

C O N T E N T S

Foreword by Senator Dick Durbin, *ix*

Introduction, *1*

I From Rags to Respect, *6*

2 “We Don’t Want Nobody Nobody Sent,” *22*

3 A Rookie Lawyer and Obamacare, *42*

4 The “Dumb Kid” Learns Some Hard Lessons, *52*

5 Watergate, Congress, and a Liberal’s Laments, *60*

6 When the Nazis Came Marching In, *78*

7 Scalia’s Big Lie and Beating the NRA, *90*

8 Politicians in Black Robes and Judge Mikva’s Proudest
Decision, *116*

9 The Clinton White House and Hillary’s Liberalism, *133*

10 The Making of a (Possibly) Great President, *156*

11 Mikva’s Challenge for Democracy’s Next Generation, *173*

12 The Mikva Challenge, *185*

Acknowledgments, *189*

Index, *191*

A photograph gallery follows page 102.



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FOREWORD

Democracy is a verb. That was Abner Mikva's mantra and one of the countless pieces of wisdom he imparted to the people whose lives he touched. Abner Mikva was—and is—my hero. He was always my North Star for integrity in public life and a paragon of both progressive values and independence from party orthodoxy. In an era of cynicism and disappointment, Abner's record of public service is proof that the good guys can win without selling their souls.

Ab's final reflections with his friend Sandy Horwitt about his rich experiences and the road ahead are a timely gift to all of us who care about our democracy.

Ab Mikva was a patriot in every sense. He served his country in uniform in World War II and later served in all three branches of the US government. He was a Supreme Court clerk, an Illinois state legislator, a member of Congress, a federal appeals court judge, and a counselor to President Bill Clinton. He was also a mentor to so many—including a promising young Chicago community organizer named Barack Obama.

Ab Mikva was the pol "nobody sent." In 1948—an election year—Ab, then a twenty-two-year-old law student, was fired up about the top of the ticket in Illinois: Adlai Stevenson for governor and Paul Douglas for Senate. So he walked into the 8th Ward Regular Democratic Organization and said he wanted to help.

Dead silence.

Then a cigar-smoking ward committeeman barked: "Who sent ya, kid?"

Ab said: "Nobody sent me."

To which the committeeman replied: "We don't want nobody nobody sent." This was the old machine's way of saying scram. That would have broken many young people's political spirit. Not Ab Mikva. Instead of giving up, he found himself in the Illinois house at the age of thirty—kicking off a forty-year career spanning nine presidents. And how did Ab characterize his years in public life? "More years in public service unindicted than anybody else. I did it all. It was fun. I wouldn't trade a day of it."

That's what made Ab special. It wasn't simply the résumé that earned him such great respect. It was his approach to the job. He brought humility, integrity, and fairness to every challenge he faced—combined with an ex-

traordinary sense of humor and a famous ability to get along with others, regardless of their politics.

Illinois and America are better today because he defied the party bosses and rallied thousands to beat them. Ab's Mikva Challenge will continue to create new generations motivated by his life in public service. Ab's spirit lives on in all of us who were inspired by his courage, his wisdom, his profound decency, and his devotion to America and to justice.

Dick Durbin
US Senator
Illinois



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Introduction

Abner Mikva saw death coming but not Donald Trump.

My old boss, friend, and liberal icon, a true believer in the lofty possibilities of American democracy, died in Chicago at ninety years old, fittingly, on the Fourth of July. It was two weeks before the 2016 Republican National Convention. Until nearly his last breath, he still wanted to make a difference, to make our world a better place.

In mid-May, despite getting weaker by the day, he had booked a 7:00 a.m. United Airlines flight to Washington, where he was determined to testify at a forum organized by Democratic senators in support of his protégé and friend Judge Merrick Garland, who had been nominated for a seat on the US Supreme Court by Barack Obama, another friend of Ab's. I planned to pick him up at Reagan National Airport, but he called me the night before and said, "Sandy, I've taken a turn for the worse. I'm going into the hospital tomorrow morning." And then, days before he died, we had our last, brief conversation. He told me that he couldn't wait for the Republican convention to start. "I'm afraid Trump may self-destruct before the convention," he laughed weakly.

I said, "Well, I think the Republicans are stuck with him."

