

**The Southern Institute
For Education and Research
at
Tulane University**

Presents

**STORIES OF
HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
IN NEW ORLEANS**

SIGMUND BORAKS

SIGMUND BORAKS, KNOWN AS SIGGY, WAS 14 YEARS OLD WHEN THE NAZIS OCCUPIED HIS HOMETOWN OF WIELUN, POLAND, IN SEPTEMBER 1939. WITH HIS PARENTS AND YOUNGER SISTER BASHA, SIGGY WAS SENT TO A NAZI GHETTO. HE RECEIVED A 'GREEN CARD' ('WORK CARD') THAT EXEMPTED HIM FROM 'EVACUATION' TO TREBLINKA DEATH CAMP.

HIS FAMILY PERISHED AT TREBLINKA IN OCTOBER 1942. IN EARLY 1944, SIGGY WAS SENT TO AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU DEATH CAMP. WORKING ON THE 'RAMP' AND IN ONE OF THE FIVE GAS CHAMBERS, HE WITNESSED THE MURDER OF 450,000 HUNGARIAN JEWS. AFTER THE WAR, SIGGY MARRIED IN GERMANY AND, IN 1952, MOVED TO NEW ORLEANS.

THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED BY THE SOUTHERN INSTITUTE'S PLATER ROBINSON.

PR (PLATER ROBINSON)
SB (SIGGY BORAKS)

SB My name is Sigmund Boraks. And I'm born July 18, 1925, in Wielun, Poland. It was about a hundred kilometers from Lodz.

MAP OF POLAND, ZOOMING IN ON WIELUN

PR And very close to the German border.

SB This was seven kilometers from the German border. That's why when the war start, the Germans were practically the same day or day after in my town. And when they came, they were hardly about a few days, when came the law came out that all the Jews have to have a yellow band and a star. And they put the people to work.

PHOTOGRAPH OF SIGGY AS YOUNG MAN

At the time we didn't notice there was nothing bad against the Jews. I remember this one, this one soldier was checking the tickets. He even to me, he said, 'Good boy, good boy.' So you don't think anything like that.

PR Did you know this was going to be a war against the Jews?

SB No, a 100% no. Actually, my parents told me as I remember that in the First World War they got along pretty good with German people and the reason why is because German and Yiddish is close. So they could understand what the German was talking about. So I remember my mother keep saying that 'The German people are nice people, smart people.' We never believed in our dreams that this

will happen to Jewish people.

PHOTOGRAPH OF PIT FULL OF CORPSES

On November the 11th, 1939, because it's a Polish national holiday, Independence Day, so they arrested I would say about maybe fifty, sixty Jewish people and Christian people, and they're suppose to send them back home after the 11th. Because my mother talked to a policeman and he said, 'Don't worry about it. On the 12th or 13th, your husband will be home again.' Well, on the 13th, they send him to Lodz in a camp. This what he told me later. And maybe end of November [1939], beginning of December, I don't know exact, they came, two Polish policemen came, and they give us one hour time to move everything, whatever we can in one hour time.

PR They were ordered by the Germans.

SB They were ordered by the Germans. The Polish, they didn't do on their own. They took the orders from the German. And they give it to us. So you know in one hour - you don't know what to take. My sister was running. My mother, she was hysterical. She was putting one thing and forgot, and then put two pair pants and we put some stuff in the pillow case. So we went to the station and we then we went to the train and we went to Cracow.

MAP OF POLAND-WIELUN TO CRACOW

My dad, somehow he found out I think through the Jewish community, he found out that we coming, so he was waiting for us and we went with the street car, we went to our place, and it was a miserable place. It was on the third or fourth floor. It was so cold that icicles was hanging from the ceiling. It was four families in one room, and we slept in our clothes because too cold, but after a

couple weeks some people moved away from over there and so were living in this room my uncle [Gustav] and my dad. He got a wife and one child.

PR So eventually you make it to the Polish city Czestochowa.

MAP OF POLAND-CRACOW TO CZESTOCHOWA

SB Yeah, well this was when they start to make a ghetto in Cracow. Everybody who came in 1939 and 1940 was sent back to different towns. Our family came to Czestochowa. Czestochowa was a large ghetto at the time, and we got a room from a lady, she was Jewish but somehow she forgot she was Jewish. Hitler reminded her she was Jewish. She wouldn't give us any place. So my dad went back to the place and told them, 'They don't let us in,' and they came and they made her. We have to stay. We slept on the floor.

