

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN BLOCHER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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TRANSCRIPT BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an oral history interview with Mr. Stephen Blocher on November 22, 2024, in West Deptford, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth and...

Jack Klein: Jacqueline Klein.

SI: We'll also be joined by...

Donna Blocher: Donna Blocher.

SI: Excellent, go ahead.

JK: I guess the first question would be, where and when were you born?

Stephen Blocher: I was born in Brooklyn, New York, on March 23, 1943, I believe in James Madison Hospital.

JK: What was your father's name?

SB: Father's name was Jack. I think he was born as Jacob, but, somewhere along the line, his name was changed to Jack.

JK: Where was he born?

SB: He was also born in Brooklyn, New York.

JK: Who were his parents?

SB: His parents were Morris Blocher and Anna Silverman Blocher, both of them born in Europe, I believe in what was the Russian Empire. I think it may have been Lithuania, in that area, but their immigration papers showed Russia.

JK: What kind of job did he have in Brooklyn?

SB: My grandfather or my father? My father was an automotive parts salesman, selling to stores, like you might see what used to be Strauss Stores. I don't even think they have them anymore. At one time, he had his own store, which went out of business. I really don't have personal memories of that, but I was told that. In my lifetime, he was a salesman, traveling usually, but home every night.

JK: When did he pass away?

SB: He passed away in October 1966 at the age of fifty-three, much too young.

JK: What was it like losing your father at such a young age?

SB: It was devastating. Looking back, I realize that we should not have been surprised. He was very ill for a long time. He died of pancreatic cancer. In those years, people didn't talk about cancer. I never heard the term in relationship to his illness. We never spoke about his death; I mean "we" meaning him and I or my family. So, those things have changed a lot in the last fifty, sixty years, where these subjects are open for discussion. They were not at that point.

His death, though he had been ill for a while, when I look back (and I know I think I've mentioned it to my grandchildren), my last interaction with my father was one of annoyance. He was ill at home and asked me to help him go to the bathroom. I was annoyed that he was bothering me, because I was wrapped up in my own [concerns].

I had gone through some of my own situations at that time and my feeling was, "Why are you bothering me?" didn't argue with him or anything. I helped him, but that was the last interaction with him and he died that night and, sixty years later, I wish I could take it back.

JK: I'm sorry about that. Who was your mother?

SB: My mother, her maiden name was Berrick, it was Carolyn.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

SB: Ready? Her maiden name was Berrick. She was married to my father, I think around 1937, definitely young. She remarried after my father died, years later, and she passed away. She lived to almost ninety-three.

JK: Yes, I got to meet her. [Editor's Note: Jack Klein is Mr. Blocher's grandchild.]

SB: Yes, you got to meet her, which she was very lucky to meet her great-grandchildren or some of them. She lived forty years after my father died, so, it was a big difference.

JK: Where was she born?

SB: She was also born in Brooklyn, New York.

JK: Who were her parents?

SB: Her parents were Morris Berrick and Fannie. Fannie's maiden name was Short. One of the things--maybe you'll be asking questions about my childhood--but, growing up in the '40s and '50s in Brooklyn, you were in walking distance of your grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins. You were just there, very different than today. It was many times, my grandparents lived on the way to my school and, sometimes after school, I would just pop by and say hello and continue.

JK: What kind of job did she have, if she had one?

SB: My grandmother did not work.

JK: Your mother?

SB: My mother never worked. When my father passed away, she got a job at a local store and I was still living at home and helped her financially, also, but my mother was a stay-at-home mom, which was normal in those years.

JK: Who are your siblings? How old are they and what would the birth order be?

SB: My oldest brother is Alan. I don't remember the year he was born--'38 or '39.

JK: I think you said '39.

SB: Maybe '39. I think he's eighty-five, eighty-six. He's still alive. My younger brother, who was born eight years after me, and, according to the story that I heard, he was an accident, [laughter] he is now--he's eight years younger. How old am I? So, he's seventy-four.

JK: How were your relationships like with your brothers and your parents?

SB: I'm not that close to my brothers. I speak to them, both of them. My two brothers do not speak to each other.

JK: Do you remember what happened with that?

SB: I never knew exactly what happened with that, but they do not speak. I speak to both. I don't see them that often, but I do speak to them. Growing up, age-wise, I was closer to my older brother. I was eight years apart from my younger one, so, I was in a totally different world than he was.

My older brother, usually, growing up was with friction. We would fight a lot and argue, but I would add, the difference in today, the three of us lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn with one bath and two bedrooms and a living room. There were no dining rooms, and we were not poor. We weren't rich, but we were not poor. That's the way it was. [laughter]

JK: How many of your grandparents were you able to meet?

SB: All four of them.

JK: What was your relationship like with them?

SB: My father's parents were more, not physically, but emotionally, more distant, did not have close relationships with them. My mother's parents, I was closer to, particularly my grandmother, Faye, who your mom's middle name is named after.

She actually lived with us after my grandfather died and she was with us for about five years. I gave her my bedroom and I was very close with her particularly. By that time, I was a young

man, but I was close with her and she ended up passing away two weeks before my father did, around the same [time]. So, that was a tough couple of weeks.

JK: Sounds tough. I had a question about what it was like growing up in Brooklyn in the 1950s, but you already answered that.

SB: It was wonderful. No, it was, let me tell you. So different than today, we would go outside and the word from my mother was, "Be back at dinnertime," and we would. We had no cellphones. Nobody knew where we were. We would be on our own at young ages and go on the subway and take the buses or take our bikes and go to Sheepshead Bay or Ebbets Field, totally on our own.

DB: But, that doesn't mean they didn't get in trouble.

SB: No, I got in trouble, one time in particular, because I did not get home at the time I was told to get home. It turned out, I went out with my friend on a boat and our boat got stuck in the middle of the water and nobody knew where we were. So, that time, I got in trouble

JK: Did your neighborhood have a name?

SB: Neighborhood? [laughter]

JK: Where you grew up?

SB: It was part of the Flatbush/Midwood Section of Brooklyn.

SI: What was the neighborhood like? Was it a melting pot or was it predominantly Jewish?

SB: It was predominantly Jewish or Italian. In fact, I've often commented, until I went in the Army, I never met a WASP. You were either Jewish or Italian. Well, many of my friends were Italian. In fact, the schools were closed during the Jewish holidays, my Italian friends would come to the synagogue, so [that] we can hang out together. Basically, that was it. So, it was ethnic, but not religious. It was more just [that] many of the people I grew up with were either Jewish or Italian.

JK: How religious would you say your family was growing up?

SB: Not at all. I was a *Bar Mitzvah* and that was about it.

JK: I was going to ask, did they participate in any Jewish communities?

SB: Only through *bar mitzvah* and even on the Jewish holidays, we would go to visit and give honor to our grandparents, but didn't go for services.

JK: How was it like growing up surrounded by Jewish people in a Jewish community?

SB: I didn't know any different. I mean, I thought basically that was [it]; I thought everybody ate bagels and lox.

SI: Did your family keep kosher at home?

SB: No, not at all. There's a funny story with that. When I met Donna and she came over for dinner, according to Donna, on a Friday night, my mother served ham. I don't remember the ham, but it wouldn't surprise me.

DB: And I don't eat it.

JK: Did you notice or experience any antisemitism when growing up?

SB: No, not really, thankfully; didn't in the Army, either, or when I entered the corporate world, never really personally had any issues or experiences.

JK: That's good. Were you ever into sports or any extracurriculars when you were growing up?

SB: Not really. I mean, the sports weren't organized sports. We'd go out with the kids, play punchball, play stickball, have a catch, but it wasn't like the organized, uniform teams that a lot of kids are in today. We just didn't have those.

SI: Were there things like Boy Scouts or Jewish youth groups?

SB: I did join the Cub Scouts and I didn't last very long, because I got lost going to the meeting. [laughter]

JK: Sounds about right. What was your education like?

SB: It was interesting. I was thinking about this the other day, when I knew you were going to interview me. I was never a good student. I was sort of average. Looking back, I found out, years later, when I went in the Army and they started giving me tests, I had a very high IQ, very high. It was about 140, which is high. Yet, I was just a "C" student. Again, I think the changes [are apparent]; I had a learning disability that was never recognized or addressed.

JK: Do you know now what it was?

SB: I don't know the name. I did mention it to somebody who gave some name. I cannot repeat, necessarily, what I hear. At this, I was never good in language. I always had trouble with language. I had trouble with spelling. You could say something and I can repeat it and you could tell me how to pronounce it; then, I'll pronounce it differently. There is a name for that.

That was never addressed, never recognized. It was, "Oh, he's just an average 'C' student. Leave him alone, that's the end of it." In looking back, I think that was a mistake and my parents never pushed me. I graduated high school, but, when I graduated high school, I really had no focus. I didn't know where I was going to go or what I was going to do. I ended up having a successful

career, but some of that, I fell into. Nobody ever pushed me to go to college, which I think was a mistake, too.

JK: You did not end up going to college.

