

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

## **William Helmreich Oral History Collection**

**Interview with Robert Karras  
August 1, 1989 and November 23, 1989  
RG-50.165\*0051**

## PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Robert Karras, conducted by William Helmreich on August 1, 1989 and November 23, 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.

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.

**ROBERT KARRAS**  
**August 1, 1989 and November 23, 1989**

RK: Right now, with my father so ill, I believe that there is some kind of turmoil, not all of these tears are being provoked by the medication.

Q: And Dr. Charles Lee Holm is a friend?

A: Yes.

Q: And is he Jewish?

A: Yes.

Q: Does he identify as such?

A: They just stayed away. His parents are much more talkative and Charles felt confident enough that we took a meal and it was "kosher" but that was about the end of it. There was animated discussion about the State of Israel and how, of all people, how there could be such brutality addressed to Palestinian children, when, of all people, this was a nation that should be sensitive. And then I raised the issue that this was also a nation that is attuned to survival. And then there was a nice intellectual discussion suggesting that there is a perpetual motion machine and that he who suffers most will persecute most.

Q: Would your own parents have discussed the issue of Israel in that way?

A: No. However with the advent of the VCR, I have chosen to very quietly select programming that was retrospective, but was not graphic. And so since, *Kitty Returns to Auschwitz* is reasonably sterile, we watched it.

Q: And so it becomes a way of identifying with it?

A: Holocaust. My father left the room saying that he had things to do. But my mother watched with me.

Q: how old are your parents?

A: They are 74 and 76. They were married outside of Munich October 23, 1937.

Q: Is your mother in good health?

A: Well, we had always thought that she would be the one to leave us first. And I left the Christian Brothers in Minnesota (St. Mary's College, where Robert taught history) to take care of her in Racine. During that time I found myself slowly becoming obsessed with

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the Holocaust. The Order, by the way, is committed to the education of underprivileged children. It has somehow lost that focus along the way. They're far more successful in the affluent suburbs.

Q: How about your sister. Where does she stand in all of this?

A: She really doesn't want to talk about it, I guess. She also lives in Walworth County, Wisconsin.

Q: Could you tell me what "this" is?

A: Have you ever known what it's like to be the only one in the neighborhood without grandparents? The story must be told and I will tell it to you.

Q: Okay.

A: My father came from Vilna, Lithuania, the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" (said with a touch of irony). My mother is from Berlin. She's the daughter of a railroad employee. After the war, they decided: 'After the Holocaust, there is no place in the world for us as Jews,' and converted to Christianity. They settled in Racine.

Q: How did you find out you were Jewish?

A: Well of course, I was brought up as a Catholic, as a Christian. But one day, I was 24, I came across my mother rummaging through some photos. They had dates next to them. I asked my mother what they were, and she said: 'Oh, some pictures of relatives before they were deported.' 'Deported?' I asked. 'Where to? Why?' 'Because they were Jews. The Nazis deported them.' 'But how could they be our relatives if they were Jewish? We're Catholic.' 'Well, we once were Jewish,' she said matter-of-factly. And that's how I found out.

Q: It must have profoundly changed your life.

A: Yes it did. I began to delve into the history of what happened during the war, of what the Nazis did. Strangely enough, my parents neither impeded nor helped me in my efforts.

Q: What have you looked into with respect to the Holocaust?

A: Well, I have read up on the Nuremberg trials and I've volunteered to do research for the division in the Justice Department that is concerned with tracking down Nazi war criminals. But, to tell you the truth, numbers don't begin to tell the story. I remember once there was an altercation in the neighborhood and it was necessary to call the police.

So I did. 'How could you have one that?' my parents asked. 'You never call the police.' 'Why?' I asked, not understanding. That's the way we lived.

**Continuation of Interview, November 23, 1989**

Q: How is your father now?

A: His health is rapidly deteriorating.

Q: I'm sorry to hear that. Can we talk for a few minutes?

A: Sure.

Q: You grew up in Racine. Did you have any Jewish friends there?

A: No. Curiously, we lived in an immigrant neighborhood, surrounded by the railway. Some of my most cherished childhood memories, this is going to be a bit paradoxical, were with the neighbors, who spoke very little English, and were Armenian, and were quite verbal about the genocide that had occurred there.

Q: When did your parents convert?

A: I'm not sure. I know that from grade school on, I attended Catholic school. I can recall that one Christmas, we gave my mother and father a bible. They happened to have been offered by our church, and it seemed like a good idea at the time in that it had a place for genealogy in the front and a place for photographs. And the Christmas gift, from what I could glean even then, had to have been provocative. It wasn't rejected though. But to this moment that we speak, the genealogy, dates of baptism, Holy Communion, etc. remains unwritten.

