My Shul-Mate Else z"l

By Sharon Mark Cohen

"Hubby here?" The familiar, friendly question came from good-natured Else (pronounced El-sa) Roth each Saturday as she peeked through the lace curtain on the mechitza.

As she turned to me after affirming my answer, "French nails this week," she would comment, as she nodded approvingly when checking my manicure. Simultaneously, she would show me her own neatly polished fingernails. That began our Shabbos routine, sitting together in the women's section at the Charles Kimmel Building of the Maplewood Jewish Center.

My friend Else, decades my senior, loved "girl talk." Like me, she also had a very strong hankering for family—and she made me feel like part of her family. Born in Germany in 1921, she spoke deliberately with a heavy German accent peppered with an occasional giggle.

As the anniversaries of her children's marriages rolled around, they were marked by how many years ago Else bought the hat she was wearing, which covered her thinning white hair, or the dress she purchased for her daughter Pearl's wedding or son Joey's, and cared for so neatly.

After her husband Kuno's passing at age 95 in 2009, and with their daughter living in Israel, their son, the doctor, began escorting his mother to services to say kaddish. He made sure that his revered mother continue her companionship in our shul community, seeing several of the same aged congregants from the days her dear Kuno had been president of the congregation.

Else was at home at the kiddush, and very much a part of the intellectual conversations, adding recaps of the weekly world news. She would update the others on Cafe Europa (Holocaust survivors) meetings, as well as family accomplishments here and in Israel. Culturally attuned, she would review the shows at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, where her daughter-in-law filled the empty seat from Kuno's subscription.

Into the 10th decade of her life, an independent Else could be found swimming at the Jewish Community Center pool, or bicycling around her Maplewood, New Jersey, neighborhood. On Shabbos, she sat back and allowed her "Super Doc" son to serve her a hearty kiddush lunch at the synagogue social hall. To Else's delight, the meal was always topped off with sweets.

When not in town, the Israeli contingent made it seem as though they were not far away, as Else made a point of noting appreciatively that Pearl's husband called her every Sunday of his married life. The grandchildren, whom Else and Kuno so lovingly babysat...even on family vacations...detoured on trips, stopping in Maplewood to visit their grandparents. Else would list the treats she personally drove to the store and shopped for to have waiting for her Israeli family on their intermittent visits.

Else and her late husband Kuno. (CREDIT: FAMILY OF ELSE ROTH)

Those doting grandparents were second cousins, who married during World War II in Europe. She knew the approximate date when she was deported from Germany to Poland, the homeland of her parents, and asked her shul mate to track the actual day on the computer. With the information she supplied, that was easy. The hard part was listening to and internalizing her straightforward first-hand account of survival.

Miracle upon miracle, with fortitude and cunning, Else lived to recount her harrowing story on the radio when she was 90. As she put it, 1933 marked the end of any formal education, as she was dismissed from school when the Nazis took over and the hardship began.

As a teenager, Else left her parents' home and went to join her older sisters living in Frankfurt on the Rhine, where she interned in the dietary department at a hospital. One sister was working in a restaurant and the other, Anna, with a PhD in Philology, was proficient in French, English and German.

In 1938, she received a call from Anna at her 6 a.m. start of work, telling her to come over, and to pack a bag. She just finished packing when there was an ominous knock on the door. It was the police, uttering the daunting words, "Come with me."

At the police station, there were large groups of Jews. They were brought to the railroad station to be deported. They arrived in Krakow about eight hours later, where Else went to work at a private home doing cooking and cleaning.

Else's maternal grandfather lived in Poland, in Galizia, which is now Ukraine, and she harbored a special desire to meet him. When Anna sent her four U.S. dollars, she found out on the black market she could exchange those four single dollar bills for enough Polish dollars to take the train, then get a horse and wagon to take her to the grandfather's town.

She was so thrilled to meet her grandfather—it was June 1939. There she met many other relatives from both sides of her family.

The Second World War in Poland began in September, 1939. After they were deported to Poland, miraculously Else met up with her parents. It was the last time she saw them; the parents were killed by the Nazis in 1943.

Else was still in Krakow, where they started a ghetto; the Jews were surrounded by police and guards in special zoning. They couldn't go out and had to wear an identifiable Jewish star on the arm. She noted it was a very strict and painful rule. There, she had to work for Nazis, where she soldered gas lamps.

Through another miracle, Else ran into a friend from her hometown who said, "I met your second cousin." Else knew Kuno from Germany. When they reunited, he gave her ideas on how to survive. While working as a special mechanic for the highest officials within the Gestapo, Kuno looked for jobs for Else cleaning in offices.

They married in the Hall of Records in 1942. As his wife, she could start working where he did. Kuno lived in a famous jail in Krakow. Every day Else and he were picked up by car and brought to work and back to the jail in the evening. Soup from the jail kitchen was delivered to them.

At one point, the living arrangements were such that the men resided with the other men and women with women. Another time, they stayed in a room with four couples on bunk beds and each couple slept together. They survived that way until 1945.

Living in such close quarters, they suffered terribly from lice. Once she was in terrible pain with a toothache and asked the superior if she could go to the dentist. He pulled out two teeth without novocaine.

As for the sanitary conditions, there was a big kitchen with a coal oven. They made the fire and cooked laundry in an extremely big pot on the oven. Someone had given Else a recipe for soap and she asked a Polish worker for the ingredients. She cooked the fluid, turning a chair over to use the frame as a form. After it cooled she cut the soap in small square pieces.

When Kuno ran out of underwear, Else used needle and thread to make more with red cotton material he brought. She found out later the fabric was from a Nazi flag Kuno cut up.

Else spoke German and worked in the office where they had all the best mechanics from Krakow. When she heard them say the Russians were coming, she told Kuno. She said he always had good ideas and told her to hide in the boiler room. He started his car and made believe he was following the Germans. Instead, they stayed and the Russians came the next day and liberated them.

Still, they had a hard time getting out of Poland. They had to smuggle everything out to the French zone in Berlin.

Ultimately, from the displaced persons camp in Germany, they came to America at the cost of $205 per person traveling for 10 days on the USS Liberty. Anna, already living in America, paid for their tickets in 1946. Here, they raised their cherished daughter and son, now married, each with three well-established, successful children...they also merited to live to see great grandchildren, whom they adored.

The radio debut ended with Else acknowledging, "...a big miracle being in the United States; the biggest gift for me and I'm very lucky."

Azoi geit es (Else laughed as though she were tickled, kvelling over my elemental Yiddish)—so went our weekly [illegible] delightful Else in 2014 to rest in peace with Kuno. But, her legacy lives on in her family and in the stories now recorded for eternity by her shul-mate.