

THE BARNETT FAMILY

By Donald Silverman

My mother was one of eight Barnett kids. Half were born in Russia and the other half in New York City. Half had deep European accents that you could cut with a knife. The others sounded like the deep Bronx. I never knew anything about my Grandfather. With 10 mouths to feed, I'm guessing he was a hard working guy. Probably in the garment industry. Apparently, my Grandmother was a little confused when my mother was born. She named her Sarah but, called her, Sadie. My mother hated that name so she, in turn called herself, Shirley. Anyway, I never got the whole story on this identity crisis. Shirley was Shirley and that was that.

My mother was the baby. While I never met my Uncle George (I think he died in one of the wars), the rest of them were really characters. Nathan was the oldest. He lived in the Bronx. I have no idea what he did for a living but when he got into his 80s, I was told he "played the horses". He religiously went to the racetrack several days a week. And, somehow he figured out a way to handicap the winners. Did he only report his winnings? Who knows? Many years later, I was told that Nathan refused to come to my wedding because I married a "shiksa". Did I miss him? No, not really.

HOWARD ran an illegal poker and betting parlor in Montreal. He was a bachelor. Always dress to the nines. Three piece suits that were custom made to fit around his ample belly. He lived in the Mount Royal Hotel. Room service, maid service .. you need it, you got it. We met him once a year in New York City. He took us all out for lunch at the Stage Deli. Mile high pastrami sandwiches with rich, thick deli mustard and a good sour pickle. When Howard came, he reached into his pocket and dug out a huge wad of cash. I never saw so much money in my whole life. Uncle Howard was a happy guy. Sadly, he died broke.

JACK was a happy go lucky tombstone salesman. He was married to Esther. No kids. For some odd reason, Aunt Esther smoked like a chimney and chewed on her tongue. I have no idea why she chewed on her tongue. But, since I chew on my fingers (oral fixation, I guess), her tongue chewing didn't bother me.

Jack was a born salesman.

He had the gift of gab and a tremendous sense of humor. One time a customer visited him at work. After a bit of kibitzing, he asked the woman what she wanted to have inscribed on her husband's tombstone. Without hesitating she replied, "Rest in pieces." He laughed. She didn't. Another time he came to our house in Long Beach (after a long drive from Montreal). He rang the doorbell, headed right for the bathroom, flushed the toilet and came out to announce, "Good, it works." He laughed. So did we.

RAE was one of my mother's sisters. She lived with Sam Mouckley and their son, Mike Mouckley in an apartment in Montreal (his name always sounded like a bookie to me). Rae was a housewife and Sam was a barber. They came to visit us in NY City in the late 1950s. Sam was amazed to see so many pizza signs. He announced, "Pizza, Pizza, Pizza .. what's

Pizza". He was simply flabbergasted. A few years later my mother said, "We should open up a Pizza Store." Too bad we didn't. It was and is a good business.

One time, when I was about 6 or 7 years old I was in my Aunt Rae's kitchen. She was making "kishka" (stuffed derma). And, while she was stuffing it, air got caught in the casing and it sounded like a big fart. Well, I almost died laughing and I guess my laugh was contagious because my Aunt couldn't stop laughing either. It was a wonderful moment.

ANNA was my mother's oldest sister. Since there were 8 kids in the family and she was the oldest, I'm guessing she was about 25 years older. Anna and her husband, Morris lived in The Bronx in a 5-story walk up. Morris was a skinny fellow and Anna was "ample". How she managed to negotiate those stairs with groceries was a near miracle. My mother and Anna often spoke on the phone. Anna had a thick European accent. Their conversations often sounded like Yiddish Pig Latin. "So, vats doing? De kinter okay? Vat so you vant me to bring mits Peseah?" "Oy, you could brrring tsmis mit plenty prunes. It voiks good, ya know."

Morris would always conduct the Passover Seder from cover to cover in Hebrew. Three hours minimum. About 10 minutes into the reading my sister and I would go into their bedroom. She was about 11 and I was 6. She would start to wardrobe me in Aunt Anna's clothing and jewelry .. pearls and lipstick and all kinds of paraphernalia. And, of course her makeup. Lots of it. And, then the show would begin. My sister paraded me around the table. The somber mood quickly turned to laughter.. Even Uncle Morris cracked up. It was a moment in family history to behold.

DAVE was the closest in age to my mother. He was married to Bess. I think he was an accountant or bookkeeper for a department store in Montreal. Good solid guy who played by the rules of life. Always loving and reliable.

Bess was a housewife who spoke French and English. She once shared this practical wisdom with her young nephew: "Donald, do you know the difference between a man and a woman? Plumbing." I was only about 10 when she told this to me. So, you can imagine it took me a few years to understand the depth of this concept. And, then I thought, "well, maybe plumbing was not such a bad career choice?"