SB: I went to night school for a while. I hated it. Part of it was that I didn't take all my requirements in language in high school, and so, I had to take a foreign language. I had to take French and I just never did well in language, so, I was struggling. I finally said, "What am I putting up with this for? I don't have to do this." I ended up dropping out and, shortly after which (I'm moving my life along), I ended up going in the Army, which changed a lot in my life.

JK: Those are actually my next questions for you. What caused you to want to join the Army?

SB: Well, I think you have to understand the time--there was a draft, which they do not have today. So, sooner or later, I was going to get drafted. They were drafting most young men around the age of twenty-one, twenty-two. Here I was, I was twenty or a month before my twentieth birthday.

I was working. I was working for a jewelry manufacturer in New York City, working in the stockroom, but I looked at my life and said, "I'm going to get drafted. Right now, I don't really have a career in front of me. I'm not going with anybody, that I've got a relationship going with. If I'm going to have to go in the Army, let me go when I think it's convenient, rather than when the government thinks it's convenient."

So, I did not enlist--enlisting would've been three years. I went into the draft board and had my name pushed up to the top of the list. So, I went in as an enlistee, which was two years, rather than three years. So, that's when I found out [about] my IQ.

When I reported, they gave--I don't know, there must've been a thousand (all guys then)--gave us all a test. They called out about ten percent of those people to take another test and I was in that ten percent. Then, they called out ten percent of that ten percent, and then, interviewed them. They interviewed me and told me, because of my test, I qualified for Officer Candidate School, "And would you like to be an officer?"

So, my first thinking was, "Well, I think you get better food and better places to sleep. What exactly is the deal?" The deal was, you have to go through basic training as an enlisted man. Then, you first go through six months, very intensive, Officer Candidate School. Then, you first serve your two years. So, I may not have been a genius, [laughter] but two years plus six months plus two months equaled more than two years. I said, "I'm in for two years. If you want to make me an officer, that's fine, but I'm not staying a day later than two years."

So, I turned it down. In the two years I was in, I was approached at least four times, or maybe five times, to try to get me to go to Officer Candidate School. I never did. It was probably one of the best decisions in my life, because, when I got out of the Army two years later, Vietnam was starting to really bubble up and they were starting to increase the draft. They were shipping everybody that could walk and chew gum over to Vietnam. If I had been a new second

lieutenant, I would've been right in Vietnam. So, that decision, I think, ended up saving me, or at least saving me from possibly going to Vietnam.

JK: I'm guessing that the Vietnam War exploded when you were out of the Army.

SB: It was started, really, if you're familiar with the history of the Vietnamese Conflict, the Gulf of Tonkin attack was, I think, in '64. I sort of remember, like, the Summer of '64; I can't be sure of the date. I was then in my second year and due to get out like six months later. So, that's when Vietnam really started to expand.

[Editor's Note: On August 2, 1964, the USS *Maddox* (DD -731) reported being fired at by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. On August 4, 1964, it was mistakenly reported that the *Maddox* and its reinforcement, the USS *Turner Joy* (DD-951), were again attacked. Congress passed the "Tonkin Gulf Resolution," officially the "Asia Resolution," on August 7, 1964, authorizing the President to take retaliatory action against North Vietnam.]

The troop carrier ship that I came back on, after it dropped us off in Oakland, California, went back and went to Vietnam to take all the dependents out of Vietnam, because it was now a war zone. So, my timing, basically, was, I got out just as it really, really started to bubble up.

JK: Do you remember what you thought when you saw all of this happening on the news or in the newspaper, when you were out of the Army and you saw how big the Vietnam War had gotten and how you could have been sent there? What was going through your mind? Do you remember?

SB: Yes. Actually, it's a very good question, because a lot of the antiwar demonstrators started in. By that time (I'm getting ahead of myself), I was working for IBM and I was in the Wall Street area and they were demonstrating all over the place.

My first thoughts were, "What's the matter with these people? Why aren't they supporting their country? We've got to support our men in uniform." I was very more *gung ho*, but, as the war progressed--and this was the first TV war. So, we started seeing on TV, every day, every night, combat pictures, a list of those that died was published, "And we lost two hundred today, we lost five hundred today."

The attitude, my attitude and most Americans' attitude, started shifting to, like, "What are we doing here?" which history has shown, "What did we do there?" We have relationships with them now and trade with them. We had fifty thousand lives lost and so many others who were destroyed. So, I did change my opinion as it went on.

JK: When you were in the Army, which units were you a part of?

SB: Well, on my first [assignment], I took basic training in Camp Dix, New Jersey, which is still in existence, but it's a merged camp now. Then, I was shipped to Missouri, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. They assigned me to some boondoggle job.

One thing in the Army you learn, you never volunteer for anything and stay out of trouble. I tried to do that and I really didn't do much. I was there a few months and I got called and interviewed by the MP captain, that they needed MPs. "Was I interested in being an MP?" "Well, no, thank you, sir." [laughter]

JK: What is an MP?

SB: Military police, and I said no. He says, "Well, we're taking [you anyway]." So, in the Army--I'm surprised they even ask--you do as you're told. So, I was transferred to the MPs and again, when they looked at my record, they tried to talk me into Officer Candidate School, "And you'll come out as an MP officer." Again, they tried to get me into it as an officer. I got into the MPs.

I totally hated it, the only time in the Army that I really disliked being there, just wasn't my cup of tea. I had to go through months [of] training--how you use the shotgun and how do you do a whole sense of stuff that I've never used again in the rest of my life.

I was there a few months, and then, I got called in again, that orders came down for me to be shipped to Korea, but they could get me out of it because I'm now an MP and I can remain as an MP and stay in Fort Leonard Wood. I said, "Choice between being an MP here and going to Korea, I'll go to Korea." I went to Korea. So, I was there for a year.

SI: What was it like at Fort Leonard Wood? Was it a good posting or not?

SB: It was in the middle of the Ozarks. To this day, I can't stand that country music, because that's all I heard all the time. It was really in the middle of nowhere. So, we did become friends with somebody who was there for a Reserve training, only there for a few months, but he was local in Missouri, had a car. So, we went home with him a few times.

I remember actually going to his house on Thanksgiving when Kennedy was shot. We saw his funeral in this person's home, in--I think it was Columbus, Missouri. So, I was there when Kennedy was assassinated. We were all put on alert, even though I was not in a combat unit, in the middle of Missouri, but, at the time, nobody knew anything. It was just some sort of conspiracy or what, but that was a very sad day.

I remember getting off duty at the MPs and I went into my barracks and people were listening to the radio and it was church music. I said, "Boy, you're listening to church music?" "Oh, you didn't hear? The President was shot." We had to go to the dayroom to watch it on television. We didn't have TVs in the barracks in those years. We watched what was going on. It was horrendous, horrendous.

[Editor's Note: President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on Friday, November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas.]

So, I lived through a lot of different historical events and that was certainly a key event. I think, my own opinion, the country has had troubles and [been] going downhill since then.

JK: Did you have any family that you knew of that went into the military before you did?

SB: I had two uncles that served in World War II. One of them, I believe, was in the D-Day invasion.

JK: Oh, wow. That was all the family members.

SB: I think I had a cousin that also served, because I remember he had given me his helmet as a kid. Somewhere along the line, that got lost. I don't know what happened to it, but we didn't have a family tradition.

In fact, the story was, my grandfather ran away at the age of thirteen from Russia, on his own, and made his way to England, because they were drafting in the Czar's Army, all Jews at the age of thirteen, because that was their way of getting rid of the Jews, have them spend lifetimes in the Army. My story is, my grandfather, on his own, as a thirteen-year-old, got his way to England by himself, and today thirteen year olds, you've got to drive them everywhere.

JK: I know you had mentioned that when you were in the Army, you went through a lot of historical moments. What was it like for you in the Army during the 1960s, especially in the South, during this Civil Rights Era?

SB: Also a good question. When I was in Missouri, it was before the Civil Rights laws were passed. I grew up in Brooklyn. There was no lawful segregation. I mean, we did live in different neighborhoods, but, when I went to Missouri, the Army posts were integrated. Truman integrated them, but, when you went outside, there were signs, "Colored Fountains, Colored Restrooms." That was totally foreign to me.

[Editor's Note: In July 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981, ending segregation in the Armed Forces.]

There was one incident. One of the group of friends I had in the Army, he was a black, also from Brooklyn, and we befriended him. A group of us went off post to a bar (I went to bars), [laughter] and they wouldn't serve him. So, all of us left the bar and we ended up going to a black bar and we were the only whites in the bar. So, it also gave a firsthand experience with [what] blacks may feel like going to an all-white bar, but in those days. It was something totally foreign to me. I had not experienced that before.

JK: What lessons did you take away from your time in the Army?

SB: I learned that the world is made up of many different types of people. They're not all Jews from Brooklyn. That alone does not make them good or bad. It just makes them different, and that we all need to get along with one another.

Like I said, I never experienced antisemitism. I didn't walk around with Jewish stars on my arm, but I didn't keep it a secret that I was Jewish. To get off track for a minute, the one time it came

in handy is when I was in basic training in Fort Dix, was during Passover. Fort Dix was the only Army base in the country that had a kosher kitchen.

