

Transcript of Interview with Bernard Keisler
Homestead Hebrew Congregation Oral History Project
Call Number: CSS#4

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Transcribers Notes:

...	indicates an incomplete sentence
(unclear)	indicates the word(s) could not be understood
(?)	indicates that the spelling may not be correct

Transcription:

Anne Sheckter Powell: This is Anne Sheckter Powell interviewing Bernard Keisler of Irwin, Pennsylvania, in my dining room, in October, 1993. We're talking about the Homestead Hebrew Congregation Oral History Project for the Western Pennsylvania Jewish Archives for the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

AP: Go ahead.

Bernard Keisler: I'm Bernard Keisler. Born in the city of Pittsburgh at one of the hospitals on May 12, 1927.

AP: Okay, 1920, and you were born in the state, were your parents immigrants?

BK: My father was, my mother was native-born.

AP: Now what brought your father to Pittsburgh, do you know?

BK: I believe basically just part of the wave of immigrants that came from Europe in the early 1900s to the city.

AP: But you don't know how he happened to choose Pittsburgh?

BK: Yes, basically he chose Pittsburgh because there was family here.

AP: Ah.

BK: There was already Keislars here, so he was coming to a place where he knew there would be work and friends.

AP: Now what took him to Homestead from Pittsburgh itself? Or when, and when did that happen?

BK: Again, I'm not sure. There were Keislars who had located and established a meat grocery store in the Homestead area, and this was my dad's vocation also, that he was a butcher trained in Europe and so he just went there, again where were work so that was just a natural path for him.

AP: So when do you remember being in Homestead, what's the earliest you remember being there?

BK: Well I can remember being there probably in the early '30s, I started school there, I can remember going to school, I can remember the steel mills, I can remember going to the area very close where the men went into the gates because that's where my grandparents lived, when I say go into the gates I mean to report for work in the steel mills, and just being all over that area from about the age of five or six, which would have been the early thirties. I can remember going to cheder, Hebrew school, probably from about 1939, 1940 on. Somewhere around fourth grade, age nine.

AP: That's about the time you think you sort of remember starting cheder?

BK: Yes. Yeah, probably that would be my best recollection.

AP: So you say you're grandparents were there also.

BK: On my mother's side, yes. That would have been the Hepps family.

AP: Oh I see, so your mother also had family who were in Homestead.

BK: Yes, yes. How my parents happened to meet, I'm not sure, I don't know the story to that, but in our family history there have been several marriages between, we had different generations, between Keislars and Hepps.

AP: So you're all intertwined.

BK: Yes, it can be confusing.

AP: I supposed you don't have any idea why the Hepps went to Homestead either?

BK: Initially, no. All I know is in the letter I had given you, that my grandfather, before the turn of the century, that's my grandfather Hepps, came to Homestead and established a freighting business, a bar-hotel business there. Then he went back to Europe, somewhere around 1900, married my grandmother, and came back to this country and I think all of their children, there was something like seven brothers, seven sons, two daughters. So they had about eight or nine children, were all born in this country.

AP: So where did they come from?

BK: Hungary.

AP: They came from Hungary. Is that the same, was the same true on your father's side of the family?

BK: Yes, the very, and this I don't know again whether it was coincidental or not, but the area of Hungary that they came from outside of Budapest, is best I know again, I'm not sure of my pronunciation, it was something like Ujhely(?). And both families, both

Heppses and Keislars were fairly close in that area that they lived there, and so they got together back in this country and ended up in Western Pennsylvania.

AP: I see. So it may be that a lot of the people from that area tended to come...

BK: Toward this very ---

AP: Towards this...

BK: We're both big families, both the Heppses and Keislars are, both sides had, again I would have to check the numbers carefully, but I think my grandfather had three or four brothers that came over, and as I've already told you he had nine children. On the Keisler side, my dad had I think four brothers and three sisters. And so they were all originally in this Western Pennsylvania area. In very extensive, especially on the Hepps side, which we've traced on my mother's side, they have a big family history.

AP: And you didn't find them all, or most of them are here so you could trace them.

BK: Right, so they all, most of them started out from here.

AP: Were you one of, I mean did you have brothers and sisters?

BK: Just one brother.

AP: Just the one.

BK: Just the one older brother, they just had two children, yes.

AP: Now you said your father was a butcher?

BK: Yes.

AP: Did he have a butcher's shop?

BK: He worked with originally with Morris Keisler, who's also a member of the Homestead Hebrew Congregation, Rodef Shalom. And then he established his own store within several blocks in what was called Lower Homestead. The main street of Homestead, as you may know, is Eighth Avenue.

AP: Right.

BK: And we often refer to things below Eighth Avenue as the lower part of Homestead, and which was one time just as nice an area as Upper Homestead in the early years. And then after he lost the store, had to close it during the Depression years, he worked as a food salesman with various companies for about five years, then he reestablished about 1943 toward the end of World War II, a same type of store at the very top street in

Homestead, Homestead/Munhall area. He had gone from like Fifth Avenue after being down there for about fifteen years, he reestablished the store on Twentieth.

AP: Oh that was way up.

BK: At the very top of Homestead. And he was there from about '40, another ten years into the '50s. Following a heart attack and health failing they sold the store.

AP: Now this was not a kosher butcher store was it?

BK: Oh no.

AP: Neither one of them was.

BK: Neither one.

AP: Okay.

BK: Nor my uncle, Morris Keisler, that was never kosher, no.

AP: And it was just meat, they didn't sell anything...

BK: No, they had groceries, as well.

AP: Oh they sold groceries.

BK: Groceries, just a little corner mom and pop store, oh you'd get anything, anything and everything. The curious thing that I can always remember about our store, because when I came back from World War II, went to Pitt but at the same time I worked in the store because I used to stay at home, because to get from Homestead to the University of Pittsburgh, even on a street car in those days was no more than twenty minutes.

And I can remember in that store there was more Slavish, Polish, Croatian, Hungarian spoken than English, and unfortunately I had never learned a fluid speaking ability in any of them. I learned words so that I could wait on people. They'd come in and say something like vitza(?), and that means eggs, and I think that's Slavish. Or they might say bandorki(?), which is potatoes, and I would know what to get them, because they were so much more comfortable, they could speak English, all the people and they did, but they were more comfortable, and my dad would always be, and he stayed strictly behind the counter on the meat side. Nothing was precut, he would cut it, if you wanted six pork chops, he was, as I say, it was not a kosher store, he would grab the loin of pork, drop it there, and he'd cut you off six chops. And there was rarely, except on the busy weekend when we were very busy on Friday and Saturday, he might stay in the store the night before and fill the whole case, the meat case, with meat so we wouldn't be slowed down the next day, but during the week very little was precut. You'd come in and you said what you wanted.

AP: He'd have to be a strong man I think, that's a lot of...

BK: Oh yes, because we had our own little cooler in the back, and if someone wanted a bigger roast or if they wanted a three, a big rib roast, three ribs, he would step in the cooler and bring out that whole, hide and quarter the leg --- and drop it there and cut off what you wanted.

AP: So all of you though knew then the words for almost all the kinds of foods in different languages.

BK: Different foods, yes. But you know, not to make a sense if someone said, to come in and said how are you, is the children in school or, I could not carry on a conversation, but words would hit my ears well enough that I would know what people wanted, so I could get it.

AP: Could your father?

BK: My father and mother both were totally conversational in any and all of those languages any of those mid-European languages. That's what I say, you would hear, there would be as much English, of course, we had a fair amount of English, there was Catholic and Protestant living there, and so we would have people who were Irish and they would naturally be speaking strictly English, or people of that derivation. And of course all the people of younger generation that was closer to my age would come in and we would strictly speak English.

AP: Did you live behind the store?

BK: No, we lived, as I told, you the original store was somewhere close to Fifth, and the second store was on Twentieth, we lived on Twelfth Avenue.

AP: Oh so you...

BK: Twelfth, we were like we lived in before. My parents, my grandparents again, the Hepps family, where the original bar-hotel was, rooming house, bar-hotel, was between Third and Fourth.

AP: Oh so that's where that thing was...

BK: Right. And that was very close to the entrance to the steel mills. And we, it was traditional, that especially the years where we didn't have the store through the forties, and through the thirties even when we had our first store, that almost every evening if we didn't have dinner there, we would end up at my grandparents. It was like almost, I don't know why, but every night we were there, on my mother's side, we were there at that house right there constantly.

AP: So they had, so their house was it like part of it, was it like attached to this bar-hotel, how was it?

BK: Oh yes, yes. Now their place, as I said we lived on Twelfth Avenue, so we were always down between, around Fourth Avenue and I had some other relatives that had stores down there and were engaged in small businesses.

The first floor, pre-prohibition, was a big bar. The second floor was several living rooms, sitting room, parlor, big dining room, and a big kitchen and pantry. The third floor was a series of bedrooms, now originally as I said, pre-prohibition that was a rooming house that my mother, my grandmother did all the cooking. But as the children came, and as I said, I believe seven brothers and two sisters, all of those rooms became their rooms, and after prohibition in the thirties,

I guess it would have been late thirties, three of the sons, there was twins, the two twins, Herb and Mart, and Sam all became pharmacists, so they took the bar, it was prohibition actually so it couldn't be a bar, and it became a drug store. And so from, and I'm not sure of the year but I know it was always there, I can remember it as a, somewhere in the '36, '37 I would have been already eight, nine years old, ten years old, that we always just were playing in and out or helping to take care of people in the pharmacy. And there was a typical counter there where you could sit on a stool and get an ice cream cone or a little Sunday, and there was a rack of penny candies and everything that we took care of people. And behind that was all the toilet articles and soaps and then the back was, you went for your medications, for the pharmacy, and behind that there was a little apothecary scale and everything that the brothers who ran the pharmacy, Sam basically, as I can remember who was the oldest, the twins worked at other pharmacies that they established in other parts of Western Pennsylvania, but that seemed to be always, that was Sam Hepps. That was always his pharmacy basically.

AP: And was it called Hepps?

BK: Yeah, it was Hepps Drugstore.

AP: And it was...

BK: Pharmacy was not a common word, it was a drugstore.

AP: It was Hepps Drugstore and before that was it called the Hepps Bar and Grill or something?

BK: I'm not sure what it was called before, it was probably called Hepps', yeah. Hepps' Hotel or something like that. Because they had roomers.

AP: Did they stay? Were they people who were transients, or were they, do you know?

BK: I think that a lot of them were people, the railroad had two big stations there, too, and so some of them were railroaders or in-and-outs, and I really don't know, because that was really my infancy and before.

AP: Yeah you were a little boy.

BK: Yeah. Probably a lot of that may have been as I was born. Again, my brother being born as you'll see in the letter, the early twenties, he's six years older than me, would have been a better interview for you on that.

AP: Well unfortunately time gets away from you.

BK: But that's about what I can tell you about that. And again, as described in the letter, my grandfather was one of the original charter members, or founders, or what have you of the whole Orthodox congregation, Jewish congregation in Homestead.

AP: This is your grandfather Hepps.

BK: Hepps, mhm. Yes, yes.

