



Joseph Kogan (1910-2006)

Jewish immigrant who lived through Stalin's political purges, two years hiding behind enemy lines as an escaped prisoner, over a year under suspicion as being an enemy spy, three years as a refugee, and years of hardship in this country learning a new language and re-claiming his career. He was an engineer. His greatest accomplishment was the spring loaded cables used to help launch and catch jets taking off and landing on aircraft carriers, and developing and implementing many of the early concepts of computer time sharing.

- Joseph Kogan was born August 16, 1910 near the city of Vinitza in Ukraine. He grew up as Czarist Russia was overturned by the Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet Union was formed. Left fatherless at the age of six, his character was molded by the responsibility of having to help support his mother, three sisters, and younger brother through times of famine and severe hardship. After a youth coping with the economic collapse and chronic food shortages brought on by communist mismanagement, he lived through Stalin's political purges, two years hiding behind enemy lines as an escaped prisoner, over a year under suspicion as being an enemy spy, three years as a refugee, and years of hardship in this country learning a new language and starting a career. Through a combination of intuition, fortitude, and luck he survived calamities that caused over fifty million deaths, imprisoned millions more, and left a trail of devastation which is difficult for us to imagine or comprehend.
- Math came easily to him and from it came odd jobs unusual for someone so young. While in high school he worked as a surveyor. College had to be postponed so he could help support his mother and siblings by working in road construction and helping collective farms repair their equipment. Finally in his late twenties with his siblings grown and the worst of the famines over he was able to attend the Kiev Polytechnic Institute and in 1941 he graduated with a degree in Mechanical Engineering. On the day of his oral thesis presentation and defense the Germans began bombing Kiev as part of their invasion of the Soviet Union. The professors judging the thesis, ordinarily a very difficult and critical group, seemed somewhat distracted. Joseph's thesis went unchallenged, no questions were asked, his thesis was approved, and he marched out of the Institute and headed to the recruiting office to enlist.
- When the German invasion known as Operation Barbarosa began it overwhelmed everything in its path and proceeded eastward into the Soviet Union at a record pace along three fronts. Within months over a million Soviet Troops were captured. It was into this behemoth that Joseph's troop of fresh recruits was sent. As they drove westward, all they saw were Soviet troops retreating, but they had their orders. His official war service lasted less than a month. It was spent mostly sitting around the campfire waiting to be captured by the German Infantry mopping up behind the Panzer Tank divisions that had long since pushed eastward. During that time of waiting, soldiers in his troops each told about their lives in intimate detail. Little did he know at the time how critical these talks would be to his survival.
- Eventually his troop was found, surrounded and captured. The pleasant campfire conversations were over. Quickly the Germans screened all prisoners for anyone looking Jewish. These prisoners were immediately shot. Joseph was a Jew without stereotypical Jewish features. This saved his life. But there were also surprise bathroom checks looking for anyone who was circumcised. He managed to avoid or sneak out of several of these, but they were very close calls. So he knew he would not survive as a prisoner for very long. One day on a work detail he found a moment when he has untied and no guards were near and none were watching his general area. He dropped into the vegetation, crawled, ran, and successfully escaped.
- Now on the loose in his own country, but behind enemy lines in unfamiliar villages and rural areas, he decided to travel toward the village of one of the soldiers who had described his home and family around the campfire. Learning quickly enough that Germans paid rewards for any Jews who were turned in, he traveled on back roads, begging and working for food. When he felt he was the object of glances that looked too suspicious, he would change his route or hide. Steadfastly, he made his way to an isolated farm house occupied by a mother and her daughter whose only wish in life was that their son/brother would return alive from the war. The details of how Joseph made it to that house and exactly where that

house was are lost, but he did make it, and after he told them all that he knew about their son, and about the love, devotion, and heart break that filled their son's stories, that mother and her daughter welcomed Joseph as if he was their own flesh and blood.

