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William Helmreich Oral History Collection

Interview with Leo Helmreich
January 10, 1988
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Leo Helmreich conducted by William Helmreich on January 10, 1988 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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LEO HELMREICH

January 10, 1988

WH: When were you born?

LH: October 3, 1909 in Lancut. I had three brothers, Benno, Moshe, Herman, and I was the youngest. I had three sisters, one was younger, Paula, Begina, Gisela. Gisela was the youngest. I was the second youngest in the family. Paula was the oldest, then Herman, Benno, Moshe, Regina, myself, Giselle.

WH: Tell me a little about your parents.

LH: My father was a Tzchortkover hasid. In Lancut there were also Belzer, Gerer.

WH: What was Lancut's population then?

LH: About 500 people, of whom 90% were Jewish. Outside on the outskirts, almost all were Gentile. Of course, Pototski's Castle was there and the town had many improvements because of him.

WH: Did you ever have a problem with the Gentiles in the area?

LH: Yes, there were always problems. The Gentile boys from the high school always fought with us. Especially when we would venture out of the town.

WH: What was your mother's maiden name?

LH: Puderbeutel. My father came from Jankowitz. He had one brother, Abraham, who lived in Premysl. All ten of his children were killed except for one daughter who lives in Paris. My mother had one brother, Tuvia and a sister Tzilla.

WH: Was your father strict?

LH: He was a learned man who spent all his youth studying. He gave lectures as an adult to other adults.

WH: What kind of business did he have?

LH: Paint, brushes, school supplies. Like a general store. And my mother also worked in the store. The oldest kids took care of the youngest. When they made public how much money people gave, my father's name was near the top of the list. My father, even although he was a Hasidic Jew who didn't fight, was very strong physically.

WH: Tell me a little about your mother.

LH: She came, I think from Belzer hasidim. I'm named after my mother's father.

WH: By the way, was your father strict?

LH: He was strict, especially when it came to religious matters. Learning was very, very important to him. Even though he didn't go to a big yeshiva, he gave lectures to people, who were very learned. If not for finances, he would have gone to a big yeshiva. He had a good sense of humor, especially on Purim. He had lots of friends, and was a fine Baal Tefila.

WH: And your mother?

LH: Very fine, quiet, and smart person. But also a strong willed person.

WH: Describe the house you lived in.

LH: We lived one flight up. The store was on the ground floor. We also rented another apt. to a tenant, plus a store we rented to a barber. We owned part of the house. We had a kitchen, one living room, bedroom, another room where the children slept, a separate room for the girls. We also had a maid who slept in the kitchen. We had a little meat during the week but mostly we had meat only on Shabbos. It was a hard life in terms of making a living. But we always had enough to eat.

WH: What about your schooling?

LH: At three I already went to a cheder. I didn't like to go. There were 40 children in one room. The melamed had no knowledge of how to handle children. If the child didn't know something, he hit him, even a three year old. At six I started regular school, public school. This went until 12:00 noon. I went together with Polish kids and there were fights whenever the teacher wasn't in class or in the yard. The Gentile boys were in the majority. I sat without a hat under a crucifix because that was the law. But I also had peyes. From noon until six in the evening I had Jewish studies. I didn't go to minyan before bar-mitzvah. I davened at home.

WH: What was your bar-mitzvah like?

LH: Very simple. On the day itself, he took me to shul, I put on the tefilin, everyone had a drink and some cookies, and that was it. On Shabbos I got an aliyah and on the way to the bimah, the boys were standing with needles so that you remember the day. They stuck you in your behind but my older brother Moshe protected me. And they didn't

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make a big kiddush. This was everything they did. Then I went to high school. I went for four or five years and continued learning Gemorah. I had a private rebbe. I wasn't required to go to high school but I was a very good student and passed a special exam. I missed school on Shabbos, so every few months I had to take a difficult special exam. The teachers were very anti- Semitic and made it hard on us. I was a straight A student.

WH: What was your best subject?

LH: Mostly math and history. I had a very good memory.

WH: When did you go to Germany?

