

OBITUARIES

# LEON RABER

 raber leon This eulogy was delivered on May 29, 2017 at the Adas Yeshurun Herzlia Synagogue in Winnipeg, Manitoba:

It is with immense sadness and yet great pride that I am able to write these words to honour our father.

Our father was a man of great integrity, courage and strength. He lived at a time when the world and humanity was at its worst. Yet he managed to survive and act with kindness, compassion and sensitivity. His is a life that must be told and recorded. For he is truly an example of how we should all live and aspire. For this reason I use this opportunity to tell his story.

Our father was born Eliezer Katz in Rovno, Ukraine on August 4, 1918. Shortly thereafter the family moved to the shtetl Ludwipol also in Western Ukraine.

My grandfather Shmuel Katz died in 1925 when my father was only 7 years old. He grew up without a father and his only recollection is of holding his father's hand walking down the street.

His widowed mother was left with 5 children Chaim, Laizer, Beryl, Leah, and Shmuelik.

The family had a yard goods store on the main market street and there my father worked from the time he was a young teenager to the time of the liquidation of the town in August of 1942. Growing up he played soccer, was active in Shomer Hatzazaar, learned Hebrew and developed a strong love for Israel.

His great math skills were well utilized in running the store and the store did well with his involvement. He developed good relationships with the Ukrainian farmers and other gentile neighbours. This would later be crucial in his survival. He treated everyone fairly and honestly and was therefore well respected in the community life of the Shtetl.

With the onset of World War II and the Nazi Invasion of his area in July 1941 life changed dramatically. The Germans created a ghetto of the town and movement was greatly restricted. Food became scarce and Jews were forced into labour battalions, everyone had to work.

My father was a slave working on the building of a road the Germans needed for their military. Those who could not work adequately were shot and some were buried into the road. If someone tried to smuggle food back into the Ghetto they too were shot. Food rations were minimal. At the Passover Seder when we say "We were slaves to Pharoah in Egypt", my father was a living example of that slavery.

In order to provide food for his family and others, he and his brother Chaim would sneak out of the ghetto in the middle of the night and buy or barter with the Ukrainian farmers. Dad would say that it was not uncommon for him to carry 100 lb sacks on his back for 10-15 km and then sneak back into the ghetto. Imagine the courage and strength that this would take.

On one occasion a Ukrainian patrol (keeping in mind that the Ukrainians were complicit with

Recent Posts

[October 7 Probe: Il Themselves to Sav](#)

[Gaza Ceasefire Tal Qatari PM Says](#)

[Death Toll From Bl: Rises to 40](#)

[IDF Strikes Hezbol Warning Residents](#)

[Israeli Supreme Cc Explain Insufficien](#)

the Germans in persecuting the Jews) stopped my Dad as he was crossing a bridge. He could have been shot on the spot or turned over to Germans. They knew him from having played soccer with him and from the store and said that he was a good guy and let him go.

On another occasion the Germans were patrolling streets in the town and some of his Ukrainian friends shielded him from the Germans so that he would not be caught.

During the summer of 1942, Dad would have been 24 years old, it was clear that German intentions were to kill all the Jews. Many Jews began to escape and cross the Slutch river that ran near the town and into the thick forests on the other side. By August the situation became desperate. His younger brother Beryl had previously fled to Russia some time before and his older brother Chaim also had run away. His younger sister Leah ran away on August 20, 1942.

On August 22, 1942 my father pleaded with his mother and youngest brother that now is the time to run. My grandmother felt she was too old to be able to survive the life in the forest. His younger brother Shmulik who would have been 17 or 18 at the time, refused to leave his mother.

My father ran away that day, German troops saw him and started firing, he swerved around trees and managed to avoid being hit and made it to the thick forested area on the other side of the river. He was barefoot and just had the clothing he was wearing.

His mother and brother were rounded up by the Germans with the other Jews who remained, and were shot in the soccer field near the town and buried in a huge pit.

That day and the next he was on the run, trying to find food, water and shelter. He found his brother Chaim and sadly found the spot where his sister Leah had been killed either by the Germans or their Ukrainian accomplices. Dad did not get a pair of shoes until November of 1942. With his brother Chaim they would steal turpentine and make shoe polish in order to sell it for food. Starvation was prevalent, Dad would say that if you found a potato or an onion you ate it right away.

Dad joined Partisan units in the forest and was part of groups that destroyed railway tracks, telegraph lines and burned buildings. There were occasions where they would come under German or Ukrainian fire. Many people died.

One day he came upon two girls hiding in a barn. One of the girls was sick with Typhus. Dad brought them food and water. Miraculously, one of the girls survived the war and currently lives in Montreal. Thanks to the kindness and courage exhibited by our father she survived. There is another example, Boris Edelman of Florida, would say that he owes his life to my father for saving him from the Germans in August of 1942.

After a year in the forest, the Russian Red Army had moved further west and were occupying the area. Dad was conscripted into the Red Army and he changed his name to Vasil Ivanovich. His basic training was with a single shot rifle with no bullets. That was the state of the Red Army at time.

He was fortunate to be transferred to the south of Finland for the balance of 1943 and into summer of 1944. The Finnish front was very quiet and relatively safe.

