

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

MEMOIRIST: SOL SINGER
INTERVIEWER: LILA BETH YOUNG
DATE: FEBRUARY 11, 1995
 FEBRUARY 18, 1995
LOCATION: ATLANTA, GEORGIA

SPONSORED BY: Taylor Family Fund
CITATION: Sol Singer, August 27, 2001, OHC10659, p. xx from the Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia

INTERVIEW BEGINS

<Begin Tape 1, Side 1>

Lila: This is Lila Beth Young on February 11, 1995, for the Jewish Oral History Project of Atlanta [Georgia], co-sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, Atlanta Jewish Federation, and National Council of Jewish Women, interviewing Sol Singer. Tell me what you recall about your grandparents. Where did they come from?

Sol: The only grandparents I knew were my maternal grandparents. My grandfather was Abe 'Avrum' Kolodkin. My grandmother was Pearl Radunsky Kolodkin. They came from a small village in Russia, Shatsk, in the state—I guess you would call it a state—of Minsk [Russia]. It was called the 'Minskaya Gubernia,' which was the equivalent of what we would call a state over here. It was about 40 kilometers from the city of Minsk. I remember them very well. Of course, they came to this country. My grandfather came over in 1907. He came to Chattanooga, Tennessee, a community which had been referred to him by a cousin of his who had been to the [United] States and had come back to Russia and told them it was a good Jewish community. He settled there and worked for two years at which time he sent for my uncle—who was his oldest son—and his oldest daughter. They came over. The three of them worked for two more years. In 1911, my grandmother and five children—of which my mother was the oldest—came to the United States and came to Chattanooga. In 1912, they moved from Chattanooga to Atlanta. My mother entered school in Atlanta . . . or in Chattanooga, actually. She entered . . . she always told

us about the story. She was probably about 14 years old at the time and entered in the first grade of school because she didn't know any English. By the end of that year, she was back up to where she should have been and entered Atlanta . . . went to Commercial High School.¹ She graduated [from] Commercial High School in Atlanta.

Lila: How did she meet your father? How did your grandmother meet your grandfather Singer?

Sol: How did my . . .

Lila: . . . how did they meet?

Sol: My grandparents?

Lila: Did they meet in Russia?

Sol: Yes. They . . .

Lila: . . . they met in Russia?

Sol: They met and married in Russia. They lived in neighboring cities. Cities— they were small—were what has always been referred to as the *shtetl*.² They were married there. They had eight children. They lost one child in Russia. They came . . . the reason they came to . . . I questioned as a child why they came to the United States. It was economic reasons, as well as the living conditions in Russia. It was primarily living . . . economic reasons that they came.

Lila: When were your parents born and where were they were born?

Sol: My mother was born in Shatsk [Russia]. She was born in 1895. My father came from Austria, what was at that time Austria-Hungary,³ in the town known by the name of Kosow . . . K-O-S-O-W, . . . which was near . . . the large city near it was Kolomyia. He was born in 1888 and came to this country—I'm not sure of the exact year—approximately 1906. Interestingly enough, I asked him why did he come to this country. He was only about 18 [years old] when he came over. Incidentally, he was the only one in the family that ever came to the [United] States. The story was that he was the baby in his family. His oldest brother was taken into the army in Austria-Hungary and died in the army. My grandfather vowed that he wouldn't lose another son to that, so he sent my father to the [United] States at about the age of 18 years old. He came to this country. I'm not sure how he got over here. He ended up in Ensley, Alabama, which is a

¹ Commercial High School began as a department of Girls' High School in 1889 for girls who wanted to learn business skills. They taught bookkeeping, typing, math and history. It expanded to a four-story brick building on Pryor Street, and in 1910 became Atlanta's first coed high school. It closed in June 1947.

² A *shtetl* is a small town, usually in eastern Europe, with a significant Jewish presence in it.

³ Austria-Hungary, also known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was a constitutional union of the Empire of Austria and the Kingdom of Hungary that existed from 1867 to 1918, when it collapsed as a result of defeat in World War I.

suburb of Birmingham [Alabama], where he worked for a family . . . their name was Seal, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Seal . . . S-E-A-L . . . work[ed] in the store. The reason that he got that good job working there is because of knowing the Austro-Hungarian language. There were a lot of steel workers around Birmingham. He was able to get the job because he could converse with the customers.

Lila: He worked there. Then what did he do?

Sol: He worked there in that store. Mrs. Seal and my grandmother were first cousins. Mrs. Seal had an eligible bachelor in Ensley. My grandmother had an eligible daughter. That's how they met. They got married here in Atlanta in 1917. They were married by Rabbi Tobias Geffen,⁴ who was the rabbi of Shearith Israel synagogue.⁵ They were married on Central Avenue, which is approximately where the stadium⁶ is now in Atlanta [and] which was at that time a big Jewish area of the city.

Lila: What did they do when they came to Atlanta? What did your father do here?

Sol: My father came in 1917, which of course was during World War I. They got married. He was traveling over the state buying scrap metal for a company here in Atlanta. On one of these buying trips, he was in Cochran, Georgia. He met a Jewish family there, and a Jewish man there. As was very traditional in those years, everybody helped everybody else. He took a liking, evidently, to my father and offered to let him have \$300 worth of merchandise on credit so he could open up a store. Then he could come every week and pay him what he had sold and buy some more goods from him. He charged him a very small profit on all his goods. My father with an uncle—my mother's brother . . . my uncle lived in a little town of Unadilla [Georgia], which was very close to Cochran. When they were on the train, the train stopped there. They got off and looked around. It looked like it was busy and full of farmers and working people in town.

⁴ Rabbi Tobias Geffen (1870-1970) was an Orthodox rabbi and leader of Congregation Shearith Israel in Atlanta from 1910-1970. He is widely known for his 1935 decision that certified Coca-Cola as kosher. He also organized the first Hebrew school in Atlanta, and standardized regulation of kosher supervision in the Atlanta area.

⁵ Founded in 1904, Shearith Israel began as a congregation that met in the homes of congregants until 1906 when they began using a Methodist church on Hunter Street. After World War II, Rabbi Tobias Geffen moved the congregation to University Drive, where it became the first synagogue in DeKalb County. In the 1960s, they removed the barrier between the men's and women's sections in the sanctuary, and officially became affiliated with the Conservative movement in 2002.

⁶ Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium was built to attract a Major League Baseball team. In 1966 it succeeded when the Milwaukee Braves relocated from to Atlanta. The stadium was built on the site of the cleared Washington-Rawson neighborhood, which had been a wealthy area and home to much of Atlanta's Jewish community. The Braves continued to play at Fulton County Stadium until the end of the 1996 season, when they moved into Turner Field, the converted Centennial Olympic Stadium originally built for the 1996 Summer Olympics. The stadium was demolished in 1997. A parking lot for Turner Field now stands on the site.

They decided they were going to try their luck there. They got off and made arrangements to open. . . . rent a little store space. That's how he started his business.

Lila: When did you come along?

Sol: Let me give you a little bit of background before I get to me. They moved there in about the middle of 1917. My mother went with him, of course, and they rented an apartment. It wasn't an apartment. It was rooms upstairs at a family there, a Christian family. Their name was Hamrick . . . H-A-M-R-I-C-K. They were very nice people, wonderful people, very religious. He was a real observant Baptist, a person who was a minister on Sundays as well as running a store himself in town. They were very kind to my parents. They stayed there with them for several months. Then came along the next January. My mother came back to Atlanta when it was time for my birth and was with her parents here. We moved back to . . . of course, she went home. Within a few months they opened a store, which was quite an experience. First with the small amount of capital they had . . . my mother actually cooked on a potbelly stove⁷—if you know what a potbelly stove is—in the back of the store. That was their one hot meal that they cooked. Of course, while they didn't keep kosher,⁸ they kept kosher-style. My father learned to kill chickens as a *shochet*.⁹ They ate . . . they kept everything . . . they didn't eat any outside . . . meats other than chicken and fish, and that sort. She did her cooking in the store. A few months later as . . . rapidly . . . they were evidently working very hard and doing very well. Within a few months they were able to find a house, move into a house, and set up housekeeping there.

Lila: What do you remember from your childhood?

Sol: I remember a lot from my childhood. It was a very good experience. I tell you, the Jews who lived in South Georgia were very close. The little town we were in, all they had was one other Jewish family in it. They were a very nice family.

Lila: Who was it?

⁷ A cast-iron round wood-burning stove with a bulge in the middle. The name is derived from the resemblance of the stove to that of a fat man's pot belly. The flat top of the fireplace allowed for cooking of food, or the heating of water.

⁸ Kosher/*Kashrut* is the set of Jewish dietary laws. Food that may be consumed according to *halakhah* (Jewish law) is termed 'kosher' in English. 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.

⁹ A *shochet* is an adult male Jew who is trained and accredited by a rabbinic authority in the Jewish dietary laws. Specifically, a *shochet* slaughters animals in a way prescribed by Jewish dietary laws to avoid pain to the animal as much as possible, and to safeguard the health of the consumer.

Sol: Their name was Jacobs, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Morris Jacobs. They had two or three daughters who were reaching the age where they had needed . . . commanded a social life. When my parents moved there, they were very nice to my parents and my father. Though he didn't have a car, of course. At that time cars were very scarce anyway. This is 1918. They were always very helpful to him and kind of took care of him, even though they were competition to a certain extent. Shortly after my mother and father moved to Unadilla—probably within a year or year-and-a-half—the Jacobs sold their store. They wanted to take their children to the city where they would be exposed—the girls particularly—to Jewish boys. They moved to Atlanta. A young Jewish bachelor whose family lived in South Georgia bought their store. That left the town with three . . . a Jewish family and a single Jewish person there. My youth in Unadilla was good. I'm sure that during the many years there was antisemitism somewhere, but I never saw any open antisemitism. I attribute a lot of it to the fact that a lot of the people there recognized, in my parents particularly, they were very much Jewish. They did not try to assimilate. They held themselves up with pride. They became good citizens in the community. They were active in the community, and they took an active part. They worked hard. They were honest. They were fair and square¹⁰ to everybody that was there. As a result, we had a very good life there.

Lila: Do you have siblings?

Sol: I have a brother who was born . . . he's four-and-a-half years younger than I am. He lives in Atlanta. He and I were the only two Jewish kids in town, except for one or two times, a family moved there for a year or two, couldn't make it, and went their way. I still remember the first house we lived in. It was . . . the whole town had 1,100 people in it, so you could see . . . one good apartment house could . . .

Lila: . . . was there one main store, or was there one main street?

Sol: No. There were seven or eight stores. Because it was a rural area, agricultural area, the big business was on the weekend, on Friday and Saturday. The farmers and all the people who worked on the farms came into town on Saturday. We lived within two . . . never lived farther than two blocks from where our father's store was. There was a lumber mill there. There was a cottonseed or cotton gin,¹¹ a cottonseed oil mill, and a grist mill.¹² I mean, these were things . . .

¹⁰ An American idiomatic expression meaning fair, honest, and straightforward, especially in business dealings.

¹¹ A cotton gin is a machine that quickly and easily separates cotton fibers from their seeds, allowing for much greater productivity than manual cotton separation. The first modern mechanical cotton gin was invented by American inventor Eli Whitney in 1793

and this brought people into town. There was actually about five or six stores besides grocery stores. There were two drug stores, and maybe three what I call general stores. They carried all the wearing apparel and all the clothing. There were others who carried groceries, hardware, and supplies. It was strictly a farm area.

Lila: What did your father's store carry?

Sol: I told my granddaughter once that he carried dry goods.¹³ She thought that there were dry goods versus wet goods. It was clothing, wearing apparel, work clothes. He also carried all the notion items, hosiery, and every . . . He did not carry any food stuffs at the time. Other than that, it was pretty much a general store.

Lila: How did you get a religious education if you were the only two [Jewish] children?

Sol: How did I get a religious education?

Lila: Yes.

Sol: That, to me, is probably the greatest achievement of our generation. It was done by our family. Our parents made Jews out of us, and our grandparents. Let me give you a little example. I speak a fairly good Yiddish.¹⁴ The reason I learned Yiddish was because my grandmother—who could speak very good English—would never speak English. If I would speak to her in English, she would tell me she did not understand English. She knew I knew that she did. She would answer me in Yiddish. I had to talk to her in Yiddish. That was the way I learned my Yiddish. We observed all the holidays. Our parents made it a must that on every weekend—after we had a car—that the families in South Georgia visited each other. The children were exposed to other Jewish children every weekend. Every Sunday we went somewhere, or somebody came to see us.

Lila: Give me an example of where you might go and who you might see.

Sol: You would go . . . for instance, we lived in Unadilla. There was a neighboring town of Hawkinsville, Georgia. There was Vienna; Georgia. There was Cordele, Georgia. There were just all the little towns around Eastman [Georgia]. They would have services on the holidays. In Cordele there was a family there by the name of Roobin . . . R-O-O-B-I-N . . . Roobin. Mr.

¹² A grist mill (also: corn mill or flour mill) grinds grain into flour. The term can refer to both the grinding mechanism and the building that holds it.

¹³ Dry Goods are products such as textiles, clothing, personal care, and toiletry items. In U.S. retailing, a dry-goods store carries consumer goods that are distinct from those carried by hardware stores and grocery stores.

¹⁴ Yiddish is the common historical language of Ashkenazi Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. It is heavily Germanic based but uses the Hebrew alphabet. The language was spoken or understood as a common tongue for many European Jews up until the middle of the 20th century.

Roobin had a big family. There were maybe 10 or 12 Jewish families in Cordele. On the High Holy Days¹⁵ they would bring somebody [a rabbi] in, rent a hall, and have High Holy Day services. The same thing happened in Eastman. They would do the same thing. My wife's family was from Fitzgerald, Georgia. Fitzgerald had, and has to this day, a synagogue¹⁶ that's active. They bring a rabbi there once a month to this day. There are very few Jews left there, but they still bring a rabbi there once a month for a long weekend from a seminary in New York. We were given . . . our families taught us to be Jews. We were always . . . I think, one of the things we got along so well in our community was because the people knew that we were Jewish. They respected my parents for bringing up the children. The store closed on all Jewish holidays. I mean the major holidays.

I'll tell you an interesting story that happened later in the years. There was a family that moved to Unadilla who had a store. That year, *Yom Kippur*¹⁷ came on Saturday. Of course, my parents closed. The other Jewish store in town closed. This man decided he was going to stay open for the Saturday business. The next Monday he was visited by a delegation, not in any threatening way. A doctor and a couple of other people came in to see him. They told him, "If you're going to live in Unadilla, we don't care whether you're religious or not religious." He said, "You've got to respect the other Jewish people here." There were just two families. "If they're going to close on the holidays, you got to close." That was just the way they felt, because they admired them for the fact that they lived Jewishly. My father was active in the community. He was a member of the Masonic order¹⁸ there. My mother was also very active. She was active

¹⁵ The two High Holy Days are *Rosh Ha-Shanah* (Jewish New Year) and *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement).

¹⁶ 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. In 1947, the Fitzgerald Hebrew Congregation hired its first full-time rabbi, Nathan Kohen who served the congregation for 28 years, until his death in 1975. He remains the only full-time rabbi ever to serve the congregation. Despite this decline in the number of Jews, the Fitzgerald Hebrew Congregation remains active. Since 1975, the congregation has brought in student rabbis from the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Currently, their JTS student rabbi comes to Fitzgerald once a month to lead services. (2015)

¹⁷ Hebrew for 'Day of Atonement.' The most sacred day of the Jewish year. *Yom Kippur* is a 25 hour fast day. In observance, Jews do not work or engage in business. Most of the day is spent in prayer, reciting *yizkor* for deceased relatives, confessing sins, requesting divine 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).

¹⁸ Freemasonry is a fraternal organization that arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It exists in various forms all over the world today, with a membership estimated at around 6,000,000 people. It is organized into Grand Lodges, each of which governs its own jurisdiction.

in the PTA.¹⁹ She was also active in one of the Masonic . . . the women's Masonic order. In fact, she was the president or—whatever the word—the matron or the head of the organization at one time. They were always respected. We were part and parcel²⁰ of the family of the community. We were never left out. Yet, they never . . . I don't recall any instances where anybody tried to convert us. They possibly invited my parents. They did invite us. If they had some kind of speaker coming to the church, they always invited us, but they knew that we were Jewish. It was through our parents who diligently taught us what we knew about Jewish life. I guess one of my . . . through my years of being concerned with Jewish education, it's because of it being not available to me that I was determined that that was one of the most important things for our kids, and our families. I devoted a great deal of time and effort to it.

Lila: Were you *bar mitzvahed*?²¹

Sol: Yes.

Lila: How did you work that out?

Sol: My grandparents live here in Atlanta. I'd come and study in the summertime, and stay up here with them. My grandfather was a very learned person. It was a minimal *bar mitzvah*. It was more ceremony than it was education. All you had to do was learn a few words so you could get by. I did not have the Jewish education that I should . . . would . . . nothing like what my children had. We made sure they had that.

<End Tape 1, Side 1>

<Begin Tape 1, Side 2>

Lila: What did you do when you got older for social life?

