

**Transcript of Interview with Allen Zeman  
Fifth Avenue Project  
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Transcription:

**Amy Lowenstein (AL):** Today is Tuesday, November 27, 2007. I'm Amy Lowenstein, and I am interviewing Al Zeman, who had a store in Evans City, Pennsylvania, and he purchased merchandise on the Avenue. Al, tell me about your store.

**Allen Zeman (AZ):** Our store in Evans City was founded about 1890 by my grandfather Joseph Zeman and his brother David Zeman. They were immigrants from Lithuania. When they got off the boat, they followed what was the usual practice in those days, peddling from a pack. Going through the rural areas, stopping at farm houses, maybe occasionally setting up temporary shop in the small towns. But eventually most of these people did settle down, if not in the cities, then in the small towns, and my grandfather and his brother, for some reason that I don't really know, chose Evans City.

I rather suspect that maybe the banker in the town took a liking to them or the people in the town liked them, whatever. The store was established then, and it was operated by my grandfather until his retirement in 1935. My father ran the store from the time, to assist my grandfather, from the time he graduated from high school, which would have been 1917, and my father continued in the business after my grandfather's death in 1945. My father died in 1955 and a lot of townspeople thought, "Hey this is a family tradition. Surely it will go to young Allen Zeman," but my father and mother said no. Two generations in the schmata business, as they liked to call it in those days, was enough. This boy will go to college. So in 1955, after my father's illness and eventual demise at the end of 1955, my mother sold the store and the tradition came to an end.

I didn't actually operate the store myself, although during my grade school and high school days I did an awful lot of helping out doing some selling. I particularly liked to sell Congoleum Rugs. For some reason those were easy and I felt like a big shot since I could take customers up to our second floor where the Congoleum rugs were stored. Also, I was very happy to be given the opportunity of selling shoes. I loved to do that. Since our store was a very general type of store—shoes, dried goods, clothing, particularly ready-made work clothing, house dresses, as I mentioned Congoleum rugs, and notions, rubber footwear. We did a big business in boots and rubber footwear.

I really felt that I grew up in the store. I did my homework in the back of the store and used to love to talk to the customers when they came in. In fact, our store was almost, you might say, a kind of community center. Chamber of Commerce meetings were held there. There were various other civic things that I don't particularly recall in detail that took place. We had a coal stove in the back of the store and chairs were pulled up around that stove and often times, if it wasn't some kind of formal town meeting, people would love to come in and just sit and chat. My father was not one to chase people out. Just like my grandfather before him, a

lot of people would just come in the store during the colder weather and sit and rest for a while by the coal stove. And whenever we got a bit busy with customers, then people knew to leave. So it was a very informal, but yet at the same time educational experience for me and the politics, the economics, and I guess you might say a bit of the gossip that existed in a small town, as I remembered in the 1940s and early fifties.

After the store was closed, I'm happy that I did select a few things at random—daybooks, ledgers, some photographs of the interior and exterior of the store, and a few other things including some ads that were placed in a newspaper that existed in Evans City in the 1890s called the *Evans City Globe*. There's a couple of large ads in two of the editions that I have for the New York Store. That's what my grandfather and his brother decided to name the store in 1890. I guess to add a bit of big city class to the proceedings, but at the time I remember, it was just known as Zeman's or Bernard's Place, my father's name was Bernard Zeman, and he and my mother, Dora Zeman, worked the store very diligently as my grandparents did before them.

It's a very pleasant set of memories that I have. Of course our store was very, very closely tied into the activities of Fifth Avenue. My mother used to say that I learned to walk on Fifth Avenue because in the 1940's, during the years of World War II, we came in—my mother, father, and of course myself as a very young child—to Fifth Avenue almost every Sunday. My father would often take special orders from customers. He knew where to go to get them filled on Fifth Avenue at the many, many jobbers that then lined the street. In fact, I think in its heyday, there were over one hundred wholesalers, or jobbers, who stocked merchandise along Fifth Avenue. And I can particularly remember spending time in Robert Comins when it was still on Fifth Avenue, Ben Dinovitz, Samuel Lorean Company. Oh, there are many other names that come to mind. Peerless, and in later years Light Brothers who had a kind of set of merchandise, a haberdashery sort, menswear. I can remember Charlie Dinovitz further down on the Avenue and many other places.