- For over a year he took on the life of the family's son. Because he was helping with the farm chores, his "sister" got a job in town largely to be able to keep aware of rumors of where the Germans policing the area were, and who they might be looking for. Joseph maintained a low profile, and managed to stay through two winters. Still it was impossible to keep rumors about the strange man at the farmhouse from spreading, and like a hunted animal he developed a wariness and intuition that somehow repeatedly saved him from making a fatal misstep. One key was the way people he barely knew looked at him. There was a certain kind of look which told him he should not stay much longer. He had seen several of those looks and took to returning to the farm house in round about ways from which he could survey the surrounding area without being seen. One day there was a German military vehicle parked at the house. Joseph turned around, resumed his wandering and never returned.
- At least three other times, that weird intuition or sense of discomfort saved his life as he traveled from village to village, staying where he could find work, moving on when he felt it was time. In one village where he stayed for several weeks he regularly followed a path along a small creek when returning from the place he worked to the farmhouse where he ate and slept. There were paths on both sides of the creek, but he had always walked on only one of them. One day he just decided to cross the creek and follow the other trail. Five minutes later he saw a group of German soldiers come down the path he would have been on. In another village he found a small car repair shop that needed his help. The owner was very friendly, and wanted him to start work the next day. The following day, he started to go there, but felt uneasy and decided not to. When he did return a day later, the garage was destroyed. Someone had identified the owner as a Jew, and the Germans came and shot him. And lastly there was the Soviet Reoccupation. It should have been a time of great celebration, but apparently in the army there were rumors of too much collaboration between Ukrainian villagers and their German Occupiers. Joseph tried to stay relatively hidden during the reoccupation, but during those first days he saw more civilians killed than he had seen at any other time in his wanderings.
- Surfacing as an escaped prisoner of war would raise questions about how he had escaped. Was he really a prisoner of war, or wasn't he more likely just a deserter? Or even worse, he could be a spy. In the time of Stalin evidence was not necessary. Such questions alone would be enough to send him to the Soviet's own slave labor camps. So Joseph waited until the front line troops had passed, then found a Captain of an Engineering Corps he felt he could confide in. The Soviet Army badly needed engineers to rebuild bridges that Germans were destroying as they retreated. Joseph had been in an Engineering Corps and his offer of assistance was gratefully accepted. For over a year he stayed with the Corps, but as the war was winding down, and victory was assured, the political commissars attached to each unit, began to inspect the credentials of soldiers much more carefully. Unfortunately Joseph's credentials were highly suspect. It was his captain who realized the commissar was asking too many questions about Joseph and who knew what the likely outcome of those questions would be. Quickly he managed to find a reason to justify sending Joseph away from the front back to Kiev for a brief assignment. His parting advice was that coming back after the assignment was completed might not be too smart an idea.
- In Kiev tens of thousands of civilians who had fled prior to the German occupation were now returning. There was horror at the discovery of what had happened to their loved ones and to their beautiful city, but there was this overwhelming sense of joy at the realization that the war was almost over and that they had survived. And in Kiev Joseph had the good fortune of bumping into a friend who knew the whereabouts of a woman Joseph had just begun getting to know prior to the war, and had thought about and dreamed of through all his travails. Soon to be classified as a deserter and as a prisoner of war who had escaped under suspicious circumstances and should be treated as a German spy, he knew he had to get out of the Soviet Union. He found that woman, Dora Knyazhitskaya, expressed his love and devotion and convinced her to abandon her family and country and join him in his journey to what he hoped would be a better life. With false military papers they flew to Poland and from there embarked on a difficult four month journey through war ravaged eastern Europe until they arrived in Italy. There they stayed in camps and housing for war refugees for almost two and a half years until they received permission to emigrate to the United States with the help of Joseph's older sister who was already a U.S. citizen. Their time in Italy

was difficult, but not in comparison to the war they had survived. Just the fact that they were alive was cause for celebration. In many ways these were the best days of the little that remained of their youth. Just as permission to immigrate to the US came, Dora gave birth to their son in Rome. She had an emergency caesarian section, but the hospital then informed Joseph that there were no antibiotics. Dora survived because of Joseph's resourcefulness in finding the necessary medicines on the black market, and getting them quickly.

- Joseph and Dora's first decade in the US was a very difficult and frustrating time. First there was the struggle to learn and communicate with a new language. Though he had a degree in Engineering, in the U.S. had to work as a draftsman because of his language limitations and because he had no way to prove he had a degree from a Soviet Institution. He knew it was futile for him to even attempt to communicate with institutions in the Soviet Union. Unfortunately Dora had sent letters to her sisters telling about their journey and successful arrival in Italy, and subsequent arrival in the U.S. They later found out that as a result, her relatives were subject to many difficult interrogation sessions.
- With a great deal of persistence and determination, Joseph finally managed to persuade professors at the University of Pennsylvania to allow him to enter an evening Master's Program, and he spent six years of evenings and weekends pursuing his degree. By this time his language had greatly improved and he wound up tutoring and helping many other students in the program. One of those students happened to be the Chief Engineer at Lakehurst Naval Air Station, and it was there that Joseph finally got a real engineering job. His primary accomplishments at Lakehurst were his work on the spring loaded cables used to help launch and catch jets taking off and landing on aircraft carriers, and on developing and implementing many of the early concepts of computer time sharing.
- He worked at Lakehurst for over thirty years until he was 83. He and Dora came to Missoula in 2001 to be closer to their son, Jerry, and daughter-in-law, Irena, and grandsons, Lewis and Clark. Their participation in Mall Walkers drew them into a sphere of caring and interesting people who made them feel very much at home in this community. Joseph died at home on August 6, 2006, just ten days prior to his 96th birthday.
- Joseph's generation of immigrants went through hardships few of us can imagine or comprehend. Through a long series of tribulations that changed but did not end even after he had arrived in the U.S., he displayed a resiliency and determination that one can only look at with awe. Everyone who got to know him realized what a truly unique man he was.



Information provided by Jerry Kogan, C K Software and only son of Joseph and Dora.