

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

**MEMOIRIST:** EDWIN EMBER  
**INTERVIEWER:** SANDRA BERMAN  
**LOCATION:** SELMA, ALABAMA  
**DATE:** JANUARY 24, 2012

<Begin Disk 1>

**INTERVIEW BEGINS**

**BERMAN:** Edward or Edwin?

**EMBER:** Edwin.

**BERMAN:** I'll say Ed for the tape. It's whatever you prefer.

**EMBER:** The only one that ever called me Edwin was my mother.

**BERMAN:** Today is January 24, 2012. I am in Selma, Alabama, with Ed Ember, who has agreed to participate in the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project of the William Breman Jewish Heritage and Holocaust Museum. My name is Sandra Berman. I'm the archivist with the Museum. Thank you very much, Ed, for agreeing to participate in our project.

**EMBER:** Glad to.

**BERMAN:** I'd like to begin by asking you how you arrived in Selma. I know you're not originally from here.

**EMBER:** Long story. It was the United States Navy and World War II that got me to the South. I was born in Brooklyn, New York. I was 17 years old. I was just about to graduate from high school. I went to Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn. I had already enlisted in the Navy, and they let me graduate. The day after I graduated, I reported for active duty in the Navy. When the war ended, I was in naval pre-flight school at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia. Actually, I was released to inactive duty in the [U.S. Navy] Reserve right after the war ended. Since I was in Athens, I just turned around and used the GI Bill of Rights<sup>1</sup> and went to school at the University of Georgia. That's how I got to the South. Eventually, [I] married a girl from South Georgia. Fitzgerald, Georgia. We got married and we lived in

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<sup>1</sup> Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known informally as the GI Bill, was a law that provided a range of benefits for returning World War II veterans (commonly referred to as GI's), including low-cost mortgages, loans to start business or farms and tuition and living expenses to attend college.

Statesboro [Georgia]. We lived in Dublin [Georgia] and then Fitzgerald. In 1965, we separated and divorced. I moved to Birmingham, Alabama. I had a job opportunity there. [I] lived in Birmingham about four years and moved on to Tuscaloosa [Alabama]. I lived in Tuscaloosa about five [or] six years. Then another business opportunity brought me to Selma. This was 1975.

**BERMAN:** What was the business opportunity?

**EMBER:** I was in retail clothing business. I managed a Leon's store here in Selma. Leon's was part of a small chain of ladies clothing stores. We had 18 stores at that time. Two in Georgia, two in Florida, and the other 16 in Alabama.

**BERMAN:** Who owned the Leon clothing chain?

**EMBER:** Pookie Tepper [sp] was the principal owner, but there were two other owners. There were three owners, actually.

**BERMAN:** Was it a Jewish owned business?

**EMBER:** Partially. Pookie was a member of this temple [Temple Mishkan Israel]<sup>2</sup> He was Jewish. The other two gentlemen weren't.

**BERMAN:** What was his real name?

**EMBER:** Let's see. Pookie did have a real name.

**RUTH:** It was Max Leon [Tepper].

**EMBER:** Max Leon. There you go.

**BERMAN:** I want to get back a little bit to after the war and you going to the University of Georgia. You had no desire to go back up North?

**EMBER:** None whatsoever.

**BERMAN:** How come? What was the allure of the south?

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<sup>2</sup> Temple Mishkan Israel was founded in 1867, with services held at the home of Joseph Meyer. In 1870, the Reform Congregation Mishkan Israel was formally established. In 1876, the congregation began to rent an Episcopal church for its functions, and 16 years later, they acquired a parsonage and school house on Broad Street for Sunday school. The congregation built a permanent temple on that site. Ground was broken in June of 1899, and the building was completed in December of that year. February, 1900, the synagogue was dedicated. Although their membership was relatively small, Mishkan Israel was able to support a full-time rabbi. From 1885 through 1976, Mishkan Israel usually employed a rabbi, although its small size meant that most of their spiritual leaders did not stay in Selma for very long. From 1910 to 1930, the congregation reached a plateau of 80 members. Its membership peaked at 104 households in 1940. Since then, its membership has gradually declined. The congregation's last full-time rabbi, Lothair Lubasch, died in 1976. In the early 20th century an Orthodox congregation, B'nai Abraham, located at the corner of Alabama and Green, was founded, but eventually disbanded due to declining membership in 1944. Its remaining members joined Mishkan Israel.

