

# Knowing Alex

by  
**Alex  
Pollak**



# KNOWING ALEX

*by*

*Alexander Pollak*



***Alex and Mary Pollak***

**Cover Picture: Alex on his 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday**

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*These Memoirs are  
Dedicated to  
My Parents, Family and Friends*



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

These memoirs are part of my life story and describe some of my journeys and reflections on the unusual events that I experienced, with the positive aspects rather than negative ones.

Because of the complexity of the events narrated I could not write it alone, but needed individuals to collaborate with me, without whose help and guidance it could not have been written. They are:

Penelope Michel, writer

Darlene Lofgren, graphics

Mary Pollak who gathered photographs to put with text

Dr. Martha Tripp and Janace Conley who helped with the final review

Thank you, ladies.



## NOTE TO READERS:

*The read ahead of you is a true story, spoken in a unique, individual voice, sometimes with a sentence structure that reveals the writer's Yugoslavian roots. And in the telling of some of his life's journey, he takes us off the main roads down many side roads, traveling often with open enthusiasm, but occasionally pulling away from the most difficult subjects. The telling of his story is not chronological and the headings are loosely structured. However, in following his narrative you will, as this memoir intends, better know Alex.*





## PREFACE

I did not want this memoir to be a biography or a list of engineering project executions and endeavors but to let family, friends, and associates know me, Alex, as I really was, and am, while narrating some unusual aspects of my life and events surrounding me during my first 80 years.

I do not claim any specific talent but rather an unusual way to survive and succeed in very unorthodox ways. These memoirs are presented as true-life, starting in Yugoslavia to the present, as my life's journey, and to thank the people who helped me and my sister to survive.

My life has been a journey with different destinations. The worst journey was during the period of 1940 to 1945 when the only goal was to survive during the war years, in distinct time frames depending on my location.

After the war, my journey continued in different countries with a slightly more stable environment and better defined future.

Since this is the first attempt to write my memoirs I wrote them as a "limited edition" for my family and friends on my 80th birthday.

If this first edition is well received I shall prepare a second edition with more details, possibly in chronological order. Of course, if anyone has the time to make comments and send them to me I would appreciate it.

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I have tried to tell my own story to the best of my recollections.

I grew up in Yugoslavia where I lived in peace with my parents and younger sister until the age of seven. Then in 1941, my normal childhood ended abruptly as terrible things happened to my family, changed Europe and swept me into personal upheaval. Those changes caused me to develop the personality and characteristics that shaped me as a man, a man with a down-to-earth outlook and attitude regarding survival.

During the war years the need to adapt myself to the demanding/challenging environment was an everyday life demand.

I have tried to present several significant events in my life and tried to justify to myself and inform the readers of the memories, and the reality, and the challenges I went through as related to the events described.

An attempt is made here to describe my "unusual life's journey" that may be of some interest due to being "unique". And I've introduced people who have impacted me during my journey, thus adding a wider perspective to the narrative.

So many years of my life have gone into the struggle to survive and succeed. I have become accustomed to overcoming the many obstacles life imposes upon us and to embrace the opportunities offered.

The chance of failure, or worse, the repetition of obstacles experienced during the war, had to be avoided.

The continuous travel and changes in my circumstances that were the result of my changing environment forced me to become like a "machine" - always on the move, looking or determining the next challenge and avoiding obstacles.

I do not remember ever being frightened, only concerned about how I get out of a "dangerous" or challenging situation with a minimum of damage to me and to others in my family or team. I avoided depressing situations and learned to control my nerves and stress, with focus on succeeding in my tasks and finding the path forward.

The secret of survival, especially when you are very low or hungry, is that considering death as a solution is absolutely unacceptable.

I knew death because of the terrible things I saw during the war, the near-fatal illness (malaria) as a boy in the concentration camp, and then the long walk from the Adriatic Coast to Zagreb (Croatia) with the partisans where the chance of dying was an everyday possibility as a group of men with rifles moved in an area covered with well-trained and heavily armed Germans.

Since death was not an option for me I considered and appreciated the countless good things that life offers and death does not.

Living in poverty, hunger, and the concentration camp experiences were the "obstacles" of my five-year ordeal from age seven to twelve in Yugoslavia. Never losing hope and moving forward was my way of life.

Through my life I have not made intimate disclosures of the "horror" happenings. Other people I've met who lived in similar circumstances never discuss their experiences in detail, either. Call it a "code of silence". My intention is to give some insight into my world; therefore, the people who appear in my memoirs have their real names.

From my graduation in Chemical Engineering at the University of Birmingham in June, 1962, until today, 2013, I have tried to contribute to the well-being of some by designing and building chemical plants and refineries, and training young people to have a productive life that can provide for the needs of their families.

I have written openly for my readers about the events and my reflections. Just recently in October, 2013, I had the opportunity to give a talk to a class of children, between the ages of 13 and 15 and their teachers, on the subjects in these memoirs. I was surprised how well it was received.

The following are two books I would highly recommend for further amplification on this subject:

Znalise 1941-1945 (Jasenovac) Anti-Semitism Holocaust Anti-Fascism, published by the Zagreb Jewish Community 1997.

The Forgotten 500, The untold story of the men who risked all for the greatest rescue mission of World War II by Gregory A. Freeman

## INTRODUCTION

Approaching my 80th birthday wakes me to the fact that my life and wanderings – mostly in solitude but covered with divine protection - have been a life of miraculous escapes and of help from others. As such I am prompted to document the sequence of my life in this memoir.

My intention is not only a description of my life as it happened, but also the environment and the economic and political situation that existed in various places around the world during my many travels.

If you will, picture a serious but carefree little boy as he watches his dog being led away. That defining image anchors my thoughts in time. It symbolizes the disappearance of my father, the obvious distress of my mother and the disintegration of our world around us.

I was born in Yugoslavia, in Bosanski-Brod, on November 10th, 1933, at the Mobil Oil refinery where my parents lived and my father was the chief chemist.

Bosanski-Brod was probably one of the first areas of Yugoslavia where the presence of the oil refinery brought wealth to the residents and attracted educated people from various walks of life. Looking back, I believe the engineers largely came from Germany and although there were few Jews in the immediate area, we were made welcome. Never could one have suspected there was a dormant fate factor in Yugoslavia just waiting for the right circumstances to be unleashed.

However I am of the mindset that later events in the concentration camps of Jasenovac could not have been accidental or even sudden but were lying dormant and in wait.

*My Mother in 1927*



Even now, I still recollect that my early life was extremely peaceful and pleasant. I remember going with my father to shop at the local butcher. I remember going to restaurants, to synagogue, and living at the refinery where he worked. I was, at that time, the only child in the refinery, therefore the closest children with whom I played were local gypsy children. (I think this fact explains why I have never been prejudiced. I



accepted and understood people from various walks of life from my earliest beginnings.)

My father was a hard-working, middle-class Jew educated in Vienna, Austria.

As the son of my father, who I know loved me, I loved him but did not necessarily understand him. It has become very difficult for me after the horrors of World War II to understand why he and my mother did not leave as did others in 1938 and 1939. It was well known that things were going to change. My only justification of the horror of it all is that my father was an idealist and believed in the goodness of people and not the horror of some.

My parents, Kalman Pollak and Bertha Schmeidler, met in Vienna in 1931, where they were both studying at the Vienna University. They were married in 1932, and spent their honeymoon in Venice. Then they settled in Bosanski-Brod.

***My Father in 1932 on Honeymoon***



Bosanski-Brod was an industrial town in the center of Yugoslavia. Because my father had to be present at the refinery most of the time, our home was a fairly large apartment in the refinery compound. I remember a gorgeous park and a most magnificent oak tree. That oak tree has remained in my memory as a symbol of nature's grandeur, a place for a little boy to play in, under and around. I can remember these playful times. I remember sunlight, warmth, and the feelings that were present at some blissful young age at the bottom of that oak tree.

I don't remember going to school or being surrounded by other children. I remember that I liked to play outside the refinery with children who were mostly Gypsy children. I was very free in what I was doing and I am sure I was a very inquisitive child. I remember that I had a nanny who took care of me until I was about two or three years old. I remember our black dog. These are the young, uncomplicated remembrances and feelings of those early days

Our home was comfortable; from my childhood memories I recall nice things and have distinct memories of wall clocks and porcelain figurines. Our life epitomized the basic definition of home; warmth, tradition, love, comfort, order, safety and hearth, a normal family. My sister, Gisella Pollak, was born in January, 1937. We were an idealized family in every way; loving parents, a boy, a baby girl, a nice home and a dog.

*My Mother and I*



*Me, at Age Two*



Then one day my father left. He left for work and he never came back. I was seven years old. I remember that my father left us but I did not initially realize that signified the end of my time in this perfect place. With my father's absence, the family no longer had an employee at the refinery and therefore we were not allowed to live in the compound. We had to leave, leave our apartment and all we held dear. The most vivid memory I have is watching my little dog being led away from me. I asked my mother, "Where is he going?" There was no answer.

I know now I was aware that this was a significant event and that I did not understand it. Unfortunately I am not a painter; that moment would be an impressive painting - that little boy seeing his dog being led away.

While we were at the refinery, my parents had developed a close relationship with Mr. and Mrs. Joris, especially Mrs. Joris, who also was from Vienna. Her husband was the chief accountant. I don't remember if they lived at the refinery, but I know she was instrumental in helping us in the horrible transition of leaving our home and finding an apartment in the town of Bosanski-Brod and taking care of us after that terrible time.

As I near my 80th year, it is only the most unusual and significant events that stay in my mind and are vividly imprinted either as memory or as a warning.

Sometime in 1940, around mid-day in that small apartment in Bosanski-Brod, my mother and a local Gypsy woman were sitting at the table. It was a simple wooden table, no longer the gracious appointments of

our home at the refinery. This Gypsy woman had been invited to foretell the future using pinto beans. I was tall enough to see the woman's hands, her movements of the beans, and totally fascinated as I listened to her incredible description of coming events. She said to my mother, "After the war only your children will remain alive. You and your husband will not be around." Those words left a tremendous imprint on me then, and to this day. I don't know why, but the odds of her being 100% right should have been very slim.

I mention this incident because as a child faced with such an ominous statement you can do two things; ignore it or keep it in mind and believe in it. I definitely did not forget it. I lived it.

At that time we did not know, and I did not learn until after the war, that my father had been murdered in the Jasenovac concentration camps.

## **THE WAR**

I am unsure when and why my mother decided to leave the apartment as I was too young to have been involved in any decision-making process. In 1941, we continued our journey and traveled to the Dalmatian coast where Mrs. Joris helped us. I never learned how the local fascists discovered where we were. Mussolini's cronies found us and we were put in the concentration camp on the island of Rab. That was their territory until 1943. We left the camp when Italy capitulated. I don't really remember how we got there. I do remember that we were in big military barracks with bunk beds and people

all over the place but I do not remember very many other children. I steeled myself to being impacted very little by the environment. I recall talking to the camp guards and waiting for the care packages from England and the United States. In 1943, I became sick with malaria. We were still in the camp, which was not good.

Once released from Rab, I had nothing, no future and no earthly goods, no father, only a mother and sister who were in the same predicament as me. So, as is often the way of concentration camp survivors, we develop our own survival mechanisms. Prayer is an important part of it.

We live in despair and die in hope. This statement might be considered extremely harsh and difficult to understand as such existence is not part of a normal human being's experience. Richard Scott Harris penned the saying, "live in hope and die in despair". With hindsight, I recognize that I lived it in reverse. I had seen the despair and could not see the hope. (Millions of people, especially those in the military theaters of the Middle East such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, etc. go through similar experiences when in the war zone.)

I believe that my attitude to it all became a shield for survival because stress kills at every age. I managed to totally and absolutely control my stress even as a child. The moments of fear were obvious to me because I was prepared for them.

Daily living was harsh and I was one of very few children we encountered as we crisscrossed the land from the partisan area to the fascist-controlled area on our journey to reach our final destination of Zagreb.

We lacked food. We traveled by foot and I reached the point of losing my yellow lambskin shoes. Because of the constant mobility of going from place to place during that winter of 1943, I never had the sense that there was any hope of coming to the Promised Land. That really concerned me as my ancestors went through the desert for 40 years to reach theirs. I did not have a Promised Land, only a land that looked to me like the gates of hell.

As I grew up and out of my childhood, Churchill became my hero. At the beginning of the war he said, "I have nothing to offer but blood, sweat and tears." Those words always resonated with me as the contributions of the Allies in Europe eliminated the terrors and turned the war events in favor of humanity and decency.

## **WARNINGS OF EVENTS IN CROATIA 1940-1945**

I have been trying to understand the World War II events in Croatia and the reason so many Jews, including my parents, perished.

I am reminded of the statement in Isaiah 8:17 (TEV): "The Lord has hidden himself from his people but I trust him and place my hope in him".

There is evidence that the Lord had not hidden himself totally from his people; on the contrary, he warned them. The highest bodies of the Yugoslav Jews several times cautioned about the growing danger from anti-Semitism. At the Sixth Congress of the Union of Jewish Communities in 1936, in Belgrade, a special resolution on anti-Semitism was adopted, which said that "*the Congress is conscious of the meaning of increasing anti-*

*Jewish attacks that are being implemented in Yugoslavia without resistance, although they are a fundamental threat to the principle of the quality of religious communities".* This was an early warning four years before the Holocaust.

The second part of the Isaiah prophecy, "but I trust him and place my hope in him", was always accepted and practiced by the Jews.

The problem was "the holocaust - the most Despicable Crime in World History" as known to all of us. Even Isaiah's prophecy could not have predicted it. I believe my parents with the other Jews who trusted in God could not recognize the magnitude of the holocaust, the actual devastating effect.

Among the few to see the truth about the Nazis was Winston Churchill, but even he had difficulty convincing some of his audience at the time.

The lives of Joseph, Jacob and Esau, lead me to go back over my life experiences with a really serious attempt to understand the events of my ancestors. In that period of time there were also travelers moving from place to place, being different and unique from their surroundings. They were also exposed to drastic laws, but had to survive within their environment. I never had dreams like Joseph in which I could see the events described as leading to a solution or fulfillment of an event, but at times I did have lucid feelings of what events could occur within the circumstances surrounding me. The six million Jews who perished during World War II...I could have been one of them. In the harsh war environment it is "live today but you may die



tomorrow". Yet I never believed that I could be one of them. Every day I only knew one thing, and that was that I must survive. The only war scars I have are the nightmares that have hounded me all my life and to this very day, in which I am always lost in a city or woods or a strange place without being able to find a way out. If a psychologist or psychiatrist reads these lines perhaps they might have an answer. I only think that reflection of the daily events that occurred, and how I tried to understand, saved my sanity and provided me with the courage to continue for the next day.

