

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

William Helmreich Oral History Collection

**Interview with Sam and Miriam Brach
February 9, 1990 and April 29, 1990
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Sam and Miriam Brach, conducted by William Helmreich on February 9, 1990 and April 29, 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.

SAM AND MIRIAM BRACH

February 9, 1990

WH: Tell me about yourselves.

MB: I was born in Czechoslovakia in Koshitz. My family was very religious, though not Hasidic. They were in the wine business, a large and wealthy enterprise. I had two sisters. Only I survived. I was in Auschwitz for eight months and then in Germany.

SB: I was born in Som Cutamaire, which was originally part of Romania and which became part of Hungary in 1940. A very Hasidic family, Satmar. We were ten children. The Satmar Rebbe, when he came to our town, stopped in our house. My father loved to be involved in community affairs, with talmud torah and the Beis Medrash. My mother was in the store at 8: 00 A.M. There was a Jewish girl who took care of kashrus and two maids. My father came into the business later in the day. Of course she also had the ten children and was therefore a very capable woman. My father also gave loans to poor people. They were special people.

WH: Where were you in the family?

SB: I was the third oldest and I'm the only one who survived. During the war it was only a fight to survive, but afterwards, it was much harder to get oneself together, to understand why I was spared.

WH: Do you think it was luck?

SB: In no way could it only have been luck. It was just written down (in heaven one presumes) that someone should survive. I was in Auschwitz a short time and was then transferred to Plazsow. I was sent to clean up in the Warsaw Ghetto, to take it apart after the uprising.

WH: And you were there for the entire war?

SB: No. After the Russians came close to Warsaw, we were marched away. They didn't let us drink water from the river but I had a beer bottle and I filled it with the dirt water that ran off on the side of the streets. Later I went to Dachau. I also had typhus.

WH: You were determined to survive.

SB: I was determined to survive, no matter what it took.

MB: With what we went through, we had more education there at age 16, than people here.

WH: Have you ever been to Israel?

MB: Yes. My granddaughter will go there this summer to camp.

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0009

2

WH: So what happened at the end of the war?

SB: I saw that my family was dead and the Germans were still alive. And I asked if there was a God, how could this happen? I think if there had been psychiatrists around in the DP camps right after the war it would have been good. Many people committed suicide right after the war. There was no one to help us adjust. And at that time I said there's no such thing as God. But we had a rabbi from our town, But the Klosenberger Rav talked to us and told us we had more of a responsibility to believe after what happened. He organized, with American money, a yeshiva in Foerenwald and I went there. There were about 25 students our age. We wore old clothing.

WH: What happened to you?

MB: I went home after the war for a few weeks. I stayed in Romania and after two years we married. We went to Italy right before the 1948 War.

SB: When the war broke out, I decided to go to Israel to fight. But my wife started to cry and said: "You cannot leave me here. I'm pregnant." So I said: "Miriam I have to go because if we lose this war there won't be anyone here to assist because no Jews will survive." We were nineteen years old. So my wife cried that I couldn't and we stayed. Actually, at that time one couldn't go anyway from Italy. Actually, most of the people who went then, ended up in Cyprus. We stayed in Italy for three years and came to the U.S. in 1951. In Italy I peddled nylons, watches, socks, whatever, trying to survive from day to day. I had some money I'd brought from Romania. But I was pick- pocketed when I went to buy some watches, I didn't tell my wife. A friend gave me some help to start over again. Our first child was born in Italy.

WH: How did you get to the U.S.?

MB: Through the Joint. Our contacts came from Reading, Pennsylvania. They had an apartment for us, completely furnished. They gave us everything we needed. They even polished the doorknobs. Their kindness was incredible. It broke my heart when I realized we weren't going to stay there. We were religious and needed an Orthodox shul, a mikveh, a kosher butcher. It was mostly German Jews who had escaped the war. I told the rabbi "I'm 22 and I come from a prominent family and I want to remain Jewish (meaning, religious.)" So we came to New York and settled in totally on our own because, since we left Reading, the HIAS or Joint wouldn't give us a penny. They didn't want more Jews in N. Y. So we took an apartment that had two mattresses with springs. We bought a used kitchen set with three chairs, the fourth one must have gotten broken. And the apartment was \$33.00 a month. It was on Stockton Street in Bedford Stuyvesant. It was a walkup. I went to night school.

