

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

## **William Helmreich Oral History Collection**

**Interview with Betty Goodfriend and Isaac Goodfriend  
June 19, 1989  
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## PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Betty Goodfriend and Isaac Goodfriend, conducted by William Helmreich on June 19, 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.

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## BETTY GOODFRIEND AND ISAAC GOODFRIEND

### June 19, 1989

WH: Where were you born?

BG: In a small town outside of ?Kovno?...in Lithuania, as it was (called)Vilkija...when I was a baby... my parents went to another city...they lived on the German border in Menel...and it's known as Klaipeda...the Russians came in '41.

WH: How old were you?

BG: ...12 and a half...

WH: ...which camp were you in?

BG: ...I was in Stutthof. I was in the (?Kofnov?) ghetto...and then I went to a forced labor camp...in ?Gerdan?...and it was a group of 400 Jews...I had my brother and sister in the Ghetto...we were nine children...I was the seventh...Orthodox families had a lot of children...

WH: How many made it through the war?

BG: Four of us survived, and now we are only two...one brother...escaped and he was hidden...one sister was with me in the concentration camps. I was with her in the ghetto...one sister survived in Paris...I was in the ghetto and then I was in ?Kadan? in the forced labor camp...from the 400, they- there was only 50 left...very few people survived from Stutthof because besides crematoria, they had a hanging method, they also would take people on the boat, we were not far from the Elbe, the water there, and they would drown them, throw them just into the sea, into the Baltic sea. They would take them on the boats, besides burning and hanging, so very few survived.

WH: How were you able to make it?

BG: The war was over, what happened was, they chose me into a group to go and dig and dig trenches, and, first of all two things. I was lucky I was only with Lithuanian Jewish girls, of course we went through in the camps all this horror which is familiar, and one day we stood like a vase, all naked, they choose 400-500 girls- that time I was 15 or so, (her voice softens and lowers) and um, my hair was shaved off by then. We did not get a number, it was already late, it was in July '44.

WH: How long were you in Stutthof?

BG: Almost a year.

WH: Why did you say you were lucky that you were only with Lithuanian girls?

BG: ...because when you come in such a situation when you are with people who speak the same language, you have the same signals of survival, and I'll give you an example, and you watch out for each other. You come from the same background and you stick together. We got together with groups, my sister was with a group, my sister by the way died in Israel of a sickness (inaudible) who was with me in the concentration camp. She was with 1,200 Hungarian women. Not one of them spoke Yiddish. Not one of them spoke German. They stuck together. And the 50 Lithuanian women, suffered because of that. How so? And it's a pity that it happened that way, but we are human, and that's why what it is. Like even dogs protect their own dogs that they know. And especially you can't communicate. We can put together a whole (inaudible) of words, with signals of survival, that we gave each other...when something happened, and the Nazi, the S.S. men- would come and say, 'Who did this and this?' Nobody would say a word in our group. At one point, that what they call a kapo, the concentration camp police, which was really only like a supervisor, who had to answer to the Nazis, and we were all- when this girl, somebody came and said, 'who did this and this?' and nobody answered. They put us all in a circle, all 420 by then, in a circle and they said 'you are all going to get 25 lashes.[ Nobody said 'Boo.' We just stood there. So they picked out one of the supervisors and they said, 'This was somebody from your group,' we were divided into six groups. And she didn't say anything. And she got the 25 lashes...she would not give out the name...well, if the Hungarian girls did something wrong, and the question would come up, they would point to one of the Lithuanian women...we had only one kapo who we were afraid of, that we didn't trust. She would go and tell- tell the Germans.

WH: Jewish?

BG: Yah. Jewish girl, of course!

WH: Doesn't this hold over today, also?

BG: No, I personally never would hold that. To me, a Jew is a Jew is a Jew. Doesn't even matter- if he's Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, when it comes basically as one nation, as one people, I always wish when people say, 'Oh they are terrible, ahh, this and that,' I always say, 'Wish we would have a few million more.' (? all listen to the Galiceaner, listen with his?)- see, I don't see it that way. Never did. Except that in this particular time, like let's say, we used to have a signal, (needs translation): ya levi yova ye levi?- part of the davening- we from the Kovno ghetto...we built an airport (in Kovno) that they desperately needed as the crossroad between Germany and Russia...among the thousands of workers with all the problems, we had the people who observed, who davened three times a day. So, in midt 'n drin, it was mincha, so they got together a minyan, and one would stand- not just one, all four corners, the women would stand and watch- that nobody is coming...they grabbed a minute to daven mincha. So here they came to ya vel

**USHMM Archives RG-50.165\*0036**

**3**

a yova, and midt 'n drin, we hear them they say, 'ya vei a yova.' And the women screamed out 'ya vei a yova'. And they knew that somebody was coming. So when we used to say to each other, 'ya vei a yova,' we knew that a big shot, a Nazi is coming.

WH: In other words, you had your own language, communication?

BG: Oh yeh, definitely.

WH: ...what year did you come to America?

BG: We came to Canada...1952.

