

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

William Helmreich Oral History Collection

**Interview with Henry Lindeman
July 26, 1989
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Henry Lindeman, conducted by William Helmreich on July 26, 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.

HENRY LINDEMAN

July 26, 1989

WH: When did you come here?

HL: In 1949, I was on the quota – American Joint Distribution quota, in Kenosha, the Jewish community sponsored me. After the war I went to Bergen-Belsen, there was a D.P. camp there and that's where I met my wife. I was born in Riga, Latvia in 1923.

WH: You were in Berlin until '42?

HL: Yes, my mother died before we were deported of natural causes. I was an only child. In 1942 my father and I were sent back to Latvia to the ghetto. We were constructing the barracks for the concentration camp. My father died of starvation in another camp.

WH: How do you go on? Is the will to survive so strong?

HL: Oh, definitely! You don't know what people can do to survive, what people can eat to survive.

WH: If they have to.

HL: Yeh. I've seen people eat other people – cannibalism. Cannibalism.

WH: You saw it?

HL: I saw it. I never – I was going to try it, but I couldn't, never could (inaudible).

WH: Never could bring yourself to do it.

HL: No. But I seen it. I seen friends of mine.

WH: How long had you been without food?

HL: Well, you always had some food, you weren't completely out of food, you had potato peelings cooked in water, you stole sugar beets, raw potatoes. You always had something to nibble on, but no nourishment.

WH: Does something like that affect your eating habits even today?

HL: Oh, definitely.

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WH: In what way?

HL: For sure. In what way? I'm very particular in knowing what I'm eating. And if something smells, I won't eat it, I won't touch it. If I haven't tried it, I won't touch it.

WH: How long were you there working in this camp?

HL: About a year, year and a half. We went to many camps...then to Stuttgart for about a year and a half. That's where we were liberated.

WH: When you saw cannibalism, where was that?

HL: I was in Salispilse/Salapils (sp?) where I seen it. I seen it in Stutthof. I seen it in Berkgraff and there was another one.

WH: To what do you owe the fact that you survived?

HL: I was young, I was strong. I can show you pictures when I came out how I looked...and the urge of survival is there. And I made myself busy. I mean, I wasn't just laying there and you know, waste away. Doing things, walking around. Talking to people. And able to work too, if you were able to.

WH: You lived in Germany until '49?

HL: Yeh. I never thought I'm going to come to America. I was signed up to go to Israel.

WH: Your desire to go to Israel, where did that come from?

HL: I was alone. I didn't know what to do with myself. Again, I still was young. I had no place to go. And talking to people in the camps and to the Israelis who came and all that, it sounded good to me. And I signed up to go. Then I met my wife, and she changed my mind.

WH: Have you visited Israel?

HL: No, never been there.

WH: Have you had the desire to go there?

HL: The older I get, the desire gets more and more...We'll take a trip one of these days.

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WH: What has stopped you until now?

HL: No particular reason. I made a life here. Sure we take vacations, but I never had a desire to go and visit.

WH: And now you feel the desire. Why?

HL: I don't know. I have no explanation. I always say before I die I want to go and see Israel.

WH: So it was a group affidavit when you came?

HL: Yeh, I think we were the last one on Ellis Island, December of '49.

WH: You left from Hamburg?

HL: Yes, the S.S. Blancheford.

WH: When you came to New York, what happened then?

HL: We came here...there were tables lined up, and we had to register again, and again, and again. And naturally, the question is, 'Where we gonna go? Where we gonna wind up?' In New York, or (inaudible). Nobody knew where Kenosha was. As a matter of fact, they weren't even pronouncing it right...it was a big mix-up there...they gave us a \$100.

WH: What were your impressions of New York?

HL: I was scared! I mean, the buildings and everything else, my English wasn't so good.

WH: Then they told you that you're going to Kenosha, you didn't know it, it could have been anywhere.

HL: No. That's right. As a matter of fact we went on the train to Kenosha and the conductor said that's the right train, it's going to Kenosha. Now, we had a hundred dollar bill. Everybody's buying sandwiches, buying a pillow and I want a pillow, too. I want a sandwich, too. And we had a heck of a time changing the money for it. But finally we did it...what a ride! We didn't know where we were going! It was a bumpy ride, it was a terrible ride. I mean, we were happy to go, finally after I don't know how many weeks now, we didn't have a home, we didn't have anything, we were living out of suitcases, we had a great big wooden

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box sent before we left and we don't know if that's gonna come on there, and who knows? A different country and then – we were kind of scared. We were two little scared people, you know. And we came here, it was Christmas Eve...they met us (Jewish Agency)...and rented us a one-room apartment.

