

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

William Helmreich Oral History Collection

Interview with Tom Lantos

May 10, 1990

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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Tom Lantos, conducted by William Helmreich on May 10, 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.

Note to researcher: This document is not a complete transcript.

TOM LANTOS

May 10, 1990

WH: You came here on a Hillel Scholarship?

TL: Yes.

WH: Did you come here by boat?

TL: Yes, on the SS Marine Falcon, which left Cherbourg and then stopped in Bremenhaven.

WH: Were you seasick?

TL: I was not seasick. My bunk was B20. My first meal was marvelous because we went into the chow line and I had never seen so much wonderful food. There was a big basket of oranges and one of bananas. And I wanted to do the right thing. So I walked up to this sailor and asked him: "Should I take an orange or a banana?" And he said: "Man, you eat all the goddamn oranges and all the goddamn bananas you want." Then I knew I was in paradise. I was 19 at the time.

WH: What did you do on the boat?

TL: I thought a great deal about my war experiences and I talked to some very intelligent people about what life was like in America. Then we played bridge. I knew English already from my mother. I already knew German and Italian from school. My mother's side of the family was an academic family and my father was a banker.

WH: Was your family very assimilated?

TL: Very assimilated.

WH: So didn't it come as a real shock to be singled out for being Jewish?

TL: No, because our family was very sophisticated and we were Jewish. I had been bar-mitzvahed and received religious training. I was proud to be a Jew. On the other hand, the first religious word I learned was in the U.S.. It was a bagel. I didn't know what a bagel was.

WH: Do you think a Holocaust is possible in this country?

TL: No. The Democratic and pluralistic traditions here are much too powerful.

WH: Does the existence of many minorities here also make it unlikely that Jews would be singled out?

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TL: Perhaps, but Hungary also had many minorities – Rumanians, Gypsies, Yugoslavs, Czechs, and Germans, and Greeks, and Bulgarians.

WH: When you came to N.Y. what did you do?

TL: I was put on a train to Chicago and then to Seattle. It was a very memorable trip. I was literally glued to the window the entire time.

WH: What did you do when you came to Seattle?

TL: I stayed in a fraternity house of students from the University of Washington. It was part of the Hillel Scholarship Program. While there I made some very long-lasting friendships.

WH: How were you able to get going again when you came here after all you'd been through?

TL: I think horrible experiences do two things to people – they either crush them or they make them very strong and I fortunately fell into the latter category. It's no virtue of my own, but people do have these reactions. It may have to do with a person's makeup. I have a tremendously strong sense of social responsibility. I'm not a religious person but I do have that sense of responsibility for my community, immediate community and broader community. I feel very passionate about America. I'd lay down my life for this country at a moment's notice without any hesitation. I love this country and feel very deeply about it. Therefore, the opportunity of concluding my life in public service is probably the ultimate high. I mean, you could offer me the presidency of IBM tomorrow and I'd laugh at you. I have zero interest in making money. My interest is in serving this country. And the fact that I can serve in Congress as Chairman of the Human Rights Committee and be involved in cleaning up a major mess in one of our cabinet agencies, HUD, means that I'm on a permanent high.

WH: How has the Holocaust influenced this?

TL: In every way, because being involved in human rights is in direct juxtaposition to the life I led during the war. The first time in my life when I was on the right side, openly and privately, was when I stepped on American soil. When the Allies dropped bombs on me I wanted them to win the war even though they were dropping bombs. When I see the Olympics on TV I want every game to be won by the Americans. And when they sing the national anthem, I start crying.

WH: When you conduct the HUD hearings do you then feel angry that these people are cheating our government?

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TL: Yes. An outrage. I feel particularly outraged when political democracy throughout the world seems triumphant and we are so flawed. Not only the HUD investigation, but the homeless, crime in the streets, the presence of racial discrimination and anti-semitism; the vast numbers of elderly living in miserable conditions. I really want this country to shine.

WH: Why did you wait so long to get involved in this type of public service?

TL: Well, I didn't wait so long. I had done political advising for senators long before. I served as an administrative assistant in the U.S. Senate with several senators, Senators Gravel and Biden. I was heavily involved in several campaigns. I have a picture of my daughter greeting Adlai Stevenson in 1956. I was involved in the high command of the Frank Church senatorial campaign. I've been active politically for as long as I've been in America.

WH: How do you feel about Israel?

TL: I'm passionately committed to Israel.

WH: And now you're on the Holocaust Commission.

TL: Well that's of course a very special thing and I plan to be very heavily involved in that.

WH: What do you think was responsible for the recent upsurge of interest in the Holocaust?

TL: Elie Wiesel, as well as other individuals generated much interest. The proliferation of Holocaust museums. And I hope we'll have one in every major city. There should be museums in places like Seattle, Portland, and elsewhere like the excellent one they have in Detroit. This is because not everyone will come to Washington D.C.'s museum.

WH: Should these museums only focus on the Jewish tragedy?

TL: I don't think it matters because the lesson is ultimately so powerful that once a child is exposed to a Holocaust of any kind, it will then be understandable that it could easily happen to others. It wouldn't be at all wrong if these museums showed different experiences. I would also love to see other groups involved in funding them.

WH: Do you ever find that people in government are insensitive to these things?