AP: So they were very involved then.

BK: Very, very involved. He, yes, he was very instrumental. He was involved to the point, of course the Orthodox religion, the Orthodox Jew is never brought into the synagogue upon death. It's traditional that when you leave the funeral home as you go by, usually the hearse will go by the shul, they'll open the doors, the rabbi says a prayer, and you continue on to the funeral home.

AP: Oh I didn't know that.

BK: Oh that, yeah that's traditional. Because if you take the body into the, and again I won't pretend to be too learned so I may be inaccurate when I'm saying this, but my understanding is that if you take a body into a, into a synagogue, in some ways you defile a synagogue, so a deceased cannot go in.

But my grandfather had been so instrumental in making sure that that congregation was formed and survived, that the rabbi confirmed with other rabbis in the Pittsburgh area, and they agreed that there would be a special ruling, if you want to call it that or dispensation, his body was taken, with the casket, into the shul. And there was a special ceremony.

AP: Do you remember that?

BK: Yes. Yes, my grandfather was ninety-two. I had just been married, I had just gone, I was in my second year of optometry school, I think, or maybe my first year, at Ohio State University, and that would have been in 1950. I was married in '49, so it would

have been 1950. We came back from Columbus, Ohio, for that ceremony. Yes, I can remember, we went into the synagogue, and they officiated and then we come back out and went to the funeral, to the cemetery. And so my grandfather was in, ninety, ninety-two, something like that. And that's the only time I know of anyone ever being taken in.

AP: Well that explains why you never do hear of funerals happening in a synagogue, and I never realized there was a real reason.

BK: No, there's never a service. Yes.

AP: Do you, do you know who the rabbi was for that?

BK: Yes, I believe that it was a man by the name of Pinkas. Now the reason I say that is, unless he had already left, I think he was still there because when I was thirteen and had gone through my bar mitzvah, my equivalent of being like a confirmation, the Hebrew school was basically Rabbi Pinkas and there was an instructor there by the name of Chetlain, C-H-E-T-L-A...I-N, I'm pretty sure his last name was Chetlain, and that that's who instructed and prepared me the following years. Now Pinkas may have, you know the war had intervened, I had gone away to the service, I had gone away to, after I attended Pitt, I had gone away to Ohio State University to start my professional school, so that Pinkas may have left, but I have a feeling, some reason my mind he's the last one I remember.

AP: He was the rabbi for that.

BK: Yes.

AP: Now, let me ask you something else. Do you remember, if during that funeral service, if the women and the men sat separately as they did for regular services?

BK: No, no, no. They would yes!

AP: They did.

BK: Oh, at all times.

AP: At all times, so for, even for something like that.

BK: Yes they sat separately. Yes they would sit separately, I'm sure.

AP: Yeah that's what I was wondering, whether...

BK: The only, if you can call it, the only flexibility that they did demonstrate in the latter years, and this may have been just because there was less people attending the congregation, in Homestead as in many of the Orthodox synagogues, the early ones that were built in the early 1900s, there was a balcony, and the women had to sit upstairs.

AP: Right.

BK: So maybe because there was less attending, about the last oh ten rows in Homestead, they erected a curtain, all the way across, so you couldn't really see each other, and the women sat on the first floor behind the curtain, and the men sat in front of it. So we still do that.

AP: That even, but there was no mixing for any kind of events...

BK: Well even today, today, last twenty years since the death of my father, in 1970, so I might say the proper prayers for him I joined Gemilas Chesed, which is White Oak, McKeesport congregation, Gemilas Chesed. And even there, it's a beautiful modern synagogue, and that's where I attend services and that's where as I said to you this morning, I'll be attending services before I come over. It's not a balcony but there's a first floor and then surrounding the main, central seating on each side is an elevated, set up another series of seats but it's elevated about six to seven feet, and the women sit on both sides there.

AP: It's another level.

BK: And so we don't sit together.

AP: Yeah, I know that's true generally speaking in Orthodox things, I always had a question in my mind whether that was true just for services or whether it was true for all kinds of events which is why I asked.

BK: When we go into the social hall at Gemilas Chesed we sit together. Before having a luncheon or whatever if it's some type of entertainment.

AP: But not in the sanctuary.

BK: No. Never, no, no, not that I know of. I know I went to one of the rabbi's daughters got married, and we sat separate and that was a wedding, which would be a social occasion.

AP: Yeah, exactly is the other question.

BK: In fact, my wife was a little disturbed because we were not real comfortable, and she still isn't because she's not that active in the congregation, she really didn't know the women. And so she had to leave and sit by herself among what we might say is a group of strangers.

AP: Strangers, yeah. Now let's see, going back, you're, did you hear stories since your grandfather was so active in the shul, did he talk very much about what was going on there?

BK: Unfortunately, being among the younger grandchildren, he talked more to my, again my brother and some of the cousins that were his age, especially the ones that were close, and they were often especially the boys. Because you know, in our religion again, women are almost second-class, or are second-class citizens, especially the....

So you don't talk as much to the women, you don't educate them, so my brother would be much more informed, but many a things I can remember both on the humorous side when I, I can remember the first tradition, when I came we had a little dinner for my fiancé, and I introduced her to my grandfather because I respect she had to meet my grandparents, not just my parents, but my grandparents, and so we talked and at the time she had hurt her back, and on the humorous side and she had just twisted her back, nothing major or anything in nature, and this is before we're married so we had the dinner and everything else and maybe she did mention it or something, so afterwards my grandfather took me aside and said in a semi-serious vein that it was not a good idea to marry a woman with a bad back.

And the other thing I can always remember my grandfather was, and I've, this has been confirmed by, we had been trying to keep the Hebrew congregation Rodef Shalom active in the past year, and so at least we had a minion, a service on Sunday mornings. And I can remember some of the other men, and I can remember again my grandfather was a very stern disciplinarian, when we were in services in shul on the Sabbath, on Friday night, that he would be one of the men that would walk around, all the kids, young men, young boys pre-and post-bar mitzvah, say from age ten to fifteen, would sit together, not with our parents. And he would walk along there and give us the stern look and make sure we were paying attention and responding properly. And one of the other men at the, we were talking one morning before, as you know Rodef Shalom was just sold earlier this year, we were talking about, my grandfather's name come up and he said he can remember how, Barney was his name, Barney Hepps would tap and sit them down and do everything but, he might shake them to extent, but everything but hit them if they were not paying attention.

AP: So he really was there, I mean, he was more than just doing the organizational things he was very involved in the services.

BK: Constantly. Well, if you will read the letter my brother wrote you'll see that, of course we're biased naturally, but we feel strongly that we don't know how, if there would have been a building ever erected in Homestead, if we would have ever had a shul, I'm sure someone would have come forward, but even with, there was enough families to make it happen, but we would like to think there wouldn't have been a building, there may not have been a proper cemetery, properly, even well-kept today, if it hadn't been for Barney Hepps.

AP: Because he was so intensely involved.

BK: So active, and such a driver that it had to be, yes.

AP: And this is while he's running this business.

BK: Oh yes.

AP: And having his family.

BK: And raising seven boys, trying to get them through college. And the other thing that, see as I talk things pop in my head, in the early, pre-World War I, my mother was a very intelligent woman, and she decided in high school that she was going to go to college, and that was unheard of. I mean no way, was there any way that a woman could consider going to college, you know my grandfather would hear nothing of it.

And with the influence of my grandmother, Bertha Hepps, in somewhere, 1914, '15, my mother went to Pitt, University of Pittsburgh, two years, received a teaching certificate and taught in Western Pennsylvania up until the time she married. I'm not sure again, I should know this, I'm not sure when my parents married. It would have had to been somewhere around '19, since by brother was born in '21. Probably it had to be somewhere around '19, '20 that my parents married. But she taught school, my mother taught school towards what it now South Park. There's an area called Brewston(?), and she taught in Brewston, she told me stories of, you know when we talk about these teaching situations today, she taught elementary school. Now when you taught elementary school then, you had children, her total class may have been thirty, forty children, but they were 1-6. She might have four, five in each grade.

AP: Oh...

BK: But they were all in one room. And the teachers, I shouldn't introduce this, but you know they fuss about making preparations for their class if they have different themes that, well my mother basically made preparations for five grades, or six grades. Because she'd have four in first, four in second, of course they use what they're employing today, they would take some of the fifth and sixth graders to help with the first and second graders, the better ones. But my mother did achieve this and I'm very proud to have a picture at home of her in a very beautiful dress holding her certificate from University of Pittsburgh.

AP: Oh my, that's marvelous.

BK: So you think about that, if a woman I'm sure, closest in the family, a Jewish woman going to Pitt, and my grandfather I give him credit for it, he certainly financed it. He put, let's see, other than the three pharmacists, the oldest was an attorney, so of the sons, one died very young but I would say five out of seven, I can only think of one who didn't graduate from college.

AP: Was the attorney the one who was the father of Jay and Pauline?

BK: No. That's Abe Keisler.

AP: That's a different...

BK: And the other, I'm talking about the Heppses.

AP: Oh that's right, I'm on the wrong family.

BK: This is Abraham Hepps, and the other was Abraham Keisler.

AP: Oh that's right. Okay, I got that.

BK: I don't know if it's any value to the Historical Society but when our parents came through Ellis Island in 1900, when Morris Keisler came through, it was common that the security people or whoever passed you through, whoever was working the gate as you come off the boats, would ask you your name, and in your Hungarian, or Romanian, or Russian accents you would say your name. The guard would take a piece of cardboard, a tag, and he would write your name in English, and pin it on you. When my grandfather Morris came through, he wrote down K-E-I-Z-L-E-R. Some five, six years later my father came through and he said again in a Hungarian accent, "Keisler". And this guard wrote down K-E-I-S-L-E-R.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BK: We may have lost that last, the only thing I said at the end was the one branch of the family spelled their name with 'Z's, my father, who was the first, my father brought over his parents, he sent back money brought over his parents and then in turn continued to earn money and brought over three, four brothers and three sisters, and we all spell our name with an 'S'.

AP: Did your grandparents speak English?

BK: Oh yes, yeah. But when they didn't want the children to understand, they all spoke Hungarian.

AP: So you never really picked up on Hungarian.

BK: No, they didn't let us learn Hungarian because it would have been a breaking of their communication, their secret communication, yes.

AP: Now I take it they were very, they were observant.

BK: Very much, oh yes.

AP: Did he, did your grandfather keep his business open on Saturdays?

BK: Well, I don't know. The pharmacy was open on Saturdays, yes. I don't know, that would have been the uncles in the same place, he permitted that. But that was always open on Saturdays, and in those days everything always closed on Sunday, all of the...

AP: That was the blue laws then.

BK: Yes, yes and it was just the Sabbath. It was just the Christian day, and so we all closed on Sunday, I believe we did. But no, we were open on Saturdays, and my parents always kept their store open, of course they were serving the general population so we were always open and very busy on Saturday.

AP: What about on Jewish holidays, what did they do about those?

BK: We closed.

AP: You closed.

