

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Barbara Firestone**  
**March 2, 2010**  
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## **PREFACE**

The following oral history testimony is the result of a recorded interview with Barbara Firestone, conducted by Judith Cohen on March 2, 2010 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Silver Spring, Maryland 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.

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## **BARBARA FIRESTONE**

### **March 2, 2010**

Question: This is the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with **Barbara Firestone**, conducted by **Judith Cohen**, on March second, in **Leisure World**, in **Silver Spring**. Mrs. **Firestone**, can you start by giving me your name at birth, as it was in **Poland**, and your date of birth and city of birth?

Answer: Okay, I was born **Brunislava(ph) Spielman(ph)**. My Hebrew name was **Brucha(ph) – Brucha(ph)**, and I was born in **Kraków, Poland**. What was the other?

Q: And your date of birth?

A: February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1939.

Q: And give me the name of your parents as they were in **Poland**, and any siblings and their dates of birth.

A: Okay, my father, **Simon Spielman(ph)** was born in 1900, December of 1900, my mother **Czarna, c-z-a-r-n-a Spielman(ph)**, her maiden name was **Steel**. And she was born in **Poland**, my father was Czechoslovakian. I have a sister **Helen** –

Q: Okay, okay [**indecipherable**]. So, one more time, your name of your father, and his date of birth?

A: My – my father's name is **Simon Spielman(ph)**, he was born in ni – December of 1900, and – in **Czechoslovakia**, he had – he wou – he's – was born in – I forget

the name of the city in ch – in **Czechoslovakia**, but he's Czech born. And my mother i – was born in **Poland**, in December of 1902. Her name was **Czarna Steel**. And they were sort of distant cousins, so it was, as they say, a – a – a **schitter**(ph).

Q: It's – yeah. And did you have any siblings?

A: Oh – oh yes, I have a sister, her name is **Helen Winchester, Henya**(ph), that was her Polish name. And I have a brother, **Arthur Spielman**(ph), and we survived as a family.

Q: Let's ha – let's – before we talk about that, want to move back to life before the war, though. You were born, you said, in 1939 –

A: Nine.

Q: – so – so you were born just as the war was beginning, so you probably don't have any memories from –

A: Very, very –

Q: – before, but –

A: I have just very few of my own memories, and most of it, what I call memories were told to me.

Q: So, I was gonna say, from what your parents and brother and sister said, what was your family's life like in **Poland** before the war? Your father's occupation –

A: My father –

Q: – cultural affiliations, religious affiliations –

A: My father was a shoemaker. They were – we were an Orthodox family. We lived very well, we – we had help. We were not considered poor, but certainly we were not rich. And we had a – a tremendous extended family. And some of the family were farmers, and – and butchers, and – **Shochets**, as they would say. And it was, I guess what you would picture of a normal Jewish family of **Poland**, which was very, very nice. I was born in February, which was like six months before the Holocaust, so my memories of that time is – is –

Q: Did your siblings go to school before?

A: Oh yes.

Q: And what type of school, was it a Jewish school, a Polish school?

A: My brother went to **chayder** and my sister, I believe she went to a gymnasium. But they had normal schooling as well. I don't recall too much about that, but yeah, my family was very learned.

Q: And what language did you speak at home?

A: Yiddish. Polish. That's about it.

Q: And among the family itself was mostly Yiddish?

A: Yes, mm-hm, mm-hm.

Q: And okay, let's now move to September '39, and I know that a lot of these are memories from your siblings and your parents, but from what they've told you, what happened September '39 when the Germans invaded?

A: Well, we were – we still were able to live in our home, but shortly after that, we were put into a ghetto. And I believe that was in 1942. And we were placed in the ghetto, in a one room place, and I think there were other people among us, and I don't know how my family's – I'm **diversing** if you don't mind.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I don't know how my family survived, because of me, because I was such a young baby. Most – well, I'll go into that later, maybe.

Q: And do you know, was your father working in the ghetto? Was he still working as a shoemaker, or –

A: Yes, he had his own place, he was making – and everything was confiscated for him. And – and I believe how we survived was that he was making boots for the Gestapo. So I – yeah.

Q: And was your mother working in the ghetto also, or was she home with you?