Such an event occurred in the winter of 1943. We were with the partisans going through a mountain forest village where the people had lived in small cottages. They were all murdered by the Nazis the day before because some of them were suspected of blowing up German trains nearby.

I was ten years old and saw the bodies hanging from trees on that gloomy day. This was walking through the village of death.

My reaction then was totally different from the one I had at Jasenovac at the age of 65, but the experience has been as strongly with me. The difference was that Jasenovac had a deep emotional impact because of my father's death, whereas the village of death I saw at age ten remains in my memory similar to the drawings of hell in Dante's *Allegheris Divine Comedy*.

I believe that the Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome suffered by the soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan is real, and makes me reflect or question my sanity in terms of the same things they have seen

and witnessed. But I think I was either lucky or managed to have the strength of conviction and belief that I am untouchable.

## **WHEN THE WAR WAS ALMOST OVER...**

In 1945, before the war ended, when my mother and sister and I lived at a Catholic monastery in Zagreb, the Gestapo arrested my mother. We never heard anything about her again.

## **AFTER THE WAR**

My sister and I were sent to an orphanage in Yugoslavia. She was ultimately given a visa for England and went to live with my grandfather in Manchester.

At that time I was twelve years old and therefore not given a visa for England, but my Uncle Jules' cousin, a Polish officer, escorted me by train to stay with my mother's elder sister Annushka, her husband Henri, and my cousins Moshe and Dan, in Bucharest, Romania.

There I went to a high school specializing in Chemistry. Romania, at that time, was under communist rule, and was only slightly better than Yugoslavia after the war. I don't have the memory of any pleasant experiences except for being with my family for several years. And while in Romania I visited Bulgaria on a school trip. In

1953, I graduated from the high school, after which I left for Israel.

On my 80th birthday I will be in a quandary, subject to an emotional turmoil, celebrating life's reward. My reward is simply enjoying life being surrounded by a loving wife, great friends, and the children born to my friends whom I watched as they grew up, and the children in my community.

All our efforts, hard work and dreams supersede the disappointments and can be summed up by the words, 'joie de vivre', or "love of life".

My concern now becomes, since I live on borrowed time, how much can I do for my fellow man? At my age, most of my close relatives are already dead, and less than half of my good friends still live, but life goes on and hope remains eternal. The eternal hope springs from my belief in God and the care and help given to me by exceptional human beings like Mrs. Joris, Fred Dilzell and others.

If a man's home is his castle, then our home is a living roadmap of artifacts, objects d'art, works of art, quirky art, and ethnic art from 50 plus years of our travels around the world. It truly is a museum, and does give me joy. We have lived in Texas for over 30 years and in the same house since 1981. Mary wonders what we are going to do with this collection of artifacts of 50 years of travel. My argument with her is simple: we keep it as long as the two of us live, and when one of us is gone to eternity he or she can get rid of it, or sell our treasure to people who will enjoy it like we did.

It delights me when a child or adult sees a statue or object of art that pleases them. I am only too happy to give it to them for their enjoyment. I only ask of them to remember my wife and me and preserve this object of art in their possession for future generations. Maybe I am tempting eternity, but I might as well try.

## **1941-1945: HOLOCAUST IN CROATIA AND THE JASENOVAC CAMP**

Both Nazis and local Croat fascists, the Ustasha Movement, were responsible for the genocide of 90% of the Jews who lived in Croatia before 1941. My father and mother were part of the 90% who were murdered. My sister and I became part of the surviving 10% due to the kindness of many individuals, Jews and non-Jews alike, especially Mrs. Denise Joris, my parent's friend and neighbor and a good Catholic woman.

I was told firsthand by people who knew the Jasenovac concentration camp - the camp where my father was murdered - that Auschwitz and Dachau were slightly less "deadly" compared with the Jasenovac group. Jasenovac camps had possibly 1% survivors while Auschwitz had a slightly larger number. It was hell on earth for the prisoners. I confirmed this during my visit to Jasenovac in 1997. As I entered, I remember a distinct feeling that I was walking through a gate into Hell, as though I was not of this world. I lost awareness of my normal surroundings. I was physically cold and I felt as being a corpse. The sky was dark. The place was silent. I was in no hurry to leave the camp but absorbed the evil of it and "lived" the last moments of my father's life. I was there for about one hour.

The following facts have been published about Jasenovac. In 1941 a group of 165 young Jewish men of various professions were arrested in Zagreb. They were all taken to the Danica camp and later to Jasenovac. Only three of them survived.

Jews and many other inmates of Jasenovac were liquidated by the Ustasha, whose leader was Anti Pavelic. The execution of the inmates, Jews and non-Jews, was carried out in various brutal, inhuman ways that were inflicted with great cruelty using firearms, steel, knives and axes, blunt objects, iron bars, pitchforks, hanging, suffocation, hunger, physical exhaustion, hard labor; this in no way completes the list of the immeasurable barbarism. If this is not hell, what is? Today, outside the camp, is a small museum that stands in lasting remembrance of this most heinous and savagely brutal place.

It is said that the last inmates of Jasenovac, those that survived the barbarism, were transported to their final journey on a small gauge railway to the German labor camps.

Strangely, I must be one of the few humans who have seen two distinct "monuments" to World War II: Jasenovac and Hiroshima. My reaction to Jasenovac was a total loss of emotions as if I myself died there. In Hiroshima, at an older age, my grief burst into tears.

Zagreb is fast becoming one of the foremost tourist spots in the world. It has blended reparation construction with the architecture and culture of the old empire and the modern world of food and nightlife. It is but a one-hundred mile journey, a brief trip from this

bustling cosmopolitan city to Jasenovac, the site of inconceivable human atrocities. I would recommend a journey to this place even though it is a journey into Hell. If I had been a film director I would have made a documentary of it. It is very real but not well known.

The sensations and perhaps the vibrations that impacted me when there were very real. They were in no way my imagination, nor did I conjure them up due to anticipation. Perhaps my extreme sensitivity was due to my childhood experiences and that I carry within me a direct link to this place of death. I am positive that the sensations I experienced were real and not manifested intentionally.

I recall that visit, as seen through the lens of an adult survivor, conscious of a direct link to this ground.

My visit was not as an historian, an archeologist nor an incidental tourist. I view myself as a survivor. I have a perception and a direct link to this tragedy that few, but for those very few who survived Jasenovac, can equally understand and can remember. It is my opinion that we have learned very little from those years of depravity.

Deep sadness fills me as I am of the opinion that events from the Balkans of 1941 to the present day have hosted atrocities beyond human understanding. The present day Bosnia and Serbian conflicts are all the evidence we need to see that we have learned little and changed even less. I feel a compulsion to ensure that this is not forgotten; that we were not just a footnote in the history of the Balkans. It is my passionate hope that the European Union can solve some of the Balkan issues.

As an engineer, I am a solution-oriented man. I am compelled to continuously look for the best outcome for the land of my roots. I have tried all my life to understand the events that impacted my family and my own life, without prejudice. At the time, the Yugoslav Croats appeared as a hardworking and honest society. Were they that different from any other specific ethnic group of the time? Yet somehow, there lived among them those who had the power to choose life or death for persons perceived to be different from them. This destruction has continued to rage on, sadly depleting this beautiful land of its humanity, talent, enterprise and simply an opportunity to exist in a normal environment. As in every society, there are the ones who understand right from wrong but choose to exploit and, as power balances swing, they will either be the top dog or powerless. If one looks at the history of my birth country, Yugoslavia, one sees the huge post-1945 emigration. I am one of those who left and never went back to live. I recognize the valuable human capital that was lost to Europe. I include myself in this vast number of émigrés. Sadly, the passing years have brought neither peace nor understanding to the ethnic groups who should simply live as neighbors and fellow humans. As we speak today, the strife continues and the region is still in need of more human understanding and compassion. Perhaps it will take one hundred years.

## **WITNESSING CHANGE**

Starting with my place of birth, Bosanski-Brod, what happened was a social change in 1940 from a peaceful country to this tremendously uncomfortable way of living from 1940-1945 up until the end of the war. I cannot possibly ignore the 80 years of events to which I

have been witness without mentioning my personal opinion, which may or not be accepted.

The whole country was divided into Chesnicks supporting the royalty in Serbia and those who supported Tito whose forces came to be known as Partisans. For the rest of us, we had no place and were condemned to certain death: Jews, Gypsies, and any other ethnic group. Archduke Ferdinand's assassination, the tinder that sparked the First World War, could have been an indication of the events that were to come within the next twenty-five years.

Through the '40s, '50s and '60s, the majority of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians had an absolute belief that things would not improve. I am mindful of the help from the Americans, the British, and the Australians who enabled the emigration of selective individuals. The genocide of Muslims and other ethnic groups in Bosnia, Slovenia and Serbia have shown that the evil in humans transcends nationalities and it continues from generation to generation. It is my firm belief that the only way to stop this madness, and it is madness to destroy one another, is by creating prosperity. And we have seen from history that change takes time.

Prosperity through education and slowly evolving democracy take longer. As is evident around the world, not only in the Balkans, this will take years and years. It took the Jews forty years in the desert to change from slaves to free people. Forty years for the Soviet Union to transition from a dictatorship into a slowly evolving democracy. In the Middle East and Africa the atrocities are of the highest order, the genocide of millions continues.



It is important to recognize that the respective governments and administrations of these regions play decisive roles in preserving the social order; for example, Yugoslavia under Tito and some African countries under "colonial" rule.

In all my 80 years of witnessing these events, I believe the greatest sliver of hope occurred on July 3rd, 2013, with the second revolution in Egypt. The masses made an historic decision to remove a man who represented a closed society of individuals who wanted to impose their rule on the multitudes. It is my hope that by 2040, one hundred years after the upheaval of WWII, the Middle East and Africa as well as the Western world will reach their season of peace. Long may it last.

## **FAMILY - MY SISTER**

As I said earlier, after the war and after the orphanage, my sister, Gisella, went to live with our grandfather in Manchester, England. She eventually attended the University of Leeds, studying languages and art. She became a teacher (and later worked on the set of Harry Potter tutoring the child actors while on location.)

Gisella married Dr. Philip Goodwin more than 50 years ago. They have three daughters: Belinda; a lawyer in Manchester; Stephanie, a doctor in Harley Street, London; and Sharon, a dentist who lives and works in England and Florida. Currently, none of them have children.

## *My sister, Gizella, and I*



### **MY GRANDFATHER**

Samuel Schmeidler, my maternal grandfather, was born at the end of the 19th century in Krakow, Poland, where his father was a baker. He was a self-educated man who studied chemistry while working in the salt mines of Auschwitz in the early 20th century. After finishing his studies he left for Romania to work at the American Oil Refinery in Ploesti as a chemist and became the general manager. He worked directly for John D. Rockefeller, founder of Standard Oil in the 1920's, and in the late

1930's he became the commercial manager of Standard Oil in Romania. Standard Oil, in the 1920's, became one of the three major producers of petroleum fuels with Baku in Russia and in the United States. I find it interesting that my grandfather came to Baytown, Texas, in the early 1900's and brought with him the first sample of diesel fuel produced in Europe to be tested. By coincidence, sixty years later, my wife Mary and I live just a few miles from Baytown, Texas. I too have worked in the development, building and start-up of facilities in that powerhouse region of the Texas Oil and Gas industry.

*My Grandmother Schmeidler*





### *Grandfather Schmeidler and I*

Grandfather Schmeidler, by his love of learning and reverence for education, gifted me with the opportunity for a lifetime of success and achievement by giving me a university education. Not only did he pay for my schooling but he also took care of me while I grew up and while I attempted to reclaim a semblance of a life. He paid for my education and took care of me financially for at least ten years while I was at school. I understood simply that this was the way families interact. I believe I have honored his gift and that my achievement on this earth is a justification of his generosity and more, especially of my survival from those years of destruction.

My mother, Bertha Schmeidler, was the second of his family of three daughters and one son. During my early childhood, until I was about seven years old, we would travel by train to Bucharest to visit his home but my most significant memories of him are after I joined the military in Israel. He visited me in Israel and it was there I felt the full impact of his personality - this was between the years of 1954 and 1958. And while at the University of Birmingham in England, I lived in Lancashire and he lived about 50 miles away in Manchester. Most weekends I would make the trip to his house and we religiously, in the strictest sense of the word, attended synagogue. This too was a part of my schooling. From 9:30 a.m. to about 12:00 noon on Saturdays we would be in synagogue and then we would spend hours talking about various aspects of life. He was very strict in his views. I respected them and never questioned them. Our conversations were on the importance of living an honest and hardworking life.

We both had seen so much and suffered incalculable human devastation. My relationship with him was never confrontational. I listened and I tried to understand the issues we discussed. Two of the most valuable things my grandfather left me were his genes and his life philosophy. I am convinced that it is very important for families to understand their genetic inheritance and fulfill their educational inheritance potential. Once I immigrated to America in 1966, I made a point of seeing him as frequently as possible. We spoke German while I was a child and English later in life.

In January, 1968, before leaving for India from New York and taking on a new assignment, I stopped to visit my Grandfather in Manchester where he and his wife

were living. I remember distinctly - we sat on a sofa where he told me this would be the last time I would see him alive. I told him I hoped it was not true. Obviously I left with a heavy heart. My grandfather died nine months later of cancer while on a trip to Austria. He was 84 years old.

## **THE STORY OF GRANDFATHER SCHMEIDLER DISTILLING DIESEL FUEL**

It is noteworthy that I am the third generation to work in and around refineries. I do see this as part of my genetic inheritance. This story of Grandfather Schmeidler's distillation of diesel is important to me and has come to symbolize my grandfather's creativity, scientific ability, and determination to succeed in any given project or problem at hand.

Grandfather Schmeidler distilled diesel fuel at a time when there was little or no data available. To this day I revere and applaud his achievement.

In Ploesti, where Grandfather Schmeidler lived, there was a small creek along part of his walking path. Over time, he made an enormous intellectual leap and recognized how the small stones in the creek bed acted to separate floating and suspended components from one another within the running water stream. He applied this reasoning to his task of separating components from within the crude petroleum oil. He selected small stones from the materials around him and put them in a cylindrical vessel using the process of distillation. That process caused the vapors of the heated oil to differentially pass over the increased surface area created by the stones, and therefore pull apart. Thus, he

separated out the petroleum fraction we have come to know as diesel. A rational, logical, calm, considered process of scientific reasoning. That reasoned process of thinking has stuck with me all of my life and I followed that whenever I did something unusual and challenging.