**EMBER:** I'd never really been out of New York and the New York area until I joined the Navy. Because of the Navy and various trainings that I had, I saw different parts of the country. I was stationed in Chicago [Illinois] for a while, the Midwest, Oklahoma, Florida. Before I could get into the naval pilot training program, I was supposed to have had a year's worth of college. Before they sent me to pre-flight school, they sent me out to San Luis Obispo, California to Cal Poly [California Polytechnic State University], where I took an accelerated year's worth of college before I got to Athens. I was trained in the navy as an aviation ordnanceman and then went through combat air crewmen's school. I was actually a turret gunner on a small navy bomber. I sat in the turret up on top with the twin 50 caliber machine guns. Then, I was stationed in Lake City, Florida, at a naval air station there. When I took the exam for pilot training, I was accepted. From Lake City, Florida, I went out to San Luis Obispo, California. When I finished there, they shipped me back to Athens, Georgia. I got to see other parts of the country. I knew that I really didn't want to go back to New York. I was either going to end up in Florida somewhere, California, or Georgia. Georgia won.

**BERMAN:** What was the appeal?

**EMBER:** The appeal was a young lady I met from Fitzgerald, Georgia.

**BERMAN:** What was her name?

**EMBER:** Her name was Geraldine Halperin.

**BERMAN:** What was it like for a young man from the northeast, Brooklyn, to come into the Jim Crow<sup>3</sup> South? Was it culture shock?

**EMBER:** Not really. Again, I had been exposed to a lot of different cultures after I left New York. Actually, back then, living in the part of Brooklyn that I lived in, it was like a small community. Brooklyn is made up of different communities. I was living in a predominantly

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<sup>3</sup> 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 Crow 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.

Jewish area. There was a predominantly Italian, Irish, or you know. It wasn't . . . it just didn't seem different. Of course, being in the navy and meeting and associating with young men from various parts of the country, it was no culture shock, really.

**BERMAN:** We've been to Fitzgerald a couple of times and that whole area. Ocilla. Dublin. Can you name some of the other people that you met? Jewish families that you had interaction with?

**EMBER:** You've mentioned some of them. The Krugers. The Kaminskys. I'm trying to think who else. There were two Kruger families. The Harrises from Ocilla, which was just eight miles from Fitzgerald.

**BERMAN:** Did you attend the Fitzgerald Jewish congregation [Fitzgerald Hebrew Congregation]?<sup>4</sup>

**EMBER:** Oh yes.

**BERMAN:** Do you remember Rabbi Nathan Kohen?<sup>5</sup>

**EMBER:** Very much so. Yes.

**BERMAN:** What was he like? We've not interviewed anybody who's really spoken about him.

**EMBER:** He was a very reserved and quiet man. The Fitzgerald congregation was actually . . . there were only, I think, eight Jewish families in Fitzgerald proper. But we had a congregation from all around. Tifton. Even Dublin had . . . of course, we were a Conservative congregation. All around. Douglas. Interactive with a lot of the Jewish community. Fitzgerald was like . . . for that area, it was like a gathering place for Jewish families. The holidays, people would come in and stay in the motels or a hotel. We would have a meal at the synagogue. We had folks that were more Orthodox. The reason they came to Fitzgerald was they could walk to the synagogue on the High Holy Days.<sup>6</sup> We had regular Friday night services, which I attended, except during football season when Fitzgerald played high school football on Friday nights.

