INTERVIEW BEGINS

Sandra: Today is January 22, 2012. I am in Prattville, Alabama, with Alan Koch, who’s agreed to participate in the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project of the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. I am Sandra Berman. I’m the archivist with the museum, and I’m very grateful that you’ve agreed to participate in this project. I’d like to begin by asking you about the family, where they were originally from, and how they came to be in Demopolis, Alabama.

Alan: My father’s family, the Koch family, didn’t come over until late . . . like in the late 1880’s . . . a little bit differently from most. The mother brought two sons to Meridian, Mississippi, where they knew a family by the name of ‘Threefoot,’ which was an Anglicized version of ‘Dreifuss,’ and left them there. She went back to Germany. One married well in Meridian, and the other came to the Demopolis [Alabama] area and married my grandmother. They lived in and around Demopolis until they finally had to move to Montgomery [Alabama] in retirement. Mother’s family had been here a considerably longer time. They were named Tannenbaum. The earliest Tannenbaums . . . not immediate family, but cousins . . . were in Mobile [Alabama] probably in the 1840’s, 1850s. They came into New Orleans [Louisiana] with another family named Emanuel. His name was Baruch Emanuel, but his nickname was ‘Rabbi.’ Mother has written a little history of the family. She thought that was an honorary title more than a valid title, but I have recently looked at the history of the Jewish congregation in Mobile.
[Alabama]. They called him ‘Rabbi.’ He served as a rabbi, or a cantor,\(^1\) so the terminology was more accurate than we thought. The immediate Tannenbaum family came over primarily right after the Civil War.\(^2\) They came to this area because of Baruch Emanuel and his family in Mobile. They came, like so many other Jewish residents, up the river system to a small town. Like I said, they had been there since right after the Civil War. Mother’s maiden name was Goodman, and she lived and grew up in Starkville, Mississippi, before marrying my father in Demopolis.

**Sandra:** What were your parents’ names?

**Alan:** Jacob Levy Koch and Hazel Goodman Koch. They both came from 100 percent Jewish families, just like I do now, carrying the mantle of the family. I have an older brother Jack that died two years ago. We were the only two boys . . . only two children. That’s the history of the Koch family in Demopolis.

**Sandra:** What did they do in Demopolis?

**Alan:** Dad ended up more or less as an automobile dealer and a farm implement dealer. He had gone through a time when he worked in the banking department of the State of Alabama as a state bank examiner. He and some others went together in 1945 and bought a Pontiac and General Motors International Harvester\(^3\) dealership in Demopolis. He stayed that way until they sold the business, and he retired.

**Sandra:** Your mother . . . did she work?

**Alan:** No, except when she had to during the [Great] Depression.\(^4\) She kept the family alive during the Depression with a cousin . . . B. J. Levy & Son, a department store in Demopolis. I

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\(^1\) The *chazzan* (cantor) is the official in charge of music or chants and leads liturgical prayer and chanting in the synagogue.

\(^2\) The American Civil War, widely known in the United States as the ‘Civil War’ or the ‘War Between the States,’ was fought from 1861 to 1865 to determine the survival of the Union or independence for the Confederacy. In January 1861, seven Southern slave states declared their secession from the United States and formed the Confederate States of America. The Confederacy, often called the ‘South,’ grew to include 11 states, and although they claimed 13 states and additional western territories, the Confederacy was never diplomatically recognized by a foreign country. The states that did not declare secession were known as the ‘Union’ or the ‘North.’ The war had its origin in the issue of slavery. After four years of bloody combat, which left over 600,000 Union and Confederate soldiers dead and destroyed much of the South’s infrastructure, the Confederacy collapsed, slavery was abolished, and the difficult Reconstruction process of restoring national unity and granting civil rights to freed slaves began.

\(^3\) International Harvester was a United States manufacturer of agricultural machine, construction equipment, and trucks. By 1985 it had nearly gone bankrupt and sold off its various lines to several other companies. They kept only the truck and engine divisions and are now called ‘Navistar International.’

\(^4\) The Great Depression was a severe worldwide economic depression in the decade preceding World War II. The timing of the Great Depression varied across nations, but in most countries it started in 1930 and lasted until the late 1930’s or middle 1940’s. It was the longest, deepest, and most widespread depression of the twentieth century.
think she made $100 a month. They ate at one grandparents’ house . . . a parents’ house . . . ate at one and slept at the other, and made ends meet. Dad tells a story about taking my brother Jack, who was born in 1932, to the park and entertaining him because he couldn’t find a job. Mother supported the family. The family had seen better days. Like so many others they didn’t ask for or receive a lot of help other than from family, but by the time they retired they had done extremely well.

