

Times Were Different
Mel Fineberg's Interview Transcript
Collected and Edited¹ by Eliza Lambert

In Association with the Maine Jewish Museum
and Documenting Maine Jewry

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¹ Note to the reader: Narratives and transcripts have been recorded and compiled to show the slang and quirks of speech inherent in every narrator.

ELIZA LAMBERT: Where did you grow up Mel?

MEL FINEBERG: Basically Munjoy Hill. Right up there, top of the hill.

EL: I live up there too, now. What street?

MF: You live up there now?

EL: Yeah, yeah.

MF: What street?

EL: I'm on Saint Lawrence. Where were you?

MF: I had a paper route there when I was a kid.

EL: Really? (laughs) Can you talk to me about your family and what growing up was like for you?

MF: I was born on Grand Street. I have two older brothers. My parents immigrated from Europe from 1920, they met here in Portland, let's see. I was born 1935. That's a tough time. The Depression was just getting over. Things were a lot diffe'ent then. I was probably around four years old, four or five, we moved up on Munjoy Hill, on North Street. Spent there, a lot of years. Times were diff'rent. There were no computers (laughs). We didn't spend time on the computers and iPhones. Never heard of those things.

EL: Right, right.

MF: Let's see. Went to school, grammar school, here in Portland. Graduated from Portland High School 1953. Then I went to Gorham State Teacher's College, four years. Became a teacher. My first teaching job was across the street on North School here. It's an apartment for the elderly now. Senior citizen, I should say.

[Interviewer coughs]

EL: 'Scuse my.

MF: I went to Boston University. Got my masters degree and became a teacher.

[Interviewer coughs]

EL: Sorry.

MF: Let's see, what else could I say.

EL: Can you tell me about how your parents probably met?

MF: Yes. Let's see. They both arrived around the same time, but it was when the Jewish immigrants came over, my father was one, Lithuanian, which was part of Russia at the time, and my mother was from Poland. When they arrived, it was different. There was no - they came, they had, somebody, I, my father was the youngest, also. He had a sister living here and two brothers. Somebody had to sign up that they would take care of him, bring him into their house, you know, when they first arrived. There was no, like there is now, there was no groups that provided all these things. My father came, he was a tailor. When he first arrived, he stayed at his sister's, her family's on Cumberland Avenue just for a - you know where the bagel place is now?

EL: Yeah.

MF: That was my uncle's shoe repair shop. That's where he, that's where they worked next door. Within a month after he arrived, maybe less than that, he got a job as a tailor. They worked, he worked maybe twelve hours a day. So whatever. Then, he wanted to become a citizen of the United States. It wasn't very easy. He went to Portland High School at night, called, 'Americanization Class.' They learned to speak English, to write, to read. He went to that. He studied. Became a citizen. My mother, she came over. Things were bad in Poland at that time. Her mother died - I forget what they call it now, but she was like eighteen. She had a sister living in Paris, so she went to Paris, lived with her sister. As I understand it, her sister's husband was an architect. They had a very nice house. She had two sons, who took care of her when she couldn't even walk upstairs, she was so emancipated. They helped her, took care of her, fed her. 'Course she always said she loved the French bread and butter. She only stayed there so long. Then she had to come here. She didn't want to, she wanted to stay in Paris. But because her visa was only for, only give out those immigrants to, not all the time. She came to Portland because she had a sister and a brother, I'm named after her brother, her two brother's actually. That's how she got to Portland.

EL: So by 'those immigrants,' do you mean Jewish people?

MF: Yeah.

EL: Could you talk to me about the laws your mom was dealing with surrounding Jewish immigration?

MF: I'm not too familiar, to be honest. I do know that my father didn't want to talk much about his background, it wasn't very good, had a hard time. Just didn't know, maybe, sometimes it did. Immigration, it was tough. Coming on ship, they'd have to go in the lowest class even though they had money. It was a lot of immigrants that came here.

EL: How did Jewish people meet, when your parents came over.

MF: I don't know, really, how my parents met. I imagine it's probably, somebody on my father side knew somebody on my mother's side. It wasn't an arranged marriage, but it was sort of, they really didn't have that opportunity. They couldn't meet at social things, they didn't have that problem, you know. I imagine, probably, that's how it was.

