Hrabina of Hunterdon

This book is dedicated to...

Mama
Papa
...who she said went on ahead and was building a beautiful home for her “Upstairs”
Bobby z”l and Allen z”l
Keith z”l
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These stories are a compilation of articles published in Der Bay, an international Anglo-Yiddish newsletter, from October 2006 through December of 2009. They were written by its editor, Philip “Fishl” Kutner.

They are a storyteller’s stories of his Mama as he recalls them years after she had passed on. Mama lived all of her life in practically all of the 20th century. As the eldest in his extended family, the author felt the need to keep this history alive. These stories are told as if he were telling them to his grandson and granddaughters.

Many of Mama’s experiences were also shared with Papa, Fishl’s brothers; Sol, Bobby z”l, and Semele. To this list must be added Fishl’s wife Sally, of 62 years and children Shelley, Ken and Debbie.

Mama was an extraordinary lady and these are her stories and the days to tell these stories are few. Mama was not special in her lifetime, but her stories today are very special. She came from a place that no longer exists, lived a life that no longer is lived, had norms that are often the opposite of those held today and did things that are not done anymore.

What seem like hardships today, were everyday happenings in those times. The War that was to end all wars—never did. The Great Depression is only a memory today, and we are told that safeguards have been put into place so that there will be no more Great Depressions, and the lessons we learned will never let it happen again—ha! Life expectancy when Mama was born was 50% less.
At first, Mama was confused and did not accept (go along with) all the change. Later she said, “Vos vet zayn, vet zayn.” (What will be will be.) I am not sure she believed it or was too tired to go against the great tide of ever-speeding changes that were swirling all around her.

The stories that tell her experiences, beliefs, problems, joys, sorrows, likes and dislikes are here recorded for posterity. As in the past, with all recollections of times long since gone, there must be truths half-truths and errors. However, these stories have been recorded to the best of Fishl’s recollections and trying to be as accurate as an aging mind can be.

There is an obligation for each generation to record the times, events and attitudes of the families with whom they have traveled their life’s journey. It is an appreciation of the challenges they overcame. It is like the author’s story of the punch hole cards and the yellow strips of paper on which he first recorded Basic computer programs. Merely recording the dates and locations of life-cycle events, results in a skimpy review of history.

It is for the family elders to share their recollections and for the younger folks to record and transmit them to their offspring. This is one such attempt, and the author hopes it will not only record the events, and give a description of the lifestyle but stir others to follow suit. The eldest person in the family has the opportunity as well as the obligation to see that this is undertaken by someone else—if he or she is unable to complete the task.
INTRODUCTION

Mama was born Perl Kaplan (Kaplansky?) in Tykocin, Poland (Tiktin in Yiddish). This shtetl lies in a northwest direction from Bialystok. About 2,000 people live there today. During the Holocaust, 3,800 Jews were slaughtered there.

Her actual birth-date is in doubt. She gave the immigration service the date of December 12, 1902. However, Papa always said that she was born in the year 1900, 2 years earlier. It seems the reason was that Papa was born in 1902.

In America, the Yiddish name Perl became Pearl. Perl in Yiddish (both singular and plural) means the gemstone pearl. Papa playfully and affectionately called her Pauline and even Paulie. Her family called her Perele. To us boys—she was just plain Mama.

For children or for affection, “ele” (pronounced eh’leh) is added in Yiddish to the end of the given name. Thus, Mama referred to the author, Fishl, as Fishele.

Mama did not arrive on Ellis Island until 1921. Her father had come prior to World War I to make enough money to pay the steerage for Mama, her mother, younger sisters and brother. Because there was no mail delivery from America during the four war years, they lost contact with each other and only a chance meeting by a landsman brought the news of “Zeyde’s” whereabouts.

The horror stories of the marauding Cossacks, trading goods with the Polish peasants and the trip on the crowded ship are only a
few of the hardships and dangers Mama encountered—as a teenager and in her early twenties. Stories as a seamstress, trying to learn English and marrying Papa, a non-religious Jew, all added to her misery and frustration.

Coming from a town not far from foreign borders and having to barter with the peasant farmers required her to be fluent in several languages. She was fluent in Polish, Russian, German, and naturally knew Yiddish and Hebrew. Last of all, she finally learned how to speak “American.”

Culture shock was just the beginning of her woes as she went to work in the garment shops of the Lower East Side and soon dropped out of night school. All of this is the material of “Mama’s Stories.”

Thirteen months after marrying Papa, Fishl was born and a year and week later Mama had twin boys. Within 53 weeks Mama gave birth to three boys.

After unsuccessful attempts in the shoe business and as a house painter, in 1937 Papa borrowed $500 and purchased an abandoned 42 acre farm a mile East of Baptistown, in rural Hunterdon County, New Jersey. He paid $5,000 for the farm with the barn and chicken coops eleven-room farmhouse that had a slate roof, a low-ceiling basement. It was built circa 1842 and still exists.

Many of these stories are how Mama and the family coped with no central heat, no electricity, an outhouse, an outside well and how she was able to supplement the family income by taking in “roomers and boarders” from New York during the summer months.
It was a constant battle with Papa’s ideas of a “windfall” and the realities of practicality in the business world. It is about her love of her children and grandchildren, and her willingness to sacrifice her personal needs (let alone her wants) for “my boys.”

By this time, modern amenities had come in and the boys had grown up. Mama became Americanized. She even learned to drive a car.

After the Great Flood of 1955 (when the Delaware River flooded in 1955) and all the hens drowned, Papa had to “make a living.” He returned to the shoe business and opened a highway store.

All these situations affected her and these stories show her gradual change from a Yiddish-speaking greenhorn to a “fensee lady” and eventually to a failing, elderly woman.

Many other women of Mama’s generation had similar experiences and their tales of hardship and woe need to be told for this generation where hardship is driving an older car, not having a cell phone or not having a TV set in each room.
"Go Ask G-d"

Mama never went to college or even high school. Her answers to each of our questions came from a different life. Those answers are not found in our college textbooks.

Mama had an answer to every question. When all else failed her, she turned to G-d.

“Mama, why don’t chickens have belly buttons?” To this day, that’s the first question I remember asking.

Mama never said, “I don’t know,” or “That’s a stupid question.”

“Go ask G-d.”

When I said, “He is not here”

She responded “He wrote it in the bible.”

“Mama, not every answer is in the bible. I can’t find when President Abe Lincoln was born in the bible.”

“That’s why you go to school. There are books, and you need to study. It’s all in the books. You have to study.”

Mama never said, “Go ask Papa.” Mama was wise.
Mama came to America and learned a few words of English during the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. Then, after a day of labor in the sweatshop she went to night school to learn English.

Mama said all went well until the teacher insisted that she had to pronounce the words “properly”.

Mama’s problem was the *th* sound—it came out as *duh*. Mama told me that all of the others in the class pronounced it *dee* and *dah* but the teacher picked only on her.

The teacher told Mama, “Your tongue has to be between your teeth and not touching the top of your mouth. Stand in front of the mirror and practice saying, *the*. Be sure you can see your tongue between your teeth.”

Mama went home and stuck her tongue out so it was easily seen in the mirror. It disgusted her. “What boy will like me if I stick my tongue out at him?”

That was the end of Mama’s night school.

All the rest of her life it was *duh*. That, these, and those were pronounced *daht*, *dees*, and *dohs*.

My mama had an accent.
Of course Mama had Papa and her four boys. She also had Zeyde (grandpa) and Uncle Shiya, her brother, but these don’t count. There was another group of men that was important to Mama.

There was the butcher man, the milkman, the iceman, the blue-and-white-box man, the candy-store man, the bakery man, the doctor man, and the insurance man.

All of Mama’s men spoke Yiddish. The word I remember hearing over and over again was vifl (how many or how much) and Mama answering, “Tsu fil” (too much).

Of all of Mama’s men I still remember the insurance man the best. He came every month to collect money. I am not sure if he worked for the New York Life Insurance Company or the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company.

I still can see that brown leather book he had with a big rubber band around it. He always wore a long black coat and a funny hat even in warm weather. Every time he turned a page he wet his finger. Mama always offered him a glass of tea, and although he always refused it, Mama always put it out, and he always drank it all up.

None of these men came with us to “Joisey” when we move to the farm.

My Mama had many men.
Every so often a word comes back from my childhood and reminds me of Mama. It may be a smell from my Serke’s cooking, a sound of an animal, or a sight in nature during my many strolls. Often it is a return to bed from one of my nightly trips when I am only half awake. I turn on the lights and write down the precious word so that it isn’t lost before morning.

Last night the word was laydn— to suffer, to have misery. Mama used it as not having enough food or money. Most of all she used it in her pleas to Der Eybishter (one of many terms for G-d). It was not for herself but for her boys.

I guess Mama was superstitious because it always came out during one of those rare times when we had good luck. She thought that it meant bad luck would follow. Things could not be good for any length of time. It seemed that there was always some bad news around the corner. Mama had lived through so many bad times that it seemed always to be inevitable.

When a Yiddish word comes back from my childhood, it brings my thoughts back to those days when times were different. Those were tough times, but there always was Mama. She was one strong lady.

My Mama’s Yiddish words keep reverberating off the walls of my being. They make me smile, sometimes they make me sad—always they return her to me for a bit—my Mama’s Yiddish words.
In our Bronx apartment, there was a shelf reserved only for oils. Mama kept castor oil, mineral oil, cod liver oil, and peanut oil.

Every day mama spoon-fed us the cod liver oil. I can still taste it today just thinking of it. She said I needed it to be healthy.

Mama fried with Hi Hat Peanut Oil. The bottle had a picture of a peanut man with a high hat and a cane. Mama used it in the large frying pan to make potato and matzoh meal latkes, blintzes, eggs, French toast, and liver and onions. Papa loved fried foods.

The mineral and castor oil were another matter. I always asked Mama, “How do you know when I need the mineral oil?”

Mama’s response was, “Mamas know!” I asked, “But Mama how do you know when I need castor oil?” Mama’s reply was, “That’s when the mineral oil doesn’t work.”

My Mama had a special shelf in the kitchen closet for her oils. It was covered with linoleum because they always had oil dripping down the side and made the shelf oily. Mama said, “Oils need to be kept cool.”

Mama had a shelf of oils.
Mama loved her boys and anyone or anything that harmed them was her enemy.

Buttons had a special place in her life. Mama worked hard and she expected her kitchenware, sewing machine, broom, and mop to do likewise.

A button to Mama was a button. It was not anything with a picture on it to wear on a lapel and surely not something that you pushed. They were shank buttons or flat ones with four holes. There were no fancy cloth buttons.

Mama said, “Buttons know their place. They should be seen and not heard. Their job is to keep my boys’ sweaters, jackets, shirts, and pants closed and neat.”

Very few things annoyed mama more than a button stepping out of line—getting loose or G-d forbid falling off. Then the button became the recipient of a long litany of curses used only for reprimanding the Czar.

Mama had a button collection that would make any collector drool with envy. She had them stored in Mason jars. She knew every button and from where they came. There was every color of the rainbow and design.

Before sewing back the button Mama closely inspected the buttonhole. It had to be just the right length. If it were too small it would put unnecessary strain on the thread when the button was pushed and twisted in use. On the other hand, if it were too large it would not remain buttoned and her boys would be cold or embarrassed.
Of course there was her ever-ready and trusty *fingerhut* (thimble). Mama never left the house without it. “You could always find a needle and thread, but where would you get the right-sized protection?” It went over her left index fingertip.

Once all was in readiness and the needle threaded, Mama proceeded with the skill of an artisan. Her hands flew as the needle whirred in and out. The needle had to be just the right size and she had the full set from numbers 1-10.

Mama had a pattern depending on the piece of clothing and the location on the garment. Mama was partial to the four-hole buttons. The patterns of the sewn thread formed a square or an X. She told me the parallel sewing style made a weaker stitch.

Mama knew her buttons.
Our feet sweated a lot and our toes always itched. So she rubbed raw garlic on our toes. We couldn’t wait for spring to get out of those rubber boots.

Mama’s powerful fist would squeeze her fingers until the (four-fifteen) cloves separated. It was like putty in her hands. She rubbed, diced, roasted or crushed the skinless cloves.

Every *peysakh* (Passover) Mama told us that the Jews ate garlic in Egypt, and missed it when they wandered in the desert.

“Mama it’s only a vegetable” was my answer when Mama raved about that smelly white bulb. All other vegetables were handled roughly. If a vegetable was dropped, by one of her boys, it was just washed off.

Not so for the king of vegetables.

I now live not far from Gilroy, California, the garlic capitol of the world.

Mama had a favorite spot for that pungent thing. She said, “G-d kicked the apple out of *gan eydn* (Garden of Eden), but didn’t remember that the little garlic bulb also was there. If She remembered, no one or thing would have received that punishment.”

“*Mame, avu iz dos geshribn?*” (Mama, where is it written?)

“*Freg nisht aza narishkayt – s’iz geshribn.*” (Don’t ask such foolishness—it’s written.)
Mama knew that raw garlic did more to “cure you” than cooked garlic. Her most unusual use was against athlete’s foot. In the winter we wore rubber boots and heavy socks.

Surely, you know about using garlic as a cold remedy. Naturally, no microbe could stand the strong taste and smell of garlic.
"Don’t Throw It Away!"

I never heard Mama use the word “waste”. There was no waste in our house. Mama could have written many of the wise sayings that I later learned in school.

Mama never heard of Aesop, John Heywood, Ralph Waldo Emerson or Ben Franklin but she was in their league when it came to wise sayings.

“Varf es nisht avek” (Don’t throw it away.) It didn’t matter what it was. Mama found a need for almost everything. For example, Mama stuffed the “heldzl” (diminutive of neck) of a chicken and it was a delicacy.

The patterned Purina brand bags of chicken feed that held the Purina mash we fed the chickens were used as pillow cases, dish towels, and sewn into aprons and kerchiefs for her hair.

The major area in which Mama was conservative was with “gelt” (money). She always had a “knipl” (money stashed away) hidden away. It was a necessity, for Papa said, “Paper money is like toilet paper. It should be gotten, used and then discarded.”

To Mama, being wasteful was tantamount to sinning against G-d.

If a piece of bread fell on the floor, it was immediately picked up, brushed off, and kissed with the idea that He took care of it.

Needless to say — this is one habit I did not pass on to my children.

Mama’s way of life came from growing up in Tiktin, Poland during World War I and having to walk the countryside to barter with farmers.
The goods she brought from town were exchanged for produce. Everything was carried on her back as she followed her mother. Her father was in America to make money for steerage to bring his family over for a better life.
Mama was a great cook and baker. Her secret recipes were based on what was available in the pantry and what her four boys liked. She always wanted to please her boys. She had learned the old-fashioned way—by trial and error.

There was only one kugel (pudding) baked at a time and it was different every week. It was like the “Kugel of the Week”

We boys called them lokshn (noodle) kugel, rice pudding, bread pudding and potato kugel. Each one was made either dairy or pareve (not meat or dairy) depending on what was available and what the boys liked at that time.

Mama made them in a large, deep, black tin pan she called a blekh. The little smaller flat pan was just a blekhle. These kugels were more like desserts, for they tasted sweet to us.

Mama never used a recipe it was always “shit arayn” (pour in). This later was a bone of contention with her daughter-in-laws who wanted to please “the boys.” The comments were, “Why can’t you make a kugel like Mama does?”

My favorites were the bread pudding and the dairy lokshn kuglel. For the bread pudding Mama soaked the white bread or khale for at least an hour in a mixture of sweet cream, eggs and milk and it came out “custardy.” Then it was fully packed with raisins and dried fruit.

When Mama served it, she poured rich sweet cream on top. It was fit for a king.

Now, the lokshn kugel was something else. It started with homemade lokshn (noodles).
I remember the *lokshn* mom made was a rich yellow—not like the pale yellow, papery-like taste of boxed, commercial products on today’s supermarket shelves. They had plenty of eggs in them, for Mama had to use up the many cracked eggs that we had.

I still remember Mama mixing, kneading, rolling and finally cutting the narrow strips of *lokshn*. None was of the same size or shape. The *lokshn* on top was crisp with brown edges just like *grivn* (cracklings) but the inside was moist and juicy.

We boys were delighted to be chosen to help in the kitchen because it was a lot more fun than cleaning chicken coops.

Oh, Mama, come back once again and make *Fishele a lokshn kugel*. 
When things went wrong and the family was down in its luck, Mama was the shining light—the buoyant force. She was also the soothing force in our home. She was like the Rock of Gibraltar.

Her faith never wavered in Der Eybershter (G-d).

We have heard, “Whatever will be, will be.” It’s Que sera, sera, Doris Day’s signature song in Alfred Hitchcock’s film The Man Who Knew Too Much.

Mama sometimes said that “Ergernish iz azoy vi mentshn, vos mer me gebn zey, di grese zey vaksn. (Worries are like people, the more you feed them the fatter they get.)

Another one of Mama’s sayings was, “Ergernish kumt fun erger.” Grief comes from worry.”

Mama had many others, but most have slipped by. My favorite was somewhat akin to the scout motto, “Grejt zikh,” (get ready, be prepared, it’s okay or, “It’s for the best.”) Mama said, “Everything is okay, and if it is not okay, it’s okay too.”

Maybe, after going through all that she did in World War I in Tiktin (in Polish, Tykocin) Poland, she had seen it all. “What new tricks could He have for me?” That optimism and positive attitude was passed on to her four boys.
"In Case G-d Missed Something"

No woman ever did it the way Mama did—not my Serke, not my daughters nor other women in my mishpokhe (family). Over these many years I also have seen it done over and over again, many hundreds of times, but not the way my Mama did it.

I have seen some women have a very special laced kerchief that they used to cover their head like a shawl when bentshing likht (blessing over the candles). Some even used a fully sweeping motion as if they were an operatic singer taking a bow. A few even did it in a sing-song manner.

Not my Mama—she used this time to have a conversation with Der Eybishter. Naturally, each shabes (Sabbath) eve the conversation was different.

Before the candles were lit and the blessings done, the requests were made. These ranged from deep pleading to mild requests.

Before getting to the task, Mama went through her entire week and noted all of the minor details. When I asked her, “Why do you do it?”

Her reply was, “In case G-d missed something, so He should know.”

This conversation did not cover the terrible events or mention anything that would be noted in her later requests and pleas.

Mama was very careful in her wording so that G-d would not think that she was exaggerating her request because this litany of words was saved for her pleas.
Every possible compliment that one could imagine and every positive attribute was included in her personal talk with Him.

In a joking way much later in life, Mama once mentioned that she hoped G-d didn’t think that she was selfish, for she never asked for things for herself, only for her boys – her four sons.
Signals from G-d

Mama received a message from G-d when she needed help with her boys. We could argue with her up to a point, but when she called Him in that was too much for us. This carried through even later on when we graduated from elementary and went on to high school. All of our school-learned debating techniques were to no avail.

First, there was the genosn (sneezed) that meant it was the truth, and our earlobe was pulled. To this day I do not know if there is a good medical reason for it. However, her most powerful ammunition came with her uttering gegenetst. “Uh, du host gegenetst, du darfst itst geyn shlofn” (Oh, you yawned, you need to go to sleep.)

Just like many other children we boys wanted to stay up later—that’s what grownups do, so it must be good. It usually happened when we formed a semi-circle around the tall Philco radio that stood on four legs. It was in the evening and the program was The Shadow. When the voice said, “The Shadow knows,” we actually got goose pimples from fright.

