

THE EDUCATION OF

ALBERT SHANKER, the leading organizer of New York City teachers and one of the most powerful union leaders in the United States, looks disheveled in whatever he wears. When he lounges in his Mamaroneck home, his faded jeans and workshirt hang on a torso that seems never to have caught up with his overgrown legs. When he works in his Manhattan office, his well-tailored business suit appears limp, as though it tired long before its wearer.

At 55, he has been president of New York City's United Federation of Teachers for 19 years. When we talked in early spring, he had just been re-elected to his 11th consecutive term representing 75,000 teachers and school employees. For the past nine years, Shanker has also led the American Federation of Teachers, a nationwide union with 560,000 members (23,000 in Westchester and Rockland counties) in the teaching and health-care professions.

Shanker, however, seems less a power broker than a professor. Reminiscing about his childhood in Queens, he explains the history and sociology of the Depression so that a younger listener can better understand why he is the way he is. Expounding on the problems that plague teachers and schools today, his deep voice rises and falls, dramatically underscoring the importance of his words.

At times, Shanker is funny, and no one laughs louder than he. He is never boring, but he is often dogmatic, as though the Shanker point of view is the only responsible, informed position to take.

Shanker moved with his wife, Edie, and three children from New York City to Putnam Valley in 1966, and then to Mamaroneck a decade later. In his cozy living room—a clutter of African folk masks, house plants, magazines and records—he talked about how teachers influenced his childhood and determined his life.

When you moved from Manhattan to Putnam Valley, did you get any flak about leaving the school system your union represents?

Lisa Faye Kaplan recently interviewed theater director and former teacher Gene Feist for Suburbia Today.

The man who speaks for the teachers remembers when schools were a good place to learn, and to work. Now, he says, they are 'dumping grounds,' where professionals are treated like grunts.

BY LISA FAYE KAPLAN

A little bit. There are a lot of teachers who live out of the city, why should I be the only one who has to stick it out? (Laughs.) No, actually most of them live in the city.

Look, it's a free country. I even think that teachers have a right to send their kids to private school. That's what freedom is about. I didn't give up my rights as an American citizen when I became the head of the union.

Didn't that move indicate to some that you had no confidence in the very people you represent?

It didn't show that at all. The school my kid left in Brooklyn was a better school than he went to in Putnam Valley. But it did show that I didn't want anybody knocking at my door at midnight because they couldn't reach me in the office. I wanted a certain amount of privacy and distance. The alternative might have been to hire guards. (Laughs.)

Look, if they didn't like my moving, they could have voted against me. I didn't inherit the office. I'm not a king.

How did you research the Putnam Valley Schools?

We bought a very nice house near the Appalachian Trail, and we didn't bother to ask about the schools—or transportation.

You didn't think to ask about the schools?

We really didn't. We just assumed everything would be all right. And we were satisfied with where we were, so we didn't raise that question. Putnam Valley at one time had one of the best school systems in the state.

But then the people around Lake Oscawana, who used to be summer residents, retired and moved in year-round. The support for public school declined.

After Putnam Valley, because of the problems with schools and transportation, Edie by that time had a whole list

of things to look for. She knew exactly what she wanted. She researched the schools.

What were you looking for?

We wanted a number of things. Our three children (Adam, now 22; Jennie, 19; and Michael, 17) are very different. One of them, I won't say which one, did very well in school. One was an average student, and another had problems with learning. So we were looking for a district that had programs for all three of them. We also wanted a town that would have a lot of activities—athletics, movies. A place where they could get around on their own. Putnam Valley was very rural.

We wanted a community that was pretty friendly. When we moved up to Putnam Valley, the local newspaper had an editorial at the time, "Shanker Go Home."

When we moved here (Mamaroneck), it was just wonderful. Our neighbors wouldn't let us cook for two weeks. It's a community where people don't compel you to engage in community life, but whenever there is any problem, everybody is willing to help.

