



*Rae Altrows and her son, Irwin. Montreal 1947.*

*Photo: Hyman Altrows*

# Lady Baltimore Cake

by Cherie Smith

*Dans cet article, l'auteure se rappelle de ses visites et des célébrations qui avaient lieu à la ferme de sa grand-mère dans la province du Saskatchewan.*

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It is raining. Pouring, in fact. A typical November day in Vancouver. Sitting at my kitchen table not long after my fiftieth birthday, I am idly turning the pages of an old family cookbook, wondering whether to spend the afternoon baking or writing, when a recipe for Lady Baltimore cake catches my eye.

My Grandmother Elizabeth was famous for her Lady Baltimore cake: a delicately flavoured, fine textured creation with a rich icing, more suited for a tea in an elegant English drawing room than her small country sitting room in the Saskatchewan village of Pelly. But then, Grandmother Elizabeth, as I recall her, fragile, soft-spoken, silver-haired, was equally out of place amongst the slop pails, hand pumps, woodpiles, and hen houses. Yet, to my knowledge, she never put on airs or complained of the life she was to play out with Grandpa Sam against this rustic backdrop.

Her parents, David and Sheindel Finn, three sisters and three brothers, were part of the second contingent of Russian Jews to immigrate to the Canadian west. She was born in Winnipeg in May 1882 in the immigration shed where the family were housed temporarily.

Her father, physically powerful, quickly gained a reputation for being strong-willed and opinionated. When religious differences arose in the Jewish community between the English and German Jews who favoured reform Judaism and the Russian and Polish Jews who were orthodox, he was one of the leaders responsible for building the Rosh Pina Orthodox Synagogue at Martha and Henry Streets in 1893. As it turned out, he outlived three wives, dying at the age of 102.

At that time Winnipeg was booming. Within 15 years he had established a thriving wholesale meat business and sired six more children.

Of the 12 children, David's great strength was passed

on, as is often strangely the case, to "the girls," except perhaps for Elizabeth who, although she inherited his stubbornness, was gentle, soft-spoken, and uncomplaining. Rae, her older sister, who was domineering, stubborn, and opinionated, would live well into her 90s. Defiant and daring, it was inevitable she would clash with her father. But what beauties they were! With David's blue eyes, Rae was tall and blond, with fine legs and a good bust. Elizabeth, her foil, had dark hair and eyes, and both had flawless complexions. When they went skating in their stylish costumes, heads turned, boys gathered round. Their father sensed trouble and was particularly anxious to marry them off. Rae turned down an offer from Sam Bronfman. "Papa, he is only a drayman and he picks his nose!" Later, during prohibition, Sam would become a millionaire from rum-running and bootlegging. Rae, however, had no regrets and years later laughed about it. "He may be a millionaire, but he still picks his nose." Instead, she married Phillip Brotman, a dapper dandy, a gambling kind of man whose finances were always unstable, but whose manners were impeccable. Elizabeth had fallen in love with a cousin but her father would hear none of it and in 1903 arranged a marriage for her with Sam Shatsky, a good-looking young immigrant who worked at the cigarette factory.

By the time I was five years old, in 1938, Grandpa Sam and Grandma Elizabeth were living in Pelly, a hamlet in southern Saskatchewan in a small clapboard house, with a wide screened-in verandah, and a large combination barn, hen house, and garage on a half acre. It was bordered on one side by a row of silver poplars which formed a windscreen, and on the other by a carragana hedge. Its several garden plots were devoted to vegetables, raspberry bushes, and masses of sweet william, delphiniums, gladioli, phlox, daisies, sweet peas, sunflowers, peonies, prize-winning lilacs, and more. In midsummer, the air around their house was so golden, so balmy and sweet that I was sure winter would never dare to enter so enchanted a place. Yet come December, as a little girl, I would flop down into the deep snow and wave my arms, totally oblivious that I was making short, stubby angels over the very spot where, not many months before, black-eyed Susans had nodded in the sun.

When Grandmother Elizabeth baked, she used only the freshest eggs, and often I would be dispatched to gather them. I would start out boldly, but when I reached the hen house a little shiver of fear would run down my back. First I would peer through the dirty, fly-specked windows. Then, slowly and carefully, I would open the creaky wooden door, and look into the darkness beyond, pungent with the warm smell of hay and chicken manure. I would

listen to the gentle cluckings of the nervous hens in their boxes, and the soft cooings of the brown and white tumbler pigeons in the rafters. Conscious of a hundred beady eyes upon me watching my every move, I would step inside, and softly close the door, looking for Henny

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Penny, my favourite Rhode Island Red. Occasionally my worst fear would be realized, a rooster would swoop down at me, squawking and flapping, sending up a cloud of spangled dust, glittering with insects and threads of golden straw caught in the shafts of sunlight that had managed to filter through the dusty windowpanes. In a second, I would be back outside, my heart beating as if it would burst. Pricking up my courage, I would venture in again, moving slowly toward the nesting hens. Acknowledging their squawks of protest with my own soft noises, I would push my hand under their fat, feathered bottoms to draw out the warm brown eggs.

