

SALLY BIRKE November 12, 1920 - December 28, 2012

Sally Birke (born Sura Dymantsztajn in Lodz, Poland on November 12, 1920), the welcoming other half of Birke's clothing store in downtown Lowell, MA, passed away on December 28, 2012. Sally was the quintessential helpful retailer, treasured by her faithful customers for her skill and friendship. She was the voice of welcome at Birke's who gently spoke up to her irascible husband Nathan Birke in order to protect her customers from his intolerant declarations that they weren't allowed to browse or be trusted to ascend to the store's second floor.

Sally built a loyal following for the store by spotting new merchandise that she felt would be perfect for particular customers and setting it aside for them. Her awareness of her customers' likes and dislikes and her sense of style and taste combined with her friendliness and small food treats, won her the affection of a wide variety of people. Often two or three generations from the same family would speak of her with special fondness.

At the beginning of World War II, at the age of 18, she started out with Nathan, at her mother's request, to find her older brother who was avoiding the German army. As the horrors of the invading Nazis and the cooperating Poles became more obvious, Sally and Nathan were forced to flee to the former Soviet Union where they married and spent the remainder of the war. Sally was the skilled operator of an elevator at a coal mine in Siberia. During this period of forced exile, Sally bore two children, Pinchus and Chaim, both of whom died in infancy.

At the end of the war Sally returned to Poland to discover that her family had all died. Her sister Leia died of starvation, her mother Szifra and 8 year old brother Avram, were gassed at Auschwitz. Her father Eliezer and older brother Moishe Aaron were never traced. She and Nathan (whose family was also killed by the Nazis) immediately left Poland and eventually made their way to Lowell, where they founded their first store on Back Central Street in 1947. In 1950 they moved the store to Gorham Street and finally opened the Market Street location in 1960 – at the site of the current Birke Building.

Despite such devastating losses at a young age, Sally acquired the strength and resilience to find the best in people and to create a life full of hope for the future and satisfaction with the present. She had four more children, son Lenny of Salisbury, NH, daughters Szifra of Lowell, MA and Roz of E. Greenwich, RI and son Richard of Portland OR. She was thrilled with her seven grandchildren, Tov, Kol, Jessica, Jaclyn, Ariel, Eliezer, and Esme and her three great granddaughters Rachel, Samantha and Paige. Her daughters-in-law Susan Hankin-Birke, Salisbury, NH, and Angela Zehava, Portland, OR and sons-in-law Neil Blitz, E. Greenwich, RI and Jay Livingston, Lowell, MA meant a great deal to Sally. In the last years of her life, she was supported and entertained by her dear friend and helper, Anne Ianuzzo of Lowell. The entire Birke family is grateful to Anne for all she did to enhance Sally's joy, and also wishes to acknowledge the team at Sunny Acres for the devoted care and attention they gave to Sally during the four plus years she lived there.

A documentary about Birke's was shown on WGBH and around the country. The film features Sally and captures her humor and vitality alongside her extraordinarily difficult life circumstances. (BrowsingThroughBirkes.com)

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To the end, and despite major memory loss, Sally was full of stories and humor. Her no-nonsense reflections on life, relationships and economics are enjoyed and valued by her family. Her resilience and persistence, despite the staggering blows she suffered, has been an inspiration to many. The joy and dignity of her later years offers encouragement that life can get better and better.

The family requests that those wishing to honor Sally's life remember that standing up to injustice is the only way to be sure that prejudice, bullying and xenophobia don't grow into crimes against humanity.

Contributions in Sally's memory can be donated to the Sally Birke Memorial Scholarship Fund. In recognition of Sally and Nathan Birke's commitment to giving their First-Generation American children the best educational opportunities possible, this scholarship is to benefit First-Generation American or Immigrant Students who have been admitted to a U.S. institution of higher education. Greater Lowell Community Foundation, 100 Merrimack Street, Suite 202, Lowell, MA 01852-1707. Or an organization of your choice.

A memorial gathering was held on Saturday, January 5, 2013 at the American Textile History Museum, 491 Dutton St, Lowell.