

1/7/74

Edited Transcript of a Discussion with
Benjamin Robinson

I've often wondered how it was possible for such a large family to carry on with all the handicaps that immigrants have. You must remember that after I arrived we were all in Portland with the exception of my brother Max who with his wife was still in Europe.

What did my brothers and sisters do after they arrived? I vaguely remember that my sister Ida worked, I don't know at what, but whatever she did she didn't work very long. The object of Jewish life as far as girls are concerned is that they should get married as early as possible. You achieved that object by having shabchonim or matchmakers who submitted names with qualifications to the father of the girl, and if the match seemed reasonable it would be consummated.

Rose was older. She got married first

Ida married Frank Kumin who lived in Worcester. He came from an orthodox family. They were related to rabbis and Talmudic scholars, and as far as my father was concerned, I am sure, that counted more than any fortune they may have had. Learning was the fortune as far as my father was concerned; knowledge was important.

After my sister Ida got married, my sister Rosie found a husband in the same way. She married Lazarus Abrahamson, who I think lived in Portland.

What was unusual about these two weddings was that my sisters married men of a different sect. They were the Ashkenazi sect who spoke Yiddish with a different accent, and we were Hasidim and spoke Yiddish with another accent. But they got married and they have their own history and I won't touch on that very much.

Max oldest brother

My older brothers--Abraham, Morris and Jacob--I believe they became peddlers of one kind or another, the same way my father did. In due course they established stores in Portland, Maine, and they carried on in their own, different ways.

* * * *

My brothers Hyman and Sam and I, as we grew a little older, began to sell newspapers on the streets in Portland. Whatever we

earned, some part of our earnings went to pay for board to my father or mother. I believe that at one time I was paying five dollars a week for board. They needed that because they couldn't maintain the whole family without some assistance. W

I started selling newspapers, I don't know, I probably was five or six. I remember on Sunday morning--in order to get papers early, you had to get up early--and my mother woke me up at five o'clock in the morning in order to go to the central point where we bought our newspapers, and then we resold them to the public. The papers were obtained from a news dealer who would get the Boston papers and the Portland papers--at that time Portland had two or three or four newspapers, The Times and the Telegram, and I forget the others. We would get them and we would acquire a certain right to a corner. I'd be in one corner, someone would be in another, and when we saw a prospect, we both would run toward that man and the fellow that got there first sold the paper. That was the big job, to keep your eyes open and sell your newspaper. At that time they would back the unsold papers and give you credit.

Selling newspapers was quite an experience: it made you self-reliant, you earned money, you appreciated the value of money early in life. The money that I earned on Sundays was quite considerable. It might have run to two or three dollars. I would go home on a Sunday with my money in bills and change and I would put it all on the table. I would put the dimes together and the nickels together and the pennies together and the quarters together and the half-dollars together, and figure out how much I earned that day. I was the one that would be the rich uncle that gave pennies to my nephews and nieces as a gesture of generosity.

Before I went to college, I had saved up from my earnings as a newsboy about \$1400 or \$1500. The earnings from each week were put into a home bank, a savings box that the Casco National Bank gave you as an inducement to open an account with them. You put the coins in the top. Then there was a hole at one end and you would roll up the bills and stick the bills in. When you felt you had a sufficient amount of money, you brought the box to the bank and you'd open it up and spread the money around in front of them. The teller would put the pennies together and the nickels and dimes and quarters and the half-dollars and the bills. He would add them up, tell me how much it was and enter it in my book, and that's how I saved my money.

Well, I saved all this money and when I was in last year high school, my sister Rosie came to me and said, "Would you lend me your money so I can buy a house, which will give me rent from which I will get an income to help support myself and my family? I will give you money as and when you need it." So I immediately arranged that and gave her the money.

* * * *

I first made my money from these corner stands, and then I guess I must have followed what my brothers did, my brothers Sam and Hyman. We went down to the wharves in Portland where the Boston and New York boats would come in, and we would get our Boston papers early in the morning, as early as you can. We would be down at the boats to meet the passengers who slept overnight, and they would get off gradually, and as they came off we would sell newspapers to them.

Then, in addition to selling newspapers, we acted as baggage carriers, particularly for women. We would go up and we'd sort of hold her bag as the woman was holding her bag, and we'd say "Carry your bag, lady?" She'd say, "No, I can carry it myself." I'd say, "Well, you know it's quite a ways up to the street-car." (We did not have any cabs in those days, you know: we did have carriages, horse and carriages, we had the streetcar coming down to the dock, I would say about a block away.) So we finally would persuade the woman, or we'd take the bag out of her hand and carry it up. You'd sweat your way through, and you came up to the corner where the streetcar went and the lady would say, "How much do you want?" We'd say, "Anything you like." We'd get ten cents sometimes, and if we got a quarter, why that was terrific.