**BERMAN:** Do you remember . . . what was his first name, Reuben Kruger?

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<sup>4</sup>The synagogue of the Fitzgerald Hebrew Congregation was originally used by the Methodist Episcopal Church. The building was converted to a Hebrew synagogue in 1939 when the northern and southern branches of the Methodist Church united. It is one of very few synagogues in South Georgia serving several other communities, in addition to Fitzgerald.

<sup>5</sup>Rabbi Nathan Kohen (1908-1975) was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His first rabbinate was at Keneseth Israel in Monessen, Pennsylvania. In 1945, he accepted the pulpit at Fitzgerald Hebrew Congregation, where he stayed for the next 25 years.

<sup>6</sup>The two High Holy Days are *Rosh Ha-Shanah* (Jewish New Year) and *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement).

**EMBER:** Reuben Kruger. Yes.

**BERMAN:** Yes. Do you remember him very well?

**EMBER:** Very well.

**BERMAN:** I think he led the services at times. I think he was very active in the synagogue. What was he like?

**EMBER:** His father was more active than Reuben was. Yes.

**BERMAN:** What was his father's name?

**EMBER:** Abe [Kruger]. Reuben's father had a clothing business in Fitzgerald.<sup>7</sup> Reuben opened a shoe store [Reuben's Shoes]. I think his wife was from Mobile [Alabama]. In fact, Connie and I saw them. It's been a number of years. We used to go to Jekyll Island for the Georgia/Florida weekends. We'd stop in Fitzgerald and visit. Jerry Heller and his wife were there.

**BERMAN:** What else do you remember about Fitzgerald, being there in that community? Any anecdotes? Funny stories about life in Fitzgerald as a young . . . ?

**EMBER:** Not really. There were good times and there were some bad times, which is one of the reasons that Geraldine and I separated and divorced. I moved to Alabama. She eventually ended up down in Florida. She lives in Tuscaloosa now.

**BERMAN:** Right.

**EMBER:** Yes. We have . . . our two oldest sons [David and Steve Ember] . . . one of them lives in Tuscaloosa. The other one and his family live in Georgia. They lived in Atlanta and then Dunwoody. Then they moved to up around Alpharetta. Both of the oldest ones are retired now. They moved up to a community. It's actually Braselton [Georgia] is the city. It's a retirement community up there right close to Chateau Elan [Winery and Resort].

**BERMAN:** What did you do in Fitzgerald? What was your line of work?

**EMBER:** I was in the retail clothing business. I was involved in small town life. Involved around the synagogue and Jewish activities that way. Also, I was a member of the . . . I got elected to the Board of Education there for a while. I stayed active. I played some golf. We had a high school football officiant association. I was a high school . . . I officiated high school football games.

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<sup>7</sup> Abe Kruger owned Gershon & Kruger, a dry goods store in partnership with Samuel Gershon of Atlanta. He later owned Kruger's Department Store until he sold it to Belk's.

**BERMAN:** I can tell you're an avid fan.

**EMBER:** Avid. Yes. She'll testify to that. <He gestures toward his wife>

**BERMAN:** Have you switched allegiance to Alabama now that you live here?

**EMBER:** Oh no. No. No.

**BERMAN:** Is the wrong thing to ask?

**EMBER:** I'm an old dog [University of Georgia Bulldogs].

**BERMAN:** An old dog.

**EMBER:** Actually, my oldest son and his wife are [University of] Georgia alumni. My oldest grandson and his wife are Georgia alumni. [My] oldest granddaughter and her husband are Georgia alumni. So I kind of started the . . .

**BERMAN:** I'm sorry I asked.

**EMBER:** Why?

**BERMAN:** I'm kidding.

**EMBER:** But then I've got the group in Tuscaloosa. They're Alabama fans. Alabama alumni and Alabama fans.

**BERMAN:** When you moved to Selma, was there much of a difference in the Jewish community here in Selma from the Jewish community you knew in Fitzgerald?