Mamaroneck is a school system that the community really supports, in spite of the annual fights that are the same in most communities.

If you lived in New York City now and still had small children, would you send them to the public schools?

I would send them to all but maybe 10 percent of the schools. Ten percent of the schools are problem schools in terms of real dangers. But 90 percent of the schools are safe as schools are, as safe as streets are.

You went through the school system in Queens.

I lived at the foot of the Queensboro Bridge—the bridge over troubled waters.

It was a working-class neighborhood, a very tough neighborhood, very

poor. I grew up in the middle of the Depression, the 1930s. I can remember a monthly experience of some family being evicted from the apartment house because they couldn't pay their rent, so they'd be out in the snow and rain with all their furniture. And my mother would send me out with peanut butter sandwiches or apples for the children.

And I went to a public school, which in those days were very heavily streamed (children were separated into classes according to ability).

I had many excellent teachers, and I remember many of them very well. They were teachers during the Depression, which was an excellent job. Twenty-five percent of the people were out of work completely.

You mean teaching was better than no job at all.

Teachers were able to afford to go to Europe, which was cheap; to afford to buy automobiles.

Was school important to you?

My parents were immigrants. I spoke only Yiddish when I entered school. To my parents, school was salvation. I was going to be the first American in the family, and I was going to be a doctor or lawyer or a dentist or a teacher, or something that was going to take me out of the life of poverty that they lived.

My mother was a garment worker, and my father was essentially a newspaper delivery boy. He got up at 2 in the morning. In those days, there had to be 40 different newspapers, and he would go from apartment to apartment, climbing up five or six flights of stairs. He only had three days a year off—the High Holy Days. He really worked like a beast.

My parents thought America was a place where I was going to make it because I was going to get an education. If you got an education, you could do anything.

They made sure I did homework and behaved. If I ever said anything about a teacher when I got home—if I said this teacher is no good or did something wrong—I'd get quite a licking. Because it was not my business to evaluate teachers or say if I liked them or not.

My job was to get my work done and bring good marks home. And if I did well, I got all sorts of rewards. I'd get gifts. I'd get allowance. I'd get to see movies I wanted to see. And if I didn't do well, I was punished.

Did you do well?

A*LB*E*RT*S*H*A*N*K*E*R



I did well until I was in the seventh grade. I was always in the top class. Then, in the seventh grade, I failed grammar, and my ego was absolutely shot when I was moved from the first track (level) to the second track.

And the teacher there kept me after school every day of the year and helped me to write and rewrite essays and learn my grammar. And I became the whiz of the school in grammar. I went from being a failure in that subject to being the school expert.

Did teachers "burn out" back then?

Yes. I don't know if they had "burn-out," but there was stress.

I remember the principal in the school was a tyrant. He was a man of Napoleonic stature, short and square. And he had a gold watch and next to it was a Phi Beta Kappa key. And every time he was coming towards the classroom, you knew, because the key would bang against the watch.

He'd throw a door open and start asking questions of the students. Well, the teacher would be in tears when he came in, because he would frequently criticize them in front of the students. Even though this was the middle of the Depression, and they couldn't find other jobs, some teachers left.

It was a job that had many tensions even then. But of course, the tensions were much different from what they are now.

In what way?

Student behavior was very well controlled. You came to school and wore certain types of clothing, or you were sent home right away. You sat down and folded your hands, and you raised your hands. The business of being caught chewing gum, or whispering, was a very serious offense. And I think all parents were like my parents. They were very supportive of the schools. Whatever the teacher wanted, that's what the child was going to do.

Once I didn't memorize "The Star-Spangled Banner" when I was supposed to. So one night my assignment was to write "The Star-Spangled Banner" long-hand, 40 times.

The whole thing?

The whole thing. By the time I finished, there were little blood marks on my index finger from just holding the pen.

What do you think would happen today if a Mamaroneck student was given that sort of an assignment?

Most parents wouldn't stand for it.