BK: Yes. Rosh Hashanah two days, and Yom Kippur we always closed, we always closed those days.

AP: Now I also heard you saying you used to go to shul on Friday night?

BK: Well, since the Jewish day starts with the setting of the sun, Friday night is the start of the Sabbath, so we would always have Friday night services, and Saturday morning services. And that's carried forward to some extent, the Reformed Jews today have their best attendance, and I don't even know if they have services on Saturday morning, I've never been really close with the Reform, but I know they're very active and their big service is Friday night. Because that's the start of the Sabbath. Always.

AP: So you always went though, I mean even as a little boy...

BK: Oh yes. Oh, absolutely yes. We, I didn't quit that until I was out of high school.

AP: Oh you did, so you went always on Friday nights, and Saturday morning?

BK: Oh yes. Oh sure.

AP: Did your father?

BK: Well my father did on Friday night, but he couldn't on Saturdays because he was working.

AP: He had a store. And your grandfather, did he go on Saturday morning?

BK: Oh yes, my grandfather was always, as best I can remember, my grandfather was always there.

AP: I see.

BK: As a youth I can't remember holidays or Sabbaths being in shul without my grandfather being there, now often my father wasn't there, my grandfather, my older brother, we were always there. Very rarely did we miss, there had to be some reason we couldn't make it.

AP: What about the other holidays?

BK: To some degree. Now some of them there were, we always had a sukkah, at Succos which is right now.

AP: Oh you did.

BK: Oh yes. Yeah we had our own, we would build one.

AP: Did you eat in it no matter what?

BK: Well there was, you'd always partake of some food, sure. Part of the ceremony, the start of the first day of Succos you'd always...

AP: I mean it wasn't to the extent that you were in there whether it rained or was cold...

BK: Oh no, not at all our meals. No, we'd always, we always would have part of one meal there and then perhaps have a kiddish.

AP: And did you have seders at your home or was it or was it your grandparents?

BK: Always, yeah. No, well, again yes it was always at my, the best I can remember, as long as they were living, as long as my grandparents on my mother's side, the Hepps side, as long as they were living and well enough, the Seder was always at their house.

AP: That must have been huge.

BK: Oh yes. Yes. And the biggest fight was, it's traditional with the matzah, that there's what's called the afikomen, and we put it away, and it was always a fight which of the grandchildren, because you have to realize with that many sons and daughters how many grandchildren, so there was always a big fight as to who got that, and they had to evolve a schedule so that there wouldn't be fights among the sisters and sister-in-laws as to which child because the grandparents had to buy it back. And buying it back in those days was not money, you came forward and you would tell grandfather what you would wanted, that you wanted a new suit, or you wanted some shirts or you wanted something, seemed to me it was always clothes, because that was by your parents, we weren't allowed to go

say I need a new bicycle or I want a new tennis racquet, you know that was frivolous, you went and said, "I need a new shirt", or maybe if you were going to be bar mitzvahed you'd say, "I'd like a special tallis" or something of this nature. And it's only evolved with the, with our children I guess it got to the point where they'd come and say well, what do I want, well it would be five dollars or ten dollars, it evolved into money. But in those days it was always something physical material.

AP: So it was more than a silver dollar.

BK: Oh yes. You know, I'd go for a suit if I could, I mean a suit was eight dollars in those days.

AP: Did you shop in Homestead?

BK: Oh yes, sure.

AP: Was that the primary place?

BK: Yes, yes. The only thing we really, as best as I can recall, there, you asked me about if our shops were kosher. There was one butcher who was a member of the congregation and a few of the years who did try to keep one set of tools and try to have some kosher meat in his non-kosher store, he sort of tried to seclude one area and we could get away with that. But mostly we went to Squirrel Hill or to Fifth Avenue, we went to you know upper Fifth Avenue to Logan Street. And I can remember going there with my parents getting meats, buying chickens always, they'd go get the chickens for the holidays especially and bring them home. And in the dungeon below the pharmacy was a cellar, the original cellar, which was dirt, and all the chickens were put down there, and when I say they were put down there because they were still alive. When we went to Logan Street we bought live chickens.

AP: So you came home on a, did you come home on a street car?

BK: No, I think we had cars then. I don't remember, perhaps, it may have been both because we used streetcars extensively. And I can remember to my horror or fear going downstairs into the dungeon, the cellar because it wasn't lit very well and it was a dirt floor, with the rabbi or, I'm not sure the proper word, the schochet, who would kill the chickens and they would be bouncing around without heads.

AP: Really?

BK: And bleeding until they were done, and then they would take them upstairs for my grandmother to take off all the feathers, clean them, and boil them, and kosher them, and prepare them. But we brought them home live.

AP: And this was just for your family that these chickens were down there.

BK: Oh yes.

AP: So everybody went off and bought his or her own chickens and had the same...

BK: It seems to me that one or two of the younger brothers lived with their wives, before they had children, briefly on the third floor where I said all the bedrooms were, but we had our own home, as I said on a higher, up on, seven blocks up the hill of Homestead. And perhaps some of those chickens were taken to our house. But they were always killed right there.

AP: And did you see that happen?

BK: Oh yes, that's why I said to my horror, because I can remember them, the blood flying and they're bouncing all around there on the floor in their last spasms.

AP: Why did you watch?

BK: Pardon me?

AP: Why did you watch?

BK: Curiosity.

AP: Oh I see so it wasn't so bad that...

BK: It's just like going to the, our children, look how much the horror movies do today.

AP: Exactly.

BK: You want to be scared, you know, you go. So that was our horror movies of the day. I guess we had our Frankenstein or whatever it was popular in those days.

AP: But other than going to Squirrel Hill for the meats and the --- you did everything else in Homestead.

BK: There was no other occasion. There was nothing else unless some of our, some of our rich, more rich, or felt more rich relatives as they moved over here maybe we went to their bar mitzvahs or their weddings over here in the Squirrel Hill area.

AP: But other than that for the most part that was the community that, the Homestead area was where you could meet all the needs that you had in terms of clothes and...

BK: Right. Maybe as I got older for dating a little bit we'd come over here as I went to Pitt because as you can imagine, I think my age, give or take a year, because you didn't date people who were much younger or older in those days, I think there was maybe two

or three eligible girls that I could date, so if I wanted to see more Jewish young ladies I had to come to Squirrel Hill, and so I dated over here to some degree.

AP: That actually raises the question, you were saying that was, you thought that was when you were in college, what about high school?

BK: Well high school was right there in Homestead.

AP: Yeah but I mean, were you in the same situation, or did you actually not start dating until you were in college since...

BK: I started to date in high school, well sure. I had a date, you know you went to the prom and things like this, this was already the forties.

AP: Now you were only dating Jewish girls though, is that right?

BK: Oh absolutely. Only Jewish girls.

AP: So were, there weren't very many there.

BK: No, that's what I say, there was only maybe two or three eligible, maybe there was three or four, it seems to me there was more guys because it was difficult. Because like in my graduating class in Homestead I think there was two Jewish girls. And I know there was at least three Jewish boys.

AP: So what did you do about a social life when you were in high school?

BK: Well, we had, other than dating, we had all of the other non-coed type of activities, we just did what our Christian friends from, and I have some still very good Christian friends, from our classes, our high school classes. But as we dated, even prior to, I never dated any of the other, but other than the girls that were right there until I came to Pitt, as a freshman to Pitt in '44 already, I was a little too young to go to the service so my first year I went to Pitt for a year before I went to the service. And that's when I started dating girls from the Squirrel Hill area.

AP: And were you driving or did you take a streetcar when did all this.

BK: That was mostly streetcar, I couldn't afford a car. I couldn't, my family couldn't afford an extra car, we had a little, in fact we had like a station wagon which was the delivery for the grocery store because we already had our store.

AP: Oh so you delivered, your father delivered.

BK: Oh yes. In those days people would call, we would have ten or twenty that would call, especially on the weekend, would call and just give the whole order over the phone that they'd want two bars of soap, a head of cabbage, maybe two steaks, a quart of milk, a

loaf of bread, and we would write it all down. That would be my job, I would pack it in the boxes, make out their bill, and I would have a little route, I might have my seven or eight houses, I'd put it all in the back of the station wagon and I'd make a loop. Because I was starting to drive, I was already sixteen, seventeen, and I would make a loop around take it right in and put it on the kitchen table. And that was standard for a little corner market those days, and everything was credit. Everybody worked in the steel mill so I would give them their slip, and when they got paid at the end of two weeks, they'd come into the store and hopefully pay off their bill.

AP: Was meat rationed during the Second World War?

BK: Yes. Oh yes. So we had food stamps, sure, oh yes.

AP: I mean was it hard to have enough supplies to sell, do you remember?

BK: Well we could buy as much as we took in, I think the way it worked basically that monthly we would turn in all our food stamps and that in turn would give us a credit at the slaughterhouse so that when my dad ordered, he went to the slaughterhouse and pick his own meat, he'd pick what side of beef he wanted, and what veal he wanted, or whatever, he would point to it and put a tag on it for them to deliver. He had to have enough stamps to cover the number of pounds he was buying.

AP: Oh I see

BK: And I don't know how flexible that was, I don't know if there was any black market or gray market going on with him if he needed it. I don't know. But basically that's what we, you know that would be enough supplies to take care of our people for the coming week.

AP: Did you go with him to the slaughterhouse?

BK: Oh sure.

AP: Where was that?

BK: Chase into Homestead, going down, going along the Monongahela River, that would be down because the river, the water flowed toward Pittsburgh. Following that in you would come into an area called Hazelwood, and at the intersection of Hazelwood and West Homestead is an area called Hayes. And just I don't know, I don't think, they may still be there. It was a Hayes Packing. There was several of them, and they were owned, well they were not kosher, as I remember. One of them was owned by a Jacobson family.

AP: Is that the Jacobson from Homestead?

BK: Yes. I think they were relatives. Now a lot of the Jacobsons were in the auto business, they had a big Chrysler agency in Homestead. But, and then it became Hayes Packing, but my dad bought a good bit of his meats there. As I recall.

AP: Now you had to carry those in the...

BK: No they deliver.

AP: Oh they delivered.

BK: Oh those were too big to put in there.

AP: I was gonna say---how would you get these big carcasses...

BK: Oh no, well you know a side of beef, even a four quarter and a hind quarter would each go a hundred fifty, two hundred pounds. So if you bought one side, which sometimes would be enough for our store, now I'm sure a supermarket probably buys a hundred sides, a side is like a half of a steer. Taking off the head and the tail and whatever, and the hooves, but a side would be the whole side. And I think once that's dressed that could easily be four hundred pounds. Three hundred and fifty, four hundred pounds, so you know, they would deliver that. But when they would carry that in the store they'd just bring in a four quarter and a hind quarter, and my dad would throw it on a block and start cutting it up into sections that he could handle. And that's the way business was done. I can remember as I got a little older and stronger, as we were busy, he'd yell and say go get me the rest of that hind quarter and I'd run in and grab it and by now it would be maybe down to seventy, seventy-five pounds and I'd grab it off the hook and throw it down and he'd start cutting it.

AP: So you were developing your own...