**EMBER:** Yes. The Fitzgerald community, as you know, the services were Conservative. I was exposed to Reform Judaism earlier because of Hillel<sup>8</sup> in Athens. I was a TEP at Georgia, Tau Epsilon Phi, which was a Jewish fraternity. Hillel was Reform services, which I personally enjoyed. I was *bar mitzvahed*<sup>9</sup> and could read Hebrew at one time. [I] still could barely do it, but it's been a few years since I was *bar mitzvahed*. I could read, but I didn't know what I was reading. I couldn't speak Hebrew or understand. So, when I got to Reform services, where there was more English, I really got to understand some of the liturgy and what the prayers meant. What they said. I found that I really enjoyed Reform services more than I did the Conservative services.

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<sup>8</sup> Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life is a Jewish campus organization. Its mission is to enrich the lives of Jewish students so they may enrich Jewish people and the world.

<sup>9</sup> 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

**BERMAN:** Was the community welcoming to a new family? A new member?

**EMBER:** Yes. In fact, I was single when I got to Selma. Connie was single, also. That's another story, how we met and got married.

**BERMAN:** Tell me. How did you meet?

**EMBER:** When I got here, the owner's wives got very interested in . . . I'm single. They wanted to fix me up with dates with some of their friends. I didn't particularly want to get introduced that way. I would find my own companionship. So I told them I only wanted to date Jewish girls. Well, there were no Jewish girls my age at that time. I was 49 years old and going on almost 50. So that got me off the hook there. Connie was recently divorced. She was living in Miami and had family here. Her mother and her father. Her father was retired. She had a sister who was here, who was married to one of the officers out at Craig Air Force Base. So that's how they got to Selma. Connie, when she went through the divorce, she came up here to visit. I don't know how familiar you are with small towns, but the first thing they want to do, they ask what church do you belong to. They want to invite you to come to church. Connie at that time, her previous husband was Jewish but she wasn't. She had never . . . so she told them she was Jewish so they could get off her back about going to church with them.

<End Disk 1>

<Begin Disk 2>

**EMBER:** Anyway, her niece and one of the owners of Leon's lived around the corner from where Connie's sister and brother-in-law lived. Her niece was friendly with the daughter of one of the girls. [She] went to school with her, anyway. She happened to mention to her mother that Lisa's aunt was here from Miami, and she's Jewish. I had a boat that I kept on a marina in the [Alabama] River. It was a 23-foot Cuddy Cabin, if you're familiar with boats. It was the kind of boat where . . . I used to joke, it's big enough so when you rode down the river, you wouldn't spill your drink. Anyway, it was a little cabin with two bunks in it, a bump out head. Do you know what the head is?

**BERMAN:** Yes.

**EMBER:** On Sunday afternoon, I'd usually take off in the boat with a cooler [and] beer and I'd head down the river. There was a sand bar that we boaters called "long beach," where we could pull up. There was always a group there. We had a volley ball net set up. We'd play volley ball, or just sit around and talk. Drink a few beers. Anyway, she [Doris] knew I would be

on the river Sunday afternoon. They had a cabin on the river, she and her husband. One Saturday morning she came into the store and said, “Ed, you going to be on the river tomorrow?” I said, “Probably.” She said, “Well, come have lunch with Henry and I.” I said, “Okay. That would be fine.” Connie was . . . Doris went that Sunday morning and picked up Connie. [She] dragged her out to the car and said, “You come and have lunch with Henry and I.” I was in my boat. I pulled up to their dock and went up. Nobody was there. That time of the year [the river] was low and [the] bank was about 100 feet up. So I came back down and popped a beer and was sitting on the back of the boat. I had a little portable TV that I used to carry with me. I was watching the football game, naturally, in a pair of cut-off jeans. The usual river attire. I’m making my dermatologist very rich these days because of riding up and down the river naked for all those years. Anyway, nobody was there. I’m sitting there. Finally, I hear Doris holler, “Ed!” I looked way up there. There is Doris, and there is this tall, skinny, blond, long hair. I thought I was looking at Mary . . . remember from Peter, Paul and Mary?

