

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

William Helmreich Oral History Collection

**Interview with Joseph Bukiet and Al Bukiet
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Joseph Bukiet and Al Bukiet, conducted by William Helmreich on December 15, 1989 as research for his book *Against all odds: Holocaust survivors and the successful lives they made in America*. The interview was given to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on Oct. 30, 1992 and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

JOSEPH BUKIET and AL BUKIET December 15, 1989

I am interviewing Joseph Bukiet (his brother Al will arrive later) in his offices in Clifton New Jersey, headquarters for his real estate firm. Lining the walls are photographs of Mr. Bukiet and the many activities that he is involved in. I request and receive a "photographic tour"

JB: I was chairman for Israel Bonds for 12 years. Here I am, meeting with Simcha Dinitz.

WH: Of all the leaders you met which one did you like the best?

JB: Golda Meir. There was no one like Golda. The difference between Golda and Begin----we're not talking philosophy. We're talking about people----Begin is above the people, it is a certain air. When you talked to Golda, she was, she was your mother, your sister, your brother, while he is the aristocracy. Now, he was smart, but I don't like him. I think the smartest of all is Peres. Now here, you see, I built a museum of the Holocaust, for the community. We have here a library of over 1,000 books. Elie Wiesel came to dedicate it. And my son Melvin is the one who helped me with this. My number one priority is Israel and over the years I helped raise maybe thirty or forty million dollars for Israel. There is a fundamental difference between myself and the professional money-raisers for Israel They envision only one thing--the dollar bill. Let me give you an example. Eight years ago I spoke in a shul. Even though I'm not so orthodox, I walked on Yom Kippur. I wouldn't drive to a shul to speak on Israel. I spoke and everyone gave, one for \$20,000 and another for \$1,000. And I asked that everyone should give ten dollars so that the entire community could participate in the mitzvah. So one person, Velvel Bailyn, said "Ten dollars." When Velvel Bailyn said "Ten dollars." I stopped and I started to cry. I don't cry easily; I'm not a crybaby. Since concentration camp, I think this was the second time that I broke down. I just lost my voice. I couldn't talk. Why? Because Velvel Bailyn is a Russian Jew. He came from Russia three years prior to that night. He was the man who collected from the community. We helped him get a job. A poor man. That day he went from being a taker to being a giver, he stopped being a ward of the community. He became a baal-haboos.

WH: When did you break down the first time?

JB: The first time also had to do with Israel Bonds. We had an appeal for Israel Bonds. Melvin was going to Amherst College. He called me up that he's coming home for Yom Kippur. He called me from the George Washington Bridge. He hitch-hiked. You know Melvin wouldn't take a bus. It was 5:20 P.M. and Kol Nidre was at 6: P.M. I grabbed the car and I said: "I'm picking you up!" And I made it back for Kol Nidre. So he came home and ate. The next day he came into shul and he said: "Dad, do you mind if with the \$1,000 from my bar-mitzvah I buy bonds for Israel?" You know, I send him away to college; I'm scared about what's going to happen to him----and when he said that, it's a certain feeling you have that this is your kid. Big things don't affect you that much; it's the little things. I fought to keep the \$100 bonds because I wanted the grandmothers should also be able to give. So one

man said Israel Bonds is not Zionism [It's business, I presume]. So I said: "If it's not Zionism, then I know better places to invest my money. I mean if there's no heart and soul behind it....."

WH: When you compare the survivors to American Jews do you find them generous when it comes to giving to Israel or do you find it's hard for them to give?

JB: The survivors should have been the biggest givers because they know from what they went through, that money meant absolutely nothing. But the survivors are not the biggest givers. However, those survivors who get involved are with heart and soul and fire. So once you get a survivor to give, he gives above and beyond his capacity. For the average survivor, when they came to this country they were afraid, they had to make a living. And they have a terrible stinginess. But the bigger givers, Wilf, Halpern, Skura, and Zborowski, they give a lot. I think there's a subconscious fear of identifying as a Jew. I have a friend who lives in the South, he said: "My child is not going to be killed because I am a Jew." He didn't circumcise his son. And the joke of it is, he's an Orthodox Jew. And he's a survivor. I don't know if he made a gimmick, a bloodletting, but I know, no circumcision. Now I know friends of mine who never will have children. They decided not to because they didn't want to go through with this. I know survivors who will talk about everything except that they're Jewish. I mean, you have to realize that, after what we went through, we're meshuggeh by admitting that we're Jews. I mean we're just crazy.

