Sandra: [Today is] January 28, 2009. I am with Karl Friedman, who has agreed to participate in the Oral History Project of the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Collection of the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. My name is Sandra Berman. I am the archivist at the Museum. I am thrilled and pleased to welcome you to this interview and as a participant of this project. I’d like to begin by asking you a little bit about your own family, what year you were born, your parents’ names, and how they ended up in Alabama . . . Birmingham.

Karl: On my father’s side, they were extremely Orthodox.¹ My grandfather on my father’s side has the same name, and there are seven of us that have that same name for that grandfather. That grandfather had seven children, and he lived in a little village Nudmihai [sp].

Sandra: Do you know how to spell that?

Karl: I can spell it for you, but I wanted to tell you something about that. He had a wife and had seven children. I’m not sure how many of those first seven children lived. I did meet some of them. They were raised in Pest, before it was Budapest [Hungary].² I went there one time to visit. I got an English-speaking guide, and I told him that my grandfather had lived and raised his family in Nudmihai. He said to me, “Mr. Friedman, ‘nudmihai’ in our language means ‘little

¹ 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.
² Budapest is the capital and the largest city of Hungary. Originally it was ‘Buda’ and ‘Pest,’ which were two separate cities that were separated by the Danube River. They were united in 1873 and became ‘Budapest.’ The city was liberated by the Soviet Army on February 13, 1945 and remained under Soviet control until 1991.
village,’” so obviously I have no first-hand knowledge about that.

**Sandra:** What was your grandfather’s name?

**Karl:** Karl B. Friedman.

**Sandra:** Karl B. Friedman. And your grandmother?

**Karl:** On that side, Sarah.

**Sandra:** Sarah . . .?

**Karl:** Neumann . . . N-E-U-M-A-N-N. Anyway time marches on. He moves to Cincinnati [Ohio] and brought his family, those who were still living. He married my grandmother, and they had seven children. My father was third from the bottom of the second litter. This is Max Friedman. My mother [Sidney ‘Sid’ Stein Friedman] was from an ultra-Reform\(^3\) family. [The] family was well-to-do. They were Berliners [from Berlin, Germany]. She was one of three children, but the family was haughty, egotistical, superior-type of people. My mother couldn’t live with that. She wanted to be plain. She didn’t want to be restricted by who could see and what she could do. She was very new fashion. She ran away a couple of times . . . once with some gypsies.

Her father [Zalo Stein] was a Reform rabbi. In his last many years, he was the senior rabbi of the government of the City of New York and had a little temple house—his house, and the temple was on the ground level—on Welfare Island.\(^4\) That’s where they lived at the last part of their life. When mother moved with her parents to the United States, the rabbi was an itinerant rabbi, went to small communities . . . into this one and that. My mother and father were completely compatible about their religions.

My father, at the end of World War I, was a cavalryman. I thought that was riding on a horse with a lance, but no, he fed and groomed mules. I guess that was low man on the totem pole, that job. He met my mother, and in a few months they decided to get married, and they did get married. They lived a short time in Louisville [Kentucky], and then he moved to Birmingham.

\(^3\) 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.

\(^4\) Welfare Island (now known as ‘Roosevelt Island’) is a narrow island in New York City’s East River. It lies between Manhattan to the west and Queens on Long Island to its east. In the nineteenth century the island housed several hospitals, including a mental institution, and a prison. In the twentieth century the island became a residential area and is now served by a bridge.
[Alabama] for two reasons. One, there was a job waiting for him, and two, the executive director of the YMHA [Young Men’s Hebrew Association], similar to today’s JCC [Levite Jewish Community Center], had been his friend in Louisville. Mr. Roth came to Birmingham to be the Executive Director of the YMHA.

Sandra: Do you remember his first name?

Karl: Ben Roth. He and his wife, Dora, played a major role in the development of the culture here in Birmingham. He was also going to have a part-time job for my father at the ‘Y’ teaching gymnastics, so they moved to Birmingham. They met in 1918. They got married in 1918. They moved to Birmingham in 1918, and my mother was 18. We always felt there was some mystery to Mother’s actual age, because she was either too young or too old to qualify as a child [for purposes of immigration]. It was a question of whether she had to come in as an adult. So she settled on 1900 as her birthday. [They] moved into a little house out in the west end of town, always identified as ‘next door to Elmwood Cemetery.’ It was a little two- or three-room house. My older sister [Elaine Royal], who has now been deceased for a while, and I were born in that house that had no electricity. It did have internal plumbing. We were born on the kitchen table by a midwife. Time marches on. Now there’s a couple of children, and things were getting a little better.

Sandra: What was your father doing besides . . .

Karl: He was an engraver, and he owned half interest in an engraving business. His business failed. Frank Chambers, another engraver, his business failed, so they went in business together. It was called ‘Birmingham Engraving Company.’ I was born into two synagogues. My mother was at Temple Emanu-El and very active in it . . . Sisterhood stuff. They had a program about helping the blind. I’m trying not to have too much detail.

Sandra: No, it’s good. Keep going.

Karl: My father, from an Orthodox family, joined a synagogue in 1918, which was Temple

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5 The Young Men’s Hebrew Association (and its counterpart, the Young Women’s Hebrew Association, YWHA) was set up in various cities of the United States for the mental, moral, social and physical improvement of Jewish young men and women. The first YMHA was started in New York in 1874 and spread across the country in the following years. They still exist today and are more like social clubs.

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

7 A group of women in a synagogue congregation who join together to offer social, cultural, educational, and volunteer service opportunities.
Beth-El. The children, Elaine and myself . . . her name was Elaine Friedman Royal. Dr. Arnold Royal was her husband. We liked the kids that we met. They were at Temple Beth-El, and we were living a couple of blocks from Temple Beth-El. We attended most of the services and events. There was a great dichotomy between Reform and non-Reform. We were Conservative, and it was a social separation. Earlier people who came here were generally people who were ready to go to work. They were going to be peddlers or whatever, and came to the United States and made their way before there was a big aliya from Eastern Europe. Let me skip that earlier part.

My mother was a renegade . . . she wanted all people to be equal. My mother was not much of discipliner. Her biggest threat was, “I’m going to tell your daddy.” My father was the disciplinarian of the family. I’m part of this Temple [Beth-El].

Sandra: Did your mother want the children to go to Emanu-El?
Karl: “Have it your own way. Go wherever you want.” My mother was never a member of Temple Beth-El, and my father was never a member of Temple Emanu-El. We were . . . social strata separated us . . . we didn’t have any friends down at Temple Emanu-El, and we developed part of this. Skipping many years, many 40 or 50, I had become president of Temple Beth-El. I served two years in that capacity.

Sandra: What year was that?
Karl: I’m going to give you a span. It is between 1962 and 1965. It was four years in a row that I was president of the Jewish Community Center. Then I was chairman of the [Birmingham Jewish] Federation annual drive. Then I was president of the Birmingham Jewish

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8 Temple Beth-El was founded in 1907 and was originally on the Northside of Birmingham and was affiliated with Orthodox Judaism. Today it is affiliated with Conservative Judaism. The current sanctuary was built in 1926 on Highland Avenue on the Southside. Its current rabbi is Rabbi Randall Konigsburg. (2016)
9 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).
10 Aliyah (Hebrew: ascent) is the immigration of Jews from the diaspora to Israel. It is one of the most basic tenets of Zionism.
11 The Levite Jewish Community Center began as the Young Men’s Hebrew Association (YMHA) and was founded in 1887. It was a center for the Eastern European Jews of the Northside. Throughout the years, it served as a meeting spot for all sorts of Jewish organizations and was the site of many social events. In the 1950’s, it became the ‘Levite Jewish Community Center,’ and moved to $1,000,000 complex on Montclair Road.

