This is an oral history interview of Elliott Levitas, memoirist, interviewed by Nat Gozansky. This is the first of a multiple [part] interview and is being conducted on August 31, 1992.

Elliott, let’s start with just the big global picture. Who is it, generationally, who came to Atlanta? Were they grandparents, what families? Let’s just, in a thumbnail way, describe the family tree.

Elliott: Sure. Paternal side. My father, Louis J [Levitas]—LJ they used to call him—he came to Atlanta as a young man. I would guess in his early twenties, that would be my guess. He had come to this country from Ireland, from Dublin. His family lived in Ireland, he grew up there. They had immigrated to Ireland from Latvia, from Riga, and there was a substantial Eastern [European] Jewish community that had come about that time. My father was educated, and grew up from a little kid, in Dublin. The family ran a dairy. I gather it was primarily a distribution of milk.

Nat: Not farming but process.

Elliott: That’s right. They had a dairy route and I gather they would buy the milk from a

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1 Louis J. Levitas was a long-time Atlanta resident and active participant in the Jewish Educational Alliance and numerous other Jewish community organizations.

2 “Eastern European Jew” refers to descendants of the Ashkenazi ethnic group, formed in the Holy Roman Empire in the early 1000’s. They established communities in Central and Eastern Europe.
place out in the country nearby. But that’s just piecing some things together. He had one sister, and I think, one brother.

He grew up in Ireland at a time when Irish Nationalism\(^3\) was also very active. While he was very close to the English culture, he had a great sympathy for the “Irish Cause”, as it were. In fact, he was a combination—as were many Irish Jews—Irish Nationalist and Zionist because Zionism\(^4\) and Irish Nationalism seem to have a good bit in common. He even described, as a youngster, having seen Queen Victoria\(^5\) come by in her coach on her Jubilee when she visited the various parts of Britain and the Empire. He was very much into both Irish and English culture. I gather he was sort of an independent-minded guy, and also, somewhat of a scholar. He read extensively and he wrote extensively.

When he was in his late teens or early twenties, he went to England, and I think spent some time in Liverpool. Maybe London, but I know Liverpool, and then ultimately, came to this country. Some friends of his from Dublin, some buddies of his, had come over to this country and they were living and working in New York City, [New York]. Apparently, one or two had come to Atlanta. So, when he got to this country—again, as a young man—unlike a lot of the Jews from Eastern Europe, he had this sort of Anglo background. He spoke perfect English, some people say with a little Irish in it, but I never was cognizant of that. Lived in New York for a short period of time…

**Nat:** This was about when?

**Elliott:** It would have been towards the “nineteen teens” [1910-1919] because he was still a British subject. There was some question during World War I\(^6\) whether he would be drafted into the British Army. He was active in selling bonds, and things like that, while he was in this country. But that would have been the period.

**Nat:** He doesn’t come because of some oppression. He doesn’t come as the Eastern European Jews come, although his lineage goes back. He’s just a young man in quest of his fortune, and friends say, “This is a great place.”

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\(^3\) Irish nationalism is an ideology which asserts that the Irish people are a cohesive people. The movement ultimately lead to most of the island seceding from the United Kingdom in 1921.

\(^4\) Zionism is a movement that supports a Jewish national state in the territory defined as the Land of Israel. The State of Israel was established in 1948 and Zionism today is expressed as support for the continued existence of Israel.

\(^5\) Victoria was Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland from 1837 to 1901.

\(^6\) World War I was a global war originating in Europe and lasting from 1914 to 1918.
Elliott: That’s right. A number of years ago I got over to Dublin and found out where the old family place was, and they were the low end of the economic scale. They lived in a very modest row house on Clanbrassil Street, which was in the part of London that was both Jewish and poor. I’m sure—I said he was an independent sort of guy—I’m sure a combination of family pressures as well as “I’ll make my own,” having been given the opportunity of a fairly good exposure to education and other things, he came to this country to make his way rather than escaping oppression. But he always maintained his contacts with his friends and family, primarily in Ireland, but also in England.

Nat: There’s a Levitas family today in Ireland and in England?

Elliott: There are people, relatives. I don’t think they have the name Levitas. I think they—there’s another name and I can’t think of it—Whitaker may be the name. It was sort of the maternal side of the family.

But I remember as a youngster, he would get letters from his sister, who was still living there, and would write to her and send her money. I remember that, even as a youngster. He would tell stories. He was born in 1884, so that gives you some sense . . . he must have been in his mid-twenties then, when he came to the United States. It would have been at a time when Joyce was writing. That would have been his period in Dublin. He was always very proud of that lineage, that contact with Ireland.

Nat: Well-read but formal education ending…

Elliott: I would guess…

Nat: … about college?

Elliott: …no no, short of college.

Nat: Short of college? Probably because of the economics.

Elliott: He clearly had gone to a Hebrew school, a cheder of some sort, because he was very versed in Torah, and prayers, and read Hebrew very well, and things of that sort.

To digress for just a moment, there’s a well-known synagogue in Dublin known as the Adelaide Road Synagogue. It’s been there for many years. He sang in the choir there, and

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7 A cheder is a Jewish religious elementary school for boys.
8 Hebrew for “teaching”, Torah is a general term that covers all Jewish law, including those recorded in the Talmud and other rabbinical works.
9 Adelaide Road Synagogue in Dublin, Ireland, was an Ashkenazi Orthodox congregation founded in 1822. The building was closed in 1999 and services were moved to the Terenure Hebrew Congregation.
one of his buddies in the choir, one of his mates—they also shared the same pew—was the Briscoe family. Robert Briscoe, who later became the Lord Mayor of Dublin.

Nat: The Jewish Mayor.

Elliott: The Jewish Lord Mayor. He and my dad were contemporaries, sang in the same choir, sat on the same pew. A very funny story . . . before he [Briscoe] became Lord Mayor, he was a fundraiser for causes in Israel and he made a visit to this country. My father went to Harold Hirsch, who was one of the founding partners of Kilpatrick and Cody and he was a very prominent German Jew. My dad—again, I think a lot because he spoke English, didn’t have the accent—had been well accepted in both the Reform as well as the Orthodox community. He suggested that Harold Hirsch invite Briscoe to Atlanta. Miles Alexander, my friend, was going through some old files and he came across this correspondence and gave it to me recently.

Nat: How delightful.

Elliott: Briscoe, in fact, came here on one of his fundraising tours. Several years afterwards, when he became Lord Mayor and was in the United States on a goodwill [trip to] get business for Ireland, he made a stop in Atlanta. Bill Hartsfield, William Hartsfield, was Mayor at the time, and they rolled out the red carpet. When Briscoe got off the plane at the airport and was greeted by Hartsfield, he said to the Mayor, “And would you be knowing my good friend, Louie Levitas? I’d like to see him.” That was his sort of greeting to Atlanta at the time. It so happened that Hartsfield and my father were in the same office building, the old Grant building downtown, so of course he knew him and he got them together. But that’s a digression. He came to Atlanta, I think, because he had a friend here.

Nat: After a couple of years in New York.

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10 Robert Briscoe was an Irish politician who served in the Irish parliament from 1927 to 1965 and was active in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Sinn Féin. In 1956, he became the first Jewish Lord Mayor of Dublin.

11 The Lord Mayor of Dublin is the honorific title of the chairman of Dublin City Council, which is the local government body for the city of Dublin, the capital of Ireland.

12 Harold Hirsch began practicing law in Atlanta in 1904 and, for more than thirty years, represented the Coca-Cola Company. In 1936 he was instrumental in establishing the Atlanta Jewish Welfare Fund.

13 “German Jews” were those who immigrated to Atlanta immediately prior to the outbreak of World War II.

14 Reform Judaism emphasizes the evolving nature of the faith, the superiority of ethical aspects over ceremonial ones, and a belief in a continuous revelation.

15 Orthodox Judaism strictly follows the written Torah and the Oral Law concerning prayer, dress, food, sex, family relations, social behavior, the Sabbath day, holidays and more.

16 William Hartsfield served as the 49th and 51st Mayor of Atlanta. His tenure extended from 1937 to 1941 and again from 1942 to 1962.
Elliott: Yes, after a short time in New York. I would think a couple of years, maybe less. He came here to see what it was all about, and he was a bachelor at the time.

Nat: This is early twenties at this point?

Elliott: This would be late teens, early twenties.

Nat: The War [World War I] has ended.

Elliott: That’s right, the War was over. He had become active, became very active right away, in Jewish communal affairs. The Alliance\(^\text{17}\) the synagogue—he taught at what they then called the Bible School at the synagogue. He was very active in the Zionist organization B’nai B’rith\(^\text{18}\).

Nat: When you say the synagogue, which synagogue?

Elliott: AA Synagogue [Ahavath Achim Synagogue\(^\text{19}\)].

Nat: He comes to Atlanta and immediately connects with the Jewish community, the Eastern European dominated side.

Elliott: Right, but had contacts with the German Jewish community. In fact, he was at one point early on, elected president of B’nai B’rith, and in those days, B’nai B’rith was a primarily Reformed German Jewish organization. If you remember, Leo Frank\(^\text{20}\) was president of B’nai B’rith lodge here.

Nat: Right.

Elliott: But it gradually began to accept certain of the Eastern European, and my dad got involved in that. He was very much involved in the Jewish community primarily, although he became involved in the broader community, but mostly in the Jewish community. Through that contact he met my mother.

My mother was the daughter of one of the pillars of the AA Synagogue. She was a social worker and was like the Executive Director of what today would be the AJCC\(^\text{21}\). They called it the Jewish Educational Alliance. That’s where they met.

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\(^{17}\) “The Alliance” refers to the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta.

\(^{18}\) B’nai B’rith is the oldest Jewish service organization in the world and is committed to combating antisemitism and bigotry and supporting the security and continuity of the Jewish people and of the State of Israel.

\(^{19}\) Ahavath Achim Synagogue, located in Atlanta, is one of the oldest Conservative synagogues in the region.

\(^{20}\) Leo Frank, a Jew, was falsely accused of murdering 13-year-old Mary Phagan. He was convicted and jailed, then kidnapped from jail and lynched in 1915.

\(^{21}\) The Atlanta Jewish Community Center (AJCC) was located in Midtown Atlanta and offered programs, events, and classes for Jewish families. The AJCC was replaced by the Marcus Jewish Community Center which is
Nat: Her family name…
Elliott: Goldstein.
Nat: Oh, so you’re from a long line of dentists (laughs).
Elliott: That’s right, all of the Goldsteins are my relatives (laughs).
Nat: Your mother is a Goldstein, and we’ll turn back to that in a minute. And they’re active in AA and very visible in the Jewish community. Given your father’s choice of how he would quickly settle into the Atlanta community, they meet.
Elliott: That’s right. I gather as a bachelor. He’d been a bachelor for a number of years here. He got around, dated a lot, or whatever they called it in those days. He used to tell me about [how] he had his horse liveried at a livery stable, which is right near where Georgia State is today. He lived not too far from there. In fact, the Jewish community was very much located in that area. The first AA Synagogue building was not too far from where the old Municipal Auditorium and Georgia State is today. Anyway, he had his roommates, and friends of his who were also young single businessmen.
Nat: What was he doing?
Elliott: He—almost from the beginning, in fact he may have done that in New York before he came here—he was a life insurance salesman. An agent, initially for Metropolitan [Life Insurance Company], and did very, very well. In fact, Metropolitan promoted him to Assistant Manager of the office here, and in those days, for a Jewish person to have been put in that position was sort of a recognition of his abilities and success. They kept pressing him to become a manager. They couldn’t make him a manager here, either because of the Jewish part, or because there were people above and they couldn’t move them out. They kept pressing him to become a manager and he would relocate to Richmond or some other place. Finally, he said, “I don’t want to do that. Here is where I’m going to be.”

He left Metropolitan and became an agent with New York Life, where he remained for fifty or sixty years. He became one of the doyens of that organization and he knew all the people, not just here, but the executives in New York. Later in my life, when I happened to be in New York, I was brought in to meet these people because they knew my father. That’s the business he was in, I think almost entirely from the time he got here.

currently the primary Jewish community center in Atlanta.

22 A doyen is the most respected or prominent person in a particular field.
Being active in B’nai B’rith and having gotten involved there, he became one of the founders, as an adult, of the AZA [Aleph Zadik Aleph\(^\text{23}\)] here in Atlanta. In fact, the chapter today is named for him, the Louis J. Levitas, Chapter #134. But at the time he organized this, got these boys together, the two advisors at that time [were] my dad and a Mr. Alexander who was Cecil Alexander’s\(^\text{24}\) father—the architect’s father—coming very much from the old line reformed community here. In fact, Mr. Alexander’s father . . . was a confederate Civil War veteran. The family went way, way, way back. But these two men who had been active in B’nai B’rith, organized this Jewish Youth Organization chapter here. He devoted twenty-five, thirty years as the advisor and became not just advisor but father confessor, etc., to all of this generation of young boys who came through. People who ultimately became leaders. Gerald Coyne was one of his protégés, and they still talk about that. I remember as a kid when they used to have meetings of committees over at the house. And as a youngster, he would take me to what was then the Jewish Children’s Home on Lower Capitol Avenue right near where the new Olympic stadium is to be.

At that time, AZA was a secret fraternity with knocks and hand clasps and passwords and ritual. And I was a little kid who was brought in with my dad on Sunday afternoons because there was no place to leave me, and because my mother would be off doing other things. So I got to know those people who were coming through AZA at that time. My dad was very much involved in that.

Nat: Secret. What, was it—how do I want to say it—selective? Could any Jewish boy be a member of AZA, or did you have to . . .

Elliott: As far as I know. I mean, you had to be voted into it, but I don’t think there was any [selection], not that I was aware of.

Nat: In that sense, it was as much as it is today, an opportunity for young Jewish [boys] . . .

Elliott: Yes, although they had much more ritual associated with it in those days.

The other thing my father did, they joined what was called then, the Jewish Progressive Club\(^\text{25}\). Again, as a young boy I remember on Sunday mornings being taken down

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\(^{23}\) Aleph Zadik Aleph (AZA) is an international youth-led fraternal organization for Jewish teenage boys. Its sister organization for teenage girls is B’nai B’rith Girls.

\(^{24}\) Cecil Alexander, Jr. was an architect—principally a designer of commercial structures—best known for his work “shaping the skyline of Atlanta”.

\(^{25}\) The Jewish Progressive Club in Atlanta was a social organization established in 1913 by Russian Jews who felt
with my dad when he would go to work out, or play handball, or volleyball, down there.

But he became active in the synagogue as well and the brotherhood of the synagogue. As the AA synagogue moved from being strictly Orthodox into a more modern orthodoxy and then conservatism, he had been involved. When Rabbi Epstein\textsuperscript{26} came here, my dad was one of the people who met him. They became friends very early on. When Rabbi Epstein would be out of town, my dad would actually conduct the services on Friday night because Friday night services were an innovation. That was a very modern thing, the late services on Friday night. If the rabbi was out of town, my father would conduct the services. So he was very much involved in that as well. Those were the principal areas in which he continued to function all through his life, primarily in the Jewish community.

Nat: When does he meet and marry your mother?
Elliott: Would have been the early [nineteen] twenties. They got married in, I would guess, early twenties.

Nat: He doesn’t stay single very long in Atlanta.
Elliott: No. I’d say a couple years, two or three years at the most. My paternal grandparents I never knew, they lived and died in Ireland. In fact, I told you I went to Dublin. I was in college at the time. Actually it was my first year at Oxford [University] and during the spring holiday, I went over to Ireland and I met some of his friends. In fact, [I met] the man that he knew in Atlanta, who had gone back to Ireland. I met them and some of the relatives.

On a later trip, Barbara was with me. We had just gotten out of the Air Force at the time and we were taking this sort of tour of Europe before I went into practice. We went to London and I remembered that I had never gone to the cemetery where my grandparents and aunt were buried. So we went out to the cemetery and found this caretaker out there and he looked up in the book, what row and what plot. We went there and found the graves, but they were not marked. They were without headstones. I took photographs and I came back and told my father about this, and he didn’t know that. He was under the impression they’d left money. He was getting along in years by this time. But when he heard that his parents and sister didn’t

\textsuperscript{26} Rabbi Harry Epstein was involved with numerous local organizations in the Atlanta Jewish community. During his rabbinical career, he was also involved with the Zionist movement and national Jewish affairs.
have these headstones, he immediately took steps to do that. That became, at that point in his life, one of the most fulfilling things he was able to do. He was so grateful that he found out about it and could rectify this. I remember after they were installed, his friend took photographs and sent them over so he could see it was taken care of. He continued to maintain that type of awareness of his early days as a kid.

He married my mother, it must have been the early twenties, because my brother was born in 1924. They must have been married a year or so before my brother was born. They had these common interests. My mother, as I said, was very active in Jewish causes. They both, at that time, not only were they both Zionists, my mother was one of the founders of Hadassah27 here. They also came out of that liberal Jewish tradition—and I mean liberal in the political sense, not in the religious sense. They were active in social issues of the day, child labor and things of that sort. Both of them worked at the Federal Penitentiary with the Jewish prisoners out there. My mother, because of her role as the Executive Director of the Jewish Alliance, and my dad, because he conducted services out there. In fact, he would drive out on Sunday mornings, this time in a car, an early car, to conduct services for the Jewish prisoners. He would go out with Dr. Philip Weltner28, Charlie Weltner’s dad, and they became friends. Dr. Weltner would go out to conduct services for the Christian prisoners and my dad for the Jewish prisoners. He, even years later, would say that it would scare him because Mr. Weltner drove too fast. He kept telling him to slow down and he would say, “You only live once,” and that sort of thing. (laughter)

But my mother also worked out there. In fact, she met and has a photograph from, the late teens or early twenties, with Eugene Debs29 who was a prisoner . . .

Nat: Oh my.

Elliott: . . . out at the Federal Pen, because of his pacifist activities during the war. She has this photograph of him, and as a result told me a lot about why, and who, and what, and so forth. They had these common interests. That was what really brought them together.

Nat: And her whole family has been very active in the Atlanta Jewish community and the

27 Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, is a volunteer service organization founded in 1912 by Henrietta Szold. It currently has over 300,000 members and supporters worldwide.
28 Dr. Philip Weltner was a lawyer and served as chancellor of the State University System and as president of Oglethorpe University. His son, Charles (Charlie) Weltner, served as Chief Justice of the Georgia Supreme Court, and as a Democratic member of the Georgia General Assembly.
29 Eugene Debs was an American socialist, political activist, trade unionist, and one of the founding members of the Industrial Workers of the World.
City of Atlanta.

Elliott: That’s right. Her father was Irving and Marvin Goldstein’s, and all the girls’, grandfather. And their father was my grandfather’s oldest child. In fact, he was the first one who came to this country. They still went by their Yiddish, Hebrew names in those days. My grandfather was (sounds like Schmul-yankle: 9:28 Elliott Levitas T1-S1-02) and Marvin and Irving’s father was (sounds like Ahvra-mayer: 9:41 Elliott Levitas T1-S1-02). Ahvra-mayer was the first of the children who came to this country and then they gradually all followed including my grandfather, my mother’s father.

Nat: Marvin is your mother’s . . .

Elliott: . . . my mother’s nephew.

Nat: Marvin’s father is her brother.

Elliott: That’s right. But in terms of age, my mother was like Irving Goldstein’s sister because they had that many children. Avra-mayer was the oldest and then there was (sounds like Merra-dinna: 10:27 Elliott Levitas T1-S1-02), and then it got down to Morris, and then it finally got down to Irving and then my mother and then my aunt. So, while she was Marvin and Irving’s aunt, she was closer in age to them.