PR But then came October 1942 when the deportations began to Treblinka.

SB Yeah, well, in 1942, one day after Yom Kippur, early in the morning, it was 5:00 o'clock, the Jewish police came, and they told us that, we have a 'green card.' I was the only one with a 'green card' because I was working on the railroad. My dad was working as a barber so this was not important. If you were working for the Germans, you got a 'green card.' So they had to go to one place, and I to go to another place. And my dad told me, I remember like today, he said, 'Don't worry, we will see each other after the war.' And he told me to come to the same town. And this was the last time I saw him.

PR And then the Germans had you dig graves in a field.

SB Well, I was in a factory. When I came to the factory, they had over there a whole bunch of Jewish people in important position. They knew something what we didn't. They tried to get in to this factory. They never had a 'green card' because, like they was working in the Jewish community center, for example. But some of them got in, some of them didn't. Anyway, when I was in there after a few hours, a soldier came in and say he look for volunteers. I never did like to be in a camp in the first place. So I volunteer and they give us a shovel. And we was walking to a street, call it Kawia Street, this was a little bit outside of the city. They told us to dig a hole. Later we found out it was a grave. But at the time we didn't even know what they were talking about. 'Quick!' 'Schnell! Schnell! Schnell!' And then all of a sudden a truck came with dead bodies. When they was emptying down, I saw a guy who look like my dad because he got a 'trench coat' on. But I tried to turn him over and to see, but they [fellow Jewish slaves] wouldn't let me because they were afraid I might make a scene. They were afraid because even the Germans were very nervous at the time that was watching us. So after the war I found out it couldn't be him because my uncle [Gustav], he lived through, and he was in Treblinka, and he told me that a week after parents came in, somebody told him that 'A week ago your brother came with his family and they got killed.'

PR In Treblinka.

SB In Treblinka.

***PHOTOGRAPH OF MEN BY THE TRAIN TRACKS HEADING TO
TREBLINKA***

TREBLINKA IN 1990, 45 YEARS AFTER WORLD WAR II.

PHOTOGRAPH OF GRASS AND TREES ZOOMING OUT OF WHERE

USE TO BE THE FAKE TRAIN STATION

LOCATION OF FAKE TRAIN STATION BUILT BY THE NAZIS TO DECEIVE THE VICTIMS.

EIGHT HUNDRED THOUSAND JEWISH PEOPLE WERE MURDERED AT TREBLINKA BETWEEN 1942 -'43. AFTER HIS FAMILY WAS 'EVACUATED,' SIGGY AND OTHER JEWISH PRISONERS IN CZESTOCHOWA GHETTO WERE CRAMMED INTO NAZI CATTLE CARS AT THE RAILROAD STATION. HARDLY ABLE TO BREATHE, THEY WAITED TWO DAYS AND NIGHTS.

SB No food, no water. The Polish people sometime came in and they were selling bottle with water, and the German let them. Sometime for the value maybe fifty dollars for a bottle water, and sometimes they took the money and they never even deliver the water.

MAP OF SIGGY'S ROUTE TO BLIZYN

And after two days we was on the way and it took us about another two days. Because every time a train passed through they put us on side road, and then we went to Blizyn. Blizyn was a labor camp. And everybody who came in, right away, there was women and men: the women was one way, and the men was in another. It was the same camp but it was somehow different. And they was looking us over, what we had, what we don't have, we had to give, and everything. But we did keep our private, civilian clothes. They never took the civilian clothes.

PR So there was the occasion when someone escaped, and as a result...

SB More than one escape. We was sleeping seven on a bunk. Seven

up, seven in the middle, and seven lower. If one guy turned over, everybody had to turn over because it was very tight. So the Germans, because some people escaped, the Germans got a law that whoever escape, the partner, whoever sleep next to, he will be responsible, he will be shot. So after a couple of weeks later someone did escape from the left side. So they took us, I got number '55' on my pants. At the time we were not tattoo. Just had a number on pants, and they took us to a forest. It was a couple of guys, three or four of them. I was looking at the sky. I said, 'This is the last time I see the sky.'

PR So they had you dig the graves?

