

-TITLE-FEHER Robert
-I_DATE-10/23/90
-SOURCE-SAN FRANCISCO HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
-RESTRICTIONS-
-SOUND_QUALITY-EXCELLENT
-IMAGE_QUALITY-EXCELLENT
-DURATION-1 HOUR 30 MINUTES
-LANGUAGES-ENGLISH
-KEY_SEGMENT-
-GEOGRAPHIC_NAME-
-PERSONAL_NAME-
-CORPORATE_NAME-
-KEY_WORDS-
-NOTES-
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1:01 Mr. Feher was thirty-four when he moved to Madison, Wisconsin with his twenty year old wife. This was initially a very happy period of his life. He started a sales business and prospered enormously in two years. Although he had turned \$1500 into \$35000, he soon became unhappy with his work. He felt that he was able to make profits, however he felt guilty making money from handicapped people. (type of business not identified)

6:02 In 1966 Mr. Feher became so dissatisfied with his work and guilty for chasing the "American Dream" that he sold his business and wanted to move to California. instead he moved to Milwaukee because his wife's family lived there. He then decided to go to Mexico to visit his eighty-five year old aunt. She was last of his father's sisters still alive. She had left Europe when she was sixteen and did not go through the Holocaust. The family in Mexico was a very wealthy family. They liked Robert very much and offered him twenty-five percent of their factory if he wanted to stay. He did not because he wanted to make it on his own. He stayed two weeks in Mexico. His aunt, Irma Weiss Kovesi, died a few months later.

7:54 This aunt had helped Robert's uncle leave Europe after the Holocaust. This same uncle married his mother when she was in her sixties. They had fallen in love when she went to visit Mexico. This is considered a mitzvah.

13:45 While traveling to Mexico Mr. Feher saw car washes for the first time. He did some "poor" research on the business and decided to buy eleven car washes. He made three or four thousand dollars each time he sold one. he managed to survive in the business although it was very difficult.

15:36 After a few years, he sold the car washes for real estate and went to California with his wife and five year old son. He had \$25,000 in his pocket. Robert never liked Milwaukee, her though it heavy and it reminded him of the German culture. The trip to California had no specified destination, and Mr. Feher felt like a wandering Jew looking for a home. He kissed the ground when they came to the California border and drove until they came to San Francisco where he fell in love with the city.

20:38 The family eventually came upon an eight room apartment building in Southern laurel Heights. There was an old two bedroom apartment there for \$220 a month. The woman who owned the building was in her late seventies, and although Mrs. Feher did not like the apartment, Mr. Feher agreed to rent it. He explains that he felt that the older woman was close to death and that he wanted to take over the building when she died and sell it. He believes this was much like a supernatural feeling, but sure enough, the woman died four our five months later.

24:23 When they settled in California Mr. Feher began taking a real estate course and was hired by Grubb and Alice (ph??). He went into commercial real estate just about the same time that his landlady passed away. The woman's son arrive from Washington and he and mr. Feher soon became friends. This man gave Mr. Feher and exclusive listing on the building, which he matched, although he was new in the business. He received an \$8,000 commission and he moved with his family to Twin peaks. At this time his wife was working as a Disability Variation Analyst in Oakland.

27:43 Within his first year working in real estate, mr. Feher was "Rookie of the Year." He worked fifteen hours a day and brought in so many sales that by 1977 he became the number one company salesman in the company's history. At this point he decided to go out on his own, and he formed Fair Young Commercial Brokerage. He had been with G & A for three years. His new firm did very well due to Mr. Feher's reputation. numerous articles were written about him in "Real Estate news."

30:46 Mr. Feher had always wanted to live on the water so in 1975 he had bought a tow-house complex on the water. he rented on house and a cabana, and his family lived there for almost nothing.

32:33 At this time Mr. Feher began to get horrible headaches. He went to the doctor who informed him that he had Polycytabiavera, a rare disease of the bone marrow. He could have a stroke at any time, and the doctor gave him the option of radiation or blood therapy. Due to the fact that he does not believe in radiation, Mr. Feher began giving a pint of blood every few weeks to help him fight this "incurable" disease.