They became very active in all aspects of the Jewish community. My mother, because she worked at the Alliance, again, got to meet all the young men and women coming up in those days. She used to tell me, she would have to get some of them out of jail, some of them back in school. She said the biggest troublemaker of all, he was in trouble with the police and everybody, was Meyer Balser30. Meyer Balser became very active in the Jewish community, a very prominent citizen. She used to talk about having to get him out of trouble. She became very active in Hadassah both locally and nationally, and founded . . .

Nat: . . . founded the Atlanta Chapter.

Elliott: . . . the Atlanta Chapter and the other spinoffs. In her later years, for about twenty years, she was sort of the “Mother Superior” of this group of young Jewish female leadership that came along.

She never drove. Never drove a car, because at the time she would have normally

30 Meyer Balser was very active in the Atlanta Jewish community for many years, including work with the Jewish Educational Alliance, Atlanta Jewish Community Center, and the William Bremen Jewish Home.
driven as a young woman, she didn’t want to appear to be competitive with her husband. Although, she was a feminist, in a 1918 sense of the word, she knew that she did not want to be competitive with her husband. He drove, and she made *gefilte fish*\(^{31}\) as well as being head of Hadassah and this, that, and the other.

She knew Henrietta Szold\(^{32}\), and founders of Hadassah, and things of that sort, and became very active in that and every other Jewish organization. Brandeis\(^{33}\), she was one of the founders. Council of Jewish Women\(^{34}\), she was one of the first Eastern European Jews who became active in council which was again a Reformed German Jewish stronghold. But she felt that you had to be part of the Jewish community and that meant the entire Jewish community. [She] was not just a “chief”, she was very much an “Indian”. Even in her later years, she would take a certain number of cards to collect for Federation and make phone calls on Sunday morning to get people to contribute or join whatever organization she was soliciting for.

Her father was one of the, as I said, pillars of the synagogue. I’ll show you a picture of him, a very interesting picture of him when we go upstairs. He studied *Talmud*\(^{35}\) and he did what old Jewish men were supposed to do. His wife was a *balabuste*\(^{36}\) and he read the Talmud, he studied. When he died and they had—which was unusual in those days—they had his funeral service in the synagogue. The rabbi dubbed him (*sounds like* Reb-Schmul-yankle: 14:55 Elliott Levitas T1-S1-02) which he is still referred to as Reb, as an honorific.

**Nat:** A learned man.

**Elliott:** That’s right, a learned man. When they call his name for *yahrzeit*\(^{37}\) or things of that sort, [they] give him that title. He was very active. He was one of the founders of what they call the *chevra kadisha*, which was the group that ministered to the dead. When a person died they made sure the rituals . . .

**Nat:** . . . the burial society.

\(^{31}\) *Gefilte fish* is a dish made from a poached mixture of ground deboned fish and is traditionally served as an appetizer in Ashkenazi Jewish households.

\(^{32}\) Henrietta Szold was a U.S. Jewish Zionist leader and founder of Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America.

\(^{33}\) Brandeis University is a private research university, with a liberal arts focus, in Boston, Massachusetts.

\(^{34}\) The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) is a volunteer-based organization that works toward social justice and support for families, children and women.

\(^{35}\) The *Talmud* is the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law and theology.

\(^{36}\) *Balabusta* is a Yiddish expression describing a good homemaker among Ashkenazi Jews.
Elliott: . . . the burial society. They had someone, the shomer, the guard who would sit up all night before the funeral, before the burial. He was very active in that.

He was a peddler to begin with, saved a little money and bought some real estate. They had these houses and little stores on the Southside. When I was growing up my mother used to collect the rent, go by and collect the rent. At a time when my father, shortly before that, would go around and collect a quarter or fifty cents . . .

Nat: . . . for the insurance . . .

Elliott: . . . these people were paying on insurance.

Nat: First your dad came around and got the insurance premium and then your mom came around and got the rent.

Elliott: In the same areas. I would ride in the cars with them and they would go around. My grandfather—when I was growing up, by the time I came along—they had what I would consider, even by today’s standards, a big house on Washington Street right near second base at the Atlanta stadium. It had a front staircase and a back staircase and a built-in sukkah.\footnote{A sukkah is a temporary hut constructed for use during the week-long Jewish festival of Sukkot. It is topped with branches and often well decorated. Sukkot is a major Jewish festival held in the fall to commemorate the sheltering of the Israelites in the wilderness.}

Nat: Wow.

Elliott: During Sukkot the roof would come down, but they had these pulleys so you could raise the roof and put the branches over it. You didn’t have to build one each year, you just built the roof. They had two kitchens, a meat kitchen and a dairy kitchen.

Nat: Two separate kitchens.

Elliott: Two separate kitchens, and in the meat kitchen they had—from earlier times, but it was still there and they still used it—an old wood stove, a big wood stove. They had a milk sink and a meat sink. A big house. It was sort of the focal point, because my grandfather was the patriarch and my mother was the “prime minister”. Because she was the daughter who was resident here and by virtue of being daughter, she gave the directions to everybody else on behalf of the grandfather. The Seder\footnote{The Seder is a ritual performed by a community or by multiple generations of a family, involving a retelling of the story of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in ancient Egypt. It is often accompanied by a feast, like the Seder that marks the beginning of Passover.} were big, very big.

For many, many years we did not ride on the Sabbath. My mother, I told you she

\footnote{Among Jews, yahrzeit is honoring the anniversary of someone’s death, especially a parent.}
didn’t drive, had to fix the Sabbath dinner and everything for my grandfather. He lived over on Washington Street and we lived over near what is today Grady High School, the northside. She used to take the streetcar every Friday over there and fix the Shabbat for my grandfather and then come back home. On the High Holy Days we would go over on that side of town and stay in my grandfather’s house, so we wouldn’t have to ride on the High Holy Days.

Nat: At that time, the synagogue was over there.
Elliott: Synagogue was two blocks from his house.
Nat: That’s a big Jewish community over there and your parents are among the younger Jewish community that starts moving into Virginia Highlands.
Elliott: That’s right.
Nat: Later they go to Buckhead.
Elliott: They go out to Johnson Estates and then to Buckhead and beyond. In fact, when I was born, the first stop they made when they left the Southside was just past what is today the Georgia Baptist Hospital. There was an area in there between the Georgia Baptist Hospital and Ponce de Leon that was populated with the Jews who had first left the Southside.
Nat: That’s where Beth Jacob was founded.
Elliott: That’s where Beth Jacob was founded, exactly. There was a Hebrew school I went to, two Hebrew schools I went to in that area. My parents were living on Ponce de Leon when I was born.
Nat: Which was when?
Nat: You’re the second child?
Elliott: I’m the second child. My brother was born in 1924. Two of us. [When] I was an infant, they had moved already, by that time, further north to Eighth Street. Then when I was seven years old, about the time of my brother’s bar mitzvah, we had moved over on the other side of Grady to what became Brookwood Park. That had become a very mixed neighborhood, a

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40 Shabbat is a weekly 25-hour spiritual observance, from just prior to sundown on Friday, through the completion of nightfall on Saturday.
41 The Jewish High Holy Days include Rosh Hashanah (“Jewish New Year”) and Yom Kippur (“Day of Atonement”).
42 Congregation Beth Jacob is Atlanta’s largest Orthodox congregation.
43 Bar mitzvah is a Jewish coming-of-age ritual for boys, aged 13. Bat mitzvah is the corresponding ritual for girls.
lot of non-Jews. Predominantly non-Jewish, but a lot of Jewish families had moved there. The Eplans had moved there, the Sugarmans had moved there, the Hirschs, the Coyens. They were all in that neighborhood and others. But it was very much, predominantly a non-Jewish neighborhood. So, I grew up with friends who were very mixed in terms of their religious affiliations. But we did move, or they moved progressively northwards. Then when my brother and I had gone off to college, my mother and father moved over to Lindberg and then ultimately to Lenox Road, and that's where she died.

**Nat:** Your mother's very active in the Jewish community and your father's very active in the Jewish community and your maternal grandfather. Obviously, your father's family is still back in Ireland, so your maternal grandfather is the patriarchal head of the Goldsteins and the small Levitas clan. When your parents moved off of Ponce [de Leon], it is, in a sense, the first time that the family starts to integrate, if you will, with the non-Jewish community.

**Elliott:** I would think that's right.

**Nat:** Your father's insurance business probably is not part of his, directly so much, his social life. He goes out and he does his business. This is part of a whole new experience in terms of family lifestyle.

**Elliott:** My mother was a very, very, little girl when they came to this country. She grew up speaking English, although she spoke Yiddish fluently. She had friends, she had some non-Jewish friends, from public school when she went to Fair Street Public School and to Girls High School. So she had non-Jewish friends. The superintendent of the Atlanta school system was a very dear friend of hers—Ira Jarrell[^44] was her name—that she had known from high school days. But mostly, they went to the Jewish Progressive Club, they were in the Jewish community, and they lived basically within a Jewish environment until they moved north.

**Nat:** But your sense is—in part because of your father's speech pattern virtually, and part because of just the philosophy of both the Goldstein family and your father—that they were among that small group of Eastern European Jews who found acceptability among the, at that point, elitist of the reformed Jews.

**Elliott:** Exactly. In fact, the epitome of the German Jewish community was Rabbi Marx[^45].

[^44]: Ira Jarrell was a career educator in the Atlanta Public Schools and became the first female Superintendent of Schools for Atlanta in 1944.

[^45]: Rabbi David Marx was a longtime leader of The Temple congregation in Atlanta.
My parents were very friendly with Rabbi Marx. I mean very friendly, he gave them a wedding gift. There was that part of bridging this and I think that came a lot from my father’s activities in B’nai B’rith and broader communal activities.

**Nat:** Let’s stop and let me change the tape.

<End Tape 1 Side 1>

<Begin Tape 1 Side 2>

**Nat:** Let’s back up a little bit and focus on your brother and you as youngsters, growing up in this richly Jewish home. Your brother was born in the early 1920’s, mid-1920’s, six years ahead of you.

**Elliott:** Seven.

**Nat:** It’s the two of you, and you’ll end up growing up in the Virginia Highland / Lenox Road area. You haven’t moved far from home, come to think of it.

**Elliott:** That’s right.

**Nat:** Tell me about your best recollection of yours and your brother’s youth; where you all went to school, your Jewish education outside of the obvious, the presence of your grandfathers.

**Elliott:** First of all, my brother—being seven years older—was very much of an older brother. In fact, some of my earliest recollections involve him, because he was very protective of me and brought me along. By virtue of being so much older, we didn’t play in the same play groups and we weren’t in the same teams, but I learned. He was much older than I was, therefore, I could watch what he was doing. He taught me how to play baseball and these types of things. We were very close, personally. I looked up to him and respected him. When I say we were close, we also shared the same bedroom because, in those days, you had two bedrooms.

The parents had one and we were in the other one.

**Nat:** Something your children probably can’t process.

**Elliott:** That’s right. That’s exactly right. They don’t understand that.

**Nat:** He was a kindly older brother.

**Elliott:** He was a very kindly older brother.

**Nat:** But you were never, obviously, in the same school at the same time because of the age spread.
Elliott: As I say, I looked up to him a great deal because he was my older brother and he was nice to me. He protected, was nice, patient. He was also, in our family, the good kid. He was the good kid. He did the right things. I was a little bit of a hellion. He made model airplanes. He would make these incredibly, intricate, model airplanes that you put the paper around, the thin paper on. It would take weeks and weeks and every so often, by accident, I would break one of them.

We went to public schools within walking distance of our house but, as you point out, we were never in the same school at the same time. He had already gone on to junior high school when I entered the elementary school. Then when I got through elementary school he was already getting ready to go into the Navy. He had entered college when World War II\textsuperscript{46} broke out.

Nat: Where did you go, Morningside?

Elliott: No, my first elementary school I went to doesn’t exist anymore—Clark Howell, Tenth Street School. It was off between Piedmont [Road] and Peachtree [Street] on Tenth Street. A lot of the Jewish kids of my age, and before me, went there. In fact, Barbara went there for a couple of years. They changed the name from Tenth Street to Clark Howell when I was there. Then when we moved on the other side of Grady, over to Park Drive, we moved from a duplex into a single family house, a bungalow. I went to Inman School which was an elementary school in those days. It was one of the first experimental progressive education schools in Atlanta. But we would always walk to school. Then I went from there to Boys High, of course, and graduated from Grady.

Nat: Help me understand. Boys High was different than Grady?

Elliott: Yes, it was physically. There were, from the late nineteenth century until 1947-1948, basically four white high schools in Atlanta. There was Girls High School, there was Boys High School. Those two were basically academic and, to the extent there was such, a preparatory school for college. There was Tech High School which, while it wasn’t entirely vocationally-oriented, there was a lot of that there. Then there was Commercial High School which was a co-educational school that was, again, vocational but bookkeeping, secretarial, typing, shorthand,

\textsuperscript{46} World War II was a global war that lasted from 1939 to 1945. The vast majority of the world’s countries eventually formed two opposing military alliances: the Allies and the Axis. By the end of the war, more than half of the Jewish population of Europe had been killed by the Nazis in the Holocaust.
things like that.

**Nat:** The Jewish community, valuing education and pushing your generation to get as much as possible, tended to dominate in Boys High School.

**Elliott:** Boys and Girls High School, that’s right. While there were some Jews who went to Commercial, it was unusual. [Those] kids usually came from families that needed to have that child out working very early. Very few Jews went to Tech High School, although some did. My father-in-law is a graduate of Tech High School. But by the time I came along, 95 percent of the Jews went to Boys High School or Girls High School.

Tech High School had almost become antisemitic. I remember many incidents. Boys High School, by the time that I got to it, was located on the campus of what is today Grady High School. Tech High School, at that time, was also located on that campus. Boys High School was located on the western end and Tech High was located on the southeastern end. We shared the masonry building that is there today. In those days, most of our classes were in what they called portables. They were wooden buildings that had been built as temporary buildings and we were in them twenty to thirty years later. But that’s where I went to high school. I went to O’Keefe, I went to Clark Howell, Inman, which I said was sort of a progressive education school, and then to O’Keefe Junior High School and then from there to Boys High. I attended Boys High for two years. At that time, Mrs. Ira Jerrell—the superintendent I mentioned that my mother knew—and the Board of Education, decided to reorganize the school system in Atlanta to eliminate sexually-segregated education, gender-segregated education, and to create—for the first time—community high schools and do away with the junior high schools. So, what was located at Boys High / Tech High, became a community high school known as Grady. Boys High and Tech High went out of business.

**Nat:** And Girls High?

**Elliott:** Girls High became Roosevelt High School. O’Keefe, which was a junior high, became a high school.

**Nat:** Let’s focus a little bit on that. You said earlier that most of the Jewish kids of your generation were going to Boys or Girls High. Very few, if any, were going to Tech, and some [went] to Commercial. As a result, Boys High has a large Jewish population, but I’m sure it’s still far from being a majority. It’s still a predominantly Protestant community.

**Elliott:** That’s right.
Nat: But in the context of Boys High, where there is numerical strength—if you will—your sense is that there’s not a lot of overt antisemitism. But at Tech High, where Jews are not present, there are incidences on the community campus that suggest that’s where antisemitism would be expressed physically.

Elliott: Physically, yes and very visibly.

Nat: Kids are getting beaten up?

Elliott: Had that in O'Keefe. But when Boys High and Tech High would play competitive sports, frequently there would be shouted epithets. The Tech High band would play songs which were derisive of Jews, during the game.

Nat: So that means the band leader was supporting this behavior.

Elliott: Whoever it was, they would actually play derisive songs about Jews.

Nat: This is 1946?

Elliott: 1945 to 1948.

Nat: What happens when they try to bring women into the school and they consolidate the other two schools?

Elliott: There was always sort of an undertone on the part of some people, but because Tech High was no longer an independent entity there, you didn’t have the same type of incidents that you had when Boys High and Tech High were sharing this common campus. Interestingly enough, even at the time when there were hardly any Jews at Tech High, those who were there were very well accepted. I don’t know if you know Gene Asher47?

Nat: Yes.

Elliott: Gene Asher went to Tech High and was the boxing champ at the same time—a year or so ahead of me, but—about that same time which was sort of anomalous.

Nat: Except that our whole Southern experience suggests, when you have one or two Jewish families in a community, somehow everybody can make an exception and befriend them. It’s when you get the collective, the strength in numbers, comes the….

47 Gene Asher was a championship boxer in high school, a decorated Marine, and a respected journalist. He was sports writer for The Atlanta Constitution and The Atlanta Journal, founded The Jewish Georgian newspaper, and wrote a monthly column for Georgia Trend magazine.
Elliott: …that’s right. At Grady there was, percentage-wise, a more significant Jewish group than there was even at Boys High. Because, by this time, a substantial portion of the entire Jewish community was now living [there]. Not all. But when they switched the schools over, friends of mine that I went to Boys High with, were now going to Brown High or Murphy High on the other side of town, because they still lived over there. But Johnson Estates, Morningside, Lenox Road; the area that I lived in was now pumping not just boys, but girls, into this environment. It was like going to the social clubs on the weekend to come [to school] on Monday morning, because we’d all been out to the same parties over the weekend. There was a significant Jewish group. From the very beginning, Jews played major roles in the student activities and increasingly even in athletics, which had not traditionally been the case.

Nat: That’s right, that’s the period where Arthur’s opens. Doesn’t Arthur’s and Sal’s on Virginia Avenue come into . . .

Elliott: . . . this is a little before that, but it’s about that time.

Nat: The Jewish community gets compacted enough [then]. Beth Jacob doesn’t move over there yet, but Shearith Israel48 by then is [there].

Elliott: Shearith Israel had opened up on University [Avenue] and Beth Jacob had not yet opened up there. They were still . . .

Nat: . . . they were still over by Georgia Baptist [Hospital].

Elliott: But the migration was beginning by this time. It was clearly moving out in that direction. The parties that I used to go to on Saturday nights were at homes in, what is today, Johnson Estates area, Homestead, Pasadena, Noble. That’s where the kids were going. When I was in high school, that’s where we would have our parties.

Nat: The mix is both Eastern and German Jews.

Elliott: Increasingly so.

Nat: Those historic divisions are breaking down. In residential patterns, they’re breaking down.

Elliott: They’re beginning to break down. Barbara was one of the first Eastern European girls who began to date the German Jewish boys. As is typically the case, the girls were brought in before the boys were. But it was beginning to break down. In the AZA chapter that I

48 Shearith Israel is a Conservative synagogue in Atlanta.
belonged to, while it was still predominantly conservative Eastern European, there were a number of the German Jewish families who also had children, boys, in my group. Ours was the only one. There were still some that were exclusively Sephardic or exclusively Ashkenazi. But we had begun to bring in both Reformed . . .

Nat: Is this the chapter that is named after your father?

Elliott: No, my father didn’t want my brother or me to be in the chapter that he was advisor of.

Nat: Oh, so, he’s over here active with this group of boys and you fellows are . . .

Elliott: He didn’t want it to appear that he was showing favoritism, or to create additional problems for us. For many years there was just one AZA chapter. By the time my brother and I came along, there were three or four. My dad was still advisor of this other one, but my brother and I had joined one or two of the others.

Nat: You joined the same one your brother had been a member of?

