

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

William Helmreich Oral History Collection

**Interview with Arthur Nunberg and Blima Nunberg
December 18, 1989
RG-50.165*0086**

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Arthur Nunberg and Blima Nunberg, conducted by William Helmreich on December 18, 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.

ARTHUR NUNBERG AND BLIMA NUNBERG

December 18, 1989

HW: Where were you born?

AN: In Wolbrom, Poland. It's in Western Poland on the water, close to Germany. I was born in 1913.

HW: And you?

BN: I grew up in Sosnowicz and was born in 1920.

AN: My parents were traditional. I went to the Nevardok Yeshiva from the age of 9 to the age of 17. I was a good student and went because I wanted to. We were eight children but I was the only one who went to the yeshiva. My parents were killed and three of us survived. Later on I became involved with the Bund. During the war I was in hiding, in Plaszow, and in other camps. Towards the end I was in Ravensbruck, where I stayed until liberation.

HW: Tell me a little about yourself.

BN: My parents were also traditional and I was one of four children. During the war I was in a concentration camp. I was liberated from Bergen-Belsen. I was the only one in my family to survive. My sister went straight to the ovens. My brothers were in Skarscysko. One was hanged for stealing something and the other was taken away during one of the selections they made.

HW: How did the two of you meet?

BN: I was a Bundist too and we met through the organization.

HW: Where did you stay when you came here?

BN: The Jewish Labor Committee gave out a notice asking whoever had a room, to contact them. I lived with a widow for a while. And already in October of 1946 we organized the first organization of survivors. It was called United Jewish Survivors of Concentration Camps. We had New Year's Eve balls, we helped people register for reparations. We organized our own branch within the Workmen's Circle named after Zieglerbaum who was the Bund representative of the Polish Bund organization in exile and who eventually committed suicide out of frustration.

HW: What kind of work did you do?

AN: I worked in the garment district. I went to F.I.T.

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0086

2

HW: Where did you live?

BN: In the first years we lived in Brownsville, on Saratoga Ave. Then, in 1954, we moved to the Bronx because we had friends who lived there who were active in the Bund. They lived on Pelham Parkway. [labor unions had built projects there before the war]

HW: How many children do you have?

AN: Two. They went to public school and to the Yiddishe school. My son went to Cornell and my daughter to Bennington. They had gone to Bronx Science. Then my son went to Stanford in biophysics. My daughter is a doctor in Santa Cruz and she is married. She started in Chicago and finished in Mount Sinai. The both have children.

HW: What do you do with your time now?

AN: I'm still very active in the Bund organization.

HW: Have you ever been to Israel?

AN: Yes. Maybe ten times. We have family there.

HW: What do you think of the politics there?

AN: We don't like what Shamir is doing. We want peace with the Arabs and without compromise you can't achieve anything.

HW: How do you feel about the situation in America?

AN: We saw the changes. We're opposed to racism and antisemitism. We feel the downfall of the blacks is their loose family connections.

HW: Did you experience antisemitism here?

AN: We have very little contact with non-Jews. Our neighbors in Pelham Parkway were not Jewish but we were on very good terms with them. But we didn't socialize with them.

HW: What is your biggest achievement in life?

AN: The grandchildren. Because surviving was certainly not in our hands. We came so close to dying so many times, but we were lucky.

HW: Tell me more about your organizational involvement.

AN: I was involved with the Workmen's Circle before I became an American citizen. I had a very high executive position in the group and traveled all over the U.S. for them --- Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City, and Canada; New Jersey, Pennsylvania. I did this while I was working as an operator. I went mostly on weekends and I was basically an organizer. My wife was home with the children. At first I didn't get paid but by the 1960s I was paid by them as a professional. I gave up my shop and worked for them. And I can say I would have made much more in my shop. Basically I was organizing survivors into branches. I was also very close with the English-speaking members of the Workmen's Circle. They wanted to get me in the "American" board of the organization, but it didn't work out. I don't know why. It didn't fit. And they were willing. So what I mean is, it's not always from their side.

HW: Why? What's the difference?

