

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

## **William Helmreich Oral History Collection**

**Interview with Ernest Michel  
December 28, 1989  
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## PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Ernest Michel, conducted by William Helmreich on December 28, 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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## ERNEST MICHEL

### December 28, 1989

- WH: I am writing a chapter on contributions made to American Jewish life and I don't think there's a person in the country in a better position to comment on that but you.
- EM: I must admit to you in all modesty that you are probably right. I am the ONLY survivor who went into the Jewish Federation field. The only one . . . in the Federation field, namely the survival and all that it implies, I am the only one that went into that.
- WH: Do you find that survivors, given their means and their situation, do you find them to be generous?
- EM: No, I do not. While that's a strong statement, and I have to qualify that. Survivors in New York do not participate in our Jewish communal activities to the degree that I feel that they should. I feel that they are too self-serving. They are primarily interested in their own relatively limited objectives. Yad Vashem, Jewish National Fund, they are not, in New York, involved in the overall Jewish community, to the degree that they are involved in other communities . . . in New York, there is not one survivor.
- WH: . . . was it just coincidence that you have in New Jersey and San Francisco, survivors who are involved in Federation, - and in N.Y. -
- EM: I don't know whether it's coincidence or not, but in New York, it is simply not the case. There are NO survivors who play a role with us in UJA Federation. Not one. It's a fact . . . we thought about it, I talked to some of them, and we simply can't get them. There are some who are contributors, but not on a scale commensurate with their ability.
- WH: . . . didn't you think that you as a survivor would be able to reach these people?
- EM: I have tried. I have not succeeded . . . some of them are very generous, I don't want to minimize that, but they are primarily concerned with things that are of concern to them, and I regret that they have not taken a larger role in the overall community.
- WH: . . . in smaller communities they tend to do more . . . do you think that the anonymity of New York (inaudible applies) to them?
- EM: Yes, very much so.
- WH: So, we are talking about something that applies to survivors or New Yorkers.
- EM: Both. Survivors to me become more obvious, since I am one of them, and I know them, and I would have wanted for some survivors to become involved here in our activities, and I have not been able to get ANY single one of them to do that. Not one.

WH: I get the feeling that you're disappointed more than average about that.

EM: I'm very disappointed. I am personally almost disappointed, that despite the role that I play and that I have played, that there was nobody whom I could convince to become involved. I consider it a failure on my part. (He's German, not Polish)

WH: . . . in your opinion, were these people, or why you were able to be more successful with them, how do they differ, the Glucks, the Ungers, from the other guys?

EM: My interpretation? They feel as survivors, they want to be involved in areas of their own specific concern. To them, UJA Federation is for the goyim. I don't mean the 'goyim' – for the established Jews and you know, they have enough money they can take care of themselves, they don't need me, yes, I'll make a contribution, but that's the limit of it. I'm more concerned about Yad Vashem, and about Beit Hamutzoreit and the areas that I'm concerned with.

WH: . . . do you think that survivors give out of proportion to their numbers to Israel bonds, or buy Israel bonds?

EM: Yeh, survivors are big – particularly in New York, are big bond buyers.

WH: . . . survivors, as people who identify as Jews, want to feel that they are doing something. They want to feel that they are contributing. But, maybe they have a reluctance to part with their money, maybe because they suffered a lot.

EM: I think that's a very true statement.

WH: So that's (Israeli bonds) a compromise, because . . . they get it back . . . and they are doing something for Israel.

EM: I agree with you.

WH: . . . when you did try to approach survivors, you're a person who's raised millions and millions of dollars. You've spoken everywhere. You've spoken in all the small towns in America . . . when you went to the survivors, and you tried, did you try them in the smaller towns with any greater success?

EM: No, no. When I went to these towns, I went as a representative of UJA. And I went for one or two – you know just, - and I did not look for survivors. I went to the Jewish community as a whole.

WH: When you approached them here, what approach did you use?

EM: The approach I used was, 'You are now an American citizen, you've made money, you're an established member of the community, it is time that you now play a role outside of your immediate survivor group. Namely, in the overall Jewish community. There are many things that we are involved in. Jewish education. Taking care of poor Jewish people in New York. This is as much your responsibility as it is mine, or somebody who is born here, lived here, for two, three generations. That's the approach I've used. And I've not had any positive response. Other than a perfunctory 'yes, I know, and I do make a contribution,' but it was limited.

