

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

William Helmreich Oral History Collection

Interview with Leon Chadajo and Renia Chadajo
July 21, 1989
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Leon Chadajo and Renia Chadajo, conducted by William Helmreich on July 21, 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.

LEON CHADAJO AND RENIA CHADAJO

July 21, 1989

WH: Where were you from?

RC: Wlocwaczek, Poland. During the war I was in the camps and I was first in Scarzysko, the ammunition factory, I worked in the good part, not the part where you become yellow from the powder.

RC: There are many survivors in Century City, Boca Raton. You know, there are ten thousand people living here.

WH: Who died in your family?

RC: Both my parents and my only sister. I had no brothers. She was six years younger than me. I was also in Czechochowa and in Ravensbruck.

WH: Where are you from?

LC: From Salonika. I'm a barber. There were maybe 65,000 Jews. We were 21 people and 19 died. I had four brothers and one sister. I'm 77. I don't think 1% is alive today. I was in Birkenau, Auschwitz, Dachau, Warsaw Ghetto. I was with my brother all of the time. It was very hard for us because we didn't know German or Yiddish.

WH: Did you think you were going to make it?

LC: Who thought about making it? You lived day to day, like an animal. I was a barber in the camp, but I did other things too. My brother is a barber. I was a barber when I was born. The German-Jewish kapos were worse than the German kapos because they wanted to prove themselves to the Germans. They never acted like Jews but Hitler taught them they were Jews. I came on the General Howze with an affidavit from the HIAS. We met in Germany after the war. We came in 1949.

WH: Did you get seasick?

RC: Not really.

LC: We came to New York and right away they took us to Boston. I think they gave us \$5.00. My brother was already here, in Roxbury. They took good care of us here, the Federation. They gave us a room with a Jewish family. And every week they gave me a week's pay and they used to buy us clothing and furniture. I said I'd like to work myself. They said, "Don't worry, everything will be fine."

WH: Did you get together with the survivors?

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LC: Yes. Every Saturday we got together by the zoo in Franklin Park where the music was. We'd ask each other "What's new?" "You working?" "How come you're not working?" And I got a job cutting hair. And I worked in one place for nine years.

WH: I see you have another number besides your concentration camp number. What is it for?

LC: This is an "s" and an "x" from the Greek alphabet.

WH: Why did you put that down?"

LC: (Leon's voice suddenly chokes and he hesitates) Why? That's my son's name. He was killed in Germany. That is why I don't like to talk about it. You can't live in the past. You have to live for the future. Of course I dreamt about it. Sometimes I wake up sweating, thinking the Germans are chasing us. But now I don't dream about it so much anymore.

WH: Do you belong to a synagogue?

LC: Yes and I go sometimes but not on Saturdays. On Saturdays I work. I always did. I often ask the rabbi why this had to happen. What did we do?

WH: Was there jealousy against the greener?

RC: Yes. When we bought our house and moved in, our neighbor, I was friendly with her, called someone over and said: "I want you to meet the refugee." I said "Liz, since when am I a refugee? I have a name. I own a house just like you do. And I'm working; I pay taxes just like you do. I'm an American." And other Americans were jealous that we were here such a short time and already we owned a house. And I said to them: "I didn't get the money for the house by sitting on my big you know what. I worked for it. We worked harder than you children did. That's why you have an education. Because your parents worked hard.

WH: What do your kids do?

RC: One used to be a schoolteacher. Now he's in business. The other son is a dental technician. They're both married.

WH: Did they marry Jews?

RC: Ah, whaddaya you talking about. Of course!

WH: Well, it happens.

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RC: You telling me!

RC: With my oldest, I pushed too much. With my youngest I was more American. I took it easier.

WH: Where do you know the people in New York from, the ones you mentioned?

RC: From the “resorts” (She gives a short laugh.)

WH: Do you think a Holocaust could happen here?

LC: No. They wouldn’t let it happen here.

RC: No. There are too many Jewish composers, writers, and actors. The youth here is too strong. It could happen. You never know what will happen.
I remember when I came to work, when I told this woman who works with me I’m a Jew, she said: “Oh my God! You’re not a Jew. How can you be a Jew?” I said: “Listen, you don’t have to bother with me, if you don’t like it. Did I change from yesterday, when you knew I was Polish? If I was a Polish Catholic instead of a Polish Jew, would I look different to you?” “Oh,” she says. “Forget it, Renia, forget it.” I put everyone in their place. I’m a Jew, but I don’t take any crap from anybody.”

WH: Do you think most survivors take that attitude?

RC: No, they wouldn’t take any crap.

WH: Did you go on vacations?

LC: We went to the Concord, Nevele, Browns, but not when the kids were small. A whole group of us from here used to go to Browns.

WH: What does it mean to you to be Jewish?

LC: To have problems. Not too many people like the Jews for some reason.

WH: Are you sorry you’re Jewish?

LC: No, I’m not sorry. I paid deeply because I’m a Jew. I’m proud to be a Jew now.

RC: How many Jews like the goyim? And the Protestants don’t like the Catholics. It’s in every religion.