WH: Where did you live between '45 and '52?

BG: We live first in Berlin, I met my husband in Berlin, I got married in Berlin, '45 I met him, '46 we were married. Couldn't stand the Nazis! Couldn't look at their faces. Ran away. Maybe we'll be able to get to America...first we wanted to go to Israel, it was far to Israel...I must empathize this, I was afraid to stay in Berlin because Russia is all around. And I used to call it, we are on the tip of the tongue of the lion, if he wants he swallows us, if not, he spits us out. So anyway, we went to a big D.P. camp near Frankfurt...(?Salzheim?)...from there we couldn't find a place where to live in there, so we went to (?Felderphing?)... a lot of Lithuanian Jews from the survivors lived in (?Felderphing?)...why didn't we go to Israel? We started to...very simple, at that age, I understood that I am not strong enough physically, or mentally to go to a country that was even harder at certain points than the ghetto. I absolutely physically, and especially mentally, (her voice drops low) I was destroyed.

WH: Your parents?

BG: - my parents died with the shtetl six weeks after the Nazis took over...that was in '41. So then, what we did from the D.P. camps, through a certain way my husband found my sister in Paris, and my oldest son was born there.

WH: ...(NEEDS TRANSLATION:) talking about ?Felderphing?...books...and collections...IN YIDDISH... what happened when you came here?

BG: What we did, when we came to America...once we got to Canada in 1952...we went back from Paris to Berlin and we came to Canada. After two years we finally had a chance to leave Europe.

WH: Did you have to apply for a visa to America?

BG: Yah...on the Polish quota...we heard that Canada takes in...

WH: ...you came...

BG: ...in Paris we could immigrate to Australia...we didn't want to go to Australia... we came to Montreal Four and a half years we lived there in Montreal (illegible to transcriber) and my husband became a cantor after a while, he was- cantor in Berlin. So he became a cantor in Montreal, and I became active with what we call now the 'Golden Agers'. I was sisterhood head of branch of activities for the elderly, and in those days of course Jewish parents didn't live in old homes, they lived with the children...

WH: When you came to America, where did you go?

BG: We came to Boston.

WH: Why Boston?

BG: That's where my husband got a job.

WH: Brookline?

BG: Brookline, and so we lived in Brookline for a very short time...did not take to the Jews in Boston, because I found them as empty snobs, and if somebody becomes snobby, that's okay...I found them very snobbish and I had a time adjusting there...I was not happy there. In Montreal we found (needs translation): (?unsa regedden?) besides survivors, the people were warm, and outgoing and the society, being that we both spoke French, it was so easy for us. Between Yiddish and French, we didn't have any problems without knowing English,

WH: When you came here, how did the American Jews react to you?

BG: To us? Beautifully. I didn't have any problems. Never, wherever we were. In Cleveland, we came from Boston to Cleveland, in Cleveland, I was Torah Fund Chairman of my sisterhood for two years. I couldn't write always my speeches in English, so I had a very dear friend...she knew Yiddish very well, so I would tell her, what I want to say in Yiddish, and she would write it out all in English, and I would get up and make my speeches

WH: Did they ever ask you about the war?

BG: Oh, yah, very little, though. They would. American Jews were not interested in that...No, it was far removed and I felt I should- in those days, it was very hard for us to talk, anyway, and besides, they didn't want to know. They didn't want to know. Every so often, I would mention, like in Torah Fund, I told them that you must provide the money

for teachers and rabbis and cantors because all those who used to come before the war from the shtetl are dead! From Auschwitz, no rabbis and no teachers for your children, will come. These type of speeches I used to give them. And it worked! They gave me money. And they gave money- money went to the seminary...so I used to tie in into my talks. In order to hit home...and then we both became very active in the Jewish National Fund. In Cleveland, we had the women's division that did a lot of good work for (?Kaneh Kiyim? Israel) and I became very active and I was President. And while I was President, my husband accepted the job here.

WH: Do you ever find yourself asking how G-d could let this all happen?

BG: Ah, yes. I ask it many times, but on the other hand, I found strength in talking to G-d in the camps, when I would come from work. When I would come from work and it wasn't too cold, I would take off my dress, shake out the lice, that used to eat me up alive, I was the only one, and you sleep- on dust anyway, and I would say, (needs translation) and this would give me an oomph. I was 16 years old. But give me an oomph to go on. I ask questions, I don't think it was a deed of G-d, it was the deed of people, and I blame the silence of Americans and the leadership of the Jewish agency in those days from Israel, or Palestine at that time, ALMOST as much

WH: Why do you think they were silent?

