

EI-846

THEODORE SHERR

BIRTHDATE: JUNE 11, 1921

INTERVIEW DATE: FEBRUARY 17, 1997

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 76

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE

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LITHUANIA, 1930

AGE: 11

SHIP: THE AQUITANIA

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Okay, today is February 17, 1997 and I'm here in Florida with Theodore Sherr, who came from Lithuania in 1930 when he was about 11 years of age. Today, you are 76 years of age.

SHERR: Yes.

LEVINE: And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, if, for the tape you would repeat again, birth date and where in Lithuania you were born.

SHERR: All right. In Lithuania it—was born in a little shtetl or village of Plunge [PH], Lithuania. And it was marked on the date on my passport, June the 11th, 1921.

LEVINE: And were you in Plunge up until you left?

SHERR: Up until—till I left, till I was ready to go on the ship.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, just a little bit about Plunge. Do you remember the—

SHERR: Very, very well. I happen to be now their agent because I'm starting a—a Plunge museum. It's called the Yiddish Museum of Plunge and the Jews called it Plungyan [PH] but the Lithuanians called it Plunge. So it was originally—it's a little shtetl. It's like you see in "Fiddler on the Roof" or anything. There—all the shtetls in the [unclear] about to say covering Poland and Lithuania. Now, the shtetl itself was built very much like Paris because they used the same thing. It—in fact, the official language on—on—it was Lithuanian and French. But we didn't speak French. It was only for diplomats or—on the—on the passport it was—it was Lithuanian and French.

LEVINE: Oh.

SHERR: But, you see, we didn't—I had no ways to converse because we—only thing we spoke was English in the cheder or Lithuanian. And the little shtetl had—it was about—from 1930, was 500 years old. The first settlement was 500. Lithuania is—I would say it's—Kovno [PH]—it's about 50 miles north of Kovno. It is right, maybe, 20 miles before Latvia. It's on the border. And the main—the main city is Memel [PH] or Kleipodus [PH]. Memel is the one that belonged to the Germans in 1918 when Lithuania was formed as a country. They gave Memel to the Lithuanians and they took away Vilna and they gave it to Poland. See, so that's why there was always—[coughs]—oh, there was always a dispute between the city of Vilna saying that the Lithuanians own it. And then it was given to the Poles. So in—in Lithuanian it's—they have it—like we in America have "Remember the Alamo," well, the Lithuanians call it "Nusmerskis [PH] Vilnius [PH]." It means "Remember Vilnius." [chuckles]

LEVINE: Ah.

SHERR: So that's what they have in the school and everything else. Well, it was—Vilnius was given back as soon as—in 1940, '41 when the Ger—when the Russians invaded—took over Lithuania. So they gave that back to Lithuania. They—it had—our little shtetl had approximately between 1,800 to 2,000 Jews. Their shtetl was laid out like a city of Paris. It had the main square and it was like a wheel. And from the square it had streets like spokes coming from it. And, you see, we used to call that in Yiddish a gus [PH]. So naturally, it was like a German gus or Deuthese [PH] gus, which meant that that street would take you to a German settlement. Or they would call it "Tels Gus," which means the next shtetl was Tels. [coughs] I lived on Bud [PH] Gus, which—Bud means it's a bath. The main baths are there so that's what the streets was named. Another one was Res [PH] Gus ors Hill Gus where there was a big hill. So each one in the shtetl had the—oh [coughs] the names on it.

LEVINE: Let me just pause a second here. [tape off/on] Okay. We're resuming here. And—and so, how about your living quarters? What—what did they consist of?

SHERR: We had—we had—in the shtetl was naturally, like you see in the movies of a—a little house made—it wasn't the greatest. We had no insulation actually. It was like a log cabin, more like it. And it had the fireplace in the center. It had third floors. The whole shtetl was poor. It was a—you know, it was e—it was hard for them to eke out a living. The only time it—that you got is when you—once a month is when you received the checks from America, South Africa or from any other countries that they emigrated, that their sons and daughters emigrated that they sent the parents. Now, I used to—when—give you an example. One dollar of American money was worth 10 Lithuanian dollars. So, in other words, most of the stuff that you bought on food or clothes, they put on the books. And they all waited for the month to get paid. So when you got the money in—maybe at that time it wasn't—we didn't get money orders—people put their money in an envelope. And you got \$10 or \$20 for that month. Hey, you paid up for your whole month and this is what kept the economy going. It was very poor. We had nothing. But there was—I don't say—I'd say about 80 percent were poor. There were a few in the rich that had factories or not [unclear] or business that had maybe five or six workers. Some had more. But they were already in the—we considered in the "capitalist class," because they already had a substantial amount in back of them. Some were in the lumber business because Lithuania had a bunch of forests, and they were able to cut the lumber and ship it to England. So they were entrepreneurs that had that. Some of them had the small business that dealt with foreign exchange. But the—the cit—the little village was very, very poor. And the only thing that we had in there was—naturally, we had our shuls. And each one, if you were a shoemaker, then you belonged to the shoemaker. Each—each trade had their own thing. And it's—like, if you were a tailor, you belonged to the tailor shul. And the oldest shul that we had, we called that the big shul, that was built in 1812. And it's still standing but it became a flea market so they took it over. And then we had the beshmetersh [PH]. Beshmetersh is like a—where you—it's a—it's not—it's where the learned rabbis come to learn and also to teach and to argue the—the books of Moses. And what happened, that became a sports club. All this was taken over when the Russians took over in 1940 trying to eliminate religion. So they made it into a sports club. The big shul was closed and made it into a stable. The small shuls were eradicated because they didn't want any teaching at all. But yet, in their—the hyp—the hypocrisy that it was, they left the church standing. They didn't touch this church. So they let the church being worshipped on Sunday. And when I was there the church was being rebuilt. It was a big church. And the church

must be about two or three hundred years old. And, by the way, I'm not sure, during—when an invasion of Lithuania by the—by the Germans they took most of the 1,800 Jews, put them into the big shul, closed it up and they did not—they stood there for about a week without food, water or sanitation. They wouldn't give them nothing. Then they were made—they were released from the shul. That happened July the 15, 1941 and they were made to walk about two miles where the—where a big hole was dug and they were all shot en masse in that. So the shul was used by them to—to hold a—the Jews in the camp. But this was similar to every little shtetl that was in Lithuania, because it was a—a—it seemed it was a method of operation that they used for them. And most of them that were killed were not killed by the Germans. They were the overseers. They were killed already by the Lithuanian anti-Semites and the fascist and Nazi collaborators that always hated the Jews. And they did most—they did all the killings. So they've done it in all the shtetlach [PH], you see.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SHERR: So most of the ones in the shtetlach didn't even have a chance to be sent to Auschwitz or anything else or to a ghetto. They were eliminated right away. The Russians, when they came in there, anyone that had a certain business in the shtetl, which was poor—but I don't know. They sent a lot of them, either because of their political beliefs, or either they didn't want to change their religion, or they still kept going to shul, that they were sent to Siberia.

LEVINE: Hmm.

SHERR: So either one, you—you'd be damned if you do or damned if you don't. You know what I mean? So—

LEVINE: Let me go back earlier first.

SHERR: Yeah.

LEVINE: When you said, like, the tailors had a shul—

SHERR: Yes.

LEVINE: Now, surely, there wasn't a—that many tailors to make up a whole [unclear].

SHERR: No, there wasn't but, you see, they—in other words, it was a small little shtetl [PH], as they call that. A shtetl is a little—oh, maybe this room is—we'll say 12 by 15, so the whole shul maybe had been about 9 by 12. It's a little one out there.

LEVINE: Ah, I see.

SHERR: So each one kept in there like they did, you know, in England when they had all their fakt [PH]. A fakt is actually a German word but it's used in Jewish. Each one had their trade. It was like the trade. It was the—you know, I forgot the name of the vehicle. But it was a trade associated. But they all combined together. We had—in there were about three or four tailors. We've had two doctors; I believe they were both Jewish. We have had—we had about three lawyers. Two were Jewish. One was Lithuanian. We've had—believe it or not, we had a library, a big library, compared to what it was. We had about 500 books in there, which was very big. We had the Talmud Torahs and the cheders. We also had a secular school, which I attended to, that was not religious. But they had about five teachers and they taught us English or French as a second language. And we taught mathematics and we were taught history. The ones in the cheder weren't. That was strictly a religious school. But at that time, from 1920—I would say from about 1927 to about 1930 the Lithuanian government gave stipends to the Jewish educational system. But after 1930 it became a fascist government because Smetona [PH] came in. And he took over the—the Democratic government by a putch [PH], which means that he—the army took it over and became a dictatorship. You see, so then the anti-Semitism really started where you couldn't go to the university if you were a Jew. You couldn't take medicine if you were a Jew. So this—from 1931, it started, to 1939 or 1940 when the Russians took it over. But we've had—we had five newspapers and it was—

LEVINE: What was the population of Jewish people at that time?

SHERR: Eighteen hundred.

LEVINE: Eighteen hundred.

SHERR: So in the 1,800 we already had a public library. We had maybe about four or five cheders. We had a gymnasium, which was a high school but it was mostly—I would say it's about 90 percent Lithuanians that—of Christian faith that attended, the very few. We also had a Jewish mayor. We were the only shtetl that had a Jewish mayor but we did not vote for the Jewish mayor. He was appointed by the president, so-called president, [unclear] Smetona, [PH] and he was appointed by them. So there was also a [unclear] involved. And the only way he stood in there—that's when I had an interview with his daughter. And I said, "How did he stay to become a Jewish mayor?" "Well, the president loved to play poker and he used to play poker with the president once a week and lose so much money and had kept this job. [chuckles] So that's how he got—so after, I think, he

felt sorry so he gave him a gold medal. I don't know how—if it was pure gold but it may have been gold filled. But this is how each one. We all had to leak out—eke out a living and each one had their own little way of getting around, you see, to stay in—to stay alive. So each one either had a payoff or each one had to do it; it was barter system. So it was really a life where it was like [unclear]. Right? Now, if you read his stories, it is—this is the city. And of course, we had nicknames for anyone else. You know, like, if it was—like, you know, we didn't have naturally running water, you know. You had to have—there was a man that carried water to you, two pails of water for you. And the only time that you can use is to go to the bug, to the bath. And that's usually Friday night before services so you can be ready for Saturday for Shabbos, you see. So the bath had just like the shritz [PH] bath like you have in here. And, you know, you went in there, had your steam room and your water and stuff—stuff like that. And Friday night there had—this man come through and we used to call him Jorsal [PH] the hoker [PH], because he naturally had a hunchback, you see. So each one had the hoker and he went around with a—a wooden hammer. And he used to say, “[speaking in foreign language.]” He used to call you to go. So you've done that. This was also taken from Spain. Spain also used to have these people saying, “Hey, go to church,” or go to shul, because they used to tell you, “It's five o'clock. Stop your work. You should be in shul.” You see? On that we had for one woman that was blind. But if you asked her the time, used to say, “Hinda [PH] da Blinda [PH],” because her name Hinda but she was blind so you could—the Blinda—say, “Hinda, [speaking in foreign language]?” “What time is it?” And she knew right away. “It's three zehe.” [PH] “Dreir [PH] zehe.” I don't know how she knew it. We knew [chuckles]—she it. But each one had their own idiosyncrasy. That's why you can really write stories and stories on each one. And with all our misery, with all our, you know, poverty, we still had to laugh sometimes at ourselves as someone else. And they say sometimes, you know, even the people in Auschwitz and the—on the last mile they still had a joke or something. They had to laugh because some people laugh right—in facing death, you see?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHERR: Even in the firing squad. So we still had to eke out and we did have quite a few people that did come from my town, my—from Plungyan—is now the Chief Supreme Court Justice of Israel. He's the one—his name, he changed. His name was Brech [PH]—Hershel [PH] Brech. Now, named Brech. He changed it when he went to Israel. He left in 1954 and he went to Israel then. He changed his name to Baruch. [PH] Now, Baruch was the attorney general that tried Eichmann. And he came from Plunge from our shtetl.

LEVINE: Oh, wow.

SHERR: And now he's the chief justice in the Supreme Court. We've also had people in the labor movement that came from us, people that—in South Africa it was easier for them to emigrate to South Africa because there was no quota there. Don't forget that South Africa, you've had 15 million blacks; you've had two million whites. They needed to bolster the white population. Not that this—the government of Africa was the lover of Jews. They weren't, because when I was in Cape Town I saw there was anti-Semitism—great, but they needed the color of your skin to back them up. So they took in whites, which was very easy for a Jew to go to South Africa. After 1925 or '26, it was hard for a Jew to come into America because of the immigration quota problem. So they all left. They—places they left was Argentina. Mexico was easy to go, Paraguay, Uruguay, South America. But as far as going, they did not go into France because it was hard for them to get into it. Of course, they didn't go into Russia because they were all running away from it. So Sou—so South Africa was one. England was tough to get into because of the quota and South America, Mexico was very light.

LEVINE: What about your father? Before he—he immigrated before you?