WH: So why didn't you go the route of your uncle? Why did you decide to say you're a Jew?

JB: I decided that route a long time ago. Because I said I lived as a Jew, I'll die as a Jew.

WH: What kinds of properties do you own?

JB: I'm by profession a builder. I build everything. One family, two family houses, office buildings, shopping centers. I build and then we sell. WE don't build by contract or subcontract.

WH: Can you estimate how much you own?

JB: We're comfortable; we're comfortable. Let's say this. My financial statement is O.K. We came to America with \$5.00.

WH: Tell me about your life on the farm when you first came here?

JB: We came on November 19, 1948 on the General Bundy, from Bremerhaven. We arrived in Boston.

WH: Do you belong to any landsmannschaften?

JB: The Cracower Society because I come from a town near Cracow, Proszowicp. It's north of Cracow.

WH: How often do you speak?

JB: Once or twice a week. I go around to the schools. I could be doing any business. If they call me to speak on the Holocaust, I stop and I go. I spoke last week from 9:00 to 12:00 in Glen Rock. I spoke in Paterson, in Passaic. I never say no and I don't charge. Also about Israel. I speak in synagogues. I speak because I feel there's a lack of knowledge of what happened among the most learned people.

WH: How were you received in Boston?

JB: Beautifully. They gave us cakes and beautiful girls took us around. We went by train to N.Y. and we arrived Friday evening. My uncle and cousin greeted us. We went to my uncle's house on 52nd St. in Flatbush. On Sunday I read in the Tog that they're looking for a furrier. I had learned this after the war. Right away I started working. After this I got a job doing cushions. I was an operator. I must have had seven jobs right away. I changed jobs so often to improve and because they didn't pay much. I'll tell you a story. A man hired me and promised me \$40.00 a week. But he only paid me \$25.00. So I saw a big man, a Jewish union organizer who always came into his office. So I went in and I complained to him in Yiddish. I said: "what kind of justice is this? This boss puts the money in his pocket." I didn't tell my uncle of course because I was embarrassed to admit I was being cheated. So this big guy, what did he do? He picked me up by the back of my neck and he threw me out the door! So I wished him dead in Yiddish. And you know something? A year later he died! Because I wished it! Then I worked in sweaters. I joined the union. Then a friend suggested I visit a friend for the High Holidays who had a farm in Vineland. We drove down there. Vineland is one of the first towns in America that was a planned town. The main street is extremely wide. And it had Christmas lights which I saw for the first time in my life, which I thought it was Paradise, all lit up. We were on the farm a few days and---I liked it. It was quiet and tranquil, no rushing; you don't have to worry if you'll be laid off, enough food. Getting up early in the morning, we didn't worry about that. But after two weeks we left after saying thank you. Then we came back to my uncle and aunt in Brooklyn and we said: Fish, after two weeks, smell. We love you, we want to stay, but not for free. So we worked out a price, forty dollars a week. My aunt was a real American, if you don't know who Da Bums are, you're not an American. You have to work hard. So when we lost a job, we'd go to the library the whole day and read books and when we'd come back she would be very friendly to us. She thought we went to work.

WH: What did you read there?

JB: We started reading English. I went to night school at Erasmus High School. In June of 1949 I got a diploma. Then the aunt got mad at us because we took the uncle to Coney Island. We corrupted him. She said a man shouldn't go to the beach without his wife; that this is how

marriages are being broken up. So we moved out. I mean, we were friendly with her till the day she died, but this how she was; no monkey business. We took an apartment with Al Goodman's sister, the musician. Then we decided we're going to buy a farm. So Mr. Harrington showed me a house with a chicken coop for 600 chickens which means you could starve! And I bought it.

WH: Couldn't you get help from the Jewish Agricultural Society?

JB: I could but I wouldn't take it. I'm not a taker. When we came the uncle bought us shirts and pants in Ripley's. He spent \$52.00. The first time I made \$52.00 I paid back the uncle. I said: You gave me coffee and tea but you have no obligation to give me clothing especially when I'm working.

WH: Something just occurred to me now about the camps. Where were you, by the way/

JB: I was in Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buchenwald.

WH: In the camps, you had to depend on people to help you. Is this idea of not wanting to be a taker, does this come from the fact that you had to depend on people and you didn't want to do it any longer?

