

History of BON TON Bakery

My name is Judy Edelmann. I was born in 1930 in Budapest, Hungary. I am here to talk about the origin of BON TON Bakery.

Bon Ton Bakery started well before it was established in 1956.

Eugene Edelmann, the original owner of the bakery, was born in a small town in Hungary in 1923. Before WWII broke out Eugene's father felt his children (two girls and Eugene) should prepare to leave the country, and with that in mind, they all had to learn a trade. At age 17 Eugene left for Solnok, a larger town, to apprentice as a pastry chef. He learned to bake and decorate beautiful and delicious tortes, petit fours etc. By the time his apprenticeship was over, he was unable to continue working for the bakery, because of the new law--as a Jew the bakery couldn't keep him any longer.

By this time the war was on and Eugene's family was unable to leave for "America" as it was impossible to get visas. He and his whole family ended up in Auschwitz, and all but Eugene perished--his parents, Soma and Janka in the gas chambers, and his two sisters, Maca and Gyorgyi were shipped to Ravensbrook concentration camp and died there.

Against all odds Eugene survived. In Birkenau, he worked in the munition factory, where prisoners were checked regularly if they were in good enough health to work. Three times he was taken out and put in a corral for the crematorium. Despite a permanent limp from a botched childhood surgery, due to his exceptional work habits, his Heftling ("station master") came and took him out of the line. That was pretty lucky for him.

After liberation in January 1945 he found a sled and a blanket and started his long journey back to his hometown. The 250 km walk took him a whole month. Once home, he waited a year for his family's return. Finally realizing he was the only survivor, he crossed over to Austria to a refugee camp where he spent a year and a half until at last his visa for Canada came.

Eugene arrived in Toronto in 1948, and worked at Health Bread Bakery for seven years where he learned to bake bread and pastries.

I was brought to Winnipeg by the Jewish congress in 1948 as an orphan, as I too lost my parents to the War. My father Jozsef (46) died at Auschwitz, sent to the Crematorium immediately on arrival, and my mother Gizella (38) was shipped to Stutthof where she, her sister and her niece all perished.

I was lucky thanks to Raoul Wallenberg, who issued special Swedish visas in Budapest and with these visas many of us had been saved. Once again in Winnipeg I was very lucky, being taken in by a wonderful family, the Ludwig & Karlinsky family.

A year after my arrival, I left for Toronto, where I met Eugene. We were married in 1952.

Eugene always dreamt of opening his own bakery, but felt Toronto was not the place there were too many bakeries, so we would have to move to a smaller place.

Mrs. Karlinsky, "Granny" as I called her, came for a "Pioneer Women's" meeting, after we had told her about our dream to start our own bakery. She introduced us to Lil Pakes from Edmonton, who suggested we should come to Edmonton. Eugene quit his job in Toronto and went to see the possibilities.

After travelling to Calgary, Vancouver, Edmonton, he decided Edmonton was the right place for a new bakery. Soon after our arrival, he met Joe Sheckter (Tasty Maid Bakery) who first wanted Eugene to join him in his bakery, but seeing that Gene wanted his very own business not a partnership, he was very helpful in getting us started. He became a lifelong friend.

In March 1956, BON TON PATISSERIE (as it was originally called) opened on 113 Ave. and 116 St at "Tower Shopping Centre" with \$3,000, lots of good support from the community and plenty of hard work.

Eugene baked and I did the cleaning, selling and bookkeeping. As the bakery's reputation grew, we needed extra help. It was getting harder for the two of us to manage, especially since I was expecting our first child.

Our first employee was Hulda, a very efficient and kind soul, she was older than we were and not only looked after the bakery, but after us as well.

All the baking was done by hand; we couldn't afford machines, which would made work easier.

We both put in exceptionally long hours. One day, Mrs. Elsie Phillet came into the bakery and saw how hard we worked. The next day her husband Mickey came in, took Eugene aside and asked, "What would you need to make life easier?" Eugene: "We would need a bigger mixer and some other equipment, but we can't afford it." Mickey: "How much money would you need? Whatever you need you go to the bank and I'll sign a loan for you." He did that. It was the most generous gesture. He did not really know us.

We stayed at that location until November 1959, when we moved to the present location.

Bon Ton Bakery played an important role in the Jewish, Hungarian, and Polish communities who were drawn to the bakery's European style breads and Hungarian tortes, Strudel, Poppy and walnut rolls. As the only Kosher bakery at the time, Eugene shipped boxes of bread and pastries every Tuesday to Calgary from the old CN station downtown Edmonton to Woodward's Calgary, as well as regular shipments to customers in Yellowknife.

Every year the Edmonton Young Judea would operate a fundraising bagel drive when the kids would take over the bakery for the weekend to help bake and package bagels, which they sold and delivered to make money for their programs.

For many years, children's birthdays at the old Talmud Torah were highlighted by Bon Ton's vanilla and chocolate cupcakes for their classmates in the lunchroom. Purim included poppy and prune Hamentashen.

By this time, we had three sons and after having some bad experiences with babysitters, it was decided that I would stay home with the kids.

Eugene worked very hard until the very end, sometimes working 20-22 hours in a day. At one point we had a couple of outlets, and also delivered to several Safeway stores in Edmonton, but it proved too much work for too little profit.

Over the years BON TON won many awards. For years it won for best Christmas Cake, but it also won for its specialty breads and pastries. In the late sixties Bon Ton won first prize in a National Baking competition.

When Queen Elizabeth visited Edmonton (to open the Commonwealth Games) Bon Ton had the honor to make Petit Fours for the banquet. For many generations special events in the city were generally accompanied with cakes and deserts from Bon Ton.

Most of the children born in the late 50's through the 80's remember the bakery's display cabinets and the baked goods with great fondness. There was always a tray of cookies for the staff to give to the wide eyed children. Parents and children alike will remember how the youngsters would stand in front of the first two cabinets which held cookies, cupcakes, Gingerbread Boys and rafts hoping to walk out with a treat. Adult's favorite was Rum Cake and Lemon Cake, Strudel, and knishes. I am still reminded of them by former customers.

Bon Ton was always a family and community business, each our boys began working at the bakery after school and Saturdays around age 13. When they got older, they would often work Friday nights. Seeing how hard their dad worked and having him as a task master was probably central to creating their work ethics and making them successful adults.

By the time Eugene retired we had 20+ employees, but Eugene was still there every day and many nights He liked to hire new immigrants, we had bakers from Holland, Yugoslavia, Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Vietnam. Some of them went on to start their own bakeries or other business, others stayed at Bon Ton until they retired.

Eugene always helped them to start their new life in this country. They became like family, even after they left they would still visit. Even now some of them come with their children and the children's families.

We always had several teenagers who had their first job at the back of the bakery scraping pans, washing dishes, helping the bakers, or in the front serving customers.

It was always a point of pride when many of them returned to visit as customers once they started their families and careers.

In 1998, at age 75 Eugene retired and sold the bakery to Hilton and Michelle Dinner who expanded and updated the shop. They maintained the high quality and the good reputation of the bakery while putting their own mark in its character. Eugene died in 2004 at age 81. He didn't see many of the changes, but was very impressed with the direction the bakery was taking. The Edelmänn family is forever grateful to the Dinners for the care and love they instilled in the business.

Sadly, Hilton passed away in 2020 and Bon Ton once again has new owners: Gerry and Edgar Semler. Gerry worked with Hilton for many years and continues the commitment to quality that was important to Eugene and Hilton. I am sure, they too will make their own changes, but trust, that Bon Ton will continue to thrive under their management as one of the oldest operating bakeries in Edmonton.