**United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**William Helmreich Oral History CollectionPRIVATE**

**Interview with Jack Tramiel**

**June 28, 1990**

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**PREFACE**

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Jack Tramiel, conducted by William Helmreich on June 28, 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.**JACK TRAMIEL**

**June 28, 1990**

WH: How did you come here?

JT: By boat on the Marine Swallow in 1947. I was extremely disappointed when I arrived, seeing the dirt and the smells, and everything else. I wanted to take the next boat back to Europe.

WH: Why didn't you?

JT: I couldn't wait that long. I had to make a living here. I went to the States first and then I brought my wife here. In the meantime I started to look around here; I didn't have much education.

WH: How many years of school did you have?

JT: Four years.

WH: So where did you go?

JT: I went to the HIAS building where I stayed about two weeks. I remember that when I first walked out of the building, I was hit by a car. When I opened my eyes and saw all the people staring at me, I ran away. I figured I'm going to be arrested…because I hit a car! I didn't break anything and was in bed for about a week. I wound up staying with some friends on E. 10th St. When I got up in the morning and walked around on the street and smelled the herring and the pickles, I said: "This is America? I might as well go back to Poland". So I joined the U.S. Army three months after I got here. I felt that I should give something back to the U.S., whose troops liberated me. I also wanted to learn something about how this country worked. Finally, I hoped to go back to Europe to get my wife. I took basic training at Fort Dix. Then I got orders to go to Alaska. I decided to find a way how not to go to Alaska. I met a soldier whose parents were from Europe and he knew some people in General Bedell Smith's office and he was sympathetic to me because he was a liberator of the camps. He transferred me to Fort Kilmer.

WH: What camps were you in?

JT: I was in the Lodz Ghetto mostly. Then I was sent to Auschwitz, and Stechen, and other places.

WH: How long were you in the Army?

JT: Three years and seven months altogether. I lived in Manhattan and began repairing typewriters in a little shop. Then I was drafted again during the Korean War but I continued doing this repair work. In 1952 I was discharged. Then I started my office equipment business. I had a GI Loan and had a place in the Bronx across the street from Fordham University near the White Castle. I lived in Canada from 1955 to 1962 and then returned to N.Y. I had a distributorship for the U.S. from Canada. In 1966 I returned to Toronto and in 1969 we moved to Santa Clara. But in all of these places I kept businesses that I started.

WH: Did you see any differences between living in Canada and the U.S. from the perspective of a survivor?

JT: No.

WH: Could a Holocaust happen here?

JT: I think it would be more difficult, but it could happen here. Here you have such a mixture of different types of people, though.

WH: What type of work did your father do?

JT: He was an "upper shoemaker".

WH: Did you have brothers or sisters?

JT: No.

WH: Was it a religious family?

J T: No. My grandfather was religious. He was a Gerer Hasid.

WH: How were you able to survive?

JT: (He points to the sky)

WH: Do you believe in God?

JT: Yes.

WH: Are you active in the synagogue?

JT: Well, I help to build synagogues. I am Conservative. I help all kinds of Jews.

WH: You've accomplished so much and I know you're a very hard-driving individual. Why?

JT: For me it was very simple. I came to the U.S. knowing no one and I had to prove to myself that I'm equal to others, that I can accomplish. I also had goals---that anything I would do would help society. It's not enough simply to accumulate money. We have to live with all kinds of people and whenever people are denied their human right or discriminated against, it is up to us to help them.

WH: Are you involved in helping non-Jews?

JT: Very much. I am a trustee of the Congressional Human Rights Foundation, with Tom Lantos. We're involved all over the world. When we saw that the Dalai Lama was being discriminated against in China, Tom and I went to China. We helped the Chinese dissidents. We made a seder for the students and translated to the concepts of freedom from the Hagadah. It was unbelievable to them that here was a people which for five thousand years was struggling for freedom. They thought they're the only ones. My drive was to accomplish those kinds of things.

So when it comes to the computers, by the way, the most important thing was to manufacture a computer (Commodore) which every kid in the world will be able to afford to buy. Before I did this the IBM people took the attitude that computers were only for the privileged people, which meant that if you didn't have $100,000, you couldn't buy it. We sell mostly abroad now. I met with German youth in computer clubs and there wasn't a time when I was speaking to them that the word concentration camp didn't come out. I explained to them why I wanted to help youth, to develop the brain and its information capabilities as much as possible.

WH: Is it your feeling then, that computers can be a very valuable tool for doing good?

JT: Information is good?

