

Baker Family
Thoughts and Reminiscences
June, 2004, by Joel Baker

Coming to America:

My father told the story this way. Sam had gone years before, as had everyone but Grandfather Jacob, Uncle Sidney and my father. They had moved from Choynik to Yurevich, because Nathan's house in Yurevich was empty, better and closer to the Blumins. Their original house in Choynik had a dirt floor. They brought in their animals and cow every night, and the boys slept near the brick oven for warmth. Dad told me that there were also two Baker girls, both of who died in infancy or early childhood. Once in Yurevich Sam convinced them to come to America, as Sidney was due to be drafted into the Czar's army. He wrote them telling them that money would be waiting at the HIAS office in Riga for them.

They left, crossing the Dnieper River in the night, inside a haystack on a cart driven by a friendly Russian woman. She then hid them in her barn and when it was safe got them to a train going to the border. At the border, late at night, the Russian guards got on to check exit visas. Only grandfather had one. They all pretended to be asleep, and one guard told another to not bother the old man and his boys since they were sleeping.

An aside: When Fiddler on the Roof first came to Chicago as a stage show I took my father to see it. When it was all over, and I was so enthralled by it; I asked him for his comments. In typical Baker fashion he said "What? You think it was all singing and dancing in Choynik?"

When the movie came I saw it and was sure it would elicit vivid memories for Dad. Indeed, when the Cossacks came to raid the wedding he got nervous, gripped his chair and began to whisper "Hooliganism." But, when I afterwards asked him for his revue he dismissed the movie, because Tevye was much richer than his father. Tevye had a silk caftan to wear on Shabbos and Jacob never had one.

Once they got to Riga, and HIAS, they had money to get to England and book passage on the Mauritania. First-class! This meant that when they got to America they did not have to go to Ellis Island, as first-class passengers were checked at the arrival dock.

After welcomes, etc. on Staten Island, within a short time my father was sent to Sam in Chicago, Sidney and Grandfather remaining on Staten Island.

My father worked as a purse maker while learning English. He lived with Uncle Sam and slept with Lester, Buddy and Howard. He was not much older than they, coming to the US when he was 18 yrs. old. He didn't like the purse trade so went to work for Sam as a clerk, eventually managing the store's large fountain/restaurant service. The store was very successful, as it was close to Devry Tech, a large trade school, and many office buildings. My mother was a secretary in one of those buildings and says she met my father by falling in love with the tuna fish sandwiches he made. Dad lived and worked with Sam until 1939, when he married my mother. He worked at S.L.Baker drugs through the closing of the big store (it was destroyed to make way for the Congress Street Expressway) and until the closing of the smaller store (near County Hospital).

The brothers:

Alex: I did not know him as he died before I was born. My dad didn't say much about him, but I got the feeling he was a very lovable brother who showed more emotion than most of them.

Sam: He was the first to come to the US and adopt the Baker name. Very bright and learned he ran a very successful business at a busy location. As a young child I often went with my dad to "work." I remember that besides the prescription business and the fountain there was much "bookie" activity and minor gambling going on, and a huge cigar counter. Part of the culture of the times.

We went to visit Uncle Sam almost every weekend, as my mother's parents lived not too far from Sam and Goldie, on the Westside of Chicago. My memories are vivid of Sam, as a man who was very much in the center of things. However, he had a severe Parkinsonian tremor and, as a child, it scared me and I would shy away from him. My dad told me later on that this hurt Sam, as he had been my father's protector for so many years and was, therefore, so interested in me, particularly as I was the baby of the family.

Nathan: I remember visiting his shoe shop and marveling at how fast his hands worked. I remember a big man with a big laugh. He seemed to fill rooms with his presence.

In comparison my Dad and Sidney seemed meek and dominated by others, particularly Aunt Rose and my mother. Sidney I remember as a quiet man. I remember that every time I visited he sent my mother and me home with loads of cloths he had made, or remade, for us. I can almost picture 365 Victory Blvd. in my mind, and Aunt Rose strongly choreographing most everything that went on.

For some reason I particularly remember a visit in 1948. My mother and I had come by overnight train (the Pacemaker) from Chicago. Uncle Sidney and Aunt Rose met us and took us to the ferry. I can still smell the freshly baked sweet rolls on the ferry. For some reason my constant companion that trip was Morris Blumin. He took me to an amusement park (South Beach?) where I had my first ever taste of Pizza and rode in little motor boats. He was such a sweet and attentive person.

In later years, Cousin David came to Chicago to go to Med School. He was my babysitter on a number of occasions. (Do I remember him playing the accordion?) When he graduated I remember being in awe of him as he stood there in his graduation gown. There is a great picture of him with his arms at his side, much as a superhero would pose. That's how he appeared to me.

Uncle Max: What I remember most about Max was much later in his life. After Aunt Bea died he often had Shabbos dinner with us. One Friday night I was talking with him about a pending strike at the high school where I was a social worker, and that I had been picked to be a picket captain. Max looked at me deeply and asked me whether I would give up my life for the integrity of the picket line. Taken aback by what I thought was a very radical notion Max then proceeded to tell me about "his good friend Eugene Debs" and the role Max had played in helping form the Shoemaker's Union early in the 1900's. Max had cut his teeth on Socialist theory as a young man, sent to apprentice in either Minsk or Kiev. I discovered that Shabbos night a bright, literate, deeply passionate intellectual. A man, who I had seen for many years as "just a quiet shoemaker." Again, a man dominated by a wife with a commanding presence.

Harold: My father. Like many of his brothers, quiet, dominated, trying to live out his life without causing too much stir. Snapshots from his earlier years show a man of genuine energy, a sharp dresser, a gregarious young man. Dad had the chance to go to pharmacy school, Sam would have sponsored him, but he did not want to "owe" Sam and refused. He was, as I knew him, one of those people who went to work, tried hard to be a parent and just get along." Three memories help describe him.

One; after my parents moved to LA and moved within a half block of Shelley and me I got a frantic call from my mother one day that Dad had gone "crazy" and that I had to come and see. I ran there, imagining all sorts of things, to find him facing a corner of the living room, siddur in hand, praying. This was indeed strange behavior for him. He could daven easily, having been schooled at a Cheder, but ritual had little seeming meaning to him. When I finished and I asked him why, his answer was "Wait until you grow old and you need to find ways to kill time!" My Dad davened three times a day from then on.

Two: After my mother died Dad lived at the Jewish Home in LA for eleven years. If I did not call every night between 6:00PM and 6:15PM he assumed I was dead in a gutter somewhere and became frantic. Every night the last thing he said to me before he hung up was "*Man tracht und Got lacht!*" Man does/plans and God laughs! A true Russian Jew.

Three: A few years after Dad entered the Jewish home the banking world invented the ATM machine. Shortly after the first one, a drive up, was installed by my bank, I stopped for money one day when my father was in the car with me. Not knowing what I was up to he waited patiently for me to make the withdrawal. As he saw the money come from the machine his eyes opened wide, a big smile emerged and he exclaimed, "Money from a hole in the wall. This is why I came to America!"