

Betty Gerber

*written by her niece, Judith Goldsmith
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Betty was born 11 Jan 1913 in Portland, Maine. Betty was actually named Bessie on her birth record and was listed as the 9th child born to David and Fannie Gerber who were immigrants from the Ukraine. David Gerber was listed as a peddler and the family lived at 455 ½ Fore Street. Betty preferred to be called Betty and not Bessie, perhaps because she already had a cousin Bessie. Betty was affectionately called Betty-Betty because her father kept calling her Bessie and she would say to him “it’s Betty, Betty”. Betty was named after her paternal grandmother (Barci or Bashir or Basya or Bassie).

Betty graduated from Portland High School in 1931. She then went to secretarial school and became a stenographer. She found that she couldn’t obtain employment in Portland so she decided to leave for New York City. Betty felt there was discrimination in Portland businesses that would not hire her because she was Jewish. When Betty left home to go to New York City, she recalled that her father had tears in his eyes, not wanting her to leave home. Betty enjoyed living and working in New York City and lived for a time with her sister Rita.

When Betty returned to Portland on a visit, her mother arranged for her to meet Sam Serota. Fanny asked Sam to do some carpentry in their house at 99 Monument Street. Her mother Fannie was friendly with Rose Serota, Sam’s mother. Sam and Betty did meet while Sam was working on the Gerber house. Betty wanted to return to New York City but Fannie told her not to be in such a hurry to leave. Sam and Betty were dating for almost nine months when Fannie asked Sam what were his intentions. Sam and Betty soon became engaged and then married

in 31 December 1941 in Portland, Maine prior to Sam's being drafted for military service.

Sam and Betty were living in the Bronx, in New York City from 1941 to 1945. While in the Bronx, their son Daniel was born in 1942. Sam was in active duty in the Army serving in the South Pacific during WWII. When Sam was discharged from military service in 1945, Betty and Sam moved back to Portland and lived there until 1966. Their next two children were born in Portland; Steven b. 1946 and Carol b. 1948. Betty recalled at age 101 years that she and Sam and their children lived at 43 Walton Street for several years and then moved to 125 Morning Street also in Portland.

Daniel moved to Boston in 1960, to attend Northeastern University. Steven also moved to Boston in 1964 also to attend Northeastern University. Carol joined her brothers and moved to Boston in 1966 also attending Northeastern University. From Portland, Betty and Sam moved to Boston in 1967 where Betty worked the night shift in the admitting office at the Boston Lying-In Hospital for 16 years, starting when she was age 52 until age 68. Betty always said that she really enjoyed her work there and actually wanted to continue working but Sam wanted to enjoy retirement together so they first retired to San Diego, California.

Betty was not so fond of living in San Diego saying it was too expensive. Her brother Frank and sister-in-law Sylvia urged them to consider moving to Florida where they could be closer. Betty and Sam moved again, this time to Lauderhill, Florida. At the time of this writing Betty just celebrated turning 105 years of age. Betty retains her excellent memory, her love of life, her kind heart, her devotion to her family,

despite the ravages of aging. She had a wonderful celebration of her life with her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren on her 100th birthday in her home in Lauderhill, Florida and again on her 105th birthday with her children and grandchildren. Betty maintained that she is relatively healthy because her daughter Carol came to live with her and was taking care of her in Florida. Betty said if it was not for Carol, she would not live as long as she has or would have withered away in a nursing home.

Betty recalled that her parents were strictly kosher and they always went to shul on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings.

Betty also spoke to me about her belief in an afterlife and that the soul lives on after the body dies. She believes in reincarnation and says the spirit comes back when we are born. Betty said that "deep in my heart is my spirit". Betty believed that she was re-born from one of her ancestors who went all the way back in time. She also discussed there were three heavens: the first heaven is the one we "see", the second heaven is for animals and the third heaven is where G-d dwells. She said "some people believe in seven heavens but why would there be seven heavens if God dwells in the third heaven?" She said that she absolutely believed that she would join her loved ones in heaven.

Samuel Serota:

Samuel was born 1908 and he died 18 Sept 1992. Sam was born in Piataka, Ukraine, a shtetl 99 miles WSW of Kiev. His parents were Louis and Rose Serota. By 1900 the Jewish population of Piataka was 833. Many Jews in Piataka were furniture makers and they exported furniture to larger cities in Russia. On 7 July 1941 the Germans captured Piataka and murdered 11 Jews. On 24 Oct 1941 200 Jews were murdered with the participation of the Ukrainian police who also pillaged property.

Louis Serota immigrated to Ellis Island from Piataka in 1909. Sam and his mother Rose endured harsh conditions during the start of WWI spending two years on foot, hiding in barns by day and running by night across the Ukraine and Poland to Hamburg. They were stowaways without papers on a ship that was headed to Ellis island. Secretly, friendly Jews on the ship helped them with food and water. They remained in quarantine at Ellis Island for six months until an uncle who lived in Canada heard of their plight and had them released to his care. Sam and his mother were headed towards Canada, then stopped in Portland, Maine and were given charity by the Jewish community of Portland. Sam, his parents and his siblings Jennie, Eleanor, Ida and Jacob were reunited in Portland.

Sam married Betty in Portland in 1941. He was drafted for WWII at age 32 and he served in the Army in the South Pacific as a demolition specialist. Sam served in the 77th Army Engineering Corps that was headquartered in New York City. He fought in the battles of Leyte Gulf, Guam, Okinawa and Japan and was a war hero. As a civilian, he was a master carpenter, building contractor and had a business for demolition of buildings. Sam's father Louis had a brother Samuel (Zalmen) who also immigrated in 1908 from Piataka. He lived in New York City as an antiques dealer and had his store Serota Gallery for antiques on 5th Avenue in New York City. There were other Serota relatives living in Chicago. Betty recalled that Sam built one of the synagogues in Portland, Etz Hayim, that is still functioning as a synagogue and as a Jewish museum. It was in the Eastern European style and I had the pleasure of being in the synagogue for a friend's granddaughter's bat mitzvah.