In 1953, after graduation from Romanian High School I immigrated to Israel where I lived for the next three years or so in order to satisfy my grandfather's wish for me to do military service in Israel. While there I had to decide whether to stay in Israel, go to study in England, or go to the United States of America. Grandfather told me he would either buy a truck so I could make a living hauling cargo or he would pay for my education. It is noteworthy that at this juncture of my life I had choices, a concept that for many years had been denied. I decided that on completion of my military service, I would go from Israel to England, complete the English grammar and high school diplomas, and then gain entrance to study Chemical Engineering. These steps I completed. I graduated in June of 1962 with a Bachelor degree in Chemical Engineering from the University of Birmingham, England. At the time of my graduation the Chancellor of the University was Sir Anthony Eden, Churchill's Foreign Secretary, who presented me with my degree.

## **ENGLAND**

My stay in England was from 1958 to 1966. Studying at the Community College in Burnley, Lancashire, an industrial town, I stayed with my Aunty Dolly and Uncle Jules and two cousins, Helen and Josephine, who

are now both married with grown children. Helen has a son and daughter, and Josephine has three sons.

### *Aunty Dolly and Uncle Jules*



Some weekends I would stay with grandfather and his second wife, Fan.

My Uncle Jules' brother, Dolek Likierman, married to Olga, had two sons, Michael and Andrew. Both were educated at Oxford University in the 1960's.

Michael, the older son, became a very successful businessman in both England and France. Andrew started in the U.K. Government's Accounting Office after graduation and now, in 2013, he is the Dean of the London School of Business and was knighted to become Professor Sir Andrew Likierman. Mary and I asked Andrew to be our best man at our wedding in 1970.



Dolek, when he retired, dealt in stamps as a hobby. I learned from him a man should continue doing something after retirement, so I am collecting and dealing in antiques.

I finished my studies at Birmingham University and then, my first job at Esso R&D at Abingdon, near Oxford. During this time I also enjoyed singing as a tenor in the Oxford University Operatic Society in their performance of *Rusland and Ludmila* by Glinka. I enjoyed the everyday life of a world-class university town with its colleges, libraries and the Ashmolean Museum, the home of a Stradivarius violin never played, among other treasures. I hope readers of this book will have the opportunity to visit and stay in Oxford, if only for a weekend.

My travels around England were enjoyable: Oxford and Oxfordshire, London, Lake District, Lancashire, and Yorkshire. A few of my Birmingham university friends I miss to this day and they are Roger Cox, John Edgley and Barry and Liz Lynam.

Barry and Liz graduated from Birmingham University in 1961, married immediately afterward, and later traveled the world like Mary and me. Barry worked with me at ARCO Chemical and in Beaver Valley. We met frequently and often had the pleasure of seeing their four daughters as they grew up and Barry always had amusing stories to tell about them. Liz was an excellent wife following Barry wherever he went and making a home for the family. Unfortunately, Barry died several years ago and we all miss him.

I pause and reflect on the last few years as I get older, but not necessarily wiser. I am at the age where I am looking for solutions and a pattern of my life's journey. As it happens I am very serious about studying and reading the Old Testament, the five books of Moses, and books on prophets, and I do that from book one to book five every several years at a slow pace with sufficient care and understanding. Really a reference for my life, as an underpinning for my soul.

## **MY JOURNEY OF LIFE AS AN ENGINEER**

On graduation I was hired by Esso Research in Abingdon, England, where I worked for three years.

But the harsh climate of the country took a toll on me. And my past life in Europe, Israel, and England of 33 years, made me long to go to the United States. I knew of its achievements and opportunities and had been fascinated with that land since my childhood.

Then, in 1966, I saw a job advertised in a London newspaper. I was interviewed by Manfred Gans - and was hired. Not just any job, but a job in New York. This meant I could immigrate to the U.S.A.!

I worked in New York for an American company, Halcon-Scientific Design at 2 Park Avenue, New York, from 1966 through 1979. In 1979, the company was taken over by Atlantic Richfield (ARCO Chemical) and I continued to work for them as an engineer until 1985. Retirement at 53 came too early for me, but I was given an excellent retirement package with excellent insurance

benefits, and little did I know then how important it would become in later life.

Mary and I moved from New York to Houston, Texas, in 1975 for a temporary six-month assignment and we are still here! I have been a consultant in various engineering fields throughout the passing years since my retirement.

I do know that over my career of 50 years in engineering, I automatically gravitated toward challenging engineering projects that others would not undertake. Management's attitude was always, "Give it to Alex. He will always take a challenge and most probably succeed".

My background and experiences during my youth prepared me to face life's challenges with a clear mind and with hope rather than with concern. I believe to this day that I was unlikely to sink and drown from the challenges of my profession or from life itself. This statement and attitude is extremely bold, or even insane, but it worked for me. At the age of 76, I took on a new challenge; to study, research, and review the cultivation and harvesting of microalgae and its processing.

This effort was made by me and a small group of visionaries. Together we presented our proposal to a group of investors in August, 2013; let's see whether or not they will accept a very challenging project.

## **MY LOVELY WIFE**

Living in Oxford, England, required a daily commute by company bus to my job with Esso Research. Standing

outside at the bus stop in front of King's College I met my wife. How was I to know that on that day my life would forever change? That a bus ride to work would yield a treasure that no chemistry, no weights and measures, no scientific process could ever have predicted, and would lead to such fantastic outcome? I was alive and living. Work in itself was a blessing, and as it turned out, so too would that bus ride be. I might not go so far as to use the vernacular of today and say that I was set-up, but, how was I to know that the friends of Doris Mary Hicks would take such great pains to enlighten me as to her virtues? She definitely had help from our colleague, Marian Godwin, and her sister, Betty! On this particular day, I sat next to her on the bus. How could I not notice this attractive, pleasant, single lady with magnetic blue eyes? A single man, newly graduated from Birmingham University, surrounded by a group of pretty women on a daily bus ride; I was putty in their hands.

I traveled extensively for my job, so our courtship became a long-distance and protracted relationship, punctuated by great gaps. Time and distance in those days were very real concepts: no such thing as a virtual relationship, nor the convenience of a quick chat on Skype, nor the ease of email. We corresponded by mail, had some few phone calls, and on the rare occasions I returned to England, we were able to see each other.

After an extended courtship we were married in December of 1970. Our marriage ceremony was held in the famed Caxton Hall in London where people like Liz Taylor and Richard Burton had celebrated one of their marriages. Caxton Hall is a place included in the myths and legends of famous English knights. Sadly, the city

of London has demolished Caxton Hall. As I approach my eightieth birthday, we will have been married for 43 years.

### *Our Wedding Day*



Mary has been my companion in every aspect. This remarkable woman simply saw what needed to be done, did it, and more. From the second day of our marriage, she took care of our finances. I like to think that not

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only did I marry a pretty woman, but a pretty smart woman, too. Our journeys together have been fulfilling. We have shared our lives, and she has not only been my helpmate, but she has brought joy and love into my life. What roads we have traveled together through so many countries and cultures; a lifetime of companionship, and memories and laughter. I could not have asked for better. We have operated as a team and I am so grateful for her superb organizational and administrative skills. They have been one of the pillars of our success. She has also reached out and been a force of change in the lives of many whom we met along our travels. Mary speaks English, of course, and some Spanish. She worked in a secretarial and administrative capacity for Esso Research, CERN in Geneva, FAO in Rome, and in Houston for Tenneco Oil and Exxon-Mobil. We were fortunate to have her work on one of our projects in Spain. Mary still actively pursues working in her field. She loves the interaction and pace of working within a busy and dynamic environment, and she misses working with people. I am sure that sometimes Preston, our pet turtle, and I are not exactly great company for her.

While I was working at the RECOPE Refinery for RECOPE Corporation in the City of Moin near Limon, Costa Rica, Mary and I financed and built a school for the local children. That region of Costa Rica has been continuously inhabited for over 5,000 years. I find the country and the people fascinating so how better to recognize this civilization than with the gift of education. Mary's compassion and zeal, coupled with her logistical and organizational skills, culminated in a fantastic project which will continue to uplift and enrich the lives of each and every child who has the opportunity to attend this school. Not only did she bring

this wonderful project to fruition but she also ensured that each child attending received a gift, notwithstanding the gift of a future. We packed suitcases of T-shirts, slacks, shorts, backpacks and Wellington boots which they needed to keep their feet dry trudging through the mountainous terrain.

### ***Children in Costa Rica Trying on Their New Clothes***



As the pages of my childhood were colored with immeasurable loss and devastation in circumstances no child should ever experience, it is balm to my soul to be able to give hope to these children (about 40 of them). Hope was one of the key ingredients missing during those dark years of mine.

As Mary and I did not have children, I see this as a philanthropic investment in humanity. By giving

education, one gives hope, hope for a better life and hope for a better understanding of our world. So too is it our wish, both Mary's and mine, that all of those who are able to benefit from this gift of education will reach their potential. Having lived my life in so many different cultures, I am acutely aware that these kinds of deeds are needed; the need to make a difference in the lives of others, as was done for our family. I have been blessed with life, good health and a happy marriage. I believe that the good you do lives on after you and sustains you during your lifetime. The motivation and realization of the project was my duty to my eternal soul. Those children were in very similar circumstances as mine at their age.

## **MY MOTHER-IN-LAW**

The first time I met Mrs. Hicks was in 1963, at her family home in Hook Norton, Oxfordshire. I have fond memories of her. She was a great lady and I remember her visits to us in Cranford and Houston. She came to Spain and we also went to Portugal where she enjoyed the four and five star Michelin Restaurants. She died at the age of 101 and my most memorable moments with her were on our wedding day when at the end of the ceremony she kissed me with enthusiasm as if telling me, "Well done, Alex, you finally took her off my hands"!

But before our wedding, I told Mary I must visit her mother to ensure that Mary will be as good looking at age 70 as Mrs. Hicks was then.

Another vivid memory of my mother-in-law was when we visited in Hook Norton in Oxfordshire for tea and



she ate mushrooms on toast. I was always on a diet, but Mrs. Hicks' diet seemed challenging. I tried it, but abandoned it for chopped liver and bagels.

***My Mother-in-Law, Doris Elizabeth Hicks, and Me***



Mary's extensive family includes her sister Joan, a widow with a daughter and son, who lost her youngest daughter to cancer last year; her sister Betty and her husband Bob and their three sons; and her brother David and wife, Joy, in England; as well as a younger sister, Lynne, married to Max. Lynne has a son and daughter, and has lived in Pennsylvania since 1966.

**REFLECTIONS - SOLITUDE WHAT IT MEANT TO ME**

In my case, solitude was nurtured, first by losing my immediate family, and then by the normal experience of

growing up. Then by traveling extensively with frequent challenges in my work.

Solitude provided me with a shield of isolation from the surrounding world I lived in during my childhood and the war.

I now call it a shield because I realize the mental isolation and the physical impact of local surroundings can preserve a human being by keeping one alert, alone and fast. I call it instinct of survival. Even my time in the military police in Israel was particularly lonely, especially while on duty as a policeman.

I especially remember one time when I was assigned to escort trucks carrying tanks as they traveled to the Gaza Strip. We arrived at midnight and I asked the commander when I should return to the base in Israel. He told me, you have two options: go back now and risk encountering the freshly laid mines placed by the Arabs, or stay with us for an undetermined time. Since I had only two months left in my military service, and it was a beautiful clear night with a full moon and good visibility of the tire tracks left by the heavy equipment, I decided to follow the tracks back.

It was the ride of a lifetime! My ancestors who left Egypt did not have to face mined roads. On the contrary, Moses took care of them and they always had the divine cloud guarding them to the Promised Land. I had to return to the Promised Land under totally different circumstances. It could have been a question of life or death. (This is why someone named me "Lucky Luciana" when I once recounted the story.)

That trip made me again realize how I was a functionary of isolation. I interfaced with people and events in a way totally different from that of a normal soldier.

My engineering career has spanned 55 years working in new technologies across various endeavors. I have had the good fortune to be surrounded by people with excellent educations and intellectual capacity. The ones I most admired were also solitary individuals, highly focused without being frivolous, and individuals with little time to waste. Ultimately I think solitude can be both a blessing and a curse. But now, almost at the age of 80, I have to be honest with myself and acknowledge that the price I paid for my solitude in my youth provided me with a shield of endurance and perseverance. I raised that shield and used it as a barrier to cloak myself in that solitude with no need for interaction with fellow human beings with respect to frivolous things. I suspect that this solitude or self-imposed loneliness became a habit and a *modus operandi*. I am sure it has created a certain amount of distress, especially for my wife. But this mental state buffered me, and provided me with a way of life that fitted my work and travels. *Tristesse*, the French word for sadness, might better be likened to my type of solitude. One might say that solitude has an unseen reward of achievement by reason that you don't listen to other people's advice or comments. In your life of solitude, you are prepared to make your own decisions based on your own success or failure.

## **LOOKING AT EVENTS SINCE 1940**

I try to imagine if I might compare my travels and the events surrounding me as having an impact similar to

the travels of Marco Polo on his trip to China. My travels may be similar to his with unknown destinations, but they brought me from the peace of a normal civilized town and threw me into a sea of disasters, surrounded by death, and having a total and absolute lack of hope of surviving any of it. Within the human spirit lies an indomitable will to survive; I suspect I also had dumb luck and divine intervention combined with purpose. I don't know. I still question and try to understand my physical survival, and at the coming age of 80, I still have not really found an answer to that one. I am alive and am enjoying life to the fullest. As I evaluate my lifetime of professional achievements, and consider my professional contributions in my field, how can I not see purpose in my life? However, how does one reconcile the magnitude of the previous events of my childhood? My mental and emotional stability has withstood the lonely passing of time. The saying "to every cloud there is a silver lining" or "to every tragedy there could be a happy ending" may apply here. Some of us have the experience of climbing our own Mt. Everest and getting to the top of it, but instead of a sunny day with a beautiful vista, there is snow and no view. You come down hoping you can go back. For some of us at some time in our lives, this could have been the truth. In my case the thing became much more complicated, but nobody, including me I hate to say, comes out of such a journey unscratched. Quirks and preferences we all have. My penchant is for collecting beautiful things, to be surrounded by collectibles, works of art and cultural icons of many origins. The acquisition of things I deem beautiful, interesting, or remarkable is also an activity that Mary and I share. We maintain a dedicated passion to the buying and selling of antiques. However, my dear wife reminds me that we

keep more than we sell. In these later years I can only view it as a deep psychological reaction to the emptiness and loneliness of my childhood with no need to start again.

I believe I spring from a people having a very resilient gene pool: hardworking European Middle Class Jewish people descended from the Ashkenazi. My only physical problem seems to have been the development of diabetes in my 50's. Thanks to the Blessing of the Lord, excellent doctors in Houston, and good insulin, I have survived and live a good life.