BG: First of all, it's easier to hide your head in the soil, in the ground, in-in-in the sand, in the everything whatever it is. Not to rock the boat, just protect me and my family.. uhh, hope we have not so long ago the similar experience with the happening in the community, and our Jewish leaders...truly, the city father's some of them two generations, they did not want to have anything to do with that, because they were afraid it might hurt THEM, to push away other Jews because there were Jews of a country that is not accessible right now! But they didn't look that you don't push away another Jew. He is your brother! No matter where he came from! If he's green, yellow, communist, apartheid, whatever it is, he is still your brother! You don't push him away! You help him...(inaudible -who?) and the Jews in the community didn't want to have anything to do with it. The leadership did not want. The Federation leadership did not want. The American Jewish Committee, did not want to have anything to do with it. We went ahead and did- yah, we going to head and did want we wanted to do. So I feel that American, the American Jewish leadership- first of all, the leadership in that time, were very far removed from what we would call a (needs translation: Yiddishe nisnomer?) to me, those people didn't have a (yiddishe nisnomer?). They were Judeo-Christian Jews. They did not feel the pain uhhh, I call it (needs translation: sa-aham b'lebam?). They did not feel it. So how could they help us? And they didn't want to rock the boat with Roosevelt. Roosevelt was a very fine masked anti-Semite. And he got what he wanted. So, uhh, I-

WH: ...( with reference to previous discussion about Jewish Community Leaders)...what was it that that they didn't want to do for them? That they didn't want to help them...

BG: ...they didn't want to have anything to do them, they told us in very plain words. We don't need them here!

WH: Are they afraid of the Black community?

BG: (inaudible)...they afraid of their own skin. And the same thing happened with us. They did not want to go to rock the boat of the Congress, of the Senate, to tell them, in their own state, the President- they had an 'in'!- they had an 'in' to the President!

WH: ...if that's the case, what does all this education do? What did they learn from the Holocaust, if anything?

BG: NOTHING! That's exactly what we were talking- and I said, and I repeat it that again and again, THEY DIDN'T LEARN A THING FROM THE HOLOCAUST! AND G-D FORBID THAT YOU REPEAT YOURSELF AGAIN! In Germany, the German Jews said when there were pogroms, I'll never forget that my mother- oval shalom- she used to repeat it all the time. She said, 'And don't always trust the German Jew.' Why? Because she used to talk to her friends and she- and she would say, 'why? Because when there were the pogroms, and they went to the German Jews, to ask for help, and they said, (needs translation: vas numverdent tu midt de aust student). Hitler made one, no more (inaudible-?east?) no more west, everybody was Juden' And that what it was, And this is what American Jews cannot understand. We are the biggest, largest Jewish community in the world. We take more Jews, they are more affluent, for a longer time in this era, more than before in Jewish history. And the German Jews didn't want to believe that it will happen to them. They served their Kaiser, they gave money for the Nazi party, they couldn't believe it that it would happen there. They got everything. They didn't-you see, what happened there, is happening now, here. When Fritz Goldberg becomes more goy than Fritz Schultz, the goyim don't trust the Jews and this is what's happening now. And this is what the Nazi's did. When they saw how, how, uhh, a Christian the Jews came, became, including of changing their names, and went over to the Christian side than as Jews, they didn't trust the Jew. They trusted the Jew, when he was with a beard- when he comes with an accent then they knew he's a Jew. But when Fritz Goldberg becomes more Christian in dealings and achievement, and coming to, to, a, in politically and in this- art, in professors, if he became more than Fritz Schultz, he cannot be trusted. THAT'S WHY they didn't give us an opportunity to convert. That's what I wanted to bring out. Because when- in the time of the Inquisition...in the pogrom times, if you wanted to convert, you survived. This time, Fritz Goldberg, is too- he's a big danger to Fritz Schultz.

WH: Why?



BG: Because he's more Fritz than he is. That's why they didn't give us an opportunity to convert. That's what I see. And we are living on the time. That's going back four generations.

WH: Jews here in Canada, they don't convert- they assimilate, right?

BG: That will not save their lives, because Hitler went back four generations. And all this conversions aren't worth that much, if the husband is not an observant Jew. The Christian girl, who grew up believing, and go to church, said suddenly says to herself, Why do I have to be Jewish, my husband doesn't observe anything. I don't want to go to hell. I have to believe in something! And she says, I don't want to be converted any more. I'll be a wife, the mother of your children, but I'll go to my church, because I don't want to lose my soul. How do you blame a woman of that- like that.

WH: Do you think that people like that could also turn on Jews, in their marriages?

BG: Oh, yeh, we saw what happened during the war...

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

BG: I believe that it may happen again- I believe very much, because I do not trust Christianity for their humane behavior. We- it might happen here in a worse way than there. The only difference is, that here we have a mixture of groups of different religions. The different hates, and, and, and greediness towards the Jews. There, we had Christians with one religion, and one bond. When the priest led the services on Easter, in the church, he would say to the congregation at one point during the day, 'Go and kill the Jews!' and they would all turn towards the door, start to march at the door, and when they were at the door, he would say, (needs translation: gresht taug gall) which means in Lithuanian, 'Come back!' But if he didn't call them back, they would go out and make a pogrom. You see what I am saying?

WH: And here?

BG: Here. (needs translation).

WH: Of course we don't have too many of them.

BG: Ahm, we don't have too many of them, we don't have too many Catholics here, that I'm talking about the Catholic country where I grew up.

