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BOOKS

Pink Packets, Family Perils

By DANIEL AKST

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After half a century of testimony from the likes of Philip Roth and about as much in personal experience, I can only imagine how Tolstoy would have begun "Anna Karenina" had he grown up in Brooklyn when I did: "Most crazy families are alike," he might have written. "But each crazy Jewish family is meshuga in its own way."

"Sweet and Low" is Rich Cohen's unblinking account of one such family -- his own -- and the fortune it built on the brand of sugar substitute from which the book derives its title. What "Moby-Dick" did for whaling, what "The Jungle" did for meatpacking, what Mr. Roth's own "American Pastoral" did for the glove business, Mr. Cohen now endeavors to do for the saccharine trade. The resulting edgy memoir, written from the perspective of a loving son whose mother was inexplicably disinherited, is alternately tender, ferocious, hilarious and tragic. Never has the word "bittersweet" been applied more accurately to a story.

A Balky Sugar Dispenser

The "Sweet and Low" saga begins with an orphan, Benjamin Eisenstadt, who married Betty Gellman during the Depression and went to work at her family's diner near the Brooklyn Navy Yard. With shipbuilding winding down after the war, Ben and Betty (the author's grandparents on his mother's side) cast about for another way of making a living. Finally a balky sugar dispenser in a restaurant led them to try packaging sugar in sanitary individual bags.

[Sweet and Low]



When Ben's Cumberland Packing Co. launched Sweet 'N Low in 1957, the idea was to provide a palatable mixture of cyclamate, saccharine and lactose "that would approximate the look and feel of sugar" without being so fattening. In fact, a teaspoon of sugar has just 15 calories, so a little Sweet 'N Low in a cup of coffee or on a grapefruit didn't help even dieters all that much. But the little pink packets were an immediate success, and so too were the Eisenstadts, whose fledgling business took flight on the nation's rising weight consciousness.

Ben was everything you could want in a founder -- thrifty, selfless, hard-working -- but his son Marvin, who took the reins as Ben got old, is portrayed by Mr.

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Cohen as weak and conniving. Eventually Equal and Splenda surpassed Sweet 'N Low in the marketplace. And it was on Marvin's watch that the business was engulfed in scandal. Some of his top managers, one of them reported to have Mob connections, looted the company through bogus vendors and invoices.

Personal income taxes were evaded. "By the 1990s," Mr. Cohen writes, "Cumberland Packing was a cesspool."

Politics and the vagaries of science played a role. In 1969, the Food and Drug Administration announced a ban on cyclamate -- it was considered carcinogenic. Sweet 'N Low was ready with a new cyclamate-free formula, but then a study found that saccharine, retained in the revised product, caused cancer in rats. In 1977, it was banned as well, with potentially fatal consequences for Cumberland. A public outcry prompted Congress to suspend the saccharine ban for two years and to renew the suspension more than once. But a regulatory sword of Damocles hung over the company, which naturally started cultivating politicians -- and reimbursing vendors for campaign donations.

Love and Money

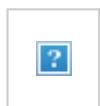
As the story of a family enterprise, "Sweet and Low" is worth any dozen standard business texts. Instead of banal exhortations about leadership and knowledge silos, Mr. Cohen gives us the Brooklyn equivalent of Thomas Mann's "Buddenbrooks" -- a vivid saga of family and business inextricably entwined, of siblings competing for love and money, of prosperity's effects from one generation to the next. Cumberland's struggle with evolving science, growing competition and wayward management allows us to confront some serious business matters: What are the consequences of innovation? What risks are worth taking? How safe is a "safe" product? And what happens if royal descent substitutes for merit-based succession?

Citing the durability of Europe's Warburg banking family, Mr. Cohen offers three rules for the preservation of a family firm. (1) "Do Not Observe Primogeniture: Birth order has no significance"; (2) "There Is Nothing Immediate About Immediate Family: Do not restrict your search for a successor to the nuclear family"; and (3) "Make the Kid Work for It: Even when a future leader is spotted, he should not be given a position of power immediately." Cumberland violated all these rules, in the author's view; presumably it could have been run by his mother or even his business-savvy father, if not an outsider or another family member tested by prolonged apprenticeship.

DETAILS

SWEET AND LOW

By Rich Cohen
(*Farrar, Straus and Giroux*,
272 pages, \$25)



Able researched and deftly paced, "Sweet and Low" is unfailingly entertaining, not least because of Mr. Cohen's razzmatazz style. He sometimes lapses into the over-the-top mannerisms of New Journalism -- at one point, an angry Marvin gives a shout "that had collapsed on itself, what might be left of a Bobby Knight harangue after that harangue had passed through a black hole." But Mr. Cohen also echoes the cadences of such

literary antecedents as Saul Bellow, as when he places his great-grandfather "amid that army of men who dressed before first light and walked in great crowds through the streets to the docks, who climbed on cranes and yardarms, and lifted and carried and hefted and hauled. He was a figure of the air, an immigrant eating lunch on a beam, coaxing the city into the sky."

The author's wonderful riff-like description of his Grandma Esther, meanwhile, owes as much to Alan King as to Stanley Elkin: "I once heard her ask a woman in her condo complex, 'Why do you hate me,

fatso?' I once heard her say to a Holocaust survivor, 'You are one Hitler should not have let get away.' When she took me and my sister to see 'Yentl,' she asked for three tickets, one senior, two children. My sister was thirty, I was twenty-two. The three of us saw 'Yentl' for four dollars. She could defrost a three-course meal in six minutes. She was, according to my father, the nation's foremost expert in cryogenics."

As it turned out, the rat study that threatened saccharine was flawed, "a piece of bad intelligence from which every other bad decision had followed." (Even cyclamate is no longer considered a human carcinogen.) But by that time nimbler competitors were eating Cumberland's artificially sweetened lunch, Marvin had pleaded guilty to knowingly filing a false tax return and two other Cumberland executives were behind bars. Although the company soldiers on profitably in Brooklyn, thanks to the expanded market it helped launch, the Eisenstadts are riven. "As long as the founder is in control," Mr. Cohen writes, "God is in the garden. When God goes, no one will ever again speak with the same authority."

Investors in Berkshire Hathaway and Apple Computer -- not to mention countless smaller enterprises identified with a single, God-like leader -- should mark those words.

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