

I



Growing Up

THE EARLY YEARS

When one speaks about their life, the best way to start is with birth. I was born in Lebanon Hospital in New York City in 1925. My folks were thrilled that I was a boy. My brother, William, had died at age seven months from scarlet fever. Two sisters were already in the family, Ethel, age 8, and Beatrice, age 5. Being the youngest child, and a boy, was very advantageous. I was a “spoiled child,” a state especially fostered by my mother.

As far as family, it was my sweet four-foot, nine-inch, bluish-gray-eyed, raven-haired mother who taught me to read and write at age three. She was an excellent cook and baker. Mom Rose was the eldest of sixteen siblings. Until she met and married my Austrian father she worked for Macy’s Department Store in New York City. Rose had to commute from the family farm in Colchester, Connecticut, to work at Macy’s. Weekdays, she boarded with an aunt in New York, and she returned home for weekends. That aunt happened to be my father’s sister-in-law. My father, Morris, immigrated to the United States from Austria as a teenager

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and taught himself to read and speak English. He was my first hero, a self-made man. Morris was very skilled in metalwork and construction from the old country. His patriotism for the United States was extreme, but when he tried to enlist in the army during World War I, he was rejected as an enemy alien. My sisters Ethel and Beatrice were of another generation.

I also enjoyed visiting my maternal grandparents in Easton, Pennsylvania. My grandfather, Martin Weitzman, had his own horse. My grandmother, Rachael, had a large talking parrot. These were fun distractions. My mother's family was so large that I had a multitude of cousins. When we had a family reunion, it had to be held in a large amusement park in town.

I was brought up in Harlem in an Irish-Catholic-dominated neighborhood. My first best friend was an Italian boy, Joey, two years my senior. Joey's mother, from Italy, wanted to feed me all the time. At that time, I really didn't appreciate the good Italian food. Even though I was Jewish and attended a synagogue, I learned about and respected my neighbors' religious beliefs. I was able to go to their churches, funerals, and wakes. My elementary school, P.S. #125, was integrated, so I developed no racial prejudices. In fact, I felt very much at home there, especially since all the teachers had already taught my two sisters. All this helped to shape my social beliefs for later life.

Though open to others' ways of life, I am unwavering in my own religion. I remember, when I was about four years old, seeing a movie about Jewish martyrs in ancient times. Romans and Spaniards burned them at the stake. As they were dying, they prayed the *Shema*, a Hebrew prayer specifying the belief in one God. This vivid memory has had a tremendous influence on my beliefs in religion. My belief in God has always been steadfast. I pray every day. The thrust





Hal Baumgarten, age 9, in Easton, Pennsylvania.

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of my prayers has always been for good health for my family, my friends, and myself.

A smart, docile child, I was very good in school, in both behavior and learning. My mother helped me with my homework and studying. Having a photographic memory gave me the ability to assimilate schoolwork with ease. I excelled in spelling and math in elementary school.

A large city like New York is a cultural banquet, with all its museums, excellent libraries, and showplaces. There was no shortage of things to do or of friends my own age. The streets outside our apartment houses, with its parked autos, became our daily playground. In warm weather we played “stick-ball,” and the street became a baseball diamond. In the winter, when the streets were covered with snow and ice, it became a one-man sledding downhill and snowball-fight paradise. My friend Joey and I played on our scooters on the campus of Columbia University. We also played around Grant’s Tomb, which was in our neighborhood. On President Grant’s birthday, his and his wife’s mausoleum was opened for viewing.

Playing on the tough streets of New York City toughened me up. I was once hit over the head in a fight with an iron roller skate, requiring sutures from Sydenham Hospital Emergency Room. On another occasion, while climbing a steel fence in Morningside Park, I impaled my left wrist on one of the spikes. Once again I became a visitor to the ER. My father made the hospital a large copper kettle in appreciation. It is interesting to remember that the hospitals in those days reeked with the smell of ether.

About age nine, my family and I moved to the borough of the Bronx. I now lived in a Jewish neighborhood. The schools were more modern and the curriculum was much richer. I enjoyed the physical training and music appreciation courses. My athletic life began in the Bronx. I was a



small child compared to my peers in elementary and junior high school. However, I worked hard to build my body and become muscular. I played baseball, football, track, tennis, boxing, and even hockey. I belonged to an athletic club at the 92nd Street YMHA, to which I traveled every weekend by subway to compete. Though at fourteen I was five feet, seven inches tall and weighed only 125 pounds, I worked out in basketball and track with the USA Club and memorably won a silver medal in a 1939 decathlon against high-school seniors. The medals I won during this period are still in my possession.

