

# THE WILL TO SURVIVE

by Adrienne Papp, Profile Editor

## Alex Kaufman

### Holocaust Survivor Alex Kaufman Defies the Odds to Live the American Dream

Watching him roll down the driveway on his throaty Harley Davidson, on his way to explore his scenic neighborhood in Aspen, Colo., you wouldn't think you were watching a man who had started out by losing everything. The motorcycle enthusiast is octogenarian Alex Kaufman, a man who parlayed a single quarter into a half-billion-dollar chemical company that sold synthetic lubricants to the aircraft industry in New Jersey after surviving a Nazi prison camp and the loss of his family.

Before World War II, a teenage Alex lived comfortably with his well-to-do family in Poland. But in 1939, when Hitler and Stalin made a pact to divide Poland, everything changed. The Kaufmans were forced to move into a small apartment and were put to work at menial jobs. And soon after Germany invaded the Soviet Union and took over all of Poland, the Kaufmans were separated and placed in work camps. Alex would never see his parents and sister again.

As a strong young man of 17, Alex worked pounding railroad spikes 14 hours a day at the work camp. As he saw the Germans killing Jews around him, Alex decided to escape by hopping a slow-moving freight train that rolled past his work site. He ran for the train and jumped aboard, where he was spotted by the guards and shot in the foot. Finally, out of danger, Alex rode the train until he was deep in the woods where he jumped off to hide.

In the years that followed, he would earn food by working at local farms. "There were no men around the area because of the war," says Alex. "It was a very primitive existence, but I felt lucky to be alive."

When the war ended in January 1945, Kaufman was finally able to emerge from the forest after four years in hiding. His desire to prove the Nazis wrong had sustained his survival. "It was almost like a game, to prove I could outsmart the soldiers and their dogs. I learned that no matter what anyone does to you, you can survive if you have the bigger goal in mind."



Soon after the war ended, Alex decided to continue his education. He graduated from high school in just two years and then got a degree from Stuttgart University in Germany.

After graduating from Stuttgart, Alex set out for the land of his dreams – America. His boat docked at the 42nd Street Pier in February 1950. Having arrived with only a single quarter that he had hidden in his shoe, Alex needed to find work. His first job was fixing sewing machines in one of New York's garment districts.

In order to learn English, he spent time at the movies. Steadily, his English began to improve and he soon took another job, washing lab ware for Hatco Chemical Company in New Jersey. It paid 70 cents an hour, but Kaufman had finally found a home. In 1959, the company was sold to W.R. Grace and Alex was promoted to production manager.

In 1962, Alex was promoted to president of the Hatco Chemical division of W.R. Grace. In just 12 years, he had risen from dishwasher to become the company's president. Hatco was now producing revenue in the hundreds of millions of dollars, primarily from the manufacture of polyol ester base stocks for synthetic lubricants for aircraft engines.

As president of the company, Alex took Hatco from \$10 million to \$500 million in revenue in 10 years, and in 1978, he bought the company from W.R. Grace.

Over the next few years, he would acquire corporations like Anderol, Inc., Royal Lubricants and Estech GmbH & Company and supplied ingredients for hundreds of consumer and industrial products. He also developed relationships with major business partners, such as Exxon, Lubrizol, DuPont and Procter & Gamble. In 1998, he was honored as Entrepreneur of the Year in New Jersey.

With a key involvement in the aircraft industry, Hatco companies also supplied a key synthetic lubricant that kept jet engines running safely and efficiently for manufacturers like Pratt & Whitney, General Electric and Rolls Royce and, eventually, more than 370 airlines. "I was lucky to have created products that ensured the high-performance level

of jet engines at a time when the whole industry was going to jet power," says Alex.

Today, the majority of all the civilian and military jets used in the world rely on Hatco lubrication products and their quality control record boasts billions of miles flown by jet turbines lubricated with Hatco-based products without a single engine failure.

With his involvement in the aviation industry and the amount of business travel, it was only natural for Alex to take a personal interest in flying. He acquired his own personal jet, a Hawker 900XP, and participates in the fractional jet ownership program with NetJets.

Alex has flown to Washington, D.C., to witness the historic handshake of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasir Arafat at the White House. Determined to

explore his Jewish roots, Alex flies to Budapest to meet with the Rabbi of the largest synagogue in the city. He continues to fly for recreational travel, often attending major tennis tournaments, like the U.S. Open.

In 2007, Alex Kaufman sold Kaufman Holdings and relocated to Aspen, Colo., but he is far from retired. He now enjoys his motorcycles and automobiles and devotes time to organizations like the Aspen Institute, which hosts many of the world's great leaders and thinkers. He has left a significant legacy to his children and has published *A Letter to my Grandchildren*, a history of his life, experiences and code of ethics based on common sense and other values he feels are important to pass along to the younger generation. As he rides off on his Harley to enjoy another day in Aspen, Alex Kaufman is a shining example of how fulfilling the American Dream can be.



After surviving the terrors of World War II and escaping from a German work camp, Alex Kaufman (opposite page) emigrated to the U.S. and worked his way up the ladder at Hatco Chemical Company, becoming its president in just 10 years. Today, Kaufman enjoys flying in his Hawker 900 XP.