Beginning however in October of 1944 he along with the First Belarussian army division began its push through the Baltic States of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. He was a Sargent in the army responsible for ensuring that telegraph communication lines would remain intact. On numerous occasions on patrol they would come up against German troops. On one instance, they were under fire and he told the soldiers under his command to stay low and do not stick your heads out. The soldier next to him needed to look and he was decapitated by a mortar shell.

Moving westward in the fall of 1944 the Red Army was approaching Warsaw. There they halted and allowed the Germans to burn Warsaw to the ground while they looked on. Dad was part of

the Red Army that at that time consisted of several million soldiers on the Eastern front. As he would often remark he was lucky to be at the back of this huge number of soldiers.

As the Red Army approached the Polish/German border they were preparing to cross the Frankfurt/Oder river. To test German resistance, the Russians would send what Dad would refer to as the "inferior races", Mongolians for example. Casualties for the Russians were very high. Again by sheer luck Dad was more to the rear of this onslaught and by time he crossed the river German resistance was light. I must add that Dad walked from Finland to the German border, there were no transport vehicles or trains.

Upon entering Germany, and particularly Berlin, buildings were routinely booby trapped. For example when he entered Berlin in January of 1945, his platoon was required to take Goebbels ministry of communication building. As the Russian troops were entering the building, it blew up. Dad was at the doorway and the explosion threw him 10 meters against a wall. Fortunately, he was not hurt. In fact he survived the war with just a scar over his left eyebrow from a bullet that narrowly missed him.

From Berlin he was transferred to Dresden. He would comment that even though Berlin had been bombed severely the devastation of Dresden was even worse.

In Dresden he would deal

in cigarettes and other commodities to accumulate items of value. He kept them hidden in a suitcase in the barrack until one day a superior officer inquired as to whose suitcase it was. Fortunately no one spoke up, for it could have been the Gulag for my father. The officer obviously took it for himself.

Before closing on this chapter of his life, I would recommend that you watch two movies "Defiance" and "Europa Europa". Both films depict the life in the forest of the fleeing Jews, and the battle for Berlin by the Russian Army.

After the war Dad worked for the Jewish agency escorting Jews from Europe to transfer points on their continuing journey to Israel.

There is one story when during one of these trips he was crossing the Czech border by train. The Czech border guards were notorious for extorting money and jewelry from the Jewish passengers. A young woman with a small child approached my Dad and asked him if he would hide her few valuables for her so that the guards would not get them, it was all she had. She said to Dad that he had an honest face. Sure enough Dad hid the valuables in his hat. After they crossed the Czech border and were off the train, Dad found this woman and returned the jewelry to her.

The Jewish Agency sent Dad to Brussels to help dismantle army barracks to be shipped to Israel. Dad was sick of war and did not want to go to Israel, so he and his brother Beryl remained in Brussels. There he worked in a sewing factory making purses. The woman sewing next to him asked him his name, he said Leizer. She said no that won't do, I think your name should be Leon, and so it remained.

In 1947 in order to come to Winnipeg, where he had family, his mother's cousins would sponsor him. Their last name was Raber, my grandmother's maiden name.

The law at that time was only very close family members could come into the country, so his cousins in Winnipeg said that he and Beryl were brothers. Thus, Leizer Katz became Leon Raber.

Dad arrived in Winnipeg in October of 1947 with \$10 in his pocket and a debt to the Royal Bank of \$375 for his transportation costs to Winnipeg.

Here he worked as a sewing machine operator until he started his own factory "Sabina Sportswear" in 1952. He operated this business very successfully for 25 years.

Dad was well respected by the other members of the garment industry. They would often meet

in his boardroom to arbitrate conflicts. His keen judgment and sense of fairness earned him the title of Rav Leizer.

Although Dad had witnessed the horrors of war and depravity, he always maintained an aura of kindness and gentleness.

He married my mom on March 13, 1949 and they celebrated 68 years together.

Dad realized how important it is to be able to help others.

When a cousin did not have money to buy coal to heat their house Dad looked after it. When his brother-in-law Shika needed money Dad helped him.

When his nephew Sheldon needed a guarantor for a bank loan to start his dental practice, Dad looked after that too.

I could go on with many other stories, suffice to say, that my sister and I are incredibly fortunate to have a father who taught us to be strong yet gentle, to be decisive yet fair. We love him very much.

I truly hope that in the world to come and the Garden of Eden where Dad deserves to be, he will meet his mother and father. They will be so proud of him, as are we.

Internment followed at Shaarey Zedek Cemetery.

Survived by his wife, Faye, children Frayda ( Charles), Label (Lynn), grand-children, Josh, Yossi (Julia) and Michael and great-granddaughters Samantha and Emma.

Pallbearers were Label Raber, Charles Wiseman, Josh Raber, Yossi Bokhaut, Michael Bokhaut and Joseph Gorenstein.

Honorary pallbearers were Sammy Katz, Burt Gorenstein, Dr. Jay-David Lifshen, Mark Cohen and Herb Grosney

📊 Post Views: 1,281

RELATED TOPICS