"I think they are, too," Ab replied, "and it couldn't be better." He was envisioning a resounding victory by Hillary Clinton, whom Ab liked and respected from his days in the Clinton White House, despite their sometimes rocky relationship.

As it turned out, Ab's customary political perspicacity was off the mark, although not completely; Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by 2.8 million votes, while Donald Trump won a majority in the Electoral College.

Later, I was surprised to discover that when Ab was serving his first term in Congress in 1969, he and his colleagues in the House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly to abolish the Electoral College. The measure had broad bipartisan support because George Wallace's third-party, racist campaign had won 46 electoral votes in 1968, coming close to throwing the election into the House. But a filibuster in the US Senate led by southern Democrats thwarted the historic reform—and forty-eight years later, Donald J. Trump was president.

In my monthly conversations with Ab over the last three years of his life, I recognized that the most important part of his timely story is that, for the last half century, he personified the kind of courageous, hopeful, honorable public service and authentic democratic voice that our country so urgently needs today. As veteran journalist Albert Hunt wrote after Ab's death: "Over the four decades I've been covering national politics, any all-star starting five of politicians would include Abner J. Mikva. . . . If judgment and integrity were the coin of the realm, Ab Mikva was Bill Gates."

This book is mostly about Abner Mikva's end-of-life reflections and insights; it is not a biography. I also have a presence in the narrative that emerged from our conversations about American politics and the law, aging and death, and the generational differences and fortuitous events that shaped both our lives. This is also a story about conversations between two friends catching up and summing up lifetimes of memories while trying to make sense of how it happened and where we are now—the two of us and our country.

I press the red start button on my old cassette tape recorder just in time to capture a savory slice of Abner Mikva's undiminished passion for American politics, justice, and the premium he places on political courage. Never mind that he has just turned eighty-seven, can't see the butter on the other side of the breakfast table, and has trouble breathing after inhaling three packs of Pall Malls every day for thirty years. He is razor sharp and has not mellowed, I'm happy to observe.

It is Wednesday, April 18, 2013, and this is our first conversation about democracy and life. A few months earlier, I had visited my old boss and friend at the apartment he shares with his wife Zoe in a retirement high-rise on North Lake Shore Drive in Chicago. After an hour or so of chitchat, I finally forced myself to ask whether he might be interested in having a series of conversations with me about his thoughts on life, family, aging, and, of course, the state of the Union, politics, and the fascinating characters that

have been part of his life: the young and not-so-young Barack Obama, Bill and Hillary Clinton, his former US Appeals Court colleague Antonin Scalia, his prize law clerk Elena Kagan, Chicago's "Boss" Richard J. Daley, and disgraced Illinois governors. Ab has had a unique set of experiences. Since World War II, perhaps no other American has been such a keen participant-observer while serving in all three branches of the federal government and in one of the most notorious rock 'em, sock 'em legislative boot camps, the Illinois state legislature, in the 1950s and 1960s.

I didn't want to sound like I was asking Ab to sit down and talk about his life's lessons before it was too late, but that's what I was thinking. Since I'm not too comfortable facing up to my own mortality, I was uncomfortable even hinting at his. I was also a little concerned about rejection—that, for whatever reason, he might say no. But no sooner had I asked him whether he was interested in meeting monthly with me and suggested that our conversations might turn into a book than he immediately responded with familiar gusto, "Absolutely!"

Like many of the monthly conversations we had over the next three years, our first one started with an impromptu story on that typically chilly April day. We met in the living room of Ab's twenty-fourth-floor apartment with stunning views of two Chicago treasures: Lake Michigan to the east and Wrigley Field to the west. It was four months after a crazed gunman shot and killed twenty schoolchildren and six educators at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. In the aftermath, President Obama and a majority of Americans wanted Congress to pass stronger gun control legislation. But even the most modest proposals in Congress were running into fierce opposition by the National Rifle Association (NRA).

This was déjà vu all over again, political kickboxing that Abner Mikva knew all about from firsthand experience. In the 1970s he was the most outspoken advocate in Congress for gun control, including a ban on the sale and manufacture of handguns. When President Carter nominated Ab to be a judge on the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit in 1979, the NRA launched a national anti-Mikva campaign and came very close to derailing the nomination. Ab has never forgotten the weak-kneed Democratic senators who voted against his nomination.