WH: Is it your impression that Blacks here see Jews different than the Whites?

BG: Yes. Definitely

WH: In what way

BG: They hate them for double. For being Jewish and being white. I believe that.

WH: We help them, right?

BG: Because we are human beings, we are- we grew up, it's part of our religion, those of us, and besides American people believe in fair play. And Jewish people especially, we grew up not- not with the saying of America, 'Mind your own business!' but 'Live and let live' Still charge ahead. Those of us who studied the Torah, those of us who learned the laws, and the- the Pirkel Avos, the Ethics of our Fathers. You should help this lady, should help a poor person. I remember since I was knee-high my mother used to say, 'oval shalom, used to say, 'When a person comes and stretches out his hand, you are suppose to give him charity. Even if you don't have, and I remember many times, my mother would give a half a slice of bread, a potato, because somebody knocked at the door, stretched out his hand. And when you grow up with such ethics, that's why we didn't shoot back! That's why we didn't fight back! We were not killers! We were not fighters, we were people with ethics, you see.

WH: What about Israel today (inaudible? a million Jews?).

BG: The Jewish people in Israel are more than heroes, and more than nationalists, they are in my eyes, an example that G-d turned around our people and showed that we can still be King David, (inaudible-? like?) King David.

End of Tape #1, Side A

### **Tape #1, Side B**

BG: -way up there, among the Arab nations, who truly want something good for their people, they would settle with the suggestion of Shamir. That they should elect their own leaders, and then the rest, we have to do a lot of praying. Because, how much can a nation take. Do you remember, do I remember, ever in the history of a country that was for 42 years on the war, in war, under seige? I don't remember that. I don't. Russia took half the world. Nobody asked her to pull out. Until Gorbachev came, nothing- even that what they say they giving back, I don't think that they'll give back, that they'll let go completely. But here they have a tiny, teeny, little country, with a very, very unusual people.

WH: Do you sometimes wish you could have lived there?

BG: Many times. I feel that I made a mistake, yes.

WH: But for a Hazzan, there's no real job.

BG: So he could have done something else. Nobody starved in Israel. Died on starvation. So if one thing doesn't work out, my husband is a very capable man, he's a wonderful teacher, and he can teach voice, he graduated and took lessons in the finest conservatories, and studied in Berlin, in Paris and was the first Jew who got a scholarship in Montreal from the "La Conservatore", the "La Provance" Sets you back, it was such a big honor. So he would have took voice, he would have sang in the theater, we would have found a way. We were not- ahh, we both, neither one of us come from millionaire homes, and we both believe very much in, how much do you need to make you happy (needs translation)...

WH: You have three children?

BG: My three sons are all educated in Yiddishkeit. Only one is really with a synagogue. The other two- one is in television, and one is in business.

WH: What do they do?

BG: The one in business lives here. The one in television...he's with CNN. He's a producer, editor in Miami.

WH: And your third one?

BG: And my third one is a Hebrew teacher and Youth Director in a Conservative Synagogue in- St. Petersburg...Florida.

WH: Is it a disappointment to you that two of them did not stay that close to the religion?

BG: Yes, not a disappointment, we live in a Christian society, which is a tremendous influence, it wasn't easy, my children had a few minuses to fight. They had the European parents. Parents who survived such a horrible era of the human race. And the cantor is the clergy, and this are for a very tough situation to be in, and I guess once they overthrew the yoke, they wanted to be as American as the other young people. But all, either one of the them, can get up, conduct a service, blow the shofar, read the Torah, and answer a few questions in Gemara...and maybe one day they'll get married, and have children, they'll go back. As long as the basis is there, and they have the education.

WH: How old are they?

BG: One, my oldest is 40, my middle one's 35, and the youngest is 29 and he was born in America. My children were born in three different countries, one in France, one in Montreal, and one in America. My American chick I call him.

WH: You think education is very important?

BG: Do I think that- definitely! Most important! To be, to be uneducated is like being blind or half dead. I always strived for knowledge, I believe in that, even though I would not be as active as I would have wanted to. I always was part- we were always part, my husband and I, of Jewish community living here. Though with everything that went on, we were always there and we were always a part of it. Zionism, and a community at large, and education, the Hebrew Day School, the Yeshiva High School. Everything. We were always- as much as we can, we support those things.

WH: Do you think that American Jews can understand what happened to the Jews in Europe?

BG: Not just the American Jews. Nobody can understand it unless they lived it. This is something that you cannot understand, and I'll give you an example. You talk to a widow, and your heart goes out to her, and she says, 'Ohk, I'm so lonely.' And I say, 'I understand.' I really do not understand. Because I turn around, and there's my husband. I don't know what it means to walk into an empty house, all alone- knowing that my husband will not walk through this door! You see? So, nobody can really understand it fully. Unless he lived it. You can sympathize, you can listen, and in a very intellectual or philosophical way, say 'yes, I understand. Impossible. It's impossible to- even for me to describe certain situations that I saw with my eyes.

WH: What did you learn about human nature- throughout that time?

