**United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**William Helmreich Oral History CollectionPRIVATE**

**Interview with Thomas Buergenthal**

**January 25, 1990**

**RG-50.165\*0010**

**PREFACE**

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Thomas Buergenthal, conducted by William Helmreich on January 25, 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.**THOMAS BUERGENTHAL**

**January 25, 1990**

WH: When and where were you born?

TB: I was born on May 11, 1934 in a small town in Czechoslovakia, the Slovakia part. And so I was ten when I was sent to Auschwitz. I was one of only three children who survived the Kielce childrens’ ghetto, but the other two were in hiding. As for me, I went to Auschwitz

WH: How did you survive Auschwitz as a ten year old.

TB: I knew whenever there would be a selection and that’s when I hid.

WH: Would you say this was luck or skill?

TB: Probably a combination of both. Actually, I think the reason I survived was that I didn’t know any better. I didn’t think long range. I simply thought of surviving from day to day. In a way it never entered my mind how remarkable this all was because I was only ten years old and didn’t think that way.

WH: Would you say in general you’re not introspective?

TB: That’s true, although as I get older I’m becoming more so. I’ve also noticed that those who were not in the terrible camps but were in labor camps seem not to have adjusted so well and I wonder why.

WH: It may be because those that survived the terrible camps were stronger and that those who were in the labor camps would, in fact, never have survived places like Auschwitz. Why else do you think you survived?

TB: I was fluent in German and Polish. Also I didn’t look at all Jewish.

WH: Did your father make it?

TB: No, only my mother and after the war she stayed in Europe and remarried while I, an only child, went to the States in 1951. I came on the General Greeley. I might add that my parents lived in Germany but came originally from Galicia near Przemsyl.

WH: And then you finished high school here?

RB: Yes, and I must say that the Jewish agency social worker tried to discourage me from college. She felt as a refugee this would be maybe too hard or whatever. It was my high school advisor who pushed me. I applied to a number of colleges but didn’t get a scholarship. One that I wrote to was Bethany College in N. Virginia. When they wrote back that they were a Disciples of Christ sponsored institution I didn’t even apply. I had actually just written for information. Then, one day, they inquired as to why I hadn’t applied. So I did and was accepted on a scholarship. And that’s where I went. It was actually a pretty good school, there were quite a few Jewish students, and the Disciples were actually pretty liberal. After that I went to N.Y.U. on a Root Tilden Scholarship. Then I went to Harvard to study International Legal Studies and finished first in the class. After that I taught at Univ. of Texas, Buffalo, and Emory. Now I have a chair here at G.W.U.

WH: I had thought from what my friend told me that you don’t especially identify as a Jew.

TB: I do. I belong to a Reform Temple, I contribute to Israel. I’m just not religious. I’ve never been to Israel and I’ve had many opportunities. But I’m hoping to go. My wife isn’t Jewish by birth but she converted. My children consider themselves quite Jewish and think of me as a “goy.” My second oldest, my son, is marrying a very religious girl from Baltimore. I would not say I’m not hostile to things Jewish, just uninvolved and indifferent.

WH: Do you believe in God?

TB: No. I can’t after the camps. Besides I saw religious people in the camps who acted very not nice and irreligious who behaved very well.

WH: Do you have any Holocaust survivor friends?

TB: No. Never had because those in my age category didn’t survive

WH: If you’d been 25 during the war, do you think you’d have had more survivor friends?

TB: Yes.

WH: When you first came where did you stay?

TB: I stayed for a week in an orphanage in the Bronx. I was 17 then. This was part of the procedure. Then my uncle picked me up and I lived in Paterson where I completed high school.

WH: Does the Holocaust affect your work?

TB: Not really.

WH: How about your decision to focus on human rights?

TB: Well, I suppose it might, but it is probably subconscious. I’m certainly not aware of it.

WH: Do you think a Holocaust could happen here?

TB: Yes and anywhere else too, given human nature.

WH: Do you think education helps?

TB: I doubt it. So many educated people were involved in the Holocaust.

Conclusion of Interview

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