

**THE WILLIAM BREMAN JEWISH HERITAGE MUSEUM
ESTHER AND HERBERT TAYLOR
JEWISH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF ATLANTA
LEGACY PROJECT**

MEMOIRIST: BENJAMIN HIRSCH
INTERVIEWER: JANE LEAVEY
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INTERVIEW BEGINS

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Jane: Today is July 22, 2002. We're here with Benjamin Hirsch doing an interview for the Legacy Project for the Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. Ben, will you begin by telling us a little bit about your family, where you are from, and their experiences in Europe before you came to America?

Ben: My name is Benjamin Hirsch. I had the same name in Germany except it was pronounced slightly differently. I was born September 19, 1932 in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. I was the fifth child of Dr. Hermann [Naftali] Hirsch and Mathilde Auerbach Hirsch. My father was a dentist.

I was born about three or so months before [Adolf] Hitler came to power.¹ Shortly after he came to power, he changed many of the laws pertaining to how Jews may or may not do business in Germany.² It affected my father's business greatly, to the point that, when I was a small child, my oldest brother and sister had to be sent away just so we could afford to feed the family. People started leaving [Germany]. People in my father's situation started leaving—dentists and doctors. Dentists and doctors that were Jewish in Germany started to leave because they no longer had a practice where they could serve anyone other than Jews. After a while, it got to the point that my father was virtually the only Jewish dentist left in Frankfurt.

¹ Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) was a German politician who was the leader of the Nazi Party, Chancellor of Germany from 1933 to 1945, and Führer ("leader") of Nazi Germany from 1934 to 1945. As dictator of Nazi Germany, he initiated World War II in Europe with the invasion of Poland in September 1939 and was a central figure of the Holocaust.

² In the years between 1933 and 1939, Nazi Party leaders began to persecute Jews through a series of antisemitic legislation that included more than 400 decrees and regulations restricting all aspects of their public and private lives. The anti-Jewish policies brought radical and daunting social, economic, and communal change to the German Jewish community. Germans also began boycotting Jewish businesses in 1933 and Jews were soon effectively expelled from almost all professions and commercial life.

Economically, things got better and my brother and sister came back. Even after the Nuremberg Laws, my family decided that it was time to let the growth of the family continue.³ My younger brother, Werner, was born in March of 1937. My baby sister, Roseline, was born in March of 1938. That was just about six months before Kristallnacht.⁴

On November 9 and 10, 1938—which is Kristallnacht—was when . . . I have actually two memories of Kristallnacht. One of them where I went to our synagogue, which was about a block or so away from our house, with my twelve year old cousin, **Arno Horenshek**. We went to see what was going on at the Friedberger Anlage synagogue, which was our *schul* [Yiddish: synagogue]—a very large and magnificent building.⁵ We got there and there were many, many people standing in the park across the street watching what was going on. We joined the crowd. We saw that there were hoodlums rushing in and out of the synagogue with Molotov cocktails [bottle-based grenade] and the sort. They were looting the place and they were trying to set it on fire. It was made out of concrete, stone, and steel. That doesn't burn easily but the interior did burn—the pews, etcetera, and the décor. They brought out the silver ornaments from the *Aron Kodesh*, from the ark.⁶ That brought out the Torah scrolls and they opened them up and they pierced them on the picket fence that was in between the arches surrounding the

³ In Germany, the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 were passed on November 15, 1935. The Nazi's racial laws were a set of policies and laws implemented by Nazi Germany, asserting the superiority of the "Aryan race," and based on a specific racist doctrine that claimed scientific legitimacy. These policies targeted Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, handicapped people, and others who were labeled as inferior in a racial hierarchy to the "master race" of Germans. They included the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor, prohibiting marriages and sexual relations between Jews and Germans, and the Reich Citizenship Law, which stripped Jews of their German citizenship. Allies of the Nazis emulated these laws.

⁴ On November 8 and 9, 1938, the Nazis started a state-sponsored nationwide pogrom. Across the country (and in Austria) Jewish synagogues, homes and businesses were looted and burned, Jews were attacked on the streets and 91 were killed. The pogrom was called '*Kristallnacht*,' which means 'Night of Broken Glass,' because of all the damage done to Jewish shop windows.

⁵ Synagogue Friedberger Anlage was Frankfurt, Germany's largest synagogue and could seat 1,600 people. It was dedicated in 1907 and belonged to the Orthodox community. It was destroyed during Kristallnacht, in November 1938. The main building contained a tall barrel vault space, built in the reform architecture style. In front of the main building was an atrium with two large portals. In 1942, a bunker was built on the site, which still exists today and is marked by a memorial.

⁶ The *Aron Kodesh* [Hebrew: Holy Ark; also sometimes called the "Torah Ark"] is the holiest place in the synagogue and where the Torah scrolls are kept when not in use. The *Aron Kodesh* is situated in the front of the synagogue and is usually an ornate curtained-off cabinet or section of the synagogue built along the wall that most closely faced Jerusalem, the direction Jews face when praying.

entrance courtyard of the synagogue.⁷ There were policemen there—to keep order I suppose. You would think that they would be there to protect the civilians who were standing around watching, but they were not. They were there to protect the perpetrators, the ones who were going in and out of the synagogue. I remember looking at Arno and wondering "What the hell is going on?" [I] started looking around and about half the hundred or so people that were there also, had this quizzical look and kind of stunned look on their face like, "What in the world is going on?" The other half were cheering the guys on like they were at a soccer game. This is a very vivid memory that I have of Kristallnacht.

The other memory that I have is really not my own memory. It's something that my mind has blacked out and continues to black out but comes from my nieces and nephews who heard it from their parents, which are my brothers and sisters, who never would tell me because, of those who survived, I was the baby. I was shielded from this type of a thing. But this is when they came to arrest my father, which was on the day of Kristallnacht, on November 10. Apparently they had been casing the house because they had been looking for Jewish men who were in leadership positions in the community. My father was one of those. They came in to arrest him. There were three men—they way I'm told. Two had uniforms and one had a trench coat and a hat. He apparently was in charge. They also had weapons with them that were quite evident and they had police dogs. They knocked on the door and my mother came and was holding my baby sister in her arms. The man in the trench coat asked for Dr. Hirsch. She was astute enough to realize that there was a problem so she told him that Dr. Hirsch was not home but that if he would leave a card, she would make sure that Dr. Hirsch would call him as soon as he got home. The man knew—they had been casing the house—they knew he was home. He wasn't too amused at this and he grabbed the baby from my mother's arms, threw my sister on the ground, pulled out his pistol and pointed it at her. He said, "You have thirty seconds to have Dr. Hirsch appear. And if he doesn't come in thirty seconds, I will shoot the baby." Then he pointed to her with the pistol and said, "He's next." Then I was next. He said, "Down the line, I will shoot all your children by age. You will see them all die and then I'll kill you." This he told to my mother. My father, who was in the back

⁷ A Torah scroll [Hebrew: *Sefer Torah*] is the holiest book within Judaism, made up of the five books of Moses. It is hand-written by a pious scribe in the original Hebrew and must meet extremely strict standards of production. It is rolled up around two ornate wooden shafts, attached to either end of the scroll. Torah scrolls are routinely read aloud in all synagogues and are a core representation of Judaism itself. The desecration of Torah scrolls and other holy artifacts was one method of humiliation and abuse employed by the Nazis.

room, overheard all this. He ran out quickly and gave himself up. He was sent to Buchenwald.⁸ That was the last time the five oldest Hirsch children saw our father at all—alive or dead. We don't know where he's buried.

My mother was trying to figure out what in the world to do to send those children that were old enough to travel to safety. She started checking around. She heard about a Kindertransport that was being organized by the orphanage that was going to Paris [France].⁹ She got us signed up on that. The five of us were scheduled to leave on December 5, 1938 to go to Paris. The reason that was so acceptable to my mother was because we had *mishpucha* [Yiddish: family] there. There were two uncles and quite a few cousins living in Paris—two brothers of my father. When we got to Paris, my two sisters went with Uncle Gustie, who was my father's oldest brother, and my two brothers went with a cousin, Marcus Cohen, whose family ran a Jewish boarding school.

I was supposed to go with Uncle Yachim, my father's youngest brother. The way I heard it from the man who took me in was that he went to synagogue that morning and my uncle stood up and said, "We have a very nice six year old young boy coming from Frankfurt today. I'm supposed to take him in and I can't. I'm having a major problem. Would somebody take him in?" Mr. Samuels raised his hand and said, "I'd be happy to do that." That's how I came to stay with Nathan and Helena Samuels. They had a three-year-old daughter named Fannie, who I played with a lot. We had fun at times, except when it came to sharing things. She was three years old and three year olds do not share. We had some fun times. I was told that I used to feed her goldfish. When I finally met her many years later, she remembered that I fed her goldfish so I guess I did!

I stayed at the Samuels' until it became evident that the Nazis, the Germans were going to overrun France, they were coming to Paris, and that Jews would not be safe in Paris.¹⁰ [The

⁸ Thousands of German Jews and close to 6,000 Austrian Jews were arrested after *Kristallnacht* and deported to the Dachau or Buchenwald concentration camps in Germany.

⁹ '*Kindertransport*' is the name given to a series of rescue missions that assisted Jewish children in leaving Nazi-occupied Europe. The United Kingdom took in nearly 10,000 predominantly Jewish children from Nazi Germany and the occupied territories of Austria, and ex-Czechoslovakia. The children were placed in British foster homes, hostels, and on farms. Some transports were organized by *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants* (OSE) in France where German-Jewish children were put up in a series of OSE children's homes. Beginning in March 1939, several transports brought children from Vienna, Berlin, Frankfurt and other places in Germany to France.

¹⁰ Germany attacked France, Belgium, and the Netherlands on May 10, 1940. The campaign lasted less than six weeks. Paris, the French capital, fell to the Germans on June 14, 1940. Germany occupied northern France and all of France's Atlantic coastline down to the border with Spain. A new French government was established in the unoccupied southern part of France.

Samuels] were going to leave Paris themselves and go into hiding. They sent me to one of the O.S.E. (*Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants*)¹¹ homes in Montmorency,¹² which is a suburb of Paris. There were several O.S.E. homes in Montmorency. The one I stayed with was called Villa Helvetia.¹³ It was not an Orthodox home. [The Samuels] didn't think it was necessary. I was only seven . . . no, I was only six at the time. The reason I'm thinking seven was because shortly after I got there, I told them it was my birthday so that I could make friends. They had a birthday party for me and everybody thought I was wonderful.

Jane: Do you want to describe what the O.S.E. homes were?

Ben: The O.S.E. homes were formed in 1939 by a group with interestingly the same acronym O.S.E. that originally came from Russia, from Moscow. They had had a group of orphanages in Moscow, Jewish orphanages in Moscow, and when the [Russian] Revolution came in 1917, they left and they came to France. They maintained the organization as a social club, as a social group, without having a function. Then when the need came up in 1939 to have a place to house Jewish children, particularly from Frankfurt and other parts of Germany whose parents were already incarcerated—in some cases, they were already killed—they made a major effort. They bought up quite a few villas and chateaus and other places throughout France in preparation for this. They hired a socialist educator named Dr. Papernak.¹⁴ He was

¹¹ After the German invasion of France, efforts were made by various groups to hide Jewish children. Wherever possible, efforts were made to send them on to safety in other countries such as Switzerland and the United States. One of the most active organizations in this effort was *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants* [French: Children's Relief Work, or OSE], a French Jewish humanitarian organization that saved hundreds of refugee children during World War II. OSE is a worldwide Jewish organization for health care and children's welfare. It was founded in Russia in 1912 and transferred to France in 1933. OSE gave assistance to children and adults in as many as fifteen towns and the internment camps in southern France. After the German movement into southern France, OSE went underground but continued to hide children and transfer them to Switzerland when that was possible. Overall, it was possible for OSE to rescue more than 5,000 children. Some of the children were French but many were refugees that had come from Germany, Belgium, Austria, Poland and other European countries.

¹² The first *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants* [French: Children's Relief Work, or OSE] home was in Montmorency, a town located 15.3 km (9.5 mi) north of the center of Paris.

¹³ Villa Helvetia is large home in Montmorency, France that was used by the *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants* [French: Children's Relief Work, or OSE] to house Jewish children.

¹⁴ Ernst Papanek (1900-1973) was an Austrian-born child psychologist and educator known for his work with refugee children during and after World War II and for his involvement in socialist parties in Europe and the United States. After the Social-Democrat party was banned in 1934, Dr. Papanek left Austria for Spain. In 1937, Dr. Papanek, his wife and their two children opened a summer camp in France. He served as the General Director of the *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants* [French: Children's Relief Work, or OSE] in France from 1938-1940. Under the threat of imminent arrest, the family escaped France in the summer of 1940. They settled in New York, where Dr. Papanek continued his work in child welfare and became a professor at Queens College.

put in charge of the homes and he made sure that one or two of them would be Orthodox¹⁵ and kosher¹⁶ for those children who had those requirements. That was done after I went to Helvetzia. When I went to Helvetzia, there wasn't a kosher home available. I believe that my sisters were in Helvetzia also if I'm not mistaken. At least I remember seeing them while I was there.

We stayed in Helvetzia for a while. Then it became apparent that if the Nazis are coming to Paris, they got to come to Montmorency because it's so close. All of the homes just kind of packed up and left to go toward south central France and to go to various homes throughout there. The one that I went to was in Creuse.¹⁷ It was Chateau de Masgelier.¹⁸ It was about a four hundred year old castle that [the O.S.E.] had bought. It was in a rural area. They told us not to have any dealings whatsoever with the local populous there because they were so much afraid that we would be turned in to the Nazis. The only dealings that we had anywhere outside of the Chateau itself is when we went to school. We used to have to walk to school from the Chateau in groups and then walk back. I remember one time walking on a very cold winter day and my *sabots* [French: clogs] . . . we wore these wooden shoes—*sabots*—at that time and I never knew that if you walk with *sabots* in snow and if it's warm enough where the snow can melt a little bit, that it'll cake up the bottom of the *sabot*. It started caking up and by the time I walked several hundred yards, I was walking on stilts of snow. I started crying because I was going to . . . I didn't want to walk. I was going to [fall] flat on my butt. Somebody had to come and knock all the snow out from under my *sabots* so I could go along the way.

There are a lot of very weird memories of Chateau de Masgelier. I was one of the youngest children there, which had its disadvantages . . . great disadvantages particularly when it came to food. When the food was served, it was survival of the fittest. The young people . . . by the time we got food, it was cold. It was supposed to be hot food, but it was cold. It didn't

¹⁵ Orthodox Judaism is a traditional branch of Judaism that strictly follows the Written *Torah* and the Oral Law concerning prayer, dress, food, sex, family relations, social behavior, the Sabbath day, holidays and more.

¹⁶ Kosher/*Kashrut* is the set of Jewish dietary laws. Food that may be consumed according to *halakhah* (Jewish law) is termed 'kosher' in English. Kosher refers to Jewish laws that dictate how food is prepared or served and which kinds of foods or animals can be eaten.

¹⁷ Creuse is a department (administrative region) in central France, approximately 340 kilometers (211 miles) south of Paris.

¹⁸ Chateau de Masgelier is a medieval castle built in 1174 in Le Grand-Bourg—a small village in central France's Creuse region—which was used by the *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants* [French: Children's Relief Work, or OSE] to house Jewish children.

make for great cuisine.

The sanitation in this rural area . . . left a lot to be desired. Our biggest game . . . some people play tic-tac-toe, but we used to go to the wall and see how many flies you can catch at one time. You can barely see the wall covering—whether it was wall covering or paint I don't know—with the flies all over the wall. I caught twenty at one time and I was a champion. With small hands, I was able to do that. I thought that was very good.

On the . . . I think it was May 17, 1941 when I got some kind of communication that I was supposed to leave Chateau de Masgelier by bus and rendezvous with my brothers in Marseille [France].¹⁹ We were going to be a part of an escape out of Europe.²⁰ There was a selected group of about 100 kids that were going to try to escape Europe. For whatever reason, we were selected. Jack and Ash and I were selected to be in the same group. I got on the bus with several other kids, most of them much older than me—two years is much older at that age—and went to Marseille. I saw my two brothers and I was really excited about that. It was wonderful, but not nearly as excited as I was about seeing the food lines because being in the situation that I was in, I hadn't had hot food in a long time. At least, it seemed like forever. I got into the hot bread line and I got my hot bread. Then I saw the hot soup line, so I ate the hot bread while I was going in the soup line. By the time I got the soup, I didn't have any bread left, so I went back in the bread line to get that. This kind of went on. I don't know how many times I went back and forth, but by the time I finished, the next day or that evening, I doubled over in cramps and I was pretty sick. The doctors examined me and said I had appendicitis and said I would not be able to go on this escape route on this trip.

My two brothers went on ahead on the train.²¹ All I knew was that it was going through the Pyrenees [mountain range on the border of France and Spain], to Spain and somehow from there to the United States. They left and a day or so later, I was sent to a

¹⁹ Marseille is a port city in southern France.

²⁰ When the Germans occupied France, the 144 children the OSE had already hidden in a series of homes across France were smuggled out of France, in two separate transports, into Portugal where they caught a ship to the United States. The first transport left on June 21, 1941 and the second on September 1, 1941. Altogether the OSE sheltered and assisted in getting nearly 1,600 Jewish children out Nazi-occupied areas.

²¹ Jack and Asher Hirsch escaped from Europe in a group of 111 children, who left the Marseilles train station at the end of May 1941. From France, the children traveled to Portugal by way of Spain. In Lisbon they boarded the SS *Mouzinho*, which sailed on June 10, 1941 and arrived in New York on June 21, 1941.

place outside of Vichy, called Brout-Vernet.²² There was a Chateau de Morelle, which was the next O.S.E. home that I was in.²³ It's kind of a misnomer because it was nowhere near a chateau. It's really more like a villa. My sisters were there. I stayed there for about three months. Then we got another communiqué that the first escape was successful and that we should meet in Marseilles with a handful of other children. [They said,] "We're going to try it one more time." We went to Marseilles and I was very, very careful about the amount of intake I had on the soup line and the bread line. I was able to make it this time. We went by train through the Pyrenees Mountains, through the Spanish countryside. The destination was to get to Madrid.

It was important that we got there after sundown because Spain was inundated with Nazi espionage personnel. They had spies all over the place. Their sole purpose for being in Spain was to try and catch Jews that were trying to get out of Europe because they didn't want Jews to be able to escape. They wanted them to come back and get their just desserts, which was getting killed. The people who organized this escape were astute enough to realize that this had to be done. We kind of went slowly and had certain places to stop for a little while. That was where, when I came across these Spanish kids that made me realize that, as bad as I thought I had it, they had it worse. The kids were starving to death and we didn't have any food to give them because we were only given food at specific times. Whatever we had, we had to eat then. We were not allowed to save anything. So we didn't have anything to give them. It was very sad to see these young, starving children begging for food and not being able to give them anything. It's something that's kind of stuck in my mind a long, long time. It's interesting because my brother and I were not on the same trip but we talked about it about a couple of years ago and he said the same thing—that that stuck in his mind too.

Anyway, we got to Madrid [Spain] and there we were taken to a convent. The nuns

²² Brout-Vernet [French: Broût-Vernet] is a small town in central France, around 15 kilometers (9 miles) northwest of the city of Vichy.

²³ Chateau des Morelles [French: Château des Morelles] is a nineteenth century home built near Broût-Vernet, France. Rabbi Zalman Schneerson was the head of the Paris de l'Association des Israélites Pratiquants [French: the Paris Association of Jewish Practitioners, or AIP]. In cooperation with the *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants* (OSE), he opened Château des Morelles as a home for Jewish children. During the war, it housed 340 children—as many as 100 at once. The children slept in at least four dormitories—two for the girls and two for the boys. One report calculates that some 340 children stayed at the castle between 1939 and 1944. On November 2, 1943, the steward was arrested and, along with his two young children, deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The staff then decided to disperse and hide the rest of the children. Most survived the war. The home officially closed February 4, 1944.

there knew the drill. They knew what had to happen. They got us bathed, they gave us some food, and they got us a little bit of a nap, whatever sleep we could get. They made sure that we got out of there in the morning before dawn so that we wouldn't be seen leaving as well. We got back on the train and then went to Lisbon, Portugal. Lisbon was like getting a breath of fresh air actually. You could feel the release of tension. Somehow there wasn't this oppressive feeling over there. There was espionage . . . there were German spies in Lisbon too, but not . . . it wasn't saturated like it was in Spain. We stayed for about ten days or so, I think, waiting for the boat to be ready, to come back for us, and then also to make the boat ready.

We went on the exact same ship that my brothers went on, which was the S.S. *Mouzinho*, which is a Portuguese liner.²⁴ Now there were many other people on the boat. On the first trip, there were 100 of the O.S.E. children who went on that boat, but the boat holds about 1,500 I think and it was full. The same thing with us. In our case, I think there were 45 O.S.E. children on the second trip. I've since met other people who were on that same boat. My friend Werner Spiegel, he was there on the boat with his family.²⁵ **Liese Strauss**—the kosher butcher's wife—she was on that trip with her family, on that same boat. There were a lot of people who were escaping out of Europe who had the means to do it on their own who were on that boat as well. Do you want any recollections from being on the boat and so on?

Jane: Sure.

