

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

**MEMORIST:** SYLVIA BECKER  
**INTERVIEWER:** KIM COHEN  
**LOCATION:** ATLANTA, GEORGIA  
**DATE:** MARCH 18, 1999

<Begin Tape 1, Side 1>

**INTERVIEW BEGINS**

**COHEN:** This is Kim Cohen interviewing Sylvia Becker on March 18, 1999, for the Jewish Oral History Project of Atlanta, co-sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, the Atlanta Jewish Federation, and the National Council of Jewish Women. Sylvia, where were you born?

**BECKER:** Ashville, North Carolina.

**COHEN:** And the year?

**BECKER:** January 1, 1929.

**COHEN:** Can you tell me how your family got to Ashville, North Carolina?

**BECKER:** Yes. My uncle, my daddy's older brother, had gone there. He was tuberculin. In those days, the mountains were how you treated tuberculosis, basically. He had gone there. He was about 12 years older than my daddy. My father was a teenager in Pittsburgh [Pennsylvania]. He was driving his mother crazy, so when he was about 15 years old, he went down to Ashville to live with his big brother.

**COHEN:** What was the name of that uncle?

**BECKER:** Uncle Lou. Louis Pollock.

**COHEN:** Tell me, how did your family get to Pittsburgh?

**BECKER:** When they immigrated, as far as I know, they . . . I don't know really how they got to Pittsburgh. My grandfather had come first, my father's father, and then with an older son. Then, Louis, my Uncle Lou and one of the sisters came. There were five kids. My Uncle Lou came with my Aunt Ada. My father came, he came with his mother. He was about three years old, four years old, and his baby sister was a babe in arms. I assume they came right to Pittsburgh. Other than that, I don't know, which is a shame I didn't get interested in finding out these kinds of details.

**COHEN:** Where did they come from?

**BECKER:** Russia.

**COHEN:** Do you know the city in Russia?

**BECKER:** No.

**COHEN:** Were there any other family members that came from the old country?

**BECKER:** There was my grandfather, his father. My daddy's father died very young. I never knew him. His grandmother, his mother, lived to be 102. As it happened, when she was 102, I was still about 22. I was the youngest from all those five siblings of my father's. They all had multiple children, so I had lots of cousins. I was the youngest of the whole crew, so that my grandmother was already an old lady when I was a young woman. As I said, 22, I promise you I wasn't interested. Had I been interested, they probably wouldn't have told me because I was that generation where we're Americans and you don't have to go back with all that stuff. They weren't particularly proud of their beginnings.

**COHEN:** What were the names of your grandparents?

**BECKER:** My father's mother was Esther. His father was Abraham.

**COHEN:** Their last name?

**BECKER:** Pollock. P-O-L-L-O-C-K. As far as I know it was always Pollock.

**COHEN:** What were the names of your uncles and aunts and their children?

**BECKER:** Uncle Sam, who settled in St. Louis [Missouri]. There was Uncle Lou, who was in Ashville. There was my Aunt Ida, who lived in Greenville, South Carolina. There was my Aunt Bella [sp], who never had any children. She always made her home with the mother, with Esther. That was the five, and my daddy, Benjamin, was next to last.

**COHEN:** Tell me some stories that your father would tell you about being a teenager in Ashville, North Carolina.

**BECKER:** He didn't really tell me much. I learned more about him as a teenager. He went to live with my Uncle Lou, and my Uncle Lou had kids who were not much younger than him. All my cousins, I had four, they had four, I call my big girl cousins. My Uncle Lou had the four daughters. Daddy moved in with them, and they absolutely adored him. They thought he had hung the moon. He was handsome. He was a devil. They had a great time with him. I really heard more from them. What I heard from him was what a pain in the butt his sister-in-law was, who really was a great lady. She was the same age as he when he went there at, I guess, 16 because she was 16. No. That wouldn't be right because she couldn't have had the children. I believe. I'm not clear on that, but he went very young. There's no way she could have had the kids. The kids may have been younger when he got there and then when he was about 22 or 24 still living there with them. But, whatever, they all adored him. He

never really spoke much about his time in Ashville. Unfortunately, I didn't think to ask him.

**COHEN:** What were the names of those four big girl cousins?

**BECKER:** There was Mildred [Pollock Michalove], Florence [Pollock Rothstein], Alberta [Pollock Server], and Betty [Pollock Golden]. Alberta and I still . . . Alberta lives in Atlanta.

**COHEN:** What is her married name?

**BECKER:** Server. S-E-R-V-E-R. We still talk to each other constantly. We do try to have lunch every Wednesday when we can. She's ten years older than I.

**COHEN:** What was your father's sister-in-law's uncle's . . .

**BECKER:** Ada. My Aunt Ada.

**COHEN:** What was her maiden name, do you remember?

**BECKER:** Royda [sp]. Her family, she came from England. I don't know how she got to England. She was a young Jewish girl. I have no clue as to how she and Uncle Lou met, but they got married. She was about 16 and he was about 26.

**COHEN:** What did your cousins say, about Jewish life in Ashville, North Carolina at the time? We're talking early 19 . . .

**BECKER:** Jewish life. I'll tell you about Jewish life in Ashville, North Carolina, because I probably . . . I was born as I said in 1929. I remember vividly, my mother's family were in Spartanburg [South Carolina], and my daddy's family were in Greenville. His sister was in Greenville. It made like a big triangle, 60 miles in each direction. We were a very close family. I see that now. I just thought everybody did this kind of thing. Every Sunday . . . one Sunday we'd all go to Spartanburg, the next Sunday we'd all go to Greenville, and the next Sunday they would all come to Ashville. In those days, driving through those mountains . . . of course my greatest memory of it is being car sick. We even have movies, my mother has movies of the car pulled over on the side of the road of me throwing up.

<Laughing>

**COHEN:** Just like a mother.

**BECKER:** Just like a mother. Yes. We went to temple every Friday night.

**COHEN:** Where was the temple? What city?

**BECKER:** Ashville. We went to the temple at Ashville. That was the social life. I went to Sunday school. My friends were Jewish, even though I went to a convent as a school. The schools in Ashville in those times were not accredited, so the Jewish families who could afford it sent their kids to the convent. I really did not, I must tell you, I did not know about any prejudice. I didn't know about any antisemitism. I was living in, I didn't realize it until I got away from it, but we would go back and forth from our house to town on the bus, and I remember getting up . . . I had to be. I

was nine when we moved, so I had to be under nine. I remember standing up to let, we were taught at the convent, you let older people sit and you stand. I got up to let a black woman have my seat, and she wouldn't take it. I remember having such a discussion with her. She wouldn't sit down, and I wouldn't sit down. I couldn't understand what the problem was. I didn't have a clue that there was antisemitism or that I could be different, or it was strange for me to be going to the convent. I was happy as a clam. Then we moved to Atlanta. We had a nice Jewish community. I know we never had a bagel. I never knew what a bagel was until we moved to Atlanta. A big thing on a Sunday was to go out to the cemetery. My Uncle Lou owned the cemetery. The Lou Pollock Memorial Park. I had all kinds of pictures taken at the cemetery. My mother's folks were buried there. That was a big outing. We used to do that on a regular basis.

**COHEN:** How did your parents meet?

**BECKER:** My parents met . . . Daddy on the video I talk about a hunk in his 20s to Spartanburg he went to a party to dance, and as if heaven sent, he met Helen Annie August, a maiden so fair. But that's exactly how it happened. He was in Ashville. It was very much like probably how Ballyhoo<sup>1</sup> and what were those other two? The one in Atlanta, one in Montgomery, and one in Birmingham. Those Jewish weekends that the young Jews all over the south. It was probably the same type of a thing. There was a party in Ashville, and they invite the young Jewish people from Spartanburg and Greenville and wherever, and he went to Ashville. I mean to Spartanburg to the party. That's where he met my mother.

**COHEN:** Did they get married fairly quickly after they met?

**BECKER:** They did get married fairly quickly, and Helen Annie didn't want to get married that quickly because her sister was working already in New York, and she wanted to go to New York and work with her sister. Her father put his foot down, my grandfather. I was only three when he died, but the stories about him are unbelievable. He put his foot down. He said, "You're going to stay here, and you're going to get married." I think it wasn't very long. It was maybe six months.

**COHEN:** What were the names of her parents, your mother's parents?

**BECKER:** Hyman and Celia. Her mother died, Celia died, when my mother was only about 11 years old. There were three children. She was the middle one. There's an interesting story that I just heard from my cousin. There was my mother. There was my Aunt Sybil, that was the one who was . . .

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<sup>1</sup> From 1931 to the late 1950's, courtship weekends in southern cities included Montgomery, Alabama's 'Falcon,' Birmingham, Alabama's 'Jubilee,' Columbus, Georgia's 'Holly Days,' and Atlanta, Georgia's 'Ballyhoo.' They were attended by college-age Jewish youth from across the South who participated in rounds of breakfast dates, lunch dates, tea dance dates, early evening dates, late night dates, formal dances, and cocktail parties, with the goal of meeting a "nice Jewish boy or girl" who might well become a spouse

my Aunt Sybil was a legend. Then my mother. She had a kid brother Alex. Alex's daughter was here a few years ago. She says, "Did you ever hear," she says, "How did you think Celia August died?" I says, "As far as I know she and the baby died in childbirth." She says, "Well my father," of course he was only about six years old. She says, "My father claims that the baby didn't die. That she died, and the baby was given up for adoption." So, Heidi says to me, "Would you go with me to Spartanburg some day and let's go through the archives." I just emailed her this week so when are you coming and we're going to go to Spartanburg and check this out? Is that something? I never heard it. Never heard it. Of course, by the time she told me that, my mother was gone, but her father who is 91 swears that this is the truth. She happens to be with the CIA, so she knows how to investigate. One of these days, we really are. We shouldn't be putting it off.

**COHEN:** No. You shouldn't.

**BECKER:** We should not. In the meantime, she's being sent to Kosova for the CIA, so she has much more important things to do.

**COHEN:** Maybe not. Maybe, I mean that's important.

**BECKER:** I just might toddle up there one of these days. Anyway, Celia died in childbirth to the best of our knowledge. My mother and the kid brother and the older sister, there was only a couple years difference between the sisters, went to live with cousins. Two women and a man. Two old maids and an old bachelor, who knew nothing about children, but they were kind enough to take in these three young children. They put them up in an attic. That's all the room they had.

**COHEN:** That's in Spartanburg?

**BECKER:** In Spartanburg. They put them in an attic with two beds. She and her younger sister slept in one. She said she was hungry all the time. I mean she really . . . I think about it and talk about it. God, she really had a terrible time. They lived like that for about two years. My Uncle Alex has to tell you, he says, "They, they didn't mistreat them, but they didn't know what in the hell to do with them." She really had a tough time. Then her father remarried and there was another daughter born. This family, my mother's family, really were interesting, colorful people. My Aunt Sybil had an incredible career.