34:35 The doctor told Mr. Feher that he had at most seven years to live. This news was, for Mr. Feher, worse than the Holocaust. During the Holocaust he had always had some hope, but this doctor had taken all of his hope away from him. He now worked harder than he ever had because he wanted to assure that his son could go to college one day, and his wife would live comfortably after he was gone.

36:22 One day Mrs. Feher came across a book written about people who were cured by "miracles" with the aid of Chaim Friedlander, a man from New York. He was written up as someone who does wonders through prayer. Mrs. Feher wrote him a letter and soon received a phone call from New York. Mr. Friedlander spoke to Mr. Feher in Hebrew and appeared to be a very warm man. This was the first person who gave Mr. Feher any hope at all. Mr. Feher was given a new name "Chaim Josef," by Mr. Friedlander. Chaim means life.

37:46 Due to the fluctuations in his red blood cell count, Mr. Feher often became dizzy. He remedied this by drinking cognac to feel better and it soon became a habit. Although he was not an alcoholic, Mr. Feher drank often and continued to conduct business. It was when he was in Philadelphia on a business trip that he became very ill. When he returned his doctor told him that he had at most six months to live, so he sold his business to his partner for \$125,000 although it was worth well over 500,000. Today, the company is still in business and makes over a billion dollars a year.

39:48 The one thing that Robert wanted at this point was to live to see his son's Bar Mitzvah. He was incredibly weak and due to his anemia weighed 200 pounds. His son became his whole life, and he wanted to teach him about life. In order to find a rabbi who would perform the Bar Mitzvah ceremony on such short notice, he went to a liberal rabbi. This man, Rabbi Winston, was very kind and Mr. Feher began to drop off his son every week for his lessons.

41:40 Mrs. Feher would not give up on looking for a cure. One day she was standing on line with a nurse and mentioned her husband's illness. The nurse knew of a non-practicing medical doctor who practices Holistic medicine. Mrs. Feher called this man and Mr. Feher went to see him a few weeks later. At this point, he was very ill and although his mind was functioning, his physical condition was much like a ninety-year old man's would be. This doctor thought that he could help Mr. Feher, and told him that he would have to stop giving blood. Although Mr. Feher did not believe in homeopathy, the doctor offered him a remedy and he decided to take it.

44:00 When Mr. Feher call his original doctor to tell him that he was giving up treatment, the doctor told him that he was killing himself. mr. Feher would not relent and stopped giving blood. His condition remained the same and he started drinking a lot of juices in an attempt to cleanse his system. He reduced his alcohol intake and didn't eat much. He was getting progressively worse, and all he wanted was to see his son's Bar Mitzvah before he died. He had not had a Bar Mitzvah before himself.

46:35 Mr. Feher wanted to invite elderly Russian Jews from the Jewish community to San Francisco to his son's Bar Mitzvah. He invited approximately 100 and rented some buses and a restaurant for the reception following the service. Several pages of articles appeared in the Sax Francisco paper about the event which included a sit-down dinner and Jewish music. Although the event was a success, Mr. Feher was too weak to give his son the Torah.

47:41 During the reception Mr. Feher became very ill. He left early and when he arrived home fell into a diabetic coma. up until this time no one knew he had diabetes. He was in the coma for two days in which he had an incredible experience. He saw himself in the house of death, which looked like India. he was sitting in a hut, waiting for the rabbi to come and give him his last rites when he decided he didn't want to die, and told the rabbi to leave and refused to let go.

49:03 When he came out of the coma, his blood test was normal and all traces of his "fatal" disease had disappeared. Now Mr. Feher just had diabetes, and this gave him much joy. He believes that God healed him, not the homeopathy. he remained in the hospital for three weeks and within four weeks his diabetes had also disappeared, as he had said it would four week earlier.

51:00 What keeps him going?

Mr. Feher believes that when his father taught him that nothing was impossible, he trusted him. He has a tremendous belief in God and in hope, the two go together. The most devastating experience to him was not the Holocaust, because he had hope. Rather, it was when the doctors told him that he had an incurable disease and that took away his hope. The doctor of Homeopathy gave him back some of his hope and he then resolved to be the first person to be cured of the disease. it was very difficult because there was no one to rely on. Although his family was very supportive he was still very lonely.

