

## Sherman Ray

The family trade, tailoring, saved Sherman's life in the most infamous Nazis camp, Auschwitz.

### Chapter 01 - 1:24

#### Introduction

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**Announcer:** Sherman Ray survived the WWII Nazi death camp, Auschwitz, by sewing German uniforms. He was targeted by the Germans not once, but twice to be transported to the infamous Auschwitz. The first time, at a young age, was with his family. Sherman had heard rumors of the camps and wanted his family to jump from the train with him to escape, but they refused, so he jumped alone. That was the last time he saw his parents, sister, and younger brother. They were among thousands of Jews rounded up after Hitler's army stormed through Poland.

After leaping from the moving train, Sherman hid in the woods and lived by whatever means available. Eventually, he was captured a second time by German soldiers and transported to Auschwitz—this time, he was not lucky enough to escape. Sherman was saved by his tailoring skills, and the soldiers put him to work making Nazis uniforms. For four years, he made his captors clothing while he watched many other Jews die of starvation and disease, and heard the screams of those in the death chambers.

Sherman was liberated in 1945 and eventually came to Oklahoma City and then Tulsa where he continued his work as a tailor and became the owner of Ray's Tailor Shop.

Now you will hear Sherman Ray tell his exceptional story of survival on [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com) a service of the Oklahoma Center for the Humanities at the University of Tulsa.

### Chapter 02 - 5:12

#### All You Need Is a Thimble

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**John Erling:** My name is John Erling. Today's date is February 22, 2017. Sherman, would you give us your full name, please?

**Sherman Ray:** Sherman Ray.

**JE:** Did you never have more than that name?

**SR:** That's all, no middle name.

**JE:** Ray has been your last name?

**SR:** Yeah, that's, yeah.

**JE:** Your name is Sherman. Were you named after somebody special? How did Sherman come about?

**SR:** I used to be Sasha. When I came to the United States, after five years I got my citizenship I could change, "This is Sasha, make it Sherman." It used to be Reiko. He said, "Make it Ray." So I figure, "Okay."

**JE:** What is your date of birth?

**SR:** May 5, 1921.

**JE:** And so how old are you today?

**SR:** Today, ninety-five.

**JE:** You're coming up on ninety-sixth birthday here.

**SR:** Right, that's right. Next May.

**JE:** And how are you feeling? Good health?

**SR:** So far.

**JE:** Tell us where we're recording this interview.

**SR:** At Ray's Tailor Shop.

**JE:** At Ray's Tailor Shop.

**SR:** Yeah, Tulsa.

**JE:** Where were you born?

**SR:** Poland.

**JE:** What town?

**SR:** Hajnowka. It was close to Bialystok. Used to be White Russia. Eighteen months I lived under the Russian. So if anybody wants to know about communism, let them come and talk to me.

**JE:** What was your mother's name?

**SR:** Freda Skolnik, it was her maiden name. Then she married my father.

**JE:** And his name?

**SR:** His name was Rafael, Rafael Reiko.

**JE:** You lived in Poland but you are of Jewish descent?

**SR:** That's right.

**JE:** What was your mother like?

**SR:** Mother was a housewife, cooking, we never went to a restaurant like here. I tell you, it's no joke. American people doesn't appreciate this country. "Whoo, I eat meat three

times a day.” You were lucky, on Saturday, once a week. You think you could buy a regular meat a lot of time? Buy the heads from the cow and make a meal for Sabbath. What rough life. We didn’t know anything better. How could we go? From one town to the second we walked.

The life in Europe, I will not say everybody, you know, but the smaller communities, we didn’t have electricity. Electricity, the big cities, they had that. But the big cities nobody could pay the high rent.

**JE:** What did your father do?

**SR:** He was a tailor.

**JE:** Ah-ha.

**SR:** And my grandfather was a tailor.

**JE:** Okay.

**SR:** So he told me one thing, John, and I will never forget and I tell a lot of people. He said, “Son, I cannot send you to college. Learn a trade, wherever you will be. All you need is simple and then you can make a living.”

You saw *Fiddler on the Roof*?

**JE:** Yes, *Fiddler on the Roof*.

**SR:** Mark the tailor.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** But we’re not like the machines. We used to peddle, you see?

**JE:** Yes, I see one over here.

**SR:** In Oklahoma City I bought a machine, it was peddle. The Amish people here, they do the same thing, they don’t use electric. These machines you cannot get, the original Singer.

**JE:** Yeah, Singer, that was a big name, wasn’t it?

**SR:** That is the best machine.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** You know what I can get for a machine like this?

**JE:** No.

**SR:** Three thousand dollars.

**JE:** Wow. My mother had a Singer sewing machine just like that, I wish I had it now.

**SR:** It’s antique.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** All these things made in Japan, it’s not the same. Made in Korea, it’s got plastic everything, wears out, it’s no good.

**JE:** How old were you when you remember learning the trade of tailoring?

**SR:** I was a young boy, eight, nine, ten. When I was eleven, twelve, you know, after school, I used to come home. My father used to have two or three boys learning the tailoring. He

showed one boy how to make a hand buttonhole, fifty times. I'm not lying to you. He just couldn't get it. The buttonhole was like a wrong, so he went for a fitting, our customer. I took two pieces of fabric, I made a buttonhole, I said, "I want you to see that." "Who showed you?" I said, "I looked at little hole." [then] he showed my uncle.

"Oh, if you can make a hand buttonhole like this you'd better come and help me."

Believe it or not I started.

