MARTIN LITVIN

A DARING YOUNG MAN

A Biography of Ben Nicholas

Martin Litvin

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Books

Non-fiction: SERGEANT ALLEN AND PRIVATE RENICK,
edited and with narrative.

VOICES OF THE PRAIRIE LAND (2 vols.),
edited and with narrative.

Fiction: BLACK ANGEL,
a true story of the Underground Railroad, told as fiction.

HIRAM REVELS IN ILLINOIS,
a lost chapter in the life of America's first black U.S. Senator, told as fiction.

A ROCKING HORSE FAMILY,
a story of a child's search for love and identity.

Biography: CHASE THE PRAIRIE WIND,
the lost story of Robert H. Avery and his agricultural inventions.

THE YOUNG MARY,
a documentary study covering the early years of Mother Bickerdyke, the famed Civil War nurse known as America's Florence Nightingale.

THE JOURNEY,
the story of August M. Bondi, the American Jewish freedom fighter who rode with John Brown in Kansas.

A DARING YOUNG MAN,
the story of Ben Nicholas, from his early days on New York's Lower East Side until he persuaded the California Legislature to pass the nation's first "right to die with dignity" law.

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A DARING YOUNG MAN

A biography of Ben Nicholas, who persuaded the California Legislature to pass the nation's first "Right to Die with Dignity" law.

Frank A. Ward
Galesburg, Illinois
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SOURCES

primary:

For this project, Ben Nicholas, the subject of this book, gave a set of his autobiographical notes, several newspaper articles, wrote many letters, and participated in telephone interviews. A lengthy personal interview was given in his home at Seal Beach, California, on Wednesday, November 24, 1982, as well as Tuesday, November 30, 1982. Ben's wife, Rose, contributed many personal reminiscences and suggestions. Both Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas read the manuscript in various drafts and sent suggestions that were most constructive.

The author's personal experience with the Nicholas Family for a period of more than 35 years was also drawn upon.

secondary:

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* * * * * * * *

This book
is for
Aunt Dora and Uncle Maury Gillis
with thanks and love.

The white-haired old gentleman peered through his glasses at some papers in a briefcase on his lap. He went through the documents brought especially for the hearing. Then he turned to the smiling, retired M.D. seated beside him.

"Sure you brought everything, Ben?" The doctor crossed his legs and sighed. A pretty stewardess went by with a tray of coffee and danish for passengers in first-class.

"I have gone over this stuff a hundred times," Ben replied. "This time we're ready."

This time, he mused. And what of the other times? He saw Rachel, her brow beaded with perspiration as her work-reddened hands attacked the wetwash on the rickety kitchen table. The family didn't even have a kitchen sink. He saw Sam coming in a bit tipsy from a night's carouse with the men down at the Lemberger Lodge. He saw Annie on that Saturday morning, buttoning her jacket quickly as she prepared to leave home and catch the train to work. And Charley, with the pegged top trousers, a big brother at 16, taking little Bennie to sit in the gallery of Miner's burlesque theater on the Bowery. He also saw Charley, very old, desperately ill, hopelessly ill, wanting to die, kept alive by all the clever apparatus.

This time, he thought, just a trace of a tear in his eye as he gazed out of the plane window at the green earth below. There, up ahead, was Sacramento. Suddenly, for the first time in more than 70 years, Ben saw Elias Lieberman's face, when Lieberman had been a young man and Ben's fourth grade teacher at P.S. 77. What was it that Lieberman was saying, something about a character in literature who had an appointment with destiny. It was a poem...

I have an appointment with destiny;
I have survived great strife;
I have a truth within me
Yes!
Because I believe in life...

Somehow, the words just wouldn't come back straight. But he remembered Lieberman, a wonderful man who became a celebrated poet and an administrator in the New York City public schools. That was the whole thing, Ben knew. He remembered it all...

He remembered...

ONE.

The small apartment's front room was modestly furnished. In the darkness, a small boy slept on an old couch by the window. His hair was black, and his eyes, when awake, were a merry, dark brown. He was five years old, weighed about 40 pounds, and was three feet tall. His teeth, a special pride, were beautifully white, and his ability to hear was excellent. In repose, his intelligent brow and other features betrayed a restless energy, an appetite for learning, adventure.

A tremendous burst of sound erupted in the crowded, narrow street beneath the window. Church bells clanged, people cheered, whistles tooted, and horns blew raucous blasts. Happy laughter was everywhere, even in the poverty-stricken environs of New York City's congested Lower East Side, as 1899 expired.

The boy leapt to the window, eyes wide, hair tousled, his bare feet oblivious to the cold, grimy floor. He quickly rubbed frost from the window and pressed against the glass pane.

"Happy New Year!" The voices below shouted in the cold. "Hoorah for the 20th Century! It's 1900!" Celebrants of every description streamed and staggered along the snowy, filth-strewn sidewalk, while others were in the sloppy avenue beside the rundown brick tenement, where the small boy lived with his family.

That lad was Ben Nicholas, listed in the 1900 Census as *Beni*, born at 95 Ridge Street, near Rivington, in New York City, March 13, 1894. Beginning with his father's arrival alone around 1890, followed by the mother and four children around 1893, Ben's family had crossed the sea from the Austrian Empire's portion of Poland—Galicia—and settled in Manhattan. Ben was the family's first-born American offspring.

Head of the family was Saneh Necheles, an artisan who was a fine upholsterer. He was born supposedly around the year 1863 in the City of Lemberg, later Lvov, in what was then Austrian Poland. Ben's mother, Rachel, was also from Lemberg and wed his father there. She and four children remained in that place when the father departed for America.

A fine book entitled *The Promised City*, written by Moses Rischin and published by Harvard University Press in 1962, contains some pertinent material which may shed a little light on the Necheles family's background in Lemberg.

On pages 31 and 32, Mr. Rischin says: "... Galicia's gross poverty, retarded industry, sparse and undeveloped natural resources, and poor transportation facilities rendered all economic activity backward. The rise in Galicia's population, from 150,000 in 1772 to 575,000 in 1869, choked an economy that annually saw five to six thousand Jews *starve to death*. (My italics) Only the hoped-for intervention of the Almighty, 'Gott hilft schon,' shielded them from despair."

Rischin continues: "Galician Jews were concentrated in retail trade, brokerage, the sale of beverages, and the handicrafts, and many worked on the land. But change affected all economic sectors adversely. The growth of peasant cooperatives made Jewish traders superfluous. Governmental monopolization of the tobacco, beverage, salt, and railway industries drove Jewish restauranteurs, tobacconists, retailers, and innkeepers to suicidal rivalries. The completion of a railway network in the 1880s and 1890s deprived Jewish teamsters and draymen of their sources of livelihood.

Jewish artisans, less numerous than in Russia, in the 1890s were largely self-employed master craftsmen..."

While the precise reason for Ben's father leaving the Austrian Empire is no longer known, from what Mr. Rischin has to say, we may surmise that Saneh Necheles had good reason to want to try his luck in America.

He made the crossing on some immigrant ship, likely in the steerage, sharing the unpleasant conditions with other travelers, enduring long days and longer nights.

It is almost possible to envisage Saneh Necheles as he entered the Land of Promise at Castle Garden. A large building in the shape of a circular rotunda, it was situated on the Battery at the foot of Broadway, where Manhattan meets New York Bay. Castle Garden's history included a period as a theater, when Jenny Lind sang to vast crowds.

When Saneh Necheles landed there around 1890, he may have noticed that the main hall was immense and barren, rather cold, which he may have found oppressive. Along two sides of this great room were red painted wooden benches. The remaining two sides had

tables, counters, and desks, used by many charitable groups whose representatives were fluent in various languages and aided new arrivals. It was probably a simple matter for an official of a Jewish organization from New York City to query Saneh Necheles in Yiddish, Polish, or German about Saneh's work background and where he would like to live in the United States.

But the processing was a slow business and the numbers of people waiting for help were great. Castle Garden was usually so filled, so packed with people that places to sit in daytime as well as places to lie down at night were simply not to be found. Even the bare floor was occupied to the last centimeter of space.

The dirt was indescribable, with so many parcels and pillows as well as feather beds and unwashed clothing on every side. People dragged what they could from Europe, and by the time the human traffic, with soiled goods, converged at Castle Garden, the effect was overwhelming. Lice were everywhere. This was the land of hope and opportunity, where the poor of many nations came for a new beginning...

After he was processed into the country and allowed to go out on his own, Saneh must have found work and made a start at learning English. How well he managed during this initial period or where he resided has been forgotten. Fluent in Yiddish, Polish, and German, Mr. Necheles was a fine upholsterer. He found work and saved enough money to send for his wife and youngsters.

Rachel and the four offspring arrived a bit later. By then, Ellis Island had become the new point of entry for immigrants. It was not long before Rachel saw a black man for the first time. A new experience, the encounter frightened the young woman. She gathered her children close, pointed to the individual, and cried out "Tzigane!", a word which meant "gypsy," and to residents of the community whence sprang the Necheles family, signified someone with a reputation for kidnapping little children.

As to the location of the Nicholases on New York's Lower East Side on Ridge Street, Mr. Rischin tells on page 76 of his wonderful book that on the Lower East Side: "... Galicians lived to the south, between Houston and Broome, east of Clinton, on Attorney, Ridge, Pitt, Willett, and the cross streets."

1893 seems to have been the year Saneh Necheles and his family were reunited.

But there were changes. Upon the arrival of Ben's father, an immigration official Americanized the father's name from Saneh to Samuel, and altered Necheles into Nicholas. Later, when Rachel and the children landed, the eldest daughter received similar attention. Shaindele in Europe became Sarah upon reaching this country. Ben

knew her as Sadie. His elder brother, Yonah, around the age of 12 or 13, became Charley. As to the other two children born in Europe, Malka became Molly, while Channah turned into Annie.

The New York City which Ben's parents encountered was crowded and colorful. The well-to-do lived in fashionable neighborhoods uptown, while the poor and indigent were crowded into grim areas downtown. Withal, except for the periodic Depressions or Panics, as they were termed, when factories were shut and desperate hordes of the unemployed walked the streets in search of sustenance, Manhattan was a bustling place. New industries sprang up and the demand for cheap labor was quickly met by the new people who poured in. Pay was low, usually five cents per hour, and the workday spanned 10 or more hours, six days a week. Many foreign-born workers were unskilled and gladly accepted any kind of employment, even though factories were often unsafe and unsanitary. Some people, who were denied employment for racial or religious reasons, as well as linguistic insufficiencies, or who preferred to become entrepreneurs, rented pushcarts. Such unsteady conveyances were loaded with goods of one kind or another and parked at curbside in certain Lower East Side thorofares as Hester Street, Rivington, Orchard, and elsewhere. The men and women who ran these businesses devoted long hours to commerce with the throngs of bargain-seekers. When the days grew short, the pushcart operators illuminated their areas by suspending kerosene lanterns from poles, attached to the carts. The men and women labored in all seasons. Spring, summer, and autumn were bearable enough, but when snow fell, human endurance was sorely taxed. It was customary to use a discarded metal oil barrel as a combination incinerator and heating stove. Wood, refuse, and chunks of coal were burnt the day long and into the night, as the cold but hardy pushcart dealers huddled nearby. Clad in layers of ragged clothing, babushkas, boots, and mufflers, they literally danced to keep warm, while struggling to make a living, in the bitter cold.

America was the land of opportunity, all right, but those who stood selling on the cobblestones of the Lower East Side in bad weather, year after year, knew that while the promise of streets paved with gold wasn't precisely accurate, the promise was right on target when it came to contracting rheumatism, arthritis, and consumption.

City streets were repositories of refuse. Although municipal crews nightly hosed down the pavements with water from fire hydrants, nothing stayed clean for long. Occupants of upstairs flats often availed themselves of the gutter's proximity to drop paper sacks filled with human excrement. Pedestrians therefore traversed the sidewalks at their peril.

Entry into America was fairly simple: a new arrival had to be in acceptable good health and have a relative or friend who would vouch

for him. Subsequent regulations required that a new arrival possess a minimum of $25 and the ability to read.

Given the chances for employment and the relative lack of political oppression in the United States, it is understandable that multitudes of persons traveled by ship westward across the Atlantic.

Of the eight Nicholas children, Ben was the first born in America. Either his mother was unacquainted with any midwives, which, in that day, in that neighborhood would be difficult to envision, or she preferred to be a patient of the nearby Essex Street Free Clinic. A story has been handed down that the doctor who brought the infant Ben into the world believed that the child wouldn't survive a month. Infant mortality was then a problem, considering the absence of popular education on sanitary and medical matters. The doctor indicated that Ben had as much chance to live as the physician had of growing grass on the palms of his hands. Ben was registered as "Male" Nicholas, as orthodox Jews only name their male offspring upon the occurrence of circumcision, which is supposed to occur the seventh day after birth. Jewish births were then calculated according to the number of days before or after a particular holiday, based on the Jewish calendar. Ben's birth took place on March 13, 1894, 10 days before Purim, which that year fell on March 23. He was lucky to be delivered by a doctor, for the medical man registered the child's birth. Babies delivered by midwives were not so fortunate, which later caused problems when birth certificates were wanted.

Some relatives did not adopt Nicholas as a surname. A few called themselves Nechels or Nechols, which, in time, for some became Nichols. Others retained the original Necheles.

Ben's father left brothers and sisters in Europe, but rarely spoke of them, though two of the brothers came to New York—one whose life ended in suicide and another, Zaida, who was blind and a most bitter man.

Ben's mother occasionally mentioned her parents who had died in Poland before she matured, leaving her to be raised by an aunt.

Rachel's other memories of the deeply-religious peasants in the old country included recollections of seeing people on certain important religious days crawling on knees great distances to a shrine or cathedral.

Rachel also recalled seeing pregnant peasant women working in the field and how one gave birth in the field. She wrapped the newborn child in an apron and walked home with the umbilical cord still uncut and exposed.

Ben's birth certificate of March 13, 1894, recites his parents' ages as 36, which, if accurate, meant that Sam and Rachel were born in 1858, not the 1863 Ben heard.

Following Ben's arrival, three more children were born in subsequent years: Meyer or Max, Allya or Alfred, and Golda or Gertie.

The Nicholases resided in a dark, ugly tenement, in an upper-story three-room flat without heat, running water, or indoor plumbing. A communal sink with a single cold-water faucet was available in the hall on each floor. The faucet served four families. Each floor contained four flats, with a window or two in the front room overlooking the street, or a window or two in a back room facing the rear yard, if the family's premises were so situated.

Tenements were built on lots with a 20-foot frontage, crammed side by side with scant room in between, block after block, mile after mile. The fronts of such structures were a monotonous, grimy brick, with the myriad fire escapes hung with washing, the window sills heaped with bedding put out to air. Earlier builders of tenement houses were satisfied with four stories; another generation ran them up to five; while the greediest lot piled up six stories, and still not satisfied, began raising the ground floor high enough to slip in a row of shops at the bottom. The latter buildings were the worst, for tenants of the upper floors had but a slim chance of escape, in case of fire.

A tenement building had a stairwell, usually unkempt and shadowy, noisy by day with the shouts of children or the raucous exchanges of adults on various floors, peopled at night by embracing young couples who had no place to go. Creaking wooden steps bore endless foot traffic. Residents trudged up and down, to and from work, burdened with groceries, infants, coal, wood, furniture, or laundry. Many headed outdoors to the back yard to answer nature's call.

Within the Nicholas apartment, amid mediocre furnishings, clotheslines frequently extended from the kitchen window to the furthest bedroom wall, and in a space of about six feet between buildings, open to the sky. Drying garments could be seen everywhere. Other lines were on the roof, allowing wetwash an exposure to the sun and the sediment released by industrial smokestacks and sent that way by the wind.

With the common sink in the hallway, pots of water for various needs had to be carried into the kitchen and heated on the coal range. Water to be discarded was borne back to the communal sink and poured down the drain.

On washday, large tubs occupied the stove, each one laboriously filled. These metal vessels were heated by the considerable insertion of fuel into the fire. Strong bar soap was cut into slivers so it would dissolve quickly and become suds. Soiled clothes were then put to soak, though this aspect was frequently initiated the night before. To hasten the process, the tubloads were stirred frequently. Housewives usually employed wooden poles of modest length for that purpose, or

inverted concave metal canisters attached to poles, worked manually up and down (one such device being called the "Rapid Washer," manufactured by C. T. Childers, Galesburg, Illinois). Poles were also used in the transfer of wet wash from the boiler to the scrub board, when that stage was reached. Garments were vigorously pummelled by hand upon the scrub board or metal washboard. Today, such boards are seen on television at the *Grand Ole Opry*, played as *musical instruments* in country-and-western bands. When Ben was a boy, a housewife used those things and added her own back, shoulder, arm, and hand power, to get clothes clean. Small wonder that modern washing machines have enjoyed such a vogue.

Washing machines have a long and interesting history. A patent for one was granted March 28, 1797, to one Nathaniel Briggs of New Hampshire for an "improvement in washing cloaths."

A rotary motion washing machine was made in 1859 by Hamilton Erastus Smith of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who obtained patent number 21,909 on October 26, 1858. A crank, turned by hand, caused a perforated cylinder within a wooden shell to revolve. Smith continued to improve his machine and in 1863 secured patent protection on the first self-reversing-motion attachment to the machine.

Before Rachel Nicholas' life would end, complete, self-contained electric machines would come on the market and of course washing machines for public use, forerunners of today's laundromat.

With such living conditions, the Nicholases were constantly troubled with bedbugs and cockroaches. Efforts to destroy the vermin were to little avail. The family tried by squirting the bugs with kerosene—on mattresses, around mouldings, near the cooking range, and so forth. Other families employed the same method. Sometimes, fires occurred in the neighborhood when some person who was smoking, chased house vermin with kerosene and the liquid ignited.

The unappetizing dwellings described herein rented for around six dollars a month and the Nicholases experienced several; when possible, they moved, seeking better, and eventually settled in somewhat pleasanter circumstances where a sink and faucet were in the kitchen and an indoor toilet was available in the hallway.

Nevertheless, the family always needed space. Rachel had an old friend, Raisele, a widow without a family. Rachel insisted that the widow share the Nicholas apartment. The lady slept on the floor for nearly a year. Frightened and suspicious, ever fearful of being robbed, Raisele kept her money tied up in a rag between her legs. Every coin or greenback she dispensed emitted an odor of urine. Her behavior notwithstanding, Raisele was kind and good to the Nicholases and they loved her.

The apartment's heat was generated by a large wood-burning stove. The group ate near it and gathered close to it in cold weather.

There was no electricity. Artificial light was provided by kerosene lamps, whose glass globes became sooty and required gentle washing, whose wicks needed regular trimming. Candles were also used. As the family moved to better quarters, gas was available via a meter that required periodic insertions of 25-cent pieces. Whenever someone saw the stove flame or wall jet dimming, a quarter had to be rushed into the meter slot. Periodically, the coins were emptied by a gas company employee.

When times were bad, occupants of the shabby apartments were frequently dispossessed for arrearage of rent. On those dolorous occasions, the tenants found their belongings parked on the sidewalk, while the neighbors stared until a wagon or truck could be summoned to carry the furnishings elsewhere. Non-payment of rent, however, was only one excuse for eviction. If a landlord merely disliked a tenant, he could get the party out without a formal hearing or even a specified objection. The landlord merely contacted the sheriff, and in a short while, maybe after some silver had crossed the official's palm, the unwanted tenant was evicted.

Rachel Nicholas was fiercely independent. She resisted having her hair cut and head shaved, in accordance with the custom which decreed that married women wear a *shaitel* or wig. No persuasion could budge her.

Because she was particularly fertile, Rachel usually became pregnant soon after ending the breast-feeding of her most recent infant. This was true except for Ben's brother, Max. He arrived three years and three months after Ben.

Understandably, Rachel lived a life of relentless toil. From early morning until late at night, she was rushed and harassed. After breakfast nearly every day, a large boiler heated on the cookstove with clothes in need of washing. The clouds of steam and moisture were everywhere—winter and summer. She used Fels Naptha soap, loaded with caustic soda that brought on cracking and festering between her fingers. Although the soap was popular with housewives because it got the dirt out, women's hands suffered, growing red and heavy from endless labor and harmed by the soap.

Rachel's washing procedure was uncomplicated: hot, soapy garments were transferred from the tub on the stove with a broomstick, deposited on the hand-and-elbow-powered metal-faced washboard, and there subjected to vigorous scrubbing and rubbing. Rinsing followed, then hand-wringing. Later, the clean wash was hung on a clothes line. On rainy days, when the weather prevented use of the roof lines, laundry was spread around indoors—on bedsteads, backs of chairs, wall hooks, everywhere.

Despite the demands on her time, Rachel often made lunch for her offspring to carry to school or work. She was, regrettably, a poor cook, and all edibles tasted alike—except Rachel's gefilte fish and koogel. The latter was a round flat cake with kimmel seeds and onion, hard and delicious. Food was cheap in those days, and when there was some money, beef or chicken was purchased. Soup always simmered on the stove.

Breakfast consisted of oatmeal, bread, and some awful coffee made with half chicory and boiled in milk.

The family's diet included tomatoes, raw or cooked cabbage, onions, beets, peas and carrots, in season. There was no lettuce, at least in the markets patronized by Rachel. Maybe it could be found uptown, in the stores patronized by the swells.

Dinner was served whenever the family members sat down—separately or in a group. This was standard procedure the year-round, except for Passover and Yom Kippur.

Rachel did provide a dish that was a great favorite, usually intended for Saturday lunch. It was *Cholent*, a tasty beef stew with a thick crust. Rachel prepared it in her kitchen and young Ben carried the pot to the nearby bakery for slow cooking, calling for it at noon, Saturday.

Ben recalls that granulated sugar was absent in their home, on Passover. Instead, a large cone of sugar was put on the table at mealtime. A person scraped off the portion he required. In some homes, the sugar cone was suspended from the ceiling above the dining table and a person swung the cone to himself, when wanted.

People's dress in that era was noteworthy. High-button shoes were in fashion. They required a button hook and many persons carried the hooks with them. It has been said, too, that a girl would find such an instrument helpful, should her escort of the evening become too persistent.

Eventually, the high-button shoes gave way to those which utilized metal hooks and laces, and then metal eyelets through which laces could be drawn, a style which continues to the present.

For important occasions, low-cut shoes were worn.

The bustle was slowly going out. In time, moreover, women would adopt brassieres as a substitute for the camisole, a woman's sleeveless, often lace-trimmed underwaist. The camisole had a tendency to impart a disconcerting jiggle to women's busts.

Men wore high collars, mustaches, and derbies. The derbies, in summer, were replaced by hats called a "boater," made of straw, which featured a flat crown, brim, and wide hatband.

Rachel assumed full responsibility for the family. She was in total command and made all decisions. The family loved her dearly and

never challenged what she said. She was bright, alert, and interesting. Her English was imperfect. In the house, the main language was Yiddish, but Polish and German were also used. Most of Rachel's adult friends were foreign-born Jews, so her opportunities for English conversation were few. Even so, she managed quite well despite occasional lapses.

Residing in the next building were Mr. and Mrs. Murphy, and their apartment shared an angled wall with the Nicholas place, so that certain windows faced. The situation allowed easy conversation.

Mr. Murphy was a hard-working type who performed general labor for a living. Mrs. Murphy was a large woman, weighing over 250 pounds. She had but one leg and employed a kitchen chair as a crutch, with considerable agility. Since Mrs. Murphy was fond of beer and Ben was small and quick, he became her errand boy. She'd open the window, stick her head out, and yell: "Bennie! Get me a can o' suds! Here's the growler."

The growler, or can, was made of light-weight metal and was fitted with a lid. Mrs. Murphy gave the boy the empty can as well as a nickel for fresh beer and a penny for himself. He proceeded with the can to a neighborhood saloon, and gave the growler to the bartender, who filled it with a nickel's worth of "suds." Ben then hastened out of the noisy, smoky saloon and delivered the beer to Mrs. Murphy, who promptly consumed the contents.

Rachel and Mrs. Murphy were good friends. Despite language difficulties—Rachel's English was not so good, Mrs. Murphy's Yiddish, Polish, and German left much to be desired—still the two women got on very well and the Nicholases were quite fond of Mrs. Murphy.

Unfortunately, Mr. Murphy was a heavy drinker, no mere growler of suds for him. One night, when he was much under the influence, he answered a call of nature by proceeding to the outhouse in the rear yard. It was dead of winter. He sat in the outhouse, trousers around his ankles, and passed out. Rats emerged and attacked the hapless fellow, gnawing his testicles. Mr. Murphy was found dead the following day.

The Nicholases shared the man's loss with his widow. Shortly after the tragedy, Mrs. Murphy moved away.

TWO.

Former residents of particular places in the old country banded together on the Lower East Side. Sam Nicholas, a handsome man who wore a beard all his life, joined the Lemberger Lodge as well as the Lemberger Chavura or synagogue. He usually went alone to the group meetings, where he and his pals found time to discuss the old days in Eastern Europe and lift a few glasses in remembrance. The few glasses may have become several. Occasionally, he staggered homeward somewhat tipsily through the darkened streets, and once indoors, collapsed on the bed fully clothed. Rachel undressed him, knowing that Sam would snore through the night and waken the following morning with a terrible hangover. He would groan that he was dying, and worse, was nauseated. One of the children would be sent to a nearby drugstore for a few coppers' worth of Seidlitz powders. The properties of this preparation resembled those of the natural waters from the spring at Sedlcany, Czechoslovakia, and was a laxative composed of two powders, one of sodium bicarbonate and Rochelle salt, the other of tartaric acid; the two were separately dissolved in water, combined, and drunk while effervescing.

After Sam had swallowed the potion, he grew quiet and fell asleep.

Despite the deleterious effect of alcohol upon his system and although he knew that much drinking occurred at lodge meetings or afterward, he never failed to attend. The men present not only exchanged reminiscences of life back in Lemberg, but also traded gossip about business and prospects for work. It could have been that Sam Nicholas found more than one upholstering job by being present at a lodge meeting and hearing of an opportunity.

Once a month, the Lemberger lodge held a dinner meeting and Ben's parents attended. These events required the couple to don their finest. Rachel found it a genuine ordeal as it called for a corset, which, in turn, meant an expenditure of much effort. Daughters Sadie and Molly had to employ all their strength to get Rachel into the contouring garment and lace it. Many groans were heard and not a few tears shed as Rachel endured the misery of transforming herself into what was then conceived to be a lady of fashion. However, when Rachel was assured that she looked splendid, she smiled. The struggle was worth it. She forgot that while the foundation garment caused her waist to be more shapely, it also meant that her breasts laid on top and were difficult to cover satisfactorily. Her arrival home after social evenings signalled a quick removal of the terrible corset, followed by Rachel's sighs of relief.

Sam Nicholas could not read or write in English and marked his signature with an X. Despite the handicap of illiteracy, Sam obtained his citizenship papers as soon after his arrival in America as was legally possible. A good citizen, he never missed an opportunity to vote. One of his landsmen was a Tammany Hall district captain who stood near the polling place with three dollars in cash and simple instructions on how to mark the ballot for anyone who was cooperative.

There was a question as to Sam Nicholas' literacy in Hebrew. He was seen, on occasion, in the synagogue, holding the prayer book upside down, leading some to conclude he could *daven* (recite prayers) from memorization, rather than through reading the language from the printed page.

The synagogue with which the Nicholases were affiliated was situated in a tenement flat on the ground floor. Partitions had been removed from the former dwelling place and benches installed. In the basement, a rudimentary classroom was set up for Hebrew classes.

The synagogue had an ark with the usual fittings of the time as well as two Torahs. Sometimes, an affluent member presented the congregation with a new Torah on the holiday of *Simchas Torah*. Such a presentation required a big celebration, with a canopy of honor held above the donor, who proudly carried the new Torah in his arms in a gala procession through the neighborhood. A band played while adults and children followed, singing and dancing. Later, wine, food, and tasty cookies were served.

An important aspect of the synagogue membership was participation in the group's burial space in a particular cemetery. The consecrated ground eventually became the final resting place of three members of the family, the parents and one child.

Today, Friday evening services are usual in many synagogues, but when Ben was young, the Friday night event was less important.

Such meetings commenced before sundown and ran an hour or so prior to the evening meal.

The Saturday morning service, however, was crucial for all men. Women who attended had to sit separately in the back of the meeting room; if the synagogue had a balcony, it served as the ladies' section. Moreover, the women were expected to sit behind a curtain, as it was believed that the ladies' presence would be a distraction to the piously praying men.

All the Jewish holidays were observed. Prior to Rosh Hashonah, as preparation for the custom of *Kapparot*, or as some called it, *Kappuras*, live chickens were purchased. A Jewish custom, originating apparently in the Geonic period, it meant to take on the eve of Yom Kippur a cock for males and a hen for females, to turn it three times over the head, and to pronounce the prayer: "May the slaughter of this fowl be an atonement for me and a ransom for my life, and while it goes to death, may I be granted a long and happy life."

Ben's recollection of this circumstance is that the live chickens were bought for the purpose of transferring the family's sins into them. With feet tied, the chickens were twirled over the people's heads as prayers were recited and the poultry squawked loudly. When the ritual was completed, the chickens were taken to a *schochet*, a ritual slaughterer. The Nicholases waited while the man slit the birds' throats and hung them over a barrel to drain of blood. Members of the family then participated in the plucking of the feathers. The poultry were subsequently taken home, prepared for the oven, and, in time, served as dinner.

The Nicholases seemed unable to recognize or else were unaware of the evident contradiction, for if they succeeded in transferring their sins into the chickens and then a while later sat down to a festive dinner where the baked birds were the main course, obviously they would return their sins unto themselves.

Religious superstition was an integral part of their family life, and true to the spirit of the season, the ritual with the protesting chickens was duly observed. But practicality must prevail over mysticism and no one could be so cavalier as to refrain from a fine dinner when the opportunity presented itself.

Then, too, if the fallacy of religious superstition should receive further scrutiny, it could be argued that even the canniest supplicant seeking to rid himself of sin never succeeds entirely, for no sooner does he manage to put his burden elsewhere than human fallibility reasserts itself and the capacity for misdoing returns to the living corpus. That could have been a reason why it was perfectly all right to transfer the sins into the poultry and then polish them off at a hearty dinner, completing the cycle.

All meats, even if slaughtered ritually, had to be koshered before cooking by being thoroughly salted and, after a time, rinsed. Chickens and fish were accorded the same treatment, and all the innards had to be examined most carefully for damage or foreign objects like metal nails, etc. If damage was observed, the chicken and innards were taken to the Roove. If he declared it *trefe*, regardless of the cost, the chicken and innards had to be cast into the garbage can.

Every Friday, the women went to the Mikveh, or ritual bath.

On the days between Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur, certain prayers are recited, known as *S'Lichot*, or, in Ben's boyhood, as *Slicchus*. It was a religious service held at midnight in which prayers composed in poetic form are recited, the content of the prayers being requests for divine forgiveness of, and atonement for transgressions.

Ben also remembered the congregation marching to the East River carrying bread, for the purpose of enacting the symbolic casting of bread upon the waters. This procession attracted smart aleck children who followed booing, uttering catcalls, and poking fun.

Another great holiday for the Nicholas Family was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On the morning of the day before Yom Kippur, Rachel commenced early with house cleaning, so the small flat was immaculate. She cooked a big meal before sundown, enjoyed by the family. The family observed the rule which proscribed food or water for 24 hours after the meal.

Following the elaborate dinner, the Nicholases proceeded on foot to the *shul*.

Throughout the following day, which was Yom Kippur, Sam and Rachel remained in the *shul*, although a few people took occasional breaks.

For the prayer service, Sam donned a *kittle*, a clean, white gown, over his clothes, as did most of the older men. Some, who were carried away emotionally, prostrated themselves on the floor, crying out for forgiveness. During some of the prayers, as part of the ritual, these repentant persons beat their breasts for past sins. The services attained a final climax with the blowing of the *shofar*, a ram's horn. As the thin, high-pitched sound penetrated clearly throughout the prayer room, all present knew that services were concluded. Afterward, everyone hastened homeward for a meal to break the fast.

Just as Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur were important holidays in the autumn, so was the Feast of Succoth. It occurred on the calendar in the period after Yom Kippur. Succoth commemorates the time of harvest, and, in Ben's boyhood, a modest structure, hardly more than a framework, was erected in the rear yard of the *shul*. It was covered with tree branches and leaves and made into an outdoor bower. Throughout the week of that particular holiday, the bower was

the site of morning worship. Each day, members of the congregation marched around the bower seven times, uttering prayers. A member carried a lemon in one hand and a palm frond in the other, shaking and moving the hands as the ritual progressed. For those members of the congregation who could not attend, and for women, one of the group was assigned to deliver a lemon, so that absent persons could, symbolically, share in the joy of the observance.

The last holiday of the year was Channukah, occurring in the period around Christmas. Gifts were exchanged and games played with a *draydel*. Plates of home-made cookies and fruit were carried to friends and neighbors. In the Nicholas flat, a candle was lit nightly and placed in a metal holder called a *Menorah*. The Talmud (Sab. 72) tells that when the heathen entered the Temple of ancient times, they defiled all the oil that they found in the sanctuary. After the victory of the Hasmoneans, they found only one cruse of oil still bearing the unbroken seal of the High Priest, and sufficient for the lighting of the Candelabrum for only one day. By a miracle, the oil lasted for eight days, until a fresh supply could be procured.

When a daily candle was lit in the Nicholas household, it was their way of observing an immeasurably old custom.

Purim was celebrated in the Spring and commemorated the time in ancient Babylon when the king's wicked minister, Haman, planned to exterminate the Jews. Good Queen Esther, a Jewess who was the mate of King Ahasuerus, appealed to the king to stop the dreadful scheme. When the king assented to Esther's appeal and the Jewish people were saved, the celebration of Purim was born. In honor of the holiday, Rachel baked three-cornered pastries containing prunes, raisins, and poppy seeds, pastries known as *Haman*toschen.

Passover, which arrived in the Spring, rated as much effort as Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur. For the week preceding the holiday, Rachel and her daughters cleaned the apartment, washed all the clothes and floors. The Passover dishes were brought from the cupboard and washed. The night before Passover, the ritual search for *Chumats* (bread) commenced.

Chumats or Hametz (Leaven) is, strictly speaking, dough kneaded from flour and water which has remained unbaked for a long time until it becomes leavened. The eating of hametz or the derivation of any benefit from leaven on the Passover is strictly forbidden by the Torah. This may account for the ritual burning.

In the Nicholas household, the procedure went as follows: Sam, followed by Rachel, who recited prayers, led the way. He carried a feather in his hand while Rachel, armed with a wooden spoon and a candle, went to certain pre-arranged locations in the flat where the Chumats had been placed. The feather was used to brush or lightly

transport the Chumats onto Rachel's wooden spoon. Next, the Chumats were carefully wrapped in a clean cloth, ready for burning the following morning. That step was Ben's job. He also called on the neighbors to burn their Chumats and for his pious service received a few pennies. Friends enacted a similar ritual in their tenements. A can was obtained, holes were punched in the bottom, some wood added, and a fire built. Potatoes were included and the event became a party.

The next afternoon, with all the usual food absent, preparations were begun for the Passover Seder. This entailed setting the table and preparing a special couch for the head of the household. This couch was piled high with pillows and covered with a featherbed-type quilt, to signify a kingly environment.

Sam and Rachel proceeded to the *Mikveh*, a ritual bath, and afterward went on to the *shul* for prayer. Sam remained at the *shul* and Rachel returned to the flat and finished preparing the great feast.

Her many tasks included the filling of the wine glasses, setting out the dishes of bitter herbs, grinding nuts mixed with chopped apples and other things. Matzos were also placed on the table.

Home again, Sam donned the *kittle* and reclined on the grand couch. Water was brought to him, with a clean towel, so that he could wash his hands. He also paused to wrap three matzos in a napkin, which were hidden beneath a pillow.

This led to an interesting thing known as *Afikoman*. Afikoman is a word of Greek extraction meaning "dessert." The *afikoman* is the greater portion of the middle of the three matzot on the seder table, which is divided by the seder celebrant. The afikoman is tucked away until the end of the Passover meal, when it is divided among the participants at the seder table. It is customary for the afikoman to be "stolen" by the children and to be "redeemed" by the celebrant at the end of the meal. This is intended to arrest the interest of the children and to keep them awake until after the seder ceremony.

In the Nicholas household, Sam held on to the parcel tightly, as in a game, and after repeated attempts by the children, permitted one to capture the parcel.

The Prophet Elijah had an important role in the Passover. A special cup is set aside at the seder table, and when the passage in the *Hagadah* (a small book of passages from Scripture and other appropriate poetry and songs) "Pour out thy wrath upon the nations . . ." is recited, the celebrant rises to his feet and calls out: "Welcome." Jewish legend has it that the Prophet Elijah visits every Jewish home in which the Seder is celebrated. A place is set for an unexpected guest and a wine glass filled for him. A tiny bit of wine may be poured from the glass onto the plate, when the word of welcome is uttered.

Apart from the ritual four questions, the Nicholas children often asked other questions in timid, gentle voices. They wanted to know

more about the Prophet Elijah. Did he travel in a chariot of fire, was he a bringer of food, and so on.

During one Seder in the family's distant past, when the ritual approached the mention of Elijah, a knock actually sounded at the front door, which had to be left open during the ceremony. The sound struck terror into the hearts of all present. The caller who materialized on the cue of the Prophet Elijah turned out to be a man going through the apartment house's hallways in search of a friend's door.

The event generated speculation for a long time after.

Ben recalled that before each holiday, except Passover, and on Friday, Sam Nicholas bought a beer token at the saloon. Before he sat down to the Saturday noon meal or after the end of a holiday, Ben was given the token and the family's growler. He ran down to the saloon, had the can filled with beer, paid with the token, and hastened back to the flat so his father could enjoy a drink.

In addition to the religious aspect of family life which Sam Nicholas oversaw, he left his offspring with another lasting memory. Following a Saturday meal, Sam poured a tiny quantity of alcohol on the family's wooden table surface and set it afire for the briefest instant, portraying a symbolic attempt to capture the flame, as it meant good luck and good business for the week to come.

Sam's orthodoxy was strict. He prayed three times daily. Ben remembers most vividly his father rising each morning, when the male parent recited prayers and donned *tfillin*, the cube-like leather receptacles which contain holy script. Ben saw his father position one cube on the forehead and the other on the muscle of the left arm, with the leather strap wound about the arm and down to and around the middle finger.

During this sacred ritual, Sam wore a yarmulke and a *tallis*, the prayer shawl.

After prayers, Sam filled a glass tumbler with a mixture of whiskey, alcohol, and kummel that had a peppermint flavor and brought the mixture down to 100 proof. He drank this mixture, shook himself, and was ready for breakfast. His meal often consisted of the previous night's leftovers, a bit of beef stew or a little pot roast. He had but few front teeth, yet experienced no trouble in eating. He did not dine again until the evening, when he repeated the morning glass of liquor and prayers.