WH: Did you go to school?

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0009

3

SB: I went to work. No one helped me. So I took the first job I could get, as a butcher's helper for 75 cents an hour. I also cleaned toilets for three months. But, eventually I learned to be a butcher. I spoke Italian perfectly and I asked the butcher Luigi, for a job. And he taught me. I'd never done it before. I didn't even know how to hold a knife, how to sharpen it. He came to like and trust me. The driver wanted me to steal and I told him: "I don't steal." I worked hard and was not lazy. And that's how I came to be a butcher. I never collected unemployment.

WH: What did you do?

MB: After I finished night school with a high school diploma, I took a LaSalle Extension course to be a bookkeeper. I worked doing that in a Bais Yaakov school. Then, in a few months (1956) there was the Hungarian uprising and many students came into the yeshiva and, of course, I knew Hungarian.

SB: I had a butcher store in Crown Heights. My biggest achievement was when I graduated from working in non-kosher places to my own kosher place. I came to Kew Gardens Hills in 1960 because there was no glatt kosher butcher in this area. So I settled here. And I had here a supermarket style, self-service butcher store.

WH: How many children do you have?

MB: Two daughters and a son. My daughters went to Bais Yaakov. In elementary school the girls went to Shevaeh and our son went to Ohr Yisroel. Afterwards he went to Long Beach Yeshiva. After that, my son went to Ner Israel and to college in Baltimore. And I worked in the butcher store helping my husband. The hardest thing was learning to be a big store because before we were a small store. And the people weren't used to the idea of choosing what they want, of buying larger amounts. We had to teach the customers how to do it. But after they got used to it, they liked it. Now, the children are in the business, but we still go in.

SB: Eight years ago I had an accident. I had gone to a Satmar meeting to see how we could help them get more help from the government. It was a rainy day and I broke my foot. The Satmar community was not backing Cuomo in his campaign for governor against Mayor Koch. I was unable to convince them that they should support Cuomo but I neutralized them a little. Thus, after the election I was friendly with Cuomo and people turned to me to ask how they could enter the inner circle. I told them we would have to wait.

WH: How do you feel about Israel?

SB: When the 67 War broke out, I cried. I desperately wanted to help even though I'm not a soldier. Without Israel, as rich as Jews may think they are, Jews cannot survive. This is my strong belief. A Holocaust could happen even with Israel. Our so-called leaders aren't popularly elected leaders. Even a rabbi, he has a couple of people in a synagogue, is not necessarily a community-wide leader. That's part of our problem today. We have very few

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0009

4

devoted and sincere leaders today such as, say, a Rabbi Herman Neuberger, who cares about and takes care of the children. Or a Rabbi Kotler from Lakewood, may he rest in peace. Most of today's rabbis though are politicians, not rabbis.

WH: What's your biggest accomplishment?

SB: That I survived the camps and that I put a family together that believes in Torah and Yiddishkeit.

WH: And you agree with that?

MB: 100%

WH: If there's something you could do different, would you?

SB: To be more educated, to know how to speak to the so-called rabbis. But that I couldn't achieve. But I never give up trying. And I believe it's important to be sincere and devoted to the Jewish community. Without that we have big problems.

WH: What do you think of Elie Wiesel?

SB: I think Elie Wiesel is a beautiful writer and a wonderful person. Nobody should criticize him. But to be a leader you have to be more than a writer. Look at Shimon Peres. He'd sell the country for nothing. And Shamir is also not a leader. He's not strong. They're all opportunists.

MB: It's a power struggle. And yet, they have to decide what's good for Israel and we have to support them.

SB: Their children are on the line every day, not us. So they have to decide. Lebanon was our destruction. In the same way Afghanistan was Russia's destruction. I still don't trust Russia. Their aim, like Japan, is to control the world. A united Germany has the same (illegible).

WH: Have you ever been back to Europe?

SB: When we go to Israel, I never stop in Europe. I don't want to see Europe, stop in Europe, or put my foot in Europe. But I would like to go back to Auschwitz. And I go to Israel because I feel at home there.