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Cuba Family Archives
We called it ‘United Jewish Appeal’ then. <memoirist pauses for drink of water> They remodeled the Temple, and when they did they gave me the eternal light. I have the first eternal light ever of Temple Beth-El in my home. I don’t know what I’m going to do with it, because I’ve got two daughters. My son doesn’t care.

**Sandra:** We’ll take it at the [William Breman Jewish Heritage] Museum.  
**Karl:** It has not lost its luster or sentimentality. We do like to talk about it, and it’s interesting.

**Sandra:** Can we go back a little bit?
**Karl:** Yes. I realize that I tend to embellish.

**Sandra:** No, it’s wonderful. I want to get to your time as president of Beth-El, but I also want to talk about your growing up in Birmingham. What year were you born?
**Karl:** Nineteen twenty-four . . . May 23, 1924.

**Sandra:** What was Birmingham like back in the Thirties for a young Jewish boy and a Jewish family?
**Karl:** I matured . . . from infancy for the first few years of my life [were] somewhat sheltered, but managed by a mother who had a driving force of equality. When we moved on the Southside, near St. Vincent’s hospital a few blocks from here, my mother didn’t understand slavery, because they long ago didn’t have slavery in Germany. Mother could not distinguish between black and white, and all the neighbors, Jewish or not, all the white people and all the black people understood the same thing . . . white people were senior, smarter, cleaner, proud. Black people were nothing.

I knew a slave when I was a little boy. She cleaned up behind some stores in our

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12 There are Jewish federations in most major cities. Their function is to fundraise for the Jewish community centrally and disperse it throughout the Jewish community (locally, nationally and internationally) rather than each Jewish institution trying to raise money individually.

13 Also called a ‘sanctuary lamp,’ the eternal light hangs or stands in front of the ark in every Jewish synagogue. The eternal light is meant to represent the *menorah* of the Temple in Jerusalem and symbolizes G-d’s eternal presence and is therefore never extinguished.

14 In 1992, M. William Breman gave the lead gift, ensuring the creation of the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. In 1996, the museum opened at the Selig Center on Spring Street in Midtown Atlanta. The Museum features a permanent exhibit called *Absence of Humanity: The Holocaust Years, 1933-1945* as well as exhibitions about Southern Jewish history and Jewish culture. The Breman Museum also includes the Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, the Weinberg Center for Holocaust Education, and a library of research materials.

15 The Southside community is situated on the slopes of Red Mountain, just south of the central business district. It is one of the oldest residential neighborhoods and is home to the University of Alabama—Birmingham and its adjacent hospitals.
neighborhood. Her name was ‘Hattie.’ We had many Jewish friends within a few blocks area. My wife [Gladys Cohen] . . . similar background . . . lived about three miles from where I lived then. All this side of the Southside were lots of Jewish families that started moving away from the Northside, so we had a lot of friends. When my birthday came, my mother invited black children and white children, and it sort of shocked the neighborhood. Some people came to look.

Behind us, in a ghetto of black people, poverty like you don’t hear anymore, worse than India or Mexico. It was really a barren space, people not having much of a life at all. There was a church in, I’ll say, our backyard. We lived on a paved street already. That was big tuff. The minister of that church came to visit my mother one time, and they became friends. Now Mother didn’t join his church, but he was invited on a regular basis, every two or three months, for Sunday lunch. People drove in their cars to see a black man come out of a white woman’s home. The separation was intolernoble to her.

**Sandra:** Was your mother ever criticized by her neighbors and her friends?

**Karl:** Only 100 percent of them. You just didn’t do that.

**Sandra:** Was it hard for her?

**Karl:** My mother was tough. She didn’t care. She was president of everything. She was room mother and PTA [Parent Teacher Association] president. She was out there.

**Sandra:** Was she ever threatened?

**Karl:** She wasn’t, no, but she was a powerful woman. Everybody knew Aunt Sid . . . Friedman. She was somebody to be reckoned with, and she was well-educated. We had a strange situation here, because when I was little and for long before I was born, we had a Ku Klux Klan [that] was a dominant facility of hate. These Kluxers were also members of the Chamber of Commerce. They were the leaders in the courthouse. You couldn’t get elected in

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16 Northside is the area north of downtown Birmingham. It was annexed into the City of Birmingham in 1910. Typically, it was an area of industrial and commercial development and the neighborhood into with new immigrants, including the wave of Eastern European Jews, moved.

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

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

19 A chamber of commerce is a local association to promote and protect the interests of the business community in a particular town or state.
the courthouse if you weren’t a member of the Klan. They had little placards in their store windows that said, “Trade with the Klan.”

Mother was never threatened, but she never yielded either. I had a friend named Mike. Mike and I went hiking one day together, and we got stopped by someone. He was an official, maybe a postman or something like that, or from the electric company, or whatever it was. He said, “What are you kids doing here?” I was a bit of maverick myself, beginning to inherit my mother’s genes. I said, “We’re hiking.” He said, “You don’t belong here.” I said, “Why not?” He said, “We don’t have black people here and white people here. We just have white people. Get out of here.” We got out of there.

I want to skip several years, to come back to that. I am the family liberal, and I’ve had some experiences that I’ll tell you about if you’re interested. Several years later, I was the first law firm to have a black employee. If you’re a big law firm in a big building or something like that . . . our firm was just a little firm. There were four of us who sort of put it together. I hired a black woman fresh out of high school [who] had good grades. I had a vision that this would be something noticeable to other people. It wasn’t like me in my home. It was in my office, and she was so good I was proud.

The first day she came to work three or four of our best secretaries or staff people came in and asked me, “Mr. Friedman, is she going to use our bathroom?” I said, “Yes.” They got up and walked out. Never an internal problem after that. There was a certain fear among my lawyers about letting her take something to the courthouse. She could take deeds up to record them at the courthouse. She could file papers for us. Things like that. She was so good that she finally became the coordinator of the mail. She received the mail and distributed the mail, took the money to the finance office, and so forth. Then she outgrew us. I associated with our firm a gentleman by the name of [J.] Mason Davis, [Jr.]. There’s probably not a black person in Alabama that hadn’t heard of or met Mason Davis. He was a good lawyer, and that really shocked the community. About the same time, a Jewish white lawyer [Harvey Burg] was a crusader too, and he came down and worked for a black firm.20

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20 Harvey Burg was active in the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham. From 1964 to 1966 he lived in Alabama in the summers and in 1966 after graduating law school he moved to Birmingham. He joined Oscar Adams, a black attorney, and the firm was renamed Adams and Burg. It was the first integrated law firm in Alabama since Reconstruction. He and his firm represented black citizens who sought equal opportunity in employment, secure voting rights, integration and equal opportunity and pay in business and the health care system.
Sandra: What was his name?
Karl: I’ve forgotten his name.
Sandra: What year was all this going on?
Karl: Let’s see. I started practicing law ... I was in law school in 1946, 1947, and 1948, and I started full-time practice on September 13 or 14, 1948. That’s when I started practicing law.
Sandra: When did you hire the black woman?
Karl: Probably [in the] early Sixties, before things blew up here. Mason has been a great asset to our law firm because he was good. He was black, and every law firm in town started hustling to hire a black person and a woman. Times [were] changing.

