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AN INTERVIEW WITH RONALD BECKER

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Professor *Emeritus* Ronald Becker on September 14, 2022, with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for joining me. I'd like to begin by asking you where and when you were born.

Ronald Becker: Okay. I was born in New York City on February 16, 1950, at the famed Flower Fifth Avenue Hospital, which no longer exists. That's in Manhattan, in Upper Manhattan, was in Upper Manhattan. I believe it became an insane asylum shortly after my birth.

SI: Tell me your parents' names for the record.

RB: Okay. My parents, Bernard--we called him Berel, his Yiddish name--Bernard Becker, and Frieda, whose Hebrew name (Yiddish name) was Fraydel Becker, Bernard and Frieda Becker.

SI: I want to ask about their family backgrounds. I see they came from the same place in what is now Belarus, was then the Russian Empire. Was that Lunna-Wola a *shtetl* or more of a town?

RB: Yes, it was two *shtetls*, basically divided by the *Nieman* River [Mr. Becker uses the Yiddish pronunciation here], the Nieman River, which is pretty well known in history. The Nieman River was a crossing point for Napoleon's army during his invasion of Russia in 1812. It was separated by the river. So, you have Lunna, was one little *shtetl*, and Wola was the other.

SI: What stories, if any, did your parents tell you about their lives in that area?

RB: Right, very interesting. They were of almost a different generation. My father was born in 1896 and my mother in 1912. So, they didn't really know each other very well during that time my mother's family was there for. Both families were there for quite a while. I don't know exactly when. I don't know a lot about our genealogy, especially on my father's side.

My mother's father had a lumberyard, had a pretty successful business there. After a fire when she was a teenager, and other very unfortunate acts, she talked a lot about antisemitism there, especially around the time of Halloween.

She would not let us trick-or-treat or do anything during Halloween, because that's when a lot of the *pogroms* [antisemitic riots] took place, where the police kind of looked the other way. They would hide in their basement and that type of thing. So, that was not a happy holiday for us.

So, she came over at a relatively young age. She and her sister came to the United States when they were still teenagers. They came on their own. They were sponsored by a cousin in the Bronx and, eventually, found jobs in the needle trade there. So, she did not have many happy memories at all.

My father, on the other hand, was older, was established pretty well. His mother was a pretty well-known woman, Basha Becker, around town. His father died when he was very young.

He got into the sort of delicatessen business. He had a little, like a deli, there, with rooms for truckers, who, if they got drunk while they were there--my father would serve vodka, certainly

with the meals, and spoke about sharing it with them, just putting a whole bottle of vodka on the table, would sleep it off upstairs.

He didn't really experience as much antisemitism. He was much more assimilated, it seemed, than my mother. It ended up costing him the lives of his family, really, because he would not immigrate during that time. The only survivors in his family were a brother and a sister and some cousins who had come over earlier.

His brother went to Argentina. He had a younger brother who went to Argentina, who encountered many Nazi sympathizers in Buenos Aires and warned my father, "You've got to get out of there. They're talking about killing all the Jews of Europe." My father poo-pooed it, of course. My father was married and had a child during that time and thought things were going pretty well. He had some interesting stories about some of the goings-on there.

During the war, in 1939, when the Soviets came, when the Russians came, he lost his business. He was sent off into the forest to be a lumberjack. Apparently, it was bad. I don't know if he was exactly incarcerated, but he was forced out to do that, as were many people who owned businesses during that time.

[Editor's Note: In the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, also known as the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, of August 1939, the Nazi and Soviet governments agreed to invade and divide Poland.]

Then, during the Holocaust period, he had it about as bad as you could possibly get it. His wife and son, his mother, many siblings and other family members were killed in Auschwitz. He himself was in Auschwitz and suffered probably as bad as you could possibly suffer.

He was a member of the *Sonderkommando* ["Special Command Unit"], which were the people that worked in the gas chambers, just a terrible existence. I only found this out much later. He never, ever talked about it. Of course, he had the number on his wrist and the whole business and said he was in Auschwitz, but didn't say what he did there. I only found that out later on.

[Editor's Note: Located in southern Poland, Auschwitz consisted of three Nazi concentration camps, including Birkenau. More than two-and-a-half million Jews were deported to Birkenau during Nazi Germany's genocide of European Jewry (now known as the Holocaust). Those not killed in gas chambers and disposed of in crematoria were tattooed on their forearms and forced to work as slave laborers. Over two-and-a-quarter million Jews were killed at Birkenau.]

A book was published by Yale Press, oh, a dozen or so years ago, *We Wept Without Tears*, and my father's mentioned. It's the reminiscences of the few *Sonderkommandos* who were still alive. The curator at Yad Vashem in Israel interviewed those people. That book was the result of the interviews. One of the interviewees, Eliezer Eisenschmidt, was a member, lived at Lunna-Wola and knew my father and mentioned him in the book. Then, later on, we found out, from a friend of the family, just what he had gone through.

[Editor's Note: Gideon Greif's *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz* was initially published in Hebrew in 1999, then, in English at Yale University Press in 2005.]

I'm skipping ahead a little bit, because this is now [in America]. We're living on the chicken farm in Vineland now. My sister and I always wondered about what became of my father's family, especially of his son, our half-brother, who would've been born around 1930.

When we read that they were in the ghetto in Vilna (Vilnius) during the war--while my father was in the camp, in the lumberjack camp, apparently, they went off to Vilna. His wife was from Vilna. We knew that. So, she probably went to be with family, and then, got trapped there in 1941 when the Nazis overran that area.

They were in the ghetto. A ghetto census, which my father-in-law found, showed them (showed my father's wife and his son) in the ghetto in that census, in the ghetto census, which he found on Jewish Gen. Her name was Chaya Schiffmonowitz Becker, and her son was Lieb, Israel Lieb was his name. That happens to be my Hebrew name. I was named for him, in his memory.

So, my sister and I decided that we would try to find this long-lost brother, "Maybe he's still alive. Maybe, somehow, he survived." My father was a really wily guy. How he was able to survive that is just unbelievable, but it shows a little bit about his character and his perseverance. We thought, "Maybe, who knows? Maybe the son had inherited this."

I read all about the "ghetto rats" in the ghetto. The "rats" were the young kids that would sneak underneath and get food and smuggle it back in. Maybe he was part of that, maybe he survived. We started to search for this brother. We looked all over the world. We used Israel, Leib, Leon, any kind of derivative, and tried to find him.

We went to visit a friend. When we lived on the poultry farm, it was a very tight-knit, Yiddish-speaking community. One of the women there, she had the kind of personality that the people there--almost all Holocaust survivors--would, basically, cry on her shoulders, would just unload.

My father never even told my mother about what went on in the camps and never told us, but, apparently, he told her. When my sister and I went to visit her in her old age, she was quite elderly and not well, but very sharp.

We were telling her this story, how we're looking for this long-lost brother. She finally told us to stop. She was normally a very happy, jovial person, but she just got more and more agitated as we're telling the story. She says, "Stop, stop, stop." She looks up at the sky and she says, "Berel, you told me--you made me swear--that you would take this to your grave, but I just can't let them go on like this."

It turns out that he had told her that not only did he know that they had passed away in Auschwitz, but he was at the gas chambers. He saw their bodies being dragged out of the gas chamber. How he survived that is, apparently, he fainted and one of his fellow *Sonderkommandos* hid him away, so [that] the Nazi guards wouldn't see him, and carried on.

So, how he was able to live the life that he did after that was just amazing, because, after the war, he was liberated in Germany. He was on the death march. By the way, he was one of the older *Sonderkommandos*, to give you an idea of how strong he must've been.

Most of them were teenagers. They picked these really buff teenagers to do this work, very, very heavy-duty work and just horrific work. He was already in his forties at that point, but I guess was very youthful. That's why he was picked, but he was on the death march back into Germany. He was liberated from a camp in Germany.

He wound up going to a DP [displaced persons] camp in Italy, in Bari, in the center of Puglia in "the Boot" of Italy, the Bari Transit Camp. He stayed there for a couple years until his sister, who had come to the United States at a very young age--she had a first cousin that was here, the Epstein Family. Nathan Epstein actually went back to Europe, after he had immigrated to the United States, got her, brought her over and married her. He married his first cousin.

She, of course, was very, very worried about what happened to her siblings, her parents, her mother, her whole family. She kept looking at the survivors' lists that were being distributed in the Jewish community in New York. She lived in the Bronx.

She found my father's name and she sent for him, because you stayed in the transit camps (you stayed in these DP camps) until some country would take you, until there was a chance. So, she sent for him. He came to the United States. He lived with them for a while and got a job in a clothing factory as a presser, which is not an easy job.

The presser is the one that you had these huge irons and they would make the pleats in dresses and in formal pants, that type of thing. So, he would always comment about how hot it was there. He once said, "I survived Auschwitz for this?"

So, one day, his sister, Rebecca, Rivka, says that, "We have *landsmen*," *landsmen* were people who were, "people from our hometown, right here in the Bronx. We should go visit them." So, the *landsmen* happened to be my mother and her parents in the South Bronx.

They'd go down there to visit them. It turns out there is one unmarried daughter in the family. My mother was one of five and three of them were girls. There was one unmarried daughter--that was my mother.

They heard my father's story, his tale of woe and the whole business. They knew him better than my mother knew him from the old country, because he was closer in age to them than he was to my mother. They made a *shidduch*--they made a match--right on the spot. They said, "You'll marry our daughter and you'll start a new family."

My mother, being the good girl that she was, went along with it. This is [when] she literally had not met him formally, other than maybe had seen him in Europe, but, certainly, didn't know him. They were married a week later and I came less than nine months later. That's how I appeared on this Earth in New York City.

So, we lived in a walkup apartment in the Bronx on 611 Concord Avenue. In that apartment were my grandparents on my mother's side, my parents and an unmarried brother, my mother's brother, grandparents' son, so, her brother. This is a two-bedroom apartment. He had one of the bedrooms and the grandparents had the other bedroom. We were in this bed in the living room.

I still remember, not from then, because I was only two years old when we moved to Vineland, New Jersey, but I remember afterwards, because we would go there for weekends all the time, fighting for a place on the bed.

We had these five people living there during the week, but, then, on weekends came my mother's sisters and their husbands. One of them already had a little child as well, exactly my age. All of us crammed into, basically, one bed, all the visitors in there. I still remember sort of clinging to one end of the bed there. It just was amazing.

So, my father was not too happy with this situation, to say the least. One day, they went to visit that very woman that I mentioned that was the person that people would cry on her shoulders, Doris and Leo Gold. Doris was a friend of my mother's.

