

# CHAPTER ONE

## *Roots*

**A** CBS colleague, Don Hewitt, famous for creating *60 Minutes*, once told me that history was really a story. “Tell me a story,” he said. “People love a story.”

So, here are three stories, each a brief glimpse into an immigrant family’s determination to live the American dream. As best it could.

One story: During the Depression of the 1930s, a milk bottle, if returned, was worth a penny. Five pennies added up to the nickel my father needed to board a subway train in the Bronx for the ride to the garment center in midtown Manhattan, where, if he was lucky, he could find a day’s or a week’s work. But he needed the nickel, and there were days when he did not have even that. I remember several mornings when I got up at four or five in the morning to look through neighborhood garbage pails for discarded milk bottles. If I found five bottles, my father had his nickel, and the chance for a day’s work. In the evening, when he got home, he would give his day’s wages to my mother. She was magnificent

at “stretching a dollar”; we never went hungry. It was only many years later when I wondered what would have happened if my father had gone downtown and had not found a job. How would he have gotten home? Even in the Depression, though, my father, a tailor born in the small textile town of Zyrardow, an hour by train west of the Polish capital, Warsaw, never lost his faith in America, his adopted home since 1914. If on occasion he did, he never showed it.

Another story: We lived in an apartment house on Southern Boulevard. During the summer my mother would often take me to nearby Crotona Park where I would play with friends, one of whom was named Benny. One day, when it was especially hot and humid, Benny’s mother bought a Popsicle, unwrapped it, and gave it to her son. In those days, Popsicles could easily be split in two, each with its own stick. My mother had no money and could not buy one for me. She hoped and half expected that Benny’s mother would break the Popsicle in two and give one half to me. That was what she would have done in a similar circumstance. But Benny’s mother gave her son the whole Popsicle. I watched as he started to lick it. My mother, in a fury of frustration, took me by the hand, muttered something to Benny’s mother, and we walked home. That evening I overheard my mother tell the story to my father. She was sobbing. “How could she?” she asked. “How could she do that? Marvin was standing right there.”

And still another story about those times: Though a very hard-working tailor, my father always dreamed of becoming an entrepreneur. He was ambitious, the first in the extended family, years later, to own a car and a house. One day, shortly before the stock market collapsed in 1929, he came home with an exciting prospect. A friend who had done reasonably well in the hat business urged my father to buy a hat store (one was available at the intersection of Third Avenue and 105th Street in Manhattan), and my father was game. He knew nothing about hats and little about business, but he was thrilled by the vision, totally unrealistic, of becoming a successful businessman. As enthusiastic as my father was about this venture, my mother was doubly unenthusiastic, but she failed to abort the deal. My father became a hat merchant, assuming naively

that the profits others enjoyed in those days, he would enjoy too. But then the market collapsed, and within a year he had to abandon his mercantile adventure and return to his more modest endeavors as a struggling tailor. But, remarkably undaunted, on the eve of the outbreak of World War II he bounced back and bought a dry cleaning and tailoring store on 188th Street in Washington Heights. My mother tended the store while my father continued working downtown in the garment district. After a while my family moved to Washington Heights. For me, this meant leaving P.S. 44, where I had many friends, and entering P.S. 189, where I had none. It was a challenge, but a manageable one.



George Washington High School would occasionally be referred to as a country club. It was no such thing, of course, though its location on a quiet corner of Washington Heights suggested a rather leisurely approach to schoolwork. The school sat, like a king at court, on a high bluff overlooking the Harlem River. It was a sprawling, four-story, red-brick bulldog of a building with a Roman tower and tall white columns looking down on a semicircular driveway at the corner of Audubon Avenue and 193rd Street. Its students were a middle-class mix of Italians and Jews, Greeks and Irish, most of them dreaming of college and careers, jobs and family. They entered GW during a hot war in 1944, and graduated in the early years of a cold war, in 1948.

I appreciated my years at GW. I was, most of the time, a serious student, though occasionally I would have “a real good time with plenty of noise and pushing around,” as one of my teachers later recalled. In my graduating class, I was fourth in grade average—94.6, as I recall. Only Francis Randall, a slender, studious, bespectacled student whose father was a philosophy professor at Columbia; Alex Kessler, an incredibly brilliant, hard-working Jewish refugee from Germany; and Norma Leichter, the beautiful daughter of the neighborhood butcher, whom I adored, produced higher grades. If I sought an explanation for my fourth-place finish, which I did not (I was thrilled to be fourth), it was

probably the many hours I spent running the prestigious Arista committee, composed of a dozen or so of the school's top students, who had banded together to help other students in need of academic assistance. For example, if a student was on the edge of flunking a course, and, knowing of Arista, sought our help, we would meet with the student once or twice a week or however many times it took to help him or her pass the course. And if, with our help, they did manage to pass, we would pat ourselves on the back—"a job well done," we'd proudly proclaim, and then go on to the next needy student.

Increasingly, by graduation time in 1948, more Puerto Rican students, freshly arrived in upper Manhattan and now enrolled at GW, found themselves in urgent need of help. Their English was poor, their study habits almost nonexistent. They had much to learn, and though we at Arista wanted to help, we came up short. We had too few "teachers" to meet the rising challenge of another generation of immigrant students. We tried, but failed.



In the spring of 1946, the editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*, a Republican newspaper that would survive in a heavily Democratic city for another twenty years, invited high school students to answer a deceptively simple question: What kind of world would you like to see? For many of us, even those aged fifteen, World War II was still a fresh memory: two atomic bombs had been dropped on Japan, Nazi Germany had surrendered unconditionally, tens of millions of people had been killed in Europe, including millions of Jews, and everyone wondered, what now?