We had with the Klan a sort of peace. The nominal enemy to the Klan was everybody that was black or Hispanic, any minority, Chinese, or whatever it was ... Catholics ... very much anti-Catholic. There was a [Jewish] man by the name of Joe Denamburg who owned a pawn shop and a jewelry shop. He organized athletic events; boxing and wrestling and that kind of stuff. He was a member of the American Legion. My father was a member of the American Legion. He and Joe lived a block apart, and they became friends. Many of the Klan were also in the American Legion ... If a Jewish person had a problem, they would go to Joe Denamburg, and he’d get it solved some way or another. If the Klan had a problem with a Jewish person, they knew ... ‘Cousin Joe’ he was called. They did business together. He was sort of a peacemaker. I don’t remember any event like they had in Atlanta of persecuting, killing, and hanging of Jewish people. I don’t remember that.
Sandra: You mean like the [Leo] Frank case.
Karl: Yes. I was different because of my attitude and my upbringing in school. In addition

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21 The American Legion, sometimes referred to as simply ‘The Legion,’ is a veterans’ organization providing financial, social, and emotional support to members of the United States Armed Forces, veterans, and their dependents.

22 Leo Frank (1884-1915) was a Jewish factory superintendent in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1913, he was accused of raping and murdering one of his employees, a 13-year-old girl named Mary Phagan, whose body was found on the premises of the National Pencil Company. Frank was arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to death for her murder. The trial was the catalyst for a great outburst of antisemitism led by the populist Tom Watson and the center of powerful class and political interests. Frank was sent to Milledgeville State Penitentiary to await his execution. Governor John M. Slaton, believing there had been a miscarriage of justice, commuted Frank’s sentence to life. This enraged a group of men who styled themselves the “Knights of Mary Phagan.” They drove to the prison, kidnapped Frank from his cell and drove him to Marietta, Georgia where they lynched him. Many years later, the true murderer was revealed to be a black man named Jim Conley, who had lied in the trial, pinning it on Frank instead. Frank was pardoned (although they stopped short of exonerating him) on March 11, 1986.
to that, I was very small. I still am. I’m not as tall as I once was. I was a sort of feisty kid. I was kind of ‘dare me, don’t mess with me.’ [I] asserted myself. You’ll never guess where that came from. To be called a ‘damn Jew’ was common, and all the schools that I went to were white only. I went to a grammar school called Lakeview School and a high school called Ramsey High School. They were the best two schools in the state of Alabama. People who lived outside of Birmingham paid tuition to come to our schools. I really had a good education, but there was always, “He’s Jewish.” “He’s a wop.”23 The vile names that they had . . . ‘nigger’ was as common as black and white. That was just . . .

Sandra: Was it hard for you to be Jewish in that environment.

Karl: Some. I had an experience . . . I don’t know how much detail you want. A good friend of mine was Roderick Beddow, Jr. I spent the night at his house . . . he had a big house over there on Highland Avenue . . . lots of Friday nights, because we were going to play football or baseball Saturday morning. His father was the premier lawyer in Alabama. Roderick and I were good friends. He went to Miles Dancing School, as was the thing for the upper crust. You could bring a guest, so he brought me. I was the only Jew there. Probably the only Jew within miles of there. A lady came over and talked to Roderick and said, “The boy’s Jewish, and I’m not going to embarrass you, but don’t bring him again.” That kind of separation.

Sandra: Did he ever bring you again?

Karl: No. I wouldn’t embarrass him. I wouldn’t embarrass myself. I had little events along the way like that. Where else do you want me to go?

Sandra: In your own home, because of your mother’s attitude, did you have black domestics, African-American maids?

Sandra: Yes. She lived in this ghetto behind the apartment that we lived in. Her name was ‘Arlene.’ Later we just called her ‘Aggie.’ It was ‘Arlene.’ She came every morning, about six o’clock in the morning, and she prepared the breakfast for my father. If it was a school day, she got the kids up and saw that they had breakfast. She tended to the house, cleaned the house, ran errands. She was a feature in the house that made it work.

Sandra: Did you feel like she was part of the family?

Karl: Yes. I sat on her lap. She was very much a part of the family. She was very, very courteous. She would stay until eight o’clock at night, and she did half days on Saturday and

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23 ‘Wop’ is a pejorative racial slur used to describe Italians.
Sunday, for $5 a week. She could eat at the house and take home food and things like that. We loved it.

**Sandra:** How do you think she felt about your family? Do you think it was a job or that she felt like . . .

**Karl:** She loved us. A couple of times . . . don’t let me leave here without telling you about my sister, Micky. Now I’m going to tell you about my sister, Elaine. We were old enough to go to the movie, and [Arlene] would take us to the movie. We had to go to the black-only movie. We had to sit upstairs where whites could sit, not on the main floor with blacks. She couldn’t get in one of the white theaters, so we went to whatever was on at the black theater. We never had any problem with her. The family just grew out of that.

**Sandra:** If a white person saw you going into the black theater, was that a problem?

**Karl:** No. A black person taking a kid to the park, no. They were servants, just one step above slave.

**Sandra:** I want to talk a little more about . . . you went to all white schools, you grew up within the [Temple] Beth-El and little bit in the [Temple] Emanu-El community . . . then December 1941, the United States gets attacked at Pearl Harbor. Do you remember where you were when you heard that news?

**Karl:** Yes. I was sitting in the den at the Kappa Nu fraternity house. December 7, 1941. We heard the flash. You didn’t have television then. Everybody gathered around the radio, and we heard about it. Nobody knew where Pearl Harbor was. It wasn’t part of our genre. We just didn’t grow up with places like that or any knowledge about that.

**Sandra:** Was there an immediate sense of ‘I need to do something’? That ‘my country was attacked.’ Did you enlist? Did you get drafted?

**Karl:** Real anger. [President Franklin Delano] Roosevelt set the nation on ‘go’ . . . anger

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24 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.

25 Kappa Nu Fraternity was founded on November 12, 1911, by six men at Rochester University (Rochester, New York). 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.

26 Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945) was the 32nd President of the United States and a central figure in world events during the mid-twentieth century, leading the United States through a time of worldwide economic crisis and
that was [wide]spread, and ‘we’re going to get even.’ We didn’t have a way to measure the horror of how [many] ships went down, how much of the Navy [was] sunk. We didn’t know that. We didn’t know where in the world Pearl Harbor [was]. There was a rally in spirit for everybody. “Let’s go get ‘em.” It didn’t work out that way. It was a long time “going and getting ‘em.”

**Sandra:** Did you enlist or get drafted?

**Karl:** I cheated and lied to get in. I was not tall enough, and I was not heavy enough, but they were anxious to get people in, too. I went back to the fraternity house, and I borrowed a guy’s shoes that had lifts. I ate four bananas and [drank] a quart of milk. I came back and I cleared just like that.

**Sandra:** What branch of the military?

**Karl:** I was in ROTC [Reserve Officers’ Training Corps].²⁷ You know what that is?

**Sandra:** Yes.

**Karl:** I got an award from the governor of the State of Alabama for being the best freshman cadet on campus, which followed me where I went.

**Sandra:** You were in the Army. Were you an officer then?

**Karl:** When they signed us up for the Enlisted Reserve Corps, the concept was we were going to finish school and then go to officers’ training school. It didn’t work . . . it collapsed, and a year after we signed up we were in the infantry. By some coincidence that’s too much to tell you . . . I met a friend at Spartanburg, South Carolina, a Jewish fellow from Dothan [Alabama] . . . [Sidney] Katz. He married [Frieda] Greenberg, a girl from Birmingham, and then he lived in Dothan. We just ran into them walking down the street our first night off the base after quarantine.

