

Written by Florence Karp

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Today is the tenth anniversary of your father's death and I want to observe it by telling you whatever I know about his family history. Mandy, our youngest, who was four years old when he died, has only a very faint memory of him. The next three of you, Steve, Erin and Jordan, probably remember him a bit.

To my great regret I don't have a great deal of information about the Karps, but since I am the last of all your grandparents, I want to share the little that I know. From Roses In December you know about my part of your heritage and I hope that each of you will read it again when you are older. You may be surprised at your own responses when you bring your maturity to a second reading.

David Karp, whose name was originally Kerpalooff, came from Odessa, Russia to the United States in 1907. The sister of his father had emigrated earlier and settled in London where her husband became a cabinet maker in the East End. (In Russia and in Poland many Jews of that time were in the lumbering business and consequently the making of furniture was a common trade, a sort of natural development.) In London David Karp's aunt, who from Nessie had become Nancy, raised eight children all of whom remained in England except Rachel, your grandmother and great grandmother.

On his way to America from Russia David stopped in London to visit his relatives and there met his cousin Ray Wolfe, a beautiful woman of 19 with a sweet singing voice. Whether or not they were promised to each other at that time I don't know, but after David had been in America for little more than a year he sent for Rachel. Your other grandfather, Abraham Berman, had the identical history in this regard. He, too, once he was making a living, sent for a girl that he knew from the "old country."

Ray's father and a younger brother came with her and David and Ray were married near Philadelphia where others of their extended family named Paul were located. They could not be married in Pennsylvania because it was illegal for first cousins, so they crossed the river to Camden, New Jersey for the ceremony.

David Karp had been apprenticed as a young boy and had become a skilled watchmaker. When he came to Philadelphia he had a trade and so was in a different class from those thousands of young men who came from the shtetls and ghettos of eastern Europe

searching for an opportunity to make a decent life. Once here many found themselves laboring in sweatshops or on the streets. But the boys who had been apprenticed at 12 or so and had been deprived of their childhood were skilled craftsmen in the New World. For a time young David Karp, ne Kerpeloff, worked as a watchmaker in Philadelphia and was the official winder and setter of all the clocks in the Philadelphia City Hall.

Before too long, David found a job as a watchmaker in Barnesboro, Pennsylvania, a coal mining town in Cambria County. Perhaps he saw an ad in the Jewish Daily Forward, the Yiddish newspaper that most immigrants read, or perhaps a salesman on the road told him of the job. In any case he became the partner for a jewelry store owned by Louis Luxemburg, one of a large family who had jewelry stores in mining towns in western Pennsylvania. My own father worked for Jacob Luxemburg, Louis' brother in Houtzdale, Pennsylvania, although he was just an employee.

As a single man David boarded with Wolf and Sarah Charlson, a young couple just starting out in the furniture business. David saved up enough money after about a year and then sent for his wife-to-be.

At that time the streets of Barnesboro were not yet paved so the town must have looked like one of those we see in old western movies. Ray told me of the time her young brother David lived with them and failed to do what he was told. The boss, his brother-in-law, slapped his face and humiliated the teenager, who went in tears to his sister. Ray encouraged him to go back to London, saying, she told me, "Better to have bread there than cake here." What unvoiced regret this expressed!

Ernie, another of Ray's brothers, came to Barnesboro later on, and worked for the telephone company stringing lines. Anytime that Ruby and I passed through the nearby village of Strongstown he would point to the high wires bordering the highway and say, "My Uncle Ernie put those up."

Somehow Ruby never knew for sure a whole lot about his family. He knew that Nancy, his mother's mother, had been married three times and that she had not lived with her third husband. They maintained separate residences but were on a friendly footing. Intriguing, isn't it, to speculate about that?

