

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

## **William Helmreich Oral History Collection**

**Interview with Herman Lewinter  
July 3, 1989  
RG-50.165\*0066**

## PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Herman Lewinter, conducted by William Helmreich on July 3, 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.

## HERMAN LEWINTER

### July 3, 1989

- HL: My wife and Regina (Goldstein) were all hidden with me during the war. We were all hidden by a Gentile. I was also in the Janowska Road Camp. I came from Zloczow. In my hometown we established a Sholom Ansky Cultural Club. I was born in 1907. I was nine when my father died. I was a photographer in the camps. The Nazis ordered me to go around the camp and snap anything what I see.
- WH: So what pictures did you snap, mostly?
- HL: Mostly *aktzions*. One time Hitler visited the camp. People were hanging on trees, from poles. But this I didn't snap for the Nazis. They would kill you if they found out. I hid it. You had to be very careful. You see, I was the last photographer in this camp. I snapped pictures so there should be a memory of what happened.
- WH: If you were afraid they would kill you if they caught you taking the pictures, why did you do it?
- HL: Because I saw the people with their hands and legs tied to the poles and killed them and every day the truck took them away like a piece of garbage. I felt if I would survive it would be a good testimony. We had pictures of Polish prostitutes who lived with the Nazis. Altogether I had maybe 530 pictures. They were sent to Nuremberg for the trials. Later the Germans sent a team to talk to me and I gave them pictures of the Gestapo. Although they called me to be a witness, I never went. So we met in New York at the consulate. My friend told me not to go to Germany. He said, "They making fun of you; they don't believe you what you say, even with the pictures. They confusing you, you getting *meshuga* (crazy). This was in the late fifties. I also sent to Wiesenthal a batch of pictures. When I escaped from the camp I took the pictures with me.
- WH: Do you have the pictures here? Can I see them?
- HL: Yes, but not all. Here are some of the mass graves which we opened. The doctors checked them to see how old they was. (He spreads out the pictures and shows them to me.) Here's a picture of partisans hanging. Here's the last Jewish band playing at a selection. Here's the machine they used to crush the bones. Here are some of the officers on horses. Here are the barracks. Here's the dog grabbing people by the throat.
- WH: On what boat did you come?

**USHMM Archives RG-50.165\*0066**

**2**

- HL: The General Muir into New York. My sister and brother and niece met me there. We went to Georgia Avenue in East New York. But rooms and work were hard to get. So I bought a farm in the Catskills in Woodbourne.
- WH: Did you even meet any *kapos* in New York?
- RG: I did. We had to go to New York on business. We were looking for a place to eat. And you know (she motions of HL) Landau. All of a sudden someone walks out from a store and says "Regina!" And he was a policeman, a militiaman. He had a haberdashery or clothing store on the Lower East Side.
- WH: He was in Janowska?
- RG: No, he was from Zloczow. Some people complained about him very badly but he was nice to me.
- HL: I saw him from a better position. He used to pull people out. He was walking around with an axe. He was opening doors where people was locked up and hiding.
- RG: I didn't have the heart to tell on him. You know, it's very easy to die. To **live** with something like this on your conscience. I never saw him again. It was near Essex Street. His name was Yossele Landau. He got married and has children.
- HL: He's still alive. People tell me they see him.
- RG: Don't you think it's worse to live with this?
- WH: In a way, yes.
- RG: You could also talk to a Minna Lanes. In Europe she was married to someone not Jewish. Here she's married to a Jew. She was hiding. She doesn't talk about it. Usually someone doesn't talk about something, they have something to hide.
- WH: What was Landau like as a teenager?
- HL: Nothing special. They had a candy store, they sold fruit. But he wouldn't talk about it. He probably wants to forget about it.
- WH: Did you start the bungalow colony (Lewinter's) after the farm?
- HL: Yes. I worked as a photographer for someone at the Concord for 15 years. I took pictures when the people came in for dinner. Keychains. I did it from 1953 to 1966.

Then when the Quickway came, they hit my property, the bungalow colony, because I as on both sides of the road. So then I had a nice dollar. I paid \$12,000 and I collected \$35,000 seven years later.

WH: How did the survivors in the bungalow colony who were survivors get along?

HL: Most were not survivors. The survivors hung around with each other. Their behavior was very bad though, very bad. They were rough. They didn't had that social way of living. Some of them I refused to rent even. They were wise guys. The children didn't behave. They fight with the people, arguments with the American, between them, too. It was a very, very bad combination.

RG: Some of the survivors think the world owes them a living. It's not the fault of the American Jew that he was suffering.

WH: Do you think the average American Jew, not Roosevelt, knew what was going on?

HL: Of course he did! Was there any Jew in the United States which didn't have relatives still living in Europe? There's no excuse.

WH: Some people didn't want to know.

HL: Culture, radio didn't start with 1945. They knew. You wanna tell me at that time they was dead, they was blind, or there was no radio; there was no underground radios? (all this said in great anger) The world was interested in killing millions of Jews! We was too many: we was a cancer in the throat! Everybody kept quiet. So Truman recognized Israel in '48. A big deal. So now you travel in Israel, you see in many places a memorial for Truman. He was the big hero. So why he didn't convince Roosevelt we shall let in at least the ship with the children? He didn't do nothing. And I heard many American Jews say in an argument with the survivors: "Why Hitler didn't kill you all?"

WH: You actually heard Jews say this or just plain Americans?

HL: American Jews! What you think, I mean the Irish? Who cares about them? He's anyway born an anti-Semite. Yes, American Jews. Many times. And some people said we came here rich. Well, some of the survivors was four or five years in Europe after the war and they made some money.

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

HL: I'm proud that I raised a nice family, that I can live comfortable here, and I'm proud I'm giving charity.

**USHMM Archives RG-50.165\*0066**

**4**

WH: Aren't you proud also of the pictures you smuggled out of the camps and that resulted in bringing attention to the Nazis' crimes?

HL: Oh yes, I'm proud of that also but you wouldn't find me talking about that. I'm a man who's not looking for *coved* (honors). I saved people. I got those 18 people out, I gave food to people, but this is between me and God, as well as what I sent to Nuremberg.

Conclusion of Interview