

Robert Katz: A Jewish Farmer in Bernville

by Tiffine Malamphy

Robert Katz's life story has been pieced together through a videotaped testimony of his son, Lee Katz, who died March 21, 2011; an interview with his nephew Joseph Goldstein; and several articles in the Reading Eagle.

On January 7, 1900, Robert Katz was born in Giesson, Germany. He was the youngest of his siblings with two older brothers and two older sisters. While Robert still lived in Germany, he served as a soldier in World War I. Shortly after the war ended, Robert moved to the United States in 1923. The main reason Robert moved to the United States was his absolute dislike for Germans and their politics. Even though Robert was Jewish, he did not leave Germany for that reason. Robert had an older brother who lived in the States which guaranteed that he would have somewhere to live once he made the transition across the ocean. Robert's older brother, Solly, worked as a farmer and was a gateway to his eventual career. Robert hung a sign on his door that stayed there for many years; it read, "Robert Katz Cattle Dealer." His life as a German Jewish farmer in Bernville is a fascinating story.

Robert returned to Germany in 1927 so he could meet his future wife. He attended a meeting with a woman, Paula, who would eventually become his wife. This occurred through the old Jewish custom of arranged marriage. On May 15, 1927, Paula came to the United States and nine days later she married Robert. After finding a wife, Robert never returned to Germany.

In 1928, Paula gave birth to their first and only son, Lee. Lee was Robert's closest relative in the United States. Lee eventually followed in his father's footsteps and became a livestock dealer. Robert was also very fond of his nephew Joseph. He essentially raised Joseph since Joseph's father died when he was only 13. Robert became a father figure for Joseph and taught him the most valuable lessons a person could learn. He taught Joseph how to work and there was no reason to be afraid of it. He also taught Joseph how to work smart. Robert exemplified that he was a smart man by teaching Joseph math while they rode in the cattle truck. He truly cared about his family and wanted to teach both his nephew and his son valuable life lessons in the hopes that they would eventually love farming as much as he did.

Farming was a major part of Robert's life and the reason that he was so well known in Bernville. He was a livestock dealer and an avid farmer. Robert knew a lot about livestock. At one point, he bought a lame cow because he realized immediately that the cow only had bruised hooves. Robert tended to the cow by treating her feet. While he waited for the cow's hooves to heal, he milked her lying down. Eventually, Robert sold the cow to a farmer who did not have stony fields. The main way that Robert earned his money was by buying and selling farms. He eventually built himself a large operation. Robert had both dairy cows and beef cattle. Joseph recalls that at any time Robert would be running at least twelve farms. He had four hired hands and a truck driver to help him with his farms. In fact, Robert had five farms right on Garfield Road which is where he lived.

Joseph recalls a story that describes how Robert was always looking for a deal for his

farming business. Robert went to a public sale to purchase cows, but by the end of the sale he had bought both the cows and the farm. While Robert enterprising he was not frugal with his money. At a farmer's market one day, Lee received a phone call from his wife and learned that one of Robert's farms was on fire. Lee was afraid to tell his father in case he reacted poorly while in the market. When asked what the call was about, Lee replied that his wife wanted him to bring home potatoes. Later, on the car ride home, Lee asked what his father would do if one of the farms were on fire. Robert said that even if the farm burned they were all insured. After hearing this, Lee decided to tell his father that one of the farms was on fire. Robert arrived at the farm only to see his barn destroyed. He eventually decided not to rebuild the farm.

Robert was a very successful farmer. It helped that farming was his passion. He truly understood livestock and what it took to have healthy cattle. One story that Joseph recounts is how Robert's wife, Paula, wanted a new car but he refused to buy it since he needed to buy new farming equipment. Farms were truly his love and they absolutely came first.

Robert was more than just a farmer. He was also an impressive man that had an essence about him that was difficult to describe. Robert had a quirk that required he dressed a certain way every day. According to his nephew Joseph, Robert wore suspenders or wear bib overalls every day. On his feet, Robert wore either high leather shoes or half boots. His style of dress made him seem very unassuming. Joseph claims that anyone who saw Robert on the street would not suspect that he was an affluent man.

Both Lee and Joseph have an almost unending list of positive ways to describe Robert. His nephew says he was the first one up and the last one to bed at the end of the day. He was also very honest. Joseph also describes his uncle as being very lucky. It seems from all the public sales that Robert advertised in the *Reading Eagle* that he was lucky in many of his business ventures. Robert was a very smart man. He never went to college which may have been a result of being a soldier and immigrating to the United States. Despite not being formally educated, Robert was very secure in his ability to conduct business. This is a real juxtaposition to his feelings about his ability to speak English. Robert was very self-conscious about his accent when speaking English. He also was not able to write very well. Joseph indicated that Robert only shared this knowledge with close relatives. Overall, he was a very shrewd businessman.

Robert also had a softer side that he wanted to remain private. He was very charitable but preferred to remain anonymous. Joseph said that, "if someone was in need then somehow they got." One story that Joseph told was of the time that Robert found out a man could not afford fuel to heat his house. Robert got in his car and drove to the store. There he told the clerk to send a significant amount of fuel to the man's house but to keep it anonymous. Robert then charged the heating fuel to his account.

While Robert was a charitable man, he was also well known as a prankster. He would go through a lot of trouble to pull a prank on someone. One story in particular exemplifies how much Robert enjoyed pulling pranks. Robert really did not like one of the local constables. He owned a goat that looked very similar to a doe. Robert decided one day that he would slaughter the goat and strap it to his car so it would replicate how other hunters would strap deer to their cars. He then drove around town showing off his prize. He even made sure that the constable saw his new prize. Later that day, state police arrived at Robert's house and demanded to see his hunting license. Robert, of course, obliged the police. When the constable wanted to arrest Robert, he pointed out that if the

constable could not tell the difference between a goat and a doe then maybe he should be the one who was hunted. Robert was very proud of this story. Joseph claims that he must have heard that story “at least 700 times.”

Robert also pulled several other pranks that both his nephew and son enjoyed retelling. Joseph recalls a time when Robert had acquired a significant amount of land. A real estate agent eventually called Robert and inquired if he could purchase the land. Robert was asked how much he wanted for the land. He replied with a ridiculous number that he must have known he would never get. The real estate agent laughed at Robert’s number and told him there was no way anyone could make that deal. Out of curiosity, the real estate agent asked why Robert decided to ask for that number. Robert simply replied that he had never sold anything for that amount and wanted to. While some would consider Robert’s pranks mean, his family says he was truly a loving man.

Although Robert never returned to Germany after moving to the United States in the 1920s, he still helped many German-Jews during the Holocaust. During the Holocaust, a person needed a letter indicating he or she had a place to live and a source of income to move to the United States. This ensured that the refugees would not be a burden to the American people. Lee speculates that Robert provided close to 100 such affidavits to German-Jews. He saved many of his friends and family from being sent to concentration camps. After Robert distributed the affidavits, he sent one of his hired hands to pick up the refugees from the boat. The affidavits likely saved many people from dying.

Robert was a practicing Jew. He attended Temple Oheb Sholom while he lived in Bernville. In Bernville, Temple Oheb Sholom was known as a German-Jewish synagogue. Joseph speculates that this may have been one of the reasons that Robert chose to attend this synagogue since he is unsure which sort of temple Robert attended in Germany.

Robert Katz died September 9, 1976. He left the bulk of his estate to his wife Paula and his son Lee. A portion of his small fortune was donated to various charities in the Reading area. According to his obituary, from his work as a livestock dealer, Robert left his family a sizable estate.