Elliott: No, he was in one and I was in another. Again, pretty much for the same reason. Although, in those days AZA—unlike [how] it became later—didn’t come in as a group. They had age groups from the very youngest kids who were in college by this time. So, when you joined an AZA chapter at age thirteen, fourteen, whatever it was, there would be people in that chapter who were in college or late high school. You sort of phased your way into it. My brother had belonged to one of the chapters and I belonged to another one. I guess mostly because my friends had gone into that one.

Nat: Your brother graduates from Boys High.

Elliott: Right.

Nat: He never experiences girls in the classroom, but you’re blessed with two years…

Elliott: . . . one year . . .

Nat: . . . one year of co-ed. My recollection is that, at that time, a lot of the Atlanta Jewish kids went up North to college.

Elliott: Yes, they were beginning to go up North to college.

Nat: What, about your brother and you?

Elliott: My brother went to Emory [University] for one or two years, when World War II

49 Sephardic Jews are descended from Sepharad, Spain or the Iberian peninsula.
broke out. Then he went into the Navy. I think one of the reasons he went to Emory at that time was, he had gotten a small scholarship. He was in journalism and Emory, at that time, had a School of Journalism. I’m sure that was part of the reason that he went to Emory. When I came along, I went to Emory primarily for economic reasons. It was cheaper than going off to school.

Nat: Because you could stay at home.

Elliott: Because I could live at home. I was trying to decide between [University of] Georgia and Emory. I think the family felt that Emory was academically superior. While it was more costly, it was worth the cost and the differential wasn’t as great as it is today. But it was felt that you’d get a better education at Emory. It would be less expensive than going off to North Carolina, Duke, or some of the Eastern schools. But Jews were beginning to go off to the Eastern schools, to Princeton, to Ohio State, and to Michigan and some of those places.

Nat: You’re going to Emory in 1948? 1948 and 1949?


Nat: What kind of Jewish population is on the campus?

Elliott: Small, very small. I would guess there would be less than a hundred, probably, about a hundred. [There were] two Jewish fraternities and most of the undergraduates belonged to one or the other. There were a few Jews who did not affiliate with the fraternities, but it was very small, a small number.

Nat: Does your brother come back to Emory after the War?

Elliott: Yes, he comes back after the War and goes straight into dental school.

Nat: Because you didn’t need a college degree.

Elliott: That’s right.

Nat: He comes back and he goes to dental school. Do you two end up on campus together?

Elliott: Yes, we’re on the campus at the same time.

Nat: For the first time you’re in the same place at the same time. But he’s now been matured by military service.

Elliott: Yes, that’s right. He had spent the War in the Navy. After the War, he came back and went straight into dental school. That was the first time we’d ever been on the campus, a school, together. He was still living at home at that time.

Nat: Were you guys still sharing a bedroom, or have we gotten a three-bedroom house by then?
Elliott: We had separate bedrooms by that time.

Nat: We’re in “high cotton” by then. How old is your dad then?

Elliott: My father was born in 1884.

Nat: He was well into his thirties when your brother was born and forties when you were born?

Elliott: That’s right. He would have been . . . 1884, my brother was born in 1924 . . . so, he was close to forty.

Nat: He was close to forty with his first child.

Elliott: There were seven years between my brother and me.

Nat: He was forty-seven when you were born. When does he pass away?

Elliott: He was eighty-four.

Nat: He’s there when you graduated college and law school?

Elliott: He was there when I graduated college and law school, that’s correct. That’s right. He died when our youngest child was about one or two years old.

Nat: So, the Levitas boys go to the closest quality school. The family has a premium on quality, but the economics are modest enough that that is influencing the two of you on where to go.

Elliott: Oh yes. I mean, they were scraping to do that. It was not a “gimmie”.

Nat: But you’re both very bright and could go pretty much anywhere that you want, in terms of academics.

Elliott: Academically, but economically this was the place to go.

Nat: You start at Emory. When do you go to Oxford [University]50?

Elliott: After I graduated from Emory. I go to Emory 1948-1952 and go to Oxford in the fall of 1952.

Nat: You’re there . . .

Elliott: Two years.

Nat: Two years as a . . .

Elliott: Rhodes [Scholar51], and get my degree there.

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50 The University of Oxford is a collegiate research university in Oxford, England. It is one of the oldest, and most prestigious universities in the world.

51 The Rhodes Scholarship is an international postgraduate award for students to study at the University of Oxford.
Your brother, meanwhile, probably finishes dental school.

He was out of dental school by the time I went to Oxford. I think he probably got out of dental school at the end of my freshman or sophomore year. He went into practice here in Atlanta with Marvin and Irving Goldstein.

With his cousins.

That’s right. In fact, there’s no doubt in my mind that the reason that he went into dentistry, and got into Emory, was because of Marvin and Irving. In fact, he was reminding me the other day, in those days it was hard to get into dental school. Very hard, and it was especially hard to get in as a Jew because they still had quotas. They did not like a lot of Jews in dental school.

Journalism background wasn’t a factor in all of this?

He had given up the journalism by that time, although he always wrote, and still does. He was editor of dental journals and he wrote the Progressive Club newsletter in return for a free membership, and things of that sort. He’s always been a writer and a journalist and an editor. But he reminded me the other day that he had applied [to dental school] and hadn’t been accepted.

He was going to wait another year and apply again. Then, on Rosh Hashana, the day before Rosh Hashana, he gets a call from Irving Goldstein who tells him, “You’ve got to get over to dental school tomorrow. If you get there tomorrow, you’re going to get in.” I don’t know if he had to take a test or if this was just registration day. But Irving, through some of his contacts—see, Irving was very prominent in the alumni at the dental school—had helped Ted get this opportunity. The big dilemma was, “Do I go on Rosh Hashana?”

Ah…

Irving said, “Yes, you go on Rosh Hashana.”

This is Ted, who grew up in his grandfather’s house on the High Holy Days so the family wouldn’t walk. Because he’s seven years older than you.

That’s right, even more so.

This is much more a part of his [upbringing].

He went on Rosh Hashana and got into dental school. That was very largely due to Irving.

Marvin and Irving are both older than Ted?

It was established in 1902, making it the first large-scale program of international scholarship.
Elliott: Oh, yes. Marvin just had his eightieth birthday and Ted is in his late sixties.

Nat: Ted goes to dental school then, in spite of the fact that he had to go register on Rosh Hashana. He goes into practice with his cousins, Marvin and Irving.

Elliott: Then after a few years he opens his own office and specializes in children’s dentistry.

Nat: Little brother, Elliott, finishes college at Emory, where there are very few Jewish students. There’s no dramatic change during your four years on campus, I assume.

Elliott: No.

Nat: [He] gets a Rhodes scholarship, which has got to be a double rarity. I mean, not that many Emory kids are getting Rhodes scholarships.

Elliott: I think I may have been the second in history.

Nat: How many Jews in the Atlanta community had gotten Rhodes scholarships by that time?

Elliott: There was one person who had. Not from Atlanta but had moved to Atlanta, Morris Abram. I knew Morris, he was sort of one of the people that were leaders in the political environment in those days. He was one of the people who really encouraged me in this regard. But it was a real rarity both for Emory, and certainly for the Jewish community. Very rare.

Nat: Obviously you had distinguished yourself academically at the college.

Elliott: It was funny. I wasn’t sure what the hell I wanted to do when I got out of college. I was having a good time and I was going with Barbara at the time. She was at Agnes Scott [College].

Nat: Another bastion of Jewish students. (laughter)

Elliott: That’s right. (laughter) She went to Agnes Scott largely because I was at Emory.

Nat: Let’s take a little digression and get Barbara worked into this picture. You and Barbara meet before you go to college?

Elliott: Oh, yes. On her father’s side, she’s second-generation Atlanta family. She grew up here.

Nat: What is her maternal name?

Elliott: Hillman. Her family owned a business. They were moderately well off. I mean, they

52 Morris Abram was an American lawyer, civil rights activist, and president of Brandeis University. In the 1950’s he served as a Democratic Congressman for the Fifth District in Georgia.
lived in a big house and went on vacations, and things like that. They also belonged to the AA Synagogue. We knew them. My brother was teaching Sunday School and had Barbara in his class and told me there was this nice girl that I ought to get to know.

Nat: Your brother really looked after you.

Elliott: He really did. This was a nice girl that I really ought to get to know, which I didn’t do at the time. I was in college second year, I guess, before I really started taking Barbara out. In the meantime, she had been dating all of my closest friends. I wasn’t involved with her, but she was a nice girl and I had gotten to meet her when we would double-date and things like that. She was in high school. I don’t remember whether she got elected or not, but she ran for president of the high school student body. She may have gotten elected. She was very active in the high school at Grady. She was a senior superlative, they used to have in those days. Prettiest girl in high school and she was very—compared to the other girls of her age, or even a little older—she was more serious-minded. She was interested in more serious-minded things. I started dating her in my second year of college.

Nat: She was the politician before you were the politician.

Elliott: Yes, more so. Largely because I wanted to emulate my brother, I became a journalist. I was the editor of the newspaper in high school. I was sports editor and then the editor. She was the politician, always was. In fact, she was in student government when she went off to college in Michigan. That’s a big place for a Southern girl.

Nat: She goes to Michigan [State] initially?

Elliott: No, after I go to Oxford. When she graduates from high school, I’m still at Emory.

Nat: You’re dating now.

Elliott: We’re dating a lot now. She’s sweetheart of the fraternity and I’m president of the fraternity and we’re dating.

Nat: She decided to go to Agnes Scott.

Elliott: She decides to go to Agnes Scott. By the next year, I thought I was going to law school, and she was going to probably go to some college near where I was going to law school. When I went to Oxford, she went to Michigan. She had friends there and it had a good reputation for what she wanted to do. Our cousin, Ronnie Goldstein, Irving’s son, now a dentist, was at Michigan. He was sort of encouraging her to come up there. So she went off to Michigan after a year at Agnes Scott.
Nat: Which is consistent with the socio-economics of the Hillman family.

Elliott: That’s right.

Nat: She goes off to Michigan and you go to England.

Elliott: I go to England.

Nat: But I gather there’s some commitment between the two of you.

Elliott: Yes, there is. We both acknowledged that we would be dating other people while we were there, but not seriously. I came back that summer. A lot of the guys who go over on two-year Rhodes, stay abroad that summer. They just stay gone for two years. But I wanted to come back to see Barbara, and it also happened that my brother got married that summer. So I came back to be in the wedding. I came back, and Barbara and I were close enough at that time that she and her family were invited up to the wedding as well. It just worked out, from my point of view, very conveniently that I had a good reason for coming back—not just to see my girlfriend.

Nat: Now, this is on a tape, and you’ve just said that . . . I want to be here when she listens to the tape and hears you suggest that, it wasn’t for her that you came home that summer.

(laughter)

Elliott: (laughter) Well, I say it worked out well, but I would have had trouble justifying, if nothing else, the expense to fly back. It was too long to take a ship. I wanted to come back, but I would have had trouble justifying the expense. Why, after we spent all this money, time, and effort; you’re over there, why shouldn’t you stay there? I think we would have probably tried to figure out, if I hadn’t come back for the wedding, some way Barbara could have come across. I don't think so.

Nat: Not in those days.

Elliott: Not in those days. That would have been a little bit too much.

Nat: You come back, and you spend the summer, but you have to return. Do I take it we got engaged during this summer?

Elliott: No. We pretty well knew that we were going to, but I go back and I finish up over there. By this time I know, I knew before I went over, that I was going to law school and now I’m ready and I start applying to law schools. Barbara is at Michigan, so I apply at Michigan and I apply at Harvard. I get accepted at Harvard and Michigan and then I got a scholarship at both places. A modest scholarship as I recall, part tuition, but it made a difference. Then I start negotiating with the two law schools about curriculum. At Harvard, what they wanted me to do
was go into the second year.

Nat: Because you’d been studying more at Oxford.

Elliott: Yes. I actually had a degree by that time, a bachelor’s degree in law. Michigan said, “You can go into the second year, we will give you one year’s credit. But you can structure a curriculum involving first year courses that you feel you need, in order to be up to speed.” That appealed to me more than what Harvard was talking about. I felt I wanted to take things like criminal law or civil procedure or things of the sort that I did not get at Oxford. I got torts, and property, and future interests and contracts, but some of those other things I felt I really wanted to get academically. They offered me, as I recall now, a much better scholarship. But in the meantime, Barbara is looking at colleges in the Boston area that she can transfer to, for her senior year. She’s got that lined up and I’m looking at Michigan and I finally decide that Michigan is really going to meet my needs better. So, I go to Michigan and she stays and finishes her last year there. That Christmas holiday is when we get engaged.

Nat: Not to the surprise of any of your friends or family at this point.

Elliott: Absolutely not. Nobody is surprised.

Nat: Her mother is relieved that you finally behaved properly.

Elliott: That’s right. On New Year’s Eve of that year, we get engaged. They have an engagement party the next day, which happened to be my father-in-law’s and mother-in-law’s anniversary. We had this big engagement party but nobody is surprised at this point. It comes as no shock. In fact, it made a lot of sense that now I’m back, it’s going to happen. Also at this time I’ve got a two-year ROTC\(^53\) commitment that I have to finish.

Nat: Oh my.

Elliott: I had worked it out that I could finish law school before I did that. And it was very funny, by the time I got out of law school and was going into the Air Force, (laughter) the Air Force had more pilots than they could use, but what they didn’t have was lawyers. So they wanted me to go into JAG, Judge Advocate General\(^54\). What I worked out was . . . we get married in June.

Nat: You get married in June and you’ve got one more year, and Barbara has graduated.

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\(^{53}\) Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) is a college program, offered at over 1,700 colleges and universities across America, that prepares young adults to become officers in the U.S. Military.

\(^{54}\) The Judge Advocate General’s Corps (JAG) is the branch of a military concerned with military justice and
Elliott: Barbara graduates.

Nat: Barbara graduates and you’ve got one more year of law school.

Elliott: I come back to Emory. I transfer from Michigan to Emory, we move back to Atlanta. Emory is operating both a day and night school at this time. Barbara gets a job teaching, I get a job working in the afternoon at a law firm downtown and I take certain courses early in the morning at Emory and certain courses at night at Emory.

Nat: This is when?

Elliott: This is 1955-1956. I graduate from Emory undergrad in 1952 and spend two years. We get married in 1955 and so, in the fall of 1955 we’re back in Atlanta. We’re living here and Barbara is teaching school and I’m going to law school. Days go by that we don’t see each other. We leave notes on the refrigerator, the breakfast room table.

Nat: Because you’re in class morning and night. What law firm are you working for?

Elliott: I was working for Arnall, Golden, Gregory\(^55\) in the afternoons.

Nat: Which would have been a relatively new firm.

Elliott: A small, relatively new firm. Very small. There was Arnall, there was Golden, there was Gregory. They had a couple of guys who were sort of working part-time there, Charlie Weltner and Ben Blackburn\(^56\).

Nat: Charlie Weltner. His father and your father had been friends.

Elliott: That’s right.

Nat: You and Charlie . . .

Elliott: We knew each other.

Nat: Relative peers. Was he a little older?

Elliott: Yes, he was a couple of years older.

Nat: Ben Blackburn who . . .

Elliott: Who was working there for a couple of years.

Nat: We’ll be talking more about Ben.

Elliott: But that’s where I was working because I needed the money. Barbara was working

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\(^55\) Arnall Golden Gregory is a law firm with 165 attorneys in Atlanta and Washington, DC. The company was founded in 1949 by Ellis Arnall, Sol Golden, and Cleburne Gregory, Jr.

\(^56\) Ben Blackburn is a lawyer that served in the Georgia State Attorney General’s office and was elected as a Republican to the U.S. Congress from 1967 to 1975.
because we needed the money. I would get up early in the morning and sometimes just crawl on my hands and knees so I wouldn’t wake her up. And she would be gone when I came back. Then when I went to school at night, in night classes, she would be gone before I got up in the morning. We would spend, sometimes, almost a week and not see each other. But we’d communicate through notes. So, I did my last year in law school, was graduated from law school here, and that June went into the Air Force.

**Nat:** Graduated, as an Emory graduate.

**Elliott:** That’s right, and went into the Air Force immediately after that.

**Nat:** To meet your two-year obligation.

**Elliott:** That’s right.

**Nat:** By then we’re out of Korea?

**Elliott:** We were finished in Korea.

**Nat:** You were born so that you were too young for World War II and by the time you were ready for military service, the next conflict was passed.

<End Tape 1 Side 2>

<Begin Tape 2 Side 1>

**Nat:** This is the second interview of Elliott Levitas following up on the August 31 interview. Interviewer is Nat Gozansky and this interview is taking place on September 14, 1992.

Elliott, when we ended last time, you were describing finishing off law school (break in tape). As I was saying Elliott, before the phone rang, you had just described your last year of law school at Emory, your married life that year—or lack thereof—and you were about to start talking about going off for two years in the Air Force JAG. Let’s pick it up there. Let’s talk about the two years as a young lawyer, a Jewish lawyer, in the U.S. Air Force after Korea. Then we’ll just come back home and talk about the practice.

**Elliott:** When I got my orders, I was assigned to the Strategic Air Command (SAC) Eighth Air Force at Dow Air Force Base just outside of Bangor, Maine. I ended up in Bangor, Maine, they say voluntarily, but as a result of mutual mistake or at least unilateral mistake. At the time, as I told you, they were very anxious to get JAG officers in. So they said, “You can pick the section of the country you would like to serve in.” So Barbara and I talked about it and decided that we’d spent most of our life in the South, obviously, and it would be nice to spend a couple of years in Boston, New York, maybe even Philadelphia, that part of the country. So, when I
checked the box, I checked “Northeast”. When they sent me to Maine I said, “That’s a little bit more northeast than I had in mind,” and they said, “Well, you said northeast and this is northeast. If you had wanted to go to New York or Philadelphia, you should have said mid-Atlantic.” It’s always been clear to me to make that differentiation [now].

We looked upon this as a good time in our life, because I would be doing something that I enjoyed, having an opportunity to get my teeth into trying cases on my feet, a lot of responsibility early on. We also decided we would take advantage of travel. We didn’t have children at the time. We drove up to Maine, stopping along the way to visit places like Williamsburg, or Washington, Boston, and went right across the border into Maine. Barbara got a lobster right after we got there. I wasn’t eating lobster at the time, but I thought to myself that it [must have been] a very hungry Indian that ate the first lobster.

Nat: (laughter)
Elliott: In any event, we got to Bangor . . .

Nat: We weren’t keeping a kosher57 home, is what you’re saying.
Elliott: That’s right, we didn’t. We did at first, actually, for a while. But then, while we didn’t have things like ham, and we always kept milk and meat separate, we got to the point—particularly once we got to Maine—where we were buying, for the most part, meat at the supermarket. Although, for holidays we would . . . I think there was a kosher butcher in Bangor, or they would ship it up from Boston or Portland from time to time. We got a nice house there, an apartment actually. Very nice, very modern. The people in Maine thought it was weird but it was a very nice modern apartment and we made contact with the Jewish community. We met a lawyer up there (phone rings, break in the tape).

Nat: You moved, you didn’t live on the base. You lived in the city of Bangor?
Elliott: Actually, we lived in Orono which is a small town ten miles north of Bangor up the Penobscot River at the University of Maine. We were two blocks from the University of Maine, which was appealing to me because it let us participate in the university community.

