

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

## **William Helmreich Oral History Collection**

**Interview with Sigmund Tobias**  
**March 1, 1990**  
**RG-50.165\*0119**

## PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Sigmund Tobias, conducted by William Helmreich on March 1, 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.

## SIGMUND TOBIAS

### March 1, 1990

WH: Where were you born?

ST: I was born in Berlin on November 26, 1932. I was seven when the war began. My parents were observant.

WH: Did they make it through the war?

ST: Yes. We spent the war years in Shanghai. My mother really couldn't cope with life here after the war. She was chronically depressed. My father had a grocery store and they both died in 1970.

WH: What did you do in Shanghai?

ST: I studied in the Mirrer Yeshiva. I was very good in Talmud. But I found out after the war that they were getting \$30.00 a month for every student from abroad and they weren't passing it on except for the 1,200 students that came with them. I felt money was gotten in my name from the Vaad Hatzala and they weren't giving it to me. And they lived extremely well. I saw that every Rosh Hashonoh the students had new suits. I only got seven dollars.

WH: Do other people know about this?

ST: Oh yes. I worked for the son-in-law of the Shanghai rabbi in a textile mill and I spoke with him about it.

WH: Did this in any way affect your attitudes towards Orthodox Jews after the war?

ST: Oh yes. I continued observing the laws in Shanghai only because I didn't know what else to do. But inside I was experiencing great turmoil. I couldn't believe that observant people could be like that. And so, in this country, I gradually became less and less observant. I feel that people who are religious are far more concerned with their relationship with God than with their relationships with other people. Now I've begun to come back through a havurah group I've joined. I was the cantor for Mincha on Yom Kippur. I was so happy that people appreciated me for what I knew and did not question me about all the things I did not do.

WH: Did religion ever provide a satisfactory rationale for the Holocaust for you?

ST: Not at all. How could we explain that all these saintly people died?

WH: So why keep it?

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ST: Because it provides me with a sense of community. The havurah is a very small group and it establishes my connection to all the people who went before me and all those who are going to come after me. To me going to synagogue is neither a religious nor an intellectual experience. It's an emotional experience. I'm "home" for a few hours. I gnash my teeth whenever I hear an English prayer in the service. It's not the way I was brought up. You see I'm one of the most Jewish people there is. I'm incapable of denying it. I react to Jewish humor; I hum Jewish songs. I know that. My kids are not Jewish in that sense and it doesn't bother me at all.

WH: Why are they like that?

ST: Because I wasn't observing Jewish things at all when they were growing up. They also didn't have that close a relationship with my parents. I care that my children identify themselves as Jewish but it doesn't matter to me if they marry non-Jews. My wife, Laura, doesn't go unless I drag her there. She's a German Jew.

WH: What were your first impressions of America?

ST: I remember staying in the Uptown Hotel in San Francisco for a few days. I think it was on Sutter Ave. People from the Joint came to greet me there. I remember gorging myself on grapes. They were so cheap and I would buy two or three pounds of them and take them to my room and eat them. The hotel was seven stories high, perhaps, with one elevator. I remember being amazed by the multiplicity of newspapers. I was buying several copies of the same paper in different editions before I realized it. In Shanghai we were starved for news.

WH: How many days did the journey take?

ST: Fourteen days. There were about 100 people in the room. They took the immigration people along in Honolulu so that by the time we arrived in San Francisco the entire immigration process had been completed. It took about three or four days from Honolulu to San Francisco. I remember seeing the bridge in the daytime and being very impressed.

WH: What were your impressions of the cross-country train ride?

ST: I had a very moving incident in Albuquerque. We were sitting in a compartment and one of the people was a black man. I got off and went into the station where I saw, for the first time, "White" and "Colored" signs for the rest rooms. I reacted as if I had been slapped in the face. And I am not a super-Democrat. I had lived for ten years among colored people, Chinese people, and seeing this was insulting to me for his sake. And when I returned to the compartment I couldn't face the black man; he obviously knew and that was why he hadn't gotten off.

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WH: Did you meet survivors in the beginning when you came to New York?

ST: Yes. I would meet them on Sundays when I would go with my relatives to Brighton Beach.

WH: How do you see yourself in relation to other survivors?

ST: It's interesting because I don't actually see myself as a survivor. I shy away from that term because my experience was really much more benevolent.

WH: Do your friends from Shanghai feel that same way?

ST: Yes, pretty much. It was a different experience.

WH: Yes, but on the other hand, both groups were born in Europe, suffered dislocation, and came here about the same time.

ST: Yes, that's true and it's why I was attracted to a young woman who survived the war in Europe. There was a common background.

WH: Where did you go to school?

ST: I went to City and eventually got a Ph.D. from Columbia.

WH: Do you think, as an educator, that education can prevent another Holocaust?

ST: That's a very difficult question to answer because when you see the enormity of some of the social forces that contribute to prejudice, it's not clear that making kids cognitively cognizant is the way to go. I certainly hope so.,

WH: How do you feel about Germans and other Europeans?

ST: I willingly approach Germans younger than me but not those older than me. As far as Poles go, I believe they are intrinsically more antisemitic than Germans.

WH: Do you think a Holocaust could happen here?

ST: No. There's brutality here too, but there's an underlying sense of fairness that wouldn't let that happen here. It seems to violate the American sense of fairness. Look at the lack of antisemitism when there was the Arab oil boycott.

WH: Do you have any friends today from the Shanghai days?

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ST: Yes. I have one especially close friend, Siegfried Loebel, who has become deeply religious and lives in Boro Park. All of my close friends are Jewish.

Conclusion of Interview