BN: We have a summer home in a community of 39 houses, in Highland Mills. It's called Raanana and was organized by the Zionist Labor Movement. There are people in this colony who are our age but are the children of immigrants. We get along well with them but . . . there's always a "but"; we are newcomers with a different mentality. We are very friendly and close with them and we socialize with them, but we are marked by our experiences.

HW: Did your children go there?

BN: No. Actually there was a camp next door owned by the Labor Zionists, but our children went to Camp Hemshech, from the Bund. It was a Yiddish/Socialist camp.

HW: Do you think a Holocaust could happen here?

AN: No. You have too many different minorities, too many different types.

BN: Even though we suffered and saw terrible things, I think most of us came out intact in the sense that we still have a belief in the basic humanity of other people. We don't condemn the whole German nation or the whole Polish nation. I don't look for antisemites in every corner and I don't say that because someone says something that the Jews don't like he's an antisemite.

HW: It's very interesting that you feel this way. Did you ever see a social worker or psychologist since you came here?

BN: No. I came to this idea myself.

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0086

4

AN: I don't think Jackson is an antisemite. The problem is if someone says anything against Jews, he's an antisemite.

HW: Are your children socialists?

AN: My son is a scientist and my daughter is not a political type although she is a liberal and was active in the sixties and worked for Eugene McCarthy.

HW: Would you say then that despite your experiences your outlook remained the same as it always was?

AN: Yes it did. Why should we become different just because this happened? If we become inhuman, then we have lost the argument in which we accuse them of being inhuman.

HW: Do you keep any Jewish traditions?

AN: We have a seder but I never go to synagogue.

BN: We are secular Jews. We don't go to shul on Yom Kippur.

AN: I wouldn't go to make it look good to someone else. I'm more religious than the religious Jews.

HW: Explain that.

AN: A religious Jew has his religion from thousands of years back. I have my culture from the renaissance of modern Jewish culture, which is not what happened to people 2,000 years ago, but what happened in the last 1,000 years and that's more relevant.

BN: We had socialist schools, we had Jewish life, we participated in the happenings of Jewish life. We had camps in Europe from the Bund. I remember that here we wanted to keep the Jewish-secular heritage and our friends were against it. They said: "Why do you need a secular Jewish school here? We have good public schools in America; America is not Poland. Here there is separation of church and state."

HW: Well, let me ask you --- did their children marry Jews?

BN: Our children didn't marry Jews. So it taught us a lesson and we were very upset.

AN: I fought against it with the first one, with our daughter. I fought very strongly against it. She went out with Jewish men too in medical school but she said: "I can't stand them. They talk only about a boat, a house, and Long Island." She couldn't take it.

USHMM Archives RG-50.165*0086

5

BN: It wasn't because I was against nationalities mixing. It was a reaction to going through the Holocaust. This was an emotional, not an intellectual attitude.

HW: How are the grandchildren being raised?

BN: Eh secularly. They call us Baba and Zayde. Our daughter and her husband Raul are active in a Jewish group. He's from California with a Puerto Rican background. They're with The New Agenda. Their group is called Koleinu. They celebrate all the Jewish holidays in their nusach, or style. We always attend them when we are there.

HW: Do you think their children will see themselves as Jews?

AN: Absolutely. My daughter brings her Jewishness home and her husband likes our way better than his family's. His family is not religious. She organizes every year a memorial for the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. When my daughter married we were not at the wedding because we were so much against it. It happened we were in Africa at the time, so we had a good excuse.

HW: Tell me about you son's marriage.

BN: Our son's marriage we attended. His wife is Italian-American. The parents aren't practicing and neither is the daughter. They had a secular wedding where God was not mentioned. Mostly they talked about love. They're now married four years.

HW: And how will they raise the children?

BN: Without any religion.

HW: Where do they live?

BN: In Philadelphia. And I'll tell you. We live in a terrible world. Maybe this mixing is the only way, in the long run, to stop all the hatred. We're definitely fortunate in that our children do have a Jewish cultural heritage that they still have. Of course, maybe I'm rationalizing because I want it to be this way.

Conclusion of Interview