Back in Grandmother Elizabeth's kitchen, the wood-burning McClary range would have reached the required temperature, as Grandmother set out milk and flour, fresh butter, sugar, whisks, beaters, bowls, and pans. All was ready for the cake-making ritual. I would sit down on the bench to watch and wait until I was handed an empty mixing bowl to lick clean. When the cakes were popped into the oven, Grandmother would start on cookies or pies. "I might as well," she invariably would say, "the oven is just right." And from an unbleached cotton bag of cottage cheese hung above the sink, drops of milky liquid would plop irregularly into a dish below, punctuating the afternoon like commas on a page.

I did not know Grandmother Elizabeth when she was a young woman. When I was eight she was 59. She would appear in the morning at her bedroom door fully dressed, wearing a fresh cotton house dress which buttoned down the front, a small white apron tied around her waist, her grey hair slightly blue with rinse, tightly curled over her ears. It seems amazing to me now, but I never heard her raise her voice. She seemed to have endless patience, sitting at the long kitchen table playing cards—fish or war—with me. I was aware that she did not have much

strength, and suffered from "spells" in which she could not catch her breath. I now know that she was suffering from both Lou Gehrig's disease and Bulbar Palsy. As a little girl, however, I was told that she had never really recovered from being badly burned in a fire.

After the breakdown of Grandpa's partnership with Great-uncle Jake in the hotel business, Great-grandfather Finn had set Grandpa and Grandmother Shatsky up in a little general store in Benito, across the Manitoba border from Pelly. Both Grandpa and Grandma were in the store when some kerosene gas exploded and Grandma was instantly engulfed in flames. She instinctively covered her face with her arms. Grandpa, who was also burned, hauled her out of the flaming store and plunged her into a barrel of rainwater that stood outside the door. The townsfolk bundled both of them in blankets, loaded them onto a railway handcar, and hand pumped them the 15 miles north to Swan River and the closest doctor. Grandmother's beautiful face was saved at the cost of her arms, which were severely scarred. The combs she had been wearing in her hair had melted in the intense heat and had dripped down her neck, leaving a series of droplet scars down her back which I remember touching and even counting when she was having a bath and called me in to give her back a "good scrubbing."

Whenever I visited Pelly, I slept with Grandmother in the big bed in her room at the end of the hall near the verandah. Otherwise, she slept alone. "Why do you sleep here and Grandpa there?" I asked one night snuggling next to her. "Grandpa snores too loud," she said. And he did, but now I know that Grandma and Grandpa slept apart because after six pregnancies, and the loss of two babies, Grandma did not want to be bothered by him, like that, any more. So he slept in his own room down the hall.

Because Grandmother Elizabeth was fragile and required help with the household chores, there was always a live-in, farm-fresh girl to do the cleaning, the carrying, the collecting of chamber pots, the tending of the kitchen garden, and the myriad other jobs that had to be done in a country home in the 1930s. The girls were usually not more than 16 and had only a few years of rural elementary education. Their real education was just about to begin. Grandmother taught them how to make a bed properly, how to serve at table, how to scrub and wax a floor, how to make a perfect pie crust, perfect cinnamon buns, how to preserve peaches and put down dill pickles, how to make sauerkraut and corned beef. It was hard work, but the girls became part of the family; they ate with the family, went on outings with the family, and travelled wherever the family went.

On Friday nights, Mary, the hired girl, would throw a clean, white cloth over the table. Then Grandmother Elizabeth would place her grandmother's shiny brass candlesticks in the exact centre of the table. A small glass of wine, and a freshly baked *challah* (Sabbath bread), she would set directly in front of Grandpa Sam's plate. Next to her perfect, shining brown loaf I put my small, clumsily braided version. At sundown, we gathered around the table. Grandmother, with a lacy scarf on her head, would strike a match, light the candles and, with her eyes closed, sing in her soft voice the *brocha* (blessing), all the while

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inscribing small circles with her fragile hands, translucent in the candlelight.

*Baruch ato adonai  
Eloheyenu melech haolam  
Asher kidshanu bmitzvotav  
Vtzivanu Ihadlik ner  
Shel Shabat. Amen.*

"What's that mean?"