WH: The survivors express a great degree of in-group loyalty.

EM: I'm not part of that group. I'm not an insider – as a matter of fact, I am a German Jew.

WH: What town are you from?

EM: Manheim . . . I am the only – no, there's one other, Norbert Wolheim – Norbert and I are the only German Jews who are involved in the whole survivor activities. The only ones. It's a total Polish - . . . it so happens it's a fact.

WH: . . . Norbert . . . once wrote that the German Jewish survivors occupied a peculiar twilight location because they're not the group that came between '33 and '38, that's 124,000 German Jews, but they're not really a part of the Polish or Hungarian group that came after the war. There are thousands of them, but their experience was somewhat unique if you put together where they grew up, and what happened to them.

After the war, you came here in '46, you went to Chicago . . . I have had the experience of people who were German Jews, having a very ambivalent feeling about German culture . . . doesn't this put the German Jewish survivor in a rather unique position, and give him a unique perspective from which to look at the whole thing?

EM: I think it should, but as I told you, I know very few survivors from German who are active in what I call the survivor mood. Very, very few. I think they're a handful. When I was at the gathering, I was Chairman of the World Gathering , Norbert and I and Freddy Diamant from Los Angeles (inaudible) and . . . Claus Stern from Seattle, and I can almost name them. I don't think that we had more than 10 that I know who are German Jews. All the others are Polish, Romanian, Hungarian, Czech, and as I said, very few German Jews are involved. I don't know why.

WH: Have you speculated why?

EM: Still today, and I regret to say it, there is a different psychology between German Jews and Polish Jews. What I'm telling you now is off the record. The only Polish Jew with whom I have really an affinity of relating, is Ben Meed. And we call each other the 'yekker' and the 'Polisher' you know? With a great deal of affection. Most of the others, I don't – really relate to. This is why I, despite the fact of my relative prominence in the survivor community, I am sort of an outsider.

WH: How do they relate to you when you do come?

EM: Oh, they welcome me. There's no problem, oh yes! But I am not one of them. I never have been, and I won't be. It simply is as clear as that. When I organized the world gathering, they were all sort of – I don't want to say 'in awe' you know, but, 'how can this German Jew put this together?' You know? So, I have a certain standing among them, but close relationship with them, I don't socialize with them, I don't go to card games, my life is more or less today, almost totally in the American Jewish community.

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

EM: I have no non-Jewish friends.

WH: . . . any of them survivors?

EM: Only one. The one I escaped with from the camp . . . we were together in Auschwitz, in Buna, and together in Buchenwald, and we escaped on a transport from a camp called Berga. In April, 1945.

WH: . . . (of your four closest friends) any of them German (Jewish)?

EM: One is German . . . most of them are Americans.

WH: You operate in a world that really, really doesn't understand in a feeling, empathetic, historical way what you went through.

EM: That's correct. I mean, they know it, they look at me sort of like . . . and yet, I have become part of the environment totally.

WH: Does it ever happen, like in Federation, where there are meetings, that you have to call attention to something that they need to be more sensitive to?

EM: Not very often. They all know me, you know, my name and my reputation, and my background, is well-known. Yet, when I am with my colleagues, I am simply a professional in the Jewish community. They all know my background.

But we have so many problems that we are dealing with today, which are part of the environment that I live in. That I live with. So, the fact that I'm a survivor is only sort of a part of my background and personality. But, it has nothing to do with the areas that we are involved in today.

WH: Your position is?

EM: I was the Executive Vice President of UJA Federation of New York for 20 years, which is the single biggest job in the Federation field in this country.

WH: Started in 1970?

EM: Yes. But I've been with UJA since 1947 . . . it's the largest staff of any Jewish organization in this country. And I reached that position, and I'm very immodest about it as an individual who has no college education, no university, who finished 7 years of public school. So, I'm very proud of the fact that I reached that position without – totally different than any one of my colleagues.

WH: . . . when you came to Chicago . . .

EM: (Hutler?) his mother came to the ship to welcome me, and she expected a little boy, you know, and was amazed . . . I was 23 . . . I went to 72<sup>nd</sup> Street, the Hotel Marseilles, then I went to Chicago after 3 days.

WH: At that point they offered to send you to college?

EM: I did not accept that.

WH: Do you have any regrets about that?