Q: When your mother told you about your history, she seemed to say it so casually. She must have known the impact this would have on you.

A: Well, I sustained an anemic disease but I found out I was ill because I collapsed after playing the two masses at our church, St. Kasimir's, a national Catholic church. It us staffed by priests who are 100% Lithuanian, which would be consistent with our origin.

Q: When your mother said what she said about the photographs----was it her nature to state something like this so casually?

A: She was very disturbed that day. It was an anniversary day, of what, I don't know. I walked in on her.

Q: What did you do then?

A: I had at this age received a remarkable amount of encouragement. I had discovered the Spanish Civil War. At the time I fell deeply in love with it because it seemed to be such a “good and evil” sort of thing. It was romantic. As I matured I began writing survivors and the survivors would write me. Very little of the mail came from Spain. And I would share the stories of what happens when you struggle against a series of dictatorships, certainly against a church I couldn’t understand, even though it was my church. Two of the survivors said that Spain had, despite its strong Catholicism, culturally accepted the Jew.

Q: When were you born?

A: 1941. And this happened about 1965. And two of the survivors indicated: ‘Our sufferings were like nothing compared to what happened to the Jews during the Holocaust.’ I studied the Spanish Civil War from high school. I only went to high school for two years in Racine. The rest of the time I spent in bed because I was sick, and was visited by my national church, and got more and more involved. I took correspondence courses to finish.

Q: How does this connect to your mother?

A: Yes. I struck up a correspondence with La Passionara who was living in the Soviet Union. She indicated that what Franco did on a small scale, Hitler did on a large scale, in terms of eradication of the unwanted. When I asked my Mom about that, she got very upset and said that woman was crazy. At Marquette I wanted to do a project on this. I was somehow attracted to emigres.

Q: And you too, immigrated.

A: I had gotten in touch since we spoke with a member of our family who knew our family name before it was Americanized. I’m about a week away from finding out. I told my Mom about your previous call and she at first was angry as to what could I ever say and then I said ‘It’s time that we say something.’ And then she said: ‘Well, you can say it for the family.’ She won’t. I was kinda hoping she would.

Q: How did you come to Wisconsin?

A: From Kansas because the sponsor was from there and was Catholic. I think my parents might therefore have decided to become Catholic in the DP camp. My family was intensely grateful to the folks in Kansas who sponsored them. We received a call recently, one night, quite late from Texas from a man who was doing family trees. He

called us to figure out some connections. So I told my Mom and asked her: 'What really was my grandfather's name?'

Q: She knew her name didn't she?

A: I'm sure she does. It just that she was 'going to help this man from Texas. She's going to help, in a sense, me.' With respect to the war, I remember once, asking my mother for baby pictures of me and my sister and she said there weren't any because there was no film, because there was a war. So I asked: 'Mom, how come other people have pictures?' 'Well, they were very wealthy or they had a roll or two of film that they had put aside.' On one of the photographs, there are X's drawn through the chest portions, a photo of whom I don't know. I asked what the X's were. She said: 'These are people who are dead. We'll talk about this sometime.'

Q: I wonder how she saved these photos during the war?

A: I am certain she was not in a camp. She was in a production area, a factory but she had been identified as a Jew.

Q: Where was your father during the war?

A: I don't know other than that I'd been told that they were barrier guards for the railway. And my sister is a year older than I. She stayed with friends during the war, we were told.

A: After you began calling, slowly but surely...I think it might just be the finality of what's going on. We haven't talked about it a lot but I have probably learned more in the last month or so from my mother. My sister is just kind of surprised in that I never much discussed it. I said to her: "Did you know we had this experience?" And she looked at me and said: "We were?" She'd never seen the photographs. So I told her what I knew. When my Dad got ill, Mom didn't want to go to Catholic Social Services. So I said: "Maybe it's because of our problem." So then the question was: What problem? So I suggested to my sister that since a lot of things are coming to the surface now because a lot's happening that, as one woman to another, she might ask Mom about it, maybe over coffee.

Q: And then it turned out she didn't know.

A: That's right.

Q: How did she react when you told her?

A: Not surprised.

Q: Why do you say that?

A: There weren't any shrieks, or 'Oh you're kidding', or, 'Oh, you made this all up'.

Q: Is this her normal way of responding to something like this?

