RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN BERENBACH

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

KATHRYN TRACY RIZZI
and
ANNE NEWMAN

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TRANSCRIPT BY

JESSE BRADDELL

Kathryn Tracy Rizzi: This begins an oral history interview with Brian Berenbach on July 19, 2018, in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The interviewers are Kate Rizzi and …

Anne Newman: Anne Newman.

KR: Thank you so much, Mr. Berenbach, for being here with us today. To begin, can you please tell us where and when you were born?

Brian Berenbach: I was born in Brooklyn, May 10, 1943.

KR: Please tell us about your family history, starting on your father's side.

BB: Okay, so my grandfather, on my father's side and my grandmother, they came from, I believe it was, Galicia, which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and they came to the United States in 1901. My grandfather was in the import-export business, food, and he was pretty much destroyed by the depression. He lived in a house on Lafayette Avenue in Brooklyn, and so my father was born in Brooklyn, in that house on Lafayette Avenue. He had three siblings, a brother and two sisters. Sad to say, all three of them developed schizophrenia in their twenties. So, he was the only one who survived that, but he may have compensated by drinking heavily because he was a pretty dyed-in-the-wool alcoholic later on. [Editor's Note: Galicia is a region in Central Europe that lies on the modern-day Poland-Ukraine border. In the early 1900s, it was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which existed from 1867 to 1918.]

I have very vague memories of my grandparents on my father's side. I remember going to their house once and they seemed to be more or less distant, and my most vivid memory is going to my grandfather's house after he passed away. The reason I went is, apparently, there was a revolver in the safe. I went with a police officer and my parents, and the police officer took the revolver. That's my most vivid memory. I think I must have been six or seven at the time. I remember my grandmother had diabetes, and she passed away in a hospital. I remember she had this red radio--I don't remember if it was tube or transistor--and that wound up in our house after she passed away. I thought that was so cool, here was this radio, because I was very poor. We had almost nothing. That's pretty much my father's side. Should I tell you a little about my father?

KR: We would like to just ask a couple questions as follow up.

BB: Sure, sure.

KR: What do you know about your grandparents' experiences in Galicia?

BB: I know absolutely nothing, the reason being that they were not communicative, didn't tell me stories, nothing. It was like there was a wall between us, and they were totally disinterested in their grandchildren, which is unfortunate but that was the way it was. I did hear later on, from someone in Galicia who emailed me and told me, that I might have a relative who is the mayor of a town in Galicia. That's about all I remember. They came over in around 1910-1911, and I saw their immigration papers where they applied for citizenship. So, they were here long, long before any issues with the Holocaust.

AN: What town would that be now?

BB: Przemyslany.

AN: What country?

BB: What country? Currently in the Lvov region of Western Ukraine. I don't even remember what language they spoke, mostly Yiddish, I think. They spoke Yiddish to my father. Something funny about that, about my father, am I getting off track here?

KR: No, please go on.

BB: Okay, so, later in life, I was applying to graduate school. I went to Long Island University [LIU], which is where I got my bachelor's, and I asked for my transcript at the alumni office. They handed me the transcript, and I opened it up. It was my father's transcript, and I had never known that he had went to LIU. I could understand why he didn't talk about it because [his grades were] D, D, F, D, D, F. [laughter] He didn't last very long. I don't think drinking and college mixed. [laughter]

KR: What do you know about your family history, on your mother's side?

BB: I know a little bit more. On my mother's side, my grandfather Mendel was born in Lithuania. He married my grandmother Bashe Henne in the vicinity of Vilna, and they lived for a few years in Jonava before departing for the United States. I remember seeing pictures of my grandmother's family in Poland and my mother. My grandmother took a trip to Poland just before World War II and my mother got to see all of her Polish relatives in Vilna and she came back on a ship. I don't remember the name of it, and on its next voyage, that ship was torpedoed by the Germans.

KR: Wow.

BB: As far as my relatives in Poland, on my mother's side, most of them were exterminated by the Nazis, and there were a couple who survived the war. I remember my cousin, Shimon Pilowitch, who, he had the tattoo on his arm. They all migrated to Israel from Vilna. I remember going to Israel as a young man after I got out of the service, and I visited them briefly.

On my mother's side, my grandfather came from Vilna, Poland. I don't know too much about his relatives because my mother wasn't very big on family on her father's side for some reason, so I don't know very much about the family. I only know that they lived on Lafayette Avenue in Brooklyn, and it was Grand Central for relatives. They used to come and stay and leave, and they'd come and stay and leave.

I have pictures of them playing poker at a table. They were very big card players. In fact, my mother once was about four years old and she came downstairs, and she knew enough to know what a good hand was. She stood behind one relative, I think it's Morris Roosevelt, she said, "Wow, four aces," and he chased her all the way up the stairs he was so angry. She told me that story, so they grew up in a house.

My mother grew up in a house--it was interesting, I think that's how they met--so my father grew up in a house on Lafayette Avenue and my mother grew up in a house on Lafayette Avenue about three blocks apart. My mother's house, my mother grew up in a house, and I lived there for a while. It was a brownstone, a three-level brownstone, and the upper story always had a rental occupancy. It was a beautiful brownstone because it had marble fireplaces and it had working gaslight. I remember, as a child, I was actually able to turn it and light it and turn on the gaslight, which was pretty incredible. I think that they installed electricity after the house was built and in use for a while. I remember going down to the basement and seeing the coal chute where they delivered coal. Then, they switched to oil. The guy used to come and deliver oil every two weeks, and he would pump it into the tank in the basement. I remember that. So, the basement for me was always like going into the monster's area. It was a dark and dingy basement. That was a spooky place, my mother's house.

For a while, we lived in the projects. Then, my grandfather got ill, this is my grandfather on my mother's side, got ill. We came back to 840 Lafayette Avenue. My mother nursed him; he had pneumonia. He passed away. My mother had nine brothers and sisters, each of whom has a story by the way, and so they all got together, all the brothers and sisters got together and decided to gift the house to my mother because, number one, we were the poorest. We were dirt poor, and, number two, she was the one who stayed in the house and taking care of my grandfather. So, they gifted her the house.

Until I was fifteen years old, I lived on Lafayette Avenue in Brooklyn, which was known as Bedford-Stuyvesant and was not a good place for a young white boy to live. It was like being an Oreo cookie, the filling in an Oreo cookie. So, I went to schools that were all black. I went to one school that I think had three white people in it, and then I went to what's called SP [special progress] class [at] John Marshall Junior High School 210, and that was all mostly black except for the SP which was mostly white. I was in the SP. We had a few African Americans.

AN: What does SP stand for?

BB: Special Progress. You skipped the eighth grade. You do seven and nine and you skip the eighth grade, special progress for rapid advancement. I had to take two buses to get there. My mother lied about our address because she didn't want me to go to Eastern District High School. She was afraid I wouldn't last very long. So, she lied about my address, and instead she gave my cousin's address. Mail would go to my cousin's place, and I wound up going to Erasmus Hall High School instead.

I did [grades] seven, eight, nine at John Marshall Junior High School, and then [grades] ten, eleven, and twelve, I did at Erasmus Hall High School, which is where my cousin had graduated from, and it had a pretty good reputation at the time. They had a lot of, what do they call them, the science winners, the science fair winners. I was not one of them. So, it was interesting because people called me bright, but the classes I went in at Erasmus Hall, I was average or lower. They were all really bright kids, and they all went on to fabulous careers. Later on in life, I was on the board for the fiftieth anniversary. I got to see all these people again and all of their fantastic achievements. Some of them were just dazzling in their achievements. So, that was my growing up.

Where I grew up, it was a very bad neighborhood. I remember when I went to school, I sometimes had to go two or three blocks out of my way because I had to avoid where the gangs would hang out. Once or twice, I was chased by gangs with baseball bats, and luckily, I was a fast runner and I was able to outrun them. We never had any parties at the house, never had. I had very few friends because of the neighborhood I lived in. When I switched, at the age of fifteen, we moved to Midwood, and I lived on Avenue M in Brooklyn. Then, at that time, it was much nicer because I started to develop friends. I went to Brooklyn College for a while and then transferred to LIU, and I finished up my bachelor's at LIU.

KR: I want to go back and ask you a couple questions about your family history.

BB: Sure.

KR: Going back to your mother's side, where was your grandmother from in Poland?

BB: She was from Vilna, Poland.

KR: Okay. Your cousin, what did she tell you or other family members about her experiences during the Holocaust?

BB: My cousin Miriam Alexandrowitz, birth name Melnick, was on a forced death march by the Nazis and was marched from a concentration camp back to Germany. On the way, she fell in the snow and could not get up. She told the German guard, a young boy, to shoot her as she could not walk in the snow, and the German left her there. After the Nazis left, villagers came out and helped her. Her and her husband were both in Auschwitz, and she did not want to talk about it. Now, she has a son, who's a doctor living in Israel and he's very nice, and I suppose I could always email him and ask him, but they just wanted to put that behind them. [Editor's Note: Auschwitz was a death camp complex in Poland, built by the Nazis during the Holocaust.]

AN: Do you know if they offered Yad Vashem any stories? [Editor's Note: Yad Vashem is the Holocaust Memorial and Research Center in Israel.]

BB: I do not know.

AN: Because they have some pretty powerful stories there.

BB: Yes, I'd be afraid to look, to tell you the truth.

AN: Yes.

BB: It was pretty awful.

AN: Yes. Did they become architects in Israel?

BB: They both taught at the Technion, and he was a professor. They had a daughter who wound up captain in the Israeli Air Force, and she married another captain in the Israeli Air Force. That's another story I'll tell you about later, after I left the service.

AN: Which town?

BB: Haifa, Israel.

AN: Oh, in Haifa.

BB: Yes, the Technion.

AN: The one my daughter.

BB: The Israel Institute of Technology. [Editor's Note: Technion-Israel Institute of Technology is a public research university located in Haifa, Israel.]

AN: My daughter just finished up a year teaching there in Israel.

BB: Oh, good for her, good for her.

AN: She was in an Arab sector school teaching English through the Israeli government.

BB: Wow.

AN: Yes.

BB: That's fantastic, yes.

KR: What were your father's experiences during World War II?

BB: My father was lucky, if you can call it that, because he was never in combat. When he went into the service, prior to going into the service, he had been a bank clerk, which was suitable, given that he was not capable of advancing further. He was a bank clerk at Bankers Trust Company. When he went into the service, he wound up in the Paymaster Corps, and he wound up a technical sergeant and a paymaster, which made him a very popular guy.

He was stationed in Greenland towards the end of the war. He told me it was cold there. He told me that. He also told me once, I asked him what his most exciting experiences were, and he told me that his most exciting experience was when he was doing guard duty and a bus pulled up and an officer got out. He's walking down the steps and he saluted the officer and the officer saluted back, let go and slid all the way down and landed on his rear end. That was the most exciting experience.

AN: Brian, what did we have in Greenland? Was it a kind of transfer station?

BB: An air base. There was an air base in Greenland, and they were worried about Japanese invasion. You can see there were actually battles in Greenland, there were, and the American Army had to wipe out the Japanese outposts and they were worried about the Japanese getting a foothold in Greenland. [Editor's Note: Germany had several manned weather stations in Greenland during World War II, and this resulted in several small-scale skirmishes with U.S. troops stationed on the island. (Michael G. Walling, *Bloodstained Sea: The U.S. Coast Guard in the Battle of the Atlantic, 1941–1944*, Camden, Maine: International Marine/McGraw-Hill, 2004)]

AN: The Japanese were there.

BB: They were there, yes, but that might have been before my father got there, I don't know. I think he was drafted just a little later. He might've been going in around '42, '43, when Greenland was solidly back in American hands.

KR: Okay. It was Greenland, not Alaska?

AN: Greenland.

BB: Greenland, definitely Greenland.

KR: Okay.

BB: I have pictures of him sitting on the steps of his barracks with his buddies, so he was a technical sergeant which is a pretty high rank in the military for a non-commissioned officer.

KR: You talked about your father going to LIU and having the poor grades.

BB: Yes.

KR: Did he go to college after the war, on the GI Bill? [Editor's Note: The Serviceman's Readjustment Act, or GI Bill, provided funding for education, home loans and other benefits to returning World War II veterans.]

BB: No, I think he was sour to the experience, and I don't think emotionally he was capable of doing that because, to be very honest with you, he used to drink a full bottle every night.

AN: Of what?

BB: Whatever he could get a hold of.

AN: Hard liquor?

BB: Hard liquor. We used to find bottles all over the house. He would not have been conducive--he would not have been able to be a good student. My mother was an enabler, so it was a case of, I have read about it since, I'm an Adult Child of Alcoholics (ACOA) and I had to go through therapy to find out what was wrong with me and all of that stuff, but she was an enabler.

AN: Did you have siblings?

BB: I have one sister. She's two years younger than me.

AN: I guess that comes next. I guess we will get to that.

KR: Yes.

BB: My sister, Susie. That was the reason, and that was also the reason why he never advanced at Bankers Trust. He told me once or twice that they wanted to send him to school to become and assistant manager and he always declined because he knew he wouldn't be able to handle it or he thought he wouldn't be able to handle it.

AN: He started self-medicating at a very early age.

BB: Yes, that's what my wife says. My wife thinks he used the alcohol to self-medicate.

AN: Because of the rest of the family, yes.

BB: The rest of the family was pretty horrible, yes.

KR: You said that your family fared pretty badly during the Great Depression.

BB: My grandfather, yes, on my father's side, my grandparents. Apparently, my grandfather lost everything. He was an exporter-importer. I know very little about it. I know that you can find information in the census records of his children. My aunts and my uncle on my father's side, they're listed in the census, but I don't know anything other than the fact that I rarely saw him. He did not have a car, which would have been a sign of status. He did not have a vehicle, and they rarely left the house. They were the recluses, and I didn't see them, very rarely, once or twice and that was it.

AN: What did you say your grandfather did?

BB: On my mother's side?

AN: Yes.

BB: He retired and sent his children to work. [laughter] My mother had nine brothers and sisters, and officially he was a carpenter and he stopped carpentering as soon as the oldest one was able to go to work. The European model is you send your children to work, and that's the way you live. He was a firm believer of that model. He was a distinguished retired gentleman, probably around the age of forty or forty-five.

AN: Yes, not a bad model. [laughter]

BB: Yes. [laughter]

KR: What did your family think of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt?

BB: Now, this is very interesting, because my mother and my father were both Republicans. They were not modern-day Republicans. They were Republicans in the Eisenhower mold, yet they thought very highly of Roosevelt for his achievements. I remember sitting and watching Stevenson versus--was it Stevenson versus Eisenhower? I remember them rooting for Eisenhower who won and my mother saying that Stevenson could never get elected because he was too intelligent. [Editor's Note: In 1952 and 1956, Dwight D. Eisenhower defeated the Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson.]

KR: What can you tell us about your mother's education?