LH: In 1927. I was about 18. I already had two brothers in Germany. There was a seminary in Germany and I wanted to study there. Herman and Benno lived there. I was the only one in the family who went to gymnasium. I was in danger of being drafted in Poland. When I was 14 I rebelled somewhat about religion. I wanted to be like all other people, not to be an outcast. I want to maybe shorten my peyes half an inch. That was the extent of it.

WH: Where did you go in Germany?

LH: I went to Cologne. There I saw modern- dressed people who were, nonetheless, very religious. And they had a rabbi, Dr. Carlebach, whose sermons were very inspiring. And he was the Rector of the Yavne Yeshiva. That's where I went. And there I became religious thru conviction. But I could look like everyone and still be religious. I studied there about one and a half years and then switched to a school for commerce. My brothers were in business and the rabbinical studies were expensive and in 1930 I went into business. I had a private room in a house and had a roommate. I got a diploma in shorthand, bookkeeping, and commerce. I traded in silverware. I took orders from large companies and hotels. Uncle Herman was already in this business. I did this for about seven years.

WH: What did you do in those years?

LH: Besides working, I belonged to a sports club. I went out with friends on hikes to other cities and into the mountains and along the Rhine River. I belonged to a Bar Kochba club. I ran and played soccer. I belonged to Carlebach's shul known as Adas Yeshurun.

WH: When did you leave Germany?

LH: In March 1938, before Kristallnacht (November 1938). I met my wife in Antwerp and this was arranged by a Cologne matchmaker. Actually there was another girl proposed to me, a young girl living in Germany. But we discussed our views, and I said: 'I don't

want to go to the beach and she insisted that I go and I saw there would be a conflict. I liked her and later she retracted but I was afraid there might be problems.

WH: What happened right before you left?

LH: Once before they came to power, I was going to Mincha on Shabbos with my brother Ben-Zion (Benno). I saw a man working on a window and he showed me his pocket-knife to aggravate me. So, to aggravate him I showed him a fist. The fist was a Social-Democrat symbol. Later I forgot about. But I saw a man following me. He threatened me. So I took a knife out to get him but he ran away. But then I heard that the Nazi Party people came to my house to inquire about me and to get me. But they found my friend and beat him up instead; so badly that he ended up in the hospital. After the Nazis came to power this man became an auxiliary policeman and tried to arrest me. So Uncle Herman, who had connections, tried to appease him. He met him and drank beer with him and some friends and he calmed down. Right before I left I heard the police were in my house and had asked that I report to the precinct. I smelled a rat and left for good. Also, in 1936 or 1937, I was on my bike, and an S.S. man owed money to Uncle Herman. The man insulted him and Uncle Herman hit him. When I came upon this I got very angry. And this man was thinking I'm on his side and he said to me: 'Der Dreckiche Jude hat mich geschlagen.' (The dirty Jew has hit me.) So I said to him: 'Du bist dreckich.' (You are dirty.) He was confused.

WH: Sounds like Uncle Herman was a pretty tough guy.

LH: We are all like this.

WH: What other things like this happened?

LH: Another time Benno and I were passing the Nazi headquarters and one of them said: 'The Jews are coming.' And we found this to be a big insult. So we had the police arrest them. This was shortly before they came to power. Life was very dangerous but since my name was really a German name, that kept us out of trouble many times. The name means "a rich helmet."

WH: So exactly when did you leave Germany?

LH: On March 9th. And I was married in Antwerp on March 10th. There were hundreds of people there including, of course, my parents. And a year later the Nazis attacked Poland. Mom's family was originally from near Cracow, Poland. Actually they came from Slomnik. They were Gerer hasidim. Grandpa was a Gerer hasid. We settled down in Antwerp where I became a cleaver. After a year I became a broker working for myself. In May 1940 Hitler attacked Belgium and we ran away to France. We went by train and it took four hours because the train was bombarded.

WH: What happened then?