SAM AND MIRIAM BRACH

April 29, 1990

WH: Tell me a little more about your father's involvement in the Jewish community in Europe

SB: There was a pride in community involvement. Actually, you will find that most of the survivors are seeking to be involved in their communities. But here, in Queens, you have a bigger problem. Let's take Kew Gardens Hills. You have a new community. The rabbis, in some cases, have life contracts. As a result, many people who moved in later were not able to gain entry into the community in terms of being involved.

WH: How did this prevent others from being involved?

SB: Because those who had hired the rabbis initially controlled these synagogues. Look at, for example, Hillcrest. It still doesn't have a mikveh. The leadership there isn't interested. On the other hand, in Europe every small town with 100 families, had a mikveh.

WH: Was your father involved in that sort of thing?

SB: Everything. He was involved in mikveh, Talmud Torah, shuls, everything that was needed in the Jewish community-----a shochet, a cantor, a rabbi, whatever was needed. And in this community, like others, there was an open election, a fair election. The need for a chevra kadisha wasn't a matter of politics. No one asked, like they do here, will the rabbi let me do it?, will the rabbi appreciate me for it? When I see this I ask: Why should I be involved? I don't want to push myself.

WH: Would you say that other survivors who wanted to be involved weren't allowed to?

SB: A lot of people. But let's look at Williamsburg, Crown Heights, or Boro Park. They pushed to become involved and they achieved tremendous things. Look at Bikur Cholim, Hatzolah, or Chevra Kadisha. Anything that involves communal things is something that survivors participated in because that's the way it was done in Europe. They're completely different from the Jews that came here previously. Those Jews may have been running away from the army, or they couldn't make a living in Europe, or they were caught stealing or doing something wrong. The survivors, on the other hand, had a business background, an educational background. They only came because they had no choice, because their communities were destroyed.

WH: Why were the survivors in Williamsburg or Boro Park able to enter the leadership structure more easily?

SB: Yes. Without mentioning names or individual neighborhoods, the other communities were more like American communities. There was prejudice against the greener. They wouldn't

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0009

6

allow them to be leaders in the community. Very few were able to do that, to become part of the board of directors, or something like that, even if they gave a lot of money. Lately some of the survivors have become more interested in communal affairs, and now, in recent years, they're more accepted. But this wasn't the case before.

MB: Right. My husband was involved in community affairs way back, from day one. He wanted to do something even before he was able to do so financially, with the chevra kadisha. He was very involved in building the mikveh. We feel you have to be involved.

WH: Would you say that in some cases the survivors' money was respected more than their thinking?

SB: That's right although one can't generalize. The fact is that most survivors wouldn't have taken as strong a stand against certain rabbis as I did.

WH: When did you take such a stand?

SB: When one of the rabbis returned from Lebanon. During the time when Schultz and Weinberger were criticizing Israel very much for going into Lebanon, I suggested to one of the rabbis that we have a big rally in the neighborhood to show our support for Israel. So, the rabbi said: "I'll give a speech in the synagogue". So I said: " You need more than simply a speech ". And he said, a businessman, a kosher butcher, should never be involved in politics because they can arrest me, they can cause me a lot of problems. And I told him that it is important for me as a human being, especially as a survivor, that I be involved.

WH: Can you explain that in greater detail?

SB: To explain that I have to go back to the time when I established myself in this neighborhood to the point where I was no longer fearful about where my next penny would come from. Until then I always had the drive, and I guess it's present in every survivor, or the need to be secure. This is because, unfortunately, during the war, in the camps, I had no one to turn to for help. I had no brother, no father, no family. This creates in a person, a tremendous fear, so much so that I can't really explain it to you. There's a tremendous pressure that makes it very important that you shouldn't have to come to a person and ask them to help you. After I was liberated I always said that I hoped I'd never have to beg someone for help.

WH: You wanted to be independent.

