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Judge Louis Bernstein

Louis Bernstein

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PORTRAITS OF THE PAST: THE JEWS OF PORTLAND

The Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Program

Dr. Conniilyn G. Feig, Director

September 1, 1977

Commissioned by: The Jewish Federation of Southern Maine
The Maine Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Program

PORTRAITS OF THE PAST: THE JEWS OF PORTLAND

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June 1, 1976 to September 15, 1977
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43. Mrs. Lester Willis (Rita)
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* Deceased since interview

August, 1977
The Oral History Study

A Note to the Reader from the Director:

Background to the Study

Sometime in the early summer of 1975, a group of Jewish leaders appointed by the Jewish Federation of Southern Maine as a "Jewish Bicentennial Committee" met together at the home of Rabbi Sky. National and State Bicentennial planning was at its peak; and some Jews wanted the Jewish community to do something to emphasize the heritage, the presence, the tradition, or the contributions in Maine over the 200 years of a distinctive culture and religious community. They knew from heresay that the Jews had come early to Maine, formed significant communities and had made and were making a considerable impact on the past, present and future of the State. But what should they do? The American Bicentennial theme, "Heritage and Horizons," seemed to echo the Talmudic words: "Know whence you have come and whither you are going." So many possibilities existed, and the suggestions flowed freely. Should the plans be comprehensive and cover the entire State or should they emphasize only the larger communities? Should the program, whatever it became, be aimed at increasing the historical and cultural understanding of the general community, or should it be a kind of re-exploration, re-examination, reminder for the diverse Jewish community? Ought it take the form of some gift which a grateful Jewish community could present to the State which had so recently served as a haven or opportunity for all of their immigrant parents and grandparents? And what vehicles should it use - theatre, music, lectures, exhibits, discussion groups, dialogues? Whatever was done would have to be inexpensive, because the Federation Program Funds were already committed to a continuing project which by consensus the entire community agreed had an urgent priority - the resettlement in Portland of Russian Jewish families, fleeing from the
modern form of Soviet persecution. The Federation had always participated fully in national and international projects, and the Refugee Program received its usual alert and committed attention. So the Committee deliberated, argued, pondered, debated.

Finally, a member of the group hesitantly suggested the sponsorship of a book - which would detail the entire history of the Jews of Maine. No information was available on the Jews of Maine with the single exception of a brief book, Portland Jewry, written by Ben Band in 1955, sponsored by a newly formed Jewish Historical Society, and published locally. Meant to be a beginning step in helping the Jewish community learn about itself, the book essentially tried to pull together the chronology of events in the formation of the Portland community and its institutions, and to identify some of the participants and leaders in that extraordinary development. The beginning step was a valiant one, but it ended there as did the Historical Society. The Portland Jews were too busy doing, building, creating, and helping Jews across the world. It was not yet the time for reflection, for stocktaking, for a thorough examination of the ROOTS of the community. But now, perhaps the time and energy had to be taken, lest the history disappear, never to be reclaimed; and the rich tradition never be transmitted accurately to the children and to the community.

Rabbi Sky mentioned that the American Jewish Committee was suggesting, in fact, encouraging, a series of Oral History Projects across the country, emphasizing that a well conceived multifaceted reconstruction of the past could surely help to create a balance, an awareness of the unfolding story of the American Jewish experience. Perhaps that thrust should be seized upon in Portland. But no one really knew what oral history meant, and additionally, who would do it? There were no Jewish historians in the State of Maine. Rabbi Sky alerted the Committee to the unusual fact that the Dean of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Maine at Portland-Gorham was a scholar of the Holocaust; and as an Associate Professor of History had initiated courses in Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Perhaps Dr. Konnilyn Feig could be approached. Rabbi Sky knew that Dean Feig had a heavy schedule in her position; that she would never allow her additional commitment to the teaching of the Holocaust to be tampered with; and that in whatever free time she managed to find, she was writing her own book on Hitler's concentration camps - the capstone of fifteen years of research in Europe. It looked hopeless, but the Committee asked the Rabbi to try. And he persevered. And Dean Feig found herself volunteering her free time to create and direct the project.

When I entered the picture, I had the same overwhelming reservations which the Committee had already expressed. I had little time, and my interest and commitment centered on the Holocaust. Where would I ever find the space for such an enormous project, and who would help? We had no graduate program in Liberal Arts at the University. Where would I get the trained assistance I would need? I met with the Committee, outlined the limits of what could be done, and explained that the project could never be a book, but a re-beginning, another first step, which could be built upon in the succeeding years, and resulting perhaps, someday in a full and real history of Maine Jewry.

It would be an oral history folklore of Portland Jewry; but widened to use the group as a microcosm of Maine Jewry, an example of some kinds of experiences of American Jewry, a renewed acquaintance with the Old World Culture, and a picture of the often-repeated American immigrant story. It would result in a set of final transcripts, made available to the entire reading public. Thus, a small study, a beginning, with wide implications, centering in Portland but suggesting a state-wide impact, a re-examination for the Jewish community and a first reading understanding for the general community, a part of a picture
puzzle for an entire nation, a gift - to the Jewish community and to the
Portland community. To my surprise, the Committee and the Federation voted to
sponsor the project. I finally agreed to do it for two reasons. When I
came to Portland, the Jewish community had been very good to me and had
invited me to the Synagogues, the organizations and the homes to talk about
the Holocaust. I felt some gratitude. But far more important, I felt a
sense of shock when I, too, discovered the absence of any real research and
history on one of Maine's most significant immigrant groups. I, too, felt
the sense of urgency to re-begin before it really was too late.

Oral History as a Research Discipline

Oral History concerns itself with conservation of a special kind. It
conserves the intimate knowledge and experience of humans who have made
significant contributions to the life of the time, to a group, to an area, or who
have been ideally posted to observe the major events and developments. These
humans may be leaders and movers of history, such as Kennedy, Kruschev, and
other notables. But oral history taken from those who "made history," only
touches the tip of the iceberg when understanding of human cultures and the
fabric of civilization is at issue. Perhaps, then, of even greater significance
are oral histories taken from groups of ordinary human beings - men and women,
known primarily to their neighbors, and perhaps in their towns and states, through
whose lives have flowed the currents of an historical age; and whose reactions
and understandings determine a collective impact upon a cultural grouping
and a time; or upon whom a collective impact of a time and a culture can be
measured, evaluated, analyzed, pondered.

The ways of life characteristic of earlier America are rapidly
disappearing, but there are persons still alive today who remember them
vividly. Their memories will not be preserved by writing historical memoirs. Oral history projects have attempted to utilize individual recordings, which are admittedly fragmentary and highly personal, but when taken together provide a fund of color, detail, and incidents valuable for future historical research. Roots, centers, beginnings, road signs - all are critical ingredients to any portion of America's colorful culture, and to the essentials of every human being's possession of knowledge of his own individual and group past. And here it is that the necessity for an oral history project centering upon Jewish life in Maine reaches the critical level.

The Jews in Maine

That Jews have been deeply involved in the religious, educational, political, cultural, intellectual and economic life of the State of Maine is one of the best-kept secrets in historical and sociological literature. And Maine is one of the few states in America to be devoid of any major study of one of its important cultural influences. Since 1800 at least, Jews have been living in Maine, and since 1829 with the formation of a Jewish Community in Bangor, some Jewish community life has existed. By 1866, Jews had begun to settle in Portland in noticeable numbers. For nearly 100 years, then, Jews have been making a considerable contribution to and impact upon the state at every level and in every area.

The Jerusalem of the North - the term used so frequently in the past to refer to the Portland Jewish Community. Almost all of the Jews who immigrated to Portland came from Eastern Europe - from Poland, Russia, Latvia, Lithuania - and they brought with them the rich Ashkenazen Orthodox religious and cultural traditions. Orthodoxy found a new home in Portland, in a transplanted form, and held its strength and oneness far longer than most communities in the U.S.
Early twentieth century Portland might be described for the Jews as a community of eastern European shtetl survivors, a pious Orthodox community with several synagogues, central in the lives of the community members. Formal education played a minimal role in the lives of their parents, yet most of the children are learned in the study of the Talmud and graduated from college or comparable institutions. Here we have an unusual phenomena: parents are immigrants, starting out as peddlers or small shopkeepers, and in one generation, the children are college graduates. These college-educated men and women began in the Twenties and Thirties to question traditions which seemed to them troublesome in a modern world. In America, the land of freedom, of relief from pogroms and Russian Army conscription, where the streets were "paved with gold," the wall of Orthodox piety of Portland's Jews began to show cracks as these men and women struggled to educate and provide a better standard of living for themselves. Many had to break the holiness of the Sabbath to work.

Institutions had to be created. In the decade from 1920 to 1930 the Jewish Home for the Aged was built to accommodate family members who could no longer be cared for by their families. In the decade from 1930 to 1940 the idea of a new Jewish Community Center, with a gym, social rooms, kosher kitchens, and sauna and bathing facilities, culminated in the dedication of the present Center in 1938. Throughout the Forties and the Fifties this Center was the focus of family, social and athletic life and the focus of all Jewish functions in the city of Portland.

The winds of Conservativism and Reformism bypassed Portland and it was not until the decade from 1940 to 1950 that a demographic migration from the inner city to the outskirts of Portland, and a shared belief by many that options to Orthodoxy had to be created, resulted in the formation of Temple Beth El, as a Conservative Congregation. The Conservative movement wanted to conserve
that which was appealing in Orthodoxy, and to bring those who were no longer practicing Judaism back into a religious atmosphere. That decade also saw the organization of the Jewish Federation, and its international concern in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the birth of Israel. The funds raised to help Israel during those eventful years into the Fifties are impressive for a community which has relatively little Jewish wealth.

Jewish people succeeded during the next two decades in breaking down some of the barriers to those of their faith in clubs, organizations, professions, institutions, and geographic areas which had previously excluded them. The need for the construction of a new Orthodox Synagogue in the Temple Beth El area became clear during the early Fifties; and the Orthodox Shaarey Tphiloh Hebrew School and Synagogue on Noyes Street was erected. The Newbury Street Synagogue, Etz Chaim, and Anshe Sfaard maintained their separate identities, although many of the congregation members of Newbury Street became members of the new Synagogue. During the Sixties the Community Hebrew School was created.

