

Eulogy: Norman Silverman, Jan. 18, 2002  
by his son, Arne Silverman

How do you sum up a life in a few minutes? You cannot.

The way I choose to remember my father's life with you today is to tell you about those things that I believe were the most important factors in his life. Not necessarily all good things, but those sets of circumstances that had the most influence in forming the man he was.

When I thought about this over the last day, I didn't know how many items I might consider that important. I was surprised that I ultimately settled on only three.

The first of those three important factors in my father's life is the fact that as a child, he didn't have a family of his own. Barely out of the womb, he was the victim of a worldwide cataclysm. His mother died in the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918 that killed 20 million people. She was 23 years old, my father a few months. His father lived another 14 years, but my father hardly knew him. He lived with his father from time to time, but was raised mostly by a beloved aunt and grandparents. They were all gone by the time my father was 15. At that age, he was shipped on a train to Saskatchewan to live with the family of his mother who he barely knew. He arrived in Saskatchewan, 15 years old, with 50 cents in his pocket and not knowing if there was a soul in the world who loved him. It was only a few years later that he met my mother. He was 17. My mother likes to say that when she met him, he was a little boy and she spent the next 50 years raising him.

The second great set of circumstances that influenced who my father was, was another worldwide cataclysm, the Second World War and his part in it. He volunteered to go fight in Europe at a time when waiting to be drafted ensured that you would never have to leave Canada. It was a sense of duty, more than a sense of adventure that drove him to go to war. But the army didn't want him. They rejected him outright. Already a great reader and showing the flashes of brilliance that would later win him a gold medal in law school, he wasn't used to flunking tests. But he flunked this one. He flunked the medical for getting into the army because he was too big. But he was not to be denied. A bottle of liquor to the doctor reviewing the applications and a promise to lose the weight, which he did subsequently lose, and he was off to the R.O.T.C. - the Royal Officer Training Corps.

A few months later, a lieutenant in the Canadian Army and he was in England, the staging ground for the invasions of Europe which were to follow. But again he was denied entry into one of the theatres of battle, because he couldn't pass a course. This time, the motorcycle course. It was mandatory that officers be able to drive a motorcycle and these terrified him, a fear which he held over me when I bought a motorcycle 25 years later.

Another well placed bottle of liquor and he passed the course and was off to fight in Europe. His war was in Sicily and Italy and he spent the war as a forward observation officer with the artillery. A forward observation officer was often called the most dangerous job in the army. While the artillery sits 10 or 20 miles back and lobbs in shells, the forward observation officer goes the 10 or 20 miles ahead of the lines to direct the landing of the shells. With binoculars and a map and a radio, he sends back signals - 50 yards to the right, or 100 yards shorter. There is danger in being hit by your own shells, by the enemy's shells and also of encountering your counterpart - the forward observation officer performing the same function for the enemy. My father spent the war in empty farmhouses, or sitting in trees with a pair of binoculars sending back messages to his troops.

Can you imagine my father sitting in a tree with a pair of binoculars? That was how he spent the war.

When the war in Europe was over, he wrote my mother in Winnipeg and said he was going to the Pacific because the war was not over there. She wrote back and said "no you're not". And that was the end of his military career.

The third factor in my father's life that was of great importance was not the result of a worldwide cataclysm, but was the most important thing of all. Finally, as an adult, he had a family of his own. And he felt a love for this family which was sometimes smothering and could only have been born of a person who had not had his own family as a child. His demands and expectations for his children were excessive and sometimes unreasonable, but always, without exception, his love was unconditional and immutable. I think he would be pleased to know that the most important thing I learned from my father is that one's love for one's family is and must be unconditional. His children never ever doubted that. His love for my mother and my sister and myself, for my wife, Deborah and my brother Joe, was so great that 25 years ago, I would not have believed it possible for him to have the same depth of love for his grandsons. But he did. Their achievements were his greatest source of pride and as many of you know, he would talk about them endlessly whether or not you were interested in listening. And if you weren't interested in listening, he didn't really care. He talked about them anyway.

He loved us all desperately. And we loved him. We will miss him.

Norman Silverman

Chaim Notah ben Avraham v'Chava

Died January 17, 2002

Shevat 4 5752

Suni told me that each day Norman would open the newspaper, turn to the obituary page, and if his name wasn't there he could then read the rest of the paper knowing that he still had an opportunity to get on with changing the world.

Today Norman will find his name on the obituary page. He will read as we did, that he is remembered and loved by his family. His wife of 62 years, Suni, his daughter Ruth-Ellen, her husband Joe, and their son, Steven, and by his son Arne, his wife Deborah, and their children, David, Zack and Ben. The reference to nephews, nieces and cousins and the knowledge that hundreds of friends, colleagues and students will also miss him is testimony to how his presence made an impact on their lives.