That was one thing we did to add to our income from newspapers, and then we did something else, we sold souvenir postcards. I can remember pictures of Ogunquit and pictures of Boothbay Harbor and pictures of Portland headlight and Portland harbor. I added to the postcards that I had, pictures of famous paintings--Botticelli, you know, with the naked girls and so forth--and I'd show these to some people as an inducement to buy. They were more expensive than the postcards because they were made in London and I probably got ten cents apiece for them. For the others I paid a cent apiece, and I would sell them for two for a nickel or twenty-five cents a dozen. When the women

would come in, they would want to send cards and they would write them out or ask me to mail them, and in that way I would add to my income.

I also became a shoe-shine boy. I had a box with brushes and russet-colored paste and black paste, and I'd have the shellac for the edge of the heels. I'd ask, "Shine sir?" and the man would stand up in the same way as you see with the shoe-shine boys in New York. I'd charge ten cents a shine and sometimes, if you were lucky, you would get a tip, a quarter. Then my brother, Sam or Hyman or both, decided to have a fruit stand at the entrance where the steamers leave. As the people went by, they would buy fruit for their journeys to Boston or New York. And there we set up a fancy stand for shoes, you see you'd sit down.

I couldn't sell papers or postcards on Saturday, but I felt that I was losing money if someone didn't sell postcards, so I made a deal with Frank de Rice's brothers who lived not far from me. I would bring the postcards to him on Friday night, and he would sell them on Saturday. I would get an accounting from him on Sunday--or Saturday night, and I would get back my costs and a share of the profits.

I was a great entrepreneur at that time--making the money that I needed for the future.

I developed my newspaper activities in other ways. The Boston boats would leave Boston at nine o'clock in the morning, and they would go along the coast and come into Portland Harbor at a different dock at the bottom of High Street. The boats would arrive at about quarter of five or so and discharge the passengers for Portland; then from Portland they would proceed to three or four points along the Maine coast until they got to Eastport and Saint John. Now my idea was to get the afternoon Boston papers--the Traveller and the Herald, the Globe--to sell to the passengers. I used to get them at the railroad station which was at the other end of the city. I'd leave my bicycle at the top of High Street, and I'd get on the streetcar to the station. I would carry the papers back in a bag with a shoulder strap. As I got back to High Street, I'd get onto my bicycle and I'd pedal my wheels down High Street, down the hill to the wharf where this boat landed. I would get there five minutes or ten minutes before the boat would land, and as the boat reached

BR 1/7/74

the dock--before the gangplank was put on--I would jump on the boat with my bag. I'd have my postcards with me and the Boston papers, and while the passengers embarked and they took off the baggage, I would make a tour of the boat, the various decks, and sell my papers and sell my postcards. Then the boat would whistle that she was leaving, you see, which means you had to get off and get off fast. I wouldn't hurry. I'd stay on till the very last minute when they throw off the rope that held the boat to the dock. They would pull up the gangplank, the boat would start, and as it started, before it got too far away from the wharf, I would jump off the boat onto the wharf with my bag. This happened three times a week, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and gave me additional money for my savings.

I developed this business further. There are around Portland, within a radius of fifteen miles, many, many islands where visitors would come for the summer. Now these people wanted the Sunday papers, but they had no newsstands on the islands. So I arranged with the steamship company--and I think my brothers did it before me and I merely followed in their footsteps--that I would bring my Boston papers on the boat (that's all I could have: the New York papers didn't arrive that early). I would have a large number of Sunday papers--you know they're big and they weigh quite heavily. As the boat arrived at a dock, the people would congregate either to meet the arrivals or to see what was going on. As the boat arrived, before it tied up, I would jump off and begin dishing out my papers and getting in my money. I'd make considerable profit on Sunday papers; I'd get more there than I would in the city. There was Peak's Island and little Shebague and Big Shebague and Harpswell. I would go on these islands and the last place was Harpswell. There I would have to wait until the boat returned in the afternoon. We'd probably arrive at Harpswell around 12 o'clock, and might leave around nine or ten. At Harpswell, I would go into the village. They had a summer colony there where people had cottages, and they had a central dining room. I would sell papers to these people, and when I was through, I would have to have my meal, my Sunday meal, which very often consisted of a sour pickle and crackers. That was my meal, and I enjoyed it--I didn't mind it. After the boat would leave, I'd come home during the afternoon. I had all this money, and I would be the big shot with my nephews and nieces.

