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Yom HaShoah speaker spent decade in Shanghai Jewish ghetto

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Sigmund Tobias, Holocaust Commemoration speaker. Courtesy

By Bill Sherman Tulsa World | 0 comments

Sigmund Tobias was 6 years old in 1938 when he and his family fled the rising tide of Nazism in Berlin to live in Shanghai, one of the few places on Earth they could find refuge.

Tobias, who will speak this week in Tulsa at the annual Yom HaShoah/Interfaith Holocaust Commemoration, has few memories of his life leading up that time, he said in a phone interview from his home in Florida.

But he does remember Nazis stenciling "Jews forbidden" signs on the benches on the tree-lined street in his neighborhood.

And he has a vivid memory of walking the two blocks to his neighborhood synagogue the day after Kristallnacht, the night that Jewish businesses and synagogues were ransacked by the Nazis all over Germany.

He saw the burned remains of the Torah scrolls and prayer books in a pile in the courtyard.

"I had been taught to revere the Torah scrolls," he said. "When I saw them being

burned like junk, I had this internal feeling that there was no safety for us anywhere. And that ended up being prophetic."

Yom HaShoah/Interfaith Holocaust Commemoration

When: 7 p.m. Thursday

Where: Congregation B'nai Emunah, 1719 S. Owasso Ave.

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After Kristallnacht, Tobias' father, a peddler, decided to get his family out of Germany.

At that time, Tobias said, the problem was not leaving Germany, but finding a place to go that would give them a visa.

Failing to get visas, his father sneaked into Belgium, not yet under Nazi control, seeking a place for his family. He was caught by Belgian authorities and returned to Germany, where he was imprisoned at the Dachau concentration camp. He was badly beaten and lost 20 pounds in 13 days.

Tobias' mother found out that he could go to the Japanese-controlled part of Shanghai without a visa, and through her efforts, his father was released and allowed to go there. Six months later, Tobias and his mother rejoined his father.

The Hongkew section of Shanghai was to be their home for about the next decade.

In about 1942 or 1943, he said, the Japanese, under pressure from the Germans, created a ghetto for the Jews.

Tobias said he learned later that a Gestapo colonel, who was known as the Butcher of Warsaw, asked the Japanese to impose the Nazis' "final solution" on the Shanghai Jews by putting them in boats and sending them out to sea to die, but the Japanese instead rounded them up and forced them to live in a ghetto, some 17,000 to 20,000 Jews.

The conditions were deplorable, he said. Malnutrition and disease were rampant.

"We (Jewish refugees) filled up three cemeteries," he said.

In 1948, three years after the end of World War II, Tobias left the ghetto and came to the United States. He was almost 16.

He was a German citizen, and the immigration quotas were liberal for Germans. His parents were born in Poland, which had much smaller immigration quotas. It was a year before they could join him in America, aided by a U.S. congressman who worked to have the Shanghai Jews categorized as displaced persons, which were not subject to quotas.

They settled in Brooklyn. Tobias attended Mirrer Yeshiva, a rabbinical seminary in the ghetto for five years, which he said prepared him well for public high school in America. He went on to college, eventually earning his doctorate, and has spent his entire professional life in the academic world, with a long resume of published works and awards.

He is currently Eminent Research Professor in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology at the State University of New York at Albany.

He tells his story in a book titled "Strange Haven: A Jewish Childhood in Wartime Shanghai."

Tobias will sign copies of his book when he speaks at the Yom HaShoah/Interfaith Holocaust Commemoration at 7 p.m. Thursday at Congregation B'nai Emunah, 1719 S. Owasso Ave. The event is sponsored by the Tulsa Council for Holocaust Education, which is a committee of the Jewish Federation of Tulsa, and the Tulsa City-County Library, in cooperation with dozens of local interfaith and community organizations.

Holocaust artwork by Tulsa area students will be displayed. Candles will be lit in memory of people murdered in the Holocaust, and the library will have Holocaust books and media available for checkout.

Bill Sherman

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Lottery payout hike bill advances

LEADS: KATIE • OK would lift lottery payout prizes, boost proceeds to schools

By Paul Hergenrother

TULSA, Okla. — A bill to raise lottery payouts and increase the amount of money that goes to schools through the Oklahoma Lottery is expected to move forward in the House on Wednesday, state officials say.

The measure, which would raise the top prize from \$5 million to \$10 million and increase the amount of money that goes to schools from 10 percent to 15 percent, is expected to be passed by the House on Wednesday, state officials say.

The measure would also increase the amount of money that goes to schools from 10 percent to 15 percent.

THE LOVE OF LEARNING

By Bill Mott

SCHOOLHOUSE ROCK STARS • Corvia Dandridge • Anderson Elementary

Anderson Elementary's Corvia Dandridge, a teacher at Anderson Elementary, is seen here with her students. She is a teacher at Anderson Elementary, a school in Tulsa, Okla.

Muskogee VA puts hold on referrals to Tahleah

VETERANS • VA hospital offers recent hold on cases for 90-day hold

By Paul Hergenrother

TULSA, Okla. — The Veterans Affairs hospital in Muskogee has placed a new hold on referrals to Tahleah, Okla., for a 90-day period.

The hold is expected to last for 90 days, according to a spokeswoman for the Muskogee VA hospital.

Rep. Bridenstine still prospect for NASA job

By Paul Hergenrother

Rep. Louie Gohmert (R-Texas) says that Rep. Tim Bridenstine (R-Okla.) is still a prospect for the job of NASA administrator.

Gohmert said that Bridenstine is a "strong candidate" for the job.

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