They allowed us, because it was Passover, to go home for a three-day leave. Where the rest of our troops went out on bivouac and had to march twenty-six miles with a full backpack, we went home. Then, when we came back, they were still in bivouac, but, since they couldn't get the kosher for Passover food out to bivouac every day, they trucked us back and forth. Now, that didn't make us very popular with the non-Jews. [laughter]

What they did do, which was fair, was, on Easter Sunday, the Jews all had duty. I had guard duty that day. They allowed the Christians to have their families visit, which I thought was perfect, a fair compromise, but that was the only time, really, that being Jewish had any impact in my Army [experience], but I'm sorry, I got off the question. What was the question?

SI: I forgot to ask before, was basic training difficult for you?

SB: I was actually in good shape, knowing I was going in.

DB: I'm going to get the picture.

SB: Knowing I was going to go in the Army. Because I had made up my mind I was going to have my name pushed up, I started doing exercises. I started weightlifting. So, I was actually, physically, in the best shape of my life. I was in very good shape.

The only physical problem I had was, I had weak ankles. If we'd go on a twenty-mile hike, my ankles started hurting, but I really did not have a problem in basic. Again, I stayed out of trouble and don't volunteer. [laughter] I got through it fine and moved on. Was it fun? No, basic training's not fun. It's not meant to be fun, but survivable.

SI: Particularly when you were with the MP unit at Fort Leonard Wood, what were your daily duties like?

SB: Well, I was actually given a choice. I could either become what they called "the white cap," which were the policemen, which [meant] you'd go out into the village and you'd go into the bars. I'm saying, "Wait a second, I'm this short, little guy and I'm going to go into some bar and arrest a six-foot-five, 250-pound sergeant who's drunk? What's the choice?" "You could be a stockade guard." I said, "I'll take a stockade guard. They're behind bars." [laughter]

I did; I was a stockade guard. The stockade in the local forts, these were not hardened criminals. They were drunk-and-disorderly, absent-without-leave. They weren't hardened criminals. Those were sent to federal prisons. So, it was just keep an eye on them. They were there, the maximum, like thirty days, but that was my duties.

What was really tough about the MPs, you did not have a set schedule. You were three days from, whatever it was, eight to four, three days from four to twelve, another three days from twelve to eight, then, three days off. So, your body could never get accustomed to a sleep

pattern. I don't know why they did it that way. I don't know, I guess to be fair, but it was stupid. That was part of the reason I just didn't like it.

JK: I guess it must have messed with your sleep schedule.

SB: Yes, exactly, yes. Most of my friends were not in the MPs. They were where I had been stationed before. It was a big base. It wasn't that you could turn around and walk two blocks and you're in a different part.

JK: How would you feel if one of your grandchildren said they wanted to join the Armed Forces?

SB: I would not discourage it. I would suggest that [they] try to go in as an officer, and then, decide if that's a career.

You don't have the legal obligation today, because there's no draft. I'm personally of the opinion that doing away with the draft may not have been the best idea. I don't think it's wrong for young people to have to give two years to the service of their country; doesn't necessarily mean Army, maybe volunteer at a veterans' hospital or what-have-you.

There's many different ways you can serve. I think a lot of the younger people today do not have that feeling of giving back to the country. Maybe that's part of the problem the country's having. We don't have people that have that same feeling about the country.

JK: No, I've definitely noticed patriotism isn't as big.

SB: No, definitely. I mean, I grew up in the '50s and I have vague memories of the McCarthy Era. I mean, that was a lunatic time, where if you refused to turn in who you thought was a Communist, you'd be blackballed. I mean, I never had any personal involvement in that, but, as a kid, I remember seeing it on TV.

[Editor's Note: Senator Joseph McCarthy's accusations of Communist infiltration in the US government led to a nationwide witch-hunt in the 1950s to unearth alleged Communists. Many institutions required employees or members to take oaths of loyalty.]

DB: Can I say something? We lived in Europe. In Europe, well, you didn't only have a sense, but they were very nationalistic. The French didn't always agree with the government, but very nationalistic. The United States, I think it was different. You might say it's patriotism, but I don't think it's the same sense of [nationalism], because we are more of a melting pot of people. It doesn't seem to be that most people are as nationalistic, which is what Steve is saying, than they are when you saw them in Europe, in each country.

SI: That's interesting.

SB: I saw something interesting on the Internet just the other day about nationalism. At least in this Internet article, they were saying nationalism did not really exist until the Napoleonic Era,

when the French nationals started talking about France and not just a collection of a bunch of people living someplace, that, historically, that was a turning point for nationalism.

I do believe, now that I'm thinking about it, that my generation, which basically was the last generation of the draft, many of us gave to the country. So, we felt we did have some more of a feeling of nationalism than the following generations that didn't.

JK: That makes sense.

DB: And I think, also in the nationalism, we talked about Europe, I think that's part of what happened during the Second World War and the Nazis coming into power. The families didn't leave because they felt nationalistic. That was the difference.

JK: Do you have any general advice for any young people who would be entering the Army?

SB: Well, your question before, if my grandchild wanted to go in, I would recommend going to Officer Candidate School, or, if eligible, go into West Point or Annapolis or something and come [through that way]. If you're going to make a career out of it, go to those schools, and then, decide if that's the career that you want, but I would definitely go in as an officer. Start as a general, that's a better rank. [laughter]

SI: You mentioned you went to Korea. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

SB: Actually, I enjoyed Korea. It was my first experience out of the country. Up until that time, actually, until I reported to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, I had never been on an airplane and here I was, twenty years old, but that wasn't that unusual then.

Now, I'm being shipped to Korea, with a stop in Tokyo and a stop in Okinawa and a stop in Hawaii. So, I started to get a little sense of the rest of the world, which really got me later on in my career, because I traveled all over the place. I'm sorry, what was your question?

SI: Oh, you're doing great. How did you get there? What was it like?

JK: How was it in Korea? How were Americans in general treated in Korea?

SB: Generally speaking, positive. When I was there, it was only ten years after the Korean War, so, there was still a remembrance of the Americans coming in and fighting. The country at that time was still recovering from the war. It was a Third World country. When you went out in the villages, they did not have indoor toilets. They had outhouses.

The money that we were making as Army personnel, which, compared to what most Americans were making, was petty, compared to what they [the Koreans] lived on, was an amazing amount of money. There were things you could buy at the PX [post exchange] that was on the base that the natives couldn't get, like sugar, forget it. You'd bring them five pounds of sugar, it was like gold, because they just weren't able to get that.

Now, Korea has obviously since developed into a major, first-rate economic power. I wish I had been able to get back to Korea in more modern times, just to see the change, because it was a Third World, backward country. The people, though, were friendly. Were they trying to take advantage of us, because we were, quote, "the rich Americans?" Yes, some of that went on, but you learned to be on your guard, too.

I did have a watch stolen right off my hand once. I started chasing him in the dark alleys. After a while, I says, "Why am I going in these dark alleys? I'm not so sure it's a good idea." [laughter] I stopped chasing him.

It was a very positive experience in my life. The Army, in general, was a positive experience. I would think of myself as, "I went in as a boy and came out as a man."

SI: Where were you stationed in Korea?

SB: I was in the Army supply depot, which, at the time, was between Soeul and Inchon. They finally, ten years after the war, realized that this major supply depot was only fifteen minutes from the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone]. Gee, maybe they should move it. [laughter] So, they moved it to Taegu [now Daegu], which was all the way on the southern tip of Korea.

I was actually in the advance party to set up the supply depot. I was in charge of eight GIs and about twenty Koreans. It was my first experience in taking a leadership position, which became my whole career later on, was in management and leadership. So, I learned from that, too.

It also helped to have this big bully sergeant that was with me, that had been a professional prizefighter. He told the American GIs, "You'd better listen to Blocher or I'm going to beat the hell out of you." [laughter] That helped. So, I was in Taegu for the last three, four months of my time there, then, got shipped home.

Again, as I'm getting ready, they're sending me back on a troop carrier. I was at what they call ETS?), which meant, when my ship docked, I was going to be mustered out. I'm called in for an interview, "We can get you into Officer Candidate School. You can re[enlist]." "I'm going home."

I went home and ended up going back to work for the jewelry company that I had worked for before I went in the Army, but I was not a kid anymore. They were going to let me work into becoming a salesman. I started selling in--what was it called? All of a sudden, I have a mind block--the showroom, where customers would come in. We would show them our wares and we'd sell to them. So, I started selling there.

Then, I was going to go out as a salesman. They had two other salesmen, full-time salesmen, and these men made a very good salary. They weren't salaried--they were commission salesmen. They made very, very good livings, drove these big, monster cars. I went out with one of them on a trial run and it was fine.

Then, they gave me my own territory, but my territory was from Virginia to Florida to Texas, up to Oklahoma, all the way across the country. So, geographically, I had half the Continental United States, which was much too large of a territory.