That was the way I operated to make my living. While I was making my living, until I was thirteen, a part of my day or evening was spent with my father being taught Hebrew or going through the weekly portion of the bible, as I'd done ever since I was a kid of five or six.

DR: What about your secular school?

Well, we started school at Center Street. I was there a very short time, and then I went to another school, a primary school, and then I went to Jackson School, and then I went to the high school, Portland High School. I wasn't a bad student, and I wasn't as smart as my children or my grandchildren, but we go along and managed to pass my grades pretty well. I suppose I was a B and part A student.

In high school, I took the tough course, which was Latin, and that meant that I was aiming for college. I wasn't encouraged by my parents to go. My father hoped I'd go in for the rabbinate since I was such a bright Hebrew student, but when I became thirteen I quit. I wouldn't be tied down to my father's side learning more Hebrew.

DR: Did you have a bar mitzvah?

The bar mitzvah is entirely different now. The bar mitzvah I had was the same kind of bar mitzvah that your Uncle Max (Leavitt) had. You went to shule, and you read the portion or you participated in the reading of the law. You made your brochah, and your father went to the bimah and said his prayer called "boruch shepatanu", which means, "I got rid of my boy". That ended the story.

I don't remember having any big party. They might have had something at school--maybe--I don't remember. And I didn't get any presents, and I didn't accumulate anything that I carried with me as a result of the bar mitzvah. It wasn't the thing to do. There was no ostentation in Jewish life at that time; that came later.

DR: Did you speak English or Yiddish at home?

We never spoke English at home. I never spoke English to my father; my mother couldn't speak English. We spoke yiddish, and I don't think it was particularly literate yiddish. Some of the Jews--yiddishists--would speak a very fancy yiddish. Our yiddish wasn't fancy; it was simple but it was adequate. We made ourselves understood, and we had to know enough yiddish to translate the bible, that way we got our vocabulary.

The Jewish life generally in Portland was to me, and to my brothers and to the other Jewish people who lived there, an adequate life. We mixed very little with the non-Jews. We had our Irish friends as usual--the Irish and the Jews. In our area, there were Negroes living. The Negro women carried on a house of prostitution right on our street, and we had a very fine home, which we bought. I must have been about eight at that time, or nine, when we bought this house on Chatham street. To us it was a mansion because we went out from a flat and went into a self-contained home.

* * * *

morris

My brother ~~got~~ married to a girl from Chelsea. He brought her back to Portland, and unfortunately she died early, a temperature of some kind. He married again and his second wife moved to Montreal with him, and then she died in Montreal--a very nice woman. Then Abraham married a woman from New York and he brought her to Portland. She unfortunately acquired a mental condition, and he had to put her into an institution. Abraham brought up his boys and his daughter after.

You wanted to know why I picked Harvard? It was the only college I knew about and I definitely wanted to go to college, something which my brother Sam couldn't make. The thing that helped me make my decision was that I had \$1500. If I hadn't had that money, I could never have made it. I took my College Board--I think Harvard had a College Board of its own at that time, I'm not sure--and I probably just skimmed through. Portland High School wasn't such a superior institution, and anyway I wasn't such a superior scholar! I had all the other things that kept me occupied, making a living, and what not, but I got in.

* * * *

I believe that I mentioned to you that we were interested in bringing other members of our family from Europe, and the only way to do it was to send a Shiftcart or a steamship ticket. The way we accumulated the money to buy the necessary tickets was that each member of the family made a contribution. When they came to me and said we're going to bring So-and-So in, we're buying a Shiftcart, we want ten dollars from you, I gave them ten dollars. And we brought, I don't know how many people. We had an open home for all the immigrants that came, it was a

BR 1/7/74

tradition. It was a Mitzvah to welcome the wanderer. It was called Athlechas orchim, the welcome of the wanderer, the immigrant.

We brought in considerable numbers of our family, maybe fifteen or twenty. We had a large group of people in Portland who came from Kovel in Russia and the surrounding villages, and they all did the same. They brought in the Cooks and the Chandlers and the Spillers and the Tabachniks. And the community grew. At the present time, there are very few of our family left in Portland. Jim Abrahamson is in Brunswick, and there may be one or two still living in Portland, but they've mostly all left and gone to other places.

* * * *

My mother was a very extraordinary woman. She had a tremendous respect for my father because he was a very learned man. My mother was able to read Hebrew and she prayed every day and she was more tolerant than my father was. My father was a strict individual. He didn't like the family leaving the fold, as it were, and we all left the fold from time to time.

