

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

William Helmreich Oral History Collection

Interview with Mendel Chulew

July 28, 1989

RG-50.165*0013

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Mendel Chulew, conducted by William Helmreich on July 28, 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.

MENDEL CHULEW

July 28, 1989

- MC: ...I came to New York in '51...on the General Eltinge...
- WH: During the war, you fled across the border into Russia...
- MC: Yes...into Siberia...a lot of them didn't make it...they got sick...and a lot of them I think, losing hope, that was the main reason for giving up. They, - there was no – no hope that they'll ever get out of there and these people went like flies...in 1941 we were free to leave...
- WH: ...You have a (younger) brother, Eddie, do you have any other siblings?
- MC: I have another brother. Bernie...
- WH: You all live in Kenosha?
- MC: Yes.
- WH: In Siberia, the three of you were together?
- MC: Yes...my parents together, too. On the way back from Russia in '46 and ...she died...my father lived here with us. He passed away in '73...we came to New York first, my father had a brother in New York, and he also had a brother in Kenosha...they left Poland in 1912...the one in New York, he gave us some money, and the uncle here helped us with an empty store to start a business, so I came first, and I arranged for the business and then my father came with his – he got married, Mrs. Kramer, and the son.
- WH: That's your step-brother?
- MC; Yah.
- WH: ...how did you get the idea to go into the furniture business?
- MC: Well, I came mainly hoping that maybe I could get my father established here somehow, and I could go back, because I didn't plan to stay here, because for a single Jewish boy, there was no place in Kenosha.
- WH: Wasn't this true of your brothers too?
- MC: Well, Eddie stayed in New York...and Bernie went to Israel...when I started in the business, I took in Eddie and he's been with me since then.
- WH: ...what were your first impressions of New York?

MC: It was very exciting, but a lot of it was very disappointing to me...the disappointing was, you could see the disparity between the rich and the poor. And coming here as a refugee, you were considered less than what you were considered over there. In the camps I was more than the average. Better than the average. I was working for the Joint...and Immigration, and I was working in food supplies, in the office, I was looked up to. I was a little better than the average there. I had very decent jobs. I came here, they didn't know what to do with me. I wasn't a doctor, I wasn't an engineer – but they all came, my uncles came...to the boat, and we told him that we worked for the Joint and the HIAS and he said, 'Take that HIAS and the Joint, they can throw it in the garbage. As long as I'm alive, I'm going to take care of you people.' That was a big mistake too.

WH: Why?

MC: Because he lived in Mamaroneck and we settled in Sunnyside, and he couldn't do very much for us and the Joint and the HIAS, they were experienced to find jobs for people, and find a decent apartment, and they paid for the first year. We didn't get a nickel from the Joint or the HIAS because he took charge of us.

WH: You couldn't change your mind?

MC: No. We didn't want it. We didn't want money from anybody. We just wanted – we were hoping that we could start some kind of a business, but you just don't get off the boat and start a business.

WH: ...the majority of the refugees did not have any money when they came here.

MC: Well, we had some money that we made there, but we bought all kinds of gifts. We bought like crystals, and silver and candelabras, and all kinds of gifts for the relatives here, we didn't think that we needed to bring any money to the United States. Having, you know, we had here rich relatives. We didn't expect anything from them, except to show us how to make a good living, you know, to get started...the uncle in Sunnyside found me a job in the jewelry section on 47th Street...in the Shipping Department to fill orders and to pack them...I was making like \$50 a week...

WH: ...when you came here...what about the Jewish community?

MC: The Jewish community didn't do anything for us really. We were involved, we did go to services, like in New York...Sunnyside...we never, we were never invited by anybody. We really didn't look for it. We had our – see, my father, with a step-mother, they had an apartment in the building, so we ate there, myself and my brother. And we slept at my uncles. He had only one bedroom apartment, and he kept us there (Sunnyside) for 7 months in the living room. And we slept on the couch, and on a roll-away bed...and he was very nice, and he didn't get tired of us...they were very generous...he had a fish store, he worked

very hard, he had to get up at 4 o'clock to go to the fish market, but he took us in and the wife is not European, she was American, and she was very nice to us, and until today we are very good friends...and I was very determined to start my own business...I was 25 when I came here...I could speak and write (English) when I came here...