SB: Not independent. A person is never independent. It's always up to God. You just don't want that in a business sense you should be dependent on another person. I had a tremendous drive to be my own boss. That gave me peace of mind and this is the main thing. I don't have to be afraid that the customer will leave me, that the rabbi will leave me, or that the wholesaler wouldn't sell to me. But then I would have to give an account to myself: What am I trying so hard to achieve? Not to take vacations? To have two jobs, three jobs; To get

up two or three in the morning and work until ten or eleven at night. After all, I didn't have such a big family. I only had three children. And I didn't feel that I had to go out to eat in restaurants. I'm not such a fancy person. I didn't have to go to hotels. The first sixteen or seventeen years we were here I didn't even take a vacation for a day. I came to a certain conclusion---usually I talk to myself in a room, or I talk to the Ribbono Shel Olom (God). I ask him to listen to me, because He has to listen to me. Because I went through the fire and came out alive and what was the purpose of it? It's not only to have a family. So I searched for an answer within myself. What is the reason that I survived? What do I need to accomplish in my lifetime? Well, thank God, parnoseh (business) I have. Thank God, the kids are healthy. And then I realized what it was that was bothering me, what it was that was hurting me so much. It was that when I was liberated from the concentration camp no one was there to accept us. There was no Jewish community organization that cared for the people.

WH: What about the Joint and the HIAS?

SB: They just oversaw. They paid employees to feed us and house us. There was nobody to care for us as human beings. There were no social workers then.

WH: What about when you came to Reading, Pennsylvania?

SB: In Reading, yes. But after I left Reading, no one in New York helped us. The fact is that the Jewish community, as wealthy as it is, as wealthy as America is, with all the rich Jewish organizations, it's not as giving or generous in heart and soul, as the community was the way I recall it as a child in Europe. There they helped a needy person. You needed a piece of bread, they gave it to you. If you had problems, there was someone who listened to you.

WH: That about today when they have Jewish Family Services?

SB: Today it's a little more organized though there's still a need.

WH: But when you became involved in the seventies and eighties, they already had these things in America.

SB: They had upgraded it but it didn't always filter down to the grass-roots of the community. And when I became involved I wanted that there should be a community where people genuinely cared about each other and not simply where professionals in Jewish organizations helped an individual. Hatzoloh, for example, is new, not even ten years old. So my desire to be involved comes from my European background and from what happened to me during the war. Today we make a big deal about the baalei teshuvah, about bringing people back to religion. But after the war, so many people needed a helping hand and no one cared. People committed suicide. You have today, rabbis who care about the community and you have rabbis who are more interested in politics.

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0009

8

WH: If you were in a position of real power today, what would your priorities be with respect to the community?

SB: First, if people want to be involved in a community they should be brought into the process. Everything isn't money. You need people who give money, but you need even more people who work for the community. But, unfortunately, today, it's not always recognized.

WH: How do you think American Jews see the survivors?

SB: If a person like me, a survivor, succeeds financially and the leadership feels threatened by that person, they'll lock him out if they can. If they can't lock him out, they'll make things so difficult for him that he'll have to move out, or they'll try to hurt his reputation. This is because they want to dictate to the community what should be done. They want to have power without sharing it.

WH: Do you think that the fact that you're a survivor has something to do with how they feel?

SB: I can't go into their mind, but I think that a survivor will come on stronger and more forceful and without the finesse of an American Jew. And this may make those in power feel more threatened. Or the survivor feels more of an obligation to be involved at the same time as he feels more eager and hungrier.

WH: Why?

SB: Because the survivor feels that he can never know what tomorrow will bring, so in his mind he has very little time in which to achieve. And this can lead him into confrontation with other people. But the rabbis should understand that such individuals don't really want to threaten them. They're not going to become rabbis. They can't be rabbis. And they don't need money. Instead of being threatened they should encourage such involvement. If I want to spend a fortune of money to get Jews to register to vote, I should have been encouraged to do this. But they couldn't put a package together.

Mrs. Brach shows me a reply by President Reagan's office to his protest regarding Reagan's presence at Bitburg. She also shows me a letter praising Reagan for his action in the air controller's strike.

Queens week, Vol.2 No. 12, April 25, 1985:1 "Thinks Reagan Can Get Some Good Out of German Cemetery Visit."-(Brach) Although a Democrat, he twice supported Reagan and together with some other Democrats opened a Reagan Headquarters in Forest Hills, Queens. Backed Koch for two mayoral campaigns, but switched to Cuomo in the gubernatorial race. Brach blamed Reagan's aides and the President's desire to improve relations with West Germany for his mistaken decision to visit Bitburg.

WH: I see you're also involved politically.