Nat: Then you connected with the Jewish community.
Elliott: We had the name of a prominent attorney there, a man who was a number of years older. He had been there for many years and [he and] his family were “old Maine”, named

57 Orthodox Jews follow the laws of kashrut very strictly and have special kosher kitchens. They keep separate dishes and utensils—one set for dairy, one set for meat.
Through him we were able to go to services at their local synagogue. They didn’t have enough for a Reformed congregation or a Conservative congregation, so they had it all together, which meant you got a double dose. They would go through the whole thing in Hebrew and then through the whole thing in English (laughter). There was no acceptance of either doing it one way or the other or dividing it beginning and end. So, the services were very long.

We did plug into the Jewish community. We went to the community center, and one interesting sidetrack, the building was named after a family named Liss. Later, when I was telling my parents about this, my mother particularly said that she had visited in Maine many years ago to visit her older sister, whose name was Liss. She was married to a *cantor*, *chazzan*, all-purpose kind of guy. Now I doubt seriously that these Lisses were the same as those Lisses, whose name was on the building, but apparently there was some Liss family up there.

In the Air Force, I had two very enjoyable years. Tried a lot of cases, both prosecuting and defending. The strictures of military life never appealed to me, although I think I would have enjoyed it if I could have started off as a general.

Nat: (laughter)

Elliot: But coming in and having to take all the stuff you had to was… I mean, I did okay. I generally enjoyed those two years, made some very good friends, fellow officers that I still maintain contact with. One was a lawyer from Topeka, Kansas, Sam Jackson, who later became the highest black [person] in the [Lyndon] Johnson administration, and was a Republican and had also been involved in “Brown vs Board of Topeka” as part of the NCAA group. Sam and I maintained a friendship for years afterwards, until he passed away several years ago. In fact, they named a square after Sam in Washington [DC] where he was living at the time. A couple of the other lawyers that I got to know I maintained contact with.

Basically, we did what we set out to do. We traveled up into Canada, all around Maine, Bar Harbor, Mt. Desert Island, places like that. We look back on those years as being

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58 A *chazzan* is a Jewish musician, trained in the vocal arts, who helps lead the congregation in songful prayer. In English, this prayer leader is often referred to as *cantor*, a term also used in Christianity.

59 Samuel C. Jackson, was Assistant Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in the Nixon Administration, and an outspoken civil rights spokesman throughout his legal career.

60 Lyndon Baines Johnson served as the 36th President of the United States from 1963 to 1969. Formerly the 37th Vice President of the United States, he assumed the presidency following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

61 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, was a landmark U.S. Supreme Court case in which the Court declared state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students to be unconstitutional.
enjoyable years. I did make it a point of telling Barbara to remind me, however, when I said, “Gee, wouldn’t this have been great to do . . . ” all of the things that weren’t so great. Like Maine, which was 40 degrees below zero on occasion. In fact, being in SAC, we would have these alerts all the time, and I’d have to drive out to the base and strap my gun on and things like that.

Nat: Oh, even the JAG?

Elliott: Oh yes, we had military assignments. I was in charge of a group that was to defend a certain segment of the flight line against incursion.

Nat: Well, I’m reassured knowing a bunch of young lawyers were (laughter) . . .

Elliott: (laughter) . . . made you feel better, right? Part of this occurred, if I remember, during the Suez campaign in the Middle East. A time when the relations weren’t that good with the Soviet Union. Being a SAC base, we were on a very high state of alert. I kept thinking that the only possibility was that the *Ruskies* 62 would think about dropping paratroopers on our base, which I thought was sort of a remote risk. But they were very military. SAC was a very military group.

One of those mornings . . . they always used to do these practice alerts, like three or four o’clock in the morning. On one occasion—literally, when it was 40 below zero—I had a flat tire on the way to the base. One of the things about the military that was hard for me, is that late is unacceptable. If you’re not there on time, you are guilty of a crime known as “Failure to Repair” which was very serious, and during an alert, even more so.

So I kept saying [to Barbara], “Remind me [of] the bad parts.” But we basically had a very useful period of our lives.

Nat: Spent both years in Bangor?

Elliott: That’s right.

Nat: Did Barbara teach?

Elliott: She taught school. She taught fourth grade for two years and she too made good friends that we stayed in touch with over the years. One of whom was the sister or cousin, that we still are in touch with, of the man named Brontus who was Mike Dukakis’ 63 right-hand [man]. So we had that relationship.

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62 “Ruskies” is a mildly derogatory slang term for the Russian people.

63 Michael Dukakis is a Greek-American politician who served as Governor of Massachusetts and made a run, as a Democrat, for President in 1988.
Nat: You meet Sam, who you’ll later see again when you’re in Washington, and here’s another political connective person that—in a different stage of your life, I assume—you get to know.

Elliott: Right. In fact, he and I maintained contact. When he left the administration and, as I said, he was a Republican in the Johnson administration—I think at HUD if I remember correctly; when he left that, he became the head of the American Arbitration Association for providing arbitrators in all sorts of disputes. Sam called upon me on a couple of occasions to be an arbitrator. As you say, these contacts remain.

I was named the arbitrator in the DeKalb County and Atlanta School [system] dispute with the teachers; between the school system and the teachers, as to whether or not they would have a union and what certain rights, tenure, and things like that [they would have]. As a result of those contacts, I also made a lot of friends in the education business on both sides. One of my friends . . . because of my position, I could not represent some of these people. So I got—I don’t know if you know Ted Frankel64 . . .

Nat: Sure.

Elliott: I got him to represent a man named Marion Thompson, who was a controversial principal in the DeKalb [County] school system. As a result, Ted ended up with most of the representation, which he still has, of the Georgia Teachers’ groups, in arbitration and other litigations. So, those things interconnect.

Nat: That would have been before you went into the General Assembly.

Elliott: That would have been about the time, yes, just before.

But, to wind up the Air Force [piece], I did stay there in fact, two years. In February of the last year, they approached me and asked if we would like to go to Guam. Since I figured that Guam was south of Bangor . . .

Nat: (laughter)

Elliott: . . . I was delighted to go to Guam. We got all ready to go and they called me in and said, “We just realized that you can’t go to Guam unless you sign up for another year. If you sign up for another year, you can go to any place. You can go to Paris, you can go to London, Hawaii, Manilla, any place you want to go.” I said, “Not one day.”

Nat: (laughter)
Elliott: So, I served my full term and got out in the early summer of that year. It must have been 1958 I guess, or 1959, and came back to Atlanta, stopping on the way. I considered, briefly, taking a position with one or another agencies in Washington. But in those days, people were not staying in school as long, and I had already spent four years in law school essentially, two years in the Air Force. I enjoyed my Air Force time because of the legal work I was doing and I was ready to get back.

Nat: I guess, on a personal level, Barbara and you each had a modest income, for kids who had come from modest circumstances, then working through school. This must have been a pleasant time, free of any responsibility, steady income, and what have you.

Elliott: One interesting thing that was very important. When we got out of the Air Force and before we got back to Atlanta, we figured this was the last time we would not have the responsibility of paying rent or mortgage. We did not have children at that time, and basically we had an opportunity to travel. So we planned an eight-week trip around Europe. I knew the law firm that I was going to was very anxious for me to get back, and one day at the airport I ran into one of the senior partners of the firm. He became a very close friend and mentor of mine, Ellis Arnall. We told him our plans and I said, “I know that the other partners are really anxious for me to get back.” He said, “Don’t even think about it. This is the time you ought to take off. You’ll never have another chance like this.” So we did take those two months off and had a marvelous trip. We planned it very carefully, and while we had limited resources, we were able to take advantage of a travel agent in Bangor who had been around, and older man. We went from Ireland to London to Belgium, saw the World’s Fair in Belgium. Went to Germany, which we had trepidation about. Went to Berlin, we went over to East Berlin which was sort of an adventure at the time. Then we went through Austria, Italy, Spain, Portugal, France also. We really did the grand tour. That was one of the wise decisions we made.

Then we came back to Atlanta, and Barbara got a job teaching at Techwood School. [Then she taught] at Moreland Avenue near Little Five Points. So she taught first in sort of a low income area and then in a very low, poor income, public housing area. And I started practicing law.

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64 Ted Frankel is a partner with the law firm of Kirkland and Ellis in Atlanta.

65 Ellis Arnall was a nationally recognized litigator and served as Attorney General of Georgia before becoming Governor of Georgia from 1943 to 1947.
Nat: This is at Arnall Golden Gregory.

Elliott: Arnall Golden Gregory.

Nat: [It is] a firm that is part Jewish and part non-Jewish, [with] Governor Arnall... so there were political ties.

Elliott: That’s right. I would say, he was primarily the reason that I went with that firm. There was another firm, there were two other firms in Atlanta that I had talked to seriously. One of them, I’ll tell you an interesting story about, and it was one of the firms that I was interested in looking at. It was a little bit larger than Arnall Golden Gregory, which was a relatively small firm at the time.

This firm had never had an identifiable Jewish lawyer in the firm. They may have had somebody who had Jewish parentage, but never identifiably Jewish. They had decided that they would like to get a Jewish lawyer to come in, so we had some very serious conversations, fine firm. I decided not to do that however, because I wanted to practice with Arnall Golden Gregory—primarily Ellis Arnall—and felt that I would also get into bigger stuff sooner with that particular firm. This other firm, when I told them I was going with Arnall Golden Gregory, had decided they were going to get a Jewish lawyer, and they hired a young man named Cohen right out of law school. Several months later, when they suggested that he might want to join the Temple and the Standard Club, he let them know that he was Episcopalian...

Nat: (laughter)

Elliott: (laughter) ... and not Jewish. Turned out to be one of the fine lawyers in that firm.

Nat: But it wasn’t an issue of fear of antisemitism or anything like that. It was Ellis Arnall, who was not a Jew, who was mentoring you at Arnall Golden Gregory, and it wasn’t that you were looking at this other firm and saying, “I don’t want to be the only Jew.”

Elliott: That’s right. That was not part of it. In fact, in a sense, [it was] because they were making an effort to change their practice. At that time there were several firms in Atlanta, prominent firms, which did not hire Jews and did not for a number of years after that. This firm was making an effort to change and became one of the first firms.

Nat: Let’s focus on that, just in the context of the Jewish history here. We’re in the what, mid 1950’s?

66 The Standard Club is a private country club that was located in the heart of Atlanta’s Jewish community until the 1920’s.
Elliott: Late 1950’s
Nat: Late 1950’s. Arnall Golden Gregory had formed a few years before that, with Sol Golden, who was an active member of the Temple . . .
Elliott: . . . right . . .
Nat: . . . and certainly clear about his religion. Governor Arnall, I guess, after he had stepped down and retired from that office. Powell Goldstein was . . .
Elliott: . . . Powell Goldstein was still, very much around at the time. Haas Holland was a firm in town.
Nat: But Haas Holland was mainly all Jewish, was it not?
Elliott: Yes, it was mainly all Jewish.
Nat: I’m trying to think of the firms that were integrated at the time.
Elliott: There was Smith Ringold, something of that sort, that had several, one or two Jewish lawyers in the firm. Dijon Franklin was one who’s name occurs to me. But I think you’re correct in reminding me that the firms tended either to be all Jewish or didn’t have Jews. Arnall Golden Gregory, was clearly . . .
Nat: Gambrell certainly had no Jews. King and Spalding had no Jews. Alston Bird had no Jews. Trying to think who else was . . . well, your firm now, Kilpatrick Cody?
Elliott: Yes, they always had Jews.
Nat: They always had Jews . . .
Elliott: . . . because one of the founding partners, or close to founding partners, was Harold Hirsch. Harold Hirsch is very identifiably Jewish, very active in Jewish issues. In fact, he was the person, you may remember earlier I mentioned my father making contact with Bobby Briscoe. It was through Harold Hirsch, because Hirsch was involved in this Jewish activity that Briscoe was coming over to participate in.
Nat: Old line elite firms, as recently as late 1950’s, were still white and Christian. Although, here’s at least one firm that was looking to break out of that mold.
Elliott: That’s right.
Nat: There were a number of longstanding, non-elite, Jewish firms.
Elliott: Right.
Nat: Then there were a handful of firms which today, I guess, are considered among the elites like Arnall Golden [Gregory] and Powell Goldstein and Kilpatrick Cody, that are
integrated on that level. You and Barbara have obviously stayed connected. Your Jewishness is an important part of your values.

**Elliott:** Oh, very much so.

**Nat:** You’ve stayed connected all along, and you end up at a law firm where you’re going to have fellow Jews and non-Jews. But your mentor is the politician, as opposed to Mr. Golden. 

**Elliott:** Although I’ve worked with both of them, particularly at the beginning, it was clear that Arnall was going to be the person that I would, down the line, work most closely with. Also, I would not have joined a firm had I thought there was an exception being made for me because I was the “right kind of Jew”. I mean, I wouldn’t have done that. There was a possibility that that might have occurred, but basically, as far as I was concerned, the firms that had an exclusionary rule, I didn’t want anything to do with them because I viewed that as antisemitic bigotry.

**Nat:** You had been working for Arnall Golden [Gregory] while you were a law student at Emory.

**Elliott:** That’s right.

**Nat:** So there was a tie there. You said there were three firms: there was the firm that hired Cohen, only to discover he was Episcopalian; there was Arnall Golden Gregory . . .

**Elliott:** There was a third firm which was a firm like Arnall Golden Gregory. Arnall Golden Gregory, also, I felt very comfortable with partially because of their political outlet, as well as the quality of the legal work which I saw.

**Nat:** So let me stop you there. At this point you’re drawn to Mr. Arnall, and now you’re suggesting that part of the attraction to the firm was that you felt comfortable with where they were politically. Had Elliott Levitas started thinking about a career in politics, or were you still a lawyer in your mind?

**Elliott:** I never, certainly not at that time, had not thought about serving in elected public office. That I would be very actively involved in politics, there was never any question about. I had been tangentially involved in the county unit litigation. I had, even as an undergraduate at Emory, gone down to the State Capitol to testify against certain legislation that got a lot of notoriety, a lot of press coverage. That was even as an undergraduate. There was no doubt in my mind that I would be involved in politics, but it never dawned on me . . .

67 The county unit system allotted votes by county in party primary elections, with little regard for population differences between rural and urban areas of Georgia.
Nat: . . . that it was Elliott Levitas, civic citizen and practicing lawyer, as opposed to congressman.

Elliott: That’s right. Later I began to think that I might, at some point, serve in elective office. But that was several years down the line.

Nat: 1958 you come home. You’ve had two years of sort of perfect freedom of responsibility. You and Barbara are now getting towards your late twenties. There probably is some family pressure about when are there going to be grandchildren.

Elliott: Right.

Nat: You go to work for a firm that is more business-oriented, distinguished from your military time when you probably did a lot of criminal like stuff.

Elliott: Right.

Nat: You’re in a firm that’s going to be very comfortable with you being civically involved.

Elliott: That was also important. I mean, it was not a question of, you’re going to take time away from what you should be doing as a lawyer. The civic involvement was considered a very strong plus by the firm, even Sol Golden. It was both within the Jewish community and the general community. Also, [I was involved in] what basically, you would describe as pro bono work. I got involved with cases that had political implications, civil liberties implications. [I] defended or represented a person who went by the name of Lord Joseph, who “God had sent to Atlanta to save from its sins”. I learned a lot about habeas corpus and lock-ups and lunacy hearings during those experiences. Also became very active in the Jewish community and early on served on the boards of the Jewish Community Center.

Nat: You and Barbara joined AA when you came back?

Elliott: Oh yes.

Nat: You join AA and now you get back to the Jewish Community Center, B’nai B’rith, which your father had been so instrumental in . . .

Elliott: . . . AJC, which years before, Ashkenazi Jews were not that involved in, but that had changed. Jewish Community Center and a number of other Jewish communal activities. Also got involved in Democratic party politics and was an alternate delegate to the 1964 Convention68.

68 The 1964 Democratic National Convention was held in Atlantic City, New Jersey. President Lyndon B. Johnson was nominated for a full term and Senator Hubert H. Humphrey was nominated for Vice President.
Nat: Are you in DeKalb county now, at this point?
Elliott: Yes, deliberately moved into DeKalb county. We were looking only in DeKalb county at that time for a lot of reasons. I mentioned earlier that we still had the county unit system. Fulton, DeKalb, and Rockdale county were the three counties in what was then the Fifth Congressional District. It was not likely that anybody from Fulton county was going to be elected, because of the unit system, and I thought that if I ever wanted to get involved in politics, I would come to DeKalb county.
Nat: So, even back around 1960, there’s some positioning.
Elliott: Keeping the options open.
Nat: Keeping the options open for congressional . . .
Elliott: . . . as one possibility. And at that time, obviously, there were very few Jews who lived in DeKalb county. DeKalb county was likely, under 200,000 population. We moved into DeKalb county. Some Jews were beginning to move into this area in the Briarcliff / Lavista Road area.
Nat: Had Beth Jacob moved out?
Elliott: Had not yet moved out. Had not yet moved here. But Shearith Israel had already located, as I recall it. So we moved into DeKalb county, into apartments. In fact, we’ve lived in DeKalb county ever since and within a mile and a half of where we first roosted. We’ve stayed pretty close to this area. Near Emory, which was also an attraction to us, to be near the university. Barbara became active in communal activities as well. We sort of figured that we were going to be here.
Nat: What were the Jewish activities, the Jewish communal activities at that stage? In my mind, [I’m] defining that stage as before you go to the General Assembly, before you seek elective office. What were the Jewish communal activities that you were most involved in?
Elliott: I was involved in The [Jewish] Federation [of North America]69 community relations type things, dealing with antisemitism problems and broader community involvement. I was very involved with American Jewish Committee70, the Community Center, these were boards that I

69 The Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) represent 147 Jewish Federations and over 300 Network communities, which raise and distribute more than $2B annually, and through planned giving and endowment programs to support social welfare, social services, and educational needs.
70 The American Jewish Committee is one of the oldest Jewish advocacy organizations, supporting Israel and the Jewish people, and defending democratic values for all.
was serving on at the time.

Nat: Obviously, you had fully bridged any historical gaps between the Eastern European and the German Jewry if you were on the board of the American Jewish Committee.

Elliott: Right.

Nat: I assume, at that point it was still dominated in its leadership by the Reformed Jewish community.

Elliott: It was. It had not yet reached out and brought in the Eastern European, Russian Jews. But it was beginning. It was very comfortable, there was no awkwardness. I told you earlier that I had friends through the AZA chapter that I was in. It was one of the first that had also bridged this gap.

Nat: Right.

Elliott: So I had friends already who were part of the German Jewish community, as did Babs, who had dated a lot of those guys before we got married. We had friends in that area. Also, our contemporary friends, for the most part our closest friends, were also bridging that gap. Miles and Elaine Alexander, for example. It was, therefore, very comfortable for us to be a part of that group that was making the Jewish community unitary.

Nat: This is at the same time that Martin Luther King\(^1\) has come to the foreground.

Elliott: Yes, about that time. In fact, as a youngster when I was fifteen years old, I served on an inter-racial Atlanta Community Youth Council which was pretty heady stuff. I had known and knew Martin King, Martin Luther King, face to face. We had worked on things together, and Coretta [Scott King] as well. Although I was not part of the group that was going to Selma, [Alabama\(^2\)] we were very involved with activities in Atlanta, which was in great transition at that time—sit-ins at lunch counters and restaurants. We were part of that group of white moderate liberals, certainly racially civil rights liberals, who were making it possible for the activists to be successful.

Nat: The “we”, is that part of the Jewish community that is active in the American Jewish Committee and active in AZA?

Elliott: For the most part, that’s right.

\(^{1}\) Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was an American Baptist minister and activist who became the most visible spokesperson and leader in the civil rights movement from 1954 until his death in 1968.