BB: My mother was very bright. She graduated high school, and she went to Cooper Union Art School. She did a four-year degree in art in Cooper Union. I still have some of her drawings and sketches. She graduated with a bachelor's degree. I still have her yearbook. She was friends with one of the people who wound up doing the drawings of the birds and the animals and wound up on postage stamps. That was one of her compatriots.

After she graduated, she was married, and she immediately became a housewife and she never once took a job using her skills. When I was in fifth grade and we had to draw something to do a report, she drew the cover for me and it was absolutely magnificent. I think it was a Christopher Columbus ship, and my teacher kept it, took the cover and hung it on her wall. My mother never did anything with that talent. She loved to dance though. That was her thing. She loved to dance. [Editor's Note: The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art is located in Manhattan, New York City. It was founded in 1859.]

AN: What kind of dancing?

BB: Any kind, mostly ballroom.

AN: Ballroom.

BB: Ballroom, and she did that through my sister, who had it rammed down her throat. [laughter] The day my sister stopped going to dance school was the day that she was strong enough to hang onto the leg of the table and not let go. [laughter]

AN: How did your mother meet your father?

BB: I have no idea. I believe, and this is a vague memory, that it might have been through mutual friends. In those days, people went places in groups. Now, my father played the ukulele, and I vaguely remember seeing a picture of a group of young adults, my father being one of them and my mother being another one, and I think that's probably how they met because, remember, they were local to each other, physically.

AN: Right.

BB: They were both on Lafayette Avenue, about three blocks apart.

AN: Was that a fairly big Jewish community at the time?

BB: Before World War II, it was.

AN: It was.

BB: Then, it changed.

AN: It's called Bedford-Stuyvesant.

BB: Yes. Then, it changed, and it became a poor neighborhood. It was mostly Jews, Italians, and the Jewish and Italian people mostly moved out and the African Americans moved in. At the time, they had this thing called blockbusting, where the realtor would come in and sell one house to a black family, and then there'd be white flight. After that one house was sold, there'd be white flight. It's amazing how psychologically they were able to basically tear up whole communities and blocks that way.

AN: Through racism.

BB: If people hadn't been racist, that never would have happened.

AN: Right.

BB: Yes.

KR: What did you do for fun in your neighborhood when you were very young?

BB: Define "very young."

KR: Grammar school.

BB: Okay, I would go to the school yard and play handball. We had these games where you'd be on the stoop, and this was the Spalding, the Spalding rubber balls. I don't know if they still make them even. They were very bouncy. We used to play stickball and we had this game where you would basically, you had a stoop going up and you would throw the ball as hard as you could at the stoop and it was the other person's job to try to catch it. If he could catch it, then he got the point, and he took it over. Also, there was a school yard two blocks away, and we would play handball. When I got a little bit older, we would take a basketball and go over and shoot hoops at the basketball.

One of my favorite forms of entertainment, when I was about eleven or twelve, I was old enough to ride the subway and I was absolutely fascinated by the Museum of Natural History [in Manhattan]. My mother would give me twenty-five, fifty cents, a dollar, and I would walk to the subway and I would go to the Museum of Natural History. When I got a little bit older, like when I was ten or eleven, I got a cheap 35mm camera and I got a really inexpensive do-it-yourself development kit and I used to go and do still lifes of the animals and figures in the Museum of Natural History. Then, I would go home and develop the pictures in my little dark room, which we made out of one of the bathrooms. This was when I was in the brownstone in Brooklyn on Lafayette Avenue. I did have one friend, Norman Bauman. It was interesting, because later on in life, he moved. He was only a couple of blocks from me. We never saw each other. I looked him up, and he was a writer, a natural history writer, later on in life.

AN: You used to do still lifes of the animals in the museum.

BB: In the museum, yes, the ones that were standing on the pedestal on the island and then the ones that are behind glass, like the big bear standing up.

AN: Bears, right.

BB: The lions. I would try and make it look realistic, like I was really in Africa. I would use a very inexpensive black-and-white 35mm, the kind that you folded up and it folds back in.

AN: What did you do with the pictures?

BB: I kept them until I was in my twenties, and I think they just got lost somewhere. They're gone somewhere. They were not very good. I also used to take pictures of miniatures, like I would have these little models I would make of cannon and I would pose these little pictures and I would take pictures and try to make it look like a warzone, things like that. This is when I was younger.

AN: What year was that?

BB: Well, let's see, I was born in '43 and I was still living in Lafayette Avenue, so I would have been about twelve or thirteen, so take '43 and add twelve and what do you get? You get '55.

AN: That is the post-war stuff. War is still on people's minds, yes.

BB: Post-war stuff, yes, right.

AN: Soldiers.

BB: I also collected, there were bubble-gum cards and there were two series. One was baseball players and the other was aircraft.

AN: I did that as well.

BB: It was called *Wings* and I collected the aircraft. I still have those by the way. Apparently, they're not worth very much. I have a whole set of *Wings* aircraft bubble gum cards from the '50s that I collected all of them. This is still when I was in Bedford-Stuyvesant before I moved. There was a local candy store and they used to sell [the cards]. This was when candy stores were really good. I used to go in and I used to buy comic books. They also had magic tricks, like they had these little magic tricks you could buy and a little thing where you could stick your fingers in and couldn't get them out. I used to buy those things and play with them when I was younger, and I also used to do coloring, color and drawings. [Editor's Note: *Wings* trading cars were distributed by Topps.]

AN: Like your mom.

BB: I was not very good free hand so I always had to use a ruler and I would make pictures of rockets and things like that.

AN: Was that Topps by any chance?

BB: Excuse me?

AN: Topps, the baseball cards.

BB: They might have been Topps, yes.

AN: Because they were based in, they had their factory right in Queens, I think.

BB: Oh, really?

AN: Yes.

BB: Yes. I still have the cards and I've always thought about selling them, and my kids aren't interested. "Dad, we don't want your junk." So, they're still there. I eventually took them, and I put them into a loose-leaf binder.

AN: You can go out on the Internet and see.

BB: See what they're worth, yes. I think I did try that. The alternative would've been to complete my set because there were one or two missing, go on the Internet and buy.

AN: You might want to go on the Internet and people in this ROHA community of veterans. I don't know if they communicate with each other, but you've got this community of veterans who have told their stories. There might be some families interested in cards like that.

BB: Possibly. Anyway, so those are the kinds of things that I did when I was younger.

AN: I have a question about your neighborhood. When you went down and shot hoops, did you play at all with the black kids?

BB: Yes.

AN: Okay.

BB: I had a couple of black kids that I played with. They were super nice. It was kind of tragic in a way. The house next door to me was a house of ill repute. I remember one lady once sticking her head out, with everything hanging out, and her yelling, "The next time y'all come back, y'all bring your money." [laughter]

AN: Oh, wow.

BB: I did have one young man named Leroy, and then I had another friend that I met when I was in junior high school. His mother was a librarian, and she was always pounding into him the value of an education. It was very easy to tell who was going to make it and who wasn't. It was just simply role models. Those people who had role models who believed in education were going to make it, and, unfortunately, I'm sorry to say, the majority of those young black kids would not, and it has nothing to do with intelligence. It's all environmental. You could see it. You could see it in public school, in junior high school. I could see that; that was very tragic. You'd see these young people who could've been scientists, engineers, doctors, lawyers, and instead they wound up in jail when they got older. That's still with me.

KR: What was your elementary school?

BB: P.S. 25 in Brooklyn, which was one block from my house, and it's still there. In fact, I think I donated some money once, and I tried to get a friend of mine, who was very wealthy, [to donate money]. He wound up very, very wealthy. He was also in that neighborhood with me, one of my few white friends. I had two white friends, and he was one, Sheldon Kasower, and then Jerry Milnowski, who ended up a school principal later on. Sheldon wound up a multi-millionaire, and I tried to get him to donate money to Public School 25. I was devastated when he told me he went to a different public school, so that was the end of that. [laughter]

KR: What were your academic interests when you were at P.S. 25?

BB: I don't know that I had any. I liked math, and I loved to read. I absolutely loved to read. I was reading above my grade level. I remember being sick in bed, and I was reading Edgar Rice Burroughs. I remember reading his stories about, oh, his novels about the lost world, yes, it was Edgar Rice Burroughs, his books, and *The Land of the Lost* and his books about *Pellucidar*. I didn't read *Tarzan.* I read his other stuff. I used to read a lot of science fiction fantasy. I read *Dr. Dolittle* [by Hugh Lofting], the *Dr. Dolittle* books, and mostly I read books that were hand-me downs from my relatives.

My mother never believed in buying anything. She had nine brothers and sisters, and all my clothing were hand-me downs and all my furniture were hand-me downs. That's another interesting story about my furniture because I kept it when I moved. I never got rid of it, well, except for the bed, and I wound up giving it to my cousin who was the daughter of my first cousin, whose mother had donated the furniture to my mother, who gave it to me and then back to my cousin, the daughter of the cousin it [originally] came from, whose also an Erasmus Hall graduate. So, it's kind of like a loop. I wanted my sister to give the bed, but I'm not going there. No one wants to go near my sister and ask her.

KR: What sticks out in your mind about your teachers that you had at P.S. 25?

BB: I remember they were kindly. They were very nice. I had one black teacher, I think her name was Mrs. Isaacs. She was absolutely wonderful and she kept pushing us and pushing us academically to do better, at least me. I don't know about my sister because she was two years behind me. My sister did not go to an SP class, which is probably good for her. I did, which was bad for me.

That was the other thing, just a bit by my last comment, my mother lied about my age when I went into school. So, I skipped kindergarten and went right into first grade, and I was fifteen when I graduated high school. That was because one year from my mother lying about me, plus one year for SP class, and I wound up two years younger than everybody else in high school. I had no idea on the social scene what was going on, none whatsoever, and I didn't date until I was in college, until I was in graduate school. I never dated because all the women in my classes were two years older than me, and basically, they looked at me as a child. That was a very bad social life for me. I had male friends of course but no female friends. I wouldn't have known what to do, and I had grown up in a black neighborhood. So, I never had parties with white people. I never went to parties. I never met girls. I never did anything until later on.

AN: Did your family go to a synagogue?

BB: My father--we're talking now Lafayette Avenue.

AN: Yes.

BB: There was a synagogue about three blocks away, and my father and mother used to go for the high holy days and drag us along. I remember with my sister running up and down and going outside and looking at the stained glass and playing games, and my father was tickled-pink to get an *Aliyah*. Everybody there was seventy and older. The culture was totally unique for me.

As far as Hebrew school, when I was twelve and a half, my mother and father decided it might be a good idea for me to have a bar mitzvah. I went to Hebrew school for six months, first studying Yiddish, then studying Hebrew. I learned the letters. Then, as far as my bar mitzvah, I memorized my Torah portion. I memorized my *Haftarah* and memorized my speech, which I gave in Yiddish. It was a terrible, terrible experience for me, and it kept me out of synagogues until I was past graduate school. It was like PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder].

AN: That was at that synagogue that you went to for High Holidays.

BB: No, it was a different one. There was a different one in Williamsburg. There was no interaction with the cantor. My interaction with the rabbi was one session where he gave me a record of the Torah, gave me a record of the *Haftarah*, and my mother gave me a written speech in Yiddish and I basically had to memorize. I memorized the Torah, memorized the *Haftarah*, had no idea what I was saying, none whatsoever. It could've been Greek, and that was it.

AN: Who was there?

BB: [What]?

AN: Who was there?

BB: It was the regular congregants, all over seventy, and it was my immediate family and maybe a couple of relatives who I don't remember. Then, my mother had a reception in my house at Lafayette Avenue, yes, Lafayette Avenue, the brownstone in Brooklyn.

AN: There was no starting at age eight and going through and having an entire community of youth that you grow up with through Hebrew school and high school. There was absolutely no community of children.

BB: Zero.

AN: Yes, okay.

BB: Zero.

AN: Because that would have been another social outlet, but it was not available.

BB: I was in a black neighborhood.

AN: Right.

BB: All the white people had mostly moved away.

AN: It sounds like the synagogues had no young people.

BB: Several blocks from me there was a Yeshiva where the ultra-Orthodox sent their kids, with the *Payot* [side locks].

AN: Yes.

BB: For that six months, I went there. Yes, but I learned a little bit of Yiddish. I started with Yiddish, learned to write script in Hebrew. Then I did a little bit of Hebrew. In fact, I still have my Hebrew school book that I spent a few weeks on, and then it was time for my bar mitzvah and it was solid memorization.

AN: That was a lonely experience, it sounds like.

BB: What?

AN: It sounds like it was a kind of lonely experience.

BB: It was a lonely experience, yes. After that, I had no desire or interest in the Jewish faith. I had no idea why anybody would want to be Jewish and go through something like that. I had no knowledge of the Jewish holidays. My parents, they used to make a Passover dinner. I would go to the Passover dinner, and then I simply viewed it as a way to get all her family there. I remember at the age of eight or nine in the brownstone at Bedford-Stuyvesant, we would have a Passover Seder and invite everybody.

AN: Well, this is a bit of a distraction. If it's any consolation, my husband, Paul Nadler, his maternal grandparents, who lived on Rutledge Street, they had come from Eastern Europe, where they had *shul* driven into them, and they had no interest. They would get dressed up on Shabbat, take the kids, pass all the neighbors, take the subway and go to Radio City. My husband grew up knowing very little about Judaism until he became an adult. [Editor's Note: *Shul* is the Yiddish word for school or synagogue.]

BB: As far as I knew, Jewish holidays were times to go for Chinese food.

AN: Yes, exactly.

BB: Although my father did go to services on Yom Kippur. I remember him going on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashana and I remember being in this really big, old temple, the kind where there's a pit and the cantor is in a pit, as opposed to the kind we have now with the bema [elevated platform].

AN: Yes.

BB: Yes, right. I remember that, yes.

AN: As far as social outlet as a child goes, Judaism was not an outlet for you.

BB: I didn't even know what Judaism was. I didn't even know that there was such a thing.

AN: Yes.

BB: Okay.

KR: How much Yiddish was spoken in your household when you were growing up?

BB: My mother never spoke Yiddish to me. My mother knew Yiddish. My father, I'm not sure. He may have not known Yiddish. My grandfather spoke only Yiddish. Consequently, my earliest memories of my grandfather was when he was moving into dementia--this is how my mother saw it--when he was moving into dementia. I don't remember any Yiddish at all and I did not speak any Yiddish, although later on I studied German in college. I had one year of German and I think some of it may have stuck because it helped me with the language because it was so close. It was so similar, yes.

KR: Did anyone in your family keep a kosher household?

BB: No, nobody, not my mother and not anybody. My attitude was if it doesn't crawl off the plate, I'll eat it, yes, yes.

KR: What kind of travel did your family do when you were growing up?

