U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum
Volunteer Collection Interview

Herman Taube
RG-50.106*0182

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Interviewer - Gail Schwartz

Disc # 1 - Herman Taube (Herschel Lichtzie Taube) was born on February 2, 1918 in Lodz, Poland. His father, Aaron Meir, came from a family who had lived there for 100 years. Aaron Meir joined his father-in-law Gershon Leib Mandel's kosher candle and soap making business. Herman's middle name meant candlemaker. Four of Herman's siblings died during WW I from a typhus epidemic. The family was very religious, lived in a Jewish neighborhood with few Polish Christian neighbors. When Herman was 31/2 his 27 year old father, who had also been a volunteer cantor, was in an accident and died from an infected finger. His mother, Miriam, moved to live with her large extended family. Herman went to cheder in his grandparents' apartment building for 2 years. He then went to gymnasium after public school and then to an orthodox religious school. He spoke Yiddish at home and Polish with the building superintendent's wife, Pani Zosia and her son Vatzik. Herman would give them challah and they would give him apples. His mother died when Herman was 9. He wrote his first poem then, an angry letter to God for his mother dying and then a letter to his mother whom he was also angry at for dying. He had his Bar Mitzvah at age 12 because he was an orphan. It was during Tu B'Shevat, the New Year of the Trees. He then went to a yeshiva, but was very bored and read many non-orthodox books. He went to Piyotrkov, 40 km away to another yeshiva and lived with a carpenter named Scheinfeld and his family. Herman helped push the family wheelbarow to market and took care of their sick daughter. A Polish doctor gave him First-Aid books to read and encouraged him to become a medic. He also worked twice a week as a waiter and brought home left-overs. His mother's sister Rachel went to Palestine against her father's wishes. She was the only one in her family to survive. His grandparents needed him in Lodz so in the end of 1935 when he was 17 he went back, and attended an ORT training school. He was aware of the increased anti-semitism in Poland, read in the papers about pogroms and saw hooligans throwing food over in the markets. He joined Shomer Yadati, a pioneer religious organization. They met at Tzvadska 29 and Herman got to know Moshe Brozen, the founder of the Ararat Theater, a poet and editor of a Yiddish newspaper. He also met Chaim Nachman Bialik. Herman went to the Katznelson gymnasium, wrote poems in Yiddish and Polish, and joined a literary group of young people in Lodz. Friends published a book of his poems, including the poem to his mother. He had an afternoon job in a hospital, cleaning the steps and sterilizing the medical instruments. Some of the patients were Jewish prostitutes. Father Jagla, a priest at the hospital helped him find a job, 8 km from Lodz, at a military hospital in Alexandrov. It took 30 minutes by train to get there and he made $12 a week. It was dangerous to travel at night. Someone told his grandfather that he saw Herman talking to a priest who was holding a book with a cross on the cover. Herman had to explain that it was a Red Cross first-aid book. He heard about Kristallnacht from newspapers and the radio. Anti-Semitism increased. He was walking with a Polish girl, the building superintendent's daughter, and he got beaten until some neighbors stepped in. Martin Buber came to Lodz and Herman accompanied him when Buber visited his sister who was the

principal of the girl's gymnasium. Buber also wanted to visit the German Jews who had been thrown out of Germany. He went to a leather factory and then to a free food center (Nossan Lechem) for German Jews. There were Poles protesting near the center saying "The Germans are our foreign enemy. The Jews are our inner enemies." Buber saw former students and talked to the people and urged them to go to Palestine, Madagascar or South America. Herman felt he was learning much about medicine in Alexandrov. Father Jagla told him to join the Polish army because after 3 years they would pay for medical school. The priest wrote a letter of recommendation and 6 weeks later, on August 3, 1939 Herman got a letter to report for duty. He was 21 years old, and when the war started in Lodz, in September 1939, Herman marched for 3 days in an "orderly retreat". He was in a medical group and carried a Red Cross bag. They crossed over the Bug River and took over a small church. On Saturday mornings the Jewish soldiers, "all those of the business faith" were told to step out for services. Some of the soldiers called him a "Slavic brother" as the war got underway. On September 17, the Russians came and told them to accompany them to Vladimir-Volinsk, to get an education that would get rid of their capitalist mentality. They went to Kremenchug to a government farm (kolkhoz) for rehabilitation. Herman and his friend Berger, a Jew, and others were ordered to dig holes for sugar beets. One person got beaten for talking and his fingers were broken. Herman went with him to a hospital in Poltawa and waited there. He was stopped in the street by a Ukrainian militia man who took him to his Jewish mother-in-law, who let Herman wash, gave him food and let him sleep on a straw mattress in her house at 25 Sholom Aleichem Street.