**Sandra:** Where was the base?

**Karl:** Spartanburg. They invited us over to the house to have cake, dessert, something like that. I said, “What are you doing here with the Air Force?” He said, “I hate my job. They shipped me up here to try and get people in the infantry who have special talent and so forth to get them into the Air Force.” Ding-a-ling-a-ling. <makes motion of sudden understanding>

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²⁷ The Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) is a college-based program for training commissioned officers of the United States Armed Forces. ROTC officers serve in all branches of the United States armed forces.

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That’s when another friend of mine, who died just a month ago . . . he and I were stationed together, and he went through the same thing. I said, “How do you do that?” He said, “We have to take a test.” I said, “How often do you give the test?” He said, “Anytime.” That was either a Saturday or a Sunday. I said, “How about tomorrow?” He said, “Okay.” I think it was a Sunday. He gave Buddy and myself a test, mostly ‘yes’ and ‘no’ type of stuff. Buddy shipped out Monday and I shipped out Thursday, and we both ended up in Biloxi, Mississippi. From there, a lot of things happened to qualify me to be isolated. I had the opportunity to be whatever the slot was open: a bombardier, or a navigator or a pilot. I’d never been in an airplane, and I didn’t want the responsibility of getting lost. I wanted to be a bombardier and just pull the handle. Everybody said I was crazy, a prime job was as a pilot, so I became a fighter pilot.

Sandra: So you became a fighter pilot.

Karl: Yes.

Sandra: Where were you stationed?

Karl: Several places. Everybody went through Max Field [Maxwell Air Force Base—Montgomery, Alabama]. That was the first Air Force headquarters. You got some training there. They shipped me and several others to Peabody State Teachers College [Nashville, Tennessee], which was a women’s college across the street from Vanderbilt [University]. That was first time we were going to touch an airplane. When we were in school and the first day we came to learn something about flying, about six of us at six o’clock in the morning went out to Memphis [Tennessee] . . . not Memphis . . .

Sandra: Nashville [Tennessee]?

Karl: I’ll come back. I got inside of the first plane I ever saw up close. It was a two-seater. I dreaded this experience because I have motion sickness among my many other problems. I was the first one chosen. We went up and flew around and did ‘S’s’ across the road to see if we could straighten out the plane. It was exciting. I was enjoying it. The fear went away. I came back and everybody was standing around waiting for their turn. They asked me to tell and I turned around and I threw up right in front of my fellow officers-to-be.

I lived a while in Windsor Locks, Connecticut. It’s halfway between Hartford and . . . That’s when I got into my final squadron. I’d been in different air bases from time to time, and

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28 Peabody Normal School was founded in 1875 to train teachers. After 1909 it became ‘George Peabody College for Teachers.’ It moved to its present location in 1914 and became part of Vanderbilt University in 1979.
we trained in some special flight training. They sent us to Richmond [Virginia] to get all your shots and so forth. At that time the war was going our way, so they sent us back to Windsor Locks.

**Sandra:** What year are we talking about now?

**Karl:** Nineteen forty-three, 1944.

**Sandra:** Did you end up going to Europe?

**Karl:** I did not. I was a P-47 [Thunderbolt]²⁹ pilot, which was in great demand. The plane was the highest, fastest, sturdiest piece of equipment that the Air Force had. We had everything.

**Sandra:** Where did you go?

**Karl:** I never went overseas.

**Sandra:** You didn’t go overseas . . . ?

**Karl:** When things started playing down, they didn’t need to fly any airplanes anymore, so they didn’t need pilots. They gave us two choices. We had to have two choices of what we were going to do with our time. One you could choose, and one they would give you. The one that I chose was to run the gymnasium. That’s heaven and paradise for me. I never even heard of the other one, a Trial Judge Advocate.³⁰ I polished up my bars, made sure my hair was cut, my hat was straight, and I went to the Trial Judge Advocate. The major took a liking to me, and he taught me how to take a deposition, how to make an arrest, how to try a court martial, those things that are rudimentary in law. He said, “Karl, why don’t you go to law school?” I said I never got past undergraduate. I only was there in undergraduate a little over a year. He said, “The dean is a good friend of mine, Dean Hepburn. You’ve got a wonderful record. I understand your academics were good, so I’m going to talk to him. When you get out, go see him.” When I got out in late 1945, the best trip I made was to Tuscaloosa [University of Alabama], and Dean Hepburn was waiting for me for the appointment. He asked me a lot of

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²⁹ The Republic P-47 Thunderbolt is one of the largest and heaviest of the World War II fighter aircraft. It was built from 1941-1945 and was armed with eight .50-caliber machine guns, four per wing. The Thunderbolt was very effective as a short-to-medium range escort fighter in high-altitude air-to-air combat but was also adept at ground attack in both the World War II European and Pacific Theaters.

³⁰ Judge Advocate General’s Corps, also known as ‘JAG’ or ‘JAG Corps,’ refers to the legal branch or specialty of the United States Air Force, Army, Coast Guard and Navy. Officers serving in the JAG Corps are typically called ‘Judge Advocates.’ They are legal advisors to the command to which they are assigned and their advice covers a wide range of issues dealing with administrative law, government contract, civilian and military personnel law, law of war and international relations, etc. They also serve as prosecutors for the military when conducting courts-martial. They are charged with the defense and prosecution of military law as provided in the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Highly experienced officers often serve as military judges in courts-martial and courts of inquiry.
questions. He had gotten my undergraduate academic record, and he gave me three years of
college credit for the three years I had in the service. That’s how I got in law school. Then you
paid for my law school.

Sandra: I’m happy to have done it.
Karl: You weren’t even born then.

Sandra: I want to get back to your mom again. You mentioned she was from Berlin. Did she
still have family in Germany?
Karl: Yes, they wouldn’t come out. Long after we knew problems were there, before
Crystal Night [Kristallnacht], my family felt like they were better than everybody else, and
particularly just ordinary Jews. They knew they were never going to... they were wrong.

Sandra: Did she try to encourage them to leave?
Karl: Yes.

Sandra: They wouldn’t.
Karl: No.

Sandra: Did any of them survive?
Karl: No.

Sandra: That must have been hard on your mother.
Karl: Yes, but I told you my mother was a strong woman.

Sandra: Did you know after you finished law school that you wanted to come back to
Birmingham and practice?
Karl: No. I had a job that was sort of waiting for me. I actually worked for the little
organized firm while I was in law school. I was the fourth one when we joined together, and we
were called the ‘founders.’ My partners didn’t want to fool around with things like bookkeeping
and mailings and all that kind of stuff, so I ended up... I was a partner. After I was practicing
two years, they made me the managing partner. I wasn’t even a partner yet, so I was taking care
of those things the other lawyers didn’t want to do.

31 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.
Sandra: Where was this?

Karl: Here in Birmingham.

Sandra: So you came back to Birmingham after law school.

Karl: Yes. I got into law school at [University of] Alabama, at Tuscaloosa, and then I came back here.

Sandra: What kind of law did you practice?

Karl: When we were organized, we had a maxim. We wanted to do quality work in a hurry. Lawyers were much lazier and laid back and not excited about growing and things like that. There were some big law firms that wouldn’t hire a Jewish person, anyway.

