

## #1 Jack Blum: big picture

**Naomi:** Five days before Jack Blum was born, his grandfather was killed in a car accident. His father was also in the car, and was pretty seriously hurt. He was a doctor who'd served in the first world war. After recovering from the accident, he rejoined the military just as the Second World War was beginning, and he spent most of his time stationed in camps around the US.

**Jack:** My earliest memories were my mother and I spending a summer with him, and I believe it was the summer of 1945, Colorado Springs, where he was a medical officer at Camp Carson. Which then became Fort Carson. And actually the military got me some kind of kid's size uniform. And I remember riding in a tank on a VJ Day parade.

**Naomi:** This is the Corruption Diaries from the Tax Justice Network. I'm Naomi Fowler.

**Jack:** I actually was born in New York. And after the war started, my mother and I came to live with her mother, my grandmother. And we all stayed in that house, and it was a house that my grandmother and grandfather had purchased in 1901.

I remember struggles of trying to make it through the World War II period. The rationing, the things like going out, reaching for packets of sugar. Because sugar was one of those things that was really rationed. And you'd want to accumulate a bunch of them so eventually they could bake a cake. So, it was a world in which you saved string in big balls. Rubber bands were, my God, a, an amazingly in-demand thing.

My grandmother had been a seamstress. And that meant that your clothes were repaired. You never just threw stuff out. Socks were fixed and clothing was reworked. Now you look at it and you think, oh God, there's a rip, let's throw it in the trash. Some of that came from the Depression, some of that came simply because of the war and the rationing and the limitations.

My grandfather had come to the United States around 1890, thereabouts, and he had been an apprentice tailor in England, and uh spoke English with an English accent. He had apprenticed as a tailor and he came here and set up his business. And one of the customers of the business was a man named Schuyler Van Vechten, a partner in Lee Higginson and Company. Lee Higginson, which was primarily based in Boston, but had offices, believe it or not, in this building now owned in part by Trump, 40 Wall Street, had underwritten a company called Swedish Match. And Swedish Match had a wonderful run in the stock market and bond markets and it was the hottest thing going until the guy who was the president of the company jumped out of an airplane at something like 20,000 feet as his way of committing suicide. And when they got into the company's books, it turned out there was no

there there. It was kind of a beginning of a modern fraud. What makes this story so interesting is that Lee Higginson Partners reimbursed all of their clients who had purchased securities, which, that enriched Swedish Match, and they did it at their own expense, at a time when that was what honorable people did. Now it turned out that because of the Swedish Match affair and the reimbursement, my grandfather had survived the Depression reasonably well, and the gentleman who had been his customer, then stockbroker, took care of my grandmother's finances. And even though he had people who had large amounts of money as his clients, he would always take time to meet with my grandmother. And I remember her taking me along with her to a meeting with him at 40 Wall Street as a kid. Five, six, you know, it just, what I'm, I don't remember exactly how old I was, but I was there more than once, becoming aware of a world that I hadn't known existed. You, you gradually discover things, as a kid. You, you realize, oh yeah, there's, there's all that going on. And, you find these things out one at a time, and, and, you absorb it and want to find out more. It wasn't until way later on that I really began to understand what had happened with Swedish Match and, and all the rest of it. But it was an awareness that there was this place called Wall Street where a lot of people did a lot of business. And yeah, so, so that, that was really the discovery.

My mother was a high school teacher in Newark. One of her students, quite ironically was, Philip Roth. And just as an aside, when, I came home she was playing cards with some friends of hers, and Roth's book, Portnoy's Complaint, had just been published, and the four teachers sitting around playing cards said - always knew that Roth kid would come to no good. Sure!-

There was quite a bit of tension because my grandmother was one tough customer. She had been through a lot in her lifetime and wanted to run everything and everybody around her. And that was very hard on my mother. It was not exactly wonderful for me. But the, the real problem was that everybody in the family had a plan for my life, which I then had to spend years deciding, no, that's not the plan, I'm gonna do what I, what I wanna do and figure that all out.

They wanted me to be a scientist. My mother was frustrated because she had an advanced degree in math and wound up as a teacher, a math teacher, for the simple reason that it was the Great Depression when she got out of school and she was lucky to have any job, much less be a woman with an advanced degree, which at that time was hopeless. And, of course, my father is a doctor and he's in, in the area of sciences and saying you know, that's, that's where he probably should wind up.

I started out trying to be a scientist but I had this problem. I'm dyslectic. And this was in a day before there were pocket calculators and things of that order. And I had this dreadful problem of not being able to follow a string of numbers without the numbers getting all bollocksed up. So, you know, I would, take a math test and the results would be catastrophic. And everybody would say, well, you didn't work hard enough. Later, I understood that it was dyslexia, but I took an awful lot of grief for I wasn't

working hard enough. There were other things about being a kid then which really was, were very different. One of them is being left handed. And back then, if you were left handed, you were really first compelled to try to write with your right hand. But failing that, you had to learn to write some other way that would produce a result that was reasonably legible. And, this was a tormenting proposition to say the least. So here I was, left handed and dyslectic. So but somehow I, I came through all of that. And, by the time I got to college, I was able to graduate with honors and, you know, do, do my thing.

**Naomi:** In the next episode of The Corruption Diaries, we hear about Jack's time at university or college, where he came across some incredible minds, and made lifelong friends.

The Corruption Diaries is a production of The Tax Justice Network, made by me, Naomi Fowler and Jo Barratt. Interviews with Jack Blum were recorded over several days at Jack's home in Maryland by Zoe Sullivan.