**BERMAN:** Mary Travers.

**EMBER:** Mary Travers. That’s who I thought I was looking at. So, up I climbed. I get introduced to Connie. Doris said, “Excuse me, I’ve got to go next door. Help yourself. The bar is right here.” So [I] fixed a drink and fixed Connie a drink. This was about two o’clock in the afternoon. We start talking and getting acquainted. Doris had disappeared. Henry hasn’t shown up with the lunch. Finally, it was getting late in the afternoon. This was [the] fall of the year and beginning to get dark. Finally, Henry shows up with a basket with the lunch. I said, “Sorry folks, but I’ve got to leave. It’s getting dark, and I’m not this familiar with the river. I’ve got to get back upriver and put the boat in the marina. I’m just not that familiar with it now to navigate in the dark.” “Oh. Aren’t you going to have some of Henry’s chicken salad?” I said, “Well, I’ll have to pass on it.” I asked Connie, being a gentleman, “Would you like to ride back up to Selma with me in the boat?” Connie said, “Yes.” So we got in the boat. We headed back up to town and had some dinner. [I] asked her if I could see her again. She said, “Yes,” and we started dating. That’s how we met and started getting serious.

**BERMAN:** When did you find out she wasn’t Jewish?

**EMBER:** Right away. Anyway, this went on. Then it was in the spring of the year. Connie came into the store one Friday morning and said, “How about taking me to Montgomery tonight?” I told her I would go to Montgomery. I probably figured there was a restaurant or

something she wanted to eat at or a movie she wanted to see. So we head for Montgomery. I said, “Where are we going?” She said, “I’ll tell you where.” We turn off on South Boulevard. I said, “Where are we going? She said, “I’ll tell you when. Turn on Narrow Lane Road. Left.” We get up there, and there’s Temple Beth Or.<sup>10</sup> She says, “Turn in here.” I said, “Oh, you’re taking me to Friday night services. How nice.” We go in and sat down and enjoy the services. [When] services were over, I get up. She says, “Sit down.” So I sat down. The sanctuary empties out. The rabbi [Rabbi David Baylinson]<sup>11</sup> is still up on the *bimah*.<sup>12</sup> He calls Connie to the *bimah*, and they go through a conversion ceremony. I didn’t know that she had been studying for months with the rabbi. Anyway, a couple months later, we got married in the rabbi’s study.

**BERMAN:** That’s a great story.

**EMBER:** Yes.

**BERMAN:** I’ll have to check with her later if it’s all true.

**EMBER:** I may have left out a few things. Maybe she’ll tell you about the white owls. She’s grinning at me. <Ed is referring to his wife>

**BERMAN:** So you’ve been in Selma since 1975.

**EMBER:** 1975.

**BERMAN:** How did you get active in this synagogue [Temple Miskhan Israel]? You’re the president now, correct?

**EMBER:** Yes. For life.

**BERMAN:** How long have you been president?

**EMBER:** It’s a life sentence. How long have I been president? I don’t even know now. Twenty years or more.

**BERMAN:** How did you get active here?

**EMBER:** Because you get in, and in a small community, people find things for you to do and get involved in. I got very interested in the history of the temple and realized what the

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<sup>10</sup> A Reform congregation in Montgomery, Alabama. The congregation was formally formed in 1852 and was known as Kahl Montgomery. In 1862, they completed a temple in downtown Montgomery and later changed the name to Temple *Beth Or* [Hebrew: *House of Light*]. It is listed in the National Registry of Historic Places and still stands today serving as a church. Due to the increasing Jewish population, a new house of worship was built in 1902 and again in 1961, which is the location of Temple Beth Or today

<sup>11</sup> Rabbi David A. Baylinson served Temple Beth Or in Montgomery, Alabama from 1965 until his retirement in 1994.

<sup>12</sup> A platform or pulpit in a synagogue.

congregation had once been. Of course, I missed most of them. I go visit them now out at Live Oak Cemetery. It just intrigued me, and I got involved. It took me a little while to . . . it took a lot of politicking before they would elect me president. Finally did, but now they can't get rid of me, it seems.