My father himself, just as a kind of footnote here, was briefly in business on Fifth Avenue himself, with a man by the name of Sam Andorsky. I think my father became a partner of Sam Andorsky about 1934. My father said in later years that he just wanted the experience. He had operated, as I mentioned earlier, the store with his father since earlier in the twentieth century, and I guess there was a bit of family pressure, maybe my father pressured himself, to get out of Evans City for a while. My father was the road man for Sam Andorsky.

The job didn't last long. I think by 1935 my father returned to Evans City, when his father wanted to retire, and my father brought along his bride. Dora, my mother. I think one of the reasons, in retrospect, why my father was anxious to get on Fifth Avenue and become a road man was to look for a wife, actually. My father was then in his thirties and from what I can gather, my father had found out about my

mother through a gentleman who, I believe, was a wholesaler of shoes. I don't recollect the detail, but he was in the Washington Bank building, a large building where Chatham Center now sits. And there were several wholesalers who operated out of the Washington Bank building and this man's name was Sam Phillips. And I can remember my mother saying that Sam Phillips was essentially the shadchan. It was the matchmaker who said to my father, "While you're making your rounds for Andorsky there, go over to Nanty-Glo, Pennsylvania. There's a very nice girl there, Dora Donofsky.

In fact, she came from a family whose economic and social background was very much like my father's. My mother's father, my maternal grandfather Abraham Donofsky, settled in Nanty-Glo about 1890, the same time. Although he originally sold blasting powder for the coal mines, but in later years he opened a furniture store and then eventually a kind of general store, a kind of mini-mini Kmart, such as the Zemans had in Evans City. They met and apparently fell in love rather quickly and my father brought her back to Evans City. My grandfather said, "Great, now I can retire to Pittsburgh," and my father and mother ran the store.

One of the first things I remember my mother saying to me when she would reminisce on those days was when she walked in the store in Evans City, she was totally taken aback by what she called the "hanging trapeze." In the store in Evans City there were wires suspended from the ceiling on which merchandise was hung. And my mother, in 1935, thought, "How ridiculously antique can you get?" When my father went out for lunch one day, she took a pair of scissors and snipped down those wires. My father came in, did a double take, "Well where are we going to hang this, that or the other," and then they both started to laugh. My father saying, "I guess it was time for them to go." And, and it was just, again, part of, just a little example of how they worked together to build up the business, and they did. As I mentioned before, they came very frequently to Fifth Avenue, probably all the way down until the early 1950's, I can recall almost a regular Sunday trip to Fifth Avenue. Primarily, of course, for economic reasons, picking up merchandise, bringing it back in our car to Evans City. In fact, as a child I even started to learn how to carry empty boxes and eventually full boxes when we'd bring empties back from Evans City and load up with things and fill them.

And I can recall also that Fifth Avenue, while it was a very necessary center for the economic life of businesses like my father had and like my mother's family had in Nanty-Glo, but for many other people in other small towns as well, economically highly important. But, socially and religiously, I have to emphasize, too, that Fifth Avenue was probably my first exposure to what might be called a Jewish Community. There were several kosher meat markets along Fifth Avenue; we would buy meat for the week and hurriedly get it packed back to Evans City so that we could freeze it. We didn't have too much of an organized Jewish life in Evans City, but strict kosher in the home is something that we adhered to. It was a way of building identity.

Also along Fifth Avenue there were at least one, and maybe two, Jewish book shops. One, I think, was named Rosen's Book Store. My first yarmulke and my first siddur prayer book was gotten in Rosen's. I can remember when the man gave me the yarmulke, Mr. Rosen, an elderly gentleman. He put it on my head and said, "There young fellow, you look like a million dollars." And I remember, I didn't want to take that thing off. I was almost ready to wear it to school in Evans City, but my mother said, "No, as the only Jewish kid in town, that little beanie is likely to raise some questions." Nowadays, I probably would have welcomed the questions. Back then we thought well, if anybody would really ask if they'd see you wearing it at home, we'll answer it. So in a very real sense, our Jewish identity, our sense of socializing, was also built up during those Sunday trips to Fifth Avenue.