She was from the little *shtetl* of Skidel in Belarus. She also married a survivor of the war and they had moved. They were settled by the Jewish Agricultural Society in Vineland, New Jersey, given a farm down there.

My parents go down to the farm. One weekend, they were invited down there. My father thinks, "Wow, this is the life for me. This is great," fresh air. They had a barbecue and he was just enjoying himself--a Yiddish-speaking community.

My father never really learned to speak English very well. He knew many languages, certainly knew Italian well from his time in the DP camp, and Russian and Polish and all the dialects. By the time he came to America, he was already in his fifties and was not ready to learn a new language.

Yes, so, they visit this farm, they come back. My father does not tell anyone, but, instead of going to work the next day, he goes to the Jewish Agricultural Society's offices in New York and gets a farm, and then, comes back home and announces, "We're moving to Vineland, New Jersey, to this farm." My grandparents were heartbroken. My grandmother barely spoke to him again after that.

I mean, it got to the point where I still remember one day when my father was trying to sneak out on a Friday night, which is the *sabbath*. You're not supposed to go out. My father was not observant in any way--but my grandmother was. She was living with us in Vineland by that time; she was quite elderly.

She tries to stop him from going out. He gets very angry and calls her all sorts of names and tries to push her out of the way. Finally, she stops him and says, "You killed my husband." I still remember that like it was yesterday.

He's like, "What are you talking about, old hag?" or whatever he called her in Yiddish. She says, "You broke his heart when you took his daughter away and took his family away." He said, "Look, lady, there's nothing you could say that could make me feel guilty, after what I've been through in my life."

He noticed that I had witnessed this. He pointed to me, he said, "You want to make him feel guilty? Go ahead, or you want to make your daughter feel guilty? Go ahead, but I will not be." Jewish guilt was not one of his traits, that's for sure, after what he had been through.

So, we ended up on this farm. So, to backtrack again and talk a little bit about the farm, I was about two years old (probably a little less than two years old) when we moved to the farm. It turned out to not be the kind of life that my father had expected.

He really enjoyed the fact that he was in a Yiddish-speaking environment and he loved Italians. You might know that Vineland was settled very heavily by Italians. It goes all the way back to the Civil War days. Charles K. Landis founded it and he advertised land in Italy.

He advertised this land in New Jersey. This was going to be "the Garden of Eden," where you're going to grow grapes (and, thus, the name Vineland) and everything will be great. So, he got many Italian immigrants to come. I still remember the names of the streets were very heavily Italian--Genoa, Cornucopia, etc., along with Civil War generals, because Landis was a retired Civil War soldier.

So, we end up in Vineland. My father, he's given a farm with a dilapidated shack on it and one chicken coop and starts to raise chickens. They give him a loan and he's able to buy baby chicks. It turns out to be really hard.

We had a five-acre farm and it needed to be drained. That was the very first thing. So, ditches needed to be dug around the perimeter. Vineland was very much known for its mosquitoes back then, among other things. There was malaria and what-have-you in the early '50s.

Somehow, he and his neighbors were able to do this. There was so much [camaraderie]--it was almost like living in a commune--that people would help each other so much with this. So, they dug the trenches.

We had the chickens outside on the range, range chickens, which are all the rage now. Back then, it was pretty hard to make a living running around five acres of property, looking for eggs. So, he built more chicken coops. Eventually, they were all in chicken coops.

Nothing was mechanized at that time. You had to feed them by [hand]. You'd carry hundred-pound feed sacks around and put the feed [out] and change the water all the time. The eggs, of course, were collected by hand.

So, it really was backbreaking work, with very little help. My father would sometimes talk about how, "The farm stole his health," but I think it really kept him healthy, because he worked right into really old age on the farm.

We eventually got automatic feeders and automatic graders, which graded the eggs, and washers. My sister and I (I have a younger sister, four years younger), at a very young age, we were conscripted to do the work, first working in the basement, candling the eggs, making sure that they were okay inside, cleaning them using sandpaper, and then, weighing them on an individual scale.

If you can imagine, we had ten thousand chickens at the height of the farm. That really translates into six or seven thousand eggs a day, doing all of that manually. I had the radio on during that time, and so, certainly became very much involved with that era of doo-wop music and became a big Philadelphia Phillies fan, because I'd have the ballgame on at night while we were doing all this at night.

Then, later, we got the electric Egg-O-Matic weighing machines that also had a light in it. So, it would candle the egg as it went through. You could see through the egg as it went through. Then, it would go from stage to stage. If it was really heavy, it would fall out for the jumbos or extra-large, then, large and what-have-you. My sister and I would pack the eggs then.

It was a tough life, but my parents really enjoyed it. It was the kind of life where they could raise children. They had very, very high expectations for these children.

Just the opposite of what you would consider sort of the "American Dream," the Midwestern farm that's generation after generation after generation--if I would go to my parents and say I wanted to be a chicken farmer when I came of age, they would know that they'd completely failed, because the idea was that you were going to become some kind of a professional, that you would get really good grades at school.

They were doing this basically not for themselves, but for the next generation to carry it on. I'm sure the Holocaust had a lot to do with that, too, that they really wanted to continue on. So, it was really interesting.

We had a little swimming hole on the Maurice, the Maurice River, pronounced "Morris," but spelled "Maurice," on the border of Cumberland and Salem County. During the summer, my parents would take us there every day; then, they would come later on and play cards. Of course, none of that exists anymore, mostly because of the idea that the generations should move on.

So, really, I remember, one of the big goals that they would present would be, "You should be a doctor or a lawyer and live in Cherry Hill," Cherry Hill, which they pronounced [in a Yiddish accent], "Cherry Hill." If you were a girl, you would marry a doctor or a lawyer and end up in Cherry Hill. So, I might have disappointed them a little bit by not doing either of those, but my sister did marry a prominent lawyer and she lives in Cherry Hill. She did a great job. [laughter]



She's also had a great career herself, so, it wasn't that she gave everything up for that--although my father did say [something] at her graduation. He was kind of disturbed at her graduation from Boston University, where she became a physical therapist.

He had no idea what a physical therapist was. He kept saying, "We spent this money and all this and that--what is it? What's a physical therapist? Therapist, shmerapist--I thought she would find a doctor there." [laughter] She actually practiced physical therapy, but she eventually married just before he died. So, he got to see; that was his thought. He basically said, "Now, I can die," after her wedding.

So, that was sort of the beginning of life at Vineland. I went through the school system at Vineland. I went to a two-room elementary school in Vineland, the Spring Road School, which doesn't exist anymore. It was kindergarten and first grade in one room and third and fourth grade upstairs in the other room, or second and third grade, I guess it was, maybe up to fourth. Whatever it was, I spent the first two years there.

The difference between kindergarten and first grade (I found out to my dismay) was that we would have the same teacher, be in the same classroom, except, when the kindergartners got to go out and play, which I always enjoyed, of course, as a five-year-old, the first graders had to stay in and learn to read.

So, on the first day of school as a first grader, I went running out with the kindergartners. I still remember some big guy picking me up and dragging me back. So, I would come in, learn to read, but we picked it up like a sponge.

It must have been a real challenge for these teachers with all these immigrants. Many of my classmates were born in DP camps. They were actually born in the camps and came to America in their infancy.

I didn't know a word of English when I started school, and neither did many other kids. You pick it up like a sponge, but what a challenge that must have been to the teachers. My parents really panicked when I came home from school just totally bewildered that first day, saying, "What in the world? I didn't understand a word."

My mother then went to night school, almost immediately, to learn English as quickly as she could. Now, she had been in the United States for a much longer time. So, she had picked up a little bit of English, and then, learned much more in night school. She came over, I guess it was in the late '20s, just in time for the Depression. She was able to work as a hand sewer right through that.

When they came to New Jersey, she also got a job as a hand sewer at Minotola Industries in Buena, New Jersey, right outside Vineland. Buena is spelled, "Buena," but pronounced "Buna," for whatever reason. She continued working as a hand sewer there. That's sewing the sequins and all the fancy stuff on dresses--so, not working with a machine, but working by hand.

SI: Between when she came here and when she married your father, she was working and living in the Bronx. It was a Jewish neighborhood, so, she had not really learned as much English.

RB: Pretty much, yes. Her friends and family, of course, were all Jewish and came from the old country, but, again, she could speak [it]. By the time I was an adult, certainly, we could speak in English very easily.

She came with her older sister at first. They got enough money for their father to come over. Then, their father came over. He went out to Wisconsin and worked as a chef in a camp for a while, until they all gathered back in New York.

They would raise as much money as they could, their father working at the camp, my mother and her older sister. She was a machine operator in the clothing factory, also. They lived with cousins in the Bronx. They just saved every penny they possibly could to get the rest of the family over.

So, then, their mother and their three younger siblings came over after that. That's how they got the family over. Then, they got that apartment together, the entire family down there. Then, the sisters slowly married.

There's a story in the family--my mother's older sister, Rachel, Rochel, we called her in Yiddish, was the first to get married. When Uncle Sol, who, later on, ended up living with my family in his old age, after his wife passed away, Uncle Sol, when he came "a courting," when he came visiting the family, wanted my mother, but there was no way they were going to give him my mother because she had an older sister that wasn't married. So, he ended up marrying *Tanta* Rochel.

Now, he also was a survivor, but was almost childlike. I mean, the Holocaust really did him in. I mean, he called his wife "Ma," I remember. He worked at a very kind of menial job. He fixed mainsprings or put new mainsprings in watches at a drug store, drug counter, in New York, and very much depended on his wife for everything.

He would hand over the paycheck. She'd give him a five-dollar allowance for the next week, to buy his lunches and things like that. He would just be so happy with it and march around, just very, very childlike.

I found out much more about him later on--that he had likely been a *kapo* [a Jewish concentration camp inmate assigned to work with the SS guards], apparently, in one of the concentration camps, except a good one--because he belonged to a *landsmanshaft* society, which, by the time I got to know him, basically just ran a cemetery. They would have a program every year at the cemetery in Long Island. I got to meet his fellow people from his town, which was Opatów (they called it Apt) in Poland.

They told me a little bit about him. I would've liked to have known more, but, apparently, he was very beloved. He was quite a dapper dresser and a real man around town. He'd also, of

course, lost his family, his wife, his children, what-have-you. So, it was the second family for him as well, but I think I've digressed a little bit there--had to do, yes, with the language.

So, another sort of anecdote, my parents panicked to the point of, "Gee, how's he going to become a doctor or a lawyer?" all this, "And how about his little [sister]?" My little sister had been born by then.

