**United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**William Helmreich Oral History CollectionPRIVATE**

**Interview with Isaac Kowalski and Masha Kowalski**

**December 13, 1989**

**RG-50.165\*0056**

**PREFACE**

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Isaac Kowalski and Masha Kowalski, conducted by William Helmreich on December 13, 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.**ISAAC KOWALSKI AND MASHA KOWALSKI**

**December 13, 1989**

WH: When did you come here?

IK: In 1951, by plane. I met my wife in Sweden in 1948. After the war I was one of the Bricha leaders along with Abba Kovner and Nisn Resnick.

WH: How come you didn’t go to Israel?

IK: My wife wanted to go to the U.S. with her three sisters who already had papers to

come here.

MK: I had a student affidavit to go to Bais Yaakov through Rabbi Jacobson in Sweden. But then the visa was delayed and I didn’t go that way. I got married and he discouraged me because he didn’t want me to work, to be a teacher.

WH: When were you born?

IK: 1920 in Lithuania. My parents had a printing business in Vilna.

MK: 1927, near Lodz, in Brzeziny.

WH: What did you do when you came here?

IK: I wanted to go into the printing business here with the Forward. I couldn’t get into the Jewish union. (He is reluctant to discuss this. Perhaps his political views were not left-wing enough. He says it had, perhaps, something to do with overtime.) I worked for the Wall Street Journal, where it was very good. They gave me a break taking into consideration my background. Then I worked for The Daily News.

IK: I’m resigning from this interview because what you want to know about is not important to me. I want to talk about my wartime activities. I could tell you half a book about that.

WH: I’ll write about that too but I want to combine it with after the war. Do you feel your life ended after the war? Didn’t you have children and everything?

IK: Yes, but everybody did this. I managed.

WH: But tell me the part I can’t read about. Do you think you see life differently because of how you went through the war? You weren’t humiliated like people in Auschwitz were? Are your children proud of what you did?

IK: They know about it but they’re not involved. We raised three children. All of them did well, went to school, and have good jobs. They all married Jews. We have five grandchildren.

WH: How long did it take to put together these three volumes?

IK: I began collecting this material after the war ended and have been working on this continuously. I don’t go to shul every day and I don’t play cards. I do only this in my spare time.

WH: Do you feel people here failed to appreciate what you did during the war?

MK: They couldn’t understand.

IK: I wouldn’t say I suffered. I had what to eat, where to sleep, but I wasn’t received the way I should have been. Everybody had problems then.

WH: Do you think that today you’re receiving the recognition?

IK: Yes, sure, sure, sure. (He then shows me his journal.) But in those days, I expected that the Jewish union would give me a break. I didn’t expect help from Italians, but these were Jews.

WH: How were you able to resist when so many couldn’t?

IK: I got lucky. Many others tried but failed. We happened to be a couple of meshugayim (crazy people).

WH: Do you belong to any social organizations?

IK: We belong to a survivor’s group called Masada. They are made up of survivors, mostly from Brooklyn. They have affairs where they give coffee and a cake and they’re packed. Shlomo Zynstein is the president. All types of survivors come. It’s on Farragut Road. Sometimes the children of the survivors come if, say, a parent is honored. When I come to these affairs, they introduce me as an important person because of the books I write. But it embarrasses me and I told them I wouldn’t come if they don’t stop doing this.

WH: What achievement are you proudest of?

IK: That I met my wife.

WH: I thought you were going to tell me that it was that you fought back?

IK: This? This is natural. I knew another man he was a printer but he ended up working for the Gestapo. He has a lot of people on his conscience. So this shows that you can go one way and you can go another way.

WH: Are you happy that you wound up in America and not Israel?

IK: I should have gone to Israel. This is the true story. It just happened that I came here. The whole business with the hundreds of thousands of people who came through the Bricha started with three people in my apartment, in Vilna. This part is interesting. But I don’t want to have printed the story with the unions because I don’t want people should say that the Jewish organizations didn’t do anything to help their own people. And I’ll tell you, 90% of what the people say they did as partisans is baloney, made up stories. Some people were partisans for a week, a month, or a day; some were just peeling potatoes for the partisans. I’ll give you my book and you’ll have a good idea of what the partisans in Vilna did.

Conclusion of Interview

**Interviewer Notes**

Isaac Kowalski is a true war hero. He was a partisan in Lithuania during the war. As described in his book, A Secret Press in Nazi Europe, (Shengold, 1978, paperback), he built and published from a secret press, leading the Nazis to post a 100,000 Reichsmark reward for his capture. He showed great courage and leadership abilities during this period and felt that nothing that happened in America could measure up to the excitement of those years in terms of the prestige he had.

He has published a monumental three volume anthology that he edited, titled, Anthology on Armed Resistance, 1939-1945 (Jewish Combatants Publisher’s House, Brooklyn, N.Y., 1988 (?). He also publishes a journal dealing with resistance called Jewish Combatants of World War Two.

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