Uncle Dave, fourth from the youngest of your English aunts and uncles, visited America in the mid-sixties because his granddaughter had married an American and lived in Croton-on-the Hudson, New York. Ruby and I had met many of the English

relatives in the spring of 1965 when we made our first trip abroad so we felt comfortable with Uncle Dave but I never could get used to hearing Yiddish spoken with a Cockney accent. On one of his frequent visits, Uncle Dave told me of how he met his wife Millie. As a young soldier just mustered out after World War I, he arrived at his mother's house to find no one at home. Then from somewhere in the house a lovely young woman appeared. One look, he told me, and they were in love. Millie was the daughter of the man Uncle Dave's mother had recently married.

Nancy, who was at the same time Ruby's grandmother and great aunt, was a business woman, and the family business was fish and chip shops. She must have been a bossy sort. When she visited Ray and her husband in Barnesboro there was a clash of personalities and Nancy returned to London sooner than she had intended. David Karp was strongly authoritarian, a man who definitely ran his world, and judging from her history, Nancy must have been the same, so we can guess why her visit was cut short. When I became a member of the family in 1935 I noticed that Ray did not call her husband Dave or David, but addressed him as "Boss." This might have started as sarcasm, but when I heard it, Boss seemed to be just a name, used in most circumstances.

Ruby was born on Nov. 28, 1909 and was appropriately named Reuben which means "Behold, a son." This naming custom goes back to the sons of Jacob and Leah in Genesis whose first son was Reuben.

Two years later Colman was born and then Elchan in 1914. In 1916 the terrible polio epidemic broke out and crippling illness or swift death struck many families with almost no warning. Colman died a day or so after he developed a fever and Ruthie Charlson at almost the same time was quickly condemned to a lifetime of crutches and wheelchairs.

(Ruby told me how frightened his parents were when he complained of a pain in his leg and how quickly they put him to bed and called the doctor, but he had not contracted polio.)

Colman was buried in Johnstown. When I visited that cemetery many years later I was surprised to see that the stone said "Colman Nachman Karp." Norman had been named Nachman for David Karp's father but I did not know then that he had already been memorialized in the family.

Lillian was born in 1920. When she was three, while Grandma

Nancy was visiting from London, tragedy again came to the Karp family. Lillian came too close to a bonfire that some older children had lit in the street and her dress caught on fire. Lillian's arm still carries the scars.

Harry's birth was in 1922 and Ray told me how he came by his name. As she lay in bed recovering from the birth, her husband told her that the baby was to be named Harry--his way of telling her that her brother Harry had died.

Interspersed among these five children were three miscarriages, a history which, oddly, was almost the same as my mother's where pregnancy was concerned. When Ray told me about the losses I sensed the same anger and bitterness that my own mother had revealed to me. The bitterness of both was not for the miscarriages but for the lack of any expression of tender concern by the fathers.

David Karp was a true entrepreneur and remained a partner of Louis Luxemburg for only a few years. I cannot say whether he quarreled with Mr. Luxemburg and then opened his own store or opened his own store and consequently created bad feeling between the two men. But from my earliest impressions in Barnesboro I remember sensing an undercurrent of hostility.

Louis Luxemburg was the mayor of Barnesboro for almost 30 years and never married. When David Karp died in 1938 Ray was an attractive young widow in her early fifties. Later on when Mr. L. was very ill in the Spangler hospital she visited him daily and I always wondered what that untold story might be.

Once the business was established David realized that he lacked a license in optometry. At that time there was a state law that allowed optometry to be practiced in a jewelry store only if the practitioner was an owner. My own father had taken a three month course (it is now six years!) in Philadelphia before he was married and so was able to practice in his store, but David Karp, whose life story so closely paralleled that of Abraham Berman, could not do so. Now that he was married and had a family and a business, he could not take the time off necessary for training in Philadelphia. So he did the most logical thing possible; he sent his wife! Ray took her six months old son and stayed with relatives while she went to the Pennsylvania School of Optometry for the required education in optometry. Then she came back in legal triumph to Barnesboro. She never practiced but Karp's Jewelry Store had complied with the law. David did the refracting and Ray signed the prescriptions. Later he hired Mr. Mitchell, a licensed optometrist who worked for Karp's Jewelry Store for many years.

