

MY LIFE STORY

By Minnie Solomon Norman

My father, Zalman, was a good boss. He was very well liked by those who worked for him. He made a good living as a tailor of men's clothes and furs.

He had three children from his first wife. After her death, he married my mother. She was very beautiful and a good housewife. The three children were very small. Riva D'varia was 12 years old; there was one son, Harris who was 6 years old and Tevya, another son, was 3 years old. My mother brought them up and took good care of them. Time does not stand still and the family grew. My mother had 5 children. The daughter Bassil was the oldest. Ronnie was next; then came a son, Savel; a daughter, Minnie (me) and another son, Abraham. There were now 8 children in the family and my father made a good living. He was a religious man who sat and read the Bible every night. In the morning, he went to his shop and lined up work for his assistant and then he left for the synagogue.

My mother was kept busy preparing meals for her big family. On Friday nights, my father brought three or four men for supper. He always remembered the poor people and my mother was always kept busy with the cooking and taking care of the house. Naturally, the children helped her. As time went on, my father and mother tried to send the children to Hebrew School. Afterwards, my brothers also became tailors. His daughter, Riva D'varia, became a big girl and met a fine young man to whom she married. His name was Nochem Norman and he was a butcher. They lived in Vilna. My folks did not have to worry about her. Tevya and Harris, being young men, had to join the army. They made up their minds to go to London and this is what they did. Bassil and Ronnie went

to work for a dressmaker where they learned the trade. This made it easier for my mother. Savel learned to be a tailor in my father's shop. Abraham and I (Minnie) being the youngest, were not required to work. Tevya was a very good person. He sent my father some money all the time so that it would make it easier in the house.

When I was ten years old, I started to think of myself. I had a cousin Sarameerel who made cigarettes so I asked her to teach me how to make them. I learned this work quickly and I started to earn one ruble a week. At age 13, I worked for myself. I then taught my brother Abraham how to make cigarettes and paid him a ruble a week. My cousin Leah worked for me and she was paid a ruble and 50 kopeks a week. This wasn't bad. I was making a good living. My family saved money for Israel in a metal box. I asked for a box of my own and put in one kopek a night. Every three months, the boxes were emptied and the man who came to collect them said that I had saved the most money. It made me feel good.

I was doing well and making a good living. All the workers came to buy cigarettes. It wasn't bad. At the same time, my sister Bassil got married to a man called Beryl Caltoon. Her happiness did not last very long. Her husband got killed in an accident, leaving Bassil with a baby son, Hymie. Bassil, being a dressmaker, made a living and stayed with my mother and father and I went on with my work.

But good times have to stop sometimes. Just before Succoth, I was sitting and working when there was a knock on the door. I was told: "Minka, the police are coming here." So, quickly, I hid the cigarettes. The police came and searched the shop. Thank God, they did not find anything and they left.

It was hard to live in fear this way. We lived in a small

city, Shmargun (Poland) and lots of troubles started. We used to work from 8 o'clock in the morning to 12 midnight. Boys and girls from other cities came to my city and they were told to go on a strike. They all met in the woods and were told to knock on windows and to tell people to also go on strike. Many people were arrested and lots of trouble started. My brother Savel could not work any longer. He made ready to go to America and my good brother Tevya sent him a ticket and money to help him go to America to learn how to become a designer and afterwards to settle in California.

Now, it was my turn. What should I do? I was 15 years old. My father could not do anything for me. I decided to go to America. I wrote my cousins, the Kissins, a letter in which I asked them to meet me and to let me stay with them. I told my friends that I was going to the golden land, America. I was sad about leaving. I said goodbye to my friends and left in November of 1898.