He accepted no outside employment, as his orthodoxy forbade working on a holiday or on Saturday. He was instead self-employed as an itinerant peddler of the craft he had practiced in Europe, upholstery. He walked in the streets with a small chunk of leather under his arm, calling out periodically two words which emerged as "Lunchin Fixin!", that is to say, couches or lounges repaired. He went out in all

kinds of weather and was rarely ill. Some weeks brought work and others didn't. He did a nice business in days preceding holidays.

Sam Nicholas had an intriguing way of carrying his upholstering tacks. He poured the loose tacks into the palm of his hand and then, with a swift movement, brought them to his lips and tucked the mass into his cheek, somewhat in the manner of men who carried tobacco plugs that way. This, of course, was only done when Sam was on the job. He used his tongue as a means of removing the tacks as the work required.

Ben cannot recall his father experiencing any health problems in connection with the tacks in the mouth. He says Sam could talk with a mouthful of tacks.

From Sunday to Friday, Sam departed from his family's flat quite early and returned home at sunset. Fridays found him home at noon.

The liquor which Sam Nicholas consumed twice daily was obtained in a large, well-run, brightly-lit shop on West Houston Street, a commercial thorofare near the family tenement. Occasionally, Ben was taken along. The boy was fascinated by the huge barrels in which the whiskey was stored, along the shop's walls. Some of the casks bore labels of Rye, Bourbon, and Scotch, all guaranteed as to good taste. Ben learned that the guarantee was based on the liquor having been aged while used as ballast in sailing ships for a year or more. Bad taste and possible fusel oil were thus removed, ensuring a smooth taste.

Sam had another idiosyncrasy: butter. He would only accept that which was made by a "Holy" Jew with a long white beard who was very pious and churned the butter in his basement. The old fellow did a great business in the neighborhood, as his customers thought the butter was the best ever tasted. One day, the health authorities arrived for a little inspection and discovered that the 100% strictly kosher butter had such a splendid taste because the old man adulterated the mixture in the churn with lard.

The old man's *frummer* customers descended upon him en masse, enraged by the hideous fraud and the knowledge of having consumed *trefe*, and, worse luck, having *enjoyed it*.

Sam Nicholas never ate butter for the rest of his life.

Sam's best friend was a man named Tzaller. He was younger and better schooled in religion. Nearly every evening in good weather, Tzaller arrived for the purpose of escorting Sam on a walk through the neighborhood. During these hikes, the men conversed about subjects of mutual interest. Once, Sam and Tzaller paused for a moment on the steps of Clark House, a settlement house and a neighborhood landmark. The building's drunken custodian decided to eject Sam and his friend from the premises. Sam Nicholas lost his temper, took hold of the miscreant, and struck him several times.

News of the incident spread rapidly. Next morning, when Ben recited his version of what the parent had done, all the neighborhood kids saluted *Ben* as a hero.

As might be expected, in the Nicholas Family's poor circumstances, the parents argued frequently about money. The supply was never adequate for the demand. Sam dealt with the problem by dividing his cash into several small pocketbooks. Rachel was always dissatisfied with her portion and invariably sought more. To appease her, Sam would offer a purse containing a dollar. If Rachel demanded more and proceeded to dig in his pocket, Sam found yet another purse which contained a few coins. He seemed to hold money back, maybe for the purchase of upholstering supplies, maybe not. His artfulness fooled no one.

Rachel's affection for Sam was apparent to all, but he took little interest in the children. Ben was never close to his father and hated him at times. As a small child, Ben was left to sleep on the floor near the parents. Sometimes, in the darkness, Ben would hear his mother cry out: "Stop! You're hurting me!"

Such moments disturbed the child, and he remembered all his life into old age the unhappy witnessing of intimacy between the father and mother.

In the house, Sam had little to say except on religious matters. Away from the family, however, he was quite sociable with his cronies.

On rare occasions, Sam's capacity for sociability would assert itself in the presence of his children. Somewhere in Sam's memories of the old country were tales he had heard of a folk character whom Sam called *Uch Malech Abushim*. This individual, who was a Johnny Appleseed-type, was the hero of many stories, and when Sam was in the mood, he could delight his children endlessly. As Ben recalls now, however, these cherished moments were few, which, in retrospect, makes them all the more endearing.

THREE.

Ben was enrolled by his mother in a *cheder*, or private school, when he was approximately four years of age. It was in an unattractive tenement basement with an outside entrance. A high wall faced the entrance, and there the mischievous neighborhood youngsters scrawled graffitti and casual obscenities, among which F-U-C-K was a favorite.

The teacher of the cheder, a *Melamed*, was an unclean man with an unkempt, scrawny beard. He was constantly scratching himself in search of lice.

It might be asked how parents could be persuaded to install their youngsters in such an unattractive environment. A tradition existed that young Jewish boys had to be sent for early religious instruction. Pitifully poor families inhabited the teeming Lower East Side ghetto and could not afford better.

The room occupied by the school contained some long tables where the scholars were assigned seats. The instructor presided at a separate table. Some open space was provided so that children could play, after reciting to the Melamed's satisfaction.

Benches were positioned on each side of the instructor's table. Members of the class, from which girls were excluded, periodically occupied the benches. As one pupil finished reciting and went to play, another pupil moved up to the Melamed's scrutiny.

There was nothing subtle about the Melamed's technique. His job was to teach the children the Hebrew alphabet and how to read prayers. To achieve his objective, the man employed a wooden pointer, or *taitel*, as a teaching aid. If a scholar erred, the lad speedily received a painful jab in the hand. It was astonishing how rapidly

scholars gave their undivided attention to the lesson, to avoid experiencing the cruel hurt.

Even though a scholar obediently cooperated, and struggled to give his all, the truth is that concentration was simply impossible. Other boys, who had already completed their recitations and been excused to play, did so amid a continual uproar. Games of marbles were always in progress, with much exclaiming over who had won or lost. A few lads ran crap games. The dice rolled amid cries of joy or disappointment, as pennies or marbles changed hands, and occasional blows were meted out to those who were slow to pay up.

The Melamed's composure amid the cacophony was remarkable. Periodically, though, he lost his temper. Then he seized a wooden switch and lay about him wildly, beating offending youngsters as well as those who were innocent. Screams of pain and tears restored order.

Ben acquired neither religion nor a pious attitude in that place. Instead, he became a proficient crap shooter, acquired a remarkable store of profanity, and did his share of enthusiastic cussing.

Most of the cheder students had to wear a sarape-like garment called a *Laptzdeckel*. It had four corners with fringes comparable to a tallis or prayer shawl. During prayer it was considered proper for the supplicant to wind the fringes around his finger and piously kiss them.

Since the Laptzdeckel extended below a wearer's waist and sometimes to his knees, there were the inevitable incongruities where a lad who was quite short wore a garment that was too long. Occasionally, such a lad who rushed to the backhouse in the rear yard to relieve himself accomplished the mission carelessly, so that the garments frequently exuded a strong urine odor.

Ben disliked wearing a Laptzdeckel and rid himself of it quite early.

Surprisingly, Sam Nicholas never inquired about Ben's progress in the cheder. Ben appreciated being unchallenged on that point, and so long as he was left alone in that regard, he was content.

There were invariably collisions between parent and child on matters of discipline, and Ben's eyes gazed upon many examples of unsatisfactory behavior in the school. He knew what it was to be spanked for infractions, but the situation between Ben and Sam never deteriorated to the point of some homes.

Some youngsters were delinquents of the worst kind. A family once occupied a flat below the Nicholases, a father, mother, and two teen-aged boys. The boys had already been behind bars for delinquency; whether they were in a reformatory or jail is no longer re-

called. The mother and father were very religious and repressive, continuously berating the sons for real or perceived misbehavior.

Walls being not too well insulated in those days, the neighbors heard a great deal. The two sons were finally tormented beyond their limit and turned on the parents, beating the mother and father into a terrible state. The boys disappeared.

Ben recalls the incident as the only close encounter with crime in this period, and says for the most part matters never reached that point, although a good deal of unhappiness with poverty, overcrowding, and sometimes hunger had to be reckoned with.

Sam Nicholas had two brothers who came to America. One, for reasons now forgotten, committed suicide prior to Rachel's arrival with the four children. The other, Ben's Uncle Zaida, Sam's eldest brother, was blind. A widower with five children, Uncle Zaida's bitterness was unconcealed.

Zaida needed particular therapy and Ben was assigned as his seeing-eye guide. The sightless man walked with a cane and held Ben's arm. He spoke little, except to complain and bemoan his fate. The two relatives rode streetcars about Manhattan for the purpose of visiting two clinics. They usually paused about noon to visit a cousin of Sam and Zaida, a man named Henry (originally Hermann) Nechols, who ran a paint store on 39th Street. Zaida timed his arrival at Henry's shop to coincide with the clock striking 12 noon so that Henry would realize Zaida should have a spot of lunch.

Henry Nechols was a good-hearted man. He not only provided Zaida with meal money, but gave him a little extra pocket cash. Years later, when Ben was an adult, Henry Nechols would again play an important role.

Being a small boy and given over to daydreaming, or, as it is presently termed, fantasizing, Ben was proceeding down the sidewalk with Uncle Zaida and led the hapless fellow straight into a lamp post. Zaida sustained a lump on the head and the youngster received a series of blows from the uncle's cane. Following the incident, Ben resigned his employment.

Uncle Zaida's motherless children consisted of four boys and a girl. The oldest was Harry, who had responsibility over the others. He was a gentle, hard-working person. After Harry was Charley, then Max and Bennie. The girl was Annie.

Young Ben Nicholas once stayed overnight in the crowded little flat of Uncle Zaida. He had to sleep on the floor with the other children. He awoke in the middle of the night, thoroughly disoriented and frightened, his cheeks wet with tears. Harry had to dress and take Ben home.

Under the helpful direction of Henry Nechols, three of Zaida's sons became house painters.

Max later went to sea on a vessel of the Standard Oil Company. Aboard that ship, he received repeated beatings, for what reason is no longer known. The cruel treatment left Max a broken man. He gave up the sea and tried to resume work as a house painter. But Max was so shattered by his experience as a seaman that he was placed in a mental institution, where, in time, he died.

Bennie became a professional beggar.

Like many of the girls of the period who grew up amid extreme poverty and ignorance, where few avenues to respectable lives were open, Annie drifted into prostitution. As time went on, she was shipped to South America along with other similar women, where she died in Argentina.

This deeply-tragic chapter of the Nicholases' ghetto life was yet another part of the family's adjustment to American life.

Harry eventually married Rose Schuppler. For 10 years, she conceived no child. Someone prophesied that if Rose would undertake a journey to the land of her birth and return to America, she would become pregnant. Rose duly undertook the long, costly excursion, and about a year after her arrival in New York, she gave birth to a son. Subsequently, she had five more children.

Another event of Ben's childhood, when he was about 8, was a first-time excursion to Coney Island. Preparation for the journey generated much excitement. Rachel woke early, fixed sandwiches, and cajoled the children to get dressed. That group consisted of Rachel, Molly, Annie, Max, and Ben. Their food was packed in a basket and their travel out to the end of Brooklyn was by steam train. Subways and elevated trains were in the future.

That first glimpse of Coney Island, with the surf, the great beaches and throngs of bathers, was memorable for the small Nicholases as well as their mother.

Children's games in Ben's boyhood were interesting. Youngsters were much occupied with Tag, and something called Prisoner's Base. In the latter game, the object was for a player to grab hold of a member of the team on an opposite side of the street and physically drag the resisting opponent from his side of the street to yours.

The fun and effort of the contest was much enjoyed by the participants, but torn shirts and trousers usually resulted, to the anger and disgust of many mothers.

The most important game was called *Pussy Cat*, in some respects similar to baseball. A five- to six-inch peg was cut from a broomstick, while a *bat* of 12 to 18 inches from the same broomstick was used to tip the peg and hit it. The result was a projectile traveling sometimes a

tremendous speed. Not far from where Ben lived, a large factory, R. H. Hoe & Co., was situated. The workers played the game during noon break. Once, while Ben was watching, the peg landed on the bridge of his nose, causing swelling and some little displacement of the bones. In time to come, one of Ben's sisters would marry a young man who had lost an eye during such a game.

Follow the Leader was quite popular. The group's leader was Gimpty, a boy with one leg shorter than the other. He said the limb had shrunk as a result of catching cold while walking in the gutter on rainy days . . . polio. People knew little of that illness then. Even with his disability, Gimpty was fearless. He led the children up to rooftops and leapt from one building to another, often crossing spaces of six to eight feet, yelling *Follow the Leader!* Surprisingly, no one was ever hurt.

Once a game of *Follow the Leader!* was in progress while Ben slept on a rooftop. Some mischievous girls undid his pants and pulled his penis, hollering *Follow the Leader!*. The boy was terribly frightened. His sisters Molly and Annie were in that group.

Cigarette smoking among the children was common, as they picked up butts. Ben did it for a few days and became deathly ill, which cured him forever of the unholy fascination which youngsters have for such adventure. However, he used tobacco in other forms as an adult.

On a given block, with 50 or so tenement buildings, and 20 families per building, each family averaging five children, as many as a thousand youngsters resided on the block. Gangs were usual and the blocks were divided. Rocks, stones, and even bricks were hoarded for the periodic fights. Some of the gang members were so motivated that a few climbed to tenement rooftops and pried "good" bricks loose from chimneys for battle. Individuals frequently protected themselves in the style of ancient gladiators, using metal garbage can lids as shields.

Rock- and stone-throwing brawls were short-lived, as the police arrived quickly and the combatants sensibly disappeared.

In view of the physical exertions and even the poverty which dogged so many families of Ben's acquaintance, it is perhaps to be seen as sensible that the children's clothes were in less-than-first-class condition. Ben and his small brothers wore mostly second-hand clothes which Rachel purchased from peddlers or a nearby shop. The children's underwear was of the old-fashioned "long" variety, lightweight in hot weather, heavyweight in cold, and outer garments included shirts, short pants, and long black stockings. A pair of tan rawhide leather shoes attracted Ben's attention in this period, but the

family lacked the means to buy them. Ben had to content himself by admiring a similar pair belonging to a friend.

Crap shooting was common among the youngsters, the prizes being marbles, agates, baseball players' picture cards, and the odd coin or two.

The capacity for mischief was beyond belief. Seltzer water in the traditional soda-syphon bottle was a favorite family beverage. Since refrigeration was virtually unknown, bottles of seltzer water were cooled by placing them outdoors on the fire escape. Periodically, the children would sneak up the fire escapes and steal the bottles of seltzer. The prizes would be taken to a place of concealment and smashed. The leaden syphon handles would then be crushed and sold to a junk dealer.

A wonderfully good-natured Irish cop walked the neighborhood beat. The children were particularly fond of him, often grabbing his legs and hanging on, or taking his hand and tugging, as if urging him to play. If the cop saw any misbehavior for which someone was responsible, the fellow ordered the miscreant to stop. If the culprit attempted to run, the police officer was capable of throwing his nightstick along the ground so expertly that it landed between the guilty person's feet, causing him to trip. The policeman rarely missed, regardless of the distance.

Since Ben was the eldest of the American-born Nicholas offspring, he was responsible for the younger Max and Al. Of the two, Max was more gentle, while Al loved a challenge. The younger ones were inseparable. If Max was in a fight with someone and going down for the count, Ben sent Al. The assailant of Max would soon be running away.

Al was quite strong and had a terrific punch. He loved to perform pinwheels on bars, gyrating rapidly for an extended period until dizziness intervened. Ben told him that too much of that exercise would scramble his brains, but Al was stubborn.

There was a day when Rachel wanted Ben to run some errands. She couldn't find her purse and fell into a panic. "Where is my *bartele?*" (purse), she mused aloud, searching the apartment. She possessed but a small amount of spending money, but the thought of loss distracted her greatly.

Youngsters in the house helped Rachel check all the likely places, but found nothing. Ben went looking for his small brother and found Al behind the hall stairs. The child had his shirt open and Rachel's purse, also open. Al had taken a little change and bought some candy for himself and pals. Now they were crouched out of sight, their mouths full of sweet viands, their eyes glazed from gluttony.

Al was soon led to his mother and was soundly spanked. As time went on, he attended public school and got through a few grades.

Then Al quit school and got a job in a drug store. The owner taught the boy how to mix Citrate of Magnesia and entrusted him, too, with shop errands. Al never returned to school, but ever after was continually employed.

There was a time when Max's and Al's mutual affection was torn by some competitive circumstance. The two boys fell into such a quarrel that it could not be resolved in the apartment. They went out to fight in the street. Soon they returned indoors, their arms around one another. "We can't fight because we're brothers," the two boys said.

Max once broke his leg while attempting to climb a fence. The doctor set the limb and put a plaster cast on. Max learned to hobble around as carefree as ever.

Among themselves, regardless of the surroundings, the Nicholas children spoke Yiddish. When strangers were present, the conversation was in English. In the beginning, their English was peppered liberally with typical street argot, plenty of *dese* and *dems*, as well as casual profanity. A few terms in public school ameliorated matters.

Every month or so, a barber came to the family apartment and administered haircuts to Ben and his two younger brothers. The price was six cents. The barber placed a boy in a wooden chair, covered him with soiled yard goods, laid sheets of newspaper on the floor, and proceeded to shear away all hair with a hand clippers. A small bit of hair was allowed in front, for bangs. At the finish, the barber anointed the youngster with some evil-smelling liquid, maybe witch hazel, and concluded by saying "Nadja Cologn."

Summer nights in New York were oppressive and the small airless tenement rooms drove the family to seek relief on the fire escape. This, however, was not without problems. Many children, including the Nicholas offspring, voided their bladders during sleep. Danger of such unpleasantness existed from those sleeping on the fire escape above the Nicholases as well as those slumbering below. Many a hot night, the outraged yells and screams from the fire escape told the entire neighborhood what had occurred.

During rainstorms, people sleeping on the fire escapes sought to dodge a soaking by plunging back into the flat, dragging the bedding behind. It was sometimes a wild competition to see who could scramble indoors first.

One neighbor was a man named Schwartz. He was a stove repairman and seemed always covered with stove blacking and soot. He had a little girl named Bessie. She was about Ben's age and his playmate. Whenever the father saw Ben and Bessie playing in the tenement hallway, he'd tease the children with "Bessie loves Bennie! Bessie loves Bennie!" The children would scamper off, embarrassed.

The neighborhood included a livery stable with a blacksmith shop adjoining. The smith was a tall, powerful man with brawny arms and a long black beard. The small boys knew the smithy well and frequently asked for the few horseshoe nails scattered on the wooden floor. The blacksmith allowed the children to retrieve the nails, after which they ran home excitedly, intent on hammering the prizes into rings.

Few automobiles were to be seen in the early 1900s, and on the Lower East Side, almost never. Whenever the boys saw a car putt-putting down the street, they ran after it, assailing the driver and passengers with catcalls of "Get a horse!"

Ben Nicholas was 10 years of age during the presidential campaign of 1904. Teddy Roosevelt, the Republican candidate, ran against Judge Alton B. Parker, a Democrat. The boys distributed flyers around the neighborhood for the Republicans and sang campaign ditties lambasting the Democrats. Roosevelt won easily. The night of the victory, a torch parade was organized and many marchers carried brooms, signifying a clean sweep. There were many street bonfires as well.

Halloween was also fun. The boys turned their coats inside out, filled long stockings with ashes or flour, and marched around exchanging blows with every likely combatant. After nightfall, fences were torn down and outhouses overturned. But the mischief was not confined to the youngsters. Many men, after having downed a few drinks, dragged heavy wooden freight wagons into the street and set them afire.

Perhaps the privations of life in those days had something to do with the Nicholas Family experiencing but few demonstrations of affection. One Christmas Eve, however, Ben's big sister, Sadie, goodheartedly filled a stocking with candy for him and pinned the thing on the mantlepiece. Awake the next morning, he thought that Santa Claus had brought it.

This response may not be surprising, given the amount of emphasis in public schools and the community upon Christmas, holiday giving, and the like. Ben found it difficult as a Jewish child to deal with the question of Christmas. At school, great emphasis was placed upon the singing of Christmas carols. Moreover, when a song was sung about "the night before Christmas," and a phrase recited "And St. Nicholas was there," the boy attempted to hide under the desk as the children almost on cue turned and pointed in his direction.

Despite the negative impact of Christmas upon Ben's feelings, when word reached him that a nearby church was having a children's party, a friend and Ben decided to go. A kindly man welcomed them and devoted particular attention to Ben, perhaps realizing that he

was a Jewish child. He gave Ben and the friend a good deal of candy and spoke of Christ, who loved children. Ben and his pal became frightened and edged for the door. Maybe the man noted Ben's discomfort and asked him to promise to return soon. Ben nodded and escaped, trembling.

When he reported the experience to his mother, Rachel became very angry and made him vow to never visit the church again.

Ben recalls that many donations then given by Jews went to the Jewish National Fund to buy land in Jerusalem or nearby, whereas many donations given by Christians went to an established church. The particular place where Ben obtained his candy and the word that Christ loved little children was an institution, he reports, aimed at the conversion of Jews. The minister was, in fact, a former rabbi. Maybe that is how he knew Ben.

Around this time, Ben was acquainted with a girl from a very poor Jewish family. There was no father, and three small children required much care. At some later time, the girl came to visit the Nicholases. She wore new clothes, and her face was wreathed in smiles. Her mother had converted to Christianity, the girl reported, and the church was providing for them, paying rent, buying food and new clothes.

During this era, young Ben was a victim of a minor crime. Sam Nicholas had a rule that he would carry nothing on the Sabbath. It fell to Ben to carry the *tallis* and prayer books in a bag, to and from religious services. The boy was walking home, as usual, lost in a day dream. He was accompanied by little Max and Al. A well-dressed man stopped Ben and said he would give the boy a penny if he would hasten to the top floor of a tenement and call the man's girlfriend to come downstairs. Ben was delighted at the prospect of earning a coin so easily, and accepted. The man said Ben should leave the bag containing Sam's tallis and prayer books, that it would be easier for Ben to race up the stairs without the weight of the bag and so forth. Never thinking that the man's intentions were dishonorable, Ben assented to the plan, gave in to the man's care Sam's precious possessions, then rushed up the stairs of the indicated tenement, seeking the girlfriend.

On the top floor, Ben found to his consternation that no such girlfriend was a resident. Puzzled, he returned to the street level to report the sad news. The well-dressed man and Sam's prized possessions were gone. Max and Al hadn't realized what was transpiring and could do nothing. It never occurred to any of the three children that anyone would wish to misappropriate articles of religious faith.

Reaching home, Ben had to report the shameful news, for which he received a tremendous spanking.

FOUR.

The harshness of poverty notwithstanding, one aspect of ghetto life was gratifying: entertainment. Popular as well as Yiddish songs were learned by rote from song pluggers. Such a person was a young man who came into the neighborhood with a wooden box as his platform. Finding a likely spot, the song plugger set himself up and started to sing the melody of the song he had to sell. People gathered, quickly followed the words, and sang with him. The song plugger sold for a few pennies printed sheets which merely contained the lyrics.

This process was part of the beginning of popular music in America, and much of it had antecedents in the poor Jews and Italians who brought with them performing and compositional skills.

Periodically, some unemployed opera singer traversed the tenement back yards and sang his heart out for the pennies which were thrown down from windows and porches. Once in a while, the organ grinders arrived. Some brought trained monkeys, while others had parrots. Sometimes, a man came along with a Hurdy Gurdy which played popular tunes to which the children sang and danced.

The organ, instrument of the grinder, was a large music box mounted on a pole about two and a half feet tall. A strap attached the instrument to the operator's shoulder. Frequently, the man also carried a modest-sized box which contained printed slips of paper. The printed texts on the paper were the fortunes of people. The operator had a colorful parrot, attached to a long chain. If a patron paid the parrot a penny, the parrot would approach the open box, remove a printed fortune, and deliver it to the customer. While this entertaining trick was in progress, the organ grinder continued to operate the

music box, so that the tune floating through the area would attract more customers.

Other organ grinders arrived with trained monkeys rather than parrots. Sometimes the little animal was clad in a red uniform and wore a tiny red cap. The creature would climb up a patron's limb and perch on his shoulder or nip up a fire escape with dazzling speed to obtain a coin.

Around 1905, an entrepreneur opened a nickelodeon nearby in what had been a large store. Each patron paid five cents to sit in a chair and watch moving photographs on a white sheet or screen. The makeshift theater was regularly filled with enthralled customers.

The melodramas enacted by stock companies of actors drew regular audiences, too. Most famous during Ben's boyhood was Corse Payton's Company, on 14th Street not far from Union Square. The theater was a short streetcar ride from where the Nicholases lived. Admission to a performance was available for 10, 20, or 30 cents. The choicest seats were the most expensive. The programs in such places were changed weekly.

Invariably, the productions generated audience response, in which the customers cheered the hero and hissed the villain. The actors were wonderfully adept, and embellished their performances with all sorts of dramatic business that audiences loved.

Miner's burlesque theatre was on the Bowery. Once, Ben's older brother took him there. They sat in the gallery. The elder brother, at 16 or so, fancied himself something of a fashion plate. He wore pegged pants which were tight at the ankles but tailored to achieve a balloon effect about the hips. A bit self-conscious about the fine trousers, the "adult" brother tugged and adjusted the trousers so the full effect could be admired.

Along with the theatres down on the East Side, the food shops were much patronized. Bakeries offered loaves and thick bread slices, a great variety of rolls, pumpernickel bread, and dark, well-baked rye, all of these goods exuding intriguing, mouth-watering aromas. Delicatessen shops, which many persons called "wurst stores" because of the varieties of sausage available, sold pickled and corn beef, salami, bologna, and pastrami. If a customer preferred to sit in the deli and eat rather than take food home, the sandwiches available were excellent. A great favorite of that time was termed a club sandwich. It consisted of half a long rye loaf, sliced lengthwise, piled with the customer's choice of meat, mustard, and half a dill pickle, all for 15 cents. The hungry boy who downed one of those concoctions was satisfied.

Also brought to mind is the story a comedian used to tell in a delicious dialect about his shrewd but marvelous immigrant, Mr. Lapidus. Mr. Lapidus, so the story goes, was a steady patron of a

restaurant not unlike those Ben Nicholas knew in his boyhood. The owner of the eatery appreciated Mr. Lapidus' faithful patronage. He noticed that the standard serving of two slices of bread which accompanied the dinner usually vanished quickly. In an effort to keep Mr. Lapidus satisfied, the owner saw to it that Mr. Lapidus was given three slices of bread as a special consideration, and when that amount disappeared, four slices. At the cash register, when Mr. Lapidus paid his dinner bill of 15 cents, the owner was pleased to note that upon inquiry as to the meal's merits, with the increasing number of bread slices being given, Mr. Lapidus' usual preoccupied countenance had become benign.

The owner, however, was dissatisfied. He wanted his star customer to exclaim with joy about the food. He instructed the waiter that when Mr. Lapidus came for his evening meal next time, the waiter was not to give the man any slices of bread. Instead, the waiter was to take an entire *loaf* of rye, cut it lengthwise, and put that on the table with the gentleman's food.

At meal's end, when not a speck of food remained on any of the plates, Mr. Lapidus rose, donned his coat, and went to the cash register to pay his bill.

The owner smiled. "Did you enjoy your meal tonight, Mr. Lapidus?"

The customer deposited the requisite number of coins on the glass-topped counter and helped himself to a toothpick. "It vas very nice, t'ank you. But how come you vent back to two pieces bread?"

Pickles were packed in a large wooden barrel containing brine. If a larger pickle was wanted, the customer inserted his arm into the liquid and searched for a suitable one.

Herrings were packed crosswise in a wooden barrel, occupying the entire surface.

For wrapping purposes, newspaper was used, rather than brown wrapping paper. Since many were ignorant about toxic chemicals, no one was apparently concerned that the ink of the newsprint might be liquified through contact with wet fish or meat and eventually ingested by some hapless diner. The grocer or butcher placed the meat or fish on the newspaper, rested it on the scale, and when that aspect was completed, wrapped the goods in yet more newspaper to seal in the odor. A steady customer of a particular butcher could ask for free soup bones, a bit of liver for the cat, and some miltz, the innards of an animal or a fish.

Candy stores were everywhere, with an open window facing the sidewalk to enable cash sales of newspapers, magazines, and soft drinks. A customer could purchase a glass of ordinary seltzer water, a

two cents plain; an additional expenditure of two pennies brought the customer some fruit juice or syrup with the seltzer.

Inside the store, more newspapers and publications were on sale. Glass cases held numerous shelves stocked with trays of candies ranging in price from two for a penny, to a nickel.

One candy store proprietor was an idealistic young man named Samuel Ornitz. He was scholarly and was occasionally occupied with writing, though he was usually seated in a chair with a book. Most of the shopwork was undertaken by Mrs. Ornitz. Later, he wrote a book, *Haunch, Paunch, and Jowl.* Something of a sensation, the book written by Mr. Ornitz helped to expose corrupt members of the judiciary.

As a small boy, Ben chatted with Mr. Ornitz a few times. He discoursed most interestingly about people's problems and the needs of the poor. Years later, he became a screenwriter in motion pictures and in his final period was hounded from his employment by the witch hunts of the McCarthy Era, a disgraceful time in American history which gave rise to such persons as Joe McCarthy, Richard Nixon, and others.

Saloons were numerous and competition was fierce. One beer ad featured a huge picture of a schooner of beer beside which a stepladder was positioned. A man clad as a diver stood on the ladder, poised to jump into the beer, the idea being that the schooner was so large, for a mere five cents.

If one patronized a saloon and spent a nickel for a glass of beer, the person was entitled to visit the free lunch counter; sometimes, a plate of goulash or stew was available as well.

Kosher restaurants offered a 15-cent meal which included everything from soup to dessert and hot tea.

Gas light illuminated city streets at night. Each pole with its fixture required the attention of an individual who carried a long pole or stick. It was equipped with a lighted wick as well as a hook to unlatch the gas valve. The gas man was required to make two trips—one at nightfall to turn on the gas light and a second around daybreak, to switch it off. After electricity was used widely, the gas lighting man had to find other work.

Transport consisted of horse-drawn streetcars, carriages, and wagons. Periodically, small boys hitched free rides on the Delancey Street line, and the conductors were continually involved in combat with the unpaying passengers. It was not unusual for a kid to fall from a moving car, not too serious since the cars rolled rather slowly. If some youngster like Ben descended from a car during a rainstorm, for example, he dropped into a mud puddle, while the conductor applauded.

People also walked great distances to save carfare.

After the electrically-powered streetcar arrived, with the metal wand extending upward from the roof to the overhead wire, pranksters periodically disengaged the wand from the power, causing the streetcar to stop. The conductor then required assistance to get the wand reconnected.

Ben's elder brother Yonah contracted pneumonia, then a most dreaded illness. He was put to bed in the parlor and treated with *bankis*, small glass vacuum cups which were heated. These objects were then placed on his back and chest to draw blood from the affected area. It was an old remedy which had worked for others, but the sick boy failed to respond. Few people recovered from pneumonia in those days and the situation was very bad.

On a particular Saturday night, a distressed Rachel took Ben along on a visit to see the Roove or Great Rabbi, to pray with that gentleman for divine assistance.

While Rachel was indoors with the religious man, Ben waited outside.

As it happened, the small boy had fashioned a fob out of laces and placed a dice cube in the center, tying it to his trousers waist. He was quite proud of the object. A group of boys, maybe four or five in number, approached. They demanded that Ben surrender the fob. He resisted, holding tightly to the thing with his right hand and striking out with his left. One of Ben's assailants had a knife. He attempted to slash the fob from Ben's garment. With all the fighting and squirming, instead of the knife reaching the intended goal, it made a deep gash in Ben's forefinger. The sight of the blood spurting frightened the miscreants away. The scar remained ever after.

Ben staunched the blood by applying a bit of rag he carried in a pocket. He succeeded in concealing the matter from Rachel. She subsequently emerged from the *shul* where she'd been praying for her sick son's life with the rabbi.

There was a smile on her face as she rejoined Ben, so different from the sad expression when she had gone in. In Yiddish, Rachel said: "Don't worry. Your brother will be all right."

Ben was overjoyed to hear the news and asked how the change in his brother's condition had been brought about. The rabbi had told Rachel the sickness could be driven away by changing the sick boy's name, and when the old name vanished from his life, the sickness would, too. The new name would bring a new life. "No more Yonah," Rachel said firmly. "From now on, he's Charley."

Returning home, they met the doctor. He reported that Charley had successfully gotten through the crisis.

Ben's childhood ailments included a carbuncle behind his left ear. The family knew it as a *maka*. It was quite painful. No home treat-

ment seemed to help. Rachel took the lad to Gouverneur Hospital. Without anesthetic, the doctor employed medical shears and cut both sides of the growth. Then he saturated some gauze with carbolic acid and cleaned the wound. Ben still carries two small scars.

Another scar resulted from a visit to the free municipal baths. Ben frequently took his small brothers there to bathe. While soaping the youngsters once, he slipped on the wet floor and landed on a broken milk bottle which some careless person had abandoned. A deep wound was sustained on his right elbow. The boy found a rag to bandage the wound and never told his mother.

In summer, the neighborhood children went to the East River and swam in a bath boat moored there by the city. Some days were reserved for boys, others for girls. Small children swam in the nude. The boat contained a floor made of wooden slats, three feet deep. The slats permitted water to flow through and allow bathing—a workable idea. But the East River then, as now, was the repository of considerable garbage and filth. Even so, the place was always crowded and kids cavorted happily amid the dirt and occasional feces and garbage. Children who soaked there and survived can only be described as miraculously fortunate in having escaped infantile paralysis and other horrors.

There were more nightmares. One year, an eye epidemic required that all the school children be treated at Gouverneur Hospital with an application of copper sulphate, put on with a swab. The medicine certainly halted the eye ailment which was rampant, but the side effects were awful. One of Ben's eyes was scratched and his sister Molly was blind for three days. They recovered.

Gertie was the last-born of Sam and Rachel. A cradle was rigged to accommodate the small baby, and some small flags were hung around it to keep the evil eye away. Despite this precaution, the infant endured many trials. Gertie contracted St. Vitus Dance, but was finally cured. A large stomach tumor was found, which had to be removed surgically. Later, she came down with the mumps. By then, the family lived in the Bronx, on East 152nd Street. The Lebanon Hospital was across the street.

Sam came home one day and learned that Gertie had been taken to the hospital. Distraught, he rushed across the street and was hit by a streetcar, which put him in the Lincoln General Hospital some distance away. Sam suffered a concussion from which he never fully recovered. With him in one hospital and Gertie in another, the family never knew which person to visit first.

ILLUSTRATIONS

The Nicholas Family photographs appearing in this portion of the book were prepared by the Holcomb Photo Studio, Galesburg, Illinois.

1. 1904—The family of Sam and Rachel Nicholas. Left to right, back row, standing: Molly, Charley, Sadie, Annie. Left to right, front row, standing: Ben at age 10, Gertie, Al. Left to right, front row, seated: Rachel, Sam, Max.

2. 1906—The basketball trio at Clark House. Left to right, back row, kneeling: Izzy Waldman, Ben Nicholas at age 12. Front row, seated, with ball: Mike Hertzoff.

3. 1912—Three pals. Left to right, back row: Ben Nicholas at age 18, Irving Nechols. Front row, seated: Jesse Measer.

4. Henry Nechols, the father of Rose, the father-in-law of Ben Nicholas.

5. Pauline (Peppie) Nechols, the mother of Rose, the mother-in-law of Ben Nicholas.

6. Washine sales meeting, February 18, 1925. Around table, first man, front left, unknown; Ben Kapp; Cesar Calder; Leon Schwartzberg; Zeke Escott; next man unknown; at far right, Ben Nicholas at age 31; in front of Ben is Mr. Blauth.

7. Frederick M. Nicholas at age 26. This photo was made in September, 1946, on the SC campus. The photographer was Sidney Vogel and picture was taken in front of the Student Union building on the University Avenue side, opposite the TEP corner. Fred was then finishing a bachelor's degree in Journalism which had been interrupted by some years of military service. The picture, which was snapped at the request of Martin Litvin, who wanted it as a remembrance of Fred, was lost for 35 years. It was rediscovered by the author in 1981.

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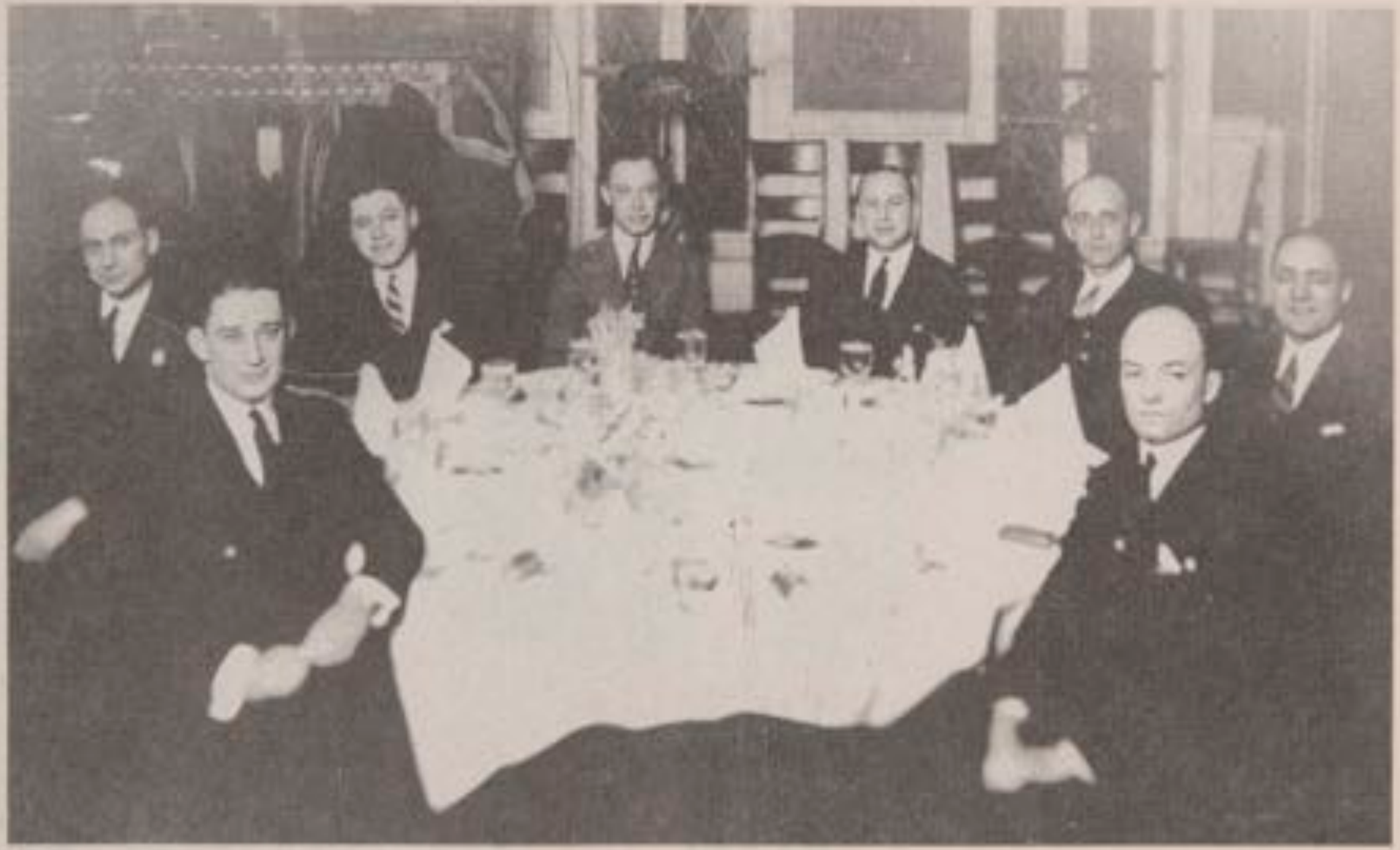

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FIVE.

