

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

## **William Helmreich Oral History Collection**

**Interview with Morris Kesselman  
and Rita Kesselman  
July 19, 1989  
RG-50.165\*0053**

## PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Morris Kesselman and Rita Kesselman conducted by William Helmreich on July 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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## MORRIS KESSELMAN AND RITA KESSELMAN

### July 19, 1989

MK: ...we started a soccer team for survivors...about 35 years ago...just to get the survivors together, to see how we could help each other, because we needed- because none of us made big pay in those days. We had a hard time getting by, but we struggled. But none of us went on welfare, I can assure you of that, if you ask. Not for the reasons that welfare was then offered, but even then if it would be offered, we wouldn't do it. We were told for one reason not to do it because it might hurt the Jewish immigration...the HIAS or the Jewish Agency did help people, there's no question about it...I know ourselves, we were very much helped with medical, because part of the days we came here, I worked in a place, I made sixty cents an hour, and my wife bore a child right as we came here, and the Jewish Agency gave us card for Beth Israel Hospital, not knowing who's paying for it. Not that we didn't get any less service, or less attention, that anybody did pay...this was my second son, my first born was born in Germany, and they were very helpful to us, and thank G-d there was two weeks we got some help from the Jewish Agency, I don't know, I think we got \$19- those two weeks...Jewish Family Service...in Boston. I remember it like today.

WH: How come you remember it so well?

MK: Because it still sticks in my throat until today.

WH: That you had to take anything?

MK: ...I'll tell you what I said to my wife. I had to go up every week for the \$19 and I said, if I have to go up one more week, I hope I'll break both my legs. I only went twice, because it was very undignified, I come from a different background, and the few questions I was asked, maybe I didn't understand that they had to ask them, but it was very degrading...the third week I went to work. And I went to work for less money than they gave me.

WH: ...you came by boat?

RK: Yes...Marin Jumper?...June 23, 1949...landed in New York...it was a military boat...

WH: Where did you meet?

MK: We met in Germany. After the war.

RK: I was in Auschwitz and I was liberated in Bergen-Belsen. And Morris came with other boys to look in Bergen-Belsen where to find a friend, or maybe somebody from the family, and I met him through somebody who went to school with me...

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WH: ...when you look today, 1989, it lasted. How come marriages that were made under stress after terrible things that people went through, do you have any thought about why so many of them lasted so long?

MK: ...we came out, we didn't have anybody. And we struggled. Love is only good for a short time. When you cannot survive and have a family, and have children, and you don't have much money, it start getting on your nerve, from either side. But, love is what marriage is, a work of art. And you try, and you get better, and you get better and you get better because we didn't have any place to go. We had to make it work. And we came out from a background a little difference than today. And we cared for each other. WE had some arguments. I think we had arguments mostly because of the children, because, I worked very hard all my life (inaudible). I'll give you an example. We took out a life insurance policy for our first two sons, I told you, gave our sons an endowment. It was 50 cents a week. I cancelled it three times. Didn't have the 50 cents. I took a subway for ten cents, and I had to take a 5 cents transfer, and I walked two miles because 7 cents was a bread! I only earned \$16 a week. SO we struggled, and we struggled and we tried for the better. The difference between today's children, they come out from a better supplied economy, easier life, and they get educated on both, which is a wonderful thing, and they have a way out. And, they don't want to struggle. You take two children, from one house and the other house, which have everything supplied by them, by the parents, then they go out- they have to give up maybe half of their things what they had before, to start all over again. If the parents do not help, they are in trouble. And I don't think most of them want to struggle.

RK: Another thing is, let's say that a couple came from Europe, they had nothing, they had nobody to help them. The woman couldn't go to work, she had little children. She had no education. Even if their marriage didn't go so well for them, where would the woman go? She wouldn't go and ask for help from the government, so she had to stay and struggle. She went to work, the woman worked, the man worked, they tried to make it. Some marriages made, were not made in heaven,. Some of our friends, they made the best of it.

WH: Do you think that there was something in the experience of the survivors that made them say that when there would be difficult times, you would say, "Well, compared to what I went through during the war, this is nothing!"

MK: Oh, sure! Many times we said it to ourselves.

RK: This everybody says. That's in everybody's back of the mind.

WH: ...what had you heard about America before you came?

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RK: That in America the Jews had more freedom, and it's a land- everybody thought it's a land of Milk and Honey. (inaudible).

WH: Did you think of going to Israel?

MK: We were on the way to go to Israel...

WH: When were you born?

MK: 1926.

WH: And you were born?

RK: December 1926. We are 19 days apart...and we got married because of (wanting to go to Israel) that. We thought, we'll get married and then we'll go (to Israel)...and my cousin wrote to me that 'it's very bad now, if you can go to America, here's an address, we have a cousin in America near Boston, cousin Ethel, write to her, and I will write to her, and maybe she'll bring you to America, because you survived such a terrible war, you're the only survivor from the whole family, and- you can always come to Israel. Try to go to America.' So, in the meantime, we still wanted to go. I was pregnant with my son, and they wouldn't take me because I was pregnant. They refused me to go.

MK: This is the second time. You dropped out when the first time when we went to Bergen-Belsen, and we got our stuff, and when we came there, the story changed, because he (Rita's cousin) told me that we gotta go for six months to a kibbutz. And then, we could get a certificate for her, and we'll go to Israel, and this,- so they got me a little upset because he got me down on the wrong pretenses. I was not ready to go to a kibbutz after the camp. And I said to Rita, let's pack up and go back to Stuttgart...

RK: In the meantime, my cousin wrote to me from America, 'Don't go any place. I want you to come here.'

