INTRODUCTION

When I married into my husband's family, their story left me spellbound. As soon as I heard it, I wanted to write about it. Alas, life got in the way. Working full time as a teacher and raising two children left little time to follow my passion. When I left teaching, I joined a writing group and finally began the journey.

My father-in-law, Irving, and his two brothers, Leonard and Richard, were forced to work in a garment business run by their father. Irving had dreamed of becoming a doctor. Furthermore, they needed to uproot their families in the North and move to Tennessee, for the family business.

In the South, the families faced anti-Semitism and were snubbed for their liberal views. Irving and Leonard, decorated WWII veterans, put their lives on the line for equality. As Northerners raised in a religious home, their families felt displaced in the segregated environment of the 1950s. Teaching their children to be open-minded and free of prejudice proved an insurmountable task.

More stories came to light as members of the family shared their memories of the Jim Crow South.

During our formative years, my husband and I lived contrasting lives. Raised in a rural, well-to-do home, his backyard consisted of woods, lakes, and farms, while I resided in a six-story pre-war apartment building in a congested area of the Bronx in New York City. He roamed the pastoral countryside; I spent my leisure time in the courtyard of my building. My wheels were roller skates; he owned a horse. While my dad held two jobs, his dad operated a manufacturing company employing hundreds of workers. When my uncle, the landlord of our building, emptied his coin-operated washer and dryer and poured an avalanche of silver into the raised hem of my dress, I believed I had struck gold.

I attended integrated public schools and interacted with children of all races and religions. My family had a choice of synagogues. I never witnessed any signs of exclusion or designated seating on buses or in restaurants. However, in one respect, I related to their experience because the girls in my building refused to play with me due to my Jewish faith.

In today's world, it's difficult to fathom some of the laws and policies that existed over seventy years ago. If we wish to progress as an equitable and democratic

nation, we should examine our past. The thread of racial inequality and prejudice are sewn into the heart of our country. Teaching tolerance and fairness needs to be at the core of our educational system so we can alter the way we view our differences. Understanding our past will provide the ammunition to move forward and celebrate our diversity. These tales seek to share the journey and preserve the legacy of one family. They are based on true events.

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THE PATRIARCH

The factory fire served as the union's final warning. The smugness of the union bruiser leaning against the office door, arms crossed in front of his chest, made Abe's stomach turn. On his way out, the representative tipped his hat, smirking under its brim. A string of curses escaped Abe's lips. The representative performed well—Abe's brow was now permanently creased. The union didn't make idle threats.

A Jewish entrepreneur, Abe Berlin thought he had it all—money, success, and security. For twenty years he had poured his heart into building A. Berlin & Sons into a thriving men's and boys' outerwear manufacturing enterprise. The feeling of imminent doom gnawed away at him. If he yielded to the union's demands, everything he strived for would be in vain, including his family's future. In order to gain control, the union would force

him to use *their* vendors and *their* truckers, resorting to extortion, kickbacks, and brutality to get their way. Once they diminished Abe's profits, they would swoop in and take over. When his close friend who owned a men's suit factory, Danny, tried to resist, one of their henchmen beat him with a bat, causing a permanent limp. Resisting their demands endangered his life and everyone he loved. Business owners tolerated the union because they were scared.

As he racked his brain, Abe bit every fingernail down to the skin. Turning to his colleagues for suggestions, every answer had been the same—there was no eluding their tentacles. The only warning of the rep's next visit was the scent of his cigar a few moments before he entered Abe's office.

As a youngster emigrating from Russia with his parents, Abe and his family settled on the lower East Side of Manhattan. To keep food on the table, his mother worked tirelessly sewing garments for others. In a two-room tenement, her knuckles grew raw from scrubbing other people's laundry while perspiration trickled down her forehead. His dad also worked long hours as a tailor, dragging himself up four flights of stairs at the end of the day. Witnessing his parents' daily exhaustion, he vowed he would never be in that position.

