

The Teacher Who Changed My Life

Nicholas Gage

The person who set the course of my life in the new land I entered as a young war refugee—who, in fact, nearly dragged me onto the path that would bring all the blessings I've received in America—was a salty-tongued, no-nonsense schoolteacher named Marjorie Hurd. When I entered her classroom in 1953, I had been to six schools in five years, starting in the Greek village where I was born in 1939.

When I stepped off a ship in New York Harbor on a gray March day in 1949, I was an undersized 9-year-old in short pants who had lost his mother and was coming to live with the father he didn't know. My mother, Eleni Gatzoyiannis,¹ had been imprisoned, tortured and shot by Communist guerrillas for sending me and three of my four sisters to freedom. She died so that her children could go to their father in the United States.

The portly, bald, well-dressed man who met me and my sisters seemed a foreign, authoritarian figure. I secretly resented him for not getting the whole family out of Greece early enough to save my mother. Ultimately, I would grow to love him and appreciate how he dealt with becoming a single parent at the age of 56, but at first our relationship was prickly, full of hostility. **A**

As Father drove us to our new home—a tenement in Worcester, Mass.—and pointed out the huge brick building that would be our first school in America, I clutched my Greek notebooks from the refugee camp, hoping that my few years of schooling would impress my teachers in this cold, crowded country. They didn't. When my father led me and my 11-year-old sister to Greendale Elementary School, the grim-faced Yankee principal put the two of us in a

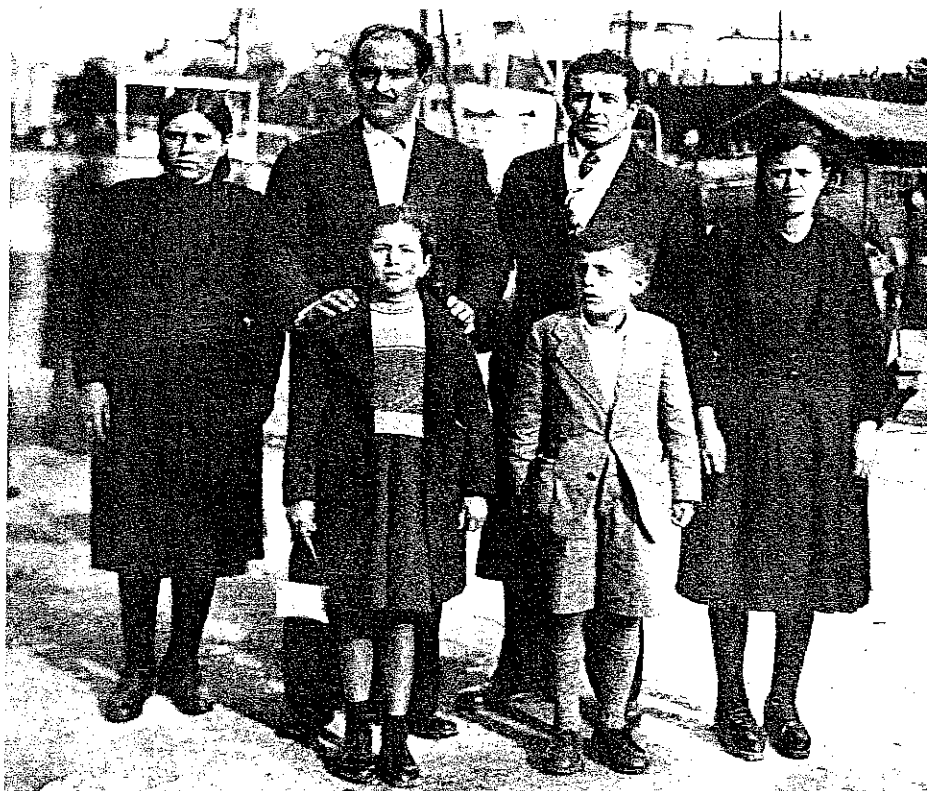
ANALYZE VISUALS

What does this photograph suggest about the relationship between Nicholas Gage and Miss Hurd after he became an adult?