BG: That the human being is put together worse than an animal, and then the highest being that G-d created. Took me a long time to trust a human being. I'm still very cautious, and I became sometimes cynical and fatalistic. I see very few silver- clouds with silver lining. I, uhh, am more geared to see reality in it's nakedness as it is, according to my understanding. And it's not easy to live with. It's very hard to live with that. But, you can't help to be what you are.

WH: You met your husband in Berlin?

BG: ...yes.

WH: How did you learn to trust people again?

BG: Ahh, when people show you kindness, and they go out of their way to do you a favor, and they don't disappoint you, they actually, they actually mean well for you, and are truly happy for you, or side with you. How can you not trust them? You see.

WH: Even after everything, wouldn't you say there's (inaudible).

BG: Even after, like I told you before, a human being is put together, is a very complicated machine, can't call it a machine, with all the knowledge that we have, can we truly say, that we completely understand the human mind? I don't think so. I don't have such a high education, but according to my common sense, I don't think so. I read philosophy, and psychology books, my son majored in psychology- the one who's teaching now. And we discuss things, and there's always something new. And everything you have in your mind. You eat in your mind, you sleep in your mind, you walk in your mind, you die at the end. Everything is your mind. Nothing else. If something goes wrong, you can't move your arm, can't move your leg, you can't see, you can't hear, you can't talk, you can't feel. Everything is your mind. So, how can we say that-.

WH: ...when I worked in the hotels...it used to amaze me how quickly,- I don't think people forget, but they change, the same person who would...kill...for a piece of bread in the camps, right, and they came and they ordered some food in the hotel and it didn't come quick enough, (inaudible) 'where is it?' And I thought, (inaudible) happy to eat anything! (inaudible).

BG: It's a different situation. It's a- and then, it also has to do, first of all, ahh, shortage of patience. May be part of what we went through- or intolerance for somebody else's hard work. It takes- a (needs translation- madele menschin), you know, to do that, to yell at somebody about food. But it doesn't have anything to do- that was then, this is now! How come so many of the survivors, unfortunately, many of them made money. Try to get tzedukan from them. It's very hard.

WH: Why is that?

BG: They have-carry a chip on their shoulder. The world owes them something. I never argue with them because of that. I tell them (needs translation) when somebody tells me, 'Oh, you became so rich,' so I said to them, 'Nu, is he sharing yet?' This is the question. Not, 'Is he happy?' But, 'Is he sharing, yet?' You see.

WH: Do you ever ask yourself- there's a fellow who wrote a book, his name is Leon Wells, he said, 'G-d, if you decided you have to punish us, you have to kill us, okay. But like this?'

BG: (heavy sigh and pause) This is something-first of all, it's his question. And we don't know where G-d was, like I said before, I don't believe that G-d wanted to punish us. I cannot accept that. I could believe in a G-d since I could understand who was so cruel.

He was so cruel. How can you make people for so many thousands of years believe in such a cruel G-d.

WH: Do you think he could have stopped it?

BG: No, I think many times he was with us in the concentration camps.

WH: Why did he allow it though?

BG: I- doesn't- you cannot question. There is no answer to such questions. Not- I learned to live with one thing, for many, many years now. Not every question has an answer in life. And this is one of them. I can't truly and honestly say that (needs translation: Barouch va yana met) G-d is a (needs translation) this I cannot say. After you see picking up a baby and hitting it against the wall, and splash the brains against the stones, you cannot say that . It was a (needs translation: mish bit). You know what I'm saying?

WH: I do.

Conclusion of Interview with Betty Goodfriend

### Interview with Isaac Goodfriend

WH: ...I know about you because I know you're very active her, in the community, and Ben told me before, he said that you did wonderful things here, and that you're active with (inaudible e-Hemschech?) and that you speak, and I think that's very, very important. Alex Gross told me, Harold Hirsch told me...anyway, you were born in Poland?

IG: Uh-huh (yes).

WH: Where?

IG: In...Chekof...outside of Lodz...

WH: During the war, where were you?

IG: In Poland all the time.

WH: Were you in a camp?

IG: I was in a labor camp. I was not in a concentration camp. I was in a labor camp...until '42...before the Final Selection.

WH: You weren't in hiding?

IG: I was in hiding after I run away from the camp... I run away to a designated place because my mother's sister was already there... with a four year old baby- a girl...

WH: Your parents, did they-.

IG: They were already gone.

WH: They didn't make it?

IG: They already gone,

WH: How about your brothers, sisters?

IG: They're all gone.

WH: Are you the only survivor in your family?

IG: Yeh. The tragic part of it is, that I knew exactly when they were killed. I know the date. I know where I was because the Polish worker that I worked with, told us an hour after they were killed, where they were killed. 162 Jews taken out of the synagogue. They were killed and buried almost alive. My family was named among them. (illegible to transcriber) days in Kislev. I remember exactly. Friday morning. So, this is what the pain- the pain was- more difficult to bear...

WH: ...to me, survivor means anyone who was dislocated, who lost family...

