

**Transcript of Interview with Melvin Pollock
Fifth Avenue Project
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Senator John Heinz History Center
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1212 Smallman Street
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15222**

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Words not understood are marked [unclear].
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Transcription:

Amy Lowenstein (AL): Okay, today is March 29, 2007. I am Amy Lowenstein and I am interviewing Mel Pollock. Mel, tell me, where was your store?

Melvin Pollock (MP): Well, our store was located in the small coal mining town of Gallitzin, Pennsylvania, which is ten miles from Altoona, Pennsylvania.

AL: How big was the store? I mean...

MP: The original store was about eighteen feet by fifty feet, and we sold everything to wear for men, women, and children. That was our slogan. So, it was a general merchandise store. We didn't sell groceries. We sold clothing and shoes.

AL: When did the store, when was it first opened?

MP: It was opened in 1914, in February. I have my records at the Heinz Center, the book records showing the date of business that we had and how much we did, and all the records from the store are in safe keeping there.

AL: Oh, well that's good. Did you get a lot of your merchandise on the Avenue?

MP: Most of our merchandise came from the Avenue. We were close to Altoona and there were two wholesalers in Altoona, three wholesalers in Altoona. And, so we did some purchasing there, but my mother was a bookkeeper for a wholesaler in Altoona and that's how my father happened to go into business, because one of the Altoona wholesalers gave him some credit as a wedding present.

AL: So, but let's talk about your source of supply from the Avenue.

MP: Well, there was a limited supply from Altoona, so usually on a Sunday and when the weather was possible, [unclear], he took Route 22 to Pittsburgh, which was quite a lengthy trip. And, my father was a very careful driver, but I can remember as a child taking that trip and measuring every inch of the way, because I knew every milestone and I can remember when we got to the Wilkesburg hill, how close we were to the destination finally, and we looked forward to it.

And, not only did we buy merchandise in the, in Fifth Avenue, and on Penn Avenue. But, we also got our kosher meat and our food supplies, which we couldn't get as well in Altoona. But mostly, we had an association with, I would say, ten or fifteen wholesalers on the Avenue. There was a personal, private association. My father and mother had them as, they treated them like members of the family. They weren't treated so much as suppliers of merchandise.

When they brought the line of merchandise to Gallitzin to show us sometimes, they would trips to us to sell us additional goods, they could stay at our house. Those folks, who my father and mother were friendly with. I think of Blackie Zions, Simons & Zions. I think of Saul Tanur, and I think of... There were several other ones. I have to really try my memory because I was just a little kid then and I didn't know. But, they came in and played with me in the store. Threw me up in the air, because I was part of a family. They were very friendly. And, we never looked at them as salesmen, but they really sold us merchandise.

AL: Did they spend the night? Gallitzin was out of the way.

MP: They would. Certain ones would. The people from the Avenue, yes. A lot of them, because we saw them more often. But other salesmen, from New York and so on, we weren't as close, so they weren't quite as welcomed into the family as the wholesalers on the Avenue.

AL: Right.

MP: Mallinger, Saul Mallinger.

AL: What did he sell?

MP: I think they were ladies' goods, but Sol was like an uncle. He was a good friend of the family. And, there was never a question did they trust us or would we pay them. Of course we paid them. Very, very cognizant of the fact that people were going bankrupt many times, but my father and mother never did.

The store was quite small. It had a potbellied stove in the middle of it. Why it didn't burn down to the ground, I'll never know.

AL: Right.

MP: Because that stove sometimes got red hot. Why no one touched it and didn't get burned, I'll never know that either.

AL: Did these relationships continue when you took over the store?

MP: When I took over the store, there were some that were still there, and the relationship still held on. I don't remember me personally then, inviting them to stay over the house because they had automobiles then. In the early days, they came by train.

AL: Oh really?

MP: So it was a very difficult trip.

AL: Did they have the merchandise in suitcases on the train?

MP: They had them on the, they brought them from the train. They would come to the store with them, unpack in the store, and lay out the merchandise and mother and dad would make selections. And, it was a more simple thing then. Shirts were shirts; they were white shirts and they had long sleeves. And, there was no such thing as a short sleeved shirt that I can remember.

AL: Was it far from the train to the store?

MP: Yes, it was.

AL: So, they had to carry all this stuff?