53:00 During the Holocaust, trying to survive in Budapest, did he use mental games to keep hope?
Mr. Feher always worked with dreams and images. he feels a contact with the unexplainable. Much like a contact from another dimension. He was not brought up religiously, though he believed in God his entire life. He prayed a lot during the Holocaust. This prayer consisted of keeping his inner voice active, so he didn't feel so alone. It was his inner voice that he leaned on during the Holocaust, for he believes that he could never have survived alone.

55:16 During the Holocaust it was the loneliness that gave Mr. Feher the strength to trust and hope. he believes that hope is the most important thing in life. He believes that nothing will transpire until he can visualize it. Once he can visualize something, it may turn into reality, much like a painter or a writer. The humanity in man comes from the ability to dream, pray and hope, so that he may liberate himself from "limited intellectual misery."

58:00 Describe a typical day surviving in Budapest.
Mr. Feher does not believe in the typical. he was always on the move until he was liberated by the Russian army. He was unable to find anyone to identify with. All of the other children he met were in the ghetto and he could not identify with them.

59:23 What does he remember about his family being deported?
the Hungarians deported the Feher family. It only took a half an hour for them to clean out the house. His father and brother went first. When his mother went, she was allowed to take one backpack. They told her she was going to a work camp. The entire apartment house of fifty people was deported the day his mother was taken.

60:30 Did he see other deportations or beatings at the hands of the Hungarians?

He cannot recall. He saw people in lines and many dead people in Budapest. The bodies were stacked head to foot in the streets. He also saw a department store filled with frozen dead bodies. Some of these people were killed by bombs, some starvation. There was no attempt to bury them. He was liberated in February by the Russian army at which time he was living in Pest with a group of people in the fifth district. He remembers house to house, street to street combat. When he was liberated he could see the Russians come and the Germans with their hands up.

62:30 When he was able, Mr. Feher started walking towards his home. The streets were chaotic and people were dancing. He remembers the women with their guns. He walked about 45 minutes to an hour until he arrived home. it was like being in a dream; he knew he was free but he could not comprehend that the nightmare was over. He knew that his parents were gone, but he was going to see his mother's friend who had married a gentile and was not taken away.

She had married a nobleman and then converted. Mr. Feher knocked on her door and she recognized him. He was infested with lice and had to wash his hair with kerosene. He also had the "Ukrainian sickness," or diarrhea. Many people died from this.

65:30 Robert knew that he was supposed to stay with a blood relative so he looked up his aunt and uncle and went to visit. He learned about all of the concentration camps and looked on lists of survivors each day to find his parents' names. There were still a lot of Jews in the ghetto with his aunt and uncle. He started working in the black market although his aunt and uncle were quite wealthy and owned a grocery store. They soon hired him as the "Schleper." His job was to buy fruit wholesale at four o'clock in the morning at the marketplace to the store each morning then he would have breakfast, go to school, help in the store and go to sleep. At this time he was only fourteen years old, and very hungry. His uncle let him take some fruit, but his aunt was always very stingy. One day she yelled at him for eating fruit and told him that other schlepers would be fired for eating fruit. Robert was very hurt by this and left his aunt and uncle.

67:30 Robert returned to see his old building and began working in the black market there. He put himself through school and earned the best grades of his life. One of his most proud memories is of the day that he earned enough money selling saccharin to buy a whole loaf of bread. He ate the entire thing, slice by slice, until his stomach was in pain and bloated. This, though was one of his greatest pleasures.

69:25 How did he feel about the Hungarians after the war? He had no feeling, he merely felt that "I made it, I'm alive." He never discussed the Holocaust with anyone. He attended a Christian school where everyone was very nice, however he could not relate to anyone. He had a lot of anger. His neighbors had stripped his apartment, and the only person who gave back anything was the wash woman - the person with the least to give.

70:55 In July Robert's parents returned and they left Hungary for German. Hungary was now a strange land to them. Most of their family had been killed and there was no one to trust. He learned that seventy members of his family were killed in Auschwitz. The largest segment of his family was in Russia during the Holocaust. His mother was the last of twelve children, some of who went to Auschwitz with his grandmother. His mother's sister and husband committed suicide in the wagon on the way there. His one uncle, who had a disability from World War I, was beaten up by the nazis for asking why the Holocaust was happening.