The idea was, once I learned English, I was never to speak Yiddish in front of my sister, so, just speak English in the house. They would speak to me in Yiddish, I would answer them in English as best I could, and only speak English with my sister. So, to this day, my sister only knows Yiddish anecdotes the way many people do, the funny sayings, as opposed to the language.

I tried to keep up the language best I could. My parents read the *Der Tog*, "The Day," it was called, a Jewish journal, which was a daily paper. We got it every day, delivered to the house. Then, when they went out of business, they started reading *The Forward*, which was more of a Socialist paper.

My father, being much more conservative, didn't like *The Forward* very much, but, then, he had no choice. After they passed away, I kept up the subscription. After a while, I just got so busy, I was just reading the headlines, and then, I finally let it go.

So, I can still read Yiddish, in a matter of speaking. I have nobody to really speak it with anymore, so, I've lost a lot of that as well, but that was sort of our background. I went to what's called the *cheder*, which is a Hebrew school, during the day, went to public schools, then, Hebrew school at night. I still remember Rabbi Efron and some of the teachers there, and the corporal punishment that was given out to kids that were naughty.

I remember a little kid, I still remember his name (I won't reveal it here), being picked up by the ear when he did something wrong. We were all doing the same thing, but I guess he didn't run fast enough, being picked up by the ear and going up a staircase--and going up to my parents and telling them just how horrible this is.

Of course, their response was, "Good, he deserved it. [laughter] It's good that they [did that]," but my parents, they were really wonderful, wonderful people. It could've been a lot worse. I mean, some of the stories that I heard from Holocaust children, Holocaust survivors' children, were really, really sad.

I had a friend, she was a very accomplished pianist in her own right, but her sister, apparently (her deceased sister from Europe), was very, very well-known and gave concerts throughout, at a very young age, and was killed in the Holocaust. So, they really put the burden on this new daughter to be as well. It really had a real negative effect. I mean, she had a successful career, but it [weighed on her].

Oh, one of my friends once said, when he got into trouble, that his father made a comment like, "The wrong son died," that type of thing. So, to put that level of guilt on people, my parents

really never did that. I mean, they really encouraged us hard to do really well in school and all of that--and to not be chicken farmers.

To this day, I don't think one person stayed on the farm. I have one friend who's still in Vineland, but as a professional. No one stayed on the farm, that's for sure.

SI: Did your father exhibit any symptoms of what you might call PTSD later?

RB: Certainly, yes, he certainly did. One of the problems that I had (and made me extremely jealous of my sister) was that I had to share a bedroom with my father, right through my teenage years. His original reason for moving into my bedroom (it was a three-bedroom house) was that my mother snored, but I found out later it was because he screamed at night and she couldn't take it any longer. He always said it was due to the Holocaust, but he would never tell me what he did there or why.

Yes, he definitely exhibited that, but, on the surface, though, he was an incredibly happy person. My parents would host these parties. Every week, there would be a card party. On a Saturday night, after the *sabbath*, people would gather in one of the houses.

I still remember when they were at our house. They would have a really nice dinner, would be prepared, and desserts and things like that. Then, the cards would come out and they played. They gambled, they played for money. I'm sure it wasn't big-time money, but it was a real party atmosphere.

Many of them came over. Oh, there were at least, I would say ten couples, would come over. There were at least twenty people in the house. The smoke, you couldn't even see through the smoke. All the men smoked, of course, and some of the women as well.

We would come out. We would have to go out, say goodnight to each one of them before we went to bed, but it was clearly a really happy scene. It was repeated at other people's homes. So, I'd say, every other month, we would host this at our house and got to meet these people well.

Some of them had really interesting backgrounds in Europe. One of them, I'll mention her name, Musia Deiches, was a real child singer/actress/model, I mean, really, a beautiful woman, a young woman in Europe and suffered through the Holocaust and ended up on a chicken farm, ultimately, after she lost her first family, and just a fascinating character. Many of them were.

So, it was a really unique, really interesting upbringing, that's for sure. The work on the farm, it was hard work, but it taught me, certainly, the value of hard work--and it taught me that I didn't want to be a chicken farmer.

When I became a teenager, though, I did have summer jobs that were not on the farm, in addition to doing the farmwork. One of them was being what's called a press flyer. I'm sure that doesn't exist anymore. It was for *The Vineland Times Journal*. That was our local newspaper.

*The Vineland Times Journal*, we had the only offset press for miles and miles around. So, we did advertisements, the advertisement fill-ins that go into newspapers, and even other weekly newspapers, shopping papers for other places, from far away, from all over the country.

We would do that. I would sit there and the papers would come off the press. I'd have to grab them, bundle them, tie them, what-have-you. That was even harder work than being on the chicken farm. I can imagine how much lead I must have breathed in during that time.

So, I really got a big break there. It was an overnight job. It was eleven PM to seven AM, was a summer job. One day, the person who had to drive the newspapers to the airport early in the morning, say three or four o'clock in the morning, couldn't make it into work. So, they asked me if I could drive the truck to the airport. I did, and then, the other person left.

That became my job. So, I only had to breathe in the dust for a few hours, then, I got to drive to the airport. Of course, I was a young guy. I'd just got my driver's license. I loved driving the truck, drove right on to the tarmac, where they would pull the papers off, put them on the plane. That was my job one year.

Then, for a couple years after that, going into my college years now, I spent the summers working at Wheaton Industries. The glass business was very big at that time. There were big glass factories there, Wheaton Industries in Millville, New Jersey, and Owens-Illinois was the other one, in Vineland, New Jersey. You could always tell whether a bottle was made either at Wheaton or Owens-Illinois, because the Wheaton would have a "W" on the bottom and the Illinois would have an "I."

When I worked at Wheaton's, which still sort of exists now as a museum, a glassblowing factory--Millville was a big glass town, big working-class glass town at that time--we did shift work. My job was to take the bottles off the assembly line as they came down (I would have nightmares, because they'd come at you so fast), inspect them really quickly and pack them. There were foremen all around watching us.

I learned all sorts of industrial sabotage at that time as well. At first, they didn't really like these college kids that came on to work at first, for the people that had to do this [regularly], because we knew we were leaving and they knew they had to do it for a lifetime, but the bottles were very hot. You had to wear gloves when you did it, when they came off thelehr [an oven for annealing glass].

You could not pack anything [broken]. If it had a little crack on the top, you had to throw it out, into the cullet [pile of broken glass], and then, just pack the good bottles. They would inspect to make sure that we didn't make any mistakes, because when they packed it and put the lid on it, if there was a crack, it would just smash the bottle. These were mostly pill bottles. So, the plastic pill bottles of today used to be glass. So, it'd make a really big mess.

So, you really couldn't do that--but, then, also, I learned industrial sabotage. When they sped up the line, the old pros there would show us how to sweep everything into the garbage, "But, make sure you break it before it goes in there," because they also inspected our garbage, to make sure

that nothing was broken there. Oh, I still remember looking out for the foreman and all that, but, even there, I got a break.

It was just so tedious to be standing at the same line. They would change shifts every week. So, it'd be eight to four one week, four to twelve the next, twelve to eight the next. It was really hot during the day shift. There was no air conditioning or anything--imagine glass being made, how hot it was in there.

For whatever reason, they picked me to be on the relief crew. So, I got to go from one *lehr* to another, and that certainly made the time go a lot quicker. You get to meet all the other people as a reliever, when people had their fifteen-minute break, and then, their lunch break. That would be one of my jobs there.

So, I did that during college as well and was very fortunate that the Jewish community really took care of us as well. I went to a private university and, basically, got out with very, very little debt, thanks to the Jewish Agricultural Society and the Baron DeHirsch Fund. I got scholarships from them and loans that I was able to pay back when I was still in my twenties--when I hear about the horror today of people almost my age still owing more and more money as the interest just continues to just accumulate.

[Editor's Note: The Baron DeHirsch Fund, created by philanthropist Maurice de Hirsch in 1891, established settlements for Jews fleeing the *pogroms* of Poland and Russia to create agricultural communities in the US. The Fund established its presence in South Jersey by founding the community of Woodbine, New Jersey, in 1891 and funding the Jewish Agricultural Society.]

So, I was very lucky to be able to go to a university there, get out of there with very few expenses. So, that was sort of the advantage, really, of being there and, of course, having those great memories, being on the farm.

SI: You mentioned the Baron DeHirsch Fund. I know they also settled people in South Jersey, particularly Vineland, before the war, people that were coming over as refugees, and then, you have the community that your parents were part of.

RB: We were the last wave.

SI: Survivors coming in.

RB: We were the third wave.

SI: Did the different generations or waves get along with each other or socialize?

RB: We actually didn't know them that well, because the same thing happened with the [second wave]. The first generations came over around the 1880s, 1890s. They didn't settle in Vineland so much as in Salem County, the surrounding area, Alliance and Brotmanville, that area, around the Maurice River, and had farms there. Some were vegetable farms, some were poultry farms.

When their children became of age and they retired, they basically gave up, and then, a new generation came. This was the generation escaping Europe prior to the Holocaust, when things started to get bad. Then, that generation kind of left and I was in the post Holocaust generation, sometimes on the very same farms.

I did know some people from the previous generations, the ones that stayed in Vineland and became professionals. So, the person who ran the feed mill was from an earlier generation, Miles Lerman, a name that you might know because he was one of the founders of the US Holocaust Museum in Washington.

He was a chicken farmer in the Vineland area who became wealthy because he got into the feed business, and then, the oil business, sold petroleum oil and really built an empire, and then, used that to fund the beginnings of the US Holocaust Museum.

Then, if you go to the Alliance Cemetery, which I always try to do whenever I go back there, you see all the original pioneers, many of them were buried there--but many of their children became professionals and left Vineland. So, there were lawyers, certainly, editor of the newspaper was from that [generation], Ben Leuchter, was from one of those earlier generations, the editor of *The Vineland Times Journal*. Many other professionals in town came from that earlier generation.

The shopkeepers, the kosher deli, the bakery, the butcher shop and what-have-you, they were people who had originally come there. There was a very big Jewish presence in Vineland. If you went on Landis Avenue in town, many of the shops were Jewish-owned-and-run, from the stationary store to the bakery to the several delis. It's hard to believe now the number of Yiddish-speaking newspapers you could buy there.

It was really something, but there were three waves. Now that the third wave, of course, is long gone, there's still certainly a Jewish presence in Vineland, but it's certainly not the same kind of presence. They're people that are pretty much assimilated into all aspects of life there.

My father loved the Italians, too. My father really loved Italians, from his time in Italy and being that there were so many great Italians, including our next-door neighbor, in Vineland. Now, I say next-door--it was a whole big field away--but he enjoyed conversing with them as well.