MP: Well, they could usually get a wagon or, in the early days, they could get a horse and wagon or they could get railway express or somebody would bring them to the store. But, then when they had cars, the trip back to Pittsburgh wasn't that bad. There was no need to stay. But, there was not always a train that you could get out of Gallitzin, and when they had to wait, and we had a customer, the customer came first. And, they had to wait around, so it would be at dinner time and so we had dinner and they stayed at the house. To a great extent, in the earlier days. God, when I was running the store that was not necessary, so we didn't have that kind of thing.

But, we had a good relationship. When I went into their shop on the Avenue, there was a great welcome. I felt that family atmosphere. And that relationship had held.

AL: Do you think this was true of other retailers?

MP: I imagine it was, because retailing was a very personal business, and it wasn't a cold hard thing. It was a warm feeling, I thought, because these men, they made a living doing that, but there was something in the relationship that was an added plus, I think. There was an, "I honor what you say, and you honor what I say." They knew that my father and mother were going to pay them eventually for what they bought.

AL: Right. How did they do it? Was it, were you billed monthly in advance? Did you buy for a season, or did you buy as you went, you know?

MP: Well, we bought for season, but then there would be periodic times when they would come to the store and bring new things and additional things. However, it wasn't that big of a cart because there wasn't that much of a selection. Colors didn't seem to be effective. The suits were blue serge and oxford grey. The pants were moleskin or dress pants. There weren't pleats, as I remember. There weren't the diversification in merchandise like there is today. It was a more simple thing. Ladies' house dresses sold for a dollar, and they were different prints. The shape of them was, they had sizes of course, but there was no great deal of decisions to make because they were bought pretty much like sugar and coffee and...

AL: Right. Well then, your decision, probably did it have to do with who was selling it?

MP: That's what it was, yes.

AL: Well now, on the Avenue there were probably several people who sold men's wear and so did you buy from different people? Or did you stick with the same ones? In other words, did you have somebody that you bought ladies' goods from and...

MP: Well, we seemed to stick with the same ones. Hosiery, it was Saul Tanur who got the bulk of it. And, if we couldn't find everything that we needed there, we would pick up odds and ends from other ones. And, so the merchandise, I think, went with the personality of the wholesaler.

AL: Right.

MP: If he had the kind of personality my mother and dad enjoyed doing business with, he got the business.

AL: Now did that continue with you? Did you...by that time were things more fashionable or are you more business oriented?

MP: Well, in the forties...in the thirties and forties things got to be fashion, more fashionable and more difficult. Shoes, we didn't buy in Pittsburgh. We didn't buy our shoes in Pittsburgh. We bought shoes from two people that came on the road. Endicott Johnson came in Endicott, New York. It showed us a line of shoes that pretty well ate up our budget.

AL: Your shoe budget.

MP: If we had it. And, International Shoe Company and the Mishawaka Rubber and Woolen Manufacturing Company names like that, they pretty much ate up that issue.

AL: Well, I'll ask about rubber footwear.

MP: Well, rubber footwear came from Mishawaka Rubber and Woolen Manufacturing.

AL: That's too bad.

MP: He made periodic trips and the un...it was almost a day in the store to display. Campus Sportswear was another big name out of Cleveland, and he got a big show, but he also had a personal connection.

AL: Was that Samuels?

MP: Yeah.

AL: What...describe like when you, you came in as a child with your parents.

MP: The earliest memories I have were that my father and mother worked after supper at this store, and it was...we slept upstairs, so I came down just to hang out and I laid on the men's pants that were stretched out on the table. And, I guess I fell asleep because they carried me upstairs to bed when they went up.

AL: Right, but when you came in for the Avenue, that was an exciting day for you, to come in for a day?

MP: No...

AL: Or was it just something you had to do?

MP: I think at that time, I was glad when it was over. Dad was a terrible driver and I, it was such a long trip. It seemed to take an eternity to get there and get back.

AL: How did you keep the meat cool?

MP: I don't know; we didn't buy meat there. We bought bread and deli, and that seemed to work.

AL: Did you eat at any of the restaurants?

MP: Yes, we ate at the restaurants there, too.

AL: Do you remember them at all or anything about them?

MP: No, no.

AL: And what about when you were doing this? When you took over? Did you come in as regularly to the Avenue?

