The Man Who Danced at Auschwitz: Adolek Kohn tells his story

I was born on 1 February 1921 in Praszka, Poland. My parents were Genia (née Faitlowitz) and David Kon, and we lived in a manor on my father's estate. (After the war our name was spelled 'Kohn'.)

When my mother married my father he was a widower with three young boys. He was thirty-five years old and my mother was twenty-two. The boys were Nathan who was nine years old, Zygmund, seven, and Staszek, five. My mother's parents wanted her to marry my father because he was rich and had a very good reputation. He was mayor of the town and well respected in Praszka.

They had five more children: Ignaz was the oldest, I came next, then Sevek, who was two years younger than me. Madja was a toddler when our father died and Władek was just a tiny baby.

My mother had three servants: one who took care of the house and worked outside, one who cooked and one, Fradla, who took care of the children. Every night before we went to sleep, Fradla bathed us in a big trough ('balia' in Polish). We had great fun and I always looked forward to the time to jump into the balia together with my brothers and sister. Naturally my half-brothers were growing up very fast and they were not interested in bathing with us anymore. Fradla was a simple girl. I remember taking lolly wrappings, putting dogs' droppings inside them, and Fradla would pick them up thinking that they were real lollies lost by us.

I remember as a child playing with the neighbour's children in a very big yard. Horses and carriages would go to the fields and come back full of straw that we could play and hide in. It's interesting that after so many years I still remember the smell of the straw.

Next to us was a liquor shop. The owner's name was Mrs Stecka and she was a very good friend of my mother. She gave me a job to find wine bottles for which she would pay two groszes. I had a very prosperous 'business' and I was very busy looking for bottles. I told all my friends – the oldest was seven years old – to collect bottles for which I would pay one groszy. I was selling them to Mrs Stecka for two, so I was making one groszy without any work. I was only six years old with a very great business mind. The value of one groszy was about two cents today. From then on I didn't waste my time playing with the children; my concentration was directed on special wine bottles!

My father was in the wholesale food business, a wealthy man, a member of the city council and chairman of the Jewish community in the city of Praszka. When I was six years old he became very sick (I think he had developed kidney disease) and he passed away in October 1927. He was only forty-five years old. My friends told me I

was lucky because I could go to the cemetery in a beautiful carriage with four beautiful horses, or walk behind my father's coffin, as if it was a big parade. Interesting is the logic of little children.

I was allowed to go into the bedroom where my father's body was lying, to see him for the last time. Staszek had probably already seen him, but I remember him knocking at the locked door; he was not allowed to see our father again.

My mother was a beautiful woman and at the age of thirty-two had become a widow with eight children. She was married for ten years and had a very good life in spite of giving birth to five children.

My mother had five brothers: Emanuel, Isaiah, Joseph, Saul and Solomon, and two sisters, Pearl Milgrom (née Faitlowitz) and Mania Sofjan (née Faitlowitz). When my father died, my mother's brothers suggested she sell his properties in Praszka and move to Łódź. My mother gave the money from the properties to her brothers to invest so she would receive an income. Unfortunately, the company went bankrupt. She lost everything and became a very poor woman. The brothers didn't have enough money to support her, so she had to move to a small room where she worked as a manicurist. Her desperate situation created friction in the family because there was an expectation that each brother should help her.

I lived with my mother's sister, Aunty Mania, and her husband, Leon Sofjan. Little Madja went to live with my mother's eldest brother, Emanuel Faitlowitz. Władek and Sevek lived with our mother. At first Ignaz stayed with an uncle but he was unhappy and ran away to live with our mother. He eventually moved to Warsaw but disappeared in the war and was never heard of again.

At Aunty Mania's place, both she and her husband, who were childless, considered me as their own. They sent me to the best school, where I was a good student. To make money, I tutored other students and made so much that I bought a suit and hat to impress the girls.

In 1938, I was still going to textile school. A Polish general called Władysław Langner shook hands with me and gave me a gold medal for winning the national shooting championship. When the war broke out I read in the papers that whoever saw General Langner has the right to shoot him because he was a Polish spy for Germany.

When the war broke out in September 1939, I had just finished school, having majored in textile engineering, and was working in a factory designing ties. Then everything changed. We had to leave our house in half a day and move to Wrocławska Street in the Łódź ghetto. At first, we were allotted two rooms, but later we all had to share one room.

