

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

William Helmreich Oral History Collection

Interview with Alex Petrushka

March 26, 1990

RG-50.165*0090

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Alex Petrushka, conducted by William Helmreich on March 26, 1990 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.

ALEX PETRUSHKA
March 26, 1990

WH: Where were you during the war?

AP: In labor camps, Auschwitz, Oranienburg, Sachsenhausen, and in Dachau's Kaufering Camp, Number 11. Later, I went on a death march.

WH: When did you become interested in music? (Petrushka is a master piano teacher)

AP: Well, I was born with music. Music was always a part of my life. My mother was a pianist and a teacher. My father was a well-known violinist in Poland. Music was in my genes.

WH: What did you do after the war?

AP: I really planned on becoming a mathematician, but then the war broke out. And in the ghetto I played the piano. I found places with pianos and played until the age of 17. Now the first thing that happened after the war was that I looked for a piano. I played because I could express myself in music better than in any other way. I joined an orchestra in Heidelberg for a year. I also worked for the Jewish Welfare Board there too.

WH: But after all the horrors you experienced, was there a reluctance to play music?

AP: No, on the contrary, it was a feeling of expression, of breathing life. I love music. I don't think I analyzed it.

WH: Is there any way in which your music is influenced or shaped by the Holocaust?

AP: No question about it. My whole personality is influenced by it. The whole experience for me was a Sodom and Gomorrah. If I had immersed myself in the bitterness of the past, then Hitler would have succeeded. Instead, I turned to the joy of music. But I do not analyze it anymore than I analyze why I love my wife. It is there; it is my oxygen.

WH: When did you come here?

AP: March 1947, on the Marine Marlin. There was a strike in Bremerhaven and we had to wait there for three weeks. When we got here I saw my first Americans in civilian clothes – until then I'd known only soldiers. And I saw that they were people like all other people. Then my mother and I went to the Marseilles Hotel and I thought, "Oh, it's the DP camps all over again." The smell! I still remember the smell of the place. It smelled like peanuts and there was a musty smell.

WH: Were your parents observant?

AP: No, but they were Jewishly conscious and sent me to a Hebrew gymnasium.

WH: What did you do when you came here?

AP: I was told my people that the best business in America is plastics. Of course, I didn't know what plastics was. So three days later I went to work in a plastics factory in Yonkers on McLean Avenue. Don't ask. I was back in concentration camp all over again. I was cutting cones for ten hours a day for 65 cents an hour six days a week. I just didn't believe what was happening – supporting my mother and myself. Then I got a job sorting panties for 75 cents an hour on 23rd Street. I became an expert on panties and I immediately wanted to go to school. I went to USNA and they were unbelievable. They gave me a fellowship of \$25.00 a week which I repaid years later, every penny of it, with joy.

WH: Where did you go to school?

AP: Well, the high school I went to, the Hebrew gymnasium, no longer existed. And they wanted my birth certificate. I went from one school to another school, to another school. No way. Then, an incredible thing happened. I met Dr. Pinchas Churgin, the Dean of Yeshiva University and I spent the first Passover in the U.S. with the Churgins. Their daughter, Batya, a musicologist, was taking me from one place to another. Then finally, Dr. Churgin said, "Do you still remember your high school studies?" I said, "Of course." He said, "Okay, I'm going to give you the exams for Yeshiva University." And so, I went to Y.U. from 1947 to 1951 and got my B.A. there. And I was the first conductor of an orchestra they had there. There was no music program there. I used to come there at 6:00 a.m., and wake up my guys to play.

WH: Where did you play?

AP: At all graduations and other functions.

WH: Were there other students in your classes who were survivors?

AP: No. I only remember a Rabbi Arthur Schneier who was in many classes with me especially German, with Professor Rosenberg. I had nothing to do with the Jewish studies division. I was excused from that because I was also going, at the same time, to the New York College of Music, taking music courses. I was going to two schools.

WH: Is this your wife?