Throughout my life I have never forgotten the quest for excellence. History however has left its mark on me as my trials have made me perceptive to the suffering and hurts of other people. I possess an innate and intuitive understanding for those who were in similar or worse situations than me. With this awareness comes the desire to help other people.

One such person was Bernard Herschel, a member of my synagogue in Houston, a survivor of Dachau and Auschwitz. We did not wear our survivorship on our sleeves. We did not talk about the happenings or ordeals of that time. He may well have had a tattooed number on his arm but this was not something he put out for general observation. He too had had a life of survival. We prayed together and talked briefly. His wife sat behind him and would not allow any talk of war; neither did she let us speak at length. What I did get from our time together was that we don't talk about the camps or the pain. We carry the banner of being a normal person but deep down there is a story that has not been told. He

looked normal to all intents and purposes but I knew exactly who he was.

Witnessing the before-and-after Stalin changes in Russia, understanding the heroism it took to oppose the Nazi's invading forces, I came to realize that these, too, were a people made of stern stuff. There are parents and grandparents within Russia who also know what true terror is. I knew that the Russia as visualized and organized by Stalin and his cronies would not last forever.

Today as we see terrorists in Russia, and England, and throughout the world, it is my wish that we recognize that this is only temporary. Today, in 2013, as the world is witness to car bombs, suicide bombers, gassing of civilians, terrorists shooting in the malls (Kenya) that include women and children, it gives me great sadness. But this is temporary.

With the support and blessing of my Grandfather Samuel, I served in the Israeli Army. My trip to Israel was by boat: a pretty rusty old tank and certainly not a cruise ship. The passage was uneventful other than it might have been characterized as a surrealistic, floating Tower of Babel. A ship filled with a myriad of accents, dialects, all fleeing, but united by the fact that we were all Jews, European Jews coming to Eretz Israel. The staggering difference here was that we would be a nation that would be constructed and united under the Star of David. This transport of Jews was not forced and it was not a cattle car but a ship, one of many that disgorged the nation builders of Israel upon docking. As a ship berths in a port, so too did this ship give birth to those coming to a baby nation to create new lives. What a

sense of anticipation fueled that arrival into the Port of Haifa.

Sadly, I deduced from my duty tour in the Israeli Army Military Police on border patrol, most of the events of the near future were not going to be good. It would not have taken a psychic, or a woman shifting pinto beans around the table, to see that the development and growth of the newly minted state of Israel would not have an unfettered road to international recognition and peace. During my brief sojourn in Israel there was a period of peace, or in news-speak, subdued violence. It was temporary, as we see today. Still there were, until recently, daily missile attacks, border incursions, and the populations on both sides of the border living in fear despite the walls that separate them.

### *In the Israeli Military*



After completion of my two and a half years military service, I left Israel, but not for want of a connection nor for a lack of like or love of Israel. I had fulfilled my obligation, had served my time and needed to get on with my education and reclaim my life. I was proud to have served the new homeland for those like me who were battered and displaced. However, I knew I would never return to live in Israel. I have come to believe that this period of military service gave me a renewed sense of belonging and gave some measure of healing after my tumultuous childhood. As I had volunteered to serve in the Israeli military, it too served me.

This incredible experience may well have strengthened my isolation but what it also did was bolster my sense of purpose and a renewed sense of hope, a personal conviction. Serving with a polyglot of people, all backgrounds, so many different origins and mother tongues - we were all here to serve Israel. Our raw pain was assuaged by military discipline from which came camaraderie; this I was able to experience albeit superficially. Trust in my fellow man was not something I gave injudiciously. I found it noteworthy that I was serving in places described within the Torah in the obvious historical context of serving Israel. I knew I was part of history again but this time I was a volunteer and not a victim or a hostage. The Israeli Military gave me an incredible experience, including meeting Moshe Dayan.

To this day I have not returned to Israel. My only excuse is that I want to remember Israel as I knew it then, as a young man helping form a new destiny for my



fellow extended-family members during those amazing early days of the foundation of the State of Israel.

Lessons I learned then have not been forgotten. The peace we brought to that region was fragile and possibly unattainable even in that time. Nothing has changed. We have CNN, Al Jazeera, BBCTV and all manner of electronic media who daily confirm that peace in the Middle East is hanging in the balance, and needs continuous negotiations in order to just maintain the status quo.

Due to the tribulations that influenced me in early life, I have felt it necessary, not to be secretive, but at the same time not to discuss or describe many of these events until I had written these memoirs. Many of the people I have met along the way have considered me an enigma or a strange man. This memoir is an attempt to change this impression by facts.

Of the 100 people or so with whom I have worked and associated on a more permanent basis, I have reached the conclusion that I had the most success with those men and women who understood me without needing an explanation of the events contained in this memoir. This may seem strange; however, as an octogenarian I am entitled to some philosophical meandering. I always was interested in and admired individuals who were different from their contemporaries. I find the story of Van Gogh to be a perfect example. (I love his paintings and have a collection of copies of his work.)

## FEAR AND HOPE

As I progressed through adolescence to maturity, I understood the combination of fear and hope, and this I believe ultimately shaped much of my mental and professional development. Never did my studies, which were difficult because of the language barrier, never did they concern me or create in me any doubt or fear. I am able to adopt this incredibly neutral position of disregarding hope as a life reward. I know that the need is to move forward, do what is necessary, and eventually succeed.

Another facet or aspect of my personality strange and unusual; I never in my life had any obvious enemies. Because, if I accepted enemies as a threat, it would create a continuous fear. I would have never survived. On the contrary, because of my isolation and loneliness, I accepted the other human being's respect for me and consideration for me as a human being creating lasting friendships.

I never accept gifts or anything from anybody; it would make me vulnerable. But I am extremely aware and deeply impressed and pleased when a child smiles at me, brings me something, or a young woman, or any woman for that matter, smiles at me in passing without knowing me.

One of the possible questions as to my statements is; have I really walked through the valley of death? Did I repeat that experience when a bit older in Israel? The answer is YES. What that journey does to one's personality and view of life is that just as you eliminate hope from your life, you don't believe in death as such -

until you are faced with it. Again, I always embraced philosophically the potential dangers to my life. I wanted them to happen because I still love life and human beings with all their unusual ways to live.

On further reflection of the concept of fear and my unusual disregard of death: this brings me to the point of always searching and looking for unusual things, activities that are out of the norm and are exciting. This is so in two areas for me: both in engineering and science, and in antiques and collectibles.

Finally, as a reflection of my environment, the fact that we're in the most exciting country in the world (USA) makes a huge difference to my survival mode, and reason.

## **MY CLOSEST FRIENDS AND ASSOCIATES**

I wish to present the friends and associates (other than those I've already mentioned) who impacted my life to my benefit, and excitement.

As I stated, I did not have enemies. We shall talk about friends. Truth be known, I have always had difficulty in making friends. That's probably due to my background and my journey. Not because of an inherent mistrust but because I continued to use my shield as a survival mechanism against all odds. Making good friends was also complicated by the fact that I traveled frequently and stayed for short periods of time in each location.

My oldest friends who had the greatest impact on me:

Many men and women really tried and exerted great effort to understand and help me get past my strange protective shield. Looking back at my past, the longest friendships started at Birmingham University in the school of chemical engineering. In 1958, I lived in the college dorm called the Manor House on the outskirts of Birmingham, England. Manor House was located about ten miles from the University Campus at Edgebaston. My neighbor was John Edgley, also a chemical engineering student. He was a typical, British-educated man with whom I exchanged ideas and technical engineering issues. He was one year ahead of me. I felt that John offered me an example of what one should be and how one should act when you are living in a red brick English university. Living in a forest with a bunch of partisans, and then as a military policeman in Israel, was not exactly a training ground for social graces.



### *My MGA and Me*

Without going into details, I did meet lovely and intelligent English girls who were companions, but I left them under no illusion that I was about to make long-term promises. I was upfront and honest about that. I

was not looking to settle down. They were part of my life and I enjoyed their company. Two women stand out: Margaret Ward, who had two teenage daughters; and Hazel Nichols, who had already graduated and was taking a Masters Degree.

As I said earlier, I knew by 1965 that I should continue my career in the United States of America. I also knew this was a big decision. The autumn of that year, I was interviewed by Manfred Gans of Halcon-Scientific Design, who had a great impact on my life.

He had studied in Manchester after the war and he recruited the British-trained engineers for special projects. As I indicated, I had shied away from people all my life but I liked Manfred immediately as he had experienced a similar fate as I during the war.

He was impressed enough to give me a good job in New York. After being considered for best fit among the assorted projects, I was offered the job and left England for America in 1966. I landed at 2 Park Avenue. I can tell you that an address on Park Avenue was the stuff of which dreams were made. Seventy percent of the engineers at Halcon-SD were of Jewish background. They came from the best possible American universities and a couple were educated in Great Britain like me. Manfred Gans introduced me to the key people. I don't know what he told them about me; it must have been good because I was immediately marked as either a wild or bloody good engineer.

My first position had too much deskwork which I did not like. I told Manfred I wanted out of the office, that I wanted to be in the field.

It was at this point that my first incredible opportunity occurred. There was a polypropylene oxide and styrene monomer project about to start in Spain. Manfred asked, "Was I interested? What did I think of it?" Within in days I replied - Yes!

Quite honestly I accepted in a moment of infinite madness and without too much proof of the project's potential success. In my defense, my mentor, Kaplan, believed that the process possibilities were greater than ever before. Also the technology was offered to companies such as Dow, Exxon, who declined to build a plant without a proof of concept. For me it then became not just a question of "could it be done" but "could it be built within budget".

When asked if it could be built for 25 million dollars I looked at the back of the envelope with calculations written by the CEO of Halcon-Scientific Design, Dr. Landau, and a member of the Manhattan Project team. I said yes. My colleagues were convinced that I was insane. My analysis was totally unorthodox. Good education, five years engineering experience, and more than 30 years of life experience had prepared me for that moment of fast decision. I had limited fear with cautious disregard for potential obstacles, and went for a challenge that must be met.

During my work at Halcon-SD, I met a highly qualified American Engineer, Morris Gelb, a few years younger

than me, but an engineer who had progressed rapidly up the company ladder becoming the COO (Chief Operating Officer) of Lyondell Petrochemical that purchased our company, Halcon-SD in the 1980's.

During this time I also met Scott Greene and we worked on several jobs in the United States, and he is my only long-term friend. Since 1966, he has always enquired about me. Both he and his family have become our good friends. Scott was always my boss but I was lucky that our relationship was not that of a boss and subordinate. I never did ask him why he believed in me but I do know that I delivered projects that he managed.

I met Rudy Pegoraro while working at Halcon-SD - his parents came from Croatia. He was a few years younger than me but he was a far more brilliant engineer than I. He graduated from the University of Columbia in New York with a score of 98%. He had a similar psychological approach to life and a similar personality make-up as I did at the time. I deeply admired him for his skill and talent. He was a loner like me. I appreciated his skill and eye for photography. His scenes taken when we worked together in Spain on the Montoro project were memorable. He was in Beijing, China, in the 1970's, where he single handedly designed and engineered the building of an ethylene oxide plant. He would call me frequently on the phone from China just to talk and I understood his loneliness, like mine. We were similar. You can produce great things, achieve success where others would probably have difficulty, or fail, but you must have the stamina to manage loneliness, self-discipline and focus. Rudy and his lovely wife Carol, who was a buyer for Bloomingdales in New York, made their home in New Jersey near

Princeton. They raised two sons, Robert and John: a lovely family. Rudy finally retired in the 1990's. He retired on Friday and on Saturday morning went to his front porch, picked up the daily newspaper - and died of a massive heart attack on the doorstep of his house. I was absolutely devastated at this event. And it made me realize that death and mortality are out of our control.

After Mary and I arrived in Houston in 1975, we became friends with Howard and Helene Gerscht and their two children, Michael and Alison. We were always invited to their family celebrations, and we shared a few Passover dinners at our home.

My latest friend, whom I met in 2011, is Samuel L. Shepherd, an American chemical engineer from Ohio; a brilliant engineer, an expert on microalgae and other fields of human endeavor including religion. I call him "The Dreamer" and now, after nearly three years of close collaboration and friendship, I am still trying to bring myself to the understanding of his personality and brilliance.

Denise Joris holds a special place in my heart and thoughts. As mentioned earlier, I have read the Five Books of Moses in the Old Testament religiously since I was about 20 years old to this very day; at least some few paragraphs a day and a chapter or two a week. The reason is simple. It is an excellent document. When one considers the good and evil the human race has gone through, it is hard to find a better description. I cannot get out of my mind the story of Abraham asking the Lord, "how many good people living there would save Sodom and Gomorra?" and that small number not being found at that time, the city was destroyed. During



Denise Joris' lifetime, until she died, both Mary and I corresponded with her. I can never forget what she did for my mother, my sister and me. At great risk to herself and her family, Mrs. Joris took care of my family during the war. The reasons for the happenings and changes in the socio-economic structure of Croatia in 1940 are not an enigma and there are explanations. My only comfort was, and still is, that our world is fortunate enough to have human beings like Mrs. Joris. There may be only a few with extreme power to sustain our hope in the future and shield us from certain death.



***Mr. and Mrs. Joris***

I am aware of her presence and her sacrifice to save our lives. I have an awareness that is manifested by the deeds I try to implement in her memory. I find this both obligatory and necessary. When seeing children, people struggling with hard times, or schools in need of help, I cannot stand by idly. I need make no explanation. I know well that she would have done the same. One who may think or assume that I do good things as a way to buy a piece of heaven in the next life:

I do not. I am only repaying the debt to her so others may benefit from her deed of saving our lives. This is on a personal scale. Charitable obligations as an individual are different, and perhaps weighted on a far grander life scale. My debt to her cannot be tallied. My sister and I have inscribed her name in Jerusalem in the non-Jewish Memorial for those who saved Jews during the war.

Here I must mention a Jewish lady, Adella Kay, who was my landlady in New York. I rented a room in her apartment on Broadway and 81st Street on the West Side of Manhattan and we became friends. She was of Russian origin, had traveled extensively, lived in Shanghai, China, and spent the World War II years in London.

I inherited my grandfather and parent's genes and I got an excellent education in England and a superb job in the United States of America. I became a valuable team member as a principal engineer in developing new technologies, new plants in places they were needed, starting with Spain, then in India, the USA, Costa Rica and Central America.