JB: Absolutely not. I was one of the lucky people in that I lived with my father from the beginning of the camps to the end. I never told them he was my father or they would have killed him. In the end I was in the schliess commando. I took out the shit. Someone had to do it in Birkenau. There were thousands of people. And every day, on this commando, ten got killed and ten lived. I saw that those who lagged behind got killed, so I didn't lag behind.

WH: Wasn't there a feeling of terrible depression, that if this is going to be my lot, what's the point?

JB: No. I said this is a war and I'm going to survive it. It's that simple. The ones who came with me and did not say it, died. They went to the wires. I survived because I organized. I collected dirty laundry. It was a side job. I saw that the kapos counted the shirts and wrote down the amount and stamped it. Then they gave me the clean shirts and underwear and I brought them back. So I went to the coal mine and I said: "If you give me a pencil, a black one, a red one, I will bring you the most beautiful silk shirt. So the Polish coal miner said "If you don't bring me, I'll kill you." At that time they weren't giving us striped uniforms; they were giving us shirts from people who were killed. I said 'Okay, but give me one week's time.'" So I made sure they caught me for the laundry detail. So I carried in 230 underwear and 230 shirts. And as I stepped out I took the three and wrote an eight. They gave me 280 shirts. On the way back I stopped by a barrack which was not my barrack and I hid them in a hole. The next day I took a shirt. From that day on I had my father and Jacob Banach--- they didn't know where I got the shirts. From then until 1944 we carried the shirts in and when we did, we got a piece of bread, a piece of salami, a cup of soup. Because of this we

survived. So if you're asking me, I never took. I gave. To survive took luck, cunning, and shrewdness. Absolutely no question we survived because of luck.

WH: So, going back to Vineland, what happened there?

JB: One came after the other. Because of me others came. I want to tell you that at one point in camp, a German (illegible) who was a real animal started with me and I knew if I don't fight back, I'm dead. Because he used to have a few Jews for breakfast and a few for lunch. So I picked up a shovel and said to him in Hebrew: "I will die with the Philistines." like Samson said. And I hit him in the side of the head with the shovel. And then, it was like a miracle, a tremendous fog came down and no one could find anyone and I got away with it. A few months later I saw him with a bandage. He never bothered me again. I don't know if he recognized me or not. He didn't really know me. I wish sometimes I would be mystical, or a hasid, and I would say the Ribbono Shel Olom (God) did it. But I don't believe that. I think you make your own destiny

WH: You don't believe in destiny but you do believe in the Jewish people. You sent your child to yeshiva.

JB: I believe in this. All the civilizations went under but we're still here. The greatest miracle that happened to us is not that we survived but how we survived. We had no education after the war, without guidance. Our parents and teachers were killed. According to the norms of the world, we should have mixed in with other peoples and disappeared. Find a Jewish community where a survivor is not involved. You'll find survivors in the business community who are movers and shakers. The miracle is we had something our parents gave us, something in our genes. And the majority of us do not walk around with a chip on our shoulders that the world owes us something. Just the opposite. It must be something that our parents did, the generations of Jewish knowledge, of Jewish belief. We were stubborn and had a strong belief. All of us have nightmares but the majority of us don't have depression. Because anytime something goes wrong in the business I just look at the number on my arm and I say: "Big deal! What's wrong? Somebody sending you to a camp?" So I'm not depressed. For instance, if you would come by today and say: "Joe Bukiet, you have cancer; you have six months." So, I would say: "big deal?" There is nothing that can shock me, make me depressed, or scare me. It's a certain attitude. So when we became chicken farmers, the chickens didn't lay. So we didn't do it. But there was a society that within a very short time people started flocking down to the farms. It was a way of having a Jewish life. Though none of us were frum [religious] we built right away shuls. And we built right away yeshivas for our children.

WH: What was the reason?

JB: That's us! It didn't matter if we were socialists.

WH: what did you do for recreation?

JB: We played cards in the evening. We helped each other. We went out to Philadelphia to Yiddish theater together. We met quite often in peoples' houses for tea and coffee. We had a real community.

WH: Where did you go after you sold the farm/

JB: I came to New York and looked for egg routes. After all, I knew chickens. Then I read in the paper a man had a supermarket for sale. We went to Far Rockaway, where the neighborhood was changing to blacks and he couldn't sell the store. We bought it. And he had a man, Benny who was going to teach us the business. After one week I told my brother: "The man is a goniff (thief). But our attitude was how much can he steal in a year and how much will it cost us to learn the business? And it would cost us less to keep him, have him teach us, and let him steal until we learned enough and didn't need him anymore. Besides, when a man steals he has to justify what he does by at least teaching us. And you know, he taught us every trick. A & P didn't know these tricks.