In the early twenties David, a true family man, brought two young nieces, Anne Paul Heimlich and Dora Paul Laub from Philadelphia to Barnesboro and set them up with their husbands in businesses. They were all very young--Anne was 16 or 17--and the hours they put into making a success of Laub's working man's store and Heimlich's shoe store were prodigious. Barney Paul, the younger brother of the two girls, spent some of his adolescence in Barnesboro and Ruby and he shared some teenage time in Philadelphia. Barney, now in his eighties, eventually settled in Johnstown, PA. and at this date still owns his shoe store in Barnesboro and works there at least twice a week.

Little is known about your other grandparents. David Karp's mother was brought from Russia and lived in Philadelphia most of the time. She was a distant little old lady who never seemed to eat, but constantly drank tea, according to Ruby. Lillian remembers that she was unaware for a long time that the old lady at cousin Dora Laub's house was her own grandmother, whose wrinkled face was incongruous with the brown shaitel, the wig, that she wore.

When Ruby was 16 or 17 he spent a summer in the CMTC (Citizens' Military Training Camp) with some other young men from Barnesboro. He was too skinny and could not pass the weight requirement, so, on the advice of the man in charge, he drank gallons of rich milk and temporarily gained the two pounds he lacked to be accepted into the program. Of course he lost what he called "baby fat" right away but he was doing what he wanted to do.

Another summer his father sent Ruby to Philadelphia to learn watchmaking at the Philadelphia Horological Institute. Ruby told me he wasted his time there and learned his skill in watchmaking from his father and through experience on his own. Men who had been trained as Abraham Berman and David Karp had been were able to make by hand the watch parts that they needed for repairs, a feat which seems almost unbelievable. But when these tiny springs and wheels became available for 35 cents from a watch factory, they made parts only in an emergency. Today, when a watch ceases to run, anyone can quickly learn to change the battery!

In his early teens Ruby and a friend played hookey one day and went for a hike in the countryside. They spotted a forest fire not too far away and ran home to report it, risking having to acknowledge that they had not gone to school. The fire was checked and the boys were considered heroes. Later, the conservationist Governor Pinchot, after whom the Pinchot roads were named, presented the boys with medals. Perhaps the truancy was even overlooked!

Jewish religious life in Barnesboro was duplicated in village after village in the United States. Most of these Jews came from the only kind of Jewish life that existed in East European communities--Orthodoxy. As immigrants they tried to reconstruct the Judaism that was familiar to them, not necessarily because they were religious, but because observing traditions linked them to their own past and to that of their ancestors. Tradition is really what one did as a child. Keeping kosher was of major importance as were other customs like having a mezuzah on the door, not traveling on holy days.

There were perhaps ten Jewish families in Barnesboro whose total population was about 3500. Barnesboro was like the hub of a wheel whose spokes reached out to Nanty-Glo, Clymer, Alverda, Cherry Tree, Spangler, Emeigh, and other mining villages. There was a Jewish family or two in many of these little towns and they came together in Barnesboro on the High Holidays for Orthodox services. Some of them stayed as house guests with Barnesboro residents for those days.

Eventually a small Shul was built and for a time a rabbi was employed. In the Shul women sat in the balcony and at the appropriate time in the Yom Kippur service--the Al Chait confession--they wept and wailed and beat their breasts in contrition for their sins of the past year. (When I attended services as a 20 year old bride in 1935 I could not believe this behavior, this recreation of the shtetl tradition, of which I had not the slightest knowledge.)

The Shul operated a Sunday School and Ruby had a Bar Mitzvah. He learned very little, he said, and remembered that at the social part of it his father presented him with a thousand dollar check which he repossessed several hours later. The emptiness of this kind of religious observance helps to explain the irreligiosity that was so characteristic of your father. There was no attempt in this ritual to explain or to understand the origin or the meaning or the tenets of Judaism. Blind observance was always contrary to Ruby's thinking and his rebellion against and rejection of organized religion had to have begun when he was 13 or earlier.

