

Betty Cassorla's Biography, continued

Ages 2 - 12, 1924-1944

Last updated: 8/14/04 - Yusef Eli - 1932 - Camhi story. 1926 - Chaim Chewing Cotton; 11/03: Bear Mountain and Fishes.



We had two bathrooms in the hallway shared by two families. These bathrooms had toilets only. If we had to take a bath, it would be in the washtub in the kitchen. Light was provided by bare bulbs, one dim bulb to a room. The hallways were always particularly dangerous because the bulbs in them were so weak.

My mother lost six babies, two sets of twins, a boy, and a girl -- all of this on the East Side.

One set of twins was born after the birth of Esther, and another set after the birth of Sally.

I never saw *Daviku* either, who was born before my brother Jack. He lived until about age 6, when he died of pneumonia.

One set of twins died as a miscarriage, and the other set died at childbirth.

My oldest sister Esther, posing in a gypsy dress. This picture was probably taken on the roof of our building at 165 Eldrige Street, roughly in 1925.





My mother, Mazalto, and my older brother Daviku, who died young.

My mother was then pregnant with Sarika (Sara, who was a gorgeous baby). My sisters always said she was the most gorgeous baby they'd ever seen: "Like a flower." Unfortunately, she died of pneumonia when she was about five months old.

I saw my sister Esther more than I saw Sally. Sally was more of a tomboy, but Esther was a homebody. Esther and Mazalto would rip out any stitching done incorrectly by my mother. Then they would both re-stitch it. My sister Esther was a big help to my mother and father.

I always went on walks in the street with my mother looking for the big horses, which we could also see from the roof, or in the apartment.

Our apartment had three rooms. Mom and Dad had their bedroom.

Esther and Sophie shared one half of the living room, and Jack and I had folding beds in the other half of the living room.

It was actually a kind of folding couch, and it always smelled of lemon oil!



My brother and I would complain to my Mom that she polished that couch too often, "It smells! It smells!"

*"Manah" Esther Camhi, my paternal grandmother.
This photo was taken at 679 Alabama Avenue,
Brooklyn, New York.*

Sometimes, my brother Jack and I would fall asleep in our sisters' beds. When our sisters would get drowsy, we'd be carried over to the leather folding couch.

I used to love watching my sisters. I was enchanted! They were very adoring to me. Esther brought me dolls of all kinds, stuffed dolls, plastic dolls, all kinds of presents. She worked as a sewing machine operator for many years.

679 Alabama Avenue

(a cold-water flat):

Ages 2 - 6, 1924-1928

This building had attached homes, or row homes. There were no alleyways. To get to the back of the house, you had to go down to the basement. There was no steam there -- we used coal or wood in the kitchen, which became the only heated room.



The Chaim Camhi family, circa 1926. Left to right are: Sally, Mazalto (adult), Betty age 4 (child), Chaim, Esther and Jack.

I slept on two or three orange crates in a red colcha with a sheet over it. Everyone else slept in freezing cold rooms. My mother would have boiling water on the stove. She would pour the water into the tub to heat up the bathroom, so that it would be warm enough for them to change for work. They wore flannels and sweaters to bed.

The boys played hockey with a stick and something as a puck. They would also play punchball. I used to play stoopball. We would throw the ball at the stoop, and depending on how many bounces it made, you go so many bases. I also used to jump rope. My friends were the Mayo family, Katie, and Ettie. Uncle Jakie didn't play with me much then, although we were very close all the time.

Everyone appeared to me to be very tall. So big, like Sophie Nachmiya and Annie Eskalyo. Every high holiday my mother would paint the coal stove silver. She was so cute!

We did not have a refrigerator -- we had an ice box.

It was my father's job to empty out the water from the ice box.

There was a flap, and you pulled out a big pan.



Betty, age 4, 1926

He'd bring the pan to the sink and empty it. Because it was heavy, he did it. Every other day, the man would come with a horse and wagon selling ice. He'd ask, "What size you want?" We'd say, "Something for 25 cents."

