

STRONG, Tracy
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Abstract

Tracy Strong, Jr. was born in Seattle, Washington on September 4, 1915. He lived in Seattle with his parents, brother, and sister for the first twelve years of his life and remembers it as very pleasant. His father worked for the YMCA and in 1923 was appointed to work at the international headquarters in Geneva and in November, Tracy and his family moved there. He went to a public school and an international school, but came back to the United States because his father thought he should learn English. After graduating from high school at the age of sixteen, he went to Germany and went to Deutsche Unionhoff where he heard Hitler speak at two rallies. After Hitler rose to power, Tracy went to Oberlin College in Ohio and earned a bachelor's degree. Afterwards, he went to Yale Divinity School and received his master's degree in divinity. Tracy then travelled back to Geneva and began to work for the European Student Relief Fund [ESRF]. His main work was to identify students held in camps and try to get them out. If that was unsuccessful, he sent them materials to continue their studies. His work was centered in Marseilles, but Tracy traveled to camps all over Europe. He also worked for La Cimade, which assisted in getting travel documents for students and helped organize activities. When the United States entered the war, Tracy was uncertain if he would be able to continue his activities. When the Germans showed no signs of being hostile towards him, he decided to continue. He did eventually leave France for Geneva. While there, he assisted prisoners of war in German camps and also helped American aviators shot down in Switzerland. In 1944 Tracy enlisted in the army and was part of an infantry division in Germany. When the war was over, Tracy was transferred to a redevelopment camp and then to the Education Department in Berlin where he reeducated German youth. He was demilitarized in America and flew back to Berlin as a civilian. He stayed in Berlin until 1949 when he returned to the United States and married. He then got a master's degree in education at Stanford and began teaching. First he taught world history and French at a school in Coalinga, and then went to Beirut and taught at an International university there. He then came back to Garden Grove, California where he spent ten years as a high school principal. Tracy believes that his experiences during World War II and his work for the ESRF helped him to understand and appreciate people more. He realized that people want someone they can relate to and have someone listen to them. His goal in educating others was to break out of the routine and try to make a difference in their lives.

Time Coded Notes **Disc One (Tape One)**

- 00:37 Tracy Strong, Jr. was born in Seattle, Washington on September 4, 1915 and was raised there. His father had moved to Seattle in 1910 to work for the YMCA. Tracy spent the first twelve years of his life in Seattle on Queen Anne Hill, where his family built a house overlooking Lake Union. Tracy had an older brother, Robin, and a sister, Ruth. It was pleasant growing up in Seattle and it was not as crowded as it is now.
- 01:43 The house Tracy's father built is still there. He recently talked to the woman who bought it from his father in 1923 and still lives there. He had a normal childhood and spent his summers with his father in YMCA camps. In 1923, his father was appointed to be the Boys' Work Secretary of the world's YMCA with headquarters in Geneva. Tracy

and the family moved to Geneva when he was five years old; his sister was seven and his brother was ten.

