

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

William Helmreich Oral History Collection

Interview with Abraham Foxman

January 10, 1990

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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Abraham Foxman, conducted by William Helmreich on January 10, 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.

ABRAHAM FOXMAN

January 10, 1990

- AF: I began City as an engineering student and switched into political science. I tutored Yiddish at M.D.S. on the side.
- WH: Where were you right after the war?
- AF: We were in the DP camps for five years. I was with my parents. I was born in 1940, so I was five or six when the war ended. We came here in 1950. The DP period is fast disappearing. My father was a writer and a fanatic about recording things and he sent much material to YIVO.
- WH: Where did you go to school here?
- AF: I went to R.J.J. and Ramaz. My kids go to Frisch Academy. I first went to Ramaz and then, when we moved the Lower East Side, I went to R.J.J. I was lucky in that I was able to experience the "true" East Side when the Tog, Forwards and Morqen Journal were still publishing. I'd go to the Garden Cafeteria and have lunch and as a kid who spoke Yiddish I met the great Yiddish poets while they were still alive. I would go with my father to book presentations on 14th St. and on 8th St. on Saturday night. We were also chicken farmers for a while in Tom's River. We had a loan from the JAS and I went to Lakewood Hebrew Day School and came back and that's when I went to Flatbush Yeshiva.
- WH: On what boat did you arrive?
- AF: We arrived in 1950, in Boston aboard the Marine Flasher. We took an overnight train to N.Y. and I ate matzoh and hard boiled eggs. That's what they gave. We were disappointed because everybody expected to see the Statue of Liberty and President Truman.
- WH: What did your father do?
- AF: His first job was cleaning out the garage at Pechter's Bakery. We first lived on 94th St and moved to the East Side when my father started making some money.
- WH: And where did you go to school then?
- AF: I went to RJJ where they brought the kids who couldn't afford suits into a room and fitted them with clothes; so I got a suit there.
- WH: Did the children who weren't survivors [most of them in his age group] look at you differently?

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- AF: I felt embarrassed but Bonnie Gurevitch, who went to Flatbush Yeshiva too, said "You should have asked. We thought you were exciting." I wish somebody had told me. There were very few child survivors around and children of survivors weren't there yet. I barely spoke English and it was hard to acculturate. When I entered Flatbush after RJJ, I was in 7th grade. It was, by the way, more comfortable in RJJ than in Ramaz.
- WH: How come you came to America and not Israel?
- AF: My father was a Revisionist. He edited a Revisionist paper. My father's brother, who was in Israel, told him: "Don't come because you don't have a profession and because you're a Revisionist." My father was a journalist and had a very rough time here. So he did what he had to do here. My mother was more successful as a saleslady. The worst time was when my father would lose a job. There was tremendous tension in survivor families. He wasn't old, but he wasn't young. He had no skills; he was blacklisted here by the Bund which ran the Yiddish establishment. Look, I was offered a job to be director of the Jewish National Fund and I was blacklisted when they found out I was a Betari. The Labor Zionists were the establishment. At the end he wound up where he should have been. He worked for YIVO. So when he got sick they said you have to go to the country. So we went to the chicken farm. But business was so bad that he had to come to N.Y. and work in the garment district to help pay our mortgage on the farm.
- WH: I read about the adaptation of survivors to life in America in Per Yiddishe Farmer as well as the Forwards.
- AF: On that subject I was runner-up in the Brooklyn Dodgers Batboy for a Day Contest. You had to write a 100 word essay. I got a letter from Walter O'Malley to attend the game, but it was on Shabbos so I couldn't attend. Sure enough they sent me two box seats for Sunday.
- WH: Did anybody ever start up with you while you were going to yeshiva?
- AF: My son had it but I didn't. We live in Teaneck. Sometimes he wears a yarmulke, sometimes he doesn't. That's something I'm still having difficulty with. Because you come to America and....I got a call one day from a lady from Hungary who said "My son is afraid to walk down the streets of Teaneck and Bergenfield with a yarmulke." It's true. My son has a sixth sense with his friends. Certain streets they wear yarmulkes and certain streets they don't wear a yarmulke. Or the kids won't go to Roller-Rink with a yarmulke. With all the great progress, and I can give you the speech of where we are in this country, there's still a lot wrong. I don't have to tell them, they know themselves.
- WH: Where did you go to camp?

- AF: Camp Tranquility in the summer of 1950. I went to Camp Deal, Camp Agudah. I went to the extreme of Camp Agudah because it was three weeks that someone provided for. I went wherever I could.
- WH: Where did you live in Brooklyn?
- AF: Ocean Parkway and Kings Highway. My mother still lives there. It was a one bedroom apartment. My daughter couldn't get over it. She said: "You had no privacy." I had privacy. I went to college and law school while I lived there.
- AF: Growing up as a survivor, there are embarrassments. Accents, money. I had a bar-mitzvah. It was an open house party. We borrowed \$300.00. We gave back the loan. My friends? I couldn't invite my friends. I was embarrassed. The other thing was no family, no family. Nobody. No aunts, no uncles, no cousins. It was a terrible thing to grow up like that. It was a terrible guilt, not wanting to be proud of your parents. I only opened up about that later. I wrote something about it later in the RJJ journal. I was embarrassed and yet I wasn't. I was struggling with it.
- WH: How much do you remember about the war?
- AF: It is impossible to differentiate between what I remember and what I was told. I went to see the church I went to in Vilna and I can't in all honesty say I remember the church. I'm sure I blocked out some of these memories.
- AF: All survivors live with guilt. I heard it at home in moments of despair, difficulty, or depression. And in an egalitarian society, I was facing another problem. My parents were elite, quote unquote. They came from wealthy homes, my father was a playboy; he dabbled in journalism for fun, not to make a living. They had a factory in Warsaw. Who survived? The tailors. They had skills, they were rougher, they were ready to risk. So my parents had no friends. In the DP camps my father was an orator, he was this, he was that. He had a world because people had to run the camp. Then he came to America. And who became millionaires ? Who were the "alrightnickers" among the greener? Those who were smuggling in the camps. My father wouldn't smuggle, God forbid! So they [the smugglers] came here and they were all right. And I felt so embarrassed. This was egalitarian America. My father grew up with them but he didn't associate with them and it took him a long time to be able to. And I used to feel terrible because I thought it was a snobbiness and I didn't understand. Not only were we on the same level, we were below [financially]. So my parents had no friends. It took a while. So there was another loneliness. The intelligentsia didn't survive. As to my parents, my relationship with them was unusual. I felt I owed them because they lost everything. They felt they lost four or five years with their child because I wasn't there. I felt it. I felt a greater obligation which in my circles was unusual: "What are you calling about?" I call my mother every day, early in the morning. She's 82 or 83.