EL: What I'm hearing is there wasn't a lot available for Jewish people -

MF: Pardon?

EL: There wasn't a lot available for Jewish people when your parents were here.

MF: That's right. Everyone worked, you know.

EL: Could you talk to me about what the Jewish community was like when they first came over?

MF: The synagogue was a main place of meeting. That was right down the street here on Newbury Street. Now it's an office building, it was sold when (inaudible words) moved to the Woodford's area. I don't know if you're familiar with that. Well, if you notice the, if you go down India Street, take a right on Newbury, you'll notice a big, really nice building, brick building, that was it. That was the center of, that was the Jewish community's center. Started. First building was one of the streets right by the church there, by the condo. But then they bought a building on Cumberland Avenue and that was the Maine, that's where, as kids, we went. They had basketball, they had a gym and everything right there. That was the center of Jewish social things.

EL: Did you go there as a child?

MF: Oh yeah.

EL: Yeah.

MF: Yeah. As kids we used to go down and play ball, walk home, walk down.

EL: So it was close to where you lived, though? It was close to where you lived?

MF: Yeah.

EL: You were born on the hill when a lot of Jewish people were living there, is that correct?

MF: Yeah.

EL: What was that like?

MF: It was good. It was mostly Irish, Jewish, and Italian. Italian was down here, you know, in this area, called Little Italy. Newbury Street, all these streets, down Middle Street. It was good growing up. We were all poor, but we never knew it. We were all in the same boat, you know. We had a house, apartment, wherever you lived, you had a house, food, you went to school. That's what we knew. We used to mosey along, we'd walk down, we'd call it the Uptown, which was really Downtown, but it was called, "Uptown to the movies." There was two or three movie houses down there. I remember going. We would go to the movie on Portland Street, it's not there anymore. They had all kinds of movies. Shorts. Cartoon things. All kinds of things. It was ten cents a ticket. Mother's made us lunch. "Here's your salami." Sandwiches and stuff. We'd take our lunch and eat it there in the theater, and watch 'em maybe over again. Went to school on the Hill, up on the Promenade. It was good. There were problems, you know, you'd get into fights and things but by and large, no, it was fine. We never had a car. Father never drove. As a kid, I never went as far as Woodford's Street. You know?

My aunt and uncle on Mother's side, they had a house, well his wife as born, which was off of Forest Avenue. I forget what it's called now. Going out, you know. You know what Moritz Corner is? You go out Forest Ave. a ways, and there's a school there. In that time it was mostly farm areas, you know. Which wasn't too far from Moritz Corner. But when we got a ride to visit the house, the stores [meaning the shopping area in that region] was a trip, but we never saw it. It was like going to Massachusetts in some ways, you know, we never went that far. There was farmlands around then. That was an overseas trip. What else was there?

EL: As far as your Jewish upbringing was, how did you know you were Jewish?

MF: Well, kept a Kosher house. Went to Hebrew School. The Hebrew School was on Pearl Street, which is, if you go Cumberland Ave, you go a little ways, that's not there now but that's where it was. There was a synagogue there. You know where the Franklin Street Arterial, and it goes Cumberland Avenue? You know where the big high rise is now? Across the street there's now a highway, Franklin Arterial, there was a synagogue there. Hebrew School was just a block away. We had to go to Hebrew School. It goes two nights a week or three after school. A Kosher house. Went to the synagogue on holidays and everything. Also, friends were Jewish. There were some that weren't. Basically, that was it (laughs). We just didn't know any different. That was it.

EL: How did you feel like people - what did you think people thought of you as a Jewish person?

MF: Growing up, we didn't know any different. I'm sure there was. As I got older, 'specially in Europe, when the Nazis came in, there was anti-Semitism. We had, we heard kids would get into fights, they would call us some names. Where did they hear it from? Pro'ly their parents, their father, you know. There were some good fights.

EL: Did you fight?

