

## For Mary Antin



Raab

At the turn of the century, a young Jewish girl, Mary Antin, came to America from Russia, and later wrote this about one of her earliest experiences: "Education was free. That subject my father had written about repeatedly, as comprising his chief hope for his children, the essence of American opportunity, the treasure that no thief could touch, not even misfortune or poverty. It was the one thing he was able to promise us when he sent for us; sure, safer than bread or shelter. On our second day I was thrilled with the realization of what this freedom of education meant. A little girl from the alley came and offered to conduct us to school. This child who had never seen us until yesterday, who could not pronounce our name, who was not much better dressed than we, was able to offer us the freedom of the schools! No applications made, no questions asked, no examinations, rulings, exclusions; no machinations, no fees. The doors stood open for every one of us, the smallest child could show the way."

A half century later, the Supreme Court finally ruled that Mary Antin's experience could no longer be denied to the black children of the nation. The Southern states and other localities which, by law, excluded black children from the mainstream schools, could no longer do so. This week is the 20th anniversary of that historic decree.

With that ruling, the country turned a sharp corner, not just for the schools. The *principle* of segregation was virtually wiped out; the *goal* of integration was affirmed. In 1955, about five percent of black children in 17 Southern states, attended school with white children. Today, about 90 percent of Southern black children attend school with white children.

**The next question, inevitably was: when is desegregation not integration? What proportions of white and black children comprise proper integration? No such questions were asked when Mary Antin went to school. In 1905, there were 24 schools in New York City in which at least 95 percent of the pupils were Jewish. There was then no push for breaking up ethnic concentrations which resulted only from housing patterns. There is such a push today, mainly because some connection has been made between school integration and improved academic achievement for black children.**

So the question of *de facto* non-integration came to the country, especially to the North. In the 11 deep (Confederacy) Southern states, about a quarter of the black students go to schools in which 90 percent of the students are black. In the North, about half of the black students go to such schools. No one is unaware of the controversy which has surrounded methods to attain fuller integration in fact. And the frustration has been deepened by disappointing results for academic achievement. Integration is critically important for reasons other than academic achievement. Integration is critically important for reasons other than academic achievement. And academic achievement is stunted for reasons other than non-integration. The chances are that academic achievement will even out more for various groups when economic achievement evens out for those groups - and no school system will be able to short-cut that.

Technically, educationally, our public schools are much better than they were when Mary Antin was a student. And they are just as critically important as they were then for providing a common entree, and promoting common national and democratic values. But, as everyone can plainly see, the public schools are suffering from increasingly paralyzed leadership. And that augurs no good. Only an infusion of interested citizens - not just parents, and not just people with single programs or panaceas - can save the schools.

**The San Francisco Unified School District has set up some special meetings around town to invite the participation of as many citizens as possible in shaping the future goals of the public schools. On May 18 from 9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. there will be such meetings at the following schools: Commodore Stockton, Everett, Roosevelt, James Lick, George Washington, Lowell, Lincoln, John O'Connell. On June 1, from 9 a.m. to 1:30 there will be such meetings at: Emerson, Francisco, Golden Gate, Hoover, Portola, Winfield Scott, West Portal, McAteer, Mark Twain, Jean Parker, Charles Drew.**

Everybody is invited to attend any of these meetings. Anyone who is interested should attend one of them.

Call it a morning for the Mary Antins, past and future.