

Rabbi Michael S. Beals
May 2, 2005

David Sklut
David ben Yosef v'Yetta
September 20, 1914 - April 28, 2005

It was David's granddaughter, Diana, who observed that if her Zee Zee had to die, he couldn't have chosen a better time than during Passover. Because David knew how to make Passover come alive for his children and grand children. He would enliven the seder with his own unique brand of humor, stress the key points, because he was a knowledgeable Jew, and skip the parts that dragged, so everyone would have a good time and learn something. Diana said she appreciated her zeida's seders even more, after she attended the seders of her friends and saw what dreadfully boring events they were in comparison to her grandfather's.

Now that's a wonderful way to remember somebody – a wonderful family man, who thought of the welfare of other people, who had a great sense of humor, and was a knowledgeable Jew. If they said that about me, I'd be more than happy. And that was the life of David Sklut, whose 91 years we celebrate today, even as we also mourn his passing.

David was born right here in Wilmington on September 20, 1914. He was the youngest of three children born to Joseph and Etta Sklut. Joseph was born in Russia and Etta, in Vilna. Thanks to the efforts of a Wilmington matchmaker they met and married on these shores. David's two older siblings, Benjamin Sklut and

Jean Bernstein have since passed away, so David's passing marks the end of an era.

And what an era it was.

David and his siblings were raised on 2nd Street, in what was then the old Jewish neighborhood of Wilmington. In his youth, David made deliveries for Mr. Banks, the kosher butcher of Wilmington. The family belonged to the old Chesed Shel Emet synagogue, attached to the old Y, that is the Young Men's Hebrew Association, on French Street. Unlike today, with Jews scattered throughout New Castle County, back then everyone lived and played in and around the Y. I was told that the Y was in such bad shape that they would have to do a head count at the dances to make sure that the 2nd-story floor wouldn't collapse under the weight. But the building served its purpose because it was at that YMHA that a gorgeous 14-year old Bebe first met the strapping 19-year old David.

Bebe had a girl friend who was a model. There was a good looking boy who wanted to date her. The condition was that the boy would have to find a date for her friend Bebe. David, a recent grad from Wilmington High School was to be Bebe's escort. And the rest my friends, well, is history. They had a wonderful six year courtship. When they weren't with their friends at YMHA events, they would take the old Wilson Liner for five cents and hit the night clubs of Philadelphia for dancing. David and Bebe looked like Fred and Ginger when they danced. They glided across the dance floor as if they were one unit. People would clear off the

dance floor just to watch them dance. Even in old age they were amazing on the dance floor. When not at the Y, or in Philly, they could be spotted with their gang of friends at a famous kosher hotel in Atlantic City. They just loved the beach. (As a Californian, I can relate). Their circle included Wilmingtonians David and Ida Gostin, Anna and Bob Silver, Shirley and Sidney Cohen, Sis and Siggy Lipstein, among others. David and Bebe were married on May 28, 1939 at the Winne in the Jewish neighborhood of Philadelphia, over on 54th and City Line. Rabbi Kraft officiated.

David began to hone his skills as a salesman working with his brother-in-law, Hilbert Bernstein, in the Installment Business. David would go door to door in down state Delaware and Maryland, selling pots, pans, dishes, and the like to people on installment plans, and then return for weekly payments. Although very quiet in his demeanor, David was an extremely personable and effective salesman.

“Mishpucha”, family, was always important for David. It guided him in all his major business decisions. Next, he started working for his new in-laws, Ethel and Hyman, for Reivers Floor Covering. He was their salesman and he was good. He also worked as a dispatcher for the Pennsylvania Railroad as a dispatcher.

Ann, the first of their two daughters, was born in 1942. Before she even turned one, David was drafted into the US Army. David was 28, flat-footed and wore glasses. Clearly the war effort wasn't going well for the United States. Ann

stated that because of her father's work for the Pennsylvania Railroad, the army sent him to India, where he worked in the railroad battalion, working to change the British gage of the Indian railroad to accept the US gage, in order to receive much-needed supplies, which would then be sent overland through China, to help in the war against Japan. Toward the end of his life, at Rockland Place, David would meet a fellow resident who remembered working with David during World War II, proving people have long memories, so best you should treat everyone well, because you never know when you are going to run into them again.

Even during World War II, David was a bit of a joker. At age 28, he found army discipline to be a little silly. You could always identify David in the unit, because he would be the only person who would be deliberately marching off step. Bebe would later say that her husband went into the army a buck private, enjoyed all sorts of promotions for his hard work, and yet managed to leave the army...a buck private. The army didn't appreciate David's humor. But Bebe would have the last laugh because she socked all of David's army earnings away and was able to purchase a '46 Chevy when he came out of the army.

During his time in the army, while stationed State side, David always reached out to the Jewish community closest to his base. While in Texas, a Jewish family really took to David and offered to sell him a piece of land and to enter into

business with him after the war ended. David was ready to move his family west and start life anew in Texas. But David's in-laws prevailed upon him not to uproot their daughter and grand daughter, and David, who put family first, allowed them to prevail. By the way, they struck oil on the piece of land that the nice Jewish family in Texas had offered to David. Oh well.