\(^{2}\) The protest marches from Selma to Montgomery Alabama in 1965 were key events in the civil rights movement.
Let’s see, Rabbi Rothschild of the Temple obviously was involved. Who else in the Jewish community comes to mind?

Well, the whole Jewish community really. This fellow named Joe Gross, who had been very much active in Jewish communal life, but also in the bridging of this. With a few exceptions, most of the Jewish leadership [was involved]. Marvin Goldstein, for example. Marvin and Irving, his brother, opened their hotel without any protests, sit-ins, or so forth and permitted Blacks to use their hotel as public accommodation.

That was Atlanta . . .

Atlanta American . . .

. . . right downtown.

It was not as a result of pressures. It was Marvin and Irving, who were also part of the Atlanta Jewish leadership, very much in the forefront, of that. While there were always some Jews in Atlanta, and elsewhere in the state, who were part of the old segregationist gang, they were clearly aberrations. For the most part, the Jewish community was either actively involved or passively involved, both of which were important functions.

But you always had the Charlie Blocks from Macon who wrote the massive resistance plan for Georgia, some of the Kaminskis who were stanch Herman Talmadge\textsuperscript{73} supporters. But, for the most part, you were seeing Jews who were in the forefront of that. Given my involvement, and Ellis Arnall’s involvement, it was a plus in many ways to be involved in that type of activity. I never thought of it as a political plus, but it was a plus knowing that you’re on the right side of the tide of history.

What was the business reality to that? Here’s the main partner in the firm, one of the young up-and-comers in the firm, and you’re all clearly out front and active.

There were negatives. There were clients who didn’t particularly like that. I mean, the firm clients were—as most well-to-do business people at that time—not part of this changing tide. And in some ways, [they] resented it and would make remarks. However, we were doing professionally an effective and good job for these people and that counted more than our own political activities. Ellis Arnall always used to say that he liked to represent Republicans because

\textsuperscript{73} Herman Talmadge served as a U.S. Senator from Georgia from 1957 to 1981. We was a staunch segregationist, and proponent of “separate but equal”, a position claiming that racial segregation did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guaranteed “equal protection” under the law, to all people.
that’s where the money was. That was always true.

I remember there was one of our large clients—it was actually a trade association—that we were doing a lot of work for. Most of the people who were leaders in this were not only Republican but very conservative. About that time they were first organizing the ACLU\textsuperscript{74} chapter in Atlanta, in Georgia. I had been approached as becoming the first chairman of the group here. Ed Ladd, whom you may remember, ultimately took that position. But several of these people made it very clear that they would be uncomfortable with that. Now, I didn’t do it—not for those reasons—but it was quite clear that, had I done that, they would have expressed themselves very vigorously to the other partners.

**Nat:** So early on, you knew that a card carrying ACLU person had political . . .

**Elliott:** . . . that’s right. There was never any doubt that if you were going to be visibly involved with those issues, you were not in the political majority in Georgia yet. May still not be, but certainly [not] in those days.

Being Jewish on top of that increased the negative aspect of it. But it was one of those things, as I say, my law partners encouraged. I found early on, a very important political fact. That if you stand for something—even if other people disagree with you—you gain more respect and are more effective than if you shilly-shally and waffle and don’t have something that you stand up for. Whether it’s a political principal, or an identifiable religious affiliation, or things of that sort. It was clear to me that while I was not in the political majority, because people knew where I stood and was coming from, and [because I] was not doing it in a destructive way, it was a positive element in my own relationship to the general community.

<End Tape 2 Side 1>

<Begin Tape 2 Side 2>

**Nat:** What were you doing outside of the Jewish community at this same time, career-wise? Where were you visible civically?

**Elliott:** I was active in the [Georgia] Bar [Association], the younger lawyers’ section. I was active in legal aid efforts. I was active in community, neighborhood-type things like garbage collection pick-up and zoning matters. Those were the activities I was most comfortable with.

\textsuperscript{74} The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is a nonprofit organization whose stated mission is “to defend and preserve the individual rights and liberties guaranteed to every person in this country by the Constitution and laws of the United States.”
Also some involvement, but not nearly so much, in things like Red Cross, symphony, museum, such as that. For Jews, and particularly Jews who didn’t have a lot of money, a lot of high visibility civic activities were not really very open: symphony, museum, things such as that.

Nat: But there were Jews that were . . .

Elliott: . . . oh, there were, very prominent . . .

Nat: . . . there were people of economic substance.

Elliott: That’s right. For years the High Museum [of Art] had been a beneficiary of philanthropy by very prominent Jewish families. From the beginning, the [Atlanta] Symphony [Orchestra] had support. In fact, Henry Sopkin, one of the earlier maestros, was Jewish.

Nat: Oh.

Elliott: Oh yes, very active in the Jewish community, as a matter of fact, he and his wife and children.

Nat: Who were some of the families, at that time, that come to mind as being economically [established] . . .

Elliott: Well, you had the Rich’s.

Nat: Mostly German Jewish decent?

Elliott: Yes, very much so. Fox I think was one of the families.

Nat: The Haas’?

Elliott: Haas’ were very prominent. Some of the Eastern European Jews who had made money, Ian Winstein, A. J. Wienberg, and closely related there, Max Goldstein, Powell Goldstein.

Nat: Is that Goldstein related to Marvin?

Elliott: No, not really.

Nat: Those are separate families?

Elliott: Those are separate families. A. J. Weinberg—who was related to Marvin, a relation of mine—his daughter married Elliott Goldstein who was Max Goldstein’s son. So a lot of people thought there was a kinship there, but there wasn’t. But the perception, I don't think, made Elliott Goldstein very happy.

Nat: (laughter) So your civic activities outside of the Jewish community are a little more participatory and less leadership-oriented? Is that a fair…

Elliott: I think that’s a fair statement, although I was pretty actively involved in committee
chairmanships, and activities of that sort, in the younger lawyer section and in the Bar. But in terms of wanting to be President of the State Bar or going up that ladder, I never really did that.

**Nat:** Now, let’s take this period and let’s have some children.

**Elliott:** Yes.

**Nat:** Take me through that private part of yours’ and Barbara’s life, and at the same time let’s end up with the decision. Help me understand how you decide to seek a position in the [Georgia] General Assembly, which is a part of your career that we forget, because you were a congressman so long. We tend not to remember those years.

**Elliott:** That was very important, very important. During this period of time, we had gotten back from the Air Force, got our apartment, [we were] getting re-involved again with the family, and so forth here. The following year we had our first child. We had really been looking forward to that. Our first born was a girl named Karen and then shortly thereafter our second child came, Susan. It was about a year and a half or two years, almost two years later, that the third child, Kevin, arrived. So, in a relatively short period of time we had two children and then the third. I think we had just moved into our new home about the time Susan was born. We moved out of the apartment into a new home four blocks away.

**Nat:** Here in Victoria Estates?

**Elliott:** No, on Jody Lane. There were a lot of friends of ours who lived in that area at the time, on those streets. We had just added on a new room to our house when Kevin was born, because I think we had his *bris* in that new add-on playroom. That was taking up a lot of our time, Barbara’s more than mine, as a consequence of the fact that the practice that I was then engaged in involved a lot of travel, both for litigation and other reasons. But, being father was something that . . . I really enjoyed the kids. It was a time where, particularly as they got older—I wasn’t that great with little kids, infants, but—once they got above infancy, I really liked it.

**Nat:** Is this an admission on tape that you did not change a lot of diapers? Is that what you’re saying?

**Elliott:** Not one.

**Nat:** (laughter)

**Elliott:** That was part of the prenuptial agreement.

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75 The *bris* is a Jewish religious male circumcision ceremony performed by a *mohel* on the eighth day of the infant’s life and followed by a celebratory meal.
Nat: This is the moderate side of Elliott Levitas. (laughter)

Elliott: We took the kids to the parks, we took them on outings and things like that, did a lot of those types of things.

Nat: You’re doing well enough professionally for Barbara to work fulltime with the children instead of teaching at school?

Elliott: Yes, that’s right, she was fulltime, and that was because we felt it was important. I was not making so much money that it was not something we had to be aware of, but I was making enough that we were able to do those types of things without too much strain. We still had one car. It was a few years later that we got the second car, used car. I was riding the bus to town, not only for economic reasons but also I just found it more of a convenience. I early on became an advocate of public transportation. We were pretty much family-involved during that period of time. I [was focused on] building this practice that I was engaged in, which at first was divided between litigation and commercial, and then later became more litigation and copyright and intellectual property generally, and then acting as counsel in many cases.

But it was during this period also, that I was still involved in Democratic party politics. I mentioned going to the Democratic Convention in 1964. I was involved in both county and state level politics. Carl Sanders’ campaign, very actively involved in Carl Sanders’ campaign. It was the first campaign that I remember in which the Jewish community was very visible. Not just a few people who were close to the candidate but in a much more broadly-based way. I always thought it was ironic that, one of the first campaign functions for Carl Sanders—which was nominally hosted in part by Irving Kaler, who was a lawyer and also very active in Democratic party politics in Georgia—was given at the Piedmont Driving Club.

Nat: Oh. (laughter)

Elliott: I always thought there was some irony there, given the exclusionary restrictive discrimination of the Piedmont Driving Club. But, Jews were very active and prominent in that campaign and not just, as I say, people “close to the king”.

Nat: Had something happened, that you could put your finger on, that would explain why the Jewish community became more involved?

Elliott: Well, this was the first big election after the county unit system is over. We were

76 Carl Sanders was an American attorney and politician who served as the 74th Governor of Georgia from 1963 to 1967.
also—and I think that’s the main thing—also there were more Jews who had become economically well-off in Atlanta. There were more Jews in Atlanta who were participating in various communal activities. It was [also] during the civil rights era. . .

Nat: . . . so Jews had taken a couple of public shots and survived . . .

Elliott: . . . that’s right . . .

Nat: . . . with incentives to stay discreet members.

Elliott: It became an environment in which you felt that you could do this and make a contribution. The idea of having to sit on the sidelines and keep your mouth shut no longer existed.

It was also during this period that the various litigation around the country on legislative redistricting was taking place. Again, I got involved in that mostly as a lawyer, but [I was] also speaking out, participating in forums, taking a very public position on that. I felt that, not only, was it important to get rid of the county unit system, but now we needed to get a legislature that was able to represent urban interests which had not been done in the past. So I was very involved in that. Then, when the redistricting decision came down for Georgia, I remember how happy I was, how fulfilled I felt, having worked on this for a number of years. But at that moment, [I] did not think that I was going to be one of them. But a lot of the people who I had been working with on these matters said, “Ok, now you’ve got to run.”

DeKalb county had gone from three representatives—one of whom was Jamie Mackey, who had always been viewed as liberal, moderate, certainly for the last ten to fifteen years prior to that, and who was about to run for Congress—had gone from three to fifteen. So there were going to be a lot of representatives elected from DeKalb county and a number of people were sort of pushing me to do that. One afternoon a group of us got together over at my brother’s house, as I recall, to talk about it—“What do you think?” . I remember my brother was there, Barbara was there, and I think Leon Eplan was there. Leon had been very active with me in the Sanders campaign. That had gotten us really juiced up on politics. I think Miles may have been there, too. We thought maybe it was a good idea.

Nat: This was a meeting of Jewish people exclusively?

Elliott: Yes, I think that’s right.

Nat: It’s Miles, your contemporary, Leon . . .

Elliott: . . . Leon, my brother . . .
Nat: . . . Leon lives in the City of Atlanta?
Elliott: He lives in City of Atlanta.
Nat: Miles was living in Buckhead at the time?
Elliott: Yes, he was not living in DeKalb county, I don’t think. No, I take that back. He was living over near me on Holly Lane, or one of those.
Nat: Okay, so he’s in the district we’re talking about.
Elliott: Right. Elaine may have been there, too.
Nat: Where is Ted living at this point?
Elliott: He’s living in this area, right off Briarcliff, right next door to Rabbi Feldman, as a matter of fact. I forget the name of the street.
Nat: But, we’re in the district, and we get together . . .
Elliott: . . . and we think that maybe we ought to take a crack at it. If we do, we’re going to need somebody to run the campaign. Leon said that he had worked with this woman on Charlie Weltner’s campaign, and if she was available that she would be a good person to work with. So he called her up and she was available and we talked for a few minutes and it sounded interesting to me. So we made arrangements to get together. This was a woman named Mary Ann Summers and she became my campaign manager. We were basically together for a number of years—[with a] hiatus after I didn’t need a campaign manager anymore—but came back when I ran for Congress and was ultimately my administrative assistant during the time that I was in Congress. So, it went, back to that.

We sort of took it as given that if I were elected, which we weren’t so sure I could be, that I’d make a good representative. But we weren’t so sure I could get elected. Again, the districts at that time were relatively large. I was going to have to run for a post in a four-member district, which is larger than state senatorial districts. The Black and Jewish constituency in that district was virtually nonexistent. It would be statistically inconsequential. It was basically white Protestant.

I had never run for public office before and really didn’t know what it entailed. While I was sort of a gregarious, friendly, outgoing person I had never walked up to a stranger and asked him to vote for me. But we thought we could take a try and maybe, if I got in a runoff, I

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77 Mary Ann Summers worked for several Georgia politicians and public figures including Governors, Congressmen and Senators. She was also active in the Civil Rights era.
could maybe make it in that fashion. Three people were running for the post that I was running for in this district. One of them came from a very prominent DeKalb family—in fact, the people who developed Victoria Estates. The other one was a person who had been involved politically in DeKalb county running for office previously. I think the other guy had run maybe once. The second person was very active in the Shrine[rs] and the [Free] Masons and things like that, and sort of well known. He was more of a “good old boy”. The other guy was more of a socially prominent family.

**Nat:** So there was good reason not to be overly confident.

**Elliott:** Oh, there was every reason in the world not to be overly confident. We decided that—I decided that—the most important campaign that I would ever run would be this campaign, and that it meant going all out.

**Nat:** You’re how old at this point?

**Elliott:** This is 1965, so I am thirty-four years old. But I knew this would be the most important campaign I would ever run. So we went all out in terms of commitment of time. In those days, state legislative races were not run with necessarily even campaign headquarters. But we opened up a campaign headquarters. We did bumper stickers. We did things that were not being done in those days. We took a leaf out of the congressional races of Weltner and Mackey and did these neighborhood coffee klatch things, again, which were not done before this. Then I went out and hit the pavement.

I’ll never forget—the first person that I had never met before in my life—and I just walked up to a total stranger in a shopping center and said, “My name is Elliott Levitas and I’m running for the state legislature. Would you please vote for me?” Let me tell you, that was one hell of an obstacle to get over, and one big “Rubicon” to cross. To just walk up to a total stranger and give him my name, which was not Jones or Smith and say, “Would you vote for me?” and hand him a fingernail file or a piece of literature or a card. His reaction maybe made my political career, because he said, “You’re the first person who’s ever asked me to vote for him. You’ve got my vote, I’ll make a note of this.”

We developed a few techniques that had not been done before about how to get people involved. Miles didn’t think I could win because, if I had the name “Alexander” I could win, but the name “Levitas” was too strange, and foreign. Not that it was necessarily Jewish,
maybe Greek, but it was different. But we really ran a pretty good campaign and close to the end I thought I had a shot at the runoff. When the election came around, I had won the election without the primary, without a runoff.

**Nat:** Do you have any sense of how much money you spent?

**Elliott:** I would say, this is rough, this is sort of a “guestimate”, but it would probably be between $7,000 and $10,000.

**Nat:** Which was a lot of money.

**Elliott:** Yes. We had a campaign headquarters. I was clearly not the establishment candidate, by the way. Jim Cherry, who was the Superintendent of Schools in the county at that time—and was one of the powerbrokers and king-makers—I know he was not supporting me. He was supporting the socially prominent guy. But we had a campaign headquarters. Mr. Rosenbaum’s old building on West Ponce de Leon across from the Chevrolet dealership which became my campaign headquarters for future elections. We had volunteers who came in and did the yard signs and the whole thing. But we had printed material, brochures. I think one of the legislative campaign and bumper stickers is over there, and posters (gestures to shelf in the room). We really ran a good campaign. A lot of hard work, a lot of people involved.

**Nat:** Not exclusively Jewish, I presume.

**Elliott:** Oh, no, very much so. We had really reached out and brought in other people. Barbara was pregnant with Kevin at the time, I remember, but she was out campaigning. There were a lot of members of the Emory community. There was a fellow, a man who’s now deceased, who was very helpful. He was a pharmacologist at the Emory Medical School named Harry Williams. He would spend every weekend with us out campaigning. We developed, in addition to the coffee klatch technique, and the innovation—for state legislative races—of giving little rulers or fingernail files or whatever, we also developed the technique of the shopping center balloon brigade, which I used from that point forward. Because by bringing balloons, you attracted kids who attracted parents. No kid got a balloon without an adult present. [So] we’d get out into the mall and into the neighborhood and we were able to do something different. We ran a good campaign.

    [We] had non-Jews very much involved in the coffee klatches, in the balloon

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78 A “coffee klatch” refers to a group of friends getting together over a cup of coffee, usually at someone’s house.

79 Jim Cherry was Superintendent of Schools for DeKalb County, Georgia from 1947 to 1972.
brigades, and towards the end, in the little fundraising that we were doing at that time. I would guess that most of my money came from friends and relatives at the beginning. Only later on did we get a broader base. In those days, $15, $25 was considered to be a very generous campaign contribution.

Nat: Who’s your mentor in this first political step forward? Is the Governor [Arnall] still an influence, or have you moved into . . .

Elliott: He is, but not so much in the nuts and bolts stuff. That was coming from myself, because I did that for other candidates. I had been in campaigns before—Charlie Weltner, Jamie Mackey, Carl Sanders. At the risk of being immodest, I always thought I was my best campaign manager. Leon Eplan was quite helpful. Barbara was very good at this, had good instincts. Elaine Alexander also. That was sort of the hard core.

Nat: That was the brain trust.

Elliott: Mary Ann Summers, who I mentioned earlier, she brought a lot of her crowd in and was just a tireless person, total political animal. Those were the people who were doing most of the strategy, techniques, and implementation.

Nat: The firm is comfortable with this, obviously.

Elliott: Arnall was happy with it. Golden, I’m not so sure at this time, but it was Arnall that I had cleared it with. I’m not even sure I told Sol Golden. I always had the feeling that if I had told him first he would have probably objected and I didn’t want to have to . . .

Nat: (laughter)

Elliott: . . . do it over his objection. But I knew I was committed to it.

Nat: This changes things, because this is what, about two months out of every year . . .

Elliott: . . . changed a lot of things . . .

Nat: . . . that you’re fulltime consumed.

Elliott: You’ve got to remember, I think at the time there was one Jew in the legislature who was elected from a small town in south Georgia. It was that type of thing.

Nat: So you’re the second Jew to go into the Georgia General Assembly.

Elliott: That’s right, that’s right. First Jewish person elected to any office in DeKalb county.

Nat: First Jew elected to any office . . .

Elliott: . . . in DeKalb county. The first Atlanta Jewish person elected to the legislature. I think there had been one or two Jews from small towns, but as you know, that’s sort of a
different phenomenon.

Nat: Right.

Elliott: So that changed a lot of things. It meant that I had more visibility, responsibility, than I would have had fifteen or twenty years later, when Jews had been elected. It wasn’t precedent setting, there were other Jews there.

Nat: Sidney Marcus is after you?

Elliott: He’s after me. He comes in after me in large measure because of my being there. Sidney and I were good friends.