EM: No. Although my life would have been totally different if I had. But I did not want to accept the offer for somebody to pay me for – to go to school, I felt that at age 23 I ought to begin to stand on my own feet. And I tried . . . to get a job in Chicago on a newspaper and didn't succeed because my English was lousy.

WH: How did you get the job in Port Huron, Michigan?

EM: That's an interesting story. I feel this is one of the interesting things that happened to me . . . I looked for a job in Chicago on every newspaper . . . and they laughed at me. 'Who the hell is this guy?' I spoke broken English. I could make myself understood, but I had never gone to school. I knew very little grammar, my vocabulary was not as it is today . . . I knew some English from the camp, from the school, from what I had learned from my

father, what I learned after the war when I worked for Al Hutler for military government. So, I knew some English, but certainly not enough to become a -

WH: To come here and you want to be in a newspaper.

EM: You see, I was a reporter at the Nuremburg War Criminals Trial . . . and I thought with that aura, you know, I could get a job anywhere. I was a naïve kid, I didn't know. So in Chicago, after being turned down from one paper to another, I walk into the office of UPI, and the man in charge, whom I'll never forget, was a man by the name of (?) Thomaston, who became later General Director of UPI, he was the only one who listened to me. None of the others were interested even to hear why I spoke English so badly. The only one. And he listened to me, and he was the first one I told what happened to me. I was in the camps, and he was very interested. He says, "Michel, if you want to become a newspaper man, first you have to learn English.

Second, you have to learn about America, what this country is. And, the only suggestion I could give you, you don't want to go to school, or can't afford to go to school, find a job in a small town, on a newspaper, because there you might have a chance to learn it. And I says, 'Where is that?' And he says, 'Well, I know a newspaper in Port Huron, Michigan . . . the owner, publisher, is a man by the name of Wile. If you tell him that Mintz Thomaston sent you, I think you can get a job.' With that, I went to Port Huron, Michigan . . . I had \$20 left. I go to Port Huron, Michigan on the Greyhound bus. One way ticket . . . (I'm writing a book now on my life here in America) . . . so I was a copyboy . . . I got room in a boarding house for \$7 a week . . . my first paycheck. \$25 a week. My first job. A tremendous amount of money to me. \$25 a week. So I wrote a column about the Russians. This was just the beginning of the Cold War, and I said, in the column, I wrote it in the bad English, I wrote that Russians are just like Americans, they don't want war, I met these people in the camps, and I can't understand why there should be a cold war now between Russia and the United States. Very naively written. I sent it to the publisher, - what he wants to do with it. He didn't say anything. The next week, he published it the way I had written it in the newspaper, saying who I am . . . he became so interested about the reaction he had about that article that he offered me to write a daily column which appeared for almost a year, every day under my byline, called, 'My New Home.'

WH: (EM shows WH his columns) . . . you describe your early experiences in Port Huron . . .

EM: I wrote in it how I looked at this country as I come here . . . anyway, that what my life in Port Huron, I became known like a checkered dog in that city.

WH: Did you make any friends there?



EM: Yes . . . non-Jews . . . I married a second time. My first wife, we were divorced in '79 and she died in 1984 . . . both times I married American girls.

WH: . . .my experience in interviewing people is that the survivors who lived outside of New York are different . . . they had to assimilate more . . .

EM: You know, I'm sort of an unusual one in that sense. Because, while I am very active in the survival movement, and have been rather involved in it from the World Gathering and even way, way before, I am not part of the survivor group. I am really not part of it. Socially and otherwise . . .

WH: You're identified with them in a very public way.

EM: Oh, of co – very much so. And they all recognize it, and I'm very well known among the survivors, which is obvious, but I'm not part of the social group, not at all . . . I've never been part of it.

WH: There is not real German survivor group.

EM: The Aufbau . . . comes closest to it. The New World Club. I'm on the board of Self-Help . . . they are not survivors. They are German Jews who came here before the war. Almost all . . . not one who came after the war.

WH: . . . do you attribute your survival during the war to luck?

EM: A large part of it was luck. To be at the right place at the right time, and not to be at the wrong place at the right time. And also, too, my upbringing in Germany, I come from a middle-class, well-Jewish family with good Jewish values. I was always interested in sports, so I was relatively healthy. Soccer, I used to play soccer. Once with Henry (Heinz) Kissinger . . . and I came in at the right age. If you can call it the right age. I was . . . born in '23, I went to my first camp in '39 at age 16. I went into Auschwitz in 1943 at age 20 and I escaped in – April, 1945 at age 22, so I was on the camp at a time when I was probably as – the best chance of survival.

