

EI-683

JOSEPH SCHWARTZ

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POLAND, 1921

AGE 5

PASSAGE ON: S.S. ZOMBAN

RESIDENCE: WARSAW

US RESIDENCE: NYC, LES

PORT: ANTWERP

LEVINE: Today is October 8th, 1995 and I'm here on Grand Street in the Lower East Side of New York at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Schwartz. I'll be talking today with Mr. Schwartz who came from Poland in 1921 when he was five years of age, soon to turn six years old. And I want to say I'm looking forward to anything you remember about Poland and then as much as you can remember about the Lower East Side because you've really kind of seen it all here. So let's start at the beginning, Mr. Schwartz. Would you say your birth date?

SCHWARTZ: September 16, 1916.

LEVINE: And where in Poland were you born?

SCHWARTZ: Warsaw.

LEVINE: And did you live in Warsaw up until the time you left for the United States?

SCHWARTZ: Well, just about two weeks before because we went to Belgium to get the ship. That was the route in those days. You couldn't--. Very difficult to get out but they managed to go.

LEVINE: Okay. And when you--? Did you have grandparents living in Poland whom you remember?

SCHWARTZ: No. I don't remember them.

LEVINE: And who were your family members when you were a little boy in Poland?

SCHWARTZ: My mother and my brother.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

SCHWARTZ: Anna.

LEVINE: And her maiden name.

SCHWARTZ: Becker.

LEVINE: And your brother's name.

SCHWARTZ: Lawrence.

LEVINE: And your father's name.

SCHWARTZ: Louis.

LEVINE: Louis. And why don't you tell the story of how your father came

earlier than the rest of the family.

SCHWARTZ: My uncle came here first. He was the older, senior member of that family, of his family. And he opened a store, a dry cleaning and pressing and so on in Forest Hills in Queens. And he did it very well. And he devoted himself to bringing the rest of the family here (he is moved). And he brought my father over. And according to the legend—I wasn't here at the time—my father came over here on one day and the next day was working at the tailor shop, with no break.

LEVINE: In, in Forest Hills?

SCHWARTZ: Yes. Just for a short while and then he went to work as a tailor at a big shop.

LEVINE: Now had your father worked as a tailor in Poland?

SCHWARTZ: Yes, he did.

LEVINE: Do, do you remember your father at all in Poland or had he left—

SCHWARTZ: No, he left--. I was just a little nothing.

LEVINE: So, so how many years before you and your mother and brother came did your father come?

SCHWARTZ: About five, six years.

LEVINE: Oh, so you were a baby. Yeah. Uh-huh. And did you have aunts and uncles that you remember from Poland?

SCHWARTZ: No. I had aunts and uncles but I don't remember them from Poland.

LEVINE: So you were really just with your mother and brother when you were over there. That was the extent of your family.

SCHWARTZ: That was the extent of our main family there in Warsaw.

LEVINE: Okay. Do you remember the house you lived in in Warsaw?

SCHWARTZ: Yes. It was an apartment house that had about three sides. And each side had a separate entrance off a common park in there or a—. No. It wasn't a park.

LEVINE: Was it a courtyard?

SCHWARTZ: A courtyard, common courtyard, three entrances into the apartment house.

LEVINE: And did you, did you remember--? Do you remember the inside of the house, the apartment?

SCHWARTZ: Very vaguely, very vaguely.

LEVINE: When you think of life in Poland when you were, up til you were five, what are the things you remember most about it?

SCHWARTZ: The things I remember most about it was playing with other children. And I was--. I believe I was too young to really get to realize that there was--. And my mother told me, many years after, a, the vein, the vein on anti-Semitism running through all of Poland.

LEVINE: Do you, you didn't experience anything?

SCHWARTZ: No because I didn't realize, I think, because I was too small.

LEVINE: Do you remember any of the games, any of the things you played with your friends?

SCHWARTZ: No, no.

LEVINE: And, Lawrence, was he older or younger.

SCHWARTZ: Younger. Three years younger, approximately three years younger than me.

LEVINE: Do you remember when he was born?

SCHWARTZ: No.

LEVINE: No, you were too young. Yeah. Do you remember, was your mother religious in Poland?

SCHWARTZ: Oh yes, she--. In Poland and even here. Not deeply religious, but fairly religious. She carried out Jewish traditions and so on. But as far as the rest of it goes, I either didn't partake or I don't remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember in Poland any religious observances when you were there?

SCHWARTZ: Yes, on the High Holy Days, yes. We saw that everything, I saw anyhow that everything stopped. In other words, people weren't rushing to go to work and so on. Everyone was very fancily

dressed and so on. That was the extent of my remembrance as far as that phase of it goes.

LEVINE: Do you remember the cooking? Do you remember anything about the food there?

SCHWARTZ: Oh, I would say the food is the same thing that my mother used to serve here when we were right here.

LEVINE: Like what?