Ben: There's several recollections I have about being on the boat. One of them was of course the realization that all of a sudden . . . I had been without family for so long. I had been without siblings or parents. Then all of a sudden, I had two siblings and two mothers at the same time. They were fighting over me to see who was going to be my mother. I was kind of the butt of that whole thing. It wasn't all that pleasant particularly when they decided to bathe me in front of all their friends, to show them how domestic they were I guess.

²⁴ The S.S. *Mouzinho* was built in Kiel, Germany in 1907 for the Hamburg America Line and was originally named the Guglielmo Pierce. She changed owners and names several times before being acquired by the Companhia Colonial de Navegacao of Portugal in 1930 and renamed the *Mouzinho*. The S.S. *Mouzinho* was sold to Italian shipbreakers in December 1954. The S.S. *Mouzinho* set sail from Lisbon, Spain on August 20, 1941 with 625 passengers on board, 611 of whom were immigrants. Flora, Ben and Gustl (Sarah) are shown on the ship's manifest as having their passage paid for by USCOM and as charges of the United States Committee of protection of European children NYC.

²⁵ The passenger manifest for the SS *Mouzinho* shows Werner Spiegel—a nineteen-year-old German Jew—was aboard with his father, Albert, mother, Amelie, and sister, Marianne.

I absolutely could not fall asleep in the quarters that we had. We had these . . . some kind of quarters down below where all of us were in one large space that had hammocks that we were supposed to sleep on. That in itself was not a problem. It was just so stuffy down there. I just couldn't fall asleep. So what I would do at night is I would sneak up and go up and fall asleep on the lounge chairs on the deck. That worked well for me until one night we had a huge storm coming up. I could see that this was a major problem. Before it got much worse and the wind was blowing like crazy, I said, "I got to get out of here. I better get downstairs quick." I started going and, to get to our quarters, I had to pass the . . . staterooms. Sort of like a motel, you go on a walkway. On one side is the room; on the other side is a railing and the ocean. These pathways have a strip of carpeting on them. The wind was blowing so fiercely that carpeting loosened and started going like a snake . . . up and down. I only weighed 42 or 43 pounds at the time. It wasn't enough of a weight for that. Boom! The thing just threw me up in the air. I thought I was going to fly over the railing, which I almost did. I grabbed hold of one of the posts for dear life and started screaming and crying. I was in bad shape. One of the stewards heard me and he came running, and he got me down. First, when he saw that I was okay and before I had a chance to thank him, he started scolding me for being where I was. I wasn't supposed to be out there. I explained to him why, that I just couldn't sleep downstairs. He said, "Well, you have no choice. You have to do that." We made a deal that I would go downstairs and not come back up, not do that again, if he wouldn't tell my sisters about the foolish thing that I did. They probably to their dying day never knew about this. That was one of the fun things.

The other thing that I remember is we landed in New York on Labor Day.²⁶ We couldn't get off the boat because it was Labor Day, but we had some very special guests on the boat and they were allowed to get off. The Coast Guard came to get them. These were two stowaways who had escaped prison in Lisbon and had gotten on the boat and were hiding in the coal bin down there.²⁷ I have no idea whether the rumors are true but the rumors had it that they had caught one of the cabin boys from the boat and killed him and ate him, cannibalized him. I stood there watching when they took them off. They were black as the ace of spades because . . . they were Caucasian people but they were black from the

²⁶ Flora, Sarah, and Ben Hirsch arrived in New York on September 2, 1941.

²⁷ Two Portuguese men were recorded on the ship's manifest as stowaways who were then "held for special inquiry upon arrival."

coal. It was such an awesome . . . I look back and think about it—I was in awe of these people. Here they were, they escaped from the prison, they were horrible people and to me they were heroes! It's really kind of bad when I think about that. It's so easy to get impressed by people. The funny thing is, I've talked to several people who were on the same boat and nobody remembers that but me. My sisters do not remember that. Werner Spiegel does not remember that. Liese Strauss does not remember that. Now I met some people just about a month ago when I was in Chicago at the OTC [One Thousand Children] reunion²⁸ . . . a couple of people that were on the same boat . . . they don't remember that. I know I didn't make it up. That's strange.

On September 2 [1941], the day after Labor Day, we got off the boat and were greeted by a social worker. I also remember a kind young man that was in charge of me. He asked me what do I want. Anything I want, I can have it. All I could think of was bubble gum. I'd never had any so he got me some bubble gum, told me I was a cheap date. I had some anticipation when I got here. I was expecting, truly expecting to see the streets paved in gold, which didn't happen.²⁹ I was expecting to see Franklin Delano Roosevelt come riding by on his white horse, which also didn't happen being that he was a polio-stricken man who was in a wheelchair most of the time.³⁰ But these are the pictures that we had. These are some of the expectations that we had, but it wasn't such a big deal that it was so disappointing. By the time I got here, my two brothers had already found a place to live. They were living in Atlanta, Georgia so the three of us came down to Atlanta. I went to live . . .

Jane: Do you want to talk a little bit about how that happened? You came into New

²⁸ The "One Thousand Children" or "OTC" refers to over 1,400 Jewish children who were rescued from Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied or threatened European countries, and came directly to the United States between 1934 and 1945. The rescue efforts in the United States were strictly non-governmental. The children were rescued through the organized efforts of private American citizens and organizations in the US and Europe. The organization One Thousand Children, Inc., was incorporated in 2000. OTC's first annual reunion and conference was held June 30-July 2, 2002 in Chicago, Illinois.

²⁹ One of the prevailing misconceptions among waves of eager immigrants to the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth century was that it was an easy place to get rich. Idioms about money growing on trees and streets paved with gold were common expectations among immigrants seeking greater economic opportunity than could be found in war-ravaged Europe.

³⁰ Popularly known as 'FDR,' Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945) was the 32nd President of the United States and a central figure in world events during the mid-twentieth century, leading the United States through a time of worldwide economic crisis and war. FDR was an avid horse rider and enjoyed an active early life. He was diagnosed with infantile paralysis, better known as polio, in 1921, at the age of 39. Despite permanent paralysis from the waist down, he was careful never to be seen using his wheelchair in public, and great care was taken to prevent any portrayal in the press that would highlight his disability. He died just a few months before the end of the war.

York. Did you know where you were going? Did they know where they were going?

Ben: I had no idea where I was going. I'll go back. When my two brothers came here in June of 1941, they were sent to Chicago, which was then the sort of gathering and disposition area of all of the kids that came. I realized now that maybe why . . . that's something I learned at the [OTC] conference . . . there was this group of 50 some odd kids that were brought in the 1930's.³¹ I think it was 1934 and I think that was the group in Chicago, so maybe that's why they felt that was the area to go to. They went to Chicago and while they were trying to figure out where to go to, they were trying to find out where are there any relatives. I'm assuming they must have known that everybody had some relatives somewhere and they were trying to find that. They found a book in my brother Asher's belongings that my mother had given him. We had an uncle Eli Auerbach in California, around San Francisco I think it was.³² He was told that the two boys were there and asked to take them in. He declined saying that he knew his brother-in-law and knew that his brother-in-law would want them to be in a religious home and that he was not religious. He felt it wouldn't be the right thing to do. Plus the fact that he had just gotten there himself not that long before. He was trying to put his life together. He felt it was a little much. He sent a *tefillin* to my brother Asher for his *bar mitzvah*.³³ [He] suggested that they try Rome, Georgia where there was a cousin.³⁴ Selig Auerbach, who was my mother's first cousin, was the rabbi there in a very small synagogue in

³¹ The first small group of OTC children arrived in New York in November 1934. This and subsequent small groups, totaling about 100 annually in the early years of operation, were taken to foster homes, many of which had been arranged through appeals to the members of congregations and organizations. After New York City, Chicago had one of the largest Jewish communities in the United States in the 1930's. Many OTC children were sent to Chicago, either because they had family there or because more Jewish foster homes were available there.

³² Elieser Eli Auerbach (1901-1948) was born in Hamburg, Germany. He and his wife Frieda immigrated to the United States in August 1940.

³³ *Bar mitzvah* [Hebrew: 'son of commandment'] is a rite of passage for Jewish boys aged 13 years and one day. At that time, a Jewish boy is considered a responsible adult for most religious purposes. He is now duty bound to keep the commandments, he puts on *tefillin*, and may be counted to the *minyan* quorum for public worship. He celebrates the *bar mitzvah* by being called up to the reading of the *Torah* in the synagogue, usually on the next available Sabbath after his Hebrew birthday. *Tefillin*, also called 'phylacteries' are a set of small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the *Torah*, which are worn by observant Jews during weekday morning prayers. They are worn around the arm, hand and fingers and on the forehead. The *Torah* commands that they should be worn as a "sign" and "remembrance" that G-d brought the children of Israel out of Egypt.

³⁴ Rome, Georgia, is a city located in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, approximately 70 miles (112 kilometers) northwest of Atlanta.

Rome, Georgia.³⁵ They contacted him and he said that he couldn't, with his very meager salary and also his very small quarters. He lived in a very small place and his wife was expecting a baby. He couldn't take the two boys in, but he suggested that they get in touch with the [Jewish] Federation in Atlanta, Georgia and that if they would take the boys in, he would then try to become a mentor and try to come visit as often as possible and so on.³⁶ So that's what happened.

In going through the files, I noticed too that while we were on the ocean coming to the United States, a letter came from the German Jewish . . . it was the organization to take care of German Jewish refugees that came to the United States. I can't remember the exact name of the organization, but they wrote to Mrs. Weil here in Atlanta.³⁷ They said, "There are three more Hirsch kids on the ocean coming right now. Would you consider letting them come to Atlanta so the five children can be at least in the same city?" They agreed and that's how I came to Atlanta, Georgia. By the time we got here, all the things had been set up. They already had a home. My sisters went to stay with a family named [Willoughby, clip 2-15:07] and my brothers Asher and Jack were staying with the Bergmans on Atlanta Avenue on the south side of town. I went to stay with them and we stayed there for about a year or so.

It was quite a bit of adjustment going on. Jack and Asher having been there three months had learned the language fairly well. When Jack was put into James L. Key Elementary School in the fall, they quickly jumped him up to the sixth grade, which was about a year, year and a half above where he normally should be by age.³⁸ Apparently the system of education that we had in France did a good job on us in the area of math and basic knowledges like that. My math was good too but I couldn't speak the language. They put me first in low third grade and then they realized that language was too much of a problem. There was a teacher in the fourth grade that spoke French so they put me in her class until I

³⁵ Selig Sigmund Auerbach (1906-1997) was a Conservative Rabbi born in Hamburg, Germany. Selig, his wife Hilde, and daughter Chana left Germany after Kristallnacht and came to the United States in 1941, where he took a temporary position in a small synagogue in Rome, Georgia. Two more daughters were born in the US. Rabbi Auerbach served as a chaplain in the army during World War II and accepted various positions as a rabbi throughout the US before retiring to Rochester, New York.

³⁶ The Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta raises funds, which are dispersed throughout the Jewish community. Services also include caring for Jews in need locally and around the world, community outreach, leadership development, and educational opportunities. It is part of the Jewish Federation of North America (JFNA).

³⁷ The Hirsch siblings settled in Atlanta under the sponsorship of the Jewish Children's Service, an organization under the umbrella of the Jewish Welfare Board.

³⁸ James L. Key Elementary School was located at Ormond Street and Capital Avenue in Atlanta, Georgia and was in existence from at least the 1940's through the 1960's.

could develop into speaking with them.

Jane: Talk about what it was like for you. You were nine?

Ben: I was nine, yes. I turned nine in September.

Jane: What was it like being in a new home, being in a new school, being in a new country?

Ben: I already learned a little bit about learning how to adapt, how to fit in, in some cases and also tried to fit into the background in other cases, and not to be too obtrusive. It was interesting. When I first came to school for instance, I noticed that some of the upper grade girls, the girls in the sixth grade—really old people—they kind of took me on as a pet. I was small. I've got six-year-old grandkids that are bigger than I was when I was nine. I was a perfect pet. I liked it. I liked having that attention and I liked . . . I automatically fell in love with two of the girls right away. I always feel like I had somebody that I had to have some feeling for because I think it was kind of like this missing the parental love that you have.

The biggest problem that I had in school really was that I never learned to subjugate my feelings. When I think that I know something, when I think that I'm right, and somebody tells me . . . if I see something that's blue and somebody tells me it's green, I'm not going to say "Well, okay." I'm going to say "Hell, no. That's blue! I know it's blue." That doesn't always work. One of the things . . . when I came here, I was always wearing a *kippah* because that's the way I was brought up.³⁹ That part had not been taken away from me when I was in France. I wore a *kippah* to James Elementary School. I didn't see it as a problem and I never felt self-conscious about it at all, but one of the Jewish teachers who was a third grade teacher came to speak to her. By this time, I already could understand enough English to see what was going on. I picked it up rather quickly. She told me that I was causing great embarrassment to her as a Jew who's a teacher in the school, to the other Jewish teachers in the school, and to the other Jewish kids in the school by my wearing this *kippah*. I listened. I said, "Tell me more. Explain to me why you're embarrassed." She really couldn't satisfy me. I would have . . . the way that my mind worked, had she been able to explain to me and prove to me that what I was doing was wrong, I would have taken the *kippah* off. I would have put it in my pocket and that would have been it. She couldn't. Her reasoning was flawed even to

³⁹ Jewish men cover their heads during prayer with a small skull-cap called a 'yarmulke' or 'kippah.' Orthodox Jewish men wear it at all times to remind themselves of G-d's presence.

a nine year old. So I said "Well, okay, I'll give it some thought," and knew darn well I wasn't going to take it off because this is me and this is what I'm going to do until I learn that I shouldn't be doing it.

She had this kid in her class—this is in the days when if you were failing, you failed, you stayed behind. We've never heard of this before—I know it—but they used to have those things! There was this kid in her class in third class who was actually supposed to be in sixth grade. He was a school tough . . . he was the bully. She kind of hinted to him that what he should do is grab my *kippah* and run and keep it from me. So I'm on a swing one day, just minding my business and this guy . . . as soon as I go near this guy, he just grabs my *kippah* and starts running. I felt very violated. I jumped off the swing and I chased him down and started beating on him like there was no tomorrow, after all he was in the third grade [and] I was in the fourth grade, so he's a little guy. Of course, he was twice my size but that didn't seem to matter. I got my *kippah* back and the teachers pulled us apart. I thought that was the end of that.

That was when I was still living with the Bergmans. When I started living with the Hirshbergs, which was sometime in 1942, my sister Flo was living with me at that time and so was my brother Asher. I went out one day to mail a letter for Flo and low and behold, there's this gang of kids there and, of course, this guy is the leader of the gang. They'd been waiting all this time to get even. It was many months. It had probably been about eight or nine months. They got even . . . They just took turns and they just kind of pummeled me with everything they could. Thank G-d they didn't take the letter and tear it up. I didn't get to mail the letter. I came back and I was all bloody. My brother and sister came running out and it's too late—they were all gone. They were going to protect me. I learned a big lesson about that: don't fool with the guy who's got a gang. Don't do that.

It was shortly after that that I quit wearing the *kippah* on my own because I started to feel that I was different from everybody else. I didn't really want to be different from everybody else. My reason for wearing it was because that's the way I was brought up and I didn't have any other reason than that. It wasn't strong enough to keep me separate because I had a strong desire to try and to fit in as much as possible into the society that I was in. I've worked at it. People tell me that I have a Southern accent sometimes. I've worked at that—tried to develop the Southern accent—because I wanted to be one of the people, one

of the guys, one of the boys.

Anyway, living with the Hirshbergs had some interesting things too because Mr. Hirshberg was from Russia I believe. He had his own experiences as a child, about playing with the *goyem* and so on and not playing with the *goyem*.⁴⁰ Some of my friends at James L. Key [Elementary] were not Jewish. I gravitated to the people that I had things in common with one way or another. If somebody likes me, that's the first thing in common that they have that I can agree with. I tend to like somebody who likes me. I brought home Dickie Bradshaw, who is about as *goyscha* looking guy as you're going to find—white blond hair and very much *goyscha* features. Mr. Hirshberg would get really upset. He'd tell me . . . "I don't want these *goyem* in my house." I had to learn to live with that. It was kind of interesting for me. Here we're used to being the ones that are discriminated against if you will, and now we're doing the same thing with other people. In a way, I can understand sort of what was going on with him. It wasn't a religious thing with him because he wasn't particularly religious. He just did not want me to bring any non-Jewish friends . . . he didn't want me to have non-Jewish friends. He couldn't control that, but what he could control was his house so I couldn't bring the non-Jewish friends there.

I liked Mrs. Hirshberg. She was the only foster mother that I had that did not insist on that I should call her "mother," or "mom," or anything like that. Therefore, I started calling her "Momma." The other ones that wanted me to do that, I couldn't do it. I couldn't possibly do it. She was very much a "mamma" type. She was a heavysset woman and just very warm. I look back at the records now at the grief that I caused her when I was living with her and I feel bad about it because I was a pretty unruly kid. I don't have any memories of causing her any angst but apparently I did.

Jane: What did you know about your parents at this point?

Ben: At this point, the last letter that I received from my mother I think was in August of 1942. Beyond that point, we didn't hear anything. I stayed with the Hirshbergs until the summer of 1944. I did not know really anything about that.

It was when I was staying with them when **Donald Kessler** taught me how to smoke, when I had burned up a half a block on Atlanta Avenue. Thank G-d it didn't have

⁴⁰ *Goy* [plural: *goyem*] is a Yiddish term meaning "people" or "nation." In common usage, it designates a non-Jewish or Gentile person.

any houses on it because we ran out of cigarettes and we still had a lot of matches left in the box. We started lighting them and throwing them and the weeds took hold. [Someone] called the fire department and said, "We saw some kids playing with matches. They went that way." I think the firemen knew that we did that but they didn't punish us for it.

There was some interesting happenings during that time, to the point that when Mrs. Hirshberg did need an operation and she didn't think she would be able to take care of me after the operation. They considered sending me to military school and I have copies of letters from two military schools that they wanted to get me in. Interestingly enough, I didn't qualify because I was an alien. I had German citizenship and therefore I could not go into a military school, thank G-d!

I went across town to live with the Ungers. This is my first dealing with anything away from the south side of Atlanta. The closest I'd ever been to the north side was the Hebrew Orphans Home—The Jewish Children's Service—every now and then would have things for the orphans they had placed in foster homes.⁴¹ One Shabbat, they had this thing at the Fox. We could all go see a movie there, but it was on Shabbat so it was a major problem. My brother Asher figured out what we could do. They could leave the tickets waiting for us at the ticket kiosk and we would walk. Jack and I walked from Atlanta Avenue to the Fox, which is a nice walk, but we did that.⁴² We got there just a little bit after the buses with the other guys got there because they passed us and waved at us. We went to see that movie with them.

The Fox was as far north as I had ever been before I moved to the Unger's. The Ungers lived near Emory University.⁴³ That was a totally different world. I would be around Washington Street, Capitol Avenue. That was very urban. Emory University area is very

⁴¹ The Hebrew Orphans' Home was located at 478 Washington Street in Atlanta, Georgia. The residence facility was open from 1876 to 1930. It was originally called the Hebrew Orphans' Asylum and was originally an actual orphanage. In 1901, the name was changed to the Hebrew Orphans' Home. Then its services phased into placing children in foster home care and helping with adoptions instead of an actual orphans' home, during which time it was called the Jewish Family and Children's Bureau (and another variation—Jewish Children's Services). Finally it got out of the children's institutional care business entirely. In 1988, the organization's mission changed and it became the Jewish Educational Loan Fund (JELF) with the goal of providing low-interest post-secondary education loans for Jewish students.

⁴² The Fox Theatre is located on Peachtree Street in Midtown Atlanta. The theater was originally planned as part of a large Shrine Temple as evidenced by its Moorish design. The theater was ultimately developed as a lavish movie palace, opening in 1929. The auditorium replicates an Arabian courtyard under a night sky of flickering stars and drifting clouds. The Fox Theatre now hosts cultural and artistic events, and concerts by popular artists.

⁴³ Emory University is a private university in Atlanta. It was founded in 1836 by a small group of Methodists and named in honor of Methodist bishop John Emory. Today it has nearly 3,000 faculty members and is ranked 20th among national universities in *U.S. News & World Report's* 2014 rankings.

suburban. I'd never, ever experienced anything like that. It had a nice, quiet feeling to it, which can drive you nuts if you've got a lot of energy and you want to do things. It can sometimes seem very boring. There were some major issues. They were nice people. They had two sons, Pat—who I adored; he was a very bright, quiet fellow who was just a nice person—and they had another guy, Joe, who was just a little bit younger than me—also very bright and very precocious and very competitive, extremely competitive. Because I was equally precocious and equally bright on some of the things that he would like to compete with, he loved competing with me except that he hated to lose. That would happen occasionally. That caused some major problems. He'd have tantrums and blame me for things that didn't happen. He'd run to his mother to get me punished and this happened on and on and on and on. It was a pretty grueling summer.