Mama watched us for a sign. When one of us yawned, she invoked her mighty weapon, “Uh, du host gegenetst, du darfst itst geyn shlofn.”

Of course there were lesser instances that included brushing our teeth and washing our hands.

Mama had signals from G-d.
A year and a week after Fishl was born (September 17, 1926) Mama gave birth to twin boys. In 53 weeks, Mama gave birth to three sons!

Papa told me he was very proud because his mama also had three boys – Uncle Mike, Uncle Al and Papa.

It also must have been a joyous time for Zeyde. That was what we boys called Mama’s father. Papa’s father was called Grandpa.

Mama’s family members were the Greenhorns and Papa’s family snobs were the Yenkis. Yes, thirteen years later and several miscarriages or abortions, baby Semele arrived on the farm.

The joke in the family was based on my selfishness on taking second stage when the twins came along. Mama still nursed me while nursing the twins—all three of us.

Mama said I was very smart and started to speak at a very early age.

Because of my extreme jealousy, I became very possessive of Mama and did not want to share her with the twins. I began saying, “My titty, my titty.”
No Time to Chew

We boys had too many things to do. There was no time to languish at the kitchen table. “Es nisht azoy shnel,” (Don’t eat so fast) was Mama’s admonition.

We had chores before going to meet the school bus down at Route #12, a mile east of Baptistown, New Jersey. If it were suppertime (dinner), there still were eggs to clean and pack, or chickens that had to be culled, moved or vaccinated.

The only exception was Thanksgiving when it was non-stop eating from dinner (lunchtime) to supper. That occasion allowed us plenty of time to slow down and relish Mama’s great food. As well, Mama did not have to say, “Es nisht azoy shnel.”

There was plenty of talking; mostly we boys were bantering about girls. Mama and Papa were highly amused and never commented.

Attending Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, I had to work for room and meals. Lunch was 90 minutes between classes. I ran a mile in ten minutes to the Hungarian deli. After washing dishes for an hour, there was ten minutes to eat, and ten minutes back to class. My lunch often consisted of a pint of ice cream and half of a pie.

Luckily, I have most of my teeth and no falsies. I still eat too fast and slow (up or down) only when Mama’s words resound in my ears. I hear, “Fishele, kay, kay, es nisht azoy shnel,” and then I slowly chew and swallow my food.
SECRET KITES

As a little boy in corduroy knee-covering knickers, I vaguely remember asking Papa, “Where are Mama’s kites?” Papa’s response was, “In the secret dresser.” It was the piece of furniture in Papa’s and Mama’s bedroom that was off bounds for us boys.

Many years later we learned that it was where Mama kept her lady’s under-things—brassieres, girdles and an old corset. We boys regularly were told that “Me tor dos nisht efenen” (one must not open it).

Mama’s kites included, “Oy iz zi a mieskayt” (Oh, is she ugly). This was the adjective Mama used to describe an actress on the Yiddish stage who had given a below par performance. These were the rare occasions when Papa drove us to “The City” (New York) to see a Yiddish play and to Ratner’s for a dairy meal.

Yidishkayt (Judaism) was Mama’s favorite kite. Mama came from an ultra-Orthodox family, who lived at 42 Boerum Place in Brooklyn, and touted that she was a “bas koyen” (daughter of a Cohen—the highest level—above a Levi, or like Papa, a Yisroel.)

We boys are like Papa, at the bottom of the heap.

Frumkayt (piousness) was also on Mama’s kite list. We kept a strictly kosher home. Papa went along with it even though on the outside he was known to have coffee with cream, after eating fleishiks (meat).

“Where are your kites now, Mama? Are you flying them in the sky?”

I still remember her saying, “Freg nisht aza narishkayt” (Don’t ask such foolishness)!
Mama’s idea about money was born and nurtured in Tiktin (Tykocin), Poland during World War I when her father was in America trying to earn enough money to bring the family over.

It wasn’t until the war was over and Zeyde (Grandpa) earned enough money that they came to America. She peddled in the countryside, physically carrying the store merchandise to the farmwomen and lugged the produce back on her shoulders.

Mama often referred to Der Yidisher Filisof (The Jewish philosopher). Her ideas about life with its myriad of problems, and her relationships, especially with Papa, were tinged with what Der Yidisher Filozof said about a given matter, or would have said if he had been asked.

There was no way Papa could argue with Mama when she pulled out her over-powering, magic weapon—Der Yidisher Filozof.

So what was Mama’s philosophy about money? It was very simple. Don't spend money you don't have. In other words, nothing should be bought on credit. And if you had money then it should be saved. Naturally, we needed to feed Paul, the Polish hired hand, the chickens, and us.

Mama never used the word zhaleven (economize) when it came to di kinder (the children), but I heard that word often when Papa wanted to know why the boys had to have the best and when it came to him and Mama, “Good enough is good enough.”

Papa vainly attempted to find Mama’s knipl (hidden money). It was only after Papa left us for a higher place and Mama could no longer live alone that we discovered her secret hiding-place.
There, right behind the hallway picture of Zeyde, wearing a derby hat and leaning on an elegant cane, was a large envelope glued to the back.

Mama’s large bills were stuffed inside. Little by little she had saved them over the years until it reached a sizeable sum.

Mama looked at us as we counted the bills. There was a glassy stare in her eyes and we noticed a small tear go down her wrinkled cheek. Her secret was now gone, as was Papa who no longer needed Mama’s knipl for his many financial ventures.

While we boys do not have Mama’s strict views about money, and our wives do not have a secret knipl, Mama’s words still are in our minds whenever we have to make a major financial decision.

Mama does not have to worry about money now.
Etl Betl - Cat’s Cradle

She came to America, “The Promised Land,” after World War I as a grown woman. Mama worked hard all of her life. While in Poland she walked out to the countryside with her mama to peddle goods to the Polish farmwomen and lugged back the produce she received in exchange. Her papa was in America to make money to bring them over.

On our farm, she did most of the housework, fed Papa, her four boys, and Paul, the hired hand, while also helping with the heavy work outside.

Things changed when one of her boys was sick. Everything except the most essential chores was put aside, and Mama became the best nurse you could ever have. She told us stories about her childhood and played games with us.

We played cards, and she always lost to us in Pisha Pasha, Rummy or Casino. It was a different matter when we put aside the deck of cards and Mama pulled out the looped string that she carried in her apron.

Her mood changed dramatically when she played our favorite game, Etl Betl (Cat’s Cradle). No professional athlete could be more intent on winning than Mama. Even that wonderful smile disappeared. Mama’s huge hands rapidly moved the looped string as she converted one of the eight shapes from our hands to hers. She always won, and then we hugged, kissed, and laughed.
Before moving out to the farm in New Jersey, we lived on the fifth floor at 1566 Washington Avenue in the Bronx. My paternal grandfather owned this building, so the rent was reasonable.

The candy store downstairs had a telephone that was used for the building. Whenever a call came in, someone hollered up so that the whole block knew who the caller was and who was being called.

There was an elderly insurance man that visited us regularly to collect the monthly insurance premiums. Mama always spoke to him in Yiddish and likewise he always replied in Yiddish.

It has been many years since that time and I have forgotten his name, but his voice and appearance will stay with me to my last days. He had a small, thick, black leather book that had a wide rubber band around it.

Mama had taken out a policy a week after Fishl was born. Mama said that if anything happened to her she wanted to be sure that the $1,000 would be there for her funeral and to take care of her boys. Papa didn’t believe in insurance policies because, “It only makes the insurance companies richer.”

When we moved to the farm in 1937, Mama was upset because the insurance man could not come out to collect the premiums.

Mama trusted him more than the United States Post Office to see that the New York Life Insurance Company got her money. When the insurance man wrote it in the book, that was that, and it made no difference what happened to the money as long as it was written in the book. If the envelope was lost in the mail, it meant...
that the premium wasn’t paid and there would be no money to pay for her burial or to take care of her boys.

For many years Mama saved the letter that the elderly Jewish New York Life Insurance agent sent. It was written in Yiddish and told Mama that when the check was in the mail it was just as good as when he collected the cash. Mama believed it until her dying day.

The letter also assured Mama that the New York Life Insurance Company was good in New Jersey even though the name of the company was New York. Mama also had asked if there was a New Jersey Life Insurance Company. The letter assured her that there was no New Jersey Life Insurance Company.

I find it ironic that my wife, Sally, was an insurance underwriter and had a small agency in Fair Lawn, New Jersey where she sold personal and commercial lines. However, when we moved to California, she worked for The James McGovern Insurance Company in Belmont and later retired from an Allstate agency in Millbrae in October of 2008—just short of her 80th birthday.
**Mama Gets Teary-Eyed**

As a child, I remember Mama telling us many stories of the old country and what it was like for her and her family during the war (World War I). This was while her father had come to America to earn enough money to pay for steerage to get them here. In recalling these stories it seems that many of her words started with “oys.”

Mama never used, “s’iz amol geven” (once upon a time.) Invariably it started with, “S’iz geven an umglik” (There was a misfortune) and then proceeded by telling us what the family had “durkhgemakht” (endured) We guessed that an “umglik” was not so good and that “durkhgemakht” was something that they encountered or lived through.

There was also Mama’s list of “oys.” We knew by the tone of her voice, and occasional tear in her eyes, that they were not happy times. It started with “oysgehungert” (starved) and then proceeded to “oysgematert” (really tired) and “oysgemutshet” (tormented). Finally she ended with “oysgeshtorbn” (perished).

It was only much later when I began to study Yiddish and had a dictionary that the full impact of Mama’s experiences were understood, and thus her use of these words became clearer to me.

Occasionally one of these words pops into my zinen (mind) and I realize that these “oys” words really are variants of “oy” (woe is me). My mama had many “oys”.

Mama Hrabina of Hunterdon
THE FOOD (FAT) PYRAMID

The United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) newly released Food Pyramid (found at MyPyramid.gov) has a dozen models geared to different people. Mama had only one—it was built around FAT.

Mama never saw a fat she didn’t like—except lard.

My earliest recollection as a child is being fed hot cereal every morning. Mama loaded the cooked cereal with sweet cream and honey. Her trick was to show me the picture of a bunch of cherries at the bottom of the bowl. As she fed me each spoonful, she urged me on like a football coach until the cereal was “all gone.”

No Rice Krispies or Corn Flakes crossed our doorstep. Mr. Kellogg was not a welcome guest in Mama’s house. It was Cream of Wheat, then Oatmeal, and finally Wheatena (sometimes Maltex), each twice a week. Mama never varied this routine, and never cooked on shabes (Saturday).

Mama had good reason to feed us the fat stuff. All of her boys were skinny and you could see ribs sticking out like keys on a piano. She was very determined to fatten us.

Dinner and supper were no stepchildren. My memories are much clearer after we moved to the farm in New Jersey. In the winter we shivered and in the summer we sweated. Food and drink were very important to Mama and us boys.

With plenty of rich milk from our Guernsey and Swiss cows, there was plenty of fat. No Holstein cow with the standard 3.5% butterfat, 2% lowfat, or skim milk ever sat on our kitchen table. The rich, dark yellow butter was fully a ¼ inch thick on our thickly sliced pumpernickel bread. Often we just tore off a piece
of bread rather than to take the time to slice it. We joked about eating “butter and bread” rather than “bread and butter.”

Our cows gave plenty of milk so we made pot cheese that Mama mixed with sweet cream. There was no gum thickener like you find in “store bought” Philadelphia Cream Cheese.

Each evening, supper was chicken soup and chicken with mashed, baked, or fried potatoes and some form of beans. The pumpernickel or rye bread was smothered with shmalts (chicken fat) as thick as the butter at breakfast time. Mama fried onions and put it in the shmalts. There never could be too much fried onions for us boys.

Mr. McDonald — you may have those impressive and famous “golden arches,” really fast service, low prices, drive-through service and colorful children’s play areas, but you could never rival Mama’s cooking.

Once a week we had “heldzl,” — stuffed chicken necks. When we plucked the chickens, there was special care taken not to tear the neck. When Mama saw torn skin on a chicken’s neck, the veins bulged in her neck. This was the only time Mama severely admonished us (other than if we dared bring home a B on our report card).

I still can see Mama sewing up the “heldzl” after stuffing it full of mashed potatoes, “shmaltz,” onions, and “matze mel” (matzoh meal). To this was added plenty of kosher salt and spices.

Papa loved soup. Chicken soup and other soups were a regular part of our evening meals on the farm. The chicken soup was loaded with parsnip, for Mama said it made the soup sweet. Mama never skimmed the fat off of the cooled chicken soup. I still can remember those beautiful, shimmering, golden globules of fat floating in Mama’s chicken soup.

Most of all I remember Mama’s “gehakte leber” (chopped liver). There were no string bean substitutes to lower the cholesterol. We
had plenty of chicken livers and hearts to be mixed with the onions and *shmalts*, and *shmalts*, and more *shmalts*.

Today I still am paying with cholesterol-lowering drugs for the high cholesterol food that Mama fed us, but that luscious taste, the “*geshmak*” (tastiness) of her hearty farmhouse meals, are still embedded deep in my memory.

Oh, what I wouldn’t give to have Mama cook me a *shabes* meal of *gehakte leber* dripping with *shmalts*, a loaf of good Jewish rye bread with seeds, a hearty chicken soup in which to dip my bread, and a rich, plump *heldzl*.

Yes, Zocor, has lowered my total cholesterol down below 150 and my HDL is fine as well as the triglycerides, but it has come at a very high price. No butter enters our house. No *shmaltz* is used in our kitchen. At the supermarket all cans, jars, and boxes are scrutinized for salt and fat content.

The price is high. My wonderful Sally does her very best, but without butterfat and *shmalts* it is like eating cardboard and drinking dishwater. Maybe later it will make no difference, and Mama can cook for me again.
When Her Boys Got a Cold

Oy, Fischele hot genosn—er hot farkilt zikh! (Oh, my Fishl sneezed—he got a cold).

That statement was the start of a routine of rituals that never varied. Mama’s pattern was totally predictable.

As we boys got older and tried our futile, youthful rebelling, Mama’s retort was, “S’vet helfn vi a toytn bankes.” (It will help like cupping on a corpse—It’ll do no good). We soon gave up the complaining and went along with Mama as she went through the following routine.

Mama’s Routine

Step 1. Place the Blame.

After pulling the earlobe (I never understood the reasoning behind this step), the following ensued, “You have wet feet. I told you to wear your galoshes. You did not wear your heavy jacket. I told you to dress warmly.”

Mama deathly feared a cold, for she lost her sister Anna, two weeks before Anna was to be married. It was during the worldwide influenza epidemic when over 500,000 people died in the worst single epidemic the U.S. has ever encountered.

Step 2. Go to Bed.

Then Mama checked to see if you had a fever. Initially, this was done by placing her lips on the sick son’s shtern (forehead). If it was warm, she had to corroborate it with a thermometer—a big rectal thermometer. Whenever I sneeze now, I can feel that glass tube painfully going all the way up to my throat.

Hrabina of Hunterdon

[Handwritten note: Hrabina of Hunterdon]
I remember begging Mama to use a “mouth thermometer” and her retort was, “Keynmol nisht (Never).” It seems that she had heard about a child that sneezed with a thermometer in her mouth and she bit and broke the thermometer and swallowed the poisonous mercury.

Next came the bedding. There were extra kishenes (pillows) to prop up the head so the “draining will take place.” Of course there was the usual cotton or wool koldre (blanket) that was now augmented with the perine (featherbed quilt).

The idea was to shwits, schwits, shwits (sweat, sweat, sweat). We were threatened with Zeyde coming all the way from Boerum Street in Brooklyn to put on bankes (cupping), if we did not obey all the rules. I still remember those purple marks on Mama’s back!

The bankes were small and made of thick glass. Zeyde had them in a brown leather box. It looked like Sally’s box that holds her mah jongg set. He would put a drop of alcohol in each banke and rubbed it all around.

Then, it was lit and the hot banke was placed open end down on Mama’s back. The idea was to have the heat pull the cold out of the back and cure the patient. The only result we saw was dark purple marks on Mama’s back.

**Step 3. Drink, Drink, Drink**

The drink of hot tea and the lemon rich in vitamin C with honey was very important, but the Gogl-Mogl was Mama’s specialty. “It is to get your strength back.”

Many years later in reminiscing Mama told me how she made a Gogl-Mogl. Here were her instructions. “You heat two glasses of
milk until almost boiling. (We had rich milk from our Swiss cow, Nodgy). Mix in two tablespoons of honey. Add two egg yolks, a little bit of cinnamon and last of all a quarter cup of brandy.”

Mama stood by our bed until it was “all done.”

**Step 4. Storytelling Time**

This was the only welcome part of the entire series of steps, “If you want to get better and not be sick anymore, you have to do exactly like I tell you.”

Our favorite stories were about how Mama fooled the Cossack soldiers and all about the good German officers who never harmed the Polish civilians. World War I was very different than the Second World War!

There was a story of a Cossack officer who wanted Mama’s ring and wanted to chop her finger off if she did not give it to him. Mama jumped out of the window and ran to her uncle and hid in the basement among potatoes sacks until the Germans returned.

There was the story of the trip on the steamship in steerage coming to America. She had a twenty-dollar bill and she cashed it to buy a candy bar. Mama was a great storyteller.
Mama was a sore loser—when she lost at cards—especially when she played against Papa. Their differences were settled by a match. Papa’s favorite was with a deck of cards and Mama was by staring.

Mama never lost a staring match. We boys and Papa were no match for Mama. As soon as she saw a little twitch at the corner of your mouth she knew that you were on the ropes and it would soon be over. At that moment she intensified her stare and we would burst out laughing. Her comment was, “You see, G-d knows that I am right,” and that settled the issue.

When it came to Papa’s game, 500 Rummy, it was another matter. Papa had a phenomenal memory. Not only did he play the odds, but he also remembered every card that was discarded. He held his melds in his hand until the very last moment. This was very frustrating to Mama who really loved the game and hated to lose.

If they each won at their specialty, it would seem that the decision was predestined and that there would not be a need for the contest. On the contrary, this winning/losing test was an important part of their marriage. This was somewhat like a courting ritual where the winner takes all.

So the only thing left was to decide whether it was by cards or by staring. It would seem that it would be a waste of time to go ahead with the event when the decision was made. On the contrary, both Mama and Papa went into battle as if they fully intended to win—this time—and they gave it their best shot. However, to us boys there was no doubt as to the outcome.

Before each contest one of them would say, “The last time we settled it your way, now it’s my turn.” While this sounded fair
and reasonable, the other would not give in without a litmus test. It always was cutting the deck to see who had the higher card.

Since Papa was better at cards it would seem that Mama would not accept this form of dueling, but it proved to be fair over the long run.

Today, whenever I read about the Indy 500 or any of the major athletic events like the Baseball World Series, Football Super Bowl or the rush of Basketball’s March Madness it reminds me how Mama and Papa chose the winner.

I wish my Sally and I were able to settle our rare, irreconcilable differences with so much zest and fun as Mama and Papa did.
A Yiddishe Rabbit & Turtle

Although Mama could not help us with schoolwork because she never finished night school and had only a fair knowledge of English, but we often went to her with problems—especially when things didn’t make sense. She had a way of explaining things that seemed to make sense.