A: I – I – I think she was home with me, but she might have – and I – I – I cannot recall that at all, yeah.

Q: And your older siblings, do you know where they wi – have any schooling, or were they working?

A: In the ghetto, I think when – once we were in the ghetto, I don't think we had any schooling at all. No, it was very, very difficult, yeah.

Q: And how long did your family stay in the ghetto?

A: Not very long, because when my father first heard of the liquidation starting at the **Kraków** ghetto, he – he was an amazing man, I must say. He had foresight, if not luck, and he was able to send ma – send my sister and brother out with a guy, to take them out of the ghetto and just take them away. I think there might have been a destination, but I d – I don't recall. It had – there had to be. And – and my father paid for the guy to take my sister and brother out.

Q: Do you remember what the emotional state was when they were leaving, and nobody knew –

A: Above – yeah, my – my –

Q: – what would happen?

A: – yeah, my father knew he would not see his children again. That – that was a – that was a given. And so I just cannot fathom the emotions that were at that time. And I remained with my mother and father. I was just too young to be sent off.

Q: So you were three years old then?

A: I was about three years old, mm-hm. Then in – in 1940 – well, during that time also, '42 - '43, my father saved a lot of people.

Q: How did he do that?

A: I'm – I'm not really certain, but being in that religious community, I don't know if you're familiar with the **Bobover Rebbe**?

Q: Oh yes.

A: Are you? Okay. Well, I – I believe they're distantly related to us. And he was able to bring them into our place, and they stayed with us while they liquidated other places.

Q: This is the **Halberstam** family?

A: Yes.

Q: And how much of the –

A: You just gave me the chills. How do you know them?

Q: I've been studying the **Bobovers**. [indecipherable] So, what was the connection between your family and the family of the **Bobover Rebbe**? And how did your father – what did he do for Rabbi **Halberstam**?

A: I'm really not sure. Oh, now I have to find out a lot more. Oh my gosh, oh my gosh. I definitely – as a matter of fact, my brother called me this afternoon and I didn't get a chance to talk to him. And he would be the one to know, my brother knows everything. He remembered the streets, and the shops and everything that went on in **Kraków**. He knew hundreds of people, and he knew the whole family. He would – he was interviewed, I think by spe – **Spielberg**. I don't know if he was interviewed by the – was he interviewed by the Holocaust, do you know – oh. He – he would make a great interview. But, so these are some of the things that he has told me. But –

Q: Yeah. So, what memory do you have of your father and what he was doing to help other Jews?



A: Very little. He saved, I know, two cousins. Two cousin, my two first cousins.

One wa – was sent to **Israel** on one of the first **Aliyahs**. And then I have another cousin who lives in **Chicago**, and she was sent with the you – youth – youth organization to the **States**, cause we did have family in the **States**, so she was able to come on one of the first immigration trips.

Q: But, you were saying a minute ago that the **Bobover Rebbe** got into the ghetto –

A: Well, yeah, he ge –

Q: What do you know about that?

A: Very little –

Q: But –

A: **Judy**, I'm trying, I'm trying very hard. I know they stayed with us. They stayed with us, and when the – when it got to be very, very dangerous, my father again sent them out. Where to, I don't know. And at that time, my father had Czech papers, so he was fairly safe, and we were able to get – once the ghetto was being liquidated, we were able to cross over to **Czechoslovakia**.

Q: Do you have any memory of how you escaped from the ghetto?

A: Very carefully. And –

Q: Was it night, or is it day?

A: I believe it was at night, and we crossed the border. And I have a very, very vague story. That's one of my rarest little memories, but again, it might have been told to me as well.

Q: That's okay.

A: We were crossing the – a border and of course it was guarded, but my – my father had the papers, and we were stopped. And they asked us all sorts of questions, and I was three or four years old. And they were talking to me, and I said – I was whimpering. And I said, my father is a goy, my mother is goy, but I'm Jewish. And I was three, four years old, and they let us through. I – that's –

Q: And when you got to **Czechoslovakia**, where did you go?

A: We stayed – we stayed in **Czechoslovakia** for a little while. I don't recall that at all. But soon after, we were able to get to **Hungary**, to **Miskolc, Hungary**. Well, first to **Budapest**. And from **Budapest** we went to **Miskolc**. I don't remember **Budapest**, but I do remember **Miskolc**. We lived there as Gentiles for about a year.

