

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

William Helmreich Oral History Collection

Interview with Susan Tatum

March 29, 1990

RG-50.165*0115

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Susan Tatum, conducted by William Helmreich on March 29, 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.

SUSAN TATUM

March 29, 1990

WH: How was it that you came to Ecuador?

ST: I was born in 1934. My father's family was a family of six. One of his brothers was very in tune with what was happening. He felt we should all leave together and we couldn't get into the US. There were about 25 people all together. Our family name was Kohn.

WH: Do you remember anything about Czechoslovakia?

ST: I remember trenches being dug. Other than that, nothing.

WH: Do you identify in any way with the country now, like when you saw what was happening this past fall?

ST: Yeah, very much. Many people spend many years in a country and don't feel like they really belong there. A peculiar thing happened to me here. I was here longer than I had been anywhere else in my life. I felt that, maybe, this is my home, that I belong here. But I really don't because I feel so different than an American, even though I am American.

WH: Does that feeling ever go away?

ST: Sometimes I think it's left, but it's still there. I think it's mostly something of a void.

WH: How did you come here?

ST: We came by plane, a beautiful plane, from Ecuador to Miami, when I was thirteen. It was like a very fancy railroad car, with sections. I came in 1947 with my parents and brother.

WH: What does your brother do?

ST: He has a store in Port Jefferson, Long Island, hand-made jewelry and pottery.

WH: What was it like when you first came?

ST: There was a terrible apartment shortage. In the first three years we moved around a lot; part of the time we were in Queens, part of the time in Manhattan. We stayed in the New Orleans Hotel, near Columbus and 81st Street.

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WH: What were American kids like to you?

ST: I think they were curious but I had nothing in common with them. There were no kids from Europe in my classes.

WH: Were your years in Ecuador happy?

ST: I think it was happy. I was with my family. We lived in Quito.

WH: Did your parents identify Jewishly in Czechoslovakia?

ST: They were, uh, Jewish. They spoke both German and Czech. The Czech-speaking Czechs were more assimilated. They went to services every Friday night in Quito. My father was very religious. He was a Conservative Jew. He observed the Sabbath. He didn't ride on the Sabbath or smoke. My mother was not religious but she respected him and kept a kosher home. My father was a butcher. One day a week he koshered his store and sold kosher food. The rabbi slaughtered the meat. We have had many kosher friends come to dinner and my mother explained to me how to do it. Like how to put a knife into the earth to make it kosher.

WH: Did he continue identifying once he came here?

ST: Yes. But he only lived for three years after coming here. He was 57 when he died. My mother never remarried although she was in her forties then.

WH: Where did you go to high school?

ST: Washington Irving High School. We lived in Woodside, Queens. Afterwards I went to F.I.T. I designed children's clothing for twenty years, for Healthtex. I designed the materials, styles.

WH: And where did you meet Bill?

ST: At the Village Independent Democratic Club, Koch's old club. This was the election (1964) that turned Koch into a public official, running against Di Sapio, where he won by 41 votes.

WH: What was Bill doing there?

ST: He was a journalist and actually was a journalist at the age of eight, working for his father. His father had his own newspapers down South. He won an award given him by Eisenhower at Columbia University for having the best high school

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newspaper. He was the editor; it was in Durham, North Carolina.

WH: Are you involved in the Jewish community today?

ST: No, not in a sense of belonging to a synagogue.

WH: What about political involvements?

ST: Most of my involvements at this point are through Bill. I don't belong to organizations. I'm more of a loner. I'm interested in art and music.

WH: Did your mother say anything about the fact that you were marrying someone black and not Jewish?

ST: Well, she was not very happy about it. She would certainly have preferred for me to marry a nice Jewish boy.

WH: You had to be very strong to do that.

ST: I was not a youngster anymore when I got married. I was 32 and I was determined to make up my own mind.

WH: This was 1966, the height of the Civil Rights Movement.