WH: ...what did you do in your free time...social life...

MC: ...we did go to social events, went on dates at the week-ends...we would go to a movie, dancing or to a restaurant...the first one was at the Hotel Diplomat...all the refugees had a big dance there...there was also a get-together at the HIAS like on Sundays, because there were new arrivals...and everybody would come there, and some would brag, you know, how well they're doing, and – some of them would exaggerate how well they're doing, and some would complain about the relatives, because most of them were disappointed. Most of them were disappointed in the relatives because the relatives really couldn't do very much for them. No. And when I came there – before I was leaving, I met some of the people that I knew and I told them we have an uncle, who is giving us some money, and the other uncle is going to give us an empty store, and we're going to start some kind of a business. And they said to me, 'We know you for a long time, you're not a bragger, but we don't believe what you're saying because it's not believable that the American relative is going to give money and the other one is going to help, because it's not -.'

WH: ...what was the reputation of the HIAS staff? Were they considered people who understood the problems of the refugees?

MC: Yah, the HIAS I think did a very good job. The HIAS and the Joint did a very good job...

WH: ...what finally made you leave (New York)?

MC: Well, first we had to find (a job) for my father, so that he could make a living, he found a job there to wash dishes in a restaurant. Never did it in his life. He was always a businessman...he wasn't well...he didn't know how to read or write, he didn't speak English. But my main job was to get my dad, my father, settled and that he could make a living. And that was my purpose to come to Kenosha when my uncle offered the empty store.

WH: Did you have mixed feelings about coming to Kenosha?

MC: Of course! This was worse than Siberia to is. It was. Because many times we would cry for days, for weeks. We were so lonesome here, so alone that we remembered the good times in Siberia where we had another 1,000 Jews there, we could have gone out on the street and have somebody to talk to. And here we were isolated. The business was no business yet. There was no big business. I went to work at American Motors. My father and my uncle were in the store the first year...I worked in a factory in Russia, but that wasn't my dream, to come to the United States and work in a factory but I didn't mind it. I got very nicely a, - I

worked for the first year to save up enough money and bought myself a new car. And when I had the car, it was already easier. I would drive to Milwaukee, to Chicago, go out on dated.

WH: ...out here in the wilderness, you're by yourself...

MC: No, we made the best of it. You know I didn't mind, I went to work, and I wasn't complaining, I liked the money, and I knew it was temporary. I was hoping to come into the business and either make a success of it or we were going to leave Kenosha and go back to New York, because that's where the most Jews are, in New York.

WH: ...most of the people who were sent to these places left...the majority of survivors didn't want to stay...

MC: The only reason we stayed is because we started the business, and the business got successful...and here, everybody is a Yankee.

WH: Did you become more of a Yankee too?

MC: We tried to. We had most of – once we had a house, and once we got married, and we had children, we had more in common with the other couples, who were American couples...

WH: Was it difficult to make friends here because of your background?

MC: No. Once we had a house, and once you made a living, people were not afraid of you that you're going to, that they gonna have to help you. And you invite them to dinner, and they'll invite you for dinner.

WH: And you go to the movies with them -.

MC: Yah. That's right. And that's the way it is. And that's the way it's been. You're not very close with anybody in particular...here we are involved with the Temple and the shul and involved in B'nai B'rith...Hadassah, Israeli bonds, UJA, we involved in everything. We're involved in everything, we're part of everything, see?

WH: ...how many children do you have?

MC: Two daughters...one on Israel (Marsha)...they both went to school in Madison, University of Wisconsin...the older is a dietician the one who went to Israel, and the other one (Natalie) is a teacher here in Kenosha...not married...and this was one of the things that we were concerned about Kenosha, you know, we hope they'd meet somebody...Marsha studied in Israel for a year and met an Israeli...they have two children...Israel is good, but unless you are professional or businessman, you have a hard time making a living. So if it wasn't for us, we went there, we bought an apartment for them, and we send them all the

furniture and the appliances, and we keep sending and sending which we don't mind, they just couldn't make it on their own...

WH: So how do you feel about your daughter having made aliyah?