IG: Well, survival in those days...survival is something that it's as- it has such a big scope classification. People survive today. And they survive daily, cross the street, and they don't get hit by a car,. They survive a day in New York, especially. A survivor going down and they are not mugged. They are surviving. But the survival in those days, was something that you did think about, and you didn't think about it.

WH: What do you mean?

IG: Well, I'll explain it to you. At times, you said, 'Okay, what will be' this is an old Yiddish saying, 'What will be with Kohel Yisrael, will be with (inaudible-? Reb Yisrael?)...it's a connotation...naturally they want to be with Kohel Yisrael, to be with ?Reb? Yisrael, to be with a ?Reb? Yisrael, with an individual...(inaudible) and individual Jew. So we made such a peace, sort of peace, if you can call it that, that look, whatever it will be. We're not going out of our way to be singled out as special individuals. I deserve to survive and

my family not? And this is the reason, the rationale, that we walked around with. On the other hand, we sort of talked about it. My friends and I (inaudible) worked there in the forced labor camps, who will be the lucky one to be the only Jew to survive. We talked about it. So I said, 'what do you mean the lucky one. We talk about luck. Well, you'll be placed in a museum, because they won't be. They won't know anything about Jews in Poland and Russia. People will come to look how a Polish Jew looked like. His dress. His manners. There'll be so few of us left, that we'll become a museum piece. An antique'. And then of course, everybody thought, 'It can't be me!'

WH: Why should I be (inaudible).

IG: Why should I be the one to marry this kind of survivor? And then he said, looking out of the window, across from the barbed wire fences, how lucky this bird is. He can fly in and out of the camp. Now he's sitting outside. And now he's back in camp. Why can't we do that? You better be born a bird, than a human being. This particular- even the dog, if he wants, he's inside.

WH: Would it really be lucky, the person who would be the only one left would know that all the others died, and he'd have to live with that.

IG: Well, this- see, this is a thought, that nobody thought of. Somebody will come to you and tell you that this is what he thought, he's not telling you the truth.

WH: You just saying that at the moment the person just thinks of surviving?

IG: Yes. Yes. Because there were cases, and I would say 100 more than- in a 100 cases, you have 75 cases were EVERYBODY thought for himself or herself. They couldn't care less about the rest.

WH: Do you think that people who go through that, feel guilty about having done that the rest of their lives?

IG: No. They have a guilt feeling, though, oh yah, oh sure. This is, this is the survivor's guilt feeling. This is the survivor's guilt feeling of sleepless nights.

WH: More than anything else?

IG: More than anything else. How many times, I sit up there, and it hurts especially when I read an article, or when I read in the paper, or a book, which I seldom finish, a book on the Holocaust. I start reading it, and I see myself again. I see my family. Then it starts to hurt. Then you say to yourself, 'Why didn't I do that! Why could he do it! Why did he go and bribe the guard- I bribe the guard, I gave him gold pieces to bring my brother around to the sewers. And it DIDN'T HELP! I waited all night. It didn't help. He took



the money. Never brought him out from the synagogue. They were together in the synagogue. (illegible to transcriber) piece of paper that my mother wrote on a piece of paper bag, brown paper bag, in Yiddish. 'Do something! Try to get me out with the children!' I couldn't. I couldn't. So now the guilt feelings- why couldn't you? You should have done it.

WH: What about a person, who say is in a concentration camp, and-.

IG: Concentration camp there was no way of doing anything.

WH: What I mean is, let's say...there's one piece of bread and there was only enough for one person. The person-.

IG: We have the same bread. We'll share it. Bread was scarce. I shared my bread. I shared (inaudible) if I (inaudible) a potato, I didn't finish the potato.

WH: You mean that was a rule, an iron clad rule?

IG: Yeh.

WH: What about a pair of shoes?

IG:: Who had shoes?...we had schmartes. I didn't share schmartes because I wore...

WH: ...a person who took something from somebody else, who took something that he had to have

IG: Yes, there were people that I still, I'm MAD at friends- at friends- even family I'M MAD AT THEM! I don't care where they are. If they survived, or they didn't survive. I was mad, let's put it this way. In this whole ghetto, you are sort of reduced from a full table to a half a table. Ten people on this table, one side you cut off half a table, and say that ten people have to fit in this half the size of this table. And, supposedly, so you go in, and I went in, I was young, I was the youngest of those four, five guys. I said, 'I'm gonna sleep here. So they finagled 500 \$ foreign currency from me. They said, 'We pay for it.' That was a lie. But I didn't want to sleep on the street, and I thought, that this is a cousin's, cousin's something, and he played along with me. I gave him the last penny I had...

WH: But in reality, the system reduced you to that...but even if the system reduces you, some people rise above something, and some don't. Every situation...is.

IG: Oh, yes. Oh, Yes. Oh, Yes. I could not take it because then, I was honest, this was my upbringing. Live and let live.

WH: Aren't you lucky, though then, that you survived in the sense that some people said only the fittest, only the strongest, only the toughest survived in a sense that-.