WH: So what was your first impression?

HL: Oh, vey! There again, thanks to my wife, I mean, she got along fine. The language, and she was a secretary, and she could type and she could do this, I mean she talked English...so naturally – everybody wants to see us. I mean, you know, we came there 12, 1, 2 o'clock in the morning before we got into our little apartment there. And at 7, 8 o'clock they were knocking on the door. They want to meet the Lindemans from Germany, from the concentration camp, you know, and everybody brought a little dish and this and that.

WH: You mean they came over with...

HL: Yah! They had cakes and they had fruit and they had soups they brought us. And you know, it's very nice, but I didn't want to be set on display and be, you know. And after that, they kind of dropped us. I mean, I think they came once. And then, maybe we got 2, 3 friends out of the whole shebang who came on there, you know.

WH: Were you the first?

HL: I was the first one, yah, that's probably why...

WH: What did they ask you?

HL: Stupid questions...and they were talking over my head. I didn't understand them. They were talking business already, and I wasn't even here yet. I don't have a trade. I never had a trade. I was a young boy when I got into it, and a young man when I got out of. Never went to school.

WH: Didn't you feel, in some way when you look back, and you think about all the effects of the Holocaust, isn't there a sense of having felt cheated? In a sense that during the years, the war years, when you could have been going to school...and you start off here in a tremendous disadvantage.

HL: Yes, that's right. Well, like I say, I came up here with a hundred dollars in my pocket. Now the suit and everything I had naturally weren't stylish ...the only thing the Jewish Welfare did for us, they took us into a Jewish shoe store, and we both could pick out a pair of shoes. We went to a Jewish clothing store, and I

could pick out a shirt, a tie, and a suit. And that was it. I mean, I didn't expect anything. I came here to make a life.

So, one of those haberdasheries there, the clothing store, he offered me the job washing windows and cleaning and that. So, "I'm going to make a window trimmer out of you." What did I know about a window trimmer at that time? So, I worked there for three, four weeks. My wife right away got a job as a secretary. Very nice. Anyway, there was another clothing store, and I think he gave me 15 or 20 cents more an hour so I went with him, and then about a month or two, there was a fellow, he said, "What are you doing here? You are wasting your time. We have Simmons Company here, right on the lake, and they are hiring people. You can get three, four dollars an hour. Why don't you apply for the job. At least you make some money."

Alright. I applied for the job, and I got a job. So now I was making \$4 an hour. But the \$4 an hour wasn't enough because six months later my son was born. I didn't have the money to pay the doctor bill. I didn't have the money to pay the hospital bill. No insurance, of course. So I got another job, in another factory earning in the morning shift, and in the afternoon, here in Kenosha. And every week I made the rounds, I paid \$5.00 for the doctor, and \$5 for the hospital, and for the rent and for this and for the groceries, you know...and then we moved to a larger apartment. Then I thought that two full-time jobs are kind of too much. Didn't see my family, I didn't see my son any more, so there was an ad in the paper, somebody's looking for a driver for an office furniture and equipment company. And I applied for the job. I go to the job and so I only drove the truck in the morning and worked at night at the Simmons factory. And he (the man he drove for) had an ad in the paper looking for a salesman. I applied, and he said, "I like your spunk, I'll give you a try." He give me that time a hundred dollars a week to start with, and it worked out. I became sales manager of the company. We had 20 salesmen and I worked there for 35 years, and my wife worked with me all those years, and I became 65 and I quit. I retired.

WH: The war and everything that happened, do you think about it a lot?

HL: At the beginning, just about every day. As you get older, it kind of goes on the wayside.

WH: You don't dream about it?

HL: Used to. Not anymore.

WH: Your wife, do you talk to her about it sometimes?

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HL: No.

WH: You don't discuss it?

HL: Not anymore.

WH: How would you characterize your attitude towards the whole thing?

HL: Thanks G-d, it's over!

WH: You belong to the Temple here. They have commemorations?