Sol: Living there, as a teenager I was very active in school there. Everything that happened there—proms, dances, whatever parties, whatever—I went just like everybody else, but everybody knew I was Jewish. Everybody knew where we stood. On the weekends you just don't . . . you can't appreciate how devoted our parents were to seeing that nobody sat at home on Sunday unless the weather was just something. They got in the car, and they made arrangements.

¹⁹ A national organization with affiliations in local schools throughout the U.S. composed of parents, teachers and staff, and devoted to the educational success of children and the promotion of parent involvement in schools.

²⁰ An American idiomatic expression meaning an essential or integral component.

²¹ 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.

It wasn't just that they spontaneously got in the car and drove 20 miles or 30 miles. It was nothing to drive 30 or 40 miles. It's no farther, really, than for you coming over here this afternoon, to go visit and be with another family. We would stay there for the day. We would go to Cordele. We would go to Hawkinsville. The kids would all be together.

Lila: Were you involved in any Jewish social groups?

Sol: Not . . .

Lila: . . . official kind of . . . ?

Sol: No official social group.

Lila: Were there special dances or anything?

Sol: Yes, they had dances all over. In fact, I met my wife at . . . originally, we had not started going together at that time, but I met her in Auburn, Georgia, at a Jewish dance that was put on by a group of Jewish people.

Lila: How old were you then?

Sol: I guess we were both seniors in high school, finishing high school. There were dances held in Valdosta [Georgia], and surprising . . . in Macon [Georgia], and all of these towns.

Surprisingly enough, you would say, how did you get there? Surprisingly enough, for that purpose my father and mother had no problem letting me have the car. I drove by myself, if necessary. Usually two or three people would go. They would come back together from these socials.

Lila: When did you go to college?

Sol: I went off to college when I was 16 years old. That was an interesting experience, too. I graduated high school in Unadilla.

Lila: How many were in your [high school] class, just out of curiosity?

Sol: There were 18.

Lila: Do you stay in touch with anyone?

Sol: Yes, I do. I talk to them every now and then . . .

Lila: Do you still have reunions?

Sol: We don't have any reunions, but I talk to a number of them. There are quite a few of them that have left this world, but it was very . . . it has been very interesting. The high school there burned down the year that I graduated. It was an old wooden building that burned down. We graduated in the Baptist church. They held the graduation services there. One of the doctors here

in Atlanta, a cardiologist who's just retired, [unintelligible] . . . he was a few years behind me. I saw him just recently. He said, "I'm going to tell you an interesting story." He said, "I went back to Unadilla to speak at the church." He said, "Your father's name came up." He said, "Somebody said, 'You know, we should . . .'" Maybe they were asking about me, or something. Anyway, he said that my father's name came up. They said, "We should. . ." Now this is 50 years after he's been gone from there. Miss Singer [unintelligible] ago. He said, "When Phillip Singer lived here . . ." He said, "I don't care whether you're black or white, or a Jew or what. If they had any kind of project or needed money for anything, they always went to him first. They knew he would start it and help get the money up." I thought that was the greatest compliment I could get for my parents. They were loved by black and white. There was never any difference as far as they were concerned, and we came up there, now. The year that I graduated high school was 1934. This was during [Great] Depression²² years. This was when the big Depression came along. I know you've read about it if you haven't heard about it from your parents.

We were [located] on the main highway between Florida and going north, on up into Indiana . . . wherever you wanted to go. There were people migrating, hungry. I don't remember, I don't . . . in that little town nobody ever came there that was hungry that didn't get what to eat. It was strange. Every town, practically every town—Vienna, Unadilla, Perry [Georgia], Cordele, all of them—one right after the other, all of them—had a Jewish family or two in them. The Jewish . . . economics brought them there. They opened up a business. They were able to raise their families there. If a Jewish family came . . . I've seen my parents get a call from Vienna, Georgia, from the sheriff of the county. He knew my father very well. He'd say, "Phillip, we've got some of your folks here. You wanted to see them. They're hungry," he said to him. My daddy said, "Buy them gas, and send them to me." They would feed them. My mother . . . we had a big porch on my house. We were never more than a block away from the store, two blocks at the most. They would come. She'd feed anybody and everybody. It was just a wonderful. When I look back on it . . . the way people . . . you look back, and see it in your house. Everybody opened their doors to help them out, buy them gas, feed the children, and send them on their way to the next stop. That's how they got along.

I graduated in 1934. That was the Depression years then. Banks had been closed all over

²² The Great Depression was a severe worldwide economic depression in the decade preceding World War II. The time of the Great Depression varied across nations, but in most countries it started in about 1929 and lasted until the late 1930's or early 1940's. It was the longest, most widespread, and deepest depression of the twentieth century.

the country. Things were tough, and I was going to . . . my parents . . . I enrolled in the University of Georgia [Athens, Georgia]. My father was going to take me there to school. I got in the car . . . I choked up on this one myself. When I got in the car to leave, to tell my parents . . . to tell my mother good-bye, she started to cry. I said, “Mother, if you don’t want me to go, I won’t go.” She said, “You don’t understand. This is what we worked for all our lives. This is what we waited for.” It was very important. That was the same thing that was important about our social life. It was important we were with Jewish kids. It was important that we were with Jewish families, and that was to be . . . I went to [the University of] Georgia in 1934. The first . . . and at that time there were no banks. There wasn’t a bank in our little town. The bank had closed. My father took me by the bank in Macon where he had a bank account, and told me to put my signature on his bank account. He said, “I don’t know what it’s supposed to cost you to go to college.” He said, “You know what we’ve got. I want you to live like you’re supposed to live. Don’t throw any money away.” From that day on, that’s how I went to college. I felt very guilty about three weeks after I got there. I joined the fraternity, pledged to a fraternity.

Lila: Which fraternity?

Sol: Tau Epsilon Phi.²³ At first they told us, “You’ve got to have a tuxedo to go to the dances with.” I said, “How about if I go call my daddy and tell him I want a tuxedo.” I called him up and I said, “They tell me I ought to have a tuxedo.” He said, “Buy you[rself] one. Just go out and buy one. Buy it if you got to have it.” I knew I had to have it, but of course I didn’t explain it was to go to the dances, Jewish yet. Now, that may be kosher. I went off [to college] in 1934. There were a lot of Jewish kids at the school, surprisingly enough. It’s always been important for Jewish parents to send their kids there.

Lila: Were most of your friends Jewish then? Who was your roommate? Was he Jewish?

Sol: When, at the school?

Lila: Was your roommate Jewish?

Sol: I stayed at the fraternity house. That was one of the reasons I did it. That was my real first opportunity to live and be with a group of Jewish kids.

Lila: Everybody you associated with there was . . .

Sol: . . . no, I was very active and always had a big . . . listen, in Unadilla, all the kids, the non-

²³ Tau Epsilon Phi (TEΦ, commonly pronounced TEP) is a fraternity founded by ten Jewish men at Columbia University in New York in 1910 as a response to the existence of similar organizations which would not admit Jewish members.

Jewish people that were my friends lived . . . when we got married, a year or two later, we lived in Columbus [Georgia]. We had a lot of non-Jewish friends. Even our social life has been Jewish.

Lila: What did you study at [the University of] Georgia?

Sol: I went into . . . I graduated law school. At that time, they had a combined course where you took the liberal arts first. You took two years of liberal arts, then went into law school for three years, and got your law degree.

Lila: What did you do after you graduated? Did you go back to Georgia?

Sol: You're jumping through five years of very important time.

Lila: Then let's talk about it.

Sol: I had a great time. College was a great experience for me. I met a lot of people. I was introduced to a new world. Coming from Unadilla, you didn't have a broad perception of the social life and the world. It was the first time that I was responsible for myself, my own disciplines, and everything else. It's quite a big move, at any rate, from a senior in high school to a freshman in college. I think it's about the biggest move that you can make. You're at the top of the heap in high school. Then, all of a sudden, you're just a freshman in college. It was a great experience. I met a lot of wonderful people. By and large, it was a good experience. I made a lot of valuable friendships. I studied . . . had to work hard. The schools in Unadilla weren't the best in the world, but I had no problem with that. I graduated and got through that. At the end of 1934, in 1937, I had a real stroke of luck. I started going with my wife, so we . . .

Lila: . . . she was there, too?

Sol: She was at [the University of] Georgia, too. She graduated in 1938. I was going five years, so I graduated in 1939. It was a wonderful year that we were both in school together. Then she went back to Fitzgerald, and went to work with her father in his store, in a retail store there. I finished school in June of 1939 and went in business. I did not intend to go practice law. I did at one time, but I wanted to go to [the United States Military Academy at] West Point [West Point, New York]. I had the appointment if I could pass the physical. My father was a very good friend of Senator Walter F. George,²⁴ who lived just a few miles away from us. I couldn't pass the physical, so that didn't materialize. When I finished law school . . . I studied law because I felt that it would give me the kind of education and ability to learn to find whatever I wanted to find

²⁴ Walter Franklin George (1878 - 1957) was born on a farm near Preston Georgia. He was a Democratic United States Senator from 1923 to 1957.

in the world in the way of studying and learning. I intended to go in business when I finished college. I graduated in June, went in business July 1, and got married August 20.

Lila: Where did you go into business at that time?

Sol: We went into the wholesale distributing business, same business I'm in now. I went in with an uncle in Columbus, Georgia, in 1939.

Lila: You moved to Columbus?

Sol: We moved to Columbus fresh. We were both fresh out of college and fresh . . .

Lila: Your uncle was fresh . . .

Sol: . . . no, my wife and I . . . were both fresh out of college, and very much in love. I went in business there. That was 1939, and it was . . . and we worked together for a while. Then he moved.

Lila: Who was your uncle?

Sol: His name was Charles Kolodkin . . . K-O-L-O-D-K-I-N.

Lila: Where did you get married?

Sol: We got married in Fitzgerald, Georgia. Fitzgerald, Georgia, is a town of about 11,000 people. We had a big wedding. Ruth's parents were just wonderful people, anyway, and there was a good Jewish community in Fitzgerald. He was, I guess . . . her father was a very outgoing person. We got married in the high school auditorium in Fitzgerald, Georgia. They brought down a kosher caterer from Atlanta, a lady who could prepare all the food. There must have been 1,200 people at the wedding.

Lila: My goodness.

Sol: Her father . . . of course, all the Jews in South Georgia were invited. My father invited . . . father-in-law invited everybody he saw. It was just a happy day, and a happy occasion. We got married there. We were married . . .

Lila: Who performed the ceremony?

Sol: I'm going to tell you that right now. We were married by Rabbi Edmund A. Landau²⁵ . . . L-A-N-D-A-U. He lived in and had a pulpit at the synagogue of a Reform²⁶ congregation in

²⁵ Rabbi Edmund A. Landau (1898 – 1945) was the first permanent rabbi of Temple B'nai Israel, a reform congregation in Albany in southwest Georgia. He was born in Ontario, Canada and raised in Michigan. His family was originally from East Prussia.

²⁶ A division within Judaism especially in North America and the United Kingdom. Historically it began in the nineteenth century. In general, the Reform movement maintains that Judaism and Jewish traditions

Albany, Georgia. Ruth's parents had gotten married in Tifton, Georgia. He had married them 25 years before that. He performed a traditional Orthodox²⁷ service even though . . . and that was usual. You didn't have rabbis in every town then. They couldn't fly in or go in, so we had him. It was a very nice, lovely wedding. It was traditional. We got married in the high school auditorium. This was 1939. Of course, we moved right then to Columbus.

Lila: What was it like being in Columbus?

Sol: Columbus was . . .

Lila: . . . a little bigger?

Sol: Columbus was a good town. We came there, I guess, at a good time in history. These were the days just prior to World War II. Of course there were rumbles in Germany and Europe at the time. In 1939, we're pretty close to the time when there was a war. Columbus is the home of the infantry school, Fort Benning²⁸ in Columbus. As a result, there was a lot of activity. It was, and is, a very big fort. We moved there and immediately took an active . . . both of us were active at college. I was one of these guys who had to be in all of the clubs and all the organizations. I was business manager of the Annual, and all those . . .

Lila: What other things?

Sol: I was in ODK.²⁹ I was on the . . . I was also president of Phi Kappa,³⁰ which is a literary society. It was in my tenure of office that we made Franklin Delano Roosevelt³¹ an honorary member. We went over to visit with him in Warm Springs [Georgia].³²

should be modernized and compatible with participation in Western culture. While the Torah remains the law, in Reform Judaism women are included (mixed seating, *bat mitzvah* and women rabbis), music is allowed in the services and most of the service is in English.

²⁷ Orthodox Judaism is a traditional branch of Judaism that strictly follows the Written *Torah* and the Oral Law concerning prayer, dress, food, sex, family relations, social behavior, the Sabbath day, holidays and more.

²⁸ Fort Benning is a United States Army post established in 1918 outside Columbus, Georgia with the capability to deploy combat-ready forces by air, rail, and highway. Much of the growth of Columbus can be attributed to the development of Fort Benning.

²⁹ Omicron Delta Kappa (ODK) is national leadership honor society founded in 1914.

³⁰ A collegiate honor society founded in 1897 dedicated to the recognition and promotion of academic excellence in all disciplines.

³¹ The 32nd President of the United States and a central figure in world events during the mid-twentieth century, leading the United States through a time of worldwide economic crisis and war. Popularly known as 'FDR,' he

Lila: Wow.

Sol: We've got pictures of all that stuff and everything. I was active on the debating team and manager of the swimming team. All of these guys tried to be a BMOC [Big Man on Campus]. There was a nice group of Jewish kids there, too. There were a lot of parties, dances and interfraternity dances. Of course, Jewish kids stayed . . . took care of each other, too—the boys and the girls. I've always told this story, because I think it's very interesting that we made our social lives very enjoyable there. I remember we had a young man in our fraternity who had a sister who came up for the dances. For the fraternity, the big dance was in the spring of the year. She wouldn't win any beauty contest, but she was a sweet girl anyway. We thought she was a queen when she was there. She just needed their attention, and everybody gave it to her. I mean, that was just the way it worked. Those years were good. Life was good. We've still got a lot of friends that we went to school with, that we knew at school.

Lila: Live here?

Sol: Live here and other places as you travel around the country. It's kind of like a network. You run into them.

Lila: Did you have a best friend?

Sol: Did I have a . . .

Lila: . . . one particular person?

Sol: I'm not sure. I had several very close friends. As you get away and you develop your own family, you can . . . even within your own family, two first cousins or two brothers, sometimes their families get separated [or] get married. They have different interests and different things. We've stayed very good friends, and see them over the years. I went back for my . . . surprisingly enough, I told you there were 18 in my high school graduating class. At the time I graduated law school, there were only 28 kids. This was the Depression years, so it was a pretty good class. I went back for my fiftieth anniversary of my fall class. I graduated in 1939. It's been 55 years

collapsed and died in his home in Warm Springs, Georgia just a few months before the end of the war. He was a Democrat.

³² Warm Springs, Georgia first came to prominence in the 19th century as a spa town, because of its mineral springs which flow constantly at nearly 32 C (90 F). In 1921 Franklin Delano Roosevelt contracted polio. One of the few things that seemed to ease his pain was immersion in warm water. He first went to Warm Springs in 1924 hoping to find a cure. Swimming in the spring waters brought him no miracle cure, but it did bring improvement. Roosevelt built a home in Warm Springs in 1932 while he was governor of New York, prior to being inaugurated as president in 1933. He lived in the home during the time he was president and it came to be called the 'Little White House.' He died there in 1945. It is now a public museum.

now, going on 56. Out of the 28, there were 14 of us came back. Several of them had died, seven we couldn't locate, couldn't get a hold of or didn't come, one or the other. Out of the 14 that were there, five of them were judges.

<Interruption in tape>

Lila: The rest were . . .

Sol: . . . I've tried to keep up with them, not on a day-to-day basis, but we keep in touch with each other.

<End Tape 1, Side 2>

<Begin Tape2, Side 1>

Lila: We started to talk about life in Columbus, Georgia. What was it like when you first went there?

Sol: We went there in 1939. For me, it was a nice Jewish community. Probably had a total of 200 or 225 Jewish families. There were two congregations there. One was an Orthodox congregation and [one was] a Reform congregation. There were a lot of young people there, so we had no problem finding a lot of friends and making friends. We knew people from Columbus, anyway, that we had gone to school with. We had gone to dances there, so we knew them. Ruth had cousins and I had my uncle that I had gone in business with. He had been living there for several years, so it was easy to make a place for ourselves quick.

Lila: Which synagogue did you join?