**COHEN:** Was she the one that went to New York?

**BECKER:** She's the one that went to New York. When she was in Spartanburg, you're too young to remember, but Jimmy Byrnes [James Francis Byrnes]<sup>2</sup> was President [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt's<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> James Francis Byrnes (1882–1972) was a judge and politician from South Carolina and member of the Democratic Party. Byrnes served in the executive branch of the United States Congress. In 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt appointed Byrnes as Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. Byrnes left the Supreme Court to head Roosevelt's Office of Economic Stabilization, which dealt with the issues of prices and taxes. In May 1943, he became head of

secretary of state. My Aunt Sybil was Jimmy Burns' secretary in Spartanburg, South Carolina. When he went to Washington, he pulled her right along. She ended up as the court reporter for the Democratic Party. But before that happened, during World War II<sup>4</sup> . . . before World War II. I guess maybe from the 1930s sometime, she ran off and got married. Now I wonder did she get married or didn't she because I'm not as naive as I used to be as a child. She ran off, gets married to a non-Jew. Literally broke her daddy's heart. Ends up all over the world with two <unintelligible> reporters in the years building up to World War II, and during the early part of World War II. They, she and her husband, were in Paris when the Nazis<sup>5</sup> . . .

**COHEN:** What was her husband's name?

**BECKER:** Ben Sills. They got divorced after the war. He ended up as a screenwriter out in California in the movie industry. She ended up . . . she became court reporter first. Then she ended up with her own reporting service. She was a fantastic woman. Fantastic woman.

**COHEN:** Did she have children?

**BECKER:** She never had any children because in the process of the two of them *schlepping* around Europe covering the war, she had an abortion, and could never have any children. Very open about it. She was absolutely a communist and was very open about that. When we would go to New York, she would introduce us to wherever she would *schlep* us. She spoke eight languages. If we went to the Russian tea house for lunch, she was my *Auntie Mame*.<sup>6</sup> If we went

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the Office of War Mobilization, a new agency that supervised the Office of Economic Stabilization. After Roosevelt's death, in 1945, President Harry S. Truman relied heavily on Byrnes' counsel. In 1945, Truman appointed Byrnes as U.S. Secretary of State. As Secretary of State, he was first in line to the Presidency since there was no Vice President during Truman's first term.

<sup>3</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945) was the 32<sup>nd</sup> 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 collapsed and died in his home in Warm Springs, Georgia just a few months before the end of the war. He was a Democrat. FDR was an avid horse rider and enjoyed an active early life. He was diagnosed with infantile paralysis, better known as polio, in 1921, at the age of 39. Despite permanent paralysis from the waist down, he was careful never to be seen using his wheelchair in public, and great care was taken to prevent any portrayal in the press that would highlight his disability.

<sup>4</sup> World War II (often abbreviated to WWII or WW2), also known as the Second World War, was a global war that lasted from 1939 to 1945, although related conflicts began earlier. It involved the vast majority of the world's countries—including all of the great powers—eventually forming two opposing military alliances: the Allies and the Axis.

<sup>5</sup> The National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), commonly known as the 'Nazi Party,' was a political party in Germany active between 1920 and 1945. The party's leader was Adolf Hitler. Initially, Nazi political strategy focused on anti-big business, anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist rhetoric. In the 1930's the party's focus shifted to antisemitic and anti-Marxist themes. Racism was also central to Nazism. The Nazis aimed to unite all Germans as national comrades, whilst excluding those deemed either to be community aliens or of a foreign race. The Nazis sought to improve the stock of the Germanic people through racial purity and eugenics, broad social welfare programs, and a disregard for the value of individual life, which could be sacrificed for the good of the Nazi state and the 'Aryan master race.' The persecution reached its climax when the party-controlled German state organized the systematic murder of approximately 6,000,000 Jews and 5,000,000 from the other targeted groups.

<sup>6</sup> *Auntie Mame* is a 1958 American comedy film based on the 1955 novel of the same name by Patrick Dennis.

to the Russian tea house, she was speaking Russian. If we went for Italian, she was speaking Italian. She was brilliant, brilliant, and fun. That whole group, I talk about this in the video. That whole group had a sense of humor, a mix of the Lower East Side and the Deep, Deep South. My father, my grandfather, I understand had been, he was like the black sheep of a very nice family, and they had to get him out of town somehow. That's how he ended up in Spartanburg. As a pawnshop. What did many Jews do? They had a pawnshop.

**COHEN:** That was what your uncle did?

**BECKER:** That was what my grandfather, my mother's father. Talking about my mother's family now and still in Spartanburg. I got to get back to how my daddy met my mother. It was in Spartanburg.

**COHEN:** What was your mother's stepmother's name?

**BECKER:** Sadie.

**COHEN:** What was the younger sister's name?

**BECKER:** Lucille. It was Lucille August. She married Danny Horowitz. He was with the State Department [United States Department of State]. They had an incredible career. We'll get to that later, but my mother and my father . . . I said my mother and her kid brother Alex were the conservative ones in the family. My mama really just got married. Never worked. My daddy always had money. She never worked. She played. Brought up two children because that was the thing to do, but she was very wise. She very wise. She was very sentimental. It was interesting. I blame it really on what happened to her with the lack of nourishing, but she was never loving. She adored my father. As far as she was concerned, that was her life, and the two children that she had because she was supposed to have two children. But she was not the warm, nourishing, doting mother that I am.

**COHEN:** But you said she played.

**BECKER:** She played bridge. She played golf. She traveled.

**COHEN:** A modern woman in a small town.

**BECKER:** Yes. Yes. She was the first . . . I used to call them Mr. and Mrs. First Nighter.<sup>7</sup> My mother and father. When we were still in Ashville, as I say we moved when I was nine. She had the first refrigerator, electric refrigerator. I remember the iceman coming. It was a tiny little town, and we had an icebox. The iceman used to deliver ice every day or however often they did. I don't remember. But she had the first electric refrigerator. It reminded me when I saw *Fiddler*

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<sup>7</sup> *The First Nighter Program* was a radio anthology comedy-drama series broadcast that ran from 1930 to 1953. The host was Mr. First Nighter. Romantic comedies were the specialty of the series. Performing before a studio audience, the actors wore formal attire evening clothes, a gown and atop hat.

*on the Roof*<sup>8</sup> and they're all coming to look at the sewing machine when he got it. Everybody was coming to look at our refrigerator. She had the first mink coat of all her girlie friends in Ashville, North Carolina. I mean, her whole life and my father too. They were on the top of every new thing, every new that came along. They really were. I credit my mother with most of that. Daddy kind of went along with it and loved it, but it was my mother was Mrs. First Nighter. She wanted the newest and the most exciting and the best. In 1938, from Ashville, North Carolina, my sister and I were sent to Maine to camp. That's pretty astounding. I was nine years old. You drove for days to get up to Maine to go to camp. But that was my mama.

**COHEN:** What was Jewish life in the small town? Tell me about holidays.

**BECKER:** Holidays were wonderful. We generally went to my Aunt Ada's. Aunt Ada and Uncle Lou had an enormous house. I was little, and you remember things as enormous, but they had a dining room with this huge, long table. All the family would come from Greenville, Spartanburg, and probably other places. All the kids would be at a round table in the corner. I loved the holidays. I mean, I didn't know there were options. This is what you are, and this is what you do, and we had wonderful holidays. I will tell you that my mother in our house, not my Aunt Ada and Uncle Lou's house, in our house we had Christmas trees.

**COHEN:** Tell me about that.

**BECKER:** I thought that was nice too. I remember one. I remember this. I don't remember much about the whole thing, but I can remember so specifically, the rabbi drove up the driveway to come visit, and I remember my mother and my father grabbing that Christmas [tree]. They weren't little bushes. They weren't 40 feet high, but it was a 6-foot tall tree. I remember them grabbing that tree. We had a big coat closet down stairs, and pushing that tree into that closet before the rabbi got in. I knew that wasn't exactly kosher.<sup>9</sup> It was just a holiday of fun and giving. Many Jews have forgiven themselves or justified themselves of having . . . I did it when our kids were little. I didn't hang Christmas ornaments on it. We hung ripe fruit because it was . . .

**COHEN:** That's Russian, as a matter of fact.

**BECKER:** Do they?

**COHEN:** I adopted a family. When they all came, my family had a tree for their first holiday here.

<sup>8</sup> The Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof* was based on *Tevye and his Daughters* (or *Tevye the Dairyman*), a series of stories by Sholem Aleichem that he wrote in Yiddish between 1894 and 1914 about Jewish life in a village in the Pale of Settlement of Imperial Russia at the turn of the 20th century.

<sup>9</sup> Kosher/*Kashrut* is the set of Jewish dietary laws that dictate how food is prepared or served and which kinds of foods or animals can be eaten. Food that may be consumed according to *halakhah* (Jewish law) is termed 'kosher' in English. In a kosher kitchen and home, meat and dairy are kept separate, so separate sets of dishes, cookware, and serving ware are needed. Food that is not in accordance with Jewish law is called 'treif.'

**BECKER:** Oops!

**COHEN:** How do I handle this? But, yes, they put the fruit.

**BECKER:** We put the fruit. When the kids were little, it was just the easy way out. Plus, we had always done it, and it was fun. It meant nothing. It didn't mean, as far as we were concerned, we certainly weren't observing any kind of a Christian tradition. But when the kids got to be a little older, about nine or ten, we stopped doing it because we felt at that time they would understand that they were different. We only did *Hanukkah*<sup>10</sup> after that. We used to always do both, of course. We always did light *Hanukkah*. Always lit the candles.

**COHEN:** What would Christmas day be like?

**BECKER:** Christmas day we would get up and open presents! We did not do presents with *Hanukkah*. But Christmas day, they would get up and open their presents, and that was it.

**COHEN:** That's a good question about Jewish continuity now. Now you have a daughter that is president of the Jewish Day School.

**BECKER:** Is that a miracle?

**COHEN:** Do you have any thoughts on that, Jewish continuity?

**BECKER:** I am thrilled out of my mind. I am very resentful of the fact that I wasn't given any of this. I was brought up here in Atlanta. We came to the Temple<sup>11</sup> because, again, Mrs. First Nighter. There was no way she was going to go to the AA [Ahavath Achim].<sup>12</sup> I never saw a *kippah*<sup>13</sup> or a *tallit*<sup>14</sup> until I got engaged to Saul [Becker]. Can you believe that? I was never at a *bar mitzvah*<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Hanukkah* [Hebrew: dedication] is an eight-day festival of lights usually falling around Christmas on the Christian calendar. *Hanukkah* celebrates the victory of the Maccabees in 165 BCE over the Seleucid rules of Palestine, who had desecrated the Temple. The Maccabees wanted to re-dedicate the Temple altar to Jewish worship by rekindling the *menorah* but could only find one small jar of ritually pure olive oil. This oil continued to burn miraculously for eight days, enabling them to prepare new oil. The *Hanukkah menorah*, or *hanukiah*, with its nine branches, is used to commemorate this miracle by lighting eight candles, one for each day, by the ninth candle.

<sup>11</sup> The Temple, or 'Hebrew Benevolent Congregation,' is Atlanta's oldest Jewish congregation. The cornerstone was laid on the Temple on Garnett Street in 1875. The dedication was held in 1877 and the Temple was located there until 1902. The Temple's next location on Pryor Street was dedicated in 1902. The Temple's current location in Midtown on Peachtree Street was dedicated in 1931. The main sanctuary is on the National Register of Historic Places. The Reform congregation now totals approximately 1,500 families (2015).

