

ROCHESTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT (Rochester Jewish community 1924-1975)

Interviewee Mrs. Libby Berman

Interviewer Nancy J. Rosenbloom

Date(s) of interview July 14, 1976, July 22, 1976

*(2 tapes)*

Setting (place of interview, people present, impressions)  
I interviewed Mrs. Berman in her home on Shepherd Street. She is a very soft spoken woman, quite intelligent but somewhat shy. She told a variety of anecdotes about her own experiences. She is a very sensitive woman and several times I sensed that she had some painful memories that she preferred not to talk about.

Background of interviewee

Mrs. Berman, the daughter of a Russian Hebrew school teacher came to America from Russia at age 9. She is a certified teacher of the lower grades but never taught in the public school system on a regular basis. She has taught Hebrew school to younger children since 1946, and retired from Temple Beth El in 1975. Mrs. Berman has one son, a professor of history of science, in California. She was quite close to her father and appears to have patterned much of her own life after him.

Interview abstract

During the first interview, we discussed her immigration experience, the teaching experience of her father and herself in Rochester. She has quite strong feelings on the state of Israel. She also has recollections of Rochester in the 1930's and 1940's.

Interview index (corresponding to tape numbers, sides of tape, and casset recorder numbers)

xxx    Social history

xxx    Family

xx    Demographic/residential

x

   Economic

   Political/civic

xxx    Zionism/Israel

xx    Jewish community

xx    community relations

xx    Religious life

xxx    Jewish education

xx    Anti-semitism

Interview log

- corresponding to tape numbers, sides of tape, and casset recorder nos.
- including references to others in the Rochester community

--see following page(s) --

Mrs. Libby Berman Tape 1  
July 14, 1976 Nancy Rosenbloom  
Side A

- XXX A. Family Overview,  
Personal immigration experience from Russia through Danzig and Warsaw. Originally her father had expected to go to England where he had sisters. After the trip commenced, they were forced to emigrate to America.  
Her father, Bitinsky, was a Maskil, enlightened scholar. He had a Hebrew school in Russia. In America he taught at the Talmud Torah and had his own school for a short while and then taught privately.
- B. Secular education  
Mrs. Berman graduated from the city Normal School in 1932. Since this was the beginning of the Depression and because she was already married it was not possible for her to procure a permanent job. Instead, Mrs. Berman spent several years substitute teaching in the public school system.

Mrs. Berman began her career at Beth El, teaching Hebrew in 1946, at first on a part-time basis. She then taught in the afternoon school and in the Adult School. For a short time she taught with her father until his private school closed. (Off tape, Mrs. Berman related the story about her father's dismissal from the Talmud Torah because his teaching was too liberal for that time. The students, and some teachers, joined with him and protested, in form of a strike, his firing. Mrs. Berman refused to go into details about the episode.)

Side B

- C. Mrs. Berman is currently a private tutor for learning disabilities and other special Hebrew students.
- D. Mrs. Berman has strong feelings about Zionism. She was a member of the Poale Zion, Israel chapter whose main function was to raise money for the labor party in Israel.
- E. The interview then ~~XXXX~~ returned to the immigrant experience. Mrs. Berman became an American citizen under her father's papers. Had she remained in Russia, she said, she would have preferred to emigrate to Israel, not to America. Mrs. Berman has never travelled to Israel, although she will go in the fall as a gift from the Temple Beth El Hebrew School for her retirement.
- F. Personal Opinions  
Intermarriage  
Women's liberation
- G. There is no antisemitism in Rochester.
- H. The assimilation of the Russian Jews is running fairly smoothly.
- I. Mrs. Berman has been active at Temple Beth El, attended some cultural activities at the JCC and really devoted most of her time to Labor Zionism.
- J. Family history  
Opinions on Israel and Uganda  
Anecdotes about students of hers  
Golda Meir
- K. Questions about Rochester  
Riots  
Joseph Avenue.

Mrs. LIBBY BERMAN

Tape 2 July 22, 1976

Nancy J. Rosenbloom

(This tape is partially fuzzy; there seems to have been some static on the tape or taperecorder and Mrs. Berman, herself, is quite soft spoken).

Side A

- A. Recollections of Joseph Avenue in the 1930's including a description of the various cultural activities available, the public library, the Farbund Schule, the the Arbeiterring. Mrs. Berman emphasized the cultural activities of the Shul; later her husband belonged to this shul. Mrs. Berman's own activities revolved around the Poale Zion.
- B. As a high school girl, Mrs. Berman taught at the Jewish Children's Home. She had an anecdote about Mr. Alfred Hart. She remembered Joseph Avenue as a safe area for children to be out late at night. She also remembered going to the chicken butcher with her mother.
- XXX C. Mrs. Berman's own residential patterns: Her parents moved more frequently than she has. She has lived on Shepard Street 31 years and before that on Laburnum Creseent for a short time. Her parents kept a close circle of friends that were involved with Zionism and the Arbeiterring.
- XXX Mrs. Berman's father taught for a short while at the Farbund Shul. (Off tape, Mrs. Berman had told me a story about how her father was fired from his job at the Talmud Torah) Mrs. Berman helped him to teach because although she was only in her twenties, she apparently was "quite a disciplinarian". Most of the students were labor zionists. Eventually the Bitenskys moved closer to be near Mrs. Berman so that she could care for them as they grew older and needer her. Mrs. Berman noted the changes in the residential area surrounding Buchan Park. The Jews moved out of this area because they were fearful for their lives. They had remained as long as they did because the Blacks were a good market for their stores. Mrs. Berman feels the public school system was adequate.
- Her participation as a parent of a child in the public schools. Monroe was a good high school with a mixed population but no blacks when her son attended the school in the late 1950's and early 60's. Shepard Street today is changing for a third time. The hippies, who had moved in about ten years ago are moving out and couples are moving back into the neighborhood. She feels particularly safe in this neighborhood now because of the Yeshiva on Field Street.
- XXX Anecdotes about the Yeshiva. The community attempted to forbid the Yeshiva from physical expansion on Field Street but Mrs. Berman would not sign the petition. The Yeshiva did receive permission to expand.
- D. Career as teacher:
- Mrs. Berman would not have preferred to teach in the public schools. She loved Hebrew and enjoyed teaching it. However, had she taught in the public school she would have received a pension and benefits. JAY STERN was a fine principal to work for.
- XXX Mrs. Berman feels that education has been watered down. The interruption on the tape is Mrs. Berman escorting an ant that was on the floor outside her house. This made her recall that her father was a vegetarian and we talked about this topic for several minutes before returning to the changes in the students over the years. In general, Mrs. Berman believes the children have lost respect for education in general and that discipline is lacking. The school is there to reinforce the home.

Mrs. LIBBY BERMAN  
tape 2 July 22, 1976  
Nancy J. Rosenbloom

- E. Mrs. Berman participates in the Chavura at Temple Beth El. She felt that the "individual was lost in the crowd" and that this is a way of returning to the days of the smaller shul. Her group has a cross section of adults ranging from ages 30 to 90. She does not conceive of this as a way to modernize the synagogue but to reinstate the traditional way.

SIDE B

- ' Small groups are "going back to the way a shul should be."
- F. Mrs. Berman had several anecdotes about her students and classes. She believes that only one student (Seymour Rosenbloom) has gone into the Rabbinate from her recollections of Beth El congregation.
- G. Mrs. Berman has never felt any restrictions as a Jew in America. She had some recollection of first hearing about the destruction of the European Jews from a Yiddish newspaper her father received. Some opinions on FDRoosevelt.
- H. The future of the Rochester Jewish community: Mrs. Berman is optimistic about it strengthening. The students, she feels, are enthusiastic especially about Israel. She has faith in the youth because of their quality, not their numbers. Mrs. Berman believes that Carter and his nomination might be indicative of a general trend in that Carter is joining a religious personal life with politics. She thinks that there may be a return to religion because the youth, in particular, need something to believe in. The mysticism that appeals to those who have joined different oriental cults is actually present in Judaism if the youth cared to look for it there. Somehow, Mrs. Berman believes that the older generation did not fully transmit their Judaism to the younger.

(Mrs. Berman has one son. Off tape, she told me that he is a professor of History of Science and is currently unemployed, by his own choice, in California. He is writing a book apparently on magic.)

Interview 1  
Tape 1  
Side A

Q. July 14th. This is Nancy Rosenbloom and I'm interviewing Mrs. Libbie Berman at her home. Just to test the tape recorder can you tell me how long you've been in Rochester?

A. Well, I'll figure it out. I came in 1920.

Q. OK. Where did you come from to Rochester?

A. I came from Baronovitz which was Russia at that time. At the time I was there it was Russia.

Q. And how old were you when you came?

A. I came here at the age of 9.

Q. And can you tell why you came? Your whole family?

A. Well, it's a long answer. . .

Q. No. . .

A. Well, my father was a teacher. He had his own school in Baronovitz, and it was just after the world war. We were suffering hunger, famine. And still we stayed on until we heard of the pogroms that were taking place all . . . all around us. And my father one day went out to one of the main streets and he saw a man who was . . . whose face was completely bandaged. And the only thing he could see was his eyes. And when he asked him what had happened he said that. . . I don't know whether it was the Cossacks, I can't remember, came in and they had shaved off the skin of his face with a . . . with a razor. And when my father saw that he came home and announced to my mother that we're leaving. We didn't have any money. We didn't know how we were going. But apparently my father had some adventurous spirit within him, and he immediately wrote to two sisters who lived in London. His family were

- A. (Continued) all in London. And told them about the situation and they loaned him money. And then we started off.
- Q. Did you get involved with international Jewish organizations that helped you to move?
- A. No, no.
- Q. When you started out where did you . . . what was your first stop?
- A. Well, we started out. . . well first my father went to Warsaw on his own to get a visa, and we were worried about him because of anti-Semitism. And I recall him telling us that when he was on the train they were all singing Jews . . . about the Jews in Russia, and how you have to liquidate them. And he was right there among them. He was terribly frightened, but somehow or other he came out OK. Got back, he had the visa. And we started out leaving my mother's oldest sister who was very, very close to us and a wonderful person. It's very interesting that she did not have any children, and she begged my mother to leave my youngest brother there and that would be her child. But, naturally my parents wouldn't do it. So, we had left. And from there . . . from there we went to Warsaw. And we stayed in Warsaw. . . I can't recall because our sojourn was about four months from the time we started. . . my youngest brother was about four years old. And so we stayed in Warsaw. And at that time they were trying to rout out many of the Jews to take them into the army, and my father somehow or other managed to escape. Bringing all the things that we did, our belongings with us, they were lost or stolen. So we came, except for a very few books, we didn't come with very much. From there we went to Danzig, and from there we were going to board the ship for the United States. Want to turn it off, I want to ask you something. . . ?
- Q. Do you. . . I don't. . . oh. . .
- A. When we had started out my mother was very much against leaving. And my

- A. (Continued) father was determined that we are going. And as I recall, and I'm not sure, he made her promise that he would see that the whole family would arrive safely in the United States.
- Q. How many children were there in your family?
- A. Three boys and one girl.
- Q. You being. . .?
- A. I was the second youngest. I had two older brothers, myself, and my younger brother. And when we came to Danzig my parents realized. . . well. . .oh, yes. . . well we came to Danzig my parents realized that they did not have enough money because my father had received a letter from London. He was going there. . . and . . . as a teacher, and he was to teach in one of the schools. But because he came from Russia the government perceived us as being Communist and they wouldn't allow us in. So here we were left high and dry in Danzig, and we didn't have enough money. My father sent a letter to my mother's brother here in Rochester, and he didn't have too much money because things were very bad here, it was slack season. So he sent some money, and with all the money his sister sent and my uncle sent there wasn't enough. And this is very interesting. I recall that we were waiting at the boat my father needed I think it was \$60 more, and we were ready to go on the boat, we couldn't go on because he didn't have enough money. And I recall my youngest brother and I standing there waiting to see the people going up and we are waiting to go on. Well my father had met someone from the city we came from who were quite wealthy because a family in New York were sending the money. And so this neighbor gave my father this extra money and we just made it on the boat. And right after us they just pulled the plank up. And I recall my father saying to my mother, you see this ocean. . . and this . . . this ocean's going to take us to the United States.