Sol: I joined the Orthodox congregation which was . . . it, too, was named Shearith Israel.³³ I started out in business. I was very ambitious and I worked very hard. I also immediately got involved and was determined to see a modernization. That was really the time when . . . in joining the synagogue there and in the community, there was a group of us who felt that it was time for us to do something about it. The community itself, while the congregation was Orthodox, the majority of the young people there were not Orthodox. We felt that there was a place for Conservative Judaism.³⁴ We started to move to gradually build from Orthodox to

³³ Shearith Israel Synagogue was established 1891 in Columbus, Georgia. The name was chartered as Chevro Saris Israel. In 1950 the name was officially changed to Shearith Israel Synagogue. The original building was on the corner of 7th Street and 1st Avenue in downtown Columbus. In 1951 the congregation moved to a new Synagogue on Wynnton Road. In 2007 the building was sold. In 2013 the congregation moved to its current home on River Road. (2015)

³⁴ A form of Judaism that seeks to preserve Jewish tradition and ritual but has a more flexible approach to the interpretation of the law than Orthodox Judaism. It attempts to combine a positive attitude toward

Conservative, which we did over the next few years as the congregation changed to a Conservative congregation.

Lila: Did you ever experience any antisemitism there in Columbus?

Sol: I'll be perfectly honest with you. I can't really say that I've ever experienced any real antisemitism. I've found people that you had to stand up to. They'd say something about a Jew or something. I think more of it was out of ignorance than it was real antisemitism. I have never had any real problem in facing . . . I know that they . . . first place, I think I have . . . I knew that my social life was . . . I wasn't trying to integrate into the social life that anybody would say, "What are you doing here? This is not your place." I accepted that it's not my place . . . that I was Jewish, and I lived as a Jew. I can really never say . . . can say that I never had any real . . . I had opportunity when I was at the University of Georgia and also during my life because I have always worked and lived with non-Jews. My business life has been, I'd say, 90 percent with non-Jews. I don't think that that has been a factor in my life.

Lila: Did you belong to a social club there?

Sol: I belonged to a social club there. There was a social club there. I was also very active and everything in the community.

Lila: What were some of your involvements?

Sol: About that time was when we started having problems. Things were beginning to rumble in Europe. We had formed a [Jewish] Federation there which I was . . . I was the new kid on the block, really. In 1944, we formally incorporated the first [Columbus] Jewish [Welfare] Federation. We had a group that collected money up until that time, which I was very active in. I took an active part in the synagogue. They had a social club there which we joined. I took an active part in that. Of course, I was working very hard at the time, too.

Lila: Were you aware of what was going on in Europe? Were any immigrants coming to your community?

Sol: A lot of them came to Columbus, and more so than that was the fact that Fort Benning was there. They were bringing in . . . building the army there. In fact, the day of Pearl Harbor³⁵ was

modern culture, while preserving a commitment to Jewish observance. They also observe gender equality (mixed seating, women rabbis and *bat mitzvahs*).

³⁵ Pearl Harbor is located on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, west of Honolulu. Much of the harbor and surrounding lands is a United States Navy deep-water naval base. It is also the headquarters of the United States Pacific Fleet.

on a Sunday. There must have been eight or ten guys at our house. It was home hospitality. We . . . Fort Benning . . . the first troops they brought in were the National Guard [of the United States] and the people who were drafted. Most of the National Guards who came in were from the East, from New York, Massachusetts, and New England. We had thousands of Jewish boys. Actually thousands of Jewish boys.

We had a huge *seder*³⁶ the first winter of 1941 or 1942 when things really got rough. We had a *seder* that was held in Columbus. It was strictly *pesadik* kosher³⁷ food, and everything else. It was done by the good graces of the general at Fort Benning. We had a couple of Jewish chaplains there. There were Jewish chaplains, of course. The Cooks and Bakers School³⁸ was one of the big schools that was at Fort Benning. There was the Infantry School³⁹ and all the different organizations. The chaplains went to the general at Fort Benning. They requisitioned all new dishes for Passover and all new pots.⁴⁰ They did all the cooking there and brought the food into town where we had a *seder* for several thousand people. The community was there and everybody. We were nothing compared to what they had in troops. It was a very busy town. It was extremely busy. Every weekend, the Jewish troops that would come in from Fort Benning. We knew . . . all of us knew . . . extended home hospitality. It was nothing . . . at our house, we could hold just a young couple. There would be five or six guys on a weekend. First place, we knew . . . we ended up knowing a lot of them, because somebody that they knew told them to be sure and call us when they got to Columbus. It was a very busy town for those first few years of our married life. We were very active there. I was active in B'nai B'rith⁴¹ there. I was president

The attack on Pearl Harbor by the Empire of Japan on Sunday, December 7, 1941 brought the United States into World War II.

³⁶ Hebrew for "order". The ritual family meal eaten at home on the first and second nights of Passover, accompanied by the retelling of the story of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt.

³⁷ Kosher for Passover (or *pesadik* kosher) foods are made with flour that is specifically prepared for Passover consumption and are usually made under the supervision of a rabbi. Jews are prohibited from eating leavened bread during the entire week of Passover. A number of specific foods are also off limits including foods made with wheat, barley, rye, spelt or oats, unless they are labeled 'Kosher for Passover.'

³⁸ The Cooks and Bakers School at Fort Benning, Georgia was constructed in 1939 and operated until 1945. After World War II, the school closed. The building is now used for offices. (2015)

³⁹ The United States Army Infantry School is located at Fort Benning, Georgia. It provides training Basic Combat Training (BCT) and Advanced Individual Training (AIT) to prepare soldiers to accomplish the mission of the infantry.

⁴⁰ During Passover, many observant Jews will use separate dishes, utensils and pots and pans to be kosher for Passover.

⁴¹ B'nai B'rith International (from Hebrew: 'Children of the Covenant') is the oldest Jewish service organization in the world. B'nai B'rith states that it is committed to the security and continuity of the Jewish people and the State of Israel and combating antisemitism and bigotry. Its mission is to unite persons of the Jewish faith and to enhance

of that tenure in Columbus. The synagogue took a lot of time. We were very busy in that social life. Then our oldest daughter came along in 1941. She brought a new light into our life, too.

Lila: How long did you stay in Columbus?

Sol: We left Columbus in 1961.

Lila: You were there a long, long time.

Sol: Long time. We raised our children there.

Lila: What were some of the other effects of the war that you felt? After the war, were there refugees that came there?

Sol: There were a lot. There were a lot of Germans who came there. A lot of people from Europe came to Columbus, and they found a place for themselves. Fort Benning was probably the biggest experience in taking care of . . . there were literally thousands. The Infantry School graduated all the lieutenants. All the officers' training and everything was done at the fort. At one time, they had probably 100,000 troops in it. It was a busy town. There was a very big social life built around it. The merchants there were doing extremely well. Everybody was busy. In the meantime, our Federation continued to operate. Our synagogue—I took an active role in that. It changed to a Conservative synagogue. I was involved in the Conservative movement and was the second president of the Southeast Region of the United Synagogue [of Conservative Judaism]⁴² and was very instrumental in helping with the guy that was the first president of it. We did a lot of the organizational work and got the whole organization which included the states of the Carolinas, Florida, Alabama, Georgia—about six states. That's when we started that. We decided our synagogue in Columbus was in the wrong part of town from most Jewish areas . . . as the Jewish community they moved a little further. Usually—I think it's traditional— everybody moves north. Everywhere we've been, nobody ever moves south. They move north of a town. We found the necessity to provide for education for our children and everything else. We didn't have the right facility. We needed . . . after joining the Conservative movement, we had to get rabbis that were acceptable. We found that was very difficult to do, too. You had to work to get those, so we built a new synagogue . . . one of the first things we did. I was president of the synagogue . . .

Jewish identity through strengthening Jewish family life, to provide broad-based services for the benefit of senior citizens, and to facilitate advocacy and action on behalf of Jews throughout the world.

⁴² United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism is an organization that creates the spiritual, intellectual and managerial network that connects all its communities with a common sense of community, shared mission and purpose. It enables communities to create the conditions for a powerful and vibrant Jewish life, empowering Jews in North America to seek the presence of God, to seek meaning and purpose in Torah and mitzvot, to fully engage with Israel, and to be inspired by Judaism to improve the world and the Jewish people.

Lila: What was the name of that?

Sol: Shearith Israel.

Lila: Same name?

Sol: Yes. Also I co-chaired the building committee. The same time that I was president of the synagogue, Ruth was president of the Sisterhood.⁴³ We were both very active in it. We had a nice group of children, and we had . . . it was always a real chore to get a good rabbi in a community of that size, because that wasn't where they wanted to be. It's a small community and a rabbi doesn't like to come and have to take care of the children and the old folks and everybody else. We made a decision that what we had to do was . . . the best method of doing that was to try to find a young rabbi, a young couple who was on their way up, and bring them in for two or three years. You didn't have a long longevity of time with them . . . keep them and then let them move on when they outgrew you and bring in another one. We did very well doing that. This was really when Sharon came along, and then three years later Alice came along. My real concern was about Jewish education. My association with the Southeast Region of United Synagogue became very important. We were determined that our children would have the very best Jewish education we could give them. They were able to go to an afternoon school with a rabbi there. Usually when you got to a certain point, the kids dropped out anyway. We didn't like that part of it, either. Through our association with the Conservative movement, we decided to do several things. We were very fortunate at one step at bringing a rabbi and his wife who were just great.

[unintelligible] he . . .

Lila: Who was that rabbi?

Sol: Rabbi Kassel Abelson . . . K-A-S-S-E-L A-B-E-L-S-O-N.⁴⁴ Rabbi Kassel and Shirley Abelson were a very committed family. He had just gotten out of the chaplaincy when he came to Columbus. Even prior to his getting there, we had found one of the . . . you have to be inventive and creative when you don't have the things at your hand. If you are determined and want to do—particularly with your family and your children—if you want to do it, there's always a way.

⁴³ A group of women in a synagogue congregation who join together to offer social, cultural, educational, and volunteer service opportunities.

⁴⁴ Rabbi Kassel Abelson became Assistant Rabbi at Beth El Synagogue in Minneapolis in 1948, immediately after being ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. In 1951, Rabbi Abelson left Beth El when he entered the U.S. Air Corps as a chaplain. Returning from overseas in 1953, Rabbi Abelson went to Shearith Israel Synagogue in Columbus, Georgia, where, during the four years of his tenure, he became recognized as one of the outstanding leaders of Conservative Judaism in the Southeast. Rabbi Abelson returned to Beth El in Minneapolis in 1957 and retired in 1992.

We were fortunate that there were chaplains at Fort Benning, young, Jewish rabbis who were there who were looking for something to do. They wanted an opportunity to sit and study with somebody, because this is what they had done at school. We engaged them as private tutors for our girls after they finished. They both were *bat mitzvahed*⁴⁵ and did everything that the boys do. I mean everything. They had good backgrounds. We continued their education by using private tutors. When Rabbi Kassell Abelson came there, he suggested that our girls go off to Camp Ramah.⁴⁶ They both went and continued their education. Prior to that time, there were Jewish day camps—I mean Jewish camps in this area here. Blue Star⁴⁷ in North Carolina is a good camp. They went there, but it didn't have anything as Jewish learning that you have at Ramah. They went to Ramah. Both of them went there. Our oldest daughter, Sharon, her husband was a camper. They met there, by the way, in camp. They've got grandchildren now. It's been a long time ago. That same network, all three of our kids. Eric came along later. He went to Ramah. He's now heading a project to establish—and they're very active in working on it, and it looks like it's going to happen—a Camp Ramah right in north Georgia within the next year.⁴⁸ Jewish education . . . At that time I realized that if you wanted to have Jewish grandchildren, we'd better keep our children Jewish. The kids got a good Jewish education.

Lila: How did you move from Columbus to Atlanta?

Sol: How or why?

Lila: Why?

Sol: We were in the wholesale distributing business. We were servicing a large group of stores. We were in the wrong place. Our business just grew and changed. Atlanta was the marketplace rather than Columbus. Transportation was better here. You could travel here . . . getting here to

⁴⁵ Hebrew for 'daughter of commandment.' A rite of passage for Jewish girls aged 12 years and one day according to her Hebrew birthday. Many girls have their *bat mitzvah* around age 13, the same as boys who have their *bar mitzvah* at that age. She is now duty bound to keep the commandments. Synagogue ceremonies are held for *bat mitzvah* girls in Reform and Conservative communities, but it has not won the universal approval of Orthodox rabbis.

⁴⁶ During the 1940's, The Jewish Theological Seminary established several programs to reconnect Jewish youth with the synagogue and cultivate leadership. One of these programs was Camp Ramah, a network of Jewish summer camps affiliated with the Conservative Movement. The mission is to create and sustain summer camps and Israel programs that inspire commitment to and engagement in Jewish life. The camps operate in the U.S., Canada, and Israel. Ramah camps serve kosher food and are *Shabbat*-observant.

⁴⁷ Blue Star Camps is a Jewish summer camp located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina.

⁴⁸ Ramah Darom (Ramah of the South) is a Jewish overnight camp and retreat center in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Georgia. It opened in 1997. The camp is affiliated with the National Ramah Commission, the national parent organization that oversees all Ramah overnight camps, day camps, and Israel programs. Ramah is sponsored by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, a main hub for Conservative Judaism.

buy goods. Atlanta was the place and Columbus was just also there. I mean, at the time we started there, it was a great opportunity. We had outgrown our facility in Columbus. We were going to have to move into a larger facility. We made the decision that if we were going to move, it was no harder to move 100 miles than it was to move two blocks. We had to uproot a lot of families. We moved 25 families with us to Atlanta. We came to Atlanta. We bought an existing business in Atlanta. They were finally closing it up just at our entree into the city, and then built our building and moved our whole business up here.

Lila: How long did your parents stay in South Georgia after you and your . . .

Sol: . . . my parents?

Lila: Did your brother go to college?

Sol: After the war, in 1947, my parents retired. My parents . . . most of the Jewish families who went to these small towns didn't go there to stay. They hungered for Jewish life. They needed a social life for themselves. They didn't have it there except what I've tried to explain to you. They were anxious to get out. After the war years, in 1947, my father and mother sold their business and moved to Columbus. My father retired and moved to Columbus. He retired. He came down and was at our office all the time, hanging around with us. When we moved to Atlanta, I didn't want to be in the position . . . and I wanted it to be their decision to move. They had found many friends in Columbus and were very happy there, but they wanted to be near their children and grandchildren. We said, "We'll move. We understand your position." We had very good communication anyway. My parents and I and Ruth, all of us, we had a very good relationship. When we moved, a few months after we moved, they said, "We don't like this. We want to be with y'all." They moved here, too. Of course, my mother had a lot of family here. That's where her family was from. It was not a difficult move for them to move here.

Lila: Do you have any family in South Georgia?

Sol: Do we?

Lila: Yes?

Sol: Yes, we have a few cousins left. Ruth has all of her relatives, because my family . . . the only one that came to this country on my father's side was my father. There's nobody there. Most of the family, on my mother's side, was here in Atlanta. We do have some relatives, though, still living in South Georgia, in Macon. There's a [unintelligible]. We moved to Atlanta in 1962, I guess it was, or 1961. Yes, it was 1962. We moved our business here and opened up our business

here. An interesting thing happened family-wise after the war when my father moved to Columbus in 1947. One of the things that he was doing was watching the papers trying to find his family. His family was in Austria-Hungary when he came over here. After World War I, it became Poland where he was. After World War II, it became Russia. That same town.

He hadn't heard anything from any part of his family. He sat . . . he would take the Jewish paper that came once a week and it would have a list—a page—and have people looking for relatives. He picked that . . . the first thing he would do is grab the paper and sit [and] go from word to word on every column. Finally, one day he found his nephew. It said if you were looking for an Uncle Phillip Singer who came to the United States from Kosow, trying to find. He got in touch with him immediately. Now, in the meantime, the Israel thing was happening. In 1948, of course, they had their independence and started the state. My mother had a big family there. My grandmother's sister in the early 1920's moved there from Russia with her family. They all . . . everybody left to Israel. She had a big family there. My grandmother and her family were here, of course. They had gotten back in touch with her. In 1951, my parents made a trip when they found everyone. It was their first trip to Israel in 1951. Those were very exciting times. When I say exciting, I don't mean good time exciting. It's hard to explain to someone who has not lived through it and experienced it with parents and grandparents who were . . . we're first generation Americans, and so we had . . . we helped . . . they helped . . . Part of that Jewish education I guess, as children, was seeing things through their eyes—why they're here and what they're doing here. Those [were] very big days in the life of a Jewish community, and in our own family life.

When we came to Atlanta . . . in 1961, the year before we came to Atlanta, Ruth and I took an extensive trip to Israel and spent time there. It was our first. We've been there 12 times. They were various times. The first time we went to Israel in 1961, I'll cover this at some other time. When we got there, we were met at the airport by 32 people, which was our family.

Lila: My goodness.

Sol: Ruth has family on both sides of her family. I have family on both sides of my family there. It was quite an experience. We have been involved in Jewish life wherever we've been.

Lila: With the formation of Israel, were you involved in that, with fundraising and things?

Sol: Fund raising, yes. In 1944, we incorporated the [Jewish] Federation in Columbus.⁴⁹ There were eight people, eight of us incorporated. Most of them were . . . all of them were my elders. Most of them were not much my elder, but older than I was. I was 26 years old then. We did an excellent job of fundraising there for the size town we were in . . . business selling the bonds . . . selling bonds and so forth. I've always been involved in Federation with the fundraising.

