

Aurora jeweller revives old-world traditions

By Brock Weir

After Fred Jakob came to Canada from the former USSR in 1984, he and his wife decided to journey to Jerusalem.

The world, after all, had been closed to him for much of his life. On a trip to a museum of Israeli crafts, however, he was struck by something familiar when he saw a depiction of a medieval jeweller's workroom.

"I recognized the tools I was working with in the Soviet Union!" he says.

Looking back over his career, Mr. Jakob is still almost at a loss on why he became a jeweller. In Russia, being in the military was a requirement. After dutifully checking that box, he was admitted to a local university to study road engineering, but he ultimately got bored in that field and was at a crossroads.

"I was in the middle of nowhere," he says. "Who was I? This was at a time when the Government started to give permission to the Jewish and Germans to leave the country. The last jeweller in our town left for Israel and it was just empty."

At the time, he put himself forward to fill a vacancy, but it turned out to be a passion.

"I never knew before what it was like to create something," he says. "It is not about just putting a few wires together. Here, it is about creativity. When I first took the pencil in hand and started to sketch whatever I wanted, I started to see my idea come to life on paper. From nothing, you start to create something nice and beautiful, something with a little bit of a sparkle. Lots of people have hobbies, but my profession is a combined money-maker and hobby."

In his small store near the corner of Bayview Avenue and Hollidge Boulevard, Mr. Jakob makes his creations in silver, gold, and sometimes a combination. Gold, he says, has more possibilities when it comes to design, but silver can get you more bang for your buck. Going that route, he says, allows people to live out their design fantasies, go bigger, and perhaps tell a whole story with a simple bauble.

Here in Canada, Mr. Jakob built a resume of working with many top jewellers before setting out on his own, first in The Beaches, then in Newmarket, before ultimately moving once more to Aurora at his wife's suggestion. Striking out on his own allowed him to feed his own creativity, working with metals and gemstones outside of the usual suspects, and keeping some older world traditions alive and well.

"Technology is best, but I lost my job because of technology," he says of going independent. "Before, model making was the profession in the trade, making models from cheap metals like silver and bronze. With technology, I lost being a model maker. Today, you can buy a copy machine creating five or six different pieces in one shot. In eight hours of work, you will have 10 different jewellery designs in plastic. You cast it, you clean it and goodbye! but the craftsmanship of the design is terrible.

"We have forgotten already how to do things by hand. I don't even bother to learn those designs because I am working for myself and I am doing what I want to do."

There are added benefits to that, he adds, in that customers are most often satisfied with the hands-on work although they sometimes do not appreciate all the effort that went into it. Case in point: engagement rings. People are often blinded by the stones and don't often take the setting around them into consideration. It is a growing trend, but it is not universal.

"Some customers have more artistic ideas," he said. "You can have more of a fantasy in silver because you can make it more detailed. In North America, it seems there are strict designs on gold and engagement rings and they often want to buy Tiffany pieces. But, my customers are ordinary people. More and more of my creations are coming in silver rather than gold."