

Fighting hate – with a sense of humor

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Holocaust survivor Jack Adler's bumper stickers say it all. April is Holocaust Awareness Month. Photos by Peter Jones

By Peter Jones

Jack Adler is quick with the quip.

Ask the 88-year-old Lone Tree man about aging and he recounts his three basic truths about approaching life as a 90-plus nonagenarian.

“The first is forgetting things. The other two things I can’t remember,” he says with an infectious smile.

When Adler pulls out a picture of his pride and joy – well, yes, it happens to be a framed photo of the so-named soap and detergent products.

With his short stature and rubbery facial features, Adler could have been a Catskills comic if the fates had gone differently for the Jewish-born Polish-American.

“A sense of humor helps,” he says with little irony. “Humor is probably the best medicine for the human body under any circumstance.”

Adler should know. He was the only member of his immediate family to survive the Holocaust, having endured the horrors of the ghettos, concentration camps and the slave labor that nearly killed him.

To hear Adler tell it, his mind – and his rapid wit – were his most powerful defenses against his brutish tormentors.

“They couldn’t take away what was in our heads,” he says. “We gave names to those who oppressed us. We felt superior for that moment.”

Those names were “not nice,” he says, when asked for specifics.

The 5-foot-6 Adler even jokes about the forced malnutrition that likely stunted his growth as an adolescent.

“I probably would have been a 6-foot-2 basketball player,” he quips.

Welcoming Nazis

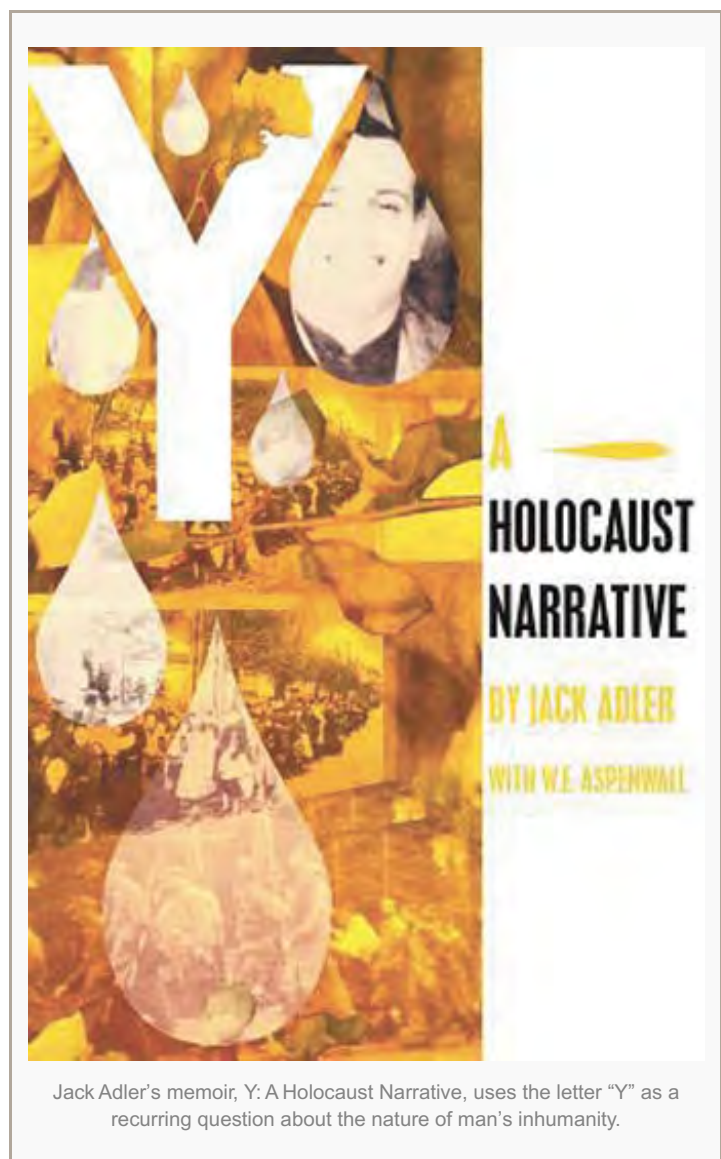
Yacob Szlamek Adler was raised – at least for a time – in Pabianice, Poland, where he was a typically curious and rambunctious boy who often played hooky.

