

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

William Helmreich Oral History Collection

**Interview with Maury Spira and Sylvia Spira
August 23, 1989
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Maury Spira and Sylvia Spira, conducted by William Helmreich on August 23, 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.

MAURY SPIRA AND SYLVIA SPIRA

August 23, 1989

WH: Where were you born?

MS: In Galicia, Poland, in Dukla. I had two brothers and three sisters. The sisters had already come to America and the brothers didn't make it. I was born in 1919. I wasn't in a concentration camp. I was in hiding in various places, in peoples' houses, on the roof of a stable.

WH: Where were you born?

SS: In Valkydobrani, Czechoslovakia which, after 1938, became Hungary. It was 27 km from Munkacs.

WH: Were either of your parents Zionists?

SS: Not mine and not my husbands.

WH: Where were you during the war?

SS: In 1944 we were taken to the concentration camps, to Auschwitz for seven months, and after that to a labor camp in the Sudetenland. While in Auschwitz we didn't work, just sat around, waiting. We were 1,000 in a block, counted twice a day. We were just numbers. My brother and sister also survived.

WH: Why did you come to the U.S. and not Israel?

SS: I had three uncles there. For us Israel was Jerusalem. It was like a fairy tale, something you know about but you don't really think of it as something real. That's how we were brought up, chasidish. And I met my husband on the boat over, the Marine Flasher. I took the boat in Bremen and my wife got on in LeHavre.

WH: You're from Galicia and you're from Hungary. Since these areas are near each other is it really the same area culturally?

MS: I would say so. Before WWI there was no border there. As a matter of fact, my mother was from Slovakia and I had an aunt who lived in Munkacs. Of course, this wasn't true of all Polish families. And I lived close to the Czechoslovakian border.

WH: How come you came to Cleveland?

SS: Both of us had relatives who lived there.

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WH: Were you religious then?

MS: Not right after the war. My sisters weren't and my beliefs were shattered. But once we got married and my wife was religious, I decided it's not right. I'll go back to what I was used to. Not that I believed it, but it's what I was used to.

WH: How come you made aliya?

MS: I instigated it. We weren't Zionists. I was in the slipcover business and we came here in 1972. I began to be excited about Israel when the State was created in 1948. I always read about the country's achievements. And my excitement kept growing. I read the Jerusalem Post in Cleveland. I talked about Israel all the time.

WH: Did you feel as though you were really a minority in America?

SS: I think that although we appreciated what America had done for us, we couldn't completely shake off the war's effects. It's not that we wanted to leave America. It's that we wanted to come here.

WH: But you were there for 26 years. Did you think it could happen there?

SS: Well, you still didn't feel you were completely welcome in America. There was still a dividing line. You'd listen to a radio program. And always there was underlying hatred.

MS: I believed it could happen in the U.S.

WH: How did you live in Cleveland?

SS: In a private house that we bought cheap at the time, for \$18,000.

MS: In 1962, we came for a pilot visit. We saw you needed at least \$50,000 to come, so we went back to save some more. My daughter came here and worked on a kibbutz where she liked it very much. Our son came on a trip through the Cleveland Hebrew Academy. He was also excited about it after spending the summer here. So he started challenging us: "Daddy, you talk and talk, but you're not going." So, eventually we went. We knew our standard of living would be reduced but we accepted that. We were prepared for it. We decided to burn our bridges behind us and sell the house. We knew that if we didn't we might be tempted to come back. Anyway, we needed the money from selling the house to live here.

SS: We had it harder than others. We weren't 25 and didn't have so much stamina, but we weren't old enough to retire. Our children were very good about it.

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WH: Do you believe God gave this land to the Jews?

MS: It's not a question of that. I believe in that, but the main thing is that in our lifetime, Israel became a fact. This is where we belong.

SS: We believe that all the things that happened in Europe are going to happen again, if not in our lifetimes, then in 100 years.

MS: I also felt that Jewish history is being made here and I didn't want to be a bystander to it.

WH: What adjustment problems were there here?

MS: I wasn't used to working for others. I had been independent. But the slipcover business was not a business for here. But I got a break. A relative took us to someone in this business, in the drapery business. And he sold us his knowhow and the business. We had a language problem but that wasn't the main problem; we got along. We started off in a very poor and depressing absorption center near Jerusalem. It doesn't exist anymore. They had nothing that Americans were used to. We were used to a carpet, to different food. After three months we hit rock bottom but then we started going back up. There was no other place to go but up. After a while we moved to Rishon Letzion.

WH: Didn't it bother you that you weren't living anymore in Jerusalem, the city of your dreams?

SS: No, because we started there and had a bad experience there. And also, it was too cold there. In Rishon we spent five miserable months. There was no work there. We were discouraged but we couldn't go back. We felt that if we returned we would say that we never gave it enough time, enough of a chance. But I worried because I saw it was affecting my husband's health. He would wake up at two or three in the morning and wouldn't be able to sleep.

WH: So how well did you do here?

MS: I never really made a living here. The success that I had was that I started working here. But we have a nice apartment because of money we had from the States.

WH: What do your children do?

SS: My daughter married to someone who works in computers. They have four children. Our son works on a Kibbutz. He was in the Army. They're both religious. He is in Maale Gilboa. In the beginning he lived in Sde Eliyahu. He's single and he's 33. It's a young couples' kibbutz. He loves the outdoor world.

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WH: What achievement are you proudest of?

MS: That we came here.

SS: I feel that same way.

WH: How are the values different here?

SS: I don't know how to explain it but even though my children struggle here, they're more productive here. Their lives have more meaning. If I buy a dress for my granddaughter, she's so happy with it. In the U.S., so what! They're not impressed. That's not a present. That you expect.

MS: You asked what I'm proudest of. I should have said first my marriage. We're married as long as this country exists.

Conclusion of Interview