SHERR: Yes, my—

LEVINE: What was he doing in Plunge before he immigrated?

SHERR: Well, Plunge was also leather, if—lumber and leather. Now, he was in the—working by leather. Not fur, but leather. Now—a tannery. Now, my—he worked—my—my—his father was—my grandfather had the tan—tannery in the basement of the house. So everyone that—you know, you—he worked right in the tannery. So if he was up—he was in the house, it was vats, and he used to put the—the leather in there to—to make it soft or everything else.

LEVINE: What was—what were the animals that [unclear]?

SHERR: They would—they would take them from cows or anything—that—the leather, from horses and stuff like that. So they were working with leather. Leather goods was a big thing for export too from Lithuania. So—and don't forget boots, so they used to make boots. The shoemakers used to make what they called stievel. [PH] Stievel were boots because the—we had—there were no pavement in the street. The street was mud. There was no sidewalks. There may be somebody that had a little sidewalk. He put down two boards in front of the house; you don't get in. So you couldn't walk with shoes in there. It was like the old Wild West, if you've seen the pictures. You had to have big boots to get because if it rained, you'd go in a foot or two. So the—it was—it was terrific. And in the—in

the wintertime the snow was immense. It was maybe 10 feet high. Their houses were small. There were no water—running water. We had no bathrooms in the house. There were outhouses. Now, the outhouses were situated near the shuls because it was a big place. So they had about 20 or 30 outhouses so you could imagine that the con—sanitary conditions were awful. I think in 1931 or 1932 the government of Lithuania, after an outbreak—typhus was—was—was prevalent too.

LEVINE: Do you remember cases—

SHERR: Yes.

LEVINE: —of typhus—

SHERR: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: —from before you left?

SHERR: Yes, yes. Typhus, yes. There was an outbreak because of the sanitary condition. We had no sanitary condition until about 1932 or '33 is when they made them put in—each one—an outhouse near the house.

LEVINE: Oh.

SHERR: Not a central one, and the central one, they burnt it down, you see, and they filled in everything. So [coughs] that's when they—the sanitary—we had—but before—to don—to see that you're Jewish, you see, they didn't put a number on us. They took what they call a felsha [PH]. A felsha is a horse doctor and he used to come around and put the—they—in Yiddish, they call this pochen [PH]. They used to put in the—what do we call that in here? On the arm, yeah, they—for a—oh, so you shouldn't get the anthra—vaccination.

LEVINE: Oh.

SHERR: Pochen is a vaccination.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHERR: So what they did, he used to come by and do it to the Jewish children and also the Christian children. So he wasn't a regular doctor now. He—he wasn't even—I don't even think he was a horse doctor. You know what I mean? He may have been some—something out there.

LEVINE: What was the vaccination for?

SHERR: Well, the vaccination—what they did—to donate, if you were Jewish, you see how big they made it? They made it, like, one, two, three, four, five. So then this is—but this I learned later on through my research on why I had such big vaccinations. Usually here, they give you a tiny one you don't see. But everyone in my shtetl, I noticed. I says, "Now, why are they having such big ones?" And then when I started to do the research on anti-Semitism or on this Holocaust where they've done I've found that in order—when the Jewish child was—beside being circumcised, which he was, which they didn't do, it was all in there that when he had to give for the time of the vaccination he came back once a year to vaccinate the children for anthrax. So what happened was he used to make it like this. You see, one, two, three—two in there [unclear].

LEVINE: All at the same time, the five—

SHERR: Yeah, all at the same time.

LEVINE: [unclear]—

SHERR: So that was [unclear]. That could go no—that showed you that you're a Jew so you can't—sometimes you can't do that, you see? But on circumcision there were Christians later on that were circumcised. So naturally, when the Germans caught somebody, they used to make him strip and see if he was circumcised so you couldn't [unclear]. But there were Jews that were not circumcised because they lived in—maybe in a little shtetl that they didn't have a [unclear] or a rabbi that came by to do it, you see.

LEVINE: How about other medical or, let's say, folk practices with medicine? Do you [unclear]—

SHERR: The medicine, we used—medicine we used on there was bonkus [PH]. You know what bonkus is? Cupping [PH].

LEVINE: Oh.

SHERR: Cupping. And each—yes, I did it. Recently, I had it. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Really?

SHERR: And I gave the car—I brought it back from Lithuania. I bought a whole bunch. But when I went to Israel I said, "Well, I don't need it." I says, "I'm sorry I gave it. I should have put it in the museum because [unclear] or given it to the Ellis Island Museum too because they"—but you don't think of it. And what happened was we—I brought it to Israel and I gave it to

somebody in Israel because she was still doing it in Israel. So they still practice it.

LEVINE: Now, what—what do you remember as a small child about cupping?

SHERR: Well, cupping is that if you were sick with a heavy cold you got the cupping. They put that on. You know how it was done; they used to put alcohol in there and light the flame and then hit you right onto—on your skin. And man! I'm going to tell you something.

LEVINE: Hurt?

SHERR: No, only when they took it off because [unclear] [makes popping sound] used to pop off like crazy. And then we also used bloodsuckers. We—don't forget, we used a brunem [PH]. A brunem means a well. We had a—a town well where each one went to get the water. Now, that was—and that was right near the cemetery. Now, don't forget, the bodies were not buried in—in caskets. They were buried in tacherichem [PH]. Tacherichem is a—is a Hebrew word for the—being put into their white clothes or the—

LEVINE: Shroud?

SHERR: —shroud. They were put in a shroud. Now, it was buried into the ground. Naturally, TB or any disease that you had came through the well. The well was right near the cemetery so the drain-off from the water—today, here you get it maybe from the chemicals that you use on the grass. Eventually, it'll come through because what is there to protect the body? If you put it into a box, there's some protection. Eventually, the box ruins and then you have—but at least there is no remains. It's just skeleton remains. Here you have already the remains that stay for awhile and it's—comes off. So you had TB prevalent in there, a lot of TB. I'll get—asking—people write me letters from Australia, all over, "Well, what is prevalent in"—glaucoma was highly prevalent, because don't forget, there was 1,800 Jews. So there was a lot of intermarriage in there, maybe married the second cousins or something like that so, eventually, you know, the genes showed up. You see? So they didn't think of all this because there was very few marriage with the Christians, very, very few. Maybe one or two and then they always converted to Christianity.

LEVINE: Oh.

SHERR: You see? So very few—I don't—maybe one—but they wouldn't even take a convert to convert a Christian woman to Juda—because they believed it's not kosher. It's not—after all, how could she do that? So if it was a Jewish woman, as you saw yourself in "Fiddler on a Roof" where she

married this Christian lad, she went to become—and she lived in a house and he became—she became Christian. She automatically—right—she went to the church to convert because the priest came already and he made them convert to that. So there was very—I would say maybe five out of the whole thing married Christians but they did convert. Some of them maybe, of course, when they left this—the—the village or the shtetl did marry Christians in Canada or America. But they probably didn't convert; they were already secular. Then we had a left movement; a communist movement started in 1927 or '28. It started pretty big because it was a rebellion of the youth against religious teaching. They didn't want anymore to go to cheder. They didn't want religion anymore. So what they did was—and communists had promised them a—a heaven. And it says, well, it's a—it's a proletariat movement. Everyone will be alike. You're not going to have hunger anymore. You're not going to have this or that. But they didn't tell you you're not going to have freedom of speech or anything else. [chuckles] You're going to be taken away. You know, you take medi—medication, it'll help you but the side effects may be worse than the whole thing so [chuckles]—

LEVINE: But it caught on among the Jewish youth.

SHERR: It did—caught on. It caught on the Jews and the Lithuanians and all that. So—but in—apropos of what I'm saying is the partisans during World War II, the Jewish communist partisans that worked out in the woods from the—from Vilna and Kovno. Yet, when you go into Lithuania you don't see one street named after a Jewish communist that fought with the partisan. But you do see after the Lithuania communists that were named after that.

LEVINE: Hmm.

SHERR: So even that anti-Semitism was prevalent. You see what I mean? So to give you—see, sometimes, if you read something you've got to read between the lines and then you get the truth, you see. It's your story, my story and the truth. Hey, come on. [laughs]

LEVINE: Let me go back to something. You—with the burials, were there—do you recall burial ceremonies?

SHERR: Yes.

LEVINE: Well—

SHERR: Definitely.

LEVINE: Can you describe that?

SHERR: You see? So I was much older than 11 years old when I came here because my—my father went into the city hall—the city hall. It was a shack, you know, like you see, you know—not even—I don't think they even had glass—they may have had a glass window. And he changed the birthday of myself and my brother. So I can remember every—I remember every house, everyone who lived in the house. The burial just before I left in 1927—no, I'm sorry. In 1929, my grandfather died. When he died they put him into a shroud. They laid him on the floor. Don't forget. We had a—we didn't have a wooden floor. There were some people that had wooden floors, yes. But we didn't have it. So we had a dirt floor. [coughs] And he was laid out. The candles were put around him. Two things, maybe because they put the candles around him so the rats wouldn't go for the body. You see? Also, religious thing that they had. And I remember there was no other thing. They put him in there. He laid there. The next day they dug a hole on the cemetery, put him in there and he was buried off—they washed it. They did wash the body before it was put in.

LEVINE: How about other ceremonies, like marriage—

SHERR: Yes.

LEVINE: Child bearing [unclear].

SHERR: The marriage is like—I saw something—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

SHERR: —in a way, and on the canopy in the shul, sometimes outside. And of course there was big tables spread out, you know, with different sorts of food, mostly candy and everything else out there. So it was not the printed invitation. Whoever came, came, sat down to eat. He was in there. We—I don't think there was any gifts to the bride because the only—the only gifts is where, naturally, is the dowry that you gave to the bride. Marriage was young. It was—I'm telling—my mother and father got married. I think she was 16; he was 18. And they were sweethearts from way back. But there were marriage that were already set in the house; in other words, that the two parents—it was a [unclear]. Somebody that had already said—promised that the kid, when was born, that there—there should be a wedding. Yeah, that would be because it was an orthodox—we—there was no—the secular had nothing to do with religion. But it was only one sector with the orthodox. It wasn't conservative or reform. We had no Reform Judaism there. We never knew about Reform Judaism. In fact, to give you an example, when the—when the circus came to town, it

was the circus that came. I never saw a circus but we finally saw the circus. It came in the square. Each—each little village had a square, you know, with the—with the shops on it. And the square was in there and they'd put up the tent, and we saw the few lions or the tiger. They—they may have had one or two, and it's the first time that we saw a black man. I never saw a black man in my life. And he was—he was billed as a mensch fresher [PH]. He ate people. He was [chuckles]—he was—we was—I was so scared; I wouldn't go next to him. So that's what it was; we never saw black people. We knew existed but we never saw them. We saw—we looked. I was—looked with amazement. Then when I came on the Equitania and I—because I was practically steerage. I was down in the hold. And I used to—they let me walk all over the ship. I—I experimented. I—I went all over. I made a discovery and when I went up there there must have been, oh, maybe 10 black people there. But I—I believed they were entertainers. And when they called me over—because I stood and stared and them and I didn't take my eyes off, and I said—just couldn't imagine. And I wouldn't come over to them because [chuckles] they—well, they put them down as—as a carnival, you know, being from Africa and [unclear] just wanted to show you how we were there. And naturally, our—we were brought up in—in religious—a highly religious—and we believed in all the religious fairy tales that they had and that, you know, first of all, that you couldn't marry out of your religion. You had to have bar mitzvah. And the only time I turned completely an atheist is when I came to this country. So I do not believe in God. I have never had a bar mitzvah. I am a pure atheist. I was always a left-winger [chuckles] when I came in here and never bothered much with this. But I remember that. But yet, I'm a student—I'll—I'll give you—I mean, I'll fight for your right to believe in it but I would not let you proselytize me. In other words, hey, I'll fight for your rights but don't try to convert me. You see, I'll let you do it but I found out, if I fight for you, those religious Jews would not fight for a secular Jew anyway. But [chuckles]—but I fought because I felt that, this way if they hit him, eventually they going to hit me. If they going to call me like they do in Lithuania—they say, "Zide vale." [PH] Now, the word, zid—Z-I-D, that means Jew bastard, or what they call "Jew devil." So in Poland or in—when you go to the Baltic State, they do not call you Jew [unclear], or like in the French or anything. They call you zid, like you would call a black man nigger. You see, this is a form of showing that they are better than you, that they want to put you, so-called, in your place. You see what I mean? To show you that they are way above you and that you're their servant, in other words. So we—we learned that also so many a times. And now every Friday we had what they called the Markplatz [PH]. I mean, Friday came in, each one—the peasants came in with their chickens and eggs and every—and it was a great barter system because, yes, they had money too. But then there was also barter. If you didn't have the money you would start to barter. So every Friday was the marketplace. So the market started about six o'clock in the morning and

wound up—of course, you couldn't be—stayed late because Friday night you had to go to shul. So you had to stop it at what? Oh, maybe about two o'clock because then you had to go—the women went to the mikva [PH] and the men went to the bud [PH] because you had to get ready for shul. You had to come to shul clean.