I was going to have to go to **North Druid Hills Junior High School**. The biggest issue really was Shabbat.⁴⁴ In the summertime—they belonged to the Mayfair Club—their Saturday was going swimming at the Mayfair Club.⁴⁵ It's a Jewish club, it's a Jewish things to do on Shabbat. I didn't have a problem swimming on Shabbat. My biggest problem was getting there. They would drive to get there and I didn't drive on Shabbat. I didn't ride on Shabbat. This became a major issue. I asked them, "Could I not just stay home?" They didn't want to leave me home alone. I even suggested maybe I should walk. They didn't like that idea either. Eventually, they forced me to get in the car and to go with them and that was a big **ticher** [**Yiddish: ?**] for me. That was a major thing for me. It really bothered me tremendously. What bothers me more in retrospect is that after about three or four weeks of that, I was used to it already. I enjoyed going swimming there on Saturday. How quickly we forget. Here I had these strong ties to my religious feelings, yet I was able to be dissuaded rather quickly and that bothered me as well.

The thing that ended up being the straw that broke the camel's back was just more

⁴⁴ *Shabbat* (Hebrew) or *Shabbos* (Yiddish) is the Jewish day of rest and is observed on Saturdays. *Shabbat* observance entails refraining from work activities, often with great rigor, and engaging in restful activities to honor the day. According to Jewish laws, driving on the Sabbath is not allowed. Orthodoxy generally prohibits driving altogether, but some Conservative congregations make exceptions for attending synagogue.

⁴⁵ The Mayfair Club opened in 1938 at 1456 Spring Street in Midtown Atlanta. The two-story club was a focal point of Jewish life in the city for more than 25 years. The club was founded in 1930 and first met at the Biltmore Hotel. Eleanor Roosevelt, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, mayors Ivan Allen and William Berry Hartsfield, senators Herman Talmadge and Richard Russell, and Governor Carl Sanders visited the club. Fire destroyed the Mayfair Club on December 4, 1964.

and more of Joe. It just got me once too often and I unleashed with all of the words that I learned on the south side in one big tirade. I think the hair went up on Mrs. Unger's head. She'd never heard words like that—either that or she made like she'd never heard them before. Anyway, I stormed out of the house. I said, "I'm going." I decided I was going to walk to the south side and spend—this was Friday—I was going to spend Shabbat with **Misha Epstein** because I knew I could always go there. I started walking. They had a little dog. I loved that dog and the dog loved me. The dog started following me. I noticed that when we got a few blocks away. I turned around and put the dog back. I said, "Can't do that," and started walking again. The dog followed me again but this time I didn't catch on because the dog was smart. He stayed about a block or two behind me so I wouldn't see it. Finally when I got to Ponce de Leon, I saw the dog. She was right behind me. I got to Gold's Delicatessen on Ponce de Leon near Parkway Drive and there was a message there because they know me at Gold's.⁴⁶ All of my siblings had worked there at one time or another. Jake Gold came out and said, "There was a message from Mrs. Unger. You have the dog. You have to bring it back. It's your responsibility or they'll put you in jail." I said, "That's nice!" I walked back and I locked the dog up, made sure that she couldn't follow me, and then started walking again; walked all the way. Before dark, I got to Misha's house. That kind of set the way for me moving away from the Unger's. At that point, I realized that it was not going to work. It was not a good match for them and I.

They set me up in **Mrs. Ida Gunsher's** house. My brother Asher was staying there. She had a lot of experience in keeping youngsters. She had several boys who had come from Europe and she had some other boys that were just orphans from the United States that she had taken. Her husband, Saul, had passed away some years back and so this is what she was doing. She was doing a very good job at it. I stayed there. First, it was going to be temporary. Eventually, my brother Asher moved to New York. He was going to go to the Yeshiva. There were some people who were interested in his developing his Jewish knowledge and his abilities in that area so somebody paid his way to go to New York. I stayed with Mrs. Gunsher through junior high school and mostly through high school.

During . . . the one thing probably that I didn't mention at all—other than the time

⁴⁶ Gold's Delicatessen was a kosher delicatessen opened at 108 Decatur Street in Atlanta, Georgia by Russian immigrants, Solomon Jacob Gold and his wife, Katie. They opened a second location at 432 Ponce de Leon in 1936. The couple had five children—Rosa, Dora, Aster, Dillie, and Jacob—who all worked at the deli.

that this guy's gang beat me up—was that I was pretty much a target. I guess after that fight I had with that boy because I was so small, and I was wiry, and apparently I wasn't afraid of a fight. I was selected out by many people who wanted to try their abilities with me, I guess is the best way to put it. In many cases, it was because I was Jewish; in many cases because I was a foreigner. In many cases, because I was a Jew foreigner. I had fights a whole lot even before I graduated James F. Key Elementary School. Mrs. Brown—my sixth grade teacher, who was in charge of the patrol boys came to me and said, "Ben, your grades are good. Your behavior is fairly good, except that you fight a lot. I need patrol boys but I can't have boys that fight. So if you'll stay out of fights for one week, I'll make you a patrol boy." I said "Mrs. Brown, it's not me. I haven't started a fight yet! These are people that are coming to me and if I don't fight back, are they going to beat me up?" I never made patrol boy. It went on that way for many years.

I used to go to *cheder* [Yiddish: religious school] to Shearith Israel Hebrew School.⁴⁷ After school and on my way back from school, I would ultimately get greeted by a group of boys from Atlanta Boys Club who wanted a piece of me.⁴⁸ I'd be walking with other Jewish boys and they would tell them, "Step aside unless you want what he's getting." They were smart. They stepped aside. The guys would just proceed to . . . they'd start with . . . let the smallest guy, Joe Johnson, to come at me and start hitting me. He was a good boxer. Joe Johnson was good.

<Disk 1 Ends>

<Disk 2 Begins>

Ben: I used to start off with, there actually were three guys that used to meet me more often after awhile. It was Joe Johnson and Grady and Billy Walker—all three of them. Grady and Billy Walker were Golden Gloves champs. Joe was a good boxer, but he wasn't a Golden Glove champ.⁴⁹ He was smaller and more wiry than them. They would start off . . . the first time that we met, Joe came up, and I know Joe. I mean, I was friendly with Joe. That kind of thing is very weird.

⁴⁷ Founded in 1904, Shearith Israel began as a congregation that met in the homes of congregants until 1906 when they began using a Methodist church on Hunter Street. After World War II, Rabbi Tobias Geffen moved the congregation to University Drive, where it became the first synagogue in DeKalb County. They officially became affiliated with the Conservative movement in 2002.

⁴⁸ The Atlanta Boys Club Inc. was established on 314 Washington Street to address a growing trend of youth delinquency in the South Atlanta area. In 1956, it changed its name to the Metropolitan Atlanta Boys Club to reflect its growing metropolitan reach.

⁴⁹ The Golden Gloves is the name given to annual competitions for amateur boxing in the United States, where a small pair of golden boxing gloves are awarded.

You know somebody, you're friendly with him, next thing you know, he wants to beat you up. I could see he was part of the gang mentality because he was with the other two guys. He came up to me, started pushing me, and said, "It's gonna be you and me." So I fought with him, and the mistake I made was that I started winning. That's bad, because when you start winning, then the other two boys jump in. I learned after awhile, that it just doesn't help to fight back. What I would do is I would just kind of stand there and let them beat up on me as much as they wanted to, and then fold my arms kind of and say, "Well, are you done?" After awhile, they get bored with it and they leave you alone. That's when I have time to release all the pain and start crying because these guys really hurt me.

I remember one day I came home to Mrs Gunsher's house after one of those episodes. They had really done a good job on me. They had torn my clothes a little bit, got me all sullied up, and I was a total mess and a little bit bloody. She happened to be talking to a social worker at the time that I came in. He wanted to know, he says, "What's going on? What's happening?" Normally that's the kind of a thing a kid in their early teens like that would just say, "That's okay. Nothing," I'd had enough. I said, "I'm telling." I gave him names and addresses. The three of them—Joe Johnson, Billy Walker, and Grady Walker—were sent to reform school as a result of that. Then I thought to myself, "In three years, I am dog meat, because when these boys get out, they're gonna kill me." When those boys got out, they were my best friends. They saw me and they said, "Aw, Ben!" [They] put their arms around me. Never, ever anything more from these guys. Weird. Surely incredible. They must have liked reform school. Very, very strange.

That didn't stop other people because I was still getting, particularly in school—the word was out, if you're gonna be a bully of any importance whatsoever, you gotta knock off Hirsch first. He's bottom rung of the ladder. After that you can work your way up. Several guys like that that just . . . recess was two or three days a week . . . was fighting time. Until I think I was about 16, and one of these guys—I'd already put him down twice in the yard. He stopped me in the hall and he said . . . he must have been working out or something. He was ready. [I said,] "Leave me alone! I gotta go to class!" He said, "No . . . You're not going anywhere. You and I are gonna have it our right here." Just as he said that, this guy, Whitey Kugler, comes up. You gotta picture this guy, Whitey Kugler, 6 foot, 4 inches tall . . . really, blonde is not the right word . . . white crew cut. He was built like an Adonis. He was a Golden

Gloves champ, heavyweight. He was all state in football at Oak Smith and he was all-state basketball player at center for Oak Smith. Just all around great guy. He was a leader at the Atlanta Boys Club. He comes up there and . . . I didn't even know that Whitey knew me. He comes up, he stands in-between us, and he looks this boy in the face and he says, "Now, I want you to pass the word around. Ben Hirsch—this guy right here—he's a friend of mine. Anybody that wants a piece of him has gotta come through me first. If you can beat me up, go for it." That's the last fight I had, after all those years. This guy was incredible. He was up to play the part of Ozark Ike in a movie.⁵⁰ . . . Ozark Ike is a comic strip character and kind of looked like Whitey. When he was killed . . . He was a jet pilot. He was killed in a jet crash, I think back in the 1950's. I remember crying. This guy was one special dude.

<interview pauses, then resumes>

Ben: Let's see, where was I?

Jane: Whitey Kuglaer.

Ben: Yes, Whitey Kugler, right. Think about Oak Smith, just growing up in general. I was *bar mitzvahed* when I was staying with Mrs. Gunsher. My sister Flo paid for everything, which I didn't know about until later on. I remember she gave me a basketball for either my thirteenth or fourteenth birthday. I forget which. I dearly loved basketball. When I was living on Atlanta Avenue with the Hershbergs, there was a boy, **Paul Moldai**. He was living up the street from me. He was kind of . . . he was four days older than me and a pretty popular guy, well-to-do parents, and travelled around a lot. I kind of felt like he was my representative to the rest of the world. He would come back and tell me where he'd been and what he'd seen and stuff like that. He went over the ocean to the north side of town. What he learned there . . . he came back one day [and] he had learned about basketball. He told me that, "You . . . this is a sport that you would love." He says, "This is . . ." Just because Paul said that to me, I decided, "Well, this is a game I have to love, because after all Paul knows me and knows . . ." It's strange, but to this day I love basketball. I wonder if Paul had never said that to me if I ever would have liked the game.

I was dependent on him a great deal. I remember he had a pet. He had a dog. I think I loved his dog more than he loved his dog. When his dog was missing, he ran away, or he

⁵⁰ Ozark Ike was a newspaper comic strip created by Rufus A. "Ray" Gotto. It ran as a syndicate from 1945 until 1959. Ozark Ike McBatt, was a dumb but likeable youth from a rural area in the mountains who excelled in sports.

was stolen, whatever have you, I spent an [in]ordinate amount of time trying to find the dog. It annoyed him. He said, "It's *my* dog! Why are *you* looking for him?" I felt the need to do that. He had a victory garden.⁵¹ I didn't have a victory garden. I spent a lot of time working on his victory garden, took a lot of pride on the stuff with him. I was kind of tagging along, trying to reap whatever society had through him. He was, for some early years there, he was . . . I don't know exactly what you'd call that, but . . . certainly 'benefactor' . . .

Strangely enough, we both became architects. That was years . . . We were not in touch for many, many years. I saw him on the side of the street one day. We're talking about what we're doing. I'd already been in the service. He had been to the University of Florida.⁵² He was taking architecture and I was taking architecture. We were doing the same thing, which was very strange.

Jane: Go back a little bit and talk a little bit about how you did in school and the jobs that you had while you were still in school, and also up to the point where you and your brothers and sisters found out about your parents.

Ben: Yes . . . I actually I did well in school, generally. School was easy and I was extremely lazy. Anything that required taking home a lot of books and things like that, I didn't do that well in. Anything that required being able to comprehend what was being taught in the class, I did extremely well in. Of course, in art as well. I learned states and capitals in fifth grade. I can still do that today. It's amazing the things that you learn.

My first job was . . . stuffing envelopes. No, long before then, when I was about ten . . . I was selling *Liberty* magazine door to door—something you don't want to do!⁵³ The first job, I was stuffing envelopes for Citizen's Jewelers. It was a dollar a day. I thought . . .

Jane: Did you have to earn . . .

Ben: Spending money? When I could. I was getting a quarter a week spending money. I remember one almost fight that I got into when I was in high school with this boy, Jimmy Smith. He was complaining about . . . I forget how much he was getting . . . some huge amount of

⁵¹ Victory gardens, also called war gardens or food gardens for defense, were vegetable, fruit, and herb gardens planted at private residences and public parks in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and Germany during World War I and World War II.

⁵² The University of Florida is an American public university that was founded in 1853 and is located in Gainesville, in north central Florida.

⁵³ *Liberty* magazine was a general interest magazine subtitled, "A Weekly for Everybody," that was published from 1924 to 1950.

allowance. I said, "Boy, that's incredible!" He said, "How much do you get?" I told him, "I get a quarter a week." He said he knew I was lying because I'm Jewish, and Jews own the world, and how can a Jew get only a quarter a week? He was ready to beat me up about that. Finally, I convinced him that I was telling the truth, and he wasn't that combative, so we did okay.

Whenever the idea was I need to learn . . . I was always . . . it was kind of . . . ever since I got here, I know at some point I was going to have to be self supportive and I have to work toward that. I have to find jobs. I know that one of the first jobs I got—which was a real job, I guess you'd call it—was at **Kenny's [possibly Kinney's] Shoe Store**. I decided to get a lot . . . there were a lot of guys who were selling shoes on weekends. That was the thing to do, but I was much smaller than everybody else was. So I went there and I decided not to talk to anybody but the manager. I was told that you don't talk to anybody but the manager. I go to Kenny's and nobody was there. I said, "Who's your manager?" They said, "Mr. Tatum." I said, "Well, I want to see Mr. Tatum." They said, "What do you want?" I said, "No, this is private between Mr. Tatum and me." So the little twerp sat down there and I waited for him for an hour. He was impressed that I waited for an hour. Then when he asked me what I wanted, I said, "I want a job." After he quit laughing, he said, "Doing what?" I said, "Well, selling shoes, stock boy . . . whatever you have for me, I'll do it." I said, "Ultimately, I want to sell shoes here, but if I have to start somewhere else, I'll do that." He says, "I like you. I like your attitude." He says, "Come in Friday and we'll start stocking. I'll start you in the stockroom." That's how I got my first job.

The first Saturday that I was there . . . this is already when I was working on Shabbat. Actually I started working on Shabbat when it, because of colors, football colors. Most of the guys that I went to Hebrew School with were selling colors at football games on Saturday, and they would make anywhere from three to six dollars on a Saturday. That's a lot of money at that time. I was very envious of that . . . because there were guys I played poker with and they all had more money than I did. Eventually . . . I started selling colors on Shabbat. I remember Rabbi [Hyman] Freidman, who was assistant rabbi at Shearith Israel, asked me how much I could make selling colors on Saturday.⁵⁴ I said, "I can make as much as six dollars." He says, "I'll give you six dollars to wash my car on Sunday." Yes, pretty impressive, but I didn't do it. First of all, I knew that was about ten times the going rate, and

⁵⁴ Rabbi Hyman R. Friedman (1913-2000) served the congregation at Shearith Israel from 1945 to 1952.

I didn't want to take it from him. I didn't think it was right. I was ready. I wanted to be like everybody else. I didn't want to be the only boy that didn't work on Saturday and I was. So that changed.

But the first Saturday that I was at Kenny's, they got busy. They got real busy and they needed somebody else on the floor. [Mr. Tatum] goes into the stockroom and he says, "Can you go out there and help sell?" I said, "Well, yeah!" I went out there and I was one of the top salesmen that day because everybody wanted that little kid! They said, "I'll wait for the little kid." That was the start of my shoe-selling career, which lasted quite a long time. I worked at the various shoe stores. I know that they had a deal going, the shoe stores were one after the other one. There was Kenny's, there was Burt's, there was Baker's, and so on like that. Then you would go several blocks up to Chandler's and Davidson's and so on. One day, Tatum comes up to me and he says, "We're running out of space. I'm getting a shipment of shoes in. I need a wall stretcher. Would you go over to Burt's and get me a wall stretcher?" I walk over to Burt's and ask them for a wall stretcher. They snickered a little bit and they said, "No, no, we lend ours to Baker's." I went over to Baker's, I went over to Beck's, and finally, when I got to Chandler's, the guy said, "They're pulling your leg, man." That's getting initiated into the shoe business. That was fun.

I worked at **Ultimate Brothers Wholesale Grocers**. There were many . . . during all these different times, I was in different ways of trying to make money, I remember going to the Garment District, which is now Fulton and Industrial Boulevard, but at that time was on Pryor Street. I went to this one man, Mr. Klein. I'd heard that he was looking for help, looking for somebody who could build, work his way into the business. He wanted a young boy who could get in there and learn that. He had a son who . . . I don't know exactly what it was, maybe autistic . . . but it affected his speech and it affected his eye-hand coordination. He was very bright. Harold was very, very bright, but he would not be able to do the kind of work his father needed done. I went to see him and I spoke with him. He was very impressed with me and he said I should come back the next day. He was gonna hire me. He went home that night and he spoke with Howard about it. Howard basically told him, he said, "You don't want to hire south side serf. And he's a German refugee to boot." I came back the next day and told me that I didn't have the job. Boy, I really felt bad about that. That was a terrible thing.

Jane: Can you talk a little bit about how, during those couple of years when the news started coming to America about what was happening in Germany . . . what you thought about it and what conversations you might have had with your brothers and sisters about the inevitable news that your parents and your younger brother and sister had been murdered?

Ben: Right. While the war was going on . . . whenever you went to the theatre, went to the movies, there were newsreels. I got all my information from the newsreels. Seeing the newsreels, I also got this strong feeling that I just can't wait till I get a chance to go over there and do my part to fight. I was really very much looking forward to that. My brothers and sisters and I never talked about our parents. They may have talked about it, but they never talked to me about it. The last letter we got in 1942. After that, we just never said anything. We all had our own trepidations. I started putting in my books, "This book is not an orphan, even though I am. Don't steal it," so I must have felt something.

Right after the war was over . . . at first when the war was over it affected me greatly in that I felt like I was cheated. Everybody was cheating and everybody was so happy, and I was pretty blue. I felt like my chance had gone, that I wasn't I gonna get a chance to go over there and do anything. Then my brother, Asher, was called up to the army. Because he still was able to speak German, he was sent to Germany to help in the interrogations. While he was there, he started looking around to see what happened to our parents. He checked with the International Red Cross and all the sources he could get.⁵⁵ Eventually he found out that what happened to . . . He actually . . . to have him tell the story is really heartbreaking for him. It's heartbreaking for to listen to him. He actually thought he had tracked my mother down. People said, "Why don't you go to this place or that place?" He had gone to our house and there was a German caretaker who was not living there. Somebody was in charge of the people who were renting in that house right there, but somebody was put in charge of that. Then this person is the one who sent him to some place outside of Frankfurt where we thought my mother was and so on. Eventually he found out from my Uncle Phillip that he saw Mom, and Werner, and Roseline going to

⁵⁵ The International Committee of the Red Cross ("Red Cross") is a humanitarian institution based in Geneva, Switzerland. In 1943, the British Red Cross set up a registration and tracing service for missing persons that was formalized in 1944 as the *Central Tracing Bureau*. By 1948, the bureau was in Bad Arolsen, Germany and the name was changed to its current International Tracing Service.

the gas chambers sometime in 1943.⁵⁶

From the Red Cross he found out that our father was . . . erroneously . . . the date they had right. They said that he was killed November 5, 1942, but they said he was killed in Sachsenhausen, [near] Oranienberg [Germany].⁵⁷ I found out years later that actually he was . . . Sachsenhausen was evacuated from Jews, with the exception of a handful of people whose names were all on a list. My father name was not on that list. In October of 1942, they were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau.⁵⁸ He died in November . . . was killed in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

When [Asher] found the information, he called Rabbi Friedman and asked him to get us all together and to tell us, and that's what happened. Rabbi Friedman gathered the four of us who were in Atlanta and sat us down. We had an inkling that this was what it was going to be about. He told us about what happened to Mom, and Dad, and Werner, and Roseline. Right at that time, I started to sit Shiva.⁵⁹ It wasn't really Shiva. I was going to the synagogue for *mincha* [Hebrew: afternoon prayer service] and *maariv* [Hebrew: evening prayer service] and then I was sitting at home, not having any company but just sort of like being in mourning, if you will. I never accepted that Werner and Roseline were dead, because it just . . . it's easy enough to understand that adults can get killed, but my mind just wouldn't work that way. It just . . . I remembered them as six and eighteen month

⁵⁶ According to a list of Jewish victims from the book "Victims of the Persecution of Jews under the National Socialist Tyranny in Germany 1933—1945" prepared by the German Federal Archives and available from [Yad Vashem](#), Mathilde Hirsch was deported to Raasiku, Estonia on September 24-26, 1942. Records for Roseline and Werner have not been located, but it is likely they were deported with their mother.