Sandra: You’re back in Birmingham. You’re practicing law. How did you meet your wife?

Karl: We were married in 1948. We were engaged on [Valentine’s Day] that year and were married September 5. I knew Gladys when she was seven or eight years old. We were in little Young Judaeans clubs. There was a boys’ club and a girls’ club, and they had different age levels and so forth. There was an adult couple, they were teenagers, that sort of managed little groups, and they were good friends. They’d have parties together. Gladys and I ended up in the same social group, the boys a little bit older than the girls, as it traditionally used to be. Off and on, Gladys and I spent time together, and then the war came. I like to say we’ve been married 60 years, but that doesn’t count the eight years I chased her until she married me.

Sandra: What’s her maiden name?

Karl: Gladys Cohen. She’s a . . . I guess it’s a third cousin to [Gladys] Bearman, in the same family.

Sandra: You’re all related. Everybody I’ve talked to so far, you’re all related. Your mother seemed to really instill in you a sense of justice.

Karl: Yes. Mother was . . . we were not really poor in the Twenties. We had two cars. In this business I told you about . . . the business bought one car every year, and we got that car to break it in. There used to be a theory, drive it for so many more miles. The other man, Mr.

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32 Valentine’s Day is observed on February 14 of each year. The day is associated with romantic love and has evolved into an occasion in which lovers express their love for each other by presenting flowers, offering chocolates or other gifts, or sending greeting cards.

33 Young Judaea is a peer-led Zionist youth movement founded in 1909. Its programs include youth clubs, conventions, summer camps and Israel programs that provide experiential programming through which Jewish youth and young adults build meaningful relationships with their peers, emphasize social action, and develop a lifelong commitment to Jewish life, the Jewish people, and Israel.
Chambers, got the car that we’d had one year. My father bought my mother a sports car called a ‘Durant.’

Did you ever hear of that?

Sandra: I have.

Karl: We lived comfortably. We lived on a paved street, and we had Jewish neighbors all around. I’d say we were quite comfortable. We didn’t have any serious financial problems, until they closed the banks in 1933. Then everybody was like they’re soon going to be here.

Sandra: You tried to get involved in the Civil Rights Era by hiring a black woman. You had a black lawyer in your firm.

Karl: Now we have several of each.

Sandra: Were you active in any other areas through the synagogue?

Karl: Let me give you . . . I’ll answer yes, but I want to restrict it. The Jewish community had a philosophy that it’s not our fight, but we also knew in our philosophy that if we got in here as Jewish people speaking publicly and all that kind of stuff it would dilute the strength of the black people who were getting organized. We were behind the scenes doing . . . we raised money. I want to tell you about the first dime that was raised. There was a new country club called the ‘Fairmont Club.’ Sol Kimerling’s dad was a Fairmonter.<Memoirist looks over at Sol who is off camera to the left and loses train of thought>

Sandra: The Fairmont Club. Raising money.

Karl: At our annual meeting, they had bingo, so everybody came. Abe Berkowitz came, and he was telling us about some things that were going on in Birmingham, that an effort was coming to try and change the government from Bull Connor to more reasonable

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34 Durant Motors was established in 1921 by William Durant following his separation from General Motors. They designed the Durant, Flint, and Star line of automobiles. They produced cars until 1931 when the last Durant-branded models rolled off the assembling line in Lansing, Michigan. William Durant died at age 85, broke.

35 Called the ‘Bank Holiday’ of 1933. President Roosevelt, immediately upon assuming office on March 6, suspended all banking transactions. For an entire week, Americans had no access to banks or banking services. They could not withdraw or transfer their money, nor could they make deposits. The bank holiday was intended to give the government time to strategize a plan for aid to the banks (which involved printing money) and to give the banks time to reorganize themselves and re-open. Congress passed the Emergency Banking Act on March 15. Most banks had resumed operations. Although some 4,000 banks would remain forever closed, the worst of the banking crisis seemed to be over.

36 Fairmont Country Club was established in 1920 for East European Jews.

37 Bingo is a game of chance played with different randomly drawn numbers which players match against numbers that have been pre-printed on 5 x 5 cards. Someone calls the numbers from 1 to 75, picked randomly, and the players match them against their cards. A player wins if they get an entire row first, either vertically, horizontally or diagonally by claiming, “Bingo!”

38 Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connor (1897-1973) was the Commissioner of Public Safety for the city of Birmingham, Alabama, during the years of the Civil Rights Movement. His office gave him the responsibility for...
representation. Abe talked about that and the fact that this is the beginning of a war, and he said our role for the time being is to provide advice and money. Abe had some contacts in New York with a national organization. He sat on a table, his legs crossed just like this. He said, “We’re going to raise money. We’re going to raise a lot of money, but we’ve got to show black people here that we’re raising money for them.” He put his hat on the table when he had finished and everybody . . . he raised over $600. A lot of people put $5 and $10. It was $600. That continued on. Several of the aware Jewish people were afraid to be identified with anything, but would supply some money.

Sandra: Did you know Bull Connor?
Karl: Yes. <memoirist takes a drink of water> I knew some good things about him.
Sandra: Tell me a little bit about him.
Karl: A country yokel. Not very smart. Somewhat of a bully, but he was not antisemitic. When we had a problem, we’d go to Bull and he’d reason it through. The Klan had . . . it wasn’t the Klan . . . it was an offspring of the Klan, the same ilk . . . produced a newspaper.

Sandra: That National States’ Rights Party? 
Karl: Yes, but they produced a newspaper, a hate sheet, and that kind of stuff. They would stick it in a free slot in a grocery store and things like that. Four or five of us went to see Bull . . . none of us ever would have supported him for office anyway . . . and showed him some of that

administrative oversight of the Birmingham Fire Department and the Birmingham Police Department. Through his covert actions to enforce radical segregation and deny civil rights to African-American citizens, he became an international symbol of bigotry.

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

The National States’ Rights Party was a far right, white supremacist party. It was founded in 1958 in Knoxville, Tennessee and was based on antisemitism, racism and opposition to racial integration with black people. Party officials argued for states’ rights against the advance of the Civil Rights Movement. The national chairman was J.B. Stoner, who served three years in prison for bombing the Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The party moved to Birmingham and its members wore white shirts, black pants and tie and an armband bearing the thunderbolt version of the Wolfsangel (the double lightning bolt symbol worn by the SS). The party produced a newspaper, Thunderbolt. In 1958, the party was linked to the men who participated in the bombing of the Temple in Atlanta. They even ran candidates in the 1960 presidential election. The party declined in the 1970’s as its chief ideologue Edward Fields began to devote more energy to the Ku Klux Klan. When Stoner went to jail in the 1980’s the party disbanded.
and told him where the operations were. He said, “I’ll handle that.” In the next few days, the police department broke open the building and tore up all the equipment and threw everything out on the lawn, because they didn’t have a city license. He did that for Jewish people.

Sandra: He had a definite line.

Karl: I always like to say, before I curse him, that there were some good points to him. He had a great sense of humor. He first started out in the radio business doing baseball games. He would do the game just like he was sitting there, roaring in the background and things like that, but he was getting it off of a tape, like a ticker tape. He’d describe a play that never happened and he never saw. “He’s out!” He was very good at that. That’s how he got to notoriety, to know who Eugene Bull Connor was.

