

Selma Koch, 94, knows a thing or two about lingerie - and life

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NEW YORK — Selma Koch was not aware of the passing years, or that she was an old woman, until she was 92. Maybe it was 93.

She is 94 now. And every day, she finds a reason to believe — in life, in work and in the importance of a bra that fits.

Six days a week she spends 10 hours a day in the Town Shop on the Upper West Side, a lingerie store founded 114 years ago by her father-in-law.

She is acutely aware that she may not live to see 95. “You don’t buy green bananas,” she says, and laughs heartily at her own joke. She doesn’t fill a prescription for 100 capsules of medication. Too expensive, she says, and tells the pharmacist to cut it by half. “I may not make it to 100.”

Pills, she means.

Life, and time, are not always kind. Mrs. Koch has seen plenty of both. Enough to know not to take anything too seriously; enough to know that work and family are the secrets to contentment. And that if you don’t laugh, especially at yourself, you might as well give up.

She also knows that progress — be it Internet shopping or shiny catalogs with unnaturally endowed women wearing bras of red satin — cannot replace simple human kindness, or making a customer feel important.

“There’s nothing left in New York that’s a service store,” she says. “You can go into Bergdorf’s, you can go into Saks, and nobody’s going to say a word to you, right?”

“He-yuh,” she says, showing her New York accent, “a customer walks through the door, someone approaches her. And stays with her.”

Which isn’t hard to do. The Town Shop, at Broadway and 82nd Street, is about the size of a bedroom with enough inventory to stock a house. Outside, beneath a hot pink sign with purple letters, is an old-fashioned glass window display with mannequins. Inside are bras, in cup sizes covering half the alphabet, panties, house slippers, stockings, nighties from flimsy to flannel, socks, “merry widows,” swimsuits, and if you don’t see what you want, just ask.

In the back is Selma Koch, wedged behind a small desk, flanked by boxes of underwear rising to the ceiling. She does much of the buying, the scheduling, the phone orders that come in from around the country and —

“When you reach my time of life, you don’t have friends. They’re all gone. You don’t have a social life. I don’t have the mobility to travel from museum to museum anymore. So my days would be endless if I didn’t come to work.”

- Selma Koch

the bane of every business owner — keeping the help happy. Not to mention the customers.

“We have 17 people working here,” she says, rapping her polished nails on a rare bit of desktop not covered by papers. “And just try to keep peace with 17 women. That alone, in a small space, is a full-time job.”

She does not lower her voice. It carries, creaky but strong, into the store, where determined saleswomen stride from customer to back room, purposefully climb step ladders and reach behind Koch’s gray head to retrieve a lacy piece of merchandise. If they have heard her comment, their faces register nothing but brisk efficiency.

Her elder son, Peter, 72, comes to say she has faxed the same order twice. The manufacturer is confused.

She smiles. “I’m entitled to errors, right?”

But at 94 years old, she doesn’t make a lot of them. Her mind, and her hearing, are sharp. She has two sons, six grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren. Crimson lipstick tastefully defines her lips and a red dress with gold buttons plunges provocatively, revealing an unapologetic neck weathered to fine crepe paper and mottled with age spots.

On her feet, over sheer stockings, are dark pumps with cutout toes.

She has been walking into Town Shop since 1927, right before she married Henry Koch, who was brash enough to flirt with the 20-year-old woman who came to design his Christmas brochure.

She’d graduated from Columbia University’s School of Journalism two years before and had done well for herself by landing a job as a copywriter at an advertising agency. She simply refused to be intimidated by the fact there were few women in jobs like hers.

Town Shop had four stores then and its advertising business was coveted. She wanted the account.

“I went in to do the interview, and this guy
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