WH: How did the Germans react?

JT: Very good. They wanted to know more about me.

WH: Do you sell in the U.S. now?

JT: We do about half a billion dollars in sales. About $425,000,000 of our sales is in Europe.

WH: Do you plan to sell more in the U.S. in the future?

JT: I plan to but it's not easy because an American does not buy a computer because he tested them all, but rather because Professor Shlomo Rosenberg from Columbia says so. He just follows the crowd. I've slowed down now. My sons are more active now. I'm not directly involved in the business.

WH: Why not be involved?

JT: I'd like to be able to help my children when I'm alive, not when I'm dead.

WH: What organizations are you involved with?

JT: Co-Chairman of the National Conference of Christians and Jews in Northern California; Director of Federation in San Jose. I'm involved with United Way, the Red Cross, and on and on and on. My permanent organizations are probably 60% Jewish. I helpled a Lubavitcher build his synagogue in Palo Alto. I belong to Chabad even though I'm not Orthodox. The rabbi there helps a lot of people in need; he visits people in the hospitals.

WH: It's interesting that as a Polish Jew, you're friendly with Tom Lantos who's a Hungarian. Yet often the two groups are separate.

JT: I was so busy through the years with my business that I never had much time for social relations. I find that Jews are basically all the same and I don't go by where they came from---Lodz or Buenos Aires.

WH: What did the Holocaust teach you about people?

JT: Helen and I are married about 43 years and we have different opinions about human nature. I believe people aren't guilty until they've done something wrong. Helen does not forgive. A German is a German and a German is bad. I believe that we even have to try to show an older German how wrong he was, not just take a pistol and kill him. We're not animals.

WH: Well, the SS guards…

JT: They were, but we are not. I don't want to go down to their level. This is very important because if we do, then they've won. Helen takes restitution money every month. I don't. I don't want to sell myself. Helen feels she's not selling herself.

WH: What did the war teach you about human nature with respect to your own fellow Jews?

JT: Most people are selfish, especially under stress. Education and knowledge can help people a lot. When you live isolated, as we Jews did, on one street in Europe, you're scared when you suddenly leave that world, the way I did after the war. I learned that there are good people everywhere and only a small proportion are bad. The selfishness comes in when living in isolation you only trust your group. You don't realize that we all have to help each other. Five percent cannot survive alone. So we have to share.

WH: Did your father try to inculcate these values in you as a child?

JT: My grandfather did.

WH: But you come across so tough in the newspaper articles. You were once quoted as saying, Business…

JT: Is war.

JT: Right.

JT: I believe in separation of church and state. The same thing is in business. Friendship and business are separate things. Private life and business are two separate things. When you're an officer of a public corporation, you're representing other people's money and you have to fight to the last drop. You're entitled to do whatever you want with your own money and your own time. That's just the way it is.

WH: I guess it's sometimes hard to separate business and friendship.

JT: A friend who doesn't understand this, is no friend. I declare myself before I start. I prefer to be divorced before I start. I tell people: "If you'll demand a high salary, I'll demand a lot from you. If you don't perform, your ass is out."

WH: Have your wartime experiences shaped your attitudes in this area?

JT: They must have. As I said before, whatever you do, it has to help society. So you have to be up front with people. You should never try to say how wonderful a person is if he isn't. If someone asks me about a former worker, I won't say how wonderful he was if he was fired. Most people don't do that.

WH: How were you able to find the strength to go on after the war?

JT: Maybe it was my youth. I came out like a tiger. I wanted to get back everything I had lost. I wanted to see everything. At first I had feelings of revenge, but that changed when a priest said to me: "If you are going to treat the Germans the same way they treated you, what's the difference between you and them?" The way he said it, just totally changed my outlook.

WH: Did you think of going to Israel after the war?

JT: No. I wasn't a Zionist. I give to Israel now and support her but I don't buy Bonds because that's not really giving. I've built a number of hospitals. Right now I'm building a home here in California and I'm going to make sure it'll have Jerusalem stone. The idea is to try to work with Israel as much as possible. We're going to have a factory in Israel which makes semiconductors. We'll have 74% and the government will have 26%. This is much better than buying Bonds.

WH: Do you favor Likud or Labor?

JT: Definitely Labor. I don't think Sharon and Shamir are the right people. We have to live in the world and not by ourselves. The way they do it, we're going to that much more hated in the world because we're only looking out for ourselves. We've been helping South Africa for years, which I'm totally against.

WH: Tell me a little about your children.