WH: ...how long did you stay in New York?

RK: A girl-friend that came and picked us up from the boat...her uncle was an actor and...President of the Jewish theater...and then put us on the train, I had already my son, a year old on the boat...and my cousin picked us up here in Boston from the train and took us to their farm.

MK: ...earlier...I had used a different name...in hopes of getting to America...(in case I had relatives here by that name)...

WH: ...what was your name (originally)?

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MK: Ziedenfeld

WH: Did you meet anybody here whose name was Ziedenfeld?

MK: No...but the way I found my family was through the newspapers, The Forward...

WH: When you were in...Birkenau...how long were you there?

MK: Twenty three months...she (Rita) was there before me.

WH: So, when you came here, you were on the farm for 7,8 months, but you didn't like it.

MK: It was a coincidence why it was 7 months. I didn't like it the first day...I had no other place to go.

RK: ...we didn't speak the language, we didn't know what to do!...then I was pregnant with my second son and there was no place for us on the farm...and my cousin didn't like another baby coming, so we didn't have it so easy on the farm so we had a (survivor) friend in Boston...and they told us to come...and they took Morris to Jewish Family Service and that's how he got a job...

WH: How many children do you have?

MK: Three...one ten years later.

WH: When you came here, what were the people like? The Americans?

RK: The Americans, we were very disappointed...so we came to my cousins, people came. He had a big family. She was my cousin, but he had a big family here and they used to come to the farm, cousins, children, and aunts and uncles, to see the 'greener' that came from Europe. And they came, and they asked us, 'Nu? How do you like it here?' And I said, 'I like it very much,' in Yiddish, and they said to us, 'Do you know how lucky you are? When we came here, we were boarders, or we had to take in boarders, and we didn't have anything, and you came to this country and you live in a beautiful home,' - which their house, had no heat, I had to go down to eat in my cousin's house downstairs and she had to cook for me, and she was tired of that. And he worked day and night...and they paid us \$10 a week...and the people came, they said to us, 'Why did you come to America? You're two young people. You should go to Israel!' Every week I went through the same thing. Every week. So one time I said to somebody, 'You know, if we would go to Israel, Morris and I, we would be a burden to the country. But we don't understand that there are young people, young Jewish people in America, if they would come to Israel, it

would be a great help to Israel to go! And someday maybe we'll go.' So they told me, 'Now' they know 'why we survived because I have a big mouth.'

MK: Or, some of them ask us, 'how many diamonds we brought with us.'

WH: They had the impression that all the survivors were rich?

RK: Yah...that we came with diamonds. You know what the impression was? That we survived because we did something...we took away, we were maybe working with the Germans, and that's why we survived. That was the impressions.

MK: I don't know if all Jewish people think like this.

RK: Not all, but this was impressions. Even now, I went to speak to a Temple. I seldom speak in Temples because Temples don't invite survivors to come and speak. But lately people know about me and it became now that I'm asked to speak to everyone. So, this was two years ago, I go to speak to a Temple, and the lady that invited me to go heard about me. And I said, 'You know something? I don't really like to speak in Temples to older people, this was an older group, Senior Citizens. Because I'll upset them, and they're going to find out such horrible things, I tell it just like it is.' And I said, 'I'm afraid I'll hurt them. What can you accomplish today by telling them exactly what happened.' And the lady begged me to come, and I said, 'Okay.' So I go to Temple, and they had lunch first, and I go to the bathroom, and a lady, a Jewish lady follows me. Polish, must have been 65 maybe. She looked very well. A nice preserved woman. And she said to me, 'Oh! I want to talk to you!' I said, 'Yes, can I help you?' She said, 'I wanted to ask you something. Do you think that the people are going to believe you?' I opened my eyes, and I said, 'I don't understand.' She said, 'I don't know if the people are going to believe you.' So, and I thought for a minute and I said to her, 'Do you believe me?' She said, 'I don't know.' I said, 'I'll tell you what. If- Ina- will wait for me, let me speak first.' I didn't want to get upset with her, because before I speak, you know it's a very emotional thing to do, I said, 'I'll tell you what. When I get through speaking, you come over to me and tell me if you believe me.' But while I was speaking, there was so many people that couldn't take it, they got up, they said they cannot take it, 'I'm sorry,' they cried and they walked out. But the majority stayed, and they came over, and they talked to me. But this lady, I watched the lady, got up and walked out. She was too embarrassed to come over and say something. And when she said to me, 'I don't know if I'm going to believe you,' I said, 'Why?' And she said, 'When you 'greenies' came to America, you were different. We were different people than you. That's why we didn't take to you,' she said. 'You were different. You come from a different background.' This was a Jewish lady saying these things to me. So, in the beginning, we had a tough time. People didn't take to us...people didn't associate with the 'greeners.' The 'greeners' weren't good enough. That's how we felt.

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WH: Is that in part what led you to found this organization?

MK: No.

RK: The organization we found, because- we couldn't mingle among the Americans because they didn't want us. And, you need friends. You need people. So we found survivors. We used to get together, we didn't have family, we used to make holidays together, we used to go to each other houses, and the kids used to play together, and we used to talk. Otherwise you could go crazy. We had no friends. We had nobody. So you listen for survivors...

WH: Did it matter where they came from?

RK: No.

WH: ...when you started the organization...in what year?

RK: ...about 38 years ago...

MK: ...we supported a soccer team...we played...not against Americans...against (survivors) there were a lot of nationalities. Greeks, Polish...we had \$5,00 dues...

WH: Did you have a meeting place?

MK: We met in a temple, in a place, wherever we could meet, we rented or we got it for nothing. A dance we had...and we never made money...we met about 4 times a year.

