

To Jean he was Ben. To Risa and Judy always Dad. To Shirley and Leyla and friends he was Benny. To his grandchildren and great grandchildren he was grandpa or great Ben. But to all who knew him around the hospital he was just Gentle Ben.

Many years ago someone pulled me aside and said to me “you know you come from a long line of gentlemen. Your grandfather, your father, your Uncle Bory, your Uncle Ben.” The words, gentle man, really had meaning if you knew Ben.

He lost his natural mother to the great influenza in 1917 at the age of 4. His father Charles remarried a few years later to Ida.

I am sure Ben must have been the favourite son; while his sisters got fine educations and his brothers went into the mattress business, Ben became a doctor.

Especially in those days nothing could make Jewish parents prouder than to have a doctor in the family. These days too I guess.

At that time there were still quotas for Jewish students and only the best and the brightest got into medical school.

I heard bits and pieces about his time in medical school including pranks with his best friend Sid Spanner. Years later it would be Sid who would sneak into the O.R. while Ben was occupied operating. He would reach his hands under Ben’s sterile gown to steal money from Bens pocket to go to the racetrack.

Ben was a major in the medical corps during the war. No one cut a more dashing, handsome figure in a uniform.

Michael, Joel and I would never tire of hearing his war stories. If you remember the show MASH you have a picture of his time in the Army. Here are parts of a couple of stories he told better than me:

Prior to going to Europe he was stationed in the Aleutian Islands. Ben was a terrible sailor. On the boat to the island Kiska a soldier had an acute appendicitis attack. Ben was terribly sick throwing up the whole trip. They held Ben up, hooked him to an IV of gravol and Ben cut. When Ben told the story to us with a twinkle in his eye and his half smile, he would tell us that “to this day I don’t know if I took out the appendix or some other body part.”

The best army story started with a poker game. The game was always in his tent because he and his buddy kept the liquor stash. Being doctors they were above reproach. When payday came for the Americans they came over for a game. 20 hours later Ben and his buddy had a small fortune. They left shortly thereafter on leave for New York City. He was too discreet to give us much detail but he did allude to a suite at the Plaza and a showgirl on his arm at the 21 Club. Needless to say, they left New York with little of their fortune left.

On the train between Toronto and Winnipeg they came across a character they knew. I think his name was Porky Shubin. They decided they would try to win back some of their bankroll in gin rummy with Porky. Again, needless to say, by Winnipeg they did not have money even for lunch. Shortly after the train left Winnipeg Ben was walking through the cars and who did he come upon – Ben’s father Charlie on his way home from a business trip. Charlie thought Ben was still in the Islands off Alaska. He asked Ben where he had been and what had he been up to? Ben mumbled a few words and just said “Dad, let’s go for lunch.” Charlie knew his son well enough that he did not want to know more.

One of the most eligible, sought after bachelors in Alberta, Ben was smitten by the beautiful Jean. They made a striking couple. Jean is still alive today but not aware of her surroundings. Only a year ago they still made a striking couple. Visiting all day, Jean doing his laundry, he calling her “dear”, she fussing over him. They didn’t have a lot to say to each other but they were happy to just spend hours together.

Ben and Jean desperately wanted children. After many failed attempts they decided to adopt. Ben and Jean never hid the fact of their adoption from Risa and Judy. Actually Ben enjoyed telling them each the stories of their adoption. It had to be a Jewish newborn so Ben would continually take a bottle of whiskey to the functionary in charge of adoptions to be first in line. He told Risa they took her home because she would not loosen her grip on his finger. They told Judy that when they were ready to take her home the hospital wanted to keep her an extra few days because of diaper rash. Ben finally convinced them that as a doctor he could handle diaper rash.

Risa and Judy remember their childhood as the happiest of times. Ben doted on them making their breakfasts early every morning. Risa and Judy waited in their pajamas for him to come home from the hospital for dinner, which was often well after their bedtime.