The camaraderie and the friendliness that prevailed, I remember yet. I can remember, sometimes when my father had to go from one end of the Avenue to the other, we would park in one place and because parking places were just so terribly hard to get, the car would usually sit from whenever we got there on Sunday morning, maybe ten o'clock until one o'clock when my father had finished his business. Sometimes he would tell my mother, "Just sit down here." I can remember my mother sitting in Comins on Fifth Avenue, I can remember my mother sitting in Sam Bernstein's, sometimes in Peerless, and that led to further conversation because usually I was with her. When I got older, I would help my father carry the packages. So when we returned from Fifth Avenue on a Sunday, we really felt that it was an enjoyable experience. Necessarily economically for our store of course, but it was a chance to renew acquaintanceships with certain of the people from the small towns who also frequented the Avenue on Sundays. Over the years, we got to know a number of the wholesalers rather well. So, all in all, the Fifth Avenue experience is one that I very highly value.

That's kind of a general overview.

**AL:** You did a wonderful job; this is the first interview where I haven't had to ask any questions.

**AZ:** Oh my goodness. I didn't mean to...

**AL:** That's really wonderful. No, you really gave a wonderful picture of the store. It was a general store?

**AZ:** It was a general store.

**AL:** Like a small department store?

**AZ:** A small department store. I remember my father sold a lot of rubber boots, a lot of overshoes, dress shoes, and yard goods. I remember shelves of yard goods. Socks, underwear, pajamas, ladies' housedresses.

**AL:** All the things that were available on the Avenue.

**AZ:** Exactly, all the things that were available on the Avenue.

**AL:** Was the Avenue your main source of supply?

**AZ:** No, actually my father also dealt with a large wholesaler in the city who was down on Penn Avenue, Arbuthnot-Stevenson. I do remember going there. I think Arbuthnot-Stevenson was closed on Sundays, but in later years my father started to close on Wednesday afternoons because some of the other merchants in town did the same. That's when we would frequently go to Arbuthnot-Stevenson's. But most of my memories though surround Fifth Avenue.

**AL:** Why would, what did Arbuthnot-Stevenson have to offer that the Avenue didn't? I'm just curious. You're the first person to mention that.

**AZ:** You know, I can't quite recollect...I know that Arbuthnot-Stevenson's building consisted of five or six floors and from what I remember as a young person, it looked very much the same as Fifth Avenue, under one roof with one of those cage elevators to take you from floor to floor. But, most of the buying was Fifth Avenue.

**AL:** What were the credit arrangements? Did you pay cash? Were you billed? Or do you have any idea about that?

**AZ:** We were billed. Yes, I do have some of the invoices, bills, and a few canceled checks, but quite a few of the check stubs that are made out to various people along Fifth Avenue. So, most of those bills, I seem to recall, were paid either within fifteen days or, in some cases, thirty days.

**AL:** So they billed monthly then, or by week, by month.

**AZ:** I think it must have been monthly. I do remember though, that just about all of the shoes were obtained by my father from outside of the Fifth Avenue area. I think that he carried shoes into Endicott Johnson and shoes that were supplied by a company over in York, Pennsylvania, Dan Peterman.

**AL:** I know. I've heard of Peterman.

**AZ:** And...

**AL:** But he didn't buy from Ideal?

**AZ:** No. For some reason my father did not buy shoes on Fifth Avenue. Just about everything else, he did. I don't really know why. Whether it was a matter of habit, something that he had picked up from his father or just what. I don't know.

**AL:** Did he buy...did you carry household goods like Charlie Kline's things? That sort of thing? You know, the sheets and towels?

**AZ:** Yes, yes, I should mention. Yes, I can remember Kline's and I remember Samuel Laurie & Company.

**AL:** What did they sell?

**AZ:** Bedspreads, sheets, much the same, I think, as Kline's. But I remember my father dealing with both Samuel Laurie and Charlie Kline.

**AL:** Do you have any idea what the price structure was and how they...you know, did they bill certain people a more favorable price, or if you dealt in cash? A problem is, as you know, a lot of these disappeared memories and we're trying to find out what people can remember, if anything.

**AZ:** I seem to remember my father receiving a lot of two percent discounts and I think those were for the bills that he paid within fifteen days. In fact, in the artifacts that I have, I could rather easily go over some of that. There was, in my mind, I'm curious...

**AL:** There was some sort of discount for early payment. Would there be a bigger discount for cash?

**AZ:** I think there would have been, yes, but I don't remember my father paying in cash. I think it was almost always the use of checks.

