

THE MAN WHO BUILT TORONTO

Toronto is a City with an impressive, modern skyline: Ontario Place, the CN Tower, the Sky Dome, the Gardiner Expressway, and the various Bank Towers. And my father built all of them. I don't mean that he conceived the ideas for these things, that he designed them, was involved in their financing, or that he supervised the men who did the work. I mean that he built them. All of them. And it was hard work.

On so many mornings, getting up no later than 5 a.m. to be able to pick up his crane from the yard at 6 a.m., to be on the job at 7 a.m., he was the guy unloading steel from trucks and hoisting it high overhead with the boom of his crane. It didn't matter what the weather: rain, snow, or blow, as he would say. And it did not matter what kind of crane he was given: a Link Belt, Grove mobile crane, a tower crane, or a boom truck. He became an expert with all of them. And often, a contractor would call the crane rental firm and say "it's a tough job - please send Mike". And he would be on the job until quitting time, whenever quitting time might be (it was often late). And he would work on Saturday too, if he was asked, or on Sunday, if necessary. And he never took a holiday. Never.

His accomplishments neither begin nor end with the skyline of Toronto. He also built the Burlington Skyway, and as a kid I remember being so surprised when he was given a life jacket as part of his safety equipment. He also built nuclear power stations, airports, and countless other buildings and structures all around Toronto. Have you seen the B-52 bomber down on the waterfront? He was the guy that lifted it onto its concrete support. From Windsor to Ottawa, and as far north as Kapuskasing, he would travel with his crane whenever and wherever it was needed.

Michael Shotyk was born on a small farm near the Village of Mostyska, in western Ukraine. At that time this area was occupied by Poland. To say that life was very difficult in those days would be to completely underestimate the depths to which humanity can sink. In the early decades of building a "workers paradise" in the form of the USSR, and to bring Ukraine under the communist yoke, Stalin had murdered countless millions of people in Ukraine by starvation. As a kid growing up in the west end of Toronto, despite the abundance which surrounded me, I was made very aware of the problems of hunger and starvation which he had known as a child. To this day, I still cannot leave food on my plate, and I cannot throw out leftovers. And every Canadian of Ukrainian descent, and every Ukrainian I have ever met, is the same way.

For my father, school was a long walk along a dirt road, and there was no money for shoes. The teachers at school were Polish and children were beaten if they spoke in Ukrainian. Because food was scarce, he was well acquainted with hunger, especially

in early spring, when winter stores were running low, and new crops were not yet ready to eat. He told me so many times how lucky he would feel if he even had just a piece of bread. To this day, for my father, bread remains far more valuable than gold. When he was still just a boy, his stepmother told him to either leave home, or kill himself. In June of 1940, when this part of Ukraine was occupied by the German army, my father left to work on a farm near Bamberg, in Germany. I have tried, without success, to find out if he was "invited", or if he volunteered to go. Either way, there really was no choice in the matter. He was 16 at the time, and would never see his father again. When the War ended, Ukraine was occupied by Russia, and there was no "home" to go home to. My father learned later on that the Russians had cut down all of the fruit trees which he had helped his father to plant, and had stolen the horses and cow; these animals had been bought using money my father had sent home from Germany.

Compared to his life in Ukraine as a child, he often said that his life in Germany was great: he had shoes, bread, and even meat and beer. In his descriptions, it sounded like paradise. For him, this must have been like another world.

When the War ended, he signed a contract to work in a coal mine, near Moens, Belgium, for two years. After one week there, he knew that if he were to stay until the end of his term, he might not get out alive. But only a severe illness would get him out of the contract, so he decided to fake one: he smoked two packs of cigarettes, one cigarette after the other, then went to see the camp doctor. The doctor had never before seen a man in this condition, and could hardly believe he was still alive. The doctor tore up his contract and sent him to a resort for two weeks to recuperate. After his recovery (!), my father returned to Germany where he worked in a DP (Displaced Persons) camp for 4 more years, driving an ambulance for the American Red Cross. From there, he immigrated to Canada. That was 1948, and Canada has been his home ever since.

