

Lindsey Schapiro and Carolyn Zelicof

Side 1a and 1b

Start:

Womans voice: Okay, I'd just like to begin with some autobiographical data and being with some of your family background. Your parents, your mother, your father, their european background and their memories of Europe.

Rabbi Bernstein: I think I want to begin by calling your attention to one of the biographies that I prepared for the University of Rochester. When Chancellor Wallis told me about the Bernstein chair they were setting up they said they wanted biographical information so that in time to come, if someone was to ask who is this fella, it would be able to say. And as I prepared it, I found that it took a great deal of research and careful assembly of materials because it wasn't easily available. I did prepare a biography- I think in its present form it runs from about 150-160 pages, and more can and in fact will come into it, but the point i'm making is that that answers many of the questions that are being asked today with regard to my boyhood and youth and so on so I would encourage that anyone who wants to follow up on this to look at that - it's in the possession of chancelor wallis, he is designated to be responsible for it. The only thing I have to ask is that it should not be publicized or distributed in any way without my consent. There are personal things about the family and so on that are not meant for publication or distribution of present time but can certainly be used for information. I was born on June 29th 1901, in Rochester, NY, at number 9 Cumberland Street. Cumberland Street then, and at that point stood opposite the area where the post office has subsequently been erected. I was born in the house, my mother was attended by Dr. Elsner whose daughter, by the way, Helene Elsner (Longo?) has been a member of my congregation ever since i've been here as Rabbi and whom I regard as a personal friend. At the age of 2 I think it was we moved from Rochester to New York, my father was always in search of Greener Pastures- never found them but we moved quite a bit in the course of our lifetime. Then we came back to rochester to live , i think it was in 1910, and we presumed life in rochester on Woodward street, a much ___ area now. I went to #14 school- they had a problem with me because I was way ahead of my age. i threw the progressive methods of New York schools and perhaps the pressures of white jewish boys , I was 2 years ahead of my age group and they did subsequently put me ahead 2 years all of my school life I was 2 years younger than the average of the youngsters around me. It had advantages: it challenged me, it didn't hold me back. But it also had its disadvantages: I never quite fit into the social life of the boys and girls who were 2 years ahead of me. I never would advise to a parent in a similar situation. My father came from , I think it was, I know one came from ___ and one from Calvree, I know it was of lithuanian origin. My mother was from suag, my mother arrived here in rochester at the age of about 12, she came alone, noone accompanied her, she brought along enough herring and black bread to avoid violating the dietary laws on the long ship surge journey. She came directly to Rochester from New York where her brother same established himself living at 247 Baton Street , opposite where the Hannah Ross;s are

today. He married a Fannie Sternberg, they lived at 247 Baton street for many years, brilliant son, Milton Steinberg- one of the most brilliant rabbi's this country has produced was born at 247 Baton street and went to 9 school and east high before they moved to New York. Now Sam Steinberg, my mothers brother, was a pecunious man- he made a living selling spectacles, buying spectacles, buying gold and selling it and so on in retail but he was a scholar- he was the one who taught milton so much of what he knew and he taught me things that i needed to know about Jewish heritage until the age of 93 when he died, he taught a class on Talmud at his shul in Brooklyn. Thats the sort of person he was and sort of guy out of which I came. My father was intelligent and articulate, but he was not intellectual. My mothers side of the family however was intellectual- my mother very early found the public library on Joseph Avenue and flaunted it- love Dickens. read ever book he ever wrote I think and this all for a little young immigrant girl because that was the way she was made and those were the values that she particularly transmitted to me and to my two brothers, which played a very important role in our lives.

My father became a cutter- almost everything that went to Rochester was in the clothes, or tailoring- he became a cutter but because he was by nature he was sort of an entrepreneur, he began to manufacture pants and have a little pants manufacturing business, wholesale and retail, practically all of his adult life. And I always remember the dissatisfied customer because he would buy this stuff that he would call remnants and the pants that would manufacture out of these remnants never fitted properly - theyd be tight in the seat or short in the croch- a very good way for me to lose a friend was to sell pants to them and i did becuase there were two periods in my life- my college career- i had to quit college to help out at home because My father was sick and he needed my help in selling some of his goods so I learned a little bit about the pants but if I wanted to have friends ___ these people I should not try to sell them my fathers pants. My mother also went to work in the clothing industry all in Rochester- I don't happen to know how they met whether it was old romance or not, i doubt it. In fact, as I look back at the history of the family, my mothers family had quite a few children and I'm not in contact with them but my father had 4 sisters, I don't think any one of them really had a happy marriage and I'm afraid I have to say that about my own parents too. Perhaps that was because romance did not play an important part of their lives, perhaps it was becuase they married for other reasons. I find the children of these families were nearly all unusual people who achieved high positions for themselves in the scientific world and one cousin of mine was the Dean of Education at the city college of new york for many years . But Harolds Father never made a living and Genny his wife, my fathers sister, she was the one that had to be responsible for the family. There's a cute story that i have for when I was worried about Genny- Genny had , besides the fact that Genny had 8 children, a husband, where could she get an apartment? Where could she find a landlord that would accept her with her 8 children and a very modest rental. So her device was to say that she had two children, and she'd make the deal on that base. Gradually, afterward shed sneak in the other 6 and the landlord would throw his hands helplessly. It is a kind of touchy phenomenon if i'm right, you couldn't really say that any of the marriages was a happy, happy love marriage. Maybe the good sense of the jewish experience didn't make that primary, in jewish history experience first one married, and then one loved. And maybe that, maybe the transition from European values of life to American Values of life changes in the whole patterns of love and marriage may have had something to do with that.

