Interview with MR. ABE CHATMAN
September 24, 1976
By Maurice Isserman

Interview 1
Tape 1
Side A

Q. Speaking with Abe Chatman in his office at the Amalgamated Clothing Workers.
Mr. Chatman, when did you come to Rochester? 1914. And where did you come from? From Russia. When did you come to the United States? How old were you then?
A. Well, I think I was much younger.
Q. OK. And now you're...?
A. Late seventies.
Q. Why did you decide to come to Rochester?
A. I had family here.
Q. Your family came over earlier? And what did your father do for a living?
A. My father was manufacturing shoes.
Q. What... was he a shoe worker or did he own a factory? And what did he do when he came to Rochester? Oh, I see. (Transcriber's note: It does not sound as if Mr. Chatman is answering many of the question posed, no voice is coming through on the tape. There is some static as well.) Where did you settle when you first came to the city?
A. I came to Rochester, and I... I came here with a sister, I was younger. And we had some relatives here, we were with them for a very short time. And then we... then I managed to help. I got a job in the clothing industry. And then I went to New York, and I spent a year in New York, and then I came back. I was gonna stay in New York, but I came back for a visit, and when I got back I thought I'd stay.
Q. So you got a job in the garment industry here? Had you worked in the garment industry prior to coming to Rochester?
A. No.
Q. Where did you first go to work?
A. Fellow by the name Michael Benjamin Haysel.
Q. And what did you do?
A. I was... I was... see in clothing industry you didn't use the whole unit, you did part of it. I was putting on collars.
Q. And how long did you keep the job at that particular factory?
A. Not very long. That was before I got a job at Michael Benjamin Haysel, and then I went to New York. In New York, I spent a year in New York, in the ladies garment workers.
Q. You were working for the union?
A. Then I came here and I got a job with Hickey-Freeman. And worked at Hickey-Freeman until 1924.
Q. Were you still a collar-baster at that time?
A. Collar-baster and also organizing... I was organizing.
Q. And this is 1916 when you went back to Rochester?
A. 1915.
Q. And
A. It seems it was 1916.
Q. The Amalgamated had really just been organized at that point? Nationally?
A. Yes, in '14, 1914.
Q. How strong was the Amalgamated in Rochester?
A. There was a strike in 1913, I wasn't here. I came in '14. And the strike was lost. Because of it the Amalgamated was formed... (Transcriber's note: much of what Mr. Chatman is saying is unintelligible.) Hold a convention so that the delegates from the east were too radical for them. Could not be able to get out of there, the Amalgamated... but they managed. And it was
A. (Continued) out there that the Amalgamated Clothing Workers was formed. And a group broke away from the Clothing . . . No, Sidney Hillman wasn't in that convention. Group largely from Chicago and Rochester, New York delegates. They were not sit . . . they refused to sit at the convention. The United Garment Workers. And so they went away and they hired a hall and that was the time they decided to form the union of clothing workers, because the United Garment Workers was . . . they didn't believe in . . . in unions. They believed in craft unions. And the Amalgamated is an industrial union. So they hired . . . they hired a hall and they met and decided to call upon a man . . . a man by the name Sam Levine from Chicago. He knew Sidney Hillman, and he proposed that they should have him . . . Sidney Hillman was at that time a clerk for the garment workers. They decided to call on him to come in and named him as . . .

Q. And when you came here the Amalgamated was at most a skeleton organization?

A. Yes, that's true.

Q. Who hired you as an organizer?

A. No one hired me, I just . . . just decided to do it on my own.

Q. Who were you in contact with? With the New York office or . . . ?

A. No, at first I was working . . . I got a job at Hickey-Freeman, and the first thing I did after working there very short time, I decided we ought to make a union. And there was a skeleton union, probably of some twenty people.

Q. In that factory or the city as a whole?

A. In the city as a whole. There was none in the factory. I decided to . . . that we have to form a union. I was young and ambitious. I really wanted a union, I never thought of being . . . I would ever be . . . So I would go around weekends on unions from house . . . to the houses where the clothing workers were and persuade as many as I could to join the union.
Q. Were you concentrating on Hickey-Freeman workers?
A. I was mainly, yes.

Q. Was anybody else doing this kind of work at the time, or were you in this alone?
A. Organizing? Matter of fact I... (Transcriber's note: remainder of sentence is so slurred it can't be transcribed.) And I succeeded in getting enough people to join. And then we got a union... from then on we decided we would spread out in the industry, a large industry, seventeen, eighteen thousand people.

Q. Did your employers at Hickey-Freeman know you were doing this?
A. Yes.

Q. They knew you were trying to organize a union?
A. They were afraid...

Q. That is, they were afraid of the reaction.
A. They were afraid they'd have...

Q. And were you able to build up a substantial following? Was the national union able to aide you in any way at this period?
A. At that time the national union was... as a matter of fact I didn't need them here. I was just doing it. And the national union, they were busy with everywheres else. And that's when I organized it, got a charter, established an office, gradually we built up.

Q. And the union was recognized in 1918? Is that...
A. The union was recognized here in 1916, '17, '18?

Q. I think if I remember correctly it had something to do with work arbitration that allowed you to... Why do you think that the manufacturers were suddenly so willing to accept the unionization which they'd resisted so long?
A. They were not willing. But, they saw... there was a man... they had a president by the name Max Holtz, he was manufacturer.
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Q. He was president of the clothiers...?
A. And Hillman came in here and he had a meeting with the manufacturers. At that time Steinbloch was here, and we had arrests and... had a meeting... The real stumbling block was a man by the name of Wise and Steinbloch... he was... and Hillman went and saw him.

Voice. The Times-Union is on, can you speak to him?
A. Not now, no interruptions.

Q. So, it was Hillman's intervention which helped them accept...
A. As far as the market is concerned, it was Hillman... Hillman. I made a start at Hickey-Freeman, but then to get the rest of them, this was very... That was considered the largest quality market in the clothing business. And when Hillman came here and talked to Wise, he talked to others. He came for a couple visits, we can avoid a lot of trouble by recognizing the union. But they at that time knew that Hickey-Freeman have a union, and that they can escape.

