

Dara Solomon

**It's the Real Thing:
The Enduring Legacy of the North and Coca-Cola
in the Kokotow family**

Growing up in my house, Coca-Cola was considered holy water and Pepsi was strictly forbidden with an intensity that was validated by the cola wars of the 1980s. The sugary drink flowed through our matrilineal lineage, from Kirkland Lake, Ontario via the Ukraine.



Originally from Toronto, Rita Kokotow (née Atkins) thrived in Kirkland Lake's Jewish community, serving as the Hadassah Chapter president and helping to organize luncheons such as this one at Hadassah's First Northern Ontario Regional Conference. There is a Coca-Cola bottle supplied by Husky Beverages at every seat. 1949. Ontario Jewish Archives, Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre, item 1195.



My maternal grandfather, Irving Kokotow arrived in Northern Ontario in the early 1920s, after barely escaping the Kiev-area pogroms of 1919 that massacred tens of thousands of Jews including his parents.

Irving Kokotow at Kokotow Lumber, another one of his business interests. His daughter Maureen Solomon still has this Russian-style winter hat, necessary for the cold winters of Northern Ontario. Photo courtesy of Maureen Solomon



Irving Kokotow with one of the delivery trucks of Frontier Beverages, an earlier incarnation of Husky Beverages. Circa 1950. Photo courtesy of Maureen Solomon.

Arriving at age 12 in rural Northern Ontario was perhaps not a huge culture shock and after being shuffled between various relatives, he finally settled in Kirkland Lake at the start of the town's gold rush boom. What he lacked in height, he made up in ambition, personality, and athleticism. There is even family lore of him trying out for the NHL. At age 19, with the help of an uncle, Irving Kokotow purchased a bottling company and franchise to manufacture Coca-Cola. Husky Dry Beverages produced Coke for Northern Ontario, along with other bottled fizzy drinks.



Irving and Rita Kokotow's 5 grandchildren (L to R: Jordan Swartz, Alida Solomon, Tami Swartz, Dara Solomon, and Jennifer Swartz. Circa 1980. Photo courtesy of Dara Solomon.



In Kirkland Lake, my mother grew up in a small but committed Jewish community. My grandmother organized Hadasah teas with my grandfather supplying the coke. At age 18, my mother moved to Toronto to become a teacher, married, and raised her family. Eventually, my grandparents followed, living their final decades in Thornhill. Memorable annual family excursions to visit a remaining relative at his rustic fishing cabin in Kirkland Lake continued into my early teens.

Dara Solomon on her front lawn of her childhood home in Toronto's Bathurst/Eglinton neighbourhood. Circa 1982 Being the youngest of 5 cousins, she got to wear the Coca-Cola shirt for many, many years. Photo courtesy of Dara Solomon.



Sisters Alida and Dara Solomon wearing the classic (and perfectly preserved) Coca-Cola windbreakers that hung in their front hall closet for decades. Circa 1990. Photo courtesy of Dara Solomon



The Kokotow grandchildren spent hours playing with this Coca-Cola machine in their grandparents' basement. It now lives in a 2nd cousin's basement but Dara dreams of having it in her home, someday. Photo courtesy of Robert Linder

The legacy of the North and of the family's long-closed Coca-Cola enterprise lingers. It's hard to open a cupboard without discovering that iconic curvy cursive logo. There are rulers, trays with the seductive pin-up girls, t-shirts, matches, pencils, jackets, chalkboards, miniature glass bottles, and even a full-sized coke machine in my cousin's basement—eliciting nostalgia and even pride.

All the grandchildren have one of these inappropriate "pin-up girl" trays that harken back to a by-gone era. Dara's family use it for birthday breakfasts in bed. Photo courtesy of Dara Solomon





Of course, I recognize that Coca-Cola's branding was brilliantly engineered to evoke nostalgia from Kirkland Lake to Shanghai. But, in our family, its ever presence is less pop sentimentality, and more of a heraldic family symbol reminding us of who we are—as Jews, descendants of immigrants, Northerners and Canadians. It's the real thing.

This Coca-Cola chalkboard is in Maureen Solomon's pantry and the grandkids love doodling on it during their visits. Photo courtesy of Maureen Solomon.



Rulers like these were special and not thrown into pencil cases. Photo courtesy of Dara Solomon.