

The Dallas Morning News

Texas' Leading Newspaper

Dallas, Texas, Wednesday, December 16, 1998

www.dallasnews.com

50 Cents

A PERSONAL HISTORY

Box holds a wealth of valuables: Memories of Nanoo



Photo courtesy of Barbara Silberberg

By Allison Silberberg

Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

My mom and I sat on one end of the bed in my big sister's childhood room. Almost all of my sister's things were long gone, either trashed or transferred to her home near Austin. Dana's room seemed tiny now. Except for the old quilt on her twin bed, there wasn't much character left to the small confines. The room had become an extra room for folding laundry, an afterthought. I hadn't noticed the emptiness until this moment with Mom.

Long before Dana put down stakes in the room, it was Nanoo's, my grandmother's. After a heart attack, Nanoo moved in

Allison Silberberg called her beloved grandmother Nanoo, but her real name was Betty Schwartz.

with our family for a couple of years when I was 3 or 4. Until I was 9 or 10, I thought her given name was Nanoo. Her name was Betty Schwartz.

In front of Mom and me lay a few boxes filled to the brim with mementos: scrapbooks from high school and various trips, photos of long-lost friends and family pets, favorite books from my youth. This small pile is all it came down to. At least, that's what I thought.

Now that I am 35, my parents told me it was time to retrieve my "childhood treasures." So there Mom and I sat, beholding my treasures. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw it: a small plastic box on the corner of the bed, and I said, "I don't know what this little box is."

Mom pulled it close and said softly, "Let's take a look."

Inside the little box, there were colorful plastic knitting needles. I knew in a heartbeat whose box of treasures this was — this was Nanoo's. Her knitting needles, some bent, some straight, caught my eye instantly.

I can still see her making countless pairs of colorful booties and many an afghan. I still have mine. I have a wool scarf she made to keep me warm at college during winters in Washington, D.C. But I hadn't seen the knitting needles in 15 years.

It has been that long since she died.

The old box had papers, papers of a lifetime, and they were all in one box the size of a shoebox, all but forgotten on the side of a bed, in a room hardly used. But Mom hadn't forgotten about the box. She Please see NANOO on Page 7C.

Nanoo kept mementos of things she loved

Continued from Page 5C.
had made it possible.

"Look at this," Mom said as she held open an itinerary of one of Nanoo's trips to South America and Europe. We read aloud where Nanoo visited, and laughed at how much or how little she paid in the '60s. I thought of how brave Nanoo was to venture forth all over the world after my grandfather died at age 56. The pictures of Nanoo on this trip show her stunning beauty, yet she never remarried.

And then I saw something in the box with crayon drawn on it in a child's scrawl. It was a handmade birthday card Dana had made for Nanoo. There were letters, too, lots of them, and the handwriting on the envelopes was familiar. These were my letters. The woman my mother always said was not the least bit sentimental had kept my letters, letters I wrote her from camp, from summer school in Massachusetts, from college.

She kept my letters, and I didn't know.

Nanoo lived with us for only a few years and then moved into her own apartment nearby. Mom would get calls about sightings of "the Green Dragon," as Nanoo was known as she wheeled around in her two-door sedan. Nanoo often ate dinner with us, shared a pina colada or glass of wine with Dad, and almost always played the piano as I did homework in the late afternoon. When I got my car at 16, I often went by her place on my way home from high school. With Tommy Dorsey or Harry James or some swing music lightly playing in the background, she'd have homemade cookies or tapioca with ice-cold milk, all waiting just for me. If I finished the milk, which I always tried to do, we'd hop in the car and drive around the corner to the Tom Thumb and load up on all kinds of food. This was our little routine.

In 1983, during my junior year at American University in Washington, Nanoo decided to visit her cousins in Silver Spring, Md. I showed Nanoo around D.C. for a couple of days. Though Congress wasn't in session, we walked through the Capitol. Luckily, the place was virtually empty. Without passes, we walked right into the visitor's gal-



Nanoo (right) celebrates the engagement of her daughter, Barbara Schwartz, and future son-in-law, Al Silberberg, in 1958.

lery overlooking the floor of the Senate and took our seats. The place was silent and cavernous.

After about 30 seconds of sitting there in silence, I said, "OK!" I thought we'd get up to go. But Nanoo didn't budge. She stared straight ahead at the empty hall and said softly, "In a minute, Dolly. Why do we have to go?"

She sat in awe. I felt bad for not realizing. Like millions of her generation, Nanoo embodied the American Dream and I believe she understood how lucky she was, how this room helped guarantee her freedoms as a Jewish immigrant and secure our nation in times of war or the Great Depression.

I said something about it's being a shame that Congress was not in session, that it was kinda dead.

"Doesn't matter," she whispered out of respect. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

To Nanoo, this was hallowed ground. It was breathtaking and gave her pause. For this immigrant of a poor Lithuanian family that settled outside of Boston with nothing but dreams in their pockets, this was a moment to savor.

That night, as the cab pulled up to her cousins' place in Silver Spring, I didn't tell her, "I love you," as was my custom. I thought incorrectly that she may be irritated with me because I insisted on paying for the cab and then didn't have

enough cash to get home. She gladly paid for the cab, which she wanted to do in the first place. The cab driver thought she was charming. I was embarrassed at my miscalculation. These would be my last moments with my Nanoo. It still upsets me that I wasted any time I spent with her.

A week later in Dallas, she was back in the swing of things — until she suffered a heart attack. And she was gone.

Upon my return to school a week later, there was a letter waiting for me. It was from Nanoo. Seeing her gorgeous, distinctive handwriting on the envelope made me shudder. She must have written it just before going to the hospital. It reads:

Monday, April 11, 1983

My Doll Allison:

I had to write and tell you how grateful I am to you for the time we spent together — it was fabulous. I will always be thankful to you for the outstanding places we dined in — very memorable.

I'm very glad I was able to spend some time with Aunt Fanny and the family "my cousins," they were very nice to me, too, drove me around for hours last Wednesday.

I know you're very busy right now, and for the next few weeks, but I'll be checking with your Mom all about your progress and will be happy to see you back home.

Take care of yourself and always

Though a sense of loss remains, I know how lucky I am to have known Nanoo. Not everyone has a Nanoo she can remember.

remember, you're very dear to me. I love you so much.

Always, Nanoo

P.S. Be a doll and call cousin Sally, and ask how Aunt Fanny is feeling. I'm very worried about her, give her my love. Thank you doll.

We never know when our last words will be, and Nanoo made sure I knew how she felt. As much time as we spent together, I would have given anything to hug her one more time, tell her how much she meant to me.

As I write this, it is *yartzeit* for Nanoo. *Yartzeit* is Yiddish for the anniversary of a person's death. On *yartzeit*, it is customary to light a 24-hour candle. One is burning in Nanoo's honor and I have said Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the departed. I also light a candle on Nanoo's birthday in November to celebrate her life, because I feel that she knew her birthday all her life and never knew the date of her death. I'd rather celebrate her life than only remember her death. Saying Kaddish is like an enduring flame; that is, the loved one who had died lives on in the memories of those who survive. That is why saying Kaddish can be a source of solace, a prayer that reminds the living to remember and to hope.

Though a sense of loss remains, I know how lucky I am to have known Nanoo. Not everyone has a Nanoo she can remember. And so for me to sit there with my mother, who was Nanoo's only daughter, and to see in this box my old letters to her, well . . . I just didn't know Nanoo kept them. It gives me pause, because I had kept her notes and letters and birthday cards, too. I love you, Nanoo.

Allison Silberberg is a writer living in Alexandria, Va. Her online address is Allison090@aol.com.