WH: Can you give me an example of what a trick is?

JB: Let's say you sell cabbage. They look like collard greens. If you take the leaf from the cabbage and put on top of the collard green, you wouldn't know the difference. It would look like cabbage. You cook it together it tastes the same way. Or let's say the supplier takes out six stale breads and brings four fresh. So he says: "I took out four stale and I brought you six fresh. It's a twist of the tongue but you lose four breads. Milk is dated. Every woman who comes into the store will always take from the bottom. So you put the stale milk on the bottom because they'll take it from the bottom without looking at the date. But the bread they take from the top; they do opposite! There are tricks in every business. And this guy knew every trick. So I hired a friend. I made him a one-third partner. His job was to follow Benny everywhere. And Benny tried so hard to show me how great he was that after two months I could run the store myself. I said "I really appreciate what you did for me but I don't need you any more." He said: "There's a lot to learn here." So I said: "Yes, but I can't afford you no more." He said: "You don't have to pay me as much as you did before." So I said: "My friend has been working for two months for nothing and I have to pay him." So he said: "I'll stay with you another two months for free." I said: "I don't want you. You're a wonderful person but I haven't got the conscience to employ you for nothing." He said: "Thank you very much." He never knew. He thought I'm the biggest putz in the world. Never did I tell the man. You are one of the few people who knows it. He knew tricks you cannot imagine. He knew how to buy, where to buy; how to display, what to display. I wrote my kalla and we got married in New York. Not a big wedding. It was a real greener wedding, no big album. It cost nothing. The uncle made the reception. We bought chickens which cost about \$1.25 a portion and that's it. My wife is an American.

WH: You don't have the situation where you married a survivor. Other survivors have told me that if their wife is a survivor they can understand each other.

- JB: I don't have this but she understands more than most of them. My wife is very well read. Every week she reads three, four, five books. There is practically no book on the Holocaust she didn't read. And she's a saint. There's not a person who knows her who wouldn't say that. Of course, it's hard for a man to talk about his wife. She knows more about the Holocaust than a survivor. I always laugh. I say we are a mixed marriage---a greener with an American. She speaks Yiddish, spoke it before she spoke English. Came from a poor house. She doesn't wear fur because she doesn't believe in animal suffering. Number two, She doesn't wear jewelry because you shouldn't flaunt it before a poor person to prove you're rich. She has a watch, a little pin. We have no problem sitting down on Sunday and making out fifty dollars for Hadassah and \$100 for animals and \$1,000 for this one and \$20,000 for UJA. And whenever my wife sees a stray animal, she takes him in. We have two dogs.
- WH: But survivors don't have dogs?
- JB: That's right, but she's not a survivor.
- WH: So what happened in the store?
- JB: Very interesting. I had competition from a gentile but he sold the store to two survivors. So I went over to wish him a mazel tov even if he was the competition. I suggested we take half a day off on Sunday. He said: "Good idea." We also agreed to close on the holidays. Then he opened on Rosh Hashonoh and told me at 2: 00 p.m. that he's going to open on the second day of Rosh Hashonoh. I said: "I thought we had a deal." And he said: "Look mister, you run your business and I'll run mine." And, you see, a survivor acts different than most people. What did I do? I grabbed the truck and ran down to Atlantic Avenue where they sell supplies and make signs up. And I had signs made up that said: 'Five pounds of sugar 19 cents; a pack of cigarettes, 1 cent; dozen eggs 12 cents; 1b butter 16 cents.' The sign maker said: "What, you crazy? You going out of business?" I said: "Mind your business." I made up 40 big signs, came back at 5:00. I took everything out from the windows. And five minutes before closing, I put up all the signs and closed the store and went home. We went away for the holidays. After the holiday I come in at 4: A.M. and take off all the signs and put back the old signs. The first Irishman walks in and he says: "I will tell you something. I says to my wife, you should never trust a man who's not religious. I admire you because you're religious, you closed the store. Those bastards, those newcomers, those Jews, they didn't close, but they're a bunch of robbers. You should have seen the prices they charged. I saw your prices. Never again will I go to those thieves. Because you are closed, they charged everything three times as much." I picked up business! People came in, they said, the others were thieves. I never spoke to that man in my life again. After that I had an Italian man run my store on the holidays. Anyway we sold the store and purchased a fancy store in Cedarhurst. And we invited people to see the store. We lived in a rat-infested apartment. They had nice homes in Boro Park and I lived in Salvation Army furniture. I had no problem that the couch was old. I didn't buy fancy dresses. It's a matter of priorities.