I may be accused of being self-centered, abrasive and inconsiderate among other human attributes. From my point of view, by building a plant and giving hundreds of people jobs that sustain the lives of hundreds of children, I see my enterprise as an incredible gift and a valuable contribution to my fellow beings. Therefore, in the pursuit of excellence and with the outcome of my work, I hope my failings and my personality profile may well be forgivable. As I get older I realize that in some strange way, building plants around the world probably

was and is my mission. Not only did the presence of a chemical plant and the operating nature of the enterprise make a difference for my company, but it provided the opportunity to change the trajectory of lives and significantly enhance economic opportunities in those regions. I lived in La Mancha, Spain, and I know about Don Quixote de La Mancha. Had things turned out differently, I could have been remembered as he is, due to my passion of embracing not impossible dreams but risky challenges. I prefer to see my legacy positively rather than tilting at imaginary structures. I do not try to say I was an exceptional engineer, but a different reasoning motivated me. My achievements would never have been possible without the team members with whom I was involved.

Most of my life, I felt that the trials of my early childhood did influence me. I did not feel the need to be secretive, but I chose not to discuss or describe the time that no child should ever experience. Perhaps this is the reason for my strangeness. I am hoping that by opening up in this memoir, I can possibly change this impression. Change this impression by facts.

## **ON MONEY**

I offer a few reflections and facts on the financial times of my life, possibly of interest to a well-trained physiologist or psychiatrist. Money has never been a goal, just a necessary commodity, and fortunately our finances have been managed by my lovely wife. She has taken care that we do not become "broke" and at times her financial assessment of us is not news to me. My only reason for this attitude of money's impact on

our life is that I have been broke, including being destitute, and am unwilling to go back.

I knew that my grandfather was never a “poor” Jew after he reached the age of 21. For some reason he chose to revert to the appearance of a poor status at the end of the 1950's when he lived in Manchester. I never understood why he lived so frugally in a little terrace house when he could have afforded a much wealthier neighborhood and better house. I realize that some people revert to their youth or childhood as a comfort level. My parents were not poor and they worked hard. Under her very good financial management, Mary and I live a good enjoyable life proportional to and dictated by our circumstances. I admit I sometimes spend more than I reap which, at times, causes her distress.

## **MORE ON TRAVELS**

My travels throughout my career as an engineer are not in chronological order but according to the countries I visited.

## **MEXICO**

My first trip to Mexico was on an engineering project in 1986, located in the center of Mexico, in the city of Torreon. The region was not industrial so this in itself would present some interesting challenges that we would successfully overcome. I was in charge of transferring the plant from ARCO Chemical in Channelview, Texas (Channelview is very near to Baytown, Texas, where my grandfather had tested the diesel fuel in the early 1900's) to Torreon in Mexico. The plant was purchased by German immigrants in

Mexico and was designed to process strontium mineral. The owners of the company in Mexico invested about two million dollars in the facility, and started the production of Strontium Carbonate used in the manufacture of television screens. They sold the company for 35 million dollars within one year. I was pleased to be part of the creation of wealth for others, including the local community.

This was the first major Polo Corporation project for a company. Polo, founded in 1986, was owned by Jack Lord, an accountant friend, and myself. The facility was located in an agricultural region of Torreon and the plant itself was built on the edge of a vineyard. Since it was a developing area in Mexico there were quite a few foreign nationals. The city of Torreon seemed to me to be exactly as it might have been a hundred years ago: with the original family-owned restaurants and with the small town ethos. My favorite restaurant served cabrito, roasted baby goat.



### *On My Mexican Assignment*

My second trip to Mexico was to an industrial complex close to Vera Cruz in the Yucatan. I was there for only

a month but I was able to visit the magnificent Aztec ruins. I appreciated the sense of continuum and greatness of this civilization. Interesting parallels might be drawn between my time on our warring planet and the Aztec civilization that no longer exists; both are guilty of a failure to adapt and preserve the environment where they live. For me, to stand in the shadow of the sheer grandeur of construction from an ancient civilization was spellbinding. This is a wonderful place to visit in Mexico.

It seems that my early life "distress" was rewarded by visiting unique if not exceptional places where the human presence and activity have left their eternal mark as a reminder of our potential to do good and evil.

Mexico was part of the good.

Jasenovac and Hiroshima were the evil. I felt while in those places that I stepped for a moment from the real world to another world.

## **INDIA**

My only trip to India was in the late 60's. I was to work in a plant that processed phthalic anhydride from coal. It was located outside of Bombay and now known as Mumbai.

That winter I flew to Bombay via Moscow but only saw Moscow from the air. On arrival in Bombay, I went to my hotel which was apparently in a good area of Bombay; Cumbala Hill. It might not have compared with the Savoy in London, but as I was there to work

and did not know much about India, it served its purpose. The work was challenging and very satisfying. There were four other Americans on this start-up team.

I did not know much about India but I really enjoyed it. The people, the sheer number of children on the streets, were an eye-opener. Perhaps it is notable that my perceptions throughout my life have always focused on the children in the countries I have visited. The smile of a child is one of the most powerful and heartwarming things for me to see. What I found interesting was that the children seemed to be freer in the streets, where at times sewage ran, than in their homes. Bombay was nothing like the European cultures I had previously experienced. There was grinding poverty alongside opulence, exotic smells, women in bright saris, rickshaws hawking their services. Every sense was impacted, from the noise of people talking, to the traffic sounds and the like, presenting a very different city sound from that which I had previously experienced. The aromas of curry, coconut, the fresh fruits, the spices of their food, the grace of the women, and the playful children were all exciting. I saw a dynamic and gracious people in a city of startling contrasts and I wanted to experience as much of it as I could. I knew it would be one of the few times I would be in India. The work was challenging and fulfilling.

While in Bombay, I read in the local English newspaper of a famous guru (a holy man) who could predict things. I was the only foreigner amongst about ten people who came to see him. As this was my first audience, I listened and watched. I had told him I wanted to hear something unusual that would happen to me. He told me to write the question I had, but he did not want to see

the question. Three months later, the Hindu religious festival was held in a big house to which I was invited. I was supposed to hear my answer at that time. Well, in a room of many people, again, I listened and watched. At the end of the session as I was leaving, without hearing the answer, I was stopped by the guru's son-in-law. He said, "Mr. Pollak, you came for an answer." I told him it was okay that I had not received it. He seemed hesitant to let me leave. Interestingly enough, it was he, not the Guru who then told me the answer to my question. I felt it was a pretty simple question. I just wanted to know when I would be finished on this project and leave India. (At least his prediction was not of dire consequential events as foretold by the Gypsy woman in our apartment in Bosanski-Brod). He correctly foretold the date of my departure in September of that year. How he got it right, I have no idea.

While in India, I had another unplanned opportunity to test my divine protection. I was on night shift and this plant entailed some outside work as the compressors were housed in open concrete structures. As a night engineer, I would inspect the machinery for maintenance and safety to ensure smooth operation. I worked under beautiful black skies. They had nowhere near the amount of light pollution that we have today which lessens the contrast between light and dark. The industrial lighting and machinery in and around the plant effectively created an island of light and warmth that attracted all sorts of nature inside the radius of that light. This unique incident and these very memorable moments occurred while I was alone in a central alley of the plant's compressor building. I do not recall who saw whom first but suddenly I was confronted by a huge cobra. It reared up, its head flattened out in the strike



pose that showed its beautiful head; perhaps it did mesmerize me. I was fascinated and could not move. I felt no fear, just absolute appreciation of its beauty. Fortunately it went its way and it was not my day to die. To this day I remember its sheer beauty and was in no way afraid for my safety.

Since I was there for nine months, I did manage to explore some of India: New Delhi, Agra and the famous Taj Mahal. I also flew to the southern tip of India to see the ancient city of Madras and its ancient temples. I had this feeling about the country that I could visualize and feel its antiquity. Even as a westerner, I could experience its uniqueness.

My grandfather once told me, "If you have to make an effort to go to work, then don't bother because it is not the way to look at work". In my whole career of nearly 51 years, I traveled and saw new places and enjoyed it all: the work, the people, the culture, and the surroundings. My only concession was, that despite the fact that I was in India, I ate mostly European and Chinese food.

Since there was little for me to do on my off hours, as I was on shift work, I started to collect ancient Greek, Roman and English Victorian coins, which I continue to do to this day. Through all these years I have enjoyed those coins that remind me of my time in India. In the United States I developed friendships with Indians because I knew about their culture. Such friends were Gulu Kirpalani and Ash Malhotra.

## **JAPAN - LIVING AND WORKING IN TOKYO**

I was in Tokyo in 1997, and was employed by Engineering & Constructors International, a Baton Rouge company owned by Mitsui. Based on my projects and past experiences in engineering and achieving excellence in my job, I was selected by my company to spend nine months on a Mitsui project with a Saudi company that required extreme environment protection during the manufacturing process. I think that if I would have realized the impact that Japan would have on me, I should have taken similar trips, mostly in the Far East. I find the beauty of planet earth, its inhabitants, buildings and traditions to be fascinating. One has to recognize these values to the fullest extent. I can just imagine what Marco Polo felt when he arrived at some of his destinations. He saw fascination, danger and promise.

The moment I landed at Narita Airport in Tokyo, I realized that I was in a different world. There were people everywhere, speaking a language I could not understand. And for once in my life during an assignment, I decided not to learn the language: to just listen, to be an observer and tourist for the sheer enjoyment of it all. (Mary came twice to visit me and she loved it.) My travel experience, and the fact that my personality was shaped as an individual who preferred loneliness to companionship, paid off for me in Japan. My department consisted of only Japanese engineers and me. Obviously you can work under those conditions only if you are focused, and if most of your work is done by yourself.

Officing in the Ginza, the center of Tokyo, there were only a few foreign engineers with whom I could communicate in English. I made a good friend in Tokyo, Hector Cerda, who lived in and came from London. We went visiting places since he knew Japan well. I lived in the center of Tokyo very close to the office in a three-star hotel, in a small room, which I loved. When Mary came to visit I could not get a double room and had to sleep on the floor. To my surprise, my English-born wife loved Tokyo and Japan. She loved the shopping, the people and traveling by train and we were always well received.

In Japan, I found a culture that reveres wisdom. The highlight of my personal experience was when I took off my hat; my full head of grey hair gave me instant recognition and respect. What a pleasure.

The European capitals with which I was so well acquainted were totally different from Tokyo, the largest city in the world.

An extraordinary event occurred to me in December, 1997. I was with several Japanese co-workers and asked them to take me to a place where I could see the Japanese children. I was accompanied by a Japanese couple who took me to a local temple, and as it was winter, I was wearing my Russian hat. People outside the temple looked at me and realized I was not “local”. I waited till there were a lot of children around us and then as I took off the hat, asked them to say that I was Father Christmas. The reaction was classic and one of total surprise. The children smiled and giggled in delight, speaking in Japanese I could not understand.

What a night. The events I describe were different and exciting.

My daily work routine was eight hours. Next to my office was a very expensive school for children from first to fifth grade. As I am an early riser, I made a daily habit of watching the children arrive at school and being greeted by their teachers. They had to take their shoes off before reaching the school door. They would run toward the school smiling, being the lively little children they were when not under strict supervision; but when they took off their shoes at the entrance, they turned into serious scholars. This transformation was fascinating. It meant a lot to me to see the school at early morning.



*Japan, 1997*

Work in Japan took place in crowded, smoke-filled rooms. Obviously you don't stay in Japan unless you are focused and most work is done by yourself. For that, I thank Fred Dilzell's principles: total concentration and

"if you want something done right, do it yourself".  
Right on, Fred.

Children, travel and shopping were my passions but children and the visit of my wife were the top of my events. I made it a rule to go to the only Synagogue in Tokyo. En route I remember distinctly every Saturday there were a group of children from two to six years old holding hands and walking in file, the smallest children first, followed by the bigger children at the end. The isolation of living in Japan as a westerner has its toll. As a man, even now, remembering this little line of disciplined children still brings tears to my eyes. It is hard to give up memories.

I recall in many instances that Japan offered relaxation in unique ways.

It was during winter that Mary made her second visit. We went to a temple at the foot of Mount Fuji (outside Tokyo) and the fresh fallen snow surrounding the temple and gardens gave us the feeling that we were in another world, a magical world.

Our visit to the very old Japanese city of Kyoto was also fascinating. The city goes back hundreds of years and can give you the feeling of that period.

My trip to Japan was not only about engineering and developing new work skills; it also caused me to look at the world in a new light. Over the last nearly 28 years since that trip I have collected Japanese artifacts as a reminder of my sojourn in Japan. When I see a Japanese child in Houston my heart jumps for joy at the remembrance of such a wonderful time. It is the role of

education by parents, schools and ourselves to understand the life experience we are given.

My life as described in these memoirs with its happenings, excitement and challenges makes it very hard for me to understand the horrors, the hate and the waste of human life and potential that continue to occur throughout the world as witnessed by me.

As I mentioned earlier I have been reading from the five books of Moses nearly daily since I was 25 and using the Old Testament that was given to me by my grandfather. I read only a paragraph a day because the contents of these books are of enormous importance and impact. By reading books such as the Old Testament, I find I have a better understanding of human beings and religions.

## **VISIT TO HIROSHIMA**

Hiroshima was the city of instant death in World War II.

The Hiroshima site has an outside area where the bomb hit on August 6, 1945, at 8.16 a.m. exploding one hundred feet above the ground. The Hiroshima area has been reconstructed with beautiful gardens. Some of the buildings are left as they were after being hit and destroyed. You are encouraged to walk through the "garden" and in the middle of the garden there is a large stone coffin inscribed with the names of those who died in the attack. Many were Koreans who were slave labor for the Japanese Military. I realized I was walking through a valley of death.

We went into an exhibition hall, which contains graphic depictions of the horrors of the bomb. Human beings reduced to skeletons leaving nothing but bone, hair and burnt skin. I had read the description of the Manhattan Project and worked with some of the engineers at Halcon-SD who had participated in the project, including Fred Dilzell. It took 14 weeks for the Americans and their associates to build and drop the bomb. Suddenly, without warning, my innermost soul broke through. I cried without stopping for one and a half hours. As I went out for air, little children eating their lunch asked why I was crying. I told Mary to tell them they would never understand. And by that I meant the horror. When confronted by the same colossal horror of Hiroshima and recollecting my experiences during the war, logical explanations are not possible. There is no answer.

## **MY CAREER THAT SPANNED FROM 1962 TO THE PRESENT 2013**

I have been offered a tremendous variety of exciting challenges. Was it sheer luck, or the incredible focus and dedication that ensured each project's successful completion without failure? In this engineering business the stakes are always high, and I was happy to meet the requirements with effort, belief and focused energy. In 1985, with great reluctance, I retired from ARCO. I was only 52 years old, and was not ready to accept a life of leisure, nor could I come to terms with it.