WH: How many people joined?

RK: In the beginning, maybe 100. (She shows WH literature).

MK: ...we have a Board of 15 people...and present day, we still charge \$15 membership- because we don't feel like making money, we don't have a hole...we have got a little more involved political...if somebody came to speak, which is against us, we would demonstrate it as a group, and we influence some local politicians because we always said we had more people in our organization than there is, and we all grouped together in those days on that particular (inaudible)

End of Tape #1, Side 1



**Tape #1, Side 2**

WH: ...what was the name of the organization?

MK: The American Jewish Holocaust Survivors of Greater Boston...in the beginning it was called the New American. And I took the new vote- when I became President...I thought it was time to take the word 'New' out after 35 years...

WH: ...(Look through fundraising invitations...and their wedding invitation- in Germany...and pictures...and articles, 'Kesselman's Watch President Reagan's visit to Bitburg in their Sharon home.) Benjamin Meed- are you in any way affiliated with his organization...American Gathering?...how are you affiliated?

RK: He's National Vice-President.

MK: ...when I became President, Ben called me- and invited me down to New York, and...told me what they do, and what they're trying to do.

RK: Six years ago, I started to speak, here in Sharon, and a teacher told me that her dream is to go to Israel to learn the right way to teach the children Yad Vashem...and she told me two groups went already, and that's her dream to do. And I decided when I came home that we should help her go, that this so important. I gathered 20 people, and we made a cocktail party in my son's house and we raised the money for her to go to Israel and she went. But that year, we get a call from Ben Meed, and he said to Morris, he's sending a group of people to Israel, and he needs support. So Morris says, 'Wait a minute, my wife is sending somebody.'...we didn't know...so we told him next year we're going to help him. So then we became very close to him, and we helping with the teachers. So we're picking the teachers from here, and we send him money and we send him teachers...

MK: We'd rather not pick Jewish...

RK: They are doing a fantastic job...they are marvelous!...(Shows more articles, pictures)...

WH: Would you say that the survivors here in the Boston area, would you say that they are more involved than the average American Jew, with synagogues, and things like that?

RK: No.

WH: But I see that they are involved in your organization, are those that are involved with your organization, are they also involved with the synagogue?

MK: No.

WH: How come?

RK: They send the children through the synagogue-.

MK: ...the majority in the cities are not involved and I don't think they were even involved like they were Bar Mitzvahs...I don't know what the reason is behind it. Because, you know, a lot of people didn't believe when they came out from the camps, most of them didn't believe, I didn't believe.

WH: Were you brought up in an observant family?

MK: I was brought up in a very Orthodox family. Very Orthodox. Hassidish.

WH: And you?

RK: I was brought up in a -well, in my area, everybody went to the Temple, and everybody went to Jewish schools. And I was brought up- we weren't rich people, but education was very important to us. I went to a private school. I went to yeshiva, Bais Yaacov. (His family was more religious than we were).

WH: After the war, a lot of survivors said, even the ones that are Orthodox say that they find it very hard to really believe in anything after everything that happened because they can't understand how this could happen to them

MK: This was the case with me...after the war I really didn't believe in anything. I went through Italy, and Germany, and finally I banged around until I got- and I didn't follow it in Germany. I didn't go to Temple. I didn't fight it, but I didn't believe in it. And it bothered me that the Orthodox movement came after the war, the first thing where they came to help us, and they brought a ton of it- with siddurim and we sort of laughed it off. They keep saying, that, 'There must be something in it, because you survived!' I said, 'What about the ones who didn't?' They said, 'They didn't know, they didn't want to talk about it. But you survived, and we gotta believe in G-d, and we got to carry on.' And until we married, and came to this country, and I remember an incident when my oldest son was 4 years old, he was too young to go into kindergarten, and we didn't have enough money to send him to private kindergarten...what I'm saying to you is, I said to my wife, 'What do we got to lose?' So we put him in the Yeshiva...and he came home to me Friday night and he said to me 'Dad, you shouldn't shut the switch off.' The lights, Friday night, my little one, four years old, when I switched the switch off...

WH: Who told him?

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MK: The Yeshiva...in Boston...the he started, four years old...and I said to my wife, 'Take him out!' ...

WH: So you took him out?

MK: Eventually, the next year, yeh. But the following thing is, it came the High Holidays, my wife says to me, 'You going to Temple?' I says, 'No' She says, 'Do you mind if I go?' I said, 'Of course, go ahead!' So she went and I didn't go. But you know, the kids- I had three sons, and I had to come down to earth. I mean, I had to give them an education...and we belonged to the Temple. But when we came to this town, we got very, very much involved...in Temple Israel...a Conservative...

WH: You wouldn't belong to a Reform Temple?

MK: No, I don't believe in it.

WH: ...how about you?

RK: ...I always believed in G-d. Even in camp. And when I came out, I started to go to shul right away, I- we joined the Temple. He didn't want to go, so sometimes I left him with the babies and I went when they were little and then later he started to go with me. But it took him a long time.

MK: Very much. A long time.

WH: But what about the question of all the people who died, how do you feel about that? How do you deal with that?

RK: How do I feel about that? It's a very tough thing to deal with. You live with that. You know, you don't wake up in the morning and you think about it all the time...

WH: ...you're a member of the Council...I was in Washington two weeks ago, and I passed by the empty place, you know, where the foundation is.

MK: I'm kind of disappointed a little bit...took much longer than it started, than it's suppose to. A lot of money is spent, and we got already a hole in the ground...I was the original start of this thing. And that's what I'm saying, I'm kind of disappointed because a lot of money- was spent because of the ways, and so on...the fact is, that we had the first dinner in the State House in Boston (inaudible) a very big fund raiser, we raised over a million and a half dollars. We had 22 pledges of \$50,000.

