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Ernest Moritz | Aviation firm owner was survivor of the Holocaust

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The less attention Ernest Moritz drew, the happier he was. After all, that's how he survived the Holocaust as a small boy in Germany, Luxembourg and France.

But the successful Dania Beach businessman owned several aviation-related companies, helped found a Hollywood synagogue and sat on a bank's board of directors.

Moritz was still working, at Air Investments of Fort Lauderdale, until shortly before his death Aug. 22 of a brain hemorrhage at age 78.

The firm "specialized in supporting the Britten-Norman Islander, an aircraft that is widely flown in the Caribbean," according to his son, Louis.

Moritz also co-founded Airmark Engines and Airmark Components, aviation repair operations.

His modest lifestyle hardly reflected his success, said Louis, president of Airmark Components. An unremarkable house near Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. Ordinary cars. A nondescript wardrobe. Nothing flashy.

"In his heart, he would have liked to have been like what he called 'real Americans,' who openly enjoyed the fruits of their labor without fear of retribution," Louis said. "If you were showy, it could be taken away."

The fear never abated, said Louis, which explains his father's membership in civil-liberties groups and devotion to the progressive radio show *Democracy Now*.

"He was a card-carrying member of the ACLU," his son said. "He was convinced it could happen again anywhere, including here."

Ernest Moritz was born July 21, 1932, in the small western German town of Becherbach. He was 6 when Adolf Hitler launched his assault against Germany's Jews in November 1938.

His father, a respected dry-goods storekeeper, couldn't believe what was happening.

"Our father was 102 percent German, cited for bravery in WWI, decorated with the Iron Cross, and must have been absolutely traumatized to be declared *untermensch* (subhuman) by his friends," said Alfred Moritz, Ernest's older brother.

EVERYONE KNEW HIM

In his book *Survival in WWII*, Alfred -- now a retired Washington, D.C.-area architect and an artist -- writes this about his brother:

Then called Ernst, he was, at age 5, ``the entrepreneurial sort and had the run of the village. Everyone knew Isidorsch Ludwig's tow-headed red-cheeked boy and they made sure he was always safe while `helping,' be it by leading some cows, or even a horse, to water, or simply helping by sitting on a plow."

After fleeing Germany, the boys and their mother were sheltered in France. In mid-1942, their parents turned the boys over to a children's aid group. For the next three years, they went from one placement to another.

Alfred writes: ``Ernest continued to be very weak and ill; he was quarantined in the castle tower as, besides his other ailments, he also had contracted the mumps.

``In his privileged situation, he had access to buttered toast and, as some good brothers-cum-best friends are known to do, he scraped the butter from his bread, wrapped it in a piece of paper and let it down, attached to a string, from the window in his aerie.

``A few of us ragamuffins managed to steal a few potatoes in a nearby field and, making a fire as I had watched the farmer do in Becherbach, we roasted the potatoes which we then ate with a dab of `Ernest butter.' None of us who were privileged to live this show of altruism in those difficult times ever forgot Ernest's potatoes."

It was six years before they reunited with their parents, who also survived -- in a French mental hospital.

By then, Alfred writes, ``we had become self-sufficient, hardened and emotionally tough. For our part, we had learned, the hard way, to always keep our emotions in check. . . We were to learn shortly that approximately 1.5 million children under the age of 15 died during these murderous times. . .

``Our adjustment to a normal and loving family life took several years."

The family settled in Chicago, where Ernest graduated from high school and earned an accounting degree at DePaul University.

He was drafted and spent two years in Germany with Army intelligence during the Cold War era.

Returning to Chicago, Moritz worked as an accountant, then became vice president of aircraft finance at Chicago's Pullman Bank.

He and the former Claudette Lardeo married in 1958. She loathed the Midwestern winters, so 11 years later, they moved to Broward County. ``In 1972 or '73, he decided to go off on his own," Louis said. ``He bought a Piper Cub on floats. That's how he started:" buy and selling aircraft.

He loved his work and was proud of all he accomplished, Louis said.

He sold parts of the business to Allied Signal, which sold to Honeywell.

After Honeywell decided to close the plant, Moritz bought it back. ``He couldn't bear to see it closed," his son said.

Moritz was a Bank Desjardins of Florida director and founding member of B'nai Sephardim Synagogue; Claudette Moritz, his wife of 52 years, is Sephardic, from Morocco.

EDUCATION WAS KEY

Nothing mattered more to him than his four sons' education, Louis said.

“My parents said we could grow up to be anything we wanted -- as long as it was a doctor or lawyer.” He is the latter, two brothers the former, another heads Airpro Corp., an aerospace machine shop.

Ernest, a grandfather of nine, “was the man who, at the end of his days, would say, ‘I wish I'd spent a little more time in the office.’ The customers and vendors were his friends.”

In addition to his wife, brother, and son Louis, Moritz is survived by sons Jacques and Michael -- physicians in New York and Pittsburgh, respectively -- and son Marc, of Dania Beach. A funeral was held.

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