As you know, Sam left early. He graduated high school and couldn't go to college. He had a motorboat, and he and a partner were selling food and supplies to the ships in the harbor. Battleships, particularly, used to visit Portland, as Portland's harbor was open all year; it never froze in. Then he and his partner, a man by the name of Baorn, decided to follow the fleet. They went to Cuba and they went to New York with their motorboat, and they serviced these ships. They brought the sailors some luxuries that they didn't get on the boat. How much they earned I don't know, but they made a living. Sam spent considerable time in Cuba, at Guantanamo Bay, and from there he went to Gibraltar with the Navy in order to service them. Then he got sick of it. He wrote a letter to my brother Hyman who was then in Montreal, and from then on Sam lived in Montreal and established the various businesses that he had.

Now of course it is interesting to find out how I ended up in Montreal. I came there eventually, and I will relate the whole business, my college life and my eventual ending up in Montreal.

My brother Hyman established a business in Portland. It was called "ship's tailoring", a very unusual expression. The ships tailor supplies the crew with certain things: clothing, souvenirs to bring back to their sweethearts, wives and children. The ships that usually went to Montreal during the summer came to Portland during the winter, because Portland was the nearest open port to Montreal. Grain would be shipped down from Montreal into Portland, and from Portland into the grain elevators, and the grain elevator would put it into the ships and they would take it away.

Ship's tailoring was a special kind of business. You would get the stock, and you would go to the purser and the captain on the boat, and you'd make an appointment with them. The crew could come and pick out what they wanted, and the ship's tailor would deliver whatever the crew bought to the ship with the bill. Before the ship sailed, the total bills were added and the captain or the purser would pay the ship's tailor.

At that time my brother Hyman and a partner, Jacob Cohen, established a business called Robinson and Cohen which operated in Portland for two or three winters. As they became more acquainted with the captains, the captains suggested that they come to Montreal and give the same service in Montreal in the summer that they gave in Portland. So they moved to Montreal and opened the business for the summer, and then they'd move back to Portland. They did that for one year or two, then they gave up the Portland business as too small. The Montreal business became fairly large, and they had a store about a half a block away from the Court House in Montreal, 31A Notre Dame St. When Sam Robinson wrote from Gibraltar, Hyman said you'd better come here. So Sam Robinson left his partner Mr. Baron the boat. Robinson and Cohen bought a broom business, and Sam began to work for five or six dollars a week. Morris was a salesman for the business, Sam was the inside bookkeeper and office man, and he lived with Morris.

Hyman was not married when he moved to Montreal. He met Mollie later. I remember that Mollie came to Cambridge when I was a student. If I remember correctly, Hymie bought her a ring in Boston. I think and it was later that year I think that they got married.

I forgot to mention that part of the money I saved came from my brother Jake for whom I worked part-time while I was in high school. My brother Jake had a general store on Portland Street, and he also had a phonograph business: "phonograph" as distinguished from a "gramophone". We carried the Edison, named after the man who invented the phonograph, and the records, as you know, were cylinders in shape. When the Victor talking machine became a competitor, you recall the trademark was a gramophone with a flat circled disc on which the record was placed, a dog was looking toward the horn. We didn't sell the Victor machine on the records which were invented, by the way, by a Montrealer named Berliner. We sold the cylindrical records and the Edison machines. As the records came in, I would listen to them. Whatever love for music I have was developed by listening to Caruso records and the other famous singers of 1907 to 1911. I enjoyed this period when we were selling records. We also ran a sort of a pawn shop, and I once tried to learn to play a cornet that was one of the assets of the Jake Robinson establishment. I wasn't very good as a musician, and, as a matter of fact, we had no music in our home. A piano we couldn't afford, and my father didn't think music was necessary in order to make your living or to be a good Jew. So I am grateful for that episode of my life, where I did acquire a knowledge of the Sousa marches and all of Caruso records and songs and operas. Also when I was in high school, I can remember going to Old Orchard, which at that time was a very famous resort. They had wonderful hotels and they used to have races on the beach. It wasn't automobile racing, it was horseracing. The beach was hard, solid sand; there were very few pebbles or stones. It was the finest beach I have ever seen, and it brought a lot of people from all over the United States and from Canada. There was a large Jewish colony of Canadians, and I met my first Montrealers in Old Orchard, while I was in high school. Old Orchard is only fifteen miles from Portland, and you'd take a streetcar and go out to see what was going on. I could do it at that time because I was a wealthy boy! I could afford to take a street car.

