

THE PIONEER: A PEN PORTRAIT OF WOLFE BARDAS

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1877. We always believed that Wolfe Bardas was born in Russia but possibly he was born in Dvinsk, Lithuania. There is little known of his family or background except that as a young man, alone, he fled from pogroms and persecution. In an overcrowded, rickety train he faced the arduous journey across Europe, eventually, somehow to reach London. He never talked, never related the details of the hazards he endured during this nightmare journey. But later, much later, we heard hollow haunting cries at night. We did not ask, nor were we ever told of the trauma behind the nightmares he suffered. When we wondered, it was too late, there was nobody left to tell us.

In London he sought help in his lonely and desperate need and was fortunate to become a boarder with an orthodox Jewish family in Sunderland. This became his home and they became his family. It was here that he met the young girl who was to become his life companion and wife, the mother of his six children. The youngest of the large family, she was kept at home to help with the domestic duties whilst the other members of the family were sent off to school.

There was a Victorian photograph hanging in a dark, lacquered frame which presented them side by side, upright and handsome. The woman's small oval face with its high cheekbones, small straight nose with slightly dilated nostrils, was set with black sparkling eyes under a thick roll of black curly hair. Everything about her was dainty and petite. Even the padded bosom was small, encased in the frilled high-necked frock. Alongside her, close, stood the man. In the sepia tones of the photograph, it was possible still to recognise he was very fair, blond in colour. The blue eyes were spaced, deep set, the cheekbones high and round. The nose was straight and smooth. A Slavonic face. A small man in stature, yet he stood firm and well built. The stiff butterfly collar dated him and the period. Always particular about his dress, he was a true Victorian in appearance and outlook.

The young couple, together, experienced difficulties in their struggle to make a living and a home for their growing and increasing family, which now numbered three boys and one girl. At the turn of the century they migrated to Australia in search of a new way of life, particularly for their children. Two other children were born in this country of their choice. They braved hostilities, encountered difficulties of language, and faced a brash new culture. They came with simple hopes and also in response to the frequent calls of their lonely relatives already in Australia. It took time, hard work and courage for them to find their way and eke out some sort of living.

The initial sorting ground was the Melbourne suburb of Carlton at a time when it offered gardens, recreation parks and space. Carlton with its broad streets still pays homage to its planners and founders. Today in Drummond Street there are still two solid red brick buildings standing, facing east, mounted by two winged gargoyles. A double galvanised-iron verandah, supported by slender iron and fluted Victorian poles, is shared by the pair. Then, each building boasted double windows with double doors opening to the interior.

Wolfe Bardas started his workshop in Drummond Street, then he moved away for a short time, but he returned to the same building which became a factory, at the front, and home for the family, at the rear and upstairs. This was the starting point of an enterprise. The factory was simply laid out. The broad floor-boards were bleached with wear, sweeping and scrubbing. On the left side of the large room there were machines, four treadle machines on each side of a broad solid wooden bench. Small straight wooden chairs, with stuffed material cushions, were hand-made to suit the individual worker. They used any material or patches available. A wooden box on legs stood alongside and was shared between two machinists as a receptacle for a part or fully finished garment, and for linings and trimmings. A shaded light hung over each machine.

Opposite was the large pressing board and irons and a wooden rack standing ready to take the pressed garments. The rack was also used by the workers for their hats or coats. Their big handbags went with them to the machines. Facing the entrance, the machines, the press, almost right across the back of the room, was the large wooden cutting table which dominated the whole room. Bolts of material, different in colour, texture and design, were stacked underneath the table, as well as rolls of brown paper of different sizes and thickness. Brown paper patterns hung by tape across the wall at the back. Here was the initial starting point of each garment.