PHOTOGRAPH OF SIGGY AS A YOUNG MAN IN UNIFORM

SB Oh yeah, we dig our own grave. Dig our grave, because if you didn't, they beat you up. They was about to shoot us. Maybe about five minutes it will be all over. But like I said, I believe I got an angel. Well, all of a sudden a guy came on a bicycle. A German soldier, he said, 'We found those guys who escaped.' They was on a train. They was jumping on a train, covered themselves with little stones, you know. We was making railroad stones for the railroad. They got dynamite in a quarry, and somehow they got in between the stones and they covered themselves. And they found them. They found them about hundred kilometers further away from the place. I think in Radom. And they brought them back and there was no reason to shoot us because they got the guys.

PR So your life was saved by a split second almost.

SB Split second. And those guys what they found, what they escaped, they was shot and they was buried in the same grave what we was digging for ourselves.

TWENTY THOUSAND JEWS AND NON-JEWS WERE ENSLAVED AT BLIZYN LABOR CAMP. IN ONE YEAR 15,000 PEOPLE DIED IN THE BRUTAL CONDITIONS. IN EARLY 1944, SIGGY WAS SENT TO AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU DEATH CAMP. HERE 1.3 MILLION PEOPLE WERE MURDERED, INCLUDING 1.1 MILLION JEWS. THE NAZIS TATOODED JEWISH SLAVES ON THE ARM. SIGGY'S NUMBER WAS 'B-2039.'

PHOTOGRAPH OF TATOODED NUMBER ON SIGGY'S FOREARM.

AT AUSCHWITZ BIRKENAU, SIGGY WORKED FOR SEVERAL MONTHS ON THE 'RAMP' WHERE TRAINS CARRYING UNSUSPECTING JEWS WERE UNLOADED. ON THE 'RAMP' NAZI DOCTORS 'SELECTED' WHO WOULD BE GASSED IMMEDIATELY IN THE 'SHOWERS' AND WHO WOULD LIVE IN ORDER TO BE WORKED TO DEATH.

PHOTOGRAPH OF CROWD BY THE CATTLE CARS, ZOOMING IN ON SIGGY

SB I was working on railroad tracks cleaning from all kind of garbage, and a train came and I told the people, I say, 'If you have small children, if you have babies, don't hold them. Give them to elderly people.'

PHOTOGRAPH OF YOUNG CHILDREN AT AUSCHWITZ

So those people cussed me out. 'How can you tell something like that? Nobody would do something like that.' I said, 'Look over there - the smoke.'

PHOTOGRAPH OF SMOKE AND MEN THROWING THE BODIES INTO

THE FIRE

They say, 'What is it?' But at the time, the guy came, the guard, you know, and I was afraid to talk anymore.

PHOTOGRAPH OF THE PEOPLE COMING OUT OF THE CATTLE CARS ZOOMING OUT OF A CHILD HUGGING HIS MOTHER

PR So you told those people who were coming into the death camp, if you have young children, they'll be killed. Put them with the older people. They'll be killed, too.

SB So at least the younger people will have a chance to live. It was smart everything done.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF PIECE OF ARTWORK REPRESENTING THE FAMILIES

When people came to the gas chamber, they had a soldier going around and they said, 'Women here, men here. Undress. Take shower.' And they told them, 'Now remember, you're going to a camp. You will work. Don't worry about anything. Tie your shoes together. And make sure your children tie their shoes together. Because when you come out, you don't so much spend time looking for your clothes and your shoes.'

PR All a lie.

SB All a lie. See, this why people were never was thinking about it - they will be dead in another fifteen, twenty minutes, and when the people went in the gas chambers from two different doors inside, they meet, the women and men was together. It was everything pretending like everything is 'kosher.'

PHOTOGRAPH OF PIECE OF ART REPRESENTING THE DEATH IN THE GAS CHAMBER

Then when they start to put gas, the stronger people went on top, the weaker on the bottom because the air was better on top than on the bottom.

PR So people would fight for the last breath of air.

SB That's right. Because when they opened the doors, you had to have a water hose to separate the bodies. It was so tight. You couldn't separate by hand. You had to actually separate them by water spray. And then some people, especially women, if they're scared, they let themselves go, the muscles, you see. So we have to clean the floors later, you know, from waste, human waste.

PR How large was the gas chamber?

SB Oh, the gas chamber was almost as big as this room here. Pretty big. They could put in a thousand people at one time.