BK: Oh sure. I was already in my teens, I'm sure.

AP: Going back to the thing about being in high school, were there other kinds of Jewish organizations or anything at the shul to serve the young people?

BK: Yes, we did have, again I'm not good because I was never real active or close with these or comfortable with them I guess, there was a AZA, which I guess, I'm not sure even what the letters stood for, I'm sure it was American Zionist something of that nature. There was a B'nai B'rith. And I can remember we had a basketball team.

AP: That was run out of the shul?

BK: Out of the shul, yes. And we played, it was all made up of all Jewish boys, and we played at that time already there was a shul in Braddock and Duquesne going up the river and of course McKeesport, and we each had our own shul by that time and through

probably even earlier than I can remember, later thirties, forties. Pre-World War II, and we had our own little league, and we'd go play each other.

AP: So it was all little Jewish boys.

BK: Oh yeah, I can remember basketball more than anything else. For some reason I can't remember other sports. Now, you know and other sports I can remember playing actually football, and swimming team, some things like that, but those were all the community.

AP: Now where did you, was there a basketball court at the shul? I mean how did you do that?

BK: No, no. Well we would, you know we could practice anywhere we could, if we could, I don't know if we were allowed into the high school facilities in those days, and none of the elementary schools had gymnasiums in those days, like today they all do, none of them did then. I can remember where, one place that we did use occasionally in conjunction with their team, St. John's, which was one of the Catholic schools in Homestead, there was at least four or five active Catholic congregations, St. Mary's, St. John's, St. Theresa's. St. John's had a nice little gymnasium, and I can remember going over there and playing. As our Jewish team.

AP: Really.

BK: Yeah, I think maybe they sort of played us occasionally too, St. John's team. And we were allowed to practice there, occasionally.

AP: So there was no objection on the part of the shul to the Jewish boys going to the Catholic church.

BK: As long as we were in the gymnasium. I'm sure they didn't want us to go into their sanctuary, it was forbidden.

AP: Yeah. But that you did do that.

BK: Yes.

AP: There was a little bit of interaction there.

BK: Absolutely, yes, yes.

AP: Let's see, did you go to, you lived in two different places, did you go to two different elementary schools?

BK: Well, no, we...

AP: Oh you didn't live in two...

BK: The store, the businesses, no we always lived on Twelfth Avenue. And the city of Homestead was divided into, the borough of Homestead was divided into wards. And there was a second ward school, elementary, third ward school, fourth ward, fifth ward. Yeah, and I went to fifth. I think there, I don't know if there was a sixth, I can remember a seventh ward which was all the way up toward the top of the hill. But fifth ward school was on Tenth Street, Tenth Avenue, which was only two blocks away. And we walked to all schools. There was no such thing as you know buses or anything, there was no need. I can, in fact, I came home for lunch, always. There was no cafeterias in the schools.

AP: Oh, so even through high school you...

BK: Oh yes. Even when we built our new high school, which was up around Nineteenth, I could run down the hill at lunch time to Twelfth Avenue, have my lunch and walk, and the kids would be coming up the hill from Eighth, Ninth, Tenth, friends of mine, and as they'd come by the house I'd watch for them and walk back to school with them at noon.

AP: Now your parents were always observant.

BK: Oh very, yes. Yes we always had a kosher house, sure.

AP: Yes that's what I was going to ask. Did you also?

BK: No. No, my wife was brought up in East Liberty, so she had lived for a while in West Virginia and other circumstances, and as a result her family never kept a total, although her grandparents did and her mother did to some extent, but they never, they used kosher meats, but they really didn't keep a kosher house. And so when we were married, we immediately went off to Ohio, to the university, and we never have.

AP: Now I guess what I mean was, going, when you were a young man living at home, for example, would your parents eat out at all? Or did you?

BK: There was one Orthodox, or Jewish, the word I want is kosher. There was a Hungarian kosher restaurant somewhere on Murray Avenue. It was almost like in a little house. I can remember off Murray Avenue, and occasionally we ate there.

AP: Oh I see.

BK: For my grandparents, now I don't know if it would have been for their fortieth, fiftieth anniversary, we all met right on Fifth Avenue, upper Fifth Avenue at what was, it became Kalson's Restaurant on Fifth Avenue.

AP: Bubbles and Sherman?

BK: Well, that yes, that may have been an outgrowth. But previously it would have been Kalson's. I don't know if it was a name before that, but it was kosher, and the second floor was like a dining hall. In fact, we have a big picture of the whole family was there that day for my grandparents', it might have been their golden anniversary, but everybody was there, I can remember eating out there. So that's how few times we ever ate out.

AP: So you, too, did not do that.

BK: Absolutely. I can remember working in the steel mill as a laborer.

AP: Oh you did?

BK: Oh yeah, so did my brother.

AP: When did you do that?

BK: When they really needed help. My brother did it pre-World War II, 'cause he was older and I wasn't old enough. But during my freshman year at Pitt, to make you know expenses, to make the money because we were not certainly that wealthy, I would work and they wanted help, and so I would work two, three days a week and all summer full, full five shifts, but I would work around my classes when I went to Pitt in '44. And getting back to, what made me think of this, you talk about how we kept the religion. At Passover, going into the steel mill, we always carried our lunch of course, I would take cheese or meat that my mother prepared in matzahs, and I would sit there with the laborers, black and white, and these Slavish people, and what the heck was I doing trying to eat this thing with those crackers or whatever that was, and cheese between them, you know what do you call that. That was, we would take that into the mill, and so we always kept. And even today, my wife and I always try to have matzahs, we try to always have a seder, especially while, our children are gone now out of our house so it's hard to have a seder, and we usually, some of our Christian friends will come over from where we live out in West Mon County to fill out the table. So we usually have a seder, today.

AP: Going back to the mill. You said black and white and whatever. I take it there, did the races, did the different religions mix together reasonably well?

BK: Well we all worked together, we had to, you know. I was the bottom of the labor hierarchy in the steel mill, so I was very bottom laborer. I was doing, I was in crews that would be unloading boxcars of bricks or things, and so sometimes in those days, especially World War II broke this down very much, I could have a black, he wouldn't be called the foreman, the foreman was a high step up, he would be called like the pusher, he would take a labor crew and we would go out and have jobs to do, and he would keep us moving so he was sort of our boss, and he could be black. I can remember even in '44 due to the shortage of labor, I can remember women working with us, a few women coming into the mill.

AP: Doing physical labor?

BK: Physical labor. And being, I can remember a woman being a pusher. Now, as best I recall, when we broke for lunch, we would usually, I can't remember really sitting in, if you'd go off in a corner by yourself to have lunch it would be with one of your friends and that was usually white. I can't remember especially having to go off with someone who was black.

AP: But you didn't have a sense, or did you, that there were real...

BK: Personally I had no, I had no difference. I can remember none. Because when we were in school, we played ball together, again, we did have showers, so we would shower together and things like this. I can remember that you know, there was always a fair number of blacks in Homestead, because they were, you know they were the base labor for your steel mills. And through the thirties I can remember fighting with them, not in a racial matter, but you know in a ball game you know you get bumped too hard or something, probably calling names. But I can remember some instances with Christians in which I was singled out and fights and surrounded by four or five non-Jewish boys who were taunting me and yelling at me. And I don't know maybe because I was the different guy and I was Jewish, and I went to this other school almost every day after public school I went to Hebrew school.

AP: Did you mind doing that, do you remember?

BK: As I look back on it, I really don't remember minding so much, because it was fun. The other thing that was segregated, we had our own Boy Scout troop. We had the Jewish Boy Scouts, we had our own group. But when we went away to camp, we went to their camp, there was no Jewish camp, there wasn't enough of us.

AP: So you belonged to this Boy Scout troop that was...

BK: Yes, that was another activities, you asked about activities in the synagogue. The basketball team we always had a basketball troop. There was a fella that I met after all these years, at, trying to keep the congregation going a little bit on Sundays as I said in Homestead, a man by the name of Milton Greene, who was a good active man in the Homestead area, and he was our leader, he was our boy scout master. Our scout master.

AP: Oh. He's still around, I just can't get him on the telephone.

BK: I've seen him recently, right.

AP: So he was your scout leader.

BK: Yeah.

AP: Huh.

BK: He was the Boy Scout master in those days. We tease about that. The one young fellow who was my age, Mervis, Harry Mervis, we still see each other. We hadn't seen each other hardly at all for almost ten years, and the fact that we started to try to get the minyan going again and keep it going in Homestead because others were doing it, both of us sort of indirectly got enlisted and we met back there, and so we've been friendly the last couple years and see each other more. Occasionally golf together. And so that, he was one of the fellows, he was the only Jewish fella at the end in my graduating class. The others moved away.

AP: Oh, he was the other Jewish guy.

BK: Yeah, right.

AP: Now the others were already moving to Squirrel Hill and whatever I guess.

BK: Or just leaving, yes. Yeah, a lot of them.

AP: Yeah, I guess that's what I wanted to ask you about, about how it felt being Jewish growing up in that area, or whether it really seemed like anything...

BK: I'm sure it was different. And as I say, I can vividly, it's amazing how sometimes I think I have the type of nature who remembers, what do I want to say, sad or bad experiences, I don't know maybe if somebody's a psychologist can answer me, maybe bad experiences stick better than good ones, but at least they do with me.

And that story I told you about being surrounded that one day with Christians, and they really didn't physically hurt me. I don't know even if I was hit, but I know I was taunted and challenged and things like this, if I wanted to fight or something. And I don't really remember any real, I'm sure there was, but I can never really recall the things we hear today, I can never recall being singled out as, and I probably never heard the word "kike" until maybe college. And you know, that was a very, I just don't remember that type of thing. So I really had no really bad experiences with that.

But one of my good Christian friends who graduated with me, as I went off to Pitt, he went to art school. He wanted to become a commercial artist. And a girl in his class had a bad leg so her girlfriend always picked her up, and her girlfriend was a nice looking young lady, and she was, too, but so my friend who was Christian, Slavish, and he asked, Catholic boy, he asked his friend in class, who was the other girl? And could he get her phone number because he wanted to call her. And so he got the phone number and as he got it from the other young lady, she says, "You should know she's Jewish." And he said, "Oh well I can't date her." This is 1946, '47. Cause we were now, I guess maybe we were back from the service. And so he come back to me, because we were friendly after the service, we were still going out in the evening to a bar, he says, "I got this phone number of a Jewish girl." And this is my wife.

AP: No kidding.

BK: Yeah. I called her. And she wasn't living in Pittsburgh proper at that time, they were living out in South Hills, which was not too common for Jewish people, they had moved out there and they were living in the Carrick area. And I called (tape cuts out)

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE

AP: (tape cuts in) the black --- or a white one.

BK: Well it was whatever mood you were in, yeah.

AP: Oh I see.

BK: I don't know if Harry Mervis ever went, but I would never go. Well I told you I enlisted, I was totally...

AP: Even though you were living in the middle of all of this.

BK: Right. I didn't know there was anything wrong with numbers. I'm sure, I didn't know it was illegal, I know there had to be something wrong with those whorehouses, I guess I knew if they had raids on them.