I gave my money to an agent and he took care of my travel arrangements. When the time came, I left with a boy who was a fellow traveler. We were taken to the station where we took a train to Hamburg, Germany and arrived at 12 o'clock midnight. The boy and I were at the station and he was arrested, I did not know what happened to him and I was left all alone. Two policemen came and took me to the station where they searched me and asked me, "Pretty girl, where are you going?" I answered: "To an uncle, a tailor who is expecting me." And they let me go. It was 2 o'clock in the morning.

The travel agent had asked another agent to meet me and those who were going to America. Bad luck followed and the agent did not show up. As I stood all alone in the station, two other boys came along and asked me where I was going. I answered that I was going to Yonkel, a tailor,

who did not come. They offered to take me to him but I did not want to go because I was afraid. So they said in German: "Don't be afraid". If you think we'll harm you, then stay here." I could not help myself and had to go with them into the woods, they did not harm me but I was frightened.

We finally reached a small house with a lamp burning at the window. The boys yelled, "Yonkel, the tailor, a girl is looking for you." I thanked them and went into the house. In the house, there were lots of people and children who were very young. Yonkel told us all to be very quiet and we left the house and walked to a river. Those who were able crossed it by foot. Those who could not, were carried across on his back. This was the border. Thank God, we had crossed safely!

We went to a big building where people were waiting for the ship that would take us to America. They were from all over the world. My luck was bad again as my agent had not sent me my money to the office and therefore I could not leave on the boat. Those people who had tickets were allowed to get on the boat and I stayed in Hamburg three weeks and waited.

I wrote my father and mother and told them what happened. The agent had taken my money and I was forced to wait. I attached myself to an old woman and wouldn't leave her. I slept near her bed. The food was very bad. There were lots of boys and girls but I stayed close to the old woman and I was very lonesome and missed my family. Thank God, I lived through this and more money eventually arrived with my ticket. And I left for America. I kissed the old woman good-bye and boarded the ship. I thanked God again for I was going to meet my cousins. The ship was at sea 18 days.

I am going to write about my life here when I came

to this country. I came to my aunt and cousins and my cousin, Tevya Kissen, met me at the immigration center. When two weeks passed, I began to look for work. I was a cigarette maker. I told my cousin, Becky, that I wanted a job that belonged to a union. My cousin was pleased to know that I had heard about the Union and took me to East Broadway in the Forward Building and I became a member of the Union.

That same week, I got a job at 7 Essex Street. The bosses were Mr. Shenker and Mr. Shrier. In the shop, there were 7 workers. When I worked and received my pay, I sent my sister 5\$ for shoes for Hymie. Each week, I sent a few dollars to my parents and another time to my sister in Vilna a few dollars. I tried my best to help my family. I made 3,000 cigarettes a day and I used to get paid 1.25\$ for each thousand. I worked six days a week and rested on the Shabbat.

My brothers in California wanted me to come to them and they would send me to school, they said. I was already going with Ike and I liked him and decided to stay in New York. He was a good looking and clean boy. We went together as a steady couple. He used to give me money to save in both our names. Three years passed and we planned to get married. He took a hall and my future father-in-law and mother-in-law made a beautiful wedding.

The shop where I worked grew from 7 workers to 500 workers and it had to move from Essex Street to Mulberry and Grand Street.

I invited everyone from the shop and from the Union to my wedding; all I had for family was a few cousins.

After we were married, we took an apartment at 55 Kenny Street, near Delancy Street. We were very happy.

A year after my wedding, I brought over my brother Abraham. Within six months, I brought over my sister Ronnie and then came my cousin Leah with her husband and her son Victor. They moved across the street from me. My sister Ronnie was with Leah and then I brought over Sarahmeerel, my niece. She also stayed with Leah and Ronnie and Sarahmeerel worked in the same shop.

Shortly thereafter, my father died and I brought over my mother and sister Bassil and her husband Ellie and her son, Hymie and Sam Skolnick. Sam was 3 months old. They came to my son Sam's pit-na-ben. They all came.