Also, I was on straight commission, no salary. So, if I didn't sell, I had to stay at a hotel, that was an expense, I had to pay for gas, that was an expense. So, I was spending money, not necessarily making money. I went on one trip and it turned out I actually made a profit, which was surprising to the bosses. They thought I'd lose money.

I realized that that's not the life I really wanted, that I would not have a family life, because there were a couple of incidents that happened when I was on the road. Again, we didn't have cellphones, we didn't have computers, we didn't have any of this stuff. You'd have to go to a payphone, put money in to make a call.

My grandfather died and I didn't even know he died, never mind being there. I didn't even know for a week later that he had passed away. Also, at the time, I was going with a young lady who had an emergency appendectomy. Again, I didn't even know that she was in the emergency room.

I realized that's not the kind of life that I'd envisioned for myself. So, when I came back off the road and the bosses said to me they wanted me to work in the showroom during in-between seasons, I assumed I would get paid. "No, you're commissioned for your territory." So, if one of my customers from Texas would come into the showroom, I would get a commission, but, if somebody from Boston came in and I sold them, the Boston salesman would get paid. So, I'm saying, "I'm working for nothing."

I finally talked him into letting me take a couple weeks off, without pay. I gave myself two weeks to find another job. I went out and I interviewed for one job. They narrowed it down from a hundred applicants to two. I was one of the two, but did not get that job.

That would've been working for a company that sold to hotels. So, they sold the furniture, they sold all that stuff; probably would've been an interesting career. I think, as you move forward, you'd go to different hotels, whatever; didn't get that job.

The Wednesday of the second week, I actually went to an employment agency. I said, "I really want something. I don't mind starting at the bottom, but I want something where there's growth opportunity." So, they said to me, "Well, what about IBM?" IBM, at the time, was *the* company in America. It was the fastest-growing company. It was expanding like crazy and had a reputation of being very hard to get into.

I went through an interview and, in those years, they didn't have a central HR department. The local manager would interview and do the hire. I was interviewed by the manager. I went through all that. He asked me to take a test. I took the test and I found out, later on, I again scored very, very well on the test. Then, he had me interview with his manager, the administration manager.

I interviewed with him and they offered me a job working as accounts receivable. It was an entry-level job. It was a non-exempt job, which meant I'd get paid overtime. I accepted the job and they said, "When can you start?" I said, "Well, I'm working at a job now. I'm not being paid, so, I don't feel an obligation to give two weeks' notice. I'll start on Monday," and I started on Monday.

Within three years, the job of the manager that interviewed me, I had his job and, in total seven years, I had the second level manager's job, in different offices, but I started my IBM career and I started really moving up very fast.

DB: How many years?

SB: I spent thirty-seven years with IBM.

JK: Before talking about IBM, I just had a few questions going back to your time in the Army. Obviously, at that time, there were no cellphones. How did you mainly communicate with your family back at home? How did it feel to be a continent away from your family with no cellphone to contact them whenever you wanted?

SB: Communicated by letter, primarily to my mother, she and I. Later on, years later, she'd say she felt that we grew much closer when I was in the Army than before. There was one girl I was communicating with. It was a friend of a friend--it was Susan's friend--that I wrote letters to. I briefly dated her a little bit when I got out of the Army.

Again, it would be weeks before you'd get letters, but it was fine. Being away didn't impact me that much. I was kept busy. I had friends and stuff.

JK: Did you have any issues readjusting to regular civilian life after getting out of the Army?

SB: Not really. I came back, I went right to work, back at the jewelry company, and started, used to travel into Manhattan by train and commute. No, I can't remember that I had any particular issues.

JK: Now, going back to IBM, how often did you have to travel?

SB: Well, it depends on where I was in my career. In the beginning of my career, like I said, I was hired at a local office as an entry-level job. I did that job for a couple years. Then, they reorganized the branch and I was promoted to manager, the first-level manager. I was still in that location.

Then, the location changed, but the job basically stayed the same. Then, I got another promotion to another management job, took on more responsibility in the same office. Then, after that, I took another promotion for one year, because I remember it was on 56th Street in Manhattan. Then, from there, I was offered my own office.

By then, I was married, which we sort of skipped a little bit. We'll have to go back, [laughter] but, by then, I was married and, at that point, had two children. I was offered a position in Minnesota. In fact, I think I was offered a position in Minnesota and Sacramento and we discussed Sacramento was much too far. I accepted the position in Minnesota. Like I said, I had two children, one of which was your baby mother.

We went to Minnesota and lived in the suburbs, in Edina, were there for two years. That was an interesting part of my career. I was a manager for most of my career--it was the only job I had where I had issues with the management or, I should say, the employees had issues with me.

Looking back, I was twenty-nine years old and I'm coming in managing an office with people who, for the most part, were older than I was, had more years in the company than I had. I'm this Jewish New Yorker that's coming in and, given the expression, "I'm charging up the hill and I look back--they all went fishing." It was a totally different work environment and a totally different work ethic.

I used to have one-on-one interviews with all my employees and try to spur them, "Where do you want to be? What's your aspirations?" "Well, the company's not going to give me an opportunity," blah, blah, blah. "Well, are you willing to move?" "Oh, no, I ain't going to move." I said, "Well, headquarters is not going to move to Minnesota. You want a career, you've got to be able to move." They didn't, apparently, like that blunt talk.

I found out somebody had submitted (the only time in my management career) a "speak-up," which was an internal complaint about your management. They sent somebody from corporate headquarters to interview [everyone]. I felt like I was really under-the-gun.

They interviewed every one of my employees, they interviewed my management, and then, they came to me and said I have done absolutely nothing wrong. "As a manager, you've done exactly what you're supposed to be doing. They don't like you." [laughter]

JK: That was the only reason they complained about you.

SB: Yes. Basically, I was a New Yorker, and whether [that] I was Jewish had anything to do with it, I don't know, but it wasn't anything that I did. So, then, the interviewer says to me, "Your management had plans to promote you out within six months. We're promoting you out right now." I literally left the next day. Then, I was offered a job.

I did say I wanted to come back East. That's where my family was, in the New York Metropolitan area. You may remember this, Donna, that I was offered two jobs--and these were promotions, both of them--one was managing the largest office in New York City and one was offering the largest office in the company, which was in Cranford, New Jersey.

The office in New York, the manager had gotten promoted out. They had the best opinion survey in the country. They passed an audit. They were the number-one-ranked office. The office in New Jersey, the manager had been taken out of his job. Four of the five managers that

reported to him were taken out of their jobs. It had a terrible opinion survey, had failed the corporate audit. Guess which job I took?--New Jersey.

SI: New Jersey.

SB: My feeling was, New York, the best I can do with the best is keep it that way. The worst, I've got to do better than the worst. I came in--I would say that job, of all my jobs, was the most challenging, but the most rewarding and most fun. I totally redid the whole office, hired new people, restructured, reorganized, got everything totally changed.

I was promoted out within two years. So, I was moving on up. When I got promoted out, at that point, I basically was at the top end of what used to be the field organization, the branches and all that. There were no levels higher than mine, other than a regional manager. I totally changed careers and took a job, staff, out of management, out of the field, into a headquarters, International Division.

I started and that, though, took another move, because, here, we had moved to Minnesota, moved from Minnesota back to take the Jersey job, lived in Scotch Plains. Now, the divisions in the headquarters were all in Westchester County, New York, which was too far to commute from where we lived in New Jersey. So, I'd have to move again, and I ended up taking a job. We moved to Pomona.

This was a totally different job. It was a staff job. I was in supply/demand management. I was in a division that was selling computers to IBM's top twenty non-US countries, and they focused only on those twenty countries. So, I now came into staff, rather than management. I'm now into international, rather than domestic. So, I had to learn some stuff, but I had an opportunity to travel.

I was going to go out on a trip to Europe, my first time to Europe, with two colleagues. The one that was organizing the trip came in to me and said, "We're going to go to the four majors, which were France, Germany, England, Italy, and we're going to do two minors, which will be Belgium and the Netherlands. We're going for two weeks. Where do you want to spend the weekend? I'm going to plan the whole trip around where you want to spend the weekend."

I said, "I want to spend the weekend in Paris." So, we planned the whole trip around me spending the weekend in Paris. So, I go on this trip and I remember going to Paris. We did spend the weekend. My two colleagues had been there a dozen times. They weren't that interested. I went out and just explored the entire city.

I remember calling Donna; Donna, I don't know if you remember this. I said to her, "You would love Paris. I don't know how or when, but I've got to get an assignment in Paris." [laughter] I ended up [that I] made some other trips. I was in that division, I'm not even sure how long, not that long, maybe a year-and-a-half.

I got a promotion again, this time into a management job, managing a similar type of organization, but for a different division. It was also foreign. It was the Americas/Far East

Division. So, now, I'm the manager of the supply/demand department. I'm traveling to South America, I'm traveling to the Far East, I'm going to Japan, I'm going to Hong Kong, I'm going to Brazil and Argentina and Mexico. I'm traveling all over the place.

At this point, I started building up miles--I could start taking Donna. So, Donna started coming with me on some of these trips. Our kids, by then, were older. I think we left them with her mother.