Q. Were there strong nucleuses in other factories or was Hickey-Freeman the sole...?
A. Hickey-Freeman was the sole.

Q. Do you think that the Hart, Shafner & Marks contract was an influence on the clothiers?
A. Hart, Shafner & Marks goes back to 1910.

Q. Right, but the example of that.
A. I'm not sure. Nothing had an influence. They didn't want to have a union. It was not until the time that they saw us, that they couldn't stop it. They quietly agreed, they didn't want to.

Q. Was Michael-Sterns the only hold out?
A. Yea, and they had a strike.
Q. Strike in 1919. Were... were you involved in that?
A. Yes, I was involved. They got an injunction... the injunction of $100,000 for calling the strike against the international union. And we couldn't get near the plant, blocks. We got around it. Took a long time, about three... about three... Michael-Stern came to the union and after that...

Q. In the 1919 strike, didn't the United Garment Workers play a role in breaking the strike? What was their role?
A. They came in and signed a contract with Michael-Stern. And on that basis the injunction was issued that they had a contract.

Q. Had they had any base among the workers there?
A. Some. They had the officers who remained coming. And...

Q. I remember reading the accounts in the Democrat & Chronicle at the time which nominated as portrayed as a front for the IWW and... Sure...
A. Yes, we have more progressive thought than the United Garment Workers.

Q. Weren't the offices of the Amalgamated raided in 1919 by the... I think it was...? No, maybe it was some hall or something then.
A. Well, we had there an office on Central Avenue. (Transcriber's note: next sentence is too low to pick up on tape.) We bought a building, it was known as the Germania Hall, German Society. And we were renting it.

Q. What was your position in the union after it was recognized? 1919, the early 1920's?
A. I was considered a rebel, see? And the general executive board of the Amalgamated here... and there were a number of people who were charged with... And many said the union was... man by the name Herman... and there was... there was a manager named Herman, there was a manager by the name of Colchin, there was a manager by the name of Solomon. Solomon was from out of town.

Q. The first union officers in Rochester.
A. Mention that there was the first... well, the very first one was a man by the name Feldman. And he was so very effective because he didn't care to join the union. So he got out and then came Herman took it over, fellow by the name of Herman. And Herman didn't last long. And then a man by the name Colchin was brought in from out of town. He was related to a man by the name Dr. Stone who was the labor manager, industrial labor relations man at Hickey-Freeman. And he didn't last too long. And then they brought in a man by the name of Solomon, I think from Cleveland. And he was very short time.

Q. What was the problem?

A. I was giving him trouble.

Q. Why were you giving him trouble?

A. I was giving them trouble 'cause certain things that we didn't like. We'd ask questions and they would not have the answers. And I had a following.

Q. Well, let me read a section onto the tape from Nancy Josephson's book, and then I want you to comment on it. "More serious and prolonged disorder threatened the important clothing center of Rochester for several years after 1924. There was not only the Trade Union Educational League group working among the discontented, but also dissension on racial grounds between the Italian and Jewish workers. The men... the men who were born from within had set up a rival council or committee which by 1926 threatened to become a controlling agent of the Rochester locals. Grievances arising from incompetent management by the union's affairs by Rochester officers gave strength to the insurgent leaders, one of whom, Abraham Chatman, a coatmaker at the Hickey-Freeman plant, was regarded as a youth of high character by the union members. One of the Rochester employers, however, describes him as a 'radical, uncooperative union agitator.' Impartial chairman, Leiserson
A. That's Leiserson.

Q. "... urged Hillman to do something about this young firebrand, while Alex Cohen, a veteran member of the General Executive Board who had been investigating the trouble, advised that Chatman was the soul of the organization in Rochester and that his expulsion from the union might do great harm." And then he goes on to describe how Hillman came up and met with you and a year later came to Rochester to campaign for you as chairman of the joint board.

A. It's pretty accurate.

Q. Well, let's take this sort of piece by piece. What... what were the different factions in the... in the union in the early twenties in Rochester?

A. Well, there were no different factions. I had a following, and some of them would go overboard. And they were... that was a time when the General Executive Board met in Rochester, they were having hearings. Well,... thanks. I think some of them broke into the office and that's why the General Executive Board met. And they didn't do anything. Some people were... And finally came in... the General Board came in and they were calling these people, including myself, before the Board. And there were... there was one young lady, Goodman, Sadie Goodman, who was... created this against... She... So then the Board met here largely to see if they could get... and they called this group, including myself, and some of them were charged with doing certain things, breaking into the... And then they questioned me and asked if I was part of it, I said yes. I was not. They knew I was not. I wouldn't... I wouldn't tolerate any breaking in.

Q. Well, why did you say yes?

A. Just so the group will not feel that I betray them. They are being charged and I wasn't. I thought that was... in order to keep the following that I
A. (Continued) had, I had to do... even though I was not... Then some of them were expelled from the union, I don't recall how many at the moment. Through the efforts of Alex Cohen, Alex Cohen spent time here organizing the... helping, Alex Cohen. Very likable. And when the group was expelled he suggested that a committee should be formed to go down to New York and appeal. And we went to New York, we appealed and they repealed it, not immediately, but after our return, the repeal was granted. And they were reinstated largely under the... I wasn't in office because of Alex Cohen's international... Then I think it was Alex Cohen after I mentioned the number of managers we had starting with... Well Feldman was before it was even recognized. But then Dave Herman was the first one, he was the first manager. And he lasted a year, I'm not quite sure. He stepped down. He couldn't stand the pressures and trouble. All right. So, he stepped out and Hillman brought in a man by the name of Colchin. And Colchin was a relative, as I mentioned earlier, to Dr. Stone who was the labor manager, the industrial labor relations. And Colchin was managing, we were cooperating with him until something happened. I was still working. And we had some understanding that they couldn't leave out, and I was told there was an understanding. And Colchin was... and they wouldn't live up to it, so I called a stop. And for seven weeks we were out. We were meeting in the hall on Clinton Avenue, Manager Colchin couldn't come in there. We were meeting everyday.

Q. People were out on strike? It was a wildcat strike?
A. Right.

Q. And that was Hickey-Freeman?
A. That was Hickey-Freeman, the older coat shop of Hickey-Freeman, not the other one.
Q. And you don't remember what the specific reason was that... that prompted all this?