The main ice chunk was covered by rubber materials. First, he'd chop it. Then he'd use big tongs, put it on his shoulder, which had a rubber pad on it, and go up to our house. He would put it inside the ice box. A piece was maybe 8" high, by 12" and 16". Then my mother would cover that with a towel all of the time. The milk would then go onto it.

1926 - Chaim chewing cotton

He chewed thread whole working. I saw it hanging out of his mouth, instead of smoking or chewing candy. He would be in the basement with half-gloves. This was 608 Williams Avenue.

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Hymie Assael's fishes - He was an uncle, his wife Anna Assael, who was Anna was Chaim's sister.

Continuing at New Lots, Brooklyn, New York

679 Alabama Avenue

Ages 6 - 10

1928 - 1932

My father had an offer of a better job in Brooklyn, as well as a chance for living in a better area. We moved to New Lots, Brooklyn. Now my sisters had their own bedroom, Jack had a bedroom, and I slept in the kitchen on wooden orange crates on a hairy red blanket.

We put sheets over the blanket to mask the roughness. The orange crates I slept on were placed near the coal stove, so I had the warmest room in the house.

The fire would be out, but the stove would still be radiating heat.

By the morning, the whole house would be freezing cold.

My mother would boil water on the



My dear brother Jack in 1926

stove and pour it into the bathtub in the bathroom, so we could all be warm while we were changing clothes. All three of them would be gone early in the morning: my dad and two sisters.



Sephardic Ladies of 1925. From left to right: Aunt Veida Eli (Mazalto's sister); Aunt Sinyora (nee Eli) Calderon (also Mazalto's sister); Aunt Victoria Eli (my mother's brother Joe Eli's wife), and my Mom, Mazalto (Eli) Camhi.

My Dad wouldn't wait for the hot water -- instead he drank hot kave, or kavijikoo, hot Turkish coffee prepared by my Mom. We didn't have American coffee.



My closest and dearest friend, my brother Jackie. Here I'm about 6 years old. Notice my scraped knee!

Brother Jack was three years older than me. We played together constantly. We were so close that we were like twins. When we lived at 679 Alabama Avenue, we would play in the long hallway with our neighbors, the Mayo family who owned the building.

Age 6: Learning to Sew

My father taught me how to work a sewing machine when I was 6 years old. I liked it. I learned because my father needed help with certain chores. He had a second job working down in the basement with cut finger gloves. It was my job to bring him *cave* (espresso).

I used to turn belts with a wire. When you sew a belt for a dress, you sew on the unshown, interior part. Then you have to turn it inside out. That was my other job. Or I'd turn cuffs and collars. This was done in the basement of 608 Williams Avenue. This was a 2-family apartment house, with the landlord upstairs. They'd never give us enough steam --- it was always very cold.

My father would make large-sized dresses for a Mr. Mevorah. This was his second job. He'd leave his first job at 5 am, come home from the train at 6 pm, have a meal, then go down in the cellar at about 7 pm, and keep working there until about 10:20 pm or 10:30 pm.

This was just to pay the bills.

Age 6: Learning of my Mother's Diabetes

My mother was a diabetic, and she needed money for medications and doctor bills. There was no such thing as Medicare at that time. My father would bring her to Kings County Clinic to get shots.



My mother was born in 1884. In the year 1928, she was 44 and obese.

She was thin when my sisters were young, but not as I knew her. She weighed maybe 250 pounds.

One day, my mother fainted. We took her to the drug store at New Lots and Alabama Avenues, Cohen's Drug's. That's where we found out that

Our group in 1928. Left to right: Sarah Eli, Jack eli, Sophi Eli (Sarah's kids), Jakie Camhi and me.

my mother was a diabetic. He advised my father to take her to Kings County Hospital. Later in life she fainted again. The doctor said then that she had abstained too much from sugar --- she needed a little bit. to work which was at 8 am or 8:30 am. It hurt, but she got used to it.

My father learned how to give my mother her insulin shots. He gave her juice and her needles every morning before going

All of my mother's sisters weighed about the same. They ate a lot of pot roast, potato, lentil, stews, with only a little piece of chuck. Also, they had a lot of homemade breads. All of them were terrific bakers and cooks.

