**United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**William Helmreich Oral History CollectionPRIVATE**

**Interview with Herbert Kalter**

**September 1, 1989**

**RG-50.165\*0050PREFACE**

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Herbert Kalter, conducted by William Helmreich on September 1, 1989 as research for his book *Against all odds: Holocaust survivors and the successful lives they made in America.* The interview was given to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on Oct. 30, 1992 and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.**HERBERT KALTER**

**September 1, 1989**

Herbert Kalter is showing me a piece of brown soap that he has saved for 50 years as a memento of the camps.

HK: I was in Birkenau and on the Death March. I marched from Birkenau to Buchenwald. Every January 19th, Norbert Wollheim and a group of us – we go out to dinner to celebrate the day we left Birkenau. I’ve only gone in the last several years but there are about six or eight of us. Before the last few years we didn’t go because everyone was busy with their own things.

WH: When you get together, what do you usually talk about?

HK: Mundane things but sometimes you make references to the camps. We remember, for example, how three fellows who ran away were hung. One of them was Freddy Diamet’s brother. He lives in California.

WH: Where were you born?

HK: In Leipzig, Germany, in 1926. On October 28, 1938, along with other Jews of Polish origin, my father was sent back to Poland. My mother fainted at the border and so they moved her ahead. If not for this, we might have been sent back to Germany and perhaps from there we might have escaped to America. They gave him two hours to pack. We ended up in his home town, Tarnow. My grandfather was born in Lancut. I was in the same camp as Abe Krieger’s father. I stayed four weeks in Birkenau because it was basically a transit camp. Everyone went there first to be quarantined. The old-timers were in Auschwitz. If you survived the first few weeks in Birkenau, you had a good chance. Anyway, we had the idea that we would be big heroes and it was nothing. Only my brother and I survived. We were in Paris after the war and came to America because my uncle sent us papers. We left from Cherbourg on the SS Marine Floyd. And no one helped us, so we did some black market business to pay for our passage.

WH: Where did you arrive?

HK: In Baltimore on July 4, 1946. No one was there to pick us up. It was very hot and we were wearing these heavy suits. There was a mix-up and my uncle wasn’t there. So we took the train ourselves to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

WH: How did you manage to get there by yourselves?

HK: *A katzetnik gibt sich an eitzah*. You also have to be able to improvise.

WH: Do you ever say that when something goes wrong?

HK: You don’t want to think about the past. You want to forget it and look to the future. But I’m basically a pessimist. You know why? Because in my life, whatever could go wrong, did. Nothing ever went right.

WH: On the other hand, you’re here.

HK: That’s right. And we brought up three lovely children. My daughters went to public school through high school and Stern College. Each one married a very religious boy. My son went to Y.U.H.S. and then N.Y.U. and has an M.A. in Business Administration and works for Phillip Brothers in the Metals Division. One son—in-law works for Phibro Energy and the other is a financial analyst for Texaco. My oldest daughter lives in Hillcrest and my other daughter lives in West Hempstead. My son lives in Forest Hills. All my children are observant.

WH: How does one adapt to life after the war?

HK: First, it’s a blessing that people can forget. Also, you’re often so busy that you don’t have time to think. You’re trying to make a living. Sometimes when things bother me, I say, why should it bother me? Like now, I’m going through a hard period. And I say to myself, why am I worried? I worked very hard physically since I came here in ’46. But it’s human nature. The setbacks bother me more lately than before.

HK: I always said to my children I’d have loved to go to college. As a matter of fact, I went to night school when I came here. And I went to City College (downtown) for two years at night. They wanted me to matriculate, but I didn’t want to. I went to George Washington H.S. at night and graduated from there. There we had a group of survivors and we hung out together.

WH: What were your first impressions of America in Harrisburg?

HK: We were overwhelmed. My uncle had a house and put us in the attic and we were so impressed, but subsequently when we went back to Harrisburg, this house got smaller and smaller and the neighborhood got lousier and lousier.

WH: Were you observant then?

HK: No. It was very hard then. We were observant in Leipzig.

WH: What about the religious questions people raised about the war?

HK: I still ask them. I returned because of my wife who came from a very religious home. She wouldn’t have married me unless I promised to keep Shabbos. She’s from Berlin. I didn’t mind because we were brought up like this. But I have my doubts. I do it because it’s a way of life. But if I wouldn’t do it, I could live just as well. My brother is not observant. He lives in Bellmore. He’s traditional. He says he’d love to keep Shabbos if it fell on Wednesday.

WH: It seems that for many people, religion is more a form of community.

HK: But I find that today’s children are more religious than the parents. I tell my children, it’s not whether this or that is kosher. You have to see the whole picture. It’s not such a terrible thing if you put on the light on Shabbos. In the realm of things, what difference does it make: When I got married and my wife told me she doesn’t answer the phone on Shabbos, I thought it was the stupidest thing I ever heard. And I still believe so, even though we have a machine. But I do it because it gives sholom bayis a certain way of life. But it wouldn’t bother me to pick up the phone on Shabbos. Okay, now, I’d probably feel terribly guilty picking up the phone on Shabbos, out of habit. But when you think about it, what terrible sin is it? All these little things. There are certain rabbis who make it their business to out-frum each other. They think of nothing else and don’t see the whole picture, to live with menschlichkeit.

HK: I don’t care what anybody says. There was no camp worse than Birkenau. We had to lie in those big rooms, 500 people to a room, 7 to a bunk, three tiers. And they had this big oven in the middle where they used to put your head in to punish you and then give you fifteen lashes. And during the day, we had to carry big rocks. And every evening we would come back and fifteen people would be dead, shot by the S.S., beaten by the dogs. How old was I, fifteen? Seventeen?