TL: There is tremendous insensitivity on the part of many people, enormous sensitivity on the part of some people, and a potential for great sensitivity on the part of large numbers of people. That is why I am so eager to use every minute of my time on these issues. You see, Congress is a club. We all try to accommodate one another across party lines. It's the last small village in America. And if you're the only Holocaust survivor in Congress and

you sit down with them for dinner and they see you have children and grandchildren like them, and you're like them, then the Holocaust becomes very real to them. To say six million Jews perished is like telling them how many fish there are in the ocean. It makes no sense to them on an individual level. But when I say: "You know my younger daughter and she looks exactly the way my mother looked . . . and she was gassed at Auschwitz," then this colleague can understand what happened. I can't think of a single colleague who denies the Holocaust occurred but it's different when you read about it and when you know someone who has been through it. Moreover, I feel in many ways that in Congress I'm here, in a sense, for all of the survivors. And for this reason, I feel particularly responsible for all Jewish issues, whether it's anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, Syrian or Ethiopian Jews, the failure of Spain to have diplomatic relations with Israel, or whatever. But I do it like breathing, not because it's an obligation. After all, I lost immediate family during the war.

WH: Do you see yourself as a symbol of hope, of how people can overcome tragedy?

TL: I always accept engagements to speak in front of school children. Many of them are underprivileged but most had an incredible head start over me. I was a penniless immigrant Jew. I got a Ph.D., built a family and a career and, at the end of my career, was elected to Congress. And I say to them: "Every single one of you can do more than I did." And to see these kids', many of whom come from "the wrong side of the tracks" eyes light up . . . it's wonderful. I tell them that I didn't know a single person in this country when I came.

WH: Are there any personal habits left over from the war?

TL: I don't waste anything. I cannot put food on my plate that I don't finish. In a restaurant I always have trouble ordering anything that is more than a reasonable portion because to send food back is a crime. I love fruits but fruits to me come in two categories: Fruits that you could have in Hungary and those that you couldn't. For example, an orange or banana will be a delicacy to me for as long as I live because I couldn't have them until I went to America. We lead a very modest life in terms of our apartment, the car I drive. When I get invitations to things I can't go to, I parcel out all these invitations to people who I know could use the meal. And so, my elevator operator goes to the embassy party in my name. He represents me. He goes to the Brazilian Embassy or to the American Medical Association and he represents me. All of our young interns get these invitations. I get invited to ten events a week. Some of these people need the meal because of their limited income and, for others, it's a social opportunity. And, you don't waste things. I always saved money. I have spent more money probably than anybody on term life insurance. I was married forty years ago and ever since then I've carried astronomical amounts of term life insurance because I feel a very deep sense of commitment to my children. If I should die, my daughters have ten children. I'm very safety-oriented, very security-oriented.

WH: How do other survivors see you?

TL: I suspect that the most important thing is they all consider me one of them even if they're all different. Many survivors live in the past. But they know I'm very deeply and emotionally involved with all of them, non-religious, non-Hungarian, it doesn't matter.

WH: When you conduct the HUD hearings, is there any particular way you respond that is related to your wartime experiences?

TL: I am very strongly underdog-oriented and that's why it's very difficult in this case. All of my activities are "dangerous activities." For example, I'm chairman of the Labor Oversight Committee. There we deal with OSHA violations in the factories. And we deal with child labor violations. Or I'll have a hearing on petrochemical industry violations. We will have to impose penalties in many cases.

WH: Doesn't this make you a bit of an outsider since many come from more privileged circumstances?

TL: I wouldn't say so. I probably had as privileged an existence before the war as anybody. Here, my wife and I went to Europe every year with our children. I actually had a better life than most other members of Congress.

WH: So then your feelings for the underdog do stem, in large measure, from the Holocaust.

TL: I've always had a strong social conscience. For instance it pains me to no end that Pierce is black. And I think he made a horrendous mistake in how he handled this matter. I was the most sympathetic committee chairman he could have had. Taking the Fifth Amendment is a constitutional privilege but if you ask me what I did during my tenure in Congress, I'm proud to tell you.

WH: You own a Mercedes. Is buying German products in any way an issue for you?

TL: I understand it psychologically but it's so irrelevant to the world we live in. People should understand that the people who make the Mercedes today are not better or worse than the people who make French or Italian cars or the cars in Detroit. It's only a symbol. It doesn't bother Israel. In many ways the Germans have done a good job of teaching about the Holocaust.

WH: Does German reunification make you nervous?

TL: Well, first of all you need to understand that I'm a pragmatist and it's a reality. So the question is how to respond to it. My answer is to push it into the Western orbit as much

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as possible. If Germany becomes part of the Western structure it will be better for everyone.

WH: How do you feel about the issue of freedom of choice for Russian Jews who want to come here?

TL: I'm in favor of a sizeable number being permitted to come to the U.S. but not for every single Soviet Jew being allowed in.

WH: If you had to give people advice on how to overcome adversity in life, what would you tell them?

TL: I am totally unpreoccupied with myself and I am passionately occupied with issues. Where I am and what necktie I wear is really of no interest to me. So many people are interested in shallow things. I'm not suggesting I'm a Mother Theresa. I enjoy good food, good wine, and I enjoy nature. I'm not an ascetic. I have, I feel tremendous joix de vivre. I'm just saying that I find people who are preoccupied with themselves unbearable. I'm interested in the light of the Bahai in Iran, the Albanians in Yugoslavia, and child labor law violations, and that makes you a human being. I love animals. I feel sorry for them because their understanding is so limited. So my advice to people is to look and go beyond themselves. The only reason I wouldn't want to die tomorrow . . . after all, I've had a full life – is that I think I can still do some good. I'd like to die on the floor of the House.

WH: What leaders have most impressed you?

TL: I would have to say that numbers of my colleagues have impressed me greatly, Tom Foley and Al Gore, and I think very highly of others. But I cannot name a Churchill in today's times. In the past there was Roosevelt, notwithstanding his policies in World War Two, and there was Lincoln.