IG: uhuh. (indicates no) I was not tough. I was not tough.

WH: But was that true of the majority?

IG: Not necessarily. Not necessarily. No. No. Not necessarily. It was simply sheer fate.

WH: What about the saying, (needs translation:.....mazel....).

IG: (needs translation).

WH: I mean, mazel is important, but don't you also-.

IG: No, Jews did- (inaudible) mazel is wrong. Jews don't-not suppose to believe in mazel. Mazel is, mazel is a connotation of the (?sojak?)...(inaudible),,,mazel is something that only a Hasic, a Hasid would believe. (inaudible-?with?) mazel.- You know, but it helps him you know, he has seven kids, he doesn't have a penny to his name, but if he wants to marry off the daughters, he doesn't have to worry 'why' G-d will help him. If he sits down a whole day, and studies Torah, and sits (inaudible) Gemorah, G-d cannot help him marry with- marry off seven kids with dowries. He has to do something. So, people who do, there are people who simply wait. Whatever will happen. I have seven times, seven times, exactly seven times my life was in danger. I felt the corners of the barrel of a gun right here.

WH: In the labor camp?

IG: Outside the labor camp, in the Ghetto. And after the war...from the Russians...

WH: And what happened..?

IG: A miracle! Don't ask me why.

WH: You couldn't control it.

IG: ...a Russian officer, and he pulled a gun, and told me to face the wall, not face him, face the wall, and he said, 'You are coming out of this house,' this was the headquarters of the Gestapo, 'then you must be a German spy.' So I said, I could hardly speak Russian, I spoke Polish to him. I said, 'No officer, I went in here to get a mattress, which- this was what I was carrying on my shoulders, a mattress to sleep. After the liberation, the war was still on in January of 1945. 'No!' He's not buying what I says, I said, 'I'm a Jew.'

(inaudible)...He said, 'Uh-uh. They killed all the Jews. How can you be a Jew. And if you are, so you are a Jew. Then you were by the Germans. Again, a spy.' And I turn, and I turn. Suddenly I see an old lady, walking and I asked her, do you speak Russian. I am so-and-so. You see, remember, my uncle lived next door (inaudible)...please explain to the officer that you know me. She did.

WH: And he believed it.

IG: He believed it. He put the gun in the holster.

WH: I would say this to you. And this story, which is very interesting, I would say that you were lucky that the woman came by. But you weren't lucky that you spoke to him, you gave him an (inaudible- ?atzer?). You had the presence of mind, in the midst of about to be shot, to think of it, and do something to...

IG: This is one thing...(inaudible)...I am blessed with that, that I can size up a situation and I'll, uh,-.

WH: How do you do that today? I mean, can you give me an example of how you size up something because of what you went through.

IG: I'll tell you very simple. I went to Moscow two years ago with my son, and I learned Russian quite a bit, you know, I spent with them two years in Berlin, and in Poland, and my son and I decided to go to Russia for Chanukah, This was before glasnot, before they opened up the doors and they (inaudible) refusniks. And I went for a - (inaudible) purpose. They called me, the- the Russian...conference...(inaudible) my son and I go to Moscow, Leningrad. And I carry along stuff, believe me.

WH: Matzohs.

IG: Matzohs? Matzohs I didn't bring along. Matzohs is- let the Lubavitcher bring matzohs and tfellin. I was interested in teaching (inaudible)...to teach music...(inaudible)...I was a cantor, I had special cards made up, 'music teacher,'...I also had an assignment to teach a rabbi in Moscow how to write a Jewish get. 'Cause I'm a sofer, I know how to do it, and I do it, so I- I was called from New York to be prepared, be ready. And, I was not afraid (illegible to transcriber) 50 pounds of salami I had (illegible to transcriber) 50 pounds of glatt kosher cheeses, and all the rest of the stuff. This didn't bother me. What bothered me, was the four sheets of the (Hasnoves?) of the- that the husband has to write, to sign, giving permission, on asking to sofer to write a get, and the paper, I'm talking about 25 sheets of special parchment, that a get has to be written on. And the ink, and a quill. Nothing else bothered me. But this. If they find it. 'Cause I know this is a question of life and death, for some people, some person. He cannot remarry, she cannot remarry, in case they want to get married, they want a get. And this was a very desperate thing, the way it

was put to me. So, that's what I was afraid of. I had seven suitcases. And I come through customs, I was very cool. I told my son, don't bite your nails. Don't act like you are nervous. You may be nervous inside, but we have to show that you're relaxed, and don't make jokes, because if you make jokes, they'll interpret- 'You're a wiseguy, huh!' Can't make jokes. Very serious, no child, you're a tourist, they'll ask you if you speak Russian, the answer of course is 'no'. I did the same thing, understood every word they talking about among themselves, but I didn't say anything. And before he asked me, 'What are you bringing?' I was ahead of him. It- just on the spur of the moment. 'Cause I saw what happened to the guys before me, how they took them apart. I said, 'which suitcase would you like me to open? Be my guest. Which one did you want me to open.' So, suddenly (inaudible) 'I'm not afraid!' I was totally afraid, believe me. 'Which suitcase?' He picks a little suitcase where I have all the stuff for the get. He picks it. It's a little handbag...so I said, 'Oh, my G-d,' I didn't say it, but I felt it. And he starts digging into the side pocket. I didn't hide the paper. I left it right in the pocket that he should see the sheets of paper, (inaudible) ah what is this?'...(inaudible)...so I tried to put my hand in, to see that nothing comes with it, pulled out the sheet of paper and this paper, 'what for?' I said, 'I like writing music, writing lyrics, I get inspired when I am on vacation and I like Russian folk music.' Which is emes, by the way.

