

A Very Rich Man

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A MEMOIR

NATHAN DAVID DONDIS

as told to

Debra Riccio Levy, Personal Historian
Ancestral Exchange, LLC

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DEDICATION

To my daughters, Toby, and Phyll, both of whom have given me unmeasured love and joy throughout my life from the day that they were born. Thank you for bringing Barry and Jose into my life. I could not have asked for better.

To my brother, Eli, who is one of the finest men I've ever met: a good brother, a good uncle, a good son. And to his wife, Charlene, for the love she brought to Eli and the joy she brought to me.

To my sisters, Annette, and Arlyne, and to their husbands, Bernie, and Ed, for their love and their friendship.

And to my beloved wife, Edie, who was such a beautiful person, and who kept our family together.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My family and my friends keep me going. My children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren make me so happy whenever I see them.

Lynn Mitchell-Orman and Sarah P. Meigs are like two adopted daughters. I love them both. I know that my senior years have been sweetened by their involvement in my life.

I miss my old friend Billy Bauknecht, who passed in 2015. We were such close friends for forty years, and there was nothing we didn't talk about. He was like a brother, a father, and a son.

I appreciate my very good friend Andy Dufresne, who was the first guy I met when I opened the Falmouth store. There is no better friend, and none more honorable, than Andy.

I talk on the phone a lot with friends. I enjoy speaking with Lynn Rappoport. She and her late husband Norm were great friends with Edie and me. And I speak with Sylvia Levin occasionally. Her late husband, Marv, was my best man.

My good friend Sam Singer and I still get together for coffee. I am so grateful for Georgia McCarthy, and all the wonderful neighbors where I live in FalmouthPort. We look after one another. Of course, it's getting to be the old folks' home. I joke and tell them I'm living with a bunch of "geris."

My health is relatively good. I had a quadruple bypass when I was eighty-three and have done fine since. Dr. Robert Rizzo did the bypass at Cape Cod Hospital. I need to thank Dr. Arthur Crago for keeping me alive for the last forty-five years. I never thought I'd make it out of my fifties, given my family history.

Really, how lucky am I?

INTRODUCTION

I remember sweeping the sidewalk in front of our store on Main Street in Fall River one day, right after my dad died. My friend Tom Hudner's dad, whose name was also Tom, came by as I swept. They owned a big supermarket right on Main Street called Hudner's Market. Mr. Hudner stopped that morning to talk for a minute.

He said, "Nate, your dad left you a very rich man."

I said, "Boy, Mr. Hudner, you must know something I don't know."

He answered, "I'm not talking dollars and cents, Nate. Your dad was such a fine gentleman. There's nobody on Main Street who doesn't love Phil Dondis. *That's* what was *rich*. He may have been successful, but he also left you a fine heritage."

I'll never forget how important I felt, and what an important lesson that was. Because that's what I hope to leave to my family.

Chapter One

MY HERITAGE

THEY CAME FROM RUSSIA

SAMUEL WISHNEVSKY AND FANNIE DONDIS

Philip Spencer Dondis, my dad, was born April 15, 1895, in Fall River, Massachusetts. His parents had immigrated to the United States from Russia in the early 1890's and settled in Fall River, where they lived at 1148 Globe Street. Their names were Samuel Wishnevsky and Fannie Dondis. My grandfather took my grandmother's last name when they married, which was not uncommon back then. My grandfather Samuel was a peddler for awhile, then owned a grocery store in Fall River. I can remember walking there with a couple of my friends. We were just little kids, and we'd walk to my grandfather's store. I remember him as the softest, sweetest, nicest guy.

Samuel and Fannie Dondis had three children. My dad Phil was the middle child and the only boy. His older sister Besse married Samuel Zalkind, but was widowed at an early age. She had three sons: Norman, Charles, and Philip. Dad's younger sister Dora married William Leviss, a manufacturer of children's clothing. Aunt Dora also had three children. Their daughter Irma was the oldest, followed by two sons: Merrill (whom we always called Buddy) and Robert.

AARON LOEFF AND KATHERINE LOEFF

Emma Loeff Dondis, my mother, was born in Kiev, Russia, on September 21, 1895. Her parents Aaron (Airy) Loeff and Katherine (Katie) Loeff were cousins, hence had the same last name. Their fathers were brothers. The name *Loeff* means candle maker, but that was not my grandfather's occupation. He was a very successful businessman in Russia. He owned a hotel and a coal mine. However, since at that time Jews weren't allowed to own property in Russia, these businesses were in the name of his partner.

Grandmother Katie had six sisters, and one brother who died when he was three. Her sister Sophie wrote a booklet about their family's experiences in Russia, so I have some history on them. The other sisters were Sasha, Clara, Lisa, Nina, and Yeva.

In 1903, Airy and Katie had to leave Russia because of the pogroms—anti-Jewish riots in which hoodlums would kill the richest Jews and take their money and their belongings. They hid in the mayor's house until they could escape with their three young daughters: Emma, Sophie, and Annie (nicknamed Zuzzie). My mother, Emma, was only eight years old. They also brought with them three of Grandma Katie's sisters: my great-aunts Clara, Nina, and Sophie. Another of Katie's sisters, Yeva, arrived in the United States later. I think the other sisters remained in Russia, and there are stories that they died in the Holocaust, but I don't know how factual that is.