A: No. No. And in fact we are going to spend some time this holiday talking. We're coming to a kind of conclusion of Dad's suffering. To talk about what my parents would want to do as far as a funeral.

Q: What is going thru your mind?

A: I'm real scared. Not about funerals but about what kind of a funeral are we going to have?

Q: Was he a practicing Catholic?

A: No.

Q: Is your mother?

A: Was when we were in school, then wasn't, and now feels some comfort in the church.

Q: Did you see any evidence of conflict in your father in later years?

A: No. Other than the fact that my father always has been, as far as I've known him, very non-verbal. When he was between jobs in electrical engineering, he just didn't talk about it, on the grounds that we, his children, were not to be upset.

Q: For you, is there a question about being Christian?

A: I eventually entered a Catholic Order. Or I attempted to enter. They required a history and a dowry, as in classic Canon Law of the Roman Catholic Church. I stayed with the brothers. And I had personal problems with faith and, I suppose feeling a sense of less than joyous support from home. No one ever said no, but no one ever said yes.

Q: This was after you'd found out about your family history?

A: Yes. I would have had to tell them this, go into the Baptismal history, to make sure you're not a bastard and all that.

Q: But if you have a formal conversion is that acceptable?



A: Yes.

Q: But you couldn't easily produce it because it was a very sensitive subject.

A: I never pursued it.

Q: Did your parents ever say anything about Jews in your house?

A: Nothing. Other than my father used a couple of times a Yiddish term which I don't remember.

Q: Did your parents ever say or do anything culturally around the Jewish holidays?

A: Yes. We had a secular Easter and a kind of expanded Christmas (Hannukah). It was kind of atypical. It was a human holiday. And it helped that we were in a national church as opposed to a mainstream one because the priest comes with Christmas bread and he eats with you.

Q: How does that help?

A: I think, for some reason, that was a common thread in my parents' experiences.

Q: You mean as Jews?

A: Well, my Mom cleaned for days because the priest was coming. I perceived there was in the Lithuanian Church a very clear Judeo-Christian continuum and the family seemed to enjoy that. The priest spoke Lithuanian and my father very much enjoyed this. And in our church, the service begins with the Lithuanian national anthem. (Substituted Lithuanian, as well as Catholic identity for Jewish).

Q: Did you get a feel for how your parents viewed persecution in general?

A: Well we didn't watch much news on TV. My father always believed that the media lies. Still takes the position that the newspapers do a lot of editing. And my Mom chides him for that view.

Q: Did your parents have a lot of friends?

A: None. My mother worked in the Catholic hospital in Racine and had friends from there, but I could count them on one hand. And that's the worst thing right now. There are no contemporaries who could get her thru this thing right now.

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Q: Did it seem strange not to have aunts and uncles?

A: Well my father's friends from the railroad who came over were Uncle This and Uncle That. And we would take trips with them on holidays to Milwaukee.

Q: When matters relating to the 1962 Eichmann trial or other things relating to the Nazis were in the news, do you remember your parents reacting?

A: The most devastating thing in our family was Kennedy's death. Our house just stopped.

Q: What did your Dad do in his spare time?

A: Dried apples, canning food, to put in the basement. He had no hobbies. And we had a very hard time getting him anything for Christmas. He'd always say not to get him anything. We used to say if he had a hobby he'd be happier, but he just worked. He had no fun (A European thing and to survivors especially).

Q: Throwing yourself into what you're doing can be a way of avoiding dealing with the past. (Bob is interested in learning this).

Q: Did anything change as a result of the fact that your father knew you knew?

A: In 1974 I put on an exhibit at St. Mary's College on what my students had learned interviewing Minnesota survivors. We collected photographs of the Holocaust and Zionism. My mother wanted me to marry the girl who coordinated the exhibit. To this day she wants me to. My father wouldn't go to see the exhibit. It was in Winona. I asked him: 'Do you want to see the work of my students?' 'Oh yes,' he said. 'What kind of work is it?' 'Well, it's a museum that they put together with slides and photos.' My parents came out and he said that he would wait in the lounge. A man took my Mom thru the exhibit and my Mom was crying.

Q: Does your Mom have any regrets that she didn't stay within the Jewish community?

A: I don't know. Looking back, after reading a great deal it just seems as though my Dad is so repressed. I mean, by now I don't know if he could ever get out of his cocoon and my Mom just seems very unhappy. Their friends have slowly but surely died and they haven't chosen others. And now he's incapable of freeing himself from the shell of this cocoon.

Q: What happened when you took out these videos?