The man stood day by day at the table, a tape-measure hanging from around his neck, a small cotton apron around his waist, and his sleeves rolled up. He worked at his patterns. He laid out the fabric. He measured. He cut the cloth with big heavy shears, separating out bundles for each machinist. He selected matching cottons, buttons, linings and tapes, from an insignificant cupboard in the corner. He laboured long hours at his cutting table. His deft, skilful fingers turned the straight smooth but firm brown paper into different patterns for skirts or frocks, or he folded out his paper into straight lines of pleats ready to receive and mould material into its own form, before being put into a tin steam box. He had learned his trade, his pleating expertise, in London. Here he was an innovator, a pioneer! It became the Electra French Pleating Company.

They, the women, the girls, came each day, exchanged their morning greetings with him and each other. Formal but friendly. Relaxed with each other, they settled into their daily routine, a slow steady even pace and rhythm. They stopped for their morning tea and ate their lunches at their places. The air was filled with the quiet hum of the machines and quiet voices humming or singing their Irish or Scottish harmonies. The scene was almost a domestic one. Crises were rare. They were skilled, careful and intent on their work. He

consulted, advised and listened to them. At the end of the day they all left almost at the same time. Sometimes one stayed later to discuss her personal problems with the man. There was concern and interest. Sometimes the child wandered into the factory from the house at the back. There was always someone, an older hand with whom she was more familiar, more in favour, who gave her the affection, the notice she sought, until her stay was shortened with a touch on the bottom and the gentle but sweet dismissal: 'Alright threepence, get on a cork and float off'.

It seemed he was reaching a plateau of stability when a fire, devastating and destructive, swept through the building, quickly pulverising his precious patterns and costly materials, causing havoc throughout the building and their lives. He was seriously burned and injured trying to battle the fire and to rescue his years and years of work. Once recovered physically, mentally and emotionally from this disaster, he started restoring and rebuilding. But, alas, 1928—1929, again the machines were silent, the workers absent when the country was hit by 'The Great Depression'. Times were desperate. He sought and borrowed money from a friend. After the debt was repaid he never forgot the man's assistance and he continued to repay with hospitality and invitations to family events. During these demanding years the little mother, Annie, unskilled in worldly affairs, became the family's chief financial support. She opened a draper's shop in Brunswick, her second son Morris guided and assisted her and she managed to adapt to the changed circumstances until the Depression years passed and the country returned to a growing economy.

The business enterprise itself grew, expanded. One by one, the sons, son-in-law and daughter joined the business. Each augmented the nature of its production with their various roles and their ability to contribute. Daughter Sadie became their office assistant and receptionist. Barnett Finkelstein, trained in fine tailoring, introduced jodhpurs and slacks to their range, and became an asset in industrial liaison. Charles Bardas, the craftsman, the staple product man, expert and reliable in the basic elements of manufacturing, was brought into close contact with workers and products. He was much respected and remembered. Brae Bardas, keen, tenacious, dedicated and an 'outdoor' man, became a specialist in the blouse product. Morris, the elder son, imaginative, innovative, a man of transition, was responsible for the changing direction of the business into the new economic era. He initiated the induction of young fresh minds and a new approach to the market place. The business Sportscraft was established (in 1951) and the name became synonymous with quality and classic creation.

More space was needed. The whole of the building was taken over and the family moved to a private house in North Carlton. Now the man journeyed in the early morning to the factory by cable tram. Sometimes he returned home too late to eat with his family. He was now producing fashionable and pleated patterns and garments which demanded monitoring, and the thermostat had to be constantly attended. His hours were long and lonely. The business had grown. It was no longer a craft period for the industry. It was the mechanical age, the mass production era.

There were few choices open to Wolfe Bardas when he first migrated to Australia but it became his home and he never travelled beyond its shores. He loved this country until the day he died. He explored the countryside, walked in the bush and relished long swims at the beaches. At weekends when his sons were unable to drive the family on outings, he hustled up drivers from the neighbouring stables. At first they moved in drays, then later they travelled in a big Buick. He savoured, drank in, what he had not previously experienced, 'the fresh air' which for him was a 'golden gift'. He was a man of strong loves and loyalties. He spoke movingly of King Edward VII, 'the peacemaker', and wept openly when George V died. He admired and respected the strong sense of duty displayed by the royal family. Sometimes premature in his views, he expressed anger and anguish at the Gallipoli debacle, but the time was not ripe for such statements and he was silenced.