**AL:** How was the merchandise packaged? Was it, when you got it, was it in the brown paper with the cord?

**AZ:** Yeah, frequently brown paper with a cord. In fact, I can remember, I think I was probably about maybe eleven at the time. I was helping my father carry some packages with the brown paper and the cords out of Peerless. I was carrying it along saying, "Hey, I'm doing a good job," and all of a sudden the package fell apart. Luckily, it was summer and no big deal. I felt so bad, you know. I remember somebody saying, "Well, carry it straight, you know. Don't shake it around so much."

**AL:** I can still remember some of the feel of the cord when you lifted the packages.

**AZ:** Yes, I recall that as well. And very good quality paper.

**AL:** It was heavy brown paper.

**AZ:** I think butcher...

**AL:** Heavy, brown paper. They had big rolls, do you remember that?

**AZ:** Yes, I remember the rolls. I remember a lot of things going in boxes, but some things came in by freight. I remember the Plunkett Freight Company carried out a lot of things into the Butler County area. Besides my father's store in Evans City, of course, there were some stores in surrounding towns I think as far away as Slippery Rock and Mercer, Pennsylvania. As far as general dry goods, I seem to remember my father's store in Evans City being really the only one in that part of the county. There was another smaller dry goods store in Evans City, although it was housed in a very old building, George Ift & Son. It was operated by an elderly lady, Josie Ift. And in a sense, she was a competitor of my father, but they used to laugh. George Ift & Sons had set up their store in about 1867, so they had a little more of a history in Evans City than we did.

**AL:** I wonder, this is the first time this has come up, is if this other stores in those periods shopped on the Avenue, even if it were not Jewish-owned. Do you have any idea?

**AZ:** I would like to know that myself. I know that Josie Ift did not, but I think she may very well have had an agent or somebody shop for her. She operated the store, mainly, as a kind of memorial to her grandfather. They were one of the first businesses in the town. And I'm just trying to think, I remember my father greeting some people who had stores in other towns. I think I remember Monessen and some of the towns in the Mon Valley, but I can't seem to remember too many from Butler County.

**AL:** My recollection is that a lot of, or some, of the wholesalers had salesman on the road who traveled to these small towns. I'm thinking, what I'm really trying to say is that maybe it was the Jewish owners who came in on Sundays.

**AZ:** I think it may have been. Buying meat...

**AL:** Sort of an ethnic thing.

**AZ:** Yes, religious, I think. Buying meat, going to the book shop...

**AL:** A sense of community.

**AZ:** Sense of community. But, I do recall, in later years at least, some agents coming out to Evans City. Peerless, I remember, had a man. I think his name was Norman Notove and he called on my father. I think Tanner Brothers...

**AL:** My husband said that he remembered going into your store.

**AZ:** Yes, I think so.

**AL:** He remembered, but he also remembered your coming in. He did remember that.

**AZ:** Yes, I guess since I came along with my mother, you know. We did have family in Pittsburgh. Usually after finishing our business on Fifth Avenue in the mornings, we would stop in East End to visit my father's family and in Squirrel Hill to visit my mother's family, but that always came after, after stopping on the Avenue.

**AL:** Now, how did you carry it back? Did you have a large car?

**AZ:** We had a Plymouth, a 1938 Plymouth, as I can remember our first car. Then later on, a 1949 Plymouth, and my father knew how to pack it. He got a lot into trunk, a lot into the backseat, and sometimes I think my father would have to agree, something would have to be shipped.

**AL:** Did...do you have any recollection of the particular stores? Why you went to one rather than another in the same. Were there personal relationships?

**AZ:** I think it was very largely personal relationships. I think in those couple of years or so that my father was sort of the silent partner of Sam Andorsky, that he got to know some of the people on the Avenue. But, I can remember a very great deal of camaraderie, friendliness. In fact, one of the gentlemen in Peerless, his name was Al Gorn, I think after he retired he moved to California. He was constantly encouraging my father, "Make sure your son gets a bit of a Jewish education," because in Evans City it would have been very hard.

**AL:** What did Peerless sell?

**AZ:** Peerless sold, I can remember neckties, men's sweaters, socks, scarves. I guess haberdashery.

**AL:** Who, who owned Peerless?

**AZ:** There were three people in there at the time; there was Al Gorn, Norman Notov, and I think a man by the name of Saul Mallinger. They were the three that operated it. I think in later years, Norman Notov's nephew, Jake Notov, who you still see occasionally around Pittsburgh, was in with them. I think he worked for them. After Peerless sold out, I believe Light Brothers had taken over. Ernie Light, I see rather frequently. Or, Ernie Light and his brothers may have set up next door to Peerless and after Peerless sold out, I remember Jake Notov, Norman's nephew, telling me that he went to work next door for Light Brothers. So, it was kind of a consolidation there. But, there were a lot of jobbers, of course, my father did not deal with, but the ones that I'd mentioned earlier are the ones that come most readily to mind.

