

Eulogy for Jerry Groner

1/27/08

by Rabbi Michael Schwab (NSS Beth El HP, IL)

At this time it is my honor to say a few words in memory of Jerry Groner, *Yosef ben Shlomo*. I want to begin by offering my condolences, as well as the condolences of Rabbi Kurtz and the entire Beth El family, to Joan, to Judy, to Jonathan and to all his grandchildren, friends and other relatives. Jerry was truly a wonderful man and his presence will be missed at Beth El and of course by all of you. I just hope that the words we offer today will bring you some measure of comfort at this difficult time.

Jerry was born in Chicago and grew up in West Rogers Park. And for awhile everything he needed in life was right there, including some of his best friends with whom the family tells me he remained close with all of his life. However, after graduating high school early he decided that he needed to join the armed forces and contribute to the United State's war effort during the Second World War. So he told the recruiting officer a little white lie and said he was eighteen and thus was taken in to the Army/Air Force branch of the military. And while his active service during the resolution of the war took place in the States, he was sent to Germany during the post-war period where he met many Holocaust survivors who had been liberated from the camps. If I have the story correct, he even took part in a post-war seder with some of the members of the displaced Jewish community there and kept the Haggadah they used, clearly dated 1946. The family tells me that although he didn't talk about it much, his experience in Europe left a deep impression upon him.

When he returned from the war he went into his father's business in dress manufacturing and later turned to a career in real estate. However, what the family recalls is that while he was a hard worker and very good at his job, this was not the focus of his life, nor his true passion.

In Judaism there is a concept called *hiddur mitzvah*, which means the beautification of the fulfillment of a commandment. It is considered a great merit to someone if they not only fulfill their obligations, both morally and ritually, but also elevate the fulfillment of that *mitzvah* by making it beautiful, special and memorable. To me this concept seems to capture the special character of Jerry Groner, who was a man of deep character, someone who always fulfilled his obligations to family, friends, God and the Jewish people, but did so with a care and an artistic grace that made everything more lovely and beautiful.

Since he was a young man Jerry loved photography. He had an artistic eye and was gifted with his hands. He joined the Greenbriar Camera club and over the years took hundreds of beautiful photographs. One can see the talent he had by just looking at the walls of his house, which is covered with his wonderful photos, and his talent was even recognized officially through his induction into the Royal Photographic Society of London. This aspect of his life brought him great satisfaction and stirred in him a deep artistic passion. Yet, his art was never his business. He exhibited sometimes but never sold his work. His photography was a purely artistic pursuit done for the beauty it added to the world. And it was a beauty he shared with his children, teaching them the craft and cultivating in them a sensitivity to the art that can be found in the world at large.

This love for beauty and the natural world was evident as well in his great love for gardening. He loved to be outside, caring for the flowers and plants in his garden, which was the envy of all his neighbors. Again, he won prizes for his skills and was very talented, however, he did not do it to be recognized. Rather he did it because he enjoyed it and because it added beauty to the world.

Our ritual Director, Mark Stadler, remembers that while driving him home from minyan for several years, which he did once Jerry's illness had advanced, Jerry still always pointed out certain trees on the way home and described each, as only a gardener could, said how he might photograph it, as only a photographer could, and told Mark how each one resembled a person he knew, whom he always described in a laudatory fashion comparing that person to the beautiful tree they had passed by, as only a *mensch* could. Jerry saw the beauty in everything and in everyone and he could make that beauty come alive.

And there were a number of other things he loved. He loved bad mitten. He was strong man in character but also in body and excelled in things athletic. He loved his dogs, his Irish setters, which he showed at dog shows with the kids. He was a handy man around the house, who enjoyed fixing things and could fix or install just about anything that needed to be done. He loved Time magazine and current events. . .

And he loved the Jewish People. For many, many years he was a regular at Beth El on Shabbat mornings sitting right there next to Jack Levin, *zichrono livrachah*. And he also became a regular at the morning *minyan*, as well. Rabbi Kurtz told me that Jerry was the *gabbai* for quite some time, helping out at services in addition to simply being a participant. Rabbi Kurtz also said that Jerry always kept the *yartzeits* of his and Joan's entire families, which he deeply respected.

Jerry also served for years as a valued member of our House Committee and was willing to pitch in whenever called upon. I found numerous letters of thanks written by the lay leadership here to him in his synagogue file. He clearly greatly valued his membership to our synagogue.

He also loved the State of Israel, which he visited with Joan on a number of occasions, especially while Judy was living there. He took many wonderful photographs there and he and Joan used Israel as a springboard for many of their travels.

He also loved Jewish music, as well, especially any of the tunes from the liturgy. In fact even when he had lost much of his cognitive abilities, he became animated when traditional Jewish tunes were sung and always perked up, in particular for "dayenu", which the staff at Lieberman would always sing "just for Jerry".

Jerry was also a kind man who simply loved to help others. For starters, everybody on the Lieberman staff adored him. They could tell what a nice man he was. In the neighborhood, he would help others plan their gardens, cut the nails of other people's dogs (which if you have a dog you know is not an easy job), he would give advice on anything on which he had expertise and help out if he could. I know that amongst the folk at the morning minyan everyone who knew him respected him and felt that he was really a great guy. This was the impression that Jerry left with those whom he came into contact.

However, his deepest love was reserved for his family. Joan, he met in 1954. She said she was impressed right away because he drove a Blue and white Oldsmobile with automatic windows. She had not yet even seen a car with automatic windows at that time! Yet this initial surface impression turned into a deep love between the two and they created a wonderful life for themselves and their children. He was devoted to her and she to him. Joan, your family and friends have told me how devoted you were to Jerry through thick and thin, through health and sickness. You honored and loved him and I know that he appreciated everything you have done. Always remember that he loved you as well and that much of the legacy you have created lives on in your children and grandchildren – your beautiful family.

And to Jon and Judy, from what you shared with me, he was a hands-on father, who spent time teaching you and in engaging you in the activities he loved. He went with you to synagogue when you showed interest and supported you in your endeavors. You clearly each made important impressions on each other's lives.

I also know that he was wonderful to his own mother and took care of her and that he was a second father to his nieces and nephews. And as a reflection of how beloved he was in the family, he was never Jerry to his relatives, but Uncle Buddy. He could be anyone's pal.

Truly Jerry Groner was one who was beloved by all and respected by all for the love and beauty he brought into this world. *Yehi Zichro barukh* – May his memory be for a blessing.