MF: I didn't. My brother did. He was the one that got into fights as a group. I was a tag-along mostly. There were things. I can remember a - 'scuse me - I can remember one time, on the Eastern Promenade, corner of the Eastern Promenade and Montreal Street, there was a large white house. It was a sort of a, not a hotel, but a -

EL: Inn?

MF: Inn, right. Promenade Inn. They had, I guess the clientele for after, course we didn't know it was, they had people from away that came every year, they were well off. Anyway. They had a sign they put up one summer. Made a sign, stuck it in the lawn. It says, 'No Jews Or Dogs Allowed.' Group of boys, Jewish boys, a few not Jewish, Italian, would go by that sign. So they decided one day, one night, that they'd get from their mother, egg and other things. Went down. Pelted the buildings with eggs and tomatoes and whatever they had. Took the sign, ripped the sign up. I got scared. I was the youngest in that group. I ran home. The others, you know, ran away. Never heard about it. They never put a sign up again. But were they still anti-Semitic? Probably. But I did hear afterwards that one of the boys, that was not Jewish, I guess, his relative was a police officer and he spoke to him. He [the police officer] knew he hung out with us. As I understood it, it wasn't his father, it was his uncle probably. Got him and told him they reported it, the owners to the police. He explained what happened. I think he was a sergeant or a captain or whatever. But that's not how the owners of it explained it, about the sign and everything. So he [my friend] explained what it was. He said, "We took care of it." I guess the sergeant, since he was in charge, said, "Okay, we're going to forget it. We're not going to do anything." That's just one example. But there's other things.

EL: What about you? Did you ever feel like you were targeted because you're Jewish?

MF: No.

EL: What other instances did you witness?

MF: At the Hebrew School, it was a tough area. There was (inaudible word). A lot of the tough kids there, they would start trying to get into fights, call us names. "Jew boy," things like that. There was fights and -

EL: That sounds like it had a lot to do with World War II, and the events leading up to that.

MF: Huh?

EL: It sounds like those evens had a lot to do with World War II -

MF: No question. Not exactly World War II, but the Nazis, the war propaganda, all this. That was bad.

EL: How aware were you of what was going on in Europe?

MF: Well, basically, of course, with all the Nazism started in the '30s, the war itself started in 1940. We were aware of it. We couldn't - I was what, five years old, then six years old. So kids. We didn't really have that knowledge of what was going on in Europe, but basically we knew things like there was, they started, for food, you had to have stamps and cards, cuz most of the food we sent the soldiers, you know. I can't remember the term they used for food. We got coupons, depending how many in your family. If there were five in your family, you got coupons, little booklet. That if you went to the store, you bought something, you'd have to give so many coupons, you know. I remember, I ran an errand at a local store, they'd say, "We need 15 coupons," or that - some things you couldn't get. In school, like for instance, I was in school. We were asked to bring in empty cans, food cans, you know, crush it. We didn't know why, we knew it was for the war. Those were collected. Radios, melted. We had to bring in, were asked to bring in other things, all the different things, you know. We knew, we heard the war and things and listened to it. Didn't have a television. My oldest brother went in 1944 to the Navy, so it was the next year the war ended. We knew that, walking along the streets, in the window they would have a gold, like a thing that they could stick on their window. It was if their son or daughter was killed in the war, they were called, that the family was a 'Gold Family,' or something like that. That they put that in the window to show that somebody in their family was killed in the war. They had a name, I can't remember. Sometimes they'd have candle that'd go all night, and things. People'd talk about it, you know.

EL: What was that like for you?

MF: We didn't know any different, you know. We'd say, "I hope they win." We'd play like we were the soldiers. What was the term, like when the Japanese ended the war, that was nice. But we didn't know different. We called them the ToJo. We'd call them the Yellow Belly. We'd shoot the Yellow Belly, ToJo. [interlude with museum volunteer] [ends]

MF: Basically it was of the war, I didn't think about it really.

EL: How did that - did any of that think about your Jewish identity?

MF: It never came out, even adults, about what was happening in concentration camps, Hitler killing 6 million Jews, and what's going on. That was hidden mostly, we didn't know. We knew that the government wouldn't say a lot of it, you know. It came, afterwards it started to come out. But during the war we weren't aware of what was happening.

