United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

William Helmreich Oral History Collection

Interview with Rosalie ("Chris") Lerman
June 12, 1990
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Rosalie ("Chris") Lerman, conducted by William Helmreich on June 12, 1999 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.

ROSALIE ("CHRIS") LERMAN
June 12, 1990

WH: What is your first name?

CL: "Chris" is my adopted name. Rosalie is my real first name but Chris is the name I adopted when we escaped during the war. Rosalie was a typical Jewish girl's name in Poland. My sisters also picked Christian names.

WH: Why did you keep it here?

CL: My sisters had trained themselves to know me also as Chris, so they got used to it and the name stuck. My official name is still Rosalie and the middle initial is C.

WH: Does it ever happen that people mistake you for being Christian?

CL: No.

WH: How long did you stay in New York when you came from Bremenhaven?

CL: About a year, in Crown Heights. We came as DPs through HIAS.

WH: How did you decide to come to the farm?

CL: It was interesting. We are basically city people and we didn't look for farming. Our families were never farmers. They had flour mills that processed grain and the only connection then was that we were processing something that was grown on the farm. We first came here when we visited friends of ours from Europe who had settled on the farm five or six months earlier, and we thought it was beautiful, with the flowers. New York City…I don't have to tell you what New York looked like. My husband was working as a clerk in a grocery store. But he was a very capable person; he could always manage things. One day he came home and said, "I'm not going to stay in this job." And I said, "Why?", and he said, "I got such a good offer from the boss that if I accept it, I'll remain there the rest of my life and I'm not made to work for someone else. I'm made to work for myself." And that was it. He's a very independent individual and he knows what he wants out of life.

WH: Who helped you buy the farm?

CL: My uncle and the JAS. We also took out a mortgage. I wasn't even there. My husband called me to tell me he had bought the farm and that was it.

WH: This place might as well be a thousand miles from New York.

CL: Well, much as I love the city, I also love the farm. It was like my town. And here we are close to Philadelphia. Many times we used to finish up on the farm at 5:00 p.m., get a babysitter, go to New York, go to the theater at 8:00 p.m., get out, get back into the car, drive as far as Bordentown down 206. They used to have a diner. We used to stop and have breakfast at 2:00 a.m. We came home, changed into our working clothes; we went into the chicken coops and fed the chickens, and then slept from four to eight instead of having to get up at the usual time of six.

WH: It must have been hard.

CL: Well, we were young and energetic, and we needed it. I mean, you couldn't just live on a farm and live with the chickens all the time. We didn't go to Philadelphia for cultural life, though. Philadelphia was more for shopping. They used to have tryouts there. So you went to the theater and you saw five flops before you could see one good show. If you're limited with the time you can spend, it's difficult.

WH: Were your parents religious?

CL: No. They were very progressive people. They were Zionists. Yitzhak Greenberg came to our town. They were very actively involved in Zionist and organizational work. They created a Hebrew school for us. My husband's family was religious, Belzer Hasidim. I didn't speak Yiddish until I met my husband.

WH: Did most of the people here have prior farming experience?

CL: Eighty percent of the people were my age, in their early twenties. All of us either stopped going to school at the fifth grade, sixth grade, tenth grade, or eleventh grade, tops. About 20% had higher education. Not only were we urban, but we were children who went through a terrible experience, and who had to start life in a new country with no parental supervision, no guidance. It wasn't easy; it was like a hit and miss thing. We didn't stay in New York because we had these friends here. And life here was simple and good. We made friends as we went along and we loved it. It was exciting because we were doing things together, helping each other. We had a certain kind of camaraderie. It was a challenge. My sister went to Brooklyn College and stayed in New York. She's now a translator. My other sister lives in Toronto.

WH: Did you go to school?

CL: I was in night school two weeks and then I said to my husband: "I'm not going there anymore. They're really acting like kids." I said, "I'm a married woman and these other survivors are acting like kids. And I'm not learning anything. It's too much like fun." They would tell jokes and poke fun at the teacher in Yiddish and in Polish.

WH: What was the community like here?

CL: It was like an extended family. People came from all different countries. We were so different from the rest of the community that people reached out to us and they then became part of our community and that's when we also became part of the community. We became friendly with the suppliers.

WH: Did the local farmers help you?

CL: Very much. Without them, people like Dr. Theodore Norman, we couldn't have made it. The JAS gave people personal loans. But we, in our own organization, The Jewish Poultryman's Association, also had a gemilas chesed fund for our own members.

