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Giving Back, Making a Difference:

A Philanthropist's Diary
 By ADRIENNE PAPP
 December 04, 2008



Photo Courtesy of Adrienne Papp

There have been many stories about heroes and survivors who inspired us with their courage during history's darkest hours. And there have been many stories that tell of a life beginning in poverty yet ending in material success – the proverbial "rags to riches." But there are no stories that combine these two as dramatically as the life of Alex Kaufman.

Kaufman is a Holocaust survivor who became one of America's wealthiest men through his personal vision and hard work. Today he is a philanthropic Harley-riding bon vivant, preparing for the most rewarding part of his life – establishing a program for young entrepreneurs at the Aspen Institute of Colorado (a world renowned think tank), using his life lessons as a guide to fulfill their dreams under the most demanding of circumstances.

Alex Kaufman had it all as a young man. Born into a professional, well-to-do family he was provided with all the advantages of an educated, cultured environment. However, in 1941 the entire family was taken to a concentration camp in Poland, where they were all separated and Kaufman experienced what no child ever should: He was never to see his family members again or gain any closure on what had happened to them – it wasn't until many years later that he learned they were all killed.

As a strong young man of 17, Kaufman was put to work pounding spikes on tracks for new railroads. Having inherited a quick mind and an educated intelligence, he understood the only respite from this man-made hell was escape.

He jumped on a slow-moving train, and although he got shot by the Nazis, Kaufman was still alive only to enter another nightmare of spending the next four years hiding in a dense forest. Occasionally working for local farmers to earn enough food to survive and frequently sleeping in snow banks in the bitter winter cold, it is a miracle he survived.

"People ask me how I survived those brutal winters all alone in the forest," Kaufman says. "It was a combination of my desire to prove the Nazis wrong, the desire to see my family again, and my basic will to live. I had to learn to ignore pain."

After the war ended, Kaufman began to search for his family. Unable to find any trace or record of them, he realized that he was now completely on his own. "I was alone," Kaufman says, "and I decided I needed to create a future for myself, rather than live in the past."

Taking advantage of a free education policy offered in Germany, Kaufman enrolled at Stuttgart University. After completing his studies in chemistry, he headed for New York. He arrived in February of 1950 with a single quarter to his name. In short order, he began cleaning lab ware for a company called Hatco Chemical, where he was quickly promoted to lab technician. He learned the business, worked hard, and moved up through the ranks later on. His plans were always built around the big picture. "I always had a dream of being successful, but you have to start with a vision for yourself. I was determined to get to a point where I could run things my way," Kaufman says.

In 1962 Kaufman was promoted to president of the Hatco division. In 12 years he had gone from dishwasher to running the company. He then began acquiring other companies, expanding Hatco from a small local company into a multi-million dollar global operation.

Eventually Kaufman bought Hatco from the parent. With that move, the Kaufman Holding Corporation was born. Over the next few years, Kaufman developed innovative specialty products and chemicals for the food, cosmetic, medical, aviation and industrial markets. "As proud as I was of our success in the market, it was also very important to me that I was able to create jobs for people and help their children get through college," he says.

Kaufman hit upon a winning formula: creating a team of employees who were loyal to the company and proud of their work, as well as innovating products that greatly enhanced a new generation of consumer and industrial novelties. Over the years Kaufman became the supplier of engine lubrication to 750 airlines, developed Nutra Sweet, acquired fashion house Jones of New York and continued to expand his business with several other products and services.



He eventually was named Entrepreneur of the Year and was successful beyond his own expectations. But he also believed in giving back, feeling a debt to the country that had given him so much. "I believe in being generous and trying to make the world a better place," he says. "I initially got involved with an organization called Seeds of Peace (www.seedsofpeace.org), which brings in children from various regions in conflict to a camp in Maine to learn how to resolve disputes." He also became involved at the political level, assisting with various charities, the state of Israel, forming relationships with the White House and Queen Noor of Jordan.

More recently, Alex Kaufman has divested himself of much of his corporate holdings and now resides in Aspen, where he is an active contributor to the Aspen Institute (www.aspeninstitute.org), an international nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering enlightened leadership and open-minded dialogue. He also established The Kaufman Theater, home of aspiring, young artists. He recently donated a large sum of money to medical research.

In a booklet titled "A Letter to my Grandchildren" he describes his life and lists some of the principles he has learned:

- Developing a good name through honesty. It lifted me from washing lab dishes in America to running a great company.
- Education. Combining a good education with hard work is the path to success.
- Entrepreneurship. Learn what you can from others, and then strike out on your own.
- Support Your Country. Help keep America great by supporting good people who run for office. Tell them when they are right. More importantly, tell them when they are wrong.
- Have fun. Hard work needs balance – good advice from a man who has a passion for tennis and skiing, an eye for beauty and rides Harleys in his eightsies.

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