
Isaac Solka 1905 - 1986

by Jack Solka

This is Isaac Solka's life story. His family name at birth was Tzalke. When he lived in Mexico from 1924 to 1945, his name was modified to Calka. Since his brother George spelled his name Solka, my father changed the name to Solka when we moved to the U.S. in 1945.

My father, Isaac Solka (Yitzchak Tzalke), was born in Goworowo, Poland, around 1903 to 1905, in a small shtetl of approximately 2,000 Jews. Goworowo is 50-60 miles from Warsaw. The later date of birth is according to my father's official documents, but he was probably born earlier. He recalled being told at the start of World War I (1914 or 1915), that as an orphan, he should have had a bar mitzvah by the age of 12. His father, Yaakov Tzalke, died of an infected tooth when my father was a toddler. My father's mother, Ruth Tzalke, died three years later from a "broken heart."

According to taped interviews with my Uncle George in 1991, he, my Aunt Edna, and my father were 7, 5, and 3 years of age when their father died. My father was the youngest of the three children. After the death of their parents, my father, and his brother and sister lived with relatives eating meals at different houses, since all of their relatives were poor and could not feed the children all the time. My father lived for a while with his grandfather who had three different wives. My father remembers that the third wife was not nice to him. He recalls



Isaac Solka, Age 22 or 24. Photograph taken in Mexico

times when the family was sitting at a table waiting to eat, and his plate was never filled. When my grandfather noticed this, he told his wife to feed the child. She put some food on his plate and told my father to choke on it. I heard this story many times growing up.

During World War I, Goworowo was the scene of many battles between the Germans and the Russians. Ultimately, the residents of Goworowo were marched to the nearest train station 25 miles away and sent to Russia for the duration of the war. According to my uncle's taped interviews, the three kids moved around and lived in at least four cities before returning to Goworowo at the

end of hostilities. While living in Russia, George was old enough to be drafted into the Russian army. When they were going places my father would ride or walk ahead of my uncle and acted as a "look out." He would signal his older brother if they were rounding up young boys to be conscripted into the Russian army.

However, the "facts" as remembered by my father and uncle changed from time to time. Thus, the information in this story might not be totally accurate. But its lessons to be learned are relevant today because they speak to my father's character.

When my two sisters and I were growing up, we frequently asked our father about his growing up years in Poland. We were seldom successful.

From time to time, Dad would throw us a "bone" to make us stop asking questions, then he would change the conversation to the present asking us questions about school, work or our other activities. He never wanted to hear about anything bad that happened to us or to others. As an example, we could not mention that an airplane had crashed, talk about automobile accidents, or that people had died. We had to talk "nice" or not talk at all at the dining table.

As a small child, my father did not know his age or his birthday. He told us that during his teen years, he realized that other kids had birthdays and got small presents. One day he

continued on page 7

decided that his birthday was going to be December 18th and that he was born in 1905. These are the dates that became official in all of his government documents. Other members of the family remember different versions of how Dad's birthday was determined. The only document that I



*Isaac Solka, age 15 or 16.
Photograph taken in Poland.*

was able to locate with a date was the citizenship certificate Dad received when he became a citizen of Mexico. It stated that he was born in Poland in 1905. No month or day was mentioned. The citizenship certificate was dated November 28, 1930.

After World War I, Dad and his brother, George, were in Warsaw living with families and working as apprentice shoe makers. At first, my father cleaned the house and the work area. It was common at that time for orphans to be brought in as apprentices and live with the family of the shoemaker or tailor. My father became an expert shoemaker and customers frequently asked that my father make their shoes. When he left Goworowo to go to Warsaw, he saw his first carriage that was not pulled by horses. He was frightened and hid by

the side of the road.

