

Norman Shneidman

Norman always said that he didn't have a native language. Growing up in comfortable, middle-class circumstances in Vilnius (then Wilno), "the Jerusalem of Lithuania," he spoke Yiddish, Russian and German at home, Hebrew and Polish at school and, eventually, Lithuanian. By the time Norman reached his teens, though, there were constant reminders of the threats facing the thriving Jewish community in Vilnius. The Nazi occupation of the city in June 1941 came with the indiscriminate slaughter of Jews and the formation of two ghettos. Both his parents perished here, and his only sister was sent to a camp in Latvia. (She and Norman were reunited in Toronto in 1958).

During the two years Norman spent in the ghetto he worked at a job outside by day and, by night, helping smuggle in weapons and supplies for an armed resistance movement. In September 1943, when the ghetto was about to be liquidated, he and a group of other resistance fighters escaped, making their way into the forest and eventually joining a Soviet partisan group in Belorussia. He never spoke much about this time in his life, and I resisted the urge to pry since I assumed his memories of it were painful. But he did provide a very compelling account of his two years with the partisans in his memoir, *Jerusalem of Lithuania*, Mosaic Press: Oakville and Buffalo, 1998.

He had always been active in sports, and was a championship boxer. He went on to coach some Soviet Olympians and complete an advanced degree in sport physiology. In 1957, taking advantage of a Polish-Soviet agreement on repatriation of former Polish citizens, Norman, his wife Nina and daughter Rose moved to Poland and then to Canada.

Here Norman had to re-invent himself yet again and master yet another language. So he began graduate studies in the University of Toronto Slavic Department, and this was where I first met him, in the early 1960s. He was already finishing his program when I was beginning mine, and I remember him as being always on the move between his classes in the department, teaching in private schools, and working on his dissertation. The dissertation, by the way, was finished in record time.

He had been teaching at Erindale College (now UTM) for a year when I came on the job market, and I'm still grateful to him for putting in a good word for me. The two of us worked well together, and we spent a very busy and happy fourteen years building up

a language and literature program. At the same time, he was publishing very actively, with a book every few years. Later in his career he served as Acting Director of the Centre for Russian and East European Studies and for a time as the university's Acting Director of Athletics.

I learned a lot from Norman, the most important things being the value of determination and plain hard work. If someone who had survived all he had could start over, in his mid-thirties in a new country and with a new language and build a solid career, then there was hope for me, too. It was a matter of rolling up the sleeves and going at the job until it was done.

Norman experienced the worst that the twentieth century had to offer: Nazi terror and the ghetto, the horrors of modern war, and Stalinism. Despite the scars he carried, he remained a thoughtful, compassionate, and thoroughly decent human being. I think his life experience also made him a very wise man. I recall how many of his students, some even after graduating, turned to him for advice, as I often did. He was a good colleague and a good friend. My life is richer for having known him.