LH: We were all supposed to meet in a small town near the French border. But then Uncle Meyer, in his desire to protect us, said something about Antwerp which made the police suspicious. So they arrested us as suspected spies. He had said Antwerp was not bombed so it shouldn't look as if things were so bad. But they knew it had been bombed. But then planes bombed the police station and we were able to escape. This was a lucky thing because the day before they had executed two suspected spies right on the spot. Mark was then 18 months old. I went out to buy a banana and suddenly a plane that was shot down by an anti-aircraft gun, crashed in a yard right next to us. Eventually we came to Paris. The train was bombed several times over one and a half days and I had to protect Mark with my body. We didn't eat or drink for several days but what could you do? It was war. When we got there an announcement was made that all Polish people, including Jews, had to join the Polish Army in Exile that was based there. So we left Paris and rented a small place in a little town on the ocean. Then we heard, this was 1941, that there was an armistice. The French, they didn't last too long. And England and Flatto came running from Lyon because they heard Lyon would be occupied, would become part of Vichy France. But it didn't happen. People didn't know. They were running because of rumors. People ran to Po, near the Spanish border to try to escape. And tens of thousands of people came there. The French were fearful there would be an epidemic because of a lack of facilities. We slept overnight in a movie theater. There was no room anywhere.

WH: How did the family members react during this time of crisis?

LH: Grandpa, he wanted to be the leader. He knew very little French but he was our spokesman. But he got desperate too. At one point he said, when he saw a train passing, that he wants to lay down on the train and be killed. He was desperate. He had a family and he didn't know where to turn. He laid down but we didn't let him.

WH: What about Grandma?

LH: She behaved good. She was a sick woman. She had gallstones, but now when she didn't have all this food, with the fat, she was actually better.

WH: What about Uncle Mill and Uncle Meyer?

LH: Uncle Meyer was always regular. But Uncle Mill was always the sick man. But here he was better too. I felt the strongest. I was always prepared for everything.

WH: How was Tante Lena?

LH: She got lost on the way. We were temporarily put in a camp at Gurs along with Spanish fighters who had lost the war against Franco. We slept in a barracks of wood and on straw mattresses.

WH: What did you mean 'I was the strongest?'

LH: Because I took care of Mommy and Mark. But I was weak because I didn't eat. But I wasn't afraid of anything. Anyway Tante Lena found herself in Marseilles.

WH: How did she react during this time?

LH: Not bad. Mommy was dependent on me for everything. After a few weeks they let us go to Marseilles.

WH: Why didn't you go to Spain?

LH: How could I? There was a guard and I had no papers. So we rented a four room apartment in Marseilles. There was no heat and even though it was a warm climate, I was never so cold in my life.

WH: What did you do there?

LH: There was nothing to do. I still had some money. The French asked me how I lived. So I told them I had about 20,000 francs (about \$200.00) If I'd had no money, they would have put us in a camp. The attitude is that if you have no money, then you could live only by stealing, so they put you in a camp. By 1942 the Nazis were arresting Jews whenever they saw them. But this s early 1942 and I was able to get affidavits for the U.S. Uncle Herman had gotten an affidavit from my first cousin Rosie Wachtel. But by the time I was ready to leave this was no longer available through her. You see, when I applied for a visa I told them my family was in Poland. Then they said: 'We'll give you a visa. Just bring us your ship reservation.' But, in the meantime, they found out that people in America with relatives in Axis countries were being forced by these relatives to spy against America. And they made a law that whoever has relatives in occupied countries (of which France was one) couldn't come to the U.S. But the real problem was that I had relatives in Poland. But Uncle Herman didn't say this to them.

WH: So what happened then?

LH: I tried to buy a visa for Mexico and paid a lot for it. I got it but there was no ship going there. Things got worse. Instructions came to the police to raid and arrest every Jew they could. Then we were evicted from the apartment because it was needed for an army officer. I promised him triple the rent. Nothing helped. So we rented a house on the

outskirts of Marseilles for me and Mommy and Mark. Because the situation was very bad, a lot of people hid out in the house also.

WH: Going back, did the rest of the family all leave before?

LH: Yes. Mommy couldn't because she was on my papers. A few days after I moved, the police came to the old apartment with my name and that of the rest of the family on a list to arrest them. They didn't believe the superintendent that we had left. They searched the house from the cellar to the top floor. As the pressure increased I decided to run away and we rented a room in Marseilles with a French family. Then Mark got sick. There was no toilet. He was only two.

WH: Did you think at that moment that you were going to get out of this?

