Jack & Millie Werber, 12-6-89

WH: What does the society do?

JW: The Radomer Cultural Center takes members from the New York Metropolitan Area, including Connecticut and Jew Jersey. Then there is United Radomer Relief, started 60 years ago to help Radomer all over the world. Now nobody is left from these old-timers. So we are the ones who did it.

WH: Did the society welcome you when you came here?

MW: There were seven Radomer organizations here when we came. There were 35,000 in Radom before the war. Each immigration brought in a new group. Each new group couldn’t understand the one before. There were also political differences. There was no religious group that was separate. Those that came in the 20s and 30s weren’t religious. They were to the left, like the Bund.

WH: Are you religious?

MW: No. We sent our kids to the Sholom Aleichem schools. We came from religious backgrounds but after the war we couldn’t be religious.

JW: We saw too much. We saw too much. We’d like to believe, but we can’t. I spoke to tens and tens of rabbis. Why did they kill the children?

WH: Does it bother you that the religious seem so stubborn in their beliefs? Does it get on your nerves?

MW: Very much so.

JW: Both our sons are religious. We’re happy about that because it means they stay Jewish.

MW: A few years ago we made the kitchen kosher for the grandchildren. David’s wife, Ellen, went to Stern College and it began with her. Martin had something in him. He went to yeshiva in Brooklyn. The boys are in business with us.

WH: When were you born?

JW: In 1914. I’m 75.

MW: I was born in 1927.

WH: What business are you in?

JW: Real estate. Apartment houses in Queens, many of which we build ourselves. I had a brother here before I came; he was 32 years older than me. He had factories that made uniforms. I was liberated in Buchenwald where I was for 5.5 years. Of the 3,200 that came in our transport, eleven remained. I wasn’t the smartest or the strongest. it was coincidence. I did a little but I was lucky. They gave us three months to live when we came. They gave us bread to eat with glass in it. They told my father I had died and they could pick up the ashes by paying for it. My father buried me and a little later he died, maybe from the aggravation.

WH: Where were you?

MW: In Birkenau-Auschwitz, for six months. We came as ammunition workers. I never thought I’d be free. I just thought about how I was going to die. I didn’t expect to live through it.

WH: So when you came here, your brother was a successful manufacturer of uniforms.

JW: He lived in Beacon, N.Y. He gave us the affidavit and we came on the second boat, the Marine Perch. He waited for us with a sign: “Werber.”

MW: And I didn’t have a good impression of America because we heard that HIAS sold tickets to people to come see us at the pier, like we were in a zoo. I also remember we went to Beacon and it was very hot. So we stopped to get something to drink and we felt he was very uncomfortable going out with us. When we arrived at his house, his wife looked me over and they didn’t give us anything to eat. They sent us to make the beds. I was taking a bath and I saw that they put in a disinfectant like we had lice, in the tub. I knew this because he said: “Don’t wash your face with this water because it has medicine in it.” When I heard that I felt very bad. They had a fifteen room house and they were only a couple.

JW: I had brought presents for them----a camera, a gold cigarette case, a good ring. When they showed up the next morning in bathrobes, I felt they didn’t think much of us.

MW: We stayed there for three weeks but it felt like thirty years.

JW: My brother drank a lot. And when he introduced me, he said: “This is my brother who came over from the other side. He cost me four bottles of whiskey already.” In other words, he had to listen to my stories so much. And he always introduced us as greenhorns.

MW: And these people looked at us, as if to say: “How come my brother didn’t survive and you did?” In other words, we had to apologize for surviving. So I didn’t want to talk about it; so I put a bandage on my number so I wouldn’t have to talk about it. They were so ignorant; they asked such stupid questions. My sister-in-law asked me if they gave us orange juice in Auschwitz! And she never even asked what happened to her family. She had a whole family in Europe. So maybe, I think now, their conscience bothered them. Then, because I knew I had an accent and everything, we moved to an all-Jewish neighborhood in the Bronx. And one time I went into a bakery and asked for sponge cake and I didn’t know the right word. And right away she said: “Greenhorn!” It was on Charlotte Street. You heard of it (Jimmy Carter visited it.)

And were we lived, we did everything in this room. It was the living room, bedroom, and dining room. It was a very small room. Then we took an apartment on Lewis Street. There the bathtub was in the kitchen. There was no hot water or heat. We bought two electrical heaters. We put the baby when he was first born, in a drawer with a pillow. We didn’t get a crib until later.

WH: Where did you work?

