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Survival and Success

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When I first came to America, I couldn't speak English at all. My friends felt sorry for me and they said, "You know, we have a speech teacher, you should go to her and she will eliminate all your problems." So I went to her and introduced myself. As you know, my first name is Nathan. She said, "My God, you cannot even pronounce your first name correctly." You see, Nathan has the "th" sound and I cannot pronounce "th." Not even today, after 32 years and a lot of practicing. So she gave me a mirror to hold and she said to press my tongue around and look at the mirror. And when I look at the mirror, it was not a pretty sight. Then she found out that my "v" and "w" are the same. She said "they are not the same, there is a difference." For me it is the same, anyway I struggled and finally, I told a friend of mine that I am taking those lessons from her and he said, "You know, Nathan, I bet you it won't take longer than two months and she will be talking exactly like you." So I gave up the whole thing.

Latvia, where I was born, was a poor country. Then came the recession so everybody got poorer. My parents couldn't feed me anymore, and I was 17 years old at that time and I felt I had to look for a job. I felt, since I am very good in mechanical things and electrical things there will be no problem. So I went to many

shops. I was all by myself. And they looked at me and said, "Don't you know what is going on, there is a recession here. There are no jobs, not even for ourselves, we don't have enough work." So I said, "How about, if I will work just for one meal a day, but it will have to be a big meal, I will work for 10 hours." They said, "No, there is no use. We barely have enough food for ourselves. Forget it." It is a very unpleasant experience when you are not wanted by anybody, not even for nothing.

I was walking around in the streets, not knowing what to do, and was ashamed to come back home. What could I do? I had only one choice, to come back home and cry. While I was walking, I was looking in the shop windows and I saw doorknobs that came from Germany. Twelve lots a piece, a lot being Latvian currency. For one dollar, you get five lots. For 12 lots, I could live over a week, over 10 days very well. And here is just one doorknob, 12 lots. Well, it is of no interest to me, I thought. While I was walking away, I start to debate with myself. I want you to know that we have at least three personalities — the strong you, the weak you and the guy in the middle who has to decide which side to take. So the strong Nathan says, "Tell me, why don't you go into doorknob manufacturing?" And the weak Nathan says, "Well, that is easy for you to say,

NATHAN A. ZEPPELL, Santa Barbara, California, was born in Riga, Latvia and spent four years in Nazi concentration camps after his country was seized and his entire family killed. He was liberated from Buchenwald by the Russians in 1945 and lived for four years in Israel. After coming to America in 1949, Mr. Zepell eventually succeeded in selling his Wingmatic pen to a small manufacturer. The pen was an instant success, and Mr. Zepell was subsequently hired by Schaeffer Pen Company to invent products for them, which he did for three years. At the age of 63, Mr. Zepell manufactured his latest flat pen, called Pentastic, and sold that extremely successful business less than two years later to pursue other projects. Mr. Zepell has given inspirational presentations to various groups throughout the United States.

how can I go into doorknob manufacturing, I have absolutely nothing." And the strong Nathan says, "Well, let's think about it. What do you need, you need the materials, you may go to the agency that sells the materials and you may get some samples." Well, it almost felt like a kick from the strong Nathan in the back. I rushed over to the place to get the materials.

Luckily enough, they gave the samples to me for no charge. So now the weak Nathan says, "Well, you have the materials, now how can you make them?" So the strong Nathan says, "Well, let's think about that too. You have friends who have shops and you should go to them and beg them that they should allow you to make them." So I did.

When I got there, I told my friends I wanted to make doorknobs, they said, "Do you realize that you cannot make them like that? You need a manufacturing plant, you need agents, you need packaging, you need distribution, you cannot do it just like that." I said, "I don't have a choice, I'll have to do it just like that." Well, he couldn't allow me to work during the day, so I ask to work at night and finally he agreed. After three days and three nights, working during the day at home and at night on the machine, I had 120 of those doorknobs. I wrapped them in tissue paper and put them in old shoeboxes, because they were the only boxes I could find and I went to a hardware store, for my first sale. I showed the owner the doorknobs and he liked them very much. He said, "How much do you want for them?" I wasn't prepared for this question. Well, I had to think fast. I said, "How about two lots?" "Two lots?" He said, and the way he said it, I didn't know if it was too much or too little. Then he got a paper for me to sign and it said that I was receiving 240 lots and had no further request. When I got the 240 lots, I thought I was dreaming, it was burning in my pocket. Just three days earlier, I was facing starvation. I couldn't even buy a meal and now I have 240 lots. This is what I would call success.