WH: Did you also go to that bond dinner in Miami honoring Ben Meed?

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MK: Yes. This is the reason why they got awarded the plaque. See the plaque? This plaque was given to us. What happened, we organized bond drives for the United States. We had a bond drive in the South. I have a picture here with him...I was one of the honorees on that dinner too.

WH: When you were working, after you came back from the farm, what did you do?

MK: I never had a profession, so I went to the HIAS...they asked me what profession I had, I said, 'I have no profession.' They asked me, 'What profession was your father?' I said, 'He was in textile.' So they send me to a factory where they were making textiles in Chelsea. And I went and got a job for forty cents an hour. When I left that factory, I was Superintendent, nine years later.

WH: How did you do it?

MK: Hard work. Smart. I wasn't afraid. Hours didn't mean nothing. But I became a Supervisor after 9 months.

WH: Are you a person who takes risks, would you say?

MK: Not risk, but I'm not afraid of doing anything.

WH: Do you think you got that as a result in part of your experience? Or do you think that you had that before you came into the camp?

MK: Always in the camp, I always said, 'I'm going to survive!' Never give up my-.

WH: How come you never gave up? You had brothers and sisters?

MK: I had a brother and a sister.

WH: Did they make it? Did your parents make it? -Did you know already during the war that they weren't going to make it? Did you hear about what-.

MK: I know my mother died in the ghetto...

WH: Did you think in terms of surviving in order to- when you were thinking of surviving, did you think that after the war, 'I'm going to get together with my family,' did you hope that they were still alive?

MK: No. I knew my family was-.

WH: So, what made you, what gave you the ambition to-.

MK: I never gave up life! I said, 'How long can it go on?' I'm saying to you, I always said to me,- I said to myself- that if I ever gonna die, I'm going to die in a place of work, never in camp.'

WH: What do you mean you're gonna die in a place of work?

MK: Because when you stayed back in camp, and didn't go to work, you gave up life, and the next day they probably took away your coat, or your shirt, and you became a mess. Did I know that I'm gonna survive? I don't know. Didn't know from one day to the next. But I never gave up.

WH: Can you figure out where that strength comes from?...when you were a kid, for example...were you the tough guy in the class?

MK: No, no.

RK: I want to tell where my strength came from. When I was in the ghetto, I was at the time 14 years old. And when they give out the rations, a piece of bread, and a little soup, and I saw that my mother used to take a piece of bread, break it into four, we were four children. And give a little extra to every child. And I saw its going on for days, and I didn't know where the bread comes from. And one day I was watching her. She didn't see, but she turned around and she broke the bread, and she gave us the bread. And I started, 'Mommy' And she- shows me quiet. She took me outside. And she started to cry, and she said to me, 'Rita, please don't say anything. Rita-la, please don't!' She says, 'Please don't say anything, you're so young,' at the time she was 39 years old, 'you're so young, maybe one of you will survive. You'll be able to tell maybe the world what's happening to us.' And all through the time in camp, when I was seeing people dying all over around me. Dead bodies wherever we went. And I was thinking, I'll be probably next. And maybe I'll survive and carry on my mother's dream, that wish, and that was- I always thought about it. And now when I go to the schools and I talk, one girl wants to know, in a Catholic High School...'Do I believe in G-d?' And I said, 'Yes, I do'. And she said, 'If I would be you, I wouldn't want to live. If all my family was killed in the Holocaust, I wouldn't want to be around. All my friends, all my family.' And I said to her, 'G-d works in mysterious ways. When the plane was flying above the camps, American planes, and were praying to G-d that they should put atom bombs, and destroy the crematoriums, and us, and put us out of our misery. And it didn't happen. But if it would happen, nobody would be here to tell the story. So, when I think of my mother's dream, and here I go to schools now, I reach thousands of young people, teachers, educators, and I feel that I'm glad I survived.'

WH: You're glad you survived because of a sense of- that you have a message to give them.

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RK: That's one thing, and the second thing is, when we get together on the holidays, (inaudible) my family is now important people. I was the only survivor. And now I have a beautiful family, with sons, (inaudible) six grandchildren, and Hitler didn't live to kill us all. We survived in spite. And I feel like from a little seedling, a tree is growing, and branches are going to grow.

MK: It is a victory.

RK: It's a victory, - that's right. So I'm glad I survived.

MK: But you know, in camp, we didn't know if we're going to live, but we always hoped that maybe one of us would get out to tell the world what's going on- but we always hoped. Maybe one of us will get out and tell the world, like they don't even know nothing, and they knew all about.

WH: Do you think that it could happen here?

RK: It could happen again...(inaudible). I don't think it will happen, because...(inaudible) so many schools now, are being taught about the Holocaust...I have here thousands of letters---teachers in some schools (unable to translate) write individual letters to speaker.

WH: You, personally, got thousands of letters?

MK: Oh, from schools!

WH: Thousands. How many times have you spoken?

RK: I speak sometimes 2, 3 times a week, all through the school year. (inaudible) I spoke in every college in Boston. At Harvard, in Brandeis...

WH: When you go, what is the main message that you want to leave them with?

RK: - not to be prejudiced. And not to hate. Because I show them what hatred can accomplish. And not to follow.

WH: Who are you talking to?

RK: High Schools, colleges, inter-faith groups, people. I start with 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

WH: What got you started on that?