Today Orthodoxy and Conservativism exist today side by side, strong, active enriched by each other. In the baggage which the immigrants, the founders of the Portland community and those who followed brought with them were two unflinching commitments and enduring dreams - education and public service, unfaltering, regardless of the cost. And the story which emerges is one of involvement and the mutually beneficial changes which come out of the tensions and reciprocal relationships between Maine society and Maine's Jews as individuals and as a community.

The Study

This transcript is only one of forty-four. It presents a portrait of a family, a story of generations, in America and in Europe. The reader would be doing himself a disservice to focus only on this transcript. All forty-four
volumes should be read, because they tell a different story - the story of a remarkable community, a courageous people. Each volume is a family story and one small part of a community folklore history. The full set of final transcripts will be readily available to the Jewish community in the Temple Beth El Library and to the public, in the Portland Public Library. In addition, a professional Permanent Photographic Exhibition containing mounted pictures of each interviewee and pictures of all of the buildings and places significant in Portland Jewish History has been presented to the Federation. It will reside in Temple Beth El.

The enormous project itself was completed under the Coordinator, Lisa Wilhelm, with two years of committed, continuous and volunteer help from a few undergraduate students trained by the Director and the Coordinator, and a few gentile and Jewish community volunteers who worked with incredible energy and dedication. Behind it was the unfailing sponsorship of the Jewish Federation. And, of course, central to it all are the human beings who are the study, the men and women who invited us into their lives and homes, and who so openly and compassionately shared their thoughts, their honest assessments, their feelings and intuitions, their remembrance of factual events, their hopes and their fears concerning the development of this exceptionally strong and traditionally Orthodox Jewish community over a period of seventy-five years, and its development in the future.

Contained within their words is an intricate web of Jewish concerns which bear significance not only to the present and future generations of this community, but also to the broader realm of American Jewry. The project raised as many questions as it answered, questions of considerable scope which could affect American Judaism in the future: What does being
Jewish mean to you? Of what significance is Israel to you in your life? How do you feel about intermarriage and assimilation, and how will these facts affect Judaism? What trends have you observed in the Jewish institutions in this city, and where are these trends leading you? What have been the changes in your Jewish family life - which traditions, cultural and religious, remain with you and which have been discarded?

The majority of interviewees are over the age of fifty, born of immigrant parents or immigrants themselves, who carried with them to Portland the traditions of the Eastern European shtetl and who have watched that ghettoized secure life in the "Jerusalem of the North" be slowly supplanted by a more modern, urbane existence of the present-day Jews.

They represent a heterogeneous group but with a strong linkage. Each is an inspiration, and each reflects commitment, dedication, humaness. As individuals, each has something to say about himself, his life, his hopes, his dreams, his thoughts, his sadesses. And if the group is placed together, the picture that this gathering together paints, patch-work quilted as it may be, kaleidoscopic as it may seem, has an artistic potential for richness, continuity, color, form and spirit.

Those of the older generation miss the piety of the "Jerusalem of the North": the days when on a Friday afternoon the smells of the Sabbath baking emanated from Jewish neighborhoods; when the men gathered after the daily minyan within the confines of their synagogues to share their thoughts, discuss business, or play cards; when Bar Mitzvah celebrations were simple, with a little herring and kichel, and pure; and when the younger generation shared their lives with the older generation. Today the traditional, Orthodox ways are melded with a modern age, and Jews realize that they can be both good Americans and good Jews. The Jewish Family Services has successfully
brought about, during the past three decades, a transition from the old belief that Jews should take care of their own to an enlightened view that Jews should take advantage of community services. Citizens are now aware of Jewish contributions to the general community, and the "Jewish tokenism" of past decades is disappearing. While there are as many definitions of Judaism as there are Jews, ranging from ultra-Orthodox to minimal identification with any aspect of Judaism, there is little to support the belief of one of our interviewees that the American Jew "will sink into the fading sunset." Many view Judaism, to some degree, as a continuum which has survived for centuries. Many also talk about it as a cultural identification, a combination of religion and common ancestry in terms of the Bible and mystical in the sense that it is inexplicable. Judaism is more than good works and ethics. It includes that mystical, spiritual something which ties all Jews from all times together in their diversity - that mystical tie which all of our interviewees struggled to define when speaking of their own Judaism.

To everyone the state of Israel has some degree of significance. "A Homeland." "A fountainhead with which all Jews can identify." "A place that worries about Jews - just in case." "A unifying structure of Judaism." "The yearning of a 2,000-year-old culture." "It shows the world that Judaism lives." "Israel made the Jew an important human being in today's world." "A paradise built from a wasteland." These are just a few of many reasons why Israel must survive for the Portland Jews.

It is with a depth of gratitude that I express my final thanks to these forty-four individuals who have allowed all of us from the outside to view for the first time a picture of the Jerusalem of the North, to understand
the background and traditions of this community, and to realize the commitment
and contribution, past and present, of Portland Jewry.

Dr. Konnilyn G. Feig
August 25, 1977
Louis Bernstein, 75 years old, is a life long resident of Portland. His parents were born in Kovno Geberna, Russia. His father came to America in 1883; and then sent for his mother and married her in Portland in 1889. His older brother, Max Bernstein, was the first to come over and set up a clan! The Bernsteins began as pawn brokers, then retail merchants, then jewelry salesmen, then real estate. Their original name was probably Oppenheimer.

Judge Bernstein's father was Abraham J. Bernstein, one of the founders and leaders of Portland's Jewish community. A.J. Bernstein was the founder of Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue and a Talmudic scholar. Judge Bernstein's brother Israel, ten years older, founded his own law firm in Portland; and became one of the leaders in the Jewish community.

In 1918, Louis Bernstein graduated from Portland High School; in 1922, he graduated from Bowdoin College with a liberal arts major; and in 1930 he graduated from Peabody Law School - a forerunner of the University of Maine Law School. While he was studying for the law, he worked in real estate from 1922 to 1927. He practiced law with his brother Israel since he graduated from Law School, except for a sojourn as a major in the United States Air Force during World War II from 1942 to 1945. In 1948, Mr. Bernstein was appointed Recorder of the Municipal Court; and in 1942, as judge of the Municipal Court. He served in that capacity for eight years.

Judge Bernstein has been one of the leading figures in both the Portland Jewish community and the Portland community at large. He had the traditional Jewish education - and went to Hebrew School, and was Bar Mitzvahed. As a young man in the Twenties, he helped create the Y.M.H.A. and served as President of that organization. In 1922, in his first year out of college, Mr. Bernstein
was elected to the City Council. He married in 1946 a woman whom he met in New York. Her parents also came from Kovno Geberna in Russia. Both he and his wife are Litvacks.

In 1934, Mr. Bernstein was elected to the Civil Service Commission in charge of the Police and Fire Departments. During the war he headed Portland's Civil Defense Organization, until he went in the service. Mr. Bernstein is a charter member of "Jacobs Cousins" (Post No. 99 - of the Jewish War Veterans established in 1935). He was President and a member of the Board of Directors of the first Jewish Community Center on Wilmont Street.

Judge Bernstein was one of the leaders in the creation of the Jewish Community Center on Congress Street. The first organization meeting was held in his home on November 1, 1939. He and a committee secured the building and he served as a member of the first Board of Directors. In 1949, he was elected to the Board of Directors of the National Jewish Welfare Board; and in that same year the community also named him as honorary president of the Community Center. Mr. Bernstein remained President of the Jewish Community Center until 1942.

Always interested in Jewish charities, and Jewish fund raising, he served as Secretary of the United Hebrew Charities when he first graduated from college. He helped create the Jewish Federation and served on the original Board of Directors created in 1942. Judge Bernstein led the Israeli Bond Drive. When the Jewish Family Services were created, he served on that original Board of Directors. His interest in charitable endeavors did not stop with the Jewish community. He served on the Executive Committee of the Council of Social Agencies and was a Director of the Portland Community Chest. In 1952, he was the first Jew named as the general chairman of the Portland Community Chest Drive. In 1946, he worked as fund raiser for the Jewish Federation for Displaced Persons in Europe.
Judge Bernstein belongs both to the Orthodox and Conservative Synagogues. He was a member of the Newbury Street Synagogue. Then, after the war, he became one of the leaders of the Conservative movement in Portland. As a founding member of Temple Beth El, he gave his fund raising skill generously for the erection of the Temple in the Woodfords area. He also was a member of the original Board of Directors of Temple Beth El. Later, he was one of the men who helped set up the Land Fund for the erection of the new Orthodox Synagogue on Noyes Street. His father was one of the founders of the Jewish Home for the Aged, and Judge Bernstein's interest has followed. He has worked actively with the Home.

Always interested in education, Judge Bernstein still is a leader in this community in the educational field. He was a founder and a trustee of Portland Junior College; he was President of the Board of Legislators of Bowdoin College; he was made a member of the Bowdoin Board of Overseers in 1958; and in 1959 he was elected the state President of the Higher Education Assistance Foundation of Maine. There is no alumni branch of Bowdoin College which he has not headed. He is Bowdoin's national campaign chairman, and President of the National Alumni Council.

He has been interested also in the areas of politics and medicine. As a Republican, he has been a delegate to the State Republican Convention. He was one of the men instrumental in merging the Children's Hospital with Maine Medical; and was a trustee of Maine Medical. He now holds the title, Trustee Emeritus. Judge Bernstein is also a corporator of the Portland Savings Bank.

Louis Bernstein is now the senior partner in the firm created by his brother. It merged with Shur and Sawyer in 1964 and is one of the five largest law firms in Portland. Judge Bernstein has been to Europe and to Israel. He was one of the first Jews admitted to the Portland Yacht Club and the Portland
Country Club. He winters in Florida, and goes fishing whenever he can.

