

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

MEMOIRIST: SOL KIMERLING
INTERVIEWER: SANDRA BERMAN
DATE: JULY 30, 2009
LOCATION: BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

<Begin Disk 1>

INTERVIEW BEGINS

BERMAN: Today is July 30, 2009. I'm with Sol Kimerling, who has agreed to be interviewed for the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project of the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. I'm very thrilled and excited to be doing this interview. My name is Sandy Berman, and I'm the interviewer today. I'd like to begin by asking you to just talk a little bit about your background, your family, how they ended up in Birmingham, and your parents' names. If you could spell things out when you think there might be a question.

KIMERLING: Kimerling is K-I-M-E-R-L-I-N-G. We arrived when my grandfather came to the United States from Bukovina, in Romania. He came . . . he actually left his family in Bukovina before he came to New York. He landed in New York. The story is, the reason he came to the United States was he had gotten into a fight with a *gendarme* [French: policeman], which meant jail or exile, so he came to the United States. His father-in-law was the one who financed his journey. He was here a number of years.

BERMAN: Name?

KIMERLING: His name was Michael Kimerling. There is a series of great-grandsons who actually are named Michael on various sides of the Kimerling family. Michael is a very . . . my son is named Michael. He came to New York. Then he brought his family over around 1912, it looks like. We can get an exact date. They had a grocery store in New York. They didn't make a living. Pretty simple. Didn't make a living. The story is that my father saw them selling a banana and took a bite of the banana. He didn't know that you had to peel it. He'd never seen one before. That's maybe a pocketful. Nevertheless, they moved to Atlanta with the help of one of the Jewish agencies in New York active at that time. He became a scrap peddler. [He] had a wagon and a mule and went around to the neighborhoods picking up various objects, bottles, rags, brass, iron, whatever. Paper and all. He worked for . . . the story goes, he actually worked for the Koplins [Macon Iron] out of Macon,

Georgia, which was always a very fine name in our family. They were always highly respected even after the Kimerlings had so called, “made it”. The Koplins were thought highly of. He had his first child . . . all the children came. Hyman was the first. My uncle Hyman was the first child. Charlie [Charles] was the first one born in this country, then Gaston [Gershon]. There was Leah, Eva, Esther, Mary. Those were the girls. It was Max, Charlie, Hyman and Gaston were the sons. They came to Atlanta. His route was from Atlanta through Birmingham to Mississippi. That's where he picked up his rags, bottles, and scrap iron. Birmingham, being in a rising industrial center, became the center from which he would ship his goods to wherever he shipped them. So they decided to settle in Birmingham. [They] came to Birmingham around 1915, in that area. [I] don't know exactly the date. Anyhow, my grandmother, whose name was Feige Adel. She was head of the *mikveh*.¹ She ran the *mikveh*. The reason I know that, besides my father telling me, is there is a record in the old United Jewish Charities minute book that states that a Mr. Kimerling came and requested money for coal for the community bath house.

BERMAN: She ran the *mikveh* in Birmingham.

KIMERLING: In Birmingham. On the Northside, which was where the Jews all lived at that time. Several minutes later, it says that \$100 or \$200 was allocated for coal for the bath house, so we know that's historical. They were of very poor people. Very poor people. Mama liger was a staple and bryndza cheese. That was a staple. The fortunes of the family changed, according to the family history, is when my grandfather got the rights to work the Birmingham dump, which we constantly remind our children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews of their humble beginnings. That's when they could get bottles. They were in the bottle business. They picked up bottles. They washed bottles. They sent them. They picked up scrap iron, aluminum, rags, bones. All those were sold. That was sort of the change in the Kimerling fortunes, in a sense. Through the years, they remembered that. I remember once a year my mother would have all the brothers and sisters over for a mama liger party. That's what they had. They had mama liger and bryndza. Of course, they also had cake afterwards and whiskey before. Nevertheless that was the . . .

BERMAN: Could you explain what mama liger is?

KIMERLING: It's corn meal. It's primitive. You know, very basic food. That's what you lived off of. Anyhow, that was sort of a memory that was ingrained in all the children and grandchildren. I think you've already interviewed Ephraim Mazer, who was my cousin and the son of my father's sister.

¹ A *mikveh* is a pool of water, gathered from rain or from a spring, which is used for ritual purification and ablutions.

BERMAN: So we know what drew them to the community, your grandparents. Did they ever describe what they felt like coming to the South? What they found when they got here?

KIMERLING: What they found was a place where you could work hard and you could make a living, basically. They lived on the Northside not far from the temple. That's where most of the Jews who came from Eastern Europe lived. By the time they came and settled in, the Jews from Germany were already moving to the South side. Eventually the Jews followed them to the Southside.

BERMAN: Did they join the synagogue right away?

KIMERLING: Yes. They were members of Knesseth Israel,² which was an Orthodox synagogue. As an aside, my father was the only person in the history [to be] President both of Knesseth Israel, in their Orthodox days, in the 1930s. Then he was the president of Temple Beth-El³ in the 1950's. He was the president of both Orthodox and Conservative synagogues, which sort of tells you the transition of the family's traditions and practices as we go.

BERMAN: Did you know your grandparents well?

KIMERLING: Yes. I didn't know my grandmother. She died before we were all born. She died before I think any of the children got married. I knew my grandfather, yes. Extremely well. We would come to *shul*⁴ on Saturday. That was the deal. You came to *shul* on Saturday. You went home to my grandfather's house, and before dinner, before lunch, you studied. You studied *Torah*⁵ with my grandfather. After you had lunch, you went out. You played ball, went to the movie, or whatever it was. Yes, we knew him very well. He would pick us up sometimes and take us to Sunday school. Then you could maybe get an extra nickel. He would give you a nickel for charity. Then he'd give you a nickel that you could buy candy with. All of the grandchildren had a very affectionate memory of their grandfather, Michael.

BERMAN: Do you recall any anecdotal stories he had about peddling and being in the . . .

KIMERLING: Yes. One of the stories was, he was peddling in Mississippi, and there was a rain storm or some such, and he sought shelter in a farmhouse. They gave him shelter. They gave him food. They found out he was an Israelite. That's what they called them. They didn't call them Jews. They called them Israelites. They wanted him to stay because he was a genuine Israelite, who they

² Knesseth Israel is the first Orthodox congregation to organize in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1889.

³ Temple Beth-El was founded in 1907 and was originally on the Northside of Birmingham and was affiliated with Orthodox Judaism. Today it is affiliated with Conservative Judaism. The current sanctuary was built in 1926 on Highland Avenue on the Southside. Its current rabbi is Rabbi Randall Konigsburg (2016).

⁴ *Shul* is a Yiddish word for synagogue that is derived from a German word meaning "school," and emphasizes the synagogue's role as a place of study.

⁵ Hebrew for 'teaching.' '*Torah*' is a general term that covers all Jewish law including the vast mass of teachings recorded in the *Talmud* and other rabbinical works. '*Sefer Torah*' refers to the sacred scroll on which the first five books of the *Bible* (the *Pentateuch*) are written.

had never seen. After all, these are people who lived in the rural Mississippi. They had never seen a Jew or an Israelite. They actually wanted him to stay to be part of their community. But, of course, he didn't. He came back to Birmingham. That's one of the peddling stories that we know about.

BERMAN: The family . . . was it your father's generation that made the business what it is, or was it your grandfather that made the business successful?

KIMERLING: It was my father's generation. Obviously, my grandfather was the start of it, but that was in the 1920s. My father ran the business in the 1930s and 1940s. That's when it began. The company, in the depression, that is M. Kimerling and Sons. That's what it's called. "M" was for Michael Kimerling. "Sons" was for my grandfather and uncles, my father and uncles. During the depression, they couldn't pay the bank what they owed them. The bank said, "What do we want with a junkyard?" So, they kept them in business, and when they made enough money, they paid the bank off. During that time, they also issued their own I.O.U.'s. That is script. The Kimerlings issued script. They took it to the [Felix] Cohen's Delicatessen, where the Kimerling credit was acceptable. That is where the workmen would go and get their food, from the Cohen Delicatessen, which was on the Northside. A lot of people, I'm sure, did that, but that is specifically with our family.

BERMAN: Did the prospects then change when war broke out because of the war economy?

KIMERLING: Yes. They were in business. Obviously World War II created a great demand for iron and steel, which was the business they were in. The scrap iron business and iron and steel. They had been pressy enough to buy what they call a press, which was a piece of machinery not many people had. They were able to do quite well with that.

BERMAN: How many brothers were in the business?

KIMERLING: Max was the oldest. Hyman was . . . there was Max then Charlie. But Charlie went to the service during this period. He was in the service. Then Hyman, who was exempt because of medical reasons. Gash, who was in the service. Gash, when he came out of the service, didn't go into the business. He went a separate business.

BERMAN: Gash. Is that . . .

KIMERLING: Gash Kimerling. Gaston Kimerling.

BERMAN: Gaston.

KIMERLING: Gaston. Yes. Gershon.

BERMAN: G-A-S-D-E-N?

KIMERLING: It's G-A-S-T-O-N.

BERMAN: G-A-S. Gaston.

KIMERLING: Gershon. Yes. Well, not really. But we were proud of Uncle Gash because he

was a lieutenant, and he had an army uniform. That was big stuff with us.

BERMAN: The community that your parents and grandparents lived in, was it a tight-knit community? The Jewish community?

KIMERLING: The Birmingham Jewish community, very tight knit. It was a very tight-knit community. It centered around Knesseth Israel in our early days. That's where we went to *shul* until we moved to the Southside. Until he moved to the Southside, we went to *shul* on the Northside. Very tight knit. Yes. It centered around activities with the YMHA [Young Men's Hebrew Association]. It was over by Knesseth Israel a couple of blocks away. That's where I went to Hebrew School early, then we moved over here. I was *bar mitzvah*⁶ here on Christmas day.

BERMAN: What was public school like for you growing up in Birmingham?