"It means, 'Be praised, Lord our God, who has sanctified us by His laws and commanded us to light the *Sabbath* candles,'" said Grandmother Elizabeth calmly.

But I had already lost interest in what she was saying and was staring transfixed at the glittering glass of red wine that Grandpa Sam was holding up to the candlelight. His fingers were thick and the back of his hands freckled. On his curly reddish hair he wore a small black cap he called a *yarmulke* (skull cap). He was speaking very fast. All I could catch were the words he said quite clearly and grandly.

"*Bo-rey p'-ree ha-ga-fin. Amen.*"

"What's that mean, Grandpa?"

He took a sip and put the glass down.

"It means, 'Be praised, Lord our God, King of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.' And now for the *motzi*, the blessing over the bread." He drew the plate with the *challah* closer and, once again, mumbled or spoke so quickly that I missed everything except:

"*Ha-mo-tzi lechem min ha-a-retz. Amen.*"

"What's that mean, Grandpa?"

"It means," he said while tearing off a piece of the *challah*, stuffing it into his mouth, and passing the plate along, "It means, 'Be praised, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who causes the earth to yield food.'"

"Oh," I said, chewing on my piece of bread for a second, "well, you forgot to bless my *challah*, Grandpa."

"No I didn't, Cherie," he said, "I'm just about to. But I am not blessing the bread or the wine. I am praising God and thanking him for the food he gives us." And with that, he repeated the whole incantation again over my pathetic little *challah*, tore off a piece, chewed it enthusiastically, and sent it on its way around the table.

After all the prayers had been said and bowls of chicken soup set out, I thought it very strange that God should be thanked when I knew, had seen, and had helped Grandmother make the bread.

But I was soon distracted from this profound question by Mary setting before Grandpa a whole roasted chicken surrounded by potatoes and carrots.

I looked at that chicken, then I looked at Grandpa, "That's not Henny Penny, is it Grandpa?"

"Of course not," he answered.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course it's not Henny Penny," Grandmother said. "This bird is twice Henny's size."

"Well, if you say so."

"You don't have to worry, dear. We'll never eat Henny Penny," Grandpa assured me, as he started to carve the bird.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"Okay, then can I have a wing?"

Monday was wash day, all day. This was the one day of the week when people under four feet tall, if found underfoot, were not looked upon kindly by hired girls or grandmothers. Little people were continually admonished to keep out of the way, to stand aside, and were told repeatedly about Johnny Popoff, who had been told not to, but put his hands too close to the wringer on the Maytag washing machine which had grabbed his fingers and flattened them. Or little Katie Kolaidachuk who had been badly scalded when a pail of boiling water had tipped over. It seemed to me that there was a never-ending supply of wash day horror stories, all designed to keep me from helping.

So I would watch as dirty laundry was carefully sorted and separated into piles according to colour and degree of grime. The whites went into the hot soapy water first, then were fed through the wringer. Next, the coloured items went into the same soapy water. And so on. The water was then drained out of the Maytag into pails which were carried down the back stairs, and thrown some place that needed a good sluicing off. The washing machine was then refilled with clean, warm rinse water, and the process repeated until all of the laundry lay in a wet heap in a big wicker basket. Carrying a pail of wooden clothes pegs, I would follow Mary as she lugged the heavy basket to the four lines strung out between poles near the woodpile. As she threw the great white sheets over the line, I was ready to thrust the wooden pegs into her large, red, rough hands with their stubby fingers and short clean nails. When

everything had been hung out on the line in order of size, colour, and respectability (unmentionable items were always hung on the middle lines, as to be invisible to passers by), we would run back into the house to drain the remaining rinse water, clean the machine, pull out the cord, and start preparing for lunch, which was really dinner.

Later in the day, afternoon or evening, depending on the weather, we'd go out again with the wicker basket and the clothespeg pail to take the warm, dry clothes off the line. Back in the house, each item was laid upon the table and sprinkled lightly with water from a beer bottle with a spray stopper, then rolled up and pat back into the basket, which would then be covered with a clean towel. In the winter, Mary would gather in the frozen sheets and clothes, crack them in half and stumble through the snow towards the basement steps, the arms and legs of Grandpa's long underwear gesticulating wildly from her basket. Then, with numb white hands she would lay them over the wooden clothes-horse near the furnace to dry. Ironing was always scheduled for the next day.

On Tuesday morning, two heavy irons would be put on the back of the stove to heat. After all the morning chores were done and the lunch dishes put away, when Grandpa would go to his room for a nap, Grandma, still wearing her

little white apron, would lie down on the red frieze couch in the living room, put on her glasses, and read a detective magazine, Mary would set up the ironing board. Soon the kitchen was filled with the steamy smell of warm clean sheets and shirts.

