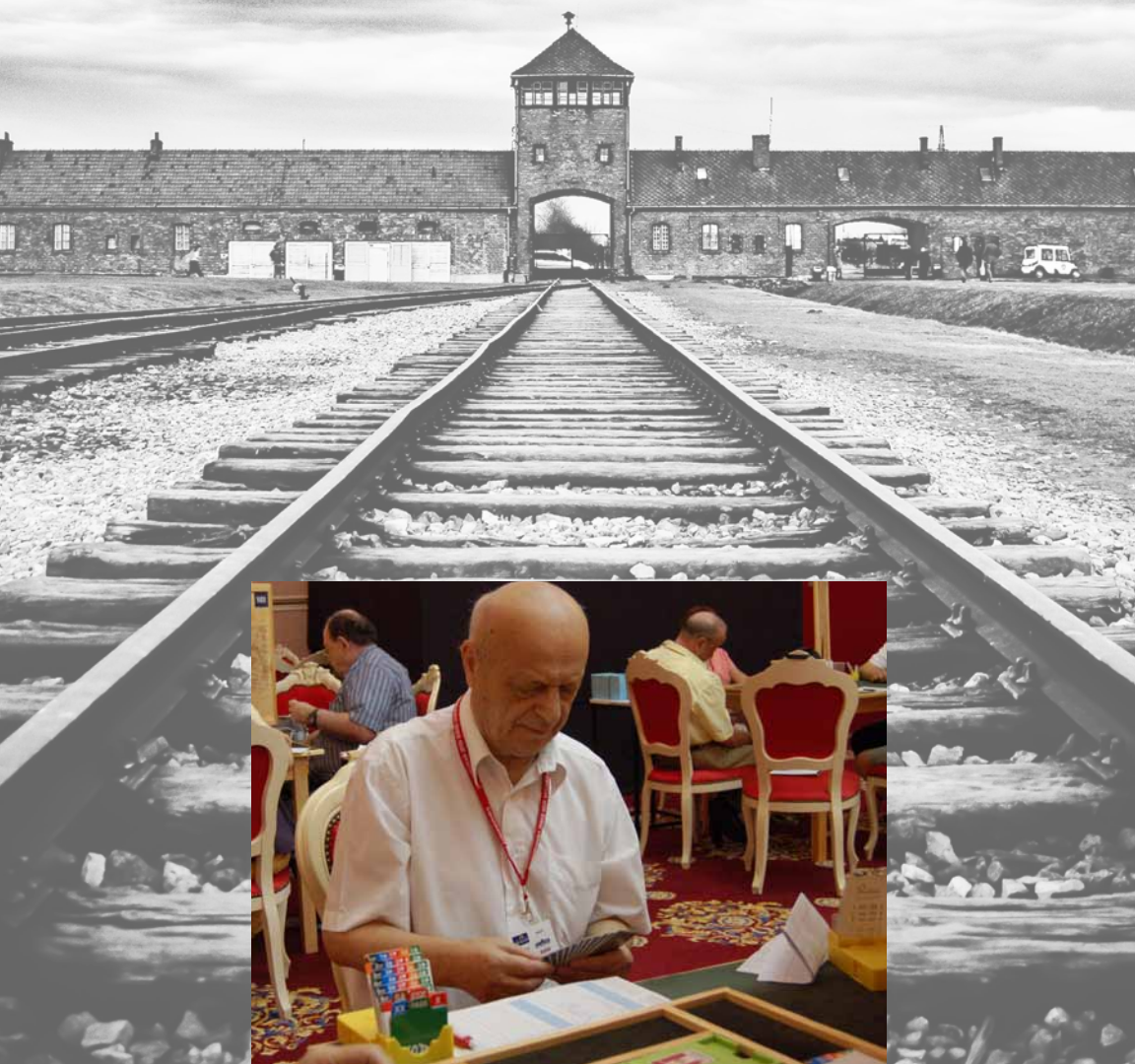


# BRIDGING TWO WORLDS

Martin Hoffman

*Foreword by Omar Sharif*



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Master Point Press • Toronto

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[www.teachbridge.com](http://www.teachbridge.com)  
[www.bridgeblogging.com](http://www.bridgeblogging.com)  
[www.ebooksbridge.com](http://www.ebooksbridge.com)

## Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Bridging two worlds / Martin Hoffman.