MB: Well, yes. I ran for the N.Y.S. Assembly here in the 28th A.D. (illegible) Daily News, Sunday February 21, 1982 p. B6, by John Toscano (his column) "Special at Butcher's: "Koch for Governor" Brach backed Abe Saperstein who unsuccessfully challenged Assemblyman Alan Hevesi.

New York Magazine, March 24, 1980 "Primary Time: Kennedy, Carter, Jews, and the Money Gap." By Joe Klein & Michael Kramer. He is interviewed and quoted on his views about Carter and Kennedy saying that Carter can't win and that Kennedy would never become President. But he said he favored Kennedy because of Carter's handling of the economy and his handling of the Iran hostage crisis.

Brach is also quoted in the Wall Street Journal of 9-22-80 as saying that he would work for Reagan, not simply vote for him. And indeed he opened a headquarters in Queens.

WH: Did this political activity and quotes from you in the paper make others jealous of you?

SB: Yes it did. I was involved in many things. Cuomo recognized my involvement. I wanted to be in the so-called "inner circle." Cuomo asked me when I had a 45 minute meeting with him: "Sam, why are you involved in politics?" I said: "May I call you Mario?" "Sure," he said. I said: "Mario, some people like to go to hotels. I don't. Some people like to go to bars. I don't. Some people like to go on vacations. I don't. I'm interested in doing something for the Jewish community. You will be the next President." He said: "Sam, you really mean it?" I said: "Sure. You didn't win this election. Koch gave it to you. But I don't want a job. I want only a "dollar a year job" that would recognize my involvement with the Jewish community." He said: "I hear you. Go work with rabbi Moshowitz." I said: "Governor, I have a rabbi, my own rabbi. I worked directly for you." I went to see Moshowitz but others in the community were continuously knocking me. They said: "Who is Sam? Sam is my butcher." So I didn't get the recognition. And so the leaders tried to attack my professional reputation to keep me in my place. But I worked too hard to establish myself and I fought back and I succeeded in maintaining my good name and self- respect.

WH: You're in real estate now too. Tell me a little about how you got started in it.

SB: When I lost a lot of money in the stock market in 1974, I decided that I have to diversify and so I went into real estate.

WH: Were you lucky or was it shrewd investments?

SB: Neither, Everything is bashert (preordained); you have to do yours and God will help you. I own apartment buildings and a shopping center, and parking lots.

WH: Is there something else that you'd like to say for the record?

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0009

10

- SB: For the record I'd like to say that we survivors have an obligation to ourselves in addition to our responsibilities for our families who perished not to be afraid of threats or blackmail. When this happens to me I become more determined.
- WH: Are you still involved in politics?
- SB: I'm looking forward to be more involved. Right now I'm trying to establish a pac (political action committee) in this community. My son is involved in politics. He works with AIPAC. As long as I'm able to breathe I'll remain involved in the community.
- WH: How did you open up a butcher store here in K.G.H.?
- SB: It was an opportunity. I first was going to open up a store in Boro Park, but the Satmar Kehilla wanted its own store. Since my deal was already made with the individual I asked for a din Torah from the Satmar Rebbe and agreed to abide by his decision. He ruled that the needs of the community come before the individual even if I had the property first. So I came here. And then I went to the Satmar Rebbe for a bracha (blessing) which he gave me. I didn't come here out of choice; I came here because it was my destiny. For the first two years I continued to live in Williamsburg.
- WH: Did you miss Williamsburg at first?
- SB: Yes. There was little here by way of Yiddishkeit. It was very hard to get used to it.
- WH: There are many butchers not as successful as you. How did you succeed in setting up such a large operation?
- MB: It was foresight and determination. We looked at non-kosher supermarkets and saw that self- service kosher supermarkets were a real possibility.
- SB: I told my rabbi 28 years ago: "I'm looking to move higher in life." So he said: "What do you want to do?" And I told him: "Look at Waldbaum's and see how the non-kosher meat is sold in packages." And he answered me: "Our wives who take a chicken only with opening up the insides are going to buy that meat?" And I said: "Rabbi, you have no idea how much they can learn and how much better they'll like it if we show them how." And so it was. We explained it to them. We pioneered in this area. And, in fact, I told it to one of my workers, who took this idea and opened a store in Boro Park
- WH: What was the story regarding the tree that happened during the war?
- SB: I was working in the forest where we had to carry 100 lb. bags of cement. I did this for about two weeks and realized that if I continued I would die very quickly. So I hid myself

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0009

11

inn the top of a tree when the workers went back to the camp. But they found me. I decided to hold on to the tree. They hit me and hit me but I held on, saying: "If I die, I'll die here."