- 02:34 Tracy's father decided that if he was going to work in a worldwide organization, he should see some of the world. So, the family sailed from Seattle in November 1923 on a Princess ship and went around the world in six months. First they went to Japan and arrived right after the big earthquake in 1923. Then to Manchuria, Hong Kong, through India to the Suez Canal, Palestine, Venice, and they arrived in Geneva in April of 1924.
- 03:43 They settled in Geneva, a small but international city due to the international organizations headquartered there such as the Red Cross. Tracy started out in public school where he had to learn French quickly in order to play with the other children. His parents could not pick up the language and eventually Tracy and his siblings asked them not to speak French because their accent was so poor. From public school, he went to an international school for about a year and then came back to the United States because his father thought he should learn English. Tracy came back to high school for two years in Bambridge Island, Washington. He graduated high school at the age of sixteen. His father thought he was too young to go to college and since his parents travelled frequently for the YMCA, Tracy went to school at the Deutsche Unionhoff in Germany in 1932. He lived in Germany during Hitler's rise to power.
- 05:35 Tracy heard Hitler speak twice at big rallies. At the end of 1932, he began his studies at Oberlin College in Ohio and spent four years there. He earned his bachelor's degree in 1937, but he was not sure what he wanted to do professionally, so he went to Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut for three years and earned his master's degree in divinity in 1940.
- 06:31 By then, the war in Europe had started. Tracy's father was head of the War Prisoners Aid [WPA] of the YMCA. The WPA was approved when the Geneva Convention took place. The International Red Cross took care of the physical problems of the prisoners from all countries that were part of the Geneva Convention and the WPA took care of their spiritual and intellectual needs.
- 07:30 Tracy went to Geneva by boat from New York to Lisbon, Spain. He arrived right when France fell. Tracy was stuck in Barcelona for several weeks, but made it through southern France and then up the Rhone Valley to Geneva. He began working for the European Student Relief Fund [ESRF].
- 08:01 The ESRF was made of three student serving organizations. They were the World Student Christian Federation, which was Protestant, the Pax Romana, which was Catholic, and the ISS, which was a neutral organization. Tracy's job was to do for university students what the YMCA did for the general population. Students were singled out in camps in all countries.
- 08:37 Tracy went to Germany for about six months to work in prisoner of war camps and visited Stalag Sixteen and Seventeen. Most prisoners were French, British, and Polish. Eventually there were a few Russians, but he could not help them because Russia did not sign the Geneva Convention.

- 09:17 Under the ESRF and the YMCA, Tracy tried to get books and materials to identified students so that they could continue their studies. He visited fifteen camps on and off in the fall of 1941. He had to go back to Geneva because the Germans would no longer let him into camps. They thought that he tried to help prisoners escape.
- 11:25 Tracy left for Geneva in March 1942 to go back to the ESRF headquarters. By this time, camps had begun to show up in southern France. Donald Lowry, who was in charge of the YMCA in southern France, was based in Marseille and the ESRF was looking for someone to coordinate things for students only. Tracy was chosen to do this. Edward Melby travelled with him. Andre Dumas, who headed the ESRF, told Tracy that the activities were up to him to coordinate, but he had to answer to Andre. He was funded by the ESRF and a large part of his job was to travel to camps and set up activities. Tracy's main job was to identify students and get them out of the camps or get them studying materials. He was not happy with leaving people in the camps since conditions were not conducive to intellectual activities such as studying.
- 15:35 Tracy became friendly with many students. One student was Hans Solomon, whom he still corresponds with at present. He also provided equipment for artists and has some paintings that the artists did. He also gave violins, cellos, guitars, and a piano to musicians in camps. At one point, Tracy met a Russian choir.
- 18:03 Tracy's work was centered primarily in Marseilles. He lived in the Hotel Terminus and travelled to camps from there. At one point, he travelled with Donald Lowry, who had a Type A personality. Donald had worked in Czechoslovakia with the Czech YMCA. Any Czech student got help from Donald and held a special place in his heart. Donald also headed the Nimes Committee, in which various private organizations met once a month to coordinate efforts and intervene in Vichy to talk to the government for permission to do things such as getting refugees out of camps if they could support themselves. As long as the state paid nothing, the Vichy government generally accepted such propositions.
- 20:15 Tracy never went to Vichy, but he was an active participant in the Nimes Committee as an ESRF representative. The Red Cross provided food; other organizations provided intellectual and spiritual help. The Nimes Committee was always animated because groups were protecting their own interests, but everyone was willing to cooperate. During one session, Lowry asked for recommendations on what to do to improve and the discussion was very open. Everyone praised Lowry for the difficult job he had because Vichy was never cooperative.
- 23:52 Tracy also worked with the Cimade organization. It was a Protestant organization, set up by the French, and headed by Mark Bugner, who was the head of the French Protestant church. Cimade would put students into camps with YMCA and ESRF representatives to help. They lived in the camps and organized activities.
- 26:16 Tracy feels that because of Lowry's connections in southern France and because he had lived there, when he worked with Donald, more was done in a week than Tracy could do

in five months working alone. Donald never asked for more than he could get. He knew he could not change the camps, but he could emphasize the unfair treatment.