So on this day in his apartment, he wanted to tell me about two letters he had recently sent to Mark Pryor, a Democratic senator from Arkansas. Pryor, who was up for reelection, was described in news accounts as wavering on a vote to send gun control legislation to the Senate floor. Ab and Pryor's father, David, had served together in the House of Representatives in the late 1960s. Ab had liked the elder Pryor and was impressed by his

integrity. Ab said his first letter to the son went like this: “Dear Mark, I take the privilege of calling you by your first name because I’ve known you since you were six years old.” That was in 1969, when he met young Mark on the House floor for the opening session of the new Congress and members brought their children with them. It was the first day of Ab’s first term. In the letter, he recalled that Mark’s father had told him that “‘the biggest thing you need to be a good congressman was courage.’ As far as I’m concerned,” Ab continued, “it still is and always was. I’m sure the gun control legislation is going to be a tough vote but just remember who you are and look in the mirror and you’ll do fine. With respect, Abner Mikva.” That was last week, Ab told me, his eyes narrowing and his face hardening. I remember the look; he’s never been a wimpy liberal. “And then he voted against cloture so he wouldn’t have even allowed the bill to come to the floor for a vote. So I wrote him a second letter. This time it was not ‘Dear Mark’; it was, ‘Senator Pryor, why don’t you change your name so that people won’t confuse your cowardly act with that of your father.’”

I met Abner Mikva in the winter of 1974. We were both in a place where we didn’t want to be. He had been redistricted out of a safely Democratic congressional district on Chicago’s South Side and was only temporarily, he hoped, practicing law while gearing up for another congressional race in a Republican-leaning district in the North Shore suburbs. Several years out of graduate school, I was teaching at the University of Illinois in Chicago but wanted to be doing something political. I began volunteering in his campaign a few hours a week, and by the summer, it was my full-time work. I sometimes sat next to another volunteer, precocious college student Merrick Garland. When Ab eked out a victory in November, he was on his way back to a post-Watergate reform Congress, and I was headed to Washington as his press secretary, speechwriter, and sometime legislative aide on a hodgepodge of hot issues from guns to Nazis marching in Skokie, Illinois.

Back then, he was middle-aged and I was practically a kid with a young wife, a two-year-old son, and another not yet born. Now we’re both senior citizens. How did that happen? In the course of our conversations, I began to realize how much of a difference one generation made in our lives and just how much each of us is a product of his times. A coincidence that had nothing to do with our first meeting forty years ago is that we were born in the same city, Milwaukee, seventeen years apart, yet a world apart, too. Nothing in Ab’s early life, including a dysfunctional family and embarrassing poverty, would have hinted at a remarkable career at the exalted levels

of law and politics and his status as a contemporary gold standard for integrity, public service, and liberal ideals. Very few of his stepping-stones were in place or obvious along the way, and neither were mine.

Our conversations, unscripted except for a few topics that I usually wrote down in a notebook, inevitably zigged and zagged from funny old stories to the world we live in now. Along the way, I was surprised at how much I didn't know about Ab's life, then and now: life-altering stories from his youth, political betrayal and moral lapses, his thoughts about Barack Obama and his optimism about the prospects of a Hillary Clinton presidency, his most important legacy, and a healthy view about aging and death. On political and some personal issues, we often agreed, but not always. Learning more about his life and thinking has helped me consider my own in ways I had not intended.



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I

From Rags to Respect

About twenty minutes into our first conversation in April 2013, I say, “Ab, when your phone rings and it’s a call from the NBC–*Wall Street Journal* poll, and they ask you whether things in our country are generally headed in the right direction or do you feel that things are off on the wrong track, how will you answer?” I wasn’t expecting his quick, emphatic response: “Wrong track.” Why am I surprised, since a majority of Americans feel the same way? Well, because people who answer “right track” are apt to be, like him, Democrats and devoted supporters of President Obama. Plus, in the years I’ve known him, Ab’s outlook on politics and life has generally been sunny, optimistic. Sunny and smart—very smart—is how I’ve thought of him for as long as I’ve known him. But I didn’t know him when he was a child growing up during the Depression and struggling in school.