Judge Bernstein and his wife live at 160 Caleb Street in Portland.

August, 1977
JEWISH BICENTENNIAL PROJECT

Portland, Maine

1976

ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPT

Interviewee Name: Mr. Louis Bernstein

I certify that I have transcribed the Interview Tapes to the best of my ability, as accurately and clearly as possible. I have discussed the contents of the tapes and transcripts with no one.

Transcriber:

Name: Judy Goldberg

Signature: 

Date: Sept. 27, 1976

Ok'd by: Konnilyn Feig

Project Director

Jewish Bicentennial Project
Dr. Konnilyn Feig, Director
1976
EDITED TRANSCRIPT

Interviewee Name Louis Bernstein

I certify that I have edited the Original Transcript to the best of my ability, checking carefully on all unclear sounds and omissions from the tape. I have added no material of substance and changed no ideas. The editing goals were completion, clarity, removal of redundancy, removal of unnecessary comments and "chatter" non central to the interview, and grammatical clarification. The prime goal was a transcript which read well, flowed, and presented the ideas clearly, while always retaining the mechanisms and responses which kept intact the personality, state of mind, and beliefs of the interviewee.

Editor:

Name and Title Dr. Konnilyn Feig
Signature
Date NOV. 20, 1976

Reread and Rechecked and held Confidential by

Name Martha H. Brewer (signature)
Date NOV. 2, 1976

Name Lisa Wilhelm (signature)
Date NOV. 17, 1976

Typist:

I certify that I have typed this transcript accurately and held the contents confidential.

Name Sondra Kendisch (signature)
Date Dec 15, 1976

Jewish Bicentennial Project
Dr. Konnilyn Feig, Director
1976
F: This is an interview with Louis Bernstein for the Jewish Federation and the University of Maine, College of Arts and Sciences, the Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Project by Dr. Konnilyn Feig and her assistants, Lisa Wilhelm and Cheryl Greaney, at the office of Judge Bernstein, One Monument Square, August 25, 1976 at 1:00 P.M.

F: We are interested in the background of every person within our project. Now, you were born in Portland, but I am going to proceed on the assumption that some of your family prior to you, your parents or your grandparents, came from some other country.

B: That's right. My father and mother were married in Portland, Maine, October 27, 1889.

F: Were both of them born in America?

B: Both of them were born in Russia.

F: Do you remember where in Russia your father was born?

B: My father was born in a small city called Zving, and my mother came from Zager. I don't know how that is spelled. That's Kovno Geberna.

F: And they met here in Portland.

B: No, they did not meet in Portland. They knew each other from the old country, and my father sent for my mother. My father came here in 1883 and my mother came here in 1889.

F: Now, were both of your father's parents from that area also?

B: That's right.
F: And were both of your mother's parents from that area?

B: That's right. My mother lost her mother when she was an infant of a few months.

F: You never saw any of your grandparents?

B: That's right. One grandparent died in 1908, my father's mother. I have never seen any of them. Three of them died before I was born.

F: And all four grandparents remained in Russia.

B: That's right.

F: Did your father have brothers and sisters who stayed in Russia, or did they come over with him?

B: I think he had two sisters. Most of them were in Portland. Five brothers settled in Portland, five Bernstein brothers. My father and four brothers and two sisters all settled in Portland.

F: Did your father come first? Was he the first one who came?

B: No. He was the second one of his family. Max Bernstein was the first.

F: So you set up quite a clan here in Portland. You have six uncles and aunts on your father's side alone.

B: That's right.

F: And everyone who bears the name of Bernstein in this city comes from this conglomeration?

B: No.

F: No?

B: There are several Bernstein families here in Portland now who are not related. In the old days, there was another family which was distantly related to my father. One of the offspring was Eddie Bernstein, the clerk of courts in Portland and on the city council.

F: Well now, the five brothers - what kind of business did they go into?

B: They first started out peddling and then they became pawnbrokers and then they became retail merchants and most of them worked in the jewelry trade. Two of them also worked on supplying folks that came here from Europe.

F: How old was your father when he died?

B: Eighty-three.
F: Was he retired?
B: Oh, yes.

F: What did he retire from?
B: Real Estate. He was in real estate the last 20 years of his life.

F: Now your mother. Did any of her family come over here?
B: My mother had two brothers. One was in Portland for a short time, but he had a son who was a doctor here, Dr. Caplan. My mother's maiden name was Caplan. Another brother settled in New York City and ran a jewelry store in Patterson, New Jersey.

F: Well, when you were growing up, then, you were around a lot of uncles and aunts.
B: That's right.

F: Many who had grown up in Russia (B: Uhhuh), and they talked a lot about life in the old country, right?
B: Uhhuh.

F: Do you remember how they talked about it? Do you remember how they talked about their lives?
B: Yes, I remember one uncle, in particular, who always told about evading the service in the Russian Army by jumping the boundary line between Russia and Germany or Russia and Poland as it existed then. One son was excused from service in the Russian Army.

F: And the rest of them were put in for that 20-year term?
B: That's right. I mean they had to be, so what they did was necessary. They found families who were childless and they gave their sons to the family to live with them so they could get away from going into the Russian Army.

F: Did that have something to do with the immigration from Russia?
B: That's right - it definitely had something to do with it.

F: These five Bernstein boys who came over here, was that the number one reason they came, do you think?
B: Definitely. To get away from service in the army, and also because of the pogroms that were going on over there.

F: Did they talk about them?
B: Yes, life was miserable.

F: What did they say?

B: They lived in constant fear of the Cossacks.

F: And they talked about it?

B: Yes.

F: What about their economic level?

B: Very poor. My father was a Yeshiva boy. He was a Talmudic scholar and he spent his younger years studying. All of them did. My mother was educated in the gymnasium in Germany. She came from a higher financial level.

F: How did your uncles and aunts afford to come here? How did they get here? How did they make it?

B: I didn't ask them. I don't know where they got the money. They all came steerage, that I can tell you, the cheapest mode of transportation.

F: So they wanted to come very badly?

B: That's right. They all were married in Portland. None of them were married in the Old Country. They were all single when they arrived here.

F: When you listened to them talking about Russia, about what in Russia did they feel good? Were they nostalgic for, did they remember some good things?

B: No, no.

F: Nothing?

B: No. They were tickled to death to get away from Russia. They didn't have any good memories of Russia.

F: I assume they lived in a small Jewish community in Russia, didn't they? Or were they mixed up with . . .

B: As I get the picture, they never had a full family life. They were always separated, so that the brothers wouldn't have to serve in the Russian Army. As a matter of fact, all our family used several names for that reason. I have been told that our right name was Oppenheimer. Some took the name of Goldblatt. The name of Bernstein was taken because one son lived with a family named Bernstein.
Bernstein, Louis

F: When they talked, how did they feel about being Jewish in Russia? Besides the military service, do you remember if they talked about their Jewish life there?

B: Oh, yes. They were all very Orthodox and lived and practiced it.

F: So they remembered it in a positive way, then.

B: Definitely. They all attended Hebrew Schools in Russia and studied there.

F: Well, obviously the military service policy and the pogroms disturbed them. But did they ever talk about the day-to-day relationships between themselves and non-Jews? Did they talk about Anti-semitism? Did they remember it on a day-by-day basis?

B: All I can remember is them telling me that life there was miserable because they were all ghettoized.

F: I see. So they never wished that they could go back, and they did not regret coming here.

B: None of them ever went back, not even for a visit.

F: Why did they select America? Do you know?

B: It was a land of freedom, the hope in those days.

F: Why Portland, Maine?

B: One older brother came here first. Max Bernstein. As a result of that, I think all the others came here. I don't know what brought him to Portland. I know what brought my mother to Portland. My father sent for her and married her here.

F: You have been to Europe, haven't you?

B: Yes, I've been to Europe, but I have never been to Russia.

F: When they came over, they spoke Yiddish and Russian?

B: Yup. Yiddish, Russian, and my mother spoke fluent German.

F: Do you remember them having difficulty with the English language here? Do you remember language difficulties for them when you were growing up?

B: No. They didn't have any to speak of.

F: What did you speak in the home? What language?

B: Both. We all went to public schools and we spoke in English. Every
Friday night or every Jewish holiday, Yiddish prevailed. The seder, for example, was a complete Orthodox ritual. Friday night was a ritual, and we all had to go to Hebrew School. In those days, my father hired a rabbi to come to the house to teach us. All of us were taught to read and write Jewish in all the families, and to speak it.

F: You can understand Yiddish even to this day?
B: Yes, sure, sure, I can speak Yiddish.

F: Did they have an easy time of it in the first years they lived here, or was it difficult in Portland for them? Economically?
B: No, I don't think it was difficult for them.

F: They all instantaneously had a better life.
B: Oh, definitely. No question about it.

F: You grew up in Portland, then.
B: That's right.

F: And you have lived in different locations in Portland, haven't you?
B: That's right.

F: Why the moves? You've lived on Quincy Street, North Street, Montgomery Street, Federal . . .

B: I was born on Quincy Street. We moved out because the house was too big. The family and children were married. They all were married and left Portland.

F: And each time you moved, was it into another Jewish neighborhood?
B: No. Mixed.

F: Always close to the Synagogue?
B: North Street wasn't close. The Synagogue was on Newbury Street then. My father was one of the founders. For 45 years, my father conducted a class in Gemara, free of charge, every Friday night at the Synagogue.

F: Were you the youngest child in the family?
B: I was the youngest boy.