Q: And at this time, did you have any knowledge that your brother and sister had survived? Had you had any contact with them?

A: Okay, in between that, there – they were sent to an orphanage. And my father heard, or – or somebody had heard that things were really happening. Whether my father knew where they were, or they were supposed to, but he didn't know whether they were alive, but if they were, this is where they would – would have been. He sent a guide out there, and that was the day they were liquidating the orphanage.

And –

Q: And this is in **Miskolc**, or –

A: I am not sure whether it was in **Czechoslovakia**, or whether it was in **Hungary**.

I'm not sure. And the gar – the guide knew who they were, and he went – first it was my brother, and he said, follow me. Don't talk, don't say anything, just follow me. And as they walked out, they – the Nazis came in and took the other children. And I think – I believe the same thing happened to **Henya**(ph), my sister **Helen**, and they were able to walk out of the orphanage, and they brought them to my parents.

Q: Do you remember the reunion?

A: No, I do not. You know, a lot of things seems to be repre – repressed in my mind, and I get so upset with myself, so irritated that I cannot have those memories. I would do anything to – to really know how I felt, how my parents felt, or – you know –

Q: So then –

A: – the rest of them. So, we lived in **Miskolc** for about a year as Gentiles.

Q: All five of you?

A: Five of us, five of us. And as I said, we lived – lived as gent – we had a house, and in the house we had a cross, because we lived as – as Gentiles. And I remember being in the basement of the house, or – we went out to a shelter in a cave or somewhere, and – and the Russians came in and they bombed the whole town, or the area where we lived. The only house standing was ours. The cross came down, smacked in smithereens, and the house was standing. There was a crack though, but

that was the only house standing in our neighborhood. So, to me that was absolutely miraculous.

Q: And then did you remain in the town after the bombing?

A: We stayed – we stayed there for awhile. Well, we – during the bombing, my – my – my mother sent my brother out to get bread, there was a tremendous bread line. And he would bring home rotten bread, or whatever kind of bread we could get, and the bombs were falling, and you know. And my mother would prepare this bread in rancin – rancid oil that we kept so we could, you know, fry the bread. And the only food we had was garlic. So we would have this rotten bread and rancid oil with – spread with garlic. And you know **Judy**, it was the most delicious thing in the world. But, soon after that, when the war – we were liberated by the Russians. And soon after that, I guess it was early part of 1946, I think it was the year – I'm not sure what part of the year it was, but my brother and my father decided they would go back to **Poland**. We remained in – in **Hungary**. I don't remember that. But my brother and father went, and he came back with stories that were just incredible. That was the time of the pogroms. Soon after the war, when Jews were coming back to **Poland**, and my father and brother went to see our house, and they knocked on the door, and some Polish people were living there, and they slammed the door in his face, saying, you were supposed to be dead. So at that – right after that, this pogrom had started, and they escaped by this much from getting killed. They survived the war, but they were so scared that they would – yeah. So, we went

back – they went back to **Hungary** and my father told my mother, there's nothing there for us.

Q: So –

A: And at that time my father, he survived the whole war without being arrested, but at that time he was arrested by the Russians. Because my father was bootlegging at that time, and the Russian soldiers got sick from – from this drink, and they arrested my father for selling bad liquor to the Russians.

Q: How long was he in jail for?

A: Not – not terribly long, not terribly long. But, he had to make a living, right?

Q: So, how long did you remain in **Hungary** after the war?

A: Well, we – we left soon after that, because I know we were in **Gabersee**, a **DP** camp in **Germany** for three years. So, we left that in 1949. Excuse me. So we must have left **Hungary** in '46.

Q: And did you have any trouble getting out of **Hungary**?

A: I don't recall that at all, I think we were just – you know, we made arrangements and we were placed in a **DP** camp. And we were there for three years, and even though we had family here in the **States**, it was – I'm sure, you know, it took forever to get the papers, and –

Q: What was life like in the **DP** camp?

A: From what I remember as a child, it was okay. I had friends, I had schooling, I had food. I was a little bit of nothing, and so that was life, and it was good.

