

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

## **William Helmreich Oral History Collection**

**Interview with Jack Perry  
August 16, 1989  
RG-50.165\*0088**

## PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Jack Perry, conducted by William Helmreich on August 16, 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.

## **JACK PERRY**

### **August 16, 1989**

WH: How did you decide to make aliya to Israel from Atlanta, Georgia?

JP: We decided it while the children were still in high school. We decided that they'll take a year off between high school and college and would spend it in Israel. And after one of our sons decided to stay after a year, it started us thinking about living here. Since I came from Poland where life is regimented, like in Israel, I knew what we were in for. Nevertheless, we made aliya in 1981. I don't think it had anything to do with a particular Zionist draw. But since two of our sons, Ronnie and Jeff, expressed a desire to come, we felt that we should come too. Of course, knowing how hard life here would be by comparison to the U.S., I decided to bring over as much as possible so that we wouldn't end up going back. My family hadn't been Zionist, just religious.

WH: Did you find work here?

JP: Yes. I was lucky. I managed a commercial laundry. In the U.S., I was a textile salesman—linens, so it's somewhat related. This is a commercial laundry which cleans hotel linens.

WH: What town where you born in?

JP: Lodz. I was in the ghetto until 1944 and was then shipped out to Auschwitz. I was born in 1927. I had two sisters and two brothers of whom one sister is still alive. She lives in Toronto. I was liberated in Allach, a camp near Dachau.

WH: When did you come to the States?

JP: In December 1949. I had been in Feldafing and then moved to Bamberg where, with a friend, I rented two rooms. I lived in Bamberg from 1945 until 1949. I came here on the General Ballew from Bremenhaven. We spent a lot of time playing cards, chess, and talking and singing. The crew was very nice to us but we didn't know English too well. I thought going to America was the best thing that could happen to anybody. My sister went to Israel, but she is one of those who couldn't make it and left. (Despite this, he came.) I was supposed to go to Israel, too, but when the DP Act was passed, a friend convinced me that you can always go to Israel but you can't always go to the U.S. It didn't take much convincing because throughout the world people know that coming to the U.S. is a once in a lifetime opportunity, so you go. I do know that with the circle of friends I had who came here, had I come to Israel then I wouldn't be religious today, as I am, because none of them were religious.

WH: Are you friends with these people now?

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JP: Yes, but because we're observant there are limits, since we can't eat in their homes. It's also very hard to explain to someone who knew you when you weren't observant that you are now. They say, "What are you trying to do, fool me? I knew you then."

WH: As I sit here listening to the muezzin the background, I think of anti-semitism in the U.S. Did you feel the anti-semitism in America?

JP: You definitely felt it. But most of my clients were not Jewish and I was very friendly with them. I traveled throughout the South. Nobody ever called me a name or anything.

WH: Religion is pretty important to you?

JP: Yes. Even when I wasn't religious I always believed in predestination. My father predicted that my sister and I would be the ones to survive. He said on his deathbed in 1943, "You two will have it good." And this was when my other brothers were still alive. I did not have the strength in the camps to commit suicide. On both occasions, when I wanted to, others didn't let me. They picked me up and carried me. So that was *bashert*, too. I don't know who picked me up.

WH: Who met you at the pier?

JP: Jewish Agency people. My friend and I went to Cincinnati where I lived for 10 years until 1960. I came to Atlanta because of business. When we came to Cincinnati, there was no one there to greet us. Instead a taxi came for us. We stayed at first in a boarding home owned by a Jewish lady. She was paid by the Jewish Family Service to put us up. We stayed about a month.

WH: Where did you meet Lilah?

LP: We met in Cincinnati. My mother did not approve because Jack was European. Her husband was European, from England, and the marriage did not work out that well. So she put two and two together and concluded that European men aren't nice to their wives.

JP: We'll we still got married.

LP: Jack is a very good husband. Actually, my parents later told me on many occasions that I wasn't good enough for Jack. They saw how he treated me.

WH: (text illegible in original transcript copy)

JP: Yes and some became very wealthy. Survivors in general have done very well.

WH: Did the survivors meet as a group in Cincinnati?

JP: There was a club started by German Jews who had come during the war. They had a soccer team and we got together and played. Most of us were single then. Others played poker, looked for girls. So people had invitations to lunch and get-togethers, parties. It was definitely a group. We often met at Meadow Park. Of course, many Americans went there to.

WH: What did the war teach you about people?

JP: People did things under extreme pressure that they thought they'd never do. Some were animals and some weren't.

WH: Do you dream about the war?

JP: Off and on, but less now than before.

WH: Isn't there a tremendous sense of humiliation about how one was forced to live by others, and how does one recover from that?