The Russians came in to nationalize my factory. Many owners, and manufacturers were called exploiters and they were all sent to Siberia. I was faced with the same thing, but the Russians came out from the meeting they had with my owner with a smile and said, "Let's shake hands, you are going to be the manager of this place." This was survival.

Then the Germans came in - the Nazis. They

not only took away everything I had, they took the lives of my mother and father, and all the members of my family, including my fiancée. She was just 19 years old and it happened two weeks before our wedding. And right away, they declared that no food is to be sold to the Jews, except at a few places, twice a week and in very, very small rations. I had to walk there to get the food, and I had to walk in the gutter. I had to wear a yellow sign, a star on the left side in front and on the back of my coat. While I was walking, I knew that the sign was a code by the government used to pick up and kill the Jews. If you could kill a Jew, you would be a hero.

So with this knowledge, I am going to pick up the food. While I am walking I see that there is a big commotion at the corner. A man is laying in a puddle of blood, with his face down, a Jew. I knew that he was a Jew because of the yellow star. There is a policeman standing around, and a lot of other Latvians, and they are all laughing. When they saw me coming, they gave me a sign that I should come over. When I get near the policeman, he says to come closer still. So I am practically standing under him and he says, "You were supposed to walk on the side, in the gutter, and you didn't. I am going to smash your skull, because I don't want to waste a bullet on you." What you have to do in a case like this is think fast. Every millionth of a second counts, because he is standing with his hand raised over my head. For me, time actually stood still. I could make all of the decisions. I could run away; but they would catch me too easy. I could ask for mercy; but this is out of the question — they would only laugh.

But one thing I could do is to look in his eyes, and not take them off his for a split second, not even for a millionth of a second. If I do that there is a chance. And this is exactly the way it was, and he lowered his hand, and he says to go away but fast. This is survival. And, this is fast thinking.

Another thing happened to me one day coming back late from work, from straight labor camp work. One man says, "Look, the commandant is coming to our barracks with a white piece of paper." And the reason why he got panicky is understandable, because we knew from past experiences that the paper is a list of numbers that he is going to call and each one of us was nothing more than a number. And when he calls those numbers, that person has to step out and is taken away, and you

don't see them anymore, because they go to the gas chamber.

The commandant came in and started to read from the white paper. But this time it was not numbers. It was a letter that he received from his wife in Berlin. She said that Christmas was approaching and they had no toys to put under their Christmas trees for their children. Maybe the inmates in your camp could do something, can make some toy that will excite our children? Well, he said, "I hope you got the message. If you can do this, you will live a little longer. If you don't, you won't live." And he walked out. The other inmates look at me and say, "What can we do, in just a few days we will be dead." I said, "Let's think about it. We have to do something."

I began thinking day and night. And then suddenly, a thought came to my mind. There is a way. When it is a matter of life and death, you'd be amazed at how efficiently the mind works. So they ask me, "What can we do, what will we do. We don't have anything." I said we have a hand drill press, why don't we mount it on the bench. They wanted to know how we could turn it, and I said we had 29 people, we can rotate turns. And so we made the toys. When the commandant came in and he looked at the toys, we weren't sure if he was going to tell us if we would live or die, but I felt that if I could look in his eyes, they would tell the story. And his eyes did, I knew that we would live. And the toys were sent to Berlin.

Two weeks later, we see the commandant coming with another white piece of paper. He came in and he read another letter saying what a wonderful Christmas the children had. Their Christmas was much better than anybody in the whole neighborhood and they will never forget the toys.

It really enlightened us in those horrible days.

How, you may ask, does the toy work? What does it consist of?

It consists of a wooden base with a hollow post. There is a round collar on the top with six sacks. It represents six sacks of flour. There is a wooden man climbing on the post with his arms and legs up to the top. When he gets to the top one of the sacks bumps him in the head. And when he climbs down the sack falls off. When the sack falls off he climbs again to the next sack. So he does it six times.