I'm not quite sure what my grandfather did- I always thought that he ran a butcher shop. When I met a relative who lived out on the west coast a year or two ago who said he had a wine business - he made wine and made a living out of that. In any event, he was the one who had the 4 daughters and the 1 son. The son and the daughters did not have a formal education except for Bessie. Bessie went to teachers training school and became a teacher and she remained a teacher for the larger part of her life. She had one daughter, with Grace, was a little wack and disappeared for a little while, and have had no contact with her. I have retained some sort of contact with the Eaglesons. There are 3 children, or 4 children. One was Jessie- friendship in the latter years. He suddenly became ultra fanatically orthodox. There's no explanation that is clear to me because it didn't run in the family- sold everything, moved to Jerusalem and lived out his life there. And every time we went there we spent some time with him and he brought us to various family that had settled in Jerusalem. They had another son, Sydney, who was a hotel clerk. I don't think he rounded to a great deal- I think he worked in the time square district in New York, you know, he hasn't don't very much with his life. One sister, the oldest member of the family, Grace, and this is one of the things that I don't want publicized, at least for a while anyway, she's still living as far as I know, she married Catholic and never told him that she was Jewish. She married him on the base that she was a Catholic. The children were raised as Catholic, and that was a story that came back to me through the family some years ago, whether that's still the case now, I don't know. The solid person in the family was Sylvia, who unfortunately did not have a happy marriage but she has a substantive person and a means, has a very good relationship with her own children. As I said, my grandfather made a very humble living. He lived up in 106th street or that area on the east side of the park in New York. Lets pause for a moment and let me catch my breath.

One person that I'm sure...Anna Steinberg Sherman, this is Ben Sherman, lived on the apartments on Edgewood Avenue, while she is over 80- very alert, very articulate, and very good memory. And was in a sense my mother's closest friend, and a dear friend of ours, and she grew up in Europe in the area that my mother did. In the area so that she would have details that I find I don't have about their life. Why did they leave? I suppose, I have difficulty remembering specific information but I have general information. The males left, I think chiefly to get out of the army because they were constricted to the Russian army, and they hated the Russian army, they were not only treated badly in the Army but they would also be forcibly seduced away from their Jewishness and they would lose contact with their families and their faith. My wife's father for example I think cut off part of his thumb to be declared unfit for military service. Many others just simply ran away in order to get out. Life in Europe was hard. They ate apparently, they lived. But they didn't live well. They had an exaggerated idea of the golden Medina, of life in America. But there was hardship there too but at least they had freedom and opportunity and their children had freedom and opportunity to grow and go places. They left also because of fear. If you had a sentimental thing like Fiddler on the Roof. You find that things could happen to an innocent village. You will find that ...where the pogroms met at age 6 ..it changed their life. Settled in Rochester years ago - a whole time in their life was influenced by that pogrom. These were a variety of factors that influenced that movement to this country. Here, my own parents came here with nothing and now have three sons who are educated and have doctor's degrees in one kind or another who have tried to make some contribution to American life- all of which would have been inconceivable in Russia or a Ghetto. Now, is there anything

else?

Woman: No, that's pretty much all of the family background. Moving onto something that you mentioned - your general education. In New York City and in Rochester. Then we can move on to your Jewish Education and interests at that time.

Bernstein: Well, it's kind of a strange thing. I became so intensely Jewish as I did. I have two brothers, neither of whom reacted the same way to their life experiences. I had very little Jewish education. I don't think I went to Sunday school at all until I came to Rochester when I was age 10 or 11 I When it became time for me to become a Bar Mitzvah in Brooklyn at the time, you get one of these itinerant rabbis who taught me, taught me the ropes, I didn't know what I was doing - had a great influence on my life and changed it completely and gave it the directions that it followed. We found a flat on Leopold Street, my folks always, at least in my lifetime, lived on the right side of the tracks or close to the tracks we lived on Harrison Street, Hudson Avenue, and so on, Woodward Street. Pretty close to the tracks or the right side of the tracks as their economic status dictated. Well, my parents rented a flat down on Leopold Street and down the street was the Leopold Street Shul and so that was our shul and that was the Cheder in which I went. And then I came Rabbi Cherdov and graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary European born but a man who understood a care for Jewish Youth. And he cared for us. and he was our Zionist and he involved us in the whole Zionist movement. He organized for us the young Judean Club, the first in Rochester maybe even first in the country. He uh, got us to usher at the Zionist convention in 1914 yea, 1914 great Zionist convention in which the top leadership of the Jewish world were present here in Rochester. We had contact and all that added up to something for me and made me begin to feel very deeply that I was a Jew. I cared so here I was 13,14,15 years old in a matter of 10 years I was a Rabbi, I was traveling to Eastern Europe. I was going to the centers of Jewish life in Europe. I went to the place where there were pogroms. I found myself caring very deeply for Jews and where Jews hurt, I hurt and where Jews rejoiced, I rejoiced. And I think that came about largely I think through the influence of this man. A very, very remarkable man.

Woman: What about your formal Jewish education?

