

My father's gift to me after Ford laid him off

"They offered to move us to the Florida plant at Chicago wages," my father said. "We'll be rich." But no one was listening. Florida?

Jun 17, 2019, 11:02am CDT

Gloria Golec

"They are shutting down the plant," my father said.

The Ford Motor Company on Pulaski Avenue was closing and my father was out of a job. My mother and I were standing in front of our house at 46th and Springfield when my father came home from work that fateful day.

"I have two weeks left," he said.

We were stunned. I was in the 7th grade and I still remember it with the intensity it had at that exact moment. It was another blow of fate in my father's already difficult life.

In 1928, when my father was 11 years old, his mother died from pneumonia. A few days later, his grandmother who was living with them also died. They had two wakes in the house within just a few days.

Without his mother's income as a cleaning lady, my father's family lost their house at 48th and Komensky and the family broke up. My Aunt Bernice, Aunt Lillian and Uncle Casey moved in with other people, and my father and my grandfather moved into the basement of the next-door neighbor's house.

My father, John Golec, was a gentle man who rarely complained, and yet I often heard him repeat the story of the time, during the Depression, when the neighbors with whom he and my grandfather lived served them bread and lard for dinner. My father refused to eat it — the only time he had ever refused to eat something.

"I tried," he said, "but I couldn't swallow it."

When my mother would bake kolaczki with lard, I would look at the hard, white grease and think of my father as a little boy, hungry and without a mother.

Like many young people of his age, my father dropped out of high school to go to work. He had no skills and bounced around from job to job, working in various factories until he got the job at Ford. We did not have a lot of money, but my father's job was secure. During World War II, he was proud to make B-29 airplanes, and over the years he rose to the level of foreman.

As my mother and I stood frozen in silence on the front lawn, my father added, "They offered to move us to the Florida plant at Chicago wages; we'll be rich."

But no one was listening. Florida? The farthest we had ever gone was to the Indiana Dunes. That was never going to happen.

My father lost his job at Ford during the recession of 1960-61, and he struggled for years to find stable employment. I remember him bent over the Want Ads on the Formica kitchen table. He was in his mid-forties with no education. How must he have felt? He never said, but I know I was very scared.

He tried to buy a bakery route from someone he knew and drove around with him to learn the stops. We were all excited since he always brought home a lot of cookies. But then he found the route had been sold to someone else.

He tried to get a job laying floor tile; he had a “friend” who would teach him the trade. My father went out on many jobs with this so-called friend. I remember one day, sitting across the table from my father at dinner, and he looked completely beaten. My mother asked him how his day had been.

“I had to carry tile up the stairs all day again,” he said.

Years later, when I had tile laid in my basement, I had the store employee put the boxes in my van. When I got home, I tried to move the boxes and couldn’t budge them even an inch. For the first time, I realized the weight of those boxes that my father had carried and I burst into tears.

How did my father endure? Each new job brought anticipation and hope and ultimately defeat. After several years, he eventually found steady work at Hupp Aviation, where he worked until he got sick. He often would say how much he was looking forward to retirement, but at age 62 he became ill and spent the last 11 years of his life in a wheelchair.

As an adult, I started to wonder what it would have been like to have been a rich kid in Florida, so I did research on Ford Motor plants. I also paid a nominal fee to the Henry Ford Museum in Michigan for their assistance.

As a child, the only city in Florida I had heard of was Miami, so I just assumed all my life that we would have moved to Miami. But my research showed no plant in Miami. The Henry Ford Museum confirmed that the only Ford plant in Florida at that time was in Jacksonville, and I cannot imagine what it would have been like to have to move there as a pre-teen.

In one of our phone calls, the researcher shocked me by telling me that the Florida plant closed a year or two after we would have moved and my father would have been out of a job again. We would have had to move to yet another part of the country. All of this would have been during my high school years.

I thought about the road less traveled and realized Florida would not have been the dream I imagined. Instead, I grew up in Chicago, a city I love, and I am grateful my parents did not follow the money.

I went to school with the same friends for 12 years, and I even went to college with some grammar school classmates. My grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins — we all lived within blocks of each other.

While my father didn’t gift me with money, what he did give me was a sense of belonging: to a city, to a neighborhood, to a group of friends and to a family.

Would my father agree that staying in Chicago was the right decision? Unfortunately, I will never know because Ford Motor Company was never talked about. He was dealt a bad hand, but he never complained and was never bitter. His losses never defined him and the ordinary events of our lives were, in the end, extraordinary.

Because of my father’s sacrifices, my heart always had a home.

Gloria Golec is an emeritus professor of English at College of DuPage.