RK: I was called 6 years ago. I teacher called from Sharon Junior High. And she said she's teaching the Holocaust---and she's looking for a survivor...would I be willing to come

and speak...and I said, 'My dream was to tell my story. But when I came to this country, and I wanted to tell my story, nobody wanted to listen.

MK: Jews didn't want to listen.

RK: People used to tell me, 'It's enough already!' Jewish people. I couldn't speak English that time. 'It's enough already, you're here, forget about it!'...(inaudible) so I told her, 'I never spoke to a group, but I would like to try.' And I came, and I spoke, and she was crying, the whole class was crying. All the children. And she came over, after I was done. And she put her arms around me. And she says, 'I don't ever call anybody else again. I had other people from different camps, but I never heard the story like I heard from you.' And since then, she's using me. She gave my name. Everybody- you know she gives my name to people...

WH: ...you were a Superintendent by the time you left that business...and what happened after that? You start your own business? What kind?

MK: Textiles...manufacturers of elastic, and non-elastic metal fabric webbing. Underwear for brassieres and girdles...

RK: (Shows letters from children ages 14, 15 to WH).

WH: 'Dear Mrs. Kesselman, (this is dated 1/20/88)  
I would like to sincerely thank you for sharing your tragic story with us'...'If only more people would share their stories like you, we could prevent another Holocaust from happening. If we are the future, we better learn from mistakes in the past. Children today don't realize how lucky we are to live in a free country. We don't realize that another Hitler could come along and start this all over again. It's hard to imagine, that as only a child you were put to work inside the camps, to drag a dead body into a pit would be like a living a nightmare for any child. A loss of parents at the age of 14 must have been terrible. Losing your brothers and friends too. It would be unbearable. It's hard to believe, but it obviously happened. I hope one day that people will come to realize that hate is wrong. All the innocent Jews being killed for no reason, makes no sense. The Holocaust is fading away into history now, and if we don't learn from it, it will be another fear in the future. Thank you again for your story. I know now what it was really like to go through the Holocaust. Most Sincerely, Noreen Flannery' - not Jewish.

RK: ...some write to me that they are suicidal and since they listen to my story, they'll never complain again...some write to me, 'You are my hero.'

MK: We hope someday to donate the letters to the Washington Museum.

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WH: ...in your business...you have an office in New York also...I would imagine you have sales in the millions of dollars...

MK: Yah. In the millions.

WH: ...many of the survivors that I talk to have real estate.

MK: And in Boston the same case.

WH: Is it the same with you?

MK: Not on me.

WH: How come you don't?

MK: It's her fault.

RK: It's my fault. I didn't let him.

MK: When I became a Superintendent...and I had a friend who was a licensed plumber. And he came to me and he said, 'Look Morris, if you come with me we'll buy a building and I'll do all the work. But I just want you with me. And I went out and bought a building. 18 apartments. In Brighton, in Boston. I came home and told her the story, she almost flipped. She says, 'Nothing doing! You now are going to work in Pawtucket, R.I. and you just went into business, we lived in Winthrop, you gonna go to Pawtucket and if something breaks, you gonna run at night to fix it?...' and we backed out. Not that I'm sorry, but if I wouldn't be in a business, I would have wanted to go into real estate.

End of Tape #1, Side 2

**Tape #2, Side 1**

WH: ...there are certain survivors who didn't do too well...

MK: Well, in Boston, if you ask people to go into business enterprise, very few went into a business enterprise...most became tailors, cleaning stores, it depends on location. I think in New York, Detroit, Chicago, a lot of big cities, a lot of survivors went into big business. I don't think that the opportunity was in Boston.



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WH: Do you see anything in common with those survivors who did something in America, who did very well, whom you'll meet from other communities? Was there some personality trait that they had in common, or something?

MK: No. Not in a personality trait...an organization or a common cause brings us together...

WH: But for you to come here with \$5,00 in your pocket, to wind up having a company of this size, by now, that doesn't happen by accident. It's not luck.

MK: No, no. I worked day and night. I had to prove myself. I proved myself. When I came here, the Korean War broke out, I would have been drafted. But I worked for a company that had government orders. We made straps for parachuting, for tanks and all that...and I was the only Jewish guy among 400 non-Jewish in that company, in the factory. The management was Jewish. And when I was given machines, I couldn't speak any English, I didn't have any friends, so when I came to work, I stood the 8 hours and worked. And it was piece work. And I was hungry, I wanted the money...and they timed me, and they timed the others, and everybody came over and congratulate me. And I'm the highest piece worker in the mill. I didn't know that. I worked! I don't think that I was that much faster than everybody else.

RK: I'll tell you why- because he has a brilliant mind. Two partners split up and they both wanted him...one offered him a partnership. He said, 'I have no money!' He said, 'I never asked you for money.' So when they went and bought a place, he came to him, and he gave him a check book and he said, 'Here, you in charge.'

MK: Twenty million dollars.

RK: And he never did anything! He said, 'Marty, are you crazy? I don't know anything about-'

MK: I wasn't a businessman, I was a good manager, I was a good mill man...he says to me, 'The money is better in your hands than mine, because you won't spend it like I do!'

WH: Do you think that survivors are more careful with the dollar?

MK: Oh, definitely, I would say so.

WH: ...what do your children do?

MK: My oldest is an attorney. He's 41. Harry. Three beautiful children...he married an American girl. The loveliest girl. She's like G-d's gift...very fine...she's like our daughter.

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WH: And your second son?

RK: The second is married to a non-Jewish girl.

MK: He works for me. 18 years. And he has 3...boys. Brought them up Jewish.

WH: Did she convert?

MK: No. But the kids are brought up Jewish.

MK: My son had an accident with a motorcycle and he lost a leg, so, we had a lot of tsores with that.