Nat: And Sam Massell has not risen on the political scene at this point.

Elliott: That’s right.

Nat: So you’re the first, because you and Sidney and Sam are all close in age.

Elliott: That’s right, and Sam had already been on the City Council, Vice Mayor, and he was in the process of doing the Mayor business.

Nat: Okay, so Sam’s political stature…

Elliott: . . . he’s already there . . .

Nat: . . . is emerging, but he’s an Atlanta Jew and you’re a DeKalb county Jew. Sidney is . . .

Elliott: . . . Sidney is active in Sam’s campaign, but he has not emerged himself in his own right.

Nat: LeAnne Levitan is not on the scene yet?

Elliott: No, she’s not on the scene yet. I’m trying to think . . . the only other Jewish person who had done political stuff around here was a cousin of mine who never was successful in getting elected. His name is Ben Rice and I think he had run for either commission or board of education or something. He lived over in Chalmette. I’m not sure there had been any other Jewish candidates in DeKalb county. There may have been, but I’m not right now aware of it. This was 1965—a special election [in 1965].

Nat: How long of a term were you elected for?

Elliott: ____________________

80 Sidney Marcus was a legislator in the Georgia General Assembly for fifteen years in the 1970’s and 1980’s, a leading spokesman on urban and progressive issues, and a leader in the Atlanta Jewish Community.

81 Sam Massell is a businessman who served from 1970 to 1974 as the 53rd Mayor of Atlanta, and the first Jewish mayor in the city’s history.

82 LeAnne Levitan, a Jewish woman, served as CEO of DeKalb County.
Elliott: One term. The day that I get sworn in, which is January 10, 1966, my father and mother and family were up in the galleria, very important to me. Barbara was there. A very big day in my life. It was also the day that Julian Bond⁸³ was to take the oath of office.

Nat: Oh.

Elliott: Immediately after I was sworn in, the next item of business was the trial of Julian Bond. It went on all day long. Things had been building up over the weekend preceding the convening of the legislature. I still have the suit I wore that day—it’s interesting, I looked at it the other day. Until late in the evening the debate continued, and then when the time came to vote, I voted to seat Julian Bond. One of a handful of white guys who did that. I thought to myself, I had a brilliant but brief political career . . .

Nat: (laughter)

Elliott: . . . because there was no question in my mind that I was not voting the way I believed a majority of people in my district would have voted. I knew, at least I believed that to be the case. But I also knew that I was voting, not only what I believed, but what was right. Again, I learned a quick lesson early on. I always ask this question every time I make a speech that has any political relationship to elective office. How do you vote? Do you vote the way your constituents want or the way you want? I learned a lesson that day. The answer is, it depends. On most issues that you vote on, your constituents don’t give a damn one way or the other how you vote. They don’t even know what the issues are, or relate to. When I was in Congress, most of my constituents didn’t know or care about how I voted on soy bean quotas or things of that sort. About 80 percent, 85 percent of the votes are that sort. Ten percent of the votes, or maybe a few more, are votes in which your constituents feel very strongly and you know what their feelings are and you should represent them and cast their vote, as it were, on those issues. That’s about 10 percent or 15 percent of the votes you cast. Then there’s another group that you vote because you are elected to be the representative and this is a republic. You do it because you either have more information or you have a sense that it is the right—constitutionally, morally—the right vote, and you do it. Then it’s your responsibility either to persuade your constituents that you were right, or they ought to re-elect you notwithstanding that, because of other reasons, because you were otherwise a good representative.

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⁸³ Julian Bond was a social activist and leader in the civil rights movement, politician, professor and writer. He helped to establish the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.
But when I voted for Julian Bond, I knew in my own mind that I was not casting the vote of my constituents, and that I would pay a price for it. I prepared my statement as to why I did it. I got all the hate calls. My mother got hate and threat calls, threatening not just my life, [but] her life. Threatening my life to my mother.

**Nat:** These people understood they were calling your mother?

**Elliott:** Oh, yes. “Tell your son we’re going to kill him.”

**Nat:** That’s pretty clear.

**Elliott:** Yes, they knew. Or, “We’re gonna get that Jew,” that came out. I remember handbills were distributed with my name on them, associating me with the Black Panthers and things like that. So my first vote ever, first time I was ever casting a vote, it was on whether to seat Julian Bond or not (laughter).

A lot of people, close friends of mine, said that must have been a very difficult decision to make, knowing how unpopular it was. I told them the truth. It was not a difficult decision at all. It was one of the easiest decisions I ever made politically because I knew, instinctively, as well as based upon my experience as a lawyer and as a student, scholar of history, that Julian Bond—or anybody else who got elected by people—had a right to represent them. Just because what he stood for was highly unpopular, was no reason not to. In fact, he had all the more reason to be seated. I never had any question as to the outcome of the litigation that would ensue, because it was so basic. So it was not a hard decision, but it was a decision that I realized at the time, had consequences attached to it. It turned out, not political consequences, they were personal consequences, and that passed. But again I learned the lesson, or got it reconfirmed, something I said earlier. That if you stand for something, and stand up for what you believe in, people may violently or seriously disagree with you, but at least they respect your taking a position and standing up for it. I never had any regrets about that.

**Nat:** Were you surprised at how few voted to seat Bond at that point?

**Elliott:** No, not really. I suspected that would be the case. Remember that it was at the height of the Viet Nam War. We weren’t losing the war yet. And the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee that had adopted the resolution that Bond got associated with, was sort of intemperate in its words or cues that Americans were being involved in murder. That wasn’t

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84 The Viet Nam War was a conflict that occurred in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from 1955 to 1975. America’s involvement in the war was highly controversial.
“de rigueur” politics at the time. Coming from a group which had other baggage to carry—justifiably carrying other baggage—the baggage was justifiably on their shoulders because of their activities in the civil rights area. It was not just the fact that Julian was Black, by any means.

Nat: There was more than the race issue.
Elliott: That’s right.

Nat: So that begins how many years of service in the [Georgia] General Assembly?
Elliott: Nine years, five terms.
Nat: First term being one year.
Elliott: First term being one year.
Nat: So you find out quickly how forgiving the voters are, that you voted against their preference on the Bond issue.
Elliott: Without being tongue in cheek, I would say, how perceptive the voters were and how amenable to receiving information and dealing with it. Something that, for the most part, I had reinforced over the years. I think my explanation of why I voted the way I had voted was accepted, and the fact that I gave an explanation and didn’t just cavalierly deal with it, was important.

Nat: So you were campaigning, in a sense, almost from the second you were sworn in . . .
Elliott: Oh sure.

Nat: . . . because you had to explain the Bond vote, your instincts told you, and you had to get ready. How did the second [election] . . .
Elliott: I’m trying to remember, I’m not even sure I had opposition. Or if I did, it was only nominal opposition the second time. I was fortunate that the district I represented was—probably, certainly from my point of view—politically and personally the best district that I could have represented. I mean, anywhere. It was moderate to liberal on racial matters. You had Emory University in the middle of the district. You had Agnes Scott College. You had Columbia Theological Seminary. You had a lot of academic . . .
Nat: . . . you had a high level of education . . .
Elliott: . . . very high level of education, middle class.
Nat: The Jewish community is growing . . .
Elliott: . . . but it was still not significant. Still not significant. That never was a significant
factor. It became a helpful factor because it provided some campaign people to work with, but it was never, in terms of vote, a significant factor.

But from that time forward it became pretty easy. That’s why I knew that that first election was important, because it is not easy to run against an incumbent for an office that doesn’t have a high visibility. In those days, incumbency was a plus, not a minus.

**Nat:** I see, so, you instinctively made the right call and set yourself up.

**Elliott:** Absolutely. Yes.

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**Nat:** This is the third, and possibly final, interview of Elliott Levitas, being conducted by Nat Gozansky on October 26, 1992.

**Nat:** Elliott, when we met last time you had just gotten elected to the state legislature. You voted to seat Julian Bond and a year later your district sent you back for what would be an additional four two-year terms. So your first experience with taking a controversial stand, but doing what you believed to be the right thing, was confirmed by your constituents who respected that judgement. Let’s talk a little bit about the nine years’ experiences being one of, I guess, just a few Jews that served in the state legislature.

**Elliott:** Well, it was, to me, a very rewarding experience and a very enlightening experience. Because for the first time, I had an opportunity to associate with, and deal with, a cross-section of people in this state. From semi-literate people to very bright people, from very smart people to some who were not, from those who were impeccably clean when it came to their legislative ethics, to some who were not. Also, I had the opportunity to associate with people who basically had never associated with a Jewish person before, particularly having to deal with that type of person on an equal footing in the legislature.

By and large, I was very visibly Jewish in the sense there was never any question about that. Frequently there were comments made, but nothing ever made in a negative way, at least not in my hearing. To a certain extent I think there were occasions when people would go out of their way to help me, to be friendly, to cooperate, because they knew I was Jewish.

It was more of an impediment to be an Atlanta-based lawyer than it was to be Jewish, by a wide margin. I became, from the very beginning, very activist in every area—environmental, consumer protection, rights of privacy. Active in nuts and bolts judiciary
committee work, particularly in reformulating the State Constitution and re-codifying the Georgia code and the corporate code, in particular. When Jimmy Carter became governor—although I had not supported him in that race for governor—I did play an important and key role as one of his floor leaders, and spent a lot of time on state governmental reorganization.

**Nat:** You wouldn’t attribute any of that ability to get positions of influence or [to get] on committees you preferred, to the fact that you were Jewish or non-Jewish, or [that] being a lawyer might have affected some of those committees.

**Elliott:** I don’t think so. I don’t think being Jewish had anything to do with those opportunities. I think that the issue of being an urban legislator was a more significant factor. Because we were in a very significant transition period between a rurally-dominated, recently post-county unit system, legislative body, to one that was moving in the other direction. Therefore, that became a much more critical issue, as far as I was concerned. As one of the leaders of what we formed to be the urban caucus, I became heavily involved in those issues. And those were the things that played out with other legislators, both in achieving results and in forming coalitions. We realized that there were things we couldn’t do without the support of our rural brethren, and they likewise. So we began to make these bridges and coalitions.

But again, it was pretty clear that I was Jewish. To me, one of the most important experiences was getting to know people who were not Jewish, who came from very rural areas of the state, and becoming very good friends, social friends. Going out to have dinner, to drink with them, to play cards with them, to be invited to go on hunting trips with them, to go down to a fishing camp and fish and play cards and eat and things of that sort. Very important. It also gave me the opportunity, subsequently, to introduce others who came in after me, such as Sidney Marcus. I would begin to take him to these events and as a result he began to form similar friendships and coalitions. So, that was an extremely important experience.

**Nat:** But you weren’t the first Jew to ever be elected to the state [legislature]…

**Elliott:** …no, there had been some way back. And then, as I said, when I was elected there was one person who was Jewish in the legislature at the time, but [he was] from a remote part of the state.

**Nat:** And then Sidney . . .

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85 Jimmy Carter is a Democratic politician who served as a Georgia State Senator from 1963 to 1967, as the 76th Governor of Georgia from 1971 to 1975, and as the 39th President of the United States from 1977 to 1981.
Elliott: . . . Sidney was the next . . .

Nat: . . . was the next.

Elliott: That’s correct. I think there may have been one or two people in the legislature, in fact I know there were one or two, who were not Jewish, or would not appear to be Jewish, but who would whisper in my ear that they were Jewish.

Nat: (laughter)

Elliott: I was very much surprised that they were, or claimed to be, Jewish. In any event, one of the things that I did early on which had a Jewish relationship, although that wasn’t necessarily my motivation, is one of the first bills I introduced and got passed. [It] was a law, making it a specific crime to desecrate a house of worship—a church or synagogue or any other house of worship—by defacing it or otherwise desecrating it.

There had been one or two incidences of that sort involving both Jewish synagogues as well as Christian churches. There was some significance in terms of focusing attention on it. But I had another purpose, because some of the newly-elected Republicans, particularly from DeKalb county, were coming up with these motherhood bills, outlawing communists in the education department, or things of that sort. They were forcing people to vote on these things even when they didn’t make good legislative sense. So I wanted to put them in a position of voting for a bill that they couldn’t oppose on the same grounds. So there was some politics involved there. Also, success breeds success. Once you’ve got the reputation of being able to pass legislation, it makes it easier the next time.

But I was given responsibilities quite early on by the governor, speaker, and by my colleagues, [other] chairmen. One of my closest friends was a relatively senior representative chairman with the judiciary committee, Robin Harris. He and I became very close friends.

He gave me opportunities to do things, as did both the speakers and the governors, of course, with the exception of Lester Maddox. I had vigorously opposed [him] when he was running for governor, and my only cordial relationship was that, when he was trying to push one of his more populist ideas, I was one of the people who would be prepared to step out front and support those things. For example, in the area of housing, one of the things I did was take a very

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86 Lester Maddox served as the 75th Governor of the State of Georgia from 1967 to 1971. A populist Democrat, Maddox came to prominence as a staunch segregationist when he refused to serve Black customers in his Atlanta restaurant, in defiance of the Civil Rights Act.
strong lead in the housing field. Georgia became one of the first states to pass a residential finance agency, which is today the model for the whole country. It’s been economically successful. It’s provided new housing for moderate and low income people. A friend of mine whom I worked with on a lot of legislative ideas, I mentioned earlier, Leon Eplan, also worked with me as an outside consultant in putting that legislation together. That was done while Maddox was governor and it had an appeal to his more populist ideas.

Another thing during the Maddox administration, coincidentally there was one of the major Arab-Israeli wars. I think the 1967 war would have occurred during Maddox’s tenure. It became very important to get support across the country. I was contacted, I forget by which groups in town, to set up a meeting with Maddox to get a proclamation from the governor and the statement of support for the Israelis. So that also played a role.

Another very significant occurrence, at least to me and I think in other ways, [was that] the legislative session starts each day with a chaplain’s prayer. Some of them are very Christian fundamentalist in nature. I decided that the time had come to have my rabbi, Rabbi Epstein, give an invocation. He did, and it was a beautiful invocation. It was printed in the Journal of the House of Representatives and it is one that I still refer to. But it also made a real impact on friends of mine who were not Jewish, who saw a Jewish rabbi who was obviously very tuned in and articulate and was speaking to something that was relevant. By virtue of my being in the legislature and having the access to the leadership, I was able to do that, which I think is a significant step in terms of Jewish awareness in the state.

**Nat:** What is the single biggest accomplishment of Elliott Levitas in the nine years in the General Assembly?

**Elliott:** It really is hard to say because, fortunately, I was able to do a lot of things and to rank them is not that easy. I mentioned the Residential Housing Finance Agency. That clearly was one. A number of the consumer protection, second home protection, legislation against the practices that were going on at the time.

But for me personally, I suppose, legislatively the biggest accomplishment was to pass the Georgia Right of Privacy Act. I’ve always been convinced that individualism and the right of privacy, the essence of an individual, can be destroyed by invasions of that person’s privacy. It’s always been important to me. I was able to get legislation passed—one of the strongest laws in the country, even today—prohibiting electronic surveillance and other types of
unwarranted invasions of privacy. In a sense, because it was important to me and what my sense is of the worth and the central nature of the individual, I guess that was the case, that was it.

In another sense, I suppose that the greatest single overall matter of importance was my ability to become friends with people who were not previously types of people I associated with or vice versa. One of my closest friends in the legislature, who became a very staunch supporter and actively worked to help me run for a leadership position, happened to be a Lebanese American from Blackshear, Georgia which is in way-far-off southeast Georgia.

Elliott: Yes, I’m sure. (laughter) But it was that, I suppose, in a way [that] became even more important than specific legislative accomplishments of which there were many.

Elliott: . . . because it opened my eyes. It opened my world and it enabled me, as I went on to other things, to take those experiences and transfer them as I was dealing in the U.S. Congress. So, legislatively, I would say it’s the Right to Privacy Act. Overall, I would say it was the ability to broaden my personal perspective and find, and give, acceptance to others.

Elliott: Also, a slight disappointment, we had passed some major land use, land planning, and state planning legislation and I had become chairman of the State Planning and Community Affairs Committee and had created certain state agencies for the first time to do those things. We had passed the Chattahoochee Protection bill. That too, was a major accomplishment in those days—first multi-jurisdictional land use legislation in Georgia history—against the most incredible opposition as you might imagine, because it went against the county rights and so forth. That too would fall into the category of major accomplishments. But the failure to pass the Little FTC, the comprehensive statewide land use planning and, I suppose, the failure to be elected into the leadership—which I came very close to doing—were disappointments. They were matters that I accepted, I think, without any rancor and just viewed that I would go on and try again or do other things. But I left the Georgia legislature before I had a chance to recycle
those few disappointments.

**Nat:** Well, let’s go to that. Your former law partner, Ben Blackburn, is the Republican representing the 4th District. By your own description, you’re having a very fulfilling experience in the state legislature; some disappointments, but a lot of wonderful accomplishments.

**Nat:** What caused you to decide to take up the Democratic mantel and take on Ben Blackburn and go to Congress?

**Elliott:** There were a number of factors. First of all, Blackburn progressively moved to the far right and became more and more, in my opinion, out of touch with the mainstream of the congressional district I lived in. [And he] became, I thought, increasingly acerbic and bitter and mean and arrogant. It just got to me, frankly. So I had that motivation.

Secondly, I had come to the conclusion that five terms in the state legislature was fine. I couldn’t solve all the problems in the world, I found out. Although, I could make a difference, I made a big difference. But I couldn’t change it all. I was reaching a point of diminishing return in terms of what it took to get things done. I felt the time had come to move on one way or the other. Either get out—and be out of politics for a while, or at least electoral politics—or to go on to something else. That race—while there was not much indication that it was a winable race at that time—I felt was an opportunity, if nothing else, to make Blackburn have a serious challenge, which he had not had in a while. To let him know that he had to modify his political behavior or else he was going to get kicked off. So I knew I could do that. I felt this was an honorable way to—instead of simply saying, “I’m not going to run again,”—an honorable way to end my legislative service one way or the other.

A number of people were either encouraging me or goading me to make that race. Manuel Maloof[^87], who was a very active local politician at the time, was goading me. And other friends were encouraging me, so I jumped in. Basically, it was impulsive. I had discussed it with some people, but it was basically deciding the time had come. I’m not sure I had discussed it fully with all of my law partners, for example, and that was a major move because it meant leaving the law firm. I did not discuss it as much as I should have even with my own family. But I just felt . . . it was compulsive, and I decided damn it, I was going to do it, and that’s how I got into it.

[^87]: Manuel Maloof was the Chief Executive Officer and Commission Chairman of DeKalb County, Georgia. He was a prominent Jewish Atlanta politician and owner of Manuel’s Tavern, a popular Atlanta bar.
One interesting thing is, shortly after I got into that race, I began to pull together some of the people who helped me when I ran for the legislature. I mentioned Mary Ann Summers earlier, and Miles, and we put together—and my brother was very much involved—we put together a campaign committee. Went out and tried to engage professionals to do some of the things that needed to be done such as polling, such as media, such as campaign materials . . .

Nat: . . . more sophisticated than ten years earlier?

Elliott: Much more sophisticated.

Nat: A new constituency, encompassing the old, but needing to reach folks that had not been your . . .