Now Risa and Judy, you should know the family always considered you the most spoiled of all of the cousins, and you were. Horses, Hawaii, covered pool in the backyard.

Risa and Judy learned well.

No two children spoiled their parents as much as Risa and Judy have in the past few years. Risa first moving in as caregiver; Risa then visiting him virtually every day at the General and Judy driving up most weekends with Larry from Red Deer.

Breakfasts brought in, dinners made in the room, walks in the park whenever the weather permitted. If that’s the result of their upbringing; parents you can’t spoil your kids too much.

Ben was revered by his patients for his empathy and patience. Beloved by the hospital staff for his kindness and gentility. Respected by his colleagues. As a doctor friend explained to me he was a surgeon’s surgeon. Meaning a surgeon another surgeon would send his own family to.

He was a walking encyclopedia on our family ailments. He was a brilliant and wise diagnostician. Saul Reichert told me the story about going to Ben a couple of years after Saul

came to Canada from Europe. Saul described to Ben a number of worrisome symptoms. Ben told him to go home, get married, have 2 kids and he would feel better in the morning. That's just what Saul did.

The sixties were the golden years for Ben, Jean and their crowd. The 3 Margolus families, the Singers, the Newhouses, the Poderskys, the Klines, the Spanners, the Kalenskys and the Belzbergs. They partied, they prospered and they partied some more. Klondike parties, roaring twenties parties in sexy costumes, grey cup parties, jam session parties at the Singers until the early morning hours.

The Margolus family was quite unique. Bens father, Charlie, and his brothers, Wolfe and Bory were community leaders each honoured by Negev Dinners. His sisters Shirley and Leyla, here with us today, are dynamos who have lead every organization they joined.

Ben did not take the spotlight. He was humble, shy, and wrapped up in his career. He followed the family tradition of giving, was supportive of all the causes; a passionate defender of Israel. A voracious reader on Jewish topics including his subscription to the Jerusalem Post.

Like all families the Margolus family had their differences, but no issue could divide the family for long. Any upset was set aside because always, in the end, Ben was in the middle, and no one could be angry at their beloved son and brother, Ben.

Growing up, Joel and I could not be around Ben enough. I think that applied to all his nephews and nieces. He was the favorite uncle. I am sure his grandchildren Jamie, Miles, Jennifer and Ryan, all feel the same way.

Ben never showed much emotion. I never saw him angry, I never saw him yell.

About 4 years ago Ben broke his hip. It ended his golf career and landed him in the hospital for several weeks. On my way home every night I would stop in and have a very short drink with Ben. It was a very special time for me, because after all those years I finally had Ben just to myself. Risa later told me it was a special time for him as well. On one of those visits after I had a not so short drink, I said to Ben "you know I have nephews and nieces, but they do not seem to be as interested being with me as we were being with you growing up." I asked him with tears in my eyes "Why do we all love you so much?" That was the only time I ever saw Ben with tears in his eyes. I changed the subject quickly.

I will tell you why we all, family, friends, patients and co-workers, loved Ben so much. When you were with Ben he gave you his undivided attention. He was genuinely interested in everything about you. He remembered your last ailment and asked about it with concern. He had that half smile on his face and he found humour in everything.

The last few years at the General involved little quality of life for Ben but until not to long ago, he retained his verve for life. He maintained his keen intelligence almost to the end. He followed hockey and golf on TV, read the newspaper religiously every day, cut out articles on health and nutrition and talked about the market with me very visit. He kept himself immaculately groomed, handsome as always.

But what I saw most these last few years when he was at the General was his unique spirit. He saw the best in everything, even the food they served at dinner. He never, ever complained. He kidded the nurses every day. Every guest was greeted with warmth and a smile.

Ben Margolus. 96 years. Doctor, soldier, family man. He worked hard, played hard, lived life to the fullest.

Always with dignity, manners, and good cheer.