A. That caused the walk-out at Hickey-Freeman?

Q. Well, it's not important.

A. I can't remember. I really can't think of it.

Q. But it was something between the company and the people in the overcoat...?

A. That's right. And walked out. And I held meetings here, and finally they sent in... Alex Cohen was not here, Alex Cohen was sent in afterwards to befriend the opposition and to keep... And he is the one who identified that I am the one that organized. He recommended... it was probably... but that was during the time when there was... the group was expelled from the union. And tried to... And after that was over and the group that was expelled were reinstated and Colchin couldn't continue, so Solomon was brought in. Solomon couldn't stay, he had some problems. Alex Cohen recommended that they ought to name me. I never had any intention... I wasn't sure I was going to stay in the industry. I didn't want it. And Alex Cohen finally said to me, look, you can't continue... you can't say that certain things are wrong and then when it's offered to you take over and do your own things your way and get it right, and if you turn it down, what have you got to argue about? It made sense. Took a lot of persuading and others who... who were active. I accepted on a temporary basis. I wasn't sure I was gonna stay. So, it was agreed that a man by the name Hymie Bloomberg, who's a member of the Second Ward, that he would work with me. And he did for a while and then he... From then on... we had elections every... in those days I think we had elections every year. And then we had a position, we had problems. People who created... we had a substantial Italian membership. And they brought people who created problems. Why does a Jew have to
A. (Continued) be the manager and there's so many Italians and so on.

Q. When was this?
A. It might have been in . . . it was about a year after I was in.
Q. Josephson mentions that as a factor in upsetting the union even earlier, before you took over.
A. That was then, yes. But then I took over it was . . .
Q. And was that the whole basis of it? Just the question of leadership of the union? Or was there other . . . other tensions involved?
A. There were other tensions involved. See, it started with Hickey-Freeman.

Then, for an example, it doesn't make sense today, but the old coat shop where I worked, we had an agreement, an understanding, verbal understanding, that if they . . . if they have no more overcoats then they were to send in jackets for suits, we used to call them set ups. Then they would pay 100% of the earnings, the overcoat shop always was higher in. . . And then they'd send in and they refused to do it. They felt that the shop . . . they ought to pay the same rate, they can't pay different rates for the same type of work. That's when we started. . . that's when we had the strike. That's when we had a strike which lasted a number of weeks. And I had meetings. . . and the people wouldn't go back no matter.

Q. This problem of . . . what were the proportions of Italians to Jews in the union at that point? Was it a majority Jewish?
A. Much earlier stages the Jewish was the majority.
Q. Then it changed over?
A. Then it changed over.
Q. Well, at what point were Jews no longer a majority?
Q. Oh, that early?
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A.  '27.

Q.  Then at that point Italians became the majority, and in your own following in the period before you became the leader here, was it predominately Jewish? Or did you draw from from all groups?

A.  I drew from all groups. All groups.

Q.  And this resentment that there should not that there was not an Italian president, did that die out after a while?

A.  It diminished. It died out. Matter of fact they weren't proposing an Italian they were proposing a man by the name Staley. Staley was.

Q.  George Staley?

A.  George Staley. You familiar?

Q.  I remember him in connection with something I did about the Socialist Party here.

A.  George Staley, that's right. He and he was sort of considered more neutral.

Q.  Does the name Meyer Kirschenbaum, is that someone?

A.  No, he did not. And so we had an election where they had a choice.

Q.  Another group that Josephson mentions is the Trade Union Education League, which was the Communist group. Did they have much of a following?

A.  They had nothing. We we wouldn't have anything to do with them. No, they they would charge us if we did.

Q.  I see. How do they figure into the story? I mean, Hillman mentions Rochester as sort of suffering from this kind of factionalism.

A.  I know. But, we didn't actually have them. We were charged that we the Trade Union Educational Group was controlling it, and I had no part of it. I wasn't a member.

Q.  So so Josephson is inaccurate?
A. He is absolutely inaccurate.

Q. Do you think this was part of Hillman's leadership abilities that he should win over opponents like...?

A. He was exceptional. He was just a remarkable person. I respected him. He kept 'em moving.

Q. He sounded like he took a very direct interest in the goings on of all the different cities?

A. He did. He would get in, right in it himself. And get to know who is who and whether there was merit. And if there was merit he would do something about it. And he would manage... if couldn't do it he would get somebody who he was close to and he would get 'em to straighten it out. And after the situation got straightened out he would help... he would help the employees. They understand...

Q. When you first took over as manager of the joint board, how large was the Amalgamated in Rochester?

A. About 17,000 members, maybe 18,000.

Q. Was that its peak, or did it grow larger later?

A. No, it didn't. That was its peak.

Q. And, what would...

A. It was a very high quality... quality market. And Chicago was larger than we were. We were second to Chicago. Only one, Chicago was the first ones who started here in 1910. And then New York had a strike in 1913. And they were sent in to work in Rochester, that's when the strike came in Rochester, in 1913. Before I came to this country.