Continued on page 18

They would report the teacher, and the teacher would be in trouble.

What changed?

By and large, we had parents who were uneducated, and there was this tremendous educational gap. And they completely accepted the authority.

Do you think it's good for people to completely accept authority?

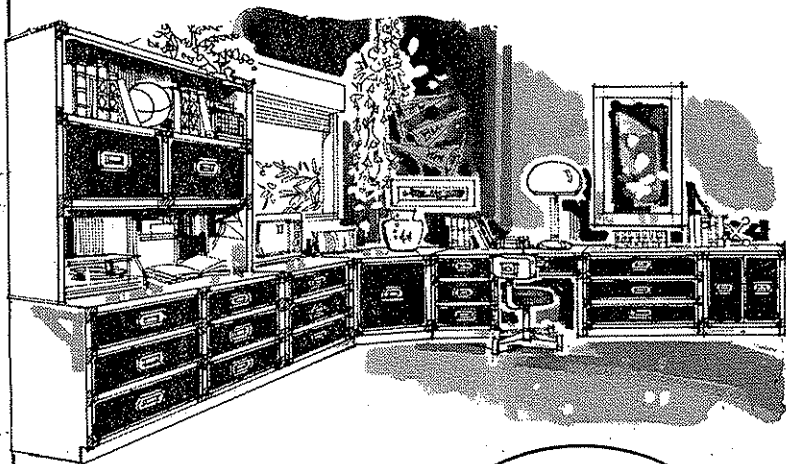
It's better than what we have now. As we parents got educated and more affluent, we got less driven as a people to push our children to succeed. We also felt the distance between ourselves and the teachers is certainly not the same as the distance between our parents and our teachers.

Secondly, I'm not driven by the same fears for my chil-

dren—that they're going to starve on the street, that they're going to end up in a life of crime because they can't make a living. I've said to my children, "Hey, you feel uncomfortable about going to college? I think you'll be making a terrible mistake if you don't go. But you don't want to do that? What do you want to do?" (Two of his children are in

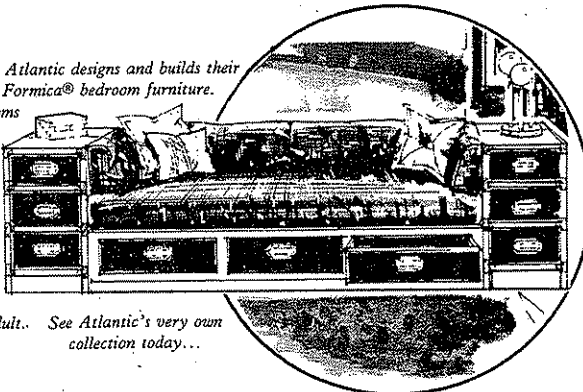
The kids growing up with two parents at work are put into an institution right away. They get "quality time," so called. Pretty soon, they won't even get quality time. They'll get a quality telephone call.'

The Campaign Collection by Atlantic



Atlantic designs and builds their own Formica® bedroom furniture.

These bedrooms are beautiful, extremely durable and designed to utilize every inch of space. There are styles and colors to match any lifestyle and any age group, from



teen to adult. See Atlantic's very own collection today...

Atlantic

FURNITURE CENTERS

Open Mon.-Fri. 10-9, Saturday 10-6
Open Sunday 1-5 (except Paramus)

YONKERS / 1966 Central Ave. / 914 WO 1-5177
PARAMUS, N.J. / 712 Route 17 / Tel. 201 447-1460
(Just North of Fashion Mall)
Other Locations: OCEAN TOWNSHIP, N.J. / HUNTINGTON, N.Y.

college.)

Yet, you seem regretful that the old work and discipline ethic is not as strong today as when you were growing up.

We are now coming to the end of a very small, short, unique period in American history where we thought, "Now we have built everything. We are an affluent society. And the only problem we have is what to do with our leisure time."

