

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

William Helmreich Oral History Collection

**Interview with Frank Colb and Margaret Colb
August 23, 1989
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Frank Colb and Margaret Colb, conducted by William Helmreich on August 23, 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.

FRANK COLB AND MARGARET COLB

August 23, 1989

WH: You were from where?

FC: Eastern Czechoslovakia...in Bilke, in 1920...our family was a Zionist family, we were a family of 7 children, I was the 6th of the 7...I'm the only survivor of the family...in 1946 I was married in Prague...during the war I was in labor camps, and in the concentration camps. First we were...in 1941...October 13th I was taken to a labor camp under Hungarian jurisdiction...then transported (to many different towns to work)...the treatment was harsh and the discipline was severe...

WH: Do you consider it only by luck that you survived?

FC: By luck.

WH: You don't think it was anything that you did?

FC: No, there was nothing that I did. I needed less food than someone else, the bigger guys, because I'm a short fellow, and I could survive on very little. In 1944 the Russians were approaching, the Germans decided to evacuate the whole area and they took us with them...sometime in the end of September, taking groups of 3,000 a night and I was in one of those groups...and they marched us all the way from the southern Europe to Hungary. Many, many people perished on the way...

WH: You marched for months, it's remarkable that you made it.

FC: We made it...we arrived in November in '44 in the southern part of Hungary...we were then about 8,900 that survived, and we were then taken by train to (?Flusenberg?) which is a concentration camp. From there, I was taken to 2,3 different places to work. And I just don't even know the names of these places. Because I was in no condition at that time to know anything, or to remember anything. And I was affected with typhoid fever. And somehow I survived...and then we were on the final march to Theresienstadt...and suddenly we heard various voices coming from loud speakers, and various languages, Hungarian, and Czech and German, and French, 'You're free!' and (inaudible) so on. And that 'you are now under the jurisdiction of the Red Cross.' Well, anyway, we were marched into Theresienstadt, the Germans were still there, took over again under their - but a few days later, they left. Must have been May 1st because May 10th we were liberated in Theresienstadt. From Theresienstadt the Russians came they kicked in the gates, and let us go. They took no interest in us as such, so everybody, whoever was able started crawling, walking, in whatever direction...and I went into a hospital, where I recuperated and recovered, from which hospital I escaped. I felt that I'm a -as if I was in prison there and I thought that I was well enough, and I just walked out of the hospital...

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WH: Would you say that you had a strong will to survive?

FC: No, I don't ever remember thinking about that kind of determination. That kind of a decision to give it everything in order to survive. It was just an instinct, a desire to survive from day to day...

WH: When did you meet your wife?

FC: ...in '45 we met in Prague...

WH: Where were you liberated?

MC: I was liberated at ?Reichenboch?...during the war I was in Auschwitz.

WH: Were you sent to a labor -?

MC: No, what was very lucky, is that I was selected the day I got to Auschwitz, so I don't even have a number, so...they send out representatives to find people very agile with their hands, and I am...they gave us tweezers...to assemble parts for tubes for telephones, and for airplanes...and I was so good that they let my sister come with me, who was not as good, as agile...when I told them that I will not go without my sister, they let her come along.

WH: Where were you born?

MC: In (?) Czechoslovakia. In November, 1921...we were eight. We were two sisters and eight brothers. Two brothers made it, and my sister and me.

WH: After the war, what year did you come to America?

MC: In '46. In June 7th, '46 we were in New York.

WH: You went by boat?

MC: No, they send us by plane.

FC: I have two uncles in Cleveland, by accident...I found their addresses, and I wrote to them, they quickly responded, they sent us papers.

MC: We were among the first three (in Prague) who applied for visas to the United States.

FC: We were the first immigrants to arrive in Cleveland...(inaudible) so these two uncles sent us plane tickets.

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MC: We paid, we paid.

WH: You flew from Paris?

FC: From Paris to New York...these uncles were my mother's brothers...