LEVINE: Can you describe the bud, what it was like?

SHERR: Yes. To tell you—just [unclear]. So the mark pledge [PH] came out there and naturally, after about two o'clock, or—two o'clock when it was ready, each one went to the monopole [PH]. Monopole is the whiskey—is the liquor store. And each one took their vodka. We didn't have scotch or anything. Vodka was big so everybody was whiskey. Whiskey—the word whiskey meant vodka or anything out there. So naturally, they came and that's when they first started to hate the Jews, you know. After all, they did business with them from six to one, or one or two, and after two o'clock they started—they—because the whiskey started to talk. And that's when they started to see if they could hit the Jew, or pogroms or anything else. But in order to defend themselves, the younger people in the—from the years 1920—from 1927 to about 1930, we had young fellow—I mean, fellows from the 15 to 18 to 21 to 22 that formed, like, a militia to stop this, so they would help that. You see? Now, we did get—we asked—we saw the coming of the pogroms and that. And we asked the American Jew to please send us guns. We need guns. The only guns we got were from the Communist Party in Russia, not because we were Jews or anything, but to foster—to have a—a standing militia so they could can come in or have somebody in there. So in other words, Russia gave it—not because they loved the Jews but they gave it because there was always a motive why the Russians do it. You know, they do not do it for help. But they do it, saying, "We gave you a favor; you owe us a favor now." So—

LEVINE: Now, would they give guns to the Lithuanians?

SHERR: No, they would—

LEVINE: No?

SHERR: —give it to the Jew.

LEVINE: Just to the Jews.

SHERR: To the Jew.

LEVINE: Why would it be—

SHERR: Because we had the Communist Party in Lith—in Plungyan was mostly—were—the topnotch were Jews.

LEVINE: I see.

SHERR: And they mostly—and don't forget, Russia in the years from 1921 to 1930 they did not bother too much the Jews. The Jews were in good position. They were in the army; they were in the KGB. They were in every important post. So naturally, a lot of Jews that left Lithuania to go into—with the Communist Party—so they had family in there. So they didn't give sophisticated weapons. They gave them just side arms, not even rifles, but just a sidearm. I would say maybe a Luger or something. But when we were asking, they sent us Bibles from America. Well, the—the rabbi said it's not kosher. After all it had—the Bible was in [unclear]; it was in Hebrew and in English. Now, being English, that didn't make it kosher. So they buried the Bible. [laughs] So, as we said before—

LEVINE: But they [unclear].

SHERR: Just wanted to show you—

LEVINE: Yeah.

SHERR: —that all these things come out. And they said, “Oh, my God!” But when you live through it and you're a kid, you see—well, I don't have to tell you, the far right is the same thing as in here. And then when you say, “Well—well, how was the bath?” As we came in, the bath, it was small and it had its, like steps where, if you go further up it was hotter. You know what I mean? It was very much like the Turkish bath that you used to have, the old Turkish bath that we had in Coney Island. And years ago, they had the Silvas [PH] Bath in Coney Island that everyone ran to. But afterward, they didn't stay overnight. You've—had the water. You had—the well, as I said before, was right outside the cemetery. Now, the bath was right outside the cemetery too; it was right next to the well. So you went outside. The people, when I got all these pails of water standing there—you got too hot, you put the pail of cold water over it.

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh.

SHERR: You see what I mean? So you sweat. It was mostly sweat. We didn't have [unclear]—but they did have a mikva for the women. But that was already—it was not running water now. It was like—it was like a bathtub.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

SHERR: You see what I mean? It wasn't even a Jacuzzi.

LEVINE: Now, did the men—did the men, like, play cards and things like that? Did they [unclear] in there—

SHERR: Yes—no, not in—not in—not in the—no, there were no card—

LEVINE: Not in the baths.

SHERR: —playing. No, because religious Jews didn't play the cards. The only one that played the cards were the secular Jews. Now, we had a gramophone, where gramophone was a record player. I can remember with the big—it was with a dog on it, you know.

LEVINE: Right, yeah. [unclear].

SHERR: The RCA Victor.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHERR: And we had a few Jewish records and—and the records we had were all from Yasolah Rosenblatt [PH], you know. That was all the liturgical—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHERR: —stuff. And then we had secular music, you know, from shows. But it was—came in from America. You see, brought in either by a visitor that came back after he left Plungyan and he came back. Or it came in from Vilna—Vilna or Kovno. It was big cities. Kovno was a big city. And so it was—and the biggest city was Memel because it was German city. So it—the boats used to come in. It was a port so you had all that stuff. In other words, if you left Lithuania you had to go to Kleipodus Memel, because when I came here we took the boat, the—

LEVINE: Right.

SHERR: —the Baltivia [PH] in Memel and we went—from Memel, you stopped at Danzig. It's no more Danzig; it's—they changed the name on there too. And from Danzig you came into Southampton. When we came into Southampton we had to stay there about a week in Southampton. Now, we were Lithuanians so we were considered very, very clean. If you came from Poland they used to cut your whole hair off there. They—they shaved your hair. They deloused you and everything else. But we weren't because the—the—Lithuania—all the Baltic States were much cleaner than the Poles, because it was much cleaner in there. We had the facilities more to wash ourselves, not the greatest, but we had more than

the shtetlach in Poland. And when we stood in Southampton, then we came—and then we came to another—we put on the boat to America.

LEVINE: Well, before we talk about that part, what was your father's name?

SHERR: My father's name was Garb—G-A-R-B.

LEVINE: First name?

SHERR: No, his last name. He was also changed to Sherr because he left Lithuania and he couldn't get a passport. So he came and he changed his name to Sher—S-H-E-R—S-H-E-R. And another one of his friends changed it to Sher. So when they left, they left with phony names and phony documents. So my other—his other friend, Philip—he went—which I met later on—he went to Cape Town.

LEVINE: Oh.

SHERR: My father went on a boat and he went as a first mate. He didn't know nothing. And he jumped ship in Brooklyn and he used the word Sher.
[laughs]

LEVINE: Ah.

SHERR: So you see? So you had to get out because there was no passport being issued at that time.

LEVINE: Because of the quotas?

SHERR: Because of the quotas and also, they want—they were forming an army in Lithuania and they wanted the men to go into the army.

LEVINE: Right.

SHERR: So each one got out of there by hook or by crook, each one changing their name. That's before computers were naturally—right after World War II where most of this stuff was—was destroyed—most of the records. But the Germans did not—the Germans, as you know—as we know through reading, they kept all the records immaculate because they were that way. They kept it—so they kept—they still have the records. So records are still in Lithuania. So records are still [unclear] in Vilna and in Kovno. But before that, in the—in the late '20—in the early '20s—now, he came—I was born '21, my brother, '22. He left in '23. So in 1923—

LEVINE: Oh.

SHERR: —when he left for America, it was—it was still, you know—don't forget, World War II—World War I just ended in 1918. So how [unclear]. So the—the world was still in a turmoil. You can go on a ship; you can use five different names. And when you came to this country, people were all over and they keep changing their names. So they went to Pittsburgh or they went to the South or anything else, Shapiro came another name. Levine became another name [chuckles] and Brech became Baruch. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Right.

SHERR: And—

LEVINE: Now, did your father—did he think that—I mean, did he leave when he left, thinking he might be conscripted into the army?

SHERR: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Is that why how leaving [unclear]?

SHERR: Also, yes. Yes. Going into the army and looking for a better—there was no economic satisfaction out there. [unclear] become a leather tanner like his father. He knew his father wouldn't make out. It was—it was hard work. There was not enough out there to eke out a living and to get—to wait for—he had no relatives. He had—although he had sisters here but they didn't send. Some sent; some didn't send. So he was [unclear]. And don't forget. His mother died and his step—his father—I think his father married a woman that was 25 years younger than he did, and he had children with her. So he was already ostracized. So he saw what kind of life has he got? He got married young at 18 and he knew that. He figured, well, it's either Africa, South Africa, or America. And he had no one in South Africa but he had two sisters in America. So when he went on the boat he came into Brooklyn. They didn't stop you in Brooklyn as they do, you know, even—when he probably went to Ellis Island or anything else it wasn't that way. Maybe—before he went to Ellis Island, don't forget, he didn't have to stop as an immigrant. He was working on the ship already as an officer. And he—when he came into Brooklyn he jumped the ship and came into Brooklyn because he had a sister in Brooklyn. So [chuckles]—

LEVINE: And what did he do when he came to this country?

SHERR: He became a furrier.

LEVINE: Before he sent for the rest of the family?

SHERR: Yes, he was a furrier—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHERR: And—

LEVINE: In Brooklyn?

SHERR: Yeah, in New—in New York. Yeah, he worked in New York, in Manhattan.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHERR: And he became a very hot union man. They formed a big union. So he became a hot union [chuckles] man. He was a leftist but he wasn't—he wasn't endowed with [unclear] political thinking. I mean, he didn't read Marx or Engel or anything else. And he was a—he was a union man, in other words. Everybody was a union man, was called a communist at that time.

LEVINE: Right.

SHERR: But that's—that's another story, which I think you should get into is—get into the early unions of the—

LEVINE: Right. Let me just finish with life in Lithuania—

SHERR: Yeah.

LEVINE: —before we go onto the—what was your mother's name?

SHERR: My mother's name was Kline [PH]—Anna Hannah. And also, the families left in there. Her—her brothers left and her sisters; they all went to South Africa. We had nobody here because it was easy to get to South Africa. And then when my mother—we came here, like, in 1930.

LEVINE: And there were how many of you coming [unclear]?

SHERR: Well, it was—my father was here already, that he sent for us. And under this new law in 1927, we were already American citizens in Lithuania, because it was so that if he became a citizen his wife and the children were automatically American citizens.

LEVINE: Well, now, he had to wait five years, I think.

SHERR: Well, he had to wait five years to get his papers, the citizen papers. In fact, I just come—I got all the papers from him, even the—the Immigration Depar—and the ticket for the boat I got too.

LEVINE: Oh.

SHERR: So someday, I said I'd like to donate it to—

LEVINE: Yes.

SHERR: But I'll see if [chuckles]—because it's got everything in—in there. And I think it was—well, it was—for the whole family to come was about \$2,000, I think it was at that time.

LEVINE: And how many children?

SHERR: Okay, my brother, myself and my mother. And when we came off the ship in Brooklyn the first thing, he took us to his sister that lived in Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Well, first, go back to Southampton.

SHERR: Yeah.

LEVINE: How long did you stay there before you—

SHERR: We stood a week.

LEVINE: And—and you were examined in Southampton?

SHERR: Not very—we were quarantined. We couldn't go out. So I had—my mother had an uncle that came to visit him from—from London and one from Manchester. He was very nice. He brought us cookies and all. But we were treated very nice in Southampton. I got out because I was young and I guess the kids, you know—there were other kids. I started to run around with other kids. I couldn't—I—the only thing I remember being taught in English—mother, father. That's it. You see what I mean? Father—that's what I was being taught. So—but that—I didn't know anything else. So—but as a kid I was—I—I—I was acclimated enough to get out but my mother didn't, you know. But—

LEVINE: Now, why did they quarantine you?

SHERR: Because we—they—we were waiting for the—to be shipped to America and we could not get into England. In other words, if we lived in England, maybe we would stay there—

LEVINE: Ah, I see.

SHERR: —in England. You know, like it's done in America where you jump the—you know, you come in with a phony card or anything else. In fact, I'll tell you. I had my green card when I was already—when I got to Southampton my green card was waiting for me.

LEVINE: Oh.

SHERR: So I still have my green card.

LEVINE: Wow!

SHERR: I still have—[chuckles]—so I figure if anybody needs a green card I'm ready to sell, although it says 1930 on it. [laughs]

LEVINE: How about the passage, the ship [unclear]?

SHERR: Ship was all right. The ship was—it was not kosher foods. I couldn't stand it because it's the first time I smelled bacon and I couldn't understand it. Oh, I couldn't take it anymore. But we—we—in order not to eat the non-kosher food that my grandmother made as biscuits. Now, we took a pillowcase full of biscuits. [chuckles] Take—I did eat later on eggs, you know—hard eggs, you know. Hard-boiled eggs you could. Meat I don't remember because it wasn't kosher so we—we stood away from it. You see what I mean? I couldn't take—English food is, anyhow, lousy so I couldn't eat that stuff out there. But I'm sure they had services on the boat too. They had a shul on there. English—there was not much that—they didn't treat us bad at all. I mean, they—they—really, we were just in quarantine and they took us by bus. And I went through London. It's the first time I seen the subway or anything, you know, in London. I never seen such tall buildings. And I was amazed because when the quarantine—it was just in a—in a big place, you know, at the—well, it looked like a school, you know. We had our—each one had a little room in there with a bed and the food was all right. It wasn't—wasn't kosher, I don't think, because we just didn't eat that and stuff. And of course it wasn't kosher on the—on the—where we were. They may have had kosher meals for people that went first class. And it was the big ship. The Equitania was a—is a very big ship. And that was when we saw, you know, that we were quarantined. But we were treated already different than any other Jewish immigrant. Jewish immigrants from Poland were treated like second class. We—anyone that came from the Baltic States, Lithuania, Latvia or Estonia, were treated differently. I guess—we had more freedom, even under the fascist rule of Smetona. We, the Jews, suffered but not to the extent as the Polish Jew did. There were pogroms but not to pogroms where they were killing the Jews. They beat us up a

lot but you see what I mean? Maybe one was hurt that it showed. But we were able to take—to defend ourselves. And also, we had a little bit more pull because—maybe because we had a Jewish mayor in town.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHERR: You see? And also, he was looking for Jewish money too, you see, because “donations” were given to his party. So the police came around to ask for donations and naturally [laughs] they give it to them, you know.