Lila: When you moved to Atlanta, did you find religious life very different from Columbus?

Sol: I found it, but again, I was perfectly at home here because I knew everybody. [I] knew a lot of people. I stepped right into [the Jewish] Federation of Greater Atlanta,⁵⁰ religious, synagogue . . .

<Interruption in tape>

Lila: When you moved to Atlanta, you had mentioned that you spent time at your grandmother's. How was it different? What can you remember about spending time with your grandmother, and how was Jewish life different once you moved here?

Sol: I remember my days with my grandmother. Let me just mention . . . I have to make this side comment. I guess the three biggest influences in my life have been three ladies. One was my grandmother. One was my mother. The third and most important has been my wife. My grandmother was a great lady. She was a real matriarch. She ran the show in the family. I can promise you that. She made sure that everything went right, too. As a child, I would come and spend some very pleasant times here. This was another opportunity for me to be with Jewish people that my parents saw to. I remember very well . . . they lived on Washington Street for a while. Then they lived for a short time on Fair Street. The days I recall so well [are] as a young child visiting on Washington Street. I had an aunt and uncle who also lived about three blocks from them who had a son that was two years younger than I was. I got to spend a lot of time with him. We had a lot of opportunity to do things. I was really in the big city, coming from Unadilla to Atlanta. Little things like the . . . what they did . . . I remember the school . . . transportation, of course. They never drove a car. Transportation was on the streetcars.⁵¹ We would . . . on a

⁴⁹ The Jewish Federation of Columbus, Georgia supports local, national and overseas needs of the Jewish people through an annual campaign.

⁵⁰ The Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta raises funds which are dispersed throughout the Jewish community. Services also include caring for Jews in need locally and around the world, community outreach, leadership development, educational opportunities.

⁵¹ Streetcars originally operated in Atlanta downtown and into the surrounding areas from 1871 until 1949. The first such transportation began with horse cars in 1871, and electric streetcar service started in the 1880s. The last streetcar service on the old network ended in 1949; the streetcar system was quickly replaced by a trolley bus system

Sunday, grandmother would get up and fix or pack two big baskets of food. Everybody got in there. She wasn't by herself. Everybody else was doing the same thing. We'd get on a street car, pay a nickel carfare and go to Piedmont Park.⁵² That place was just packed with Jewish families picnicking and spending the afternoon swimming in the lake.

Lila: Did you all meet in a special part of the park?

Sol: Yes, they were all there. They all . . . when you got to Piedmont Park, there was one area where our people were. That's where everybody walked over. They'd bring a blanket and sit on the ground and everywhere else. It was a very warm Jewish community. Again, most of the people here were . . . there were a lot of *landsleit*,⁵³ which means people from your own area of Europe. They would more or less stay together. It was . . . a lot of the families . . . I talked with a number of people now since I've come back to Atlanta. We recall the instances that our grandmothers and our . . . used to sit together. We would know each other through them. As I'm sure you've already recognized, there's been a lot of intermarriage in Atlanta in a good way—and in the South in a good way—intermarriage among the Jewish families. There weren't a whole lot of Jewish people. As a result, families would cross-marry. There are a lot of people kin to each other. You have to be very careful in Atlanta now not to talk about anybody. It could be a very close relative of whoever you're talking to. But Atlanta . . . the Jewish life here was very good. Of course, I found it completely different. Atlanta was already . . . when we came back here in 1962, it was beginning to be a big city. When we announced in Columbus that we were moving our business to Atlanta and it became known, I got a letter from the mayor of Atlanta who sent me a book that his father had written . . .

Lila: . . . who was the mayor then?

Sol: I'll give it to you in a minute . . . Ivan Allen Jr.⁵⁴ was the mayor. His father⁵⁵ had written a book about Atlanta and attributed the success of Atlanta to two things: it was altitude and

and later with buses. A new streetcar system in Atlanta began operating in 2014 and is known as the Atlanta Streetcar project. (2015)

⁵² Piedmont Park is a 189-acre park located just north of downtown Atlanta. It was originally designed by Joseph Forsyth Johnson to host the first Piedmont Exhibition in 1887. Swimming in the park's lake was allowed until 1973, when the city opened a pool in the park.

⁵³ A Yiddish term for fellow Jews; sometimes specifically those from the same town or village in Europe as oneself.

⁵⁴ Ivan Allen, Jr. (1911 – 2003), was an American businessman who served two terms as the 52nd Mayor of Atlanta during the turbulent civil rights era of the 1960's.

⁵⁵ Ivan Allen, Sr. (1876-1968) (born Isaac Anderson Allen) was born in Dalton Georgia. In 1900 while still in his mid-twenties, Ivan Allen cofounded the Atlanta office supply firm later known as the Ivan Allen Company. The Atlanta Chamber of Commerce tapped him. to head the *Forward Atlanta* booster campaign from 1926 to 1929 to

attitude. Atlanta does have a wonderful altitude. The weather is good here, for the most part. It's a very pleasant place to live. You can live here 12 months a year. Frankly, I think it's great because you got seasons. You got wet weather. You got dry weather. You got spring. You got summer. You got the beautiful times of the year, the hot times of the year. The altitude has been pretty good. We're right at the foot of Appalachian [Mountains].⁵⁶ The attitude of the people, I think, has been by and large very good. When we came to Atlanta, we found that we were moving to a big metropolitan city that was just busting at its seams, ready to become a big city. I think you would recognize in just the short time that you've been here that it is a big city. If you don't believe it, get on the road about 8:00 in the morning.

We found it very, very interesting. I had no problem, Ruth and I, neither one. We're both very outgoing. We had been active. We were hungry for more Jewish life, more Jewish activity, and more community. We immediately had found access to being active in every way. Ruth and I. Of course, we joined the AA [Ahavath Achim] Synagogue.⁵⁷ There's been five generations in our family in that synagogue.

Lila: My goodness.

Sol: Rabbi Harry H. Epstein,⁵⁸ who's the rabbi that married us, has served . . . been at service . . . about to say serviced our family . . . has done life cycle events for five generations of my family. We had no trouble immediately getting active in AA. I knew the officers and people involved there. I got active, Ruth got active. Rabbi Harry H. Epstein and Reva Chashesman Epstein, they're just wonderful people. It was no problem at all finding a life there. Of our two daughters, Sharon had already gotten married. She was married in Columbus to her husband who was a childhood sweetheart that [she] had met at Camp Ramah. She was married and gone. She

solidify Atlanta's emerging position as the leading city of the South. Allen wrote the campaign's central document, *Atlanta from the Ashes* (1928). Twenty years later he wrote another booster booklet called *The Atlanta Spirit: Altitude + Attitude* (1948).

⁵⁶ The Appalachian Mountains, often called the Appalachians, are a system of mountains in eastern North America. Definitions vary on the precise boundaries of the Appalachians. The range is mostly located in the U.S. but extends into southeastern Canada. The Blue Ridge Mountains are the southernmost province of the Appalachians.

⁵⁷ Ahavath Achim was founded in 1887 in a small room on Gilmer Street. In 1920 they moved to a permanent building at the corner of Piedmont and Gilmer Street. Rabbi Abraham Hirmes was the first rabbi of the then Orthodox congregation. In 1928 Rabbi Harry Epstein became the rabbi and the congregation began to shift to Conservatism, which they joined in 1952. The synagogue moved to its current location on Peachtree Battle Avenue in 1958. Cantor Isaac Goodfriend, a Holocaust survivor, joined the congregation in 1966 and remained until his retirement. Rabbi Epstein retired in 1982, becoming Rabbi Emeritus and Rabbi Arnold Goodman assumed the rabbinic post. He too retired in 2002 and Rabbi Neil Sandler is now (2014) the rabbi.

⁵⁸ Rabbi Harry Epstein (1903 – 2003) served as rabbi of Ahavath Achim Synagogue in Atlanta, Georgia from 1928 to 1982, when he became rabbi emeritus.

married at 18 and a half. That's another story. I'll tell you about that in a little while, too. Alice left the year we came up to Atlanta. She went off to [Case] Western Reserve [University] in Cleveland [Ohio] to college. Eric was in the sixth grade.

Lila: Where was he in school?

Sol: In Atlanta? We came here and he took private tutoring until he could get his Hebrew good enough. He entered the Hebrew Academy.⁵⁹ He graduated from Hebrew School at the Hebrew Academy. He went to Camp Ramah. He did it every year, so he got an intensive Jewish education. At that time Ramah had a great deal of Hebrew speaking. He was therefore—and still is—very qualified . . . had a great background. He went to Camp Ramah and Israel. He was also in the summer school at Hebrew University [of Jerusalem] in Israel, so he's had that type of background. Alice went on to [Case] Western Reserve [University] and graduated there. She taught after she graduated. Her husband at the time was in dental school at Ohio State [University—Columbus, Ohio]. She taught one year or two years at the day school in Columbus, Ohio. She later divorced that husband, incidentally, but she . . . they had a good background. We also got very active in Federation and were very active in the Bureau of Jewish Education⁶⁰ here. I tried to play an active role in both of those. About that same time, there was a move afoot to build a new Jewish Home.⁶¹ I got involved in that, too. My activities in Atlanta have been . . . In [the Atlanta Jewish] Federation. I served as chairman of the first Missions Committee. I helped organize and served as chairman of the first Missions Committee for approximately three years. A few years after that, I was called on to do some work with the Committee on Aging. I chaired a Committee on Aging at the Federation for approximately three years. In the meantime, I had worked with the educational programs at AA Synagogue. I was very active and again, my thrust was Jewish education. I became chairman the Education Committee at the AA Synagogue, and took care of that for approximately three years. At the same time I was working very intensively

⁵⁹ The Katherine and Jacob Greenfield Hebrew Academy was the first Jewish day school in Atlanta, and was founded in 1953.

⁶⁰ The Atlanta Bureau of Jewish Education (ABJE) was created in 1946 to foster Jewish education in the city. In 1947, it was instrumental in forming a Hebrew High School in Atlanta. Over the course of four decades, the Bureau offered services to schools, the community and individuals including curriculum guides for Atlanta-area public schools, Holocaust education programs, conferences, workshops, programs for teenagers in Israel, festivals, adult education, classes, lectures, and extension classes for Sunday school teachers. The organization also operated a lending library of Jewish books and resources.

⁶¹ A nursing home in Atlanta, Georgia providing short and long term dementia, Alzheimer's, and nursing care. Formerly The Jewish Home, it was renamed The William Breman Jewish Home in 1991 in honor and recognition of its third president, Bill Breman, as the prime motivator of the modern-day facility.

for the Bureau of Jewish Education for the city, and became president of the Bureau of Jewish Education.

Lila: For the city [of Atlanta], or the [Atlanta Jewish] Federation?

Sol: For Federation . . . it was a separate independent organization.

<End Tape 2, Side 1>

<Begin Tape 2, Side 2>

Lila: What were some of your other involvements in Jewish education? We had started to talk about your role as chairman.

Sol: Mike Craft was president of the synagogue when I came to Atlanta. He asked me to get involved with the synagogue, which I did. He unfortunately passed away at a very early death and was succeeded by Harry Lane Segal who became . . . who was president of the synagogue. Harry asked me if I would take responsibility for the Jewish Education Committee of the synagogue, which I did. I chaired that. my efforts were . . . I have always felt that the quality of Jewish education . . . so many of the people . . . we were going through a transition, in my opinion, that we needed . . . the quality of our teachers had to be better. So many people did not give the proper . . . the parents and the grandparents did not give the proper respect to those people who were responsible for Jewish education through giving and transmitting the Jewish education, not the laymen like me. It was my first role. What I was pledged to was to get the quality and respect . . . to get the quality by getting respect. If the people did not have respect for their teachers, they did not give them a living wage, and see that they were recognized in the community for what they really are—and they are really the ones who are conveying Jewish education to our children—then it would never be good. That was the thrust of what I tried to do as chairman of that committee. It worked, I think, a lot. We got rid of the people who were problems. I fought for those who were being underpaid and fought for employing and finding people. I didn't say we hired people, because that's a terrible . . . you don't hire people, you employ them to come. They were people who were really influencing the whole lives of our kids. We were able to do a lot by just attitude. Again, this is a matter of attitude.

As a result of that, I got involved with the Bureau [of Jewish Education], too. We needed a Bureau to help furnish us consultation and leadership. If you ever volunteer in Jewish life, all you got to do . . . if people say that you've got to . . . a clique runs everything. A clique is the people who want to do the work. If you just want to be a member of the clique, all you got to do

is just be willing to work. I got involved, and believe me—I tell you this and I tell it to you now—I’ve had a lot of involvement in community work. I have given to the community and the community has given to me. That’s been my Jewish education. The rabbis that I’ve known, my rabbis, and my involvement in organizations have been my Jewish education. I think that you can get one if you’re just willing to learn that way.

The Bureau [of Jewish Education] was also going through . . . all of these things have been going through transitions. There’s been a lot happening. In the last 50 years there’s been so much history happen. The whole Israel thing . . . being involved in Israel . . . being involved in Federation, helping there, being involved in the meetings, being involved in all the campaigns and all the organizations . . . it’s been an opportunity. People who take advantage of an opportunity make it, learn from it, and gain from it. I got involved in the Bureau of Jewish Education. I got involved on a number of studies we did for Federation. I thought . . . as I have tried to state . . . I think it’s our pride of being Jewish—and knowing who we are and what we are—is what makes you happy and makes you accepted by your fellow man, too. If you know what you are and who you are, then I think that people that are around you know who you are. By improving Jewish life in our own relation to the community, I think we grow. I think everybody will walk a little bit taller than we did before. Bureau of Jewish Education was a good experience.

Being active in Federation, the first . . . it was very exciting working on the missions program.⁶² We found that the best education. It’s been proven. Today, they want everybody to send . . . everybody wants to send their . . . they want them to send their family or their children or somebody to Israel for their Israel experience. The missions program was the first start of this. We had to talk our heads off to get allocations for subsidizing missions. Now, we know about the return on investment because the money we put in sending people to Israel came back to the Federation in contributions and people working.

The community supported the Federation idea. The 1967 War⁶³ I recall distinctly. We had a meeting at the [Atlanta] Americana [Motor] Hotel. The room was packed. There were those of us

⁶² Jewish Federation missions are for people of all ages interested in a spiritual, historical trip to Israel and to Jewish communities throughout the world with experienced guides and renowned scholars.

⁶³ The Six Day War was fought between June 5 and 10, 1967 by Israel and the neighboring states of Egypt (known at the time as the United Arab Republic), Jordan, and Syria. Relations between Israel and its neighbors had never fully normalized following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, and in the period leading up to June 1967 tensions became heightened. As a result, Israel launched a series of preemptive airstrikes against Egyptian airfields on June 5

in there who were giving thousands of dollars that you'd have never dreamed any of us had, much less could give. A lot of us went out and borrowed that money the next day, because we knew we were at a critical point. I can say this for the community: it rallied. It was supportive. You had a lot of very committed Jews. In my particular case, my daughter Sharon's father-in-law was a very active participant in Jewish life at that time, too. By even exchanging notes, he was active on a national basis. He was one of those who before 1948 was smuggling dynamite to Palestine.

Lila: What was his name?

Sol: His name was Norry, Irving Norry, N-O-R-R-Y.

Lila: Where does he live?

Sol: Rochester [New York]. He's living in Florida most of the time now. Irv was an ardent Zionist and had been very active. He was in this group, the Sonneborn Group⁶⁴—or whatever it was—in New York. About 50 or 60 people were smuggling everything in the world over there, taking refrigerators and packing them full with ammunition, sending them over there, and everything else. This was a feeling all over the country. People everywhere were giving very creatively. The Mission program was another very good experience. We sent planeload after planeload of people to Israel. It was a remarkable teaching thing. Afterwards, we went along with the first . . . we sent from Atlanta and I co-chaired . . . on the particular Mission at that time, I was chairman of the Mission Committee, the second Mission to go into Budapest [Hungary] when they opened it up to us. We and a group from Miami went in.

Lila: You went to Budapest?

Sol: We went to Budapest. We stayed there for four days. We were so brainwashed by the community and by the people in the government portion of it, that we thought they were living the life of Riley.⁶⁵ It was really . . . things were good there, but it wasn't near as good as it was

following the mobilization of Egyptian forces along the Israeli border in the Sinai Peninsula. The outcome was swift and decisive. Israel took control of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. The Sinai was returned but the other territories were incorporated into Israel.

⁶⁴ Before Israel became a state in 1948, there was an underground movement by Jewish-American activists to provide ammunition to its then illegal army as the Jewish community prepared for a war of independence. The group became a secretive, nationwide organization led by New York industrialist Rudolf Sonneborn (1898 – 1986). The group called themselves Materials for Israel, or the Sonneborn Institute. Their story is outlined in the book, *The Pledge* by Leonard Slater.

⁶⁵ An American idiomatic expression referring to an easy and pleasant life. The phrase originated in the Irish/American community of the U.S. in the early part of the 20th century. The expression became the name of a

painted to us. That was an experience. Those were the learning experiences. We left there, and went to Israel. Now . . .