⁵⁷ Sachsenhausen was established as the principal concentration camp for the Berlin area in Germany. It was located near Oranienburg, Germany. When the camp was opened in 1936, it housed mainly political opponents, criminal offenders, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses and other "asocials" such as Roma and Sinti and, later, Soviet civilians. The camp ultimately included more than 40 sub-camps concentrated around the armaments industries of northern Germany. Prisoners were forced to perform hard labor. SS doctors conducted medical experiments on prisoners and a gallows, shooting gallery, and gas chamber allowed the SS to directly kill prisoners in Sachsenhausen. The number of Jewish prisoners varied over the course of the camp's existence, but most Jewish prisoners were deported from Sachsenhausen to other concentration camps, most often Auschwitz-Birkenau. Soviet forces liberated the camp on April 22, 1945. According to one witness' account available from [Yad Vashem](#), Hermann Hirsch died in Oranienberg on November 5, 1942.

⁵⁸ Auschwitz-Birkenau was a network of camps built and operated by Germany just outside the Polish town of Oswiecim (renamed 'Auschwitz' by the Germans) in Polish areas annexed by Germany during World War II. It is estimated that the SS and police deported at a minimum 1.3 million people (approximately 1.1 million of which were Jews) to the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex between 1940 and 1945. Camp authorities murdered 1.1 million of these prisoners.

⁵⁹ *Shiva*, literally "seven," is the weeklong mourning period in Judaism for first-degree relatives: father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister and spouse. The ritual is referred to as "sitting *shiva*." Immediately after burial, first-degree relatives assume the status of "mourner." This state lasts for seven days, during which the family members traditionally gather in one home and receive visitors.

old children . . . very beautiful. I just . . . there was no way to imagine that anybody would kill a baby. That just didn't make any sense. I've learned a lot since then, but that just didn't make any sense at that time. I kept that with me until I finally volunteered for the draft in the army and then made that a goal of mine—to get sent to Germany so I could find them, which also ended up a disappointment.

It was an interesting feeling: finally finding out that you were in fact orphaned, that your mom and dad are dead, that you don't have any parents. I tried to compensate in some strange ways. I would tell myself, and sometimes tell my friends, that I was luckier than they were because they're going to have to live through their parents dying and I'd already passed that. I got myself to believe it. I got myself to believe that . . . that I was one of the fortunate few.

The really weird thing is that, back in 1991, I attended the first Hidden Child Conference.⁶⁰ [I] sat in a session with a lot of other people my age who had been children during the Holocaust, who had been hidden with a family somewhere by their parents. Later their parents came back, and their life, they felt, was very traumatic because of the things that their parents had gone through, and that [was] how they related to each other. I left that meeting where everybody was telling me that I was the lucky one because I didn't have to go through that. That still blows me away, but it's . . . Growing up in Atlanta—growing up anywhere, I imagine—but in the situation that I was in, at first not knowing what the situation was with my family, if I were going to get together . . . But never really having a nurturing parent, somebody that you knew you could rely on, not just to discipline you but to also hear what your fears are and live through your trials . . . [it's] pretty tough . . .

<interview pauses, then resumes>

Looking back on my approach to my religion, I remember that looking at letters from my father in particular, he pleaded with us to remain true to the faith and to be diligent in observing and so on. Those letters never came to me. I never saw them until many years later. My brother Asher, who is obviously the most religious of our family, took them very, very seriously. He also tried to get my brother, Jack, and myself to

⁶⁰ The Hidden Child Foundation was established in 1991 and held its first meeting in New York City, New York. Members are former children who survived the Holocaust by hiding, either physically or under assumed identities.

follow suit. There was a lot of pressure. He kind of gave up on Jack fairly early on in life. He was with Jack in France. I was not with any of my siblings in France. So I was the project, if you will.

When Asher left to go to New York, to go to the Yeshiva, one of his first goals was to find a way to get me there as well.⁶¹ I remember when I was *bar mitzvahed*, I was approached by someone afterward to go to cantorial school in New York.⁶² They said I had a fantastic voice. All this time, in my vanity, I believed all that bullshit. It turns out later on, these were people, they were friends of my brother, Asher, who, like they sent him to go to Yeshiva, they wanted to send me to go to Yeshiva. I still like to think I had a fairly nice voice, but I wasn't being scouted for Hollywood, that's for sure. I chose not to go. I remember responding to them that I was quite flattered, but that I'd been moving around so much, that I'd been trying to find a niche, a place where I could feel like I belonged, and Atlanta was beginning to be that place, and I just did not want to pick up and move again. I didn't go.

Of course, the results were, in a way, what my brother had feared. That is that the environment around me was such that very few people observed Shabbat. No one my age observed Shabbat. Very few people observed the laws of *Kashrut* [kosher], at least outside of the house. It wasn't too long . . . I'm trying to remember when it was . . . most of my friends were selling colors at football games on Saturdays. I became very envious of that because they would make anywhere up from three to six dollars a Saturday, which was a hell of money. Of course, this would show up when we were in the poker games and they had more money to throw around than I did. After awhile, I decided that I wanted to do that as well. I remember that Rabbi Hyman Friedman, who was assistant rabbi at Shearith Israel, who was in charge of the youth, was very interested in me. When he found out that I was going to be selling colors at a football game on Saturday, he came up to me and asked me how much I could make during that. I told him I could make as much as six dollars. He offered to have me wash his car on Sunday for six dollars, which was

⁶¹ *Yeshiva* (Hebrew for "sitting") is a Jewish educational institution for religious instruction that is equivalent to high school. It also refers to a *Talmudic* college for unmarried male students from their teenage years to their early twenties. Yeshiva University was founded in 1886 in New York City, New York. It is the oldest institution of higher learning in the United States that combines Jewish scholarship with studies in the liberal arts, sciences, medicine, law, business, social work, Jewish studies, education, and psychology.

⁶² The *chazzan* (cantor) is the official in charge of music or chants and leads liturgical prayer and chanting in the synagogue.

outrageous. That's like asking somebody to wash their car for 50 dollars now, maybe for 100 dollars. Six dollars in the late 1940's was a lot of money. I, number one, felt guilty about taking his money like that because he certainly wasn't made of gold, and number two, I really wanted to do it. I really wanted to be like everybody else. That was sort of like a beginning, you might say, because after that—after selling colors—I started taking jobs on Saturday. Many more jobs were available that way. I would switch from job to job. Almost every job really relied on being available on Saturday.

By the time that I was already out of high school and at Georgia Tech, I even began to slacken on my dietary laws as well. I remember even ordering a ham sandwich one time at Georgia Tech Commissary and I looked around and nothing happened. So I ordered another one! <laughing> No, not really. That's really what led up to the change that went on when I was in the army. Before I went to the army, my education . . . when I got out of Oak Smith High School . . . I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life. I know most, many of my friends said they envied me because I had talent. They knew that I was going to be a commercial artist. That was a foregone conclusion for them. It was for them, but it wasn't for me, because actually, I wanted to be a cartoonist. That's what I enjoyed doing more than anything else. Anyway, for the lack of not knowing where to go and also for not having the resources of places where I could go, I went to the Atlanta Division of the University of Georgia and majored in art. While there, I got into the art program. Looking back at it, it was a very sophisticated art program, but I wasn't very sophisticated. My idea of art was replicating the [\[unintelligible, sounds like "crambre," clip 6-6:30\]](#), just trying to make something look the way it is.

In the labs, I saw this one guy who sort of became my mentor. He had this about ten foot long piece of glass, and he was taking cans of paint, and just pouring them on there like that. He would take a cigarette and dip his ashes along the place like that. It was . . . I looked at that [and] I said, "What the hell is he doing?" I thought it was the weirdest thing in the world. Later on he showed me some of the things that he could do in a realistic fashion or in a more realistic fashion. He was fantastic. He was a great artist. I think he and I agreed that this was . . . I wasn't ready for this. I had to learn a whole lot more about art, about the history of art, because I really didn't know that much about it. Basically, I was disillusioned because the school and art courses turned out to be easier

than high school and my high school was a pretty easy high school. I dropped out for a year and I went to work full time at Ultimate Brothers Wholesale Grocer Warehouse. That year taught me a very important lesson: I did not want to work in a warehouse for the rest of my life. So I decided, "What do I want to do now?"

Most of the guys that I grew up with, my **DSR** friends, were either at the Atlanta Division of University of Georgia or they were at University of Georgia in Athens.⁶³ Some went to Alabama. Most of them were in university around there. One of my friends was at Georgia Tech, Abe Israel.⁶⁴ He wanted somebody else to go there. He started conning me into going to Georgia Tech. He said, "Tech is perfect for you." He says, "You're great at math and you're an artist, and you combine math and art, you get architecture." I said, "What's architecture?" I started looking it up, and I said, "This looks interesting." He has vague memories of that, but I remember it very well because that's what influenced me to think about architecture. I signed up to go to Georgia Tech. I didn't have the qualifications as far as courses were concerned. I needed a physics course, which I never took in high school. So I took physics at night and I absolutely loved it. That's really what sold me on Georgia Tech, because I realized, "I really liked this stuff. This is great!" I went to Tech and I worked full time. I took 21 hours, which was the maximum that you could take if you were in the top 10 percent of your class. I still virtually made the Dean's List every time. I made honor society for the School of Architecture.

I was doing quite well, but then . . . from quarter to quarter, the courses started becoming harder. I began to realize that, "Hey, I'm not gonna be able to do this for a long time. I'm not gonna be able to work fulltime to support myself and go to school and do well." I got to thinking about what I was going to do with myself. I remembered that there still was a GI Bill.⁶⁵ The Korean War was going on and there was still the GI Bill.⁶⁶ I

⁶³ The University of Georgia, founded in 1785, also referred to as 'UGA' or simply 'Georgia,' is an American public research university in the city of Athens in the U.S. state of Georgia.

⁶⁴ The Georgia Institute of Technology (commonly referred to as 'Georgia Tech' or 'Tech') is a public research university in Atlanta, Georgia, in the United States. It is a part of the University System of Georgia. The educational institution was founded in 1885 as the Georgia School of Technology as part of Reconstruction plans to build an industrial economy in the post-Civil War Southern United States.

⁶⁵ The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the 'G.I. Bill,' was a law that provided a range of benefits for returning World War II veterans. It provides low-cost mortgages, low-interest loans to start a business, as well as educational assistance to service members, veterans, and their dependents.

decided, "Well, maybe what I ought to do is think in terms of volunteering for the draft." I was exempt from the draft because I was in the top 10 percent of my class. I thought, and I remembered that I really wanted to go to Europe and try to find my brother and sister. That was another draw to doing that.

By the time that I was in summer school for my second year—my sophomore year—I realized that I wasn't that sure that architecture was what I wanted to do, because most of the guys in there and I were not really of the same ilk. Everybody hated math. I loved math. [I thought,] "What am I doing here? Maybe I'm the one that's wrong, and these guys are right and I'm wrong." There were a lot of factors. I went on ahead and I volunteered for the draft. I went to the draft board and said, "Take away my exemption and take me." They gave me a choice, and they picked a date, and I went. That was it.

It was while I was in the army that people started getting interested in me as a Jew, which was really strange. During my basic training there was a sergeant there who was really one of the most intelligent people I'd ever met, except that he was almost virtually illiterate. He couldn't pronounce my name to save his life because—think about it—it only has one vowel and all these consonants. He was trying to pronounce it phonetically from reading it, and he just couldn't do it. That was beside the point. The thing was he knew that I was Jewish and he knew that a Jew is supposed to attend services on Friday night. He came up to me one . . . we were having a GI Party. A GI Party is when everybody scrubs down the barracks on Friday night for Saturday inspection. He comes up to me, he says, "Hirsch, put on your Class A's and go to Chapel." I wasn't about to do that because I'm not gonna say, "Hey, I'm a Jew. I'm getting out of the GI Party." Uh-uh. That wasn't gonna work. He says, "I'm ordering you. You're gonna go." He told everybody else, he says, "Hirsch does not want to go to Chapel, but I'm making him go to Chapel, and don't you guys give him a hard time about it." So I went to Chapel, came back and then started scrubbing to make sure that I did my part. It was interesting that I didn't want to go, but he wanted . . . he made me go!

⁶⁶ The Korean War began when North Korean forces invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950. American troops entered the war in defense of the Republic of Korea to the south against the Soviet-backed Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the north. Fighting ended on July 27, 1953, when an armistice agreement was signed maintaining a border between the Koreas near the 38th Parallel and creating the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between the two Korean nations that still exists today.

It turns out I was only a Jew in the outfit. Later on, when I got to Camp Chaffey⁶⁷ and particularly when I got to Ft. Lewis, Washington,⁶⁸ there were a lot of very devout Christians who saw me as a goldmine of information. Why? There were other there but they didn't seek them out. They sought me out. They wanted to know about Judaism and . . . they had all these questions. I was good enough of a bullshit artist to fake anything, but I knew to myself that I was not straight. I didn't know the answers, but I made like I knew the answers. They got me to thinking that, "Something's wrong here. These guys are so interested in what my religion's about and this is why my parents were killed—because they were Jews. My brother and sister—if they're dead—were killed because they were Jews. Here I'm giving up Judaism and I don't even know what the hell it is. This is . . . I don't have the right to do that." So I made myself a promise that I was going to delve more into Judaism. While I was in the army I wasn't going to have all that much opportunity to become a practicing Jew, but I could to some degree start going to services. If I got to the point where I knew everything that . . . I knew what it was that I was giving up, then I would have the right to give it up. That was my promise to myself. I started going to Chapel then, and these guys started going to Chapel with me because they wanted to hear me daven, because they heard that I was leading the service.⁶⁹ What they didn't know was that the people asked me to lead the service not because I had a great voice, but because they wanted to hear a Jew with a Southern accent. They wanted Hebrew with a Southern accent! So I led the services there, but that was a big turning point in my life.

A lot of things happened to me while I was in the army, and it was one of those experiences that I've written a book about.⁷⁰ This is not the time to start telling army stories because I could keep you here for another 20 hours. One of the most important things that happened to me really was my realization that Judaism is something that is

⁶⁷ Established as Camp Chaffee in 1941 in western Arkansas, adjacent to the city of Fort Smith, it was renamed to Fort Chaffee in 1956. Fort Chaffee has served as a United States Army base, training camp, prisoner-of-war camp, and refugee camp. The base was closed in 1995 and became Fort Chaffee Maneuver Training Center, an Army National Guard installation.

⁶⁸ Fort Lewis is a United States military facility located 9.1 miles (14.6 km) south- southwest of Tacoma, Washington. In 2010, it merged with the United States Air Force's McChord Air Force Base. Joint Base Lewis-McChord is now a training and mobilization center for all services.

⁶⁹ Davening is the act of reciting Jewish liturgical prayers during which the prayer sways or rocks lightly.

⁷⁰ Benjamin Hirsch is the author of two autobiographical books: *Hearing a Different Drummer: A Holocaust Survivor's Search for Identity* (published in 2000) and *Home Is Where You Find It* (published in 2006).

really quite important to me. Once I got out of the service, I started to pay much more attention to it.

When I went back to Georgia Tech, I kept looking for an opportunity to start doing religious buildings because, besides the many intellectual endeavors that I'm interested in . . . Mathematics is one. History is another. I love history. I love history of art, history of architecture as well. In history of architecture in particular, you see that the buildings that we talk about and that we study from ages past, are all religious structures. Those are the ones that are important. That's the mark of a civilization: how people celebrated their belief in their G-d in the form of a building. I was just looking for the opportunity to be able to do a church, or a synagogue, anything. I just wanted to do something. As luck would have it, I never, ever had a class in which our project was to do a church or a synagogue. Everybody else did—the one class in front of me, the class behind me. Somehow I never got to it. By the time it was time to do the thesis, I chose a synagogue. I went to P. M. Heffernan,⁷¹ who was then the head of the school, and he said, “Well, the only way you're gonna get to do a synagogue for a thesis is you're gonna have to find a real client, because I can't be your client. I can't advise you what to do. I don't know what a synagogue's all about. So if you find a real client, find somebody who's looking to design a synagogue, then I'll let you do it.” That's how I met Rabbi Emanuel Feldman.⁷² I asked my brother, Jack, if he knew anybody. He had a client who was the vice president of Congregation Beth Jacob.⁷³ He introduced me to Rabbi Emanuel Feldman because they were thinking about building a synagogue. That was my thesis. My thesis was designing a synagogue for Congregation Beth Jacob on the side of Briar Cliff Road, which now has condos on it.

I remember I started working on the building and I did my thesis research but there was no design in that part, in that semester, that quarter. When I started designing, I

⁷¹ Paul M. “P.M.” Heffernan (1911-1987) completed his master's degree in architecture at Harvard University in 1935 and joined the Georgia Institute of Technology faculty in 1938. Heffernan designed several campus buildings before taking over as director of the School of Architecture in 1956.

⁷² Emanuel Feldman (b. 1927) is an Orthodox rabbi and Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Beth Jacob of Atlanta, Georgia. He was born to a family of Orthodox rabbis dating back more than seven generations. During his nearly 40 years at Beth Jacob beginning in 1952, he nurtured the growth of Atlanta's Orthodox community from a city with two small Orthodox synagogues to a community large enough to support Jewish day schools, *yeshivas*, girls' schools and a *kollel*. In 1991, his son, Rabbi Ilan Feldman, succeeded him.

⁷³ Beth Jacob is an Orthodox synagogue on LaVista Road in Atlanta founded in 1942 by former members of Ahavath Achim who were looking for a more Orthodox congregation. Beth Jacob is now Atlanta's largest Orthodox congregation. The first location was a converted house on Boulevard.

realized that the site is too small to do everything that they need on it and to get the parking that they needed on there. I called Rabbi Feldman and I said, "Don't buy the property." I said, "You'll never make it." I said, "There's just not enough land to do what you need to do." He says, "What are you gonna do? Are you gonna give up your thesis?" I said, "No. No, I'm gonna fake it. But you guys can't fake it." I remember when I was presenting my thesis, I had six 30 inch by 40 inch boards. The first board, of course, had a sight plan on it, and I put in Hebrew, '*Beit HaMikdash*.'⁷⁴ One of the professors, whom I knew before I went into the army as "Frank" and when I came back he was "Dr. Beckum"—he wanted to be called that by everybody, but he was still Frank to me . . . he was a real badass.⁷⁵ He gave everybody a hard time. He looked at that and he says, "Ben, how do I know you're not calling me a son of a bitch right there?" I looked at him, I said, "Frank, you'll never know," and went on from there. That's when I started explaining to the jury, which Frank Beckum was part of, about my thesis. I said, "You're gonna notice that I only have 20 cars parking here." I said, "But there's a reason for this. This is an Orthodox synagogue, and on Saturday, and on holidays they all walk to the synagogue. You can bear this out with . . . anybody who's Orthodox can tell you this. And that's the reason we don't need anymore cars than that." And they bought it! I did real well.

From that point on, I wanted to design synagogues. I never was able to get . . . who's gonna give a project like a synagogue to a young neophyte out of school who doesn't have an experience. What happened . . . I opened my office in 1962. I had to work for three years for different architects in order to be able to pass my registration. In 1964, I read in an article that there was a group of survivors called *Eternal Life-Hemshech*.⁷⁶ They're

⁷⁴ *Beit HaMikdash* [Hebrew: the sanctified house] refers to the Temple in Jerusalem.

⁷⁵ Arthur Franklin Beckum (died 1990) was a native of Wrens, Georgia and was on the Georgia Tech faculty from 1955 until 1990. After serving in the army during World War II, Beckum began his association obtained both his B. S. (1950) and bachelor's degree in architecture (1952) from Georgia Tech. He later earned a master's degree in fine arts from Princeton University. Beckum returned to Tech in 1955 as a professor and was on the faculty there until his death.

⁷⁶ *Eternal Life-Hemshech* is an organization of Atlanta Holocaust survivors, their descendants and friends dedicated to commemorating the 6,000,000 Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Approximately 100 Holocaust survivors living in Atlanta, Georgia founded *Eternal Life-Hemshech* in 1964. *Hemshech* is a Hebrew word that means "continuation." Their purpose was to "perpetuate the memory of their beloved families along with all of the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust." The group wanted the memorial to serve as a place to say *Kaddish*, the Jewish prayer for the dead. The committee was comprised Abraham Gastfiend, Mala Gastfiend, Gaston Nitka, Rubin Lansky, and Rubin Pichulik. Dr. Leon Rosen served as chairman and Lola Lansky and Nathan Bromberg were co- chairs.

survivors of the Holocaust. They were gonna build a Memorial to the Six Million.⁷⁷ They were having a meeting across the street from the Atlanta Jewish Community Center and the public was invited. I said, "I'm gonna go to this meeting." I went and I listened. They presented on an easel a 20-inch by 30-inch drawing, rendering that was done by Georgia Marble Company. It was a white tombstone, about six feet long and about four feet high. It had the number 'Six Million' on it and it had candelabra in white marble on top of it with six candles. This was gonna be their thing. They were doing it on a piece of property they bought at Greenwood Cemetery and it was gonna cost . . . 6,500 dollars.⁷⁸ They had a vote and a little bit of a discussion. It passed unanimously and that was it. I waited till the meeting was over and I went over to the people who were running the meeting. It was a Dr. **Leon Rosen**. He was an attorney. He was kind of the head of the group, you could tell. Then Mrs. Lansky was there and a few other people. I introduced myself. I said, "You don't know me. My name is Ben Hirsch. I'm a survivor as well—a child survivor. And I'm an architect. And I would like the opportunity to show you what I can do, because I think that I can do something that is gonna be much more meaningful than a tombstone. It won't cost you a thing. I will not charge you a penny. Just allow me the chance to submit something to you." Most of them were poo poo-ing, saying, "No, no, it's already been approved. We don't want to do that." But Mrs. Lansky and Dr. Rosen said, "No, no, no, no, no. Let's give this guy a chance. Let's do it. Let's do it." They turned to me, they said, "Okay, you have two weeks. In two weeks we have to give an answer to Georgia Marble. Do we accept your \$6,500 offer or not? Now you've got to design this for us and it's got to be within our budget."