They all traveled second class on the ship *The Atlantic*. Great-aunt Sophie wrote in her booklet that they all got sick coming across and that there were nurses to care for them. They settled in Fall River because Airy had family there. He was the first Jew in Fall River allowed to open a store on the main street—a women's dress shop called the Victory Clothing Store. I don't think he worked for anyone else when he came here, so he may have taken money out of Russia when he left. Grandpa Airy also

opened a warehouse and would sell wholesale to peddlers (traveling salesmen) who would buy goods from him and then go out into the country to sell their wares. When some got to a city they would decide to settle there and open a retail business. That's why so many Jews were involved in stores throughout the country, as it was the only thing most of them could do. At the time, they weren't able to go to school and become doctors or lawyers—but the next generation was better educated, and things were quite different after that.

As for my great-aunts who came from Russia with my grandparents, I remember that Nina and Yeva lived in Newport. We would visit them when I was very young. Yeva taught the Russian language to members of the United States Navy in Newport during World War II. Clara lived in Fall River. Sophie married an old flame from Russia, Samuel Sapadinsky (changed to Sapadin), who had left Russia for the United States when he was twenty-one to avoid serving in the Russian military because he had no sympathy for the tsar. After his arrival, Samuel wrote to Sophie's mother in Russia, who provided Sophie's address in the United States. Sophie and Sam reunited, married, and settled in Fall River. They had two daughters and two sons: Jennie (who wrote books about food and nutrition using the nom de plume Jane Kindelara), Besse, Harold, and Irving. Besse was fifteen years older than me, and we were always very fond of one another. We kept in touch until she died at one hundred years old. And she was "with it" until ninety-nine and a half. She married Ralph Kane who owned a bar in Norfolk, Virginia. I have a story about that bar that I'll share when I talk about my days in the Navy.

Grandma and Grandpa Loeff had a beautiful home at 446 Whipple Street in Fall River, a three-family where they raised my mother and her sisters. Their youngest daughter, Annie (my aunt Zuzzie), married a lawyer, Louis Shabshelowitz (Uncle Shab). They moved to the first floor of the house. They had a son, Harold—who I always looked up to—and two daughters:

Frances (married name Trachtenberg) and Adele (married name Savitz). Harold was a CPA and I loved him. Anything Harold did, I wanted to do.

The front stairway of the house led from Aunt Zuzzie's apartment on the first floor to Grandma Loeff's on the second floor. The third floor was rented to a tenant. I remember that tenant because years later I accidentally ran over him with the car. Fortunately, he wasn't injured too badly. My Uncle Shab was his lawyer, so he took care of it and we kept it in the family. I was a little crazy with cars and was always getting into fender benders.

My mother's sister, Sophie, married Dr. David Medalia. Sophie was a spectacular artist. She spent lots of time at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. She would copy the great masters. She gave many of her paintings to family, although none to me, unfortunately. They had one daughter, Henrietta. She was the oldest of my cousins and is now deceased. Henrietta was close to ninety years old when she passed.

Grandpa Loeff also owned a home on Cottage Street that I think he bought as an investment so that one of their cousins had a place to live. My grandparents were always very charitable.

Grandpa Loeff died in 1927, two years after I was born. I never really got to know him. For my first Hanukkah, he gave me a five-dollar gold piece which I had made into a necklace for my wife.

Before he died, he wrote letters to his children and his wife in Hebrew which were translated into English by a relative. Here are those transcriptions:

Dear and Loving Children – Daughters and Sons-in-Law,

Live Happy. What I'm asking of you - first of all - after my death don't take it too hard. The time has arrived that I had to die. And when it comes, you can't help yourself. Secondly, I ask you my dear children....you should keep the automobile. When your mother wants to go somewhere you should try to take her. If you don't have the time, see that she should go with a chauffeur and take pleasure in doing it. The most important thing I ask is that you should live together with friendship. Help one another. Always stay together. My children, live in good health, be happy.

Your Father

Dear and Loving Wife,

Live well and be happy. On the second day after Yom Kippur, 1927, being of sound mind and health I wrote my will. I ask of you – you should not worry. When the time comes when I will die, it will most likely be the time to die. What I ask of you - all your years you worked very hard, so you should now take it more easy. Not work so hard. Don't try to earn money. I believe there will be plenty of money left for you. There remains enough money from the two properties on Whipple Street and Cottage Street to make a very good living. I beg you to try to sell the store as soon as possible for cash. It is no kind of business for you.

From the money that remains for you from the sale of the store, pay off the mortgage of both houses and there will be an income for you to live on. Share with the children and grandchildren and that means they will have respect for you. Don't live in the same house with the children. You should have a servant in the house to sleep there. I beg you to maintain the automobile. When the children want to ride with you good, but when you want to go, do. The first year after my death, divide the money equally between the children and take care of the grandchildren.

This is the best advice I can give you. Keep well, be happy for many years.

Your devoted husband.

My grandmother Katherine Loeff lived until 1943 and is buried with her husband in Fall River.