Look how fast that changes. Now all our industries are falling apart. We didn't rebuild our roads, our bridges, we have no railroad system. The Japanese are killing us in international trade. So is Taiwan. So is Korea. So is Germany.

We felt that tradition wasn't important. We felt family values weren't important. We felt that self-discipline wasn't important. We developed the "MEism" thing. And we have more suicides and lower productivity, more drug use, less in the way of belief and commitment.

What do you think is the result?

I think there is a movement back. There's a feeling that you can't just do your own thing. You have to rebuild the country. You have to work hard so you can compete with other countries and raise our standard of living. You have to have a dedication to country and have to be willing to fight for it.

The kids growing up with two parents at work are put into an institution right away.

They get "quality time," so called. Pretty soon, they won't even get quality time. They'll get a quality telephone call.

It seems you'd like to go back to the time when kids weren't allowed to question authority. In an environment like that, how does a child ever learn to question, to make judgments on his own?

They do. The fact is, all the kids I went to school with did rebel. They rebelled against their parents. As an adult, I rebelled against the system. I violated the law, went to jail (for 15 days in 1967 and again in 1970 for defying the Taylor law, which prohibits public employees from striking). I did all sorts of rebellious things. Right? I also did them in my adolescence, when I went to college.

You were a teacher at one point, weren't you?

I became a teacher accidentally. I was completing a Ph.D. at Columbia University in philosophy, but I ran out of money and patience. I said, "For one year I'm going to stop. I need money. So for one year, I'll teach."

In those days, there was a terrible teacher shortage. So I became a permanent substitute teacher. And I taught in an elementary school on the west side of Manhattan. It was the beginning of the Puerto Rican influx, 1952. And it was very, very rough. My salary was \$2,600 a year. My take-home pay was \$38 a week.

I would have left, but I joined the union. The union at that time was very small. Nationally, the whole union

had only organized 50,000 people. Most teachers were afraid to join the union, or they didn't believe in it—they thought it was not professional.

Because of my family background, my parents were very pro-union. And here I was, getting no money, doing a very hard job, with a very dictatorial principal, no time for lunch, even.

What kept me in teaching through the 50's was that I was active in the union, and I felt that teachers ought to have a strong organization to improve their salaries, to change their relationship to the principals, to have some voice in their own occupational lives.

Things had changed.

In my neighborhood kids came to school and they sat there with folded hands.

And here I walked into the classroom with kids yelling four-letter words, flying paper airplanes and making fun of my name. I felt destroyed my first day in school. I did not know how to get the kids to sit still and be quiet long enough to listen.

How did you? Or, did you?

Not always. There were bad days when it just didn't work. There were some classes where there were too many kids who were too violent and disruptive. But with most classes, I did. I found out that teaching was not so much what you had in your head, but to a large extent, it was like an actor onstage—the way you moved your eyes, the way you moved your body, the way you looked at the students. I had to establish a stage presence.

What was your stage presence?

It was a combination of being serious and tough, but always with a sense of humor. They knew I meant business, but they also knew that I liked them and I joked with them.

Most of the years I taught, I taught in Astoria Junior High School in Queens, and I lived in the neighborhood at the time. And I would invite students up to my apartment. We would go hiking on week-

ends or cave exploring. There was a close community relationship with students and their families.

Do you miss teaching?

I do not at all miss those classes that had violent and disruptive kids. I cry for those teachers who have to go to schools every day where they fear for themselves and for their students.

On the other hand, I had some average classes that really wanted to learn, and others that were really bright classes. If I had classes like that, I never would have left teaching. Even with all the belief in the union, I would have tried to do that after school, or part time.

I loved to teach those students who wanted to be taught and who were receptive. And I absolutely hated being a policeman and a psychiatrist and a jailer with kids, many of whom were sick. They're not getting anything out of the school setting. They're driving teachers out of the profession, and they're also preventing other kids from being educated.