**Sandra:** What year were you born?

**Alan:** I was born in 1938. I’m 73. [I’ll] be 74 next month, in March really.

**Sandra:** Tell me about growing up in Demopolis. Was it an idyllic small town life?

**Alan:** It was. Everybody knew the Jews from the non-Jews. We were accepted as part of the community. Maybe it’s the fact that I’m six five [6 feet 5 inches tall]. I never was raised with any kind of prejudice that I was aware of. Yes, we were accepted. In a small town, you have to be old Demopolis [Alabama] or old Montgomery [Alabama] or old Atlanta [Georgia]. Thankfully the Koch’s have been there long enough that I was old Demopolis and accepted as part of the crowd. My father was a unique man. Mother may have worn the pants in the family as a very talented lady. He was remarkable in the sense that he never missed a day of stopping by the hospital to see who was there, who might need help, and so forth. When I was about to go to college, I know he was stretched to the limit worrying about how he was going to pay for it. When I ended up getting a baseball scholarship that paid all of my college expenses, his gesture of appreciation was starting a scholarship fund at the local Rotary Club.\(^5\) It now has sent over 300 kids to school and is still in existence, now named for him.

<conversation pauses and taping is briefly interrupted, then resumes>

**Sandra:** You were speaking about your dad and some of his community service activities.

**Alan:** Like I said, he was a remarkable man in the sense that . . . I’ll say it again, Mother undoubtedly wore the pants in the family in my opinion, but she, too, was a very talented lady. There wasn’t much that she didn’t do. I’ve got pictures that she painted and had exhibitions. She sewed. She played the piano. She cooked. She wrote. Her college got interrupted at MSCW [Mississippi College for Women; now Mississippi University for Women—Columbus,

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\(^5\) An international service organization whose stated purpose is to bring together business and professional leaders in order to provide humanitarian services, encourage high ethical standards in all vocations, and help build goodwill and peace in the world. It is a secular organization with about 1.2 million members worldwide.
Mississippi] when her father died when she was in the end of her freshman year. She had to drop out of school, but there’s nobody in Demopolis who remembers Mother who won’t tell you she was a bright, bright, bright lady. Dad, in addition to that, also is the man responsible for the maintenance of the Jewish cemetery as of today, because he badgered and pleaded and begged enough that we now have money in a trust fund at the local bank in Demopolis to help us maintain the Jewish cemetery. That’s all attributable to his efforts to raise the money. The fact that the cemetery is there, it’s intact, it’s well maintained, it’s well taken care of, is a tribute to him.

**Sandra:** That’s remarkable. How many Jewish families were in Demopolis at its height?

**Alan:** By my studying, the peak of the population was probably about 1900 to 1910. If you figure the white population no more in that time than 2,000 and you had 150 Jews of all ages there, there was a significant Jewish population there. When my parents’ generation started dying off, the kids like me had gone off and gone to school, and the population dwindled down to now one lone Jewish man, Bert Rosenbush, who’s close to 80. He likes to capitalize on the fact that he’s the last remaining Jew in Demopolis.

Demopolis, the little town now, has really appreciated the Jewish presence there. I’ve had any number of generations above mine, and mine, saying that, of all the ethnic groups in Demopolis, the success of that community is in large part due to the Jewish population more than any other. They were the mercantile group. I laugh when I look at old . . . contemporary newspapers . . . and one was lamenting the fact that all the churches in town had bells but the Baptists. The Baptists needed a bell for their church, and they were trying to raise money, $1 or whatever you could contribute. I think of the first $50 that they got, $30 of it came from the Jewish population. I told them over there that the Baptists had to be thankful, for without us Jews they’d have never had a bell in the Baptist church. There was a warm relationship, and it still continues today.

**Sandra:** What were some of the major businesses that were in downtown Demopolis that were Jewish?

**Alan:** There was Frohsin Store that’s related to the Frohsin stores that were in Atlanta. Leon and Louis Frohsin. There’s a brother, Ralph Frohsin, who married Frances Koch, my dad’s sister. There was a B. J. Levy & Son, which was another department store. Rosenbush Furniture

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6 Bert Rosenbush’s oral history is available at the Breman Museum OHC 10816 (2012).
Company that Bert’s family . . . I’m sure I’m leaving out others, but they were the three largest. Even in the 1950’s I have to laugh and look back and say that there were a couple of small Jewish stores there where the owner dated back 50 or 60 years when sharecropping\(^7\) came in. They would get land in return for debts that couldn’t be paid. They would put farmers out there and provide them with the food and the machinery and the seeds to plant it, and they’d take a piece of the crop. They were like a company store. That’s where the people that lived on the farms would come to buy all their things. They were still in existence in the 1950’s, which is a little bit of a shocker. When I grew up and graduated from high school, in the 1950’s, there was still . . . Saturday was, in a predominantly black area, the time when the blacks came to town, and the wagons and the mules. It was quite a . . . it’s something that’s missing today, but it’s something I remember well.

Sandra: Growing up did you . . . even though you had your little synagogue and the families, was there much of a Jewish community life through the synagogue?

Alan: No. One of the things that I regret today is getting so little of any kind of education in Judaism or what it was all about. An uncle, B. J. Levy, and Jerome Levy is the ‘J’ in the Jerome in B. J. Levy & Son, was an acting rabbi, which was all they ever had in Demopolis. We would have what I call Sunday school and tell a few *Bible* stories or listen to a few *Bible* stories . . . minimalist is all I can say. I regret that I didn’t get more of that because I still sense it today how little I know.

