

SAM NUSSBAUM



Sam Nussbaum – Shmuel in Yiddish and Samek for short – installed the first indoor plumbing in his family’s apartment. He became a plumber at 15 when his father, Laibish, took him out of yeshiva, Orthodox Jewish academy. “We didn’t have such a good time in Poland,” says Sam. “My father wanted me to learn a trade so I could go to Israel,” Sam never made it to Israel, but plumbing did save his life.

The Nussbaums lived in Przemysl, a town of about 80,000, including about 26,000 Jews, 100 kilometers from Lvov. Like many Jewish boys, Shmuel started cheder, Hebrew school, at age 3 and yeshiva at 8. He also went to public school, played soccer, belonged to a Zionist youth organization and went to synagogue every day before work.

In September 1939, the Nazis came to Przemysl, took 500 children to a cemetery and shot them. Hitler then turned that part of Poland over to Stalin, according to a Soviet-German pact signed a month earlier. Until 1941, Przemysl was Soviet territory. When the Nazis returned, they made Shmuel their plumber. Shmuel tried to escape by volunteering for a transport – he thought – to work in Germany. A Gestapo agent who appreciated Shmuel’s work had him taken off. The other 8,000 Jews on the transport went to the gas chambers.

Having liberated Shmuel from a labor camp in Austria, the Jewish Brigade took him on an American truck to a displaced persons camp in Italy. There, until leaving for America in 1948, he managed the kitchen for 300 people, sold old clothes and married 17-year old Elizabeth. The birth of their son, Larry, quashed their plans to immigrate illegally to Palestine.

The Nussbaums were sent to live in Kansas City because, they were told, there were already too many new immigrants in New York. In Kansas City, Sam met a rabbi who helped him find an apartment. Still speaking hardly any English, Sam walked into a plumbing shop and got hired.

Sam didn’t talk much about his experiences until 1992, when he traveled to Stuttgart to testify against the Nazi Josef Schwammberger. “It was worth surviving for my children,” he says, proudly, adding, “I’m protected! I got David, a rabbi, Larry, a doctor, Bonnie, a lawyer, and Mel, a plumber. And I got 19 grandchildren.”

In 1973, Sam and Elizabeth bought an apartment in Israel. “I’m waiting for maybe one child to go to Israel,” he says. “I won’t be here 10 minutes.”

The Nussbaums also bought 10,000 trees in a Jerusalem forest and built a monument to their lost family. “Made me feel I had done something,” Sam says.



Portrait by Gloria Baker Feinstein

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