The only time I remember my mother speaking directly, and with great sadness, about leaving Germany on a kindertransport at the age of 10, was when I was back in Frankfurt with her some 40 years later. I was 19 or 20 years old. We were waiting for a train together, just she and I, in the Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof (central station). I saw her look at a platform adjacent to the one where we were standing, and she said “That’s where I waved goodbye to my mother and grandmother—it looks exactly the same.” And, indeed, it did. From both photographs and history books, I knew that although the allied bombing of Frankfurt destroyed much of the city, the central train station suffered only broken windows and minor damage. Only the advertising looked different. My mother remembers smiling while she waved goodbye so that her mother would not cry. She also remembers giving her favorite doll to the girl seated opposite her who was disconsolate. They were two of the 100 girls and boys on the train headed to relative safety in Switzerland. It was the last time my mother would see her family.

Writing an intellectual autobiography seems challenging, because I know that reading an intellectual biography is a bit like reading about love. It falls short of the author’s experience. My development as a scholar, like anyone’s, is bound up in a variety of life experiences and putting those experiences onto paper (or screen) risks stripping them of their vitality and meaning. Yet pen and paper (keyboard and screen) are the tools of our trade. They are imperfect tools, but they are the tools we have. And so I begin on that train platform in Frankfurt, not because it is the first experience, chronologically speaking, that shaped my scholarly endeavors, or even the most important one. I start there because I am guessing that, although my parents, both German Jewish refugees, spoke relatively little about their experiences during World War II, the intellectual lineage I inherited was surely shaped by the profound injustices that informed their childhoods.

It has been said that we don’t choose areas of intellectual inquiry but, rather, they choose us. I’m willing to bet my work in education, democratic community, and social justice are the above-ground products of scholarly concerns with deeper roots. For as long as I can remember, I have been interested in the ways people treat each other, learn from each other, and live together in communities, local, national, and global. When asked to contribute to this volume, I knew my biggest challenge would be in staying within the bounds of social education as a field. Like many academics, I’ve never been all that comfortable in one field, and my work tends to spill messily across disciplinary boundaries. But then, that is one of the strengths
of social education: its capacity for relevance to all teaching and learning. I have always believed social education should be at the center of the school curriculum, because all other subject areas and disciplines are made meaningful through their connection to the social world.

My intellectual development is rooted not just in the books I’ve read or the scholars with whom I’ve interacted but also in my experiences as a classroom teacher, camp director, political actor, and amateur musician (the last one being an important counterbalance to the analytical and methodical nature of scholarly work). In what follows, I trace my intellectual journey through the experiences that brought me to my current work. This journey has had more highpoints than I could have imagined (just now, for example, I love my various jobs: University Research Chair in the Sociology of Education, executive director of the research collaborative, Democratic Dialogue, and educational columnist for CBC Radio in Ottawa). But here’s a teaser for a few of the more difficult challenges that you’ll read about below: by the time I took my current position at the University of Ottawa, 10 years ago, I had flunked out of one university, suffered paralyzing writers’ block at another, and was fired from a third. Sometimes, I like to call these my four ‘F’s: Failed, Fickle, Fired, and Fortunate. I hope that after reading this chapter that you—like me—are left with the sense that the first three are inextricably linked to the last.

SOCIAL EDUCATION AND SOCIALISM

My earliest and most socially, intellectually, and politically influential experience with institutionally-based education took place not at school but in a youth movement called Hashomer Hatzair, an organization with socialist-Zionist roots that began in Europe in 1913. My parents knew that the private schools that both my older sister and I attended in New York City would provide an excellent education but not a socially balanced one. They wanted our academic pursuits to be matched with the kinds of social and educational experiences that nurture a strong sense of conscience, community, and social justice, though they would not have used those words. When I was nine years old, I followed my sister Miriam to weekly meetings in the Bronx with other children and youth, and then to weekend and week-long outings, and finally to summer camp in Liberty, New York.

All of these gatherings, in particular the summer camp, were modeled after the educational and social ideals of the early Israeli kibbutzim. Youth and young adults worked together planning educational programs and activities for younger children that emphasized the values of equality, community, justice, and cooperation. For the next 13 years, Hashomer Hatzair helped create a foundation for my ideas about education and community that, although I didn’t know it at the time, would become central to my later life as an educator. I became a counselor, area leader, director of cultural activities, and camp director and, upon reflection, I can see at least three aspects of my experiences there that informed my ideas about education for years to come.