SCHWARTZ: In the way of practically-- I'd say the diet was confined to about four or five different soups. And maybe the same thing in the way of the second course, meat, dairy, depending on what we were having. Of course you know that meat and dairy are separated. And, as I said, she was fairly, not deeply religious, but quite religious. And whatever she served, we ate and it was good. She was a fantastic cook. She was.

LEVINE: Did you have a favorite dish that you recall?

SCHWARTZ: In soups I used to love barley and mushroom. In meat, stuffed breast of veal, and duck. Duck was a staple diet there. It's like chicken here almost. They were much easier and less expensive than chickens. So because the farmers used to keep the chickens for the eggs. Chicken lays eggs quite often. A duck is almost a cycle. That I know even from here.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds like you were, you were fairly comfortable in your life over there.

SCHWARTZ: Yes.

LEVINE: In other words you weren't very poor.

SCHWARTZ: Oh, no. I wouldn't say very poor. We were not . . . far from rich. But we were comfortable. Of course my father used to send money from here, the United States, to us over there.

LEVINE: So your mother never worked when you were over in Poland.

SCHWARTZ: That I don't remember if she did or not.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about what your father said about the United States in letters or anything you thought about the United States before actually got here?

SCHWARTZ: Well, I was too young to read. And my mother used to read letters from him and then she tried to give us just a few smattering of what was in the letter, which I tell you truthfully, I don't remember any part of it.

LEVINE: What was your attitude? What was her attitude about like about coming to this country?

SCHWARTZ: Oh, she wanted to because her husband was here, so, very much.

LEVINE: So, she didn't have relatives either then over there.

SCHWARTZ: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Did she have family back there?

SCHWARTZ: Yes, she had family in Poland. She had. As a matter of fact, we very often get--. I would--. Well, this is superfluous. . .

LEVINE: But you remember her family from in Poland?

SCHWARTZ: Well, not in Poland, no. But when I came here and came almost to an age of realization—perhaps ten, eleven, twelve—I knew we used to go to visit them or they came to visit us. And I knew who they were, not as deeply as you'd probably like to know but I can't--.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay. Well, so let's see. What else? You didn't go--. Did you, did you go to school in Poland?

SCHWARTZ: In Poland, no.

LEVINE: You were too young.

SCHWARTZ: Well, if anything--. I don't say I did. But if anything we used to, would go to a Hebrew school. Of course as I said, the attitude of the Polish people towards Jewish people was not the best. If I were at an age where I could attend the school, they wouldn't want me.

LEVINE: So in your, in your apartment complex were there all Jewish people living there?

SCHWARTZ: I don't recall that.

LEVINE: Do you remember market day, or do you remember any, any, anything about the community, the shops or any of that kind of thing?

SCHWARTZ: No. At six you don't pay attention to those things.

LEVINE: So, is there anything else you can think of before you were getting ready to leave, anything about Poland, anything about the community, the family life, the . . . anything.

SCHWARTZ: A six-year old I would dare say that it wouldn't interest me. My interests were my little friends there and that's it.

LEVINE: Okay. So do you remember your mother preparing to come to America?

SCHWARTZ: Yes, vaguely, packing, giving away things to certain people and packing whatever she thought was absolutely necessary particularly for the voyage.

LEVINE: Do you remember what she took for the voyage?

SCHWARTZ: Yes, the heavier clothing because we'd be on the ocean and she was very careful about it.

LEVINE: And do you remember anything that either you brought with you or your mother brought with you to this country?

SCHWARTZ: No.

LEVINE: And you have some vague memory of leaving Warsaw and going to Belgium.

SCHWARTZ: Right.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that little—

SCHWARTZ: It was a train voyage, a train, which went to Belgium, very close to the docks. And we stayed there for a day or two as I recall. And then we went to the ship.

LEVINE: And the name of the ship.

SCHWARTZ: S. S., as I recall, S. S. Zomban.

LEVINE: And do you remember--? What do you remember about that voyage on the Zomban?

SCHWARTZ: Throwing up a few times. The fact that we slept on bunk beds about three or four floors high. I was lucky I was up on the fourth floor because everybody who got sick--. We used to go up on deck--. I want to clear my throat.

LEVINE: Okay. So you go up on deck sometimes.

SCHWARTZ: We go up on deck. My mother held my brother with one hand and me with the other. We dared to go over to the railing. She mentioned that to my father I remember when a couple of days after we arrived here that [unclear]telling him about the nerve we had to walk to the railing. She just stood back. She came forward because to hold onto us. The voyage itself, the ship was not a luxurious ship. As a matter of fact, we were down in what I now realize was what you called “the hold” literally, which went for as little as possible as far as the fare went. And—

LEVINE: Do you remember the food at all?

SCHWARTZ: Not particularly. I don't think there was anything about it to Remember (laughs).

LEVINE: Okay. Do you remember the boat coming into the New York Harbor?