The Adlers lived on Ulica Warszawska, one of Pabianice’s main thoroughfares. Their apartment was across from a Catholic church, where young Yacob got an early taste of Europe’s burgeoning anti-Jewish hatred.

Although his mother had told him to stay away on Sundays and Christian holidays, Adler’s curiosity would get the best of him. One day as parishioners were leaving, a schoolmate started bullying Yacob without provocation. Before long, the boy was plucking buttons, one by one, off Adler’s jacket.

“The parents were laughing. He tried to show what he was being taught,” Adler said. “The church taught to hate Jews.”

Then in September 1939 when the Nazis took control of Poland, it was easy, even for 10-year-old Yacob, to get caught up in the excitement of the swastika, as many Poles with German ancestry were welcoming their conquering heroes.



“I could see the local population embracing the Germans, handing them flowers, food and drinks. It was beyond my imagination. How could you envision something like the Holocaust coming out of this?” Adler

said.

But within a few months, the family's life would change in horrific ways that even few adults could have even imagined.



Eighty-eight-year-old Jack Adler of Lone Tree still bears the scars of a Nazi beating.

Life in the ghetto

In February 1940, Pabianice's 9,000 Jews were forced into a newly configured ghetto in the Old City, each family squeezed into a partial apartment with no plumbing. The Adlers – Yacob, his father Cemach, mother Fella, brother Chaim, and sisters Ester and Peska – were confined to one second-floor room.

It did not matter much that the adjacent former kitchen was now someone else's bedroom since all meals were now courtesy of the Nazis – usually a daily slice of bread and a bowl of watery soup to be shared by the entire family.

In exchange for accommodations, residents, especially able-bodied men, were subjected to slave labor, and the threat of never returning. One day, as brusque guards were heard going door to door loudly scaring up workers, Yacob pleaded with his father to hide in the bulky clothes hamper. The ploy worked.

"I left some laundry sticking out because they wouldn't touch dirty Jewish laundry," Adler said, still proud of his successful trickery.

Despite the luck of childlike ingenuity, malnutrition was taking its toll, especially on older brother Chaim, 18, who was withering away in sickness.

In hopes of saving her son, Fella sneaked out of the ghetto one night to get Chaim something – anything –

to eat. Hiding in the shadows of Nazi guards, the desperate mother quietly knocked on the doors of her non-Jewish friends.

"Most slammed the door in her face," Adler recalled his mother's telling. "One said, 'Wait here,' and they gave her an egg."

That egg – for which Chaim's mother risked her life – was not enough to save the malnourished teenager. A few days later, Chaim died in his sleep. A brokenhearted Fella soon followed, as "a skeletal shadow of humanity," closing her eyes for the last time at exactly 10 p.m. on a Thursday night, Adler recalled.

"The only consolation I have is they never had to see the worst of what happened to our family – our people," Adler wrote in his memoir *Y: A Holocaust Narrative*.





Lone Tree's Jack Adler sponsored a planting of a fruit tree in Israel in memory of his family members killed in the Holocaust.

Saving Peska

When the surviving Adlers were eventually marked for shipment out of the Pabianice ghetto, their numbers were almost reduced again when 9-year-old Peska was placed in a group with small children and others deemed unfit for labor.

As the sun began to set that day, the two groups awaited their fate in a vacant soccer field. When the Nazis barked orders, Yacob volunteered for a cleanup duty that he hoped might keep the family together. In a disquieting twist, workers were given empty baby carriages for makeshift trash containers.

"I slowly moved from one group to another picking up stuff, trying not to attract attention," Adler said. "When I got close enough to Group B, I started calling her name out. To my surprise, she was still there."

This time, it was baby carriage – not a clothes hamper – that saved a hidden family member, at least for a while.

Two years later when the family was shipped by cattle car to parts unknown, any luck they had was wearing thin. When the Adlers disembarked, members of the Sonderkommando – inmates forced to assist Nazi guards – quietly warned the incoming prisoners of what was to come.