F: How many . . .
B: I have a younger sister.
F: How many other brothers and sisters did you have?
B: I had two older brothers. One has passed on; and I have one sister older and one sister second in age to the oldest. She passed on. And I have one younger sister.
F: The two older brothers, did they remain in Portland?
B: One lived all his life in Portland and was the founder of this law firm.
F: What was his name?
B: Israel Bernstein.
F: Israel Bernstein is your brother?
B: Oh, sure, just ten years older than I am.
F: I think even members of the Jewish community had difficulty figuring out which Bernstein was related to which Bernstein, don't you think?
B: Israel was the prime mover in the community (F: I know). He was the founder of the ... 
F: I know about Israel. I didn't realize you were his brother.
B: Yes. Rebecca is his widow.
F: All right, and the other brother, where did he go?
B: He went to New York. He was in the jewelry business in New York.
F: Is he still alive?
B: Still alive.
F: And your older sister, your two sisters, one died ...
B: I had three sisters. One died. She married and lived in Rochester, New York, and she passed on in 1960.
F: And another one ...
B: Another sister is still living. She is a widow of an outstanding doctor in New York City at the Long Island College of Medicine. She is now living in California. Her daughter is out there.
F: Now, your father went through the traditional study and was a Talmudic
BERNSTEIN, Louis

B: Yes.

F: Your mother got as much education as she could.

B: That's right, until she was 19.

F: Did all of your brothers and sisters go to college?

B: No. One brother didn't want to go, and none of the girls went to college.

F: But two of you received a college education?

B: That's right.

F: Does everyone have a Jewish...

B: Absolutely. No intermarriages at that level. It was an unknown factor in those years. It wasn't a problem as it is today.

F: Now, you went to Bowdoin College.

B: Uhuh.

F: And what did you major in there?

B: I got a liberal arts education. Then I studied law here in Portland. I started in 1927 at the school which was the forerunner of what is now the University of Maine Law School.

F: When do you remember deciding to be a lawyer?

B: In 1927.

F: Why?

B: Why? Because I figured out that that was the profession where the older you get the more respected you are, and they seek you out. It is different than medicine; they want younger boys, and dentists get tired of standing. But law grows with age.

F: And you thought that way in 1927?

B: Definitely.

F: Well, after you went to law school, you went into the Air Force. What did you do in the Air Force?
B: I volunteered for the Air Force. I could have stayed out if I wanted to, because I was 41 when I entered the Air Force.

F: Forty-one?

B: That's right.

F: What did you do in the Air Force?

B: I was with troops all the time. I went in as a Lieutenant and came out as a Major, and I was always with troops, either as assistant to the commanding officer or as a staff officer.

F: You were 41 years old, and in those days that was considered old to go into the service (B: that's right). Why did you do it?

B: Why did I do it? Because I tried to get into World War I. My two brothers were in it, and I lied about my age, and they told me to come back when I was 18. That's how I happened to go to Bowdoin College. I was entered at Columbia, but Harvard was closed to the lower age bracket.

F: Where were you stationed in Europe? What countries did you visit while you were in the service?

B: I spent my four years in the Air Force in the United States, in four different Air Commands.

F: When you got out of law school you came into your brother's firm.

B: That's right. We formed a partnership, the very day I passed the bar exam.

F: Was it difficult in those days or was it easy, economically? Was it easy to get started here as a lawyer?

B: We never struggled because Israel passed the bar and started a law firm in 1915 himself as a single practitioner, a firm which was broken up for a year when he was in World War I. He had an established practice when I joined him. He could use me.

F: Well, are you one of the presidents or directors of this law firm? Are you a director of this law firm?

B: I am a senior partner.

F: Senior partner. And who are the others?

B: Barney Shur, (F: You), Sumner, Lenny Nelson and Sawyer. We were four then.

F: What is the date of that? When was that?
B: That was in the Sixties. Lenny Nelson didn't come in. Israel, Louis and Sumner, Sumner joined us in '48.

F: Now, is Sumner a nephew of yours?

B: Yeh, Sumner is Israel's son. He is my nephew.

F: How did you get Barney in here?

B: In 1964, he had Shur and Sawyer, and we merged the two firms.

F: I see. Okay. Now, I want to go into your business life here. When you and Israel started this law firm, did you have any difficulty in Portland? You say you did not have much economic difficulty; you didn't have any trouble with the banks in terms of loans. But did you meet with Antisemitism as a businessman with your firm?

B: We didn't, no. We were fortunate. We only had good relationships with all the banks, because my father ahead of us had a good relationship. In 1890, the Canal National Bank passed a vote that if anyone of Jewish origin wanted a loan, he should clear it with my father. He was a great friend of the Senior Mr. Thomas who was the President, the greatgrandfather of the President Thomas who was the President of the bank.

F: That's very interesting.

B: We spent five generations with the Thomas'.

F: Did your business grow rapidly?

B: Yes.

F: Were you a leading law firm in the city in the old days?

B: We weren't large. There were several larger law firms. The big growth has come, I should say, since 1955 or '61. The work piled up so that we had to take on more lawyers. We now have 17 of them.

F: Are you the largest law firm in Portland?

B: No. No. We are one of four or five large law firms.

F: So your business life has been a steady growth.

B: A steady growth.

F: And even during the Depression years, in the Thirties, did you manage to keep your head above water?

B: Oh sure, of course we did, right along. We always were participants in everything active in the city. My brother was on the school board.
In 1922, I was elected to City Council in Portland.

F: Does this business here observe all the Jewish holidays?

B: No. Because we have so many Christians here.

F: Oh, do you have Christian lawyers?

B: Do we have Christians here? Sure, we have Greeks, too. I don't know what branch of religion the others belong to, but Sawyer isn't Jewish, Tselikis isn't Jewish, Frinske isn't Jewish, Gordon Grimes isn't Jewish, Bill Willard isn't Jewish.

F: This is no longer a Jewish firm!

B: Oh, no- no, no.

F: At all.

B: It wasn't then. Ward wasn't Jewish.

F: I'd like to talk about your family now. You met your wife in New York. How did you meet her?

B: Through my sister. I was in the army.

F: And it was a matchmaking?

B: No. My Mother died while I was in the service, and my sister always felt that I wouldn't have a home to come back to when I got out of the army. So she met a cousin of mine who knew my present wife, and it is through her that I met her.

F: Is your wife still alive?

B: Sure. Very much so! (F: Laughter)

F: Was she born in America?

B: Oh sure. Her mother and father were married here.

F: Where were her mother and father from?

B: They also came from Kovno Geberna - The city of Kovno in Russia. Her folks came from here; so we were both Lithvaks, if you know what Lithuanians are.

F: Yes, I do.

B: Yes.

F: You don't have any children?

B: No
F: Was your wife educated?
B: A high school degree, that's all. She never went to college.
F: What was she doing when you met her?
B: She was in business with her father. They were furriers in New York.
F: Is she from an Orthodox background, also?
B: Yes, yeh.
F: So both of you were Orthodox when you married.
B: That's right.
F: Did she ever work?
B: Only with her family when she was in New York, until I took her away from New York.
F: Now, your parents, I take it, were very religious, Orthodox Jews.
B: Very religious.
F: Are you as religious as they were?
B: No, no, no. I am not as religious as they were.
F: How did they feel about that?
B: They tolerated it like everyone else did, because Orthodoxy was losing its grip on the growing American boy and girl.
F: Why did it lose its grip on you?
B: On account of my association, like every one else, with non-Jews. We wanted to go to enjoy a football game or a baseball game played on Saturday and we went. My folks wouldn't go.
F: Well, to which Synagogue do you belong?
B: I belong to both. My father was one of the founders of the Orthodox. I belong and support the Orthodox, because I am a firm believer. I was one of the founders of the Conservative Movement here in Portland, but only because I saw that as a conduit to bringing more back into Orthodoxy. I believe that Orthodoxy will be the only salvation of the Jews, but they were losing their grip. I could write a book (F: I know you can) on what they told me down there when I started the Conservative Movement here in Portland.
F: I know. I am going to ask you something about that in a minute.
BERNSTEIN, Louis

F: I just want to get your personal life cleared up here. I realize there is so much we could talk about. When you grew up, you were a member of...

B: There was no other form of Judaism in Portland until 1948, other than Orthodoxy. There was no Conservative Movement; there was no Reformed. There still is no Reformed in Portland.

F: Okay.

B: So the entire Jewish population in Portland was tied into the Orthodox branch of Judaism.

F: In what Synagogue were you Bar Mitzvahed?

B: Shaarey Tphiloh, which is now on Noyes Street. That is where we were all Bar Mitzvahed. They never had Bat Mitzvah for girls in those days.

F: If you had a daughter, would you have her Bat Mitzvahed?

B: Yes, because Orthodoxy does it today, sure. As a matter of fact, I always maintained that one of the weaknesses of the Orthodox movement at the time was the fact that the mother was more with the child than the working father was. They were not anxious to have the daughters study Hebrew and the allied subjects, because they figured that the girl was nothing but a reason for continuing families and should not have a life in the community, which is all wrong. My mother was different. My mother founded the auxiliary of the Portland Hebrew School and was its only president from 1915. She founded the auxiliary when they bought and built the Portland Hebrew School on Pearl Street.

F: Well, do you...

B: She held that for years until she died.

F: Do you observe most of the Jewish rituals?

B: To a degree.

F: Well, can you describe to me just how you place yourself?

B: I observe the High Holidays. I go to the Synagogue on all anniversaries of both my mother and father's death, because they are memorialized in that institution and they were the founders; but I go over for other activities at the Shaarey Tphiloh. I go to the Temple for all the Jewish holidays. I fast on Yom Kippur.

F: Do you keep a kosher home?

B: No, no. We don't keep a kosher home.

F: Did you at one time in your life? You never did?
B: My brother did.

F: So you broke from that at a very early age, then. You were brought up in an Orthodox home?

B: Definitely.

F: And everything was kosher . . .

B: But when my father and mother passed away, that was the end of it as far as I was concerned. I couldn't maintain it because my wife wasn't geared to it.

F: Oh, I see.

B: My brother does and Sumner still does.

F: What do you do on a Friday night now? What do you do on a Sabbath?

B: Some Friday nights I go to services at the Temple. They are closed in the summer.

F: What do you do in your home? Do you do anything in your home?

B: No.

F: So you would describe yourself as somewhere in the middle?

B: That's right.

F: A commitment in a deep sense, but not aligned to form.

B: Not as a practicing one.

