INTERVIEW BEGINS

BERMAN: Today is January 23, 2012. I’m in Selma, Alabama, with Richard Gibian, who has agreed to participate in the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project of the William Breman Jewish Heritage and Holocaust Museum. I am Sandra Berman, the archivist with the museum. I’m very pleased that you have agreed to participate in this project. Thank you so much.

GIiban: You’re welcome.

BERMAN: I want to find out from you when you arrived in Selma.


BERMAN: Where were you were born?

GIiban: Montgomery [Alabama]. I’m an immigrant over here.

BERMAN: Is your family originally from Montgomery?

GIiban: My father was born in Macon, Georgia. My mother came from Snow Hill, Alabama.

BERMAN: What were their names?

GIiban: Daddy’s name was Julian [Albert] Gibian. Mother’s name was Lucile Newman.

BERMAN: Then they moved to Montgomery? Why did your dad leave Macon and go to Montgomery?

GIiban: I have no idea.

BERMAN: You came here after the war because you met your lovely wife?

GIiban: Right. And I hated what I was doing in Montgomery.

BERMAN: What were you doing in Montgomery?
GIBIAN: My family had a men’s haberdashery, and I was determined not to sell shirts and socks for a living.
BERMAN: What was the name of the company in Montgomery?
GIBIAN: Capitol Clothing Store. Number 1 Court Square.
BERMAN: You did not like the retail business?
GIBIAN: No. Absolutely not.
BERMAN: Tell me about the candy business. What was that like?
GIBIAN: It was an old, old business [American Candy Company]. I think it started in 1899 or something like that. It was small and local. I think they had somewhere around 25 to 30 employees. I came over here. As a Georgia Tech [Institute of Georgia Technology] graduate, I was mechanic minded, and I got mixed up in the business. I bought some machines and equipment and developed it.
BERMAN: I asked your wife [Betty], and she remembered two of the candy brands. Do you remember any of the other names?
GIBIAN: We had old-fashioned stick candy. I don’t know if you ever noticed the racks around. We started that in <unintelligible>. We had a Disney license. We had lollipops and swirl pops, the big round . . . the swirl pops. We built the machine that made those right at the plant. We had the little five or two’s with the hooks on it with Disney heads on it. We finally got going and did pretty well.
BERMAN: At the height, how many employees did you have?
GIBIAN: It varied from maybe 350 to 500.
BERMAN: It was really a big operation. When did you sell out?
GIBIAN: I believe it was 1989, wasn’t it? <He turns to ask his wife, Betty> Sold out to a tobacco company.
BERMAN: Do they still make your candy?
GIBIAN: No. The business is kaput.
BERMAN: Do you still have a sweet tooth? Did you ever have a sweet tooth? Did you eat your candy?
GIBIAN: Every day.
BERMAN: Did your kids have a lot of cavities?
GIBIAN: Let me tell you about that. If you keep your teeth clean, you won’t get cavities. I don’t care what you eat.

BERMAN: Was that part of your slogan?

GIBIAN: Oh yes.

BERMAN: What was the community like when you came here after the war? The Jewish community. Welcoming?

GIBIAN: Yes, they were. Overwhelmingly so. I got along with everybody.

BERMAN: Who were some of the people you met that became life-long friends?


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GIBIAN: <unintelligible> most of the non-Jewish people. If you have an hour and a half or two hours, I’ll tell you all about Donny Russell.

BERMAN: Why don’t you tell me one thing about Donny Russell.

GIBIAN: He was a character.

BERMAN: How so?

GIBIAN: He just was wild. Very wild.

BERMAN: What branch of service were you in?

GIBIAN: I was in the [United States] Army Air Corps. I was a fighter pilot.

BERMAN: Which theater?

GIBIAN: European.

BERMAN: Do you want to talk about those experiences? We do a lot with Jewish people who went into the military. I was wondering if that would be okay if we talked about some of that.

