

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE

My father Jerome was born at the end of November, and I visited him this week at the Jewish cemetery on Gill Lane in Iselin. He lies among a group of plots identified as Chechanovitzer K.U.V. — which was a mutual aid society that existed in Newark's Jewish community from the 1880s to the 1930s. K.U.V. was an abbreviation of the astoundingly named *Krankenunterstützungsverein* meaning “sick benefit society.” I remember my father, for his entire adult life, sending three dollars a month to the K.U.V.

With my hedge-trimmer I sawed through the overgrown ivy that obscured his headstone; I stepped back to read the stone, and I laughed at my brother's inspired decision to engrave on it: *The People's Choice*. This was the phrase Big Jerome (he was 6'1") used to describe himself. And today, five years after his passing, he remains a larger-than-life figure whose ebulliently satirical view of the world still sings in the ears and eyes of everyone who encountered him. It was as if we had a musical-comedy star among us. Though he had aspirations to be an actor, he'd never worked in show business; he'd spent most of his life in the automobile industry. His metaphors flowed easily from that used-car world. If he noticed my fly was undone, he'd say, in a tone of complete seriousness, “Your store's open and your salesman's sticking out.” When we watched the Miss America pageant on television; he'd characterize any older contestant as a: “high-mileage broad.” Another contestant, with a large rear end, was dismissed instantly with: “Heavy-duty shock absorbers.”

His humor could be surreal. He owned a full-face gorilla mask that he encouraged me to wear when we drove down the Parkway towards Bradley Beach — during those ancient days when everybody had their windows open. At age ten I was eager to oblige, sitting masked in the backseat, casually looking out the window at the passing cars. What came next was the textbook definition of a double-take. The quick look from a passenger; the half-turn away, and then the occupants of the car exploding in laughter as they glimpsed what appeared to be the World's Ugliest Child.

Jerome made it to 93 living on a diet that consisted nearly entirely of Milky Ways and gefilte fish. After my mother died, I took him out for dinner every Friday night, determined to get some decent food in him, but his choice was always the White Castle on Route 22 in Union. It wasn't so much the food he enjoyed as it was talking fluent French to the Haitian employees. He'd claim to be a native speaker, born in Paris — he was born on Nye Avenue in Newark — and by the end of the conversation everybody on both sides of the counter was smiling. He *held court* wherever he went. Once I drove him to get an echocardiogram at JFK and accompanied him into the testing room. The young woman taking the sound pictures of his heart (you could actually see his heart chambers opening and closing) asked him what he did for a living. “I'm retired, but I used to be in show business,” he replied.

“Really”

And then, at full stage volume, he belted out a complete version of “I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’”; including arm motions. When I close my eyes there he is still, pointing to his heart: “I got no lock on the door/That’s no way to be!”

When he was housebound at the end of his life, the staff from his final job at Auto Exchange in Sayreville still called to ask him to sing “Oh! Doc!” (a vaudeville song for strippers.) He’d protest that he barely remembered it — and then let it rip.

On this, his birthday, I placed a stone on his grave-marker, and I thanked him for all the gifts he gave to me. I spoke aloud: “Big Jerome, you’re with me every minute of every day of my life.” I think about the those words as I write this sentence sitting in the light-filled living room of this house I bought with the money he bequeathed me. It was his last gift to me. The People’s Choice.