JK: Before we go into you moving to Paris and that part of your life, I guess we can go back--how did you and your wife meet?

SB: Both of us came off of a broken engagement. I don't know if you knew that. We were both engaged to someone else. [For] both, the engagement was broken. My aunt, my mother's sister, used to live in the same apartment house as Grammie (for the interview, my wife) and had given me her number.

She once before had given me her number, but she was four years younger than me. At the time, I thought she was too young, but, now, she gave me the number. Now, after my broken engagement, I dated a few other girls, nothing serious, but I went out a few times with some different girls--they weren't girls; by now, they were women--but nothing serious.

My aunt gave me the number and I called. I hesitated, because she was in the Bronx and I was in Brooklyn and it was a schlep. She's probably a Yankee fan, [laughter] but I called her. Well, we ended up spending, I think, two hours on the phone, a long time on the phone. You don't remember. [laughter] She's thinking of somebody else, probably.

We made a date and I went out to the Bronx. She lived with her parents and sisters in an apartment in the Bronx. I, as always, was early. So, I sat in my car for about half an hour and, finally, went upstairs. One of my wife's younger sisters answered the door. To this day, I'm not sure whether it was Aunt Lolly or Aunt Randy, but I opened the door and there's this sixteen, seventeen-year-old.

"Oh, my god, it's a baby," because, now, I'm twenty-three or whatever it was. I was twenty-three, but it turned out it was her younger sister. So, then, I went inside and I met her father and mother. They sat me down and interviewed me. [laughter] My date was late. Gee, I don't know where that came from, but she was late, getting ready, and, finally, came out. We went out and we saw the movie *Dr. Zhivago*. We went out for a light bite.

DB: Horn & Hardart.

SB: Whatever it was. I don't remember whether it was that night or after the second date, but she was invited to a friend's wedding and asked if I wanted to go with her as her escort. I said yes. We started dating. At first, it was more Friday nights; no, I think it was Saturdays, Saturday nights.

I was playing poker on Friday nights and I kept losing. I said, "You know what? It's cheaper to go on a date than to lose at poker." So, I started asking her out on Friday night. So, we basically started constant dating only for a few months. Did you start borrowing my car before we were engaged or after we were engaged?

DB: You didn't want to drive back and forth.

SB: Well, she was still going to college. She was a senior in college and I was working. I had a car, she didn't, but I was living in Brooklyn. My car sat in the street. I didn't take it to work. I took the subway to work. So, I lent her my car.

Then, we started dating and we were engaged for a little over a year. We were married a year later, in June of 1968. We ended up, our first apartment was a very nice apartment in Riverdale in the Bronx, nice apartment overlooking Spuyten Duyvil, Hudson River, that area. It was a very nice area.

JK: I know you mentioned you had two kids. Who are they and when were they born?

SB: Our son, Jerrold Scott Blocher, was born January 1972. Back up a little bit, that we had this lovely apartment, but it was a two-story walkup. Well, once we knew we were expecting a child, we realized that that's not going to work. So, we started looking for a place, a house, and we ended up buying a house in Milltown, New Jersey, right near your school. It was a three-bedroom ranch. Also, the builder's [company] was still building the community.

We moved in there a month before our first child was born. Her belly was like up to here. We moved in in December of 1971. Our son, Jerry, was born in January 1972. In the meantime, I was working in Manhattan, used to commute different ways. I took the bus. We had carpools, all different ways that I was trying to commute into Manhattan. It was a bit of a schlep to get in, but I commuted into Manhattan and in some of those jobs that I mentioned earlier.

Then, our second child, Lisa Fara, was born in June 1974. She grew up to have these wonderful children, but that's a different part of the story.

JK: That's good.

SB: And Lisa was a year old, right after her first birthday, when I got that promotion to Minnesota. So, we moved out to Minnesota. Jerry was three and Lisa was one when we moved out there and we moved a few other times.

JK: What was your favorite place to visit with your family? How often, when you had your kids, did you move around?

SB: I think the favorite place is, when the kids were a little bit older, we used to rent this place on the St. Lawrence Seaway. It was right on the water. We had a little boat with the rental, a little dock. We were a short drive from Canada and we did that a few years. We went up with

the kids. I very much enjoyed that and enjoyed the time with the kids and enjoyed the boating and the fishing and the swimming.

The first time we took them to Canada, it was your mother--we drove into Canada and we're driving, driving, driving. She says, "When are we going to get to Canada?" I said, "We've been in Canada for the last half-hour." "It looks the same as the United States." [laughter] So, that was their first international [experience], but, when the time came when we were considering going to France--oh, I sort of skipped that.

To go back to the job where I had that management job in the Asia/Pacific [region], I was told by my management [that] I was their top-rated manager and they were very pleased with me, blah, blah, blah. There was an opportunity for an assignment in Hong Kong. I said, after talking to my wife, [I had] decided I was interested in pursuing the assignment in Hong Kong. My management told me they would support me.

Fast-forward, they came back later and told me that they had taken somebody else for the job. All right, disappointment in life, you don't always get what you want. I went out to Hong Kong on a business trip. The manager sees me, who I had known, and says how sorry he was that I wasn't available to take the job, because he really wanted me.

I was livid. They lied to me. My management told him they didn't want to lose me. So, they told him I was not available. They told me that somebody else took the job; they lied to me. I was furious.

JK: I'd be furious.

SB: So, furious that I left the job, which, career-wise, turned out was not the best move. That's a whole other story, that the people that replaced me went on to director and a whole bunch of stuff, but I was just so [angry], I said, "How can I work for people that I can't even trust?" Well, if they had said to me, "Steve, I know you want it, but we can't let you go," all right, I'll be disappointed, but that's life--but to lie to me was too much.

So, I ended up leaving. I found another job. I was still in IBM, but it was a nothing job. It wasn't management. I don't even know what I was doing. My former manager, one of my former managers, not from that group, but a different group, was on a business trip to Paris and talking to the manager there, who was an American, who I knew, and said that he was looking for an American assignee--did my former manager know of anybody?

He says, "I bet Steve Blocher would be interested." He said, "Oh, I'll take Steve Blocher." He came back and said, "Am I interested?" and I said, "Yes." So, then, I went home, obviously spoke to my wife. I think she had her bags packed before we left the room, but we both said we were very excited.

Then, we had to tell our kids. Well, they were like, "Paris, Paris, Paris," but it wasn't definite. So, we said, "You can't tell your friends," which go tell a ten-year-old, eleven year old, "You can't tell your friends." [laughter] Then, Grammie would go around, so [that] we'd start learning

the language, had little stick-ums with French names, "door," "window," whatever, and stuck them all over the house in French, so that we'd start learning French. Then, the assignment came through and we moved to France.

We sold our house, which is a whole other story. We had an unbelievable mortgage on that house. I said I couldn't wait to get out of it, because it was like ten-percent mortgage rates. It was horrible. I was getting killed from it. So, I got rid of it, sold the house. Then, we went to France. We rented a phenomenal apartment, a duplex in the suburbs, in an old town that the painters used to like to use.

DB: Impressionist painters.

SB: The Impressionist painters used to use our town and the next town, Bojouval, for painting. They were very picturesque. It was just a short train ride to where the IBM office was. We had a phenomenal apartment. So, we moved to Paris and we all just fell in love with it.

Now, I'm in a job, with all the international travel I was doing [before], with that job, I didn't travel at all, but, boy, we took vacations. [laughter] We just traveled and we made the best of it. I don't think we ever spent a weekend not doing something.

JK: How different was it living in France from living in America?

SB: Totally different, obviously, the language, the culture. Grammie used to love to go out shopping for food and vegetables. They had the outdoor markets and you would go around and pick what you want. That was wonderful. The food and wine in Paris was just out of this world. It was just phenomenal.

Interestingly, I worked in the European headquarters, and so, they had a lot of different nationalities working at IBM, Italians and French and Spanish and Americans. You could see the differences in their work habits. Americans, generally, we came in early. We would normally either work through lunch or just eat in the cafeteria, but we'd try to get out of there around six o'clock.

The Spanish would come in and take literally a three-and-a-half-hour break in the middle of the day. They would start around ten and take three hours. The Italians were similar. The Germans were more like the Americans. They just constantly worked. The French were somewhere in-between. They'd go out--they'd start later than the Americans--they'd have a whole big meal for lunch.

Not working there, but I also worked with Japanese at different jobs. The Japanese would work to eight, nine o'clock at night, but go out and have major dinners and beer like this [showing the size of the beer mugs]. I don't know where they put it, [laughter] but they would have these huge beers. That's a whole other story. We took trips to Japan. Donna came with me to Japan, she came with me to Hong Kong, all over the place, but we loved working there and loved traveling.

We took one trip in particular, took a month off. In all my working career, never took [that much vacation]--no American takes a month off; take a month off in the US, you come back, you don't have a job. I took a month off, which was the norm in Europe. I had my own car.

We drove from Paris over to Germany, went through, and this was [with] the two kids, through Germany, down to the Black Forest of Germany, across into the Italian Alps, across into Switzerland, the Swiss Alps into Switzerland, then, spent some time at Switzerland, and then, across into the Italian Alps into northern Italy. We did Siena and Florence, and what was that other--oh, Venice, how can I forget Venice?