Here’s an example of one of those times. I think it was in the Bronx and I was in the third grade. The teacher read us a story about a rabbit and a turtle. I think it actually was about a hare and a tortoise. It seemed that they had a race and the fast rabbit lost the race with the slower turtle. That didn’t make sense.

I said to Mama, “The teacher told us, ‘Slow and steady wins the race.’ Mama, we then went out to play and I ran slowly and all the boys beat me in the race.

“Mama—Papa always says, ‘Makh shnel’ (go fast) and you always say ‘hob geduld’ (have patience). Should I go fast or have patience?”

“Oy, Fishele, du fregst azoy fil frages. S’iz faran an Untershid tsvoishn zakhn un menshn, khayes un geviksn. (Oh, Fishele, you ask so many questions. There is a difference between things and people, animals and plants.)

“Ven du arbetst un ven du geyst ergets makh shnel, un ven es kumt tsu lebedike zakhn – menshn un khayes, hob geduld. (When you work and when you go somewhere go fast, and when it comes to living things—people and animals, have patience.)

“Es nemt a lange tsayt far a kalb tsu vern geboyrn, un a lange tsayt far veyts tsu vaksn.” (It takes a long time for a calf to be born, and a long time for wheat to grow.)
Many years later I remember telling Mama that my students seemed to be getting lazier and didn’t want to do all of their homework on time. Mama then said, “Du darfst hobn geduld mit dayne studenttn.” (You need to have patience with your students.)

By this time Mama sometimes spoke to me in English and said, “The difference between your smart students and those that are not so smart is how long it takes them to learn. Once they learn it, they know it just as well. Everybody learns the address of where they live no matter how long it takes them.”

Mama had patience after Papa went away. Then, in 1990 she said, “I want to see if they are taking good care of him.”

Mama, I still remember your advice of when to makh shnel and when to have geduld.
apa left for work early and came back late, except on Sunday. We boys saw very little of Papa while living in The Bronx. Papa spoke English to us, and Mama switched between Yiddish and a few words in English.

He wanted to move to a farm so he could spend more time with his boys. Papa was a Republican and Mama a New Deal Democrat. While they disagreed on FDR, they both voted for Mayor Laguardia.

Because Papa was around so little while we were awake, Mama was our main source of comfort, as well as discipline. I now recall that when Papa came to America he must have been the same age that I was when we moved from The Bronx to our New Jersey farm in 1937.

While we lived in several different apartment houses, the last one was at 1566 Washington Avenue, in The Bronx. We went to the elementary school across the street and played “immies” (marbles) in the gutter (alongside the curb in the street).

Mama was a kind but strict disciplinarian. She kept a kosher home and we were raised that way as the normal way of life. School was the center of our life and doing well was Mama’s constant concern.

We came to Mama when there were problems and she always said, “Go ask the teacher.”

That advice was not given when I came home one day and told Mama about two boys who got into a fight. I asked her, “Mama, what should I do? Should I go tell the teacher?”

Mama’s quick reply was, “Fishele, mind jerome business.”
I remember saying to Mama that neither boy’s name was Jerome.

She answered, “Mish nisht arayn, (Don’t mix in) mind jerome business.”

Still today, I remember those words and the fact that Mama called someone from the candy store downstairs and told the operator the telephone number and it was Jerome….

While I have no friends named Jerome, there is a relative, and several friends named Gerald. When I call them “Jerry,” Mama’s words come ringing back, “Mind Jerome business.”
TWELVE-HUNDRED MASON JARS

When Mama was busy in our large farm kitchen she reverted back to Yiddish. I remember canning time in the fall. First, all clutter was removed and then the kitchen table was filled with fruits and vegetables. The boxes of jars were stacked separately on the chairs. We had 1200 mason jars, and they were all filled each year.

The ritual began with boiling the jars, lids, and rubber seals in big pots, bubbling in anticipation, on the coal stove in the kitchen. There were fruits galore; apples, peaches, plums, pears, and cherries. Then came the vegetables; peas, beans, corn, and tomatoes.

All the jars were stored on wooden shelves in the damp basement of our 1842, dirt-floor, slate-roofed farmhouse in Hunterdon County, New Jersey.

Mama never labeled the jars, for the fruit and vegetables were easily visible through the glass. There never was a time that any jar was left over for the following season.

Summertime roomers and boarders pestered Mama for her canned goods. She doled them out as if they were gems. Peaches and cherries were the special favorites.

Besides the names of the canned items, except corn, all were in Yiddish. As we boys helped Mama, every other word was gikher, gikher un shneler, shneler (both words mean quicker, faster or speedier).
Wrist As Thick As My Fist

Yes, Mama was a powerful woman. Her wrists were as thick as my fist and almost as big as Papa’s—this was until Semele was born. I guess it was too much. After that she slowed down. Mama said, “Ikh bin nisht mer keyn berier.” (I no longer am a skillful housewife.)

Up until then, she could pick up a 100 lb. sack of chicken feed from the floor, chuck it onto her shoulders, and carry it up to the second floor of our large chicken coop, without slowing her gait to one step at a time. This was something that I was never able to do.

It was the power in her wrists that made short order in dismembering a chicken, duck or turkey. This was the source of energy that wielded the large mop in her weekly washing of the linoleum on our farm-kitchen floor.

Mama was born and raised in Tiktin (Tykocin), Poland, some 25 kilometers from Białystok. During World War I, as a teenager, she walked eight kilometers out into the countryside with her mother. They visited the peasant farmers bringing sewing supplies and material. In return farm produce was received, which they carried home. This was the manner in which Mama said they earned their parnose (livelihood). It also built up her large muscular frame.

While she was a powerful woman, she also possessed the most delicate touch which showed when it came to tending to her sick boys or handling the fuzzy, yellow, Leghorn baby chicks.
Purina Feed Bag Aprons

Mama had many sayings. I remember she used to say, “What you wear on the inside is for you to be comfortable so that you can work, but what you wear on the outside is for others to see. It tells a lot about you.”

Mama’s aprons were lovingly made on her old, foot-pedaled Singer Sewing Machine. The material came from chicken feed bags made of cotton—the ones that were filled with mash from the Purina Feed Company.

The feedbags were brightly colored pastels with lovely patterns. The bags that held grain were brown burlap, and they were too coarse to use.

Each morning Mama came downstairs to her large, old woodstove on the chicken farm eight miles from Flemington, New Jersey. She always wore a freshly ironed apron. I don’t remember Mama ever wiping her hands on her apron or ever seeing a dirty one.

Her aprons were neatly stacked in a dresser drawer next to their bed in Mama and Papa’s bedroom. She was as proud of her aprons as any movie actress would be of a closet full of designer gowns.

I wish I had one now to put against my cheek—all I have is memories.
THE KNIPPL

Papa was always short of money, but Mama always had a knipl. It was during the time of the Great Depression and on our chicken farm times were not good. Yes, there always was plenty of fresh and canned fruit and vegetables, dairy products, eggs, and chicken but no hard cash. However, Mama always had her knipl.

At first it was in a slit in the mattress—Papa and we boys knew it, but never dared touch it. Mama’s bed sheet was tucked so tight that mama could notice even a slight pull. No hospital or hotel sheet has ever been put on the way Mama did.

When mama went to the hospital to give birth to little Semele she took her knipl—it was at her side the whole time. When Semele was brought in to be nursed, she had her two most prized possessions—one on either side of her chest.

Mama’s knipl was earned from roomers and boarders who came out from “the city.” Our large farmhouse was always crammed during the summer. We boys all slept in one room, for every available room meant more for Mama’s knipl.

Although Mama collected cash from the roomers and boarders, she never paid Papa for the chicken, eggs, milk, butter, cream, pot cheese, fruits, and vegetables that we produced.

Mama always had a knipl!
**A Contraption Replaces Mama**

For 21 days, the hens would lovingly cover the eggs and the warmth of their bodies was just right for the embryos to develop. Until finally the baby chicks pipped away many, many times until they broke through the shell and hopped out wet for a day until they fluffed out.

Instead of using the hens to brood the eggs, we chicken farmers had the hatchery place the eggs in a heated box called an incubator and many thousands of chicks could be produced under carefully adjusted temperatures by the thermostatically controlled machines.

Mama said it was a shame that the mother hen was not allowed to sit on her eggs and hatch her baby chicks. If we did not remove the eggs each day from the nest, the hens would become “broody” and sit on the eggs.

Mama lamented that the love and warmth of the chicks from the mother hen was replaced by a *makherayke* (contraption) that did not cackle.

Every spring the brooder houses were prepared for the baby chicks. First, we disinfected the coops. Then came the brooder stoves and the Stazdry (shredded sugar cane) for litter. Newspaper was placed on top of the Stazdry so the chicks would not choke trying to eat it.

Then, little hoppers (feeder troughs) and water fountains were all placed neatly around the brooder stove, and a foot-high tin placed at a distance away from the stove to keep the chick from wandering too far from the heat.
The day the chicks arrived was exciting. They came in cardboard boxes divided into four compartments with 25 chicks in each compartment.

How soft and cuddly they were — these tiny balls of fluffy, light yellow peepers. We cupped our hands, scooped up several at a time and gently removed them from the box.

Many years later we placed each hen in a wire cage where she could not scratch the litter, run around the range, and look for tiny tidbits from Mother Nature.

Mama was old-fashioned.
Mama spoke Polish very well, in addition to several other languages. It came in handy with our hired hand on the chicken farm. His name was Paul, but we called him the “workingman” or the “Polish guy.”

Paul was a giant of a man, and the strongest person I ever knew. He was stooped and completely bald. There was the tiniest cap on his head whether it was the coldest day in winter or the hottest day in summer. I don’t think the cap had ever been cleaned. He always wore that cap, except when he ate. At meals it was carefully placed on his lap.

Paul ate with our family. He especially loved Mama’s soups—chicken with *lokshn* (noodles), beef barley, lentil, borscht and Papa’s favorite—potato. Mama saved the parsnip for Paul.

When mama asked if he wanted more he always said, “No, thank you.” But Mama gave him seconds anyway. He never left a drop of food in his special, over-sized bowl.

One day it was raining hard. It was so muddy that the truck could not come near the brooder house and baby chicks were coming in. The coop had to be cleaned out of the old litter and disinfected. We shoveled the litter into burlap feed bags and Paul carried them out one under each arm, until the building was emptied.

Paul called Mama “Hrabina,” (the countess.) I remember, one day, overhearing Papa asking Paul why he called Mama the countess, and he said, “She speaks like a fancy lady.”
Mama read the Yiddish paper, Der Tog. It was not until I left the farm and went to Rutgers University in New Brunswick to study poultry husbandry, that I discovered another Jewish (Yiddish) newspaper existed.

It was then that I learned there were the Forverts and the Freiheit. Mama said, “I like Der Tog because the writers talk like I do.” Papa, a lifelong Republican, read the Hunterdon County Democrat. It was the only local newspaper.

After the newspapers were read they were recycled. Mama mopped the kitchen floor every Friday before the shabes. When Mama mopped, she twisted the strands of the long heavy mop so hard that the muscles in her forearms bulged.

Then, came the newspaper. The sheets were placed neatly on the floor end to end to keep it clean for a longer time.

I clearly remember our linoleum floor. It had a square pattern with red and yellow flowers and green leaves. Gold colored metal strips were tacked down at the seams. The tacks came up occasionally and needed to be hammered down.

Finally, when the paper became dirty and worn, Mama picked them up and placed them aside to be used each morning during the week when the wood stove was started. First, we crumpled the sheets and placed them on the grates of our six-burner Kalamazoo stove.

The sheets were then covered with narrow slivers of kindling wood. Later, logs were put in. I still remember the curved handled lid lifter we used to expose the flames and add the wood.
Today, large trucks come by the curbside of my home to pick up the bins in which the papers are stored. The sheets are taken away to be recycled.

Mama not only read the newspapers, she used them to keep the kitchen floor clean longer, and then burned them in the kitchen stove. There was no expensive garbage pickup truck and no recycling charge.

Mama was a recycler.
When I asked Mama what she was, her reply was, “Ikh bin a farmeke.” Shtolts is proud and a peasant is a poyer, khlop, or muzhik. What is the word for a peasant woman?

Mama was a strong woman who could toss a full crate of chickens onto a truck bed. We boys took either end and lifted the crates on. Mama could swipe a fly or mosquito on the wing, and then say, “nisht af mayne kinder” (not on my children).

Mama had a beautiful head of long brown hair that she always kept bundled under her red kerchief. She had several red kerchiefs. My favorite kerchief was one that had white polka dots.

Mama hated the cold, but went outside in winter without gloves, and always wore her red kerchief and a button-down sweater. Her hands were rough, calloused, and cracked. She put cold cream on them every night.

Mama’s legs were heavy and her veins stuck out. They were muscular like Papa’s legs. It came from much walking and carrying heavy goods when she walked out to the farms to trade with the farmwomen, while still living in Europe.

She talked Polish to our Polish hired hand. He spoke only Polish to her.

She spoke Russian to the farmer’s wife whose farm was on the other side of the creek. The “Russian Lady” came over to talk to Mama whenever her husband beat her or their daughters. Mama always calmed her down and she kissed Mama when she left.

Mama was a proud peasant woman. She raised her voice only when Papa was wrong.
I was the “milker” on our chicken farm eight miles outside of Flemington, New Jersey. Papa bought the farm in 1937 during the Depression. It was my job to milk the cows every morning and night—we always had at least one milk producer.

My favorites were Betty, a Jersey-Swiss cross, and Nodgy a purebred Swiss. Betty’s milk was very creamy and Nodgy gave more milk. I wondered how Nodgy ever got her name or what it means.

After the milk was strained to remove any straw or flies that fell into the milk pail, it was Mama’s milk. She worked wonders with every drop of it.

We always drank fresh milk. What was left over was separated after the cream rose to the top. Mama skimmed the cream off. We had it on our cereal and over compote or rice and bread pudding. The rest was set aside to be churned into butter.

We boys hated the tedious job of churning. It was wonderful when finally the golden butter emerged—separated from the buttermilk. The buttermilk was fed to the chickens in the wet mash. We spread butter on the bread almost a quarter of an inch thick.

Meanwhile the skimmed milk turned sour and separated into custard-looking curds and pale-green watery whey. The whey also went into making wet mash for the chickens. I always wondered why Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet (a low stool) and ate curds and whey.
Mama poured the curds and whey through a cheesecloth funnel and the curds dripped until it became pot cheese. We had the pot cheese in blintzes, mixed with vegetables, or with buttery noodles.

Mama’s milk was never ‘ized”. Mama never gave us homogenized or pasteurized milk like the milk that was served to the city kids.

City kids wanted only milk that came from a bottle. Every morning during the summer when Mama had roomers and boarders from the city, she took the milk which I brought in, and filled several bottles and placed them in the icebox. The city kids thought city milk was cold milk from a bottle.

As long as we milked the cows, they gave milk. That is, until the unborn calf grew larger and consumed more of the cow’s energy and production.

When the calf was first born, it took the milk, for the first milk after birth is too rich and we could not use it. If it was a bull calf, it was shortly sold for veal. Every few years we raised a heifer to replace one of the “dry” cows.

Mama never served us “ized’ milk.
We boys called them the big knives and the little knives. The little ones were used to pare fruits and vegetables, especially for canning. Mama's whetstone was used to sharpen her two sets of knives.

The big ones were for cutting the big pieces of chuck meat into cubes, and cut off the feet, toenails, wings, head, and neck of the chickens we brought back from the shoykhet (ritual slaughterer). Our chickens were taken to the shoykhet in Somerville or Trenton and we boys did the plucking.

Mama never gave her knives to the man who came in the old brown pick-up truck. He came around about twice a year to sharpen the farmers’ axes and saws. He had a big round stone that he turned with his legs as he sat and pedaled like a bike. The saws were different. He put them in a vise and used a file.

Mama used her whetstone to sharpen the knives before every major use. Mama knew just the correct angle to hold the knife to get the best cutting edge. Mama was a powerful woman and could cut limbs with only one swift swipe of that big knife.

Until much later, we never ate broiled, roasted or fried chicken because they were all old Leghorn layers and the meat was tough. Usually it was chicken soup, and so we ate boiled chicken several times a week. On special occasions she ground the beylik (white meat of the chicken) and made cutlets.
Roomers & Boarders

School was out and the influx would soon come. Our large, circa 1842 colonial farmhouse would be totally rearranged. The families came in many different combinations.

There was the single rich older lady whose son drove her out each spring to see the room she would get, and also “make the arrangements.” Money was paid up-front, and Mama used it to get ready for all the rest.

We boys liked this time because there were new kids with whom to play. Our chores often suffered, but all the mamas were happy because it got the children out of the house.

Yes, there were families—many of them. They wanted to get the children out to the farm. Jersey was a shorter trip than going to The Mountains (Catskills), so it was filled early and full all season.

All the bedrooms were rearranged. The twins and Fishl all slept in one bed in the small bedroom. Even Mama and Papa’s big bedroom was rented (to the rich old lady).

The kitchen was where Mama fed the boarders and us boys and papa—later. The large screened-in summer kitchen, added on around the 1920’s, was where the roomers cooked and the back room where they ate. The summer kitchen and back room were unheated and thus not used the rest of the year.

Mama sold the roomers; fresh eggs, milk, cream, butter, pot cheese, kosher chickens, and ducks. Papa drove the roomers in once a week to do their shopping, or would take their orders.

Most of the time, the men would carpool and come out for the weekends or stay on their one-week vacations. This was a very
special time because the living room became the time Papa would play pinochle with the men.

It was a time when the women or we children would not dare make noise or bother them. Every once in a while, there would be some loud laughter or an argument when a partner overbid and the other would be upset when they could not make the bid.

Papa’s rules of the house paid extra for a double pinochle (both Jack of Diamonds and Queen of Spades) and double if trump was spades.

We all felt a little sad when they left by Labor Day.
Mama’s Tshok

Mama never changed. She always said it the same way—tshok! When Mama chucked a bag of feed onto her shoulder or a bale of straw or hay, she always said tshok.

When Mama wanted to refer to chalk, she said tshok.

When Mama was asked what flavor ice cream she wanted, she said tshoklit.

When Mama went to the butcher for meat, she usually asked for tshok steak. Since Papa was a “meat and potatoes man” we had a lot of beef barley soup and Mama’s version of beef stew.

Papa always said that his mother bought flanken, but Mama never used it. It was always tshok. For a while Papa purchased our poultry feed from the dealer who handled Purina feeds.

Besides the mash and scratch, we got oyster shells (the calcium made the egg shells stronger) and grit (when chickens are not on the range they need little stones to help grind the feed in their gizzards).

The fellow that drove the “Purina truck” and delivered the Purina feed was Chuck. He was a short stocky fellow and always had a joke for Papa who always laughed. I think they were off-colored, because Papa never laughed with Chuck when we boys were right there.

Mama liked Chuck because he always took back the burlap bags for which we got credit, even when they were slightly torn.

She called him Tshok, but he never corrected her.
Katie was the largest and ugliest farm cat I have ever seen. She had a special place and role on our chicken farm. She was just as much the matriarch in her domain as Mama was in ours.

On our farm all animals and folks had a job and a role. There were no pets—except Semele (our baby brother), when he was young.

Charley, the German police dog was a watchdog and was always chained. His job was to alert us when there were strange people or animals in the area. Cats were for keeping the farm buildings clear of mice and rats.