<sup>12</sup> Ahavath Achim (often referred to as "AA") was founded in 1887 in a small room on Gilmer Street. In 1901 they moved to a permanent building at the corner of Piedmont and Gilmer Street. In 1921, the congregation constructed a synagogue at Washington Street and Woodward Avenue. The final service in that building was held in 1958 to make way for construction of the Downtown Connector (the concurrent section of Interstate 75 and Interstate 85 through Atlanta). The synagogue moved to its current location on Peachtree Battle Avenue in 1958. 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. 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 retired in 2002 when he was succeeded by Rabbi Neil Sandler. Rabbi Laurence Rosenthal is the current senior rabbi (2020).

<sup>13</sup> Jewish men cover their heads during prayer with a small skull-cap called a 'yarmulke' or 'kippah.' Orthodox Jewish men wear it at all times to remind themselves of G-d's presence.

<sup>14</sup> A prayer shawl fringed at each of the four corners in accordance with biblical law. The wearing of *tallit* at worship is

party or a *bat mitzvah*<sup>16</sup> party. I just didn't mingle at that age with that crowd. As I got older and got into high school and started going with boys from that crowd, I would double date with girls and become friendly with them and everything. My mother was not happy at all. We belonged to the Standard Club.<sup>17</sup> I'm sure if you've done interviews in Atlanta you know the caste system between the Standard, the Mayfair [Club],<sup>18</sup> and the Progressive [Club].<sup>19</sup> It was always, "What would people think?" Mrs. First Nighter used to say. I would say, "I really don't care, Mama. I don't care what people think." But she was always very concerned, which I think is probably very typical of a first generation. Her family came from Poland, Russia. Spoke Yiddish.<sup>20</sup> We were not allowed to use a word of Yiddish. Here she was, thrown in with the Standard Club crowd and a lot of German Jews and the fact that my daddy had money got them like a passport into this whole thing, but she was almost like a fish out of water.

**COHEN:** Can you talk to me about that? You could even see it as a child, this fish out of water?

**BECKER:** No, I could not see it as a child, but it used to annoy me that she . . . "What do care what people think?" And the fact that she was so adamant that I shouldn't go with this one, and I shouldn't go with that one. "This one's family owns a grocery store and you don't belong with those people."

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obligatory only for married men, but it is customarily worn also by males of *bar mitzvah* age and older.

<sup>15</sup> A *bar mitzvah* [Hebrew: son of commandment] is a rite of passage for Jewish boys aged 13 years and one day. At that time, a Jewish boy is considered a responsible adult for most religious purposes. He is now duty bound to keep the commandments, he puts on *tefillin*, and may be counted to the *minyan* quorum for public worship. He celebrates the *bar mitzvah* by being called up to the reading of the *Torah* in the synagogue, usually on the next available Sabbath after his Hebrew birthday.

<sup>16</sup> A *bat mitzvah* [Hebrew: daughter of commandment] is 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.

<sup>17</sup> The Standard Club is a Jewish social club that started as the Concordia Association in 1867 in Downtown Atlanta. In 1905, it was reorganized as the 'Standard Club' and moved into the former mansion of William C. Sanders near the site of Georgia State Stadium (formerly Turner Field). In the late 1920's the club moved to Ponce de Leon Avenue in Midtown Atlanta. Later, the club moved to what is now the Lenox Park business park and was located there until 1983. In the 1980's, the club moved to its present location in Johns Creek in Atlanta's northern suburbs.

<sup>18</sup> The Mayfair Club opened in 1938 at 1456 Spring Street in Midtown Atlanta. The two-story club was a focal point of Jewish life in the city for more than 25 years. The club was founded in 1930 and first met at the Biltmore Hotel. Eleanor Roosevelt, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, mayors Ivan Allen and William Berry Hartsfield, senators Herman Talmadge and Richard Russell, and Governor Carl Sanders visited the club. Fire destroyed the Mayfair Club on December 4, 1964.

<sup>19</sup> The Jewish Progressive Club was a Jewish social organization that was established in 1913 by Russian Jews who felt unwelcome at the Standard Club, where German Jews were predominant. At first the club was located in a rented house until a new club was built on Pryor Street including a swimming pool and a gym. In 1940 the club opened a larger facility at 1050 Techwood Drive in Midtown with three swimming pools, tennis and softball. In 1976 the club moved north to 1160 Moore's Mill Road near Interstate 75. The property was eventually sold as the club faced financial challenges and the Carl E. Sanders Family YMCA at Buckhead opened in 1996.

<sup>20</sup> 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 twentieth century. Although the terms "Yiddish" and "Yid" are sometimes used to refer to Jews, Yiddish is a reference to a person's language and not necessarily their ethnicity, religion, or culture.

She was a snob. She was a terrible snob. Today, you're happy if your kids if they're white that they're dating and so forth. God forbid, but I just went ahead and did what I damn pleased. There was always a tension about that. But she was a terrific snob. Looking back and trying to justify it is very interesting. Where did I . . . when we went to see *The Last Night of Ballyhoo*.<sup>21</sup> If you remember one line in there towards the end, the father is saying we're taking all these new people into the Standard Club because we need the revenue. We just can't afford to run it. These people, I thought, "Oh that's me! There's me. Walked right in." Because my father moved here with two other families to start Butler Shoe Company.

**COHEN:** Let's go back a little bit and talk about, what did your uncle do?

**BECKER:** My uncle was in the shoe business in Ashville. He had shoe stores.

**COHEN:** What were they called?

**BECKER:** In those days they were called Pollocks or Cinderella [Slipper Salons]. He expanded and started with a small chain of them. My father went into business with him. They had a very hard time. They were not good business partners. His brother was so much older. Naturally, it was almost like a generation thing where the younger generation had ideas, and the older generation didn't want to do it. Instead of being a father and son, it was two brothers. So, he went into business with his brother, but it was not a happy event. At some point we bought him out. At that point, my uncle probably had about 20 shoe stores throughout North Carolina, South Carolina. I think they were into Virginia. Whatever. My father bought him out and merged when he met two men who had stores called Butlers down in Florida.

**COHEN:** Do you remember his name?

**BECKER:** Bernie Feldman. Bernard Feldman, whose daughter still lives in Atlanta. [Elaine] Penny Commins. I don't know if you know Penny. And Dave [David L.] Slann. Dave Slann had three daughters.

**COHEN:** Are they in Atlanta still?

**BECKER:** Yes.

**COHEN:** What are their names?

**BECKER:** There was Sheila married Dave [David] Saul. She died a few years ago, but she married him. Her mother nearly had a fit because that whole big Saul family. The Gershons and the

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<sup>21</sup> Award-winning playwright and screenwriter Alfred Uhry wrote *The Last Night of Ballyhoo*, which premiered in Atlanta in 1996. *Ballyhoo* later received the Tony Award for Best Play when produced on Broadway. The play is set in Atlanta on the eve of World War II in an upper class German-Jewish community as Adolph Freitag and his sister and nieces look forward to attending Ballyhoo, a lavish cotillion ball sponsored by their country club. *The Last Night of Ballyhoo* was inspired by Atlanta-native Alfred Uhry's childhood memories and is the second of what is known as his "Atlanta Trilogy" of plays. The first is *Driving Miss Daisy* and the third is *Parade*.

Sauls. They were certainly were not our people, and her mother was as big a snob as my mother.

**COHEN:** What was her mother's name?

**BECKER:** Hortense. Where was I?

**COHEN:** You were talking about coming to Atlanta.

**BECKER:** Daddy merged with Dave Slann and Bernie Feldman. They were partners and had a small chain of stores. They moved to Atlanta from Florida, and we moved from Ashville. Even then Atlanta was a hub of transportation. The goal was to open many shoe stores all over, but Atlanta would have the warehouse. The shoes would be shipped into the warehouse and then broken up and split into shipments and shipped to all the stores all over. They, at that time, were the second largest shoe chain of stores in the world. When daddy retired . . . and he did all the real estate for the business, it grew. When Daddy retired, it maybe had 300 stores. It was a huge business. It got listed on the big board. They were very successful.

**COHEN:** Can you tell me where his first store was or the warehouse?

**BECKER:** Ashville. You mean here in Atlanta?

**COHEN:** Yes. Which street?

**BECKER:** Absolutely. I have a magazine, by the way, with it on the cover. There was one right on Peachtree Street across the street from what used to be the Paramount Theater.<sup>22</sup> The Paramount and the Loews Grand [Theater]<sup>23</sup> were right next to each other. The Loews Grand is where they had the premier of *Gone with the Wind*.<sup>24</sup> The shoe store, Butlers, was right across the street from there. There was another one a block away from Rich's<sup>25</sup> downtown. I know where

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<sup>22</sup> The Paramount Theater was a theater that stood from 1920 to 1960 on Peachtree Street between Ellis and Houston (now John Wesley Dobbs) streets in downtown Atlanta next to Loew's Grand Theatre. It was designed by architectural firm Hentz, Reid, and Adler. Upon its opening, the *Atlanta Constitution* called it the South's most palatial theater. It had a pipe organ and seating for 1,000 people. The theater was closed in 1960 and demolished. A 12-story building was built in its place, which was later demolished. Today, the site is open space above the MARTA Peachtree Center station.

<sup>23</sup> Loew's Grand Theater, originally DeGive's Grand Opera House, was a movie theater at the corner of Peachtree and Forsyth Streets in downtown Atlanta. It was most famous as the site of the 1939 premiere of *Gone with the Wind*, which was attended by the stars of the film except for the African Americans who appeared in it. It concentrated on showing films made or released by MGM, a Loews-owned studio. The theater was built as DeGive's Grand Opera House in 1893 by entrepreneur and Belgian consul Laurent DeGive and hosted many concerts and touring opera productions. The Grand was bought by the Loews organization in 1927 and renovated into a movie theater by architect Thomas W. Lamb. The one-screen theater had 2,088 seats. It was extensively damaged as the result of a fire on January 30, 1978. The Georgia-Pacific Tower was built on the former site of the theater. A chandelier from the building now hangs at the center of The Tabernacle, a church turned concert venue in Atlanta.

<sup>24</sup> *Gone with the Wind* is a famous film based on the book of the same name by Margaret Mitchell in 1926. The film was made in 1939 and is an epic historical romance produced by David O. Selznick. It tells the story of Scarlett O'Hara, the strong-willed daughter of a Georgia plantation owner, from her romantic pursuit of Ashley Wilkes, who is married to Melanie, to her marriage to Rhett Butler. It is set against the backdrop of the American Civil War and the Reconstruction era. The leading roles were portrayed by Vivien Leigh (Scarlett), Clark Gable (Rhett), Leslie Howard (Ashley), and Olivia de Havilland (Melanie).

<sup>25</sup> Morris Rich (1847-1928), was the anglicized name of Mauritius Reich, a native of Hungary. He was the original

it was. I can't remember the name. I don't know the name of the street, but that was the best store. It was in a cheaper location, because up around the Loews Grand and up on Peachtree and Davison's<sup>26</sup> in those days. Regenstein's<sup>27</sup> was a block away and J.P. Allen [& Company]. It was a ritzier part of town. The Butler shoes were cheap shoes, so that store didn't do the kind of bargain, but the one down by Rich's, it was down with . . . what were the names of some of those stores? Some of the less expensive stores. They really dealt mostly with the black community. I used to, on Saturdays, call that store like at 5:30 or 6:00 to get the figures for the day. That was a whole big thing. The Saturday before Easter was always a whole big thing. How much business did we do today? I would check that every Saturday afternoon with my daddy. They had stores all over. They used to joke that . . . we moved here in 1938, and the war started two years for us in 1941. Pearl Harbor<sup>28</sup> Day. Travel got very difficult. My father was always flying. He was one of the first ones to fly. Back in the 1930s, he was flying out to Las Vegas to go gamble.