My brother-in-law, Ellie Skolnick, got a business in New Haven and Ike was not against all the money I spent to bring my family to this country, Abraham stayed with me and helped me to help Bassil with her children when I sent money to my sister, Riva D'vera, who was still in the old country, Ike never refused. I used to send bundles of clothes.

Then we moved to Brooklyn and Ike opened a haberdashery store. I gave birth to my second son, Louis. We had the store for a year. My father-in-law had move to Hartford, Connecticut and he told us to sell the store and to move to Hartford too. We did that and opened a store on Asylum Street. This was in 1897.

Then, I had a third child, Bessie. Leah Meerson also moved to Hartford and all from New York moved to Hartford. My niece, Sarameerel, came to this country to marry Abraham, her uncle. Her mother wanted her back in Europe, so she broke the engagement and went back home. She got married in the old country and raised a family there. I kept my job and continued to send bundles and a few dollars.

My sister, Ronnie, got married, but her life was a hard

one. I did what I could for her. Her children know it. We also supported Ike's family and we did not leave out anybody. We tried to help our family and strangers as well.

When my sister, Bassil, died, she left three children – Hymie, Sam and Hankale. Ellie Skolnick remarried and Hymie was on my hands.

Hankale wrote me a letter. "I am 14 years old and I want to come and live with you, Tante. The new Mother is not good to me." I sent a letter and asked that Sam come to me. Sam answered that he would not come until he was able. Hymie came and Hankale became ill. It was the time of a terrible influenza epidemic and she died.

Hymie went to the army. When he joined the army, I told him to send me his money. I saved it for him and I told him: "When you have a dollar you have the whole world." When he came home, he asked for spending money which I gave him from my own pocket. When he got married, I handed him 500\$ which was his savings and gave him 100\$ as a wedding present.

When Hymie returned from the army, he came to my house and he was sick. He used to cough. He was gassed during the war. I gave him a room and put my children three in a bed.

Ike took Hymie into the store and made a "man" of him. He met a nice girl, Annie, and married her. He used to go with other girls and he listened to me when I advised him about what girls I preferred.

When I asked Sam Skolnick to come and live with us, Sam wrote: "when I can, I will come. Thank you, Tante, for your invitation"

And then I became sick and had to be hospitalized. While there, my daughters came to see me and Bess

said: "Ma, we have a surprise for you." The next thing I knew, the door opened and in walked Sam Skolnick. I was terribly excited and very happy to see him. He was all dressed up in a new suit and had 100\$ in his pocket.

When I came back from the hospital, there was no room in my house for anybody else. So, I asked Hymie to take Sam to live with him for a while until I felt better. (At this time, Hymie was known as George Hyne. He had changed his name while in the army). He stayed with Hymie for a few weeks but Sam was unhappy there and did not feel welcome. He decided that he wanted to go to New Haven. He left for New Haven and that is where he learned his trade, that of a mason. I was satisfied that he was able to make a living.

I had a great deal of naches when he decided to get married to a fine girl, Dottie. He was like my own son. I have no complaints.

My husband was wonderful to me and to his family. I was lucky during good times and during bad times. We always had made the best of things. Then I can say that I had a father-in-law and my mother-in-law. They were like a father and a mother to me. They were very good to me. Everyone thought that I was their daughter.

In the Norman's family (in-laws), there were eight children, a family of ten. On Friday night, they did not eat unless I ate with them. Ike's sisters and brother gave me the greatest respect all my life.

My father-in-law sold real estate and then he bought a farm in Ellington, Connecticut. They visited us often and I always fussed and served big meals. If they had to sleep over, my house was always open to them.

Usually, my mother-in-law came on Saturday and told me to go downtown. She offered to stay with my mother and the children and we all got along very nicely.

My home was a happy one. My father-in-law would come to visit us every day on the way to Shul.

I cannot understand why God has been against me and robbed me of my three wonderful children. I cannot figure it out. I never did anything wrong. I always gave to charity as mu as I could afford and my Ile too.

