

Family Memoir

The Man With The Golden Fingers

BY BETTY LANS KAHN

If you wore a garment made by J.J. (Jack) Lans, you could be sure of wearing something exquisitely fashioned of only the finest woolens and/or furs. For over 35 years, Jack Lans made fur coats, did tailoring, repaired furs, and even took in dry cleaning at 948 East 43rd Street on Chicago's South Side. (43rd Street, from 900 to 1000 east, is now called Honorary Muddy Waters Drive after the great Blues musician.)

J.J. Lans was my father, an immigrant from Kiev in the Ukraine. Dad made me many very beautiful suits, coats, and fur coats over the years I was growing up. No store-bought, ready-to-wear garment could compare with the quality of his workmanship, and he would use only the best materials.

Dad's shop was located between Ellis Avenue and Drexel Boulevard. At one time that area was a very affluent neighborhood, especially along Drexel going south toward the University of Chicago. Over the years the area experienced population change and economic deterioration. However, many of my father's customers remained faithful and would come to him from all parts of the city, or he would go to them. (One of his faithful fur customers came all the way from Pocatello, Idaho every year to leave her coat with Dad for repair and cleaning.)

I can remember my father and my brother lugging large boxes via streetcar and "L" to deliver customers' garments. Dad never owned a car nor learned to drive.

The shop, "J.J. Lans-Furrier," stood next door to the old Shakespeare Movie Theatre, where my brother and I often stopped in. [See box on facing page.]

Dad had another neighbor, a merchant he often argued with. They would make up, and my father would say to me, "Go next door and buy some hosiery." This man was an Arab and my father was Jewish. Looking back, I now know that their disagreements must have been about Palestine.

When my brother and I were old enough to travel across the city on our own (we lived on the North Side), we'd go out on a Saturday or Sunday during Dad's busy season in the winter months to keep him company. I used to watch him as he was putting together a fur coat for someone. He would sew the skins together on a special machine, or he would stretch the skins on a large, flat board on legs, and nail each piece in place as he dampened it with water. We learned how a fur coat was "built" and it was a fascinating procedure. My father used only the finest, freshest skins. He never used dried-out furs because the skins would crack, and that would not be honest workmanship. I remember that there was a large vault where the skins and coats were stored to protect them until they were ready for the customers.

Dad would let me pick out what kind of fur coat or fur-trimmed cloth coat I liked when I needed a new one. My favorite coat was of soft light blue wool trimmed with real beaver. There was a raccoon coat once, and several silver muskrat coats, too. They kept me pretty warm when I was standing on wintry Chicago street corners waiting for buses and streetcars. Every coat was made with love and I knew it.

As the years went by and the neighborhood was no longer safe, Dad moved his business out to the Marquette Park neighborhood and shared space in a cleaning shop. He cut back on his hours and went into semi-retirement, but some of his faithful customers still came to him.

Dad rests in Rosemont Park Cemetery on West Addison Street with other family members. I miss my father every single day—he of the golden fingers. ♦

BETTY LANS KAHN wrote about her grandfather Mandelbaum's hardware store in CJH Fall 1997. Mrs. Kahn lives in Batavia, Illinois.



Jack Lans and his daughter Betty.
Courtesy of Betty Lans Kahn.