**COHEN:** Describe your father to me.

**BECKER:** He was Pecks Bad Boy<sup>29</sup> from the day he was born. He was a wild man. He really was. I think because he was so wild and so outrageous, I married an archconservative. He was wild. He really was wild.

**COHEN:** When you say wild, a risk taker? An adventurer?

**BECKER:** An adventurer. They used to joke that he would . . . nylon stockings were impossible to find during the war. They were very short. They would save the nylons they got in, and when they had the opening of a new shoe store, they would have nylons available. They used to joke that my daddy would walk up to the airlines, Eastern Airlines, and say to the girl, "I want to go such and such." "We don't have room on that plane, Mr. Pollock." "Well, where do you have room on a plane? I have stores everywhere." He would bribe them with the stockings. He walked around with a briefcase full

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founder of Rich's, a department store retail chain headquartered in Atlanta that operated in the southern United States from 1867 until 2005. The store was founded on May 28, 1867, as M. Rich Dry Goods by 20-year-old Morris Rich with only \$500 in capital. In 1877 Morris' brother Emanuel entered the business and the name of the store was changed to M. Rich and Brother, followed by Daniel in 1884, when the store was again renamed as M. Rich and Brothers. On January 12, 1901, a charter for incorporation was granted, and the firm became M. Rich and Brothers Company. Morris Rich was elected president at a meeting of stockholders on January 18, 1901

<sup>26</sup> Davison-Paxon Company was a department store in Atlanta, Georgia, that was later called Davison's.

<sup>27</sup> Regenstein's was a high-end women's clothing shop called Regenstein's founded by Julius Regenstein. It was sold in 1976.

<sup>28</sup> On December 7, 1941 the Japanese surprised the United States by attacking the United States' fleet in Honolulu, Hawaii. The ships were all docked in Pearl Harbor. The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was the beginning of World War II for the United States, which until that time had remained neutral. A few days later, Germany declared war on the United States as well and we began fighting in the Pacific and Europe.

<sup>29</sup> Henry "Hennery" Peck, popularly known as Peck's Bad Boy, is a fictional character created by George Wilbur Peck. First appearing in the 1883 novel *Peck's Bad Boy and His Pa*, the Bad Boy has appeared in numerous print, stage, and film adaptations. The character is portrayed as a mischievous prankster. The phrase "Peck's bad boy" has entered the language to refer to anyone whose mischievous or bad behavior leads to annoyance or embarrassment.

of stockings. That's the way you traveled during the war because all the soldiers had priorities on everything. I remember Hartsfield [Jackson Atlanta International] Airport wasn't much bigger than his bedroom. But he was always Mr. and Mrs. First Nighter. It's such a good way to describe them. I also used to describe them as Scott and Zelda [Fitzgerald]. When we were kids in first grade in Ashville, they went on a cruise for 18-19 days. They would travel all over the world and leave us boarding at the convent. I thought to myself . . . when I had kids, what an incredible thing. In this little town you can pick up, because it was always, and still is a problem. You want to go somewhere, who is going to take care of your kids? In this little town, 65 years ago, they could go away, leave us at the convent, know we were well cared for. Of course, when they came home, I made the rosary beads one time, but the sisters didn't teach me that. The nuns didn't, one of the older girls.

**COHEN:** How did your mother react to that?

**BECKER:** I'll tell you, my mother always had a bad back, and she was quick to discipline with the hand. She was after me one day for something, and I got under the bed. She couldn't bend down to get me. I said to her, "I'll come out, but if you hit me, I'm going to turn Catholic." I got them. I don't think she was terribly happy about it. But I don't think it bothered her.

**COHEN:** What was the name of the Catholic school?

**BECKER:** St. Genevieve-of-the-Pines.

**COHEN:** Who were some of your father's business associates? People he hung around with at the time?

**BECKER:** Here in Atlanta? Oh God, the whole National Women crowd. I.M. Weinstein. Joe [Joseph] Jacobs was his very special buddy. Uncle Joe was adorable. They never had any children. Betty Ann [Romm] Jacobson. Joe Jacobs was Harvey's uncle also. I'm sure she's talked about him if she's been interviewed. He was the one, when mother and daddy were going on their first trip to Europe. It was a big thing to them. They were so worried. What do you take? What do you wear? He had traveled all over the world for many years, he and Aunt Lena. He said, "Look, just take half as many clothes and twice as much money. You'll be fine." To this day we quote him saying that. But he was friendly with them. There was a gentleman in town, Harry Davis, who was a big shot in town. Jewish, from Montgomery, Alabama. There was no way, other than if he didn't tell you he was Jewish, there's no way that you would know it. They did nothing Jewish. Blanche and Harry also never had any children. He was the Massachusetts Mutual [Life Insurance Company] general agent here in town. The young man who worked for him was Meyer Balser,<sup>30</sup> who, of course, became a major player in the

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<sup>30</sup> Atlanta native Meyer Balser (1908-2004) was a business and civic leader. He served as chairman of the Red Cross and Community Chest (predecessor to United Way) campaigns. He was twice named 'Man of the Year' of

community. Who else? The whole Selig group. Mother and Daisy Bell used to . . . Al [Alfred] Davis. One of his big cronies was Al Davis. When we first moved here, daddy had lived here for a year before we did. Al Davis was a young single guy. Liquor salesman. Drove a big Cadillac convertible. Two gorgeous guys, my daddy and Al Davis. They were obviously cronies during that year because I remember when we moved here, we were renting a little house out on . . . Daddy had hocked himself up to his ears. Who knew whether the business was going to go or not go. We were living in a little rented house way out on Ponce De Leon and functioning with one car. Al Davis used to come many a morning, pick up daddy, drive my sister and I to school, and then he would take daddy to his office. He was really a sweet guy. Wasn't married at that time. He married Adele. She was a gorgeous young girl. I remember that so clearly. First television set that I ever saw was at Al's house. That was one of his buddies. Daddy used to go to the health club at the Progressive Club every day with Otto Orkin. Have you heard about <unintelligible> going on at that health club?

**COHEN:** No.

**BECKER:** There was a whole gang that would go down on their lunch hour. There was daddy. <unintelligible> Saul would know that better than I. They would all go down to the health club at the Progressive Club. They would take a steam. They would all have lunch. They probably had a little schnapps in the middle of the day. Otto Orkin's valet used to come with a whole set of clean clothes because he wouldn't put on the same clothes he had on in the morning. The others would just go ahead and put their clothes back on but not Otto Orkin. They used to make jokes about that. There was a whole crew of them that would go down to the health club. I remember once when [Rabbi Jacob] Jack Rothschild<sup>31</sup> had not been at the Temple very long. Daddy ran into him somewhere or something, and he was so appalled at the car Jack was driving. He was driving an old car. Daddy came down to the health club. He says, "Look we've got to get some money together and buy the rabbi a new car because his car looks terrible." Right then and there, I think 10 guys each gave 100 bucks. They gave it to the rabbi, and they traded in his car. You could do that in those days for \$1,000. God knows what went on down there at that health club, but they loved it and they did all kinds of good work, all kinds of good stuff.

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Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company where he was a leading insurance agent for many years. He received numerous accolades and awards for his leadership in Atlanta's Jewish community including the Atlanta Jewish Community Center and the Atlanta Jewish Federation. The Meyer Balser Naturally Occurring Retirement Community at the William Breman Jewish Home, which offers programs and services to help seniors live independently in their own homes, is named in his honor. A book about his life by Vida Goldgar, *A Goal Worth Shooting For: The Biography of Meyer Balser*, was published in 1998.

<sup>31</sup> Rabbi Jacob Rothschild (1911-1973) was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was rabbi of the city's oldest Reform congregation, the Temple, in Atlanta, Georgia from 1946 until his death in 1973 from a heart attack. He forged close relationships with the city's Christian clergy and distinguished himself as a charismatic spokesperson for civil rights.

**COHEN:** Tell me some of the things.

**BECKER:** They would raise money for whatever project happened to be going. This was a small group of really rich Jewish guys. The [William Breman] Jewish Home<sup>32</sup> got started, I swear to you, down in the health club. I.M. Weinstein. Again, the National Women crowd. The Butler Shoe crowd. What were some of the other businesses? I'm trying to think of some of the big businesses. I remember. My father was such a good businessman. He was so creative and imaginative. He used to swear they all ought to merge. Before the days of conglomerates, he said, "We ought to all merge and make one big company." I can't remember which was the third company, another big Jewish.

**COHEN:** They definitely identified with being Jewish?

**BECKER:** Oh my God yes. They were the movers and the shakers. Anybody in the community that needed money. I.M. Weinstein and I don't know who else. Joe Lazear. He was a big insurance guy here in town. They all got together and they thought it was a disgrace that a whole part of the Jewish community didn't have any place to go swimming. Where Broadview Plaza is now, right in back of that area, there was a lake.<sup>33</sup> Maybe I'll think of the name of it. It actually had a sign on the thing, "No Jews or Dogs Allowed." This was the feeling around most of the place and that's how the Progressive Club got started. If I remember correctly, when they started the Progressive Club, dues were like \$3 a month. But they felt they needed somewhere. This was in the 1930s. If you know your Atlanta history . . . you know but not everybody does. You know the *aliyah*.<sup>34</sup> By the time these kids were growing up from the parents who had come in 1910, 1920. Here, they were teenagers, and a lot of these parents were still at the grocery stores, and they really didn't have any place to hang out. That's how . . . they built the Jewish community. They

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<sup>32</sup> A nursing home in Atlanta providing short and long-term dementia, Alzheimer's, and nursing care. Formerly the Jewish Home, it first opened in 1951 at 260 14<sup>th</sup> Street, NW, on land that had been donated by real estate developer Ben J. Massell. The Home's growth called for a larger, updated facility, leading to the construction of a new building at 3150 Howell Mill Road, NW. The second Jewish Home opened on February 16, 1971. In 1991, it was renamed the William Breman Jewish Home to honor and recognize its third president, Bill Breman, as the prime motivator of the modern day facility.

<sup>33</sup> A lake known as Mooney's Lake was originally located in Lindbergh on the east side of Piedmont Road. Deuward S. Mooney developed it into a recreation center in 1920. It had two spring water pools, a lake for swimming and canoeing, horseback riding, miniature golf, and a railroad. Food was sold at the pavilion, and there was dancing to jukebox music. The pavilion burned down in the 1950s and subsequently went out of business. In 1958, Mooney's Lake was drained and the developers Jordan, Davis and Carter built the Broadview Shopping Center, later named Lindbergh Plaza mall.