His father and mother’s ill-fated union, Ab speculates, began with “a contract marriage in Ukraine, even though they were married here. He didn’t like her family and she didn’t like his, and they didn’t much like each other,” Ab tells me over lunch one day. His father, he says, sometimes hit his mother, which is difficult for Ab to admit even now. “But most of the time, as I remember it,” he says, “my father and mother weren’t talking to each other.” Young Abner often played the uncomfortable role of the go-between or messenger for his feuding parents. “You tell your mother . . . ,” his father would say to him, beginning in English and sliding into Yiddish. “You tell your father . . . ,” his less Americanized mother would reply in Yiddish. Some sixty years later, he realized he was playing the same uncomfortable role, minus the Yiddish, when he

was Bill Clinton's White House counsel and Janet Reno was the attorney general. He often acted as a carrier pigeon of angry messages in the bad political marriage between Clinton and Reno.

I tell Ab that his Mikva family discord sounds familiar to me. My first-generation parents were something of a mismatch; I never understood what brought them together. And growing up, I didn't know of a single happy marriage among my Jewish-immigrant relatives; the unions all seemed an ocean away from wedded bliss. My mother's parents, who were about the same age as Ab's parents, came to Milwaukee from the vicinity of the Polish-Russian border and had a rocky relationship. My grandfather would disappear each summer to Michigan, allegedly to seek relief from the misery of his hay fever, but my mother suspected it was also a convenient refuge from the misery of matrimonial warfare. Still, in our two Jewish American extended families, the Mikvas and the Horwitts, divorce was almost unheard of. More than anything, the glue that kept our families from cracking up were the children.

And here is where Ab and I agree with today's conservatives and their contentious celebration of the two-parent family. "The change in family makeup," Ab says, "is no longer only about race. There are an awful lot of single mothers, either by choice or divorce, who are white. And that's not healthy. It just isn't." I mention that about two-thirds of all black kids are growing up in single-parent homes, which is triple the percentage of white kids in single-parent homes. But Ab is right about the trends. And I observe that he and I were much better off, even in our strife-filled families, with our mothers and fathers around. "It made a difference," he agrees.

The Depression made things a lot worse in the Mikva household when Ab turned five and his father lost his job as an insurance agent. "He was fired in 1930, and it changed his life and it changed ours," Ab tells me, his voice still conveying the anguish of those distant, confusing days. "For many years, I thought the word *fired* meant that somebody took a match and put it to somebody's rear end." In his elementary school years, "there was literally no money. I still don't know how we got by. I remember one night—this was a terrible domestic scene—I complained that there wasn't any butter. I said, 'Where's the butter?' My mother said, 'We don't have any.' My father blew up. 'What do you mean there's no butter,' he yelled. And it shook me up." In tough times, when America didn't seem like the promised land, Ab's mother would say bitterly, "*ah broch tzu Columbus*"—a curse on Columbus.

Ab doesn't remember going to bed hungry, but he does remember missing sweets. One day his mother sent him to Berson's, the neighborhood

grocery store. I, too, recall going to Berson's years later; my aunts and uncles lived three blocks away. "She sent me to buy ten cents worth of salami, but I copped two cents" for candy, Ab says. "I came home. She looked at the salami and said, 'They cheated you, there's not ten cents worth of salami.' So I had to tell her about the candy. She was very upset. And then I also remember—I think that may have been my only case of shoplifting—they had these little one-cent Hershey bars on the counter. I came in one day and Mrs. Berson was in the back. She said, 'I'll be right out.' So I reached in and grabbed a few and put them in my pocket. She came out, she was glaring at me. She said, 'Did you get enough?' And I said, 'I haven't ordered anything yet.' She just glared at me. Nothing happened, but it embarrassed me enough that I don't think I ever did it again," he recalled.

"How old were you?" I asked.

"Ten, maybe eleven."

Ab's grocery store embarrassment was momentary compared to the full-time humiliation of being on welfare until he was twelve or thirteen. The family's food, his clothes, and his schoolbooks all came courtesy of the Milwaukee County Outdoor Relief Agency. "I don't know why they called it Outdoor Relief, but that's what it was," he says. "We would pick up our food in a coaster wagon. My dad and I pulled the wagon back from the relief station. My mother used an oilcloth to cover the wagon so people wouldn't know." In the winter, Ab avoided wearing the telltale Outdoor Relief blue wool cap. "It had to be well below zero before I put on that cap." For a time, the Mikvas lived in a duplex that was owned by the parents of his friend Newton Minow, and Outdoor Relief paid the rent. Ab says, "It humiliated me that Newt knew that we were on relief."