**JE:** How old were you then?

**SR:** I was then about twelve years old.

**JE:** So that was your first job?

**SR:** That was my first start. Every day after school, believe it or not, when the war broke out first the Russians come in. So eighteen months we lived under the Russians. Three days the Germans stayed and they took half of what it was before World War I.

## Chapter 03 - 8:00

### Poland Invasion

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**John Erling:** Well, let me just say that the European theater of World War II opened with the German invasion of Poland on Friday, September 1, 1939, and the Soviet invasion of Poland on September 17, 1939. The Polish army was defeated after more than a month of fighting.

**Sherman Ray:** Russia was holding up about two weeks, three weeks later. The Poles were so stupid, the little trees they put by the border. They got us, I was young, had to go to the border and setting up trees. They didn't bother the border. They dropped the parachute in the middle of Poland. They surrounded and the war already the German bombers bombed Poland.

**JE:** What was your first experience of realizing there was an invasion?

**SR:** Well, number one, as long as we didn't see the Germans came for three days, they didn't do any harm. Well, the second time after eighteen months then we started feeling. You see, Bialystok was a lot of boys, Jewish boys, they were throwing rocks at the Germans. They didn't forget.

Second time they came to Bialystok, the second time, they took seven thousand Jews in the synagogue, women, children, kerosene and set a fire. I never could forget.

**JE:** No.

**SR:** A life.

**JE:** Yeah. Did you see that?

**SR:** Everybody saw it, everybody heard.

**JE:** They were rounded up and it didn't affect you?

**SR:** I was hiding in a little chicken shed, my father and me. We was hiding. They then rolled up the sleeve like butchers. The machine guns laid out in Poland every church middle of the town. And everybody rolls around the church there the Jews all around over there. We thought, you know, they going to kill us. They all said, "Let them suffer a little bit." You see, Jewish in German is very close. If you speak Jewish it's very easy to learn German. If you speak Polish it's Slavic, it's easy to learn Russian. But Russian is a hard language.

They start training me at night marching, you know. Go to the Russian army.

**JE:** Go to the Russian army?

**SR:** Yeah.

**JE:** Why?

**SR:** To be a soldier, go fighting.

**JE:** The Russians?

**SR:** It was training, yeah. Oh, and the pictures of Karl Marx, Engle, Lenin, Stalin, all over. They say Russia the best place to live, all the propaganda, you know. I speak Russian, I speak Polish, I speak German, you name it. During the war you went through this. You never saw a German soldier walking but the Russians, they walked a lot. A lot of them on horses, a lot of them walking.

But the Germans, the motorcycles, you know, with the extra—

**JE:** Side car?

**SR:** Yeah. That's what they used and bicycles. Nobody walked.

**JE:** Did you see Russians and Germans at the same time?

**SR:** Well, when they moved out, the Russians, they didn't move out, they took them all a plan, they're surrounded. Three and a half days, you can't imagine how many tanks and the big, big artillery. I never saw such a big tanks in my life, like a house, coming into Poland. And the best of the German took everything over. And took the soldiers and put them in camps.

**JE:** They made prisoners of the Russians.

**SR:** Prisoners of the Russian army.

**JE:** Right.

**SR:** When the Germans took us to Lublin, Eva was over there too.

**JE:** Eva Unterman, you meant, right?

**SR:** Yeah. When the Russians come into Poland they pulled up a train. They said, "Whoever wants to go to Russia, go right. Whoever wants to go back, stay left." So whoever who don't want to go to Russia, they put them on trucks, took them to Russia and sent them to Siberia. These people also wives. The people was stayed in Russia and the Germans attacked Russia, everybody was killed.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound). So were you given that choice?

**SR:** I lived under the Russians so we still stayed. What I'm talking on the German side.

**JE:** Okay.

**SR:** They was trying to come over on our side. People didn't have hotels like here, they didn't know what to do with the people. Young guys, all they could wear was just a suit, no underwear, nothing.

**JE:** Let's follow you then with the Russian army. How long did they—

**SR:** The Russian was eighteen months. With the Russians it was this way, they used to send them from Russia fish, frozen.

**JE:** That's—

**SR:** Real big fish.

**JE:** About three feet long.

**SR:** Yeah, you get to stand in line, get fish. For bread you had to stand in line. People were staying out all night to get sugar. You came in after an hour, run out. Everything you had to stand in line. But you see, my father is still operated when the Russian, he had to go do hard labor two weeks. I said, "Dad, you stay in the shop, I am going."

So I went. Wintertime we cut forest for firewood, sent to Russia. Summertime we walked on the pavements like it was mountains. They didn't have the fancy shovels we had to dig, make so many meters. I used to come home, I was bleeding.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**SR:** I was not used to this kind of stuff.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** Living through this when it was end, the villagers we used to stay like go. The promise used to give us, you know, they put straw and we slept on the floor. And food you can imagine, whatever they had the farmers was trying to feed us. It was nothing but hell, but we had to keep the mouth shut. If you say one word—

**JE:** Sent to Siberia.

**SR:** Sure.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** They didn't play around.

**JE:** So how long did you work like that?

**SR:** Well, you see, after this was over, when the Germans come in it was a different deal. They had to do labor. If they needed to load coal, they took fifty Jews. My uncle, he was in the city, twenty-one miles from our town. They used to come to him and say we need half a pound of gold and so much wanted coffee. You know, a lot of Jews had these stores, they used to sell it. Everybody would have it otherwise we're going to take fifty or a hundred Jews and send them to the camp at Treblinka, yes. It was going on all the time.

**JE:** So did your uncle come up with—

**SR:** He had to do that. Everybody with a little ring on little chain, gold, you know. The bastards what they have done, you wouldn't believe it.