LH: Always I was optimistic and I was fighting to get out. I was young then. Today I would be maybe pessimistic. We left there and hid with other people. Finally, I saw we couldn't go on living like this. So I organized together with 28 other people to hire smugglers, at \$1,000.00 a person to get us into Switzerland. This was in September 1942. These smugglers were Polish members of the army in exile that made a business of this after the French armistice. The route was to Grenoble and with all the stops and searches, it took a long time. I had British papers. Two people in the group got caught. It took eight days to get there. I found out later, the next group made it, but the third group was caught and they were all shot to death, that is, the smugglers. The Jews were sent to Auschwitz, of course. Grenoble was very dangerous because from there people were trying to get into Switzerland. Then we came to a small city on the border Poulon (?). We heard there that Jews were being caught and dragged off to the police. From there we went to Evian. Once a gendarme was standing next to us and Mommy made signs to me but I didn't do anything because I didn't want to alarm him and so nothing happened. A Jewish man whom I met later in Switzerland saw this and said later: 'Your calm saved your life,' because he had seen that Mommy was making signals. In Evian we again saw Jews being dragged off so we returned to Poulon. Finally one night we decided to go over the border.

WH: Didn't it look funny to have 28 people all together?

LH: We were spread out. But there was great danger anyway. We went through the woods and then, in an open area, we had to go along the shadows made by the trees. And there was a problem. Another child, Mark's age, cried all the time. We saw the Gestapo on motorcycles nearby. When the child started to cry, everyone panicked and ran. I did too and came to a different place, but one of the smugglers found me and returned me to the group. But then people decided not to go with anyone with children. And even though Mark was not crying they left us alone in the wilderness, in the night, this family and myself. They promised to pick us up.

WH: Did you argue with them?

LH: No. I couldn't do anything. They had a point. I had to agree. I said to myself, my child doesn't cry, but he may cry. He's a child. The other family was Katz. They lived in our neighborhood. Henry Katz, Mimi Katz's brother. But one smuggler had himself small children, and he came back. And when the smuggler saw that I was exhausted and my hands were trembling, he wanted to carry Mark, and Mark started crying. So I took Mark and he went with us and we rejoined the group. And then we came to a very dark place and there was a small bridge and we crossed one at a time. And suddenly a dog started barking by a house and the light went on. The people panicked. A very heavy woman ahead of Mommy made a false step and fell down. There were rocks there and Mommy followed her and fell down too. The woman started screaming. And I didn't care anymore what will happen to me. I gave the man next to me Mark and I grabbed Mommy. But the people all ran away. Then we went over the bridge and we found ourselves in Switzerland. I had a spare pair of socks which I gave to Mommy because she had lost a shoe falling down. But, then on the other side, a woman started crying because she lost her bag and there she had all her possessions, a few thousand dollars, jewelry. And her husband was desperate and wanted to go back. But the smugglers knew that if he did that, all would be lost. So the smuggler hit him in the face and he said: 'I am an officer and I give you my word of honor that if I find it I'll give it back to you.' He went back and came back empty-handed. Anyway we came to the outskirts of Geneva. I had an address from a man who was very active in the Agudah in France. I went there and got something to eat. The Swiss had a policy that sometimes they let thru people with small children. Sometimes they let through old people and the others they sent back. I read after the war in the papers that 30,000 Jews the Swiss let in and 100,000 others they sent back to the authorities, the Nazis. And sometimes they had a policy to send back everyone. When I arrived, they said: 'You have to go to Zurich, away from the border.' But this was Erev Yom Kippur. I said: 'But I'll arrive in Zurich on Yom Kippur.' They said: 'Don't look on this. Your life is in danger. If they catch you, they'll send you all back. But if you get to Zurich, they won't send you back.' So they called up a family.

WH: You were no longer with the group?

