**United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**William Helmreich Oral History Collection**

**Interview with Livia Bitton Jackson**

**March 5, 1990**

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**PREFACE**

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Livia Bitton Jackson, conducted by William Helmreich on March 5, 1990 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.

**LIVIA BITTON JACKSON**

**March 9, 1990**

LB: I have been teaching the Holocaust and writing books about it for many years, so I understand the nature of such an interview very well. My current book is about returning to visit my hometown.

WH: When were you born?

LB: In 1931. The town I came from was mostly Hungarian and it was not a very anti-Semitic place. It was called Chamorin. They had grown up under the democrats in Czechoslovakia. Some of them tried to help us. But the town was small, located on a plain, everyone was well known, and it was very hard to hide.

WH: How did you feel when you returned to your town?

LB: Suddenly the loss became graphic. I saw my house still standing and people were living in it. Eighty percent of our neighbors were gone because of population exchanges that replaced Hungarians with Slovaks. It looked like another planet.

WH: What year did you come to the U.S.?

LB: In 1951, with my mother. I had survived in Auschwitz and in Plaszow and later in Augsburg. My brother left in 1947. He had gotten papers from Yeshiva University. I had also gotten papers from a school, Esther Schoenfeld, but I didn’t go then because my mother couldn’t get out. So from 1949 to 1951 I was in the DP camps. I wanted to go to Israel but my mother and brother went to the U.S., so I went too. HIAS has sponsored us and we came on the General Stewart. And I volunteered to be an interpreter for Mr. McGregor, second in command of the boat. I had learned English in Feldafing. I was young; I was only thirteen when I came to Auschwitz which was quite young. Mengele picked me out of the line for the gas chambers. He did it because I was tall and had blonde straight hair, and looked like an Aryan. He said to me: “You are not Jewish.” And I said: “I am.”

WH: Wasn’t there a temptation to say you were not Jewish?

LB: No. First, at that age you don’t know what’s going on. Second, I had no idea then what Auschwitz was. Anyway he touched my braids and said: “What beautiful golden hair you have. How old are you?” So I said: “Thirteen.” And he said: “Remember…from now on, you are sixteen.” And then, he asked if that was my mother and told her to come with me. And then my aunt started to scream to come with us. And my mother asked Mengele, saying, her sister needed her. But he said: “No. Go with your daughter. She needs you more.” And then my aunt was dragged away.

WH: How did you feel that such a terrible person did something nice for you?

LB: He didn’t do it for me. He did it because I looked Aryan. Two minutes later I could have been shot.

WH: Now; you were translating on the boat?

LB: Yes. I knew the boat very well. It was small with several decks. I organized a kosher kitchen. When the boat left I spit on the shore, because I wanted to spit on Germany as we left Bremenhaven (She says those who call it Bremerhaven are wrong and don’t know.) Bremen is the town and the town in the port is called Bremenhaven. We stayed in an unused military camp in the town before we left. We stayed several weeks until the boat was ready.

WH: How do you feel about the behavior of some Jews during the war?

LB: Whenever I meet survivors I think to myself: “I wonder how she was in the camps?” Even without being a kapo, there were so many ways you could behave.

WH: You mean like sharing with others?

LB: Nobody shared. Nobody shared. Your piece of bread was really your life. But you had to stand on line for soup and some would push. In America my mother always said to me: “Why do you let people get ahead of you?” That was part of camp life. So sometimes I look at survivors and I wonder. A woman, Malvina Graf, came to me because she was doing a Masters Thesis and wanted credit for a book she’d written on Plaszow. And I helped her and looked at the book. And I saw that each of her sisters had some kind of a job in Plaszow. Now for you that means nothing. But for me it means that it’s very possible she was one of those toughies, but maybe she wasn’t. I don’t know. But I live with that. When I see people pushing I cry because it brings back those memories. On a tour of the Sinai there was this couple; everywhere we went, they were at the head of the line, getting back to the busses. The guide said: “Please save your water because we’re going to be in the desert for eight to ten hours. And this woman took her water and she started to clean her shoes and her hands. And I said to her, Mrs. So and So” “What will you do when you’ll run out of water?” And she said: “I’m sure the guide has some more water.” I turned to Len, (her husband) and said: “This woman would have done this in the concentration camps and wouldn’t have cared.” I don’t blame only the Nazis because there were other Germans and Hungarians, and the British who closed off Palestine, and the French who informed on people. This is human nature. But most people are not cruel or kind.