BB: Okay, keep in mind, that we were very, very poor, so the travel consisted of walking three blocks to a Chinese restaurant. In the summer, this is just me and my sister without my mother and father, there was a Hebrew Educational Society and I would go to camp for two weeks every summer until I became too old to do it. Once in a blue moon, we would take a train, go up to the country and stay at one of these places. Remember, they used to have--I don't think they do this anymore--there used to be cabins and there'd be a farmhouse and there'd be cabins and you stay in a cabin. My mother and father would go there, and some of my relatives would be there also.

KR: Where was that?

BB: New York, usually New York, Upstate New York.

KR: Was it the Catskills?

AN: Catskills.

BB: It was in the Catskills, yes. I actually looked up and the place you could Google and find one of those places on the web. It was called Hunt's Farm. It's no longer there. It's now owned by some rich people who took it and turned it into a ...

AN: Spa.

BB: No, I think it's a big country house.

AN: Oh, it's privately owned.

BB: It's landscaped land. It's all private land. Apparently, there were, all of the cabins, the guest cabins, they all went to waste, so they all just kind of disintegrated. Once in a blue moon, my father could not go because he was busy, and if my father couldn't go, sometimes my mother would go up to the country with us without my father, or my father would join us on weekends. I remember once or twice, my uncle Herman would drive me up, and I would stay. My aunt Jane would watch over me while I was up there because I had a cousin, Betty Anne, who was six months older than me, and we would do things together occasionally when we were younger.

AN: This camp, was that a secular Hebrew society camp? Was it a day camp?

BB: No, no, it was an away camp.

AN: It was an away camp.

BB: For two weeks. It was run by the Hebrew Educational Society.

AN: Was it in the Catskills?

BB: What?

AN: Was it in the Catskills or Upstate New York?

BB: I think Pennsylvania. Something else I used to do, I grew up, as I said, in an all-black area. This is no reflection on African Americans at all, but to me it was very depressing. Now, for a variety of reasons, once in a blue moon, I would go and take a subway and I would visit one of my relatives in a nicer area. My aunt Jane and uncle Max, that was Betty Anne, the cousin who was two years older than me. I would go and I would stay with them on weekends when there was no school. I remember Harry (Sax?), my cousin, he lived in the projects, he was a World War II veteran and I would go and stay with him and his wife and his daughter Linda. I recently reconnected with his daughter Linda, who now has a grown child.

KR: Your cousin Betty, where does she live?

BB: She lived, as far back as I can remember, she lived in Fresh Meadows, New York, which is, I don't know if you know the Long Island Expressway, it's the Utopia Parkway exit, right there.

AN: That was where your aunt Jane lived. You took the train where, Fresh Meadows?

BB: Yes.

AN: Oh, okay.

BB: So, I would take the train and I would either take a bus or my uncle Max would drive a car and meet me at the train, one or the other.

AN: It was their house.

BB: They had a small, old Levittown-style brick house, and they would have a place for me. I guess my cousin Harry living in the projects, he would put me in a storage room or something, yes. So, I would stay with them for the weekend. With my cousin, when we were going up to see my uncle and aunt, Uncle Max and Aunt Jane, we would do things like we'd go to the park, we'd ride over to--there's a big park where they lived and see the model sailboats being run and you'd walk around in the park, that type of thing.

AN: I think growing up in poverty is depressing, no matter what color the people are.

BB: Except that when you're poor, you don't know it.

AN: Yes.

BB: You only realize it retroactively.

AN: Right.

BB: Once you're out of it and I would not want to, if I had to live my life over again, it's better than growing up in, say, India, in a poor area in India, but for the United States, it wasn't a very pleasant experience.

AN: What was your income, your parents' income?

BB: Good question. Initially, my father was a clerk in a bank, in Bankers Trust, and we had very, very little money. Then, later on, Susan, when my wife, my sister--see, my sister is Susie, my wife is Susan.

AN: Susan.

BB: When my sister and I were a little older, my mother got a job working for the Social Services Department at the City of New York. Now, she had a college degree, so she was able to get a job as an administrator for the City of New York, for the social services. I think she had to take an exam or something, and once she did that and my father was screaming and yelling the whole time, macho man of the house, "You shouldn't work," and all that stuff, but once they had the money coming in, until my father passed away, we were then able to move to Midwood and get a house in the Midwood area of Brooklyn.

AN: His income as a clerk just was not doing it.

BB: It wasn't very much at all, no. I remember the big thing for me was when I graduated high school, they got me a movie camera as a present. I remember going on the Brooklyn Bridge with my father and taking pictures, movies, from the Brooklyn Bridge.

AN: Cool.

BB: Yes, and took movies at the World's Fair, the one in Queens. [Editor's Note: The 1964 World's Fair was held in Flushing Meadows, Queens.]

KR: Before we get to moving to Midwood and high school, I just wanted to ask you a couple questions about growing up in New York City.

BB: Sure.

KR: Was baseball of any interest to you?

BB: Actually, yes. My father, on one or two occasions, took me to Ebbets Field to watch the Dodgers play. I still remember, bottom of the ninth, Pee Wee Reese striking out and the Dodgers losing the game. It's strange what memories stay with you. I was a Dodgers fan, and I used to follow baseball. I used to follow Roy Campanella and Pee Wee Reese and Gil Hodges, and I would follow all of those guys until, poof, off they went. [Editor's Note: Ebbets Field was the baseball stadium of the Brooklyn Dodgers in Brooklyn, New York. It was built in 1912 and demolished in 1960. The Dodgers moved to Los Angeles in 1957.]

AN: Off they went.

BB: That was the end of my interest in baseball.

AN: You and a lot of other people.

BB: Yes. Of course, they tore down Ebbets Field, that was the other thing, yes.

AN: There is a plaque there. There is a plaque where the stadium was.

BB: Right, right, how wonderful.

AN: Yes, right on the ground.

BB: Yes, yes.

KR: At the game when Pee Wee Reese struck out, was Jackie Robinson playing?

BB: Yes, I believe he was. At that age, I was not able to distinguish. He was a player like the others. He did well, I believe. He got a couple of hits. I suppose we could go and look it up, but I wouldn't know which one.

KR: When you were young, who were your heroes in society, literature, sports? Who were your heroes?

BB: Real life people?

KR: Real life or in movies or from reading.

BB: Okay, so in real life, it would be my Uncle Sam [Natelson], who was a world-famous chemist, and these are all my mother's side of the family. On my father's side, forget about it. They're all on my mother's side of the family. My Uncle Sam, Samuel Natelson, he was a world-famous chemist. He took pity on me once or twice--and that was my first airplane ride--he took me out to Rockford, Illinois, where he was living when he moved there. He would come over to the house, and he and his younger son would take me to play tennis in the projects. It was a black school yard, but we were able to play tennis. He would, also once or twice, take me over to the hospital, where he was the hospital chemist, and I would stay there with him and watch him and his colleague playing chess. My uncle was a very outspoken person, and I absolutely idolized him. I like Paladin, if you've ever heard of him. I was having some difficulty with calculus, high school calculus, and I called my Uncle Sam to get help on a program. Well, he was absolutely livid because he was watching the TV show Paladin, and he screamed at me, "How dare you call me while I'm watching Paladin," and he hung up. That was the end of search for help from my uncle on that occasion.

AN: How old were you when you went and visited your uncle, at what age, like high school?

BB: No, no, it was not after high school. I was about twelve or thirteen at that time because I remember my Uncle Sam came once. He would come and visit. Once, he stayed with us, and I think he might have still been living in Brooklyn at the time, when they did that. I remember visiting my other relatives when they were still in Brooklyn, and it had to be before they all dispersed, all on my mother's side of the family. Her sister, that she was very close to, went off to Ohio, so I visited them. My aunt (Fannie?) I remember visiting. My mother put me on a sled once, and she walked it up the Eastern Parkway [to] where my aunt was living to visit and then took me back on the sled because there was snow on the ground.

AN: Oh, nice.

BB: Yes, I remember that. At the time, I was probably about six or seven. I couldn't have been very big. I had to be between four and seven when that happened.

KR: You mentioned Paladin.

BB: That was Richard Boone, the famous actor. He was a very famous actor and he was famous for having shot John Wayne in the back in one of his movies. [Editor's Note: *Have Gun-Will Travel* was a radio and television series produced by CBS that starred Richard Boone as the character Paladin.]

AN: Right, right.

BB: That was his claim to fame. He was also in a couple television shows as a doctor. So, I used to watch it. I remember once [that] I needed help with calculus or math. I called my uncle up, and he said, "Why are you calling me now? Don't bother me. I'm in the middle of watching Paladin." [laughter]

AN: Did your family have a television?

BB: Yes, we did. Later on, we got one. We had a black-and-white one, and even when I was fifteen, we had black and white. I vaguely remember switching to color when I was about sixteen or seventeen, in Brooklyn. That would have been in the Midwood area. I remember this really small television screen and I was watching Foodini and Pinhead in the brownstone and all these small children shows, Beany and Cecil. This was the puppet, not the cartoon, the puppet series, Beany and Cecil. [Editor's Note: Foodini and Pinhead were the main characters in the children's television show *Foodini the Great*, which aired from 1948 to 1951. *Time for Beany* was another puppet television series that aired from 1949 to 1955. Beany and Cecil were the main characters. An animated spinoff aired from 1962 to 1969.]

AN: Right.

BB: Puppets and that was a lot of fun, watching them. I used to watch, there was one [show], I remember the song--I don't remember the name of the show--"How old are you, my fine young man? How old are you this Thursday? Did I hear you say you'd be twelve years old? Twelve years old on Sunday." Then, he used to take them through a train, and they'd go visit historical points in history, take them back in history.

AN: Did you watch with your sister?

BB: I don't think so. Interestingly enough, the guy who was the star of that television show, he became "Doc" on *Gunsmoke* with James Arness. [Editor's Note: James Arness starred in many country westerns, including the country western *Gunsmoke*, in which he played U.S. Marshall Matt Dillon. Actor Millburn Stone played Dr. Galen "Doc" Adams.]

AN: Oh, that's a great show.

BB: Who was "Doc" on that show? I don't remember the names. I'm not good with names anymore. I can Google it in about thirty seconds. [Editor's Note: "Doc" was played by actor Millburn Stone.]

AN: I know. That wasn't *The Virginian*. That wasn't Arness. [Editor's Note: *The Virginian* was a country western television series that aired from 1962 to 1971.]

BB: No, no, that was the one with James Arness.

AN: I remember that. "Doc" was great in that.

BB: He played "Doc." I remember saying, "This was the guy from taking children back in time. What's he doing on this western show?" I couldn't understand why he'd be on a western show.

AN: I had seen him on all the local kiddie shows.

BB: I used to watch Paladin all the time, and I did not have any real-life heroes or heroines, none whatsoever. My heroes and heroines were all from the Edgar Rice Burroughs [books]. I used to read--what was that series they made a movie out of it? John Carter on Mars, and John Carter was my hero. Did you ever read any of those books? The books were very good. The movie just butchered it, but the books were super. He did a whole series of books, John Carter on Mars. It was really nice. He was one of my heroes, and I don't think I had any others, I'm sorry, other than my uncle Sam. Another one that was up on a pedestal was my uncle Morris, who I hardly knew. My uncle Morris was a senior partner at Lehman Brothers. [Editor's Note: Beginning in 1912, Edgar Rice Burroughs wrote a series about the character John Carter of Mars. The 2012 film *John Carter* is based on the same character.]

AN: Really?

BB: Yes, when I was in high school, so this was later.

AN: What was his last name?

BB: Natelson.

AN: Oh, that is your mother.

BB: Yes, all of them. Her maiden name was Natelson. My mother's middle name was Ella.

AN: *Gunsmoke*.

BB: *Gunsmoke*, yes, that's right, *Gunsmoke*.

AN: A classic.

BB: You've got it.

AN: Classic.

BB: Right.

AN: Because of my phone, that's it. [laughter]

BB: My uncle Morris was a senior partner with Lehman Brothers. I remember once or twice going to visit him in his offices, which were palatial. He even took me to lunch in his club once, and I had one or two conversations when I was in my last two years of high school and my first year in college. Before he passed away, he got me summer jobs with Lehman Brothers as a runner.

One thing that happened was that later on, I was in college and I knew a little bit about computers--this is before he passed away. I'm getting ahead of myself, but, anyway, I got a job. They said to me, "Brian, you know about computers. How would you like to work for the computer department?" I said, "Fine." My uncle Morris blocked it. He blocked my promotion on the grounds that it would be nepotism.

AN: Oh, he was a little bit too ethical.

BB: Yes.

AN: Wow.

BB: He blocked me from being promoted, and then I stayed in the mail room until I stopped being an intern at Lehman Brothers.

AN: Oh, gosh, you would have been ahead of that curve.

BB: Wouldn't I, though?

AN: Wow.

BB: So, he blocked it. No harm done. [laughter] My uncle Max, again, this is later on, he brought me in and I worked one summer. He owned a coffee company, Savoy Coffee Company in Brooklyn, and I worked for him once summer. I wound up delivering coffee for him. This was when I was old enough to drive at the time, and that's a whole different story--I don't want to go there. He died of Parkinson's later on. He was not a businessman.

KR: Yes. Did you have other part-time jobs before that?

BB: I folded newspapers. I used to stand under the train and fold newspapers and then handout the newspapers, I did that. Let's see, what else did I do?

KR: How much money did you make?

BB: Twenty-five cents an hour maybe.

AN: How old were you then? When was your first job?

BB: My very first job, okay. I did not have any jobs when I lived in Bedford-Stuyvesant. My very first job was right after I moved to Midwood, and my very first job was folding newspapers.

AN: Like fifteen years old.

BB: Yes, fifteen, and that was the age I could legally work. When I started working at Lehman Brothers in the summers, that's when I didn't have to fold newspapers anymore. Then, one summer I worked, after I stopped being an intern at Lehman Brothers, I worked one summer for my uncle who owned the Savoy Coffee Company.

AN: At that internship, they were paid right?

BB: Oh, absolutely, I was paid. I didn't make very much money, but I was paid.

AN: They were paid [internships].

BB: I remember one year I used the money to buy a camera, a much nicer camera than I had been using when I was thirteen. I was very big into cameras, most of which I could not afford. Later on in life, there was a period of time when I collected--the digital era started and people were dumping their film cameras--I started collecting them. I would go to my relatives, and they'd say, "Oh, I heard you collect old cameras." I'd say, "Yes," and they'd just hand me these film cameras. I have this big collection of old film cameras.

AN: You do?

BB: Yes, some of which at the time, when they were in use, were worth thousands of dollars, like Zenza Bronica. [Editor's Note: Zenza Bronica was a Japanese camera manufacturer.]

AN: We should talk because my son is studying photography in college. He's going to the Classical School of Art and Fine Arts in photography next semester.

BB: I started with a light meter. I used direct light, indirect light, flash, direct flash, indirect flash, and I used to do all of that stuff.

AN: He has a couple old ones. He would love to talk to you.

BB: Oh, sure.