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- A: I can tell you which ones were successful. Judgement at Nuremberg. The Man in the Glass Booth made him walk out. My mother also walked out of that saying it was nice but kinda boring.
- Q: Did you ever sit down and talk to her about this? She apparently is the person that you could talk to more easily.
- A: She'll talk about her childhood and particularly about a doctor she worked for, helping to keep his house. My Mom was from South Germany.
- Q: Do you have any idea of how traditional an upbringing your parents had?
- A: No. But she promised me that she's going to do this family tree with me.
- Q: How could she do a family tree if the name wasn't originally Karras?
- A: Well, he had another name. He said his name was James Kairis (spelling unclear) He knew about my parents coming to Kansas City. I said I'd call him. You know, you're probably helping me more than I'm helping you.
- Q: Well let's say it's at least mutual.
- A: We're not a very touching family. The Armenians we were friendly with in our neighborhood were. They hugged and danced and did all kinds of things...
- Q: That Jews also do.
- A: Yes. Very much and they always have coffee, something a little sweet.
- Q: Do you ever feel a temptation to be like that?
- A: Yes. I went over to Auntie's (his Armenian friend) almost every day.
- Q: Do you feel Jewish in any way?
- A: Well, when I started the Holocaust research on my own, I never felt ill at ease with people that I met. I very much treasured the opportunities to say prayers at temple. I was asked to, when I was doing my interviews in Illinois. But I guess it was just the openness, you are instantaneously welcome. You can stay as long as you want. I never felt pressured. I never felt in any way....different. It was in Skokie. I went with a Mr. Leo Seifman who organized my interviews. For some reason the two of us were naturals. I had written to a number of rabbis for my research.

Q: Did you ever tell them about your own background?

A: No....I'm ashamed to say that, but....

Q: Well, this is a very major thing and it's difficult to do.

A: The first people I ever told were the Wolnerman's (and to think they forgot who he was! I guess he didn't say it that clearly.) only because the professor running the course was late. I was going to have Mr. Seifman come up but he didn't want to and that's how I got hold of the Wolnermans. Rabbi Feingold (of Kenosha) knew of the New Americans (Club) in Milwaukee where Mr. Wolnerman was. They were wonderful people and we just stayed and stayed and talked, and I said I had this problem and he said; 'How about you and your family come up (to Milwaukee) and have dinner.' It was just a remarkable gift because I had a kind of European sense of what my company----that sounds very selfish because actually it was Professor Markison's company and I was (illegible) a kind of agent trying to live down an embarrassment (because Seifman didn't come). And the professor is a driven man and he said: 'Are you sure that (illegible) these Jews are going to come?' And I said 'Yes'. And I just grew up with flowers and little gifts, kind of a way of saying thank you...well the people have already done you a favor by just coming. I gave Mrs. Wolnerman flowers and a small gift to Mr. Wolnerman and, I don't know; I cannot explain the evening other than to say that I had never gone thru such a wondrous experience in a long, long time. We sat and had coffee. In class I sat in the back and Mr. Wolnerman asked Professor Markison if I could be a little closer. So I just sat a little off to the side of them not in the spotlight but just---close. And he would look at me from time to time and I'd nod or smile. When it was over I found myself for no other reason than just the emotion of the moment, walking up to him and hugging him and, um, we both cried. And then everyone left and I said to them: 'Would you like to see our chapel? So we just talked in the chapel. I told them about myself, a lot, and didn't feel ashamed. And they were both so gracious. They invited me up to meet people from that area (Lithuania).

Q: It may be that you'll find, in pursuing the family tree that you have 40 relatives here

A: Yes, I know.

Conclusion of Interview

**Interviewer Notes**

Robert Karras is Director of Security at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin. He came to my attention quite by accident. A Holocaust survivor from Milwaukee, named Israel Wolnerman, gave a talk at the college. Bob Karras drove him to the classroom and mentioned, in passing that he was a child of survivors, but was also a Christian Brother. When Wolnerman mentioned the incident to me, he no longer remembered the college or the person. He thought it was a professor who told him this. After numerous calls and some deductive reasoning, I tracked him down. Unfortunately, his father was, and is very ill and he could not talk. Nevertheless, we arranged an interview for later and what follows is that interview. I was especially intrigued because although I knew, intuitively, that survivors had sometimes converted, this was rare and vibrant. It was much more likely in certain European countries. Moreover, this was a case where the parents had not only converted, they had done so secretly, never telling their children, whom they raised as Catholics, that they were once Jewish.