Bernstein: Well, there was almost none of it up to this point. In other words, I had no Sunday school training, no Hebrew school located in Brooklyn that I now remember. They only asked me to move to Rochester that we went and become involved in the shul there...a year or 2 at most. Sunday school and Cheder training there. and uh. and then they influenced the impact on me of the Zionist movement.

woman: the same influences didn't effect your brothers?

Bernstein: No, no the funny thing my 1st brother would come next to me. he was 4 years younger than I. He became greatly influenced by the settlement. and uh He has never been Jewish to the extent that I am. Brother that's at Southern University of California. They were all

academic people. He um, he stands midway between us. He's jewish and not organizationally not institutionally.

Woman: Did your parents push you towards it? were they pleased?

Bernstein: I don't think my father cared very much. um my mother uh wanted us to be educated every jewish boy had to be educated, had to go to college. and nothing about finances we had to go to college and we did. we did. I don't know but we did. uh. i think my mother ya sure she wanted me to get a jewish education. but i was way ahead of her and once i made up my mind this was my life, i pursued it intensely.

woman: Awesome. and what were some of the groups you belonged to? the youth groups? or the clubs besides the zionist clubs?

Bernstein: Well uh, the J wire was there on Franklin Square and uh we were assigned whatever group activity there was. Now, the Young Judean club we met there where we developed the Young Judean club here in rochester and there were about a dozen ___ remarkable development in the city and i was a president, always president of something or other. i was the president of the Young Judean council. uh there was a very interesting club called the ABC club.uh kinda paternalistic german jewish were reaching out or something to the young immigrant kids, or the children, the young kids of immigrants. Elmar adler offered his services to that club. I remember the adler firm which was wealthy and cultured and had a clothing business in the city for generations. He hated it. As soon as he could he quit. for fine printing and became head of the university of princeton press.He organized our club, you know, uh, he called it the ABC club. He introduced us to culture. As strange as it seems, we didn't know anything about art, nothing about music, uh, but he brought us into contact with the beauty of the western world that we knew nothing about and he was the one who loaned me 40 dollars to go to syracuse university which became the basis for my tuition my fees my what not, my everything somehow it enabled me to go to college. Now what other clubs were there? I think those were...well of course i was always a member of the debating team of the JY. First i would debate for the JY against the syracuse community center then when i went to college in syracuse, i did for the community center against the Rochester JY and i was always talking.

Woman: and you were active in zionist clubs?

Bernstein:Young Judea, of course, is the junior zionist movement so that once you are in young Judea you mean zionism group but on a youth basis

Woman: And getting back to your general education, where did you go to primary and high school? And what were some of the influences there or some of your interests?

Bernstein: Well, when we came back to Rochester we lived on Woodward street and i went to 14th school, there the decision was made that influenced my entire life to skip me 2 years so that i was out of grammar school by the age of 11 not quite 12 years of age. um, we moved, we

didn't last on Woodward Street very long, we move to ___ Street, I went to 10th School and uh I had 2 very good teachers. I remember them very distinctly. One was a Ms. or Mrs., Mrs. Joy, little woman, who uh, short little woman who uh, had a great deal of warmth and a great deal of affection for the kids and uh an excellent teacher. Mrs. Nicholson who was the last one had in the grammar school who was tough, hard, high standards, but an excellent teacher. Later on, when I came back here to ___, I ran across her once sitting on a porch on Lake Avenue, where she lived and we re-established our relationship. Incidentally, that reminds me, that my mother developed a beautiful relationship with a Ms. Pauline Stricker. She was our teacher in the 4th or 5th grade in the school in Brooklyn, where I went. and would you believe it, that was 60 years ago, more than 60 years ago, 65 years ago. Would you believe it she was here 3 years ago with my invitation for the function at the University of Rochester at which the Bernstein share was set up, still living, still retaining the closest and the warmest relationship with me, as she did with my mother all of her life, and with many many memories of what life was like in Brooklyn in those days. But, it was very interesting that so long, you know, from about 19 uh 15, 19 yeah I think 15 no 1910 to 1974, 75 was devotion at continuum. Uh, mine was an unusual class at East High. At that time, there were only 2 high schools in Rochester. East High and West High. They were divided by the river. The Genesee River, the children coming from the streets west, west of the Genesee river went to West High and the east went to East High. They did a science experiment by putting it into one class, the top boys and girls in the Grammar school who graduated that year, the year was 1913 and uh, so there I was whatever the number was, 25, 30, of the top kids on the east side of the river and they gave us the heads of the departments. We had Mason D Grey who was head of the Latin department, we all took Latin, we took Greek even. William Betts, who was one of the foremost high school Mathematics uh mathematics principal and teacher in the country. He taught us Mathematics. We had Ernest Clark, we called him Baldy Clark, ___, he taught us English. Um, we had a Ms. Partridge, I think, who taught us history. and by the end of 3 years we were all through and they didn't know what to do with us we had to finish out high school course and we and the final the worst thing we had to get weeds picked in South Lima and they offered us early graduation from high school which we took at the time.

Woman: What were some of your interests in Grammar School and High School?

