

BORIS SEGELSTEIN



The oldest of four brothers, Eliezer Dov – later Boris – was born in 1921 in Veretski, a Czechoslovakian village of 3,000. He lived mostly with his grandparents. His grandfather, a mason, brought Boris presents, and when Boris wanted a violin like the one belonging to the boy next door, his grandfather fashioned one from wood.

Grandfather held Friday night Shabbat services and *Shalosh se'udot*, the third Sabbath meal, in his home for neighbors. Grandmother told him stories about the days in World War I when his home region was a battleground among the armies of Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary.

There was no electricity or indoor plumbing in Veretski. Large gardens sustained the family with vegetables. Meat was only for the Sabbath. Boris' father, a shoemaker, kept his workbench in the kitchen, also the family living area. The other room was for the goat.

Boris bathed weekly at the *mikveh*, the ritual bath, and washed each morning in the nearby river. He had eight years of *cheder*, Hebrew school. The town's 500 Jews had three synagogues.

Besides reading, Boris as a child enjoyed skiing and, in summer, playing soccer, volleyball and ping-pong, as well as hiking and swimming. He also belonged to a Zionist youth group. Sometimes, he was treated to movies that ran on generators and to choral concerts presented by traveling troupes.

Boris had been a tailor's apprentice for two years when, in March 1939, Hungarian forces occupied Czechoslovakia. His father was taken to a field and gunned down by armed troopers.

After he was taken to a Hungarian slave-labor battalion in the early 1940s, Boris never again saw his mother, grandparents or two of his brothers. He escaped in May 1944 and joined the Soviet army. After the war, Boris met his wife, Lilly at a displaced person camp in Como, Italy.

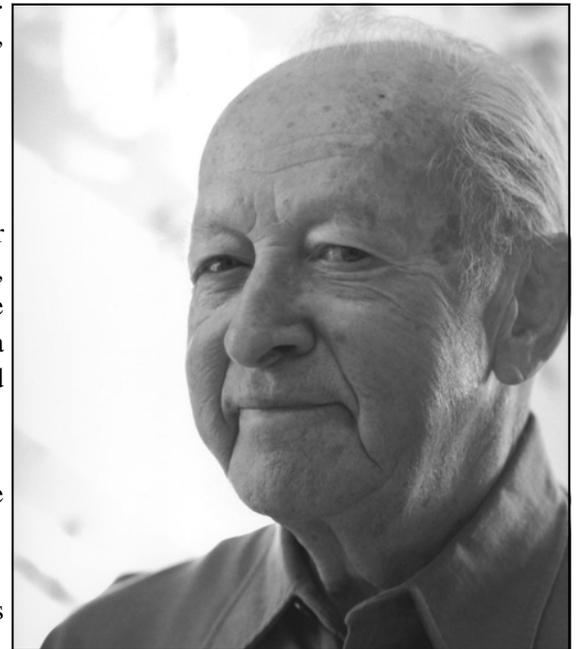
"She was standing in a food line," he recalled, "and I decided to try my luck."

Boris and Lilly came to the United States because an aunt who had cared for Boris in his grandparents' home was in New York. Never happy as a tailor, Boris took evening courses in design. But design jobs in New York were hard to come by, so he accepted an offer in Kansas City in 1953. He was a designer for clothing companies for decades. He and his wife were married 54 years when he died in 2000.

He had written a memoir but had spoken little about his experiences in the Holocaust, even to his three children, Cookie, David and Cindy.

"I didn't see any purpose in sharing my experiences," he said. "I felt I was not unique." He never returned to Europe.

Boris Segelstein could never forget certain images. He could somewhat accept the demise of his parents, but never their humiliation. Certain smells – fresh-cut flowers and gunpowder – brought the memories back. And he was not sure about the existence of God – except when he looked into the eyes of his children and grandchildren.



Portrait by David Sosland
Excerpt from *From the Heart: Life Before and After the Holocaust ~ A Mosaic of Memories*

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