WH: What did you feel like when you got off the plane?

MC: We were so scared, that for the 17 hours that the plane took...we didn't even talk to each other.

WH: You were just sitting there.

MC: Yes. We didn't know what was waiting for us...there were G.I.s on the plane.

WH: Did your uncle promise to get you a job?

MC: No, no. They didn't make any plans. They didn't even say that we should come to Cleveland. Just tickets.

WH: Do you know what the ticket cost?

FC: \$500 a piece...(inaudible).

WH: I'm looking around at this house and I'm thinking, you live here, in Ramat Poleg. You have a beautiful pool down the block, you live facing the Mediterranean Sea...and that you have a beautiful house...a private house, furnished like in American style...

MC: We brought everything from our house.

WH: Well it is SO beautiful. Beautiful couches, carpets. There are four bedrooms...and you have a gorgeous shul across the way.

MC: It is a perfect place...if we go outside, we have the youngsters, and they all ask you, 'How are you feeling?'

WH: You didn't have that in America did you?

MC: No. At the hospital, each neighbor came twice. I was there 10 days. We would never have had that in Cleveland. Not with the Jewish community...

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FC: They are so wonderful, warm, we have become so integrated into the community, it's just lovely. We are part of every simcha, we are part of every helela, and (inaudible) whatever it is, happens, we are part of the community.

MC: We were accepted by the Orthodox community...let me tell you a story. The neighbor across the street, the first thing we moved in, he said, 'If we do something that offends you on Shabat, please let us know and we will stop.' An Israeli.

FC: A young couple of thirty. And so I told him, 'Listen, -each one of us is responsible to our maker, in our own way, for our own being.'...they have been wonderful here, we have had wonderful relations with each and every one of them.

WH: Is your family a Zionist family?

MC: Yes, my father wanted to come to Israel with his six boys. He said, 'With his six boys, and my two girls, the way they work, I would make a living anyplace,' he said.

WH: What stopped you from coming?

MC: The riots. The Arab riots in '38. He was very worried. 'Cause a rabbi talked him out of it.

FC: And he himself came! He came in '42. A plane.

WH: You were brought up religious?

MC: Yes...my father was not hasid, but he did have a beard.

WH: Was your father Zionistic?

MC: Yes...and then when we got to the United States, I became involved in Zionist affairs and I was president of the Zionist Organization in America in Cleveland. We always wanted to make this move. That's why our son then came over here 15 years ago. Brought him here for his bar mitzvah and from then on he came every year...

WH: ...immediately after the war, why didn't you go?

FC: First of all I was not in a mental condition to really have grasped all that was going on. I wasn't informed...

WH: When did you come here?

FC: In 1985.

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WH: What kind of work did you do in America?

FC: I was a CPA lawyer...at (age) 45.

WH: You were born in what year?

FC: 1920.

WH: How did you manage to start your life over when you came here?

FC: ...I got a job as a shipping clerk in a dress factory, worked so hard but I felt I needed to eat a loaf of bread at every meal...(inaudible) the Jewish community got me the job. And then I saw there was no future, and the N.C.J.W. had volunteer teachers, and they assigned us...Mrs. Shulman who took us under her wing...and she taught us language...and saw to it that we learned, and she used to come and read with me Shakespeare, and eventually I went to college...at night, all at night...I was making .65 cents an hour, alright this is 45 years ago, but even then, it was \$26 a week, out of which \$15 went for a third floor attic apartment...and then Mr. Shulman ...found a job for me...in a bank as a clerk...at the rate of \$125 a month, -out of which \$45 went for rent. And \$45 was a bargain.

MC: Every week, from the check, \$5 and we put in the bank.

FC: Well, anyway, it was a hard life, so I realized that I had no trade, and I had no profession. Unless I will get some education, I'll be poor the rest of my life. So I started to go to a school, first to finish high school, then I went to college, and eventually passed the CPA exam...so we struggled, very, very, very hard for very long. And what happened, the older uncle was not a rich man...the other one was a little better off, but he died six months after our arrival...He would have helped us but...so we were completely on our own, without any help whatsoever. But she (my aunt, the widow) insisted that we repay the \$500 that she contributed towards our fare. And we paid this out at installments of \$5 a month.