He was given a 1 year contract to work on a farm in Quebec. His salary was 60 dollars per month. At the end of his first year, he had saved 720 dollars. The farmer's wife had remarked early during his stay that she had noticed that at mealtime, my father "really used a lot of butter". After that, he never used their butter again.

At the end of his stay in Quebec, he moved to Toronto where he lived with his sister Maria. She had also worked in Germany during the war, and also by good fortune, ended up in West Germany. Their sibling, Anastasia, was less fortunate: she ended up in East Germany as the war ended, and was shipped by the Russians to work in heavy construction in Kazakhstan. A fourth sibling, Katarina, had stayed at home in Ukraine; she ended up working in a Soviet Army camp kitchen until she retired.

In Toronto, my father started out working at Leaver`s mushroom farm in Mississauga, driving a truck to collect horse manure from Christie`s bakery; at that time, horses were still being used for bread deliveries. Not long after this a friend taught him how to operate a crane, and my father got his license as a hoisting engineer. He was a crane operator for the rest of his career. He should have retired at 65, like everyone else, but he was not that kind of guy - he would not have known what to do. He worked three more years after that, and while he did not regret having retired, he said many times that he wished he could go back to work.

Work was really the only thing he knew how to do. He worked very, very hard all his life. And he saved his money. He might not have had a formal education, and he was laid off for some time more or less every winter I can remember, but he owns his home in the west end of Toronto, near High Park, as well as a farmhouse with 71.5 acres near Elmvale, and a cottage on Kawagama Lake, near Dorset. There is no great secret to his success: he simply worked at least 60 hours per week, always drove an old car, took no holidays, bought no luxuries, and saved every penny. But to view his accomplishments in light of their asset value as mere material possessions would be superficial, to say the very least. In fact, these things had far more meaning to him simply because they were his. They were all the more important because in his other life, things were either confiscated or destroyed. Deep down inside, he knew that if anything terrible were ever to happen again, at least he could live at the farm and grow food. He lived life at a very basic level.

It is not possible to describe my father and not mention salvageable materials. Because he always worked on construction sites, there was no shortage of scrap materials at the end of each project, and he could not watch these go to waste. He collected ropes, gloves, bricks, steel bars, shovels, cement blocks, 2x4s, 4x4s... well, every kind of board imaginable. And plywood, and bits of copper wire. All of these materials were put to use at the cottage, and at the farm. He would sell his stash of copper wire to the local scrap yard when he was laid off during the winter. Even when he was working, he was not too proud to collect empty beer bottles in the park, and to return them for the deposit. Even today, the barn in Elmvale is home to 21 doors, innumerable windows, chairs of every description, several kilometres of wire, a complete room full of lumber, and VW Beetle parts (several engines, doors, tail lights, speedometers). "You always need parts" my dad would say. Yes, he always needed parts, because he was always fixing something. He was famous in our neighborhood for his VW Beetles, invariably bought used, regularly repaired by himself (usually not very pretty, but he managed to keep them running). His garage in Toronto has enough engine oil for several lifetimes, parts from every conceivable home appliance, and enough pieces of string to sponsor an international kite flying competition. This man invented recycling. Even today, my brother and I affectionately refer to the barn as

Tato's "Ukrainian Tire Store". And when I say he could fix anything, it is true: not just our cars and trucks and motorcycles and bicycles, but every kind of home appliance, even his own watch. In another life, he could have been a brilliant engineer because he had a great curiosity about how things work. If only he'd had an opportunity for a formal education.

While my father might have lacked a childhood and bore a tough exterior, in fact he was a very compassionate man. He loved animals, and fed the birds all winter. He was no friend to the squirrels though, and often chased them away from his feeders, thinking that they should be hibernating instead. One summer, when a hummingbird hit his living room window, he immediately went outside and gave it mouth to mouth resuscitation. He was able to bring it back to consciousness, gave it some water, and it flew off. I was so happy that my own children happened to be there at that time, and I hope they will retain this memory of my father.