AN: He is getting home tonight, actually.

BB: Okay, fine.

KR: When you were growing up, how did your parents and you and your sister get your news?

BB: Radio. I remember once on the radio--and you could tell what year this was from what I'm going to tell you; and this was my very first memory of hearing news on the radio--that there was an encounter between MiGs and Sabre jets near the Yalu River and the Sabre jets had shot down some MiGs. That's my very first memory of listening to the radio. So, that would have been about '51, so, '43-'50, I would have been about six years old. That's my very first memory. I remember I used to listen to shows on the radio, and once in a blue moon, I would listen to news. Mostly, I was totally indifferent to what was going on in the world, totally indifferent. I didn't even know that there was such a thing as the Korean War. I didn't know, didn't have any relatives who served in the Korean War, didn't know anything about it, at all. [Editor's Note: From 1950 to 1953, the Korean War involved American, South Korean and United Nations military forces fighting against the North Korean military, backed by Chinese military forces and Soviet weaponry, for control of the Korean Peninsula. Korea remains divided at the thirty-eighth parallel. MiG is a Russian aircraft manufacturer. The North American F-86 Sabre was a jet aircraft used during the Korean War by the American Air Force.]

KR: What about McCarthyism? [Editor's Note: Senator Joseph McCarthy's accusations of Communist infiltration in the U.S. government led to a nationwide witch-hunt to unearth alleged Communists, particularly in academia and in Hollywood]

BB: I knew nothing about McCarthyism. Today, I know about McCarthyism, and I think it's vile. I think there might have been a little bit of anti-Semitism rolled into that because most of the people that were targeted in Hollywood were Jewish, so I think there might have been some anti-Semitism in there. The whole McCarthy thing was a witch hunt. I had relatives who were dyed-in-the-wool, hardcore Republicans, and I used to argue with them, when I was old enough to be able to argue with them.

AN: Interesting.

BB: When I was younger, for some reason, I don't know why, my family was dirt poor, but they were Republicans, go figure that one out.

KR: You said your parents supported Eisenhower.

BB: Yes.

KR: What were the political discussions about Eisenhower?

BB: I think there weren't so much discussions as to the fact that he was a war hero. He was a general. The first most important thing--and you may or may not have read about this--is he said he would get us out of the Korean War. I think that played very heavily in their minds, and I do remember them talking about it. He said that he would end the Korean War. I think he, I forgot who his opponent was, Stevenson, it might have been.

AN: I think that the parties were so divided then. My parents were Franklin Roosevelt supporters, but they loved Eisenhower.

BB: Yes, people liked Eisenhower because of what he had achieved and who he was. He was, more or less, he was kind of apolitical. People like Eisenhower, if that black general had run, I think it might have been, what was his name?

AN: Colin Powell. [Editor's Note: Colin Powell is a retired Army general and former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. After retiring, Powell served as the secretary of state from 2001 to 2005.]

KR: Colin Powell.

BB: Colin Powell. If he had run, I think we'd have a whole different United States, if he had run. I so wanted him to run, but he didn't. That was my memory of the early years, and I don't remember very much about politics. I didn't start to get involved until I was like a senior in college, and then I started to get a little bit involved in politics, not a lot, and I loved the Kennedys. I absolutely loved the Kennedys.

KR: Why did you love the Kennedys?

BB: I think it was the whole Camelot mystique and also the fact that when John F. Kennedy spoke, he was very clear about what he was saying. He knew what he was doing. He gave you the impression that he knew what he was doing and that he wouldn't do anything stupid, as opposed to Stevenson, who was very intelligent but had a blurred message. He appeared to have a blurred message. [Editor's Note: Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson lost two elections for the presidency in 1952 and 1956 and then lost the Democratic candidacy in 1960 to John F. Kennedy.]

The other thing my mother told me--and I think this had been brought out by history--was that John's father, Joseph Kennedy, was anti-Semitic, a very, very virulent anti-Semite, but that John was not. In fact, he met with some of the Holocaust survivors. I kind of liked him for that reason. Also, of course, I liked his policies. That might have been the time when I was briefly a Democrat, and I remember--now, this is post-elementary--but I remember in college, when I was in my last year of college, not John Kennedy but his brother Bobby, Bobby came to the college and spoke. I came to see him speak, and I was absolutely furious because his wife Ethel was standing there on the stage. She was about eight months pregnant, and no one would give her a chair to sit down and I thought that was absolutely awful. I guess that was my one flirtation with leanings towards being sympathetic.

KR: What do you remember about his speech?

BB: Nothing. I remember absolutely nothing about his speech. I only remember that I thought Nixon was a crook. I didn't care for Nixon at all. I thought he was--and this was just impressions--you couldn't put your finger on anything. It was all impressions. I really didn't care for Nixon as a person.

AN: I was wondering how old were you when your parents died.

BB: Okay, so my father died when I was about fifteen, no, no, sixteen. He died between my freshman and sophomore year of Brooklyn College.

AN: You started out of Brooklyn from Erasmus.

BB: I went from Erasmus to Brooklyn because it was what we could afford.

AN: Right, it is a good school.

BB: Well, I was there for four years. I flunked out, nervous breakdown basically, and then I transferred to LIU. I did very well at LIU. What happened was it was my father's death that triggered the breakdown.

AN: Yes, granted, you are young.

BB: What?

AN: You went to college when you were sixteen.

BB: I was sixteen. I graduated [in] May. My birthday was May 10th, so I graduated just around the time I went from fifteen to sixteen. I started college at the age of sixteen.

AN: Your father died when?

BB: My father died between my freshman and sophomore year. He died in August of 1960, which was between my freshmen and sophomore year at Brooklyn College. I had been taking "Calculus III," advanced calculus, in summer school, and up to that point I had a 100 on the exams and had the highest grade in the class. I got about a 50 on the final, after my father died, and the teacher gave me a D in the course. She never bothered to ask if there was a problem, and that stayed with me, that she never inquired as to what, if anything, had happened. After that, I tended to view all the teachers at Brooklyn College as lacking decency.

AN: Was his death unexpected?

BB: Well, it depends on your perspective. For me, as a child it was unexpected, but if you were a doctor, you'd say, "Yes." [He] smoked very heavily, smoked three packs a day, drank himself into a stupor every night. Yes, it was not unexpected.

AN: How old was he?

BB: Oh, fifty-two, I think, around fifty-two.

AN: That was, nevertheless, a shock.

BB: I'll be very honest with you. My emotions, having grown up in Brooklyn and having been through that--maybe I should back up a little bit and tell you a little bit what life was like in the brownstone in Brooklyn. My mother wanted to be a dancer, and so she did it through my sister. From the age of four, she took my sister to dance class almost every single night in downtown Brooklyn, Minerva Nowve Dance Studio. She left me home alone with my father at night. My father would go into a drunken rage every single night, and I would be home with him. He very rarely ever got physical, so I was lucky in that respect, but, emotionally, it was a real roller coaster. I remember him yelling and screaming--and how old was I? My sister was four, I would've been about six or seven, and I remember being home alone with him. I remember when I complained to my mother about it, my mother said, "Well, you could've come to dance school. You could've been in dance school with your sister." That was her response. By the time my mother and sister got home, my father was passed out. That was my memory. My emotions were very dulled. I could not feel anything.

When my father died, I felt absolutely nothing, absolutely nothing, and I think it kind of caught up with me later on because my grades went to hell. I could not study. Well, I couldn't study with my father getting drunk every night. My grades went to hell, and, unfortunately, I flunked out of Brooklyn College. I had all "F's" and flunked out.

KR: When you were at Erasmus High School, what kind of guidance did you get regarding college?

BB: Zero, nothing. The only guidance I got [was] my mother was saying, "You should go here because your cousin went here. You should go to this school because your cousin went to this school." The other guidance I got from my mother was, "You should be a doctor. I'm not going to pay for you to go to college unless you become a doctor." The closest thing to medicine was chemistry. My Uncle Sam was a famous chemist, and they both pushed me into chemistry. I absolutely hated it. I didn't do poorly in it, but I absolutely hated it. The first chance I got, I got out and I never looked back.

AN: You ended up being an engineer.

BB: Well, that's a whole different story that you're going to hear about if this thing keeps going.

AN: At Brooklyn College, you flunked out. Did you take time or did you try to get back in LIU?

BB: I went right back to LIU in the fall. Now, the one thing at Brooklyn College that happened, it was very interesting was, while I was at Brooklyn College and I was taking chemistry classes and sometimes doing well and sometimes not doing well, I took one course in computer programming. I think it was the very first course ever given in Brooklyn College in computer programming, and it was given by a math teacher who was a consultant to IBM. I did very well in that course, and I fell in love with it. I fell in love with it because it had nothing to do with chemicals. I found it to be beautiful. The structure, the philosophy, [was] very mathematical in nature. I absolutely fell in love with it, and so later on I pushed in that direction.

KR: When you were at Long Island University, what did you study?

BB: Chemistry, because that's what I had taken at Brooklyn College and the transfer credits, and that was my ticket to graduation fast, as opposed to changing majors and I would have to go back and take a lot of stuff over again, so I majored in chemistry. I remember I assisted one professor in organic chemistry, and I helped him out.

I do remember two very strange incidents when I was at LIU. The first was [that] I took a midterm in [biology] and I was high on medicine because I had a very bad cold and I had taken something. I remember I was really sick, and I cut class. I came back and then the head of the Bio Department came in and said, "Where were you Berenbach?" I said [that] I wasn't feeling well. He said, "We just announced in class, you're the highest grade on the midterm." I couldn't believe it.

AN: Which class was that?

BB: Biology.

AN: Biology.

BB: That was biology, and I also had the highest grade on the philosophy midterm. I had the highest grade in class on the philosophy midterm. I remember my last semester on my chemistry final, I had a hundred.

AN: Wow.

BB: It was "Physical Chemistry," and I had a hundred.

AN: Did they pay for your education since you were in chemistry?

BB: Who?

AN: Your mother, or your parents? You said your mother would not pay unless you became a doctor.

BB: Oh, she paid for Brooklyn College, and she paid for LIU. Then, after that, I wanted to get the hell away from her and I wanted to get the hell away from that whole environment. I got a teaching assistantship to Emory University.

AN: In chemistry?

BB: In chemistry.

AN: Yes.

BB: I did chemistry. I did a year as a TA, teaching assistant, and then it switched over. For the latter part, I was on a NSF [National Science Foundation] Fellowship. That was a little different. You're pushing me along here. That was about the time of the Vietnam War, when I had to make a decision.

AN: Got it.

KR: Going back to LIU, where did you live?

BB: I lived where my sister still lives on Avenue M in Midwood in Brooklyn, which is a nice area, mixed, Jewish and Italian area. Now, we're getting a lot of religious Jews living there. I remember once being ambushed coming out [at] eight in the morning going somewhere, and a group of Jewish people came over and said, "We're short for a minyan." [Editor's Note: A minyan is a group of ten Jewish adults needed for certain religious services and activities.]

AN: That is very welcoming.

BB: They were very nice to me about it, but they asked me.

AN: Yes.

BB: [They asked me], "Could you be part of a minyan?" I could see [that] they were all very religious. At the time, I wanted nothing to do with the religion, but it wasn't that. I was going somewhere, or I might have, just for curiosity, gone along with them.

AN: You were living at home when you went to LIU.

BB: Yes, I was.

AN: Yes, the whole time you went to college.

BB: I was a commuter. My mother could afford it. I made one or two friends who were in the dorm, and, during this time, I started to study martial arts. When I'd get out of the subway and I was heading for LIU, I passed on the right a martial arts studio. I started to study the martial arts. I just went in. It wasn't very expensive, and I started to pay for it. I wound up, after I retired many years later, with a seventh degree black belt in Okinawan karate.

AN: Oh, wow.

BB: I had a karate studio for over twenty years.

AN: Oh, really?

BB: I didn't have my own place. I was not stupid. I could see the karate places, these hotshots would all start one and they'd all fail within a year or two financially. What I did was I went to a community center. I didn't have to worry about insurance, and I didn't need to worry about facilities. I would teach twice a week, and I did that from '86 until I retired in 2014.

AN: In New Jersey?

BB: In New Jersey, at the Stelton Community Center.

AN: Yes, yes.

BB: In New Jersey, yes.

AN: Back during college, did you work?

BB: Let me think. Two or three of the summers, I worked for my uncle at Savoy Coffee Company. When I was at Brooklyn College, one or two summers I was a camp counselor, an away camp counselor.

AN: Where?

BB: I don't remember.

AN: Okay.

BB: It was Jewish, but I don't remember where it was. Again, I was younger than everybody else. It's not that we didn't get along well--they were very nice to me--but I felt uncomfortable with the other camp counselors because I was younger than most of them. I was a bit of a social outcast.

KR: When you were at LIU and then Emory, it is the mid-1960s, society is drastically changing.

BB: Yes.

KR: What sticks out in your mind about going to college at that time?

BB: Well, LIU not very much but Emory I remember. I decided to be a member of the Young Republicans, mostly because I wanted to meet and date people. I remember I went to one meeting of the Young Republicans, and the two candidates were Lester Maddox and Bo Callaway. [Editor's Note: Lester Maddox served as the governor of Georgia from 1967 to 1971. He was a populist Democrat and supporter of segregation. He then held the post of lieutenant governor of Georgia from 1971 to 1975, when Jimmy Carter was governor. Bo Callaway served in the U.S. House of Representatives from Georgia's third district, the first Republican elected to that post since the Reconstruction era. He ran against Lester Maddox in the 1966 gubernatorial race in Georgia and narrowly lost in a disputed election.]

AN: Oh.

BB: Remember, Emory is in Atlanta.

AN: Yes, yes.

BB: Bo Callaway came to give a talk. One of the [students]--it might have been me--someone raised their hand and said, "Do you believe in segregation?" Bo Callaway said, "Yes, I do." That was the end of Bo Callaway because then Jimmy Carter came in and he ran against Bo Callaway and he ran on the same side and he split enough votes off that Lester Maddox won the election as a- [Editor's Note: Former Georgia Governor Ellis Arnall, not Jimmy Carter, ran in the gubernatorial race in Georgia in 1966.]

AN: Dixiecrat. [Editor's Note: The term Dixiecrat refers to Southern Democrats that supported segregation and later realigned to the Republican Party.]

BB: He turned out to be not quite so bad. He turned out to be not as bad as people thought he would be. I remember that there were riots about that time in the '60s. I remember riots. I remember my roommate.

AN: In Atlanta?

BB: In Atlanta. I remember in school I had a place to sit at Emory, and the guy that I was sitting with was black. He would tell me about his experiences and he came from Howard University, and he was doing a doctorate in chemistry. He was a really smart guy. I so admired him because of his intelligence and what he had to put up with.