MC: But we paid it off.

FC: She made a mistake, listen, you make mistakes. But that's not the thing -.

WH: You're a forgiving soul -

FC: Well, listen, people make mistakes, what can you do. Then I became already a CPA, aha, things were looking up for us, and we became independent economically...

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- WH: You're a person who survived the Death March, you survived the camps, you're the only one from your family who survived and when you came, how did you still have the energy...tell me why you think you had the energy.
- MC: I hope I was some help.
- FC: I was making \$6 a week, and she was able to sew.
- MC: And made \$17 for a suit because I'm a professional. I learned cutting and design, you know, before the war.
- FC: (inaudible) we had two children right away, in '47 our first one, our daughter who is still in the United States. And our son in '48.
- MC: One thing that helped him, he liked to travel, go places, see things, he is one of those – you can see we have four dictionaries right here in the living room. And he has some upstairs in his office.
- WH: Do you also have an optimistic view on life?
- MC: I do. I do.
- WH: You didn't feel depressed after the war?
- FC: No, the objective was, once we got to America the objective was, to try to rebuild our lives, to establish ourselves economically, to be part of the Jewish community, and of the American community.
- MC: And our happiness, of course, and devotion to each other, helped an awful lot.
- WH: Were you observant all those years?
- FC: Yes. At first, when we got to the United States, we had sort of thrown off everything, because we were so (inaudible-absorbed?), I worked on Shabbat. And just, nothing there. Nothing to hold on to. But the Shabbat at home was there, Shabbat. We start lighting candles, and there was no cooking, no washing on Shabbat, but I worked on Shabbat, but she maintained the spirit.
- MC: I held on.
- WH: What about the doubts, questions, that you must have had after the war, questions that people asked, like, 'How could God do this to my family? If there really is a God, how

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did he allow our people to suffer so much,' and your own personal losses. Didn't those doubts sort of bother you?

MC: Oh, sure they did.

FC: They did, and they do to this day. I think about it and I break down. (inaudible-he breaks down). A constant problem all the time.

WH: Do you keep faith in a sense because it's a carry on of tradition, a sense of community?

FC: Yes, there is a great deal to that. A great deal to that. Our parents (inaudible) were devoted, knowledgeable, my father (inaudible) and my brothers studied in the best yeshivot, the Harvards of the yeshivot in Europe (inaudible)...

MC: There were certain things that we did because of the kids. We realized when we bought our first house, in 1950, my sister lend us some money, and we had already \$3,000 saved up, from this meager saving, then we bought our first house. The first Rosh Hashonah, I remember, we had moved in just a couple of days before, we had no (inaudible-? direction).

FC: We didn't know where to go.

MC: We were sitting at home, and we cried.

WH: You were crying because you didn't have a synagogue?

MC: No, because we didn't belong to anyone.

FC: Didn't belong to anyone, to anywhere, we are strangers again, you know, strangers and neighbors...but...they went to Hebrew School and they are knowledgeable, both of them outstanding, and our son married as an adult...he is a graduate of Harvard Law School...he went to University of Pennsylvania, majored in physics...and our daughter, summa cum laude from Brown, and our son magna cum laude from the University of Pennsylvania.

MC: We have two, -very proud!

WH: ...you went to law school at night?

MC: Yes...and one year he took six courses and worked during the day...one day I thought he's going to have a nervous breakdown...

WH: Why did you do it?