Grandma Katie Loeff (seated, on the right) and her daughters, from left: Sophie, Emma, and Annie.



The five-dollar gold coin given to me by Grandpa Loeff in 1925. The coin is dated 1909.



Members of the Loeff family, left to right:
 Back row: Sam (Nina's husband), Grandpa Airy, Brody (Clara's husband).
 Middle row: Aunt Sophie, Great-Aunt Nina (holding Besse), Grandma Katie, Great-Aunts Clara and Yeva.
 Front row: Annie (Aunt Zuzzie) and my mother, Emma.



My paternal grandmother, Fannie Dondis.



Members of the Dondis family, left to right:
Back row: Aunt Besse, Besse's husband Samuel Zalkind, Aunt Dora.
Front row: My grandparents Sam and Fannie Dondis, my dad Phil Dondis.

Chapter Two

GROWING UP IN FALL RIVER

MY PARENTS

PHILIP AND EMMA (LOEFF) DONDIS

My dad graduated from high school in Fall River and joined the Navy. His eyes were bad so he wore glasses. Dad had one spectacular memory. In order to pass the Navy physical, he had to pass an eye exam. The Navy used the eye charts that looked like E's going in different directions, so on the day of his physical, he stood in the back of the line and studied the chart until he knew it by heart. By the time he got to the front of the line, he had it memorized. That's how he passed the eye test.

He was stationed in Newport, Rhode Island. He never went overseas, but he told a great story about the day he "met the enemy." He was on guard duty and there was talk of German submarines in the area. He was walking along a railroad track, carrying a gun with no ammunition in it, when he heard rustling in the wooded area near the track. He stopped, and yelled, "HALT, WHO GOES THERE?" There was no answer. He heard the rustling again. "Nate," he told me, "I was *...ing* in my pants. I yelled 'HALT!' again." He heard the rustling a third time, and then out of the woods came a cow. And that was the only time my dad ever met the enemy.

My mother graduated from a local college in Fall River. I don't know how my parents met. I think my father was engaged to another woman at the time, but he met my mother and it was a

love match. They were married January 2, 1922, at Grandma and Grandpa Loeff's house. Aunt Zuzzie was married a couple of weeks after my mother. It was a busy time. My mother and Aunt Zuzzie seemed to have children at the same time. The following year Aunt Zuzzie gave birth to cousin Harold on January 3, and my mother gave birth to my oldest sister Annette on January 24. Frances was born a year before me, and then Adele was born a year before Arlyne. We all stayed very close.

ANNETTE, NATHAN, ARLYNE, ELI

My oldest sister Annette was born January 24, 1923, and passed away at the age of ninety-two in April of 2015. She married Bernard Horowitz, and they had four children: Catherine, Sheila, Philip, and Stephen. Annette and I always got along great. She was humorous and a good friend. If I got measles, she got them. We had the mumps together, chicken pox together, and our tonsils out on the same day. She was a beautiful redhead. Her husband Bernie used to call her Rusty or sometimes little Orphan Annie.

I was born next, on July 1, 1925, at Truesdale Hospital in Fall River. I have the hospital bill for \$77, which was for the second week of my mother's maternity stay. I also still have the baby book my mother started when I was born. Among other things, it says in the book that I weighed eight and one-half pounds at birth; that my first car trip was to visit my great-aunts in Newport; and that I swallowed a locket at three months. I find this a little hard to believe. Did I swallow a locket at three months? I think that date may be wrong. My mother wrote, "Annette dropped baby from the bed"—information I used as an excuse for any indiscretions later in life. After all, I was dropped.

My younger sister Arlyne was born February 15, 1929. She married Edward Hoffman and they had two children, Patricia and Seth. Arlyne is a beautiful mother, and is devoted to her children. She is a very upbeat person and is always doing things

to help others. A talented jewelry designer, she has made beautiful beaded jewelry, which she has sold at craft shows and boutiques.

I have heard that my mother lost twins, who would have been born between Arlyne and Eli. My brother, Eli Nisan Dondis, was born September 23, 1933. He married Charlene Gough and became a father to Charlene's son Tim, who sadly passed away when he was just thirty-five years old. Eli is not only my kid brother, he is also my best friend. When we were kids I used to drag him everywhere with me. My friends loved having Eli around. He is absolutely the nicest person I've ever known. He is eighty-three now, and I am ninety-one, and we have never had a bad word between us.

OUR LIFE ON WHIPPLE STREET

When we were very young, we lived on the second floor of a three-decker at 501 Whipple Street, across the street and about half a block away from Grandma and Grandpa Loeff's house. On the first floor lived the landlords, the Michaud family, who were French. They had three sons and one daughter, Josephine. I remember sitting with them around a table loaded with food. I was maybe four or five. I remember saying to my mother, "If you had as much food on the table as they did, I would eat more."

The Flannerys lived above us, on the third floor. In that house, we had French, Jewish, and Irish families, and we all got along. Mrs. Flannery was a nurse. I was very friendly with her middle son, Ed. Her oldest son was Jimmy (who went to school with my sister Annette), and Bobby was the youngest son. We all stayed in touch for many years.

