

EUGENE LEBOVITZ



Gene Levobitz believes he survived the Holocaust for two reasons: luck and youth.

“When I was young, I walked seven kilometers a day,” he recalls. “In the morning, I walked to my grandparents to bring fresh milk home for breakfast. After school, we went to Hebrew school. Then we played soccer.”

Gene, who was born Evzen Levobics, and his older sister and brother grew up in the Czech town of Berehovo, now part of Ukraine. About half the town’s 18,000 residents were Jewish. The Lebovicses collected water for washing in barrels. If there was no rain, Shifra Lebovics did laundry in the river.

Gene chopped wood every morning for the kitchen fire. On Friday, before Shabbat, he accompanied his mother to the market to purchase a duck or chicken. Then they took the animal to be plucked and ritually slaughtered. “Berehovo practically closed down on the Sabbath,” says Gene, “because 95 percent of the businesses were owned by Jews.”

Gene’s grandfather was a custom tailor, as was his father, Abraham Lebovics. The tailor shop, which employed eight people, was attached to the family’s two-bedroom home. Abraham Lebovics put Gene to work in the shop at age 7. “No matter what happens in your life,” he told his son, “all you need is a thimble and a needle and you can work.”

Gene played clarinet in his school’s marching band, prayed in the synagogue every morning and evening, and, like his father, was an ardent Zionist. Gene was 14 in 1938 when Hungarian fascists occupied Berehovo.

The Zionist Vladimir Jabotinsky had come to the town in 1936, warning about the threats to Jews, Gene recalls, but “we didn’t believe what he told us then.”

Gene spent 1941 through 1944 in forced labor battalions. In the Budapest ghetto, Gene met [Kate Stern](#), who worked for the Swedish Red Cross under Raoul Wallenberg. They married in August 1944, before Gene was deported to the Mauthausen concentration camp.

At liberation, Gene weighed 104 pounds. He and Kate were smuggled to Italy by the Palestine Brigade. Thwarted by her pregnancy in their hope to reach Palestine, they obtained U.S. visas and arrived in 1946. Within four days, Gene found work in a New York garment factory. He was head designed for the largest coat and suit company in the world, the father of four children – George, Allen, Shari, and Karen – owned a house on Long Island when the Youthcraft Manufacturing Co. lured him to Kansas City to help build the business.

Gene served on the boards of the Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy and Beth Shalom Synagogue. He has been the president of B’nai Brith Lodge 184 and B’nai Brith Council, and has been honored by the State of Israel for raising hundreds of thousands of dollars in bonds. Years after playing clarinet in his school band, Gene shared his love of music and of Jewish tradition by performing concerts for residents of Shalom Geriatric Center.

Gene has spoken to groups about the Holocaust for more than 30 years. He and Kate have nine grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.



Portrait by Gloria Baker Feinstein

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

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