Lila: How many people were involved in this?

Sol: There were probably about 50.

Lila: Who was the leader of that group?

Sol: Allen Kolodkin—who is my first cousin—Elaine [Kolodkin], and Ruth and I were the leaders of that particular trip. A few years later, we had a trip which went to Prague [Czechoslovakia]. We went to Prague. We had a scholar-in-residence with us while we were there and saw what Czechoslovakia . . . and that is mind-boggling what the Nazis had done there to . . .

Lila: What year was this when you went to Prague?

Sol: I'll have to look that up and give you that later.

Lila: Yes.

Sol: Again, all of this was educational. I'll tell you a short story. I'll mix in a story here now, if I have the time for it. A number of years ago, Ruth and I saw where the Westminster Synagogue⁶⁶ in London [United Kingdom] had been given the responsibility of about 400 *Sefer Torahs*⁶⁷ which came out of the Holocaust out of Czechoslovakia. When they found them, they gave them to the Westminster Synagogue to distribute them to Jewry in the world on a permanent loan basis—for synagogues, museums, and organizations. Along with the cost of it, whoever got them had to make a substantial contribution to the expense of this whole operation of getting them out and getting them in. Ruth and I got one for the AA Synagogue. We wanted to give it to the synagogue. If you have seen it in the cabinet there . . .

Lila: Yes.

Sol: . . . in the museum. It's an old German *Torah* that was in a synagogue in Pilsen, Czechoslovakia.⁶⁸ About three years before we went to Czechoslovakia, I got a letter from a rabbi in Pennsylvania who said that he had gone to visit that synagogue—the synagogue from

popular American radio situation comedy series in the 1940's called *The Life of Riley* that was later adapted into a 1949 movie, a 1950's television series, and a 1958 comic book.

⁶⁶ Westminster Synagogue in London is an independent progressive congregation, with close links both to Reform Judaism and to Liberal Judaism. It was established in 1957.

⁶⁷ A *Sefer Torah* is a handwritten copy of the *Torah*, the holiest book in Judaism. It must meet extremely strict standards of production. When not in use in services, it is stored in the holiest spot in a synagogue, the *Aron Kodesh* (Holy Ark), which is usually an ornate curtained-off cabinet or section of the synagogue built along the wall that most closely faced Jerusalem, the direction Jews face when praying.

⁶⁸ Plzeň or Pilsen is a city in the Czech Republic about 90 km (56 miles) west of Prague.

which that congregation had gotten the *Torah*— and it was a little town near Pilsen. He went back to Pilsen on his way there. He stopped at the synagogue there because he knew that we had the *Sefer Torah* here in Atlanta that came from Pilsen. He met a man there named Rudolph Lowy who spoke very good English [and] who as a young man in his late teens had escaped from Czechoslovakia, went to England, enlisted in the English Brigade, and then came back to Czechoslovakia in the underground. When he told him that he knew where their sacred *Torah* was, he was so excited. He urged me that if we ever had the opportunity to go to Czechoslovakia, we must visit him. When we went to Prague, I called. They sent me his phone number and everything else. I called him, told him we were in Prague, and I had hoped we could come to visit him. This was on Thursday afternoon. I said, “I’m not going to be able to do it,” because after looking at the schedule that had been for us, we were going to be there four days, the next day was Friday, and Friday morning we were going to Theresienstadt,⁶⁹ the concentration camp. After the concentration camp, we had to come back to Prague. He says, “I will meet you at Theresienstadt. I know where you’re going, because I have been to it. I know where the groups go. I’ll meet you there and take you to Pilsen. I must meet you and must show you the synagogue.”

We went there the next morning, and as the bus pulled out I could see a . . . he said, “You’ll recognize me. I got a Russian car. I’ll be there by my car.” I looked out the window of the bus. I said, “Ruth, that’s got to be him. He’s pacing.” Granted, he spoke very good English because he had been in the English army. So we got out. He was just a lovely human being, just a lovely human being. As soon as we got through there . . . we got through about 11:00 . . . the rest, they were going out to have lunch there. He says, “No, you come with me. We’ll take you to Pilsen. Then after you visit Pilsen, I’m going to take you back to Prague.” I got another couple—the Howards went with us—and we went to Pilsen. I can tell you how happy I am to . . . the first place he took us was to the Jewish cemetery which they had redone. It was a beautiful cemetery.

⁶⁹ Theresienstadt (Terezín) near Prague was originally designed to hold prominent Jews, persons of special merit and old people and to camouflage the extermination of European Jews by presenting it as a ‘model Jewish settlement.’ The non-Jewish population was completely moved out by June 1942 and thousands of Jews from Germany and Austria were moved in. The first Jews arrived at the end of November 1941 and by the end of May 1942, 28,887 Jews had been deported to the ghetto, about one third of the Jewish population of Bohemia and Moravia. The conditions were terrible and the death rate overall neared 50%. The ghetto was filmed by the Germans as a propaganda film about how wonderful Jews were being treated. The Jews featured in the film, including all the children, were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau and murdered. Theresienstadt was the ghetto visited by the Red Cross where they were carefully escorted around by the Germans to show them the wonderful treatment they were giving the Jews and how happy they all were. The Red Cross duly published a glowing report.

Afterwards, he took us to the synagogue.⁷⁰ The synagogue had been saved because it was right in the middle of downtown. If you would like, I've got some pictures and an article I'll be glad to share with you, too. We went down to the synagogue. We walked into this synagogue. It was built to seat 3,200 people. I can tell you . . . everywhere you go . . . you stood in the middle of a beautiful building with two big gables— or whatever you call it on either side of it, inside there. I could even hear the *chazzan*⁷¹ singing. I mean, you could just imagine what it must have been. He said, "We're going to have services here because you're here this afternoon." We went into a room. With the four of us, there were 11 people. Now, that was the community. That was the community.

Lila: Were they all old?

Sol: All old. He was the young . . . he was the baby of the crowd. He passed away just a few months ago. It was a great . . . it was a heartrending experience. We visited there, and then he took us back to Prague. In Prague, we saw all the treasures with Mark E. Talisman.⁷² He brought the Precious Legacy,⁷³ a display . . . to remember all the stuff from Czechoslovakia. [He] brought [it] into this country for a display. It has toured the country. He was there. He's an outstanding authority on it. He took us to all of the warehouses. The story of Prague is that Hitler was going to make a museum⁷⁴ there to the forgotten people, the Jews. He had built warehouses of items over there of Judaica, 20,000 portraits of . . . it blows your mind. That was a great experience

⁷⁰ The Great Synagogue in Pilsen (Czech Republic) is the second largest synagogue in Europe. The synagogue was completed in 1893 and at the time the Jewish community in Pilsen numbered about 2,000. The synagogue was used without interruption until the Nazi occupation of World War II. During the war, it was used as a storage facility and was spared from destruction. The last regular service was held in 1973, when the synagogue was closed and allowed to fall into disrepair under communist rule. Restoration was undertaken in the 1990's, and the synagogue was reopened in 1998. The building's central hall used for concerts. The synagogue is still used for worship, but only in what was formerly the winter prayer room. The present number of Pilsen Jews is a little over 70. (2015)

⁷¹ The *chazzan* (cantor) is the official in charge of music or chants and leads liturgical prayer and chanting in the synagogue.

⁷² Mark E. Talisman served for 18 years as the first Director of the Council of Jewish Federations' Washington Office. He was Founding Vice Chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council from 1980-1986. Talisman is President of Project Judaica Foundation, Inc., a foundation committed to the conservation, preservation, and dissemination of Judaica.

⁷³ The Precious Legacy: Judaic Treasures From the Czechoslovak State Collection" traveled to cities in the U.S. and Canada over three years. The collection of Judaica of the Jewish Museum in Prague (formerly the Czechoslovak State Jewish Museum) includes historic artifacts, artistic rarities, and cultural memories documenting the vitality and significance of Czech Jewry, the oldest continuous Jewish community in Europe. More than 150 Jewish communities in Bohemia and Moravia were devastated during the Holocaust, and thus the Prague Museum bears testimony to a world virtually snuffed out. *The Precious Legacy* exhibit was drawn from this special collection in Prague.

⁷⁴ Adolph Hitler ordered that a collection some 200,000 Jewish artifacts confiscated by the Nazi's in Bohemia and Moravia be catalogued and photographed. The plan was to display them at the end of World War II as a collection of archaeological remains, a Museum of an Extinct Race.

going there, going to Prague. These missions—and being active in these kinds of things—are, in my opinion, where you really learn what your community is about.

Lila: What about your involvement with the Epstein School?⁷⁵

Sol: The Epstein School . . . of course, right from its very beginning, I knew we had to have a Conservative day school in Atlanta. Rabbi Harry H. Epstein saw fit to really head the organization of it. I was involved as one of the people who were for it. They made a . . . we made a . . . I won't say "they" because that's not fair. We made a terrible mistake in starting the school. Not in the fact that we started it, but with what we tried to do. We opened up a school from the first grade to the eleventh grade. Now, you can't open up a school . . . try and take a bunch of people who tried open up a complete school. The proper way would have been to form the first three or four grades, and keep adding and adding and adding. As a result . . . and the school probably started for many wrong reasons, and some right reasons. The right reason was because of the commitment and dedication that Rabbi Harry H. Epstein had. What made it right . . . had to go from . . . it opened up to 11 years. When it came out they were going to open a Jewish day school, and they knew that AA was behind it, and Rabbi Harry H. Epstein was behind it, it was going to be . . . should be a very good school. The public schools here at the time . . . this was in the heat and heart of integration of the schools, the segregation issue, and integration of the school systems. The public school system lacked a lot. People were scared to death. Everybody clambered for the day school. I believe in public schools, but I also very strongly believe in Jewish day schools, very strongly. I think it serves a very big part and place in our lives. I don't think it takes . . . that doesn't mean that we are in any way not doing the American thing by supporting day school education. As a result of that, the school got in trouble about the third or fourth year of its existence. I was asked to come in and take a responsible position in running the school. Not in the operation, but as a layperson. We suffered because where we had eleven grades, we went down . . . we were lucky if we had five or six grades. The classes . . . small classes. We went down to about a hundred students in the whole school.

Lila: What year was this approximately?

Sol: It was about 12 years ago. I can verify the years for you if you want to make a note.

Lila: That's all right, 12 years roughly.

⁷⁵ The Epstein School is a private Jewish day school in the Atlanta area located in the City of Sandy Springs. In 1973, Rabbi Harry H. Epstein and the leaders of Ahavath Achim Synagogue wanted to create a Conservative Jewish day school. The first campus was housed at the Synagogue. In 1987 the school moved to Sandy Springs.

Sol: It's about 12 years ago. We brought in a new headmaster. We had a good headmaster. Things didn't go right with him. He left. We brought in another headmaster. That didn't work. We had to make another change. We just had all of the growth problems that could be had. We just would not give up. We were very fortunate in interviewing a young lady named Cheryl Finkle who was the headmaster—the head of school today. She was with the Bureau of Jewish Education. She was very committed and very qualified. She wasn't as qualified scholastically, as an educational background in day school operation. [She was] qualified in education, committed to Jewish education, and did know Jewish education, but not to the extent that she knows it today. She had the right *neshama*⁷⁶—which is heart—to do the job. She related to the parents. She came in and took over her job as the . . . and again, we struggled for several years. The school started, though, immediately to build. We were very blessed. From 95 or 100 students, we grew. We outgrew our facilities at the synagogue. Not only we outgrew the physical facilities there, but so many of our families today— young families—can't afford to live that close in to town. As you are probably well-aware, most of them moved out. It's a big trek to bring your children all the way over here. We were able . . . what they decided . . . they were going to close the Underwood Hills Elementary School, a public school, and they were combining it with a new Heards Ferry [Elementary School]. The property was available for rent or lease. We went to the county and struck a very good deal with the county to lease the property. We leased, and we moved the school out there. We moved from the space that we had to a place with 50,000 square feet. Up until about that time, we'd have classes of 12 or 13 kids in a class, and we just . . . we were building all along. We moved out there, and it just flourished.

First place, she's a very qualified educator. She's committed. She's got a committed staff. At the present time, we have 570 children in school ranging from 18 months—we have a preschool program that starts at 18 months—up through the eighth grade. We got 570 students and a staff of 100 people. They're not all full-time, but the ratio of staff to students is so great that the children are getting an amazing education. It's really something to see what's happening. I've got three grandchildren out there at the present time. The youngest one is in the second grade. Last year, I visited. They're doing an experimental teaching Hebrew. It's a course on the way to teach modern Hebrew. It's designed by a lady in Montreal. We're one of the pilot places for it. They teach the first grade. Last year, they started teaching the first graders. About two

⁷⁶ *Neshama* is a Hebrew word which can mean soul or spirit.

months after school started, I visited Jackie's class, and I stood at the back. For 20 minutes, nobody in that class spoke a word of English. These are kids that are six and seven years old, and have been in school taking Hebrew for two months. It's just amazing what they've been able to do. There are three first . . . there are three grades the school . . . Finally the building and the county was ready. We had to do something because the children were sitting on top of each other. We had to build five temporary buildings— these movable building—out there to take care of the student body. We have three classes, three first grades, and three second grades, all the way up involving three classes. We've got a big seventh and eighth grade. This year, they are sending . . . the first year we are sending our seniors, eighth graders, on a trip to Israel. The parents are sending them, but it's the school sponsoring the trip. I think there are between 35 and 40 kids going on that trip. It just has been a terrific experience. We were able to buy the building. We did a long-range plan just after a short range plan several years ago, and we've been working against that plan. The school's been recognized by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools,⁷⁷ and the Southern Association of Independent Schools.⁷⁸ We are qualified in every way. We bought the building. We are in the process . . . hope to start on April 2, to break ground for an addition doubling the size. We're putting in all the facilities.

Lila: I bet your grandchildren appreciate your efforts.

Sol: They do. I've been very fortunate. I want to tell you that. I've got a granddaughter who graduated the school who is in graduate school at City College of New York [New York, New York]. She graduated from Columbia [University] - Barnard [College—New York, New York] last year. We are at the place now that we've got children of alumni, which is a great feeling . . . to see . . . I saw a lot of graduates that are sending their kids back to the school. It's probably been the most gratifying thing that I've ever done in my life.

<End Tape 2, Side 2>

<Begin Tape 3, Side 1>

Lila: This is Lila Beth Young interviewing Sol Singer on February 18 1995. This is our second interview for the Jewish Oral History Project of Atlanta, co-sponsored by American Jewish

⁷⁷ The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) is one of the six regional accreditation organizations recognized by the United States Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. This agency accredits over 13,000 public and private educational institutions ranging from preschool to college level in the Southern U. S.

⁷⁸ The Southern Association of Independent Schools (SAIS) is a U.S.-based voluntary organization of more than 340 independent elementary and secondary schools through the South.

Committee, Atlanta Jewish Federation, and National Council of Jewish Women. This is our second interview. I thought it would be worthwhile to go back and talk a little bit more about life in Unadilla. What are some of the stories that you remember from your childhood, and descriptions?

Sol: I have a vivid memory going back to starting school. The public school in Unadilla was from first grade through eleventh grade. In those years, there were just 11 years you went to school. I started in first grade when I was five and a half years old. I recall all of my teachers. It was a big wooden school building. It was . . . the whole town had . . . I think I mentioned earlier, [it] was probably 1200 residents. That's black, white, and everybody there. Probably more than half of the children are in that school. In those years, there was segregation. It was a strictly white school. More than half the children, I'm sure, were rural dwellers who came in on the school bus. There were no lunch rooms there. We all went home for lunch. Home, if you lived in town, was no further than three or four blocks away. That was the size of the town.

As coming up, I remember a very close relation. The teachers knew everybody in town, and I'm reminded of Mrs. Rosalyn Carter⁷⁹ when she was interviewed after she went to Washington [District of Columbia]. Somebody asked her, "How did it feel to be a first lady and be in everybody's eyes where everybody saw everything you did?" She said, "You didn't have to come to Washington to do that. If you lived in a small town like Plains, Georgia,"—Unadilla was probably just a little bit bigger if anything than Plains—"everybody knew what you did all the time anyway." It was that way there. All the teachers, as I remember them, were very fine people. Most of them . . . we had some single teachers who came and were brought in, but most of them were residents of the community.

Since our last interview, I've tried to stop and think back of instances that I could bring any real antisemitism up. I don't recall any real antisemitic situations in my life time. Certainly, remarks were made. South Georgia was a very interesting place for Jewish people. You may not understand what I'm going to say in explaining this, but there were one or two Jewish stores in the community. Both of them serviced the whole community. There were other stores, several other stores there, who carried similar merchandise that weren't Jewish. A lot of the blacks, particularly, would refer to the stores as "the Jew store." They didn't . . . they weren't derogatory.

⁷⁹ Rosalynn Carter (born Eleanor Rosalynn Smith in 1927) is the wife of the 39th President of the United States, Jimmy Carter. She served as the First Lady of the United States from 1977 to 1981.