EL: And then after -

MF: Yeah, it was after -

EL: Do you remember finding out?

MF: Yes. Because we found out little by little and then it all came out and things changed.

EL: How did things change?

MF: Well, you had a deeper appreciation, and there were so many meetings and things. People talked about "that war over there," and saw it. We had some come back that were in the army, actually went in the concentration camps and brought people out and talked about it. The Federal government talked. That was a life-changing -

EL: How did it change your life?

MF: Well, you just had - you read and had a deeper appreciation of what it is to be Jewish. People say, "We gotta do it. Those who gave their lives for it. We've got to do something for them to uphold the religion, to fight back." And I don't mean physically, but, you know.

EL: Yeah. What do you think it means to be Jewish?

MF: At that time? Well, we were proud of it. We always say, "We're proud to be Jews. Anybody that doesn't, you know, we'll fight 'em and talk back to 'em too." We weren't afraid to say, "We're Jewish." Or hide. Just the opposite.

EL: How many siblings did you have? How many siblings did you have?

MF: Two brothers.

EL: Older?

MF: Yup.

EL: What did your -

MF: The one was here, come see about it, he's the oldest. My brother who's in Boston, he's two years older than me, not quite two. He's in the hospital. I was the baby of the family.

EL: What did your parents do for a living?

MF: My father's a tailor. My mother's a homemaker. Not very interesting.

EL: Just good to know, good background.

MF: Listen. I went in the Navy. I was in the Reserves ten years. Most of the time, South Portland.

EL: Was that before or after you went to college?

MF: After.

EL: Where'd you go to college.

MF: I went to... Well, the first one was Gorham State Teacher's College. Now it's University of Maine, Portland, the Gorham campus. Then I went to Boston University.

EL: For what? For what?

MF: A master's in education.

EL: How did you decide to join the Navy?

MF: My two other brothers were and so I thought I should too.

EL: During that time period, were there any points when the way that you thought about being Jewish changed?

MF: No.

EL: What was it like to leave Maine for the first time?

MF: When I went to college, I came home weekends usually. Lot of times it was summer, and a few course then, so it wasn't, I wasn't really a full-time student, as such. Yeah.

EL: But when you went for your masters, and you left Maine for the first time.

MF: Yeah. It was a change.

EL: Yeah.

MF: Yeah. But even then, when I was in Boston, I took a lot of summer courses, and some winter courses. I enjoyed it. There was, like I told others, this is kind of ironic. Boston University was big. Not as big as it is now, but it was a major university. Are you familiar with Boston?

EL: Yeah.

MF: Down Commonwealth Avenue, part of Boston College. There was a famous student there. He wasn't famous then, but he was afterwards. He was actually, I don't know what they call them, but he was a graduate student. Sort of a graduate student, which, he met a lot of the students there. It was, it was B.U. I was in the School of Education, which was

next door to the School of Religion, cuz Boston University's founded by Methodist school. Big majority of the students were Jewish. He was, I don't know what the called the graduates, assistant, he was like an assistant at the School of Religion, you know. He worked with other students.

EL: Who is this man?

MF: Well, who do you think it would be? I noticed there'd be a sign posted by the school, you know, all the coming events. One or two of 'em would say 'So-and-so be giving a talk' or something at the school. He became very famous.

EL: Is it Martin Luther King?

MF: Martin Luther King.

EL: Yeah.

MF: Very good.

EL: I was like, "I'm going to get it wrong." Good.

MF: I was at the School of Education, yeah.

EL: Did you know him?

MF: No, I didn't. I mean, I didn't go to listen. I didn't know who he was then. It wasn't until after they said, "Oh, man!"

EL: Yeah. What was the Jewish community like in college versus here?

MF: There was a lot more Jewish students, and they were from all over the country, world, country, world. There was a Hillel group. There wasn't that many organized groups for me at that time. The classrooms got along fine. I remember, a summer course I took, we had two or three nuns in a classroom. They were fine. They joked, you know, in the classroom. It was two students from Egypt, we got along fine. Things are different.

EL: Did you prefer it to growing up here?

MF: When I was at school?

EL: Yeah.