F: Not aligned to form, I see. In terms of the relationships religiously between gentiles and Jews, how would you feel now, if you had children, about intermarriage?

B: About intermarriage?

F: Yes.

B: I am definitely against it; one million per cent against assimilation for the reason that we destroy the entire Jewish movement from every angle. Eventually we'd be wiped out if that's carried too far.

F: You had an extensive Jewish education?

B: Right.

F: And you went to Hebrew School and you were Bar Mitzvahed?

B: Oh, yes. I had an Orthodox wedding.
F: Oh, you did?
B: Oh yeh, sure I did.
F: Do you read Jewish publications and periodicals now?
B: Yes, all the time, all the time. Even the Jewish Advocate.
F: You have no children, but, if you had had children, would you have insisted, at least until they were 18 . .
B: Absolutely.
F: They would have gone to Hebrew . .
B: That they had a Jewish background. Everyone of my family's children were born and brought up that way.
F: Then each of the sons and daughters made his/her own decisions about how formalized they wanted to make their Jewish lives.
B: That's right, that's right.
F: But has every one of them contributed to the Jewish life of the cities in which they have lived as much as you and Israel?
B: To a degree, yes.
F: You have been dedicated to improving the life of the Jews ever since you grew up, right?
B: Yes.
F: Is this . .
B: My sisters were active in the Jewish life of the communities in which they lived and the middle brother, who is still alive, was active in it.
F: Nobody strayed away from it.
B: No, nobody strayed away, in that generation.
F: What you are really talking about is some of your nieces and nephews, actually . .
B: That's right.
F: Some strayed away, some of them married off . .
B: Not nieces and nephews - children of nieces and nephews, second generation.
F: And that troubles you, doesn't it?
B: Absolutely troubles me.

F: I want quickly to get to what you have done in the community before I talk to you about the most important thing and that's you and the Portland Jewish community and what you have done in the history of it. Put the Jewish Community aside. You have been active civically ever since you were a young man.

B: That's right. I was elected to the City Council of Portland the first year out of college.

F: What other things have you done civically in this town that you think are important?

B: Number one, I was the head of Civilian Defense.

F: For Portland?

B: Yes, yes. It started with the war. We formed it. I was head of it. I conducted classes for defense, Red Cross - you know, the saving of lives, treatment of injuries, if catastrophe struck a community. We had classes in the various churches and various buildings in the city of Portland.

F: What else do you see as contributions?

B: In 1934, I was elected to the Civil Service Commission in charge of policemen and fire department employment and served on it until I went into the army.

F: Then, when you came back, what did you do for the city?

B: I headed what is now the United Way, but at that time it was called . . .

F: Community Chest?

B: Community Chest. I was active in that and was Chairman for one year. In 1952, I was the campaign chairman.

F: And in the last 20 years, what have you done in Portland?

B: I held a court for eight years. I was on the bench.

F: Did you like that?

B: Yes, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it very much because I helped a lot of people, especially youngsters.

F: What else?

B: I have been connected with the hospitals across the years.
F: What contributions have you made outside of Portland to the State? Have you served on any State Commissions? Or anything like that?

B: No, no.

F: Your major energy has been directed to Portland.

B: Portland, that's right.

F: Have you belonged to any political organizations in town?

B: Yes. I have been a Republican all my life.

F: And have you been an active Republican?

B: I ran and was elected to the City Council. I was a delegate to State Conventions.

F: Why did you do so much? What motivated you?

B: I wanted to make it easier for the other people in the community. I wanted a better community. I wanted to help build a community, from all fields, whether Jewish or non-Jewish.

F: It took a long time . . .

B: I was instrumental in, for example, in doing away with the Children's Hospital and merging it with the Maine Medical Center. That's how we got the Maine Medical Center, out of the Eye and Ear Infirmary, Maine General Hospital, and Children's Hospital, of which I was a trustee. The building never had any doctors in it while the kids were sick. They had no interns; they had no one stationed there . . .

F: It took a lot of time and energy in those years, didn't it?

B: It has always been very busy there . . .

F: I know, but you could just as easily have not done it. What do you think motivated you, underneath?

B: It wasn't money. Just my interest in other people and the community.

F: Well, where did you get that interest? Was it in your home?

B: Yes, it was in the home. My folks always were interested in the community. They always participated in good causes.

F: It sounds to me like you grew up believing it was an obligation.

B: Then, when I was out of college, I became Secretary of the United Hebrew Charities in the City of Portland. That was an organization to help immigrants and less fortunate Jewish people to become self-sufficient so they shouldn't need any charities.
B: We gave them money to start a business. We gave them money to buy a horse and a wagon if they needed it.

F: You are at a time of your life where you should be relaxing a little. Are you still involved civically, right now, today?

B: Yes.

F: How?

B: Well, I am connected with the annual giving campaign of the Maine Medical Center. I am working on it now. I am Trustee Emeritus, so I am not active on the Board. But I am active on the fundraising end of it at the hospital.

F: You mean you were a Trustee?

B: Yes, I was a Trustee of the Maine Medical Center for years.

F: So your interests have been very wide, (B: that's right) in health services for the city (B: uhhuh). You spent more time on that almost than anything else, haven't you? Except the whole legal field. You have really been instrumental in the development of the good health facilities in Portland, haven't you?

B: No question about it. That's why the college honored me.

F: Which ones have honored you?

B: Bowdoin College gave me an honorary Doctor of Law in 1973 when I got through there as President of the Board of Legislators.

F: You can look back then, can't you? You can look back to a time in Portland when there wasn't much.

B: That's right.

F: And you can see something there.

B: That's right.

F: Does that give you some feeling of satisfaction?

B: Well, I wanted to open doors where I felt Antisemitism existed; and I wanted to make it possible for those who followed me to have an open door. That's why in every organization I joined, I never changed my name; and I stressed the fact that there should be no second-class citizenship. That was my underlying motive. That tends for a good community.

F: So you can look back with some feeling of success, unlike some people. You can look out this window and you can see, visibly see, some things
in which you have been very instrumental?

B: No question about it.

F: It must make you feel pretty good.

B: Now, let me tell you. This is not for publication. I want to tell you an interesting story. This is interesting. I got a call from the president of the Unionmutual Life Insurance Company back in 1937. He had just moved here. It was a moribund insurance company, going downhill. He came to Portland, turned it right around, made a very successful institution out of it. He took an active interest in the hospital, took an active interest in everything, and we became quite friendly. He called me up one day and he said to me, "Louie, you represent here two shoe factories. Why don't you get a shoe factory to buy the Knights of Pythias Building, against which we had a mortgage and foreclosed?" I said to him, "Is it for sale?" He said, "Yes. We will sell you the mortgage." I said, "You can't sell me any mortgage because I wouldn't allow the Jewish community in Portland to put the Knights of Pythias out of business; but if you put them out of business and the building then becomes available, and you have a right to sell it, we will buy it from you, and we will buy it to establish a Jewish Community Center in Portland." He says, "Okay," and that is how the Jewish Community Center started. That's the original building. That was the Knights of Pythias Building. Now, when I joined the Portland Country Club . . .

F: What year was that?

B: About five years ago.

F: Five years ago?

B: When I joined the Portland Yacht Club in 1938, I said to them, "I have a boat, but I'll tell you one thing. I am joining the Club here because I am a Jew and I want other Jews in it. I don't want any second-class citizenship." I made the same remark to the Portland Country Club. Today we have a dozen or more in there.

F: You mean, there is no problem anymore.

B: Well, there is only because of the limit as to the numbers they can take in.

F: But other than that, you were one of those who . . .

B: Broke the barriers, definitely.

F: So, the Jews in Portland, and the people in Portland, really owe you and the members of your family a great deal in terms of the way they are able to live now because of some of the things that you did.

B: I couldn't do it alone. I had support. I had a wonderful brother who was a great one, and my sister-in-law was a terrific influence. You notice that document I showed you?
F: Yes.

B: Very interesting. That was my father, this was my uncle, this was my mother's nephew, Dr. Caplan. Everybody here has family still living in Portland.

F: This was in 1904?

B: Yeh. This is a very interesting document and very well drafted, because the banks wouldn't loan any money to build a Synagogue, and that's true today. That's not because of Antisemitism. It is because it is a one-purpose building. What can they do with it if they don't pay? So these directors guaranteed the payment. But that document was a very important instrument because it had a provision in it that if anyone died, the survivors assumed that responsibility and you can't go after the decedent's estate. It's a very novel and interesting document.

F: These people really felt a deep need to get things moving, didn't they?

B: Absolutely.

F: Let's just look now at the Jewish community in Portland. When you were growing up, it was the Newbury Street Synagogue, right?

B: That was the only one in Portland. Then later on came the Congress Street, but that also was Orthodox. That just caused friction.

F: Can you remember anything about that?

B: Oh, yes.

F: Can you tell us about what happened there?

B: Sure. Like everything else, there were petty jealousies; and the leadership was at odds with those who wanted to be leaders. But they had the same motive. It isn't that they changed religion or weakened it in any way, shape, or manner.

F: Well, what do you think was the basic cause?

B: There was a feud over the Rabbi.

F: Are some of those stories correct about the . . .

B: No. He never was locked in a closet, but they tore up his seat in the Synagogue where he sat so that he couldn't hold that seat. They ripped it right off the floor, literally. I can remember that.

F: They just didn't like him?
BERNSTEIN, Louis

B: They didn't like him. He made some enemies.

F: As you think back, do you remember a lot of differences in religious practices within the Jewish Community in Portland? Even though everything was Orthodox, did the practice of religious life differ widely here?

B: What happened was the second generation turned away from it. They went to the Synagogue just to make an appearance, to show their parents that they knew that that day was a holiday; but they never stayed for the services, I saw that coming. They lost their hold on that group. When we started Temple Beth El . . .

F: Now, when was that?

B: 1948.

F: How did you do that? Did you just call some men one night and say, "Let's talk about this." How did you actually do it?