- 27:32 Tracy had to keep a lot of identity cards for travel. He also had a lot of food cards because of rationing. They were issued to him by the government. Bread and meat were rationed. Each month, Tracy got enough meat to make one good hamburger. One big difference between Germany and France was that France was a rich agricultural country and in southern France there were plenty of fruits and vegetables. Food seemed to be a central part in Tracy's life. He could always eat well though, not like they ate in the camps.
- 29:31 Tracy went to Switzerland regularly. He would gain five pounds there and lose the weight when he got back to France. He worked with the Quakers, particularly with Ross McClellan. Ross was very imposing, which helped him. In May 1941 Tracy witnessed the Quakers distributing milk and flour from a ship in Marseilles. As long as the ships kept coming, distribution continued smoothly. When the Germans stopped the ships from coming, distribution also stopped. All children were entitled to the distributed food. The distributions were an attempt to improve the diet of, not just refugee children, but children in all of southern France.
- 31:29 At the end of the foyer in Rievsaltes, Tracy built a stage where shows were put on. There were plays, musicals, church ceremonies, and so on. He went to regular Sunday services, which had mixed groups of German, Spanish, Polish, and French people. The service was conducted either in German or in French. Tracy also preached occasionally, in French. One time, a Spanish lady with a baby began to nurse him about halfway through Tracy's preaching. He said that for a twenty five year old, he was very surprised and distracted. Cimade was very big on Bible studies and the intellectual approach towards it. Not only refugees, but French people as well, were allowed to come to the ceremonies. They kept the organization central in its beliefs and ideas.
- 34:31 Tracy believes that the difference between French and American churches is that in America the mainline church always needs to have an impact on other social work issues, whether it is healthcare, improving food supplies, prison care, and so on. The French were more intellectual in their approach and loved to argue. They are far ahead of America in theology. Even with his theological training, Tracy was not prepared to discuss religion in such detail.
- 36:07 He had very good relations with the Cimade workers. Every six months, there was a big retreat for the workers that lasted three to four days. It consisted of relaxation, discussion, and skiing. Tracy loved to ski. He did so when he was ten in Switzerland, but has not skied in thirty years.
- 37:28 Tracy tells the story of Mr. Kaufman, a refugee trying to get out of France. He did not make it at first, but eventually did. The ESRF did not specialize in legal or illegal immigration, unlike the Unitarian and Jewish organizations. If Tracy could not get refugee permits for both leaving France and entering Spain, he would have students take them over the border via the Pyrenees or into Switzerland. This is what Hans Solomon and his five friends did. However, they were stopped by the Swiss Guard,

given a big bowl of soup, and sent back to France because Switzerland could not take everyone. Hans and his friends went back to Rievsaltes, arranged again to go back, and were eventually successful because they had visas. The visas were arranged through Cimade. They were very good at it, because it was one of their jobs, and they had students as guides across the mountains. The ESRF did not specialize in immigration, but could not help getting involved.

- 40:53 Tracy advised students to learn a trade or handicraft. He took a practical approach; even though he wanted them to continue their studies, the internees needed a place to live and to have a steady income, which the ESRF could not provide. The ESRF actually gave very little money, which was true of most of the organizations. They tried not to hand out money.
- 41:54 At the end of 1941, Tracy was part of a committee of the ESRF in France with Professor Ligall from Montpellier, who was head of the French committee. He wanted to get students into an atmosphere where they could really continue their studies. Tracy met with the mayor of a small town, Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, which was a rural mountain area. Two pastors there were the leaders of the community. The difference between "the plateau" (the whole area) and the rest of the France was the plethora of food available. While there, Tracy had butter for the first time in months. Tracy and Melby were looking for a place to rent and put students in and once they found butter they decided that it was the place. They rented a hotel and staffed it with a director and someone to run the place. Over one year of operation, 75 students took advantage of that place and got out of camps. Nimes began to pressure Vichy for this kind of normal living. Tracy was not influenced by the fact that Le Chambon-sur-Lignon was Protestant, but the two pastors did influence his choice.
- 47:04 Tracy met the commander of the Rievsaltes camp, but he did not have much to do with him. He had met him because the commanders had to be notified that Tracy was at the camps. Tracy also had to have authorization from the prefect for every trip.
- 48:41 Tracy was appalled by conditions in Rievsaltes. The conditions at the camp were minimal. It was towards the end of 1942 and the camp was on the beach, so it was cold and windy. There used to be a thriving black market for special goods, but at that point prisoners were worn out, tired, and hungry. There was no desire to do activities because no one had the strength to read, play instruments, and so on. Tracy saw the people starving, but there was not a thing he could do except encourage them to have goals. The prisoners would just pull their blankets over their heads and lie there.
- 51:23 In the camp, the Cimade personnel had their own barracks. Tracy stayed there while at the camps. It was small, not fancy, and either very cold or very hot. There was no running water and the toilet facilities were all built aboveground. One area was reserved for the Red Cross and Cimade personnel. The soil was rocky, the camp was overcrowded, and Tracy never knew when another transport would happen.
- 53:36 Germany insisted that the Germans in Rievsaltes be sent back to Germany. There were 100,000 Germans sent to France because Hitler gave the Goelters permission to do whatever they wanted, as long as they got rid of the Jews. Cities on the southwest