A neighborhood newsboy went on vacation and arranged for Ben to take over the news route temporarily. The lad sold Jewish newspapers, three competitive ones, by going through the neighborhood restaurants and delicatessens. He called aloud the newspapers' names and offered them at a penny each. If he sold his quota of papers and turned in the requisite cash, he was then paid a few pennies for his efforts. Ben did well for a few weeks of his substitute tenure.

When Ben attained the age of 6, he was supposed to enroll in first grade. Rachel, however, refused to enroll him, claiming that he wasn't strong enough. He was thus kept out for an entire year and never made up the lost time.

P.S. 77 was on Sheriff Street, near the Nicholas tenement. The school children were taught the alphabet by singing ABCDEFG—HIJK, LMNOP . . . LMNOPQRST—UVWXYZ, XYZ, Oh dear me, How can I learn my ABC?

Classes consisted of boys and girls in separate rooms. The regimen of separateness extended even to fire drills, with girls being sent to the left side of the street, when the school was emptied, and boys to the right. Needless to say, in the assembly hall boys kept glancing across the aisle to the girls, and they reciprocated the attention.

Another recreation was reading, and Ben was much attracted to stories of great athletes like Frank Merriwell in baseball, or Nick Carter, the great detective, *Aesop's Fables*, and most particularly, Horatio Alger. To read at night, Ben often lit a candle beside his pillow on the floor where he slept.

Until the fourth grade, Ben's standing as a pupil was average. At that point, he encountered a new teacher, Elias Lieberman. Lieber-

man, Russian-born and destined to prominence as a poet and a New York City educator, was a gentle fellow. He seemed to give Ben needed encouragement and confidence. Lieberman's technique was illustrated in the teaching of grammar. He made a game of learning prepositions, the youngsters reciting them musically: abroad, about, above, across, along, amid, or amidst, among and amongst, around, at, before, behind, below and beneath, etc.

The park adjoining the school had athletic fields, where track meets were held. Ben competed, but never finished better than second. A band shell was situated there, too. When the band or orchestra gave no evening performances, all the stagestruck actors, tap and clog dancers, as well as comedians in the area tried out. A small few survived the long struggle to professional recognition and got into the Bigtime. One girl was Ben's favorite. She had dark hair, dark and expressive eyes, and a prominent nose—Frances Borach. Her mother ran a saloon on Forsythe Street, not far away. Most of the kids knew the girl as Fannie.

She had a fund of stories that moved the neighborhood children from laughter to tears. She would clutch a shawl about her head and tell a sad story . . . How Mrs. Cohen lost her little girl, Sadie, at Coney Island (the gypsies kidnapped Sadie and carried her far, far away, to . . . New Jersey, which in those days was pretty far), or she told a story about a bad man who owned a saloon and ignored his hard-working wife, while he had a good time with a tough blonde shikse named Lulu who sang *Put Your Arms Around Me, Honey, Hold Me Tight* . . .

The way the girl highlighted her monologues, with dramatic vocal inflections, opening her eyes wide, sighing, modulating her voice, achieving quick tears, reducing the neighbor children to sobs as well . . . was only a hint of things to come. Around the age of 13, she clicked as a singer during amateur night at Keeney's Theatre in Brooklyn. Fanny Brice's career had begun.

School let out in mid-afternoon, and by the time Ben reached his tenement's stoop, his chums were already assembled on the sidewalk, waiting. Invariably, he'd be hungry. To his mother up on the third floor, Ben'd yell: "I'm hungry! Throw me down some bread!"

Rachel would select a thick slice of rye bread, perhaps the heel of a loaf, rub garlic on it, wrap the bread in some newspaper, and toss the parcel down from the window to Ben. He would deftly catch the snack and devour it.

When school vacation arrived near the end of June, Ben's shoes and school garments were discarded in favor of overalls. He went barefoot until autumn.

After the older children attained an age where they were employable, the family's financial standing rose somewhat. Sadie quit school when she was about 12, going to a sewing machine in a textile factory.

Molly found work in the garment industry making sample cards. Her job was to paste small bits of colored cloth on cards. Annie became a sewing machine operator in shirtwaists. Their salaries helped support the family and enabled the Nicholases to move to a flat with a cold water sink and faucet in the kitchen and a communal toilet in the hall.

Charley was around 12 or 13 when he began delivering telegrams for ADT . . . American District Telegraph. He wore a distinctive messenger's hat, with ADT stamped above the front. The headgear was the ADT essential uniform.

Charley's idiosyncrasies were various; among them was his fondness for ketchup. He put it on breakfast eggs and bread, in soups and other things, except cake.

As the male offspring of a new citizen, Sam Nicholas, Charley was not obliged to take out personal citizenship papers. At age 21, to vote for the first time, Charley carried to the registration desk Sam Nicholas' citizenship papers, for the sake of identification. Thereafter, Charley's name was always recorded as registered.

He had many friends, among them Harry Shirer, a young cop. The two friends fell into a bitter quarrel and decided to fight on a Sunday in front of R. H. Hoe & Company, a large factory where printing presses were made. The place was situated on a somewhat deserted street, being closed on Sunday.

A large crowd gathered and a spacious ring was formed. Many people posted cash bets on the outcome.

Little Ben ran around seeking a vantage point from which to view the bout. He crawled on the pavement and peered through people's legs, fearful that Charley would sustain a serious injury, because the fight was with bare fists.

The contest began, with the two opponents striking one another with mighty blows. As the action proceeded, the crowd's absorption in the battle deepened, the people sighing or groaning over every hit, every miss. Time was not called. Neither fighter yielded.

The combat ended only after Charley and Harry became so exhausted, they could not continue. They stoutly vowed to resume the fight at a later date. As time wore on, however, sensibly they made up and became good friends again.

After the fight, Ben escorted Charley home, proud and full of praise for Charley's ability and stamina.

Charley was worn out, dirty, sweaty, wanting to bathe and apply salve to his hurts.

On the same street where the fight occurred, at another time, a great event was the funeral procession for a most venerable rabbi. It

was the largest such procession on the East Side till that time. Thousands of grieving Jews marched behind the horse-drawn hearse.

Perhaps half-way through the march, some bullies on the top floor of R. H. Hoe & Company poured quantities of boiling water on the mourners, causing pandemonium. Many innocent people had to be hospitalized.

The pace of life in New York City was forever altered when the subway was completed from the Battery to the Upper West Side and opened in 1904.

An important discovery was made by a Frenchman who worked on the project. His name was Berday and he developed a system to estimate the time required to excavate one cubic foot of earth by one man. Many people believe that the New York subway's construction signified the arrival of the efficiency expert's day and the discipline of time and motion study. It enabled the construction industry and others to estimate with fair accuracy many crucial costs. However, Frederick Winslow Taylor is credited with his efforts at the Midvale Steel Company in the 1880s, with being an early-day efficiency expert.

SIX.

During Ben Nicholas' boyhood, New York City and environs moved into a new era. Electricity, with other industrial benefits, helped masses of people to attain a more comfortable mode of existence. Inter-city travel for New Yorkers changed, too. For many years, ferry boats had transported passengers from Manhattan to rural areas across the bay or wide rivers. The construction of the Brooklyn Bridge in the late 19th century, however, pointed the way to speedier travel, which meant access to new employment.

The portion of New York City where the Nicholases resided was on the southeast exposure of Manhattan Island, next to the East River. On the opposite shore was a portion of Brooklyn, known as Williamsburgh. Dating back to the earliest time when it had been a charming rural settlement on the bluffs overlooking the river, the area faced Manhattan. By the time Ben was a school boy, Williamsburgh had been over-run, nearly stifled with congested streets lined with tenements, stores, churches, and schools. Persons traveling to Williamsburgh had to proceed by ferry, a slow business. Once the Brooklyn Bridge was accomplished and the community recognized the possibilities, a bridge from Manhattan to Williamsburgh became feasible.

The construction of the Williamsburgh Bridge, with a center span of approximately 1,600 feet, five feet longer than the Brooklyn Bridge, was a long, costly process. Near the tenement where Rachel and Sam lived with their several offspring, the bridge's Manhattan terminus was Delancey Street. To accommodate the massive, extensive foundations and provide suitable egress for the flow of traffic from the bridge onto the city's main avenues, and enable a subway connection,

a neighborhood clearance project was undertaken on an enormous scale.

The district's alteration caused by the almost stupefying scale of construction drove literally millions of rats out of nesting places in search of new homes. Every tenement then housed families who depended upon coal for obvious reasons. Each basement contained several bins, a bin being assigned to a specific tenant. Members of the Nicholas clan were fearful of venturing into their basement because of the rats. Except Molly. She was fearless and marched down to the nether regions with a bucket, coal shovel, and baseball bat. The minute she saw anything move, the bat started swinging. The rodents scurried away and Molly filled the coal bucket in peace.

Bearing in mind that the bridge project was accomplished in an era of horse-drawn freight wagons, when crews of laborers numbering into the thousands were utilized in various aspects of the project, the bridge's construction was an on-going spectacle for a lengthy period. Houses and commercial structures were knocked down for a considerable distance westward along Delancey Street. Streets were widened and power lines re-strung, to mention but a few of the salient changes.

Like many of the small boys of the area, Ben Nicholas was intrigued by the gigantic bridge and observed the progress daily. A short while before the bridge was opened, Ben and one of his street pals found a way to walk across the entire span to the Brooklyn side. They saw a neighborhood which closely resembled the one in which the boys resided in Manhattan. Finished with their sightseeing, the two small boys hurried back home, enjoying, no doubt, the spectacular view of the East River and the boat traffic passing beneath the great span.

Ben's journey with his pal to see what lay on the far side of the new bridge may be considered as a desire to experience the unknown, to discover Groggan's Bluff.

Just as he was open to adventure in finding new places and things, he was equally open to friendships beyond his immediate circle. One such pal of Ben's was a small Hungarian boy whose family were of the Catholic faith. Rachel, Sam, and the Hungarian's parents accepted the somewhat incongruous association, although it was unusual that Christian Hungarians lived among Jews and were separated from their own ethnic group in a time when ethnic demarcations were fairly strict.

This early experience of Ben Nicholas with a friend of another ethnic, religious group was repeated for others without number. The author, Israel Zangwill, would eventually publish a book titled *The Melting Pot* in which he suggested that the big city community was a

bubbling cauldron in which members of various cultures would fuse into a new group and become "American." Years later, two researchers were responsible for a new book in which the scene of the bubbling cauldron was re-examined in the light of more recent developments. Each group's progress out of the old Lower East Side to the suburbs was reviewed. It was found that frequently Jews moved to locations inhabited by other Jews, Italians to so-called Italian areas, and Polish, Irish, and others behaved in the same way, as they were all more secure among their own.

This contrasts with Zangwill's social homogeneity view, but it may be said in his defense that during the period when he was living and anticipating the future, his dream of what the future might hold for the many was perhaps influenced to some extent by what he had made of his own life. There are situations which might be interpreted as reflections of a melting pot in action. Maybe one possibility concerns Jewish musical composers who wrote music in a Negro jazz idiom, embellishing the compositions with melodies that harkened back to liturgical harmonies in the synagogue.

Regrettably, unpleasant examples of racism occurred during the boyhood of Ben Nicholas, as in the early lives of others. In 1903, around the Manhattan entrance to the Williamsburgh Bridge, a great deal of rubble accumulated. After the spot was cleared, the city authorities organized a market for fish peddlers, a rather animated group. Ben has a recollection that on Fridays, Italian fishmongers arrived to offer for sale to Jewish housewives the kind of fish which could be made into gefilte fish. The ladies proceeded from one pushcart to another, seeking quality and haggling over prices, occasionally lifting a fish and smelling it for freshness.

One peddler became incensed, grabbed the fish from the prospective buyer's hand, and exclaimed: "Hey, sheeney! Don't smell 'er d'ere! Smell 'er here!" The monger pointed to his behind for emphasis.

Irving Howe, in his fine book *World of Our Fathers*, tells on p. 125 a bit more about the fish market at the Williamsburgh Bridge. The location of the fish mongers at that place was intended to halt the selling of fish on pushcarts. Three hundred stalls were provided, but there were over a thousand peddlers of fish. Howe explains that the peddlers pointed out "that to be fixed in a stall meant losing the business of housewives who lived far from the bridge. In July, they (the peddlers) held a parade, lined up six abreast and accompanied by brass bands: it was such a pleasure to make a bit of noise in the world! Soon they were back on the streets with their pushcarts..."

The word which the Italian fishmonger had used during the angry moment with the Jewish housewife, "sheeney," was one of those racial unpleasantries which originated a long way back in time. It has

been said that the term started when Jewish rabbinical students wore long black coats with silken lapels that were *shiny*, altered by the processes of street argot into *sheeney*. Whatever the word's precise origin may have been, Ben heard it periodically in his early years. If he or his friends strayed or ventured into different ethnic neighborhoods, they were chased, and, if caught, beaten, roundly cursed, and called sheenies.

Other ethnics suffered as well. Ben remembers that the Chinese received much bad treatment. Their pigtails were yanked and dead rats thrown into the stores and laundries which the Chinese ran.

There were, however, occasions when people spoke harshly to Ben without his ethnic identity being the object of rancor. One such occasion grew out of Ben's attraction to bicycling. Nobody owned a bike where Ben lived, being too poor. If a bike ride was important, one parted with a few precious pennies to rent a bike by the hour.

Young Ben found his way to a shop with a bike for rent. The shopkeeper informed Ben that not only was a customer required to pay an hourly fee of some coins, but to deposit an appropriate security as well. Ben had not anticipated the need of giving security and the pennies in his hand seemed pitifully inadequate. He explained that he had no security to offer, except his cap and his coat. The lady who ran the shop agreed to hold the clothing against the safe return of her bike. She then accepted Ben's rental payment and allowed him to pedal away on the bicycle.

He rolled along happily, although he fell from the bike a few times, not altogether unnatural considering that bike riding was a fairly new experience for Ben. Unfortunately, the final fall damaged the bike in such a way that it could be seen. When the rental period was finished, Ben duly returned the bike to the shop, fearful of retribution. He behaved as if nothing had happened and attempted to put the bike in the rack, take the cap and coat, and depart.

The lady shopkeeper, however, was not too busy with other matters to observe the state of her property. Furthermore, she had been in business too long to be anything less than vigilant where rentals were concerned. She saw whatever scratches and nicks had appeared on the bike since Ben had been out riding and lost her temper. She struck Ben a few times, and complained vociferously of how he had ruined the bike. Then she threw him, with the cap and coat, out of the shop. "You little bastard! Don't you ever come near my place again!"

Ben never did. And also, he never learned to ride a two-wheeled bike properly.

There were other tough times. A *P* and an *O* and an *O* and an *L* spells *pool*, that dread game which lured young boys into lives of sin and worthlessness, as a certain Broadway musical reminds us. Like

many youngsters, Ben wanted to play pool. The pool room operators, however, had a rule: only kids in long pants could enter the sacred precincts and partake of the seductive exercise, inhale the acrid cigarette and cigar smoke, expectorate in the brass spittoons, and hear the click-click of the balls on the green baize.

Ben planned carefully. He shrewdly donned a pair of his elder brother's long pants, much too large for the stripling's modest frame, and swaggered down the street and into the nearest poolroom. He was promptly ejected. Not to worry, he went around the block and entered another establishment, with the same result. He tried another place and yet another, for the Lower East Side was well populated with pool halls (and saloons and whorehouses and a variety of other establishments whose doorways exuded mystery and seductiveness). But in whatever pool hall Ben entered, even if it were a place two or three blocks from where he lived, the owner took one look at Ben and hopeful expectation became swift rejection and a swifter exit. He was amazed that pool room operators uniformly were endowed with an uncanny ability to spot a little kid trying to pass himself off as a teenager.

Ben reluctantly abandoned the masquerade and is deeply chagrined to inform posterity that after living almost nine decades, he *still* has not learned to shoot pool.

Then there was the time he broke the dietary laws, which, as some might readily agree, was almost as bad or maybe worse than becoming a steady patron of billiard parlors.

Knowing that it was only permitted for him to eat of fish which had fins and scales, Ben accompanied Uncle Zaida's son, Cousin Bennie, to an *oyster bar* on Grand Street. Could there have been a worse place of inequity? We will never know. There, guiltily, with many covert glances at the other customers, who were themselves probably consuming forbidden delicacies and hastening their own progress straight to Hell, Ben dined on a soft shell crab and found it to be utterly delicious.

And so did a little Jewish boy fall from grace.

Ben subsequently became rather disenchanted with his Cousin Bennie. Cousin Bennie, having led the boy astray, went to Sam Nicholas, the boy's father, and described the visit to the oyster bar. Sam spanked Ben till he saw stars.

Some years later, when Ben was in his teens, a dress salesman paid Ben a dollar and bought him lunch, in exchange for Ben carrying the salesman's sample cases for the day. The salesman was a Jewish man and good company. At lunchtime, he led Ben to a suitable restaurant and invited him to select something from the menu. Ben ordered ham and eggs. The salesman was a bit surprised and re-

minded Ben that ham was *trefe,* unclean. Ben brassily replied that he not only knew ham was *trefe,* but that he didn't care. He had always wanted to taste ham and knew he would enjoy it.

SEVEN.

It was the 10th Springtime of Ben Nicholas. He was growing, a sturdy, cheerful, intelligent boy, always on the lookout for new experience. Adventure. Whenever a charitable group or church sponsored one-day excursions or children's outings, word spread through the ghetto. Ben was always ready. Then came the report that St. Mark's school picnic would include a magnificent outing for a vast number of youngsters. It would be highlighted by a boat trip on the East River. The outing was to commence at 9:00 a.m. and continue until 11:00 p.m. that night.

Ben secured a ticket and explained to Rachel the importance of the event. She was to wake him early on the morning of the excursion, June 15th. He'd have time to dress, eat a bit of breakfast, and proceed to the Third Street pier, where the excursion boat would take passengers aboard. Many of Ben's pals were going. Some were accompanying their mothers and other persons.

Rachel listened to the urgent words of her 10-year-old and agreed. Of course she'd wake the boy early. Naturally she wanted him to go and enjoy himself.

On the morning of the great event, Rachel had her hands full. She had to prepare several breakfasts, get the laundry started on the coal range, send the elder children and husband to their respective destinations, jobs or school. Ben was forgotten. He slept on in the cool of the mid-June morning, until something caused him to stir. He sat up, rubbed his eyes furiously, and wondered. He was horrified. It might be too late! He'd miss out on a grand day of fun and excitement! Everyone was going to enjoy himself. Why not little Bennie?

He jumped up, scrambled into his clothes, and ran to the kitchen where Rachel was stirring a great metal tub on the coal stove. A soap-stained wooden pole moved the soiled clothes about as perspiration stood on her brow. She had already done a day's work in the hours since she'd risen at 4:00.

Ben gazed at the loudly ticking alarm clock and his heart sank. He had scarcely seven or eight minutes to run from the Nicholas apartment across the district to the Third Street pier. But he knew all the good short cuts. Stuffing an apple in his pocket, he dashed out the apartment door and clattered down the rickety staircase onto the street.

Past the janitor positioning garbage cans on the curb, across the path of the tired old couple pushing a cart along loaded with inexpensive pots and pans to sell on Orchard Street, across Houston, dodging too close to a team of dray horses pulling a heavily-loaded freight wagon piled high with barrels of beer, dashing through a knot of people waiting for a streetcar, over fences, through backyards, too near a middle-aged lady emerging from a backhouse and straightening her hem (she nearly had a heart attack as little Bennie tore past and leaped over an adjoining fence), down a street where an Italian lady was leaning out of her front window and talking with dramatic gestures to a lady in an opposite-placed window across the way, across an intersection, around a corner, down yet another street, and then finally hearing a steamboat whistle go *toot-toot*, renewing his effort to run even faster, because the gate to the Third Street pier was just around the corner, and finally there it was. A great, side-wheeled steamer was beside the pier, her decks jammed with parents and children dressed in their holiday best and a good many of them gazing at the pier gates, seeing the attendant pushing the panels shut, with Bennie galloping onto the scene from the opposite direction, shouting, "Wait for me! Wait for me!"

Bennie got through the gate to the accompaniment of loud cheers and whistles from the youngsters on board, but the ropes had already been cast off and the vessel was moving ever so slowly out of the dock. It was close enough for Bennie to jump aboard! He drew back to gather a bit of additional strength for the leap, was airborne, and found himself firmly in the arms of a burly New York cop.

"And where d'ya think yor agoin'?"

"Lemme go! Lemme jump on the boat! I wanna go!"

By then, the boat had traveled a foot or so beyond, and no 10-year-old, not even Ben Nicholas, could get across that ever-widening area of dirty river water between the deck and the pier.

"There'll be other times," the policeman said, lowering Bennie to the pier's surface, dusting his hands. "Now yer just too late!"

As if to underscore the officer's words, a brass band aboard the vessel struck up *Hail, Hail, The Gang's All Here!*

Heartsick, angry, and with tear-filled eyes, Ben kicked the wooden side of the pier and uttered some of the choice profanity usually spoken by adults.

The policeman patiently regarded the crestfallen, disappointed boy who now walked slowly off the Third Street pier and headed home.

Meantime, the excursion steamer, powered by great paddle-wheels, cleared the dock and headed out into midstream. It was *The General Slocum* and this would be the ship's last voyage.

While little Bennie was walking dispiritedly home, trying to rid himself of bitter disappointment, kicking every stone and stick in his way, muttering words which adults always deem appropriate for such situations but dislike hearing emerge from the mouths of children, the 250-foot-long *Slocum* was moving slowly up the river. It was one of the largest excursion steamers in the Port of New York and had been launched in 1891. The ship's commander was a gentleman named Captain William Van Schaick. He and his ship already had an unhappy record by the time Bennie Nicholas was tardy for the June 15, 1904, sailing. Ten years earlier, in the mid-summer of 1894, with Captain Van Schaick at the helm, *The General Slocum* accidentally beached herself on a sand bar. Once there, neither the captain nor the crew bothered to stop the growing panic which brought about dozens of injuries among the passengers. In the late summer of 1901, some picnickers aboard the vessel became involved in a shipboard riot, as a result of which numbers of people had to be hospitalized.

The ship's three decks were jammed with more than 1,400 passengers, the greatest portion of whom were women and children. Only 83 were men. The paddle-driven steamer had a crew of 23.

As the boat departed from the pier, the odor of cooking chowder was noticeable, for a kitchen staff in the galley were busy. Hundreds of children played on the decks, and the day was promising, the air being crisp, the sky a clear blue and filled with sunshine. *The General Slocum* had recently been given a coat of white paint and many colorful banners snapped in the breeze. Closer scrutiny would have shown that many hatches were open, paint lockers unlocked, and life preservers in a state of inaccessibility. The crew were occupied with tasks and *two* reserve policemen were aboard to maintain decorum.

The holiday vessel proceeded leisurely up the East River and was near a place called Hell's Gate, a rather treacherous area of water, when a ferry passed, *The Haarlem*. Everyone waved and cheered.

Around 10 o'clock, an hour after the pier gates had been nearly closed in Ben Nicholas' face, *The General Slocum* was near 130th Street. A woman screamed, "Fire!"

Flames could be seen in a paint locker on the forward area of the boat. So said one account. Another reported fire as having first begun in the galley when a cook stove exploded. Yet another said that a cabin filled with stored combustibles—gasoline, brass polish, and oil lamps—burst into flame. *How* the fire started was but a small part. The ship was old, her timbers rotting, and the fresh paint was highly combustible.

People on the Long Island shore of the East River viewed the scene through field glasses and saw smoke and flames leaping near the front of the vessel. The sounds of more than 1,400 people in a state of panic were clear.

Many mothers moved their children to the rear of the ship, the stern. It would prove fatal.

Captain Van Schaick could have ordered that the vessel be steered to the Manhattan shore, which was merely 300 yards away. He had already turned the wheel over to Pilot Edward Van Wart at 138th Street. The ship could have been beached in a few minutes' time and a great many lives saved. Instead, inexplicably, disregarding the stiff northeast wind that fanned the flames, Captain Van Schaick chose the long route to North Brother Island, yet up the river. It proved to be the wrong decision.

Many crew members tried to douse the fire, but the hose wouldn't function. On one hose, a rubber disc had been fitted over the nozzle and required several minutes of effort to remove. When the water was finally switched on, the hose proved to be rotten. Only a disappointing trickle emerged, due to dozens of leaks.

Great numbers of passengers congregated at the stern. They fell into a new panic as flames ate backward and moved ever nearer to the frightened women and children.

The river scene was pandemonium. Other vessels were tooting their whistles like mad, signalling for the fireboats to come. One such fireboat was the *Abram S. Hewitt*, which hastened to the scene, but first lost precious time by stopping at the 67th Street pier to pick up the fire chief.

When the *Hewitt* reached the scene, *The General Slocum* had already run onto the rocky shoals of North Brother Island. The good Captain Van Schaick had beached his hapless vessel in a most inaccessible place.

People crammed into the ship's stern fought like the very fury over life preservers, nearly all of which turned out to be rotten and went to pieces in people's hands.

The preservers were manufactured by the Nonpareil Cork Works, and the law mandated that the preservers were to be of a certain weight. To bring the things up to that weight, it was later testified, the

manager and some employees placed iron bars inside the preservers. Those individuals were later brought up on criminal charges by the Department of Justice.

As the broken vessel ran onto the rocks at North Brother Island, the fire in the ship's holds, galley, and bow cabins roared upward. This sealed the fate of vast numbers. Most could not swim and they either burnt to death or fell or jumped from the ship's stern, which extended back into perhaps 30 feet of water. Then some supports for the ship's hurricane deck burst into flame, causing the *Slocum's* upper decks to fall inward and jettisoning those trapped there down into the general inferno.

Captain Van Schaick and his two pilots were on the bow side when the crash came. They jumped quickly onto the deck of a tugboat moored nearby. The captain's uniform was hardly rumpled.

Most of the crew, many of whom were untrained, thought more of saving themselves rather than trying to save passengers. The crewmen ran, jumped, and dived into the waters to save themselves.

The whole East River was a madhouse of frantically-tooting tugboats and other vessels. The *Massasoit* as well as the *Franklin Edson*, tugboats, drew near and started the rescue of survivors.

Soon other craft arrived and assisted in the rescue operation. There were numerous stories of bravery and everyone did what they could, but at the end, near the bow of *The General Slocum*, bodies were so thickly crowded together in the water that they formed *a carpet upon which survivors walked to the safety of the shore.*

Only 407 people survived. More than a thousand victims were almost all women and children.

Captain Van Schaick, who was 61, was arrested and brought to trial for manslaughter and failure to train his crew in fire prevention and life saving. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison but was later pardoned by President Teddy Roosevelt, due to Van Schaick's advanced years.

And what of little Bennie Nicholas? After he learned the awful news about the holiday ship, he was glad his mother had been too busy to call him from bed that morning.

EIGHT.

Amid the congestion and squalor of the district where the Nicholas family lived, some important social welfare establishments flourished. These places were known as settlement houses. Originated by Jane Addams in Chicago, trained social workers endeavored to improve conditions. Such institutions provided community services and promoted neighborly cooperation. Four such establishments were known to Ben—University Settlement, Madison Street, the Educational Alliance, and Clark House. The latter was frequented by Ben.

Clark House had a gymnasium, meeting and reading rooms, with separate but equal facilities for boys and girls.

Ben spent considerable time at Clark House, to play basketball. With Mike Hertzoff, Izzy Waldman, and others, the boys started a team called the Olympic Club. They obtained shirts upon which the team name was imprinted, and also bought sneakers and shorts. The Olympic Club challenged other Clark House groups. One such team was led by Ben's old *Follow the Leader!* acquaintance, Gimpty. Although his leg had been shortened by polio, he was a tough, good player. The Olympians were reluctant to engage in any rough-house with Gimpty on the basketball floor. Curiously enough, Gimpty's brothers went to college and became basketball stars.

Occasionally, professional fighters trained at Clark House. Leach Cross, a dental student and a great lightweight, fought for the world's championship. Sometimes he let Ben spar with him. All the boys at Clark House idolized Cross.

An empty lot was across the street from Clark House. The dirt was piled in mounds, hardly an inviting topography for a baseball

diamond. That circumstance didn't prevent Ben and his chums from playing baseball. Bases were emplaced on the mounds, sides were chosen, and the games began. If a player erred, he was rewarded with a punch or a swift kick. Subsequently, the lot was graded and a suitable playground constructed. Swings were built for small children and a proper baseball diamond laid out. An athletic director was hired. The director once arranged for the team, which included Ben, to play a game at a place in Staten Island. The group rode the ferry across the bay, landed, and went to the playing field. The opponents were an Irish neighborhood team and they weren't very good. Ben managed to catch a well-hit ball that might have resulted in a home run. At another stage, Ben made a one-hand catch. The game might have concluded with the Clark House team winning, but no one ever learned how the game would have ended because a terrific rainstorm ensued and everyone had to run for cover.

As the storm gave no sign of abating, the Clark House youngsters decided they might as well start the trip home. They gathered their equipment, such as it was, and began running down the street to the ferry slip.

The Staten Island players were in a bad humor, for they had been losing the game, and just as luck seemed to accompany their efforts, the heavens had opened and showers fell, killing the afternoon.

The sight of the Clark House players departing somehow triggered the Staten Island group's enmity. The host team picked up stones and began aiming and throwing them at the Clark House boys with considerable accuracy. "Jew bastards!" the Staten Island bunch yelled. "Sheenies!" The air was rent with other choice curses as well.

Once the Clark House group were safely aboard the ferry and it had moved out of the slip and headed toward Manhattan, Ben and his friends discussed the game and the way it had ended. He recalls that the players laughed about it for weeks after.

During this period of Ben's association with the Olympian Club, it was apparent that one of the lads always had money in his pocket. It was known that the boy associated with some toughs who lived in the neighborhood. Some of the members of the Clark House group believed the boy was being paid by the unattractive types to perform sexual favors. Nobody admired the young fellow for his believed homosexual activities. Ben and his chums were fearful of accusing the boy of behaving disreputably because the boy could always enlist his tough friends in a retaliatory move. So nothing was said, but there was always an undercurrent of distrust. Ben and his pals knew such things happened and labeled homosexuals as "cocksuckers," an example, perhaps, of homophobia that reflected the social code extant in the intensely conventional ghetto, where it was expedient to pursue material gain in any manner, except sexually. And where there had to

be an exception, the rigid view was that only women could sell themselves to men, but no one was expected or allowed to do it with a member of the same sex. Many painful years would pass, obviously, before education and psychology had advanced to the point where public awareness of such matters even approached a glimmer of tolerance.

The Clark House boys engaged in almost daily fistfights, but the bouts were usually short. Ben remembers once landing a tremendous punch that broke an opponent's nose. Ben felt much ashamed for a long while, but was later reconciled with the boy.

The boys' heroes included members of the New York Giants baseball team—such individuals as Roger Bresnahan, Mike Donlan, Christy Matheson, Strong Man McGinty, and prize fighters as Jim Corbett, Jack Jeffereys, Leach Cross, and Bennie Leonard.

During this time, Ben befriended a young immigrant named Yonah and brought him into group games. Sometime later, Ben heard that Yonah turned to crime and carried a gun. Ben couldn't believe it. He met Yonah a bit later, gave him a friendly greeting, and patted his back, hoping to detect a sign of a shoulder holster. Yonah must have guessed Ben's intention, for he whirled in a fury. He warned Ben against repeating the effort. Ben never sought Yonah again.

One of Ben's chums was a red-headed boy whose face was covered with freckles. He was a truly brilliant Hebrew scholar. One day he arrived with a swollen cheek due to an infected tooth. He asked Ben to accompany him to have the tooth extracted. Across the street, a barber doubled as a dentist. A striped barber pole was beside the door, while a big sign depicting a tooth hung above the door. The dental work was performed upstairs. It required a barber's chair and some tools.

Ben's pal was duly seated in the chair and opened his mouth. The barber/dentist used pliers to accomplish the extraction. It cost 25 cents. Regrettably, when the tooth emerged, a bit of the patient's gum did, too. That night, the youngster had to be hospitalized because of hemorrhaging. He recovered.

While Ben was growing, his older sisters and brothers had begun their adult lives. One such story related to Molly, who needed some dental work. The young dentist who treated Ben's sister fell in love with her and proposed. He was short and stocky, and quite likable. He had won a gold charm made in the shape of a football in college sports competition, and Ben admired him greatly. The dentist was not Jewish, but in order to wed Molly, offered to undergo a Jewish ritual conversion and submit to circumcision.

Rachel insisted that no child of hers would marry a non-Jew. She would not budge, even threatened suicide.

The poor dentist! The Nicholas children all loved him and hoped Molly would marry him despite parental opposition. Apparently, though, she was too intimidated by the mother's disapproval. Molly gave the young man up, and some relatives question whether she ever recovered from the experience. Ben recalls the incident as one of the few times in his life when he was angry with his mother.

As Ben's 13th birthday approached and his Bar Mitzvah was in prospect, the red-haired, freckle-faced friend who had suffered with the tooth extraction came into the picture. He was an expert Hebrew student and undertook to tutor Ben so that Ben could perform the religious ritual.

In due course, Ben's Bar Mitzvah service was held in the *shul*. He was called to read the day's message from the Torah. Sam Nicholas stood beside the boy. The rabbi held a short wand trimmed in gold leaf and used it as a pointer. It was shaped like a human hand. The index finger was elongated and served as the pointer to conduct Ben along the printed lines of Hebrew words. The boy also led a prayer. When the service duly concluded, some cookies and drinks were served to the congregation.

As part of his new status, Ben was expected to perform with *tfillin* during daily morning prayers. Some coaching was required before Ben mastered the ritual, but not long after being confirmed, Ben discontinued the procedure.

One of the memorable aspects of being Bar Mitzvah was the purchase of Ben's first new suit. Quality clothing at a modest cost was available on Division Street, some blocks from the Nicholas tenement. If a prospective customer paused at a shop window to study a display, a salesman from within would quickly appear and persuade the shopper to enter. Often a sale occurred, but only after some hard bargaining.

Sam and Rachel took Ben to Division Street and purchased the needed suit. The trousers were knickers that strapped under the knee.

During Ben's adolescence, New York had no junior high schools. A student attended grammar school through the sixth grade, then transferred to a different building for seventh and eighth grade. In his case, it meant going from P.S. 77 on Sheriff Street to P.S. 62 on Hester and Essex streets, a goodly walk from Ben's tenement.

P.S. 62 had high athletic and teaching standards and the students were proud of those things. A tragic incident happened which shattered the atmosphere a good deal. A boy in Ben's class got into a fight with the teacher, Mr. Becker. The student drew a knife and stabbed the teacher, though not fatally.

The bad actor was speedily arrested and the teacher recovered, but the other pupils had a hard time living the incident down.

Later, after Ben entered DeWitt Clinton High School, a faculty member inquired what school Ben's group was from. The students replied enthusiastically en masse: "P.S. 62!"

"Oh yes," the interrogator commented. "That's where you stab the teachers."

There was a difficult incident around this period which Ben still recalls. A particular delicatessen on Rivington Street was a landmark, known for strict kosher rules. The owner's son was a friend of Ben. The lad was tall and a great basketball player. Sometimes Ben helped his friend with homework and the friend reciprocated by defending Ben in periodic challenges at school. When it came to fights, Ben's limited height was sometimes a disadvantage.

A tremendous scandal erupted when the father of Ben's pal was accused of getting their Christian maidservant with child.

Ben's own awareness of such matters was widening rapidly. His body was losing the characteristics of childhood. The fact was emphasized when, one day at the East River Free Baths, with his small brothers, a security guard told Ben it was time for him to wear trunks in that place.

Furthermore, Ben saw not only hair around his crotch and under his arms, but fuzz on his upper lip. He sneaked Charley's straight razor for a first-time shave. He finally bought one with a whetstone and a strop. When an early-model safety razor came on the market, the Durham Duplex, he purchased one. It had a short, straight blade, with a protective guard. It didn't provide as close a shave, but was safer. Eventually, Ben switched to a safety razor made by Gillette.

A barber charged a dime or 15 cents for a haircut and a nickel for a shave. Many men also got a shave when they visited a tonsorial parlor for a haircut. Some men were shaved daily by the same barber for years.

Sex was a steady topic with Ben and his teen-aged pals. One boy said he knew of a whorehouse where 25 cents could purchase endless delight. Fifty cents was the usual tariff, but times were bad just then and even whores had to make a living.

A few of the boys agreed to try the 25-cent adventure leading to pleasure and knowledge. Ben refused because he was afraid. Among the adventurers who went that day, a fine-looking youngster and a close friend, who was a good athlete, contracted syphilis. It ruined him. Another friend of Ben's was stricken with a dreadful spinal ailment which killed him in a week.

Ben's own attempts with girls led him to a big lumber yard facing the East River. Couples sneaked in after nightfall. He took a girl there once, with strictly dishonorable objectives. She talked continuously about the trials of being poor and miserable. She described endlessly how her cruel parents tormented and abused her. Ben's mood

switched. What had begun as lust turned into pity, and he sat with tears in his eyes, heartbroken. He took the girl home and never called again.

It was inevitable that someone would be interested in population problems and attempt to bring about reform in public attitudes. Margaret Sanger pioneered in the area of birth control. She visited many large families. A large percentage of them were poor Jews from Eastern Europe. An apocryphal story exists that Sanger once asked a mother of a large brood if, after intercourse with her husband, she rose from bed and repaired to the water closet for a douche.