When I started playing baseball in the 1960’s, I started in Birmingham [Alabama] and the general manager couldn’t wait to get me to Atlanta [Georgia] to take me to a real delicatessen that I’d never been into. It was an eye opener. My brother Jack and I always laugh. It was the first time we’d ever seen meat that wasn’t grey. Mother cooked it until it was so done that it changed color to dark grey. Seeing rare food was an experience for us. So, no, the answer . . . if I dated a Baptist girl and we were going to a movie on Sunday night, I’d sit outside in the car until church was over and we’d go to the movie . . . wait until MYF . . . Methodist Youth Fellowship.

\(^7\) Sharecropping is a system of agriculture in which a landowner allows a tenant to use the land in return for a share of the crops produced on their portion of land. The landowner provided land, housing, tools, seed and perhaps a mule. The local merchant provided foods and supplies on credit until harvest time. When the crops were harvested the landowner usually took two-thirds and the sharecropper one-third, out of which they had to pay the merchant. Sharecropping became widespread in the South in response to the economic upheaval caused by the end of slavery during and after Reconstruction.
. . No, there wasn’t any of that, and it didn’t improve for me because I went to Auburn [University—Auburn, Alabama] on a baseball scholarship from 1956 to 1960.

I don’t think there were more than 10 or 12 or 15 Jews on the campus at Auburn at that time. The primary Jewish population was Tuscaloosa . . . University of Alabama . . . with two or three Jewish fraternities and two or three Jewish sororities. I had thought that’s where I was going, but Auburn offered me a much better scholarship than Alabama did and it was a very easy economic decision for me to go to Auburn and forego the Jewish fraternities. That’s another thing that I missed. Later I went to law school at Alabama, and graduate school. [I] got a master’s [degree] in history, then law school. I did get to ZBT [Zeta Beta Tau]\(^8\) fraternity as a social member and eat my meals there and enjoy that, but I missed all that growing up.

**Sandra:** What about within your own home? Did you celebrate *Hanukkah*\(^9\) and Passover?\(^10\)

Did you have a Sabbath meal?

**Alan:** No. Minimalist, again, if at all. Like I said, it makes me sound like being Jewish in name only as far as an education’s concerned, but I think my basic philosophy is about as Jewish as you can get. Even though my awareness of customs and traditions may be on the . . . I wish I knew more. I grew up . . . the only thing I can tell you is my parents would tell me you’ve got to live up to more than just what you like for yourself, because you are representing yourself and your family. In a way it’s more than that, because you’re representing all the Jews in the community. For those who don’t know any Jews in the community but have heard of Jews in the newspaper, you’re representing them, as well. Later when I saw . . . mother said that in her writings about when she grew up . . . I was expected to hold myself to a different standard

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\(^8\) Founded in 1898 as the world’s first Jewish fraternity, Zeta Beta Tau (ZBT) prides itself on being an inclusive organization welcoming of any college man who understands and appreciates our mission. With more than 140,000 initiated men ZBT’s can be found in all aspects of life: business, entertainment, media, politics, and much more. In 1989, ZBT became the first fraternity to abolish pledging from its organization and, in its place, created a brotherhood program that focuses on equal rights, privileges, and responsibilities for all members.

\(^9\) Hebrew for ‘dedication.’ 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 *menorah* with its eight branches commemorates this miracle.

\(^10\) Hebrew: *Pesach*. 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 Israelites 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.
because of being Jewish and not allowing myself to do something that would bring shame on me, the family, and the Jewish community here and everywhere.

**Sandra:** Were your parents concerned that perhaps you would not meet any Jewish women to date or marry?

**Alan:** I’m sure they were. My brother and I both married out of our faith. I don’t know that I ever really grew up dating any Jewish girls. I had a cousin my age named Gerry Levy [sp] that . . . of course we were friends. There weren’t any Jews for us to date. When I was playing ball in Detroit [Michigan], the only experience I had was I had a date with a Jewish girl and I picked her up. The Detroit Tigers [baseball team] had given me a red Ford convertible to drive while I was there playing ball. I picked her up and had this wonderful stereo. I loved classical music and loved Richard Wagner’s music. I had Wagner <he pronounces it the German way: Vogner> music on. I was just the coolest young man you’ve ever seen. She said, “Do you know whose music you’re listening too?” I said, “Yes.” She said, “Do you know he’s responsible for the death of 6 million Jews?” I said, “You’ve got to be kidding.” She said, “If you have to listen to him, you can take me home.” Which is what I did. I don’t think I ever got two blocks from my house before I turned around and took her home. That was my experience dating Jewish girls for the first 25 years of my life.

**Sandra:** That’s a great story. I want to get to your baseball career in a minute, but I want to go back a little bit more to Demopolis. I know a lot of Southern families, because they were in this environment where there were so few Jewish families in their communities, they . . . not in a religious way but in a sectarian way . . . celebrated Christmas. Did your family also celebrate Christmas?