SCHWARTZ: Yes. That's when I wrote here the thing I pointed out my mother said that's the Statue of Liberty. And we came into Ellis Island. I think we slept also. The Great Hall used to be sleeping area. You know what I mean—

LEVINE: The dormitory area on the third floor.

SCHWARTZ: Right. Same idea as the ship but it didn't rock.

LEVINE: So you stayed overnight?

SCHWARTZ: Oh yes, one night. Came in like kind of late. And I suppose, whatever. And the next day we took a smaller boat, took us into— as I recall—it took us into Battery Park.

LEVINE: Did your father meet you at Ellis Island?

SCHWARTZ: No, he met us on Battery Park. And there was a place there that eventually became an aquarium called Castle Garden. I remember that because he took us in there to show us the-- at that time there was an aquarium. While we were waiting for my uncle we went in there and walked around that place. It was very, very-- To this day I remember it.

LEVINE: Do you remember what it was like to see your father for the first

time?

SCHWARTZ: Oh boy (laughs) (sighs). Very, very touching experience. He was a great man.

LEVINE: So then your uncle came.

SCHWARTZ: No, no. He was there waiting for us with a car. And he took us to Queens to his house where we stayed for a couple of days. Then we kind of went back to the Lower East Side. Of course that's where most of the tailor shops were.

LEVINE: Oh, so what was this uncle's name?

SCHWARTZ: Also Louis. They used Louis because we weren't given English names. They were given their names in Hebrew. And there's two ways to spell Louis. And his was one way and my father's was the other way. And he came over virtually everyday to check on us. We got an apartment right away. It wasn't like today how difficult it is to get apartments. First apartment I remember was three rooms.

LEVINE: Do you remember where it was?

SCHWARTZ: Yeah, on Allen Street. And this was not like it was, like it is today where there's a parkway on Allen Street. The elevators ran, the Second Avenue el. It used to come right under our window. We got used to the noise. And then it turned off at Second Avenue, went up straight Second Avenue, Houston Street also. But that's ancient history. Of course I don't think we were here any length of time for they actually started to tear down the elevator, Second

Avenue el.

LEVINE: Did you--? Can you recall any other things that struck you as new and different when you got here that you never saw before?

SCHWARTZ: Other than the elevator? Apartments with running water. In Warsaw I had to go with a pail and bring in water, certain water for washing and certain water for drinking. The two were separate and –

LEVINE: Where did you go for it?

SCHWARTZ: Right in the courtyard.

LEVINE: Like a pump? Was there a pump there or—

SCHWARTZ: Well it was like running water. So all you did was put your bucket or whatever you were filling up under it and brought it up to the, to the house. That apartment I don't remember. I think I wiped it out. [Laughs]

LEVINE: And, let's see. So you stayed, you stayed right where the elevated train went by the window for a short time or—

SCHWARTZ: Well, that was Allen Street. The Second Avenue el came from South Ferry somewhere. And when Houston Street turned west to Second Avenue then it continued up Second Avenue. That's why it was called the Second Avenue el. When it went by me, it was the Second Avenue el going by, but this was not Second Avenue.

LEVINE: And did you stay there a long time or did you move?

SCHWARTZ: The time element I can't remember. We did move to a little more spacious quarters, four rooms. And, well a little easier because my brother, and subsequently, my other brother, and I slept in one room. My parents were in the other room. There was a living room and a kitchen and a bathroom, no bathroom, excuse me. The bathroom was in the hallway, used by all--. I think there were four families on the floor as I remember. And the bathroom was central. Actually, I think there were two. I can't recall. But there was a bathroom out in the hallway. And if you got up during the night and you had to do something, you went out in the hallway. It was a very common thing. You tried to door and it's closed so you went back and sat by the door, and when you heard the door open you went out. The door to the bathroom open, you went out and did what you had to do.

LEVINE: Now, let's see. Your father was, had a little shop here in the Lower East Side.

SCHWARTZ: No, that was subsequently. At that time he was working in tailor, as a tailor.

[Telephone rings]

LEVINE: We're gong to pause here.

LEVINE: Continuing here. He was working in a tailor shop at the, in the Lower East Side.

SCHWARTZ: On the Lower East Side. And one day-- , this is go --running into two or three years after we arrived. As my parents told me the story, my mother was walking on Allen Street and she saw this one store that had comforters and pillows. She also noticed that the comforter was what was very popular then but it isn't today. Of course the cost of labor's high. A handmade quilt in the window. And this is what she used to work at occasionally back in Warsaw.

So she walked up and she walked up to the man. And she said she can do that kind of work, can he use her. He says, I don't make this. I remember his name was Joe Gerstein. And he said I don't make this. I give them the material and the filling. And the people who have a shop a few blocks away and they make the handmade quilts. So she said, gee, you know I could do that, too. He says, well if you do, come into see me and I'll give you some work.

So she had a frame built, a wooden frame. And as I said to the people—you probably could hear it on that other thing—my father came home from the shop. They took the frame apart. They put out the frame. All the furniture went over to the side because they put out the frame. And they put out the material and the wool and they got to learn how to do the marking of the design because she can't, nobody can do that free hand, free style hand. Well, and, she used to make the quilts.

