

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

## **William Helmreich Oral History Collection**

**Interview with Irene Fishman**

**March 25, 1990**

**RG-50.165\*0024**

## PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Irene Fishman, conducted by William Helmreich on March 25, 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.

## IRENE FISHMAN

### March 25, 1990

IF: I was born in Hungary, an only child, comfortable parents. My husband was also an only child. He was also from Hungary. Besides the wine, because everyone was in the wine business, my husband and I had a wholesale grocery business. I had four children from before the war and we're from a very Orthodox family. My husband had semicha. As for me, I was always very business oriented. During the war I was hidden by Christians. My husband died in Auschwitz.

HW: What did you do after the war?

IF: I sent the boys to Canada and came after they were there to Montréal. But I decided I wanted to live in New York. When I told my uncle I wanted to do some business in New York, he said: "What do you think you're doing. You're in America. You think this is Tocco (Hungary)? You have to know the language." And this was my biggest handicap. I thought about opening a grocery store or delicatessen but then I thought I wanted to start something that could grow, not just labor. So I said I would start a spice business. I thought this wouldn't be too big. I saw the little jars in the grocery. So my uncle had a relative who imported spices who helped me. So I started selling the spices to the stores. I went into a few places and they just threw me out. Nobody wanted to buy from me. I was a woman. Women sold jewelry or clothing, but not spices. And I didn't know English. So someone said: Go to Harlem because the Jewish stores there use a lot of pepper. I sold to them. I didn't know Yiddish so well, but I knew German. But the man was very much against German and he said: "Or mama loshon (Yiddish, lit. mother tongue) or nothing." So I spoke more Yiddish and they bought from me. I took the subway there from Boro Park where we lived. I didn't see a white person on the street but I wasn't afraid. Nobody was afraid then. And I went to night school to learn English. I read and listened to radio. So I went to a place in Manhattan called Embassy to sell spices and the man I met there, a Mr. Tomaroff, said: "I don't buy these spices. I buy big boxes, five-pounders." So I said: "We pack big boxes too." So he said "But I have my own cans, under my own name." So I said: "We will pack it." And he was very nice and he bought from us. If not for him I wouldn't be in the business. He was my first big customer. Then I got another customer and I started only selling big boxes. And my boys came and packed after school. And I kept on taking bigger and bigger stores, more places in Brooklyn. Then, after a few years we bought a big place in Ozone Park. Then we bought onions from Israel; we made it into dried onions. Then I remarried, but my husband had cancer and died after a few years I don't want to talk about it; it was a real tragedy. Then I went to Israel and met Shlomo Fishman. He proposed marriage and I told him to come to America. He had the Artic ice cream business. We married and divided our time between Israel and America. Unfortunately, after a few years, he died of a heart attack. Now my sons are in the business as well as my grandchildren and we built up a big business. It's about 150,000 square feet and is located in Bayonne, New Jersey. We have 70 or 80 people working and over fifty million in sales. And I'm still working in the business because I enjoy it. I go to

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New Jersey every day (she's 81). They pick me up every day. I want to feel useful. If I don't do something every day, I'm not happy. Shopping is okay but only once in a while. I need to work to have satisfaction.

HW: Are all your children religious?

IF: Yes, some are modern and some are Chasidics.

HW: Do you visit Israel?

IF: Oh yes, I go every year and I have an apartment on the 13<sup>th</sup> floor in the Pinsker Building in Jerusalem.

HW: Do you think there could be a Holocaust in America?

IF: No. I love America. It's too democratic for that. The only problem is, it's too loose. Everybody can say what they want.

Conclusion on Interview