

# A Stranger in Strange Land: A Purdue Fan in the Hoosier State

By Alex Kor, DPM

In April of 1945, as the U.S. Army was advancing and the Nazis were fleeing, a young, Jewish Latvian man was struggling to survive another day. Having been in concentration camps for 4 years, he found himself near Magdeburg, Germany. Hiding in a hole in the ground until all Nazis had left the area, he was desperate for food, water and shelter. Upon hearing voices that were not German and not Latvian, he abandoned his hiding place and was greeted by American soldiers who recognized that he was a Holocaust survivor. His clothes were dirty and filled with lice. So, they quickly furnished him with the uniform of an American GI and served him a bottle of Coke. That young Latvian, sipping the soft drink as if it were champagne, is my father. And, he has always maintained that moment was his first "taste" of freedom.

The commander of that American unit was instrumental in bringing my father to Terre Haute, Indiana. He completed high school and initially attended Indiana State University. Perhaps, to forget about his tragic past and to find some casual interests, my father became a sports fan. At I.S.U., he was required to take a gym class, and the instructor was the basketball coach who took an interest in my father. Years later, that coach, John Wooden, won a record number of NCAA titles at UCLA.

After completing his pharmacy degree at Purdue University, he married my mother, and raised my sister and me in Terre Haute. I had always wondered why my father never wanted to leave Terre Haute. There was a small Jewish community and he had no family there. But, as the years passed, I realized that my father liked Terre Haute because he could hide from his past. In many ways, he thrived in this environment. He worked, had a family and paid close attention to his beloved Purdue Boilermakers. He never told anyone that he was a Holocaust survivor.

In 1995, he retired as a pharmacist and surprisingly agreed to volunteer two days per week at the holocaust museum in Terre Haute. A good day at the museum (for my father) would be no visitors. But, one day, a teacher from a local school entered the museum with a small group of students, and requested a lecture. Reluctantly, my father chronicled his life and emphasized the importance of freedom. Now, approximately, 12 years later, my father lectures two days per week and is very proud to tell everyone of his past. A few years ago, after finishing his lecture, a teenager raised his hand and said "Mr. Kor, you are the most un-lucky person I have ever met." My dad replied "Why is that?" The student then said, "You were a Jew in Germany during WW II ... and now you are a Purdue fan in Indiana University territory." My father smiled and knew that he was no longer a stranger in Terre Haute.