A. (Continued) When we got on there my mother and father threw their arms around each other and they wept, you know, it was very sad. I just wanted to tell you the experiences in Danzig. When we arrived there they took the women and the girls into one barrack and the men and the child. . . the boys in another barrack. So they made us take off our clothes because they had to be placed in one of these big furnaces in order to. . . what do you call them. . . fumes. . . fumigate? They had to fumigate it. And so I recall I was standing with my mother, they allowed my little brother with us because my mother wouldn't let go of him. And they gave us back the clothes, and we slept on straw, straw on the floor and a straw pillow. And we were separated for a while. After that the family was placed together, and we stayed in a barrack where the water was running down from the roof. Perhaps my father was a man who was very humorous. He had a lot fun within him, and so you know when it would be raining and all the people would congregate, he would tell stories and jokes and recite for them. And he made it very pleasant for everyone around because everyone sort of gathered around my father. One thing that was very sad there was that each one had to come before a staff of doctors, military doctors, and they had to be examined. I want you to turn it off again for a minute. . . When each immigrant appeared before the doctor, they sat at a table, and we were, you know, in lines. They examined their hair to see if it had any lice, and also they had the women pick up their dresses and they examined them. So I was then. . . when we arrived there my father was so afraid that they wouldn't allow us in, he shaved off everyone's head, including mine. I wept terribly because I was completely shaved. And he said I'm not going to have any trouble and you can always grow hair. Well, when we went up there. . . the women were terribly afraid of going up, especially if they were modest, and they



- A. (Continued) were asked to do. So, they came to my parents asking that I as a little girl should say who I am, I'm someone else and to come up and to impersonate, and to come up and say who I was. I was terribly frightened. But my parents explained to me that this is important. And so I didn't even want to do it and I cried. So the women who asked me to do it would give me a bar of chocolate. But even with the chocolate I didn't do it, but to please my parents I did. And then I was frightened that, you know, they'll see me so many times that they'll know. But, I did help many people doing this. Well, there's one sad story that happened and it made an impression that I never forgot. A very beautiful young woman, I don't know whether she was seventeen or eighteen or nineteen. And she was going to the United States to marry someone. And she was very beautiful and had long beautiful hair. Well, when they examined her they found that she had lice, and they shaved off her hair. She jumped into the ocean and drowned. I recall how sad it was. We all felt terrible. But this is one story. Well, . . .
- Q. Can I interrupt just a minute. . . you said they separated you into barracks. Who was they?
- A. Germans. This was under German rule then.
- Q. Officials. . .
- A. And I recall that my father took my oldest brother and went into Berlin. You weren't allowed to go in there, but. . . but he did go in. I can't recall now whether it was because they needed food or what. They had gone in and my father spoke German, and so he went there several times. And then after we boarded the boat, we were two weeks on the ship, and my youngest brother became ill with measles. So they quarantined him into a dark little room with bars on it, and you know he felt so strange and all alone. You know, we all felt very bad, and so my mother stayed with him the whole week that

- A. (Continued) he was sick. She stayed with him, and we were two weeks traveling on the ship. And we arrived to Ellis Island. When we got to Ellis Island. . . well, before we got there there was a rumor among all the passengers that we could see the Statue of Liberty if we went to the. . . is it the prow of the boat where you. . .? So I told my father, I said you want to see the Statue of Liberty, come I will show you. And in order to get to see it we had to go down to the hold and then run through where all the furnace was and all the machines, terribly hot there. So I took my father's hand and was leading him and he became very angry, we shouldn't have come in the first place. And I kept on saying, but to see the Statue of Liberty. Well, I took him across and got there and then many of the immigrants were standing and there was the Statue of Liberty, you know. And everyone just wept. It was so wonderful.
- Q. Let me just go back a second and ask when you first left your parents intended only to go to Great Britain and then changed their plans?
- A. I did forget to tell you, now I recall you see, I'm not really too clear. While in Danzig we went to Ansberg and we just loved the city, it was very beautiful and clean, and the people were so friendly. And all the immigrants were kept in one building. Someone, I don't know how, found out about my father and came and offered him a very high position in one of their schools. And my father wanted to remain, it was just such a wonderful opportunity. And this time my mother said no, she says, we went this far, now we go. And so we went to America, but we loved it there. I think this was. . . I think we bought ice cream there, too. It was just so wonderful to eat ice cream. In Russia we didn't. . . there was ice cream, I remember in Russia it was called (Russian word), vanilla ice cream. And for a few coins you could buy it and occasionally my parents if they had it they would treat the

- A. (Continued) children. And to this day I think that vanilla ice cream, there's nothing like it in the world. It's the most wonderful ice cream. I think they tell me that in Russia now too the ice cream is much superior to our ice cream. But I remember the taste of that ice cream.
- Q. Were there lots of immigrants coming or some. . . perhaps the whole neighborhood would be coming?
- A. No.
- Q. It was just by chance that you ran into neighbors?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Do you recall the reaction to the Bolshevik Revolution at all or. . . ?
- A. Well, I . . . you know, I was very young. But the Bolsheviks would come into the city and . . .
- Q. Was your father a teacher in a Russian gymnasium or a. . . ?
- A. No, it was a Hebrew school of his own. But he was. . . you see he was among those people in Hebrew you call one of the maskilim, they are called the enlightened. And he was one of these so that he taught Hebrew in a very modern way, which many people did not. In fact, what is interesting in those days you were not allowed to teach Hebrew. You could teach the Torah, but you could not teach the language because the language was holy. But my father was one of the enlightened men and he felt that Hebrew should be spoken, too. So when he had married my mother . . . you see his father was a husim, and he was a teacher and he was called Yakov Yasedish, which means Jacob the righteous man. And my mother's father was the stofitz in the city. So this is considered a very fine marriage between two people, you know, the daughter of a stofitz. . . Well, all right, after they had been married . . . I think after several years, they moved to a small town not far from Baronovitz. And my father opened a school, but he taught

A. (Continued) Hebrew, no Yiddish was spoken, no other language. Everything was in Hebrew. Well, my mother had just had my first brother at that time and she was sitting at home. And she noticed. . . and she became very frightened because people were throwing stones through the windows, and this was because my father had dared to teach Hebrew. And it became so uncomfortable for them that they moved down. And when they came to Baronovitz there were more enlightened people and they felt like my father, and, you know, they also felt. . . But it's very interesting now when you think about it that they teach Hebrew and everything's fine. But in those days they weren't allowed to teach it.

Q. How did your father come to be enlightened? What. . . is the son of the hasim. . .

A. He was the son of a hasim, and he also. . . he was . . . let's see, he had gone . . . I. . . I don't know whether before or what, but he became interested. . . he went to yeshiva. And then he said that he found people involved in studying. . . I think that somehow or other got the material and he gave the material, the reader, and became very fascinated and realized that there was French and German and all these languages had so much to learn in a search for knowledge. Then he left when he was a young man, before he married my mother, he went to London. And of course he had to steal over the border and he was thrown in jail, he had a rough time. He lived in London for four years, and was a teacher there, began to teach there. Then when he came back he married my mother. But by then when he came back from London, too, you know, he was more enlightened in that sense. And he got back to Russia, they began to call him to teach English, because he spoke English. And if anyone received a letter that they needed to read, they went to the teacher and the teacher read, and the teacher wrote the

- A. (Continued) letters for them. So they would come to the house with the letters. And I recall he said that in the towns that . . . I don't know if you want to include this, he said that those people would spit on the sidewalk, you know, and he taught them that you don't do it. He showed them a handkerchief, he came with a handkerchief and showed them how to do it. So . . . and the program. . . all of us were taught at home Hebrew songs, and we learned them. And we knew the Hebrew songs, and I know quite a few of them. But I didn't know really what I was saying, my father explained them but we sang Hebrew songs so that we already had a little bit of a knowledge of Hebrew, I was just a little girl then.
- Q. Did he teach you up until the time you left or did you attend some Russian schools. . .?
- A. Well, my oldest brother had attended my father's school, and he attended a Russian school. And my second oldest brother. . . I was very young so that I attended my father's school, but I had just begun to go to school when we left. So I just got a smattering of Russian. My youngest brother didn't get it at all. But, I had attended a Hebrew synagogue and had already been taught Hebrew. And I had other teachers. . . This one time I think my father worked also, they had a gymnasium, a Hebrew gymnasium, and my father taught there with many teachers. And I recall this must be at the age of eight I learned. . . I already learned the Mitzsaya, and I . . . I learned a whole chapter, everything had to be memorized, I learned the whole chapter by heart. And I could recite the whole chapter because at this age I learned this because teaching was in contact . . . very important. . . learning special talents (Note: Mrs. Berman is so softspoken it is difficult to distinguish many words and phrases.) But there was another thing that was interesting about my father. Rabbi Karp would enjoy. . . my father when we

- A. (Continued) had eaten used to sit and recite us poetry, sometimes he used to even make up a melody when he'd walk or pace or anything. And he'd sing the songs, you know. So that before I even studied I knew many, many songs. . . (Note: says a few words, probably titles of things, too softly to be understood). I can't recall now. And I could recite the poetry now, too, because you know he would sit and study the Torah. But he was always sort of sing-song like, you know? And we were brought up with those things.
- Q. Do you think that there was a generation conflict between your father and his father over. . . ?
- A. There wasn't a generation conflict. That I don't know. Except that his father felt that one should not become enlightened. One should follow the way it's written in the Torah, and my father did it. But along with this he wanted to read. In fact, he said he would. . . I can't recall what book my father was reading then, his father caught him and really beat him up. And after that he said he went, you know, in the bedroom and he hid the books. But he just had this thirst for reading. Otherwise, I mean, there was great respect which you don't see nowadays. That existed then.
- Q. At the time in the town would there have been a choice of going to Palestine or going to America? Did Jews from . . . ?
- A. At that time not many went.
- Q. So, if they left they knew they wanted to come to America?
- A. Most people did.
- Q. Not even . . . not even England, mostly America?
- A. We were going there because of my father's family, but America was called the "Golden" a lot and everybody wanted to go there.
- Q. And the people did have really, as you read in the myth, really that the paved were street. . . that the streets were paved with gold. . .

A. Well, I heard it. . .

Q. Freedom and. . .

A. Freedom, yes. In fact, when we came over here. . . when we. . . this is interesting. . . we had to leave. . . we came to Ellis Island and all the very, very large group and all the immigrants gathered together, they gave each one a blanket, and each one a bar of soap. And there were showers there. We didn't even know how to use it, you know. I recall we were sitting down at a table to eat and they served jello and we were frightened. We didn't want to eat the jello, there's something that just shook, you know, looked at it wouldn't touch it. What kind of thing do they eat in America? And they served butter and the butter was salty. What butter. . . what kind of butter do they have in America? We were. . . we were shocked. We had to leave my brother because he had to stay so many days after quarantine. Well, my. . . the first time and my parents didn't want to leave, they were afraid to leave their youngest child. And my mother wept, they just made her get off the floor. Now it must have been frightening for my brother. And my mother wept. And a relative called her in New York and took us there. They told us when to come back. So my parents came back and there was this little boy on a bench with a tag. And my parents came up, he wouldn't look at them, he wouldn't go. And they came up and they pleaded and he wouldn't go. He didn't want to have anything to do with either one of them. It took quite a while I'm told, you know, finally they realized. . . he realized they would take him home. But it was heart-breaking, you know, to leave this little child.

