

Kaneff celebrates 50 years in Mississauga

Peel Biog April 18/01 MN

Born October 6, 1926, Ignat Kaneff was the fourth and middle child of what would eventually be a family of seven children, his parents hard-working Bulgarian farmers.

Despite an oppressive lack of money in the family, life was generally carefree for young Ignat, his days crammed with the routine freedoms only children enjoy. School work, soccer games with his brothers and cousins, farm chores and horseback riding along the banks of the Danube consumed his energies.

Growing up with older brothers taught young Kaneff many survival skills, talents he used to compensate for his compact stature. "I was a little guy, the second smallest guy in the school. But I was a very tough little guy, because I always had somebody who was bigger than me who could beat me up."

In a display of savvy and stamina that would come to characterize his life, Kaneff turned his stature to his advantage. "You learn not to pick a fight when you're the smallest boy in the class. I learned sometimes it's better to negotiate than fight."

In keeping with the custom of the times, Kaneff was not offered an opportunity to continue his education beyond that of the local grammar school, an

honour reserved for the eldest son. It was the lack of prospects in his own country that convinced Ignat to strike out on his own in 1941, at the tender age of 15, to seek his fortune in Austria.

In the early 1940s, young Bulgarians eager for a chance to spread their wings were easily influenced by the propaganda being spread through the country by the German army, and by the vision of a land of opportunity.

In the earliest years of the war, news of the atrocities perpetuated by Adolf Hitler had not reached the masses in Bulgaria, and the promise of an easier life, a chance to learn a trade and the guarantee of the highest standard of living in Europe was difficult to resist for young Ignat.

A Bulgarian expatriate family greeted Kaneff, offering them all jobs in their market garden, a thriving enterprise that managed to support dozens of workers.

But by the fall of 1944, the war had intensified, and the first overt signs of conflict became apparent in Austria, threatening the 18-year-old's comfortable existence. Bulgarian expatriates were urged to return home.

At the beginning of September, Ignat packed and prepared to return home to Bulgaria, but before he could leave, Bulgaria officially renounced all ties

with the Germans and the communist government came to power. War was declared on Germany.

The Germans rounded up Bulgarians still living in Austria, forcing them to relinquish their passports and their ability to travel freely. For Kaneff and his fellow countrymen in Austria, the rest of the war would be spent in what had become enemy territory.

In the days following the end of the war, opportunities for entrepreneurs abounded in Austria, and Kaneff wanted to be counted among them. As 1945 came to a close, he purchased a surplus German army truck, painted over its green and khaki camouflage, and entered once again into the business of market gardening, this time as his own boss.

By 1950, life was good for Ignat Kaneff. His business prospered and he bought his first home. The only smudge on his happiness were the letters he received from the Bulgarian consulate, ordering him to return home to Bulgaria or risk being branded a traitor.

Fearing for his life, Kaneff began making preparations to leave Austria. He sold his garden market business and set sail for Canada.

When Kaneff arrived at Union Station, after a train ride from Quebec, he had



Ignat Kaneff (centre) picnicked with friends outside the city of Wells, Austria in 1942. He was 16.

only \$5 and some change in his pocket. With a friend's address in hand — 320 King St. — he hailed a cab for the short ride from the station.

But his cab ride turned into an unpleasant lesson. At a time when a

cab ride across the city might have cost 50 cents, an unscrupulous cabie charged \$5 for the six-block trip, after first asking him how much money he had. "I knew right

• See Kaneff page B5

Kaneff turns hard work into hard profits

• Continued from page B4

away there was something wrong. I thought right away I was making a big mistake coming to Canada."

A couple of months later, disheartened and disillusioned, Kaneff met Stanley Zita, a Port Credit man who was building his home on Meredith Ave. That same day, Zita had started working on a construction project for Gordon S. Shipp, president of the prosperous and innovative Shipp Corporation. A day later, Kaneff was working for Shipp.

"I remember it very well," Harold Shipp, son of Gordon, recalls. "It was late March 1951 or early April and we were working then as G. S. Shipp and Son. We had just started building the first houses in Applewood Acres.

"He came straight from Bulgaria and arrived without any tools. He applied on site and was given the job of nailing in the subfloors," Shipp said.