Intuitively, I knew that retirement was not my immediate future; I knew that I was only about halfway through the potential of my career. I decided that by design or by determination, this new period of my life

was just the beginning of another phase of my career. No limit, just a continuation from one stage to another. Like the Quantum theory my journey was to move from one level to another level of activity.

Looking in retrospect at my retirement date of 1985, I realize that I could have become obsolete anyway; my training, the independent implementation of ideas and modus operandi of working with a few qualified engineers was disappearing in favor of committees. The technical engineering decisions were now being made by committees and computers who directed risk analysis, scheduling, acquisitions, justifications, profitability, etc. and were all becoming part of the engineering packages being used in an ever-changing world. Luckily for me, I was able to work with the best in my field without highly restricting limits as to the project costs or other newly acquired restrictions. After “retirement”, in a sign of the times, I was able to move into a new phase of my career, and into projects offered by other companies who had projects born of necessity and not speculation. Retrospectively, I take great pleasure in visiting some of those plants in Channelview and Bayport, Texas (thirty miles from where we live in Humble, Texas). Much of the work still stands today and I have the satisfaction to look at the achievement of my work and that of my colleagues.

So, at “retirement”, I was faced with the problem of finding a new challenge. It had to match as close as possible the magnitude, excitement and risks of my previous life and career in order to sustain me. I had already begun to believe with increasing conviction that this was the elixir of my life – a productive and optimistic and close to insane way to live life. Since my



retirement in 1985, I have had various projects financed by Mary and me, some financed by others.

To continue on this life long journey with all of its unusual circumstances took a tremendous effort. Finding the new opportunities, then executing them with highly limited funding sources created a new challenge. This new age is the electronic age and I was not nor am I yet 100% part of it. In my youth there were no video games or computers. Even now my computer skills are zero. My personal heroes Leonardo da Vinci and Winston Churchill wrote by hand as I still do. The question becomes simple: what is wrong with my looking at the dark side, what is good about it?

So I decided to look at the new areas in Bio Engineering. Starting in the 1990's, I looked at biodiesel from palm oil, soybeans, and ethanol from corn. I did the studies without recommending or investing in any of them; I determined that feedstock availability and utilization were very questionable at this point in their historical development. I thought back to the days of my youth of being hungry with no food available, where nothing but hunger mattered. I think there is a place for this project as there are still many hungry people who can benefit from the palm oil, corn and soybean bioengineering project; but it is still a matter of money and helping the technology mature to a point of cost effectiveness.

In 2010, on my return from Costa Rica, I looked at the prospects offered by microalgae, its cultivation, the extraction of key metabolites and above all its challenges and potential due to its abundance and the lack of competition as a direct food source. To be

realistic, it is a difficult dream; failures on algae projects in the last ten years have been significant and the successes are miniscule considering the time and money spent. I do not see them as failures but rather as the laying of a foundation for the future. I personally believe this is a project that is ahead of its time. However, trying to think through the project and justify my actions of being involved with enthusiasm on such an obviously risky challenge hardly has a logical explanation.

All I can think is that life is like a large tunnel or a small particle accelerator; you are propelled through it till you reach the end of the tunnel hoping for success, or you collide with the wall and disintegrate in a burst of energy. I use the tunnel as a metaphor and reference since when you are dedicated and focused, as you must be in order to achieve difficult tasks, the travel is simply a means to the end. By travel I mean the orderly planned milestones that mark the achievement of success.

My wife is a good budget controller, which is good. My doctors issue stressful and continual warnings about my health, which is difficult for both of us. I'm finding that the older one becomes, the more actual life challenges, pleasures, or needs to survive, are greatly reduced from earlier years. I revel in my current project which focuses on microalgae and cellulosic diesel. My only non-technical distraction is the care and feeding of Preston, our aquatic turtle. He really does not fit with my daily routine and challenges but I have to put up with him, because I really don't know of anybody else who needs me; and, above all, he entertains me. Feeding him at midnight when I work and again during the day perhaps satisfies the need in me to be slightly human. He is a finicky eater; he only eats juvenile

pellets with Omega-1 oil content and frozen baby shrimp. While dogs are great companions, Preston is still an enigma. He routinely comes up with new behaviors. For example, presently he performs a delightfully acrobatic action of jumping into a cardboard box from the dining room windowsill three feet above, or he will refuse one bowl in absolute preference to another. After three years of living with us, Preston is starting to display his frustrations and rage in violent tantrums. I installed a platform in his tank, suspended from the side, for him to rest on but now after living with it and using it, he furiously tries to remove it! Just like a rebellious child he has decided to sometimes hide under it (I guess he thinks we can't see him).

## **1953-2013 - MY PERSPECTIVE OF THE EVENTS IN ISRAEL**

In 1953 at the age of 20, I immigrated to Israel alone, traveling on a small passenger ship from Costanzo, Romania. We sailed through the Black Sea, through the straits of Bosphorus, past Istanbul, and along the Turkish coast. We entered the Mediterranean and headed for the Port of Haifa, Israel. I think there were about 500 people on the ship. It was a good crossing that took five days and was without any rough seas. I remember having a small cabin rather than being in the other parts of the ship together with people in a big room. The majority of passengers were Jews from Romania, but there were other nationalities on board as well. There were not many children on that passage. The passenger demographics were pretty much comprised of able-bodied adults from twenty years old

to about mid-fifties. It was a transformative journey for we left Europe as survivors and entered Israel as nation builders.

Due to the massive influx of immigrants, the area's infrastructure was strained and tent cities were created. I was spared the tent-city, and stayed briefly with a local family. A short time after that, I was moved into a small hotel owned by one of the family members. Product availability was still limited as the state struggled to keep up with the ever-growing need for food and utilities. Food was scarce and luxuries were few. My major diet consisted mostly of bread made from Canadian wheat, local Jaffa oranges, and frozen Norwegian and Swedish codfish.

Of special consideration at that time, as now, were security needs and basic services along the borders. In order to enter the Israeli military, I had to speak Hebrew. This I diligently studied for my first six months there.

As I reflect, I note that my adult life has been directly and indirectly focused on the building of petrochemical plants, and creating new processes for chemicals. This too is a source of pride as I register my contribution to the building and development of the infant state of Israel. Basic training for the Israeli military was held in the desert. It was tough, and the most memorable feature was the highly restricted water rationing as part of the training.

On completion of basic training I was posted to the Military Police in Haifa and did most of my service there. I believe that I adapted myself well; I was promoted to the rank of sergeant and during my service I

also became an Israeli citizen. This makes me a veteran and so I can claim the status of an Israeli military veteran. During my stay of nearly four years in Israel, I don't remember any great construction of roads, airports, etc. Just improvements to existing facilities. What Israel is today would have been very difficult to imagine at that time. I am sure it bears almost no resemblance. Since I worked in the armed forces in a highly populated Palestinian region, I quite frankly could not see any difference from being a Jew in Croatia before the holocaust and of being a Jew in Israel among Arabs. On several occasions I had to participate in calming down some uprising in Nazareth or on the frontier in Northern Israel. Looking back I realize that I saw the first signs not of the Arab Spring, but of an Arab uprising. I reminded my colleagues that we the Jewish people come from a race of priests and prophets. It was at this time and place I carved out my first prophetic vision. This vision I shared with friends and family; it was that we were associating with people who have a great desire to wipe Israel off the face of the earth. I told them of the incidents where I saw the hatred in the eyes of the Palestinians, of their attempt to kill me while on duty in an American World War II jeep, of great hatred for the Israelis such as I had never seen before in my lifetime.

Obviously, this was not taken well by my comrades. Confronted with such racial hatred again, I made the decision that after honoring the promise to my grandfather of two and a half years in the Israeli military, that I would leave Israel and return to the West. While in Israel, I had some contact with a few members of grandfather's family, but developed no relationships that have withstood the decades since my departure.

I had maintained touch with Reuben Kraus a young Croatian Jew. He and his mother were with my mother, sister and me most of the time during 1941 to '45. He and I maintained a good friendship. I honor his memory every day. He was living in one of the Kibbutzim in Northern Israel and was killed in Israel while serving in the military. This was very hard for me to accept.

I was fortunate to see and experience the magnificence of the Negev Desert and to walk the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, too. During my service I spent some time in Northern Israel.

The place that impressed me the most was Petah Tigva, a very old settlement where some of our family lived and settled in 1930. On the several occasions I did visit them, it was a pleasure to participate and experience with them how the Jews had lived there since the early 1930's.

Naturally, after I left the country and traveled to England and around the globe, I always kept abreast of happenings in Israel, but there was never a reason for me to return.

If it has taken 40 years for the Soviet Union to change only slightly, and it took 40 years for Jews to change in the desert so they could enter the Promised Land, how long will it take for the Middle East situation to improve? Much, much longer I suspect, since the Middle East is made up of more than two ethnic groups.

The behavior of ethnic groups in the Middle East has not improved. It has deteriorated. Within the recent Syrian genocide of 2013, which equals my experience in

Croatia in the 1940's, I see no forward movement for a solution, nor any thought about humanity or living comfortably in peaceful co-existence.

I am frequently visited by the statement I heard some time ago, "we live in hope and die in despair". At my age, this thought continues to creep into my thinking and is becoming one of extreme concern. For me, as I have stated previously, I have had only moments of despair (not fear). Even in the worst conditions I have never relied on hope. Hope was too elusive a concept at the time. For most of my life I lived on achievements that fed the hope for survival. Achieving and surviving, not hoping, but acting.

Significant events in the Middle East during the last 60 years, culminating in the June/July uprisings in Egypt in 2010-2013, give hope that there might be a softening of the fundamentalists' hold on nations and populations in that region. Stability in the Arab World is necessary. With stability might come a measurable impact on the terrorist groups like Al Qaeda. Hopefully Israel will benefit from socio-political restructuring of the Middle East. Perhaps they can return to some kind of normality; I know I sought that when I immigrated to Israel. I think I am qualified to look at and evaluate the events and happenings in Israel, Syria and Libya. For me, they are déjà vu. Over and over certain scenarios are being repeated in one form or another. Holocaust and fascism were of the 1940's, yet events now replay in slightly different versions of that time, again and again; this time in the Middle East at the end of the 20th century.

I think the people in those areas must understand that the suffering of children and murder of specific population

groups cannot be a part of the continuous search for political changes. This is genocide, a crime against humanity. I have been through it, suffered it, and I condemn it. Unless this is eradicated we will face doom for the rest of our lives.

## **80 YEARS OF CHALLENGES**

Due to my continuous travels, movement, challenges and new vistas, I must confess that I have never been aware of a time frame or time constraints. I think the Latin phrase “tempus fugit”, or "time flies", applies to my life to this day. I did not seek relaxation, as such, or the luxury of enjoying idle time; I have always been besieged by challenges, not always the professional ones but simply by life and its demands. This has made me always on the alert for the arrival of new things and a fascination for enjoyment of the events of the moment. There is a new movement now being offered on TV; individuals who use phrases such as "live with intention" and "being present in the moment". I smile at this, as I know I am alive and find fascination in the world around me, right here, right now.

When in a new locale, I made a definite effort to enjoy the local life, to find the good food, meet the people, and so find good company. I was always propelled to action as an antidote to stagnation. All the antiques and collectibles we have acquired over the last 50 years are objects that remind me of my trips and provide tangible memories of events and people in the various countries. I continue to enjoy each one and my reluctance to sell them, despite reminders from my wife, are simply because each plate, statue or painting reminds me of an enjoyable experience.



As I look at stately homes and manor houses in England and Europe, which have tremendous collections of art and furniture collected through generations, I see the proof that possession of objects is a part of our life. No wonder the pharaohs and ancient people were buried with their belongings. As I do not have the option to be entombed in a pyramid with all my earthly goods, I wish to simply keep them and enjoy them as long as I can.

## **AFRICA**

As a young man, immediately after graduation and while working for Esso Research, I was given the opportunity to do a wind tunnel experiment on sand dunes with the objective of providing rainwater in arid areas. The project was in El Obeid in the Sudan in 1963. This was in the middle of the Sahara desert. We lived in a colonial guesthouse built by the British. Our work was close by and we taught the local people how to prepare and mix the heavy oil coverage for the sand dunes that would collect the water.

I feel incredibly lucky to have worked there: a stunningly beautiful place, as only the desert can be. The environment was cool at night and had sunsets that were a whole new phenomenon for me to experience. Each late afternoon we watched and listened as the whole area came to life, starting with small flying insects and birds, and then reaching a crescendo, and then, at the moment the sunset ended, there was total silence. What a magnificent experience. Again, an opportunity like that forced me to understand life in another part of the world.

I remember also that the local black race, the Nubians, were a very beautiful and big people. Young men traveled from villages to work. They were followed by young, good-looking women, who were courting them while walking - or it could have been vice-versa. I realized that we in the west did not have such advanced courting practices. Women kept their distance from the men.

It was here, at full moon on an exotic evening in an open-air cinema built like a Roman amphitheatre, that I experienced another epiphany. I caught a momentary image of the light as it reflected on the wife of the governor sitting close to my friends and me. In that briefest second of time, there came together a combination of all the aspects of my ancestry, my past and my present, where I was physically, in that moment, in the brilliant light of the moon's rays, seeing such a beautiful woman. I was transported in time - I saw what could have been a reincarnation of Cleopatra. It was a captivating sight.

While in the Sudan I was able to spend a few nights in Khartoum, the country's capital on the banks of the Nile. That night, I saw two Sputniks (Russian satellites in orbit) in a clear and brilliantly starry sky.

The Sudan did inflict some measure of discord as I contracted hepatitis by drinking coca cola from a "not too clean" bottle. While in El Obeid, I felt a bit strange, and wondered if I should be checked by a doctor. I went around to the local hospital and found sick people lying around on the ground. The only doctor was an English surgeon, who was too busy. So I did nothing about it. I

suppressed my illness, and only on my return to Oxford realized my illness was actually quite serious; it was hepatitis.

## **LIBYA**

This was in 2005, when westerners were still allowed to visit and do business in Libya. I was invited by a local oil company to prepare bids and I stayed about ten days in Tripoli, a truly beautiful city on the Mediterranean. There were beautiful beaches with no one living on them, no houses. I said to myself - this is a place to retire. Lucky for me that I have never officially retired; I would have been living there during the problems with Kaddafi in 2010. Due to the presence of the Italians in the '40s, the pizza in Tripoli was outstanding. I enjoyed my stay, but never made it back there to live or work.