**BERMAN:** Like the rest of everybody we've spoken to, this synagogue and the building is very meaningful to the small number of you that are still living here in Selma.

**EMBER:** Yes.

**BERMAN:** What do you hope you can accomplish for this building?

**EMBER:** It would take more than me. What I'd like to see happen to it, again, is to be able to raise enough money to not only restore the building, but make it like a museum. To do that, we'd have to do a lot of things. We would have to make it wheelchair accessible. We would have to have a complete different bathroom. We would have to have an elevator type of system, where people with wheelchairs can get in here. Not only that, but you'd have to have a lift to go down. It's a little bit more than just putting a new roof on it and painting up the inside or whatever. There's a lot of structural work that has to be done. We need a whole new heating and cooling system. We need something like a dehumidifier to preserve the three *Torahs*<sup>13</sup> in there . . . besides the books and things. I would like it one day to be a museum, where we would have a curator, and it would be open to the public. It would be a remembrance that there was once a very vibrant and an integral Jewish community here in Selma. [The] whole downtown of Selma at one time was nothing but Jewish merchants.<sup>14</sup> There were three Jewish mayors of this town. They were . . . Jews, like I said, were an integral part of not only economic growth but the social growth of the city. The Harmony Club<sup>15</sup> was a center for Jewish activity and entertainment. They had card clubs. They would have dances where young Jewish girls and

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<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> Jewish merchants dominated downtown Selma in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century along Broad and Water Streets. Stores included Tepper's, Kayser's Liepold's, Rothchild's, the L.C. Adler furniture company, Siegel Automobile Co., Benish and Meyer Tobacco, and Richard Thalheimer liquors.

<sup>15</sup> The Harmony Club was formed in 1867. In 1909, a brick building was erected on Water Avenue. It served as a social hub for the Jewish community, hosting dances, card games, billiards and other social functions. Non-Jews would occasionally rent out the space to host their events. It is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The names on the building's cornerstone are Ben J. Schuster, Isaac Yaretzky, M.J. Meyer, E.F. Ullman, J.C. Adler, Isaac Schwartz and A. Thalmeier

Jewish men would meet from all over the area, not just Selma. They came from Montgomery. They came from Birmingham. It's gone today. It's sad.

**BERMAN:** It made national news a couple of years ago when the . . .

**EMBER:** You'll have to speak just a little louder.

**BERMAN:** I'm sorry. It made national news a couple of years ago when the city of Dothan paid . . . offered . . . I think it was \$100,000 to . . .

**EMBER:** Yes. It didn't last long.

**BERMAN:** Yes. Have you all thought about doing anything so drastic?

**EMBER:** If we had \$100,000, we would start getting the roof fixed.

**BERMAN:** Yes. It didn't last long? I don't know.

**EMBER:** No. It didn't. What's happened to the Jewish community in Selma is so similar to what's happened all over the country, not just the South, in smaller Jewish communities. The young people went off to school. Met wives or husbands from other parts of the country. They all ended up in Birmingham, Atlanta, Connecticut, or California and never came back. There was limited opportunity. Most of them were well educated. Like David and Lynn Barth [sp] you met. They're from here. Even though their families were here, and there is a lot of history, they ended up in Nashville [Tennessee] because of Vanderbilt [University]. That's typical of what happened.

**BERMAN:** When you came here in 1975, the Jewish businesses were still a factor, vibrant along Broad Street. Can you describe what it looked like?

**EMBER:** Not that many. There was just a few. There was Tepper's [Department Store] downtown. There was Kayser's. I think Rothschild's was just about gone. There was the men's store. They eventually . . . they were all . . . you could tell that this was the end. As folks got older, they either retired or passed away. They didn't have children that were coming back to get in the business.

