

# The Open Air School

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When I was seven years old in 1942 our family physician Dr. Seifert told my mother that since my health was not improving, perhaps I would do better in what today we would call a school for the handicapped. I do not recall the official name of the school but it was always referred to as the Open Air School. The school had been started in the 1920's for children who had tuberculosis. By the 1940's doctors had been successful in reducing TB. The incidence and severity of the disease was beginning to be controlled so there were less kids being enrolled in the school. The school then changed its focus from TB to children with other respiratory diseases, and as they put it - *other delicate children*.

The concept of the Open Air School was a kind of Teddy Roosevelt attitude, that the outdoors and a highly structured atmosphere were good for the health. Since there were only about 100 to 150 of us, there were only a few classrooms and classes were grouped by age. Two classrooms were built back to back with a central wall between them. All the rest of the walls were actually only about two feet of regular wall at the bottom and then folding glass windows all the way up to about a foot from the ceiling. The windows were only closed after the last lesson of the day. This meant our classes were always open to the elements on three sides. There was only one reason to close the glass windows during the day and that was fog. In any other circumstance (rain, snow, hail, etc.) we just moved our desks away from the open window. Autumn and winter in London could get pretty cool but regardless of the temperature those windows were always open. On the colder days we just wore a sweater. During spring and summer unless it was raining we took our desks and chairs out onto the field and enjoyed the great outdoors. It took a little while to get used to being in the colder atmosphere all the time but even though we all wore shorts we got used to it pretty fast. The school bus picked us up in the morning around 7:30. We then filed into the main hall where our meals were served. We ate three meals a day at school and took a nap every day for an hour. At various times during the day it was therapy time—for me that was breathing exercises and exercises for my flat feet.

Of course when we were not in class we were missing a lot of lessons which meant we were getting further and further behind regular school. Following lunch we had about 30 minutes of play, and then it was time for a nap. Napping was a compulsory rest time and consisted of going to an outside structure with just a back wall and a roof where cots had been laid out again in the open air. Just in front of us was a large stand of Lombardy Poplars. It was very pleasant to lay with our eyes closed and listen to the breeze blowing through the tall trees and hear the drone of the occasional plane flying overhead. Nap time over it was time for another class or therapy period depending on our individual needs.

The time I spent at The Open Air School was very good for my health but disastrous when it came to my education. By the time I left that school when I was twelve I was at least two years behind regular school so it was no surprise that I failed the national eleven-plus exam—most of the children who had been at the school for more than a few years failed to pass that exam. So, I was destined to attend Secondary Modern School. Secondary Modern Schools were for kids who were deemed unable to understand more than the basics. It was for kids who were probably going to be working with their hands, or other low expectation careers. More than a few had the disposition of Tyrannosaurus Rex with IQs that were not much higher.

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