<sup>34</sup> *Aliyah* in Hebrew means 'ascent' or 'going up.' An *aliyah* is the calling of a member of a Jewish congregation to the *bimah* for a segment of reading from the *Torah*. The person who receives the *aliyah* goes up to the *bimah* before the reading and recites a blessing thanking G-d for giving the *Torah* to the Jewish nation. After the reading, the recipient then recites another concluding blessing. *Aliyah* also refers to the immigration of Jews from the diaspora to Israel. It is one of the most basic tenets of Zionism.

built the [Atlanta Jewish] Community Center.<sup>35</sup> They built the Progressive Club. They saw that the Jewish Home got started. This tiny little nucleus. Of course, at the same time, World War II was going on with, with the Jews in Europe.<sup>36</sup>

**COHEN:** What was the feeling in the community about that?

**BECKER:** I can't really tell you. I was really too young. We moved here in the fall of 1938. Knowing your history, in the fall of 1938 was *Kristallnacht*.<sup>37</sup> All I remember is . . . I remember hearing on the radio. I knew that Germany, that there was a war and that Germany was not good for Jews and it was a bad time for Jews. I remember hearing on the radio that a Nazi sub, a German sub, I don't think they used the term Nazi at that time, a German submarine had been spotted off the coast of Florida. At nine years old, I knew enough geography to know that Florida was next to Georgia. I can remember being scared to death that those Germans could march from Florida to Georgia, and that I as a Jew would be in danger.

**COHEN:** So, you knew that it was against the Jews.

**BECKER:** I knew that it was bad for me as a Jew, that things weren't good. When I heard that that German sub was right near, but I don't remember anything about *Kristallnacht*. I don't remember anything about any of that. When we moved here in 1938, and as I said to you, we used to go to temple Friday nights in Ashville. When we moved here, we joined the Temple, and we started going. Rabbi [David] Marx<sup>38</sup> was the president of the Temple at that time. Here we are, *Kristallnacht* has occurred. Certainly knowing the history we know today, the Jews were so endangered. I remember in the car coming home from Temple, my father raising hell. He wasn't going back. He wasn't going to listen to that anti- . . . You know Dr. Marx was a rabid anti-Zonist.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Atlanta Jewish Community Center was officially founded in 1910, as the Jewish Educational Alliance. In the late 1940's it evolved into the Atlanta Jewish Community Center and moved to Peachtree Street. It stayed there until 1998, when the building was sold and the center moved to Dunwoody. In 2000, it was renamed the 'Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta.'

<sup>36</sup> The Holocaust was systematic, government-sponsored attempt by the Germans to annihilate the Jews of Europe between 1939 and 1945, which resulted in the deaths of nearly 6,000,000 Jews.

<sup>37</sup> A Jewish youth named Herschel Grynszpan, distraught over the deportation of his family from Germany to Poland in August 1938, went to the German consulate in Paris and randomly shot a German consulate official, Ernst vom Rath. Vom Rath lived for several days and then died. Vom Rath's death was used as a pretext to instigate a state-sponsored pogrom on November 8 and 9, 1938. Across Germany (and in Austria) Jewish synagogues, homes and businesses were looted and burned, Jews were attacked on the streets and 91 were killed. Thousands of Jewish men were sent to concentration camps for several weeks and released only when they agreed to leave the country as soon as possible. The Jews were made to pay for the damages to their premises. The pogrom was called '*Kristallnacht*,' which means 'Night of Broken Glass,' because of all the damage done to Jewish shop windows

<sup>38</sup> Rabbi David Marx was a long-time rabbi at the Temple in Atlanta, Georgia. He led the move toward Reform Judaism practices. He served as rabbi from 1895 to 1946. When he retired, Rabbi Jacob Rothschild took the pulpit that Rabbi Marx had held for more than half a century.

<sup>39</sup> Anti-Zionism is opposition to Zionism, broadly defined in the modern era as the opposition to the ethno-nationalist

**COHEN:** No, I didn't.

**BECKER:** He was one of the last to ever acknowledge that there should be . . . Daddy was so adamant. I would hear this conversation with him and my mother in the car. "I'm never going back to listen to him." We stopped going to Temple Friday nights because daddy was not going to listen to Dr. Marx. When I got interested in Holocaust studies, I would ask them, "What did you do? What did you know? What did you think? What was happening in the community?" My mother said once she remembered going to a luncheon at the Mayfair Club, probably given by the United Jewish Appeal<sup>40</sup> before it became [Atlanta Jewish] Federation.<sup>41</sup> She said they had us go into a room. She said the room was dark. There was nothing but a few candles around. She said the tables had nothing on them except a metal bowl and in the bowl were potato peels. They said, "This is what your brothers and sisters in Europe are eating today for lunch." That made an impression on her. I know my father was always very active in raising money. Mother was always very active in Federation and all the Jewish organizations. Sisterhood.<sup>42</sup> I don't think she was active in *Hadassah*.<sup>43</sup> It wasn't the right people. It seems to me there was a, how did we say it, we would call it a resale shop today but like a thrift shop. What did they call them? It's like Bargainata [Thrift Boutique] today. She was active in that. She was active in the Jewish community.

**COHEN:** What other things did she do?

**BECKER:** She started a garden club because she loved to garden. She remembered that in Ashville, as a young bride, there was a garden club. She wanted to be a member. She went to the first meeting.

<End Tape 1, Side 1>

<Begin Tape 1, Side 2>

**BECKER:** With my mother, there was no question about our Jewishness. There was no

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and political movement of Jews and Jewish culture that supports the establishment of a Jewish state as a Jewish homeland in the territory defined as the historic Land of Israel.

<sup>40</sup> 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. After World War II, the Jewish Federations worked with the United Jewish Appeal (UJA), the United Palestine Appeal (UPA) and the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) to help resettle Jewish concentration camp survivors and helped refugees create new lives.

<sup>41</sup> The Atlanta Jewish Federation was formally incorporated in 1967 and is the result of the merger of the Atlanta Federation for Jewish Social Service founded in 1905 as the Federation of Jewish Charities; the Atlanta Jewish Welfare Federation founded in 1936 as the Atlanta Jewish Welfare Fund; and the Atlanta Jewish Community Council founded in 1945. The organization was renamed the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta in 1997.

<sup>42</sup> A group of women in a synagogue congregation who join together to offer social, cultural, educational, and volunteer service opportunities.

<sup>43</sup> *Hadassah*, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, is a volunteer organization founded in 1912 by Henrietta Szold, with more than 300,000 members and supporters worldwide. It supports health care and medical research, education and youth programs in Israel, and advocacy, education, and leadership development in the United States.

question about that, but I had to be a fancy Jew. I couldn't speak Yiddish. I should only date the Jews from the Standard Club. That's what my mother would have liked. When I got into my Holocaust studies, she could not understand it at all. As I got more committed as I went along, and my mother and father had everything they needed, I sent a donation once for her birthday. "Don't send donations for my birthday. I want a present."

**COHEN:** That is so funny.

**BECKER:** Isn't that funny?

**COHEN:** She doesn't like donations.

**BECKER:** Yes. That was not her idea of a present.

**COHEN:** Tell me. How did you do the holidays once you came to Atlanta in that context?

**BECKER:** Once we came to Atlanta, Passover<sup>44</sup> was always very important to me. I remembered the *seders*<sup>45</sup> was at my Aunt Ada's. When we moved here, we really had no family. Keep in mind, we moved here at wartime. We always used to have a houseful of soldiers, so we always had people around us. My mother would always do that. My mother loved to entertain. We lived in a little rented house for the first couple of years,

**COHEN:** Where was that located?

**BECKER:** On Lakeshore Drive right out Ponce De Leon Avenue. Rented the house from Fanny Revson. I don't know if you know Alfred Revson [Jr.]. I don't know, maybe he's retired now, but Alfred Revson was with Courts and Company. Courts and Company was a big stock brokerage firm. I'm not even sure if they're still in business here in Atlanta. His mother owned a fabulous antique shop, an exquisite antique shop. She lived across the street, and she owned this little house. We rented that little house from her for two years. As the business caught on, we moved over on Fairview Road. On Fairview Road, Oscar Strauss lived.

**COHEN:** Can you tell us who that is?

**BECKER:** Oscar Strauss was Margaret Weiller's father. They were very high German Jews.

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<sup>44</sup> Passover [Hebrew: *Pesach*] is the anniversary of Israel's liberation from Egyptian bondage. The holiday lasts for eight days. Unleavened bread, *matzah*, is eaten in memory of the unleavened bread prepared by the Israelite during their hasty flight from Egypt, when they had not time to wait for the dough to rise. On the first two nights of Passover, the *seder*, the central event of the holiday is celebrated. The *seder* service is one of the most colorful and joyous occasions in Jewish life. In addition to eating *matzah* during the *seder*, Jews are prohibited from eating leavened bread during the entire week of Passover. In addition, Jews are also supposed to avoid foods made with wheat, barley, rye, spelt or oats unless those foods are labeled 'kosher for Passover.' Jews traditionally have separate dishes for Passover.

<sup>45</sup> *Seder* [Hebrew: order] is a Jewish ritual feast that marks the beginning of the Jewish holiday of Passover. It is conducted on the evening of the fifteenth day of *Nisan* in the Hebrew calendar throughout the world. Some communities hold *seder* on both the first two nights of Passover. The *seder* incorporates prayers, candle lighting, and traditional foods symbolizing the slavery of the Jews and the exodus from Egypt. It is one of the most colorful and joyous occasions in Jewish life.

He was part of the owners of Rich's with Richard, with Dick Rich.<sup>46</sup> A cousin of hers lived two or three doors away, Davey Strauss. I remember David, because David was my sister's age. Betty Jacobson and her family lived . . . we lived on the corner of Fairview and Oakdale [Road]. Betty lived on the corner of Springdale [Road]. Fairview and Springdale, which was a block away. Mary Louise Holtzman lived on that street. He owned Holtzman jewelry Store. Friedman. Lee and Max Friedman lived on Fairview Road. Of course, the . . . she's such a bitch. Non-Jewish. She was the sweetheart of Sigma Chi and one of the biggest socialites in the city. She lived on the street and wouldn't talk to us. The Yudelsons lived not too far away. That's Frances Kuniansky. Frances' younger sister, we used to car pool together to go to school. I'll tell you a funny story about our next-door neighbor. Lovely people. Not Jewish. Lovely people.

**COHEN:** Their names were?

**BECKER:** Akers. A-K-E-R-S. They had a daughter Cloris Akers [sp], who was precious. Very popular in the non-Jewish . . . she was older than I . . . but with all the college kids and everything. Her mother fell and broke an ankle. My mother, being a good neighbor . . . we had, Miss Eva was our upstairs maid. We had Dessie, the cook. We had the yard man and for a while we had the chauffeur. But whatever, Dessie was the cook. She would take care of the main level of the house and do the cooking . . . Miss Eva would . . . in the basement doing the laundry and taking care of all that sort of stuff. Mother said to Miss Akers when she broke her foot, ankle, whatever the hell she did, "I will send Miss Eva over to help you out." She says to Eva, "I told Miss Akers that you would be happy to come over there and help her out for a couple hours in the mornings." Both of them lived, all of them lived five days a week at our house. Eva said to her, "I'm not going, Miss Pollock." Mother said, "What do you mean, you're not going?" She said, "I don't work for no *goyim*."<sup>47</sup> She said, "Do you see this, these ulcers I have?" She says, "That comes from working with the goyim. They make me sit on the basement steps and they would feed me the scraps off of their plates." She says, "I don't work for no goyim." She wouldn't go. Miss Eva was something. She was something. In a different world and the proper education, she really could have been something. She was going to night school. Worked five days a week for us, and I mean worked. I'm sure she got there at eight o'clock in the morning and probably didn't leave until six in the afternoon, going on the streetcars back and forth. When you think

<sup>46</sup> Richard "Dick" H. Rich (1901-1975) was a grandson of the founder of Rich's department store in Atlanta, Georgia. He took over as president of Rich's in 1949 and under his leadership Rich's began expansion in the 1950's. Richard's mother Rosalind Rich Rosenheim was the daughter of Morris Rich, founder of Rich's. Richard changed his name legally from Rosenheim to Rich because his grandfather wanted him to. Richard served in WWII in the US Army Air Forces.

