

Posted on Thu, Dec. 04, 2008

Craftsman, Holocaust survivor

BY ELINOR J. BRECHER

In the Kovno ghetto, his hands kept Abraham Rutschaisky alive. In the world of pool and billiards, they made him famous.

A talented woodturner like his father and late brother, Morris, the teenage Abe did something the Nazis found useful: He made shaving brushes and razor handles for officers serving in Lithuania and toys for their children.

Later at the Dachau death camp, he carved wooden clogs for fellow prisoners and wooden canteens for the guards who tormented them.

As Abe Rich of Miami Beach, he created custom cue sticks in a tiny workshop at 428 Jefferson Ave. Initially Florida Cue, the company now is called Star Cue Manufacturing, listed in the Blue Book of Pool Cues.

He died on Nov. 25 at 82.

Though he never advertised, Abe sold to professionals as well as amateurs. Minnesota Fats once bought four cues and Jackie Gleason, who portrayed the legendary pool shark in *The Hustler*, bought one inlaid with diamonds, rubies and sapphires.

Six days a week Abe rose at 5 a.m., then took a bus from Sunny Isles Beach to the shop, where he'd been working alone since 1973. He'd open a can of sardines for lunch, and turn blocks of wood into works of art on his lathe.

October 8 was no different. But the following day, unaware that he had non-Hodgkins lymphoma and colon cancer, Abe passed out during Yom Kippur services, said nephew Howard Rich.

He was taken to Aventura Hospital, where he later died.

"Abe was a treasure that I don't think anybody knew about," said Greg Hark, a Delray Beach photographer who owns several Star cues. "He has wood aging on the racks for 50, 60 years. He's got wood from Brazilian trees that are probably extinct."

Abe lived for his craft, caring little for money or material things. He never owned an apartment and charged bargain prices for collector's-item cues.

Gleason, who supplied his own gems, probably paid \$300, Howard said, but the average Star cue costs \$180, some only \$75.

In 1983, Abe Rich told The Miami Herald: "If you will take away my work, I think I would be a lost man, a miserable man. I am not afraid to work. I am afraid *not* to work. If I can take a piece of wood and make a cue, then I can be a happy man."

He had abundant reasons not to be happy. Lithuanian thugs killed his father in the early days of World War

He even before the Nazis had a chance to murder his mother and younger brother.

And a Nazi soldier condemned Abe to a life of pain after slamming a rifle butt into his back, breaking it.

He stood 5-foot-3 and "looked like the Hunchback of Notre Dame," Howard Rich said. Because of this, he never married.

Yet Abe didn't dwell on his tragedies. He preferred to talk about how the same soldier later became a lifesaver for himself and his brother, Morris -- Howard's father -- by sneaking food to them.

That kept the Rutschaisky boys strong enough to endure the horrors of Dachau, where, Howard said, they had to haul heavy bags of concrete.

At liberation, he weighed 75 pounds. He and Morris spent two years recuperating at an Austrian monastery, then Abe headed for what was to become the state of Israel.

In 1962, Abe decided to join Morris, who was running a successful wood shop in Miami. He stopped in New York to visit an uncle, Izzy Rutschaisky, cue maker to celebrities like Fred Astaire and Erroll Flynn, and stayed a year to apprentice.

In Miami, Abe worked with Morris until 1973 then opened his own shop.

"The place was a mess," Greg Hark said, but Abe at the lathe was a joy to watch.

"In this day and age, nobody hand-turns a lathe like that. It's a lost art," Hark added.

About four years ago, Miami Beach freelance photographer Joe Gato stepped into the shop.

"It looked like something stuck in an old European time warp," said Gato.

Abe ``looked like Central Casting's version of a good pool cue maker. He was all bent over and he'd look up at you with blue, soulful eyes. It was like visiting one of the Hobbits."

About the same time that Gato discovered Abe Rich, so did Rabbi Shraga Mann of the Chabad in South Beach. New in town, he was introducing himself to Jewish merchants. Behind a flower business, he found Abe.

"It was a little narrow shop with piles of wood, paper -- you could barely walk. I see this old man. I ask him, 'Are you Jewish?' Abe says, 'Do I look Jewish?' I got my answer."

On Sunday, Shraga Mann prayed over Abe Rich one last time, at his funeral. Attached to the casket: a Star cue.

In addition to nieces and nephews, he is survived by sisters Faye Salzman of Aventura and Miriam Fuchs of Israel.

The family suggests donations to the Holocaust Memorial Committee, 1933-1945 Meridian Ave., Miami Beach, FL 33179.