AP: And did you actually see those women come over to the market?

BK: I knew some of the women because they'd come in the store. Because there was a man who worked, a Catholic, who helped the Markowitzes in the store, and he married one of the girls, and so I would see her because I saw him and they would be together. My leg's --- cramping so I just...

AP: Oh, just stand, I actually have known people who have done that before, they have to walk around after a while.

BK: My legs cramp very much. I'm still active, physically, athletically, I still play a lot of tennis and things, and so I sit a long time with my legs they tend to cramp.

AP: Especially when you have them underneath the table like this.

BK: Right ---.

AP: There's this bar over here which makes it even more difficult.

BK: But I was very much of a (unclear). As you say we were on the streets. When I was at Pitt, my first year, '44, I told you I worked three days a week, if I was out carousing whatever, with my buddies in the evening, and I worked in the mill, lived with my

parents, well no I guess, I worked in the mill when I come back from Ohio State, for three months until my license came through, because see that was the Korean War. Because I got out of school '51, and so again they needed help. But I can remember in '44, especially the summer of '44 before I went to Pitt, I could get up in the morning, I was working in the mill, your shift was eight to four, and since I was out the night before, I might end up getting up around seven, seven fifteen, I would run down the hill with my, you had to punch in, you had like a little check with your number on it, they called that, it was a metal, piece of metal with your number on it, and so that you'd get paid, and get through the gate before ---, sometimes I wouldn't leave the house 'til ten to eight. I'd run down the hill, go through the gate, hit it, keep running, get you know, because I changed my clothes at home, I usually didn't keep much clothes in my locker, have my safety shoes on and everything, go running right to my work space by the time the whistle blew or I was in trouble with the foreman.

AP: Did you have to belong to the union to work in the mill?

BK: Yes, yes. When I went to the service in '45, the mill sent me vacation pay, they were required by law. If you had a full year in, you got, and I got in my year, because I started in May of '44, and I didn't go to the service until May of '45, as I finished my first year of Pitt I went to service, they send you vacation pay. And that was, it made it easy for me when I come back from Ohio State, and I just went down and said I'll do some labor work again, and because I needed money again until I could get my practice open waiting for my license, they just said report here. But that's how close you were to the mills. You know, the Pinkertons, when they had that and everything that was like right on our doorstep because that was the gate, the Pinkertons when they had the fighting and things at that one gate, I'm not talking about the shooting that was down at the river which was three blocks away, but the one gate was the gate right off Fourth Avenue. And Markowitzes were on Third Avenue, the pharmacy, the hotel-saloon was between Fourth and Fifth on Dixon, you know it was only one block over to the, City Farm Lane was the name of that street. And that was the gate. But we would just run down the hill, go right through the gate. It was just a way of life, everybody just worked in the mills.

AP: Did you ever, did you know people who remembered the strike and talked about it at all?

BK: Not the, not that one. A lot of them we had, there were some strikes after World War II.

AP: There weren't any old people around who talked about the old days.

BK: If they did, they didn't talk to me or we didn't dwell upon it, because none of our people really worked in the mills then. I can remember there was Schwartz, he became active as one of the presidents, but one of this brothers was a mill cop, worked in the mill. At the gates, after the Pinkertons and everything. What year were the Pinkertons? I forget.

AP: It was like 1897, I think.

BK: Oh I thought it was later than that, okay you're probably right.

AP: Maybe I'm wrong, I could be wrong.

BK: No you're probably right, it may have been earlier. Because they just had a big celebration and a bunch of things that they try to pep up things at the library, and that's where the author of the Homestead was signing books, we just had, that was the centennial celebration.

AP: Then yeah you're right it would probably be...

BK: It would probably have been the 1890s, yeah. Right, but none of the Jewish people really worked in the mills. I can remember that fellow Schwartz was a cop, and I think helped get my brother in. My brother worked for a long time, he was a crane, he worked his way up to being a crane man. While he was going to Pitt through '38 to '42, he went into service right out of Pitt.

AP: So yeah, I'm gathering that the other thing is, it was not a problem for Jewish people to get a job in the mill. I mean it didn't matter, there was no...

BK: Well, I don't know. I think it was easy for anybody to get a job, they were so labor intensive, they needed laborers. Now I don't know if you could move up the line very far. Because you know, no matter what they talk about the strength of the union seniority, there was no black foreman 'til World War II, the black didn't move too far.

AP: Oh I see.

BK: One way or another, they kept them, they may have been union members et cetera, US Steel may not admit this, USW, but I'd like to know when the first foreman was, I'll bet you it was 1942, '41, '43, you know as they were losing help they had to...

AP: Take whoever was available.

BK: Right. And maybe the union fought to some degree for them, but they, there was a, under-the-table coordination with management that they just weren't qualified to be foremen.

AP: What about things, like you were talking about, what about being a crane man, was that also segregated?

BK: Well that was, yeah, I mean I would be interested to know what first years there was even a crane man. That they let them get out of the labor gang and let them get off the floor. When they let them do things like welding, you could talk to some of the blacks that grew up in the mills, they probably have their own history that would verify those

things, that the, our white community don't like to acknowledge those things, but we know they exist there's no doubt about it. But that was built in. It's still there today, you know as democratic as they profess to be. How many UMW, USW teamsters, how many blacks do you see as officers?

AP: You're talking the union itself.

BK: I'm talking union, I'm not talking management, management might have some justification they say hey we have the money, we have the power, we built this, why should we take them in? But look at the unions from their democratic side, and you know I deal with that constantly, I work with unions, I work with teamsters and management, public sector right now, constantly.

AP: That's a very interesting...

BK: And I can think of in the Teachers Association, you know it's basically white, there's a lot of black teachers in there, but as I go through the Pennsylvania, PSEA, Education Association with their reps, at the, they have like a second level for their support people, they've organized most of the janitors, secretaries, teachers' aides, cafeteria people, they have a group that they call "Educators Support Personal Association". You've heard of PSEA, okay the ESPA is the Employees Service Personal Association, which is made up of these people. I know of only one black rep, and he's at that level. He works with secretaries, custodians, things like that. And we have this black-white, I don't know how we'll ever get over it. I think it's as, I think it's as great a problem or as insurmountable as the Middle East situation is. You know we've all been shocked about Arafat and Shamir shaking hands, I hope I live to see the day were blacks are on that good of a footing as maybe the Palestinians, I hope the Palestinians will be in the coming years. It's, it's sad. And it keeps our country from becoming greater than it is. But it's, their breakthrough is impossible, maybe part of it's their fault, like we want to blame them on not properly educating and pushing you know, like the Jews, when we came from Europe you were gonna go to college.

AP: As you were saying, you were putting your two cents of your few cents a week away no matter what.

BK: My parents as you can hear from what I'm saying were not, my family was not poor, but we were not upper middle class either. We were good middle class people, but you were going to college. And that's the same with, my children are going to college. My son didn't graduate, but that was his choice, we fought that out, but you know, you, I'm sure there's the families in Squirrel Hill, it's a given. And the ones that don't go, it's the kids breakaway. (phone rings) So should I get out of your hair already?

AP: No, actually you're not in my hair at all. This has been a really terrific interview, lots of information as it turns out.

BK: I like to talk as you can hear.

AP: Oh well I'm glad that you did, because otherwise it's not much of an interview.

BK: I didn't know what I could give, as you say most of the people say, and I hope that's of some value. Are you going to throw that away? Or will you keep it together for me, because I labeled it.

AP: Oh absolutely, I'll give it back to you, just...

BK: Yeah this is my brother's writing, this is when he was already living up in Bradford with his daughter.

AP: Oh I see, that's what (unclear). Okay I'll get it back to you as it is.

BK: Unfortunately he went, he had two unhappy marriages and as he got in his later years he was living on his own and as he became as ill his daughter had migrated to Bradford and had asked him to come live there, which was a blessing for him.

AP: Although I guess it felt kind of isolated.

BK: Well, yes, but he was somewhat isolated self-imposed here.

AP: I see.

BK: In his last couple years. Probably from '88, '89 when he broke up with his second wife.

AP: Mhm. And there was no real community to support him anymore.

BK: No, not at all. Other than a few friends. He and I weren't even close unfortunately, in those years.

AP: It happens.

BK: Well I had moved to Westmoreland County. We saw each other, we talked.

AP: Yeah, people go different ways too.

BK: Yeah, but we didn't socialize.

AP: Actually, apropos of that, there's just one other question that comes to my mind, you were talking about the classes and whatever, did you have any sense that the range of people in the synagogue, you know I was asking you about Joe Frank before, did you have any feeling that there were distinctions between the people who were better off and more prominent families?

BK: Oh, sure. Yeah, it was no big deal, but the, you know single out the Gordons, the Jacobsons, the had the bigger houses and they were, gee, they had the big auto dealership, we looked upon them, and I guess maybe the Solomons who had a bigger store, a big men's clothing store right on Homestead Main Street, and I guess they were a little bit more wealthy.

AP: But I mean, did you have a feeling that their, that they had any more privileged kind of position in the synagogue?

BK: Well, they usually were the ones that put up the money, along with my grandfather, because he fought them pretty good at the services to buy the aliyahs relative to the opening and closing of the ark and taking out the Torahs, and so they did that more often, and my grandfather usually did them too, because he liked having five sons and innumerable grandchildren to make sure they stayed, to make sure his sons stayed on the holidays that they stayed in shul all day, if he bought the aliyahs they had better be there because grandpa was going to call them to (unclear).

AP: And he would notice that you weren't there.

BK: Well yeah, mostly his sons. I mean, he didn't send up the grandsons too much because there wasn't that many aliyahs and he had too many sons, and so you had to follow the pecking order. And so he would do it. Keisler, Grandfather Keisler though. But no there was no real distinctions that they were the rich ones and we weren't as rich. There was no problem other than little things like that, and they had a big fancy house I guess, though our house was pretty big.

AP: Yeah so that would be just the personal things.

BK: There was no ---, we didn't have any country clubs.

AP: Or he said he can't be the officer because he doesn't have as much money or anything like that.

BK: Oh no, I don't think so. I don't know, maybe there was.

AP: But you didn't hear that.

BK: No, not at all. Again, maybe I was in the wrong one, again, I was the six years removed. But that, there was no real class distinction within our Jewish community that I can think of.

AP: And I take it there was no negative feelings about taking jobs in the mill, or you would, or was there?

BK: Well I think that was a little bit of, outgoing. That was, I don't know if that was, I don't know what the other families said about it. Our immediate family was rather proud of it.

AP: Okay I guess that's what I was...

BK: You know that we had the strength to do it, because you know that was not a Jewish occupation. Because it was dirty, and it was more with your back than your head. We were supposed to strictly stay with things that used your brain. And so maybe that's why it was, maybe, maybe it was discussed in the community, I think our family, personally we were proud of it. To this day, you hear me say it with real gusto, "Oh I worked in the mill."

AP: I guess it might have been different had you made that your career.