**Alan:** Yes. Not in a religious way, but in a . . . like everybody else, we had a Christmas tree. All of us worked in stores leading up to Christmas. The Jewish population in Demopolis was no different than the Jewish population in all of these small towns, where there was no rabbi and whose young kids went through the same experience I’ve just described. They were very

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1) Richard Wagner (1813-1883) was a German composer, theater director, and conductor who is primarily known for his operas, among them the four opera-cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Wagner has also been accused of being an antisemite, mostly particularly based in his non-opera writings. Adolf Hitler was an admirer of Wagner’s music and saw in his operas an embodiment of his own vision of the German nation claiming that they glorified “the heroic Teutonic nature.” Hitler visited Bayreuth (Wagner’s own opera house) from 1923 onwards and attended the productions at the theater. There continues to be debate about the extent to which Wagner’s views might have influenced Nazi thinking. However, it cannot be claimed that Wagner “was responsible” for the Holocaust.
anxious to assimilate themselves into the community, and they did everything they knew how to. My uncle sang in the Episcopal choir. They sang in whoever else had a choir, and if there was some music at the temple the Episcopalians and the Baptists came over and sang in the Temple [B’nai Jeshurun]. If you want to know what happened to the Jews in rural Alabama, they assimilated themselves out of existence. They wanted so much to be accepted that they inadvertently assimilated themselves away.

Sandra: Let’s get into the 1950’s and the 1960’s. First of all, before I get into that, did you have domestic help in your home?

Alan: Did I have what?

Sandra: Domestic help in your home?

Alan: Yes.

Sandra: What was the relationship between your family and the people that worked for you?

Alan: Let me go back to my grandparents. They had a maid named Evelyn Hurt [sp] that was as much a member of the family as a member of the family. We laugh that she had heard all the Yiddish expressions enough where people would come in and say things not thinking that she didn’t understand. She didn’t miss a trick. She knew it just as much as anybody else. They effectively raised the kids. It had grown different in the 1850’s, when we had a maid . . .

Sandra: Nineteen fifties.

Alan: . . . I mean 1950’s. We had a maid that came once or twice a week. It wasn’t near the relationship that had existed prior to that when a lot of . . . that went back to after the Civil War. You think that the plantations in the South just disintegrated with the end of the war, but during the war and afterward a lot of those plantations were run by ex-slaves, or blacks, particularly when the owners had been called into service and were in Virginia fighting somewhere. Those plantations were managed and maintained sometimes by black overseers, and a lot of those . . . If you look at the history, you’ll see some of these old Jewish restaurants in Demopolis, listed as slave owners, but they weren’t slave owners. Those were . . . they’d be listed with two or three slaves, but it was no different than a yard man and a maid really. Some are buried in white cemeteries, not necessarily Jewish, but with their owners, the blacks in the white cemeteries.

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12 Temple B’nai Jeshurun was established in 1958, making it the fourth oldest Jewish congregation in Alabama. The original Temple was built in 1893. It was torn down after a new smaller building was built inside the older structure in 1958. The Temple was inactive by the 1980’s, with the title being transferred to a local church in 1989.
There was a bond that was certainly different than the image of Simon Legree. If they weren’t family members, they were well-treated and well-respected and well-liked.

That had cooled considerably by the . . . remember Demopolis was a community that was 50 percent white and 50 percent black, and control politically and economically was a focus. Every white . . . I’m not going to say every white . . . my father said that he was conservative. He didn’t come across on the Mayflower. He came across on the [Noah’s] Ark, and he believed in separate but equal. He thought that was valid. You could treat everybody alike, and that was a valid premise. Was he a segregationist? Yes. Did I grow up as a segregationist? Yes. That’s all we knew.

When I worked in high school growing up, we had a porter at the store about my age that went to the black school. We had a great time together, and we really had no problems. In high school, whites would play football on the field on Friday night. The blacks would play football on the field on Saturday night. More often than not, you’d find us looking through the fence at them playing on Saturday night and them looking through the fence watching us play on Friday night. Socialize any way, shape, form? No. My father . . . another story about him . . . one of his black workmen at the automobile dealership got arrested in a dry county [where alcohol is illegal] for having beer. Dad was furious, and he said, “Come on, Alan. We’re going down to the country jail and get Henry out.” He got down there, and he told the police chief, “I want you to come to my house. I’ve got beer at my house and I want you to arrest me. Then we’re going to the mayor’s house. We’re going to have a beer there and we’re going to arrest him. Then we’re going to your house, and we’re going to try to arrest you unless you let Henry out of jail.” Henry got out of jail. “Don’t get excited, Jake. Don’t get excited, Jake. It’s okay.”