Across the street lived the Regos, who were Portuguese. Next door was a Polish family, but we didn't get to know them as I don't think there were any children involved. On the other side was another French family, the Paquettes. The youngest boy was my age, and we always got into trouble together. They were

named Dominic, Clement, Leland—very French names. They had two sisters, Frances and Madeline. Frances was older and she was beautiful. The Paquettes owned Slade Laundry.

My dad was a traveling salesman before he married my mother. I believe he worked for the King Arthur Flour Company. He would travel by train and then get on a horse and ride through the country, mostly in Virginia and the southern states. After my parents married, Grandpa Loeff didn't like the idea of his son-in-law being on the road. So, he loaned my father \$5,000 to get him started in business. On September 22, 1922, my father opened the Empire Men's Shop on Main Street in Fall River, right next door to the Empire Theater, which is how the store got its name. He paid the loan back to Grandpa Loeff in six months, and he never borrowed another nickel.

When my parents were first married, Grandma Loeff did the cooking for them. My father always thought my mother was the cook, but it was Grandma Loeff. My mother would go across the street to get the food and bring it home. Then my mother learned to do her own cooking, and there was none better. Rolled cabbage was one of my favorites. She made rice pudding; it used to come out like a cake. She made the best hamburgers, called *kocletan* in Yiddish. She made a brisket that you could cut with a fork. Everything she made was good, except steak and meat. You couldn't have blood on the plate so she would soak the meat in salted water and then overcook it. When she cooked steak it was like a rock. My mother was strictly kosher in the house. Any Jewish holiday the family kept tradition. I'm proud to say, fortunately enough, that my daughters still do the same. I lit the Hanukkah candle last night, even though I was home alone.

I was five years old when Arlyne was born. My mother hired a helper from the Girls Continuation School, whose name was Mary Souza. Mary was a fifteen-year-old Portuguese girl, and she was supposed to stay for six weeks. She stayed with us until she was eighty, living with us until she got married, then coming

in on a daily basis. She was like another mother—Arlyne thought she *was* her mother. Mary was an angel.

Mother taught Mary how to cook and Mary became a spectacular kosher cook. As a matter of fact, even after my mother passed away, Mary kept the house strictly kosher. My brother was the only one living at home when my mother died, and Mary still stayed and took care of Eli.

Every Sunday at noon we went to Grandma Dondis' house for dinner. Both Grandma and Grandpa cooked. They would kind of compete with one another. We would have borscht—not beet borscht, but a meat borscht. It was so spectacular, but there was no recipe, and it's never been duplicated. Supposedly, we wouldn't know who cooked it. But we all knew when my grandpa cooked, and we would say to my grandmother, "What happened? This borscht doesn't taste like you usually make." And my grandpa would get upset. And then we'd do the same thing to my grandmother, just to tease her. Also on the menu was usually a chicken and the vegetables that went with it. There was sisal bread—which was like a big rye bread—and I'd sit there with a big bowl of soup, just dunking that bread. We had a routine. My grandmother would say, "Have some more." I'd answer, "I don't want any more." And she'd say "You don't like it?" I loved it and she knew it. I'd go through half a loaf of bread with that soup.

CHILDHOOD ANTICS

As a kid, I was always getting in trouble. I can remember getting thrown out of kindergarten at the Wixon School for making mud pies in the sandbox. I must have my father's memory; I remember all my teachers. Miss Kennedy was my kindergarten teacher, and she had a twin sister. Miss Riley taught the first grade, and I had Miss Sullivan in the second grade, who made me sit in the wastebasket when I was in trouble. Miss McDermott taught the third grade, where I won a spelling

contest. The prize was a bar of candy, and I tell my kids I still have that bar of candy in the back of my drawer.

In the fourth grade, the teacher was Miss Grace Cuttle, and we were in love. Miss Cuttle and I kept in touch until she was ninety years old. She was gorgeous. But part way through the fourth grade, in 1933, we moved to the magnificent new home my father had built on Madison Street. So mid-year, I left Miss Cuttle and switched to the Highland School, where Sadie Borden was the fourth-grade teacher. She was a toughie. She called everyone by their last name. I remember I cried in class on the very first day because the assignment was to memorize the poem *Paul Revere's Ride* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. She assigned one stanza of the poem to each student and told us to memorize it by Friday. I misunderstood and started to cry because I knew I could never learn the whole poem by Friday. She said, "Dondis, don't you listen? I said one stanza." And to this day, I still remember that stanza.

*Listen my children, you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April in Seventy-five
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.*

I think I eventually learned most of the poem.

Miss Wareham taught the fifth grade. When I was in grammar school, my mother would have luncheons for the teachers just so they would pass me. I always struggled in school because my mother sent me off at the age of four, and I was always the youngest kid in the class. I was doing well enough to get by. I fooled around a lot, but I got my work done.

The fun continued in high school. In sophomore English class, Mr. Kaylor was lecturing, and I started sharpening my pencils. He continued with the lecture, and when he finished he said, "Mr. Dondis, you can write me a 10,000-word composition

on why you shouldn't sharpen pencils while the teacher is lecturing." I wrote the same words over and over.