Names: Hoffman, Martin, 1929-2018

Description: Previously published: Bicester : Bound Biographies, ©2011.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 2019018003X | Canadiana (ebook) 20190180048  
| ISBN 9781771401999

(softcover) | ISBN 9781771403047 (PDF) | ISBN 9781554946938 (HTML) |  
ISBN 9781771408929 (Kindle)

Subjects: LCSH: Hoffman, Martin, 1929-2018 | LCSH: Bridge players—Great  
Britain—Biography. | LCSH:

Czechoslovaks—Great Britain—Biography. | LCSH: Holocaust survivors—  
Great Britain—Biography. |

LCSH: Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)—Personal narratives. | LCGFT: Auto-  
biographies.

Classification: LCC GV1282.26.H64 A3 2019 | DDC 795.41/5092—dc23

Editor Ray Lee  
Interior format/Cover design Sally Sparrow

# Publisher's Note

The original version of this book appeared in 2011. It was privately published, in a small edition, and does not even appear in the list of Hoffman's publications in Wikipedia. Martin Hoffman died in 2018, and Master Point Press is proud to be a part of bringing his story to a wider audience, with the assistance and blessing of Audrey, his wife of 41 years.

# Author's Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Eileen Lieron (née Rook) for all her many hours of work in helping with the manuscript of this book. Her experience as a teacher of children from difficult backgrounds was of immense help.

## Note from Audrey Hoffman

I wish to mention that Martin and I had the most wonderful marriage, with our love for each other stronger than our love for ourselves. I feel blessed to have met and married such a wonderful and beautiful, warm person as Martin.

# 2011 FOREWORD

by Omar Sharif

Martin faced years of unimaginable danger. His life was on the line daily, in ghettos, hiding, concentration camps and the horrors of the Death March. I believe that an angel must have descended from heaven to guard him, so that he could learn to play bridge and write the wonderful *More Tales of Hoffman*, which has brought pleasure to so many.

Martin has developed friendly relations with Palestinian Arabs, Egyptians (including President Nasser's son), Iranians, Pakistanis, Saudi Sheiks and other people of many different nationalities. He has a strong support for Israel too. This leads me to the belief that our game, bridge, can also be the catalyst that bridges between gender, race and creed.

My great friend and bridge partner, Leon Yallouze, introduced Martin Hoffman to me, in the late 1960s. By then, Martin was already establishing his reputation as a leading Pairs player in Europe. Our first partnership was in Juan le Pins. Martin agreed to play my favourite bidding system, the Italian Blue Club. Despite a few misunderstandings due to unfamiliarity with that system (Martin prefers natural bidding), we always remained in the top ten out of six hundred pairs. The next time we played together was in a British television series on 'bridge' for Channel 4. This time Martin was outstanding.

Over the years we have had many head-to-head clashes in Paris, Crans sur Siere, London and Monte Carlo with honours about even.

As a boy, Martin experienced horrendous suffering during the war. He lost everything. He lost his childhood, his home life and his loved ones. This is a story about a boy who went through 'hell' and emerged as an internationally famous and successful bridge player. His greatest success, however, is that despite everything, he still has decency and human feelings. I am proud to be Martin Hoffman's friend.

*Omar*



# DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my wife, Audrey,  
the loved-one who always stands by me;  
the loved-one who is allowed to stay.





*The Hoffman family  
in 1937.*

*Back (left to right):  
Toby, Herman,  
Shoshi. Middle:  
Martin, Beth.  
Front: Ben*

*Martin Hoffman in an American  
Army uniform, 1945*





*Wedding Day,  
July 14, 1977*

*August 1987 cover of English Bridge magazine, which featured an article on Martin Hoffman.*



*Left to right:  
Tony and Jane Priday,  
Martin Hoffman, Louis Alt*



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# Chapter 1

## The Turning of Light into Dark

A brilliant flash of light blinded me for a second. It was quite unexpected. Looking round, I could not see him. The after-image fixed in my eyes and followed wherever I glanced. Gradually, as it faded, I noticed a bevy of jostling females and a man with a large camera, the sort that professionals use. He looked inquiringly at me. "I do not know where he is. I cannot see him anywhere," I replied to the unasked question.

Still the man said nothing, so I continued, "He was right behind me a moment ago."

"No, Mr Hoffman, it is you that I want to interview this time," he said to me. "You are the winner aren't you? Congratulations." With that he held out his free hand to shake mine.