And the first quilt she made she went down to this Joe Gerstein and looked at it, said, it's very nice. He says you need a little bit of this and that because he had a lot of experience at it. Not that the handwork himself but how he'd seen it. And he says I'll give you some material and some wool and you can make one for me and let's see what it looks like. So he gave her the material and the wool.

An outstanding bit that my mother told me was that she took out her pocketbook and she said, how much do you want? He says, "I don't want anything". She says, "Why?" She says, "Well, in Europe if I went to do this. If I didn't have a frame the people who did it used to leave money with the person who gave the material almost equal to the value of the material. And I was going to do the same thing". "Go. Take the material and go." That was the beginning. She did quite well.

Well, working alone I used to take her about two or three days to make a comforter. And she brought it back to him and paid her, very satisfied. Gave her all the material. She did a nice business down there. And eventually his family and our family got to be friendly.

Of course, we were only about a half a block away when we opened up a store on Allen Street. It got to be awkward this business of constantly changing from a living room to a shop. So he went looking and he found a place at 84 Orchard Street.

Orchard Street, you know where it is, I'm sure. And two floors up, it became a shop. It was small so he had the one frame there. A couple of years went by and business picked up more and more business. He went looking and we found a place--.

At that time I was capable of going with him. On 272, 274 Grand Street. It's about four or five blocks from where we were on Orchard Street. And this was a larger place. He was able to work two frames. And he got a couple of girls, particularly my uncle brought over like his niece, I think, because it was his wife's side of the family. And put her to work.. She brought a friend of hers and they put up two frames. And when they were working on this he was setting up the other one. When they finished the other one he took it off and when they finished and started to work on that and they went to work on this: They just stepped five steps away.

LEVINE: So was your mother still making the quilts?

SCHWARTZ: Oh yeah, she was working. She worked all her life.

LEVINE: And so your father was setting them up.

SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Was he, was he a tailor anymore?

SCHWARTZ: No, he was no longer a tailor now. He's out of the tailor, because—

LEVINE: This seemed to be a better idea.

SCHWARTZ: And that went on until an opportunity presented itself to open a store back on Allen Street, about a block away from this fellow I just mentioned who put my mother into business. And we opened our own business. And that's where we were until we closed. Except we had expanded from that one store to another store that opened in the same building and the biggest store that opened up on the other, the next building. So we ended up with three stores.

LEVINE: For the quilts?

SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: All for quilts.

SCHWARTZ: Then we were doing already wholesale and things like that. Whatever happened?

LEVINE: [Unclear]

SCHWARTZ: I know, I know. Ah, she's busy on the phone. Etta?

MRS. SCHWARTZ: Yes dear.

SCHWARTZ: Can you put, hold on there for a minute to give me something I want to show?

[There is a brief pause.]

LEVINE: Okay. We're talking about the family business of quilts and

pillows. And you were just saying about, you got the feathers from Europe.

SCHWARTZ: For the pillows and the down for the comforters and the down for the pillows when you made a mixture.

LEVINE: Okay. Now why was that?

SCHWARTZ: Because when the--. There, very little geese are consumed here, so you can't get the feathers. The down, in the summertime the women would take the geese and pull the down out from the underbelly of the goose. By the time the winter came around the down had grown back so they were not uncomfortable in the cold. That was the reason. The down was then put up in bales of about two hundred, three hundred pounds with a covering on the outside, jute, and shipped over here to the United States for people to process them because in New York the state requires a certain process before you can sell it. You can't sell it right from the goose. You had to wash and clean and sterilize.

LEVINE: Now did you do that?

SCHWARTZ: No. That was done by a very large process with all kinds of machinery. And we didn't have space for it. I wouldn't have done it anyhow because of the difference between buying the ready-made down, ready-made, already cleaned down, against the—

LEVINE: Raw.

SCHWARTZ: Raw is, you lose some in the weight but you can't help that. It's part of the process. So it was all figured into the price. And that's—

LEVINE: So tell about what the women--. So the women in, in Poland

would take the down—

SCHWARTZ: Yes. They would do all those things. They would wash it. And on a nice day in the summer when there was no breeze they'd pluck the geese and then they let the geese continue living. And they started on their process which was washing it in their own wash wherever they washed and cleaned it. They didn't bother sterilizing it because it wasn't required. And then they made feather beds, which incidentally when we came off the ship--.

In those days if you ever see films you'll see people with big bundles. A woman or a man carrying a big bundle over their shoulder. That is usually pillows and quilts because in those days there was no steam heat in the type of quarters that we could afford. And they needed as much warmth as they could get. And you can't get more warmth than you can out of a down comforter. Nothing else. You can use wool. We used the wool. We used cotton. We used dacron. That's it. But the greatest was down, till today.

LEVINE: Well, how--? When did you go into the business?

