

United Nations International Holocaust Remembrance Day – 27 January 2021

Helen Klisser

Tena Koutou, Tena Koutou, Tena Koutou Katoa

Shalom

I am honoured to be here to tell the story of my father Johan Klisser, a Holocaust survivor, on this day that has been set aside to remember the Holocaust – those who perished and also the resilience of those who survived.

My father Johan Klisser was born in Amsterdam in 1927 to loving parents. His mother, Leentje Kok was a cashier at the very fashionable Department store called the Bijenkorf. His father Elkan Klisser was a travelling salesman who sold raincoats and razor blades amongst other goods.

In 1936 when my father was nine years old, his brother Leo was born and the family was complete.

My father has very fond memories of his early childhood years. The family weren't particularly observant, but he remembers going to the Jodenbuurt (the Jewish neighbourhood) on a Sunday with his father where the shops would be open and beautiful cakes and delicacies could be bought. This fondness and celebration of food was kindled also by his mother who was an excellent cook, and has stayed part of Dad's DNA up until today.

Dad turned 13 and had his bar mitzvah in 1940, just as his world was about to change irrevocably. Germany occupied the Netherlands.

Restrictions had begun for Jewish families like his: no going to cinemas, no riding on buses, curfews in place, and going to the public baths was forbidden. There was enforced segregation of schools and without a bus to catch, dad was forced to walk for one hour each way to a Jewish school, Mulo. Perhaps worst of all was the compulsory wearing of a yellow star, though his mother had the foresight to use dimes instead of stitching to fix the star onto his clothes.

The family talked about going to England, but what of grandparents and extended family? Surely the reports coming from Germany were exaggerated?

Then, one day my father was arrested from his home by the SD which was part of the SS (the Gestapo) and locked up in the Hollandsche Schouwburg, a Jewish theatre being used as a deportation centre. He would have been deported to the concentration camps had his father not intervened and paid a lot of money to have him released.

While dad was incarcerated, he looked out the window one day and saw a woman across the street washing her windows. He wondered if she realised how lucky she was to have the freedom to perform this mundane act?

Once Dad was released the family then realised they needed to go into hiding... but it wasn't easy. Dad remembers the initial futility of asking for help, but finally it came from unexpected quarters. The Dutch underground provided the family with fake identity papers and my father became Joseph Klein born in Batavia (now Jakarta) to account for his olive complexion.

A hiding place could not be found for a family of four, so the family was split up and sent to the countryside finding refuge in Driebergen. Dad was separated from his brother and parents but could visit them from time to time. When he had just turned 16, he managed to visit, not knowing this would be the last time he would see them.

His parents and brother Leo were discovered and transported to Westerbork a dutch transit camp /concentration camp and then deported onto Auschwitz where they would be murdered along with most of his extended family and 75% of the Jewish population from Amsterdam, 104,000 men, women and children who perished in the same way.

Dad was 18 years old when the war ended and he discovered he was an orphan. A loving, childless Aunt and Uncle wished to adopt him, but he felt no one could replace his family so he joined the Dutch Army and went to Indonesia for a couple of years.

When he returned to Amsterdam he lived in the YMCA until a friend he'd made there mentioned he was going to New Zealand for no greater reason than that there were wide open spaces, more sheep than people and reportedly beautiful women. Dad boarded a ship to New Zealand with literally NOTHING to lose. He had less than \$20 in his pocket.

In Auckland, he was taken under the wing of recent European émigré and refugees, in particular his dentist Dr Unger who introduced him to Dr Max Reizenstein (a doctor of philosophy), another German Jewish refugee, who had a small bakery on Ponsonby Road. Dr Reizenstein loved New Zealand but not the bread, and it he who taught dad the principles of baking.

The generosity of a thoughtful introduction is probably the most valuable thing that any one of us could do for each other. In my father's case, his introductions to the Dutch underground and later to Dr Reizenstein were the seminal moments that helped shape his life.

Dad delivered Reizenstein's bread initially by bike, then by truck.

Dad is known for thinking outside the box and not letting anyone define his parameters. One day he decided that the truck needed a finishing touch – a sculpture of a loaf of Reizentein's bread to sit on its roof. Dad was introduced to Peter Sauerbeer, a Dutch sculptor in Titirangi.

At this studio, dad met my beautiful mother Janna Dettingmeijer, young nurse from Rotterdam, who was visiting and staying with her cousin – the wife of the sculptor. They fell in love and married in 1956.

A couple of years later, my parents founded Klisser's Farmhouse Bakery in Auckland baking 1200 loaves a week. My mother did the accounts and label designs and my father baked and delivered the bread. A couple of years later, they bought out Reizenstein's and in the 1960s, secured the franchise for Vogel's bread. By the time Klisser's Farmhouse Bakeries was sold to Goodman Fielder in 1990, the company was baking more than

500,000 loaves a week and Vogel's bread had become a household name and beloved New Zealand icon.

Of course, at the same time, they had four children. I am the oldest followed by my brother Edward, my sister Jacq and our younger sister Sarah.

Being very biased, my parents are my sun and moon. My siblings and their families are the planets, my son's and partners- rising stars. We've witnessed how my mother enabled my father to live life to the fullest -- showing him how to trust and to love again after he had lost everyone he loved. And to this day at age 93 and 90, when one inhales, the other exhales.

But this is not the end of my parent's story. In their mid-60s, mom and dad fell in love with a sheep station in the South Island on the flanks of Lake Benmore looking at Mt Cook, producing fine merino wool and farming cattle and deer. Putting everything into this farm, dad at 93 is proudly wearing a pounamou given to him by the local iwi.

My parents feel that they are simply the custodians of a little piece of paradise and have done their best together to give their best and to make a difference.

Dad has a joy in living that's rubbed off on all my siblings and me. He has always told us: "You've got to make the most out of life." My father knew that life was precious and that things could change on a dime. He taught us to celebrate freedom, to cherish the ability to dream, to have hope, to create and to love and to work hard – he is a Dutch-Kiwi, after all.

My parents are deeply concerned with racism. They are upstanders for human rights they condemn bigotry, white supremacism, oppression of any other race or religion and they believe firmly in education to help erase ignorance and intolerance.

It's our differences that can make a difference for a richer and better world.

I want to end off with a message that was forwarded to me this morning by Paul Moon, Professor of History at AUT.

Ulu Aiono, the Chairman of Alliance Health Plus

“I haven't seen them for 40 years but Mr Johan Klisser & his wife Jenny are two of my favourite people. For all their business acumen and Holocaust survivor memories they are generous, loving and full of encouragement for others. As a teenager I met them in a ski weekend at Ruapehu. The Ruapehu Ski Club's bread was almost all comp'd by Mr & Mrs Klisser. It didn't matter that I was a Samoan teenager with no skiing experience ... Mr Klisser encouraged me and offered me the use of equipment and gear. I think about this couple and their many long-tail effects on Kiwi society and pray that I will likewise contribute.”

Le Chaim! To life!

Thank you