How should teachers discipline students today?

I think you have to have certain rules in the school. If you get a child who can't get along with any teacher, and not just today and yesterday, but year after year, I think it's the job of the school to say, "This child doesn't belong in school. Let society provide some other place."

School is for those who follow the rules of the game. You can't play ball unless you follow the rules of the game. You don't stay in any place unless you follow the rules.

You can't just say the schools are a dumping ground that takes every person between certain ages, no matter how that person behaves. There's no other institution in society like that.

And if the schools don't adopt that, we'll have vouchers and tuition tax credits. Because parents are going to say, "If my kid's education is going to be destroyed by one sick kid in a class, then give

Continued on next page

FREE!



The complete Andersen window quality story.

It adds 24 pages to our quality TV message.

Please send me the free 24-page "Window & Gliding Door Answers From Andersen" booklet. I plan to build remodel replace windows. Mail coupon to Andersen Corp., Box 12, Bayport, MN 55003.

Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____ State _____
 Zip _____ Phone (____) _____

Come home to quality. Come home to Andersen.
Andersen Windowalls
©1971 Copyright © 1980 Andersen Corp., Bayport, MN 120-0583

reborn maternity
SUMMER SALE!
20% OFF*
EVERYTHING.

THROUGH MAY 30th
 WITH THIS AD ONLY

reborn...the Tri-State's largest discounter of better maternity clothing is proud to present the most fabulous selection of Spring-Summer maternity fashions anywhere!

FEATURING SUCH DESIGNER NAMES AS:

Jane Schaffhausen of Belle France • Sasson Evelyn De Jonge • Fran Klernan for Jeanette Great Times • Regina Kravitz • Sternmade M.H. Fine & Company • Cynthia Gregg

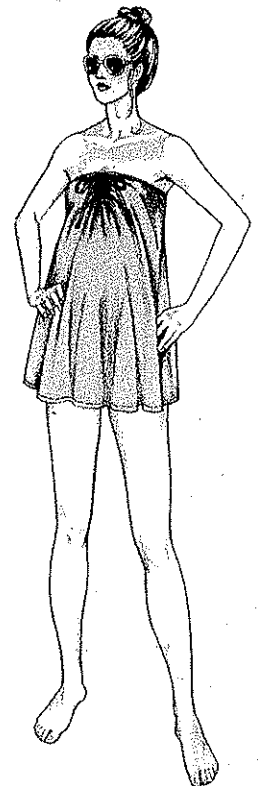
*Off our regularly discounted prices—NO OTHER SALES APPLY One coupon per customer only.

Visa, MasterCard, AmEx. Open 7 Days except Paramus. Call individual store for specific hours.

Send \$1 to NYC store for Spring-Summer color catalog.

NOW 8 GREAT LOCATIONS

- N.Y. 82ND ST & THIRD AVE. • MANHATTAN • 212-737-8817
- 215 EAST POST ROAD • WHITE PLAINS • 914-948-3914
- 1699 NORTHERN BLVD. • MANHASSET • 516-365-7259
- 602 CENTRAL AVE. • CEDARHURST • 516-569-5568
- 315 ROUTE 110 • HUNTINGTON • 516-421-2655
- N.J. 300 ROUTE 17 NORTH • PARAMUS • 201-265-9596
- 163 S. LIVINGSTON AVE. • LIVINGSTON • 201-994-4483
- CONN. 1098 POST ROAD EAST • WESTPORT • 203-226-3115



reborn MATERNITY

GW

SUBURBIA TODAY / MAY 22, 1981

me tuition tax credits, and let me take my child across the street to a private or a parochial school where they either won't let a kid like that come in, or they'll kick him out the first day he misbehaves."

If you can't "dump" these troubled kids in the schools, where will they go?

You need therapeutic facilities for those people.

But, you do not destroy the education of 98 percent of the students because you have 2 percent of the students who decide they have to scream, yell, throw things, pull knives.