SCHWARTZ: I might have been ten years old at the time. Just whatever little dirt I could sweep up literally. And continued, progressed. And then we opened up two other stores, as I told you, and we expanded.

LEVINE: Do you remember when you first went to school? Did you start school right when you got here?

SCHWARTZ: Here. Yes. Yes.

LEVINE: What do you remember about that?

SCHWARTZ: I went--. The first one I went to was Public School 161 on the corner of Delancey and Ludlow, which wasn't far from where we were living so, and finished public school there. That's sixth grade or something. I don't know how they work it today. I don't even pay attention to it. I did when my children were going to school. And from there I went to junior high school 20, which is on Rivington and Eldridge. Finished my junior high school and I went to Suet Park High School, which is here on Grand and Ludlow. So my schooling, basic schooling, was in the area.

LEVINE: And were you then working from the age of ten after school?

SCHWARTZ: Yes, definitely. After school I used to would go sit down, do some homework for a while if I had it and then into the store.

LEVINE: And your brother, too?

SCHWARTZ: Oh, both my brothers. I had two brothers.

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BEGINNING OF SIDE B, TAPE 1

LEVINE: So do you remember when you started school? You didn't know English when you first came.

SCHWARTZ: No.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that, about learning English?

SCHWARTZ: Definitely. You had to learn English. There were no such things as they have today, bilingual teachers. There was no such thing.

LEVINE: Were there a lot of children in your class who also didn't speak English?

SCHWARTZ: Oh yes. There were quite a few, not a lot. But there were not all Polish. There were Italians. There were Italians and other nationalities. But it was not like today.

LEVINE: What was the--? When you think of like the Lower East Side when you first started school can you say anything about it, like what it was like coming to this community? I mean was it, was it mostly Jewish when—

SCHWARTZ: Yes, to a great extent. I was taking, at the same time as this. Now that's a notice for services.

LEVINE: And—

SCHWARTZ: This time of the year, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur. That's Yom Kippur.

LEVINE: So do you--? I noticed there was like a synagogue on every block it seems.

SCHWARTZ: There are still synagogues on every block. The synagogue--. In those days there were synagogues in the basement. What it actually was, when my father came here and lived here in Manhattan as opposed to my uncle in Queens, he found that there were a small group of men from his town, shtetel, as they called it. And they got together. They made a little society. And had meetings. Whatever they decided on, I don't remember.

In addition to that, as they subsequently grew, as more and more came, they found that they didn't have enough space. Space was limited or too expensive if you wanted a larger. So they built synagogues. Now many of them started out in the basement of a lot of the buildings around here. They're still some places.

We lived in a building when we first were forced out of our apartment. Yeah. We were--. We had our own apartment. And they were tearing that area down for projects. It was on East River Drive and Houston Street. And when we were living on Columbia Street, which is only a few blocks away. And we had a nice apartment because the mother of one of my wife's dear friends owned the building. And they were just remodeling one apartment. Even better than hers because it was a floor lower. And we moved into there and we lived there for quite a while until they decided to build more projects. Then we forced to go into the projects for a period of time until we found this co-op.

LEVINE: So then they would start these synagogues in the basement of a, of like a tenement where people were living above it?

SCHWARTZ: Yes, definitely. We had--. I was about to say that's the reason I went into that tact. We had one in our basement. Enough for like a store, small, comparatively medium-sized store., let's say. So they could get forty, fifty people in. That's it. But when they built the synagogue it was here on Rivington Street. I didn't take a picture of it. The rabbi's son lives right below me.
When we moved into--. What was I saying? I lost my train of thought.

LEVINE: You were saying you lived in the building when a synagogue was in the basement.

SCHWARTZ: Yes, in the basement. Right. They eventually as they continued

expanding--. That was a common expansion because that was a time of immigration, not only in the Jewish faith but the Catholic and so on. They were also coming from Italy and places like that. Even Polish Christians came over here. And that's, and they, they did the same thing. They are still today. There's one on Second Avenue between Eighth and Ninth Street, which is a Hungarian. And every year we go to their festival because I feel close to food I can buy there I can't buy any place else. I was used to that type of food, also. They, they also starved out--.

You could see in the basement, which is now being used as a restaurant. In the bottom of the building, then the athletic club and this and that. And they had the whole building filled with Hungarians. Different kind, doing different things.

LEVINE: Well, now were these--. Were these synagogues that were started, were they started like by people who would have come from the same area in Europe?

SCHWARTZ: They could, yes.

LEVINE: And—

SCHWARTZ: They are the ones who got together. And when the war came they couldn't compress that close. They built or rented a bigger place. But if you walk around as you do in this neighborhood you can still see the original synagogues and you'll see the date on there. There's one right here on Norfolk Street. There's one on Houston Street. They're all over the place. They built the synagogue and that's where they had their meetings and that's where they had their services. That's where they devoted their lives.