I saw his love in other ways too. Together we planted countless trees together, at the cottage, but mainly at the farm in Elmvale. He treated each seedling with great care and respect. I will never forget how he would gently separate the tiny roots, cover them with fine soil, and hold the stem while trampling the ground all around the young tree. I've planted several thousand trees in Elmvale, but I had no talent for planting them straight. I have vivid memories of him following me, and very precisely straightening the seedlings I had planted. I am not sure how I will ever be able to plant a tree without him.

When I was a university student, my father always helped me move into my apartments in the autumn, and out in the spring. During the semester he would visit me regularly, perhaps taking me and a friend out for dinner. During one such visit, we were sitting alone in my very small basement apartment in Guelph, and he looked at the cover of one of the books on my shelf: "what is chemistry?" he asked. I did my best to explain, but to a person with no formal education, atoms and molecules are very far removed from direct experience. I went on to do my Ph.D. at UWO, postdoctoral research in California, and eventually moved to Switzerland where I spent nearly 12 years teaching and studying environmental geochemistry at the University of Berne. Throughout my career, I always tried to explain to my father what I was doing, and why. While I could always make this understandable in a very general way, I wished I could share with him a part of my world, the world of molecules and atoms and isotopes and chemical reactions.

In May of 1993, I went home to plant trees in Elmvale with my father. I brought him back with me to Switzerland (he had never been on a airplane before), with plans to take him to Germany, to find the farm where he lived during the war, and then on to

Ukraine, to the village where he was born. We took the train to Bamberg, and checked into a small hotel. I got out the phone book, and started to look up the name "Geyer". I was able to reach the grandson of the farmer, and learned that both sons had died long ago, but that the farmer's daughter, Kunnigunda, was still alive. I was given her phone number, and called her up: she wanted to speak with my father right away. When I put him on the phone, he started speaking German as if he had never left Bavaria. That night, he and I went to the local pub for a ham supper and Rauchbier; Bamberg is famous for this "smoked beer", and there is only one brewery in town which makes it; it is also a restaurant and pub, so we spent the evening there. "I never thought I would be back here" he said, with tears in his eyes. It was the first time I had ever seen my father cry. I was beginning to understand that there was much more to his life in Bamberg than just meat and beer. And for the first time, I appreciated that his life in Germany were completely different from his lives in Ukraine and Canada. In fact, this man has lived three lives.

The next morning, Kunnigunda and her husband picked us up and drove us to the farm. I sat up in the front of the car, and the husband drove. From the back, the first thing I heard Kunnigunda ask was "did you think about me all these years, Michael"? I then realized that he was 16 when he had arrived to work on that farm, and she was 13. But he spent 4 years there, and that his life could have turned out very differently if he had remained in Germany after the War. I also saw the outbuilding where my father had lived, and the hill behind the farm which the Americans had bombed night after night, trying to blow up an underground oil storage facility which they knew was in the area.. Then I also realized that he was just lucky to be alive.

While my father was being bombed in Germany by the Americans, my mother was being bombed in Glasgow, Scotland, by the Germans. It is a great miracle, really, that either of them survived this process, that they arrived safely in Toronto where they met and married, and that my brother and I were given our lives.