The ghetto was a prison. We had to line up for rations: one loaf of bread a week and a thin soup once a day. Some ate all their bread in one or two days and then had nothing for the rest of the week. They died from starvation. There was a dysentery epidemic which also killed many. When I caught dysentery, a cousin pinched an injection for me but did not realise it was only useful at the beginning and not at the end of the sickness. The injection paralysed me. I lay in the room and everyone thought I could not understand them, but I could understand every word. I remember so well when my mother asked a cousin of mine “What will be with him?” He answered, “He will be alive for a week, maximum.” I survived, thanks to a chicken in the ghetto that laid an egg every day. That chicken saved my life.

We had no coal and were only allowed to use forty watts of electricity, which wasn’t enough to cook with. I took two bricks, joined them together, carved grooves into them and had the luck to find the special wire I needed. I made a hole in the brick wall on the other side of the meter, threaded the long wire through this and connected it to the meter. I took the plus wire from the meter and the minus wire from the ground. Then we could cook.

I hid this ‘heating element’, because if it was found I would be shot. I put both bricks inside the oven and covered them with the heat rings that were usually on top of the stove. If someone passed and saw the oven, they would think there was a coal fire inside. I sold these ‘electric plates’ in exchange for food. I was a gifted boy. I knew how to do these kinds of things and so our room was very warm at night.

Every day I used to bring my uncle and aunty 200 grams of meat. I managed this because I was working with my best friend, Sevek Tieger, in a joinery owned by a man called Fein, who now lives in Stockholm, Sweden. My friend’s brother-in-law wanted us to join the ghetto’s Jewish police, which executed commands issued by the SS. This job promised more rights for one’s family, especially food. But we chose the more difficult job of carrying furniture and timber to and from the timber yard on sleds in the snow, with us harnessed like horses. We preferred this hard work to the morally incorrect task of working with the Jewish police. When they liquidated the ghetto and we were sent to Auschwitz, I lost contact with that friend.

Life was terrible in the ghetto. In 1942, the ‘szpera’ began. People gathered outside the buildings where they lived, and the Germans selected children and old people and sent them on trucks to Auschwitz. My Uncle Leon and Aunty Mania were taken to Auschwitz in 1942. I felt so terrible when that happened because I knew what it meant. According to the Germans they were old at forty.

In 1944, my younger brother, Sevek, died of tuberculosis. This was a real tragedy for my mother. I had to carry his body in a wheelbarrow to the Jewish cemetery, which

was in an area called Marysin. I thought I could bury him there but that was impossible because there were endless piles of bodies waiting to be buried and not enough space in the cemetery. My youngest brother, Władek, died in the ghetto when he was twelve years old.

I went to Auschwitz in a cattle wagon with my mother, a beautiful woman who was only forty-five years old. I was twenty. At the ramp, we were told to leave everything behind but I asked if I could take some jam my mother had made. The guard said no, so I offered him my gold watch. He took it and stomped on it, shouting, “We don’t need watches like this here!” Dr Mengele sent my mother to the left and me to the right. That was the last time I saw her.

My sister, Madja, was in Auschwitz for only a short time. She managed to hide a diamond in her mouth till nearly the end of the war. In the camp, she became exhausted and lost her will to live, so she gave her diamond to a Kapo called Pola. Fortunately, Pola cared for her, gave her extra food and clothes and helped her survive.

On 7 September 1944, I was one of 300 Jews sent as slave labourers from Auschwitz to a factory labour camp at Mieroszów in Friedland, a sub-camp of Gross-Rosen. I did specialist work assembling propellers for German aircraft. The camp was in a mountainous area of the Sudetenland. Little did I know that my wife-to-be was preparing bombs in a women’s camp nine kilometres away, in Halbstadt. I began to sabotage my work, hoping to cause the planes to crash, but I was scared that, if caught, I would be hung in public.

I used to pinch potatoes from the bunker with four other boys. Reflectors moved backwards and forwards all night long and we had to jump here and there to avoid being caught in the beam. One day, after such an evening episode, an SS man came to me and warned me that he had seen me stealing from the bunker. I always remember this good Nazi amongst the monsters.

