

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

## **William Helmreich Oral History Collection**

**Interview with Abraham Kessler and Frieda Kessler  
August 1, 1989  
RG-50.165\*0054**

## PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Abraham Kessler and Frieda Kessler, conducted by William Helmreich on August 1, 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.

## ABRAHAM KESSLER AND FRIEDA KESSLER

August 1, 1989

AK: I was born in Rozwadow, Galicia, near Lemberg. I had two brothers and four sisters. I was the next to the youngest. I have a sister and a brother in Israel, and a sister in New York.

WH: Where did you arrive?

AK: In New Orleans. We went on the General Harry Taylor. We stopped in Venezuela. We came to Kenosha, Wisconsin. After three days a man said to me you will have to work because if you don't work, you'll go crazy. So I worked in a wire cable factory.

WH: When were you born?

AK: In 1912. My mother died when I was three years old. We had a general store—cookies, seltzer, challah, sauerkraut. My mother was religious. By 16 I belonged to Hashomer Hatzair and my family didn't like it.

WH: Where were you born?

AK: Rozwadow. I had two brothers both of whom died in the war. We were brought up religious.

WH: Where were you during the war?

AK: They took us to Siberia. We went to Yakutsk and we left in 1944. We had enough to eat but it was very hard and many people died there.

WH: Why did you leave Kenosha?

AK: I spliced wires for bridges in a wire cable factory. I was a good worker. But I had a heart attack in Germany after the war and I also suffered from pleurisy.

FK: In the camps my husband didn't speculate because we were afraid. I had a small child [Perhaps these people, unwilling to take risks, had a way of thinking, of looking at life, that prevented them from making it big in America.].

AK: I was never a big shot and I'm not now.

FK: When we came to Kenosha I didn't ask for or expect anything.

AK: Other people asked but we are different people.

FK: In Siberia I adjusted and did whatever the Russians did. Whatever they told me was good. And this is how we survived. They liked us. When we came to Kenosha, they brought us *chulent*. I guess they thought we had to have *chulent*.

AK: Americans!

FK: Maybe they knew something from previous generations. We had a very good first impression of Americans because they were very nice. They came to see if we know how to eat. They gave us a banana and they said: "Oh, they know how to eat a banana!" Then an uncle of mine found us and said we should come to N.Y. So we visited and I saw other survivors were here too. So I said "I'll be a greener like all the other greener." I kept kosher because I went through too much to be Jewish and this is what I wanted to do. But Hadassah had no Jewish friends, there was no Jewish school. She was the only Jewish girl in the class. I knew someone there whose child intermarried. The mother had a nervous breakdown; the father had a stroke. So I said, this is not for us. We stayed for four years.

WH: Do Americans act differently than greener?

FK: A daughter, an American, says to her mother "shut up!" And she went to college. A girl should come in and not say hello or good morning to her mother? The mother says "Hi" and she says "Shut up."

AK: But I believe in the sea you have all kinds of fish. I don't think it matters if you're American or not. But there are some differences. Americans can't say no to a child. But I believe there are times when you have to say no.

WH: What kind of work did you do?

AK: I had a laundromat. I had it for eighteen years.

WH: Do you think Americans like Jews?

AK: No. Who likes a Jew?

WH: Do you think a Jew could become president of the U.S.?

AK: I'm afraid not. I think a black would be elected first and I would not vote for him, believe me.

WH: After everything you went through, Mr. Kessler, do you believe in God?

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AK: I don't know; I think I'll take the Fifth Amendment on that.

WH: Do you think He's listening?

AK: I don't know. But my children are going in this direction and I see it's good. But I don't agree at all with what the religious do in Israel with movie theaters and *shmittah* laws.

WH: Do you ever dream about the war?

AK: No. Never, not even when I came here. She does, a thousand times.

WH: Are you happy?

AK: Yes. If I'm healthy, I'm happy. I had a lot of operations but I'm living.

WH: Do you worry about the children?

AK: No I don't worry.

FK: I do.

WH: Do you think a project like this is important?

AK: Yes. We know that it won't be long before all of us are dead and there won't be any witnesses left to tell what happened.

Conclusion of Interview