For a long stretch, school wasn't much of a sanctuary. "Were you always a good student?" I ask Ab in one of our early conversations, expecting him to say yes because I already knew he had been a star at the University of Chicago Law School. "No," he says. "I had a bad second- or third-grade teacher. We had moved from the West Side to the North Side during one of my father's periods of particular poverty. I think he was opening up a beer depot on the North Side. Then I came back to Hi-Mount School on the West Side, but I had broken my continuity. I didn't know anybody and school was very, very unpleasant. There was a teacher who was picking on me. I think she was offended," Ab laughs, "that a white, Jewish student was on relief. The West Side at that time was completely white, about 15 or 20 percent Jewish and mainly middle class. I don't think there were more than three kids on relief at Hi-Mount."

The Mikva family's fortunes improved somewhat in the latter half of the

1930s when Ab's father landed a Works Progress Administration job. But when Ab started junior high school at Steuben, a ten-minute bicycle ride from his family's duplex apartment, he was still feeling insecure. "I would always flunk penmanship, art, and gym, so I really didn't think of myself as very able," he says. But then one day—and he tells me this as though it happened yesterday—"the class was choosing people to write a play. And they nominated people and voted on it. Of course, I was not nominated. And the teacher was very angry. She said, 'Abner is the best writer in this class, how can you not nominate him?' And of course, then they nominated me." I observe that, even after all these years, it still sounds like a fresh story. "You remember it," he says. "The impact is so heavy. I still remember Miss Hardgrove saying, 'He's the best writer in the class.' It had never been said about me, by anybody."

Perhaps because of Miss Hardgrove, Ab's first serious career aspiration was to be a journalist. It says so in his senior-year profile in the Washington High School *Scroll Weekly*. By then, he was the editor in chief of the *Scroll*, but it took some luck to land that position.

Located on Sherman Boulevard in the heart of Milwaukee's old West Side, Washington High School was considered the best in the city, both academically and athletically. I attended Washington High, too, class of January 1961. Ab and I didn't know it then, but this was perhaps the golden age of urban public education. The legendary George Balzer, principal of Washington High in Ab's era, was succeeded by the debonair, charismatic Arlie Schardt in my post-World War II era. Schardt's son, Arlie Jr., told me many years later that it was the pinnacle of his dad's professional life. Washington was a three-year high school with some 1,500 students when Ab was there; by the time I graduated, the school was packed with nearly 2,500 students, including the first wave of baby boomers. In our high school days, the virtually all-white student body, about 15 percent of which was Jewish, came mostly from working-class and modestly middle-class families. If our classmates went to college, they were likely the first ones from their families to do so, as was the case with Ab and me.

From Ab's high school days in the early 1940s and into the 1960s, Washington High was loaded with talent, or so it seemed. Student leadership roles were determined by a mix of merit and popularity, as Ab discovered when he sought the editorship of the *Scroll*. The paper's faculty adviser, Rose Helen Hauer, nominated Ab and three other students, Ab recalls, even though "she complained about me, that I didn't do this, that I didn't do that. In today's language I would have called her a kvetch. I was not her favorite person but, on the other hand, she obviously thought I had talent." Each candidate gave

a campaign speech to the student body, which elected the new editor. It was Ab's first losing electoral experience, with a dash of insult added to injury. "I had expected to run second or third," Ab says, "but I finished dead last. Even a guy who had done nothing for the newspaper, a guy named Mel Teski, beat me out. He had a very clever speech. 'T is for truthfulness, E is for enthusiasm, S is for blah, blah, blah.' He ended up third. But the final indignity was the next day when I saw Mr. Balzer in the hall. He stopped me and said, 'That was a wonderful speech you made, taking your name and using the letters like that.'" All was not completely lost, however. The girl who was elected editor graduated the following January, in the middle of Ab's senior year. Miss Hauer, the kvetch, appointed Ab editor in chief of a staff that included his friend Newt Minow as associate sports editor.

Just for fun, and, I guess, because I was a little curious, I went back to our old high school and talked a clerk into digging out our transcripts. When I see Ab the next time, I say: "I have your grades here, but I haven't opened the envelope because it's stamped confidential." He laughs and says, "OK, we'll keep it confidential, but you'll have to read it to me." Our grades were similar, mostly As and some Bs, with a few of Ab's highest grades coming in Latin and typewriting. "I was an excellent typist," he says. "I was the fastest typist in my class."