## Chapter 04 - 8:15

### Train to Auschwitz

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**Sherman Ray:** And I was captured under them.

**John Erling:** They put you and your family on a train to Auschwitz.

**SR:** Oh, I begged them to jump. They thought they were going to a resort.

**JE:** They thought they were going to a resort?

**SR:** That's right.

**JE:** And you knew?

**SR:** I knew, I said, "They're going to kill you." Their allegiance cost so many problems, you have no idea.

**JE:** So you decided to jump from the train?

**SR:** I said, "I'm jumping." I said to myself, "If I have to get killed by a bullet but I don't want to go to the gas chamber."

He said, "Son, God shall help you."

I said, "What I got to lose? I don't want to be killed." Whoever was on the train, nobody came out alive. The back car, it was wired up so one guy got a pliers and he cut the wires. I was the first one, and they told me, "When you jump, don't jump backward, jump forward." Snow was about so high. I couldn't get up, you know what I mean. I had boots.

One guy wanted to offer me bread, I said, "No, I'm not selling." I wore the boots until the second of May 1945. You think you could have socks?

**JE:** No.

**SR:** But I was a tailor, I find some pieces. I stayed one year on the ground with another three boys. We thought the war would be over.

**JE:** Okay, you were living in a forest?

**SR:** Underground.

**JE:** Underground. Once you jumped off that train, then what happens to you?

**SR:** When I jumped out I started walking, you walking, and I said to these guys, I said, "I will walk close to where I used to live." If you walked, I think, six or eight or ten hours, if you walked you walked through the forest, a lot of forest. And I find the village. And the village I figure I know who—used to take a tailor for two weeks to make up clothes. And I went to this guy, the farmer I recognized my father used to make clothes for.

“Are you alive?” They thought everybody, you know, is already killed. He lived about seven or eight kilometers from his village. He had a sixty or eight acres and Poland was a lot flat, good, rich land.

One boy had three twenty-dollar gold pieces and I gave him the three pieces. I said, “You got to help us. I know you cannot keep this in the house, I need a shovel, I need a hatchet, whatever you can give me.”

He said, “You come in the middle of the night.” He said, “I will try to give you food, whatever; I cannot keep you in the house. If they find out you have the Jews they put the farmer in the camp.” And by the trees he told me, “That is east, that is north,” he told me about. I used to come every night and pick up food.

**JE:** How long did you live in the forest?

**SR:** I would say close to a year.

**JE:** That’s astounding.

**SR:** I never dreamed I would survive.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** Forty below. It was getting closer to Easter. I didn’t know a day, I didn’t know a time, nothing. It was so cold you wouldn’t believe it. But around Easter it started melting. The snow was getting dark and they gave us some parts during the daytime, you know, this farm melted. That’s the way we had the water to drink. It was getting summertime, we used to pick the berries.

**JE:** What about animals in the forest?

**SR:** You didn’t see too many animals.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** Poland they bent the rule, not too many.

**JE:** You said forty below zero, you’re living outside.

**SR:** Right.

**JE:** And you didn’t have a lot of clothes.

**SR:** I had a little coat, it was sheepskin inside and we built underground. And then they put that over and little trees. We fixed it all so that they will not know. Poland had a lot of forest.

**JE:** So then what happens?

**SR:** We took the boys to Bialystok, they amputated legs, they’re gangrene. I could tell something is not right.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**SR:** They couldn’t stand up. The doctor said they didn’t even have an aspirin, nothing. I figured if anybody was crippled, no chance to survive.

**JE:** Yeah. What happened to the boys?

**SR:** Oh the boys? We never saw them. The Pollack, he gave us the food, he said, "Why do you have to hide? Why did you go to Bialystok? Did you stay less or defect for the Germans?"

Well, I said, "I got no choice." I went to Bialystok, and believe it or not, we had to put on the stars, they let you in. But to get out, forget it.

So I find my father's brother, he was so happy to see me. He was still in the ghetto and he was demolishing buildings, you know, bringing a little firewood, you know, they would let him in. And he smuggled in once in a while a loaf of bread, a little butter, whatever I could.

Six, seven months I worked at the factory as a tailor. After six, seven months, they decided to go and liquidate Bialystok, Łódź, and Warsaw, but left three big cities in Poland to go in, liquidate, send them to the camps.

**JE:** So then you were—

**SR:** Then my uncle, the women were separate, the men, he never saw his wife and two kids. And he was with me in Blegian. Over there I was trying to help him some time I had a little extra food, give it to him. He was making our shoes. He learned by tailoring, but he was not a tailor.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**SR:** Tailoring I had to do. The Ukraine was wearing black uniform from Russia. They decided they wanted volunteers, they gave them black uniforms, rubber sticks, not guns. Jews, you know, do the shovel digging. They knocked them over the head, they just felled over.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**SR:** When I saw this and I heard they start on the loud speaker, "Snyders, tailors, shoemakers, brick layers, anything with a profession, step to the right." They'd see if you were a tailor, take a thimble out too show him, you know, it is not out of way. So we ran over, they send us clothes to Lublin, that's close to Radom. Radom was the Polish soldiers' storm barracks, and believe it or not, they have electric over there. They put machines up and tables that our foreman he cut it and he tell us what to do. We going to make not for the soldiers, but for the SS.

**JE:** The SS, the protection squadron.

**SR:** Yeah, the uniform had to be done perfect.

**JE:** And they reported directly to Hitler, didn't they?

**SR:** Yeah, and believe it or not, I think six or seven months we worked on the uniform. After this we had to make civilian clothes. So the guys started designing, taking measurement, making civilian suits.