His first job at Spiewak Clothing Company introduced him to the manufacturing business. A few years later, he ventured out on his own. With the help of his father's contacts from the old country, Abe obtained a profitable contract to supply the Russian army with heavy overcoats during WWI. Around this time, a mutual friend introduced him to a young woman named Anna. Drawn to her alluring smile and self-confidence, the attraction flourished. Anna admired his take-charge demeanor and strong family values.

When he arrived on their second date clutching a bouquet of roses and held her firmly, yet gently, while dancing, she was smitten. After a short courting period, Abe knew she was "the one." When they married, Anna's cooking and supportiveness fulfilled his dreams of a proper wife. Maintaining a kosher home, her beliefs mirrored his own, upholding traditions and observance of the Jewish holidays.

When WWII broke, he secured an order with the U.S. Army, manufacturing men's jackets. After the war, he expanded, producing men's and boys' sportswear and outerwear, specializing in sports coats, heavy parkas, dress coats, and jackets for every season. When his sons were old enough, he brought them into his company and taught them everything he knew. To showcase

the latest style, he often sent his oldest son, Irving, to B. Altman and Saks Fifth Avenue to copy men's garments on a sketch pad. Abe designed his own label representing power and family—a stallion and a colt with the company's name, A. BERLIN & SONS, printed across the top. Knowing the profits supported the entire Berlin family gave him tremendous satisfaction.

Abe's three boys worked in the family business, just as he had planned. His two older sons, Irving and Leonard, operated the manufacturing plant in Haverstraw, New York. However, Irving had designs to attend medical school and become a doctor. He never wanted to work for his dad, but his generation was more apt to comply with their elder's wishes. With the help of his youngest son, Richard, the showroom in the Empire State Building became his showpiece. Located in the heart of New York's fashion center on 34th Street near Fifth Avenue, the large well-lit room meticulously displayed samples on mannequins. Richard's marketing ability helped select garments and colors that caught the buyers' eyes. Abe's business acumen and no-nonsense personality impressed wholesalers. Customers knew the Berlin name meant quality. These attributes delivered clients such as: Montgomery Ward, JCPenney, and Sears, Roebuck and Company.

Abe walked the streets of the garment district as if he owned the world. Covering several blocks in midtown Manhattan, trucks would line the streets from Fifth Avenue to Ninth Avenue between 34th and 42nd Street. At any hour of the day, men rolled racks of clothing along the sidewalks. Within this neighborhood, fashion design, production, wholesaling, and manufacturing took place. Supply houses that produced buttons, trimmings, and zippers were located here. The whole nation depended on this industry. New York fashion competed with Paris and Milan.

In 1955, corruption grew in New York City due to organized crime seeking control of the garment industry. For the sake of his sons' safety and the survival of his company, Abe needed a quick solution. It kept his wife, Anna, up at night too. It sickened him when the buyers from Sears, Roebuck and Company and JCPenney expected handouts, but this scenario was intolerable.

The factory fire sent a clear message. The destruction in Haverstraw caused insurmountable disruptions and order delays. Holding his head in his hands, his eyes caught the newspaper headline on his desk, "KENTUCKY OFFERS INCENTIVES TO NEW BUSINESS." Grabbing the article, Abe viewed it as a sign. He phoned Governor A. B. "Happy" Chandler to

investigate the possibility of moving his manufacturing plant.

Governor Chandler, known for his good humor and strong Christian principles, served as a US senator and as baseball's second commissioner for six years. Despite overwhelming opposition from the club owners, he backed Branch Rickey, the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, to allow Jackie Robinson, the first Black player, to become part of his team, essentially integrating baseball. Familiar with Governor Chandler's background, Abe believed he would understand his dilemma.

After pleasantries were exchanged, the governor said, "We'd love to have you in Kentucky! Give me a few days, and I will find the perfect spot for you."

He suggested a site in Clinton, a building that looked like an old airplane hangar. After Abe flew there, a cloud lifted. Unbeknownst to his sons, he leased the building for his factory. Dave Shatz, a prominent businessman in Union City, Tennessee, helped the Berlins by offering an office to file job applications. And so began the Berlin legacy—a family who went against the grain and forged their own path.