AF: I was embarrassed by the Holocaust until I understood. I asked why did it happen? Why didn't they fight back? I started reading almost to the point of an obsession, to understand. My parents and I talked about what happened. I asked my parents why they still believed in God. And they said: "Because we saw miracles." Do I believe? How deeply? Do I do things because I think God will come down and strike me dead? No; I do it because I like to do it, because it gives me a feeling of continuity.

WH: Do you belong to an Orthodox congregation in Teaneck?

AF: Yes but that's not my life; that's not my society. I go to shul to daven, not to socialize.

WH: Where did you go to college ?

AF: I went to City College and then N.Y.U. Law School. At City I was active in Hillel and in the student Zionist organization. I majored in political science. I went to law school because it was a good skill and in my third year I started looking for work in Jewish organizations.

WH: Why not work in a corporation ?

AF: I wasn't interested. I wanted to work for the Jewish people. It sounds corny but that's the way it was. My father was a person who worked for the community. He used to get up and give speeches. Maybe it was to make it where he didn't make it here. He saw some naches from this. People saw his son's name in the papers. I've been at ADL since 1965. I came here right out of law school. They had an opening in the legal department. I've been here 25 years. And it's exciting when I get up in the morning. When I came to the ADL I was uncomfortable because the ADL was not a Jewish organization. It was an organization that sometimes worked for Jews. There were a lot of identity problems. I was the Jew. I had to negotiate for going home early on Friday and second day of yontif. I was the Jewish expert. But it's come a long way. I remember when people said to me many years ago: "Abe, you don't have a future because you're too Jewish. I said: "All right, so what are you going to do?" Today we're much more Jewish. We have yarmulkes here, people like Jeff Sinensky.

WH: When you think of the KKK and groups like that, do you really see them as a danger or do you think of them as kooky fringe groups?

AF: I don't think Jews have the luxury to look at any racist or anti-Semite as a kook. If I have to err on the side of schrieincr (screaming) even to the annoyance of my non-Jewish friends, I'll take that risk and say I'm sorry. My antennae vibrate very actively and I have a supersensitivity to hate. I won't apologize for it. I'll be sensitive to those who say: "Maybe you're exaggerating." But because there was silence, we paid a high price. I may

annoy or upset people——too bad. It can happen anywhere because it's people. We haven't developed a vaccine, no antidote. Hate is a germ, a disease; it's irrational. There's a latent anti-Semitism in this country. All we have done is keep the lid on, make it disrespectful. But it's there. As long as that disease exists, it has the potential for being a plague. We just don't know exactly under what conditions it happens.

WH: Aside from the obvious is there a way in which your experiences affect the way you function here?

AF: I don't know. I'm a product of both the good and the bad. On the one hand, there was the anti-Semitism and on the other there was this woman who risked her life to save me regardless of what happened. She did it as a human being. I don't know whether she did it because she wanted me to be a Catholic priest. It doesn't matter; she risked her life. And the people who saved Jews were not the doctors or professors, the simple people.

WH: Do you believe education can prevent a Holocaust?

AF: It's one of the elements. Sometimes it's exposure; sometimes it's embarrassment; sometimes it's a threat. We've also found the more educated blacks are, the more anti-Semitic they can be. I remember one time a black professor said at a meeting we had: "You know why there's anti-Semitism? It's because Jews excel." So another guy around the table said: "You know, I'll make a deal with you. We'll be number three or number two if you'll guarantee there'll be no anti-Semitism." Education isn't necessarily the antidote, but it's one way. I'll fight it any way I can. In this country anti-Semitism is here but it's different. We experienced in this country in a period of twelve to eighteen months Boesky, Pollard, Iringate, and the crisis with the farmers——four classic situations for anti-Semitism: Boesky—Jewish greed; Pollard—dual loyalty. And our people, not the goyim, wrote about dual loyalty; Iringate—a situation where Israel was shlepping America into its interest; the farm crisis—America lives on myths. One of the myths in the farm belt has been that if you work hard and go to church and you're moral, you'll be rewarded. These people wake up one morning and they're being bankrupted. Guys come in and say: "Hey, the Jews, Eastern bankers It didn't sell...So I say to you, something's different in this country. Thirty, forty years ago, if you had a confluence of these things there would have been anti-Semitism. There isn't. In 1973, we saw it coming with the oil crisis, but it didn't. For every bumper sticker to burn Jews, not oil, we got 10,000 phone calls.

Conclusion of Interview