"(He) bought a lot over on Erindale Woodlands from Murray Elias and he moved on from there building more homes and then apartment buildings. He had his first Cadillac dealership within the first 10 years of arriving here. It is pretty impressive," Shipp said.

By October 1951, six months after arriving in Toronto, Kaneff bought a lot

to build a house of his own. Slightly more than two years after getting off a bus at Alexandra St. and Lakeshore Rd. — Stop 6A — he had established a home for himself and laid the foundations of a career in the construction industry.

One day, Kaneff's friend Alberto Francheshini took him to visit his son at a nursery school for intellectually handicapped children set up in the basement of Cookville United Church.

Moved by the plight of those youngsters, he made a donation that would alter the course of his life and lead to a lifelong partnership with Community Living Mississauga.

In the years since, Kaneff has become that organization's strongest supporter, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars on their behalf through annual golf tournaments and fundraising dinners.

Rozalyn Werner, chief fundraiser for Community Living Mississauga, said legions of children with disabilities have benefitted from Kaneff's generosity.

"He has supported us without fail for more than 25 years and he's given us, I'd say, about three-quarters of a million dollars as well," said Werner.

"That money is used, for example, for our summer programs. We just couldn't have those programs without his sup-

port. Because we know we can count on him, we know that these programs, that mean so much, can continue."

In the decades since, Kaneff's involvement in the community has become the stuff of legends. An avid supporter of Mississauga Hospital, Credit Valley Hospital, Peel Memorial Hospital and Oakville Trafalgar Hospital, University of Toronto at Mississauga (UTM), dozens of minor league sports teams, *The Mississauga News* Christmas Bureau Fund, arts groups and dozens of other non-profit organizations, both in Canada and Bulgaria, Ignat Kaneff has become one of the most prolific philanthropists in the province.

In recognition of his incredible support of the community, The Ignat Kaneff Charitable Foundation was formed in 1986, a 60th birthday tribute that has since distributed \$900,000 to community agencies.

Ignat Kaneff's ongoing involvement with Erindale College, Mississauga's University of Toronto campus, is perhaps one of the most rewarding.

Kaneff has shown a great deal of support over the years for the University of Toronto at Mississauga, said Robert McNutt, UTM principal, including chairing the Erindale College Building Fund

for the construction of a centre for management and business studies, later named in his honour, and the recent Student Centre Building Campaign, which raised roughly \$6 million for the construction of the new centre.

"Iggy Kaneff's life story of immigrating to Canada with nothing beyond a talent for building exceptionally successful businesses is inspiring," said McNutt.

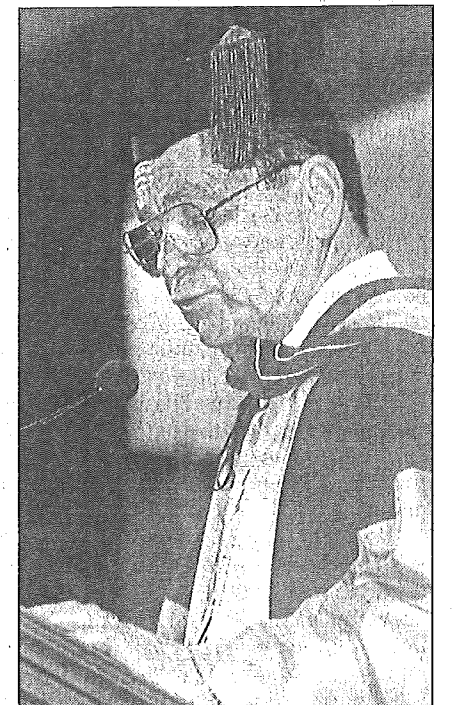
The scope and depth of his volunteer work eventually led to recognition by the entire community when, in 1992, he received the Gordon S. Shipp Memorial Award as Mississauga's Citizen of the Year, an honour that brought his involvement in the community full circle.

"It was a tremendous honour to receive that award, particularly since it was in Mr. Shipp's memory," said Kaneff.

"He was such a good community man himself and an example to so many people. I was very humbled."

Ignat Kaneff's work would be recognized countless times throughout the four decades since his arrival in Toronto, but he retains his humility and belief his is only doing what is expected of him.

"We all have to give back to our community if we want to make our city and our world a better place for our children. It is our duty."



Ignat Kaneff received an honorary doctorate from UTM in recognition of his contributions to the community and his accumulated knowledge of business.