

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

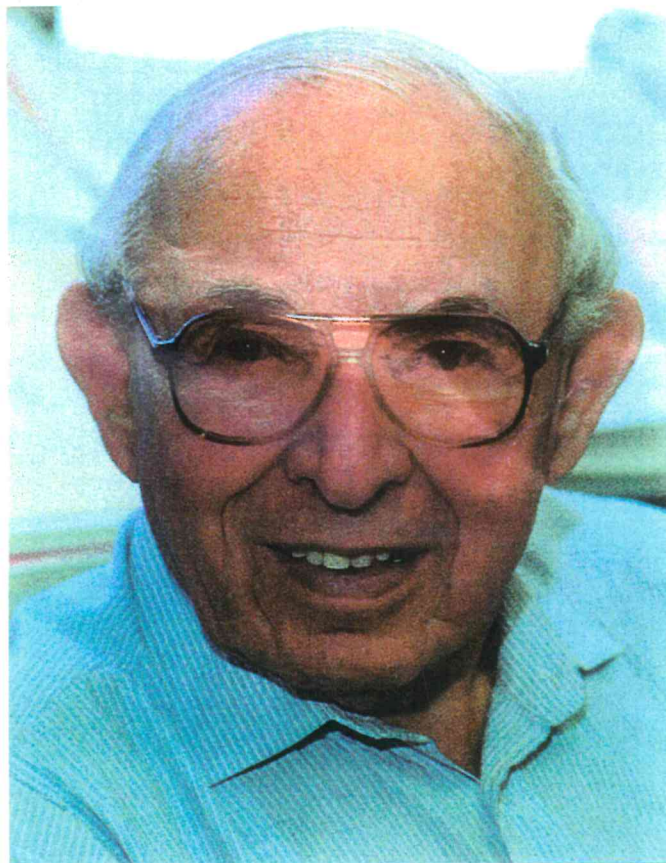
was born on Jan. 22, 1908 in Ostrava, an industrial city in the heart of the Austro/Czechoslovakian Monarchy.

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.

"If you obtained a City of Toronto plumbing licence, it was good for all municipalities. Cole only had North York before I came along," he said smiling. "Cole's business soon expanded rapidly to other municipalities. It was a good arrangement for both of us."

Friendship renewed

In those early days Roccamora Bros. was one of the few wholesalers open on Saturdays. One weekend, while there to pick up supplies, another customer looked quizzically at Joe. George Brady recognized him and their friendship was renewed. They were only kids when they first met in the concentration camp.

Shortly after that meeting they both went to Ryerson for a year to train for their Master Plumbers licence.

"We were told we needed more time in the field before writing the examinations," remembers Seidner. However, they both passed easily.

"It was our licence to start our business," he added. In May of 1954 Brady and Seidner Plumbing and Heating Company was born. For the next eight years they worked out of a garage at Seidner's home in Toronto. Working the tools, their business and reputation for quality work grew rapidly.

In time, Joe became involved with the Mechanical Contractors Association (MCA) and in 1981 he was elected president of MCA Ontario. In 1986 he became a board member for Toronto, was on the Ontario provincial board, and became vice president of the MCA Canada board for the central region.

He represents MCA Ontario on the executive committee of the Ontario Plumbing Inspectors Association and was awarded an honorary life membership. He also serves as a member on the plumbing advisory council of the Canadian Institute of Plumbing and Heating.

Recognition from industry

His work and influence on plumbing material standards have earned him platitudes and recognition from industry leaders and his peers. In 1991 CSA awarded him a certificate of achievement and, in 1994, CSA International recognized him with a prestigious award of merit.

Recalling some of the significant changes to plumbing codes, Seidner cited the transition from galvanized pipe to copper, the change from lead and oakum joints to the M J system in drainage and, perhaps the most dramatic growth, he said, was the use of plastics in the plumbing industry.

"It was a tremendous step to develop appropriate codes to address fire and smoke concerns related to plastic systems."

In his own business, Brady & Seidner were one of the first to develop a system of pre-fabrication

of plumbing systems for high rise apartment and condominium construction. In the 1980s Seidner held a Canadian patent on an original system.

Career trademarks

When asked what he considered a highlight in his career, Seidner responded "You can take a lot from the industry, but I feel strongly that you must return something as well." Besides his 56 years in business, Seidner has

contributed 40 of those years to volunteering his time and energy to that end.

"There are so many important things to be done. My work has been my life and I have enjoyed every minute of it."

His advice for younger people entering the trade? Seidner suggests they gain as much education and training as possible through special trade courses, apprenticeship programs and to reach for the top by pursuing master plumber status.

Seidner's trademark has been honesty in business and a consistent and devoted work ethic. Those that know him would agree his untiring commitment to improving and advancing the integrity of modern plumbing systems has and will be a benefit to all Canadians for years to come.

His friends and associates wish him continued good health and well being. Joe Seidner can be reached at 416-661-1981. ♦



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