As I look back on it, it wasn't being derogatory when they said, "the Jew store." They meant that was the store that the Jewish people ran. I don't remember really any real problems that my parents had. I give credit to them. I think their being positively Jewish, living a life as close to what they could to observe their Jewish background and upbringing, and always reaching out to everybody . . . I think this was the reason that they were respected in the community. They were respected for who they were, and what they were. The fact that they were not a Methodist or a Baptist—which were the only two other faiths there besides the couple of families of Jews—didn't make any difference. They were all well-accepted in the community.

I remember as a child the first houses that my parents lived in. My mother and father moved from living upstairs at Mrs. Hamrick's house to a big wood house that was almost on the railroad track. [It was] about a block away from the railroad tracks and across from a family where the husband was a carpenter, and an elderly gentleman . . . Mr. and Mrs. Moore. They were like a second set of grandparents to a little child. I stayed over at their house, I guess, half the time. I gave them credit for my being chubby as a little one. She always fed me cold sweet potatoes. They were wonderful. She'd cook them and have them always there when I came in. That was the first thing I had to do was sit down and eat. Those were the kind of relationships that you had. We moved from that big wood house to another great big wooden house. We progressively moved around until many years later, in 1929, my parents build a home. In fact, [they] built the first brick house in Unadilla. All of them had been frame or wood frame houses there. That was quite an accomplishment. They were proud. They had found a community in which they were cared for, and they were loved. I'll tell you how close a little town it was.

I'm skipping a little bit. When I went off to college, in those years the telephones weren't like they are at AT&T [American Telephone & Telegraph]⁸⁰ today. You had to ring the phone with a crank. They had an operator in every town. I'd call my parents, and I'd call collect, of course. The operator would answer the phone and it was a collect call for the Singers. The operator would laugh. An operator—Mrs. Irving, I remember, I can see her to this day—she'd answer the phone and says, "Tell the operator in Athens. Tell Sol that his mother is playing

⁸⁰ AT&T Inc. is an American multinational telecommunications corporation. AT&T is the largest provider of fixed telephones in the U. S. and the second largest provider of mobile telephone service. (2015)

bridge,⁸¹ and his daddy's at the picture show tonight." They knew everything that went on. This was the kind of a relationship that you had in a small community like Unadilla. We lived that life. I came up all the way. [I] started out in first grade there. I had wonderful teachers all the way through school, some better and some worse. My mother insisted that I take elocution which is the equivalent today, I guess, of public speaking. I wasn't musically inclined, so I took elocution. We were welcomed in all the community. There was a close bonding between all the families. We had two wonderful physicians there, a Dr. Redding Hamilton Pate and Dr. Linton Hines Bishop. They were family practitioners. They took care of everything and everybody.

There were a lot of black people in Unadilla. My father did a lot of business with the black families there. It being an agricultural community, the farmers worked very hard all year. [They] reaped the benefits of their crops, and had made their money in the Fall of the year when they harvested their crops. They would come in, and he did a fairly extensive credit business which he extended credit. He knew everybody, black and white. I want to say this, that I don't . . . there was never any . . . the treatment of the black community . . . certainly they did not have the rights, freedoms, and everything that they have today. But as far as when they came in to do business with my parents, they were treated just exactly like everybody else was. He had a wonderful relationship with them. They would always come to him with their problems, because they knew that he would champion them. If there was anything wrong in the community that they didn't think they had gotten a fair deal on, they'd ask him. He had the—I guess the word would be—*chutzpah*⁸² to do anything that he thought was right. That was the reason he came to America. They wanted to be sure that everything was right. They worked hard. They contributed to everything in the community, both with effort and with their limited funds.

I may jump around a little bit here. As I was coming up, I wanted to tell you that we also visited, and were associated with, the Jewish community all through that area. There was practically no town of any size in South Georgia that I knew of that didn't have at least one Jewish family there. Those Jewish families had been there for a number of years. The reason was: first, they were welcomed. If they hadn't been welcomed, if there had been rampant

⁸¹ Bridge, is a trick-taking card game using a standard 52-card deck. It is played by four players in two competing partnerships, with partners sitting opposite each other around a table. Millions of people play bridge worldwide in clubs, tournaments, online and with friends at home, making it one of the world's most popular card games, (2015)

⁸² *Chutzpah* is the quality of audacity, for good or for bad. The Yiddish word derives from the Hebrew word *hutzpâ* (חֲצִפּוּת), meaning "insolence", "cheek" or "audacity". The modern English usage of the word has taken on a broader meaning—particularly in business parlance—as courage or confidence.

antisemitism, I'm sure the Jewish people wouldn't have stayed in those towns, but they were welcomed in those towns. They were good citizens. They were able to go there and make progress economically, build a family, build a home, and educate their family with very little capital. The competition certainly wasn't as hard as it was anywhere in the bigger cities. In fact, they were entrepreneurs. Most of them were entrepreneurs. Most of them had what we would call small department stores, or dry goods stores, where they sold wearing apparel. There were some in Cordele [Georgia]. There was a Jewish merchant there who had a shoe repair business.

Lila: What was his name?

Sol: The Cohen family. I'm friendly with his children to this day.

Lila: Where did they come from? Do you know?

Sol: Mrs. Cohen came from England. He came from Russia. They married over here. Her family came over from England. She had a decided English brogue. He was a shoemaker. They had a shoe shop there, shoe repair business there. There was another family there. Their name happened to be Singer. That family was from Germany. He lived out from the city, from Cordele—probably a mile and a half, two miles away from the main part of town—and had scuppernong⁸³ vines, and made wine. He was a wine maker. In addition, he had a grocery business in town. There was a family there who kind of was the leading Jewish family in the community. [It] was the Roobin family. They spelled it R-O-O-B-I-N, which is an unusual spelling of Rubin. I think most of the Rubins I know spell it differently. Anyway, it's the only family I ever knew that spelled it that way. He was a leader. He had a big family, a lot of children. It was he that really . . . he had a prosperous business, and he made sure that there was a . . . someone came down and held . . . they held services every *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur* in a rented hall in Cordele. They held services every holiday. All the other people came in from around and were invited to come and join in the service.

Lila: Did you stay or do you travel back and forth?

Sol: You travel back and forth 20 miles. Twenty miles wasn't around the corner like it is today. You would stay. I'll tell you . . . get to it in a minute about the level of the congregation in

⁸³The scuppernong is a large variety of muscadine, a species of grape native to the Southern U. S. It is usually a greenish or bronze color. The grape is commonly known as the "scuplin" in some areas of the Deep South. It is also known as the "scufalum", "scupanon," "scupadine," or "scufadine" in some parts of the South. The name comes from the Scuppernong River in North Carolina.

Fitzgerald. Mr. Roobin, the Roobin family was influential in keeping a lot of *Yiddishkeit*⁸⁴ going there, too. There were a number of merchants in Cordele, a prosperous little town. Vienna [Georgia]—which was halfway between Cordele and Unadilla, and was the county seat of the county that we were living in—had a family there that was named Freedan, Roy Freedan. He was a bachelor. It wasn't a family, really. It was just him. His parents had really been a plantation holder. They had been . . . they probably came over in the middle of the nineteenth century, lived in the town called Byron, B-Y-R-O-N [Georgia], had a big farm there, and was quite a farmer. You found Jews in all areas of business. My folks lived in Unadilla and opened a store there. They were doing very well. Going through school, they were active in the community. They participated in the life of the community. They made sure that every weekend that we were exposed to . . . usually we would get in the car and either go somewhere or people would come to us. Those plans were made a week or two in advance. When you came to visit in those days, you drove in around right after lunch, and you stayed until that evening. There were no restaurants. You didn't go out to eat. Everybody ate at home. It was all home hospitality.

Lila: Did everyone bring food to make?

Sol: No, they wouldn't, because every house had . . . occasionally they'd bring sweets and things of that sort. The food usually was there. In some of the communities which were a little bigger, as we grew up . . . we went to Eastman, Georgia, E-A-S-T-M-A-N, which was a little larger town and had probably 10 or 12 Jewish families. There was a Kaplan family in Eastman who also . . . there usually seemed to be one family who kind of took the responsibility of getting the Jewish things going in the community. They would hold services there for the holidays. You would find 10, 12, or 15 families coming together and holding services there. Macon was the nearest town of any real size to us. We even went there for some of the services. Primarily, in our family though, for many years we went to Atlanta. My grandparents were here. That was always exciting to look forward to. Even the weeks and months that I spent coming here, visiting my grandparents in the summer here, the Jewish community, it was . . . There was no ghetto, but the Jewish community lived together on the south side [of Atlanta], about the area now where the stadium is. AA Synagogue was there. [Congregation] Shearith Israel synagogue was there, and The Temple, before it was moved on Peachtree Street. All of them were within four or five

⁸⁴ *Yiddishkeit* literally means “Jewishness” or “a Jewish way of life,” in the Yiddish language. In a more general sense it is associated with the popular culture or folk practices of Yiddish-speaking Jews, such as religious traditions, food, humor, and music.

blocks of each other there. You got to know a real Jewish community when you got here, too. The delicatessens and the bakeries were on Georgia Avenue. It was a very interesting area.

Getting back to South Georgia for a few minutes, I came up in Unadilla. My social life there during the week was with the boys and girls in Unadilla. On the weekend we would be exposed to visiting the families all around us. Later, there came along the Depression. This was an interesting time—the big crash of 1929 when things really got tough. I think that it was tough, but I think in many ways it made . . . it brought out some things about the Jewish community in South Georgia that I'd like to really include in this discussion. One, all of the banks closed. In the small towns, most of the banks closed up. They really came on hard times. You were not even a child in the Depression years, my post-Depression person, but I'm sure you've read some of the stories. It was really hard times. Take a town like Unadilla. Prices were absolutely nothing. One of the big agricultural products was watermelons. During the summer time, they'd ship carload, railroad car after railroad car of watermelons out of there. This is the honest-to-God truth. I've seen the time there, about 1929 in the Depression era, where watermelons were sold at 15 to 20 cents apiece. They'd load up a solid carload of watermelons and get \$50 for it. I don't know how they even paid the freight on it. Yet I don't remember people being . . . I'm sure they did without, and I'm sure there was some hunger, but it was no . . . you didn't see people, the homelessness and people lying in the street, because people got something to eat. Everybody shared. I don't remember a time that anybody came in that couldn't get help of some sort. Nobody had much, so they couldn't give you a lot. I think it brought people together. This is one of the things that brought the Jewish community together.

I want to tell you an interesting story about an interesting organization that came up in Fitzgerald, Georgia. It was called the Hebrew Commercial Alliance.⁸⁵ What was the Hebrew Commercial Alliance? There were four or five men—principally [my wife] Ruth's father, Elex Kruger, her Uncle Abe Kruger, Phillip Halperin, Abe Harris of Ocilla, Mr. George Rhoades, and one or two others—[who] organized the Hebrew Commercial Alliance. Each one of them put

⁸⁵ During the early years of the Great Depression, Jewish-owned stores in Fitzgerald, Georgia banded together in 1929 to form the Hebrew Commercial Alliance. The Alliance lent money to Jewish businesses that did not have the cash on hand to pay their suppliers. It also helped to support an area Jewish Sunday school, and later the Fitzgerald Jewish Congregation. Starting with just 18 members and \$7,500, the Fitzgerald-based alliance had 75 members from fifteen South Georgia counties by 1932. At their annual meeting in 1935, the alliance's president, Phillip Halperin, reported that it had 147 members, some in neighboring states, and \$77,500 in capital. By 1953, the alliance was loaning out almost \$1 million a year. The organization continued into the 1960's. It eventually disbanded when many Jewish owned stores in the area went out of business.

up—you could only buy at that time for shares of \$500—five shares of stock at \$100 a share. They put their money together. Then they formed this cooperative or corporation to lend money to the merchants from all of the towns over South Georgia. How did it operate? The only way you could borrow money was if you were a stockholder. You had to buy a share of stock. They'd sell you the share of stock, and lend you the money to buy the share of stock with. It wasn't designed and built for four or five people to make money. It was designed to keep . . . because there were no banks in these towns. A thousand dollars was a lot of money. You couldn't borrow \$1,000. There was nobody to borrow it from, so they formed this bank, the Hebrew Commercial Alliance. You could come in and borrow money. What was the way they'd lend it to you? They would lend you \$1,000. They'd give you \$950 for the \$1,000 and took out \$50. That was the cost of the loan. You gave them 20 checks for \$50 apiece, one for each week. You had two weeks' grace [period] before the first check was deposited. You paid it back in 20 installments. You could borrow in multiples, but then as it went along . . . at first they were lending \$1,000 tops. They didn't loan anybody after that. It worked better. That saved literally hundreds of Jewish merchants. There were people that came to that bank, as it grew along . . . it happened that these five men or six men who organized it had a little money, because everybody didn't lose everything during the Depression. There were some people who had a little money. They lent the bank money. They also had credit that they could borrow. They established a credit line in Atlanta with what was then the First National Bank of Atlanta for \$100,000. That was all the money in the world in anybody's eyes in those years. They could lend [that] out. They had money coming in every week so they could re-loan it. Nobody drew a salary except they had a bookkeeper, a lady who worked there. She ran the place, as it were. Although at first, they didn't even have her. That business . . . that thing went on during this whole Depression and everything. They lent millions of dollars. What they would require? First you had to be . . . if you borrowed money from them, the first thing you understood, you were borrowing money and you had to pay it back. There were no jokes, no tricks, no nothing, regardless. They lent people money who couldn't borrow anywhere else. That organization lent money in South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. The Jewish merchants came from everywhere to borrow money. As a result, the one thing they used . . . did out of the profits there, they helped build a community there. When I say helped build, they would have meetings twice a year. Everybody would come to them. They'd

have holiday services in the Odd Fellows⁸⁶ Hall. They rented that every year. Fitzgerald became something of a commercial center. They extended themselves to help everybody. You would come in, you could either . . . if I wanted to borrow money and I didn't have any collateral and no reputation, and I'd had some financial difficulties, they would allow one or two other merchants who weren't in as bad shape to guarantee the loan. That's the way they let you have the money.

I married Ruth Kruger. My wife and her father were just . . . he was just one of the 'princes of all princes.' He never turned anybody down on anything. I recall so intimately. At his funeral, a man came to his funeral. I'm not going to mention his name, but I know it. I can see him right now. He told me on the porch of that home, "Elex was better to me than my own parents." He said, "When nobody let me have any money, he guaranteed my note at the Alliance [Hebrew Commercial Alliance]." He said, "That's what got me through." He said, "Otherwise, I would have lost my business, and everything else." It was that kind of relationship in the community. That's how the synagogue got started there. The Alliance didn't pay for the synagogue, but the people were able to prosper, and they went back. I can tell you this. There were no jokes with those guys that ran this thing. If you didn't pay up, or if you started any kind of hanky-panky, they came to you and said, "Listen, we're your neighbors. You're not taking anything from us. You're behind. You've got to pay, and that's it." I recall distinctly a family that lived in South Georgia who went bankrupt. I mean, he was bankrupt. When they put his stock up for sale—his bankrupt stock—they came in there, they bought the stock, and gave it back to him so he could start over again. There were two or three of them that said, "We'll guarantee to give him a start, and get him back in business." This was what built a very strong network of people in South Georgia, Jewish families and Jewish connections. It built community. You could go to Fitzgerald on any given Sunday after Ruth and I got married—we got married in 1939—when I was courting her and afterwards when I got married . . . you come there on Sunday, and people would drive to Fitzgerald. They'd drive around past the houses and see where the crowd was gathering. The kids were all together in one place. They were playing poker,⁸⁷ setback,⁸⁸ or pinochle⁸⁹ at

⁸⁶ The Independent Order of Odd Fellows is a global altruistic and benevolent fraternal organization derived from the British Oddfellows service organizations of the 18th century with initiatory rites and ceremonies, gradation or degrees in membership, and mystic signs of recognition and communication. While Odd Fellowship is not a religious institution, many of its principles, tenets, practices, and objectives are based upon the teachings of the Bible.

⁸⁷ Poker is a family of card games involving individual play and betting. The winner is determined by the ranks and combinations of players' cards, some of which remain hidden until the end of the game. Poker games vary in the number of cards dealt, the number of shared or community cards, and the number of cards that remain hidden.

another house. All the families were being visited. There were always a lot of Jewish people in the community. It was through helping each other. There were wholesale houses who supplied most of the merchants in South Georgia. There was one big one in Macon, Georgia. There was one . . .

Lila: . . . was it a Jewish firm or . . . ?

Sol: . . . Jewish firm. One Jewish firm in Albany, Georgia. There was a big one—several big ones, but particularly one big one—the Slotins in Savannah. Atlanta had numerous ones . . . had millinery houses, dress houses, and regular wholesale houses. [They were] down around where the courthouse area is here in Atlanta today on Pryor Street. That was lined with wholesale houses. Practically every weekend, merchants would come in, buy goods and take it back in their cars.

Lila: Did you come with your father on buying trips?