JT: All three are married. Sam is in charge of Atari. He has three children. His first wife converted to Judaism and died tragically, at 26, of cancer. Her dying wish was that he marry an Orthodox girl so the kids would identify as Jews. She taught us more about Judaism than anyone else. And he did, to an Orthodox girl named Tzippy. Leonard has a Ph.D. in physics from Columbia. He's in charge of our software. He's more in technology. He's also married, had one child, and is expecting another. Gary, the youngest, is in charge of operations and administration. He's married and just had a baby. The youngest one's wife converted too.

WH: It doesn't bother you, does it, that the wife was not Jewish initially.

JT: I will never allow my child to marry a non-Jew since the culture is so different, if only for the sake of the kids. So they would have to convert so they'll be raised in one religion. My children try to please me as much as they can.

WH: Any idea why some survivors did so well?

JT: Americans, in general, are lazy. Survivors had different values. As immigrants they see a lot, namely, that if you'll work your ass off, you can do anything. Today, I would not do what I did 35 year ago. Then, nothing is impossible. I had nothing to lose. I could only gain, so I could take chances. People set in their lives with families, are afraid to take risks. I had to take risks because I had nothing. [Some who took risks had nothing to lose, failed. They are forgotten] So when I was asked by Sears Roebuck to assemble a typewriter for them, I asked them: "Would you lend me the money to do that?" They said: "Yes," and lent me $176,000. I didn't know how to assemble typewriters. So I went to Royal, Smith Corona, and they all laughed at me. They had their own branches in Canada. I wound up in Prague, Czechoslovakia and I got a license from Prague to build typewriters. I set up an assembly line there. That's how we did it, by taking a chance, by not giving up, searching until you succeed.

WH: So it would seem it wasn't only God.

JT: It's always like that. God gives your opportunities, but you have to take them (He chuckles.) You always have to find something new. That's the only way you can grow. Necessity is the mother of invention. If I would have had a lot of education, I would have wanted to be in that, a professor. Same thing if I had been a plumber. I had no education and I was therefore forced to reach out.

WH: Do you think the majority of people make it, if they're forced to reach out?

JT: If they are reaching out, the majority will make it. But very few will reach out, they're afraid.

WH: Who should the Holocaust Museum portray?

JT: It is a museum of the Holocaust, between 1933 and 1945. So the Armenians are out because that happened before, but Gypsies, homosexuals, Catholics, all people who have suffered, should be represented.

WH: Are you involved with Ben Meed's group?

JT: Ben is giving the thing over to the Museum. Vladka is a wonderful person. We met with the Secretary of Agriculture in April, they're our neighbors, next door to the museum. And he said: "It's wonderful that we're building a memorial to all those people who are no longer living." (He laughs.) And this is a Secretary. We didn't say anything. Like you pulled out an article about me, but very few people will research something. In Japan and Germany, people have a staff that gets the material for them automatically. Here you have to ask for it and you're lucky if you get it.

WH: What should we do in terms of the future?

JT: We should extend ourselves to others. When I bought my factor in Germany, the fellow who introduced me to his non-Jewish father-in-law said to me: "Jack, one thing you should not do. Don't tell them you're Jewish. You've got 2,000 German employees because you won't get their loyalty." So what did I do? I made a speech to them and told them I was Jewish (like Gross in Alabama) and that I was a survivor of the concentration camps. And then I said that I wanted anyone who was in the SS in my office in the next two days. Over twenty of them came and about six of them walked out and said they will never work for a Jew. The others apologized; it wasn't their fault and all that. I saw it as honesty and that they were looking for forgiveness.

WH: And you gave it to them.

JT: Yes.

WH: Were you beaten during the war?

JT: At lot.

WH: You seem to have a large capacity for forgiveness.

JT: It's so much better to be able to forgive than to hate.

WH: Well, it's clear you've done very well in your life.

JT: You see that bridge out the window, the 59th Street Bridge?

WH: Yes.

JT: I just looked straight ahead, in front of me, and never turned back. Plus people have always underestimated me. I never competed against the little guy because I was a little guy. The little guy will fight back. I went against the big guys like IBM who didn't pay much attention to me because I was a mouse to them, unimportant. So I sneaked up on them and succeeded before they knew it. (He laughs.) And now let me ask you a question since you know about Jewish history and that kind of thing---What was the first Jewish settlement in America?

WH: I think, maybe, somewhere on the East Coast, eh…

JT: No. Ten cents on the dollar! (He laughs heartily as we say goodbye.)

Conclusion of Interview

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