I could not resist the editor's invitation. I had recently been chosen to represent George Washington High School in a mock United Nations debate. For a few memorable days, I enjoyed the thrill of being the "U.S. ambassador" in a "Security Council" exchange about European security. Fresh from this experience, I bubbled with the youthful notion that I

had something of importance to contribute to the paper. I wrote my letter, and it appeared on the editorial page on May 26, 1946, under the headline: "The World We Want—Forum of High School Opinion."

"To the *New York Herald Tribune*," it began innocently enough. "The world I want? I want a world where all men are really and truly equal, not just an empty phrase. I want it stated in black and white that all the peoples are independent and have the same opportunities.

"I want all the peoples in the devastated countries of Europe and the South Pacific to feel they can rely on us for aid. I want to see them all get an even break until they are able to take care of themselves. We are indebted to them: let's show it.

"I want all the Negroes in our country to be recognized as a race equal to any other. They should be able to vote without a poll tax.

"Finally, we must start on the organization of a world government.

"That's the kind of world I want. I believe that it is about time that sovereignty bowed out and made room for international cooperation."

Reading and rereading the letter now, I am proud of the world I wanted in 1946, a world, I wrote, where "all men" were "truly equal," where the United States of America provided foreign aid and "all [got] an equal break," where "Negroes" (the parlance of that time) were "recognized as a race equal to any other," able to vote "without a poll tax," and where "sovereignty" yielded to the creation of a "world government." In fact, over the years, the United States did bestow hefty amounts of foreign aid on developing nations, African Americans did acquire full voting rights, and although "sovereignty" remained as sovereign an international force as ever, the UN did provide an international forum for the discussion and sometimes the solution of dangerous problems.

My letter might have forecast a career for me in politics or diplomacy, and although it appeared in a newspaper, it did not, on its own, point me in the direction of journalism. All that was to come later.



Late one winter afternoon, after an especially long Arista session, I bundled up and left GW through one of its large front doors. I was alone. The snow was falling, and a fierce wind was blowing. Across the street I could see a gaggle of GW students. I recognized them and waved. One student, named O'Reilly, waved back and, almost in the same motion, threw an icy snowball in my direction. He missed. His friends then joined him and, crossing Audubon Avenue, threw many more snowballs at me. One of them hit my head and drew blood. Frightened, I ran away from them. "Jew boy!" they hollered. "Running home to Mommy?" I could hear them laughing, but they did not run after me.

A few weeks later, I again left GW late one snowy afternoon, but this time the O'Reilly lesson having been burned into my consciousness. I arranged to be accompanied by a dozen of my Puerto Rican students. They were, in effect, my bodyguards. I had warned Pedro, a strong, self-confident student, that we might be met by a hostile Irish gang armed with icy snowballs. I had learned that O'Reilly's snowballs were actually pieces of rock or coal covered with snow and frozen in icy water. Pedro seemed unimpressed. "Don't worry," he said with a smile. "We know what to do." Indeed, he did. No sooner had we exited GW, Pedro and his friends forming a protective shield around me, than the Irish began their icy offensive, hurling snowballs in our direction from across Audubon Avenue. Many struck their targets. Pedro then screamed something in Spanish and, followed by his friends, raced across the avenue. To this day I do not know whether they had knives, but I suspect they did. What I do know is that within a few minutes the Irish were in full retreat, and the Puerto Ricans were slapping one another in satisfaction. The Great Snowball Battle was over. The Puerto Ricans won decisively, the Irish lost, and my youthful flirtation with pacifism died. Every now and then, I learned, overwhelming force, applied judiciously, could accomplish miracles. I never again had to face another Irish attack.



I had two memorable English teachers, neither of whom wore a wedding ring. One was named Miss Draddy. She was tall, spider thin, and chronically cranky. She opened her first class by telling her students, "There are two kinds of people in the world: the Irish and those who would like to be Irish." Otherwise, she was a good teacher, one whose command of American novels was unmistakably impressive. She introduced me to *Look Homeward, Angel* and its author, Thomas Wolfe, who quickly became one of my favorite writers. For that and much more, I would always be indebted to Miss Draddy.

The other English teacher in my hall of fame was Miss Bachner, a short, soft-spoken woman who had fallen in love with English poetry while still at Barnard and managed to retain her passion and convey it to her students many years later. We got on very well. Miss Bachner became my number one adviser. If several of my friends thought I had become her "pet," they were right. After a while, she decided on her own that I should become a lawyer, and while I was still a junior she arranged for me to meet her brother, Lester Bachner, a successful Wall Street attorney. He had a sparkling reputation; other lawyers described him as "the lawyer with the razor-sharp mind." He spoke crisply, smiled rarely, and dressed immaculately. In our first talk he offered me an extraordinary opportunity, starting with a part-time job, which I accepted on the spot. I held it for four years, until I was a junior in college. There was an unspoken understanding between us that once I earned my law degree, I would continue working with and for him. I would become one of his partners. Fantastic! And yet, despite the temptations he spread before me, I was not quite certain I wanted to be a lawyer. There was always the lure of journalism.



In late January 1948 I graduated from GW and promptly enrolled at City College. I never considered attending any other college, though I might have been able to get a scholarship to Columbia or Harvard. City was where my brother had gone, and so too would I.