

Erv

My father, Ervin Sieracki, died at the age of 64, which to me now that I have reached the age of 75, seems all too short. My one consolation in losing him so early is that he was able to cram an awful lot of living in those 64 years. And I am sure a lot of people would agree with me. My father loved a party and he loved to be the life of the party. He had a stash of jokes and funny stories ready to roll out when least expected. He never met a Polish joke he didn't like. To my surprise, they seemed to be among his favorites. He was so confident of himself as a man and as a Polak that he simply took no offence at them. And if they got a laugh, well that was the point, wasn't it! How many times did I hear the story of the man at work who lost his false teeth in a deep water vat used to cool chains. Or the man who got his just come-uppance for flaunting his hamburgers on Fridays – a mortal sin for most- when grease was exchanged for ketchup in his squeeze bottle. Or Dad's lament about the poor souls burned to a crisp in hell for eating meat on Friday after the rules of the Church changed to allow it. To everyone in Winona he was "Erv," whether it was his many cousins, his co-workers at Peerless Chain, his customers at the Cinderella Shoppe and numberless friends and neighbors. But at the lively parties – and there were many – he was "Ernie." He was so likeable because he liked everyone. It was just his nature to be friendly and nonjudgmental.

He was the definition of a family man. He bought his father's house at 507 E. 2nd St. during the Second World War. His two brothers, Dan and Louis, were welcome to stay until they moved out to be on their own. His uncle Skorpy and his father Nick stayed their entire lives. And still the house provided lots of room for his own five kids.

Of all his many attributes, the one that has always stood out for me was his passion to provide for his family and become independently wealthy. He was in pursuit of this goal his entire life.

It started early when he bought and sold cars for a profit. Then it was the concession business. He made potato chips and sold little bags of them out of a little wooden stand. He went to night school to study to become a tool and die maker. This meant a bump in pay and the opportunity to work ten-hour shifts – 7:00 to 5:00.

A Berlitz book on learning Spanish appeared in the house. I asked my mother how that happened. She said someone told Dad that he would be a great businessman in South America if he only learned Spanish – which was very close to Polish!

The next venture was the chicken business. He built a garage in the back yard to house tiny chicks in cages until they were ready to be butchered. The processing was done by relatives who were expert at their assigned tasks. The fated chickens had their throats cut, their feathers steamed and plucked, and then were butchered and packaged for sale to local bars and restaurants. It was as gruesome as it sounds. My Aunt Mary's only protection against the stench and squalor was a hanky doused with perfume that she kept pinned on her sleeve. My father managed everything from ordering the chicks, raising them, butchering them, refrigerating and finally selling

the meat. My brother Jerry hated his assigned task of cleaning up after the chickens. I, on the other hand, was happy to ride to the dump with my father to watch him throw out the refuse that he hauled on his trailer.

Then it was the sewing machine business. Sieracki Sewing Service and Sales was the sign in the side window of our station wagon. The cheaper sewing machine was the Brother model from Japan. The top of the line sewing machine was the Bernina made in Switzerland. Dad had a little display area for his sewing machines in Lilla's Appliance Store. Every summer meant a trip to the Winona County Fair to set up a booth to sell his sewing machines. Many years later, I asked my mother how many Berninas he sold at the fair. The answer: not one.

When the little dress and fabric shop connected with the Watkowski residence at 212 Mankato Avenue became available, dad bought it because he could display his sewing machines there. And when the Nash Rambler garage went out of business on the corner of 9th and Mankato, Dad bought the property and transformed it into the Cinderella Shoppe to sell fabric and notions. The Cinderella Shoppe sign and the lavender walls (Easter color means Easter finery) became an icon in Winona. The slogan, "Irene and Erv Sieracki are friendly folks to know," played endlessly on the radio. Any stranger in the town became an instant friend: "Oh, your parents own the Cinderella Shoppe. I know them." At long last my father hit the jackpot. At a time when home sewing was very popular, the Cinderella Shoppe was the place to go.

I saw the incredible work my parents had done to try to make their small businesses a success. I was proud of their accomplishments and they inspired me to work hard as well. My parents never preached. They taught by example.