ST: Some people were against the marriage, but it's something that Bill and I went into very consciously.

WH: Does it result in appreciating different people more?

ST: Sure. It's an experience a lot of people have. They always say that on TV interviews.

WH: Do you think Black-Jewish relations will improve or deteriorate in the future?

ST: I think things are bad right now. Things are anti-Jewish and anti-Black and I live in both worlds. And I think it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. I think the skinheads and the temperament of the government is not conducive to good relationships. And it's going to get worse. I just have a very bad feeling. I'm very distressed because very few people see it. And a Holocaust could happen again. It's going to be very different from the way it was before. It's not going to be possible for it to happen the same way again. It's going to be both against blacks and against Jews. And it's in the air. There was an article about hate group propaganda in Midwestern jails. It's so

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widespread it's incredible. It's not going to be concentration camps, but it may just be a bloodbath.

WH: Do you see it in New York?

ST: I see the angry kids. I see the kids who aren't learning anything in school. And the unemployment, which leads to more hatred. Then white supremacists say, "Those jobs belong to me. My kids have to eat and yours don't. You're trash; you're a Jew. You don't deserve that job; you're black."

WH: How about Dinkins?

ST: Somebody did a poll and people said they felt there has been no improvement in race relations since he's been in. Of course, he's been in for a very short time. I think there was a relief when he was elected. And I think he'll improve race relations.

WH: How could Black-Jewish relations be improved?

ST: I think it goes back to people just getting to know each other. We had a coalition with Bill, Dinkins and Rabbi Brickner, but it just stopped after a while. When Bill spoke, people were fine until he spoke about Jesse Jackson, because of his relationship with Arafat.

WH: Do you think Jackson's anti-Semitic?

ST: I don't think so. Again, it goes back to knowing someone personally. I don't know whether he has a relationship with Arafat, but embracing him doesn't mean Jackson is anti-Semitic.

WH: He's a politician.

ST: Right. I don't know him personally. I've met him.

WH: Then there was the "Hymie" comment.

ST: We had never heard of "Hymie" before. They wanted an excuse to hang somebody. It was the "needle in the haystack." Sometimes the same people that either hate or love blacks, have a black maid and they say *meine schvartze* "my wonderful black maid." And I can't imagine that someone would say, "I hate blacks" or "I love blacks." It's such a relative thing. If you say you hate blacks, say you hate people.

WH: Did you ever experience racism?

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ST: Not with Bill except for an occasional cab not stopping. But in California, in Eagle Rock, Los Angeles, I experienced racism one summer living there, because my daughter is black.

WH: Do you identify in any way with the survivor community?

ST: Well, I identified with my mother's friends when she was alive and with their kids. There was a Masaryk Club for Czech Jews and non-Jews. The parents started the club and we and the other kids used to go once a week to the Empire Hotel near Lincoln Center on Broadway. We went to Central Park, to the Palisades. The club had a lot to do with not being accepted elsewhere. Like I didn't have any friends. And we all had a common background. I formed a friendship with someone I met in 1948 who is still my friend today. She lives in Canada.

WH: Did you feel that Americans looked down on the refugees?

ST: They just had nothing in common with us.

WH: How might your experiences have influenced the way you see things?

ST: My husband has said I have a very different sense of justice. He also says I want to find good in everyone and that I refuse to be critical. I get very upset about things that are not fair. My brother, who's a year older, has it too.

WH: What about what's going on in Israel? You've been there?

ST: Yes. I had a very good impression of the country. I felt, maybe, it could be home. I don't feel that I have a home because I was torn from what my home would have been in Czechoslovakia. I felt it could be home if I would give it a chance, if I would settle there. That the people would be more like I am. I know a lot of Israelis here. I just get that feeling.

WH: If you were living in Israel what would you do politically?

ST: I would probably be in Peace Now. We had a marvelous experience there during Operation Moses and we saw the absorption centers. The problem was that they were farmers in Ethiopia and they gave them industrial jobs in Israel.