LEVINE: Okay. Just a—we’re going to pause here for one second. [tape off/on] We’re going to resume here now after a break and, let’s see. Where were we? We were talking about you were on the Equitania and do you remember when the ship came into the New York harbor?

SHERR: Yes, it was—I remember because I’ll tell you why. We had the Jewish holidays on the—on the ship.

LEVINE: Can you talk—tell—talk—

SHERR: Yes—

LEVINE: —about what that was like.

SHERR: Yes, they had—the—the ship was made up mostly—a lot of Yiddish immigrants. We met other people from—I met—next to our cabin was an American family. I didn’t understand a word they were—but they treated me very, very nice. They were not Jewish. And I remember her giving me chocolate and cookies and everything else and conversing with my mother. And we conversed, you know, like with sign language, you see what I mean? And my mother spoke Yiddish [chuckles] and she spoke English but they got along. I—I guess they knew what the hell they—and to me it was very, very interesting because she always came into the little cabin. You know, we had the bunk beds in the cabin—the small cabin. And she used to give me cookies and all that. And I remember to this day when I first came in I saw Castle Garden. Now, Castle Garden was the first one that was in there. You see? And they said that this one was the old place with the immigrants. And I finally saw the Statue of Liberty.

LEVINE: Tell me what that—

SHERR: That—

LEVINE: —was like for you.

SHERR: —was an experience. And we came out on the deck and we saw the Statue of Liberty. And I didn't know what it was until they explained to me in Yiddish—you know, there were other people much older or they were coming in to—what the Statue of Liberty was all about. And you can see that standing there and as you passed by it—it was—and you could see the land in the back. It was like a fantasy. It was like people, they say they die and they see—they come back and they—to a new, different world. That's how I felt. I can remember it myself. It was—it was a world—it was an—a—well, a roller that you never experienced itself. I don't know. It's—it may be like their first orgasm. [laughs] It was terrific and you never seen it. You never can repeat it again so it was great. And it was something that you say, "Oh, my God!" You know? You stand there stupified. I mean, if you see the statue when it came up there and—and all the immigrants coming on the—on the—on the deck and each one pushing each other to see if you get the best side of it. And—and all talking in Yiddish and maybe in Polish and Russian and—you know, and all the Swedes and everything else in different languages. But—but yet, you understood. But there were [unclear] because they—because you can watch their faces and you can see the glow that came in. And it was really something. And then when we got off—the ship docked and I got off in a tremendous dock, like, but was covered. And then there was a—a boat waiting for us to take us to Ellis Island. It was a—a little tugboat that they put us on to take us to Ellis Island. Well, when we got to Ellis Island and I was looking for my father—he was there too—there—everybody was there—that was like Castle Garden. It was so noisy and the voice and the talking. And my mother said, "Look for your father. Look for your father."

LEVINE: But you, of course, didn't know your father.

SHERR: I knew him by the picture, only by the picture. [laughs] And everyone looked alike. And they came up—they had the voices and the—the noise were there. And they—it was like grating, you know. The people that had to pick up the people, they stood on one side and we stood on the other. And it was like a chicken coop wire that kept us apart. And people were shoving notes through the wire and holding hands, people that recognized each other, and the crying and the carrying on. And then the people that said, "Well, they won't allow us—this one has got TB or she has something where may"—you know, all rumors coming through, because, "Well, your eyes are cross-eyed. They—Americans don't want"— [chuckles] and everything else. And then finally they—we put the number on us. You know, they—we carried a number. They put a cha—a chain with a number on us. So then called back, like, "Number 72," and came in. And it was—myself and my brother, we went in together in a room. And he was dressed in a uniform. And we hated uniforms because it reminded us of the police. And still, to this day, I cannot stand uniforms because it reminded me of the old regime, because when you saw a

uniform, you know, you either get hit or be put in jail. You see what I mean? And he was standing there with the white coat and also the—he had a uniform on. And I remember he—the first thing he did was put his stethoscope—not—it wasn't like the one that they're using now. It was a different then in the early '30s—to listen to my heart—listen to my heart. And he—my brother, he would—my brother was a year younger. And he listened to me and then he asked me in questions and put up his hand. One, one. Two. You know, he asked me just a few, like, questions.

LEVINE: But you were answering in—in—

SHERR: Yes.

LEVINE: [sentence unclear].

SHERR: In Yiddish. In Yiddish. I couldn't speak English. I answered them in Yiddish. But he understood. He may have understood Yiddish himself or may have understood German. You see what I mean? But—or maybe his experience in asking the same question and getting the same answer, he would. And he did give us an eye test and he was—he looked in there to see if, you know, our eyes have glaucoma or some illness. I think one or two were turned down, one young [unclear]. Not from us but, you know, the rumor got—and it was—the examination did not take that long. I—I—from what I'd guess, the examination took maybe 15 minutes because it was so crowded, I guess, that they wanted to take—but he did ask you the questions. He ask you where you're going, who you have in America—

LEVINE: Do you remember anybody being asked to read?

SHERR: To read?

LEVINE: From a card?

SHERR: Yes, I think we were too. But it—I couldn't read because he didn't have a Yiddish card. But he would just—I thought maybe the eye examination, to have that. But they did have—they had a card and he said to me, "Point it." But I couldn't read English. So it was that in there. But he did—the questions that he asked me were very simple because, you know, I—but he'd do—that we—like, we went to school, yes. But if he spoke German, I would have answered them anyhow because German—we spoke German in the shtetl too, because it was right near the German border. Because it—don't forget, Lithuania was right [unclear]—Memel was German. The town where we left from was German. It was—Memel, you only spoke German so—

LEVINE: Well, Yiddish is not [unclear]—

SHERR: Not too far but we—we did—we did speak German too because most of the Inteligencia [PH] spoke German, because most of your books were there, and a little bit of English. You see what I mean? And a little French but German was mostly the language that—

LEVINE: So what was the reunion like with your father?

SHERR: Well, when I saw my—I stood away. After all, I haven't seen him. I was—I don't remember him. I left—when he left I must have been a year old. But I used to write him but that don't mean nothing. He used to send pictures. And I stood away and, you know, he wasn't a demonstrative man but with my mother he was, and Sully [PH]—my brother's name was Sully. We looked, you know what I mean, and "Das ist the tater. [PH] Das ist the tater." And, you know, and then he put us—we didn't give much. He came over, give us a hug, you know. And I don't even think he gave us a kiss—I'll be honest—because he wasn't a demonstrative man. He wasn't the kissing type. [clears throat] But I know with my mother he did. And we stood aside, you know, just looking in amazement, also with the other people too. And then he took us back with that little—there was a little boat he took us back to—to shore. And there was a cab and he took us in a cab to his sister that lived—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

LEVINE: —keep going with—you came into Brooklyn. You met your father. You and your—you took a cab and you went to—

SHERR: You took a cab to—I went to see his sister on Bedford Avenue in Brooklyn—

LEVINE: Right.

SHERR: That was my aunt. I've never seen the sister and—I knew his father. I knew my grandfather. I knew my father's father in Lithuania. But I never liked my father's father in Lithuania.

LEVINE: How come?

SHERR: Because I asked him to make me boots and he never made me boots. [chuckles] But my other—my mother's father—we lived—you—we were close and the town was so little I could have spit and go to my other grandfather's house. Don't forget. Eighteen hundred—it was nothing at

all. The—the village here is much bigger than the little village that we went to. And my other grandfather used to—was a tailor. And he made me all my clothes. But we lived with them. In other words, we lived in a little room above a bakery. But everything we did, ate and everything—we went only there to sleep. But we—everything I did was with my mother's parents. He—you see, so everything he—they were my favorite. And when my grandfather died, as I explained to you, we had to bury him. When I came to this country and I worked and I was making, what, \$10 a week or something, or \$5 a week in those years of—in 1934, '35, I used to make it my business to send \$1 to my grandmother—

LEVINE: Ah—

SHERR: —every week. But that was \$10 there, you see? So [unclear] at that time. I don't think her own children ever sent [chuckles]—but this was the—I had such an affection for them. But I did—when we got off the taxicab I was amazed. I've never seen so many cars in my life. We only had two cars in the village and it was a 1905—19—no, I'm sorry, a 1920 Ford with the open Ford that they used in there; it's my first ride in there. Oh, I felt like a king and—and see a cab! With all this, I can [unclear]. The only one I rode was a 1920 Ford with—just that had the top on it. It had no—the doors were like you see in pictures of it. And my father took me to his sister that was my aunt. We walked in and her husband was a tailor too. But they lived in back of the store. You see, it was one of those that they had the apartment in the store. They didn't even have a bathroom. He was—this man, I'm telling you, had his first dollar. And I remember the bank was next to him. Manufacturer's Trust was next to him and he used to use the bathroom. [laughs] I'm telling, you had [unclear] say—what was it? I never used to know his first name. I used to call him—I never knew her first name neither. Their name was Kahn [PH] so I used to call her Tante [PH] Kahn and then Uncle Kahn. I never knew his first name, just [chuckles] [unclear]. Peculiar guy. And I know many years before he died, of course, I—I was in high school. I used to come there to visit and I used to say, "Uncle Kahn, I'll tell you what. I've got a check. Cash my check and when you die, I'll—you give me your money. I'll give you a check. Take the check with you." [laughs] So I always had fun with them, you know. They always thought I was crazy anyhow, so—

LEVINE: What about other first impressions?

SHERR: The first impression to school, that they—they—I went into and then we moved to Saratoga Avenue, 8—865—685—I—685 Saratoga Avenue. Saratoga and Blake and that was the markets too. And the first movie I went to see was at the Lowe East Pitkin [PH] on Pitkin Avenue. And I saw "Billy the Kid" and for me, Billy the Kid, a cowboy! Oh, my goodness! You know, and I didn't stay—you know, after—I don't remember what we paid,

but I'll tell you. I stood there three—three times to see the picture just to get my money's worth out. [chuckles] I stood there three times to see the picture, "Billy the Kid."

LEVINE: Do you remember what you thought of—of the whole thing with the cowboys—

SHERR: Oh, of course, the cowboys were terrific. I mean, I've never seen anything. And then when I walked out of the movies, naturally I was—and I saw the—Blake Avenue. It had the pushcarts in there, you see. We didn't have any pushcarts, you know. Well, we had similar to with the horse and wagons, you know, but I've never—I've seen the horses, you know. In '30s we had horse and wagons but the buildings—I've never seen such tall buildings in my life. And I remember going to school and they—my father took me to school. My mother didn't speak English but she would—she also went in high school because she wanted to learn English. And I—they put me and my brother into 1A and it was in PS156 on Sutter Avenue. And it—and I remember coming in there and I came home. And I says, "Mama, [unclear] in English [speaking foreign language]—cock-a-doodle-do. Cock-a-doodle"—she said, "That'll do." But I thought she said cock-a-doodle-do. So [unclear]. So only thing she—we knew is, "That's all right. That's all right. Cock-a-doodle-do." [laughs] So I—she was saying, "That'll do," but, you know, I figured—I says, "She's crazy. Cock-a-doodle-do." [laughs] Or, "That's all right." You know. So we had all that time. But I was pretty quick. I started to play with the kids and I started to pick up English. And I lost all my Jewish inclination and the Jewish language. I spoke to my mother in Yiddish in the house. But we spoke Yiddish and English. In other words, it was mixed, a few words here, till she understood. Because I remember to this day that my mother never saw lettuce in her life, and she thought it was cabbage. Capusta [PH] is cabbage. And she made a cabbage soup and the damn wasn't worth a dime. [chuckles] And she says, "What a funny country this is. The cabbage has no taste," you know. [unclear]. I also brought my wooden shoes. I still have my wooden shoes with me. And my grandmother sent me some woolen socks because she knew in America they don't carry wool. And my mother went to night school and she was so proud of going to night school. But then I caught on right away and they kept me into 1A. And I kept into 1A and then I started to skip—in those years, they skipped classes. I went from 1A to 3A to 4B, or I did very fast. And my brother stood behind. He wasn't that—but I know I graduated James Madison High. I was [clears throat] 19 years old. Now, just as good as making—don't forget, I—and I—and I graduated in 1938, you know, I think in James Madison High and I went into Brooklyn College. So at 19 I did pretty good in that—you know, what—in other words, I came here, was 11, 12 years old. So in the seven years I went through public school and high school. So it was great and I picked up

the—I picked up the language very, very fast without an accent. Nobody knew that I came in there.