One winter’s day I pretended I was sick and fainted. When they touched me, I screamed. I was important to production so they took me to a hospital guarded by an SS man. The doctor said I was short of calcium, so the SS man brought me calcium injections to help get me back to work. But instead of sending me back to the factory, they sent me to the big kitchen to peel potatoes. This was the best job you could ever get because there was food. I stayed there for five months, until the end of the war.

Our camp was built alongside a highway and towards the end of the war a friend and I tried to run away. The SS had fled west to escape the approaching Russians.

German police were watching us but did nothing as we cut the fence's electric wires, still dressed in our striped prisoner's uniforms.

We saw a light in a house not far away, took a risk and knocked on the door. A woman with a little baby opened it. We said, "Don't worry, we're not criminals or murderers". We were lucky that she was a kind woman. She invited us in and offered us a room with a double bed. Her husband was a prisoner-of-war in Russia. It was the first time in five years that we had slept on a proper mattress with blankets, but we weren't used to the comfort and couldn't sleep all night.

In the morning, the woman prepared eggs and a lavish breakfast for us. She knew we were Jews from the camps and gave us her husband's suits to wear. We didn't know where to go. Finally, we decided to go back to camp to be amongst our people, and so we returned via the same way we had left.

No-one was looking for us because the Germans had already fled and the highway was full of people running away. The Jewish leader of the camp decided we should also all run away. We feared that, when the last German departed, they would blow up our camp of five hundred people. We escaped to the mountains where we spent two days sleeping under trees.

In the morning, we watched the Russian army approach down the highway. First came about fifty young soldiers on bicycles. They were carrying machine guns and shooting everywhere. Next came the tanks. We walked down the mountain waving white shirts and approached the Russians, explaining that we had been in the camp. There were a lot of Jewish generals amongst the Russian officers and they told us about the women's camp nine kilometres away.

The Russians arrested those German officers who hadn't managed to flee and they became our prisoners, though we treated them better than they had treated us. A young German soldier called for water, so I brought him water. I did this because I wanted to save his life. I remember having a good time with the Russian soldiers, who drank raw eggs and sang Russian songs.

The local German girls had run away because they were afraid of the Russian soldiers, who were hungry for girls. One night, Russian soldiers came to where we were staying, looking for young women. The young ones were in hiding so they raped the older women instead.

When Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated on 27 January 1945, the inmates in Friedland still didn't know the war had ended. When the Russian army liberated us on 8 May 1945, I found a bicycle and rode from Friedland to the women's camp at

Halbstadt. On the way, I saw three girls with shaved heads who looked like boys. One looked very familiar; she was my sister Madja whom I hadn't seen for maybe one-and-a-half years. I took her to the big house with six bedrooms that the Russians had given us in Friedland. She brought along her best friend, Marysia, who soon became my wife.

But we had nothing to eat and decided we should leave for Łódź. We rode on the tops of trains and although I found no relatives, Marysia found her old aunty. Two weeks later I found my brother Staszek, who had remarried and had a little boy, so we slept on two chairs in his apartment for a week. I also met my brother Zygmund's widow, Carolla, and her little boy, Dudek/Dudush.

My eldest half-brother, Nathan Kohn, was twelve years older than me and studied chemistry at the university in Warsaw before the war. I don't know how he died. When I visited the Warsaw Uprising Museum in 2009, I saw his name on the list of people who had perished, but my sister Madja remembers that around 1939, he stood up on a platform, spoke publicly about communism and was shot by the Germans.

My half-brother, Staszek, was eight years older than me and only two years old when his mother, Bertha, died. He lived with his father's mother in Wieluń, but she died when Staszek was fourteen, so he went to live with his mother's mother in Łódź. She died when he was sixteen and so he went to work, first in Łódź and then in Warsaw.

In 1934, Staszek was drafted into the Polish army for one and a half years, and then returned to Łódź. During the war he lived in Częstochowa for a time with his brother Zygmund, who was shot and killed by the German police in 1942. That same year Staszek was deported to the extermination camp, Treblinka, where he was put to work. He used to pass money he found in the clothes of the murdered to Ukrainian guards in exchange for food.

He took part in the Treblinka Uprising in 1943, during which prisoners smuggled machine guns and other weapons into the camp, ambushed and killed the Germans, cut the wires and ran into the forest. Staszek survived the winter of 1943-44 in the forest, digging holes in the ice to keep warm at night. Eventually the SS came to the forest and shot all the escapees except for Staszek, who hid in a tree with nothing to eat or drink for days. Fortunately, the Nazi dogs didn't sniff him out, but unfortunately, when he finally climbed down, the Russian partisans arrested him.