Disc #2 - The next morning the Ukrainian took him to the militia and Herman changed his name to Grigori Arionovicz Taube. He became a medic in a factory making field kitchens for the battle with Finland and also helped working with the metals. He stayed with a Jewish family. After a few weeks, refugees had to register and was sent to Samarra (renamed Koibashov) where he got more medic training. There everyone listened to Radio Moscow and Radio Kiev over loudspeakers. He did not believe what was happening thinking it was Russian propaganda. Koibeshov became the capital of the Soviet Union since Moscow had been attacked, so he was sent, along with good shoes and a jacket, to Tyumen in Siberia in June 1941. He was attached to a hospital taking care of people who had worked in the mines and others who had been in labor camps and gulags. He had no contact with his family in Lodz and cried at night when he started to believe the news about the Jews, and had guilt feelings that that he had left his family. He would go to the gulags to give first aid. He lived with an older couple and became close to them. He would pick up their coal for them. When he was with other Jews, they would talk about food and home and family and when the war would end. He did not do any writing as his feelings were so anti-Soviet that it would have been too dangerous. He did write letters to his family on the margins of newspapers but never got any replies. The Jews covered up the holidays surreptitiously, marking them with tears, saying that Passover was a birthday celebration. An order came from the Polish government-in-exile in October/November 1941 that all of the 25,000 Polish prisoners were to be let out of Siberia. Herman asked to go to Tashkent in Uzbekistan and then went on to Andizhan. He was so hungry that he looked for food in garbage cans. A woman shared her bread ration with him and took him to the health department. He was offered a job at a farm community (Kishlak) malaria station. Cotton had been planted and there were water canals with mosquitoes. He worked in the malaria clinic, saw camels and 2 wheeled wagons. He complained to the party headquarters that food was being stolen from the hospital while people were dying from typhus. He was arrested for accusing the Communist party of theft

but a doctor saved him, gave him money and cookies, and Herman took a train to Tashkent and then to Seratov to the headquarters of the Polish Army. By then he had given up hope about ever getting answers from his family. In June 1944, he was assigned to the Kotsk offensive against the German army after Stalingrad and almost got to Brest-Litovsk. They were told to get off the main roads which were needed for tanks and trucks. An ambulance went on a side road, there was an explosion from a mine and Herman was thrown out of his truck. His legs were numb and he was badly wounded. He was taken care of by a Communist woman doctor and by December 1944 he was finally able to walk again. He got to Lublin, to the Polish army headquarters in Majdanek on January 6, 1945. He registered, and was still bleeding from his wounds. He found out from Father Jagla that his grandfather had been taken to Chelmno. He was assigned to a unit and went by truck and train to the Stettin area of Pomerania to the town of Platte. There was a typhus epidemic, so he blocked off 4 houses to isolate the sick and took care of Germans and Poles. He opened up a repatriation station and helped people get rid of lice and gave them clean clothes. He then opened up a Red Cross Station. At the end of the war on May 8, 1945 there was no joy - there were too many dead. In one mass grave there were dogs, horses, Poles, Russians and Germans. He ran out of medications and was told there was a CIBA warehouse in Keslin in Bessarabia. When he got there on June 12, he met a Bessarabian Jew in the warehouse and saw Vilna Ghetto survivors. A young woman who had been liberated by the Russians in Stutthof told him of another who had scarlet fever. He got medicines from the warehouse, gave them to the girl and the patient was better in the morning. Herman was able to translate the medications in the warehouse from the Russian alphabet to the Latin one. The first young woman, Susan Strauss, wanted to leave, to go back to her home and not to Russia. Herman gave the commander his watch to get his permission for the girl to leave with him. On July 6, an order came for the Soviet Army to leave, so Herman bribed a driver with vodka and kielbasa, to take him and the young woman, Susan, to Potsdam. They got there the night of the Conference and slept in the cemetery. From Potsdam they went to a DP camp in Halle Mersenburg. There they met a young Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, Henry Rothfogel, who was from Lodz. Herman opened up a Red Cross First Aid station for the military. He had boxes of medications that he had brought with him.

