

ZDENKO BERGL



One of the five Jewish families in Zabno, Croatia, the Bergls owned 300 acres planted in wheat and an orchard of 4,000 trees. Nandor Bergl managed his father-in-law's grocery store, brick factory and lumber mill. They experienced little overt antisemitism. After all, says Zdenko, an only child: "My father was the biggest employer in town. His donation helped build the church."

The Bergls' employees ate with the family. Five staff people helped Zdenko's mother, Ernestina Bergl, run the household. Traditional Croatian meals included meat almost every day. With three bedrooms and two toilets, the Bergls lived well.

Zdenko's hobby was soccer. On Sundays, he walked 20 miles to a Hebrew lesson. When the Catholic priest taught the Old Testament in public school, Zdenko enjoyed knowing all the answers. The Bergls celebrated Shabbat, but not in the traditional manner.

"We had traditional foods and a very short prayer," he recalls. At Passover, the whole town came to share the Bergls' matzohs. In the working part of the house, the Bergls had a Christmas tree with presents for their employees.

By 1936, Zdenko's parents were boycotting German products. Zdenko was disappointed on his 10th birthday when he got a Kodak Brownie camera instead of a Leica.

"We were hoping America would just trounce Germany overnight," he recalls. The occupation of Croatia began on Easter Sunday 1941. By July, Nandor Bergl was forced to work his own land. Two weeks later, he was arrested. He was released, thanks to family connections. The Bergls immediately fled to Italy where, with the help of a priest, they obtained forged papers.

Upon liberation by Americans in August 1944, the Bergls were sent to Cinecittá, a refugee camp in Rome. Zdenko drove a food truck and went to architectural engineering school in Como until 1949, when the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee assigned the family to Kansas City.

Shortly afterwards, Zdenko – now also known as John Bergl – was drafted and served in Korea. "This was the most fantastic experience of my life," he says. "I learned discipline. I learned to depend on myself. I became a better American. And I never heard any American call me a greenhorn. I paid my dues." He still keeps in touch with his Army buddies.

The couple settled at 2308 Truman Road in Kansas City. A sheet metal worker, Zdenko Bergl never felt accepted by the established Jewish community in Kansas City. Most of his friends have been fellow refugees.

He has visited Croatia several times since the war. The best visit was in 1972, when he shipped his Cadillac overseas and drove it into Zabno.

"People came from all over and said: 'We cleaned you Jews out. How do you do it?'"

Zdenko told them: "When you come to America and tell them you're Jewish, your fellow Jews give you a key for a new house and a key for a new car."

"And they believed it!"



Portrait by Gloria Baker Feinstein

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

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