**BERMAN:** Did they try to sell the stores to other individuals to try to keep them going?

**EMBER:** Some of them did. Yes. Then others just closed. There weren't buyers. By that time, too, Selma was changing. The air force base was closing. That was like a \$3 million a month payroll that was gone. Also, the whole country was changing at that time. When I came to Selma . . . besides the air force base, you had about five or six sewing plants where women were working. Besides Bush Hog and International Paper, you had a battery factory here and a

lot of small industry where there were jobs for people. Eventually, all those jobs ended up in Asia, South America, or Mexico. They're gone today. You've got one sewing operation that makes uniforms for the armed services and that's it. So, people began leaving Selma. Today, the population of Selma is . . . I don't know whether it's about 18,000 or 19,000. I don't know. It was over 25,000 to 30,000 when I first came. The population is aging because there's nothing for young people really to do here.

**BERMAN:** What do you see for the future for Selma?

**EMBER:** Unless there's a change in what's happening throughout the whole country, where we're able to bring manufacturing jobs back to the United States from where they are, the whole middle class of the country is disappearing. That's part of what the problem is. Not only in Selma, but all over. There are no jobs for people that aren't engineers or doctors. Everywhere you look, there's another lawyer. You've got plenty of those. Really, I don't know. I hope that somehow where people, the country as a whole, which reflects in our [United States] Congress, wake up and realize that you got to rebuild the middle class. It's so different from when I was young. When I got out of the service, there was opportunity. First of all, the whole generation was exposed to college that probably wouldn't have gone or wouldn't . . . just like . . . I would have had a time financing myself through school. My parents couldn't send me. You had the GI Bill of Rights. You also had, within the GI Bill, you could buy even without resources, without financial . . . you could buy a house, a home because we had a government loan guarantee.

<End Disk 2>

<Begin Disk 3>

**EMBER:** It was carryover from the war. I'm talking about World War II, where the whole country was involved in the war effort. It wasn't just the ones that were in service, serving in the army or the navy. There wasn't an air force then. It was the Army Air Corps. But it was people at home. They went through rationing, food rationing. Bought war bonds. Women went to work for the first time in factories. Everybody was working, and everybody was together. The kids . . . I remember scrap metal drives.<sup>16</sup> My group . . . my "gang," as we called ourselves, we were the "Huskies." That was our name. We played ball together and hung out together. One of

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<sup>16</sup> Americans were urged to turn in scrap metal for recycling, and schools and community groups across the country held scrap metal drives. To build tanks, ships, planes, and weapons, it required massive amounts of metal. A single tank needed 18 tons of metal, and one of the navy's biggest ships took 900 tons. Anything using metal was rationed, from chicken wire to farm equipment.

the fellows in the gang, his father ran a filling station. There was an old junker car there. I remember that it couldn't run. They had a scrap drive at Ebbets Field . . . the [Brooklyn] Dodgers. If you brought 10 pounds of scrap metal, you'd get in the game. Anyway, six of us, pushed that car from where we lived on Ocean Parkway. This was about six miles, seven miles to Ebbets Field. We pushed that car up on the scrap heap and got into the game together. It was things like that. The whole country was involved. Korea was different. Vietnam was different, and Iraq and Iran is different. The country, as a whole, isn't involved. Just the folks that's over there [and] has family over there fighting. It's just so different. There was economic opportunity for people who'd come up and get into the upper middle class and even higher. It's not there in this country today.

**BERMAN:** You expressed that really well. I was wondering if you, personally, see what we can do to get back on track?

**EMBER:** It's like I said. It's got to come from the country as a whole. It's got to be a different mentality. I believe we're . . . I was just listening to news and politicians talking, and they are beginning to realize that we're losing our middle class, which is really the backbone of the country. If you don't have people working, they can't pay taxes. If they don't pay taxes, you can't have various programs that a country as rich and powerful as us should have [to] take care of its people that can't take care of themselves. It's way beyond me.

**BERMAN:** On that note I think we can conclude. I want to thank you very much for participating. Thank you.

**EMBER:** Glad to. You'll have to let me know when your presentation is available. Like I said, I've got family in the Atlanta area or the Georgia area. I know they'll be delighted to go see what grandpa and great-grandpa is about.

<End Disk 3>

**INTERVIEW ENDS**