

JUNE FEINSILVER



In the midst of World War II, June Rubenstein met Isaac Feinsilver in the Tomaszow ghetto. June had a card that allowed her to work as a secretary in the factory where Isaac was a sheet-metal worker. Isaac found a cantor who married them under a chuppah kedushah, the sacred canopy. From the ghetto, June and Isaac were taken to Blizhyn, a labor camp, and then to Auschwitz.

When the war ended, June was liberated from Bergen-Belsen and Isaac from Buchenwald. Upon receiving a letter from June, Isaac – a bicycle racer before the war – rode for two weeks across war-torn Germany to rejoin her. He brought her soap and cologne. June and Isaac were the only survivors from their immediate families.

June was born Junia Rubenstein in Lodz, Poland. Her father, Jacob Rubenstein, owned a silk stocking factory. When Lodz became unbearably hot in summer, June's mother, Eva Rubenstein, rented a villa. Every Friday, her father took his mother, Brena Royza, hose and candy before coming home.

“When we went to see her, we had to be seen, not heard, and we had to kiss her hand,” June recalls of her grandmother.

The Rubensteins belonged to a synagogue, but the children – June and her older and younger brothers – went only on Yom Kippur because they felt sorry for their fasting parents. June's brothers were trained for bar mitzvah by a rabbi who came to their apartment. When the war broke out, June was two years short of her degree in bookkeeping.

Isaac's family was one of about 8,000 Jewish families in Tomaszow Mazowiecki, Poland. Moshe Feinsilver, a coal dealer, and Etta Feinsilver had seven children. Doted on by his siblings, Isaac, the youngest, was four when his mother died. His stepmother had a Torah written in his name so that he would say Kaddish, the mourner's prayer, for her after she died. As a boy, Isaac went to cheder, Hebrew school, and a Talmud Torah public school. His non-Jewish friends called him “our Jew.”

When the factory where Isaac worked was bombed, he fled to Russia by bicycle but returned to take care of his parents. “Aryan” features and familiarity with Poles enabled him to smuggle goods in and out of the ghetto.

After the war, the Feinsilvers did not want to have children in a country that, as June says, was “splattered with Jewish blood.” Isaac's uncle in Israel urged them to go to the United States.

Isaac and June were happy to be assigned to Kansas City. They started in a tiny apartment in Kansas City, Kansas, moved to 10th Street and later to 26th Street and Benton Boulevard in Kansas City, Missouri.

Isaac's first job in a metal shop paid 65 cents an hour. When Isaac asked for a raise and his boss threatened to deport him, Isaac joined a cabinet-making shop and within three months, was admitted to the union. For 30 years, he and a partner had a wood furniture-making business. June worked as a hairdresser.

The older they get, the more memories come back to them, especially at night – from June's pillow-fights with her little brother to Isaac's trading bread for underwear to give to June in Auschwitz.

The Feinsilvers have a daughter, Evelyn, and two grandchildren.



Portrait by David Sosland

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

© 2001 Midwest Center for Holocaust Education