You hear all these kind of weird stories about people dreaming up designs, but then this. I'm not sure I dreamt it because I'm not sure I ever fell asleep. That night I was

⁷⁷ Initially, the *Eternal Life-Hemshech* planned for a monument in the form of an inscribed marble slab. Architect Benjamin Hirsch proposed the more substantial design that exists today. It is an open-air structure composed of four L-shaped walls of varying heights made from granite blocks. The walls interlock to form a single "interior" space. In the center of the space are six white torches, which rise above the walls and are lit during special ceremonies represent the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust. The torches rise from a black granite coffin that contains the ashes of an unknown victim from the concentration camp at Dachau, Germany. Memorial bronze plaques and stone markers are located throughout the monument. The Memorial to the Six Million was dedicated on April 25, 1965 in Greenwood Cemetery in Atlanta, Georgia. It was the second Holocaust memorial to be built in the United States. Hirsch's creation won a national design award in 1968. The memorial was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on April 21, 2008.

⁷⁸ Greenwood Cemetery opened in Atlanta, Georgia in 1904. It is designed in the Lawn style, with long vistas in all directions. Greenwood has a large Jewish section.

just lying in bed, thinking about it. About two or three in the morning, all of the sudden, I said, "I got it!" I got up and I started sketching so I wouldn't forget what I was sketching. Then I went back to sleep. Then the next morning I completed my sketches and I made a clay model of it. I called Dr. Rosen and Mrs. Lansky, and I said, "I've got something to show you." What I showed them is virtually what you see there today, with just a few refinements of the memorial. They liked the idea. They said, "What you need to do, though, is you need to help us raise money for it, because we think it's going to cost more than the 6,500 dollars." I said, "Whatever you want me to do, I'll do." They wanted me to go see the various survivors with means, and then talk to them and sell them on the idea. I would take the model with me and we would go from one house, from house to house.

We sold the idea and we got Abe Besser, who was a survivor, to be the builder.⁷⁹ That was an interesting dynamic because he kept wanting to change the design, and I was steadfast and would not allow it to happen. He kept . . . when he told me that, "There's no way that we're going to be able to get people to build stone two-sided walls by the perch because they're gonna sell by the face foot, and that's gonna be thousands upon thousands of dollars," I said, "I'll find somebody." And I did. I found somebody that I knew had done work on one of my projects before. They built it by the perch. It's the last job they ever did by the perch. Because it cost . . . they lost a lot of money on it, but it was done beautifully. They built all the . . . mock-ups that you build so that the wall can be built with the right taper and everything. I set to that, which is what Abe did, to help them do it. It was *schnorred* [Yiddish: begged for]. The poles I got from **Sidney Golden**, who's in the scrap metal business. I said, "Just get us some light poles without stanchions." So we did. It was actually . . . it ended up being built for 8,500 dollars.⁸⁰ It won a national design award, which is . . . I'm sure that no project that ever won a national design award was built that inexpensively. When I finished this project, I sat down . . . counting my laurels, if you will. I was so proud of what I'd done and felt so good about it. I sat back and I said, "Well, what am I gonna do now? I'm 32 years old and I've achieved my life's goal. What

⁷⁹ Abraham Besser is a Holocaust survivor from Poland, who immigrated to the United States after World War II and started a construction company in Atlanta, Georgia. His story is available from The Breman Museum at <http://www.thebreman.org/Research/Cuba-Family-Archives/Oral-Histories/ID/818/Besser-Abe>.

⁸⁰ *Hemshech's* 1965 financial report states that the completed monument cost \$11,000. This included \$2,400 for the small plot of land, \$7,924.21 for construction, and \$440 for landscaping. Funds for the memorial were raised entirely within the Holocaust survivor community in Atlanta.

now?"

That was quickly overridden by my brother, Jack. He had the idea that now that we have this . . . he considered it a teaching tool—the memorial. He decided that he was going to meet with the people in the community who were in charge of it, of Jewish education, to help them in teaching the Holocaust and to use this as a catalyst. Quite a few people met at Jack's house. There was Hans Erman, who was head of the Atlanta Bureau of Jewish Education.⁸¹ There was George Alterman, whom Jack used to live with and work for. Anybody that had any interest at all in Jewish education was there. The heads of the various Sunday Schools and Hebrew Schools and something like that. We got to talking about what is being taught to Jewish children in the Hebrew schools and the Sunday Schools about the Holocaust. We found out, to our dismay, that the answer was zilch, nadda, nothing. This was in 1965, toward the end of 1965. The memorial was dedicated in April of 1965 and this was a few months thereafter. I was appalled. I turned to the head of the Bureau of Jewish Education, thinking he would know the answer to this, [and asked], "Why? Why are you not teaching about the Holocaust?" He said quite candidly, "We feel that if we would start teaching something so gruesome, that it would turn the children off, and particularly their parents would get so upset with us for traumatizing their children that they would take them out of their Hebrew Schools and their Sunday Schools. Therefore we can't do it." So then, we gotta go at that point. I had a new project—to see that the Holocaust gets taught, first in the Jewish schools, and to think, of course, about teaching it in the other schools as well. I did talk to the ADL [Anti-Defamation League], and they started having things available to the public schools, where you could go to speak to various students, but they had to find teachers who were in the right mindset to try and even broach the topic.⁸²

At 1965—we're talking about 20 years after [the Holocaust]—there's still, at that point, were very few survivors who would talk, who would go and talk to a school. Lola

⁸¹ Founded in 1945, the Atlanta Bureau of Jewish Education was created to coordinate Jewish education efforts in the local community. Hans Erman, a German Holocaust survivor born in 1914, served as its Executive Director from 1963-1969.

⁸² The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) is an international Jewish non-governmental organization based in the United States. The ADL was founded in 1913 "to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all." Today, the ADL describes itself as "the nation's premier civil rights/human relations agency."

Lansky was one,⁸³ Isaac Goodfriend was another,⁸⁴ and I was the other. We were the only three who would even be available to speak to a school. Everybody else would just not want to talk about it. This went on for many years like that, until maybe the 1980's [or] the mid-1980's, until finally people started saying, "Well, take me with you when you go. Maybe I'll see how it is and maybe I'll decide I want to do it too." Ultimately, as the survivors got older and older, and realized that they had something to say, and they didn't want to leave this world without somehow telling what happened, many of them did start to talk. There are still many of them that went to their graves never telling anyone—including their own families, which is a very sad thing . . .

My first opportunity to do a synagogue came in 1970 or so. No, I take it back. You wouldn't call it a chapel at Camp Barney Medintz.⁸⁵ It's a synagogue. That was really my first opportunity. **Frank Fuhrmann**, who was the director of the Atlanta Jewish Community Center,⁸⁶ saw the Memorial to the Six Million and he was most impressed with that. He had a benefactor in the name of Erwin Zaban, who wanted to build a chapel

⁸³ Lola Borkowska Lansky (1926-1999) was a Polish Jew who survived the concentration camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Ravensbruck, Buchenwald, and Bergen-Belsen. In 1964, she co-founded Eternal Life-Hemshech, a membership organization for survivors living in Atlanta, and in 1965 led the campaign to have a Holocaust monument erected in Atlanta. Her efforts resulted in the Memorial to the Six Million at Greenwood Cemetery.

⁸⁴ Cantor Isaac Goodfriend (1924-2009) served at Ahavath Achim in Atlanta from 1966 until his retirement in 1995 as Cantor Emeritus. Cantor Goodfriend was born into a Hassidic family in Poland. At the age of 16, he was interned in a German labor camp in Piotrkow, Poland. Escaping in 1944, he was hidden by a Polish farmer and was the only member of his family to survive the war. After the war, he attended the Berlin Conservatory of Music, McGill Conservatory of Music in Montreal, Conservatoire Provincial de Quebec, and later in Ohio at the Music School Settlement and Baldwin Wallace College. Before coming to Atlanta he served as cantor at Shaare Zion in Montreal, Canada in 1952, and later at Cleveland, Ohio's Community Temple.

⁸⁵ Camp Barney Medintz is an overnight Jewish summer camp near Cleveland, Georgia in the North Georgia mountains. It was founded in 1963 and named in honor of Barney Medintz, a prominent Jewish leader in Atlanta, who died in 1960.

⁸⁶ Known today as The Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta (MJCCA), MJCCA has served the Atlanta Jewish community for over 100 years. The Atlanta Jewish Community Center (AJCC) on Peachtree Road in Midtown preceded it. MJCCA is the primary Jewish community center in Atlanta. It is located in Dunwoody, north of the city, and offers family-centric programs and events with programs, events, and classes that enrich the quality of family life. Their programs include preschool, camping, fitness and sports, Jewish life and learning, arts and culture and social and educational programs. It was named in honor of Bernard Marcus, one of the co-founders of Home Depot, who gave a major gift to the capital campaign.

at Camp Barney Medintz in honor of his twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.⁸⁷ He approached me to see if I would do that. I was very happy to do it. They gave me a Judaistic topographic map of the hundred acres of the camp and said, "Pick your spot. As long as there's not a cabin already there, just pick your spot." That was a very interesting opportunity, and I designed that particular project, across the lake from the main part of the camp . . . able to reflect from the lake. It's an open-air thing. It got a lot of acclaim. It was written up in a lot of magazines, for some magazines because of its appearance, but others because of its unique structural concept, because it was done . . . on the roof . . . if you were flying above, it looks like a Star of David. It had six piers laid to form a hexagon and it's really a series of hyperbolic paraboloids⁸⁸—I don't want to get too technical—which lean on each other to form this folded plate-type *Magen David* [the Star of David]. It's such an efficient structure that actually, if we could have gotten a 4 foot by 8 foot long enough—the largest number would have been a 4 foot by 8 foot piece of wood. As it turns out, we used, like four and a quarter by nine and a quarter glulam laminated wood. We had a span from pier to pier of 51 feet, and that was being done by 4 foot by 8 foot, and 2 foot by 6 foot, and 2 foot by 4 foot [pieces of wood]. It was really quite amazing.

The other amazing part is that it was built by **Mene Cardell**, who was the caretaker of the camp, who's a real legend up there. He said he can build anything as long as I draw it up for him. I drew it up for him. I drew it . . . to get it on the sheet, I drew it at a three thirty-second scale, which is not a standard scale. I gave him an architectural scale, I said, "Here, here's the thing. Here, use this so you can do the measuring." I said, "And if you have any questions, give me a call." He called me about five or six times, and I went up there and advised him on what to do. He built this thing all by himself. He cut down . . . the site that we built on, there were a lot of pine trees and he cut down all the trees. The 18-inch pines that were on that site, we hewed them down and cut them down,

⁸⁷ Native Atlantan, philanthropist and community leader Erwin Zaban (1921-2010) was known by many as the 'Godfather of the Jewish Community.' After quitting school to help in his father's Depression-era business at age 15, Zaban built successful businesses worth billions of dollars and donated millions to worthy causes. He worked alongside his parents to build Zep Manufacturing Company. Zep later merged with National Linen and became National Service Industries, a Fortune 500 Company. He donated and raised money for undeveloped land in Dunwoody that became Zaban Park, home of the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta. He donated money to the Jewish Home, for which the Zaban Tower is named. He helped create the homeless couples' shelter at The Temple which bears his name.

⁸⁸ A hyperbolic paraboloid is an infinite three-dimensional surface that is shaped like a horse saddle. More about the Doris Zaban Chapel can be found at http://benjaminhirsch.com/architecture_268.html.

and then we split them in half, and made the pews out of those. The pews, they were half logs. It's probably still the way it is today. It was a wonderful experience. I lost my tail on it. I think I made about ten cents and hour on the thing, but I got a lot of satisfaction out of seeing it done and seeing it work that well.

That also gave me enough recognition so that when the time came for Or VeShalom to buy a site on North Druid Hills [Road] and build a new synagogue around 1970—many of my friends that I had grown up with were members of Or VeShalom—they came to me and said, "We want you to design this thing."⁸⁹ Unbeknownst to them, another member of the synagogue had gone to Warren Epstein because he had done some apartment work for them and they wanted him to design it.⁹⁰ They had a little get-together on the thing and finally **Victor Maslia** decided that, "I want the two of you to design it." Talk about backhanded compliments! He said, "I want Warren to keep you in line as far as cost is concerned because I don't think you can design it economically. And I want you to provide the design because Warren can't design." Warren didn't like what he said and I didn't like what he said, but the result . . . I did the preliminary design in my office. Then Warren had just kind of come by and took a look to see what I had. As a result of that, we finally formed a partnership, Epstein and Hirsch, which we had for about eight and a half years.

The interesting thing is that I did the design for Or VeShalom. When they were ready to go from the preliminary design phase to start building this, to go to the work and drawing phase, we had a meeting at our office. There was a building committee of six that was gonna meet with us, and out of those six, 32 showed up, including the Rabbi [Robert] Ichay.⁹¹ He was the new rabbi at the time. When the meeting started, there were two out of 32 that were in favor of the design as it was. There were 30 who had different degrees of dislike for it to the point of hating it, saying that, number one, it didn't look like a

⁸⁹ Or VeShalom was established by refugees of the Ottoman Empire, namely from Turkey and the Isle of Rhodes. The Sephardic/Traditional congregation began in 1920 and was based at Central and Woodward Avenues until 1948 when it moved to a larger building on North Highland Road. The current building for Or VeShalom is on North Druid Hills Road.

⁹⁰ Warren M. Epstein graduated from Georgia Tech. He was involved with the design of Or VeShalom, Atlanta's first Sephardic Jewish synagogue, in the 1960's. For a short time he was in practice with Benjamin Hirsch in the firm of Epstein and Hirsch. He and Kyle Epstein opened the architecture firm of Warren Epstein & Associates in 1978.

⁹¹ Rabbi Robert Ichay (1929-2012) led Or VeShalom for 33 years. Upon retirement he was named Rabbi Emeritus. While leading Or VeShalom, Rabbi Ichay helped grow the congregation to more than 500 families, up from less than 200. He also helped lead the congregation into a new building in 1971, less than two years after he arrived in 1969. He was born in Tunisia and educated in England and Zimbabwe.

synagogue. I said, "Well, what does a synagogue look like?" It wasn't . . . it didn't look like what they were used to seeing. Rabbi Ichay was one of the ones that did like the way that it was. By the time the meeting was completed, my job was to try to explain to them why I did what I did. Because basically, they had . . . there were some unique problems. They had a program, a wish list that would require about 30,000 square feet of space. They had a budget that would allow for about 18,000 square feet of space. I had to design a 30,000 square foot building in 18,000 square feet, which is what I did, with a lot of multi-use spaces. That really is what ended up controlling the design a great deal. That, plus the fact that I was very much enamored by the wooden synagogues of Poland. I'm sure that influenced it somewhat as well. By the time the meeting was over, they took a vote, and 31 were in favor and two were opposed. The design passed, went, and we started working on it.

While it was under construction, we decided that we would submit the design to the GRA, which was the [Guild for Religious Architecture](#). They have their conventions once a year, the national, in various parts of the country. As it turns out, I had received a National Design Award for the Memorial to the Six Million at the GRA Conference in Miami in 1968. So I was not unfamiliar with this group. We went on ahead and did something, did a presentation based on the model because the building was just barely under construction at this point—we were just getting out of the ground—and submitted that to them, and got a call saying that we won a National Design Award, that it was an honor award, and I should come and be there for the presentation. So the secretary got me first-class tickets to L.A., and we went and got an award for that. After we received that award, the two people in the committee who were deadily opposed to it said, "This is *our* synagogue! This is *our* design!" They loved it to pieces to the point that . . . as we speak today, they have changed their minds, apparently, because they have built an addition in front of it that sort of looks like a Hollywood set for a Persian movie maybe or something like that! It's almost totally covered up the building. It's very sad. I'm glad I have the pictures that I have, before that was done.

Jane: Can I switch gears for a moment? You, I think, were probably about the time in your life—if not, way past—where you met your wife and started your family. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Ben: Yes . . . I met my wife when I was at Georgia Tech in my fourth year. In fact, she . . . I met her at Warren Epstein's apartment. He was then not my partner but he was, we were working at the same place, the same architect's office, at James Wise and Associates.⁹² He was having a cocktail party there. I think he had just gotten divorced. I remember I was sitting on the steps. I didn't have a date. She came in there with a date. She walked up the steps and spilled her drink all over me. That got my attention. I think that was the idea. We started going out a little bit, and then . . . I went into my fifth year. When I went into my fifth year that was pretty grueling at Georgia Tech. I just did not have time to do any dating at all while I was doing that, at least while I was doing my thesis research. Then, after I graduated, I went to work for James Wise and Associates for a while and I was dating Jackie for a little time. Then I decided that I needed to work in a small office. I need to find a small office that I could work for and get much more hands-on experience, because Wise . . . his office was fairly large and I was basically doing window details here, maybe got to design a kindergarten room one time and things . . . but there really wasn't much creativity being taken care of there.

I looked around and the only thing that was available was in Macon, Georgia.⁹³ There was an architect at Bernard Webb who was looking for a design-oriented graduate from Georgia Tech to come to work there.⁹⁴ I contacted them, and he was very excited, and he offered me the job. I went down there and Jackie said she wanted to come with me. We went down and looked at . . . the only place that was available there was a duplex. It was a two-bedroom duplex on the Ocmulgee River.⁹⁵ It wasn't the only place available, but it was what Webb had recommended. He knew the people who owned it and I could get it at a reasonable price. Then on the way back, she said, "You know, that's too big for you to live by yourself." I'm a very suggestive type of a person, so I got the idea, I got the hint, and asked if she would come marry me, live with me, then that was it. That's how we . . . it

⁹² James Carl Wise (1904-1988) was an American architect who graduated from Georgia Tech. In 1951, he formed a partnership with William M. Simpson and Hobert W. Aiken. The firm was incorporated in Atlanta, Georgia in January 1959 as Wise Simpson & Aiken, Architects. The firm's projects focused on commercial and government buildings.

⁹³ Macon is a city located in the state of Georgia, United States. Macon lies near the geographic center of the state, approximately 85 miles (137 kilometers) south of Atlanta.

⁹⁴ Bernard A. Webb, Jr., Architect firm was opened in Macon, Georgia in 1946 by Bernard A Webb, Jr (1915-2000), a graduate of Georgia Tech.

⁹⁵ The Ocmulgee River is a 255-mile (410 kilometer) river that runs south-southeast from Atlanta, Georgia through Macon, Georgia. It is a western tributary of the Altamaha River, which then flows into the Atlantic Ocean.

was up and down a little bit there for a while. She changed her mind when we got back, and then her mother called and said she really doesn't mean that. Of course, she didn't know anything about what her mother did. Anyway, what happened though, was I moved to Macon and started working there. After a couple months, we got married in Atlanta and then Jackie moved down into the duplex. We moved back to Atlanta in March of 1960, and started . . . our first child actually was born right around Rosh Hashanah of 1961.⁹⁶

Jane: What did it mean to you to become a father?

Ben: That's a very good question. I'm trying to think what it meant to me then, at that time. I wasn't sure I was prepared for it, to be honest with you. The idea of having a family . . . I knew that ultimately I would like to have a large family. I thought about . . . I'm one of seven and I thought about having seven kids, but at the time that we first started, that was really my wife's initiative, because I just didn't know. I wasn't able . . . I was really more focused on trying to get my life straight, as far as my career and being able to support a family. For instance, when I was at Georgia Tech, I knew that there was no way ever I was gonna get involved with any girl and get married before I finished school. I would never think about getting married unless I knew that I had a job and I knew that I was going toward a career. That's the way that my life is structured, if you will. It's the same way about family. I wasn't sure about being able to support children, but if she was sure about it, then I said, "Okay, I'll go for it." I was rather passive, in a sense.

Our first child was born with many problems—a hole in her heart, disconnected major elements . . . I forget what things that were disconnected. The child could not survive. It survived four or five days. Having lost that child was fairly traumatic, but it made me realize how much I really wanted to have children. So within a year, we had the first child, Shoshana. Then they started . . . about every two years, we had another child.