He also became an excellent speller, thanks to the demanding, uncompromising Miss Hauer. And like her, he had developed a persnickety, zero-tolerance attitude toward misspellings by the time he became a congressman and I was writing speeches for him. So, when I saw a *New York Times* story in the spring of 2013 about a Yiddish word that had been used to determine the winner of the Scripps National Spelling Bee, I couldn't resist putting Ab to the test. We were having breakfast at The Bagel, a deli on North Broadway, just a short drive from his apartment and the default location for many of our conversations. He orders his usual, salami and scrambled eggs, which is a treat after the dreary fare that is the specialty of the kitchen at his retirement complex. I go for the Hoppel Poppel and then pull out a copy of the *Times* article. I say to Ab: "You told me that when you wrote for the *Scroll* you became a stickler for spelling."

"Right," Ab says.

"I've got a word for you."

"OK."

"This was the championship word in the most recent Scripps National Spelling Bee. A thirteen-year-old boy, his name is Arvind Mahankali, spelled it correctly." I say this with the intent of ever-so-slightly needling my very competitive friend. "The word is: 'knaidel.'"

“Knaidel,” Ab repeats. “A Yiddish word.”

“Right. A dumpling, like the kind of dumpling that’s in matzo ball soup. But the thirteen-year-old kid, whose parents are from India, probably doesn’t know the difference between a matzo ball and a snowball.”

“I would spell it k-n-e-d-e-l,” Ab replies. “Or, k-n-e-d-l-e.”

“You only get one.”

“I would spell it e-l.”

“OK, spell it again.”

“K-n-e-d-e-l.”

“Sorry, no. Here’s the correct spelling. It’s k-n-a-i-d-e-l. But there’s a controversy about the spelling. The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research . . .”

Ab interrupts. “Evo,” he pronounces it. “YIVO is an old Yiddish institution.”

“Well,” I say, “in the *Times* story, according to YIVO, the correct spelling is k-n-e-y-d-l. But the Second Avenue Deli in Manhattan has it on the menu as k-n-e-i-d-e-l, and an eighty-three-year-old bubbe who teaches a Yiddish class in Queens spells it k-n-a-d-e-l. The thirteen-year-old spelled it k-n-a-i-d-e-l and won the spelling bee.”

Ab, sounding annoyed and a little peevisish, says, “Why would they use a Yiddish word in the spelling contest?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “But their bible is *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*.”

To which Ab says dismissively, “*Webster’s* doesn’t know borscht about Yiddish.”

Ab and I both did well academically, even though our family lives were not child-rearing models by today’s standards. As a kid, I don’t remember my parents ever reading a story to me. In fact, I don’t remember that we had a single book in our cramped one-bedroom apartment, where I slept on a hide-a-bed sofa in the living room for the first ten years of my life. In Ab’s case, he was not going to receive much assistance with his homework from his immigrant parents, although his sister Rose, seven years older, sometimes helped. Ab gives a lot of credit to his public school education. “In my case,” he says, “school did make all the difference. The school was able to pick up the deficits from family life. But it was an important institution for everybody, not just the dysfunctional families like mine.”

Listening to Ab’s stories about growing up, I realize that one of our common denominators was that our parents wanted us to do well in school, they expected us to do well, and we knew they loved us. “My mother was

probably the most important inspiration for my getting an education,” Ab says of his Yiddish-speaking mother who had no formal schooling. “In retrospect, I’ve always felt guilty about not appreciating my mother more. She clearly loved me unconditionally. Even though she was not educated, she felt it was important that I did well in school.”

“As you were growing up,” I ask Ab, “how did she express that?”

“She appreciated when I would get good grades. She would be concerned if I—I used to get ‘poor’ in penmanship, art, and music. And she would say, ‘Why can’t you do better than that?’”