* * * *

I forgot to mention about the time we bought our home on Chatham Street. I was seven or eight, I suppose, or nine. My father had in back of the house what appeared to be a very large vacant lot, which he converted into a garden. I helped in the

planting and the gathering of the vegetables. I can remember the radishes and the lettuce that we had. We grew lettuce in various crops throughout the season, and we would make lettuce with vinegar, which would be the relish for everything, the meat and everything. We'd plant radishes early, and we'd bring them in and we'd cut 'em up and make them with vinegar. I can recall cucumbers and the squash and the beets, which we left until the end of the season, and the carrots and the peas and beans. We had a little plot for flowers and corn. That was a wonderful thing. My father seemed to get a great kick out of it; we all did; we enjoyed it very much. When I came back after I graduated from Harvard, and I went down to Chatham Street, I couldn't believe my eyes, because Chatham Street was so narrow, and I thought Chatham Street was a terrifically big street, you see. We had only one Jewish family on the street. There were twenty-five or thirty houses, fifteen houses on each side, and we had one of the finer houses that my father was able to buy I suppose with a mortgage that he paid off after a while, but I felt very, very affluent with a home of our own.

newbury st
Chatham Street ran only from Portland Street to Middle Street, and on Middle Street my brother Abram built a small building, which looked large at the time because we were kids. It was called Robinson Hall, and it had two or three stores and a hall upstairs. I think I remember a family wedding of some kind that went on there. ✓

* * * *

It is worthwhile to put in the record the fact that we had in Portland a YMHA. I was only a kid--twelve, thirteen, fourteen--and I was very active in the YMHA. I remember they would have affairs, for which we would decorate. We'd take these streamers and turn them around, you know, and tack them up at the ceiling, and we'd have ballons and what not. Then we would have picnics. I thought of the idea of selling corn beef sandwiches. I bought the bread, I bought the meat, and I made sandwiches out at the picnic grounds. I sold them and made a profit, and I did that at every picnic they had. I remember the Y occupied a loft building right near the post office.

DR: "Was Sam active then?"

At that time he might have been, but he was busy with his own worries cause he graduated high school three or four years before I did.

* * * *

I think I could also put in the record the life my father led in Portland. As I told you, he was a peddler. He devoted a great deal of time to study, and a great deal of time to teaching his boys. He didn't bother much with the girls. I don't remember the girls learning, but they could all read Hebrew, they knew enough to get along. It wasn't essential, in the orthodox tradition, that the women be highly educated in Hebrew. If they could read and say their prayers, and make the blessings that they had to make on Friday night and other times, why that was adequate.

Now this is something that I don't think you've ever seen. I think it is during Succoth that they would have a ceremony where you would say a prayer with a chicken. Zeh Hilichoti zeh. We'd turn it around our heads. That was before the holidays, and we needed a lot of chickens for food. Each person would have a chicken, both men and women, and they would say the prayer and they'd turn this chicken around. The wings would flutter, you know, the beak would be tied. We called that Shlogen kaporis. That would be a Kapora. Max, what's the translation for Kapora?

Max Leavitt "Forgiveness."

No, it's not. You read it in the services when they send the goat away. Scapegoat! Kapora for you--you see, that's to replace you. Then you killed the animal and therefore that's the sacrifice you made on your behalf. And that was part of the life--the Jewish life.

We also had Hoshanna Raboh. During the Succoth, the day before Simchas Torah is called Hoshannah Raboh. The men would go out and get certain reeds with leaves on them. They would bring them in and say prayers and they'd knock them on the benches, and the leaves would all be on the floor of the synagogue. They'd have a special prayer, a special service for it, the same way they would have a service for Simchas Torah.

In a small community like Portland where the Jews lived together, the maintaining of the traditions to the full extent was a fulfillment of their life, they were occupied with it.

They had what I thought was a wonderful kind of custom in Shlachmonis, which is "sending gifts to each other." Now we were all poor people, so each family would make a plate of one kind or another. The kids would be the messengers. We would bring a plate to the other home, and in return we'd get another one. Eventually you'd get some of your own things back! Mother would go out of her way to make special cakes and things, and we'd have an orange or an apple which was unusual because fruit was very scarce.

The hasidim are supposed to be jolly people, as you see in, what do you call it that play in New York? The one with Zero Mostel? Well, my father on Simchas Torah would dance, something he would never do at any other time. Then he and Bernstein and some of the other orthodox would visit each other's homes, and the women would make a special dish for the orthodox people who would come to the home. They'd sing their songs and eat the Catullah, or whatever it is.