German border shipped the Jews living there to France. However, they wanted the Jews back one year later when the convoys started. Preparing the convoys was always dramatic. Andre knew the directors and soldiers much better than Tracy and he would sit with the director and argue with him about separating families. In some cases, Andre successfully kept families together, but it still took a toll on him because he had to replace one person with another. Eventually, Andre could not do it morally anymore.

56:16 They would try to get people excluded, but there was the moral dilemma of deciding who should stay and who should not. At that point, Tracy had also learned about Auschwitz.

Disc One (Tape Two)

01:35 The Rievsaltes prisoners had not only no desire, but no goals. When they saw no future, it was depressing not only for them, but also for others. Tracy could not give them what they needed, which was more food. When the prisoners lost interest, lost a mate, or saw someone else going downhill, it was awfully hard for Tracy to get them back up. They needed not only food, but some reason for living. The prisoners had no reason for living. If they were going to Auschwitz, why bother?

03:46 When Tracy reflected on what he was doing, he could not give up hope on the people because he would be in the same situation. It was a matter of maintaining his own spiritual feelings and beliefs.

05:00 Everyone wanted to get out. Not everyone put in requests for exit visas, but everyone had friends who could try. One person had a relative in a church office in New York who wrote to Tracy about his relatives in camp. He told him that the best thing to do was to get a visa, but it was unsuccessful. Tracy had to tell him that it was unsuccessful, but that he should keep on hoping. It was not surprising that people were trying to walk out of camp and head for the frontier. The leader of the World Student Christian Federation at that time had an American passport and visa and visited Rievsaltes with an exit permit. He got on the train to go back to Cerbón, on the border of Spain, and was turned down. It took three attempts before he was allowed to cross the border.

07:52 The camps were not run in a military fashion. Soldiers there were civilian guards and had no discipline at all. It was easy to get in and out of the camp, but it was unknown when they would crack down and make it more difficult to do so. At one point, Tracy organized activities for the inmates because they were bored. It did not work too well, however, because of sporadic attendance.

09:28 Tracy talks about Madagascarians who were recruited to fight, but never did. Instead, they were put into work camps. The Germans put every male into camps because they needed many workers. Some of those affiliated with the ESRF worked in Brest at a submarine factory. A German colonel found that they were Jewish and sent them back to the camp.

11:43 When the United States entered the war, there was a period of uncertainty whether Tracy would be able to continue his activities. He knew that the Germans were in

control in Vichy, although not openly. Tracy was shocked that the United States entered the war. Donald Lowry wanted to leave and get more involved in the war effort back in the United States. It was not easy to leave at that time, so he went to Switzerland with most of the other Americans working there. At the time, Tracy did not know if they would be taken into camps like the Americans in Germany who were under protection. Tracy had no protection at all. He decided to stay because it was his responsibility and work. At the time, there was no outward expression from the Germans about that. Germany wanted the French navy, which was located in Toulon, but the French scuttled the ships. It was a big blow to Germany and they became stricter and took over all of France.

