

# **D. Atlas & Co., Inc.**

## **The David Atlas family: Three Generations in the Jewelry Business**

David Atlas left Shepatovka, Russia at the age of 12, all alone. The time was about 1888. He walked to Paris where a job as an apprentice jewelry craftsman was either pre-arranged or found. He stayed 4 years in Paris, learned to make jewelry and located a similar job in London, as his goal was immigration to the USA.

On the way to London his boat sank in the English Channel. His hand made jewelry manufacturing tools were lost along with all his possessions. He survived and still got to London. All the tools needed to be made over. He eventually became well trained and saved enough to come to Philadelphia. This was another 3 to 4 years.

My belief is that he arrived in about 1896 and by 1898 opened his own jewelry making firm, D. Atlas & Co. in the heart of the jewelry district. He must have been successful as he began the process of building a business and also bringing relatives to the States.

He married and brought his bride to be and her 13 brothers and sisters over in various stages. Some of them were not really brothers and sisters, but they came as "family". He brought some other people over from his hometown that were not related at all. All used new names and they became official members of the family unit. Some worried about "the immigration" until the day they died. They did not want to be deported for using a false name.

In 1911 he built a building which still stands at 721 Sansom St. His firm occupied the entire first floor. Sometime before WWI he was contacted by a cousin in Belgium about importing diamonds. Dave Atlas became one of the very first diamond dealers in the USA. We had some old records of the imports showing a two or three dollars for 1 carat sized stones. Money was a little more valuable than it is today. Inflation has taken a large toll. His trips to Europe were once or twice a year to buy diamonds and bring them home. This was the time of steam ships. He was gone for weeks at a time. Life moved at a slower pace.

There was lots of money made with diamonds early in the 1900's. He had a LaSalle car with a chauffeur. His wife never drove or had a license, as she was always taken care of. He had three children who went to Philadelphia Public Schools. They all went to the University of Pennsylvania and graduated with degrees. My dad graduated from the Wharton School. The daughters married well and went on to live traditional American

homemaker lives with all the comforts, vacations, cars and expected luxuries. The first daughter, who graduated from Penn before the depression received a new, paid for house as a wedding gift, when she moved to Cedar Rapids, Iowa. This is just an example of the sort of father figure he was to his whole family.



1920's: My grandfather, his accountant and his brother behind the counter. In front of the counter are two cousins.



Photo of me in the arms of the founder, the first David Atlas back in 1948. It was his last year and my first.

This had been accomplished by a man who had only a fourth grade education, one who could barely read until late in life and with great practice. He brought his parents to the USA in the early 1900's. They stayed a year but went back to Russia, as the USA just didn't suit them.

Things were good through the 1920's but my grandfather had made a critical error. He had signed a guarantee for a loan for the construction of a hotel in Miami Beach when the world was blindsided by the crash of the stock market. The note eventually was called and my grandfather lost his paper millions. He knew he could work with nothing, as he had succeeded before. He began again.

He went through bankruptcy but worked until the middle of WWII to pay every person he owed everything back. He was known all around Philadelphia and New York City as a most honest and ethical person. Everyone that knew him told me I ought to follow in his footsteps. I never met him other than he lived long enough to hold me in his arms for a photo when I was about a year old. I was born in 1947 and he died in 1948. I was named not only for him but also for my other grandfather, David Gottlieb who was also alive at the time and was a practicing dentist in Trinidad, CO. Both were happy to have been around when I was born and had no objection to me being named in their honor.



A plaque presented to our firm in 1948 for service to the local trade.

My father was a trained businessman and a graduate of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. He brought a very orderly mind to the jewelry business. He and my grandfather worked together before and after WWII. They bought and sold second hand jewelry. Since they had little working capital, they bought on a day's credit, sold immediately and then paid. With a good reputation this was possible, and they made a living, not a great one, but they got by.

During WWII my father met my mother on a blind date while he was in the Air Force stationed in Colorado. She was one of the early lady's lawyers and had recently graduated from the University of Colorado Law School in Boulder, CO. They married in 1946 and joined the baby boom with me.