A CHARACTERIZATION IN NONFICTION

What methods of characterization does Gage use to explain his initial impression of his father?

1. Eleni Gatzoyiannis (ě-lě'ně găt'zô-yân'is).



Nicholas Gage and his family at the harbor in Piraeus, Greece, ready to set out for the United States

class for the mentally retarded. There was no facility in those days for non-English-speaking children.

By the time I met Marjorie Hurd four years later, I had learned English, been placed in a normal, graded class and had even been chosen for the college preparatory track in the Worcester public school system. I was 13 years old when our father moved us yet again, and I entered Chandler Junior High
 30 shortly after the beginning of seventh grade. I found myself surrounded by richer, smarter and better-dressed classmates, who looked askance at my strange clothes and heavy accent. Shortly after I arrived, we were told to select a hobby to pursue during “club hour” on Fridays. The idea of hobbies and clubs made no sense to my immigrant ears, but I decided to follow the prettiest girl in my class—the blue-eyed daughter of the local Lutheran minister. She led me through the door marked “Newspaper Club” and into the presence of Miss Hurd, the newspaper adviser and English teacher who would become my **mentor** and my muse.

A formidable, solidly built woman with salt-and-pepper hair, a steely eye
 40 and a flat Boston accent, Miss Hurd had no patience with layabouts. “What are all you goof-offs doing here?” she bellowed at the would-be journalists. “This is the Newspaper Club! We’re going to put out a *newspaper*. So if there’s anybody in this room who doesn’t like work, I suggest you go across to the Glee Club now, because you’re going to work your tails off here!” ❸

mentor (mĕn’tôr’) *n.*
 a wise and trusted
 counselor or teacher

❸ **CHARACTERIZATION
 IN NONFICTION**
 Why might Gage have
 chosen to quote Miss
 Hurd’s actual words in
 this paragraph?

I was soon under Miss Hurd's spell. She did indeed teach us to put out a newspaper, skills I honed during my next 25 years as a journalist. Soon I asked the principal to transfer me to her English class as well. There, she drilled us on grammar until I finally began to understand the logic and structure of the English language. She assigned stories for us to read and discuss; not
50 tales of heroes, like the Greek myths I knew, but stories of underdogs—poor people, even immigrants, who seemed ordinary until a crisis drove them to do something extraordinary. She also introduced us to the literary wealth of Greece—giving me a new perspective on my war-ravaged, impoverished homeland. I began to be proud of my origins. **C**

One day, after discussing how writers should write about what they know, she assigned us to compose an essay from our own experience. Fixing me with a stern look, she added, "Nick, I want you to write about what happened to your family in Greece." I had been trying to put those painful memories behind me and left the assignment until the last moment. Then, on a warm
60 spring afternoon, I sat in my room with a yellow pad and pencil and stared out the window at the buds on the trees. I wrote that the coming of spring always reminded me of the last time I said goodbye to my mother on a green and gold day in 1948.

C AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

Reread lines 45–54.
Which **details** support Gage's purpose of explaining Miss Hurd's influence on him?

Nicholas Gage (top row, center) with his third-grade class



I kept writing, one line after another, telling how the Communist guerrillas occupied our village, took our home and food, how my mother started planning our escape when she learned that the children were to be sent to re-education camps² behind the Iron Curtain³ and how, at the last moment, she couldn't escape with us because the guerrillas sent her with a group of women to thresh wheat in a distant village. She promised she would try to
 70 get away on her own, she told me to be brave and hung a silver cross around my neck, and then she kissed me. I watched the line of women being led down into the ravine and up the other side, until they disappeared around the bend—my mother a tiny brown figure at the end who stopped for an instant to raise her hand in one last farewell.

I wrote about our nighttime escape down the mountain, across the minefields and into the lines of the Nationalist soldiers, who sent us to a refugee camp. It was there that we learned of our mother's execution. I felt very lucky to have come to America, I concluded, but every year, the coming of spring made me feel sad because it reminded me of the last time I saw my mother.