WH: Something has to be emes...

IG: So I have (inaudible) paper, I don't know how I'll be able to get this kind of paper. This paper holds the ink- it is good, I have special ink...nobody told me what to say...

WH: Being a hazzan is a Jewish occupation. Is there any way that being a survivor made it different for you in being a hazzan? I know you have to sing, so you sing in Hebrew, but was there any-.

IG: Yes, yes, yes. The answer is positive. The answer is positive because certain prayers that I do, they touch me personally. Referring to (inaudible) referring to family, or referring to (?torres am yisrael?)...this is an obvious prayer that we talk about that I'm involved in, you know, the Holocaust (inaudible) but, I'm talking about prayers that are standard prayers, and they've been recited through the ages, for pogroms, prayers that were written in the middle ages, prayers that were written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, you know, there were always prayers, ( a haov?) for instance, when I recite Tisha b'Av, I always sort of cry, when I (inaudible) chant it. Even at home. When I said to my father on the (inaudible) but now, when I recite (illegible to transcriber) I have a replay, of what happened, not 2,000 years ago- but what happened 50 years ago. Because the words hit in. You know, the desolate, how desolate Jerusalem is. How desolate the city is.

WH: Is there ever any conflict, if you become a Hazzan in a Conservative shul that you had, I suppose you had probably a pretty Orthodox upbringing...Alexander Hassidim...you can deal with the ambivalence. There are other ways to make up for it...but I'm saying, is

there ever any- like a person who is born in America, goes to a Conservative seminary, maybe he went to Camp Ramah as a kid, he doesn't have these problems. But if a person grew up in a hassidische background...

IG: I understand. But it's not a question of feeling guilty. In a way, I said, if my father would be here, seeing what kind of shul that I have, and that I- don't have the peyas anymore, and I don't- my tzitzit don't hang out, so, he'll probably be disappointed, because this is not what he expected of me. On the other hand, look at the greatest writers, Hebrew writers, if they became later on, you know, atheists, non-believers, once upon a time they went to yeshiva. If not, they wouldn't be able to write as they did...like Isaac Bashevis Singer...(inaudible)...the editor of the Forwards, he's a (inaudible) yeshiva bochur. He is a genius, is when I remember him from Paris. But he was the editor of the Zionist paper...(inaudible) it was the paper for the Zionist movement when Israel became a state...all the greatest writers, once they had this background...Elie Wiesel is a hasid...(inaudible)...(inaudible-dubakos?) which is an ingredient of a hasid. If he wouldn't have the (inaudible-dubakos) he could not pour it out his heart with a pen and put it on paper. The same thing with me, when I chanted, interpret a prayer, I have to have this type of feeling. It has to come from here...(inaudible)...G-d wants the heart.

WH: If at that time, there was a position in an Orthodox synagogue, you would have taken it?

IG: Yes, yes.

WH: There aren't that many opportunities?

IG: Yes...correct. When I came to Montreal, and I took this Conservative shul, and I felt that- you know, this something that I can live with. It was a pretty Conservative shul, men and women separate. I like that we have reading in English, because I felt that the people have to participate, instead of mouthing out, (bla-bla-bla). I said, 'You don't want to be prayed, he doesn't want to be prayed,' but here you have (inaudible) congregation where the rabbi reads in English.

WH: It means something to them.

IG: It means some- (inaudible)...I was very impressed with it.

WH: I think you understood American Jews better than a lot of Americans.

IG: By the way, I Americanized very, very, fast. Extremely, extremely fast.

WH: How come? How come you did it so fast?

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**20**

IG: I guess- I didn't come down, you know, right from the camps, into the civilization.- I had a gradual indoctrination into the civilized world.

WH: To France...

IG: Paris, Paris did it.

WH: ...when you came as a Hazzan, if you came from Europe, did it mean anything to people who were employing you? Did it mean anything to other people...was it a disadvantage or an advantage?

IG: It was an advantage, yes. It was an advantage. But they wanted to see. My first interview, with the President, Vice-President, of the congregation, when he asked me to stand up, he didn't ask me what do I know. Stand up. And he sized me up, from top to bottom, and then he ask me how tall (laughing) I am. So I said 'Is this the way you hire someone?' 'How tall are you?' And then he said, 'How old are you?' I was young, I was very young. 28 years old...

End of Tape #1, Side B  
Conclusion of Interview