Q. The clothing industry, of course, was always very sensitive to shifts in the economy, but what was the state of the clothing industry in the twenties when you first took over?
A. They were in good shape. They were in very good shape.
Q. And...
A. As time progressed there were a lot of manufacturers, gradually, largely got out of business because it was a one-man operation. They had... when they had... got old or died or infirm, there was no successor.
Q. Family businesses basically?
A. Right.
Q. Interesting point. Someone pointed out to me that most of the garment factories, or a large number of them in Rochester, were owned by German Jews where the workers were largely the Russian Jews.
A. That's right.
Q. Do you think that added any element of... oh, I don't know, either tension or lack of tension, you know, anything like that?
A. No.
Q. Was this general prosperity in the twenties in the clothing industry reflected in terms of the workers and what they... What... what kind of improvements took place in the twenties in working conditions?
A. Well, unemployment insurance was started by the Amalgamated, and that was part of Rochester industry.
Q. How did that work?
A. Provided for in case of unemployment that people would get a certain amount of money.
Q. Well, just generally, that the employers paid in or workers?
A. The workers paid in.
Q. Was that a voluntary for the workers or was it part of their... just part of their contract that they'd pay? And when the crash came in '29, how... how quickly did that affect the garment industry here?
A. The crash came it had its effect on the industry here. The... it didn't have an immediate effect, but it gradually took hold. And some people... some firms went out of business. Like, for example, the firm... (Transcriber's note: remainder of sentence is too low to transcribe.)... went out of business. At a later date... they operated... they went out of business. Clothes...
Q. Well, then there was a great rise in the unemployment naturally. What proportion of the union's membership was out of work?
A. And then as things started to pick up they were absorbed, a good many of them. They were absorbed in the existing firms.
Q. Was the Amalgamated's unemployment program able to continue to provide benefits, or did you run out of money?
A. No, we didn't run out of any money.
Q. That must have been quite a strain on... Was there any attempt to... when great numbers of people were thrown out of work to share the existing work? Or how did you cope with it?
A. We had... it was Hillman's idea, equal division of time, equal division of work. So, people were not laid off. In other words, we had no provision of seniority. People were...
Q. So that if a given factory cut its production by 30% say people would be working one-third less? How many... did anybody manage to keep working full-time? Or was it pretty much across the board that...
A. Board.
Q. And was this something that you did at... at all the factories or only selected factories?
A. Well, that concept was for everybody. And when the... when the Depression started we managed to get through by dividing work. And when it was needed...
A. (Continued) shorter... shorter hours.
Q. Were there other measures that the union took to provide for its membership in that period?
A. Mainly the unemployment insurance. Then we had...
Q. No, I'm sorry.
A. Then there were two sort of... one firm that...

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A
Interview with MR. ABE CHATMAN
September 24, 1976
By Maurice Isserman

Interview I
Tape 1
Side B

A. ... certain part of the contract. ... Kelly and Thompson later were not Amalgamated Clothing shops. Head man was a man by the name Sol Heuman, German, he was. Trying to get them away from the... and we would make speeches. We got to know each other. And we would have to join these people, big wheels, the Jewish people in the shuls. I mean I kept...

Q. You didn't have a contract with Telly Heuman at that point? And you were trying to. ... Right. This was in 1933?
A. Right.

Q. And so that NRA was already in effect then? Did you find it useful that... what's that section? 7A?
A. 7A. Seems to be...

Q. National Recovery...
A. Yes.

Q. I remember I think when Lewis was organizing he said something like the President wants you to join the union. Did you take some kind of similar line here?
A. Yes. He was on the board.

Q. The Teller Heuman strike in '33 was ... sounded like it was quite a bitter strike. Why? How did they break it up?
A. People intended to win, and...

Q. Was it in higher work forces...
A. Teller, Heuman, Thompson three was... Sol Heuman was the head of the Thompson factory and so Teller had Colchin. (Transcriber's note: can't hear next sentence clearly enough to transcribe it.) And, Thompson had the best
A. (Continued) shop. So we organized a strike in the cutting rooms, time piece, it was the cutting room. We called them out first. In fact, I think one man, popular, and they put him on... and he worked. And he had to cut himself. We called the cutters out. Took him a week... then after the rest of them. Had a shop on Sullivan Street, shop on Berlin Street. And the vest shop, we paid no attention to the vest shop. And at that time there was no labor so you could do things that you could not do today. You could make people... you could... you know, people didn't rush because again they had a price. When we had a strike, we immediately announced the strike benefits. And the very first day strike benefits were a little better than the earnings in the shop, and we were paying... only people who would register that day could get it...

Q. Expensive strategy.
A. And it paid off.

Q. Telly Heuman called in the police?
A. Tear gas.

Q. Where did they get the...
A. Somebody threw gas and Sullivan Street was the main shop, Heuman, he had it. And we concentrated. And we would... the whole street would be... I would have one plant at a time would be the one. They would come there and picket for several hours so nobody can walk through the picket, even police couldn't.

Q. The... where did you get the idea to send away to the... what was it...
A. Gas masks...

Q. For the gas masks. How did you come up with that idea?
A. Because the police ran through us, motorcycle cops came, and they ran through and threw gas at us. We did it once, and we... terrible... so we went
A. (Continued) to Frances Perkins to send us gas masks. . . masks. . . the papers printed it.
Q. She didn't send the masks?
A. We didn't expect. . .
Q. But I did see. . . I did see the one photograph with people walking down the street with gas masks.
A. We had members who were in the war, and they were. . . they had. . . they brought with them their masks.
Q. It seemed that just from what I could tell by looking at the clippings there a lot of the . . . the strategy was concerned with public relations because there was that thing with the gas masks. There was an assembly of sort of young women strikers with. . . with bands. . . right. Were you the one who was thinking up all of these?
A. Yea. And then we had a man who came in to help us strike. I don't know now, the one who. . . studied it . . . And I got a man here by the name Charlie Berbick. Charlie was Socialist, Socialist. And he would ask people. . . father was a banker, said the bankers were capitalists and so on. Very effective. Had a very powerful voice. Had a man by the name Gustaf Straedel.
Q. Yea, he's. . .
A. And he was Socialist and he was some speaker. He had a remarkable voice. And he was here. But Straedel was not here during that strike. Charlie was here. And a lady by the name Dora Taybelink, she was Jewish but was married to an Italian, one of our board members at that time. And she was a very able speaker. And she. . . she came in here. And the consequence was that we settled the strike, nobody lost their job, and we. . . we got pretty much what we were out for.
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Q. That was... as far as I know that was the only strike in the clothing industry in all the time that...

A. No, we had a strike at Michael-Stern.

Q. No, but since you took over, the only... What do you figure that long peaceful stretch to... Why... why were you able to work so effectively without strikes?

A. Well, partly through the employers who were recognized the fact that they can live in peace with a union if they have the right people to deal with the union. They had... they engaged labor managers. And the first one was Dr. Stone, and he didn't turn out to be quite helpful. But, he was the first one and then others. There was Harold Holodim. And Dr. Stone was a... we used to have a lot of trouble at Hickey-Freeman with stoppages. And the consequence was that they had come to the conclusion and to realize that it wasn't the people, it was Dr. Stone who knew nothing about clothing. He was an intellectual and he didn't begin to understand. And he was only... well, they came to the conclusion that they... they will need a person unless one can keep peace. Jeremiah Hickey hired people to keep peace, not to stoppages so they fired him. And things started to get better after that. I mentioned such as Colchin and Solomon who were managers of unions who didn't conform to... maybe they did, but we didn't like 'em. I'm not sure that they were right and we were wrong.

