

BOOKS: Survivor talks horror of the Holocaust, finding success in Halifax

PAUL W. BENNETT

Published February 24, 2017

Simon Spatz, From Holocaust to Halifax: A Story of Survival and Success

Nimbus Publishing, Hard Cover, 333 pages

Enterprising, hard-working ‘rags to riches’ founders are not uncommon in family business success stories. What makes the life of Halifax businessman Simon Spatz truly unique — and compelling — is his truly miraculous escape from the Holocaust and his incredible resilience in rebuilding that life in Halifax, especially amidst the whispers of anti-Semitism in the immediate post-war years.

The Simon Spatz saga (1913-2007) is, in his son Jim Spatz’s words, “a story worth telling” because the elder Spatz not only survived the horrors of the Second World War, but thrived against all odds in postwar Halifax. As a Jewish Nova Scotian businessman, he built his success with a tireless work ethic and blazed the trail for others in later generations.

Recreating the flesh-and-blood realities of that life’s journey can be a formidable challenge for an official biographer, especially one commissioned by the family. The Simon Spatz story, as retold by author and former Kings University journalism professor Michael Cobden, succeeds admirably in rising above hagiography to push at the limits of the genre.

Cobden’s masterful, finely crafted and thoroughly researched biography of Spatz recreates that life in vivid and graphic detail, assembled over almost a decade of interviews, research and trips to the former homeland.

Winning over his gregarious, storied subject and his wife, the late Riva Spatz, was relatively easy, far easier than piecing together a rather complex life’s journey from the small Ukrainian village of Pidhaichyky, once known as Unterwalden, Poland, to immediate post-war Munich, Germany and then on to Pier 21, Halifax.

The Spatz success story in Halifax is already well known, at least within the relatively small, closely-knit Nova Scotia business community.

The elder Spatz arrived in Halifax in 1950, an almost penniless Holocaust survivor, struggling with his English and approaching 40 years of age. First, he established a thriving grocery store, then branched out into acquiring small South End Halifax rooming house properties, purchasing one modest apartment building, then another, and eventually finding the courage to develop and build his own apartment complexes.

By 1987, when Simon had reached the age of 74 and son Jim joined him in the family business, the company known as Southwest Properties had expanded to 900 apartment units, making it one of the city’s largest and most successful landlords.

That was Simon's legacy to his son, an ambitious former doctor with big ideas and a passion for redeveloping commercial real estate properties and visionary condominium-apartment complexes, such as Bishop's Landing on the Halifax Waterfront.

Lesser known are Simon's humble, poverty-stricken origins and incredible struggles to survive before arriving in Canada. Born Shimen (Simon) Spatz in August 1913 in a rural village in Galicia, east of the city of Lviv, as the fourth of eight children in a Hasidic Jewish family, he earned his livelihood as a butcher before the outbreak of the Second World War.

The rise of Nazism virtually destroyed his village and childhood memories, in a region where 97 per cent of the Jews were extinguished in the Holocaust. It left an indelible impression upon Simon for the rest of his life.

Cobden is at his best when describing in gripping prose Simon's path to survival and escape from Nazi tyranny and then Ukrainian oppression.

"Simon learned to trust his instincts when it came to people who hated Jews," Cobden writes. "He'd defied death many times: in the village after the Nazis came, in the labour camp where a shot in the head could come at any moment, on the day he escaped in a desperate dash across the fields, and in the woods where all around him people were hunted and killed by Ukrainians or Nazis or died of disease. He had survived."

Upon returning to the region after the war, Simon felt chilling fear and said "Goodbye Charlie," never to return again. He met and married Riva in Munich, but never felt comfortable in postwar Germany. "No Germany for us," Riva later recalled. "Too many bad memories."

Simon Spatz's journey to Canada through Pier 21 may be immortalized in a popular museum exhibit, but we learn that the Dominion was not really his first choice. Initially, they wanted to go to the United States, but the Americans did not accept them as immigrants.

Simon and Riva then opted for a different destination, Canada, sponsored by Riva's sister Ruzia and brother-in-law, who had left for Canada in 1948, two years earlier.

Gaining entry into Canada was relatively easy, once Simon showed a Canadian immigration official his business licence showing he was slaughtering about 500 cattle a week. The answer was swift. "Straightaway," he replied. "Yah, you can go to Canada. Yah."

Upon arriving in Halifax, Simon and Riva never looked back. It was also a dramatic, life-changing move for their 10-month-old son Josef, now known as Jim.

While Cobden's subjects were co-operative, from the start, reliving buried, memories and discussing family matters rather forgotten can be painful.

The author, "born half-Jewish" in South Africa and a family confidant, shows a real talent for bringing out those confidences. Over time, the bond between author and subject became so close

that Simon once said, “Michael, you are a good Yid.” That’s what makes this biography, at times, a riveting and revealing look at business life.

The Spatz family — their aspirations, combativeness, jealousies, and schisms — form the core of Cobden’s biography, elevating it above most glossy, puffed-up, predictable business success tales.

For a commissioned biography, Cobden’s Simon Spatz has an unmistakable ring of authenticity. It conveys much about the personal sacrifices made in building a family business from the storefront-up and exposes family tensions that arise in attempting to reshape a second-generation business.

Family businesses can be messy, combative little enterprises that can capsize passing from one generation to another. The Simon Spatz story reminds us that maintaining that competitive advantage requires steely resolve, as well as innovation, sacrifice and fresh commitment, from the succeeding generation.

Source: Herald Lifestyles <http://thechronicleherald.ca/thenovascotian/1444795-books-survivor-talks-horror-of-the-holocaust-finding-success-in-halifax>