WH: How long were you in the camps?

EM: Altogether, five and a half years.

WH: . . . isn't survival more than luck?

EM: . . . a combination, but mostly luck . . . when I was a boy in Germany, my father literally almost forced me to take calligraphy lessons, you know? And that saved my life in Auschwitz. That knowledge of calligraphy saved my – I was a musselman . . . and I was ready to go up the chimney . . . in the fall of 1943 . . . I was down to 90, 100 whatever the

weight was, you knew you couldn't last too much longer, so I went to the countenbau because I had . . . a boil . . . to get it opened . . . and there was a prisoner, an inmate . . . he was a communist, he'd been in the camp for years as a communist, not as a Jew and comes in and says, 'Anybody here who has a good handwriting?' And I was sitting there, hungry, shivering fever, temperature, this poor thing, you know, bothering me, to get it (the boil) opened and to get out, so I had maybe another month to live. And I raised my hand, and I hadn't had a pencil in hand in I don't know how long.

So he said, 'Come on, write something.' . . . so I wrote calligraphy, and he says, 'You got the job.' . . . those that were killed, were never killed by gas, they were killed 'weak of body' so next to each name, I had to write whatever the diagnosis is, and then, 'died: (needs translation)' and that saved my life. I stayed in the prison hospital.

WH: . . . the values you talked about before, how did they come into play in the camps?

EM: Well, in terms of trying to be decent, trying not to take advantage of others. And handle yourself in, you know, still in a way without becoming an animal, as many did.

WH: . . . people often banded together . . . in the camps . . . did you have anyone?

EM: I had two very close friends . . . who is as close to me as a brother, he saved my life, I saved his, we escaped together, and there was a third one . . . who disappeared. The three of us stuck together all the time. From the first to the last day.

WH: Could you have made it through without them?

EM: No.

WH: Could they have made it through without you?

EM: No. We shared everything . . . we were in very tough situation where a wrong move could have cost our lives, just like that. And the three of us depended on each other, and I don't think anyone of us could have made it along . . . one was Polish and one was Czech . . . before that I was part of a group that went from a town called, 'Potabaun' to Auschwitz and we were a very close knit group.

As a matter of fact, this spring we were invited by the city of Potabaun to come back because this was the last place I was before we went to Auschwitz . . . nine of us were left.

WH: . . . if the war hadn't broken out, what would you have liked to have done with your life?

EM: . . . be a writer . . .

WH: How do you go from writing to being a major fund-raiser?

EM: As a reported, I did a lot of public speaking.

WH: How did you get into this field?

EM: Since I couldn't go to school anymore, and since I had to leave Germany, by sheer luck, this is the field that I got into that fits me like a hand fits a glove. I LOVE my job! All my years. I don't think you could have paid me for the enjoyment that I got out of my 42 years with the UJA Federation.

WH: What do you love about it?

EM: I love, really to put it in the simplest terms the fact that as a survivor, I am involved today in shaping, and helping to shape Jewish history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To help in the creation of the State of Israel, to help those who need help, to be able to go wherever they want to go, and to be involved in the Jewish community nationally and internationally. And I've met most of the Jewish leaders throughout the world. I've had a tremendous ball in doing what I'm doing. I LOVE my job!

WH: Are you still working?

EM: Oh, sure! I am now officially retired . . . I have my office . . . secretary. I'm doing things now on a volunteer basis. I'm co-chairman.

End of Tape #1, Side A

**Tape #1, Side B**

EM: . . . as a survivor I think two major museums . . . one in Washington and one in New York, is one too many.

WH: . . . here in New York, that's where they came.

EM: Well, the survivors, unfortunately in my opinion, are not as forceful in their giving to the museum as I thought they would be . . . and many survivors who have the capacity to give a lot more, are not giving us . . . (they give) cautiously. Nobody ever gives themselves.

WH: . . . couldn't Ben Meed have been helpful in persuading the New York Jewish survivors that they should give to Federation or did he not want to take away from his own thing?

