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(signed)  

(date)  
June 8, 1976

Understood and agreed to

(interviewer)  
(date)  
June 8, 1976
Q. This is Dennis Klein and I'm talking with Mr. Fred Neisner at his home. Today's date is June 8, 1976. And I wonder, Mr. Neisner, if you can give us a background overview of your life?

A. I was born in 1909 in White Plains, New York. But, I've lived most of my life in Rochester. My family moved here when I was two years old, 1911, when my father and my uncle had an opportunity to open a five-and-ten-cent store on East Main Street. So, it was opened within a month of my second birthday. Four years later I moved to Philadelphia where I lived for nine years and then came back to Rochester in 1924. I went to the University of Pennsylvania, where I was graduated in 1931 from the Norton School. Worked for several years at various stores around the country, and then came back into the main office in 1934. I became President in 1942, upon the death of my father. And became Chairman of the Board in 1956. I retired active management in the company in 1973, but I'm still on the Board of Directors.

Q. All right. If you would give us some information about your parents.

A. My father's name was Joseph Meyer Neisner, a native-born American. His parents were of mixed Polish-Russian ancestry. He was born in New Milford, Connecticut. My mother, mixed German-Jewish parentage, was born in Brooklyn, New York. Her maiden name was Hattie Plaut, p-l-a-u-t.

Q. And when did they come to Rochester?

A. They came to Rochester in 1911, approximately my second birthday.

Q. They were married outside of Rochester?

A. They were married outside of Rochester, although I'm not. . . don't recall exactly where. . . I think Brooklyn, New York. . . Brooklyn, New York.
Q. Brooklyn. Good. And how many brothers and sisters do you have?
A. I have one sister who was born in 1913. She was married in 1939 to Abe Hurwich, h-u-r-w-i-c-h, and since then has been living in South Bend, Indiana.

Q. OK. Neisner Brothers was begun in 1911 and it was opened in Rochester on East Main Street.
A. Right.

Q. All right. There were no other stores at this point, this was the first one. There were other stores that were added on in subsequent years.
A. Right.

Q. Can you tell us something about the expansion of Neisner Brothers?
A. Yes. The second store was opened in Worcester in 1913, the third store in Philadelphia in 1915. In the next approximately 10 years, about a dozen stores were opened. In the late... starting in 1926 a very rapid expansion took place. In 1931 or '32 we were approximately 75 stores.

Q. Why was the rate of expansion increased in the mid-twenties? Was there any particular incentive from outside forces?
A. Well, the only reason was that condition, economic conditions in general were booming, and the... all the officers were favorable for such an expansion.

Q. But, the idea of expansion itself didn't really begin until earlier or did this... or did the idea of expansion begin at this point in the mid-twenties?
A. The idea of a... of a major expansion, I think, began in the mid-twenties.

Q. The offer from Worcester, Massachusetts was really just a second store rather than...?
A. Right.

Q. ... than a beginning of more stores.
A. Right.

Q. Now, you and your family went to Philadelphia in 1913. And that was to take
Q. (Continued) over...

A. 1915.

Q. In 1915, all right. And that was to take over the store that would be the ... or as the store itself was set up...

A. That's right.

Q. ... by your family, by your father, and then your family stayed with the store for a number of years.

A. Ten years.

Q. For ten years.

A. Nine... nine years.

Q. OK. What was the reason for leaving Philadelphia or coming back to Rochester?

A. The lease in Philadelphia ran out and we decided not to extend, and my father returned to Rochester to work with his brother in managing the entire chain.

Q. Was the store doing well or not in Philadelphia?

A. No, it had not been doing too well.

Q. The store does not exist today, then, in Philadelphia?

A. We haven't... 1924.

Q. OK.

A. Closed in 1924.

Q. The reason for coming back to Rochester was because of the establishment of the business here and of family connections as well.

A. Yes. Main headquarters of the business were in Rochester and with the closing of the Philadelphia store there was no reason for my father to remain there.

Q. When did you become interested in the operation of the store... of the company?

A. Well, I had always rather assumed that I would work in the business, and after graduating from the Norton School in 1931, I began work in September of that
A. (Continued) year in our Minneapolis store.

Q. And when did you come to Rochester?

A. I came back to Rochester in January, 1934.

Q. Did you have any intention of staying in Minneapolis when you first went there?

A. No. I went there merely to... to gain experience and I spent the next two and a half years I worked in four or five stores, St. Louis, Detroit, Wilkes Barre, Buffalo.

Q. But, your intention was to really come back to Rochester?

A. Eventually.

Q. Eventually. If you can tell us now the impact of the Depression, since you got into the business the Depression was...?

A. Well, the Depression had a very strong impact on our stores. In 1932 when things were at their worst, we had plenty of problems, but luckily we overcame them and came out of the Depression when business began to turn upward in the spring and summer of 1933.

Q. During that year, during that period of time, the company itself was threatened, the business itself was...

A. Yes, in...

Q. ... in danger?

A. ... 1932 the business itself was in danger.

Q. So much so that some stores were closing or that perhaps the company itself would have to close? Was that as serious as it became?

A. No, no store... I don't believe any stores were closed. But, the entire chain was in jeopardy until business started to pick up in 1933.

Q. And slowly the idea of expansion was continued?

A. Right.

Q. By 1935, I believe, there were more...?
A. Starting in 1934 or '35, we again began expanding. And by the time the war
broke out in December, 1941, we had I believe about a hundred and ten or one
hundred and fifteen stores in operation.