Q: And di – and did your parents have enough to do in the **DP** camp?

A: Well, my fath – ma – my father worked, my mother stayed at home, and I remember at that time my sister and brother wanted to make **Aliyah** to **Israel**. And oh, they cried to go to **Israel**. But, you know, they were good kids, it was all family, you know, and my mother said, absolutely not. She was tired of fighting, she was tired of being scared, and she wants peace in her life and she didn't want her children going to **Israel** and fighting another war. So, that's how they remained with us, you know, that we stayed as a family unit. So we came to the **States** in 1949.

Q: Did anyone sponsor you?

A: Well, we had the family. We had my aunt and unc – two aunts and an uncle ra – oh, no, we ha – that time we still had quite a bit of family left. We were a huge family. My father had a brother, two sisters. One sister with a husband, and an uncle who I – I hate to mention, that wer – that were in **New York**. And we had other relatives th-through the **States**. So we stayed with them for awhile til we – til we settled. But we arrived in **New York** harbor on a Shabbat, and cousins came to pick us up. My father would not get off the ship. He would not – it's Shabbat, he is not going in a car, he's not – you know. So here after – after 10 years of suffering, he would not get off the ship. So my cousins left, and they came back a little bit later and they said, if you don't get off the boat now, we're not coming back and get you. So finally he's – he – he – he was – he was the sweetest man – so finally he

consented to get off the ship and we came to my aunt's house, **Tante Eda**(ph). And it was the beginning of a new life. But he – he – he – his faith was so very strong.

Q: And he stayed a – a Hassid?

A: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

Q: And what about your siblings? Did their faith change at all through the war?

A: Somewhat. Their children are – are very religious, all of their children. My sister and brother-in-law are very – yeah, but they're not Hassidic or any – and that's a – neither is my brother, but their children are very, very **[indecipherable]**. And wonderful, beautiful family, yeah.

Q: Where in **New York** did you settle?

A: In **Brooklyn. Bensonhurst**, yeah.

Q: And talk about th – what was it like as a young child all of a sudden moving to a new country with a new language? Did you have any trouble adjusting to life in the **United States**?

A: I was scared of a new language because I was able to pick it up no matter where we were I spoke hungar – not that I know it now. But I spoke German and Hungarian and Polish and you know, a little – a **bissell**(ph) here and a **bissell**(ph) there. But when I came to **America**, I said, oh I'm – I – I don't know if I can learn the language, I was really scared. And my cousin insisted that I only speak English in front of him, or wherever I was going. And then I forgot all the other languages. I just never retained it. But my parents took English when we were in **Gabersee** in

the **DP** camp, and they had a tutor come to the house. We had a one room place, and he would come to the house and teach my parents English, but it was English English, so it was somewhat different than when we came to the **States**. But it never helped, they wer – they managed with – with whatever they could speak. But one thing about my father, may he rest in peace, and God love him a million years, we came on a Shabbat, on a sa – Monday he already had a job.

Q: Was he able to work in his own field, shoemaker?

A: Shoemaker, mm-hm, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Q: And what was the reception of the other children at school to the fact that you were a newcomer from another country? Did they accept you immediately, or –

A: Ah, I never looked for it. I know – I had a small group of friends, but I didn't have an extended group, so I ne – I never really looked into that. And I remember being in one class, where the teacher called upon me and asked for me to speak in front of the class, and I really couldn't because I was so foreign, it was so unrelated to the classroom atmosphere. I was very difficult, I – I – I've always told bits and pieces, but I never – yeah. I don't know if I'm even helping you with this interview.

Q: Right, yeah. Oh, very much. And your family, once they came to the **United States**, did they ever talk about the war years, or did they just put it behind them?

A: Not for awhile, not for awhile. Maybe they talked to their family privately, like to their sister – their sisters. My mother did not have family here – she had a cousin, I take that back. She had a – a – a – a very Hassidic cousin and an extended family.



She did have a brother in **Israel** that settled there in 1933, but here in the **States**, it was mostly my father's family. So, I'm sure they talked among themselves, but not really openly, not til later on. Not til later on.

Q: [indecipherable] different question. At which point do you start to identify – did it strike you that you were a Holocaust survivor and not just an immigrant?