PHOTOGRAPH OF PEOPLE STANDING IN TWO LINES AFTER SELECTION

PR And then, in the spring of 1944, the arrival of the almost 500,000 Jewish people from Hungary, and you witnessed it.

SB The Hungary people came in, they were dressed nice. You could see they was not hungry. They looked, the skin, everything looked okay.

PHOTOGRAPH OF YOUNG CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ZOOMING

OUT

PR When the Hungarian Jews came, they came with a lot of food.

SB That's another story. A prisoner came over. I was working in the water department this particular day. There was two Catholic priests. It was one man - he was in the Polish police department. I don't know why they send him to Auschwitz. Anyway, he was there. He came over. He said, 'They have so much food, you have no idea. It's like before the war.' So I just took a chance, and I tied my pants, and I went over there, and sure enough, there was sugar, and candy, and chocolate, and bread. Everything was just lay there, because they have to leave everything there and go away.

PR Go away to the gas.

SB Yeah. So I just got a hole in my pocket, and I was putting everything in. I keep walking. I almost was there. I was three quarters of the way. And all of a sudden there was a 'woman commando,' was working and the *kapo* woman, she was screaming and showing me something, and I turned around and there was a German guard with a rifle and he was holding against me. So I know, 'Oh, that's it.' So I just stood still and he came closer and he said, 'Open pants.' So I open and everything just went on the floor, and he said, 'What is this?' 'Well, it was laying on ground anyway. I thought I could have it.' 'You can't have nothing!' Said, 'Go against the wire!'

PHOTOGRAPH OF BARBED WIRE

And at the time if somebody went against the wire, this means he try to escape. It was impossible to escape.

PR So he was sending you to the wire so that he could shoot you.

PHOTOGRAPH OF DEAD MAN LYING BY THE WIRE

SB So he can shoot me. Exactly. This was his excuse. I was actually begging for my life at the time and I told him, 'I didn't do nothing wrong. I said I'm hungry.' And I say, 'You probably have children, too. You don't want to have on your...to kill me.' Stuff like that. Anyway, he just looked at me so funny like and just turned around and walked away. And I was staying there 'til I didn't see him no more. Because I was afraid that if I start to walk he might shoot me in the back. So he just left. That's why I say, I was so much in trouble sometimes, and I always somehow came out.

PHOTOGRAPH OF PRISONERS WEARING STRIPED UNIFORMS AT ROLL CALL

I tell you, in time you are like a zombie. Whatever they tell you to do, you do it without even thinking. Because if you just do it slow, you don't do it, you got beat up real bad, and once you was beat up, you was a marked man because every guard who passed by, he saw you beat up, he beat you up too, again, because he figure you did something wrong.

PR How much of survival was luck?

SB I would say 99% just pure luck. You see, in Auschwitz, later when the Russian came closer to Auschwitz, and Auschwitz was close up, there were still some prisoners because they couldn't empty everybody out. Our block was sent on a train again and we went through a very narrow way. On one side was the gas chamber and on the other side was a real place where you took showers, and every time somebody was sent to another camp they give you a shower. But my heart was beating so because I didn't know if I go

right or left. Right was life, left was death. But when I came to left side I know it was the shower so we took a shower.

PHOTOGRAPH OF DEATH MARCH IN THE WOODS

So they send us to Kaufering. This camp was deep in a forest. No food. We was sleeping under ground. They was digging like a tunnel. It was ice, ice cold, and I was working. Everyday people died. Dropped like flies. So I was working with the 'death commando.' This mean we have to pick up the dead people and bring them in a forest and bury them because they had no crematoria over there. In winter, the ground was so hard like a rock. We had picks. We had picks. Once you make a little place where the ground was a little soft, but it took us a long time, and we had a wagon. What you call a 'Japanese wagon.' This is a wagon with two wheels, two big wheels, and because I was small, I was the front guy who was, you know, holding it, and I got ten people behind it and they suppose to push it, and, well, we went up the hill and then went down the hill and it was snow and ice and the guy tried to hold the wagon back and it went faster and faster, faster and faster. And finally I just let it go and a piece of wood where it hit a stone, and the wagon jumped up and all the dead people was flying round in air. So a German guy with his wife was passing in a car. He almost got an accident because he was looking up and he probably couldn't figure out where the dead people come from. So he went on the side and he stopped. Later we had problems because we had to pick up the dead people and put them back in the wagon. We had to make two trips. We came in camp it was eight o'clock. It was cold, snow, and cold.