The other thing that happened to me, there were racial incidents all along. When I had been in Brooklyn College, I was on the rifle team. There was a gun club in Brooklyn. A friend of mine was a member, and he asked me to join. I joined the gun club, and we used to shoot archery there, too. When I was taking karate, one of my karate instructors was Jamaican. He was black. He was a very nice fellow. His name was Kurt Blackwood. I asked him to come with me [to] the gun club, and he seemed very uncomfortable. I had no idea why he was uncomfortable. He came with me to the gun club. He had a good time. He went away. After that, the president of the gun club came up to me, his name was Mickey Cohen, and he said to me, "We don't want people like that here anymore. Don't bring people like that anymore." This guy was Jewish. It just goes to show you racism goes all different ways. That was there. I had incidents in the Air Force, and in Atlanta, I had incidents. I remember going to stores where it said, "No Jews or blacks allowed." I remember that.

AN: Culturally, what was that like to go Emory from Brooklyn? Your whole life, you had been in Brooklyn mainly and then Upstate for a few trips.

BB: In the Graduate School of Chemistry, it was a good school, and all the professors were imported from the North. There were no good southern schools, except maybe for Georgia Tech, which made engineers and Georgia Tech has gotten much better than it used to be, too. The reputation went up in the world. On campus, Emory was practically all white, and that was due to a variety of things, one of which was the cost of going. Emory was a very expensive school, and I was on a fellowship, so I didn't see that. First year, I was a TA, teaching assistant. Everybody was white, and they all came from rich families. You see them driving around in Ferraris, the kids who would drive around in Ferraris.

Then, when I went into town, the center of Atlanta was very cosmopolitan, so I didn't so much see any racism or anti-Semitism. The one thing I did see was there was a poor [neighborhood] of black people in the downtown area, and that was probably due to racism, the businesses not hiring any black people. Now, Emory, probably would not have had black faculty. It takes a while for black kids to percolate up in the system, and they were so suppressed that you didn't start to see black academics until the '80s.

AN: I went to Duke. I am sure Emory was probably behind Duke progressively in integration. I do not think Duke was integrated until '63.

BB: Right.

AN: There was big a fifteenth anniversary of a bunch of activists and they worked with a bunch of people, because fifteen hundred people sat-in after King was killed [in 1968]. Among the people, there were the handful of black students. You could count them on both hands.

BB: Right.

AN: I think Emory, I am sure, was on the same kind of schedule.

BB: Right. On a personal level, I felt empathy and sympathy for the African American kids and faculty and people. On a group level, my mother was constantly talking about, "The *schvartze* is this and the *schvartze* is that." It took me a while to get that out of my system. It really took me a while to get that out of my system. I had black friends in high school and I had one or two black friends in college, and by the time I graduated college, that was gone. It was totally gone. [Editor's Note: *Schvartze* is a Yiddish racial slur.]

AN: I was wondering, running into such a segregated but very different culture, was there anti-Semitism at Emory? Did you run into that at the graduate school?

BB: Half the faculty was Jewish.

AN: Okay.

BB: Yes, yes, I remember that. One of their star chemistry professors, Leon Mandell, was Jewish, so you didn't see that too much.

AN: Good.

BB: I used to go to temple in Atlanta. Once in a while, we'd go to temple. The reason I did that was--it had nothing whatsoever to do with Judaism, [but] because I wanted to meet people and have a social life.

AN: Did you go to that big reformed temple, [called The Temple]?

BB: Yes, that's the one I attended, yes.

AN: Yes, that's a famous temple.

BB: Yes, that's the one I went to. I wanted to meet young ladies. I never did meet any, but that was my hope.

KR: You said the student body was predominantly white. The people that you had contact with, where were they from?

BB: Most of them were from various parts of the South, but they were from areas that were not poor, like Florida, Virginia, and there were a few northerners, not too many. There were some northerners. At the time, in the '60s, Emory was not looked at as--people used to call it the Harvard of the South. Maybe it was.

AN: Duke had that name, too.

BB: Yes.

AN: They were the two.

BB: It was a very expensive school, and the professors that I saw were all top notch. They were all first-rate faculty, but that was an exception.

AN: You were doing chemistry there.

BB: Chemistry.

AN: You got your graduate degree in chemistry.

BB: Well, that's the story, yes.

AN: I thought you made the shift.

BB: I was doing chemistry, and I stayed in chemistry. I had "A's" in anything that didn't have to do with chemicals, and I had "C's" in anything that had to do with chemicals, like organic chemistry. I did research on thermodynamics, liquid surfaces. If I had stayed in the field and hadn't gone into the military, I was doing studies on the liquid crystals before they became popular.

AN: Wow.

BB: Boy, would I have had a career. What happened was I was under a lot of pressure psychologically, if not physically. People at my draft board were being taken left and right. My draft number was like ten, and I was looking over my shoulder. My choice was very simple. Carry a rifle in Vietnam for two years and maybe get your arm blown off or go into the military. I tried all the branches of the service, including the National Health Service, and the lines were a mile long of everybody trying. I tried the Coast Guard. I tried everything. I even spoke to someone from the Marines, and, boy, did that sour me. Then, I tried the Navy, and the only thing the Navy and the Air Force [had] open was in was pilot training. That was the only thing they had open. So, I was frantic. I was going to go in.

My faculty adviser said, "Look, you passed your qualifiers. Finish your thesis, get your master's degree, and then you can head for the military." I went down and I took the test for Navy pilot and I did very well, but I had been drinking the night before and I flunked the eye test. They said, "You can be a navigator, but you can't be a pilot." I said, "No." I went and took the Air

Force test. I learned my lesson, and I stayed away from liquor. I passed the test for pilot, and I did very well.

I went into flight training, not flight, pre-flight, OTS they called it, Officer Training School. This was in Lackland Air Force Base in Texas. I was in pre-flight, which is just regular cadets marching around and taking courses on Air Force culture and history and all that stuff, [learning about] different types of planes and logistics. I had some hay fever, and I went in to see their physician to get shots. They reported me to the flight surgeon, and the flight surgeon says, "You've washed out of flight training." [Editor's Note: Lackland Air Force Base was established in 1941, in San Antonio, Texas. It is part of Joint Base San Antonio, which consists of Lackland Air Force Base, Fort Sam Houston and Randolph Air Force Base. They were merged in 2010.]

AN: You never seriously got into training.

KR: Yes, it was very early on.

BB: Very early on.

AN: Wow.

BB: So, I-

AN: Back up just the timeline, I am a little confused.

BB: Okay.

AN: What year did you get to Emory?

BB: '66.

AN: You were a teaching assistant in chemistry.

BB: Then a fellow, an NSF Fellow and I did my research.

AN: How long was that program?

BB: That was from about January 1966 through December of 1967. I went in September. I got my master's in September of '67, which is when I went into the military.

KR: I wanted to ask you something. You said that the draft board was looking over your shoulder. If you were in school in Emory, would you have had a deferment?

BB: They ended it.

KR: Okay.

AN: They ended deferments?

BB: They ended deferments for graduate students.

AN: I remember that, yes.

BB: In fact, when I went into the service, I ran into a guy who was drafted within six months of his doctorate. He was six months within his Ph.D., and he was drafted.

AN: Did he make it out?

BB: What?

AN: Did he get out of the military?

BB: Oh, he wound up in Minot, North Dakota as an underground missile launch officer. [Editor's Note: Minot Air Force Base is located near Minot, North Dakota.]

AN: Okay.

BB: So, that was the other thing that you could be, a missile launch officer, and spend your life in Minot, North Dakota.

KR: Did you have friends from Brooklyn, from LIU, from Emory, who were drafted?

BB: I didn't have any friends. I had one friend, and he had a draft deferment because he was married. That was all I knew. I had one friend. I was not big on friends at the time.

I was doing my master's. I absolutely hated chemistry. I remember going down and looking enviously over the shoulder of someone doing computer work. I was so envious of what he was doing, but it never dawned on me to take an extra two years and change majors. It never even crossed my mind. I just wanted out. I always wanted to be a pilot. I thought it was glamourous being a pilot, so I went into flight training. I went into this OTS in the Air Force with a specialty of pilot training.

When I was in OTS, once it was Yom Kippur. The TAC officer, this was the officer in charge of the cadets, came to me and said, "You can't go to services." He says, "Your buddies are depending on you, and I forbid it. You can't go to services." I said, "Screw that," and I went to services. I went to Yom Kippur services. I met a guy who lived a block around the corner from me. He was an enlisted man, and he had gone into the Air Force to avoid the Army. He lived right around the corner from me.

AN: In Midwood?

BB: In Midwood, yes. That was my first experience with anti-Semitism, but that wasn't real anti-Semitism. That was just not knowing what Yom Kippur meant. The thing was, if you think about the United States as a whole and the military, the number of Jews in the United States military is about two to three percent and so most Americans you meet haven't met a Jew in their entire life once you get away from the metropolitan areas. When I was in OTS, most people, for the most part, it was perfectly normal, everything was fine. It was only when I wanted to go to services on Yom Kippur that I ran into trouble.

AN: Was there any consequence when you were going?

BB: No consequence.

AN: No consequence.

BB: I mentioned it to the rabbi, who was a friend of the base commander, and he said, "Let me know if you have any trouble and I'll take care of it."

AN: This was at Lackland.

BB: This was at Lackland Air Force Base while I was a cadet. The way it works was the first one-and-a-half months, you're an underclassman, and then the second one-and-a-half months, you're an upperclassman. The second one-and-a-half months, I became an upperclassman, and I was given the names of three Jewish people entering OTS. I went over to them, but the one thing I remember saying to them was, "Never volunteer. Don't volunteer for anything and whatever you do, don't accept a promotion." This one poor kid, when I was leaving, he became cadet major, which is in charge of everybody, this Jewish kid. The thing I remember about them was they hid their religion. They didn't want anybody to know that they were Jewish, but I found out because it was on a sheet of paper, so I was able to go and talk to them.

AN: I misunderstood the three Jewish names.

BB: Yes, what happened was the rabbi gave me this list. He said, "These are the Jewish people coming in. As a pep talk, go and talk to them and say hello to them and welcome them to the Air Force."

AN: I've got you.

KR: I am curious if your religion was marked on dog tags at that point. It was in World War II.

BB: I believe it was. I took my dog tag--I could find out--because I took my dog tag, I had it gold plated and I gave it to my wife as a necklace. My wife has it. I said, "This is it. No one else in the world has a necklace like this." So, I believe it was stamped "H" [for "Hebrew"].

AN: What was the comraderies like in training?

BB: In basic training?

AN: Yes.

BB: I made one friend that I kept in touch with, just one, but he, remember that I went one place and he went someplace else when I went into the service. I made friends as an officer in the Air Force; I made a couple friends who I stayed in touch with for a while.

KR: Of your cadre at flight training, do you know if people went on to Vietnam to be pilots?

BB: Yes, some, well here's the story of that. I was in OTS--let's back up how I got where I went, because I went to OTS and I got disqualified from flight training. I spoke to the flight surgeon. He explained to me that if you have allergies, you could have blockages and blackout at high altitude. I didn't believe him and I didn't think so, but I said, "Okay." Then, I got this thing that said, "You've been reclassified. You have to go and get a new classification. If you're not going to be a pilot, you have to have something else to do." I went and I was sitting in a row of chairs and there was a major and he was calling people in, "Next," or he called by their name and, "Come on in." Most of the people I was sitting with had done what was called SE or self-elimination. Self-elimination is they had gone into flight training only to get an entry into the Air Force as an officer. He was screaming at them. They can't force you to fly if you don't want to, you see. Once they were far enough along in basic training so that they couldn't be washed out, they'd get reclassified. He would be screaming and yelling, and they would get things like the DEW Line [Distant Early Warning Line] in northern Canada, missile silo, four years underground. I was really scared. I went in. I said, "Sir, I really wanted to fly. I didn't want any of that to happen to me. I really wanted to fly. The flight surgeon said I can't fly and I really wanted to." He looks at my thing, and he says, "You have a master's in chemistry, don't you?" I said, "Yes." He says, "Well, how would you like to be a nuclear engineer?" I said, "Where?" He says, "Sacramento." I said, "I'll take it."

AN: Wow.

BB: That was the end of my life as a chemist--well, not really. Then, I graduated OTS.

AN: How long was that program for you?

BB: Three months, OTS.

AN: Just three months, okay.

BB: They had a very quick program because what happens is you spend three months in basic just to learn how to march and serve and all that.

AN: Right.

BB: Then, you go and spend six months to a year learning your trade in the military.

AN: Oh, okay.

BB: So, I report to Sacramento, California, McClellan Air Force Base, 1155th Technical Operations Squadron, which was a member of AFTAC, the parent organization, and the division of it was 1155th Technical Operations Squadron. I reported in.

AN: It was the Air Force Technical what?

BB: Well, the higher level one, AFTAC, Air Force Technical Applications Center. [Editor's Note: AFTAC served as the U.S. Department of Defense's monitoring center for ensuring the implementation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (1968).]

AN: Got it.

BB: You can Google it online, and you'll find out about it. I went to a reunion a year ago, with my wife, of the organization. Then, the local chapter I was at was 1155th Technical Operations Squadron. The commander at the time--I thought this was so funny--his name was Bob Smith. He was a colonel. I kept thinking of *Howdy Doody*. I think it was Buffalo Bob Smith, on *Howdy Doody* show. [Editor's Note: *Howdy Doody* was a children's television series that aired from 1947 to 1960. It starred "Buffalo" Bob Smith and his puppet Howdy Doody.]

AN: Right.

BB: So, this guy was an Air Force colonel, and he was as nice as nice could be. I went in to meet him, and he was telling me, "Get yourself a convertible. You'll put the top down and it'll be down all year and you'll never have to put the top up." He was very pleasant. I must say that with the exception of one or two cases that I'll tell you about, every single person I met in the military, both officer and non-commissioned, they were really nice people. All of them were really nice people. Most of them, many of them, were highly educated. I'll tell you about that, too.

I'm going in as a second lieutenant, and so they put me in a barracks with one other guy from--I forgot where. I think he was the nephew of the guy who ran the skunk works for the Air Force that developed the SR-71. His uncle was a very famous person. So, I remember him. Dave Pachett was another friend, and he took me skiing with him once. They all had girlfriends or wives, and I was a real bachelor. [Editor's Note: Skunk works refers to a secret project that is unimpeded by bureaucracy. Lockheed Martin's Advanced Development Programs designed a number of aircraft, including the Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird.]

I remember in Sacramento going to a temple, and I actually wound up joining the men's club. My whole purpose in doing this was to meet women, and I did get one or two dates out of it, nothing serious, but I got one or two dates out of it. If you went to a bar in Sacramento at the time, it was wall to wall guys. You didn't have a chance. It was like one hundred to one, men to women.

AN: Wow.

BB: Because of all the young men that had been pushed into that area because of the Vietnam War, all the military bases in that area.

AN: Wow.

BB: Yes.

AN: Was the age difference, at that point, less relevant?

BB: The age difference, there was no age difference at that point.