Q. Did the Second War... did the Second World War have any effect on the business?

A. Well, yes to the extent that it, of course, stopped expansion completely. It
was impossible to open any stores during that period. After the Second World
War, we entered into another period of expansion starting approximately in 1947.
And by early or mid-sixties we had approximately 190 stores in operation. In
1961 we opened our first discount store and since that time we have opened more
discount stores and closed quite a few of our smaller, old, what we call junior
department stores. At the present time we have 43 discount... 44 discount
stores and about 90 junior department stores.

Q. A discount store means, I assume, that it's a different way of marketing?

A. Yes. it's a larger... it's a larger store with generally store is the... the anchor of... of the shopping center which is frequent free-parking and
generally selling at lower prices than the conventional department store.

Q. The discount store business and variety store business has been affected quite
seriously recently with the closing down, for example, of Grant's. Do you have
any observations about the business or the nature of the business that you're
in today?

A. Only to say that we went through a rather difficult period in late 1974, early
1975. Since the summer of 1975 our business has improved considerably. And
at the present time it's quite good.

Q. But there was that period of... when you had to go back to the drawing boards
and...?

A. Yes.

Q. To reorganize your approach?
A. Yes.

Q. The variety store business was itself not doing well during these years? So that you are in a period of growth once again?

A. We think so, yes.

Q. And expansion as well or is that...?

A. Well, only to a very limited extent. We want to consolidate what we have before we really start to expand again. We will only... we will open two stores in 1976, but that is all. And we will close more than that.

Q. So that you really are in quite a different situation than Grant's today?

A. We like to think so.

Q. OK. Very good. Let me ask you a couple of questions relating your business with questions that concern Jews generally. Did the business have any experience with discrimination, Jewish discrimination or anti-Semitism over these years? Or have you personally?

A: No, I can't say that we have. Our stores were in all different types of neighborhoods, in black neighborhoods, Spanish neighborhoods, Jewish neighborhoods, all white middle-class neighborhoods, they've been in all types of neighborhoods and we've never had any particular problem.

Q. When the business was expanding in 1920's there was a concurrent phenomenon anti-Semitism in the country at large. Was there any confrontation in the expansion of Neisner Brothers with the atmosphere or mood of... of discrimination?

A. Not that I can recall.

Q. This include, I assume, the thirties as well?

A. Yes.

Q. There was... and you personally have not had any or have you had any sense of discrimination because you yourself are Jewish?

A. I personally had very little experience with... and I... with any anti-
A. (Continued)  Semitism.

Q. OK. Fine. Was the business...?

A. I certainly know it exists though.

Q. OK. Was the business closed for holidays generally? Was... was there any observation of the... of...?

A. You mean Jewish holidays?

Q. Or, well... let's begin with...

A. Well, the business was closed normally on Christmas, Christmas Day, New Year's Day, Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Thanksgiving Day. As far as Jewish holidays were concerned, the stores were not closed, but any help who wanted to take the day off were allowed, of course, to take the day off without any cut in pay or anything like that.

Q. This is true for other holidays beyond the Jewish holidays? If somebody were...

A. Generally speaking, it only applied to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Q. The high holydays. What about the Sabbath? Was... did any of the...?

A. People were expected to work, after all Saturday was one of the best business days and was the best business day of the week. And there were no...

Q. Do you recall any...?

A. There was... there was no observance of... of Sabbath as far as business was concerned.

Q. Did anyone request to...?

A. Not to my knowledge.

Q. And you yourself worked on... on Saturdays?

A. Yes, yes.

Q. As well as the high holydays?

A. No, I... I didn't work on the high holydays.

Q. So you yourself...
Q. Do you have any impressions of this figure in Rochester generally...?

A. Yes, I think that he was by far the most important and impressionist Jewish influence in the City of Rochester, as well as the other work that he did outside of the City of Rochester, which from the point of national importance, which was much more important than what he did in Rochester. But, I've always felt that he was a wonderful spokesman for the Jews of Rochester to the rest of the Rochester community. I've always had extremely high regard for him.

Q. Is there any one incident or any one thing that stands out in your mind as far as his contribution to Rochester or the nation? Was there any...?

A. Well, of course, he... he did a tremendous job during the Second World War as the, I believe he was in charge of all the rabbis in the Armed Services. And, of course, after the war he was Advisor to General Clay was it in resettlement of the Jews in Europe. And as such he became a national figure. He returned to Rochester after that and he's been here ever since.

Q. Did you have personal relations with the rabbi?

A. Yes, I know him personally, he's been in my house, been at his house.

Q. What kind of person was... was he? What... could you describe his personality in broad sketches?

A. He's extremely warm.

Q. Did he have... was he a charismatic figure?

A. Yes, I would say he was extremely so. Much more so than most rabbis with whom I've had any contact. In fact I always thought of him as more than a rabbi. I thought of him more as a Jewish leader.

Q. In... in... 

A. In all fields rather than in just fields relating to the temple.

Q. OK. B'rith Kodesh, of course, has made its own contributions generally to the community of Rochester as well as to Jewish life in Rochester. Since the
Q. (Continued) thirties there have been a number of changes, for one thing the location has changed from downtown to the present location in Brighton. Do you have any feeling for the changes that the congregation or the temple itself has gone through? Any noticeable highlighted changes?

A. Well, I've been very extremely inactive in the temple in recent years. I rarely go to services. When I go there it's usually to a funeral. In fact, I'm going to one this afternoon. I think the temple has grown very large and I feel when a temple gets as large as B'rith Kodesh I think it loses a lot of its feeling with a great bulk of the membership.

Q. It always had a fairly large . . .

A. It was always large . . .

Q. . . . membership.

A. . . . much, much bigger now. Originally, it was the only Reform congregation in Rochester. There are now several others, but it's still by far the largest. I believe they have about 1800 members.