LEVINE: Would—did you want to lose your accent?

SHERR: Yes. Yes, I did want to.

LEVINE: How did you feel about—how did you and your mother feel about—and your father—about becoming Americanized and—

SHERR: Oh—

LEVINE: —holding onto some old ways?

SHERR: Well, no. My mother wasn't—she became a—she did away with religion. The only thing were—we were religious because of her folks, or the town was religious. But when she came in here she was secular. She—she started to go into left movement—left-wing movement. She was already very much interested in the movies. She was American dress, American history. And at that time my father was offered a job to go back to Russia as a furrier [unclear]. And it was during the Depression years. And she—“Oh, no, Moshe [PH], we're staying in America with—wouldn't want to go to Russia.” And we had it during the Depression time. And it was hard. It was—in fact, I'll tell you. It was the closing of the U.S. Bank and my father had a few dollars in that bank at Saratoga and Pitkin. And we got a check back of five cents. I had that check and somebody stole the damn thing. [chuckles] And I had it out there. And Depression time, and it was hard to make a living. And like everybody else, we went on welfare. My mother was so—she'd never had welfare in Europe and it was so degrading to have that man come up and ask you the questions. And she—she felt like two cents. She felt [unclear]—she didn't want to. And she used to push Moshe. “Geh arbeit. Moshe, geh arbeit.” [PH] And when the WPA came in, she—he went as a painter to, you know—because there was nothing doing in the fur market. The fur—who was buying fur? There was nobody to buy. And he went to do—and worked for the WPA so he can make—at that time they were paying 50 cents an hour. And—

LEVINE: And what was the pay—

SHERR: [unclear] the schools and—anything at all. Just cleaning the streets, cleaning the snow. And I remember going and—on welfare. It wasn't called welfare; it was called relief at that time. And we went on relief and then I used to go to Canarsie [PH] to walk from, let me see, Newport Street in Brooklyn to Canarsie. Now, it's Rockaway Avenue. And I used to go there and buy milk and bread for three cents. And that was the thing. And I—we had sneakers and it was cold [unclear] sneakers out

there. And the American school, I—the teachers—I had—did not have one that—and they—they were Jewish teachers. I didn't have one that epitomized Americanism to me. I had one that insulted me. They didn't know how to talk to immi—immigrant kids. At that time, we didn't have pajamas. We had pajamas in Europe. Believe it or not, I had pajamas in Europe but over here I didn't. It was—well, we were on relief. We—we were glad to get a piece of bread for the three cents. And she came to me at one time and she says, "Ooh, you smell. Don't you take a bath? What? Do you sleep in your clothes?" Which we did. But instead of saying so—that shows you, from 1930 to now—that's what? Sixty—sixty-seven years that thing stood. So it shows you how you've got to be extremely careful how you talk to a child, because there's certain things that your brain locks up and suddenly it comes out. Now, I will—I'll be damned. I—I can't remember where I parked the car sometime. But you tell me who lived on that street in 1930 in this little shtetl, I'll tell you who lived on that street and I'll tell you all about it. By the way, we only had one prostitute in the shtetl too so that's where I learned my sex. I watched through the window. [laughs] So everything is in there. So we had it out there. Her name was Etka. So—each one had the—each one had a—a—and by the way, I'm for—I was friendly with her—with her kid. She had two sons and one daughter. And there were—one wrote me a letter. He lives in Austria and he—he's not only shoe—but he builds shoes, asked me if I can vouch for him to come to the United States. That was about—when I lived in Inverary [PH]—oh, that was about 18 years ago. But I didn't want to be bothered because I—you know, everyone was telling you, well, you had the troubles. I just retired and everything else. I didn't want to. One was killed in the Red Army and one married a—out of her faith, a Christian fellow. And the families date back. As I say, we had—the richest family in—in—in our shtetl was the name Rest—R-E-S-T. And I went to school with this David Rest. After the war, David Rest—he was a—a major in the Red Army because of his education. They had a very good education. They already were the town. They had a restaurant. They had the only stone house in there. They dealt in lumber so they were pretty well to do. And they were in the Inteligencia. The—his mother was a very pretty woman, beautiful woman. Father was a—also a handsome man. His father was killed also in the Red Army. He became the—David became—we went to cheder together. David became a major in the Red Army. After the war, they took one of the—one of his nieces that some Christian lady was holding onto—they gave it to them to hold her that Germans shouldn't kill. And he took her back, but in order to smuggle her out of Lithuania he put her into sacks of potatoes. And he left too. He took—he went into—the border was only maybe 10, 20 miles away. So she was able to cross the Lithuanian border and go into Germany. From Germany, he went to Israel. But he was not very nice. He wasn't very good—they always thought of money. The whole thing was—materialism to them the biggest thing, the Rest family, in that. They'll probably sue me because of

saying that. [chuckles] And David went to Israel. David went to Israel. He—because he was with the Red Army, they sent him to Prague, Czechoslovakia to buy guns—

LEVINE: Oh.

SHERR: —for Israel. When he was in Prague, he approached a KGB saying that he will be a spy for them. Now, that's the first Jewish Israeli spy that worked for—he didn't do it because he was a communist or anything else. Not because of thing—it reminds me very much of Pollag's [PH] situation. He did it for the money. The money, that was their most important. Now, when you—when you finished working for the Russians, they have no use for you. They'll squeal on you because they don't have to do it. They'll just drop a line to somebody, "You know this guy, David Rest, the major? Well, he does all the secret"—he told them what Israel was buying. Don't forget, Czechoslovakia was an independent country at that time too. So when he was going to [unclear] to buy all the arms, he told the KGB what kind of guns they were buying and everything else. Now, he was caught by Israel. Israel gave him 20 years. I saw him when I made in '65—I went to Israel and he came to visit me at the—one of the hotels in Israel in Tel Aviv at the Hilton. And as he came in, I was speaking to this man that was head of ORT. He's not here anymore; he died. He was head of ORT in Lithuania and he was head of ORT—O-R-T, the Jewish organization in Lithuania—in Israel. So we were standing at the bar. As soon as David walks in he says, "[speaking foreign language]." You'll have to excuse me. I hate this man. If he can sell out Israel through the Russians, he's no good. I don't want him, and as a Jew yet. He was the first Jewish spy, David Rest. So he just passed away recently too. So we've got [unclear]. We've got brilliant people. We've got people that work in Hollywood that have television programs. And the man that produces your—"NYPD"—

LEVINE: Oh. [tape off/on]

SHERR: Steven Bochco. Well, his mother and I came together. We lived—we were right next door. I diapered Steve when he was a kid in the Bronx. So I just wanted to show you that—

LEVINE: Yeah.

SHERR: Now, of course, they don't know. What I still see is when I go to L.A. or we write there or I call her up, and when I went to L.A., when I went to China—I just got back from China—I stopped in L.A., you know, and Frisco. We stopped in L.A. just before we went on to Beijing. And his mother his made it my—his business that we should come to visit her. Well, she's pretty well to do. She lives on Rodeo Drive. She's got over a

million-dollar condo. Well, why shouldn't she? Steven has his own plane. And after—and then when we talk we talk in Yiddish.

LEVINE: Hmm.

SHERR: And we talk about the old shtetlach.

LEVINE: Oh.

SHERR: And we talk about that. She comes from that Rest family too.

LEVINE: Oh.

SHERR: But they're all very, very pretty women. And this will—

LEVINE: Tell me about the prostitute in the—in the shtetl.

SHERR: It [unclear]—

LEVINE: What was the attitude with the—

SHERR: We knew it was a—what—it was a—she worked for herself. She didn't have anybody else. [chuckles] But I think the one that she always had to do with the business she had to do with the lowlifes. Here, we call them the truck drivers. Over there, we called them the formann [PH]. A formann—a for is a wagon. A man is the man that drives the wagon. So everyone that—that drove the—the lowlifes, you know, the real no-goodnik. You know, the ones that were—oh, they were—they were—well, they were—there was another name but I would say that the real lowlife—the real stuff. Also, the peasant. And she lived on the ground floor, you see? And she had the windows. [chuckles] And [chuckles] it was small and houses were right next to each other. And they're tiny, like you see in the movies or like you see—you know, [unclear]. I'm sorry I didn't take the pictures but I have the pictures of the whole shtetl. I get them now too where they show—it shows you that half of the houses were leaning into the right. You know, you came in. And we—and everybody says to me, "Tefke [PH], Tefke." That's my name, Tevie [PH]. "Tefke, kumme hier. Come over here. [speaking foreign language]. Look through the window. You see a whole show." And that—and I stood there—

LEVINE: Was she looked down upon or not?

SHERR: No, we—not looked upon. They tolerated her. She was not looked upon—

LEVINE: How about when you came to Brooklyn when you were right in—in the—in the area in Brooklyn when you came to this country? Did—were there prostitutes in that whole area then?

SHERR: I—no, not that I—I—it didn't—it didn't faze me. The only thing that I knew about her is because the shtetl was so small.

LEVINE: Right.

SHERR: Don't you see? And everyone had to say at the publika [PH], the [unclear], she was a—well, I'd know about in my admiration, you know. I think Jackie Gleason has a—no Jackie Mason has a bit in his repertoire. And he walks over to this girl and he says, "You know, you look like a street walker." And she gets so flattered. "Really? [unclear]? Oh, so nice. I look like a street walker." Or "You look like a prostitute?" "Oh, yeah. You look like a good call girl." "Oh, how nice." You know what I mean? So [chuckles] she must have been on the same par, you know. "Oh, yeah." She wasn't that well—but—but she had a good heart because she gave me a present—or she gave me a bar of soap for—the night before I left. So it was very inter—nobody else did. So she did have a good heart. My mother got along—everybody got along with her.

LEVINE: What happened the night that you left? Do you remember? Did people get together or—

SHERR: We had—no, we had a—a party that—yes, my grandmother made a party. Of course, we were all crying because we knew when we said, "Oh, we'll see you. We'll see you." We knew. And the first thing we took was our parem [PH]. Do you know what a parem is? It's the down quilt.

LEVINE: Right.

SHERR: After all, they don't have it in America. And my wooden shoes, I had to take klumpasses [PH]. Wooden shoes. And you have to take a—and the food is not kosher so she made a pillowcase of the biscuits, you see. They were biscuit—it's like, oh, God. It had no taste, the damn thing. Even matzah has a better taste. And we had that to eat. But, of course, we ate—I sneaked in there too—sneaked in some bacon. I was always ready to try—I'm not my mother, you know. Eggs, we ate most of the time. And there was a big party before we left and the crying that went on. And we took a horse and wagon. It was a covered horse and wagon and we drove to Memel. And Memel—it took us about—well, Memel is about—with the horse and wagon it took us about two hours, because the horse only—you know what I mean. After all, it didn't go that far. They had one car but he wanted too much money to take us by car. As I said, there were two cars in there, two Fords, a 19—1919, 1920 Fords. That's

with that canvas top, no windows. Do you know what I mean? But I don't—and [unclear] I don't think he was able to take us because we had too much. We—with the perina [PH] and then we had pillows. And everything was wrapped—and the suitcases. But everything was wrapped up in rope. You see what I mean? And—because when we got on the ship, everything went down to hold, you see, so we—and we took it when we came off the ship. And it was—that's the first thing you did. After all, you're coming to America. Nobody—you know, it's a different country.

LEVINE: Do you know what you expected before you ever got here, what you thought?

SHERR: I did. I did.

LEVINE: Well, how did you feel? How did you feel about coming? You, personally?

SHERR: Oh, I was—I was [unclear]—not—not—my brother was—well, he—even in here it was—if it comes my way, I'll take it. If it don't come, don't push me; I'll fall. You know what I mean? And my mother was also—well, she—her husband was here. You know what I mean? And that's why she was longing to see him, because they were very much in love. And she missed him terribly. And I was looking for discoveries. I was looking for new lands. I was looking for—what's over the hill. Even now, what's—hey, what's over there? I'm very curious. I want to see and want to look. [unclear] show you a picture. I wanted to live like a black man. And I went—that was—that was about 20 years ago.

LEVINE: Oh,

SHERR: I went for injections. I became black.

LEVINE: Really?

SHERR: Yes, I have pictures of me and everybody looks at me and they say, "What? Are you"—my wife says to me, "What? Are you crazy?" I said, "No, I want to live. I want to see what they go through."

LEVINE: So what did you do?

SHERR: I went to the islands of Jamaica. And then when my wife came to me, they—"Hey, mon—hey, mon. Hey brother. Shee—where'd you get the white woman?" [laughs] But it was—

LEVINE: So what was it like?

SHERR: I was—it was—it was like I expected, you know. I wanted to see how they feel and it was the same thing as we felt in Europe. The ostracization, the put-downs, the—the—you know, the, “I’m better than—than you,” or something like that. And the—it was like the black—the only thing they had to look forward is their religion and what’s going to be in the—and the coming world. And the same thing out there. Everyone talked not what we’re living in today but “[speaking in foreign language].”

LEVINE: [unclear].

