

Viennese Cremeschnitte

By Tuvia (Toby) Erez (Reiss)

This article was originally published in June 2013, in memory of my father, Yitzhak (Kurt) Erez (Reiss), who passed away in May 2013, at age 94.



My father and Aunt (Hedi), Vienna, 1926



My father's photograph on the cover of about a book about his life that he published



We had sat all day at home in memory of my father who passed away. As evening began to fall, Shuki (the dog) and I went out to refresh ourselves on the bench in the garden. "Your grandfather's story is a long one," I said to Shuki. "It began in Vienna in 1919 right after the end of World War I, and has ended 94 years later in a nursing home in Naharia." "Interesting", said Bamba (the cat) who sat, without my noticing, on the windowsill. "You always try to act young, but your father's birth-year gives away how old you really are." I ignored the sarcastic comment. "His life story," I said, "on a small scale, is the story of the Jewish people in the twentieth century."

"When your grandpa was 19," I continued, "the Germans annexed Austria. The year was 1938. Grandpa, who was young then, escaped with the youth movement 'Af-Al-

Pi' on an illegal immigrant ship headed towards Israel. This was where his string of wars began: member of the Beitar Company - defending the Jewish settlement, a soldier in the British army fighting the Nazi oppressor, and a soldier in the IDF (Israel Defense Force) in the War of Independence until the Six Day War. Here he met Grandmother and here he built a family." "All that you can read in a history book," said Shuki. "Tell us something we don't know. Tell us what kind of a man Grandpa was."

What can I say, Grandpa left Vienna, but Vienna never left him.



My aunt Hedi, Grandpa's sister, told me the following story about their childhood. Every Friday, their mother (my grandmother) made apple strudel (apple cake): one cake for each member of the family. Grandpa would hide the cake in his closet, lock the closet with a shlissel (key) and every single day he would eat a piece of cake.

His sister, on the other hand, would devour her cake in one day. Throughout the rest of the week she would beg and plead for her brother to give her just one more piece of his cake, but he was stubborn and refused. "Control yourself", he would say, "and don't eat all your cake in one day."

"I guess you are like your aunt," said Bamba, "I've seen you devour a pack of peanuts in one go."



The war interrupted his high school studies and his violin lessons. But as an autodidact he knew (almost) everything about music, history, geography, and so forth. When my children would come to me with questions on these topics I would tell them: call your grandpa, he knows the answer. And he never disappointed.

At my other aunt's house on Ben Yehuda Strasse in Tel Aviv there was a grand piano. At every family gathering he would sit at the piano and ask, "Who has a song request?" To the person making the request he would whisper, "hum me the start of the melody of the song." He would immediately start playing with great feeling and precision as if he had written the melody himself, even if he had never heard it before.

"I remember," said Shuki, "that you too studied violin in your youth. I barely had a chance to answer when Bamba interjected again, "Have you forgotten what they used

to say about your violin playing? The neighbors paid you a lot of money not to play."

"His greatest love was the opera." I continued. "Verdi, Mozart and Puccini performed in our house almost every afternoon. He took me to Edis de Philippe's Israeli opera on Allenby Street. For me it was a nightmare. The shrieks, the incomprehensible words, when would it end?! Later in life I decided to give it another chance. Grandpa of course guided me: begin with a light opera like Cavalleria Rusticana by Mascagni and go from there, he said. I did as I was told, and ever since we shared a common love.

"I noticed," said Bamba, "that you have not managed to pass on your love of opera to the rest of the family. Every time you put on opera everyone leaves the room." Ugh, I thought to myself - this cat and his cynicism.



Once, when I was a teenager, I took the bus from my home in central Tel Aviv to the vocational school in Givatayim. Like most teens I preferred not to see well rather than wear my glasses, which I buried deep in my pocket. By the HaBima Theater I noticed, (in a blur of course), a driver in a private car running rampant, speeding, honking incessantly, trying to pass the bus. The cautious bus driver pulled over to the side to avoid an accident. The car stopped in front of the bus and the driver jumped out, ran to the bus and gestured for him to open the door. When the door opened he came in holding a bag, searched the bus and came directly to me and said, "Toby, you forgot your sandwich bag at home."



Two years ago Grandpa moved into a nursing home near my home. A nice modest room with healthy meals suitable for the elderly. "You can go crazy from all the health food," he would say. "Bring me something sweet and tasty to eat."

So, once a month I would bring him a Cremeschnitte cake (a vanilla and custard cream cake, popular in Austria). The cake was frozen, straight from the Shoham Bakery fridge in Meona. I would cut the cake into eight pieces with a knife that resembled a saw. Bamba licked his whiskers and grumbled, "You never bring me delicacies like that, only La Cat in the morning, La Cat in the afternoon and La Cat in the evening." "Of course not," I answered, "you would devour the whole cake in one day." "And Grandpa didn't?" asked Shuki.

Grandpa had great self-discipline and an irritating sense of responsibility. Every day in the afternoon he would have his coffee with a piece of cake. At times he would take an additional piece to indulge one of his numerous lady friends at the nursing home.

Two days before he entered the hospital for the last time I brought him the usual Cremeschnitte cake. The following day when I came to visit, he told me it was hard to swallow the cake. Take it for yourself, he said. "But father", I relied, "you know I don't eat cake. We'll leave it here in the fridge. Tomorrow you will feel better and you can have a piece."

"So give it to someone else." He grumbled.

"I don't have anyone to give it to," I said, "let's wait for tomorrow."

"So throw it out." He said.

"Absolutely not!" I said. "Tomorrow you will feel better and have a piece."

He did not reply.

The next day he was moved to the hospital. I came to visit him in the evening. Lying on the bed, pale, eyes closed and mouth covered by an oxygen mask. I gently touched his shoulder. "How do you feel?" I asked softly. He opened his eyes. He removed the oxygen mask with one hand, and held my hand with the other and asked, "Toby, have you thrown out the Cremeschnitte, yet?"

From the corner of my eye I could see Bamba shed a single tear and so did I.

That was how he was to the very end: responsibility, order and self-discipline.

■ ■ ■



Tuvia Erez, Yitzhak's son