They took account of every holiday and every Jewish memorial, the memorial when the Temple was destroyed: Tish U B'ov. Then you'd have the fast days, and you'd have that period of time when the people would go to the wharves and shake out their pockets of the sins. They'd go into the ocean before they got back to schule. It's interesting. All these things just filled up your life; otherwise you might find it lonesome.

There wasn't a Jewish baker in the community at that time; that came later. Everyone baked his own bread. There was a special man--the shochet--who would do the ritual when you killed an animal or chicken. He would go in the back yard and he would put the throat of the chicken against the fence, and bend the throat back so the blood would flow out. That was the chicken you were going to eat for your Shabbos and for your holidays.

It was intimate. It was a close life, you see. The life was built around the little synagogue you had. Later they built a bigger synagogue, of course. They moved to a bigger synagogue and they had a rabbi--a formal rabbi--that you didn't have before. You didn't have a chazan (cantor) either, but the men

were so well-versed in their prayers, they could act like chazonim.

Now my father was so orthodox that on Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur, he would wear a Kittle, like a Klu Klux Klan gown, and it would have a hat. On Yom Kippur he would stand all day. He'd go to schule in the morning on Yom Kippur, and he'd stand through the entire period. I was a kid, and I would be standing next to my father, saying the prayers, and my father would weep--he'd weep like you've never seen people weep in your life, for he was asking forgiveness from his Maker for all the sins he had committed during the year. And he included everything, because of those he wouldn't remember, and he would just weep tears. When he would say Aleynu and go to the floor--My Goodness! It was all--they have a special word for it in Hebrew, it's called Kavannah. How would you translate Kavannah?

Max Leavitt: "Fervor."

It's even more than that--it's a very strong word. You say it with fervor, and with the most intimate of feelings. When you prayed, you prayed with Kavannah. It means you let nothing outside interfere.

Max: "Heart-felt fervor."

Heart-felt fervor. That's it. Very strong feeling, that you see only in the extremely orthodox people. In that way I have a tremendous respect for orthodox people; bigoted though they may be. Because I feel they're extremely honest; in their bigotry, they're very honest. And they are reliable; their word means something. You don't find today that sort of feeling. When I went to the section of Israel where the extreme orthodox are--the kids with the pais, the gowns--I had a certain intimacy with those people. I think I had pais (curls on the side of the head) when I was a little kid, because my father was of that sect. And that remains with you--it's something you don't get rid of.

DR: "Even though at thirteen you stopped..."

I abandoned practically everything--almost everything. I abandoned reading, but I remained orthodox. When I entered Harvard and lived that first year with my sister in Worcester,

Worcester was a very orthodox community. Sam Berman (S.N. Berman the playwright), and the Goldblooms are connected with the Worcester group. I remember that I visited a girl in Worcester, I visited her home, and her father was a man with a beard--very orthodox. I wouldn't take my hat off--I'd wear my hat in that orthodox home. I would never take it off, because I respected that tradition.

I'd wear a hat at home in Portland. I'd never go around without a hat--terrible! My father never slept without a hat, he always had a nightcap on. My mother would sleep in what was called a chippick, a frilled cotton hat. This hid the fact that she was--she wore a wig, you know, my mother wore a wig. She had to; they shaved their heads when they got married. And she'd wear a wig all the time. She took off her wig when she went to bed and she changed it for the hat.

You see they tried to bring their life from Russia in toto to Portland, Maine, and the same conflict that exists now between the youth and their parents developed there because, for example, the boys played baseball. My father never went to a play. He wouldn't go to an English play; he wouldn't read an English book. He read the Yiddish newspaper, the Forward, or the Morning Journal, and he was satisfied to spend his time studying the Talmud. He felt that he could find everything in the Talmud. Everything you wanted to know was there; any question you asked you could find the answer there. There was no doubt in his mind, you see.

Mother was very orthodox, also. She was a wonderful woman because she understood her obligation to her husband and her family, and she fulfilled it completely. At the same time, she felt she was fulfilling her obligation to her Lord and Master. She survived my father by over twenty years; she probably was close to ninety when she died. She was the tolerant one; she tried to understand why we are different. And she was a fish for the itinerant selechim--the so-called teachers or semi-rabbis, who travelled around collecting money for institutions mostly in Israel. At that time they had yeshivas and talmud torahs that needed assistance. These fellows would go around to the leader of the community and show him their credentials, and they got sort of his approval to go and collect. My mother's house was the center where these people always came. She always said, of course, she didn't have any money. The

boys maintained her during her life, and she had enough to live on, no problem. But she always told us that our inheritance would be the receipts that she got from the various collectors for charity. And that is the inheritance she has given to us.