FC: It always had to be the decision, that if I don't do it, I'll be poor. Everybody has, all the immigrants who came immediately after, a year or two later and so on, they were either tradesman and immediately made good money, a hundred dollars a week, a hundred and fifty a week...but we were the poor ones, and it's not pleasant to be poor, let me tell you. I remember when our children were born, they brought gifts for us, to poor people you give little piddly things. And at the bar mitzvah already, you should have seen what gifts we got. And we were already better off...it's not fun to be poor...the reason I went to law school...they didn't give me a chance to do accounting...you needed experience...and I couldn't get a job...I did some small jobs...and went back to school...and I wanted law all along...so ten years later I passed the bar...

End of Tape Side A

Tape Side B

WH: Do you have any regrets that you didn't send your kids to day school in Cleveland?

FC: ...we thought we made a mistake...with our daughter we had difficulties. Not our son...he now has four children...

WH: What does he do here?

FC: He's a patent lawyer...he's doing so well. He has a large office, he has a dozen lawyers working for him, forty secretaries.

WH: Is he observant ?

FC: Yes. He brought us back to being observant...through college...at college he met up with an orthodox group...once we decided to join a synagogue, we joined the Conservative movement and we were in that for 20 years. And then our son brought us back to Orthodoxy. He came home from college one day...and one day he said, 'You know, Dad, if you don't mind I'll walk to Young Israel, you can ride to (inaudible).' I said, 'If you can walk, I can walk.' And that's when we moved over to (Orthodoxy)...so we were with Young Israel for 15 years.

WH: ...what happened with your daughter?

FC: She is a very bright young woman, and we had some problems with her when we send her off to college, because she was a Viet Nam protestor and she married right after college, a young man, of the Einstein family, who is a Harvard graduate in physics, summa cum laude. (needs translation-shidach) if you know the expression- lucky match.

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WH: Do you mean the Albert Einstein family?

MC: Albert Einstein.

MC: ...but they divorced. She threw this marriage away. Because of his –Viet Nam ideology. He wasn't that determined. He, too, was in favor of the protest, but not in the same (?way) that our daughter was. And, we don't really know the full stories as to what happened between them. Those things will probably remain a secret forever. We don't pry, we don't care. But then she remarried, and thank God she is doing well, -and she's a lawyer, too...she went to Princeton for graduate work...in Sociology...(FC comments on the Viet Nam war:) Unfortunately, the two leaders (inaudible) were communist, two Jewish men. One is a professor Peck (inaudible) and Goodman, a lawyer, they were both Communist, card carrying Communists for years. And they were initiators of every move, and every counter-move, so they took advantage of these youngsters because they were impressionable. I'm not debating the question, as to whether this was a worthwhile protest or a needed protest, or a justified protest. That's not the thing. What I object to, is that people who had ulterior motives, were behind it, and manipulated this.

WH: How did you feel about the war in Viet Nam during that time?

FC: We were not happy about it. We thought this is a more far away. We're bound to get into trouble with it. Not because we were not justified to support –all big powers have (inaudible).

MC: I was really afraid from it. That we lose all the generation.

FC: Yah, we were afraid...

WH: Were you Liberal, or Moderate, or (inaudible)?

FC: We were Liberal...but within reason. We are not a radical. We realized, and I remember discussing with our daughter in particular about the Blacks, and I told her, halevi. Our Jewish people here in America would be as safe and secure as the Blacks are. They have a future, it's their America, but it's not our America in the same sense.

WH: Would you explain it?

FC: Yes, because the real power, the political power, ...(inaudible)...we put powers in the hands of the Blacks. The Black –regardless whether it's a Black man or not, but the (inaudible-?constant)was, true the Jews were the businessman, the Jews were the lawyers and the doctors and stuff. But it's the political power that decides eventually whether you will be the businessman or whether you will be the lawyer, or the doctor or whatever. So I don't begrudge them the power, that's fine, but it wasn't my responsibility to go out all

the way for their rights, and to ignore my own. I say, first I want to feed my own children. I do care about the others, too, but to ignore my own –mine should starve, and the others should be well-fed? I don't think that's a natural reaction. Gloria felt, our daughter, Gloria, she felt that the Jews are doing okay for themselves, so my concern should be with the Blacks. Well she is now learning what she is getting from the Blacks, she's in Georgia, in a small town, Lake Crosse...they are moving to Jacksonville because they have a five year old boy, and they are concerned about his Jewish education.

