

## JAN DROBOT



*Engineer, diplomat, traveler, story teller.* Born Aug. 7, 1913 in Krakow.  
Wore out in Toronto Nov. 14, 2007, at the age of 94.

**T**he plane circled JFK after an aborted flight to Frankfurt. My mother grew more frantic with each loop. Her husband slept. “Jan, Jan, wake up! We’re going to crash!” He cracked one eye open. “Why do you care?” he asked. “It’s not your plane.”

He survived that trip. He survived Hitler, Stalin, Indira Gandhi (who put him in Delhi’s Tilak prison) and the Polish government, which issued his death warrant. He had enough lives to make a cat envious.

His began life as Jakub Djament, fifth and youngest son of a timber merchant in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

He studied at the university in Lwow and at the German Polytechnic in Brno, in (then) Czechoslovakia. He scrambled to survive in Russian-occupied Poland in 1939, then made the life-saving decision to volunteer for the Soviet Union, where he built power stations beyond Novosibirsk, literally electrifying Siberia, and fixed clocks for villagers in exchange for vodka, honey and caviar.

He returned to a devastated Poland as Jan Drobot, to discover one brother had been shot by Ukrainian partisans, and his mother and another brother — with his wife and twin six-year-old daughters — had been slaughtered in Sobibor. Nonetheless, he threw himself into building Communism in Poland, living the life of a privileged Party member as director of Energobudowa, the national power-plant company. When the grimness of Communist Poland took hold in the 1950s, and the Iron Curtain sealed off Eastern Europe, he joined the trade ministry and traveled all over Western Europe to sell Poland's wares. "Drobot's so trustworthy," the Minister bragged, "I'd send him to New York."

Instead he was sent as commercial counselor to New Delhi, where India's nonaligned status made it an ideal trading partner. There he lived the life of a *burra sahib*, hosting parties that included the young writer Ryszard Kapuscinski, and developing a passion for Indian miniature art. And where he went on to betray the minister's trust by befriending the second secretary at the U.S. embassy — a CIA agent — and arranging his defection.

For the next few years he was officially stateless, crossing the Atlantic back and forth until he decided that he did indeed belong in New York. There he lived the life of a corporation man, commuting into Grand Central station and riding up to the 57<sup>th</sup> floor of the (then) Pan Am Building, where he worked for Westinghouse International on huge projects such as hydroelectric dams in Egypt.

When their man in New Delhi retired, he agreed to hold the fort temporarily, and — rediscovering the joys of *burra sahibdom* — stayed on as VP for India, Burma, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

That life ended unceremoniously when Indira Gandhi decided to nationalize American firms in India. He found himself one of several hostages Gandhi used to leverage her position, thus he spent the night in Tilak prison in a cell next to an internationally notorious serial killer.

He had a life as an adventurer, kayaking through the lakes of Finland to the Arctic Circle, driving the Khyber Pass, and thrilling to the tiger hunt before it was deemed (rightfully, in his opinion) uncivilized.

He also lived the life of a lover, adoring the beautiful Wanda. He filled their house with 50 red roses to celebrate their 50 years of marriage shortly before her death.

“I’m never going to die,” he often said, tongue, as usual, in his cheek. “You’re going to have to hire someone to kill me.”

Time beat me to it.