JW: I went to the fur market on Seventh Ave and 30th St. i learned from the camps that it didn’t matter if you were a doctor or a lawyer. I look for the person themselves. A truck driver can talk with anybody. With a trade person you can have a favor. The professionals in the camps were the most selfish, they were the squealers. They sold you out. They didn’t wash themselves. They couldn’t take chances. It wasn’t like here where a boy from any home can become a professional. In Europe only someone from an affluent family could become a professional. The professionals were the dirtiest people among us. When they got a job, they were more likely to become murderers. The plain people, if they were kapos, they took chances and looked away. This is a proven thing.

WH: Was there a difference among nationalities?

MW: We personally had difficulties with the German Jews. They told us that they suffer because of us. They said the immigrants who came to Germany from Poland were the worst. There was also not a good relationship with the Hungarians but with the German Jews it was worse.

WH: Let’s go back to the work question.

JW: I began doing piece-work with muskrats. it was so hard at first with the unions and the prejudice against the greener, that I would have gone back to, say, a Western European country if I could have. I didn’t like to work for a boss, for someone standing over me. Those who had a trade stayed still. A tailor remained a tailor.

WH: How strongly do you support Israel?

MW: We go every year. We’ve already built four clinics there. We’ve built them in Ramat Chen, Moshava Germanit in Jerusalem on Rechov Ruth 6. We also built a clinic in Kiryat Motzkin. The Radomer gave the money. We give a part of it and we also work with the Histadrut.

JW: I’m President of the Radomer Relief, the umbrella organization of all Radomer organizations in the U.S. and Canada. We have groups in L.A., Miami, Toronto, Montreal. We collect money to send our old sick Radomer landsleyt money in Israel.

WH: Are all of your four best friends survivors?

JW: Mostly. We have new friends, but they’re not the same.

WM: You asked about the Radomer. When we came here, there were seven Radomer societies, but they thought we were less than them because they were here longer. But these people actually didn’t know anything. They only knew how to go from their houses on the Lower East Side to work and back. When they saw we were going to Times Square after one week, they said: “Look at the greenhorns. They travel already; they know how to go already.” They saw us as being brighter or more intelligent, I don’t know what.

WH: Did they offer to help you when you came here?

JW: Naw. The Relief group, they gave some people, maybe a couple of dollars.

WH: When you get together with the Radomer, what do you talk about?

JW: Oh, we remind ourselves about the war, about before the war. We feel like family with them. When we make a bar mitzvah or a wedding we invite them.

MW: When we get an invitation from them, there is no such thing that we wouldn’t go because we know they need us. We can talk open with them, I don’t even know how to put it.

JW: We understand each other. We have a special room in Beit Hatfutsot.

WH: How come your society is so successful?

JW: Because in our society most of the people, not me, they suffered together in the Radom Ghetto. Other societies came from here, from there. There are people from around Radom who also belong to our society. Every month except January, February, July, and August, we have a meeting. The best attended one is when we go out to the Montefiore Cemetery between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, where we have a monument.

MW: We don’t have graves but all the names are on the monument. And you have to see how when we go over and we touch the names on the monument, we feel a connection. We brought some soil from Auschwitz and put it there. Our regular meetings are held on the West Side Jewish Center, on 34th Street, between 8th and Ninth Avenues. We have the meeting in the synagogue.

WH: Do you have Orthodox people in the society?

MW: Yes, they’re not too involved, but they come. And we serve kosher food at the meetings. And we have a paper called The Voice of Radom.

WH: So what happened with the business?

JW: I took my own place on Ave C making trimmings on collars. I borrowed $1,000 dollars and my partner, an American, also put in $1,000. Then we sold earmuffs. It was a big struggle. I worked 25 hours a day. I never saw the children awake.

WH: What did you say to all this?

MW: What could I say? I knew we had to do it.

JW: Then came Davy Crockett, we started with the coonskin caps. I was the Davy Crockett King and Daniel Boone also. We were looking for ways because the trimming business was no good. We took different lofts. They came with trucks, they were selling like hot potatoes. We couldn’t make them fast enough. I found different methods to do it, not like a furrier is doing it. When we didn’t have the fur for the whole hat, I took plastic tops, made a picture of Davy Crockett, printed it in gold....we did a lot of things. I was the packer, the sender; we took in girls, Puerto Ricans, they didn’t know anything about furs. Then there weren’t enough raccoons. So we found them in warehouses, where they had old raccoon coats that were lying around from the 1920s, when they were in style. We bought and cleaned them. We sold the hats at twelve dollars a dozen. And then I invented a mouse in box with a hole at the bottom of the box. Then you put your finger in the hole, and you moved the mouse. It was made from rabbits.