BK: Oh yeah. Now the Mervis, the young Mervis did. That was funny. He started mercantile, he was one of the ones that didn't go to college of our friends, because I think his family really couldn't afford it. His father died when he was an infant, and his mother really, there was no money in that family. One Mervises, one branch had the Studebaker, and I think that's the one that became a Ford agency, but it was basically Studebaker in Homestead, and they were fairly well to do, but his mother on their side, there was just no money. So he went to work, I mean he was working all through high school as much as he could and was in the Little's Shoe Store, and he went that way and he worked through Kauffman's things and then he married a young Catholic girl, whose father was big in the union, and suggested that he start to go, become an electrician apprentice, in the mills, and so he made that his life.

AP: So you needed to have a union connection to be something like an electrician.

BK: Oh yeah. To get into one of the trades? Oh my.

AP: Oh so I see, so if you didn't have that connection in the first place that would be something that you couldn't do.

BK: Oh, no. To get into the trades, it was very difficult, I would say, for a Jew to become a journeyman plumber, electrician, carpenter in those days? Absolutely. Because one, they didn't do it. But if you wanted to do it, work with your hands and that way, it was difficult. I think it was difficult early on for Catholics to break in.

AP: Until there were enough of them to sort of become the predominant thing, which I suppose in some ways may explain why so many of the Jewish people migrated toward having the little grocery store or whatever.

BK: Sure to become merchants or the health professions, because that required brains, and, well, the other doors weren't open. You just didn't get into those things. And the blacks, again I'm going back to them, I don't mean to harp upon it, how many, it's only

since, I don't know, since World War II, it's probably more since the seventies that they've been able to break into the trades. Go check with Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and see how many blacks have the papers today, have their card that they can get jobs through the union electrical workers, because I did a case for them against the, they wanted me to help move a black guy out because he was such a trouble maker, unfortunately with drugs and things. But they said they wanted him, they're so unhappy he's a bad member and was fouling things up for them, they needed his black representation. And that's you know, that's been the way in America. Our banking industry and et cetera. Of course the Jews have been fortunate to break into that very well.

AP: But that's a place I assume no one would have looked for a job, to go to one of the banks and try to get a job.

BK: Oh, no. Not at the base level, no. Not unless you were in New York I guess with the Morgans or the Rothchilds or somebody that had their own banks. You didn't go to Mellon, I'm sure, around here.

AP: Yeah, so there were all these little areas that you knew were places where you couldn't apply.

BK: It was no use knocking on that door. That door was closed, yeah. In those years. May I ask how old you roughly are?

AP: Yes, you may.

(tape cuts out)

BK: (tape cuts in) probably just had chips or something, maybe by then I was eating hotdogs and hamburgers, but it seemed to me basically in the evening if we were playing around through high school and things like this it would be ice cream cone or a sunday, or an ice cream soda. And so I didn't have to worry about if I was eating any kind of meat.

AP: And now when you came back from Ohio, did you, did you go back to Homestead, you were married by then right?

BK: Between my first two years, in forty, I'm trying to keep my years straight, probably forty-seven, was my first year at Ohio State, I started, and then I come back and I was friendly with these same guys, and I got the number for my wife, and we dated through the summer of '48. And we decided, I went away to school and we were running back and forth so much this was silly, so we got married in the fall of '49, we went back to Ohio State which would have been my second year in professional school, in '49.

AP: And then when you graduated you came back to the Pittsburgh area?

BK: Oh yes. We come back and my brother was practicing here, and...

AP: Now where was he practicing?

BK: He was practicing in Homestead.

AP: He was.

BK: He always practiced in Homestead.

AP: And was he living here also?

BK: Yes. Yeah, my parents' house on Twelfth Avenue, on the back of the lot, it was not a real big lot, they had built a three story apartments for an investment, three apartments, one on top of the other, separate little building, and my brother got married and took over the first floor. So he lived there and practiced optometry right there in Homestead. Until he built his own home in Homestead Park.

AP: I see. And then, but when you came back where did you set up your practice?

BK: Well when I came back, of course, I lived during my early Pitt, until I went away to Ohio State and everything, I lived with my parents. I lived with my parents, and I think my brother was already married and was living in the little apartment right behind us, on the first floor there. And then I got married and of course, my wife and I when we came back until I got my license, we lived with her parents on Stanton Avenue, in East Liberty.

AP: Oh I see.

BK: I was, we were married in '49 at the Poale Zedeck.

AP: Oh. So you were married in an Orthodox synagogue.

BK: Oh yes, yes.

AP: Was that her synagogue?

BK: Not really, because her parents were not that active. They really didn't belong to a synagogue, so I guess that was the most convenient that had the proper facilities and could, I'm sure they rented the social hall, and so that's where we were married and had our reception.

AP: Yeah, so that sort of raises the question then of why you didn't get married in the Homestead synagogue.

BK: Well that's the bride's...

AP: Choice.

BK: Choice, yeah. And the bride's family's responsibility, so they...

AP: That's what they chose.

BK: They chose there, we had nothing to say about it.

AP: Oh I see. I thought since she didn't have a synagogue that...

BK: Well they found one.

AP: But you didn't have any strong feeling about getting married in Homestead I take it either.

BK: No, not at all.

AP: That would be part of what you were talking about.

BK: I don't know if my parents did either. Again, my father working so much, couldn't be as active as he wanted to, even though my grandfather was still living as I said, my grandparents Hepps on that side, that, my mother's side. No, I can't remember any discussion of it. It was just an automatic, you did what the bride's parents said, this is where the wedding will be, give me your list of relatives you want us to invite, and that's it.

AP: And when you set up your practice, where did you set up your practice?

BK: I formed a partnership with my brother, and I set up in the South Hills. Because at that time my wife, as I said her parents were living in the South Hills, and I scouted the area and I really couldn't find anything that I really was strong about, other than the South Hills area, which was a new area building, and that's where I opened my first practice, but I was in conjunction under the help of my brother, we were like a loose partnership.

AP: I see so he had his office in Homestead, and you had this other one in South Hills. And then did you live in South Hills?

BK: We rented an apartment up there. That was our first home. We left, I got my license, there's always an interval between graduation and the state giving you a license from anywhere from three, four month, so then we rented an apartment over there.

AP: And did you affiliate out in that area?

BK: Yes. Yes, we formed the, the young people out there formed a congregation. It was a traditional. Though we did use a lot of Hebrew in the congregation and more English, but we did use a lot of Hebrew in the services, and we affiliated out there.

AP: Now I'm trying to follow this, because you're now in Irwin. How did you end up in Irwin from South Hills?

BK: Okay, let's see. The practice didn't go well in the South Hills. You know, it was in those days, it was customary, ninety percent, there was no places to work, if you didn't have someone who was overseeing you, you could become a junior partner. Ninety percent of the people opened cold, and so I just opened a practice and it didn't go well. And a friend of mine was practicing in Irwin that I had become friendly with, another optometrist, he wanted to go to California, he said, "Why don't you buy my practice." that was taking off very well, and I located in, out there in '57. And been there ever since. Raised my family out there.

AP: Okay, now, this is probably my bad geography, is that the point you became involved with the synagogue in White Oak, with Gemilas Chesed?

BK: Well, from '57 to '70, we were practically not involved anywhere. Our children, first child was born in '59 and so we started to become involved with the synagogue in Greensburg which is a Reformed. As our children become seven, eight, nine years old, so that would have been, our first child was born in '59, that would have probably been about '67, so probably there was at least a span from around '48 to '50, when I went to Ohio State to almost '65, probably a span of almost fifteen years that we were really uninvolved.

AP: Mhm. And you weren't coming back for services or anything.

BK: Oh yes. We'd always go, I'd always go somewhere for services, for holidays.

AP: But did you go back to Homestead?

BK: Probably. As I can think of it, yes. I probably did come back into Homestead for services. That would have been most convenient. My dad died in '70 so I guess I was still coming back, I think my dad died around '70.

AP: And they were still living in the same place until they died.

BK: Oh, yes. Until they, oh no, wait. Sorry. My brother built a home, built or bought a home in Homestead Park, and so my parents finally moved from their dwelling, I think they may have sold it shortly thereafter, sold the store, and bought a home close to my brother in Homestead Park. And this had to be again, somewhere in the late sixties.

AP: And so they, your brother and the rest of that family were still maintaining...

BK: A membership and activity in Homestead. In those years, my brother, that's probably one of the years he was one of the officers in Homestead. At Rodef Shalom.

AP: So he maintained...

BK: Yeah he was always active. But, when my daughter was born, now for my son I was already living, I was still living out by my practice in the South Hills, though I had closed it off because I was working elsewhere. My son's bris was in the house. He was adopted, so we just had the bris right in my living room. When my daughter was born in '62, I came back to Homestead to name her, I made sure they had a minyan, and we had a service to name my daughter, official service, at the Homestead Hebrew Congregation.

AP: So and that was partly I guess because you weren't so connected with anything else.

BK: Anywhere else to go, that was just most natural, yes. My wife had a stillborn, somewhere around '58, it was buried in the Homestead Cemetery, because there was nowhere else, there was never a thought of going anywhere else.

AP: So when those kinds of events happened, it was to Homestead that you...

BK: Back to Homestead. Always, yeah. That's our roots without a doubt.

AP: And, now what I heard you say is now toward the end you were going to this minyan in Homestead.

BK: That only occurred in the last year or two.

AP: Now how did you get back involved with that?

BK: Well, at the holidays, prior to the holidays, all the years, I would go to the Homestead Cemetery. So at the cemetery, one of the young men who I was active with, had now become one of the pillars to keep the cemetery open.

AP: Who was that?

BK: And he was always there. Alan Smooke. And so he grabbed me as always being a good organizer, and said you know, we're having trouble on Sunday morning. He says, "If you're going to Gemilas Chesed on Sunday morning, would you drive another ten minutes to fifteen minutes, and start to help us on Sunday morning?" I said, "Okay." He always (tape cuts out)

AP: This has been Anne Sheckter Powell interviewing Bernard Keisler in September of 1993 for the oral history project of the Homestead Hebrew Congregation for the Western Pennsylvania Jewish Archives of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE

TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO

AP: (cuts in) to say was the cemetery because that was really the thing where he found you.

BK: That's right. Because I hadn't attended services or anything there from the mid-sixties when we started the congregation out in the South Hills, close to the South Hills country club, right in that area, White Hall, Castle Shannon, Pleasant Hills, that circle was where we started the congregation.

AP: Was that, is that the congregation that wanted to connect with, a few people have talked about a Pleasant Hills congregation that wanted to connect with the Homestead one if they would become conservative.

BK: No. I don't remember any, ever consideration with Homestead. What they were trying to pull out of, as I recall, Beechwood. That they were losing their building or they wanted to migrate because their congregation was moving further out from Beechwood which is a suburb of Pittsburgh.

AP: Beechview?

BK: Beechview, I'm sorry. Thank you, near Dormont, you're, thank you. And that was, I think called Beth El, and they wanted to form a congregation, and they did eventually somewhere out in that area. And we wanted them to locate closer to Pleasant Hills, and that never occurred.

AP: I see.