Q. And also the composition of the congregation has changed over the years. There was, for example, kind of an immigrant flavor to it, German Jewish, largely German Jewish flavor to it. And I suppose during the thirties with many Jews coming from Europe to this country, there was absorption of these Jews into the congregation itself.

A. That's true, though most of them still were German Jewish extraction. The refugees that came in in the thirties. So, it didn't change the . . .

Q. The nature of the . . .

A. . . . the actual nature; however, in the thirties I believe B'rith Kodesh was extremely Reformed. And I think it's gone more back toward the Conservative in recent years. I think that has been true of most Reform congregations in the United States. They've gotten away from the extreme Reformism that was
A. (Continued) prevalent in the twenties and thirties. They've gone back more to traditional ways.

Q. It was my impression that Rabbi Bernstein made contributions in this direction.
A. I believe he did, yes.

Q. Do you recall any ritual that he introduced while you were affiliated with the temple?
A. Well, yes. Originally, they used to... my... I believe in the early thirties we used to hold services on Sunday morning. And it was quite a wrench I believe when services were changed to Friday evening and Saturday morning.

Q. Well, what was your response to that?
A. What's that?

Q. Did you respond to that change yourself?
A. Not particularly, I hadn't gone too much on Sunday morning, and I didn't go there much on Saturday mornings. But, it was a change at the time. I believe this took place in the mid-thirties, although I'm not sure exactly.

Q. I believe in the mid-thirties as well there were services held both in English and Hebrew. I believe Hebrew was already a part of the service.
A. There was always some Hebrew service obviously. I believe there's more in it now than there was.

Q. And it's the direction it seems to be... be going into.
A. Right.

Q. Let me ask you, do you have any children?
A. Yes, I have a son, 37, who is in the business, Neisner Brothers. And I have a daughter, 34, works in New York, works in New York.

Q. Does she work in... in... in the Neisner business? No.
A. No.

Q. Your son does?
A. My son does.

Q. And what are their names?

A. Lewis, l-e-w-i-s, and Merry, m-e-r-r-y.

Q. What is their attitude towards the religion of ... of Judaism?

A. My daughter has very little feeling I think. My son does have feeling and does go to the services on the high holydays. He does not go, as far as I know, at any other time.

Q. Did they marry Jews?

A. My daughter's not married. My son married a Catholic, as a matter of fact. Their children are being brought up a little mixed up at the moment.

Q. Do you mind sharing with us your reaction to intermarriage?

A. I personally have no great feeling against it. I think it's difficult, more ... I think it makes for more difficulties, but I have no objection to it.

Q. So that at the time the ... of the marriage itself, you did not object?

A. No.

Q. To that. OK. It would be impossible to talk about the Jewish community in Rochester without talking about Baden Street. And you've been very much involved and are very much involved in Baden Street. I think this is an important story. Could you give us first of all when you became involved in the settlement and what it was like then?

A. Well, I became involved in Baden Street, I believe, in 1961. And that was long after it had ceased to be a Jewish agency. At that time the area was already 90... almost 90% black. And the entire direction of the settlement had changed. As I ... as I had heard, I believe it was originally begun by the German Jewish women to teach some of the newer immigrants how to sew and ... and obtain work here in the clothing industry. That was back... I don't know how long ago that was, well over 75 years ago I would imagine. By the time I
A. (Continued) became active in the agency it was completely different oriented type of thing. I would say cause the settlement in the sense it was a neighborhood organization, and it was trying to help the blacks of the neighborhood adjust to the limits of living. It was a time of tremendous influx of blacks from the South. And they were having real problems, as was proven by the riots in 1964.

Q. Your involvement then with Baden Street really has nothing to do with the earliest phase, which was the Jewish phase?

A. Yea.

Q. Did you have any connection with Baden Street then before '61?

A. No.

Q. There was none. Why did you decide to become involved in this... in this settlement project in the sixties?

A. Well, I was asked to by several friends of mine who were on the Baden Street Board. Then at the time I was interested in social betterment and I thought that perhaps I could make some kind of contribution here. I found it very interesting, frustrating at times, but a very interesting experience. I certainly learned more about the black community in Rochester through Baden Street. I would never have known if I hadn't been on the Board.

Q. What prompted your personal decision to become part of this project in '61 beside the encouragement from outside sources? Were there any events or was there something that you wanted to do for a long time?

A. No.

Q. Was this...?

A. ... specific I wouldn't say, it was just...

Q. This, but did this encouragement make...

A. Yea.

Q. ... you think about this... What was the idea or purpose of Baden Street
Q. (Continued) Settlement when you became involved? What were they trying to do?

A. At that time they were trying to help the blacks in the neighborhood to adjust to living conditions in the North to learn how to get things done. The idea was to try to reach out and teach them how to do things for themselves. But also how to make themselves felt in the community.

Q. I know that projects, I'm not saying this is true for the Baden Street Settlement, but I know that projects of this nature, this applies to Jewish community as well, have been criticized because there was a sense of assimilation, of Americanization. And the criticism, the basis of the criticism, I'm sure you're aware of this kind of criticism, is that you are taking them away from their own culture and trying to introduce them the way of the North or of the whites or of whoever is in control of the.

A. Well, that might be true but there are certain minimum things that they have to know in order to be able to survive in a... in an alien culture. And even though... even though... even though blacks are... were encouraged, or should be encouraged to keep their own forms if they wish to, they still have to, in order to adjust to living in a... in an alien society, they have to learn how to get things done. How to do things, how to adjust to things.