I was given Hebrew School training between ages eleven and thirteen. At one time, I could read and write Hebrew like a native. At age thirteen, I was bar mitzvahed. With my unbelievable memory, I was able to read from the holy Torah and make a three-page English speech without notes. Around the time of my bar mitzvah, I was also honored to be the best man at my sister Beatrice's wedding.

Advancing in my studies, I attended Macomb's Junior High School, which was a terrific school to attend. I departed for school early, in order to play handball before classes. The curriculum was great and varied. We studied French, American history, and advanced math as well as woodworking and electric wiring. Here too I excelled in sports. As an eighth grader, I hit a three-hundred-foot home run over a thirty-foot-high wall, a play that allowed my class team to win the school's softball championship. The gymnasium was kept open in the evenings for community use. I played basketball there with a team called the Admirals.

Away from school I found any way I could to continue my athletic games. In the street fronting our apartment house, I was able to play a New York City game called "stick-ball." It was played like baseball, except the bat was a broomstick, broom removed. The ball was a rubber one by the





Hal Baumgarten's bar mitzvah, March 1938.

Spaulding Company. In the winter, when the street was covered with snow and ice, we sleighed downhill. We used a one-man sled with a steering mechanism. Touch football was another of our big street games. There was never a dull moment, but none of my friends, nor I, indulged in drugs or alcohol.

After graduating from Macomb's, I attended the prestigious Bronx High School of Science. It was a great school, walking distance from my home. However, after only one year I transferred out in favor of a school with an athletic program, DeWitt Clinton High School. This school, located in a park, looked like a college building, built of light bricks, three stories high, with a tower in the middle. The student body was all male. When I attended, the school had 12,600 students. We had three shifts for our school hours; I attended from 8:00 A.M. until noon. Sounds bad, doesn't it? However, when I started college, I realized how well prepared I was. The biology, physics, trigonometry, and French courses gave me a great educational foundation. Besides track and baseball, I went out for the soccer team. In retrospect, playing soccer in the U.S. in the 1940s was revolutionary, as soccer has only become popular in our country in recent years.

While in high school, weighing 165 pounds, I was playing football for money. I played under the name of Harold Babe, since at that time money from any sport would make you ineligible for all college athletics. I earned as much as twenty-five dollars per game kicking field goals for a semi-professional football team. In the 1940s, this sum was considered big money, especially for a sixteen year old. Incidentally, I never thought of kicking a football like a soccer player. In those days, people would have laughed at that. Though I found great satisfaction in the pursuit of sports, my parents were not attuned to athletics, and I had to sneak



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out of my house to play on Sundays. The equipment I used had to be stored in another player's house. My father only watched me play on one occasion; that day I kicked a forty-three-yard field goal. He wasn't impressed. During that season I received one bad injury playing, a sprained or fractured ankle; however, I played the rest of the season with the ankle taped.

My entire life did not revolve around sports, however. My social life was great. We had neighborhood parties and dances. We danced to the big bands like Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Harry James, and Benny Goodman, who frequented Broadway in New York City. People like Frank Sinatra sang at the Paramount Theater. We didn't have television in our time, but I was introduced to it when I attended the 1939 World's Fair, where they demonstrated that new technology. Instead of TV, my friends and I were entertained by *The Lone Ranger*, *Green Hornet*, and *The Shadow*, radio programs. We also had a popular music program called the *Hit Parade*, which played the ten top songs for each week.

Another exciting activity of my youth was travel, which my folks enjoyed. In 1936 and 1937, I went on cruises with them on the Swedish-American liner *Gripsholm*. We visited Havana, Cuba; Kingston, Jamaica; Port-au-Prince, Haiti; and Nassau, Bahamas. These were interesting places for a young person to see, and the weather was delightful. There was great poverty in all of these places, except Havana, Cuba. On this island nation, people were very friendly and the Cuban food and music were great. The Cuban economy was flourishing, even though the country's citizens were under a dictator, Fulgencio Batista. As a mark of the island's prosperity, Havana boasted a huge capitol building, almost a copy of that of the United States. Under its dome was a glass case in the floor. I was amazed to discover that this round glass case held a twenty-five-carat diamond.