B: We got a group together. It was really sparked by women in those days, Mrs. Elias Caplan, Mrs. Frances Elowitch, and a woman who left town after her husband died, Ruby Packard. She is re-married. They wanted a Conservative Movement and they asked me to call a group together, which we did. We had our first services in Frye Hall on Spring Street for the Jewish High Holidays.

F: Where did you get a rabbi?

B: The theological seminary sent us a different rabbi any time we wanted one.

F: What did you do for a cantor? Did you have one then?

B: No. We had a local man at that time do it.

F: How big a group got going the first year and how many people did you . . .

B: Well, we had a meeting. I called a meeting at the Eastland Hotel and we raised pledges of $102,000.

F: In 1948?

B: Yes. And that started the movement. That came, I think, in 1949, or maybe the early part of 1950. My cousin owned a building on Forest Avenue, a house; and he gave us the use of it for nothing. We held our services there Friday nights and started the ball rolling at the corner of Noyes Street and Forest Avenue. For the High Holidays, we were first at Spring Street. Then we rented the hall which is now the Blue Cross-Blue Shield out there on Forest Avenue. One year, while we were building, the Woodfords Congregational Church gave us the use of their Community Center on Woodfords Street.
BERNSTEIN, Louis

F: What year was the Temple completed?
B: Must have been somewhere around 1950.
F: Were you the leader in raising the funds to build the Temple?
B: Yes. I was one of the leaders. I called the first meeting.
F: Did you have any trouble getting the money? That is not an inexpensive Temple.
B: We got a mortgage. The bank gave us a mortgage that was paid off a few years ago.
F: They gave you a mortgage?
B: Uhhuh.
F: Is that usual?
B: At that time it was usual. Don't forget the Jewish picture was better then than in 1904. We had people who had some influence with banks. We bought the land from the Noyes Estate.
F: Uhhuh.
B: That tiny little piece, I think we paid $11,000 for it. I never allowed myself to become head of a Temple or a Synagogue or a treasurer of any Jewish organization. I never wanted to get into a fight over money or on account of beliefs. I didn't believe in it. I didn't think it was necessary for the city of Portland to have two Synagogues here, but they wouldn't do anything about it.
F: How did you get this organized?
B: In the Center. The Center was the combining force. We didn't have two factions then. We didn't have Conservative and we didn't have Orthodoxy. We only had Orthodoxy. When we founded the Center, we were a united people. We had the backing of the entire community.
F: So you had mixed feelings about leading this Conservative Movement, didn't you?
B: Well, I'll tell you exactly my feelings and this will explain it to you. One of the older gentlemen, a generation ahead of me, said, "How come you, being the son of A. J. Bernstein, who was one of the founders of the Orthodox Synagogues in Portland, became interested in the Conservative Movement?" So I was invited to a breakfast on a Sunday morning down there which was attended by the older members of the Synagogue. And I spoke in Yiddish, and I said to them, "What are we doing? Are we taking away members from you? No, we are taking people who you have lost and are out on the golf course on the High Holidays when they should be in the Synagogue; and we are bringing
them back into a house of worship. It will be the happiest day of my life when you can take them from us, and bring them back into your place." And that has been my belief. That decision was a stepping stone because Orthodoxy has grown since then. The Temple created a terrific Orthodox movement in Portland, and Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue today has the largest Jewish congregation in the community.

F: Were you criticized by some of the Orthodox Jews in this town?

B: Yes, I was at the time. But I overcame it, and I overcame it because I said to them, "We are not hurting Judaism, we are helping it. We are making it easier for you to bring them back in the fold, because it is much easier for you to take them from us than from the golf course. At least they are getting some baptism into Jewish beliefs. You may not agree with all of it, but certainly it is better than nothing." That is really what's happened. Then they didn't want any of our members to be buried in their cemetery, so once again I appeared before them and overcame them. I began naming the people who were sitting there and said, "Do you want your children not to be buried near you? Do you want to separate them from the cemetery? That is ridiculous." So they agreed and the only thing was, they charged $50 extra to a non-member, which was fair. Now we have our own cemetery.

F: What full-time Rabbis have you known in Portland?

B: In the Orthodox?

F: Both. I take it you have known them all.

B: Yes, I do. Well, it all started in my day with a Rabbi Shohet. His son became the first or second rabbi in the Congress Street Shul. When it broke up, he was the one who had that. Then they had Rabbi Miller. I am talking now about Orthodoxy. Then they brought in a young fellow, brilliant, who left here for Montreal. I know him. I brought him back here for the 25th at the Jewish Community Center. He was brilliant.

F: He went to Montreal?

B: Yeh, he went from here to Montreal.

F: And who followed him?

B: Then we had Rabbi Greenbaum. Wait a minute now, I am jumping it. There was an Essrig here before Greenbaum. He just died in California, I think. Then came others. Following Bekritsky, We had Dworken, a brilliant youngster, and that is the history of the rabbis in the Orthodox group.

F: What about the Conservative ones? Who was the first one?

B: The first one we had here was Ephraim Bennett. They they had three others. I can't remember their names. They didn't stay here long. But we only had one cantor.
F: Messerschmidt?

B: That's right - at the Temple.

F: When you look at this list of Orthodox and Conservative rabbis, which ones would you pick as the ones who have really made the greatest contribution. Whom would you identify as the best leaders for your community?

B: For the Conservative Movement?

F: For both.

B: Bennett for the Conservative, absolutely, was the one who really sparked it in its infancy. Of the others, I wouldn't even dare state. I think Bekritsky carried on beautifully - he was here over 15 years.

F: You have seen the trouble that other communities have had with rabbis. Do you think, in general, you have had a pretty good group here?

B: Yes, I do. Yes, I do. They have all contributed something.

F: Do you think now that the people, at least in the Synagogues and in the Jewish Community, and their leadership basically work together regardless of whether they are Orthodox or Conservative?

B: Surprisingly, and this is what pleases me. The Orthodox Movement is getting a lot of youngsters and your married couples. They have a terrific following here. That doesn't mean that they practice Orthodoxy according to the Jewish rituals or custom; but they are pretty loyal to the cause and they support it very well.

F: Let's go to the Jewish Community Center quickly. Do you see any changes in emphasis or direction over the years?

B: Yes, definitely.

F: Like what? How would you put it?

B: Well, of course the Center has been weak in leadership. No question about it.

F: What do you think is going to happen to it?

B: One of the things that created that weakness was the fact of the establishment of the Conservative Movement in Portland, with the building of the Noyes Street Orthodox Synagogue and the Temple. That took leadership away from the Center. Many of the activities that were taking place at the Center were transferred to each of these houses of worship.

F: Well, in the old days . . .
BERNSTEIN, Louis 25.

B: You see, we haven't got a united community.

F: Tell me if I am wrong. Before, there were some functions which the Community Center performed that are no longer necessary, probably more social functions, probably more educational functions. What do you think?

B: Yeh, the reason for that is that some of the programs that were carried on by the Center have been taken on to help build the interest in the new Synagogue out there on Noyes Street and in the Temple. What used to be the hub of the city, and the idea of a Community Center being the focal point of Jewish activity, has been split into three units now.

F: When you look ahead, say five years from now, what do you think will be . . .

B: Well, let me tell you what has happened in other communities. I have been very close to the situation in Burlington, Vermont, in the past. In the same graduation class at the theological seminary were two rabbis. One Rabbi Wall and one Rabbi Bennett. Bennett came to Portland and Wall came to Burlington. In Burlington he is still there and has an active interest in civic affairs. Smartly he took over the leadership of the Orthodox group there when they didn't have an Orthodox rabbi, and he served both. Now he builds a new Temple there; and he built under one roof a community center, a Hebrew School and a house of worship. It is a smaller city. It is 1/3 or 1/5 the size of Portland. He has been the Rabbi there for 26 years. Portland has had five Rabbis. They have had one. That is what can happen when a city plans it, and it planned it. It could plan it because it didn't have a community center there. So when they built, they fulfilled three needs under one roof. Here we have three roofs now, and . . .

F: What do you think will happen?

B: Well, number one, if a movement is started by one, the other side doesn't cooperate and it is typical.

F: Do you think the Center will be less and less used in the future?

B: There is another factor that enters into this picture. The Community Center is now located in the heart of Portland and you know what has happened to the heart of any community: the people have moved away. All the Jews in Portland in 1938 lived in the center of Portland. Today 95% live outside of the city, on the fringes of the community - with the result that the Temple and the Synagogue are focused in Woodfords, while the Community Center is in Portland.

F: Let's go on, then, with the Community Center.

B: I have a book that may be of interest to you which is the dedication issue of 1937.

F: This is very interesting. I am glad we are doing this oral history
project because I think there is a very serious problem in Portland. Everybody has been so busy doing things that no one has actually sat down and collected some of the material. I asked the Jewish Community Center if there was something available in terms of the Community Center, and nothing was available.

B: Well, that is a weakness. I brought the first executive director to Portland. I brought the most outstanding man to the city of Portland. He was fantastic. He built that Community Center. I left him when I went in the army. When I came back, he was dying at 34 years of age from leukemia. What a wonderful leader he was, Norman Godfrey.

F: All right, we can borrow it then?

B: Sure.

F: We will return it to you in good shape.

B: Where is your office?

F: In Luther Bonney Hall.

B: Luther Bonney Hall. I was one of the founders of that, you know, of the forerunner of the University of Maine of Portland.

F: You mean Portland Junior College.

B: Sure.

F: You were doing that also?

B: Yeh, sure. I resigned because I figured I couldn't serve two masters when I was made an Overseer at Bowdoin College in 1958. But I worked with the President of the Board of Trustees of the University of Maine, Fogler.

F: Really?

B: Oh, sure. I knew him very well, yeh.

F: In terms of the other services which the community provides, were you instrumental in the Home for the Aged?