Grandpa Sam rose very early in the mornings, usually at three or four o'clock. He would have finished all his chores by the time I trudged down the hall in my flowered flannel pajamas to peek into the kitchen. Invariably, he would be reading yesterday's paper at a small wooden table by the side window that looked out onto a bit of lawn and a hedge of lilac bushes. Seeing me, he would get up to make me a cup of cocoa, then cut a big slice of fresh bread, clamp it in a long-handled wire rack, and hold it over the coals of the range to toast it. Munching my toast, I would watch him pop a lump of sugar into his mouth, then sip hot coffee from a saucer which he held in both of his hands. It was an "old country" custom that was not allowed at Grandmother's table, but one in which he could safely indulge before anyone of consequence was up.

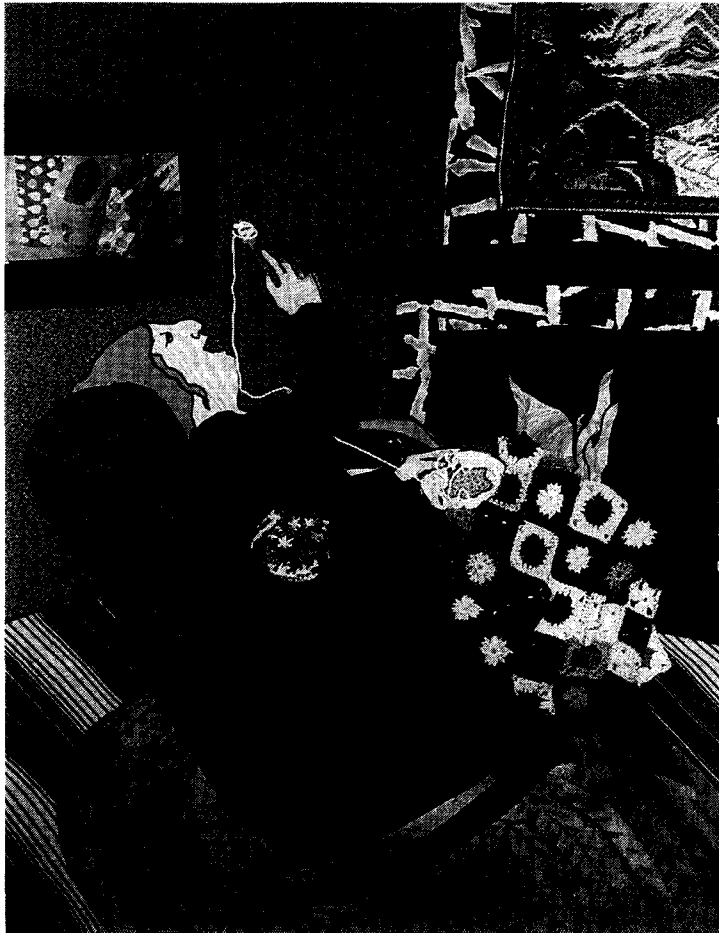
The only time Grandmother Elizabeth refused to leave the kitchen was while her Lady Baltimore cake was baking; the oven temperature had to be checked, more wood slipped into the firebox. She fretted over it like a speckled hen over her chicks. Little people were admonished not to slam the door or jump off chairs. "The cake will fall," she said. How could the cake fall, I wondered? It was in the oven. But I had a vision of it falling, a cake with mountain peaks of white icing on a big white plate, falling gently from the blue sky, through great white fluffy clouds, wafting through the open window and landing right before me on the wooden table in Grandmother's kitchen.

"It's done," Grandmother said, breaking my reverie. Carefully she removed the cake from the oven, placed it hot on the table before me. Its rich vanilla aroma engulfed me, impressing it forever in my memory.

*"Lady Baltimore Cake" has been excerpted from Mendel's Children, a book-length account of four generations of Russian Jewish immigrants on the Canadian prairies, to be published in the fall of 1997 by the University of Calgary Press.*

*Cherie Smith recently published a story in the Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad, and her story "Big Bessie and the Vildeh Hyah" was a winner in the 1995 contest sponsored by the BC Federation of Writers. A chapter from her family history will appear shortly in the forthcoming issue of Canadian Ethnic Studies.*

*Jeannie Kamins has been an artist since 1974. Originally a painter, she began to work with fabric, using all the scraps of material she had been saving to make a quilt and found her medium. She writes, paints, curates, and does performance art. Her work focuses on family life, portraits, politics, and erotica. Currently, she is living and working in Vancouver, BC.*



Jeannie Kamins, "Everybody Loves Spaghetti," fabric appliqué, 39" x 54", 1992. Photo: Henri Robideau