MF: Yeah, I enjoyed both. Gorham was fine, too. I do remember one thing you might be interested in. In Gorham, in those days, I went there, I graduated from there in '57, so I started in '50, I graduated in '53 and then I went there, in the class, in our class, class of '53. The whole of Gorham wasn't that big, several hundred students maybe, in Gorham.

We were required to go to, what did they call it then, forgetting what they called it. Twice a week, like Tuesday and Thursday, something in the morning, we would have to go to the Community Building Center. They had one that was, where was the gym and a little auditorium. We'd have to go to required - I can't think of the name - but it was required that we go in first thing in the morning and you would have, freshman would have to sit in this section, juniors over in this upstairs, whatever it was. They would actually have to have somebody take attendance by looking at each class, like freshman class, have somebody in each class see who's missing from that class. Well anyway, then they had a speaker. The speaker was usually a minister or pastor from Gorham area, that area. The president would select the speaker to come that day. Not always, but I don't know, maybe the majority of the time it was a minister or pastor coming there from one of the local churches in that area. Some were okay. They should have realized, you know, this was a mixed group. They realized some - no. They gave a fire and brimstone talk. "If you don't believe in Jesus Christ, you're not going to go to heaven." You know, that type of thing.

EL: Whoa.

MF: Some was not appropriate for a mixed group. It wasn't just Jews, it was others. Maybe some were not religious. This went on the first year. The second year, group of us, Jewish kids, maybe three or four, we went to see the president. Doctor - I can't think of names. He was, anyway, it wouldn't matter the name, but he was the president for quite a few years. He was different, but he was okay. He would talk. So we made a point, we said, "We would like to talk to you." "Kay." So we talked and he was good about it. We said, "The reason we're here is when we go to" whatever it is, I can't remember. I says, "You know, we noticed that the speakers, when the ministers and priests come, we listen." I says, "But there's never been a rabbi coming." I says, "You know, is it possible to sometimes have a Jewish minister and rabbi come speak?" He says, "Oh my word. That's true, I should have thought of that." He says, "I don't know any." I said, "Well, in Portland there are several." Well, 'course, they didn't have one from Portland come either. That was too far. It's Gorham and, you know, towns around there and he says, "Why not. Give me the name of one." So we did. He called, he did come and he talked. It was pretty good. I think after that he used a little more care.

EL: Yeah.

MF: Perhaps he told some of 'em, you know "This is an..." I mentioned, which got his attention, we says, "You know, Gorham State Teacher's College. This is a state college."

EL: Yeah.

MF: It's not a private college. It's a state-funded college. So. We prepared, we were ready to - we didn't know what he would say. He might say, "Hey, all you, all you students, you get out of here." You know. He couldn't do that because it was a state university, but we didn't know what to expect. But he was fine about it and what he said, you know, "This is a state college, supported by residents of Portland." We did speak to somebody, a town

lawyer, who we knew from the Jewish Community Center. We told him what we were going to do. He said, "That's fine. Mention it's a state, remind him it's a state university. Gets state funding."

EL: Yeah.

MF: We're happy from then on.

EL: Yeah.

MF: 'Course now they'd have these required things. But, you know, that's one thing we -

EL: That's very interesting. I'm going to check audio, but I want you to answer the question that I ask you while I check it, which is: What was your next step after college, after the navy?

MF: Next step?

EL: Yeah, what happened next for you. What happened next for you?

MF: Well, I was working here.

EL: Doing what?

MF: Teaching.

EL: Where were you teaching?

MF: It was elementary school. 'Cross the street for three years, then I went up the Hill for one. Then I was teaching Assistant Principle in some of the small schools. Remember Emerson School on the Hill? On Emerson Street, it's now a housing. Then on North Street, you'll see, you can tell it's a former school building, the brick, that's also housing. There's one on Monument Street. That had to be torn down. That couldn't be. That was very old. Basically, that was it.

EL: How has the Jewish community here changed from when you were born to now?

MF: Oh. Big changes.

EL: Yeah.