KIMERLING: Public school was pretty much of a cinch. I mean, it was a not a difficult task for any of us. We had . . . Jews always want to know how you're accepted. Some people accepted us. Others, you settled in a school yard. That is how you settled your differences. Mostly, I won. But sometimes I didn't. I had a brother who was much older. I would bring him back with me, and that would settle it up. Settle up with the guy. We had Greeks and Italians. This was in high school. Greeks, Italians, Lebanese, Syrians. We all played ball together. Mainly football and basketball was where the Jewish boys excelled. They were smart. The Jews were smart, you know.

BERMAN: Were most of the problems relating to religion? Were there experiences of anti-Semitism at the school?

KIMERLING: No. Actually, there were a few people who . . . we had a swastika painted in front of our house, but not really. Like I say, you settled them. The Jewish boys were good athletes. The Jewish boys and girls were good students. We got along real well with everybody. It wasn't a real problem. The problem I had was playing football. I took off from practice every holiday. You know, why not. Two days for *Rosh Ha-Shanah*.⁷ Two days, *Shavuot*.⁸ Two days, *Sukkot*.⁹ You

⁶ Hebrew for 'son of commandment.' 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.

⁷ *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.

⁸ *Shavuot* is the Hebrew word for "weeks" and refers to the Jewish festival marking the giving of the *Torah* by G-d at Mount Sinai. It occurs at the completion of the seven-week counting period between Passover and *Shavuot*. *Shavuot*, like many other Jewish holidays, began as an ancient agricultural festival that marked the end of the spring barley harvest and the beginning of the summer wheat harvest. In ancient times, *Shavuot* was a pilgrimage festival during which Israelites brought crop offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem. Today, it is a celebration of

know. The kids on the football team who went to Temple Emanu-El¹⁰ only took one day. So you come back to school, and the football coach wants to know who the real Jew is because we both used the same excuse. But that's not antisemitism.

BERMAN: No.

KIMERLING: That's just bewilderment.

BERMAN: Did you have relationships with other children who weren't Jewish?

KIMERLING: Yes. Two of my two best buddies were Charlie Culp and Tommy Collingwood [sp]. Tommy Collingwood and I used to ride our bicycles together. We didn't date non-Jewish girls. There was no inter-dating. You would go maybe to a dance, and you'd dance with them if it was a big public dance. But there was no inter-dating between Jews and non-Jews. Barely dating between Reform and Conservative Jews in those days.

BERMAN: That brings up an interesting point. The dating between Jews and non-Jews, was it a conscious decision on both sides that they didn't want to date anybody Jewish and that you didn't want to date anybody Christian? Or, was it just kind of . . .

KIMERLING: You just didn't do it. You didn't date Christian girls. Just straight forward. That's just the way it was. Way you did. It wasn't even a question. It wasn't even something you talked about. Just didn't. I'm sure they felt the same way. You just didn't date Jewish boys. Yes. There really wasn't any animosity connected with it. Just, you didn't do it. Like mom would say, "Aren't there some pretty Jewish girls here?" After all, her friends had daughters. So, "What's wrong?" That was just the deal.

BERMAN: What year did you move over to Beth-El, the family?

KIMERLING: I was *bar mitzvahed* here. That was 1943. We moved to the Southside . . . the 1930s . . . my family. But my grandfather was still on the Northside until the 1940s.

BERMAN: Did you attend services regularly?

KIMERLING: Yes. We attended services regularly. I mean, the front row of the bench. The first three rows of the bench. That is where the Kimerlings, Mazers, and the Feidelsons all sat, even to this day. Comes *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur*,¹¹ we're pretty belligerent if somebody sits in our

Torah, education, and actively choosing to participate in Jewish life.

⁹ One of the Harvest Festivals. It is seven days long and comes after the ingathering of the yearly harvest. It celebrates G-d's bounty in nature and G-d's protection, symbolized by the fragile booths in which the Israelites dwelt in the wilderness. During *Sukkot* Jews eat and live in such booths, which gives the festival its name and character.

¹⁰ Temple Emanu-El is a Reform Jewish congregation. The community first held *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur* celebrations in 1881. Before the synagogue was built, the community met at the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Land for the synagogue was purchased in 1884 and the building was inaugurated in 1889.

¹¹ Hebrew for 'Day of Atonement.' The most sacred day of the Jewish year. *Yom Kippur* is a 25 hour fast day. Most of the day is spent in prayer, reciting *yizkor* for deceased relatives, confessing sins, requesting divine

spot!

BERMAN: Do you have assigned seats?

KIMERLING: There are no assigned seats at Temple Beth El, which is a good thing. There shouldn't be assigned seats. But, yes, we all sat in the front row. Of course, everybody had lots of children. Today, you know, all the children are gone so you don't have . . . we don't take up as much room. But in those days, man, you fought for a spot.

BERMAN: Who was the rabbi that you first remember?

KIMERLING: I remember Rabbi [Dr. Abraham J.] Mesch.¹² He was the rabbi when I was coming along. He was here for my whole growing up.

BERMAN: What was he like?

KIMERLING: Rabbi Mesch was a scholar. He was taciturn. He was quiet. He was very Orthodox but in a very modern sort of way. His program was to make sure that you maintained being Jewish but within the American framework. I mean, very modern. He looked good. He dressed well. He was a member of various organizations. There is sort of an interesting, in my research, I found there is a comment about football. I told you that the Jews played football. The report from the committee on Friday night services was that services should . . . we should get a greater attendance now that football season is over.

BERMAN: That's great.

KIMERLING: Mesch introduced Friday night services. He used to give sermons in Yiddish, but he stopped doing that and gave them in English. So you can tell the transition. He introduced English into the service. He had a very close relationship with Rabbi [Harry] Epstein¹³ in Atlanta. Very close. Rabbi Epstein was . . . I don't know if they would mentor. I'm not sure of that relationship. I do know that on several occasions he would consult Epstein about changes in the service, in the ritual. He was different from today. He always . . . his sermons were not flowery, but they were . . . you always learned something.

BERMAN: Did his sermons address Jewish issues or Jewish community issues? Temple Beth-El issues? Or did they address issues that affected the Birmingham community?

KIMERLING: The sermons I remember were about the *parashah*¹⁴ of the week. That's the

forgiveness, and listening to *Torah* readings and sermons. People greet each other with the wish that they may be sealed in the heavenly book for a good year ahead. The day ends with the blowing of the *shofar* (a ram's horn).

¹² Rabbi Abraham J. Mesch was the rabbi at Temple Beth-El for over 27 years, from 1935 to his death in 1962. He was an ardent supporter and public advocate of Zionism.

¹³ Rabbi Harry Epstein (1903-2003) served as the rabbi of Ahavath Achim from 1928 to 1982. Under his leadership the congregation began to shift to Conservatism, which they adopted in 1952. Rabbi Epstein retired in 1982, becoming Rabbi Emeritus and Rabbi Arnold Goodman assumed the rabbinic post.

¹⁴ *Parashah* is Hebrew, meaning a section of the weekly cycle of readings from the *Torah*.

sermons I remember, basically. Then on *Yontif*,¹⁵ the sermons would always include, as long as I can remember, always include saving the Jews. Always include Israel and displaced persons and just a continuation of the Jewish people. That was, you know, the basic always there in a service.

BERMAN: Did he take any kind of active role in the general community? Was he a spokesman for the . . .

KIMERLING: Yes, he was. He was in various non-Jewish organizations. Yes, he was considered a spokesman. In fact, I was looking the other day. They had interfaith services here that speakers came. The object was, you know, the Jews were part of the community, but they were still Jewish. That was the underlying theme. You could participate in everything, do anything that you wanted to do, but you still were Jewish. That meant certain responsibilities, primarily, to the survival of the Jewish people and Israel and that kind of thing.

BERMAN: Did he ever talk about the situation between . . . did he ever talk about Jim Crow¹⁶ issues?

KIMERLING: I don't remember anything specific. I don't think it was necessary because the Jewish community was always liberal. I mean, in our family, my mother took *The Nation*.¹⁷ *PM*.¹⁸ You had Paul Robeson¹⁹ records. The Jewish community was pro New Deal.²⁰ They were pro liberal. I don't think in terms of Jim Crow, that they actually thought in those terms, but they were, for

¹⁵ *Yontif* is the Yiddish word; in Hebrew it is 'yom tov.' It is generic word for Jewish holidays. It includes all but the High Holy Days of *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur*.

¹⁶ Jim Crow laws were state and local laws in the United States enacted between 1876 and 1965. The name seems to have originated in the song "Jump Jim Crow," a song-and-dance caricature of blacks performed by white actor Thomas D. Rice in blackface in 1832. As a result of Rice's fame, "Jim Crow" became a pejorative expression meaning "Negro" by 1838 and the later segregation laws became known as "Jim Crow" laws. Jim Crow laws mandated racial segregation in all public facilities in the southern state of the former Confederacy, with a supposedly "separate but equal" status for black Americans, although in reality this was not so. Some examples of Jim Crow laws are the segregation of public schools, places, and public transportation and the segregation of restrooms, restaurants and drinking fountains for whites and blacks. Private businesses, political parties and unions created their own Jim Crow arrangements, barring blacks from buying home in certain neighborhoods, from shopping or working in certain stores, from working at certain trades, etc. In the middle twentieth century, the Supreme Court began to overturn Jim Crow laws on constitutional grounds. Rosa Parks defied the Jim Crows laws when she refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man, which became a catalyst to the Civil Rights movement. Her actions, and the demonstrations that followed, led to a series of legislative and court decisions that contributed to undermining the Jim Crow system. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 officially ended Jim Crow laws.

¹⁷ *The Nation* is the oldest continuously published weekly magazine in the United States. It is a journal of liberal/progressive political and cultural news, opinion, and analysis.

¹⁸ *PM* was a liberal leaning daily newspaper published in New York City from 1940 to 1948.

¹⁹ Paul Leroy Robeson (1898-1976) was an American bass singer and actor who became involved with the Civil Rights Movement.

