

Jewelry maker keeps alive a family tradition

By Tom Henderson
staff writer

Just as his grandfather, Elijah, had said it of him, so Isaac Widenbaum says it of his grandson.

"I want you," says the old man, leaning his unlined face close to whisper his treasured secret, "to put down that Dan Widenbaum shows Isaac Widenbaum he's gonna be some day great."

There is a true heir, a spiritual as well as genetic heir, to a jewelry dynasty that spans two continents and five generations.

The kid's really got it, after all. Isaac says it's okay to say he's "more than 50," though he looks much closer to 60. The skin's smooth, the voice clear, the hands steady, the mind as honed as a new scythe. Above all, notice the hands, stronger than they are steady as they grip the platinum and carve/mold/wrestle it from raw metal to a work of art. Hardly any jewelers work with platinum, these days — too hard, takes too much strength, too much technique — but the old man makes it look easy.

The stuff's so hard, it takes a special torch to melt it, and special glasses to look at it.

The kid is 23. Dan went away to the big city, New York, to become a lawyer. As soon as he finished school, he came back to Detroit.

"Don't you know, Dad," he said, "I don't want to be a lawyer. I want to be a jeweler."

"Now you tell me," said his father, Victor, feigning chagrin and proud as hell.

THE WIDENBAUM family owns and runs Widenbaum Creative Jewelers at the Boardwalk shopping plaza, on Orchard Lake near Maple, West Bloomfield. The Widenbaums have been there since the fall and were in Southfield for five years. Before that, they were a downtown institution for 52 years.

They didn't sell to the public, then. Isaac was too good; he was in demand by other jewelers, who needed him to make their special pieces. Occasionally he worked for special clients, like Michigan governors, foreign ambassadors and Grosse Pointe millionaires.

Isaac doesn't mean to denigrate the rest of his family when he praises young Dan. His daughter, Madelyn Gruskin, is a top saleswoman; and his son, Victor, is a three-piece-suited businessman who designs jewelry when he isn't tending to nuts-and-bolts details and bartering with the public ("for \$1,200 I'll give you two more diamonds and that's more than fair.")

No, they contribute their part; it's just that, to Isaac, Daniel's talent is

special, surpassing craftsmanship and becoming art.

If Isaac doesn't know talent, no one does.

His grandfather, Moses, did pieces for the czar in Moscow; his father was a Jew who was so good in his native Krakow, Poland, that he did the silverwork for the Catholic church there.

As for Isaac, he began working for his dad, Elijah, at 10, and at 14 was sent to Vienna to learn platinum work from the masters.

World War I and Europe was a hectic, exciting and strange place to grow into manhood. Isaac, filled with the spirit of adventure and the desire to learn from the best in Europe, lived and traveled across the continent from Belgium to Paris to Warsaw to Germany to . . .

Ask him about Europe and the clouds of time are blown aside as if by a giant fan. He recites off names, dates, places and events with a clarity that nearly makes time, make 69 years seem like fewer days.

In 1923, he left for New York from Belgium, where he had opened a successful shop and put his father and brother to work. "In Belgium, I see 50,000 people, 100,000 people," explains Isaac, "all going to America. So, I sent my father home to Poland, and I sent my brother home, and I left for the U.S."

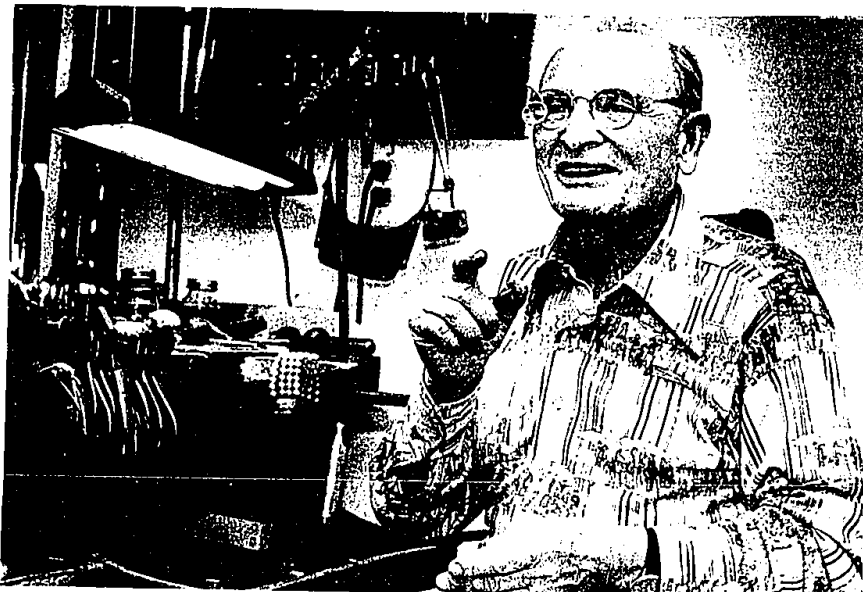
From New York it was on to Detroit, where he married his hometown sweetheart, opened up his shop in 1925, raised a family and the rest, as they say, is history.