MC: Well, we're not very happy about it because of the fact that we are here, and she's there. We can't spend enough time together, Otherwise we love Israel, but it would be nice if either we were there or she was here.

WH: ...do you ever think about moving to Israel?

MC: We think, but we are comfortable here. Too good to give it up, you know...you learn to live with it. Until we go and we make the best of it. We help her. If it was our choice, you want to be closer to your daughter and your grandchildren. And this makes it – we go just about every year and she came here a few times with the family, it's expensive, but we can afford it, thank G-d and we don't mind it...

WH: ...your living here sort of resulted in your Americanizing faster...

MC: Yah, but I didn't forget, I never forget where I came from, and I'm not a Yankee. I know who I am, I am more (inaudible) in Kenosha.

WH: Really. You say that after all these years.

MC: Of course.

WH: In what way?

MC: In every way. It's the upbringing, the family, the uncles, the -.

End of Tape #1, Side A

Tape #1, Side B

WH: ...you kept the ties...

MC: I spoke to my father in Yiddish. I still speak to my brother in Yiddish. In the store we speak Yiddish by ourselves. So we really didn't forget about it. But we do everything else, we do just like everybody else.

WH: But there's a bond between you that always remains.

MC: Of course.. My heart is in Israel, my heart is with Jewish people wherever I hear on radio, on television, when I see something, I stop my business with my customers I have to see what's happening in Israel, what's happening with the Jewish people.

WH: ...your family in Ruminoff, was Hasidish?'

MC: We had both...(Shows WH pictures of family and early years and a kepah from home.)...

WH: Are you faithfully observant now?

MC: Here, I'm considered religious, but I'm not that, because I work on Saturdays and on holidays.

WH: Do you keep a kosher house?

MC: 'No – we don't mix fleishig and milchig but we eat out , but we go out to shul and we, actually I do the services at the shul – with Rosen, together we do it.

WH: So, you were involved in a family business since the beginning, since you started it, tell me, when the '60's came and the war in Viet Nam started and everything else. What was your reaction to all that? What did you think of that as a person who had lived through everything in Europe?

MC: I felt that the government had more information than I had, and whatever they were doing was necessary.

WH: What about the Civil Rights Movement?

MC: I was never involved in it. Was I sympathetic to it? Yes, I'm sympathetic to minorities, you know, but I feel that I'm a minority myself, and I'm preoccupied with myself – (inaudible).

WH: Do you think that the minorities in America today are deserving of all the help they get?'

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0013

7

- MC: I know that they don't like us. A lot of them, the Black – a lot of the Blacks – but even a lot of the Blacks don't like us because we're more successful than they are, and a lot of them work for Jewish people and they resent it.
- WH: Do you have Blacks working for you?
- MC: We had a Black guy working with us, it was very unpopular in the '60's when we bought this house.
- WH: You had a Black guy when it was very unpopular?
- MC: It was unpopular then, at least nobody else had anybody Black in the Businesses working. He was delivering furniture for us.
- WH: Did you hire him as a matter of policy?
- MC: No, we just needed somebody, and just because he was Black, it didn't bother us.
- WH: Did people ever make anti-Semitic remarks in the store?
- MC: No...but I identified myself whenever I get the chance, that I'm Jewish, and we talk about it, we talk about Israel to all of them...most of them know we are Jewish – and we don't hide it, never – if they ask us, because we have an accent, or whatever, we always tell them that we are Jewish...(non-Jews) most of them come to the store and they want to know my story, my life (inaudible) story, and they sometimes sit down and they get very personal, and I tell them.
- WH: Do you ever speak in public about it?
- MC: I spoke in some schools... our daughter asked me to – (she's teaching the gifted program) and they were studying the Holocaust. So she just thought that it would be nice to go to these 3 schools...5th and 6th grade...to give my personal, experiences...most of those kids never saw a Jewish kid in town. I even asked them, 'Did you ever meet a Jewish boy? Do you know a Jewish person?' And most of them wouldn't know what a Jew looks like. What a Jew is.
- WH: ...when you say a Temple and a shul...Reform...you belong to both?
- MC: Yes...there was a split...
- WH: Do you have any regrets coming here/
- MC: No, I don't have any regrets because I didn't give up anything there that I had, you know, when I left. And here, I was very happy that what I accomplished, at least financially, as far

