



## From the Holocaust to Hardware to Hollywood

by Deborah Oppenheimer  
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I like to say I grew up on a cul de sac in Green Acres, a planned community where many of the streets are named after bushes and shrubs. I walked to Forest Road Elementary School and South High School and spent thirteen years with some of my classmates, a great many of whom I saw at our reunion last month. I was a junior counselor at Creative Day Camp on Central Avenue, a confidential files clerk at the Dime Savings Bank in the Green Acres mall, and a hostess at the International House of Pancakes on Sunrise Highway. Saturdays, my sister Wendy and I did filing in the family business, Central Hardware, on Central Avenue, where my grandfather, father, and brother knew everything there was to know about hardware, and my grandmother and mother worked the cash register.

Everything about who and where I came from enabled me to make my way to Hollywood, where I won an Academy Award for a documentary entitled, *Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport*.

The film was inspired by my late mother, Sylva Avramovici Oppenheimer, whose parents

put her on a train in Chemnitz, Germany, in 1939, a week after her eleventh birthday, and sent her to safety with strangers in Great Britain. Like ninety percent of the ten thousand children rescued by the Kindertransport, my mother never saw her parents again.

The paternal Oppenheimer side of my family has a story of equal but different interest, about whom I never made a film.

My grandfather David had a wholesale hardware business in the tiny Bavarian town of Aub, Germany. A veteran of the German army, he was awarded an Iron Cross in the First World War, but by the 1930s, he was no longer able to conduct business. My then-young father Eric was driven out of the local school and sent away to boarding school, and my aunt Liz was photographed in front of a friend's home that had a Jewish star spray painted on their front post. It was time to get out, which thankfully they did with the aid of some resourceful relatives.

Travelling by boat into New York harbor in March 1938, my father's family settled in Washington Heights, where David persuaded a

local hardware merchant to allow him to work for free so he could learn the language. In short time he worked his way up to \$7 per week. In 1939, searching for a business where he could start over, he saw an advertisement for a small storefront near "Rockefeller Center." Upon arrival, he examined its prospects, asked around among neighbors, and decided to plant his stake in Valley Stream, near Rockville Center, a slight difference in pronunciation and real estate value.

My father completed high school at Valley Stream Central, enlisted in the American military in World War II, and returned to Germany with the 35th Signal Battalion. At the age of nineteen, upon liberation, he accompanied his Colonel to the concentration camp Nordhausen after hearing reports impossible to fathom. It's difficult to grasp how he must have felt seeing emaciated prisoners and mass graves, knowing that could have been his fate.

In the 1940s, Central Hardware was expanding with the opportunity to serve the burgeoning local community. Its slogan was, "You name it, we have it," and it was a classic Mom-and-Pop-store with impressively knowledgeable and helpful salespeople. My grandparents lived across the street and went home each day for lunch. On weekends my grandfather purchased merchandise in bulk on the Lower East Side, and the extensive store basement was crammed with every hardware item imaginable from there and from auctions, plus then some.

My father returned to Valley Stream and was studying architecture at Pratt and then Columbia but couldn't withstand the pull of my grandfather and the family business. For my brother Alan, a mechanical genius who disassembled and reconstructed engines from a very young age, the store became inevitable when he was still in school. My mother greeted everyone from the

cash register and knew everyone's business. My grandmother toddled around the narrow aisles.

There was no hardware question my grandfather and father couldn't answer, and customers sought out their friendly expertise. The local men came on Fridays, sat around and talked, and purchased supplies for their weekend home building projects. Everyone knew my family. Everyone loved to shop in "the store," as it was widely called.

My family worked together six days a week. We had dinner together every night, after which my father would retire to his desk to work on bills and paperwork. On Sundays my grandparents visited. The hardware store enabled my parents to put Wendy, Alan, and me through college, the first generation in our family to complete our college degrees.

My grandfather passed away in 1975, and my father assumed the running of the store. By then my brother had graduated from college and was working there full-time. Some years later, he married, and his wife Laura came to work. Generations of customers began frequenting the business. Very few other changes were visible. If you took a snapshot, you might tell the passage of time only by the changing models of cars driving by.

In the late 1970s, my father installed a music system to subvert the growing number of radio ads trumpeting a new phenomenon that competed with his business, the big box store. Yet when fierce snowstorms unexpectedly arose and rock salt was at a premium, you could be sure my father and brother were painstakingly measuring out small portions so no one business could purchase in bulk, and everyone could get a bag to melt their sidewalks and driveways.

After the death of my mother in 1993, my father finally retired, handing over the reins to my brother, although he still went to the store regularly to help out. He's 87 now, happily remarried for seventeen years to our neighbor Gloria from across the street in Green Acres, which is now called Mill Brook. His tool bench is a thing of beauty.

Sadly, the store that shaped our values, instilled a fierce work ethic, defined loyalty and honesty, and wired us into the entire community,

could no longer withstand changes in the retail world.

It is going the way of the diminishing bookstore, pharmacy, and stationary store.

On November 5th after 72 years, Central Hardware will close, a poignant end to an era. When I came home for my high school reunion, all my old classmates asked about Eric, Alan, Wendy, and the hardware store. I hope they and a lifetime of customers will stop by to say one final farewell.

