

Old South News



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THE STORY OF A 1950s IMMIGRANT FAMILY IN OLD SOUTH...

At the end of World War II, families from many countries applied to leave Europe and come to Canada. One such family, the Dohnbergs, had moved around from Latvia to East Prussia (now Poland) and then to Germany. The father, Erik, came from a family who had owned a shipping line and, though this operation had been lost in World War I, Erik's life had been one of wealth and privilege. By the end of World War II, this life too had gone and Erik, with his wife Eva and four small children sought to come to Canada. In 1952, Erik, in order to get settled ahead of the rest of the family, arrived in London at the CP train station on Richmond Street (currently the site of the Keg). He walked across the road to the CP Hotel (now the Ceeps) for lodging, and soon found employment as janitor at the hotel. Meanwhile, his family remained in a refugee camp in Hamburg awaiting permits to follow him.



Eighteen months later the family was reunited, and they rented a home at 68 High Street, where they lived for the next 5 years. They arrived speaking only German, although British soldiers running the refugee camp had taught the youngsters some basic English words: Good morning, Please, Thank you, and, chocolate. The children, enrolled in Tecumseh School, assimilated quickly and easily, as children tend to do.

They soon learned the new language, although the older two boys never completely lost their natural German brogue. Life for the new immigrants was challenging, and the children received their share of bullying in the playground, from name-calling to mimicking, but they survived it.

Their mother had a harder time settling, however, having left behind her three sisters. She discovered, and joined, a group named the Baltic Aid Society, formed by fellow migrants from the German-speaking Baltic States. With her dressmaking skills, she obtained a position as a seamstress, working in Simpson's department store downtown, at a time when most mothers did not work outside the home.

In 1958, the home at 8 Ardaven Place came on the market, and the Dohnberg family bought it. Built in 1905, it had only known one owner.



Graduating from Tecumseh, Sven, Bjorn, Margrit and Knute, all went to South Collegiate, and the boys later graduated from UWO. Sven became a well-respected lawyer in St. Catherines, and at his funeral in 1993, an RCMP honour guard was in attendance. Bjorn became a librarian and retired in Ottawa. Margrit travelled widely and raised a family in Sweden, although now resides in England. Knute, a realtor with Gleed Commercial, was the first Londoner inducted into the Canadian Ski Instructors Hall of Fame, in 1999. Today, almost 60 years after buying the Ardaven home, the property remains in the Dohnberg family.