WH: Was there anti-Semitism here?

CL: I didn't experience any. We were strange, not only to the Gentiles here, but also to the Jews.

WH: You know about this book, The Golden Egg by Arthur Goldhaft.

CL: It was actually ghost-written by Meyer Levin. Goldhaft was a very colorful man. He had a very scientific mind. There was a big commotion about the book when it came out.

WH: Yes, I remember that Meyer Levin apologized for offending the survivors.

CL: Did you find it offensive?

WH: Not to me. I couldn't really judge it.

CL: Goldhaft did a lot for the farmers. He described the mistakes made by the Europeans in farming. And it was kind of cute, but people were offended. But a lot of the commotion was directed, I think, at my husband because he wrote a lot about Miles Lerman. Miles did everything he could to create this organization. He is, by nature, a leader. He's always involved in constructive things. The man has done so much for the Jewish community that he doesn't have to explain himself to anybody. And the man wrote in the book that Miles Lerman is the only one who knows anything about farming and when you look at Miles Lerman and his beautiful wife and healthy children and whatever, blah, blah, blah. So people said: "We are so incapable and our lives are not beautiful, and our children are so sick?" Things like that. And this is foolishness. Miles was the founder and first president of the poultry farmer's association. In 1949 my husband was already involved with UJA. Although Goldhaft and Levin apologized it wasn't enough for some people. They ostracized my husband. It was like a mob psychology. And that was it. But we stayed and people realized that they made a mistake.

WH: When did people start leaving the farm?

CL: After Hurricane Hazel in 1955 (?). People just abandoned the farms in some cases. Some people wanted a yeshiva. And then they started a yeshiva. It was mostly the survivors who started it.

WH: Did most of the people come here directly?

CL: About 30%, I would guess, came here directly through other people here but not on farmers' quotas.

WH: Did you stay in the farming business the whole time?

CL: Until 1957. Then he decided it's enough and he went into the oil distributing business. And he was successful and sold the business five years ago. And now he's a real estate developer and is on the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council. He's been negotiating the opening of the archives with the Russian and Polish governments. It was through his efforts that the Museum is getting all these things. He also chaired the project that brought together all the liberators from the different countries.

WH: It was very hard on the farm.

CL: Yes, but we did things. Did you hear what I said? Five o'clock we had the babysitter and then we went to New York.

WH: Did most people do it?

CL: I don't know who did it. I know that when I went, I went to see Porgy and Bess when it first opened; I went to see Madame Butterfly at the Metropolitan Opera when it was still in Madison Square Garden. I went to see Inherit the Wind, with Paul Muni. I went to Second Avenue once and I promised myself not to go again because I couldn't stand Menashe Skulnik (she laughs). We didn't go every week, but we went two, three times a year because we needed it. We didn't get a television until 1961 or 1962.

WH: Do the memories of the Holocaust always remain?

CL: They do and they will always be there, even though I'm an optimistic person. I still have nightmares and wake up screaming. I used to dream that I was running from the Nazis holding the children in my arms. But when I was in camp I was a child myself.

WH: What about your children?

CL: David was a very successful lawyer. He went to Harvard and then to Georgetown Law School. But now he's a developer together with his father. He's married to a Jewish girl from Corpus Christi. My daughter got a fine arts degree from Brandeis. She does documentaries, educational films. She's single. Now she's a Corporate V.P. for Communications at Burroughs.

WH: Are there still survivor farmers today?

CL: Not much. There are maybe only forty families left here. They may be involved in allied fields – processing, egg shelling, things like that.

WH: How many synagogues were there here?

CL: Four – two Orthodox and two Conservative.

WH: Was there a high intermarriage rate here?

CL: No. Less among the survivors.

WH: Was one community better to live in than others, between say, Norma, Dorothy, Milmay, or Egg Harbor?

CL: No. Each one had their own synagogue.

WH: What did the war teach you?

CL: How to decide quickly. And that no matter what decision you have to make in life, you have to be decisive. You go left, you go right. No matter what you do, you have to be pretty much in control of yourself. That I am by myself; I have no one to protect me or guide me and I'm the one who is making the decision and whatever the decision is going to be, it better work.

WH: But you had your sisters.

CL: That's right. Without them I wouldn't have survived.

Conclusion of Interview