Dinah was the second one. Dinah was born without an esophagus, which was interesting, to say the least. Thank G-d it was discovered in time. When she was, I think less than a week old, she was operated on by two teams of surgeons—one to remove a piece of the colon and the other to take that piece of colon and use it to connect . . . use it as a

⁹⁶ *Rosh Ha-Shanah* [Hebrew: head of the year; i.e. New Year festival] begins the cycle of High Holy Days. It introduces the Ten Days of Penitence, when Jews examine their souls and take stock of their actions. On the tenth day is *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. The tradition is that on *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, G-d sits in judgment on humanity. Then the fate of every living creature is inscribed in the Book of Life or Death. Prayer and repentance before the sealing of the books on Yom Kippur may revoke these decisions.

substitute esophagus. The only problem with that is that a colon is like a one-way valve. Things can only go in one direction. An esophagus is like a two-way valve so you can regurgitate. Dinah could never regurgitate. She could never . . . excuse me, that operation didn't occur until she was four years old. The operation that did occur was that [they] took what was there and gave her an intrusion . . . it was a hole right here <indicates throat> so she could . . . things that would come in her mouth would then come out of this little hole in here. Then there was a tube put in her stomach. For the first few years of her life—the first four years of her life, and it was supposed to be six years, according to Dr. [William A.] Hopkins—she was fed with a tube.⁹⁷ But Dr. Hopkins mentioned that if you put a colostomy bag on, over the opening here, and allow her to eat food and chew it and mix it with the saliva—saliva is a very important part in the growth of a child—and then take that food and put it in through the tube with a plunger, that that would work. We did that, and nothing . . . That helped because by the time she was four years old, she was ready to have the operation, which was two years before the predicted time that it would be done. Today, she's got four kids of her own and it's a miracle. It's a wonderful miracle.

I have to say that this Dr. William Hopkins was just an incredible doctor. There was much pressure being put on me when Dinah was growing up by friends of ours in the medical community who were living in Atlanta and knew all the new things that there were to know about medicine and said that people all over—New York and everywhere—when babies are born with this kind of a situation, within six months they have the operation to connect up, to take out the colon, and to do this thing. They were driving me crazy, to be honest with you. I went to see Dr. Hopkins and I said, "Look, I love you and have all kind of faith in you. Just tell me what it's all about." I explained to him what they were saying. He says, "If you want to change doctors, you can. I will not operate at that early age." I said, "I'm not saying I want to change doctors. Just tell me why." He says, "Oh, that's simple: I do not have any fatalities. They do." [I said,] "Good answer." I waited, and when she was four years old, then she was ready to go, and that was it.

Then two years after Dinah was born, Michrah was born. Then about almost three years after that, the last child was born. At that point, the obstetricians, Velkoff and Epstein, said, "Absolutely no more, no more, no more children" because my wife is RH-negative

⁹⁷ Dr. William A. Hopkins (1916-1998) was a pioneering surgeon at St. Joseph's Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia.

[blood type] and I'm RH-positive. There were many transfusion problems with various kids. By the time Rafi was born, he was born with **Holland's Membrane**. They didn't think he was gonna live. They said nothing like that. I remember going to a basketball game with my wife—an Atlanta Hawks game—and sitting in front of me were Jake [Dr. Jacob] Epstein and Abe [Dr. Abraham S.] Velkoff, our obstetricians. I suggested . . . I said, "You know, we're thinking about maybe having another child." The whole stadium just about went berserk. He said, "What?! You're crazy! I'm not letting it happen!" Okay, enough! That was the end of that. No more childbearing after that.

Being a parent was very important to me . . . I tried to be a good parent, but I find that, in looking back, that I stayed away from home a great deal. Part of that . . . I'm sure had to do with the fact that my wife was very possessive about childrearing. I felt like I was in the way. I just was more comfortable in my office, in my domain, where I could create things and feel like I was doing something. That's in retrospect. But when it came to school, I was supportive with the kids, I helped them with their homework, I taught them whatever I could teach them.

In the case of Dinah, whenever the tube would come out and she'd have to go to the hospital to have the tube put in, that was my job. I was the one . . . no matter when it was—if it was Saturday, no matter. You have to understand that I'm a very squeamish guy. I faint at the sight of blood. There was one time that I took Dinah to the Emergency Room and there was a new doctor there, an Oriental doctor, who simply did not know how to put the tube in. He kept trying, and kept trying, and finally I said, "Move out of the way. Let me show you." I did it. Then I thought to myself, "I did that! I can't believe it!" When things have to happen . . . she had to have the tube in because that hole will close after awhile. The guy just couldn't do it. He didn't know what the secret was. So I just pushed him aside and I did it. No, I think that I had a part in raising my children. I'm sure that I had an important part in raising them.

Of course, religion was important to us. We sent them to the Hebrew Academy and to Yeshiva High School.⁹⁸ I was a board member of Hebrew Academy for many years and I was one of the founders of Yeshiva High School, and a board member for many years, and past president of Yeshiva High School, and past president of the Congregation of Beth Jacob. I've

⁹⁸ The Katherine and Jacob Greenfield Hebrew Academy was the first Jewish day school in Atlanta, and was founded in 1953. Yeshiva High School was a modern Orthodox high school founded in 1971, which offered a well rounded, *Torah*-based, college preparatory education to young Jewish men and women. As of mid-2014 the Greenfield Hebrew Academy (grades pre-K through 8) and Yeshiva High School (grades 9-12) merged into one college preparatory day school now called the 'Atlanta Jewish Academy.'

been involved in the Atlanta Jewish community for a long, long time.

For a long time I was sort of on the periphery of community activities in that I was sort of anti-establishment, particularly when it came to things like protesting for Russian Jewry, when there was a big need to protest on behalf of Russian Jewry that was in need of great help.⁹⁹ Somehow, the Federation had their committees, but everything was just perfunctory. They didn't do anything. There was a group of activists at Emory University who sought me out, saying, "We understand that you are pretty much of an activist. Let's get together and let's do something for Soviet Jewry." All right.

There was the Bolshoi Ballet came to town [in 1987].¹⁰⁰ They went to the [Boisfeuillet Jones Atlanta] Civic Center.¹⁰¹ What we did was we raised money and we bought up the front two rows of seats for the Bolshoi Ballet. We got permission from the city . . . and we picketed on the outside. We had signs and so on like that. Of course, many Jews were coming to the Bolshoi Ballet. We were hoping that they wouldn't, that they would boycott. We were pleading. We had ads in the paper for Jews to boycott the Bolshoi Ballet, but no, after all, it's the Bolshoi Ballet. You don't want to miss that. My way of doing this was, we got people recruited . . . students to go in there and sit in the front row, in the best seats in the house, until the curtain went up. Then when the curtain went up, we all got up and left some literature on the seats and left. It caused a lot of commotion. The Federations' response to that was they put me on the Soviet Jewry Committee to shut me up! These are the kind of . . . that's typical for the kind of thing that I was involved in some, but I've mellowed in my old age.

I still get involved in certain things here and there. The march that we had in [April 23] 1990, the [Hemshech Cheder March](#), this was also for Soviet Jewry. This was already after many Soviet Jews were able to go to Israel, but the *Pamyat* had said that they wanted to finish Hitler's job.¹⁰² This was very scary. We decided on Yom HaShoah that we were going to meet at the state

⁹⁹ The American Soviet Jewry Movement was a human rights campaign that advocated for the right of Jews in the Soviet Union to emigrate. A protest movement on behalf of Soviet Jewry spread throughout the United States during the 1960's and 1970's in response to the closure of synagogues, imprisonment and execution of Jewish leaders, and antisemitism experienced by Soviet Jews. When Soviet performers visited the United States, Jewish pickets demanding rights for Soviet Jews often greeted them.

¹⁰⁰ The Bolshoi Ballet is an internationally renowned classical ballet company founded in 1776 and based at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, Russian Federation.

¹⁰¹ The Boisfeuillet Jones Atlanta Civic Center is a 4,600 seat theater built in Atlanta, Georgia in 1967.

¹⁰² *Pamyat* [Russian: memory] was a group of Russian activists who identified themselves as the "People's National-patriotic Orthodox Christian movement." The group's stated focus was preserving Russian culture, which included an anti-Semitic ideology.

Capitol and have a few people speak to us, and possibly the governor, and so on like that.¹⁰³ Then from there, march to the Memorial [for Six Million] and then have our Yom HaShoah service. We figured that would get media attention, which it did do, but there were many people in the community, who were very much opposed to that, in particular the second generation, for some reason, felt that we were denigrating Yom HaShoah, which was sacrosanct. [Our response was,] "We, the survivors, don't think it's denigrating it. What the hell do you care?" It was a big rift. They lined up with other members of the community who were opposed to that, but we got a lot of community support. A lot of people in the community were very, very much in favor of what we did and came out. The Governor [Joe Frank Harris] didn't come to speak, but the Lieutenant Governor [Zell Miller] did come to speak. We had a senator, a U.S. Senator from the state . . . John Lewis was not able to make it to the Capitol but he met us along the way, spoke to us over there at the corner of what's now Ralph Abernathy and Cascade [Road], and then marched the rest of the way with us.¹⁰⁴ Then we passed by Reverend Lowry's church while they were having . . . They saw us, they stopped their church service, and marched the rest of the way with us.¹⁰⁵ I felt very good about that.

The first memory I have of any kind of real activism or having to do with anything with my feelings [or] concerns about civil rights was when I was at Georgia Tech. Before that I have memories of when I was in the army in Germany. We used to have what they called "free beer night" at the PX [Post Exchange] once a month.¹⁰⁶ Because the PX was a non-profit organization, they made a profit on everything that they sold. Then, once a month, they would use that profit to have a free beer night and free something else that went with it, like free pizza one night or free something else. The first time I went, I experienced a race riot and got out of there quickly. The last time that I went also was when I was leaving . . . was almost my last

¹⁰³ *Yom Hazikaron laShoah ve-laG'vurah* [Hebrew: Day of (remembrance of) the Holocaust and the Heroism] known colloquially in Israel and abroad as *Yom HaShoah*, or in English as Holocaust Remembrance Day. It marks the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and is on the 27th day in the month of Nisan.

¹⁰⁴ John Robert Lewis (born 1940) is an American politician and civil rights leader. He is the U.S. Representative for Georgia's 5th congressional district, serving since 1987, and is the dean of the Georgia congressional delegation.

¹⁰⁵ Joseph Echols Lowery (born 1921) is an American minister in the United Methodist Church and leader in the Civil Rights Movement. He served as the pastor of Cascade United Methodist Church in Atlanta from 1986 through 1992.

¹⁰⁶ A post exchange (PX) is a type of retail store found on U. S. Army military installations. It is a place for military personnel and their dependents to buy food, supplies and other needed items.

night in Fuerth [Germany].¹⁰⁷ I had a good friend named Featherstone, who was black, African-American . . . We both had about the same amount of college. I had two years in architectural school. He had two years in med school, pre-med. We had a lot in common. We decided to go to free beer night as our last night, just to talk and make contact. As the night went on, we hear one guy calling somebody a “honky,” then we hear somebody else calling somebody a “black son-of-a-bitch,” and then we see beers and bottles flying. Then all of the sudden, whoa! The whole place explodes. Featherstone and I just looked at each other, and I said, "I'm not gonna hit you." He said, "I'm not gonna hit you." We both got on under the table and we waited the thing out. Those kinds of things left... it's not a scar, but it left a lasting impression about how tense the situation can be between the races in the American scene.

Therefore when I got back to Georgia Tech . . . they first started having women at Georgia Tech [in 1952] when I got back. When I was at Tech the two years before the army, there were no women there. When I got back, there were two girls in the architectural school. It was interesting to see how they faired and how the teachers treated them. It wasn't always very pretty. I had wished there was something I could do, but there was never anything quite that I could do without totally jeopardizing my own situation as a student, and then not being able to do anything about it anyway, just to voice my opinion.

The thing that I can remember is . . . I think it was 1956, when Georgia Tech was gonna be playing in the against Pittsburgh.¹⁰⁸ Pittsburgh had an All-American end [Bobby Grier] who was black. The governor, Marvin Griffin, made the intelligent decision that Georgia Tech was not going to be allowed to play in the Sugar Bowl unless Pittsburgh would bench their player.¹⁰⁹ Pittsburgh said, “We’re not benching our All-American man!” Marvin Griffin

¹⁰⁷ Fuerth [German: Fürth] is a city located in northern Bavaria, Germany, just outside the city of Nuremberg. The U.S. Army operated the Fuerth Air Base and Monteith Barracks in Fuerth from 1949-1993.

¹⁰⁸ The Sugar Bowl is an annual American college football bowl game played in the Mercedes-Benz Superdome in New Orleans, Louisiana. The Sugar Bowl has been played annually since January 1, 1935.

¹⁰⁹ Samuel Marvin Griffin, Sr. (1907-1982) was an American politician from Bainbridge, Georgia. He served as the 72nd Governor of Georgia from 1955 to 1959, where he supported educational segregation and opposed the integration of Georgian schools. Controversy erupted when the Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets were scheduled to meet the University of Pennsylvania’s Pitt Panthers, commonly also referred to as the Pittsburgh Panthers, in the 1956 Sugar Bowl. In December 1955, in anticipation of African American player Bobby Grier's presence, Governor Griffin publicly sent a telegram to his state's Board of Regents imploring them not to engage in racially integrated events that had African Americans either as participants or as spectators. However, students and football players from the Atlanta-based school, civil rights leaders, as well as a large number of the Pitt community, succeeded in ensuring that the game took place. The board of regents soon issued a decision that university-system teams could play integrated teams in states permitting integration. Georgia Tech did not integrate its student population until 1961.

said, "Then Georgia Tech isn't gonna play." That really kind of ticked off a lot of people, myself included. I remember on a Friday night, doing something which is not really the kind of thing I ever expected that I would be doing, but actually I was just there with a group of people and I saw that we were just standing there. I said, "Come on, let's go. Let's charge the Governor's Mansion." This is when the Governor's Mansion was in Ansley Park.¹¹⁰ I felt like Joan of Arc all of the sudden. I was right at the head of the thing, just saying, "Come on! Let's get up out of here!" Everybody was behind me! We were going! We got across the street, and—it's a very wide street there—as soon as we got to about 15 feet of the bushes, a whole bunch of state troopers stood up with their rifles straight at us. We all said, "Whoa!" and discretion ended up being the better part of valor. We all turned around and walked away, but that was a kind of situation that got your adrenaline flowing.

There were many things . . . like when I was at Tech, there was a place called **Wallahachie Hotel**, on Simpson Street, I think it was. This was in a black neighborhood. In the basement of the Wallahachie, on the weekends, they would have jazz entertainment. They had top-notch entertainment. They had Stan Kenton,¹¹¹ Dinah Washington¹¹² . . . Dave Brubeck.¹¹³ We saw some *great* people there! [Unintelligible] I used to go there and I would take dates. One time, I took a date and she was convinced that I was some kind of a Communist because I would go around blacks, because she was from North Carolina. She was born there. She had . . . it was just not done. You don't mix with blacks. Somehow, I just could not go along with that, even though I was trying to become a good Southerner. That didn't quite cut it.

There was a time shortly after I got married, that I had a very good friend who was the . . . I do not know exactly what her position was. She was like the Maître d' in a

¹¹⁰ Ansley Park is an affluent, historic residential neighborhood in Atlanta, located east of Midtown and west of Piedmont Park. Ansley Golf Club borders the district.

¹¹¹ Stanley Newcomb "Stan" Kenton (1911-1979) was an American jazz pianist, composer, and arranger who led an innovative, influential, and often controversial progressive jazz orchestra.

¹¹² Dinah Washington (1924-1963) was an American singer and pianist, who has been cited as "the most popular black female recording artist of the 1950's."

¹¹³ David Warren "Dave" Brubeck (1920-2012) was an American jazz pianist and composer, considered to be one of the foremost exponents of cool jazz.

sense, to Charlie Leb.¹¹⁴ She used to be at Leb's [Restaurant] downtown . . . we all used to hang out in Leb's because Jeannie Foster was there and she was our good friend. She became like his assistant. He opened up a place called the King's Inn at the Cabana Hotel at Eleventh and Peachtree.¹¹⁵ It was very popular. It was more high scale than Leb's downtown was. He tells Jeannie one day—and she told me—"You know, Harry Belafonte is gonna be here in October and I'm not gonna let him come into King's Inn."¹¹⁶ He's gonna want to eat there. He's gonna stay at the Atlanta Cabana Hotel. He's gonna want to eat there and I'm not gonna let him in. It's gonna cause a big hullabaloo." Charlie Leb . . . I don't really think he was racist. He just thought he was being a good businessman because he was from Miami [Florida]. He thought that in order to endear himself to the redneck people in Atlanta who probably he thought, had the money to come eat, and then he thought he would do that and he would become a real hero. It backfired on him like crazy. She tried to talk him out of it and he wouldn't hear of it. Sure enough, he did that. Harry Belafonte came, Charlie Leb wouldn't let him eat, and as a result of that, they started picketing Leb's downtown because it was more accessible. You can go all around the block.

One Saturday night, my wife and I went to eat with some friends and we were going to this place about a block away from Leb's. We saw this huge crowd of people picketing around Leb's.¹¹⁷ I said, "Let's join this group." The other couple that was with us and my wife said, "We'll watch you. You go ahead and join the group!" So I went and then we walked around the block. When I finally got to the entrance of Leb's, the manager saw me there and he says, "Ah, you must be having a hell of a time trying to get in. Come on in, come on in." I looked at him and I said, "Do you serve Jews?" Man, if looks could kill! I

¹¹⁴ Charles (Charlie) Lebedin (1901-1989), also referred to as Charles Leb, was the owner of Leb's Restaurant in downtown Atlanta. Leb's Restaurant was located at the corner of Luckie and Forsyth Streets, across from the popular Rialto Theater. Lebedin also owned a second restaurant in Jacksonville, Florida, as well as the King's Inn restaurant at the Atlanta Cabana Motel.

¹¹⁵ The Atlanta Cabana Motel was a 200-room motor hotel located at the southwest corner of Peachtree Street and 7th Street in Midtown Atlanta. It opened in 1958 and was razed in 2002. The 28-floor Spire residential tower now occupies the site. The Cabana was Atlanta's first major new hotel in 30 years as well as a pioneer in the concept of motor hotels, that is, motel-like facilities in cities, as opposed to alongside highways between cities. It was recognized as a prime example of modern motor hotel architecture. Charles Lebedin leased space at the hotel for his King's Inn restaurant, where, in 1962, Harry Belafonte was refused service.

¹¹⁶ Harry Belafonte (born 1927) is an American singer, songwriter, actor, and social activist.

¹¹⁷ Like most downtown restaurants and hotels, Leb's Restaurant did not allow black customers. In the early 1960's, protestors began to hold repeated pickets and sit-ins, and Leb's was a frequent target. After a series of civil rights protests that were met with increasing violence, Leb's and the other downtown restaurants were finally integrated on July 23, 1964.

thought that guy was gonna kill me. Those were the kind of things that were sort of . . . I don't want to say commonplace, but whenever there was an opportunity to make a point . . . because I really didn't believe in what was going on in the South and the way that blacks were being treated.

The thing to look back in retrospect is how that changed. It's not that my feelings changed so much. It's that my comfort level in being involved in things with the Civil Rights Movement changed.¹¹⁸ I attended—in fact, Jackie was with me . . . we attended a lecture at Morris Brown College or University—whichever it is.¹¹⁹ There were several speakers that got up there and attacked whites as if they were the Devil incarnate—every white. They talked about Hiroshima, how had the Japanese been Germans, they never would have dropped the bomb because they were Caucasian, and this kind of stuff.¹²⁰ When I walked out of that place, I felt like I wasn't safe. I felt like these . . . I thought that I was an ally to the people there, and when I left I didn't feel like I was an ally. I felt like it was them and me. I thought that was very sad. There was . . . everything from that on that I did up till now has just been on a personal level, just on a relationship of one-to-one. You're a black person, or a white person, or a blue person, or a grey person . . . you're a person and I deal with you as a person. I haven't had any dealings since then, institutionally, as far as any activism is concerned, but that doesn't mean that I didn't find things to be active about. Like we . . . The situation with the Jews in Russia was a big matter of concern to many of us. I was very concerned about it and used to not only attend rallies, but also organize rallies. There were many students at Emory that, whenever they wanted to do something, they would call me and say, "Will you help us organize this and will you help us organize that?" There was this one situation when the Bolshoi Ballet was gonna be at the Atlanta Civic Theatre . . . I've told that story? Okay, never mind then.

Jane: You did the last time and I think you talked about the march . . .

Ben: The march to . . .

¹¹⁸ The American Civil Rights Movement encompasses social movements in the United States whose goal was to end racial segregation and discrimination against black Americans and enforce constitutional voting rights to them. The movement was characterized by major campaigns of civil resistance. Between 1955 and 1968, acts of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience produced crisis situations between activists and government authorities.

¹¹⁹ Morris Brown College is a private, coed, liberal arts college located in the Vine City community of Atlanta, Georgia, United States. It is a historically black college affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

¹²⁰ The United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan on August 6, 1945.

Jane: . . . the Soviet Jewry on Yom HaShoah.

Ben: Right. Okay. Good. So that's done. All right, lead me into something else.

