

The Silent Lion

By Elaine Rosenberg Miller

I first met Max Krauser the day our family moved into our new home in Teaneck, New Jersey, a leafy suburb six miles north of New York City.

My parents had bought a large house at the top of a hill on a street named Ogden Avenue.

It was mid-winter break between college semesters. I was helping my dad unpack.

A huge man entered through the unlocked front door.

He had a round head, a broad chest and deformed ears.

He extended his large, paw-like hand to my father.

"Shalom Aleichem!" he said in a surprisingly high pitched voice that revealed his Eastern European accent.

"Aleichem Shalom," my dad said.

"Vilcom to the strit," he said, smiling.

I immediately liked him.

He had a warm, engaging personality and was gentle despite his size.

He looked like the star of my favorite childhood television program, Wagon Train, but he spoke with a Polish-Yiddish intonation and cadence.

Max and Greta, his wife, became our best friends in Teaneck.

I welcomed his caring attention.

He was about ten years older than my father and I saw him as a near surrogate grandfather.

He continued to come over several times a week, always entering without knocking, always welcome.

As the years went by, I learned more and about about Max.

He had been the undefeated Heavyweight Wrestling Champion of Europe from 1935 to 1938. He fought over 500 bouts.

At a time that Nazi Germany was tightening its grip on its citizens and threatening Europe, he traveled freely and fearlessly from country to country, hemisphere to hemisphere, recognized, celebrated and successful.

He had been born in 1909 to a Jewish family in Stanislawow, Poland. He had been the youngest of

eleven children. As a teenager, he worked in his family's tannery. He would hoist hundreds pounds of animal skins on his shoulders and back. He grew into a powerful young man.

He attended the University of Lvov, majoring in science. He had planned to apply his knowledge to the family enterprise. One day, he attended a wrestling match fought by the reigning German heavyweight. He jumped in the ring and defeated him. At age 22, Max decided to be a professional wrestler.

Max's idol was Zishe Breitbart, a world famous strongman. Breitbart had also been a Jew and was a hero to millions of his co-religionists in Europe. Breitbart played in circuses and theaters. He performed feats of inhuman strength. He seemed invincible. He died in 1925, after having contracted blood poisoning following an injury received in a stunt gone awry.

Years after we met, after my repeated requests, Max finally showed me his press clippings.

They were written in many languages, including Romanian, French, English and German.

The photographs showed Max in wrestling trunks, his muscular arms raised and flexed, in a tuxedo, his white shirt illuminating his handsome face, his glossy hair brushed straight back. He had been a fearless-looking man.

In some of the photos, I saw images of svelte women in fur wraps at his side, but shyness prevented me from asking him about them.

I never asked Max about his ears, either.

My father called them "cauliflower ears" but they didn't look much like cauliflowers.

They looked like potatoes.

The tops of his ears looked like raw, peeled potatoes.

He was one of the cheeriest people I had ever met.

Always a quip, a sly look.

Open hearted.

Generous.

He and Greta owned a company that manufactured luggage. When they developed a line of soft sided luggage, we received a set as a gift.

At a time when everyone was carrying Samsonite, heavy as bricks, I toted denim luggage fitted with scarlet shoulder straps.

When styles changed, he gave us another set. Cinnamon colored polyurethane with saddle trim.

He had come to America in 1939.

None of his European relatives survived the war.

It was odd that Max entered the ring and threw men to the canvas, using his ox-like strength to pin them.

He was soft-spoken, calm.

Once in America, he continued to wrestle. He was known as Iron-Head Krauser.

He joined the United States Navy.

They trained him to be a cook.

He took to it.

"I cook fah tousends!" he told me.

He continued to cook in bucolic Teaneck, NJ.

"She couldn't boil water," my dad said affectionately, about his wife.

I moved to Florida in the late seventies and a few years later, Max and Greta came to visit me.

I had heard that he had memory problems but his state left me shocked. He was no longer verbal. I introduced him to my younger son, He placed his arms under my son's armpits and lifted him slowly up, chest-high. Max smiled reassuringly and my son laughed. Tears rolled down my face. I stood to the side so that Max couldn't see me, but Greta, his loving wife, saw and she understood that I knew.

Years later, I found a newspaper clipping on the Internet about his 1938 visit to Australia. The Melbourne, Australia Argus wrote that he had twice fought and defeated the Olympic champion, Johann Richoff and received a medal from King Gustaf V of Sweden; that he was an expert swimmer, skater and skier and former international Rugby player; that his favorite move was "the aeroplane spin" and claimed that it won him most of his matches. The paper reported that he "issued an open challenge to all wrestlers and also hopes to find an Australian wife."

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