Hitting my head on the lock -- Age 6

My friends were Katie and Etie Mayo. I remember distinctly what happened to me when I was about six, on Alabama Avenue.

As our friend Jenny Barocas said at a later date, "Everybody in our building was poor then." She lived on New Lots Avenue near Alabama.

My mother was bringing up the carriage, that belonged to my little sister Sarika, from the street. I saw my mother struggling while we were playing in the hallway. So I said to my mother, "Mom, I'll help you!" The big door near the building entrance was too much for my mother to handle while trying to pull an empty baby carriage.

Meantime, we were playing a game on the ground floor hallway. So one of the girls called me and said, "Becky, it's your turn to play." I said, "No, I'm going to help Mama."

In my excitement to hurry and help my mother, I turned back, and I hit my head on the lock that locks the front door. The protruding part of the lock went into my forehead, and I couldn't get my head out. My mother let go of the carriage and it went tumbling down the stoop.

My mother grabbed me, and pulled me out of the lock. I was spurting blood all over my face. My mother put her apron over my forehead and screamed to my father, "*Chaim! Ven aqui prestu!*" (Come here quickly.) That was the first time I heard my mother scream.

My father saw what had happened, took me in his arms, put my mother's aprons on my forehead and ran with me to the corner drugstore.



Betty, age 4.

My parents were very ignorant people and knew nothing of doctors or hospitals. The pharmacist took care of me, putting a clamp on my forehead and using a big butterfly bandage. To this day, I still bear that scar.

This was such a big event that happened, that all the relatives came to look at me and visit with my parents.

From that period, I had one photograph taken by a street photographer that has since been lost. I sat on his little valise. He told me to cross my legs and fold my hands on my lap. I remember distinctly that my little bloomers were showing, and I wore a little red and white checkered sweater. The man developed the shot and came in to my mother's house to show the picture to my mother. He wanted perhaps ten cents for it.

My mother laughed. We paid the man and kept the picture. The shot was lost at a party of Eli and Julia Rousso's, when everyone came dressed as children. Lou was a little sailor boy, and I was a little girl. A maid threw out everyone's pictures after the party.

1939 - Betty lures customers to Hymie Eli's Bear Mountain Fishing Game

When I was a little girl, maybe 5 or 6, I used to go sometimes with Hymie Eli's to help him with his concession at Bear Mountain. Hymie Assael was an uncle, his wife was Anna Assael, who was my father Chaim's sister.

My job was to win at a game of fishing for plastic fish, to encourage others to play.

I would catch a plastic fish with my little rod, and shout with joy. My cousins would also come along and cheer every time I won.

The day would go like this... My parents would send me off with Hymie for the day. Hymie took us by subway to the Battery. He had three daughters too. We all had fun playing.

We took the boat at the Battery. My brother Jakie was 9 years old then, and he would sometimes come too. Hymie picked us up at 221 New Lots, Avenue, at Hindsdale.

Dad: (When the Cassorla children went to Bear Mountain) we had melons, five kids, and they all went under a turnstile to avoid paying.

There was live a carnival there at Bear Mountain. His daughters also had to be skills.

He had maybe 7 or 8 relatives, all kids, cheering. Hymie was nice and clean-shaven.

After I caught the fish and everybody cheered, he would give me a big stuffed bear and everybody would see what I'd won.

He'd say "Go away and come back later."

So Jakie and the cousins and I would go sit on the grass or watch the carousel.

Then we would go back around the back entrance and return the stuffed bear. Then we'd do it again.

I didn't like it, because I knew it was a game.

Then he closed the concession and would take us out for a sandwich and ice cream.

Charlotte Aldorati also took us once and that was a nice trip.

Age 10: Kept Indoors

Several times, when I was about 10, my friends would call on me. My friends were Zelda Sedocah and Regina Cohen. They'd come to the apartment door and my mother would say, in Spanish, "*Becky esta abajo con mi marido. Esta laborando con el. No pueda a jugar.*" ("Becky is downstairs with my husband. She's working with him. Therefore, she cannot go to play.")