²⁰ The 'New Deal' was a series of economic programs implemented in the United States between 1933 and 1935. They involved presidential executive orders or laws passed by Congress during the first term of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The programs, which involved massive government spending, were in response to the Great Depression and focused on relief for the unemployed and poor, recovery of the economy, and reform of the financial system to prevent another Depression. The Supreme Court later struck down some of the massive entitlement programs as unconstitutional. Despite all the spending, the economy failed to recover until the United States entered World War II in December 1941, which brought full employment.

whatever would ameliorate the situation.

BERMAN: Did you think about it much? Did you think about the separate drinking fountains, the separate schools?

KIMERLING: No.

BERMAN: Is it a part of your memory?

KIMERLING: No. You just didn't. That wasn't something that you were . . . you really weren't concerned with it. It didn't cross your . . . it was just the way it was. You didn't do that. That is not post World War II. That was different. You're talking about once we grew up, it became a different situation, but during the growing up years, going to Ramsay High School. No.

BERMAN: What changed, then, after World War II?

KIMERLING: I think the Holocaust²¹ was one thing that changed, obviously. I mean, that is one thing that changed. Then everybody went to the service. I mean, all the Jewish men went to the service. There were very few Jews who didn't go to World War II or the Korean War. That was just what you did. There wasn't any question about that. Nobody wanted to go overseas if you could help it. Nevertheless, you went to the service. In our family, I don't know how many people we had, cousins and uncles, I don't know, 17, 18 cousins and uncles who were in the service. World War II. Then Korea. The first time ever I ate a piece of un-kosher²² food was in the service. That was okay. My grandfather said, "You know, when you go to the military, you do what they tell you to do."

BERMAN: Do you think that the war just started to change people's attitudes?

KIMERLING: I think, just generally. I'm not sure it was totally the war. Certainly, it was the war and the obvious discriminations and what was taking place. You become aware. I mean, when you go out and see the world, you become aware of things that you weren't aware of. I think another thing was, too, that by the time my generation came along, there was a little bit of leisure time. I mean, everybody wasn't scrambling for a living. It was tough when they were growing, coming up. Remember you had the [Ku Klux] Klan²³ here. You had the anti-Jewish and the Jews . . .

²¹ The systematic, government-sponsored attempt by the Germans to annihilate the Jews of Europe between 1939 and 1945, which resulted in the deaths of nearly 6,000,000 Jews.

²² 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. Food that is not in accordance with Jewish law is called '*treif*.' The word 'kosher' has become English vernacular, a colloquialism meaning proper, legitimate, genuine, fair, or acceptable. Kosher can also be used to describe ritual objects that are made in accordance with Jewish law and are fit for ritual use.

²³ The Ku Klux Klan (or Knights of the Ku Klux Klan today) is a white supremacist, white nationalist, anti-immigration, anti-Jewish, anti-Catholic, anti-black secret society, whose methods included terrorism and murder. It was founded in the South in the 1860's and then died out and come back several times, most notably in the 1920's when membership soared again, and then again in the 1960's during the civil rights era. When the Klan was re-founded in 1915 in Georgia, the event was marked by a cross burning on Stone Mountain. In the past it

Of course, this was post-World War II. They are associating with the communists. The Jews were under the gun even though they didn't suffer any direct activities, not really direct activities. But they were always under the gun. You had the leisure time to think about things.

BERMAN: Was there a difference with, I mean, did you feel there was a difference within the African-American community, the black community, when those servicemen came back? Were there issues with . . .

KIMERLING: My experience with that was . . . man, we had Negro maids. You said, "Yes, ma'am. No, ma'am." It wasn't that . . . She was a lady and you treated her just like you treated any other lady. You didn't talk back to them. You didn't rush in front of them. You didn't tell them what to do. They were a maid. That's what you called them. They were a maid. A housekeeper. Later, they became housekeepers. The respect. You worked. The workmen who worked for you, they were workmen. They had a job. They were workmen just like every . . . they were labor. That comes from studying Jewish history. That is Rabbi Mesch. That is my grandfather. That is just the way people . . . that's the way you treated people. Saying it didn't matter whether they were black or white. That's just what you did.

BERMAN: You mentioned that there was a lot of Klan activity in Birmingham. What do you remember or what stories did you hear about the Klan?

KIMERLING: By the time I was coming along, the Klan had already diminished in its power in Birmingham. You just knew they were there. You knew. I've got to separate what I've learned about the Klan in my research recently and what I knew about it when I was coming along. When I was coming along, you just knew they were a bunch of bad people. They were not good folks. You didn't want to have anything to do with them, and the government wasn't doing enough to put them down, but they weren't a part of our lives. That wasn't something that you concerned yourself, particularly, with. You had run across people like that from time to time. Perhaps my parents in their business may have run across it, but business is business a lot of times.

BERMAN: What have you learned about the Klan in your research?

KIMERLING: In my research, I've learned that the Jewish community was very active in the anti-Klan movement in the 1940s. In 1948, 1949. They were very active in opposing the Klan and were part of a movement that actually created the anti-masking laws in Alabama.

BERMAN: Who was involved? Do you know names?

members dressed up in white robes and a pointed hat designed to hide their identity and to terrify. It is still in existence.

<End Disk 1>

<Begin Disk 2>

KIMERLING: Abe Berkowitz²⁴ was your primary Jewish person, which is sort of interesting about the Jewish community, because he also was the leading Zionist²⁵ in the area, in the whole Southeast. I mean, he was the leading Zionist in this area, so he had these parallel movements of opposing the Klan. He was supported by the Jewish community in his activities as a Zionist, raising money, raising arms. I know our family shipped half-tracks to Israel. This was in 1948 or before 1948. Someone says, you know, "Are you getting paid up front?" They said, "Well, if they win, we get paid. If they lose, we don't." Pretty straight forward, but that was the general attitude of Jews. Very much supportive of Israel. So they were against the Klan.

BERMAN: You mentioned someone else earlier. A Werner?

KIMERLING: Marvin Werner was from . . . Yes, he was a partner with Bill Engel. He and Mervyn Sterne were the most famous Jews in the city. He was head of the American Legion, which spearheaded the Veterans Against Violence. I think that's the name of it, which was really an anti-Klan to get them unmasked.

BERMAN: Going back. Personally, you mentioned a little bit earlier that you also didn't have much interaction with the temple crowd. Is that the same old story? The German Jews. The East European Jews. Not much interaction.

KIMERLING: Exactly. I remember when Patsy Weil invited me to go to a . . . she was from Temple Emanu-El. She invited me to go to a dance, whatever that it was.

BERMAN: How do you spell her last name?

KIMERLING: W-E-I-L. Great family. Really. Still are a great [family]. Were and still are. Man, that was surprising. Then that all broke down. I mean, that broke down by the time we got out of high school and went to college. That all disappeared.

BERMAN: Did you or any of your family members go to either Ballyhoo in Atlanta or

²⁴ Largely due to the Nazi threat, membership in the Birmingham Zionists rose to 600 members by 1936; the city's Zionist ranks continued to grow during and after the war. Abe Berkovitz led the group for a number of years, and actively lobbied the Alabama Legislature for a bill supporting the creation of a Jewish State. In 1943, he and other Zionists achieved success when both houses of the state government passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. When the United Nations declared their support of the formation of Israel in 1947, the overwhelming majority of Birmingham's Jewish community celebrated. After Israel won its independence in 1948, the Birmingham Zionists worked to raise funds to help build the fledgling Jewish state. Together with the Birmingham Jewish Fund, the Zionists held annual Israel Bond Drives.

²⁵ Zionism is a movement that supports a Jewish national state in the territory defined as the Land of Israel. Although Zionism existed before the nineteenth century, in the 1890's Theodor Herzl popularized it and gave it a new urgency, as he believed that Jewish life in Europe was threatened and a State of Israel was needed. The State of Israel was established in 1948 and Zionism today is expressed as support for the continued existence of Israel.

Falcon²⁶ here?

KIMERLING: No. We didn't go too much. We knew about Ballyhoo. We knew about Jubilee. It was Jubilee here.

BERMAN: Jubilee here and Falcon in Montgomery.

KIMERLING: Yes. I think we probably went to Jubilee dances. I don't remember it. I'm sure wherever there were guys and wherever there were girls, they found each other. It's pretty straight. Just a straight old what you did sort of thing. Yes. I'm sure we did.

BERMAN: Did Rabbi Mesch have much interaction with the rabbi at the temple?

KIMERLING: Absolutely. Both were ardent Zionists, so they had that relationship. Both knew or felt that interfaith was very important. That is, interaction with the Christian community. Each did it in his own sphere and his own way. I never heard Rabbi Mesch say one word against Rabbi [Dr. Milton] Grafman²⁷ or even against the Reform movement.

BERMAN: But Rabbi Grafman, he became more involved in the Civil Rights²⁸ years, did he not?

KIMERLING: He was involved. Grafman was involved. He had an institute, I don't recall the exact name, where the Jews and the Christian ministers studied each other's religion. The object was for Christians to understand Jews. After all, that was the problem. The Jews, we forget, had a problem of Christians understanding them. He did a lot of work in that. He was also very vocal. By this time, Rabbi Mesch had died. He died in 1962, I think. In 1963, Grafman went with a group of rabbis, I mean, a group of ministers [who] actually opposed [Governor] George Wallace²⁹

²⁶ From 1931 to the late 1950's, courtship weekends in southern cities included Montgomery, Alabama's 'Falcon,' Birmingham, Alabama's 'Jubilee,' Columbus, Georgia's 'Holly Days,' and Atlanta, Georgia's 'Ballyhoo.' They were attended by college-age Jewish youth from across the south who participated in rounds of breakfast dates, lunch dates, tea dance dates, early evening dates, late night dates, formal dances, and cocktail parties, with the goal of meeting a "nice Jewish boy or girl" who might well become a spouse.