He never did more than average work in school but absorbed a lot of knowledge from independent reading, always based on plain curiosity. History was his favorite subject and his interest in it lasted all his life. In my reading, even now, I occasionally come across something obscure that I have not seen in print before, and then I bring to mind that Ruby had told me that long ago, but I had dismissed it. For example, he explained to me that although the Levites were and are next in importance to the Kohanim in Jewish hierarchy, they were

really appointed to this "honor" because of some odd circumstances. They were guilty of a certain sin, and as punishment received no portion of land when the Promised Land was divided among the tribes. The rest of the ancient Hebrews, realizing that the tribe of Levi had to have a means of subsistence, created the position of physical caretakers of the Temple. Ruby himself a Levi and consequently having certain ritual worship obligations, dismissed the whole "honor" concept by saying that the Levites were really the janitors of the building! If you study the book of Leviticus, you will understand this accurate, if sardonic, reasoning. That they developed this occupation into one of honor second only to the priests, the Kohanim, was a tribute to their entrepreneurial ability.

In Kittanning Ruby refused the obligation that his being a Levite entailed. Any of David Karp's sons and grandsons through the male line can claim this ancient aristocracy, while the rest of us are only Israelites. If you boys, Norman, Michael, and Jordan, are ever in an Orthodox Shul and a call goes out for a Levi, you are qualified to offer your services. No one will challenge your claim.

The Barnesboro Shul was built by a handful of people with David Karp acting as one of the building committee.

The rabbis that were employed by such a small congregation were usually immigrants with a minimal secular education and no knowledge of handling children other than by a rap on the knuckles. Ruby and Archie Charlson and Eugene Fridman must have earned and received their share of this teaching method.

I know nothing of the occupation of the father of David Karp. In a conversation with him I mentioned that of my grandfathers one had been a tailor and the other a balegola, a drayman, with a horse and wagon, like Tevya, but without the dairy products. My father-in-law sniffed contemptuously, "There is no profession lower than that of balegola."

My father-in-law and I got along especially well for several years. For a long time he had wanted his oldest son to marry and when, after a two-year courtship, Ruby married a "nice Jewish girl" who could speak Yiddish, he was delighted. None of the Karps spoke Yiddish because Ray had been brought up in London using only English. In Barnesboro she learned Yiddish although her English accent was superimposed on it and her vocabulary was even smaller than mine.

Somehow, in my mid-seventies, I find myself using more Yiddish than ever before, no doubt because of the people I associate with. There are words that come to my tongue that I never used before but that were spoken by my mother, deposited somewhere in my brain, and are only now coming into my consciousness. As a result I now understand well the pleasure David Karp took in speaking his mother tongue with me, a family member.

In about 1932 David Karp became ill and had to retire completely from the business. He was not permitted to drive and so Ruby became his chauffeur on his trips to Altoona or Johnstown mostly to buy kosher meat. On one of these he dropped into Berman's Jewelry Store to chat with my father as a fellow Jewish merchant. I was working behind the counter, Ruby and I met, and you were at that point entered into the Book of Life. Belle and I were having a program dance party with an even number of boys and girls, except that we were short two boys. Naturally I invited the newly met Ruby Karp to come and to bring a friend.

Thus began our two year courtship. I was 18 years old and Ruby was 23. In high school I had not dated until my senior year when I was 16, but after a year of going out only with Julius Small, I suddenly became popular with three other young men. By Saturday I always had a date for Sunday night with whoever had called me first.

After the house party Ruby phoned for a date but not early enough. The next week he called earlier. It was not long before I said no to the others in just the hope that he would call. It did not take too many weeks of this development for the others to retire from the field and so Ruby and I became a couple.

During this period David Karp had an argument with his niece Anne Heimlich and her husband, whose shoe store was located in the Karp building, and the Heimlichs moved to a different location. David then decided to open his own shoe store in his own building with his son Ruby in charge. So Ruby spent a month in Altoona living with Al Klein and his family while learning the shoe business at Mr. Klein's store, the Shoe Market, a block away from Berman's Jewelry Store.

There, in a few weeks, he was supposed to learn not just to fit and sell shoes, but how to stock the store, to understand the purchasing cycles of seasonal merchandise, to know when to close out a line and when to expand it. In short, the Ideal Shoe Store of Philadelphia Avenue in Barnesboror, PA, was an experiment in inexperience.