He believed in fairness and equality. [It was] just [that] the prevailing sentiment then was ‘we’ve got to maintain control.’ The blacks aren’t nearly as well-educated. They’re not prepared to take an active role in governance in particular. That manifested itself that you couldn’t have a race . . . when blacks suddenly decided they could run for office . . . with two

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13 A cruel slave dealer in the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe.
14 The ship that transported mostly English Puritans and Separatists, collectively known today as the Pilgrims, from a site near the Mayflower Steps in Plymouth, England, to Massachusetts, in 1620. The culmination of the voyage in the signing of the Mayflower Compact is one of the greatest moments in the story of America, providing the basis of the nation’s present form of democratic self-government and fundamental freedoms.
15 The ship in which Noah, his family, and the animals were saved from the Flood, according to the biblical account (*Genesis* 6-8).
whites and one black running for the same office, because the whites would split the vote. I worked for a candidate when I was in college that was in a congressional race with . . . that was . . . one of the other candidates wanted him to give him $5,000 to get in the race so he wouldn’t split the vote. That opened my eyes a little bit.

It was a warmness . . . I’ve always said the difference in the North and the South and the attitude toward the blacks was the South recognized and appreciated the blacks as individuals, but not as a race, and it was just the opposite in the North. They accepted the blacks as a race, but not as individuals. When I was playing ball again in Birmingham, one of the white boys from Pennsylvania gave us hell about living in the South until his parents put their home on the market and found out blacks had moved in the neighborhood and the value of the house had gone down. His attitude was, “Why in the hell did they move into that white neighborhood. They knew that wasn’t for them.” That’s the point I’m making. Blacks as a race were fine, but blacks as individuals were not. It was just the opposite in the South. Blacks as individuals were fine, but the fear was if the blacks get in the majority, that’s the total, we’re in trouble.

Sandra: How did the Jewish merchants react during the late Fifties, early Sixties when all the businesses were becoming integrated and you had to remove the drinking fountains separate . . .

Alan: I imagine most of them were like everybody else. If you go to Selma [Alabama] tomorrow, you’ll hear stories of being active in the Ku Klux Klan.16 One of the Jewish restaurants there in particular had been very active on the negative side, but I imagine among the first generally were, if they hired blacks . . . would have been some of the Jewish merchants.

When I was at the university, by the way, in 1967, I managed apartments to help me pay my law school expenses. I was the manager of a 100-unit four-bedroom . . . apartments. There was not a single integrated apartment building in that entire city . . . the University of Alabama. The owner of the place was in Birmingham. I asked him, “Could I rent to blacks if we had an empty place?” He said, “You think you can handle it?” I said, “Yes, sir.” So we did.

That was the first integrated apartment in Tuscaloosa [Alabama]. I had some very liberal law school professors who were shocked. One said, “I’m sorry I gave you a ‘C’ in that

16 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. In the past it members dressed up in white robes and a pointed hat designed to hide their identity and to terrify.
course. I misjudged you.” “Thank you, sir.” That got me into every honorary in the university, because the faculty members were the ones that made a lot of that decision. They perceived me as doing something they couldn’t do. I got my apartment complex integrated without any fanfare at all, when they had been striving for that forever and ever and ever. They just told that professor, “Don’t worry. Alan’s got a gun, and he’s going to find you for giving him that C.” That was in 1967.

**Sandra:** What was the name of the apartment building?

**Alan:** It was called the ‘University House Apartments.’ It was built like a fort. I don’t think anybody could have hurt it if they’d have stormed it like the Bastille.\(^\text{17}\) I’ve always been a little bit proud of that, because . . . I worked at the Dean of Men’s office when I was finishing law school, as well. I was the Director of Off-Campus Affairs. I kept telling them, “It’s none of the university’s business what happens off campus. You need to abolish my position.” They didn’t, but abolished me instead. A year later, they finally did get a way to the apartment. That’s when the black students were starting to get active, walking, marching. There wasn’t but a handful of them. My job was to walk with them, to make sure if there was trouble, I’m supposed to handle the problem. One man. We never had any problem. It was a charade. It was like George Wallace\(^\text{18}\) standing in the schoolhouse door with the Kennedys\(^\text{19}\) right there. I was looking right down the window out of the law school library. I didn’t even bother to go over there, it was such a charade. We grew up in a strange time.

**Sandra:** For me, hearing these stories, it’s so interesting to be with someone who actually lived through that time and experienced all of the changes and all of the . . .

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\(^{17}\) The Bastille was a fortress in Paris, known formally as the ‘Bastille Saint-Antoine.’ The Bastille was built to defend the eastern approach to the city of Paris from the English threat in the Hundred Years’ War. It played an important role in the internal conflicts of France and for most of its history was used as a state prison by the kings of France. It was stormed by a crowd on July 14, 1789 in the French Revolution, becoming an important symbol for the French Republican movement.

\(^{18}\) George Corley Wallace (1919-1998) was the 45th governor of Alabama, serving four nonconsecutive terms: 1963-1967, 1971-1979, 1983-1987. He also ran for the presidency unsuccessfully. During the Civil Rights Era he was noted for his Southern populist and segregationist attitudes. Wallace’s most remembered utterance was: “In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” He tried to stop desegregation in schools by physically standing in the way of black students at several universities in 1963. Federal marshals and the Alabama National Guard under federal command forced him to step aside. He later renounced these views at the end of his life.