Q. Too young to understand. . .

A. No, he didn't understand. He couldn't speak English. He didn't know what they were saying. But, when we got up there among the relatives, and we

- A. (Continued) stayed. . . we would have remained in New York and my father would have been a teacher there, but my mother had a sister and brother here. They wanted us to come. And at the Talmud Torah they had an opening. So my father came he already had a job to work. But what I wanted to say, when we got off the boat he saw a little flag lying on the ground and he picked it up, you know, and he brushed it off and he put it in his pocket, you know. Patriotism then and today, it's different.
- Q. On the boat were there mostly Jews coming? I guess what I'm asking was there a problem keeping kosher food and observing the laws as you would want?
- A. I don't think that in the first place on the boat. . . I can't recall now, but we were all sick so that we ate very little. If we did I think it probably was a lemon, some oranges. I recall lemons, so I was so sick. A sailor went by and he felt so sorry for me he gave me a lemon, piece of a lemon, he said suck on that you'll feel better. But I don't recall, you know, eating at all nor do I recall. . . I don't think that they did. . .
- Q. Let's see now, what did your mother's sister and brother. . . brother-in-law or brother and sister?
- A. Brother-in-law and brother.
- Q. Why. . . why were they Americans? I mean. . . what. . . what was his business?
- A. Well, I don't know. My mother. . . how my aunt came here I don't know. She came to Rochester and she met her husband and was married here. She brought her brother. And then eventually we came. Yea.
- Q. OK. So then your father became a teacher at the Talmud Torah on Baden Street?
- A. Baden Street.
- Q. Do you recall what the Talmud Torah was like?
- A. Well, the Talmud Torah was . . . I would say it was like the Golden Age in



- A. (Continued) in Rochester as far as education. We really used to go out and . . . and we went two hours every single day. But the children and the majority of them wanted to go. And if there were some that didn't the parents insisted that we had to go. We had a wonderful teacher because the teachers also maskil. I mean we came from Europe and we learned a great deal from them. Everything was in Hebrew, and we loved our teachers. We respected them, we loved them. And you know there was a trusting . . . academic achievement, everybody wanted to learn.
- Q. Was this Hebrew school an after school. . .
- A. Yes, after school. And then on Sunday mornings. So, we didn't go Friday and Saturday. And then Sunday, and then summer they also had Hebrew school. We went in the mornings. But, I think that the . . . one of the community leaders here in Rochester are proud of it, proud of that Talmud Torah. And I know that I have learned a great deal from the Talmud Torah because these men gave of themselves and the children were like sponges.
- Q. So there was your father, and I know Mr. Panitch and Mr. Berlitzer? Was he another one that was. . .?
- A. He wasn't there very long. And see, my father was the longest there. He held . . . (Note: finishes sentence but in such a low voice it doesn't come across on the tape.) But my father had been one of the oldest teachers there. They had a principal who was a very grave man who was principal of the school, and later on . . . I think they had education, Hebrew education. . .
- Q. Were they children from all over the city that would go down to . . .
- A. Mmm-hmm.
- Q. And were they boys and girls. . . so that everyone got the same education?
- A. Yes.
- Q. It wasn't a yeshiva. . .?

- A. No, no. It was a Hebrew school. But it was the finest education. . . we don't have it today.
- Q. What were some of the courses?
- A. Well, it wasn't so much as courses. . . I think frankly in the afternoon school today you start and spend so many subjects. . . but you don't have to teach prayers because the children knew the prayers. At home, you know. . . they went to shul with the parents and all, so prayers weren't taught. But, the. . . we were taught the Torah, and we got as far. . . even as young children we were studying the prophets, the children today don't do. . . we would study the prophets. We. . . we learned grammar. Let's see, we had literature, studied literature. And we. . . we really understood it. And the teacher was. . . he was just terrific. And as I look back now and remember my teachers I have a great love. . . these were men and I loved them. I couldn't wait to get to class to learn from my teachers. So that one wanted to emulate the teacher. Today, I don't have to tell you how children feel about the teacher or about education, or Jewish education.
- Q. Did your father teach there his entire career in America?
- A. Yes.
- Q. What grade? All grades?
- A. I guess so, yes. He taught there, but you know it's very hard. . . I. . . I couldn't. . . I can't remember all the. . . I don't even. . . I think he taught about. . . I was. . . he taught. . . and then he. . . he had his own school for a while. And then he taught in Temple Beth El.
- Q. Where did he have his own school?
- A. Well, he had school in our home. My mother had. . . we had rooms in a large house, and my father used to. . .
- Q. What was your maiden name?

- A. Bitinsky. Then my father taught in the Karban Shul. (Continues speaking for a few sentences, tape doesn't pick it up.)
- Q. Here in Rochester?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Was that just a short . . . that school had a short life or . . .?
- A. Short. The Talmud Torah was of the longest. . .
- Q. And then when the Talmud Torah . . . did the Talmud Torah close?
- A. Well, you want to shut that off?
- Q. Well, maybe I'll pick up then and ask you about your own career. OK. Let's see, I've get you at about age 10, 9 or 10, arriving in Rochester. How did you learn English? Did you go to a foreigners' class?
- A. Yes, they had a foreign class. I don't remember the teacher's name. That was. . . he taught us . . . and from there we were placed in a classroom. That's when we had learned. . . I recall I was put into the fourth grade after being with this teacher. And there was one teacher we were terribly afraid of. She was an art teacher. She. . . I recall was . . . she had us cut up letters and I didn't understand English that well, we couldn't follow you know directions, instructions. So she wanted us to cut out a "w." And when I cut up my "w" it fell apart, fell into a "v" and she walked by and noticed it, and she slapped me over my eye and she slapped me so hard I had all her five fingers right on me. And immediately I put my work down and I went home. And when I got home for lunch I had this . . . and my parents asked me and I told them, but they feel that if the teacher does it why I must deserve it. But I was always afraid. . . I almost to this day. . . I don't particularly. . . I can't do anything like art and I think it's because I've always been frightened, you know.

- Q. In this foreigners' class again were they mostly Jewish children or mixed, mixed class? Were there enough immigrants. . . Polish and . . .?
- A. You know I don't recall except I think. . . I think. . . but at that time there were. . .
- Q. Where were you living at that time, near Baden Street?
- A. Well, we lived on. . . no we moved a great deal. We lived on Nassau Street, then we moved up to Kaplan Street, and we lived on Holtzer Street. When we became more active we moved on Clifford Avenue. And so on and on.
- Q. So that was probably No. 9 School?
- A. Yea, No. 9 School.
- Q. And then Benjamin Franklin?
- A. No I went to Washington Junior High School and then to East High School.
- Q. And then you went on to you said to City Normal. And what grade did you teach or what were you. . .?
- A. Well, I was just. . . but at that time it was the Depression so one was not allowed. . . so I substituted. And then I was married, too, and I wasn't allowed. I substituted for a while. But actually I have really never taught except when I substituted, the principal would give me a year at a time instead of one day or two days, so once I got in I taught because it was very difficult to get a job in those days. Now history repeats itself, we've got the same problem again.
- Q. When you say you were married, does that mean if you were married they don't give you a job?
- A. No.
- Q. And I don't know how. . . where did. . . when you substituted where did you go? Any. . . any school?
- A. Yes. I'd be called into a school and then in terms of. . . I taught in No. 18

A. (Continued) School for a while and when he had an opening he asked for me, and I came back and stayed around a little, you know, just pretended I was. . . I was the first one to be called. In one school I got. . . in No. 32 School, which is near Charlotte, on Stone Street there, and the principal was a darling man, Mr. Wilcox, and he came and he observed me several times. And one day the supervisor was coming, so all the teachers were frightened when they knew the supervisor was coming. Well, the supervisor knocked on my door and opened the door and says I don't know what you've done to Mr. Wilcox, but he asked me not to supervise. . . that I would feel more comfortable. And she did. She did all right, and I was so relieved that she didn't come in.

Q. How many years of training in the city Normal School did. . .

A. Three years.

Q. And then you graduated from there right at the start of the Depression? Right in the early thirties.

A. Yea, I graduated in 1932.

Q. So, let's see. . . over a course of how many years were you substituting in the public schools?

A. I guess it must have been from . . . until I think my son was born and then I stayed at home with him until. . . until my son was about two and a half years old. And one day I got a call from Dr. Diamond, I think, he was then the Deputy Director of Jewish Education, asked me if I had a Hebrew background and if I'm a teacher, would I be interested in coming to teach at Temple Beth El? Just a few hours. And I thought it would be fun, you know, always loved people anyway. And so I got someone to sit with my son for a couple of hours and I went in there. And you know I thought I'll just stay through. . . when I finish that if I could stay on and finally before I

- A. (Continued) knew it, you know, I was teaching there. I really loved it.
- Q. Did that. . . would that be maybe the 1940's? When was your son born?
- A. 1944.
- Q. So that already after the Second World War you began to teach at Beth El?
- A. Yes. And . . .
- Q. At that time Beth El was on Park Avenue?
- A. That's right.
- Q. And what was the school. . . where was the school?
- A. Well, there was a little house next door and we taught. . . I had one room and each one had a room where they taught. Very interesting. I recall this one time I had to speak to the dedication. . . for the dedication of the new. . . new Temple Beth El school. And so I . . . I made a comparison, I drew a comparison between the old school and the new one. And it really was very humorous. I described us being in the one room and there's the slate and all there's one bulb. And it's. . . it's . . . the desks are all squeezed to the floor, three of them in a row. Children put in, you know, threes. And it's very, very humorous. They . . . if they had to go to bathroom they had to get dressed, go to the back of the room, and all the coats were piled one on top of the other, you had to search down. In the meanwhile the lesson was beat. . . . and you know they saw this was happening so they played it out a little more because they would get their coat and they would get dressed and they would march outside, and in the winter it was terrible, you know. And he'd go, then they would come back and come in and the lesson would stop again. And the boy or the girl would go out again and bring in snow. . . snowballs and then get undressed and sit down and then it would repeat itself, you know. And it was under the coat. . . they used to come up with the rest of them . . . everybody

A. (Continued) would cough, all the children would cough. And everybody . . . there was nothing you could do. But somehow or other we learned and studied.

Q. What age of children did you have in the . . . ?

A. Well, I actually . . . at one time I taught nursery school, but usually it was from the beginning right through high school and then I taught adult education. And I found that the kids . . .

Q. Did they have adult education courses still when Beth El was on Park Avenue?

A. No.

Q. That was all part of . . . when did you . . . do you remember when they moved the school to . . . ?

A. That I don't recall the date. But you could get it.

Q. I can get it, yea. What kind of courses did you teach in adult education?

A. Adult. . . well, I taught them Hebrew and sometimes I taught them the . . . the prayers in the prayerbooks that was being used in the temple. I also taught them Hebrew through film.

Q. Are you still teaching?

A. No, I just retired. They had a dinner for me, you know, and they gave me a trip to Israel.

Q. Oh, I . . . I'm gonna . . .

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

Interview I  
Tape I  
Side B

Q. This is Side B. Today is July 14th. This is Nancy Rosenbloom interviewing Mrs. Berman. And you said you just retired and . . .

A. Well, I retired a year ago, but I have been teaching there, you know, what I was asked on my retirement. . . so that I enjoy it very much. It was a little bit hard to give up teaching. I recall when I went to Dave Stern and I told him I'd like to retire he looked at me in a real crazy way. You're not of age to retire yet, he said, you've got many years to teach, why? And I said well I just feel I would like to walk out of the temple instead of being carried out. And he said to me, you're crazy. It'll be many years before we'll carry you out. I said, no, I really don't. He said, will you get out of my office, I don't want to talk to you. And a few weeks later I came back again, and I said I'd like to retire. And we argued and finally I said look I just feel I'd like to try it. He said, well I see you feel seriously about it, he said, so let's put it this way, you can retire but anytime you want to come back you can come back. So I left it at that. And it was rather hard, you know. To pick up and make a break like that. But I'm teaching children whom I love very much, I teach the Russian children. And that's very rewarding.

Q. You mean now? After. . . where do you teach?

A. At Temple Beth El.

Q. Oh. . . What. . .

A. I have a class of several children, and they wanted to learn Hebrew, so I taught them. In fact one of the boys just became Bar Mitzvah, it was a beautiful Bar Mitzvah. They were so proud, and I was so proud. And it's



A. (Continued) interesting how this boy came up and . . . . (last part of sentence is unintelligible; transcriber's note.) You know, he says, all the credit goes to my teacher. I thought that was so sweet of him. And then I teach a few children that have difficulty in learning. I feel that a teacher should teach them on a one-to-one basis. I love that kind of work.