as making a decent living, we always lived comfortably, financially, we didn't have to worry about anything...we didn't need anything from anybody, we were very self-sufficient, and independent, and that's very important, you see. Because (inaudible) a lot of Jews, and if you're making a living, nobody wants to know you. Everybody shies away from you. Including your relatives – They're afraid you're going to need something from them. And this we never needed, because even in the camps, I made a lot of money in the camps, and I never asked for any money from the relatives here. When my father used to ask me to write a letter to the uncle and to ask him to send some money, I said, 'What's he gonna think about us? We're young people. We're healthy and we need money? We can't support ourselves?' I went out into the city and I made myself \$50, a \$100 under any circumstances, in Russia, in Austria, any place.

WH: Doing trading?

MC: Yah, I didn't steal,,sort of gray market...

WH: Do you feel that your experiences there helped you when you came to America?

MC: Of course! All the experiences, I was in business since I was 10 years old. We had a gasoline station and oil business...and my father used to take me out there (to resorts) when I was 12 years old and he would introduce me to all these barons...and 'he's going to be coming here every month and he's going to bill you and he's going to collect from you'...I took a very big interest in the business...

WH: ...when you came here, could you give me an example of...how you seized opportunities here...

MC: In the American context, I...would find out that there was a competitor only a block away from us who handled the same merchandise. I knew that in order to make customers I have to be a little bit cheaper than the next guy, and I have to make a little less. It's better than nothing...and we were flexible, they could bargain with us, and we would come down, you know, we would kind of compromise, and they liked that. Even lately. (Wife: Today we're not only selling their children, but their grandchildren).

WH: So you built up a business on personal (inaudible-contact?).

MC: We had five families made a good living from it. There's myself, my two brothers, my step-brother...my father, my wife is working, she gets paid, - so, we all make a living from the store.

WH: ...what is business like today?

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0013

9

- MC: We're not making millions, we're making a good living, and we're comfortable, and we all paid for our homes, we always have new cars, we never borrowed any money, we never owed anybody, everything is -.
- WH: America was good to you.
- MC: I would say so.
- WH: It's a great land of opportunity.
- MC: 'Of course! Yah. That's what we were hoping because when I was working for the Joint...the Director of the D.P. Commission...he came up to me and says, 'Mendel, why don't you go to Israel? Why do you want to go to the United States? What are you going to do there?' I says, 'I want to be in business. We have relatives there. And I think they can help us.' He says 'Business? Do you think they're waiting for you? In America it takes a lot of money to open up a business.' I says, 'That's all I know. And that's what I want to do.' And as it turned out, six months later, I was in business, so, it's a miracle!
- WH: ...the survivors as a rule don't forget where they came from.
- MC: No. Some try to pretend.
- WH: But the others don't let them forget.
- MC: No...some...they make a few dollars, they think they are something -.
- WH: How do you think it affected you, that you married a survivor?
- MC: (Wife: I think that it really enriched my life. It certainly has. We've done many things together, and we work together, and we have a lot of togetherness.).
- MC: We don't talk about it that much privately, you know, between us...
- WH: If there's a show on the Holocaust on T.V. you'll watch it?
- MC: Sure. We saw Shoah in one day. The whole thing...
- WH: But then again, you came from Poland, it must have been fascinating to you to see that train guy -.
- MC: It's fascinating, but it was nothing new to me. Nothing pleasant, but you see, when the war ended, most of us didn't even want to talk about it. And at first we thought that we had it so terrible in Russia, which it was, very hard. We had days when we were hungry, and we didn't have anything to eat, and...when we were coming back to Poland, we thought that we would

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0013

10

have stories to tell about Russia, (needs translation)...and we found out that what happened – that ours was like in a way like a picnic, you know, in comparison, see, because nobody was rounded up there, nobody was shot or gassed you know. But many people died, though...when I was telling my – let's say, our daughters, or my wife, or other people that I talked to, they come away that it was a cery good experience...

WH: Why does that happen?

MC: Because I don't feel sorry for myself, and I don't make it – I try to tell you about the positive parts of it. And I remind myself today a lot of times when the market goes down -.

End of Tape #1, Side B
Conclusion of Interview