HL: Yes. I do go and I say the Kaddish. And, you know, naturally it comes right back to me. No question about it. I don't want to speak about it. If somebody—I never bring up the subject. But if somebody brings up the subject, I do it, but, it pains me. I, I don't want to talk about it. I mean, I live with this now for forty some years, and I never, I never bring it up.

WH: Now that you're retired, what do you do in your spare time? Take care of your yard?

HL: Yah, and we took some trips. We like Las Vegas. We go there at least twice a year. We travel, a little.

WH: How many children do you have?

HL: That's it, a son. He's (not married) 39 years old...and in this community. I wish he marries a Jewish girl, but he's running around with Gentile girls. There is nobody here.

WH: If he married a Gentile girl, how would you feel?

HL: Very upset, but there's nothing I could do about that.

WH: Do you have a feeling like you'd like to see your own family line go on?

HL: Right, I'd like to see my name go on. I'd like to have a grandchild and whatever. Definitely.

WH: You have no other relatives?

HL: No.

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WH: Does your wife have any relatives here?

HL: Nobody. We got her mother over here but she died of cancer. No, we both have nobody.

WH: Ho do you deal with that? It must be very, very difficult.

HL: It's lonely at times, yes, very much so.

WH: Of your close friends, are all of them Jewish?

HL: No, a few Gentiles.

WH: What is the Jewish community here like?

HL: It's falling apart. We are less and less people...there's not future in Kenosha. Kenosha is a dying city.

WH: ...(Holocaust) Do you think that what happened there could happen here?

HL: I always think, it can happen any place, not just in America. I think it could happen here. People disagree with me violently on that, but...

WH: Was there anything in your view, that could have been done to prevent Nazism from coming to power?

HL: No. Well, being more or less brought up in German, I probably think like a German does. Hitler's idea was okay, when he first started off, because Germany was on the verge of collapse. Communism, and they had so many different parties there. No jobs, it was terrible. He promised everybody a job, and everybody got a job. He built highways and byways, and then he started fooling around with all the boys (inaudible? Goys?) there, and that was the biggest mistake he made, when he start with the Jewish people. That was his downfall.

WH: You mean, ultimately that was his downfall.

HL: Yes.

WH: You think if he hadn't done that, he would have won the war?

HL: I doubt it. I doubt it. It didn't endear him with the rest of the world.

WH: How do you explain...that it was Germany...that these people...

HL: But Germany? Intelligent people...the hate was implanted to the younger generations, and the other generations, again, it was...I cannot explain it, but such a hatred, came from your own neighbor, your good neighbors, and they turned you in.

WH: Do you detect it in their attitudes here, in this country, Polish-Americans?

HL: Well, we right now, every time. I have my doubts. Down the road there's a neighbor, he's from Latvia, he's about my age, so already my age, he couldn't have been—he was just a little kid when all that happened, but his father must have been there. That preys on my mind.

I, same with the Germans, I mean, if somebody comes from Germany, and I met him at the store, or outside in the business world. It always was in my mind. Always figured out the age, what could he have done.

WH: Do you think that your life would have turned out differently had you gone where your friends went, to Chicago, for example, to a bigger city. Are you sorry you came here?

HL: No, I'm not sorry. Not sorry at all. No. I got used to it, living in a small city. I don't like the hustle and bustle and the traffic.

WH: Do you think that you found a measure of peace here?

HL: Yes, definitely.

WH: Do you sometimes think that like this whole world, or when this happened, that it was like another, it didn't happen?

HL: Yah! Oh, how could, yeh, definitely, yes! I mean, it's out of the blue sky. Everything happened so fast! Out of the clear, blue sky.

WH: When a film comes on about the Holocaust, do you watch it?

HL: Yes, I did. I did watch it. Then we stay up and talk about it.

WH: Somebody made a statement to me, a survivor...I don't want you to be shocked, I don't want you to be offended, but I would say to you, from my experience in the camps, and he included himself in this category, that those of us who survived, are not necessarily the best, not necessarily the nicest, not necessarily the most loyal. When you survived in the camps, you did what you had to do.

HL: That's right, yah, but that doesn't mean you're not the best.

WH: Is this an unfair characterization?