SI: It sounds like there were not any antisemitic issues.

RB: Not then, no, there certainly wasn't. Vineland was actually a pretty progressive place for being in South Jersey, which is not known for its progressiveness. It had a very early NAACP chapter. Women's rights, there were people there. We have some collections at the Rutgers Library including the papers on Thelma Parkinson Sharp, who was a Democratic Party activist and candidate for the US Senate in 1930.

It was a fairly progressive town at that time. It didn't stay that way, but, certainly, people got along. For my father, this was heaven, I mean, after what he had been through.

My mother liked it less than my father. She was homesick and we went to [her parents often]. At first, I had to accompany her. Then, when I became old enough, I got to stay home, but she went back almost every weekend.

It was a pretty arduous trip. It was a bus trip. It took about four hours, was about 125 miles away. The bus stopped everywhere between Vineland and New York, but she definitely was homesick.

Remember, she marries this person she doesn't know, and then, within maybe a couple months, she's dragged off to the farm--but she too made many friends there and really came out of her shell. After my father passed away, she moved in with us in Metuchen, New Jersey, and really enjoyed her time there as well, became a member of our synagogue.

SI: Within your family, it sounds like there was some tradition kept up, but maybe not as religious.

RB: Yes.

SI: How would you characterize the role of religion?

RB: My mother kept a *kosher* home, certainly. My father, whatever religion he had was pretty much killed during the war, but he didn't have much before the war, either. He had a particular disdain for the ultra-Orthodox, of which there were many in his community.

When the Nazis came in, he would tell me stories, that they would kind of almost, not exactly welcome the Nazis, but say, "This is the natural thing that would happen because of people like you," pointing to him, who didn't follow all of the *mitzvot* (the commandments) and who lived what they called a *goyishe* (a Gentile life). "This is God punishing us, just like he did when we lost the Temple in Jerusalem, thousands of years earlier."

My father never got over that, that people could actually behave that way. He would actually make jokes about stuff like that, if he saw somebody like on the subway. I remember, when we were in New York, if you saw somebody that was clearly ultra-Orthodox, dressed that way and the like, he would make some kind of a comment.

We had a relative that was very observant, but my father could not stand the hypocrisy, like having timers so that the Yankee game would go on automatically at two o'clock on the *sabbath*, but you wouldn't be turning on the TV, and the *sabbath* elevators that stopped on every floor going up and every floor going down, so [that] no one would have to push the button. He was particularly disdainful of stuff like that.

My mother remained pretty pious during that time, but they made sure we had a Hebrew education. One thing about my father, he may not have been Jewish religiously, but, culturally, if he was needed, even if he thought it was silly, like, if you needed a tenth person for a *minyan*, say somebody had died and they're sitting *shiva* there, if he got called, he would come running. So, he never gave up, certainly, the cultural identity, but was not religious, really, in any way.



SI: Did they have any affinity for Israel or talk about wanting to go there?

RB: Yes, and my mother did make it there. I'm going to backtrack a little bit, but, in the town of Lunna-Wola, at the time my mother came to America, a number of people immigrated, because there was antisemitism throughout.

She didn't know anything about Nazis or anything like that, but she knew she wanted to get out, and so did many others. So, her first cousins, many of them went to Israel (to Palestine at the time) in the 1920s. They settled in a little town called Kiryat Shmuel.

My wife and I and kids have visited there before. It doesn't really exist as a little *shtetl* anymore. All the old huts have been built up. It's been gentrified and modernized, but these were the survivors from Lunna-Wola who lived at Kiryat Shmuel. It was just a few miles outside of Haifa in the north of Israel. We visited there a couple times.

It was almost like being--I've never been back to Belarus, I've never been there, I have no idea what Lunna-Wola looks like now, except for pictures in some of the stories I've read--but it's as if I was there, just by going to this town. It was a completely Yiddish-speaking town.

I went there for the first time, I believe, in 1974, somewhere around there, and [was] greeted by our cousins there. My mother's first cousin, I remember, it was as if she was still living there. It was amazing. She had been there at that time since the '20s, probably close to fifty years, forty-five, fifty years.

One of the things she told me--when we tried to get out of there, she wouldn't let us leave, because we wanted to see things. I hadn't been there, but my wife had been to Israel before. I had not been there before--and [she] said, "What do you want to see the country for? You come to see family. I've been here since," whatever it was, 1926, 1928, whatever year it was, "I've never left Kiryat Shmuel." I looked at her in total amazement, this tiny, little village. Her kids were there and they all nodded, "Oh, that's true. She never left."

I guess another story, when members of that family--she never came to America--but, when members of that family came visiting, my job was to drive from the chicken farm to the airport in New York, pick them up and drive them to the chicken farm. Three weeks later, I would drive down to the chicken farm, pick them up and take them back to the airport. So, that was their trip to America. [laughter] So, that's what they thought we would do when we went there.

So, my parents, my mother, of course, had a special affinity for Israel because she had family there. She made, I think, two trips there with one of her sisters, I think first with one sister, and then, with the other sister. They bought Israeli Bonds, I remember that.

I certainly remember the war in 1967 very well. They instilled this sort of Zionism in me--I don't have the same feeling for it today, knowing what I know--but, at that point, I had just graduated from high school, "I'm going to go there and fight in Israel." My father said, "Are you kidding? There's no way a son of mine will ever fight for anybody. I'm not going to lose another son."

Of course, the Vietnam War was raging at that time. I had a student deferment, but that was lost after I graduated from college. Fortunately, I was part of the first lottery, so, I never got called. My number was 212. That's a number I'll never forget.

So, they only got up, I think, to the 180s that year--as the war wound down after that, less and less--but my father was all set to send me to Canada if I got drafted. There was no way that he was going to put me in harm's way after losing a son before that, the way he did.

So, yes, there was an affinity for Israel. I still remember, oh, the speeches in the United Nations, Abba Eban, the Israeli Ambassador to the UN [from 1949 to 1959], giving those big speeches and feeling a sense of pride at that point. My parents certainly did as well. So, there was an affinity to Israel.

I collected, early on, I still remember, even before '67, the synagogue collecting money to send over there.

SI: Would you have the little box that you bring home?

RB: Yes, the *tzedakah* box, it's called, right. Mostly, I think, to plant trees in Israel was the big thing, planting trees with the *tzedakah* box. I even have one here. So, we'd take pennies and nickels and dimes and quarters from our allowance and put them in there. It was filled, we'd bring it into the synagogue and they would get some over to plant trees in Israel.

SI: Going back to the work on the chicken farm, it sounds like you were working day and night. How many hours a day would you be working?

RB: My work, well, in the summertime, I worked a lot more, because I actually went into the coop, with the manure and the whole business. During the year, during the school year, we'd come home from school, make sure our homework was done first, and then, after dinner would be the time. I would say it was, oh, two or three hours to get all those eggs packed and cleaned and all that.

That was the routine. If we were sick, then, one of my parents would do it, but my father was working all day, collecting the eggs and doing the other work on the farm. I still remember the long naps that he would take during the day, because, again, he was older. I mean, the idea of starting a chicken farm at that age, it's just incredible, but it kept the family going. They never regretted it, as far as I know. They never said, "We never shouldn't have done this." They were very happy with it.

SI: Do you know if they got any kind of training in how to do this or was it just sort of like neighbors helping out?

RB: Right, yes, very little training. There was an agricultural school that was started way back in the nineteenth century, but did not last up until the time that we were there. I've done quite a bit of research in this. In fact, I'll send you an essay that I wrote. It's basically a talk that I gave

at the Jewish Genealogical Society one year on that--but it was very much by-the-seat-of-your-pants learning. There were classes that my father took in the DP camp in Italy, in Bari, part of which were agricultural.

Tell you a little bit more about the DP camps--I've done some research into those as well--these were people mostly younger than my father. Some of them were teenagers. They had lost their parents, their siblings, everything. They were the only survivors and just shell-shocked, basically, gone in these camps.

Somehow, they had schooling for them. There was Yiddish theater and music. I mean, they really tried to recreate those lives. Part of it was so that they would learn some kind of trade when they finally found a country that would take them and the like. So, that was very much part of that.

Let me go back again to that first wave of immigrants--many of them didn't really plan on staying in New Jersey, staying in the States. The idea was that they would almost learn to be *kibbutzniks* there. They would, like, learn communal farming.

Many of them were Zionists. The thought was that they would end up going to Palestine later on, which never happened. I mean, they never did, but that was part of that training. I think that's one of the reasons they had that school and the like.

It was not an easy life, that's for sure. I've read some diaries of people that really, really suffered from it. I'll send all that along to you. If you want to append part of it to this, you certainly could.

SI: Yes, that would be great. It sounds like you and your age peers were kind of all from a similar background, or at least there's this undercurrent of common experience as children of survivors, but was it talked about, either among your peers or in school? Was it just sort of known, but not discussed?

RB: Not very much. No, that was not a topic that we discussed with our teachers very much. No, it was just pretty serious learning for the most part, and doing the same kind of social stuff that kids do. We would hang out. I remember, there was a pizza place in Vineland I would hang out every Saturday night with friends. There was something known as "riding the avenue" in Vineland.

Vineland is kind of a unique city. It's actually still the biggest city in New Jersey in area, I think some sixty-seven or eighty-seven--I forget the number of square miles--"of gracious living," the sign would say when you went there, but it was a very rural area. [laughter]

It had a really interesting downtown, a very wide main street with diagonal parking. There was a traffic circle at one end, and then, you could turn around at another end. We would just ride. "Riding the avenue" was just riding up and down and waving to friends and that type of thing, and occasional little racing off of the red lights in town. It was about eight blocks, I think.

It was a center. It was a place that people went to. It's seen some pretty sad days. I've been back there recently and a lot of the stores are boarded up now. Mostly social welfare type organizations are sitting in the stores that are still there.

The old department stores aren't there anymore. It is really unfortunate what's happened there. They built a shopping center, I think while I was in college, the Cumberland Mall. I understand that's not doing very well, either, but many of the stores that were downtown moved to the mall at that time. So, it's certainly not the same, but it was great when we were there.

The synagogue was downtown. We would hang out downtown on Sundays often, like I say, "ride the avenue" at night.

SI: Were there other activities that you were able to do, like sports or clubs?

RB: Right, yes. I was certainly into sports. I played lots of sports. I was on the high school tennis team and, also, played basketball, but I was probably not good enough to make the team or wouldn't really have the time for all the practices anyway.