WH: The boys are converted?

MK: Yes. Converted with papers, with the Rabbi, the whole business. They are in Hebrew School now.

WH: Is she Protestant?

MK: No, she's Catholic. She's an observer.

RK: She goes with us to the Temple.

WH: How come she didn't convert?

RK: She has a hard time with that...she told me that she will, and she cried, one day she was with me, and she started to cry, and she said, 'I have something to tell you. When my grandmother will die.' Cause her mother died, I'll convert, but I just can't- She was crying. She said, 'I want to do it for you, ma'...

MK: But she goes with the kids more than my son.

RK: My youngest just got married.

WH: How did you feel about that when it first happened?

RK: Very bad.

MK: Very broke up.

RK: It was very hard for us.

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WH: Many parents say, 'If you do that I'll disown you!' But they almost always forgive their children.

RK: I said it too.

MK: She said it many times. But- I was much tougher on (inaudible).

RK: She's a lovely girl. She's very nice.

WH: How did you resolve it?

MK: Time heals.

RK: ...then she was pregnant, they had a baby, you know, you have to make peace.

WH: How did your son explain it to you?

MK: He came and said he's marrying her.

RK: I see now. I look back. I'd rather have him married to her, than not married at all, because if he wouldn't be married, he wouldn't have a life. He has a beautiful life, she's a very lovely girl, they have 3 lovely children, they have a nice home, she's very devoted, she's a nice girl, and today it's a different life. You know, I cannot see it, and be stubborn and say that I'm not going to change! I'm not going to change! You have to change with time...you know, it wasn't my choosing, it wasn't our doing, we did everything on our-.

MK: I would have to give credit to my other daughter-in-law, my oldest son. She was very much instrumental in bringing her close to us...

WH: What about your third child?

RK: My third child just got married, two weeks ago...lovely girl. She's a psychologist, and my son just went back to school (Yale)...he was in business with me...the reason he went back. I didn't mention to you, but we sold our business 5 months ago...and I'm under contract...

RK: And I was glad that he sold it.

WH: ...so will you do some traveling now?

RK: ...we go to Israel, maybe 32 times...

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MK: ...some years I went twice...

RK: ...we adopted a girl over there...we support her...she's married now...we still send money and our kids know to do the same...

MK: ...I went into business in Israel...35 Russian families worked in that family...the point is, that it was not done for profit. We never had profit.

RK: It was made to help Israel. Not to take money.

WH: ...I want to go back to something that you mentioned. You worked in the crematorium. And you were ?Asunder? Commando?

MK: Yes.

WH: Does that mean that you had to put the bodies in?

MK: I for one, didn't do that type of work there. You know, there was only a certain amount of people did that type of work. There were other jobs. I- I was taking care of the headquarters, and the laboratories, cleaning up, and polishing their boots. Do some chores.

WH: In the crematorium?

MK: Crematorium, sure. We had officers...

WH: Did you ever have to go by the ovens?

MK: Sure! Every minute, every day.

WH: ...were there times when you had to use your head to survive?

MK: Always use your head...when we came to Mauthausen, the camp was run by Polish prisoners. In Auschwitz, the camp was run- Birkenau- by Jewish prisoners. In the camp, police and kapos were Jews. Majority....the first ovation we got, 'This is not Birkenau, we are running this camp here, and we show you Jews how we run a camp.' So they picked on us special. And, I'll never forget that day. One day, they ask, 'Who's an electrician?' So I picked up my hands. This was my sixth camp, you have to understand...I went around with two bulbs on my shoulder...if a bulb goes out on a fence, I was suppose to screw one bulb in. I didn't even know how I'm going to reach up there, there was no ladder. But I never put a bulb in. I froze to death, but I never got beaten. And this took- like 3 months.

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WH: You were freezing?

MK: I was freezing to death, you know, I was walking around the fences. I never put a bulb in. I don't know how I would put a bulb in...but I had two bulbs on my shoulder, and I marched around, so I didn't get beaten, I didn't work hard. And this helped. So what made me say I'm an electrician? I wasn't an electrician.

WH: What about the previous camps?

MK: ...they ask me once, who can operate a crane. Now, the boxes of cement, and they put a hook, they take the box with the crane. And there were four buttons. One left, one right, one up and down. I never operated a crane...when I was in a labor camp...'who wants to volunteer to work on a train?' I said, 'What can be wrong? If it's no good, I won't work.' So I volunteered. What I wound up do for many, many months, I was pulling over the rails, you know the switches...so, I don't know...

MK: I tell you, I don't know what I did right...I had a very tough time. I- was a skeleton. The girl that slept with me, on the bunk, didn't want to sleep near me, because my bones went into her ribs. I had a very, very tough time. And there was nothing you could do. You couldn't (inaudible) be smart. So many smarter ones than I. It was just luck. With me, it was just luck.

WH: But it was one thing, though, because of what your mother told you, you didn't allow yourself to die. It meant, you wouldn't do anything suicidal

MK: Oh, no, no.

WH: Throw yourself against the fence.

MK: A lot of them did! I'll tell you who did! Most the educated.

RK: All the people educated did.

WH: ...when you know what happened to the educated ones in the war, and you still want to send your children to school here, that's really an expression of hope for the future.

MK: Of course!

RK: Well you don't think that it's gonna happen here.

MK: We hope it doesn't- it shouldn't happen anyplace.

RK: But you don't think-.

MK: Rita! But it IS happening.

WH: What do you mean it is happening?

MK: It is happening all over the world. Look at Biafra, look at the Cambodia, the millions of people...

WH: Do you think that America is different?

MK: It is different in one respect. Because you don't have anybody here who can tell you it's my country, not yours.