In 1939, we went on a long driving tour that has left me with vivid memories. Traveling north from New York City, we arrived at the St. Lawrence River. At that time the river was unpolluted and emerald green in color. There were islands in the river, known as the Thousand Islands, and I saw Irving Berlin's island home, where he likely wrote "God Bless America." I was able to swim in the St. Lawrence and Lake Ontario. We then drove to Niagara Falls, which we viewed from both the U.S. and Canadian sides. There I happened to meet a girl friend from home, with her parents; however, she soon caught the mumps and had to return home. As we visited Canada, I noticed that the motion picture *The Wizard of Oz* was playing. Exploring farther into Canada, my family visited a beautiful botanical garden at Hamilton, Ontario. Then we visited Montreal, where I was able to practice my junior-high-school French. We also viewed a magnificent church on a very high hill, called the Sacred Heart of Saint Andrew. From there, we returned home, traveling through beautiful New York State. Our stop at Fort Ticonderoga, of Revolutionary War fame, gave us a great view of Lake Champlain. Saratoga was interesting, with its special spring drinking water and horse racing. It was summer time and the New York State grapes and cherries were delicious.

Though our trip to Canada had been one of pleasant sights and beautiful locations, the harsher reality of the war that had erupted in Europe surfaced during our vacation. While the United States was in isolation, Canada was involved with England in World War II. As a result, I saw Canadian soldiers guarding strategic facilities. Within two years, America would be joining World War II, but only after suffering a disastrous attack.

The attack on Pearl Harbor occurred while I was still in high school. My classmates and I were all anxious to enter



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the service, but I was too young. On Pearl Harbor Day, I was playing in a football game in George Washington High School's stadium. I was buoyed up by returning a fifty-yard kick, but was dragged down by the sadness of this day's momentous event.

In February 1942, at age sixteen, I was accepted to the very prestigious University Heights Branch of New York University. Though this campus no longer operates as part of NYU, University Heights was at that time a small branch of the largest privately endowed college in the United States. It was a wonderful school that offered in its country atmosphere a stadium, track, tennis courts, Hall of Fame of Great Americans, and a compulsory ROTC program. The ROTC there had its own building and rifle range and scheduled a full-dress parade every Thursday, reviewed by a U.S. Army general. I was in the school's infantry battalion, and thus I was in an army uniform by 1942.

At the age of seventeen, I tried to enlist in the Army Air Corps. My parents lived in Florida a good part of the winter, and I had to have my sister sign so that I could enlist as a minor. I wanted to be a navigator, as I was fascinated by their ability to guide a plane so exactly. However, I was turned down for flying duty because of exophoria of my left eye (lazy eye syndrome). I refused ground duty. Therefore, I remained in the ROTC Infantry at New York University. We used the U.S. Army General Manual, paraded, and qualified firing weapons on our rifle range.

As far as my social life, we had campus dances and parties at Lawrence House, a social hall. I had many girlfriends, but at that time, I had the "old fashioned" belief that sex was only for married people. In fact, if I had died in World War II, I would have departed as a virgin. My first sexual experience was on my twenty-first birthday. One of my girlfriends was determined to give me a good birthday present.



After a year at the school, I had been transferred to the Arts and Science college, where I majored in science and history. Though the school canceled its football team during the war years, we did have an active intramural program, and we played touch football on the campus. Being on the baseball and track teams balanced my educational and athletic experience. The best way to make a college sports team was to obtain an athletic scholarship. Without one, an athlete was considered a “walk-on” in a general tryout. Even as a walk-on I made the baseball team; however, I had to wear a uniform that said “freshman.” In college athletics in the 1940s, freshmen were not allowed to play on the varsity teams. One day in the spring of 1943, a talent scout named Barrett offered me a Yankee Stadium tryout. He had observed me hitting balls about four hundred feet in batting practice. I was not a great catcher, but I could hit the long ball. In my tryout, I batted against a left-hander, Mario Russo. I put three balls into the left field stands. Barrett planned to use me for the Newark team of the American Association. But before I could begin playing for the team, I was drafted into the U.S. Army.

With two years of college and ROTC, I received my draft notice at age eighteen on June 26, 1943. I was happy to receive the notice; it was time to enter the service and repay our country for all the benefits extended to my family. Applying for a college exemption was not on my agenda, even though my professors were on my draft board. On July 10, 1943, I entered the U.S. Army.