Bernstein: Well, uh physically I was always puny, um when I was married I weighed 119 pounds. When I was 24 years old, I weighed 119 pounds so my physical interest could not of been in football in fact, there were some Jews who played football, Ben Goldstein, uh who was my assistant at the temple, that I directed for many years and uh. uh. Henry Haze and (Punch?) Upenheimer, they were football players, but primarily, uh Jews had a more um, well Jews were the basketball players. I remember at East High, practically the whole team was Jewish. Bonny Shaft, Benny Friedman, so on. Um. Somehow the cleverness, the brightness of the game of basketball attracted to the-- roughness of the football didn't particularly ___. uh I played on the chess team. I learned Chess at the JY. But I had a very sad experience because being the number 1 man at East High, I was always pitted against the number 1 man at West High, who happened to be Harold Jennings, who was the NY state champion, he slaughtered me. No matter how I played against him, it was a pogrom. So that happened for like 2 years. I was also

on the East High um Debating Team. And, I debated for this and for that and against this and against that for years. Um. I played Tennis. I used to- I learned to play on the court at my high school. It was like a crater. I don't know how anyone could play on it- but i did. I never took a lesson. And i _____take some lessons, and i never did. And i still play. Well I,

Woman: What about some of your academic interests.Were you- obviously you were very academically inclined. Did you start having some kind of specialities there that you especially enjoyed?

Bernstein: That's a great question. I haven't really thought about it. I uh i would say i was less interested in science and math than i was in the humanities. I was more interested in books and literature and uh interested in the social problems. um. Less interested i think in science and geometry and so on. I could never figure it out very well.

Woman: Well then let's move on to the next category of what's been labeled growing up in Rochester, and beginning with what was the jewish community like here? um a couple areas we could go into the German Jews,and the Russian Jews and perhaps the problems between them, uh socialism, um anarchists?

Bernstein: Well, I have to distinguish between what I knew then and what I know today. As a kid u know 12, 13, 14, you know these things, well, you know something about it. He know that it's not easy to be a jew. He knows that uh there's anti-semitism all around. He has a feeling he can't, he cannot trust the Goye which is something hard to get over. Not all justifiable, but um, he has that feeling so that uh.. where was i directing my thought in this..in this in this pattern uh. What was i saying? oh yeah thats right. as a kid, you were less aware of something. You knew anti-semitism was here. it was apart of your daily life. And you expected to get a beating once in a while ___ once in a while. That was a kid experience. but then as you grew up, uh you had the adult experience.and it is very hard to know where one begins and where the other leads off. uh, i would say that um I wasn't unhappy about being a jew at all in my early youth. I didn't, i mean, i knew,... kid around the corner was a dope and tried to starts throwing at me but that didn't bother me very much.and uh, I wouldn't say that i was unhappy because of my experience as a Jew in High School, or College, Grammar school. uh, Now, what was it like? well uh, the community, when i was a boy, uh the situation seemed fairly stabilized, it wasn't really uh... the general community was a prosperous, well established jewish community in Rochester. It had the money, it had the money, they had the culture, they had the know how, to set themselves for the goodlife. The east European Jews were immigrants or the children or immigrants. German Jews were paternalistic toward them. they didn't get too close to them. They were paternalist. Among the things they did, my temple set up a ___ settlement, for primarily for strictly the jews. uh they established a settlement house within our temple. Saturday sunday afternoon programs for the children of eastern european immigrants. So they tried to a nice, paternalistic thing. But the, uh the handwriting was on the wall. Nobody saw anything at the time but it was fine. The Russian Jews, the East European Jews began to make money. Leaving their sacks and their horses, pedaling, and they were beginning to open stores and going into the clothing business. and doing other forms of activity. uh which began the

establish of the east european jews as people of significance and importance in the community.
uh. the uh.

Alex Saffran & Josh Cohen
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Bernstein Tape 2 side 1a

Bernstein: Studying at Cambridge was a wonderful experience; the Jewish students there were Jewishly oriented. And they were also very intelligent, very cultured. Had a level of culture and intelligence that I thought was higher than that I was accustomed to. College in the United States, we had many important people who came there whose sons were at Cambridge, one was... for example. I had the misfortune to arrive in London, in England I think it was the day that the man with whom I came to study died. He was Israel Abrams, he was the foremost Anglo Jewish scholar of the time. He'd come to teach for a semester at the Jewish institute of religion, and interested me very much of what he taught and how he taught in his own vast cultural background and so I had arranged with Dr. Wise and the faculty to spend a year abroad at Cambridge and Nazareth and Jerusalem. Cambridge is of course a wonderfully beautiful place. Its rich in tradition its serves a great strength to the English people as it was before them to the British Empire. We used Cambridge as a starting off point for many trips. I went by bicycle and Sophie never unfortunately never learned to ride a bicycle. We had some near accidents and we just about had to quit. I did take bike rides to Erie Cathedral and others in the area which were magnificent. We also got to London every few weeks for long weekends built a friendship with Basal Enrikes and his wife, they ran the St. Georges Jewish Settlement on the east end of London and we got a chance to see how the east end lived and functioned. We got a chance to see what the nice and kind people were trying to do for other people in the area. The Jewish life was very intent on the sacrifice. Its interesting to me that the cremation of Israel Abrams of whom I spoke before taking place in the Goldas green crematorium that cremation, at that cremation, Israel Zang sat directly in front of me was gossiping throughout the whole service probably nervously and only a year or two later was cremated in the same place under similar circumstances. The arrangement that I had made with the Jewish institute of religion was that I would spend the first term in Cambridge and travel for a while in Europe and then I would go on in Palestine for a period of about 6 months. We reined with Thomas Cookenson as I recall for our travel arrangements first to go to Paris where at last we could get a hot bath at the Oxford Cambridge hotel after the primitive arrangements actually the plumbing facilities at Cambridge mind you were outdoors in the house, small house in which we lived so the taking a bath was quite an adventure in those days because nothing was ever warm enough, there was no central heating, and they use fireplaces and the heat radiates within 5 or 6 feet within of the fire but outside of that it would be ice cold. So we got to Paris and we got the central heating it was just a wonderful experience, of course we loved Paris, we loved every minute of it. It was a very warm feeling between Paris and the united states back then, which unfortunately doesn't exist in the present time apparently, then we went on and it was going to be Chanukah 1925 and I did the following; we, I arranged for us to spend a few days in Amsterdam, where we worshipped at the old Spanish and Portuguese synagogues that had existed for three centuries and we went to one particularly in which Spenoza had been excommunicated. We went on from there to

