



Gene Ziegler

Octogenarian Time Capsule

Mitchell's Secret

I grew up in a working-class city in the industrial northeast, in a comfortable row house not far from the city center. A church stood at one end of my street, a bar at the other, and a trolley-track ran down the middle. The red and green trolley rattled down the street, clanging its bell to signal a stop across from the church in front of Mitchell's Corner Drugstore.

Corner drugstores back then usually did not fill prescriptions, but sold over-the-counter drugs and a wonderful collection of magazines and comic books, plus a mysterious collection of gadgets, necessities, and oddities that appeared like magic on customer requests. The proprietor, Mitchell, worked the store alone and lived with his wife in an apartment above the store.



The store also featured a soda fountain and wide terraced semi-circular steps leading up to the front door. The steps, the soda fountain, and the comic books attracted all manner of neighborhood kids. We often met there after school and generally hung out there in the lazy days of summer.

Mitchell himself provided the real magnet for the store. He appeared an old man in the eyes of neighborhood kids, likely in his 40's in the day. A rare Jew in our otherwise Christian neighborhood, he seemed especially mysterious to us on those special occasions when he wore the Yarmulke. Our parents cautioned us to be respectful

and not stare or ask rude questions.

The neighborhood kids thought Mitchell the smartest man who ever lived. He knew every item in his vast inventory and where to find each item. He knew the names of authors and illustrators of each comic book, and he could discuss the story lines and link them back to original literature, as writers often borrowed from classical works. He could recite lines from Shakespeare which we found terribly funny because of the strange way Shakespeare's characters talked; "Alas poor Yorick...", holding up a paper skull. He knew math, spoke several languages and told us tales of his travels to places in the world that we never knew existed. With no children of his own to school, he showed a genuine interest in the neighborhood kids, helped us with our homework, showed us the magic of cross-word puzzles. He entertained us with the names of countries and cities too strange too believe. Such were two cities he visited called Buda and Pest that existed on opposite sides of the Danube River and had grown together to create the great Hungarian capital of Budapest. We

regularly stood in awe of Mitchell's intelligence and the breadth of his knowledge. How could anybody be so smart? What was his secret?

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Fast forward some three-score years, I have made the trajectory of my life one of curiosity, studying, reading and learning. I've spent most of my adult life on college campuses and I think I have finally discovered Mitchell's secret. Mitchell read. Mitchell's secret place was the public library. Had we kids been invited to visit his apartment above the store, I am convinced we would have found stacks of books and magazines, the treasure trove of a consummate mind. Mitchell never had the chance to go to college, but he knew that education was free for the taking if you had the curiosity and the drive. The secret power of the Jews for thousands of years has been literacy and study. Mitchell's gave me the gift of curiosity.

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What might Mitchell make of the modern-day Internet? I started my educational journey carrying IBM punch cards from my dorm to a computing center half a mile away, in the snow (at least not up hill). Today I sit in the comfort of my home office with my laptop, portal to the universe, with the works of a thousand libraries and millions of curious minds at my command. Not only can I drink from the seemingly endless firehose of free information and shared knowledge, I can query the most arcane thoughts, questions and ideas that pop into my head, and with razor-like precision, tap into others anywhere in the world with similar thoughts and ideas to share.

"The moon belongs to everyone, the best things in life are free", so the Sam Cooke song goes. The urge to share hard-found knowledge is the lifeblood of the creative and curious mind. Training of skills, knowledge and enlightenment are yours for the taking. Not everyone gets to go to college, but everyone with access to a library and the internet and the drive to learn can self-educate and in doing so, expand their opportunities for growth and success.

As it turns out, to those of us who have lived a life of reading and learning, Mitchell's secret is no secret at all.

