

ABE GUTOVITZ



Avram, later Abe, Gutovitz was born on Dec. 14, 1911, in the small town of Warka, the second oldest of six children of Laibel and Passa Gutovitz.

When the family moved to Bialobrzegi, Poland, they lived on the main street near most of the town's 50 or so other Jewish families. Their home included a kitchen, a bedroom and a room for Laibel Gutovitz's shoemaking business. "We didn't even know about vacations," Abe recalls.

He did not begin school until he was 8 years old. Instead, his mother's sister Chaya, who "talked a few languages," taught him at home. His public education ended at 13, although he still went to cheder, Hebrew school. Along with his parents, he and most of his friends belong to Zionist organizations. As a teenager, Abe was a member of the Revizionist Party, a Zionist group espousing Vladimir Jabotinsky's philosophy that fighting would be a necessary precursor to the birth of the State of Israel. Not interested in shoemaking, he went into business with a partner buying fruit, which they delivered by horse and wagon to larger cities.

In Bialobrzegi, says Abe, "Shabbos [the Sabbath] was *Shabbos* and *yontif* [a religious holy day] was *yontif*. We came from the synagogue, we had dinner. Then, everybody went to sleep. The young people had speeches, went to the organizations, went *shpatzierin* [promenading] with girlfriend or boyfriend."

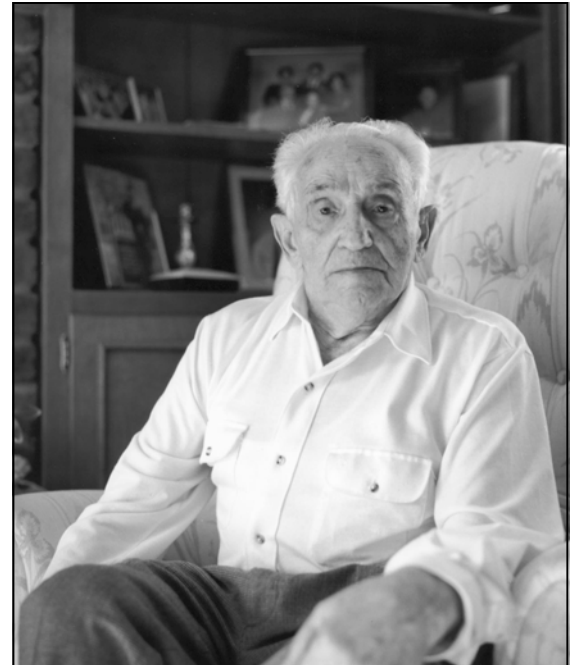
In those years, he says, "You could walk days and nights; nobody bothered you." Abe noticed the change a few years before World War II. "They start talking, 'Don't buy from Jewish businesses.' But you didn't want to know. Because you were living with them. In our town, the gentiles didn't bother you."

When the Nazis arrived, they gave Abe's family 15 minutes to pack and leave their home. It was the last time Abe saw his parents. He and two of his brothers were among the few taken as slave laborers to an ammunition factory, where Abe remained until 1944. Abe was hiding under bodies of the dead when he was liberated from Buchenwald concentration camp.

At the displaced persons camp in Landsberg-am-Lech, Abe and his brothers met and married under the same *chuppah*, a wedding canopy, in 1946. "She was a beauty," says Abe of his wife, Bena Gutovitz.

The couple was brought to Kansas City in 1949 by Abe's uncle. Together they ran a shoe repair and alteration shop until 1991 when Bena was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease. Abe closed the store the next day and devoted the next six years to her care. She died in 1998.

"She was more important to me than the business," he says. "She was like a princess in the house." Abe is proud of his children – Patsy, Toby, and Sam – who helped care for their mother. He also has six 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