His love and loyalty for his own culture and religion were deep and constant. He studied the teachings and concepts of the *Torah* and the *Talmud* and was frequently sought out as an authority on doctrine or dogma. He was not an orthodox, but a traditional, Jew. He loved the concepts, the teachings and 'the togetherness' of Judaism. Resplendent in his navy suit, he enjoyed the atmosphere of the synagogue and the discussions which inevitably followed. His friendships were limited but close and deep. This was enough for him. He was recognised early as an ardent Zionist, not only in theory but as a worker for Zionism. This was at a time when the proposal for a national homeland was not fashionable and British Foreign Office opinion prevailed. The advent of Hitler and the horrific years of the Holocaust reinforced his compassion, his views and his efforts for the establishment of the State of Israel. In practical terms, he supported Zionist emissaries, he worked assiduously with Solomon Wertheim to establish 'The Golden Book'. He sponsored, helped migration to Australia and, even when money was scarce, he continued to assist a niece in Palestine, but he disclosed little information about these efforts. In communal and public life he was humble, always on the outskirts of a gathering. He was known for his quiet dedication but never received any public accolade or recognition.

He sought not only religious learning but he was an avid reader, devouring whatever he could obtain, from Marx to Shakespeare. When he was corrected for his choice of language, he retorted: 'If Shakespeare can use "bloody" or "guts" so can I.' Each night he read, word by word, the daily newspaper and inevitably threw it aside with 'It's a lot of bloody lies!'. Whenever possible he took his two younger children to the theatre or the cinema on a Saturday afternoon.

He was a traditionalist, a true Victorian, demanding in his work ethics and his code of behaviour. His expectations and demands were high, endeavouring to see all his family equipped and trained to cope in life with some useful skill. He sent his oldest daughter to a business college, a son was sent to a tailoring college. He despaired when his second son Morris flirted with an unsettled career in journalism, but sponsored and supported him as the family collector of books and art. His younger daughter later fulfilled his dreams

by going to university. He was loved but feared by his family because of these high expectations and ambitions. Very often the demand was too great and his frustrations registered in a very explosive temper which rocked and alienated the household! At other times he was humorous and witty and reminisced about 'the village weddings' of his childhood or hummed an unfamiliar tune.

Many businesses, large and small, moved to the city corresponding to the industrial and economic climate of the country. The small craft trade moved into an organised manufacturing production era. It was the ambition, foresight and creative thinking of second son Morris Bardas which brought about the move from Carlton and the redirection of the business into a wider range of production and, ultimately, retail. Cautious, conservative, accustomed to minute examination of each item of production, the father was fearful at the momentum and the divergence.

Other changes challenged the family compound and relationships. There was an urgency, a need, a demand for the delineation of roles and responsibilities in the business which brought about a clash between father and son. Gradually, gradually, in his philosophic style, he measured the arguments and admitted there was justice in the demands for equal rights, for positions and authority. So the challenge of litigation was never realised. Business returns were modest for many years after the firm was established in Latrobe Street (Melbourne) but there was enough income to keep three families. Together with their remaining children, Wolfe and Annie shifted to St Kilda, their first home with clear ownership. The other two married couples lived in maisonettes, within pram-distance. At first, a small Austin was the shared vehicle between possibly five drivers. They piled in and commuted daily between their homes and the business. A roster system for the car was shared during weekends.

Wolfe Bardas lived to love and enjoy his first two grandchildren David and Wendy. He continued in the business, and retained his interest in communal affairs, until his sudden death at sixty-eight years in 1945. Like many other migrants who came to Australia, he recognised the beauty and joys of the land and was enriched by the experience. In turn he toiled and made a wonderful contribution as an Australian citizen. He left an indelible impression.



Wolfe Bardas