WH: You teach about the Holocaust. Don’t you ask what good is all this education?

LB: Oh yes, it’s good.

WH: Did aggressive behavior give one a better chance of survival?

LB: Oh yes. All things being equal, they had a better chance. Often people helped others because that helped them. Sisters or friends who banded together had a much better chance of survival.

WH: Do you believe that writing about the Holocaust serves as a sort of release?

LB: No. I don’t think that anything releases it emotionally, only intellectually. The longer time passes, the more difficult it becomes. In fact, having taught the Holocaust, I became more of a spectator, because by writing and teaching, I distanced myself from the experience. But it’s such a horror that you can’t fully appreciate it if you survived because it destroyed so much of you that you became immune to a large extent. But slowly the anesthesia is wearing off. You can no longer fool yourself.

WH: How do you feel about German reunification?

LB: I’m not threatened by it. I don’t think that by being strong and unified gives birth to a Hitler. It was just the other way around. I don’t think that unification has anything to do with it.

WH: Do you think that education can help prevent a Holocaust?

LB: Education strikes at the root of prejudice. Christianity taught all sorts of things about Jews. If you can teach Christians about Jews, then they won’t be considered as an obscurantist group. I believe very much in contact. As an Orthodox Jew I believe we have a commitment to the survival of Judaism and intermarriage is going to erode the Jewish people. If intermarriage brings the other side into Judaism, I’m all for it. I am not against intermarriage if the other partner converts to Judaism. I’m not sure I want this published but I wasn’t against Schindler’s position on patrilineal descent. The more Jews are dragged into this “exclusive” group, the better. And I don’t care about exclusivity. Many Orthodox argue that it will result in a watered-down Yiddishkeit. It’s not true because Yiddishkeit has, through the years, always included all kinds of elements. Otherwise we wouldn’t be here. I’m very much for it.

WH: What if your child married someone not Jewish?

LB: If they would convert, what’s wrong with it? I would be happy. If the person is sincerely interested in Yiddishkeit…any goy who’s crazy enough to do that. I would love her. I had straight hair and could never get it to be curly, and as a child I always used to curse that great-great grandmother. That mamzer Cossack, what did he do to me?

WH: But it may have saved your life. And some Jews take it as a compliment that they’re told they don’t look Jewish.

LB: And you do too. (She laughs.)

WH: Where did you obtain your schooling?

LB: I completed the gymnasium in Munich. Here I got my B.A. in Brooklyn College at night. We lived in Flatbush. I worked during the day. My mother did piece work in a factory and I taught at Yeshiva Central in Queens. I had studied Hebrew in the DP camp. I studied the mishna and Tanach by myself. When I came here I took the tests in this area. I was very intoxicated with Jewish studies because I didn’t have anything before. Everybody thought I wasn’t Jewish because I didn’t look it. So I walked around with a big Magen David so no one should think I wasn’t Jewish. I didn’t consider it a compliment.

WH: But isn’t it often the case that survivors don’t want to be recognized as Jewish?

LB: Yes, but in my case it was just the opposite.

WH: Why?

