



Our Community

Nathan Kornmehl's Story

The Buffalo Jewish Review asked Linda Chalmers Zemel to interview well-known, well-loved Buffalo resident, Nathan Kornmehl. The story of his life is the stuff authors draw upon for a book and screenwriters for a script. His story tracks events that resonate with that familiar sound of the pain and tragedy of the Jewish experience in the 20th century. But it is also a story of happiness and fulfillment realized by the relatively few Holocaust survivors who were fortunate to reach America and make a new life.

The story that follows is a compilation of the interview by Linda Chalmers Zemel and the information that was available to the staff of the Buffalo Jewish Review.

The butcher business was Nate Kornmehl's stake in Buffalo for 44 years, starting in 1948. But what came before the Hertel Avenue store is a journey whose story stretches from Cologne in Germany, to Lemberg in the Ukraine, to Siberia and then back again to Germany.

Long before Frances Leder and their five children became the center of his life in Buffalo, Nate Kornmehl was listening, providing, thinking and working in ways that would help, not only himself, but, importantly, those around him who were in dire and desperate circumstances.

When Hitler came to power, Kornmehl was still a teenager in school. But school and soon, even work, were to become a distant memory and an even more distant possibility.

Nathan was the only son of pious parents. When he was 14 years old, his father died, leaving his mother prematurely widowed. He had four sisters.

In those early years of the Hitler regime, the family was ordered to Poland. But as they were not admitted into the country, the family settled on the German-Polish border with others from all over Germany.

One of his sisters, in an overnight departure, was able to escape from there to the United States. The year was 1936.

Feared for son's life

Fearing for her son's life, Nathan's mother urged him to leave. He heeded her advice and that fateful moment of departure marked the last time he saw his mother and one of his sisters. They perished in a concentration camp.

Nate managed to get to Lemberg (also known as Lvov) in the Ukraine, but that was only his initial stop in the Soviet Union. From there he was sent by Soviet authorities, with many others, to Siberia in a cattle car. The cattle car ride was to last four weeks.

Exhausted, the passengers de-boarded at the last station after Novosibirsk, at a town called Asino, where, at that time, the train tracks literally stopped. He found himself in a gulag where Soviet government officials were in charge.

In Siberia, young Nathan was given a series of jobs; his first was carrying water from wells to the workers. He was given a horse for the job that in winter was hitched to a sled, in summer to a light wagon.

Food was scarce in Siberia. On the route, people would sometimes give Nathan a piece of bread and sometimes a strip of tobacco wrapped in newspaper. "I had never had a horse before," says Nathan, "I was from Cologne!" But Nathan knew it was important to take good care of the horse. He exchanged the tobacco for

more bread to better feed the horse and that would benefit him also: "If the horse was fed, instead of five stops, I made maybe two stops."

Within a few months, the government officials said the horse looked so much better that they hardly recognized it and that, in turn, encouraged them to give Nathan even more bread.

In Siberia, it was rare to find an orange or apple, but, occasionally, he was even given a piece of fruit as a holiday gift.

Nathan's next job was in a bakery. This was a blessing since it was warm in the bakery, and he preferred to remain there at night rather than return to his cold living quarters. At that early age, Nathan exhibited the kindness that our community recognized so many years later — he managed to bring others into the warm bakery at night.

Beside the cold in Siberia, the scarcity of food continued to be a terrible problem. Kornmehl recalls that, anomalously, "People in Siberia were wearing diamonds and gold, but they were dying of hunger."

Lumber was the industry of the gulag. Trees were cut, cleaned, put on trucks and, in the warm weather, unloaded into water and transported to the factory.

The chief cook

Kornmehl's next job was to cook for these workers and he eventually became the chief cook. In the soup he prepared, the heavier, more nourishing substance settled at the bottom of the pot. In no uncertain terms, Nathan admonished the "servers," as they were called, to take the soup from the bottom for everyone, not just for their favorite workers. At first, the servers resented his demand and authority, but as time passed, they came to recognize his honesty and fairness.

"You practice what you preach," they said. They embroidered his Russian name, Anatole, on his uniform. It was an expression of their respect and fondness for him.

When the war was over, with others who had spent the war in Siberia, Nathan made his way back to Poland. There, in Tarnow, he spotted a young woman, Frances Leder, whom he had known when she was a little girl. Young Nathan also knew that his mother and the sister whom he had lost in the Holocaust had been taken in and cared for by Frances' brother in Poland.

Before the war, Frances' large family, with its many rabbis, was deeply pious and highly respected in their community — none of them survived. Now Frances, a young woman, was all alone.

"I had rachmonis (pity) on her," says Nathan, "Come with me, you can go where I go," he said. He would take care of her, protect her and lead her to safety. The two were able to make their way back to Germany.

With the war over, the American consulate established a quota that allowed Germans who were not affiliated with the Nazi party to immigrate to the United States. Nathan headed right for the consulate.

As a German national, he was fortunate to come under that quota. But



NATHAN KORNMEHL

Frances was Polish. For Frances to receive permission to immigrate, she would have to be married to a German national. Nathan asked her to marry him.

"I'll give you a get (a religious divorce) when we get to America," he offered. Frances accepted and, on an April day in Germany, in 1946, the two were married.

On arrival in America, Frances went to live in New York City and Nathan settled in Buffalo, where his sister, Ida, who had escaped to America 10 years earlier, was now residing.

Nathan called Frances in New York, offering, again, to give her a get, but this time, he also asked her to consider marriage with him, as he had fallen in love with her.