Berlin and there was a zoo and the garden for public purposes at the time at which the Jewish community in Berlin was going to have a Hanukah celebration which proved to be almost identical to that of the reform congregation in the United States except they had more food and richer food and the people were fatter. You wouldn't dream then in December 1925 of what was going to be the fate in only a couple of years. Something incomprehensible and how it happened. And then we went on to Warsaw. I still can't get it through my head, how I with practically no money, really very little and this young bride of mine, I think just 19 were knocking around in eastern Europe looking for Jews, looking for pogroms, looking for suffering Jews that we might help and tears and rejoicing with our people. We did and among the things I did in at the time was to go to Gorico [incomprehensible] where the famous Chasidic wonder working rabbi the Gamon Rebbe had his headquarters. For Chanukah you could just imagine what frenzy there was, what rejoicing there was, what passion there was. And the singing and the dancing and the worshipping at that occasion in the little village of Gorico at which I think at the last point of resistance against the Nazis where they did attack Gorico in September 1939. I was invited to a meeting in the Jewish community leadership of Poland. Very interesting to me, I knew enough Yiddish to understand what was going on. Sophie, perhaps I'm not sure if she knew as much as I, perhaps she knew more but she was less interested in, the details of community life and organization as I was and she fell asleep. At one point the speaker whom I later got to know, Yizchac Krembaum I think it was, he was the leader of Polish Jewry, banged on the table for attention because of something he was about to say or had said and the banging woke Sophie and he saw that she was aroused from her slumber and said shlouf kin shlouf go back to sleep you're not missing anything. Then from Poland we found our way to Vienna and there again I don't know how we did all those things, they seem so different now but when your young you do them, you have a strong bat. We found our way to Kitsfield, one of the famous skiing resorts in Europe where I tried in a few minutes to learn to ski where instead I fractured my thumb and lost my trunk key and all kinds of foolish things but we recovered and went on our way and at some point came by train I think it was to Naples where we picked up in ship it was going to take us to Alexandria and then from there by train to Jerusalem which was the way it worked out. We spent some very interesting times in Egypt, seeing things that were not going to be accessible for a very long time at the time and having a great many interesting and pleasant experience and in those days not a hateful soul appeared on the surface at least in that period, we visited the Alexandria zoo which we loved, we are great zoo goers and are familiar with zoos in many, many places around the world. Alexandria had one of the most interesting. We left at night from Contara where we were on a flat bottom boat that was pushed, propelled by long sticks, long hunks of wood in the mud, pushed across the Suez at that point and then picked up the train to Jerusalem, which took 14 hours from Contara which was some miles away from Alexandria, 14 hours to Jerusalem, filthy ride, filthy train at last we were in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem we soon arranged to be put up at the home of Yichach Epstein who was a professor at the seminary in Tel Aviv the Geenazim I think it was called in Tel Aviv, he and his wife and their three daughters lived in the most rah rah section later became the no mans land section of Jerusalem near the Mendlebaum Gate. He, they gave us room and board or whatever the sum was, it wasn't very much, we helped them and they helped us. We lived with a Hebrew speaking family. The professor was a purist, he spoke Hebrew so

that almost the natives of Israel didn't understand. He was so pure in the use and manipulation of the language. The youngest daughter Bonnie, Baunecha fell in love with a Christian, Sydney who also lived in the house, there were many interesting people who lived there canter Rosenblatt's son, the great orthodox canter, his son lived there. Rabbi Morton Berner my classmate and lifelong friend also lived there. Benacha, Bonnie fell in love with Sydney, also he couldn't be with her because he was Christian and she was Jewish and the question was will they be able to marry. All this is tightly controlled by richer Orthodox law in Palestine it was then and is today. Poor Sydney had lots of problems, I remember one Saturday he wanted to go to the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus and take a carriage up there and went and arranged for it and started on his way when members of the Shomer Shabbat, the guardians of the Sabbath emerged from I don't know where, under the rocks, and said "you will not go up on the Sabbath" and he said "I'm not a Jew I'm a Christian", and they said "you are a Jew you are not a Christian, you've got a beard and talk Hebrew" and wouldn't let him go so he had to get out of the carriage and walk miles along the dusty hill to Mount Scopus because of the fanaticism of the Orthodox. Jerusalem was of course was a fascinating time in those days and its just a beginning of a new era, the historic age and people there were unusually interesting. Dr. Magnus the head of the Hebrew University was a great idealist, passivist in the midst of warring factions, man of great simplicity and yet profundity remarkable eloquence. We got to know him quite well, he came to Rochester on a few occasions to visit us. Gerstan Gransky later became Martin Gransky was the uncle of Martin and Martin came over to work with Gerstan and founded the Jerusalem Post which was then Palestine post which was the best paper in the east.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah?