Dad related one of his experiences aboard the ship that brought him from Europe to Cuba. The trip was long and the food had to be purchased from the ship's store. He traveled in steerage class. His funds were limited after he accidentally used a 5 or 10 dollar bill to clean himself after a trip to the toilet. First class passengers were located in the upper levels. One day, he observed a first-class passenger eating a fruit, peeling it and throwing the exterior portion overboard. The peeling landed near him. He picked up the discarded portion of the fruit and proceeded to eat it. That was my father's introduction to bananas. After my mother and father married, she introduced him to many fruits and vegetables that were not common food in Poland. He claimed that in Goworowo there were tomatoes and lettuce, which was considered the food given to the horses.

By the time my father was 8 or 9 years old, he was expected to work for his upkeep. One of his uncles had a fruit orchard. The orchard gave my father an opportunity to earn his keep. He remembers sleeping in a small "dog house" located at the edge of one of the orchards. During the days he would gather the fruit that had fallen from the trees and save them for his uncle to pick up. He also was expected to keep the village kids from stealing the fruits. His diet consisted of the fruit he picked from the trees and once a week he was given a hot bowl of potato and beef soup. The potatoes were plentiful; however, traces of the beef were only evident at the bottom of the bowl.

Although he was in Russia for a total of four years from 1914 to the end of the war in 1918, my father did not remember much of the time that he was there. He did remember

selling newspapers in the street in Russia. Many daily extras newspapers were published giving accounts of the battles.

My father never had a formal education. As a young boy, he tried to attend cheder—the Jewish school in Goworowo. He was sent home because there was no one to pay the required fees. Somehow, he learned to write and read Yiddish, Spanish and later English when we moved to the United States in 1945. He had a wonderful memory and remembered names, faces and telephone numbers with ease.

My Aunt Edna was the first of the three siblings to leave Goworowo. She went to Warsaw to live in a relative's house and help with the household's chores. The Tzalke (Solka) family had relatives in San Antonio, Texas, so Aunt Edna and Uncle George went there to be with three aunts on my paternal grandfather's side of the family.

Immigration laws required the return of illegal immigrants to their country of origin, and my uncle, who had crossed the Canadian border without adequate documents, was forced to leave the United States. He was allowed to go to any country that would accept him. Cuba accepted him. After settling in Cuba, my father joined him there. While living in Cuba, my father made a living by selling ties to American tourists in Havana. I have recently obtained a photograph of my father and my uncle taken in Cuba in August, 1924. The following year Dad and my Uncle moved to Mexico.

After World War I, my maternal grandfather left Germany because the economy was in disarray and moved to Mexico City. My grandmother, my mother and her two sisters came to Mexico a few years later in 1926. My father and grandfather became friends and spent time playing dominos. One rumor, that has never been verified,

continued on page 8

is that my father won my mother in a game of dominos.

For their first date, Dad took Mother to a theater. My grandmother went with them and was sitting behind them in the theater. My father attempted to kiss Mother and received a slap in the face. Some months later Dad asked my grandfather if he could marry Mother. My grandparents were delighted with the prospect of having my father join the family. Mother, when asked, was not sure. She asked my grandmother for her opinion. Her response was that my father was an “arbeiter” meaning a worker and that she would never be hungry if she married him. In 1932, an adequate amount of food was a major concern for most families.

Prior to meeting Mother, my father was working in a small oil town called Ebano, Mexico, south of Ciudad Victoria, selling religious items and blankets to local residents. When he entered a residence without a cross displayed, he would tell the family that it was dangerous to be without religious symbols. He was a good salesman. When we had the dry goods store in Corpus Christi, he taught me something that I will never forget. You ask a customer how many or which one. If you only ask, “do you want this shirt?” you give the customer an opportunity to say no.

My parents married February 21, 1932. Dad remembers getting a little drunk during the wedding reception. After the reception, Dad and my mother took a taxi to their apartment. Dad fell asleep. After driving for a long time, police stopped the taxi and asked my father where they were going. After he gave the police the apartment’s address, the policeman told my father that they were near the airport a long distance from their apartment. My parents were being kidnapped by the taxi driver.