A: Oh my God, it took years.

Q: Why was that?

A: It – I'll tell you exactly. Oh, I – it took years, and I know exactly when I realized that. A number of years ago, there as a Holocaust renu – reunion here in **Washington** at the convention center. You must have been a baby then. I forget what year it was. I'll tell you later. '69, or maybe seven – well, when a – and I tried to get involved with that, I begged my husband to get involved with that. And we sang – we went to the – President **Reagan** spoke then – no, so it must have been much later, was in the 80s. Okay, early 80s. And President **Reagan** spoke in front of the Holocaust reunion group. And I signed up for a few seminars at the convention center in **D.C.** And I attended the second generation seminar. I don't know what made me do that, but they spoke on children surviving, and families surviving. And I finally realized – the reason I wanted to get involved in this thing was because I just felt it. But what I realized at that time, and realized that I am a survivor, was that families of my – of my generation, did not survive. I realized I was very unique and very rare, because children my age did not survive. And – and

my siblings as well, my sister and brother, who were sent out to God knows where. And how they reunited with their parents, and how my father survived all that. We were very unique, and I cherish that in my – in my head, I – I could not believe that as a family unit we survived, you know? So that's when I realized I'm a Holocaust survivor. We were in no camp. We were in no labor camp, but I think we survived many –

Q: And do you think that affected the choices you made later in life, that realization?

A: That I-I realized I'm a Holocaust survivor?

Q: Or, having gone through the Holocaust.

A: Selfishly, I feel like I'm a very special person. But my everyday life is, I'm just as normal as you or anybody else. But when I look back on it, I feel very special. I wish my husband would feel that way. He's the silent one. He does not discuss it. So it makes our feelings very, very difficult. And things that I would get more involved in, that I would like to get more involved in, I feel like I can't because I'm not getting his support. And he wouldn't – he won't accept my support. He lost his entire family, so he's – he's – he keeps everything inside. And it – I think he did a lot of damage to our children because he wasn't open with them. But they always pursue, they always ask questions. But I find that a very, very difficult part of my life, yeah. My brother-in-law, he was liberated in **Auschwitz**, and for many, many, many years he would not speak of it. Like, I think it was a normal thing of many

survivors at that time. But a few years ago, all of a sudden, everything came out.

Everything came out. And he had a tremendous i-interview with **Spielberg** and the – I believe the Holocaust Museum as well, an extended one. He made several donations to the museum. I think one of his shirts is hanging there. It's – it's different than the others. I'm sure you have enough of them there. So, sometimes I envy people who can really speak out and be noticed for what they went through, where my husband is – yeah, I find that very, very difficult.

Q: And he was from which city?

A: He was from **Kalomaya**(ph). It was **Poland** at that time, but that area seems to be changing from the **Ukraine**, to **Poland**, to **Russia**, to **Ukraine**. I think it's **Ukraine** now. But he was born **Kalomaya**(ph), **Poland**, yeah.

Q: Let me just ask if you have any other last thoughts, anything that we didn't talk about, that you would like to talk about?

A: During the Holocaust period?

Q: [indecipherable] During the Holocaust, or the years right afterwards, coming to the **United States**.

A: It was like a dream come true coming to the **United States**, because of all the availability of food and – and whatever we had. Clean bed. I remember getting into a bed, into a nice, clean sheet. That was – that was just delicious, it's just delicious. And – and taking baths, that was delicious. And – but during the war years, I remember a few points where my mother had the most difficult hardships. How she

had to be sent to the hospital because she had a – oh, what do you call it? Appendix. She had to have an appendix taken out. And how that came about, I – I don't remember – I – I don't know how she even survived that. And then one time we were crossing a – a border where she fell and just the difficulty of it all. And when I watch all these Holocaust movies and stories, so – na – well, I cannot do all of them. I choose and pick which ones I want to watch, and I don't put myself in it. I – I – I can't do that, because it's just so horrible. So I don't put myself in it. It's like surreal, yeah. So, I hope I was able to help you. I – I – I really – yeah.

Q: Thank you.

A: Oh, you – you're very sweet, thank you.

Q: Thank you very much. And this concludes the **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with **Barbara Firestone**. Thank you.

### **Conclusion of Interview**