The inquiring statement gave me a double surprise. Firstly, I had not expected acknowledgement from a reporter. Normally, anything of that nature was reserved for Omar Sharif. The beautiful women, who had so eagerly inspected me when I passed through the door, confirmed it. For, when they saw it was me who had actually emerged, they lost interest immediately. Only one of them continued to look in my direction and that was just for a moment. The remainder reverted to talking between themselves, inspecting their nails or gazing at the door. Secondly, what really puzzled me was how the reporter knew about the result.

We had just finished filming a series of 14 episodes for Channel 4 television. This was based on a bridge challenge competition between eight players and I had won. The news was not public yet, for none of the series had been shown on the air. I did not expect anyone off set to have discovered the outcome.

The handsome film star, Omar Sharif is an exceptionally charming person and an excellent bridge player. Everyone seeks him out. As he was a contestant in the competition too, there were always people hanging around in wait for him. So when the reporter snapped the photograph, it did not occur to me that I might be the focus for the image.

"Yes."

"No."

"No."

“No.”

“No.”

After confirming that I was indeed the winner of the Point a Board Bridge Challenge, there were a number of questions that followed, to which I could not give answers in the affirmative. There was no intention on my part to be difficult, but the reporter was puncturing the elation of my success by his persistent quest for personal details.

Probing with questions was not meant to offend me, but neither was the time ripe for full answers. A hesitant, but gentle series of denials was my consistent response. To deal with them any other way would have knocked scabs off what had taken too long to form.

The reporter appeared to hold a number of popular misconceptions concerning those who play bridge, whether they are successful players or not. He seemed to think that bridge players came from comfortable backgrounds, that they were well-schooled, probably with a university education, that they were coached by other top players and had the support of their family. Perhaps this holds true for some but in my case it could not be further from the truth.

Curiosity showed in his eyes at my negative replies. He knew they were not intended to block him, but he also realised that persistence in the human interest area would elicit no further information. Taking a different tack he asked me why I was known as one of the best analysts of bridge hands in the world. Now, I could answer freely. The interview was concluded on an amicable note, allowing some of my original high to remain. Looking around, I scuttled away, making sure that no one else followed. There was something I just had to do.

The reporter had gone but the interview had resurrected thoughts that neither my success nor my exodus could suppress. The reasons for my negative responses disturbed me and lingered on. It was not until many years later that I felt able to delve into my past sufficiently to write about it in depth.

If it weren't for the Second World War, maybe my existence would have mirrored what he had indicated. However, the effects of Hitler's power dramatically changed the course of my life. It is amazing that one man's influence could have inextricably affected the lives of so many people.

I grew up in a conventionally middle class home, a much-loved child in a family of six: my mother, father, elder sister Shoshi, myself, younger sister Bessie and baby brother Ben. I regarded Blanche, our maid, as family too, for she was a warm, hard-working person. She did the washing, the cleaning and the cooking. My mother spent her time helping my father to run his wholesale provision business, so I was in Blanche's care for many hours of the day. I even slept with her. It was a very happy time for me. Then everything changed. Blanche had to go. I had loved her dearly.

Her departure happened quite suddenly. It was a few days after one of my friends had received a mini car for his sixth birthday. I had wanted one too but father was adamant and said, “No!”

This made me very unhappy. When I had almost recovered from my disappointment, I was suddenly presented with a lovely little car of my own. Mother said that it was a present from a friend. Never finding out who that friend might be, I reasoned it must have been my mother, who would just not let on. Mama was a kind person; it was the sort of thing that she would have done. I knew that Blanche could not have afforded to buy such a fine car.

About two days after the gift of my car, my mother announced that Blanche would leave us. We were to have a new maid. I was devastated. This was an era of, ‘not in front of the children,’ so I had received no prior warning and never really knew the reason why she had to go. Perhaps it was because she was the daughter of a Czech Army officer. Our home was a very strict one regarding the Jewish lifestyle and Kosher eating habits. Blanche was not qualified to prepare Kosher food.

My paternal grandfather, of whom I still have some hazy memories, had been a rabbi and a religious teacher. His huge white beard covered most of his features and dominated his face. Always close by him was a menacingly large rod. This he used when he wished to keep his students in order. The mere sight of it in the corner of the room, propped up on end, acted as a severe restraint to me.

My father also had strong ties with the synagogue. He was the honorary treasurer at the one where our family attended every Shabbat (Saturday). He made sure that I followed in the same path as my forebears. Religious Instruction was considered a necessity and I received it twice a week at the chapel opposite the historic Alt Neu Schul. This is the oldest synagogue in Europe, if not the world. I used to gaze at it and was fascinated by the tales the adults told of it. Tradition holds that the foundation stones are from the temple destroyed by the Romans.