LH: No. Doppelt and Katz and the others split up. There was also Schimel, whom I met in Marseilles. The fact is that this Schimel, he had the connections to make me this visa for Mexico. He was not with us in the woods. Anyway, we went to Schmerling (the cheese people) where we stayed over Yom Kippur. We then reported to the police. Even though they weren't going to send us back, we had violated the law. So, symbolically they put us in jail for one day. And what was this. You sat in a room for a day. They gave you food there. I'll tell you, I went thru so much and I left out half of what I went through. The Swiss then gave me a special refugee passport. Then we were put in a quarantine

camp. There were 500 people, men and women separated, sleeping on straw. There were no obligations and no rights. You couldn't leave or write letters. The Jewish congregation in Zurich helped. There was one table with kosher food. And people played cards. I didn't play cards. People walked around and we were happy to hear about the beating Hitler got at Stalingrad. Finally, they asked for volunteers to cut wood. So I volunteered because I wanted to do something. I was elected to a two man social committee which gave out funds to help people in emergency to travel for a day, to see a dentist. Finally, they sent us to labor camps, separate for men and women. But Mommy, because she was a Belgian citizen, was able to get out. The Belgian Consulate gave her some support and she had a private room in Zurich. Mark was then in a home for children. The camp was near Zurich and had mostly Austrian Jews who had come already in 1939. They were mostly not religious. There was no kosher food and people were required to work on Shabbos. I led a group of people who said to the camp leader that we would be willing to work on Sunday instead of Saturday. I also offered to forego my wages so as not to have to work on Shabbos. This very much impressed him. And, in the end, we didn't have to work on Shabbos. Why did I insist on this point? Because I felt this was a free country. It's not Germany. They wouldn't kill me for not working. They might imprison me for a few months; but for this it was worth it, not to work on Shabbos.

WH: Did the war make you more religious?

LH: No. I was religious from before. I'm very strong on this point. Since I only ate kosher I lost about 20 pounds. Then I was transferred to a camp near Basle where we made tank traps. Mommy was still in Zurich. I was allowed to visit her once in weeks for three days. This was the rule. I was like a prisoner. Mark was still in a Catholic home for children. Eventually I was put in charge of distributing all the work in the camp. Then, through the Zurich Jewish Community, I got a community job, which really, was associated with the HIAS in the U.S.

WH: Could you explain a bit more about the kind of work you did for HIAS?

LH: Many refugees were sick and I was in the Statistical Section. My job was to report on how many refugees there were and where they lived; how many were working. And so then I lived with Mommy and I took Mark out of the home. This was 1943.

WH: When you worked with HIAS, were you thinking they might eventually help you get to the U.S. or Palestine?

LH: Of course. We lived in the hope of getting out.

WH: Were you hoping to be reunited with your parents in Poland after the war?

LH: No. I knew what happened to them. They were hiding, but, in the night, a Polish boy saw them throwing out water and gave them away to the Germans. That was in 1944. I got the news about my parents through the U.S. I also got the news that my brother Benno was killed in Buchenwald. Tante Salla was sent his ashes. She was still in Cologne in 1940. Hilda was in Lodz until she was deported to Auschwitz.

WH: Where did you want to go?

LH: To the U.S., because I had a brother here and Mommy had her family here. I thought about going to Israel and made an application to the Jewish Agency. They asked me if I was associated with any Zionist organizations. I said “No, but I’m a religious Jew and in all my prayers I mention the desire to go to Israel and I want to go there”. But they refused to give me permission because I wasn’t with any organization.

WH: Were the people you were with anti-religious?

LH: Could be, but I don’t know.

WH: Why would you think of going to Israel if the family was in America?

LH: Because I was in Belgium in the diamond line and I heard that they were building up an industry in Israel.

WH: Wasn’t there one in the U.S. then?

LH: Yes, but I was more interested in Israel because I am a Jew. It was only partly the diamond industry. My desire to be in Israel was stronger than the family reasons. When I thought in 1943 of going to the U.S. I didn’t know then about the work possibilities in Israel.

WH: Did you feel more strongly about going to Israel because of what happened during the war?

LH: No. I always felt this way.

WH: If that was the case, why didn’t you go to Israel from Poland instead of to Germany?