**JE:** How did that make you feel that you were making German uniforms?

**SR:** Well, you know how I felt, but you had to keep your mouth shut.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** And twice a day they count us on the field place, naked. I said to doctor one time, "How come I didn't catch pneumonia?" He wrote a big biography about me.

**Chapter 05 - 5:37****In Auschwitz**

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**John Erling:** Weren't you in Auschwitz?

**Sherman Ray:** In Auschwitz too, yeah. In Auschwitz, no tailoring. We used to carry bricks from one side of the fence to the other. No tailoring in Auschwitz. Like Grenfeld said in Auschwitz they did tailoring; I didn't see any tailoring over there, all I saw was the gas chamber.

**JE:** Did you work long days, twelve-hour days?

**SR:** Yeah. When I came to Auschwitz I say, "No way I will get out of here." You could see flame, the flesh from the human body. And it smelled like you take a salted towel and you fry. And the ashes was falling down.

**JE:** Human ashes?

**SR:** Yeah. And the orchestra was playing not to hear the screaming from the gas chambers. The people by the door, after they gassed it, they dropped the wall. It was huge guys special, with bends, pulling the gold teeth out. They find gold then to boxes, they shipped it to Switzerland. If not for Switzerland, do you think Hitler would be able to build an army and a navy?

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**SR:** No way. They told the Swiss, "We will not bother you but we've got to build some buildings. The jets, that was the way.

**JE:** Did you hear the screaming that went on?

**SR:** Oh, yeah. The screaming, sure. The people by the door, they were trying but they couldn't get out. When you went in over there, forget it.

**JE:** Were those mostly women and children?

**SR:** Women and children, men.

**JE:** People who were sick?

**SR:** Special, little babies, they took for their little legs and tear them apart.

**JE:** Ummmmmm (thoughtful gross sound).

**SR:** The kids was going in the SS, they didn't care. No humanity, no feeling for human at all.

**JE:** So you were only kept alive then because they wanted you to work?

**SR:** That's the only thing. John, when I got through after the war, seventy-five pounds.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**SR:** Skin and bones.

**JE:** You are a strong, strong man.

**SR:** Living the one year was worser than anything I've been through.

**JE:** The one year living—

**SR:** Underground.

**JE:** In the forest?

**SR:** The forest.

**JE:** That was worse than the Germans?

**SR:** It was worse than anything.

**JE:** Because in that forest you went many days without eating.

**SR:** At least in the camps, you know, there was for horses but we had a roof over the head.

**JE:** And they fed you.

**SR:** Yeah, every day of the lice we could take a cold shower, you know, sponges, I could wash my body.

**JE:** But in the forest you could never clean, wash yourself up.

**SR:** Are you kidding? I couldn't go to a dentist. I used to have a toothache, so I asked the farmer to give me an axe and I had to pull it out.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**SR:** I couldn't go to a doctor.

**JE:** But in Auschwitz you had health.

**SR:** Next to our block was a Russian general and I spoke Russian. "Rabunk," he said, "why not? Hitler say know it." I don't know how they know it exactly when the war will be over. And before you know, it was in Auschwitz, they know it's getting closer to Poland.

They used to tell us, "Before you know, you'll be free." The English used to bomb at night. The American in daytime.

**JE:** Never came close to Auschwitz.

**SR:** Roosevelt and Stalin said, "Don't touch." In Russia was the camps. In every zone they had the concentration camps, Buchenwald, Dachau, and in Bobaygo in Russia, a lot of camps. When Stalin made a speech it was already close to Moscow. Every woman and child, knives, whatever you got, the Russian general said to Stalin, "Don't trust Joe, he's going to fool you."

He wouldn't listen, "No, we signed a contract." You can take the contract and wha-

I tell you, living through this I can survive anything. I had a guy two or three years ago, he find out more of my family. I got everything in documents to show you. All my family, you know, the names, I think they finally opened the doors. You know what they find out? Eight miles in Treblinka it was another six gas chambers.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**SR:** On top there's only one. They figured one thousand people a day is not fast enough. That was the day they told me seventy or eighty thousand people was killed.

**JE:** Oh my, oh my. And where was that again?

**SR:** Poland in Treblinka, ninety miles from Warsaw.

**JE:** Right, okay.

**SR:** It was so, so many people killed. Poland had the most, three and a half million Jews. The biggest Jewish population. Villages, small towns, big towns, Jewish people.

## Chapter 06 - 5:07

### Soap and Tattoos

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**John Erling:** Soap, you used soap in the showers?

**Sherman Ray:** Oh, right [German phrase] made from Jewish flesh. It was like a rock.

**JE:** So you would be handed soap, which was really human flesh—

**SR:** When we went to take a shower.

**JE:** When you took a shower?

**SR:** Yeah.

**JE:** And you knew what it was?

**SR:** [German phrase] it was clear, Jewish fat, that's made from the flesh. The morning they count us, see if nobody is missing. Like in Auschwitz, it was big ditches, you know, around the electric wires. And every sixteen, seventeen meters was an SS with a machine gun in case you try to run away they kill you. Nobody had a mind. Even civilian clothes they put in the back of the coat blue and white stripes. So any time you go out they are able to see you.

**JE:** In Auschwitz, did you think you were going to survive Auschwitz?

**SR:** I told you another wall would build there, a year. I see a year and the Polacks told me, "And the war will go on and on."