JP: Just by saying, "I know what I am." But does that person know who he is? How do you feel when you humiliate someone else? Do you feel proud? If you do, then you're not a person.

WH: Did you feel a desire for revenge?

JP: Well, my revenge, maybe because of my Jewish upbringing, was not a physical revenge. My revenge is, and I spoke at my niece's wedding about it, our children are getting married, they're having their own children, and we're still Jewish. Israel is a state and this is our land. Thus we did not let Hitler accomplish what he (intended?)

WH: Do you feel your life here is richer than in the States?

JP: I have mixed feelings. I lived much better in the U.S. It was a nice community. I sacrificed the easy life and conveniences for the feeling that I am here as a Jew in my country. I became a citizen here because that way I became a part of the country for better or for worse. I felt that way, for example, about the rescue at Entebbe. We burned our bridges by selling, rather than renting the house, in order to make aliya. (Their apartment here is quite beautiful, American style, with all the conveniences that exist in America; well, most of the conveniences. It doesn't compare to the house with a private pool that they had in Atlanta.)

WH: Were you very involved in the Jewish community in Atlanta?

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JP: Not really. I ran once for the synagogue board, but I was defeated. I traveled and couldn't be too involved. I gave money to Israel Bonds and to the synagogue.

WH: What are you most proud of?

JP: Our children and how they brought us to our present level of observance. My son came home one day and said he wasn't going to go to public high school. When they started observing Shabbat, our agreement was: You do what you want and don't bother me. And they just bided their time and little by little, there came a time when I said if I have to sleep on the floor, I will not drive to shul on Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah. That was the turning point.

WH: In all the years you weren't observant, did you question how God could have allowed the Holocaust to happen?

JP: (text illegible in original transcript copy)...happened and would happen again—to Jews and to other people.

WH: So when you believed in *bashert*, who was responsible for that happening?

JP: That belief came **after** I became religious.

WH: Do you believe in God?

JP: That's a very hard question to answer. What do we mean by "believe in God?" I believe in some being who controls the world. Is my putting on tefillin, praying in the morning, part of it? I don't know. Do the rabbis saying you shouldn't move the light (on Shabbos) mean something? I feel that's absurd, no matter how smart the sages were. Or that you should tear the toilet paper before Shabbos? There was no toilet paper in the old days, so how do you know you cannot tear it? Is it work? How come you can open up a box of food because you're going to eat it? I mean, these things, I'm not a learned person. If people say this is what you should do, I'm not going to question. I'm a follower. I'm not going to go out and shout, "I'm not going to go out and follow the thing of not cutting the toilet paper." (The Perrys live in Arzei Habirah, a very religious section in Jerusalem. She covers her hair. They are *Baalei Teshuvah*.) But I will not feel bad if I forget and tear the paper. I won't run to shul and say I sinned. I don't say you should move the light, but to say you should move it this way and not that way, this is a little far-fetched. I definitely believe there is a higher being. Does He expect me to do everything the sages say He expects? This I question.

WH: (text illegible in original transcript copy)

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JP: According to the sages we weren't doing what He told us to do. We were punished because we strayed.

WH: Do you believe that?

JP: Do I have a choice?

WH: Yes. Lots of people I've interviewed have told me they don't believe it.

JP: But I choose to believe it.

WH: One person asked me why those who didn't believe and came to America missed the Holocaust and so many who believed and who stayed, were killed?

JP: But some Jews who were Orthodox came to the U.S.?

WH: Very few.

JP: Well, the Jews had a choice. I do question.

WH: What makes you follow it?

JP: It's a combination of a lot of things. Once I took on this life, I'm going to follow it. I don't want to offend those around me. Like I used to smoke on Shabbos. And when I did it, the kids would just leave the room. So I did it in the bathroom. And then I said, "Who am I kidding?" It was hard but I said I'll do without it.

WH: Where are you politically in terms of Israel?

JP: Well, keeping the territories is one thing. Killing for that is another. We have a strong right and a strong left here. If we have to till or transfer by force, I'd rather give it up.

WH: (text illegible in original transcript copy)

JP: I really can't say I had any special ability but a normal person picks up the pieces and doesn't brood. Maybe it was the idea I mentioned before of raising a family as revenge over Hitler.

WH: Do you have any habits from the war like freezing bread?

JP: No. I knew I could always get something at a 7/11. Only in the very beginning did I think like that. Eventually you accept your losses and go back to a normal life.

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WH: What do your kids do?

JP: Jeff is a computer programmer for the New York Stock Exchange. Ronnie is an insurance salesman in Jerusalem. Mayer works for Feldheim Publishers in Jerusalem. Jeff's wife is very keen on living in Israel. He was here for three years, but was laid off.

Conclusion of Interview