Once in a while a hero comes around touching our hearts, leaving a wealth of inspiration and hope in their wake. It is always a relief when one looks for answers. A never before survivor and business icon tells his story.

Watching him roll down the driveway on his thronging Harley Davidson, out to explore his scenic neighborhood in Aspen, you wouldn’t think you were watching a man who had started out by having everything.

The motorcycle enthusiast is renowned octogenarian Alex Kaufman, a man who has been a shining light for the Harley Davidson Motor Company in New Jersey. But that was just one of his ventures he built after surviving Nazi prison camps and the loss of his entire family without an inkling of his survival. Born during the Great Depression, Kaufman was able to live the quintessential American success story. As part of his most excellent adventure, he now makes his life in Aspen, enjoying his grandchildren, the breathtaking mountain scenery and the Aspen snowboard scene.

Kaufman was a survivor of the Auschwitz and the Dachau concentration camps. He was taken to the camps by the Germans in 1940 after his family was taken away. After surviving Nazi genocides, his and his family’s efforts were assigned by the Germans a tiny room in an apartment complex where they were told their neighbors were going to be two “charming young ladies.”

Kaufman’s first job was to begin work as a porter at the age of 15. He was sheltered from old men for roommates. Running into a big laugh, he says, “But, we found a solution for everything.” Not hard to believe from a man who survived the forest all by himself for four years and took a bullet out of his foot with his bare hand.

Alex Kaufman was in his teens, living comfortably with his late to die father in the small town of Milford, New Jersey. Before his father was an attorney and professor of law, and his mother was a hon of the war, but at least the family was together.

In 1940, Germany invaded the Soviet Union, and, in the process, took over Poland. As The Nazis systematically separated men and women, families were broken up and everyone was put to work as slave labor. Kaufman was separated from his parents and sister, some of whom he would never see again.

As a young man, off of Alex was forced to work pouring railroad spikes with a hammer 14 hours a day. As he worked, he saw that Germans were killing Jews all around him, and he knew that he would be killed at some point too. Determined to survive, Kaufman decided to escape by hiding in a deserted freight train that rolled past his work site. He ran for the train and jumped aboard, where he was spotted by the guards. As the train rolled down the track, the guards fired at him, wounding Alex in the foot.

Hanging on for his life, Alex was able to ride the train until he was able to surface deep into the surrounding woods where he finally jumped off. While walking in the desert, he stumbled on a young man, who was on his own small entrepreneurial move," he says, "I took a risk and it worked.

Convinced however that the SS and their dogs were on his trail, Alex was able to hide in the woods until it had rained deep into the surrounding woods where he finally jumped off. While walking in the desert, he stumbled on a young man, who was on his own small entrepreneurial move," he says, "I took a risk and it worked.

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In January of 1944, the German army began retreating from the area and the Soviets returned. The war in Europe was finally coming to an end. Living by himself for four years, Alex's desire to prove the Nazis wrong had been the sustaining motivation for his survival.

"I felt I had a drive to survive. It was almost like a game, to prove I could outsmart the soldiers and their dogs."

In his survival mode, Alex didn't have time to feel sorry for himself or complain, instead of despair, he concentrated on what he had to achieve to survive every day. His toughness of character led him to overcome the worst possible circumstance. "I learned that no matter what anyone does to you, or what your circumstances are, you can survive if you have the bigger goal in mind. That was something that always kept me going. That ability to think ahead is something that was there all my life."

With the return of the Soviets to Poland, Alex began looking for his family, but could not find any information on them. Despite his sorrow, he decided that he needed to focus on the future and move forward. With no time to mourn, he would get an education and then set out for America, where he was convinced he could be successful.

"The pavement is made out of gold in America. I kept on hearing about the war during the day, he says smiling. "I still look down at the pavement today and see no gold, but at least I know I can make it."

Banding together with a group of 20-30 Jewish orphans in Krakow, Alex convinced the local government to set up an accelerated two-year high school curriculum program. He found an old Jewish dormitory for the school.

Taking charge of his students, Alex had his class studying day and night. Everyone worked hard and they finally graduated in an accelerated time frame.

Looking for the best educational opportunities he could find, Alex finally decided to enroll at Stuttgart University in Germany. Despite the fact that Germans had treated Poland and his family brutally, he thought the university would give him the best opportunity for a first-rate education. All he needed was a place to stay and funds for tuition.

In Stuttgart, Alex and some friends discovered a cellar under a bombed-out house, cleaned it up and opened a small restaurant and nightclub. "I always liked to dance," Alex says. "That was a form of expression for me." A friend's mother became their cook, and they served a hearty menu of borscht, chicken soup, brisket, matzo balls, and other traditional Jewish dishes. The restaurant quickly became a popular meeting spot for the city's Jewish community.

After completing his study in organic chemistry, Alex set out for the land of his dreams—America. He set sail for New York in January of 1950, working as a baker on the ship. As the boat approached New York harbor, he passed the Statue of Liberty. The dream of living in America that had sustained him all those years in Poland was finally coming true.