The exhausted woman sighed plaintively and lifted her eyebrows expressively. She replied: "Fulg mier a gangg, eicht mol a nacht."

Those words reflect a rather generous overstatement, but an exaggerated translation can emerge as: "Eight times a night I get fucked. I have to get up and take a douche, too? Spare me!"

Birth control and family planning concepts were difficult to popularize, but people who were oppressed by the problems of raising many children did take heed. With time, families grew smaller. Men had access to condoms because street peddlers and drug stores sold them. Women had their own methods.

As for sex, Ben recalls that many Jewish mothers hated it (and perhaps with good reason, for the fear of pregnancy and a family bigger than could be supported properly was a constant concern) and urged their daughters to resist participation, except in wedlock. Daughters were instructed that they had a religious duty to accept their husbands, *but not to enjoy it.*

In February, 1909, Ben graduated from P.S. 62 and was enrolled into high school. It was DeWitt Clinton on 59th Street and Columbus Avenue, uptown on the West Side, a distance of more than 10 miles. Ben was given 10 cents daily for subway fare.

To reach an uptown-bound train, Ben had to walk to the subway terminal on Bleecker Street, through a district heavily populated by Italians. He remembers that the odor of garlic and spices was noticeable.

When Ben walked alone, he went undisturbed. With a group of friends, however, the situation was different. They were frequently attacked by opposing groups. Ben ran fast, though, and was rarely hurt.

On nice days, the group walked all the way home from school and saved the subway fare. The resultant coins were gambled in crap games on Saturday morning under the Williamsburgh Bridge.

At high school, Ben tried out for the basketball team, but was turned down. His attention was then diverted to gymnastics. He became fascinated with chinning and set himself the task of breaking the record of 70. Daily practice followed until he chinned 75 times.

These strenuous workouts were sometimes followed by the long walk home, to save carfare. Once he got home and collapsed in what seemed an impenetrable coma. Rachel had to obtain a doctor and nurse from the Free Clinic, as Ben was unconscious for a week.

NINE.

The nurse was holding his hand. She bent over him and smiled.

"Welcome back. You have beautiful teeth!"

The cause of Ben's week-long lapse into unconsciousness had been an enlarged heart. He was lucky to have recovered without serious damage. He was sent to a convalescent home in a small town beside the Hudson River. It was his first glimpse of rural life. He saw fruit trees, cows, gardens, pigs. It was quite captivating.

After a few days of rest, he was full of energy, jumping over hedges and running great distances. Among his companions at the rest home was a man with a curious ailment. When they sprawled on the beautiful lawn in the sunshine and gossiped, he confided bitterly that the reason for his indisposition was because his wife was impossible to satisfy sexually.

Following the summer vacation, Ben returned to high school and was promoted, although he had failed Latin and had to take it over again. One day, he noticed on the blackboard from the previous Latin class the name *I. Nechols,* but it apparently didn't register. Another day, a student came into the classroom and asked to meet the student named Nicholas. That is how Ben and his distant cousin, Irving Nechols, became acquainted.

Every noon, Ben and Irv lunched together. Ben always brought the same fare: tomato herring on thick rye bread with butter. Irving marvelled that the menu never changed, but Ben was true to his favorite.

By now, Ben's other favorites were more prominent. Ever since he had gone to see stock company players on 14th Street with his brother

Charley, as well as to Miner's burlesque on the Bowery, any kind of stage entertainment caught his eye, especially when ethnic humor was promised.

A theatre of the B. F. Keith vaudeville chain was on 57th Street, near the high school. Whenever Keith's had a bill featuring a favorite act or comedian, Ben was a sure bet to ditch school and catch the show from the gallery. He never missed a chance to see Weber & Fields, who did a wonderful, broad dialect comedy; the Avon Comedy Four, known for their Jewish humor; and Ben and Lew Welch, whom he considered to be the funniest Jewish comics. Ben Welch, especially, had a line that left Ben convulsed with laughter: "I hadda fight widda fella. He grabbed me by da t'roat! I grabbed him by da pockabook!"

Ben Welch sometimes worked on the same bill with the Three Mosconi Brothers, a trio of handsome, athletic acrobats. The Mosconis would come on the stage and with a few deft moves transform themselves into a living pyramid. Ben Welch then followed, bare to the waist, revealing a physiognomy that was in sharp contrast: where the Mosconis were trim and possessed of rippling muscles, Welch was pale, flabby, and terrified.

The object of the exercise was for the Mosconis to hoist the trembling comedian to the top of the human pyramid, which for the trained acrobats would be a simple matter. For Ben Welch, it was a scary, death-defying experience which he communicated to the audience. While being lifted into place, he loudly protested in an impeccable Yiddish accent and begged not to be dropped. The effect on the audience was laughter bordering on pandemonium.

Yet another act showed the clumsy, frightened Ben Welch in the process of being placed on horseback.

Ben Nicholas found these moments excruciatingly funny.

Welch later went blind, but continued to perform.

Another favorite of Ben Nicholas was the team of Smith & Dale, whose life stories inspired the film *The Sunshine Boys*.

Among the great singers of Ben's adolescence was Eva Tanguay, and he went to see her whenever possible. He was much captivated by her song *I Don't Care!*

Theaters were not equipped with public address systems. "Sound" was still some time in the future. Therefore, singers had to project to a considerable degree, so the folks in the upper balcony could hear. Eva Tanguay had the gift, as did Sophie Tucker (who became The Last of the Red-Hot Mommas) and Fanny Brice. She, more than any of the female Jewish stage stars, remains vivid in Ben's sentiments. Miss Brice, Sophie Tucker, and Eva Tanguay were known as "Coon Shouters," originally, because of their tremendous lung power and vocal ability. They worked in blackface.

Columbus Circle was a few blocks east of the high school. It was the starting point of many parades. The return of former President Teddy Roosevelt from his journey to the wilds of South America, in search of the "River of Doubt," was one such event. The public was much intrigued with the former president's adventure. The day of the parade, there was Teddy, flashing a great toothy smile, riding a spirited horse, and leading a huge procession down Broadway.

The lives of the other Nicholas children continued to go forward. Charley had a friend, Sam Dolmatz. Charley introduced Sam to Sadie Nicholas. Strangely, when Sam began calling on Sadie, Charley objected strenuously. He insisted that Sam was a tough guy, leader of his block gang, and unreliable.

Sam had been through some trying experiences as a boy. He had been playing the game *Pussy Cat* when one of his eyes was knocked out. Charley complained about that, too. The father of Sam Dolmatz had been a barber. Sam was called "Bob" by his close friends.

Charley's objections notwithstanding, Sam Dolmatz had many affirmative qualities. Most interestingly, as is sometimes the case with a person who lacks a formal education, Sam's wonderful, good nature attracted outstanding friends. In time, Sam Dolmatz, a poor and uneducated young man, became close with some rather sophisticated and intellectual people. He got on famously with Harpo Marx and the other Marx brothers, as well as Franklin P. Adams. Sam was an occasional visitor to The Algonquin Hotel's roundtable, when Alexander Woollcott and Dorothy Parker were present.

The Dolmatz Family insisted on an engagement party for Sam and Sadie, for that clan loved parties. The Nicholases reluctantly agreed, believing that such an event was too costly, too fancy.

March 21, 1909, was Sadie's wedding day. She and Sam were married in a wedding hall on the Lower East Side. A fine dinner was served and a band provided for dancing. Unemployed prior to his marriage, Sam left New York to enter the picture frame business in Philadelphia with a friend.

Charley, meanwhile, had been calling on Minnie Berger. Sadly, Charley contracted tuberculosis, then called consumption. He was sent to the Raybrook Hospital for a cure. It was situated in the Adirondack Mountains near Lake Saranac. Most of each day while there, Charley rested outdoors, wrapped in blankets, whether winter or summer. He ate nourishing food, gained weight, received instructions on the proper way to live, and within a year was sent home.

Charley was absent from Sadie's wedding, but Minnie Berger and her good friend Yetta were invited. At the time, they were salesgirls in Siegel & Cooper's Department Store on 14th Street. When Minnie and Yetta arrived for the wedding, all eyes were on them. The girls were short, stubby types, but in their big picture hats with flowers, long

dresses featuring tight waists and shapely bosoms, Minnie and Yetta stole the show.

After Charley was home again, he lectured Ben on the importance of fresh air and open windows regardless of season. (The ever-present soot of New York City was apparently discounted as a health hazard.) Because of Charley's imposition of the New Discipline, some mornings in winter found the family awakening to the sight of snow on the living room floor, blown in during the night. And no heat. It is possible to envisage members of the Nicholas Family hastening to don clothes and start a fire in the coal stove, meanwhile muttering under their frosty breaths such choice epithets as *Meshugeh oftate* (crazy altogether) and *Azoi vie Kalt gevenn, Gottineu!* (My God, it is as cold as hell). But they managed.

Charley confided that he dreaded the thought of getting married. Nevertheless, a date was set for his wedding with Minnie Berger. Whatever Charley's schemes for avoiding matrimony may have been, he was hooked. They soon got married and settled in a small flat in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. Having had some experience in a printing shop, Charley got on for 12 dollars weekly in a printing establishment. While Charley and Minnie were living in Brownsville, their son Howard was born.

Sadie, the first of Sam and Rachel's children to marry, lived in Philadelphia with Sam Dolmatz. A daughter, Gladys, was born to them in November, 1909. Sam was not happy in the picture framing business. He quit and returned to New York, settling with Sadie and Gladys on the Lower East Side. He found work as a dress salesman, and because of his winning personality and natural ability, Sam started to prosper. It wasn't long before the Dolmatz family were relocated in a nicer neighborhood.

Gladys, it may be said, was an amazing baby. Ben remembers that she walked and talked before attaining the age of one year. She frequently mixed Yiddish and English, saying such things as "Don' (don't) carry Goldele (the little girl's Jewish name). Goldele will fall." She was a precocious child, but if one mentioned it to Sam, it may be presumed his reply was, "Naturally. She's my daughter!"

Arnold Dolmatz arrived a couple of years later.

After Ben's sisters began working, there was less communication between him and the girls. He was in school each day and they were in the shops.

In the family apartment, Molly slept on a bed which was near Ben's mattress on the floor. She woke early and sat on the edge of her bed for about 10 minutes, yawning, stretching, enjoying an occasional scratch, pulling her stockings on. Fully awake, Molly moved

fast and was clothed in no time. She was the most dependable and talented of all the children.

Molly and Annie were very close. They had their own friends and social life.

Ben has few memories of Annie. Of all the Nicholas offspring, she fared least well. Like Molly, Annie had quit school early and found work as a sewing machine operator. She commenced in the days of the foot-operated treadle. Shop girls had to make the machines whirr to earn any kind of money on piece rates. Eventually, however, the sewing machines were powered by electricity.

The wages brought home by Annie and Molly were incorporated in the Nicholas Family's store of funds and enabled them to move to a flat in another district. It was a bit nicer and the premises boasted a kitchen sink with a cold-water faucet plus a communal toilet in the hall. The new address was 126 East 110th Street, and the neighborhood was Harlem, then an attractive section of Manhattan, where many upwardly mobile Russian-Jewish families moved from the congested, run-down Lower East Side. Living in Harlem meant a daily 45-minute commutation journey into the city, or "downtown," on the elevated train, to reach jobs, and a similar trip homeward at day's end. But the travel cost was cheap and deemed worthwhile because living in Harlem signified something better.

Family life in the new neighborhood was reminiscent of the old haunts. Max and Al were sent to a cheder, in the same class. They responded poorly to discipline. Once the Rabbi lost his temper and struck one of the boys with a ruler. Max and Al thereupon attacked the man and beat him mercilessly, to the accompaniment of cheers from the other pupils. Rachel had to accompany the two devils to an interview with the principal. The meeting was tense, because the school official had grave reservations about allowing Max and Al to return to class.

Another time, the two boys wandered into an Irish neighborhood, after having been warned against it. It wasn't long before Max and Al got into a fight with some of the kids, and in the melee, one of Max's shoes was flung into the river. Sometime later, after having limped home with but a single shoe, Max was apprehended by an outraged Sam, who proceeded to spank the boy as he no doubt deserved.

As for the circumstances encountered by the older children, who had left school and found jobs, the general working conditions of the time left much to be desired. Hours were long, pay was low. Workmen's compensation for injuries on the job, unemployment benefits, medical insurance, dental care, and paid vacations, pension plans, and a variety of other possibilities—many of which are now taken for granted—either did not exist or were in an infancy of development.

Many of the machines in factories lacked proper safeguards or were "protected" with minimal devices, and industrial accidents were not uncommon. A person who was maimed in the operation of a machine, such as the loss of a finger, two or three, or an entire limb, often received nothing in the way of financial assistance, or very little. Only modest legislation, if any, protected the blue collar worker, and in many places the word "union" was blasphemy. Unions existed in some situations, but the industrial barons had bigger influence through political connections. Whenever a strike occurred, police or military troops were called to charge in on the pickets with clubs and firearms.

The working man's lot was far from ideal, and many tragic years were to pass before any sort of comprehensive protection was available. Reforms would be enacted only after the most immeasurable hardships had been inflicted upon those least able to protect themselves. Sam Nicholas lost half the thumb of his right hand in an unknown accident.

When Annie Nicholas was a girl earning a few dollars weekly as a sewing machine operator, it was the era of the dress whose hem touched the floor. Women had the choice of wearing one-piece dresses, or combinations of skirts and blouses.

The blouse of that era was called a shirt-waist, a distinctive upper garment which was quite popular, manufactured widely and available at reasonable prices. It featured full, billowy sleeves and a tight waist, very stylish, frequently worn by the bright, up-to-date young Miss who had a job and dreamed of a place in life as a career woman.

Factories for the production of such items could be found in sections of New York City. Numerous multi-storied buildings had been erected to accommodate those enterprises. In a given structure of perhaps 10 stories, it might be possible to find on one floor a factory producing ladies' shoes; on another floor a place busy with the output of children's garments; still another floor where men's caps and gloves were made, and so on. These buildings had electric elevators, telephones, running water, toilet facilities, electric lights, and other amenities sufficient to accommodate the numerous employees. The goods produced were intended for retail sale, usually through the nation's great merchandising emporiums called department stores. Each factory owner had a group of salesmen who called on buyers representing such customers as Gimbels, Macy's, Marshall Field, etc.

A business day would find the street-level freight entrances of such industrial skyscrapers jammed with horse-drawn wagons or early-day trucks, some bringing new goods in, others taking shipments of finished merchandise away, with drivers, hostlers, laborers, and supervisors struggling to get in and out of the elevators which rose up and descended the day long with continual loads. The men who ran

the freight elevators were not famous for their sense of humor, and perhaps with good reason.

Such structures had fire escapes, fire doors, and other appurtenances deemed appropriate. The New York City fire codes laid down certain rules, and the builders of skyscrapers as well as the owners of them were obliged to observe the regulations.

But there were exceptions.

The location of Annie's employment was on the West Side of Manhattan in the southern or "downtown" portion of Manhattan. She may have traveled to work daily by elevated train.

The structure in which Annie worked was located adjacent to New York University. Known as The Asch Building, the place was on Greene Street and Washington Place. Three minutes may have been required for a walk from the Asch Building to Washington Square, where the great Arch faced the entrance to Fifth Avenue. On nice days, many young persons employed in the district ate their lunches in the Square, enjoyed the sunshine, and promenaded.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Company had built an immense business and occupied the eighth, ninth, and 10th floors of the Asch Building. The firm, owned by Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, had more than 500 employees, the greatest portion being young women. The girls worked six days a week for precious little money. Apparently wages were set arbitrarily by the supervisors and the girls' purses were checked nightly at quitting time to ensure against stealing.

The owners of the firm had an unappealing history of bad relations with labor unions. A strike had occurred in 1908, protesting the unsafe, unsanitary working conditions of the establishment.

As a result, Mr. Blanck and Mr. Harris allowed a "company union" to be formed, but, curiously, within a year all those "union" members had been discharged.

In 1909, another strike occurred. That time, Mr. Blanck and Mr. Harris called in the police. Some of the girls on the picket lines were beaten and carried off to jail.

By the early Spring of 1911, the Asch Building was 10 years old. Originally, the construction plans for it had been given approval by the municipal authorities. By the notions of what constituted a fireproof building then, the Asch Building was qualified, at least theoretically. The reality, unfortunately, was far different. The structure had wooden floors and wooden window frames. Legally, stone floors and metal frames were only deemed necessary if the structure had 11 or more stories in height. The Asch Building had 10 floors. The fire chief of New York City had said in 1910 that the city's firefighters, even with their spanking new, up-to-date equipment, could only successfully fight fires up to seven stories.

The fire code said that if a building had 10,000 square feet on each floor, it had to have three staircases on each floor. The Asch Building certainly had 10,000 square feet on each floor, but only two staircases, and each of them was less than three feet wide. City officials magnanimously excused this insufficiency, as the Asch Building was equipped with a fire escape which led to a rear court. Curiously, though, the fire escape stopped its downward descent at the second floor.

Labor laws required that factory doors had to open outward and could not be locked during working hours. Strange to say, the Asch Building was designed so that all the doors opened in. Moreover, the doors on each floor of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company were locked during working hours. The firm believed such locking of doors during working hours was required because the workers were so numerous and stealing was such a problem.

Another irony is that these situations were a matter of record. The Asch Building had been inspected in 1909 and notice taken that the doors were locked; furthermore, it was seen that the top floors were much too crowded. No steps were taken to ameliorate matters. In 1910, the fire inspector was back for another look at the building and announced that it was in good shape. Again the place was declared to be fireproof.

TEN.

About 20 or 21 years of age, Annie Nicholas rose that Saturday and set about preparing for payday and the closing hours of a long week. She was an attractive girl, endowed with the dark hair, brown eyes, and sweet smile which are characteristics in the Nicholas Family. Moving quickly, she washed and dressed, had a quick breakfast, then donned a coat and hat and hurried to the nearby elevated station to board a downtown express.

It was crowded on the platform as many young women gathered for the train's arrival. Some were friends of Annie, and there were smiles and quick words of greeting as the train rolled into the station, screeched to a halt, and the cars' doors slid open. Then the crowd swept in, found seats or stood holding ceiling straps, while the doors closed and the train began to move.

People were starting to think about the onset of Spring, that particular Saturday being March 25th. April was drawing nigh and with it the promise of nice weather. Maybe there'd be a few more ugly snowstorms, but all that would pass.

For Annie and other Jewish folk, it was the season of Passover, one of the Nicholas Family's favorite holidays.

As Annie had left the family's Harlem address, Sam had gone to *shul* for the usual Saturday morning service. Rachel was with the smaller children. Ben had turned 17 a week or so earlier and was out with his pals. Molly had her employment, too.

Memory no longer calls to mind precisely how it was with Annie Nicholas or her family that Saturday morning, March 25, 1911, but the sketch given here may not be too wide of the mark.

Annie performed the usual day's work and was paid, along with the other girls in the shop.

Quitting time for her would be 15 minutes before five o'clock, and like the other shop girls, she was probably hurrying to finish her day's work in order to get home, clean up, and enjoy the evening. Tomorrow would be a day of rest.

The interior of Annie's particular shop—remember, the company had three floors of them—was crowded with girls, sewing machines, overhead power cables, and stacks of the lightweight shirt-waist material. Some of the goods was in the form of finished garments, the rest was uncut yardage and so on. Sewing machines had to be kept well-oiled, to ensure optimum efficiency. The speed at which the devices were operated meant that the parts were so well lubricated they practically dripped.

The work tables were of wood, as were the chairs. The building had very high ceilings, and the one way to fight a possible fire was to use some of the 259 pails of water placed here and there on the Asch Building's 10 floors.

Around a quarter to five, on the crowded eighth floor, the quitting bell rang and the girls started to depart for the dressing room, where they could freshen up and prepare to go home. They had been paid, and the little cash-filled envelopes were in purses, bosoms, inside stockings.

On the eighth floor, some cutting tables were situated along the east wall, on the Greene Street side. Under the tables were storage bins, on this day stuffed to overflowing with bits and pieces of shirt-waist material remaining after three months of garment cutting had been in process. Smoking, of course, was forbidden, but not strictly enforced. Fires had begun previously, but they had always been put out by speedy use of pails of water and other means.

One of the girls proceeding to the dressing room noticed smoke curling out of a storage bin beneath a cutting table and promptly yelled for the superintendent. A few of the cutters worked assiduously to smother the fire.

The flames shot upward, engulfing some overhead pattern pieces. Piles of dress material began to ignite. The place quickly filled with smoke.

A superintendent, Sam Bernstein, rushed up and called for the water hose. When someone attempted to disengage the hose from the wall bracket, the hose, which was rotten from dis-use, fell to pieces. In any event, there was no water pressure. The heat had become so intense that windows were popping.

Bernstein saw that the situation was impossible. He shouted for the cutters to get the girls out.

Three avenues of escape were open. One, most obvious, was the elevators. Girls rang the elevator buttons like mad and the men running them answered promptly. It is a matter of record that the men operating the passenger and freight elevators succeeded in getting numerous girls to safety. But the operators were soon overcome by smoke and exhaustion and the elevator cars could not possibly accommodate everyone who wished to depart.

A second alternative was to descend the fire escape. Some of the cutters and perhaps 12 girls opted for that way. The metal steps were somewhat like those of a ladder, and several people literally fell from floor to floor. One man plunged downward to the court at ground level. Some of the girls succeeded in reaching the sixth floor—two stories below the fire. They broke windows and got in. Perhaps 20 people of more than 500 seeking escape on the three floors managed to reach safety via the fire escape.

A third alternative was the series of narrow, downward-winding stairways. Girls rushed to the staircase on the Washington Place side and found the door locked. The pandemonium reached an unbelievable pitch. Finally, someone managed to get the door open, but because of the design, it only opened inwardly. The confusion as the girls struggled to get into the narrow stairway was impossible to describe. At the seventh floor, someone collapsed and those behind simply piled up. No more space was available on the stairway for the women remaining on the burning eighth floor.

A quick-witted policeman on the street level saw the fire. He raced up the Washington Place stairs and succeeded in unsnarling the traffic jam of hysterical women at the seventh floor landing. Perhaps 125 girls thus descended the stairs to safety.

A bookkeeper, Diana Lipschitz, only seconds after the fire had been seen on the eighth floor, called in the alarm. She next tried to warn the people on the ninth and 10th floors. On the ninth floor, nobody answered the floor phone. Diana rang through to the 10th, however, and told them.

Triangle's executive offices were on the 10th floor. Maybe 40 men and women were employed at pressing tables along the east or Greene Street wall. The remainder of the floor constituted a huge shipping room. It was jammed with packing cartons and other materials.

The firm's main switchboard was on that floor, too. The regular girl was out that day, and when the substitute operator heard the call from Diana, the substitute operator wouldn't believe the message. Fortunately, there was a speedy check of the stairway on the Greene Street side, now a holocaust of smoke, fire, and screaming women. Convinced, the substitute operator sounded the alarm, then quit the board to look for her dad, who was the watchman of the 10th floor.

Mr. Blanck and Mr. Harris had come to work that day. Mr. Blanck brought his two little girls, one who was 5 and one who was 12. In all, around 70 persons were on the 10th floor when the fire commenced. All escaped safely, except for one girl who became so possessed with fright that she jumped out of a window.

Mr. Harris kept his wits reasonably well. When the alarm went off, he pushed girls in the direction of the elevators on the Washington Place side. The cars which rose to the 10th floor were speedily occupied, but were unable to halt for passengers on the way down.

Sam Bernstein, the superintendent on the eighth floor, rushed up the stairway from his floor to the 10th. He guided most of the persons, including Mr. Blanck and the small children, to the roof. In that way, Bernstein saved their lives.

An adjoining building contained a 10th-floor law class of New York University. When the fire broke out, the law instructor and his students heard the commotion and hastened to the roof of the N.Y.U. building. That roof was perhaps 15 feet higher than the Asch Building's.

Some painters had left ladders on the university structure's roof that day. The law students used the ladders and some cool nerve to assist terrified victims to safety.

As the final individuals reached the law building, the fire and smoke from the Asch Building followed and ignited the N.Y.U. structure. Faculty and students rushed to the law library to save the books.

It was subsequently found that despite the pandemonium which ensued at Triangle, most of the eighth and 10th floor persons lived to see another day.

The people on the ninth floor, however, did less well. Some 260 were employed there, and not even half of them would get through the conflagration, which only lasted 30 minutes.

Conditions on the ninth floor were so bad that it was almost a foregone conclusion as to the fate of those workers. Many of the girls died at their sewing machines, unable to escape from the long aisles where no egress was available. Others, riveted with fright, piled up against doors that wouldn't open. Still others jumped down the elevator shafts, landed in heaps on the roofs of the cars, and caused the car roofs to fall in.

Many jumped from the window, some in groups of two and three. It was utterly hopeless. Several actually survived the fall of nine stories and died later in the hospital.

The fire department was bitterly defeated by the combination of circumstances. The ladders wouldn't reach high enough; the safety nets were unable to stop the hurtling bodies because the accumulated downward speed and weight exceeded the nets' ability. Metal fire

escapes, black with the many people scurrying downward, collapsed and fell away from the building's side, causing more fatalities.

The horses which drew the fire department's many conveyances were panicked by the carnage, smoke, continual screams of the dying, and the terrified girls plunging earthward. About all the vaunted fire fighters of New York City could do was aim their water hoses on the building and cool it off.

An immense crowd of onlookers gathered. The police held them back and could do little more.

The total death count was 146. One of the girls was Annie.

Horse-drawn wagons carried the dead people to a temporary morgue established on the 26th Street pier. Groups of people watched in stunned silence.

News of the conflagration spread quickly. Many of the victims belonged to families on the lower East Side or elsewhere. As messages reached concerned parties, a line of people formed outside the temporary morgue. It was more than a block in length.

The New York Times for Monday, March 27, 1911, page 4, carried a list of dead and included this notice: NICHOLAS, ANNIE, 18, of 126 East 110th Street, died at New York Hospital.

A further comment in the article said: "Most of those in the hospital received their injuries by jumping from the windows."

Annie's age was reported incorrectly. She was nearly 21.

It was Raisele, Rachel's old friend, who endured the ordeal of searching for the girl and identifying her.

The funeral was attended by many people, who followed the horse-drawn hearse in a procession to the cemetery. A few very old pious Jews clad in velour hats and long black coats were present, too. These aged men carried alms boxes and begged donations for the poor as well as the less-fortunate Jews residing in Jerusalem.

At the Lemberger group's section of the burial ground, Annie was laid to rest. The attending rabbi cut a section of each male's garment, a tie or vest, to signify the rending of clothing during a time of grief; moreover, the garment was to be worn during the following seven-day mourning period, Shiva.

In the family's apartment, all mirrors were shrouded, and everyone, in stockinged feet, sat on wooden boxes and ate food served on larger wooden crates. Neighbors arrived in the morning to form a *minyan* (quorum) of 10 male adults for prayer and returned in the evening for a repeat service.

Ben's personal response to the situation troubled him for long years after. At the news of the Triangle fire and the possible loss of Annie, his response was strangely stoic. He described it as a lack of emotion, interest, and feeling. Why? He loved his sister, but couldn't understand how he had completely disassociated himself from the

result of the disaster. He was, he says, at the time unhappy, bored, aimless.

A few days after the funeral, Charley arrived and informed Ben that Ben had to quit school and find work, to compensate for the loss of Annie's wages. Ben didn't protest. Charley led him on a job hunt and helped Ben get on at the firm of Weisenberger & Mock, dealers in millinery accessories. The outfit dealt in flowers and feathers, especially ostrich feathers. Ben received three dollars a week for 60 hours' work, going home a half hour earlier on Saturday.

Sometime later, a representative of the Red Cross visited Rachel and gave her 300 dollars as an expression of sympathy and assistance to the family. The money was gratefully received because the move uptown from the Lower East Side to Harlem had strained the family's resources and the help arrived when the need was considerable.

As for Ben's attitude about Annie, more than 70 years have passed since the girl's life ended. At the time of the tragedy, Ben was progressing fairly well in DeWitt Clinton High School. He was the first of the American-born Nicholas children to remain so long in public school. Another couple of years' attendance would have seen Ben graduating from high school. Very possibly, at that juncture, he might have enrolled in college. He was young, and even if he had been compelled to seek work full-time, he could have undertaken night courses, leading to what . . . no one can say, as the entire scenario is merely conjecture. The vision, however, of a bright young man like Ben going forward as a result of education must have appeared a modest few times in his imagination, the way it did for others in their lives. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that with an education, Ben could have achieved . . . who can say what? The fact that Ben had to give up school and go to work, so his wages could offset the loss of Annie's wages, was an inescapable reality. But who can deny that a smart 17-year-old boy who liked school and was ambitious and who knew what education could do in the way of self-betterment might not be a bit resentful, even subconsciously, when made to quit school and find work?

The Nicholases had to be interested in success, for that was the one sure route out of the squalor of the Lower East Side, that was the one way to a more genteel existence in pleasanter surroundings. By the time Annie's tragedy occurred, the family was already on the road to new things, having moved up to Harlem. *It was already apparent to them that the dream worked*, and with more concerted effort, who knew what the possibilities might be?

That Ben recalls himself as having felt aimless, bored, and restless about then is believable. He had just moved to a new neighborhood, where the harshness of the old poverty was meant to be forgotten. He

probably was not well acquainted in the area, having left many friends in the old neighborhood.

Annie's death had the effect of throwing Ben's hopes into a chaotic state and brought about a trauma in his feelings toward her which lasted for him into old age.

As a further note to Annie's tragic death in the Triangle Shirtwaist Company's fire, it should be mentioned that the fire generated a tremendous revulsion throughout the United States. There was a great demand for reform in the area of workshop conditions. Eventually, some new laws were passed that went further in protecting the working conditions of women.

Frances Perkins was among those responsible for the reforms. She later became the first woman in a presidential Cabinet, when Franklin Roosevelt designated her as Secretary of Labor.

Ben's employment with Weisenberger & Mock lasted about six months. The hours were from 8:00 to 12:00 and 12:30 to 6:00 p.m. Saturdays ended at 5:30. There were no rest periods.

The firm went through a difficult time when laws were passed forbidding the use of ostrich feathers in millinery. Ben lost the job.

His next job was obtained through personal initiative. An architectural magazine took him on as an office boy and photographer's assistant. The most important assignment was the photographing of the New York Public Library, prior to that fine institution's opening. Ben was fascinated with cameras and lenses, and the photographers were most kind to him, explaining interesting details. He loved the work and experienced that wonderful sensation which animates people at every stage of existence... he had *big hopes*. But the firm sold out to another publishing house, and though Ben went along, his work changed.

The new owners were photo-gravure printers, using copper engraved plates. The presses were flat-plates with pressure applied by long arms. The arms brought the padded pressure plate against the engraved plates, which had been prepared, inked, with the excess removed and cleaned with talc. Paper was placed upon it and pressure applied. A girl helper placed the printed sheet between tissue, to ensure against offsetting impressions. The work was slow and each copy had to be perfect. The tissue was later removed, the pages assembled and bound into books.

A father and son worked as printers. Ben swept the floor.

On a particular and unfortunate occasion, Ben unconsciously pushed the broom against the father's foot or stepped on it. This angered the man. He called Ben a Jew bastard and insisted he had done the act deliberately.

Perhaps Ben should have attempted an apology, but the kind of language which had been used was too incendiary. Ben told the man

he was an old bastard, whereupon the man's son appeared, eyes blazing. He punched Ben. Ben struck the son once and knocked him down. The young man rose with a black eye. He sought out the boss and complained.

Ben was soon summoned to the office. He told how he had been insulted by the name calling, that he was hit first, and would accept such treatment from no one.

The boss sent Ben back to work, with instructions to avoid further contact with the father and son.

Photo-gravure printing was soon replaced by new and modern presses which could do the work at a much lower cost. The employer sold out to yet another firm and Ben went along again.

Many women worked in the new company. Some of them were rather brazen. Two girls conducted an ongoing dialogue as to which girl had the bigger tits. Ben was chosen to judge. He obliged with a bit of by-play and attempted to date them. He chose one, which offended the other, but of course it was impossible to please everyone, although at the age of 18 or so, Ben was willing to try.

Willingness, in fact, was a virtue in a young bachelor, Ben found. The people often worked late in the shop, and when an evening meal had to be missed, the girls prepared coffee and sandwiches elsewhere on the premises. One girl asked him to assist her, as she hated the dark. This nervous young lady was engaged to be married, was small and perky, with a snub nose.

When the pair reached the room where the food was to be prepared, Ben's companion grabbed him and then ensued a bit of hugging and kissing.

Another time, the boss assigned Ben to accompany the same girl to a particular loft to bring back some supplies. That was where he lost his virginity. Hardly the ideal environment for romance, of course, but willingness, thank God, and success compensate for many things.

To Ben's delight, the boss delegated him and the girl to return to that loft a few times more. On the final visit, a man who wanted to rent the loft walked in while the couple were so occupied. One glance and he was gone.

Ben's partner in amour was understandably concerned, but although he was a bit frightened, he convincingly assured her they had not been observed. Nevertheless, they were never again detailed to bring supplies from the loft.

ELEVEN.

Ben was entitled to a week's vacation. He persuaded his brother Max to substitute during the absence, but Max was restless working inside. He performed Ben's various duties, but hated the routine and failed to appreciate that Ben was fond of the work. The girls in the office complained that for diversion, Max folded and floated paper airplanes through the premises.

Max liked less cerebral work. Molly Nicholas persuaded her girlfriend, who had married Sam Minskoff, a boss plumber, to hire Max as a helper. Max remained in the plumbing business for the rest of his life, also expanding into building construction.

Ben's vacation week was spent on a kosher farm near Hudson, New York, where the Nechols clan was enjoying some play time. Ben traveled up the river on a boat of the Hudson River Day Line. When the vessel reached the landing, the farmer waited with horse and wagon.

The farm was large. It featured orchards, fresh vegetables, fresh eggs, and other things. Ben and his cousins helped pick fruit, feed the chickens and livestock.

When Ben returned to the city and resumed his employment, Max was glad. Irving Nechols had become Ben's close friend long before. They chummed with Irving's first cousin and Ben's third cousin, Jesse Measer. With Ben back in town from vacation, the young men were together constantly, going to vaudeville shows and sports events. They spent considerable time at the home of the Nechols Family.

The firm where Ben worked had to shut the doors, having gone

broke. Unemployed again, seeking work, the subject of jobs was a sensitive one. Sometimes, Ben believed himself to be jinxed. His elder brother, Charley, however, was able to help. He was a pressman at C. S. Hammond & Company, map makers. Charley worked on their big Miehle press. He informed Ben of a job opening at Hammond's. Ben was interviewed by Mr. Hammond and hired. At that time, only Rand-McNally was larger.

Versatile and quick, Ben learned to recognize color plates used in printing maps, by states or foreign countries, in four colors. He learned to be a proof-reader and lettered names of towns on maps, among other things. He liked the responsibility and felt himself to be truly appreciated by Mr. Hammond and the office staff. It remains a matter of conjecture as to how far Ben might have gone if he had been able to finish his studies at DeWitt Clinton High School and matriculated at some college. Obviously, he had the intellectual depth and motivation for learning, and his stay at C. S. Hammond was indicative of his possibilities.

Charley Nicholas, meantime, was headed for trouble. He was trying to organize the shop. Mr. Hammond heard about it.

Charley was remarkable. He had a good friend in the shop, a young deaf mute. Through daily contact with him, Charley learned sign language, and even when he was seated high on the press, feeding the paper, he and his pal maintained continuous contact, so that the pace of work never diminished. Despite Charley's many virtues, though, Mr. Hammond was firm and discharged him. Ben went to the boss and pleaded for Charley's reinstatement. Hammond was courteous and informed Ben that he'd like to please him. But the man was convinced that if Charley returned to the payroll, he would attempt to organize the shop another time. There was nothing Ben could do.

Ben's recollections of his days in this firm are vivid. Mr. Hammond was in his early sixties. He had a sister, Mrs. Bird. She was the wife of a doctor. She and her husband were partners in the firm, but only Mrs. Bird participated at the office. She resembled her brother, also being of small stature and possessed of a pleasant smile.

Hammond fancied himself something of a Lothario and attempted to date the office girls. They knew he was married and gave him no encouragement. Mr. Hammond's eldest son, Dean, ran the plant. The youngest son, Robert, attended Yale.

Richmond Snow, fine-looking, bright, and about 25, was in charge of sales and the retail store at 60 Church Street, downtown. He urged Ben to undertake the selling of a new series of maps to parochial schools. Ben set out on the assignment. Parochial schools, that is, Catholic ones, had priests as principals. Ben had to talk with those individuals and was frightened. Whether it was the sight of men in long, dark dresses, cassocks, or superstition dating back to days on

the Lower East Side, Ben didn't prosper in the assignment and was taken off.

Dean Hammond was hospitalized with appendicitis, in those days a most serious matter. He was away from the office for a few months. His father put Ben in charge of the plant. Hammond said that if any member of the crew questioned Ben's authority, the skeptic was to be directed to the office for an immediate paycheck followed by a quick departure from the premises.

Ben accomplished the new work and handled the responsibility nicely. Part of his job was the supervision of proof reading. He assigned a young woman to undertake the initial reading of galleys, after which he re-read the material and followed up any unresolved errors.

As it happened, Ben's young assistant was engaged to be married to a New York City fireman. The lovers quarrelled, and upon reporting this news to Ben, the girl revealed a considerable hostility. She told Ben that she knew her young man had cheated when taking his fireman's exam. In her anger, she requested Ben for instructions as to how the matter could be reported to municipal authorities. Ben thought this reprehensible and denounced her intention. Ashamed, the young lady dropped her scheme, and a good thing it was, for the couple reconciled a few weeks later and got married.

After Dean Hammond was well again, he returned to work and another assignment for Ben was found. He was appointed to edit a world's almanac. Hammond & Co. printed the books and sold them to newspapers all over the country, although each paper added its own cover and frontispiece.

The almanac had the largest circulation of all the firm's output. The data contained in the almanac was periodically updated via correspondence with U.S. embassies around the world. Unfortunately, Hammond & Co. discontinued publishing the almanac. The reason was vexing. The firm employed a particular salesman who was on the road selling the almanac 11 months each year. In the salesman's absence, his wife took a lover. The lover jilted the wife. She attempted suicide. The salesman was called home from the road, discovered the true nature of the problem, and quit C. S. Hammond. Anyway, war was approaching and many Hammond customers were losing interest in the almanac.

Intramural situations in the shop kept everyone titillated. For example, Richmond Snow married a clerk named Virginia Swan. A crude joke quickly made the rounds that there would soon be six inches of snow in the middle of Virginia.

In 1916, General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing led an American military expedition into Mexico in pursuit of the famous bandit

Pancho Villa. Hammond & Co. produced a huge enlargement of the map of Mexico, added colored pins to mark Pershing's progress, and displayed the exhibit in the window of the Church Street store, a brilliant means of capturing attention. Crowds of passersby gathered daily in front of the Hammond store window.