Q. When did you go to Israel then?

A. I will be going in September or October.

Q. That's not the first time you're going to be in Israel? Oh, it is going to be the first time then? Oh. . . .

A. I'm looking forward to it.

Q. Do you call yourself a Zionist?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. Have you been active in Zionist groups in Rochester?

A. Yes.

Q. Which ones? The. . . .

A. Well, I belonged for many years . . . . well, you know, when I was a child I was in the Young Judea group, and then as I got older I belonged to the Poale Zion group, which is a Labor Zionist group. Then as I got older I belonged to the Pioneer Women organization, which is Labor Zionist women's group. I belong to the Israel Chapter, which is also a Labor Zionist group. That's it.

Q. Why did you choose Labor Zionism? For philosophic reasons?

A. Yes, yes.

Q. Well, what . . . what kind of. . . what kind of activities did the Poale Zion. . . Poale Zion sponsor?

A. Well, we raised money and the money is spent for the Labor Party in Israel. And also it was a cultural group, too. We had lectures and studies. It really was a very, very fine organization.

Q. Whose. . . under whose leadership was it? Was it. . .

A. No this was a national. . .

Q. A national. . . Have you ever held any leadership posts in any of the Zionist groups?

A. Well, in the Pioneer years ago. . . in fact I was one of the charter members that organized it during the thirties and I was president for a while. Now I'm a member but I don't do it, you know.

Q. Do you think Labor Zionism still has an active voice in Rochester? Do you think it's diminished over . . . ?

A. I. . . I would say it has diminished. There are people that are still working for it, but the older generation had been working and they gave their whole life. . . whole life was specially . . . I know with my parents it was. And it was too. . . But the younger people they joined Hadassah. But I think culturally the Labor Zionist does more for Israel. . . Hadassah did more. . . not that I'm speaking against Hadassah, but it just didn't seem that this was part of our life. . . We built. . . we helped build a dream, and kept the liberal party always in power so that. . . you felt you played a very important part. It still plays an important part, but as I said the group isn't. . . it has some young people but they're not as active.

Q. Did your parents ever go to Israel?

A. No.

- Q. Were they ever. . . , they never went.
- A. But it's interesting maybe, I don't know, Rabbi Karp might be interested, but I'm sure he knows it. My father was never in Israel, but he knew Israel more thoroughly than I think an Israeli knew it. He could tell you where every pebble was; where every prophet, where he lived, where he taught, where he died. He just knew the land thoroughly, it was part of his life. That was part of. . . it's a pity and a shame that he had never been there. There was a man that knew the land, never tread the land.
- Q. I guess somebody said something like. . . to the effect that today everyone is a Zionist and there's no more Labor Zionism, everyone's a Zionist. Do you agree with that? With that statement? Do you think Americans today. . . ?
- A. I. . . I would say that I think that. . . I think most people are.
- Q. Do you think that tends to hold the Jewish community together?
- A. Well, I think the congregation. . . a congregation holds the Jews together enough that if Zionist. . . Zionism does, too. But it seems to me that if you could just congregate in a congregation. . . and so then again. . . And also I imagine that there they also work for Zionism, but at least you're there no matter what happens.
- Q. Maybe I could find some other. . . another question on education that maybe I could go back to. You never taught at Hillel School?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Oh, you did teach at Hillel School?
- A. For a short time.
- Q. Again a younger grade?
- A. I taught. . . I can't even remember what grades I taught, but I taught in the English Department and I taught in the Hebrew Department. Because Rabbi Rosenberg's sister-in-law had been teaching there and she was ill. She left

- A. (Continued) suddenly and there was no one. And they needed someone in English and someone in Hebrew so they came to me. At that time I really couldn't do it. I don't recall why, but finally they appealed I guess to the school. And so I came in and I taught there, but I enjoyed it very much.
- Q. And what about this new yeshiva? That's appeared here on Field Street. Is that. . . How is that related to the school? Is it. . .
- A. I don't think it is.
- Q. Well, I mean for older children. . . ?
- A. No, they start with young men, and I think that many men are housed there, college age.
- Q. Oh, this is already college and high school?
- A. College and I think there might be even some graduate students living there.
- Q. I didn't realize that. I thought that maybe that was the extension of the Hillel School.
- A. No, no.
- Q. OK. That's my mistake. Let me think. I. . . I left out a few questions on the immigrant experience that I wanted to ask. When did you get your citizenship? When you. . . or when your father. . . ?
- A. After my father was here for five years he got his papers and we were all under age. . .
- Q. On his papers. Your mother included or . . . ?
- A. No, my mother had to get her own.
- Q. Did your mother learn English as well?
- A. Yes, she learned, but she learned it through the children speaking at home.
- Q. She never went to foreigner's class?
- A. I think she did for a while. Yea. She had to go in order to get the papers.
- Q. Right. Then in your home did you grow up speaking part English, part Yiddish?

A. My parents spoke Yiddish, but we answered in English. And so later on they always spoke in English, too. But I can speak Yiddish, and I understand Yiddish very well because it was spoken at home all the time.

Q. Did you just have the one son?

A. Yes.

Q. Did your son speak or understand Yiddish?

A. I think he understands, he has to, but he knows what. . .

Q. Well, your husband was a Rochesterian?

A. Yes.

Q. Let's see. Here. This is sort of a full half of a question. Do you think that America is sig. . . has had a significant effect on your practice of Judaism? Had you stayed in Russia, do you think it would have been different? Or is. . . 'Cause your father was already enlightened before he came. . .?

A. I think it did. Had I remained in Russia I probably wouldn't have wanted to go to America, I would have wanted to go to Israel as a youngster, you know. Because I was very much imbued with Israel, had a great love for it. But once we got here, you know, . . . in fact while I was here for a while I wanted to go to Israel, but my mother didn't want me to go. I was the only girl and she was a Zionist until her daughter wanted to go, and then she didn't want her to go. But I think I would have gone.

Q. Were your brothers also Zionists?

A. I don't think so. I think my oldest brother was a Zionist. And then I think after he left Rochester, he was married and left, I don't think that . . . I can't say he wasn't. I'm not sure, but I know that about five years ago he went to Israel. And he came back with such a love for Israel that everytime he talks about it he's ready to leave. So he's quite a follower. He reads all the Hebrew newspapers. So I imagine he is. He reads Hebrew literature.

- A. (Continued) He's very, very interested in Hebrew school. That's my oldest brother.
- Q. Is that. . . is that his profession as well?
- A. No, no. He was a psychiatric social worker in New York. And then he was a parole officer for New York City.
- Q. He reads Hebrew literature?
- A. He reads Havdahoran; he reads the Hollern; and he reads. . . he reads the Press and the Town Carrier. There's a new book . . . a new magazine out, I forget what it's called. The Presence, he reads that. He sends me the magazines that he gets, too, so I read them, too.
- Q. Do you subscribe to the. . . to the Hebrew press also?
- A. I don't but my brother sends it to me.
- Q. So you. . . you keep up with it or. . .?
- A. To a certain extent, not that much, but I do. Whenever he sends me, you know, I. . .
- Q. And your second brother?
- A. No, he's not a Zionist.
- Q. But he went through the same Hebrew education that. . .?
- A. Yes.
- Q. And the little one?
- A. The youngest one . . . he isn't. He's an associate dean at a university. He teaches social work. And he's not interested. I am the one that is the Zionist. . . the, you know.
- Q. It sounds also as if you had great respect for your father and possibly have tried to emulate. . .?
- A. Yea. He influenced me. My. . . my son has written a book, if you're interested, and he dedicated the book to my father. I think my father had . . . well, I

- A. (Continued) know he didn't spend a great deal of time with him. He used to babysit for him when I went out, and he would tell him stories from the Talmud and the Mizrach. And he just knew everything. And all that he could give my son he gave. So I think that when my son grew he appreciated. . . it was an unusual relationship, a wonderful relationship between the two.
- Q. You were telling me before the tape that your son also is a Zionist. . . he's very Zionist. . . to put it another. . . Does he have much feeling, do you think, for Jewish background. Would you call him a religious man?
- A. No.
- Q. But. . . but knowledgeable?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Do you think that that comes at all from the way that the topic was chosen to explore? In terms of . . .?
- A. Well, he is very highly principled person, see this is the way our Daniel was brought up. He's a person of great integrity. He's a scholar. He's loved by . . . and this is very similar to what my father did. And I think my father had influence on him.
- Q. Would your son be considered a Zionist also?
- A. I don't know. I couldn't say. You know, in a way we haven't had really time to discuss it. And I often wonder. . . I know he went to Israel for a . . . eight days a few years ago. And he was very much impressed, and he brought me a . . . this picture, which is an original one, one of Robert (transcriber's note: pronounced in French, "rowbear.") The little one. And that is a picture of Saifeth, and it's originally done in pastel. When he was there he had asked me what I would like from Israel and I told him to bring me a picture, print, I didn't say a picture. But I told him to bring me a print. I'm always interested to go there. When we went there to look at it we. . .

- A. (Continued) So he said that when he had come to the artists' colony there was a woman there and she was born there. And she looked at it, and he said mother this was original but I wanted it for you. And it was too expensive. So when she heard that his mother teaches Hebrew, and she spoke it fluently, she gave him a very good price. And. . .
- Q. And you know when you pointed it out, I was going to say that looks like an original. . .
- A. You can see it because it looks as if it's going almost right into the sky, you know, there's something so very, very lovely about it.
- Q. Really. The picture does make you see. . . Do you have grandchildren? No. Is he married?
- A. He is divorced.
- Q. I guess . . . I guess I don't have. . . Well maybe I will. . . I don't . . . I don't know whether I'm treading ground that I shouldn't. . . You just tell me. Do you have an opinion on intermarriage? Or is that a. . .?
- A. I'm very much . . . (rest of sentence fades out; transcriber's note.)
- Q. Do you think that it poses a real problem to the Jewish community?
- A. I think so. I know that many of the students have intermarried and there were. . . they had very good Jews; and they were wonderful people. But, I think that life in America was excellent, that . . . that they go away to college and meet some of the people of different religions. And after a while they find out that . . .
- Q. Do you think there's an answer to that in terms of more Jewish education, more Jewishness in the home?
- A. Well, I think that naturally we have to have more Jewish education and the home has to be a positive. . . But that alone isn't the answer either. I'm sure it helps, but I have seen some very children from very good homes



- A. (Continued) . . . fine Jewish cultural homes and religious homes, and I see it over and over again. However, if they did give them the Jewish education at least we feel that we're trying and perhaps we did do something.
- Q. Do you think that Jewish women have a special role or, . . . I'm sure that still . . .? You have worked and certainly such as women's liberation. . . sort of silly in a sense, but do you think the Jewish woman is a . . . has a role to fill or. . . I don't know if the question makes sense. I'm trying to get at a couple of questions I guess. Women's liberation and women's roles.
- A. Well, I. . . I feel that the Jewish woman is a liberator. I'm not talking of the very religious woman, but I'm talking of Jewish women. And in Israel Jewish women are liberated, and even those women who are very religious, there's a great respect, there's a great love, so that if. . . if they love what they're doing and they care for the family, and if the husband respects the wife. . . he will let. . . she can do almost anything that she wants to, so I feel that I personally feel that the Jewish woman is liberated.
- Q. That she doesn't owe a special. . . The Jewish woman shouldn't stay in the home and make just a Jewish home and that's. . . there's nothing that. . .
- A. I. . . I. . . I don't know that she should make a Jewish home, but you can also go out and. . . because if she feels that she has to express herself, I think that she should. But she can still be a good Jewish mother and has a fine Jewish home and study and go out. . . And if there is the understanding in the family, then she can do all these things and still be a fine Jewish mother.
- Q. Do you think that, let's say in terms of let's say the last thirty years, there's been a change in women's . . . in women's roles as women?
- A. Well there has been. . . there has been a change in roles in women's

- A. (Continued) liberation we see today, but well. . . Well, you know. . .
- Q. OK. Maybe I'll go on and ask you some questions about anti-Semitism. Have you ever experienced anti-Semitism in Rochester? As a child maybe?
- A. In Europe, yes. I recall the Russian soldiers were marching through the streets, singing the Jews will polish our boots in Russian. Sounds very, very awful, you know, bad. And when the Germans screaming the Jews were . . . Russia hated the Jews, the Poles were very anti-Semitic. . .
- Q. How about the Poles transplanted in Rochester? The same Poles that after they'd emigrated to America do you think that they became. . .?
- A. Well, I don't. . . I haven't had any experience with them. I know one woman that was a Pole and she comes. . . sometimes comes to help me and she just loves the Jewish people. But I don't think the woman would ever feel anything for me. But, that's. . . but I think the ones . . . (last part of sentence dies out: transcriber's note.) No matter how free they will be they would be anti-Semitic. And now in Russia, of course, I don't know. But, this is what I hear about Russia.
- Q. And Jews. . . the Russian Jews. . . How do you think the Russian Jews are integrating to Rochester?
- A. Well, the few that I have had any . . . they like it very much. I know two families and they. . . they have jobs. One of them has had difficulty because of his language and age, but I think they're finding it. . . those who are here.
- Q. How do they. . . how are they brought here to Rochester?
- A. They're brought by the family. . . the Jewish Family. . .
- Q. The Jewish Family. . . So they're helped finding jobs and. . . homes and . . .
- A. Yea. The Jewish community has been very kind in taking them in socially.
- Q. They have?