AP: No, I separated from my wife and now I'm married to Jeannie. The only thing that may surprise you is that she's not Jewish. She is one of the most beautiful people I have ever

met. She is gentle and, strangely enough, in all my encounters. I never met anyone who showed me such compassion and understanding, who licked my wounds, as her. We've been together since 1973.

WH: What do your children do?

AP: My son is a computer specialist and my daughter is a graphic designer.

WH: Many survivors have strong feelings about marrying out of the religion. I take it you just look at people as people, as human beings?

AP: To answer you I have to take you on a trip. For me to talk about my Jewishness would not only be redundant; it would be silly. I'm so Jewish there's nothing I could do to change it. I couldn't imagine changing it anymore than people wanting to discard their tattoos. I would never, ever want to change that number. I look at it. I still see the victory. I always think of 34452. That doesn't exist anymore. That was my father's number. It is tragic, yet it's victorious. One of us died. The day he died was a horrifying day. When the war began I took care of them. I saved their lives innumerable times. And that day I couldn't save this life. I was in Auschwitz, working sixteen hours a day. And he had a boil that was so infected that he was very, very ill. So he went to the hospital (**illegible**) in a commando that was working in the hospital. The place was empty. I asked the man working there, "Where's my father?" He looks at the chimney and he says, "Right there, in the smoke." And you know what's incredible? How a person's defense mechanisms work. My father was really a very special man. I didn't shed a tear at that moment. What I remember, what I remember is my stone-like insides. I feel his death much more now; he died in forty-four, 46 years ago. I feel it every day stronger and stronger and I am more enraged about it.

WH: How does one have faith in a world where a man as accomplished and talented as your father could just be reduced to a nothing, to a number in a camp?

AP: Somehow my life instincts were so strong. In Jeannie I met a person with whom I am so much in concert with, that humanity has no boundaries. I didn't marry Jeannie because she was Jewish or not Jewish. And we have no barriers because neither of us are religious. I think she was a Presbyterian, but we don't practice.

WH: Do you ever go to synagogue?

AP: I don't participate in religion because I feel that throughout all the years I found no solace there or in talking to rabbis. I'll never forget – one day I was at a bar mitzvah, a rabbi spoke in Scarsdale. He gave one of the most brilliant sermons I ever heard on the Holocaust. And afterwards I came over to him and I said, "You don't know how you touched my heart." And he said, "Gut Shabbos, gut Shabbos, gut Shabbos." So. I feel,

frankly, more (**illegible**) am really, deep in my heart, a temple unto myself. I'm still angry at Him.

WH: But you believe in Him?

AP: Oh yes, but He took away everything I ever had. He took away my childhood. But then He gave me what I have now. I have friends and students who I like more than I can tell you.

WH: What about other survivors?

AP: The people that survived, in general, were the people that had the greatest chance to survive because they were the least sensitive. The people that were most sensitive were immediately exterminated.

WH: Well, you're one of that group. How then, did you survive?

AP: I don't...I cannot understand it.

JP: I think his family upbringing was so difficult, it trained him.

WH: In what way was it so difficult?

JP: Because his parents were not home. He was probably not a wanted child.

AP: I had a very European upbringing.

WH: What did all these experiences teach you about human nature in general?

AP: I was appalled by the lack of sensitivity, indifference, and contempt of American Jews when I came here. As Dreyfuss would have said, "I accuse" the Jewish people for having so little compassion and asking me certain questions. For example, one night I was sitting with Lorin Hollander's teacher, in Maine, mind you, in (**illegible**). And I started at 9 p.m. and finished, five hours later, at 2:00 a.m., and this was the first time I'd ever talked about it. And the teacher said to me, "Did you have to upset my life that much?" And I found that this was not the exception, but the rule. I found very few people who were compassionate.

WH: Why was this?

AP: It had to do with their own guilt and the fact that it simply made them uncomfortable. And I find that my wife, who is not Jewish, understands it better

because she has the objectivity. If I were a sociologist, I would like to write about why I got so little compassion.

WH: Do you have any friends who are survivors?

AP: No. I met one person I knew from childhood when I first came. I saw him once but never again.

Conclusion of Interview