Q. What were...

A. This is what Baden Street, I think, tried to do.

Q. And what... how did Baden Street, specifically, try to do this?

A. Well, Baden Street is organized into several different departments. One is called an activities department, and here the main... one of the main ideas was merely to get the kids off the street and into some kind of organized play groups to keep them busy and to have them doing things rather than just hanging around the streetcorners. There's a neighborhood development department, which
A. (Continued) works hard towards developing a sense of the neighborhood in
the people of the neighborhood. And, teaches them how to make their voices
heard in City Hall, and the Health Department and any other department they
might have to come in contact with. And there's an employment department,
which tries to assist blacks with getting employment. Teaches them how to
... how to conduct themselves in an interview and so on. These are all...
these are all programs that have evolved change over the years. That's
essentially what they are trying to do.

Q. Did you at any time feel exposed in being white and perhaps Jewish on this kind
of... of Board?

A. Well, no. The Baden Street Board, of all the Boards I've ever served on in my
life, is probably the most integrated. It's made up of Jews, of what should I
call "wasps," of blacks, and of some Spanish-speaking people. And generally
speaking, we work together very well.

Q. Was this a deliberate effort?

A. Yes, it was. Originally, of course, I assume the Board was practically all
Jewish. And over a period of years, I think, other whites became interested in
it. But, it wasn't until... until Baden Street itself became a black
neighborhood that any real effort was made to get blacks on the Board. And at
the... time I went on the Board in 1961, there were perhaps three or four or
five blacks on the Board, I don't recall. Today there are perhaps a dozen.

Q. How many members are on the Board total?

A. I think there are 32, I'm not sure, 32... 32 or 33.

Q. When you first joined the Board, and that's what... that was your first
capacity was on the Board of Directors?

A. Yes, yes.

Q. What was the composition of the Board at that time? Do you recall?
A. Well, there... there were quite a few Jews on the Board, there were quite a few other whites on the Board, and there were, as I say, maybe half a dozen blacks. I'm not... I'm not too sure about this, I'm just trying to remember.

Q. Was Irving Cratesfield a part of the...?

A. He had... he had left just before I went on the Board.

Q. As Director of the Board. Was he...

A. He had been the Director.

Q. And who succeeded him as Director?

A. I don't recall the man's name, there was a man there for several years after him and who was there at the time I went on the Board, but he left shortly after I came on the Board. And a man by the name of Sidney Lindenburg was hired at that time, this was in 1961. And he was there for about six or seven years I believe. And since then, Bill Hall, a black, has been the executive.

Q. Was Lindenfeld...

A. Lindenburg.

Q. Lindenburg.

A. It was Lindenburg, as I remember.

Q. All right, was he an effective leader in your memory?

A. He was originally, but I think after a while he... he didn't relate quite as well to the changing problems, particularly after the riots. And toward the late sixties... I think it was around... I don't recall just when he left, in '67, '68, '69, thereabouts. He wasn't doing as effective a job as he had done originally.

Q. Was this because of the '64 riots? Was this an important reason?

A. I think that had something to do with it. He was a... I don't think he was as willing to accommodate to changing situations as he should have been.
Q. Was there anything specifically that occurred that made it clear that he was not accommodating?

A. I don't recall any specific... no.

Q. The '64 riots, of course, is a major event that happened in Rochester. And perhaps you can tell us something about your experience with the riots.

A. My only involvement would have been as a member of the Baden Street Board. And the Baden Street Board held several... quite a few special meetings in the evening after the riots of course. Because our settlement was right in the heart of the section where the riots took place. There was a lot of soul-searching and trying to figure out where we'd gone wrong and how we had gone wrong and what we hadn't done that we should have done. One of the main things I think to come out of it was that several of the Board members, particularly black Board members, felt that it was very important that we get a chapter in the Urban League in Rochester, which we did not have at that time. And it was through the efforts of several of the Board members that the Urban League finally came to Rochester, I believe in 1965.

Q. This was an important addition to the development of the... the black community?

A. I think it helped, yes. Yes, I think it helped.

Q. We can go back and talk about your perceptions of the beginning of the riots in '64, and perhaps how the Settlement, or other agencies, went wrong, as... as you mentioned. If you could perhaps give your perceptions of this?

A. Well, I think the... I think that some start had been made in... in doing something for the black community. And I think that probably not enough had been done. And that was the major reason for the riots, for dissatisfaction of the black community. The black community had grown very rapidly and they probably had not been absorbed as rapidly as they should have been into the
A. (Continued) stream of entire community.

Q. Specifically in the area of employment?

A. Employment, yes. Also, politically, socially... well, socially certainly.
But, politically. Well, mostly employment and politics I would say.

Q. I know that one of the manifestations of the riots was an attack against those who were still in the area, Joseph Avenue, I guess I mean by this whites or Jews. That they were attacked or I should say rocks were thrown and some of the stores and... and homes. This is one of the manifestations of the riots.

A. Yes, that's correct.

Q. What was... from your perspective, the reason for... for... for this?
Why were they angry at whites and were... and was...?

A. I don't know, I... I think that generally I think it was just a... an explosion of frustration. I don't think that they had anything specific against the particular people who owned the white stores on Joseph Avenue. I don't think that they... they were badly treated by the stores or anything like that. I think it was just a... just an explosion that's all.

Q. And as far as you're concerned, there was no Jewish dimension of this either then?

A. I don't believe so, no, no.

Q. Because I understand that there were in the area at this point still some Jewish shops.

A. Oh, yes.

Q. Delicatessans...

A. Yes, there was a delicatessen, there was a... a linoleum and tile store down there run by Jews. But, I don't believe that there was anything specific against these particular stores or the people who ran them.