Q. All right, that's good. Well, when Teller Heuman settled that left only Michael-Stern as a hold out. When did they finally agree to recognize the union?

A. I'm not sure what year it was. I think it was earlier than the thirties, '37. I think Michael-Sterns came in before '37. I have to...
Q. Why did they...
A. Phil Gordon...

Q. Why... why did Michael-Sterns finally surrender? I mean, they were such a recalcitrant group?
A. Michael-Sterns surrendered because they manufactured clothes, and they couldn't. They started to pull... took in people and were able to get along and recognized that you got to deal with a union and if you recognized... They took in people... that was after the strike.

Q. In 1936 you were... you and the Amalgamated were instrumental in organizing the American Labor Party here in Rochester. And I guess the Amalgamated was active on a state-wide level. What was the reason for doing it?
A. It was... the Liberal Party was formed in New York. Alex Rose... Alex Rose and I think the ILG in connection with it... And Heuman did not like it, so he was instrumental in organizing... As a matter of fact... now this will make a good story... When Roosevelt was in the White House he felt that he needed something to upset the Democrat Party. He was the one who helped... who asked Heuman to form some kind of an organization and Heuman formed the Labor Party. Supposed to...

Q. And so it was a way of channeling votes from a normally Socialist membership to...?
A. That's right.

Q. ... to Roosevelt. Did it ever function as anything more than that? Did it ever function as a political party between presidential elections?
A. Very much so.

Q. It did? In what way?
A. Well, not as a political party in that sense. It was functioning to help
the Democrats to pick candidates that were favorable to the. . . to the
Liberal Party. And that was the purpose. The Labor Party later was taken
over by Alex Rose, who was the cap makers. . . he had a cap makers union.
And International Garment Workers were doing well, and the chapter...

Q. Just in Rochester? Was it a powerful political force?
A. Reasonably so.
Q. In what years?
A. Well, when it was first formed and for several years after.
Q. So you supported Roosevelt in '36?
A. Yes.
Q. Heuman in '38?
A. Heuman in '38. We have been involved in politics of the Federal government
for thirty years. But the Labor Party later was infiltrated with Communists
and we dropped it.

Q. So after that the Amalgamated worked directly with the Democratic Party?
How extensive. . . prior to this how extensive was Socialist sentiment in
the Amalgamated in Rochester?

A. Socialist sentiment in Rochester was not too great. But, we had here
Socialists. We had the Proletarian Party. We had the Labor Party. The
Labor Party was formed to offset the Proletarian. . . the Labor Party was
formed as I recently said at the request of Roosevelt. And then Proletarian
Party was formed. Ravel. . . from the temple Rabinsky of the . . . was
connected. . . Sidney. . . and he supported. . . (Note: rest of sentence
fades out.) . . . in the formation of the Liberal Party.

Q. No, I just know that a lot of people I've spoken with were members of the
Workmen's Circle. And this was not a political group, but it was Socialist
Q. (Continued) in sympathy. Was the Workmen's Circle very strong among members of the Amalgamated?
A. No, it was not. Workmen's Circle was never... usually they were... when we were on strike at one time, the Thompson strike, they were helpful. But many of the members were among the...

Q. And the Farbund I believe was the Labor Zionist...?
A. Yes.

Q. They were also...
A. Where'd you find that?

Q. Well, I talked to Benjamin Owerbach and I talked to Manny Hoffman.
A. Workmen's Circle was always helpful in whichever way they could. But, ...

Q. Certainly after '36 majority sentiment shifted to just supporting the Democratic candidate?
A. That's right.

Q. Well...

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B (Interview 1)
Q. In the 1936 campaign. In 1937, if I remember correctly, you were appointed regional director of the textile worker organizing committee? How did that appointment come about?

A. The CIO... CIO had designated... (Transcriber's note: loud background noise partially drowns out voices on this tape.)... different members of the executive council to do an organizing job. At that time the issue was that the AFoFL didn't want to take in the CIO and they didn't want to go out... They said we come in and we'll spend money and we'll go out and organize the unorganized. And the AFoFL was... So there was some series of... and there was a form that went out to the organizers... and Sidney Hillman was assigned. He was to take over textile... textile was... and organize. It was a big job and took use of entire staff. (Note: next few sentences are drowned out by background noise.) And New York State there was a town of textile... state...