LEVINE: Was that the social--? In other words, the people that came from your father's shtetel, you said, did they have their social club meetings—

SCHWARTZ: Yes, all activities. If you had a wedding--. There were a couple of wedding halls in the neighborhood. I don't even think there are any more of those. If you had a wedding and you wanted it performed properly, you had it done in the synagogue. And they had the basement part of the synagogue also had kitchenware. And they set up tables and they either catered it in or they had a cook come in and cook everything there. I went to quite a few as a youngster.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. Let's see. What else--? What else has changed a lot from, in the Lower East Side over your, over your period of time here?

SCHWARTZ: Well, as I was telling you, right now we're going through a metamorphosis on Grand Street. Where all the stores used to be interior decorators of one kind or another, draperies, slip covers and so on. Now I think there are two left. That's only because they own the building. And the way I have been told by several -- we came to a decision because of the situation in Singapore and China and so on that the 1970 they're going to take over, supposed to take over Singapore—the way I understand there are already radicals there.

And the people who are there who are affluent to any degree find it wiser to send their money over here to relatives. And they go out and buy buildings, not as big as this, businesses. They're in everything, banks--. As I mentioned there were hardware, food. It's--. They've taken over the whole area there,

Chinatown, up.

LEVINE: Yeah. So what used to be Jewish has now changed; a lot of that.

SCHWARTZ: Changing. Of course, the other thing, you go to the Bowery.

That's as far as that particular--. No, there's a couple of them going across the street already, too.

The Bowery was the separation line between the Jewish population and Italians. The other side of the Bowery, Elizabeth Street, Mulberry Street, Mott Street, Bow Street—I'm sure you know what they are—were entirely occupied by Italian people. But if you go there now you'll see Chinese signs and so on, restaurant or laundry, what have you, all kinds of things.

The reason is because the money. The people who are in these places which are supposed to be taken over by China in 1970, or turned over to China. I don't understand the whole thing. I don't, didn't go into it. It's none of my business. Have, some of them have a lot of money and they send the money over here. These people here buy what they feel. And whatever it is that's how it goes. They buy it in their own name and probably eventually will or should turn it back to the people if and when they get here after 1970.

LEVINE: How is that different from the way it was when your father came and when the businesses were being started in the Lower East Side by the Jewish people in the twenties?

SCHWARTZ: Well, in those days there were plenty of stores available. I could move every three months without a problem if I found anything better. But we never did. But they centered around the Lower East Side. They lived here. They wanted to go to work here if they could. And if they didn't they just opened their own place if they could. To open your own

place you needed a space, and the wherewithal and the knowledge. That's all.

LEVINE: So they were living here and doing it rather than somebody sending them out.

SCHWARTZ: And now they're getting out because the Hispanics are coming in. Now this building--. Let's leave that part out, I think.

LEVINE: Okay. Now let's see. So you, you finished school here and then you went into the business. How did you meet your wife?

SCHWARTZ: We, like the people before us, in order for a social life, used to get together and open social clubs. A bunch of guys who knew each other from the street decided to get a social club. East Broadway here had every basement was a social club, every basement. They couldn't do anything else with it, I suppose, so they just ran the social clubs.

I belonged to one, which was practically around the corner here, on the second floor. We were about twenty guys. I still see one or two of them. A lot of them are gone. Gone from the neighborhood or gone all together.

And we decided to open a social club, too. And we did so on the second floor of this particular building here on Suffolk Street, which is one block from Norfolk Street. And we had a nice place, big, spacious.

We used to go to--. We used to go to Suet Park High School, which had a swimming pool. And they-- we paid very little in those days to go swimming, to use the facilities, lockers. All you had to do was come with a little suitcase with a combination lock and your stuff, a towel and everything in there. You put the towel in the locker so that when you came out you didn't have to go digging. And you put your suitcase in

there. You turned the knob and you remembered the numbers. That was on, right here on Suffolk Street, the social club called--.

Are you ready? They got all kinds of fancy names for them. Ours was called Club Moderne, M-O-D-E-R-N-E. And we eventually got a few more members. But there was a lot of them so that you had a choice. But we decided to build our own because we used to hang out on Norfolk and Broom, which is a block from the club. Convenient, convenient to-- I lived here on this side. The 383 Grand Street was the original tenement with my parents.

LEVINE: What would you do when you hung out?

SCHWARTZ: Well, we'd either hang out in the club. In the street on Norfolk and Broom there was a candy store there. And it was called the Bug House. And we used to come over there and talk. And we knew the owners very well. They never objected. So they were happy to have us, plus we spent money, very little but spent money.

LEVINE: So you met your wife in the—

SCHWARTZ: In the club. She came up with one of her friends. I met her there. Went out a few times and then I went into the service. And when I came out I was driving around in my car with one of my friends who still works here on Orchard Street. I just saw him a few weeks ago, he and his wife. And he says, "Hey, Joe, there's that girl you used to go with". Pointed her out. Lucky girl. (laughs) she married me. She laughed at me.