Villa had led his men into New Mexico and caused an uproar by the incursion. There was a good deal of public resentment in the U.S. and some people thought Villa had been financed by German agents.

As the war in Europe continued, the demand for maps was overwhelming. Hammond & Co. received so many orders it was necessary to make duplicate plates of all the colors and farm out the printing to other large firms. At that juncture, Ben's job was to coordinate the outside work and obtain promised deliveries. With Hammond's permission, he hired a taxi by the day to travel about Manhattan on business errands and avoid the delays of public transportation. It tickled Ben's ego that when C. S. Hammond himself wished to use the cab, it was necessary to first clear it with Ben.

The volume of Ben's work required an assistant. He engaged a young man for the job, an Italian. The two men became friends. The new employee invited Ben to his home, in an Italian section of the East Bronx. He introduced Ben to some friends who were in revolt against Catholicism, often disrupting church services. The young assistant purchased a cigar for Ben, the beginning of Ben's lifelong use of tobacco—cigars and pipes, never cigarettes.

Like many bachelors, Ben, with Irving Nechols and Jesse Measer, often went to wedding halls to crash parties. If too few bachelors had appeared, then the trio found themselves much in demand, with abundant opportunities to eat, drink, and dance until evening's end. It wasn't all fun and games, though. Sometimes it meant taking a girl home all the way to East New York in Brooklyn, a considerable distance by subway and elevated train. Even so, there were compensations. Ben learned the latest dance steps at the wedding celebrations, then went to the home of Rose Nechols, Irving's sister, to demonstrate the terpsichore to Rose's girlfriends.

By then, Irving had graduated from high school and taken a course in advertising at Columbia University. He landed a job as a copy writer in a department store in Olean, New York, near Niagara Falls. That Irving might one day be Ben's brother-in-law was becoming apparent because Ben was calling on Rose so frequently that people were talking.

Meantime, Germany's U-boats were wreaking havoc upon international shipping, and although Woodrow Wilson was re-elected president in 1916 on the platform "He Kept Us Out of War!", it was evident that the United States would not much longer be able to avoid involvement. Military preparedness became a public concern, fos-

tered to some extent by ambitious politicians and the newspapers, who were accruing great wealth through the repeated emphasis of sensational news reports in edition after edition.

Early in the Spring of 1917, a preparedness parade was scheduled in every city and town, to alert the public. New York City's massive procession would include participants from various industries. Jesse Measer urged Ben to march with him in the jewelry retailer's group. For the parade that day, smoking was banned in the ranks, although the use of chewing tobacco was acceptable. Wanting to show his sociability, Ben accepted a chew of tobacco and found it was awful. It made him ill.

He managed to stay in ranks. Lines of marchers extended for miles, with bands playing, drums beating, flags waving. The many political notables beamed benignly in the reviewing stands. Soon the patriotic officials would do their duty and piously consign innumerable young men to horrible deaths.

A typical work day found Ben and his shop assistant enjoying lunch in a fine saloon on Church Street. Beer was 10 cents a glass and included a thick beef tongue or corned beef sandwich on rye. In other places, fighting competition, beer was a nickel a glass and was sometimes served with Hungarian Goulash or beef stew, sufficient as a meal.

They also ate periodically in the Exchange Buffet, not far from the Stock Exchange. It was an interesting place. A customer took a tray and proceeded to some long buffet tables loaded with salads and sandwiches, with all prices clearly displayed. One table, for desserts and pastries, featured apple pie and a large plate of cheddar cheese cut in individual cube servings. The cheese was included in the pie price. A customer could take cheese cubes in whatever reasonable quantity was desired.

When the customer finished dining, the person went to the cashier and reported the amounts of food consumed. If the honor system was not observed and the customer fibbed as to what had been eaten (could have taken enough cheese cubes to make a sandwich)—not to worry—an inspector was on the scene who promptly recited the correct answers. The untrustworthy customer would then be told to leave the premises and never return.

April 6, 1917, occurred on a Good Friday. Ben and his friend ate lunch downtown and paused to read the big news board in front of *The New York World* building on Park Row and Nassau Street. A declaration of war against Germany was imminent. The question was ... would it be declared on a Good Friday? Affirmative. In the eyes of some innocents, that made the conflict a Holy War, which some satirists of man's baser instincts claim is the best kind.

Ben's friend belonged to the National Guard. Ben wondered how an official declaration of war related to the fellow. The young man answered: "I'm afraid this is the last you'll see of me." He was summoned to report for duty that night and the two friends never met again.

A draft law was soon passed. It covered males from age 18 upward. Ben's elder brother, Charley, was in the eligible age group, but having a wife and three children, he was exempt. Ben attempted to enlist. He visited recruiting stations set up in municipal parks for all branches of the service. He was rejected because of poor eyesight. When Ben's draft board called him for a physical, he failed that exam as well. Every month or so thereafter, he had to return for a new eye checkup.

Jesse Measer was drafted and sent south to an army camp.

Irving initially failed the physical because of his eyes, but when the war was nearly done, was inducted and stationed at headquarters on Governor's Island, New York. The duty must have been pretty good, as that's where Irving met Betty (Bessie) Liss, who married him.

As time went on, C. S. Hammond & Co. decided to publish road maps, acknowledging the growing presence of cars on country roads. Ben was assigned to write driving instructions. Those texts provided instructions to courageous drivers for reaching particular destinations. Ben's text always informed the driver that if the trip were planned as starting from Columbus Circle, which was at Broadway and 59th Street in midtown Manhattan, set the speedometer at zero, and if the driver carefully followed the various posted signs along Central Park West, then turned right at the big church and bore ⅛ of a mile to the left and looked sharp, he might find himself perilously close to the New York Central railroad tracks beside the Hudson, or, if the driver possessed a sense of direction more efficacious than Ben's written text, the driver might come safely to the beach beside Long Island Sound near Larchmont. Regardless, the instructions were printed and folded into a map cover. Business was good, but a main attraction was maps of the European battlegrounds along with the ever-popular road maps.

The staff at Hammond's included some interesting people. A draftsman named Thompson was, regrettably, color blind. Ben aided him in distinguishing the difference between green and red. Thompson, in turn, reciprocated by helping Ben with printing and lettering. Ben consulted the man frequently and whenever a question arose, Ben demonstrated to Thompson how far he had progressed, and then, with Thompson's instructions, undertook necessary corrections.

Thompson invited Ben and Rose to be his guests at a revival conducted by the noted sin-killer, Billy Sunday. The rally was staged in a big tent on the old Yankee baseball grounds. Sunday, who was a

retired baseball pitcher of repute, and a reformed drunkard, had experienced a hard life and showed it. Perhaps 10,000 people were present as Thompson led Ben and Rose to reserved seats in the front row. On the platform, Billy wound up dramatically, his arms arranged as if he were about to pitch a baseball. He mimed a throw, pointing to the floor and yelling "Devil, I defy you!" He chanted it several times. Within the tent, the atmosphere was electric. No one moved.

Another Hammond employee was the then-president of the Amateur Athletic Union. He was an expert copper engraver and often described to Ben how the work was done.

America went to war. Following a short training period, the first A.E.F.—American Expeditionary Force—went to England for further maneuvers. General Pershing led the group. On the home front, life was affected by the war in every imaginable way.

One method of the government to rally public support was the War Bond selling drive. This was a highly-publicized ploy in which patriotism was equated with people's willingness to invest in federally-issued bonds, the money then being used by the government to finance the war effort. The selling campaigns or "drives" were launched amid tremendous publicity, highlighted by the public appearances of stage and screen stars, famous singers, dancers, and comedians. Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks were among the many well-known screen names who went on bond-selling tours for the government. Al Jolson, then commencing his heyday as a Broadway singing sensation, Eddie Cantor, and others sang at open-air rallies. Will Rogers told humorous stories.

George M. Cohan wrote the song *Over There* while Irving Berlin brought forth his show *Yip, Yip, Yaphank,* intended as a spoof of military life.

Ben and Irving Nechols (Nechols at this time had not yet been taken into the army), deferred from service because of poor vision, observed the departure of friends and acquaintances, experiencing a good deal of guilt. They returned to the military doctors for monthly eye tests, hoping to be accepted. By war's end, Ben was about to be drafted. Then came peace.

Irving insisted that Ben leave C. S. Hammond, saying there were better opportunities elsewhere. Ben found his job at Hammond's not as exciting as formerly, and after Irving's persuasiveness, decided to quit. He gave Snow and Mr. Hammond notice. They urged Ben to stay, offering him an increase in salary that was hard to refuse. Ben truly liked his bosses, and knew the firm could offer a good future. If he had known what his next experiences were going to be, Ben would have swallowed his pride and gone back to Hammond without a murmur.

Ben found a new job selling advertising. Each day, he called on firms and one time arrived at the offices of Cassidy & Goldberg, specializing in high-quality ladies' coats. Ben asked the receptionist for an interview with Mr. Cassidy. In due course, there emerged from the back room a little old Jewish man, who obviously resented being interrupted. He looked at Ben, frowned nervously, and said with some asperity: "Nu, vat you vant?"

Ben gravely answered: "I'd like to see Mr. Cassidy, please."

The old man knit his brows. "*I'm* Mr. Cassidy!"

Ben did a take. A Yiddish accent, a name like Cassidy . . . was this some kind of *shtick* from vaudeville? "*You're* . . . him?" Ben was choking with laughter.

The old man lost his temper. "Bummer!" he yelled. "Get out!"

Needless to say, Ben Nicholas obtained no order at that firm.

His adventures while selling advertising generally proved to be a good deal less humorous and barely remunerative. After advertising, Ben attempted to sell other services, without noticeable success.

1918 saw the great flu epidemic sweep the country and the number of fatalities was unbelievable. Rose contracted it, the only member of her family to do so. At the time, Ben and his family lived on East 152nd Street. Almost daily, he rode the street car across to Acqueduct Avenue, to the Nechols house, to stay with her and be comforting. Rose's doctor cautioned Ben that such exposure was dangerous, but she recovered and he never became ill.

Max Nicholas, now a plumber, worked on various jobs with a brother of George Meany. George was then president of the New York Plumbers' Union and also head of the State Plumbers' Board.

Max applied for a Master Plumber's license. He failed the first exam, then tried again and failed a second time. He complained to Meany's brother, who suggested that Max pay $200 under the table. Max did and passed.

During the war, Max was too young for military service, and was offered a shipyard job in New Orleans. He worked there and returned to New York after the war with an impressive bankroll. The funds were invested in his plumbing contractor's business. At this stage, Max took on a partner named Jake. They accepted a job out of town, rented a furnished room nearby, and set the alarm for 5:00 a.m. Jake erroneously awoke at half-past *two* in the morning, but believed it to be six o'clock. He quickly roused Max. They dressed hurriedly and rushed out, then discovered the mistake. Since they were already up and ready, they went to work anyhow. The partnership did not prosper and was dissolved a short time later.

Al Nicholas found work as a riveter, first doing apprenticeship as a catcher of hot rivets in a tin pail. Such continual exertion helped Al

to develop a marvelous physique. One of Al's co-workers became angry on an occasion and denounced him as a Jew bastard. Al beat him up. Angry, Al was tough and a good fighter. Otherwise, he was most gentle.

He later got out of heavy construction and joined a well-known investigative detective agency, checking on sales help in stores and restaurants.

Gertie, Ben's youngest sister, stayed home and helped Rachel. The girl was sweet and cheerful except while scrubbing the floor on her knees. If anyone dared enter the room, Gertie snarled, yelled, and threw the wet scrub rag at the intruder. She bullied everyone, but being the baby of the family, received considerable indulgence. Gertie's first job was obtained for her by Rose in a Fifth Avenue jewelry shop, where Rose was a private secretary.

About that time, Ben's old Clark House friend, Mike Hertzoff, and Mike's brother-in-law, Jack, were planning to commence the manufacture of chemicals. Jack was a chemist for United Piece Dye Works in Paterson, New Jersey, the largest dyers of piece goods, with a well-fitted lab. They tested all the dyes used, as all were imported from Germany.

Jack was busy with the development of an intermediary called *Dimethelanaline* for making *Rhodemine Red*, a most important color at the time. It was so important that Germany, before America entered the war in 1917, sent a U-boat cargo of the dye to United Piece Dye Works. Prices for the German stuff skyrocketed from a few dollars per pound to 50 dollars per pound and more, greatly diluted in strength. All that was needed to produce it domestically was the intermediary. Jack thought he was onto an answer. The natural consequence would be for him to produce the material independently and make a lot of money.

E. I. DuPont bought out the dye business of United and Jack went with the deal. Even so, Jack intended to proceed with his own scheme on the side.

Mike Hertzoff and Jack called on Ben. They wanted him to join them in a three-way partnership, which, with understandable optimism, they knew "couldn't miss."

Ben was much impressed by his friends' concept and agreed to participate. Ben's circumstances, just then, were not sufficient to permit him to move with any alacrity. He had experienced a lengthy era of trial and disappointment already and was compelled to seek outside assistance for his portion of the needed capitalization. Max Nicholas and Irving Nechols helped, and in due course Ben added his share of funds to launch the project.

The trio found an empty loft building across the Hudson in the none-too-attractive Jersey Meadows. Nearby, a municipal garbage area and several hog farms around the community of Secaucus exuded unpleasant odors; across from the trio's new location, a soap factory was situated. To add insult to injury, the neighborhood was mosquito-ridden, not unusual in swampy stretches like the Jersey Meadows. On days when the wind blew in the wrong direction, people didn't know whether to swat bugs before they contracted malaria or hold their noses lest they died of asphyxiation.

The three young men plunged ahead. They bought equipment, a boiler, vats, and other things. Deals were arranged with supply houses to sell their lines as jobbers. These lines included chemicals and chemical glassware.

On the face of it, the scheme was promising. Jack had zeroed in on an industrial item that was in desperately short supply. The demand for it was virtually beyond measure. The little which was available brought sky-high prices. The whole thing was too marvelous for words.

But there were drawbacks. Jack was an employee of E. I. DuPont and could only attend to the new venture after a regular working day at the big plant. Mike Hertzoff was going to law school and encumbered with all that such enrollment portended—long hours of lectures followed by even longer hours of preparation. Ben was a salesman and manager, short on experience in the marketing of such items.

Nevertheless, they were young, optimistic, industrious, talented, and, best of all, a huge market beckoned.

Jack prepared samples for Ben to offer dye manufacturers. Ben also called on laboratories. Mike did what he could after law classes. A line of credit was arranged and the enterprise commenced.

Ben obtained some orders, picked up the goods from suppliers, and delivered them to customers. It was a promising beginning but hardly enough to pay expenses. And those goods, after all, were not produced in the trio's shop. Their intentions were more ambitious than to be mere middlemen.

The samples got up by Jack for Ben to show were sub-standard, even after several corrections. This sad circumstance proved to be the venture's undoing, for the three young men were descending into more debt at an alarming pace. They were frankly stumped, because even with Jack's wonderful knowledge and ability, some secret ingredient eluded his analysis and was never discovered until long after the war ended.

The product offered by the trio was unsatisfactory because the end result lacked the proper shade and brightness; moreover, it was not colorfast. Potash was the primary ingredient and the quality of the

potash made the end product. The thing which was wanting, all along, was the high quality of potash produced in Germany. No one else had it. The poor quality of American dyes at that time caused U.S. producers to lag behind the Germans.

After a long, valiant effort, the trio suspended operations. They had attempted a brilliant maneuver which, if it had succeeded, would have—in their enthusiasm and confidence—turned the world upside down.

Instead, the struggle came to naught, and although their failure was honorable, the stress of it not only destroyed the business, but rent asunder, too, a long and faithful friendship, not unusual in the circumstances. Mike's wife, also a long-standing friend, broke off with the old group as well.

Mike and Jack sold the equipment and inventory of supplies. They refused Ben his share of the proceeds, forcing Ben to sue. After enduring a painful litigation, Ben won about $250, insufficient to meet his obligations, which subsequently entailed a lengthy period of repayment.

Appearing in court against his old friends was painful for Ben. It was also necessary for Max Nicholas and Irving Nechols to testify in Ben's behalf.

As an unhappy footnote to already dolorous proceedings, Ben had the additional bad luck to have a lawyer whose ethics left something to be desired. After the court had ruled in Ben's favor, the money to be paid to Ben was first placed in the lawyer's hand. The attorney was to subtract a legal fee and send the proceeds to Ben. It didn't happen. Ben pressed his lawyer for months, to no avail. Desperate, Ben reported the matter to the bar association, after which the lawyer remitted the amount without subtracting any fee for himself.

Ben found himself again unemployed, looking for something new. He got on as a salesman of a coal saver. It was a system whereby steam boilers could reduce coal usage and eliminate smoke. The process involved the spraying of jets of super-heated steam over a hot coal bed to increase the temperature of the fire. Ben received some business from a manufacturer of carbonated drinks. The firm installed a flue halfway up a great smokestack, to remove part of the carbon dioxide, then directing the carbon dioxide into a tank that purified and compressed the gas. Subsequently, the firm added the gas to their beverages.

Ben found the system to be amazing, a means of recovering an obnoxious gas that polluted the air and turned it into something useful. He was baffled as to why others did not also employ the system. This experience occurred early in 1919.

One hot day, Ben called on a client who ran a brewery. Ben asked for a drink of cold water. Instead, he was directed to a cooler of beer.

He consumed some cold, delicious beer which sent him weaving, cutting short his workday to go home. This experience drifted into his memory as part of the topsy-turvy history of Ben to find a decent job.

Another time, Ben merchandised a soap powder that one customer claimed was so marvelous he used it to wash his teeth. The stuff may have been great, but Ben couldn't sell enough to make a living; furthermore, he was not set up to use the soap as a means of crashing the dentifrice market.

On yet another occasion, Ben found work as a rent collector for a large realty firm. He was assigned to collect in a slum on Manhattan's tough Lower West Side. In that area, the danger of being held up and robbed was as constant as the chance of being mugged. Ben had to travel across rooftops or pass through cellars to adjoining buildings. The rooftop travel at least had daylight in its favor, whereas the cellars were murky and often rat-infested. The previous rent collector had been badly injured. Fortunately for Ben, he was always alert and just plain lucky. Nonetheless, he soon quit. Next, there was an attempt to sell advertising for the Actor's Guild magazine. He also collected some delinquent accounts from some of the top theatrical names.

About then, Ben met Herman Oshann, an insurance man associated with Henry Nechols, Rose's father. Herman became a close friend. He was a member of Shakespeare Lodge #247 Knights of Pythias and urged Ben to join. Ben did and found many friends.

One friend, still close, was Paul Pakula. Another was the young friend that Ben retained to file suit against Mike Hertzoff and Jack. That experience ended badly, a rare exception in Ben's memories of lodge life.

Another friend, an eye-ear-nose-and-throat specialist, removed Ben's tonsils. The operation was performed in the doctor's office. Ben sat in a chair under a big light, received a local anesthetic, and while fully conscious, his mouth open, the surgery was done. Afterward, Ben was given a piece of ice to suck, to halt any bleeding. The operation was successful.

Upon joining the lodge, Ben was made Inner Guard, on the lowest rung of membership. He later became Prelate, whose function was to administer oaths and undertake certain speaking duties. Later, he was elected Vice-Chancellor and finally Chancellor Commander or president.

When Ben was scheduled to speak, he experienced considerable apprehension, and some little time was needed before the ambitious salesman found his tongue in oratory.

The social calendar was an attractive side of lodge life. Many events required full dress ensembles of tails, white tie, spats, stiff white shirt, and a winged collar. The men sometimes rented top hats,

an elegant touch. Ben loved the stylish atmosphere of dinners, dances, New Year's celebrations, and other events.

A particularly memorable event was a lodge picnic held in a park beside the river. Games and contests were the order of the day. One called for a group to form a pyramid. Paul Pakula, clad in the uniform of the Coast Guard, was on top. He fell and was hurt. Ben appealed to the eye-ear-nose-and-throat fellow, who was also a lodge brother and present. The medical gentleman declined to treat Paul, saying that such work was not his line. Many of the lodge brothers were considerably peeved by the refusal.

Paul had brought his girl, Bertha, to the picnic. She criticized him for the unfortunate descent from the human pyramid, calling him clumsy, and engaged in a lengthy quarrel as they went home. They broke up. Paul then courted another girl, Jeanette Goldstein, and eventually married her.

Meantime, Ben and Rose's courtship continued. As he rode daily on the platform of the subway train to work, Ben's thoughts were filled with pictures of the happy marriage ahead with Rose.

The couple talked of becoming engaged and decided to look at rings. There were problems, however. Peppie Nechols (Pauline), Rose's mother, and Rose's brother, Ben's pal Irving, were not very enthusiastic about Ben's romantic attachment to Rose. Ben was all right as a friend and of course he was a relative. But he was not quite good enough to become a son-in-law. He had problems holding a job, and, besides ... Jesse Measer was also quite fond of Rose.

A small diamond was finally selected. As Rose and Ben departed from the jewelry shop, they heard newsboys on the street shouting *Extra! Extra!* (extra edition), proclaiming ARMISTICE SIGNED. It proved to be a false alarm. The formal armistice was actually signed the following week, November 11, at 11 o'clock a.m., 1918. It was the 11th month, the 11th day, the 11th hour. The rejoicing was universal.

Rose and Ben were pressed to name a wedding date, but he was reluctant, postponing until he had a decent job. It would be June 15, 1919.

A trip downtown for a wedding license was necessary. Irving Nechols and Betty Liss, who were also courting, accompanied Rose and Ben. On the spur of the moment, the two couples decided to get married in the clerk's office. Newspapers picked up the story, facts were rewritten, and the headline was BROTHER AND SISTER MARRY TOGETHER. It provided conversation for weeks after.

The following Sunday, Irving and Betty were married in a rabbi's office, attended by the Nechols family as well as Mr. and Mrs. Liss and Stanley, their young son.

In Europe, Liss had studied for the rabbinate, but in America became an atheist.

An official "nice" wedding for Ben and Rose would be the succeeding Sunday. It remains the only date the couple observes. In following years, whenever the couple had their fortunes told, whether by cards, palms, or horoscope, they have invariably been told they would marry twice.

Sunday morning, June 15, 1919, was a bright, sunny day. The ceremony was held in the Nechols home on Aqueduct Avenue in the West Bronx during the afternoon. Rose wore a traditional wedding gown and veil, while Ben donned his full dress suit. Henry Nechols, father of the bride, was in afternoon garb, with tails. The couple were married by a rabbi wearing the uniform of an Army Chaplain. They stood under a *chuppeh*, wedding canopy, and finished with the ritual breaking of the wine glass amid cries of "Mazeltov!" All of the Nicholas clan were present, including in-laws and their offspring. As the Nechols home was quite spacious, everyone was comfortable.

Jesse Measer didn't show up. He was back from the war and telephoned earlier to say he would attend and was bringing a nice wedding gift. His deep love for Rose and jealousy of Ben was apparently too much. Ben and Rose never saw Jesse again until many years later, when there was a chance encounter in Los Angeles.

Following the ceremony, the bridal couple changed into street clothes and departed with Betty and Irving. They traveled by subway into midtown Manhattan to spend their wedding night at the McAlpin Hotel, at 33rd Street and Broadway. Rose had remained a virgin throughout three years of often torrid courtship.

Next morning, the newlyweds descended to the hotel's restaurant and enjoyed their favorite breakfast of hotcakes with ham and eggs. They next traveled by train to the village of Arverne, near Rockaway Beach in Long Island, for a two-week's honeymoon in a Jewish boardinghouse.

Although Ben was in his mid-twenties, he was rather bald, a circumstance duly commented upon by one elderly guest. She knew Rose was a recent bride and inquired how it was she had come to marry such an old man. The question left Rose in a terrible temper.

During their first dip in the ocean, Ben absorbed water in his ear and it wouldn't come out. His lodge brother, a G.P., had to lance the ear to clear it. Ben spent the entire two weeks rinsing the ear.

Yet a week later, Rose and Ben attended the marriage of Si Dolmatz, Sam's younger brother.

After the holiday at Arverne, the couple were established in an apartment which the Nechols Family had built for them. It was on the top floor of the wooden framed house on Aqueduct Avenue, and consisted of a kitchen, bedroom, and bath.

Rose continued at her job, while Ben searched for work. He answered an ad for a printing expert, listed by Orr & Company, Can-

ada's finest quality printers. Ben was offered the job, with expenses paid for a move to Toronto. The Nicholas and Nechols families objected vehemently. Rose and Ben, however, were determined to move to Toronto.

Then Sam Dolmatz, Ben's brother-in-law, offered to hire him. With Rose's approval, Ben reluctantly accepted the offer. The irony is that Ben's experience at Hammond & Company made him a "natural" for the job in Toronto, and entering Sam's firm meant that Ben would have to learn an entirely new business. Even so, Ben went ahead, and perhaps with good reason . . . Rose was going to be a mother.

Sam Dolmatz was then in a partnership with an old friend, Sam Abramowitz. They were prosperous dress jobbers.

A contributing reason to Ben's reluctance to work for his brother-in-law was that Sam Dolmatz also employed his brother, Si, and his sister, Rose, a bookkeeper. Ben felt redundant. Another disturbing aspect was that Ben's sister, Sadie, and Ben's mother, Rachel, had pressed Sam to hire Ben. Ben was professionally qualified to do a good job for Orr & Company in Toronto, and his unease in the garment business lingered for a long period after.

Sam Abramowitz also had his family involved. His father-in-law, an elderly tailor, was kept on the scene for small repairs, quick alterations, and the need to freshen the samples for the young model. She was a pretty and attractive girl. Whenever she tried on a new dress, Abramowitz's father-in-law was on the spot to approve of the fit, a determination which the old man felt required him to touch the girl's bosoms or the curved fullness of her posterior. She expected this attention and merely laughed and told Abramowitz's father-in-law that he was an old fool.

Ben witnessed this scene many times and found it reprehensible. He took Abramowitz's father-in-law aside, reproached the man for taking liberties with the model, and reminded the man that he had a wife.

Abramowitz's father-in-law waggled his head back and forth in a self-forgiving manner and replied in Yiddish: "Even a mouse hates to go into the same old hole all the time."

As dress jobbers, Dolmatz & Abramowitz hired designers, supplied materials, and contracted for labor only. They sold mostly to retailers through resident buyers, direct to retailers, and to some out-of-town distributors. D&A had two seasons, Spring and Fall, with slack periods sometimes a month in length preceding the two busy periods.

Ben had to learn the business. He aided the shipping clerk, called on out-of-town buyers, coordinated contractors who sewed the garments using the jobbers' material, and checked stock.

Between seasons, when there was plenty of free time, the men played cards, pinochle, klabash, or poker. Each Saturday afternoon, a

large table in the shop was covered with a canvas for a big-stakes crapshoot. The porter of Dolmatz & Abramowitz anticipated these games with some pleasure, as he served as croupier. He made more money out of a day's gaming than his entire week's wages.

During the gaming, Dolmatz and Abramowitz were in the forefront and led the betting. Other manufacturers, buyers, and salesmen arrived, anxious to get in on the action. One buyer, a regular customer, won over 10,000 dollars, spread over three successive Saturdays. He took the money and ran.

Ben's education in the garment industry thus included developing considerable skill at pinochle. He also learned to deal effectively with dress contractors, estimating how much material and how many stitches each dress required, and could fairly estimate the contractor's cost.

Around election time, Ben picked up some extra money by moonlighting as a packer of political literature for distribution to precinct workers. For a while, he picked up some other wages at a flag and banner company. They placed decals on plates, mugs, cups, and other objects, for college fraternities. Ben was the shipping clerk and had to pack the breakable items in wooden barrels and cases. The firm also sold flags of all sizes of every country in the world.

TWELVE.

When a recession occurred sometime later, Dolmatz & Abramowitz closed their doors. The Dolmatz Family might have endured some uncomfortable moments thereafter. As it happened, Sadie, wife of Sam Dolmatz, was quite thrifty. The years of poverty on the Lower East Side had left an indelible mark upon Ben's oldest sister. She had been receiving amounts from Sam for housekeeping needs over the years. Sadie had managed to build up a nice account in a savings bank, as a result of her careful use of household money. After the dress jobbing partnership went under, Sadie's nest egg sustained her family until Sam was established in commission buying.

Ben, unfortunately, was unemployed again. He applied to various dress jobbers and received some attractive offers. Regrettably, whenever a prospective employer learned that Ben was Sam Dolmatz's brother-in-law, the job offer would vanish. The assumption was that if Ben were hired, he'd spy on the new employer and report to Sam.

Rose had been working as a private secretary for the Sapoline Company, a large, well-advertised paint manufacturer. She remained on the job throughout her pregnancy. A month before it was time to go to the hospital, Rose resigned. Around midnight on May 29, 1920, Rose awakened with the realization that her child was on the way. Ben phoned the doctor, his friend, and then took Rose to a small private hospital on Lexington Avenue and 105th Street.

By five in the morning, Rose had not yet given birth. The doctor told Ben to go home and get some sleep. Rose agreed. Ben returned to the third-floor apartment on Aqueduct Avenue. At half past six, the phone rang. The doctor congratulated Ben on the birth of a son. Ben pulled on some clothes, then dashed downstairs to the quarters of his

in-laws, Rose's parents. He dashed into the bedroom of Henry and Peppie Nechols and jumped onto their bed yelling "It's a boy! It's a boy!"

The grandparents, awakened from a sound sleep, were frightened by the antic behavior of their son-in-law.

Ben then rushed to the hospital, to Rose's room. He found her sweet and clean, smiling broadly, her infant boy snugly held. By then it was eight o'clock in the morning, a beautiful Memorial Day, bright and warm, May 30, 1920.

A week later, a *bris* or circumcision was performed at the hospital and the infant was named Frederick Mortimer Nicholas.

Thirty days later, the family participated in the ceremony known as Pid-yon Ha-ben, for the first-born male only in a family. The father redeems his new-born son from the child's godfather, sometimes for five silver dollars, sometimes for a pocket watch which has been borrowed for the occasion and is speedily returned to the owner.

Fatherhood emphasized Ben's concern about finding employment until his preoccupation about it verged on the pathological. Then the search led to Rose's side of the family. Rose also had a sister, Sadie. She had gone through a stormy courtship with a young man, Leon Schwartzberg, and married him. Leon changed her name to Syd. He often confided to Ben that Syd was difficult to live with. Ben listened but wisely refrained from offering advice.

Leon had gone into partnership with Zeke Escott, a fraternity brother. They engaged in the manufacture of laundry bleach. A mixture of chlorine gas and caustic soda which was originally developed by a doctor and a scientist, Carol and Dakin, for use in cauterizing wounds on World War I battlefields, the stuff was found to work well, too, as a replacement for Chloride of Lime solution. It, in turn, was then the only bleach used. Although difficult to dissolve cleanly, it worked.

Zeke Escott worked as a chemist for a firm specializing in the extraction of chlorine. Zeke saw great opportunities for starting into business independently to produce laundry bleach. Chlorine bleach was an important improvement in the bleaching of cottons and linen piece goods.

As Leon Schwartzberg was able to supply some money and was a good salesman, he joined Zeke in a deal and started calling on customers.

Ben may have recognized some slightly familiar parallels between his memory of Mike Hertzoff and Jack and the partnership of Zeke Escott and Leon. Nonetheless, it represented a new chance.

Leon concentrated on sales, while Zeke worked in the plant they had running in Yonkers. Leon, however, complained that it was too

difficult to cover all the sales to laundries. Before long, Ben was invited to join the two.

Ben accepted Leon's offer. It was Ben's responsibility to cover Brooklyn, Long Island, and a portion of New Jersey. Leon spent one day with Ben.

Each morning, Ben prepared a list of the day's calls. Without samples or printed matter to offer a prospective customer, Ben decided on a novel approach: he would go to a client, admit no knowledge of the laundry business, but tell the listener why the new bleach was stronger, cheaper, and more dependable. Astonishingly, many laundry operators gave Ben trial orders, and after the bleach passed careful scrutiny, sent in re-orders.

Ben quickly learned more about the business. He queried every washman and manager, obtaining much valuable information.

Not long after Ben started selling for Washine, the company formed by Zeke Escott and Leon Schwartzberg, the realities of life in the big-city laundry business intruded. It was a Friday and Ben was standing outside the entrance of a firm called The Great Wet Wash Laundry, situated in Brownsville, one of the more ferocious areas of Brooklyn. He was waiting for the boss of the firm to come outdoors, the man having been called within to answer a phone. Horse-drawn laundry wagons were parked in front of the establishment, waiting for the drivers to load up. Some ornery kid ducked in among the wagons and began to disturb the horses. A driver chased the lad, grabbed the recalcitrant youngster, and landed a well-aimed kick on his backside. The lad was then told to make himself scarce.

The defiant kid brandished an angry fist at the driver and disappeared.

An interval passed. Then two burly young men materialized. The driver saw them, correctly guessed their intentions, and dashed into the laundry. By the time the sinister pair reached the premises, the boss, Hymie, was at the door. He told the intruders to depart, although he knew very well they were going to enter the building to corner the driver. The two thugs were not to be discouraged from their objective and pushed their way inside. They soon found the driver.

Hymie had his own group of hirelings and called them on the phone. The crew were quickly on the scene and confronted the two young men, who had finished with the driver. Knowing they were outnumbered, the two good-for-nothings took flight.

Hymie's bunch included a fellow who drew a knife. He caught one of the invaders who had attacked the driver within the plant, and struck him with the knife. Ben saw the blade slash down the boy's back, cutting through his shirt, undershirt, and flesh, a chillingly neat stroke. It drew blood. The victim was taken into a nearby drug store, where the wound was bandaged and taped.

Ben was so repelled by what he had witnessed that he went home almost ill. He had half a mind to quit and find other, less horrifying circumstances in which to make a living. After reviewing the matter, though, Ben decided to hang on. He believed that the wet wash industry was too important. It was a first effort to liberate mostly ghetto and other poor women from the dehumanizing, back-breaking labor of washing clothes. He was haunted by the vision of his mother's youth consumed by the endless drudgery. Yet in his young manhood, Ben had become a successful cog in the machine that brought the miracle of beautifully washed and ironed laundry to the homemaker's door for a modest 50-cent charge or something similar. He could not walk away from a dynamic role.

He learned subsequently that Hymie's crew of musclemen were known as The Little Douggie Gang, who collected tribute for protection from most of the Brownsville industrial plants.

Friday in the laundry business was usually slow. Time was thus available for doing maintenance. Laundry operators often ran big poker games during such periods, and one of the more respected men was caught cheating, using marked cards. The game was halted so the other players could administer a beating to the crooked gambler. After he was thrown out, the game resumed. Naturally, the man's behavior was broadcast widely throughout the industry.

Competition was especially keen. Drivers sometimes had many tickets from other laundries along with their own. Few customers were personally acquainted with the driver on a route, and many times a bundle was left outside a family's door for early morning pick-up and the wrong driver took it.

Price cutting was another aspect of the sharp competition. It was not unusual for a particular laundry to engage in price cutting, to attract new business. Another laundry might retaliate by having some of its paid mischief-makers break into the firm doing the price cutting. Such break-ins usually happened on Sunday nights, when the place was shut down and bundles piled in anticipation of Monday morning's activity. Once inside the place, the thugs poured gallons of bleach over the bundles, causing irreparable damage to customers' goods. Those horrors were the bane of laundry operators' existence, because customers would submit heavy claims for ruined goods.

Another form of retaliation against a laundry doing price cutting was when a competitor paid someone to enter the stable where the horses of the targeted laundry were kept. The hapless animals would be fed poisoned grain.

A third approach by thugs was to steal washed clothes out of delivery wagons and hold them for ransom. Compared to the pouring of bleach on goods in the plant or the wanton destruction of stabled horses, this latter behavior was perhaps less of a nuisance.

Laundries were easy targets, and those operated by nominees of gangsters had access to a good deal of financial backing as well as protective muscle. One of the "names" in the underworld related to the laundry industry was an individual known as Frankie Yale. He led a well-known gang and was bumped off. His funeral procession was blocks long, led by many carriage-loads of flowers, priests chanting prayers, and others who recited Frankie's charities. No one mentioned the many murders for which the deceased was believed to be responsible.

Ben had the misfortune to be unknowingly involved with that gangland figure.

Frankie Yale had organized a union of laundry drivers and inside workers. In a particular plant, an acquaintance of Ben, a washman, asked Ben's advice about joining the union. With a lack of discretion that could be attributed either to general ignorance or an iron-clad sense of self-confidence, Ben informed the washman that the union was gangster-managed, and once the organization was fully established, was a sure bet to be sold out to the bosses.

The washman compounded matters by repeating to an agent of the union, who wanted the washman to sign up, that the union was not a very good deal and this attitude was based on "what Ben Nicholas of Washine told me."

This news had a less-than-salutary effect upon the union representative and it may be assumed that he departed with anger evident in his face.

The indiscreet washman then returned to work, with ample opportunity to reflect upon what he had tactlessly said. The longer the washman ran the scene through his imagination, the more he realized his signal error. By nightfall, the fellow was so distraught that he located Ben's telephone number and called. In emotional phrases, the washman explained to Ben what had transpired with the union agent and begged forgiveness.

Like everyone else in the laundry industry, Ben knew to what lengths underworld persons would go to even a score with anyone adjudged to be out of line. He was quite frightened. However, Ben knew a vice-president of the union and got in touch with him. The union official advised Ben not to worry, that the matter would be resolved. Moreover, the union official confirmed that Ben's assessment of the recruiting picture was accurate. He told Ben the union was merely waiting to fill the ranks. When it happened, the group would be sold out to the bosses.

Other aberrations existed. One of Ben's customers was a large linen laundry whose partner was a gangster of the first magnitude. He maintained an office on the balcony overlooking the shop, from whence he could observe the girls at work. If a particular female

struck the lord of the underworld as rather lissome, he'd signal the floor supervisor to fire her. Then the girl would break down in tears, insist that she needed the job, and ask if she could do anything to "make amends." She would be directed to the office on the balcony. Old shop employees were familiar with the routine, and every time they saw some unhappy but rather attractive new girl climbing those stairs, the outcome of the girl's visit was a foregone conclusion.

This same gangster, who employed such a patently adolescent yet callous subterfuge in order to provide himself with an ever-renewing circle of feminine companionship, had a soft-hearted side. Away from the hurly and burly of a mundane existence among corruption and people of unattractive character, he raised pigeons on the roof.

Ben once witnessed a particularly terrifying scene. He was calling on an Italian gentleman who ran a wet wash laundry. While Ben and his customer were chatting, two men entered. As soon as the shop owner saw the two men, he turned pale and trembled. Speaking to Ben in a low, quivering voice, the shop owner said: "See those two? Know who they are?"