EM: Ben and I have had discussions about that, and Ben said I don't give enough credit to survivors who give, not the survivors, but as members of their communities. I told him it's not so, that if I would know that they are survivors, I would know their names . . . we have a little, not controversy, we have a little argument about it in a friendly way. I'm very close to Ben. I love Ben. I think he's a wonderful guy.

WH: . . . you said that at some point, you felt an obligation to speak out for UJA because they, and as you put it, their affiliated organizations had helped you like USNA . . . HIAS . . . Jewish Refugee Service . . . why is it that you felt this obligation more than other survivors? Thousands were helped.

EM: There's a very simple explanation for it, Willie, it is because of the fact that I went into this field. I know –

WH: But you went into this field after you started speaking out.

EM: Yes, but at that time, I was in a small city, Port Huron, Michigan, it was hardly any Jewish community, I got into this because of my background and because of the fact that I began to speak, and found speaking relatively easy. It's a natural gift. Either one has, or doesn't have.

WH: . . . do you still get a thrill from a gift?

EM: Absolutely! Still today. And I'm still involved in solicitation. I solicit many of the major gifts here in New York, I am a consultant to the Philadelphia campaign in terms of their major gift effort, I still speak today a great deal for National UJA all over the country. And I get as much of a kick out of it as I did when I got my first contribution.

WH: . . . survivors . . . people like yourself, they didn't lie down and give up after the war . . . and you are a quintessential example . . . what do you think accounted for that? I mean, you were already a (inaudible)

EM: Yah, but I was a musselman physically, but I was not a musselman emotionally.

WH: How did you do that? Prevent yourself from giving up?

EM: I have a tremendous love for life.

WH: You never felt like killing yourself?

EM: Never. NEVER would it occur to me to kill myself. Even under the worse in the worse, moments. Would not occur to me.

WH: . . . your parents didn't make it?

EM: They were sent to Auschwitz and they were gassed, my father and mother. My sister survived, she's in Israel. She's the only one . . . she was saved in France by Catholic nuns in a convent and was taken out of France in 1942.

WH: . . . do they give (to UJA) in Los Angeles?

EM: Limited.

WH: Do they give in Chicago? In Miami?

EM: In Miami there's a fellow, David Schacter, who's a survivor who's very active, in Chicago, there's a fellow named Sol Goldstein, who is a major contributor . . . to come back to your original question, I have a tremendous love for life. I never, it never occurred to me to commit suicide in the camp. I always hoped and felt that maybe one day we'll survive and I have looked at my survival very much from a non-guilt. I have no guilt about having survived. Some survivors, the story goes, they have guilt feelings. That they made it and others didn't. I have none whatsoever. And I look at my survival, as an obligation to be involved in the community the way I have.

WH: . . . . in the camps . . . sharing food . . . was always not enough for others . . .

EM: I did what I could. First of all, there's a selfishness, first you want to take care of yourself, and after that, you help others, which we did. But to come back to your – I wanted always, to – as I say have a tremendous love for life, I enjoy life to the fullest. Everything that happens to me. I love walking down the street and saying, 'Gee, nobody's after me,' You know?

WH: You go to a party, you enjoy a good laugh?

EM: I enjoy that, I have a good time. Only one thing is bothering me. My shoulder bothers me and I can't play tennis like I used to.

WH: . . . do you belong to a synagogue?

EM: Yes. Central Synagogue on 55<sup>th</sup>. I think every Jew should belong to a synagogue.

WH: Would you consider yourself a religious man?

EM: No. Not at all.

WH: Did you ever think about religion . . . G-d . . . during the camps?

EM: No, not at all. Help yourself and G-d will help you.

WH: Was your father and mother religious?

EM: Conservative.

WH: Do you believe in G-d?

EM: Nope.

WH: But of course, you feel very culturally Jewish. Ethnically Jewish.

EM: Oh, traditionally, ethnically, in every possible way. Although I am not religious.

WH: . . . you spoke about the Holocaust in the early years.

EM: I was probably the first one who spoke about it . . . and very interesting. I only spoke before non-Jewish groups. They wanted to hear about it. I spoke before the Rotary Club, the Kiwanis Club, the Lions Club, the Daughters of the American Revolution, church groups, men's clubs, all over Michigan on the Holocaust. What happened to a Jew in Germany in the 1930's and the 1940's.

WH: How did they look at you?

EM: They looked at me as I'm a freak.

WH: Did that bother you?