Q. You had the whole state as your region?

A. I was organizing. I had people...

Q. Were most of your confederates also from Amalgamated?

A. Yes. Although we took some from... Fellow by the name Will Bachevsky. And we organized...

Q. Was he a Rochester...?

A. No, he... he's from Amsterdam, he was a youngster at the time, a very aggressive sort, working for himself. And showed... we put him on. Today he's the vice-president, executive vice-president, of the first AFL-CIO, they merged... the Amalgamated Clothing...
Q. When I heard of the organizing campaigns in New England and in the south, but I hadn't known that there was much activity in New York.
A. Wasn't the same as the firms in New England. The south was more... had to organize...
Q. Were there many textile factories in Rochester?
A. Well, not big ones. It wasn't just Rochester. I had an area here and New York, New York State. Here in Rochester there is Schlegel, they're still... They are still in business, and they're doing business...
Q. They were... they were organized?
A. Yea, they were. And when I checked out... and we organized... (Note: most of sentence fades out.)...
Q. How large... how large a union... how many... how many textile workers were organized in these unions in New York?
A. In New York State? Well, there was Alexander Smith, carpet making. There was Sanford in Amsterdam, and then every town, there was some textile... these were the big ones. I would say there were about six, seven thousand.
Q. And is that...?
A. Yea, about seven thousand.
Q. Have those plants remained organized all these years? I mean I know Mohawk is still there...
A. Some... some of them left and went to south. Some are still here, others:... the one in Rochester is still here. Schlegel is still...and... New England states... they signed contracts and then they gradually just pulled it out.
Q. Is that the reason why the Amalgamated recently merged with the textile workers? To organize this...
A. The reason was why the textile workers decided they needed to organize.
Q. They needed... well, I know now they're undertaking a program...
A. They're still organizing...
Q. J. B. Stevens.
A. J. B. Stevens in Utica. We had a worker by the name of Farrell, he was making... J. B. Stevens and everything...
Q. Is that what the bulk of the national textile industry is, now in the south?
The workers in the Rochester textile industry, were many of them Jewish?
A. No.
Q. No. Had they had any contact with the Amalgamated through other people who worked in... in the clothing industry?
A. Some.
Q. Yea, so that wasn't really a factor in organizing?
A. Different. In 1937 organizing was very popular. John L. Lewis, Phil Murray, Sid Lieberman they were the men decided to organize the unorganized, not to... not to sit, but do it. And they succeeded.
Q. Were there other...?
A. Everybody...
Q. Were there other industries in Rochester that the Amalgamated helped organize in that period?
A. Yes. They tried to organize Xerox.
Q. Xerox.
A. Xerox was... sit down strike at Xerox.
Q. What union do the Xerox workers...? Are... are they still in the Amalgamated? I see. Had a factor in your decision to organize other industries been the realization that the garment industry was on the decline?
A. No.
Q. It was not a deliberate attempt to...
A. No. The garment industry was not in fact in good shape. It was a matter of organizing the unorganized. Really a dedicated by...the...(Note: rest of sentence is drowned out by background noise.) We got John L. Lewis...to go along with that and Phil Murray was...and there are a lot of people...the actual press we had...they had the know-how and the willingness to organize.

Q. Were there any other important CIO unions here in Rochester? No, it was the Amalgamated...?
A. Well, during that very same time the time that the IAU was organized, it was time that the...this is not a still...steel workers were organized at that time. The...Rochester it wasn't...anybody was...anybody willing to organize it...the...the union was...

Q. Well, clearly if the Amalgamated had...
A. Even the little stores...

Q. Clerks and...was that the Amalgamated? Well, clearly if...if the Amalgamated in Rochester had just provided for its own workers it wouldn't be in the powerful position it is today in the garment industry.
A. The garment industry...

Q. But it's a much smaller factor than it was thirty years ago? When was...at what point did you first begin to realize that there was going to be this importance in the garment industry? When...when was that?
A. The very beginning.

Q. When did you first realize that the garment industry was on the decline and that you would...the garment workers would no longer...
A. Actually we were not on the decline. We felt that no union can possibly make headway if a great portion...the largest portion of industry is not
(Continued) unionized. That was the feeling here. We had to organize in order to have...

Q. When did the garment factories begin closing down in Rochester?
A. Well, actually they didn't, some of them just went out of business. Fashion Park went out of business, Stein-Bloch went out of business.

Q. When was this?
A. Well, that was in the forties. Stein-Bloch went out of business. They were the first merger Fashion Park... Lieberman went out of business. Benjamin-Hayes went out of business. Dinklesmith's went out of business. Berbricks went out of business.

Q. What happened to the workers who were working in those factories?
A. They were gradually absorbed.

Q. There was never a point where there were too many workers for the remaining jobs in the garment industry?
A. There was.

Q. When was that?
A. In the thirties.

Q. Well, there... there... if I understand correctly there are now many fewer jobs in the garment industry than there were back then.
A. Through automation.

Q. So, did you simply stop recruiting new workers? Or... or how did you achieve a balance between the old workers and the continuing needs in industry?
A. Well, it isn't the industry... Of course, we lost... we and others had various losses and went out of business. Some went out of business because it used to be a family... a family business. And the original people were German Jews. They got too old and left it for the children. And the children weren't able to do what... whatever. Very few. Philadelphia was not a
A. (Continued) market at all and it grew fast. But it was my union while
the others were here.

Q. I see. Did many garment workers who lived in Rochester wind up leaving the
city in search of work?
A. Yes.

Q. Many... many of the Jewish garment workers, did they tend to stay...
A. Yes.

Q. ... or to go?
A. People lasted. But by in large we held them until the time that certain
industries were just dying of old age. And the ones they called they
crashed... one went into the jewelry business. Stein-Bloch's merged with
Fashion Park. Others went out of business. Dinklesmith's, Benjamin's...
Benjamin-Hayes went out of business. It was all... it was a one-man operation.
The men got too old to do business.

Q. So from your account it sounds like the transition from the thriving garment
business to more modest one now wasn't really that painful? In terms of the
union strength and its members?
A. See, in New York City is the largest... largest number of... Chicago.
Chicago started even before them. Chicago started their walkout at Hart,
Shafner & Marks in 1910.

Q. In the remaining garment industry do Jews continue to play an important role?
A. Yes.

Q. How many Jews are... are... do you think are currently among the union
membership?
A. Very few.

Q. How about in the union leadership? In say the shop stewards and on up
through the union offices?
A. Well, also very few. Matter of fact, I have a few Jewish members. Les Kalder, he doesn't look like one, but he's a . And . Nick Delvechio, he's Italian.

Q. Among shop stewards it's pretty much the same?

A. Yea. Some of us on my staff are Jews. Sherman, Fagenbaum. . . Fagenbaum and fellow who's been here ten years. . . name is. . . member of the legis. . . state legislature, city legislature. And it's . . .

Q. What is the single most important ethnic group within the Amalgamated membership?

A. Italian.

Q. Italian. Do you think that when you retire, do you know who will succeed you?

A. I have an idea.

Q. But, is it for publication or . . .?

A. No, no.

Q. But it pretty much seems that the days when the Amalgamated was largely a Jewish union in terms of membership and its officers has passed?

A. The officers are largely Jewish.

Q. The national officers.

A. Chicago. And Montreal, Canada, the top men. Baltimore is Italian. Philadelphia is Jewish. And New York among Italian and Jews.

Q. Do you think that other ethnic groups have as strong a feeling for unionism as the Jews did at the time when the union was largely Jewish?

A. I think Italians have. But today we organized Sears and they had a sit-down strike, and they were known as . . . and that's when we came in.