I used to wear suspenders purposely so I could use them as a slingshot to throw spitballs across the room. Then, I had to write a 20,000-word composition on why you shouldn't throw spitballs while the teacher is lecturing. Believe it or not, after I graduated, Mr. Kaylor and I became good friends.

My shenanigans weren't restricted to school. Annette and I shared a bedroom on Whipple Street. I remember one night my folks went out and I was jumping from my bed to her bed, back and forth. Mary came in and yelled at me, "Get to bed or I'll let your dad know what you're doing." I got into bed and said, "I want an apple." Mary brought the apple, and I said, "Peel it." She peeled it, brought it back, and said, "Here, I hope you choke on it." And on the first bite, I choked. Mary went screaming for our neighbor Mrs. Flannery, the nurse, who came running down the stairs and saved me. Mary said, "I'll never do that again." She felt so badly, but it was really my fault.

In another incident, I remember coming home from school one day, reaching into the refrigerator for an egg and saying, "Mary I'm hungry. Here's an egg. Cook it." I tossed it to her. The egg dropped to the floor and broke. She picked it up, put it in the pan—shells and all—and cooked it. She said, "Eat it. Eat all of it, or I'll speak to your dad." That's all she had to say. I ate every bit of it, including the shells.

MEMORIES FROM MADISON STREET

In the basement of our home on Madison Street there was a storage room, and next to it was the laundry room. My mother used the storage room for excess food, canned goods, etc. I used it as my workshop. I was twelve years old, and I was making my own tin soldiers, thinking I would start my own business. I had installed two locks on the door. One day, I was in there with the

doors locked, and I lit a can of sterno to melt some lead for the tin soldiers. The flame was too high on the sterno and as I tried to put it out the sterno spilled all over the floor and the fire spread. Mary was in the laundry room next door, ironing at the mangler, which is a large machine, like a press. She heard my screams and came running, but I panicked and couldn't unlock the door. Somehow, she calmed me down and told me to unlock the top lock, which I did. And then the bottom lock, which I did. She burst in with a bucket of water and put out the fire right away. To this day, I'm paranoid about fire. I'll always unplug appliances, and check the stove before I go out. If I use a match I'll leave it in the sink overnight before throwing it away. Even when I light the Sabbath candles, even the Hanukkah candles, I put the menorah right in the sink.

Mary really saved me that time. I don't think she told anyone about the fire, not even my parents. My mother was not much of a disciplinarian; my father took care of that. When my siblings and I would act up, my mother would look at us in exasperation and simply say, "What do you want from my young life?" But I was constantly in trouble with my father. Every fall, my father would have a load of manure dumped in the back yard. Whenever I misbehaved, my punishment was spreading the manure.

Dad loved his yard. During the war, he had a victory garden. Most families grew their own vegetables. I raised pigeons that Dad had bought for me. We had a beautiful pigeon coop built on stilts next to a wooded area in the backyard. Behind our house, on Highland Street, was another Dondis family. I think he was a distant relation of my father's. My father didn't like him at all. He was not charitable. He was well-to-do but cheap.

I would let my pigeons out during the day—twenty-five to thirty pigeons. Before they came back to the coop, they would land on this relative's roof and poop all over it. They must have known we didn't like him. The roof was white with poop. He called my father one day to complain, and my father said, "Don't

complain to me. Tell the pigeons.” That was the end of that conversation. Unfortunately, when I cleaned out the coop, corn would drop to the ground and that would attract—I don’t even like to say the word—*rats*, coming from the wooded area. My father saw them one day, and that was the end of the pigeons.

In 1939, my father and a group of his friends joined the UJA, the United Jewish Appeal. They found out about the Holocaust, and they knew there was a need for money in Palestine. Supposedly, the world didn’t know what was going on there at the time. This was before the United States got involved. My dad went out and knocked on doors and would embarrass people into giving money to arm the Jews. Then they would have one big pledge meeting. I remember my father making a pledge that was not easy to meet, but it was important to him. Even my father-in-law—who was a wonderful guy—went out and *borrowed* money so that he could give it to UJA. That’s how important it was.

Another of our neighbors on Madison Street was ‘Guilty’ Goldberg. When my father knocked on Guilty’s door for a donation to the UJA, he couldn’t get a nickel out of him.

My gang and I built a clubhouse when we were kids. We stole a two-by-four plank that was laying in Guilty’s backyard. He called my father and raised hell about it, so my father made me pay Guilty nineteen cents for the plank. The Goldbergs used to have a beautiful row of tulips, which formed half of the border between our two houses. When my sister Arlyne was around five years old, she pulled up all the tulips and gave them to my mother for Mother’s Day. When Guilty died, on the day of his funeral, the neighbor across the street yelled to my father as the coffin came out of the house, and said, “Hey Phil, I wonder if they’re carrying out Goldberg, or his money?”

Guilty’s son was Guilty Goldberg Jr. We “waxed” his car, my gang and I. All the kids in the neighborhood got candles and dripped candle wax all over the car. It was a big black car, and we waxed it white. He called my father and said, “I know it was

your son and his gang that did this.” My father called me in and said, “Nate, I want you to tell me the truth. Did you and your gang wax Goldberg’s car?” I said, “Yes, Dad.” And he said, “Good job. Tell them all, good job.” He was with us on that one.