B: My brother was the attorney who formed the corporation and my father was a director. My mother was an active worker for the Home for the Aged. That was founded in 1928. I once gave a speech on the Jewish history of Portland to the Noyes Street Shul at one Sunday morning breakfast. I pinpointed for them the highlights of the decades in the city of Portland. From 1900 to 1910, the outstanding accomplishment was the founding and building of the Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue on Newbury Street. From 1910-1920, the outstanding bit of progress was the establishment of
the Portland Hebrew School from a filthy building on Newbury Street to a modern building then on Pearl Street. Because of it, they raised the standard of education for both boys and girls. In the decade from 1920 to 1930, the achievement was the building of the Jewish Home for the Aged. From 1930 to 1940, the leading bit of progress was with the building of the Jewish Community Center. From 1940 to 1950 was the founding of Temple Beth El. From 1950 to 1960 was the Noyes Street Synagogue. Those were the outstanding progressive events of Jewish life in Portland.

F: What about in the last 15 years?

B: In the last 15 years? (long pause) We have gone downhill a little bit. The Temple and the Shul have grown, but the Community Center has gone down.

F: Let me move your mind now to politics.

B: One of the things which took away from it and hurt any progressive steps was the tremendous drain on the Jewish Community in the city of Portland for the United Jewish Appeal and the State of Israel.

F: Yes, yes. I want to ask you about Israel later, because I thought you would probably come to that.

B: I headed the campaign in 1947.

F: Well, let me just interject some questions about politics before I get to that. Have Jewish men and women in the community exerted influence in a political sense in this community?

B: Yes, definitely.

F: When you think of individuals who have done that, who would you think of? Who would you refer to besides all the Bernsteins?

B: The growth of the number of Jewish judges that were appointed by the various governors in the State of Maine. We have a batch of them.

F: Yes, you do, don't you?

B: Yeh, we have ... .

F: From the Supreme Court to the ... .

B: The Supreme Court and five, I think, on the district court and five or more on the superior court. Then locally in the city government we had Jewish representation on the school board. Sumner was on the city council for six years.

F: Roz was on the school board, right?
BERNSTEIN, Louis 28.

B: Roz was for six years on the school board, chairman of it. My sister-in-law has been secretary of the Board of Trustees at Westbrook College all these years. So it's grown - they have been recognized . . .

F: Are most of these Jewish leaders in Portland Democrats or Republicans or does it split?

B: I should say that most of them are Democrats today.

F: In political times, do the political organizations in the State, particularly in this area, solicit the help or the support of the Jewish leadership?

B: Definitely.

F: They do?

B: Uhhuh.

F: They make a point of touching base?

B: Yup. They come to the Temple. Muskie was just over at a dinner at the Synagogue, where he spoke. I think in the month of June all of the politicians came to the Brotherhood breakfasts at both houses of worship to sell their political wares.

F: So they consider that the Jewish Community is a force to be reckoned with, even though it is relatively small, right?

B: Very small. I think we are four percent of the population.

F: But you are treated, in terms of influence, at least politically, as though you were greater.

B: Well, rightly so. We've had to head the United campaign for the city, myself, Barney Shur, Harold Nelson. I know two others who were offered it and didn't take it. One was Sumner; but he was tied-up as head of the bar association for the State - he was President of the Maine Bar. We've had 'em all - President of the Cumberland Bar Association - my brother and Barney Shur.

F: The Jewish leadership has been influential, far beyond the number . . .

B: Oh yes, far beyond the percentage of population. No question about it.

F: Let me ask you a question about the economical end of this area. Has the Jewish leadership exerted an economic influence on the growth of Portland that's significant?

B: Definitely.
F: Why do you think that is, and how?

B: Well, number one, I think the Jew fundamentally is interested in the community in which he lives and wants to contribute something towards it. I think that is evidenced by the new Civic Center. The old physical barriers are gone between the Jews and the non-Jews. Today, there may be incidents, but they are rare. They still exist, but they are much fewer in number. The Jew has taken an interest in the Portland Museum of Art and the Arts and Sciences. Lenny Nelson was State Chairman and he has done a tremendous job there. Lenny served for eight years as the head of the Arts Commission appointed by the Governor.

F: Have the Jewish business people been involved in certain kinds of businesses more than others in Portland, or is it quite varied?

B: No, it is pretty varied. You see, they have grown with the times. I have always been interested in higher education. I was one of the founders of the Higher Education Foundation in the State of Maine which created the loan policy which has now been taken over nationally by the national organization. But when we formed it, I was its second president and we got the president at the University of Maine, Loyd Elliott, Bob Strider from Colby, Chuck Phillips from Bates and President Coles of Bowdoin. We got the Trustees interested in attending meetings only by adopting the policy that the meetings were held at the college, and they took their turns in being the host - something that attracts them to the scene. The meeting was held at the college rather than at an office or a bank building or so forth. Things have changed also with the banking industry of Portland. There isn't a bank outside the Maine National Bank that hasn't got a Jewish director there. The times have changed, and that's true of the colleges, too. The support of the colleges only came after World War II. Prior to that the Jew was considered as a non-contributing alumnus. That changed.

F: This Jewish community, in general, isn't a particularly wealthy Jewish community, but it has contributed . . .

B: Well, ten one-dollar bills make $10.

F: But it has made contributions that are rather unusual. You wouldn't term it a truly wealthy Jewish community would you? In general?

B: Not a poor community. We have had some very, very successful business people. We have some fabulous businesses built from the ground up by Jews. Take the Elowitches, take George Lewis, one of the big producers of poultry in the State of Maine. He's the largest packer of blueberries today in the State of Maine. Times have changed and the different things that they have gone into . . .

F: Looking back in the last 25 years, if you were to pick five or six Jewish families living in Portland who made the most important contributions from your way of thinking or in leadership, who would come to mind? Besides the Bernsteins?
B: Well, the youngsters are moving up. Barney Shur is staying very active.

F: Barney is a youngster?

B: Well, he isn't a youngster (F: Laughter), but in the past 15 years he has grown by leaps and bounds. He represents the University of Maine, you know.

F: I know Barney.

B: And Lenny Nelson. Jerry Goldberg is an up and coming one. Joel Abromson, President of the Boys Club. I guess he just got through; I think his term has expired. Those are all steps in participation, Jewish participation in civic organizations.

F: You have alluded many, many times today to difficulties for Jews in Portland vis-a-vis gentiles, and you have talked about opening doors and incidents becoming relatively rare. But you would also say Antisemitism still exists?

B: Oh yes, still exists. There is no question about it. There are still some hard-boiled Antisemites who still roam around.

F: In the old days . . .

B: Look at what just happened at your University of Maine with Brown up there. Look what happened with that Arab speaking at Bowdoin College (F: I know). Look at the guy they brought down to speak at the Holiday Inn (F: I know), a rabble rouser. Those things we have to contend with. Now with the Arab oil situation, it is becoming more and more difficult. They are trying to overcome the restrictions that the Arabs have set on doing business with Jews. Massachusetts just passed that law, you know.

F: Well, in the old days, can you remember growing up and as a businessman seeing much more evidence of Antisemitism?

B: As I grew up? Most definitely. When I went to Bowdoin College, I wasn't allowed to join a fraternity because I was Jewish. There were no Jews taken into a fraternity in my day. But I never changed my name, and there isn't a branch of Bowdoin College that I haven't headed. I was the alumni organization's campaign chairman; I was the President of the Alumni Council. I am talking now about being elected nationally. So that's why I say Antisemitism was for a long period, up until this Arab situation, definitely on the wane.

F: In terms of Antisemitism, were there restrictions on housing or where you could live in this town?

B: Oh, sure. Of course, they had a pact right out here in Woodfords, on Highland Street. A group got together and agreed not to sell their property to Jews. Sure, it existed.
F: What do you think about the social relationships in this town?

B: Oh, it's changed. It's changed. That doesn't mean that it is wide open, but we are invited to weddings of outstanding families.

F: You mentioned Israel before. Would you call yourself a Zionist? When do you think you became a Zionist?

B: Well, what is Zionism?

F: I don't know.

B: That's the wrong word. Zionism is just another word for Jerusalem. That's all it means.

F: You are committed to Israel?

B: Yes, definitely. Definitely.

F: Have you been there?

B: Yes, I have been there.

F: When Israel became a State in 1948 . . .

B: I was at Atlantic City when Chaim Weitzman spoke and the State of Israel was born.

F: Did you serve then as a leader in this community in terms of raising money for Israel (B: oh, sure) and those types of things?

B: Sure, I was head of the campaign in 1947 when I got out of the army, sure. I worked on every one of the campaigns. Of course I have. I still do.

F: How do you feel about the survival of the State of Israel?

B: I think it is going to survive because it has guts.

F: Do you think it is important that it does?

B: What else can we have to point to? We can't be a man without a country. Six million were killed in Europe and those who are left behind need a haven for survivorship. Who is going to go to bat for them? Where is there an open door policy to save human lives? Look, the Arab can't stand one minute against me in a debate because I can just raise one point that he can't answer. I there any reason why there should be a poor Arab in the world today?

F: What about the latest resolutions in the UN?

B: The United Nations hasn't had an influence at all on the State of Israel. Israel recognizes it. But Israel has to lift itself up by its own bootstraps and it is going to do it. There is no question
about it. Israel is here to stay. It is the only democracy in the Near East. You know what is going to save Israel?

F: What?

B: The Arabs fighting amongst themselves.

F: You mentioned the killing of the six million Jews.

B: Yes.

F: I'd like just to ask you a couple of questions about that. During the war, were you aware of what was happening to the Jews in Europe?

B: Sure. I was in the war. The Air Force.

F: Were you aware of the slaughter that was going on over there?

B: Yes. And I resented the fact that no one lifted a finger to try to stop it.

F: But you knew.

B: Yes, I knew.

F: You read it in the papers, and it hit you, right?

B: That's right.

F: I suppose that all of your relatives were killed, were they not?

B: I didn't have any there. They were gone. We don't have any relatives in Europe. You see, when you start thinking, my father came here in 1883.

F: Now, listen. You knew as did others, and you believed what was happening. But you were living in a country that did nothing. America did nothing.

B: That's right.