I was the only child and although I had every option open to me, I went into the family business in December 1967. I suffered all the trauma of being the only child of educated parents who both excelled in school. I proved to them that genetics aside, I could still be a trying and difficult student. It pleased them greatly that I also went to U of P, but it pained them much more when I left after two years, during the Vietnam War. I had a low draft number and finally found a slot in the Army reserve. I left school without any hesitation and went to work with my father. I don't regret my decision as it was the right one for me, but one should not assume that they will be so lucky or such a good fit into a family business.



My father holding my son in the front office of our current location.

My father took the early gemology courses offered by the Gemological Institute of America in the early 1950's and received his Graduate Diploma in 1953 or 1954. In 1959 he joined the staff of Marcus and Co located in Gimbels at 8th & Market and they trained him to be an appraiser. Under his guidance I became an appraiser, a gemologist and an estate jewelry buyer. All the courses he took and many more have been long ago taken and completed. I now teach these to newcomers on a national level.

It has been a good life and a success. It is not easy to work with a perfectionist parent, as they never let you grow up completely. My dad slowly gave up the reins over an extended period beginning in 1982 and ending at his passing in 1997. He never lost interest and never failed to give his sage advice even if I didn't want to hear it. I think I learned about all I was capable of learning with him and use his teachings and philosophy as a tool in daily decision-making. No doubt, some of what my father taught me, he learned from his father.

Things change, but the principles of good business begin with honesty and ethics. I believe I have continued to extend that initial goal which all small businesses quest for. The nature and size of the business has grown and changed over more than 100 years, but it still is a family business. With my two children well fixed in other fields, it will be the end of this as a family business when I hang up my loupe. That may be a few years yet, but by that time I will have tried to make my grandfather and father as proud of me as I am of them. I hope their spirits look in on me from time to time and they still like what they see.

David S. Atlas  
Grandson of the Founder, D. Atlas & Co., Inc.

*Sidney Shapiro, a cousin, wrote this essay on the original David Atlas, my grandfather, as part of a book on the Shapiro family. This essay contains more about my grandfather than I knew from any other source. Additionally, David Atlas apparently was born in 1878, which I only found out this past week from Sidney, when he contacted me. He lived to be 69 and died in 1947, shortly after I was born.*

*Sidney Shapiro was one of the two brothers who owned the Trenton Crockery Co on Arch Street where mom occasionally bought inexpensive dishes and glassware. Before I was born, I was told they had artisans there who hand painted dishes there and they fired the crockery in the Arch Street factory before selling it all over the country. It was a very successful place until the final generation and the cheap competition from the Pacific rim.*

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“Although “Uncle Dave” was not a member of the Shapiro family, I would be remiss in not writing something about him in this family history. He was a distant cousin of the Spiegelman family, and, in 1902, married Essie, one of my mother’s older sisters. Without him, the Spiegelman clan would not have succeeded in the manner in which they did when they came to this country. My grandmother and her children not only lived in this generous man’s home, but they were assisted financially and in every manner possible to adapt to the new country.

Uncle Dave was a diamond merchant who set up his business in 1898 at 702 Sansom Street in Philadelphia. Starting around 1910 he made summer trips to Antwerp to buy precious stones. He was a hard worker, some weeks traveling to New York City three or four times by train to buy and sell his wares. In 1911 he built 721 Sansom St. and moved his offices into the first floor. Jerome Atlas was born in 1912.

People “on the street” learned to trust him and he became a very wealthy man. In 1921, he was responsible (along with his brother-in-law Joe Spiegelman [next oldest after my mother]) for bringing to this country most of the Spiegelman clan who did not come over with Bubba Spiegelman (see the essay on Anna Shapiro) in 1895. Joe (also in the jewelry business) went from Antwerp to Shepatovka, Russia, to gather his relations and personally escort them here. He also took Uncle Dave’s mother along with the group of cousins. Joe and Dave not only paid for their first class passage, but Uncle Dave set many of them up in business. Most of them went into the grocery business, which later, many referred to as the “Greenie Grocery Co.”

