

RETURN TO NEW YORK

By James Prevor
President & Editor-in-Chief



I learned a great deal about the produce industry listening to my grandfather. Of course, I also learned a great deal from my father, but he was often working and busy. My grandfather, retired, could discourse: He had been a networker, an association person and an industry leader — a Mason and head of the Fruit Auction Buyers' Association for many years.

My grandfather's produce career was cut short by cancer. He had cancer of the larynx. The cancer itself didn't kill him, but he had to have a laryngectomy to remove his larynx, and since his voice was the primary tool with which he made a living, he could no longer do business.

When my grandfather fell ill, he moved to Tamarac, FL. On one trip to visit him, I accompanied him to a homeowners' association meeting where some issue was hotly debated. We sat silently, listened to the others and, in the end, my grandfather cast his vote. We walked home in the dark, without a star in the sky that night. All was quiet except for the occasional cricket, and my grandfather, for whom speaking was laborious, drew breath as he prepared to say something he thought worth the effort.

We stopped in the darkness and he said, "You know, years ago I would have given the speeches. I would have led that meeting. But they took my voice. Now I can't do it." I remember observing his demeanor and thinking he wasn't really sad. He was a practical man and had accepted his fate, but he spoke because he wanted me to know the values he approved of did not include sitting silently while the issues of the day were decided.

We continued to walk and I remember saying, "Grandpa, don't worry, one day I'll give the speeches for you." I'm not 100 percent sure what I meant, but the thought seemed to please him and we walked on.

It has been over half a century since my grandfather chaired the Fruit Auction Buyers' Association. Each year, the association held a gala in Manhattan, bringing in entertainment and a big orchestra. In its day, it was a grand produce event.

I write this as I prepare to leave for New York City, to return to the place my great-grandfather, Jacob Prevor, arrived at from Russia so many years ago and where he opened a produce wholesaling business in Brooklyn's now defunct Wallabout Market. I return to New York, where my grandfather, Harry Prevor, was a wholesaler and auction buyer in the old Washington Street Market. I return to New York where my father, Michael Prevor, was an original tenant in the Hunts Point Produce Market.

The visit to New York would normally be unremarkable; it is, after all, a trek I have made many times before. Yet I travel now to launch the inaugural edition of The New York Produce Show and Conference. Bringing it to fruition is, by far, the hardest thing I've ever done. Yet each step has been an inspiration.

We had the good sense to join hands at the beginning of the venture with the Eastern Produce Council. What a fortuitous choice that was. We owe a debt of gratitude to John McAleavey, executive director of the EPC; Dean Holmquist, director of produce and floral for Foodtown Supermarkets and president of the EPC; and Paul Kneeland, vice president of produce and floral for Kings Super Markets and chairman of the EPC conference committee. They were always my friends, but they turned out to be inspirational in their daily dedication to serving the trade and in doing the right thing.

Our PRODUCE BUSINESS team rose to the occasion in an amazing way. When Ken Whitacre and I hired Ellen Rosenthal, she was working in a shoe store. It is elevating to see people become all they can be. Watching Ellen fight for this event — fight to make it extraordinary — has been a measure of her own extraordinary growth and accomplishment.

It is never a good idea to count one's chickens before they are hatched, and as I write this, no event has yet been held. But we stand convinced that we have created something World Class. It is not only the sold-out trade show, nor the educational micro-sessions, nor the chef cooking demo, nor the many tours of the region. Neither the keynote retail panel, nor the networking opening reception explains it. It is a sense that there is a synergy here. It is a notion that in the biggest buying region in the country, in the capital of the world, there had long been a void and now it will be filled.

Sometimes when I visited my grandfather, we would sit by the pool and he would talk with the other retirees. Oddly enough, they didn't speak too much about their own lives; they would talk mostly about their children, and as my grandfather reported on the exploits of his sons, recounting their success in business and in life, he would beam.

My grandfather passed away many years ago, not long after we launched PRODUCE BUSINESS. I think he would be amazed at what we have created. If I am quiet, I can hear his voice, now restored to its pre-cancerous state, as he speaks proudly to his friends and points down to the different events going on in mid-town Manhattan at The New York Produce Show and Conference.

When I get up on stage at the keynote breakfast and prepare to moderate our all-star panel, I'm going to tip my microphone to my grandfather and tell him that, as promised on a starless night long ago, this one is for you Grandpa.

pb

In the biggest buying region in the country, in the capital of the world, there had long been a void and now it will be filled.