- A. Yes. They've been very nice.
- Q. The Jewish community ir regardless of Orthodox, Conservative, Reform Jews. . . in general?
- A. Yea. Well, the people I know from. . . I don't know about the others, but I know. . . and in the summers . . . these people too. . . they've become very friendly with them. D. . . this was very interesting. I have a Russian boy, and he and his friend both study with me. And one day they said. . . oh, my what. . . they were talking about G-d. And they said you know this person always talks about G-d, and so I said well don't you believe in G-d. And one of the little boys, a young Russian boy, said look Mrs. Berman I want to tell you something. I don't know whether I believe in G-d. When I was in Russia I wasn't allowed to believe in G-d, but now I'm here. Now I want to have the opportunity to decide for myself. Maybe I won't believe, but maybe I will. But I want to decide. I thought that was kind of bright, you know.
- Q. That is. . .
- A. Yea.
- Q. How do you think the integration or assimilation of the Russian Jews compares to let's say the German Jews that came. . . or the Jews that came after the Holocaust to Rochester? Do you recall those who arrived after. . . I guess '46, '47?
- A. Well, those that came . . . I just probably. . . really I don't know very much about those from Russia. . . But those that came after the Holocaust, those were Jews because Poland was a land. . . a land of Jewish culture. And . . . but worse than that the Russian Jews had no culture at all. But the miracle is that they. . . that they within the spark to want to become Jewish and to want to identify because they have so many years where they

- A. (Continued) . . . they want strength from us. And here within them something drew them back, so this is a miracle in itself. Because other Jews that came are barely Jewish, they speak Judaism.
- Q. Do you. . . did you work at all with the Jews that came in after the Holocaust? Those that came. . .?
- A. No. I had some students, you know, that . . . I know of two people who came at that time, not too much.
- Q. Were they involved in Labor Zionism, you know, as individuals?
- A. Those that came?
- Q. Those who came after the war?
- A. Well, I think in Rochester they organized them and called them the New Americans, and some of them I understand are active Zionists. Now I don't know whether where it came from, but I know they were organized in this group. They. . . they. . . most of them identified and I think they. . .
- Q. Going back I guess to the late thirties or early forties, do you remember when you first became aware of Hitler and what he was doing? You had always been aware of anti-Semitism in Europe?
- A. Yea. As I recall it was horrible news, I shuddered. But, you know, all that we heard we couldn't believe it was possible. You can see the Germans. . . some felt well, you know, it's impossible that a thing like that will occur. Later on. . . later on. . . it was frightening to look through the. . .
- Q. Did the synagogues organize themselves, or organize protests of any sort?
- A. We didn't have too many. See, this is where the problem was. Now today anything happens to the Jews there really is a unit organized and that actually cried out fight. But in those days we didn't. Because I think it's because of what is happening in Israel now that . . . (last part of sentence fades out: transcriber's note.) If anything happens. . .

- Q. Have you always been a member of Beth El? Or . . . or . . . your father also? Your family when they came to America?
- A. No, no. It was only when I began to teach that I became a member, and then my parents joined.
- Q. Before that were you affiliated with Orthodox?
- A. I belonged to an Orthodox shul, but after I started to teach I joined Beth El. But I liked Beth El anyway because, you know, you can express yourself whichever way you want. And, you know, everyone . . . you have people at Beth El. . . you have people who are Conservative and you have people. . . who knows? I mean, you know, everybody I think finds a place at Beth El, it promotes self. I . . . I really like it there.
- Q. OK. Let's see. Have you ever been involved with the JY? Participated. . .?
- A. Well, I've been a member there. I don't know how much I participate, but I was a member. I used to go to all the lectures. I would attend, but I was not an active member. If I had time it was for Zionism. Zionism was where all my energy went to.
- Q. In Labor Zionism were there also people who were members of the Labor Party and different Socialist parties? I . . . I'm . . . I have Abe Chapman's name on my mind, for example. Did Labor Zionism draw up from generally organized labor as well?
- A. Well, I don't know. You see, there was a Arbeiter Ring here in Rochester. And many of the Socialists, most of them belonged to the Arbeiter Ring. But the Labor Zionist is really Socialists, too. But I don't know whether this was Socialist Party, I don't know.
- Q. But, . . . but if they were members of the Arbeiter Ring. . .
- A. Then they were Socialists. They were Socialists if they belonged to the Arbeiter Ring. And in fact the Arbeiter Ring at one time was opposed to

- A. (Continued) Zionism, you know. . . Now, they look at it a little differently. But, the. . . the. . . am I still on this question. . . ?
- Q. Yes, unless you have something else you . . . Well, was Rochester active in terms of being . . . not a union city, but were there strikes by the Arbeiter Ring or . . . ? Like if I said Abe Chapman, does that ring a bell?
- A. Yes because he was the head of the union. He was the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. . .
- Q. Was he a community leader though?
- A. I don't know.
- Q. How about recollections of Rabbi Bernstein?
- A. Well, I used to go occasionally there, lectures, where I would hear him. And they always had a very high regard for him. I think he brought much Zionism into the temple. I think that they are. . . they turned more to Judaism and to tradition more than they ever had under him.
- Q. At B'rith Kodesh?
- A. At B'rith Kodesh, yea. And he brought in more Hebrew studies and. . . and one group broke away because they felt it was much too Jewish. The Sinai group broke away. And he was a true, ardent Zionist and he worked for Zionism.
- Q. Do you observe Kashruth? I just wondered. And you keep the Sabbath also?
- A. Well, I keep the Sabbath to a certain degree. I go to the temple on Shabbas, you know. But I'm not Orthodox, we're Conservative. I drive to temple.
- Q. But you wouldn't work on the Sabbath? You. . .
- A. No, I don't. . .
- Q. You wouldn't have to because of your job.
- A. No.

- Q. It's not that type. . . Let's see. Oh, what do you think about girls being Bat Mitzvahed? That's something that's recent in your own . . .
- A. I think it's. . . I think it's a very good idea. And, here comes in the women's liberation and, you know, again I think that it teaches them how. . . the girls look forward to do it, and after all they're Jewish girls, will be a mother one day, she's gonna have a Jewish . . . it's a wonderful. . . I feel very proud when they go up there. They . . . those children who studied the Hebrew. . .
- Q. In your own experience, having been so steeped in Hebrew education and having four. . . three. . . three brothers and. . . do you recall, did you sort of. . . not resent, but feel bad that. . . that your brothers had been so honored with a Bar Mitzvah and whatever and that you. . .?
- A. Well, that really happened in Europe. I always felt that my brothers had the preference. And I recall when my son was born I had Dr. Rosenberg deliver, and the first thing I heard him say was Mrs. Berman, Mrs. Berman, you had a son. My father said, oh you had a son, a son. And I just wondered, you know, why a son. But then in the Bible, too, they'll mention the son, but you'll very seldom hear. . . It can't be that everyone in the Bible never had a daughter, but constantly you hear the names of sons, and very rarely daughters.
- Q. Did you send your son to Jewish camp, the Seneca Lake Camp, or. . .?
- A. No.
- Q. Was he a member of Habonim?
- A. No.
- Q. Was there even a Habonim?
- A. Yea, but not very active. No.
- Q. He didn't go to Jewish day school?

A. Well. . .

Q. The Hillel School?

A. He went to, I think, he went to the nursery for a while. And then I. . . he went to public school and he had Hebrew school. I think he began at the age of seven, instead of putting him with a babysitter, I said, well I'll just send him to Hebrew school.

Q. And he went all the way through Hebrew high school? Did you have. . . still have family left in Poland. . . in Russia after. . .

A. My aunt.

Q. You mentioned her.

A. She was killed by the Nazis. . . (Last part of sentence fades out: transcriber's note.) We don't know how. . . And my father. . . And my aunts in England. . .

Q. Why had they left before. . . even before. . . ?

A. I. . . I don't know. I never even questioned it. They lived there.

Q. Your father. . . your father's father also?

A. I think his daughters went. . . Of course there was poverty there, and I'm sure that they left because of the poverty.

Q. Well, we were talking about anti-Semitism before, you said you never experienced anti-Semitism. Have you ever experienced any sort of restriction in. . . in. . . well, not just in Hebrew school, but teaching public school, as a Jew or restricted as to where you could live, or where you wanted to live? Do you recall?

A. I don't think so. I don't think so. The only thing I know is that when I went to school, went to Normal School, I know that I never wanted to sing the Christmas songs. And, you know, they had somebody that's going to. . . and I just couldn't sing. I felt. . . I was embarrassed, but I just couldn't.

And the children would ask me in school what. . . what can they do?



- A. (Continued) Because they were also feeling the problem.
- Q. Yea. Were you aware that there was a quota system for Jews at the U. of R. in the forties, 1940's and '50's?
- A. Yea, yea.
- Q. Did you ever even consider trying to go or your brothers?
- A. Well, see my parents didn't have enough money so . . . and again the boys had the education. The girls gets married even in my home, an enlightened home. All right, so a girl gets married, she doesn't need it. That's not. . . so each one having. . .two of them one . . . one brother didn't study, my father felt . . . (sentence fades out: transcriber's note.)
- Q. Did your brothers go the the university here?
- A. Well, my oldest brother attended the U. of R. then he went on. . . then he went to Columbia. From Columbia he went to Tulane. And my youngest brother went to U. of R. and then Columbia.
- Q. I. . . Do you recall their ever having felt . . . I don't know what the word is. . . because they were Jewish at the U. of R.? I mean, do you think it was hard for them to get into the U. of R.?
- A. No, not really.
- Q. Just because this was even before the quota? I mean the quota was in the forties?
- A. My brother's sixty.
- Q. That would be 19. . . in the thirties.
- A. Yea. Not then, no.
- Q. We talked a little bit about Zionism, maybe I'll just ask you some of the other questions that we have on Zionism. Do you think that there can be Jewish survival without the State of Israel?
- A. Presently we need it very badly.

Q. In terms of American Jewry? In terms of world Jewry?

A. Well, anywhere. We need Israel very much in order to survive.

Q. Do you think Israel has a right in Uganda?

A. Of course. I think it was very daring, it was brilliant. And it shows you know that . . . that Jews are responsible for sharing. . .