WH: Because it's a nation of immigrants.

MK: Right...

WH: Your children...do you think that they'd survive if there was a Holocaust?

MK: Oh, yeh! Very hard workers...

WH: The most important to me is that your proud of them.

MK: Very proud!

WH: Now, you see that you have nachas from your children, and you built up a whole life here, in America and everything.

RK: We build a house on the Cape. A family house.

MK: This was built for the children...and I didn't want the house. Not because I couldn't afford it. I just didn't want to have the responsibility. But she said,- 'Morris, we got a few years left to ourselves, if you want to keep them together, let's do something to have them together,' so we gave everyone of them a key, each one has his own bedroom...

WH: What do you think gave you the strength to rebuild your life here in this country?

RK: We came with nothing, we saw the opportunity, we were determined. We had the children. And we wanted to give them what we didn't have, and as much as we could.

WH: ...the memories of what happened there. You saw people being burned...

MK: Yah.

WH: How do you learn to smile after something like that? How can you be happy?

RK: There were two ways you could go. You could go crazy, and give up. Or, you know, when I came here, I came with a baby. And I wanted to do everything for my baby. I had somebody to live for now. I was building a new home. I was building a new family. And when I woke up in the morning, I had terrible dreams in the night, and he used to wake me, and I used to wake him, he still does. He screams at night. I- still sometimes at night and I always dream of running and being chased, but I go up in the morning, and I had a new day, and I had to get up and live. I had a child to live for. And that's it. You don't wake up in the morning, you say, my G-d, you know, -you can't live like this. Otherwise you go crazy.

WH: So what do you do?

RK: You get up, and you do what everybody else do. And I'm free, and I'm the luckiest girl in the world, because I want to look the right way. I get up in the morning, I can do whatever I want to do. I'm not afraid, I could be (?not afraid?) like any person. If somebody can come and rob me and kill me, but not because I'm a Jew. I have a right. I can speak up, I'm free!

WH: ...you never went to a psychologist?

MK: Never.

WH: Do you think it's norishekeit?

RK: No. For people that need it-.

MK: It's good...

WH: ...if you had to say something to people who are not survivors, what lesson do you think you'd take away with you from this whole experience?

RK: I have friends who are not survivors. And they go through sometimes, depression, or they have bad days, -they call me. And after they call me, they tell me their problems, and then they say to me, 'I feel so much better, after I talk to you. Who am I to complain?' They say to me they take strength from me. I have a lot of friends like this...

WH: Did you talk to your children about the war?

RK: Always.

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MK: Always.

RK: ...my health isn't so good.

WH: Is it related to the war?

RK: Oh, yeh.

WH: How about you?

Mk: I don't have any...

RK: I have half my stomach out, and...high blood pressure...so, I don't get up again in the morning and say I have problems. I'm a very outgoing person, I get up, and I'm free, and I try to do as much as I can, and if I can't I go and I lay down...

WH: ...maybe that's part of the answer towards having good health. In a sense of not giving in.

MK: Oh, never! Never!

WH: ... I wouldn't say that you have to be meaner than everybody else to survive...

RK: But I'm a kind person. I love people. I love life. I have a lot of friends...

MK: ...I would never hurt anybody, willingly or knowingly. I might have hurt somebody, I'm only human, and I probably did, and I probably will hurt someone, but not knowingly, or not go out with vengeance and hurt somebody. We are very understanding. I always say to myself, 'What would I do if I would be in his position'...

WH: When you think about Israel...what do you think that they ought to do with this problem they have now with the intifada?

MK: ...something has to give, but we are not the ones, who sit here in the United States, (inaudible) have no right to tell them what to do...even if I knew how, I wouldn't tell them...

End of Tape #2, Side 1



**Tape #2, Side 2**

WH: ...when you vote...usually Republican or the Democrats?

MK: I vote for the person. I'm a registered Democrat.

RK: We're Democrats, but we vote for the person.

MK: I didn't vote for Dukakis. She voted for Dukakis.

WH: What about Jackson?

MK: Very much so. This was one of the things I didn't vote for Dukakis. The other thing I didn't like Dukakis as a manager.

WH: His Jewish wife didn't help?

MK: Oh, she's very much involved in Jewish (inaudible) here but she didn't help.

RK: That's the reason I voted for him because-.

MK: ...I told you, the first meeting for the American Gathering from the Holocaust Museum Memorial, was raised, the FIRST dinner, EVER HELD in the State House of the history of Massachusetts...

RK: So I thought I owed it to him to vote.

WH: ...were you ever called upon to testify?

MK: My wife was but she couldn't recognize him...I tell you, I never came out until about 3 years ago...I didn't want to talk about it.

RK: He had terrible dreams. He was screaming in the night.

MK: Very, very bad nightmares.

RK: And he wouldn't talk about it. He never talked about it to anybody...when I started to talk, they started to ask me questions, the children. And when I started, I didn't tell them everything. But the more I talked, the more they wanted to know. And if they wanted to know, then I told them...he wasn't speaking as much in schools...

MK: When I came out, I'll tell you what happened...three years ago, the Poles brought an exhibition from Auschwitz to the United Nations...The Polish government...I got a call

from Ben, he said, 'Morris, I want you to come down.' He knew I was in the crematorium. 'I want you to come down because I'm bringing together about 20 educators, and about 10, 15 survivors from Auschwitz. And we want to go through the exhibition because we got a promise.' That time that General...Vernon Walters, that if we go through and we find something what isn't-.

WH: ...so they asked you to go through this.

