

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

William Helmreich Oral History Collection

Interview with Dovid Felberbaum

March 8, 1990

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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Dovid Felberbaum, conducted by William Helmreich on March 8, 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.

DOVID FELBERBAUM

March 8, 1990

- WH: Did you come here by boat?
- DF: Yes, in 1949, on a Dutch boat, called the *Noordam*.
- WH: Where are you from?
- DF: From a small town in Hungary. I was born in 1921.
- WH: Where were you taken at first?
- DF: I went to the Hotel Marseilles. NYANA (New York Assoc. for New Americans) took me there. I *davened* (prayed) at the Sassower *shul* (synagogue) on 103rd Street. I stayed on the West Side until the end of May. Then I went to Williamsburg because our people were moving there. The Lower East Side was becoming a bad neighborhood.
- WH: When you came on the boat were you dressed like a *Hasid* (ultra-Orthodox)?
- DF: No, because after the war I returned to my town in Hungary and the people were very anti-Semitic. It was too much for them that an average Jew should go with a beard; only a *shochet* (kosher butcher) or a rabbi dressed like that. So I went with a black hat and a dark suit. But the minute I stepped off the boat I began to grow a beard.
- WH: After all you saw in the camps, how were you able to keep your belief in God?
- DF: This question you could ask anybody.
- WH: And if someone asked you, what would you say?
- DF: If a father slaps his son, is he no longer his father?
- WH: But what about a big slap?
- DF: What's the difference? Does a heretic really understand the world? Every day he thinks that he thought the day before is no longer true. I also don't understand everything. This is a faulty question.
- WH: I'm only asking you for the book, not because I personally don't understand.
- DF: I'll ask you—when Einstein stated his theory, how many people in the world understood him? Two? Three? And twenty years after Einstein died, how many more people really understood it? One knows the mechanics, but not the logic

behind it.

WH: I interviewed a man from Munkacs, Hungary, who said he could no longer believe because the irreligious Jews who came to America before the war didn't get killed. He also questioned how God could allow women and children to be killed. What do you say to a man who asks those questions?

DF: I don't like to go into philosophical matters like these. It's not good or healthy. But this person who asks such questions never really believed deeply. You know who believed? People who put on tefillin and who didn't eat non-kosher food in the camps.

WH: Have you been to Israel?

DF: Yes, four or five times. I like it there. I have relatives there.

WH: Why didn't you go to Israel after the war?

DF: Two reasons. First, many who went found life so difficult there they had to leave and they came to America. Second, I'll explain it by way of an example: If I see a Jew smoking on *Shabbos* (Sabbath) in the street, I don't like it but I don't do anything about it. But if I saw my own son smoking in my house on *Shabbos*, would I stand for it? Of course not. So this is how I feel about Israel.

WH: What was it like in terms of *Yiddishkeit* (Jewish culture) when you first came here?

DF: Most of the stores in Williamsburg were still open on *Shabbos* in the early fifties, and if not for the highway construction, most of the American Jews would have stayed there. Several American *shuls* (synagogues) were removed to make room for the highway.

WH: But you stayed.

DF: Well, the *greener* (newcomers) were *greener*. They had no money. Where should we have gone? So we stayed.

WH: What kind of work did you do here?

DF: I worked a little as a *shochet* (kosher butcher) and as a *shammos* (sexton / custodian) in a *shul*.

WH: How many children do you have?

DF: Seven. One of my daughters has fourteen children.

WH: It must have been hard to financially support them?

DF: No. As they say, "Every child brings his own luck into the world."

WH: What do they do?

DF: Some are in business and some are learning.

WH: Where are the Jews here from?

DF: Here in New Square, the Jews are mostly Hungarian.

WH: Do you think what happened in Europe could happen here?

DF: There could be a Hitler here legally with our system of government. Hitler was elected by a multi-party parliament.

WH: When you think of voting for someone here, do you think in terms of whether or not he would be good for Israel?

DF: Not necessarily. I live here and I can't say all my thinking is about Israel. If there was a situation here that would be good for Jews here but not so good for Israel, what would you do? You would pick here. But in general, of course, what's good for Israel is likely to be good for the Jews here. Certainly the Gentile doesn't make that distinction.

WH: What about blacks?

DF: My opinion is different than that of many people. I went through a great deal in Europe and I don't see where the whites are better than the blacks. When someone is oppressed, he looks for a scapegoat. So the blacks pick on the Jews. If blacks had the same education and family life as whites, they would be no different than the whites. Now Puerto Ricans are different. They can be very nice, but if they get angry, they lose control of themselves completely. At that point they could stab you. Blacks could be the same sometimes but not if they're brought up in a good environment.

WH: Are people still moving in to New Square?

DF: The Skvirer Rebbe's position now is he doesn't accept new people, only those who grew up here. Outsiders can cause difficulties.

WH: Why did you come here?

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- DF: Because of the crime and it was nice here. It was also not so expensive. Today, it costs no more to live here than in Williamsburg and less than in Monsey. It's similar here to Monroe although we are perhaps more secluded than Monroe.
- WH: Have you been back to Hungary since the war?
- DF: I went recently to check on my family's graves. When I went I couldn't open my mouth. I was like a stone.
- WH: When you get together with other survivors, do you talk about the war?
- DF: It's impossible to get together with survivors without telling stories about the war.
- WH: Did religious people act better than others during the war?
- DF: I saw it. The religious didn't say they had to have everything. I saw educated people from Pest who acted like animals. But not us, the religious ones.
- WH: What is your impression of Elie Wiesel?
- DF: He is a righteous Jew. He went to yeshiva. I don't have a real opinion.
(reluctant to comment)
- WH: I understand you've also published something.
- DF: Yes, I've edited and gotten published certain teachings of my rebbe. [He shows me the book and we agree to exchange books, one of his for one of mine. He was under the impression I was studying for my doctorate and was surprised to learn that I've already written some books. His book is in its second edition.]
- WH: Is there a difference between the way a Hasidic Jew looks at the Holocaust and the way a Lithuanian or Modern Orthodox Jew sees it?
- DF: I would say there is no difference. The Holocaust did not challenge Hasidism: it challenged general belief.
- WH: What did the Holocaust teach you about people?
- DF: Why does every prayer that is said daily talk about the Gentiles? Save us from the *Goyim* (Gentiles), etc. Not because they're so wonderful, but because they haven't risen to the level yet to be decent people. Haven't we seen that when a *Goy* gets angry he can take a knife and stab someone to death and a Jew doesn't?

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Why is that? Because we have a Torah and know how people are supposed to act. Every person is born an animal and without learning he remains that way.

WH: What are you proudest of?

DF: My children and grandchildren, of course. But you have to remember that I always look back into the past, what I went through. And when I look at the past, I can't really be happy. I think about what might have been, what more I might have been able to [do] with my life, with scholarly activity, and I am sad.

Conclusion of Interview