GIBIAN: I was class of 1941 at Georgia Tech. “North Avenue Trade School,” I call it. I graduated and volunteered for the cadet program. I got my wings in December of 1942. They gave you a form, asking you what kind of assignment you would like to have. They gave you three choices. I wrote in there, “fighter pilot, fighter pilot, fighter pilot” in all three of them, and they made me an instructor. So, I instructed for about a year and three months in advanced flying school. Finally, a request came through for some volunteers for fighters, and I volunteered. I ended up flying with the Ninth Air Force in Europe with 87th mission.
BERMAN: When did you get over to Europe?

GIBIAN: Just before D-Day.¹

BERMAN: I want to backtrack just for a second. Do you remember where you were when you heard that Pearl Harbor was attacked?²

GIBIAN: I was a member of the <unintelligible> fraternity in Atlanta, Georgia. One of our members developed rheumatic fever. I had my mother’s car there, so I drove him out to the airport so they could fly him home because he had to drop out of school. On the way back to the fraternity house, we were listening to the radio when they broke in and said the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor. I had already, at that juncture, made up my mind that I was going into the cadet program. The next day, I skipped school. I went down to get a physical for the navy and the army. I passed them both. I decided that there were no railroad tracks to fall in the ocean, so I decided to stay in the air force.

BERMAN: Where did you do your training?

GIBIAN: At Texas. Fort Worth, San Antonio, Victoria, Texas graduate. Then I instructed at Eagle Pass, Texas.

BERMAN: When you finally got sent to your . . . you said right before D-Day?

GIBIAN: Yes.

BERMAN: Where were you stationed? In England?

GIBIAN: In Kent County at Ashford [England].

BERMAN: Is that where you flew your missions from?

GIBIAN: To begin with, then we went to the beachhead. They built a little strip over there at Normandy [France]. Then we went to Saint James [France]. We were following the ground troops to keep the path clear ahead of us. <unintelligible> bombing. Third place was Rheims [France]. Fourth place was Liege, Belgium. Then we ended up in Holland and Germany.

BERMAN: As an American-Jewish soldier, did you have any idea what was happening to the Jews of Europe?

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¹ The Normandy landings, termed ‘D-Day,’ were the landing operations on June 6, 1944, of the Allied invasion of Normandy during World War II, known in its entirety as ‘Operation Overlord.’

² On December 7, 1941 the Japanese surprised the United States by attacking the United States’ fleet in Honolulu, Hawaii. The ships were all docked in Pearl Harbor. The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was the beginning of World War II for the United States, which until that time had remained neutral. A few days later, Germany declared war on the United States as well and we began fighting in the Pacific and Europe.
GIBIAN: Not really, no. I knew about Kristallnacht³ and that the Jews were being discriminated against in Germany, but I didn’t know that they were being eliminated.

BERMAN: Did you have any issues being in the Air Force and being Jewish?

GIBIAN: I wondered what would happen to me if I bailed out. I had an “H” on my dog tags.⁴ Betty’s brother-in-law was a D17 pilot. He ended up in Stalag [Luft] 1.⁵

BERMAN: I know two people in Atlanta that were in Stalag 1.

GIBIAN: They were treated fairly equally until it was apparent that Germany was going to lose the war. Then, he said, they got separated and put the Christians in one place and the Jews in another. He thought he was going to get shot, but he didn’t.

BERMAN: Did you have any close calls?

GIBIAN: I got shot up a couple of times.

BERMAN: When did you get discharged? I know about the point system. There are points.

GIBIAN: I came home in April, 1945. I was a squadron CO [commanding officer]. They sent me home on a 30-day leave, and I was going to go back and fly some more. I landed in Washington, DC, the day [President Franklin D.] Roosevelt died. When my days were up, the war was up in Europe, so they didn’t send me back. I requested to go be stationed in Eglin [Air Force Base] in the fighter squadron down there as a test pilot, and they sent me down there. I stayed there until I got out in December 13, 1945, which was exactly three years after I was commissioned.