²⁷ Milton Louis Grafman (1907-1995) was an American rabbi who led Temple Emanu-El in Birmingham, Alabama from 1941 until his retirement in 1975. He then served as Rabbi Emeritus from 1975 until his death in 1995. He was one of eight local clergy members who signed a public statement entitled "A Call for Unity," criticizing the Birmingham Campaign, to which Martin Luther King, Jr. responded in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

²⁸ The American Civil Rights Movement encompasses social movements in the United States whose goal was to end racial segregation and discrimination against black Americans and enforce constitutional voting rights to them. The movement was characterized by major campaigns of civil resistance. Between 1955 and 1968, acts of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience produced crisis situations between activists and government authorities. Noted legislative achievements during this phase of the Civil Rights Movement were passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Immigration and Nationality Services Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

²⁹ George Corley Wallace, Jr. (1919-1998) was an American politician and the 45th Governor of Alabama, having served two nonconsecutive terms and two consecutive terms as a Democrat: 1963–1967, 1971–1979 and 1983–1987. During the Civil Rights Era he was noted for his Southern populist and segregationist attitudes. Wallace's most remembered utterance was: *"In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow,*

and wrote him when he made his famous [speech] "Segregation Today, Tomorrow, Forever." They wrote him. They also wrote [Dr.] Martin Luther King, [Jr.]³⁰ "Don't come to Birmingham and start demonstrating" in April 1963. That is where his Civil Rights . . . yes, he was active in Civil Rights. He really was.

BERMAN: But you said earlier we shouldn't call it "civil rights." We should call it "social reform."

KIMMERLING: Well, we should because they defined "civil rights," as in "Did you march or didn't you march?" In other words, Martin Luther King forgot to, or the biographers or the historians forgot to give, in my opinion, enough emphasis on the fact that [Eugene] "Bull" Connor³¹ was voted out of office by the citizens of Birmingham. The whole history of that time is the marches, the hoses, which are terrible in themselves, but that wasn't the whole history. That was a slice of that time. That was where Grafman was skewered. He and other ministers were skewered, saying, "Give the new government time to make the changes."

BERMAN: You are doing some research and writing a book on Birmingham's Jewish role in Birmingham during the Civil Rights era?

KIMMERLING: The Jewish role is not the history. It's just where they just fit in with the . . .

BERMAN: Is the book on . . .

KIMMERLING: The title of the book is going to be, at least at this writing is, *No More Bull: Whites, Blacks, and the Ballot*.

BERMAN: How did you come up with this, and where did your interest begin?

segregation forever." He tried to stop desegregation in schools by physically standing in the way of black students at several universities in 1963. Federal marshals and the Alabama National Guard under federal command forced him to step aside. He later renounced these views at the end of his life

³⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) is best known for his role as a leader in the Civil Rights Movement and the advancement of civil rights using nonviolent civil disobedience based on his Christian beliefs. A Baptist minister, King became a civil rights activist early in his career. He led the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957, serving as its first president. With the SCLC, King led an unsuccessful struggle against segregation in Albany, Georgia, in 1962, and organized nonviolent protests in Birmingham, Alabama, that attracted national attention following television news coverage of the brutal police response. King also helped to organize the 1963 March on Washington, where he delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. On October 14, 1964, King received the Nobel Peace Prize for combating racial inequality through nonviolence. In 1965, he and the SCLC helped to organize the Selma to Montgomery marches and the following year, he took the movement north to Chicago to work on segregated housing. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. His death was followed by riots in many United States' cities. King was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was established as a holiday in numerous cities and states beginning in 1971, and as a United States federal holiday in 1986.

³¹ Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor (1897-1973) was the Commissioner of Public Safety for the city of Birmingham, Alabama, during the years of the Civil Rights Movement. His office gave him the responsibility for administrative oversight of the Birmingham Fire Department and the Birmingham Police Department. Through his covert actions to enforce radical segregation and deny civil rights to African-American citizens, he became an international symbol of bigotry.

KIMERLING: My interest began when . . . because my father was president of the synagogue when they attempted to bomb it in 1958.³² Here in 1958. That is when my interest began. When I started researching the bombings in Birmingham, specifically, what surrounded the bombing at Temple Beth-El and that history prior to and subsequent to that. That was sort of the starting point. I got the impetus at the 100th anniversary of Temple Beth-El. A significant event in Temple Beth-El's history was the attempted bombing and the subsequent events to that. That is what got me really started because it changed the dynamics of the Birmingham Jewish community. It really brought the Birmingham Jewish community together. For any one particular act, that really brought it together.

BERMAN: The bombing?

KIMERLING: Yes. The attempted bombing.

BERMAN: Why do you think Beth-El and not Emanu-El was picked?

KIMERLING: That is a really good question. I really haven't found what I would consider a satisfactory answer, especially in the social side that. Let me give two reasons. One, Beth-El was off the beaten path, not quite as visible as Emanu-El. It may have been just as a very practical matter. It was easier to do at Temple Beth-El. From a social point of view, Abe Berkowitz, who was a member of Beth-El and known to be, was a very active anti-Klan member in the 1940s. But then Bill Engel and Mervyn Sterne were active in social movements in Birmingham. All the big stores were members of Emanu-El, so I'm not sure. I think it was tactical. I haven't found why Beth-El was selected.

BERMAN: Was anybody picked up for the attempted bombing?

KIMERLING: No one was picked up for the attempted bombing, but they knew who did it. They knew who did it. The same people. I traced this in one of the chapters that I'm writing. I traced the perpetrators from Birmingham to Reverend [Fred] Shuttlesworth's Bethel Baptist Church³³ a few months later, to the October bombing in Atlanta of The Temple³⁴ to the Sixteenth Street Baptist

³² On April 28, 1958, 54 sticks of dynamite were placed beside Temple Beth-El in a bombing attempt. According to police reports, there was enough dynamite to demolish the building, but the burning fuses were doused by heavy rainfall, preventing the dynamite from exploding. The crime was never officially solved.

³³ Reverend Fred Lee Shuttlesworth (1922-2011) was a United States civil rights activist who led the fight against segregation and other forms of racism as a minister in Birmingham, Alabama. He was a co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), was instrumental in the 1963 Birmingham Campaign. On December 25, 1956, 16 sticks of dynamite destroyed the Bethel Baptist Church parsonage, where Shuttlesworth lived. Shuttlesworth left Birmingham in 1961 to pastor Greater New Light Baptist church in Cincinnati, Ohio, and continue to work against racism and for the alleviation of the problems of the homeless in Cincinnati. He returned to Birmingham after his retirement in 2007. He helped Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights movement. The Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport was named in his honor in 2008.

³⁴ The Temple on Peachtree Street in Atlanta, Georgia was bombed in the early morning hours of October 12,

Church bombing³⁵ five years later.

BERMAN: Was it the Bowlings and . . .

KIMERLING: It was the Bowlings³⁶ and the Stoners.³⁷ That group. That was a real terrorist, what we would classify today as a terrorist group. Stoner was in Birmingham at that time. One of the Bowling brothers was here with Stoner at that time, so I think it's fair to conclude, even if circumstantial. Stoner was then convicted of bombing of the Bethel Baptist Church, Reverend Shuttlesworth's church, in May. They got them there, interesting enough. You can read the court testimony, saying, "We don't want any mess up like you did at that Jewish Temple." And Stoner says, "There won't be."

BERMAN: I think on that note we'll take a break.

<Break in recording.>

BERMAN: I'd like to pick up again. We were discussing the attempted bombing, here at Temple Beth-El. We were talking about why you thought Beth-El was chosen instead of Emanu-El. That is kind of where we left off with all of this.

KIMERLING: Yes.

BERMAN: So if we could continue on that train of thought. Talk a little bit about the Jewish role in that whole decade or time period.

KIMERLING: The bombing here was in 1958. There was another bombing at the Reverend Shuttlesworth's, interesting, Bethel Baptist Church. B-E-T-H-E-L. Not Temple Beth-El. The bombing of his church was a couple months later. Then, the bombing in Atlanta was a few months later. I think that in Birmingham, it was a turning point. It wasn't a tipping point, but it was a pivot point because the white community rose up as one, condemning the bombings. You could say they condemned the bombings because they were Jewish. I don't think it was because they were Jewish. I think it was because they were just flabbergasted that someone would bomb the Jews, who were good

1958. About 50 sticks of dynamite were planted near the building and tore a huge hole in the wall. No one was injured in the bombing as it was during the night. Rabbi Jacob Rothschild was an outspoken advocate of civil rights and integration and friend of Martin Luther King Jr. Five men associated with the National States' Rights Party, a white separatist group, were tried and acquitted in the bombing.

³⁵ There had been many bombings over the years in Birmingham, so much so that the city was nicknamed "Bombingham." The most infamous was the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. A bomb was placed under the steps of the church on September 15, 1963 and detonated at 10:22 a.m. killing four black children. An investigation revealed that four members of the local Knights of the Ku Klux Klan Robert Chambliss, Thomas Blanton Jr., Herman Cash and Bobby Frank Cherry were the perpetrators. All but Cash (who had died) were charged with murder and convicted many, many years later in the 1990's and 2000's.

³⁶ Richard Bowling was known to be linked to the National States Rights Party and Knights of the White Camellia.
³⁷ Jesse Stoner was an American segregationist convicted in 1980 of the 1958 bombing of the Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. He was the founder, and long-time chairman of the National States Rights Party, and the publisher of its newsletter, *The Thunderbolt*.

citizens, part of the community, and they were white. So, they had crossed over. That is, the bombers had crossed over. They had picked the Jews as their target. They were an unacceptable target. An award was offered. A \$10,000 award. That is fairly large in 1958. Of course, nobody ever came forward to claim it. The point is that the community did not hide that bombing. Did not hide behind anything. They had a congressional investigation came to Birmingham, Senator [Jacob] Javits and Senator [Kenneth] Keating came here.

BERMAN: The bomb itself. It didn't go off because the fuse got wet?

KIMERLING: That's what they say, that it rained and that the fuse got wet, and it burned out before the bomb went off.

BERMAN: Do you know if it was set to go off when there were people in the building or not?