## **PERSONAL REFLECTIONS OF LARGE COUNTRIES WITH ADVANCED CIVILIZATION AND INDUSTRIAL POTENTIAL**

I feel it necessary to make this analysis since my stay in Japan was nine months while my residing in the USA, England, and my work in Europe was of much longer duration. I find it hard to understand the atrocities assigned to the Japanese in their invasion of China when contrasted with their care for children, and their highly organized society. Their care for children and dogs, who were very few in number but extremely loved by the people, makes it hard to understand why a very small group of people from Imperial Japan could unleash such atrocities on China, Burma and the Pacific theatre of conflict during the war years of the last century.

This military regime and its war machine were stopped by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The damage was not only physical, but of enormous human consequence. When it comes to Germany, it becomes more understandable, but again the source was a small group of people with Hitler leading the pack.

In comparing the destructive power of the military machines of Japan and Germany, no doubt the Germans were ahead of everyone else. And today in Continental Europe they are still masters of the game.

This brings me to the fact that the ethnic populations of countries play a distinct role in peace, war, and atrocities that are still occurring to this very day throughout the world. In my experience, the participation of the Italians in the Balkans was very small. My stay in the Italian concentration camp did not leave any great scars, only a memory. The reason was probably because as a ten-year-old child I was not hungry all the time or cold during the winter.

I was a little Yugoslav (Croatian) boy whose father was dead, whose entire idyllic existence of a close-knit family, parents, sister, lifestyle, future hopes and dreams was shattered, and yet I survived. I am a survivor! To this day I avoid crowds and close quarters.

I think that as a whole, my experience in travel during my 80 years has made me more aware of ethnic behavior and aspirations.

Through the events in which I participated, willingly and unwillingly, I learned a very important aspect of life. You can never assume that important steps in life;

marriage, jobs, education, friends and enemies, as well as events associated with those assumptions, will play out according to what we want.

For me personally, this was a very important lesson and I lived by it. And I really must confess that in doing risk analysis for engineering projects I evaluated all steps with great care. I'm not saying all were a great success, but there were no catastrophic failures, either. Also, I managed to adjust myself quickly, irrespective of my age, to the new challenges of living and succeeding.

## **SPAIN - MY STAY AND TRAVELS**

I have reasons to believe that my ancestors living in the 14th and 15th centuries were the Jews that lived in Portugal and Spain, then migrated to northern Europe and settled there. Perhaps it is wishful thinking but I would like to envision that all those generations ago they were the advisors to the Caliphs (Arabs) and Kings of Spain (Catholics). As my career also could be seen as an advisor, I returned to Spain to fulfill a mission along the same lines as the achievements of my ancestors. Hindsight in all our lives is 20/20. With foreknowledge that they could not possibly have had, perhaps they might have had better luck throwing their lot in with Christopher Columbus, sailed the ocean blue, and settled on the new American Continent. It might have been a better place for Jews than the Inquisition.

As a young student in Birmingham, I traveled to Italy every year visiting Rome, Florence, Genoa, and Capri. It was exciting to see and experience Italian art, architecture, culture, food and the people. Spain was not

in my personal travel map of life. But my first European project was in Tarragona on the Mediterranean Coast. I believe that I rose to the challenge in that project, and we successfully completed our contract. Tarragona is an old Roman city, yet another interesting place for me to have lived and use as a base of exploration. I had the opportunity to visit the Costa Brava, Costa Del Sol and other places further south. Some of my most memorable trips were to about 50 miles west of Tarragona. There I enjoyed frequent visits to Monasteria de Santa Cruz, a medieval monastery built most probably in the 4th century. This old monastery is an extremely unusual building surrounded by little creeks. The vegetation, topography and the whole ambience of that place were a vivid reminder of what is seen in history books. On Sundays the locals would picnic along the banks of these creeks. Families cooked, in a flat pan, their paella, a typical Spanish rice dish with meat and seafood. It was so charming for me to see and gave me a feeling of peace.

I managed to go from the edge of despair and uncertainty during 1943 to total tranquility in these similar natural surroundings in 1967.

I understood the religious significance of the sanctuary in the monastery. Even now, nearly 50 years later, do I see unique aspects and the incredible experiences and the sheer fascination of the monastery creating a very pleasing memory. At many points as I reflect on my journeys through life, I think that Dante Alighieri Divine Comedy has real value. I think I was for a short time in hell, sometimes in purgatory and sometimes have had heavenly experiences.

My love affair with Spain started then. In Tarragona, I was working for Scientific Design on a new high-pressure polyethylene technology plant. I was there at the end of the construction and during the start-up of the plant. This was a well-designed and simple plant, the first of its kind. While all phases of plant construction are of critical importance, the start-up phase has unique challenges. Testing the process, selecting, and training new staff, ensuring that quality standards are met, putting into place the process that will ensure a safe and profitable plant: how I thrived on the exciting challenges that were presented to us on an almost daily basis.

While in Tarragona I made good longtime friends, including Scott Greene, Lloyd Thibodeaux and his wife, Eloise. Of course at this time the country was governed by Generalissimo Franco, a very different Spain from the one we see today.

Lloyd was a start-up engineer from Louisiana who was an excellent man whom I admired. If nothing in life happens by accident then befriending him enabled me, as a young and gutsy engineer, to observe and learn his exceptional skills, too. We were frequently invited by Lloyd and Eloise to their home to have a good Louisiana dinner.

On the Tarragona project I also met a lifelong friend, Paul Gibson, from England. Today Paul lives in London, and this relationship has endured. We still communicate on a weekly basis. I meet with him in London and he visited Scott Greene, and Mary and me in Houston a few years ago.

This plant in Tarragona, Spain, was built for Dow Unquinesa. It was a small plant, but interesting. What a life, what opportunities I was being afforded. The home that I was provided was on the beach on the Mediterranean in a developing tourist region. My little apartment was in a beautiful part of the world. To live on the coast of Spain was an unanticipated pleasure. What pleasant surroundings I was able to live in. This was freedom, so far from the damp of England and the crowded streets of New York that had negatively affected my health. My quality of life was superb. The work was challenging, and people of many dimensions surrounded me. Jose Closa Pont, our Spanish company accountant at the plant, was from an old Spanish family who fought against Franco. He had stories about that dark era in Spain. I felt a connection with him and learned so much.

Throughout my life, food has always been a source of pleasure. Food seems to be a common focus and theme amongst those who survived the camps, or starved during the war. And they never waste it. So, living in Tarragona, a tourist center filled with many eateries, it was for me an added bonus. I was able to explore and enjoy regional cuisines, many times in the excellent company of Jose. As Jose and I were both bachelors, earning good salaries, our choices of where to eat would naturally be the best restaurants. This was an exciting time to be in Spain, and it afforded me the opportunity to travel for pleasure and edification. My professor of mathematics, Dr. Caldwell at the University of Birmingham, so aptly told me, "Alex, your degree is just a passport. The question is - how will you travel with it?" On my many weekend forays I was able to find



places of interest, quiet roads, and experience history, art, and people.

My second assignment in Spain was the Montoro project. I was the first engineer to start the design of the facility with a Spanish company, Intecsa, located in Madrid. Life in Madrid was fascinating and I was in Heaven. Don Felipe Gonzales Sanchez, the president of the company, gave me temporary housing near the Museo de Prado, and the per diem was close to being extravagant for those times. Being a bachelor I lived the high life for nearly a year. This level of comfort could do lasting damage to your figure.

Life in Madrid on a daily basis was an elevation in style, standard, and substance. The comfortable apartment next to the American Embassy in Madrid was central and fashionable. On my way to work I visited a little café where I had a small cup of coffee and (Carlos Premiero) brandy (this might be shocking to Americans, but was an acceptable European habit in those days). I worked until ten o' clock, and then we went to a little café filled with Americans where we would have a bocadillo, a sandwich of omelet. Then we would return to the office all within walking distance. We would usually work until one o'clock.

Walter Winniki from New York (who was also a big man) and I would go to four and five star restaurants. Often they were close to where we lived, so we would start with appetizers, white wine, soup, main course, dessert and red wine or port, ending with brandy. The lunch took one to two hours, and we talked about life as well as the job. Then back to our respective apartment for a two-hour siesta, and then back to work for a few

hours. What a life. At around six o'clock we would go to a tapas restaurant for a small snack and a drink. Then home to rest until about nine p.m. and then meet again at a hotel for a six-course meal. If this is not a good life, then what is? I considered this a reward for my early life. No way can you forget a city when you experience such delight. Perhaps it was a way to assuage my earlier years of hunger and deprivation.

Madrid is a gorgeous city.

The plant for Montoro was to be built in the center of Spain in Puertollano, La Mancha. It was simple and well designed, the first of its kind. My knowledge of Spanish, honed and perfected earlier on the Tarragona project, added to my ever-growing skills. So my move to the Montoro job site was a logical sequence. Due to my fluent Spanish, I became a significant part of the success of that project.

From the outset of my career I had the ability to extract the important details from the periphery, while still operating within as a team player to get the job done. It was a very different culture of engineering to that of today. In every job I was surrounded by peers and superiors within a culture of excellence from whom I could learn. This responsibility carried a weight and most certainly made an impact on me. At Montoro, I was the process project engineer and the first site engineer from our New York City headquarters. Additional manpower gradually came to Spain. I may not have assumed I was a founding father of that plant, but I was an integral team member of the early stages of the decision-making process. I was working with very interesting and experienced engineers such as Rudy

Pegoraro, Joel Goldberg, and Walter Winniki, all of them Americans. And always in the pursuit of excellence. Long lunches and dinners with friends, mostly Americans, in the four and five star restaurants were good enough for us. What a life. I do know that I enjoyed those days. Still it was about the work and I was immensely challenged by the job.

After two years of designing the plant in Madrid, I went to Puertollano, which was located next to Ciudad Real. I was the resident engineer and I stayed from site preparation to start-up. How satisfying to see the project from inception to fruition.

Spain offered me several new challenges. I worked with local engineers, trained supervisors to start-up and to run the plant, and brought in new technology with all of its challenges and risks. I was part of the selection process for the men we recruited; men who had worked previously as waiters, railway clerks and other jobs. They were all naturally smart, hardworking and had pleasant personalities. It amazed me at the time that we were lucky to find such a selection outside Madrid.

While watching with great sorrow the events in Spain in 2012 and 2013, I noticed the emigration of Spanish talent to Germany and other parts of the world where their education and skills would be appreciated. I am grateful to several of my Spanish friends who accepted me for what I was. They warned me of three things while in Spain; never talk about religion, or politics, and do not associate with Spanish women. Not being facetious, I asked why I should be barred from the most beautiful women in the world. They told me that Spaniards regarded themselves as in possession of their

women. Those were very important facts of life and I had the highest regard for their principles. I was there for several years, so I understood that concept.

During the construction of Montoro in Puertollano I worked again with Fred Dilzell, who had worked in Oakridge, the heavy water plant. He joined Scientific Design and was in charge of the Montoro project. I considered him an exceptional man for whom I worked directly.

The Montoro project stays in my mind as my finest hour. I participated in the initial study of the project design in Madrid and followed with La Mancha construction and start-up.

When the plant design in Madrid was finished, I was transferred to Puertollano to start building the plant. During that period my project manager was Arcadai Pikulik, a brilliant American engineer of Russian descent. I was never sure if he ignored me, gave up on me, or if he was of the mindset that I did nothing wrong. Regardless of his thoughts, I have only fond memories of him.

During the start-up I worked with a friend of mine from Colombia University in New York, a man of Indian origin, Gulu Kirpalani. We were good friends and his favorite topic was the stock market. I only listened to him but never played it.

In Puertollano, we made friends with Rafi and Gila Gordin from Israel. Rafi worked with me at Halcon-Scientific Design.

It was during that start-up in Spain that I returned to England, and Mary and I were married on the 30th of December, 1970. She returned with me to Spain. I recall Don Felipe Gonzalez Sanchez welcomed her to Spain by giving her the most magnificent bouquet of red roses and a large bottle of Shalimar perfume.

My travels in Puertollano, La Mancha, Toledo, Andalusia, Madrid, and Ciudad Real are remembered by me for their history and the great restaurants. I am content to recapture those memories of wonderful times.

I always took lesser-traveled roads; the castles and windmills on those trips transported me to the days of Don Quixote of La Mancha. Another captivating city is Cordova which has a fascinating Jewish history. Their original Roman Bridge and the visits to nearby Alhambra and Cordova were intriguing, too. There were many open street cafés and plazas. I remember distinctly that I saw more Semitic faces there than in Israel. I am pretty certain that my ancestors five and six hundred years ago lived there. Of course I visited the island of Ibiza and spent some time in Barcelona, another fascinating city, and in Valencia. This was nearly 40 plus years ago, when Spain was just starting her early attempts at tourism. I was fortunate not to be faced with the vast numbers of tourists of today. It made those visits pleasant and meaningful.

For all my three years in Spain, I never felt I understood those people. I did become well acquainted with their character, being able to work with them. But when traveling in Italy I found that my blending with Italians was easier.

## TEXAS

My first trip to Texas was in 1968 for the start-up of our Halcon/Scientific Design Propylene Oxide PBA facility in Bayport. I lived in the NASA Bay area close to the Johnson Space Center. I worked closely with Rudy Pegoraro, Gulu Kirpalani, and my old friend Scott Greene was with us.

My second trip to Texas took place in 1975, when we started the construction of the Channelview Propylene Oxide Styrene Monomer plant, the first of its kind in the world. Roger Cox, an Englishman from Birmingham University, was with us on that job.

Our team, including Roger Cox, brought the design of the Montoro Plant in Spain that had been up and running, with some improvements to the process by Morris Gelb and his team. Thus with these improvements we were able to use the Montoro plant as a scale up, learning from the operation and bringing it to Channelview which was a huge engineering challenge that paid off. On the Channelview Plant I was process, project, construction and start-up engineer.

My next project was the Methyl Ethyl Glycol (MEG) plant start-up in 1984-1985, also with Roger Cox and Anthony Bryant, part of which had to be demolished. I was in charge of the demolition and sale of surplus equipment. Luckily for me, I managed to find a young woman from the town of Humble, Texas, who knew the "good old boys" who were in the business of buying the old equipment; we made over twenty five million dollars in sales. To the surprise of Mr. Sargenti, the CEO of ARCO, we turned this project into a profit. This was

not something they expected, and I was pleased to show not only my engineering prowess, but also bring in a huge windfall profit. On this project, for the first time, I had a company car.

In December, 1985, I retired from Arco Chemical at the age of 52 with great regrets and exceptionally good insurance. It was the most intelligent move I ever made. My decision to retire and not stay was based on my recollection that my parents did not move when they should have. Again, the fact that I was a gypsy rather than a settled-down, middle-class person, helped my decision. This in its own way created new challenges in my life and career.