When I did the evening milking of the gray and black Swiss and the red and white Guernsey, the cats would line up. It was fun squirting milk five feet and hitting Katie. She would open her mouth and when I missed, she would lick her fur. Katie was the only one that got milk. Mama never knew—or let on that she knew. Milk was not to be wasted on a cat—not even Katie.

The only cat that was ever allowed in the house was Katie and only if she had a job to do, or was ready to give birth to one of her many litters. When it came her time, she would stay outside of the kitchen door and meow until Mama let her in.

Katie went right to her spot behind the kitchen stove. Our large Kalamazoo stove was about a foot away from the back wall. This was necessary so that there could be a bend in the stovepipe leading to the chimney flue. Here always was a doubled over Purina feed bag that Mama kept special for Katie and her kittens.

They didn’t stay there long. As soon as the kittens began to walk away, Katie and her litter were put outside to fend for themselves.
The number of kittens that were permitted to exist depended on how many cats were already on the farm. We had as many as seventeen at one time.

As I look back at those times on the farm, they were hard and harsh. How we disposed of the kittens cannot be written here. In those days we had never heard of the ASPCA—only HIAS, WPA, CCC and the distant KKK.

We finally lost Katie one day. She got into a fight with a huge rat and the next morning we found them both. Mama mentioned it once and the subject was never brought up again.

There had been a very special relationship between Mama and Katie.
Picking Bugs off the Plants

We said it was Mama’s garden, but the boys did all the work. Having a 42-acre chicken farm gave us plenty of room for a garden. With four boys, Papa and the hired hand, there was plenty of need for vegetables. Also, during the summer there were the city folks, our seasonal roomers, and boarders. Additionally, mama canned 1200 jars of fruits and vegetables for the winter.

Mama laid out the rows and told us what seeds and what plants went in each row. The garden was about 30’ by 50’. We had no problem with the rabbits, for the seventeen cats around the house, chicken coops and dairy barn kept them away.

In the spring the ground was plowed, disked and harrowed. Some of the vegetables were reseeded and we had several crops. These included radishes and scallions.

Mama said it was important to place the different vegetables in the right place so that the tall ones would not shade the smaller ones. The exception was that the cucumber plants which could spread out and grow under the tall sweet corn stalks.

Mama told us how deep to plant the seeds and to firm the soil afterwards. We never sprayed the vegetables, but spent many hours picking the “bugs” from the plants. We used a hoe for chopping the hard soil and a 3-pronged cultivator for most of the weeding.

Mama told us about mulching and we placed wet newspaper and straw around the plants to help keep down the weeds.

We never staked the tomatoes or other vine plants. Mama said if G-d wanted tomatoes to be staked He would have said so. She said it was like a person walking around with a chain around him.
Now I miss those rich, red Jersey tomatoes. Here in California we have the *pink*, greenhouse tasteless ones. Mama’s tomatoes were large, juicy and full of seeds. We picked them fresh, cut them and with a thick piece of pumpernickel bread and pot cheese, it was a great snack.

There were peppers, eggplants, zucchini, celery, beets, string beans, peas and several different types of cucumbers. Sweet corn was our pride and joy. The corn seeds were planted at the end of the rows so as not to shade the other plants.

Most of the deeper root crops did not do well because the Hunterdon plateau soils were mainly rich in clay and thus were hard and had poor drainage.

No, we never had luck with white or sweet potatoes. The vegetables that grew shallower like beets, scallions, and radishes did well.

After the city folks left, we started the canning. The rewards from Mama’s garden were plentiful and delicious.
Cross-Examination

Mama should have been a district attorney. Her cross-examination of the girls we boys brought home to meet her now seems comical.

Each was Jewish and from a respectable family. There never was a question of whether the girl’s parents would meet Mama and Papa before our becoming “serious.”

There was an interviewing session that would be as stringent as the job interview for a high level position at the CIA. Before meeting her parents, the future shnur (daughter-in-law) was grilled. Mama asked questions slowly and in a singsong manner. Her questions were short, but she expected detailed answers.

When we boys met later and got the report from our prospective sister-in-law, each said they were more nervous than taking a final college exam. We compiled a list of questions and passed them on for each future shvegerin (sister-in-law.)

Here is a partial list of questions we remember.

Fun vanen kumt di eltern? From where do your parents come?

Vu voynt ir haynt? Where do you live today?

Vi heyst dayn tate? What is your father’s name?

Vi heyst dayn mame? What is your mother’s name?

Hostu brider un shvester? Do you have brothers and sisters?

Bistu a frumer? Are you religious?

Vifl farmogst dayn tatn? How much money does your father have?
Hostu gegangen tsu kalidzh? Did you go to college?

Du host a groysn boykh—shvengerstu? You have a big belly—are you pregnant?

Denkstu dayn kleyd iz tsu kurts? Don’t you think your dress is too short?

Farvos shlingstu di verter? Why do you swallow your words?

The next day at a family conference the evaluation was announced. It always was the same. It is too embarrassing to print the actual statements made. However, to be kind and summarize Mama’s words, it amounted to, “Is that the best you can do?”

To be fair, Mama always wanted the best for her boys. Yes, Mama asked hard questions.
Roses, Noses & Toes(es)

Mama had many superstitions as well as sayings for many of them. Occasionally, some of them resurface under unusual circumstances. Frequently at some untimely event, her comment would have been, “Fishele, ikh hob dir gezogt…” (Fishele, I told you…)

She had an aversion to her adored boys ever walking barefoot. We were admonished with, “Me tor nit geyn borves” (One is not permitted to walk barefoot).

Originally, I thought it would be to prevent catching a cold from walking on the chilly winter floors. It also occurred to me that she thought we might get a splinter from the old country farmhouse’s wooden floors.

In later years she confided in me that she did not want us to stub our toes or nose. Since roses already are red they were thrown in along with the stubbed toes and nose. It was shtekshikh (slippers) that she had wanted us to wear whenever we left bed after going to sleep at night.

Nighttime duties in winter were complicated. On the one hand we used a Mason jar to be emptied the next morning, or it was outside to the three-seated outhouse, some twenty yards behind the farmhouse.

This of course required putting on our boots either because of the snow or the ever-present mud.

So stubbing our toes or nose was the reason. Now in my own twilight years, and also with diminishing sight, it is even more important to heed Mama’s advice. I have learned to navigate in the dark by putting my fists together and elbows extended in
front of my face. Most of the time the object is high and this protects my face (nose). The slippers protect my toes.

Since many of us have our toes extend out further than our nose, the slippers hit the object first. There are some of us who have added a little over the years and our baykhele (abdomen) protrude beyond our toes. This adds a third degree of safety.

The only place where an unexpected problem arises is with low-hanging branches.

Mama does not know about my Orientation and Mobility training and using the white cane in dark and unknown places or for use in crossing major intersections.

Mama does not know that I am almost blind now, but I shall always be able to see Mama and hear her near me saying, “Me tor nit geyn borves.” (One is not permitted to walk barefoot).
Mama never had time to play cards, but she envied the men playing pinochle in the parlor. They were the husbands of the wives who came out each summer with their children. It was mainly weekends when the men came out from “The City,” New York City.

My Serke plays Mah Jongg every Thursday with four other women who meet in each other’s home. Four play at a time and they keep alternating. Mama had no playtime.

While working in our large farm kitchen, Mama overheard the boisterous laughter of these husbands. She picked up words and phrases that she used quite often. The men were oblivious to Mama and the other women.

When she did not care for a couple who were noisy or whose children misbehaved, she would say in a derogatory manner, “That’s a pair!”

If a shadkhn (matchmaker) made a great match, it was a “royal marriage.”

When she referred to a mixed (interracial) marriage she called them a pinochle (a jack of diamonds and a queen of spades.)

If someone was wealthy it was either “filthy rich” or “they’re flush with money.”

If someone pulled off a good deal he trumped. Her boys were “four of a kind.”
I Remember Mama Saying

Gey nisht borves. Don’t go barefoot.

Es nor koshere zakhn. Eat only kosher things.

Hob khasene mit a raykhn meydl. Marry a rich girl.

Ven s’iz kalt, trog a hut un hentshkes.
When it’s cold, wear a hat and gloves.

Folg dayn tate un mame. Obey your father and mother.

Tu on t’filn. Put on phylacteries.

Gey tsu shul shabes in der fri.
Go to the synagogue Saturday morning.

Es nisht tsu shnel. Don’t eat too fast.

Her zikh tsu tsu, vos dayne lerers zogn.
Pay attention to what your teachers say.

Zhalohe nit far esn un a dokter. Don’t be stingy for food or a doctor.

Zoln dayne kinder tuen far dir vos du tust far mir.
Your kids should do for you what you do for me.

Di velt iz ful mit ganovim. The world is full of thieves.

Gedenk, du bist a pror. Remember, you are the oldest son.

Dayn mame iz a bas k’henes.
Your mother is the daughter of a Cohen.

Vash di hent. Wash your hands.
Loz di blote in droysn. Leave the mud outside.

Shling nisht dos esn. Don’t gulp your food.

Khayes zenen oykhett gotz kinder.
Animals are also G-d’s children.

Freg nisht! Don’t ask!

Dos iz gotz veg. That’s G-d’s way.

Ven er volt gevolt az du zolst es hobn volt er es dir gebgn.
If He wanted you to have it, He would have given it to you.

Zorg nisht. Don’t worry.

Zoln mayne sonim dos hobn.
My enemies should have it!

Zol er krenkn. He should be sick!

Tshepe nisht di shikses. Don’t touch the gentile girls.

Hob a sakh kinder. Have many children.

Zol got geyn mit dir. May G-d go with you.

Mish nisht di milkhiks un fleysiks. Don’t mix dairy and meat.

Nem a bod. Take a bath.

Trog di glezer. Wear your glasses.

S’iz rikhtik – s’iz geshribn. It’s right—it has been written.

Got hot dos ales gemakht. G-d made everything.

A ku darf hobn a sakh vaser in zumer.
A cow needs to have a lot of water in the summertime.
Er iz nor a hunt. He is only a dog.

A kats iz gut nor far khapn moyz.
A cat is good only for catching mice.

Shisn a biks iz nor far goyim.
Shooting (hunting) a gun is only for gentiles.

Ober dayn tatns mishpokhe esn khazer.
However, your father’s family eats pork.

Es nor frishe fish. Eat only fish that’s fresh

Vash di negl. Wash your fingernails.

Zog kadish nokh mayn toyt.
Say kaddish (memorial prayer) for me after my death.

Du trogst dem nomen fun mayn feter fishl.
You are named after my Uncle Fishl.

Zog nisht proste verter. Don’t use foul language.

A grobe moyd iz a foyle moyd. A fat girl is a lazy girl.

Gey nisht arum mit leydike hent.
Don’t go around with empty hands.

Gey nisht aroys ven es dunert.
Don’t go outside when there it’s thundering.

Breng arayn genug holts. Bring in enough wood (for the stove).

Zhaleve nisht far dayne kinder. Don’t be stingy for your kids.

Rozvelt iz a held. Roosevelt is a hero.
Getting Rid of the Khomets

There was a time for everything. Mama had a “tsayt far dos” (a time for it). When Nodgy our large Swiss milker was ready to calve, Mama was there speaking in a calming voice and gently stroking Nodgy.

Ultimately, the calf came out and all was well. That is until the following year when the ritual was repeated.

When peysakh tsayt (Passover time) came, everything changed. Mainly, it was the large country kitchen that was rearranged. There was excitement, food and of course, we boys always were a part of it.

Peysakh meant that all the dishes, silverware, pots and pans from the attic came down in the large brown boxes and were unwrapped from the newspaper binding. All the khomets (regular, non-Passover food) items were wrapped and taken upstairs, as they were being replaced for Passover.

With all the khomets removed, we were ready for new dining pleasures. Everything revolved around eggs. Our chicken farm had plenty of cracked eggs.

Mama always had a jar filled with the eggs that she had filled with the eggs that she cracked open and slipped into Mason jars.

Mama could separate the yolk from the albumen with the bat of an eye—and never ever broke the yolk.

Matse (matzoh) was the staple. We had matse bray (omelet with matzoh), matse latkes (small pancakes made from matzoh meal), a faynkukhm (omelet), and eyer in zalls vaser (chopped hard-boiled eggs and onions in salt water). Mama even used them in making...
the kneydlekh ("alkes" or matzoh balls). She said the difference between the floaters and sinkers was the amount of fat in them.

The fat is the binder and the more shmalts the HEAVIER they were.
Mama’s Soup & Stuffed Helzl

There was soup almost every day in our New Jersey farmhouse, located some 60 miles from Brooklyn. That was because we had a chicken farm of White Leghorns—the breed known for its egg-laying ability.

Mama said, “Ibergevaremte zup hot a besern tam” (Reheated soup tastes better), but we never had the same soup two days in a row.

Since Papa was “a meat and potatoes man,” the soups had to be hearty. With soups other than the chicken soup and the borsht you never have enough broth to dip your bread.

This was a problem for the hired hand who always ate with us. He was a huge bald man with palms the size of ping-pong paddles. His name was Paul and that was what we boys called him when we spoke to him directly—otherwise he was the “Polish guy.” He always ate hunched over so nothing could fall off the plate or bowl.

Mama made soup from potatoes, beets, cabbages, barley, beans, peas, lentils and the weekly chicken soup. All the grain and vegetable soups had some form of beef in them and were served fiery hot—that’s the way Papa liked it.

We boys always blew on the soup in the spoon before we could put it in our mouth. The only exception was the summer borsht that was served cold and with a big dollop of sour cream.

Chicken soup was the “no surprise” weekly staple. Mama’s secret ingredient was parsnip. She said it made the soup sweet. There were carrots, celery, and of course dill and plenty of kosher salt. Those little egg yolks were a rare find, for the only hens that went to the shoykhet for chicken soup were the ones who were non-layers.
Theses old birds were tough as cardboard to chew. This was the beginning of my lifelong dislike of the white meat—the chicken breast (*beylik*). It was like chewing on cardboard and I imagined it tasted like it.

No clam chowder or lobster bisque ever came to our kosher table. No cream of corn, cream of asparagus, cream of mushroom, French onion or New Orleans bouillabaisse “soups,” were ever on our farm menu.

At Thanksgiving time, we had turkey and there was no soup on that day. The *gorgl* (neck), *pupik* (gizzard), *harts* (heart), *fis* (feet) and *fliglekh* (wings) were saved for soup the following week.

Naturally the huge *helzdl* was stuffed, but never for Thanksgiving.
Makh Zikh Nisht Visndik

Clearly, Mama had advice on everything. As I look back now, her advice was much better than Papa’s, but we did not take it.

At school we were called, “Dirty Jews.” When we came home and said that we were being picked on. Papa said, “Fight the bully.” The problem was that the bully was too big, and besides, he always had a bunch of friends around. It was not a happy time during those years.

Mama’s advice always was, “Makh zikh nisht visndik.” She said, “Smile and don’t say a word.” It was none of the childish sayings about sticks and stones—just smile and makh zikh….

Many years later I read Mahatma Gandhi’s saying, “I cannot teach you violence, as I do not myself believe in it. I can only teach you not to bow your heads before anyone even at the cost of your life.” Nelson Mandela’s book, The Long Walk to Freedom added more to her wise words.

When I finished college, I was married and the in-laws and children came. There came a time when I taught school and joined several organizations. Many instances arose where other people had a difference of opinion and I was nearby. Mama’s words came in handy, for it was none of my business unless they asked for my opinion or advice.

Many of Mama’s words come back to me now and I wish I had listened to them when I was growing up.

Makh zikh nisht visndik.
Mama had many knives and a whetstone that she used to sharpen them.

Her two major kinds of knives were *milkhiks* and *fleyshiks*. These were used all year long, except for *peyskah*. They were the black-handled knives for meat dishes and the brown-handled ones for dairy. They all had brass rivets in the handles to hold the handle to the blade, like a sandwich. I especially remember the black meat-knives, for they were longer and not serrated.

Of course there was the *peysakh* set of silverware, which was wrapped in newspaper (*Der Tog*) and stored in the attic. The knives in this set did not have wooden handles. They were part of a beautiful set of silver. All the pieces were very heavy, or seemed that way to our small, young hands as we carried them downstairs where we unwrapped the sheets of newspaper saved from past issues of the *Der Tog*.

**That Special Knife**

Mama had one knife that could have been used to cut meat or dairy, but never did. It was used every weekday. It was an all-purpose knife that had only one purpose--to sharpen her boy’s school pencils. We called it the *pencil knife*.

At elementary and high school we had real pencil sharpeners that made points as sharp as a needle.

Mama hated those pointy pencils. She would say, "I want my *Fishele* to see what he’s writing. The lines have to be thick.” Those points made skinny lines and put holes in the blue-lined paper with a red margin down the left side. So Mama sharpened my yellow Ticonderoga pencils every morning before I went to school.
No one else ever dared touch Mama’s *pencil knife*. It had a thin, rough leather strap that went through the handle. Mama hung this knife in the kitchen next to the wood stove, and it shone next to the sooty wall.

Naturally we boys all had our own pocketknives with five blades and used them to open the sacks of feed or whittle things. They even had a screwdriver, a cork opener that never was used, and a bottle-cap opener that came in handy on many occasions.

Mama made sure that we never sharpened our pencils with our own pocketknives; they had to be sharpened with her very special knife.

I still have a Valentine Card that I made with a pencil for Mama when I was in the third grade and we still lived in the Bronx. We boys went to P.S.(Public School) 42.
No queen ruled over her domain like Mama reigned over our farmhouse, located near Baptistown in Hunterdon County, New Jersey. It was built circa 1842 and had a pitched slate roof.

The ceilings were nine feet high, and for a few years there was no inside running water, toilet, or central heat, but it did have some electricity. Mama’s “castle” had five bedrooms upstairs, an enclosed porch and a summer kitchen downstairs that must have been added at a later date.

Mama’s rule was total and complete. Papa may have made suggestions, but the division of control was never violated. On the very rare occasions that Papa or Mama made suggestions about the other’s “property,” there was a gentle reminder, “I don’t tell you what to do, don’t tell me!” That always instantly settled the issue.

The only parts of the house that were not under Mama’s complete control were the cellar (it was never called the basement) and the large attached woodshed.

The cellar had a dirt floor and all the beams were hand-hewn and attached with pegs, not nails. The ceiling was six feet high, but eight-inch beams lowered it and caused a problem for us boys—as we grew taller.

I still remember numerous head bumps and the cool dampness of the cellar. It was where all of the egg-production was brought, cleaned, candled, sorted by size, packed in 30-dozen wooden egg crates, and stored. Twice a week, the egg crates were taken to Flemington to the Flemington Cooperative Egg Market to be auctioned. We boys referred to it as the “Auction Market.” I recall our lot number, 2448, which we placed on every crate.
The woodshed was another matter. Here the logs, which had been cut into 18-inch lengths, were chopped for firewood and used in the large Kalamazoo stove nested in the kitchen. For a while, it was the only source of heat for the entire house.

Mama never went into the woodshed, for it was overrun with rats. It was Katie’s domain.

Katie was the matriarch of our feline “herd,” that often reached well over a dozen cats. No rat was safe if it ventured out of the woodpile. Only when Katie gave birth to her frequent litters, was there a short reprieve for those varmints.

Our outhouse was the talk of the area, for it was a three-seater—yes, small, medium and large. It was 50 feet behind the house and never had an odor.