KIMERLING: It depends on when they set it. No one knows when they set it. I would say that they probably didn't give a damn if somebody was hurt. The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, I think, was designed to go off and hurt people. I think, literally, designed to go off and hurt people. Beth-El, I don't think they cared whether it was a quasi-threat verses if somebody was hurt. So what. So be it. It was somewhat different, slightly different, though still nefarious motivation.

BERMAN: So the community sort of came together after the . . .

KIMERLING: The non-Jewish community was outraged by it. Even Commissioner Connor, who was certainly no flaming liberal, condemned it. The governor offered a reward. Governor [Jim] Folsom, who was more on the liberal side of things. All the labor unions, churches, businesses, individuals, I mean, there are records of letters in the files from just individuals writing.

BERMAN: Was it hard to come back to synagogue after that?

KIMERLING: Nobody ever thought about not coming back. No. You didn't think. You went. Services were held the next . . . they held Hebrew School that week. They didn't even cancel Hebrew School or Sunday school. No. They never thought not to come back.

BERMAN: Did Rabbi Mesch give a sermon on the bombing?

KIMERLING: Probably. I don't remember it, but there was a comment in the Beth-El Bulletin. What it did . . . two things it did. For the Birmingham Jewish community, it brought it together. They realized quickly that the community had to act as one because acting individually was fine, but the enemy looked at you all as one, as the same. So it came together with . . . that was the beginning of the Birmingham Jewish Community Relations Committee, which is, of course, a big deal today. Then, it was the beginning where the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform came together to form that community. One of the reasons they knew right away was they wrote the FBI requesting an investigation. Mayer Newfield, who was the son of the most prominent of the early Temple

Emanu-El rabbis, Rabbi [Dr. Morris] Newfield,³⁸ wrote the FBI requesting an investigation. [J. Edgar] Hoover's³⁹ response was, "Don't get involved with those Jews and colored people. And don't cooperate with the local police department any more than you have to." Which was quite different than that when the bombing went off in Atlanta when he sent his best investigators. I'm assuming he sent them, because he said he would . . . when they investigated. So it's quite a difference.

BERMAN: Why do you think?

KIMERLING: In April. Because I think he found that the response of outrage was so high. The spotlight had now not only gone to the bombers but also to the government, the federal government. "Why aren't you looking into this?" Because there had been a similar thing in Nashville and one in Jacksonville. So there was a big spotlight. When the same thing happened in Atlanta that really caused damage . . . The others had not caused much damage. The Jewish community nationwide . . . I don't want to say nationwide, but certainly . . .

BERMAN: In Birmingham, as we move on into the 1960s, we have the desegregation legislation in 1963.

KIMERLING: It was 1954. The major piece of desegregation was . . .

BERMAN: 1954.

KIMERLING: The 1954 school desegregation, which outlawed, "Separate but Equal."⁴⁰

BERMAN: Then in 1963, I think . . . Wasn't it in 1963 that the government said the schools had to actually begin integrating?

KIMERLING: It was actually 1954 when they . . . then there was all this legal stuff about what you did and what you didn't. That was when Wallace challenged [President John F.] Kennedy,⁴¹ and Kennedy sent the army, the bases outside. I actually have a copy of the battle plan from General [Creighton] Abrams.

BERMAN: What was the feeling within the Jewish community about the integration of the schools?

KIMERLING: The Jewish community felt that the schools . . . that it should be no law against integration, that integration was the right thing to do. They were all against bussing.

³⁸ Rabbi Morris Newfield was rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in Birmingham, Alabama from 1895 to his death in 1940. He was a prominent religious, interfaith, social leader and social reformer for the entire community.

³⁹ J. Edgar Hoover (1895-1972) was the first Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) of the United States and was instrumental in founding the FBI in 1935.

⁴⁰ *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* 347 U.S. 483 (1954) was a landmark decision of the United States Supreme Court that declared state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students unconstitutional. The ruling paved the way for integration and the civil rights movement.

⁴¹ John F. Kennedy (1917-1963), commonly known as 'JFK,' was the 35th President of the United States, serving from 1961 until November 22, 1963 when he was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. He was a Democrat.

They didn't feel that bussing was the way to do it, to bus them out of one area into another area. As far as integration of schools, they thought that was fine, but bussing . . . there may have been a few people who weren't . . . In general, they felt that bussing was wrong because they wanted their kids in the school districts where they were.

BERMAN: Then we have the marching beginning in the 1960s.

KIMERLING: By the way, along that, B'nai B'rith ADL [Anti-Defamation League] has a survey on Jewish attitudes on that, which pretty well goes along with what I'm saying on the desegregation. Yes. It's quite different from the general population.

BERMAN: On Martin Luther King, the march, and the rabbis . . . Can you talk about the 12 rabbis coming down to Birmingham and the reaction here?⁴²

KIMERLING: You've got to go back, when you're talking about Jewish involvement, you've got to go back to 1961. This was 1963 you're talking about. In 1961, the commissioners voted to close the park because Judge [Hobart] Grooms declared that they had to be desegregated by early 1962.⁴³ They closed the park. The Jews were part of a movement to protest that. There was actually a petition in the newspaper, and Jews were part of that petition. The leaders of the Jewish community . . . when I say leaders, those who were most noticeable to the non-Jewish community, who were Bill Engel and Mervyn Sterne. They expressed themselves quite vigorously against the closing the parks. As a matter of fact, Bill Engel at the Jewish Community Center, honoring him, made that expression. That's pretty open. That's not marching in the streets, but that's pretty open. When they talked to the commissioner, they told him the same thing. That goes to 1962. In 1962, things had gotten pretty bad in terms of relationship. There was developed a Citizens for Progress, which you'll have to look at the footnotes to find. Citizens for Progress was a group of young democrats, mainly Kennedy democrats, who formed this group to change city government. The mentor for that group was Abe Berkowitz, the same one who challenged the Klan in the 1948, the quintessential Zionist. He was the mentor for this group of Young Turks that was a coalition of Jews. One of the fund raisers . . . one of

⁴² In 1963 during the Civil Rights era, Martin Luther King, Jr., made pleas to the Birmingham clergy, including rabbis, to support his marches. When the Jewish rabbis counseled patience and moderation and asked him to wait for desegregation laws to take effect, King called them out on their perceived passivity in a "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." The letter gained national attention, and a few weeks later a group of 19 Conservative rabbis from the North, outraged by the images they saw on the TV of black protestors being beaten, arrived in Birmingham. They didn't tell anyone in the Jewish community they were coming, which angered the rabbis and many Jews in Birmingham. After talking with King in the Birmingham jail, they toured black churches, making speeches of support. Then they left. The whole episode appeared high-handed to the Birmingham Jewish community, and they feared an anti-Semitic backlash from the Ku Klux Klan.

⁴³ In 1962, a federal ruling demanded that Birmingham desegregate its parks. Despite numerous protests from both civil rights workers and Birmingham business leaders, Mayor Hanes and the City Commission closed down the parks rather than desegregate them.

the two main fund raisers was Alex Rittenbaum, who everybody knew was one of the major Jewish fund raisers. They were operating openly. I mean, they weren't being harassed by the police, but they were certainly . . . everything they did was public. That group was made up of labor, PTAs, university women and every group . . . doctors, lawyers, accountants, women's clubs. They formed this Citizens for Progress. The purpose was to change the city government because that was the only way you were going to get rid of Bull Connor and the other commissioners, because they'd only recently been re-elected. Do you see what I'm . . . so that was the only way. They did. They were able to affect a change to get a vote. Remember, all during this time, [John G.] Crommelin was running against him on a Jewish-Communist conspiracy theory. This was part of the background here in Alabama. They were doing this. Then, the National States Rights Party⁴⁴ moved in, which you're familiar with, because they . . . well they emanated to, I'm not sure whether Chattanooga [Tennessee] or Atlanta. Anyway, they gravitated here. They were active in the area. They did get a vote to change the city government, to change the form of city government. Interesting enough, the black vote, I think, was determinant of the vote [which] won by less than a thousand votes. There were about 3,000 thousand black voters. They would all have voted for the change in city government.

BERMAN: What was the change?

KIMERLING: The change was to have a mayor council form of government,⁴⁵ what we have today with some modification, as opposed to a commissioner. Three commissioners. This was a mayor council. That was in November of 1962-63. They have the first election. Albert Boutwell,⁴⁶ who was friendly with the Jewish community, but an avowed segregationist but a moderate. The tag line for the election was, Boutwell would say, "I will keep the schools open."

⁴⁴ The National States' Rights Party was a far right, white supremacist party. It was founded in 1958 in Knoxville, Tennessee and was based on antisemitism, racism and opposition to racial integration with black people. Party officials argued for states' rights against the advance of the Civil Rights Movement. The national chairman was J.B. Stoner, who served three years in prison for bombing the Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The party moved to Birmingham and its members wore white shirts, black pants and tie and an armband bearing the thunderbolt version of the *Wolfsangel* (the double lightning bolt symbol worn by the SS). The party produced a newspaper, *Thunderbolt*. In 1958, the party was linked to the men who participated in the bombing of the Temple in Atlanta. They even ran candidates in the 1960 presidential election. The party declined in the 1970's as its chief ideologue Edward Fields began to devote more energy to the Ku Klux Klan. When Stoner went to jail in the 1980's the party disbanded.

⁴⁵ Birmingham had a form of government that consisted of a three-person commission. In 1963 the three commissioners were Eugene (Bull Connor), Art Hanes and J.T. "Jabo" Waggoner, Sr. (all staunch segregationists). The November 1962 called for a referendum to change the form of government from a commission to a mayor and a nine-member city council. The referendum passed and was followed by an election for mayor and city council members who took their oaths of office on April 15, 1963. However, the commissioners did not go quietly. They filed a legal challenge to the election and refused to leave City Hall. For a while there were two parallel governments and Bull Connor remained in control of the city's police and fire departments. On April 23 the Alabama Supreme Court ruled against Connor, Hanes and Waggoner and they left City Hall.