On February 23, 1950, his boat docked at a pier at 42nd street and Alex Kaufman stepped on American soil for the first time. Having arrived with only a single quarter that he had hidden in his shoe, Alex needed to find work. After passing through immigration, he located a Jewish relief organization that found him a small room in Harlem. His first job was at a sewing machine factory, fixing sewing machines in one of New York's garment districts.

In order to learn English, he spent time at the movies, where for a few cents he could learn the language and get a little entertainment in the process. Steadily his English began to improve, and he soon took another job, washing lab ware for the Kato Chemical Company, which was located in New Jersey. He paid 70 cents an hour, but Kaufman had finally found a home.

The owners at Kato Chemical quickly recognized Alex's talents and moved him to the position of lab technician. "I always had in my mind that I would be able to be successful and get to the top. I had a vision of what was supposed to be doing," he says. After getting a promotion to production manager at Kato, the company was sold to W.R. Grace and Company in 1959. It was the beginning of Alex's long-term relationship with J. Peter Grace, the president of the company and a man who taught him a lot.

In 1962, Alex was promoted to president of the Kato Chemical division of W.R. Grace. In just 12 years, he had risen from dishwasher to become the company's president. Kato was now producing revenue in the hundreds of millions of dollars, primarily from the manufacture of polyesters and Felixicure, and the company was on a steep growth curve.
With his vision and business intuition, Alex began looking for other companies that he could partner with. His belief in synergism, in purchasing companies that used the products that Hato produced, created relationships that improved efficiency and reduced cost.

He also looked for companies outside the chemical industry when he saw their potential. When women began to get involved in golf, tennis and skiing, he purchased Herman's Sports Goods, and expanded the local retailer nationwide. He was helped create the Jones Apparel Division of W.R. Grace (now Jones New York), which has become one of the most fashionable women's clothing in the US.

In ten years, Alex took Hato from $10 million in revenue to $900 million. Part of the satisfaction in growing the company so effectively was that, in creating well paying jobs for the economy, Alex was in effect helping repay the United States that had adopted him.

Alex continued to move up the corporate ladder, eventually becoming the executive vice president of Grace. He organized Operation Bootstrap in Puerto Rico and built a large chemical plant there. He also successfully acquired a number of U.S. and international consumer, industrial and chemical companies, and directed a joint venture with a Japanese company.

Alex also tried to persuade Grace to purchase an oil company. When they balked, he decided he needed to run his own company, and went into negotiations to purchase Hato from the Grace stable.

In 1976, Alex Kaufman bought Hato from W.R. Grace. He was finally at the top of the corporate heap - in charge of 3,000 employees and the president of a company that made specialty chemicals for the food, cosmetic, medical, aviation, surfactant and industrial markets. With Hato as the core of operations, success followed success.

Kaufman's philosophy involved acquiring companies that had a synergistic relationship with the types of products that Hato produced. Over the next few years he would acquire companies like Anderol Inc., Royal Lubricants, Estech GmbH & Company, and also started a joint venture with Cariglian in Brazil. His companies supplied ingredients for products like Neutrogena Night Crème, Coppertone, Avon skin-care, Aveeno cleansing products, and Lubriderm. Seeing natural sugar alcohols as a substitute that could be used in food, Alex came up with the primary ingredients (a phenol-based key intermediate for aspartame) now used in NutraSweet, which became an industry leader as a sugar substitute.

Hato companies also supplied a key synthetic lubricant that kept jet engines running safely and efficiently with manufacturers like Pratt & Whitney, General Electric and Rolls Royce and eventually over 3700 airlines. Today, more than half of all the civilian and military jets used in the world rely on Hato lubricant products, and their quality control record boasts millions of miles flown by jet turbines lubricated by Hato-based products without a single engine failure.

Hato was also able to develop a relationship with major business partners such as Exxon, Lubrizol, Dupont and Procter & Gamble, and developed the chemical component used in safety glass for automobiles.

In September 1993, Alex witnessed the historic handshake of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasir Arafat at the White House. In 1998 he was honored as the Entrepreneur of the Year in New Jersey. Some of the most important by-products of his remarkable career are the jobs that he provided for so many people. With these employees, he was able to innovate many new products and improve the lifestyles of countless people.

In 2007, Alex Kaufman sold Kaufman Holdings and relocated to Aspen, CO, but he is far from retired. As a full-time resident of Aspen, he indulges his interest in motorcycles and automobiles, riding a Harley around the scenic local landscape, and has also devoted a lot of time to helping improve lives through organizations like the Aspen Institute, which hosts many of the world's great leaders and thinkers.

And, maybe most importantly, he has left a significant legacy to his children and the younger generation by sharing with us the history of his life experiences and the code of ethics based on common sense and other lessons. Alex Kaufman is a legend in his own lifetime. His entrepreneurial spirit, which came early on from his mother, and his determination, is the most important example to all of us trying to find our path in life.

Now, with a wealth of achievements behind him and the legacy of his business success, Alex is enjoying his home and family around the beautiful Aspen countryside. He's a man who knows how to live to the fullest. As he rides off on one of his legendary Harleys to enjoy another day, Alex Kaufman is a shining example of how fulfilling the American Dream can be.