MP: No, I didn't. I unfortunately...fortunately, I used the Avenue as a hurry up place. When I ran out of merchandise and I needed it, I got it there. To some extent...I could use Saul Tanur on a regular basis, but most of the other ones, I used when I couldn't get enough directly from the manufacturer.

AL: Right, so...

MP: So, I fed it from Fifth Avenue.

AL: Well then, how were their prices with you, because you weren't the...?

MP: They were higher, and we knew that. But, I had the goods and a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

AL: Right, so how did they ship them to you?

MP: I took them in the car.

AL: Oh you took, so in other words when you needed it, you just came to Pittsburgh and picked it up.

MP: I loaded up and took it back with me. There was no sense in shipping. Unless it was a lot of difficult selection, and then they shipped, and I was in no hurry. But, if I was completely out of an item, that's where you went and that's where you got it. And that's...

AL: Well then, did the salesmen still call on you from the Avenue then? If you weren't really using them, in other words, they stopped coming to you?

MP: No. They stopped coming. Occasionally, somebody would come in and they could see that I was in a hurry for merchandise, that's when it became handy.

AL: At what year, approximately, did you stop using the Avenue as your chief source?

MP: Well, we used to go to New York. Later, dad took the train and took the excursion trip to New York and had an office in New York.

AL: A buying office?

MP: A buying office.

AL: So what year...would that be in the thirties of in the forties?

MP: I would say it would be in the thirties and in the forties. Not so often at the beginning, because between the Avenue and Altoona and Johnstown, all the merchants...there was clearly sources for immediate use that we could get. I think that the Avenue source was good when you needed it in a hurry. These were the guys who had it, and you needed it. You were out of gloves, [unclear] gloves, and you needed them. In the time you make an order with New York or your glove supplier, you could go to Ash and he had all the gloves and everything.

AL: Right.

MP: If you wanted, your mark-up was just short...

AL: But you paid him a different price than somebody who gave him an opening order, is that right?

MP: I can remember that, when we paid a dollar we retailed it at \$1.39, a \$1.49. So sometimes it would have to be \$1.59 because we were paying a little more from the jobber and getting a smaller quantity, knowing that if you went directly to the glove manufacturer, you'd make a longer markup.

AL: When you bought things at the end, when you were buying them for emergency fill in things, did you pay cash or did they bill you? How did that work?

MP: Never paid cash.

AL: Never, even when it was on an emergency basis?

MP: Never. We had it established who we were, we were on Dun and Bradstreet, and when my father shook hands with Saul Tanur after making a purchase, or whoever it was, it was gold.

AL: So that was...the billing arrangements were the same, even when you used your buying office in New York? In other words, you never had a different credit arrangement?

MP: No, no. None of them asked for that. Sometimes, I can remember my mother and father counting out the cash in the register and suggesting that maybe five dollars could be sent on the bill, that we owed a pretty good-sized bill. But, at least we'd know that they'd know we were interested in doing something.

AL: Right.

MP: And five went here, five went to there, and five went over to here, and they all got a little something. And so that the bill finally came down. But, my father was adamant about that. Nobody's going to get cheated. He left a good thing for me to know that that is what you do.

AL: What about, do you have any memories, sort of describe what the Avenue looked like or maybe when you were older even?

MP: Street cars, busy, noisy, rush, rush. And it was something that we didn't have in Gallitzin.

AL: I imagine

MP: It was a dramatic change of atmosphere and the hubbub. And my father seemed to know everybody, and when I got into that position, I didn't know as many people as he did. And we were also buying, not only clothing, but we sold dry goods. Towels and...

AL: Did you buy from Charlie Klein?

MP: We bought from Charlie Klein, sure. And blankets and stuff like that when we moved into the bigger store. Now, when we got rid of that small store, because the large department store in Gallitzin, which was owned by Westin, went bankrupt... They would use the expression, there was an outfit called the "Forty Thieves," who came to Pittsburgh, and they were wholesalers from Pittsburgh, who came in when this event happened. Made the purchase for, bid on the whole building and the merchandise, came to my father because they didn't want to be in the retail business, and said, "If you give us an extra five hundred dollars than we bought it for, you can have the whole works."