AN: By that point.

BB: Because I had lost two years when I went from Brooklyn College to LIU.

AN: Right.

BB: It took me two extra years to graduate.

AN: Okay.

BB: The age difference was gone, so I was right about where I should be.

AN: Okay.

BB: When I had the master's degree, I was right about where I should be. I was twenty-four when I left the service and twenty-eight when I ended the service, so I was four years in the service.

AN: Socially, you did not have that huge-

BB: I didn't have that problem anymore, no. I spent two years in Sacramento, California.

KR: Before we go on and talk about your time at McClellan-

BB: Yes.

KR: I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions about Lackland.

BB: Sure.

KR: How did you get there?

BB: I drove. I drove from Brooklyn, New York. I was sworn in at the Army base in Brooklyn, New York, Fort Hamilton. I was sworn in at Fort Hamilton, and I was given a date that I had to arrive. Then, I just put all my stuff in my car, which was a--my mother had bought me a

Plymouth Valiant convertible. I drove down to Lackland Air Force Base, Texas [and] put the car in the parking lot. I was told that underclassman, first year, a month and a half, you're not allowed to drive, and I didn't see the car again for a month and a half.

KR: Did you make any stops on your way to Texas?

BB: No. Except to get gas, I drove straight through.

KR: What was your first day like? What were your impressions?

BB: I remember reporting in the morning and being given an assignment, bachelor officers' quarters, reporting in and filling out paperwork, being assigned a place to stay, a permanent place to stay. Okay, so there were two [road trips]. There was going from my house to Lackland and going [from] Lackland to McClellan Air Force Base, California.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

KR: We are back on. I just wanted to go back to your time at Lackland. Who was training you?

BB: This was the pre-flight, so we were all being trained by--we were in groups of maybe ten people and we were all cadets and we were being trained by two classes. One was full officers, regular officers, and we would go in to classrooms and we would have lectures during the morning. We would also have upper classman who would drill us, who were responsible for marching us around, because when we were lower class, first month and a half, you're lower class. Second month and a half, you're upper class. As lower classmen, we were being marched around by upperclassmen. When you went into a room, the PT [physical training] officers, the people who would watch you when you did physical training, the people who would march you or give you classes in the Air Force and military history, and tradition, dress, those were all commissioned officers usually of the rank of lieutenant or captain. Some of the people who gave lectures were people who'd actually served for four years. They came back from missile launch duty, or they'd come back from duty somewhere else. We didn't have any pilots because the pilots were in such short supply. The only people who were pilots were very high up, like the base commander or the commander of the training facility, things like that.

We also had NCOs [non-commissioned officers], like when we went out on the field, and we had to do PT, physical training. You had to do jumping jacks, sit-ups, push-ups. Sometimes, those were sergeants. I remember having one officer complain to me. He was an officer. He came in. His job was to teach self-defense, but I'd been studying karate for an extended period. So, he was talking to me, very friendly, he was complaining that we only have three hours of self-defense and we have forty hours of marching and we're a military organization and you're supposed to be able to defend yourself. He thought it should've been the opposite.

Also, I went to learn how to shoot a firearm, and I already knew how to shoot a firearm. I go in, and I got the expert pistol badge. We shoot this little pop gun, a .38 special gun, which is what pilots put in their holster when they're flying planes. I thought it was pretty much nothing, but apparently some people didn't do too well at it.

AN: I was curious about, backtracking just a little. Why did you do the rifle training back in Brooklyn?

BB: In Brooklyn, I was at Brooklyn College. I was always interested in firearms, and it turned out that Brooklyn College had a rifle team.

AN: Okay.

BB: I still remember the name, the name of the coach was Ted Rosequist, and the nicest thing I remember about it was that if you were on the rifle team, you were exempted from [PE, physical education]. So, I didn't have to go and do physical [education], and I didn't have to take the [PE] courses, which were all one credit. I thought they were a waste of time. I shot a rifle, and I did fairly well and I won some prizes. We got to shoot. We got to go all over the city. We fired at King's Point. We fired at St. John's University, every place that had a rifle team. Most of those places were places where they had ROTC.

AN: Back to the Army, the forty hours of marching and all of that, part of what is involved there, what I have heard from my brother, part of it is just learning how to take orders. What was it like emotionally to go through that experience? Was it just something you just had to do?

BB: Right. You get up at four o'clock in the morning. You clean the floor with a toothbrush. You clean the walls. You have to make sure that everything is totally spotless, your shoes. Everyone has to do this that goes through basic training. You go, you get shots because your shots, [for] your immune [system], because you never know where you're going to be sent, shots. Then, you go to breakfast. You sit at breakfast, and you sit at attention. You're only allowed to eat with one hand, and you're not allowed to talk to the person next to you. That's only for the first month and a half. The second month and half, when you're an upperclassman, you're allowed to talk a little bit. It was traditional military cadet [training].

AN: Did that come as a shock to you or did you know to expect it?

BB: I expected it. In fact, the officer in charge asked us at one class session whether we thought it would be easier or harder, and two-thirds of the people thought it would be easier and I thought it would be harder because I had done karate. In karate, the physical training and the concentration and focus, when you do something two hundred times and your body is dripping sweat, you kind of get used to that treatment. To me, this was nothing. I wasn't being asked to do five thousand jumping jacks, so it was easy for me, having had training in martial arts training. It wasn't difficult at all.

AN: Interesting.

BB: Yes.

KR: I am curious about the food for the first month and a half. I have heard from other servicemen stories and nicknames about the food that was served. What were your impressions?

BB: I thought it was fine, but keep in mind that I was an officer in training. I was getting officer food and not enlisted food. Later on, when I was an officer, I went back one day, and I was responsible for inspecting the enlisted food and I thought it was fine. Keep in mind, this was the Air Force, not the Marines, and the Air Force prided itself on being the best of the best.

KR: How much of a difference was there?

BB: Between what?

KR: How much of a difference was there between the officer and the enlisted food in the Air Force that you saw?

BB: Well, it depends. When you're an officer, you buy your own food. You go into officer's quarters and you buy your food, or you go off base and get your own. When you're an enlisted person, you eat in the mess hall, and the officers have an officer's club. The enlisted people have the mess hall. Then the non-commissioned officers have an NCO mess hall, so there are three levels. I guess I had the best food available, and you can go in and buy your own breakfast and you can have eggs, whatever you get at a diner. The closest thing I could say to it was it was like diner food.

AN: How old were you, Brian, when all this was going on, twenty-six?

BB: When I got my master's degree I was twenty-four years old, and I actually started before they awarded the master's because I got it in the mail. When I left the service, I was twenty-eight years old.

AN: A lot of people in officer training were about the same age.

BB: Yes.

AN: It was kind of like a similar maturity.

BB: Yes. Now, there were also some people who had a college degree that had gotten it while they were enlisted people, and they were coming back and they had to go through this to become officers. They were prior enlisted, and they wanted to be officers. For them, the big advantage was that your pay is based on years of service, and their pay grade would have included all their years as an enlisted person.

AN: Right.

BB: Some of them had five or eight years enlisted.

AN: Yes.

BB: They were going to become officers.

AN: Yes.

BB: I felt the training that I went through, I really didn't have a problem. It was just you just do what you're told, you dull your mind, you keep awake for the classes and dull every other time. The physical [training], for me, was not a big deal. You had to run a mile and a half in sand, packed sand, and some people had difficulty. We had one long distance runner who used to run it backwards encouraging us. We did have one or two people drop out for physical reasons.

KR: Yes, that is still the requirement in the Air Force to run a mile and a half.

BB: A mile and a half, I ran it in sand with hard packs, and then I had to do push-ups and sit-ups. I'll tell you, I've never been in such good shape my entire life. Before I went in, I knew what was coming. When I was at Emory, I remember running at night around the city to try to get into shape. I was expecting it when I went in.

AN: How was the heat?

BB: Not bad because I was there, keep in mind, I was there from, let's see, September, when I joined the service. I think I went in in September. I was there September to December. So, I was in Lackland September to December. So, I was lucky; I escaped it, yes.

AN: Yes. Were there many people expecting to be in Vietnam eventually?

BB: No one thought about it.

AN: They did not talk about it.

BB: No one talked about it. No one thought about it.

KR: Yes. What did you do for fun?

BB: I didn't know there was such a thing. When I was a cadet, once or twice, as an upper-class cadet, I was allowed to drive. As a lower-class cadet, first month and a half, I couldn't. As an upper-class cadet, I was allowed to drive. Once, I drove to Houston, and my cousin was doing--what do they call the Broadway shows when they travel on the road?

AN: Tour?

BB: What?

AN: Tour?

BB: Touring. She was in *Sweet Charity*. I went and I visited her one afternoon or evening, and she introduced me to the rest of the cast. That was one. [Editor's Note: *Sweet Charity* was a musical that was directed and choreographed by Bob Fosse and starred his wife Gwen Verdon. *Sweet Charity* premiered on Broadway in 1966.]

Once or twice, I went to San Antonio, and I remember going to see the Alamo and stuff like that, as an upperclassman. Generally, we had one day off as an upperclassman. We had Saturday or Sunday off. There were cases of one or two people disappearing, finding a girl, and then coming back until a few days later. Those people were usually washed out immediately, because the discipline was pretty strict. When you left, you knew when you had to get back, and if you weren't, you were in big trouble. One guy fell asleep in his car. He had too much to drink and fell asleep in his car, out, stuff like that.

AN: What were the commanders or people in charge, were they sadistic?

BB: Well, this was Air Force. It was not Marines or Army. I would say [the officers were] mostly scholarly. Many of them had master's degrees. They were very pleasant to us for the most part. I can't recall a single person being sadistic or mean.

AN: Not like the movies.

BB: Well, remember, this was Air Force, too.

AN: Exactly.

BB: It was almost like a nine-to-five job. The only closest thing I can recall is the one TAC officer who told me not to go to Temple because I had to do my duty in the military. I just said, "Okay, to hell with that. I'm going to go and take my chances," and I went to services.

AN: That is interesting what you said, too. He may not just have known that Yom Kippur is like Christmas, right?

BB: He didn't know.

AN: Exactly.

BB: He had never met Jewish people. He didn't know.

AN: He had no clue what it was.

BB: Yes, he wasn't even a captain. He was a first lieutenant. Eventually, I stayed, and I was a captain.

AN: So, not anti-Semitism as much as just ignorance.

BB: He was not anti-Semitic, no. I ran into anti-Semitism later.

AN: You wrote that on your initial form that you wanted to talk about that.

BB: Just a little bit, not much, yes. Then, I graduated, got out of OCS. They say it's like an advanced start. You head for your car, and you disappear and you never want to see that place again for as long as you live. [laughter] You're gone.

AN: Have you been back?

BB: Back where?

AN: Lackland. Is it the kind of place you go back to?

BB: Yes, I did go back.

AN: Really?

BB: I was in the service. I can't remember when. I think I might have just made captain, and I offered to go back and address the cadets about what life was like once you got your commission and you're out in the field. So, I did do that, and basically, though, I told them the job was very nine to five. You basically put in whatever time is necessary, and if there was an alert, someone knocks on your door, right away, get down here, "There's an emergency." That did happen.

AN: Okay.

BB: Yes.

KR: You told us about your drive to California.

BB: Yes.

KR: What was your training like at McClellan?

BB: All of the officers who trained me were in-house. They were all people who had their Ph.Ds. or about to get their Ph.Ds. and had been drafted and had gone into the military. On a couple of cases, they were people who got their bachelor's and had ROTC, had been deferred to get their Ph.D., had gotten their Ph.Ds. and then went in after they got their Ph.Ds. They had a program whereby you could get your bachelor's and if you were in ROTC, you could be deferred and the Air Force would pay for your training through your college for your doctorate. You come back and serve the requirement, being three for one. For every year you spent in college, you owe the Air Force three years of your life afterwards. If it took you four years to get your Ph.D., the minute you came back, you owed the Air Force twelve years. There were other things like that, too, tricks that the Air Force pulled on people, that a lot of people didn't know about. Those were the people who trained us. One or two of them were gung-ho. Most hated the place. They wanted to go back to civilian life.

The treatment that we got, the training we got from these people, was all--basically, I was in school most of the day. I was studying nuclear engineering, and I took the material that you normally take. I took a nuclear engineering program, and I got the equivalent of a master's in nuclear engineering. When I graduated, I was awarded a certificate.

AN: In what period of time?

BB: A year.

AN: Wow, it's pretty intense.

BB: Well, yes. When I was at Lackland and I was serving at Lackland, I was the coach of the Air Force base rifle team. [When] I was at McClellan, we flew down to Lackland to shoot and I came in high enough to qualify for the Air Force Olympic Team.

AN: Wow.

BB: I came back, and I hadn't said anything to anybody. I walk in the door, and my boss is there, the major is there, and he says, "Berenbach, if you think after all this time we spent training you we're going to send you off for four years to shoot a rifle you can forget about it." I hadn't even asked him [how he knew]. He just knew. Somebody had told him or something, or he had gotten a form requesting my presence at the Air Force to shoot a rifle for the Air Force.

AN: To shoot a rifle.

BB: Now, that would've been the Munich Olympics, by the way, to give you context. [Editor's Note: The Summer Olympics of 1972 took place in Munich, West Germany. In the second week of the Olympics, on September 5, Palestinian terrorists stormed the living quarters of the Israeli team, killing two Israelis and taking nine hostage. In a shootout at the Munich airport, nine Israelis were killed, along with one West German police officer.]

AN: That would have been what?

BB: At the Munich Olympics, where the Israelis, all those people were killed. That would've been those Olympics, yes. I never made the Olympics, but I did shoot a rifle for four years--not four years--just for the two years I was there, when I was at [McClellan].

KR: What was daily life like at McClellan?

BB: At McClellan Air Force Base, initially I stayed in a bachelor officers' quarters with one other fellow, Ed Kelly. He was related to Clarence Kelly Johnson, the chief of the Lockheed skunk works, where the SR-71 was developed. On one occasion, I got a phone call from Ed at two in the morning that he was stranded in Reno, could I come pick him up, his car had failed. He had made the mistake of buying a Renault. So, I had to go and help him out. Then, what I did for occasions, once in a blue moon, I would take a weekend and I would drive into San

Francisco because Sacramento is a three-hour drive from San Francisco and I would stay overnight.

AN: Where would you stay?

BB: Different places. Once I stayed at the house of a relative of a member of the Sacramento Temple.

BB: I would go to a wine tasting. To tell you the truth, I don't remember. I don't remember any of it.

KR: Would you wear your uniform?

BB: No, no.

KR: Why?

BB: What?

KR: Why not?

BB: People would spit at you. People would say, we were told specifically, "Don't wear your uniform." Originally, they required, when you flew, you had to be in uniform when you flew on business, on Air Force business, and they changed that and required all people to wear civis [civilian clothes] because of the incidents that were occurring. People were against the Vietnam War, and they attempted to take it out on us.