It was Ab’s mother, imagining that the New World could offer new possibilities for her newborn son, who made the strategic selection of his name. “You heard how I got my name?” Ab asks, and then explains how his mother made the choice. “Her grandfather was named Avrum, which is my Hebrew name. That translates to Abraham, but my mother didn’t want me to be called Abie. She wanted me to be fully Americanized.” Later, I think to myself, maybe she was uncomfortable about the association with *Abie’s Irish Rose*, a hit Broadway comedy around the time Ab was born, about a young Jew who marries a Catholic girl. In any event, Ab says that his mother went through a Bible that had “very poor scholarship and she found the name Abner, which she somehow thought would be a good translation of Avrum. But Abner is not Avrum. Abner is Avner, who was a general in David’s army. And so whenever I got up in a synagogue as a kid, they’d say, ‘So your Hebrew name is Avner.’ And I’d say, ‘No, it’s Avrum.’ And they’d say, ‘No, it can’t be Avrum. Avrum would be Abraham.’ I’d say, ‘No, I can’t be Abraham.’ And to this day, if somebody calls me Abe, I have to correct them.”

At our breakfast, I’ve also brought a photocopy of a 1943 issue of the Washington High School *Scroll Weekly*, when Ab was the editor. We look at the masthead, and as I read the names aloud, Ab notices that about half the student editors are Jewish kids. “We had a disproportionate number of smart people, the active people in our class,” Ab says. Suddenly he’s reminded of an old *New Yorker* cartoon. “This football player is hunkering over a Japanese student who’s in the library. She’s got glasses on, looks very nerdy, she’s writing, and he says, ‘What is it that makes you people so smart? Is it the fish you eat? What do you think it is?’ And in the last panel she says, ‘Well, first of all, I’m Jewish.’”

A generation later, when I was at Washington High, I wasn’t part of the Jewish subculture. Virtually all of Ab’s friends were Jewish, while most of mine were not. Part of the reason is that I was a serious jock, and my football and baseball teammates had names like Burgardt, Kreuger, Wertz,

Crowley, Tevich, LaPrest, and Hatch. After Friday night football games, we'd go to Picciolo's for pizza, where my Catholic friends would have to skip the pepperoni on those old meatless Fridays. Ab, who was barely five foot nine and weighed maybe 135 pounds, considered himself a little nerdy in high school. He would have loved to be Washington High's quarterback, as I was. He says, "I remember standing outside of the fence at the practice field watching the football players with such admiration." And he still has a bit of a chip on his shoulder about a baseball career that never happened because, he says solemnly, his father never played catch with him, "so I never did learn to play baseball." Perhaps sensing that I am somewhat dubious about his ability to have been a Jewish Willie Mays, he fires off a lawyerly enthymeme. "Now, you were a good baseball player," he says, knowing that I was. "Did you play catch with your dad?" I had to admit that I did. "OK," he says, case closed.

But it wasn't only athletics that set us apart as kids. Ab and I grew up in different neighborhoods and had different Jewish cultural and religious experiences. By the 1940s, the old West Side, which is now called Sherman Park, was the heart of Jewish life for many of Milwaukee's eastern European Jews whose parents and grandparents had emigrated from Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Romania. This was Ab's neighborhood. My neighborhoods were a few miles away, at first to the north and then on the edge of the city's far western boundary near Mount Mary College, where Jews were an alien species.

Still, Ab might have had gentile friends, but he almost never did. On any block in the slightly less than two square miles that made up the heart of the Jewish West Side, Jews lived side by side with their far more numerous, often German-gentile neighbors. But they tended to be the closest of strangers. When he lived on North Forty-Ninth near Center Street, Ab's Catholic neighbors walked to St. Catherine's Catholic Church on Sunday, his Lutheran neighbors to Mt. Calvary. The religious divisions played out in school. "I remember one time asking a parochial school girl to go out with me," Ab recalls. "She said, 'Oh, I can't. You killed Christ.'" In high school, Ab briefly dated one non-Jewish girl, LaVonne Ketter, whom he recalls fondly. This was very rare; even a generation later, I was one of the few Jews at Washington High who dated gentiles. The tribalism was still intact. Ab says he really liked LaVonne. "Unfortunately, she was a good ice skater and I was a lousy ice skater, so I almost broke my ankles trying to keep up with her. I found out later that she got grief from her parents for going out with me."