\(^{19}\) President John F. Kennedy and his brother, Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General of the United States.
Alan: I mentioned . . . it’s a little bit out of context, but we talk about these times. You’ve heard of Bear Bryant, the football coach at [University of] Alabama. He goes down in history as one of the greatest coaches of all time and had a reputation like none other in Alabama. One day I was in law school, and there’s a knock on the door, and it’s the dean. He interrupts a criminal law class and says, “Bear Bryant wants to see Alan Koch.” Needless to say, there was no problem getting out of that class and going across the street to the athletic building. I walked in Bryant’s office, and [he said], “Hello, Alan,” with that deep voice. “Yes, sir. How are you coach?” “Fine.” He said, “I know you went to Auburn.” I said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “I know you’re Jewish.” I said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “I’m trying to recruit this Jewish boy from Birmingham, and he insists on the fact that he wants to go to Auburn. I want you to go up there and tell him there ain’t no Jews in Auburn. He needs to come to Alabama. Isn’t that right?” I said, “Yes, sir. There weren’t any Jews at Auburn when I was there . . . maybe 10 or 15.” He said, “If that’s important to him, you need go tell him that he needs to be at Alabama, not at Auburn.”

He got me up to Birmingham to see a boy named Alvin Bressler [sp], who was intent on going to Auburn. I knew Alvin’s sister, who, by the way, was at Alabama. I told him Bear Bryant had sent me up there to tell him that he ought to come to Alabama, and I told him why. [I told him Bryant had] said, “There ain’t no Jews at Auburn, Alan. That’s exactly what he said. There ain’t no Jews at Auburn, and that if that’s important to you, you ought to come to Alabama.” He said, “Didn’t you go to Auburn.” I said, “I did.” He said, “Didn’t you like it?” I said, “I loved every minute of it, and you will, too.” He said, “I’m going to Auburn.” I said, “Why are you so sure that you’re going to Auburn?” He said, “Because they’re giving my girlfriend a band scholarship.” So I went back and reported that to Coach Bryant.

Two years later, Alabama’s recruiting a cousin of mine named Florian Opopo Koch at Demopolis High School, who’s an all-state football player. I hear he’s all set to go to Alabama, so I called him. I said, “Opopo, I want to talk to you about going to Auburn. You need to consider Auburn. It’s a great place. They know the Koch name over there, and they’ll really treat you well.” He said, “I’m going to Alabama.” I said “You really need to consider Auburn.”

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20 Paul William ‘Bear’ Bryant (1913-1983) was an American college football player and coach. He was best known as the longtime head coach of the University of Alabama football team. During his 25-year tenure as Alabama’s head coach, he amassed six national championships and 13 conference championships. Upon his retirement in 1982, he held the record for most wins as head coach in collegiate football history with 323 wins.
He said, “No, my mind’s made up.” I said, “Why are you so sure you’re going to Alabama?”
You know what he said? “Because they’re giving my girlfriend a band scholarship.”

Sandra: He learned.

Alan: He learned. He learned.

Sandra: That’s a great story.

Alan: Anyway, that’s about the only contact Bear Bryant ever made with anybody like me, when he needed recruiting help, because there ‘weren’t no Jews at Auburn.’

Sandra: That’s a great story. What was it like for you in Auburn, being one of the few Jews? Was there ever any issues?

Alan: It wasn’t any different than being in Demopolis. Again, you have to remember, I’m six foot five [six feet five inches]. I was then. I weighed 200 pounds. I had light brown hair. The nose could have been an accident. I don’t think anybody thought one thing or the other. Everybody on the team knew I was Jewish, and it was that way playing professional ball. I started out in Birmingham. They were very, very nice to me in Birmingham. They tried to schedule me to pitch on Saturdays, when Mom and Dad could come up and watch me play.

They were so nice to me that I didn’t want to ask for the day off for Rosh Ha-Shanah. I knew I wasn’t going to be actually playing, and as long as I was just in uniform sitting on the bench that would be okay. Before the game, the little Catholic general manager came in there that knew Mom and Dad, and he almost had a heart attack. “Damn it, Alan. What are you doing here on Rosh Ha-Shanah?” I said, “It’s okay.” “No, it’s not okay. Don’t even start. You get out of this . . . I’m going to give you five minutes . . . I’m fining you $50.” I said “Damn, Mr. Glennon [sp], you’re only paying me $500 a month.” “If you’re not out of here in 10 minutes, it’s going to be $100. Your mom and dad would kill me, and so would the Jews in Birmingham.” So my experiences were favorable.

Sandra: You played professional ball with the Detroit Tigers?