Q. And that's largely non-Jewish? Membership there?

A. Yea, it's 99%.

Q. All right. During the war, did the Amalgamated work closely with the government in war production?
Interview with Mr. Abe Chatman

Q. What... what form did that cooperation take?
A. We had the war production was made by...
Q. How about in Rochester? Did you participate in...?
A. Sure. Participated in uniforms.
Q. Was there... was there a local War Production Board or I don't know how that worked.
A. There was a War Production Board largely from Washington.
Q. But there was no local board directing production? Employment must have picked up considerably during the war. Most of the factories were engaged in making uniforms?
A. It's unfortunate to have their own work and have to...
Q. When was the Jewish Labor Committee organized?
A. I don't know if I can name the exact year. I would judge early... early thirties.
Q. And the Amalgamated was a constituent body to that?
A. That's right.
Q. Were you active in the Jewish Labor Committee?
A. No.
Q. No. Was it any kind of force in Rochester?
A. Yes, many were members, but not leadership.
Q. What exactly did the organization do? What sort of organization was it?
A. Jewish Labor Committee? Well, largely looking out for the workers, Jewish person.
Q. So you were...
A. They would go to employers... (Transcriber's note: remainder of sentence is too low to pick up on tape.)
Q. I understand that during the war the Jewish Labor Committee helped bring over some labor leaders and Socialists from Europe?
A. That's right. And they are still...
Q. Were you involved at all in refugee aid or in any kind of European aid?
A. No.
Q. But people were here in Rochester? I understand that a number of people who were brought over came to Rochester and to the garment factories?
A. Yes, they came here. (Transcriber's note: last sentence is too low to be picked up on tape.)
Q. No, what I mean, the people who the Jewish Labor Committee brought out of Nazi Europe came to Rochester to be resettled.
A. Jewish Labor Committee helped bring people...
Q. And into Rochester? There was a group called the New Americans? I believe, it was a Rochester group of refugees?
A. I've heard the name.
Q. Did the Amalgamated have any formal contacts with the Histadrut, Jewish labor movement? What... what...
A. First secretary-treasurer was a Rochester man by the name Joseph Schlogenberg. He was very active.
Q. Sidney Hillman he did not? How about you, yourself, were you ever active? What form did this tie with the Histadrut take?
A. Well, Histadrut is the labor movement in Israel, labor movement to Israel, American movement, very close. Very close.
Q. Did the Amalgamated, for example, send aid to... to Israel or to Histadrut?
A. We did as much as other unions did.
Q. Did you ever train workers or...?
A. At one time we did.
Q. When was that?
A. In the early days, Israel was very first... they had to start industry and among others they came to be trained.
Q. Under the auspices of the Amalgamated? How many people do you think were involved in that?
A. Oh, throughout the country there must have been a lot of 'em.
Q. Have you, yourself, ever been to Israel?
A. Oh, yes.
Q. And when did you go?
A. I think last time I was there was about six years ago, and I was once before that. I was very much impressed. I was impressed with the idea of the... of sacrificing. The people, at least at that time, and there was so much land... they're looking forward to something great, something new, something theirs.
Q. Were these just vacation trips, or did you go on union business?
A. I went there just to see.
Q. Did you have any contact with any...?
A. I didn't go myself.
Q. Did you have any contact with the Jewish Labor Movement when you were there? What? How did that... (Transcriber's note: cannot hear Mr. Chatman's responses during this sequence.) You visited factories. Now I understand there was a meeting here in Rochester in May of 1948 when Israel was declared a state. Did you attend that meeting?
A. It wasn't really a meeting, it was a celebration. Yes.
Q. Was the Amalgamated involved in organizing it? You just went.
A. It was more or less continuous.
Q. What... what do you remember of that evening?
A. I remember that evening we had people jumping for joy. Everybody was ready to jump and celebrate.

Q. Was large number of garment workers in attendance?
A. At that time...

Q. And then when they came to... 
A. Celebrate...

Q. It must have been something. The Rochester Welfare Federation, I understand that you were active, the Amalgamated was active in supporting it... its drives?
A. Yes, the Amalgamated was. I wasn't.

Q. You were never an officer or...? When did the Amalgamated first begin supporting the Rochester Welfare Federation? Back...back in the thirties?
A. Everything was... people work and do something special perhaps. There were organizations would be there making drives and... we were not...

Q. But you were a sponsor? Did you ever feel that there was any friction between the Jewish garment workers and others? It seems that the Amalgamated was involved in a lot of specifically Jewish causes, like the Federation and the tie with the Histadrut.
A. But we never neglected... we never... we never... we never lost sight of the fact that we are not a Jewish union. And we took care of people so that they have their places in the organization. And while the top leadership was Jewish, it gradually opened up. Too much, it's too Jewish. Substantial... in Chicago, in Rochester, in Philadelphia, in New York... New York has co-managers, one is Jewish, one Italian.

Q. Well, did you sponsor any drive...
Interview with Mr. Abe Chatman

Q. Did you sponsor any drive, any activities that came out of any other ethnic communities?
A. We... we fundamentally applied ourselves to our job, union. Organize the unorganized. Now a job is kept have to have Stevens and some big shot, national. And the entire labor movement... what is involved is not just steel, the south is involved. If we break through in steel, we break through in south.

Q. And you're optimistic about...
A. We hope... we're working on it. The economy is helping, too.

Q. Do you expect any benefits from having a Carter administration?
A. Hopefully so.

Q. I was interested in the last election that the Amalgamated endorsed Bella Abzug in the Democratic primary. And well Matthews in his book characterized Sidney Hillman as a labor statesman and seemed to say that his chief characteristic was pragmatism, but it would seem that if the Amalgamated was truly pragmatic and not idealistic at all it would have endorsed Moynihan not an Abzug. Why did it decide to back the more liberal candidate?
A. Well, Abzug was liberal and well-known, better known, than Moynihan. Although Moynihan got to be known in the United Nations. And after the primaries we here supported Moynihan in the primaries. We had the feeling... the reason... they want us to be liberal, they want us to support liberal candidates. Nobody tells us. Well, we supported Moynihan.

Q. Well, I just never...
A. We didn't support Abzug.

Q. I remember you appeared at a rally with...
A. Yes, but...
Q. Well, I was just wondering because sort of the major New York City mainstream like the UFT, and I was wondering why...