**JE:** So we hear about the Jews, they were tattooed with their number.

**SR:** Yeah, they had some kind of a sharp pen with ink they put in a B25, 26, the second transport was writing like this.

**JE:** And there you're showing it to me right now.

**SR:** Yeah, yeah. Writing on it, see?

**JE:** Isn't that something?

**SR:** So when I come to Oklahoma City I said to the guy, "Put me some butterfly, I'm going to put it over, try to forget." But you never can forget.

**JE:** But he made it look like a butterfly.

**SR:** Yeah.

**JE:** And now everybody is getting a tattoo today.

**SR:** I'm telling you.

**JE:** That is something.

**SR:** Everybody is, "Hey, what is the number?" You know, people, they didn't know.

**JE:** So then when the Germans began to lose to the Russians they moved the healthy prisoners to Dachau.

**SR:** Well, from Auschwitz they go and exchange the Jewish prisoners for Germans. That what they gave us the story. What they was trying to do is get us underground but tell the clothes by the garments, you know, the mountains and everything and tear the water loose and wipe them out. You get it?

**JE:** Yes.

**SR:** Believe it or not, we marched one day, the second day was already end of April. So we stayed in the forest in Bavaria. I had a little blanket, I was ready to roll up like the soldiers. And I covered myself up, laying down on the ground by a tree and tried to fall asleep. And I got up in the morning we started looking and everybody, we don't see what is SS, what happened?

We start looking, it was by Tells, it was a little village, three stories in Germany. The white flags a lot of people for excitement, they just died. And we saw the dead horses, the Russians was running and there wasn't a lot of Russians. They carve the dead meat and start—and I said, "Oh, no, I'm not going to eat."

**JE:** The Russians ate the horses?

**SR:** They was so hungry. You have no idea. Anyway, after three, four hours, the F-boats and the American 45th division. The boats, the trucks, they came and I hardly could walk, you know. They took us to Munich. Flockizon was over there, the German [unrecognizable] was staying. They took three guys and gave it a room, gave it a blankets and a French doctor came and checked everybody. And said they got to start him a little bit of wine to get his stomach shrinking and soup. Every day the doctor checked us.

The Germans used to get rations, the bread and everything. We used to get double. I had so much bread I accumulated it and I went on the black market and traded for razor blades. And from razor blades for a while the German like the cigarettes I start trading. I said, "No, they going to catch me, I'll not be able to come to America."

And believe it or not, after six months it was a guy he was came through with me from Loftria Bergman. He said, "You want a nice apartment?"

I said, "Get me anything." So now with two other boys we had a nice apartment.

**JE:** In?

**SR:** Munich.

**JE:** Munich.

**SR:** Munich.

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**Chapter 07 - 5:23**  
**Signed Up for USA**

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**John Erling:** So the war came to an end May second?

**Sherman Ray:** May 2, 1945.

**JE:** Nineteen forty-five. Tell me, when the Allied forces were coming in, the jubilation—

**SR:** When they, the soldiers in the kitchen, you know, we used to go to where they throw the food away, you know, a lot of them. Everybody was so hungry. They stopped it. Whatever was left, stay in line as they gave everybody plates. After six, seven months I got in shape. I was gaining weight, flesh, and I got a ten-speed bike. I wait four years when President Truman signed all the refugees you can go to Australia, you can go to Canada, you can go. I signed up for USA.

I remember my grandpa, he went during the Depression in New York. He was a good ladies' tailor and grandma started writing come and come I still want you. He went back. If he would stick it out and bring the whole family we wouldn't have to go through this, but who in the hell know it?

**JE:** So you signed up to the United States?

**SR:** Yeah.

**JE:** How did you—

**SR:** After six months they called me, they asked me if you're a communist. I say, "Anybody want to know about communism let him come talk to me." And communism, I hate it. Communist? I said, "No way. If I have to be in jail in Russia or free, no way." A lot of Jewish boys went.

**JE:** Went where?

**SR:** They went to Russia. One of them was an artist so he got in the movie business.

**JE:** So they asked you first, "Are you a communist?"

**SR:** Oh yeah, I said, "Nobody's going to sell me communism."

**JE:** So was that all they needed to know from you?

**SR:** All they needed to know. But I had no problem. They checked me. A lot of boys had to book a laws, they wouldn't let them in. A lot of them arrested in the German jails. They was canceled.

**JE:** So if they'd been arrested in the German jail and they had a health problem, the United States wouldn't let them in.

**SR:** That's right. If they checked you had anything to do with the police, was in jail in Germany, you couldn't come.

**JE:** Where are you when they ask these questions?

**SR:** In Munich.

**JE:** In Munich, all right.

**SR:** Yeah.

**JE:** So then he said, "We'll let you in to the United States"?

**SR:** It was so. But they checked all the papers and everything before, you know. I got in the mail, "You got your visa."

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**SR:** I already prepared a big wooden box, I had clothes, I had some silverware, I had a Liker camera, I had a Breitling watch. When I was on the black market I used to buy the two-hundred-dollar gold pieces for fifty-four dollars. You went to France, you could sell for fifty-eight. I went with a Jewish captain from Brooklyn, he spoke German, French. He said, "Sherman, I got money."

I said, "Look, you got money, you can buy two-hundred-dollar gold pieces. But you got to make me an identification card." He was with the MPs.

He said, "I will take care of this."

We got fifty pieces, was quite a bit of money. So we went to Paris and I showed him who to go. We sold it and made a good profit.

Then he said, "Sherman, we're getting ready to go back."

I said, "Peter, it's a lot of young girls like the nylon hose." Paris was the place to get. I said, "Let's get some nylon hose."

