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# MEMORIES OF CONCORD

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The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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I grew up in the 1940s in leafy Concord. It is a beautiful name for a suburb. It connotes peace, agreement, reconciliation. Concord afforded a very good atmosphere for children to grow up in. Neat houses, bright gardens and tidy people: clean and industrious, ambitious for their children.

In the 1940s, Australia was just getting over the Second World War. Children walked to school. No car drop offs in those days. The streets were safe and the days were mostly sunny. Sometimes, on Concord Road, opposite Wesley Methodist Church, I caught the 459 bus to school. The fare to school for children in those days was a penny. Ration cards were still in use. When I was sent to the shops, I had to present the small yellow ration coupons to purchase our family's share of the necessities: milk, butter, eggs etc. On the weekend, I would accompany my brothers, Donald and David, to the Concord West *Odeon* or the Central Concord *Ritz* to see an afternoon movie. The regular features, which were our favourites, were *Batman and Robin* or *Hop-Along Cassidy*. Entry to the cinema cost sixpence. Our parents, ever generous, gave us a shilling to include bus fares and ice creams. This was a happy time.

North Strathfield Infants' School was where I began my experience in public education. I had wonderful teachers, the first of whom was the redoubtable Miss Pontifex. Her name was symbolic of the power that she wielded over our young minds. She taught me the alphabet. She

used new books which were printed on shiny paper. This was a rare luxury in the austere conditions of post-war Australia. I can still remember the pleasant smell of shiny paper. And in those days, there were inkwells in the desks. We learned to write with slope cards. I still write in copperplate. After our generation, ball points completely destroyed the art of writing.

My other teacher in the Infants' School was Mrs. See. I then graduated to the "big" school. Class 3A was conducted in a room parallel to Concord Road near the corner of Correys Avenue. Miss Godwin was my teacher. In the "big" school, the boys were separated from the girls.

In Fourth Class, Mr. Casimir supplemented his classes with school broadcasts that emanated from the loudspeaker, high on the wall in the front of the classroom bordering Correys Avenue. Our lessons in singing were given on the wireless by Terence Hunt, who had a beautiful baritone voice. The songs we learned were usually English songs, like *The Ash Grove*. In fact, much of our education was English in character. We were the last children of the British Empire. It held "dominion over palm and pine". It had just triumphed in the Second World War, although with great suffering. The maps on the school walls showed our Empire coloured red. It occupied about a quarter of the world's surface. Little did we imagine that it would fade away in a couple of decades.

To celebrate the end of the war and Victory in the Pacific, we school children in Concord received a "VP medal". My father probably still has mine somewhere in his shed. Unkind people say I also still have my first penny. The times of austerity in the Depression and the war that

followed it, made us careful and prudent people. We also went to church on Sundays.

At first, I walked up Sydney Street to the Wesley Methodist Church. But eventually, when I was old enough, I attended St. Andrew's Anglican Church on the corner of Parramatta Road and Concord Road. The Union Jack and the Australian flag were placed over the altar of the church. Up near Burwood Road, St. Mary's Catholic Church reminded us of the divisions between Catholics and Protestants. I can still hear that church bell sounding the *Angelus* every night at 6pm.

In 1949, I was selected to leave North Strathfield School to attend Summer Hill Opportunity School – a school for 'talented' children. My Concord-centric days of education were over. Henceforth, I had to take the train or bus to school, and later, university. The process of growing up and venturing forth had begun. But I will always be grateful for those early secure days in post-war Australia. They were days of still continuing sacrifice and austerity. But also of safety and gratitude for the peace that had been won by heroic efforts in wartime.

The memories of most children of that era would extend to the lovely parks and play places in Concord. But for me, from the earliest days, my life was study and reading. More than 60 years later, nothing much has changed. On Sunday nights, with my partner Johan, I still return to Concord. There, in Sydney Street, opposite Bell Street, is our family home. My father is there in the kitchen preparing the Sunday meal. My late mother's graceful presence can be seen in the beautiful furniture and environment that she created. My sister Diana sometimes comes to

the dinner on her way to work at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. Her daughter Julie helps in preparing the meal.

It is a blessing in life to have such an upbringing and such a family. Surrounded by love, support and acceptance. We were children of Concord. If only the whole world could enjoy the peace of Concord. It is a peace that passes all understanding. Those who shared in Concord's bounty feel a duty to share such gifts with later generations and with the wider world.

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