MK: He came, and he got a group together and we went through two hours and we found a LOT of wrong and he promised us if we don't like what we see, he'll postpone the opening. It was the lobby of the United Nations. And...then we sat down...and argued it out among ourselves...and that time, Ben said, 'Morris, why don't you tell them what you saw in where you work and we'll get a better opinion and consensus of what we should do about it. Because we found a lot of things wrong.' I came out, (inaudible) and I really broke down. And I rested, and I told them little things. And I stayed over the next day, and we negotiated with the Polish government, and we took out a lot of things, what we didn't like.

WH: ...when you come out with it, what do you tell people?

MK: I told them my experience, what I went through, I was in crematorium eight months, what I saw. And I tell you, I saw more than anybody else. Because we had two crematoriums. Two and three. This is the biggest crematoriums. And in the middle was an open road. Nobody could go without any supervision from one to the other. I could, I had a bandana. Because I was cleaning there, the quarters from both sides, and the laboratories.

WH: ...how was one side different from the other?

MK: Same thing. But the other side was the headquarters, too, and there the Germans- they had their offices and I had to go and do their work there, too. So, I saw more. I saw the laboratories, it's a horrible thing. What they- they were practicing on- flesh, human being, people, and all that.

WH: Alive or dead?

MK: No, most- no, the children, you know. The twins. I saw Mengele every day.

WH: That was not the headquarters of the crematorium, that was the other side?

MK: No, no. Three and four were the laboratories only. Four and five was- is crematorium.

RK: I found the letter (a student wrote) : 'Dear Mrs. Kesselman, I want to thank you for coming to our school. I did not believe some of your talk, but I believed most of it. I

liked when you talked about all the killings. My friend and I laughed through parts of your story. We did not believe and the kids behind you were laughing at you, too. My friend and I raised our hands a couple of times, and you went right past us. Thank you again. Scott Rose.'

WH: What school is this?

RK: Concord Middle. So listen what I did. This is what I answered, I want you to read it: Dear Scott, (1/26/87) Even though you did not ask any questions, I felt that I had to write back to you and tell you and to thousands of letters that I have received over the past three years, I have never read one like yours. I was very distressed of your response. I wish some of the horrible things I went through and saw were not true, but they were. If the things I talked about made you laugh, then what kind of a person will you grow up to be? My whole purpose in giving these talks, is to let children such as yourself, know about the truth, which is so difficult to believe. Each time I tell the story, I am forced to relive these thoughts in my memories. Which is a very painful experience. If I failed to call on you, it certainly was not intentional. I tried to answer as many questions as I could. Why didn't you come down to me personally, as other students did, and ask me your questions? The future of this world is in the hands of your generation. I can only hope your generation doesn't make the same mistakes as those before you. Sincerely Rita Kesselman.' (She shows a letter from the teacher). I called the teacher and I told him the story: 'Dear Mr. Miller:'

WH: Is Mr. Miller Jewish?

RK: No. He was a priest and he became a teacher. He became my best friend, he's a wonderful-.

WH: 'I enjoyed receiving all the letters from the students. These letters give me the strength to be able to tell you my story, which as you know, is not easy to tell. There was one letter, however, that made me quite upset to read it. As you can see, I have included this letter, and I have answered it. I am hoping that you either know this student or can find out what school he attends so that you may pass on my answer to him, since he did not include his last name or address. It looks like his name is Scott Rose. I hope you will be able to assist me in this matter. Once again, thank you for your warm words of introduction. I feel very comfortable speaking in your school. I always have such an interested response from your students'...what he did is, he called me up and he told me...that the child is a problem child and they had a lot of problems with him, but he personally took him out, and he sat down and had a long talk with him. And he cried...and he became my best friend, - this Mr. Miller, the teacher. He's a wonderful, wonderful teacher...(Shows more letters to WH)...

WH: 'Dear Rita, I want to thank you for coming to our school in December, and speaking to our students. As you can tell by their letters, they were deeply moved. And in our classes we continue to refer back to your very powerful presentation. We are indebted and very grateful to you. The gift of your testimony touches all of us, and won't be forgotten. I have enclosed letters that the students wrote to you. Thank you again. And I hope you would be willing to come in the future and speak to the students in the coming years. Sincerely, Bill Miller.' And here's a letter from one of the students. 'Dear Mrs. Kesselman: Thank you so much for coming in and sharing your sad story. I am Jewish, and I am glad that I didn't live in those tragic times. I still can't believe how Hitler could have done those bad acts. There were'- and if Jewish students can't believe! There were- things such as, eating your frozen urine, that you wouldn't do in normal life, but you did to live. It would seem hard to tell your story, but you did it quite well. I think telling us about the tragic things that happened back then, will make us more aware not to hurt other people, no matter how different we are.'

RK: All the letters tell me that they learn from me more than they watch movies.

WH: Do you read them?

MK: Every one of them!

RK: Every letter I read.

WH: Do you read them again after you've read them?

RK: Yes. There are nights, -there are bad nights for me, that I can't sleep. I go down, and (inaudible) I have nothing to do, I go to the letters, I take them out, and I can sit for hours and read them again...I save them all...

WH: ...tell me, now you have more hope for humanity after you spoken to all these people and seen their reaction.

RK: Yes.

MK: I hope so, yes. I hope I did a lot of good. Wait a minute! I still believe that a majority of the people are good. The only problem is, it doesn't take many bad people to start something...

WH: No, that's why when you have problems like the skinheads-.

MK: Yah...as I say, the majority of people are good. That's my belief and I hope I'm right. But it doesn't take many bad people to start something.

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WH: ...the exact name of your group...is American Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors  
of Greater Boston.

End of Tape #2, Side 2

Conclusion of Interview