In 1932, my father opened a shoe repair store and named it “La

Victoria.” It was located at #12 Calle Victoria in Mexico City. Eventually, he added new shoes for sale. When the family moved to Corpus Christi in August 1946, he named his store Victoria Dry Goods Store. He wanted to continue the name of his business in Mexico.

My sister Ruth was my parent’s first child. She was named after my father’s mother. She was born December 18, 1932 – the date that my father had selected before to be his birthday. I was born May 20, 1935, and was named after my father’s father. When Mother was expecting me, my Uncle George teased my father that I was going to be another girl. He told my father that the Neuman’s (my mother’s family) only had girls. My mother had two sisters. Well, my father challenged my uncle to a \$50 bet that I would be a boy. My father collected the \$50. My sister Genie was born April 4, 1942 (her original name was Eugenia. She did not like the name and had it changed legally to Genie as an adult). I remember that as a nine-year-old kid, I had to rock Genie’s crib until she fell asleep before I could go out and play.

In Mexico Dad worked long hours. He would leave the apartment early in the morning to go open his shoe repair shop and often returned home after we were asleep. However, on Fridays, he would close the shop



Isaac Solka, Edna Solka Ducler (sister) and George Solka (brother). Photograph taken in Poland circa 1920.

earlier and stop by the grocery store to buy herring, salami, and dark bread. We always looked forward to festive Shabbat dinners.

Dad expanded his small shoe repair shop to a store that only sold new shoes. In Mexico, legislation at that time did not allow him to terminate employees without having to pay high penalties, so he gave the shoe repair portion of the business to his employees. He operated the shoe store with only one employee. Although my father always hoped to move to the U.S. to be closer to his brother and sister, his plans were reinforced by a tragic incident. Dad had developed a close friendship with the owner of a toy store next to his shoe store. One evening, his friend was outside

continued on page 9

his store. He was approached by a person asking for a cigarette. When he replied that he did not smoke, he was assaulted with Anti-Semitic insults and the assailant proceeded to kill him by cutting his neck.

In May 1945, my father travelled to San Antonio, Texas, to attend my cousin Ruth's wedding. While in San Antonio, he met a friend of the family that was either an attorney or accountant. He asked my father why he was still living in Mexico since all of his family was in the U.S. My

parents' quotas.

Within six weeks of my father's return to Mexico after the wedding, my parents were notified that the family had been approved to immigrate to the U.S. My father sold his shoe store, Mother sold or gave away all of our household items and we packed everything we wanted to take with us into five large suitcases. Dad changed all his pesos into approximately \$5,000 dollars. The plan was to purchase everything new once we reached our new home in America! My father

we moved into a small one-bedroom apartment with no servants. My older sister lived with my Aunt Edna. She had a daughter, also named Ruth, two years older than my sister. My three-year-old sister Genie moved in with my Uncle George and Aunt Ida. Their daughter Marcia was five years older than Genie.

In the beginning of 1946, my Aunt Edna, her husband Jake, and their daughter Ruth moved to Corpus Christi. Yes, we had three Ruths in the family. All were named after my father's mother. Our entire family moved into the house previously occupied by my Aunt Edna and her family. When school was out in May 1946, Mother took the three of us back to Mexico City. We lived with my grandparents. Some years later I found out that Mother refused to return to the U.S. until Dad made arrangements for the family to move out of Refugio.

When our family moved to Corpus Christi in 1946, there were two commercial areas where most of the retail businesses were located. These were identified as Downtown and Uptown. They were separated by an actual hill and by the socio-economic residents that they served. The downtown area was also known as "La Playa" meaning "The Beach." Shops in this commercial area served the upper and middle income residents of the city. Uptown shops identified as "Leopard Street Stores" served lower income and blue-collar workers which included the bulk of the Mexican-American families in Corpus Christi and the surrounding agricultural communities. My father's store was located at 908 Leopard St. Being fluent in Spanish, my father was able to communicate with his customers with ease.