F: Now, how do you feel about that and why do you think that happened? I imagine you understand why Hitler did it, and some of these other countries (B: Yes, sure). That's another question. But here is America, and here is the largest Jewish community in the world that is free, or was. Now, how did you feel about it at the time? Do you think that we could have made a difference - America?

B: Did I feel what?

F: Do you feel that if this country had done something, first of all, that it would have made a difference? (B: definitely) Fewer people killed, correct? (B: sure)
F: Do you remember reading in the paper about the incidents - like the St. Louis?

B: Of course.

F: Well, how did you feel during that time about this country?

B: I felt terrible. They wouldn't even take them into Cuba.

F: That's right. How did you feel about this country, though?

B: I felt terrible. I thought America wasn't fighting for the principle in which it was set out for.

F: Well, what about some of the Jewish leaders?

B: The Jewish leaders did, I think, what they could. But they weren't as influential then as they are today.

F: Do you think that they were afraid? When we think back, we know that Brandeis and Morgenthau were in the government. Do you think they could have done more?

B: No, no. They were lost to Judaism.

F: Oh, you don't think they were ... 

B: Yes, that generation was lost. They intermarried and they went away . . .

F: Well, they sure didn't do much to help . . .

B: No. The Morgenthau, no. Even though some were only 1/8th Jewish in Germany, Hitler even described them as Jews who had to be exterminated. The the Morgenthau and the others began to realize that they couldn't hide and they couldn't forget their background and they had to come to the fore.

F: Well, America's gentiles, primarily, and some of the American Jewish communities failed the European Jews.

B: Yes. And you have the same situation right now in America with the Irish. What are they doing to stop the slaughter in Ireland? And look at the powerful Irish in America.

F: I am sure you are getting tired, but I have two things I want to do. Do you remember when Ben Gurion came here?

B: Yes.

F: You do?

B: Yes.
BERNSTEIN, Louis

F: How old were you then?
B: When Ben Gurion came to America for a visit?
F: Didn't he come to Portland also?
B: No. He didn't come to Portland.
F: He came to Boston, right?
B: Yes. He didn't come to Portland. I went down to hear Abba Eban in Boston.
F: You did?
B: Yes. And he has a power.
F: And you heard Chaim Weitzman?
B: Yes, I heard Chaim Weitzman in Atlantic City in 1948. Brandeis came to Portland for the Zionist movement.
F: Do you remember him?
B: Sure, in 1917. With Morgenthau. Morgenthau was staying, because he was Ambassador to Turkey, and although the Poland Spring House didn't allow Jews, they allowed Morgenthau to stay there. And my father, with a group, met him and brought him to Portland and he spoke at City Hall.
F: What about the Hebrew Free Loan Society? Were you involved in that?
B: Yes. I became secretary of the United Hebrew Charities. The Hebrew Free Loan was a branch of the United Hebrew Charities. Today it is called Jewish Family Services.
F: I see.
B: I became secretary the year I was graduated from college. That's the Hebrew Free Loan. You asked me what they did and I told you. The United Hebrew Charities not only supported the poor, but they loaned money to give them a source of independence so that they could go into business for themselves. Whether it was peddling, whether it was opening up a little shoe repair shop or something, we would loan them money, free of interest.
F: Then this community, in terms of welcoming immigrants from Europe, from the time you can remember, has been very supportive, is that right?
B: Absolutely
F: And they are making major contributions today, aren't they?
B: Absolutely.

F: In terms of bringing Russian Jews.

B: Yes.

F: Have you been partly instrumental in being sure that that did happen?

B: Yeh, I still am. I go to a Spa in Florida in the winter. We raised $600 and some odd thousand dollars for the sale of Israeli bonds last winter down there.

F: You know, you don't look 75 years old; you don't act 75 years old; you don't think 75 years old. I don't know what a 75-year old man is supposed to look, think and act like, but since I am going to be forty next week, I'd just like to have your secret!

B: Well, it is connected with the Bicentennial, you see. I'll be 76 this year.

F: I would like to finish by asking you to ponder some things and just to tell me how you feel about them. Do you feel more or less Jewish today than you did 20 or 30 years ago?

B: I don't feel any less Jewish today than I did 60 years ago. I think we are living in a fabulous age. It is a horrible thing to say, but [F: I know what you are going to say] it was the Holocaust that brought us all together and taught us that we can't hide our heritage, that we must see to it that it shouldn't happen again.

F: There are some Jews who believe that unless they are different, the whole thing is going to happen again. Do you share that belief?

B: You are asking me now if the times have made them snug and complacent. I don't think they have a chance to become snug and complacent because I think the publicity and the daily articles on television, radio, and the newspapers has kept the subject alive and they are familiar with what is happening in the world. I read the New York Times religiously, every single day, because it is the only paper which gives you the complete picture of what is happening all over.

F: When you look back in your own life, what difference has it made that you are Jewish?

B: Well, the big difference it has made, from my standpoint, is to dissipate the second-class citizenship. It has reduced the numbers substantially. In other words, I feel just as much at home in Portland as the descendants of a family who came over on the Mayflower, because I can substantiate my loyalty to my community, my country, and my contribution to life. To me, that is damned important.
F: Do you expect the Jewish Community in this area to grow, or do you agree with those who keep writing and talking about the death of American Judaism?

B: There was a brilliant article written just last week by a Rabbi in London about the big danger to Jewry right now, and that is intermarriage and assimilation. And that's my firm belief.

F: It's almost like it's a circle, isn't it? As things get easier because of people like you who have broken through barriers, and it becomes easier for people to communicate and talk with each other, it then seems less and less important to some kinds of Jews to remain Jewish.

B: Well, I will tell you what scares me. It scares me when I get the statistics, because I read them. Forty per cent of the Jewish boys and girls who go to college intermarry.

F: I know.

B: Frightening....

F: But let me add something ....

B: It is frightening - that figure ...

F: Yes.

B: Over 40 percent And what is frightening about it? Eventually it can wipe out a Jewish people.

F: The State of Israel is the homeland for world Judaism, but the other place of strength - financial, moral, religious - is America, and, if Judaism in America dies out or reduces itself, it could affect the fate of [B: Jews all over the world] Jews in many places who are not free...

B: Absolutely, 100 percent right. 100 percent right. You know, you need a spirit; you have to have some belief, and hope, and faith; and the hope and faith of the Jews of the world are looking to America. Let's not kid ourselves. They can't look to Portugal; they can't look to Spain; they can't look to France. They can't look to the Orient.

F: They certainly cannot. Around the country, we see small groups of Orthodox Jews or Orthodox synagogues attracting a growing number of young people, who may or may not observe all of the rules, but are at least intrigued by Orthodoxy; and, in that sense, that is a very healthy sign, isn't it?

B: Absolutely, definitely. And I think the proof of the pudding is to check with Rabbi Dworken. You will find that their numbers have grown. But the old ones have died off, and there are mostly young members there.
BERNSTEIN, Louis

F: I know. I have gone over on two different occasions. I have been very interested and very encouraged in seeing that kind of growth. I think that's healthy.

B: Sure, it is healthy.

F: Well, since your family has long lives, Judge Burnstein, what are you going to do with the next 25 years?

B: What do you mean?

F: In the next 25 years; what are the kinds of things you are thinking of doing next?

B: I am going to rest in peace at the cemetery out there!

F: That will be a long time from now!

B: Aren't you kind!

F: No. I am not kind. What are you going to do next? Really, what are you going to do in the next 10 years?

B: What am I working on now?

F: What you are interested in now?

B: I am working very much with Bowdoin College now. I am entering my 30th year as class agent, and I want the whole picture of college support to change. There are people who have been giving $5 and $10 a year who should be giving hundreds and thousands a year to the College. If you don't get that, you are going to make it impossible for the average boy and girl to attend college because the cost is too great. It is becoming prohibitive. I want the colleges to keep down their costs of a college education, and the only way you can do it is through endowments and through scholarship funds.

F: So you are devoting a lot of your time to higher education.

B: I certainly am.

F: You are not going to stop, I know that, so what else are you going to do?

B: No, I'm not gonna stop. I am going to work for every good cause. Now, I am going to tell you another thing right here in Portland. I sent out a letter last year. We pay support for the police department; we pay support for the fire department; we pay support for education; and the most valuable thing in life we are not supporting is protection of own body in case of sickness when we need hospital care. The cost of running a hospital.....
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F: Especially with older people.

B: It is growing by leaps and bounds, with the result that every citizen, I honestly believe, must contribute annually to a hospital to make sure that those hospitals still have the room for them when it is needed.

F: Bravo! Do you think you are going to get support?

B: Oh, it is definitely growing. Oh yes, oh yes, it is definitely growing. We have to be very careful, that is the unfortunate part about it, because we shouldn't compete. We can't go to the wide open spaces and ask for help, because then we are in conflict with the United Fund, do you follow me?

F: Yes.

B: So we have to seek those who can contribute to the United Fund, without hurting anybody.

F: I suppose it is fair to say that for the past 60 years, you have given your time to all these things, and you are a serious man, and you are committed man, and you have made contributions to the wider community and most particularly to the Jewish community. Now, you are not a man without humor? [B: no, I have a lot of wit] Yes. You are a very serious man, but what have you done in between all this to enjoy yourself? What do you do that you enjoy?

B: They cut out my golf because I have a bum back [laughter] never mind about my 75 years. I got my aches and pains [F: laughs]. For 39 years, I played golf, and I can't anymore, even though I belong to the club. I can't swing because I have a bum back; and everytime I throw it out, brother- I am gone, so I walk instead of that. I fish every weekend.

F: Where?

B: Sebago or out in the ocean. I am a great fisherman.

F: Do you still have your own boat?

B: I used to. I have a guide and I rent. It's cheaper.

F: What do you do in the winter time when you can't fish?

B: I go south. I fish down there. It is the first time in my life I took off three months, last year. This year, I am going to take four months. Let them work. I'm done; let them do it. I work, believe me. I'm in here first thing in the morning. But I'm going to take off four months this year.

F: And your wife is glad you are doing this?

B: Oh yes, absolutely.