After our brief trip to Germany, my father and I returned to Switzerland, caught our breath, then flew from Zurich to Kiev. Since Ukraine became independent in 1991, I had already made several trips to Ukraine to study various environmental pollution problems, including that of Chornobyl. My father, on the other hand, had not been "home" since 1940. When we arrived in Kiev, we were warmly received by a colleague and his family who had arranged an apartment for us. They spoiled us with excellent meals and showed us all around Kiev. This was my father's first trip to the capital city of his native land. It was then I realized that, although born in Ukraine, he had lived there only as a child, and only on the farm. In fact, during a few short trips I had seen much more of his country than he had himself. We took the overnight train to Lviv, in western Ukraine, where we were met by relatives. It had been more than 50 years

since he had seen his sisters Anastasia and Katarina: where do you begin a conversation that ended more than half a century earlier. I just sat and listened. The conversation began with June of 1940, and the sisters described the atrocities which my father had been lucky to avoid: Poles fighting Germans, Germans fighting Russians, and Ukrainians fighting everybody. At night, it was not safe to stay at home, so for their safety, the family had been living in the forest, in trees. This is one aspect of the Second World War which has not been described in any New York bestseller or portrayed in any Hollywood blockbuster. If there is one adjective which can be used to describe Ukraine and its people, "suffering" is the one which comes most easily to my mind.

Seeing the village where my father was born was illuminating for me, to say the least. The roads are as my father left them in 1940, and although there are cars, horse and buggy are much more common. Given the size and depth of holes in the road, they are much more useful too. The house where my father was born is now gone, but I could easily imagine it: it had been etched into my memory early in life from my father's stories of the rabbits which occupied the house with them, and the other farm animals. But I had no idea that this setting would be so beautiful: a valley full of apple orchards, now all in bloom. This view was no less lovely than the Annapolis Valley in springtime, or PEI, or the Niagara Parkway. I also saw the forest behind the farm, which my father had spoken of, and was now full of wildflowers in full bloom. When I stood there I could feel the spirit of my grandfather and his love for this land, and in an instant, I could understand my father and what made him live and breathe. How could a man who had been born here, survived the war in Germany, and arrive in Canada without a penny, be anything other than an industrious worker, saver, and recycler?

And through this, I could see deep into my own soul. I understood why and how the farm in Elmvale had become so important to me: it belongs to our family, and can never be taken away from us. It explained to me why I love the sun, the rain, the trees, and the soil - the love of all of these things was imbedded in me from birth. On my deathbed, I am sure that my last thought will be of trees we have planted on the farm. On this farm we can grow food, raise animals, and survive. Even though my research may involve clean air laboratories, sophisticated analytical instruments, and measurement of trace elements at concentrations in the range of parts per quadrillion, my instincts remain very basic, and the most basic of them is telling me simply to survive.

I surprised my father on his 75th birthday when I went back to Toronto for a few days, just to hang out with him and chat. He was sure I must have had a meeting or conference or something in the area. No, I just wanted to be there for him, and to

hang out. It was great. I am so glad I went. We just sat in the living room, enjoyed a glass of scotch, and he told me about his life. He never spent time looking back, or wishing things had been different. He only looked forward, and despite whatever obstacle might have been put before him, he simply got on with it. If there is any attribute which characterizes this man, it is perseverance.

In 2000 I was lucky to spend much of the summer in Toronto, before and after a scientific expedition to the Canadian High Arctic. It was then that I joined my father for one of his regular visits to the doctor, mainly to check on his heart (he had suffered a mild stroke in the late winter of 1999, and has since been on medication to regulate the heartbeat). During this visit, I learned that my father had been diagnosed with Alzheimer`s. I had noticed some changes in my father`s memory and perception, but to hear this report from a doctor was devastating. Having been through this horrible affliction already with my mother-in-law, I knew what lay ahead. As fate would have it, I had just accepted an academic position in Germany, as Professor and Director of the Institute of Environmental Geochemistry at the University of Heidelberg. My guts were wrenching: instead of now moving back to Canada to be with my father when he needs me most, I was moving again, but no closer to Canada. As much as he misses me and wants me back home, my father understands how important my research is to me, and was very happy when, after nearly two years of negotiating, I finally accepted the position. "I`m glad you got that job in Germany, that`s a good country". Yes, it is a great country, and its an incredible opportunity for me. But I think of him every day, and wish I was not so far away. My only consolation is the memory of the times we have spent together at the farm in Elmvale.