Next door to Guilty Goldberg, lived Rabbi Goldberg (not related to Guilty Goldberg). He was the Rabbi of Temple Beth El in Fall River, the synagogue that my dad and his friends built. One of the biggest honors of my life occurred when I was only four years old. In 1929, my sister Annette and I helped dedicate the cornerstone for that Temple. I remember holding the spatula with cement on it. It was too heavy for me, so one of the workmen held my hand. All the members of the Board of Directors were there, including my dad, along with Rabbi Goldberg. Annette and I were invited back for the 75th anniversary a few years ago. The Fall River Herald News took pictures and had a big article about it. I am the last survivor of the entire group that was there the day the cornerstone was dedicated.

Thinking about the Temple reminds me of a story about my brother Eli, and our friends the Levin boys. The Levins were friends of our family, and both parents died very young. There were four boys, and they all stuck together. There was Sumner, the oldest, and Marvin who was my best man. Next was Gibby, and then Clint, the youngest, who hung around with Eli. Those boys were always at our house. My mother had them over for dinner all the time.

In the Temple, there are two big towers, and in one of the towers is a classroom, way up at the top. One day, Eli and Clint went to class in the tower, and the teacher, Miss Jacobson, gave them an exam. Eli didn’t pass. He got hysterical, saying he didn’t dare to go home because he was afraid of Dad. He jumped up on the windowsill and said, “I’m going out the window!” Clint Levin said to Miss Jacobson, “Eli will jump. I know him. You should pass him.” She panicked, and said, “OK! OK! I’ll pass him.” So Eli climbed down from the windowsill, and quietly said, “Thank you.” Eli was a bit of a devil. He wouldn’t have jumped. It was

all an act. Clint saved him from having to tell my father he flunked the test. Clint just passed away a couple of weeks ago, he was a very successful doctor in New Bedford.

FAMILY VACATIONS AND ISLAND PARK

Dad took a week off from work every summer. We would leave early Sunday morning for vacation and get home Friday night so he would be back for business on Saturday. We usually went north someplace. My dad drove, with as many people as we could fit packed into the car: my mother, the three of us, (Eli was not born yet), usually one of the Shab kids, and sometimes Aunt Zuzzie.

Sometimes we would visit the other Dondis family in Rockland, Maine. My grandmother's brother had settled up there. Uncle Joe was in the theater business. I remember going to New Hampshire and seeing the Old Man of the Mountain. We visited Vermont. We'd stay in hotels or motels. Many of these places had cottages instead of one big building. I remember going to Niagara Falls and Saratoga Springs, and taking tours of the Kodak Company in Rochester New York and the Shredded Wheat factory. This was in the 1930's. I remember having a good time. Then came the 1940's, and the war, and that was the end of those vacations.

In 1929, Dad bought a summer cottage in the Island Park section of Portsmouth, Rhode Island. He bought it for my mother because she couldn't take the summer heat in Fall River. We would spend the whole summer there and Dad would commute back to Fall River to run the store. My mother loved it. We had some great friends, especially the Neves family, and the Rousseau family. The Rousseaus had eleven children. Mr. Rousseau owned the My Own Bakery Company and everyone in their family worked there. The youngest son, Eddie, was very friendly. He was a couple of years older than me. Then there was George, Edgar, and a bunch of others. We'd go to the beach and

dig for clams. They'd eat the clams, but we wouldn't because clams aren't kosher. I fell in love with their sister, Jeannie Rousseau. She was about my age, and I remember hiding in the dressing closet when we were twelve years old. I guess she was my first girlfriend; my first kiss, I think.

Every Fourth of July, on the way to Island Park, Dad would stop just over the Rhode Island border in Tiverton to buy fireworks. He couldn't buy fireworks in Fall River since they weren't legal in Massachusetts. He and Mr. Neves would put on a display of fireworks that was magnificent. Fourth of July was always a favorite holiday for me.

Harry Burstein's family owned the Jewish bakery in Fall River. In the summer, he would drive to Island Park with his van loaded with bagels and bread. Our house was the first stop. I was just a little kid, but I'd jump in the van and go with him to make deliveries. Originally, bagels were strictly a weekend thing—Saturday or Sunday morning only.

I had a couple of little summer jobs at Island Park. There was an ice cream shop across the street from our cottage called Keith's ice cream. They had a big parking lot, and my friend Albert Neves and I would clean it up. They'd give us a stick with a nail on the bottom, and we'd pick up papers. We'd do it in the morning, and get a "nickel cone"—one scoop of ice cream in a wafer cone. In the afternoon, we went back and cleaned up the lot again, and got a "ten-cent cone." It was still one scoop, but in a sugar cone. No money, just ice cream. I used to set pins in the bowling alley for a nickel a string. I got that job because one of my friends at Island Park was Francis Sabens, and his dad owned the bowling alley.