WH: How did you hold on?

SB: Don't ask me how. That's it. I stayed there. I woke up later on all beaten. I walked around the camp and looked for another job, which I found. You had to be determined to survive. But of all the attacks on me, when people here try to attack my reputation, that is the most painful, especially because I worked so hard to be involved in the Jewish community like with Russian Jews.

WH: Miriam, how did you decide to run for district leader?

MB: My husband insisted that I do it. Friends supported but I'm not a political type.

SB: At the same time, I established a community newspaper called The Voice of the Hills. Unlike you, who went to school and got a Ph.D., I had to try to understand why I work so hard; what do I want to accomplish? Why didn't I enjoy myself like any other American after I succeeded financially? Before you came here this evening, I had a meeting with other people about rebuilding a shopping center which will cost close to two million dollars. I'm 61 years old. I don't know what tomorrow will bring. And there is a need to show our children that we have a responsibility that goes far beyond simply enjoying ourselves-to do for the Jewish community and to show those American Jews who did not go through the Holocaust, how much of a need there is to have helping institutions. Sure, the Germans are the ones who were directly guilty, but at the same time, the Jews could have done more to help us, to save us. They sent money? Money alone wasn't enough. And a Jewish community that is organized politically has real power. We have tremendous institutions that help others, like hospitals, but we don't do enough to help ourselves.

WH: Why is it we don't do more?

SB: Because the so-called leaders always preach that we have to show the world how we're better people. But the world isn't interested and never was interested. But I say that first you have to start locally in politics and that you also have to be financially successful because the money helps too. Spending time is not enough. Money is required to create and have an impact. Look at the Amsterdam News. It's a small paper but it's quoted everywhere. We should learn not to turn the other cheek. Koch spoke out but few Jews supported him. Now Dinkins has praised Mandela and Tutu. And that's why you need local influence, not only necessarily in the U.S. Senate because if you're strong locally, then you can go further. Look at the Boro Park Council. And I tremendously admire Malcolm Hoenlein who understands these things. He's one of the most unique individuals I've ever met.

WH: Are you sorry you didn't go to Israel instead of the U.S.?

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0009

12

- SB: It's very easy to say you're sorry. But if you're truly sorry you can go now. You don't have to look for parnoseh {income}; you have income from here. I could retire on Social Security. But since my destiny was that I should be here, I wanted to do things here. My children are here; they wouldn't go there now. And let's face it---without strong U.S. support, Israel cannot exist. In a couple of years though, I hope to have an apartment there and spend half my time in Israel.
- WH: Do you ever take a vacation now?
- SB: In the last four years I haven't taken a vacation. Look, a vacation is nice, but after you come back, what have you got? It's all nonsense. A person needs to have a rest, but if you don't have the patience, why go?
- WH: Well, do you ever relax?
- SB: I wish I could. My mind is always going.
- MB: We go away for Shabbos if we're obligated, like for a barmitzvah.
- WH: But I see you watch television.
- MB: That we do.
- WH: But you do enjoy work.
- MB: He thrives on it.
- SB: Let's understand each other. I think there's a great deal that needs to be done. Those few of us who are left have to get involved. Let me ask you this: Do you think if someone would go for a vacation, they would live longer?
- WH: How is your health?
- SB: Okay, now. Four years ago, I didn't think I would have four years to live. But now I'm okay.
- WH: You said you wanted to see Auschwitz. Why?
- SB: I feel it will make me stronger to see what we overcame.
- MB: I wouldn't want to go back.
- WH: Have you personally experiences anti-Semitism in America?