Sol: Yes. My father, and principally my mother, because we sold a lot of ladies ready-to-wear. There were several ready-to-wear houses here in town. She would come up here and buy. Because my grandparents were here, she'd certainly come. I would go with her many times. Albany had them. Everybody knew everybody. You'd send messages. The salesman had called on you, and sent messages from one. The other would tell this one, "I got this." The merchants would even swap merchandise. I remember during the Depression, there was a gentleman in Cordele, Georgia, Mr. Joe Arnovitz. He was struggling. He didn't have any credit. There were three or four merchants—of which my father was one of them—that he would come to every week on Monday or Tuesday and pick up whatever items he felt that he needed. Then he'd come back the next week and pay them for it, but get some more. He did that with four or five of them. He'd work on their inventories. It was this kind of help, this kind of cooperation . . .

All of these people were first generation Americans. They were important parts of their town. The little towns prospered because they had good merchants there. It was a very important feeling. There was a family feeling. Most of them were traditional Jews. There was a large German Jewish . . . a German background community in a Reform temple in Albany, Georgia. There was one in Columbus, Georgia. Those two were very old congregations. Most of the

⁸⁸ Setback is a card game played with a standard deck of 52 cards that requires cooperation between pairs of players to win tricks containing certain cards. You can play setback with two, three or four teams of two.

⁸⁹ Pinochle is a trick-taking card game for 2-4 players using a 48-card deck. It was very popular with American Jews in the first half of the 20th century.

Jewish families were traditional . . . especially in the small towns, were traditional families. We made it through the Depression. I don't know how. I graduated high school in 1934. I was 16 years old, and going off to the University of Georgia in the fall of 1934. That's young to go off for college at 16 years old. In those years, you grew up a lot quicker than you do now. You had responsibility. During those Depression years, we all worked. My parents certainly worked hard. We as kids, as teenagers, [were] there on Saturday . . . were the busy days in the store. We'd contribute to the business, too.

I went off to [the University of] Georgia. Most of the kids I met there were quite a few kids from Atlanta. There were a lot of Jewish students from up East, particularly New York, who came to Georgia because the . . . first place, it wasn't expensive. Second place, they had no problems getting in the school. It was a real thrill and exciting time for us. Here we were, the first time we had a big group of Jewish kids. There were 2,800 students at the University of Georgia. I think there is something like 24,000 there now. We probably had a couple of hundred Jewish kids there. The community was very nice to us, very hospitable. That was a good exposure, too. I don't remember. We had some instances with different fraternities and sororities, but I really don't remember. There always have been instances. I guess there are instances between different cliques and different beliefs in the Christian community, if you're a Methodist or a Baptist or a Catholic. I know the Catholics, the Methodists, and the Baptists didn't get along too well. I think they had more problems. From my viewpoint, they probably had more differences in their community than we had in ours. I don't remember going through the University of Georgia running into any blatant antisemitism. Certainly there was some. There's no question about that. We had to . . . we always were on guard. I have often remarked . . . Ruth and I made our first trip to Israel in 1961, and it was . . . the big thing that I noticed that we weren't . . . when we got to Israel and walked down the streets, we didn't have our radar on. We weren't listening to see to be sure that everything was all right. But as far as blatant, uncomfortable, real uncomfortable antisemitism, I don't remember running into it, personally. It existed. During those years we'd go to Florida, and there would be nothing, but there'd be a sign on the road [at] such and such hotel: "No Jews Allowed." It existed, but by and large, I never ran into a lot of it.

Lila: Did you have services in Georgia, religious services?

Sol: Did we?

Lila: Yes.

Sol: Yes. Fitzgerald . . . of course, they . . .

Lila: . . . I meant in the University.

Sol: At the University of Georgia?

Lila: Yes.

Sol: We had what was a Hillel⁹⁰ at that time. We had . . . it was very interesting. The congregation was small. Athens [Georgia] was rather small. It's not a big town today, but it had a lot of good Jewish people there. The Michael family had a big store there. They were a positive influence on the community. Mr. Bernstein was there. I recall the Loeb family. These were families who did a lot of outreach to the students. The Bush family . . . let me be sure and mention them because the kids would go . . . they got friendly with a bunch of kids every year, and there were always 10 or 12 adopted children that would go to their house and be there. They had a warm congregation there. They had the rabbi. The rabbi worked with us, with the Jewish students. They allowed us—those of us who were more traditional—to have the kind of services . . . we could have services in the building and in the premises as we wanted to. I guess we would kind of form a club based on our religious beliefs and our backgrounds. There were a lot of kids from Savannah, Augusta, and most of the small towns in Georgia like Unadilla and Fitzgerald. There were one or two from a town. The bigger towns—Atlanta, Macon, Cordele, Savannah, and Augusta—had a lot of Jewish kids there. We had services there all the time. [We] sure did. The fraternities, while they weren't religious in any way, you lived . . . it was a Jewish environment that you lived in there. There were people there who had better Jewish educations and religious education. They kind of helped things go along. The Jewish fraternity in those years, I think, played a very important part for the students. I don't recall any Jewish kids going to any other fraternity except a Jewish fraternity. It has changed, I understand, tremendously over the years. Today, even the ones who at one time would never think a Jew would step foot in them are members of those. They've integrated a lot of that.

<End Tape3, Side 1>

<Begin Tape 3, Side 2>

Lila: When we left off, we were talking about fraternity life. Did they keep kosher?

⁹⁰ Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life (known as Hillel International or Hillel) is a Jewish campus organization. Its mission is to enrich the lives of Jewish students so they may enrich Jewish people and the world.

Sol: No, they didn't keep kosher. We never had, in our fraternity house, which was Tau Epsilon Phi, we didn't serve ham or milk. That was the extent of keeping kosher. Again, that was quite an experience, too. Our whole social life was built around the fraternity. In those years, the University had . . . that was the days of the big-named bands. They would have their fall dances and their little commencement dances at the University. Of course, all of the fraternities had a big social life. We'd get tickets to the . . . buy tickets to a series of dances on a weekend. They'd bring in a big band. There would be a dance on Friday night. There'd be one, a tea on Saturday afternoon, and then a big dance on Saturday night. Everybody made a big thing of that. There were formals. I think the last time we talked I told you the first thing I had to do was have a tuxedo. That was a big venture for me. It was an opportunity for most of the guys in the house. We're talking about Jewish continuity. When I look back, in the fraternity life, I don't remember . . . occasionally, you'd find inter-dating. Most of it . . . the Jewish boys with Jewish girls went together. They didn't have to . . . it didn't have to be a serious love affair. It wasn't a one girl, one boy situation. You could date this girl this time, and somebody else the next time. It worked together. In fact, I'll be perfectly honest with you. When Ruth and I went together, we finally got very serious. We were going steady, and she was pinned already with my fraternity pin. We were still both on allowances. We had only so much money, because this was 1934. It was really Depression. We were there in 1938 and 1939, too. The first half of the month, I was a big sport because I had my monthly money. When my money ran out, then it was her time to pick up a show, to go out and get a sandwich and a drink, or an ice cream soda after a date. It was a very nice arrangement. There were a lot of Jewish boys and girls there that had a real good time going to school. I enjoyed it. To look back, it was a great experience.

Lila: Were the people from the north . . . you said there were a lot of New Yorkers. Did they mingle well with the Southerners, or were there separate social cliques?

Sol: They formed their own fraternity or group here, but there was a lot of them . . . that was only a certain number of them were in that. Most of them . . . there were a lot of guys in our fraternity from all over. My roommate at college was from Brooklyn [New York], Gene Lipschitz. His father was a high school principal in Brooklyn. There were several guys in our fraternity from Connecticut, and other places. Also, we would visit the fraternities in Athens. From Athens would come over here to Georgia Tech [Georgia Institute of Technology—Atlanta, Georgia]. We would also go to the fraternity dances. I remember we went to Charleston, South

Carolina, to the fraternity dances there. They'd come to Atlanta. We went to Gainesville, Florida, to the University of Florida fraternity dances. We made it a point. The continuity was there. We went with the Jewish kids, principally. I'm not . . . as I say, there always have been exceptions. I'd say a very high percentage of it, we were with Jewish kids. Incidentally, there was a big advantage in going to the University of Georgia, too, for people who were going to live here in the state. You tended to meet and know people who also ended up living here in the state. For instance, one of Ruth's classmates from grammar school—all the way through—was Morris Abram.⁹¹ Morris is quite a national [and] international figure now. He was just recognized as being one of the top ten Jewish leaders in the world. He's an ambassador at the present time. He went all the way through school in Fitzgerald with Ruth, and then went through college with Ruth and myself. We were all very good friends, and are still very good friends. Those kinds of friendships you make and you keep forever. People that I went to school with are still here, not only in the Jewish community, but in the non-Jewish community. You go to school and live with them. These are the people that you know throughout life in Georgia. I think there is a lot to be said to going to a good state school within the state that you're living in. Particularly, we weren't so big . . . the state wasn't so big. I guess if you went to school in New York, you'd be lucky if you ever saw some of the people you went to school with again after you finished school. Here you ran into a lot of them. It was a good experience there. I had decided to go to law school and finish law school, so I went to school for a year longer than Ruth did. At that time, to get her B.S., Bachelor of Science in Commerce, took her four years. I went through law school. That was the combined course of five years, two years in pre-law and three years law school. When we got out of school, we immediately got married and went in business in Columbus, Georgia.

When we moved to Columbus, I already knew eight or ten young couples there who had been at [University of] Georgia. They had finished a year or two ahead of us, at the same time we did, or came a year later. It made it very nice to finding friendship and finding friends right here within your state. When we were in Athens, I was very concerned. I formulated my feelings

⁹¹ Morris Berthold Abram (1918 – 2000) was an American lawyer, civil rights activist and leader in the Jewish community who grew up in Fitzgerald, Georgia. Over the years, Abram helped bring civil rights cases to the U.S. Supreme Court. President John F. Kennedy named him the first general counsel to the Peace Corps in 1961. President Lyndon B. Johnson made him U.S. representative to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, and co-chairman of the Planning Committee of the White House Conference on Civil Rights. Abrams served as President of Brandeis University from 1968-1970. He was the Representative of the United States to the European Office of the United Nations from 1989 to 1993. In 1993 he founded U.N. Watch while he was Honorary President of the American Jewish Committee.

about Jewish education. I realized how important it was, and what I had really missed in my life. I also formulated in my own thinking what kind of . . . what my affiliation, what role . . . whether I was going to right, left or center, as far as my Judaism was concerned. It was at that point, I think, that I made up my mind that I wanted to be a Conservative Jew. My grandfather was a very learned man, a goodly scholar. He was a poor businessman, but he was a good scholar. My grandparents were a big influence on me. They had a very traditional home. They were certainly Orthodox in their belief. There was either Orthodox or Reform in Atlanta. There was nothing else at that time. The AA Synagogue became Conservative a few years after that.

I had taken an active role in Athens in our little clique of a group who wanted Conservative services. We got Conservative prayer books. The Jewish community there was very proper. The rabbi was very proper. It was Rabbi [Lawrence] Block. I don't know where he went to after he left there. He was very helpful in recognizing . . . and did everything he could to give us the diversity that we needed or asked for. I had pretty well made up my mind where I wanted to go. Ruth felt the same way, because we were already modern Americans. We occupied, as first generation Americans, a very interesting role. You just stop and think about it. I don't know your background and the Youngs, but here's my mother and father who have come up in Europe. Their education is primarily in the Hebrew schools with a tutor in Europe. My grandfather, maternal grandfather, was certainly a very liberal man in his thinking. His daughters got the same education as his sons. They went to the same teachers, and everything else. That was very unusual at that time. I have since . . . when we went to Israel, I got to know my family there. My grandmother had a sister in her family who moved to Israel just a few years after they came to America. Some of that family even went to university. The women went to university in Russia. They were very liberal in their thinking. But here, they were still green. They say 'green.' They had just come to this country. They weren't Americanized. They certainly spoke with decided accents. They had to learn the language. They had to learn to live . . . in particular, there in the small communities . . . had to learn to live with the Christian community around them. [They] had to learn to be an important part and become a part of the community. We were the conduit from them to the neighbor, to their non-Jewish neighbors. We represented [them]. They depended on us. We helped Americanize them as we came up as Americans. There was a very interesting relationship. This played a . . . made a tremendous influence in our life.

One thing that I understood—as I matured after getting married and having my own family—they got this sudden freedom when they came to the United States. They weren't committed to Sabbath. They weren't committed to having all the holidays. Yet they found it necessary to have all the holidays and to do as much . . . observe as much of Jewish life as they could. They had to work on the Sabbath, because that was the big day for 90 percent of them who were either in the grocery business, the furniture business, or the dry goods business. Most of them were merchants. There were very few as it is today. I guess that's why a lot of their kids became professionals, took their professional degrees. They went off to college and were able to get those. I think if you look back on it, they came here and worked very hard. The thing they were working for was establishing their own independence and educating their children. That was the key. Nothing else mattered but to get children an education. When they went to these small towns, they had no intent of staying there forever. It was to build their businesses, be able to make a living, be able to . . . so that they could educate those kids. That's why you've got so many doctors, lawyers, and accountants today. They got those kids off to school.

I recognized that in my own thinking . . . to satisfy me . . . I had to be satisfied, too, as to what kind of life and influence my family was going to have. I felt that Conservative was the right place for me. I could not be . . . with Orthodox, it was at that time particularly the all or nothing. You couldn't be . . . if you didn't do but half those required things, you really were Conservative anyway, in the eyes of everybody. On the other hand, the Reform had completely at that particular time . . . this was long before Israel was a question, long before . . . when I was a kid, long before Israel was even a dream. The Holocaust, nobody thought of that. That appeared on the surface in the 1930's. They had almost abandoned Zion. There was no thought of any Zionism, or anything. In fact, the Hebrew language was almost abandoned in the Reform community. The leading rabbi here in Atlanta, I understand that he was actually anti-Zionist. I felt that for me, for what we wanted in our family . . . Ruth and I both felt the same way. Both of our parents had gotten a good education. Her father had gone and learned to be a *shochet*, just as mine had. They learned how to kill chickens so that they could do as much as they possibly could to keep Judaism in their home. We decided that we wanted to see the growth of Conservative. We wanted to practice that, too. We both became very active. Now Ruth was active . . . about the time that we got married, this congregation in Fitzgerald which just a couple years ago celebrated

50 years of owning their own synagogue. They were organized, but using a hall to hold services there. Then about 52 or 53 years ago, they bought their building. Now, I . . .

Lila: . . . that was the Odd Fellows Hall originally?

Sol: They bought a church that became available just a couple blocks from their house. They made a synagogue out of it. They were renting this hall, the Odd Fellows' Hall, for years to hold their services when they didn't have their own building. We've been married 56 years this year. It was about that time that all this organization . . . Ruth was home for a year while I was in college. She was very active there, and helped organize the Sisterhood. The families would come in on Sunday. They'd have Sunday school on Sunday afternoon so that they would be able to bring the kids together. You asked before about traveling. Did you go back and forth for services? What they did when they finally bought the synagogue . . . I'm jumping around a little bit. It'll all be on the tape. When they finally bought the synagogue, they remodeled it. They built a social hall and a big kitchen right next to it. They would have services on Friday night. They adopted the practice of reading the *Torah* on Friday night. Normally, it's not the practice to read the *Torah* on Friday night, but they did. Somebody questioned whether it was right or wrong. They went to Rabbi Sanders Tofield in Jacksonville [Florida] and asked him. They told him what the circumstances were. He said there is a precedent for reading the *Torah* at night. On some of the holidays, they read the *Torah*. On *Simchat Torah*⁹² they read the *Torah* at night, so it's okay. He said, particularly [because] these people could not come to the synagogue on Saturday to read and study the *Torah*, but they could come Friday night. If they would come and bring their children on Friday night, it was okay for them to read the *Torah* on Friday night. That was one of the ways . . . they invented a new law so that they could get by with it.

On the holidays, every hotel and every . . . there was no motels, really, in those days. It was primarily big hotels there . . . was taken. There were always 150 or 200 people for the holidays. They brought in a rabbi. Ruth's Uncle Abe [Kruger] had a beautiful voice. He conducted. He was the *chazzan*. All the meals for everybody were held in the social hall. They had kosher meals in the social hall for holidays. Even the people who lived in town, so that they

⁹² *Simchat Torah* (Hebrew: "Rejoicing of *Torah*") is a Jewish holiday that celebrates and marks the conclusion of the annual cycle of public *Torah* readings, and the beginning of a new cycle. The main celebration of *Simchat Torah* takes place in the synagogue during evening and morning services. In Orthodox as well as many Conservative congregations, this is the only time of year when the *Torah* scrolls are taken out of the ark and read at night.

wouldn't feel that they had . . . that the people in town were going home and eating in their own homes. Everybody . . . and we all ate . . .

Lila: Nice.