Bernstein: Yeah.

Interviewer: Ok

Berstein: If I had one very interesting conversation with Gerstan and Gransky we sat in the tea room outside the old city walls in Jerusalem with an Arab tea house and we talked about my future and I had to make a decision whether to return for the final examinations and ordination or whether to stay on in Palestine and while he didn't tell me what to do, he did make it clear to me that I could be on the inside of making Jewish history if at that point I decided to remain on. We wrestled with it but decided that America was our home that the Rabbinate was really what I wanted to be a Rabbi and that we could postpone to the future any major decision I might have to make that I wanted to make to return to Palestine which later to become Israel. And that has agitated me all through the years, all through these 50 years and it has been a serious decision to make because I think I would have had tremendous satisfaction from living and working and fighting in Israel. On the other hand, I think I've made my contribution as a rabbi and it was a career for which I was trained and prepared and somehow I think I managed to get the best of both worlds although I am not sure. In any event, the Jerusalem in those days was sort of a primitive city, Sophie fell in love with the Old City, got to know every cobble stone in it, loved the reeking smells, the meat that hung out, been eaten up by flies, the women with their

hidden faces and so on, it was a very interesting period and before the terror there had been problems but not as serious as it became later. Jerusalem had for us and still has for us a hold on our hearts that nothing else had and you can't quite describe Jerusalem and its significance in strictly rational terms it has a mystical appeal to it that no other city has to it. And I've been back to it many times, most recently in the summer of 1976 when I received a Booblic award from Hebrew University, very great honor and highly treasured by me at the hands of my dear friend Abraham Harman, president of the university who was an ambassador of Israel for the US for a period of about 10 years and we worked very closely together. The Jerusalem had a fascination for me and on that trip we decided to make it a Jerusalem trip so we spent 5 weeks living at our favorite hotel in the world, the King David hotel and loved every minute of it. And wish that we could go back soon and perhaps we will. In that period we began to have contact with the labor leadership, I cant recall now because they weren't so important then when we first met David ben Gorion and Moshe Shoret and golden and the others but before long because I kept going back every few years and at one point I was chairman of the public affairs committee we went back at least once a year. These were the people I dealt with these were the people I become closest with and knowing and having as warm personal friends and they were. I began to take an interest in the kibbutz movement and in my, in our first visit to Palestine in 1926 we spent one month hiking with the young poet named Aaron Ofert who later somehow under my unknown influence became interested in the rabbinate, in the reform rabbinate and is today a rabbi in Orlando or one of the west coast Florida, Tampa, West Coast Florida cities. He was then 17 a very beautiful and handsome young man, couldn't do it a few years there after and couldn't do it since and at that point we were able to do it and we hitchhiked we went on found busses we slept in the filthiest Arab hobbles, we slept in primitive tent cities of kibbutzim and saw how great and terrible the sacrifices being made by the of the pioneers as they were coming along and also saw the determination and the success and the will to survive the will to achieve the will to bring it to a fruition am Israel chai, the Jewish people lives.

Interviewer: Ok. And from this day in Israel, Palestine you came directly back to Rochester and you made your decision to become a rabbi.

Well we made our decision in Jerusalem to return and be ordained and become a rabbi. And then the question was whether first whether id get ordained because Id done a awful lot of footing around when I was in Europe and Palestine and really hadn't concentrated seriously on the studies the way I really which id wish I had because it was too exciting for me, meant more to me than digging in books. I did my work, I received my degree in the ordination but I think I'd might've done better if I had done things conventionally but of course I would then have missed all of this excitement and thrill and sense of achievement and being in on the inside of history being made which I had inn this experience. We came back and I was ordained and I remembered giving an address with two other graduates in Carnegie hall where Rabbi Steven wide held floor on the minister, very interesting to me that I called it the minister and not the rabbi, in those days I was not as shouldn't say parochial but narrowly Jewish minded perhaps as I may have been later maybe that's the wrong way to put it but I did stating a fact that I described my life, my work, my vision of what my moral responsibilities were and I called it as a minister

