

## LOUIS KUHN MEMORIAL EULOGY

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*The following written eulogy was prepared from notes used in my oral eulogy, presented at Boulevard-Riverside Chapels, in Hewlett, Long Island, NY, on November 11, 2001.*

On behalf of my mother, Lee, his wife of over 60 years; his daughter Karen; my father's grandchildren, Aaron, Adam, Daniella, Ross and Michael; son-in-law Stuart and daughter-in-law Dora; and all his extended family, I thank you for coming today to honor Louis Kuhn.

A life lived full, into one's 90<sup>th</sup> year, surrounded by adoring family, is a life to celebrate. It is good and right to mourn, but in this time of trouble when many lives are tragically cut short, it is also good and right to appreciate such a full life.

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Several months ago my father had fallen and acquired a nasty cut over his eye. He was seated with a group of elderly folk at the assisted living facility into which he had recently moved when someone asked how he had gotten such a deep gash. My father flushed his face, feigning anger, pointed to a nearby 92-year old gentleman and said, accusingly, for all to hear, "He did it!"

Everyone froze, especially the old gentleman, and then, getting the joke, everyone laughed – and talked about it for weeks. It was a moment of exhilaration for this taciturn, compliant group of once-vibrant people now unable to function on their own. When else had there been such excitement in assisted living? That was my father -- always with a smile, often with a twinkle -- and he had picked on the 92-year old because the gregarious guy was always bragging to have been an associate of Al Capone.

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Permit me today to tell some stories of the life of Lou Kuhn -- for those who may not have known him, and for those who knew him all their lives and still may not have known him.

Louis Kuhn was born, as were many of his generation of Jews, on the fabled Lower East Side of New York, the son of very poor immigrants from Hungary and Austria. His parents had met and married in the Old Country where his two sisters, now deceased, were born.

It was said that no one of his day could punch a ball further than Lou Kuhn. (My generation played stickball; I guess his couldn't afford the stick, so they played punchball.) Punchball was the game of choice on the streets of the Lower East Side. It was like a combination of handball and baseball in which you would literally punch a pink rubber ball with your clenched fist instead of hitting it with a bat. How far you could punch the ball – bragging rights -- was measured in “sewer” lengths, the distance between sewer covers on the city streets. I don't remember the details, but if a big homerun was three “sewers,” Dad could hit four.

It was a tough world, that one, and Lou was a tough kid -- brawny, brainy, dominating; academically smart too, but his was a world where being academically smart didn't much matter. He graduated high school at 16, was a star of the math team and a standout slugger in baseball, his “big sport” (but was more noted, I'm told, for occasional fights, including a memorable one with an oppressive teacher).

It was the Great Depression; there was a family to support and college was not an option (though he later attended college at night). He found a pick-up job in the jewelry industry, the only work available. He made a few bucks a week, working up, I think, to about \$8 a week.

Well, those were the days when Unions were powerful in New York, and Union sports leagues were serious business -- and when the Garment Union discovered my father's Big Bat and powerful arm, they offered him \$16 a week – double his salary -- if he would play baseball for the Union team. The Union recruiters hinted that Lou wouldn't need to work too hard, or for that matter have to show up all that often. I call it “the Depression's version of an athletic scholarship.” My father accepted the “scholarship,” and that is how he came into the apparel industry. But he surprised the Union, by not only going to work but working very hard.

Lou started as a shipping clerk, packing garments in boxes. He said it enabled him to really understand the business; and throughout his life, he was really good at packing stuff. (Getting lots of things neatly into boxes

was always a great mystery to me.) In fact, Lou required all his budding salesmen, including his nephew Dick, to start in the shipping department.

It was when my father was 24 that he met, at the office, a perky, pretty, vivacious, independent, self-assured 20-year old named Lee.

Here was this big, good-looking guy whom Lee just tumbled for -- he was an "experienced" 24-year old and she, well, a "less-than-experienced" 20-year old -- but let's eavesdrop and listen what happened when Lou first called Lee on the telephone. Remember, this was their very first phone call, which Lee had been desperately hoping for.

He said, confidently, "This is Lou." And she, heart thumping and pulse racing but not deigning to give him such satisfaction, said the now immortal words: "LOU WHO?"

I can only imagine how this gorgeous, strapping young man felt. No woman had ever said "Lou-Who?" to him before. So he shot back, "You know darn well, Lou-Who!"

"Lou-Who?", of course, says as much about my mother as it does my father -- and "Lou-Who?" thus became a watchword in our family, and I pass it along now so that "Lou-Who?" may enlighten future generations.

By the way, when they first met, Mom was making more money than Dad, as she'd often remind us, something like \$23 per week to \$18. And she still flutters when recalling the cute telegram he sent for her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, after they began going together.