Elliott: . . . that’s right. It was a much larger constituency, probably four to five times as large a constituency. I was fortunate in getting some really good people. It was in 1974. Obviously, the Watergate world had an impact on it, but ours was still a very conservative district. I remember we had a good advertising firm, [that] came up with very patriotic kind of stuff. I was trying to cast myself, not as an ideological purest, but someone who knew how to deal with problems, who had principles, and would fight for them regardless of party labels, and things like that. I wanted to appeal to people who had voted Republican before, because they had demonstrated having voted for a Republican congressman, so I wanted to appeal to them. I recognized that during my first term in office it would be the bi-centennial of the American Revolution. So, we adopted as our campaign slogan, “Vote for Elliott Levitas. It’s a declaration of independence.” It became a very popular theme for the election because it identified patriotism, principle, and independence, which was appealing.

Ran a very, very, hard grassroots campaign. Organized down into neighborhoods. Things which, by today’s politics you accept and take for granted and almost are boring clichés, were not in those days. The coffee klatch approach had just been in for a few years. The emphasis on door-to-door canvassing and using volunteers to extend out into the constituency, those were things that we were pioneering. I had started as a campaign idea, to further the idea of citizen contact. One of the issues that I had raised was that Blackburn had lost contact. He had gotten a serious case of “Potomac Fever” and lost contact with his people. So I wanted to show

88 The Watergate scandal was a major political event that took place in the 1970’s. Five men broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office complex in Washington, DC. President Richard Nixon’s administration attempted to cover up its involvement, but an investigation by Congress resulted in a constitutional crisis for America and ultimately, Nixon’s resignation in 1974.
that I was out among the people. I got a recreational vehicle, like a Winnebago, and would take the campaign—campaign workers, posters, balloons, and the whole thing, and myself—into neighborhoods and shopping centers. We continued the concept that balloons were a key feature in political campaigning, and we would take this caravan out into the neighborhoods and to the shopping centers. The idea struck me that if that was a way of outreaching during a campaign, it would work if, and when, I got elected to Congress. I made a commitment to have an office that would go out into the neighborhoods, a mobile office, and that was a very innovative approach. It was both substantive, but it was also very symbolic, because it tried to show that the incumbent, you never saw him, or you saw him very infrequently. In fact, one of my television commercials showed a picture of what appeared to be a congressional office with an empty seat and a telephone that kept ringing and ringing and was never answered. That was part of the campaign.

Also, Blackburn’s undying support for [Richard] Nixon\(^\text{89}\), even as the disclosures began to come out during the campaign, during the Watergate period; we hit him hard on that. Also, the fact that he had moved too far to the right. There were a whole host of issues such as energy policy—the need to do something about the skyrocketing energy prices, and the shortage of gasoline at the service stations, and the need for a national energy policy. Those were some of the things that I was using in the campaign. When the election came around, I really—until the last two weeks—didn’t think that I was going to win. I thought I was going to do well, but I didn’t think we’d win. But towards the last part of the campaign I knew that we had a real shot at it.

One of the interesting things that we did early in our polling was—and we did some good polling—[discerning] what issues played, what didn’t play, what vulnerabilities were perceived in Blackburn’s service. I had pretty high visibility, I was a very visible state legislator.

\textbf{N}at: \textellipsis{} right \textellipsis{}

\textbf{E}lliott: \textellipsis{} unusually so. I had a relatively high degree of personal name recognition. But one of the questions we wanted to find out was, would people in this district vote for a Jewish person

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\(^{89}\) Richard Nixon was the 37th President of the United States from 1969 until 1974, and the only president to resign from office. He served as the 36th Vice President of the United States from 1953 to 1961, and prior to that as both a U.S. Representative and Senator from California.
for Congress?

Nat: Now your district goes what, up into Stone Mountain, right?

Elliott: Oh, into all of DeKalb county. Stone Mountain, all of Rockdale county.

Nat: You’ve lost that intellectual base of Emory University where one would accept . . .

Elliott: …we now had blue collar, we had more Blacks. But still, even then, when I say minority—Catholics, Greeks, Blacks, Chinese, Koreans, Jews—all together they weren’t 12 or 14 percent. It was very still white, Protestant, but more blue collar than before. So, we needed to know. The numbers came back and about 25 to 28 percent of the people said, “No, they wouldn’t vote for a Jewish person.” That was the question. I thought that was a pretty significant number. As we did cross relationships in the polling, however, we found out a couple of things. That number, a large majority of those people, would have voted against me if I weren’t Jewish, because of the positions I took on issues. So these were people who weren’t going to vote for me anyway. Then there were a number of people, percentage-wise, not a large number but a significant number, who weren’t sure what was meant when we said, “Would you vote for a Jewish person?” They weren’t quite sure what that was. But 28 percent of the people, nevertheless, said no, they wouldn’t vote for a Jewish person. I thought that was significant, although it translated less into electoral significance, because of the other issues that were involved.

I got elected to Congress in 1974. I got sworn in . . . this is an interesting story. My mother came up to Washington along with Barbara and the kids, [for my swearing in]. Tickets to the gallery are very hard to get, because of the ceremonial nature of the event. By this time I had gotten to know Ed Koch, who was a congressman from New York, a senior congressman. He had been very helpful to me during the transition, moving in, and we became friends. He had been sworn in [on] a number of occasions and he still got his allotment of tickets.

I’d given him, at one point, a box of my mother’s cookies. She made a chocolate mandel bread . . .

Nat: Ahh . . .

Elliott: . . . it was world famous . . .

90 Ed Koch was a lawyer, politician, political commentator, movie critic, and television personality. He served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1969 to 1977 and was mayor of New York City from 1978 to 1989.

91 Mandel bread is a Jewish cookie popular amongst Eastern European Jews. The Yiddish word mandelbrot literally means “almond bread”, a reference to its common ingredient of almonds.
Natl: . . . the infamous “mandel bread strategy.” (laughter)

Elliott: . . . and Koch knew that. So when I asked him for tickets to the gallery for the family, my mother and others, he agreed only on condition my mother made him some chocolate mandel bread. (laughter) So, we bartered mandel bread for gallery tickets.

Anyway, I started in Congress, I got the committee assignments basically that I wanted to get, public works and transportation; because of the importance of transportation issues to Georgia, and because of the importance, at that time, of the economy—we were in somewhat of a recession at the time—and because of rapid transit and other issues that were very constituency-oriented. Then the other area was government operations, which appealed to my reformist activities and also it gave me the opportunity to get involved in national security issues. I wanted to be on the National Security Subcommittee which I ultimately became involved with, along with two other major international activities. I was a member of the Congressional Delegation to the North Atlantic Assembly which was the parliamentary arm of NATO92 and a member of the American Congressional Delegation to the Inter-Parliamentary Union which gave me opportunities to get heavily involved in international matters.

One interesting event that relates to Jewish life in the Congress . . . there were probably 20, maybe 25, Jewish members of the House at that time, ranging from Bella Abzug93 to Eddie Koch to Sid Yates, Bill Layman from Florida, Steve Solars, a number of others. The Congress, on most occasions, took into account Jewish holidays. So there wouldn’t be votes or sessions on Jewish holidays. But I think it was in my first or second year, for whatever reason, the Congress was in session during Passover on the first Seder. That made a number of us really upset, because they could have scheduled around it. So we went to the speaker, Carl Albert, at the time, and said, “Look, this was a bad schedule you put on us. We want to have a Seder. That means we don’t want to have any votes between six o’clock and eight o’clock.” It was an evening session that night, and about 12 or 14 of us went over to a local restaurant on Capitol Hill, got a long table, got some matzah94 and had a Seder. There was a big argument as to

92 The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is an intergovernmental military alliance between 29 North American and European countries. The organization implements the North Atlantic Treaty that was signed in 1949.
93 Bella Abzug was an American lawyer, U.S. Representative, social activist, and a leader of the Women’s Movement.
94 Matzah is an unleavened flatbread that is part of Jewish cuisine and forms an integral element of the Passover festival. It commemorates the first Seder meal, and the haste in which the Israelites left Egypt, giving them no time to allow their bread to rise.
whether Koch or Abzug was going to preside.

Nat: (laughter)

Elliott: Abzug muscled her way in. Eddie Koch never liked Bella Abzug, and that simply added to his attitudes about her. Steve Solars asked the four questions, he was the youngest there . . .

Nat: . . . the youngest at the table.

Elliott: So, during this session of Congress, at a restaurant called the Rotunda—which was a very popular restaurant on Capitol Hill—Jewish members conducted a Seder. I thought that was significant at the time.

Also, while there is no formal Jewish caucus, the senior Jewish member would, on occasions of importance, convene meetings—informal meetings—of the members of Congress who were Jewish. Both Republican and Democratic. We would talk about issues. There was no block of voting for or against foreign aid or issues of that sort. But if there was a major issue that clearly had overtones of concern about fundamental issues involving Israel, and had been made into a national issue such as arms sales, for example, or the outbreak of a war, we would be convened. Frequently we’d meet with the Israeli ambassador who would come over to the hill to meet with the Jewish members and answer questions and explain what was going on. When the Israeli Prime Ministers or Foreign Ministers would come to Washington, they would always arrange for a meeting with Jewish members of Congress. [It was] usually at Blair House, where they would stay, or they might have a reception of some sort at the Israeli embassy. But they always made it a point of wanting [us] to stay in touch with Israeli issues, that [those issues] would be communicated directly to members of Congress. As a result, I got to meet the entire panoply of Jewish leadership from Israel, as they would come to the United States, both ambassadors and other ministers. I got heavily involved in just knowing what was going on in the Middle East.

Nat: How did that play back home in your district, which was not a predominantly Jewish district—so, those issues wouldn’t be first and foremost?

Elliott: By and large, my district was opposed to all foreign aid. It wasn’t just to Israel. That was more a result of conservatism than any xenophobia\(^95\). I don’t think that was what was

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\(^95\) Xenophobia is an intense or irrational dislike or fear of people from other countries.
driving it. So I voted against a number of appropriation bills, foreign assistance appropriations bills, which I thought were excessive and [not] the proper targeting of the foreign assistance—and I’m not talking about Israel, although, in some instances I thought that that funding was excessive. I felt that our foreign aid programs were not working as well as they should and were somewhat overly generous on many occasions. So I voted against them. That was interpreted—particularly by some of my Jewish constituents—as a vote against Israel, which was just as absurd as—had I voted the other way—being a vote for Israel. I just, again, had to explain to those people what the votes were. It was interesting that probably the most intolerant group of people I ever dealt with—other than the ultimate dealings with the Moral Majority96—were the AIPAC, American Israel Political Action Committee, who I came to regard as the lobbyist thugs in Washington. They had a litmus test that was about as purist as the gun lobby and the anti-abortion lobby.

But I was a very strong, outspoken, supporter of Israel both in my district and in Washington; and in my district, on the basis that Israel was a bastion of democracy in the Middle East. It was the only democracy. It was a very important, strategic ally for the United States, and we had both practical and moral reasons to support the state of Israel. I never made any bones about that. Although, it was also interesting . . . when the civil war in Lebanon broke out in the mid 1970’s, I was the first member of Congress—of any faith—to take the floor to speak out against the oppression of the Lebanese people by the Syrians, and the slaughter that was going on. [I said] that the United States could not just simply stand idly by and see the Lebanese suffer under this type of civil disorder and civil strife and Syrian aggression. It was only later that other members of Congress began to pick up that theme.

So I had concerns about that whole region and felt that instability in that region was one of Israel’s greatest threats. Therefore—getting out of chronological sync now—one of the most memorable experiences was to be in Congress and in Washington as the Camp David Accords97 were reached. Having the opportunity to meet not only with [Menachem] Begin but

96 The Moral Majority was a prominent American political action group associated with the Christian right and the Republican Party. It was founded in 1979 by Baptist minister Jerry Falwell and his associates, and dissolved in the late 1980's. Its aim was to further a conservative and religious agenda, including the allowance of prayer in schools and strict laws against abortion.

97 The Camp David Accords, signed by President Jimmy Carter, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin in September 1978, established a framework for an historic peace treaty concluded between Israel and Egypt in March 1979.
also with [Anwar] Sadat, and to again, gain a broader insight into the dynamics of war and peace and survival in the Middle East. I came to the conclusion that Israel had to have peace. That it could not survive, no matter how strong it was militarily, in a world that was surrounding it that would be forever hostile. While it could survive for ten, fifteen, twenty, maybe a hundred years, its long-term survival was based upon a relatively peaceful and stable region. That had a lot to do with my view of international politics in the Middle East from that point forward.

Nat: Your Jewish nexus in Congress is not a problem back home because you’re able to stay philosophically in tune with your constituency on the foreign aid issue. It frustrates the Jewish political action community a little bit, because they can’t get you to just be their rubber stamp, but those who are willing to listen are able to hear what the real issues are in your mind.

Elliott: That’s correct.

Nat: Part of being a Jew in Congress at this particular time is the ability to really understand the Mid-East issues and dynamics while you’re busy with the more secular, domestic, issues of Congress. You come back every two years. How does that go, that process of re-election, when you’re there?

Elliott: Well, first of all, let me just close the loop on the other part of the political dynamics of being Jewish and still having disputes with the Israeli lobby political activist group. What had happened in the past [was], Jewish members of Congress basically got elected from Jewish constituencies. For Steve Solars or Mel Levine or Sid Yates or Ed Koch to be very strongly supporting Israel without critical assessment—although I’m not suggesting they weren’t critical when it became necessary—but for them to tow the line, was a clear constituency-appealing issue. Now you’re having congressmen being elected from Atlanta and from Birmingham and from Wichita and from places where their constituency interests were quite different. That was one of the things that I began, and others began, to say very up front to the AIPAC people and other groups of that sort, that we have to represent our constituency.

Nat: And you weren’t being elected because you were Jewish, and arguably . . .

Elliott: . . . that’s right . . .

Nat: . . . Koch in New York, in part, is getting elected because he’s Jewish . . .

Elliott: . . . just as Blacks were being elected from predominantly Black constituents. Koch,
and Solars, and Ted Weiss, and Bella, and people of that sort, were being elected from Jewish constituencies.

Now, having said that, let me get to your last question about the re-election process. The one thing I knew was that you don’t campaign for elections in the two or three months before the election. You have to be campaigning from the very beginning. That meant staying in touch. The two things that I felt were critical to being elected were to be a good congressman, be effective, stay in touch with constituents; and take care of their needs as a member of Congress and be concerned about it. Thirdly, to make certain that you didn’t lose touch with the political sentiments.

I always felt that if a poll told me something that I didn’t already know, I was in trouble. [I felt] that one of the talents—if there are talents that politicians have—is the ability to know, to feel, to sense the attitudes of their political constituency. To be able to sniff the air and know how your constituents feel about issues. That you don’t vote based on what the poll says. You vote based upon what you either think is right, or what you—more frequently—know that your constituencies feel about issues; to represent them. That meant staying very close in touch. I did town hall meetings. I did mail-outs with return ballots coming in from constituents. I actively pursued my mobile office and I spent a lot of time out in my constituency speaking to groups, going to neighborhoods, and doing things that kept me constantly in tune and in touch.

That would be accompanied by a vigorous campaign using the same types of techniques that we had used in the first campaign, which were grassroots-oriented, involving volunteers, and getting out amongst the constituency. Debating with my opponent, Blackburn, I don’t think he and I debated each other except maybe on one occasion. On one of the occasions we were supposed to debate, he was having, what turned out to be, an illegal fundraiser in a House office building. Illegal, because you can’t raise political campaign funds in a House office building. I wanted to debate any opponent that wanted to debate me. Again, part of that staying in touch, letting your constituents know that just because you had to work in the nation’s capital to be a congressman, that you were really still a person of that district. That’s what I worked on.

[We] basically kept the same campaign team together, brought in a few new people. The part that was the most difficult for me was the fundraising, which you had to do. I found it to be both distasteful and demanding of time which I wish I could have devoted to other pursuits. But if you didn’t have the resources, you couldn’t run political campaigns, which was one of the
reasons that I, very early on, became a supporter of public financing for congressional campaigns. It’s interesting, because you would think that the people who could raise the most money would be incumbents, which is true, because of their incumbency. I, as an incumbent, wanted to have public financing even if it meant my opponent got the same amount of money I did. I would be freed from the time and other constraints that political fundraising places upon you, or at least largely free of [it]. But you had to do it and I did it. I had a lot of people who were very helpful in assisting me doing what I did not do well, which was fundraising, and who were generous. Obviously, most of my fundraising was not amongst the Jewish community, because there wasn’t that much of a Jewish constituency. Therefore, it came from people who were small contributors. Ten dollars, $15, $25, $50 from average citizens, and larger gifts from contributions from the general business community.

**Nat:** You’ve got this district that, during the period you’re serving, is culturally diverse. You’ve got the Virginia Highland upwardly mobile young professional group. You’ve got the academic community in the Druid Hills area where you live. A professional population that is there, moving out to the rural counties in Stone Mountain and Rockdale, where you move to blue collar. Growth in the Black population in the southern part of your district, I guess?

**Elliott:** Yes, that began to get larger.

**Nat:** Not a dramatic growth in your Jewish population, because while DeKalb county increases its Jewish population, the great growth in the Jewish population tends to be out on the perimeter, Sandy Springs.

**Elliott:** There was some growth in the Jewish population as new synagogues opened, as more Jewish people began to move closer to their synagogue. But it never, at [any] point, was a significant number of people or voters.

**Nat:** Not, perceptively to you, an issue in the minds of the DeKalb county voters. That is, they don’t go to the polls thinking about the fact that Elliott Levitas is Jewish.

**Elliott:** No.

**Nat:** They’re concerned about your fiscal policy, your foreign policy, and the service you’re giving them. On fiscal policy and foreign policy you, and those you represent, have a comfortable coalescence. There’s no tension here where you’re debating between what you prefer and what you know your constituents want.

**Elliott:** I was very much in tune with my constituency on fiscal policies, and on foreign
relations, and military policies, which were the most important things. Then the fact that I was perceived as being a very effective, respected, member of the Congress. Very visible in the national scene, not only for aviation activities but for a lot of the international stuff and environmental areas. Having been primarily responsible for saving the environmental programs when the Regan administration came in. Bringing about the resignation of Anne Gorsuch Burford who, as head of the Environmental Protection Agency, really began to reverse—oh, it wasn’t her doing, it was the White House’s doing—the progress we had made in that area. That environmental issues are very important in this area as well.

**Nat:** You had good relations with the Georgia Congressional Delegation, I would assume?

**Elliott:** Very good, with the possible exception of Larry McDonald.  

**Nat:** Larry McDonald is to the north of you. Wyche Fowler and then John Lewis?  

**Elliott:** Well, first it was Andy Young, then Wyche, and then John, and then to the northwest, was Larry McDonald. Then there was Phil Landrum, followed by Ed Jenkins to the north and northeast.

**Nat:** [To] Larry McDonald you must have been, like the rest of the congressional delegation from Georgia, rabid liberals.

**Elliott:** Larry was not good. It was not just that he was a John Birch right-winger. I don’t think he was a very good person. I remember him and the Birch Society and others and they were very active throughout my entire period in Congress. They’re not active at all as much now, but they were very active. They would publish a monthly scorecard of my votes which they

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98 Larry McDonald was a Democratic member of the U.S. House of Representatives, representing Georgia’s 7th congressional district. He was also a member of the John Birch Society. He served from 1975 until he was killed when Korean Air Lines Flight 007 was shot down by Soviet interceptors.

99 Wyche Fowler is a Democrat who represented Georgia as both a Senator and member of the U.S. House of Representatives. He served in Congress from 1977 to 1993.

100 John Lewis is a civil rights leader and politician who chaired the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), worked closely with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and lead the march on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama in 1965. He currently serves in the House of Representative for Georgia's 5th congressional district.