MF: They, the Jewish population is more steady. They were more together because most of them worked in Portland, either Munjoy Hill, Western Promenade area, which I was born in though, and they from here to Woodfords Area, that was a big move out. Mainly group composed of that and Jewish Community Center was the hub, synagogue. Down here, on Middle Street, those were Jewish stores, butcher shops, Jewish bakeries, you

know, that type of thing. You knew most of them. I mean, not everybody, but you had this. There was, I can remember, a friend. They lived in Portland. Well, they moved, bought a house in South Portland. Everybody went, "Jesus. You're going to South Portland? Why you moving up there? So far away?" But that's what it was. And then when somebody, I know the family, I won't mention the name, they moved to Falmouth. And everybody said, "Oh my god. Falmouth." Couldn't believe it. But now, in the, it's, they're everywhere and new people come in. I used to know everybody, now I don't know probably anyone. I mean, I do but all the new people coming in here, in the synagogue on holidays. None of them, not really, know a lot of them here. A lot of young comes in from all the states, you know, for the jobs and the labor come in.

EL: Anything else you can think of that's changed?

MF: Well, of course it's changing, just like everybody else changes. You don't, you're Jewish, you don't realize the change. Well, you probably know too that it's just a general change in the population of the state, this area, the country.

EL: Yeah.

MF: There's not that, there's not Jewish Community Center. Jewish Community Alliance, but it's not the same. It probably wouldn't work today, I mean you have so many different things. You have three synagogues now, actually. You have Etz Chaim here, you have Shaarey Tphiloh, you have Beth El, you have the one in South Portland. You have four. There's people just don't belong to things, you know. They're, everyone has a hard time, different clubs. From civic clubs like the groups they used to have that know more, you know. People just aren't joining, participating. They'll go to games, you know, something. Now they stay home, watch TV, or the iPhone, going on Facebook. Things, times change.

EL: Yeah. Can you talk to me about how things are more American now? American?

MF: No, we're all Americans.

EL: Americanized, I guess. Americanized.

MF: Oh yeah. We all were. I mean, we were Americans. We didn't know anything else. My father would talk in the house in Yiddish. He'd speak, when he went to Americanization class, he wanted to learn to read and write English. He did. When we were in the third grade or something, fourth grade, he would help us with spelling. You know, with doing things. Yeah.

EL: Yeah. Well those are the questions I have prepared. Is there anything we didn't talk about that we should talk about?

MF: No, except the growth of Jews in general in the United States. There's always that thing. For instance, my parents were always saying, "Don't cause trouble. Because if you do something wrong, they're going to see what the Jews are like." They had that feeling.

You know, when they were especially adults coming in. When we were kids, we were protected, we didn't know. So it was always, when someone with a Jewish name got in the paper, or someone we knew that did a - I don't know, what's the - picked up for speeding or drunk driving or something. "Oh, look at this. Jewish. What're they going to think of us." You know, that type of thing. They were very. In school, "Don't cause problems. You know.

EL: Do you think you listened? Do you think you listened to that advice?

MF: Yeah. But that changed after, when a Jewish person became the first, what's the, well, okay, I should go back. There was discrimination.

EL: Okay.

MF: In that golf clubs would not take Jews. Portland Country Club, the other ones. No Jews allowed. It wasn't written on things, but it was assumed that a Jew couldn't get into that club, even though they might have acquaintances that weren't Jewish but the club wouldn't accept them. Whether it was, what's on High Street, the Cumberland Club. Wouldn't accept Jews. Portland. The Woodford's Club on Woodfords Street. Now they're begging for people, Jews, anyone, you know. I would never. Somebody say, "You want to join that?" No. They wouldn't take me before, now they need people, they'll take you, I wouldn't do it. I said, "I don't think others should either." That was when they started it. There was that, you could tell, there was that discrimination. This came to involve some of the proper folks that had been here, you know, years, had these set things. "They're not American. We are." And all this. As you're probably aware of a lot of that.

EL: Yeah.

MF: That's a change. When somebody, maybe not in Maine, became a senator. You're first Jewish senator. The first Jewish, Portland, Maine congressman, senator. That was a big thing. Then when somebody ran as vice president to the United States, from Connecticut, as a Jew. Times change.

EL: That's so interesting. Are there any changes you want to speak to?

MF: Nothing I can think of.