My mother reports how young women in the office would virtually swoon in the presence of my father -- one girl in particular confided such feelings to my mother, not realizing that Lee had already captivated Lou (my future parents having schemed to keep their relationship secret). Pictures of my father at the time, found by my daughter Daniella rummaging through old photos, show an exemplary male specimen, a "gorgeous hunk" in my mother's legendary imagery.

Sometime during my father's mid 20s, one of his older sisters, Sadie (called Syd), disappeared. She had been, according to family oral history, "high up" in the American Communist Party. As Lou began following some leads, he was warned not to search for her, lest he put the entire family in physical jeopardy. (Apparently Syd had been supporting Trotsky in his losing battle

against Stalin.) Personally, Lou was fearless, but for the family's sake he backed off.

World War II interceded, and my father served in Europe, along with thousands of his contemporaries, fighting in Germany and helping to liberate two concentration camps. Following are some of his war-time recollections.

-- When a fellow soldier made an anti-Semitic comment to my father, thinking that this tall, handsome athlete could not possibly be Jewish.... It was an instant lesson that stereotyping can be dangerous because Jews can be tough.

-- When my father contracted a severe skin rash and the medics told him to stop "fraternizing" – that was the word for it then – which he protested that he was not doing..... My father discovered that he had been the only soldier to take a shower in 60 days – he had been the only one willing to travel 30 miles to take the shower -- and that by washing off the thick layers of accumulated dirt, his body became exposed to the "straw ticks" that infested their field beds.

-- When my father never ate his emergency rations, a chocolate bar, always preparing for circumstances that could be even worse, it was a life lesson – and for my father not to eat chocolate....

Personally, the most important event of the War occurred in early 1944, just before my father was to be shipped to the front in Europe. I had an older brother, Charles, who had been born with a severe congenital brain deformity, which devastated my mother. The doctors said that they had missed an earlier diagnosis only because of the extremely fastidious care that my mother was lavishing on the infant. My father poignantly felt my mother's current distress, exacerbated by his own coming vulnerability in the War, and so convinced his superiors to allow him a brief furlough, at the right time of the month, so that Dad and Mom could try to conceive another child.

I am that child..... and later today we will be laying my father to rest near Charles.



**My father recently told my son Aaron that in case “compassion” hadn’t worked, he had had “threat” as a backup. Lou informed his sergeant that if he’d be refused the special pass he’d go AWOL. I believe that, because that was Lou Kuhn. To pressure the wartime Army to agree to an unplanned furlough so that one simple soldier could make love to his wife may perhaps be the most unusual achievement of my father’s life. (I’m certainly thankful for it.)**

**After the War, my father returned to his job as an apparel salesman – and he was a good salesman: smart, engaging, personable, intense, honest, and occasionally just a bit intimidating. In fact, he may have been too good a salesman, since his disproportionately large contribution to the small raincoat company brought him into increasing conflict with the owner.**

**My father had saved \$15,000 and, with \$10,000 borrowed from Lee’s brother (Julius, who became Dad’s CPA for 40 years), formed a company (“Rain Chief”) to sell raincoats, the business he knew. It was not a blind shot; Lou had lined up several large orders that he felt sure to get. The problem was securing a loan from a bank, critical in the apparel industry where there are long lead times between buying raw materials (textiles), manufacturing garments, shipping to stores, and finally (hopefully!) collecting receivables. The time span could be almost a year. Which bank would dare loan money to this fledgling company with so little capital?**

**Why one bank did make that first loan tells a story. It seems that when the bankers were inspecting my father’s meager facilities, they noted that he would always turn off the lights as he left each room. When in later years the bankers recounted their critical observation, my father expressed surprise, “But I didn’t even pay the electricity; it was part of the rent!” “We knew that,” said the now retired banker, “that’s why we made the loan. If you’d take that much care of your landlord’s money, we figured you’d do no less with ours.”**

**Chief Apparel – the new name reflecting an extended line of men’s outerwear – grew rapidly, becoming at one time one of the leaders of its industry. My father built the business by maintaining focus, assuring reliability, and providing good service to customers; by motivating energetic salesmen, paying them well, and maintaining their loyalty; and by not being afraid to confront rough tactics, including resisting union goons with tougher union goons, and personally facing down union intimidators with physical counter-threats. But Lou Kuhn always refused to give kickbacks,**

no matter the putative business benefit, and he did very little business entertaining, which he just did not like to do. For over three decades, Chief Apparel as a company, and Lou Kuhn as its founder and president, were well known, respected and admired throughout the men's apparel industry.

Reflecting back on why he had decided to start his own business, my father many times told me that it was "Death of A Salesman," Arthur Miller's mordant play about expectations and reality, which changed his worldview. My father said that the thought of becoming an aging salesman petrified him -- Lou Kuhn did not want to become Willy Loman! -- and that being his own boss would be his only escape.