And that's how he moved into the big building, which was in 1935. And, it was three stories high, and it went from one block to the other, and we were the big Kaufmanns, Gimbels, and Hornes of Gallitzin. And this store had pottery and dishes, and groceries, but my father threw all of that out. He was not interested in that kind of stuff. Now he became a respected account by a lot of people who never came into Gallitzin in their lives, but his name appeared in Dun and Bradstreet book, and they knew they had to make the call. There are many funny stories that occurred about that.

AL: Do you... what year did you go out of business?

MP: We went out...

AL: Approximately.

MP: Well, I came to Pittsburgh in 1954, so we had kept the store open. My father married again, and my stepmother was my bookkeeper. And, we were still keeping it for another ten years, and then somebody in Altoona bought it.

AL: Well then, during those years, did you still come to the Avenue to buy?

MP: Not as much.

AL: Uh huh, so that really wasn't a part of the, the fifties were not a part of the Avenue for you?

MP: We still had a connection with them; we still went to certain ones, but I never made it. Early on, my father drove almost every Sunday. But, when I was driving, I didn't particularly care to do that and I didn't think there was a need to do it. If you bought more carefully, you could buy your needs and you didn't have to go every weekend. I didn't keep a, I wasn't so interested in the kosher food and all that stuff that went with it.

AL: So your memories are really the thirties and forties? And the twenties, I guess.

MP: Yeah. They go back, and the earlier you go back, the more intense we were with the Avenue.

AL: Okay.

MP: My father died in 1948 and I don't...I remember his funeral, and I know a lot of the people from the Avenue came to his funeral.

AL: I remember a story about that. You know, my father was on the Avenue and he was asked to be a pallbearer, and he said, "I carried him all his life; I might as well carry him 'til the end."

MP: My father said that it was like having a baby. He said that you carried them for nine months and might as well call him a parent.

AL: So, is there anything else that you want to add to the Avenue story, or do you think we've covered it?

MP: Well, that limits it pretty much because some of it is peripheral. I know you're interested in what when on in Fifth Avenue. There were other business on the Avenue, but I can't ever remember a building on Fifth Avenue that didn't sell merchandise or some kind of merchandise that we could use. They all were selling our merchandise, so there were plenty of opportunities. I didn't see anyone on the Avenue that I couldn't walk into and there would be something there that I could probably buy.

AL: Well, when you bought it, did you take it home with you?

MP: Yes, we generally did. And the car was a big sedan. He didn't bring the whole family.

AL: How did they wrap the packages?

MP: Just in paper, and we went around. We'd go up and down the Avenue, parked, and picked them up. Parking was a big problem, to get in there close so that you could pick up your packages and go. But, if we made the trip in the winter time, that was horrendous. That travel was just...

AL: Right. Did you become friendly with other retailers who came in? I mean, was there camaraderie on the Avenue with the retailers? Or was it...

MP: We didn't become friendly with other retailers because these guys...we all had a cost code on our merchandise. And, most of the wholesalers and retailers could interpret it right away and wanted to know how much you paid for the item, compared to what I paid for it, what we paid for it. And you could interpret it. It was mostly Cumberland spelled backwards, from one to ten. And, it was interesting from that point. In our case, I had one brother...

AL: Where you a D or a C?

MP: And my brother wanted to be a doctor, so it left me to be the one to run the business. My father, in 1935, gave me the keys to the store that he just bought, in Gallitizin. And I was

a teenager, a young teenager, and wanted me to take the keys, open the door, and go in there. I could never figure out why he wanted me to do it, but I can see now that was his only hope, if somebody was going to run the business, it had to be me. And, he had to get me inspired in some way. Well, I went into this mammoth store that sold tennis racquets. God knows, you'd have never saw a tennis racquet in Gallitizin. I can't imagine who would buy it. The guy wasn't really a bright merchant, never bought on the Avenue, and we bought the store. I went into the grocery department of the store and opened up those Uneeda Biscuit boxes, with the glass top, and reached in and took a cookie, and ate one of every cookie that was there. And I said, "I like this, this is nice." I think I became a merchant at that time.

AL: But you didn't really, other retailers you didn't deal with them on the Avenue. It was strictly...

MP: We didn't...we didn't break down and give too much information on what we paid for anything or what. Or sometimes I might meet somebody I know, and I'd tell them I'm looking for gloves or I'm looking for socks, or I'm looking for pants or something that I can't seem to find. And, they would say, "Well, I got mine over here."