BK: I don't think Homestead was ever in on consideration that way. There may have been a problem with the Orthodox versus the conservative with the others, but they finally put up their own building, which we were part of. I think we may have moved already out to Irwin, but we were still coming back for a little bit for the first few years, and I think we were contributors to help them getting that building up.

AP: Okay, just sort of ranging over the whole thing, let me ask you one thing, do any families or rabbis or other characters sort of stand out in your mind as you think about your experiences with the Homestead community, the Jewish community?

BK: Not really, not really. Other than I had one close friend that I'm still friends with from that Jewish community, but it seemed like I was at the niche, right below it, I pulled away before I could become integrated into the organization of the synagogue to the congregation to keeping it alive, so really I have no fond memory. My memory even of Rabbi Pinkas, who I know left shortly thereafter he fell out of favor with the congregation.

AP: Do you know why?

BK: No, not really.

AP: I've always tried to figure out, it seems like most people don't remember why these rabbis came and went.

BK: And there were several after him and I really don't even remember their names well. There maybe have been somebody like Pinkser, Pickscur, I don't remember. But no, no. Alan Smooke I became friendly with and brought back only because of going back to cemetery. The men that had run, well there was one other man I should, whose always been active, who recently died also was Oscar Cohen, I can remember him as always being one of the men that if you wanted to find out what was happening you would call Oscar. He was also very active with the cemetery also until his latter years when he became ill.

AP: But you don't remember families that were, like involved with your family in any particular way, or that your grandfather said, "Those people are driving me crazy." or anything.

BK: The only ones I can really remember that were really close, I can remember many of the names, but the ones that were close were all family, they were all Heppses, because there was two or three Heppses and there was two Keislers right in the community.

AP: So that was really your circle.

BK: That was really our circle. I know the Gordons were there, the Jacobsons, the Stahlbergs, the Heidovitzes, there was a family by the name of Solomon that I had some familiarity with, there was a Stein who was related to the Stein that you mentioned, Bernie Stein, but this was another Stein who was my age, the Katzes and Greenbergs who had the hardware store, and a little store on main street, but that's about it. But there was no real outstanding adult other than my uncles and grandfather that I can really point to, which is maybe good or bad, it's almost like we were a closed society within a society.

AP: Although probably people make those little circles, whether they're family or whether they're friends, there's just a limit.

BK: I'm sure it was a strength too, it maintained our Judaism.

AP: Exactly. In a larger society Jews were, really were not...

BK: Right.

AP: Did I miss anything else? Any thoughts have come to your mind that you want to add on?

BK: Not really. There was a book written called *Homestead* recently. It was fairly new I think because I know the author had a signing of it in Homestead that I missed, because I wanted to get a copy. And he wrote, so he went and lived in the community in recent

years and wrote his book and tried to give a history of the steel mill, or the community and everything. And I was very unhappy with it, and so was my brother, because I really think he slighted, he didn't have an opportunity, probably because there's no families really, there's, I don't know of any Jewish families still living in Homestead, there, well I'll correct that, there's the Katzes and a few, but he didn't make contact with them. And he wrote a description, and practically left us out to begin with, when he mentioned that relative to the merchants on the avenue and he made a point of saying that in the early, I guess seventies, certainly post-World War II, that the whole Jewish community migrated to Squirrel Hill. They crossed the river, as he put it, to live a better life or something and that wasn't true. Because as I pointed out, my brother was there and there was quite a few families and we maintained, the congregation was active, and maintained a rabbi probably through the, into the eighties, and so I was disturbed by that. If I ever have an opportunity to meet the author, I will certainly correct him, as I'm sure other people have. Other Jews.

AP: Although it's one of the reasons for having an oral history like this because he...

BK: Because he dismissed us, really, and we were an important part. I remember another man that's probably somewhere in your history too, when I speak about being part of the history. For years when I was growing up, the family by the name of Samuels, and while he was not perhaps a good member of the congregation, he was the fire chief. He was the Homestead fire chief for years. I don't even remember his first name, I want to say Irv, or Hyman, or Hymie, but Samuels was the fire chief, and so he was very part of government.

AP: He certainly was.

BK: Yeah, yeah.

AP: That's Homestead.

BK: Yeah, oh yeah. He was the fire chief in Homestead. That's the only, I guess there was some other politicians, I know my brother was on the school board for a few years.

AP: He was.

BK: Yeah, he was on the Homestead school.

AP: So it was possible for Jews to be very actively involved in the community.

BK: I don't know if, I don't believe anyone ever became mayor or anything like this, or maybe there was Jews on council, but they were an important part because the whole avenue as was typical of the times, you had the Linkoffs, the wallpaper, was the Linkoff family, there was a Linkoff Jeweler, there was a Linkoff optometrist, and I'm going back.

AP: Did they all live there, the Linkoffs?

BK: Oh yeah, I think most of the family is now, they may have migrated some of them, but the Greenbergs lived across the street from us and they were hardware, wallpaper also, general stores. There was post, I don't know who owned the shoe stores, and they're part of the Little's, oh that was the last name, Little. And they're the Littles that have the shoe stores here on Murray Avenue, and they were always active in Homestead. Half-Brothers was the furniture store, was the big store, and I think, as I say the automobile agencies was Mervis, who was the big Studebaker, Ford agency later on, the Chrysler was Gordon and Jacobson was the partnership. One of my uncles was the master beer distributor for Duquesne Brewery for the whole Monongahela Valley, and he had his store right on, the beer distributor, right on the avenue. I don't know if we were in many saloons, one of my uncles had a saloon in West Homestead.

AP: What was that?

BK: A saloon was a bar.

AP: No, no. What was it called?

BK: Probably Herb's.

AP: Herb's, oh okay. Was it on Eighth Avenue?

BK: Well it was on the extension of Eighth Avenue that went past the Mesta Machine Company down by Mesta right off of, well actually it divided so that was Seventh Avenue I think. Seventh and Eighth divided right there, so the main street became Seventh Avenue going through West Homestead, I think. Yeah, we were all, of course Bernie Stein, the man you mentioned, in the later years probably when I say later years that's not fair because it was already the sixties, he had a big saloon right on the, Sixth and Amity, right alongside the railroad station. And there was a lot of little grocery stores, the Markowitzes had a store way down on Third Avenue which is another, Markowitz was a Hepps. Markowitzes, Heppses, yeah. I should have brought my Hepps book with you.

AP: Yeah I'm sorry I didn't see that.

BK: One of the out springs from those set of five or six brothers on the Heppses, and the two sisters, whatever sisters there were on the Hepps family. One of them living in Texas decided she was going to gain information, you could say she was an amateur historian, and she started about five years ago writing everybody. All the family brothers and, and she compiled the book that has all the Hepps family, and it is tremendous.

AP: With stories about all the family?

BK: She listed all the brothers, the original that came over from Europe, and their wives. She traced all their children. She has, each on has a chapter. Each brother has a chapter.

She did a tremendous work. She called all of us. I went out to the Homestead cemetery after talking to her, went around all the gravestones of Heppses, if I knew it was a Markowitz who was a Hepps, I wrote that down and what connection, many of the stone that are Heppses, I didn't know who they were. Even though my grandfather were Heppses and et cetera, and I wrote them all down and sent the dates to her, and she incorporated them in the book. We also sent her all of the photographs that we could collect, and we have one big book. I should have brought that with me but, I was thinking that you really wanted more information about the Homestead congregation, as you do, and around, that this conversation would be more around the synagogue.

AP: Yeah. Except that is the synagogue in many ways.

BK: I have nothing else, I can't think of anything else that I can really. I'm sure there's a lot of little things. My grandfather's brother, that he was closest with, who, he moved to Squirrel Hill eventually and lived right over on, right off Beechwood Boulevard, the part that goes down the hill towards the bottom of Murray Avenue. They had a fight, somewhere, it would have had to of been the early thirties, maybe even earlier. Never spoke to each other from then on.

AP: Ever?

BK: Their two wives were sisters. They had married sisters in Europe and brought them over. His name was Adolph, by grandfather was Bernhard, they never spoke. All the years, the sisters kept communication, the sisters spoke, because one sister was living here in Squirrel Hill, the other Homestead, they came back to Homestead for the holidays, the two brothers never spoke. When Adolph died, my grandfather was probably at least eighty, and they said well you probably going to be going to the funeral, he said, "Why?" He said, "We never spoke, we haven't spoken for the last thirty years, why am I going to go to his funeral now?" And he didn't. So that's part of my grandfather's character too. That's one of the things I can always remember about him, that he did bother going to his, they never spoke those two brothers. I don't even know, I was a child, they never told me what the fight was about.

AP: They may have forgotten.

BK: I never probably asked. I don't know if they remembered.

AP: Sometimes these things get a life of their own.

BK: Yeah.

AP: But they never were able to use Yom Kippur to get over that.

BK: No, no, no. We forgive, you know and we atone for our sins and we ask everyone to forgive us, you don't get forgiven for sins between you and I.

AP: Exactly.

BK: The only way that can be forgiven, if I were forgive you and go to you and ask for you to forgive me, that's the only way that can be wiped out. I can't wipe out all my other indebtedness or whatever as we do in Yom Kippur by prayer, any of my commercial or outside activities, but from person to person we have to do that between us, we can't do it just with prayer.

AP: And they weren't able to do that.

BK: Evidently they didn't want to, I don't know. I really as, I've searched my memory, and you've prodded me very well to bring these things back. I really wish my brother could have spoken to you.

AP: I'm sorry about that.

BK: Because as I say...

AP: And he really wanted to.

BK: Yes, the six year difference. And he would have enjoyed it. I've enjoyed this and I'm sure he would have enjoyed it even more, being six years older. But that was just enough of a gap. And living there, as I say, he stayed there.

AP: He continued to be involved with that so that's a whole different thing. But this has been very helpful. You know I do want to ask you one thing since you mentioned Samuels, do you remember your family, you remember a lot of things about politics in Homestead.

BK: A little bit. I remember there was a family by the name of Frank. And I don't remember their name, but he was, and this was rumored...

AP: Joe.

BK: Yeah. He was a numbers king, he ran the numbers. The racket from that standpoint. I can remember now that I say, another thing, I talked about the Markowitzes having a grocery store just like my parents on Third Avenue, which they lived behind and above, and Third Avenue you know, was three blocks, well the mill was on both sides because the mill ran at an 'L'. The mill came up to Eighth, if this was the main street Eighth Avenue, the mills came down to Second, and came across. Now World War II they took everything up to the railroad track, so my parents, my grandparents' home was gone, the Markowitzes on Third Avenue, now my point of bringing this up since I got into the numbers. The Markowitzes were on the corner of Third and Dixon, and next, going across Third Avenue, the next house was all of the brothels, the white whorehouse.

AP: Only white.

BK: Oh that was strictly white. The blacks were along the railroad tracks on Sixth Avenue.

AP: Oh I see so there were different ones that people would choose.