72:51 In Hungary, after the war, there were no alliances left. Even the local police had been switched between villages. When the Holocaust was over, Robert felt like an island. No one could adjust to society immediately. The memories were too painful, and the element of trust in man had virtually disappeared. When he was a child, Robert thought of himself as a Hungarian first and a Jew second. After the Holocaust, he was just a Jew, no longer a Hungarian.

74:08 After a period of forty-five years, Mr. Feher returned to Hungary for a visit. He still didn't want anyone to know he was a Jew. In fact, he had difficulty even asking where the Jewish temple was because subconsciously he was afraid of being arrested. He visited the Duhan (ph) temple and could not comprehend how people could live and pray within Hungary. He certainly did not feel like he was home, but more like a stranger who spoke the language and understood the customs.

75:32 In the United States, Mr. Feher is not a closet Jew. He has the Twelve Tribes of Israel printed on his business card. In Hungary, however, he felt much resentment. He did not have the same feeling in Germany in 1945 when he moved there. He believes this is because as a displaced person he had food to eat and cigarettes to smoke. he felt like a conqueror and a certain amount of revenge as he ate in front of the Germans who had nothing, although his heart would still pound when he would see the German police.

77:05 What was his reaction when Germany reunited?
Mr. Feher is not particularly happy about German reunification, as he believes it has nothing to do with freedom. Intellectually, he thinks that it is good for the west, but he finds something distasteful in the German character. He feels that Germans believe that they are better than anyone else. They believe they are "supermen," and this is what he still fears.

78:35 What was his reaction to seeing Jews praying when he went back to visit Hungary?
These Jews all looked like they were saying their Kaddish. To him they looked dead. In fact, the whole culture looked dead. The buildings and people were there, but the spirit is dead. When in Hungary, Mr. Feher went back to his place of birth where there had been five thousand Jews. They, there are between five and ten. An old man took him to the cemetery, and he went to a chapel where these Jews pray. He sang cantorial songs for them, yet he sensed death, - even the Jews that are alive there seemed dead.

80:04 To Robert Feher, the Holocaust is the celebration of the survival of the human spirit. Without the Holocaust there would be no state of Israel. The phenomenon of the birth of a nation after six million Jews were killed is beyond his comprehension. He does not understand how God could have allowed the Holocaust to happen. He recognizes that he is not God. In 1948, after the war, Mr. Feher went to fight in Israel. Although he did not want to live in Israel, he and others, felt that they needed a country. Mr. Feher believes that Israel was born as a direct result of the Holocaust.

82:21 Mr. Feher believes that Israel is about survival. The whole country is a miracle, including sustaining it, and the wars they've won. He feels very fortunate and blessed that he is alive to tell the story of the Holocaust. He has no regrets about telling his story. It brings a different dimension to life, and a greater depth to understanding. He believes that he has lived many lives in one lifetime, as have the other survivors. He believes that he is fortunate for being able to still love humanity and have faith.

83:26 A business associate asked Mr. Feher what life is about. He answered, "life is a total experience, and unfortunately, not many of us are aware of the totality of the experience." He thinks that living through horrible experiences enables man to appreciate what life is about. At least he does.

84:23 What has contributed to Robert's and other Holocaust Survivor's success after the Holocaust?

Mr. Feher believes that survivors are successful because they know what it is like to "beat the odds." He is grateful that he did the interview because although at fifty-nine he has more drive and ambition than most younger men, he has learned that his survival was a way of beating the system on his own, and that he has lived his entire life on the edge. Through the interview he has learned that he is always seeking uncertainty even if he is taking unnecessary risks. He wants to take fewer risks. He has no sense of what is normal, and he believes normal to be ordinary, and he has not had an ordinary existence since he was a young child. The Holocaust has become a part of his entire existence. The interview taught him that he doesn't have to live on the edge any longer and he may still have a productive, creative life. He believes that to get ahead in life, people must take risks, however he will now rearrange his life to take fewer risks.

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