

## CHAPTER VI

### *Meet the Family*

Throughout the book I have tried to include some insights into my immediate family and my family life, but there was simply not sufficient opportunity to include all that I wanted. And so I have decided to add that information here as an introduction of sorts to the Shapiro/Smith Time Line and Family Tree. As the Family Tree shows, the two main “roots” for my Sister and I are the Shapiro and Smith families. Rose, my Mother’s Mother, was from Poland and died from a stroke in 1947 at age 67. She was a Solomon and had five siblings which included Tillie, Mini, Anna, Max and Morris. The only one who was still living when I was born, and whom I remember quite well because she passed away when I was in my forties, was Aunt Anna. She was the youngest of the six siblings and was a gem of a person. She lived to just a few months short of her one hundredth birthday and remained as mentally sharp to the end as anyone reading this book. In all the years I knew her, I never asked her questions about the Solomon family. I now look back and realize what a lost opportunity that was.

Mom’s father, Simon, was from England, and he had four brothers (no sisters) Jake, Harry, Morris and Dave. Simon, Jake and Harry all lived in Scranton. Simon took his own life before my Sister or I were born, and it’s a story neither my Mother nor her siblings ever seemed willing to talk about, so no one in my generation really knows the full story behind the story. The brothers were all born in England, and I was told they never lost their distinct British accents. Simon owned an insurance agency in Scranton, and Jake was a professional politician and an Alderman which, supposedly back in those days, was a powerful position with tremendous local control. I remember hearing stories that it was also a hotbed of corruption.

Jake died when I was six or seven years old, and despite the fact that it happened about sixty years ago, I still have a vivid memory of it or, perhaps more accurately, part of it. Jake and his wife, Yetta, had four children; Bea (Newirth), Hilda (Blume), Bernice (Brown) and Joe. Joe was a celebrity of sorts, although he rarely had contact with anyone in the family. The reason for his celebrity was that as a brigadier general in the army he was instrumental in organizing the famous Berlin Airlift immediately following the end of World War II. His efforts got him the cover of National Geographic Magazine in 1952 along with an accompanying story which chronicled his career. He ultimately retired from the Air Force with the rank of lieutenant (three star) general. He was then, and probably remains today, the highest ranking Jewish officer to serve in our country’s armed forces. (I know, there were rumors about George Washington being Jewish, but that was never confirmed!)

But back to the story. When his father (Uncle Jake to me) died in the late 1940s, “General” Joe flew up from Washington, DC in a four engine World War II bomber to attend the funeral. His arrival would have made a lasting impression on any seven year old kid. In those days the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Airport had not yet been built, and the General’s plane had no choice but to land at the Forty Fort Airport which back then wasn’t much more than a flat grass strip used for small private aircraft. My Dad and I were appointed to meet him at the airport and provide him with transportation to Scranton so that he could attend his father’s funeral. I barely remember Joe, and I remember nothing else from that day other than the size of the plane he arrived in and the volume of noise it generated when it landed. I’m guessing that if he wasn’t a general in the Air Force, we probably would have been meeting him at the local Greyhound Bus station rather than at the airport! Apparently, rank had its privileges, even back then!

My Mother was born and raised in Scranton at the family home on Madison Avenue, and she moved to Wilkes-Barre in 1933 when she and my Father were married. In 1961, five years after Dad’s death, she

remarried and returned to Scranton where her second husband, Harry Dickstein, lived. In the 1940s, 50s and even into the 60s, the Smiths who resided in Scranton were quite numerous. All of Mom's three siblings lived there along with their children, as did Uncle Jake, Hilda and Bernice along with their families, and Uncle Harry.

Aunt Minnie died when I was quite young, although I do have vague some recollections of her. She was Grandma Smith's youngest sister and was never married. That being said, I had the impression that she was that day's version of a "party animal". My Mother and her two sisters were fairly close to her, probably because she was younger than their other aunt's and closer to their own ages. In any event, they seemed to enjoy spending time with her. There are a few surviving pictures of Aunt Minnie and, interestingly, all of them are with my Mother. One such photo has been included at the bottom of page 168.

The oldest of Mom's siblings was Aunt Edith who passed away at age 97 after suffering through two years of stroke rehabilitation. I always thought of Mom and Aunt Edith, not merely as sisters, but more like twins who for some reason were born eighteen months apart. They were inseparable. They went shopping together, they socialized together, they played cards several times a week together, and they spoke on the phone every day and several times a day. They were both very beautiful women, and as they aged their hair turned silver (not white, but silver). The silver hair combined with their elegant sense of fashion and the regal way they carried themselves gave them an air of royalty, an observation that was made often even by total strangers. They were both opinionated, but particularly so with each other, and their constant bickering was more reminiscent of a married couple than of sisters. Edith, as was her basic nature, was always kind and generous, and both women looked for any occasion that might serve as an excuse to throw one of their famous dinner parties. They had an elegant, and sometimes even slightly overstated style of dress that called attention to and further highlighted their unique grace. Edith was rarely seen in public without a large brimmed hat even though such hats went out of fashion sometime in the 1960s or early 70s. But where no one else could pull off that look, on Edith it looked quite natural and well placed.

Edith was married to Uncle Joe who, along with his brother, owned a dental supply business. Uncle Joe had a good sense of humor which Edith seemed to enjoy. He treated her with great deference, a bit like a butler treats the one he serves, but without the associated formality. Through all the years I knew him he was always very heavy and weighed at least three hundred pounds. Sometime in the 1980s he died under unusual circumstances. That's not to say there was anything suspicious about his death, just that the circumstances of it were unusual and very difficult for Aunt Edith.

Edith wanted to do a day of shopping in downtown Philadelphia, and Joe agreed to accompany her on the trip so that she wouldn't have to drive. In the afternoon, Joe decided to do his own thing while Edith shopped. They agreed to meet at a designated location and time, and though Edith was there when and where agreed, Joe was a no-show. An hour went by, then another hour, but still no Joe. In desperation, Edith called the police, and an hour or two later the mystery was solved. Uncle Joe had been found dead sitting in a movie theater not far from where they were supposed to meet. It appears that he was not feeling well and that he went into the theater to get a place to sit down and rest. The cause of death was a massive coronary.

Miriam was between Monroe and my Mother in age. She and her husband, Uncle Lenny Newman, lived in Scranton on Vine St. where they shared a duplex apartment building with Bernice (Hilda Blume's sister) and Marty Brown. Uncle Lenny worked in the Scranton Shapiro's store until it closed in the early 1960s and then managed Bartikowsky's Jewelry Store in Scranton until his retirement. Sometime in the

early 1980s they relocated to San Diego to be near their two children, Louis and Barbara. Both were very loving people who always enjoyed the company of their family. From my childhood I remember Aunt Miriam as a very happy person, but in her later years she suffered from periodic depression. Although being near her children was very important to Miriam, she also missed her friends and family in Scranton. Uncle Lenny was very easy going and enjoyed the simple things life has to offer like a few glasses of beer or some Dewars on the rocks while listening to some light jazz.

The youngest of the Smith children was Monroe who during World War II made his family proud by valiantly serving his country in the Army recruiting WACs (Women's Army Corps) in Alabama and Mississippi. (No, I'm not making that up. You should hear his *war* stories!). He managed to remain single until his mid thirties when he married Marge Quinn, the family's first Irish Catholic. In those days mixed marriages were neither common nor well received by either side, and this was no exception. But purely on the strength of her personality and character (and great sense of humor), within a year or so Aunt Marge was accepted into the family as if she had been born into it, and she accomplished that in the face of some of the world's biggest critics...the Smith family! Growing up I never had a particularly close relationship with Uncle Monroe, although he was very close to my Father whom he considered to be his mentor. Like two of his sisters, Ruth and Edith, he had been blessed with the "stubborn" gene which accompanied him throughout much of his life. But the one thing I will remember him most for was his strong support of decisions I had to make regarding my Mother's care as her mental and physical condition deteriorated and she slipped further into dementia. During those years a different Monroe emerged that was more flexible and sensitive than the "old" Monroe. Perhaps it was also because he was the last of the siblings that we developed a much closer relationship. As of this writing, he recently turned 93, and other than his eyesight and hearing which are both, shall we say, "problematic", his mental acuity, sense of humor and physical condition are all remarkably intact and sharp for someone of his age.