Q. Do you think that support in Rochester for Israel has increased from 1948 to '56 to . . .?

A. No, there's been wonderful support for Israel. I don't know how much people give, but I know that. . .

Q. Why do you think that?

A. I think it's the fact that we have Israel to support, it's a fact that. . .

Q. That. . .

A. I recall, you know, when we had the 1967 rally at Beth El, the turnout . . .

I know I felt proud . . . (rest of sentence fades out: transcriber's note.)

And I recall in class one boy showed up and brought forty dollars, and I hated to take their money because I had asked them to give, and I felt, you know, they were trying to help Israel. Each one of them brought five dollars. . .

and one, he comes in with forty dollars. Where'd you get this money? He said, well, this is the money, he said, that I put away for my Bar Mitzvah, and my parents say I can give only ten. He told his parents, it's my money and whatever I want I can do with it. (Hum on tape is beginning to drown out Mrs. Berman's voice, which is very soft to begin with. Rest of sentence is too low to transcribe: transcriber's note.) I want to tell my parents. . . very valuable . . . And to this day whenever I meet him, you know, as a graduate, he has such a love for Israel. So that I think people . . .

Q. Did you see Golda Meir when she was here?

A. Yes.

Q. Was that a big turnout?

A. Oh, yes. I'm reading her book now, too.

Q. Which one?

A. My Life by Golda Meir.

Q. What do you think of the United Nations?

A. It's a third world organization, that's all.

Q. Do you think it's an effective peacekeeping force?

A. No. I hate to say this, but it has the worst. . . you can't help it, you still have to try to go ahead because some kind of a voice where the world can here, even if they don't agree with us, we can speak out there.

Q. Did you have a lot of hope for the United Nations when it was first formed?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. Do you think people generally thought it would be the. . .

A. I recall when I was in high school, at that time there was a League of Nations, . . . an idealist and . . . but somehow or other it just wasn't working.

Q. Do you recall when they first passed the resolution for the State of Israel? To make it a state?

A. I listened. . . I listened to the radio. I sat there all the time listening, and counted each country, which ones for and which ones against.

END OF SIDE B, TAPE 1 (Interview 1)

Interview II  
Tape I  
Side A

- Q. Today is July 22. This is Nancy Rosenbloom and I'm interviewing Mrs. Libbie Berman at her home. Side A. . . or Side one of Tape A. . . Tape B, second . . . second interview. Maybe just to test the microphone, do you want to. . . When we stopped talking last week we were talking about Joseph Avenue, and we were. . . you have some recollections of Joseph Avenue, 1930's and 40's.
- A. Yea. I . . . my whole life centered around Joseph Avenue. The Talmud Torah was there, where my father taught, it was on Baden Street. And then there was the . . . (next few words fade out: transcriber's note.) The Farbund Schule was there. And the Arbeiter Ring was there. So that the whole cultural center was right . . .
- Q. Did you participate in the Arbeiter Ring?
- A. No.
- Q. How about in the Farbund Schule?
- A. I, myself?
- Q. Yea.
- A. Later on after I was married my husband was a member, so I joined there.
- Q. Now those were the Labor Zionists?
- A. Well, they weren't.
- Q. Oh, they weren't?
- A. No. Farbund was the Labor Zionist. Poale Zion and Farbund were Labor Zionist . . . and I was a member and active, too, in the Labor Zionist group. But later on I just joined a group, a cultural group, see?
- Q. Were they affiliated in any way with the different Socialist parties?
- A. Yes, they were Socialist.

Q. Were there any contradictions between Labor Zionism and Socialism?

A. Well, the . . . the Arbeiter Ring was . . . they were. . . I think they were anti-Israel, they were anti-Zionists. I think that was true only. . .

Q. But not the Farbund Schule?

A. The Farbund was pro-Israel. . . I mean. . . yes.

Q. I know somebody was telling me stories about the Socialist groups making a farce of Yom Kippur. Did you ever see that?

A. Well, I didn't see it, but I heard about it, you know. But they didn't observe, they didn't go to shul. But I had heard these stories. But actually I'm not . . .

Q. How about the Jewish Children's Home? Was that still operative when you. . .?

A. When I went to high school I got a job at the Jewish Children's Home. So I made my spending money, and I went to teach there. And after high school I would drop my books there and teach. My older brother was already teaching then, and I taught the children. Mr. Hollender was the superintendent. And I enjoyed it very much. The children were nice and well behaved, very good experience.

Q. What did you teach?

A. Hebrew.

Q. To all different ages, or only to the younger kids?

A. I think at that time I taught the younger ones. I, myself, was only about fifteen, sixteen; so, I had very young children.

Q. And that was an Orthodox. . . wasn't it?

A. Yea, I recall . . . this was interesting. . . I was teaching then. I used to put up little plays and they loved it. And then they had a dancing teacher. And one day Alfred Hart came in and he walked up to me and put his arm around me. And he said, I'm so proud of you, you're doing so much for

- A. (Continued) for the Jewish community and the children who need it.  
And at that time it meant so much. Mr. Alfred Hart!
- Q. Do you recall when they closed the Children's Home?
- A. Well, I don't know. I'm not sure. I know it was closed but I couldn't tell you when.
- Q. Because I. . . I'm wondering whether or not the Jewish community felt. . . not angry, but displaced by. . . by social workers who came in and took over functions that had previously been performed by the Jewish Chil. . .
- A. I imagine that they probably. . . the social workers realized there was no need to put children in an institution, and give 'em the experience of the home.
- Q. But, do you think that that home was an institution like. . .?
- A. Yes.
- Q. . . . like an institution today? That. . . that it was better to put them in foster homes? I just wondered whether or not there was some conflict in the community?
- A. I. . . I don't know whether there was a conflict, but I know that the trend was to give the children at least some kind of a home with parents there. This was, I imagine, the reason that they did it.
- Q. How about the Hebrew Char. . . Jewish Charities? House. . . was there a house on Kelly Street? Do you recall that? For. . . for Jews traveling . . . Traveling Jews that came through. . . or hospitality house? I guess. . .
- A. Not unless it's . . .
- Q. Right.
- A. Is that what they mean?
- Q. Was that. . . was that. . .
- A. Well, I don't know too much about it except I know when someone came or someone came to town or someone needed . . . I recall several women

- A. (Continued) especially that were very active going down to see the needs of the people, made arrangements for them.
- Q. So this. . . what would you say that operated to the 1940's or whatever? It was eventually replaced by the Jewish Family Service?
- A. I imagine.
- Q. You have nothing like that now?
- A. No, no. All things, I think, are taken care of now by the Jewish . . . and then they had the Jewish Family Service.
- Q. OK. How about Joseph Avenue as an area to shop?
- A. Oh, there was a lot of it. The children were, you know, could stay out late, stay out at night. No one was afraid. The parents went out to find the children. And, of course, I. . . I recall that there was no such thing as going to get a frozen chicken or chicken in the meat market. You had to go to the . . . what was it called. . . I forgot what it was called. With my mother I'd occasionally go there with her and she'd buy the chicken and then they would pluck the feathers off, you know. And they used to pick 'em, it was terrible, I didn't like to go. But that's the way you went. They put live chickens, and they'd pay for having it, you know, feathered and we would bring it home and take care of it. And the fish market you'd go if you wanted a live fish. It was like bringing the shtetl into Joseph Avenue.
- Q. In your own. . .
- A. It was excitement. . .
- Q. In your own experience did you ever do that also? Feather the chickens? Very. . . Let me see. . . I. . . I have a pretty good vision of what's going on on Joseph Avenue. Do you have any particular stories or anecdotes you remember? Did you ever work in any of the shops? In high school?
- A. Well, I worked downtown, you know, on Hudson Avenue. I loved Joseph Avenue,

- A. (Continued) I loved the stores, you know. The bakeries and the appetizing stores. You went to get a herring. . . now I think a herring costs dollar thirty-five or something. Then I'd go with a few cents and get a small herring to put it into a Jewish paper, you know, wrapped it up and gave it. And everything was in barrels.
- Q. Do you recall when it started to change? Joseph Avenue? When did you move out of that area?
- A. I'm trying to think where we moved.
- Q. OK. We were talking about changes in residence.
- A. I don't remember. I think when my parents moved to Clifford Avenue then we moved. . . And then we went to OK Terrace, which is very . . .so my parents moved a great deal. I don't. I stay close. My parents . . .
- Q. Well, how long have you been on. . .
- A. Here? I've been . . . I think about thirty years. So I've stayed in one place while my parents were constantly moving.
- Q. Well, before. . . before you moved onto Schubert Street, where were you?
- A. Well, I lived on . . . on Laburnham Crescent. And from Laburnham Crescent I moved onto Shepard Street. And then I had to get out, so I found this house and then moved in.
- Q. What induced you to move into this particular neighborhood?
- A. I don't know if it's anything particular. It was very difficult to get homes and I noticed in the paper that there were homes. . .
- Q. Because actually you moved from the other side of the city?
- A. Yes. But there was no reason then. . .
- Q. It wasn't to send your son to a school?
- A. No, no. He was only seven months old then. Partly was that family got the Yiddish paper. . . and they called him in and . . . (last few words of



- A. (Continued) sentence fade out: transcriber's note.) But. . .my parents belonged to a circle, they had a circle of friends and the friends accorded my father great respect and they would get . . .(sentence fades out; interference on the tape -- fuzziness -- transcriber's note.) I was only. . . didn't like that. . . lot of lovely people. And they were all interested in Israel and it was a very cultural group. And they all. . . Hebrew people didn't have much education, they were inspired to listen.
- Q. Who were they? Immigrants?
- A. Yes. All people around my parents' age who'd come from Russia. . . come from Russia. And many of them were . . . and some were. . . but they all joined in. . .
- Q. But, do you think they had participated at all in the revolution? Do you think they were disillusioned revolutionaries?
- A. These were not. . . no these were. . . they were Zionists from. . .
- Q. They were Zionists.
- A. Right. And they came here. There were, I think, in the Arbeiter Ring, there were many that were called Bundistas. And they were the ones that wanted to overthrow the government in Russia. They were not . . . jus the friends in the Farbund. . .
- Q. Was it the Farbund that had its own Yiddish-speaking high school?
- A. They had. . . I don't think a high school, but they had . . . my father taught there for a while 'cause they had what you call a schule, which was a school. And my father taught Hebrew and helped in teaching. And from there he'd walk down. It was a little difficult. I was a very strict disciplinarian so he'd say come over . . . I'd come in, the kids would see me and they'd be quiet.
- Q. How old were you then?

- A. I must have been . . . I don't know, twenty. I maintained discipline. I used to start out that's what you're going to do. I did that, too. The first thing in the morning I thought I was going to, you know, teach and have order. After that . . . but as I got older I was interested in more of the subject matter, and discipline came along with it. It worked itself out.
- Q. What kinds of things did they teach you at the Farbund?
- A. Well, there. . . there was also Hebrew and , you know, the subjects. About Israel and everything. The make up of the. . .
- Q. That never. . . did that ever draw as many students as. . . ?
- A. No, no.
- Q. It must have been designed for children. Do you remember where that was located?
- A. It was on Buchan Park. Oh, it's become now the Upper Falls. I think that's what they call it now. The people would never believe that this is called the Upper Falls. I guess the idea. . . it broke my heart. And the way it . . .
- Q. Yea.
- A. That, you know, all Jewish life revolved right around that area. I used to drive by. . .
- Q. What happened to people when they moved out of that area? Did they move into, for example, this neighborhood?
- A. Yea.
- Q. Did your father stay and your parents stay in that neighborhood. . . ?
- A. No, I. . . see I moved down first, and then my father was getting along at that time and so he asked me to try to find a place near so that, you know, I could take care of them. I found a house and took care of the family. So I found them a flat on Laburnham Crescent. And that's. . .

Q. And what about that people's circle?

A. Well, they also came. They went either to Irondequoit or they moved to . . . not Brighton, but Monroe Avenue area.

Q. Because some people say that the Monroe Avenue area is more socially higher placed than . . . than the old . . . older neighborhood.