Island Park reminds me of a story about the first radio my dad ever bought, long before television was invented. Dad didn't want to take the radio to the cottage in the summer because he was afraid the dampness at the beach might affect it. So he left it with our neighbors on Whipple Street, the Michauds, and that became their entertainment. They loved it

so much that they stopped using their player piano. At the end of the summer, when my dad took our radio back, the Michauds went out and bought one for themselves. Years later I took my daughter to visit Josephine Michaud and she offered me the player piano. But I never went back to get it.

My mother liked to play the piano. For a wedding gift, her dad gave my parents a baby grand. Annette took piano lessons, and I took violin lessons. The reason I studied violin is because cousin Harold played the violin. Whatever he did, I wanted to do. Eventually, my parents caught me leaving the house with a baseball bat and glove in the violin case. I was supposed to be on my way to a lesson but had no intention of getting there. That's when they figured it was time for me to quit violin lessons. I never really enjoyed it, anyway. But I like music. I like to dance. I've been told I can really rumba!

The Great New England Hurricane of 1938 hit on September 21. I remember it like it was yesterday. I was thirteen years old and was bike-riding in the neighborhood in Fall River with my gang. We were coasting *up* the hill, that's how strong the wind was during the hurricane. We had to push our way back *down* the hill. We went to my backyard, sat on the steps, and watched as one of the big maple trees came crashing down. We didn't realize what was going on, or the magnitude of that storm. It came without warning.

The next morning, school was called off. Dad wanted to go to Island Park to see if there was any damage to our cottage. We stopped at the store to get cardboard boxes, in case any windows were broken. Thankfully, our house was still standing. We were in the second row of houses, away from the beach. The Neves' house, which was very sturdy, also survived. But the hurricane wiped out almost all of the houses right along the beach. There must have been forty to fifty homes, wiped out. The Horvitzs' house—a big stucco two-family—was very heavily damaged. The Rousseaus' house was wiped out. Their house was on the water; our house was in the row behind them. We had some broken

windows, but very little damage, compared to others. The Old Stone Bridge was wiped out. I can still see the people walking out with their belongings in a bag or a suitcase; their homes were gone. It was devastating. It took years for Island Park to recover from that hurricane.

BOATS AND CARS

My dad loved fishing. He bought a magnificent Chris Craft speedboat for \$1,000. I remember going out in that speedboat once or twice, sitting on his lap and steering the boat. Dad didn't know the first thing about engines. He knew this guy who was a mechanic, and Dad made him a partner in the boat. My father wasn't aware that this guy owed money to a furniture store. The furniture store confiscated the boat for payment. That was the last boat my father owned. After that, he would go fishing with friends on their boats.

My dad had a Ford Model A. He used to say it was Annette's car. Then he bought a Buick and said it was my car. He bought a Packard, and that was Arlyne's car. But that Packard never ran very well, and I know why.

Dad would go golfing on Sunday mornings with Mr. Rousseau. Annette and I would play gasoline station with Dad's car while he was gone. Annette was behind the wheel, and I was the gas station attendant. I would pour water from a quart bottle into the gas tank. My father could never understand what happened to his car. Every Monday morning he'd have to take it to a mechanic. I realized many years later what I did, but Dad didn't live long enough for me to tell him. He said that when he got rid of that Packard, the mechanic retired.

After that, he bought a Pontiac and said it was Eli's car. He liked Pontiacs. He and I had an accident (not a bad one), so he traded that 1936 Pontiac and got a 1937. We had an accident in the same spot the following year. Someone banged into us at an intersection. In 1940, he got another new Pontiac—a two-toned

blue and gray torpedo-back. And that was the last new car Dad bought before production stopped because of the war.

Dad always wanted to buy a Cadillac. I think there were two Cadillacs in Fall River, and Dad's landlord owned one of them. Dad's buddy Joe List had a used car business. He said, "Phil I've got a great Cadillac for you." It was a used car—I mean previously owned. When it's a Cadillac, you don't say used, you say "previously owned." So Dad traded Joe his Pontiac for the Cadillac. We had the Cadillac for about a week, and Dad let me use it Friday night to go out with friends. We're out in front of the house and I couldn't get the car started. So Dad looked out the window and there I am with my two buddies, pushing the car, trying to get it going. He knocked on the window and motioned me to come back inside. He said, "Sonny boy, tomorrow I'll call Joe List and get my Pontiac back." And he did.

My father, Philip Spencer Dondis.

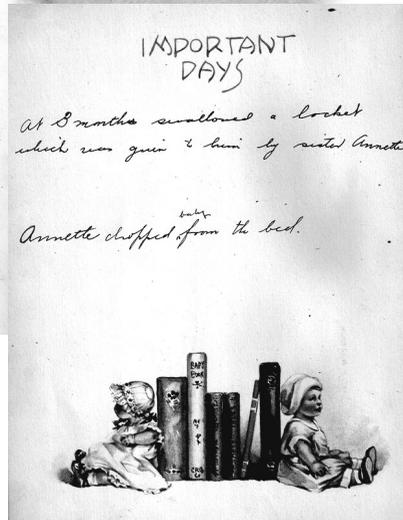


My mother, Emma Loeff Dondis.