## **TEXAS OUR NEW HOME**

Mary and I came to live in Texas in 1975. Initially, we lived in a new townhouse development in Houston and then finally, in 1981, moved to our home in the North Hollow Subdivision in Humble, where we have lived in the same house ever since. (One of our original neighbors was George Foreman, the boxer.) For the last 16 years, we have enjoyed the friendship of our neighbors Jimmy and Cindy Stokley.

## **AFTER "RETIREMENT" IN 1985 TO THE PRESENT**

In January, 1986, I went to Arco Beaver Valley, close to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The plant manager, Mr. Fitzpatrick, for whom I had previously worked at ARCO Chemical, offered me a contract job to do project

engineering for the plant. I was hired by Alex Parris Construction and lived with some of my friends in Beaver Valley while working on this contract.

My first year I worked alone and my earnings were seventy five thousand dollars: then the next year, eighty-seven. I put together a team of engineers, increasing the number from two to three to ten, with engineering revenues in the black. Living in Beaver, a small town next to the plant that produced the plastics, I was able to travel regionally and got acquainted with parts of Pittsburgh, Cleveland and parts of Ohio. As always, throughout my travels, I found I could easily enjoy the local flavor and traditions.

In Libya, even though I was only there for less than two weeks, I made certain that I found time to go to the Souks (local street markets) and spend the evenings with local people drinking coffee on moonlit ancient streets close to the Tripoli Fort. It simply reeked of history, yet another continent, and culture I was able to visit. As in Spain, I made a point to talk to and meet the local people and go to the local restaurants and spend time browsing local shops.

Travel, without meeting the local people, just being a tourist, in no way gives one the benefit of the local culture, the people, and the food.

## **LOOKING BACK**

Because of my frequent changes of countries, areas and jobs, I, quite frankly, never dwelt in great detail on the events surrounding me. But, now in the year 2013, the events in Europe, and especially the Middle East,



concern me greatly. The same signs of uncertainty and of the lack of knowledge of political events are as in the 1940's. Then we were unable to really ascertain the right thing to do. Now, in regard to today's events in Europe, Egypt and Syria, anybody with responsibility and knowledge ignoring these events fall into the same category as the Jews of Europe years ago - when some of them were told to run and not walk from the Nazi's upcoming domination, extermination, and annihilation attempt. Now the question is where do you run to? Obviously, thanks to a better understanding of events and the existence of the United Nations, relocation for refugees in Jordan and Lebanon is available. This is a temporary band-aid. Still the tragedy exists in Europe, economically and financially and under great stress. And subject to immigration waves from North Africa and the Middle East that are very difficult to control. To me, personally, this is a "déjà vu" situation but of vast proportions. Luckily for me, I am not in the mix, but I feel for those people and see the events impacting our neighbors and fellow human beings going through this horrible tragedy. Needless to say, the children's tragedy is the closest to my and my wife's hearts. Now in my mind, trying to extrapolate the happenings of my youth to the same if not identical but magnified tragedy, I am trying to see - is there really a solution? A satisfactory solution? I know that it took from the 1940's through the 1950's to try to settle the damage and the aftershock of the atrocities committed in Europe.

Now looking at the devastation of Syria, Egypt, and the Middle East, whatever the meaning of "apocalypse now", it is really happening. I think the situation on the ground is more perilous and devastating than waiting for a shower of meteorites to destroy cities and countries.

These happenings on the ground in the areas under attack need to be remedied immediately.

I know that my resurrection into a normal life was due especially to my grandfather who not only provided the necessary funds and guidance, and due to the love of my family, particularly Dolly and Jules Likierman, and to many friends. But then I was one of the very few. Now the numbers of displaced and potential genocide targets are vastly larger. What can we do to alleviate this misery that started in the thousands and now is approaching 100,000 in Syria alone? This is the question of the century.

I witnessed the struggle of many young families with children in Costa Rica, and families in other places, who are making every possible effort to try to survive and make it a better world for their children. In the United States we have so much positive opportunity to impact and alter the trajectory of children living in compromised circumstances. Costa Rica, I believe, faces the usual challenges of a Central American country, but until there is economic change, this will not change the lives of the people, especially of the children of this nation.

Seeing others struggle represents a magnification of my personal tragedy, because I can only do so much. I do know my wife and I have faced the difficult, if not impossible, in the task of helping children. I can only satisfy myself that in the little we are doing, we have helped a few, mostly in Costa Rica, Israel and the USA.

The happenings in the Middle East and Cairo show that this is only the beginning. The tragedy of it all is that

we are not capable of solving our human problems by negotiations, diplomacy or any other civil means, and we have to revert to the eruption of killings, destruction, and other manifestations of war. The only common denominator that one can draw is the evil ideas of a small group of people who have managed to capitalize on local ethnic and religious instability, thereby expanding into full-scale regional and national unrest.

I paraphrase Churchill's statement about "so many owing so much to so few"; if it takes a flotilla of drones to destroy key military targets to eliminate them then we need to get it done.

As distasteful as it may seem to even come out of my mouth, I whisper that killing specific targets by drones is by far a better method than the Holocaust, Hiroshima or Nagasaki.

## **REFLECTIONS 1930 TO 2013 - THE WORLD WHERE I LIVED**

These are Reflections of the Past, Present and Hope for the Future - with events known to us, with specific highlights as witnessed by me.

From the Past I mean 1930's to 1955 as experienced by me in Eastern Europe and Israel. Eastern Europe was subject to violent in-country changes with the Second World War and deep political upheaval and significant emigration of Europeans to Australia and the Americas (Canada and the USA) immediately after the war.

Yugoslavia in 1930 to 1938 was a "tranquil" period when ethnic differences may have existed but were dormant until the violence erupted at the end of 1930's.

During 1940 to 1945 I lived in Croatia (part of Yugoslavia) under the Nazis and Croat Fascist occupation, and from 1945 to 1954, I lived in Bucharest and Romania, and then in Israel the following years, 1955 to 1958.

By the Present I mean 1958 to 2013 when I lived in England and the USA, and worked in Spain, Costa Rica, Venezuela, India, Japan and the USA. In 1970, I married Doris Mary Hicks, and in 1973 returning to the USA from assignment in Spain, we bought our first house in Cranford, New Jersey.

Throughout the history of the human race the minorities and new immigrants like me settled in the host countries since they were uprooted from their countries of birth by famine, religious and political persecution, or simply losing hope by staying in their homeland.

In general the migration of sizable numbers of people that had to establish and adapt to new lives became a burden for the host countries.

Looking at the period 1955 to 2013 various regional wars and uprisings created more bloodshed, economic unrest and human misery of astronomical proportions such as in Iraq, North Africa, Afghanistan and now Syria (2013).

During this period, Western Europe, USA and Canada did their best to act as a global police force and provided

needed economic assistance and safety assistance under the U.N. (United Nations) umbrella.

The human race has demonstrated once again the centuries old attempt of self-punishment by the actions and misguided aspirations of a few of their own men.

But the events of the last 50 years have also created and are providing a platform for hope: an electronic technological revolution has facilitated residents of our planet to be in close contact with easily available information.

The new technology in communications, manufacturing and transportation on land, sea and air, have united countries more closely, united continents and their residents who can share the new technologies and the benefits of their economic impact. Humans, with the aid of computers and with advanced wholly integrated manufacturing facilities with robots, can create better and more abundant products. Thus all of us should have more time for education, leisure, and also volunteer for charitable activities.

But the benefits outlined have not so far erased or slowed down the present perils among us, namely:

*Drastic climatic and socio-economic changes have created an ever more threatening global unrest on a larger geographical scale.*

The major global players, Russia, China, USA, UK, Canada and Western Europe have managed to stabilize, police and control potential problems from regions closed to them (Cuba, Bosnia, Middle East). The

success so far has been proportional to the effort and the region targeted.

On the other hand, the Middle East, Iran, and North Africa continue to be the cradle of unrest and danger, and an immediate solution is not at hand.

*A solution must be found similar to the one after the Second World War in Europe by the USA Marshall Plan, which brought Europe from Ashes to Prosperity. The USA has done more than its share in the last 60 years while China and Russia have not decided on their course of action.*

*France has decided to participate in the conflict in Africa in its old colonies with hopefully their military intervention to STOP the insurgent aggressions and rebuild the war-torn African countries. They seem to have succeeded in smaller Central African countries.*

All these reflections are personal views with deep concern to me as an individual who has been through part of the atrocities that continue now with increased intensity in some regions. Sadly the present atrocities are on a larger scale and over a longer time frame than during World War II.

I would hope these past and present events over a span of 1933 to 2013, or 80 years, will gradually end, and our world becomes a safer and happier place to live in, especially for the children and for future generations.

During August/September 2013 the war in Syria brought, again, a "déjà vu" scenario of the Second

World War and the Nazi Holocaust - that is not perceived or understood in its actual horror even today.

Speaking of a "déjà vu" scenario: on September 25th the BBC showed a group of refugee Syrian children in Lebanon working in the fields, harvesting vegetables. Mostly boys of 14 years of age were doing the work. A boy on a truck was trembling with anxiety, which showed in his face. I did not want to see this, to see again what happened to me in 1943, to see that it is now happening in 2013 in another part of the world with the same cruelty but more sophisticated killing methods, like nerve gas.

I was a child during the war and saw the suffering around me, people living in hopeless fear with no end to it. The scene of the boy from Syria in the Lebanon fields devastated me personally to a greater extent than my own experience during the war. If political solutions fail in 2013, we better find another "final" solution for the guilty.

Some of the Second World War survivors in Europe, the Pacific, and the armed forces that participated in the war theaters come out with physical scars and haunting memories in their minds. What really mattered in the war was the killing of children and women. Atrocities that are part of that killing deserve a death penalty for the guilty. We now have the modern execution of the guilty by means of rockets and drones. It may not be enough.

The new generation needs to internalize the atrocities in Holocaust Museums, Auschwitz, Dachau and Jasenovac in Croatia, or read books to ensure that their generation

is not faced with the past and then repeats it in the present.

But the survivors will die and the new generation is now on i-Phones, i-Pods and i-Pads escaping from the virtual world to what end? Maybe the new hope lives in the new world of electronic screens and not the everyday realities.

From my experience, escaping the harsh realities surrounding us is not an easy task and forgetting life-long scares from a tortured childhood is not easy.

Hence my recollections and reflections could be of some use to those who know me or worked with me and still read books, including hopefully my memoirs.

My life's contributions to others are few and I do narrate them in previous pages with the desire that all of what I've accomplished and hoped for was not a wasted life but a continuous life of better things to come and achievements that others also benefited from, even if only a few.

All I can say is that we must share and use our personal blessings and experiences and share them with our fellow humans so they are shielded from some of the harm that surrounds us.

Much happiness and hope comes from individuals, from family and friends, who have protected us from some of the dangers that life and society present. I was fortunate that throughout my life I met such people. This is why I try to be one of those people who help others in need and distress. Mary and I consider that our contribution to



the welfare of children is significant and our emotional reward immense.

My solitude provides the inner strength I need to share with people who need help and hope.

The most encouraging signs in my last 80 years are the number of ordinary people, in addition to family and friends, who care in increasing numbers to help their fellow human beings who are distressed, or subject to super storms, tsunamis, and regional wars.

Looking at the future we need to address two major issues:

The reduction of global warming for the well-being of our world, including all of the inhabitants, animal and human. And controlling the crowding of the planet not by wars, but with technology and our own devices

How to achieve a happier and safer world for all of us:

*In solving the planet's problems, global warming must be solved soonest since the remediation for pollution has been developed, and now all that is needed is their implementation - after an economic basis has been established. I believe in this concept and have been working on microalgae projects most of the last four years.*

We have sufficient evidence from the last 100 years of wars against humanity:

*Right - Needed decisions in regard to wars, such as in the Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Bosnia*

*Wrong - Letting Hitler, Assad and other dictators go too far with their ambitions*

By the right handling of the Egyptian and Syrian conflicts in 2013, one will hope to set the scene for peace within the next few years.

A happier and safer world should be the 21st century's challenge. We have achieved a great leap in education and technology. Let's use the new generation's skills and education for a better world.

My hope, including the most righteous people, is to see the world enter a phase of tranquility towards happiness, starting with the saving of children from further suffering. As for me, as I am approaching the end of my terrestrial journey and am looking to enter the realm of eternal life, my hope is that my and other people's hopes are fulfilled.

## **MY 80TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION**

There are several reasons that I wrote these memoirs to hand out on my 80th birthday as signed copies so that the ones who had the courage to participate in this celebration go home with something more than a piece of birthday cake. Not done for my ego, but for a deep need to present these happenings since most of the people only know me superficially, or by my every day work. Let you be the judge, but I am justifiably proud of my achievements.

I see this document of value to students, engineers, and as a testimony of survival. Not as a renaissance man but a look at a man in his time encapsulated in shifting landscapes both of a hostile and a friendly environment.

Looking at my challenges and me, the things I achieved were born out of horror, frequent encounters with death, and tremendous odds against success.

That was my destiny and my legacy. And the comparisons stop there.

## **ACHIEVEMENTS**

Listing of some of my career tasks:

- Israeli Army

- Israeli Military Police

- Chemical Engineer:

  - Process & Project Design

  - Construction and Resident Engineer

  - Start-up Engineer

  - Owner of mid-size engineering company

  - Professional Engineer - Texas

  - Training of Operators and Supervisors

- Research & Development (R&D):

  - Wind tunnel studies

  - Small scale tubular reactors

  - Pilot Study Chemical Reactions

  - Micro-algae cultivation and harvesting

- Others:

  - Antique buying, collecting, and selling

  - Amateur singer - Operatic Society

  - Retail sales associate - Macy's Rug Dept.

  - Built and funded school in Costa Rica

  - Member of Subdivision Board of Directors

**SURVIVOR!**



## EXCERPTS FROM "KNOWING ALEX"

*"The secret of survival, especially when you are very low or hungry, is that considering death as a solution is absolutely unacceptable."*

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*"Daily living was harsh and I was one of very few children we encountered as we crisscrossed the land from the partisan area to the fascist-controlled area...We lacked food. We traveled by foot....I never had the sense that there was any hope of coming to the Promised Land. That really concerned me as my ancestors went through the desert for 40 years to reach theirs. I did not have a Promised Land, only a land that looked to me like the gates of hell."*

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*"...over my career of 50 years in engineering, I automatically gravitated toward challenging engineering projects that others would not undertake. Management's attitude was always, 'Give it to Alex. He will always take a challenge and he succeeds'."*

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*"We (Mary and Alex) have shared our lives, and she has not only been my helpmate, but she has brought joy and love into my life. What roads we have traveled together through so many countries and cultures; a lifetime of companionship, and memories and laughter. I could not have asked for better."*