Alan: One year with them, and one year with the Washington Senators [baseball team]. I started in Birmingham, got to play in Atlanta with the old Ponce de Leon Park. I’d been there

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21 Hebrew for “head of the year”, i.e. New Year. The cycle of High Holy Days begins with Rosh Ha-Shanah. It introduces the Ten Days of Penitence, when Jews examine their souls and take stock of their actions. On the tenth day is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The tradition is that on Rosh Ha-Shanah, G-d sits in judgment on humanity. Then the fate of every living creature is inscribed in the Book of Life or Death. These decisions may be revoked by prayer and repentance before the sealing of the books on Yom Kippur.
with Auburn and Georgia [Institute of] Tech [nology—Atlanta, Georgia], too. I enjoyed playing in that environment, because of being in Birmingham. [I’ve] been to Colorado and Syracuse, New York, Puerto Rico one winter, and then Detroit [Michigan] for a year, and then Washington a year. That was in 1965, before I went to law school. That was during the civil rights legislation struggle in Washington [D.C.].

That’s another whole story [that] led to my demise as a ball player. Everywhere we went in 1965 . . . even [when] we went to Mexico . . . to play a series down in Mexico, George Wallace was on the front page of the newspaper. I mean everywhere. I asked one of the sports writers in Washington would he please write a story that all the people in the South were not racists. We were not all George Wallace. He said, “Alan, you know more about it than I do. If you write it, I’ll print it over my name.” I did. Next morning I had a call from the general manager, and Gil Hodges, who was the manager [of the Detroit Tigers], to come to the office. They printed the story. “You know about this story?” “Yes, sir.” “You know what it says then.” “Yes, sir.” What it said was everybody in the South wasn’t a racist, that I was from a ‘Black Belt’22 of Alabama which was not named for the color of the people but the color of the soil. I thought that everything was grossly exaggerated to substantiate the Civil Rights Act.23 Quote: “I haven’t been to a lynching in years.” End quote. That did not go over well with the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]24 in Washington. They threatened to boycott the ball games unless the Senators did something about their problem child. So they did. They optioned my contract to Honolulu [Hawaii], the Pacific Coast League. I said, “Why Honolulu?” They said, “Because it’s the furthest place from Washington that they play organized baseball.” “That’s not necessary. I think I’ll quit and go home and go to law school,

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22 The term “Black Belt” has long been used to describe a broad agricultural region extending from southwest Tennessee to east-central Mississippi and then east through Alabama to the border with Georgia in the American south. It was characterized by a history of plantation agriculture in the nineteenth century and a high percentage of African-Americans in the population.

23 The Civil Rights Act (PL 88-352) was enacted on July 2, 1964. It outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. It ended unequal application of voter registration requirements and racial segregation in schools, at the workplace and by facilities that served the general public.

24 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.”
if there’s still a Constitution left by then.” My sense of humor got me in trouble for ever and ever and ever.

**Sandra:** Did you regret the article?

**Alan:** No, and no one who’s ever known me has ever thought of me as a racist. I told them that, but that was the impression the article left.

**Sandra:** Did you regret leaving baseball?

**Alan:** No. It was like being a 16-year-old for 10 extra years. I always thought professional sports was an avocation, not a vocation. It was, again, like being 16 for another 10 years, until I quit. I knew I wasn’t going to make a career of it. I didn’t want to be a manager or a coach or anything like that.

**Sandra:** Were you ever on a baseball card?

**Alan:** Yes, I’ve got a card. It was called a ‘one-year-wonder card.’ Then there’s another set of Jewish baseball cards . . .

**Sandra:** I have that. I’ll have to look for you.

**Alan:** I’m in there, believe it or not.

**Sandra:** Great.

**Alan:** I laugh about the one-year-wonder card they printed. The Jews who have made headlines in Nobel Prizes and every conceivable academic honor in the world, and yet on my Jewish baseball card it said in effect you didn’t have much of a record as a pitcher, but you were a very good hitter. They calculated my batting average incorrectly and said that my career batting average was .350, which is marvelous, when it was really only .286 because they confused a denominator and a numerator. I said that of these people that for years have made fortunes out of math, they can’t even get the back of a baseball card correct.

**Sandra:** Is that the position you played, pitcher?

**Alan:** Pitcher. ‘Throw it and duck’ was my philosophy.

**Sandra:** When you were growing up in Demopolis, did your parents ever send you off to Jewish summer camp?

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25 The United States Constitution is the supreme law of the United States. It delineates the form of the government (executive, legislative, judicial), the doctrine of separation of powers. It describes the rights and responsibilities of the state governments and the states in relationship to the federal government. It has been amended 27 times.

26 The Nobel Prize is a set of annual international awards bestowed in a number of categories in recognition of cultural and/or scientific advances. They were established in the will of the Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel in 1895. The prizes are in Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, Literature and Peace.
Alan: As far as I know, our brother used to go to ... older brother ... they had socials ...

Sandra: Falcon.27

Alan: Falcon, right. Those had pretty well gone by the way by the time I ... When I was lower teens, like 12, 13, 14, I went to a YMCA28 camp in Selma [Alabama] for three years, for 10 days each summer. G-d first, others second, me third. I loved it. There wasn’t ever a problem. Mr. Paul Grist [sp] was the owner and operator of that, managed the YMCA there. If ever a man deserved to sit at the right hand to G-d, he’s the man. He was one of the nicest men that ever drew breath of air.