Only a few of his many accomplishments are listed but notably his service for the Canadian Army in World War II, when he saw active duty in Italy, was one of the life changing events that showed him the importance of fighting for your beliefs. His accomplishments at the University of Manitoba where he won the Gold Medal as the top student in his law class are recalled. What isn't mentioned is the frustration he must have felt at his inability to enter the Ph.D. program in History at the university due to the discriminatory quotas against Jews in some departments that still existed in the 1940's and 50's.

Was it this injustice that gave him the drive to not only set up a law practice in Edmonton, but also to become involved on his new community as not only a member, but as a leader of organizations such as the Talmud Torah, Beth Shalom Synagogue, B'nai Brith and the Jewish Community Council.

Norman did not confine his efforts to the Jewish community. He believed in social justice, he believed that people had a voice that should be heard by government and he advocated for these causes through his involvement with Kiwanis and the Edmonton Chamber of Commerce. The past few years saw his strident advocacy turn towards the plight of seniors, many who like himself were at the mercy of the increased demands on the health system. He did not hesitate to express his views through letters to politicians or the newspapers about the plight of seniors on reduced income or on behalf of fellow veterans whose sacrifices were being forgotten.

But if we are to imagine that Norman is indeed reading his obituary in today's paper then probably his greatest frustration is that his death has ended his ability to be a teacher, passing on his skills to others. In recent years this meant speaking to law students at the University of Alberta or in the Minerva program for seniors at Grant McEwan College where he is still scheduled to teach Canadian history next semester.

To Norman, however teaching was not restricted to a classroom or lecture hall. His children and his four grandsons have benefited all of their lives from his immense knowledge and unselfish desire to pass it on to others.

The Torah portion we will read tomorrow, Bo, from the Book of Exodus, shows us one of the roots of the tradition that exists among our people to teach our history to future generations. In this portion God tells Moses to go before Pharaoh in Egypt and tell him that the Lord will continue the cycle of plagues which he has forced on the Egyptians in retribution for the hardships placed on the Hebrews and to force him to give them their freedom. One may question why so many punishments were necessary, as it would seem that the retention of the Hebrews was not worth the agony placed on Pharaoh's own people.

The answer lies in the first words of the portion as we read, *Bo el Paro ki ani heechbaditi et leebo v'et leiv avadav l'ma'an sheetee ototee eileh b'keerbo . Ool'ma'an tesapair b'aznei veencha oovein beencha et asher heetallaltee b'mitrayim v'et ototai asher samtee vam v'yadatam, kee ani Adonai.*

Come to Pharaoh, for I have made his heart and the heart of his servants heavy with stubbornness in order that I may put these, my signs among them and in order that you **may recount in the ears of your child and of your child's child** how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I displayed my signs among them, in order that you may know that I am the Lord.

**Recount in the ears of your child and your child's child - your grandchildren.**

Later in this same portion we are given the first instructions in the Torah for the celebration of the Passover festival and the seder where this commandment is to be fulfilled. This is a mitzvah, a commandment that Norman took to heart. Each year he gathered with his children and his grandchildren to recount the Passover story recognizing that it is a feast of history, where every celebrating generation becomes united with the first generation and with all those who have followed.

To Norman, being surrounded by family was proof that he had escaped his personal Mitzrayim of prejudice and a vindication that his role in the war against fascism was just. He took the role of leading the seder seriously witnessed by the forceful way he enunciated each word describing the plagues that befell the people of Pharaoh. As each of the four cups was raised he completed the prayer not only with the proud wish of l'chaim - to life- but also a curse - "and damnation to our enemies". Each cup was a reminder to Norman that life will go on through his four grandchildren, all of them devoted to him and through their own university studies following in the quest for excellence that Norman set for Ruth-Ellen and Arne.

Words of comfort to a family are always difficult to come up with when a loss is sudden. Although his mind remained as sharp as ever, Norman's body had been slowed by crippling arthritis and this past year has been made more painful by the tragic loss of his close friends Norbert and Sheila Berkowitz. Perhaps his life's mission wasn't completed, there were more courses to teach, more letters to write, more politicians to vilify, but I think you can all take comfort in the knowledge that our lives have been enriched by having Norman with us. His death cannot take from us the wisdom we will continue to cherish, nor the experiences that were shared. The Talmud says "the righteous need no monuments, their good deeds are their memorials."

To Norman's family I ask that you continue to do as you have been doing, to follow his tradition of devotion to community, to justice, to making this world a better place. To Steven, David, Zack and Ben, remember that every class you take at U of A, Yale, UBC, and wherever your future takes you is another victory for your grandfather.

Norman was a man of many words but he also knew there were times when he could say just two words that meant a lot, God bless...

Norman - God bless you.