EXCEPT THAT it really is history. From World War I and creating opulent pieces for a European gentry that was near an end, to emigration to the new world to the Depression to World War II to the nuclear age.

To raising a son, Morrie, who was a U.S. national chess champion. Morrie, also a jeweler, owned the Chessmate Gallery, the legendary folk and blues joint on Livernois and Six Mile that helped spawn the careers of Joni Mitchell and Gordon Lightfoot. He died in 1975. Isaac was national chess champion, in Michigan, too, and as if that isn't talent enough, he is a fine tenor, once spent two years making a violin from a tree and composes music in his spare time.

To teaching a grandson who can carry on the tradition of greatness.

"I just want to know one thing," says the grandson, Dan, turning around for a second from a piece of gold he has been chipping away at. "If you sell shoes, they don't call you a shoemaker. So why do they call 'em jewelers when all they do is sell it? WE make jewelry."



Isaac Widenbaum recalls earlier years when he worked as a jeweler in Paris. Widenbaum-family jewelers were a downtown institution for 52 years before coming to the suburbs.

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CITY OF FARMINGTON COUNCIL PROCEEDINGS (Summary)

A regular meeting of the Farmington City Council was called to order at 8:03 p.m. on April 4, 1983, by Mayor Bennett in Council Chambers, 33000 Liberty Street, Farmington, Michigan.

PRESIDENT Mayor Bennett. **COUNCILMEN** Hartsock, Mitchell, Tupper, Yoder. **CITY OFFICIALS** **PRESIDENT** City Manager Deadman, Deputy Director Lauhoff. **MINUTES** of previous meetings were approved.

A Public Hearing on the proposed use of Federal Revenue Sharing Funds was held to receive input prior to adoption of the 1983-84 fiscal year budget.

Council approved the closing of Raphael Street and Shawanaw for the annual Kid's Day celebration in July.

Council was advised that Farmington is paired with the City of Sterling Heights for Mayors Exchange Day in May.

The following proclamations were issued:

- POPPY DAY** - Month of May
- POPPY DAYS** - May 10, 18, 21, 1983
- MUSCULAR DYSTROPHY MONTH** - May 10 thru June 15, 1983

A two-year contract was ratified with the Teamsters Law Enforcement Local No. 129, Public Safety Officers Unit.

The following ordinances were introduced to amend the Farmington City Code:

- Ordinance No. C-504-83 - Use of Animal Traps;
- Ordinance No. C-109-83 - Damage and theft of library books.

Council considered the transfer of the SDM Beer and Wine License at the Grand Q Party Store, 31330 Grand River.

Council reviewed the attorney's report on the proposed reorganization of the Farmington Community Library and instructed the City Manager to arrange a meeting with the City of Farmington Hills Council to further discuss the issue.

Margaret Walker and Donald Hunter were reappointed to the Farmington Historical Commission for three years.

Council viewed samples of paving blocks to be used in the approach and driveway of the Farmington Museum.

Council received and filed the Plante & Moran audit report for the 47th District Court, year ended December 31, 1982.

Monthly bills were approved for payment.

The meeting adjourned at 8:40 p.m.

ALTON L. BENNETT, Mayor
JOSAPHINE M. BURNEY, City Clerk

Public April 14, 1983