and a rabbi became later, an intense concentration on Jews and Jewishness and then the question arose where would I function, I was ordained I had never been job minded, never had the opportunity to be and there were two positions open, one the congregation in White Plains which has since become an enormous congregation 17-1800 families I think where my friend Laurence, ministered for many years. They were looking for successive tiny little group Rabbi Wise son were very flamboyantly resigned from the [incomprehensible] blast against reform Judaism and the rabbinate and this and that and never took it very seriously but that's the way it was. They were looking for a successor and then Rochester my own home town had looked for an assistant whose rabbi become ill and I preached in white plains I think I hit the same sermon on the minister and then went and I spoke in Rochester, Rochester was very eager for me come, white plains like me but they wanted more samples. We made the decision to accept the Rochester position. We liked rabbi wolf, we liked the city, we like the people. I never found, I never thought id find a conflict between the service I wanted and the fact that I was a hometown product never bothered me in the slightest and so we had the summer to spend and then I spent it a Columbia where I got very high grades, practically 100 in everything I took including Jewish history and a course in education with professor Patrick but I had nothing else to do but study, I was married and I was glad to have the respite and I loved the books and I loved the studies and I got the highest possible marks I could have. Sophie on the other hand had become the.. of the family and become an expert on antiques on creating 19 century worm holes and 18th century furniture in Cambridge, she went to work for an antique shop for 15 dollars a week and very carefully allotted to me 5 dollars a week for coffee and lunches... taught me the lesson to never let myself be dependent on a woman for finances and we went up to Rochester sometime in late August. We stayed for a while in my parent's home on Sullivan Street, the only time I experienced a family north of the railroad tracks. We only lived south of the railroad tracks, no, yes we were south of the railroad tracks but near them. But that time we both moved to Sullivan street and we lived with them until we found an apartment... and we gradually began to build up a home, we had no furniture and no money, so we began to establish credit at the department store and we turned to furniture people in those towns in Syracuse where they had the most beautiful furniture which we still have which are cherished possession in the dining room and so on. We established a home in began life I never really had much contact with rabbi wolf after he took sick, he was sickly even before he went to bed. He wasn't very interested in relationships, I mean I don't blame him for it, he was a sick man he was doomed to die in two to three months, I think he had some form of hypertension which now was controllable on medication but then it wasn't several of his brothers die the same way young. [incomprehensible] was a football player on University of Cincinnati football team, that didn't help him at all with high blood pressure and in November he went to bed and never came out and I innocently, naively, without any other alternative intentions of any kind simply carried on Sunday services I preached the whole congregation, Saturday morning we had about 30 to 40 elderly women, usually widows who came faithfully. And I did my best to keep the institution going but I not very successfully fall apart, not really thinking of taking over, until one day I was told by Ben Goldstein my dearest friend, my colleague my associate... board of trustees and made the decision to invite me to remain on as the rabbi of the temple. It was a very unusual situation and a very challenging opportunity for me because this was still

then and old line reform temple, German Jewish anti Zionist, protecting the concept of Jewish peoplehood where the rabbis still living who detested East European Jew, where Dr. Lansburg said to me before he died that he had nothing in common with those people he had much more in common with the Unitarians than he had with East European Jews so here I was with no experience, nobody told me with anything coming right out of the fresh out of the seminary, even having missed the last year in the seminary and in Rochester within a couple of months I was functioning as a rabbi of the temple and officially became such and thus there after remained there for 47 years until I retired in 1973. What I didn't know at the time became clearly that almost the watershed period in the history of Reform Judaism and certainly the history in the congregation because the German Jews I don't like to put this crudely but were on the way out, and they were not reproducing with their own in terms of population, the younger people did not have the drive the capacity for achievement, that the older generation had. It was great deal of intermarriage that it is hard to find descendants of those family that survived anyway congregation, Jewish family, there still are some but not very many. So that was a major development that I wasn't fully aware of, I tended to localize it but it shouldn't have been localized that is part of the total national situation. The decline of German Jewry and the rise of consummation and all happened around in World War II and arise the power and wealth cause that was important of the eastern European Jewish group. Lets pause for a moment here now, how shall I describe what this congregation was like when I became the rabbi in 1926 the assistant and then the rabbi in 1927. In the first place it had a membership of approximately 400 families and when I retired there were about 1400. For many of them my friend Ingrid Horbrid used to describe Temple Emmanuel book members in our telephone book members no active relationship religious life of the congregation in fact in those days, those who still cared had Friday nights at home, not in the temple, the Sabbath was gone completely, Passover was practically gone, no body had a Seder, Hebrew was gone, there was no Hebrew education of any consequence, a few minutes on a Sunday morning but no real Hebrew knowledge that was imparted. There was a Sunday school, no Hebrew School of course, there was a Sunday school of 250 children, they weren't reproducing themselves of 400 adult memberships in a fortress like old building on the corner of Gibbs and Gold Street. In some ways a very beautiful building and I loved it I hated to leave in some way but of course I saw at one point and then became to press for action that we simply had to leave that area. In the first place it was the wrong place, no body was living in that area anymore, in the second place it was a deteriorating area where people were afraid go at nights, and the third place it was utterly inadequate to the growing needs of the growing congregation so I persuaded leadership of the temple and necessary individuals like Ike Gordeon to think in large and generous terms of a new building which fortunately came to existence at the right time, cost two and a half million dollars and would cost 5 to 6 million dollars today and nearly all paid for so that in a certain sense was gratification, looking at it objectively I was the one who pressed for it I was the one sought to it that we got large contribution I was the one that insisted we got a great architect which we did and great sculptures as we did so I could feel that the physically this structure owes something significant to me because it was an enterprise in which many took part and many took an important part. The Gibbs street synagogue was outgrown of course some time ago and for a number of year I forgotten how many, congregation worshipped for the holidays at Eastman theatre across

the street and filled it one year was little temple that held about 750 or 800 people the with service piped into the auditorium next door that held a few hundred people because Eastman theatre held 3,000 3,400 I think in which we filled for every one of the holiday services were all which pointed up the need of course for the inadequate structure.