It is traditional among very orthodox people to prepare for death. They prepare the clothes in which they will be buried, called tachrichim. My mother had them prepared for years.

We were called to Portland when she was suffering from her last illness, and she was conscious and clear. She was lying in bed, suffering from phlebitis in one leg that she couldn't move. Every one of us went in to visit. I came in and, of course, she greeted me and I kissed her. She said she wanted to have a drink, her throat was dry. I went to get it for her, and as I offered it to her, she refused to take it saying to me, "negelwasser". That means "water for the nails". Before he eats, a Jew washes his hands. She wouldn't drink this on her dying bed until she washed her hands. That to me was the remarkable thing so vivid in my mind. She was so sure she was going to heaven--there was no doubt in her mind, absolutely no doubt. She lived her life of piety, she prayed every day, she cried when she had to, and when she passed out--ten minutes after I saw her--she didn't mind, she was prepared for all this, her tachrichim were ready.

They have a havre kadishe charged with the responsibility of burying the people that die; it's not a professional undertaker that does the work. It's a mitzvah to bury people and see that the ritual is complied with.

So you see, this is a tradition that remains with you. Every once in a while you think of it with some nostalgia--it's played a big role in your life, it's played a big role in the life of your family, and the orthodoxy you were brought up in had its place in its time. I drifted away from it, I went to college, and I gave up the idea of being kosher only after I came to college.

* * * *

After I left Portland, I never came back to stay there at any time. I don't think I stayed a day; if I did, I don't know whether I stayed in a hotel--or probably in one of my brothers' homes. But we'd go back every year--except during the war when I couldn't get back--for Passover. The entire family would come back, and we'd meet. When I came down to Portland with Mother (Tony)--without telling them I was bringing her as my future bride--there were thirty-odd people present. And she was asked to remember every one that she met, and she went through the whole business and showed everyone that she had a wonderful memory. We'd come back to weddings and bar mitzvahs when we could.

When my father died during the war, I didn't see him. They didn't want me to come because I'd be subject to the draft in the United States. So I didn't go back, I wasn't present at his funeral, and I remained in Montreal during that time.

But since then, after the war, we visited as often as we could to see my mother. She never wrote letters. I don't remember ever receiving any letter from her. I probably wrote her once in a while in Yiddish, which was difficult for me because I knew Hebrew better than Yiddish, and I didn't know Hebrew well enough to write in Hebrew, and if I'd written in Hebrew she would have had difficulty understanding it. So that's as far as we got.

We have no telephone in my mother's house. We never had a phone in my father's house; that would have been a luxury, which he wouldn't pay for and didn't.

* * * *

I thought I would put on the record some details concerning the way we managed to acquire what were really luxuries, for example ice. Ice, as you know, in our day, you couldn't afford to buy it. We lived close to the railroad yards and sheds. There was an ice shed where ice was brought in large blocks and cut to suit the requirements of itinerant ice vendors who would go through the streets and deliver ice to their customers.

BR 1/24/74

We could not afford to be a customer of the ice man. We managed to get some ice by going down to the shed where the ice was cut and picking up the uneven pieces of small size that were not salable by the ice vendor, and this was the way we got our ice. We had a refrigerator of some kind in which we put the ice we managed to bring home.

We also availed ourselves of the opportunity to get bananas which were brought in by railway cars. As the bananas were handled--they were green--the odd banana would fall off. It wasn't a merchandizable commodity, and we kids--I and some of the other members of the family--would go down to the cars and, as these bananas individually became available, we picked them up. Then we brought them home and we put them under hay and waited for them to ripen.

We also couldn't afford to buy fruit, except fruit that was damaged or specked. So we would get oranges that were slightly damaged, unfit for retail sale. And eggs, too, were a luxury. The egg candler was in the neighborhood of our home. As they were being handled, the eggs--some of them--would crack, and were called cracked eggs, and these were sold at a considerable discount. We brought these home. They were fresh, and they were utilized in baking and in frying eggs, and in that way we managed to acquire some of the luxuries that were not available to immigrants.

The question of food was a problem. Naturally, we couldn't serve an elaborate table. Mother made do with what she could get, with what was supplied to her, either the money given to her by my father and by the older boys who contributed to the maintenance of the home. The older boys paid for board and room, a nominal amount, and even I, when I became an active newsboy, contributed part of my income--four or five dollars a week--to support the family. Our meals were satisfactory, we accepted them as they were. They were tasty, they were far from elaborate, and many a time I'd have to be satisfied with them, without complaint. Bread and butter and coca, or bread and butter and coffee. I can recall that a herring was utilized to the full. The roe was not used much, but some people ate the milch which was found in the male herring, and which was converted into a sauce or a liquid made up of vinegar and ax water. The milch was chopped up in small pieces and rubbed with sugar so that it would dissolve, and to this mixture was added some linseed oil.