Jane: You didn't talk about your Pat Buchanan days or about your Pat Buchanan confrontations.¹²¹

Ben: Yes. More recently I have been very concerned about some politicians who are very high profile, running for high offices. In particular, Pat Buchanan was very problematic. When, around 1990 I think it was . . . I don't know when the election year was—1990 or 1992—but he was running for president. He was running pretty strong. He was coming to Georgia. I wanted to organize a group of people to come and protest that, and in particular the survivor community. I was president of [Eternal Life-]*Hemschech* at the time and I used that platform in trying to get my executive committee and some members of the general membership to get more involved. The membership itself, they were . . . the older people just did not want to get involved. They cared, but they didn't want to get involved. Some of the younger people did show some interest. The question was, "How do we resolve the issue? How do we find out where he is to confront him?" His schedule was a deep secret. Nobody ever knew where he was gonna be or when he was gonna be where. I used my contact with Jim Galloway at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and asked him to let me know if he can find out where Buchanan's gonna be.¹²² He also let me know that's a very hard thing to do, but he will . . . as soon as he gets a heads-up, he'll let me know. He called me one day . . . I think he called me on Tuesday afternoon and said, "He's gonna be 9:00 in the morning, Wednesday morning, at the Georgia state Capitol, and he's gonna speak to the House and to the Senate. So if you want to go, that's it, but don't tell anybody where you got the information."

I had a meeting that night in my house. People like **Phyllis Fraley** were there, and **Arnie Schneider**, and some of the children of survivors. Arnie was the only other male

¹²¹ Patrick Joseph "Pat" Buchanan (born 1938) is an American conservative political commentator, author, syndicated columnist, politician and broadcaster. In 1990, Buchanan made controversial remarks that caused the Anti-Defamation League to label him antisemitic and a Holocaust denier. In 1992 and again in 1996, Buchanan ran as a Republican Party candidate in the presidential primaries on a platform of immigration reduction and social conservatism. He ran again in the 2000 presidential election as the Reform Party candidate.

¹²² *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC)* is the only major daily newspaper in the metropolitan area of Atlanta, Georgia, United States. It was established in 2001, after the merger of *The Atlanta Journal* (founded in 1883) and *The Atlanta Constitution* (founded in 1868). Jim Galloway has been a columnist for the AJC since the 1970's and writes the Political Insider blog and column.

involved in this. Most of the other ones were female. I guess because people don't have the time, whatever it is. We made . . . we realized too, we were told there's no way that you can bring signs into the state Capitol. So we made signs and folded them up so we could hide them and bring them out when we got inside there. We did that, and we got inside and it was a [\[unintelligible, sounds like "bottle of gun," clip 10-14:48\]](#). So many people were there, and he was getting a whale of a reception from the Georgia legislators. But I got friendly with one of the guards at the Capitol and told him what it is that we're trying to achieve. I told him, "Here's a man who's denying that the Holocaust existed, and who's championing people like the [Manyuk](#), and David Irving,¹²³ and so on—deniers of the Holocaust. I don't think this kind of man should be president of the United States." He says, "I tell you what. You want to confront him? See that set of stairs over there? No matter which way he goes, he's gotta go down those stairs. There are about 20 exits out of this chamber. Whichever way he takes, he's gotta go down those stairs." So I positioned myself at the top of the stairs before anybody else did. Of course I had my sign there, which was still folded up. Just before he was coming, I pulled out the sign and somebody grabbed it away from me right away. As he followed me down, I said, "Hey Pat!" He turned around and he looked like he was my long-lost buddy. I said, "The Holocaust did happen. I was there." There were about six or seven of his bodyguards ready to come pounce on me until they saw all the media around and thought better of it. He just turned around and walked away. Right away, the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] came up and says, "Why did you say that?" and all these other news media came around. So it was effective. The word got around somehow, unless they decided to squelch whatever it was that they got. I never saw anything myself on TV about it.

Then we . . . Jim told us about the closing thing that he was gonna be having in Marietta [Georgia].¹²⁴ By that time, there was enough time . . . We had several days to organize this one. I called the [Atlanta] Rabbinical Association and they were very interested.¹²⁵ I called the ADL, and I called AJC, and called every organization I could to get them involved. Many more survivors decided to get involved at that time too, because they saw that we did make a little

¹²³ David John Cawdell Irving (born 1938) is an English Holocaust denier and author who has written on the military and political history of World War II, with a focus on Nazi Germany.

¹²⁴ Marietta is a city located in central Cobb County, Georgia, United States, approximately 18 miles (29 kilometers) northwest of Atlanta. Pat Buchanan held a campaign rally in Marietta on March 2, 1992.

¹²⁵ The Atlanta Rabbinical Association, founded sometime prior to 1970, is comprised of rabbis who represent the full spectrum of organized religious expression in the Atlanta area.

headway on our own before. We got there and it was pretty open. You were able to get inside, but I guess you can't expect political opponents to be friendly to you. These people were much less than friendly! In fact, there was one guy that I thought was going to kill me and Rubin Lansky, of all people, stepped in and told him that if he touches a hair on my head, that he was gonna kill him himself.¹²⁶ Rubin's a little guy, but he scared the hell out of this huge fellow. Avi Weiss also came down.¹²⁷ Avi Weiss knew what we were doing, but he couldn't come to that Wednesday morning thing at the state Capitol. There wasn't enough notice. This was enough notice. He came down and he heckled the way he normally heckles, and also he had an artist who was like a bodyguard, who was about 6 feet, 6 inches [tall] and could have been a lineman for any football team in the NFL [National Football League]. He kind of protected us for a little while too, when these guys came around. That was a very confrontational thing. There were . . . the rabbis, they made a lot of headway in the media and a lot of rabbis got their faces on TV, which was good.¹²⁸ The point was made that there were people who were not comfortable with Pat Buchanan, with his views on the Holocaust . . . I felt good about it. I thought a good job on it.

Jane: Talk a little bit about your assumption that because you were a child and were sent out of Europe that you didn't have a story to tell, that your story was not an "authentic" story. Also how, Yoni [Werzberger] in particular, and the . . . lack of Holocaust education in Atlanta encouraged you to start speaking.

Ben: Right. When I first came . . . We have to go back, actually, to being in Europe. When we got to France and were no longer with parents, I was no longer with siblings either, at least for almost three years . . . being all by myself. When I finally got back together with my siblings, it was almost like I wasn't there, like I wasn't . . . I never knew anything about any relatives that we had. I never knew anything about what was going on with our parents. I have the letters that my mother wrote us and my father wrote us now, but I never saw them when I was a kid. I was just totally out of the loop. I guess they wanted me to grow up and be a normal kid, but that, plus the fact that I was a child and the fact that I was

¹²⁶ Rubin Lansky (1923-2005) was a Polish Holocaust survivor who had a successful career as a real estate owner and manager in Atlanta, Georgia. He and his wife, Lola Borkowska, (also a Holocaust survivor) were very active in the Atlanta Jewish community.

¹²⁷ Avraham Haim Yosef (Avi) haCohen Weiss (born 1944) is an American Modern Orthodox ordained rabbi, author, teacher, lecturer, and activist.

¹²⁸ For one account of the confrontation, see http://articles.latimes.com/1992-03-03/news/mn-3109_1_white-house.

never in a concentration camp . . . always, whenever someone talks about the Holocaust [the question they get asked is], “Well, what camp were you in?” As if that were the only category [of child survivors] that existed. I was convinced that if you're not in a camp, you're not a survivor of the Holocaust. It's as simple as that. You're just a person that happened to have been there.

Even though I called myself a survivor when I talked to them about designing the Memorial, I never really felt that I had a story to tell, as a survivor. As we started getting our educational systems going, after the Memorial was built in 1965, I think it was 1966 or so that Yoni Wertzberger, who was then the director of BBYO [B'nai B'rith Youth Organization] approached me.¹²⁹ He said, “We're gonna be having a weekend of BBG B'nai B'rith Girls] girls and AZA [Aleph Zadik Aleph] boys, and the theme of the weekend is ‘Lest We Forget,’ which is talking about the Holocaust.” It was gonna be a roadway in. He wanted me to be the keynote speaker. I said, “Yoni, I'm not a survivor. I was never in a camp.” I said, “You don't . . . I mean, I'll be happy to come there and tell you about the design of the Memorial and things like that, but no, it doesn't make any sense.” He was persistent. He was very persistent and he says, “Look, you have a story to tell and you have to tell it.” So I did. Actually, the story that I told was not so much my story. It was a very little bit of my story that I told when I went in there because I felt what I needed to do was to tell them the story of the Holocaust. At the time, it was probably appropriate because the kids that I had spoken to at that time had learned nothing about the Holocaust prior to this weekend. My giving them the overview, if you will, was good. It worked. Then after that . . . not the same day but the next day, I took them to the Memorial and we talked about why it was designed the way it was designed and so on. This was all very effective.

The one thing, one thing stands in my mind: I have spoken since to, I'm sure, hundreds of groups, of school groups, or church groups, whatever have you, about the Holocaust, about my experiences to various degrees. Never has anybody ever just come up and said, “I don't believe you,” except that first time. A Jewish fifteen-year-old kid got up and said, “Why should I believe you?” I looked at him. I said, “Why should I lie to you?”

¹²⁹ B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (BBYO) is a Jewish youth movement for students in grades from 8 through 12. The organization emphasizes its youth leadership model in which teen leaders are elected by their peers on a local, regional and international level and are given the opportunity to make their own programmatic decisions. B'nai B'rith Girls (BBG) is the female order of the BBYO. The male brother order is the Aleph Zadik Aleph (AZA).

He said, "To get my sympathy." I said, "Why in the hell would I want your sympathy? For your sympathy and five cents, I might get a cup of coffee somewhere." They were ready to shut him up. I said, "No, don't shut him up. Let's talk. What's going on?" We never resolved anything. He was very obstinate. He said, "You're not gonna convince me. I don't think you're telling the truth," and that's the way it stood. He wasn't with the group that went out to the Memorial the next day.

I've been in church groups where people were belligerent about saying that Israel is rolling Palestine and so on like that, but never did anybody get up and say, "I don't believe you" when you're talking about the Holocaust or talking about your experiences. That was quite strange, but Yoni got me to thinking, got me realizing that, as time went on, I realized that I didn't need to be a textbook for the kids, that if somebody wants to hear about the Holocaust, or they read about the Holocaust, books were coming out. In the early 1960's, there weren't many books out. By the time the 1970's got around, there were a lot of books around that people could read and find out the details about what went on. What they needed to see and to hear was somebody talking about their own experiences, how they were affected, that they were individuals and that what happened in the Holocaust was not to a bunch of numbers, but to individual people. Here we are, that's what we're doing today. It has a lot to do with the way our museum was designed because . . . going back to that weekend, when I was showing those kids around the [Memorial] . . . these were 15, 16, 17-year-old kids and we talked about the Memorial, we talked about how it was designed, we talked about the fact that we have a wall in there which is a wall of remembrance in a way and this was where people had plaques about . . . related to their families. This was the only place where people could come to say *Kaddish* because they don't know where the graves of these people are.¹³⁰ That had a big effect on them, theoretically. It sounded . . . neat. Then when they started walking around on their own, they spent most of their time on that wall, looking around there, and they said, "I know that! I know that! I know those people!" and like that. They realized that you can talk about six million, you can talk about six hundred thousand, but it's when you get that connection with one person, that's when you've

¹³⁰ *Kaddish* (Hebrew for 'holy') is a hymn of praises to G-d found in the Jewish prayer service that is recited aloud while standing. Mourner's *Kaddish* is said at all prayer services and certain other occasions. Following the death of a parent, child, spouse, or sibling it is customary to recite the Mourner's *Kaddish* in the presence of a congregation daily for 30 days, or 11 months in the case of a parent, and then at every anniversary of the death.

really told the story.

When it came time to do . . . Our first exhibit was [the Israel] Expo 85.¹³¹ Originally, I had wanted to do a museum component in front of the AJCC. I'd drawn something up and I'd presented it to the executive committee of the AJCC. They were ready to vote and they were ready to vote unanimously, "Let's do it! This is a fantastic idea!" Then Erwin Zaban got up and he said, "I think it's great, too, but if we do this, we'll never be able to separate ourselves from the Center."¹³² We'll never be able to sell it, and we'll be stuck with a building that we may not want to be stuck with. Maybe this should be somewhere else." When Erwin speaks, everybody listens. They decided, "Well, let's . . ." They voted to agree with a concept, but it should be somewhere else.

Then it kind of just was shelved until 1984, when **Phyllis Franco** and . . . Ruth Singer both came up to me.¹³³ They had both been on the executive committee and they remembered the presentation I made. They said, "You know, we're gonna have an Expo 85 at the AJCC, which is gonna be an Israel experience for an entire week," for ten days, I forget what it was. She said, "And we can't fathom having that without having a Holocaust component." They gave me a heads-up in that I was allowed to select my space before anybody else was. [They asked,] "What space do you want to use for that?" I selected three rooms upstairs in prime location and proceeded to design an exhibit that would do the job for that. One of the motivating things in that design, really, was this concept of trying to bring it to a personal level, because I remembered how those kids were in looking at that wall at the Memorial and how important that was to them. I came up with a flow of traffic that would purposely lead people as if they were like cattle going into a slaughterhouse, which is fine. Slowly they can watch things as they go. But I wanted to make sure that

¹³¹ Israel Expo 85 was an event held at the former Atlanta Jewish Community Center campus in Midtown Atlanta. The event had exhibits, booths, and a marketplace that presented Israeli food, gifts, and entertainment.

¹³² Erwin Zaban (1921-2010) was a native Atlantan, philanthropist and community leader known by many as the 'Godfather of the Jewish Community.' After quitting school to help in his father's Depression-era business at age 15, Zaban built successful businesses worth billions of dollars and donated millions to worthy causes. He worked alongside his parents to build Zep Manufacturing Company. Zep later merged with National Linen and became National Service Industries, a Fortune 500 Company. He donated and raised money for undeveloped land in Dunwoody that became Zaban Park, home of the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta. He donated money to the Jewish Home, for which the Zaban Tower is named. He helped create the homeless couples' shelter at The Temple, which bears his name.

¹³³ Ruth Kruger Singer (1918-2004) was a founding member of The Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. She was also a founder of Atlanta's The Epstein School and active in the Atlanta Jewish community, volunteering at Ahavath Achim synagogue and the Atlanta Jewish Federation.

toward the end there would be a survivors' component, where there would be panels, family panels of survivors and their stories on their panels of what happened, where they're from, what happened to their families, who was . . . and so on like that, and when they came back, and where they are today. We started doing a few of those panels for that exhibit. In fact, that was when I met Jane, when she was called in to ask people for artifacts for that exhibit, and also for photographs so that we can do these panels. Those panels had the same effect, that people saw . . . They would see these survivor families. Many people would look and say, "I never knew they were survivors!" and "I didn't know that they were from Belarus or from Czechoslovakia! Incredible." It was incredible.

After Expo 85 was over with, Perry Brickman, who was the chairman of Expo, came up and he says, "You know, we're gonna have to make this a permanent exhibit somehow."¹³⁴ We're gonna work on that." They did. They got to send it . . . to allocate some space in the basement, which was a [recreation] room—much smaller than the space they were at for Expo 85—but would make it a permanent location. Then we redesigned that. Again there was one complete section that was what you would call "The Survivors' Room", in which we made a lot more panels. People who saw them at Expo 85 said, "I want one too." We interviewed a lot of people and got these panels made, all with volunteer help. **Louise Baum** did all of the calligraphy and her sister was very helpful. **Saba** got coffee...

Jane: All of this was a part of the concept of creating a Jewish heritage museum?

Ben: Yes, or became that. Let's put it that way. Yes, it was a concept . . . I'm gonna be repeating a little bit, but with the success of the Holocaust exhibit in Expo—it turns out it was probably the most visited exhibition that Expo had—certain people at the Federation decided to go with the momentum, to create a permanent Holocaust exhibit, which would be the second part of what would end up being a Jewish heritage museum. The first part had been the archives [Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History], which had been

¹³⁴ Dr. Stanley Perry Brickman (born 1931) is a noted oral surgeon who practiced oral surgery in the Atlanta area from 1961 to 2004. Dr. Brickman was kicked out of Emory University's School of Dentistry in 1951 because he was Jewish. Brickman spent the next few years interviewing dozens of Jewish students who attended the school in the 1950s and 1960's, compiling a video that revealed a pattern of antisemitism by the school's dean. In 2012, Emory University administrators issued a public apology Stanley Perry Brickman. Along with his wife Shirley, he has been active in the Atlanta Jewish community, volunteering at various synagogues in Atlanta, the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta, Hillel, Yeshiva High School, the Greenfield Hebrew Academy, and the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta.

funded by Erwin Zaban before. The Federation got AJCC to give us a space downstairs, which was slightly more than half of the space that we had upstairs. That was quite a challenge to try and get everything in there. We had to really cut out on the artifacts, cut out on the use of pictures. The space was opened. It was really quite successful, but the most successful part of it really was that now it opened up to . . . a speaker's bureau that was an arm of the museum or vice versa—the museum was an arm of the speakers' bureau. We opened up a teacher's program to educate the teachers, public school teachers, about the Holocaust and how to teach it. All of this was kind of spawned from all . . . We started with Expo, went all the way, and went to this second exhibit.

The exhibit lasted there . . . for ten years. In the location that it was in, it did not get the exposure that it would be getting in another, in a better location, I think. Many groups did use it. Many schools did use it and we had speakers. We had survivors speak to the groups. We had docents who were trained to be docents for the exhibit. Then as a result of this, when it came out the Federation was going to expand its facilities next door to the AJCC, then everybody agreed that . . . the Holocaust component should move there, because nobody knew how long the AJCC was gonna be around. It was already for sale. That became a part of the design criteria: that whatever was done in expanding the Federation that there would be a museum component to it and, in that museum component, there would also be the Holocaust component. Initially, they were going to add one floor above the existing floor of the Federation building that was on Peachtree [Street]. The space that was . . . allocated for the entire museum was smaller than what the Holocaust exhibit is today. We tried . . . I was involved as a critic you might say, because I was not the architect for that. I did make an impassioned plea because I was one of the architects being considered, telling them I really wanted very much to be the one to design the Holocaust exhibit.

When it finally got around to being in the location that it is today, Steve Selig donated the IBM [International Business Machines Corporation] building to the

Federation.¹³⁵ That opened up everything because there was going to be so much more space available. Then they knew there was going to be a real museum there. The Federation told [unintelligible, sounds like “Oberdine and Busbee,” clip 12-15:40] that they wanted them to hire me to design the Holocaust exhibit itself.¹³⁶ The other permanent exhibit,¹³⁷ which is the created community exhibit, had already been at the Atlanta History Center.¹³⁸ It was just in storage, waiting for the museum to be built. The museum was going to be built with two core exhibits plus the first part, which is the archives. So that was done.

Today, we still think it's much too small . . . When it was being done, I spoke to the architects about not enough room being given to the office space and to the library space. Of course, now we feel that pinch and wish we had the space, but . . . you can only put so much into a can of sardines. Only so many sardines will fit in. Hopefully, one day they will go along with the addition, which we have designed, which would loosen up the office space and give us a lot more activity. What we have now is we have exceptional teaching programs. We have exceptional docent programs. We have a speakers' bureau and we have a whole education system on the Holocaust. All of this is really based on the original kernel of an idea when Expo 85 was created . . .

<interview pauses, then resumes>

Ben: One of the things that probably is important to talk about is my relationship to Judaism, to observance of the religion, because when I came to this country, I was as observant as I could remember. I used to daven everyday and I used to wear a *kippah* all the time. I used to eat kosher and I used to keep Shabbat. That's all I knew. As time went on and as I became one of the boys and wanted to be like everybody else was, things went by the wayside. By the time that I was 15 [or] 16 years old, I was already no longer being Sabbath

¹³⁵ Simon (Steve) Stephen Selig III (b. 1943) worked in the Selig real estate development business, campaigned for Jimmy Carter in his presidential campaign, after which he moved to Washington D.C. where he served as Deputy Assistant to the President. After his government work, he returned to Selig Enterprises and was active in the Jewish community with roles in the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta and the United Jewish Communities, where he served as chairman of the annual campaign and president of the Federation from 1996 to 1998. He donated the building the Selig Center and William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum now occupies in Midtown.

¹³⁶ “Absence of Humanity: The Holocaust Years, 1933-1945” is a permanent exhibition at the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum that presents a detailed history of the events that led up to the Holocaust, the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis during World War II, and those events that took place in its wake. It features historic photographs, personal memorabilia, family documents, and videotaped interviews with Atlanta-area survivors.

¹³⁷ The Blonder Family Gallery is a permanent exhibit at the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, dedicated to Southern Jewish History.

¹³⁸ The Atlanta History Center was founded in 1926 by 14 Atlantans who wanted to preserve the city's history. They called it the ‘Atlanta Historical Center.’ Today it is the Atlanta History Center.

observant in that I was working on Saturday. Probably by the time I was about 17, 18, [or] 19, I got away from keeping kosher. I found no problem with going out and seeing who could eat the most Krystal hamburgers at one time.¹³⁹ I had no problem with that. My brother, Asher, had a big problem with that, but I personally had no problem with that. My brother, Jack, and I saw the world the same way. We both agreed that religion was a divisive factor in the world and that it had no part in our lives to speak of. Then I went into the army.