WH: How could you retain your humanity in the face of that assault?

HK: Right. You try to survive. And what did we eat? A little bowl of soup and a piece of bread. And you traded it for socks because you couldn’t walk with the Buna shoes they gave you. And you had to put rags on your feet so you didn’t have too many boils.

WH: Did you see instances where people rose above this and tried to help each other?

HK: No. Very little. Everybody tried to survive by himself.

WH: How were you able to trust people afterward when you came to America?

HK: You’re right. That’s why we were very disappointed when we came here. One of my first jobs was going door to door working for someone who had a junkyard. Then my brother and I got jobs in the fur market through people who knew my parents.

WH: What did you do in your spare time?

HK: I went to night school and on the weekends I went out with girls. I hung out with a group of other survivors on the West Side at a place called Tikvath Israel. It was in the Herzeliah Institute.

WH: Would you buy a German car?

HK: No, but we probably have Rosenthal dishes. I don’t think I’d go back to Germany. We were invited by my wife’s hometown, but I’m not sure. I was in Switzerland last year and it bothered me seeing all those German people.

WH: When you first came and you had time to yourself, did you ever think: ‘What’s the point in going on living?’

HK: Yes, many times.

WH: Wasn’t there a feeling of being totally defenseless?

HK: Yes, that’s why I hate to sit in traffic. I can’t stand waiting in line. I feel so helpless. I’m trapped. As long as I feel I’m in control, I don’t mind driving much longer. But this may not have anything to do with being a survivor. In general, if you follow other people, that’s the end. It was that way in the camps. You had to think for yourself. When I got to Auschwitz, I said my father and I fixed typewriters even though I had only cleaned typewriters. In general, I don’t like it when people say this is the way it has to be. I don’t accept that.

WH: You went to Israel in 1949?

HK: Yes, because I thought I might want to settle there. I was very Zionistic, already in Europe before the war. It was about eight months after the war. We went on the SS Marine Carp. We had a wonderful time on the boat, all nice Jewish boys. I have a movie of it, how we’re singing Hebrew songs. I had a brother here, so I didn’t go on aliya. I just went to look. We stayed on different kibbutzim, my friend and I. We sailed into Haifa. But when I came back here, I felt more at home in America, because my brother and friends were here. And relatives had come here from South America. Altogether, I stayed in Israel two and a half months. I didn’t like the kibbutz as a place to live because the regimentation reminded me of the war.

WH: Can you ever trust people again after what you went through?

HK: I’m very distrustful. Most people do what’s good for them. I don’t know how many Jews would do what some Christians did when they saved Jews. I don’t know if I would. If I had a situation where a colored fellow runs into my house, he’s being persecuted, I don’t know if I would put my life on the line to save him.

WH: Do you think Jews are less altruistic than others?

HK: Depends on the individual. That’s why the Israelis are so cocky. They think no one will help them. I like Israel; I don’t like the people. The taxi drives are rude. They try to beat you for a dollar. The people there annoy me terribly.

WH: What was your wedding like?

HK: Shimon Wincelberg, my wife’s brother, lives in California. So we flew to California to get married. It was a small wedding. We make big weddings for our children. But I always feel guilty about being happy, about letting myself go.

WH: Where did you live after the wedding?

HK: In Forest Hills.

WH: What do you do today?

HK: I sort skins within garments. It’s a specialty. It’s hard work because I’m on my feet all day. But with the Korean imports, business became very slow.

WH: How come you moved to Great Neck?

HK: We were looking for a shul and the house cost me $36,000 in 1959. I liked the house. They had a day school.

WH: Do you have long-term effects from the Holocaust?

HK: I have a terrible reaction to Clorox. I hate it because it reminds of when they used to put the bodies, stacked one on top of the other. But when I think of what I went through, I think: “Why should I be annoyed that I’m not working now?” But there are a lot of things that bother you and you weren’t in the camps.

WH: What did you learn from the whole experience?

HK: People are selfish and have to be to survive.

WH: Does that mean that those who weren’t selfish didn’t survive?

HK: Most of the time, yes. Also luck. If the war had lasted another three months, I probably wouldn’t have survived.

WH: Were religious people more inclined to help each other or others?

HK: I don’t think so. The only thing you though about was to make it through the day.

WH: How does one overcome tremendous suffering?

HK: Try to live your life as normally as possible because if you try to live in the past, you can’t live your life. People who can’t sleep, they still live in the past. I dread retirement.

WH: Do you dream about the war?

HK: Many times.

WH: Do you talk to your children about the war?

HK: Yes, I have no trouble talking about it.

WH: What do you think of psychiatrists?

HK: After the war, I went to one from the German government in 1952. They didn’t know about survivors then. How come they don’t interview me now? Maybe I’m entitled to a bigger pension. At that time, I got $1,200 - $1,500.

HK: Another thing that bothers me is why don’t the survivor organizations open homes for people that didn’t do well, who are suffering, old and didn’t make it. Everybody talks about the past. How about the present? There should be an old age home for survivors. It would be much better for them if they were all together.

WH: Do you ever regret that you didn’t go into business for yourself?

HK: Yes, I do. Also my uncle said to go to college. I’m sorry I didn’t.

WH: Do you think Americans understand what happened?

HK: Not really. But, on the other hand, people read about Cambodia in the paper today and then they turn to the sports or financial pages and forget about it. I can see that that’s what happened during the war. People want to know if the Yankees won. Unless you’re personally involved and had, maybe, relatives there, who gives a damn?

Conclusion of Interview

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