So, I belonged to one of those rec league teams. They took it so seriously that they would have the box scores in the newspaper after our games, [laughter] even though it was just a recreation league. I was into sports and clubs and things like that. So, we got involved in lots of activities in school, certainly.

Vineland High School, at that time, was a large, regional high school. We attracted kids from all over the place, even outside the county. There were kids that lived in Atlantic County, in the rural areas of Atlantic County, that went to our high school. They all have, of course, their own schools now, but it was very much a regional high school at the time I was there. So, I did get to meet some people from different walks of life than ours.

SI: How would you characterize the education and the quality of the teachers?

RB: Well, there were a few of them, that, in fact, I got interested in history because of a really interesting history teacher that we had, that was not like the old style. I hated history until then, memorizing facts and things like that, and really making no connections as to, like, why it was important and why we really need to study it and why we need to learn from it. I finally got a teacher (and I took several classes with him) who was just really an inspiration to me and several others. We all kind of became minions of his.

Otherwise, I guess it was a decent education, maybe not quite the same as I would've gotten in a more urban environment. I remember, in college, I took chemistry my freshman year because I had taken it my senior year in high school and did pretty well in it. So, I thought, "Oh, I'd better take that," not knowing that that's not the science that you should take if you're not planning on becoming a scientist.

I remember, the first day was pretty much a review. I got through that, and then, after that, by the second day, it was like another language. I really had to struggle. Fortunately, I had a lab partner that helped get me through.

I discovered then that my education wasn't quite up to maybe what some of the others' might've been, but I enjoyed it. I ended up taking Spanish for a foreign language. So, that helped me later on, when we adopted our children from Latin America. We were in Colombia. It really helped, being in the courtroom, to still have some of that knowledge.

It was a pretty good education. The large percentage that you have of students going to college in the more urban areas did not exist where I was. It was less than fifty percent, and we were not encouraged to go to really great schools. I was told that the best I could do was Glassboro--not to demean that in any way, I mean, but, basically, it was a school that pumped out teachers.

It was basically a teacher's college at the time I was in high school. It's now Rowan University and has a medical school attached to it and all sorts of things. Our guidance counselors didn't really inspire us to do really great things, but I enjoyed it.

[Editor's Note: Glassboro State College later changed its name to Rowan College (1992) and Rowan University (1997).]

When the Vietnam War started, when the draft started, that suddenly really cast a big shadow over it, because these kids were being drafted right out of high school if they didn't go to college, they didn't get the student deferments.

Again, this is just anecdotal--I haven't done research in this--but I think that the sudden building of the community college system, I think, was partially--it was going to happen anyway--but I think the speed to which it developed [was influenced]. In Cumberland County, they literally had classes in converted chicken coops those first few years, to try to get these kids into college, at least for those two years. In addition to learning, I think part of it was to stay out of the draft.

I was happy with the education I got there, anyway, so, could've been better probably, but...

SI: With the chicken farm, what was the market for it? Would you take it into town or go into the city?

RB: Yes, okay, there were various ways you could sell. We belonged to the farmers' co-op. They published a newspaper, by the way, *The Poultryman*, of which we have many of the issues and I hope we can get it digitized someday--by "we," I mean the Rutgers Library--hope we can get it digitized. The Rutgers Library and Cornell, between the two of them, we can put a run together. It's on very fragile paper.

That kept my parents into it. Even though it was in the English language, I think they had Yiddish in it as well, but there was a newspaper that's published. You could sell your eggs at the farmers' co-op if you couldn't find anybody else to sell it [to]. So, I've got a few stories I could tell about that.

Normally, we would sell it to a middleman, someone who would come over, buy the eggs. He would sell them to the big markets. We never sold directly to, say, A&P or any of the big chain supermarkets. It was always to the middleman. The middleman would usually be Jewish and would come and they would speak in Yiddish.

He and my father would have these horrific fights over the price. There was an established price, and then, you would either go over or under, whatever. They would fight. Sometimes, I got caught in the middle, especially if the person couldn't speak Yiddish.

My father would say, "Tell him that he's a shyster. Yes, he's just trying to rob me," and all this and that, "tell him [he is] a no-good son of a you-know-what." Then, of course, I would moderate it, "My father said that maybe you should offer him a little bit more," that kind of thing. [laughter] They'd go back and forth.

At first, though, it was fairly lucrative. I remember, there were years in the '50s where we did really well. We got our first car then, television, all of that. Eggs were like over a dollar a dozen, if you can believe it, in the '50s. Who knows what that would be now? probably five dollars or more. So, we did all right, but, then, lots of things hit. Big factory farms could produce it much cheaper, but the biggest thing was the cholesterol scares.

The first cholesterol scares, people suddenly stopped eating eggs. It really hit us hard. I mean, the prices went down to nothing. You would have to sell it to the co-op. I think I remember eighteen cents a dozen, that type of thing, maybe even less. Things got to be very, very difficult. Ultimately, that caused many of the farmers to retire early.

My father, even though he was one of the older chicken farmers, he was [the] one that carried on the longest. He got it. Somehow, he'd figured out a way to get through this by buying, I remember the baby chicks were three cents apiece. He would raise them until they were just ready to lay eggs, and then, sell them to one of the big factory farms, say, in Delaware or wherever they had larger farms and, somehow, was able to eke out a living for a couple years before he finally retired and sold the farm.

They basically had no savings or anything. By the time they sold the farm, I was in college. I remember, they got a hundred thousand dollars for it and the interest rate was just incredibly large at that time. I think it was like eighteen percent or something. Literally, between Social Security and the interest from that hundred thousand dollars, they were able to have a pretty decent retirement. They lived in an apartment for a while. Then, they moved in with us, up in North Jersey.

There are just several things I remember relating to the price of eggs and all of that and the selling of the eggs, one of which is, things were so bad that there were fires that I know were deliberately set during that time, even though no one was ever prosecuted for it.

We had quite a fire once. It happened to be on a weekend when we went away. I kind of put two and two together. I have no direct proof, but my father sent my sister and I and my mother

off to New York for the weekend. I probably was maybe around twelve or thirteen at the time. My sister was probably eight or nine.

We come back, "I have bad news for you," when he picked us up at the airport [bus station?]. "We had a little fire," a little fire--a whole chicken coop burned, with several thousand chickens in it. I remember going over to our garage and I said, "Dad, where's my bicycle?" "Oh, it was in the chicken coop. Don't worry, you'll get a new one," and other things, my sister, "Where is this?" "Oh, it was in the chicken coop. Don't worry, you'll get a new one," from the insurance.

So, they were definitely insurance fires. I've read about them in the newspaper. They were not reported that way. It was usually "a gas leak," something like that, but there were a number of those. Then, I remember another thing, our neighbors' barn was on fire. I slept right through all of this, but my mother was a fairly light sleeper.

Whenever these fires happened, all the neighbors happened to be there. The idea [was], they had to control the fire, so [that] it wouldn't burn down your house and all of that. Tragically, that did happen in one case, where the fire spread and they couldn't control it.

I remember, there had been a fire. I get up and I'm eating breakfast in the morning. My neighbor comes over. He is really angry at my mother. He just goes after her and is like, "Can't you sleep, lady?" because what happened was, my mother got up, saw the fire and called the police, called the fire department. They put it out before it could do very much damage. [laughter]

Again, none of this was reported that way and I don't have any proof. I can't say that it was arson or anything, but I have a strong suspicion that they did this out of desperation. You read about these things every once in a while, people setting fires to businesses in places where they're just so desperate that they need to get the insurance money.

So, things fell apart pretty quickly, but, by then, the generations were already [dispensing]. We were already young adults by the time people were leaving the farms. As far as I know, there are no poultry farms in Vineland now.

One other sort of anecdote--my father gets this idea. In the summertime, we lived near Atlantic City and Ocean City, all the Shore resorts, and we often went there at the end of the day. If we didn't go to the river, we'd go off to the ocean, take a quick swim, and then, drive back.

My father gets this idea--there are all these tourists that come for the summer, that come and they rent these places for a week. "Let's fill up the truck with eggs, as much as we can handle there, drive to Ocean City and go door-to-door and sell the eggs."

Well, we did that and people loved it, because these were eggs that were collected that very day. My father would give them the line, says, "Tell them, Ronnie," as he called me, "tell them the line that these eggs were picked today, they were laid today, and the eggs you buy in the supermarket are at least two weeks old." So, we did that.

We're laying on the beach, afterwards, one day. This was after we had done it a couple days. These big thug types come up to us and threaten us, especially my father, "If you ever do this again, you're a dead man." Obviously, there were other people that were selling eggs and we're horning in on their territory. [laughter] So, that put that to an end. We were getting a really nice profit from that.

Also, my sister and I came up with the idea that we'd have a stand. So, my father built this little shack in front of the house, on land that--our property was on Landis Avenue, the main street in town, but way over in the eastern part, near the Atlantic County border, a very rural part of it--but cars would come by. It was a very heavily traveled street. We actually did sell eggs, my sister and I, from the stand and, also, some vegetables.

My father grew lots of vegetables in the summer. When there would be more than we could eat, we would try to sell those as well. We certainly didn't make much money doing that, sort of like the proverbial lemonade stand, but it was an attempt to try to get more than what the middleman was paying us or the farmers' co-op could pay us.

So, it was not the easiest business in the world, but the camaraderie, the fact that they could live a life together, a life at peace, where no one bothered them, where they had Yiddish-speaking friends and neighbors, so, it was a good way for them to live out their lives, considering what they had been through before.

My mother was [one of] the few people that was not a survivor, who had come over earlier. There were very few. Most of the women, too, were survivors. Many of them met in the DP camps. They started new families almost immediately. So, that desire to carry on was just so strong and almost incomprehensible.

You wonder how people who'd been through so much would really want to carry on that way, or would have the strength to do it, just the fortitude to do something like that. So, all-in-all, when I say it was kind a unique way to be raised, it kind of was.

SI: Absolutely. Do you think most of the parents had a similar experience as your father in terms of losing religious feeling?

RB: Yes, most of them were not very religious. I remember a couple of them that were. There was one that went to synagogue every *sabbath* morning, every Saturday morning. He and his son would pick me up on the way, because my parents didn't go there. He was not a chicken farmer. He lived out in Atlantic County. I forget what he did, but he would go there.

Now, remember, all the synagogues were Orthodox at that time. A Conservative synagogue was built during the time I lived there and is now, really, the only one that's still very viable, but, back then, we had little *shtiebelekh*, we called it, little houses of worship. Mine was on Grape Street, downtown.

Even though it was an Orthodox synagogue, you're not supposed to drive on the *sabbath*, but the idea, obviously, the Rabbi knew that we're not walking twenty miles or fifteen miles or



whatever, but you wouldn't flaunt it. You would park around the block, and then, you sort of like pretended that you were walking.