Four blocks of Leopard Street contained seventeen stores primarily owned by Jewish merchants. The four blocks started at the edge of the

continued on page 10



The Solka Family in 1948—Jack, Genie, Rose, Isaac and Ruth

father told him of his many attempts to obtain entry visas for his wife, who was born in Germany, and for himself, who was born in Poland, so the entire family could move to the U.S. at the same time. The friend informed my father that the quotas had recently opened as World War II was coming to an end. The American embassies could process entry requests easier and much faster where they could verify backgrounds and police records such as my parents' versus the refugees from Europe. Mother would come in under the German quota while my father would be allowed to come under the Polish quota. My sisters and I, as minors, would come in under our

waited twenty-one years to come to the U.S. legally.

We traveled by train and arrived at the border in Laredo, Texas on October 20, 1945. Our final destination was San Antonio the following day. Uncle George was waiting for us at the train station and took us to Refugio, Texas, where we stayed until May 1946, while my father learned how to conduct "business" in the U.S.

Mother had a hard time making the cultural adjustment from a city of over 8,000,000 residents to a town of just 5,000 people. In Mexico, we occupied a large apartment and Mother had two household servants. For the first few months in Refugio

hill that separated the downtown and uptown shopping areas and terminated by a large Sears store four blocks away. These seventeen shops would make a good case study of the transition by Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe to successful merchants in many small towns in the U.S. Most of the shop owners started by being peddlers or pushed carts with their merchandise either in Corpus Christi, other towns in southern U.S., or the New York City area. Most graduated to small store fronts, then to larger stores like the ones in Corpus Christi. However, the offspring of the merchants on Leopard Street became doctors, attorneys and other professionals. This pattern could be found all over the U.S. However, the downside to these humble, hard-working families is that their children generally did not return to Corpus Christi. The children of these Leopard Street merchants settled in Houston, Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, and other large cities.

Most of the Jewish merchants in the area had a group that helped other

was verified, it would be divided by the number of merchants and each participant would give an amount which varied from \$5 to \$25. None of the group was ever told who was the recipient of the funds and the recipient was not told who made the contributions. In the 1950s and 1960s even a \$15 contribution was a respectable amount.

In Corpus Christi, my father worked long hours. He would open the store around 7:00 AM to accommodate some customers on their way to their jobs. Victoria Dry Goods Store served low income blue collar and farming families. The store had merchandise that supplied their needs. Most items sold were men's and women's shoes, women's wear, men's work clothes, and underwear. During the summer months, the store sold cotton picking bags used by the "braceros" from Mexico that traveled the state picking cotton and vegetables. My father knew most of his customers by their first names. He advanced credit to a limited number of families.

On some Sunday afternoons he and my mother would go to the homes of some of his credit customers and collect payments. One Sunday, they drove to a small farm town near Corpus Christi called Gregory. When he visited the family, he found out that their child was

ill and that one of the windows was broken and a cold wind was blowing in. He asked the mother what was happening. She told my parents that her husband had not worked in weeks and that they did not have any money to make payments to him and was not

able to take their child to the doctor. My father immediately handed money to the woman and asked her to have



Brothers George and Isaac Solka, circa 1930

the window repaired and to take her child to a doctor. A few months later he refused to accept repayment for this amount. He did accept payment for the merchandise they had obtained from the store. My father was never able to make large donations to charitable causes, but he made numerous donations quietly in small amounts.

In 1976, Dad closed his store in Corpus Christi and my parents moved to Dallas. Initially, my folks indicated that they would live there for six months and see if they liked living in Dallas. They did. My sister and her husband, Genie and Herb Weitzman, made a house available to my parents. Mom continued to live there after Dad passed away in 1986, and lived there until she passed away in April, 2014. A few weeks after my parents arrived in Dallas, my father got bored. He told my mother that he had hung up all the pictures and that he had nothing else to do. He had no other interests other than family and work. My brother-in-law, Herb Weitzman, made some calls and Dad began to work at

continued on page 11



Isaac and Rose Solka on their 25th wedding anniversary, February 21, 1957.

