

William Federer, 91; survivor of Holocaust became chocolatier

By Gloria Negri
GLOBE STAFF

In the little shop filled with chocolate and Viennese truffles in Coolidge Corner, customers often dropped by not only to purchase the hand-dipped delicacies but to chat with their legendary creator, William Federer.

With his wife, Rose, standing behind the counter, Mr. Federer would emerge from the curtained back room where he had spent half the night dipping candy, hands dripping with chocolate.

"He looked like a little bear with these enormous chocolate gloves," a longtime friend, Harriet Rosenstein of Brookline, said yesterday.

His store was not trendy, but "more a place where people came simply to schmooze. So many customers simply loved Bill," she said. "They were his huge extended family."

Mr. Federer, a survivor of the Holocaust, which decimated his family, died of a stroke on Sunday at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. He was 91.

Mr. Federer's mother helped get him out of the Dachau concentration camp in Germany with forged papers. He then left England by ship, bound for the United States as World War II was starting, "climbing aboard on a ladder just as the ship was leaving port," Rosenstein said.

After the ship docked in Charlestown, she said, Mr. Federer slept for six nights in a cardboard box he shared with a homeless man under a bridge near the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, before a Jewish organization gave him shelter. His first job, Rosenstein said, was packing bags.

Blessed with fortitude and the power to forgive, Mr. Federer fought his way back to normal life. During the war, he enlisted in the Army and was sent to Tennessee, where he served as translator for hospitalized German prisoners of

"One of Uncle Bill's amusing stories was how he would ask the Germans if they would accept blood donated by Jews," said Nur Kilic, a Brookline candy maker whom Mr. Federer befriended. "Nobody said no."

When Mr. Federer was a youth in Vienna, his tenor voice had gained him a place with the famed Vienna Boys Choir. Once back on his feet, he joined a choral group here. The soprano sitting behind him was Rose Phillips.

The two married and set up housekeeping in Mattapan, where Mr. Federer began making chocolates and what became his signature creation, Viennese truffles, on their kitchen stove and delivered them to customers. Eventually, the couple moved to Brookline, where in 1960 he opened Serenade Chocolates on Harvard Street in Coolidge Corner. As word spread, the store became renowned.

"Bill made all the chocolates fresh each day and stayed up half the night doing it," Rosenstein said. She remembered the 4-foot cardboard cut-out figure of Mozart placed in one of the windows to advertise a Viennese chocolate of that name and to express Mr. Federer's love of the composer. He and his wife regularly attended the symphony and Tanglewood.

And Mr. Federer's creations — some 40 varieties — were reasonably priced.

"I once told Bill he should charge more," said Louis Zand of Brookline, a regular customer, but Mr. Federer wouldn't. "'How,' he asked me, 'could so many of my older customers afford them?'"

Mr. Federer operated his chocolate store for 26 years. He called it quits when the building was being converted into business condominiums, his wife was suffering with Alzheimer's disease, and he was 71.

"When Bill left the store, he was weeping," Rosenstein said.

Nur Kilic entered Mr. Federer's



FILE/JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

William Federer, at the Brookline store in 1999, opened Serenade Chocolates in 1960, making candy fresh each day.

"She was a struggling candy maker trying to make ends meet," according to a 1999 Globe story. "He was a retired candy maker taking care of a wife with Alzheimer's. She called and asked if she could buy some of his old recipes. Later, he said, 'I'll come by later.'"

A year passed, but Mr. Federer didn't forget his promise. "He dashed into Kilic's tiny shop in Brookline, took off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves and said, 'I have until noon,'" according to the Globe story.

Kilic has been in business 19 years now. Mr. Federer not only gave her permission to use the name of his old company, but many of his recipes and the implements, the refrigerator, a giant marble slab, and scales.

He taught her how to make her three-layered truffles stick together. "She wasn't using the right ingredients," he said in the Globe interview. He taught her to make the best butter crunch and the creamiest muffins. He often showed up when he had a few hours to spare. The Globe story said he "dons a burgundy apron, spends a couple of hours dipping chocolates, mixing caramel, telling Kilic she's spending too much money."

Mr. Federer became part of the Kilic family, even more so after the death of his wife in 1995.

Kilic, now a successful chocolatier and candy maker with a Sere-

line, decided the best way to repay Mr. Federer was to help others as he had helped her. In 1993, she became one of the first people to bring a Bosnian family to Boston and sponsor them. That family in turn brought other Bosnian refugees here.

Mr. Federer was born in Vienna, son of a Catholic father and a Jewish mother. In 1939, when the Nazis invaded Austria, he was 23 and a librarian at the University of Vienna. He was taken to Dachau, where he was assigned to carry out dead bodies. He never learned how his father died or the exact fate of his mother, but they were exterminated, Rosenstein said.

He became an American citizen, but still enjoyed visits to his native land, Kilic said. He was a "very generous" man, she said. Once when she was having a run-in with someone, she said he gave her advice from his life's experiences. "Uncle Bill told me, 'In spite of what I suffered at the hands of the Germans, I still fly Lufthansa.'"

Whenever Mr. Federer left his chocolate store for a short time, he would hang up a sign that made others smile. It said: "I am almost here."

He leaves no immediate survivors.

Services will be held at 10 a.m. today at the Levine Chapel in Brookline. Interment will be at