⁴⁶ Albert Burton Boutwell (1904-1978) served as the 19th Lieutenant Governor of Alabama. Boutwell's election in 1963 as mayor was seen as a rejection of Eugene "Bull" Connor's policies.

Connor said, "I don't care what the law is. I will close the schools." So the lines were pretty well drawn. Boutwell and Connor. When the first election top two voters, April 2, I think, 1963, there is a vote. Boutwell Beats Connor. He's now the new mayor. He will be the new mayor. Comes April 15, or whatever the date was, Martin Luther King decides to march. Got me? Right after the new mayor. Right before he is nominated, but right after he's the new mayor. One of the interesting things about that, the police chief of Albany, Georgia, comes to see Connor and says, "Now if you don't want any trouble, all you got to do is treat them nice," which is what they did in Albany. When they arrested them, they arrested them politely. When they put them in jail, they put them in jail away from the center of town, so there's no fuss. Connor turns down the police chief's advice on how to handle King. Subsequently, you have all the riots and dogs and hoses. In my view, in my research, I would say that Connor, King, and George Wallace were the winners because Connor was through as a political force in Birmingham. Yet, a year later he runs statewide and wins. George Wallace begins his, "I'm standing against the governor. I'm standing up against Kennedy." He begins that right after this. He starts in June. So, you have the three winners each appealing to their electorate. King, of course, he goes on to make his great speech in Washington, [D.C.]. The 1964 Civil Rights Act. Of course, Kennedy is assassinated in the interim.

BERMAN: Right.

KIMERLING: You have King really affecting the attitude of the citizenry of the United States. I think one statistic, up until the Birmingham riots, maybe 10 percent of the people of the United States thought that Civil Rights should be on the front burner of national issues. Afterwards, it's something over 50 percent. So, he achieves what he wants. That is, bringing Civil Rights to the national agenda. Wallace achieves what he wants by being the leader of the anti-government group. Connor achieves what he wants by running statewide for Alabama Public Commissioner. The Jews were part of that. Specifically, about the Jews, they were part of the movement to integrate and do things right. There was a petition signed by the lawyers addressed to the governor, saying that we should follow the laws of the Supreme Court. I mean, why wouldn't you follow the laws? Why do you need a petition? But there was a petition by lawyers. I don't remember exactly how many, but I think it was like 30 percent of the signatures were Jewish. Jewish lawyers. So they stood out. The point is they were not silent in the sense. The rabbis came.

<End Disk 2>

<Begin Disk 3>

KIMERLING: You have to make a choice.

BERMAN: The rabbis . . .

KIMERLING: The rabbis came in. They were Conservative rabbis. They never notified anybody in Birmingham. There is a Jewish tradition that says when any Jewish personage comes to a Jewish city, they should contact the Jewish leaders of that city. We know the reasons. The reasons are historically grounded in "find out what the hell is going on before you start your stuff." Well, they came. They didn't contact anybody. Except, a member of this congregation happened to be at the meeting when they announced they were coming. He phoned someone here, who then got the leaders together, who met them at the airport. One of the leaders of whom was Abe Berkowitz. Now he is a bone fide hero, saying, "Hey, they are in the midst of negotiations between the blacks and the whites on cutting out the rioting . . . not the rioting . . . the protesting. Cutting out the boycotts." As a matter of fact, I have the minutes. They call it "Project C," which meant, "confrontation." The boycott. King's boycott. I have the minutes of their meetings while they were here. It's good reading. It's great stuff. Smart as they can be. Smart as a whip. Really smart. They're saying to the rabbis, "Hey, come on, let's don't start this marching because they are in a delegate, negotiating." An interesting thing, which I haven't tracked down yet, but I'm going to track down, is why no Jewish merchants were involved in negotiations. It was all between the blacks and the white power structure. See, the Jews always knew just about where they stood. Nevertheless, they came. They were prevailed upon to teach the black songs and sing, but they never hit the newspapers because all during this time, you got to remember, it was a Jewish-Communist conspiracy. That was the line that was taking place. That's what happens. It's the typical Southern line. The blacks didn't know how to do it. It's the Jews that were behind it. That has been that way. That really didn't hit the newspapers. They came. They made their mark so they could go back to New Jersey or wherever, Connecticut, and say they'd been here. But that's why they were met. A year later, or two years later, I'm not sure of the date, Richard Rubenstein,⁴⁷ who was a re-constructionist rabbi . . . Rita and my wife and I headed up a forum series at the Jewish Community Center. We invited him to speak. Of course, there was some protest from the Jewish community because they knew he had been one of the rabbis. But he came. The first thing he did was apologize for coming. First thing he did before he got into his discussion, which I think was, "Is God Dead?" Or "God is Dead." That was the big subject in those days. I was on a panel in Montgomery here this spring with another one of the rabbis. It was a congressional group that had come down. I was on the panel. He was half apologizing, not totally

⁴⁷ Richard Rubenstein (1924-) became a rabbi in the early 1950s. He attended Harvard Divinity School earning a Ph.D. in 1960. He was an active rabbi for only a few years moving on the various organizations, foundations, and socially conscious organizations. He was a professor in various universities as well as the president of University of Bridgeport in Connecticut. He was also the director for the Center of Holocaust and Genocide Studies.

apologetic. He said, what he learned when he went back to New Jersey or wherever, Connecticut, was how prejudiced his own congregants were. Without saying anything, he understood the broader ramifications of it. And that's your rabbis.

BERMAN: I wanted . . .

KIMERLING: Rabbi Mesch, by the way, had died, prior to that.

BERMAN: I wanted to get back to you a little bit. You talked a little bit earlier about how your father's family ended up in Birmingham, but we didn't speak at all about your mother's family.

KIMERLING: My mother's family's from Atlanta. She was born in New York. Her mother's family was in Atlanta. They actually brought them to Atlanta. The Newmans.

BERMAN: What was your mother's name?

KIMERLING: My mother's name was [Tillie] Alterman, if you're familiar with Big Apple Stores.

BERMAN: Yes.

KIMERLING: That is my mother's family. Her brothers were, Izzy [Isadore], Sam, George . . .

BERMAN: Dave.

KIMERLING: Dave, Max and Abe. That's not birth order, but that's who they were. She was an Alterman. That is certainly a big connection between us and . . .

BERMAN: A very big connection.

KIMERLING: Between them. My mother and father met . . .

BERMAN: And your father's name?

KIMERLING: Max. Max was my father's name.

BERMAN: And they met how?

KIMERLING: I think they probably met at some Zionist function or something like that. You know, they used to have functions like that. This was in the 1920s. They were married in 1926. I think it was 1926 when they were married. Probably at some function like that. Certainly a Jewish function.

BERMAN: How did your mother adjust to living in Birmingham from Atlanta?

KIMERLING: She was fine. My mother was a very adjustable woman. She always had this very tight relationship with my uncles. Yes. She was the oldest of the group. Their mother died in child birth with the last one, a sister, I think. Paula. So the uncles would spend time here. The younger uncles, especially Maxie and Dave, who were the youngest. My aunt, she lived with us for a

while. I remember that. I don't remember much about it. I just remember she lived with us for a while. No, they were fine. No problems adjusting. I mean, Mom was the president of *Hadassah*.⁴⁸ Worked in the *shul*. There was a long history. A bit of a socialist.

BERMAN: She was a bit of a socialist?

KIMERLING: A bit of a socialist. Yes. She was.

BERMAN: That's great. Growing up, you attended the public school here?

KIMERLING: Yes. I went to public schools.

BERMAN: Did you ever go to summer camp?

KIMERLING: We went to Camp Olshine, Oshan, or Oshine.

BERMAN: Olshine. I know where exactly.

KIMERLING: In Nashville. Near Nashville. Yes. We went there. One summer, they had a polio epidemic, and we were all sent home. Some of our cousins stayed with us at the house because we were quarantined in our homes for, I don't know, two or three weeks. I don't remember what it was. Yes, we went to Camp Olshine.

BERMAN: How did you end up there? How did they end up sending you up there to Nashville?

KIMERLING: That's where the only Jewish camp was. It was a Jewish camp.

BERMAN: Because there were camps in Atlanta.

KIMERLING: I'm not sure at that time. In the 1940s? I don't know.

BERMAN: Yes.

KIMERLING: Of course, Atlanta wouldn't be an attraction.

BERMAN: Right.

KIMERLING: Since we were there all the time anyhow.

BERMAN: Tell me about the family business.

KIMERLING: The family business was, basically, a scrap business. Scrap iron and metals. It started out as bottling, washing bottles and paper business. Always had the scrap business. It grew as a scrap processor. Later, post-World War II, it added, what they call Kimerling Truck Parts. They bought surplus army equipment. That's how we ended up with these half-tracks, some of which ended up in Israel through my father and Abe Berkowitz.

BERMAN: Half-tracks. Like a jeep? A tank?

⁴⁸ *Hadassah*, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, is a volunteer organization founded in 1912 by Henrietta Szold, with more than 300,000 members and supporters worldwide. It supports health care and medical research, education and youth programs in Israel, and advocacy, education, and leadership development in the United States.

KIMERLING: No. It's got a track on the back and the front wheel. It could go through the sand. That was what a half-track was. That was a big part of the business. Another part of the business was scrap iron. Another part of the business, my father understood the value of aluminum. Post World War II aluminum. He bought a lot of wrecked aircraft. There was a lot of aircraft that were just wrecked. Not that they crashed as that they didn't have them. They wrecked them. So we bought them. He put in a smelter. One of my first jobs was running that smelter. You smelted the aluminum off of the iron. You pulled out the iron, and aluminum was sent to the steel mills.

BERMAN: Is the business still in business?