- 14:50 At that point, Tracy had talked to a young Cimade officer who had helped smuggle others. He showed him how to get across the barbed wire safely by covering it with a coat and jumping over it. Tracy did not have to do it, though.
- 17:07 In Rievsaltes, people were constantly moved from one barrack to another. This was done because the Germans were grouping people to be shipped out. Tracy could tell when a convoy was being organized because everyone was on edge. His goal was to try to keep things as simple as possible with his activities, but he was always uncertain about who would show up. As an American, Tracy felt that it was not his job to get involved with the kommandant's selection process. He did have a camera with him and took pictures of deportation convoys. The pictures were taken from a window about 100 yards away because he could not get any closer. He took them because it was another sad, discouraging event in the camp. The prisoners were told to pack suitcases that they would have to carry. There were not many children among them, mostly adults, but there were some families. By that point, most of the small children had been taken out of the camp by the Red Cross and other organizations. The entire transport process took one day. Once everyone had said goodbye, the trucks came to load the people being transported to take them to the railcars. The trucks were open, coal burning trucks that smelled terribly. Tracy does not remember seeing the prisoners with food or water. He wondered if he should have done something, but what could he have done? There was no resistance. No revolt happened. Eventually, Rievsaltes was liquidated, but this was after Tracy left.
- 25:14 There were instances of people getting onto the trucks and then deciding that they did not want to go. It was a very dramatic thing because the Germans had tried to run things smoothly and these were last minute changes. It was dramatic and tragic because Tracy hated seeing the people taken away. The transports went to Paris, to the camp in Drancy, and after they spent some time there, they were sent to Germany. In some cases, if the prisoners were young enough, they were sent to German work camps because there were labor shortages with the German Army out of the country. At the end of the transport day, the camp atmosphere was very somber. No one felt like doing anything because everyone was drained after watching the others leave. Tracy felt it was a complete letdown to work with people for months and then watch them disappear.
- 32:37 Tracy remembers the Spaniards who had been in Rievsaltes since the Spanish Revolution. They had more freedom because they had been at the camp longer. They

also had more rations and were able to cook their own dinner. Tracy was invited to dinner; food was a central thought in everyone's mind and good meals were remembered. The Spaniards were not really internees, but more like residents. Tracy does not think that they were part of the labor brigades. The Spaniards did not come to his activities as much as he would have liked. They were so established in the camp that they even had a family life and children. Moreover, they had more energy because their food was better. They continued to want to go back to Spain, but could not yet because there was still the danger of being put in prison or shot. Tracy did not have much contact with the other populations such as the Roma.

- 38:28 Tracy could buy paper, pens, and pencils. Books were either bought or donated. He does not remember where the instruments came from. The ESRF budget was from Marseilles, but the money came from Geneva.
- 39:30 Interviews for students to live at Le Chambon-sur-Lignon were done by local committee referrals. All students, not just internees or refugees, could participate. There was no age limit, but Tracy did not look for high school students. Older students were rare, although there were a couple of male students in their forties. In order to get the students out of the camp, they had to prove that they had a place to go and that they were not a charge to the state. The release was done by the camp's kommandant. Permission for the students to travel and settle in a new area was given by the camp prefect. Then, Tracy either assisted in helping the students get out or the students came to Le Chambon-sur-Lignon on their own. One problem was getting central heating because the internees were used to a Mediterranean climate and Le Chambon-sur-Lignon was in the mountains. At any one time, there were up to twenty students living there. Tracy spent a lot of time keeping it running because it was a big project for the ESRF. There were no girls there; he attributed this to the lack of educational opportunities that were available to them at the time.
- 46:06 Tracy made the decision to leave France for Geneva. He left when Germany was going to take over all of France, which was in November 1942. He bought a ticket for a train and did not run into any problems. It helped to have an American passport. Cimade was still active in Rievsaltes and all of them were French. The camp folded in 1943, but the Spaniards were still there.
- 48:23 Back in Geneva, Tracy's main work was with the prisoners of war and identifying students in POW camps. He also helped American aviators who were shot down in Switzerland. The Swiss government put them in a nice hotel where they could go skiing and the aviators were still paid monthly. They were more like tourists than soldiers. Tracy was a Protestant chaplain for them and held regular services. He also opened a cemetery outside of Bern and would hold services there. Tracy then began to think about enlisting and while in England in 1944 with the aviators, he did. He went through basic training in England and France and ended up in Germany. He was on his first leave in Paris on May 10, 1945, when the Armistice was signed, and there was a big celebration. Tracy was part of the infantry in Germany. He was first sent to Marburg [Marburg an der Lahn] to a re-education camp for four months. He was placed in that camp because he was fluent in German. The camp had soldiers from all over Germany who spent about five days there before they were sent home. Tracy was then