Ben, of course, was unacquainted with the two visitors. The shop owner then informed Ben that one of the two men in question was a two-fingered head of the Black Hand, a society which was a forerunner of the Mafia.

In his capacity as a salesman of laundry supplies, Ben realized he had to offer a bit more than persuasive ability. He therefore extended his horizons to include helping to train drivers to become salesmen. Several of Ben's customers liked the idea and arranged with Ben to present motivational talks at drivers' meetings. Ben prepared a basic lecture on how drivers could sell or package themselves and their service. It was, to the marketing sophisticate, merely another variation of the Dale Carnegie approach on how to make friends and influence people. The point was, however, that Ben's audiences were not sleek, well-trained graduates of the best emporiums of learning. He was talking, night after night, to groups of men who were poor, uneducated, knowledgeable in the ways of the street, but ignorant in matters of sales technique, and, above all, they needed self-confidence. They wanted to get ahead and realize the American Dream, a central theme of the mid-1920s. These unpolished but hard-working men had families and wanted their children to graduate upward into better lives. It was Ben's self-appointed mission to talk to the men and liberate their will to improve, so they'd give a better performance on the job and enhance their personal lives. This was quite a tall order, but Ben had succeeded in realizing himself and in the process recognized how he could persuade others to do the same. Precisely how many of the rough-and-tumble laundry drivers accomplished the metamorphosis is unknown, but all of them must have benefitted in

some personal measure, because there are few individuals who can't gain from a little encouragement.

The motivational seminars for the drivers deepened the shop owners' and drivers' confidence in Ben. When drivers changed jobs, sometimes with Ben acting as a broker, the drivers reciprocated by recommending Ben to new clientele.

Ben never sought a fee or commission for placing a driver, manager, or washman in a new job. Matters usually worked out nicely, although there were exceptions.

One particular service was when Ben managed to obtain help in fixing industrial fines. He was friendly with a court clerk, who was a fixer. The clerk instructed Ben to direct any customers who were ticketed for an infraction like a smoke nuisance or something comparable. For a fee, the court clerk would take action to quash a citation, and sometimes go so far as to kick back a portion of the original fine. This was 1920s casual corruption in an unblushing form, but it should be remembered that after the Volstead Act became law in the United States, it was fashionable to break the law, and Americans are nothing if they are not a fashionable people.

Laundries often gave banquets and dinners to celebrate attainment of sales goals, anniversaries, retirements, and so on. Ben received frequent invitations to speak at these affairs and often shared the dais with Victor Kramer, a partner in the Sunshine Laundry on Long Island.

Victor had grown up in the business in Boston and graduated from Harvard. He came to New York and found work as a claims manager in a large Bronx wet wash laundry. He was taken to his new office, which featured a desk piled high with unsettled claims, and instructed by the boss. The boss swept the desktop clean and said: "Start fresh. Get busy and never let claims pile up."

After a few years, Victor and a friend raised sufficient funds for a new plant. Victor took an interest in industry affairs and spent a good deal of time speaking to trade groups. At a national convention held in Boston, which Ben and Rose attended, Victor delivered a speech titled *Alice in Launderland*—a history of the industry. Long after Victor sold his business and became a top-flight consultant, Ben's friendship with him continued.

Another side of Ben's interest was the improvement of laundry operation. People who worked steadily in laundries were very often those who devised mechanical improvements of existing machinery. Labor-saving contrivances were in continuous demand, which accounts for experiments with monel metal, stainless steel, flatwork ironers, and other things. After experiments were proved successful, the large laundry machine manufacturers would buy the patents, some to suppress from competition and others to improve further.

Ben had a friend whose father was a major partner in a big laundry plant. At the time, the industry was having problems with flatwork ironers. Ben and his friend evolved an idea to eliminate string marks on ironed sheets, caused by strings tied around the cylinders to keep the sheet from rolling around the cylinder instead of under it. The string also scored the steam chest and had to be ground down.

The idea of Ben and his friend was to place an endless apron around all the cylinders, from four to eight per ironer. Ben's associate had some aprons made and tried out, after first seeking a patent. The method worked well for a period of time, but because of the different thickness of the sheet, tended to shift. This, in turn, required that that ironer be halted and the apron straightened.

The concept was intriguing and promising, but although Ben and his friend consulted many engineers and gave the matter careful thought, no solution could be found and remains apparently insoluble. It was small consolation to Ben and his enthusiastic coworker that in using the process they devised, sheets looked better and were firmer after only one pass, rather than the usual two passes. The project was abandoned and the resultant financial loss written off.

The largest wet wash laundry in Brooklyn then was the Independent, owned by the Boslow Family and run by the father, four sons, and a son-in-law. They were an aggressive lot and protected their sales territory with their fists. The Boslows were responsible for more wet wash laundries and training drivers.

Their united front, while cultivated for the sake of protecting the business so carefully nurtured, was only an optical illusion. The Boslows privately agreed on little. Their bickering was constant.

When the senior Boslow died, the sons split the business. Two kept the Independent, while two others built the Brighton. One opened yet another.

Fortunately for Ben, he was able to remain friendly with all the men. The last Boslow to go out was Nathan, and he constructed a plant on 18th Avenue in Brooklyn.

Sometime early in 1925 or thereabouts, Ben received a call from Harry Boslow. Harry inquired if Ben was interested in putting him out of business. At the time, Harry was having considerable trouble with torn clothes. Ben hurried to Harry Boslow's laundry and was escorted to a large storage room which was piled high with torn sheets and shirts. Ben found that each item had a large hole which appeared to have been ripped out.

A quick test revealed that the edges of the holes disclosed traces of acid. Everyone was baffled. Ben and Harry re-checked the wash formula but found that no acid was used. Other suppliers were con-

sulted and it was found that several laundries were experiencing the same problem.

The answer was finally found by H. Kohnstamm, the oldest and largest chemical and laundry supplier. H. Kohnstamm had a fine laboratory and their staff determined that the problem was caused by smoke damage, a view that no one found acceptable. Samples, however, were forwarded to the Interior Department's labs in Washington, D.C. Those technicians agreed with the personnel of H. Kohnstamm and described the problem with the term "Winter Damage," saying that it occurred on dull days with a low ceiling, mostly in wintertime. Clothes hung outdoors with billows on lines near coal-burning chimneys were subject to damage, as smoke would rise and was confined more or less in place by low-hanging clouds in the sky. This would precipitate a fallout of sulphur dioxide in the form of a colorless powder, which would settle into the folds of material. Subsequently, when the clothes were pressed with a hot iron, chunks of material would drop out because the connecting fibers in effect burned away.

Acid rain. From coal. In 1925.

Ben agreed to accompany the laundry drivers of the Brighton plant, to help settle damage claims of customers. Ben duly explained to irate clients that garments and sheets had been irreparably injured as a result of smoke unable to rise into the outer atmosphere due to low-hanging clouds, a situation covered by the term *Winter Damage.* Ben was asked many times: "If coal smoke does such damage to my clothing, what does it do to my health?"

It has also been found that metal roofs are harmed by coal smoke. People in Canada and the Northeastern U.S. and now the Far West say that their lakes and forests are irreparably harmed by the clouds of coal smoke which blow about from coal-burning utility plants and factories in the Midwest. There is some feeling that the inhalation of certain fumes rising in coal smoke over a period of time can cause cancer and leukemia.

The U.S. Government is ever-anxious to placate friends in heavy industry. It concedes nothing and merely says cryptically, "More research is needed."

Many theories have been advanced as to why knowledge of the damage has only been recognized in comparatively modern times, while some questions have been posed as to why the coal smoke damage has only started to take effect now.

It is the widespread realization of this damage which has only started to be recognized now. Television, radio, and newspapers have helped acquaint the public and educate it about acid rain and acid fog.

A bit of the answer may also lie in the growth of education. As

more and more people learn about the chemical properties of fossil fuel, as coal is known, and how those properties are transmitted in the smoke, it has been easier for environmentalists to convince segments of the public that acid rain and acid fog exist and are harmful.

Yet another part of the answer may be that the damage has occurred as long as coal has been used for home heating and industrial purposes, since the first discovery of coal in earliest times. Acid rain has always existed, but, over a period of time, people have been kept in ignorance of it by industrial and corporate persons who have found it profitable to use the fuel, persons who care more for their profits than for the maintenance of public health, and by political figures who receive donations from great companies and trade associations.

Ben has a theory that coal smoke became something to reckon with in the mid-1920s because that is when home radios were introduced. Others no doubt have additional views. One well-known newspaper columnist, now retired, whose writings appeared daily in the old *New York Graphic* as well as *The Mirror* when Ben and Rose Nicholas lived in New York, is afflicted with emphysema. The columnist wonders if the new chemically-produced, wall-to-wall carpeting widely manufactured and sold may not contribute to people's respiratory ailments. It remains to be seen whether she is right.

Ben reports that the coal-smoke damage to laundry was eliminated with the introduction of a new laundry service, wash & dry.

THIRTEEN.

As the orders arrived, Ben's self-confidence was strengthened. He went out in all kinds of weather and regularly walked for miles, from customer to customer. He called on business people who were starting to like Ben as well as his product. His territory was a valuable one and two tough competitors challenged him. But once Ben had tasted the exultation which accompanies success, the competitors didn't have a chance.

Since Ben clicked as a salesman of laundry supplies, it is tempting to conjecture that maybe his mother, Rachel, who had washed clothes in the primitive tenement of the Lower East Side, rejoiced that in her first American-born child, she had successfully motivated a lifelong advocate of cleanliness.

The Nechols dwelling on Acqueduct Avenue had a large porch, and Ben's infant son slept in a perambulator each day. When the baby was neglected for any length of time, especially when the family was dining, he wailed to get attention.

Rose's sister, Ethel, was quite fond of the small boy and devoted considerable time to him.

Ben, ever the watchful father, knew what was best for his son. Ben, who could not only sell a cigar store Indian a truckload of laundry bleach, but the cigar store, too, was pretty smart. He decided to stop the child's monopoly of people's attention. When Ben was home and the baby Fred cried in his carriage on the porch and some sympathetic relative came running, Ben stoutly intervened. Even with such complaints as "How could you be so cruel?" directed at him, Ben was resolute. He let the child howl. After three or four evenings in a row,

the smart little baby realized that he was being ignored and halted his complaints.

No doubt everyone in the Nechols Family was much impressed.

Poor Ethel. She was so devoted to the child and took him out for walks in his carriage. On one occasion, she was wheeling the carriage down the five front steps and the thing got away from her. The carriage turned over and the baby boy landed on his head, which caused him to emit screams heard, we are told, a block away. That time it was all right if someone came running. Ethel, good soul, wanted to kill herself. She really should have become a salesman of laundry bleach. Then she would have developed an appreciation of human toughness.

The baby received a lump on his head. He got over it.

Meantime, Rose's young brother, Henry, Jr., was doing his bit to attract attention. At age 14, he was over six feet tall. He succeeded in persuading an army recruitment officer that he was 18. He was quickly signed up and sent to military camp for training. The elder Mr. Nechols quickly discovered the reason for his son's absence and went to the army camp to resolve matters.

Within a short time, Henry, Jr., was discharged and sent back to public school, where he cut a bold figure with grand stories of military prowess. He later came down with lung trouble and went through surgery. Because he joined the American Legion, it is believed, Henry, Jr., received medical care in a veterans' hospital.

Around then, Rose's father purchased a Model T Ford. It had a cleverly convertible truck feature, which could be installed by removing the rear seats. In that primitive time, no driver's license was required. Henry, Jr., then about 16, was instructed by the Ford salesman and mastered the routine. As an expert of tender years, Henry, Jr., had his moments. One morning, for example, he prepared to drive the automobile with the intriguing truck body out of the family garage. The father was standing behind, ready to close the garage doors. Henry, Jr., hit the reverse gear rather than the brakes and backed up like a shot. Henry, Jr., knocked his father down and, to compound matters, ran over him as well.

Rooted with terror, Ben and Rose observed all from the kitchen window. Mr. Nechols was flat on the ground, motionless. Everyone thought he was dead. The tale has a happy ending. The Ford was so light that the collision with the man merely caused him to sustain some bruises and there was lingering stiffness for a few days. Even so, Mr. Nechols went to work the day following the accident.

A certain amount of coordination and speed was required to start a Model T Ford. The vehicle came to life only after having been cranked, but more than a strong shoulder and arm was needed. The driver had to make some adjustments within the car before applying muscle

power to the crank, which hung down from the front of the car between the front wheels in a manner that modernists might be tempted to describe in Freudian terms.

Attached to the steering column, a bit below the steering wheel, two levers were visible. One lever was on the right side and one lever was on the left side. The left side lever, resembling a present-day turn-signal, was called a Spark Control. The right side lever was the accelerator, allowing the driver to feed gasoline into the engine by hand. In preparing to crank the Ford, the left lever was positioned up a bit and the right was positioned about a third of the way down. Both levers were backed by a small metal guide plate, with lines indicated for position. The driver merely had to align a right or left hand lever over such a marked plate and the position would ensure a particular response from the car.

The process also involved switching on the hot shot battery.

These movements were performed deftly and speedily by the sensible driver, a kind of choreography which millions of Ford owners had "down to a science."

But the cranking hadn't begun. By this time, the driver was at the Model T's front getting ready to crank. First, though, the driver had to remember that the choke wire ran through the radiator from the carburetor. The driver had to jerk this choke wire outward, to himself.

Then the driver cranked, a mighty and fast turn. If all the steps had been duly performed, the motor gave a modest cough and started running.

After the motor was going, the driver released the crank and hastened back into the car to switch it over to the magneto—known as "the mag"—and pull the spark lever down a bit.

Some seasonal niceties had to be borne in mind. In summer, the driver didn't need to switch on the hot shot battery, as the magneto was ample for the car's needs. In winter, when the motor was cold, it was necessary to jack up one rear wheel. The object of the elevating was to get the oil moving, something that was more or less a necessity.

Another thing which had to be done when the motor was cold was to fill a teakettle with water, boil it on the kitchen stove, and then carry the kettle of hot water outdoors, lift the Ford's rattley hood, and pour the hot water over the manifold.

The spectacle of millions of Americans running outdoors on cold mornings with teakettles filled with hot water, for the day's starting baptism of Henry Ford's mechanical masterpiece, is a spectacle and an experience that present-day drivers will never witness at this time of our century. That, however, was the reality 60-odd years ago, as recalled now by an old-timer who said with a rueful shake of the head that "the good old days" were far from the best, but people had to employ such exertions to get their Model Ts running, or get a horse.

The five dollars per day wages which Henry Ford paid his workers to build the Ford automobile helped set the standard for workingmen's pay.

Henry, Jr., obligingly took Ben out one day and taught him how to drive, a process that wasn't exactly like the blind leading the blind, but something perilously close to it. Thereafter, Ben chauffeured the family about on sightseeing and visiting excursions. Posterity hears no comment from Nechols family historians about the joys of cranking cars whose motors refused to start, the fun of changing a flat tire in bad weather, or trying to drive along a road that was hardly more than a cowpath. Still, there is another remarkable tale.

One wintry day, when the snow was piled in great drifts about the Bronx, Ben took Mr. Nechols, Peppie, Aunt Lena from Sharon, and Rose in the car to go visiting. Ben and Rose were in the front seat. The three adults in the rear seats, fairly mature types, found themselves heroes when, on a slippery, snow-covered street, Ben attempted to turn a corner and the car went into a skid. It shot across the pavement sharply, the rear wheels colliding with a curb, and started to capsize. This horrifying circumstance propelled the three rear seat passengers into abrupt standing positions, from which they collapsed backward into their seats, causing the car to right itself, after which Ben applied his foot to the accelerator and sped on his way.

The car was an open touring model, with isenglass side curtains that could be fastened to the collapsible canvas roof in bad weather. How much protection those flimsy objects provided remains a matter of conjecture, but the fact is that millions of Americans endured such trials in early-day experiences with automobiles, and quite a few recall those tribulations with considerable fondness. Of course, they're crazy, but you can't change human nature.

Then there was the time when Ben and Rose took the infant Fred, with Rose's sister Ethel, for an automobile ride in Van Cortlandt Park. It began to rain, descending in torrents, amid terrifying thunder and lightning, crashing and exploding so that even God in His Heaven would not wish to witness such a cataclysm. All that Ben could do was stop the car. With Rose's help, he fastened the wretchedly inadequate side curtains in place, which resulted in the man and wife getting thoroughly soaked. After that, the adults huddled in the car with the thoroughly frightened little boy, as lightning dramatically struck a tree nearby and all present wondered if their time had come. Not to worry. The storm wore itself out. Ben drove his family home and everyone was safe. The best part was, they had a wonderful story to tell.

Ben found his Nechols in-laws fascinating and became particularly fond of Rose's father, Henry Nechols, whom Ben addressed

appropriately as Dad. Although Peppie and Irving had not favored the match between Rose and Ben, the passage of time helped rationalize differences.

Henry Nechols had an interesting story. When he had been about 16 years of age, he departed from Lemberg with Adolph, an older brother. It was the late 1880s and they crossed to America via steerage class.

There were six children in that Nechols clan—Henry, Adolph, Isidore, and three sisters. The oldest sister was already in America, married to a tailor named Zier and living in San Francisco. After landing in the United States, Henry and Adolph decided to visit their sister. They purchased a modest stock of inexpensive watches and nondescript jewelry, to peddle, and made their way across the continent.

In the Far West, the two greenhorns from Galicia encountered genuine lawlessness, saw authentic Indians and cowboys, and, worse luck, had a terrible time mastering English and adjusting to new customs. Butte, Montana, however, proved to be something of a haven, as the men employed in the great copper mine were in large part from Central Europe. The two Nechols brothers therefore found it easy to communicate. Eventually, the pair reached San Francisco and lost no time in visiting that den of iniquity, the Barbary Coast. Describing these adventures in later years, Henry Nechols invariably held his listeners spellbound.

Adolph, who was somewhat Henry's senior and much loved by him, had some subsequent adventures. When Adolph and Henry ultimately returned to New York from California, Adolph met a woman of German extraction and married her. They moved to the Oklahoma Territory when it was opened for homesteading. Adolph was a tailor in Tulsa.

Rose's parents had a story, too. Peppie was a Fialkowitz from Cleveland, Ohio, originally from Hungary. It was a large family presided over by a mother and included nine daughters as well as some half brothers from the parents' previous marriages. Peppie (Pauline) and Henry (Herman) were married in New York in 1894. Irving was born in December of that year.

Henry Nechols was a generous man who loved people. He enjoyed good times and helped others, being especially responsive to the needs of his family. His favorite food was caviar as well as sandwiches of raw hamburger topped with chopped onions.

Ben, now a married man with a thriving business career and a young son, felt himself ready to seek a political affiliation. Consulting with his father-in-law, Ben agreed with Henry that Tammany Hall, a Democratic bastion, was reprehensible. The two men decided to join

the nearest Republican club. After contacting the organization and learning the time of the next meeting, Ben and Henry set out.

At the door of the neighborhood Republican Club, Ben and Henry were met by the head of the group. He seemed intrigued that Ben and Henry were interested in joining and invited the two men to step in.

As Ben and Henry entered the crowded meeting room, a heated discussion was in progress. A rather crude, burly individual had the floor. He was complaining loudly about the Jews who were members of the Democratic Club in the next district. His manner of speech was most unsatisfactory to Ben and Henry, and when they heard the man denounce their brethren as a bunch of Jew bastards who should be run out of the country, they turned around and headed for the door.

The Republican Club leader hurried after Ben and Henry, making apologies, saying that the man who had spoken was a trouble-maker and everyone in the club wished the fellow would resign his membership. He further insisted that if Ben and Henry would stay, they would find many fine, friendly people in the group. But Ben and Henry had heard enough and departed.

As the son of Ben and Rose grew, it became obvious that they needed more living space than the bedroom, kitchen, and bath which they occupied on the top floor of the house on Aqueduct Avenue. The three Nicholases removed themselves to a new apartment on Walton Avenue, near the subway.

Henry Nechols stopped there each evening en route home from work. That was his time to play with Fred, who, near the age of 2, was quite a lad.

Henry Nechols was an entrepreneur. He bought and sold old houses, repairing them when necessary (it usually was), and also ran a thriving paint contracting business. His partner in real estate was a wily individual, Mr. Blumenstock.

While Ben was still single, Mr. Blumenstock took him aside and asked him to perform a little favor. Upon inquiry, Ben learned that Mr. Blumenstock desired that he should escort Mr. Blumenstock's adolescent son to a whorehouse. Mr. Blumenstock explained that it was time for his boy to be "broken in." A practical viewpoint perhaps, but the assignment did not appeal to Ben. With some asperity, he replied to Mr. Blumenstock: "Why don't you take your son to a whorehouse yourself? Maybe you'll enjoy it."

Early one April morning, the phone of Ben and Rose rang. Ben picked up the receiver and heard a voice yell "Poppa died!" In the absence of any further explanation, since the calling party had quickly hung up, Ben mistakenly assumed that it was his sister, Gertie Nicholas, calling from 152nd Street to say their father had expired. Sam Nicholas was not in the best of health, just then. Ben dressed quickly and hastened by subway to his parents' residence. He rushed

in the door to find his mother in the kitchen, enjoying a calm breakfast.

Rachel studied her distracted son. "What's the trouble?" she asked.

That's when Ben realized that the dead father was Rose's, not his. He returned home, but found that Rose had already gone with Fred to her parents.

Henry Nechols had died of a heart attack in his bathroom. The family was asleep at the time. Henry, Jr., however, woke early, and upon entering the bathroom saw a pair of legs protruding from beneath the raised bathtub, a sight which caused Henry, Jr., to almost drop dead.

Rose's father was only 52 at his death and the effect upon her was devastating, as she was his favorite child.

Mr. Nechols left a comfortable estate, adequate for the support of Peppie, Henry, Jr., and Ethel. Irving served as executor and Ben was assigned to distribute funds to them. When Peppie died sometime later, the estate was divided equally among the five children.

Among other things, Henry Nechols had put some funds into bonds issued by the Cuban Government. As Cuba had undergone a revolution and change of government, Irving and Ben were in a quandary. Ben figured the bonds were of no value, but Irving was determined. He sent repeated messages to the U.S. State Department as well as the new Cuban Government. After a considerable effort, Irving received a settlement.

With the war's end and the much-wanted "return to normalcy" in process, it was inevitable that time would bring additional change into the life of Ben and his relatives.

Religion was still a big factor, but attitudes were shifting. In the evening after returning from Yom Kippur's *Kol Nidre* service, admittedly a solemn time, the family would sit on the porch and observe passersby, many of whom belonged to other faiths. Ben and the family, undergoing the 24-hour fast of tradition, being solemn and quiet, witnessed the passing scene which included people who were laughing, smoking, going along. Ben and Rose could not help wondering how the individuals on the street could escape the Lord's Wrath on such a sacred day, when the Lord was busy deciding the fate of the Nicholases for the coming year. The contrast between the status of the Nicholases and the strangers of the avenue generated a good deal of skepticism. It was true that a spiritual lift was experienced when the family's 24-hour fast ended, maybe because they sat down, enjoyed a fine meal, and felt their bodies resume a peak of energy. Yet the skepticism lingered. The Bible was studied along with many religious treatises, and the young couple went further by attending meetings which dealt with metaphysics. They joined the Rosicrucian

Society on Horoscopes and Numerology, went to seances, toyed with the occult, and considered Christian Science. These adventures marked the couple's drift away from traditional Judaism, and although their Jewish identity was to always be respected and open, emphasis on the rigid dogma and superstition of early days greatly lessened.

Other changes occurred, too. Irving Nechols' wife Betty bore a daughter, Doris, in March, 1920. That family lived in Paterson, New Jersey, as Irving was advertising manager for a big department store in the community.

Molly Nicholas, Ben's sister who had been hounded into renouncing the wonderful dentist with the gold athletic charm, married a cab driver named Barney Turitz in 1919. They married not long after Ben and Rose. Barney owned his taxicab, and his passengers were set for high adventure when surrendering themselves to his rather free-form driving style. Barney rode car tracks, shifted gears *without moving the clutch*, and steered through traffic with immutable aplomb. He was a good driver, but a little inclined to behavior that to some verged on the hysterical. It can only remain a matter of historical conjecture how the good Barney might have performed had his car been equipped with a stick shift, four-on-the-floor, dual carbs, and other things.

Next in the Nicholas family to wed was Gertie. Her groom was Julius Hirsch. He worked for a brokerage house downtown in Wall Street and later handled some accounts. For a while, the money came in like a tide and went right back out in the same way. Gertie and Julius patronized the best restaurants. Since Julius was a good tipper, he had plenty of good friends, the best maitre des and waiters.

Max Nicholas, a busy plumber, was courting Esther Alpert.

Al Nicholas was immersed in his work with the detective agency. He was experiencing the drama of the gangster era. Since the agency had many retail stores as clients, one of the procedures to check the honesty of sales personnel involved the use of a decoy, a man who worked with Al. The decoy would enter the store, buy an item, and pay with marked currency. Al would follow a moment or two later and examine the cash drawer to determine if the amount had been properly rung up and recorded. If the transaction appeared on the register tape, the sales clerk received good marks; if not, a confrontation followed. It was an unpleasant but realistic approach to the matter of petty thievery.

Away from work, Al, with the marvelous physique dating from his days as a catcher of red-hot rivets, and easy-going nature, enjoyed his bachelorhood. Sometime later, he married Sally Cohen.

1920 also brought the start of Prohibition. Congress had passed the Volstead Act, a foolhardy attempt to legislate morality. Instead,

the country bloomed with illicit liquor stills and speakeasies, illegal taverns, the entire network supervised and serviced by gangsters of every hue.

At the time, Irving Nechols' father-in-law, Mr. Liss, was running a large and profitable liquor store. Because of the new law, Mr. Liss had to dispose of his entire inventory. He was an optimist, though, and believed that the interdiction against alcohol would lapse quickly. Since Mr. Liss could not dispose of his entire inventory as speedily as the law required, he retained some residual stock in his basement. Unfortunately, Prohibition lasted a dozen years. Mr. Liss sustained a sizable loss, as the celluloid which lined the corks in the stored bottles dissolved with time and the contents tasted of carbolic acid.

Ben, Rose, and Fred were still in the dwelling on Walton Avenue when Gertie and Julius rented the apartment above. Some evenings, the two couples played cards and opened the dumbwaiter doors between the apartments, in case the children should cry.

Gertie and Julius had a daughter, Muriel, about a year after Fred was born.

By this time, Ben's prime sales territory was Brooklyn, and he endured a one-hour subway ride each way, daily. It wasn't long before the Nicholases decided to move to Brooklyn. Two apartments in the same building appealed to Ben and Rose and to Rose's mother, Peppie, and Rose's sister, Ethel. The Nicholases took the upstairs space, the Necholses underneath.

The new place of residence was situated on 46th Street and 11th Avenue.

Peppie bought a Dodge touring car, quite a smart vehicle in its day.

Ben's prowess as a salesman of laundry supplies was attaining full bloom. He was still associated with Zeke Escott and Leon Schwartzberg, husband of Rose's sister Syd. The business was growing steadily, and although it had a longer corporate title, the company was known as *Washine*. A new addition to the sales force was a gentleman, Caesar Calder, who had a bachelor's degree in Chemistry and was brought in to cover New Jersey. A man named Henry Goodman was assigned to call on customers in Manhattan.

A big step forward was when Leon convinced Zeke to negotiate with Warren Sands. Sands was a former Procter & Gamble executive. After Sands agreed to join the outfit, he brought in the Procter & Gamble representation that paid a commission of 5% on all bulk consumer sales and some good specialties like a good bluing and an alkali neutralizer. Soap sales commissions were paid even if the orders were obtained by Procter's direct representative in each territory.

It wasn't long before another deal materialized. The two Scheffler brothers, who owned the National Bleach Company, became par-

ticipants. Another bleach company, O-So-White, joined, and the name of the firm evolved as Washine-National-Sands, Inc.

The plant in Mount Vernon was maintained and an office opened in Long Island City, with a chemical laboratory and manufacturing facilities.

Ben Kapp, a fraternity brother of Leon and Zeke, was hired. Kapp was a chemical engineer who had been a partner in a dye business. In Kapp's new situation, he took over the development of new laundry products under the Washine label.

It was not long before Washine had a full line, including cotton goods from the La France Company of Philadelphia, who, arguably, made the best line of cotton nets. That firm gave the folks at Washine a thorough instruction, which aided Washine in doing a good business for La France.

When Ben and Rose Nicholas relocated in Brooklyn, the bosses at Washine bought a Model T Ford for Ben to drive, so that with Peppie Nechols' new Dodge touring car, the family was living very *a la mode*.

About that time, Ben Nicholas learned he would be a father for a second time.

One Friday evening, in the winter of 1924, after a fine evening meal, Ben became seriously ill with a fever. The neighbor next door had a brother who was an M.D., Doctor Wald. Wald catered to many neighborhood patients. An urgent call to the doctor brought him quickly. He arrived in an automobile and proceeded to wrap Ben in an overcoat and blankets, after which the doctor removed the trembling 30-year-old Ben to a private clinic situated in a brownstone in another section. Dr. Wald was not a conventional medical man. He was of the natura-pathic variety. Apparently Dr. Wald followed a treatment concept which emphasized the restoration of the natural balance in a sick patient's system, believed originated in Germany.

Dr. Wald and his nurse administered an enema to Ben, then wrapped him in hot sheets followed by a wrapping in cold sheets, laid a cold compress on his forehead, and put him to bed, where he promptly fell asleep.

The diagnosis seems to have been pneumonia, and the course of treatment over the next few days involved the drinking of considerable water by Ben, enemas twice a day, and little else. The treatment seems to have had a decided restorative effect on Ben's sense of humor, as he reports that when someone knocked on his bedroom door, he inquired: "Who's there, friend or enema?"

Ben never experienced a crisis, and in due course, he tells, the pneumonia vanished.

Dr. Wald had another interesting routine as well. He took Ben to the basement each afternoon and shot him with hot and cold water

from two pressure sprays 10 feet from the young man. The application of water in this manner further restored Ben, who felt himself growing stronger. Dr. Wald then broke Ben's fast with grapes for breakfast and water drained from boiling vegetables, which caused Ben to have severe diarrhea that took almost a week to cure. Moreover, Dr. Wald inspected Ben's rectal area with a wide tube containing a light, to determine if some reason other than the diet was causing the new problem.

After two weeks of Dr. Wald's treatment, Ben was sent home cured, but weak. Ben and Rose went to Atlantic City for a short holiday, following which Ben returned to work.

Ben says that Dr. Wald was a genius, that Wald treated each patient similarly, which apparently meant that Wald employed the same view that the body had to be purged of all poison before the natural balance of health could flourish again. Dr. Wald, according to Ben, managed to cure nearly all patients. Ben tells that some patients arrived on stretchers, many of whom were afflicted with such ailments as prostatitis or diabetes. After one or two weeks of Dr. Wald's miraculous attention, patients danced down the front steps of the clinic and hurried off to happy lives.

Rose Nicholas had an uncle who lived a most self-indulgent existence and was overweight. Ben persuaded the uncle to go to Dr. Wald for the cure, which the uncle did and departed in the usual smiling, carefree manner. The uncle, however, was solemnly warned by Dr. Wald that the destructive lifestyle must be renounced in favor of something more sensible and austere. The uncle ignored Dr. Wald's good words, resumed the former excesses, and died.

While Ben was still in Dr. Wald's private clinic, Henry, Jr., took the family out for a spin in Peppie's Dodge touring car. They were riding through the park and had an accident, during which Rose was thrown from the car. As she was well advanced in her pregnancy, the incident frightened the expectant mother considerably. Luck, however, was on Rose's side and there was no problem.

A week before the child was due, Rose experienced what turned out to be false labor pains. She was taken to Israel Zion Hospital on 11th Avenue in Brooklyn, near the Nicholas residence. When there was no birth and the pains subsided, she was sent home. A week later, though, the second child of Rose and Ben arrived, on May 18, 1924. A girl, rather large, was born in the afternoon after a difficult labor. As Rose was being wheeled back to her room, she pointed at Ben in the hallway, crying "It's your fault!" But that was only a temporary attitude.

Rose was unable to provide much natural milk. The doctor therefore prescribed a special bottle formula, which was to cause some serious problems.

Peppie Nechols found apartment living not to her liking. Irving believed, perhaps remembering the family home on Acqueduct Avenue, that his mother would be happier in her own dwelling. Ben and Rose were invited to join in the venture. Ben had reservations and postponed a decision, but the pressure for a house was ongoing and Ben relented. A two-family structure was purchased on Avenue I in Brooklyn, on the corner of 28th Street.

After the move occurred, Fred and his baby sister, Helen, were left in the care of the Necholses. Ben and Rose then set out on their first sea voyage, to Norfolk, Virginia. The novelty was memorable, but the sea sickness was something to reckon with. Disembarked at last, the couple rode a bus to Virginia Beach and later proceeded by bus to the nation's capital.

In Washington, Ben and Rose took in the traditional sights, and Ben remembered the trip ever after as the time when the first sign of gout assailed his heel.

One of Ben's sales associates at Washine, the graduate chemist Caesar Calder, was a most affable young man. He was an excellent salesman. Caesar's father, an Italian gentleman named Calcano, was divorced from Caesar's mother, a Jewish lady. Caesar's Jewish grandmother lived with them and young Calder was raised as a Jew.

Calder announced that he was engaged, and Washine threw a bachelor party for their salesman at a Broadway nightclub, probably one of those places with a hot floorshow, drinks served in coffee cups, and a suave man in evening clothes at the front door peephole to sound the alarm in case of a raid. The guests took a few too many cocktails, as is the custom at such affairs, and afterward, Ben set out alone to drive home to Brooklyn. His description of how he weaved the Model T around and through the support pillars of the Ninth Avenue "L" must be typical for the time. Sufficeth to say that he got home with only one dented fender, after which his very sober wife led her somewhat inebriated mate to the bedroom, removed his clothes, and put him to bed.

Calder's adventure that night is duly recorded, too. Two salesmen were required to escort the groom-to-be home. He was led up the steps and the front door bell rung. Calder's mother answered. She found her son swaying drunkenly, a silly grin on his face. "Hello, Mother," Calder said pleasantly, and passed out at her feet.

The bachelor party made splendid shop talk and buoyed many Washine sales meetings for a lengthy period thereafter.

But there were other, more serious problems to cope with. Fred, for example, was almost 5 and had a little playmate, Tommy. One day, Fred came home crying. Upon being questioned, the child reported that Tommy had told Fred they couldn't play together anymore.

Tommy's father *forbade* his son, because Fred was a Jew. Fred had told Tommy: "But you're a Jew, too."

Rose attempted to explain to Fred that it was a fine thing to be Jewish and that one should be proud of the heritage.

As it turned out, Fred and Tommy were soon playing together once more, and on certain occasions, when he thought no one in the neighborhood noticed, Tommy's father went outdoors and played ball with the two kids. It was never indicated what circumstances had caused Tommy's father to denounce Fred's heritage.

Ben and Rose's infant daughter, Helen, developed a severe case of eczema and no one could help. The baby cried continually, scratching and suffering so that the Nicholases could not sleep and neither could neighboring families.

Baby Helen was solemnly examined by medical specialists who were recommended by individuals on all sides, but the medicines (and sizable doctors' bills) were of no help.

As is often the case in such matters, relief came from an unexpected quarter.

An old friend in the Bronx heard that Rose's baby girl was suffering with the skin problem. The friend suggested a pharmacist who happened to be located on Avenue H and 18th Street, near the Nicholas home in Brooklyn. Rose's acquaintance in the Bronx said the pharmacist could be of help, if the Nicholases approached him with the greatest discretion. The reason the pharmacist was so careful related to laws which said that his function was different from that of an M.D. The pharmacist could not jeopardize his circumstances by being accused of practicing medicine without a proper license. However, after the pharmacist was satisfied that the Nicholases were not police decoys sent to entrap him, he looked at Helen, nodded, and gave Ben and Rose a bottle containing some type of preparation and some salve, with instructions as to dosage.

The instructions were carefully followed, and in a few weeks, Helen was cured.

A long-simmering conflict erupted between Rose's sister, Syd, and her husband, Leon Schwartzberg. The couple had a son, Leon, Jr., nicknamed Buddy, born a year after Fred. Even with a child to deepen their mutual interest, the marriage foundered. Syd moved out and sued for divorce. This unhappy circumstance along with other matters ended the residence of Ben and Rose in the two-family dwelling with Peppie and Ethel Nechols. The property was sold. Ben and Rose took their two children and settled in an apartment at 1350 Ocean Avenue, near Avenue I in Brooklyn. Peppie and Ethel went to Florida.

Henry, Jr., meantime, had gotten married and worked in the paint department of Montgomery Ward. Henry's wife, Billie, became ill with a brain tumor and died.

FOURTEEN.

Among the friends of Ben and Rose, Murray and Sadie Cohen were quite close. Murray's uncle was a member of the Shakespeare Lodge, and it was Murray's aunt who brought her nephew together with the Nicholases.

Murray and Sadie had married recently in Boston and settled in Brooklyn because he was hired by a luggage manufacturer. He soon opened an office and display room on Broadway to sell to out-of-town buyers and local stores.

At the time, Ben and Rose had recently settled in the apartment house at 1650 Ocean Avenue. Murray and Sadie decided to take an apartment in the same building. There were many friendly pinochle and bridge games. As the apartment building was new, many of the tenants were young couples, and there were numerous social evenings as a result. Paul Pakula's brother, Moe, got married and settled nearby. Moe joined the circle.

Ben recalled a charming anecdote. Murray Cohen's grandparents had a diamond wedding celebration. Ben and Rose were invited. The grandfather of Murray Cohen was 93, the grandmother was 91. Of the couple's 11 children, only two attended. The others had died. The grandfather's brother, lively at 90, was present. Ben asked this gentleman if he thought his 93-year-old brother looked well. The reply was, "No... he doesn't know how to take care of himself."

A summer arrived when Ben and Rose decided to travel by auto to Cleveland, Ohio, as well as Sharon, Pennsylvania, places where Rose had cousins and aunts to visit. Accompanying Ben and Rose Nicholas on the journey was Ben's sister, Sadie Dolmatz, and Sadie's

daughter, Gladys. They were planning to see Sam Dolmatz's sister in Columbus, Ohio.

By then, the Nicholases owned a Model A Ford. The children went to Peppie in Long Branch, New Jersey, where Peppie was spending some time with her sister, Katie.

As the Nicholas expedition approached Syracuse, the Model A broke a bearing. Though a minor problem, it required a day's delay. Still, an excuse to visit Niagara Falls was provided. That meant a boat ride at the foot of the falls plus an overhead cable ride.

There was a side excursion by boat to Toronto as well. The group found their way to a Jewish restaurant and visited a famous horse stable converted into a museum. It was a structure built without nails, relying instead upon wooden pegs.