For the weak, it would be the gas chambers.

"They whispered to us, 'When you march, look strong. You've just arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau.' We didn't know where we were," Adler said.

The boy was unable to save his little sister this time.

"I'll never forget her face," he said. "Sometimes eyes can speak to you. She was saying, 'Can't you help me now?' She was all alone. I would hope an older person put a hand over her shoulder, but who knows?"

Random kindness

What was left of the Adler family was soon separated again. Esther and Cemach were respectively sent to the Bergen-Belson and Kaufering concentration camps in Germany, where they died, likely of starvation.

Yacob was sent alone to Dachau, where he eked out his unlikely survival in the waning days of the war, thanks to a sympathetic SS officer. Assigned to clean the colonel's office, the boy would inexplicably find

daily rations of bacon and bread hidden in wax paper in the wood-burning stove.

“It was like Thanksgiving,” he said. “He knew the war was coming to an end and he was a decent human being. I’m sure there were many other Germans who got caught up in the Nazi movement, not knowing what they got into until it was too late.”

Incredibly, the officer offered further sympathy when he saw young Yacob crying in pain after a particularly brutal beating at the hands of a camp guard.

“I was skin and bones. My rib cage was on fire,” he said. “This was the first time in over five years someone – especially a Nazi officer – spoke to me like a human being.”

In a turn of events that could only happen as the Nazi movement was unraveling, the guard who had beaten young Yacob was ordered to give the boy daily bread rations as a kind of comeuppance.

The extra food would save Adler’s life, giving him the strength he would need to survive the final death march out of Dachau in waning days of the war.

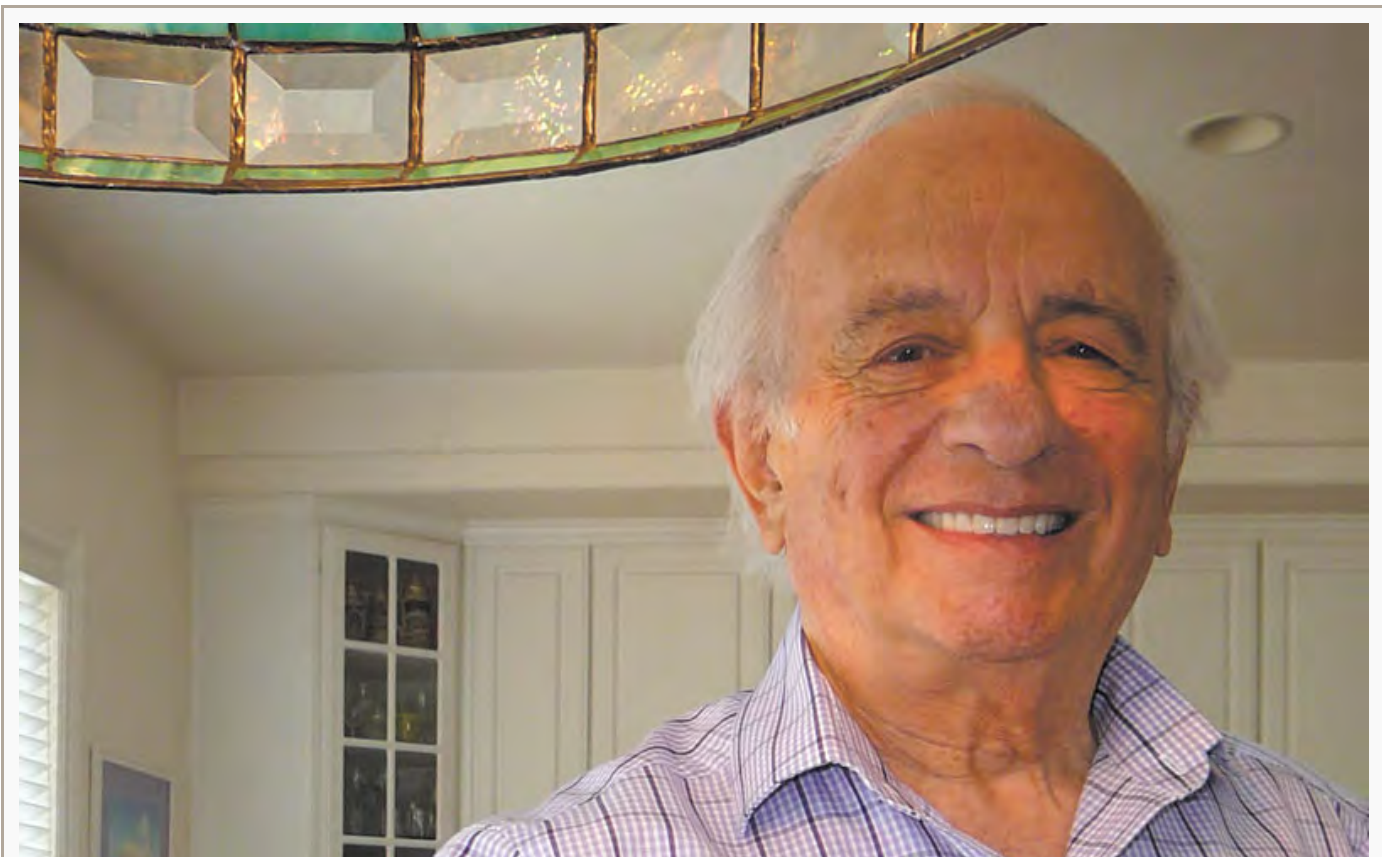
Those too sick to keep up would be shot on the spot.