WH: How does your daughter identify?

ST: She has difficulty, not because she is Jewish, but because she's in a very white school, St. Lawrence University, and she does not relate to the black community, even though she's black. What I'm hoping is she's going to be able to walk from one community to

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another, like my husband is able to do. She feels Jewish on Hanukkah and Christian on Christmas. She definitely identifies as a Jew.

WH: Do you ever go to Temple?

ST: Less now that I used to. I went more before my father died. After he died I had a nasty experience with the temple that turned me off. A stupid rabbi who, on Yom Kippur, told the congregation that they should be ashamed of themselves for not buying a ticket for the services and that we were in the temple by the good graciousness of all the parishioners who paid to be there but left so we could come in. It was a temple in Woodside on 75th Street. We never knew about buying a ticket until we came here. I didn't go for years, not until Rabbi Brickner invited my mother and I.

WH: Did your mother come to terms with the fact that you married Bill?

ST: Oh, she loved Bill.

WH: What was the wedding like?

ST: We had a small ceremony in a judge's chambers. Then we had a small party in my mother's house, and then we gave a party the day after.

WH: Why send your daughter to such a white school?

ST: We didn't know it would be so tough. Now we'd like her to attend a more cosmopolitan school. And she said an interesting thing the other day. She said, "Maybe I'll go to a black school."

WH: That would be a switch.

ST: Oh, it would be a **wonderful** thing. She meant a place like Howard or Lincoln. She's dyslexic, went to Hunter High School for a while. I think she should have gone to Music and Art. (At this point Susan's daughter calls and I help her pick a title for a library research project on a community. My choice: the Hasidic community of Williamsburg. She also tells me about an Orthodox Jewish friend whose parents think he's observant but who really isn't.)

WH: Do you believe in God?

ST: No. If there is a God, I don't think he would have allowed the Holocaust to happen.

WH: Where were all the good people during the war? How were the Nazis able to act like that?

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- ST: I have to let you know also that it's very difficult for me to kill a fly. So I can't understand people who can take a human life.
- WH: Someone said to me, you'll pardon me for repeating it, that the Amsterdam News is an anti-Semitic paper. And I fail to see how if someone is married to someone Jewish, is conscious of the issues, has Jewish friends, goes to Israel all the time, he could be anti-Semitic.
- ST: Well, he's not. Ed Koch made him anti-Semitic. Ed Koch is the one that's spreading that word about him. When Bill was involved in the Jewish-Black coalition Ed Koch accused him of being a cabal. Bill is nowhere near being anti-Semitic.
- WH: Well, it does sound ludicrous and when I said that to the person, he said there are anti-Semitic articles in the paper.
- ST: So, look at The New York Times. (She laughs.)
- WH: You know who likes him? Jerry Lippmann, who runs a truly independent newspaper on Long Island, The Long Island Jewish World.
- ST: Bill was actually threatened by Farrakhan and had to have protection for three months from 24-hour detectives. My daughter was taken to school every day by a detective. Just like Dinkins was threatened by him.

At this point Bill Tatum returned. He was incensed at the suggestion that he or his paper might be anti-Semitic and vigorously defended himself. "I've published a piece by Israeli Consul Uri Savir just last week on Black-Jewish relations. Koch spread that story about me." He then criticized Israel for its actions saying, "Israel had better get its act together. Peace is breaking out all over. If not why should they get three billion a year in aid while black Africa gets only 400 million?" Then, returning to the other subject, he quipped, "Yeah I married my wife to get back at the Jewish people." He then described how he had gone to Bitburg where his friend Elie Wiesel had sharply rebuked Ronald Reagan. He inveighed at length about the outrage of Bitburg. He was clearly establishing that, while he might be critical of Jews or Israel in certain areas, he was definitely highly sympathetic to the Jewish people in general.

Conclusion of Interview