SIGGY WAS LIBERATED AT DACHAU CONCENTRATION CAMP NEAR MUNICH, GERMANY BY AMERICAN TROOPS, ON APRIL 29, 1945. HE HAD BEEN A NAZI PRISONER FOR 2,060 DAYS AND WEIGHED 68 POUNDS.

PHOTOGRAPH OF EMACIATED PRISONERS

AFTER THE WAR, SIGGY LIVED IN FRANKFURT, GERMANY, WHERE HE MET MARGOT. SHE WAS GERMAN-JEWISH AND HAD BEEN FORCED TO WORK AS A SLAVE ON A GERMAN FARM. SIGGY AND MARGOT WERE MARRIED ON AUGUST 30, 1946.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF MARGOT AND SIGGY

IN FRANKFURT, SIGGY BEFRIENDED A YOUNG GERMAN NAMED KURT. SIGGY DIDN'T KNOW THAT THE MAN WAS A FORMER NAZI WHO SERVED IN THE EINSATZGRUPPEN, A SPECIAL UNIT THAT HAD SLAUGHTERED JEWS IN POLAND AND RUSSIA.

AS A TOKEN OF FRIENDSHIP, KURT GAVE HIS PHOTOGRAPH TO SIGGY. ON THE BACK WAS WRITTEN: 'CHARKOV, RUSSIA, 1943.'

PHOTOGRAPH OF KURT IN UNIFORM

SB And we was talking. He didn't know I was Jewish. Never asked me if I was Jewish and I never told him. One time day we got Yom Kippur and I never show up this particular time, and he asked me. I said, 'Well, we got holiday, a Jewish holiday.' He said, 'You a Jew?' Like I'm a sick man. Crazy. He left me standing there, and later, about four weeks later, he told me that 'I was in *Einsatzgruppen*.'

PHOTOGRAPH OF GERMAN SOLDIER SHOOTING MAN ON KNEELING ON THE EDGE OF A DITCH AS SOLDIERS WATCH

And he said, 'I kill many women, children.' He shot them. He said, 'This the law.' He said he had to follow the law. He said this what they told me to do it, and he did it. And I told him, 'How can you

sleep at night? I can understand if one soldier kill another one because if you don't kill, he you, but civilian people?' This war was more about civilian people than anything else. You know, I couldn't do nothing that my parents were Jewish. What could I do about it? I was born. I believe in one God, if I believe in God. We couldn't have ten gods. Catholic, Protestant, Jewish. One God. We call him different name. Maybe he forgot about us. Maybe he got a 'honeymoon' or something. I don't know, but the people lost faith. Real faith.

SIGGY AND MARGOT MOVED TO NEW ORLEANS IN 1952. THEY HAD FOUR CHILDREN. SIGGY WORKED THREE JOBS: AS A LENS GRINDER AND JANITOR DURING THE WEEK; AND AS A GAS STATION ATTENDANT ON WEEKENDS.

PHOTOGRAPH OF SIGGY WORKING

PHOTOGRAPH OF HIM AS A YOUNG MAN AFTER THE WAR

MARGOT DIED IN 1994. SIGGY EVENTUALLY BOUGHT HIS OWN OPTICAL COMPANY. HE HAS EIGHT GRAND-CHILDREN AND FOUR GREAT-GRAND CHILDREN.

PHOTOGRAPH OF SIGGY SPEAKING TO STUDENTS IN SCHOOL

PR Sigmund, I know that you travel to schools, you and I have gone together, and I wonder what message you want young people to derive from your life story.

SB Well, you see, I couldn't talk about my experience with my own children. I just couldn't. But I would say ten, fifteen years ago when I start to talk about. And I feel the children should know what happened if a group of people take power. Because sometimes we voting for people, for politicians, they promise you everything, but

once they're in power, they do just the opposite. People in a war-time, people commit terrible crimes. Let the children know, go to vote, vote for right man. Do whatever best for you. Get educated so you know what you're doing. Because without education, without knowledge what's going on, things like that can happen again and I hope it will never happen. You see what's happening between the Catholic and Protestants in Ireland? What happened in Bosnia? People never learn. And I think we should talk about it, 'til we put the point into the people that people can be sadists sometimes if they have the opportunity.

PR People can be 'sadists'?

SB Sadists. Some people take pleasure to inflict pain on the other people.

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