transferred to Berlin to the Education Department of the military government. He was the head of the youth activities section for the American Zone in Berlin. He demobilized in the United States after the Armistice and flew back as a civilian after coming to Washington and waiting for transportation.

55:52 Tracy went back to Berlin and stayed there until 1949 when he went back to the United States and got married. Then he and his wife flew back to Berlin. He had met his wife in Berlin. She was at the Moscow Embassy for one year, but got tired of that.

Disc Two (Tape Three)

00:28 Tracy decided to go back to the United States in 1949 after having been gone for ten years. Once he came back, he got his teaching credential at Stanford University. He was interested in teaching, but wanted something broader than ministry and liked reeducating the German youth. When Tracy came back, he was with his wife, baby, and a German Shepherd.

01:37 He chose Stanford because his wife was from California and she had an uncle who was a superintendent of a school district in Palo Alto. He had a house that they could stay in while Tracy was attending Stanford.

02:23 He saw a lot of change in the United States after living in Europe for ten years. Tracy had missed the little things that he forgot, like television. Driving again in the United States was more of a problem because there was more traffic and he had no car while in Europe. Tracy had been on German Autobahns, which he said were a problem in themselves.

03:48 Tracy finished his Master's Degree and got a job in Coalinga, near Fresno. He taught world history to kids who were growing up on farms in the area and were not particularly interested in it. Tracy also taught French. He stayed in the same school system for three years and then went to Beirut, Lebanon and spent five years there at an International University. Then Tracy travelled back to Southern California to Garden Grove where he stayed for 25 years. While there, he was principal of a high school for ten years. In those days, California was growing so fast that when Tracy first arrived in Garden Grove there was one high school and ten years later, there were seven!

05:50 He stayed in contact with Andre Dumas and Donald Lowry, mainly through Christmas letters. Tracy lost track of the others he had worked with. His work in the ESRF gave him a greater appreciation and understanding of people. He found that students in the United States were not very interested in Europe after the war; they had had enough of it. While teaching, Tracy tried to incorporate the events of the war with the impact it had on his students' lives, but most were interested in just finding a job.

08:08 He realized that the world was not a peaceful place. It was possible to change individuals, but major changes were very difficult to make. When talking to a group at a Holocaust museum in Philadelphia, he was asked if the Holocaust could happen again. Tracy believes that crises like the Middle East, Serbia, and North Africa still have not been solved and he hopes that something like the Holocaust will never happen again.

- 10:32 He believes that changing the lives of people who are in a difficult situation is rewarding and a big step. There was some satisfaction in helping a few people like that. It gave Tracy the courage to keep trying. Otherwise, it would have been a dreary world.
- 11:45 Tracy still keeps in contact with Hans Solomon. When reflecting on his war experiences, he thinks that they were extraordinary times. He feels lucky that he was in a situation where he was able to do some good. It gave him an appreciation of the difficulties people faced. Tracy realized that he could do something, even if it was very small, and give people temporary relief at the very least.
- 13:38 The reason he wrote letters to his parents about his deeds is that he felt that if he could open up to someone and give them a sense of his feelings and beliefs, it would help him go on and continue his work. Tracy wrote his diary because he thought he was living through special times.
- 14:42 He thinks that everyone looks for someone to just relate to, especially when they are 25 or 26 years old. Cimade was very good from that point of view. Tracy began to realize that people want to share their experiences. A lot of work in education is very temporary; every day is not a major day. Often days are routine and the goal is to try and break out of it and make a difference in people's lives.
- 17:30 Tracy appreciates the chance to talk about his story. His children want him to write a memoir, but it takes time because of his lack of computer skills. It is also a lot harder for him to organize his thoughts now.