After the War, David went back to work for his in-laws until he fell very ill and was let go. Bebe then stepped up to the plate, and between selling tupperware and encyclopedias, she helped make ends meet until David was on his feet again. Meanwhile, in 1947, Bebe gave birth to their second daughter, Jane.

In 1949, David moved the family to 503 W. 19th Street, right around the corner from Congregation Beth Shalom. The Sklut home was always open to congregants all day on High Holy Days, which always seemed to be around the time of the World Series. In fact, Jane seems to remember having the sacred task on High Holy Days of running back and forth between her home and the Beth Shalom pulpit, to keep Rabbi Kraft abreast of the score. Being virtually in the backyard of Beth Shalom gave David Sklut a second unofficial career as a life-long filler for the daily minyan...how we could use him now!

With his health fully restored, David went into business for himself, opening up Continental Custom Floors on Dupont Highway, which he ran for twenty years,

from 1950 to 1970. Due to his sterling record in business, Delaware Trust underwrote his next business venture, a contract flooring company which he ran from his home.

His work in the floor covering business resulted in bonus trips, which he would use as excuses for adventures with Bebe. First it was Puerto Rico, later France, Italy, Switzerland. Other destinations included China, Japan – David and Bebe were on the first Aeroflot trip from the United States to the former USSR.

Closer to home, David would finish up his business early, so that he could accompany Bebe on adventures, be it to Amish country to purchase bags of finely ground wheat and 500 pounds of chocolate for Bubby Bebe Bakery 's gourmet dessert business, or up to New York City to catch the latest Broadway show. David and Bebe's 65-year plus marriage was filled with love, adventure and fun. Be it their strolling and dining in quaint French villages, their spins around the dance floor, or just listening to records in their living room, this couple loved being together, and Bebe is going to need our love and support now more than ever.

Ann described her dad as very quiet and as a very hard worker. One of his simplest pleasures was just being able to lie on the sofa and listen to the ball game. He would go to sleep to the sound of the play-by-play, but God help you if you turned off the tv. David took pleasure on Sundays, when he would play Broadway

show tunes and jazz on his forty-fives and watch his girls make up impromptu dance routines to the music. Ann also described her dad as being incredibly patient. He would drive his girls up to Stuff to Wear on 54th and City Line, sit in the car for hours while they would shop, and then dutifully come in and pay the bill when they were done.

Jane described her dad as being simply wonderful! While at Shortlidge school, aka #30, David would go to the school nurse, and tell her that Jane had a doctor's appointment in Philly. Then he would bring her to the opening of a brand new movie. She still remembers the premieres of "Ben Hur" and "Around the World in 80 Days." She even remembers taking in a Philly's game with her dad. David would shlep her great distances for good food. He swore the best ice cream was up in New London, Connecticut, and would think it nothing to drive Jane up there to sample some. But most memorable of all was the road trip Jane and David took up to Ratner's on the Lower East Side to buy their fresh, hot bagels, Danishes, and fish for sister Ann's confirmation party from Congregation Beth Shalom. They ate so much of the food on the way home that they were sick. Sick but happy.

I told you that David always put family first. And so it was, at a time when David was economically hard-pressed, that he still insisted on making a beautiful wedding for Jane when she married Steve back in 1971. That marriage resulted in

two beautiful grandchildren: Wendy, a.k.a. Yaffa Miriam, born in 1974 and Andrew, a.k.a., Naftali, born in 1978.

It was Wendy who first named her grandfather ZeeZee, or Zeez. It seems, in childhood it took too long for Wendy to say z-a-y-d-a, so to get David's attention quickly, she simply called out "zeez", and it stuck.

Bebe said that to look at her grandson Andrew now is to get a sense of just how wonderfully dashing David was in his youth, because Andrew looks just like the young David she dated. There is general agreement in the family that David and his grandson, Andrew, are two peas in a pod. Nothing could give them greater joy than hanging out at the Wilmington train station and watching the trains come and go, or driving to the end of the Philadelphia airport runway and watch the planes land and take off. Sometimes it is the simple pleasures that render the greatest satisfaction.

Ann presented David with a wonderful granddaughter, Diana, a.k.a. Penina, in 1980. It is Diana who we have to thank for the wonderful Passover memories which opened our celebration of David's life.

David's demise began in September of 2003, just in time for his 89th birthday, when he was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Kidney complications led to Bebe and David's move to Rockland Place, where David sought a death with dignity. All

the staff at Rockland Place commented how wonderful David was – always grateful, always expressing appreciation. David treated the medical aide with the same respect that he did the doctor. He inspired prayers from all the health professionals, from all faiths. I would like to think that their prayers combined with my own visits and “misheberach” prayers, allowed David freedom from pain, as he made his transition from this world to the next.

David Sklut, this wonderful native son of Wilmington, will be remembered for his humility, his sense of humor, his ability to take initiative, his hard work, his desire to put his family first, for his ability to make Passover fun, and for his expression: “this is FOR REAL”, when the food he was eating was particularly good. May his memory be for a blessing, and let us say “amen”.