Then, we went down to spend a week in the Amalfi Coast, which was phenomenal. If you ever get to Italy, go to Amalfi, love it, beautiful. We went to Pompeii and Vesuvius and all that whole area, then, up to Rome, and then, up through Tuscany and back into France, spent some time in the French Riviera and back to Paris. How about that for a vacation?

DB: I think the answer to your question was, how different, it wasn't only the work ethic, it was the time. Because [going on] vacation, also, as an American in the European countries, there were perks. So, they would help subsidize some of the trips.

So, if we wanted to hop for a weekend--well, it was a week--in Switzerland, it really didn't cost a lot of money. So, that was one thing. The second thing is the time. I wasn't working, but I had time to volunteer at the school. I had time to volunteer at the American Women's Group. I had time to...

SB: Shop.

DB: Well, yes, I shopped, but I think that's a difference. Their vacations are a month long. The two weeks is not what they take. In August, most people are gone.

SB: The difference.

DB: It's that culture that allows us to have the time that we never experienced in the US, because it didn't work that way. So, I think that's what he's sharing with you.

SB: At the time, in IBM, you were allowed to bank unused vacation. I had sixty days in the bank of vacation that I had not used. That was not uncommon with the Americans. The French thought we were nuts. "What do you mean you don't take your vacation?" [laughter]

We got into the European ways. We'd go to lunch and the topics of conversation were, "Where have you gone for vacation? Where are you going on vacation? What do you recommend?" and it became a lot of word of mouth. Through the American Women's Group, also, we found places to stay that weren't the typical American hotels, but these were small, little places.

We stayed in a twelfth-century monastery. We stayed in a thirteenth-century hotel. We stayed in a farm that was haunted. I mean, we really managed to stay in some out of the way [places].

We didn't want to stay in the big American, Hilton hotels. So, we got the local flavor and we just loved the traveling. It was just phenomenal.

At the time, though, IBM started going through some difficult financial problems. That was the beginning of the PCs and everything else. IBM really missed the boat on a lot of that stuff. Instead of being the top-rated company in America, it started going through a very major downturn. They laid off 150,000 people in three years. It was terrible.

In the meantime, when you went on an assignment, usually, when you came back, you got a promotion to the next level. Now, those that were coming off assignment were having difficulty finding jobs. So, now, the whole environment has changed. I was actually offered a job in northern New Jersey, but I was also offered to extend a year in Paris.

We discussed it. We had said, if we did stay, we were going to move into the city, rather than the suburbs, but I was reluctant not to take the job that I was offered, because we just didn't know. In another year, I may not have a job. So, we took that job.

DB: That was a shame. That made a big difference

SB: Yes, and we came back and we bought the house in Ramsey, which we loved that house, loved the community. I was working in North Jersey, which actually was the smallest commute that I ever had. It was like twenty minutes, fifteen, twenty minutes, never had a commute like that.

JK: I just have a quick question before you go on talking about your life after France. When you were in France, I know, at that time, there was an international group that was threatening Americans overseas.

SB: Yes.

JK: What was it like living in France then? How different was it being an American at a time when Americans were being threatened overseas?

DB: That's a good question.

SB: It was a very good question. It was also different being an American and different being Jewish. At the time--I'll first cover the Jewish [aspect]--we would go to a synagogue in Versailles. On the outside of the synagogue were armed guards with bulletproof vests and Uzis and flak jackets and helmets guarding you as you went into the synagogue. I remember saying to my wife, "Thank God, in America, we'll never have that." We now have that, which is another thing.

DB: A whole story.

SB: So, being Jewish in France was different. When you went to other countries and we'd go to a Jewish synagogue, same thing, they wouldn't just let you in. You had to be frisked or you had to have an appointment. I mean, they weren't open.

Being American in general, the French have a reputation for not liking Americans. Living in France, what I found is the French didn't like anybody. They didn't like the Germans, they didn't like the British, they didn't like the Americans. Many of them had a feeling that their culture and wine and food and everything was far superior. In a lot of cases, they were right. I mean, the culture was phenomenal, but some of them, particularly the Parisians, had that attitude.

During what you're describing, it was during the Reagan Administration and America bombed Libya and ended up killing the dictator, Gaddafi, his child, or I think it was his son. He vowed that he was going to strike at America and he was going to strike in the European [area], Americans in Europe. So, we were all put on alert. Our children went to the American School of Paris.

[Editor's Note: On April 15, 1986, US Armed Forces conducted an air strike against targets in Libya.]

[RECORDING PAUSED]

SB: So, we're talking about when Gaddafi [was] bombed [in] Libya and he threatened American [interests]. Our children went to the American School of Paris. They used to be bused. The bus had an American flag on it, an American school. They had to take the sign off. The Americans Women's Group had to take their sign off. The American church, I think, took the sign off.

We were told, "Do not read *The International Herald Tribune* on the metro or in public." Friends of ours who were Canadian didn't want to be mistaken for American, so, they started wearing Canadian flags on their lapel.

DB: That was upsetting.

SB: And so, there was a panic. In the meantime...

DB: What about the American School? No, you didn't talk about the gate.

SB: They put up a gate around the American School of Paris.

DB: Barbed-wire gate.

SB: In the meantime, we had signed up for a vacation in Kenya. We were going to go on a photographic safari. This was through the IBM group that they subsidized. So, compared to what it would've cost leaving from the States, it was a lot cheaper, but still not cheap. We were on the waiting list. We were number one on the waiting list. We were told, almost definitely, we're going to get it.

Well, when all this started happening, we said--oh, we had arranged for the kids' gym teacher, who was a single man, to stay at our place and watch the kids. We would've been gone for two weeks. So, we had all that arranged.

So, when all this happened, we said, "We can't be that far away. If, God forbid, there was an incident, we probably wouldn't even know about it for a day or two. By the time we'd make the arrangements to come home, days would've passed. We just can't be that far away." So, we took our name off the list.

We ended up, since we had the time and I was planning on taking a vacation, we had the babysitter, we drove through the south of France, just the two of us. If, God forbid, there was an incident, we would've been able to be back in Paris in one day's drive. So, we didn't feel it was out of touch, but the whole attitude then was, it was frightening.

In fact, when we were even talking about flying, if we were going to go to Kenya, their original flight was to fly over Libya. There was concern they'd shoot the plane down. So, it was a different environment than certainly we were used to in the States.

SI: Is it the company telling you all these things, is it the Embassy or a combination?

SB: It was a combination. Definitely, we got alerts from the Embassy and IBM. They had suggested, "Don't read the paper, don't obviously be an American." Now, thankfully, there were no incidents. So, we were thankful for that.

DB: But, the school took their own [precautions].

SB: The school? Oh, yes.

DB: The school. I mean, when you put up a gate--we had a railroad that went right by the school. There was a yard. So, that was a concern, "What if somebody got off or jumped off a train and came back?" but they put a gate up in front. Anybody could get into the property before then. That was a big thing, the buses. So, there were no armed guards inside, though? no, nothing like that.

SB: No. Again, we had them at the synagogue. We had armed guards. So, I don't know if that answered your question.

SI: How long was that period?

SB: A couple months, maybe? I don't remember exactly.

DB: Until something happened with Libya.

SB: Well, they eventually took Gaddafi out.

DB: Eventually. I don't think Gaddafi was out when they bombed.

SB: No.

DB: But, I think they eventually took him out. That waned; everything waned. It was there, but the gates were still there. They still didn't put the signs back on. Then, we were leaving, I think, after that. I think that was towards the end of our stay in France.

SI: In all your trips in Europe, did you ever go behind the Iron Curtain?

SB: Yes.

SI: Okay.

SB: I did, with my daughter. I was scheduled to go with Donna. Something happened that you had to stay with Jerry; I don't remember what it was.

DB: There was a problem.

SB: So, Donna stayed with our son and I took our daughter, Lisa. It's the only time, actually, I took a trip just with my daughter, which was quite an experience. I remember, of course, at the time, the Berlin Wall was still up and we crossed from West Berlin into East Berlin. It was like going to a different world.

I remember they were bringing each one of us individually into a room to be interviewed by the border guards. I was able to see in. They wouldn't let me in for the interview my daughter, who was eleven, twelve years old. I mean, she was a kid. I could see she was, like, terrified. This little twelve-year-old was on the spot, but it was an amazing trip. We had a very, very good time. We recounted that when Jack's brother went recently to Germany.

JK: Didn't you say that you had secretly taken pictures?

SB: Yes. Your mother was ready to kill me. We took the train from West Berlin to East Berlin across no-man's-land, which was all barbed-wire and landmines and the whole bit. You weren't supposed to take pictures. I had my camera here and I'm [clicking it]. [laughter]

DB: He's done a few things in Europe that could have gotten him killed.

SB: So, yes, I took pictures. Your mother was mortified.

JK: How was it living in both America and Europe when the Cold War was happening?