WH: What were your priorities?

JB: To become independent. Not to work for any bosses. And to support my wife and family. And as we were leaving the house, a woman, we were good friends, she said to her husband in Yiddish: "If you want to live like a pig, you can buy a store like this." I heard it; it hurt me. Then I opened another store. A new elegant subdivision opened in North Woodmere. My brother and I bought houses. We bought new furniture and carpets. We invited these people for dinner. They were surprised: "Such a gorgeous house." And he said: "This must be like Rockefeller's mansion." And when he said it, I said: "If you want to live like a pig for two years, you can live in a castle for the rest of your life." And she looked at me and said: "I deserve it, don't I? I shouldn't have said it." "You're darn right," I said. "But you have a good memory," she said. "You should have known that," I answered. These are the things....But I shouldn't have said it because by saying something, maybe I took away some of his manlihood. One day, though, when he lost his job, I took him as a partner in a building because we were dear friends and his wife came to me and said: "Joe, you have to help us." But it was hard to make it in the supermarket. We were competing with Waldbaums. So I went into the building business with a friend, the same one I knew from the chicken farm (Al walks in and we are reintroduced.)

AB: When we wanted to buy the chicken farm we had no money. My friend lent me the money. We got to where we got because we helped each other out. How many people would do that for a friend? Pantirer was from our hometown. He collected cigarettes for us after the war. We helped him and we were very close. When we came to Brooklyn, the cousin didn't want us; he lived two houses down but he was ashamed to have anything to do with the greener. He was peeling potatoes on an army boat. That's how he won the war. But, then, two years later he needed money to buy a store. Then we lent him the money. And he started making money. The first thing he did was he bought himself a new car, then he bought himself new furniture, and a beautiful apartment. We, the first thing we did was to repay the obligation you owed somebody.

JB: And I wouldn't call it a European mentality. I would say it's survivor vs. non-survivor.

WH: What happened to your father?

JB: He died the day of Liberation. We marched from Buchenwald to Theresienstadt. We ate nothing but grass for weeks and drank water. Of 25,000 maybe 5 or 10 survived. So my father was one of the few who survived. He grabbed the food when the Russians came in and he died from eating the food. They were not used to it. Anyway I saw my friend Rosenblum and I saw he was building a house here in New Jersey and I said: "When you buy a small grocery store, you make a living or you can go broke. When you buy a big supermarket, you can make money or you can go broke. So what's the difference? With both you can go broke." I said if you build 20 houses you can make more money than with one.

WH: Wait a minute. You don't run a bigger risk with twenty?

JB: No. No. We didn't have more money involved. Just more credit. The guys on Wall Street are proving it to you. The more money they make, the more money they invest.

AB: You see, if you borrowed a million dollars, the bank couldn't let you go broke because they have to lend you money to pay the interest.

JB: Work is a privilege. If you come to a country and you have to shovel shit, plain English, it should be something acceptable to you. When I had people around me, they say I think I'm in Auschwitz because I pressure them so much to work, because I love my work so much.

AB: My son is a lawyer. He was working for Simpson-Thatcher. He was working for Cyrus Vance. He works here and took a big cut to work here. He loves it here. There he would have been a partner by now. My son-in-law also loves the business.

JB: I love what I'm doing. Melvin said we should buy this building in Sunnyside. Aesthetically I love it. We paid 2,000 dollars just to take away the garbage. I want you to know in one year the graffiti and garbage disappeared. We have flowers growing.

WH: Of everything you achieved in life, what are you proudest of?

JB: My children, my family. That we do not count the dollars, the pennies. You can drive through the state of New Jersey and you'll see American flags outside apartment buildings---it's my jobs. I am a Zionist, an ardent Zionist, but I am also a great patriot for America; not a Conservative, not a Republican, not a Democrat, but an American, because America gave me something that I didn't have---freedom, love.

WH: Do you think this could happen here?

JB: No, never, never. never. There are too many differences. Because of this I have an American flag. But everyone knows too that I am a Jew, a proud Zionist.