Sandra: After you finished law school, did you practice in Demopolis?

Alan: No, I decided that here I am with three degrees, and I’m unsure about what to do. I think maybe I ought to specialize. I went to NYU [New York University—New York City, New York] and got a master’s [degree] in tax law and came back to Montgomery and practiced in Montgomery for one firm. Another large firm recruited me. I went there for a year. I really had the wrong mentality to be a lawyer. I knew more law and less procedure than any man that ever drew breath of air. I left the law firm by mutual consent and got into health care. I worked as a lobbyist and liaison for the state hospital association for five years and then became director of the Alabama State Health Planning and Development Agency, which governed developmental hospitals and nursing homes.

I did well with that until I was fired by George Wallace. I don’t know why I went to a meeting up in Birmingham and told a joke I’d heard [that] somebody told me. I said, “You know what the state tree is. It’s the oak tree. You know what the state flower is. It’s the such and such. Do you know what the state vegetable is? No, it’s George Wallace.”29 There was one of these little things <points to the video camera> like a camera that took a picture of it, so it’s no wonder that I got fired when I got back to Montgomery [Alabama]. I went to work in hospitals, and I stayed 18 years in Mobile. I did a little health planning, a little in contracts. I did risk

27 From 1931 to the late 1950’s, courtship weekends in southern cities included Alabama’s “Falcon,” Birmingham, Alabama’s “Jubilee,” and Columbus, Georgia’s “Holly Days,” and Atlanta’s “Ballyhoo.” They were attended by college-age Jewish youth 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.

28 Young Men’s Christian Association, commonly known as the ‘YMCA’ or the ‘Y.’ Worldwide organization founded in 1844 that aims to put Christian principles into practice by developing a health body, mind and spirit. They offer recreational facilities, parent/child education programs, youth and teen development with after school programming, etc.

29 In 1972 an attempt was made on the life of George Wallace that left him paralyzed and in a wheelchair.
management: why people fall out of bed, why they get shots, and this, that, and the other, until I had a couple of surgeries and retired in 1999.

**Sandra:** Did you ever think of living anywhere but the South? You went to NYU [New York University—New York City, New York]. Did you ever think of staying up north?

**Alan:** No, and I still wouldn’t. No, never. I enjoyed my travels. They were wonderful. Linda, my wife, and I still travel every year. We . . . the cruise line . . . even after the situation in Greece. We enjoy cruising. It’s gotten now where it’s easier for us to drive down to Florida and go to the Caribbean than it is to go elsewhere. The ship’s usually the destination. We’ve been to all the islands so many times. We’ve enjoyed the food. Her twin sister lives across the street. Her husband loved to dance. They’re the dancers and entertainers, and I’m the camera man, so we have a good time.

**Sandra:** That’s great. Are you disheartened about Demopolis, just the fact there is one Jew left and that the downtown area is so desolate?

**Alan:** I’ve been pleased that it’s better than it could have been. I take my hat off to some of the people I graduated with who stayed there either as scholastics or other. I went over there a couple of years ago, and they had a tribute to me for something. That’s misguided. It ought to be on the other foot. When our parents took care of us, they did so in spades. I thought that would never be duplicated, but when I see what current Demopolis has done in the way of school facilities and recreation facilities, you have done just as well as our parents did. You’re the one who deserve the tribute because . . . that’s black and white now. It wasn’t that way when I was there. Downtown may be like a downtown everywhere, but that little community will survive. They will survive. The nucleus is there for them to prosper.

**Sandra:** If you could recall one of your fondest moments of living in Demopolis, growing up in Demopolis, what would it be?

**Alan:** I don’t know. I’ve gotten a disproportionate amount of attention all my life from playing ball. I can’t brag about playing ball, other than the kind of stories I’ve told you today. It was a marvelous experience, from the exposure to Bear Bryant and all these other people, getting to see people. I’m glad I did that, but what I remember most is what I regret the most. I regret that I didn’t do what a lot of my classmates did, and that’s go back [to] Demopolis and help it maintain the environment that it had then and continues to have now. I should have gone back as a coach or teacher. I’ve taught enough night law school, and I was dean of students at a junior
college one year, and all my career. I missed being an academic. I should have done that, and if I had my life to do over again I probably would do it. When I got out of Auburn, though, they were paying a teacher $3,000 a year, with a $600 a year supplement if you stayed there coaching from 3:00 to 6:00. You were there from 7:30 [a.m.] to 6:00 [p.m.] for $3,600 a year. I didn’t want to do that.

Sandra: That would have been a tough . . .

Alan: Still, I regret that I didn’t go back to help maintain a community that was so good to my family and to me, and to the Jewish community, as well. I could communicate with those people, and vice versa.

Sandra: On that note, I think we’ll conclude. It was a wonderful, wonderful interview. You’ve been one of my favorites. That was great.

<End Disk 1>

INTERVIEW ENDS