MW: And you make mink coats for dogs.

JW: Yeah, for dogs. I also invented a method using a shoemaker’s machine instead of a furrier’s machine to make what looked like the head of a fox but was really a rabbit, as a hat. We invented a machine that put both eyes in at once.

WH: How many Davy Crockett hats did you sell?

JW: We made a thousand dozen a week, 12,000 to 20,000 hats a week. After a while we used rabbits and we made the tails from rabbit skins. We couldn’t get enough raccoons. We painted them.

WH: I’m trying to remember if the one I had was real.

JW: You see, we are raised to do a job that we don’t like, to make a living. Here in America, people do what they like. They go to school.

MW: And the Davy Crockett business didn’t end good. The whole thing stopped and we got stuck with a lot of hats.

JW: Then we moved to Jackson heights and we bought a house. A friend lent me the money and we bought a three family house there and we rented the apartments out. Then I saw it was a good business and I thought why should I struggle with the furs? We rented to the stewardesses and the pilots. Then friends came to me to buy for them. In a short time we had maybe 32 houses.

MW: They trusted him and they made money on it. It was an investment for them. There were 51 partners. Today we own 25 apartment buildings and a shopping center in Armonk. We sold the private houses because it was too much work. The children manage the business and they’re building; they’re building hotels. They built a hotel on Greenpoint Avenue from an old school. It’s now a Best Western across from a cemetery.

WH: To what do you attribute your success?

JW: Hard work and good luck and good friends.

MW: Our people are very cautious people. Their money is their security and they don’t part with it so easily. So it was very gratifying to us that they supported us. But the survivors did well because they took chances. There was no help from anyone.

WH: What about the Russians who come here?

MW: They don’t come poor. They all come with money. They have businesses and they know how to do business. And they don’t practice as Jews.

WH: Do you belong to survivor groups?

JW: Yes. I’m on the committee with Ben Meed’s organization but they don’t do much.

MW: They don’t do anything.

JW: The few gatherings they made were very nice.

MW: I don’t believe in him because it’s an ego involvement.

JW: He didn’t go through the whole camps. He was outside the ghetto. [Sonia Pilcer’s hierarchy]

MW: And he is quite a dictator. he wouldn’t let anybody next to him. He pushes away a lot of people that want to work with him.

JW: I wouldn’t fight with him.

MW: He’s not doing anything. When he made the gatherings in Israel and Washington, that was wonderful. But when he started to go to Philadelphia and Canada, it made no sense. In Israel it was wonderful. Begin spoke to us at the Wall and this was a night to remember as long as I live. For the first time I didn’t feel a need to explain why I survived. he said that we don’t owe anyone an explanation. He was a beautiful orator.

WH: What is the most significant thing you did in your lives?

JW: That we had children. Who would have imagined that we would have grandchildren forty years later?

MW: And that my grandchildren are religious; that’s unimaginable. It’s easier to believe than not to believe. Any many times I want to but I can’t. I listened as my granddaughter read the story in synagogue of how the whale spit up Jonah after three days and, of course, I couldn’t say anything to the children about what a stupidity this is, that after we were in such fire, in Auschwitz, there was no sky, everything was black from the people burning. There were a few Jews who tried to revolt; so they pushed them into the ovens alive.

So couldn’t there have been just one little nes (miracle), or something to show that there is justice in the world? So I should believe this: I was sitting there and it turned my stomach. The children. j What they did to children. They were learning how to shoot with children. So that’s why I never believed. There were no miracles. There were no miracles.

WH: How does all this have a permanent effect on you?

MW: I promised myself that no one will ever walk out of my house hungry. I’m obsessed in this way with food. We don’t throw out food. And when we serve, it’s too much food and I know it’s too much food. We pushing the kids too much. They say I stretched their intestines; maybe I did. When we made a wedding for the kids, we made everything big, everything big.

WH: Do you know anything about kapos in this country?

MW: Yeah, there are plenty of them.

JW: We know from Radom too. They have thousands of Jews on their conscience. And they came here under a different name and we went to immigration about them, but you can’t do anything about them here.

MW: We know someone like this here. He doesn’t show himself anywhere. he has two children. They are doctors. he has no conscience. I told his wife what her mother said. He was a squealer and he did a lot of wrong. He lives in New Jersey and he has friends, but mostly American friends. There are surely hundreds here. Maybe another nation would be even worse, but we had enough bad people. I wouldn’t say about other people maybe; you shouldn’t judge. But I would say about this person because I suffered directly because of him.