

Mark Koller

is a retired executive. An inspirational teacher. A former Israel Defense Forces soldier. A loving husband, father and grandfather. An esteemed engineer. An immigrant. An active community member. A Holocaust survivor. Of the many ways to describe Koller, none do him justice. This brilliant 88-year-old Mount Kisco resident, born with the name Mordechai in Romania, has turned his own unbelievable life story into a lesson on struggle and survival.



What was your childhood like? I was born in a town of about 5,000 people called Vinjitz and raised in a house with my older brother Dov. My father was a prominent lawyer and my mother was a pianist. She was from Vienna, and she had the only piano in our village. I have no idea how they transported it as we didn't have cars. But how I loved the piano. I remember my teacher. She was a red head. My other favorite was Shirley Temple. We spoke German at home, then learned Romanian, Yiddish, and Hebrew in school. It was a very beautiful life.

How did your life turn upside down as a young boy? In June 1940, when I was nine years old, the Russians invaded and took complete control of our lives. My father could no longer practice law, and I was no longer permitted to go to school. Then, the next year, the Nazis turned on the Russians and took over. Jews were murdered and Jewish businesses looted and destroyed. They ransacked our house and took everything but the piano. My mother wisely hid coins and jewelry in the piano which helped save our lives later on.

What happened under Nazi control?

My family was first ordered to live in a ghetto. It was very difficult there. After some time, the Nazis decided to liquidate the ghetto and began herding people like cattle onto trains. Hundreds of us were forced to march for tens of miles to Transnistria, a forced labor (concentration) camp. We had no food, heat, electricity, water, or sanitary facilities. It was complete squalor, and disease began to break out. I was one of many, many people who had typhoid fever. My brother Dov stole some potatoes and sugar beets from a neighboring field, and that helped me survive. We were liberated after three long years. Hundreds of thousands of people died there.

Amazingly, your parents and brother also survived. You made your way to Israel together where you joined the IDF. How did that experience shape your life?

It was a miracle that my base was close to Tel Aviv. I was a sergeant in charge of a maintenance group for electronic equipment and tanks that was critical in those times. My unit approved my going to Tel Aviv at night to get my high school equivalent diploma. I was hungry for knowledge. I had barely ever been to school, but I excelled in electronics courses. My brain was ready to be filled.

How did life change for you in the United States?

When I was discharged from the IDF in my twenties, I was admitted to study engineering in New York. I was eager to continue my education. Given my love of piano, I became an acoustical engineer and traveled throughout the

world evaluating products for my company. I lived by my ear. And, at a Chanukah party at the consulate in New York, I met a beautiful woman from Brooklyn named Gloria (Koss). She was a third generation American and her mother wasn't thrilled when she heard my accent over the phone. But Gloria made it clear that she made her own choices. We have been married over 60 years.

How have you maintained such a gracious attitude throughout your life?

According to Yiddish folklore, your first seven years give you the structure of how to behave in life. They are essential to your formation. I had nine years before the Russians came, so being a good person was already ingrained in me. It came right back.

Since moving here in 2007, you've been teaching Hebrew, helping kids prepare for their bar/bat mitzvahs, and telling your personal story. Why is this important to you?

At one point this person who had to steal to survive became not only a useful, productive member of society and a father of a beautiful child and grandchildren, but also a respected executive. There is nothing that you can't do. I'm an immigrant. English wasn't my first language. That's why I find it infuriating to see the way immigrants are being treated today.

How do you stay so active and engaged at 88 years old? I live surrounded by books, as you can see, and I go to the Saw Mill Club to walk on the treadmill. I spend every Shabbat (Saturday morning) at Bet Torah (in Mount Kisco). My spirituality is food for my soul. I was once considered to be nothing, a cockroach, but I became a human being in Israel. I was able to find my dignity and persevere.

—AMY ORINGEL



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