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. 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, 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.

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 in 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.