<sup>47</sup> *Goy* is a Yiddish term meaning "people" or "nation." In common usage, it designates a non-Jewish or Gentile person.

about it. God what a life they had. She went to night school. When I was in eighth grade, she was also in eighth grade. We would work our algebra together. Oh God, I've forgotten about this. "Jackie" [Jack Roosevelt] Robinson,<sup>48</sup> the big baseball hero, Dessa and Eva would both have the radios on with the game going. If he hit a homerun or did something special, they would be flying through the house running up and down the steps comparing notes and talking about Jackie. What an incredible thing that was for them. Dessa lived right about where the Jimmy Carter [Presidential Library and] Museum<sup>49</sup> is today. I used to, at 15 years old during the war, we could get our drivers licenses. That was a special thing they did for Georgia and maybe some other states also. So many of the young farmhands had to go to the war, so they lowered the driving age so that they would be able to help on the farms. I was the beneficiary of this, not exactly living on a farm. But at 15 years old, I had a little red Plymouth convertible, and I'd put the top down and had not the first qualm about driving Dessa home into this totally black neighborhood by myself, in the dark. Not the first qualm, and my parents let me do it. I mean they didn't have a qualm either, about a young, white girl with the top down on a red convertible driving right into the black neighborhood. Show you how things have changed.

**COHEN:** Do you have any other stories about segregation at the time or your feelings on it?

**BECKER:** Yes, absolutely. I remember being at the health club at the Community Center. We all used to go there, get massages, work out. In the locker room there was a group of us, and to me it just never dawned on me that anybody I knew would be against integration. The conversation came up, and I was so astounded at these young Jewish women who were so vehemently against it. I could not believe it. A lot of revelations about people . . . like today with politics, sometimes you just get in a crowd and you don't talk about it. There are just certain people you know that if I'm going to have to spend an evening in this company, I'm just not going to bring it up. Who needs it? It was astounding that people you thought you knew, you didn't know. No, the integration thing was very, very scary. I remember when the Temple was bombed.<sup>50</sup>

**COHEN:** Tell me about that.

**BECKER:** I guess my kids were little. I was very active at the Temple and in the Sisterhood. I had made the curtains. I had a sewing machine from the time I was 12-13 years old and took sewing in home

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<sup>48</sup> Jack Roosevelt Robinson (1919-1972) was an American professional baseball player born in Cairo, Georgia, who became the first African American to play in Major League Baseball in the modern era. He played for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

<sup>49</sup> James Earl "Jimmy" Carter Jr. (b.1924) was the 39<sup>th</sup> President of the United States from 1977 to 1981. He was a Democrat. The Carter Presidential Library is in Atlanta, Georgia.

<sup>50</sup> The Temple on Peachtree Street in Atlanta, Georgia was bombed in the early morning hours of October 12, 1958. About 50 sticks of dynamite were planted near the building and tore a huge hole in the wall. No one was injured in the bombing as it was during the night. Rabbi Jacob Rothschild was an outspoken advocate of civil rights and integration and friend of Martin Luther King Jr. Five men associated with the National States' Rights Party, a white separatist group, were tried and acquitted in the bombing.

ec [home economics class] in high school. My mamma bought me . . . I wanted to sew. She bought me a little Singer sewing machine. I got the lessons from the Singer people. I've always sewed. I made the curtains for one of the school rooms, first grade, kindergarten, whatever. I remember when we could go into the building, or looked through, I'm not really sure whether we were in the building or whether I saw it through the window or they brought. Those curtains were just tattered. It was awful. I sat in the trial. I went downtown and sat in that trial and listened to them talking about these good Christian women and these good Christian men. It was a very growing up experience.

**COHEN:** How did that affect you as a Jew?

**BECKER:** I don't really know how it affected me as a Jew. Probably made me more militant, knowing me. I really can't say that happened. I remember us all, they had services at Temple that Friday night, and the place was packed. I think it made the whole Jewish community in Atlanta more militant. It was not too long after the war was over. We knew more about the Holocaust and so forth. It had an enormous impact. I think a lot of us didn't really understand the impact until years went by. Because it had an international impact that we certainly weren't aware of at the time it happened. I remember driving pass the Temple that day. Actually, that night. We had friends who had come in the night before from Cleveland, Tennessee, people Saul was doing business with. Not Jews. We had dinner and we were riding around showing them a little bit about Atlanta. We drove around the Temple, probably about one o'clock in the morning, 12:30 at night. Nothing amiss. We just drove around to show them this is our Temple. And, voom, six o'clock the next morning or seven [o'clock], whatever time it was. It was a big thing.

**COHEN:** Getting back to your neighborhood, how did you get along with the non-Jews you sort of mentioned them.

**BECKER:** Our next-door neighbors, it was just like parallel lives. My mother, I really, the girl, this Florence. We would wave and that was about the extent of it. She was probably five, six years older than I was. I think we didn't live there very long before she went off to college, so we really didn't have much in common. I don't know what the relationship, but they were decent people. My mother got along with everybody, with everybody. And the others on the . . . I went to Girls' High School. There really was very little. That's when they had their sororities. The Jews were just not welcome into those groups.

**COHEN:** Who were your friends at Girls High?

**BECKER:** Harriet Zaban was a friend of mine. We carpooled together. Shirley Yudelson. We carpooled together. There again, we were not as much in the same crowd because they were from the AA. Most of the AA went to the Mayfair Club. Who else? Most of my friends didn't go to Girls' High.

**COHEN:** Where did they go?

**BECKER:** They went to NAPS, which was North Avenue Presbyterian School. They went to private school. North Avenue Presbyterian School. Barbara Weinberg, Barbara Berman, and Sonia Freitag, Mary Louise Holtzman, Sheila, and myself. There was somebody else. We had what called the Little Women's Club.

**COHEN:** Tell me about that. Who was in it?

**BECKER:** This whole little gang of Standard Club German Jews. I remember there was a German family who had moved here, immigrants. Edith Wirzman. It's really interesting because Edith I knew at that time. They were living in a tiny little apartment off of Highland Avenue. They had come from Germany. God knows what they had gone through. I'm not really sure whether they came out before. I really don't know the background. Today, her older sister is Gia [Gisela Meyer] Spielberg. Gia I know so well because she has come to the museum to speak to the kids groups that we take through, but I didn't know Gia at all at that time. We were being very magnanimous, I'm sure, when we took Edith in to be part of the group.

**COHEN:** What would you all do? Did you all meet on the weekends?

**BECKER:** I knew you were going to ask me that question. I'm not sure.

**COHEN:** Did you do volunteer stuff?

**BECKER:** Probably. I don't remember.

**COHEN:** How come you didn't go to the private school?

**BECKER:** I tried it. I didn't like it. I did go.

**COHEN:** Did your mother want you to go there?

**BECKER:** My mama would have loved for me to have gone. She didn't really care that much, I don't think. But if I wanted to go, she would have been happy for me to go there, but I didn't like it. I had a lot of friends at the school that weren't Jewish. Mary Poulos, who was part of the Greek community. We have a huge Greek community in Atlanta and did at that time. When Mary ran for president of the school, I was her, who's the one that . . .

**COHEN:** Campaign manager?

**BECKER:** Campaign manager. There you go. There were several non-Jewish girls that I was very friendly with at Girls' High and very active with. I had my car, so I would see all my other friends. Lots of times, I would skip school and pick up Barbara. My friend Barbara Berman, who we are still such close friends. I would pick her up and we would do the theater downtown, which was right next to Davison's. It used to always have horror movies. I would pick her up and we would usually go over to Georgia Tech [Georgia Institute of Technology], pick up some of the guys from the Phi Ep [Phi Epsilon

Pi]<sup>51</sup> house and all go to the horror movie. I inherited some of that from my daddy, I'm sure.

**COHEN:** Tell me about the Ballyhoo. Were you part of that?

**BECKER:** When I saw the show Ballyhoo, I was in Ballyhoo and went to it a few times, but it was never such a great big thing in my life as they made it or as it was to some of these people. It was obviously a much bigger thing when Alfred Uhry<sup>52</sup> was a kid than it was to me. But they had Jubilee.<sup>53</sup> There was Ballyhoo, Jubilee, and I can't remember the name of the third one. I did go a couple of times to Birmingham and to Montgomery. It was fun, but it was never a big thing to me.

**COHEN:** Tell me about dating when you did cross over the line or someone from AA.

**BECKER:** God, my mother used to just have a fit, but I had a great time. I dated Leonard Diamond. They used to call my house "snob hill," which was such a misnomer because I wasn't a snob at all, but they knew my mother. The house was a little bit on a hill. I'm trying to think of the names of some of these guys I dated. We were just kind of thrown together, and the girls. I'll tell you one thing we did as kids. I'll never forget. Who was I with? When I was 16, we already started dating Georgia Tech freshmen.

**COHEN:** Did you only date Jewish? Did you ever date anyone not Jewish?

**BECKER:** I did once, just probably as a rebellion, and I never did it again. I didn't like it. Then I tried it once again in college. I went out once with a non-Jewish guy, and I just didn't like him. I didn't feel comfortable. I guess I didn't realize . . . whatever. I tried it. Been there, done that. I didn't like it.

**COHEN:** Where did you go to college?

**BECKER:** University of Missouri. I went from one year there. Then I went down to the University. I was not a good student. I was wonderful in literature. I was wonderful in science. I loved human biology and dissecting the frogs and everything. I was wonderful in anything to do with art. I loved everything, but I was not a good student. My teachers would constantly be calling, writing letters to my mother. "Sylvia just doesn't put in the effort. She doesn't try." I don't remember my

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<sup>51</sup> Six men at Rochester University (Rochester, New York) founded Kappa Nu Fraternity on November 12, 1911. It was a local organization, and by 1917, there were five loosely connected groups who decided to hold a convention in Rochester and set up the Organization of Kappa Nu as a National Fraternity. In 1959, Phi Alpha merged into Phi Sigma Delta, and in 1961 Kappa Nu merged into Phi Epsilon Pi. In 1969-1970, Phi Sigma Delta and Phi Epsilon Pi merged into Zeta Beta Tau, which had begun as a Zionist youth society in 1898.

<sup>52</sup> Alfred Fox Uhry was born December 3, 1936 in Atlanta. Uhry is a playwright, screenwriter, and member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers. He is one of very few writers to receive an Academy Award, Tony Award (2) and the Pulitzer Prize for dramatic writing. Uhry's early work for the stage was as a lyricist and librettist for a number of musicals. *Driving Miss Daisy* (1987) is the first in what is known as his Atlanta Trilogy of plays and earned him the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. He adapted it into the screenplay for the 1989 film which was awarded the Academy Award for Writing Adapted Screenplay. The second of the trilogy, *The Last Night of Ballyhoo* (1996), received the Tony Award for Best Play when produced on Broadway. The third was a 1998 musical called *Parade*. The libretto earned him a Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical. Uhry wrote the screenplay not only for the film version of *Driving Miss Daisy* but also for the 1993 film *Rich in Love*. He co-wrote the screenplay for the 1988 film *Mystic Pizza*.