BK: The blacks were almost, I don't know how well the blacks were organized. It seemed to me like they were almost independent entrepreneurs that ran along there. But the white was very well organized and the, I can remember from my childhood, we didn't have playgrounds, there was one maybe, but we played on the street on Third Avenue. We had our football games, we had even our baseball, in those days it was mushball, like they play softball today, it was a softer ball, and maybe that was to protect the houses so we'd be less like to break a window, because we'd hit off the houses all the time. And I don't know how familiar you are with playing ball, but the street was pretty wide, but if you were playing in the field and someone hit a ball and hit a house and you caught it that's an out. Because that's like, you couldn't run over for it, so if it carooned (sic) off the house and you caught it they were out. If it hit the ground it was a fair ball and you played it. But my point of bringing this us is we would play, this is Eighth Avenue, this is Dixon Street, along Third Avenue Markowitzes store was here, grocery store and they lived there, we would be playing ball in the street. And men would stop and say "where's the whorehouse?"

AP: They asked the little boys this.

BK: Yeah, we were playing, we may have been, I'm sure I was eleven, twelve, thirteen, we'd play, that's where it was the best place to play ball, and we would turn around and point right over here to this house. Now, where the Markowitzes lived, and where the brothel was, okay, there was a little house in between that the lady would sit out front so she could press the button, big black heavy set, heavy black lady, colored lady, and as you'd go through the closed door into a little court to step into the brothel, if she knew you, or if she felt you were okay she'd press the button so they'd open the inner door for her. If there was a raid, and they didn't know beforehand, if they weren't tipped off that the police were coming, and if it was an unexpected raid, as they would bust in she would see the place, she would hit the button, a code of sometime to alert all the women. Okay now, there was a passageway between a false wall that they would open up, and the women would come into the Markowitzes and they would stay upstairs 'til the raid was over, the ones that got out in time. I can remember that vividly.

AP: Oh my, what a story!

BK: Yeah, yeah I'm sure you, wasn't that brought up before by someone...

AP: No.

BK: Well you would have to talk to a Markowitz or to my brother and I.

AP: The only one I talked to was Edgar Markowitz, was that the same family?

BK: Yes, but that was not immediate family, he was removed, they lived up on the hill. He never come down below the tracks, and played with our grandparents. I can remember he or his brother who were about our age, one was a year older than me one, I saw Edgar coincidentally at the cemetery, the first time I've seen him in thirty years, but they didn't come down, I don't think they were allowed.

AP: Yeah, well they lived with their grandmother and their aunts.

BK: Yeah, they lived up on the hill, so they didn't come down below the tracks. They were one of the families that didn't come below the tracks.

AP: So did you, would you recognize the prostitutes when you saw them out, I mean did you...

BK: I don't know if I knew what they did. I'll tell you how naive I was, I'm not sure I knew what they did in there. I knew what a whorehouse, what they wanted, I guess, I honestly I was so innocent, I was very innocent, even though I was brought up in that area, I knew they were writing numbers. From the drugstore, I delivered orders to the whorehouse, I would walk in and I would go, the lady would indicate here comes the kid with the stuff from the drugstore, you know whatever the women wanted, magazines I guess pharmaceuticals, beauty makeup whatever, I'd ring the button, I never went inside. But they'd open the door and they'd pay me. I helped my cousins carry groceries over from the Markowitz's store to the, you know because they prepared food there. In those days, little boys to earn money would have newspaper routes of course, but the other thing they had from the, I don't remember what the publishing company was, but the *Colliers* magazine, there was a magazine that come out once a week called *Liberty* magazine, *Colliers*, *Saturday Evening Post*, but the *Colliers*, and *Colliers* magazine, C-O-double L-I-E-R-S, and *Liberty*, we were permitted to establish routes.

AP: Oh so they didn't come in the mail.

BK: No, no there was no mail. You don't do things like that. And so we had a route. And before I, I wasn't big enough to deliver newspapers yet, or couldn't get a route, I developed my own little magazine route, and there was two of the women who bought for a nickel, as I can remember, would buy *Liberty* magazine from me. So every week I stopped at the whorehouse and they'd come to the door and I'd give them two magazines and they'd give me a dime. I can remember that to this day. I had maybe twenty customers, I probably covered, I'll bet I covered three miles, a loop, cause I remember I had one family, a Jewish family down in West Homestead, the Langs, and Leftkowitzes that lived down there by my uncle's bar that they bought a magazine from me, so I had to walk an extra half mile down to their place to deliver their magazine and got my nickel.

AP: You were willing to do that for a nickel.

BK: Well I got a commission out of that, I probably made a half a cent each. I delivered, I had from one end of Twelfth Avenue to the other, about eight blocks, I had my first newspaper route, I delivered the *Pittsburgh Press* and the *Homestead Messenger*. The *Press* was three cents, the *Messenger* was two cents, okay now some people only took the *Messenger*, the *Homestead Messenger* from me, so at the end of the week, because there was no Sunday paper, I'd stop at the house and they'd give me twelve cents, that was for the papers for the week. And if I was lucky maybe they'd give me fifteen, that three cents that they gave me for a tip was probably more than my commission. I think we got like a quarter of a cent for every *Messenger*, and maybe a half a cent for every *Press*. So I don't know what I had, maybe twenty, fifteen or twenty *Messengers* and maybe twenty or thirty *Presses* that I delivered every day after school. And so maybe I got a couple bucks every week at the end of the week that was my commission for the...

AP: So you went to Hebrew school four days a week and then you were delivering these things.

BK: Oh I delivered those after school every day sure.

AP: So you managed to fit that all in.

BK: Oh yeah that didn't take long. As a kid I can run that route in no time. And in those days, you know where that money went?

AP: No, I was going to ask that.

BK: Directly into a savings account because I had to go to, I wanted to go to college.

AP: Oh so you were thinking ahead.

BK: Well my parents were. You know I told you my mother went to University of Pittsburgh, my dad, you know my dad went to about six or seven years in Europe of school.

AP: Really.

BK: And then he took his trade to become a meat cutter, a butcher, and that was his whole education. And so oh yeah, I don't know if I got twenty-five cents, or fifty cents out of my commission of two dollars or whatever it was for the week. That went directly to a savings account.

AP: So your parents had, you had this image far ahead of you that you were gonna go on.

BK: Oh, absolutely. There was no doubt about it. It was a matter of what I wanted to do. And I think the only reason we ended up in optometry is my brother couldn't get into medical school. He good grades, 'cause there was a Jewish quota, you know. Where ever

he applied, I don't know how many, if they took ten percent of the class, but if that was Jewish then, in the late, he was trying to get in, he graduated high school '38. '39, '40 he was trying to get in, well he went to Pitt and then the second year on when you can apply, he never got into medical school. So he decided to go to optometry school when he got back from the service and I just followed him, I figured I'm not going to go through that frustration of trying to get into medical school.

AP: That's interesting, I never thought of asking how he thought of being an optometrist.

BK: Yeah, well he wanted to go to medical school. If you talk to many dentists, probably, maybe psychologists, optometrists my age, talk to the fellows that are in their sixties, how many of them wanted to be physicians. You just couldn't get in. You know, how many Jews did they take? So you ended up, you went to your second choice.

AP: Were there other things that you knew that were sort of off limits to you as a Jewish person?

BK: Well I never went into a bar. 'Til I come back from the service, I wouldn't go into a bar, there was a lot of stores, places I wouldn't even think to go into to. As you said, where did I eat? I would never go into any of the little restaurants or things like that. I'd go into the drugstore and get an ice cream cone as I told you, but...

AP: Were there also other places where you knew you shouldn't apply for a job, that you were unlikely to be hired, or professions you shouldn't think about?

BK: No, as you said we stayed out of the Catholic churches. Pretty much. Even as close as I was to my friends, I never went into any of their churches.

AP: As they probably would not have come to a synagogue.

BK: Oh goodness no. No, our one big social center was the Carnegie Libraries, through the whole valley, Monongahela Valley, you're aware of that. You know Carnegie built these lovely buildings that were, this wing would be the auditorium, the center wing would be the library, and the other wing would be the swimming pool, pool hall, and gymnasium. So that was my life.

AP: Oh you did, you took a lot of advantage of that.

BK: Oh my. I went swimming, boys' days were Monday, Wednesday, Friday. And so I was there, oh heck, I can remember walking home three blocks, because the library was on Eleventh, walking over to Twelfth and my hair would freeze. Because I was so young, I wouldn't dry. And you know, no bathing suits, that's why it was boys on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and women, girls on Tuesday and Thursday.

AP: Oh I see.

BK: I don't know, I think the women used suits.

AP: They had those little tank suits.

BK: Yeah, but we didn't, we didn't wear bathing suits on Monday, Wednesday, Friday. The only one to wear a suit was a life guard, you could tell the life guard because he had on trunks.

AP: Because he was sitting out of the water.

BK: Well no, I don't think he sat there, because the ceiling was only this high as this. There was no place for him to sit. The building you know, it was a sunken pool, well, it was indoor of course. And so yeah, that was our social center, and there was no blacks. I can remember that vividly. Another place we never went as Jews was in pool halls. There was a lot of pool halls, you know because that was not a good environment. I shot pool, and I learned pool in the Carnegie Library. I often joke with people, I learned how to play ping pong very well, and it wasn't called table tennis, we learned ping pong and we learned how to shoot pool including billiards, in the library. And people would say, "Where'd you learn how to swim?" Because I was a fairly good swimmer, I was on teams and things, I learned at the library.

AP: They taught you as well?

BK: Oh yeah there was classes. Oh yeah we had classes from early on. And I became a life guard, and I was an instructor, I went through the Red Cross and got my instruction and then they hired me, I forget what they paid us, but I worked there in my last years in high school before I went away to college. That was our social center. But the Jewish kids, we never, you know if you had a chance to talk to Harry Mervis I'm sure he would collaborate, that's the wrong word.

AP: Corroborate.

BK: Thank you, thank you. I do that so often, and then I'm embarrassed because I am a, I have a master's degree, but I do that with words.

AP: They all tend to get away from us from time to time.

BK: Right, right. But we never went in bars. Never went in. 'Til post-war, post coming back from service. Never went in pool halls, I guess there was some other stores and things we didn't go. We didn't go in like stationary places, there was a family, I think they may have been Jewish, by the name of Marx, who were printers and they had like a big stationary store outlet, but they wrote numbers in there. And so we didn't go in.

AP: You weren't supposed to go where people wrote numbers.

BK: No, you know because that was...

AP: I see.

BK: Even though Joe Frank may have been the boss or something or one of the king pins in the numbers racket.

AP: Did you know him?

BK: I knew his son, yeah, he was a little older than me. Trying to remember his name, if it was Herman.

AP: Did he send him to Hebrew school and things like that?

BK: The fire chief's first name was Herman. Oh yeah, I think he went, he went to Hebrew school with us. Yeah, he was between my brother and I, he was closer to my brother.

AP: So he was like, he was a member of the congregation.

BK: Oh yeah I'm sure he came to shul.

AP: All kinds of things like that.

BK: Oh yeah. I don't think, I don't think he was ostracized. I don't know, I don't think the rabbis ever have had the strength of priests, to try to say no (tape cuts out)