The Russians took over Warsaw and the surrounding territory of Treblinka. Staszek, in order to verify his story, led the Russian officers to Treblinka, but instead of an extermination camp site there was only grassland. The Russians therefore presumed

he had lied and was a spy. Staszek insisted they dig up the ground. After finding endless bones they finally believed he was telling the truth and nominated him as an officer of the Polish army, affiliated with the Russian army.

After the war, when Staszek was in the USA testifying against Eichmann, he finally revealed that in 1941 he had been married to a woman who had been murdered at Treblinka.

Staszek suffered from haunting memories of clearing bodies at Treblinka and sorting out their clothing. One day the workers gave him a sack to burn. He felt something moving and, peering inside, discovered the sack was full of live babies. They had survived the gassing, probably because their mothers had protected them with their bodies. Staszek was forced to throw the sack of babies into the fire.

Meanwhile, after liberation, Marysia stayed with her aunty, her only surviving relative. We saw how dangerous it still was for Jews in Poland, so we decided to leave, which was hard to do at that time.

Marysia told her aunty she was one of a group of five young Holocaust survivors who had decided to leave Poland for Palestine the next morning.

“What?” cried the aunty, “With whom are you going? I would like to speak with this person!” Marysia brought me to the aunt who said to me, “If you marry her, I will allow her to go with you.” It was midday. How could we marry when we were leaving the next morning? Besides, we were just friends with no romantic intentions. The aunty said to come back in two hours and we would have a wedding.

We didn’t take her seriously. I returned, wearing shorts, and discovered she had prepared a chuppah using a blanket and four brooms to hold up its corners, and she had also found a rabbi. The rabbi needed a ring, so someone gave me a ring. Immediately after the ceremony the guy screamed out, “Give me back my ring!” We did not tell anybody that we had married, not even my sister. We were both very ashamed! But we exchanged secret smiles remembering our comical wedding.

We travelled on a freight train to the Russian border but when the border control officer found out that we were Jews he said we weren’t allowed to enter Russia. So we returned to Łódź, very unhappy. This turned out to be a lucky twist of fate. I suspect the guard who prevented us from entering Russia was Jewish, and that he didn’t want us to enter Russia because he knew how bad it was there.

Back in Poland, the Zionist organisation, Ichud, helped us escape to Munich where I studied architecture and worked in an office run by ‘The JOINT’, a Jewish relief

organisation which helped people from all over the world find members of their families lost during the war.

We slept in a community centre, always separately, and I continued my studies because the Americans paid for survivors to be educated.

Our daughter, Celina, was born in Munich. As members of the Union of Jewish students, every month we received a parcel with coffee, cigarettes and jam. Our daughter also received a parcel, so we sold the cigarettes and had plenty of food and money!

I wanted to emigrate to Palestine but Marysia insisted on migrating to Australia. After the trauma she had been through, she wanted to move as far away as possible from Jews and the Jewish State. My sister, Madja, and brother, Staszek, stayed in Łódź until September 1947, then travelled to Palestine on the ship 'Exodus'. On their arrival, the War of Independence was being fought, so they were conscripted straight into the army.

In 1938, shortly after *Kristallnacht (The Night of Broken Glass),*
Icek and his German born wife, Irma, sent their ten-year-old son, Sigi (1932-2010) to safety in England on the Kindertransport (children's transport). Soon after, Icek was picked up by the German police and sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Germany. (Irma had family in Finland who paid a large sum of money to have him released). Irma's brother worked in Finland and his employer, who was Jewish, provided a large sum of money to have him released. The Gestapo gave Icek 24 hours to leave Germany and, together with Irma, they fled the country and sailed to Shanghai, China. This trip was also paid by her brother's employer. Shanghai was one of the few places at that time willing to accept Jewish people. (Icek eventually started a successful business constructing kitchens for poor Jewish families in Shanghai). Icek's business in Shanghai was trading in men's suiting material.
Meanwhile, Sigi continued his education at the prestigious Oswestry School in London, and was fostered by the headmaster (of the school) who agreed to accept one Jewish boy from the Kindertransport into the school. During the war Sigi managed to trace his parents through after the International Red Cross. (Icek and Irma survived the war and, after ten years, the International Red Cross managed to trace Sigi in London, where the three of them were finally reunited.) After ten years apart, Irma and Icek arrived in England to be reunited with Sigi, who was training as an accountant in Birmingham. Once reunited they moved to a London suburb where Sigi completed his studies as an accountant. Sigi and Icek worked together in the woollen suiting business until Icek's passing in 1960.