KIMERLING: No. The business was sold a number of years ago. By that time, we had split into two different companies. One was the oxygen business. They were big producers of . . . In the scrap business you cut things with oxy settling torch. That was the way you did it. Now, they do that, but they have crushers and shears. They were big users. M. Kimerling Sons was the name of the company. The same one that the bank didn't want in the 1930s. The same company. The same owners. They didn't want them in the 1930s. But by now, they wanted them. They were big. My father went to a scrap convention and found out that somebody was paying a lot less for oxygen than he was. So he goes to the local people and asks them for a better price. Of course, it was a monopoly then. There were only three companies in the country that made it. He went to the army bases, army sale, and bought what they call portable plants. The same ones they used on remote islands like other folks to repair things. He electrified them. We started making oxygen, our own oxygen, which was the worst possible way to get into it. The worst possible way to get into a business.

BERMAN: He was so entrepreneurial.

KIMERLING: That's exactly what it was. Years later, the company grew. I came back from the service. Of course, in a Jewish family, the youngest son gets what the oldest son doesn't want. Exactly what it was. My brother had tried the oxygen business. He didn't like it. He didn't want any part of it. I came back. I had one child and a pregnant wife, so it wasn't much discussion on taking over the business, which I didn't know anything about. We built the business. We had one great entrepreneur things. You probably recall, America had ICBMs, Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles. They were in deep silos around the country. In order to fire off the missiles, they had to have an oxygen plant because the oxygen is what propelled them. It was a liquid propel before the solid fuel. When they demilitarized those, we bought one of those plants off of a silo in Oklahoma, and we brought it to Birmingham, actually Bessemer, and we remade it by myself. A real smart Jewish engineer. We made it. That was when we really moved ahead. We became a public company. We

were quite successful. Then we sold the public company to another public company. The progression. The scrap business stayed even after we sold the oxygen.

BERMAN: And it sold also?

KIMERLING: It sold also.

BERMAN: Was it difficult being in a family business or did everyone get along?

KIMERLING: Everybody didn't get along. That's why it's called a family business. You get along because you got to get along. No, which is one reason we had the scrap business. One would have the oxygen business. One had the Kimerling Truck Parts business. Everybody . . .

BERMAN: . . . did something else.

KIMERLING: Had something else and you could do it. I think that's one reason the Altermans got along is because they had supermarkets. They had peanut butter and jelly. They had wholesale associated grocers. You work it out. You still get along. You still come to *shul* on *Yontif*. You still sit together. I don't know what getting along means.

BERMAN: After you finished school, is that when you enlisted in the army?

KIMERLING: Yes. I went to the [U.S.] Air Force through the ROTC Program [Reserve Officer Training Corps].

BERMAN: Air Force. Okay.

KIMERLING: When I was at [University of] Alabama, you took a test. They gave you a test. Everybody took a test. Those that passed, stayed in school. Those that failed, were drafted. Pretty simple criteria. I passed. So I got a commission. I got an Air Force commission. It took me about a year. After I got my commission, I was called into the service.

BERMAN: Did you go to Korea?

KIMERLING: No, I didn't go to Korea, but I could tell you a story about that. My first big duty station was Cheyenne, Wyoming. That's where we went. We went to class 6:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. A bunch of second lieutenants. We all were married. All out of college. You know, we were young. So we started playing golf. Well, none of us had ever played golf before in our lives. So, we were not very good golfers. We chewed up the course, as you can imagine. One day, this older fellow comes, and we should have known something, because he had this fellow carrying his golf clubs. The guy carrying it had all these stripes on his arms, so we should have known he was somebody. He says to us, "Gentlemen." He said, "I notice you all are playing golf." We said, "Yes sir." "It's a great game isn't it?" We said, "Yes, it is." He said, "I notice, though, that you all are sort of tearing up the course a little bit." We said, "Well, we fix it. We fix the course. We put it down." He said, "Well, have you ever thought about not playing golf?" Well, we got very

indignant. I said, "Well, we're officers, you know, and this is an officer's golf course, and we're entitled to play golf." He says, "That's correct. You are officers. You're right. This is an officer's golf course, and you're entitled to play golf. But let me tell you, my name is General Claymore, and I'm entitled to send your asses to Korea if I find you on this course one more time." Nobody played golf again. I don't even look at a golf course any more. It's still making an impression on me. So I ended up in France. I actually ended up being sent to France, which is . . . I was originally scheduled to go to North Africa. When they found out I was Jewish, they sent me to France, which was where our first child was born. A daughter.

BERMAN: So you were already married.

KIMERLING: I was married. Yes. I got married in college.

BERMAN: How did you meet?

KIMERLING: It's pretty simple. I was on the quadrangle, and she was walking across on the other side. I looked at her. I was with my friend, I said, "Who's that?" And he told me. I said, "Is she Jewish?" And he said, "Yes, she's from Montgomery." I said, "I'm going to marry her." It's just what I said.

BERMAN: Tell us your wife's name for the interview.

KIMERLING: Rita. Rita Capouya. C-A-P-O-U-Y- A. Sephardic Jews from the Isle of Rhodes.⁴⁹ They lived in Montgomery. Still does. Her brother still lives in Montgomery. She finished college in three [years]. It took me more than four.

BERMAN: So how did you introduce yourself to her?

KIMERLING: Well, in those days, you just went up and said, "My name is . . ." You know, you didn't . . .

BERMAN: And that was it?

KIMERLING: It was it for me. It wasn't it for her. I can tell you, she wasn't all that impressed. Took me a while, but nevertheless. She's terrific.

BERMAN: How long have you been married?

KIMERLING: We will be married 57 years in December.

BERMAN: Do you have children?

KIMERLING: We have four children. We have Elise [Wirtschafter], who has married and has

⁴⁹ Sephardic Jews are the Jews of Spain, Portugal, North Africa and the Middle East and their descendants. The adjective "Sephardic" and corresponding nouns Sephardi (singular) and Sephardim (plural) are derived from the Hebrew word 'Sepharad,' which refers to Spain. Historically, the vernacular language of Sephardic Jews was *Ladino*, a Romance language derived from Old Spanish, incorporating elements from the old Romance languages of the Iberian Peninsula, Hebrew, Aramaic, and in the lands receiving those who were exiled, Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, Greek, Bulgarian and Serbo-Croatian vocabulary.

three children. She's a Russian historian, of note. Judith, who'll be here. She is a professor of environmental political science and human rights attorney. Just coming back from the Amazon. Michael, who is an MD. He just left after 14 glorious years in Birmingham with us. He just moved to Seattle [Washington] with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He's a specialist in TB, tuberculosis. And Leslie, our youngest, who is our only truly Hebrew-speaking child, who lives in Boulder, Colorado. So those are our four children.

BERMAN: And how many grandchildren?

KIMERLING: We have three grandchildren.

BERMAN: That's wonderful.

KIMERLING: I couldn't help but listen to what you said about living in the South. Elise would drop the kids off every summer, and then she'd go to Washington or New York or somewhere to do some research. Then, she would come back, pick them up, and go back to California. Of course, the kids from California have a little different manners than the kids from Birmingham, Alabama. So, we're having breakfast, and Eric, the oldest of the grandchildren, turns to his grandmother, Rita, and says, "May I be excused from the table?" And Rita says, "Yes." He gets up, and Elise grabs him, hugs him and says, "Oh, that's wonderful, Eric. That's wonderful manners. I'm so proud of you. Where did you learn it?" He turns towards her, he says, "Grandma." He says, "But I don't like it."

BERMAN: That's great.

KIMERLING: That gives you a difference right away between the southern view of how things operate. But they're great kids, they're really great grandchildren.

BERMAN: Did you ever think about living anywhere else?

KIMERLING: No. First of all, the family was here. I've got dozens of cousins. Atlanta's close. Between Birmingham and Atlanta, you had so many friends and cousins. Then, of course, we had very good friends, both Jewish and non-Jewish here. So, we never thought . . . the children are different. They all thought about leaving Birmingham and did eventually.

BERMAN: You had mentioned earlier. There was one incident at the scrap yard metal business, about an employee. Someone not wanting to . . .

KIMERLING: This was actually someone in the oxygen business. We had black and white drivers, and black and white personnel. It was pretty much mixed. During the height of the rioting and protesting, we got a call. We sent our black driver out to make a delivery of oxygen cylinders, which upset one of our customers. He called and said, "I don't want you ever to send another black guy out here again." So I said, "Okay. Fine, suits me." I said to John, who was the . . . I said, "John, pick up all our cylinders," which means we're not going to do business with them again. I told them,

I said, "We're not doing business with you anymore. Just come on home." And we're not. You talk about civil rights. I wasn't really thinking in terms of civil rights. I'm thinking that he was one of our workmen. He worked for our company. Black. White. It didn't matter who they were. That's who we selected. Our people. They qualified based on our standards, not based on some arcane attitude or bigoted attitude.

BERMAN: What year was that?

KIMERLING: This was 1963. I remember it because it was the year that John Kennedy died. That was a very tense period between blacks and whites in Birmingham for lots of other reasons, but that was also very tense. So, I think that served me very well. We had a union, which was somewhat unusual in Birmingham.

BERMAN: It's pretty unusual for the south.

KIMERLING: Later on, we had a black president. Not at that period, but later on. A number of years later. We had a black president of the union. That was unusual in any period.

BERMAN: If you could just describe some of your fondest memories of growing up and being here in Birmingham. In closing, how would you describe your life here in Birmingham for the purpose of the tape?

KIMERLING: Well, it's been a good life. Certainly it's been a successful life in terms of economic success, social success. I was president of the first Birmingham Jewish Federation, the reorganization. My wife was the first woman president of a Jewish Federation. She was also president of Hadassah. We made a good life here. We had a lot of good Jewish friends and non-Jewish friends. Our kids got a good education here. It's been nice. [If] we wanted to go someplace, we went. I mean, we wanted to go to Paris. We went to Paris. In fact, the way we would go to Israel was we would stop in Europe, either going or coming back. It was such a long flight. We would stop either going or coming back in Europe, so we went to Israel a lot.

BERMAN: Do you still go to Israel a lot?

KIMERLING: We do. Not as much as we did. I think the last time we were there was around three years ago. Yes, we went to Israel. Leslie goes to Israel a lot. That's our youngest. She does that. As I said, she's our main Hebrew speaker.