As for Jewish culture and religion, our youthful experiences were un-

usual in different ways. Ab's father, Henry, was unequivocally, passionately, stridently anti-religion. He would often boycott Passover Seders with the family. When his wife tried to keep two sets of dishes for her devout father, who came to the house for Seder, Henry would deliberately use them for every day. "My father came over in 1916 or 1917," Ab says. "It was either just before or during the revolution. Jews were the easiest people to recruit to be revolutionaries because they had reasons to hate the czar and many of them had reason to hate religion because it was so repressive. It was an angry God, a mean God. I still remember my mother used to say to me when she was really unhappy with me, '*gott vet der shtrofen*,' God will punish you. And so it was easy to be an atheist and anarchist. And my father came over happy in both those roles." For young Abner, that meant an odd Sunday school experience. His father, who loved Yiddish music and culture, wanted his son to learn about that culture, so he sent Ab to the Garfinckel Cheder at Fifty-Second and Center Streets. But cheders also taught Hebrew, the biblical language. Ab had strict instructions from his father: "I could go only to learn Yiddish and Yiddish songs and poetry. As soon as they started Hebrew, I would have to get up and walk out. I remember that Mr. Garfinckel used to say, 'Abner, come sit down. Don't listen to that meshugena father of yours.' I knew better. I kept walking."

When I hear Ab's story, I tell him that it reminds me of how my mother learned Yiddish in the 1920s at a local chapter of the national Workmen's Circle. "The Arbeter Ring," Ab says quickly, using the Yiddish name for the socialist workers' organization. Its members consisted of my maternal grandfather and thousands of other secular eastern European Jews who came to the United States in the early twentieth century. Like Ab's father, my grandfather never attended a religious service that I'm aware of, at least not willingly. My father and mother seemed indifferent to religion, with one exception: my father would faithfully say Kaddish whenever someone in the family died. But he never took me to a synagogue, and unlike Ab, I never attended Sunday school to learn about Jewish culture and history. Neither Ab nor I was bar mitzvahed.

For me, lessons about growing up Jewish were largely implicit: I could observe that family was important, that doing well in school was important, and that Jews could expect to be treated unkindly and unfairly because we were different. When our downstairs neighbor banged on her ceiling because I was making a little noise, my father might say, "She doesn't like Jews." When my parents started talking about buying a house, I learned that some neighborhoods were off-limits because NJA—no Jews allowed. I understood at an early age that, as a defense mechanism, many Jews, including

my parents and aunts and uncles, thought of themselves as superior to the goyim. But simultaneously, we often felt like underdogs in American society. That may be why my first hero when I was six or seven years old was Jackie Robinson. I'm not sure that I realized at first that Jackie Robinson was black. But by the way adults talked about him, I sensed that he was a courageous underdog. My first phonograph record, which I still have, is *Slugger at the Bat*, featuring Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese, the white, southern Brooklyn Dodgers teammate who befriended Robinson when opposing players and even his own teammates were hurling slurs. On the two-record album, Jackie and Pee Wee encounter a kids' sandlot baseball team and help them win the big game by showing them that the key to victory is color-blind, unselfish teamwork. I listened with hopeful, receptive ears.

In Ab Mikva's last semester of high school in 1943, the senior play was Robert Sherwood's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*. Ab played Lincoln's law partner Joshua Speed. His classmate, Bill Spankus, played Lincoln. Both Ab and Bill were eager to join the military after they graduated, like virtually all the boys at Washington High. But Ab had to wait until he turned eighteen. Spankus, six months older, didn't have to wait. The next year, on a German battlefield, he died.

Ab tried to enlist in the US Navy Air Corps, he says, "because they took you at seventeen, but I flunked the physics exam." He tells me this one morning while we're talking about how he and his friends could barely wait to fight in the "Good War." We're at The Bagel, and the deli's sound system is pumping out rock-and-roll hits from the 1960s, when my friends and I wanted no part of fighting in Vietnam. A mere generation earlier, kids like Ab were unflinchingly, passionately devoted to the war effort. Ab's Washington High class of 1943 held numerous student-led war savings bond and savings stamp drives and participated in highly organized block-by-block campaigns to collect paper, string, and metal keys for the war effort. Every issue of the *Scroll Weekly* carried stories about these campaigns and how successful they were—90 percent of the student body participated in a savings stamp drive in Ab's senior year. There were frequent updates about teachers who had enlisted and where they were serving. At least one was a woman, Edna Goeden, who had been Ab's English teacher. At his graduation, Ab says, instead of having the valedictorian speak, a panel of students gave speeches about the branch of the armed services they would be serving in. Ab spoke about the US Army Air Corps.

"I enrolled in the army air corps when I was seventeen, but they wouldn't