So, there were a few people like him, and I got to meet them. I got to meet the *frumakes*, as my father called them, people with *tefillin* who were religious. They became friends as well and kind of took advantage of that.

I did get into it. I had a *bar mitzvah* and I'm still very much involved now in this. In fact, I'm the spiritual leader of our little synagogue here in Florida now, because we can't afford a rabbi. Back then, I remember, we had what was called "The *Tefillin* Club." The *tefillin* are the phylacteries that you wear when you pray during the week. We would meet on Sunday mornings with the old men.

So, there'd be a bunch of us young teenagers and the old men. I had tricked my parents into thinking that we were there most of the day and we wouldn't be getting home until like two o'clock--but, actually, it was only from about nine until ten. We'd have a little breakfast, and then, my friends and I would go to the pool hall downtown and smoke cigarettes and play pool--until somebody told my father, saw me there.

My father comes running in--of course, with a cigarette in his mouth and all that--and I could've burned the place down. It was this little wooden pool hall there. I remember taking the cigarette, flipping it behind me, probably into the--I could've just been an arsonist there. Somehow, it didn't turn into a fire.

I had to make a deal with my father. So, he picked me up and he says, "Wait until I tell your mother," the usual stuff, as we're driving home. I'm trying to think. "Oh, my mother's going to be so disappointed in me," and I said, "Well, let's make a little deal. If you don't tell her about this, I won't tell her about Jim and Larry's."

Jim and Larry's was a diner in New Jersey. When I became old enough that I didn't have to go to New York with my mother and my sister on the weekends that they went, my father and I would eat at Jim and Larry's and eating all sorts of prohibited, non-*kosher* stuff, which would've upset my mother. It actually worked. [laughter] Of course, I never went back to the pool hall again on Sundays, but another one of the crazy, little small-town stories.

SI: Right. Did you have any contact with the ag agent?

RB: Not only did we have contact with them, but Rutgers was involved in this. Rutgers actually had the Vineland Poultry Laboratory, was run by Rutgers. My father became almost a veterinarian himself. You had to, I mean, because the diseases would spread so quickly. Mostly, they were these lung diseases that the chickens had.

He would bring a sick chicken to the Poultry Lab. I think free of charge--I'm pretty sure that Rutgers didn't charge (I'm sure the state gave them money to do this)--they would dissect the chicken, do an autopsy and find out what the disease was, and then, prescribe whatever antibiotic

or whatever they should put in the feed to keep it from spreading, because, if a disease spread, boy, that could wipe out a flock very, very quickly.

I'm sure you've heard about all these flocks, thousands of chickens being killed at once, to keep a disease from spreading. So, the minute something happened here, you had to be on your toes. So, we got to know the people at the Poultry Lab, which was part of the Extension Service from Rutgers. So, they actually went all the way down there.

They also had the shellfisheries one down in outside of Greenwich, New Jersey, down in, I think, Bivalve, around there, right on the Delaware Bay. I visited there. In fact, I picked up some records from there for our archives at one time, later on, as an adult. So, Rutgers did have its tentacles into South Jersey and we chicken farmers definitely took [advantage]. That's probably the first time I heard the word "Rutgers," was at the Poultry Lab.

SI: Sitting around your table at night, would you discuss world events? Were you and your family kind of keeping up on the news, nationally or internationally?

RB: Yes, I would get their take on it, mostly as it affected them. They were certainly Democrats. I remember they were big [1952 and 1956 Democratic Presidential nominee] Adlai Stevenson fans. We would talk about politics occasionally.

My father especially was very upset with people who protested, because life in America, this is utopia compared to where he was before. "How could people not appreciate this?" So, even though he was against the Vietnam War, he didn't like the protests, and the Civil Rights protests and things like that, when he saw the cities burning and things like that. He didn't really go far to look for the causes of it, but the results. So, there was a little bit about that.

As I said, he was very anti-Communist, because, when the Russians came in, in 1939--between '39 and '41, the Soviets ran the area where he was--he saw that, the brutality of that. So, he was very anti-Communist and anti-Russia.

Again, that was the reason we read *Der Tog* rather than *The Forward*, because it was a more conservative paper; didn't get very involved, but we watched the news. I remember, we watched Walter Cronkite or *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* every night, that half-hour news show, maybe it was fifteen minutes then. It was very quick, I remember. So, we did certainly watch the news.

Once we got a TV, it was on all the time. My mother would actually come home from work to watch the soap opera that was during the lunch hour. So, she would come home during the lunch hour, rather than eating at the factory. She'd come running home to catch the soap opera, then, running back.

Yes, there was discussion of it, but more discussions with my peers than with my parents, much more so there. We definitely had great political discussions in high school and, certainly, of course, in college.

SI: With your peers, would you discuss the Civil Rights Movement?

RB: Yes. The NAACP was certainly biracial when we were there. I mean, there were many white members of it and we would go to meetings and things like that. We got very involved in social issues ourselves. My parents weren't exactly happy with it, but they tolerated it.

SI: Since it was an agricultural community, often, that means there is an African American community descended from migrant farm workers. Was there a community in the area?

RB: Yes, there was, they would come in. There was an employment agency, I think in Baltimore, and we definitely [used it]. After a while, my father was able to hire one worker. I'm kind of ashamed at how they lived. He built a little shack for them to live [in] on the farm and paid them very little.

Of course, they drank a lot and all that. There were all sorts of domestic problems with having them there, but they were mostly Hispanic, although there were some African Americans, too, as I remember. I got close to some. I remember some of their names, but it was not a very good way for them to live. It just wasn't good.

It engendered some racism, especially my father, because he would extrapolate, "All they like to do is drink," and all that. These were the poorest of the poor, of course, that would come, that would subject themselves to that kind of a life, but that went on for a few years. We did have some help that way. They would mostly do the collecting of the eggs.

SI: Would you see examples of segregation in the area?

RB: There probably was. I didn't think of it, because we didn't live in town. I'm thinking like the synagogue was in town, but it was still pretty mixed, although I think it became a Hispanic neighborhood at that time. Many of the migrant workers that worked in the fields, that worked on the truck farms, that they're there, would just work seasonally, but, then, after a while, they stayed there.

I know it became a crisis because I remember reading--because I was reading the Vineland papers even after I wasn't living there--the fact that so few kids knew English. There were so many Spanish-speaking people there.

There were urban problems in Vineland that never existed before that, but I think most of those have been [addressed]. Still, I think Cumberland County is the poorest county in the state still, or one of the poorest, if not *the* poorest--but I think things are at least more tolerable now. I don't think that there was a [problem] and I never really knew it myself.

There were African Americans, but very few at Vineland High when I was there. I never really kept up with many of them. I know one of them was an accomplished baseball player who actually made it to the Major Leagues for a little while.

Of course, there's a very well-known baseball player, Mike Trout, who is not African American, but grew up in Millville, one of the real super-duper [players]. So, I hear the word Millville, New Jersey, mentioned every once in a while on the sports pages.

We didn't really feel--and I certainly didn't feel--any anti-Jewish discrimination. I think it was more there was bullying, certainly, in the school. Like if you were one of the so-called "smart kids," you could certainly be bullied.

Of course, we lost more than our share of kids who were drafted and died in Vietnam. I've only been to one high school reunion. I was at the twenty-fifth reunion. The first thing they had us do when we went into this dinner in the catering place was go through a narrow hallway that had the pictures of those who were killed-in-action in Vietnam. There was enough to cover a hallway. So, that was a real sad introduction.

I was going to go to the fiftieth reunion and even traveled all the way from Florida to New Jersey to do it, but, then, unfortunately, my wife got ill. I couldn't actually make it, but they did call me, they called me from the reunion. So, I had a telephone conversation with some of my classmates from that--and then, went back to Vineland.

Not too long ago, I was in New Jersey and my sister and I did kind of a nostalgia trip to where we had been before. I even went into Salem County, where the original settlements were, to see what was left of it and did find a little bit of it.

The only thing downtown that I remember that was still there was our favorite frozen custard place. The Verona actually was still there. It was in a different place, but we found it and actually had a frozen custard at an unusual time of the day. I think it was still morning, just to do it, but you know the old saying, "You can't go back and expect it to look like it was before."

I remember, my predecessor at Rutgers (we overlapped for years), Donald Sinclair, who was a real giant--he had basically established our Special Collections unit at the Library--he would always wax eloquently about his hometown in Kansas. "Now that was the perfect life." I'm trying to think of what town--it was near Emporia. I can't remember the name of it right now, but a tiny, little town in Kansas.

He actually went back, when I knew him, at one time, visiting family or something. He came back and he couldn't believe [it]. He says, "You wouldn't believe it. There's a McDonald's there. There's all that stuff." I said, "You can't go back."

It's not that it was better than where we are now, it was a different time--and where we are now probably was a lot better in your mind as well. You really can't go back, but it was an interesting trip. That was just less than a year ago we went back.

SI: It sounds like you were definitely aware of Vietnam as it was building up, from 1964 on.

RB: Very much so.

SI: Yes. It sounds like you would've gone to college anyway, though. It wasn't influenced by that.

RB: Oh, no, no. I was definitely [going]. No, our parents, that would've been, like I said, the most disappointing thing you could give your parents, I mean, to show them that they were a complete failure at raising you, was to tell them that you weren't going to college, you wanted to keep up the family farm. So, no, we knew, I knew, from the time I knew what a college was, that I was going to go to college. There was absolutely no doubt about that.

SI: How did you decide to go to Duke?

RB: It was one I didn't think I was going to get in, but I thought, "Let me just sort of expand my horizons a little bit." My physics teacher was an alum of there and had mentioned it was a great school. Of course, they had a good basketball team and all that. So, they were on television--except they didn't have a good team when I was there, as they did before and after.

So, I applied there and several other places. That was probably the best school I got into, although I got into Rutgers and I would've been very happy to go there. Normally, I wouldn't go to a place like Duke, because the tuition was fourteen hundred dollars, which was a fortune at that time.

I think Rutgers might have been a hundred or something at that time. Again, you could fact check--I may be off by a lot--but it was nothing like it is now, but it still was going to be too much. Between the Jewish Agricultural Society, the Baron DeHirsch Fund, and then, getting offered a scholarship from Duke, it was really manageable. Then, I was one of the first work-study students.

One of the reasons why I liked libraries and, eventually, would end up working at one, spending a whole career there, was that my first work-study assignment at Duke was to be an intermural basketball referee, because I played basketball. We got to choose what we wanted. I figured I'd do that, but, boy, was that hard work, running up and down the court, and then, of course, learning how to make very fast decisions and knowing when you were wrong and how to make up for your mistakes.