The following morning, the Nicholases headed for Sharon, Pa., while Sadie and Gladys went to Columbus. The plan was for the group to reunite at Buffalo for a trip back to New York.

Apart from spending a few days in Cleveland and traveling by night boat with the car back to Buffalo, where Sadie and Gladys were found safely, the trip almost came a-cropper when a bearing in the Model A broke a second time. It had to be towed to a garage in a small town, where the needed part was unavailable. An unscheduled two-day stay had to be endured, and worse luck, Ben lacked the cash to pay the bill. To add insult to injury, the garage refused to accept Ben's check. Ben was therefore compelled to wire his bank in Brooklyn, for the bank to, in turn, wire a certification of Ben's check, to convince the suspicious garage owner. After a series of maddening delays, the certification arrived and the bill was paid.

On another occasion, Paul Pakula rented a cottage in Long Beach, New York. He suggested that Ben and Rose also rent one, which they did.

Paul's wife, Jeanette, had a cousin. The cousin had recently married. Since Ben and Rose had perhaps five bedrooms in their dwelling, they were asked to rent one for the season to the newlywed cousin.

Ben's younger brother, Al, arrived to spend a weekend. He was given the bedroom next to that occupied by the honeymooners. Al Nicholas arrived groggily at the breakfast table next morning, bleary-eyed, complaining that sleep had been impossible with the honeymooners next door making love.

Ben and Rose enjoyed the cottage. He drove to and from work daily and the children played on the beach. Helen took to the water with gusto, but Fred protested. When carried into the water, the male heir *screamed*. The adults undoubtedly perceived that Fred was an unusually sensitive child and most discriminating in his choice of recreation.

Rose had a good friend, Regina Meltzner. With Regina and her husband, Al, the Nicholases departed one summer for a drive through New England. In that primitive era, tourists motoring through the picturesque countryside encountered such dubious charms as unpaved roads, inaccessible telephones, outdoor plumbing, the absence of electric fans, a plenitude of bugs, and a shortage of refrigeration. Into this uncharted expanse of nature and joy, Ben and Rose proceeded with Mr. and Mrs. Meltzner.

Nightly, the two couples paused in tourist homes which charged a modest few dollars for bed and breakfast. These places were filled with authentic antiques, a splendid variety of grand old chairs, rugs, tables, and brass beds. The dwellings also contained windows so old they were impossible to raise to admit the night breezes, or, once raised, continually fell down, or boasted metal screens so hoary with age that the interstices shattered from rust and allowed the odd troupe of mosquitoes, bumble bees, or dragon flies to gain entrance. The indoor plumbing in such establishments was of an age and pedigree that certain varieties of sound were generated when the bathroom was in use, all guaranteed as reliable evidence of the convenience's age, proof of genuine maturity. The bedsteads were equipped with springs that creaked charmingly, though at the most unwanted moments.

In one old place near Boston, Ben and Rose found themselves spending the night in a tourist bedroom which featured a dramatic carving of Jesus Christ in agony, crucified, and immediately above the pillows. One had only to glance upward for the briefest instant to be rewarded with a portrayal of human torment more vivid than the most perverse imagination could conjure. Ben recalls that he didn't sleep well that night.

Yet there were compensations—plenty of fresh-caught lobster offered in restaurants at modest prices, plenty of clean beaches and good swimming. At Poland Springs, Maine, the two couples drank the bottled water, rented a two-room cottage at the lake's edge, and swam contentedly.

On another jaunt, the Nicholases succeeded in installing three, rather than two, couples in the family automobile. On still another trip, Ben and Rose took their children through New Hampshire and Vermont, visiting many scenic locations.

There was a rainy day, yet recalled, when the group was en route to an adult camp in New Hampshire, beside the Merrimac River. It happened to be in full flood. Huge boulders and logs were catapaulting down the river, sweeping everything along. But the Nicholases were game. They fought their way to the camp and were escorted to a small sleeping tent, which had but a modest amount of water seeping

in. Ben and Rose prepared themselves for what turned into the worst ordeal.

The next day was bright and sunny. At the communal dining room, Ben and Rose were greeted by a smiling waiter clad in shorts.

"I'm Ike," the young fellow said brightly. He mopped crumbs and cigarette ashes from the Nicholases' portion of the table.

Ben was glum. "I'm Mike," he replied.

Disgusted, the couple soon checked out and went home. It was hotter on Ocean Avenue and more humid. At least they didn't have the Merrimac River cascading through their bedroom.

Camp Tammamint in the Poconos was one place which delighted Ben and Rose. They liked the place's location and outdoor amphitheater and were especially pleased with the camp's intellectually-stirring programs. The role of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union in the operation of the camp was not lost upon Ben, for he knew that if his sister Annie had survived the Triangle Shirt Waist Fire of 1911, she might have gone on to become active in the union.

Through all this, an undercurrent of anxiety was present. Sam Nicholas, the same Saneh Necheles who had traveled from Lemberg to New York years earlier and re-settled his wife and children in the *Galitzianer* portion of the Lower East Side, where Ben had been born, that Sam Nicholas was now aged and ailing. He had been seriously injured in a streetcar accident while crossing a street to the hospital where the sick little girl, Gertie, had been a patient, years before.

The injuries, combined with a history of difficult and tragic experience—the death of Annie in 1911 being but one part—now bore in on the elderly gentleman. After a lifetime of hard work, he now sat at home quietly sucking on hard candy and attended to his prayers. The doctor forbade Sam to even take a shot of liquor.

Trouble with the prostate compounded Sam's difficulties, and in that long-ago time, surgery was not available. Because of the impossibility of treatment, along with other factors of age and health, Sam Nicholas died. There was always a lingering suspicion that he may have had cancer.

The funeral was traditional and orthodox. Mourners walked behind the hearse, followed by long-bearded Hassidim, pious old Jews who shook alms boxes, *Pushkes*, some men collecting for themselves, others seeking donations for the purchase of land in the British Mandate of Palestine. At the graveside, the rabbi rent the clothes of the males present by cutting a part of a tie or vest and reminded the offspring of Sam Nicholas that they had become orphans.

Later, the family gathered to plan Rachel's future. Elderly, alone, and understandably bewildered, Rachel was dependent upon her children. Ben wanted his mother to resume her life in the apartment

shared with Sam and see if her resourcefulness and capabilities might not still stand her in good stead. She might find an elderly lady for a companion or take in a suitable boarder.

Max, Ben's younger brother, felt strongly that Rachel could not live alone. Max proposed that Rachel move into the home of Gertie and Julius Hirsh, and if this would be done, Max would share in funding the expense. This plan was accepted by all the *mishpocheh*, who would also contribute equally to Max. Rachel went to live with Gertie.

Molly Nicholas' husband, Barney Turitz, had, as previously mentioned, begun his marital existence as a self-employed taxi driver. He eventually disposed of the vehicle and secured work as a laundry driver, serving a route quite well for a large wet wash laundry in the Bronx.

Then Ben's good friend, Hymie Boslow, brother of Harry, of the Brighton Laundry in Brooklyn, entered the picture. He said he was looking for a route manager, that is, a sales manager. Ben suggested Barney for the job. In due course, Barney was interviewed and hired. The Turitzes then moved to Brooklyn and found an apartment on 26th Street near Avenue U.

A short while later, Gertie and Julius, with Rachel, settled in Brownsville. Max, elegant fellow, went to Forest Hills. He found an apartment in a new high rise, boasting an elevator and a door man. Sam Nicholas should have lived to see that day!

Gladys, daughter of Sadie Nicholas Dolmatz, settled in Flatbush.

As to other Nicholas grandchildren, younger than Gladys, there were many stories. When Rose and Ben motored to visit Charley in the Bronx, Molly's Ann and Stanley were invited to be with Fred and Helen. Ann always got car sick and threw up, which meant that the Nicholases had to halt and clean the interior. After a few such experiences, Ann was encouraged to find other pursuits. Usually, Charley was found asleep in his living room, but with the arrival of company, he was ready to be sociable.

Simmie was a lovable child, but so active that clothing and shoes were quickly damaged. Anne was beautiful, demure, and shy, while Howard was quiet and studious.

That the grandchildren of Sam and Rachel Nicholas were truly unusual is evidenced by the stories which have come down that either Simmie or Stanley Turitz gnawed on wooden furniture legs, often removing big chunks. Some graduate student of sociology might find it a fascinating study to trace the progress through life of a child who literally cut his eyeteeth on his mother's fine Grand Rapids living room suite.

Ann Turitz went to dancing school, as did Helen Nicholas. Ann

had a flair for dancing and tumbling and enjoyed attracting attention. Helen's performances also contained some fine moments, but when she saw Ann performing in what was thought to be an exhibitionistic style, the girls quarrelled.

Helen was occasionally difficult, stubborn, and defiant, yet affectionate and loving.

Fred's joy was handball. Each Sunday morning, when he was about 10, he departed for Brighton Beach, a favorite spot for adults to play handball. Fred looked for a handball player in need of a partner, usually a man whose friend failed to materialize for a scheduled game. Handball games meant betting, and since Fred had no funds for that purpose, the adult who took Fred on in competition had to put up Fred's share of the bet. Fred lost a few games, it should be reported, but he also won some of the matches. On those occasions, he returned home with pocket change. As time went on, Fred became a fine handball player. His cousins found Fred a formidable match in sidewalk ball, too.

Each Friday, around noon, Ben paid a call on Rachel at Gertie's house in Brownsville. There, he dined on Rachel's gefilte fish and the hard, round onion biscuit or koogel that he favored.

Another of the grandchildren, Morty Dolmatz, was sent to Camp Kenmont in the Berkshires. It was a resident camp for boys, operated by the Kiviat Brothers. One, Abel, was a champion mile runner. The place had such a fine reputation that Ben and Rose decided to enter Fred. It happened that Fred was sent to the camp a bit late. The place was already open for the season and the boy's departure from home was hasty.

Carrying the clothing that Fred would need at camp, Ben and Rose on visiting day set off for the place by auto. Accompanying were Fred's sister, Helen, Sadie Dolmatz, and her son, Arnold.

It was raining heavily and the dirt roads winding through the countryside were muddy. Ben had confidence in his automobile's ability to navigate, but the rain had washed some rocks into the car's path. One boulder in particular was impossible, and the Nicholases found themselves stuck, wheels spinning aimlessly in the downpour.

Arnold was directed to get out of the car and push it off the rock, which he could not do. His suit was quickly soaked, which put Arnold in an angry frame of mind. He had to set out on foot and seek help.

At length, the Nicholas expedition reached the camp and liked the place very much. Fred had been there a short while and decided to stay, although he was, his father reports, a little apprehensive and shy. It must be remembered that Fred was still quite young.

Fred had an assigned councillor who was quite friendly and enabled the boy to feel truly welcome.

When the next visiting day arrived, the Nicholases returned and found that Fred had been made captain of his cabin, displayed leadership abilities, learned to swim, and held his own. He was apparently losing the apprehension and shyness with considerable speed.

Ben recalls that a summer camp season for Fred cost around $300, and it was so worthwhile that Fred returned to the establishment for an additional two summers.

During the final summer, Fred was accompanied by his cousin, Buddy Schwartzberg. Buddy, big and clumsy, according to Ben, was proud he had won a wading race. Buddy apparently was not one of the Nicholas grandchildren who gnawed the wooden legs of living room furniture.

Later that season, Ben's office received a call from the camp saying that an outbreak of polio was suspected, one of the boys having become quite ill. The camp was shutting down immediately and the youngsters being sent home on the next train. Ben was to meet Fred at Grand Central at three in the afternoon.

As infantile paralysis was then a severe problem in this country, highly contagious and without a known cure, Ben was appropriately frightened. He tried to reach Rose, but she was out of touch. Instead, he located Rose's sister, Syd, mother of Buddy. Syd Schwartzberg went with Ben to midtown Manhattan to meet the boys' train.

When the platform gates were opened, all the parents rushed forward to find their respective offspring. Fred and Buddy were all right.

At home later, when Rose saw her son entering the apartment a good deal sooner than the regularly scheduled end of the camp season, she sensed disaster and nearly became ill herself. Fred did complain of a headache and a doctor was promptly summoned, but the lad was all right.

Ben and Rose were glad the camp authorities had acted with dispatch.

FIFTEEN.

Ben and Rose widened their circle of friends when they became close with Yetta and Harry Boslow. Ben and Harry saw one another often, Ben calling on him at the Brighton Laundry.

Al Nicholas, meantime, had been placed in the Chicago office of the detective agency. Now he was moved to Philadelphia to open a branch in that city. The Nicholases mentioned this to Yetta Boslow. Al was still a bachelor. Yetta had an unmarried sister living there. It was arranged that the Nicholases and Boslows should drive to Philadelphia and arrange a meeting. It was the dead of winter, in a heavy snowstorm, when the Nicholases and Boslows set off on their self-appointed venture to spark a romance. It was necessary to stop and scrape ice from the windshield on several occasions, but the journey was accomplished in safety. A pleasant visit in Philadelphia followed, but Al Nicholas and Yetta's sister found themselves unattracted.

There were many card parties in the apartment on Ocean Avenue, and Harry and Yetta Boslow were usually present. One evening, while a game was in progress, Yetta received a frantic phone call. The voice on the telephone was that of the Boslows' maid, apparently a nervous type. The maid reported that the Boslow infant daughter had just awakened in her crib, and horror of horrors, the child's eyes were crossed.

Pandemonium ensued at the Nicholases, as Yetta and Harry hastened away. Reaching their own dwelling, Mr. and Mrs. Boslow found the place filled with neighbors and relatives, who had been summoned apparently by the nervous maid, all of the people gabbing

noisily, exchanging ideas on traditional ways for a Jewish mother to uncross a baby's eyes. Yetta listened to all the suggestions and recollections of what someone's mother had done back in a certain village in the old country. Such a plethora of inventive notions and superstitions was heard as to put a well-educated, highly-trained pediatrician into a state of shock. Yetta thought carefully and decided to try the one she thought would work: she squatted over her cross-eyed infant daughter and urinated in her face.

Miracle of miracles, a few hours later, the child's eyes uncrossed.

The Boslows were interesting people in more ways than one. For example, during Prohibition, when there was a plenitude of rotgut sold to the gullible public, the Nicholases refrained from consuming any alcoholic beverage unless assured that the beverage was "the real thing." Harry was host to the Nicholases at dinner one night. The guests were served drinks and Harry solemnly said the liquor was "the real thing" because he had obtained the stuff from his brother-in-law, a pharmacist, the inference being that Harry's brother-in-law would certainly know reliably if a particular beverage were genuine.

Ben knocked back his drink and had to throw up. Everyone in the group was amused at Ben's misery and told Ben he was a sissy, such being the fallacious insufficiency of peer pressure. However, it wasn't long before others in the group felt the need to regurgitate, and that put the stamp of group disapproval on Mr. Boslow's "real thing."

The other Boslows, who ran the Independent Laundry in Brooklyn, still could not resolve their differences. It was agreed that a solution could be found, upon consulting a most learned, pious, and famous Lubovitcher Rabbi, who was en route to visit his flock in America. This remarkable religious man was going to settle, once and for all, the conflicts of the fighting Boslows.

When the Lubovitcher Rabbi's ship tied up at the pier, the Boslow brothers-in-law were among the mob of pious Jews waiting to greet the Man of God upon his arrival to America. In due course, the religious gentleman heard the Boslow complaints and agreed to arbitrate. Posterity conceals what wisdom from On High the Lubovitcher Rabbi succeeded in imparting to the restless Boslows. Posterity also is ignorant of the amount of the gratuity paid to the Holy Man for the rare and perfect advice given to the Boslows and others who sought help.

Based on what has been reported thus far, however, it can be seen that the Boslows were interesting and colorful people. Two of the men were a bit extreme. Take Muttick, for example. Ben helped a cousin of Rose get a job as a clerk in the Independent Laundry. The girl worked industriously, and during the few days of the job, she liked it very much. One day, though, Muttick came into the office, observed the

young lady at her desk, and saw that she was left-handed. He wrote out a paycheck for the young lady and told her to leave.

Ben was astounded and asked Muttick why the girl had been dismissed. "Because she's left-handed," Muttick murmured with great conviction, perhaps ready to spit over his left shoulder and cast out the Evil Eye. "Left-handed people bring bad luck."

Muttick's partner, Louie, also displayed some alarming tendencies. When Louie became angry, he uttered a loud stream of profanity without concern for anyone who might be present; and if truly aroused, he tore off his spectacles and dashed them on the ground. Many people found this a colorful idiosyncrasy, while the optometrists in Brooklyn were overjoyed because Louie's eccentricity meant more business for them. But Ben was bewildered and asked Louie the reason for such behavior.

"When I get mad," Louie replied with stoic simplicity, "I don't give a damn."

A particular Saturday found Rose busy with the preparations for a dinner party. Ben decided to pay a call on Nathan Boslow and invited Fred to go along. Fred, then still a small boy, was left in the car, the understanding being that Ben would remain at Nathan's but a short while. As business conversations often do, this one ran much longer, and Fred had to endure an unwanted solitude lasting more than an hour, a considerable trial for him.

When Ben at length returned, he found his little son furious. Fred, whose capacity for the overtly physical was evident even then, yelled angrily at his father and gave him a few vigorous pushes.

Ben was somewhat embarrassed and apologized to the small boy, who sat angrily in the car's front seat beside an open door. Having uttered what he believed were the appropriate words to mollify his angry son, Ben thereupon gave the door a shove to close it. He went 'round to the driver's side, got in, and started the car. Ben continued to utter words of apology and pulled away from the curb into traffic, only then realizing that Fred's door was open and the child was gone.

Ben glanced into his rear-view mirror and saw Fred lying back on the pavement, bleeding, and looking for all the world as if his last breath were near. Ben hurriedly returned, terrified beyond measure, and retrieved the boy, who had a gash above one eye. Ben drove with Fred to a friend who practiced medicine not far away, in Brownsville. Stitches in the child's forehead were necessary and were covered with a neat bandage. He still has a slight scar.

Upon arriving home, Ben and Fred were greeted at the front door by an unsuspecting Rose. One glance at Fred nearly unnerved the young mother, who exclaimed, "My God! What happened to Fred?" This was followed by an embrace of mother and child and copious tears.

Fred pointed an accusing finger at his father. However, once an explanation was given, and Fred was seen to be in satisfactory condition, the anxiety lessened and the afternoon tragedy receded into the background. The Saturday evening dinner party went quite well.

As to the doctor who had stitched the wound in Fred's forehead, like so many of Ben Nicholas' friends, the medical man had an interesting story.

Originally, he had been a plumber, was married, and had two children. Then he felt the call to practice medicine. The plumber duly resigned his employment, sent his wife to a job, and re-enrolled in school, remaining until he had matriculated as an M.D. Periodically, when family expenses were climbing, the medical student would accept a few plumbing jobs to pick up some extra money.

In this somewhat telescoped version of what was obviously an intriguing tale of human ambition and intelligence, there is much that speaks well in behalf of spirit and motivation. Still, there are residual questions. Was he a good doctor because he was a good plumber? Should pre-medical students be assigned to a trial apprenticeship in industrial plumbing? Did plumbers decide to charge high hourly wages after seeing how much doctors got paid? How many Jewish mothers wanting their sons to become doctors found they could inveigle their unwilling offspring more easily by first holding out as bait the thrilling possibility of their sons working as plumbers' helpers, "to get into the swing of things"?

Is there a symbiotic relationship between the handling of adjustable wrenches, pipefitting tools, and scalpels and retractors? What would Freud's position be on the question?

The 1920s were a cockeyed time and there are surely as many Prohibition stories about human excess as one could hope to hear.

A big Jewish temple was opposite the Nicholas apartment on Ocean Avenue. The family once attended a New Year's Eve costume ball at the place. Ben went as a New Year's baby.

A cocktail party was scheduled. The host was a dress buyer, Joe. He worked for the best women's shop on Division Street, a thorofare on the Lower East Side somewhat less chic than Park Avenue. Joe assured Ben that a proper book on how to mix drinks had been obtained, thus providing the guests with an ample opportunity to experience such seductive potions and exotic libations as exceeded anyone's previous knowledge.

Joe, adventuresome fellow, relative of a pharmacist who specialized in the "real thing," was busy tasting all the drinks at the sideboard, urging Ben to try a few.

No one ever knew positively what some of those punch bowls contained, but Joe *turned yellow* and had to be put to bed, where he

behaved so strangely that a doctor had to be summoned. Joe was found lying beneath the bed. Other grotesquerie included a man passed out with a cigar in his mouth, his chin on the kitchen sink. All the men at the party got drunk except Moe Pakula, an achievement which has become remarkable in the memory of one who was present.

The Nicholases were fond of Lundy's, a restaurant in Sheepshead Bay, at the foot of Ocean Avenue.

Ben and Little Fred were quite partial to raw oysters. Many Sundays found them riding in the car to Lundy's, to wait on line with an astonishing number of people to reach the counter, which was almost 100 feet in length. At the counter, a dozen kitchen helpers busily opened oysters and filled plates with a dozen each.

Sometimes, Ben and Fred ordered two plates each. Considering that the Nicholases were Jews and the oysters, being shellfish, were *trefe*, it might be assumed that the Heavens would part and a deep voice would boom down an interdiction. Not to worry. Most of Lundy's customers were Jews and no complaints were ever heard.

Furthermore, during those months with the letter "r" in the name —October, November, December, and so on—the Nicholases ate clams.

If Jews ate oysters and were consigned to spend Eternity in Purgatory, what happened if they also ate clams? Were the Devil's fires any hotter? People with high blood pressure would probably be in a position to supply suitable answers.

Lundy's also served delicious Shore Dinners, consisting of all shellfish plus clam chowder. The meals were expensive for the era, about $6, and so grand a gustatory adventure that they were reserved for special occasions.

Perhaps remembering his own experience in an oyster bar on Grand Street long years earlier, Ben Nicholas invited Harry Boslow to accompany him to Lundy's for a soft shell crab lunch. Poor Harry. That night his face blew up with hives, which kept him in bed almost a week. Imagine having to stay away from business for such a reason. Somebody Up There must have been telling Harry something.

Another of Ben's colorful characters from the laundry business was Duff Shapiro.

Duff was employed at the office of Washine as Leon Schwartzberg's secretary and assistant. He was pleasant and friendly, with an open, intelligent Irish face inherited from an Irish mother and the name Shapiro from a Jewish father. Duff's brother became a priest, Father Shapiro, while a first cousin became a Rabbi. Duff, then a bachelor, had an unmarried sister. The family lived in Bayonne, New Jersey, and lacked any real knowledge of Judaism until Duff's father died.

The Nicholases went to the father's funeral, a ceremony arranged by an orthodox synagogue to which the father had belonged. In the traditional style, mirrors in the Shapiro household were covered and the family sat Shiva on boxes and ate from the surface of other boxes for the full week of mourning. Ten male Jews comprising a *minyan* arrived each morning at the Shapiro household to recite prayers for the deceased father.

Although Ben's sales territory included Long Island, the demands on his time in Brooklyn were too great. Ben suggested to the Washine bosses that Duff Shapiro be trained as a salesman for Long Island. After an initial uncertainty in the job, Duff "caught on" and did well.

Another Ben in Washine, Ben Secher, was appointed by Procter & Gamble to cover Brooklyn and Long Island in their behalf. This meant a step upward for Secher, who had been calling on retail grocers for years and was one of the few Jews with that firm. He was a heavy-set, good-natured man who loved to eat. He and his wife Lil and their son Murray were part of the Nicholas social circle on Ocean Avenue. Frequently, the Sechers and the Nicholases went by car to the East Side of Manhattan for a Chinese dinner. The two couples sometimes met mutual friends in the restaurant, people who claimed to be strictly kosher at home. Eating out, the people dined on roast pork, often tabbed by cynics as "the Jews' Delight."

As time went on, the Washine salesmen wanted better pay and mentioned it to the company bosses. Leon Schwartzberg devised a complicated point incentive system whereby each unit of merchandise or service offered to the trade by Washine salesmen represented a unit measure. Each salesman was paid a given rate per point, on unit sales. If a salesman was industrious enough to accumulate sufficient points in sales performance, he could be sure his compensation was equitable and reflected what had been accomplished.

Washine's representatives found many friends over the years, and it was customary for the men and their wives to be present at many social affairs and family events. Ben once attended a funeral of a client and encountered a competitor who had often expressed publicly a great dislike for the deceased. Ben asked the competitor why he was present at the funeral of someone categorized as an enemy. The competitor said to Ben: "I didn't believe that bastard was really dead, so I came to see for myself."

Many people in the laundry industry felt that a trade association should be formed. Attempts at such organizing had been ongoing for some time. An early-day association had been disbanded when the secretary of the group had been sent to jail for poisoning dray horses and engaging in other sabotage. In jail, the individual had become friendly with a former high official of the New York Stock Exchange who had been put away for swindling stock brokers.

Incarcerated together, the two men evolved a scheme to merge the big laundries into a new corporation and then sell the corporate stock on the open market.

The former association secretary was given the names of persons who could set up the proposed company. When the man was released from jail, he visited some key supporters and explained the scheme. As a first step, some money had to be raised which would enable this person to concentrate on the project. In exchange for such financing, he offered his key backers a participation, which they accepted. This resulted in funds becoming available for the former association secretary's use.

Ben Nicholas attended the initial meeting along with most laundry owners and found the man's presentation to be excellent. The project moved along at a good pace, and after a firm known as The New York Linen Supply became interested, things fell into place quickly.

The New York Linen Supply was a corporation of eight partners, two of whom were relatives of Irving Nechols' wife, Betty.

The new corporation was duly formed and the promoters cleared over a half million dollars. These funds were invested in the market and were helpful in merging other firms. Eventually, the whole thing fell apart when the stock market collapsed.

A Chicago lawyer, Aaron Shapiro, was brought to Brooklyn to organize the laundry industry. Shapiro had made a great name when he brought suit against Henry Ford, the car maker. Ford had backed an anti-semitic newspaper in Dearborn, Michigan. Shapiro won a judgement against Ford and received an apology as well as a cash settlement. The newspaper ceased.

Arriving in Brooklyn, Shapiro received a fine welcome, but made little progress. Competition was too tough and it was hard to hold the members in line. The first agreement was broken when the laundry drivers were instructed to offer lower prices to the customers of most hated competitors.

SIXTEEN.

The High Holidays of 1929 found worshippers in the big synagogue opposite the Nicholas apartment on Ocean Avenue. Some were standing outside, taking a break. Newsboys dashed up and down the street, hawking an extra: NEW YORK STOCK MARKET CRASHES.

It had been a time of hypnosis, intoxication, euphoria, those crazy 1920s, as the market went up and so did people's expectations. But the bubble had limits. Christmas, 1928, found the stock market behaving skittishly and overstimulated. Hoover had won the election in November, causing a rally. A month later, the market broke more sharply than it had the previous Spring. It was a bit murky why leading issues fell so extensively in a single day's business. A lot of small customers, working on margin, got in too deeply and were sold out by their brokers. It was a rough winter, but during the Spring of 1929, things seemed to stabilize and improve.

The summer of 1929 was a time of soaring, as the market rose upward. Prices of stocks rose out of all proportion to the earnings of the companies. There was a cracking in September, however, succeeded by some uncertain weeks. The market seemed to hold and people hoped for a new upward turn.

Ben had been accumulating stock in Cities Service, on a 10 percent margin. Like millions of others, he built up some pleasant paper profits.

After the market began to wobble, Ben attempted to stabilize his situation by putting up more margin. There was, however, a limit to his resources, and the valued position in Cities Service shares was

wiped out because the broker had to liquidate the account in order to recoup the broker's need of cash, never mind about Ben Nicholas.

Another loss was in a new laundry then being launched in Great Neck by a friend. It never had a chance to commence operation.

A savings account in the Public National Bank, an institution with Jewish owners, was tied up when the bank had to close its doors. The major portion of the money was returned subsequently, without interest.

The Federal Reserve, formed in 1913, which was supposed to help banks in distress, refused to do anything. It appealed to New York banks to intervene in depositors' behalf. The New York banks stepped back. There were banks whose depositors lined up, seeking return of their savings, but retrieved nothing.

Passage of the Hawley-Smoot Tariff was another factor contributing to the nation's problems. That law was intended to protect American industry by restricting imports. That, in turn, dried up Europe's buying ability, as foreign countries needed American markets for their goods.

Curiously, there was a lag between the technical start of the Great Depression and its effect upon the populace at large. Washine, for example, was not immediately affected. It took on a new bleach user, bleaching walnuts to a lighter color which made them more appealing. The customer bought huge quantities at harvest time. Business was fine.

Rose's mother Peppie and sister Ethel departed for California to visit the Krieger family and Aunt Katie. Peppie and Ethel went next to Florida for the winter.

Ethel met a fellow and married him. The marriage was a mistake, however, and annulled before Ethel and Peppie returned home. Back in New York, Ethel and Peppie moved into an apartment hotel on 72nd Street.

Rose's mother became ill with a gall bladder complaint and went through surgery, which was successful. Unfortunately, she developed a blood clot and died. She was 60 years of age.

Peppie left a sizable estate and Irving was assigned to manage it. Ben was appointed assistant and treasurer. It was the wish of Rose's mother that her two single children receive half of the estate until they married. The remaining three children received one-sixth each.

Ethel decided to travel through Europe and remained abroad for more than two years. Ben sent her a monthly check from the estate. In time, Ethel developed a profound interest in modern dance and studied with Martha Graham in Germany at the time of Hitler's emergence.

For many years after, Ethel continued as a devotee and practitioner of modern dance, working with top directors. She traveled widely throughout Europe and spent time in Jerusalem, where she became a friend of Henrietta Szold, the famous organizer of Hadassah.

Henry, Jr., meantime, had secretly remarried. The new Mrs. Nechols was Sara Weitz of Cleveland, a friend of Ethel.

Henry, Jr., had experienced a good deal of sadness, having lost a young wife who died. Now he had embarked on a second try at matrimony and attempted to keep the marriage secret, so as to continue receiving his share of Peppie's estate. However, the marriage came to light, as was perhaps inevitable, and Henry, Jr.'s role under his late mother's will changed drastically. Instead of enjoying an equal portion of one-half, he now found himself on the same basis as the other three.

Even with the harshness that seemed to touch everyone in those days, the Nicholases diverted themselves with frequent attendance of first-run movie houses in downtown Brooklyn on Fulton Street. The Brooklyn *Paramount*, for one, offered movies plus stageshows with popular bands and singers. It was during the young Ethel Merman's initial outing as a singing attraction at the Brooklyn *Paramount* that Ben and Rose heard her for the first time. Folks could certainly hear Ethel in the back row clearly, but still ahead of her was the song *Sam and Delilah* in George Gershwin's *Girl Crazy* on Broadway. Then would those bell-like tones make the rafters ring and she'd become a star.

The band leader of the Brooklyn *Paramount* was a matinee-idol type with wavy blonde hair that roused the adoration of female fans. However, he was closed out and Rudy Vallee brought in, complete with megaphone and assorted love songs.

Another theater which the Nicholases liked was situated at the foot of Ocean Parkway. The family drove to a movie there on an evening when a raging storm was in progress. Reaching the place, Ben and Rose found the area seriously flooded. But they wanted to see the show and the theater needed the business. A porter was standing by in a raincoat and rubber hip boots to *carry* patrons to the boxoffice. So much for the inventiveness of free enterprise.

During another storm, Ben acted as chauffeur for Murray Cohen and Moe Pakula, when the men were headed for an important meeting. Along Ocean Avenue, an area of deep depression extended for perhaps two blocks and it was inundated. The car's motor failed. While Ben sat bravely behind the wheel and steered through the flood, Murray and Moe gamely shed their shoes and socks, rolled up their suit pants, and pushed the car to safe ground.

A men's club in a large synagogue attracted Ben, mainly because of a program series. One memorable speaker was the Customs Collector of the Port of New York. The gentleman described a consignment of crates which arrived and underwent examination by staff inspectors. The shipper claimed that since, under law, anything over 100 years old could enter the country duty-free, the crates then being scrutinized should fit that category. Supposedly, the crates contained sections of walls of an ancient English castle. Closer examination, however, showed that the crates contained pine wood, and pine wasn't exported before the end of the 19th century. The customs people speedily wired the exporter asking for payment of import duty, and a check arrived shortly after. It was believed that the purchaser of the goods was William Randolph Hearst and the destination may have been his estate at San Simeon, California.

Irving Nechols' wife, Betty, had some kinfolk, and they became a part of the circle. Betty's relative was Eddie Gresser, an eye specialist. Dr. Gresser was fond of describing one adventure. It happened after he obtained a medical degree and was seeking work.

Gresser got on as a ship's doctor, and eventually, in Scotland, the young medical man was able to take in the sights. It was a Sunday and no amusements were open because of the Sabbath. Some retail shops, however, were exempt from the ban. Eddie walked along, studying shop windows, and paused at a clothing store. A moment later, a salesman emerged, took hold of the young doctor's arm, and urged him to enter the shop and try on the wonderful suit.

This approach amused Eddie, who informed the salesman that such behavior was quite common on Division Street in New York.

The salesman replied: "That's where I'm from!"

The Depression was well under way, but people still had to have their clothes washed and ironed. Ben had plenty of work.

Procter & Gamble usually gave their sales representatives two weeks' notice of any increase in prices. Since Ben Secher handled P&G's line, Ben Nicholas worked with Secher to accumulate as many advance orders as possible. The two Bens broke all sales records for laundry soaps, sometimes exceeding 10 carloads in a given week. Ivory soap was the best known toilet soap then, and P&G decided to offer it for sale to commercial laundries. The two Bens industriously introduced the soap to top quality laundries, with promises to aid in advertising. They disposed of a few carloads per laundry in each section of their sales territory.

Ben Secher's brother-in-law lived in Cedarhurst, Long Island. The brother-in-law located a vacant house for rent and the Sechers moved in. Soon, Mr. Secher appointed himself to find a dwelling for the Nicholases.

Ben and Rose liked the place, found the $65 monthly rent attractive, and moved in. The two-story dwelling was on a large lot and boasted a spacious back yard. It contained two bathrooms, four or five bedrooms, and a two-car garage. The location is now recalled as Central Avenue, a dead-end street.

Fred and Helen enjoyed individual bedrooms, and a live-in maid joined the family. Finding themselves two miles from Far Rockaway and perhaps five miles from Long Beach, the Nicholases joined a swimming club at Far Rockaway and became suburbanites.

Ben planted a garden with tomatoes, peas, and other goodies, tending the plot with loving care. Heavy rainfall was a trial and he was outdoors frequently, fearful that the wooden supports for his bean vines might collapse.

Ben was able to sustain his family in satisfactory style during these Depression days, but the circumstances of others less fortunate were indeed grim.

Suburban life had a salutary effect on the children, and cousins were steady visitors, along with uncles, aunts, and friends, many of whom came to stay for weekends—a trip to the country. Even Rachel Nicholas arrived to see with her own eyes a side of life largely unknown to the apartment dwellers of crowded city neighborhoods.

Ben was preoccupied with keeping the house warm in winter and cool in summer. He experimented with coal and then coke.

On particularly cold winter nights, Ben had to feed the furnace a few times. About 30 tons of coal per year, all hand shovelled, was used.

There were family pets, Fred's dog and Helen's cat. In summer, the pets attracted fleas and the cat bore kittens. The cellar was a haven for fleas and mosquitoes.

The fleas and mosquitoes became a sore point. Ben and Rose wanted to go away with some friends for a week and asked Henry, Jr., and Sara to stay with the children. They demurred, wishing no responsibilities.

Regina and Al Meltzner agreed to take on the job and duly moved in. When the Nicholases returned, they were assailed with complaints about the fleas and mosquitoes. Ben and Rose attended to the problem and the Meltzners departed in good humor.

Fred had a dog named Scotty. He was smart and tough, a typical New Yorker, and chased every vehicle that passed. People found the continual barking and leaping a nuisance and Fred decided Scotty should be cured. A stick was tied to the dog's collar, so long that it extended between his legs. The dog could walk easily, but running was painful because the stick smacked Scotty in the testicles, causing him to stop short. Scotty found that the stick couldn't be dislodged. The chasing of moving vehicles came to an end.

Scotty conducted his amours on an ambitious scale and was often absent for days on missions of love. But even the greatest passion will pall eventually, and the Nicholases knew Fred's pet would return home.

On weekends, the Nicholases fished in a rowboat off Far Rockaway. Fred had a young cousin, Henry Nechols, Irving's son. Henry was a few years Fred's junior, and because Fred was 10, he was the senior man. One evening, when Fred and Henry were left home and the adults were absent, Henry awoke with a bad case of sunburn. Fred hastened to the medicine chest, found the big yellow and black tube of *Unguentine*, and applied it to his cousin's sunburn. Afterward, Henry was given an aspirin with a glass of water and sent back to bed.

New York winters were rather fierce, even then, and when the snow drifted too high to allow travel, the Nicholases were housebound. Their friend and neighbor Ben Secher was similarly prevented from going to business. On such days, he donned rubber hip boots and struggled through the snow to drop by and play cards.

Paul and Jeanette Pakula resided in nearby Long Beach and were regulars for bridge. The Pakula house was quite attractive, and since Paul had been elected to the local school board, there were always provocative discussions.

During this period, a friend of the Nicholases established a day camp for children. Fred and Helen were duly enrolled. Rose was so taken with the project's possibilities that she became associated with the venture. Ben bought an immense Packard sedan, which Rose used to transport the school's children daily. The car was hard to handle, but Rose persisted and managed well. This venture was her initial outing in the area of group child care and motivation. It was a turning point. She eventually devoted 25 years to working with school youngsters.

Adjusting to a life without conscious obeisance to religious dogma continued to haunt Ben. Ever since the family's drift away from traditional Judaism, there had been a residual feeling of guilt. One fine autumn morning, which happened to be Yom Kippur, the family went to the seashore at their swim club. Still a little girl, Helen hastened into the surf and was soon being swept to deeper precincts. She became frightened and called for help.

Ben was a mediocre swimmer, but leapt into the water to rescue his small daughter. As he fought his way out to Helen, Ben's lingering guilt of having abandoned his Judaism assailed him anew. The family had gone swimming on Yom Kippur when they should have been in the synagogue. For this most serious misfeasance, Ben now saw his child being dragged under, not by the undertow, but by those natural forces unleashed by a dissatisfied God. However, he reached Helen safely and together they swam back to shore.

On another occasion, the Nicholases were driving into Far Rockaway and the traffic was heavy. Ben noticed a pedestrian walking along the opposite side of the road. The pedestrian behaved as if he were drunk, staggering a little, weaving unsteadily, and turned as if preparing to cross the road. Ben assumed the man would see the steady flow of traffic and desist. However, the pedestrian continued and walked into the car ahead of Ben. The pedestrian was killed. Immediately, the traffic halted and the driver of the car solicited witnesses to testify. Ben agreed to appear and give evidence that the driver of the car couldn't avoid hitting the strangely-weaving pedestrian.