LEVINE: She laughed at you. (laughs.) So, so, then, so then you start seeing each other and you got married soon after.

SCHWARTZ: Right. I don't remember the time element. I'm trying to forget.

LEVINE: Okay. Now how many children did you have?

SCHWARTZ: Three.

LEVINE: And their names? Oh, first your wife's name and maiden name.

SCHWARTZ: Etta (calling to his wife)

THE MRS.: Lehrer

SCHWARTZ: Lehrer. Oy, she asked me.

LEVINE: L-A—

SCHWARTZ: E-T-T-A L-E-H-R-E-R.

LEVINE: Okay. And your children's names?

SCHWARTZ: My oldest daughter's name was Laurie. My younger daughter, who came next, is Marcie. And my son, whose, after that we locked the door, Mitchell. You can see his picture right over there with my grandson. Right against the wall. Right against that, by the--. That's it. Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. All right. Well, let's--. So you went into the service. What service did you go in?

SCHWARTZ: Air Force.

LEVINE: In the Air Force. And then when you got out you went back into the business?

SCHWARTZ: Yes, After a couple or six weeks in Florida. I went—

LEVINE: On vacation?

SCHWARTZ: Yeah, definitely. Not in the Air Force.

LEVINE: Do you think that the fact that you started out in Poland and you came here as a young child, do you think that influenced the way you were as a person? Do you think that had any affect on you and your personality?

SCHWARTZ: No, because in those days parents--. If my father said something or told me to do something I listened and I did. Today a lot of kids don't even listen. They don't listen. So I have two grandchildren. Sometimes yes. And my grandson, he's two and a half, three years old. And he'll come over, give me a kiss, hello, when I come there. They're in Connecticut. And after that I barely see him. I see him dashing by. Like I told my wife yesterday. He wears usually Dutch balloon pants like, and that's all I see, that little rear end and those balloon pants. He'll come over--. Like the other day, my daughter called here and he got on the phone. My wife spoke to him first and he said he wanted to speak to me. "Hello, Grandpa. How are you?" "Fine." "What are you doing today?" "What are you doing, Michael?" "I'll go see." That's the end of it. [Laughter]

LEVINE: Well, well what is it like for you to, to have been in this neighborhood so long and to have seen all these changes? How does it affect you?

SCHWARTZ: Very fascinating. If I get together with somebody whom I haven't seen for a long time or somebody new and they bring up the subject, I'm fully versed on whatever has happened in this neighborhood, fully versed all the way from, let's say the worst, East Broadway.

And at one time, you remember, there was recently a movie called “Crossing Delancey”. At one time that was an adventure to me, people like me, because we lived on Broom Street, which was one block from Delancey, parallel.

And I got in friendly with a doctor who had an office in the next building to where we lived, which at that time was the family apartment, 305 Broom Street. These things come back to you. And got friendly with the doctor. And I used to watch his office, he went out or sent me, the big deal was to go to Ratner’s and get him some sandwiches or some food. And I had to cross Delancey. This was an adventure. My wife, also, will tell you the same thing. That was a big adventure, believe me. I still feel—

LEVINE: What, what, what were you feeling when you were crossing it? What, what did you think about crossing it or feel about crossing?

SCHWARTZ: You’d almost say in the sense of going to another country. It was quite an adventure. Of course very few kids did it. In those days the relationship between the parents and children was different. If the father said to the child, “don’t cross Delancey Street any time”, they would not cross Delancey Street. I didn’t. But I went because the doctor sent me. And I used to hang out and get few cents at the end of the day for my free time. I used to read his books, medical books.

LEVINE: Do you remember the Depression? How did that affect you and Your family?

SCHWARTZ: Definitely. Well life for us during the Depression was as bad, turned a little bad, but not as bad as a lot of other people. My dad never had to stand on a corner and sell apples and he never had to panhandle or anything. He--. We were always--. He, he and my mother were always

capable of making a living with their hands, the hand work on the comforters. It wasn't too bad. We ate well. I don't remember ever having to be hungry, ever, although a lot of people were.

LEVINE: How about your mother? How did she adjust to being here?

SCHWARTZ: Oh, very well, very--. Once she came together with my father everything was fine. On the ship she used to go out and look, every day thinking, "Is this the day?"

LEVINE: Do you remember any either customs or ways of doing things that either your mother or father brought from Poland and they continued in this country?

SCHWARTZ: Frankly, no. I don't--. I can't put my finger on anything or whatever. With you, you gave me the idea of what, what path we're going. Whether you've noticed I've veered off every once in a while because the thought came to me and I thought it was worthwhile for you to know.

LEVINE: Absolutely.

SCHWARTZ: So I did it. Now, the only way I can do that is to keep questioning me on certain topics and something may come up.

LEVINE: Okay. So you, you had a bigger extended family once you got to this country than you had in Poland.

SCHWARTZ: Oh definitely, oh, definitely.

LEVINE: And were they in the Lower East Side, a lot of them?