- EM: No. I told them, 'I'm Jewish! This is what happened to me! This is what discrimination can lead to if it's taken to its extreme and I'm here to tell you how I, as a Jew, survived one of the greatest tragedies in all of history.'
- WH: . . . you mentioned that at some point in the past that for about 3 weeks you didn't really want to be Jewish.
- EM: That's correct.
- WH: How did you make the transformation?
- EM: You have to keep in mind what the situation was at that time. We had escaped in April, and we, after several days, we managed to work on a farm. And it was the first time that I had some solid food in years! I had bread and butter, and luckily, I did not eat too much, because your stomach, - because many people unfortunately died afterwards from eating too much heavy food. Butter, chocolate, and I knew about it, and my sense told me go slowly.
- WH: You had to have a lot of self-control.
- EM: Yes, you did. And I maintained that and I started very slowly. On May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1945, and I have almost total recall and this will also be part of my book, the farmer's wife, who didn't know that we were Jewish, comes out to the field and she said, in her German, (needs translation - shepkot geherd de crek is vobiden) . . .
- WH: You describe this in the May article in the Jewish Week. That she went right back to what she was doing, and she told you in a very casual way.
- EM: . . . . back on the farm, and I said, 'I work there,' and (inaudible - he) says, 'Gee what's going on with you? You know, you worked just like you did before, and now it's all over.' And that evening, Hansel and Freilegs came to (tell me they're leaving) and I said, 'I'm going to stay here right now. I want to get myself back into shape and I don't know what I'm going to do.' . . . so they left immediately, on the same day, I stayed. And then I said to myself, 'Look, they don't know I'm Jewish. I've been through enough for being, having been born a Jew. Maybe I ought to simply begin a new life. Stay here on the farm, have enough to eat, the farmer has a daughter.'
- 'Maybe I'll stay on the farm and become a farmer and forget about what happened to me as a Jew.' And I actually considered that for a few days. I stayed there, the war was over, I could have left. And I didn't and then after a few days, I says, 'No, you can't do that. First of all you have too much, more than being a farmer. I wanted to know what happened to my family, whether anybody had survived or not, and then I came back to

my senses. I says, 'You can't after all that happened to you, now live as a non-Jew. Never!' And then I wondered why the hell this happened – why did I even think about it?

WH: Why couldn't you live as non-Jew?

EM: Well, because I was so all the time in the camp, I wanted to survive to tell what happened! And I couldn't tell it as a non-Jew. And that some of us who survived, and this imbued me, really my whole career, that those of us who were lucky enough to survive, have an obligation to those who did not survive. And so therefore, gradually, my better senses came back, and then I decided to leave the farm.

WH: . . . how do you feel about the Berlin Wall coming down?

EM: I have mixed emotions about it . . . first of all, as somebody who's been deprived of freedom, I know what it means to be free and I welcome any opportunity in Eastern Europe, or wherever it is, for people to be free the way I am today. That's one part of it. The second part of it is, that I am afraid of a reunification of Germany and I am afraid of what it might lead to eventually, because Germany has the tendency to become nationalistic whenever it has the power to do so, and while I don't think the chances are that it could repeat itself, I believe that two Germanys are better than one.

WH: From you, that's a remarkable statement, because I have read what you have said about the Germans. You said, 'That's today's generation – we can't hate, we have to be tolerant.' I don't see this as a contradiction but what I am saying is, with all the tolerance, there is still a little bit of doubt.

EM: Well, no, I don't think that it's a contradiction, because when I make these statements, and I stand behind them, I make them at that particular situation, where there was not a chance that even East and West Germany could get together again, and I still say today, having met President (?Weitzekker?), having met others in the German government, dealing today with Germany in a very positive way, having said all along, 'you cannot live with hate all your life, and that there is a new Germany and you have to deal with it,' I still maintain that. But this was before the whole – wall came down. And I am concerned.

WH: Do you think that there's a possibility that they could revert?

EM: I would think that there is a possibility.

WH: But not likely.

EM: It's not likely, no . . . as a matter of fact, I would even prefer, it is highly unlikely.



WH: Do you think that the Jews in Germany before the war . . . achieved a position as high in Germany as that they have achieved here?

EM: I do not believe that there has been any generation of Jews that has lived as freely, as openly, as democratically, as well-accepted, as well-situated, as we Jews in America, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

WH: Who came in second?