BERMAN: Was it a difficult adjustment, after being in the service, to go back into civilian life?

GIBIAN: I forget what I was making, $400 or $450 or something like that a month, as a captain. I went to work in my family’s clothing store. My uncle was very generous. He paid me

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³ On November 8 and 9, 1938, a state-sponsored nationwide pogrom was started by the Nazis. Across the country (and in Austria) Jewish synagogues, homes and businesses were looted and burned, Jews were attacked on the streets and 91 were killed. Thousands of Jewish men were sent to concentration camps for several weeks and released only when they agreed to leave the country as soon as possible. The Jews were made to pay for the damages to their premises. The pogrom was called ‘Kristallnacht,’ which means ‘Night of Broken Glass,’ because of all the damage done to Jewish shop windows.

⁴ “Dog tags” is an informal term for the identification tags worn by military personnel. The tag shows the recipient’s last name, first name, social security number, blood type, and religion. During World War II, an American dog tag indicated only one of three religions, “P” for Protestant, “C” for Catholic, and “H” for Jewish, taken from the word “Hebrew.”

⁵ Stalag Luft 1 was a German World War II prisoner-of-war camp near Barth, Western Pomerania, Germany, for captured Allied airmen. American, British, and Canadian airmen were imprisoned there. It was liberated on the night of April 30, 1945, by Russian troops.
$37.50 a week. When I announced I was getting married, he gave me a $5 a week raise. I will make this comment about it, at $42.50 I was definitely not worth it, as far as an employee because it just wasn’t my cup of tea.

BERMAN: Did you ever think about making military a career?

GIBIAN: Definitely.

BERMAN: Why didn’t you?

GIBIAN: Because I had children. I was offered a <unintelligible> in the Air Corp. I got out and got recalled in Korea. We had one daughter and one on the way. I met the delay board and told them I didn’t want to go. They agreed with me. But I had made up my mind that if I had to go back, that was going to be my career.

BERMAN: Are you ever sorry you didn’t make that decision?

GIBIAN: I’m sorry I didn’t stay in the [Air Force] Reserve because I missed that nice retirement check that I would be getting if I stayed.

BERMAN: Where you happy in the candy business? Was it a good fit?

GIBIAN: It was pretty tough in the beginning, but yes, it was a challenge. A very definite challenge. We had our good years and our bad years.

BERMAN: Tell me about your own family and the impact of Judaism within it. Was it an observant family? A Reform family?

GIBIAN: Reform but not very religious.

BERMAN: What about when you came to Selma and you got married? Did the synagogue become an important part of your life?

GIBIAN: No. I taught Sunday school, but I learned more than I taught. I promise you.

BERMAN: Who was the rabbi here when you came?

GIBIAN: <He talks with his wife> I can’t answer that.

BERMAN: I want to talk a little bit about the business in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. Did the Civil Rights Movement impact your business here?