Lime was thrown down regularly and the only recurring problem was the constant battle with spiders and their webs. I still remember the large, thick, glossy Sears and Roebuck catalogs that served both purposes.
Mama’s First Luxury

The first luxury Mama was able to extract from Papa was a kitchen-sink that had a pump from which we got the water. The boys were as happy as Mama. It meant we did not have to fetch water from the well, which was at a distance from the house.

This was an especially uncomfortable chore in wintertime, when carrying the sloshing water pails often got our pants wet.

A year or so later, Papa had central heat put into the house and Mama got a gas range in the summer kitchen. Since the summer kitchen was reserved for the roomers and boarders during “the season”, this had a higher priority.

Mama was able to use the income to amass her “knipl.” Papa never got his hands on it. “Dos iz far di kinder” (This is for the children).

The last major change in Mama’s “palace” was the inside toilet. We never referred to it as the bathroom. It was located upstairs in a hallway and necessitated our going around it to get to our bedroom.

No longer did we have to put on our boots during the winter nights to slosh through the snow to deposit our solid waste. When it was only liquid waste, then we were fortunate enough, in the freezing cold, to have a milk-bottle at the side of our bed.

Mama’s pride in her domain came at a high price. It was a source of constant hard labor. The floors were washed regularly with the large mop that she wielded with her powerful arms. There was linoleum throughout the house. Carpets were just “far raykhe layt” (for rich people).
Bathing was done in a large tub in the kitchen and the water was heated on the wood stove. It was tight and we had to tuck our knees up to our chin.

Replaceable irons that were slipped into a wood handle were used in the ironing. These irons soon got cold and were replaced with hot irons that kept being rotated as Mama worked.

When the deep well was drilled next to the house and we had running water, Mama felt that she had the ultimate. There was no more luxury that Papa could give her. This was a long way from Tiktin (Tykocin) in Poland, from where she had come.
When it came to borsht, we had a milkhike (dairy) borsht with a dollop of our own sour cream and Papa’s favorite fleyshike (meat) borsht with beef.

Mama never said, “It’s only peanuts,” or “Cheap as dirt.” Mama never said, “It’d be cheap at half the price.” To Mama there was nothing that was cheap. If it cost her money, it was tayer (expensive).

We ate cracked eggs every day—every possible way, except poached. We had chicken in one form or another every other day. The shoykhet (ritual slaughterer) had only our old, non-laying Leghorn hens to slaughter.

Everyone raves about white meat, the breast, but to us boys, beylek (white meat) was like cardboard. Mama boiled them in soup or ground them and made cutlets.

Mama used the Purina feedbags to make pillowcases, sheets, quilt covers and her aprons. When they were torn and could not easily be mended with her trusty Singer Sewing Machine, they became shmates (rags) for washing—all except the kitchen floor. Mama had the biggest mop you ever saw. Her powerful arms swept the mop across the floor like a bluebird going to nest.

The only thing that Mama never complained about was the money she spent on her children’s doctor bills. If a physician charged a lower amount, he must not be a good doctor.

When we lived in New York City and Papa belonged to the Glovner Society, we went to the Glovner doctor. He was cheap, bilik vi borsht (cheap as beet soup), but after all he was the “Society Doctor.” Mama knew value.
TWO CLOTHESLINES

One clothesline in the kitchen hung for warm rainy weather and the cold blistery wintertime. Then there was a second line outside that started at the kitchen window and went to the “pole.” Mama liked the outside one better, because the clothes were brightened by the sunlight and being outdoors added a fresh smell to them.

The outside one had large pulleys on either end and the clothesline was tied on the bottom and at the far end of the loop. Mama told us to always have the knot on the far end so that as we put the clothespins on the clothes, sheets and towels the knot would move toward the kitchen.

Occasionally, one of us boys was not paying attention and the knot ended up in the middle.

As we loaded the clothes on the line, the knot would reach the kitchen window too soon. We could not load any more clothes and would have to take them outside and stand on a ladder to finish the job.

There were separate loads for towels and sheets and another for our underwear. I still see Mama’s large pink bloomers fluttering in the wind.

Papa and we boys wore only boxer shorts. Once, Papa brought home tight, short, white briefs, but they cut into our skin when we bent over.

Mama washed all of our clothes and most all of them were hung on the clotheslines. The only clothes that never were hung outside were her brassieres, girdles, and corset.
We never had the new clothespins with the metal springs. Our clothespins were the old fashioned wooden ones that had a round head and the tapered slot that held the clothing onto the clothesline. We used two clothespins on every item except our socks which used only one.

Finally Mama got her electric washing machine. It had two rollers that rotated and squeezed out the excess water. Mama was very happy with the washer.

Later, Papa bought Mama an electric dryer and she used the dryer only when there was rainy or very cold weather. From then on there was no drying inside during nice weather.

When the roomers and boarders came during the summer, they always used both the electric washer and dryer. The city folks wanted their luxury and would not hang their clothes on Mama’s clothesline.
When the Chickens Got Sick

Our New Jersey white Leghorn chicken farm often had sick chickens. Sick chickens make other chickens sick so we would isolate them as soon as possible. When we first moved to the farm, this meant putting them into a small coop or the brooder-house that we called *der shpitol* (the hospital).

Mama cared for them just as if they were her children. Invariably this meant putting an eye-drop or two of cod liver oil down their throats. Just like children they did not take kindly to this but often they “came around” and were able to be put back into the coop with the other healthy chickens.

Papa wasn’t so kind. He felt it wasn’t worth the bother and would get rid of them by ringing their necks or banging their heads against a stone. His response was, “You win some and you lose some.” Today it sounds cruel, but it was a way of life.

As our flock became larger and larger and Mama became older and older, her ability to tend to the sick chickens decreased until it disappeared. There came a time when we never spoke to Mama about the sick chickens and “the hospital” became just another brooder house.

Papa learned about Dr. Beaudette, the poultry pathologist at the New Jersey Agricultural College at Rutgers University. This was a free service and Papa brought the sick chickens in to be tested. By that time it usually was too late and usually we already knew what was wrong with them.

Our major poultry disease problem was Newcastle. It was first noted in the veterinary medicine literature in the mid 1920’s; in the United States in the 1930’s. It became a problem for us in the 1940’s, which by then, luckily they developed a vaccine.
Papa didn’t want to bother vaccinating the chickens because of the cost, the time, and the work involved. It was Mama who forced the issue and Papa gave in because, “I can’t stand the constant nudžen (nagging). From then on, it became a regular practice with each new batch of chickens.
When Papa came to Mama with a new idea on how to make more money on the farm, “a brainstorm”, he would receive the same reply, “Folg mikh a gang.”

To us boys, it meant that Mama was not for it and that Papa was talking “pie in the sky.”

Mama was a “bottom line” person and not willing to take a chance. Papa was a gambler in business and he would have gone bankrupt much earlier if it had not been for Mama.

One time Papa persuaded Mama to go along with “a sure winner.” We did well in selling hatching eggs from our White Leghorns to Paul Kuhl’s Hatchery in Copper Hill, New Jersey.

Papa was approached to raise a flock of Rhode Island Red hens and Plymouth Barred Rock Roosters. The cross was supposed to produce the best broilers.

Papa’s argument was that instead of getting 20 cents a dozen over the market price for the White Leghorn eggs for hatching, the Red-Rock cross would bring a 40-cent premium. I remember Papa throwing his hands up in the air and shouting, “We’ll be rich!”

What Papa had neglected to tell Mama was that these brown-egg, producing Rhode Island hens took longer to come into production, ate more feed and laid fewer eggs.

There also was a problem with the Plymouth Barred Rock roosters, for they were larger and ate much more feed.

Still another negative factor was that the ratio of White Leghorn roosters to hens was 1 rooster to 15-20 hens, but the Plymouth Barred Rock roosters could service only 12-15 Rhode Island hens.
So, the Rock roosters ate more and could not service as many hens as the smaller Leghorn roosters as well as taking longer to mature.

According to Uriel Weinreich’s English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary, “Folg mikh a gang” means:

It’s a far cry.
It’s quite a distance
This is no small distance
This is no small task

To Mama it meant, “It’s a bad idea—NO WAY!”

I guess Papa was very much like Sholom Aleichem’s character, Menachem-Mendel.
How Mama Came to Run the Farm

It was a short time after World War II had ended that matters on the farm changed drastically. It came about when Papa could no longer do any lifting.

Before Papa moved the family from the Bronx tenement in 1937, Papa got a hernia. He told us about it many times as we boys grew up.

After Papa was discharged from the U.S. Army, he worked in the family shoe store. This was not to his liking, for he wanted to be his own boss.

*Zeyde* (that’s what we called Mama’s father) was a house painter. Papa decided he wanted to be his own boss, and all that he needed to be a painting contractor was a few paintbrushes, some cloths to spread out and a ladder.

As Papa told the story, one day he fell off of the ladder and as he fell his feet were spread apart tearing his insides. From then on he had to wear a *kile bendl*. In English we call it a truss.

I still can visualize this two-inch wide, gray, thick band that had a big knob the size of a fist. Papa pushed on the knob that was put over the bulge in his belly. This kept the tear from pushing out and getting larger—it worked for many years.

As the hernia became more pronounced and caused more problems, it was obvious that Papa had to have the operation to mend the tear. At that time, there was no mesh to be used or the Canadian Schultice Method where one went to Toronto and came back a short while after.
Papa was told that there would be a period of at least six months with no lifting. After moping for a few days, Papa went to New York City and met a Mr. Kane who had contacts with the Jewish Agricultural Society. It was at a time when Jewish survivors of Hitler’s Holocaust came to America. Many did not speak English and had little money.

Papa got his real estate salesman’s license and would meet the “refugees” at the train in Flemington Junction.

Papa showed them chicken farms and the “Society” gave the money for the mortgage. It lasted for a few years until the influx dried up.

Sally and Fishl were married in 1947 (he was 20 and Sally 18). He had just graduated from Rutgers University with a B.S. in Poultry Husbandry.

The twins were a year younger and Semele was still in elementary school. It was at this time that Mama was in charge of running the farm—even though Papa still wanted things done his way.
As far back as I can remember, Mama used this phrase and it had little meaning or importance to us boys until we became teenagers and the hormones began to take over our thoughts—if not our actions. I still remember some of the many questions I asked Mama and her answers.

It always started with, “Mama, what is a nice Jewish girl?” It started not long after being a bar mitzvah. In the beginning her replies invariably were, “Fishele, you know.”

As I became older and more persistent, Mama soon realized that she had to be more specific and could no longer give her standard reply.

In general her answers fell in the realm of “not too.” There were exceptions—money was one of them. “You can love a rich girl just like you can love a poor one, so why not marry a rich girl?”

Then there was the trait that she used often “a baleboste.” Mama’s reasoning was that a girl could not be too good a baleboste (literally a housewife, meant as a good one).

Invariably, it was, “Girls should not be too fat or too skinny. Skinny girls give birth to sick children, and too fat girls can’t be good balebostes.”

When we teased mom by asking her, “How much is too skinny or too fat?” She always evaded the question with her response, “You know.”

One of the areas that fell into the “not too … or not too …” was, height. Mama was as tall as Papa, but her answer was, “That’s different.” This type of answer never stood well with us boys.
Another trait was intelligence. “If a woman corrects a man in public, it is very embarrassing, and not good for the marriage.”

The only time Papa was involved was when I was persistent in having Mama be more specific about what she meant by “a nice Jewish girl.”

It was at the dinner table one Friday night and Papa had a little too much wine. He said, “You know, a voydzhin.” He soon realized that this was a no, no.

Mama’s sing-song response was always, “A shikse may be sweet, but...”

We four Kutner boys married five very nice Jewish girls.
SLABS OF FRENCH TOAST

It all started with the khale (braided, rich egg bread) on Friday night when we had our usual traditional shabes dinner. Mama did the shabes blessing over the candles, and we boys took turns with the brokhes (blessings) over the khale and the wine. Papa was always there, but he did not do the blessings.

We took turns and started at both ends of the khale with the shpits (end) and quickly worked our way to the middle—the part of the huge khale that was left over for Mama’s French toast was what we much later called the “center cut.” It never was sliced—we just tore off sections that were quite uneven.

French toast was our Sunday morning breakfast specialty. It was never ever prepared for our Saturday meal. That would have meant Mama would have had to prepare it on the shabes.

Mama said, “The whole difference is all in the batter. The khale was sliced into one-inch thick slabs and dipped into Mama’s thick, rich batter. I should not say dipped, for it was permitted to soak. The rich batter permeated into every pore of the khale, which became very limp.

The slices were so soft that Mama had to handle them with a spatula. Mama’s batter was made of the following ingredients: our own eggs, rich sweet cream from our Guernsey and Swiss cows, vanilla, honey from our neighbor’s beehive, and some kosher salt, probably too much.

No one made French toast like my Mama. Each slice was crispy on the outside and a little moist on the inside. When you lived on a chicken farm, you ate a lot of eggs. If you have eggs, you have cracked ones. They were sold to bakeries for a fraction of market value. “Leaky” ones were put in a Mason jar. Mama always had a full jar ready to use.
The heavy, large, black iron frying pan was brought to a high heat and Mama put in a great amount of our homemade butter, which soon caramelized into a rich brown color. We could hear the sizzling and smell the wonderful aroma as Mama turned the slices at the right moment. They were golden brown and never burned at the edges. Somehow they were fried perfectly through and through.

This was not the end of the preparation. Because our chicken farm had plenty of broken eggs that we could not sell, so there were fried eggs placed on top of the French toast. The eggs were always perfect. The albumen (white) was always firm and the yolk slightly soft.

The “filthy” rich people ate caviar—the roe (fish eggs) of sturgeon and specially seasoned. The rest of us poor folks ate chicken eggs—brown and white ones. The only things that could compare to caviar were the little yolks that were from preformed eggs. Oh, when they were boiled, did they taste good!

We boys ate four to six eggs every day. There were fried eggs (sunny side up), scrambled eggs (faynkokhn), hard-boiled eggs, bread pudding steeped in an egg batter and baked, and of course there was Mama’s French toast that we always had with two fried eggs on top.

Each of us Kutner boys had his favorite jam. Fishl had the deep orange apricot, Sol loved Mama’s homemade strawberry, and Bobby, z”l, would take only Mama’s cherry jam. Semele was too young to have a choice of jam on his French toast.

On Sunday morning Mama always made hot cocoa during the cold wintry days and switched to cold chocolate milk in the summertime. I remember that my usual Sunday breakfast consisted of four large slices of that mouth-watering toast, two fried eggs, and topped with that apricot jam, and two large glasses of cocoa.
No Parisian ever had French toast like Mama’s.

Out here in, California, the people in Petaluma called it a Poultry Ranch, but for us, in New Jersey, it was just a plain old chicken farm. Petaluma was a major poultry and egg producing area for a long time and there were many Jewish farmers here.

My taste buds have long since lost their sharpness, so has my sense of smell, and the Fairy Godmother has taken back some of the teeth. Oh, do I miss those hearty, Sunday morning farm breakfasts with that French toast, but I miss my Mama even more. No one has ever made French toast like my Mama did.
A Shep Hangs in the Feed-Room

i shep is the scoop. This is not about a new news story, but the piece of equipment we used to dig into the feed bin or barrel to get the powdery mash or scratch (a mixture of whole grain, usually corn, wheat, and oats) to feed the chickens.

We boys had smaller scoops because the strength in our wrists wasn’t like Mama’s. The scoop was used to fill up the pails from which the mash feed was placed into troughs called hoppers and the scratch grain was scattered in the litter, from which the word “scratch” was derived.

The smaller scoops were purchased from Paul Kuhl who ran a hatchery in Copper Hill, NJ and sold poultry equipment. He also was the one to whom we sold hatching eggs and who supplied us each year with the baby chicks.

Mama’s scoop was made entirely of wood. It was twice the size of our manufactured metal scoop made of tin. When we tried to use Mama’s scoop, our wrists began to hurt. It was only after several years of milking our few cows that my wrist developed the strength to use Mama’s shep.

At first the feed was kept in large wooden barrels and we scooped as much feed into the pails as possible and then used the scoop to fill them up. Later Papa built bins in the feed-room, which actually was a small section of the chicken coop prior to entering the large room or rooms where the chicks or hens were kept.

These bins were large. The bottom of the bin was actually the concrete floor and the back and sides were part of the walls of the
feed-room. With the large bins we could scoop out the different sized pails and not need the scoop.

Later, we became mechanized and had automatic feeders that moved the feed from the feed-room through the coops with a chain that was pulled through the long trough.

To the very last day we were on the farm, Mama’s shep hung in the feed-room as a reminder of how it used to be.

Later when we boys went on to college, married, and had children of our own, I remember mama saying “Ikh shep nakhes fun mayne kinder un kindskinder” (I get pleasure from my children and grandchildren.)

The Yiddish word for sheep both singular and plural is sheps.
Mama’s Three Authorities

Even though Mama always won the arguments between her and Papa throughout all the years of their marriage, up to the very end, Papa still did what he wanted. This frustrated Mama.

Mama never used G-d as an authority—S/he was too important. G-d was the one she went to when one of her boys was sick and she wanted a special favor. This was a very unusual relationship, for they knew their roles and it seemed that both were pleased with the other.

Mama’s authorities were:

1. The rabbi of the shul (synagogue) in Flemington, New Jersey.

2. Dr. Beaudette, the poultry pathologist at Rutgers University, the state agricultural college. When the chickens were sick, Papa took them in to find out what could be done.

3. FDR — “President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was good for the Jews so he was a good leader.”

Papa sometimes got a word in, but mostly he listened. Usually it was over Papa spending too much money. When it came to money, Papa said, “It was meant to be spent,” so he never had any.

When he could not take Mama’s nagging he hopped into the red, half-ton, International pickup truck and went to the Circle Diner on the Flemington Circle (eight miles away) for a cup of coffee.

Papa was a staunch Republican and disliked FDR. He voted for Alf Landon in 1936 and was a great supporter of Wendell Wilkie who lost to FDR in the 1940 presidential race.
When it came to Mama’s three authorities, Papa did not always agree. Despite this, they never argued about it. It seemed that they had a live and let live attitude.

Papa’s attitude towards the rabbi and religion was much more “relaxed than Mama’s.

Papa’s attitude towards Dr. Beaudette was the same respect that mama had.

Papa’s attitude to FDR was the exact opposite. While he had long heated debates with the men who were summer roomers and boarders, he never argued with Mama over politics.
Mama was very partial to wood. She said that metal gave a funny taste to the food.

There were two of each of her wooden items—a large one and a small one. They hung by a thin leather strap from a hook near the large, cast iron, Kalamazoo wood stove in our New Jersey farm kitchen.

Mama used a mix of Yiddish and English terms when she referred to them—there was no pattern. I never remembered Mama buying any of them. Perhaps she had them in the Bronx when we moved to the farm in May of 1937.

Wooden Spoons

They had many alternative uses. I well remember when she was pestered by an annoying horsefly; she whacked it with a wooden spoon. While she often admonished us waving the spoon, it was never ever used for punishment.

Wooden Rolling Pins

Of all of Mama’s wooden “tools”, these were my favorites. As a child, I was constantly amazed how those round balls of dough became a thin round sheet.