101 Andrew Young is a politician, diplomat, and activist. He was a leader in the civil rights movement, executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and a close confidant to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He served in the U.S. House of Representatives, was a United Nations Ambassador, and Mayor of Atlanta from 1982 – 1990.

102 The John Birch Society is a radical right-wing conservative advocacy group, founded in 1958, with an extreme anti-communist and limited government agenda.
generally disagreed with very badly, very fundamentally, for which I was glad.

**Nat:** (laughter)

**Elliott:** I think you’re more defined by your opponents than you are by your friends, and I was very glad to number them among my enemies. I remember that when the first request for Aids research funding came in, it was, I think $10M, and I supported it. That was viewed by Larry McDonald and his crowd as joining league with the devil, that these people were just paying for their sins. As I say, I don’t think he was a very good person.

But I had excellent relations. I ultimately became the Dean of the Georgia delegation, its leader. Ironically enough, when McDonald went down in the Korean Airline 707 crash—the shootdown by the Soviet Air Force—I was the person who led the delegation officially to his memorial service in Cobb county, Marietta.

I was fortunate in having a very productive career in Congress on issues that were, I thought, important. [I] had a profound effect in changing a lot of the government operational activities with sunset legislation, with congressional review required of regulatory actions, a whole series of things of that sort. [I] became very involved in international matters. In NATO, ultimately becoming the chairman of the NATO Committee, and speaking in different parts of the world on these issues from Holland and Denmark to Japan.

Let me relate two stories because they are Jewish-related and they were a result of the fact that I had become, not just a member of Congress, but an influential and effective member of Congress. Tip O’Neal\(^\text{103}\) used to decry the fact that he and I had political differences on issues. He was much more liberal than I was, and I thought his political time had passed, although I liked him as an individual. He used to complain that I was always able to get 40-50 votes on any issue, just because I voted for it. That’s a significant number. It’s almost 25 percent of a majority of the House. So he and the others had to deal with me, which they didn’t like. That made it easier for me to get some things done because the *perception* of power is even more important than power, in a body of that sort; maybe in any endeavor, but it clearly is in Congress.

Anyway, two very important events. One of the groups that asked me to help them early on were two organizations having to do with Soviet Jewry. Not too long after I got elected to Congress I was contacted about one. I spoke out on the issue generically, but there was one

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\(^{103}\) Thomas “Tip” O’Neill served as the 47th Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1977 to 1987, and represented Boston, Massachusetts, as a Democrat from 1953 to 1987.
Soviet citizen whose name was Boris Levitas who was one of the more prominent refuseniks\textsuperscript{104}. Because he had refused military service [he] was also under the cloud of criminal action, criminal prosecution and incarceration. I worked very hard to try to get Boris released, by writing to the Soviet leadership, by making speeches on his behalf, by contacting the Soviet embassy and doing other things.

In 1976 I got a telegram from Boris, from Vienna, that they had finally released him. There’s no question, the Soviets told me it was a result of the activity that I had engaged in, in cooperation with these two groups of Soviet Jewry activists. That was an awesome feeling, to have played a part in the escape from oppression to freedom, of an individual. Now clearly, the association of name had something to do with it, from beginning to end. But nevertheless, this young man—I think he was maybe 26 years old when he finally got out—and I knew that his life would be changed for the better, forever. As a result of some dealings that I had with these Soviet Jewry activists, we arranged to bring Boris to Washington. I met him for the first time in a ceremony . . .

Nat: . . . oh, how sweet . . .

Elliot: . . . that we put on, that took place on the floor of the House of Representatives. He had come to Washington under the auspices of this group. I put together some people from Washington, and before the House opened for business one morning, we embraced. It was a very touching moment. He went on to Israel—where he now lives—got married, got an advanced degree at the Technion in Haifa. I still hear from him from time to time. He has made a new life for himself. That had a great deal of significance for me.

Another thing that grew out of that, is that I made a trip to the Soviet Union at a time when it was still a very oppressive regime, and made it a point of visiting with various dissident groups; not necessarily all Jewish. I also made a point of meeting with refuseniks both in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, and in Moscow. It was very courageous, on their part, to meet with me publicly. But it also gave them more security, because the Russians who were spying on them and me, knew that I was in touch with them and that they had somebody on the outside. I brought (sounds like fill-un and ta-lay-see: 1:06 Elliot Levitas T3-S2-02) to these people, and it was just before Passover and I also brought matzah to them, which the Russians didn’t like, the

\textsuperscript{104} Refuseniks were individuals in the former Soviet Union who were refused permission to emigrate—in particular, Jews who were forbidden to emigrate to Israel.
Soviets didn’t like. But they weren’t going to do a hell of a lot about it at that particular point.

It was at a time when relations between the United States and the Soviet Union were very tense because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and imposing martial law in Poland. But it was important for me to meet with these people, some of whom had been refuseniks for fifteen years. I also, as I say, met with some dissidents and met with [Yuri] Orlov’s wife in Leningrad, who passed me a secret memorandum that he had written in his cell—solitary confinement—which I got out. His wife was Jewish, by the way. That was important to me, in addition to what I was doing over there.

One of the meetings I had with a group of refuseniks in Leningrad was amusing because we were talking in a room at the hotel, and this was on a Saturday afternoon. I had made a comment about something which was very controversial, having to do with whether or not the Helsinki Accords ratified the status quo, territorial status quo, in the post-World War II period. I said, “If the Soviets don’t deliver on their side of the agreement to provide human rights, then the question of territorial agreement, if there was one, had to be reopened and revisited.” On Monday I was in Moscow in a meeting with the [Alexei G.] Arbatov’s group, U.S.-Canadian special group, and I got an answer to my question in Moscow without ever asking it. They had taped and bugged the entire meeting and that question came up, so they wanted to answer it, even though it meant showing the fact that I was under surveillance. So that was a very significant event.

One last thing I want to mention. During the period of the Israeli military action in Lebanon—when Begin was still Prime Minister, [Ariel] Sharon was the Military Defense Minister—a group approached the speaker, Tip O’Neal at this time. They wanted to go visit the Middle East. The group was made up of people who were very supportive of the Arab position. O’Neal said that he would authorize a trip, but only if there was somebody else in there for balance. He asked me if I would consider going on the trip, and I consented to do so.

This was 1982 we’re talking about, summer of 1982. In the group were, as I say, members of Congress who were generally supportive of the Arab position and not supportive of

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105 Yuri Orlov is a nuclear physicist and human rights activist, a former Soviet dissident, and a founder of the Moscow Helsinki Group and the Soviet Amnesty International group.

106 The Helsinki Accords was a major diplomatic agreement signed by 35 nations in Helsinki, Finland in 1975, at the conclusion of the first Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. The multifaceted Act addressed a range of prominent global issues and had a far-reaching effect on the Cold War and U.S. and Soviet relations.
the Israeli position. I remember some of the people in the group, Nick Joe Rahall. All of these were friends of mine, by the way, these were not adversaries. I had learned the ability to be friends with people with whom I had very deep political differences. But Rahall, Mary Rose Oakar, Pete McCloskey, Mervyn Dymally, David Bonior, and myself. We flew from Washington into Damascus. First meetings were with the Syrians. Had a two-hour meeting with [Hafez al]-Assad\textsuperscript{107} in which he engaged in, not just anti-Israeli rhetoric, but gutter antisemitism, gutter antisemitism. He and I took on each other. I went at him as hard as he went at me.

For example, he kept raising the question of dual loyalties and the fact that America was working against its own interests. American Jews were overly influential in government and by supporting Israel, as opposed to the Arabs, they were hurting America. Not just in oil, but in other issues. That Americans were under the domination of a Jewish protocol—the Elders of Zion\textsuperscript{108} type of idea—world domination. I came back at him in the meeting, that he had just been involved with the slaughter of 10,000 of his own citizens, in a city called Hama. I raised that question with him and he became very angry about that. I also pointed out that if he was concerned about the Palestinians, why, during the 19 years that the West Bank and Gaza were under Arab control, he didn’t insist at \textit{that} time on rights for Palestinians. So we really went at it. It was interesting, he had a map in his office, and on that map of the Middle East and Syria, not only did Israel not exist on that map, but Lebanon did not exist on that map. So, we got into that. To their credit, my American colleagues were very supportive of me in this encounter, particularly once he became viciously antisemitic and moved away from the typical anti-Zionism, anti-Israel, into gutter, dual-loyalty type of rhetoric.

Went from there to Lebanon through the north. Came down through several of the Palestinian refugee camps. Came into Beirut from the north. I remember on Sunday, as we came through the resort town of Jounieh, you could look across the bay to Beirut itself. And it was so psychedelic to see people lounging on the beach in bikinis, playing with their kids with beach balls and rafts, and actually watching the shells explode in Beirut.

\textbf{Nat:} Oh my…

\textbf{Elliott:} People being killed, hearing the gunfire, as you looked across the beach of people

\textsuperscript{107} Hafez al-Assad was a Syrian politician who served as President of Syria from 1971 to 2000 and as Prime Minister from 1970 to 1971.

\textsuperscript{108} The Protocols of the Elders of Zion is an antisemitic fabricated text, purporting to describe a Jewish plan for global domination.
who could have been on the Riviera.

[In] the meetings, again, I’m with this more supportive-of-the-Arab-cause group. Pete McCloskey, by this time, had become vitriolically opposed to Israel, and very outspoken on the issue.

In Beirut we met with the leadership of the Sunni, the Druze, Christians. I met with the [Amine] Gemayel family and the others, with [Walid] Jumblatt, with [Nabih] Berri, the Sunni leader. The day we met with Berri and Jumblatt, I’ll never forget, they gave us five minutes each of very vigorous anti-Israeli, anti-American rhetoric because of the American support for Israel. At the end of five minutes they said, “Now, let us tell you who we really hate. It’s the Maronite Christians. Those are the worst people in the world.”

In the middle of this meeting, the doors come open and some gunmen walk into the room. This is occurring in the Lebanese Parliament, and they say, “Yasser Arafat is ready to see you.” He was holed up in West Beirut. They said “If you come now you can meet with him.” I said, “I’m not going. I don’t think it’s right for us to go. You guys do what you want to do. I’m not going. This is a set-up. I’m going back to the embassy.”

So I went back to the embassy and they left. Sure enough, it was a set-up, because before they came back I got a call from one of the news services that Arafat had given McCloskey a written declaration that the PLO was now prepared to accept [UN resolutions] 242 and 338. Therefore, the recognition of Israel had occurred. He had given it to this American Congressional Delegation. They really wanted me there for that stunt. The reporter said, “What do you think about this?” I said, “I haven’t seen it, so I can’t comment, but I would doubt it. I don’t think we ought to buy it.” But it’s already now out all over the world. By the time they get back I look at it and sure enough—I still have a copy of it—it said 242, 338, and all other resolutions relating to Israel, which included Zionism as racism, etc., etc., etc.

So it was nothing new, but had been presented to an American Congressional Delegation fortunately, that didn’t have a Jewish member of Congress there. It had gone all

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109 Lebanese Maronite Christians are Lebanese people who adhere to the beliefs of the Maronite Church in Lebanon, which is the largest Christian denomination in the country.
110 Yasser Arafat was a Palestinian political leader and Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from 1969 to 2004. He was also President of the Palestinian National Authority from 1994 to 2004.
111 UN Resolutions 242 and 338 are two resolutions approved by the United Nations Security Council in 1967 and 1973, respectively. Both call for the peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict through territorial compromise. The acceptance of the Resolutions by Arab elements indicated their recognition of Israel.
around the world. For the next several days we are engaged in press conferences and interviews. Several very interesting experiences between Beirut and Israel which I don’t have time to get into now. Fascinating experiences with these people.

We get to Israel late at night, drive into Israel, check into the King David Hotel at about 10:30, and are contacted by Nightline\textsuperscript{112}. Would McCloskey and I go on Nightline and talk about this event because it had gotten worldwide? I said there’s nothing to it, McCloskey says it’s the great breakthrough. I realized, the next day we were going to meet with [Ariel] Sharon and [Yitzhak] Shamir and [Menachem] Begin\textsuperscript{113} and so forth. To do the Nightline show it would be like 3:00 or 4:00 o’clock in the morning, and we were tired from the day. But I realized this was a very, very, important event—on worldwide television—to take on Arafat and McCloskey and put a lie to this setup.

I had not been in Jerusalem for many years. I’d made one visit there when I was still a student at Oxford. I agreed to the interview, to the [Ted] Koppel program, knew I had a long time to kill. When I was in Israel the first time, Jerusalem was still a divided city. McCloskey’s top aid was Jewish and we had had a number of conversations. While she was supportive of McCloskey, she knew what my views were and was supportive of me. She had made many trips to Jerusalem. I’m trying to remember her name . . . Amber something or other. Very bright woman.

We were all going to go over to the studio to tape this program and she asked me—I had my driver and my aid and so forth—she asked me, had I ever been to The Wall\textsuperscript{114}? I hadn’t been. She said, “Would you like to go? We’ve got some hours and I’ve got to get over there, too.” I said, “Yes, I sure would. I think I would.” I didn’t know if I would have a chance the next day. So we get in our cars and we go over to the wall.

I’d never been there. It’s now 2:00 o’clock in the morning, illuminated, relatively empty. I’m sort of standing towards the rear of the area. Somebody approaches me, someone—a

\textsuperscript{112} Nightline is ABC’s late-night news program created by Roone Arledge. The program featured Ted Koppel as its main anchor from March 1980 until his retirement in November 2005.

\textsuperscript{113} Ariel Sharon was an Israeli general and politician who served as the 11th Prime Minister of Israel from March 2001 until April 2006. Yitzhak Shamir was an Israeli politician and the seventh Prime Minister of Israel, serving two terms, 1983–84 and 1986–1992. Menachem Begin was an Israeli politician, founder of Likud and the sixth Prime Minister of Israel.

\textsuperscript{114} The Western Wall, or The Wall, is a shrine in Jerusalem, considered holy due to its connection to the Temple Mount. Because of the Temple Mount entry restrictions, The Wall is the holiest place where Jews are permitted to pray, though the holiest site in the Jewish faith lies behind it.
relatively young man—in his forties I would say. He said, “We need someone for a minyan\textsuperscript{115}, would you join us?” I said, “I’d be happy to, it would be a privilege.” I walked forward with him and I said, “You’re obviously an American.” He says, “Yes, and you are. Where are you from?” I said, “Atlanta.” He said, “Do you know Ben Rubinowitz? Ben Rubinowitz is a friend of mine from Atlanta . . .”

\textbf{Nat:} Oh my goodness . . .

\textbf{Elliott:} . . . He’s very active.” He and Ben were very close friends, as it turns out. Anyway, as I get closer to this wall—which has such important historical significance, religious significance—I reached out and I touched the wall. I’ll never forget this. I have never directly experienced the divine presence, but if I ever came close, it was at that moment. There was something electric that happened as I touched that wall. I knew that there was some destiny involved, a lot of destiny involved, that I should be at that wall before . . .

\textbf{Nat:} . . . being on the show . . .

\textbf{Elliott:} . . . this Koppel experience, where it would make a lot of difference how it played out. I took part in the minyan, and then McCloskey’s aid knew how to get to where we were going. We made it and I got on the Koppel show and hit a double homerun. The next day, Begin came to me and said, “What happened in putting the lie to this move, and [saying] that it was no breakthrough, and until Israel’s right to exist was unconditionally accepted, and terrorism…” so forth and so on. He said it was very important, and that there would always be a debt of gratitude, because that was a critical moment in time. I just thought I’d tell you that story . . .

\textbf{Nat:} I’m delighted to have it.

\textbf{Elliott:} . . . because of so many other overtones to it.

\textbf{Nat:} We’re just about out of time. Just real quickly, the far right decided it was time for you to do something else.

\textbf{Elliott:} (laughter) That’s right.

\textbf{Nat:} (laughter) Quick comment on that.

\textbf{Elliott:} Well, it was a classic. It has, in fact, become a subject of study all across the country, that particular campaign. A political science professor I ran into recently heard my name and said he teaches my election in his class.

\textsuperscript{115} A minyan is a quorum of ten Jewish adults (traditionally men, but now also women may participate) required for certain religious obligations. The most common activity requiring a minyan is public prayer.
It was a result of several factors, not the least of which was redistricting. My district had been reapportioned. The few Blacks that I had in my district were basically taken out, and they were tending to vote for me. A whole new area was added in the northern part of the district which was predominantly Republican. People who had not known me, newcomers, had a big turnover. There had been a coalition between Blacks and Republicans nationally to redistrict in a fashion which would make it easier for Republicans to get elected in suburban districts and Blacks in central, city districts. That was a major, major problem. New constituents, more conservative, more Republican, and less of my democratic base. Plus, the fact there was a campaign that was launched [by the] Moral Majority, church-based, with a candidate to whom truth meant nothing. It was a deliberate assault upon me, not only because I was liberal, but I was liberal and Jewish. In fact, one of the ads that was run against me used Geraldine Ferraro, who was running that year for vice-president, and Walter Mondale. By the way, that didn’t help either.

Nat: (laughter)

Elliot: Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro in my district, that being the head of my ticket, and Jesse Jackson, coming to Atlanta to be on television once a week to speak to the Blacks in the South—all of those things contributed. But that commercial said, “Elliott Levitas voted the same way Geraldine Ferraro voted 75 percent of the time and she is a New York liberal.” Then there was a pause, fill in the word, “congressman.”

There was a clear effort. Campaign literature was put out talking about, “It’s time,” literally, “that we have a Christian representing us in Congress.” Clergy would have meetings and write letters to their parishioners saying, “We need to have a Christian representing us.” Church parking lots were leafleted with my views on Biblical matters. I was interviewed by a panel of Moral Majority people and the first question I was asked was, “Do you believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ?” Now first of all, to ask that question. But to ask that question of a person in a political campaign, knowing I’m Jewish. It was a flavor.

Phone banks would call people the weekend before the election, “Do you know that Elliott Levitas is Jewish?” Canvassers would knock on doors. One canvasser knocked on this fellow’s door . . . they would make it a point not to go to homes or apartments that had Jewish sounding names on them. But this guy was named McCoy. These two canvassers came by and knocked on his door and said, “You’re not going to vote for Elliott Levitas are you?” He said,
“Yes, I voted for him in the past and I think I will in the future.” “Did you know he was Jewish?” at which point, Mr. McCoy decked the guy.

Nat: (laughter)

Elliott: It was not altogether subtle. There were some subtle things, but they were not altogether subtle. Therefore, for the first time in my political career, my Jewishness had become an issue. It did make a difference, although I do not believe that it was the only reason I lost the election, I think it made a difference. It provided a church-based volunteer group of believers to my opponent, who was lying about other parts of my political record and voting record and things like that. It gave a volunteer ideological base to a campaign that would not have been as successful—my opponent’s campaign—had it not been there.

It was clearly a blatantly antisemitism campaign. His wife, the candidate’s wife, had written a letter, supposedly by hand, which she sent out. It was mass mailed by the Republican National Committee, in which it made the distinction between him and me. She pointed out, “You shouldn’t vote for Elliott Levitas, he is not one of us.”

So, it did play out. It was not the only reason. It was probably, almost certainly, not the main reason that I lost that election. But it clearly was a factor, and for the first time, played out in a political campaign in which I was involved.

Nat: Elliott, I can’t thank you enough for all this time. I know you’ve got to run and we appreciate it.

<End Tape 3 Side 2>

INTERVIEW ENDS