Dave’s importing business began when he was helped by a distant cousin who started him on his trips to Antwerp. Years later, this cousin, a Mr. Schwartzstein, who lived in New York, came to Uncle Dave and asked him to lend him a large sum of money to build a hotel in Miami Beach, the Blackstone, named after him. Uncle Dave felt obligated to help his cousin who had helped him to get in the importing business years before. Dave co-signed a large loan as guarantor. This was in 1929, and the hotel and all of my Uncle’s assets were lost in the “Crash”, the beginning of the Great Depression. This was

quite a blow to him, but after some time he managed to recover. After his financial loss, my father loaned Dave (his brother-in-law) some money to help him. I remember the day that Dad came home and told my mother that Dave Atlas took him to lunch and made the last payment on the loan. Luckily, for the Spiegelman family, Uncle Dave's financial troubles occurred years after he helped them. In the essay of my mother, I mentioned the several large houses where the Atlases lived.

The house at 1319 Franklin Street was where most of the Spiegelman cousins lived, especially all the unmarried girls. In addition to these cousins, Dave had sisters to marry off. All of these young women needed a place to entertain their beaux. There were upstairs and downstairs parlors and a few porches scattered around for the young women to do their entertaining. Dave also contributed money for their trousseaus. Sure, he was wealthy, but as Martha Neuman, his younger daughter told me recently, "He loved each and every member of his family, and he showed that in his deeds. 'Til this day I love him and revere him. He gave of himself, and materially, with pleasure, and never expected anything in return."

My mother was one of the young ladies who lived with the Atlases, and my mother and father were married in that house on Christmas day, 1912. Essie and Dave had three children. Ceil, Martha, and Jerry. Jerry was the one that many of the cousins looked up to. He earned a full scholarship to Dartmouth College, but changed his mind and decided to go to the Wharton School. Since his father was so "well off" he went to the University of Pennsylvania and paid the tuition in order that a more needy person might have the scholarship. His sister Ceil graduated from "Penn" before him. She was probably the first in our family to both attend and graduate from college. When Ceil married Al Smulekoff, Uncle Dave bought them a home in Cedar Rapids as a wedding present. Both Ceil and Jerry have died, but as of this writing, Martha is living and celebrated her ninetieth birthday this year, 1999.

Uncle Dave must have been a good listener who paid attention to the youngsters in this large family. In addition to his demanding business and helping the family, he was involved in "the little things" that happened within his family. Since the Atlases and the Shapiros were very close, he learned of my difficulty with spelling. During one of our visits, he told me that he would give me a mechanical lead pencil (something new in those days) if I would get 100 in a spelling test at school. After a few failures, this almost impossible task was achieved with the help of my mother. She stayed up late with me going over each word on my list. I brought this miracle test paper (with the big 100 in red) to my uncle's office and he presented me with a slim gold "Eversharp" pencil. I kept this wonderful gift for many years, hardly ever using it for fear of wearing it out (I was only six years old). It was probably one of the most exciting gifts of my young life.

When his oldest child Ceil had her first child, Elaine, (Uncle Dave's first grandchild) he and my father decided that she and I should have a "date" in the future. They chose the year 1940. This date was something that the Atlas and Shapiro families spoke about over the years. Elaine Smulekoff, who lived in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, came to visit her grandparents almost every summer. When she was in Philadelphia the summer of 1940,

we actually had our date that was “hatched” over seventeen years before. Elaine was a lovely looking young lady, a few years younger than I. She had a western accent, and was very bright. I borrowed Sid’s car and we went to a movie in town and then for something to eat; (probably the Hot Shoppe). We enjoyed each others company, and ended the evening “necking.” During the next few years I saw Elaine several times. I introduced her to some of my friends and we dated a few times. Because of the distance between our home towns, I lost track of her. I just found out that she now lives in the Boston area, and perhaps I will try to get in touch in the near future.

Jay Spiegelman, in his Memoirs, describes Uncle Dave as “short and rotund with a big belly, a very happy man.” That is exactly as I remember him. He parted his hair in the middle and had a mustache. A photograph of him today would look like the tin-types I have seen of men at the turn of the last century. I don’t ever remember his raising his voice to any of us children. He had a slight accent, but his English was good. Somewhat religious, I remember his reading the Passover service in very fast Hebrew.

If Uncle Dave Atlas sounds “too good to be true,” he was! But, he was really true.

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