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0009

13

- SB: Definitely. From my workers. I have a superintendent in a building who is an anti-Semite. I had drivers who delivered meat who made anti-Jewish remarks. And I don't tolerate it. I had fist fights about it. When I have such problems now, I fire the people.
- WH: Do you think blacks have a particular problem with Jews?
- SB: Yes. We demonstrate for them but even though we helped them, we're the first to be blamed. The reason is jealousy, because we're hard-working people. Now they have the same problem with the Koreans and for the same reason. Instead of being involved with the black community we should be involved with our own people. We should be worried about possible reapportionment in the city. We are a minority! We're more of a minority than blacks are. The ACLU should fight for Jews. In our community voting in local elections is not sufficiently promoted.
- WH: Do you prefer Democrats over Republicans?
- SB: You have to go with the individual. The party no longer matters.
- WH: Do you know of any other survivors whose efforts to become involved have been rejected by snobbishness by Americans?
- SB: When I worked for Koch I went to Williamsburg and survivors there said: "What, we have no chance; we have nothing to gain by being involved in politics." The same thing happened when Cuomo ran for governor. Now Jews vote Republican more often, but unfortunately, people like Sununu and Baker are not friendly to Jews.
- WH: Were you involved in politics in the DP camps?
- SB: No. At sixteen I was too young.
- WH: What boat did you come on?
- SB: The General Stewart.
- WH: What did you do on the boat?
- SB: I worked as a steward bringing food to the people. It's my nature to work.
- WH: Do you dream about the war at night?
- SB: Yes. Whenever I have time and I think, the memories come back.
- WH: Are there any habits left over from the war?

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0009

14

MB: I freeze food.

SB: I never saved food in the camps because they would steal it.

WH: Do you live “with your bags packed,” so to speak?

SB: It wouldn't help if something happened. You could have a billion dollars today and tomorrow nothing. There's no security in banks. Who knows how much money Jews deposited in Switzerland during the war and no one is claiming it? Sometimes one has to take a chance, though. I remember when after the war I reclaimed my family liquor business. I saw two Russian soldiers carrying off about 20 liters of spirits, which was a lot of money. So I ran after them and I said: “C'mon guys. Bring it back.” The women ran off. So one of them took out his gun and pointed it at me. I said to him: “I'm from the concentration camp and I'm not afraid.” And I took the gun and pushed it down. So they brought it back and I gave them wine, and they left. But I accepted things as my destiny. What hurts much more is when Jews attack you.

WH: Do you feel that Jews are different than other people?

SB: I think Jews are more devoted and caring as a group. Look at how they take care of their children. Or take Hatzoloh, which takes Jews to hospitals, look at the yeshivas we established. Of course, there are some rotten Jews too.

WH: It's nice to see that despite everything that happened, you didn't lose faith in the Jewish community as a whole.

SB: It's the opposite. I fight for the community

WH: Was the Jewish community in Europe more giving?

SB: Yes, because people were more sincere.

WH: Why was that?

SB: People felt more responsible in Europe.

WH: What did you like about life in Europe?

SB: There was nothing to like. I remember that I went to my grandfather sometimes for a simcha but everything else was bad (He was young during the war.)

WH: What do you think about the fact that most of the yeshivas didn't allow students to go to Washington to demonstrate on behalf of Soviet Jewry in 1988?

- SB: It's very distasteful to me. And I know that some of the yeshivas tried to force people into supporting their position. And my position is we need to do more than just give money to yeshivas even though that's good too. And I want people to realize that Sam Brach isn't just interested in himself alone or just in making money. On the contrary, he spends money in the community. Some yeshivas are only interested in their own yeshivas, not in other yeshivas. And rabbis too. A rabbi's job shouldn't be merely to deliver a eulogy or visit the sick. In Europe the societies did that. A rabbi should do more than that. He should lead the community.
- WH: How do you decide which charities you'll give to?
- SB: First, I like to give directly to the people. Second to Hatzoloh, Bais Yaakov. I used to give \$5,000.00 a year to the Shevach School. I got a call from the Satmarer leader. I had to give. They're my own people. I buy a lot of Israel Bonds and I give to other organizations in Israel. I give to Ner Israel because my son went there.
- WH: What did the Holocaust teach you about human nature?
- SB: It taught me only one thing: To be determined and to accept responsibility to do things for the Jewish community. After the Holocaust I also learned a great deal about how to survive.
- WH: Did you ever doubt God through all the years?
- SB: Right after liberation I said there's no such thing as God. No such thing.
- WH: And when people ask you now how to explain the Holocaust happening if there is a God, what do you say?
- SB: I have no explanation. I don't think there is an explanation for it.
- WH: I know of survivors who are Orthodox, they pray every day and go to synagogue. On the surface they appear Orthodox, but they tell me they keep the religion, not so much out of deep belief, but because it's the community they grew up with and feel comfortable with.
- SB: No such thing. I disagree very much with that. Survivors especially, should adopt whatever they want to adopt. It's not like home where you had to hold on to the traditions. Today you can do whatever you feel like.
- WH: It's not necessarily a matter of force. They say the traditions make them feel good.
- SB: It doesn't make sense to me. These people are just fooling themselves talking themselves into something. It's actually a copout and that's no good for us. It's bad. The important thing is to face yourself. That's what I try to teach my children: Face it and don't go around things---go through things. You can't pretend things are good when they're bad.