Yet a simple check of dates, done just now as I am preparing this written eulogy [subsequent to my oral eulogy in the memorial service], reveals that my father's recollection could not possibly be true. My father founded his company in 1947; "Death of A Salesman" premiered in 1949.

I am crying to call him to discuss the discrepancy; he'd have loved to ponder the problem. The only explanation that seems to make sense would have my father indeed seeking (~1947) to break free from the likely lifecycle of an apparel salesman, and then a short time later (~1949) seeing a similar image so searingly portrayed in the play and personified by Loman, so that decades later the two memories would meld together. (Arthur Miller, coincidentally, was in my mother's high school class.)

Lou Kuhn was practical and realistic, common for an entrepreneur; for example, he appreciated the often-brutal difference between "profits" and cash. I recall his response when, in one of Chief Apparel's best years, profits were high and his executives demanded extra bonuses. My father showed them the company's financial statements, which demonstrated that the year's stated pretax profit on the income statement was well exceeded by the year-over-year growth in finished-goods inventory on the balance sheet. Then he said: "Fine, you guys can have extra bonuses; we'll take them from some of these profits: Go to the warehouse and pick out some jackets!"

Over the years, my father never took much money out of his business, preferring to keep the company solid, a perspective not always the norm in the apparel industry. We didn't need much; the family lived comfortably but modestly -- my parents lived in the same \$40,000 house for almost 50 years -- yet my sister Karen and I lacked little and enjoyed every reasonable

**opportunity. But my father's aversion to taking out money for himself wasn't always a good thing.**

**During the Conglomerate Era on Wall Street (1960s), several public companies offered my father what at that time would have been a great deal of money if he would sell his business. But when one CEO didn't pick up the check at lunch, that killed one deal; and another's fancy offices and flamboyant promises turned my father more Off than On. Dad was without pretense and, although generally nonjudgmental, he didn't like it in others. My father treasured his independence and protected his privacy, but that also wasn't always a good thing.**

**Chief Apparel had built up a large U.S. manufacturing base, with multiple garment-making factories, and in the early 1980s, a depressed economy and a surge of apparel imports from Asia staggered the company. Purchasing Eagle Clothes, an attempt at synergy that didn't work, just made things worse. Some say that Lou had trusted his people too much.**

**It was just then, trying to help, that I joined my father in the company; I was dejected -- and I looked it -- but my father taught me, by example, how to act and how to think. Dress up and appear confident, he admonished me, be strong and positive, even when business conditions are poor and you are depressed.**

**We struggled through, financially battered but with our spirits intact. It was one of the lessons learned at my father's side. Two of those lessons have guided my business and professional life:**

- 1) Never worry whether the other guy is getting more than you. Only worry whether you are getting what you need or want.**
- 2) Never look back; never second-guess the past. Always look forward; always do what's best for your future.**

**I have done both and they have served me well.**

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**My father was a great athlete all his life: All-City centerfield in high school baseball; center in college basketball – he was just 6 feet and Jewish... now that was a long time ago. Dad never played tennis, didn't much know how to**

hit a stroke, but he “miraculously” won several business tournaments, by raw athletic ability and a tricky little slice.

He continued playing baseball, primarily softball, in semi-pro and serious pickup games, sometimes for money, always for fun. After his baseball days were over, he decided in his 50s to take up handball (four-wall), which he had never played before. I remember feeling sorry for him; I guess it was because I knew how much he wanted to play some kind of ball. Well, within a few years he was playing handball with champs (like Jimmy Jacobs), who liked my father as a partner – because Lou had a great sense of the court and knew when to get out of the way. My father’s most impressive statistic was that, when in his mid 70s, he’d often play doubles in which the combined ages of the three other players on the court – all added up together -- was less than his!

Lou was an intellectual at heart, though even friends would miss it. He hardly ever went out to business lunches and virtually never had a business dinner. If he weren’t with the family, he’d always be reading.

One time, he excitedly told me that he had devised a mathematical formula describing a certain progression of numbers. He asked me to check if it were correct. I was surprised to find that it seemed to work, but with a little research, I learned that it had already been described. He was disappointed, but I was elated -- because the formula had been discovered, in the 1700s, by one of the world’s greatest mathematicians, Leonhard Euler. And if you know anything about Euler and number theory, to get to the frontier of mathematics of the 1700s, to Euler’s level, well that’s pretty remarkable for an accidental apparel manufacturer and almost handball champ.

In the good years, Lou and Lee started a small foundation together, which the family has used for years to make modest contributions to various charities. My parents gave generously to their grandchildren, money they might have needed themselves, which in our lean years provided a safety net for their education. At the age of 88, Lou patented a special pocket that could, he claimed, improve posture and breathing – and he was written up in the New York Times Business Section.

And Oh those chocolate cakes and ice cream. How his eyes would light up, even to the very end, to that last lunch that Daniella and I shared with him.....