It was during this business venture that our courtship took place with dates every Sunday night and sometimes in between. In 1934 my mother spent several months in Latvia and in Russia with relatives, and since Emma was working in St. Louis, I was in charge of the Berman household. My father liked Ruby and they were comfortable together long before we were married.

When my mother came home in October she gave me one of those Jewish expressions that are pregnant with meaning, an expression that has been quoted and joked about since Yiddish became a language. Leo Rosen on pp. 267-268 of The Joys of Yiddish explains the unending meanings of the word and its nuances. (If you have not yet guessed what the word is, you reveal your lack of exposure to your Jewish heritage and I acknowledge that I am to blame.) The word is simply "Nu?" With this one word my mother meant, "This has gone on long enough. It is time to marry or to break off the relationship." And by her tone, her facial expression, and her body language I knew exactly what "Nu?" meant.

On the night before Thanksgiving Ruby took me to the ballet at the Syria Mosque in Pittsburgh and when we came home he finally asked the question, "You don't want to get married, do you?" So much for high romance.

We planned the wedding for February 10th and my mother, a pessimist by nature, asked me if there was anything wrong, that we were in such a hurry. In view of today's customs, you young people might not understand this conversation, but 1934 was not 1988.

Some of the details of our wedding appear on page 45 of Roses in December and need not be repeated here. My sister Birdie, aged seven, caused me considerable embarrassment. My father and I were ready to go down the stairway, my hand on his arm, to the waiting rabbi, family, and guests, when I suddenly realized with horror that Ruby had been nervously chewing gum when I last glimpsed him. I told Birdie to go downstairs and tell Ruby to get rid of it. Instead, she leaned over the railing on the second floor and yelled, "Ruby, Florence said to spit out your chewing gum!" With this indignity our wedding ceremony began, to be laughed about for 44 years.

We spent our week's honeymoon at the Edison Hotel on 47th Street in New York City because that was the gathering place for shoe salesmen. Many years later Ruby was absolutely certain that we had been in New York for two weeks, but maybe it only seemed so to him in retrospect. What should I make of that argument?

We came home to David and Ray's house because our furniture had not yet arrived. I was immediately and unexpectedly made aware of a difference in our families. Although we were made welcome, nobody kissed either of us.

In about a week our furniture came and we were established in a two bedroom apartment over the shoe store. The main part of the first floor was occupied by the A & P grocery store which caused the apartments above to be infested with roaches. Coming into the kitchen at night and turning the light on always caused an unconscious bracing for what one might see. Eventually I reached the end of my rope and, sick with the nausea of pregnancy, I berated Ruby since the building belonged to the Karp's, and I completely lost my temper. He stomped out in disgust and I was left wondering if our marriage was over and if I would ever see my husband again.

Later in the evening I heard a strange, whooshing sound in the hall. Ruby was holding a large Flit gun in one hand while the other was pumping insect killer into the joint of the floor and baseboard. The roaches were controlled but not obliterated and it was an ongoing battle for the nearly four years we lived in Barnesboro.

Ruby operated the shoe store and I learned to sell shoes during my first pregnancy, but as December approached, fitting shoes was impossible for me. With Norman's birth that part of my life came to an end, but I learned Ruby's elaborate bookkeeping system, a shoebox into which invoices were tossed. At that time the only record keeping was of cost of merchandise, utilities, and bank deposits. The complicated recording of the varied taxes that arose during the war came later and the wage records with their multiple withholding aspects came later still. The shoe store was closed out in a short time and the family business reverted to the jewelry store only and the management of real estate.

David Karp died in 1938 after a long struggle with what was thought to be pernicious anemia. Ruby and his mother, under the pressure of the Jewish custom of swift burial, bought by telephone a six-occupant plot in the Jewish cemetery in Johnstown, which later was found to be suitable for only five because of a map error. David, Ray, Elchan and his wife Sylvia are buried there.