EM: Second came, the Golden Age of Spain . . . in recent history, I would say that it's the Jews in Germany.

WH: . . . of all the countries that it should happen in, that its birth should come, was Germany and not in Poland, or Hungary – how do you explain that?

EM: I've written about it, and I've spoken about it, when I speak, I lecture today again about Germany, it's history, it's development, the possible future. Germans have a tendency to be highly nationalistic, more so than probably any other European country. Germans have the tendency to follow a strong leader which they did first with Bismark, then with the Kaiser, then with Hitler . . . the Germans, as strong economically as they are could have the tendency to go beyond that. I don't think that it's likely to happen but I'm, you know, having been through it, I am fearful.

WH: What did the Holocaust teach you about human nature?

EM: It taught me that nothing is beyond the nature of a human being to do, if given the opportunity to do it.

WH: In your own journey here, in this country, you started life over again, and you became successful . . . at some point you made that leap far beyond what most survivors here did. Especially because you went outside your milieu . . . you made it in the American world . . . in your own opinion, how did that happen?

EM: Yah, I think that is very easy because I'm the only one who did it. If others would have done it, there would have been others. But as I said, I am the only Holocaust survivor who went into the Jewish Federation field.

WH: . . . people don't like to say 'survival of the fittest,' but-

EM: It's true. Absolutely true. The weak ones fell by the wayside.

WH: How about your children?

EM: I have 3 children. My Laurie lives in Israel . . . she married an Israeli (he's an architect), and just had her second child . . . my daughter is very much aware, and very much imbued as to what happened to me, she feels very proud about it, of me and what happened to me . . . my younger daughter is married to a student rabbi . . . he goes at the Hebrew Union College. Karen again, like me, is very much aware and feels very close to me, and particularly since their mother isn't living anymore. We have a very good relationship. I have a – son who is totally different. He couldn't care less. He lives in New York. He was married, he's divorced. He married a shiksa . . . I felt very, - not only because she was a shiksa, but because she was just a nothing, you know. Fortunately he got a divorce now . . . I don't think he'll ever get married, he's a loner . . . he drives a limousine.

WH: You would have liked more from him.

EM: Exactly. I would have liked for my son – that's one of my disappointments . . . I know he has some severe emotional problems.

WH: Is he close to your daughters?

EM: Relatively close . . . it's one of my disappointments. But I have to accept it. I have to live it.

WH: . . . two out of three is pretty good.

EM: I look at always from a positive point of view. I have three kids, two out of three, even he, we get along with – but, it hurts once in a while.

WH: . . . . are you close to you sister?

EM: Yes . . . they live on a kibbutz . . . she is orthodox.

WH: Are you active in any non-Jewish organizations?

EM: No . . . I used to be when I lived in California, active in the Democratic party, in politics, because I'm very concerned, I'm very interested. But I'm not active in any non-Jewish. My whole life is the Jewish community.

WH: Where do you go on vacation?

EM: Oh, I have a lot of hobbies. I collect stamps, I collect Judaica . . . I collect antiquities, I play tennis, I write a book, we like trips . . . . I love to read, everything. Fiction, non-fiction, whatever . . . I read a book a week.