SHERR: No, Messiah will come with his white horse and everything will be different. You see? So I told my wife. I says, “Well, they don’t believe. I’m waiting to—to—for a Messiah to come in a white Cadillac so everything will be different.” [laughs]

LEVINE: So how was—how was being black—

SHERR: I did—I related—

LEVINE: —different from the Jewish? Was there any difference?

SHERR: It was none. To me, it was the same.

LEVINE: The same.

SHERR: To me, it was the same.

LEVINE: Interesting.

SHERR: And it was the same and I’ve got pictures and everybody that comes in, they say, “Gee, what it is.” I says, “I love Ja—I loved the Caribbean because I was very much interested in the politics too.” And I says, “I lived—I lived a life of everything.” That’s where they say—even my granddaughter says to me today, “Pop, you promised you’re going to make a tape with me. You show me. You know, every time we went out there.” And I did. And when—I’ll tell you. When my daughter was little I says, “I’m going to take you to show you how people live.” I took her to a rabbi’s house and I took her to a prostitute and I showed, “This is—she sells her body for money. There’s no difference between this guy.” I says, “He’s just on the people’s back.” I—I’m not religious. I don’t particularly—I hate this religious stuff. I says, “He’s a parasite, the same as [unclear]. But at least she kisses you; he doesn’t.” [chuckles] So she—and every time she went she got something for the Christmas tree. And she said, “The education I got from you—even the kids now”—and I says, “No.” That’s why I can’t stand anybody that has any attitude that, “I am better than you,” or “You”—and money does not make you smart. In fact—it—

far from it. I've met people who are educated idiots. And that's what they are. All they know is what they've read in a book but they have no way of conversing to people. They can't communicate. They can't show their—what it is on people. And in—in—where I live too, I mean, it's the way you say it. It's not how you—you know, it's not what you—it's the way you say it. And this is what caught me. And—and people come in. I used to give Yiddish lessons in—where I live in Windmore [PH]. And I used to give classes in Yiddish in there till I got away. I says, "Well, some of these that came from Europe, especially the new ones from the Holocaust, it's true they went through hell. But the attitude—maybe this is how they survived, by being strong, by being—say, 'The hell with you and hooray for me.'" You see, each one is out for himself. And this is—maybe this is a—so I can't condemn them because I haven't walked in their shoes. If I would walk in their shoes, maybe I would know. But what I saw I don't like. But that's—that's my opinion. But to—condemnation of it, I can't—I'll count to 10 and I'll say, "Hey, for the grace of God, I could have been killed over there too." So I care to put myself in their shoe. I can't condemn them or condone or say anything else. This is how they lived. They lived through that life. They came out and this is how it is, that either by trickery or by using ways of getting away without going to the ovens. That's how they did it so maybe they bring it there. There—maybe this is how it is. If you live that way for awhile, it stays with you, you know. Even if you don't, then the process of osmosis goes right through it and, you know, you keep it that way. But all—

LEVINE: What do you feel proudest of? You've done so many interesting things. What makes you feel very satisfied that you've done?

SHERR: Actually, nothing. [laughs] You're never satisfied. I have never—I always look for different fields. I—I'm a romanticist but I look forward in the back—in other words, my wife says to me, "Don't look in the back. Don't look in the past." But I'm a historian. I like to look in the past because history does repeat itself. And you see, and—and I like to look and I like to talk to people. I don't care who they are. I can't talk to anyone that brings how much money he has or he shows me the—I am not interested in that. You can't take it with you. I'm interested in what you got in your head. Show me what you have. I'm interested in a conversation. It's hard for me to read now. My eyes hurt me. [unclear]. I want to listen to you. Tell me what you know and tell me what—what you think. And I may not agree with you. I probably won't agree with you but I'm not going to shut you up. And I'm going to let you talk. And maybe the more you talk, the more hole you'll dig in. And then I can fight you [chuckles] in the back. So you're bound to make a mistake if you keep talking a hell of a lot. [laughs]

LEVINE: How about attitudes? You—you—you say that you—you're not interested in religion, per se.

SHERR: No.

LEVINE: H—h—what's the Jewishness that you have?

SHERR: The Jewishness is just a secular Jew. It's just like it's part of a civilization. It's part of a history. And you can not shake that off. I don't care what you are. You're still born a Jew and you're going to remain a Jew because our attitude is different already than—than [unclear] of the Christian faith. We were born that way.

LEVINE: Well, what do you think the difference is?

SHERR: In the—different in the way we think, the way we act and maybe the way we talk or communicate, because we know how it feels to be kicked in the behind or being—the door shut in the face. It may be not now but I remember when I came, I—we couldn't get an apartment because we were Jewish in—in Brooklyn even or in Connecticut.

LEVINE: Really? You experienced this?

SHERR: Yes, yes. In Norwalk, Connecticut. "We don't rent to Jews." You see? So then you know, no matter how it is. No matter if you wear a cross, you're still a Jew inside. That don't mean a damn thing. This is just cosmetic crap. That's all there is, that you're doing it just for—to get into—this opens the door. Once the door is opened I don't have to put my foot in it. I don't have to push the door. You're opening the door. Could be the—this stupid signal or the—or this—this stupid way of talking or even the dress or something that—that catches your eye. You know, they—they say it's—it's not—it's not the steak that gets you; it's the sizzle. When you smell it, then you walk in. No matter how many pictures of steaks there is, you—it may be [unclear] but when you smell that lousy steak, that's when you come in. This is what I want you—when I wear this, when I come in, I'm your friend. Now, I'm going to be your friend and then you're going to tell me. I say get in—but I'm only doing it for the research value. I want to tell you why you hate the Jew, how it is you're talking to a—you're talking to a Spanish [unclear]. You're talking to an Italian. Hey, come on. Open up, [unclear]. Let me know what is the difference. I am not here to prosthesisize. I can't make you over. You were born this way. You're anti-Semitic. You're going to be this way. You're a hypocrite; you're going to be this way. You're a racist; you're going to be this way. I'm not going to change you. I don't want to change you. I'm not a teacher to change you, like people say, "Why don't you tell

him this and”—no, well, my telling him off don't mean nothing. Why should I tell him off? Yes, I went on State Route 7—

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B]

LEVINE: [unclear]—

SHERR: Yes, I also—

LEVINE: Perhaps fundamental to [unclear].

SHERR: I also, when they call—now, I'm going to tell you, my little place is right across the street from the Lebarbecher [PH] Shul. You know the Lebarbecher, that—that's highly orthodox, [unclear] centers. All that. Now, he'll come along, the rabbi. Rabbi Yoshi'll come along. "Tevi, I need you. We need a minion. You're the only one that can read the Torah." I get up and read the Torah. But one thing has nothing to do in—you know what I mean? It's the old story out there, "Don't pee on my shoulder and tell me it's raining." [chuckles] You see? Hey, [unclear]. I'll play al—I'll go with you but the respect that I give you, yes. This is what—I'm not believing it. But if you have—if you can call me at—if I didn't want to go, make a fool, then I don't go. But if I go, then I'm in your house. I respect you in all the ways. You see, it's not my job to—to—to insult you or anything else. If I wanted to, I wouldn't have gone. But if I see, and he says to me, "Teddy, we're—we're short. We need a minion." You need 12. Fine. So I'll come in and he'll say, "Teddy, please." And he'll give me an aliya [PH]. I come up there and I can read the Torah. I read it. I read Hebrew. I—I read the—the Homas [PH]. I read the National [PH]. I got to know religion from—if you were you a different type, a Buddhist or anything, fine. Before I went to Beijing I read up on China, everything from their religion and everything. Yes, they liked me in China; I was able to get along because I wouldn't say—I'd been to the—see the ugly American that comes in sometime. "Oh, this is crap. This is what you have?" Who the hell are you? When I went to South Africa I didn't like what they went on. Mandela was in Robbins Island. I was followed by the—by the police. I knew what it is. I can't—they invited me—a black family invited me into the house. They had a refrigerator from 19—something with the motor on top. "Hey, that's nice. Where'd you get that?" "Fine." "What are you doing? You sit down and eat?" Yes, I'll eat with them. Only one time I went outside and I puked after I ate. The guy told me I ate possum; I thought I'd die. [laughs]

LEVINE: How—

SHERR: Oh, God! It sounded—it tasted like chicken.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SHERR: I'll tell you. But he says to me, "Hey—hey, brother." I says, "Yeah, what you got?" "Here, man, it's good. Eat possum." I said, "[several words unclear]. Let me go outside a little bit. Let me get some fresh air. [unclear]. [laughs]"

LEVINE: How about attitudes? Attitudes that either came from your mother or your father that they tried to instill in you that [unclear]?

SHERR: No, don't forget. They both died very young. My mother died when she was 38 years old. She was only in the 30s in the country. So we were left—I was left with my brother and my father. And then we lived in Brooklyn, Aushim [PH] Parkway and then I went to Madison. So actually, my father was working all the time. But my father was kind of a woman's man too. He was hardly home because he was a young man. He was a good-looking guy. So then he remarried. And, you know—and I stood—just before I went into the service I stood with my stepmother in there. But they were nice. They treated us—I didn't have much of the—my mother's attitude. She was just glowing out. She was just shedding her shtetl beliefs and she wanted to become Americanized. And she wanted so much—she was interested. Of course, there was no television at that time [unclear]. But she was interested in the movies. She was interested in—in—in books and, you know, she read—she tried to read English. It was hard. But in Yiddish, you know, she was—in the theater she went to see a lot of Yiddish shows. So she was more. She was a secular. She was later on in the left-wing movement, not because that she—

LEVINE: Tell us what that was like.

SHERR: Yeah, the left-wing movement out there, I'll tell you—

LEVINE: What was her—what was her involvement and—

SHERR: She was very little involved. I was mostly—I was training to become bar mitzvah. And we were on welfare relief and at that time we didn't have the money. And I went into—my mother couldn't send me, you know. It was nothing. And I discovered a beautiful library in Stone Avenue in Brookstone and Blake and [unclear]. And that was my first time I took out the book called "Seven Pillars of Wisdom." And it's actually "Lawrence of Arabia." And I became so fascinated with the Arab and the Arab culture. I was really towards the Arab. I was leaning towards the Arab and their—not so much in their religion because they're highly religious, you know, in Islam. And I did—to me, it didn't matter much. But in their way of thinking

and the way of—they wanted to their own land and the way they were colonized by Britain, which was a bunch of bastards all the time. And I was very much iter—and I read—and by the way, he was highly anti-Semitic too, Lawrence of Arabia. He was. And so was the writer—what—I met him too. Oh, he killed himself. Ah, the American writer. [unclear]—

LEVINE: You don't mean—

SHERR: Star—not—ah—

LEVINE: The one who was in Key West?

SHERR: Yes.

LEVINE: I can't think of his name either. [chuckles]

SHERR: Ernest Hemingway. Ernesta Hemi—Ernesta Hemingway.

LEVINE: Right.

SHERR: I was—I was going to go to Spain to fight in Spain. I was going to join the Lincoln Brigade. And that's another story. And they asked me not to and then to work for their Secret Service to find out—so I did that. That's why I speak Spanish, because I was learning Spanish so good. And all my friends went there and books—and when you have a book written on Spain by Weden [PH], Peter Weden. He just wrote a book about—named it a Jewish name—a Jewish woman, Rosetta or something [unclear]. She worked for the Gestapo. They had quite a lot of Jews working for the Gestapo. They let 1,500 Jews in the—in the German Army that Hitler allowed in the officer corps because he needed their brain. So I show you. Jews did work for the Gestapo because they squealed on other Jews. They—they took the prettiest Jewish women to work for the Gestapo so they can weed out—they can find out the Jews that were living in the streets or hiding or something like that and offer them sex or something so they can do—but that's how they stood alive. So I guess that's what I was saying, that, yeah, we can't know until you walk in their—so—and their—and when I came—

LEVINE: [unclear] been brought up on trial also, these Jews that worked for the Gestapo?

SHERR: No. Only one man—lives in Brooklyn. His name is Tannebaum [PH] and he was a couple in—in Auschwitz but he beat the Jews merciless. He beat them so that the blood came from their skin. He wanted to show the Nazis how he hated the Jews. P.S. He went to the United States. Just

about 20 years ago he was walking on Bedford Avenue and this woman that survived Auschwitz recognized him—

LEVINE: Wow.

SHERR: —and she pointed it out. They wanted to extradite him. His name is Tannen—I can give you his name because I got all files. I got files bigger than this, up to [laughs] on everything.

LEVINE: Tell me why you do all this.