LB: I couldn’t explain it to you. I married someone whose last name is Jackson. So when I meet new people I say: “Oh I love part of the year in Israel.” I bring it into the conversation. Or I say: “I teach Jewish studies.” And I have often heard anti-Semitic remarks. Once in the subway the craziest thing happened in 1973 in Brooklyn. A husky blond woman who was obviously a nurse was sitting next to me. She noticed a pregnant woman standing and she turned to me and said in an undertone: “These Jewish women. They are so brazen. They have no taste or manners. Do you see her? She’s pregnant and she’s flaunting her pregnancy.” So I thought she’s crazy and I said: “What are you talking about?” And she said: “Don’t you see? She’s pregnant and instead of standing in such a way as to hide it…when I was a young woman and pregnant, I always wore a coat. Even in the summer I always wore a coat so nobody should see me, because of good taste. We were brought up with good taste, but these Jews, heh.” So I looked at her and said to her: “How do you know she’s Jewish?” And she says: “ I can tell a Jew anywhere. I take one look and I can tell them.” And I couldn’t tell. She looked like anybody, just a young woman. So I said:” Would you ever take me for a Jew/” She said: “No.” So I pulled up my sleeve and I said:” Do you see this?” She looked and she said:” What is this?” And I answered: “This number was put on my arm at Auschwitz by people like you.” And by that time I was getting excited. And everybody’s looking at us. And I said: “ Are you a German?” She said: “No, only my husband is a German. I came here many years ago. My family came here from Germany. I was born in this country.” So I said: “You don’t have to be a German to be a Nazi. I don’t know, I don’t care if you are German or not, but you are a Nazi. People like you put six million Jews to death. You are calling this young woman a Jew and calling her brazen because she’s pregnant? Are you insane or just prejudiced?” And everybody was quiet. And she stood up and the train happened to come into the station, and she ran out. And everybody was applauding. Everybody was looking. I don’t know what they heard. But they heard me telling her she was a Nazi and they heard her saying: “ Only my husband is a German.” The tragedy is that she was a nurse.

WH: Where did you get this very strong sense of Jewish pride?

LB: Part of it was defiance. Before the war I didn’t know much. But after the war I felt that I suffered for being a Jew and I wanted to know about it. First, I believe that the Jews are a special people, not genetically, but anyone who subscribes to this “club” is special. I also think that the ideals of Judaism and its values are very special. And I think if everyone would achieve that level of holiness there wouldn’t be Holocausts and things like taking an eleven year old child and burning him.

WH: What do you think of the relationship of blacks and Jews? I mean, you teach in a school like mine.

LB: As a survivor I have a strong affinity for blacks. Not just because they suffered but primarily because I know that blacks did not participate in the Holocaust. I look at them and know they or their grandparents couldn’t have done it. That is a very important thing for me. The other thing is I believe that blacks don’t have a tradition of anti-Semitism the way whites have had for centuries. And I believe that what they’re taught is simply propaganda and, of course, as a result, many of them have such attitudes. Blacks are very important to me because I think they have been terribly misled and it’s a tragedy.

WH: What about Hispanics?

LB: It’s the same thing. I tell my Hispanic students: You have Jewish blood because in Spain and in places like Recife and Curacao there were large numbers of Marranos who intermingled. And they think about it and then they know about it---Rodriguez and Mendez. And the name Bitton, which I have from my first husband, is also Spanish.

WH: How did you get to be a professor?

LB: I graduated Brooklyn in 1961 and then went on to N.Y.U. And all these years I worked hard, teaching in yeshivas. I got my Master’s in Jewish history at N.Y.U. and then received a doctorate there in history. I wrote about the history of Zionism in Hungary during a certain period.

WH: When were you first married?

LB: In 1953, two years after I came here. Part of the tragedy of my first marriage was that the person I married was not a survivor. I didn’t recognize that this was a bad choice because I didn’t really want to talk about the Holocaust then; I didn’t want it to be part of my future. And I married someone who came from Morocco, a totally different culture. And he was a scholar and that was the big thing for me, the Yiddishkite. He had come here through the Mirrer Yeshiva. He was a teacher in Yeshiva Magen David. He became the principal there. He was a very talented young man. Everyone knew him. But he had very different ideas about what a wife should do, He didn’t want me to go to school, or work, or drive, or talk on the telephone. So I married Len after I discovered that…

WH: How were you able to last fifteen years?

LB: It was very hard. Mentally, It was worse than Auschwitz. Basically I brought up the kids. And, thank God, I have two wonderful children.

WH: Well, you seem to me to be a very optimistic and vivacious person.

LB: Yes I am.

Conclusion of Interview