He said, "Are you sure?"

I said, "Peter, I know what I'm telling you. Whatever money you got," I say, "let's get the hose." We bought it and made money again. He gave me five hundred dollars.

John, I was young but...

**JE:** You were a tailor but you were a businessman.

**SR:** I was a business guy.

**JE:** Yes you were.

**SR:** I never told anybody in Germany I'm a tailor. I said, "Hell, this a matter of time."

**JE:** Okay—

**SR:** But I came, believe it or not, I'm telling you this, with five thousand dollars.

**JE:** To the United States.

**SR:** You wouldn't believe the way I smuggled it in.

**JE:** How?

**SR:** I got some condoms.

**JE:** Condoms?

**SR:** With hundred-dollar bills and I got some toothpaste and I got the toothpaste out and filled it in the tubes.

**JE:** You put money in condoms—

**SR:** In condoms.

**JE:**... in the tube.

**SR:** In the tube. Nobody checked you.

**JE:** So could you get five thousand dollars that way?

**SR:** I had two, three of them.

**JE:** Two, three tubes.

**SR:** And I had my shaving, that's what I used to carry always. I never found it loose. And I was on the ship.

General McMay was the navy ship. Once used, I thought that's it. I had to call about the silverware, the camera, and I had my Breitling. Every German officer, the pilot was getting a Breitling stopwatch. I gave it to my son and I gave my son the camera and the silverware.

## **Chapter 08 - 3:45**

### **Ellis Island**

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**John Erling:** You came to America on a ship from Hamburg, Germany?

**Sherman Ray:** I came to New York.

**JE:** Through Ellis Island?

**SR:** Ellis Island. I said to the lady, she spoke Yiddish, I said, "I would like to stay in New York."

She said, "Young man, the papers say you got to go west."

And Peter told me, he said, "You go into Oklahoma it's nothing but Indians and black people."

**JE:** What year was this?

**SR:** Nineteen forty-nine, end of '49. When I told this guy Oklahoma, he said, "Nothing but Indians and black." I came in Oklahoma City, I see Mrs. Ruskin the jewelry. I say, "I see white people." They was laughing at it.

**JE:** So you came by train to Oklahoma City?

**SR:** I came to Oklahoma City.

**JE:** You knew somebody there?

**SR:** And the Jewish counselor already had places where we can stay, we can live. They already drop one guy, a rabbi's son, he was buying the surplus from Uncle Sam when the war was over. He opened up sixteen stores. People was buying pilot's jackets, hats for cold weather, gloves.

**JE:** You came to Oklahoma City and did you know somebody there when you came there?

**SR:** All I met was Mrs. Ruskin and she, on the Robinson, the corner, there's a jewelry store. She spoke Russian and she spoke German and Yiddish, so three languages I could correspond

with her. And the kid was in by twelve boys and twenty-six families. Believe it or not, I was the only one. Most of them went to Detroit. The Buick people, Chrysler, Ford, they all, anybody could hold a wrench. They didn't have any profession. I was the only one that had no problem. I said, "I'm a schleider, a tailor."

And believe it or not, not one job but three tailors came after me. In the '50s I was making five hundred dollars a month. First the guy I told you, we was buying gold and salvage from the army. I stayed over there seventy-five cents an hour. And then I said to the foreman, "I'm a tailor, why didn't you?" I said, "The language." I said, "I got to learn English." I went Monday and Thursday. Wednesday I took citizenship class and started seeing the girl's stockings. And before you know, I got to learn the language. Mexican, Greece, like the table, they couldn't sell. I said, "I got to learn the language."

**JE:** Was it difficult to learn English?

**SR:** It's hard. Everybody, "How you spell?" Europe, nobody ask how you spell. The way you say that's the way you wrote. Russian is the same way. But if you speak Polish it's easier to learn Russian.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** If you speak Yiddish it's easy to pick up German. In Germany, like brat, they don't say brat, brot. And in Yiddish they say brite. You see?

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**SR:** It's really easy. Wasser, you know, water.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**SR:** Wasser in Germany, Yiddish, wasser is the same thing. So the languages, if you was in Europe it's easier to pick up French, it's easy to pick up Italian.

## Chapter 09 - 1:25

### Tulsa

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**John Erling:** You must be terribly excited. You're in Oklahoma City and now you—

**Sherman Ray:** Oh.

**JE:** ... have a job as a tailor.

**SR:** Well, I never felt so good when I came to Tulsa and I saw the way that the land was laid out, the downtown, everything was downtown.

**JE:** I got to ask you, why did you come to Tulsa?

**SR:** In Oklahoma City, one of the Greenburgs said parks a store. I was making suits for the tailor. He said to me, "Sherman, my uncle in Tulsa got a stall in Oxford, Baker, Tregees,

Hollywood.” Don Richards was the cheapest suit, it was better made than today. No fusing, real canvas and buttonholes. Twice a year they put on sale \$49.99. People are buying five, six suits.

**JE:** What store was that?

**SR:** Streets, Fifth and Ninth. Eighteen years. They started me out with six hundred and after six months I said, “Mr. Greenburg, if you don’t like what I do we will talk about.”

After six months he called me and said, “Sherman, first of the month I’m giving you a fifty dollar raise.” This was going year after year. In the ’60s, I was making a thousand dollar a month. And I was married then.

## Chapter 10 - 3:50

### Married in Israel

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**John Erling:** Your wife, tell us her name and how you met her.

**Sherman Ray:** Oh, when I got my citizenship of the United States I said to Mr. Greenburg, “Every woman is after me. I’ve got to find a woman.” I was already, you know, out on thirty years.