With our family’s religious connections, my parents probably had a great deal of pressure put upon them to dismiss Blanche. I could not think of any other reason as to why she should have to leave. My mother was a good person and I knew she would never have willingly ended Blanche’s employment. I wished she had not. Perhaps Blanche was sad too, for, from time to time, she came back to visit us. Occasionally she visited especially to take me out, and then I was very pleased. In many ways, until Blanche left, my childhood was idyllic. However, bit-by-bit other changes occurred too.

I was born in Prague, on November 15, 1929, between the two world wars, at a time when Czechoslovakia was very much a democracy.

People could state clearly who they were and what they believed in. Sometimes passions might rise when confronted with deeply held convictions. I can still



remember the day when Uncle Jerry came home with many bruises and a cut on his lip.

The Authorities allowed public demonstrations. This meant that even the hated Nazis could parade openly. On this particular day, there had been a pro-Nazi demonstration in Prague. Apparently, Uncle Jerry was involved in a fight with one of the Nazi supporters. Although my uncle was a tough guy and in the Czech army, we were shaken by his appearance when he returned home from the demonstration. He tried to reassure us, by telling us that what had happened to him was nothing compared to what had happened to the others. I was very fond of Uncle Jerry and this made him a hero in my eyes.

Uncle Jerry was one of my mother's three brothers. The eldest was Uncle Morris, then came Uncle Jerry, and the youngest was called Jacob. He was just a little older than myself and was more like a brother to me. Jerry and Jacob came to stay with us quite a lot and I liked them both very much. It was not the case with Uncle Morris, however. He lived with us permanently and had a share in my father's business. While my mother and father never beat me, he would quite often; any excuse would do, even the slightest naughtiness.

My mother had three sisters as well as three brothers. She and they were all very pretty. Mother was the eldest, then Shiffra, followed by Hannah and the youngest was Rachel. My favourite was Shiffra. She was not only very beautiful but she also had a lovely nature. I loved her second only to my mama. As for my mama, I always thought that she had a special feeling for me (although she tried to treat us all equally) and I had a special feeling for her. Our relatives would visit us often, for we were a close family. However, it was my uncles that I had most to do with.

When they stayed at our apartment, Uncle Morris (the businessman) and Uncle Jerry used to go and visit many of the Russians who had large fruit orchards in the Carpathians. Even before the season began, they would go and buy produce from them. Later as the time came for picking the fruit, especially the nuts, I would set off with Uncle Jerry and Uncle Jacob to pick the nuts, pack them and send them away to Prague for sale. This was a very profitable arrangement.

Many of these fruit farms were in the mountains, where people lived a similar pattern of lifestyle from time immemorial. The money that we gave them for their produce was sufficient for them to buy all the necessities they might need. There was another benefit too. They might spend it in either my grandfather's shop or at Uncle Sam's. These shops were both in the nearby village of Horince. Uncle Sam was the leading businessman and, in addition to owning the largest store, he had a butter and cheese factory. He was my father's brother. Papa was the youngest of three and was very close to Sam. His other brother, my Uncle Chaim, on the other hand, was the black sheep of the family. He possessed a lot of real estate and had plenty of money, but always pleaded poverty. He was a proper villain.

One day, Mother suggested that Ben and I should go and stay with her parents in the Carpathians for a while. With relatives from both sides of the family living in the same village, she felt that we would be well cared for. I jumped at the chance, for I had spent many pleasant times nut-picking there. I was very adventurous and looked forward to the opportunity of going to stay in the mountains. Also, Uncle Sam had six children, three boys and three girls. Out of the boys (Lazar, Michael and Bernie), Lazar was my favourite and of the girls (Blanche, Leah and Betty) I liked Leah best; she was my favourite. She was cuddly, very pretty and I was to grow to love her as much as I did my real sisters, who remained with my parents. The other two girls were brilliant at school but were not good looking.

The ambition for all well-to-do Jewish families in that era was that their sons should receive a good education and their daughters marry a learned man. Jewish parents would work their fingers to the bone in order to give their children a better chance in life. Learning was a way to the top. You gained a little respect if you were a shrewd businessman, but you gained enormous adulation if you were a brilliant Talmudic scholar.