- WH: . . . (Asks EM to walk around the room and tell WH what all the things are) 'Here's my antiquity collection. Here's a book that was my farewell dinner . . . after I retired. This was the dinner that Herzog, Shamir, Harris, Bush, you know, and here are the pictures from the dinner – at the Pierre Hotel, Wednesday, May 10<sup>th</sup> in honor of Mr. Michele. It was called, 'The Importance of being Ernest' it was a 'This is Your Life.' It was the leadership of the – everybody was there. Herbie Jesselson, Bob Arno, Joe Gervin, Andy Tish, - there's Bill Unger (describes picture). This is Al Hutler . . . Ronald Lauder . . . Ben Meed . . . Bob Morgenthau, (?) Rudin, Larry Tish . . . Tom Dine, Robert Rothchild, Bert Resnick, Yitzi Greenberg . . . Jerry (inaudible - ? Lippman) and Naomi . . . Phil Rosenwald . . .' In 1960, I organized the first survivor dinner in this country with Norbert Wollheim.
- WH: You don't mind if I read this: 'New York Times, Saturday, May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1960, in memory of Auschwitz. The barbed wire, the barracks, the execution yard, the crematorium' – who wrote this, by the way?'
- EM: An editorial writer for the New York Times.
- WH: 'These are the silent reminders still standing today, that recall to a forgetful world, a scene of as intensive, man-made suffering, as any, that history has every know. And of all the sights at Auschwitz to make, we live that camp of horror, there is one that seers the heart more deeply than all the rest. There is the glass case containing the frayed dresses and tiny shoes, the pathetic remnants of babies clothing and a few dusty broken toys.' I'm going to skip here: 'about 600 of the survivors of the Auschwitz Buna Concentration Camp are meeting tomorrow at a reunion dinner in New York. They hope to establish a scholarship fund to help the children of former inmates in memory of the children who had no chance. No more appropriate memorial can be devised, looking back to the past with sorrow, and forward to the future with hope.' This is the first survivor dinner as far as you know.
- EM: As far as I know . . . (Shows WH a transcript) this is interesting, when I was at the Nuremberg Trial, this is the first time that the name 'Eichman' was (inaudible) mentioned. It's in German. That's the original transcript from the trial. . . . (Continues to show letters, papers, collections.) This is the dinner – the meeting at the White House, to which I was invited . . . I have a collection of Judaica . . .
- WH: (The World Gathering) do you think that had a permanent effect, do you think that it changed –
- EM: I do
- WH: What did it do? Give the survivors more self-respect?

EM: I think so. I think it was the first time that the survivors made a statement, not only to themselves, but to the world. I feel very proud about it . . . (continues to show articles) ...and this is a picture taken on my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday in Auschwitz, the first time I went back.

WH: What did it feel like?

EM: I've been now back, twice, and I feel that it's important for me to do it, because I always go with Americans, particularly with younger people, who (inaudible - ?get the intense?) feeling about what it means to be Jewish today, seeing Auschwitz and Birkenau. So, I feel that it makes a contribution.

WH: Is there a feeling of unreality?

EM: Yes, I don't believe it. I find myself being in total lack of – 'I was here? Forty-five years ago?' I don't believe it! It's not me . . . (Continues memorabilia.) This is the first listing that we printed in the paper about the people who went to the World Gathering.

WH: The first listing?

EM: The first listing of those who signed up to go. Because nobody believed we could get thousands of people to come.

WH: How many went?

EM: All over, world-wide, we had 6,000. The biggest group that ever met in (inaudible- ?Israel?) . . . out of this came the Second Generation . . . Golda . . . Rothchilds in Paris with whom I worked very closely.

WH: This is something you bought?

EM: That, no. This I didn't buy. This I got myself. This is the official picture of the signing of the treaty with the – see, Begin . . .

WH: Isn't it amazing how Carter is regarded as something of a – like against the Jews. I mean, look what he did.

EM: Well, this was the most positive thing he did.

WH: But, it's pretty positive.

EM: Oh, and how!

WH: But I don't think that he gets that much credit for it.

EM: No, he should. For that he should.

WH: What about Koch? Did you like him?

EM: Oh, I loved him!

WH: You miss him?

EM: Uht! I miss him. He gave me a reception at City Hall when I retired. (Continues to show articles.)

WH: Well, all I can say is, you lived a full life.

EM: I sure have!

WH: What about the next ten years?

EM: Oh, I'm as busy as I was before . . . I'm writing my book . . . I'm Co-Chairman of the Holocaust Museum in New York. I'm working with Ronald Lauder on a project to preserve Auschwitz-Birkenau because it's deteriorating. And we want to do something about keeping it – not beautify it, G-d forbid! But to keep it the way it is today.

WH: . . . the museum is before, during and after?

EM: Yah. It's about 15% before the war, 15% after the war and 60% to 70% the Holocaust.

WH: You know, you have a lot to be proud of. Would you tell me what you're most proud of?

EM: The World Gathering. That was probably THE greatest personal satisfaction in my life. Against all odds. Without an organization. Without any –

WH: You had no landsmanshaft.

EM: Nothing. You know, to create something that I believe will be historically an important event. I have no hesitation in saying that's the proudest thing that I feel I can point to, aside from the fact that all my life, I thin I have been involved in something very, very important.

WH: That's more important even than the work here.

EM: Yes – personally. Other than that, my – satisfaction about my work here goes beyond anything that I could have dreamt of.

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WH: And you're proud of your children?

EM: I'm proud of my children.

End of Tape #1, Side B  
Conclusion of Interview