Disc # 3 - Susan changed her mind about going to her hometown and ran to the station when she heard that the Soviets were in her town in Germany and that her father was alive in America. Herman, Susan and Henry went back together to Platte in Pomerania. They found a German Jew, a Dr. Arnt, who had opened up a home for refugees. He had food and clothes from a warehouse for them. Herman and Susan, the only Jews in town, got civilly married in Platte. He then went to Stettin to get medicines.There was an orthodox Zionist Mizrachi kibbutz in Stettin. A young rabbi there urged Susan and Herman to have a religious marriage ceremony. That afternoon, the rabbi brought 4 men, a tallis for a chuppah and some apple juice. He wrote the marriage contract, the ketubah, on yellow paper. Susan, sad because of the loss of her family, did not want to celebrate. She felt guilty that she did not save her younger sister. On July 16 they went back to Platte where Herman worked in a hospital and at a repatriation station. There were many refugees from Danzig, Stettin and Russia and they suffered from scabies and lice. Herman let the women refugees sleep in the hospital so they would be protected. Henry registered as their nephew in the city hall in Platte. They had heard by then of the July 4, 1946 massacre in Kielce, Poland where 44 Jews were killed with axes. People started running to Czechoslovakia, Austria and Germany to the DP camps. The head of the Platte secret police, who admitted he too was

Jewish, urged Henry to leave also, as the mayor had reported to the police that Herman was sheltering refugees. By then Herman and Susan had a 2 year old child, Mark, with them whom they adopted. They left Platte, and by bribing the soldiers with vodka and kielbasa, they got to Stettin and across no-man's-land to the Oder River. At the border an Israeli Bricha volunteer took them to the Russian zone in Berlin. They were urged to leave as the Soviets could take them back. Susan, whose father had been sent to Buchenwald after Kristallnacht and then ordered to leave the country in 4 weeks, found out that her grandfather's house had been taken over. On September 30 Susan had their first daughter, Miriam, in the Zingenheim DP camp in Aufsfeld. Susan gave a note to an American soldier to take to her father in Baltimore. They got married a 3rd time because the first civil document in Polish was not recognized. Herman had wanted to go to Palestine but Susan wanted to come to the U.S. to her father. Herman, Susan, Henry and Mark left for the U.S. from Hamburg on the "Ernie Pyle". Herman conducted a seder on the ship without a Haggadah. The Joint Distribution Committee arranged for the food for the 100 DPs. They arrived in New York on April 18, 1947. Juden Metzger, a journalist from the Jewish Daily Forward came to interview them. Susan had interviewed refugees in the DP camp and in the hospital in Platte. While in New York at the HIAS hotel she translated 2 of these life stories into Yiddish for the journalist and they were published in the Forward along with a picture of Susan, for which she got paid $50. 5 weeks later, with the help of HIAS, they went to Baltimore to Susan's father, Herman Strauss. When they got there, Herman bought a hat to go to services, went to the synagogue, was told to take off his hat, heard an organ and thought he was in a missionary church and left immediately. Later, he found out it was a Reform temple. When he went to a bakery for bread, he was offered and accepted a job for $2 a night cutting bagels on a machine. Metzger, the Forward journalist who wrote the Bintel Brief column, sent a letter to the Baltimore Forward manager about Susan and Herman. They were invited to a dinner. Herman was seated next to the leader of the Railroad Conductors Union (A. Philip Randolph?) and the mayor of Baltimore Tom D'Allesandro. Though he was Italian the mayor spoke Yiddish. He grew up on Lombard Street and had been a "shabbos goy". The Forward offered Herman a job writing a column "News from Baltimore". He also wrote for a Yiddish radio station and the Histadrut Labor Zionist organization. The New York Histadrut office offered him a job to edit a yearbook in 1950. By then he had spent 2 1/2 years in night school. The large book had many articles in Yiddish written by Herman about the numerous landsmanschaften. Susan had written many stories about survivors that were published in a book. She was asked to speak before a group of women, but was interrupted soon after she began and told not to talk about her experience. She left immediately. She soon moved back to Baltimore with the children, ran a grocery store in a poor neighborhood and lived upstairs.