Jews in Corpus Christi when there was a need. The group functioned as follows: when one of the members of the group learned that some family in the Jewish community needed financial help, he would determine the amount required. After the amount

- Restoration of Baytown's Congregation - K'Nesseth Israel Has Begun

by Joan Linares

Over a year ago when Hurricane Harvey hit the Baytown area, one of the city's historical buildings felt repercussions from the storm. The torrential rain exacerbated water-related issues at Congregation K'Nesseth Israel making it impossible to hold worship services there. Members held their services in the community building which is adjacent to the synagogue.

Congregation K'Nesseth Israel leaders waited several months before seeking contractors to restore the historical synagogue. Due to the tremendous flooding in Baytown, contractors were scarce and congregation leaders felt it more important that individuals who lost their homes to flooding should have priority in getting the much needed help.


Congregation K'Nesseth Israel has a small membership as Baytown's Jewish population has declined over the years. The restoration needs for the synagogue and neighboring community building were more than the small membership could take care of by themselves. A "Save Our Synagogue"

fundraising campaign was launched in January of 2018. Shana Bauman, Treasurer of Congregation K'Nesseth, was instrumental in spearheading the fundraising efforts. Letters were sent to former members of Congregation K'Nesseth as well as descendants of those former members. Donations came in not only from Houston area friends but supporters from all across the country. One Mah Jongg group from Fort Worth, Texas sent a donation. Many individuals gave generously to the restoration project as they held fond memories of growing up in Baytown and attending services at Congregation K'Nesseth. The congregation reached out to the local Baytown community for help and members were touched by the support shown by their neighbors. Shana Bauman and Congregation President Joan Linares also sought grants from various sources. Grants were received from Houston Jewish Federation, Al and Ethel Herzstein Charitable Foundation, San Antonio Jewish Federation, and the Texas Jewish Historical Society.

Member Denise Havenar serves as

the Project Manager for the restoration project. She has worked tirelessly for months in this endeavor. Denise is coordinating with Phil Rivers, a Houston architect, who is serving as the consultant for the project. Congregation K'Nesseth is extremely fortunate to have this team working to restore the historical synagogue and adjacent community building.

After months of fundraising and planning, the restoration began in the early part of October. The reconstruction process is expected to take several months to complete. Plans to celebrate the culmination of the restoration project will be in conjunction with the 90th anniversary of the synagogue on Sunday, April 7, 2019, at 2:00 PM.

For more information or to make a donation contact Denise Havenar at denise_havenar@yahoo.com, Shana Bauman at shanabauman@yahoo.com, or Joan Linares at joantlinares@gmail.com. The mailing address for Congregation K'Nesseth Israel is P. O. Box 702, Baytown, Texas 77522-0702. 

Isaac Solka, continued from page 10

an Army-Navy Surplus Store for the following ten years until just a few months before his death. The store was located near Love Field and many of the customers were Mexican Americans. He was able to continue talking Spanish to the store's customers as he did for 30 years in Corpus Christi! He loved to tease young ladies and ask them for a date. He did that when my mother was in the store while she heard the conversations! They seemed to take his teasing well and usually asked if my mother would give them permission! Mother also worked at the store part time.

While I was gathering information for this article, I came across an early photograph of my father taken in Mexico City just prior to or after the time he and mother married. I noticed the ring he was wearing in the photograph. After my father passed away in 1986, Mother gave me the ring. I remembered the ring since Dad had showed it to me before their move to Dallas in 1976. The ring was totally smooth so my sister Genie arranged to engrave his initials "I. S." When Mother gave me the ring, it was bent out of shape and separated in the back. To my amazement the ring I have is the same

as the one my father wore over 80 years ago in the photograph.

Dad passed away on December 11, 1986. His prostate cancer was not detected early enough to treat it. We were informed by the doctor that he had the cancer for over 15 years before it was discovered. PSA tests were not available at that time. It has been over 30 years since my father left us, but I think of him frequently. He loved his family and taught us how to love our families. My father was a happy man after leaving Poland and was satisfied with what he had. In his own way, he thanked God for his good fortunes. 