Sol: . . . in the social hall. This was real continuity. They were very close friends. When we went back for the fiftieth birthday of that synagogue, there were many of the children who were there for the birthday who started off their early education in that synagogue on Sunday afternoon. They got a rabbi, and had a full-time rabbi on several occasions. The families . . . as the children grew up . . . the biggest majority of them did just as we did. We wanted no part of it. We wanted our children to have . . . to be able to come up in a bigger town, be exposed to the opportunities that they would have in the social life, and everything else that they would have. Most of the towns, the Jewish kids have left there. If you take right here . . . and it's not only from the little towns, too, Columbus . . . a year or so ago, we got a note in the mail here. We lived in Columbus about twenty years. We got two young ladies who had moved to Atlanta and organized a 'Good-Bye Columbus Day.' That was the people who had Jewish kids . . . the people who had moved to Atlanta from Columbus. I want to tell you, we went to it. There were 300 of us. There were more Jews from Columbus in Atlanta than there were Jews left in Columbus. It was exciting. This has been the history of what's happened to the Jewish communities in this area, I think. They have progressively moved up and up. You can go right here in town. That's why you see, and I'm sure . . . how long have you been living here in Atlanta?

Lila: Seven years.

Sol: Seven years. I'm sure that you have seen how everybody is kin to everybody here. That's the reason for it. We've had intermarriage a long time, but it was among the Jews. Everybody is cousins. There wasn't a big community, so you . . . and believe me, there were a lot of *shadchans*.⁹³ You know what a *shadchan* is? That's the person that makes marriages . . . brings two people together. Jewish mothers were the greatest at that. Especially in South Georgia, if they knew a nice Jewish girl and a nice Jewish boy, they didn't leave them alone until they got together and started dating each other. That's how they ended up getting married that way. I think it's a real lesson in history. I think it's real progress. You can go into most of the families and they'll tell you how they had relatives that lived in this small town, or that small town. They all branched out, got out, started making a living, and doing that.

⁹³ *Shadchan* is a Hebrew word for matchmaker.

When we moved to Columbus, it was natural that we take an active role. Both of us had been active in college in one thing. I guess a lot of it was the fact that we had missed the opportunity to have as much exposure as we really wanted with Jewish people. When we got to Columbus, it was natural that we both took an active role in the community and in the synagogue there. We worked very diligently along with . . . and it was ready. They were ready for a change in the synagogue there. It came from an Orthodox congregation to a Conservative congregation. We had to struggle, but it was a lot of fun. We accomplished a lot. Our children got good Jewish educations.

Lila: Were you influenced by any leaders of Columbus?

Sol: Yes. I had some elders there, Jewish people who have been there for a number of years that did influence my life. In the first place, they readily accepted me into their fold. We started immediately. One of the things we . . . they had a charity fund. They didn't have a Federation. In 1944, there were eight of us who incorporated the Columbus Jewish Federation. I was probably 25 years younger than the next one on the ladder. Because I wanted to, and because I was active, they brought me in. They were very good to me. There was Simon Schwob, who was a clothing manufacturer there; Morris Rothschild, who was a big wholesaler there . . . many others . . . Phillip Crafton, who was a merchant there. Wonderful families. They did influence our lives because they shared, too. They shared in the community. Columbus was an old Jewish community. It was on the Chattahoochee River.⁹⁴ It seems like the communities back in the 1800's—the ones that were on the river and had river transportation—seemed to attract Jewish families because they were merchants. There was trade there, so there were a lot of old families there. It is a good community. There were good people there.

Lila: Do you feel you got groomed? Were you put in different spots in the Jewish community to develop since you were young and there were elders that were on that committee, for instance, that you started?

Sol: Even with the synagogue, the first thing we had to do . . . we had a building that was in the worst part of town. Most of the Jewish families had moved out of there. We had to do something about getting us a building. We went to a lot of work, a young group of us, nice people— Morris Shapiro who still lives in Columbus, Isadore Monsky, and Aaron DeFonk. There was just any

⁹⁴ The Chattahoochee River is about 430 miles (690 km) long. The river originates in the Blue Ridge Mountains in northeastern Georgia and winds down through the state to form the southern half of the Georgia Alabama border, as well as a portion of the Florida border.

number of people I could name you. We were all ready to do something about a building. We went down to a board meeting. Some of our elders on there, we had to . . . we went down there with the purpose of raising \$30,000, getting the pledges of \$30,000—ten people who would pledge \$30,000, or 15 people who would pledge \$30,000—to get the building campaign started. This, again, was in the 1930's. That night, we all walked out and we couldn't . . . we got the young group that turned out. We were . . . they said, "No way." We got defeated. I'll tell you a strange story. This is the truth, too. About 3:00 in the morning, one of our closest friends, Isadore Monsky who was a young man about my age and successful, a successful businessman . . . about 2:30 or 3:00 in the morning, my phone rings. It was Isadore. He said, "Are you serious about wanting to build that synagogue?" I said, "Isadore, please. I have been worn, pulled to a thread last night at that meeting. You know what happened." I said, "What do you mean, am I serious?" I said, "I'm sick about the whole thing." He said, "I want you to be at my store at 6:00." I said, "6:00 when?" He said, "6:00 this morning." I said, "Okay. I'll be at your store at 6:00 this morning. Now, let me go back to bed." I got up and I drove up. As I drove up, I see other cars driving up. He called together ten . . . I have to almost cry, because he was such a sweet, wonderful guy. He called together ten guys. When we got in there in his store, he locked the door. He said, "I want to tell you, I went to the meeting last night." He went over what happened. He said, "I went home and I went to bed. The angels came to me and they said, 'Isadore, you all have to build that synagogue.'" He said, "The angels told me to get us together here." He said, "The door is locked, and we're not leaving until we all sign the pledge for the \$3,000." He put down a piece of tablet paper, and we all signed it. I've got that piece of paper in my room.

Lila: How wonderful.

Sol: It was that kind of *mensch*⁹⁵ that built the Jewish community.

Lila: You were the youngest?

Sol: That's right. I was the baby of the crowd. I was really the baby in the crowd. We had some older. We had some guys who were 5, 6, 10, or 15 years older than I was at that meeting. We sat in that store, and had one or two of them that said "No." He says, "We're not unlocking the door." He said, "I'm telling you we are not leaving here. All of us are going to go through the same thing." He said, "We're all able to do it. We are all in the position to do it." He said, "We

⁹⁵ *Mensch* (Yiddish: "human being") means "a person of integrity and honor." According to Leo Rosten, the Yiddish maven and author of *The Joys of Yiddish*, a *mensch* is "someone to admire and emulate, someone of noble character." The term is used as a high compliment, expressing the rarity and value of that individual's qualities.

are all going to sign it before I unlock the door.” That’s how we started. It got a very nice synagogue in a nice building. We raised it, built it, and did everything else with it. It was this . . . these were the things that made me appreciate being Jewish. Being Jewish is a real . . . you’re fortunate if you’re Jewish, in my opinion. I don’t think we are the chosen people because we’re anything special. We are chosen people because we stick with what we’re doing. We are still here and it’s because of this stubbornness. If the non-Jew had left us alone, we would have dissipated many years ago. We’d have just faded away because . . . we have had to be good Jews and we’ve had to be Jewish. We’ve had to get Jewish education because we believed in what we were doing and we had to show the world we’re right. Evidently we’re still here and a lot of them are gone, so we must be right.

<End Tape 3, Side 2>

<Begin Tape 4, Side 1>

Lila: We were talking about Jewish commitment, and really what it is to be a Jew.

Sol: Living in Columbus, we continued our life there. We built the synagogue. We had an opportunity . . . it was very difficult. First place, I think World War II came along which brought a lot of Jewish kids into Columbus. We had a lot of experiences. It was a busy, busy time. The town had a . . . the town itself . . . we had many more soldiers at Fort Benning than we had people in the community. There were probably 150,000 soldiers there at one time. We did have an active relationship. Our USO⁹⁶ and the Jewish people had an active relationship with the Jewish contingency at Fort Benning. A lot of our girls married guys who were stationed at Fort Benning. There was an infantry school there and an officer’s training [school] there. There were a lot of Jewish guys there. We also had a contingency almost constantly of chaplains there. The chaplains took an active part in bringing the community of Columbus and the community of Fort Benning together. We were a vehicle for taking care of some of the needs and requirements of the people at Fort Benning. Ruth and I, when our daughter Sharon was born in 1941—she was just a baby—we bought our first house. I guess it must have been about 1942. [We] moved into it and it was just a two-bedroom house, but had a big living room. She was a baby sleeping in a crib. There was a bed in there. On the weekends, these guys . . . it was the greatest thrill in the world

⁹⁶ The USO is a private, nonprofit, non-partisan organization whose mission is to support American troops and their families with programs and services. During World War II, the USO began a tradition of entertaining the troops that still continues. The USO is not part of the U.S. government, but is recognized by the Department of Defense, Congress and President of the United States.

for them just to have a place to go, a home to sit down and to be able to take off their shoes, and to be able to see a baby. We weren't the only ones. I don't want to say that we did this. The whole community did it. Every house was open. I doubt if there was a single house in Columbus, Georgia, that didn't have anywhere from two to four G.I.'s sleeping in their home on Saturday night. They'd come in. On holidays, we'd go to . . . we knew that we were bringing home four to five people for dinner to eat with us. We didn't walk out of the synagogue until everybody who was there as a guest, the soldiers, had a place to go to eat, and be taken care [of] at home.

We were fortunate in bringing several very good rabbis to Columbus during those years, too. Jewish life has always been very important to us. We came along . . . this was about 1950, I guess, that we . . . I'm trying to think. It was about then that the Abelson's . . . we got a letter . . . I went to New York to interview. I was in New York on a business trip, and one of the responsibilities . . .

<Interruption in tape when phone rings>

Sol: On this trip to New York, I interviewed a rabbi for the community whose name was Kassel, K-A-S-S-E-L, Abelson who had just come back from North Africa as chaplain, he and his wife. They had a son, David, with them who was probably no more than three or four years old at the time. She was pregnant. We were fortunate enough in . . . I was very impressed with him. I came back and I recommended that we do something about it. We checked the references. His references were impeccable. In fact, his major reference was a regular congregation in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I called and he said, "You would be doing the wisest thing you could do to get this man and his wife there." He said, "But he won't be there over three years." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "In three years . . . he was assistant rabbi in Minneapolis, and we're calling him back in three years to take over the main position." Those three years he made such an impact on our community. I guess if there's ever been anybody that's influenced mine and my wife's life, it was Rabbi Kassel and Shirley Abelson. Their values were just the greatest. They were the most honest, giving people I have ever known in my life. She, unfortunately, passed away a few years ago. Our friendship with Rabbi Kassel Abramson is still the very closest relationship. All my children . . . he came back and married two of our children for us. He was instrumental in them going to Camp Ramah many years ago and in their Jewish education. He was just a major influence. He taught me one very important principle about Judaism, I think. He taught us that you can't . . . none of us can do 100 percent, but if you are doing five percent, you

can increase it to six or seven, and from seven you can go to eight and ten. You can get involved and you do make a difference. You can grow and grow and grow, and there's always room for growth. We're never quite at the top, but we need to keep being Jewish, keep contributing, keep developing, keep getting educated, keep educating, and then . . . and our people are right. That's why I guess we're called 'People of the Book.'⁹⁷ Without the Book, without knowledge, you are really lost. They were a tremendous influence. They taught us how to think through and really made the whole thing worthwhile and important to us. They were a great influence to us. The Jewish community in Columbus prospered and gained from that. He went on to Minneapolis, was very successful there. He later served as president of the Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative Movement. He retired a couple of years ago, and is living in Bethesda, Maryland now most of the time. He remarried and goes back to Minneapolis for the High Holy Days. He's head of the law committee at the [Jewish Theological] Seminary now. He influenced our children and us. She did, too, both of them. I give her just as much credit as he. She was just . . . she was really an angel.

Jewish life . . . it's fun to be Jewish. You can make it a drudgery, or you can make it a hardship. If you work at it, there's a lot to do, and a lot of satisfaction. It was natural that during our time in Columbus, we were active in everything. Ruth served as president of the Sisterhood. I was president of the synagogue. When we left there, it was with regrets, really, but our business life demanded that we make a move. We left a lot of good friends. It was natural when we came to Atlanta to get involved here again. I had known Rabbi Harry H. Epstein for many, many years. I had known most of the people who were very active at AA Synagogue because of my activity with United Synagogue in this region. It was natural. My family came from here. Ruth's family was known in the state. Her father was an outstanding man. She had relatives here, too. We fit in. We had a lot of people that we knew from school, and people who we knew through Jewish organizations. We had done UJA⁹⁸ work during the time that we were in Columbus. We worked through the Atlanta Jewish Federation. [We] came up with seminars and meetings here, bonds,

⁹⁷ In Judaism the term "People of the Book" is used to refer specifically to the Jewish people and the *Torah*, and to the Jewish people and the wider canon of written Jewish law, including the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud*.

⁹⁸ The United Jewish Appeal (UJA) was a Jewish philanthropic umbrella organization that collected and distributed funds to Jewish organizations in their community and around the country. UJA existed from 1939 until it was folded into the United Jewish Communities, which was formed from the 1999 merger of United Jewish Appeal (UJA), Council of Jewish Federations and United Israel Appeal, Inc.

Israel Bond organization,⁹⁹ AEL, and B'nai B'rith. All of the organizations were in Columbus. They were all spun off or were associated here in Atlanta. It was natural that we fit right in.

We joined AA Synagogue. My parents moved up here shortly after that. My brother had moved, I think, just prior to us . . . this whole group . . . moved the whole family up. I took an active role at the synagogue, an active role at the Bureau of Jewish Education, and an active role at the Federation. Finally, it worked into a position of president of the Bureau of Jewish Education. I served as chairman of the Education Committee at the AA Synagogue. I was active in Federation, in all areas. I particularly became very active in organizing, working with, and chairing the first Missions Committee at the Federation. I served in that post for about three years. After that, I took the Committee of the Aging.

Working in education at the synagogue was very rewarding. Our son Eric at the time he came up here, he was six years old. He went on . . . got tutoring so he could go to the Hebrew Academy, and he went to the Hebrew Academy. Then when Rabbi Harry H. Epstein made the move to organize . . . I served on the Board at the Hebrew Academy for a number of years and have been involved in supporting it, too. After that— when AA through Rabbi Harry H. Epstein's big move to formally organize the Epstein School and get it started—[the Epstein School] was started. About three years after they started, I was asked to come in and take over the presidency of [the Epstein School]. We had gotten into some real big trouble. I think it was because of the ambitious program of trying to start school with 11 grades in it. It was impossible to do. It's been a real experience. It has been a very pleasant and growing experience. I have been very fortunate that all my kids had good Jewish educations. They are positively Jewish. My oldest daughter and her husband live in Rochester. They are both very active in— not only on the local scene but nationally and internationally—Jewish affairs. In fact, they're in Israel right now at a board meeting of . . . my son-in-law is a member of the Board of the Jewish Agency.¹⁰⁰ He's there for a board meeting right now. They've been very active in UJA. They were on the first trip in the organizational group of the young leadership of UJA. They've been active and all of their kids have gotten very good Jewish educations. Their youngest is a graduate in seminary and getting

⁹⁹ Development Corporation for Israel, commonly known as Israel Bonds, is a broker-dealer that underwrites securities issued by the State of Israel in the U.S.

¹⁰⁰ The Jewish Agency for Israel is the largest Jewish nonprofit organization in the world. Previously called the Palestine Zionist Executive, it was designated in 1929 as the "Jewish agency" provided for in the League of Nations' Palestine Mandate. The Jewish Agency played a central role in the founding and the building of the State of Israel and continues to serve as the main link between Israel and Jewish communities around the world. Since 1948, the Jewish Agency for Israel has been responsible for bringing 3 million immigrants to Israel.

his doctorate right now at the [JewishTheological] Seminary, but plans to go into . . . wants to teach Judaics on a college level. He's getting his doctorate at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York at the present time. Their boy is involved and got a good education. My daughter's got the same situation with her . . . my second daughter, and Eric's the . . . my youngest is Eric. He has three kids. One of them graduated from Epstein [School] this year. One will be graduating next year. The other one is in the second grade. They have been to Ramah. He went to Ramah. All of them went to Ramah. It's been an active life, and we have put . . . we have . . . Ruth has been very active in the community, also. Her big *shtick*¹⁰¹ is both the elderly and the young. We've both been very active at [William Breman] Jewish Home here. She served as Vice President of the Jewish Home. I was on the Building Committee there and responsible for part of the . . . chaired the committee that took care of building the synagogue at the Jewish Home. We were given honorary chair . . . board members this past year. I'm a lifetime member of the board of the Federation. Life has been good to us. We worked hard to try to give what we can to the community, but the community has given an awful lot to us.

Lila: I appreciate your time. You've given us some wonderful memories and certainly have made wonderful contributions, and I want to thank you.

Sol: Thank you.

<End Tape 4, Side 1>

INTERVIEW ENDS

¹⁰¹ *Shtick* (Yiddish) is a comic theme or gimmick. *Shtick* is derived from the Yiddish word *shtik*, meaning "piece." In common usage, the word *shtick* has also come to mean any talent, style, or habit, for which a person is particularly well-known even if not intended for comedic purposes.