Disc #4 - Herman then went back to Baltimore and helped in the store and also wrote for the Baltimore Jewish Times and the Forward. They ran a bigger store and Henry got a job with the Histadrut. In 1968 the store was destroyed by fire after the assassination of Martin Luther King. Herman was asked to organize a Histadrut office in Washington, DC. He went to Morris and Abe Pollin who became chairman of a fund raising dinner. Later he organized a chapter in Minneapolis. He became head of the synagogue and community division of the United Jewish Appeal. In the 1970's he taught at the Midrasha high school and at American University after getting a Master's Degree in classical Jewish literature. He also taught for 12 years at the College of Jewish Studies. He has been to Israel 23 times including 6 UJA missions. After retiring from UJA, he helped out at the Jewish Chaplaincy Service for 19 years. He still works

with survivors at JSSA - Jewish Social Service Agency and at the JSSA Hospice. He organized the Yiddish Club at the Jewish Community Center and was on the Executive Board of the World Gathering of Holocaust Survivors. He wrote a column "Getting to Know You" in the Jewish Week. He is a member of the Maryland Commission on the Humanities and the Board of Jewish Education library. He also wrote for the Chabad Lubavitch paper. He had the accreditation to interview people in the White House and in Congress. He attended the press conferences and befriended people in the press office, received faxes of news connected to Israel which he translated and sent to New York. Herman still has nightmares and the sound of an ambulance siren bring back the memory of his accident in Germany. His wife Susan is still struggling with nightmares of her time in the camps. He does translating for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum which is a monument and a living memorial. When he lectures he always speaks about the need not to be silent, to speak up about the evils of war. The Museum is a place to commemorate survivors' families. He feels the reason he survived was to bear witness. He writes about how people lived before the war, now that 2500 communities are gone. He feels he is a living witness, so he believes he has an obligation to continue to write about what he saw. He still writes every day - essays, articles, poems. His poetry expresses what he has in his heart. He sees himself in the 3rd dimension. Though he grew up in a religious home, his faith disappeared during the war years and he cried about being an unforgiving believer. His religious feelings came back later when he realized he could not blame God for what humanity had done. He feels Polish, served in the Polish army and has good friends in Poland. He thinks frequently of Janusz Korzcak and Jan Karski. He has good friends who are German. It is better to be color blind, and most importantly to be a good human being and hope for a better world. His 5 children who are attached to Judaism, Israel and family, are the center of his and Susan's lives. He had nightmares of his visit to Auschwitz which had a deep influence on him. He still dreams of Father Jagla. The secret of survival is not to forget, but to go on with one's life. He is comfortable with survivors as they are "my people". Though genocides are still going on he doesn't feel that the Holocaust could happen again. When he was in the White House press room, a woman said "It's a lie." 4 months later the same woman came up to him in the Museum and said she owed him an apology. Her grandparents and uncles had always denied the Holocaust. That experience gave him the courage to go on. Herman feels that people here do not appreciate their country and their freedom. If you are a good person, you are a good Jew. He prays for a better world filled with harmony and peace. He also feels that one should always help people who need your help.

Additional comments, post-interview, from Mr. Taube

In August, 1939, I was called up to military service in the Polish army. After a physical examination and inoculations I started rigorous basic training as a 'corpsman'(sanitariusz) and assigned to a first-aid company.

Three weeks later, September, 1939, Germany invaded my homeland, Poland, our army tried bravely to stop onslaught, our counter-offensive brought us to the Bug River, we stopped at a small village.

Our medical team kept vigorously active, helping our wounded, we consumed most or our medications and often used our own shirts and underwear for bandages. We also faced a

shortage of "Tetanus", and drugs against clogging of arteries.

On September 17, the Soviets arrived, they ordered us to halt our work on the 'slightly wounded' allowing us to continue helping severe hurt soldiers, they searched for guns, knives, vodka, and tobacco, claiming "We liberated You".

The shocking unexpectedness of the Soviets 'liberation' stopped our ability to help our wounded, under strenuous conditions, with limited help of the local population we continued help the wounded, but the Soviets stopped suddenly our work.

Army trucks arrived one morning and loaded all our patients and two 'medics', claiming all wounded will be cared-for in the "Soviet Army Lazarets"'in Minsk. Our 'unit' were taken to Vladimir Volinsk, demobilized and send to Kremenchuck .

At "Sovchoz Lenina" our former Polish medics were called to rid ourselves from "our capitalistic mentality", acquire habits of Sovier low calorie-foods, not complain about lack of soap, tobacco, razor-blades, and embrace the new "Sovier way-of-life".

Our war-veterans started to suffer from various, serious complications, stomach pains, side-effects to the 'Soviet diets', many escaped, to take to Poltawa Hospital. While accompanying a wounded soldier to an emergency unit, I escaped to Poltawa.

Herman Taube, March 2010