SB: When I was younger in the Cold War, I vaguely remember the McCarthy era. I remember, as a child, having atomic bomb drills, that, "In case of atomic attack, duck under your desk." That's going to do a lot of good, when I look back at some of that stuff. I remember seeing a sign on the George Washington Bridge, "In case of atomic attack, drive off bridge." [laughter]

JK: Wow.

SB: If there's an atomic attack, there ain't going to be a bridge. I mean, you look back at some of it--so, grew up with that. As I said before, that I lived through a lot of historical events, the Cuban Missile Crisis was probably the most frightening. I don't know how much you know about it, but we were this close to atomic war. We watched it on television, live. President Kennedy came on TV and they were talking about it.

[Editor's Note: In October 1962, the United States demanded that the Soviet Union remove its nuclear missiles from Cuba. The United States placed a naval blockade around the island nation, creating a tense standoff between the superpowers that many feared would lead to nuclear war. The crisis was averted when the Soviet Union agreed to remove their nuclear missiles from Cuba in exchange for the United States removing its nuclear missiles from Turkey.]

I've since seen stories about it and TV programs and everything else, but we were this close to an atomic war. The Russians backed down and thank God, but that obviously was frightening. During, primarily, I think it was the '50s, people were talking about building bomb shelters. We used to have drills. I mean, so, the threat of nuclear war was with us.

JK: What would you say was the most significant era that you lived through?

SB: As far as history or as far as my life?

JK: Just like historical moments.

SB: Well, historically, I'd have to say the '60s, Kennedy's assassination. When was the Cuban Missile Crisis?

SI: '62.

SB: '62, that was in the '60s, Kennedy's, I said, assassination, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Martin Luther King's assassination, Bobby Kennedy's assassination, the Civil Rights era, the riots from Martin Luther King's assassination. There were tanks in the streets of Newark, tanks. So, the '60s--and Vietnam, of course--all this happened in the '60s. The '60s were very, very turbulent.

Looking for my own personal history, most of my major changes in my life also took place in the '60s. I got started with IBM. I met my wife, I got married. I bought my first house. All this was in that same decade. So, it paralleled, to some degree--and I went in the Army. All of that was in the '60s. So, I would say the '60s, definitely, were turbulent and, personally, had personal growth.

I was talking to somebody my age who said, "Oh, the good, old days--we never had all these problems." I says, "Did you forget about Kennedy's assassination? Did you forget about Martin Luther King? Did you forget about the Cuban Missile Crisis? Did you forget about the Cold War? It wasn't exactly the life of Riley," as they used to say. There were a lot of things going on

and we managed to get through them. So, that's some encouragement that we will get through the turbulence today, hopefully.

SI: You seemed to go right up the ladder at IBM. Were you ever in a management training program or were you just kind of learning on your own?

SB: Actually, my first few management jobs, no, they tagged me as somebody when I was doing administration management as high potential. They sent me for a month to North Carolina College to take management courses. So, that was outside of IBM. IBM paid for it. Within IBM, they had their own management training.

SI: Okay.

SB: I went through the basic management, experienced management, second-level management. So, I went through internal management courses, but most of my career was in management. I always liked managing--so easy to tell somebody to do it than do it yourself. [laughter]

JK: You had said the 1960s was the most significant decade that you lived through, but what do you think would be your personal favorite decade to have lived through?

SB: You mean my life?

JK: Yes, your life.

SB: That's a hard one. Well, actually, in the '60s, it was the early '70s also, and that's when my children were born, '72 and '74--weren't in the '60s, but it was in my twenties, which wasn't exactly parallel to the '60s decade. So, I'd say my twenties and early thirties were the most significant.

JK: I guess just in your life in general, what kind of significant hardships did you go through just in general, the biggest hardships that you can remember?

SB: Well, that's unfortunately an easy one. As you know, we lost our son, Jerry. He passed away at the age of thirty, two days after our daughter's wedding. Nothing comes close. That was unexpected. You don't recover from that.

Losing a child--you expect at some point to lose your parents, you expect at some point to lose your grandparents--you don't expect to lose your child. That was very difficult. It's still difficult and it's been over twenty years, but we were able to have two wonderful namesakes of him.

JK: Myself included.

SB: Yes, Jack is named after our son.

JK: How were you guys able to, I guess, get through that period?

SB: Well, after the week of *shiva*, I went back to work, at this point, was at the end, tail end, of my IBM career. IBM had been laying a lot of people off. It wasn't the same company. I was working for a miserable manager and I hated the job.

I went back after a week and I knew I wasn't myself. I went and said to my manager, "I think I need some more time off." She gave me a hard time. That's when I realized, "This company is not the company I spent thirty-seven years working for." It had changed.

I ended up going and I got a medical leave. I was out, on full pay, for months, but I took medication, I went to a psychiatrist. I had to take medication and I came through it and weaned off the medication and got back to a normal life, but I realized I didn't want to go back to IBM. I retired. So, that's when I left IBM.

Grammie never stopped working. She did go on medication. She's not here, but I think she had difficulty and still does. People would say to us, "Oh, I know how you feel." You don't know how you feel. You can't put yourself in somebody's shoes like that. Losing a child, you can't think of it; you don't think of it. You never expect to lose a child.

JK: After IBM, what jobs did you end up having?

SB: Well, interesting, because I had a whole other career. I decided to retire from IBM and we were living in northern New Jersey, Bergen County. If you're familiar with Bergen County, it is very expensive. Taxes are, like, double what they are down here in southern New Jersey. I said, "I cannot live on retirement in Bergen County." We loved the place we lived in.

So, we decided--my brother was moving down here, his daughter lived in Cherry Hill. Donna's sister lived in Philadelphia. So, we ended up getting this house. Our daughter, who was now married, felt we shouldn't move that far away. We said, "It's only two hours from you. It's not that big a deal." Well, when I was sixty, it wasn't a big deal. I'm now in my eighties--it's a bigger deal [laughter]--but we bought this house.

In the meantime, I was sixty; I knew I wasn't ready to totally retire. So, I wanted to get a job. It's hard to find something when you're sixty. My niece told me about an opening in the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation. Our son died from complications of diabetes. He was a diabetic from the age of six. So, I knew, unfortunately, about the disease. I knew how difficult it was to live with it. I knew, as a parent, how to cope with it. I felt almost like this was God's path for me.

I applied for the job. It was like twenty-five percent of what I was making at IBM. I mean, the salary was nowhere comparable to what I was making at IBM, but I had my pension and I had benefits from IBM. So, I was able to take the job. I took over the branch of JDRF--it was in Cherry Hill, near our home.

Again, I seemed to come into disasters. The branch was a disaster. I ended up taking it over and started managing. Again, I hired other people. I started restructuring, started rebuilding. I ended up quadrupling their revenue in six years.

I did run into a problem, because, now, I went from a corporate environment, where everything was structured and you reported to somebody and somebody reported to you and you gave orders, they followed them, [to], now, I'm working with a nonprofit and a very small staff, but you're counting on volunteers. You're counting on a board of directors.

Well, being the type of manager I was, I make decisions and follow through. In corporate management, that's great. You can be successful; in a nonprofit, not so helpful. The board, even though I quadrupled the revenue, resented the fact that I wasn't coming through the board. I was just managing it and doing it successfully. My national office was thrilled, because we were building the revenue and getting bigger and bigger and bigger, but the board didn't like the fact that I was bypassing them.

So, I ended up with problems with the board. Finally, they were trying to push me out and the national office offered me a job. I was working from home for a few years as the national manager of budgets and forecasting. Then, I left. By then, I was seventy years old and I left JDRC and I was retired.

I said, "You know what? This retirement thing isn't for me." I went and got a job; I was a senior director of the Arthritis Foundation in Philadelphia. Again, this was a disaster office. I really felt I could have revamped it, but nonprofits are very quick to lay people off and close offices and don't ever work for [them]. Nonprofits can be a real challenge. They closed the office.

So, all of a sudden, now, I'm out of work and I'm now seventy, seventy-one. I tried to find another job--forget it, nobody's going to hire [me]. I interviewed in jobs that I could have done with one finger, but I was seventy-one years old. Nobody was going to hire me.

So, I said, "I'm really not ready to retire." I went for my insurance license and I got my license. I started working for insurance companies and I hated it. It was all cold calls. Maybe if you're twenty-two, twenty-three years old, you can build up clientele over ten years. This is not for me. So, I dropped that.

Then, we started getting more involved in our local synagogue. Donna became the chairperson of the fundraising committee. I was asked to be on the board. So, I joined the board of the synagogue. The board president felt the synagogue was growing and should have an executive director. Since I had been an executive director in a nonprofit, she asked if I would write the position description and I did.

I'm going through it and I said, "You know what? I want that job." [laughter] I applied for it. It was a part-time job and talk about pay, I mean, it was a decimal point compared to what I made in IBM, but I took the job. It's part-time and I've been here now ten years.

So, in a sense, I've had three careers, at IBM, I've had JDRC and, if you call this a career, I've been here ten years. I'm eighty-two years old and I still go to work every day. That work keeps me going, gives my mind something to do.