<sup>53</sup> Jubilee was a Jewish youth group in Birmingham, Alabama, similar to Atlanta's Ballyhoo.

mother ever coming to the school. I don't remember my mother ever coming to a PTA meeting or ever any involvement at all in schools. Perhaps I would have been better had she taken an interest.

**COHEN:** Was she raising you to be a career woman?

**BECKER:** Absolutely not. We would go to school because, you know, you go to school. This is what you do and you get married and you have children. I was not given . . . I will tell you something that I've told my grandchildren and my children in recent years. It was really very sad. In school, I remember two or three times, they had these career tests to see what your aptitude was. The only thing I was ever shown that I could do was be a hairdresser. Those tests probably did me more harm than anything in my life because I just didn't feel I had any ability. I would have loved to have been a doctor, but I thought I can never do the math. I'll never be able to do all that math. I was a late bloomer.

**COHEN:** I was too.

**BECKER:** Were you?

**COHEN:** I think I'm blooming now at 40.

**BECKER:** Right.

**COHEN:** I love being 40.

**BECKER:** At 70, I'm still blooming. Right. It's great. Yes. Me too.

**COHEN:** I'm finally mature.

**BECKER:** Right.

**COHEN:** I can do whatever I want. Anyway, tell me about meeting your husband and his background.

**BECKER:** I met. Let me see how to get into this. I was in college, and I wasn't happy in college.

**COHEN:** You were at Missouri.

**BECKER:** I was at Missouri then I tried Alabama. Whatever. I wasn't happy. I wanted to be an air . . . I didn't want to go to college. I wanted to go to work. I wanted to be an airline stewardess. They had an ad in the paper here on a Sunday. I think it was Delta or Eastern and they were interviewing for stewardesses. You go to the school in Kansas City for six months, whatever it was. I went. I got interviewed. I got accepted. When I told my mother and father, my father just had a fit because he was flying. As far as they were concerned all the stewardesses were a bunch of little <unintelligible>. You're not going to be . . . That wasn't good enough for me. So, what kind of a job can I get? I have absolutely no qualifications. Remember I talked about Fanny Revson? She gave me a job. I went to work for Fanny Revson in her antique shop. That really had an enormous influence on me. That's when I really learned about porcelain. She had exquisite stuff and exquisite taste. I sold. I really learned about the stuff, but I was biding time.

**COHEN:** What was the name of the business?

**BECKER:** I think it was just Fanny Revson Antiques.

**COHEN:** Where was it located?

**BECKER:** It was on Peachtree Street. There is a theater there right near Crawford Long Hospital. There is still a theater there. She was right in that block. Anyway, I was floundering. Not really floundering but it was certainly not . . . I was doing nothing. I was biding my time. Went to New York. When I was in New York, I called a guy that I had known at University of Missouri that was friendly with Cegie.

**COHEN:** What was his name?

**BECKER:** His name was Don Coleman. I will never forget. And boom, boom, boom. Exactly. Is it 52 years ago? The 25<sup>th</sup> of this month we got married.

**COHEN:** He introduced you to Saul?

**BECKER:** No. We're not going to get to Saul yet. I'm going to tell you how I get to Saul. So, we get married very quickly.

**COHEN:** Oh! Oh!

**BECKER:** The whole thing was like . . . there, again, my mother should never have permitted it. She should have said, "No, you're not." But my mother, her main concern, "You're not going to be running back and forth to New York not married." She had visions of me, God forbid, I'd maybe go to bed with him. All that kind of stuff, which I didn't, but she wasn't going to have me running back and forth engaged, so you're going to get married. In 10, 12 days, we had a marriage at home and I go off to New York with him. Well the whole thing was over in just a period of weeks, and I came back to Atlanta. Remember, my father was in the retail shoe business. A friend of ours, a manufacturer, who manufactured shoes up in Hayborough, Massachusetts, her husband had died. She called mother. She said, "Look, it must be miserable for you in Atlanta this summer. I've got the big house with all the help." She says, "And I'm lonesome. Maybe you and the girls will come visit." So that's exactly what we did. We used to go to New York every summer to shop, anyway, at the end of the summer in August. So, we drove up to Hayborough, Massachusetts, to visit Elsie. Elsie was friendly with the Becker family. Being a very gracious, lovely family, they invited her and her guests to come out to the beach house to spend the day. That's how I met Saul. We went for a walk on the beach. He'll tell you what I was wearing on the beach. I don't think he'd even kissed me yet, and he says, "So when are we going to get married?" "What?" That's how we met.

**COHEN:** How old was he at the time?

**BECKER:** He was 21. Had come out. Had gone into the service before he finished high school.

Finished the service, finished high school, and he was a student at Brown University. And meets me. I'm trying to figure . . . at the same time he met me, my sister was with us.

**COHEN:** What is her name?

**BECKER:** Cegie [Dr. Cecelia Pollock Korsen].

**COHEN:** She met his older . . . we met the whole family. His older brother was also single. Cegie and Ralph [Becker] immediately become a thing. This is in August. They end up getting married in December, and we ended up getting married the next year.

**COHEN:** My mother's brother and sister married <unintelligible>

**BECKER:** So we ended up . . . but that summer my mother and my father were so against this marriage of Saul and myself.

**COHEN:** Because?

**BECKER:** First of all, it was only a little over a year since I had been through that terrible thing. I was only 19 at that time. This time, I'm maybe 20. They felt that I was jumping from the fireplace into whatever.

**COHEN:** Right.

**BECKER:** Because when I met Saul, we didn't get married for close to a year and a half, but when I met him, this whole thing had only happened three or four months before. So, they were scared to death of it. Saul was in college. In those days, you didn't get married and your family supports you. You quit college. He was in college with no visible means of support. My sister had married his brother, so they knew there was no money in the family. It looked like there was a lot of money, but there wasn't, so they didn't want it. Plus the fact that my mother had said they always felt that I was so headstrong that I needed someone older and stronger to control me. Whatever!

**COHEN:** Whatever!

**BECKER:** Whatever. That summer after I met him, they sent me to Europe with my friend Barbara. Barbara Berman Weinberg. Anyway. Barbara and I go off. It was right after the war. They were just starting with the tours. We went on an eight-week tour of Europe together. When we came back, Saul met me at the dock. I said to mother, "We want to be together. We want to be married." We ended up getting married that November.

**COHEN:** How long have you been married?

**BECKER:** Would you believe, we have a 50th anniversary coming up this November of 1999. It's one of God's miracles!

**COHEN:** What is Saul's Jewish background? Is he Reform?<sup>54</sup>

**BECKER:** No. Saul probably was Conservative,<sup>55</sup> leaning toward Orthodox.<sup>56</sup> One of the most appealing things to me about Saul was this great big Jewish family. I never could quite understand it. Looking back on it, I think I missed those big family dinners. I don't know why everything makes me cry.

**COHEN:** It's a beautiful thought.

**BECKER:** Yes.

**COHEN:** It's beautiful. Especially today <unintelligible>

**BECKER:** Right.

**COHEN:** A big *Shabbos*.<sup>57</sup> It's no different when we were growing up. We all would get together on Sunday night.

**BECKER:** Right. Where was I? Saul's father, I've got all this in the video. It is fabulous. He walked out of Russia at 15. Was on the train. Came to Boston on the boat. On the train, he had a tag. He didn't speak any English. This man sits down next to him, a Jewish man, who happens to be from Hayborough. In Yiddish he starts talking to him, "Where you going?" He says, "I'm told there's good jobs in Lynn, Massachusetts." He says, "Don't go to Lynn. Come to Hayborough. He says, "I'll help you get a job in Hayborough. Hayborough's a better place than Lynn." He gets him off the train in Hayborough. He says "You take this street and that street and the other street and there's a boarding house run by a Jewish family." He's 15. He goes up there to the boarding house, and that's where he meets Saul's mother. She was 16. She was six months older than he. Hers is a long story too. She was the chambermaid. She was the maid in the boarding house with these like foster parents. Her mother and father had died. She was an infant. She was taken in by this family. Never given any education.

**COHEN:** But she's the chambermaid now?

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<sup>54</sup> Reform Judaism, sometimes also called Liberal Judaism, is a division within Judaism especially in North America and Western Europe. Historically it began in the nineteenth century. In general, the Reform movement maintains that Judaism and Jewish traditions 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.

<sup>55</sup> 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 modern culture, while preserving a commitment to Jewish observance. They also observe gender equality (mixed seating, women rabbis and *bat mitzvahs*)

<sup>56</sup> 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.

<sup>57</sup> *Shabbat* [Hebrew] or *Shabbos* [Yiddish] is the Jewish day of rest and is observed on Saturdays. *Shabbat* observance entails refraining from work activities, often with great rigor, and engaging in restful activities to honor the day. *Shabbat* begins at sundown on Friday night and is ushered in by lighting candles and reciting a blessing. It is closed the following evening with the recitation of the *havdalah* blessing.

**BECKER:** She was like the maid. They meet each other. Within a couple of months, they get married and nine months later, the first child was born. They ended up having eight. He was working in a shoe factory. Very shortly afterwards, he went to one of the bankers and said he wanted to open his own shoe factory. He borrowed \$200 from the banker. He rented a garage, and he went into the shoe industry and had a career like this because he had no education. Had he had any sophistication or education, he probably . . . because he made fortunes but he lost fortunes. He just didn't know what to do with it or how to handle it or how to manage it or anything. They started out as Orthodox, but then when his father made some money . . . they lived what they called "up the hill" in this town Haverhill. When he made money, they came "down the hill." They bought a beautiful house. He says, "We're going to be Americans. We're going to have bacon in the house." Well, my mother-in-law would never touch the bacon, and she certainly wasn't ever going to eat it, but everybody else in the family. They brought *treif*<sup>58</sup> into the house. But she would light her candles. *Shabbat* was a big thing. Judaism was a much bigger thing of their tradition. They did things, as I say, Conservative leaning toward Orthodox. Very traditional Jewish upbringing.

**COHEN:** You came to Atlanta. Saul came with you back to Atlanta?

**BECKER:** We lived up there the first two years we were married, and I hated it. I absolutely hated it. I kept telling my daddy, "You got to get us back to Atlanta. I don't want to live up here. I hate the weather to begin with it." I hated it. It was too much family. No matter who I tried to make a friend with, the family would say, "Oh they're not your kind of people." Finally, Daddy made an arrangement down here with Sam Goldberg, who was in the real estate business. Sam Goldberg basically handled all Ben [Benjamin] Massell's<sup>59</sup> stuff. That was right after <unintelligible>. Massells were good friends of mother's and daddy's. You talk about a lovely lady. She was so special. Anyway, he talked to Sam because daddy did the real estate for Butler's. Sam was in real estate. Massell was in real estate. Saul went to work for Sam Goldberg. Ben Massell was a wonderful friend to Saul. I mean Saul was a kid. Mr. Ben, Saul would call him. He really helped him tremendously. That's how we ended up in Atlanta.