I mean, you had to blow that whistle right away and make it, because everybody's in your face the minute you blow the whistle. You had to make a decision. Then, I'd be running back and saying, "Gee, I was wrong on that one. I've got to make that up at some point," [laughter] so, learning a lot about life, but not really like it very much. So, when a job came to get a work-study job in the library, I jumped at it. I really fell in love with that.

SI: Tell me a little bit about your impressions of going down to the campus. It was probably your first time down South.

RB: My first; right, I went there pretty much sight unseen and I went there on a Greyhound bus. That's how my parents shipped some clothing and the like, in the trunk down there. I went down on a Greyhound bus.

The very first thing I noticed--remember, this is pretty early in the [period], right after the Voting Rights Act [of 1965] and all of that--the first thing I noticed was that African Americans were being deferential to me, this kid, "Good morning, sir," walking down the street and that type of thing. I thought, "Boy, was that highly unusual," and then, knowing that, like, the custodians were all African Americans, whereas, in New Jersey, most of them were white, and so, noticing that kind of thing.

So, I got a feeling for that. Of course, I was in the Research Triangle of North Carolina, which was much more progressive, certainly than even the rest of the state, not to mention the other states in the South, and got to know African Americans very early at Duke. There was a number of them. My dorm was very well mixed.

I guess I must have told them I was Jewish, because I had a Jewish roommate. We discovered that all the other Jews had Jewish roommates and all the African Americans had African American roommates. So, the University was clearly cognizant of that and was not going to mix the races so much at that time. Of course, all that ended after freshman year, when you could do what you wanted, but that was something that kind of stuck with me right away.

Then, later on, after I'd been there a couple years, I got involved politically and the like. In fact, I got involved politically right away, because, when I was a freshman, it was during the big election year, when Eugene McCarthy and Bobby Kennedy were running, the year that Johnson decided not to run for reelection--of course, I was very naive, but I "stayed clean for Gene." I was a big Gene McCarthy person. We did all sorts of stuff.

Then, later on, after that year, there was a group of people that were going to, like, kind of take over the campus. There was a big vigil and it got kind of violent when Martin Luther King was killed. There was a vigil in front of the chapel. The President of the University at the time, Douglas Maitland Knight [1963-1969], panicked and called in the police. They teargassed the people out there, really radicalized what was a pretty conservative student body, relatively so.

The next President who came [was] Terry Sanford [1970-1985], who had been Governor of North Carolina [1961-1965], and then, later, became a Senator [1986-1992], but, in-between, he was President of Duke University. Duke had to find a President very quickly, because Knight resigned suddenly after the building takeover on the campus and all that.

He just didn't handle it well and had to leave. I think he went back to his hometown in New Jersey and became involved, I think, with RCA. He became an executive there or something like that. Again, I'm not sure exactly how that all shook down.

Terry Sanford really calmed things down. I heard about Mason Gross and I got meet Mason Gross shortly after I came to Rutgers. He had already retired, but I did get to meet him, because whenever he went on vacation, he kept his valuables in Special Collections. He and Don Sinclair were friends and he would store them in our vault. [laughter]

SI: Really?

RB: He'd bring this suitcase. We never opened the suitcase. We were so tempted to do it, but, somehow--I think it was more fear than honesty--we never opened [it]. He'd bring the suitcase and, when he got back from vacation, he'd come and collect it again. Sanford reminded me of him, as a really sort of soothing, sort of calm, calming-down-things character. Like, he ate his lunch with us in the dining hall and all that. He got to know students and the like.

[Editor's Note: Dr. Mason W. Gross served as Rutgers University President from 1959 to 1971.]

So, when a group of students were about to take over the campus, and you could do that by--Duke University has this big traffic circle and there are like four or five streets that come [together]. If you can take control of that circle, you could shut down the campus. There'd be no way to get to anything.

He came out there. He called us, I forgot what he called us, "A bunch of white, middle-class, naïve," and I certainly was very naïve at the time. He said, "Let's do something that's really worthwhile." He commandeered a campus bus and the whole bunch of us went into the African American neighborhood in town.

Durham, North Carolina, was a pretty big, bustling town. There was, of course, Duke and North Carolina Central University was there, the African American school was there. There were the various hospitals. It was also the county seat of Durham County. It was the corporate headquarters of Duke Power, which is now Duke Energy, sort of the Con Edison of the South, the PSEG of the South. In fact, I still pay my electric bills down here in Florida to Duke Energy; world headquarters was there.

Liggett & Myers Tobacco Company, the American Tobacco Company, they were both very prominent at that time. You could actually smell the smoke of the tobacco curing on campus, when the wind was blowing the right way. So, I thought of it as a pretty big, industrial town, pretty wealthy town.

So, he took us into the African American neighborhood with voter registration packets, "Let's go knock on doors and let's register people to vote. You want to have change? You want to do stuff? These are people that never voted in their lives."

We'd knock on doors and people would be so fearful of us, I remember. It was like, "Go away, go away, I'm not [registering to vote]." They were afraid to vote. Obviously, they were discouraged from voting.

We registered very few people, but the shock of seeing dirt roads in the middle of this city, people with shacks and outhouses--I mean, this is in the late '60s--just could not believe it. I just couldn't believe that something like this could exist in a city. So, we learned a lot from that.

I think one of the reasons why I really loved to study the Great Society is because of the great changes that were made during that time. Most of it was from our own Senator, Harrison Williams, Chair of the Labor and Human Resources Committee throughout that period.

[Editor's Note: Harrison A. "Pete" Williams, Jr. (1919-2001), a Democrat, served as a Representative from New Jersey in the US House of Representatives from 1953 to 1957 and the US Senate from 1959 to 1982.]

Again, I was just so, so naïve. During that election, I remember, again, I was so disappointed when Gene McCarthy dropped out. I hated Bobby Kennedy, because he was one of the reasons why Gene McCarthy dropped out--and really was upset when Hubert Humphrey was running. I thought of him as a war monger--not what a great Civil Rights advocate he was and really the champion of the Great Society, what he did as Mayor of Minneapolis.

I learned all this later. When I was a history major, I never bothered to study that period, which turns out to be a really seminal period. When he was Mayor of Minneapolis, at the 1948 Convention, Democratic Convention, he put the first Civil Rights plank into their platform.

That was one of the reasons why the Dixiecrats left the Party and why Strom Thurmond ended up running. It was because of the bravery, really, of Hubert Humphrey, they're willing to [add it]. It turned out he didn't have to give up his career doing that, but I didn't think of him that way at all.

[Editor's Note: The States' Rights Democratic Party, or Dixiecrats, splintered off from the Democratic Party during the 1948 Presidential Campaign and supported a segregationist, conservative platform.]

Again, one of the more embarrassing things in my college life was, a friend of mine, who later became the Head of the Housing Authority in Philadelphia, became a great urban planner and lawyer, he was way ahead of me in terms of really understanding American history, recent American history, and was a big Hubert Humphrey fan.

Hubert Humphrey was giving this big rally at the big Coliseum that had just been built in Charlotte. So, I guess one of the organizations on campus chartered a bus and it was plastered with Hubert Humphrey stuff all over it. I didn't really want to go, but, by then, Hubert Humphrey was clearly going to be the nominee of the Party.

I'm sitting on this bus. Apparently, they're waiting to start, so that the bus driver turned off his engine, and it got really hot in the bus. Everybody else on the bus was a big Humphrey fan and they were out there with their placards. They were walking around the bus and all of that. So, they were celebrating Humphrey and all that.

I wasn't going to do it, but I'm dying on this bus. So, finally, I open the window. These buses had these big windows. I opened the window, I stuck my head out. Sure enough, a photographer takes a picture. I believe it was on the front page of *The Durham Morning Herald* and it's also in my yearbook. [laughter] So, there [I am], and right underneath me is the big, "Up With Humphrey," thing. [laughter]



I was so angry at the time; now, I'm so proud of it, because now I can pretend to actually [like Humphrey]. So, I think that's one of the reasons why I really zeroed in on that part of history and just really feel proud that I was able to build up our collection at Rutgers with the Harrison Williams Papers and all the other documents dealing with the Great Society.

When you think of the time that I was in college, there was no Medicare, there was no OSHA, there was no safety for employees, just everything, ERISA, the Employment Retirement Income Security Act, where public [employees get retirement benefits]. I didn't even realize that public employees didn't have Social Security, that it was all through the work of that Committee.

Hubert Humphrey was very involved, as Vice President, during that time, Williams, in being able to make deals with his fellow Senators, be they right-wing, left-wing, what-have-you, to get to ram this legislation through. Much of it, of course, has been undermined since then.

SI: Yes.

RB: But, I did become very political at that time.

SI: It's a little more conservative, I would imagine, than maybe Rutgers or some West Coast universities.

RB: Yes.

SI: Was there more conflict between conservative students and liberal students?

RB: I didn't notice a lot of it. I mean, there was the--what is it?--YAF, Young Americans for Freedom. They had a chapter there. I was part of what's called the Southern Students Organizing Committee (SSOC), I think we called it.

I did go to one of their conventions in Atlanta, I remember doing that one year, and sleeping on the floor, either in a church or a community center, somewhere. We went for a weekend down there, but I don't remember a lot of conflicts. I remember a few zany things that happened.

They have, of course, homecoming and they made a big deal of it. I know we wore shirts and ties to football games. You have this big election for the homecoming queen. I still remember the stand; there was the pictures of all the various candidates. These good-looking girls were on there and one of the pictures is of a cigar-chomping boy who hadn't shaved in a week or two.

Of course, he wins. The University had to do something about that. I remember, there were two cars. There was the car with the queen that was eventually crowned and another car with him. So, there was a little bit of [eccentricity], mostly for fun. I mean, there wasn't a lot of really serious political activity, except around issues.

I mean, [comedian and 1968 Presidential Candidate] Dick Gregory came to speak there. Shortly after that, a group of African American students took over the administration building. It was

calmed down. It reminded me a little bit about what happened at Rutgers at almost the same time, when the building was taken over.

Terry Sanford, I think, handled it very much the way Mason Gross did, in that there was a list of demands, African American studies and more resources and that thing. Some of them were met. Most of them probably weren't, but I thought the same thing happened pretty much at Rutgers.

Duke, at that time, our classes were co-ed, but we did not live in the same [dorms]. The females lived on the East Campus, which was the old college that was founded in the 1820s, that Duke ended up endowing, that became part of the University, and the men lived on the big, spacious West Campus, which looked a lot like Princeton, and probably not by accident, Gothic buildings.