A. Yes.

Q. Did people realize and consciously decide that they would take a step up in life?

A. Yes, oh yes.

Q. So it was a planned move?

A. Yes. Except also people that moved . . . see Irondequoit also has lovely neighborhoods, so they moved there too which was a step up.

Q. Well, who was moving into Buchan Park from Joseph Avenue? Were they . . . are there Italian immigrants, or were they already blacks come directly in after the Jews?

A. I . . . I think . . . Jews . . . but it took a long period of time, you know, because I think until a few years ago many Jews lived there. I think Jews were also fearful of the blacks in their businesses so they moved out. 'Cause many, many businessmen remained.

Q. Even after the black . . .

A. Yea.

Q. . . . blacks came in?

A. Yea, but you know what happened to Mr. Schaeffer and this was frightening, and quite a few storekeepers were really hurt, so they moved out. It was more fear than anything else.

Q. Do you think there was anything special in terms of black/Jewish relations?

Or just black/white relations? They deteriorated. . .

- A. I don't think it was black/Jewish.
- Q. What about when they. . . whoever it was. . . destroyed. . . bombed out the old Beth Sholom? Did they ever figure out who did it or why, do you recall?
- A. That was during the . . .
- Q. It was after . . . it was about five years after the riots, but . . .
- A. Yes, but. . . but I imagine it still had to do with it. I recall now it was two o'clock in the morning and I heard this awful noise. You know, my window shattered. So, the people upstairs were calling me. . . you know, they understood something had happened. And then . . . they're not Jewish. He ran down and he came back and told me what it is, you know.
- Q. Did your window actually break?
- A. No. . .
- Q. The whole house shook. 'Cause you're not that far from. . .
- A. Yea.
- Q. OK. Did your son graduate from Monroe?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Were you always satisfied with the public schools in Rochester?
- A. In most things, yes.
- Q. Were you ever active in PTA?
- A. I wasn't active. . . I went to meetings, but I was not very active because all my time was spent . . . and there were meetings there and things to do so . . . but wherever . . . whenever, you know, I went to open house or whatever they had, actually I wasn't very active.
- Q. Do you think that at that time, as your son was growing up, I assume that was happening in the 1950's and early sixties. . .
- A. He graduated in 1962.
- Q. Was that predominately a Jewish. . . Jewish friends, extensively a Jewish

Q. (Continued) community?

A. There? No, he had both Jewish and non-Jewish.

Q. Was there any black?

A. No, no. But it was a very tight community. When he was 16 I recall that my son had a teacher that I imagine was one of the outstanding teachers in Monroe High, and she was Italian. And my son decided that they ought to make a party for her. And he was the one that started the whole thing. And they had a beautiful party. He had me go with another friend and they all chipped in and . . . (rest of sentence fades out: transcriber's note.) And they had a beautiful dinner for her. She'd been marvelous. She said . . . you're so wonderful. . . he came home and told me about it. But they loved her very much. She was very strict and talked a lot.

Q. Did he stay out of school just on the high holydays or on . . . Passover and . . . Do you recall did he ever. . . do you think he ever felt different because he was Jewish in Monroe?

A. No. He was. . . he was proud of being Jewish. And it wasn't like I was very . . . it wasn't like they . . . he stayed home. He just wanted . . . he wanted to go to the temple and . . . but this was his way of life. I mean, just. . . also many times he would come to the temple and sit there and do his homework so he could be together with me there. Then we would just go home together. At other times one of us when we came home. . . I never could be with him. . . to get home. . . it was always dark when I came, and he was. . . he was very little, and I think that my father had a great deal to do with it. My father taught him, he spent a lot of time upstairs with my father, answer about books. That was a way of life. My son did that too. And he'd spend hours of study where another person would be at the beach.

Q. Yea, takes a lot of patience.

A. And Yiddish. (Says a sentence which is drowned out by the background hum of the recorder: transcriber's note.)

Q. Yea. I guess one of the things I was thinking of . . . you know, today in Brighton they close the schools on. . .

A. Rosh Hashanah. . .

Q. And that's quite a change even from ten years ago when, you know, a handful of students would stay in the public schools in the city and the school work would go on just as. . .

A. Well, the teachers expected it. I think they respected the children, and somehow or other they made up for it, you know. I was teaching at Beth El the last few years and many parents would send their children to school because their children wanted it, so they sent them to school. For a few years I really wasn't. . . you see, they would have gained more by coming to Beth El during the holidays. A great deal is learned from your own people, they can teach you. And many children felt they wanted to go so much, but they went to public school.

Q. Did the students used to come and tell you that?

A. Yes.

Q. OK. Do you think this neighborhood has changed a lot?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. And when do you think it. . .

A. Well, this was a very, very lovely neighborhood. And about . . . during the Viet-Nam War you could see a change in the street. It wasn't kept up as well, you know, the hippies were staying. Rock music was played early in the morning till late at night. You had the hair styles that they're wearing. We had blacks. Not that that makes any difference, which I mean on the

A. (Continued) street. . . well, we still have blacks. . . but, then the last few years there's a change again. Couples are moving in now, and couples are moving back in. And they're taking care of the yard, and it's really a pleasure now. I'm hopeful. . . they have the yeshiva academy, which is up at Pinnacle. And I think that adds, too. I was saying the other day to a friend, and I also said it to my brother, even when I come home at night I'm not afraid, and then . . . 'cause I live alone, and you walk down the street and all the shades are drawn and the draperies are drawn. And you're just afraid even to enter into your home. But since the yeshiva moved up there I see the young men around eleven, twelve o'clock. They're walking down the street with their yamulkes, and I have a sense of security. I just feel. . . look, I don't have to be afraid because just knowing that they're up makes me feel good.

Q. That's interesting because the street is well taken care of.

A. I think that's now. There's also a young man that comes to me, I didn't want to mention his name, he's Jewish. He came to me and handed me a petition not to allow them to extend the yeshiva. So he came to ask me. Not. . . not . . . to allow them because they wanted to expand the dormitory. So I told him . . . (rest of sentence fades out: transcriber's note.) So he gave me a lecture, it's too congested, which I know it is. But that's not reason enough for me. I. . . I. . .

Q. What do you think? That. . . that they'll eventually have to move the yeshiva?

A. No, I think that they did buy, I understand, they bought the house next door and they are expanding. But, they walk through the streets here, the young boys. There's one young man. . . this is very interesting. I . . . I was driving to Temple Beth El early one morning to teach and as I drove

A. (Continued) through Norris Drive I noticed a young man with a beard standing under a tree. And I thought he was davading, but I . . . I wasn't sure, you know. I'd never seen anyone davad under a tree. So I went on to school, and when I got to school about ten minutes later this young man comes in. I said didn't I see you. . . I'm Mrs. Berman and didn't I just see. . . and he says, oh yes, I like to pray under the tree to G-d. So we became quite friendly, and he. . . when he went to Columbia, and when he came back from New York he called me up and he said and he just wanted to know how I'd feel. A pleasant person, quite nice.

Q. Do you think that most of the neighborhood is happy to have a yeshiva there? Or do you think. . . did. . . did they get sufficient signatures on the petition?

A. I don't think they did.

Q. Did. . . is this street now largely Jewish or. . . ?

A. No.

Q. It's still. . .

A. See, it used to be Jewish, it isn't anymore.

Q. It isn't anymore.

A. There are really few Jews, but it was practically all Jewish at one time.

This street is very interesting. This house was built by Mr. Shepard, and this was the first house that was built on the street, he built it for his home. And then he lived here, I understand, many, many years. And then he built one across from the . . . But he had owned all this farmland. . .

(rest of sentence fades out: transcriber's note.) I looked up the street one time. . . this is quite interesting. . .

Q. This house was his actual house?

A. Actual house. And in the attic there was his maid's room. And I don't know how they ever went upstairs because there's no electricity, it's dark. And



- A. (Continued) she must have gone up by candlelight. And then I think there's a schoolroom with a heater and. . .
- Q. Well, when you first moved into this neighborhood were these new houses?
- A. No.
- Q. They were already. . .
- A. This house is about 70 years old.
- Q. That's interesting.
- A. It's a very. . .
- Q. OK. Let's go back to your career as a teacher. I wondered, would you have ever considered doing anything but teaching?
- A. No, I love teaching. I don't think I'd ever do anything else. I don't know if I mentioned this to you but my father had his Hebrew school in Russia. So by the time I was two or three years old I would walk in and they would be studying, so if he. . . whatever he'd teach them, if he'd teach them the Torah or whatever, I would listen. And finally I knew them all. And sometimes he would pick me up and put me on the desk, he must have been. . . and hold me up and say well if they don't learn it, here's a two-year old and she thinks in this, you know. But there was one episode there in Russia, it was just interesting, too. It was during the war. I had gone. . . I don't know where I had gone with my brother, I always took care of him. I was five years older than he was and he was my charge. And all through life he was until finally, you know, he went into the army. So we were walking along and suddenly he sees this ball and he picked it up. This is too big. So I picked it up, it was so heavy. (Rest of sentences fade in and out: transcriber's note.) And then I said, you carry it, back and forth, you carry it. And we got into the house and I ran to my father and I said look what we found. He turned. It was a bomb, and we had carried it. And he

- A. (Continued) was so frightened. (Background hum drowns out next sentence: transcriber's note.) But it was just one of those, you know. . .
- Q. Did. . . did your mother work outside of the home?
- A. My mother never worked until my father lost his job, and he wasn't teaching. Then she went to work.
- Q. I forgot I. . .
- A. Yea.
- Q. OK. Do you think you would have preferred to have taught in a public school had you been able to get into the public school? You. . . You told me last time that at the time you graduated from Normal School. . .
- A. Yes.
- Q. . . . it was the Depression. . .
- A. Well, I. . . I didn't want to go to teach the first few years when my son was very little. Beth El called me and I went in and I remained there because I love Hebrew, I really do. So that meanwhile financially I would have been much better off had I remained in public school.
- Q. In public school.
- A. They have an excellent pension I would have had. But I. . . you know, my friends did. I don't have. . . but it was just a love of Hebrew, and I love to teach Jewish children. That I. . . I. . .
- Q. Is your circle of friends. . . were they other women, for example, that are public school teachers?
- A. Yea, most.
- Q. Mostly Jewish women, or. . . ?
- A. Yes.
- Q. That had gone to Normal School?
- A. No, some went to the U. of R. . . (a few words are too low to pick up on

- A. (Continued) the tape: transcriber's note.) Others who had gone to U. of R. went to other colleges.
- Q. Were they also Labor Zionists. . .
- A. No, no.
- Q. . . or did you. . . They just had similar interests?
- A. No, no. They were not Labor Zionists. I had another circle of friends, too, who were. . . and I came to the Labor Zionists . . .
- Q. But this group of friends was that like people who shared. . .?
- A. Yes.
- Q. OK. Maybe I. . . sort of a hard question to ask. I sort of was curious what it was like teaching at Beth El in terms of the other. . . the other Hebrew school teachers and the students and. . . I don't know. . . I should be more specific in my question, I think. Did you have. . . more or less have freedom to plan your own curriculum?
- A. Well, the finest principal we had was Jay Stern. I had others, but one teenage teacher, she almost could teach in the . . . how do you say. . . had the freedom teaching what she wanted. That is the subject. . . we knew the subject we were to teach, had to understand the curriculum. But a teacher could go her own way and teach. And I think the fact that he trusted his teachers. . . of course, there was a great deal of supervision, too. And, all right, he knew what was done in the class, and he could tell, you know, if I taught . . . But as I say, he put great trust and faith in his teachers. I don't know if he did it with all teachers, but he did it to many teachers.
- Q. Were there changes in the curriculum over the years, or did you largely teach . . .?
- A. Well, it was. . . personally I'm a traditional teacher. And, I find that I. . . I can't teach when children are noisy and walk around. . . Well, they

A. (Continued) can walk around, but they're very noisy I can't teach. And I've gone sometimes into a classroom and children are talking, they. . . they don't seem to listen to what the teacher is saying. I. . . I can't teach that way. At the same time I've seen some innovative ways of teaching where children can have the freedom and still learn, too. I'm not knocking the other way, but I think that . . . that there has to be guidance and . . . and you really have to teach the subject matter. I. . . I recall. . . I believe personally even in memorizing, too. I. . . they don't do that anymore. And also I. . . I believe in teaching phonetically, too, 'cause I find that many children cannot learn just by the rote word method. They have to have that as an aid, so you have to know your children and know what to teach them and what method . . .

