

The Joe Seidner story

The extraordinary life of a plumbing icon and his selfless contribution to the industry

By Ron Eckroth

Perhaps one of the most amazing things about Joe Seidner is his zest for life and his continued devotion to his work with trade associations, plumbing codes and the business he and George Brady founded 46 years ago.

As a partner in Brady and Seidner Associates Ltd., he arrives at their North Toronto office at 7 a.m. four days a week. He usually stays until late afternoon. "I would likely work Fridays," he says, "but my wife has trouble with her eyes and cannot drive, so I must take her shopping."

Seidner recently renewed his drivers licence by passing the required test at age 92. He shyly opens a desk drawer and extracts a certificate, his paid-up Master Plumber's licence. The document is numbered P.H. 35. — the 35th Masters licence issued by the City of Toronto. That was back in the early 1950s when he and George Brady got together. His years in the plumbing trade, however, go back far beyond his arrival in Canada in May of 1952.

Back in time

To gain some appreciation for Seidner's self-assured and tenacious nature and his uncanny ability to function day after day with the vigor of a man half his age, a step back in time to when he started life in his native Czechoslovakia is required. He

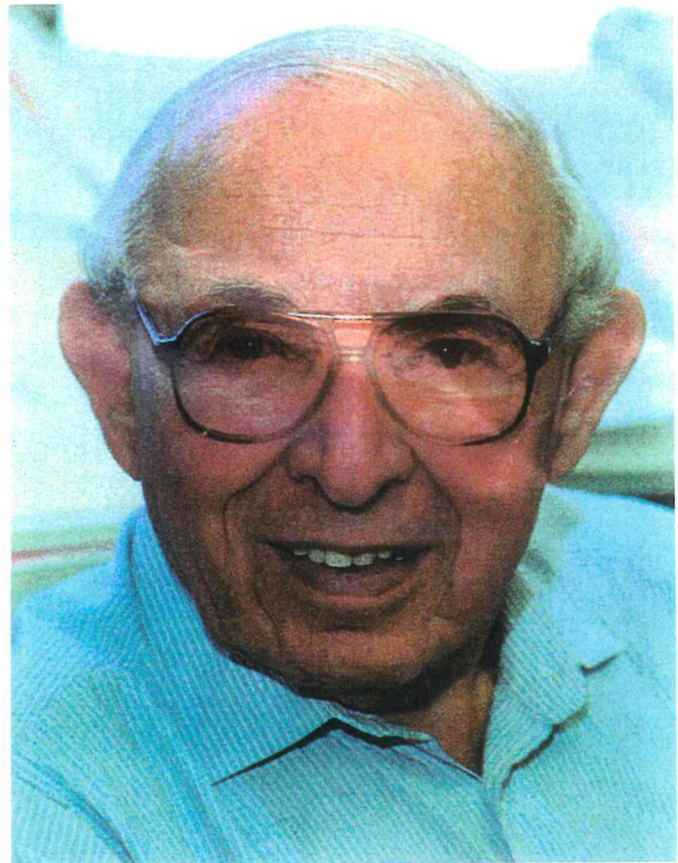
was born on Jan. 22, 1908 in Ostrava, an industrial city in the heart of the Austro/Czechoslovakian Monarchy.

It was a fact of life there that when young boys finished school they worked in the steel mills. Joe was no exception. "I was 16, maybe 17. I had taken plumbing mechanics in college and, in the mills, I was employed to repair machinery." He recalled working on massive ship propellers, cast in bronze, which required machining to fine tolerances for proper balance.

At age 21 Joe was inducted into the Czech army, a mandatory requirement of the time. Within 1 1/2 years he made sergeant, but took an honorable release after serving his required time.

Drawn to business, he took a job in a wholesale plumbing supply house and, five years later, was promoted to manager with control over every operational aspect of the business.

"I had the technical knowledge and was easily able to prepare catalogues, establish lines with manufacturers and service the trade with products they needed." When Germany occupied Czechoslovakia in 1939 the Jewish owners of the business were forced to leave. Within a short time, Seidner resigned to take a job with a plumbing contractor. Work was plentiful but "much trouble was in the making," he recalls.



Joe Seidner: "My life has been my work. I have enjoyed every minute of it."

Imprisoned by Nazis

In September of 1942, Joe and his mother were sent to a concentration camp at Theresienstadt, a walled city that was emptied of its inhabitants to make room for inmates. "Being a good plumber actually saved my life and that of my mother," reflected Seidner. "There was much plumbing work to be done throughout the imprisoned city and because I was the most experienced in the trade, I maintained my existence and also protected my mother until the end of the occupation."

He met George Brady, an apprentice plumber, there. Their crew was responsible for tearing apart an old brewery and reusing the piping and vessels to pipe up a steam system and distribution network for kitchens which ultimately fed over 10,000 people daily.

"Our work was under duress, but it had its rewards when one considers the benefit it provided for our own people," he recounted. On May 9, 1945 the compound was liberated by the Allies but, he added, "We actually liberated ourselves six days prior by flying a Czech flag from the top of a brick smoke stack."

When an officer approached and demanded they take it down, the less-than-tall Joe Seidner stepped forward and, using his best German, defiantly

said, "If you want it down, climb up there yourself and take it down." Smiling now, Joe said his suggestion was never acted upon.

Lone survivors

Once free, Seidner and his mother returned to their home city of Ostrava. Of all the people they had known there, Seidner and his mother were the only survivors. With all his possessions gone, Joe decided to go to Prague to find and marry his girlfriend whom he had met in Theresienstadt.

A brother living in the United States owned a telecommunications and radar equipment factory. Through his contacts, Joe found a job in a business that imported electronic equipment. He became manager but, in 1948 when the communists occupied the country, he was forced to make another move. Securing passports, he and his pregnant wife traveled to Italy and ultimately to the U.K. In 1952, they emigrated to Canada.

While looking for work, Seidner stayed a brief time with a cousin in St. Catharines, Ont. He placed an ad looking for plumbing work in The Toronto Star. In one day he had a response. Reginald Cole, a plumber from Willowdale, needed help and Joe was quickly back in the trade. He said that in those days there were 13 municipalities in the Toronto region.