

## Emil Acks Story by Olli Lamminen

I have told the story of Emil Acks countless times. Most often I tell Emil's story to the young ones, the ones with too much time on their hands, the ones who are bored to death, to the ones who have too much or don't have enough.

The story might or might not have changed in the last 40 years the way most of the family tales do with the time.

Emil was born to the Jewish family in Poland at the onset of the II World War. He was just a baby when his family started a long journey east barely keeping ahead of the advancing Germans. As the war spread to Russia, Emil's family always kept ahead of the advancing Germans.

By the end of 1945 the family had crisscrossed most of the Eastern Europe and finally ended up in Israel around the turn of the decade. By that time Emil was already over 10 and had never attended any form of school. His sole education consisted of what his parents had been able to teach him during their 10-year journey.

One of the skills his father had taught Emil was welding. Barely past his teen-age years he started a small welding shop near the Gaza strip in Israel. He was making birdcages for the local markets. He got married at a young age, had three children and had difficulties to earn enough for the growing family.

When the 1967 war broke out, Emil's small welding shop was destroyed. When he got out of the military service after the war, he rebuilt his welding shop. The Yom Kippur War of 1973 again destroyed his shop. After the war Emil decided he had enough and decided to search for better life elsewhere. At that time he had no passport, spoke only Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew and some Russian. Neither had he any money. If he wanted to travel, he had to find a free passage.

He first jumped onto a Polish freighter at an Israeli port, Haifa. The captain agreed to keep him in the ship as long as he worked. Emil jumped out of the boat in London, UK. But after spending few

weeks in England doing erratic jobs, he decided that England was not for him. Another Polish freighter took him to New York where had to physically jump overboard and swim to the shoreline.

Emil was now walking the streets of New York penniless, without any knowledge of English and without any personal documentation. He kept walking, for days, till he heard Polish being spoken at a local car wash. The location was Carz-R-Popping owned by Sam Sherman who was known in New York as the king of the car wash. As Sam was also a Polish Jew, Emil easily was able to communicate with Sam. Sam gave him a job wiping the exiting cars at the end of the car wash. He was paid a dollar an hour.

As Emil had neither money nor place to sleep, Sam let him sleep in the equipment room on a mattress somebody brought in. Within days it was obvious that Emil on one side of the car was doing more work with better results than the two guys on the other side. Soon Emil was alone on one side and three other Polish immigrants were on the other side.

Car washes of the sixties were not the most reliable pieces of equipment. They broke down pretty much on a weekly basis. When this happened, Emil was out of work till somebody repaired it. The days he worked, he earned 14 dollars doing that many hours at dollar an hour.

Soon Emil recognized that nobody really serviced and maintained the car wash equipment. It was fixed and repaired when it broke down. Without anybody asking Emil started waking up 3 hours before the car wash opened. In those 3 hours he cleaned and tidied the place, lubricated all bearing and made sure that everything was in good working condition.

I love the reaction to the above from most of the teenagers whom I am telling the story. Emil is crazy or stupid, doing work for nothing without anybody asking for it. Doesn't make any sense. I would never do something that stupid.

Without considering the opinions of the future generations Emil kept on his routine for several months. Soon Sam Sherman realized that one of his several locations always looked clean, had no breakdowns and the equipment worked better. When he found out why, he immediately went to talk to Emil. He suggested Emil should concentrate only on servicing and maintaining his dozen or so car washes. He promised to get Emil a proper set of tools and buy him a car so he can get around from one location to another.

That became a bit of an issue. Emil had never owned a car, had never driven a car and did not know how. The solution was that Sam gave Emil a car and a driver to take him around. The only thing he did not offer Emil was to raise his pay. In less than a year from Emil's arrival Carz-R-Poppin locations all increased in sales, profits and all looked cleaner and nicer. Naturally this did not go unnoticed by the competitors. Neither did Emil's reputation – he had single handedly created the new image to these car washes, had increased their profits and he was still being paid only a dollar an hour.

Soon the second largest car wash operator approached Emil. Sam faced either losing Emil or

raising his pay to a completely new level. By the time Emil finished negotiations with competing car washes, he was earning over \$20.00 an hour, had immigration documents being prepared for him and his family, had lodging arranged and was learning to drive a car. (\$20 per hour salary in 1973 equals to \$120,000 annual salary today)

I met Emil first time in 1976. By that a time he was already a partner in the biggest car wash chain in New York City. When Emil retired around 2010 he was a legend among American car washers with multiple sites of his own.

I learned his story when we flue together to Nigeria in 1976. In all of his successes and failures Emil had never asked anything. In the plane I asked Emil directly: "Did you plan it this way or did it only happen so?"

Emil's reply was that his only plan was to make himself so important to the business, wherever he worked, so that they could not afford to lose him. Financially Emil today is comfortably retired in Southern Florida.

I still have an honor to call him my friend.

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