- WH: Do you think your own children would have a good chance of surviving if a Holocaust happened?
- SB: It's not up to them. No person can survive without help from upstairs. Impossible.
- WH: Is there one political leader who particularly impressed you?
- SB: Believe it or not, I don't want to say it; he's no tzaddik but I would say Ed Koch. He's not even a believer. He goes to churches, but he impressed me. Yet of all the people, Malcolm Hoenlein impressed me the most.

Speech by Sam Brach

Honored Rabbis, My Good Friend Lt. Gov. Mario Cuomo, Mayor Ed Koch, Boro President Donald Mannes, Worthy Members of Congress and our own Dedicated Legislators, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to acknowledge the presence of a most important representative of the State of Israel

We serve a great purpose here today. If the news media will report this gathering honestly, then the message will be received by our fellow Americans and by our brothers and sisters in Israel, that Israel does not stand alone. There are people of good conscience and heart throughout the world that will not allow the facts to be ignored damaging the image of Israel by presenting a one-sided story and promoting an atmosphere of anti-Semitism.

I may not have full command of the English language or a great ability to express my thoughts and feelings; but when one heart speaks to another heart there is no need for big words as we share the same ache and the same determination to ease that ache. You see before you a heart that has felt many aches. Like many of you I am a product of the Holocaust. There is no one in this world who can tell me that what I went through in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Dachau was created by someone's imagination. It was as real as the signs of today. A new Holocaust today that shows its ugly head in Europe and yes even here in this great democratic country of ours, America. I took an oath when I survived that hell that when I got on my feet, never again would I allow anyone to treat me, my family and my Jewish brothers and sisters as anything less than human beings.

It is the existence of the State of Israel that has given us the courage to defend our honor and our place in the world as a nation to be reckoned with. The price for this courage is very high. Six million Jews in Europe, thousands in battles with our Arab enemies and hundreds in the cowardly acts of terrorism.

But we have learned from the defenders of the State of Israel "Never Again". Israel has become a refuge for Jews throughout the world. It has become a symbol of our right to exist, it has become a reason to exist.

Surrounded by enemies, threatened by friends, we have survived.

Our battles were fought for our survival, never for new lands or wealth. For a supposed momentary period of peace we have surrendered land and wealth as witnessed by the return of the Sinai.

Mr. Weinberger and Mr. Schultz, do not take that as a sign of weakness. We will pay the price in search of permanent peace, even with the loss of our soldiers, but never with the loss of our security and our ability for Israel to exist as a refuge for Jews around the world. Less than that would make all the sacrifices of human life and suffering a terrible waste. We stand solidly with the Israeli government in keeping Israel in the Mid-East as a secure and honest friend to America. For there is no other. But, Mr. Weinberger and Mr. Schultz you must be aware that to keep that friendship, to keep the only democratic state in the Mid-East as a partner in American interests, you may not dictate who should be Prime Minister, you may not tell Israeli citizens where they may or may not live.

Is it any wonder that Prime Minister Begin strongly and promptly rejected the proposal that denies Israel the fruits of a hard fought victory? With the defeat of their sworn enemy the P.L.O., Israel could now turn its attention to the Arab situation in the West Bank and deal with it to the satisfaction of all parties. This way its security would be strengthened.

Instead Mr. Weinberger and Schultz and you Mr. President have betrayed your ally in the Mid-East. You would present.

And now You must all vow today as I did when I left the concentration camps, NEVER AGAIN, NEVER AGAIN.

Thank you