The Duke Family was very prominent in New Jersey. There was a rumor (that's totally unfounded) that Duke wanted to give his money to Princeton, but Princeton refused to change their name. So, he found a little college in North Carolina that would. I'm sure that is not true, but the rumor still persists.

SI: I've heard that same story, except with Rutgers instead of Princeton. It must make the rounds.

RB: Probably the reason why Princeton became the focus was because Duke looks like Princeton. The buildings were built very much in that Gothic style. So, I was at least used to having females in my classes, but, then, when I started school, when I came up to Rutgers, Rutgers was not co-ed. I was just shocked.

Rutgers was one of the very few state universities--North Carolina, ironically, being the other. While I was at Duke, Chapel Hill was all-male. The females were in Greensboro, UNCG, a number of miles away. Since the Duke girls were much smarter than us, we used to always hang out at Greensboro, [laughter] where they would accept us a little bit more.

They [Duke women] always looked down on us. If you looked at the class ranks, the girls were much higher than the boys at that time, even though our classes were coed, but they had separate class ranks, apparently. (It was called the women's college then?). Of course, that's all changed now. So, I don't know where I was, where we got into that.

SI: You said you wound up studying history. Was that your intent when you went in?

RB: Pretty much, pretty much, yes. Again, I hadn't intended on going to Duke. The advisor, the teacher that we so looked up to in high school, was a graduate of Wesleyan. He kind of bragged that he could get us all in and all that. We were all going to follow in his footsteps and go there. None of us got in, [laughter] of the four or five of us that applied there.

Let's see, that was one of the places; I think I also applied to Penn, University of Pennsylvania, wasn't accepted there, either. So, Duke was really the best choice to do that. I was interested in history right from the beginning. They had some great teachers with great courses there, very inspired.

SI: What professors stand out in your memory?

RB: There were several of them, but one that really stood out, even though I wasn't as committed to that field, was John TePaske. He was a Professor of Spanish and Latin American History and I think I took all of his courses.

Back then, it was really interesting, people, they really took an interest in students that were serious. We had small classes. I remember, I took one class over the summer with him where we met at his house.

The faculty at Duke were able to get these incredible homes in the Duke Forest. They sort of owned them and sort of didn't. It was a thing where they would buy them from the University, and then, when they either retired or passed away or whatever, they would then revert back to the University. Then, other people would go [in]. I have no idea if they've kept that up or not, but that was the practice at the time.

He had this beautiful home in the Duke Forest--and just got very, very involved. He just took such an interest in us. It continued later on. When I was first applying for jobs, it turned out that he had a friend, Rudy Vecoli who he went to graduate school with at Ohio State. Vecoli happened to have a Rutgers connection.

He taught at Rutgers, labor history and ethnic history, and wrote a book on that as part of the Centennial Series in 1964. I guess it was the Bicentennial of New Jersey, they put out a series of books. He went off to the University of Minnesota.

There was a job, the curator of the immigrant archives, that I applied for. I was much too young and inexperienced to get that job--but almost got it because TePaske wrote a letter to Rudy Vecoli, who was nominally in charge of that, from his position in the History Department there.

So, he kept up with me, pretty much until the end. Until the end of his life, we corresponded. Others, Warren Lerner, I remember, Ann Scott--I probably remember all of them--Fredrick Holiday, Francis Acomb--it was a really, really good department and a number of really radical professors there as well.

I don't remember any African American professors. I think they were all hired as part of what happened on campus later on--but really enjoyed it, knew that I wanted to do something with history, didn't know quite what.

Of course, the draft was still very much on my mind, throughout my time there. Boy, when I got that card that no longer said--oh, whatever that was--it was 2-A or something, whatever my status was that kept me temporarily out. When I got the 1-A card in the mail, boy, that was really something.

I still remember that lottery so well, a bunch of us in the dormitory. We made a big party out of it--and the country did. When I think about it, it was kind of shameful. It was like a big

entertainment show on television, this draft lottery. I remember there was music and all sorts of stuff. I think it was an actor or an actress who put her hand in, like, a thing and drew out the first number, and so on, and so forth, through the night.

We took up a collection in the dorm, where the person who got called first was going to get the money. It was like we put money in a pot--I think each of us put a dollar in the pot--[for] the person (the unfortunate person) who was called first.

Someone was called pretty early, but it turned out he was going to medical school, which is a further deferment. So, we had a big argument over that, whether we should give him the money, since he wasn't going to be drafted anyway.

I still remember that really well, and wondering whether 212 was going to keep me out. It turned out it did. You didn't know it at the time. You didn't know how far out they were going to go. So, February 16th in the first draft lottery was number 212. Like I say, I think they came pretty close, but not there.

SI: You were also there in the Spring of 1970, when there was the moratoriums and the reaction to Kent State. Do you remember that period?

RB: Yes, right, and there was activity that was going on on campus. I remember I was part of that Southern Student Organizing Committee during that time. The thing I remember most about the unrest was that I almost never took final exams those last couple years I was on campus, that they would just call everything off, because spring would come and part of it was spring fever, I guess, and part of it was just sort of that's when all these things happened.

There are these student strikes and people would stop going to class. The classes got called off. We still would have to hand in all our papers, I remember, and some of them, we got over the summer, but didn't take final exams. It was at least one year, maybe two, where we didn't take final exams because of that.

SI: Would you go to marches or other types of actions?

RB: The only one I remember was the one that we went to in Atlanta. Everything else was local, on campus--so, we really weren't convincing anybody in town.

So, there really was a "town-gown" situation, which I never realized until we went to register those voters, that what I was doing really had not that much meaning at all. I was just doing it in a very closed, comfortable setting and not really putting anything on the line.

So, like I said, the only rally I went to, the only big convention rally I went to, was that one in Atlanta, and then, to--I can't remember, but it was in the spring or the fall--but, otherwise, not really getting involved that much in the community. I'm really sorry for that now.

The closest I came was, I took a course in, they called it "abnormal psychology" at the time--I'm sure they have a much more politically correct name for a course like that now--but part of what

we did was to volunteer in a place for troubled youth. It was in Butner, North Carolina, so, a little north of where we were, about twenty miles north.

We went up there and volunteered at a youth facility with people for troubled youth. I remember watching the Super Bowl where Joe Namath [played], where the Jets won that Super Bowl, Super Bowl III, there with those kids. That gave me at least a glimpse into [their lives], because you're finding out a little bit about their family life and all of that.

Otherwise, Duke was really--it was not the real world, for sure. I mean, I really enjoyed my time there, but, when I look back now, I realize that I enjoyed the discussions we had, all of that, the social life and what-have-you, but it was not the real world, to say the least.

SI: Did you work in the library all through?

RB: No, I'd spent most of it being a basketball referee. It was only at the end, and Duke had closed stacks at that time. So, fortunately, I did an honors paper my senior year and I was able to get a carrel in the stacks.

That was like a big thing. Oh, I loved that. I practically lived at the carrel. Instead of working at the dorm, I did all my schoolwork there. You could have books checked out to your carrel and all that, made me feel real adult, very sophisticated, because of the fact that graduate students were in the other [carrels].

I fortunately was able to get employment at Rutgers. I had my first [job] when I was a graduate student at Rutgers. The first thing I did, I know I taught some sort of remedial history at Livingston College. Livingston was pretty new then. They had the best and the worst students, it seemed, at that time.

I did some work with--I got to meet Prof. Seth Scheiner there. We became very close friends. I gave a eulogy at his funeral. Even well after he had retired, we still had lunch together all the time. John Gillis was there at the time, too.

I got to sort of get the layout at Livingston, but, then, I really didn't like doing the work that I was doing there, when I got a chance to get a job in the Library, especially at Special Collections. I knew a little because I had done research with primary sources before and all of that.

In fact, I remember asking someone who worked at the library while I was in college, who was helping me so much--it wasn't even at Duke. It was at the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina. I was doing something--I don't even remember what paper I was working on--but I remember speaking to one of the young men that was working there and just thought, wow, he was really into his job and helping me so much.

I said, "Like, what do you have to do to get a job like yours?" [laughter] He said, "Well, pretty much what you're doing--major in history, go to graduate school." There was no professional training at that point.

So, when I had a chance to work at Special Collections as a student, it was just really wonderful. Then, I got a couple of degrees at Rutgers, a master's in history, and then, later, in library science, which is what they called it then. I think it has a much fancier name now, information something or other, and there's very little library in it these days.

I was very interested in social history. I think that's what really got me really into it, that I was into reading diaries and manuscripts and things like that.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

SI: We will pick up next time with more of your coming to Rutgers, but is there anything about your early life or your time at Duke that you'd like to mention for this session, that we missed?

RB: No, I don't think so. I was a pretty good alumnus. They started to require interviews, but, of course, people couldn't get on campus all the time or couldn't afford to or couldn't travel. So, they conscripted me to do alumni interviewing.

Then, I think the person who was in charge of it, who I believe lived in South Jersey, somewhere in Camden County, suddenly got transferred and couldn't do it anymore. They somehow got me to be in charge of the New Jersey interviewing--having to set up all the interviews, find my fellow alums all over the state to do it and assign them all, in addition to doing as many as I could, many of which I conducted at the Rutgers Library.

I thought that was kind of ironic, doing interviews for another university, but it was where I worked. It was the most convenient place to meet with them--but what I didn't realize was, I pretty much had to find my own successor or I'd be stuck for life doing it.

Sure enough, shortly afterwards, the Wassermans showed up on campus, Mark and Marlie Wasserman, who were--I don't know if they were classmates--we graduated pretty much at the same time. I got them to do it. I figured, "Well, you're a team, the two of you could do that," and so, they took over. I think both of their kids ended up going to Duke.

So, they would be an interesting couple, too, because she was Head of the Rutgers Press for years and he taught in the History Department, of course, for years as a colleague of ours. I think they'd be really fascinating people to [interview]. Maybe they could comment on some of the things I spoke about.

SI: Yes, absolutely. Between now and the next time we talk, you might remember things. I always encourage people to jot down notes.

RB: I will, certainly.

SI: For now, thank you very much. We'll find another time to do the next session.

RB: Well, thank you very much for all the work you're doing. It's just really outstanding. I know the history of it quite well. I still keep up with [first ROHA Director Dr G.] Kurt Piehler. We're good friends here in Florida and I still see him and his family occasionally.

SI: Oh, great.

RB: Done a great job of carrying on what he started.

SI: Thank you.

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Reviewed by Hami Asif 9/5/2024

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 9/13/2024

Reviewed by Ronald Becker 11/2024