**JE:** Did you say these women were after you?

**SR:** Whatever they want me, I didn’t want them. Whatever I want, they didn’t want me.

**JE:** Okay.

**SR:** I said, “I got to go to Israel.” I made a passport, bought a ticket, it was five, six stops. We went to Italy and a guy said, “Get some fruit in Israel, no pears, nothing.” I stopped, I got some apples and pears.

They come in Israel, they check me, you know, the policeman, “Can I have a pear?”

I said, “Take one or two.” And I had a landsmen over there with know him from Germany. I stayed with him a few days. I say, “I get me a hotel.” I went to a hotel in Tel Aviv and stayed in Sheraton. And the girls from Romania, from Hungary, from Poland.

Finally one day, I’m supposed to have a date but I stopped at the coffee shop that’s where I saw the woman I married. She was young, she was good looking, that is the woman. I supposed to be two weeks. I took another week.

**JE:** What is this young girl’s name?

**SR:** Her name was Mariam Fischel Miller, Miller’s daughter. He had seven daughters.

**JE:** Did you have to go meet her father and ask him to marry her?

**SR:** Father, he was in hospital. He had a lot of kids. His wife was a beautiful woman. But anyway, I came over and I said to him, “Mr. Miller, I met your daughter, I’m a tailor.”

He said, "Do you know one thing that I like about you? Any tourist came, ever dated my daughter, 'I'm a lawyer,' 'I'm a doctor,' you say the truth." He said, "In my book you're okay."

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**SR:** I said, "All I need is permission from you. But I got to go back, people depend on me."

"I understand," he said. That was not all. But he talked to the rabbi.

The rabbi said, "My son, it'll take two, three months."

I said, "Rabbi." I had a hundred-dollar bill in my pocket. "See what you can do."

He said, "I will two, three days. You will get your getting married. The only thing, you want to hear from Tulsa from the rabbi, if you're single, if you don't have a wife with kids.

I called Stavinsky, a Main Street tailor. I was acquainted with him, I met all the tailors. I said, "Oscar, please go to Rabbi Kahn. Ask him to send a cable to Tel Aviv, number so-and-so. Tell them that I'm single."

Sure enough, the wire came, the telegram, you know, showed the rabbi. "Son, we will get you married.

I took fifty-nine dollars, I paid for the dress, I paid for all the ring, I paid for everything. The food and bottles, invited a lot of guys what I know of them. They drank, they steal the bottles. I say, "Do whatever you want, I don't care."

And next day I said, "I got to go back."

And I came back. "Boy, what's happened to you? The tailor was hired, he left, he couldn't take it."

## Chapter 11 - 4:40

### Divorce

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**Sherman Ray:** And that was my vacation.

**John Erling:** But your bride came with you, didn't she?

**SR:** No, are you kidding? It took a year.

**JE:** Why?

**SR:** You remember Boston was the lawyer for the store. Hired him, then they had another two lawyers to get. Boston and H. P. Talbon called the counsel in New York and talked to him. Then I called Ray Crevice, Mal Gimp, all the guys that used to come in the store, they find out I got married. It took a year. They find out you married American over there the guys was trying, you know, handle the paperwork.

And I told her, I said, "Don't you show him away. He got to let you come." If she was such a religious girl they would let her out. But if she was not religious they wouldn't let her

come. They needed the girls in the army. All the young people, they wanted Israel become, you know I mean, a state.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**SR:** They need people, they need people, you know, they wouldn't let people leave. They want to come in.

But anyway, it took a year. I paid for everything. It last, the marriage, forty-seven years. She wanted me to move to Israel. I said, "I never will live in Israel. I will help them but," I said, "I will never live over there."

But she kept fighting and fighting.

**JE:** Her name was Miriam, right?

**SR:** Miriam.

**JE:** How many children did you have?

**SR:** A daughter and a son.

**JE:** Are they still living?

**SR:** Oh yeah.

**JE:** How many years did she live here?

**SR:** She lived here all the years. But every other year she used to go take trips. And every time she went the deposit in the bank, that's what I didn't like. And I didn't know about the gambling. She gambled away a half a million dollars. Would you believe it?

**JE:** Gambled away?

**SR:** Gambled away.

**JE:** Well, where did she gamble?

**SR:** Cherokee Casino.

**JE:** At the Cherokee Casino.

**SR:** Casino. You see, she lived in the house where we was living ten years. In the divorce, in the papers, the lawyer any time breaks down something in the house she got to fix it. Something is broke, she didn't do a thing. She leave the house. She said, "I want to die in the house, I'm not moving."

So I had a lawyer, it cost me ten thousand, and he got out. When we came in the house, we find all the paperwork, that's when I find out. But the banker comes, how much money she withdraw and gambled away the money what I worked my tail off.

**JE:** Well, did she move back to Israel?

**SR:** Are you kidding? Israel, all the years, she cannot have any insurance, you got to pay in over there, like here, if you don't pay in you can't get the insurance. Now she don't know what's going on over there. She got dementia, she got Alzheimer's.

**JE:** She's living now under those conditions?

**SR:** Yeah.

**JE:** You are ninety-five, how old is she?

**SR:** She is about ten years younger.

**JE:** Okay.

**SR:** And her sister have to call me after so many years you should take her back. I said, "Are you kidding? If I have to live in a blank room and I said I- (laughter)

**JE:** But why did she want a divorce?

**SR:** She didn't want a divorce, I filed a divorce.

**JE:** Oh, because of the money and the gambling and—

**SR:** The money and the way she gambled.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** I had no future. I figure she gets in such a shape, we will have to pay.