<tape is interrupted, there is general discussion about the course of the interview, then interview resumes>

Karl: We were already communicating with Martin Luther King [Jr.]41 and his associates. There was no equal, but there were a lot of associates. For the first time, some prominent black people, who already had made some money and had built a house, were coming out of the woods and taking part in things. They were coming here and marching indiscriminately, and there’d be fights and fusses. We made an agreement that we would not have any marches. I didn’t speak these words. They wouldn’t have any marches and boycotts. They were boycotting downtown stores. [King] would, for three months, not bring any opposition, not make any public . . . sort of a breathing spell. Martin Luther King was cunning. He was a good gentleman, and he was smart, but he also was clever. He was smart. He knew how to push the button. He came into town and shackled himself with six or seven others. There’s a picture showing the leader, the

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41 Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) is best known for his role as a leader in the Civil Rights Movement and the advancement of civil rights using nonviolent civil disobedience based on his Christian beliefs. A Baptist minister, King became a civil rights activist early in his career. He led the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957, serving as its first president. With the SCLC, King led an unsuccessful struggle against segregation in Albany, Georgia, in 1962, and organized nonviolent protests in Birmingham, Alabama, that attracted national attention following television news coverage of the brutal police response. King also helped to organize the 1963 March on Washington, where he delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. On October 14, 1964, King received the Nobel Peace Prize for combating racial inequality through nonviolence. In 1965, he and the SCLC helped to organize the Selma to Montgomery marches and the following year, he took the movement north to Chicago to work on segregated housing. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. His death was followed by riots in many United States’ cities. King was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was established as a holiday in numerous cities and states beginning in 1971, and as a United States federal holiday in 1986.
ministers and so forth. That created a big flurry. Now the department stores were suffering from boycott. Black people just wouldn’t go downtown.

King organized . . . a march without getting a permit. They probably would have given him some kind of restricted permit. Black people kept their children out of school. They marched downtown and marched through the department stores. They were all over the place . . . little black children. Headquarters for fighting was at a park between City Hall and Jefferson County Courthouse. It graduated toward that. Everything was concentrated there. That’s the time when you had the fire hoses. The same period of time. Bull Connor arrested these 450 odd school children and put them in jail. There were kids four, five and six years old . . . 15, 16, 17 years old. It was obviously a school-oriented thing.

Now you’ve got 450 black kids in a yard in front of the jail out on 6th Avenue, and he didn’t have facilities there for it. It was an old jail. It couldn’t accommodate 100 people, much less children. There are picture out there showing the kids behind the wire looking out at their parents, and things like that. Real pathos. He wouldn’t put them on bail. He wouldn’t let them out on their parents’ signature, which would ordinarily be what would happen. Gene Zeidman, who was a leader in many ways, had never received sufficient acclaim for a lot of good things he did, like the cemetery and things like that. We went to USF&G [United States Fidelity and Guaranty Company], which was a bonding company . . . insurance company, and we talked to the local chairman. He knew everybody because he was a big enough shot to be in the upper echelon of discussions. He said, “We’ll write the bond if you’ll guarantee it.” Gene and I neither were of the wealthy level of people in town. We said that. He said, “You give me your two signatures, and I’ll get the bond,” and he did. They turned the kids loose. Then they had to set a day for trial. Without too much detail . . .

Sandra: Detail is good.

Karl: Bull Connor finally threw in the sponge on that thing and had the cases dismissed

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42 The Birmingham Children’s Crusade was a three-day protest march by hundreds of school students from May 2 to 5, 1963. It was organized by Reverend James Bevel. The children were supposed to walk downtown and talk to the mayor about segregation. In the course of the protest hundreds of children skipped school and tried to walk downtown, during which time they were arrested, set free, and then arrested again the next day resulting in many hundreds of children being held in the city jail, where the facilities were not adequate. The marches were stopped by the police commissioner Bull Connor, who brought fire hoses to ward off the children and set police dogs after the them. Footage and photographs of the violent crackdown circulated throughout the nation and the world, causing an outcry. On May 10 an agreement was reached and city leaders agreed to desegregate businesses and free all who had been jailed during the demonstration.
without having to pay court costs and things like that. There were several vignettes like that.

<interview is interrupted and resumes>

**Karl:** . . . who were always inferior and that never had a black policeman. It had a big police force, and Bull Connor was the Police Commissioner. The ADL [Anti-Defamation League] really took the lead in that, Sol. <looks right for acknowledgement from Sol, who agrees> The few of us who did go to meetings and showed their face and were visible realized that one of the things we were going to have to do was get a black policeman. We had to make some promises. We had an office of ADL [Anti-Defamation League] that was established here and was dealing with things all over the State of Alabama. They gave plenty of guidance. I'm not sure what was the final force, Sol, that caused them to capitulate on that, but the city government of Birmingham was being changed. Sol can tell you a lot more about that than I could. We got two black men who agreed to become policemen. The first one quit after a week. The other one stayed on and rose up, but he rose up into a different . . .

**Sandra:** How did you choose those individuals? How did you find them?

**Karl:** The ADL office did that.

**Sandra:** What made you become so involved? Was it your mother? What was it that inspired you to get so active?

**Karl:** I don’t know if there was ever a decision. It was a way of life. One of the things that embroiled me was that there weren’t any young Jewish lawyers around. I was accessible. People knew that there was a Jewish lawyer. They asked me to serve on a committee, and I did. Another one asked me to serve on a committee. A group wanted to establish a crisis center, so I established a crisis center. People grabbing some of my time. It got to the point there was about half work and half fundraising. I went through a bunch of chairs in different organizations. I want to characterize myself . . . as a young lawyer I was tough, and I could be mean. I could make it hard for other people. I was a vigorous lawyer.

I divert to tell you that we were Sol’s attorney when he got in a problem with the union, a tough problem, like turning people’s cars over and stuff like that. But I divert. I think my mother’s willingness to sacrifice for other people became part of who we are. What she did,

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43 The Anti-Defamation League was founded in 1913 "to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all." Now the nation's premier civil rights/human relations agency, ADL fights antisemitism and all forms of bigotry, defends democratic ideals and protects civil rights for all.
we just fell into step. I have two sisters. Elaine, that I mentioned to you before, was like everything to everybody. She was president of this in organizations and everything. Now, I think Sol will tell you that my kid sister, Micky [Maxine Joy] Rubenstein, is one of the most valuable servants that our community has.

<interview is interrupted and then resumes>

Sandra: Tell me about your other sister.

Karl: [Eleanor’s] been officers and everything for every organization. She helps everybody that hurts. She’s fantastic.

Sandra: Your mother instilled this in all of you.

Karl: Micky didn’t know otherwise at all. She’s many years younger than I am . . . 11 or 12 [years].

Sandra: How do you see Birmingham today? What kind of changes?

Karl: Very clearly much better. It’s like a glacier, just edging along in different things. The election of a black president sobered a lot of people’s thinking. He sure better deliver, because a lot of people [are] betting on him. I don’t know. I do have an empathy for people in need. I’ve been blessed with some talent that enables me to get some things done, and I’ve been around here so long I’ve got a lot of contacts in different arenas. I’ve served the universities. I’m on the president of UAB’s [University of Alabama—Birmingham] advisory board. I just resigned from being the senior advisor to the dean of optometry. I’m the number one basketball fan at UAB. Those are things that are fading out. When I had some disabilities coming on me, I needed to cut back. I quit making a lot of speeches, and I was very reluctant to do this.

Sandra: I’m so glad you agreed.