AL: Did they ever come to you with close-outs and things like that?

MP: Not that I remember, no. They...mostly staples. They were good for staples and I know that I was always surprised that they did business with the major department stores in crisis times. There was a huge amount of snow, and you had to have boots. And you had to have them today. You don't want them tomorrow, God knows, the sun would come out and you wouldn't need them. You wanted them now. So you'd go to Comins, and that's where you got them, and you got them now. You may pay a little more, but you had them. And, I think the Avenue, that's what it was for. You know, you needed them, they had it. You didn't send in away orders to just some place in God knows where, you'd never get them. And, by the time you got them, you didn't need them.

AL: Right.

MP: The Avenue provided an immediate supply of merchandise when you needed it. And, your credit was good and so you didn't have to worry about it.

AL: Right. Okay, well I think we covered what you know, unless you can think of anything else. I really appreciate it and I know they appreciate you turning your book into the Avenue, into the History Center, because that will be...

MP: Well, it's in safe keeping.

AL: Right, and also it will be something that will last for a long time there.

MP: There's more history in that book than I can remember.

AL: Right. Why don't you describe the book, because...

MP: The book was a small book, and my mother was a bookkeeper for a wholesaler. And my father met her at, because his boss had a store, [unclear], or God knows...one of those little towns. And, took him on the train to Altoona, and he saw my mother as a bookkeeper with beautiful handwriting, and he said, "If I'm ever going to achieve anything in my life, I need somebody like this." And so, he married her, and the guy, it was Jacob Berman & Company, said, "For a wedding present, you can have five hundred dollars worth of credit." That was pretty good because he was unknown on the Avenue at that time, and so he had a certain allegiance to Jacob Berman & Company.

AL: What did Berman Sell?

MP: He sold everything to wear for men, and women, too, I guess. You know, not as...

AL: As clothing?

MP: Clothing. So, my mother and father...and he told them there was an empty room in Gallitzin that he could open up next week. All he needed was some empty boxes and the merchandise he could buy for five hundred dollars, plus two hundred dollars that he already had in his pocket. And, my mother had a large family in Altoona, so he had built in employees. We had some [unclear].

AL: So, really the store has originated from somebody on the Avenue, actually?

MP: Well, that was Altoona.

AL: Oh, that was Altoona. I'm sorry, I have it wrong.

MP: And he knew that he couldn't get the merchandise that he needed, the diversification of merchandise that he needed in Altoona. Sure he bought, Altoona was close. It was ten miles away. He did the same thing with Altoona on a daily basis what he was doing on a weekly or monthly basis in Pittsburgh.

AL: But, now the book was a ledger of all the sales?

MP: It was a daily ledger of what he sold and accounts payable, listing all the...

AL: Suppliers.

MP: All the [unclear] from the Avenue, all his suppliers, and I'm sure that somebody who would be knowledgeable today would be able say who they were, because how much he owed and how much his accounts receivable was, and in his accounts receivable, there was a lot of bartering. It was [unclear] paid on the bill.

AL: So this would be a wonderful source for somebody researching the Avenue then, to see who was selling what and what it cost, and you know.

MP: Absolutely. It didn't list the individual items, it just listed the total. There was a company in Pittsburgh called Arbuthnot-Stevenson, I don't know if they were on the Avenue or not.

AL: No they weren't.

MP: But, Sol Wolk. How much we owed Sol Wolk, not how much the individual suits were....

AL: I understand, it was the whole bill.

MP: And, then all expenses, down to the stamps. An individual stamp would be paid for. Every tiny expense that was paid for was listed in that book. Also, the purchase of the building, how he paid for it.

AL: That would really be useful for multiple type of research.

MP: Yeah.

AL: For the Avenue purposes, I can see, would be a wonderful source of who was selling what to whom.

MP: I think the success was that he spoke seven languages, or eight languages.

AL: Really?

MP: And his customers were built in to those languages. They couldn't speak English, or they weren't going to go anywhere else. My father spoke them. Of course, a lot of the Jewish guys could speak the language.

AL: Yeah.

MP: And they always seemed like they were fighting when they were buying, because it was in another language.

AL: This is really interesting and I really appreciate your giving us the time, and I thank you very much.

MP: You're very welcome. I hope it works.