But how does it work? You see I had a lot of gravity there. I made good use of it. In the hollow post there is a cord attached to the

wooden man, running through a slot and around a pulley to a counterweight. That counterweight is heavier and pulls a wooden trigger. Since the counterweight is heavier it pulls the wooden man up to the top. When he came to the top, momentum knocked one of the sacks down on his head. With the sacks on his head, he was heavier than the counterweight, so he climbed down. When he climbed down there was a little protrusion which knocked the sack from its position. Once the sack fell off he right away got lighter, so he climbed up again. And so on for six times.

Many people have since asked me how much I was paid for my invention of the toy. Before they knew the story, I said, "I have been paid more than anybody, ever, has been paid for a toy and more than anyone, anywhere will be paid for a toy." This is survival, and success too.

In 1949 I couldn't speak English at all. All I could say was "all right", but the trouble is, it was not all right.

I talked to all the pen companies and told them I have a great invention. I thought, they will all line up in front of my hotel room, begging me to sell them my invention. It didn't happen. They were very polite, they looked it over and then they wrote me a letter telling me what they thought of it. And they said it is very good, but very complicated, and is not a very saleable item. So I got busy right away on another invention. This invention got the same reply. After eight years I had a stack of letters about that high, all reading the same thing as before. I was really upset about it. It is a good thing that Hitler taught me how to starve because without this teaching, I wouldn't have made it in New York City.

So, I thought, this time I will invent something really simple. Something that everybody can understand and they cannot afford to refuse. All ball point pens have a push button on the top, so that before you put it in your pocket, you can retract the point so it won't soil your shirt. But a lot of people forget, and put the pen in their pocket with the point extended anyway. Another thing is a lot of people don't like the pen clip pressing against their hand. And when you pull on the clip you can bend it, and then the pen is no good anymore.

So the pen I have invented doesn't have a pushbutton at all. All you do is press on the clip. The clip goes in and then you write. There are very few things that are 100 percent, but

this one is. And when the clip is in, you can write in any position, and when you pull on the clip, you don't bend it at all, and there is no wear on the fabric. So when the big industry listens to my talk, they looked at me and said, "Gee, we never thought that anybody could talk so much about a clip."

I decided to go to the Shaeffer Pen Company, whom I approached without success, even though I explained my reasoning to them. Two months later they replied, "Since you are already nine years trying to sell your invention we feel obligated to tell you what is wrong with this pen. In America, everybody is used to pushing from the top, and now you are telling them to push from the side. It will cost at least \$10 million to re-educate the American public. Why should we do that?"

"Number two is when you push from the side and you still want the pen to run lengthwise, you have to transfer that motion. To transfer that motion, you need a cam action. That is a very expensive thing. It will never work."

They gave me a list of ten reasons why the pen was no good. And every one else said exactly the same thing. My patent attorney, whom I was working with for almost nine years, gave me a very sad look and said, "Nathan, drop it, drop your inventing and take a job where you can at least start eating again." I asked myself, "Where did I fail, where did I go wrong? Nine years of my life gone. Why can't I sell my invention?" I decided my mistake was to go to the big companies only. The big companies reject me before they even see me, because they have their own inventor and they feel that I am in competition with him. So I will go to the smallest pen manufacturer I can find.

I went to the Columbia Pen and Pencil Company and demonstrated the pen to Mr. Scross, the owner, just as I had done before. And he said, "That's great. We like it very much." For nine years, I was hoping to hear that. And here it was just like that. They said to bring an attorney and we will write an agreement. The next morning, I was there. They looked at me and said, "Nathan, I told you to bring your attorney." I said, I want to tell you a secret, I cannot afford an attorney. I want your father, Mr. Scross, to be my attorney too. "That is a heck of a thing to ask," he said. But then his father wrote up the agreement, and when he was done, they looked at him and said, "Whose side are you on?" That is the way we started.

When we were driving back to his little

plant, he said to me, "Look, it is your ballgame, I don't know nothing about making drawings, about writing all the specifications, I am a total illiterate about it. This is your ballgame and you will have to walk with it. I want you to know that we can't do anything on time, because the suppliers tell you three months, and after three months they haven't really started yet." So I started to get busy, I made the blueprints, I made all the drawings necessary. And I went to the tool makers and die makers. After three months, the tools were ready. "It is amazing," Mr. Scross thought, it had never happened to him in his experience. So he called them up, and said, "How come you make it on time for Nathan?" They said, "We had to." He said, "What do you mean, you had to, why?" "Well," they said, "we thought, if we don't make it in time, he will commit suicide."