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**Whenever Dad would talk of his daughter, Karen, his face would glow, his whole presence radiating warmth as if his body's thermostat had just been turned up. Even to the last, as he would call for Karen to help with the rudiments of life, he was ever protective of her, always concerned for her welfare.**

**Those of you who know my mother and I might surmise that we share a high percentage of genes that code for personality, and that -- how shall I say this -- we are prone to complexity. Whenever an issue would arise during my father's illness, my mother and I would seem compelled to squeeze out all matter of alternative and possibility, only to discover, after all the rehashing, that Karen's practical, straight-forward approach had been right all along. Even Karen's medical diagnosis, not what any of us might have liked, bested two of the three specialists! Throughout my father's final years, Karen had the clearest head and surest step; she was the steadying force and Dad was deeply appreciative.**



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I want to describe what to me is the most important picture in the world. It is a small, faded photo, about three inches long; my father is about 34, I'm about two; he is crouching, surrounding me with strength; I'm struggling to stand, pointing with intensity at some far-off mystery. The background is grainy; it's probably in Brooklyn, maybe the "barracks" near the beach where we lived just after my father returned from the War. The composition of the photo has a structural simplicity: its center, to me, is my father's protective arm and guiding hand, which are firmly but gently orienting me as I start to explore the new world into which I recently emerged. Dad is in the picture as he was in life -- caring, confident, strong, assured, vital, radiant, and always looking forward.



**As the Great Cycle of Life often has it, our roles reversed in the last two months of his life, and my arms and hands were suddenly supporting him as he struggled to move and walk, terribly weakened from the systemic lymphoma. (The one difference in the reversal was that he was still bigger than me and not so easy to steady.)**

**Even then he'd make his comic observations. After a particularly traumatic and enervating night session of my lifting his heavy, limp body off the floor – he had fallen in the bathroom -- he said that we'd now both get a good night's sleep from the "good" (i.e., exhausting) workout we just had together.**

**He never spoke a word in self-pity or regret. Relieving my mother for a few nights, I'd sleep with him, and choke up watching him in the dim light feel those two grotesque tumors, hoping against hope that they might have shrunk, and I remembered how he would sleep with me when I was afraid as a child.**

**Charismatic and magnetic his whole life, whenever Lou Kuhn entered a room he emanated a "presence" there. It was presence without pretense. Even to the end, when my father had to be wheeled into the assisted living activities area, all the elderly people brightened up, as if a bright light had been switched on. I should report, if my mother will hold her ears [here, eyes], that this was especially true of all the elderly women. I never saw the aura in a room change so quickly.**

**My father had always been meticulously and fastidiously clean remember his 30-mile Army shower!), and so when the degenerating progression of his cancer caused bodily functions to detach from conscious control, it should have been especially distressing (and demeaning in the awkward company of family). Yet in these most embarrassing of personal moments, he maintained remarkable dignity and good humor, giving us running commentaries, as if we were the ones with the problem and he needed to put all of us at ease.**

**The last days brought us together. All the grandchildren came, helping, caring, encouraging. Karen and her husband Stu were incredible, always there, always with a smile. My wife Dora shared his last meal at Sherwood Diner in Lawrence -- my parent's four-decade hangout -- with bagels and chocolate cake of course. Most of all, my mother made enormous sacrifices, pouring out her psychic energy, staying up with him all night, virtually every night, assisting with all matters most personal, often shooing**

away the nightly nurses and professional care givers. She could do, my 85+ year old mother said, what they do, only longer and better.

Faithful lifelong to my mother, my father profoundly appreciated all that she did in those final weeks, but he continued to express fretful concern for her welfare. Until the end, he was telling us to take care of her, that she had to get some rest. “You try telling her, Dad!”, I said with unintended exasperation.

His voice, always rich and resonant, remained sturdy and oddly reassuring. My father’s last words to me, the night before he died, personify his deepest instincts.

The lymphoma was very far advanced, and under the influence of his first morphine, he began to hallucinate. But it is the content of the hallucination – protecting the family -- that is most meaningful.

Though he had not been running Chief Apparel for 15 years, the years dematerialized and he was consumed by worry that when he died, the family would be saddled by huge bank debts, since this was the time of year, pre-Holidays, when the working capital loans would have been at their peak. He was tortured by the thought of his family being so burdened.

“Get Saks Fifth Avenue to pay us,” he insistently instructed us in semi-somnambulance, “and sell the houses.”

I am thankful that my last words were able to reassure and soothe him. I told him that we had paid off all of our debts, that the family had no debt, that the family was protected, and that we were all now very comfortable – and so he could rest in comfort.

He hesitated, wondering perhaps if I were just trying to cheer him up; then he said, “Thanks, Bob. Goodbye.”

I thought it was for the night, but it was forever.