HL: There was a group, I bet each concentration camp had it, and each ghetto had it, where there were leaders. They used to call them 'kapos.' And, they were ruthless. I mean, sometimes, you had to watch them more than – because they took on where the S.S. stopped. But we got rid of a lot of those kapos after the war. Not myself, but I know it happened. Hey, I was just a little kid. I was this small.

WH: You were 19.

HL: Yah, I know it, but I was always so small stature. And they threw me into the latrines and all, you know, but being a survivor, doesn't mean you were a bad boy, or whatever it is, or you killed somebody, or you ate somebody, or...

WH: When you think back, what is there anything you would have wanted to do, or anything you would have done differently?

HL: Yes, I think I would have. I would have gotten some sort of an education.

WH: That's a regret?

HL: Yeh, that's a regret. And I couldn't do it. I could have done it later on in years, and then I thought it was too late for me, but I found out that's it's never too late to get an education. I came here with no money in my pocket. Made a lot of bills when I came here. Had to pay them off. Had to work two jobs. Couldn't go to school. I was...but, we made it. I mean, I made a good living. That's the only thing I think I would have done different. Make something out of myself.

WH: What accomplishment or achievement would you say that you are most proud of over the years?

HL: Well, the achievements, is first of all, bringing up a son, educating him. He had college. He went to the University of Wisconsin.

WH: Did you send your son to Hebrew school?

HL: Oh, definitely! Sure!

WH: Did he ever ask you about the war?

HL: Well, yes! He knows about it. Definitely we talked about it. Sure, he knows everything. As a matter of fact, he went to some of those meetings, those Holocaust meetings, you know, the survivor of the Holocaust (inaudible)...from Chicago.

WH: How did you feel when that whole thing happened in Skokie?

HL: Oh, terrible! Terrible.

WH: What does your son do?

HL: He's in real estate. He has two jobs. He's in quality control in the factory.

WH: You have this dog for a long time?

HL: This is our third.

WH: It's unusual, I have to say, in that most of the survivors I know, do not have any pets.

HL: Yeh.

WH: Do you buy German products?

HL: Not if I don't have to.

WH: Before the war started, did you believe in G-d?

HL: Well, I believed in something, sure I believed in G-d.

WH: Did the Holocaust destroy that?

HL: When I was an inmate, I thought there was no G-d. How could G-d let that happen? Now, the more I getting (inaudible), I'm more religious again. I don't know.

WH: Do you give money to Israel?

HL: Yes.

WH: Where do you think you got the strength to rebuild your life, after you came here?

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HL: Well, when you have the strength, I mean, you want to go on with your life, naturally, and going on with your life, I mean, it takes a lot of things you have to do, even if you don't like it, raising a family, even though it's a small one, took strength.

WH: Everybody goes through tragedy, but the survivors have a bigger tragedy than anyone else. Is there any lesson that you learned, that you can explain to people, that in terms of how to cope with a problem if they have it?

HL: The only thing I can say is, don't trust anybody too much.

WH: Too much?

HL: That's right.

WH: Did you feel that you wound up being (inaudible).

HL: I been cheated, naturally.

WH: Where?

HL: Out of my life. Out of four, five years out of my life. Losing a parent. That's enough.

WH: Most survivors left Kenosha, you stayed. Why do you think that was the case?

HL: Well, they came later, first of all, I already was more or less established here and the others who came, didn't want to take that chance, didn't want to wait that long, you know how human nature is. I mean, I want it today. I don't want it tomorrow. I mean, I don't want to wait...I know a lot of Holocaust survivors, they made very well, I mean, they done very well for themselves.

WH: Yes. I interviewed people like that.

HL: They done very well, but I still think that you needed a little push, you needed a little help, which you might get in a bigger city, I don't know. In a small city, I didn't get it. I didn't ask for it. The only thing I felt cheated, I could have bought the business when my former boss sold out the first time, I was cheated not to being asked because there was always a promise that was without saying, nothing in writing. Only verbal. When the time comes, you have the first choice or a chance to...

WH: And he didn't keep it.

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HL: No, he didn't keep it.

WH: Why?

HL: I don't know. How I found out, I was on the convention, and one of the salesmen told me, "I understand your boss sold out." (laughs) "Oh, yeh? He did?"

WH: Must have been a bitter disappointment.

HL: It was. It was a big...

Conclusion of Interview