Within a few days, Ben was summoned to police headquarters in Long Island City. He told what he had seen, as did other witnesses.

Some of the witnesses agreed with Ben's account, while others didn't. One person told of having seen the *driver* of the "hit" car weaving in and out of traffic and speeding. The examining officer explained to Ben how difficult it was *in finding the truth* since most witnesses are honest and relate what they think they saw.

The driver ahead of Ben in the accident turned out to be an industrial arts instructor at an area high school. As a gesture of thanks, the shop teacher built an oaken coffee table for Ben and Rose.

Fred's Bar Mitzvah was drawing near. He was sent to a nearby synagogue for instruction, to comply with his grandparents' wishes, and became quite interested in the religious ritual. He asked Ben several questions. Moreover, Fred wanted to know why his father hadn't joined the synagogue. Ben offered a careful reply: Fred should apply himself to the religious studies offered, but Ben's plan was to refrain from joining the organization. Ben further indicated that it would be Fred's option as to whether he continued his religious studies after the Bar Mitzvah.

Ben conceded privately that the reason for Fred's Bar Mitzvah was mainly to please Rachel Nicholas, by then an elderly lady who wished to see her grandson properly brought to the estate of a Jewish man.

Fred applied himself to the course of study and learned to read from the Torah. With the aid of his teacher, Fred wrote a speech. Helen learned the speech and could deliver it as effectively as Fred.

The ceremony was held on a Saturday, and after the synagogue portion had been completed, the Nicholases held an open house for all their friends and relatives. Fred, of course, gave a splendid accounting of himself.

The family decided that Fred's Bar Mitzvah gift should be the privilege of joining his parents and other kin on a cruise to Cuba. At

the time, Fulgencio Battista was the Cuban dictator, and American tourists were welcome.

Helen was deemed too young for such a journey and was assigned to stay with her Aunt Molly in Brooklyn.

A cabin was engaged on the lowest deck of the ship, without air conditioning, the cheapest kind of accommodation. The room contained twin beds, plus an upper berth for Fred. Also traveling with the group was Rose's sister Syd and her son, Fred's cousin Buddy, as well as a business friend and his wife. As the ship left port, the women and children went off to explore, while the men removed their shirts in the sunshine and sat down to play pinochle.

After an uneventful cruise southward, the ship docked in Havana. By then, the men in the group had become acquainted with other men aboard, and there were new friendships (and card games) in abundance.

As the tourists left the ship, peddlers were waiting on the pier. One man approached Ben and said in Yiddish, handing him a printed card, "Come to Moishe Pippik's Kosher Restaurant, the best in Havana!"

The tourists were led on group visits to a brewery which served free beer and snacks, followed by time on a magnificent beach with stately palm trees, clean, white sand, and visions of a placid sea.

Signs of widespread damage were visible, from the recent revolution. The Nacional Hotel, a high, modern edifice, was still closed, bullet holes in its walls. However, the Capitol building had a famous large diamond buried in thick glass at the entrance, untouched.

Still, there were those occasionally intriguing sights so natural to tropical life, which made a noticeable impression upon the Americans: enormous outdoor advertising boards which proclaimed the virtues of a particular brand of contraceptive, and the glamourous nightclubs where the floorshows featured Latin talent and the chorus girls were almost, but not quite, nude.

For the evening schedule, Fred and his cousin Buddy were left aboard ship.

At one rather busy and elaborate casino, Ben found himself seated alone, trying to resist exhaustion. A rather nice American lady approached and asked if his name were Nicholas, as she knew Charley Nicholas and thought Ben resembled him greatly.

Needless to say, the young husbands proposed to the respective (and respectable) wives a visit to Havana's famed x-rated area. Since everyone wanted to be a good sport, the people soon found themselves in the city's biggest whorehouse. In a large room, young lady prostitutes clad in bathrobes sat in chairs along two walls. As a prospective client approached, a prostitute would open her garment and permit a glance.

Male prostitutes were available for the wives. One such gentleman took a fancy to Rose's sister, Syd, but Syd, proper and sure, failed to respond.

The man was undiscouraged and gave Syd to understand that if she could not pay him to make love to her, he would pay her to make love to him. The situation remained a stand-off.

Later, the group attended a movie which featured live stage shows with a cast of nude, inter-racial, male and female personnel.

After the obligatory erotic dancing, the curtain was lowered briefly, and when it was raised, the audience saw a Master of Ceremonies at a microphone, and beside him a giant of a man clad in a beach robe. There was a roll of drums. The M.C. addressed the audience with many linguistic flourishes, after which the fellow in the beach robe opened the garment and showed the audience his large penis in a glorious cockstand.

This was, of course, too much for the refined ladies from New York. They screamed and rushed for the exits.

The husbands, however, were a good deal more patient and remained in the auditorium for the movie, which was billed as *Tarzan, the Apeman*, a version of the Tarzan legend unlike anything exhibited in nice movie houses back home.

In this presentation, the camera tracked in on a powerfully-built, nude young man seated in a tree. He gazed out at the distant ocean where a boat was obligingly sinking, leaving a nude woman floating unconsciously upon a mere log. Tarzan, splendid fellow, leapt into the sea, where, with powerful strokes of his mighty arms, he quickly reached the pitifully weak, firm-bosomed maiden and swam with her to shore.

In a short while, the couple were comfortably installed high in a tree, where the lady returned to her senses, clasped in the reassuring embrace of the jungleman. The young woman slowly opened her eyes, looked about with great innocence, and finally saw her rescuer's cock, which she grabbed enthusiastically. Just then, a huge, English-language title appeared on the screen obscuring the action. The music came up loudly as the words recited CIVILIZATION COMES TO THE JUNGLE.

Just as the story was becoming very interesting to all the young husbands in the group, Rose Nicholas opened the auditorium door and shouted clearly, "Ben Nicholas, you come out of there this minute!"

Having to leave just then was most disappointing, but knowing he could go back home and tell his pals at the office about having seen a genuine dirty movie, Ben, good fellow, followed his wife's instructions.

Back in New York once more, the problems of the Depression were evident on every side. In Cedarhurst, the Nicholases knew a couple who had been living in California, but couldn't make a go of it. The couple's main problem had been a lack of employment. However, there was nothing but praise for the climate, the relaxed pace of life, and the attractive future which the area promised.

The continual talk about California made some little impression upon Rose. Her sister, Ethel, after a couple of years abroad in Europe, where Modern Dance had been studied, was a guest in the Nicholas household for the New Year's holiday. 1933 would soon be only a memory, but no one would ever forget the banks' closing and millions of people suffering as a result of the Hoover Administration's notions.

On New Year's Day afternoon, 1934, Ben was working at his desk on business papers. Rose entered with a startling idea. She and Ethel had been chatting in the other room and wanted to know Ben's reaction to the family relocating permanently in California. The idea was intriguing.

Ben decided to investigate the possibilities of taking a line of goods from his firm to the Coast.

While the problem of gainful employment was central to the family's plans, there was a good deal of concern about Helen's annual summer misery with asthma and hay fever, which seemed to coincide with the appearance of rag weed pollen. Was there any rag weed in Los Angeles? That fall, Helen experienced her worst asthmatic attack. Rose and Ben had sat up with her all night, to help ease the child's struggle for breath.

At that time, Washine was the local representative in New York for La France Textiles of Philadelphia, a firm that produced the finest quality of laundry textiles. As part of his plan to establish himself in Los Angeles, Ben had inquired of a friend, Harry Gilbert, general sales manager of the Philadelphia firm, if the line would be available for Ben on the Coast. Harry assured him that a deal was possible. Harry Gilbert also gave Ben to understand that on Harry's most recent trip to the West Coast, he had opened enough accounts to almost guarantee Ben an income equal to or better than Ben's earnings in New York. Harry, however, did not inform Ben that all the Coast jobbers were loaded up with merchandise, in an effort to beat the new cotton tax which came into effect January 1, 1934.

Leon Schwartzberg and Zeke Escott heard with some dismay Ben's plan to relocate the Nicholases in Southern California. Ben had been for several years a top producer for the Washine firm and his continued sales efforts were greatly needed. Leon was stoutly opposed, but Zeke was intrigued.

There was a matter of money. Washine owed Ben several thousand

dollars from loans and deferred commissions. Cash was tight and the bosses decided that Ben should collect the delinquent accounts of his various customers, and Leon and Zeke would make up any difference with notes payable at $100 per month. Ben concurred and the deal was set.

At the time, Ben owned a Willys-Knight automobile. It had sleeve valves and eliminated the need for grinding the valves, an unpleasant repair chore of the time. The family was fond of the car, except on severely cold days. Then the engine required a lengthy period to get warm. Worse luck, there were moments when the Willys-Knight required pushing, to start, because the oil, even the thinnest grade available, was still too thick in winter. Perhaps it was the winter before the family departed for California when the temperature fell to a new low of 14½ below zero. The car was inoperable for two days.

With the move to Los Angeles imminent, Ben traded the Willys-Knight for a new Ford V-8, to be picked up on the Coast.

His next step was to approach his long-standing customers about the delinquent balances due. It was a difficult period for everyone, not just Ben Nicholas' customers. The tragic consequences of the Hoover Administration's ineptitude, stupidity, and disinterest in human suffering, so similar to the Reagan Administration today, were then bearing down cruelly on the general populace, even though President Roosevelt was already in office and trying to find a way to restore confidence.

Ben appealed to customers who owed Washine and they attempted to clean up arrearages. The final total, though, was insufficient to cover what was owed to Ben. He therefore took promissory notes from Washine.

The westward journey was to be by the Southern Pacific Railroad, which did not extend to New York City. The railroad offered an attractive plan for westbound passengers to Los Angeles. They could proceed by boat from New York to New Orleans and then go overland to the coast by train. The journey required nine days and the boat departed once a month. Ben and Rose agreed on the next sailing, which would be March 14, 1934.

It was a time when family relations were still good. Rachel, still living with Molly in Brooklyn, was a chipper old lady, with an abundance of kosher recipes and good cheer. She had a lifetime of memories, many of them still near the surface. Sometimes she would be visiting with someone and become lost in thought, tears in her aged eyes. People knew she was thinking of Annie, gone for more than 20 years in the holocaust of the Triangle Shirt-Waist Company, or remembering Sam, whom she had married long before in Europe.

Ben's brothers-in-law as well as others had learned to admire his prowess as a first-class salesman. They had to respect the way Ben

supported his family and cared for his children, but they didn't care for many of Ben's ideas. In his 15 years of life with Rose, Ben had done such novel things as help his wife in the kitchen and had even washed his infant son's diapers. A little too modern to suit the more traditional macho types in the family.

A curious footnote here: Ben and Rose were friendly with Mr. and Mrs. Alexander. Mrs. Alexander had become a student of Astrology and Numerology, had even made charts on some close friends. She was particularly interested in Ben's chart.

At the time, Ben and Rose's reservations for the westward trip had not been confirmed and there had been no mention of a departure date. Ben encountered Mrs. Alexander in Brooklyn one morning. She informed him of her recent study of his chart and concluded from it that Ben and Rose would be leaving New York permanently, that they would prosper in their new place of residence, and, furthermore, that they would depart on March 14th.

It was decided that the family would retain books, utensils, pictures, and clothes. The furniture, including a fine baby grand piano and a Circassian walnut bedroom set, were sold, bringing far less than hoped for. The hand-made oaken coffee table, presented to Ben and Rose by the shop teacher from the car accident, was awarded to Molly.

Finally the packing and shipping were finished and the day of departure arrived. On the boat, the Nicholases found themselves assigned to two staterooms connected by a bath. A noisy farewell party took place, marking not only the move to California but Ben's 40th birthday as well. Before long, the ship had slipped out to sea.

Fred and Helen had the run of the ship. As a diversion for the adult passengers, a platform was rigged on the top deck for the shooting of clay pigeons. There was also a good deal of firing on sharks. Ben and his family observed this rite with some apprehension, observing how the passengers seemed to derive considerable pleasure from the gratuitous killing.

After a week of smooth sailing, the ship docked at New Orleans. The through passengers were able to enjoy a full day of sightseeing before boarding the train. The family saw the French Quarter, the great cemetery where people are buried above ground, and had dinner at Antoine's. The most exciting event occurred in a hotel lobby, when Ben encountered the former baseball pitcher, Grover Cleveland Alexander. Alexander at that time was the manager of the Washington baseball club in the American League.

Alexander met the Nicholases and shook hands with Fred. Not quite 14 then, Fred was so delighted at having met one of his baseball heroes that he refrained from washing the hand shaken by Alexander for the entire day.

Late that night, the train departed for Los Angeles, being moved across the Mississippi on a huge railroad barge. Rolling westward and passing through Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and into California, the family saw Indians, sometimes selling jewelry or rugs at train stops; a few times, they saw cowboys, and, best of all, ate all meals in the splendid dining car. The service was grand!

Ben and Rose brought their family safely to Los Angeles early on the day of March 23, 1934. Rose's Aunt Katie and her daughter, Anna Krieger, were at the station. The family went immediately in search of a furnished apartment and located an attractive one on Cloverdale Avenue, near Wilshire Boulevard, in the LaBrea district. The apartment featured two bedrooms, kitchen, living room and bath, nicely furnished, for about $50 per month. The Nicholases moved in.

Fred went outdoors to study the neighborhood and met a boy, Bill Gross. Bill and his mother, a widow, lived in a building near the Nicholas apartment. Fred and Bill continue to be friends.

The following morning, Ben opened a checking account at the Wilshire and LaBrea branch of the Bank of America. His next stop was a Ford car dealer close by, where Ben picked up a four-door Ford V-8 on a year's time payment plan. Later, Ben proceeded to the office of John P. Lynch, the local exclusive jobber for La France products. This was Ben's initial opportunity to become acquainted and make arrangements to work with the firm's sales personnel.

That was when Ben heard the news that the company was overstocked with his firm's products, because a huge purchase had been made to escape the new cotton tax. Ben was to move the excess inventory as soon as possible. His work was cut out for him.

Rose, meantime, entered Fred and Helen in public schools near the apartment, and the Nicholases became official residents of California.

SEVENTEEN.

After Ben and Rose settled into the Southern California life style in the Spring of 1934 and saw their two children enrolled in school and progressing, there were other goals to realize. They found a house, friends, and new business contacts. During this period, Ben came to appreciate more vividly the experience of Sam and Rachel in locating their family in a new place 40-odd years earlier.

The Depression years passed somehow, with visible social tragedies beyond count. By the end of the thirties, Fred and Helen were fairly well along in school, and when the second world war came along, it was apparent to the Nicholases, as well as to millions of others, that the U.S. was going to be a participant and the struggle would be long and horrible.

Fred was drafted out of college three months before Pearl Harbor, and sometime later, when she was of a suitable age, Helen enlisted in the women's auxiliary of the U.S. Navy, the WAVES.

By war's end, when Fred was home and returning to college, Ben was in his fifties and looking ahead to the next dozen or so years, after which he could think about retirement.

In the early fifties, Fred finished law school at U.S.C. and got married. Time would see him become the father of two daughters and a son. Helen and her husband also had two daughters and a son.

Ben remained in the laundry supply business until he quit in 1961. Thereafter, Rose and Ben did an around-the-world cruise and lived in Europe for a year. There was also a trip to "Down Under" and Hong Kong.

By 1965, the couple had settled in the Leisure World Retirement Center at Seal Beach and turned their attention to politics and community affairs.

Charley Nicholas, Ben's older brother, neared the end of a long and interesting life, culminating in a lingering illness that was a great sadness to the entire family. This rending experience persuaded Ben and Rose that people who are of an advanced age and whose physical being is in such a state of extreme decline that recovery is impossible, but who are being maintained on life-support systems, should be allowed to die in dignity.

It began early in 1975 when Rose and Ben followed the advice given by Dr. Walter C. Alvarez in his syndicated column in *The Los Angeles Times*. The Nicholases filed the living will Alvarez suggested with their doctor, requesting that artificial or mechanical means to keep them alive in case of terminal illness be withheld. The doctor agreed to keep the statements in the Nicholases' medical files but said he could not carry out their wishes for fear of malpractice suits from relatives, no matter how distant. The Nicholases found this most upsetting. It brought visions of needless suffering without hope and depletion of their life savings, as was happening to their neighbors.

Rose and Ben read books, magazines, and news articles on the subject of death and dying, requested material from *The Euthanasia Educational Society*, and started to write letters to legislators, state and federal, and to anyone they thought would be in a position to help them. They lectured to clubs, church groups, and schools—wherever they could generate interest. The Seal Beach newspaper, a weekly, interviewed them, and their story and pictures appeared on its front page. The Nicholases appeared on the NBC program. *The Issue Is*. *The Long Beach Independent-Press Telegram* featured an article by their staff writer, James M. Leavy, on May 25, 1975, titled *Crusade Is Dignity in Death*. Rose and Ben obtained numerous copies of this article and mailed them to legislators, and things began to look more encouraging.

Many of those whom Rose and Ben contacted warned that they were undertaking an impossible task, that the Health Committee of the California State Assembly had considered and held an interim hearing on the "Rights of the Terminally Ill" on October 8, 1974, in San Francisco. The group had decided to drop the matter. However, a Mervin D. Field poll published in *The Los Angeles Times* on April 4, 1975, reported "87% in Poll Back Passive Euthanasia." National polls also showed that the majority of those polled on this subject were in favor.

Early in 1976, the Nicholases began to attend political functions and were fortunate to meet Leo McCarthy, Speaker of the California State Assembly. They aroused his interest. When a small party was

arranged where Rose and Ben had Mr. McCarthy and his staff to themselves, the political persons became even more interested, and McCarthy promised "to see what I can do." Members of his staff also volunteered to help.

The big break, however, came when the Nicholases spoke before the Leisure World Rotary Club. They met Dr. Clifford Bishop, a retired surgeon and physician, who had practiced in the center's clinic. Dr. Bishop was most knowledgeable on the subject and offered to join. The Nicholases gladly accepted.

The Health Committee in the California State Legislature is responsible for legislation of bills similar to the one Rose and Ben were suggesting. The couple had been sending the committee many ideas for a comprehensive bill to be added to the material already gathered. On February 13, 1976, a bill was placed in the Assembly and given the number A.B. 3060. Letter-writing began anew, with greater enthusiasm. All 13 members of the Health Committee were contacted. Dr. Bishop had copies of the bill duplicated and attached them to petition forms which stated: "We, the undersigned, residents of Leisure World-Seal Beach, are very much in favor of the Natural Death Act, A.B. 3060, introduced by Assemblyman Barry Keene, and urge its passage."

More than 2,500 signatures to the petition were obtained, and many individuals also wrote letters to the chairman of the committee, Barry Keene. The couple enlisted the support of the American Association of Retired People and the Senior Citizens Council. Dr. Bishop spoke before medical groups and service clubs. Then, in April, 1976, A.B. 3060 was set for hearing by the Health Committee. Ben agreed to testify on April 21 for the bill. At their own expense, Dr. Bishop and Ben flew to Sacramento early that morning. The petitions were brought and placed in the record. Each gave his testimony and answered many questions. Some committee members assured the two that their testimony was convincing, and the vote was 7 to 5—enough for passage. The two men were jubilant.

The opposition opened a strong campaign led by a "Pro-Life" group of ardent anti-abortionists. They wrote letters, but the Nicholases matched them. The vote on the bill in full Assembly was 43 to 25, ready for Senate action, and A.B. 3060 was sent to the Judiciary Committee. A hearing was called for August 17. Letter-writing was continued, this time to members of the Judiciary Committee. Again Dr. Bishop and Ben arranged to testify. Also testifying in favor was Dr. Kash Rose, president-elect of the California Medical Association. The Pro-Life people came out in force with pickets marching, carrying signs demanding the defeat of the bill. A number of them gave highly emotional testimony, prophesying that passage of the bill would

"...give our children the right to kill their parents..." and similar things. The bill was passed 22 to 14.

The next hurdle was to convince Governor Jerry Brown to sign A.B. 3060. Yet another letter-writing campaign was undertaken. At long last, with only minutes to spare, A.B. 3060 was signed into law and became effective on January 1, 1977.

Early on the morning of October 1, Ben and Rose had a phone call from a reporter for the Associated Press. Since Ben was absent and Dr. Bishop not in town, Rose answered questions. Her replies were sent immediately over the national wire service. A call from a San Francisco radio station was next, and this was followed by one from NBC-TV requesting an interview for half past two that afternoon. Ben and Rose appeared on the 6 p.m. newscast. Next came a call from *The Long Beach Press-Telegram*. The newspaper people arrived later in the afternoon and a front page article ran on Saturday, October 2. The Nicholases were overwhelmed but elated.

Telephone calls and letters began to pour in with congratulations and thanks. Some of the writers offered or sent payment for copies of the official declaration. Rose and Ben photocopied the declarations and mailed them, simultaneously returning the money—the couple had accomplished their purpose.

Governor Edmund Brown, Jr., described the nation's first "right-to-die" law as an attempt to face death realistically and to end the tyranny of machinery over human lives.

Brown, a former Jesuit seminarian, was reported in the press as saying, "There is no moral principle that requires extraordinary means or artificial devices to prolong life beyond its natural end." Furthermore, Brown said, "In this country, we have often been afraid and unwilling to face death. This bill recognizes birth and death and not making humans slaves to a machine."

Rose had participated in the campaign for two years. She saw the passage and signing of the bill as a chance for freedom from medical treatment that might otherwise be forced on her. Two thousand elderly residents of Leisure World had signed a petition to the legislature urging passage of the bill, and many were expected to sign a living will. One newspaper quoted Rose as saying: "Now there can be dignity in death—not to lay there with tubes and all sorts of apparatus trying to keep life going when there's absolutely nothing. If we're terminal and we have to go," Rose added, "for God's sake let us go."

Such a living will, which contains instructions relative to the use of mechanical devices in case of serious illness, must be renewed every five years to remain valid. It can be acted on only after two doctors certify a patient hopelessly ill, with death imminent no matter what treatment is used.

Needless to say, the law was controversial, from inception to passage and signing, but reflects the growing support of seniors and others against the artificial prolonging of life when there is no hope.

After the "right-to-die" law was signed, Ben had even more calls to appear as a guest lecturer and consultant for programs related to the welfare of older adults.

Meantime, Ben and Rose had been taking college courses in various subjects to fill in the gaps of their educational background.

In the late Spring of 1977, the year that Ben was 83, Coastline Community College awarded him an honorary associate in arts degree. It was duly noted that Ben was "simply amazing" and "one of the most active citizens in Orange County," as well as "a self-appointed champion of human rights for older adults" who, at 83, "takes advantage of his prime physical fitness to get about town in service to his peers."

At that time, Ben was engaged in an attempt to get the educational system to study the life-style of senior citizens. The theory is that the population is continually growing older and that young people should know and understand what they face in later years.

Ben asked an anthropology professor at a local college if he would be interested in having his class research the accomplishments of senior citizens over the age of 65. Ben thinks it a worthwhile project and would like to see a television series produced on the same subject. The professor indicated that he would give the idea serious consideration.

The Los Angeles Times for June 13, 1977, quoted Ben as saying: "I want to live life to the fullest. The great thing about aging is that I can keep expanding my knowledge and intelligence as long as I live. I am accomplishing more of the things I'm interested in than ever before in my life."

Rose keeps active as well. She spends some hours each week tutoring foreign students in the English language.

Another activity in which Rose and Ben participate is called Capitol Classroom, the official title of which is American Studies Seminar. It was originated in the mid-seventies by Noel Gould, assistant director of the California State Office in Washington. People from their teens to mid-80s are found among the group, which travels to Washington annually to interview California members of Congress as well as political figures from other states. The group also tours national monuments and attends sessions of the Senate and House of Representatives.

The Long Beach Independent Press-Telegram of July 20, 1978, describes one such "Capitol Classroom" expedition when Ben and others had meetings with Senator S. I. Hayakawa of California,

Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, as well as with Supreme Court Justice Byron White. The paper quoted Ben as saying: "The questions the young people asked were outstanding. They challenged the speakers. They were great. My wife and I concluded there is no need to worry about the future. With young people like these, from 16 to 30 years old, the future is in good hands."

Ben has since organized trips to Sacramento for people from Leisure World to see California state legislators in action.

Together, Ben and Rose continue their college courses. When he was 88 and she was 84, they were busy with classwork at California State University, Long Beach, studying computer programming.

As regards the family, Fred practices law in Beverly Hills, while Helen is a professional worker in community relations.

Of Ben and Rose's six grandchildren, one is married and the others are busy with careers or finishing college.

Ben and Rose have a great-grandson, the offspring of Charles Weinberger, a little boy whose first name is . . . Nicholas.

The life of Ben Nicholas has spanned the crucial events of modern times and all of the Twentieth Century, of which but 17 years remain at this writing. During the course of several interviews for this book, he repeatedly stressed the importance of education, pride, and ambition. He also emphasized the need for the willingness to work and the development of self confidence. All, he pointed out, are necessary qualities for any young person seeking a life of sensibility.

Again and again, he repeated that education is vital, more important than nerve gas, atomic bombs, and high-powered rockets; more desirable, even, than beauty, money, and a host of other things. As he recited the events of his boyhood and described the struggles of Sam and Rachel, how Sadie, Molly, Annie, and the others managed and had to compromise, sometimes to their disadvantage, there was an implication of how different things might have been, if only the persons concerned had enjoyed *more time in school. Yet our president favors cuts in federal aid to schools.*

Interestingly enough, it has been observed elsewhere that America's greatest strength is in her young people, not plants where plutonium is produced; that the hope of our future is in the classroom, not in government councils where germ and nuclear warfare is postulated and ideologues in the president's entourage talk about "winnable" atomic warfare.

And to senior citizens, worst of all, the government seeks to cut back federal funding for programs to aid senior citizens.

But as unsatisfactory as Ronald Reagan is, the worst of what he symbolizes is personified by James Watt, Secretary of Interior. Ben has nothing good to say about him.

If the life of Ben Nicholas and the history of his kinfolk can be read as a gauge of rationality, then the argument in favor of sending our children to school rather than to war takes on new meaning. The country may presently be saddled with a government comprised of petulant and mediocre persons who are so myopic and stingy that ordinary people and their needs are subverted and ignored, with the result that many desirable social understandings are in abeyance, *but this, too, shall pass.*

The story of Ben and Rose is an important, modern reflection of the Everyman legend. In the couple's successes and failures, their joys and tears, their reactions to the tug of life forces, can be seen essentially the pattern of all people, wherever they may be. When all is said and done, life goes on, *no matter who is living it,* and that is the best gift of all. What we have to do is ensure that more people realize it.

A poor boy existing in squalor saw his mother surrender her young years to brutal hard labor, for him symbolized by her struggle to get the dirt out. He grew up to become a first-class salesman of improved laundry products. It may not appear like a scenario for a great literary classic, but literature is, after all, only *art,* a synthesis of reality. Ben Nicholas experienced *life,* the real thing.

On the afternoon in November, 1963, when the jet from Dallas landed at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland carrying the body of President Kennedy in the great bronze coffin, also arriving were other Kennedys as well as the new president, Lyndon Johnson, and his wife, Ladybird.

A light rain was falling. A microphone was set up. After Mr. Johnson and his wife left the plane and were crossing the tarmac to their car, they detoured over to the mike. An umbrella was provided for the couple. Mr. Johnson took a breath and said into the device: "I will do the best I can. That is all anyone can do."

As for Ben Nicholas, his wife Rose, and in the past, poor Annie, Rachel, Sam, Charley, and others beyond count or memory, all who have contributed their labor as well as their lives to make this America which we cherish—"I will do the best I can" remains a sensible starting point for all who want to realize the dream.

AUTHOR'S POSTSCRIPT

The SC campus in late June of 1945 was fairly quiet. University Avenue sparkled in the sunshine. The great palm trees which encircled the old, wooden/stucco-covered, white Victorian "Old College," shifted in the occasional breeze. The sky was blue as blue could be, the air clear and bracing. If one stood on the narrow grassy traffic island bisecting University Avenue before the Student Union and gazed northward toward the great "hills" overlooking Hollywood, because the atmosphere was so marvelously open, the "hills" seemed scarcely a block away. Actually, they were several miles distant. The huge sign on the hillside, in enormous white block letters, told the world that the busy area below was " 'OLLYWOOD," because the H had fallen over.

Although the war with Germany had ended five or six weeks earlier, the conflict with Japan still raged in the Far Pacific. On University Avenue, a few cars were visible. The occasional sailor or Marine in uniform could be seen going to or from classes as part of a service program. Groups of those servicemen drilled on Bovard Field, periodically.

Total student enrollment was about 5,000. A year later, it would exceed 30,000.

Bovard Administration Building, Doheny Library, Hancock, the Law School, Bridge Hall, and the others appeared to the eyes of a just-turned-17 Marty as wondrous, a Promised City.

Newly-enrolled, tall, skinny, overly sensitive about being from Galesburg, Illinois, I entered college life as a freshman when an accelerated 16-week term commenced during the first week of July. Throughout the never-ending summer and into the autumn, I took many classes and met several people, but there was always an undercurrent of anxiety. Like many who experienced 17, I was uncertain and seeking someone to comprehend my interests.

By late August, the money I had earned in my peanut machine business during high school was gone. Despite a terrible uproar, I had used my modest means to escape an oppressive home life and paid my way to college. The end of summer found me nearly broke. I did the unthinkable and asked my father for help, as I would do repeatedly for years into the future. I told him that if he would help me to the extent that was crucial, I'd find part-time work. For a short while thereafter, I washed dishes for my meals at the ZBT house. Sometime later, a better meal job opened at the AEPhi house.

The Hillel chapter at SC then occupied an early '20s bungalow on McClintock Avenue near 36th. I was acquainted with some of the students who visited the place. A few of those young men were returned ex-GIs who belonged to a fraternity, Tau Epsilon Phi. The fraternity's SC chapter, Tau Gamma, had gone into inactive status due to the war.

TEP men were coming back to SC with discharges and the GI Bill, and there was talk of forming a colony with the hope of reactivating the chapter. Before long, I was invited to their social gatherings. Edward Sarrow presented me to Jere Kopald, and from then on, Jere rushed me. I also met Jay Druxman and Bert Russick, fellow rushees. These two individuals lived a block from my dorm and became friends of mine.

Among the pre-war actives returning to school was Joe Wapner. I loved his ethnic stories and found the actives of pre-war TEP to my liking. But Jere and Joe were headed for law school and their time for the fraternity was to be sharply curtailed.

A colony was duly formed. One afternoon, following my return to the dormitory from my job at ZBT, Ed Sarrow and Jere Kopald arrived and presented me with a TEP pledge pin. Jay and Bert were pledged around then, too.

Our group lacked a chapter house. Meetings were initially held in the dining room of AEPhi, on the Row. That is where the group met the new president.

He was a returned GI, an ex-captain, veteran of North Africa, Italy, and the Philippines. He was 25, smiling, soft-spoken, smart, and frank. He faced a year of undergraduate work to complete a Bachelor's in Journalism. He had been drafted out of the university in September, 1941, before his senior year could get under way, and his chance of becoming editor of SC's *Daily Trojan* was fulfilled.

It was in the TEP house meeting held one November night in 1945 at AEPhi that I heard Fred Nicholas speak for the first time.

He wore a blue suit with a knit tie and in the lapel a serviceman's discharge button called a "ruptured duck."

Fred stood before the group in house meeting and outlined the prospects ahead. I liked the way he talked. I liked his unsentimental attitude, expressed without rancor. Something inside me moved. I trusted him.

After the meeting, the sorority house living room loaned to our group became thronged with young men chatting, smoking, drinking Cokes. I went to Fred, introduced myself, and, without the slightest hesitation, asked him if he would be my big brother. He assented with a pleasurable smile.

I knew that in other campus fraternities, active members were frequently "big brothers" to pledges. Nothing comparable existed in our group, maybe because everyone except me was a hard-talking ex-GI, made too cynical by experience to have patience with such a notion. That didn't change my reality. I wanted the whole antediluvian, sentimental bit—cashmere sweater, flannel slacks, saddle shoes, a fraternity pledge pin, and a big brother.

I am now 54 years of age. He is 62. He is still my big brother.

For the next school year, while Fred completed his degree, we were together as much as I could devise. It never occurred to me that as a returning veteran, Fred, like countless others, was impatient to pick up the threads of his life and go forward. It never dawned on me that Fred, as a worldly young man, had a variety of interests which did not relate to catering to a mixed-up 17-year-old. I had always wanted a friend, an older brother, a father, a kindred spirit. Everything which had been denied to me since I was a small boy, even when my mother had been young and still in good health, had assumed a tremendous focus by the time I set myself on the road to college, to escape. I abandoned my previous life without the slightest regret or so much as a backward glance. I had departed amid dire warnings and much grave prophesying and hurried to a new world. In Fred, I found what I wanted. Now I'd have the companionship I'd searched for.

Every morning I had coffee with him at the Student Union, accompanied by my pledge brothers, Jay Druxman and Bert Russick. The place was mobbed, but somehow there was always a table and enough chairs, plenty of good humor and joy. Sometimes, when the joking took off, Bert would attain a pitch of amusement, and his amazing, roaring laugh made everything seem even more funny. I was sad when scarcely a term later Bert left SC and went back to his home in Minneapolis.

I watched Fred play handball some afternoons in the SC gym. I had never heard of handball or known that grown people devoted time and energy to it. Every book title that Fred mentioned in casual conversation was duly noted by me. I *ran* to the Doheny Library and consumed the volume. My English teachers never persuaded me to read as Fred did. I studied Thomas Wolfe, Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, and many others. My college education became meaningful.

It was not long before Fred mentioned that his family wanted me to come to dinner. They lived in a Spanish-styled villa at 5161 San Vincente, near La Brea.

The first time I met Ben and Rose, my 17-year-old eyes immediately perceived that they were a rather elderly couple—he was 51, she was 47. Notwithstanding that circumstance, the food was marvelous and there were books everywhere—rows and stacks and shelves and tables of books. I quickly noted some titles and found them at the school library.

The conversation was superb. The family discussed politics, business, theatre, sports, travel, history. I would go there exhausted from a stultifying existence on campus and depart at evening's end charged with excitement and new ideas.

Now that I have the advantage of time and experience, I can see that my friendship with Fred could not have prospered without the contribution of ideas. My time with him at school was quite modest. He had classes to attend and social interests in which I did not participate. As much as I liked him and treasured every minute spent with him, the reality was that he was a far more mature person and could not devote much time to a boy who had already attained sophomore status in college before finishing his 17th year, yet was woefully immature.

Ben and Rose extended the association so that their influence was as constructive as Fred's. I knew very little of Nicholas Family history, except that a long while before they had lived in New York, liked Fanny Brice's comedy, and Ben was in the laundry supply business. Those things made little impression, however. It was their home, which was a theater. It drew me. The books, the music, the laughter. After my experience of "family life," going to Ben and Rose for an evening was intoxicating. I used to ride the old Pacific Electric red car which stopped in front of their place and pretend I was en route to Heaven.

I knew Fred's sister, Helen, a bit later. She was then the wife of Butch Weinberger and the mother of a beautiful little baby boy, Charles.

Changes were in store for my campus existence. Fred finished SC and found work in the public relations section of the Los Angeles Park Department. Later, he wrote for a publication I recall as *The Hollywood Radio News*. Subsequently, he went to live in Honolulu.

About a year after Bert went back to Minneapolis, Jay and Sis Klein got married, by coincidence on my 19th birthday. The new Mr. and Mrs. Druxman left school.

During this period, when my own adventures were multiplying, Rose and Ben were together with me frequently. We dined, attended foreign films and the theater, talking endlessly. Rose was a steadying influence, always encouraging, looking ahead, hopeful. I knew that she taught pre-school children, but never realized she was also teaching a big, ungainly college kid—me. She knew how to handle insecure youngsters so I was never any problem.

When Rose and Ben relocated in Southern California, many old friends from the East stayed in touch. Ben Kapp of Washine, and his wife, Lillian, decided to move to Los Angeles. A year or so after the Nicholases reached the sunny environment, the Kapps followed. With time, Rose and Lil Kapp established a school for youngsters which endured for many years. Today, when Ben and Rose attend social gatherings, it is not unusual for some of Rose's former school kids, now adults with families, to greet the Nicholases with joy.

Having experienced so much that was memorable and beneficial with Rose and Ben, it is easy for me to understand how others are so fond of them.

As for the ongoing experiences of my late adolescence, a time of transition which had begun far too early for me and continued, lurching hither and thither until I was in my late thirties, I said and did innumerable things which tried the patience of many people. Through it all, I never stopped believing in the love and intelligence of Rose and Ben.

As for associations which began in 1945, I never saw Bert again, though I did find him in Minneapolis in 1982 and we exchanged a couple of letters. I was reunited with Jay and Sis for a weekend in the Spring of 1951 and for a few minutes in February, 1959. We chat on the phone every few years.

No one can ever take Fred's place, though we meet but rarely now, to my great regret. I am comfortable with him still, because the trust has remained intact. Long ago, I was naive and young. I thought that Fred was invincible. Now I see that what appeared as invincibility was the virtue of his good sense. Better to have brains than brawn; better to be perceptive than empty and feign imperturbability. Better to... well, I've made the point. A separate book would be needed to recite all that I remember of happy moments with Fred. My prayer is that his children realize how lucky they are to have such a man for their father.

One night, Rose and Ben were entertaining me at their house on San Vicente. Maybe it was the night of my 21st birthday, when the table was set in front of the fireplace and I was presented with a fine leather breastpocket billfold. Fred was absent in Honolulu, I believe. We were exchanging the latest news about him. Then something was said about the people we knew in Tau Epsilon Phi—Joe Wapner, Herbie Turman, a few of the others. Rose said: "Some of these friendships will last a lifetime."

She is right. More than 37 years have passed since I asked Fred Nicholas to be my friend and it is surely the best thing I ever did.

Late in the Spring of 1982, when it became clear that the life story of Ben Nicholas would come under my gaze, I embraced the project with enthusiasm and love, glad of the chance, long wanted and long denied, to learn more about those who are my own.

It is a good thing that friends can be found, for when a person has experienced disappointment in one place, the possibility remains of fulfillment in another. There is justice in this life, after all. But it is necessary to look for it, to believe that it is there. Someplace. Waiting. I know.

—M.L.

Foxboro, Massachusetts
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Martin Litvin lives and writes in the town of his birth, Galesburg, Illinois. He is busy with a full-length biography of the Civil War nurse, "Mother" Bickerdyke, whose lost personal papers he found.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Bonita Oliva drew the sketch for the cover of this book. She lives with her husband and family on a farm near Woodston, Kansas.

Photo by Holcomb Studio, Galesburg, Ill.

Martin Litvin