Sometimes Mama sprinkled in a little extra water and at other times she add a little extra flour, “So that the dough would not stick to the wooden rolling pin.”
Because we boys had a sweet tooth, we often watched as the dough was rolled out to make the crust for pie dough (Mama used every fruit imaginable for her fruit pies).

Depending on the time of the year, there was Homentashn and my favorite Rugelakh.

**Wooden Cutting Boards**

When Papa replaced the hand water pump in the kitchen with a real sink that had faucets with hot and cold running water faucets, Mama would “kasher” the meat on the “groysn” (large) cutting board by the side of the porcelain sink.

When we came home from the shoykhet, the first thing we did was to pluck the chickens and singe them to burn off the little hairs (I can still smell that foul odor.) Then they were placed on the cutting board where mom’s powerful wrists soon had the large sharp knife quickly slice off the neck, wings and legs.

There was a quick twist as she severed each limb. Then the other parts of the chicken; necks, wings, breasts, thighs, legs gizzards and livers were spread out on the cutting board and sprinkled liberally with coarse Diamond kosher salt.

By this time, we boys were growing both in height and increased appetites. In addition, Paul, the Polish fellow, was now working for us and had to be fed.

The smaller cutting board was used for cutting fruits and vegetables—mainly during the Fall canning season. However, most of the time, it was used for rolling dough.

Mama never made breads—other than khale, but we had lokshn (noodles) several times a week. It seemed that she had a way with this “Jewish staple.” Sometimes it was thick and wide and at other times it was more like thin spaghetti. It even seemed to vary in taste.
We loved to watch Mama as she made short order out of the rolled out dough while making these evenly sized *lokshn* strips.

**Wooden Bowls**

Mama used wooden bowls for chopping with a *hakayzn* (chopper). The smaller bowl was used to chop a variety of nuts and raisins. Mama used only the dark raisins. She said that yellow ones were not as healthy.

The larger bowl was used for making *gehakte leber* (chopped liver). In addition to being the container for chopping, Mama used a circular motion with the *hakayzn* to blend in the ingredients. In went the fried chicken livers, the onions, the hard-boiled eggs, *shmalts* (chicken fat) and *grivn* (cracklings).

Mama always was a buttress against Papa wanting to discipline us, except for one lone incident when she actually lost her temper. It was when we used her precious wooden bowls while we played “War.” These make-believe helmets and our pocketknives were the closest we could come to being warriors.

Mama had a hand grinder that was used to grind the meat that was such a common item on Papa’s plate. Mixing and adding in the eggs, crumbs and spices were done in the larger wooden bowl.

Many years later when we had grandchildren, we boys chipped in and bought Mama a real, electric food processor. I don’t think she ever used it. At least we never saw her using it.
When he spoke to Mama, Paul the Polish Guy” used the word “Hrabina”. We boys gave him that name because he spoke only Polish and most of the time to Mama. He probably knew a few English words and more Yiddish ones, but never spoke them. He was the best hired hand Papa ever had on our New Jersey chicken farm in Hunterdon County.

Paul undoubtedly was the strongest man I have ever known. He could throw a 100 lb sack of feed up on each shoulder and walk away with them. While he walked and spoke slowly, he never had a day off except for when the Kingwood Township Volunteer Fire Department had two annual fundraising days.

The first event was when three young women a brunette, a blonde and a redhead were brought down from Easton, Pennsylvania. The volunteer fire fighters were charged two dollars. The girls got a dollar and the other buck went to paying off the secondhand fire engine.

Mama never let Papa become a volunteer fireman at the Baptistown Firehouse despite his constant comment that, “If nobody would volunteer there would be no one to put out a fire if one of our chicken coops caught on fire.”

I remember these conversations. Mama always had the same answer. “Loz di goyem geyen tsu di kurves. Paul darf hobn a meydlay er iz a goy.” (Let the Gentiles go to the whores. Paul needs a girl because he is a Gentile.)

During those times, we young boys did not know what “kurves” (whores) were, but got the general idea that they weren’t nice girls.
The other fundraiser for the Kingwood Township Volunteer Fire Department was definitely a family affair. It was an old-fashioned carnival and we all went.

Of all the events we boys watched, ringing the bell was by far our favorite. It consisted of a tall tower with a bell on top. You would hit a lever with a sledgehammer and that would send the steel ball up the shaft. If the ball reached the top, it would ring the bell.

Many farm boys tried and only a very few could reach the top and ring the bell. The prize was a doll that they gave to their admiring, on-looking girlfriend. It was different with Paul. He could swing the sledgehammer with either hand and the steel ball swiftly climbed to the top.

After a short while, the man running the concession permitted Paul to try just once, allowing the winning of merely one doll. This attempt was allowed only after it seemed that no one could hit the bell. At that time, Paul was called over and the crowd swelled quickly around him.
MY JEWELS ARE IN
MY CHILDREN’S EYES

Mama dressed and worked like a peasant woman. She always wore a kerchief to cover her hair and skirts made from multi-flowered, Purina feedbags.

Her hands were calloused and red. The cracks in the skin from the cold often opened and bled, but she carried herself as if she were royalty. That was why Paul called her HRABINA (Countess).

While Mama always wore her gold wedding band, her engagement ring was kept for very special affairs. Then it would be brought out and Mama wore it like a real Hrabina.

Many years later, she gave her precious ring to one of her granddaughters who did not like the old-fashioned setting and had the three diamonds reset.

It was only then that we learned that the half-carat stones were cloudy, dull yellow, with an industrial cut and quite worthless. Somehow on Mama’s finger these stones shone with the brilliance of sunlight.

I do not know what happened with those diamonds, but they were not part of any of our rings thereafter and I don’t believe Mama was ever told about them.

Mama had one store-bought dress for “The Holidays” and other special occasions. When Mama took off her kerchief and Purina bag skirt and put on lipstick, her store-bought dress, and her engagement ring, she looked and felt like a real Countess.
After leaving the farm, Mama became Americanized. She had a beautiful wardrobe and real jewelry, but she never was as regal as she was as a poor peasant woman on our Jersey chicken farm.

I believe while she hated the farm and the work her boys had to do, it gave her that true name of The Countess.

My daughter still remembers Mama singing her a Yiddish song. The lyric she remembers most was “my jewels are in my children’s eyes.”
Life on our New Jersey chicken farm was work from early morning until dusk. However, Friday night suppertime was special. We boys all had to “wash up.” In the early years it was a communal bath.

Mama pulled out all the stops to make it very special. This meant the embroidered tishtekh (tablecloth) and silverware. Mama had only a fleyshik good set. Of course there were the everyday and peysakh sets, so Mama had five sets of silverware.

Mama took care of the lighting of the candles with her special tikhl (kerchief). We boys took turns doing the blessing over the khale and grape juice which we called “wine.”

This unusual arrangement came about because Mama was Orthodox and Papa was at the other end of the spectrum, off the chart. At that time we boys did not consider it unusual.

The best part of the evening was the banter that Mama and Papa had about each other’s accent. We boys had fun with how they pronounced the English words, but for Mama and Papa it was their Yiddish. Mama said she was a Litvak and proud of it. She called Papa a Galitsiyander which put him on the defensive. This normally was not Papa’s style of operation.

The give and take on their parts was full of humor and often Papa would touch Mama’s arm when she made a particularly good point and we boys couldn’t stop laughing.

There are several words that I remember which resulted in this foray into linguistics. Mama differentiated between zun and zin (son). Papa was only a “ziner” (a new word). It made no difference whether our neighbors had only one son or like the
Gordeuk’s who had 11 or the Gombosi’s who had 5 sons. Papa always said zin for one or the whole clan. 

Another was shoyn, shen, shan and sheyn. Many years later I learned about a Mr. Weinreich and his dictionary. In it he says that shoyn is already and sheyn is pretty.

Mama made khoyzik (ridiculed) of Papa with his shin words. She said, “Oy, du shushket nokh amol.” (Oh, you are shushing once again.)

Papa always laughed because Papa said, “There is no such word as shshiken.”

Papa and we boys laughed and Mama said, “Du veyst vos ikh meyn” (You know what I mean.)
A Plausible Excuse

While Papa was always definite in his replies Mama hedged hers in terms that permitted changing without us boys being able to say, "You changed your mind," or rudely "You speak out of both sides of your mouth."

Papa’s favorite saying was, "I may be wrong, but I’m never in doubt." This created many problems that made him eat a treyfe (not kosher) bird — crow!

Mama believed the adage that there is an exception to every rule. There was only one exception. For us boys it dealt with dating shikses (Gentile girls). Papa said, "shikses may be sweet, but they ain't kosher meat."

Living on the farm eight miles from Flemington, New Jersey meant that there were very few Jewish families and thus very few Jewish girls our age. Our argument was that we were just going out on a hayride, there just happened to be a full moon and that’s all there was to it.

Even today, the entire population of Hunterdon County is only 120,000 and Flemington (county seat) has only 4,000, but there is now a Reform temple and of course the ubiquitous Chabad.

Mama was very forgiving when one of her sons did something wrong. While she never used the saying, "Boys will be boys," the excuses she made for us meant the same. No, she did not say we were right, but she let us get away with the transgression with an excuse far better than any we could conjure up.

I remember being caught cheating on an exam. I looked over at the test paper of a girl in the next seat. When the teacher sent a note home, there was a request for Mama to come to school for a conference.
After Mr. L. had gone through a lengthy discourse on how important honesty was and that it was just as essential as teaching the subject matter, Mama came up with a better excuse than any I had ever heard in my 30 years of teaching.

Mama said, “Mr. L., you are absolutely right. What would America be like if we could not trust President Roosevelt to be honest? I know my son. If he did something wrong, he must have had a good reason.”

Mr. L. said, “What reason could he have to cheat on a major test.”

Mama looked at me and before I could say a word she blurted out, “Maybe he wanted to see if she had the right answer.”

When she got home, Papa asked her what she told Mr. L. Her answer was, “Fundestvegn efsher Fishl hot gevolt visn oyb di meydl hot geshibn dem rikhtn entfer” (However, maybe Fishl wanted to know if the girl wrote the right answer.)
Mish-Mash

When speaking to her father, our *shom hashabes zeyde* (ultra-religious grandfather,) Mama spoke a lofty Yiddish. The rest of the time, while we were on the farm, I recall that it was an earthy Yiddish and richly interspersed with English farm words. *Me darf kuln di hiner* (We have to cull the chickens.) Another was *tshikn kreyt* (chicken crate) and not *kastn* for crate.

I remember certain words and phrases that seemed to come up much more frequently than others. Mama seemed to *mish* quite often.

There was *mish mash*—a hodge podge, a jumble, an odd mixture. When she heard that a youngster had not declared a major in college and was taking many different courses, “I’m trying to find myself,” Mama referred to his courses as being a *mish mash*.

*Araynmishm - Mish nisht arayn*—(Don’t put in your two cents or it’s none of your business, don’t mix in.) Mama felt that many family problems arise when in-laws butt in.

This realization came later in life after she had done some irrevocable damage. It also was her attitude about politicians

*Farmisht* and *Tsemisht*—both refer to one who is confused. *Farmish* and *tsemish* both mean to confuse. I am trying to recall if there were instances when Mama would use one term or the other. I vaguely remember that she used *farmish* when she was telling you to not confuse her. On the other hand if she were referring to her being confused she would say that she was *tsemisht*. It was as if *farmish* was a verb and *tsemisht* was an adjective.

*Mishmilkh*—a milkshake, while in the Bronx and before we went to the farm, Mama coaxed us into drinking more milk. She said it
was a malted milkshake, but it usually was Ovaltine. Once we tasted it there was no turning back. The rule in our house was—if it was on your plate or in your cup and you started to eat or drink it, you had to clean the plate or make bottoms up with the cup

*Tsumish*—to add and mix up as when we added buttermilk and water to the poultry mash in making wet mash. It was supposed to make the mash more palatable for the chickens.

The idea was that the more they ate the more eggs they would lay. Actually, the more they ate the more droppings they produced. Another instance was to mix the corn, wheat, and oats to make the grain mixture known as “scratch.”

Mama’s usage of Yiddish was her own mish mash, her personal interpretation.


RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

ama’s rules of behavior were established long ago in the “Old Country.” She was Americanized in speech and dress, but her religious beliefs and practices were established “over there.”

Mama’s rules of engagement were in two areas—meeting people and potential mates for her four boys. Rules upon meeting people depended on whether you were a stranger or friend/family.

Strangers were approached with caution. Mama had an uncanny eye for seeing through them. She said, “It is all in the eyes.” She stared at and watched their reaction. If the stranger seemed uncomfortable, Mama would see right through him/her.

When Mama met friend/family she always asked about your health. One never answered Mama with, “okay, fine” or just “good.” She knew of your last or current illness and you had to address it—in detail. Part of your answer had to be what you did, were doing or needed to do to become “healthy.” Mama had everyone’s “condition” memorized and could spout it off at the drop of a hat. Likewise, she was a walking health encyclopedia.

Mama’s rules of engagement for “girls” for her four sons, was an entirely different matter. The first thing to know was that there were no girls good enough, but “We have to get as good as possible. It is just as easy to marry a rich girl as a poor one” The adage of the apple not falling far from the tree was the first step in the long list for the bases of Mama’s evaluation.

Although Mama married one of those—a Galitsianer, she was determined that none of her four boys would make the same mistake. Her argument was that in her case she was a poor girl who did not speak much English and worked as a seamstress.
Her sons, however, were college boys. Any mishpokhe (family) would be very lucky to get such a catch.

Mama seemed to be more disappointed as the boys fell along the line. “You should have learned from your brother’s mistakes. I warned you and you would not listen. A mother knows in her heart what is right, and still you wouldn’t listen to me. I had no choice, but you—look at you—you are a college boy. You have everything. You deserve the best, and look at what you got. Don’t come crying to me—I told you so and you did not want to listen. I hope your children will listen to you more than you listened to me.”

Mama’s rules of engagement were instinctive and used to aid in protecting those she loved, especially her four boys.
The Kellers lived across the road about a mile east of us. They had a large dairy farm and were very well-to-do. They were there many years before Papa bought the abandoned 42-acre chicken farm in 1937.

Mrs. Keller was much older than Mama and had long since given up farm chores. She loved to speak with Mama in Yiddish. There were not many women in Mrs. Keller’s circle of friends and none of them could speak Yiddish like Mama.

I once overheard Mrs. Keller saying, “Avu hostu oysgelernt aza geshmakan Yiddish?” (Where did you learn to speak such a good Yiddish?) Mama said, “fun tatn” (from my father).

There was very little time on the farm for socializing, but once a month when Papa went into The City (NYC) to bring crates of eggs to make extra money, Mama would walk over to spend an hour with Mrs. Keller.

One day Mama told Papa that the “season” was approaching and that we should get another milk cow for the roomers and boarders. “Speak to Mr. Keller and ask him for a good ‘milker’ that gives rich milk.”

Part of my chores was to take care of the few cows we had. Mama skimmed the rich cream from the milk and we boys churned it into golden butter. The skimmed milk was permitted to curdle and Mama passed it through cheesecloth to make pot or farmer’s cheese.

Papa wore the pants in the family—or thought he did. Everybody said so. He was not a good businessman because he had a big ego, and a smart merchant would take advantage of Papa.
Mama was a good “handler” and always could cut a sharp deal—when Papa wasn’t around. She never interrupted Papa when he was “handling.” At these times she was mild and meek—the dutiful housewife.

Anyway, Papa and I came back from making a deal with Mr. Keller for a small brown, gray and white heifer that was going to give birth “any day now.”

After the calf was weaned I told Mama that the new cow was giving only 3 to 4 quarts per milking, while our other cow was giving 6 to 7 quarts.

Mama could tell that Papa had not made a good deal and told him, “Go back and get a better cow or get our money back.”

Papa raised his voice and said, “When a man makes a deal, it’s his word. I am not going back.” And that ended the discussion—the matter was closed, or so Papa thought.

Many years later, after Papa had gone, Mama told us what had happened. The next time Papa went to the City she visited Mrs. Keller and cried about her Max. Mama explained all about the heifer that he bought from Mr. Keller.

Mama never told us about the exact conversation she had and we never learned about what Mrs. Keller said to Mr. Keller, but it must have been very interesting.

The next day about noon, Mr. Keller came over to speak with Papa. We were sitting down for dinner (farm folks eat dinner at noon and supper at night) and Mama asked him if he would like to eat with us. Mr. Keller gladly accepted because Mama’s cooking was known around the whole area.

Later, Mr. Keller told Papa that the hired hand had given us the wrong cow and that he should bring her back for the right one. Papa was speechless and Mama had a small smile on her face.
The next day, after coming back from school, I took the cow back. Mr. Keller had selected a beautiful, large, reddish-brown and white Guernsey. She was fully a head taller and had a much larger udder.

When the pail was brought in, Mama strained the milk and said, “We have one glass shy of eight quarts.”

Papa was raised in the Yorkville section of New York. The three boys were the only Jewish kids in a mainly German block. They had to be tough and learned how to be winning boxers.

On the other hand, Mama was raised in a small town in Poland. Because Zeyde had come to America to earn money to bring over my Bobe, Uncle Joe, and Aunt Bella, Mama had to help make money. She walked out to the countryside and “handled” trading goods with the Poylish farm wives in exchange for their produce.

Mama was a smart business lady.
"Do You Want Me To Drown Them?"

Papa liked to use new words. After a while he would find a new one, with the exception of the word "agenda." He saw no need to replace it with a new word. It seemed to work for him when he used it in the many arguments with Mama. They weren’t arguments—he called them “discussions.” It invariably was about money or us kids.

Papa first and foremost was a businessman and a fierce Zionist. He was not a very good businessman, but he always was looking to play the angles. Mama’s agenda was her four boys and later the eyniklekh (grandchildren).

Papa was a sucker for any “good deal,” but Mama usually saved him because she always had extra money and Papa had only enough to pay current bills. Papa was a soft touch for the Kuhl’s Hatchery when they had a better than expected brood. Papa came home with, “I got chicks at half price.”

Mama’s reply was, “Where are we going to put them and where is the money coming from to feed them until they start laying in six months?”

Papa always answered with, “They’re here—do you want me to drown them?”

Mama always said, “G-t zol ophin” (G-d forbid)! That settled the matter until the next time, and this dialogue was repeated many times over the years.

However, when it came to Israel, Mama helped Papa to be “generous.”
Papa had his peeves with Mama. He never made headway with Mama in the financial realm, but he hit Mama hard on the matter of her boys. Papa wanted the tough approach and Mama was the proverbial nurturing “Mother Hen”.

It did not matter to Papa that we had a cold—the chores had to be done. At these times Mama would step in and do our work. Papa said, “You are making them sissies. They have to face the hard world.”

I can still hear Mama saying, “Zey zenen nor kinder. Zey hohn tsayt tsu arbetn ven zey veln vern gezunt” (They are only children. They have time to work when they get healthy.)

Mama probably did not know the exact meaning of the word “agenda” but she knew it was not good. Whenever she overheard Papa telling us, “Well, that’s only Mama’s agenda,” Mama said sarcastically, “shmenda dzhenda—shmenda, dzhenda.” That was the end of the matter.

In all arguments, Papa may have had the agenda but Mama always had the last word.
**AFTER THE FLOOD**

It was August of 1955 when a hurricane brought the Great Flood which caused the Lockatong Creek to overflow as the Delaware River, fully four miles to the west, rose forty feet and flooded its banks. What had been a slow running creek, at its widest point twenty feet and three feet at the very deepest, became a half-mile across and ten feet deep.