**JE:** How old were you when you got a divorce?

**SR:** I would say about eighty-five. I see it's not going the way I want to. Dr. Ungerman, Arnold, he was my doctor. He said, "Sherman, get rid of her."

What I took, no American would take it.

**JE:** How about your children? Did they side with you?

**SR:** Oh, the daughter was kind of close to her. But my son always was on my side. I stayed with two years with him, you know, in the house.

**JE:** Your son, is he a tailor too?

**SR:** Oh, don't even mention. I told him, "Learn to be a tailor."

He said, "No way." Works for American, works on the engines. And I got him the job.

## Chapter 12 - 2:35

### Tailor Shop

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**John Erling:** We're in your shop here at 31st and Harvard. When did you open this shop?

**Sherman Ray:** Over there it was about thirty years.

**JE:** Working for Streets?

**SR:** No.

**JE:** No?

**SR:** Streets I worked eighteen years. In the '60s, on January the first, a Mexican had a shop over there. And he remodeled it and everything. It was a year he couldn't make it. I said, "Okay, since you remodeled it and everything," I said, "I'm getting ready to move in."

The guy, "Oh, you make clothes? I need a tailor. I got bowlegs."

I gave him 165 rent to him and he used to buy clothes. I started making him suits. He used to buy forty-eight, fifty portlys. Oxford. I started making suit Paul Sisk, all these young guys, oilmen, they all coming from Streets. I had two manufacturers, one pants maker, and alterations. I handled everything.

**JE:** When did you decide to open this shop?

**SR:** The shop I opened up in the '60s. Over there on Harvard. You know where Braums is? Used to be ten tenants. Used to be a beer joint in the corner, next was a Royal Mayan Carpet, next was my shop. Thirty years. I was getting ready to retire, so Mr. Zetta called me and Bill Warren, "You find another place, we need a tailor. If we have to pay the rent," he said, "we will do it."

**JE:** So is that when you opened here?

**SR:** Aye, it was a place and a guy too, you know, he need his clothes. He liked the cuffs, you remember they used to wear in the '60s? I said, "I will make you whatever you want." You think it's time to retire?

**JE:** You're ninety-five years old.

**SR:** Ninety-five.

**JE:** What do you do to stay so healthy? Do you work out?

**SR:** Well, I work out and try to eat the right food. I don't drink, I don't smoke, no women.

**JE:** I was going to ask you, after you were divorced, did women want to marry you then?

**SR:** They come to me, "Mr. Ray, don't you buy a lady a cup of coffee?"

"Ma'am," I say, "I don't drink coffee."

"What do you drink?"

"Whiskey." That's the way I get rid of them. I don't have time for women, I've got too much to do. People need clothes.

## Chapter 13 - 1:35

### Dreams

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**John Erling:** Today, we've been through your Auschwitz story. Does that ever come to you in dreams?

**Sherman Ray:** When I came here and then when I was married I feel a lot of times, you know, with the legs. I start screaming. They say, "Oh, you're already..."

I say, "Yeah, I was where the Nazis was shooting, and I jump."

I told Dr. Ungerman, he said, "It will be a long time but eventually," he said, "you will get out of it."

Everything was nothing but laying on the ground this one year.

**JE:** Yeah. That's just hard to imagine that you could do that so—

**SR:** Do you think I had a mattress on the ground?

**JE:** No.

**SR:** Or pillows?

**JE:** No.

**SR:** Or toothache, I was the doctor.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** All I can tell you, John, living through this, and I'm telling you I'm not a communist, I still say God exists, but living through this, when God saw what was going on, where was God? I kept asking in Israel the same question. No rabbi could give me answer. What they have done to humanity, not just Jews but a lot of wonderful Christian people and nothing was done about it. How can you sit and pray? When you go in always the dish in the churches, synagogues the same thing. Always male self-help, everybody wants help.

## Chapter 14 - 1:50

### America Is Wonderful

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**John Erling:** America has been so good to you. What are your thoughts?

**Sherman Ray:** America was wonderful. This country, I told you, if I have to be in jail in some place over there, nobody will ever change my mind.

**JE:** No.

**SR:** If I have to give my life for this country I will. American people are the most charitable people in the world. It's still the best country in the world.

**JE:** Here you are at ninety-five, did you have any major health problems along the way?

**SR:** Well, who doesn't? Everybody got. I went to the eye doctor, he said, "Ray, I got a lot of patients but you are aged, and the way your eyes, I can't believe it." I'm diabetic, not one but second. But I take my blood count, watch what I'm eating, and I'm still here.

**JE:** Yes you are.

**SR:** And I go to the gym. I went yesterday, I said thirty minutes, I made forty minutes. It didn't kill me.

**JE:** You looking forward to a hundred?

**SR:** I go day by day. When there's one thing when I get up I make a prayer, when I go to bed I make a prayer. I say, "I thank you, Lord, I'm here, I'm still here." I didn't use a cane but not to fall you got to be prepared.

**JE:** Sherman, I really appreciate you telling us your story.

**SR:** Only time when you buy a suit you got to be fixed, nobody can do it, I will do it for you.

**JE:** I know you will. You're a dear, wonderful man.

**SR:** I don't care if you pay me or not.

**JE:** Yeah, yeah. Thank you, Sherman.

**SR:** It's a pleasure.

**JE:** Thank you.

**SR:** All righty, the meeting is adjourned.

**JE:** It is adjourned, yes it is.

## **Chapter 15 - 0:33**

### **Conclusion**

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