SCHWARTZ: A lot of them. I had a couple up in the Bronx, a couple of families in Brooklyn. We never got to Staten Island. That was--. We went down to the Battery and looked.

LEVINE: Did you have family get togethers?

SCHWARTZ: Yes, particularly if there was some occasion like a wedding or a confirmation, things like that.

LEVINE: Let's see. How about the Italian children, were you friends with them? How did--? How did that work out?

SCHWARTZ: In school we managed to get along. You had no choice. You had to go to public school or junior high school or high school. And they had--. They didn't separate you by your background. They took you where you belonged; that's it. And I'll tell you the kids today have it much better than we had as far as schooling goes because today if a kid comes over from Poland or Italy, whatever the case may be, he goes into school and they try to--. They always put him in a slot where the teacher speaks the same language as he does so that if he stumbles she'll correct it, which they didn't do with me. We had to learn English.

LEVINE: Was that difficult for you? Do you remember?

SCHWARTZ: No, it wasn't because I was young enough. They got me young enough. And I still remember there were difficult times that—particularly when I went to public school here on Delancey Street. There were difficult times. Ninety percent of the teachers I would, as I recall now, were of the Christian faith and some of them didn't cotton to us. So you lived it. Very rarely that you ever got in a scuffle with a teacher because of that particular situation. The teachers were like gods. A teacher was a god.

Parents used to say to their daughters, “Teacher, teacher, teacher”. And they did it. Son, it’s a Jewish tradition. You know what it was?

LEVINE: Doctor.

SCHWARTZ: Yeah. A son--. You’re a son you go for medicine. They had some for daughters too. Maybe it will come to me. But I had for a while.. . I wanted--. I still tell my friends when we get together and get in some type of conversation like this, I always wanted to be a doctor. There were two difficulties: Number one, the money. I shouldn’t say number one. Number one getting into a medical school. We had right next to this Joe Gerstein I mentioned before there was a mattress shop. He had, I don’t know, four sons. One of them became a doctor. He had to go to Scotland to become a doctor. You couldn’t get into medical school here unless you had well off or wealthy Jewish, Jewish parents. I’m speaking now of the Jewish faith. And if you had parents who were well off or wealthy—take your choice—they could afford to buy their way, your way into medical school.

LEVINE: This is just for the Jewish—

SCHWARTZ: No, it went for Italians, too. How many Italian doctors do you know? You probably see today more Jewish doctors than Italian doctors. And there are so many women doctors. There was no space for a woman doctor.

LEVINE: Did you encounter any other prejudice besides that kind of thing?

SCHWARTZ: Well, in school, yes. They--. Like I told you before, the Bowery was the dividing line between the Jewish community and the Italian community. And if you went into the Italian community you took a chance because [unclear] a gang of them got you sometimes. I got beat up once or twice.

Don't remember. But I wiped it out.

LEVINE: Would Italian kids come into the, into the Jewish?

SCHWARTZ: Oh, then? No, no. They had the same dividing line because when you had the numbers you had the power. If you didn't have the numbers, you didn't have the power so they didn't come here, we didn't go there. I was forced to go, to go--. If I had to go somewhere in the Bronx, for instance, I had to take the IRT. And that was over on Spring Street. That was way up in the Italian section. I imagine the Polish would be the same way. I imagine any other Christian faith, there may have been the dislike of you coming into their territory. You have it today with the blacks and the whites: That simple.

LEVINE: Did you--? Did you--? What language did your mother and father speak at home?

SCHWARTZ: At home? We--. They spoke Yiddish. They spoke some broken English and a secret language, which was Polish.

LEVINE: Why do you say secret?

SCHWARTZ: Because they only used that when they had to say something to each other that they didn't want us to understand. See had I been in Poland to, let's say, age ten, I would be conversant. Although I do meet Polish people and I do understand some of the things they say. My younger daughter works for Hewlett-Packard. She's a head of a group of salespersons. In order to do that work—and she gets paid quite well—she needed a nanny for my, my granddaughter. [To wife] Etta, did [mentions a name, unclear] ever have Michael? Yeah. Even my grandson, who's the last one. He had this Polish woman. And I started to speak to her the few words of Polish

[unclear]. She looked at me. Her mouth dropped open that somebody else spoke Polish of the Jewish faith. And she knew our daughter was Jewish, you know. And I heard her name [unclear]. But they had to dispose of her because she started to get a little high and mighty and my daughter wouldn't take that.

LEVINE: We're just about out of tape. But how is this phase of your life now?

SCHWARTZ: A little boring but not bad.

LEVINE: Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to say before the tape ends?

SCHWARTZ: Nothing than what you would lead me into.

LEVINE: Okay. Well I want to thank you very much. It's a very interesting interview.

SCHWARTZ: It's a pleasure. It's a pleasure.

LEVINE: And I've been speaking with Joseph Schwartz. And it's September 8th--. I mean October 8th 1995. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW