

Sharp Edges, Invisible Scars

Subcategory: Life Experiences

Author: Janet M. Stiegler

Sharp Edges, Invisible Scars

Preparing a meat and vegetable chili for Superbowl Sunday, I cut the top of my thumb with a serrated knife. The incision didn't register at first—it was a tiny but precise slice, almost like a paper cut—until droplets of blood suddenly appeared on the cutting board, giving the minced onions a pinkish hue. Not again! After rinsing my hand under the kitchen faucet and wrapping it in a paper towel, I ran to the bathroom for a Band-Aid. Given the cut's vulnerable location, it took over a week to heal, leaving another small scar on my long-abused hands.

My ineptness with sharp objects is almost laughable, given that I come from several generations of German cutlery. In 1869, my mother's great-grandfather, Gottlob Eisele, founded a small cutlery shop—*Messerschmied Eisele*—in Waiblingen, just outside Stuttgart, Germany. Besides knives, they'd sharpen and repair scissors, swords, gardening tools, and sewing equipment. His second-oldest son, Otto Friedrich, inherited and subsequently expanded the business over forty years, even serving as head of the city's artisans guild. The family-owned shop passed through two more generations of sons until it could no longer compete with today's market of mass-produced goods. After almost 150 years, the small business finally closed in 2018.

Why my great-grandfather (Heinrich, the founder's oldest son) did not take over the business remains unclear. Maybe he lacked the requisite education, business acumen, or personality. His son—my grandfather, Erich Eisele—was also a lifelong grinder, but it wasn't the whetstone that left him most scathed. His biological mother died in childbirth when he was six, and his first stepmother passed away when he was 10. As the oldest child, he grew up fast, often protecting his younger brother from their parent's cruelty. Various anecdotes suggest his father was a harsh, even violent man. Once, when Erich came home from grammar school with a note saying he needed eyeglasses, his father slapped him—no son of his wore glasses.

The post-WWI economic crisis forced my grandfather to leave Waiblingen in search of work. He fell in love with a girl from Bavaria and proposed but could not marry without a steady job. With no other options, he emigrated to the United States and found work with a Jewish-owned cutlery shop in New York City.

Deblon Cutlery was a well-known concern that had been sharpening and selling knives longer than *Messerschmied Eisele*. Several months later, the Stock Market crashed. Luckily, tailors, butchers, furriers, and even the poor still needed sharp tools and knives, so my grandfather always had work.

Becoming a skilled cutler takes both knowledge and years of practice. There are different types of steel, and Swedish steel is considered the best in Europe. Its iron ore deposits have few impurities and contain tiny deposits of the element vanadium, which helps produce a tough, fine-grained steel with high tensile strength. Grinders, I've learned, also have their own vocabulary. Swarf is the fine metal shavings removed by a cutting tool or sharpening stone. The burr is a ragged protrusion of metal formed on an edge during the abrasion process and can indicate sharpening progress. Sharpening a knife too often will result in a beveled edge, thickening and dulling the blade. A knife not only has to cut well; it also needs to fit properly in your hand. And every cutler has their favorite type of knife or knife handle. Was this true of Erich? Did he often reach for one special blade? And was his blade similar to my favorite, the serrated utility knife?

I imagine my grandfather, a wiry 5'6" figure, sitting before his grinding stone, gently holding a steel knife in his calloused hands. They are like lifelong partners, this man and his blade. Despite its lethal potential, he's in control, taking the lead in a complex dance. He presses the blade back and forth at precisely 17 degrees to make the edge razor-sharp. Afterward, he will polish off any residual rust and then sharpen it again. He's both a scientist and an artist, his hands strong and agile: no visible scrapes, piercings, or other wounds.

Fearful I will one day slice off a finger, my husband buys me a 12" Mezzaluna—a half-moon blade that I operate by holding the two end knobs and rocking the edge back and forth in a seesaw motion. I can mince onions, garlic, and herbs lickety-split, and it even comes with a stainless-steel bar of soap to neutralize odors on my hands afterward. It's safe, almost risk-free, but I can't help thinking I'm cheating. That somehow, I've not paid my dues.

Erich worked twelve-to-fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, to save money and send for his fiancée, Genevieve. She arrived at Ellis Island within a year, and they married the next day. My grandfather and his wife had only one child—my mother, Irma—before his wife was diagnosed with tuberculosis. After spending several years in two different sanatoriums—the last one reachable only by boat—she finally succumbed to the disease. She was only 34, the same age at which Erich's mother had died. The telegram, only a few simple words, lacerated his heart:

MAR 30 1939: GENEVIEVE EISELE DIED 825 PM MARCH 30 CALL IN
MORNING= MEDICAL SUPT SEA VIEW HOSPITAL

Distraught but needing to work, he places seven-year-old Irma in an orphanage. When he visits several weeks later, his daughter (my mother) bends down on one knee and kisses his outstretched hand as if he's some prince. His heart breaking,

Erich takes the girl into his arms and sobs. German friends come to the rescue and offer to watch Irma after school. He agrees and takes his daughter home but never remarries. Perhaps he fears losing another woman in his life or maybe he just doesn't want his daughter raised by a stepmother.

Besides numerous self-inflicted wounds, I've been under the knife several times for breast cancer. The first time, I was only 37 but lucky. Caught early, the cancer had not spread to my lymph nodes, and all I required was a lumpectomy and six weeks of radiation. During that time, four other women in an office of about 80 were also diagnosed at various stages of the disease. Only two of the five of us lived beyond five years. And even though I never seriously contemplated that I could die, I remember thanking my surgeon for saving my life. "I didn't save your life," he responded. "I only extended it." Sure enough, the cancer came back ten years later, and the breast was removed.

Despite this loss, I was mentally prepared. I had heard that a recurrence was not uncommon, and in the intervening years, my sister and two cousins lost their breasts and required more invasive and debilitating post-op treatment than I did. I never lost my hair or missed a day of work. Somehow, I managed to cheat fate again.

After two heart attacks, my grandfather moved in with us on Long Island. He was in his early 60s and still spry, always finding something to fix, something that would keep his hands and mind busy. Living with us after being on his own for so long wasn't easy. Sometimes he would escape to the German deli downtown to chat with the owners and buy some *Leberkaes*, a bologna-type sausage baked in a bread pan. He'd slice off a half-inch slab and fry it up for us—a special treat from the homeland.

One Saturday morning, when my mother was out grocery shopping, he collapsed from a third heart attack on our kitchen floor. He was only 65. A lifetime of loss and longing, of repeated emotional cuts, gashes, and lacerations, had finally scarred his heart beyond repair.

My last breast surgery was almost 20 years ago, and the scars, though hidden, are now part of my identity. Four years ago, Mohr's surgery to remove a small squamous cell near my nose left a five-inch scar running along the inside line of my cheek. "This way your eye isn't crooked," the surgeon explained. "It will be gone in six months." But the scar's still there, plain as day, the small blood vessels turning red with the cold. I'm not happy about it, but how can I complain? These are relatively small nicks on an otherwise sweet life.