AN: San Francisco was the epicenter [of the anti-war movement].

BB: Then, the other thing that happened is when I was stationed there, I think I mentioned, I started taking courses towards a doctorate in mathematics at Sacramento State College. I started taking courses at night, and the other thing that I did was I went to--there was a local chapter of Hillel at the local university, that was Davis, UC Davis. So, I would go to Davis. Once in a while, I went to the dances, and I would go to the Hillel chapter there and meet people. I remember sitting there and one of the girls saying to me, "So, how come you're not an officer?" I was; I was an officer. They had these guest lecturers, and some of them were complete idiots. I remember one guest lecturer saying we shouldn't have a military. I said, "What are you going to do about smugglers?" "Oh, we don't worry about that," and stuff like that. [I would say], "What are you going to do about defending the country?" "Nobody's going to bother us," things like that. [Editor's Note: Hillel is a Jewish campus organization at colleges and universities across the globe.]

AN: What an idiot.

BB: This was worse than libertarian. People were off the wall when they were talking at Hillel, and the people at Hillel had strange ideas. I dated one young lady at Hillel, and she didn't want to see me anymore, I think because I was Air Force, she didn't want to see me anymore.

AN: You said strange ideas. About the war or just politically?

BB: Killing babies and stuff like that, yes. That was when I was at [McClellan], and then once I was deployed to Samoa for three months. When I was at Samoa-

KR: This is from McClellan.

BB: McClellan. The big thing there was playing chess. Once in a while, there'd be an emergency, the emergency being that there would be a Russian or Chinese nuclear test. You have to remember what my job was. My job was to analyze Russian and Chinese nuclear tests.

KR: How did you analyze Russian and Chinese nuclear tests?

BB: We had--that's why we were called a squadron. We had U-2 aircraft. The U-2 aircraft would go up [when] a blast was expected. They would fly through the cloud, and they had these big filters made out of fiberglass. They would come back to either McClellan or Samoa, and we would then--that was my job--we would dissolve these huge filters in a combination of hydrofluoric and nitrous acid, really vicious stuff. You didn't want to get any of that on your skin, and these things were as hot [radioactive] as a pistol, these things. You put them in tubes. After they were dissolved, they would then go to centrifuges, and from the centrifuges, they would go to magnetic spectroscopy, where they would be analyzed. They would determine the percent of each radio isotype, and from the percent of each radio isotope, they could build a profile of the weapon that had gone off. [Editor's Note: The Lockheed U-2 is a high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft.]

KR: What types of nuclear bombs were the Russians testing at that time?

BB: They were testing hydrogen bombs, mostly fusion weapons. I'll tell you this because it was something that I found out, that you were required a top-secret clearance to find out about. Did you ever wonder why Sakharov, why the Russians just didn't shoot him? Did you ever wonder that? You know who Sakharov was, right? [Editor's Note: Andrei Sakharov was a Russian nuclear physicist. In the 1960s and 1970s, he became an outspoken critic of nuclear weapons and the Soviet government. In 1975, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.]

KR: Please tell us.

AN: Because he knew too much?

BB: Well, he was a Russian dissident, a big Russian dissident, very famous, famous in the West, and you would have expected that the Russians would simply have shot him, right, which he would disappear, but he didn't, he was awarded the Order of Lenin. The reason he was awarded the Order of Lenin was because he figured out how to make a hydrogen bomb air droppable. Up until that time, when the United States was setting off hydrogen bombs, they had these big towers with liquid hydrogen, and the atomic bomb would go off, it'd go off. [The United States] couldn't drop something like that from an airplane. He figured out [that] if you take the hydrogen, the deuterium, and you condense it as lithium deuteride, you can then coat the lithium deuteride around the atomic bomb or vice versa and it's light enough that you can carry it in an airplane. The Russians gave him the Order of Lenin. My organization ran tests, found out that was happening, and we got air droppable hydrogen bombs after they did, you see.

AN: Wow.

BB: That's why Sakharov got the Order of Lenin for making that discovery, and that's how come they never shot him.

AN: They never shot him.

BB: Yes. That was classified, and the reason it was classified is because the U.S. government did not want any Americans to know that the Russians were ahead of us.

AN: Right. You got a high security clearance, right?

BB: Top secret.

AN: Top secret.

BB: About as high as you can get.

AN: Now, you can talk about it all after the fact. It is all declassified.

BB: Basically, what happened was my detachment in McClellan Air Force Base, at the Technical Operations Squadron, we did what I just described to you. It was top secret. You're not allowed to talk to anybody. About four years ago, I opened up the web, and there was this whole thing online.

AN: Yes, well, that is what I meant, yes.

BB: Except for one or two little things that I could tell you that are not listed there.

AN: You actually went to Samoa. You are not flying; somebody else is flying.

BB: Right.

AN: You're not a pilot.

BB: Right.

AN: But you are an engineer.

BB: Right.

AN: When you're actually in the lab, do you have to wear protective clothing and stuff?

BB: Just a lab coat and gloves when you're working, and then the work is done [makes a motion imitating a hood sucking up the air] in the hood, so that you are not inhaling the fumes, that type of thing. So, the filter is dissolved and you basically take it. We had enlisted people doing some of the work, too. The enlisted people were all people who for one reason or another had flunked out of college. They flunked out of college. They got drafted. They went into the Air Force, because they didn't want to carry a rifle in Vietnam. The Air Force was on the lookout for people who had had one or two years of chemistry or physics. We would take them. They would then become enlisted people. After they went through basic training, they would be assigned to work with us, and they would become lab technicians, you see.

I remember one of those guys, his name was Paglione. About ten years ago, I went and gave a lecture at a conference, and this guy comes up to me and says, "Are you Captain Berenbach?" I looked at him and I said, "What? Who? Where?" He says, "The Captain Berenbach who served at McClellan Air Force Base." I said, "Yes." He says, "Well, I'm Paglione." He was one of the technicians, [an] Italian technician. He was one of the people who partied and flunked out. After he left the service, he went back to school, got his engineering degree, and he told me if the professor didn't show up, he went and banged on the door because he wanted that degree and he was paying for it. He finished, he got his bachelor's degree in engineering, and he wound up a very high-ranking executive with the Department of Defense.

AN: Wow.

BB: So, it's just some of the stories about these people.

KR: You said before you were reading online and one or two things you noticed were not available online. What were those things?

BB: I can't talk about them.

AN: I am still kind of back in Samoa and McClellan, I'm getting confused.

BB: I went on TDY, temporary duty, for three months because there were one or two Russian incidents where they set off bombs.

AN: Mainly, you were in school.

BB: No, after I graduated. This is after I graduated.

AN: Oh, this is after you graduated.

BB: I was still at McClellan Air Force Base, and I was serving as a lab manager, a manager of a nuclear laboratory.

AN: You graduated with that training in nuclear engineering.

BB: Right.

AN: So, you went to school for a year.

BB: Yes, yes, in the facility where the labs were. I worked part-time in the labs while I was doing that, and then after I finished the schooling, then I was put in charge of one of the labs. I had only technicians working for me, no officers. Actually, that's not true. I remember, when I went to the reunion, I ran into one officer who said, "Hey," Jay Biliou, he said, "Hey, I worked for you." Apparently, I did have one officer working for me. I had completely forgotten about it. He sends me Christmas cards every year.

AN: This was the lineup that was basically trying to figure out what weapons the Chinese and Russians had.

BB: Yes.

AN: Based on the results of the test.

BB: Right. Want to hear stories about my work there?

AN: Sure.

BB: Or are you in a hurry?

KR: No. We definitely want to hear. I just want to ask, first, what type of nuclear weapons did the Chinese have?

BB: Both atomic and fusion. They had both types, and you can tell when they set them off. The French also tested, and they tested fission. They tested atomic, not fusion weapons.

KR: Did the Chinese have hydrogen bombs that could be dropped from airplanes?

BB: Later on, they did but not initially, not initially. We also found evidence of one bomb that had gone off prematurely with a bunch of Chinese technicians standing around it. You can tell because it has a certain amount of carbon in it and you wouldn't expect to see radioactive carbon in a nuclear weapon because there's no carbon. When you see the carbon, it tells you that there were some people who were a bit too close.

KR: Where was that?

BB: Wherever the Chinese nuclear test was. See, what happens is when they set it off, the bomb is so powerful, it punches right up into the stratosphere. If you're adventurous, you can send the U-2 over Chinese territory, collect it, and come back. If you're not adventurous, you can wait until it drifts. [It was] best to go over their territory, and the U-2s flew so high that the Chinese could not intercept them. They would wait until they went up in the stratosphere, and then they would send U-2s through the cloud, which was, at that point, was somewhat homogenous, quickly, if you can get it quickly, bring it back.

You'd spray down the plane from the outside, and then we'd get the filter paper. That's why we were at McClellan Air Force Base, so the U-2s would land at McClellan and you'd just bring the filters over while they were still hot. They were hot as could be. We would separate all the components, run it through filter beds to separate the various effluents, then put it into the test tubes, and then it would go to something that would read the type of the material and the level of the radioactivity. From that, they can build the profile of the weapon.

KR: Was that the same case with the Russian tests? Were they over Russian soil and the radioactive material would go into the stratosphere?

BB: It would drift. It would drift.

KR: Okay, yes.

BB: I don't specifically know the route that the planes, took but I'm thinking that maybe some of the planes went over Siberia. The Russians, I don't think the Russians had any SAM [surface-to-air missiles] there, and if they did have them, it would have been unlikely that they could have shot down one of the planes because they couldn't reach that altitude. [Editor's Note: During the 1970s, Soviet nuclear tests took place at a number of different sites, many of which were underground tests conducted in Kazakhstan. Other sites included Novaya Zemlya, Murmansk, Orenburg, Perm and Komi.]

AN: Who was the guy they shot down?

BB: Gary Powers.

AN: Gary Powers. [Editor's Note: On May 1, 1960, Francis Gary Powers was shot down over the Soviet Union by a surface-to-air missile while piloting a U-2 reconnaissance flight. Powers was imprisoned and then exchanged for Rudolf Abel two years later.]

BB: He was just doing photographic reconnaissance and he was in a populated area and he was doing it all the time. They had SAM installations, and they knew where the U-2s were going. When they set off a bomb, there's no point in building a whole SAM installation for one plane, you see, so they didn't bother.

AN: Then the French, where did the French [test nuclear weapons]?

BB: The French shot out in the Caribbean somewhere [Pacific Ocean in French Polynesia] or wherever their place is. That was interesting, because we, as spies, did not distinguish between friend and foe. We wanted to know what the French were doing too, and the French were doing nuclear testing too. We did for the French what we exactly did for the Chinese and Japanese [Soviets].

The one thing we did for the French though is since they tested in international waters, we could get planes there that could take pictures of the explosion. We would have planes, and the plane would have high-speed cameras that would be triggered by the blast. The plane would circle the area where the bomb was going to go off, and they would just keep circling. It would bank, so that the camera was always pointed at where the bomb would go off. Then, the French used to send the Mirage fighters up that would buzz the plane to try to get it to change its course. In one case, the Mirage actually fired on the plane, not to hit it, but fired in front to get the pilot to flinch and he didn't. [Editor's Note: France first successfully tested a nuclear weapon in 1960. France has used Algeria and French Polynesia as nuclear testing sites.]

AN: How did you know where the French were going to set off a bomb?

BB: They tell you in advance to stay clear of the area. They have to. You can't have international aircraft wandering through the area.

AN: You will be on your toes.

BB: Yes, right.

AN: How long were you in the lab, or how long did you work there?

BB: Two years, until I was transferred to Japan.

AN: Okay.

BB: When you say how long, do you mean a typical day?

AN: No, I mean years, length of time. You went to school for a year, and then you ran the lab for two years.

BB: I ran the lab for one year and then off to Japan for two years, maybe eighteen months, possibly eighteen months. Now, I was in McClellan long enough to take courses in university, two semesters worth of courses, before I had to leave.

What am I going to say about that? I wanted to relay one or two incidents while I was at McClellan. There was one case where a friend of mine, Luther Elrod was his name, and he had been interrupted while he was studying for the priesthood. [laughter] He relayed a story to me where he was the defense attorney in a case. One non-com had driven his car into a parking area, and he was working for our outfit. The MPs or the construction people came by, painted out the white lines, and put up a "No Parking" sign while his car was there. Then, half an hour after that, the MPs came by and gave the guy a ticket. So, my friend had one day in court. He was very dramatic about it, an outrage, a miscarriage of justice and all that, and the poor enlisted person got off. That was one thing.

The other thing that happened is that the commander called me into his office and told me that I was being transferred to Alaska. He showed me a picture, and the picture was a snowfield with a smokestack sticking out of it. That was the picture he showed me, that would've been an airbase in Alaska. I said, "Sir, if you send me to Alaska, I'm going to be stark raving mad and of no use to myself or the military." He said, "Really?" He took me seriously. I was sort of serious. The next thing I knew, Luther Elrod, who was studying for the priesthood, he got sent to Alaska and he was the perfect guy to go to Alaska because he was studying for the priesthood. Unless you want to go out with the caribou.

AN: Right.

BB: You want to date the caribou.

AN: Right.

BB: So, he went to Alaska, and I went to Japan.

AN: Wow. You ever keep up with him? Do you know what happened?

BB: No, I have no idea what happened. I tried to keep up with one or two, and it just didn't go anywhere.

AN: Hard.

BB: Yes, it just didn't go anywhere.

KR: You said you were, for a time, at Samoa.

BB: Yes, while I was at McClellan, I went for three months to Samoa, and then I came back. The reason I went to Samoa is that, once in a while, especially when the French were testing, there were times where the material was time sensitive. Once the bomb went off, some of the elements decayed very rapidly, like fourteen-hour half-life. So, you had to analyze them very quickly. They had a small lab in Samoa. The stuff that went off in that region. The planes would come, the big planes would land with the filter paper, and we would analyze it right there and then send the results back to McClellan. It was a detachment. My boss complimented me. He said, "Berenbach, you did good." So, I had a compliment after.

AN: What was the means of communication for sending results back, Telex or something?

BB: Telex, teletype, data communications were, in the '60s, the PDP 6s or 8s. That was another thing I did while I was there. I had gone on a trip to Lawrence Livermore Radiation Labs. [Editor's Note: PDP stand for Programmed Data Processer. Founded by the University of

California, Berkeley in 1952, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory is a federal laboratory located in Livermore, California.]

AN: That is where I was in California when I was in high school.

BB: Excuse me?

AN: Northern California, right?

BB: Yes.

AN: That is where I was in high school.

BB: Okay. While I was there, I went on a tour, and I spoke to several people and I saw what they were doing. They were using stainless steel tubes, and the material for the columns for separating the beds, that they used for separating, was in stainless steel and they used high pressure and the high pressure would push it through faster. I did that, and I introduced that at McClellan. I got the separation time down from twelve hours to one hour. I used the computer analysis to determine when to switch from one effluent to another, and the stuff would start to switch and switch and switch and switch and I was able to separate all the elements. I left right when that was going on, when I had developed it a little bit. I was using glass. I had to be careful because it would go bluey if I used too much pressure, but then they switched over to stainless steel after I left, yes.