It lets me use the experiences and skills that I built up over years. I manage the office and I manage the grants. I've got a half a million dollars' worth of grants I wrote. I have two people reporting to me. It's part-time. I basically keep my own hours, but I don't want to stop until I stop. It keeps me [going], gives me something to do when I get up in the morning.

JK: That actually kind of leads to my next question. I know you said that when you were younger, when you were growing up, you weren't religious at all, but, obviously, over the years, you got more religious. So, what caused you to become more religious and how do you think Judaism itself compares to today?

SB: I'm not sure I personally have become more religious. I've become--let's put it this way, my wife, Grammie, is more traditional. She was kosher; we turned kosher. She follows more than I do, more traditional, more into the holidays than I am. I've developed more of the--what's the word I'm looking for?

JK: Cultural.

SB: More of the cultural--and a relationship to the synagogue itself, because I'm the executive director, so, I feel some ownership of the synagogue--but cultural and historical, that the Jews have this history going back thousands and thousands of years and we're still here.

When you look at the history of the Jewish people, they have been constantly discriminated against, attacked, and, yet, they're still here. They are less than two percent of the population of this country, less than 0.1 percent of the population of the world, and twenty percent of the Nobel Prize winners are Jewish. That's something.

It was Mark Twain, I think, that said that--I forgot his exact quote, but he was talking about the Jewish people--again, how the Greeks tried to kill them, the Egyptians tried to kill them, the Romans tried to kill them, the Byzantines tried to kill them--they're still here. The nations that tried to conquer them have gone to "the dustbin of history," and, yet, the Jews still have an identity.

Is that "the chosen people?" If you look at what the Bible says, according to the Bible, what the Jews have been chosen for isn't success, isn't fancy cars--it's to bring the word of God to the world. In that case, mostly through Christianity and Islam, number-wise, rather than Jews, that word has gone out.

Is that God's will? Again, those of more faith than me probably would say yes, which is why a lot of the Evangelist Christians are very supportive of Israel, because they believe that that's God's will, is to have an entity of Israel.

So, I will say, politically, and I've had this conversation with others, I could be supportive and proud of the State of Israel without necessarily agreeing with everything that the government does, the same as I can do for this country. I don't agree with everything our country does, no matter who's in power, but that doesn't mean I'm not a supporter of America.

JK: Going away from Israel to your own life, I know you said that you didn't necessarily become more religious, but how much did Judaism grow in your life as you got older? Even if you didn't become more religious, how much did it become more a part of your life?

SB: Again, most of it was influenced from my wife, that she came from a more traditional background than I did. My affinity with the synagogue has grown since I'm working there. As in the last few years, since antisemitism has been so prevalent, that makes me more conscious of being Jewish.

I also look at my grandchildren, the fact that my grandchildren are Jewish, that at least that generation is going to continue. Hopefully, they have children, they marry, they have children. I'm hopeful that they will have Jewish children and carry on, because, when you look back, of the traditions, they go back thousands of years.

One thing I didn't mention about my Judaism, and I have been more conscious of this, I am a *kohanim* and a *kohanim* is from the priesthood. According to Jewish tradition, I'm a direct ancestor of Aaron, Moses' brother. There's been a lot of DNA testing of Jews, of *kohanim*. *Kohanim* have a very unique DNA, different than the rest of Judaism. They do feel that they are descendant from people from about 3,500 years ago, which is the time of Aaron. They, of course, can't prove Aaron's existence, but DNA seems to be in that direction.

The fact that my ancestors were the rulers and the priests, I sometimes joke with the rabbi that we have too many holidays around the fall, we ought to move some of them to December or move them into the summer. We have no holidays in the summer. I said, "This was my ancestors that wrote this stuff. Why can't we just change it?" [laughter] doesn't work that way.

DB: I think, even your question, which I think is a great question, is that when we moved to Minnesota...

SB: My identity came out more.

DB: It came out more, not only working and where he was, but our oldest went to the JCC nursery school. So, by virtue of that, the Jewish community center started an involvement again in Judaism in a different way.

Then, Jack's mom wanted to go and they told her she was too young. [The director] said, if she would potty train, she could come, being only two. She went home and she said, "Okay, I'll potty train." She potty trained and she ended up in the same school, right away. So, we had two children close in age and young that started getting involved in Judaism.

SB: We started meeting other Jews.

DB: And then, we started meeting other families

SB: Other Jews from the community.

DB: While we lived there. Then, that continued. When we moved back, we looked to join a synagogue, and then, the growth of the synagogue.

SB: Well, as we had children also, our children, we wanted our children to have involvement, but Donna brings up a point. When we moved to Minnesota, it was the first time, really, I felt like a minority. I grew up in Brooklyn. We never felt like a minority. Even when I was in the Army, I was just in the Army, but, here in Minnesota, they have a very small Jewish community.

We did sort of get together more. I did feel like a minority. In my office, even though I was a manager, I was the only Jew in the entire office. When I worked in downtown Manhattan, there were plenty of Jews in the office. So, it was a time I became a minority or felt like a minority that I started, I think, feeling more my Jewish identity at that time.

JK: From what I remember, you had said that you turned your household to keeping kosher after my uncle was diagnosed with diabetes. Is that right?

SB: Yes, yes. If I'm speaking to you, it's Grammie, if I'm speaking to this, it's my wife, Donna.

DB: You can just say Donna. [laughter]

SB: After our son was diagnosed, Donna started going to synagogue and went for *bat mitzvah* lessons, because, in those years when she grew up, [most did not have a] *bat mitzvah* and decided she wanted to be *bat mitzvah*. [She] came home one day and said she wanted to turn kosher. Up until this point, our household was not kosher. We had cheeseburgers and we had shrimp and we had scallops and lobster, no ham, but other stuff. I agreed.

So, we had to call a rabbi in, they had to do whatever they had to do. We had to throw out some dishes and we changed over to kosher. To this day, Donna is still kosher outside. The household is kosher; she's still kosher outside. We lived in France and Europe for three years, ate in phenomenal restaurants--all she ate was fish. I didn't; I ate whatever they would put on the plate.

DB: But, the reason for wanting to turn kosher was because, since Jerry was a diabetic, we had to change habits around food. While we had to change habits, I just was, as he said, getting closer to Judaism. I think it's a way of coping when your child has a problem and you want support and need support. For some reason, that's where it was for me.

As he said, then, it went into things, but it started because [of] the need to watch his diet and change, or to start making changes from what we had, let's put it that way. It evolved from there.

JK: All my questions are done. Do you have any?

SI: No, I think you answered all my questions, too. I really appreciate that. You've both been very open and I really appreciate that, too. Is there anything that you'd like to add that we didn't talk about?

SB: I covered my almost eighty-two years; a little bit about my childhood?

SI: Sure.

SB: Looking back again, I do not feel I was very close to my father. Part of that was, my father worked a lot. For a long time, he had two jobs and worked one job during the week and another job on the weekend. I did not see him that often. I have no visual memory of having a catch with him or going out and spending time alone with him.

So, when I look back, if I could have done some things differently, I would've wanted, and, as I mentioned, the night he died, I felt that I didn't do him justice. I was wrapped up in my own selfishness rather than helping my father. When my mother grew older, I vowed I would not make the same mistake with my mother.

I went over backwards to help my mother and was there for her at the end. I ended up doing her finances and paying her bills. I was there. We visited her more than my brothers visited her. My daughter and her children visited her. She was in a nursing home nearby. So, we really tried to be there for her. I was the one making many of the decisions.

A funny episode with my mother--about a month before she passed, I was sitting with her in the nursing home. She knew I was taking care of all her paperwork and finances and the interface with the doctors and I was doing it all. She looked at me and said, "I hope I haven't been too much of a bother to you." My mother was, like, ninety-three at this time.

I said to her, "Mom, you haven't been a bother to me since I was ten." She said, "But, you deserved it when you were ten." [laughter] Looking back, I probably did deserve it when I was ten.

JK: I do feel really lucky that I got to meet her and a few of my great grandparents.

SB: I know. You're very lucky and they're lucky that they got a chance to meet you. They were thrilled. Nana was just thrilled to see you guys when you and your brothers came. When you used to visit, there was this man in a wheelchair who I believe had had a stroke and never conversed, never spoke, just sort of sat there. He couldn't move. He was in a wheelchair.

You would come in and go to him and ask him to dance. His face, remember that, his face would light up with such a smile when he saw you. He was just [struck] that this little girl would [ask him]. Obviously, he couldn't dance, but he...

DB: He moved the wheelchair.

SB: Yes, you moved. Seth would move the wheelchairs around.

DB: Also, when you'd visit the other grandparents, they used to love to see you in the nursing homes.

SB: They used to love to see you guys show up, because the little kids used to come in.

DB: They would dance.

SB: Yes, you would put on a show. You'd put on a show for all the patients.

DB: They loved it.

JK: Well, thank you so much.

SI: Thank you.

SB: I think it'd make a great movie. [laughter]

SI: Yes, I agree.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Jack Klein 12/20/2024

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 7/10/2025

Reviewed by Stephen Blocher 10/10/2025