Frances was reluctant to accept his marriage proposal. She was raised to be deeply religious and was fearful Nathan would not be as observant. "I was religious, too," says Nathan, "but I knew I wasn't like Frances."

Nathan gave her his word that he would always keep the Sabbath in the way Frances wanted. They were married in a religious ceremony in Buffalo in June.

Menial jobs

Like most other new immigrants in America, Nathan set himself to earn a living by accepting any job, however menial. He worked in a junk shop. He worked in a gas station. He took a job with the Niagara Blower Company and that was a good one. But then the Korean War was in progress and the company wanted employees who could work on the Sabbath. "I gave her my word," Nathan says. He quit his job.

Now Nathan needed employment and his sister, Ida, helped out. She brought him to Yochelson's Kosher Meat Market, where he was offered an apprenticeship. His job was to deliver meat, which he did on a bicycle. (Even today, he remembers some of those customers.)

When Yochelson recognized the young man's qualities, he invited him to become a partner — but Nathan had reservations about becoming a butcher. He wasn't sure that was what he wanted to do in his life. Nate still remembers Yochelson's advice: It was a positive message of faith, "Be a men-

sch and everything will be all right." (Yochelson's own children turned out extremely well.)

It was when Nate opened his own shop on Hertel Avenue that his career, as many Buffalonians know it, began. His shop on Hertel was a place where customers chatted with each other and with the Kornmehts — and where he and his wife happily worked together long hours and many years to raise and educate their children.

And what children they are!

One son is an attorney, one an orthodontist and one an ophthalmologist; one daughter is a teacher and the other has a sales career in New York City. His three daughters-in-law are oncology and radiology physicians. A book on ophthalmology is authored by Dr. Ernest W. Kornmehl. Dr. Carol Kornmehl, who is the wife of orthodontist Dr. Marvin Kornmehl, is the author of a book on oncology (see box for information on their books).

Devoted to their father

The children are devoted to their father — utterly. But Nathan repeats many times over — insisting sometimes, pleading at others — that full credit for the accomplishments and fine character of his children goes wholly to his dear departed wife, Frances, who passed away 11 years ago.

Without help, Nathan says, she cleaned the house. She scrubbed, cooked, set a table that would be a credit to any homemaker. (He used the Yiddish word "balabusta" to describe her.) Nathan remembers the ironing board in the living room that she was using at 1 o'clock and 2 o'clock in the morning. She watched over every detail that pertained to the children and she worked with Nathan in the store.

"I was working and tired all the time," says Nathan. His hours in the shop were 6:30 in the morning to 11 o'clock at night, four days a week, Monday through Thursday. The hours were not as long on Fridays and Sundays. He didn't give so much time, he explains, to his children because of his hours and fatigue.

Today, he asks his children: "I never took you to a baseball game or to a football game, why are you so good to me?" (Though out of town, the children keep in constant touch with him and insist that he winter, away from the cold, in Florida, at their expense).

"We remember how you worked," they say. They remember because they saw him when they, too, after school and after homework, helped at night with the physical cleanup at the store.

Frances insisted on their help. "Your father has only two hands and he has seven people to feed," she told them.

Although Nathan's children, in their growing up years, never sat next to him at a baseball or football game, they learned the importance of responsibility, diligence and appreciation. They saw a father who was hard-working, kindly, honest and generous — and they saw parents who, in a time-honored Jewish tradition, sacrificed that their children might have a full and fruitful life ...

As the late afternoon dims the sky and Shabbat approaches, we wind up our interview so that Nathan can set the table for the Shabbat meal he has prepared for himself and a friend.

As I stand up to leave, he takes the plate from my hand with the half-eaten coffee cake on it and in a minute is back with a neat, foil-wrapped package.

"You'll finish it later," he says. "And here's another piece, too, for tomorrow."

Books by the Kornmehts

"The Best News about Radiation Therapy How to Cope and Survive"

By Carol L. Kornmehl, M.D.; Academic Radiation Oncology Press, 2003

"Lasik: A Guide to Laser Vision Correction"

Ernest W. Kornmehl, M.D., Robert K. Maloney, M.D., Jonathan M. Davidorf, M.D.; Addicus Books, 2001

What is outstanding about both these books is their user-friendly format coupled with scholarly content. Dr. Carol Kornmehl's book gives the reader a compendium of facts about the body and about radiation, but not until she has thoroughly explored with the reader a chapter titled "Radiation and Your Life." Making her way knowledgeably from "Life and Death Issues" to "Lifestyle Changes" to "Family Issues," she lets her readers know that there is indeed lots of living to do after radiation therapy and to do with enthusiasm and vitality.

Dr. Kornmehl has received multiple honors, her Web site notes, including listing in "Who's Who Among Rising Young Americans," "How to Find the Best Doctors: New York Metro Area," "National Registry of Who's Who," and "America's Registry of Outstanding Professionals." She was elected a Fellow of the American College of Radiation Oncology for her exemplary service to the field.

Dr. Ernest Kornmehl's comprehensive guide educates readers about the structure and function of the eye as well as Lasik surgery. Color pictures, Q-and-A formats, and clear definitions team up with user-friendly print as he takes us from how to talk to your doctor — to asking to talk with other patients — to whether you will be able to drive right after surgery.

Readers might guess from these details what his Web site notes: Dr. Kornmehl serves as an examiner for the American Board of Ophthalmology, is on the executive board and is a past president of Massachusetts Society of Eye Physicians and Surgeons. He has served as president of Boston Aid to the Blind, as a member of the Patient Education Committee of the American Academy of Ophthalmology and as an appointee by the Massachusetts governor to the Commission for the Blind.