Ruby at 28 became the head of the family. Harry was still in high school and Lillian was a student at Pennsylvania State College of Optometry in Philadelphia. Elchan worked in the jewelry store as did Ruby. The jewelry store had for some years

been unprofitable because David had deliberately allowed it to run down with no restocking of merchandise. I never knew why this was done. David had gone through the formality of selling the jewelry store to his three sons for one dollar, and so when he died they owned it instead of inheriting it. Lil and Harry each received five or six thousand dollars from David's life insurance and Ray, of course, got the house, the building, and whatever else there was.

Ruby managed his mother's affairs in that she always followed his suggestions. Harry graduated at 18 and was encouraged to join the army because the threat of the draft was daily becoming more a certainty. If he joined voluntarily he could at least choose his branch of service. Elchan remained at the watchmaking bench and Lil got her degree in Philadelphia. Then she got a job in New Kensington.

In 1939 Ruby found a location for a second store on South Jefferson Syreet in Kittanning and for about five weeks he came home to Barnesboro only on weekends. As Danni's birth approached he and Elchan traded places and so my husband was with me at the important time while Elchan stayed in Kittanning.

When Danni was six weeks old I left her with her grandmother and took Norman, three and a half, to Kittanning to see the town, the store, and a house that was waiting for my inspection. Frank Butler, the real estate agent, took me on a tour and I remember how his face fell when he asked me what church I belonged to so that he could show it to me. His look was not because I was Jewish but because he was embarrassed to point out the miserable little converted house that was the Kittanning synagogue.

Ronnie Wolfe, a high school kid, hung around the new store and eventually became a full-time employee. He stayed with us for 20 years. When Ronnie and Helen, his wife, wanted to buy a house, Ruby helped them get a bank loan by putting up his own insurance policy as collateral. After 20 years when Ronnie was offered a better paying job as a salesman with a Kittanning brick manufacturer he talked it over with Ruby. Ruby advised him to take it because his future with Karp's Jewelry Store had an obvious limit.

The war years affected everyone, of course. Harry spent five years in the south Pacific and was at Pearl Harbor when it was bombed. Elchan was sent to Lincoln, Nebraska where he operated a prophylactic station at the base there. Lil left her job in New Kensington and came back to Barnesboro to work in the store. Ruby supervised both stores and worked long hours at

the bench to keep up with watch and jewelry repairs. Trade shops were short of help, and since new merchandise was hard to come by for every merchant, there was a great demand for repairing old watches, etc.

Lissa was born in September, 1941 and so by the time the United States entered the war our family was complete. We never suffered from the rationing of sugar, shortening, meat, canned vegetables and leather shoes because we had five people who each got complete ration coupons, even though the youngest was an infant.

The draft board sent Ruby frequent notices that his classification had been changed although he never asked for any review. Once the fact that he had three children deferred him and once the deferral was because he was a watchmaker and was considered to be "essential to the welfare of civilians." But as the war dragged on the age limit of draftees was raised. Family men were being called up and there was a real possibility that Ruby would be drafted. A member of the draft board told him that if he went to work at the Pittsburgh Plate Glass plant in Ford City he would again be deferred.

And so he became a worker in the PPG factory. He gave a good day's work and because of the circumstances of his employment was given a job that regular workers shunned. He picked up the sheets of glass at the end of a conveyor belt, placed them on a dolly and then ran back for the next piece. (He learned from fellow workers that... in piece work to exceed the "stint," the maximum output agreed upon by the union, was to risk having your work deliberately destroyed.)

In the hours when he was not at the factory Ruby worked at the bench or gave me orders about the store where I was putting in full time. He hired Dora Grossman as a clerk and she and I did our best. One night Ruby came home from Ford City at about 8:00 o'clock and was staggering visibly as he came up the front walk of the Porter house on Allegheny Avenue, where we lived. He was punchy from exhaustion and mumbled, "We're going to the movies." He was too tired to eat or sleep or talk and had to unwind. After the movie he told me he had quit the job and would rather go to the army than continue this pace. The war ended soon after this and Ruby never became a soldier.