WH: She married a Jew?

FC: Yes...he's a paralegal, associated with a law office, he deals only with social security (inaudible) and he's doing fabulously well. She's happy with him.

WH: When you say that she's learning what she's getting from the Blacks, what has happened there?

FC: Well, she deals mostly with Blacks, and now we see how the Blacks have turned against us.

WH: Does she feel that way?

FC: I think she feels that way...she's beginning to realize that all the effort that went into assisting the Blacks politically, and economically too, and in Cleveland, that we know, I don't know how it was in New York, or in Chicago, but in Cleveland, you know, it was the Jewish community that allowed them to go into the neighborhoods. The Italians wouldn't allow them, they would axe them. And the Slovaks wouldn't do it, and the (?Serbians?) wouldn't do it (inaudible).

WH: Did she ever come to you and say, 'You know, Dad, you were right.'

FC : No...but she is a wonderful daughter.

MC: She bakes the challah Friday.

FC: They are observant, and watch Shabbat.

WH: Did your son rebel?

FC: No. Never...

MC: ...we really never, the minute we had an argument, five minutes later he was on my chair and hugging me and saying, 'I'm sorry, mother.'

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WH: Is he right wing orthodox or modern?

MC: Modern.

WH: How many children do they have?

FC: Four...

WH: Do you regret not coming sooner?

MC: No, because we couldn't...in 1965 I passed the bar, from the day that we came, it was 20 years.

WH: ...but you knew that you were going to come to Israel?

FC: Yes.

MC: Even if our son wouldn't have come.

FC: That was our goal. We were Zionist. And let me tell you, all the Zionist leaders in Cleveland have come too. All the presidents and all the Vice –presidents...(inaudible)...

WH: Certain communities are able to encourage aliyah, and others are not...why?

FC: ...there are here in Netanya, hundreds. And in Israel, thousands of people from Manchester, England. And I asked a few Manchesterians...they said, 'The influence of Chaim Weitzman.'

WH: He was from Manchester?

FC: He lived in England...but Chaim Weitzman made that kind of impression on the community. Now, why am I telling you this about Manchester? Cleveland was (inaudible...) and that, too, made an impression. And Rabbi Spira also a dedicated Zionist. You see, some leaders do have an influence.

WH: What do you like best about this country? (Israel)?

FC: I like my people. I love to see, to walk out of our door and see those kids with our kids...

WH: Basically, you retired in '85 and that was your motivation, to come here.

FC: Yes, that's correct.

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WH: When you think back on your life, and everything that you did here, what achievement, would you say that you are the most proud of?

FC: ...well, what we are most proud of is our decision to come here, now, and of course we are very proud of our children. Thank God that they turned out okay and that they are contributors to society to Israel in particular, to society in general. We are happy (inaudible). We have no –arguments...(inaudible)...it was out of love, it was out of love that we came here...

Interview Notes: I just wanted to say that you can really see that these people here are the beautiful people in the sense that they really have values that transcend their Holocaust experience; it transcends the idea of material possessions. That's what I got from all the survivors here. That they came out of a love for Israel, out of an appreciation of things here, and that it isn't just money that they are after. Whether they retired, or whether they came here to work, it isn't easy, and it wasn't easy for anyone to pick themselves up after W.W. II and come here, but these people really have a sense of principle. Not just an accumulation of goods. And it's expressed, and you can see how they relate to each other and how they look at each other. I think of three couples that I interviewed today, all really love each other, or really care about each other. I picture, a beautiful picture of Mr. and Mrs. Colb walking, holding hands, each of them about 70 years old, walking, holding hands, he knows his wife is sick from cancer. He takes care of her. He's a very genuine gentle individual. Notice his voice broke when he thought of his family.

End of Tape Side B
Conclusion of Interview