**AL:** Did you ever call in for merchandise?

**AZ:** Yes, yes my father did call in and sometimes things would be ready when we...

**AL:** So in other words, you'd pick it up rather than have it shipped.

**AZ:** Yes, to pick it up. And sometimes things were just shipped out. My father ran his business in a rather traditional way. I can recall that when inventory was taken, it was often with a system of lines and dots that had the number of pairs of buckle-arctics or number of pairs of overshoes, or ladies' dresses or whatever. And I can remember the code that was used on merchandise in the store. In fact, I asked my father, "What do all these letters mean?" For example, E would be one, H would be two, B would be three. My father had said that his father, before him, had made up a Hebrew saying, if I can recollect it here, "Eliyahu HaNavi ba gul kedem pores v'omar b'hitov zeman, amen." I think that's a bit ungrammatical, I've studied some Hebrew in later years, but it's something to the effect, "Elijah the prophet came from the East and said, 'May it be good for Zeman, Amen.'" In any event, whether that's apocalyptic or not, I don't know, but in any event each of the first letters of those words were our code for merchandise, so if something had EHB, it would mean 123, a dollar-twenty three or whatever.

**AL:** That as your price.

**AZ:** That was the price that my father paid, and then of course we had the price that it was to sell for.

**AL:** And then the price in the middle.

**AZ:** And the price in the middle. My father loved to remark a lot of the boxes himself. In fact, I used to say, "Why are you doing this?" He said, "Well, I can see it better." My father was a man of habit, and he put a great deal of time into the store, as indeed I can recall all of the people along Fifth Avenue doing. Frequently, if for some reason we were still in Pittsburgh as late as five, six, or seven o'clock on a summer evening, many of the wholesalers would still be in there. It was rare that we were down on Fifth Avenue at that time, but it's not like they punched the time clock and got out of there right at five o'clock. If there was a reason to come in early for somebody or stay late, they did. That indeed was my father's practice in Evans City.

**AL:** Right, so you were there when the...you were out of the business by the time the Avenue started to decline.

**AZ:** Yes.

**AL:** So you have no memories of the change? In the way you bought merchandise...who bought your store? I mean was the store still in existence...?

**AZ:** Well, it was sold to a man. I think his name was Lewis. In fact, Lewis Brothers. I think they were noted for buying up inventories. When it became clear that my father would not be able to return to the business, and it was just too much for my mother to run, it was decided by my mother with my father's input, of course, with some members of our family, sell out. And it went to Lewis Brothers, and they operated the store for, oh maybe something like six months or so, sold out. They were like liquidators. I guess you'd say professional buyers. After that, the store came to an end, and that was in 1955. My mother moved into Pittsburgh in 1956. I was already at the University of Pittsburgh. In later years, I often used to tell people, I still ended up on Fifth Avenue. I became a faculty member at Robert Morris College, down at the end, so I can say, "Hey, I came back to Fifth Avenue."

**AL:** That's where you started.

**AZ:** But, yes, I think it was just really an answer to the question why my father dealt with those wholesalers that he did, probably, mainly friendship and habit to a degree. Those people that accommodated him, and I can't remember anybody that didn't really accommodate him. My father was a very likable man, and people just loved to talk to him. As we were indicating before, that was a way of plugging in to the Jewish community as well.

**AL:** Alright, this was wonderful. Is there anything else you think, or did we pretty much cover it?

**AZ:** I'm a bit inspired now to look back over those check stubs and things like that and see if I can learn a little about discounts and time periods.

**AL:** If you could, we can extend an interview. I think it would be wonderful. We are trying to get...but, you seem to have more information than a lot people because you're so late during this.

**AZ:** Yes, I remember when the Heinz History Center opened, and I came to visit, I thought to myself how great it would be if there was something about Fifth Avenue, a little something. I remember remarking that twenty years ago. But, you know what it is. We get involved in our life and maybe someday it will be done. But certainly, my hat's off to you and the other good folks behind this project.

**AL:** Thank you for helping us. I appreciate it.

**AZ:** Hopefully it will crystallize.