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6 The American Civil Rights Movement encompasses social movements in the United States whose goal was to end racial segregation and discrimination against black Americans and enforce constitutional voting rights to them. The movement was characterized by major campaigns of civil resistance. Between 1955 and 1968, acts of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience produced crisis situations between activists and government authorities. Noted legislative achievements during this phase of the Civil Rights Movement were passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Immigration and Nationality Services Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.
GIBIAN: That’s a pretty good story. As far as employees were concerned, we really didn’t tell a whole lot of difference. Our plant was right down here at the railroad tracks. The brown church is right around the corner and another little brown church here. We would see the people walking back and forth all the time. Once or twice a week, I’d have one of the employees knock on my door and ask me to get their child out of jail. I would call Jim Clark⁷ and ask him to please release so-and-so. He’d say okay. He said, “But he’ll be back in this afternoon.” We didn’t have any problem with that. Most of the problems came from outside. Like Betty said, I have a story to tell you about. As I said before, I said we made the old-fashioned stick candy, right? We had some big customers, and we had some little tiny customers. There was an outfit in Laramie, Wyoming, called the Pink Goddess Saloon. They would buy one or two cases at a time. I noticed one day they had not ordered in a long time, so I wrote the lady a letter and asked them if there was any problem and that I appreciated their business. If there is something wrong, please let us know. I got a letter back, saying, “We’ve been reading about all the things going on in Selma, and we’d like to ask a few questions. Do you have any blacks working for you? Do you have separate restroom facilities? And separate eating places?” I wrote back and said, “We don’t have separate restrooms. We don’t have separate drinking fountains. We have a common lunch room. We have about 375 or 380 black people working for us. If you’ll tell me how many Indians you have working in your saloon, I’ll be glad to consider sending you some candy.” And I got an order by return mail. I never did find out whether she had any Indians working. <He laughs> We had those kind of things.

BERMAN: That is a wonderful story. Do you have any more of them?

GIBIAN: I have . . . you don’t want to be bored with them.

BERMAN: No, I do. Tell me. That was a great antidote.

GIBIAN: I had one candy company in Milwaukee [Wisconsin] that I went up to see. I sat in the office waiting to see the guy for probably an hour. Finally he came out. He says, “I can’t see you. We’re going to lunch.” And I said, “Look, I came all the way up here from Selma to see you. I don’t appreciate what you’re doing to me.” I said, “You at least owe me a minute or two.” He says, “What are you all doing with all those people down in Selma?” I said, “We’re

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⁷ James Gardner "Jim" Clark, Jr. (1922-2007) was the sheriff of Dallas County, Alabama, from 1955 to 1966. He was one of the officials responsible for the violent arrests of civil rights protestors during the Selma to Montgomery marches of 1965.
feeding 300 and some odd. That’s what we’re doing.” He said, “What did you all do to my rabbi?” I said, “I didn’t know your rabbi was down there.” I don’t know if he was put in jail or not, but it was a good chance that he was. I didn’t sell him anything. I don’t think I convinced him of anything. He convinced me that he didn’t know me and didn’t know what the candy company was or anything about it, and he didn’t care.

BERMAN: We’ve spoken a lot to folks in Birmingham [Alabama] about when the 19 rabbis came down to Birmingham.8 How did you feel about Jews from the north coming down to Selma and . . .

GIBIAN: I wasn’t happy about it.

BERMAN: What effect did it have on the overall Jewish community? How did you all feel about it?

GIBIAN: I think that the Jewish community . . . I can’t speak for everybody . . . really didn’t want to get too involved in it because there might be some anti-Semitism raids because of that, because of our involvement. I mean, there was some pretty radical people down here, but they were certainly in the minority.

BERMAN: In Birmingham, the Jewish community tried to talk to those rabbis and explain the situation.

GIBIAN: Yes.

BERMAN: Was there any effort by the Jewish community in Selma to tell the Northern Jews who were coming here that this was going to be a problem for you all after they left?

GIBIAN: I don’t really know. I don’t know if anybody else in the community talked to anybody. I know one time Judge [Edgar] Russell called me and said he had a rabbi in jail and what he want me to do with him. I said, “Let him out in the morning.” He said, “Thank you.”

BERMAN: That’s great.

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8 In 1963, in the throes of the Civil Rights era, Martin Luther King, Jr., made pleas to the Birmingham clergy, including rabbis, to support his marches. When the Jewish rabbis counseled patience and moderation and asked him to wait for desegregation laws to take effect, King called them out on their perceived passivity in a “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” The letter gained national attention, and a few weeks later a group of 19 conservative rabbis from the North, outraged by the images they saw on the TV of black protestors being beaten, arrived in Birmingham. They didn’t tell anyone in the Jewish community they were coming, which angered the rabbis and many Jews in Birmingham. After talking with King in the Birmingham jail, they toured black churches, making speeches of support. Then they left. The whole episode appeared high-handed to the Birmingham Jewish community, and they feared an anti-Semitic backlash from the Ku Klux Klan.
GIBIAN: So, he spent the night in jail. I hope he was that guy’s rabbi from Milwaukee.