SHERR: All that—because I'm going to tell you the left-wing—and I went to cheder. I wanted to go to cheder. I wanted to be bar mitzvah. Not me. I didn't care, but my mother. Not my father, but my mother felt that being a Jew [unclear]. Fine. I went to—I went to the man and I says to the rabbi in Brooklyn, "I haven't got the money." There's 50 cents to teach you how to go—how to read, you know, the Torah and then the shul. We had no money. And he says, "If you haven't got the money, I can't take you." I says, "Fine." So down the street there was a communist club. And I went in there; I was hungry. And then there—if you went to the communist club they would teach you—they were reading Lenin, stories about Lenin. And I got a sandwich, cheese sandwich. Hey, that was great doing that. Then they start to talk to me and teach me. Of course, later on after I got through, I found it was lot of crap. I mean, when they talk. But they took me in. It's just like you would take these kids today, as they do, in all these sects. They—you know, they—he is—he was just at the—at that place and he was just in there. And he—he was—he was ready for the picking of it so they can propagandize you. And this is what happened. And since that time in the early—naturally, didn't forget—the left-wing movement in the early '30s and the very early '40s was—that's before the war—was the only salvation we—we knew that the Jew could—can get ahead. [coughs] We didn't know that Stalin was killing the Jews on the side. They would never tell you that. But we knew that Russia had Jewish generals. Russia had the—they sent you as a Jew. They didn't discriminate you into colleges. But later on, we find there was a lot of crap because they did that. But it was our way out because the Democratic Party wasn't for us. The Republican Party wasn't for us. So it was either the Socialists—but they weren't strong. The strongest party was the Communist Party. It had 150,000 members. But [coughs] that's what I was telling you. When you go there, take out my tape because I interviewed Herbert Benjamin. And Herbert Benjamin was a confidante of FDR. So I got stuff in the tape that you have never—and I didn't want it to go—I'm against censorship. I hate censorship. But yet, I too held back saying, well, maybe this is not the right time. But it's still censorship if the man told me and I wanted to put it out. You see? So we're—all have a bit of hypocrisy in us.

LEVINE: So how did that catch on? You were, like, college age—

SHERR: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: —at the time when you—

SHERR: At college age and then—

LEVINE: Then there were a lot of communist—

SHERR: Yes, we went—I went to join the Young Communist League. I went to march for—at that time, you know, for—against racism. The biggest thing was to fight against fascism because the war in Spain was just started off in 1937. And all my friends went to Spain. And I wanted to go to Spain and I was ready to go to Spain. And the head of the Furrier's Union, Ben Gold, [coughs] and Irving Potash [PH]—the Furrier's Union was a communist union—said, “Teddy, you're too valuable to go there. But, however, we'll teach you—if you want to go to Spain we'll give you this man's name and everything else. You are to investigate [unclear] but not openly.” So if you said, “Janet—Teddy, I want to go to Spain.” I said, “Okay, Janet. What do you want to”—“Oh, I want to be a nurse.” “Fine.” When you live—and everything else—my job was to snoop around, find out all about you, that you're not a spy to be sent in and to speak to your friends, not to—“Hey, do you know Janet?” “Oh!” You know, not that way but to mingle in and to see—watch you and see and then—and see what you read, what you don't read. And that's how I stood. So when they came after the war, after I was in the army—

LEVINE: Now, you didn't go to Spain?

SHERR: No, I didn't go. I was in—in their offices here. [coughs] That's where I got to know Ernest Hemingway. [laughs] He was anti-Semitic too. He wasn't that great. He was going with Gertrude Stein.

LEVINE: Right. But he liked her, right?

SHERR: Well, he liked—

LEVINE: He learned from her.

SHERR: He liked—no, he didn't—he liked her. Well, [chuckles] he liked any woman. My friend was a very good friend of his and that's—and he wrote—Johnny—isn't that funny? When you talk, you forget the names. But anyway, he stood at the Florida hotel in Madrid and—Johnny Teisha [PH] wrote some books and he dedicated it to me. And there are quite a

few in there. He got quite a few authors that said, “Teddy, you’re all right. When you are you going to write your book?” I says—I—I don’t know. I started but there’s so much footnotes. I go crazy. I get—and that’s—I lived the life. And they say, “You get into places that—can’t.” You ca—I went into Harlem; I used to live in Harlem. Nobody I bothered in Harlem. I worked—I was a numbers man in Harlem; I made my money. And I bought a brand new Mercedes. So you can imagine, before I came down in—and nobody ever bothered me because I was one of the brothers. Do you see? But I lived and people say, “Harlem?” Nobody ever bothered me. I was on 123rd Street in a [unclear] flight. [laughs] That’s how we came back, went to the [unclear]. I did everything out there because I wanted life. I says, “Hey, you know, I want to live the fullest. I want to see what other lives are like.” And just to sit around, you know, even now—that’s why my wife call me crazy. She said that every one that came from our village from Plugyan [PH] is crazy. But it’s not hereditary; it’s the water we drank from the cemetery. [laughs]

LEVINE: From the cemetery. Where do you think that comes from? This idea of living [unclear]?

SHERR: All the time. It may be me. I’ll tell you. I have an uncle of mine in Cape Town and he was—he’s a bit of a boor. He was also a left-winger till they—till they got after him because of that time, you know, when they put Mendela into prison and everything. He was in that—in that whole movement. And he’s an artist; he’s a good artist. But of course, now he’s 86. He don’t—now, he climbs—he climbs Table Mountain. When I came there, he made me climb Table Mountain. I thought I’d die. I’m—my behind hurt me so from walking me so from walking, I thought I’d die. And then my other—they’re not like me. They’re not.

LEVINE: They’re not.

SHERR: Not. None of them. It was different.

LEVINE: [sentence unclear].

SHERR: That’s what it is. It—I don’t—I don’t know. My daughter’s like me. Oh! She’s—she’s—any [unclear]. She’s great. Evann [PH] is great. And she’s got one name, Evann. We just gave her a name, Evann. That’s her mother and my mother. My—my wife’s mother’s is Eva. My mother’s name was Ann. So we gave her the name, Evann, just one name. And that’s what it is. And she’s—she’s doing—she had—she’s very well known in Atlanta. And this is how it is. And my granddaughter told her. She’s a dentist in Atlanta and my grandson in computer and they said, “Pop, why [unclear] we want?” And every time they come they—“Oh, the pictures you have. You have so much pictures. So”—and my wife says,

“See all these things you have in the file cab—I’m going to throw them out. When you die, I’m throwing everything out. I’m going to burn it and throw it. I can’t read half of the stuff that you’ve got.” [chuckles] So I got letters and everything, but I ain’t cured. And it’s time involved. I haven’t got the time. And the few things I do in business is because I don’t want to come to anyone to help because I don’t need partners. I don’t like partner. And the money I make I put aside and I buy books. I donated—I just donated some books to the Jewish Museum in Vilnius. And I sent them some books because it’s hard; they asked me to send them books. And I don’t ask anyone for favors. Whatever I do is I do. I try my best. And I get into New York at least twice a year. But this time that I do get into New York, I’m going to get into a deal where, you know, when you came off there we had the landsleit [PH], like you said. We do have a landsleit. We have—everyone that came off the boat were looking for family—familia. You know, the Italians [unclear] familia. Everybody wants the family. The roots; we were looking for roots. And everyone would grasp so we formed society, the Landsleit Society. And the idea was for burial mostly, not for anything but for burial. So we were—had the burial ground that everybody came from Plunge belonged, that all came from Kovno and Vilna. And we have—we have two cemeteries on Mount Zion and—and Springfield Gardens. We have that. But these people that came came in—from 1894 and there’s—and it was from—the First World War was when—right after the war the immigration started to come until they—until these anti-Semites and the congress made it so, you know, with quota from 1926. But before, they were all coming in. It was easier to get in. There was nothing—go to Canada, cross over. [unclear]. There was no immigration quantity, unless you were crippled completely and they kept you out. But they formed the societies. Now, after so many years, there’s no more. So I asked the people. I asked them from Plungyan. She’s a teacher. She—she has all the books. I says, “I want to ask you something. Do you know—that was your great grandfather that started. Do you know the shtetl Plugyan?” “No.” “You’re a teacher? Or you’re an ex-teacher. You live in Century Village? Didn’t it ever faze you?” “No.” I says, “Can I see the books?” “No.” I says, “I’ll tell you why. There was money left over. There’s, you know, maybe 10,000, 15,000 of all the dues that they don’t want nobody to know. And when I approached the “Jewish Daily Forward”—so I get the “Forward” every week. I get it in English and then Yiddish. I read Yiddish fluently. And I asked him. He says, “Teddy, it’s done in every society. These new people took it over.” I says, “You know, this is what I’m going to do. I’m going to start looking and I’m going to do some research and write some articles how they took away the money instead of sending it to the poor Jews that came out of the concentration camp. They bought an apartment here, bought—so it’s maybe 10,000, 5,000. But after all, it was—but nobody belongs to the societies anymore. They’re being run down. The—the monuments being toppled over, everything—but you need money to—to do it. You see?”

LEVINE: Now, how did the Society operate? Like, people would give in a certain amount every week?

SHERR: Yes, there would be dues, every week dues. And everyone paid the dues. Let's say, for instance, even the Depression time, it may have been much more but it was a few dollars. But—and they only used it for burials. So in other words, if you died you have a plot and you would have the use of the funeral and the funeral parlor. And till recently—till—I remember when they were being buried from the house yet. But now, you—you wait in the funeral parlor. But I remember being in the '30s, you know, the Depression time. When the Depression time, sometimes you—they died. I know in the South they did bury you by the road. What were we going to do? You see?

LEVINE: Would these societies have officers?

SHERR: Yes.

LEVINE: Who was getting the money?

SHERR: Yes, they—you elected, like, a president, a vice president and then you elected somebody as secretary.

LEVINE: And these were all from the shtetl—

SHERR: All from the same shtetl, you see? So when they—they died, you could—you go to the cemetery. In fact, what I want to do is I'm going to make pictures of the cemetery. See, I'm going to go—the last time I went to see the head of the cemetery was in 1932. So [chuckles] I'm sure he's not there but I want to get all the information and I want to show pictures of it. You see what I mean? If I'm going—that's why I said. I can't complete because there's something else that comes along.

LEVINE: You can't do the book because you're so busy living out the—all the things you have to do.

SHERR: All the—you can't. I can't do it. And then they all say to me, "Hey, when you—I says, "I found something new." I got a letter the other day from Arizona. "Dear Ted," Head of the Plungyana [PH] Yiddishe Museum. Sounds good but I've got a little office with everything else in it. Fine. I get—I get respect. [laughs] Anyhow, I—at that—and she says, "I'm sick and I'd like to know if you know"—my grandfather came to this country in 1894. Well, I just made a tape through my uncle. He's got glaucoma. It's hard for him to read. The other one is getting also up in age. So I made two tapes, one in Yiddish to send to Israel and one in Cape Town. I've got

them in the car. I was supposed to mail them—mail it tomorrow. That took 60 minutes. I told them everything, if he remembers. [unclear] of course, I said. Boris, [unclear] you don't remember 1894. But do you remember a Fleishe [PH] family in Plungyan? Can you tell me anything about them?" So I have a source now and I don't want to give up that source. The other sources that I have are afraid to talk. They fear—

LEVINE: Afraid of what?

SHERR: Of being interviewed.

LEVINE: Do—why, do you think?

SHERR: Because—I asked them, like you. And I says, "I'd like to interview you. You come from Lithuania." "No, I don't want to." "But I'm not going to do—I'm not in there. I don't want to interview—I'm not, you know, from the FBI or anything."

LEVINE: What is the fear, do you think?

SHERR: They fear because—some of them fear because they were in the camps so they don't want to talk about it, or maybe it jars their memory. I can see that. Or maybe they just don't—they don't want to talk. They're afraid because—

LEVINE: They're afraid they don't know how it'll be used or—

SHERR: Or possibly too. There's only one man and he was—I caught him in Pompano. You know where Pompano is. It seems that somebody came from Lithuania, a Christian. And he—and he is studying at the Vilnius University as a doctor of psychiatry. And he—he got my name through somebody. And I stood with him for one day. I showed him around Florida for one day. And then he says, "Teddy, I'm staying with this man in Pompano." I says, "Fine." When I got there, the man—I had my tape recorder, like you. So I says to him, "Vitos [PH], can I interview you?" "Yeah." They were talking about independence—Russia still was powerful there—about independence of Lithuania. He gave me a complete interview. Then I says to the man at the table—and he's telling, "Don't tell him everything. Don't tell him," in English but with a Lithuania accent. So I says to him, "I want to ask you something. Where were you during the war?" "Oh, I worked on the trains." I says, "So then you took the Jews to Auschwitz and all that." "I'm not talking anything." He says, "I think you're from the KGB. So then I says, "Well." I says—he says, "Do you want to have a drink with you?" I says, "Yeah, I'll have a drink with you." "Okay, what do you want?" I said, "You got Scotch? I'll have that?" "You want to eat?" I says, "Okay, I'll eat with you." He had the hot dogs. I can't eat—

but I ate it anyhow. I says, "You know what I'll do? You like Italian food?" He says, "Yeah. I love it." I says, "Okay. You go with me. We'll go and—Italian food." My wife says, "I'll kill you if you go with that bastard." [chuckles] [unclear]. And he [several words unclear]. He says, "Look, I'm going to tell you. I don't hate the Jews. I eat gefilte fish." [laughs] Go figure that. So I says to myself, 'There's another asshole, so what the hell am I going to do [unclear]?' But you know, "Oh," he says. "You know, I made your car. I made your Cadillac." I says, "Yeah?" He says, "I worked for General Motors in Detroit." Who didn't? All the ex-Nazis worked over there. They all came out. They all worked for General Motors.