We would eat bread dunked in this liquid and we found it enjoyable. Even now, I would imagine, if I took the trouble to make this same dish, I would be pleased with it. It would be reminiscent of the "good old days".

* * * *

I also wanted to add to some of ritual that went around the house, which made Jewish life attractive and particularly interesting. Just on the eve or morning of Passover, they had a ceremony which you had to go through to get rid of the leavened bread. As you know, at Passover we use unleavened bread only, which is the matzoh. But you couldn't have any ordinary bread in the house, and the head of the house had to make sure there was none left.

There was a symbolic ceremony. My father would cut up bread into very small cubes, probably a quarter of an inch on the side. Then he would deposit them in every room in the house, a corner or somewhere. When they were all deposited, he went through a principle called Bodeh Chometz, which was the search for the leavened bread. I remember it today as vividly as can be. He would have a small cardboard box, which he had in one hand, and a feather in the other hand, and he would go from room to room and push these cubes of bread into the box and then cover it. And there was a prayer said as he was doing it. Then, taking this leavened bread in the box and whatever odd pieces of bread that may have been left in the house, he would go through a ceremony of selling this bread to a gentile. And the sale was made in this fashion. He would pay the gentile to take this bread from him, and in that way he was sure that the house had got rid of all leavened bread.

You wouldn't eat leavened bread at the noon meal of the evening of Passover. You would eat food with neither leavened nor unleavened bread. So you would have potatoes and probably meat of some kind, and that would be your indication of the changeover of the ordinary period to the Passover period in the life of the Jew.

You couldn't eat any food that touched leavened bread, and you had to have new dishes for Passover. There was no way of utilizing

your old dishes, except your glass dishes. You could use glass, but in order to get them ready for Passover, you would have to soak them in water for, I think, either twenty-four or forty-eight hours. In that way they felt they got rid of whatever contamination these glass dishes had with leavened bread. It was always an argument as to whether glazed earthenware could be utilized in that way and could be cleaned, but my father and mother never accepted that as a possibility. We had to have a separate set of dishes for Passover which was kept from year to year, and was not used at any other time during the year.

Now we couldn't afford several sets of silver cutlery. (Usually the cutlery was brought over from Europe. Those were the things they managed to bring over: cutlery and feathered pillows and eiderdown covers. They were brought over from Europe and they remained with the family for years.) The way they handled silverware--and I participated in the ceremony--was to tie probably a dozen pieces singly in the twine, with a space between each piece. They they would have a boiler on the stove with boiling water, and you would dip all the cutlery. In that way you purified it and made it available for Passover.

My father, as you know, was a very pious man (so was my mother), and he never shaved and he had a beard. The only other member of my family that had a beard was my brother Max. He came from Europe, he was married, he had a beard which he trimmed. My father never trimmed his beard. That beard, I can always remember him pulling down the hairs in the beard as he was studying the Talmud or the Mishnayis or when he was teaching me. There he was. I considered him a handsome man with a beard. (I don't know if you saw the picture of my father.) He always wore some covering on his head; during the day he wore a hat and at night he slept with a yarmulke, a skull-cap; the principle being that no Jew ever went uncovered before his Maker who was ever present. That was the principle.

Now there was another very interesting ceremony dealing with Succuth. Succos means a tabernacle of some kind, and my father would make a Succah in our yard or on our balcony. It would be a wooden structure with a lattice roof on which were placed evergreens so that you could see the sky at night. During the period of Succuth, we had all our meals in the Succah.

My father once was able to afford a special hinged cover which you life up in the morning so that the light would shine through, and cover it at night to protect it from rain; but the

first years that I remember, we didn't have it. If it rained, it was just too bad. And if it rained some people ate indoors and others ate out.

As you know at that time they had the lulov and the esrog which are now part of the ceremonial in the synagogue during the succus service.

When they read the Torah, they would parade around with the lulov and the esrog. It was something which reminded you of Israel, because the esrog and the lulov came from Israael, and you had to be wealthy apparently to buy one.

My father achieved the distinction of owning a lulov and an esrog. A boy would take this lulov and esrog during the weekdays and go from house to house of our relatives so that the women members who didn't go to the synagogue, could say their prayer. They held in one hand the esrog and in the other the lulov, and as they finished their prayer, they shook the lulov....
(At this point the second tape ran out, and the interview was postponed to another day.)