My son, Sam, left two children, Paul and Michael. My Louis left two children, Mark and Gail. My George left two children, Robert and Louise. Sam's wife was Evelyn and she passed on a long time before Sam. Louis' wife is Berte and George was married to Gladys.

I have 15 wonderful grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren.

I have always been a member of a great many charitable organizations. I am still a charter member. I do not go to meetings now, but I still contribute and belong to them yet.

I want to write about our life when we first came to Hartford. My Ike began his business. He bought a small place for cleaning and pressing. It was a small room upstairs at 375 Asylum Street and he had good customers and one of his big accounts was the Garde Hotel which was across the street. We made a fine living. We had 3 children, Sam, Louise and Bessie and we lived at 18 Bellevue Street. We had nice rooms and everything at the best.

Then Ike took a man to work for him. This went on for one year. Then we began to think of enlarging the business. Ike went to New York and bought 6 suits and as soon as he put them in his store, he sold them. The next Sunday, he went to New York again and bought 12 suits and they were quickly sold. And so he grew and soon he took in another worker but the store was too small.

We were in luck that there was another room available

which was empty at the time. So Ike took it and he had more room for our business. Every Sunday, Ike brought merchandise and he made out well. Then on the same floor, there was a dentist and he also moved. We took his room too. We soon had the whole floor. Ike did not have to go to New York every week for merchandise. The wholesalers came to him. We then had a few salesmen and a few tailors and my family became larger.

Downstairs, was Ligette's drugstore and they moved out. I advised Ike to take this store. At first, Ike was hesitant but I persisted and he eventually took the store. We had this connected by a stairway with the upstairs and we now had two floors for our business: upstairs for coats and downstairs for suits. Ike was satisfied.

We had 8 tailors and salesmen and one was named Farrell and there was Hymie and Moe Dunn. There also were part-time workers, Siggie Orenstein and Frank Slater. It was not bad.

My children grew with the business. Then we took haberdashery and this too went well. When the children came home from college, they too helped in the store. We were good to our children and we taught them music, dancing and whatever they wanted to learn. I had steady help in my house and I was active in organizations and went to all the meetings.

In the summer, I went away with my children for a vacation for the whole summer. We had 7 seven children in all and I was lacking for nothing. My mother lived with us for 28 year and we all gave her great respect and so did my husband.

When Sam and Louis became engaged, I bought their fiancés Evelyn and Berte nice rings at Gillepsies. When my children got married we gave them beautiful presents. There was nothing missing. My children worked in the

store with their father and there was enough for all. George also worked in the store.

When we lived in Bellevue Street, we bought a house at 501 Garden Street. We lived there for 11 years until the neighborhood started to change and we realized that we had outgrown the house.

We then bought our present house at 31 Sharon Street. We had a great pleasure living in this house. We had a great deal of company and there was always room for everyone. There are nine rooms in the house. On Saturday night, Ike came home with his salesman and I got busy making potato latkes and a little supper. My Ike would play cards until 2 in the morning. My home was happy.

My three daughters brought their friends and life went on very well.

However, nothing "can stay in one place." A big depression took place in the country and Ike had over 100,000\$ worth of merchandise in the store. The prices began to get down and we began to lose. We used to make sales. We tried to sell out the goods for half the price. We advertised in the paper and tried everything we could.

My Louis entered the insurance business and Sam became a salesman. George went into the insurance business with Louis. Ike moved to 139 Albany Avenue in a small store and we made a living. Everyone knew that Ike Norman sells good merchandise. Our customers came to us in the small store and the children always helped after their work with the books and the selling.

Teddy went to the army and when he returned he was with his father in the business until Ike was not able to work. And then it was on Teddy's shoulders.

Then Louis passed away. A few year went by and we lost Sam. In August of 1970, my son George passed away too. I was alone now in my once happy home with Teddy,

"he should have many years."