<He laughs>

BERMAN: Did you get involved in any community activities here in Selma, in the greater community, like the clubs Kiwanis and all that?

GIBIAN: I was a member of the Kiwanis Club for a while. I never could make the meetings because I was repairing a rapid machine and doing something at the candy company. I got out of that, but I was on the board of two banks. I was president of <unintelligible> association. I was on board of directors of a hospital. I was vice president of the P47 Pilots Association. A few other things like that.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Excuse me, you still do Meals on Wheels and the Food Pantry. You both do.

GIBIAN: I work at the library one day a week.

BERMAN: I’ve asked everybody this question all day long about Selma and your hope for it for the future. How do you see the Selma community moving on in the future?

GIBIAN: I think we’re certainly in a downhill situation. Whether that will change or not, I don’t know. We’ve got a lot of crime and shootings going on in the city. A lot of robberies. I don’t know how you are going to stop it. I really don’t. These kids drop out of school and they’re not getting an education. There is no future for them. Third generation welfare people. There’s not a lot of hope for them. It’s just a bad situation.

BERMAN: What is the government like here in Selma?

GIBIAN: For many, many years, we had a white mayor. He was a pretty good character himself. We’ve had two black mayors now, George Evans. I don’t know if you’ve met him or not. He’s alright. We’ve got controversy with one of the female blacks in town that cause a lot of trouble.

BERMAN: How so?

GIBIAN: She is messed up with education. Causes all sorts of . . . <He turns to others in the room> What does she do? Rose Sanders.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: She is living in the past.

GIBIAN: She has crowds gathering to chant things. She writes a lot of nasty letters in the paper. She is a racist. She is a real racist.
BERMAN: I want to get back to . . . before we conclude. You have such an illustrious war career. All those missions. We’ve interviewed so many soldiers. I wanted to ask. After Pearl Harbor, was there any question in your mind that you would serve?

GIBIAN: No.

BERMAN: How did you feel? Why was it so important to you to serve?

GIBIAN: It was . . . as Roosevelt said, it was a very dastardly act. It was just no question. I didn’t know of anybody that didn’t want to go.

BERMAN: Tom Brokaw wrote a book [The Greatest Generation] about World War II and called your generation the greatest generation. Do you agree with that assessment?

GIBIAN: Pretty much. I wrote him a letter one time and told him I would pick him up in my airplane and fly him to the P47 reunion if he would be the speaker there. I never heard from him. I liked his book.

BERMAN: Why do you think you were a great generation?

GIBIAN: Because of the war. One of the greatest things to happen to this country was the GI Bill after the war. That all these kids went back to college. I’d call myself moderately successful in the candy business, but I don’t think . . . it wasn’t hard to do well right after the war because everybody was out of everything. No washing machines. No homes. No jobs. Everything was on the up-and-up going for quite a while.

BERMAN: How would you compare your generation with the generation today? Do you think that they’re . . . do you think that there is still that same sense of patriotism?

GIBIAN: No.

BERMAN: What do you attribute that to?

GIBIAN: I just . . . I don’t know how to respond to that. I don’t think that the family situation is what it used to be. Too many divorces. I think drugs are a tremendous problem. I don’t know what we can do about that.

BERMAN: I think on that note, we can conclude. I appreciate it so much.

GIBIAN: You’re welcome.

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9 Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, known informally as the GI Bill, was a law that provided a range of benefits for returning World War II veterans (commonly referred to as GI’s), including low-cost mortgages, loans to start business or farms and tuition and living expenses to attend college.
INTERVIEW ENDS

<End Disk 2>