Q. I don't recall anything overtly against the Jews either.
Q. What was the relationship between the Settlement and the FIGHT organization?
A. Well, it was rather difficult at the beginning. As I recall the FIGHT organization wanted us... wanted Baden Street Settlement to become a member of FIGHT. And as I recall the consensus of the Board was that we should not become a member of another organization. And it more or less took a hands-off attitude I believe. It's true that several of the Board members were among the organizers of FIGHT, I believe. And there are still I believe Board members on the Baden Street Board who are active in FIGHT, have been right through the years. But they've been... there's been very little... actually FIGHT has not been as vocal and as visible in the local scene in the last five years as it was back in the late sixties. At least it hasn't been getting as much publicity, put it that way.

Q. There seems to be some tenuous connection between FIGHT and the Settlement, is this... it's certainly not official, and...?
A. No, there's no official connection, I don't believe as far as I know. There is a connection in the sense that there are some Board members who are active in FIGHT, who are officers in FIGHT, as a matter of fact. On the other hand I think there are some Board members who are very much opposed to FIGHT. But it hasn't been an issue for many, many years now.

Q. In the beginning, because it's interesting in the evolution of FIGHT, relationship to the Settlement, there were these tensions.
A. Yes, there were.

Q. Is it possible to characterize that as a separatist inclination on the one hand versus the Settlement efforts to be it... try to integrate the community? Is it fair to characterize...?
A. Yes, I think that's true. I also think it's true that a lot of the members of the Baden Street Board were fairly conservative people. And they didn't like
A. (Continued) the idea of FIGHT.

Q. Conservative in what way?

A. Politically, economically, they... they were... they worked, they were ... they were interested in Baden Street, and they wanted to do whatever they could, but they were still in more of a conservative group. There were some of them who were more conservative than... just felt they couldn't go along with the ideas of FIGHT, some of the ideas of FIGHT.

Q. It would be helpful to flush this out even more. In other words, what demands were FIGHT making, or what projects were they... were they undertaking that would not be likely to bring in the Baden Street Settlement?

A. I don't know so much the actual projects as it was the means, I mean the abrasiveness, the... Baden Street has always tried to work quietly and behind the scenes to... to do things for the neighborhood. Here this organization came along which was gonna go right out and get in the newspapers and create trouble and disturbances and all that type of thing. And I think that some of the Board members didn't like the idea.

Q. It appears that FIGHT was...

A. I don't think it was... I don't think it was the FIGHT's aims so much as it was their methods and means.

Q. It appears that their... their methods and means were ideological, highly political. That they wanted to make issues and to... and to talk about the black community in very broad terms of where...

END OF TAPE I, SIDE A
Q. We're talking with Mr. Fred Neisner. This is Tape No. 1, Side B. And I would like to ask you now about your participation in the Jewish community, some of the institutional contributions that you have made in the community over the years. Could you tell us what organizations you have been involved in?

A. Well, I've been involved in Temple B'rith Kodesh. I've been involved in the United Jewish Welfare Fund. I've been involved in the Jewish Young Men's Association. And, for a short time I was involved with the Jewish Family Social Service. Jewish Social Service Bureau.

Q. What was the first organization you became a part of?

A. I believe the temple was the first organization I worked in.

Q. As... as an officer? You said you were Treasurer?

A. First as a member of the Board and then later as the Treasurer.

Q. And what years were these?

A. This was in the late thirties and early forties.

Q. The interesting theme that evolves in a study like this is to see how the community has become unified, Jewish community, between the twipartheid, Reform, Orthodox, and Conservative divisions, as well as ideological differences. Would you tell us something about the JY? It seems to me that this was a significant factor in the development. When was it organized and when you first became involved in its nature, what its purposes were?

A. I'm not sure when the JY was originally organized, but it was I know from hearsay that in 1929 the Jewish community leaders evidently decided to build a new Jewish Young Men's and Women's Association. And they had quite a large fund drive. I don't recall the amount they raised, but it was a sizeable amount
in those days. The building was begun I think in 1930.
Unfortunately the Depression struck at that time and a lot of people were unable
to pay their pledges and the building remained partially completed but
unoccupied until I think about 1934 when a joint drive was held along with the
Christian community in Rochester. And a sum of money was raised sufficient to
finish the building and furnish it and get it open. This was about one of the
first. . . also one of the first things that I participated in when I returned
to Rochester in 1934 was this particular drive. My father had. . . was. . . was
instrumental in the early days of the JY. In fact, he was in charge of furnishing
the entire building at the time. I think the building was eventually opened,
oh, I think around 1935 or '36.

Q. Your father, therefore, was involved?

A. Yes. I was not involved at that time. Some years later after my father died,
I became involved as a Board member and as Treasurer of the JYMA, JYM&WA. Get
the women in there.

Q. Interesting that the. . . that the name of the organization itself has the
similarity between the YMCA.

A. Yes.

Q. There's a kind of. . . Was there any sense of that as a model for the JY or was
there . . . was it. . . were you aware of the fact that there was that
similarity in names and that. . . ?

A. Well, I knew there was a similarity in nature between the two institutions, I
wasn't around at the time the JY was organized, of course, so I really don't
know what the. . . what the idea was behind it originally. But, at the time
I was active in it there were still a lot of Jews living in that area of the
city. Now there are practically none down where the old JY used to be.

Q. Where was that located?
A. That was located on North Street, oh, about three or four blocks from downtown. That was the building that was built in the early thirties. And I became less and less active in it and I . . . I've been completely inactive now for, oh, at least about 10 years anyhow or maybe more. I'm on the Board of Governors, but that doesn't mean anything.