Karl: I think what you’re doing is so important. Right now, I talk to a lot of middle-age people . . . I don’t know what that is . . . that don’t know about the Holocaust. They read about it, or they saw a movie about it, but they didn’t live it. The same thing with the [Great] Depression. There are very few of us who still are active as far back as the last Depression. I do a lot of writing, publishing articles and so forth. I’ve written a book, and it was fun. ax-wise I came out okay. It was an ego thing. I wanted to do something for Gladys . . . [something]

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44 The Great Depression was a severe worldwide economic depression in the decade preceding World War II. The time of the Great Depression varied across nations, but in most countries it started in about 1929 and lasted until the late 1930’s or early 1940’s. It was the longest, most widespread, and deepest depression of the twentieth century.
special, so I wrote a book with a lot of stuff like this in it, fictionalized.

**Sandra:** When did you retire from the law?

**Karl:** I didn’t.

**Sandra:** You’re still practicing?

**Karl:** I go every day.

**Sandra:** That’s wonderful.

**Karl:** It’s not wonderful to me, but I go every morning, five days a week. I don’t go in on Saturday anymore. Most of my time is devoted to helping my wife, who has a serious medical condition.

**Sandra:** I’m sorry.

**Karl:** You have to keep going.

**Sandra:** Yes. How many children do you have?

**Karl:** I have three. My son is really like a savior. He makes our medical appointments and drive us wherever we have to go and things like that.

**Sandra:** What’s his name?

**Karl:** He lives with us. His name is Mark. I have two daughters in Houston, and the exact picture that you’re painting of me is applicable to them. They’re both real active in the community, and particularly in charitable things, educational things.

**Sandra:** In looking back . . . do you feel that the Jewish community did enough or do you think they could have done more?

**Karl:** Hold that question. I wanted to be sure to tell you this. During that four or five critical years in the early to mid-Sixties . . . for four years I was president of the [Levite Jewish Community] Center, two years Temple Beth-El president. Growing out of the concentration of that period of time there was a complete metamorphosis going one. I went to Israel on . . . the organization . . . we were sponsored by the City of Birmingham to make a trip to Israel called ‘Young Leadership.’ I was on the second trip, and that was in 1964. Herbert Friedman . . . [is that] name familiar to you? . . . persuaded us at a conference in Dallas [Texas], and we went. [It was] one of the best things that ever happened in my life. We have been to Israel several times, and we still have some contacts and some family that survived on my father’s side that we’re in touch with. Stuart [Karl’s nephew, Stuart Royal] has been to see them. That’s a long and interesting story. I guess that’s enough about that.
**Sandra:** Do you think, in looking back, that the Jewish community could have perhaps done more or do you think they did what they could do?

**Karl:** I think we played it so smart it was remarkable. We provided private legal services through our law firm and things like that.

**Sandra:** Raised money.

**Karl:** [We] had a big struggle with the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. The courts were trying to force the NAACP to reveal its contributors and its membership and amounts, and so forth. It went around and around the court. No judge would ever render a decree and risk his political jeopardy if he sang other than the white tune. We did some legal work there. A lawyer named [Jack] Greenberg . . . he must still be around . . . was the lead counsel in the case. We finally had a victory when it had to go the Supreme Court of the United States.

**Sandra:** What about the rabbi of [Temple] Emanu-El? Do you think he was too vocal?

**Karl:** Temple Emanu-El. [Rabbi Milton] Grafman. I really liked him, and I admired him. We did lots of things together, and he was a mover and shaker . . . he was on the Ministers’ Council. No black ministers . . . At first he was, “Let’s wait and see. Let’s do this. Let’s do it slowly. Let’s program it out.” Even his congregation didn’t like that, so he shifted gears and became very affirmative. He showed up at a lot of these meetings, and he would go to see [Bull] Connor. He was very active. He was an ardent Zionist, too.

**Sandra:** Did the community resent him being so vocal or were they happy about it?

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45 An African-American civil rights organization in the United States. It was formed in 1909 and its mission is “to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination.”

46 The Supreme Court of the United States is the highest federal court of the United States. It is the final interpreter of federal constitutional law. It consists of a Chief Justice and eight associate judges who are nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate. Once appointed, the justices have life tenure unless they retire, resign, or are impeached.

47 *NAACP v. Alabama* (1958) was an important civil rights case brought before the United States Supreme Court. Alabama sought to prevent the NAACP from conducting further business in the state by asserting that they were in violation of a state statute requiring foreign corporations to qualify before doing business in the state. The NAACP, a non-profit membership organization based in New York, believed it was exempt. The state issued a *subpoena* for various records, including the NAACP’s membership lists. After a lengthy legal battle the case came before the United States Supreme Court, which found in favor of the NAACP.

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

49 An American idiom used to refer to business and civic leaders and those who have made great accomplishment.

50 Those who subscribe to Zionism, that is, support for a Jewish national state.
Karl: There are two things. When [Rabbi Grafman] came to the congregation, he followed a rabbi who was probably the greatest rabbi ever in Alabama, except my rabbi here now. He was an ardent Zionist, and the rabbi who preceded him, [Rabbi Morris] Newfield, was absolutely opposed to a State [of Israel]. It really shook the congregation when Zionism showed up. Some of his people left the congregation because there was some conflict there. He was in the leadership all the way. He wrote. He spoke. He invited and had programs at Temple Emanu-El. They were always more aggressive than Beth-El in reaching out. I would say everybody . . . some people didn’t like him, but even those that didn’t like him admired him and respected him, because he was a kingpin. I wish I could have said it was my rabbi . . . you get triple A plus for Rabbi Grafman.

Sandra: What about when the northern rabbis came down to Alabama.

Karl: They came to see me. <memoirist is joking>

Sandra: Tell me about that.

Karl: I think I can pin it down to a day of the week. It was a Wednesday. It was Tuesday night that I got a call from Sylvan Laufman, who was on business in New York. He said, “Call me. There’s a big blast in our newspaper here of 17 rabbis from the assembly are coming to Birmingham to witness.” New words. You may have that in Christianity, but it wasn’t Jewish orientation. I gathered what I considered my advisory panel, and we met them at the airport. . . . Richard Rubenstein . . . have you heard the name? He’s frequently on speaker’s tours. Seventeen rabbis showed up at the airport, and we were there to meet them. We had Rabbi Grafman. I could name several other people there, probably eight or nine of us.

We stopped them in the foyer that is attached to the airport. This was a hotel, and we sort of stopped them. Some of them sort of snooted at us and went on by and didn’t want to know anything about us. Some paused and talked a little bit. Finally, a couple of them said yes, they’d sit and talk with us. I said, “Let’s go back to my office.” [I had] an office twice of the size of this conference room. There were about 15 or 20 in all of them and us. We wanted to

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

52 An American idiom meaning an important, or most important, person in an enterprise or system.

53 Sylvan Laufman’s wife’s family owned Sokols Department Store in Bessemer, Alabama.

54 Richard Rubenstein (1924- ) became a rabbi in the early 1950s. He attended Harvard Divinity School earning a Ph.D. in 1960. He was an active rabbi for only a few years moving on the various organizations, foundations, and socially conscious organizations. He was a professor in various universities as well as the president of University of Bridgeport in Connecticut. He was also the director for the Center of Holocaust and Genocide Studies.
prepare them for some things that they obviously didn’t know. But they were ‘witnessing.’ We warned them about the volatility and the danger and things like that, but Richard Rubenstein was on a crusade. That’s the way it was going to be. I said, “Okay. We’re here. We’ll help you all we can.”