My Bessie is married to Ben Hencken and lives in Detroit. My Mae is married to Louis Norkin and they have retired to Florida. Ida is a widow and was married to Mitchell Smith. She lives in Springfield, Massachusetts. As I said before, I am left with Teddy who lives with me in my home.

I think about how fast the young years went by when Ike used to come from shul on Friday night. The table was set and the whole family used to sit at the table and Ike made Kiddush and my mother had a great pleasure. I made Challehs and for the children, I made little Challehs. Sam would make Kiddush too and we always had a few friends at the supper. It was a great pleasure.

When Pessach came, we had a big Seder with friends present and the children's friends were there too.

Every holiday, we had a big crowd and I was busy cooking and baking. It was my pleasure. It was never too hard. When one is young, we don't think it can be otherwise.

Whom do I think about today? I think of my good Ike and my beautiful young sons whom God took away from me. I see them in my dreams. I talk with them but it is only a dream.

I want to tell about my character. I do not forget good times but I do not forget bad times either. When my children were very young, I used to leave them with my mother and a maid and I would go to New York for a few days. I would stay with either my brother Abraham or my sister Ronnie or my cousins and go to see them all. The Caplan children took me to see all my relatives and friends.

Sometimes, Becky's children took me and I was always invited somewhere for dinner. Everyone was delighted to

take their Tante Minnie wherever she wanted to go.

Several years went by. I then decided no to go on these visits to relatives separately. Instead, I would stay with my brother or sister and I would call everyone, either friend or relative. Everyone who was interested came to see me instead.

On a Sunday, all the people would come to see me and we all had a good time. There was a great deal of food prepared for the occasion. This arrangement was much easier for me and my cousins used my visit as a reason for getting together and seeing each other.

My children grew older and Lou and Sam went to college. On New Years, my Ike said: "Let's celebrate and have 'good time' "; he liked to stay at the Commodore Hotel in New York and we would reserve 2 rooms. We would take the three girls to New York. George and Teddy were left with our maid, Vanessa, and my mother. I would call my friends in New York and all the interested people would come and celebrate with us at the hotel. My Ike was a sport. Louis' fiancée, Berte, came to visit us as well.

My Ike liked opera and a good show. We would go to Parsons Theatre in Hartford with some friends. And then we could go to a restaurant. We all had a good time.

Soon, the good years went away and also the young years. I cannot forget the good years. Like I said, a bad time we cannot forget and a good time we cannot forget either.

Before bringing this story to an end, I want to tell about my brother Harris. He and his family came to this country in 1906 and settled in California. There was an earthquake and my brother lost everything he had. My brother tried to save a family that was trapped from the earthquake and broke his right hand when he tried to

break the door down. At this time, his wife Rachel and two children, Dave and Annie, were missing. A few days later, however, he found his family. They came east and moved in with me. I was living in New York at the time. They stayed until they bought a candy store on South 5th Street in Brooklyn. They had only a parrot with them when they came from California and the bird talked. It was never too hard for me to take care of them and I know that they appreciated it.

And now, I come to the end of my story. I am waiting for the marriage of my son Teddy to Claire which will take place on May 19, 1973. God willing, I will dance at their wedding!

This is my story. I had gone from a child to a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother through heart-aches and happiness. I thank God for all the happiness and I try to understand the unhappiness.

I will be 90- years old on my next birthday, May 16, 1973.

Dated
January 1973.



הדודה מיניה נורמן



הדודה מיניה ובעלה אייק נורמן



הדודה מיניה ובעלה אייק נורמן ובן אחיה
מלוין סולומון



כל המשפחה של הדודה מיניה ובעלה אייק נורמן.
יושבים משמאל לימין: סם, מיניה, אייק ולואי
עומדים משמאל לימין: ג'ורג', מיי, איידה, בֶּס, ותֶדָה



הדודה מיניה ובעלה אייק, בניה ונכדותיהם