LH: There was no State then and people who went there then were mostly not religious. The very old religious ones went there only to die there. So Spangenthal in the U.S. got me an affidavit. He had a business in California. I knew him from Germany where we had shared a room. Besides this, Uncle Herman sent me papers from someone he did business with. And that’s how I came here. I left Le Havre on the S.S. Uruguay. We slept in bunks, about six to a room. Conditions on the boat were good. There was

enough food and it was even kosher. We were on the way about three weeks. And we arrived in June of 1946. I remember going to the barber on the boat and I was upset that it cost me a dime. We saw the Statue of Liberty and it was a big sensation. Everyone was waiting for this minute to see the Statue. It was a real symbol of freedom. We knew the meaning of it; that it was a welcome sign for the oppressed.

WH: What were your first impressions of America?

LH: My impressions of America before I came were of people who looked to make money and who were quite selfish. But I found out just the opposite. I found out that very rich people took care of poor people. They go for meetings, they spend money, give for charities. People work for nothing just to help others. I was surprised. I didn't expect this. In Europe, rich people didn't care so much about the poor people.

WH: Did you have any permanent injuries from the war?

LH: No.

WH: Did you have any trouble getting in?

LH: I had just one incident. By mistake the carriage was left behind and I had trouble getting it in. The inspector, who spoke Yiddish, helped me get it in. Then Uncle Herman picked us up. And when I saw him I felt like I was born again. He took me to grandpa. I stayed there for a few days. Then they found an apartment for me on 105th Street. I was then very enthusiastic to start something because for over six years I was running and non-productive as an individual.

WH: What things were the hardest to adjust to?

LH: To live a normal life again.

WH: Were you given any help?

LH: Not much. I was on my own. But I got the apartment thru them and this was very important. All the soldiers had come back and it was very hard to get one. But I never went to HIAS because I was a free man and I wanted to stand on my own two feet.

WH: What did you do in the beginning?

LH: I worked as a cleaver like I had done in Belgium before the war. So I made money right away.

WH: Do you ever have nightmares about what you lived through?

LH: No. I went thru all these experiences with a will to live.

WH: Did your father have this strong will?

LH: Oh yes. And my brothers and sisters had it too. That's the only thing that saved me. But some people made it because it was fate.

WH: Do you think your children got it?

LH: Oh yes.

WH: Did you ever experience anti-Semitism in America?

LH: Yes. In Midtown, a lot of Irish people lived. Once Irish boys threw something in the carriage. I chased them but they ran away. Mark and you had fights, not once but few times. I was used to this from Poland. And I fought back there and I fought back here. In Poland it was much stronger. But later this changed. Still, there's anti-Semitism today too.

WH: Would you say you've done well here financially?

LH: I would say I make a living. I'm lower middle-class. I sent my children to yeshivas, even though I didn't pay the full tuition.

WH: What achievements in life are you most proud of?

LH: Most proud of the fact that I was able to give my children a Jewish education. And also that I didn't have to take help from other people or borrow from others. Because I'm too proud for this. But I wasn't too proud to ask for a reduction in the tuition because I felt very strongly about a Jewish education.

WH: Is there anything in life that you feel you'd have wanted to accomplish?

LH: If I had had the time I'd have studied more.

WH: How is your health today?

LH: Fairly good. In the beginning after I came I got viral pneumonia in August. The doctor said I got it in the subway. And I was critically ill. But after that I had nothing terrible.

WH: Are you a cautious person?

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LH: I'm normally cautious. But when I got mugged I fought back and they didn't get anything from me. I would fight back today even though I'm 78.

WH: Do you feel you've succeeded in life?

LH: Yes. My children are menschen. They're intelligent. They lead a Jewish life. Thanks God, I have four beautiful grandchildren, all of them talented. This I consider a big part of my success because I see in their lives the continuation of my own life.

WH: Do you like being in charge of things?

LH: I've always been whether by choice or not. I've been gabbai in four shuls.

WH: What's more important---a challenging job or one with security?

LH: I think security, because with no security you have no peace of mind and you can't concentrate on other things.

WH: Are you an optimist?

LH: Yes.

WH: When you make decisions, do you make them quickly?

LH: I make quickly usually, but later sometimes, I get a new idea.

WH: When you look back over 78 years, are you more or less satisfied with the way things turned out?

LH: I am. I had a very tragic life which I couldn't help. But I have no regrets, nothing that I feel guilty about. When Mom was sick I did all I could to save her.

Conclusion of Interview