After the war, Icek discovered we were living in Munich. He arranged and paid for our permits to Australia, costing 1,000 pounds each, and also gave us an extra 300 pounds spending money, which was an enormous amount then. Icek arranged seven more permits for other family members who had survived the war. He had planned to migrate to Australia too, with his wife and son, but over time Sigi had adapted to the English way of life and did not want to leave. Icek died in 1960 in Berlin of a heart attack.

I would like to mention another uncle of mine that I am very proud of. His name is Jack or Jaques Faitlowicz who was a Professor of Anthropology. He eventually discovered the 'Falashas' – the Ethiopian Jews. Because he was researching the Falashas, he lived in Addis Abba at a time when Haile Selassie was the Emperor of Ethiopia (or King of Abyssinia). Faitlowicz could communicate with the peoples he knew the local language, Amharic, in 1935, he developed a friendship with Haile Selassie. When the King fled Addis Abba, he lived with Jaques in Jerusalem.

In the 1970s, Mum and I were staying in Jerusalem. We used to walk everywhere, exploring the streets. On one of our walks we coincidentally bumped into a woman who explained that in this particular street the King of Ethiopia used to walk his dog.
I asked her if Jack Faitlowicz also lived here?
Surprised, she asked 'How do you know?'
'I know because he was my uncle.'
I have a photo of Jaques at Igal Ahouvi's Brit. He was in Palestine during the war, which probably saved his life.

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Marysia and I sailed to Australia on the 'Eridan', an old military ship that transported displaced people and refugees from Europe. We arrived in Sydney on 19 January 1949 with little Celina who was one-and-a-half years old. We had just five American dollars.

The Salvation Army gave us accommodation for the first night in a large hall at the Bialystok centre near the port. We slept on the tables, and we took down the curtains and used them for blankets because it was so cold. The next day we caught a train to Spencer Street Station in Melbourne.

Marysia remembers standing there, lonely and crying because the Jewish Council had promised to sponsor us in Melbourne, but no-one had turned up to greet us. Eventually, we were offered a room in St Kilda Junction where we slept on the floor.

The landlady insisted we buy only kosher food but we could not afford it, so we moved to Northcote three days later.

Unfortunately, my architecture studies were not recognised in Australia, so I had no choice but to take on three jobs, working from 8am ‘til 10pm every day. I bought myself a bike so I could travel quickly to my main job in a carpet factory and not waste time waiting for buses and trams. Our second daughter, Jane, was born in 1955.

I also worked at a factory on the corner of Lygon and Brunswick streets, called ‘Furnishing Textiles’, where I became a manager and then a director. I eventually left to start my own business in Collingwood, which slowly began to receive fashion awards every year. In the 1960s, the famous English model Jean Shrimpton wore one of my striped knitted mini dresses to the Melbourne Cup. It caused a sensation!

Every year Marysia and I threw a fancy-dress party where it was compulsory for everyone to dress up and dance. We loved dancing and celebrating our life. Those parties were such memorable times for all of us Holocaust survivors.

I became a celebrity in 2010 when my daughter, Jane, made a video called ‘Dancing Auschwitz’. The video shows three generations of our family dancing at Holocaust sites where Marysia and I had spent time during the war. We all danced to the song ‘I Will Survive’ by Gloria Gaynor. Before we danced, it was very important that we recited Kaddish (the prayer for the dead), with our heads bowed in memory of all those we had lost during the Holocaust.

I was very happy to dance at Auschwitz. For me, our dancing was the ultimate act of defiance to Hitler. It was a celebration of life – of my survival – and the creation of all the beautiful generations that followed.

Adolek passed away on 20 April 2016 at the age of 95. He was survived by his wife, Marysia, daughters Celina and Jane, grandchildren Anton, Justine, Coby, Sunny, Yasmin and Gil and great-grandchildren, Sabe, Sienna, Mia, Evie, Ben, Eitan, Alma and Yonatan.