80 I handed in the essay, hoping never to see it again, but Miss Hurd had it published in the school paper. This mortified me at first, until I saw that my classmates reacted with sympathy and **tact** to my family's story. Without telling me, Miss Hurd also submitted the essay to a contest sponsored by the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, Pa., and it won a medal. The Worcester paper wrote about the award and quoted my essay at length. My father, by then a "five-and-dime-store chef," as the paper described him, was ecstatic with pride, and the Worcester Greek community celebrated the honor to one of its own. ♦

For the first time I began to understand the power of the written word. A
 90 secret ambition took root in me. One day, I vowed, I would go back to Greece, find out the details of my mother's death and write about her life, so her grandchildren would know of her courage. Perhaps I would even track down the men who killed her and write of their crimes. Fulfilling that ambition would take me 30 years.

Meanwhile, I followed the literary path that Miss Hurd had so forcefully set me on. After junior high, I became the editor of my school paper at Classical High School and got a part-time job at the Worcester *Telegram and Gazette*. Although my father could only give me \$50 and encouragement toward a college education, I managed to finance four years at Boston University with
 100 scholarships and part-time jobs in journalism. During my last year of college, an article I wrote about a friend who had died in the Philippines—the first person to lose his life working for the Peace Corps—led to my winning the Hearst Award for College Journalism. And the plaque was given to me in the White House by President John F. Kennedy.

tact (tăkt) *n.* an understanding of the proper thing to do or say around others

♦ **GRAMMAR AND STYLE**
 Reread lines 82–88. Notice how Gage uses the **concrete noun** *medal* and **abstract nouns** such as *pride* and *honor* to describe responses to his essay.

2. **re-education camps:** camps where people were forced to go to be indoctrinated with Communist ideas and beliefs.

3. **behind the Iron Curtain:** on the Communist side of the imaginary divide between the democracies of Western Europe and the Communist dictatorships of Eastern Europe; in this case, the camps were in Albania.

For a refugee who had never seen a motorized vehicle or indoor plumbing until he was 9, this was an unimaginable honor. When the Worcester paper ran a picture of me standing next to President Kennedy, my father rushed out to buy a new suit in order to be properly dressed to receive the congratulations of the Worcester Greeks. He clipped out the photograph, had it laminated
 110 in plastic and carried it in his breast pocket for the rest of his life to show everyone he met. I found the much-worn photo in his pocket on the day he died 20 years later. **E**

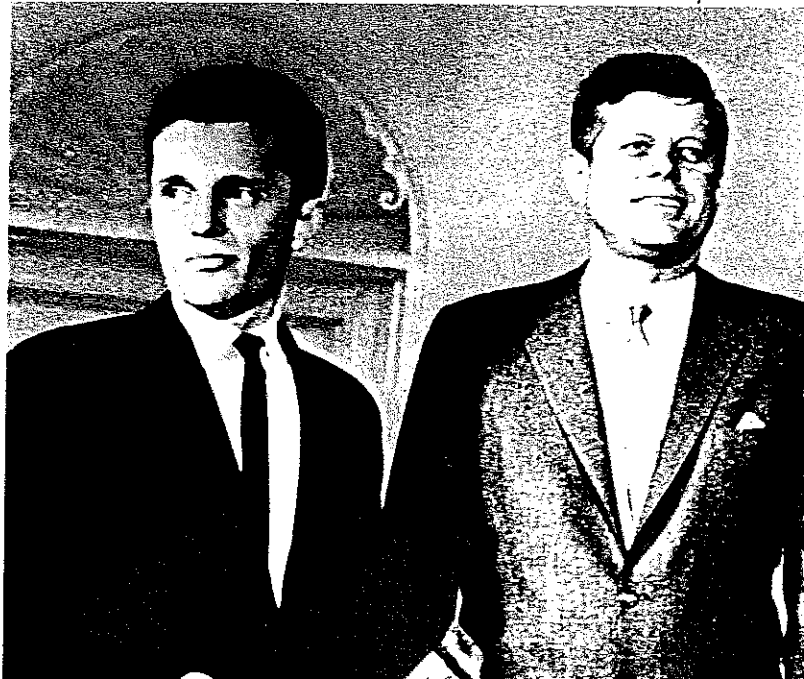
In our **isolated** Greek village, my mother had bribed a cousin to teach her to read, for girls were not supposed to attend school beyond a certain age. She had always dreamed of her children receiving an education. She couldn't be there when I graduated from Boston University, but the person who came with my father and shared our joy was my former teacher, Marjorie Hurd. We celebrated not only my bachelor's degree but also the scholarships that paid my way to Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism. There, I met the woman
 120 who would eventually become my wife. At our wedding and at the baptisms of our three children, Marjorie Hurd was always there, dancing alongside the Greeks.

