**United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**William Helmreich Oral History CollectionPRIVATE**

**Interview with Albert Schimel and Helen Schimel**

**December 13, 1989**

**RG-50.165\*0102**

**PREFACE**

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Albert Schimel and Helen Schimel, 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.**ALBERT SCHIMEL AND HELEN SCHIMEL**

**December 13, 1989**

WH: Were you always interested in music?

AS: I was interested from childhood. My father played the fiddle and he started me

out. I wanted to be a musician. I was born in 1911. I went to the Vienna

Conservatory when I was eleven. By eighteen I played professionally. I studied

for the baccalaureate. I finished school at 22. My parents were furriers. At age

24, I went to Vienna University to study musicology. I realized you needed more

than just being able to play music. There were so many musicians in Vienna. I

wanted a teaching position but all this was interrupted by 1938. I then went to

Luxembourg and worked in a radio orchestra. I was then able to bring my parents

out of Vienna and they eventually went to Antwerp. In 1940 I joined my family

in Antwerp. My father died in 1940. I went into the fur industry. From there my

mother and I went to Brussels. From Belgium we went to Nice, France. I hid out

in a Rome monastery.

WH: Do you ever discuss the theological reasons for the Holocaust together, as a couple?

HS: No. There’s nothing to talk about. I believe that whatever God did, He had His

reasons. Either you believe or you don’t. Jewish people before this era were

also slaughtered.

WH: Where were you born?

HS: In Germany. My parents were from Poland. My mother was from Rzeswow

(Jeshuv). I was taken from Germany to Poland by the Nazis. I was put on a train

to Broiten near the border. It was in 1938. I was born in 1918.

WH: Did you continue your musical career here in the U.S.?

AS: No, because I couldn’t keep Shabbos if I played in an orchestra. I went into the

fur business. I learned gradually. I never went back to music. I play, but only

with friends as a hobby. Also when I got married I couldn’t travel because I

wanted to have a family and bring the kids up religious. (compare with Petrushka

#154)

WH: Have you ever run into any survivors who played in concentration camp

orchestras?

AS: No. Very few of those survived. I only met a professional player who is a

survivor once and he actually was a refugee who came before the war.

WH: Could a Holocaust happen here?

HS: Yes, if you have a person like Jesse Jackson as President. He makes me very

nervous. He reminds me of Hitler’s voice with his screaming. He speaks like

Hitler used to speak, his angry way of speaking.

WH: What kind of work did you do here?  
  
HS: I worked for *Time* magazine for nineteen years as manager of (the) book

purchasing department. But I only went to work there after the children were

older. And I always identified as a Jew even during the time when most didn’t. I

didn’t even realize Henry Grunewald was Jewish until after several years when he

happened to say something about it. But they respected me. At first they said:

“You know, because of you we have to change the rules here about holidays.”

But later on they took in some other religious people and when I retired, they

made a big catered party and they had a table for me with food from Lou G.

Siegels. When other Jews saw that I got so much respect for being identified

from the gentiles that they, too, began to admit openly that they were Jews.

WH: So how did you get to America?

AS: We went first to Oswego from Italy. The idea was we would go there until the war ended and then go back to Europe.

WH: How has the war affected you in the long run?

HS: What I would like to do is have some money or something somewhere where

nobody can touch it…in case. I’m scared…in that way.

WH: How did the war affect you in the long term?

AS: It’s very difficult to speak about it because, as Dr. Hillel Seidman once said,

“There’s no beginning and no end.” American Jews can’t understand it. I never

spoke about it to my children. David once asked me and I said, “Where shall I

start? How can you condense it into a tape?”

WH: Do you dream about the war?

AS: No.

HS: Not any more.

WH: What happens when you go back to visit Europe?

AS: When I visited Nice, I felt fear again. But Vienna, where I was raised, is to me

the strangest city. It is so different now because there are no Jews. I only went

back to go to the cemetery.

WH: You love music, don’t you?

AS: For me, playing the fiddle is more than a hobby. It’s a passion. I must play

several hours a day. I practice as often as I can. But I couldn’t make a career if it

because I was too afraid of losing my *Yiddishkeit*.

Conclusion of Interview

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