LEVINE: Really?

SHERR: Oh, yeah. They all worked out there. They all got good jobs with the help of the American CIA. So [unclear]. But I met him. I wasn't afraid. And they said, "Were you afraid?" "No, I wasn't afraid." Just have to know.

LEVINE: Did he talk to you [unclear]?

SHERR: Yes, he spoke to me but not openly. He just—I said one of these days I'll get him openly and I'll go to an Italian restaurant with him, and I'll buy a bottle of whiskey. We'll both sit down and get a—polluted a little bit and start asking. But my wife says, "Not on your life." She says, "I don't want to—to bury you because these bas"—he'll [unclear]. "How do I know," she says, "What'll happen? If he decides that he wants to kill one more Jew, what the hell do I know?" Should I pick up my cross and hold it up? [laughs] She says, "Well, this guy knows you're Jewish and then he can't say nothing [unclear]. [laughs] The ones that don't know," she says—"okay, you can get away with this crap." But I did meet Jews that came back from the Holocaust. But—and they say sometimes [unclear]. "What are you wearing the cross for?" I says, "You know why? That gets me into a house that you can't get in. That'll get me an interview that you can't get into." You see? But the—I says, "You've got to forget about religion. You've got to get—if you're hungry, you eat even pork." I says, "And this is"—"Why?" "Auschwitz had a kosher kitchen?" You know, this is—but they don't realize it but they're so fanatically inclined in it. You see, I'm looking for the end results. I don't care how I got to three. Two and one or one and one and one. I'm interested in the bottom line. "Tell me what you did to the Jews." That's what I'm interested in. If I can come or connive you in, and think that I'm Italian and speak to you in Italian and everything, fine. I have had—but—but this is what I'm interested. It's the same thing as [unclear]. So all this that we have from the shtetlach [PH] now, that I'm going back to the cemeteries to visit them and find out what happened and everything else. But I did find two that also—that in the [unclear] Lithuanians Jewry have a party once a year. I go there. I—Mil—

my wife, Mildred, doesn't go there because she says, "I have nothing to do with them." Okay. They're very particular. They charge you \$50 for a meal. It's not the \$50. I don't give a damn. But just to meet them and say to them, "I'm doing a documentary. Can I interview you?" "No, no. it's all right. I'm afraid." "What [unclear]. What [unclear]. [sentence unclear]. You and the Red Army, what polk [PH], what division were you? What company were you? Who was your kapo [PH] in there? Who was your kapo? Who was your—the commandant from the camp?" Wouldn't talk. But yet, when they had the whole thing, after it got through—after the ball got through and the meal and everything else—and a week later I called him up. I says, "Sam"—he lives in Miami Beach. "I figured you took in five grand—\$5,000. What did you send the Yiddish Museum in Vilna?" "Oh, \$200." Two hundred dollars. But you see, I got a big mouth and I used some filthy language. And I figured, 'They won't remember me other way, but they'll remember me, they don't cut this bullshit. Do it in here.' But you see, there was no one to talk to. And it's unfort—I [unclear] say why I do it, I do it myself. I figure there is only one man left in my town that's doing the same thing I'm doing and he's married to a Christian. And then I met people when I—when they go for a visit to my town, I say, "Please do me a favor. Write me—write me out what you saw. Write me a page in your own words what you thought of the town. If it's your first visit, write it to me." And I got compositions from them, you see, that I keep it in there. And like—like you said, there is only one man that—in Ponterrey [PH]. You ever hear of Ponterrey? That's the woods out of Vilna where they killed all these Jews. He's living in the woods. He's living—this Jewish man lives in the woods. He don't want to go to Israel, don't want to—his wife lives in Israel because he felt that maybe it's on a mission. I'm not on a mission or anything else. But I figured, hey, maybe I'm the last voice. Maybe I want to give it out. There's people in here that don't know about the shtetlach or have that. And if—I tested. If my grandchildren asked me for it, there must be other grandchildren that ask for it. You see? So by me leading all these different lives I can acclimate myself. I know how you think, how you do it. The reading doesn't mean—the words are read; that's fine. The print is—it's—it's when you talk face to face and I can look at the face and look in the eyes and study the person and tell them. You see, or, you know what I mean, the way he expresses himself. But reading is—it's fine. It's—but it's still flat. There is no emotion into it because—and then taping does brings your emotion, unless you put the tape right on the person's face. You see? You can see every detail and every [unclear].

LEVINE: Are you videotaping these?

SHERR: Yeah, some of them I do. But every menalach [PH]. The word menalach means every—

LEVINE: Minutia.

SHERR: —minutia. So every way—the way he holds his face or the way he holds his eyes or the way he talks; the expression in the face alone sometimes can tell you. You see? So all this is—is interesting. So when you do your interview and that—you know what I mean? I've never come out with bing, the question of, "Why were you a Nazi?" or "Why—who was your [unclear]?" Fine. Everything's sta—then they come out to one point like you did just now. You—you did, "Well, when you came into Brooklyn, what did you see in Brooklyn?" You see what I mean? So to get away, these—it'll change the subject and bingo, you go right back to it again. And this is the interviewer that makes a good interview, you see. So the questions you ask and you follow—you leave out the question and keep talking. Got time. The tapes runs; keep talking. And they grab one sentence or two sen—or a phrase, "Well, what'd you mean by that?" You see? So all this comes in very handy. And you'll learn and it's—it's a very interesting fact that—I don't know how many other people that you had from the shtetlach that you—from Ellis Island that you interviewed.

LEVINE: I would say more from Poland.

SHERR: Yeah.

LEVINE: A number from Poland.

SHERR: But they were cut and dried. They were telling you about the shtetl. There was nothing in—that—that they had feelings for.

LEVINE: It isn't that they've carried, let's say—a lot of them want to leave it, you know, [unclear].

SHERR: They want to leave it alone.

LEVINE: Right. It's—it was something—

SHERR: They want to become a—

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE A]

LEVINE: Okay, this is tape three and we're going to be concluding here, but just a few specific questions. When did you meet your wife?

SHERR: I met my wife in 1941.

LEVINE: And how did you meet?

SHERR: My father married her sister.

LEVINE: Wow.

SHERR: So actually, my stepmother is my—is my sister-in-law. I'm practically my own grandfather. [laughs]

LEVINE: And your wife's name?

SHERR: Mildred.

LEVINE: Her maiden name?

SHERR: Podelensky. And she—her folks also came from Poland.

LEVINE: Really? How do you spell her maiden name?

SHERR: Her name, P-O-D-E-L-E-N-S-K-Y. And she lived in Borough Park. You know where Borough Park is. And that's where I met her because I lived with my father downstairs and they lived upstairs. And the windup was that, naturally, you know, it was just before the wartime. And we were married in 19—yeah, 1941. New Year's Eve. This is—that's why I can't re—can't forget. She says, "I'm going to put a date you can never forget." [chuckles] So she says, "Then I know when your anniversary is." That's when I married her. But she's fluent in Yiddish. She—she speaks a better Yiddish than I do and she was born here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about your children? You have two children?

SHERR: Yes.

LEVINE: And their names?

SHERR: Evann and then there's Billy. And Evann, she's got two. She's got a daughter that's a very good dentist in Atlanta. And my grandson, David—David is in the computer line. She's got two good kid—and my son is single, by the way. He's 40, single, and he hasn't found a girl yet. And my wife says, "I hope he gets married because he calls me everyday. He calls me everyday. If he had a wife, let him with his wife," you know. [laughter] And—

LEVINE: Okay.

SHERR: And always—they're—all the kids—now, they tell me, "Dad, I'm sorry you didn't teach us Yiddish because we miss it." At that time, "No, I don't want to—I don't want to hear it." But in this time, now they do. And they still ask me, like, they're very much interested in their roots. They are. And they want to know from the shtetl what it is, not so much my children. It's my grandchildren.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SHERR: They are the ones that want to know. And every time they come along, she comes into the house, "Pop, you want to show me the pictures again? Tell me who this guy was or this guy was, or what they did." And this is—this is what it is. This is how they [unclear].

LEVINE: Now, how about—how do you think of yourself, as far as Lithuanian, Jewish, American? How do you—how—what do you see different aspects of yourself? Or how do you put it together for yourself?

SHERR: No, I think I'm a conglomeration of everything. I'm a composite, a collage, they say, of everything. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Collage, that's good.

SHERR: I don't even think my—I'm not—my wife and myself, we're not, "America, right or wrong." You know what I mean? I don't believe. You're wrong, you're wrong. The same with my kid. "Hey, you did something wrong, you're wrong. And—and you've got to admit." That's what she does to me, "Don't make any excuses. Take the blame for yourself. You're wrong." So I think myself more than a world person. In other words, whatever country I go to, I acclimate. If I went to China, I suddenly became Chinese and I took on their attitude. If I go to France or Spain it's this way. Israel is this way. So I don't have a chasm. I don't have a line to cut me off. And—but I do have the in—inward, it's Jewish, because everything that goes through is channeled through my mind. And it goes through—sifted through Jewish thinking. So it's like a filter and it's still Jewish. So everything is there because it's your formative years. And you still have to have it. You see what I mean? So no matter what it is, it still hurts when they say, "Hey, you Jew bastard." So I said, "He's talking about me." You see what I mean? So I—I still feel that same way. So inwardly, I still have that Jewish up—not the—the secular Jewish up—I still have that roots into the—into Jewish. So if I take out a book or read it, I'll still—like a—some boy that goes to cheder. You still wave and you say, "Maybe so. Maybe not. I still want to see the other side and read it carefully and everything else." And that was brought to your attention when you went to cheder. You know, when you argued in the homus [PH] and you said, "Well, God said this." Well, may—how do you know God

said it? Maybe he didn't say it. So this is what they argue all the time. You see? So all this brings you forward. It brings your mind in there. So no matter what it is, no matter what language it is, I think in American and English, you know, and Ashramback [PH] and everything else. But when I speak Yiddish it's strictly thinking and talking in Yiddish. But I still have to think of the word. I mean, I don't use it every day. If I used it every day, it's fine. But as you come to—even reading a book, you know what I mean? You still go back.

LEVINE: Let me ask you about your heroes. Have you had particular heroes that you can think of that had some strong influence on you in your life?

SHERR: Not any of my teachers. Books that I read—that—outstanding books—“Lawrence of Arabia” that—that suddenly changed my mind towards the Arabs. And he was anti-Semite but you meet people that are anti-Semites, and yet they're not anti-Semites. And you've got to take their—maybe it's their way of talking, like you say, “Hey, don't Jew me down.” They don't mean any harm, maybe, or maybe they do. But you see, this is a form of expression so you can't go around calling everybody an anti-Semite. You can't call every German a Nazi [chuckles]. Most of them were but the idea is this; you can't. So actually, the heroes—I don't know. I found that heroes are human beings and they have their faults. So I found that, after I—I thought that this guy was—I had a hero, my uncle, in Cape Town. But after I met him so many times I says, “What a schmuck. This guy's a jerk [unclear].” Suddenly, he—I became the Talmud and he became the student. So I says to myself, ‘Well, what did I see?’ Well, yes, I looked up to him to see people that I thought—writers that would—but when—after I start to meet them and people in political things, I says, “You know”—

LEVINE: Everybody has [unclear].

SHERR: He's nothing. He's a human being. [unclear] is it? You know. If you have something—I envy. Yeah, I envy people that—that believe in religion because, you know, when they have some tragedy happen they—they bound themselves in that religious stuff and it seems to help them, you know. It's a form of panacea. You know, it's a form of a drug so they don't have to drink or anything else. You know what I mean? So they're into that religious thing and I—you know, many times when they—they see a kid get killed and then she says, “God took him and he went up to heaven.” Hey, it's good if they believe it. I'm not going to—no. This is a way. Maybe this helps them along. You see? So—but in heroes—even when I found out FDR—what I thought he was—I found out he was a—[chuckles] you know, so you say—after you read, you say, “I think the hero's my wife.” [laughs]

LEVINE: [unclear]

SHERR: She is. She—she—she—hey, listen. If you're married 55 years, like I am, and—and she stood me for 55 years for my [unclear] to become black, to become this. She's got to be good because [laughs] no other woman would stand for my crap. She told me that. She said she'd throw [unclear] but good. [laughs]

LEVINE: Very good. Okay, that might be a perfect place to end on that note with your wife. Okay, I want to thank you so much for a fascinating interview. Very—

SHERR: Well, it was nice, Janet.

LEVINE: Yeah, speaking with Theodore Sherr, who came from Lithuania—Pluns—

SHERR: Plunge.

LEVINE: Plunge, sorry—in 1930 at about 11 years of age. Today is February 17—

SHERR: Yeah.

LEVINE: —1997. And we're here in Florida and this is Janet Levine from the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

SHERR: Great.

[END OF INTERVIEW]