And now let's move over to the Shapiro side of the family tree. With a few notable exceptions, I was not all that close to most of the Shapiros because most of them did not live in Wilkes-Barre (or even in Pennsylvania), and as a result I saw them perhaps once a year or even less. My Father was the second youngest of four siblings. The oldest, and only sister, was Goldie Levy who also turned out to be the last surviving sibling to pass away. I believe she passed away sometime in the late 1970s. Aunt Goldie was married to Joe Levy who died when he was in his late forties or early fifties, well before I was born. They lived in Brooklyn where they raised four children, and Goldie remained there even after Joe died and her children were all out of the house. Henry was the baby who looked very much like my Dad, though a bit taller, and was a very colorful personality. About two years after he and first wife, Ruth Oslander, were married, she and their baby died tragically in child birth. A few years later Henry married a woman from Paducah, Kentucky. I never met Aunt Jean because she never traveled to Wilkes-Barre, and I never went to Paducah. However, Uncle Henry did come to Wilkes-Barre, and I have many memories of those visits in Wilkes-Barre, Kingston and particularly Harvey's Lake where he would swim a mile or so while accompanied by my Dad and me along side in a rowboat. That may not seem all that remarkable, but consider this. He had only one leg! The other had been amputated above the knee while he was in college. It was supposedly the result of an injury caused by a shoe spike which became infected and then "turned into cancer". I'm not a physician, but I don't believe those types of injuries cause cancer, and I suspect that an infection probably developed and may have led to gangrene which ultimately led to the amputation. Uncle Henry wore a "wooden" leg (that's what they were called back then) that was hinged at the knee and looked like it weighed a ton. It was state of the art for its time, and although he had a decided limp, it never seemed to keep him from leading an active and normal life.

Since Uncle Charlie and his wife, Aunt Thelma, lived in Wilkes-Barre, and since he and my Dad were in business together, I saw them quite often, and they were very much a part of my life as I grew up. As was the Shapiro curse, all Shapiro men had a "sweet tooth" as well as a "nut tooth" which they were always

trying to satisfy. Since Uncle Charlie knew that any candy or nuts that he purchased would be consumed within minutes, he rationalized that it would be different if they were bought by *me* and kept in *my* coat pocket where he could occasionally take a small hand full. So he and I would take a shortcut between Shapiro's and the Charles Shop through Kresgie's five and dime store and invariably stop at the bulk candy counter.

"Louis will have a half a pound of the salted cashews and a pound of the caramel filled chocolates," he'd tell the counter attendant, and when she handed him the bags he'd put one in each of my jacket pockets. And for the rest of the day he had his hands in my coat pocket every few minutes.

How do you describe Aunt Thelma and do the description justice? When they talk about making one of something and then throwing away the mold, they were probably talking about Aunt Thelma. She was kind, sensitive, sympathetic, cordial and just about any other positive meaning adjective you can think of. She never spoke badly about another human being and was particularly sensitive to the feelings of others. When my Father died, and I felt very much alone for the next few years, she was one of the few people I did not hesitate to go to or lean on when the need arose. Uncle Charlie had a very serious stroke sometime around 1968 which left him largely paralyzed, unable to speak and confined to a wheelchair. By that time both Shapiro stores had been closed, my Mother had remarried and was out of the business, and Aunt Thelma ran the Charles bridal shop by herself. When Margie and I became engaged there was never a question as to where the bridal gown would be bought. Having met Margie only once, Aunt Thelma sent her a picture of a bridal gown so that she might get Margie's reaction which would provide her (Aunt Thelma) with further guidance in her search for the "perfect" gown. Margie immediately contacted Aunt Thelma to let her know that the gown in the picture was the one she wanted. I have been told by many women that selecting the first gown seen is something that almost never happens, but then again, not many people had the sensitivity and insight of Aunt Thelma.

Thelma and Charlie had one child, Esther May who, from my very first memories of her and up the present day, is the reincarnation of her Mother. What I have said about Aunt Thelma, well, ditto for Esther May. She was about nine or ten years older than my Sister, but they were much closer than cousins, and Sally looked up to her much as a big sister. Esther and her husband, Bob, were married when I was about five years old, an occasion I still remember because the party my parents threw the night before the wedding was the occasion for which I wore my first pair of long pants. (Maybe it doesn't sound like a big deal now, but back then it was bigger than voice mail!) When I was a young child, Esther and I had a very cordial relationship, although we were not particularly close, probably because of the age difference of about sixteen years. However, after the death of my father, she and Bob were a great source of support as I stumbled through my adolescent years and then continued stumbling through my first year or so in college. As the years passed, and particularly after my sister passed away, I grew much closer to Esther and Bob, and today I truly think of her more as a sister than a cousin.

But we're not yet quite done with the Shapiro's. Louis was my Father's father and the person for whom I was named. He had three brothers, Morris, Isaac and Wolf. My Mother spoke quite often and very glowingly about "Pop" Shapiro whom she said was an exceptionally kind and generous man. His father, my great grandfather, was Mitchell. Louis's wife, Esther (for whom Esther May is named), was a Lipka, and if you were to look at photos of Grandma Esther and her daughter, Aunt Goldie, at similar ages, they'd be hard to tell apart. In fact, not only did many of the children bear remarkable resemblances to their parents, some of the cousins looked remarkably alike as well. The reason for this is that two Lipka sisters, Esther and Anna, married two Shapiro brothers, Louis and Israel. There were five Lipka siblings in all; one brother, David, and four sisters, Esther, Ann, Sarah, and Celia. One final note regarding the Shapiros which has never been talked about all that much but which I think we can now let out of the bag.

My Father had a cousin, (I believe his last name was Rothstein) who was apparently mixed up with the mob. Just so there's no confusion here, we're not talking "mob" as in a group of *disorderly* people, but rather "mob" as in "I'll break your legs and then do bad things to you!" One day sometime in the 1930s he was found in New York's East River, not swimming or water skiing, but floating. Again, so there's no confusion, I mean floating as in "dead man's float"! So you see, the Smiths and their General don't have a monopoly on celebrity!

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And now we come to my immediate family which consisted of my Mother and Father, Ruth and Melvin, my Sister, Sally, and me. Sally was roughly seven years and seven months older than I, and only in my later years did I come to realize how much that age difference fueled many of the family dynamics and, in particular, her relationship with me. They say that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, and this was certainly true for both Sally and me, although our apples fell from different trees. Sally was, in many respects, much more like our Mother, and I like our Father. Sally, like Mom, was very loving and had Mom's stubborn streak, temperament and need for structure in all that she did.

Since Sally was an only child for nearly eight years, she was the center of my parents' attention during that time, and that was particularly so with our Father who, I have been told, took great pleasure in spoiling her. Although I was not yet born to witness it, I have been told by many people how as a child my Sister could, and did, manipulate my Father. She also apparently had quite a temper, even as a child, that would manifest itself in occasional tantrums akin to a religious exorcism! And while she still retained a bit of her temper as an adult, I remember her as being a very caring and loving person who was very involved with both her family and friends. After Dad died, she went out of her way to try to help me deal with that trauma even though she lived in Boston and wasn't around all that much. Sally died quite suddenly on October 20, 1970 from a cerebral hemorrhage while on a visit to Scranton with her family. She had suffered another such hemorrhage seven years earlier while in her seventh month of pregnancy with her youngest child, Elizabeth, and we all knew that another hemorrhage was a real possibility.

Sally, Harry and their children had come to Scranton for a weekend visit, and what better way to celebrate their arrival in Scranton than with a dinner party at my Mother's. In addition to Mom and Harry Dickstein and Sally and her family, dinner was attended by Margie and me, Aunt Edith and Uncle Joe, Aunt Miriam and Uncle Lenny, and I think (but I'm not sure) Hilda and Joe Blume. By 9:00 PM, when Margie and I left, Aunt Miriam and Uncle Lenny were the only other ones remaining who were not staying at Debbie Drive that evening. As we walked in the door of our apartment I heard the phone ringing. Margie answered and immediately handed it to me. "It's Uncle Lenny", she said.

Only moments after we left, he explained, Sally said she felt a numbness slowly spreading over one half of her body, and knowing all too well her medical history, someone called an ambulance. While I was on the phone with Uncle Lenny, she was being taken out to the ambulance for transport to the hospital. If my memory is correct, and it may not be, I believe she was fully conscious when she left in the ambulance, but she slipped into a coma in transit. Margie and I got to the hospital shortly after the ambulance and everyone else arrived and began a very long vigil which lasted about four days. Dr. Goldstein, a close family friend, was called in to direct her care, and he was very good about updating the family every few hours. However, the truth was that there was nothing to report. For roughly four days she remained in a coma kept alive by an assortment of machines. None of the tests showed any signs of

real life or brain activity. Dr. Goldstein finally acknowledged that there was nothing that could be done, and he ordered the artificial life support mechanisms to be shut off.

At the time of her death, Sally was a month sort of thirty six and I twenty eight. When I look back now and think about it, I am quite surprised how little time I actually had with my Sister. She left for college in 1952 when I was just barely ten years old, and from that time onward she was only in the house for occasional and brief visits. While at Wellesley College she worked in New England in the summers, and she found a job in the Boston area upon her graduation in 1956. As you might imagine, her trips home were not all that frequent. Although she lived another fourteen years past her college graduation, I saw her perhaps twice a year during that period because from 1958 onward I was either in military school in Bordentown or at Penn State, quite occupied and busy myself. Long distance telephone calls in those days were quite expensive, so calls were spaced out and brief in duration.

What I find very revealing is that Sally's oldest son, Michael, who was a bit over twelve years of age when she passed away, actually spent more time in the same household with her than I did! Since I was twenty eight when she died, today I retain more memories and probably with a bit more detail than Michael does, but he actually spent two years more living with Sally than did I.

The memories of Sally I have retained are all quite pleasant. I don't think it's because I have blocked out any unpleasant memories, but rather that there probably weren't many bad memories to begin with owing to our age difference. As further evidence that the apples didn't fall far from the trees in our family, I was, and still am, very much my Father. He was, as I am today, non-confrontational, and we both used humor as a way to relate to people and get through the day. On the other hand, Sally had our Mother's strong will and determination, and everything was pretty much black and white for them both. However, Mom's black and white and Sally's black and white didn't always coincide, and when that happened their wills were strong and tempers short. These were epoch battles of titans!

In retrospect, I remember Sally very much as a mother figure to me in my early years. She wouldn't hesitate to step in and shield me from Mom's temper, a task I actually think she grew to enjoy because it was a way of showing her own strength and independence. In my pre-school days she took me to school with her as a part of what was probably that day's version of "show and tell". As a child, and with one minor exception when I punched her in the stomach, I can honestly say that I never remember a tense moment between us, and the punch in the stomach was initiated by me, not her. (More about that later!)

I have a few rather vivid memories of Sally from my early years even though many of those memories are sixty years or more old. It seemed as if she almost always had a headache in the afternoon when she came home from school, and she often went to bed for a brief nap. I can still see her sleeping on her back with one hand holding the soft sheet over her mouth and just below her nose. It was a classic Sally pose and one she always adopted the minute she got into bed. I have often wondered if the fatigue, and especially the headaches, were a harbinger of what was to come.

The earliest of Sally's friends, well before I was born, was Sherry Wasserstrom. The Shapiros and Wasserstroms shared a duplex apartment building on Academy Street in Wilkes-Barre, and Sherry and Sally were the same age. My Mother used to tell a story about what she and Mrs. Wasserstrom would do if the girls began fighting which I gather was a fairly common occurrence. The mother on guard duty where they were playing at the time would give the other child a potato to give to take upstairs (or downstairs) to her mother, and when she arrived home with the potato that mother would know that the girls had been fighting.

Prior to Academy Street Sally and my parents lived at the River Side apartments on Ross Street probably sometime around 1937 give or take a year. Somewhere in my Mother's vast collection of photos is a photo taken during a big flood in the late 1930s. In the photo, Sally is being passed through their second floor apartment window to someone in a coastguard boat. Yes, the water was that high, and the apartments are still there for anyone who wants to check it out. Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate that particular photo or I would have included it.

Sally attended Wyoming Seminary in high school, and she had many friends. Most of these friends went to "Sem", as it was called, but there were still others who attended the public high schools. The names I remember (maiden name first and married name last) were Madge Klein Benovitz, Jane Fleischman Sugar (or possibly Sugarman) and Janice Karp. (I have no idea what Janice's married name is or even if she ever married.) Madge, who still lives in Wilkes-Barre was probably her closest friend during those years.

Some of my earliest memories of Sally were centered around the dumbest thing; her handwriting! Those were days before the ball point pen was invented, and the fountain pen was king. Many companies such as Waterman, Sheaffer, and Parker make a nice living providing fountain pens to the masses. Well, maybe not the real masses, maybe the top of the masses because their pens were a bit on the pricey side. However, for those adults (and kids) who didn't want to make a life long investment in a writing instrument, there was another company called Esterbrook who manufactured a very functional fountain pen that could be bought for a fraction of the cost of the others. It was also a pen that had a very distinctive look that you could pick out ten or twenty feet away. Rather than a solid color, as were most pens, the Esterbrooks had a marble like finish which was available in four or five different marbled colors. Sally's choice was a redish, pink marble with veins of black running through it. The other memory I have of this pen is that she always filled it with a distinctive turquoise ink, and if you look at any of her surviving correspondence it will almost certainly be in that color and probably written with that very pen.

But my near obsession with her handwriting doesn't stop there! She had a somewhat unusual handwriting style which was particularly unique for that era when the "Palmer Penmanship Method" was king and was taught to all elementary school kids. The Palmer Method required that you write with a slant to the right, and if you didn't the teacher was all over you like a drunk on a passing beer truck. In direct contradiction to the Palmer Method, Sally's handwriting has perfectly vertical; not a degree or two to the left, or a hair to the right, but perfectly vertical as in straight up and down. But wait, there's more. All of her letters were perfectly rounded. It was almost as if once she finished writing a line, she went back over the line with a magic pen that erased any jagged edges. So there it was; my big sister with a neat looking pen, a cool color ink and this great up and down handwriting style which was in open defiance of the accepted penmanship system of the day. So what would you do if you were in second or third grade and just learning to write? You'd do exactly what I did. I tried my damndest to copy her handwriting style.

Well, here I am some sixty years later with the handwriting of a fish with a crayon, so you tell me how you think it worked out! First of all, my Sister was right handed, but I was left handed. That may not sound significant, but since in the USA we write from left to right, and since fountain pen ink is notoriously slow to dry (are you getting it yet?), what do you think happens to a left hander if he follows the traditional Palmer instruction? Don't bother straining yourself to figure it out. I'll tell you. If you're a lefty, as I was and still am, your left hand drags over every single letter you write smearing the still wet ink in every single word. The end result was illegible writing and a very angry teacher. So when that happened to me, as I'm sure it did to countless lefties all across the country back then, one of two things would take place. (1) Either your teacher tried to force you to write with your right hand, or (2) the teacher allowed you to continue writing with your left hand while further allowing you to adopt a so

called “backhand” posture so that your hand would no longer smear everything you wrote. After numerous unsuccessful attempts on the part of my teacher to make me a righty, she finally gave up and allowed me to stay on the *dark* side where I remain today. However, between her strong and many attempts to make me switch hands, the dictates of the Palmer method, and my burning desire to emulate my Sister’s handwriting, the results were not pretty nor has it gotten better with practice and the passage of time.

Sally was a reasonably accomplished piano player who took lessons for many years. These lessons were given by a woman named Ms. Durkin who was so stiff I doubt that she could have bended at the waist if her life depended on it. When Ms. Durkin came to the house to give Sally her weekly lesson, I was told in no uncertain terms that I was to get lost for the duration of the lesson. I was probably only six or seven at the time, yet my dislike for this woman approached an obsession, or as much of an obsession as a child can have. It was as if God himself had assigned me the mission of doing all within my power to disrupt Sally’s weekly piano lesson, and I became quite creative in pursuing that mission. A few minutes into the lesson, I’d sort of sneak into the living room where the lesson was being given on our baby grand piano. I’d sit on the floor very quietly until I was noticed, and then I’d smile at Ms. Durkin as if to reassure her that I had no hostile intentions. After a few minutes, I might cough and then smile, or sometimes I’d even hum until I got the evil eye from Ms. Durkin.

On one such occasion I did my humming routine, but this time I continued humming even after I’d gotten the Medusa stare from Ms. Durkin. Then, as if to make her point, she stared directly at me and put her hand on Sally’s hand to make her stop playing. Sally knew what was going on, and I guess she was both embarrassed at my behavior and madder than hell because of it. Without any further warning, Sally jumped up from the piano bench and ran toward where I was standing in a far corner of the room. I thought she was going to rip my head off, so when she got close enough I punched her in the stomach as hard as I could. Apparently a six year old boy’s punch isn’t nearly as effective as a fourteen year old girl’s. My punch did nothing but to further anger the beast, and Sally didn’t waste a second returning the favor with a shot to my stomach that quite literally took my breath away. I dropped to the floor like an overcooked string of pasta, and even though I was already crying, no sound came out because I couldn’t breathe. And then Sally started to cry which in turn brought out my Mother, and of course Bertha, and what followed wasn’t pretty. However, what I find particularly interesting is that this was the only time that I ever remember fighting with my Sister, and it was also the last time I “sat in” on one of her piano lessons.

My Mother told a few good stories about Sally’s temper tantrums when she was younger. It must be something with the name “Sally” because my daughter Sally was also known wide and far in her early years for throwing some really excellent tantrums. One day Margie, my Mother and “my” Sally (back when she was about three years old) were shopping, and in the middle of the mall Sally decided to throw one of her tantrums. My Mother had never seen her do this before, so it was somewhat of a shock, and it prompted her to relate to Margie a story about one of my Sister Sally’s better known tantrums which occurred around age four or five.

My Mother, Father, Grandmother (my Mother’s mother) and Sally were returning from a vacation in Atlantic City. They had stopped for lunch at a restaurant, and afterward they took a few minutes to stroll the grounds and look at the gardens and two swans named Mike and Ike which were swimming around a small pond. After several minutes my Father told Sally it was time to leave...but no response.

“Sally, we’re leaving”, he repeated, but again, nothing. “Sally, come on now, we have to go.”



“No,” came the reply. “I’m staying with Mike and Ike.”

My Father took her hand and tried to lead her toward the car, but she angrily pulled her hand away.

I’m staying, and you can’t make me go,” she responded quite defiantly.

Without saying another word, my father picked her up and headed toward the car where my Mother and Grandmother were already waiting. Sally screamed and wiggled, and by the time they reached the car she had changed positions so that Dad was holding her by the waist and upside down. He opened the back door and put her in next to my Grandmother. She ended up with her head down toward the floor and feet up in the air and all the while still screaming. Dad got in the driver’s seat, started the car and pulled out onto the highway, and yes, Sally was still screaming. A moment or two later the screaming finally stopped, and my Mother and Father looked at each other in relief that this tantrum had been fairly short.

A few moments later Dad look into the rear view mirror just to check the situation in the back seat, and what he saw puzzled him. Although Sally was now quiet, her head was still down near the floor and her feet were still up in the air, and next to her Grandma sat quietly though with a very distressed look on her face. Knowing something wasn’t quite right, Dad turned his head for a quick look, and that quick look was more than enough to explain Grandma’s distress. Sally had her teeth sunk into Grandma’s leg, but Grandma, the ultimate trooper, was willing to take one for the team rather than get Sally in further trouble by revealing her plight. Dad immediately pulled the car over to the shoulder, got out and removed Sally’s jaws from her prey. While Sally had apparently become somewhat famous for these tantrums, the closest I ever came to seeing one was the piano lesson incident which had been provoked by me, not Sally.

A final incident I would like to relate is fairly typical of the relationship Sally and I had. Her inclination to mother me is probably the strongest memory I have of her. One year while I was at Penn State, I contracted a very bad virus of some sort which included strep throat and a respiratory infection and which finally put me in the University’s infirmary for about a week. During that period Sally telephoned me regularly to see how I was doing. But on the fourth or fifth day of my stay I received, at the infirmary, a package from her which I opened with great anticipation. I was expecting nothing from her and had no idea what was enclosed. What I found was something I had not seen before; a small box with three individually wrapped packets of something called instant chicken soup. To be more exact, Lipton’s chicken soup, a new product which had just come on the market. It was obvious that instant chicken soup wasn’t going to make me better, but it was her way of being there to take care of me.

\* \* \*

I guess I knew my Father about as well as any fourteen year old knows his father, but that’s as far as it went because he died two months after I turned fourteen. He didn’t live long enough for me to have a relationship with him past my adolescent years, a fact that has always saddened me. That being said, my father was still a major influence on me. He was actively involved in both the local civic and business communities and was widely known for his kindly demeanor and exceptional sense of humor. He was thirty nine when I was born which, in those days, was considered old to be having a child. But as I was growing up, that didn’t stop him from teaching me sports and spending a fair amount of time with me.

While I remember well his physical presence and mannerisms, I can no longer recall his voice, but I do remember quite well that his tone was always kind and solicitous. He rarely, if ever, raised his voice, and

in my fourteen years of knowing him I can recall but one instance when he became angry. Unfortunately that one time was with me, and it was when he received word that I had just been expelled from Hebrew School about three or four months before my Bar Mitzvah. To add to the heat of the fire I had lighted, at that moment in time he was on the board of directors of the Temple. Without really even thinking about it, I had managed to embarrass him, something that he was not accustomed to and certainly did not deserve.

When he returned home from work that night he barely said a word to me or my Mother and Sister. Dinner was much quieter than usual, and even my Mother was quiet at the table. It was quite unsettling because I had never seen my father act that way before, but I knew it was serious because I had never seen my Mother subdued like that before in the presence of my father. When the meal was done Dad motioned for me to follow him. He led me into my room where he expressed in no uncertain terms his great displeasure and disappointment in me. I could tell he tried hard to mask his anger, but it still bled through a bit, and although he wasn't yelling, I thought it might move into that category at any moment. When he was done, he simply turned and abruptly left the room closing the door behind him. I immediately figured out that the closed door probably meant that I should remain in my room until instructed to do otherwise, and so I did. I remember feeling really badly, not just because my father, who had never before been angry with me, for the first time was now angry, but more so because *I* had caused this reaction. Here was a man who never got mad at anyone, and it took his son, his own flesh and blood, to accomplish the feat. Not exactly a proud moment for me. Although I think his intention was to vent rather than make me feel bad and want to atone for what I had done, it probably accomplished both.

Now we move the clock ahead about twenty minutes or so, and there was an almost tentative knock on my bedroom door. When I opened it, there stood my Father holding a bowl of ice cream with chocolate sauce (a Shapiro male of the species staple) which he offered to me with an extended hand. I took the bowl, said "thanks", he kissed me on the forehead and went back to the living room. Tellingly, he did not close my bedroom door when he left. The bottom line was that as badly as I may have felt about the incident, he felt even worse! And that in a nutshell is what my Father was really like. He rarely, if ever, got angry. He always seemed very calm and in control, and he was incapable of being mean.

Earlier in this chapter when talking about Uncle Charlie, I made mention of the notorious Shapiro "sweet and nut tooth". The Shapiro males had what bordered on an addiction to sweets and nuts. On the sweet end of things, while they enjoyed cakes, pies and other baked goods, their real focus was on candy, and in the case of my Father, candy that had nuts in it was the best of both worlds! I don't know if it was the nuts he really enjoyed, or if the nuts were merely a palatable vehicle to assimilate salt into his system, but he was attracted to anything that had nuts and salt in it. When we lived in Kingston, there was a neighborhood store about a block and a half from our house that had a soda fountain and snack bar. At least one or two nights a week after dinner, Dad would give me some money and ask me to go to the store and pick up a can of Planter's peanuts. Of course there was always a little extra so that I could get something for myself as well.

When I look back on his unrestrained consumption of nuts, there are correlations I can make between that consumption and his two biggest health problems. He was hospitalized no less than twice for bleeding hemorrhoids and at least twice for a bleeding ulcer. Both problems became so severe that they had to be corrected surgically, the hemorrhoids some time in the late 1940s, and the ulcer in the spring of 1952. I remember the ulcer operation so well because it was at a time when ulcer surgery was still somewhat experimental and was done at only a few select hospitals across the country. His surgery was done at the University of Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia where he remained hospitalized for three weeks following the surgery. I can still remember the first time I saw the incision. It ran from the top of his

groin vertically all the way up to the bottom of his rib cage, and the scar had the imprint of what looked like a pair of shoe laces the entire length of it. They had quite literally removed more than half of his stomach, and the surgery routed food directly into his intestine where digestion was accomplished. Because the intestine couldn't hold as much food as his stomach did prior to the surgery, he would eat much smaller and more frequent meals. But the worst part of the whole ordeal was...no more nuts!

One of the best memories of my Dad, and the one thing he left me that I will have forever, is my love of astronomy. One summer night when I was five or six years old and we were spending the summer at Harvey's Lake, I was outside shortly after dark looking for nightwalkers to fish with the next day. I don't know why, but I looked up at all of the stars, and then I began to wonder what those little pinpoints of light really were. In order to get that answer, I went to my source for everything, my Father.

I was surprised to learn that my Father really didn't know much more than I did about the stars, but he promised to find out. A few days later he brought home a book called "The Stars, Sun and Planets". This was my introduction to astronomy, and over the next several weeks my Dad would read the book to me almost every evening. I was too young to read it myself, and too young to understand a lot of the concepts, but that one book, which I kept until we moved to Jermyn Drive in 1977, was responsible for kindling in me a fire that still burns today. Over the next few years until I was able to read comfortably on my own, Dad and I read many astronomy books together while discussing what it all meant. What was particularly interesting was that once I asked the first question he became as committed to the quest as I was and seemed to enjoy it as well. In the many years since I asked him that first question, astronomy has grown to be one of the great loves of my life, a love that was made possible by and nurtured by my Father.

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Even though I'm roughly two thirds of the way there, I can't imagine what it would be like to live for a hundred years. My mother lived to be one hundred years and seven months almost to the day. During that time she had two children, five grand children, seven great grandchildren, and buried a daughter, two husbands and outlived nearly all of her friends. She had what you could call a "full" life having experienced some of the best things life has to offer as well as some of the worst.

We are fortunate to have a large number of photos of my Mother, my father and their families from their childhood days through their last days. The photos of my Mother as a young adult are particularly striking with her jet black hair, exquisitely sculpted facial features and movie star beauty. Even as a young child, I remember how striking her beauty was. But as I grew older and the years went by I learned that there was a lot more to her than just physical beauty. She had a moral compass that always pointed straight ahead, and everything in her mind was either black or white. There was no grey because she instinctively knew right from wrong and had no difficulty in making that distinction.

As a mother she was caring and loving, though quite stern. She was exceptionally well organized in the household, and she expected others in the family to follow that lead. As a child, organization was not my forte, and my lack of it was a continuous point of friction between us until I eventually left home for college after which my time at home was minimal. Until I was a young adult I had trouble having any type of communication with my Mother that involved me disagreeing with her. You could probably even say that I had a fear of disagreeing with her.

By any measure we had a fairly close relationship, but that closeness did not stem from my childhood relationship with her, but rather from a completely different relationship that evolved much later in both of our lives. When my Father died suddenly at age fifty three in 1956, my Mother was forty nine years old and I fourteen. It was a very difficult time for us both, and for some years that event probably served more to push us apart than it did to bring us closer. She had trouble dealing with and understanding the sensitivities of an adolescent male who had been traumatized by the abrupt loss of his father, and I in turn had absolutely no sensitivity to, or even an inkling of, what she was going through having lost her husband who was her life partner and primary bread winner for the family. At the time I had no idea of how many problems the death of my Father had created or how alone she was in having to address those problems. The decision to send me to a boarding military school in the beginning of my junior year of high school must have been quite difficult for her, not to mention expensive, for the cost of this school was on a par with a good university. The thing that got lost in the shuffle from my perspective is that with my Father gone and my Sister out of the house, she would be all alone. Despite that fact, not to mention the cost of the new school and the financial burden it put on my Mother, she did what she knew to be in my best interest. Looking back now on that decision, there is no doubt that sending me to military school was unquestionably the correct decision. This was unquestionably a life saving decision and experience. Military school was a turning point in my life that made me recognize and accept academic responsibilities while learning some self discipline, neither of which were previously my strong suits. On my Mother's part, it was both a gutsy and expensive decision, but without that decision, I don't know where my life might be today. This was but one example of her willingness to make hard decisions, even if the decision was to be accompanied by difficult consequences. Her ability to deal with adversity, and her resilience in the aftermath of adversity were truly remarkable.

The death of my Father was, as one might expect, a severe blow to my Mother as it would have been for any woman of her age. But as traumatic as that may have been, the death of my Sister was even greater. Her grief was indescribable, and even though she managed to get on with her life, it left a scar that was evident until the day of her own death. When my Mother was somewhere around 96 or 97 years old, and dementia was having its way with her mind, I was having a visit with her at Elan Gardens when out of the blue she suddenly asked, "Where is Sally?"

Thinking it to be a reasonable question, because "my" Sally lived in town and visited her regularly, I responded, "She's at work, Mom."

She looked me right in the eye and said very softly, "No, I mean your Sister Sally." For a moment, I was caught off guard because it had been several years since my Sister had been brought up in any conversation with my Mother.

"Mom," I answered in an equally soft tone of voice, "Sally died a long time ago."

She slowly shook her head up and down as if to accept what she had just been told. "I thought so."

I think she really knew all along that Sally was dead because her reaction was one of resignation and sadness rather than shock. She was very regal, almost like a monarch in what she did and said, and always with class. But her most important concern and greatest love was for her family, always for her family.

Some of my earliest memories go back to the home where I was born, 263 South River Street in Wilkes-Barre, just a few doors down from Temple Israel where I attended Hebrew School, where my Bar Mitzvah was held, and where many other family events took place. We had a live in-maid named Bertha. (Yes, Bertha. And no, I didn't make it up!) Bertha was what you might euphemistically call "big for her age". She was probably in her early or mid forties (in those days who could tell!), about five foot ten, several hundred pounds, and she could do the one hundred yard dash in a bit under an hour and a half. If Sally or my Mother were considered to be stubborn, then you could say that Bertha was to *stubborn* what Tiger Woods is to *infidelity*. And when my Sister, Mother and Bertha all "got into it", it was the show of shows to witness. I think that's where Sally must have honed her early tantrum skills. You'd think that two grown women could bully an adolescent into doing whatever they wanted, but Sally was up to the task and did well in holding her ground.

In the 1940's, long before T-V, we would sit in our sun parlor after dinner gathered around the radio to listen to the popular shows of the time. And when I wasn't listening to the radio, I was downstairs at the Karnofsky's. They owned the duplex apartment house in which we lived, and they were as much my family as my Mother, Father and Sister. Fanny Karnofsky and her husband Clem, Aunt Fan and Uncle Clem as they were know to me, were a bit older than my parents. I would run as freely in their home as I did in my own, and because of my preference for cowboy outfits with a pair of cap guns and a sheriff's badge, they nicknamed me "the sheriff", a name which is still used by their two sons Jay and Bob, sixty years later!

About once a month or so on Sunday we made the trip from Wilkes-Barre to Scranton to visit my Mother's family. I guess it was probably more an event than a trip, and it stretched our respective patience quotients to their very limits. There was something about that trip that created instant tension. From the moment we got up the morning of the trip you could feel and taste it in the air. Everyone was on edge, even my Father who seemed to live in an almost perpetual state of calm. By the time we were ready to leave, usually around mid morning, you could cut the air with a dull butter knife. Everyone was on edge and looking for any opportunity to justify a good venting.

The trip to Scranton wasn't the forty five minute shot up I 81 that it is now because there was no I 81 or any real highway at the time. We left Wilkes-Barre and crossed the Market St. Bridge into Kingston. From Kingston we made our way down streets, not roads, through the "metropolis" of Forty Fort, then Wyoming, Exeter, West Pittston, Pittston, Dupont, Duryea, Moosic, and finally Scranton. The whole trip probably took an hour and half, and we were exhausted by the time we got there.

But, you ask, where is *there*? *There* was here, there and everywhere! On one of these typical Sunday trips we might stop and Aunt Miriam and Uncle Lenny's, Aunt Edith's and Uncle Joe's, Hilda and Joe's or Uncle Monroe and Aunt Marge's. Most trips had at least two such stops, and sometimes we hit all four! Each stop was usually accompanied food, lots of cousins around my age and, of course, lots of noise. The festivities would usually wrap up by around 3:30 or so, particularly in the winter, so that we could make it home before dark.

And speaking of cousins, one of mine, Louis Newman, shared along with me the same first name. On several occasions during the course of our Scranton trips this became a source of confusion. When one of us (usually me) misbehaved, the parent of the offending child wanted to be able to single him out without any difficulty, so some genius came up with the bright idea to call us by our first AND middle names. I was Louis *Benjamin*, and he was Louis *Edward*, names which are occasionally used by other family

members even today. (Editor's question: Don't you have to be from the south to use both your first and middle names?)

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There are times when it seems as if events in the universe converge as if by fate. One such occasion was the weekend of September 9, 1956. This was the weekend my Sister Sally became formally engaged to Harry Martin whom she had dated for a year or more. The weekend began on Friday afternoon with the arrival of Harry, his father and his sister Ann from their homes in Pittsburgh. My parents had planned a weekend of activity centered around food which began with dinner on Friday night at our home in Kingston. I don't recall all that took place on Saturday, and I'm sure none of it was of any real importance, but the engagement became official at dinner on Saturday evening. The Martin family's trip to Kingston was finished off Sunday morning with brunch at our home after which we said our goodbyes and the Martins began the six hour drive back to Pittsburgh.

Their departure left me the rest of the day to get ready for the first day of my freshman year at Wyoming Seminary prep school which was to be the very next day, Monday, September 10. The Martins left sometime around 11:00 or so to drive back to Pittsburgh, and since it was a beautiful summer day, I decided to go next door to play with one of the neighborhood kids. Dad left for the golf course, and Mom and Sally did their own thing in different parts of the house. About an hour and a half later I heard an ambulance siren on the street which seemed to come quite close and then stop quite suddenly. After a few minutes of wondering where it had stopped, my friend and I decided to see for ourselves, and we ran from the back yard to the front yard in time to see two ambulance attendants leave the front door of my house and go to the ambulance parked at the curb. They removed a stretcher from the vehicle and hurriedly wheeled it back into the house.

Something was horribly wrong, so I ran across the lawn and into the front door of our house. There, in the living room, was my Mother who was visibly upset and my Sister doing her best to calm her down. It was obvious that something was very, very wrong. But before I could ask any questions, our family doctor, Dr. Jackier, emerged from the bedroom hallway, the ambulance attendants right behind him, but with an empty gurney. He walked slowly into the living room and stood in front of us looking much like a kid who had just been called into the principal's office.

"I'm sorry," he said in a barely audible voice while looking at my Mother. There's nothing else we can do." And then after a brief pause, "I'm afraid he's gone."

"Who is *he*, and where did *he* go?" I wondered quietly to myself.

My Mother, who was still being held close by my Sister, broke out into hysterical crying. Dr. Jackier stood there looking uncomfortably helpless, and I, well, I wasn't really sure what was going on, and for a few moments no one seemed to even notice that I was there. The two ambulance attendants left quietly, and the doctor gently ushered Mom and Sally over to the sofa. It was then that I finally realized what was going on, but it all happened so fast that it felt as if a mighty wind had just gone through the house and unsettled everything, including my life.

No one seemed to be watching me, so I decided to investigate for myself. I walked slowly down the hall leading to the bedrooms. The door to my parents' room was partially closed, so I slowly opened it and saw my Father, apparently sleeping on his back on his side of the bed. It was all so normal looking. Whatever I had heard a few moments ago was obviously wrong, and Dad was just having a little nap. I

stood there for some time listening and looking for some sound or other sign of life like movement or breathing. I then tentatively stepped into the room and stood next to where he was lying on the bed. Finally, almost in desperation, I leaned down and put my ear next to his mouth and nose expecting to hear a breathing sound, but there was nothing. The reality of what had just happened began to overtake me like a freight train, but I was still not completely convinced that he was dead. Next, I poked him gently in the arm, then again and again. “Dad”, I whispered into his ear. “Can you hear me?” But nothing. My God, he really was dead!

For the next several hours people arrived at our front door in a steady stream. People I knew, and those I’d never seen before. But what I remember as particularly strange was that everyone seemed to whisper, especially when talking to my Mother. She was sitting on the couch and they would lean over and whisper something in her ear which often made her cry. The whole thing was very much like a dream because it was confusing and unfamiliar. I don’t remember all that much about the next week except that the number of people who were at the house during our waking hours was overwhelming. I guess this is what you would call an *eventful* weekend and the convergence of three important events: my Sister’s engagement, my Father’s death, and my matriculation in high school, and all within less than forty eight hours from start to finish.

Naturally, I didn’t go to school that week, and when I did finally have my first day at Wyoming Seminary I was already a week behind, a week that took me more than two years to catch up on. I can’t help but think about the Martin kids as well and why so many children in my family suffered the same fate of losing a parent while still in their childhood.

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It was sometime in November of 1956. I found myself standing in front of a tall, stone archway with wrought iron gates, and although I knew this was not the case, I somehow recognized it (or thought I recognized it) as the entrance to Hansen’s Amusement Park at Harvey’s Lake. Hansen’s was a magical place where a few times each summer Dad would take Sally and me for a few hours on an escape of mind and body where kids were king and anything was possible. We would ride the many rides, eat cotton candy, and thoroughly enjoy ourselves. I looked through the gate squinting and shielding my eyes against the blinding rays of the rising sun which was just now making its way above the distant horizon and which was perfectly framed by the stone archway. As I looked through the arch, a silhouette of sorts seemed to appear out of nowhere, but because of the bright sun it was impossible to see what the silhouette really was. As it drew closer it began to take on a more distinct form which I recognized as a person, and when it had almost reached where I was standing I could see who that person was. It was my father. He greeted me with his customary smile and kiss on the top of my head. I was so happy to see him, and I hugged him as hard as I could.

“Dad, what are you doing here?” I asked anxiously. “Aren’t you dead?”

“We never really had a chance to say goodbye, so I came back to spend the day with you.” He looked at me with a smile that was both happy and kind.

And for the rest of the day we had the park to ourselves. No lines, no crowds, no park staff. Just the two of us, all alone, riding all the rides and enjoying the most perfect summer day of all time. The sky was totally clear and a beautiful shade of blue, and the green grass between the rides had patches of wildflowers in every color imaginable. On this day everything was brighter and crisper than ever before. What an absolutely perfect day!

Dad looked at his watch. "I have to go now," he said while stooping down so that his face was at the same level as mine. Our eyes were only inches apart. "I know you'll be good for Mom, and believe me...everything will be okay," he said very reassuringly." He kissed me on the top of the head, hugged me for a moment, and then turned and walked back through the stone arch into the setting sun.

"Dad! Dad!" I yelled after him as loud as I could, but his silhouette kept getting smaller and smaller until there was nothing left to see but the blinding disc of the setting sun.

I was crying uncontrollably when I felt someone hugging me. "Shhh...Shhh," the voice said. It was my Mother.

I remember that dream even today probably as well as I did on the night it occurred a bit more than fifty three years ago. And while any psychologist will probably tell you it was just my psyche's way of seeking closure for an event that had traumatized me, I guess I'll always wonder if there isn't perhaps *another* explanation.

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My Father was in business with his older brother, Charlie. They owned three dress and bridal shops, two in Wilkes-Barre and one in Scranton. In those days retailing wasn't a bad way to make a living because until the early or mid 1950s all stores always closed at 5:30 and just about everything was closed on Sundays. My Mother and Charlie's wife, Aunt Thelma, both worked in the stores, and because I often went there from school, they became a big part of my life. There were two "Mr. Shapiros" and two "Mrs. Shapiros", and when the stores were first opened it must have been difficult to keep them straight. However, that problem was dealt with quite effectively, though I don't know by whom. Someone came up with the idea to call them Mr. Melvin and Mrs. Melvin, and Mr. Charles and Mrs. Charles, names that stuck forever. Sometime in the 1980s, many years after the stores had gone out of business, several of the former employees of Shapiro's got together at lunch for a reunion. My Mother happily attended, and I managed to stop by for a few minutes. I was surprised and amused to find that so long after the store had closed they all still called my Mother "Mrs. Melvin".

As I began to grow into adolescence, I spent more time at the stores on Saturdays and once in a while after school. I would help with opening and checking in in-coming merchandise, work the cash register, wrap purchases, or do just about anything that needed to be done. For these services I received a modest pay check as well another almost indescribable fringe benefit. Shapiro's, the dress store on Public Square, is where I spent most of my working hours. The store itself had a wide open area when you entered the store, and then it quickly narrowed to a rack of clothing on each side with a relatively narrow aisle down the middle. This narrow corridor space continued back through dresses and gowns, a fitting area, the alterations room where the fitters and their sewing machines were situated, and then finally into the office area which had desks for my Uncle, my Father and three office clerks. But I left out the best part. The fitting area had full length mirrors on one wall and several fitting rooms with flimsy curtains on the other. I quickly became quite skilled, perhaps *expert* might be a better word, at finding reasons to go from one end of the store to the other, and I was quite successful in taking in the sights while appearing not to be looking. I used to think of it as a gift, a divine gift, that I had been blessed with.

Shapiro's and the Charles Shop were both in Wilkes-Barre. Shapiro's carried everything from sportswear to coats, dresses and gowns, and the Charles Shop carried some of the same merchandise as Shapiro's, but it was a slightly smaller store with the emphasis more on slightly higher end lines of bridal and



bridesmaids' gowns. All three stores were under a corporate entity called Melvin's Inc. My Father and Mother spent most of their time at Shapiro's while Uncle Charlie and Aunt Thelma spent most of their time at the Charles Shop. The Scranton store seemed at times to be almost an afterthought, and Dad and Uncle Charlie split that duty alternating trips to Scranton a few times a week. The office and merchandise receiving area was in the back of Shapiro's in Wilkes-Barre from where the business was run.

While I was in grade school, I spent a fair amount of time after school at Shapiro's, especially when Mom was working and there was no one at home to watch me. I'd hang around the front desk, or back in the office, and find dumb things to keep me occupied until closing time at 5:30. As I grew older, I would work in Shapiro's on Thursday evenings and often on Saturday's as well. Over the years, the business grew to be a home away from home of sorts for me. There was very little staff turnover, and most of the women who worked there had been with the business for quite some time. I remember these women with great fondness, many of whom kept in touch with my Mother for many years after the store closed.

As I entered my teens, I was given more "responsibility" in the store. However, that doesn't mean "managerial" responsibility. Here are a few examples of what was involved. Since all new merchandise was shipped to the office at Shapiro's in Wilkes-Barre, that merchandise had to be checked in, ticketed and then transported to the two other stores. Twice a week the rear seat was removed from either my Dad's car or Uncle Charlie's, and the merchandise going to Scranton was unceremoniously loaded into the car. That's how Scranton deliveries were handled, but getting merchandise over to the Charles Shop, a mere block and a half away, was another story. In the office area was kept a wheeled, covered cart, the same type commonly seen being pulled or pushed through the streets of New York's garment district. We also had an office boy whose job it was, among other things, to take the cart back and forth between Shapiro's and the Charles Shop as necessary to move merchandise around. When I turned thirteen, someone determined that I had become mature and responsible enough to handle that chore, and believe me when I say that it was a real chore.

First of all, once the cart was loaded and ready to go, I'd wheel it out the back door of Shapiro's and down an adjacent alley to get to Public Square which was the main access route to the Charles Shop. After dodging pedestrians on the sidewalk of Public Square, I turned off onto South Main Street where the remaining half block of the journey was made on a much narrower sidewalk. But here is where the tricky part came in. The degree of difficulty became much greater for me because I decided I didn't want anyone I knew seeing me pushing the cart. And that was doubly true for any girls I knew. So, as I pushed the cart I was constantly on the look-out for familiar faces, and when I saw one I'd execute a practiced move to the other side of the cart where I couldn't be seen. I also reasoned that the faster I pushed the cart, the faster I'd get to the other store and the less chance there was that I'd be seen.

The second main area of new "responsibility" created so much embarrassment for me that I'm probably blushing as I type this. We also employed a full time window trimmer who was on a perpetual tour between stores to keep the sidewalk display windows updated, and about once a month or so the "windows" (as they were referred to) would be stripped clean and readied for a totally new display. When I say "stripped clean", I mean just that. Not only were decorating items like artificial leaves, tree branches and bolts of fabric removed, the mannequins themselves had to be stripped. So there I was in a display window elevated about two feet above the sidewalk, and doing...you got it....removing the clothes from the mannequins! There was no place to go and no way to hide. I just had to get it done as quickly as possible to reduce my exposure time, but it was rare I didn't get at least one knock on the window from some passerby who knew me. That experience, which continued for several more years, traumatized me beyond description. In fact, it's probably the reason why today I'm afraid of naked women!

There was one other thing about the business that I always thought was particularly neat. During the course of a typical day, every hour or so my Father and Uncle Charlie would check the cash register in each store to see what the day's take was up to that point in time. They each had special keys that somehow allowed them, and only them, to retrieve that information from the registers. But the neat part was how they transmitted that information back and forth to each other and their wives without anyone else knowing what they were talking about. They had devised a rather simple and very functional number code based on the quasi-French words COMETALIVUZ which, if spelled correctly would mean in French, "How are you?" Each of the letters of the code stood for a number beginning with C equals 1, O equals 2, and so on through U equals 0 (zero). Now you're wondering, "what's the "Z" for? Simple! "Z" indicated a repeat of the last number (or letter). So, if I said, "CUZZ", that would mean \$1,000, and they tossed those letters back and forth as if it was their native tongue.

As was the custom in those days, our stores, and all other retail businesses, operated from 10:00 AM until 5:30 PM Monday through Saturday. There were no evening hours, and so called "blue laws" prohibited businesses from opening on Sunday under penalty of law. Sometime in the mid 1950s all of that changed, and suddenly the stores were opened until 8:30 on Thursday evenings. A few years later that spread to Monday night, and eventually it grew into the greatly expanded retail hours that we have today. This was also still in a day and age before the advent of suburban malls when the downtown area of any city was the only place to shop. For you post baby boomers, yes, there really was a day when there were no malls and you had no choice but to shop downtown. Sales were rare and very special events which were held perhaps twice a year, and the very sight of a "Sale" sign was enough to get your attention. On a typical Saturday afternoon even the generously wide sidewalks were difficult to navigate because of the throngs of people who flocked downtown to shop.

In those days retailing wasn't a bad way to make a living, and as I grew up my family and I just assumed I too would eventually go into the family business. The fact that I worked in the stores when I had free time was not so much to provide needed help to the store, but more to teach me the business I would some day enter. But sometimes things don't always go according to plan, and this was definitely one of those times.

One year at Penn State in accounting was enough to prove to me that I was not destined to become a wizard of the business world. The courses were of little or no interest, and I never could have slugged it out for four years to a bachelor's degree. And while my move to architecture took the entire family by surprise, it has proven to be a much wiser pursuit for me than life in the retail business. In fact, when I now look back on that fateful decision, I look upon it much like an airline passenger who got tied up in traffic and missed a flight that crashed. The retail flight crashed (would you want to be in retail today?) and fortunately, I wasn't on it!

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If you've never lived in a kosher house, you should try it; not necessarily because you'll like it, but because it will give you a firsthand look at why it's such a pain. Apparently, my Grandmother kept a kosher kitchen, and when my Mother and Father were married it must have seemed like the natural and logical thing to do...so they did it too. When I say "they", "they" was really my Mother, and I'm sure Dad went along with it to please his new bride. When we lived on South River St. in Wilkes-Barre, there were two sets of dishes and two sets of silverware which, by the way, my Mother still had when she left Debbie Drive for Elan Gardens in 2000. In fact, we still have the "milk" set of silver which, unfortunately

rarely if ever gets used. I honestly can't say if she used a kosher butcher, but I suspect that was not the case.

On Saturday mornings I would usually accompany my father to the store where I would spend the morning. In the afternoon I usually went to a kids matinee at one of the downtown movie theaters which usually lasted four to five hours and tested the outer limits of human eye endurance. The store opened at 10:00, but we would arrive downtown around 9:00 so that we could enjoy a leisurely breakfast next store at the Whealan's Drug Store lunch counter. The only thing that was remarkable about the breakfast was that we both always had scrambled eggs and bacon. Yes, bacon! Bacon for two people who had just a left a kosher household only moments earlier. This was a stop my Dad made six days a week, and every day he had the exact same thing. So the minute the waitress, whose name was Helen, saw him take his usual seat at the end of the counter, she placed the order without ever asking him what he wanted.

So while Dad may have kept kosher in the house, outside of it he was on his own to eat what he liked. But this was nothing he did behind my mother's back. She knew what was on our breakfast menu and accepted it without a problem. In fact, whenever we ate at a restaurant, keeping kosher was never an issue to my Mother. When we moved from River Street to Ford Avenue in Kingston, in 1952 when I was about nine and a half, Mom decided that the kosher thing had run its course, and the move became the occasion for saying goodbye to a kosher household. I think it had finally gotten to the point where she realized that keeping kosher was really not her own choice, but rather a habit inherited, so to speak, from her Mother.

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My Mother was always in charge of buying my clothes, a responsibility she was relieved of when I went off to military school. Oh but how I remember those earlier days when we would make one of our regular visits to Erlich's Boys Shop on Main St. in Wilkes-Barre. It was actually a very simple process, though traumatic for both Mom and me. We'd slowly make our way from the front of the shop to the rear stopping every few moments to comment on a particular shirt, pair of pants or, when the occasion dictated, perhaps a sport coat or a tie.

Her taste in boys clothing and mine were not always on the same page, but the one thing that drove me crazy, and I mean absolutely insane was one comment or, more accurately, a question which was always asked in a tone of voice that a deaf man in Florida could hear it. And while you might think this question to be specific to a particular piece of clothing, I think it was asked for everything we bought regardless of race, color, creed or what part of the body it covered. "How does it fit in the crotch?" Even as I write this, and despite the fact I haven't heard the question for more than fifty five years, I still cringe when I say or read these words to myself. "How does it fit in the crotch?" It's got a nice ring to it, and everyone in the store would turn to look at me. It didn't matter that I might have been trying on gloves or a belt or even just looking at handkerchiefs, the question was always the same. "How does it fit in the crotch?" This was evidently one of those *Mom* things that all moms are programmed to ask no matter what.

We also had another ritual when I needed shoes. The big shoe store in town was Walter's which carried shoes for every age and taste. At least that's what it said on their sign! Walter's was on the cutting edge of technology and had this weird looking apparatus which you could look into through a view finder to see exactly how the shoes fit little Bobby. It was actually an x-ray machine that allowed you to see the feet and their physical proximity to the shoes. The apparatus looked like a large box about three feet square and maybe four feet high. The kid whose feet were being fitted stuck his feet into a slot on the bottom of the box. On top were three view ports; one for the sales person, one for the mother, and one for the kid. If you looked through the view port you could see these ghostly green images of the feet and

shoes, and the sales clerk also had access to a long metal rod he could point to a particular spot to show mom how and where the shoe fit or didn't fit. Hundreds of moms and kids used this machine every day, and the typical mother and child used it every time they bought shoes, probably at least twice a year. Gee, I wonder why there's so much cancer today!

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A final note about my family. By all accounts, and until the time of my father's death, we were probably a normal, typical upper middle class family living in a growing post war America. So much of what we did centered around family and friends, and almost everything we did was with those people. Growing up was an experience and a time I recall with great fondness. I'm more than a bit sorry now that I didn't pay more attention to some of the details when it was all happening so that I could better relate them now, but I guess that's a fate we're all destined to experience. I'd like to think that that period of my life was special and perhaps even more so than the childhoods of other generations, but I know that's not the case. Most of us, regardless of what generation we come from, probably think in similar terms of our early years, and I've come to realize that what makes those years so special is that I spent them with my "original" family, all of whom are now gone. Unfortunately, I probably appreciate those people more now than I did during my childhood which, in itself, may be another factor that motivated me to make more of this book than just a collection of old recipes. It may also serve as a lesson to others that while it's nice to look back and cherish the *memories*, it's even better to cherish and appreciate the *people* while they're still here.

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