Adler awoke one day to the near-surreal sight of a U.S. Army officer standing atop a jeep, yelling into a bullhorn.

“You are all free,” the man spoke in German.

To this day, Adler credits his survival – not just to his sense of humor and aspirational thinking – but also to the kindly SS officer, whom Adler tried to locate after the Holocaust.

“Had I been successful, I wouldn’t have hesitated for one moment to testify in a very positive way on his behalf,” Adler said.





Jokester Jack Adler shows off his Pride and Joy. Humor, he says, is the best medicine.

The new normal

After months of regaining his health and strength in a hospital, Adler eventually immigrated to the United States, where as a teenager he was placed with a Jewish foster family in Chicago.

“The way they treated me, I regained faith in humanity,” he said.

Still, Adler could not completely escape the hate he had fled. When he finally attended school again, he was harassed as one of the few Jews in the classroom.

“Two guys, right in my face, said, ‘Are you the Jew student?’ I said, ‘Why, do I look like Jesus?’ They didn’t bother me after that,”

Later while serving in the military in Virginia, Adler witnessed racism firsthand when his black Army buddy was denied service at a white lunch counter.

Adler eventually got married and had children, but did not speak with his family about the horrors of the Holocaust for decades.

“I didn’t want them to be exposed to that evil,” he said.

As time passed, Adler became increasingly willing to talk about his experiences. In 2012, he published *Y: A Holocaust Narrative*. In January of this year, he took his son and three grandchildren to the 70th anniversary commemoration of the liberation of Auschwitz. This month, he attends a similar memorial at Dachau.

“It was a mixed bag,” he said of the Auschwitz experience. “But if Hitler would see this, he would commit suicide all over again.”

Adler’s son, Eli, an Emmy-winning cinematographer, is completing *Surviving Skokie*, a PBS documentary about a neo-Nazi group’s infamous efforts in the late 1970s to stage a march in the Jewish-dominated Chicago suburb.

“My son looks a lot like my father,” Adler said proudly.

Although the retiree has settled into a life of normalcy in Lone Tree, the pain is still palpable when he talks about his family – especially the day his helpless younger sister was taken away to the gas chambers.

To this day, Adler has difficulty expressing emotions, even as he proudly witnesses the accomplishments of the descendants he calls his “miracle family.”