They'd want to go roller skating, or just walking. My brother had roller skates. I'd be downstairs, turning collars, belts and what-not. I wasn't resentful of this.

Age 10 - 12: 1928 - 1934

221 New Lots Avenue:

A Big Tenement House

(steam heated luxury!)

I was at P.S. 190. People were poor, so they'd keep moving and not have to pay rent. But not us, my father had to pay the rent.

This was a big building, with about three floors and six or eight apartments. To us, it seemed big at the time. We moved there from Alabama Avenue. These were not row homes. We still didn't have steam, only a coal stove in the kitchen, and an ice box. They used to stuff the windows with rags, to keep the drafts down. It was a nicer area... less crowded, cleaner looking, and nearer to the train for my Dad to go to work.

My father wore nightgowns, not pajamas. He'd hang up his nightgown on a hanger. He hung it out on a hanger on a hook. My brother Jakie and I used to sleep in the living room.



My sister Esther, on the left, with a friend, perhaps in 1934

That night gown used to give me nightmares. The wind in the room would move the nightgown, and I'd think it was a ghost.

I'd tell Jakie, "It's a ghost, it's a ghost." He'd say, "Go to sleep, go to sleep." We slept on a leather couch that opened up into a double bed.

Age 11

221 New Lots:

Smashing the window with my hands!

My brother had two-wheel in-line skates. I decided to take them without his permission and put on his skates. When I was about ten or twelve, I crashed into a radio store window. I didn't cut myself at all. That store belonged to the building. There were two brothers at the store -- they knew it was me.

I didn't want to face my parents, because of the expense of replacing the glass. My parents were calling in the street, after dark, "*Becky, Becky? Donde estas?*" The two shop owners were looking for me, and told my parents, "Your child did this and this. She broke the window, and you have to pay."



Four young lovelies of the 1920's! From left to right: Betty's sister Esther Camhi, Annie (nee Elias) Eskalyo, Betty's sister Sally (nee Camhi) Angel, and Sophie Nahmias.

I was hiding on the side of the stoop, and it was getting dark and cold. My father called, and I answered him. He brought me upstairs, but didn't yell at me. He felt sorry and they were frightened for my safety, but not angry.

They said, "OK, you're safe." When my Mom saw how terrified I was, she made Ovaltine for me. My brother Jackie was so scared and worried that he didn't yell at me either. They paid for the window and forgot about it. I had crashed over all of the radios, all the tubes, everything!



Betty, age 12

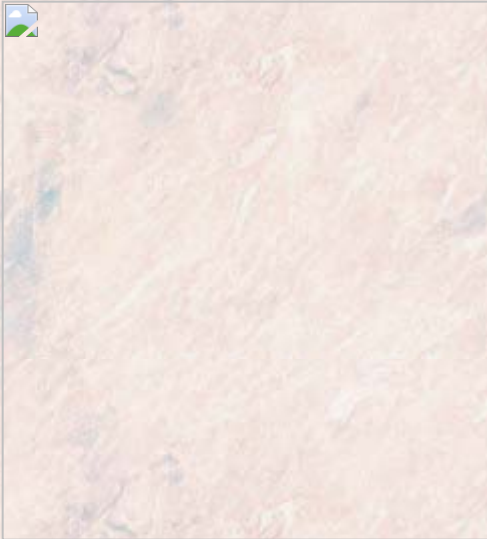
At that time, my father was earning a little better money and he bought for us a typewriter, and this was a very big deal! Then he bought a Kolster Radio-Phonograph, the radio was on the bottom and the phonograph on top. We were very proud to have that.

Jakie had a friend, Julie Pesserillo who had very red hair and a million freckles. In fact, he was on a Life magazine cover as the typical American boy in the 1930's. He was a very nice boy. He used to go to school with my brother, whose hair was not as red as Julie's. Julie was the boy I waved at in the Mrs. Kriegen story.