Water came fast and furious, flooding the chicken coops and went down into the cellar of the house. We had fifty fully filled crates of eggs (a crate holds thirty dozen eggs) that had to be thrown out. All the chickens drowned. Mama and Papa had to walk away from the farm.

This was the beginning of the end of Mama as a farm lady.

It was not much later that Papa and she moved to Dunellen, New Jersey and Papa opened a shoe store called Klik Shoes on Highway 22. He bought closeouts and Mama became a shoe saleslady!

Gone was the hearty cooking—gone was the Purina Feedbag Apron Lady. The conversion was swift, and overnight her mannerisms changed. She became a glib talker and the customers crowded to her. It was especially with foreigners that she wove her spell. As she fitted the shoes, she spun stories about the old country and the farm—they loved it, and her.

Besides the change in her clothing, she had a definite change in her diet and cooking for Papa. While he still craved the hearty meat and potatoes, Mama became a “nutrition freak.” Papa never saw a potato that he didn’t like. His favorite was a hearty potato soup laden with *flanken* (flank/ribs of the cow).
When she was in the apartment, she saw the cooking shows and subscribed to every nutrition magazine she learned about. Her vocabulary included all the long nutritional terminology, pronounced with her still heavy Polish accent. While I had studied poultry and animal nutrition at Rutgers University, her updated nutritional terminology far surpassed mine.

Often I asked her, “Mama, where did you learn that and what authority said it?” Invariably she spouted a litany of jargon and names until I stopped her and caved in.

The most bizarre of all was her “addiction” to those “vitamin pills.” How many vitamins can there be! Mama always came up with a new one or element that so-and-so said is essential. What had been Mama’s medicine chest of remedies on the farm became her shelf of bottles filled with nutritional musts.

These weren’t the only changes in Mama. Her clothing was now up-to-date. She still kept her thrifty ways, but Mama became an even shrewder shopper and her closet filled with clothes was “chic and smart.” This was the final change in Mama’s becoming a “City Lady” and casting off her labor-laden days caring for chickens, roomers, and boarders.
I speak to me in Yiddish, Mama. I remember how you drawled my name so that it sounded like Fi’she-le, Fi’she-le.

When Chayale (a Yiddish friend) calls and she says it the same way, a chill and goose bumps cover my skin.

Now I see you very late at night. You are sitting on a chair with your hands clasped like Whistler’s Mother. Mama, speak to me in Yiddish.

I miss you and our talks in Yiddish. Now I think about nuances of grammar, transliteration, syntax, past participles, complemented verbs, and my speech is stilted. With you it was cozy, free, and easy.

Tell me another story of what it was like in Tiktin before you came to America. Tell me what it was like working in the sweatshops in the garment district.

What was it like meeting Papa and his “pork and beans family?” Tell me about the shadkhn (matchmaker), your wedding, and having three boys in a year and week.

Look at me—you would be so proud and happy. Mama, oh Mama, won’t you speak to me in Yiddish?
I remember having three mamas, and they all were very different.

My first mama was a big woman. She was powerful and could out arm-wrestle her three boys. She was a very hard worker, but never complained.

I loved this mama, for she was gentle, soft-spoken and a wonderful cook. She always smiled at me even when she was tired. This was my favorite mama.

One day I looked Mama in the eyes and did not have to raise my head to do so. Mama looked smaller—not so powerful and she looked like an ordinary middle-aged woman. Her hair was beginning to turn gray, and I noticed that her answers weren’t as sharp as they used to be.

I liked this mama, but the deep respect and admiration that I had had for her was gone. Maybe it was because I had grown and was almost a man. Maybe it was because Mama wasn’t as educated or knew as much about math and science as I did.

Many years went by—I had married, become a daddy to three children and enjoyed a wonderful career. The grandchildren came, they grew up, and made me proud of them.

It happened at one of my rare visits that I noticed a brand new mama.

Somehow Mama seemed shorter, thinner and grayer. Her skin was more wrinkled and her speech slower. This mama was only a shell of my first vibrant and dynamic mama. She misplaced things and didn’t put on makeup. Her clothes seemed wrinkled and she did not cook her great chicken soup.
MAMA, I GET EMBARRASSED

I hear Mama saying “Fishele, why don’t you speak more Yiddish? When you were little, you spoke it all the time. Now you’re older, you speak only a little—Why?”

“You are right, Mama! I guess it’s just because I don’t want to make a bad mistake and be embarrassed. When I was a little boy, I did not know about cases, numbers and genders needing to be considered in determining the ending of adjectives, or that one had to avoid using syntactical redundancy.”

“Vos redstu (What are you saying?) Dos iz alts narishkayt (It’s all foolishness.)

“Mama, what should I say when they correct me in front of other people? I get so embarrassed and revert back to English.”

“Oy, Fishele, if they tell you that you made a mistake, just tell them that your Mama said that’s the way they spoke back home in Tiktin, Poyln and in The Bronx on Washington Evinya. (Washington Avenue)

Don’t forget to say, ‘It’s okay to not know you don’t know how to say it, if you don’t know how to speak right.’”

We both laughed when Mama told me this.

Sometimes I forget to tell them what Mama said.
Mama NEVER thought her *shnir* (daughter-in-laws) were good enough for her four boys—except the last one.

Mama NEVER raised her voice except when she was angry with Papa.

Mama NEVER hit her boys—except when *Fishele* asked, “What do you do with that—a *kontshik*?” (a half inch dowel peg with four leather thongs)

Mama NEVER said a good word about anyone in Papa’s family, except her *shwer* (father-in-law)—after he died.

Mama NEVER thought Papa was a good businessman—except when he took her advice.

Mama NEVER said teachers were wrong—except when they gave *Fishele* a B on a report card.

Mama NEVER spoke Polish—except to Paul, our hired hand.

Mama NEVER spoke Russian—except with the woman from the farm across the creek in back of our house.

Mama NEVER drove a car—until we moved to the farm.

Mama NEVER ate *treyf* (non-kosher)—except when she met Papa’s folks—and she didn’t know it until later.

Mama NEVER talked to her boys about sex—except to tell her boys that, “Nice girls don’t ever do it.”

Mama NEVER ate on Yom Kippur—except when she was pregnant with *Fishele*, the twins or *Semele*.
Mama NEVER stopped lifting heavy weights—except after Semele was born and she was 38.

Mama NEVER voted for a Republican—except when the Catholic, John F. Kennedy ran for president.

Mama NEVER went into a church—except when one of her grandchildren converted and got married.

Mama NEVER stole anything—except little onion rolls—when we ate at Ratner’s on Delancey Street.

Mama NEVER thought kids should eat candy—except her grandchildren. She was a “health freak.”

Mama NEVER said Christmas was good—except when Semele had a good *season* in the shoe store.

Mama NEVER missed taking out her beautiful embroidered shawl, silver candlesticks and lighting Friday night candles—except when she got very, very old.
Mama Wanted a Daughter

Papa was very happy with four boys because they could work on the farm. Mama loved her four boys, but always wanted a daughter.

There were several miscarriages—self-induced. Many years later Papa told us of the gruesome way Mama proceeded to force a miscarriage. It wasn’t until 14 years later when everything went right—but again it was a boy. She said all the outward signs showed that she was going to have a girl this time. All the old wives tales of how she carried the baby proved wrong.

Mama said, “That is enough, and it is time to stop.”

Papa later told us, “It was time to hang up his spurs.”

Mama bewailed her lot in life. Not only did she have to slave on the farm, but she was doomed to have finf shnír (five daughter-in-laws.)

It was only after the eyníkleykh (grandchildren) came that she changed her mind. Her shnír had six meydeleykh (girls) and five yinleleykh (boys).

We reminded Mama that she often said, “Wait until you get your own children you’ll see how they treat you.”

Because we had more girls than boys, Mama said, “You see, I raised you right.”

Mama always had the last word.
On a Scale from "A" to "F"

Everything and everyone was carefully evaluated and rated. Mama was extremely judgmental. This was especially true for anyone or anything that was new to her. She had devised her own original rating system. It consisted of a combination of only a few words, but nice was always at the core of it.

Whenever Mama wanted to say something positive, she used the term nice. It could refer to the weather (nice day), her children (nice boys), egg layers (nice birds), a good milker (nice cow), Roosevelt (nice man) and Clark Gable (nice actor).

Words like terrible, bad, poor, fair, good, great, wonderful, magnificent and tremendous were not part of her vocabulary. These adjectives were replaced by really and very.

The rating system went like this.

- Really very nice: A
- Very nice: B
- Nice: C
- Not so nice: D
- Not nice: F

It is said that, “All rules have an exception.” Mama’s exception was so, so. It was a non-judgmental—non-committal reply. She used it in late life when we asked her, “Mama, how do you feel?” Her answer was always, “So, so.” Mama was a nice lady.
No Wiggle Room

When it came to religion, Mama had no wiggle room. “You were born a Jew, so you have to be a Jew.”

For Mama it was both a reward and a burden. “G-d picked the Jews because he wanted the best.” This meant that the rules he meant for us had to be followed.

We boys often asked, “Why…”

Her response was, “It is written somewhere, and He meant it to be.”

However, when we boys asked, “Mama avu iz es geshribn?” (Where is it written?) her reply was always, “Azoy iz es. Der zeyde hot dos gezogt.” (This is the way it is. Grandpa said it).

Mama accepted the role of a good Jewish wife. She followed the rules of a “good Jewish woman.”

Mama had only one exception. It came much later in life and after most of her grandchildren were born. It happened one shabes, when she was called up to the Torah. Up until then, it was a strict no, no.

When Mama sat down after saying the “borukh atos,” (the prayers) she was beaming like I had never seen before. Her first statement was, “It’s too good for men only.” She went to shul (synagogue) every Saturday thereafter.
Advice to Papa & Her Boys

We always went to Mama for advice. It did not matter what the subject was and we always knew what the answer would be. It was almost always a final seal of approval of what we probably would have done even if we did not ask for Mama’s final blessing.

We seldom asked for her opinion, for her answer would have been, “Why are you asking me? How should I know?” You went to college. You should know. You should know.

I still can hear her saying that right now. It always was the same, “Tu di erlekhe zakh” We boys took it to mean, do the right thing. I just looked up the word in Weinreich and the first definition is observant then came virtuous, honest, straightforward, and honorable.

This was not the case with Papa. He always came to Mama when it was a matter of business and Mama never gave him the same answer she gave us boys. It was sound business advice as if she had a Harvard MBA.

Papa always did what he wanted. It invariably was the opposite of Mama’s advice. Mama later said, ”Meks (Papa’s name was Max) I told you so.” He would turn around and drive to the Circle Diner on the Flemington Circle (eight miles away) and hang around at the counter with a cup of coffee.

The values that Mama instilled in her boys, especially of doing the “right thing”, have stood them well in later life. They have been handed down to our children as well as to our nephews and nieces.
Often when I am alone I still ask Mama, “What should I do?” From afar I can still hear her voice saying, “Fishele, tu di erlekhe zakh.”

Mama gave her boys good advice.
Mama's Word Game

I didn't see Mama very often when she got older. There was very little she could say when I asked her, “Mama what have you been doing?” She would speak in Yiddish and I invariably answered in English.

Finally there reached a time that she had nothing new to say. It was then that she made up this word game. I never asked her how or why she did it, but it became a routine with her whenever I visited. It was almost like she spent her time thinking up what to ask me. It was as if she did not want to have to say “Ikh hob gornisht geton” (I did nothing.)

The word game was a series of words that either rhymed or had some commonality to them. Most of them have long since been forgotten, but a few remain.

She would say, “Fishele, gedenskst a bisl Yiddish?” (Do you remember a little Yiddish?)

My response was always the same, “Yes, Mama, a little.” Then the game started. At this point she became more alert and there was a twinkle in her eye and a lilt in her voice.

“Fishele, vos iz der untersheyd tsvishn, vish, vash un vesh?” (What is the difference among; wipe, wash and laundry?)

In this case, all three words start with the same letter and the last two letters are the same. As a child I had played word games. It was called Rounders. The idea was to use all of the five vowels between the same two consonants. I remember P and T. You can place a, e, i, o and u between P and T and have a real word. Maybe
this was where Mama got the idea to play Yiddish word games with me.

On another occasion it was *hant, hent, hint* and *hunt*. (hand, hands, dogs, dog)

Then there was the other type of *hun, hiner, hon and hener* (hen, hens, rooster and roosters.) Having had a chicken farm in our younger years made this one more meaningful. Now out here in California there is no one with whom to play this game.
Only a Faint Glimmer

Mama, there’s a story to tell and the days are few. It is a story about a very special lady who was not special in her lifetime but her story today is very special. She came from, a place that no longer exists, lived a kind of life that no longer is lived, and did things that are not done anymore.

What seems like hardships today were everyday happenings in “those times”. The war that was to end all wars—never did. The Great Depression is only a memory today, and we are told that safeguards have been put into place so that there will be no more Depressions, and the lessons we learned will never let the Great Depression happen again.

We live in a world where:

- Change occurs faster and faster.
- People are living longer and longer.
- We are getting fatter and fatter.
- Globalization means cultures are blending.
- Computers and the Internet give instant information of new and ongoing events.
- Children’s knowledge of the computer often surpass that of their parents.
- Family ties are strained with relocation and divorce.
- The value of age and respect for elders has diminished.
- Traditions are being laid aside and values are changed.

My children have only a faint glimmer of what it was like on the farm and what Mama’s life was like. They know little of her toiling and going through the drudgery of a monotonous day with few neighbors, friends or family to share and socialize. Most of all
there was little *yidishkayt* (Jewishness) other than what Mama was able to retain by her own wits.

My children have only a faint glimmer of an idea what it was like living through World War I in Poland with the Cossacks and Germans alternating in occupying Tiktin where she lived with her mother while her father was in America trying to raise enough money to bring them over.

My children have only a glimmer of what it was like coming across the Atlantic in steerage, arriving in a new land, knowing no English, working at a sewing machine, being paid by the piece and then going to night school to learn English, and the difficulty in mastering the “*th*” sound.

Mama, you were a very special lady.
SHTROF NISHT MAYN KINDER

It is so important that I make you happy. Your sons were your whole life. Nothing was more valuable to you than your four boys. They all raised wonderful children.

Bobby is with you and must have told you all about them.

If I were sure that you could see me, hear me and know what was going on, you would be pleased that your granddaughter is carrying on my work.

No, I did not become a famous rabbi—not even an ordinary one.

Papa took us over the river to Jersey as there was no yeshiva near our farm. I did become a bar mitsve and put on t’filn (phylacteries) until I was 19.

Mama thirty years I spent in the classroom teaching children not only to learn the sciences, but more important to be honest, treat each other with respect and be kind to those less fortunate.

Many times the class lecture was suspended so that there was time to show how one of the students was hurt by an unkind word or deed.

These were my most rewarding moments. Years later when they came back to visit over and over they told me so.

Mama your grandchildren are all grown up and have children of their own. In each case, you would be proud of them, for they are kind and loving.

Your hard work in raising us has borne good fruit I still remember your unending prayer, “G-t, shtrof nisht mayne kinder” (G-d, don’t harm my children). Mama, I hope you are proud of me.
We four Kutner boys were raised in a strictly Orthodox Jewish home. After moving from a Jewish neighborhood in The Bronx in 1937 to the chicken farm a mile away from Baptistown, New Jersey and eight miles west of Flemington, the neighborhood changed. It was called Baptistown because there was a Baptist Church in addition to the gasoline station, tavern and general store that doubled as the post office. Our one room school borrowed from the church a curtain for the annual December play.

Papa crossed the street when he saw a man or woman cloaked in black with a tight collar. It meant bad luck. This was carried over from his days in Poland. For us boys it meant that we were the only Jewish boys in high school and had no close friends. We never went to anyone’s house to play. In school, all we had was each other and “acquaintances.”

We were constantly reminded that, “A shikse may be sweet, but she ain’t kosher meat.” Needless to say, we all married nice Jewish girls.

Things really changed after Papa died in 1977. Oh, no, Mama still kept a strictly kosher home and never ate treyf even outside of the home, but when one of her granddaughters converted and was married in a church, Mama went. She even used the term bashert (predestined). I could not. Mama accepted the situation and visited the couple, but the rest of the family could not for many years—although, today there is a “normal” relationship.
Shoe stores were in the Kutner family long before we moved to our New Jersey farm. Grandpa Samuel and Papa’s two younger brothers also had a lady’s shoe store in Manhattan.

Papa was very knowledgeable in the field, but hated the business. When we lost the farm, he opened a very successful shoe store on Highway 22 in Greenbrook Township near Dunellen, New Jersey.

Well, Mama had some unusual ideas about shoes and the feet that go into them. Here are some of her quotes.

“Never zhaleve (be stingy) with doctors or buying shoes. Your whole body rests on your two feet. If your shirt or pants don’t fit right, it only looks bad, but it doesn’t hurt you.

“Every time I gave birth my feet got a half size longer or a size wider.” (This is so for most women.)

“The way you tell which shoe goes on which foot is to put them alongside of each other. If you have a hole in between, it’s right. If they are touching each other in the middle it’s wrong.

“Don't walk around the house in your stocking feet. (This is only for people sitting Shiva.)

“Don’t lie with your feet facing the door. (People are carried out feet first.)

“If you don’t like your shoes, change the color of the shoelaces.”

Mama always complained about her feet. She had bunions, calluses and corns. She always said it came from wearing too small shoes when she was a young girl.
I remember asking Mama why there isn’t a separate word in Yiddish for *leg* and why “sole” and “heel” both are the same (*pyate*). If there is a separate Yiddish word for foot (*fus*), “knee” (*kni*), “ankle” (*knekl*), “thigh” (*polke*), “calf” (*litke*), “hip” (*lend*) why isn’t there a separate word for *leg*?

Mama’s reply was always the same. When she didn’t know or was too busy to answer, she brought Him, the Almighty—*der eybishter*, into the picture. “If G-d wanted a Yiddish word for “leg”, He would have made one.” This invariably ended the discussion. Who am I to argue with Him?
**Mama’s Advice to Suze Orman**

Very, very early this morning I opened the front door and there was Suze Orman with her personal secretary. She asked me if she could ask Mama for advice on an upcoming program. I invited them into the living room where Mama was sitting reading *Der Tog* (The Day).

**Ms. Orman:** Mrs. Kutner, I am a renowned, internationally acclaimed financial advisor in the television media. My next program will be on instituting budgetary constraints in transportation. However, I have no personal acquaintance with dire times such as occurred during the Great Depression. Would you kindly tell me how your family coped with the problem of transportation?

**Fishl:** Mama, Suze wants to know how people can save money in getting around.

**Mama:** Oy, Fishele, you are so smart—you I understand. Ask them if they would like a glass of tea and some honey cake.

**Ms. Orman:** Actually we are on a tight schedule and need to get back shortly for our television broadcast on PBS. Mrs. Kutner, thank you, but we are on a tight schedule.

**Mama:** Hokay, first, each family should not have more than one car. People should walk more. It will save money and it is good for their heart. If they belong to a gym, they should quit it and save money. If they walk more, they will get the exercise. They don’t need to lift weights—they should carry their body around. If they go shopping, they can carry the packages home.
Ms. Orman: You have a poignant point. Our policy in going green is to conserve fuel, and by reducing the carbon emission from automobile exhaust we would not only save money but would improve the air quality. I shall mention this the next time I speak with Al Gore.