Bernstein Tape 2 side 1b

Spiritually the congregation was an old line reform congregation when I first came they weren't even using the union prayer book, they were using Dr. Lansburg's very thin anemic prayer book almost no Hebrew in it and very unsatisfying to anybody but him I guess. It was used for as long as he lived, he continued to have a certain type of relationship to the congregation. He an a embitter old man when I as I heard about him in his closing years, very much embittered and he felt that he wasted his time he felt that he hadn't left the heritage of affliction, I don't think he did. He was here in 1870 or 71 until his death after Rabbi Wolf in 1928 a year after I think it was. He fought every innovation, he fought every attempt to make things more Jewish, he had no use for East European Jews, he hated the attested Zionism all violence kind of expressions that he used against it and so on. So that was part of [incomprehensible] now Rabbi Wolf overcame some of that. He wasn't a East European Jew he didn't have that kind of background but he had a warm wholesome feeling toward being a Jew and toward other Jews. And I think he saw the need now to compensate for the weakening of affection of the German Jews in the congregation of America because he had an envision you would see that and I think he did. Therefore he work for the JY and went to Europe and worked for the JDC and all sorts of things that a Jewish Jew with a Jewish heart would do and he prepared the ground for the changes that occurred later for the things that I was able to do, the congregation consisted of services on Sunday morning which were sparsely attended, but people like to walk in town that was the reason they were convicted to be held the liked to walk down East Avenue it was very beautiful, so they'd come along to these services and there was a service also on Saturday morning and the widows the Kaddish sayers nothing on Friday night at all, and then I began to gradually re-introduce and I worked gradually, I tried at first to build up support for what I wanted to do rather than to thrust it at them. The religious school obviously needed much attention and I gave it what I could and then the board felt and I agreed that we could use the full time services of ben Goldstein as he took the secretary and director of the school, in fact he'd been anyways a volunteer, a wonderful man very wonderful character fine human being and so he stayed there until he died. Became my closest and dearest personal friend. The big changes in the school came long in time not quickly established a weekday Hebrew school because we knew the few minutes on Sunday were useless and we engaged Aaron Brayman at some point there and then I think we had Ben Zion Emanuel if I recall correctly of the well known Emanuel family here in town who was in-charge of the Hebrew school, he was a full time man in charge of the week day Hebrew school here in this congregation forty years ago so in that sense too we were pioneers. The basic I think what I succeeded in doing was changing the atmosphere and the attitude so that instead of this being an old line anti reform anti Jewish anti Zionist German Jewish congregation re-immersed itself

through the influence that we were able to bring into there re-immersed itself into the mainstream of Jewish history.

Interviewer: And what does characterization of Birth Kodesh at the time. How would you put that into the whole Jewish community here. How would you characterize the Jewish community in Rochester in general.

Well at that time until maybe I forgot it was 15 years ago there was only one reform congregation in Rochester, the rest were either orthodox ministered to by European orthodox rabbis who didn't know or there was Temple Beth el which came to existence since the 1920s and was the one concerned with a lot of rabbi trouble, constant shifting of rabbis so they couldn't effectuate continuity of program the way I think it might have been more effective but it brilliant man it had very interesting man but didn't stay long. That was a picture, one reform congregation, which was the dominant congregation in town no question about, if you wanted any action, philanthropic or social idealism, you had to go to Birth Kodesh, you had one conservative congregation comparatively young and not strong. Tottering in an old building in an old church building on park avenue and then you had all of these schules that were also many of them on the way out because Jewish was changing. The orthodoxy that there was would be no longer. Because that was European orthodoxy which was transplanted here. The whole group of younger rabbis that came along were American oriented. They were intensely orthodox, sincerely orthodox but they were also American oriented which was much better for their leadership here in the scene that it had before.

Interviewer: And what about was there any friction between these three factions Or pressures between them did they get along?

Well there were constant strains and tensions certainly because neither of the orthodox or conservative I think everyone accepted the right of I don't know how to put this so I won't be controversial it was a big controversy, it's a dead controversy you don't want to beat the dead horse but I don't think that the orthodox and the conservative leadership, particularly and maybe the lay people do, all together accepted the idea of a reform not just for themselves but for the community. They had the idea of an aberration that it was something that was for convenience not out of conviction so on and so on but I think that it was anti Zion. The whole combination of things brought about change. For place the holocaust. Nobody asked what, what the religious demonization of the victims was, there were slaughters as Jews. The communities became better organized. Again the question no longer whether you were German or Russian or Polish or what not the question was you sent the responsibility of what you gave and what you contributed not only in money but in services so that you find then a, a growing unity in the Jewish community not 100% you couldn't expect it I mean, there has to be differences in opinion I don't object I don't want a if I could make the I'm a committed reformer and If I could make the whole community reform I wouldn't do it. It would be much better off as we are with a challenge with a grouping with different ideologies.

Interviewer: And how did this Jewish community that you characterize fit into the whole community of Rochester. What was that like at the time?

Well the community of Rochester was a, a growing expanding community economically. Kodak was on the way up, Bausch Lomb was on the way up. The [incomprehensible] industry was strong powerful and weak in the city we have today and so there was acceptance and I found I came here that I was invited to be on practically everything. My problem was how to stay off boards and committees rather than to get on them. Whether it was a community chess, I was the president of the city club, Rabbi Wolf was the president of the city club and so on I even remember the protestant family service agency board and B'rith Kodesh occupied a unique place, if you were a rabbi or even a member, B'rith Kodesh you had a an immediate platform, you had an immediate voice, you had immediate position, immediate prestige, toward getting things done in the community.