By then, she was Mrs. Rabidou, for she had married a widower when she was in her early 40s. That didn't distract her from her vocation of introducing young minds to English literature, however. She taught for a total of 41 years

**E CHARACTERIZATION
 IN NONFICTION**
 What do the father's
 actions tell you about his
 feelings for his son?

isolated (i'sə-lā'tīd) *adj.*
 separated from others

Nicholas Gage (left) receiving the Hearst Award from President Kennedy in 1963



and continually would make a “project” of some balky student in whom she spied a spark of potential. Often these were students from the most troubled homes, yet she would alternately bully and charm each one with her own special brand of tough love until the spark caught fire. She retired in 1981 at
130 the age of 62 but still **avidly** follows the lives and careers of former students while overseeing her adult stepchildren and driving her husband on camping trips to New Hampshire. **B**

Miss Hurd was one of the first to call me on Dec. 10, 1987, when President Reagan, in his television address after the summit meeting with Gorbachev,⁴ told the nation that Eleni Gatzoyiannis’s dying cry, “My children!” had helped inspire him to seek an arms agreement “for all the children of the world.”

“I can’t imagine a better monument for your mother,” Miss Hurd said with an uncharacteristic catch in her voice.

Although a bad hip makes it impossible for her to join in the Greek
140 dancing, Marjorie Hurd Rabidou is still an honored and enthusiastic guest at all our family celebrations, including my 50th birthday picnic last summer, where the shish kebab was cooked on spits, clarinets and *bouzoukis*⁵ wailed, and costumed dancers led the guests in a serpentine line around our Colonial farmhouse, only 20 minutes from my first home in Worcester.

My sisters and I felt an aching void because my father was not there to lead the line, balancing a glass of wine on his head while he danced, the way he did at every celebration during his 92 years. But Miss Hurd was there, surveying the scene with quiet satisfaction. Although my parents are gone, her presence was a consolation, because I owe her so much. **G**

150 This is truly the land of opportunity, and I would have enjoyed its bounty even if I hadn’t walked into Miss Hurd’s classroom in 1953. But she was the one who directed my grief and pain into writing, and if it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t have become an investigative reporter and foreign correspondent, recorded the story of my mother’s life and death in *Eleni* and now my father’s story in *A Place for Us*, which is also a testament to the country that took us in. She was the **catalyst** that sent me into journalism and indirectly caused all the good things that came after. But Miss Hurd would probably deny this **emphatically**.

A few years ago, I answered the telephone and heard my former teacher’s
160 voice telling me, in that won’t-take-no-for-an-answer tone of hers, that she had decided I was to write and deliver the eulogy at her funeral. I agreed (she didn’t leave me any choice), but that’s one assignment I never want to do. I hope, Miss Hurd, that you’ll accept this remembrance instead. **C**

avidly (äV’Yd-lē) *adv.* with great eagerness and enthusiasm

F AUTHOR’S PURPOSE
Reread lines 123–132.
What **words** and **details** in this paragraph help Gage pay tribute to Miss Hurd?

G AUTHOR’S PURPOSE
Reread lines 145–149.
What purpose is suggested by Gage’s tone in this paragraph?

catalyst (kät’l-ĭst) *n.*
something or someone that brings about change

emphatically (ēm-făt’ĭk-lē) *adv.* with strong emphasis

4. **summit meeting with Gorbachev** (gôr’bē-chōf’): a high-level meeting between U.S. president Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, the last president of the Soviet Union.

5. **bouzoukis** (böō-zōō’kēz): traditional Greek stringed instruments resembling mandolins.