

## Memories of St. Stan's Grade School

My neighbor Bunky Tushner and I were as excited as five-year-old boys could be about our first day in kindergarten. The day before, we were shown the way to school five blocks away, and on the first day of school we were on our own. It was only half-day kindergarten, and we arrived in the morning. When we were told that we were assigned afternoon kindergarten and would have to return in the afternoon, Bunky burst out crying. Not an auspicious start to our school careers. Kindergarten must have been enjoyable enough because except for the first day I don't remember much of anything. Maybe back then, starting to count and recognize letters was not in the kindergarten curriculum. It was enough to get used to coming to school and behaving every day. I don't remember how we passed the time. I do remember getting the little rugs out of the cloakroom and then lying down on them for the prescribed rest. And I remember what a big production it was during the winter to get out boots and heavy overcoats out of the cloak room and put them on.

Usually I was bored in school. I didn't like sitting and listening all day. The highlight of the day was recess in the park in the next block, where we were pretty much left to our own games, the swings, softball, football, etc. One day in the second grade, I misbehaved and paid the price. Our second-grade teacher, Sister Ethyl, interrupted our planned game of "cops and robbers" to organize some other kind of game. I unfortunately was standing next to her and said that "cops and robbers" was a game. Well she took me by the shoulders and shook the bejesus out of me. I thought my head was going to snap off. Discipline was paramount even on the playground. My favorite activity of the year was cleaning up the hallways the last couple days of school. It got us out of the classroom. Finally, however, the tide turned. I was most fortunate to have two really good teachers for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, Sister Philomena and Sister Cyril, who had a gift for making learning exciting.

The St. Stan's School building was torn down many years ago. It was a three-story brick building with six big classrooms on each floor and a wide stairway on each end of the central hallway. It was replaced probably for a lot of good reasons: expensive to maintain and heat, life threatening if there were to be a fire, and the number of parish kids to attend dropped significantly. One day in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade we had a little excitement in the form of an explosion in the parking lot between the church building and the school, which resulted in a big hole in the ground. A muffled Whumpf! The school was heated with steam generated in the church boiler. Something obviously went terribly wrong with the steam pressure. It would have been catastrophic if the pipe had blown underneath the school.

The building also had an attic above the third floor. The door was kept locked until someone – a nun or a janitor- inadvertently left it unlocked. One of the students stole

up the stairs and promptly started running around up there. As soon as the nuns climbed up to investigate, the perpetrator would hide. And so it went, until one of the nuns herself hid up there while the others descended. Thinking the coast was clear, the rascal came out to play and was caught. The building had a narrow limestone ledge that ran under the windows. One time when a student was locked in a cloakroom as punishment after school, he opened the window, worked his way along the outside ledge until he could get to an unlocked classroom window and escape.

Carl Bambenek and I share a couple of funny stories. Every year the school would have a paper drive and we would scour the East End for newspapers. Carl and I got a lead on some old lady with a lot of newspapers. We filled up a wagon with them and started the long walk back to the school. One of us got the bright idea to save energy by trading places every block sitting in the wagon. I got the short end of that scheme because I had a hard time pulling him in the wagon filled with paper. Carl was big then and later as an adult. He went on to win a Minnesota weight-lifting championship. The second incident occurred when we were both serving Mass as altar boys. One day he played a trick on me in the church sacristy, so I returned the favor by hiding his winter coat in a sacristy closet. To my horror, I was called down to the principal's office later that morning to explain what happened to the missing coat. Carl had gone home without it and refused to return to school until he got it back. So somewhat sheepishly I retrieved the coat and brought it to Carl's house. He answered the door while munching on a sandwich. There is a lesson in here for me some place. But Carl did top this experience. One day the school principal was scolding our class for something in the 8th grade, and Carl had had enough. Much to her displeasure, he answered one of her rhetorical questions. "To whom are you talking? To whom are you talking?" she repeated. And Carl, storming up the aisle on his way out the door, pointed to her and shouted, "To you!!!"

Father Halloran met a similar defeat when he was keeping our 9<sup>th</sup> grade class after school. LeRoy Gierok had to make the rounds to check his traps before dark, so he started walking out of the classroom. Fr. Halloran drew himself up to his full height of 5' 4" and with as much authority as he could muster said, "Sit down!" LeRoy quietly said, "I have to check my traps," and proceeded out the door. I doubt there is any connection, but Halloran was not long for parish work after that.

School and church had an outsized impact on me and no doubt on most Polish kids in the East End. It wasn't really school and church because the two were fused: education was religion. Education was the Polish community's way of shaping our religious beliefs and behavior. During the Middle Ages, when no one had a clock, the church bells told you what time it was, and the liturgy presented what beliefs were to be taught during each season. Advent taught and made us prepare for the Son of God becoming man. Christmas celebrated the joyous mystery of the birth of Christ. Lent called for the

penitential preparation for the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection and for us to be holy enough to rise again with Him in heaven. Not much had essentially changed from that guidance. We students were called to church for Mass every morning before classes began. Classes were taught by nuns with Religion or Catechism being the most important subject. We knew – and memorized – all the major tenets of church dogma and God's laws as articulated by the Church and published in The Baltimore Catechism. Preparation for First Holy Communion was momentous and involved a long procession in church with our clothing being completely white. And preparation for the sacrament of Confirmation also was intense.

Report cards were handed out personally by the Pastor or Assistant Pastor, who made a perfunctory show of looking over the grades. Parents and teachers realized that this emphasis on religious moral behavior was a wonderful tool to fashion polite manners and to keep the kids from sexual promiscuity. Out-of-wedlock pregnancy was a community scandal. It meant that someone had sinned and that priests, teachers, and parents had failed in their holy mission. For the most part the system worked well: kids behaved and absorbed the religious beliefs. Education itself was probably short changed in the process. But I was lucky enough to have some teachers who rose above the system to make education exciting in its own right, especially in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I still greatly admire the dedication and sacrifice of the nuns.

The church and school buildings were huge imposing structures. The Romanesque-style church had glorious stained-glass windows and a rose medallion window over the front doors. Numerous statues were featured on the roof and in the interior. All was designed to teach the Church mysteries and the lives of the saints. Monsignor Grulkowski, the Pastor, initiated an expensive program to repair and redecorate the church with a view to heighten the dramatic effect of the bright colors. Church and school governed the rhythm of our young lives and the central role of the Church would continue into our adult lives.