Q. So your activity with . . . with the JY was through the decades from thirties to the . . . well, to the present?

A. Well, yes, I started with . . . I worked on the drive in the thirties and then I was active in it, oh, I think it was in the late forties and early fifties when I was on the Board and Treasurer for a while.

Q. This became the JCC, the Jewish Community Center?

A. That became the Jewish Community Center, right.

Q. Were you involved in the transition?

A. Not too much, no. There was a . . . as I recall it, there was a committee to study the possible ways of using the JY and whether it should be moved and what type of organization should be, whether it conflicted with the temples, youth programs and so on. But I was never particularly active in it. I haven't been active in it since it's moved out to the new location.

Q. OK. To go back, it not only, therefore, had an effect of unifying the Jewish community, but even had relations with the non-Jewish community, especially in raising of funds?

A. That's correct, it was a non-denominational drive back there in the early thirties to finish the building and furnish it. Also, I believe although I'm not . . . I don't. . . I really don't know the figure, but I understand that the present JCC has quite a few non-Jewish members. People who live in Brighton and who only use its facilities, which are really terrific.

Q. This was a new thing, though, for the Jewish community then. It was to be one
Q. (Continued) unit for all the divisions within the Jewish community. Was an enterprising idea...

A. Yes.

Q. ... in fact. Do you recall if that had any problems in the beginning, if there were tensions between the Orthodox or and the Reform or ...?

A. There was never too much. I mean, the JY used to close Friday afternoon and open on Saturday afternoon I think. And there was never any problem when they serve... they had a restaurant there for a while, it was always, of course, Kosher as I remember. I don't think there were any particular problems connected with that.

Q. In fact, there seems to have been a great deal of consensus and... and working together and sense of community?

A. Yes, yes.

Q. That was very much in the forefront of...

A. It was essentially what they call a character-building agency. It was supposed to be for youth, although today it's... covers a much wider spectrum. But, it was essentially a character-building agency and the Orthodox versus Reform or Conservative had very little to do with it.

Q. What do you mean by character-building agency?

A. Well, it was... it was for... mostly for... supposed to be for young people, and the name itself Jewish Young Men's and Women's Association, was supposed to be for young people to be a place for them to congregate, to hold meetings, to form clubs, to participate in athletics and other activities. That was its major purpose originally. Today, it's more of a contemp... Jewish community center which is a slightly different thing.

Q. Perhaps even a bigger division than the religious one within the Jewish community was in the 1930's the German Jewish and Eastern European Jewish composition of
Q. (Continued) the ... the Rochester community. Do you recall any relationships between these two segments of the community?

A. I'd say that over a period of years that the station has really broken down considerably. Thirty years ago I think there was quite a difference between the German Jews and Eastern European Jews. Today I think it's pretty much eliminated.

Q. Do you recall the difference to be a ... a deep one when you first became involved in the JY? This would be in the ... 

A. I don't recall any deep ... I don't recall any fights or any arguments ... 

Q. How did it manifest itself?

A. ... about it, it was just a feeling, you know, that ... 

Q. It was like a different culture?

A. All the people ... When I grew up in the mid-thirties, or the early thirties, most of the prominent Jewish names were German Jewish, the old German Jewish families who had been over here since maybe 1850 or 1860 or so. And since that time things have changed. I mean the ... most of the Jewish organizations in town and even the Jews who are active in other community affairs are not necessarily the German Jews, they're ... they come from all parts of the Jewish community. And there's very little distinction I think, if any, between the German Jews and the Eastern European Jews.

Q. You said that there was this ... a definite between the two cultures of Eastern European and the German Jewish. That was perhaps the major manifestation of a sense of distinction within the Jewish community. Is that ... is that right?

A. Yes, yes I ... I think ... well, of course, it showed up mostly in the ... in the synagogues. You had ... you definitely had division between the Reform and the Conservative and the Orthodox. When you got into organizations like the
A. (Continued) JY and the United Jewish Welfare Fund, people did get together. They had to work together, and I think eventually that's what broke down all the antagonism.

Q. Did you feel yourself any distinction as a Jew between yourself and the Eastern European community? Did you feel any...?

A. No, I... I was... matter of fact, I was a little mixed because my mother... well, my mother was of German extraction, my father was of Polish or Russian extraction. And we were not one of the old Rochester families. We came here in 19... well, we... well, they moved here in 1911, but then they moved away again and came back in 1924. And we were not of the old Jewish aristocracy in Rochester, if you want to call it such. But, I was never aware of any particular feeling.

Q. In fact, the dating is very interesting here. You came to Rochester at the point when the sense of community was beginning to evolve.

A. Yes.

Q. And you were quite definitely a part of that... of that growing community.

A. I suppose that's true, yes.

Q. One thing that has happened apparently is that... well if I can retract and go back one step and say that B'rith Kodesh congregation of which you were a part, of which you were a part, was a I guess largely German Jewish extraction.

A. Yes, that's correct.

Q. And, of course, it was Reform. The community, if it were to transcend these differences, would have to look at other agencies perhaps or other ways of organizing. If the community itself was to be brought together, it could not be done through the various synagogues because they were already broken down into various categories at that point. Do you think one of the incentives behind the JY was to transcend the differences that were part of the
Q. (Continued) congregational distinctions?

A. Well, I think that may have been true with a sort of a drive in the late twenties for a big new building. The original JY I think was just to help the poor Jewish boys who were living in that area down... downtown area, or just off of downtown area, the Joseph Avenue area, and had no where to go, had no place to play, nothing like that. And I think that was the original idea of the first JY.