Why don't these therapeutic facilities already exist?

It's expensive. But part of it is ideological. It's the old Spencer Tracy "there's-no-such-thing-as-a-bad-boy." Public schools feel they have to say every single child is educable. It's a good slogan, and a good thing to aim for, but it's an idea.

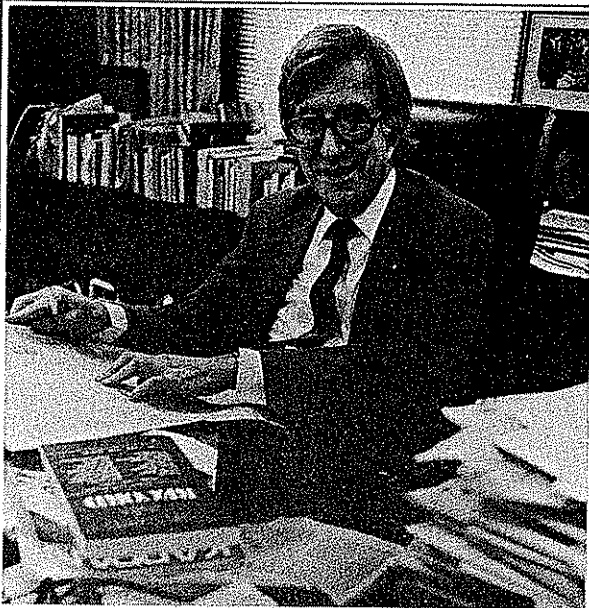
Do you think teachers today are as well-educated and as competent as they were when you were in school?

They're more educated. They may not be as well-trained. When I went to school, most elementary-school teachers didn't go to college for four or five years. They went for two years and training school. They did receive a lot of practical instruction—how to set up lesson plans, how to set up your blackboard, how to use your voice. Some of these dramatic things I was talking about.

Remember, in those days, only about 5 percent of the people in this country went to college. So teachers in those days came from the top 5 percent of the population. But today, 50 percent of the population goes to college, and by and large teachers come from the bottom of that 50 percent. In a sense, we've moved backwards.

Why are they coming from the bottom 50 percent?

Economics is an important part of it. A teacher's average starting salary today is about \$12,000, whereas you can become a trainee in most



'The principal and the superintendent are still four-star generals who can order people around,' says Shanker.

companies for \$18,000.

Second, it's the image in our society of working with children. If you don't call me a sexist, it's what used to be called "women's work." And now women are no longer going to do it either.

We got a big bunch of people during the Depression, because there were no other jobs. Then we had lots of talented women who had no place else to go. And then we got a whole bunch of people in the 60's who preferred the schools to Vietnam and got draft exemptions. Now we don't have a draft anymore.

Third, you have the authoritarian structure of the whole industry. I do not know of any other field that employs 3 million college graduates in which the principal and the superintendent are still four-star generals who can order people around. Get your plan book in every Friday; put it in the following boxes; I'll come in to observe you five times this year; make sure you have the following bulletin boards; do this, do that.

You're told you're a professional, but it's more and more like factory work, like a military situation.

What are some other reasons people don't want to go

into teaching these days?

There's the whole question of standards. A person in mathematics, a person interested in French, is likely to go into a field where they feel they can share that with others. They're not likely to go into a school where kids can decide not to take English, not to take math, instead take movies or camping or "life experience." Because then they feel the classes will be empty, and they're not going to be teaching at a level they're interested in, doing for kids what some teacher did for them.

I could stand in front of a bunch of kids and do what my teachers did for me. But I'm not going to stand in front of a class that says, "Who cares? I'm going to be promoted anyway. I'm not going to do my work."

How do you feel about your UFT re-election?

The first time I was elected, I thought that would be my only term, because the union was so filled with internal strife. So I thought I'd do what I could for two years and then somebody else would be president. I didn't think I'd get reelected.

You were wrong.

I was wrong. ■