About two months later, I got a call from the Schaeffer Pen Company. They asked if I would sell my invention to them. I said, "This would have been a dream for me if you would have asked for this six months ago, but no, I already have a company here, working rather well." They said, "Why don't you ask your partner what he thinks of it, then decide." So I went to my partner's house, and he said, "You know, it may be a good idea for you to take the job, because then I can tell all my customers that my partner is the inventor for the Shaeffer Pen Company. This will be a boost for me." So I took the job.

Then a couple of months later, Wally Shaef-fer, Chairman of the Board, called me in and said, "You showed us a pen some time ago that does not have a push button anymore. This would really be a pen to remember." They called it the "reminder pen." He wanted to buy that patent. "You want to buy that patent," I said. "You gave me 10 good reasons why that pen is bad. You were one of the first to say so." He said, "You know, you taught us a lesson. You taught us a lesson that one man can be right and the whole industry can be wrong. We are willing to pay for that lesson — and they did."

I recall I was always impressed and amazed with astronomy. Each of the stars can be bigger than our sun. The sun is a billion times bigger than our earth. That one star gives off more energy in one second than humanity has been using from the creation to this very day. In one second, day and night, all of the time. What could be more amazing than that? What

can be more amazing than the fact that light goes at a speed of 186,000 miles a second? How many miles does it cover in a billion years? It is beyond comprehension. It is the most amazing thing there is, I thought. But then I realized that there is something more amazing than all of this. Much more amazing and each one of us has it. What is it? The human mind. If each of us would use it just a little more often, it would do miracles for us.

In 1976 I got a big package in the mail. It said, return receipt requested. I opened it up and it was from the American Academy of Achievement. I had been nominated to be one of the recipients of the Golden Plate Award in 1976 in San Diego at the Southern Conference Convention Hall. Among the recipients in that particular year were Dr. John DeBout, Chairman of the Board of AT&T, Dr. John Dault, Alexander Haig, and it kept on going. Then at the end I found, to my great surprise, Nathan Zepell. How do I fit into that group? I thought that it must be a mistake, so I did not respond. Then I received a call asking if I would accept this honor. I wanted to find out more about them, so I asked my banker to find out. He told me that this was one of the most prestigious organizations in America. So I accepted the award. Next on to the Noble Prize from Norway. There they invited 240 of the most outstanding students of the nation. Each one of them is not only a straight "A" student but they also excell in fields where there is no equal. To be given this award before 240 of the most outstanding students — it was like living in a dream world.

At the Golden Plate awards, I had to give a talk during the day. I could talk just as long as I wanted to. To give a long talk is easy for me, but to give a short talk, such as my acceptance

speech on the fourth night, which was limited to only two and one-half minutes, is a different story. There, every word must count. I was scared stiff, because the other 39 ahead of me were able to say whatever they wanted in much better English than me. I was the 40th speaker—at the end of the list. People were already half asleep. How can I tell them anything? How can I wake them up and tell them exactly how I feel, what it means to me to be here and to get the Golden Plate Award. How do I say all of this in two and one-half minutes?

I will repeat what I said. Naturally I cannot repeat exactly the same words I used, as I do not have a copy of that talk, but I will try.

"Forty-five lashes from a six-foot long steel whip is not easy to take, but it is what I got at the concentration camp. After the first 25 lashes the Nazi guard got tired, so he gave it to his buddies to continue. Another slave also got 45 lashes. He died on the spot. The punishment I got was fitting of the crime I committed. In my shoe the guards found my only treasure, the most important thing that I had succeeded in saving. It was a picture of my mother and father, who they had killed three years earlier."

"Today, 32 years later, I am standing here, a proud citizen of the most democratic, the mightiest, the richest culture that has ever existed in human history, surrounded by top achievers and being counted as one of them. Who says that miracles don't happen anymore? Hitler prevented me the joy of having children of our own. But to be with you, 240 of the best youth this mighty nation can produce, is an indescribable joy for me and for my wife. I believe that you can achieve and will achieve even greater goals than our founding fathers could have dreamt 200 years ago."