Mother wanted at least one of her children to have a university education and be learned, so it was decided to send my brother and myself to my maternal grandparents in the Carpathians. This would mean a strict, religious upbringing. For most Jewish families, life revolved around the synagogue and we conformed to that pattern. With a rabbi in the family and with Papa the honorary secretary at the synagogue, it was felt essential that these strong religious traditions of our family should be continued.

At this time, I was quite backward at school, which was a source of great disappointment to my father. I was never very close to him and felt that my naughtiness and lack of scholastic progress played a big part in the decision to send me away.

Happily, Ben was to go with me. My brother and I had a strong bond between us, although we were complete opposites. He was not very good academically but worked very hard, whereas I hated school, did not apply myself to lessons but was very bright.

So, that is how my brother Ben at the age of 5 and myself, at 7 years old, came to live in Horince in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. The village had a fierce reputation -- anyone originating from Horince was considered shrewd and often was referred to as a 'Horince Ganev' (Yiddish for 'Horince thief').

Maybe this toughness paid off, for the percentage of survivors from Horince after the Second World War was much larger than that of the surrounding villages, probably 100 out of 1,500 inhabitants. There is even an association of Horincers in New York. Other survivors from the village are scattered all over the world. London, Los Angeles and Israel are just a few of the places where they can be found. Most of them have been able to rebuild their lives and are doing very well.

At first it was great fun for us to stay with my grandparents. They ran the little shop in the village and sometimes we would help out in it. Everyone became very pleased with me, for suddenly I started to take an interest in my religious studies. Examining the Talmud was fascinating and absorbing for me, especially the part where the sayings of various rabbis are analysed. My teachers said that I was an outstanding scholar. By the age of 9, I had outdistanced all my contemporaries and was studying with boys of 15-16 years of age.

I became intensely religious, spending most of my time in contemplation. My faith and trust in the Omnipotent God was absolute, despite all the evidence of suffering that we had to endure. Nothing could shake my belief, as it was total. I never tried to question the reason or the purpose of what God was doing. Reward and punishment was the basis of our belief. Our religion imbued us with a conviction of treating other human beings as God's children... we must treat them as we would wish to be treated ourselves.

When I was young, I was punished when I was naughty and rewarded when I was good. Now that I was older, it was God who did the punishment and reward. I have often thought about the paradox of humanity, where some men are decent and almost Godlike, whereas others behave worse than even the lowest forms of life.

Having been separated from my family at such an early age, I badly missed them all, especially my mother and my two sisters. At first, I had been very excited at the prospect of staying in the Carpathians -- it had sounded like an adventure! Soon, I was quite restless and very homesick. I desperately wished I was back in Prague. This restlessness has stayed with me even unto this day. My love for my family was so great that I often felt that I would have gladly given my life for them if they were in danger.

In the spring of 1939, Mother came from Prague and stayed in Horince for a whole week with my brother Ben and myself. Oh, what a joy! It was a very happy time to have Mama with me again. Something I will never forget. When she left, my whole world seemed a little darker. Although I did not know it then, it was the last time that I would ever see her.

## ONE MAN'S JOURNEY FROM DARKNESS TO THE LIGHT...

*I could see SS men with machine guns guarding the line of people, people waiting to go into the showers. 'Don't look; there is nothing you can do about it... You are a man. Be strong.' Not daring to tell them that I was only 14, I bit back the tears, but I did not cry. And so it was that I became a man. That line was my Bar Mitzvah.*

Fourteen-year-old Martin Hoffman escapes immediate death on arrival at Auschwitz by claiming to be eighteen. Through a combination of chutzpah and luck, he first survives a year at Auschwitz, then the Death March to Buchenwald, and stays alive until the camp is liberated by American troops. He goes back to Czechoslovakia to search for his family, only to find that, other than one uncle and aunt, they have all been murdered.

After relocating to England, he is tortured by survivor's guilt, which leads to episodes of deep depression. He learns a trade (diamond-cutting), but eventually discovers two things: a talent for bridge, and a fascination with gambling. As he finds success with the first, becoming a world-class professional player, the second almost destroys him.

It is only later in life, with the help of his wife Audrey, that Hoffman is able to overcome his dark memories, conquer his addiction to gambling, and finally find contentment in a new life in Florida.

**MARTIN HOFFMAN** (1929-2018) was a Czech-born bridge player and writer (he was the author of eight books on the game). The winner of many top events in the UK, he was regarded at his peak as the best duplicate pairs player in Europe.