As the two or three days passed, some of them filtered through the information that we had and realized that they didn’t have the facts to cope with what was going on. They stayed in an all-black motel, and that [A.G. Gaston] Motel was bombed.\(^{55}\) They marched and disrupted traffic, went to City Hall, that kind of stuff . . . that’s called ‘witnessing.’ Some of them got arrested. They did more harm than good. It created a Jewish face that hadn’t shown before. We were angry about it and exhibited it through the . . . Rabbinical Assembly of America.\(^ {56}\) That went to be something of the past, too. About three years later he was on a speaking tour. The Jewish Community Centers [Association of North America]\(^ {57}\) . . . I’ve forgotten what it is . . .

**Sandra:** I know what you’re talking about.

**Karl:** . . . had a speaking tour that they sent speakers around the country at the Jewish community centers, and he’s on that list.

**Sandra:** This Rubenstein.

**Karl:** We had a couple of meetings, and we decided that I was going to respond. I think everybody was bristling. We were ready to get even after he came down here and screwed things up for us. When they introduced him, there was no clapping. No thank yous . . . anything. The tenor of his whole speech was, “I was young, and I was foolish. I should never have done [it]. I apologize to everybody here and those who were there during my tour in Birmingham. I never should have done it, and I sincerely hope you’ll accept my apology. I’ll answer any of your questions about it, anything that you want.” Of course, that took all the steam out of it.

**Sandra:** There must have been a lot of resentment when these rabbis came down and then they

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\(^{55}\) The A.G. Gaston Motel was built in 1954 by Arthur George Gaston (1892-1996), a pioneering black entrepreneur who established several business including a bank, radio stations, insurance company, funeral home and construction firm. The Gaston Motel was designed to be a place of luxury for minorities during the days of segregation. It was the epicenter of Birmingham’s civil rights protests and demonstrations. During the spring of 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr. stayed in Room 30, from which he organized the protests. On May 10, 1963 King held a press conference in the Gaston’s courtyard, and a pair of bombs exploded near King’s room two days later.

\(^{56}\) The Rabbinical Assembly of America is the membership organization for Conservative rabbis.

\(^{57}\) The Jewish Community Centers Association of North America is the leadership organization for the Jewish Community Center Movement, which includes more than 350 Jewish community centers, YMHA, YWHA and camp sites in the United States and Canada. They strive to help Jewish community centers serve their communities better in finances and operations, marketing, early childhood services, membership and outreach.
left and went back up North and left you with the problem.

Karl: Yes. I still resent it.

Sandra: This is amazing. You have more stories . . .

Karl: I’ve been around a lot.

Sandra: I just want to make sure I’ve gotten everything before I let you go. <discussion off camera about the course of the interview, then it resumes> Your participation in Jewish organizations, and then you participated in civic organizations. Has there been a more meaningful part of your life, or has all of that been . . .

Karl: My community service has been an important part of my life. I feel good about some of the things I’ve done. I was probably too rough or too tough sometimes along the way. I made as many enemies as I did friends on things like race issues. I’ve resigned from every obligation that I have, except one or two. I’m president of UAB’s advisory cabinet. I’m still on that. It meets every quarter. I’ve quit going to meetings, and I don’t go out at night. I still . . . in fact, in the last couple of months or so there’s been a lot of volatility in my clientele who are now not looking to open a store. They’re looking to keep from closing one. I’m still active in doing things and showing up.

Sandra: I think you’re remarkable, and your career sounds remarkable. Did you ever meet Martin Luther King?

Karl: Three or four times. He called me ‘Karl.’ I was an observer and a participant. I was not in any leadership role, although I will say many, maybe half, of the black leaders were clients of mine. We had a meeting at my house once that was mixed, and Mountain Brook put a police car out in front of my house. I needed to tell you this. When I went to Israel in 1964, someone burned my front yard . . . my front yard is 100 feet wide and about eight or nine feet from top to bottom . . . with women’s hair spray. They wrote in eight-foot high letters ‘nigger lover’ . . . all the way across the front of my yard. My brother-in-law, Micky Rubenstein’s husband, had the lawn replaced while I was gone. Sometime after that someone shot a bullet hole through my front window. It’s still there. If I sell the house, I’m going to take that window.

Sandra: I don’t blame you.

Karl: Those were exciting things, but there was a lot of . . . you asked about threats. They

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58 Mountain Brook is a city and suburb of Birmingham, Alabama. It extends along the ridges known as ‘Red Mountain’ and ‘Shades Mountain.’
had a lot of meanness. They’d call the law firm and say, “Let me speak to Arthur Shores,\(^{59}\) please.” He was the black lawyer. Great man. Just messing with the switchboard. They’d call, and two or three times one of my daughters would answer. They’d say cuss words and nasty things. As far as bodily harm, there were some areas of that, but none of them that I recall, these excluded, were frightening.

**Sandra:** Were any of your friends, or acquaintances even, members of the White Citizens’ Councils?\(^{60}\) Did you know people who were . . .

**Karl:** Yes.

**Sandra:** How did you deal with that, knowing someone who was in one of these . . .

**Karl:** Let me tell you how some cities in Alabama dealt with it. In cities like Dothan or Jasper that had nice-sized Jewish communities, they were members of the same country club, golf club, bridge club. It was really an amalgamation, where there wasn’t a whole lot of difference. Even a Jewish person might get elected to office in those small towns, and all of them had ADL positions. When the White Citizens’ Council showed up, it was to substitute and give dignity . . . instead of the Klan. That was a real tough call, because your next-door neighbor and your partner in business, you’re being asked to separate your beliefs. We thought that it was best to have no overt violence and unpleasantness, so most of the little communities and their organizations stayed out of the picture. If they had to join the White Citizens’ Council so they wouldn’t drive away their customers, they’d join the Citizens’ Council and that’s it. All of them but Birmingham and I think Selma [Alabama] turned in their charters, got out of B’nai Brith\(^ {61}\) and ADL and everything.

**Sandra:** I think that’s it, and I appreciate it. It was a wonderful, wonderful interview. I’m so

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\(^{59}\) Arthur Shores (1904-1996) was a black American civil rights attorney. He began his legal career in 1937 and was the attorney before the United States Supreme Court in *Lucy v. Adams* to prevent the University of Alabama from denying admission to Autherine Lucy solely based on race or color. He also campaigned to integrate Birmingham’s public schools. His home was fire-bombed on August 20 and September 4 in retaliation for black parents registering their children at white school. During the 1960’s, he became the first black member of the Birmingham City Council.

\(^{60}\) White Citizens’ Council (WCC) was an American white supremacist organization formed on July 11, 1954. After 1956, it was known as the Citizens’ Councils of America. It had about 60,000 members, mostly in the South, and was opposed to racial integration during the 1950’s and 1960’s when it retaliated with economic boycotts and strong intimidation against black activists, including depriving them of jobs. By the 1970’s its influence had faded.

\(^{61}\) B’nai Brith International (Hebrew: ‘Children of the Covenant’) is the oldest Jewish service organization in the world. B’nai Brith states that it is committed to the security and continuity of the Jewish people and the State of Israel and combating antisemitism and bigotry. Its mission is to unite persons of the Jewish faith and to enhance Jewish identity through strengthening Jewish family life, to provide broad-based services for the benefit of senior citizens, and to facilitate advocacy and action on behalf of Jews throughout the world.
grateful that you came and decided to do this.

<End Disk 1>

INTERVIEW ENDS