No. 11898
 1820 HIGHLAND AVENUE
 FALL RIVER, MASS., July 13, 1925.
Mr. Philip Dondis.
 TO THE TRUESDALE HOSPITAL, INC., DR.
 PAYABLE AT HOSPITAL OR AT TRUESDALE CLINIC, 151 ROCK STREET
Mrs. Emma Dondis

From	July 8	to	July 14		
	6 days at \$	8.00		\$	48 00
Etherizing					
Surgical Supplies					
Medicine					
Laboratory Examinations					
Board Miss Sestak				9	00
Care of Baby				6	00
Due on pervious bill				14	00
				\$	77 00

The hospital bill for the second week of my mother's maternity stay, when I was born.



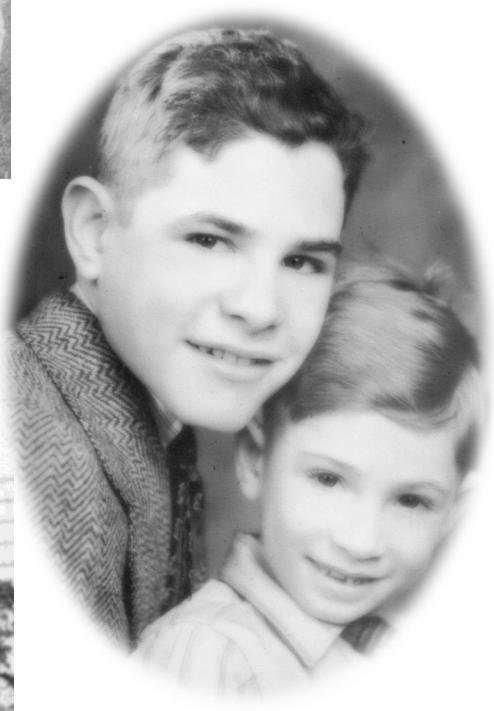
The baby book my mother started for me, showing my name written in Hebrew in her handwriting and evidence that Annette dropped me from the bed.



Helping to place the cornerstone at Temple Beth El in Fall River, with my sister, Annette. Dad is behind us.



Me, on the left, with Annette, in 1926.



With Eli, in the late 1930's.



With Mary Souza and Annette, early 1930's.



My whole family: Dad holding a fishing rod, Mom holding Eli, me in the cap, Arlyne on the left, and Annette on the right.



Me, with my dad, cousin Frances Shabselowitz on the left, and Annette on the right.

With Annette and Arlyne, on Dad's Packard.



From left: Arlyne, cousin Adele Shabselowitz, Eli, and me, at Island Park.

Thank you for taking the time to read this excerpt from Nate's memoir. We hope it inspires you to write your own life story. Be sure to read the next two pages of messages from the authors.

A MESSAGE TO OUR FAMILY

I learned to show love at an early age. Every day, when I saw my dad for the first time that day, and sometimes the second or third time, I'd walk over and give him a kiss. In the morning when he left, I'd always say "Goodbye, Daddy dear. Have a good day, and have a good business." The four of us kids would say that. I don't ever remember not saying it. He called me Sonny Boy and I loved that. He didn't come out and say, "Nate, I love you." But he called me Sonny Boy, and I knew. Don't be afraid to let people know you love them. If Edie and I could speak to future generations of our family, here is the message we would give to them:

*Be conscious of family, be charitable, do not envy,
and show love.*

AFTERWORD

During one of our interviews for this book, Nate said, “I’m a believer that there’s always one event in your life that changes the direction of your life. For me, it was the day I came to Falmouth and decided to open a store.” Then he paused for a moment, looked at me and said, “I guess for you, it was the day you read the article in the *Cape Cod Times* about becoming a personal historian.”

I met Nate twenty years ago, when my husband Bill and I bought the house across the street from Nate and Edie, on Menauhant Road in East Falmouth. We were here only on weekends then, but Nate was a friend from the start. Bill loved when Nate crossed Menauhant Road to share one of his jokes. And I waited every Christmas for Nate’s phone call; “Hey, we’re Jewish over here; tone down those Christmas lights!” We’d invite him over for a cocktail, and somehow the lights were no longer an issue. When we were finally able to move to Falmouth full-time, Nate sold his house and moved to FalmouthPort. It was the right move for him, but we miss him.

I approached Nate nearly a year ago and asked if he would help me in establishing my new career. As gracious as ever, his response to me was, “You know I could never say no to you.” Although I did my best to explain the process of life review, and the steps involved in the creation of this memoir, I’m not sure either of us fully understood the journey we were about to take. We both looked forward to every interview session. We laughed (and laughed, and laughed), and teared up once or twice. And now that we are nearing the completion of this project, I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to really get to know a friend I’ve had for twenty years. Nate has been incredibly generous with his time and with his stories (he has an amazing memory, just like his dad). He was “all in” and for that I will be forever grateful.

The last time I asked Nate if there was anything else he wanted to include in his book, he said, “I need to write something about you, and thank you for doing this for me.” Nate, when I show you what we’ve done, your reaction is all the thanks I could ask for. Now, I will look forward to regular meetings, probably at Liam Maguire’s, to hear more stories, old and new, from my dear friend. And I look forward to more of your latkes. I love you, Nate.

Deb Levy