While I was in the army, the observant Christian soldiers would seek me out. There were other Jewish in the outfits, always, but they always sought me out for some reason, to ask me questions about Judaism. I was fairly knowledgeable about Judaism, but I also realized that there are a lot of things that they're asking me that I don't know the answers to. I wasn't about to let them know that I didn't know the answers, so I faked it. But I knew that I faked it and I got to feeling bad about it after awhile. I said, "You know . . ." I got to thinking that, "Here my parents, brother, and sister were killed because they were Jews. And I'm giving up Judaism in a sense, at least the observant element of it, without even knowing what the hell I'm giving up," because I didn't know the answers to all these questions. I could daven. I could lead the service and so on like that, but that didn't mean anything. I didn't know what Judaism was all about. I kind of made a vow to myself when I was in the army. I said, "You know that when I get out of this mess, I'm going to start delving into Judaism to the point that I'm gonna know what it is that it's all about. And that if I decide that I want to give it up once I know what it is, then I feel that I have the right to do that. But I really don't feel that I have the right to do that until I know what it is I'm throwing away." That had a tremendous effect on me. When I got out of the army, I started to slowly—very slowly—going back toward observance, mostly with an eye toward observing what it was all about—not observing as far as observing ritual, but observing [as in] seeing and living it. I realized that the only way to find out what Judaism was about was to live it. Slowly but surely I went in that direction, to the point that when I got married, it was my decision to keep a kosher home. My wife would have gone either way. I said, "No, we have to have a kosher home."

By the time that I opened my office, which was in October of 1962 . . . I made the decision that I was not going to work on Saturday anymore. I had made the decision that I

¹³⁹ Krystal is an American fast food restaurant chain headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia.

didn't want to work on Saturday anymore before then, when I was working in Heery and Heery, but I couldn't figure out how in the world I would walk in one day and say, "Hey George, I'm not gonna work on Saturday anymore because I'm a Jew."¹⁴⁰ Somehow that didn't look like it was gonna work. So I waited. A year later, when I opened up my own office, I made the decision. From that point on, I never worked on Saturday again. The first time that I got a phone call from a client on Friday night, I realized that I'm not gonna answer the phone on Saturday again either, because you can't answer the phone and say, "Well, look, this is my Sabbath. I'm not gonna . . . I'm not working." [They would have said,] "You answered the damn telephone, so give me the answer, what I want." I realized then that that wasn't gonna work either. One step at a time is the way it went.

The thing about Jewish observance is that the more that you become a part of it, the more that you delve in, that you act it out, the more it becomes a part of you. I'm not gonna say I know what it's all about. I don't. I'm still not at the point where I can give it up, but I know a lot more now. I'm convinced that traditional Judaism is really what it's about. That's what we're supposed to be, that's what we're supposed to do. The other thing I'm convinced about, though—which I'm afraid not everybody else is—is that we are one people and there are many different ways of approaching G-d, that what G-d wants from us is for us to be together, and not to fight each other. But that's never gonna happen.

If you look back at the history of Judaism, back to the time of Moses, there were only 20 percent of the Jews at that time who went with Moses during the Exodus, when he left. The other 80 percent said, "No, I know we have it bad here, but we're one of the people, you know. That's us." They perished along during the plagues with . . . most of them did. That's always been the way we were. There's always going to be parts of us that are going to go by the wayside, and be, and go elsewhere—not necessarily disappear, but not be Jews anymore, because they choose not to be Jews anymore.

The other thing that I learned is that in the time of King Solomon, there were eleven million Jews because everybody thought that Judaism was the thing to do. [They all

¹⁴⁰ Heery and Heery was an architecture firm opened by George T. Heery (born 1927) and his father, Wilmer Heery—both graduates of Georgia Tech. Wilmer operated an office in Athens, Georgia, while George operated an Atlanta office. George is considered to be among the first generation of modern architects in post war Georgia. The firm later expanded into construction project management and participated in many notable building projects around Atlanta, before the firm (which had been renamed Heely International) was sold in 1986. Today, George Heery and his daughter Laura M. Heery lead the Brookwood Group.

thought,] “This is nice! Look, they got this Temple, man! What a neat place! Yeah! I'm a part of it!” Of those eleven million Jews, there were one million maybe, who were authentic Jews. That’s a lot. There were a million authentic Jews then. The other ten million, when the Temple was destroyed, they left and went somewhere else. That’s fine, but at the very same time, there were one million Chinese. You figure the math out. Now there are what? Two billion Chinese? If everybody would have stayed together and been together all the time, look at how many Jews there would have been today, but that’s not the way it's meant to be. Apparently, we're always supposed to be a small group. That’s the way it’s gonna be, but we're supposed to be who we're supposed to be. That's what it's all about. There are always gonna be people who are gonna try and destroy us until the time comes when it's not supposed to happen anymore, I don't know what that's all about. Anyway, that's my . . .

That probably leads into, really, about my family. I have four children. Shoshana’s my oldest—she just turned 40—and there’s Adinah Chaya. Shoshana has five kids. Adinah has four kids. She is now just getting in to start Mercer University to get her pharmacy degree.¹⁴¹ Then there's my daughter, Michal, who lives in [\[unintelligible city, sounds like “Orname-yu,” clip 13-9:00\]](#), Israel and has eight children. Then there’s Rafael, who lives in Atlanta and has three, so I've, [\[unintelligible, sounds like “kinyebrew”\]](#) . . . Jackie and I have 20 grandchildren, which we are very proud of. Everybody is, to one degree or another, living an observant Jewish life, to some degree. I think it makes them happy, so it makes me happy.

I don’t know. I know that there are many survivors who felt that, having gone through what they went through in the Holocaust, and after having been brought up very steeply in Judaism, that they felt that G-d betrayed them, and they didn’t want any part of whatever this was that was Judaism. Many people left. Other people, many other people became more observant. I’m reminded only of my good friend, Lola, when she was trying to explain to me—this is when I was working on the Memorial—why she doesn’t believe in G-d. She says, "You know, I got to synagogue and I go sometimes for the Shabbat, and sometimes I have Shabbat dinner and this, but I don’t believe in G-d. I do these things, but I don't believe in G-d. And to prove to you I don't believe in G-d, I'll tell you." She says,

¹⁴¹ Mercer University is the oldest private university in Georgia with its main campus in Macon, Georgia, United States.

"When I first got out of the concentration camp," when she was freed from Bergen-Belsen,¹⁴² they gave her . . . the British came along there and they gave her sandwiches. She had a meat sandwich and she had a cheese sandwich. She took them, and put them together, and she took a bite, and she looked up and said, "See? Do me something!" I said, "Lola, that doesn't mean you don't believe in G-d. That means you're angry at G-d. And you have good reason to be."

Jane: Is there anything that you could tell us about your older siblings, about their lives here?

Ben: About their lives here in Atlanta?

Jane: Yes, or wherever they ended up.

Ben: When they were here or . . .

Jane: Yes, maybe just talk a little bit about them since they are no longer here.

Ben: Yes . . .

<interview pauses, then resumes>

Jane: How he ended up married . . . He went to California . . .

Ben: Right. The five of us came to Atlanta, but actually my two brothers came first. They were on the first escape, which I'm finding out now that there were 300 kids from the south of France that were saved. We were very fortunate to have been among those 300. Why we were selected, I don't know. To the best of my knowledge, the Quakers made the selection, the American Friends [Service Committee].¹⁴³ They had all the people to choose from, and

¹⁴² Bergen-Belsen was a concentration camp in Germany established in 1935. In 1943 it began to serve as a transit camp for Jewish prisoners who were initially excluded from deportation. Toward the end of the war, Bergen-Belsen became a dumping place for Jews marched out of camps in the east. There was no housing for them, no medical care, no food, and no water. Ultimately there were about 41,000 prisoners in the camps and the mortality rate was extreme. The British liberated Bergen-Belsen on April 15, 1945 and it took them weeks to even be able to start to deal with the horrifying situation. Many thousands of prisoners died after liberation, being too far-gone to recover.

¹⁴³ In September 1940, HICEM (a Jewish overseas emigration association that is an acronym of three merged organizations: HIAS—Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society; JCA—Jewish Colonization Association; and Emigdirect—the United Jewish Emigration Committee) began making plans to facilitate the immigration of Jewish children to the United States on special State Department visas. Though the program was designed to help children below the age of thirteen, children as old as sixteen were admitted if they were accompanying younger siblings. The JDC (American Joint Distribution Committee) facilitated and financed the emigration of children without American relatives. HICEM made arrangements for French exit visas, Spanish and Portuguese transit visas, and reservations on ships out of Lisbon. On March 5, 1941, OSE (Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants) France in Montpellier sent HICEM a list of 500 detained children as candidates for emigration. From June through September 1941, three transports managed to bring about 200 children from the OSE homes to the U.S. They were sponsored by the United States Committee for the Care of European Children, The Jewish Children's Aid, and assisted by the American Friends Service Committee (Quakers) in Marseilles.

they made the selection as to who should be the ones to go. Which criteria they used, I don't know as of yet. I was supposed to go with my brothers . . . They came, and when they came to America, they went to Chicago . . . [Then] they came to Atlanta because my mother's cousin was there. They stayed with the Bergmann family when they got here. When I came with my sisters, we were directly sent to Atlanta from New York. We didn't go to Chicago like Asher and Jack did. I stayed with the Bergmanns along with Jack and Asher. Flo and Sarah stayed with the **Willoughby** family for about a year . . . At the time, I was nine. Jack's a year and a half older than me, so he was 10. Asher was about 14, I think. Sarah was right in between. I think she was 12. Flo was 16 at the time.

We stayed with the Bergmanns for about a year. Then it was decided that Jack should be on the one side of town and that I should be on the other side of town. I stayed with the Hirschbergs and Flo and Asher were also staying there at the time. [We] stayed with them for a little while. Asher and Sarah went to stay with Aunt Fanny Asmund on 6th Street. **Henny Bernberry**, who was another child of the Holocaust who was living there, and several other children were living there. Fanny had had and still had quite a few young children living with her. The Hirschbergs had the three of us. It turns out that I was more of a hellion than I'd like to think I was. In fact, to my knowledge, I think they had . . . the plans were to send me to military school. The reason that didn't work out was because I wasn't a citizen and they were afraid that there would be some kind of a security issue in that. Thank G-d that didn't work out, but instead . . . when Mrs. Hirschberg got ill and she was going to have an operation and she didn't think she could take care of me after that.

I went to stay at the Unger's—this was the same Unger on Emory Circle—for the summer of 1944. My sister Flo was there at that time, also. My brother Asher went to stay with Mrs. Gunsher on Ormand Street. [Jack] and Sarah were still at the Asmund's. When Aunt Fanny Asmund passed away, then Jack went to live with the Altermans—George and Ursula Alterman—who were somehow related to Mrs. Asmund. He became like part of the family with them. It was really a neat situation. I remember I was kind of envious of Jack. He was driving around in George's convertible. Jack is a hardworking guy, and a real straightforward guy, and I thought that he had the world by the tail at the time.

Asher, shortly thereafter, moved to New York to go to Yeshiva. Some people in Atlanta, they were interested in seeing him develop his Judaic learning. They footed the bill

for him to go to New York and to go there to study to be a rabbi. They had also . . . very shortly thereafter, **Rabbi Mitzver** wanted me to go to study to be . . . They used the ruse: they said that I had a good voice, and that I was a great chazzan, and that I should become a chazzan, and that I should go to New York. I remember that I felt that I had moved around so much, trying to find a place where I felt that I belonged, and I felt that I had friends here. I was enjoying myself here. I didn't have any reason why I would want to go to New York and to become a chazzan, so I declined on that one.

Flo left a couple of years after that and she went to move to New York. Exactly what were the circumstances of her decision to move to New York, I really don't know. I wasn't privy to that. My sister Sarah got married very young. She got married at 18. She was the first one of our siblings to get married. That was 1948. It was May 9, 1948. It was Mother's Day as well as the wedding. She was married to Harry Shartar. Until she passed away, she was married to Harry. They had three children: Tiel, and Niel, and Edward.

My brother Asher was the next one to get married. When he was in the army in 1947 was when he found out what happened to our parents. While he was there also, he went to visit our father's cousin in Basel, Switzerland. He was Max Meyer, the one who had ransomed him out of Buchenwald after Kristallnacht. Asher went to visit him while he was there. One of Max Meyer's daughters, Henriette, his oldest daughter [is] whom [Asher] fell in love [with]. They got married in 1949, even though she was a second cousin. They had five children, and unfortunately three of those children had a disease, which is said to be exclusively for Ashkenazi Jews.¹⁴⁴ It's called dysautonomia and those three children have since passed away.¹⁴⁵ Mayer was the oldest one when he passed away. He was 38. The youngest was Eli. I think he was 19 when he passed away. Samson Rafael was about 21 or so when he passed away. It's very sad to lose three out of five of your children to a debilitating disease like that.

Asher, when he moved to New York was studying to be a rabbi. Then he got into the army. He got drafted, which delayed his getting *smicha* [rabbinical certification]. Then after he married Henny and they had a child right away, he decided not to continue his Yeshiva education and just . . . He was offered a job to be a rabbi in a synagogue in New York, so he

¹⁴⁴ Ashkenazi is an ethnic division of Jews that formed in the Holy Roman Empire in the early 1000's. They established communities in Central and Eastern Europe.

¹⁴⁵ Dysautonomia is an umbrella term used to describe several different medical conditions that cause a breakdown, or failure of the autonomic nervous system.

took that job and started raising his family there. Some years later, he was approached to help be a fundraiser for the Shaare Zedek Hospital in Jerusalem.¹⁴⁶ They were gonna form an American committee for Shaare Zedek Hospital. This was interesting to him because the Shaare Zedek Hospital was a pet project for the Jews of Frankfurt, Germany, and our father had been very much involved in that. Asher felt like he was kind of continuing the legacy. He became the chief fundraiser for Shaare Zedek. He was the head of the American Committee for Shaare Zedek. He developed the two major annual fundraising programs that they have, which is a concert they have in November every year, and then also they have a dinner with an ad journal, I think in May or something like that. Even though he today is retired and has been living in Israel now for the last 15 years, they bring him in every year to help them out with the concert and with the dinner and with the journal because of his vast experience in that.

When he took the job at Shaare Zedek, he was already the rabbi for Congregation Joseph ben Mayer in the Bronx, which was his second congregation.¹⁴⁷ His first one was in Astoria-Queens. That particular congregation, over 90 percent of the members were from Frankfurt. He was their rabbi. He's not a rabbi. He's really a reverend [named] **Jascha** Hirsch. He doesn't have *smicha*. He strongly believes—which there are some things in the Talmud that say, that go along with this concept—that someone should not make their livelihood from teaching the Torah, from teaching G-d's Word. He's always had a second job to go along with his being a rabbi. Therefore, number one, he didn't have to demand a living wage from whatever congregation he was working from, and gave him an upper hand in making the decisions of what the congregation does. [He would say,] “You're not paying me a living wage anyway, so dammit, don't tell me what to do!” He was with Congregation Joseph ben Mayer for 25 years. When he left the congregation, the congregation folded and people just went their ways throughout the congregations. He left and he went to Israel.

In Israel, he is also with Shaare Zedek Hospital, except now he's the Director of Religious Affairs there. He helps people who are there who have religious needs, he helps people put on the *tefillin* who are not capable of doing it because of their health and so on. He

¹⁴⁶ The Shaare Zedek Medical Center is a major hospital in Jerusalem established in 1902 with funding from European donors. The American Committee for Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem provides financial support to fund services, capital projects, research and the purchase of equipment for Shaare Zedek Medical Center

¹⁴⁷ Congregation Joseph ben Mayer was organized in 1959 and stood at the corner of Aqueduct Avenue and Kingsbridge Road in the Bronx, New York. Today, the building is used by a business and the Congregation no longer exists.

runs the religious services there. They have a chapel there, and the chapel, incidentally, was donated by another Hirsch—Jack Hirsch—my brother here in Atlanta who, besides being one of the better CPA's (Certified Public Accountant) around, he's also a very philanthropic person. When he decides that something is a good cause, he does something about it.

I think I mentioned before about growing up here, Jack and I were kind of at each other's throats, but we couldn't be any closer than we are right now. He's the one who, when I said that I wanted to write a book but just couldn't quite get going . . . I said, "I think I need a computer to write a book. I'm not gonna write a book without a computer." He bought me a computer! He said, "Okay, now you don't have an excuse. Write a damn book," which is the same way he was about his house. When I graduated from Georgia Tech, he said, "Okay, now I've been waiting for four years. Design me a damn house." I said, "Jack, I don't have the time to do it now. Give me a chance to breathe. Plus, I don't think I'm ready yet. I need to learn some more." He said, "I waited four years. Now." So I designed him a house! He's still living in that house today.

I was just there last night visiting with Herb, our brother-in-law from California. Which brings us to his wife, my sister Flo, my older sister. She got married in May of 1951 to Herb Spiegel. He's also from Germany. He's from Cologne [Germany]. His parents got out early enough in the 1930's and they moved to Albany [New York], where his father was a doctor—I think a pediatrician. I'm not sure. Herb became an electrical engineer and moved to Alaska. He was working for the government of Alaska. When he met Flo, he had been on one of his many excursion weekends back to New York, trying to meet somebody. They met, and hit it off and got married, and moved to Kodiak, Alaska, where Sammy was born. His was the first *bris* in Alaska.¹⁴⁸ Their son, Sammy, now is the police chief of some town near San Diego, California. Flo and Herb eventually moved from Alaska to Corona, California, where they built up what they call Corona Electric Company. They were electrical contractors and quite well loved in the community. My sister Flo was also somewhat of an activist. She didn't like what was going on in the education community in Corona, so she ran for the school board to make some changes. That led to running for city council and that led to her

¹⁴⁸ A *bris*, formally known as the '*brit milah*' (Hebrew: Covenant of Circumcision) involves surgically removing the foreskin of the penis. Circumcision is performed only on males on the eighth day of the child's life. The *brit milah* is usually followed by a celebratory meal.

becoming the mayor of Corona, California.¹⁴⁹ Finally, because of health, she had to give up politics. She had diabetes and cancer. When she passed away [in 1992], they had the flags at half-mast in Corona.

Flo has got three sons. Sammy, the oldest, is a police chief. Bobby, the middle one, is a people person! That's the best way I can put it! I think he's now the city manager of Corona. I don't know whether he's gonna keep that job or not. They talked him into doing it, but in a way he's a natural at that because he really is a people person. They have five beautiful children themselves, and the youngest son, Mark, is an airline pilot. He was for TWA [Trans World Airlines], so I guess he's now with American Airlines. He lives in St. Louis, Missouri.

I told you about Sarah . . . No, I didn't tell you about Sarah. I did tell you that she was the first one to get married. She got married to Harry Shartar. Harry had gone to Georgia Tech, graduated 1949, I believe. At that time, he was in industrial management, which was a very good field at the time unless you were a Jew. It took him two years to find a job. There were all kinds of jobs, all kinds of industries that were looking for Georgia Tech graduates for industrial management, but not Jewish ones. He finally got a job with Atlanta Paper Company, which eventually became Mead Atlanta Paper Company.¹⁵⁰ The owner of Atlanta Paper Company was Jewish. Harry stayed with them his entire working life. He retired from Mead Atlanta Paper Company. While at Mead Atlanta, he also moved around quite a bit. They—Harry, and Sarah, and the kids—moved to Amsterdam [the Netherlands]. They were in Holland for a couple of years. Then they came back to the States and they were in Massachusetts for several years. Then they moved back to Atlanta. That's when she became sick. She was the first of our siblings to pass away [in 1990]. She had multiple sclerosis and was not diagnosed early in the game.¹⁵¹ It was pretty advanced by the time they realized what it was that she had, but she lived till she was about sixty and then succumbed to the disease.

Her three kids are: Tiel, whose daughter is getting married this weekend in Maine. Tiel lives up in New Hampshire; and Neil, who has two daughters and also lives up in New Hampshire; and Edward, who had been living in Atlanta for a while, went to Harvard

¹⁴⁹ Corona is a city in southern California, approximately 45 miles (72 kilometers) east-southeast of Los Angeles.

¹⁵⁰ The Mead Paper Company was established in Dayton, Ohio in 1847 and is now known as MeadWestvaco. It acquired Atlanta Paper Company in 1957.

¹⁵¹ Multiple sclerosis (MS) is an often-disabling disease of the central nervous system that disrupts the flow of information within the brain, and between the brain and body.

Business School.¹⁵² He had been working for Coca-Cola of late. He is now the director of Coca-Cola for Canada.¹⁵³ He lives in Toronto [Canada]. I believe that pretty well covers the base of all the siblings. I think the five of us that survived made a difference. At least, I like to think that.

Jane: You didn't tell the story about Michal wanting to have seven children, just like your mom, and how she wound up with eight instead.

Ben: My third child, Michal, had always made up her mind that she wanted to have seven children like my mother had. She had seven children. She, of course, got pregnant after having six, and low and behold, she had twins. Not just any twins—they were like seven pounds each. [They are] something else. The little boy is named after Rabbi, Reb [Elazar] Shach, who just recently passed away.¹⁵⁴ His name is Hose Menachem Man Appelbaum, so I call him "The Man!" The girl is just Temimah.

Jane: Thank you very much.

Ben: You are welcome.

<Disk 2 Ends>

INTERVIEW ENDS

¹⁵² Harvard Business School is the graduate business school of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

¹⁵³ The Coca-Cola Company is an American multinational beverage corporation headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia.

¹⁵⁴ Elazar Menachem Man Shach Elazar Shach (1899-2001) was a leading Lithuanian-Jewish Haredi rabbi in Bnei Brak, Israel.