A. Well, the Amalgamated... Moynihan in New York. In New York, we supported him here.

Q. I see. In the primaries?

A. Here we supported him in the primary. In New York they supported Abzug.

Q. But, in the general election. . .?

A. Yea.

Q. While we're on top of the politics, you were instrumental in organizing the American Labor Party in Rochester?

A. I was, yes.

Q. Was that largely organized through the Amalgamated? Through its membership? Not. . . all right, so in '36 and '40 Roosevelt ran on the American Labor Party ticket as well as the Democratic ticket. Did he also in 1944?

A. Yes.

Q. When did the.

A. The American Labor Party supported him each time he ran.

Q. When did the Amalgamated withdraw from the American Labor Party?

A. When the Communists started to come in, infiltrate.

Q. Which was?

A. In the forties.

Q. In the forties. So before the '44 campaign you were already. . .?

A. We still had the labor party, but we were checking out of it.

Q. How powerful. . .

A. Well, let's see, the labor party. . . when did Roosevelt run for the. . . Roosevelt ran for the second term, when was it?

Q. Well, he ran first in '32 then '36. . .
A. So '40... In '40... In '40, maybe '44 when it started to check out. '44 I'd say.

Q. How powerful was the American Labor Party locally in Rochester in '44?
A. They were very important.

Q. Was Roosevelt... did Roosevelt get more votes on the Democratic line or the ALP line?
A. Democratic.

Q. But he got a sizeable number on ALP? Did the ALP...
A. The whole idea was that time there were a lot of Socialists who would not vote on the Democratic ticket. And that was the whole purpose of the labor party. They had... they had voting for Roosevelt, labor party.

Q. Well, I know the labor party was able to elect one congressman, Vito Marcantonio. Was there any local offices that the labor party won in Rochester?
A. I don't recall.

Q. How about in 1944, I understand that the CIO Political Action Committee played a very important role. Was that true also in Rochester?
A. Definitely. As far as CIO...

Q. Well, what about the Political Action Committee of CIO?
A. That was active.

Q. Well, what kind of things were they doing?
A. I think...

Q. Voter registration?
A. Everything.

Q. Was that largely... who was head of the local?
A. I was.

Q. You were. Were most of the campaign workers drawn from the Amalgamated?
A. Most, but we had... we had...
Q. Do you think that... did Roosevelt actually make that statement in 1944, clear it with Sidney?
A. No.
Q. He didn't.
A. That was drummed up by the others at the time.
Q. But do you think he might just as well have made it? Was the Amalgamated really that strong a factor?
A. No, he didn't.
Q. No, but was the Amalgamated that powerful a factor that he would have had to have checked?
A. The Amalgamated was a factor with the White House, Hillman was the... Hillman had... he was looked up to in spite of the fact that we were not affiliated with the AFofL. He picked Sidney Hillman. Contrary to the... at that time Bill Green was the president and we joined and then we dropped out.
Q. The... during the war I understand there was a War Labor Relations Board? Were there many... there were, of course, no strikes during the war. Were there many cases of grievances that were settled through the War Labor Relations Board...?
A. Yes, important grievances to avoid strikes. There could be no strikes. They were settled.
Q. What... what kind of grievances came up?
A. Some grievances that come up now when a new contract is to be negotiated. And today now at General Motors they don't want to go along, there's a strike. At that time they had to settle it.
Q. Of course, in Rochester you already had a long history of collective bargaining and cooperation with... with the employers. Do you think that Rochester...
Q. (Continued) the garment industry in Rochester got by with less difficulty than other industries?
A. Garment industry got by with no strikes. I don't remember... we had a strike years ago, nationwide strike. Employers settled. We negotiated a new contract on an industry-like basis. We don't negotiate individual gripes. We negotiate for the entire industry. And the industry began to suffer...(Transcriber's note: remainder of sentence is too low to be picked up on tape.) Because we haven't had a strike in so many years. And they say if you don't have strike to see that we have the people behind us. Lot of people... strike didn't last long.

Q. And was successful? I didn't know there was a national employers organization.
A. Oh, yes.

Q. What... what is that?
A. Employers Exchange, Rochester. There is a national organization called the National Clothing Association.

Q. What do you see as the future of the garment industry? Has it stabilized in...?
A. I always assume people will be buying some kind of clothes.

Q. That's true. But, they could be wearing them made someplace else. Do you think that it's... the remaining industries will remain in the north or will there be continued shift in the industry?
A. If we organize the south, the north is safe...

Q. Why is that?
A. Because they need the skilled...

Q. If you do organize the... organize the south and try for a national wage level, you know, one wage.
A. For example, very... very hard...

Q. What about plants where they're shifting overseas to South Korea or to Taiwan?
A. They... that's definitely has a problem.

Q. I remember...

A. We are not opposed to imports as such we have more control, we don't put ourselves out of business.

Q. I remember a campaign the ILGWU launched several years back against Japanese imports.

A. Well, they are not nearly as much as... then, of course, people went to work... they wear clothes because the ladies are a constant change in style. And we can't very well... some... (Transcriber's note: rest of sentence is too low to be picked up on tape.)

Q. Are most of these imports from foreign companies or are they from American companies that...

A. Foreign.

Q. Oh, I see. So it's not a question of them picking up and moving out of Rochester and over to Taiwan? Would you favor protective legislation to... to limit imports?

A. We are working for it, legislation to control imports. We believe that we have to have imports as well as exports, but that it should be controlled. Low wage, very low wage, workers...

Q. Is it the National Clothiers Exchange... is it... do they share... they must be in alliance...

A. They show as much concern as we are.

Q. What do you expect from the Carter administration on the question of protection?

A. He met with our officers, top officers, of the union, they were impressed.

Q. Will having a southern President have any effect on southern unionization?

A. Maybe it'll help. I am not certain that... I saw the other day the
A. (Continued) President's brother ran for mayor and they didn't offer it because they feel...

Q. I never did ask you about your own family. Did you ever marry?
A. I have grandchildren.

Q. When were you married?
A. My son lived...

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A (Interview II)
Blank side.