

Number 126612, Chaim Kronenberg, My Father

by Rene Geist

Unfortunately there is more that I don't know than I do. Because it was too painful for my dad to talk about his "old" life, I asked him little, too little. I didn't realize there would be a time when I would no longer be able to get answers to my questions.

What I do know.

My dad was born December 1910 in Warsaw, Poland. He was the only boy among three or four sisters. His father (my grandfather) contracted tuberculosis when my dad was little, and remained bedridden for the rest of his years. It was left to his mother Ruchel (my grandmother for whom I am named) to provide for the family.

By the time my dad was seven or eight years old his Talmud Torah days were over. He was needed to help his mother make a living. On market days, my dad carried bolts of cloth to his mother's stall, where she sold the fabric. At the end of the day, he returned to the market to carry the remaining bolts back home. For the rest of the day, my dad trained as an apprentice learning how to make leather handbags in a small at-home factory.

My dad told me a couple of his apprentice stories. The at-home factory where he worked was in the bedroom of the boss'

apartment. My dad arrived, sat on a bench at the end of the boss' bed and began working. Frequently the boss' wife was still in bed. My dad related that from time to time she would kick him in the behind as she stretched her legs.

Another story he told me was that his mother prepared lunch for him to take to work – a sandwich made with a whole loaf of bread except for the heel at the end of the loaf. Apparently it was bad luck to eat an entire loaf, so she cut off the heel. To replace that piece of bread his mother sent him with another small bun. The boss however ate only a small lunch which embarrassed my dad. He soon cut down the size of his lunch.

As the years went by, his mother depended on his earnings more and more; especially after his sisters married religious men who studied all day instead of earning a living. To ensure my dad's assistance continued, his mother told him he had "goldene hent" (golden hands) and was able to accomplish anything.

During the 1930's, my dad married and had two sons. I never asked and he never told me about this time in his life except that he was recruited into the Polish army and served there until the Poles were defeated in 1939.

From this army stint he was taken as slave labor to a coal mine. He felt relatively fortunate to be in the mine because he said, "as long as I didn't cause any trouble in the mine I wasn't beaten much." He told me little of his coal mine days. He did however tell me about the egg he stole one time. He was found out and was so badly beaten he couldn't get up. The guards yelled out

that if he wasn't cleaned up and at roll call they would finish him up. With tears in his eyes he relayed how his friends washed him and brought him to roll call - saving his life.

From the coal mine stint my dad was taken to Auschwitz. There he became number 126612.

My dad left Auschwitz on a death march in late winter/early spring of 1945. Where he went and what he did right after liberation I'll never know. I do know he never saw his wife and children again.

Eventually he got to Berlin and lived by selling women's scarves. He graduated to trading in silver. Somewhere along the way he met my mom. Perhaps it was at a Red Cross Centre. She was ten years younger than him, but no matter. She had no one (except an older sister) and he had no one (except a distant cousin), so they married. It was May 1945.

As they waited for sponsorship and exit papers, my dad went back to doing what he had done since he was a young boy. He made handbags to be sold in their small shop.

In September 1948, my dad, my mom and I (born June 1946) climbed onto the SS General Stewart with visas in hand and headed for Pier 21 in Halifax, Canada.

The most important chapter in his life's story now grew as his family did. Memorable were the warm smiles and unabashed joy that greeted each and every announcement and achievement from family members young and old. My dad was a very proud

man and nothing provided him with a greater sense of pride than his family. The smiles that accompanied family accomplishments were surpassed in later years only by the smiles and sheer joy with which he greeted the arrival of his great-grandchildren.

My dad's spirit will remain with me always, leaving me amazed at the life he lived, the challenges he faced, the love he gave, and the contributions he made.



Chaim Kronenberg and His Daughter, Rene Geist