

Ruthie and Bill Katz Archives: Our Immigration Stories Arvey Wolke

By Ellen (Katz) Block

An esteemed member of our congregation, ever-present at Friday night, minyan and holiday services and a consummate volunteer, beloved by the children in our religious school, Arvey Wolke, was born on October 26, 1926, in a small shtetl in a part of Poland that is now Ukraine. Arvey's father died when he was only two years old, thus he lived with his mother and older brother, Sanford, in one large multi-purpose room in a building behind his paternal grandfather's house. Like houses in many shtetls through Eastern and Central Europe, his home had no indoor plumbing, no electricity and no gas. A coal burning stove was used for cooking and heat along with a stone oven. Arvey's mother had a stall in the village marketplace where she sold coal to local farmers to help support the family.

The marketplace, which convened twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays, was all important in the shtetl. As with tradition from ancient Jewish history, Mondays and Thursday were the days, along with Shabbat, when the Torah was read. Jewish children were not particularly welcome in the local Polish schools, so at the age of 3, Arvey began attending *cheder* with several other children at the home of the local *melamed* (teacher). Yiddish was the only language Arvey ever learned as a child – not even any Polish – and he was taught not science, math or history but only the Alef Bet and the Torah. He was however, surrounded by a warm and loving extended family of 33 people.

In the summer of 1935, as Arvey's cherished grandfather was dying, Arvey's Uncle Morris who had emigrated to the United States in 1910 and was doing well, came with his wife, Sarah, to visit his father one last time. Arvey's grandfather told Morris that Poland was becoming a very bad place for Jews and would only get worse. As Morris and Sarah had no children, Arvey's grandfather prevailed upon him to take Arvey, Sanford and three other cousins back to the U.S. with him. Morris did so but when they traveled (by horse and buggy) to Warsaw to obtain visas, the cousins were not allowed to leave Poland. Only Arvey and Sanford were allowed to travel with Morris and Sarah to the U.S., voyaging, as mandated, on a Polish ship to New York and then by train directly to Chicago. Because they were traveling with U.S. citizens, Arvey and Sanford did not have to enter the U.S. through Ellis Island. It took another 3 years before Morris was able to bring the three other cousins out of Poland.



Arvey was 8 years old when he arrived in America and was amazed at the paved streets, lights, cars, buses, radio and indoor plumbing. He knew not one word of English but within 5 years was able to complete 8 years of elementary school. He then finished high school in 3 years and enrolled at Northwestern University. After one year there, he turned 18 and was drafted into the army and sent to France where he spent the next two years as a sergeant and field artillery officer. One of his jobs was to fly over enemy lines in a small airplane, a Piper Cub and to report German positions to Allied soldiers manning artillery on the ground. Because of his knowledge of French, which he learned in high school and German, which he had studied in college, Arvey often interrogated captured German soldiers. As did many U.S. soldiers, Arvey brought back a few souvenirs from his tour of duty in France. One was a

glass Chanukkiyah which he has used ever since; the other items were 2 German army rifles which he gave to an underground group, based in Glencoe, that collected and shipped arms to the Haganah fighting the British in Palestine.

Although over and often vicious anti-Semitism was rife in the U.S. in the 1930s and 40s, Arvey has said he rarely experienced anti-Semitism either at college or in the army. When he returned to the U.S. in 1946, after his time in service, he finished his studies at Northwestern and then went on to Northwestern Law School, earning his law degree and admission to the bar in 1951. He joined the staff of the U.S. Attorney's Office and spent the next 10 years as a prosecutor. For many years after that, he practiced law as a criminal defense attorney.



Arvey's love and study of Judaism has never left him. With Morris and Sarah, he grew up in a non-Jewish neighborhood on the Northwest side of Chicago where the family's department store was located. They kept a kosher home and Arvey attended Hebrew school and Hebrew High School at the orthodox Albany Park Hebrew Congregation, becoming a Bar Mitzvah at the age of 13. In addition, the family frequently followed Shabbat dinners by attending Friday night services at Anshe Emet, a conservative congregation. Later, with his own family, Arvey joined Niles Township Jewish Congregation, a Reconstructionist synagogue, before finding what he calls his "spiritual home" at North Shore Congregation Israel.

Arvey has been a volunteer of long-standing at NSCI and has particularly dedicated himself to working with the children in the religious school. Based on his personal experience, he keenly feels the importance of a supportive family and the essential need for children to have a full and proper education, particularly a Jewish education. Every year for the past 25 years, at the minyan service, Arvey chants the Haftorah and parshah of the Torah portion (in Bereshit) from his Bar Mitzvah as well as several other Haftorah selections during the year. He encourages others to do the same.

Like so many others, when Arvey left Poland, he had no realization that he would never see his mother or the rest of the family again. Everyone anticipated that the war would end quickly, and families would be reunited. It was only after the war ended that Arvey learned his family had perished. Arvey has chosen not to return to Poland as a cousin who did return told him NOT to go – that nothing of their old life is left.

Arvey has maintained a close relationship with his extended family. He is a great grandfather and continues to be an inspirational fixture at NSCI services, frequently with his wife, Barbara.