

The Death of a Neighbor

Ivar Segalowitz was not just any neighbor. Ivar was my parents' neighbor in Great Neck, New York, where I grew up.

Whenever I visited my mother, I would run into Ivar riding his bicycle, walking his dog, or preparing his small sailboat for another cruise. Ivar was distinguished by his soft German accent, his engineer's penchant for detail, and the graphic numbers tattooed on his arm which he never tried to hide. I did not know much about Ivar's Holocaust story, except that he indicated to me that he did provide an oral history to the Spielberg Foundation on Holocaust preservation.

Ivar once told me that he was in the same bunk as the eventual Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Elie Wiesel. Both Ivar and Elie wound up in a French orphanage after the war, eventually making their way to the United States.

Ivar lived a quiet life as an engineer, and later a Park Commissioner in Great Neck. I first knew Ivar as a child fond of launching my homemade rockets from the back lawn which, on more than one occasion, landed on Ivar's lawn.

Ivar had a favorite story whenever he saw me. "I will never forget the first time I met your father. He came over when we first moved in, and he wanted me to join the Synagogue. I told him that I did not believe in religion and that for me G-d had died at Auschwitz. I was pretty blunt with your father, but it did not discourage him. He wanted me to join the Masons, the Republican Club, and a host of other organizations that he was active in, but he always came back to the Synagogue." Ivar would chuckle as he told the story of my father's persistence. This past winter I was walking the dog when I ran into Ivar, who I knew had suffered from prostate cancer. He was waging a ferocious battle for survival, and trying to take care of his lovely, beautiful wife, Bernice, who, some years earlier, had suffered from a stroke. "Tell me about your health," I inquired. Ivar told me that he was fighting, but that he had hope. He then told me the story about my father approaching him, and he said: "You know, I am starting to think that I should give religion another chance. I no longer am angry with G-d, and I am beginning to study, although I never will become a religious man. Your father planted the seed."

I felt something warm and satisfying about Ivar's remarks. I told Ivar about my daughter, Kaila, living in Jerusalem, who had recently become a dual citizen intending to serve in the Israel defense forces. He expressed support, and we parted company on that cold day.

Ivar gave of his time generously to anyone who asked. There were times when I would call him to check on my mother, who had been a widow for over 20 years. We talked about boats all the time. Ivar's 29-foot French sailboat was one of the major loves of his life, and I know that he was very sad when he had to sell it. One disappointment which I carry with me is that I never got to take Ivar sailing on my boat, which shared a mooring close-by to Ivar's.

One time my son was exposed to repeated anti-Semitism when he was a student in Williamsport schools. We thought it would be an excellent idea to bring a Holocaust survivor to speak to the schools, and the administration was extremely cooperative. I naturally called Ivar first, but he was reluctant to speak. He reminded me that he had given an oral history to the Spielberg Foundation, but he gave me the name of another man. The other Holocaust survivor did come to Williamsport, and spoke at a number of venues. The trip was extremely successful, and the history provided by the Holocaust survivor touched many souls.

The world will be a little bit less interesting, and just a little bit worse for the absence of Ivar Segalowitz. His charm, dedication, and his overall commitment to his community and to life will be much missed. An entire generation of Holocaust survivors is passing away, and soon there will be none who suffered at the hands of the German juggernaut that killed 50 million or more people in World War II.

I once had the occasion of meeting Ivar in the company of a man born in Germany who used to be a friend of mine. Ivar refused to speak with him when the man spoke to Ivar in German. The man I was with was upset, and I tried to explain to him what it would mean for a Holocaust survivor who had lived and personally witnessed Auschwitz to speak with even a young German man. I am sure the fellow I was with could not possibly understand.

Dwight Eisenhower had photographs taken of the camps as the troops liberated them. Eisenhower wrote that the photographs were a living history necessary because the time would come when people simply could not believe what happened to the Jews of Europe and would deny the truth of the destruction of European Jewry. Eisenhower was right, and that day has come.

Anti-Semitism has arisen anew. Europe has become almost inhospitable to Jews, and Israel is surrounded with threats of death and destruction on a daily basis. Lies about the Jewish State and the Jewish people in general abound, have been expanded, and now have been institutionalized by many nations.

Ivar Segalowitz was only one man, but he was a living history and a testament to the need for Zichronot, remembrance.

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire
Rieders, Travis, Humphrey, Harris,
Waters, Waffenschmidt & Dohrmann
161 West Third Street
Williamsport, PA 17701
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)*

Cliff Rieders, who practices law in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.