Q. And if the congregations were to prove a useful... in this way they... these families simply either did not belong to a congregation or were not active enough so that there was a need for something else to absorb this energy and activity. You're also... you were also very much involved in the United Jewish Welfare Fund.

A. Yes.

Q. When did you become involved in this?

A. Well, my involvement in that began really, oh, I'd say during and right after the war. My father had been active in the formation of it back in the early thirties, I think it was the middle thirties, whatever it was. I didn't really become active in it until during and shortly after the war when the needs suddenly mushroomed, you know. Right after the war there were these millions of Jews in Europe to be taken care of. And suddenly instead of raising $200,000 we decided we had to raise a million dollars. And I remember the first complete drive that I worked on, it was 1946. And at that time I was a member of what they call the Special Gifts Committee, which was a large, you would get gifts from large donors. And it was a very inspiring experience, a very interesting experience. And it... it was the beginning of the, well I won't say beginning, but it was the sort of the culmination of the... of the bringing together of all these diverse groups and actually raising the
A. (Continued) money. And then of course two years later when Israel got its independence, then the... the amounts became even larger and the... the emotion was... became greater and there was a breakdown of the feeling. I mean, the people who had been opposed to maybe years before had been opposed to any kind of creation of a Jewish state kind of backed away from that feeling and became supporters of it. And that... that resulted in more of a... oh, cooperation between all the Jewish groups. And we had a series of very successful campaigns here. In fact, they're still very successful.

Q. Prior to this point, there were the... the various features within the Jewish community who had their own fund drives?

A. Yes, they... well, no, beginning in the mid-thirties, at the time I spoke of when I said my father was active in getting... in the formation of the Welfare Fund originally. At that time the Welfare Fund raised money for the JY, for the Social Service Bureau, and then... but most of the money went abroad to the what was then the Joint Distribution Committee, which supported Jews all over the world. Beginning in 1945 and '6 or course the great bulk of the money went to Israel. I think probably, I think of the money raised in Rochester, I don't know what it is today, but at that time I think about 70% of the total amount raised went out of the city. Went to Israel or to some other foreign countries that still needed aid. And the other 30% went to the local agencies. Wiat a minute now, no, correction, I'm wrong on that. The JY and the Jewish Social Service Bureau belonged to the Community Chest and they did not get money from the Welfare Fund, except that the... the Jewish Social Service Bureau got money from them for their resettlement of German refugees during the war, before the war, back in the 1930's. I'm sorry about that. I... I got mixed up. The... the Welfare Fund did not have... still does not support the JY or the...
Q. JCC.
A. The JCC or the Jewish Social Service Bureau, except to a very limited extent. They get their support from the Community Chest overall Rochester fundraising agency.

Q. When the Welfare Fund was set up it was so specifically Jewish and so much money was needed that they had to have an independent fundraising drive.
A. Yes, there were... there have been a lot of small drives, drives for this little Orthodox organization or that little Reform organization or that little Orthod... Conservative organization. And they decided that it would be much better to get together. And they kind of patterned themselves on the Community Chest, the idea that they'd all get together and they would recognize some things that they didn't like to recognize, but overall it would be good for the whole community.

Q. Was there any tension because of the communication with various groups?
A. There was from time to time. For instance, one... one thing that was a bone of contention at one time, I... I don't think it's so anymore, was Jewish education which the Orthodox community and the Conservative community generally believed in very strongly, and which the Reformed community did not believe in too strongly. And the... there was a... the Jewish parochial school was set up in Rochester and they were supported by the Welfare Fund. And it... it was always a problem, at least in the early years when I was active at it back in the... well, back in the late forties. It was always a problem of what allocation they should get. There was certain members of the Board did not favor spending a lot of money on a parochial school. They didn't believe in parochial schools in a philosophical point. Whereas the members of the Orthodox community did. Generally speaking I would say the Orthodox community won. They did get money. They... the school is still in existence, the
A. (Continued) Hillel School.

Q. Still derive money from...

A. I still believe they get money from the Welfare Fund, yes.

Q. Did you take yourself any stand, one position or another?

A. I always recognized the fact that in a... that in this type of an organization I would have to agree to give money to something that I personally didn't believe in because they were giving money to some things that I believed in that they didn't believe in. So, to make it work you had to do it. But, I was never quite willing to give them as much as they wanted, put it that way.

Q. But you finally acceded to the decision?

A. Yes, yes. Oh, yes.

Q. Because you felt that it, a unified drive was most important.

A. More important, yes.

Q. Did you have any position, did you take any position on the effort to give money abroad, something like 70% was...?

A. At least 70% of the money went abroad, yes.

Q. Did you encourage that?

A. Oh, yes, yes. That was the major... that was the major appeal was the whole fundraising thing, I mean people in Rochester weren't gonna give money to the... most people in Rochester weren't gonna give money just to the Hillel School or to found a chapter of Hillel on the University of Rochester campus. But they were gonna... they were emotionally inclined to give money to Israel, which in the late forties of course was a very emotional thing. And this was the big selling point of the whole appeal. In fact if the money went overseas to help the Jews, the Jewish state, and all that type of thing. That was the big appeal, that's where most of the people wanted to give their money. They weren't interested in giving to local things. They knew that the YJ was
A. (Continued) supported by Community Chest. They knew that the Social Service Bureau was supported by the Community Chest. And I think that the only local organizations that were supported by the fund at that time were the... well, the Hillel School, Jewish Education Association it was called, and I think the what was called the Jewish Community Council, which later became the parent organization of the Welfare Fund. But at that time they were completely separate. And but as I say most of the money went overseas.