Q. Over the years that you taught there did you. . . were there. . . who devised the curriculum?

A. Jay Stern.

Q. Oh, Jay Stern.

A. With the Board of Education.

Q. Of the city? The Jewish . . . ?

A. And I think Rabbi Karp had something to do with it.

Q. I wondered whether, for example, the whole Conservative movement had certain. . .

A. Oh, yes. They. . . they. . . it follows the curriculum of the Theological Seminary.

Q. And whether or not that has changed over the years?

A. Except I think that . . . I don't know if I should record it, that education has been watered down.

Q. Have the. . . do you think the children have changed over the years?

A. In what way? Well, you want to stop that?

Q. You don't want to put it on . . .

A. No.

Q. Wait. . . OK.

A. This reminded me of . . . my father was a vegetarian for about. . . I don't know, over five years. And he just ate eggs and cheese, you know, vegetables, fruits. And so somewhere or other . . . it must be a carry-over, but I just can't kill anything or when I eat meat there's always that feeling of guilt.

Q. I know.

A. And I know it's due to my father, but . . .

Q. I'm gonna say on ~~the~~ tape that it was just an ant that you put out the door again. Otherwise. . .

A. Yea, yea.

Q. OK. I know. When was he a vegetarian? Towards his later years?

A. No, when he was . . . I would say in his forties.

Q. Do you think many people were vegetarians? 'Cause you know now it's a popular thing to be.

A. Personally I think that it's really the right way to be a vegetarian. I know what I'm doing is wrong. I've been brought up that way.

Q. You mean to eat meat?

A. Yea. Goes against my . . .

Q. OK. Let's see. Well, if you don't mind putting it on tape, the change in the children and the parents. I don't think that there's anything wrong with it.

A. Well, there's a lack of respect for . . . I wouldn't even say Jewish education. I think education in general. And the discipline isn't what it used to be.

Q. You mean, even within the children's home, this. . .?

A. I don't know, but I know. . . I know in the classroom. I think also that if the parent would really be interested in Jewish education, the children would be. They would be more motivated, but whatever you're teaching in class, he comes home and the parents don't live that kind of a life or, many times, they. . . they don't think it's very important. The child is bright enough to know, so that there's a carry-over into the classroom of what the parents feel. But, I become a sign. . . I'm not asking for reverence, but you know a certain respect, and children are inspired by a teacher. I don't think that any teachers have it right now. I'm not even speaking about our school. . . (last part of sentence fades out; transcriber's note.) But they don't even want to enter the. . . that they did years ago.

Q. Do you think there's a solution to that? I mean, is that something for example that . . . that teachers would get together and everyone would say that there seems to be a pattern of disrespect? It's one of our problems.

A. Yea. I. . . I personally think that not only the children but the parents have to think . . . (last few words fade out; transcriber's note.) I think it should start in the home first. The students are not going to learn anything without the home. Actually the child comes to us from the home, and what we do is reinforce, so that the. . . the school, itself, cannot do it. And if the home is erring, and that's involuntary, but if the home is erring, the teacher can give just so much. And then you have children that come -- there are all kinds of emotional problems and the teacher. . . I don't know personally . . . I think that being a teacher means a great deal because she is so handicapped and yet she accomplishes. And gets across education to a certain degree in the elementary grades.

- Q. OK. I heard several times that they refer to the generation who are now in their fifties as the lost generation in terms of Jewish leadership in Rochester. And I wonder whether now there was a swing back to children, for example, coming from stronger Jewish homes and whether or not there seems to be a trend in terms of the children they have taught. Or whether it is a trend right that. . . I wonder whether things are getting better or. . .?
- A. Well, I hope so. Let's put it this way, I hope so. I also have met some students that are very interested, they've gone to Israel and they are very positive. But these are unique children. These are from homes. . .
- Q. Yea.
- A. So I. . . I really don't know. I think that eventually they'll have to come back to traditional teaching, and take education more seriously.
- Q. What about the Mishara that they've established at Beth El? Is that something that you participate in?
- A. I'll tell you, see I think that the individual get lost there, it's too vast. And I belong to a Havurah. I think it's just beautiful. Most beautiful group I've ever belonged to. And it's thirty through ninety. There's respect and affection for one another and caring. It's a beautiful feeling. I hope that there are many members like that.
- Q. Is that one of the Mishara?
- A. Mishara is a family where they have the children.
- Q. Oh.
- A. A Havurah is just friends, a group of friends, all ages. They wanted them. . .
- Q. About how large a group is it?
- A. We have a large one. But they're lovely. And I think that the temples should do that because one finds himself and his friends.
- Q. That certainly is not a traditional. . . or is it a traditional. . .?

- A. Well, in older times you had your shul, it was small, and everybody knew everybody else. And everybody cared for everybody else. And if somebody didn't come to shul, immediately they'd run down on Shabbath to see why the person didn't come because they took an interest. Here you come to shul, and you come all the time, and you're out for a month and people don't even bother to call up to find out. They see you all the time and then you don't come, they don't. So, Havurah I think brings the people closer. It's almost like having a little group in shul.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A (Interview II)



Interview II  
Tape I  
Side B

Q. OK. This is Side B. Today is July 22. This is Nancy Rosenbloom interviewing Mrs. Libbie Berman. We were talking about the smaller groups. Do you think though that that's an attempt to modernize the temple? Or. . . or . . . I mean I wonder do you. . . I just wonder, I don't. . . I don't know whether or not it is. For example, Roots is the modern psychology, philosophy or whether it does. . .

A. I think the tradition is going back to the way a shul should be. It's just . . . and. . . and the young people are. . . you know, in the high school age, have complained to me that they didn't feel like going because they felt lost there. But I think that if Temple Beth. . . any temple, if they would, you know, try to bring the people together more. It's wonderful, it's what really a shul should be. It's a place where people gather and care for each other and not be just lost in the community.

Q. OK. Do you remember any particular students, famous students, any special stories about, especially famous students? Anecdotes about when you taught at Beth El? I. . . I. . . we did talk last time about . . . that the. . . that the students. . . the temple gave you a trip to Israel. . .

A. Yes.

Q. . . . on your retirement. I don't know if that was on tape.

A. I'm trying to think of one. I've had some excellent brains. I know I had. . . of the last. . . the last eighth grade. . . the one before that most of the children came from very highly motivated parents. And there was such a love and respect for the teacher and one for another, really exceptional. I thought it was a really wonderful class. They were a beautiful class.

Q. Have you had many students go on to become rabbis?

A. Just one.

Q. Just the one? Has Beth El, do you know, in . . . had many or . . . ?

A. No.

Q. I just. . .

A. I had just the one, that's all I can remember.

Q. Interesting. Maybe I'll move onto another topic. Have you ever experienced any restrictions, any form, in America because you were Jewish in terms of wanting to move into a neighborhood that you couldn't move into, a job which you couldn't have?

A. No.

Q. OK. How about. . . do you recall when you first learned about the destruction of the European Jewry? Was it. . . did you get letters from . . . from Russia, or from . . . ?

A. Well, we. . . we subscribed . . . my father subscribed to the Yiddish papers. And it was from there that we got a great deal of it. It was just so incredible, we were. . . we couldn't believe what happened. You know, you'd hear about it and say well, impossible that it could occur. Naturally, I don't think that we knew then . . . we didn't. . .

Q. In Rochester was there much organized activity, protests?

A. There were some protests, but if I recall, I don't know, I think it was Rabbi Karp. . . I think it was Rabbi Karp who spoke at . . . during the time when the Holocaust was going on. He was mentioning all the activities, all the social activities that were going on in Rochester. I'm not sure if he's the one, but one of the rabbis did. And, the conclusion was how could we have done all these things when human beings were being tortured. But I think. . . I think actually that it was. . . it was impossible. . . the

A. (Continued) catastrophe was so great that we didn't understand it.

Q. Was Rabbi Bernstein an active speaker in those days? Or don't. . .

A. Yes. The rabbis.

Q. In general, the community was. . .

A. Well, there were protest meetings, but not. . . you know, now if anything happens there are demonstrations, and we reach out into the White House. But, that was impossible, and as we learned later President Roosevelt was not doing anything for the people. He could have done a great deal.

Q. At the time do you think Roosevelt was popular?

A. Yes.

Q. Were you sort of surprised in the last. . . I don't know, it would have been the last three or four years that people. . . stories have been written that he wasn't so generous President or. . .?

A. Yes, but . . . you know, it just. . . I think it took time. . . it was in the last few years, but as time went on and as you get older you . . . he wasn't the man you thought he was. He was good in many areas. But as far as the name was concerned, Jewish people, I don't think he was. . .

. . . You know I'm looking . . . (last part of sentence fades out: transcriber's note.)

Q. Oh, thank you. Thanks for the teaching profession. Thank you. I. . . I enjoyed talking with you. I really only have one question left, and that is about the future of the Rochester Jewish community, which is one of those big questions. Are you optimistic in terms of the community strengthening as a Jewish community or. . .?

A. Well, I'll tell you. I am optimistic also I know that in teaching some of the students who have gone to Israel, they are taking an active part now in Beth El, too. I think that these people will accomplish a great deal. I

A. (Continued) mean you can't go really. . . right now we can't go by so many numbers as quality. And I think we are getting young people. It'll take time. I know on the campus there are young people who are interested in Judaism, and they are. . .they. . . they are taking their courses. They're starting to. . . and I think that perhaps there will be the return. . . I . . . I hope and I think it will if it . . . if it. . . it bothers me a great deal to see people. . . you know, now what you call race for. . . men, women and Judaism doesn't play an important part. This is the thing right now. In Hebrew there's a saying, this also will pass. And I imagine it will.

Q. Do you think that Rochester is a strong Jewish community of anybody?

A. Yea.

Q. So that. . .OK. Try to think. Do you think that the community in general. . . well, has lost a lot of the tradition? Because let's say. . . let's say forty or fifty years ago there was a very strong Orthodox community. Do think that that entire complexion of the entire community has changed?

A. Well, I don't know. I . . . I've been talking to a few. . . a few students of mine, about sixteen have joined an Orthodox movement and they have groups where they meet. And this young lady was saying to me that she doesn't understand why the Reform and the Conservative doesn't draw the youth like the Orthodox is drawing them. (Next sentence is too low to be transcribed, recorder hum drowns it out: transcriber's note.) Many of my students belong to this group and they talk about it.

Q. I wonder why.

A. I . . . I asked her, and I think that. . . I don't know whether it's education or whether there is a great love for Judaism, whether the group leaders are inspiring so that I know that they like . . . And even if . . . if some of the rituals don't please them, they go along with this

A. (Continued) because they just like to be together. And once. . . once brought into the group they just remain. I was very, very happy to hear about this group.

Q. Also, for example, the St. Regis Street shul seems to be growing.

A. Yes.

Q. Thriving.

A. Yea.

Q. Also seems to suggest the Orthodox. . .

A. Well, you know, I was just thinking, you know, about Carter and he's bringing religion back to politics. But perhaps there is a returning to religion. We've been. . . we've been moving away from it for a long time, and I think that people want something. They . . . there isn't a depth anymore, faith and a searching. Not that I want them to vote for Carter, but he's bringing something people are searching for into politics. And I think, too, the children. . . young people want to believe in something. Or you have all these. . . what do you call that? I'm trying to remember what it is. . . the yogi and all that, it's a way of searching for spiritual beliefs. And Judaism has it. Somehow or other the young people didn't get a hold of it, or perhaps the older generation didn't bring it across to them. I don't know. But. . . but, it's there, we have it there.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B (Interview II)