**COHEN:** Tell me about your children. Their names.

**BECKER:** We have three children. Kip, who is Howard Adam, named after Hyman, my mother's

<sup>58</sup> Food that is not in accordance with Jewish law such as pork or foods that are not prepared according to kosher law. In colloquial usage, refers to anything that is not legitimate.

<sup>59</sup> Benjamin J. Massell (1886-1962) was a civic and community leader in both the Jewish and general communities of Atlanta. In the early 1900s, he and his two brothers, Sam and Levi, founded the Massell Realty Company, which had a hand in the development and sale of several landmark properties in Atlanta. Civic leader Ivan Allen, Sr., was known to say, "Sherman burned Atlanta and Ben Massell built it back." Ben Massell was the uncle of former Atlanta mayor Sam Massell.

father, and Avraham, my father's father. He was born on *Yom Kippur*.<sup>60</sup> He's been Kip from the day he was born. Kip is 47. We got married in 1949. Kip was born in 1951. We had already moved to Atlanta. He was born here.

**COHEN:** Does he have children?

**BECKER:** Kip is married and has no children.

**COHEN:** Who is he married to?

**BECKER:** He is married to, her name is Tania. She was Tania Armour. Tania Armour's grandmother was a cousin of Tzar Nicholas of Russia.<sup>61</sup> So she was a princess. A genuine princess. When granny died, Tania's granny died a few years ago, Tania inherited the title of princess. She is a genuine Russian princess. Tania's Uncle <unintelligible> was the head of the Cossacks.<sup>62</sup> The Cossacks are the ones who were riding into the *shtetls*<sup>63</sup> and slaughtering the Jews. She comes from a really interesting background. Kip says sometimes when Tania is having her fits, he says, "Don't forget, she's descended from Attila the Hun."<sup>64</sup> These are genuinely her relatives. Anyway, they're married. They don't have any children. They never plan to have any children. Katie is three years younger than Kip. Saul had a brother and a sister who died young. One was a sister Katherine, so our Katie is named after that sister Katherine. Katie is married to Kevin McLoughlin. Kevin McLoughlin's mother was Ruth Goldberg, so Kevin is Jewish. They have one son, Benjamin, who is named after my daddy. He is the one that's going to be *bar mitzvahed* April 10th. Our third child, Sue, is 21 months younger than Katie because we hurried up. I said, "Saul . . ." We had started out, we really wanted five or six children. We wanted a big family like his. Shows you how dumb we were. After having a boy and a girl, I said to Saul, "If I get Katie toilet trained, there's no way I'm going to want to have another child, so we better do it fast." We had Sue 21 months after Katie and we stopped because that was enough. Sue is married to an Israeli by the name of Udi Sandalon. They have two fabulous children, Rachel and Belinda. Rachel is named for Udi's

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<sup>60</sup> *Yom Kippur* [Hebrew: Day of Atonement] is the most sacred day of the Jewish year. *Yom Kippur* is a 25-hour fast day. Most of the day is spent in prayer, reciting *yizkor* for deceased relatives, confessing sins, requesting divine 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).

<sup>61</sup> Nicholas II or Nikolai II Alexandrovich Romanov (1868-1918), known in the Russian Orthodox Church as Saint Nicholas the Passion-Bearer, and was the last Emperor of Russia, ruling from 1894 until his forced abdication in 1917.

<sup>62</sup> The Cossacks are a group of predominantly East Slavic-speaking Orthodox Christian people who became known as members of democratic, self-governing, semi-military communities, originating in the Pontic steppe, north of the Black Sea.

<sup>63</sup> The Yiddish term for town, '*shtetl*' commonly refers to small towns or villages in pre-World War II Eastern and Central Europe with a significant Jewish presence that were primarily Yiddish speaking.

<sup>64</sup> Attila the Hun (r. 434-453 CE) was the leader of the ancient nomadic people known as the Huns and ruler of the Hunnic Empire, which he established.

mother. She was Rachel. Our Belinda is, of course, named for my daddy Benjamin again. My mother was still living when Belinda was born, so we don't have a name for my mama yet, but I'm sure one of the kids will someday. That's our family. Rachel is now 17. Belinda was *bat mitzvahed* last summer.

**COHEN:** Tell me about, you're known as the Holocaust historian. <unintelligible>

**BECKER:** Yes. I will. I was 47. We had a lot of problems with the kids during the 1960s and all the . . . you know. I said in the video.

**COHEN:** I'll have to come back and talk about that.

**BECKER:** I got to show you the video. In the video at one point . . . I went through thousands of pictures. I have always taken pictures, always, and saved them. In going through these thousands of pictures, I found a picture of Saul with a bottle of beer pouring. In the video I say, "Saul poured beer, and Sylvia's hair turned grey." During the 1960s, what was I going to tell you?

**COHEN:** About the Holocaust historian.

**BECKER:** Yes. We really never got . . . From the time I was 21 and married and living in Atlanta, I remember going out to, I was active in UJA [United Jewish Appeal] and I would take names and go raise money. I was active in whatever we had. I was active in starting Brandeis [University], which started at that time. I was active in everything in the Jewish community. I didn't work. That's what we did. None of us worked. We volunteered. Everybody was starting to go to Israel. We were having such problems with our kids. There was no way we could leave, no way we could leave. When I was 47 years old, I was rushed to the hospital with the thing with my heart. My heart almost stopped. I was very, very sick. They thought, they said, "Probably within a few years you're going to have to wear a pacemaker." This was right about the same time that the United Nations had come out. We'll go back to the exact year. If I was 47 <counting> 57, 67. It was 23 years ago. So, 23 years ago would have been <counting> 1999, 1989, 1979, about 1976. This was right about the time when the United Nations had come out with that edict equating Zionism<sup>65</sup> with racism. And the whole world was against Israel. I got this bug in my bonnet that Israel is not going to make it, and I'm not going to make it. Neither of us is going to get old. And I wanted to go see Israel before I died.

**COHEN:** Yes. Sounds very strong.

**BECKER:** Absolutely. I had been wanting to go for years. I couldn't leave. Then, when all

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<sup>65</sup> Zionism is a movement that supports a Jewish national state in the territory defined as the Land of Israel. Although Zionism existed before the nineteenth century, in the 1890's Theodor Herzl popularized it and gave it a new urgency, as he believed that Jewish life in Europe was threatened and a State of Israel was needed. The State of Israel was established in 1948 and Zionism today is expressed as support for the continued existence of Israel.

this happened is just when the real estate recession hit like crazy. Here we were living in this enormous house, three kids in college. Saul and I always said the worse time financially for us was going to be with having these three kids, these stair steps. They were all in college together. Not only was there a real estate recession that hit us very hard, three kids in college, and this enormous house to keep up. There was a mission going. I went to my daddy. I said, "There's this trip going. I want to go. Will you send me?" He says, "I'll send you and Saul." Saul wouldn't go. He says, "I'm not going to go because I'm in no position to even make a pledge to UJA this year. I'm not going to go. I said, "You know what, I'm going to go. UJA knows when I've got the money, I give it. If I don't have it, I don't give it." And I went on the trip. I was really treated beautifully. I was given an honor at Yad Vashem.<sup>66</sup> They knew that if I have it, I'm going to give it. I saw Yad Vashem, and I must tell you . . . I handle Holocaust about as well as anybody. You would see it on the television, you turn it off. Everybody said, "We didn't know. Who knew what was going on." My daddy, when I asked him, what did you . . . he says, "We didn't do a God damn thing." He did. He just felt that they didn't do a God damn thing. Of course, they tried, but they really didn't. He never felt that they really did enough. When I walked in and I saw these huge in red and black and green and all this. It was so overt, whatever. It was, what do they call it, a life turning event. I came home. My question was, "How did this happen? Where was the world?" If you look on my bedside table now. I started reading, and as one book does, one book leads to two. Two of those lead to five. Those five, lead to twenty. I started reading only Holocaust. That was in 1976. I still read virtually nothing but Holocaust. When I started with this . . . then I was going back and forth to Israel every six months. I could not get enough of it. I went on women's missions. I went on UJA missions a couple of times. Saul went with me once. I took Sue with me. I was going every . . . I needed this nourishment. I could not get over the feeling that I got not being a minority. I couldn't get over the feeling that I never realized I had until I went to Israel. It was there as a majority, I didn't realize that it even had an impact on me to be a minority. It's very strange. Holocaust studies really got started then. Also, right about that time, maybe not, a few years after that, was when [Rabbi Dr.] David Blumenthal<sup>67</sup> came, and they opened up the Department of Judaica at Emory. I think, is probably about 19 or 20 years. I met David immediately. We happened to go to a

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<sup>66</sup> Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, was established in 1953 by an act of the Israeli Knesset. Since its inception, Yad Vashem has become a leading center for documentation, research, education, and commemoration of the Holocaust. Construction began in Jerusalem in 1954 on the western side of Mount Herzl and in 1957 the memorial and museum opened. On March 15, 2005, a new museum complex four times larger than the old one opened at Yad Vashem.

<sup>67</sup> Rabbi Dr. David R. Blumenthal is a professor of Judaic Studies at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. He received his Ph.D. from Columbia University and his ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

dinner for Simon Wiesenthal<sup>68</sup> was there speaking. They had a dinner at Emory. Great big long tables. We ended up sitting right next to him and introduced ourselves. He had just come.

**COHEN:** <Unintelligible> his wife?

**BECKER:** I'm crazy about Ursula. We have a great time together. She wasn't there with him that evening. I said to him, "I understand they're teaching Holocaust in some of the colleges. Are you planning to have that too? He says, "Well I haven't really thought that much about it." I said, "Well if you ever do, I would really love to audit the class if you'd permit me to." That started our friendship. They started having . . . I would read about conferences, and I'd *schlep* to Seattle by myself. To this day, none of my friends, none of them, not one, is into anything I do with the Holocaust. Not one. One of them, Shirley Blaine, I've taken her family through the museum. The others, and we're such close friends. My cousin Alberta has been to the museum several times with me. But all my good friends, and we've been good friends all these years, are just not interested.

**COHEN:** It's not pretty.

**BECKER:** In this enormous interest in my life, which is fine, but interesting. Really interesting. To me, it's interesting. That's how I started *schlepping* to these conferences. I went out to Seattle all by myself. That was the first time I heard about Deborah Lipstadt.<sup>69</sup> I bet she wasn't 25, 26 years old, this red headed fire cracker. Anything that I had been to with Holocaust . . .

<recording ends>

### INTERVIEW ENDS

<End Tape 1, Side 2>

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<sup>68</sup> Simon Wiesenthal (1908-2005) was a Jewish architect living in Lvov, Poland at the beginning of World War II. In 1941, he was sent to the Janowska concentration camp and then to a labor camp. He escaped in 1943 as the labor camp was being liquidated but was recaptured in June 1944 and sent to Janowska again. When the concentration camp was liquidated, Wiesenthal was sent on a westward trek through Plaszow, Gross-Rosen and Buchenwald, before finally being liberated at Mauthausen in May 1945. After the war, Wiesenthal dedicated his life to locating and prosecuting Nazis who had evaded justice. In 1947, he opened the Jewish Historical Documentation Center in Austria.

<sup>69</sup> Deborah Lipstadt (b. 1947) is an American historian and author of the books *Denying the Holocaust*, *History on Trial: My Day in Court with a Holocaust Denier*, and *The Eichmann Trial*. She is the Dorot Professor of Modern Jewish and Holocaust Studies at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.