Q. While we're on that subject, what is your feeling... well, what was your feeling then and what is your feeling today about Zionism? Or perhaps I should say the State of Israel for Zionism has such a strong political...

A. Well, I believe the State of Israel is a very necessary thing for the Jews. I think they made some rather serious mistakes, particularly recently. But, I still think that it has to be supported, that it has to remain a viable country.

Q. Of course, this was...

A. I don't see any alternative.

Q. This was a very strong feeling of yours in the forties...

A. Yes.

Q. In the late forties, as well. Was this part of your decision to become involved in the Welfare Fund?

A. I don't know whether it was a conscious thing at the time or not. It was about thirty years ago, and I don't recall whether it was a conscious part of it or not.

Q. But certainly part of the... unquestionably part of the emotion of the late forties was the Holocaust. And the State of Israel was a reaction to this. Naturally, this is the... the emotional dimension of the drive itself. And, I would suggest your own participation, and your reason...

A. Yes, yes I wasn't interested in supporting the Jewish Education Association
A. (Continued) of Rochester. I was interested in the Community Council, but I wasn't interested in the Jewish Educational Association.

Q. Would you tell us something about the Community Council? When you became involved with this?

A. Well, I... I was involved in it but not... not too... too strongly. Originally the... the Welfare Fund raised the money and the Jewish Community Council was a very small organization which supposedly spoke for the Jews of Rochester in the community. And then I don't recall the timing of this, I think it was probably the late forties or early fifties. It was a move... there was a movement to combine the two organizations and make the Jewish Community Council the top organization and the Welfare Fund merely the fund-raising arm of it. And that's what eventually happened.

Q. What does the Community Council... does it exist today, the...?

A. Oh, yes, yes.

Q. What does... what does it do? What is its function?

A. It's... it's supposed to represent Rochester Jewry in general. It's made up of... of representatives all areas of the city, all... all types of religious feeling, all so-called types of social differences. It's made up of I'd say a very representative group of Jews in the city. And it's supposed to be the... the voice of Jewry in Rochester.

Q. Do you mean the political voice?

A. Today the... what's that?

Q. In the... which ways is it the voice, and when does it express its voice?

A. Well, on every kind of a problem as it relates to Jews. It's... well, I think for instance, I think it was the Community Council which... which made this study of what the JY should do at the time when they didn't know whether to move or build or become a community center or what. I think they were the
A. (Continued) ones who made the study at the time and what it should be, how it should proceed.

Q. And the Jewish Family Social Organization was something you became a part of?

A. Jewish Social Service Bureau, that's what it used to be, I don't know what it's called today. That was the counseling and... organization. I was on the Board, oh, this was a long... back in the thirties, when I first came back to Rochester. I was on the Board at that time, but only for four or five years. And I was never very active in it.

Q. OK. Well, I have just a few brief items to ask you about. The first thing is if we can just go over where your family settled in Rochester and where they moved to. You said they came to Rochester in 1913?

A. 1911.

Q. 1911, OK. Where were they living then?

A. Well, they first lived on a street called Morningside Park, which is now known as the Park Avenue area. And then moved around the corner to Goldberg Street. When we came back from Philadelphia in 1924 we lived for three years on Westminster Road. And when I went to college, my parents moved down to the what was then the Sagamore Hotel, which was combination residential and commercial hotel. And they lived there for approximately five years. They then moved to a home at 2123 East Avenue.

Q. What year was...?

A. They moved there in 1931 or '2. And when I came back to Rochester in 1934 I lived there with them until I was married in 1936. At that time, after my marriage, I rented a house on Rhinecliffe Drive for two years, at which time we built a house at 1151 Clover Street. We moved into this house in 1938 and lived there until 1972, at which time we moved into our present house at 3399 Elmwood Avenue.
Q. Now this Clover Street is in . . .?
A. Clover Street is in the immediate vicinity, it's the next street down.
Q. In Brighton?
A. Yes.
Q. This is Brighton out here?
A. It's all Brighton, yes.
Q. So, for the past 40 years you've lived in Brighton?
A. I've been living in Brighton, that's correct.
Q. I assume that community has changed over the years?
A. It's changed but not as much as you might think because Brighton was a . . . well, it grew quite a bit after the war, of course, a lot of space that had been unused before grew, but the . . . the type of . . . of thing hasn't changed very much. It's a . . . it's one of the better-known suburbs in Rochester. Pardon me. (Transcriber's note: Telephone rings.)
Q. You mentioned that you moved into the Sagamore Hotel? Where was this located?
A. Downtown, right down near on East Avenue right near Main Street.
Q. Do you have any recollections of the Park Street area when you lived there?
A. No, no I was only . . .
Q. You were very young then.
A. Two to four, two to six years . . .
Q. Right.
A. . . . old and I don't remember.
Q. That was just . . . OK. Good. Let me ask you then these brief questions. You mentioned to me that you belonged to other organizations in Rochester. What were these organizations?
A. Trying to remember.
Q. I think you mentioned the Highland Hospital.
A. I'm on the Board of Highland Hospital. In fact, I'm the President of the hospital this year. I'm a member of the corporation of the Wegman Foundation. I'm on the Evaluation Committee in the Rochester Community Chest. The United Community Chest, I think it's called now. I think that pretty well covers...

Q. Did you mention the Whitehead...?

A. What's that?

Q. Was there a Whitehead...I thought you mentioned something with that name in it, the Whitehead.

A. The Wegman.

Q. Wegman's, this is Wegman's.

A. Yes, this is Wegman's.

Q. So you belong to a number of non-profit organizations?

A. Yes, I have.

END OF TAPE I, SIDE B