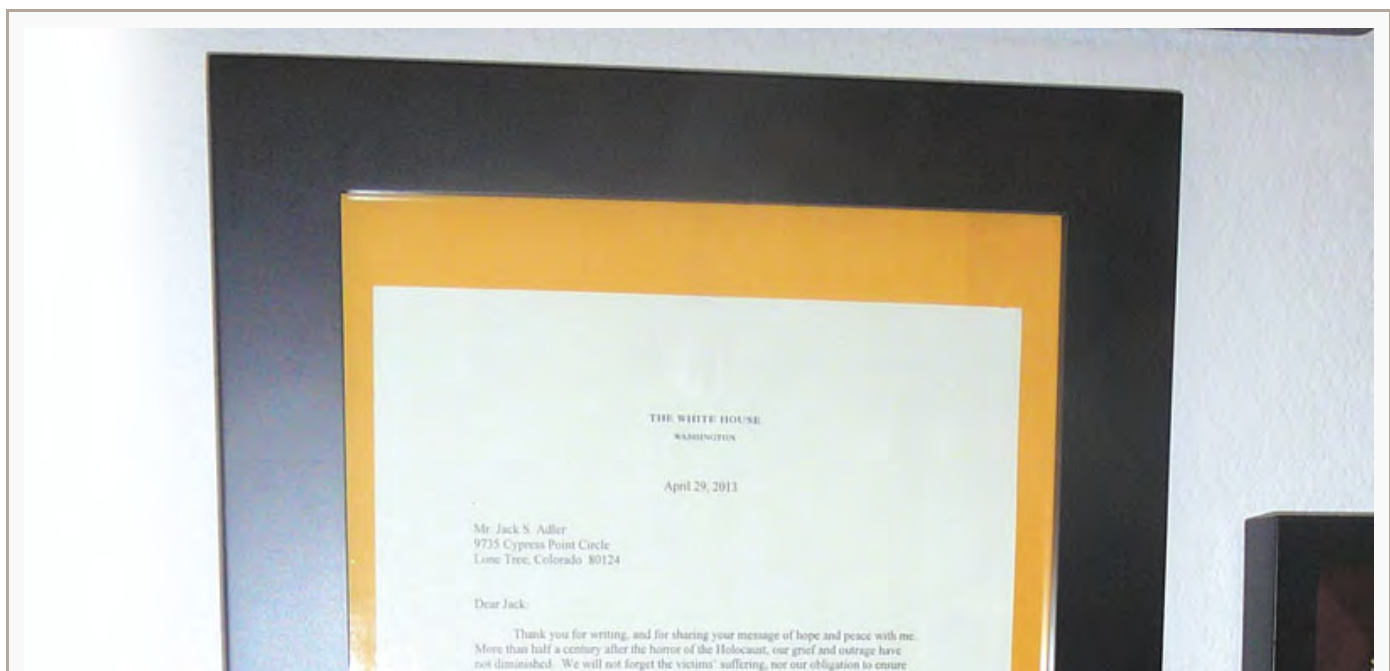
“I feel the joy inside, but I can’t express joy,” he said.

Ask the Jewish-born Adler about his religious beliefs and he will cite the Bible’s Golden Rule of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you – though he remains skeptical about organized religion, which he blames in part for hatred.

“Until we live by the Golden Rule, we will continue to destroy each other,” he said. “God created man. Man created evil. It’s up to us.”

As for life after death, Adler likes to keep the ideas of tolerance and kindness decidedly in the present tense – while keeping his ironic sense of humor.

“Once you’re dead, life isn’t worth living,” he said with a smile.



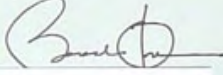
we never again allow such crimes against humanity

As we work together to build a more just and peaceful world for every human being, the millions of Holocaust victims and their surviving relatives are always present in our minds. In the face of atrocities that defy understanding, Holocaust survivors left a legacy of hope and moral triumph that continues to inspire and guide us all.

Today, their stories anchor our Nation's commitment to promote human rights, confront genocide, and oppose prejudice in all its forms. Let us recommit to raising our voices against every form of intolerance, indifference, and injustice, and let us endeavor to build a world where all may live together in peace.

Thank you, again, for being in touch and for your kind gesture. Michelle and I wish you all the best.

Sincerely,



President Obama's tribute to Lone Tree Holocaust survivor Jack Adler

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