BERMAN: I know you were really involved in the Jewish world here, but did you get involved much in non-Jewish activities, community activities?

KIMERLING: I was president of the International Oxygen Manufacturers Association, which represented the producers all over the world, Asia, Europe, United States, Canada, Australia. Yes, was there. I was on the board of the American Welding Society. I am a board member emeritus, that

is, for life for the Bessemer YMCA. That is work I did out in that community. Yes, I did it. Rita did even more.

BERMAN: Was the YMHA still around when you were growing up?

KIMERLING: Yes. The YMHA. Sure. The YMHA was where you always went after school. That is where you went. The boys swam naked except on Tuesdays and Thursdays. That was for women. The women swam on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and you swam every other day. It's where you learned how to swim. You know, they just threw you in the pool.

BERMAN: No suits.

KIMERLING: No suits. Weren't any suits. Who had a suit? The first suit I had was for my *bar mitzvah*. Those of us who weren't good enough to play on the high school basketball team, played basketball at the Y. We were part of a league. One particular event, we were playing out in Ensley. Ensley was the steel mills. They were the rough tough guys, and the Jews were the merchants. You know, there's a difference. The score was like 22-22. In those days, that was a high scoring game. I remember Bud Rapman [sp] gets the last free throw. The coach comes up. He said, "Now let me tell you something, guys," he said, "If Bud makes this shot, I don't want any celebration. I want you to run like hell for the bus." And we ran like hell for the bus.

BERMAN: So he made it.

KIMERLING: He made it. We ran for the bus. I mean, that's the way it was.

BERMAN: That's a great story.

KIMERLING: Yes. That's just the way it was. They used to play at the old YMHA basketball, handball. Had some great handball players, really top flight adult handball players. You played ping-pong. They had part of the lobby, you played chess. Had chess boards all set up.

BERMAN: When did it close?

KIMERLING: It never closed. It moved to what's now the Jewish Community Center on Montclair Road. So it never closed. It just moved with the population.

BERMAN: But the YMHA and the Jewish Community Center were two separate things. Were they not?

KIMERLING: YMHA became the Jewish Community Center. That's what it was.

BERMAN: I want to make sure . . .

KIMERLING: By the way, the Jewish Community Center, I remember one time, I got a call. I was on the board, and Harold Katz, who was the director says, "We've got an application from a black family." "Are they going to pay their dues?" That was the only question.

BERMAN: That's great. Did they join?

KIMERLING: Yes.

BERMAN: Is there a Jewish Country Club here in Birmingham?

KIMERLING: There's one Jewish Country Club now. It's called the Pine Tree [Country Club]. There used to be two Jewish Country Clubs. One was Hillcrest [Country Club], which was the Reform. They had a golf course. That was uptown. That was upscale. That was where the Reform Jews . . . They had been here a long time. Immediately after World War II, the Conservative Jews, essentially Beth-El members, formed what they called the Fairmont [Club]. The Fairmont Club had swimming only, but somebody knew the sheriff, and they had slot machines.

<End Disk 3>

<Begin Disk 4>

KIMERLING: Those were your two country clubs. Then time eroded both. That is, the sheriff was replaced, and the slot machines went out. The Jews at the Fairmont wanted to play golf. The people at the Hillcrest . . . So, like everybody says, it sort of, everything began to merge together. The community came together. They have one country club now called Pine Tree.

BERMAN: Are there Jews at non-Jewish country clubs?

KIMERLING: I don't think. It would be rare. There may be. I'm not saying there are not, but they would be rare. The Jews were never members of non-Jewish country clubs in any significant, if at all, numbers.

BERMAN: I think you had a question.

RUTH EINSTEIN: Yes. So you have been doing a lot of research about the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s era. Two questions. What has surprised you the most? What did you not know before you started your research? Second, what do you think may be a misconception about Jewish involvement or not during that time? What would you want people to understand about the Jewish community during that period?

KIMERLING: Well, two parts. It's one. It sort of wraps in one. But the one thing I did find out, the general public was not silent. That part. I base that upon the fact that there are petitions in the newspapers where people signed their names. Hundreds and hundreds of people signed their names. In fact, there were about 1,200 of them [who] signed their names against closing the parks, which was straight up and down a racist issue. Then there's another ad in the newspaper, about 500 people signed their names asking other citizens to vote for the change in city government. That's pretty upfront, publishing your name in the newspaper. That was interesting to me that I didn't know until I got into

it. That is, generally, the people of Birmingham. I'm not talking about the Jews. The thing about the Jewish community, I didn't know all the involvement in what I call social reforms. Not just desegregation of the department stores. From my point of view, they could have been desegregated right away. My business was desegregated. I had my whites and blacks sitting next to each other, eating together, and doing things together. It never even occurred to me that would be a problem, but, obviously, you knew it was. When they decided to hire a black person as a salesperson or in the office to be a clerk, I'm saying, why so late? They were subject to lots of threatening phone calls. There is a great story about the Pizitz⁵⁰ family. They were the biggest target because they had the biggest store and the biggest reputation. They decide, after all these threatening phone calls, that maybe they ought to have a gun in the house. So, Michael goes and gets a gun. His wife, Patty, who's a Jewish mother says, "Why do you need a gun in the house? We're not going to have any guns in this house." Michael gives her the whole story. She says, "Okay." He says, "I'll make you a deal. I'll take the gun apart." He puts one part over here. Another part over there. The third part, he said, "It would have taken me 30 minutes to put the gun back together." That sort of gives you the attitude of the Jews towards violence. Historically, people who you don't know. The Jews were involved very much in social welfare, social reforms. Part of the leaders. They were part of the group of the National Conference of Christians and Jews⁵¹ here in Birmingham. Started in the late 1920s. They were active in the 1950s and 1960s against integration. I mean, against segregation. There was an inter-racial committee. They were part of that group. They asked for black policemen. This was in 1950s. Of course, it didn't come about until the 1960s. Nevertheless, all through the history, there's a strain of Jewish participation, not as a Jewish community, but as individuals. These individuals were leaders in the Jewish community. It's not as if they were some stray person who came about, except for the communists. The Jews never bought into the communist, the Jewish communist people who were in Birmingham. They were part of the labor movement, a very large part of the Birmingham Labor Movement. Buddy Capouya was president of the Jewish Community Center.

⁵⁰ Pizitz was a major regional department store chain in Alabama that got their beginning in the late 19th century, with its flagship store in downtown Birmingham. By the 1920s, the store became known as the Louis Pizitz Dry Goods Company on the site of its flagship building in downtown Birmingham. At its peak, it operated 12 other stores, mostly in the Birmingham area with several locations in Huntsville and other Alabama cities. In 1986, McRae's, a department store chain based in Jackson, Mississippi, announced that it would be taking over the Pizitz chain. In 2000, Bayer Properties acquired the historic building. Pizitz Middle School in the City of Vestavia Hills was built on land donated from the family estate. The school was named in honor of Louis Pizitz

⁵¹ The National Conference of Christians and Jews was founded in 1927. Its founders included prominent social activists who dedicated the organization to bringing diverse people together to address interfaith divisions. Several years later, the NCCJ expanded its work to include all issues of social justice including race, class, gender equity, sexual orientation and the rights of people with different abilities. In the 1990's, the name was changed to the National Conference for Community and Justice to better reflect the breadth and depth of its mission, the growing diversity of the country and the need to be more inclusive.

They were recognized for what they were and what they did. That part has never been fully explored, which I hope to do.

BERMAN: I think what you said earlier about, there's a thin line you had to walk. You had to be smart to figure out how to walk it.

KIMERLING: Yes. They knew, and you knew what to say. I remember going to this customer. I knew damn well he wasn't doing business with me because I was Jewish. This and that experience. Whatever it was. Years went by. I finally went down. I said, "Mr. Smith." That wasn't his name. I don't remember. I said, "You know my name." "Yes, I know who you are." I said, "You know I've been in business now for 10 years." I gave him a whole list of a company. "I think I've got enough experience. I've had four children. I think we qualify now to do business with you." And he gave us the business. You ran into that. It was nothing that set you back. I think a lot of Jews ran into the same thing. It didn't deter anyone.

RUTH EINSTEIN: The last time that we were here, you were speaking to us about people from other places had an expectation that Jews would be front and center and marching. Yet, the Jews in this community, if I understand you correctly, or if I'm remembering correctly, didn't feel like it was their place to be front and center and that they worked a lot behind the scenes as well.

KIMERLING: Marching was strictly a black phenomenon. Actually, if you read the literature, it was necessary for the blacks to stand up for their rights. One of the things they didn't want to do, and the Jews are criticized for that, is they are standing up for the blacks as if they're the ones who brought them their rights. It wasn't. It was the blacks standing up for their own rights. It is their marching that eventually does it. I mean, it's not anything behind the scenes. Of course, you have to change the laws, and you have to do this and do that, but it's their confrontation. It's their marching. Their willingness to go out there on the front lines that really brings about the changes. First of all, the Jews didn't amount to anything. They're one percent of the population.

BERMAN: Right.

KIMERLING: There was no significant . . . One time, Senator Allen, who was the senator from Alabama. U.S. Senator. We always had senators to meetings. He told us, he said, "Let me tell you, I don't support Israel." That was the main issue. It could have been at the time where they were trying to sell arms to Saudi Arabia or Egypt. I don't remember. Anyhow, he says, "My commitment is to the idea." He said, "Look. Your votes don't matter." He says, "We like to have them," but he says, "How many Jews are there?" He says, "I won by 50,000

votes or 10,000 votes. And how many Jews vote?" He said, "Sure, I like your money, but I raised \$1 million. You gave me \$100,000." He says, "It's the idea. We share the same ideas." You knew. It's good. He was your friend. That's why you . . . I happen to think that's the reason the Jews are popular in America today. We share the same basic ideas.

BERMAN: Same values. I agree. I think on that note we'll conclude.

KIMERLING: Thank you.

BERMAN: Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS

<End Disk 4>

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