Age 11: Mazelto becomes "Meel-dred" (Mildred)

Around this time, my mother decided to become more sophisticated. She didn't like the name Mazelto any more. She told her friends, "*No me yamas Mazelto mas.*" ("Don't call me Mazelto anymore!")

"*Ahora, me llamas Mildred.*" She pronounced this "Meeldrid." *("Now call me Mildred.")



Once, my Aunt Veida was calling from the street: "Meeldrid, Meeldrid!" And my mother didn't answer. So this poor heavy-set lady, who wore a very heavy fur called Silene fur -- the heaviest in the world. Had to climb two flights of stairs, huffing and puffing until she got to the top floor. She knocked hard.

She said, "*Nah! No te voy llamar mas Mildred. Ahora va llamarti Mazelto! Ya ti llami cien veces, no me respondiates.*"

Betty, age 12

("I'm not going to call you Meeldrid any more. From now on, you're Mazelto! I was calling you a hundred times.")

My mother giggled into her hand, and said, "*Meo olvedi!*" ("I forgot!") That was the end of being Mildred.

I never went to the movies with my parents. They had no interest.

I became a tomboy at New Lots and Hinsdale. I'd play Johnny on the Pony. You put your head between someone's legs. Everyone has their head between the legs of the person in front of them, and is holding onto their legs. The first person starts near a wall, which braces the center pillar. His back is against the wall.

Perhaps six people are in this position. A seventh person jumps to the farthest person he can reach -- the one closest to the wall. Maybe I'm at the second closest to the wall. Someone jumps on behind me and tries to get over me -- three bodies deep -- to get to the wall.

I would play this game with the boys. Maybe one other girl would play. I forget the names of these kids. I'd get knocked around, punched in the head and shoulders. I became very athletic. This was age 10 or 12.

In summer school, I'd enter races. I'd walk to P.S. 190 from New Lots to Sheffield Avenue, maybe twelve or 15 blocks. I'd run acres, I became so good at it. The teacher asked me, "Would you be so kind as to not run a few races, to give the other girls a chance to win."

This nice teacher so appreciated this, that at the end of the summer, she gave me a box of lady's handkerchiefs. I treasured this gift and kept them in a box in my bureau. I never used the handkerchiefs.

Yusef Eli - 1932 - Camhi

This is my mother's brother. Aunt Cora was a sweetheart with a tenor voice. She was a champion baker.

He brought home a loaf of fountain pens, and he wanted people to assemble them for free. This was a sin to Aunt Victoria's house on Snedicker Avenue.

He made a go of it - Who is going to win? Mom: I came home late from Snedicker to 679 Alabama Avenue, in the dark., maybe 5 blocks.

He used to kick relatives because they did not listen to him to sit and work for him.

Chaim's draft card - Albert: My father (Lou) doubts that a Turkish national would have a draft card. He said this after seeing a scan of one.

My Sister Sally meets Uncle Dave -- and they fall in love

While in this place, Sally was working at a factory in Manhattan. David Angel came and said, "How did they let such a young girl like you sit on a sewing machine?" She gave him a very curt answer. That's how he fell in love with her.

After he became wealthy, he visited Sally and bought for her a whole bridal trousseau. He also bought blankets, comforters, linens and sheets. My mother was very impressed with him.

In those days, if the older girl was not yet married, the younger one could not marry. My sister Esther said, "Don't be silly. You don't have to do that. You get married."

There was heartache about this, about Esther not marrying. Why was she not married, even though so beautiful? Perhaps she was so timid. My parents were overly protective of her, though not of me.

We took pictures of the bride and groom, Sally and Dave, on the tarpaper rooftop at New Lots Avenue. We took snaps there, and then they went to a studio.

Sally had bought for me a new yellow dress. I loved that dress. My mother bought white shoes and stockings. My mother brought me to a man's barber shop to have my hair cut. I looked like a goon, and so did my brother. I look like a *moygen* because the wind was blowing so fiercely.

My future husband, Louis Cassorla, used to hang out at the bench at New Lots Avenue, but I didn't know him then. Unknowingly, my future husband used to play at the same places that I did.

End of Betty Cassorla's Autobiography through Age 12

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