Mama: Now people give their grandchildren a car in high school as soon as they get a driver’s license. That’s why the teenagers are so fat. They should walk to school and carry their books. Remember to tell them to wear galoshes in the winter when there is snow on the ground or rubbers when it is raining. They shouldn’t get their shoes wet and get a cold.

Ms. Orman: You are absolutely correct and very wise. Imagine—not only could American families save money but they would aid the environment and help solve the ever-increasing problem of child obesity.

Mama: We should carpool and make hitchhiking safe. Why should you drive around alone when it would not cost you any extra money to pick somebody up on your way somewhere? You might make a new friend, and at least you would do a mitsve (good deed).

Ms. Orman: Mrs. Kutner, it is not practical and that would be very dangerous. We have sexual predators and also everyone knows that we need to lock the cars when not attended and not leave the keys in the car.

Mama: Times are different today—not like the old days. Maybe President Obama will tell all the people that we have to help each other and the government in Washington doesn’t have enough money to help everyone.

Ms. Orman: Is there any other bit of advice you can give me to process for addition to the next program so that my audience can save money in the area of transportation.
**Mama:** Motorcycles aren’t safe except for policemen who know how to ride them safely. People ought to ride bicycles and they should have more bicycle lanes so you don’t have to ride on the sidewalk. Kids can use scooters that are safer than skateboards. I was almost knocked over by a big boy on a skateboard.

**Ms. Orman:** Mr. Fishl, I see that it is getting late and we have to get back to the studio. Mrs. Kutner, you have had a great deal of experience in being thrifty and I am very appreciative of your willingness to share this information. I would like to pay you for your services.

**Mama:** *Fishele,* tell the nice lady that I don’t want the money, but to put it instead in Israel Bonds. That way she will get good interest, the money will be safe and it will help Israel.

This was an interesting experience and perhaps Ms. Orman may visit again when Fishl is in one of his twilight zones.

If you are a relative of Ms. Orman or know someone who is, perhaps you can pass the word along. So until then, take Suze and Mama’s advice and act as if we are in a depression. Remember to save, save, save.
Di Mame Fregt (Mama Asks)

Fishele, vos tustu (Fishele, what are you doing?) Ikher nisht fun dir (I don’t hear from you.) Du shraybst nisht tsu mir (You don’t write to me.) Du telefonirt nisht azoy vi amol (You do not telephone the way you used to.) Ikher ze du nisht (I do not see you.) Dertseyl mir vos geyt mit ale dayne arbet un organizatsies (Tell me what is happening with all of your work and organizations.)

Mama, I’m sorry. Your picture is on the mantle over the fireplace. You remember the one with you and Papa. That’s the one where you are wearing that hat that almost covers your eyes. I used to not like it, but it seems to be special now.

Sally seems to be a little better and the kids and eyneklekh (grandchildren) are doing fine. Now that Serke (Sally) is retired, it seems that I have less free time.

Mama my blind group’s website, newsletter and activities keep me busy and the Yiddish clubs are doing very well. I know that there will be bad days, but somehow it all seems to work out.

Mama, I miss you and promise to see you soon.
Greatest Disappointment

Mama was convinced that her Fishele would grow up to be a great rabbi. She had good reason to believe it, as you will soon see.

Mama had four boys—no girls and Fishl was her eldest. All of her friends and relatives wanted their boys to grow up and be rich doctors and lawyers, but not Mama. Being strictly Orthodox, the rabbinate was the highest calling.

All of her hopes began to fade in 1937 when Papa took the family out to Hunterdon County, New Jersey to an abandoned chicken farm. It completely faded when her Fishl, at the age of sixteen, went off to Rutgers University in New Brunswick to major in Poultry Husbandry and was graduated at twenty.

Even when his bride, Sally and he had left the farm (caused by the great flood of 1955 when 10,000 breeders drowned and 100 crates of eggs had to be discarded) and was president of the regional teachers association, it still didn’t change her mind.

Matters were no better when he became President of Temple Beth Sholom, a Conservative Congregation in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, and president and founder of a successful Israeli Investment Club as well as being on the ZOA Board.

So what was it that had convinced Mama that her Fishl was going to be a great rabbi?

Mama used the phrase nisht ahin un nisht aher (not there and not here) often with Papa, for few matters were important to her except her boys, money, yidishkayt (Judaism), and President Roosevelt. On the other hand Papa had strong opinions on everything.
It seems that when Fishl was six years old. He asked Mama, “Why do you say, *nisht ahin un nisht aher*, while in English we say not here and not there?”

*Fishl* came up with the answer to why in Yiddish we say not there and not here while in English we say not here and not there. *Fishl’s* brilliant analysis of this conundrum (at the age of six) was that in Yiddish we write and read from right to left and in English it’s the other way.

Fishl becoming a rabbi was Mama’s greatest hope and her greatest disappointment.
Mama Meets President Obama

It was drizzling outside and the drops hitting the downspout kept me awake, but after a while I did drowse off until a sharp rap on the front door woke me up. There were lights flashing, but through the crystal haze I could make out that a large plane had landed on the front range where the young pullets were housed. It was summertime and the shelters were locked for the night to prevent the raccoons from getting at them. If it had been daytime, these young hens would have been frightened, cackling and scattering all around.

From the kitchen, Mama called out, “Ver iz in droysn (Who is outside?”)

I ran to the front door and a group of plainclothesmen surrounded President Barack Obama. I gasped and rubbed my eyes in disbelief.

Mama called out again, “Fishele vos iz der tuml (What is the hubbub?”)

“Mama, it’s President Obama!”

“S’iz shpet, vos vil er (It’s late, what does he want?”)

At this point, one of the burly, well-dressed guards stepped forward and said, “President Obama will be addressing the House, Senate and the nation on national TV on the Health Issue, and was told by his trusted advisors that he must first hear what Mama has to say.”

Mama finally came to the front door to see for herself what the ruckus was all about. She yawned and said, “Vos pasirt (What’s up?)”
happening?) S’iz shpet zey darfn shlofn (It’s late they need to go to sleep.) Zog zey tsu kumen morgn durkhn tog, ober nisht tsu shpet. (Tell them to come tomorrow during the day, but not too late.”)

“I’m sorry, Mama says it’s late and you should be in bed. She said to come back tomorrow, but not too late.”

The burly guard gently brushed by me and entered. “Please tell Mama that The President will be addressing the Nation and Mama must give him her wise counsel tonight.”

“Fishele, nu, vos viln zey, un farvos geyen zey nisht avek (so, what do they want, and why don’t they go away?”)

“Mama they have come for your advice on the National Healthcare Issue and you’ll have to talk English so they will understand you.”

“Alright, I’ll try but they won’t listen, and if they do listen, they won’t do it anyway.”

At this point The President came in and told the others to wait outside—except a recorder who took down all the notes.

“Mrs. Kutner, you lived through the Great Depression and your children always were healthy, well-nourished and cleanly dressed even though times were difficult. How were you able to do this on your meager income?”

“Fishele, tell The President that I had a pushke (alms box) and put money in the little blue and white can.”

“Mrs. Kutner, that is very commendable, but what advice do you have for our nation in these financially strapped times.”
“First of all, you have to eat and drink right. What goes into your mouth goes into your body—no junk. If you want to drink shnaps (whiskey), just take Manischewitz sweet wine and no more than a glass—except if it’s Peysakh (Passover) or Purim. You should not smoke because it is bad for your lungs, and makes your fingers brown.”

At this point, The President smiled and said, “But, Mama, how would you implement it? These are lifetime habits and we have strong tobacco and liquor lobbies.”

“You have to set an example. You can’t invite the professor and policeman to your house for a beer. Then you can’t have nice ads for smoking and drinking. Mr. President, it is more important that people should eat right and not be too fat.”

“Now, Mrs. Kutner, let’s get down to your advice on nutrition and how we can have a healthier nation and thus reduce healthcare costs that are spiraling out of control.”

“Mr. President, I like you and voted for you. It was like President Roosevelt having to fix things after that Hoover man did terrible things. That Bush was no good.”

“Thank you for those kind words, but, please, would you give me some specific advice.”

“Hokey, people should buy whole chickens. They are cheaper and you get exercise cutting them up. People should walk their children to school. They’ll get exercise and can talk to them about their classes and why they should listen to their teachers. Mamas should make good lunches for their children. You would save money and pay the teachers better.”

The recorder began to write faster and Mama got excited and began a long litany of advice.
“You should eat fresh food and not stuff in cans. It has a lot of sugar and salt. If you eat healthy, you will be healthier and go to the doctor less and you will save money for the kids’ college and buy Israel bonds.

“Mamas should not use cleaning ladies. The children and husband should help. It will save them money and the exercise is good for them. Cleaning ladies should work only in hotels or go to college so they can be good secretaries.

“You should eat dark bread. Fishele tells me that the children eat white bread and even cut around the thin dark outside. You should eat a good rye or pumpernickel or bialys.

“The bread should have plenty of fresh butter—the real yellow kind, not the pale color or with salt. The milk should be real milk not the thin skimmed kind that looks like dishwater. If you sit around, you get fat. If you are active, you burn off the fat.

“All these people go to the gym to work out. They even ride their cars there. This costs money, pollutes the air and all the work doesn’t get anything done. They could have a garden with healthy fresh vegetables, wash their own cars, cut their own lawn, wash their own clothes, cook their own food and save a lot of money.

“There are too many babies without fathers helping to raise and pay for them. It’s those bad men who should pay for it.”

“Mrs. Kutner, do you have any specific advice?”

“Yes, Mr. Obama, I mean Mr. President, if a man makes a baby and doesn’t want to pay and help raise the baby you should use a tight rubber band and the blood stops flowing and they fall off and he cannot make any more babies. It is cheaper than putting him in jail and works better.”

“Hmm, it sounds cruel, but probably painless.”
“There are men that cause most of the trouble, but also there are some very bad women. Instead of putting them in expensive jails, they should be put in nice hotels. Then when men want to see bad girls, they can go there and pay for the girls. This way it won’t cost us money and the girls will be doing some good for the rest of us.

“Israel makes the boys go to the Army for three years and the girls two years. This teaches them responsibility, and they learn to do things. At 18 or after finishing high school, we could have them be teachers’ helpers, keep the parks clean, or work with the old and sick people. They could work with children in the summertime and save parents money instead of the kids going to expensive camps. They could teach old people how to use a computer or even a cell-phone.”

“Mrs. Kutner, I came from the White House in Washington for advice on healthcare and, in addition, you have helped a long way, to solve the financial crisis. How would you have handled the banks and AIG?”

“Oh, it is late, and we have to prepare the eggs for market.”

“Mr. President, Mama says it’s late and we have to get the eggs ready for market, tomorrow.”

“Well, Mr. President, I’ll tell you one more thing, we have to go sleep, I mean go to bed. Since we have given the Araber (Arabs) so much money for oil that makes bad air, let us give them some of our bad loans for money. We have the bad air and they can have the bad loans.”

“Good night, Mr. President and good luck to you with fixing the country’s problems. If Roosevelt could do it, so can you.”
“Mama, I’m Depressed”

Fishl, you gotta get out of bed—it’s nine o’clock.”

“Serke (my Sally), I don’t feel like it, I’m depressed.”

“I’m calling your mother; she’ll stop your talking nonsense.”

“Okay.”

“Fishele, whadya mean, you’re depressed? Serke said, you said, you’re very depressed.”

“Mama, I don’t feel like getting out of bed this morning.”

“Whadya mean you don’t feel like getting out of bed this morning?”

“Mama, I just don’t have the urge to get up and get out of bed.”

“Whadya mean you just don’t have the urge to get up and get out of bed?”

“Mama, it’s just that I don’t care to get out of bed this morning.”

“Whadya mean you just don’t care to get out of bed this morning?”

“Mama, it’s just that I’m listless, and nothing seems worth the bother. It’s not interesting or fun anymore. So I just feel like blah and don’t feel like getting out of bed.”

“Whadya mean it’s just that you’re listless, and nothing seems worth the bother. It’s not interesting or fun anymore. So you just feel like blah and don’t feel like getting out of bed.”
“Mama, alright, alright, I’ll get out of bed already. You don’t have to say anymore”

“So, Fishele, now you’re gonna get out of bed and you’re not depressed anymore?”

“No, Mama, no, Mama, I’m not depressed anymore, I’m not depressed anymore.

Good, now I know you’re not depressed anymore.

Mama was the best, unlicensed, therapeutic psychologist there ever was.
Mama, Where Are You?

I have learned many facts about family and friends. I’ve memorized phone numbers, addresses, and special dates. I also recall all the subjects in school, news articles, films and travels to many places. All have left impressions and memories. None compares with my memories of Mama.

As a teacher, at the beginning of each school year, I had to learn the names of 150 students. Most of those five thousand have passed from my memory with few exceptions—like a train in the night.

In elementary school we had to memorize the states and their capitals, the planets in their order in the solar system. Also we had to put to memory the presidents of the United States in their order.

We were taught tricks like using mnemonic techniques and memorized sentences where the first letter of each word was exactly like the first letter of the word we wanted to memorize.

My memories of Mama are different. There is no gimmick, no trick to make me remember her. She flashes by in many forms. Sometimes, it is a mirage, sometimes it is a sound and sometimes I feel her touch my arm and I get goose pimples.

I wonder where you are and what you are doing today. Are you looking down and watching over us?

Are you speaking to Her/Him and reminding of the effort you put in to see that we were raised as good Jews and more important, good people.

Every once in a while, I make believe you are here. I look at your picture and close my eyes. It is like a dream while being awake.
All of you are there and it is real, until my eyes open and you are not there.

Mama, when I next really see you, will you be that young vibrant woman or that sick old lady?
**The Bedroom Door Is Closed**

Mama had three boys in 53 weeks. A year and a week after I was born mama had twin boys. A year after I had my Bar Mitzvah, Semele was born. That was when we realized that Mama and Papa did--you know what. It came as a shock.

Mama and Papa never showed outward affection in public, and the only time I remember them kissing was at their 50th wedding anniversary.

On the outside Mama let Papa appear to be the boss. When everybody stood on line at a buffet table to get their food, Papa sat like a king waiting to be served. Often we heard comments like, “It’s a shame that he doesn’t get his own food like the rest of us.” They felt sorry for Mama.

Many years later Mama told me that after they got home the bedroom door was closed. She then told Papa what he did right, what he did wrong, and what he will never do again--Mama was the real boss in the family.

As I look back, I do remember Mama on occasions referring to Papa as Meksele and Papa calling her Perele. This probably was a signal of intimacy that we boys never understood until we got much older and had our own families.

There was love in our home, for us boys always kissed each parent good night and even as grown men the same thing took place. I treasure my memories of Mama and Papa like a valuable possession.
Mama made more changes in her life—especially after Papa went to see his Mama. It isn’t easy being a widow and living alone. The question never arose about ever living with one of her sons. After all, you know the saying about the best of shnir (daughter in laws.)

While Mama loved her sons dearly, she often admonished Der Eybershter (G-d) for not blessing her with at least one daughter to take care of her in her old age.

As Mama added on the years, she became increasingly thinner and more frail. Finally, she could not live alone in her own apartment and we boys had to make arrangements for her care. Mama’s concept of a moyshev zkeynim (old-age home) was a place where you went to die.

It started on the East Coast, and as Mama became frailer and she began to “wander,” her demands increased as well as her complaints. It started with, “They are stealing from me.” Perhaps they were, but it soon became evident that both Mama and the management decided that there needed to be a change and we began looking for more appropriate lodging.

Once we had used up the ones on Long Island, for they had to be strictly kosher; it was decided to bring her out here on the West Coast. After all, with two sons here and only one back East, the argument was that it is only fair that we had to share the burden of “looking after” Mama.

We soon learned that tending to an aging parent 3,000 miles away is a lot easier than being nearby. We learned all the questions to ask the caretakers and the management. We learned the
exorbitant schedule of fees for all the “little extras” that we took for granted.

Mama was not very happy in California. She particularly questioned the dedication to kashruth (laws of kosher) that the “establishment” had. It was a standard comment, zey zenen goyim (they are non-Jews.) There was always someone hiding behind the doors listening to Mama and what she said to her boys. We had to “be careful” what we said.

After a while, and several changes, Mama went back East to her final home in Jersey City.

It was not very easy on her—or us boys.

Mama, please help us when we hit those years.
No More Chores

Mama spoke mostly Yiddish when she got old.
Mama did not *bentsh likht* (blessing over the candles) on Friday night when she got old.

Mama did not go to *shul* (synagogue) when she got old.

Mama had four boys, but there were only three when she got old.

Mama could not take care of herself when she got old.

Mama was not allowed to drive her car when she got old.

Mama could not stay with her children because she had only *shnir* (daughter-in-laws).

Mama could not remember many things when she got old.

Mama did not give advice to *Fishele* when she got old.

Mama went from the East Coast to the West Coast and back to the East Coast, when Mama got old.

Mama now has no chores, for she rests next to Papa.
An Era of Greenhorns

Mama’s stories started appearing in the October 2006 issue of Der Bay Newsletter. There have been ninety six stories published since then and it is now time to compile them into a book for my children and grandchildren.

There have been many letters and e-mails from readers sharing their personal stories of their mamas. Many of them came from Europe and their stories are rich in unusual experiences of bygone times.

It is a subject that needs to be told of the first generation of immigrants who went through hardships, but never lost their love of family and their “Jewishness”.

They sent their children to college, watched the movement out to the suburbs and saw their grandchildren become professionals. These stories are often humorous as we recall the era of the “greenhorns” and their battles to learn the new language and its difficult spelling.
MAMA FLOATS
AMIDST FARM IMAGES

Many times, the question has been asked, “Fishl, how do you come up with all these different stories about Mama?”

Some are inspired during the day when I hear or read a certain Yiddish word that triggers a thought or memory of the farm and Mama.

Much more often it occurs during a long sleepless night, and I finally reach that stage midway between the journey to sleep when thoughts and scenes of Mama and the farm seem to “float” in and out.

Sometimes the next morning finds me full of fresh thoughts and recollections while at other times there is only a vestige of a thought and nothing to write. Perhaps one of these days the well will be dry and Mama’s stories will be like a flame blown out by a wind in the night.

This morning was one of those times when I become fearful that this is the end of my creativity. However, I am hopeful, for there seems to be a fountain underneath, and hopefully a gusher will be there tomorrow with a fresh, new idea and another one of Mama’s stories to tell.

Will the next story be of Mama in her European youth trudging to the farms and exchanging goods?

Will it be in her Bronx childbearing years?

(Translated by Harry and Hymie H.)
Will it be on the farm as a berye (Mama referred to herself on the farm as a berye – Uriel Weinreich defines this word, of Hebrew origin, as a skilful person or efficient housewife), or will it be about that thin, pale, helpless old lady near the end of her life?

Whichever it is, it will be precious to me.
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All the stories are true as recollected from an 83 year-old memory that probably has subconsciously embellished some of the stories and hidden the sadder parts.

The author is solely responsible for all omissions and errors of any kind and realizes that without the help of all the aforementioned, this book would never have been possible.
Kutner family in the farmhouse, from left to right, Samuel “Semele”, Papa (Max) z”l, Philip “Fishl”, twin brothers Robert “Bobby”z”l, Sol and Mama.