KR: Did you ever get to analyze the results of United States nuclear tests?

BB: No, that was done at a separate faculty, but I did get to talk to some of the people who were involved, and they were telling me about walking around in the caverns after the bombs went off. That was spooky.

KR: What did they say about it?

BB: They said it makes a copper dome, and you could see--there's a big copper dome and you're walking under the ground. You can't stay there very long though because of the radioactivity.

KR: They were wearing suits.

BB: Yes, wearing suits, yes.

KR: Where was that?

BB: Nevada.

AN: Nevada.

BB: Nevada, where else? That was in Nevada. They had underground [testing]. They were testing underground for a while. For a while, they tested above ground, and you know about that because it's been in all the movies and everything and then they tested underground. I'm very lucky that I'm not dead from cancer because I was playing with this stuff, and it was really hot.

AN: That was going to be one of my questions.

BB: Yes, I'm lucky.

AN: Are you aware of anybody you worked with who has died of exposure?

BB: Nobody, nobody. Again, the pilots were the ones who flew through it, and they had a pressurized oxygen system. The plane was washed, and they had to take a shower. We had showers too in case of an emergency. We pulled a cord [to] douse you, and we'd wear radiation badges.

AN: What does that mean?

BB: Oh, okay. When you wear a lab coat, you wear this badge, and if there's radiation, the badge changes color. If the badge changes color, immediately when you see it change color, you have to go and take a shower and all that good stuff.

KR: How many times did that happen to you?

BB: Never. I was lucky. Yes, I was lucky.

KR: When you were at Samoa, where were the nuclear tests taking place that you were monitoring?

BB: The French, the French Caribbean. I think the French have islands out there somewhere.

KR: In the French territories in the Pacific?

BB: French territories in the Pacific, yes.

KR: Okay.

BB: Wherever Samoa is, that area.

KR: Yes, yes, Samoa is in the South Pacific.

BB: Right, but it was interesting because the planes could not take off during the day. It was hot. The planes needed a certain air density to give the wings lift, so the planes could only take off early in the morning. They could land anytime, but they could only take off early in the morning. So, early in the morning, the plane would come in and it would spend the night and then it would take off early in the morning.

You'd asked me a question, and we'd dropped [it] a little bit. The question was did I keep in touch with any of the people in my class who went onto flight training. I met one young man who was in my class, and he went on to flight training. What happens is if you don't cut it as a pilot, they make you a navigator, and he was telling me that he was a "back seater" on an F-4. He may have gone into combat, I don't know. Most of my class went into four-engine transport. What they did was at one of the Air Force bases in Seattle, they'd go to Yokota, Japan, back to Seattle, back to Yokota, back to the United States. They would do this for four years, and they would get out and join the airlines. That's what they would do. I flew on one or two flights like that, and those planes had a cot because the missions were sixteen, eighteen-hour missions. What happened is the two people that were flying would alternate, and one of them would go back and take a nap, take a nap in the back. Or they would stick a comic book in the stick, and they would just read the comic book or read a book. [Editor's Note: The McDonnell-Douglas F-4 Phantom II fighter-bomber jet was introduced in 1960 and retired in 1996.]

AN: Right.

BB: Once in a while, you'd get a talker, and these were guys who liked to tell stories. They'd just like to talk and tell stories. You get those people like that, too.

AN: Were you being paid this whole time?

BB: Yes, I was a lieutenant.

AN: At what point did you start getting money?

BB: From the day I was enlisted.

AN: You did?

BB: From the very first day I took my oath, I was getting enlisted pay, when I went into the military, when I went into OTS training, they had me listed as a sergeant. I was getting a sergeant's pay, and the minute I graduated, I got a second lieutenant's pay and then the first lieutenant's pay.

AN: That was from OTS.

BB: Yes. I was in OTS. When I graduated OTS, I actually have a certificate as a discharge as an enlisted person, as a tech sergeant, and then I commissioned as an officer. I got both at the same time.

AN: Oh, wow.

BB: Discharged as a sergeant and enlisted as a second lieutenant.

AN: At what point did you become a captain?

BB: [It] was three years, three years of duty.

AN: Second lieutenant to what?

BB: Second lieutenant is the day you start. A year-and-a-half later, unless you've done something really stupid, you're first lieutenant, a year and a half, and then one year after that date, unless you've done something really stupid, you're a captain. It's automatic. Then, after that, they become manual. You have to go before a board, but those are kind of automatic.

AN: Automatic.

BB: Kind of automatic. I did run into people who didn't get promoted; they'd done something really stupid.

AN: Was it a living wage? [Could] you go to San Francisco and enjoy yourself a little bit?

BB: No. Well, it was kind of like being on welfare. When I was living in Sacramento, first, I was in the BOQ, which was some modest amount. I had enough money just to pay off my car, to pay the insurance on my car, and maybe go out once in a blue moon, but I had to watch my money. Then, I could not afford a place to live when I left the base. I found two other guys, and the three of us shared a house. Each of us paid the equivalent of what we would pay for the BOQ, but we had the advantages of an entire house. We rented a house, the three of us, and we paid. So, that was a more pleasant time, because I was living off base. That's when I went to the temple, and I was able to go into town and go to supermarkets and go shopping. Once in a while, I think I was in uniform, was never able to get a date, especially not in uniform. I remember I met this one nice shop girl, and it was like I wanted to go out with her and she was not interested.

AN: Do you remember the music at the time?

BB: I remember going to McClellan Air Force Base and hearing on the radio, "Do you know the way to San Jose?" It was funny, and the reason I remember it is because I was on my way to San Jose. That's how I remember it.

AN: Dionne Warwick.

BB: Dionne Warwick, yes, so that's how I remember that. When I got to Japan, I was bigger into music because I got a Japanese stereo.

AN: There is a lot of music happening at the time. There is a big shift in music at the time.

BB: Yes.

AN: Beach Boys.

BB: I was more or less oblivious. I was more or less oblivious because of what I was doing and where I was.

AN: That's if you're in the lab like that.

BB: Yes.

AN: Did people talk about the war?

BB: No. First of all, our mission was not the war. Our mission was Chinese and Russian weapons testing. My boss did tell me he spoke to the President of the United States once, Major Ciambrone. He eventually retired as a full colonel. He did get to speak to the president. Again, this was the question was should we build a nuclear weapons defense. Should we build--I forgot what they called it--a ballistic missile defense [system].

AN: Is that Johnson? Who was president then, Nixon?

BB: It was Johnson; he had just gotten elected. The question was should they spend the money on building this big defense against nuclear weapons. In order to determine the state of where the Russians and Chinese were, they asked my boss, who was a major at the time, he actually spoke to them and told them the state of weapons technology, military weapons technology in China and Russia. This is when I was in California, when I was still in California. I also got to meet one or two British scientists. The British were involved in our program. One or two of the senior British scientists were involved in the program, and they would come over and they were all civilians. I could remember thinking to myself how sloppily dressed they were because I was used to seeing military officers in uniforms, and here come these guys slouching in suits that were disheveled and all that stuff and they couldn't care less. I was thinking to myself, "Wow." That was in McClellan, and that was in Japan. I'm holding off on Japan.

AN: Meanwhile back at home, did you ever get leave to go back to Brooklyn?

BB: I got leave, and I used to use the leave locally. Once, when my mother came to Japan and visited me, I took her on a tour for two or three weeks. Mostly, I'm trying to remember, the problem with taking leave was that if you wanted to fly, you had to fly commercial. I did once take leave to go to my sister's wedding, which I think was in Montreal. I took leave to go to her wedding, and I had to pay out of pocket. I'm trying to remember if I wore a uniform to get the discount. I don't remember. I think I did. I think I wore a uniform to fly, because then you get a discount. I don't have orders because I'm doing it on my own. I did that. I used to take a three-day weekend and go into San Francisco, but I couldn't afford to stay at the hotels. I would mostly just go for [a day]. Once, I met this girl, and I stayed at her house in San Francisco for two or three nights. She was very explicit that there would be no hanky-panky, and there was no hanky-panky. I stayed with her for two or three nights, and I toured San Francisco a little bit and I got to go see Fisherman's Wharf and all that.

AN: Nice.

BB: Golden Gate Park.

AN: Golden Gate Park, yes.

BB: Golden Gate Park, I did that as a civilian. I also toured the Napa Valley, and I got to do wine tasting. I remember my favorite was one of the Christian Brothers wines. I used to drink it like orange juice.

KR: How did you communicate with your family?

BB: This must seem absolutely primitive, by letter. My mother would send me letters, and I would send her letters. After she passed away, I found all the letters I sent her.

AN: Letters were great.

BB: Yes.

KR: Weekly? Biweekly?

BB: Biweekly, to my pleasure, biweekly.

KR: Did you write to other members of your family, your uncles maybe, your cousins?

BB: I had one Uncle Ben. He was in Florida, and I remember writing to him on occasion. That was pretty much it; nobody else was interested.

AN: Your mother must have been proud of you.

BB: Well, I can remember what she said when I joined the military. She said, "Are you crazy? Are you trying to kill yourself?" That's what she said.

AN: That was the war.

BB: Yes. "What are you out of your mind? How can you do such a thing? You should be a doctor," all that stuff.

KR: Did you have any cousins who served in the war?

BB: My side of the family, not one. Nope, I take it back. Okay, so, the oldest cousin I know, my oldest cousin was Steve, Steve Natelson, and he went to med school. The Air Force paid for him going to med school, and then he served his internship and residency in the Air Force stationed in Greece. What a poor guy. How unlucky. He spent his whole time in Greece, and he was discharged as a captain. The Air Force paid for all of his medical stuff. I'm trying to think of anybody else. Any other cousins? My father served. I had one cousin of my mother who served, and other than that, I can't think of anybody. My mother's attitude was, "Jewish people don't go into the military." That was my mother's attitude.

AN: It is kind of true.

BB: No, it's not but she didn't see it that way.

AN: Were they draft age, your other cousins?

BB: What?

AN: Were your other cousins draft age?

BB: Yes.

AN: How did they get out of it?

BB: Married mostly or deferment because of their career or occupation. I have one cousin who was a nuclear engineer, and he worked for Hymen Rickover on the nuclear submarine fleet. He was a civilian; he never got drafted. I'm trying to think, I may have had one or two other similar situations and one or two of them just had draft deferments because they were married. My other cousin, Norman, he never had to go in. I have two other cousins who--one cousin who was initially in Army ROTC, but he had partially lost his hearing because of a childhood illness, so he couldn't serve. Another cousin who had shot himself in the leg, he couldn't serve. [Editor's Note: Admiral Hymen G. Rickover lived from 1900 to 1986. He led the Navy's development of designing ships that would run on nuclear power.]

AN: On purpose?

BB: No, no, he was practicing fast draw when he was in college.

AN: People did crazy things to get out of the draft.

BB: No, no, he would've gone in if he could've because he wanted to be a pilot. He would've gone in.

AN: Did it get cold in here?

BB: Yes, I'm a little chilly.

AN: Yes, yes, I am, too.

BB: I bet there's a thermostat you could change. It's set to sixty. You could probably raise it a few degrees.

KR: We will pause for a second.

BB: Sure.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

KR: Okay, we are back on the record. Before we talk about your deployment to Japan, is there anything you want to add about your time at McClellan or at Samoa?

BB: The people I met at McClellan, the officers, all had master's or doctorates, except for one or two officers, who were ex-pilots who tended to be administrators, and some of those didn't even have college degrees. They were like old farm boys from Oklahoma who shot down a couple of Messerschmitts, and they got promoted up to colonel that way. Most of the officers were--the Air Force was a whole different animal, and I was in an organization that was the best of the best because this is where all the people with graduate degrees went into military intelligence and we were in a highly specialized area, military intelligence. It was almost like being in a nine-to-five job, except, A, it wasn't nine to five, B, it involved the security of the United States. Unlike a regular job, I couldn't leave whenever I wanted. I couldn't go whenever I wanted. Other than that, it was a very enjoyable experience, and the people that I worked with were uniformly very nice. I was a little older than some of them because some of them had come right out of ROTC and just had a bachelor's degree. They would've been twenty-two, and I was twenty-four. On the other hand, some of them were older than me because they had gone and gotten their doctorates and stuff. In general, we were kind of an outlier that we were not fliers or anything like that. We were scientists. We were all scientists in labs wearing white coats. So, that was the nature of my organization. We were not even real Air Force. We didn't fly planes, but some of the people who were in charge of has us had flown planes. [Editor's Note: Messerschmitt planes were used by the German *Luftwaffe* during World War II.]

KR: What kind of interaction did you have with the U-2 pilots?

BB: Never spoke to them, never saw them. It was like a wall, and the camouflage was that we were a weather squadron. That was the camouflage. People would say, "Well, what is that outfit doing with airplanes? They're all walking around with white coats. Why are there airplanes?" So, the cover story was that we were a weather squadron.

KR: When you were on Samoa, you were a weather squadron.

BB: We were a weather squadron, yes. That was the cover story that everyone would think. We also, not only the U-2s, we also had the regular transport planes, and they would carry filters, too. They would land sometimes. They would land some places, and they would come back and we would analyze for radiation. I remember, in one case, we were asked to look for a downed nuclear submarine. One of the American submarines had gone under, so the thing was we would fly planes over the water, trying to find it, because maybe there would be some radioactivity but was never very good at that. [Editor's Note: The USS *Scorpion* [SSN-589] was a nuclear submarine that was lost on May 22, 1968 in the Atlantic Ocean near the Azores.]

KR: What was the outcome with that submarine?

BB: I don't know if they ever recovered it, but it was lost. Usually when they go down nowadays, they have submersibles that they could go down and find them. That might actually have been where they recovered the hydrogen bombs off of Spain. That situation, I wasn't too much involved in that. One thing I did learn that I guess most college kids don't learn when they study nuclear engineering, I didn't necessarily learn how to build a commercial reactor, but I did sure as hell learn how to build a nuclear weapon and I could put one together when I was done. We learned all about the ins and outs of how to make a nuclear weapon, because we had to reverse engineer them and learn how to analyze the debris and put together what the weapon was made out of. So, it was interesting, yes. [Editor's Note: In 1966, a B-52 carrying four nuclear weapons crashed near Spain. Three of the weapons were found in Palomares, Spain, and the fourth was found in the Mediterranean two months later.]

KR: Let us talk about your deployment to Japan. When were you sent to Yokota base in Japan?

BB: That would have been about 1968-1969, say, about 1969 and a half I would've gone. When I was stationed, when I was sent to Yokota, I was stationed there at Yokota Airbase. It was Detachment 407.

I couldn't live there, because there were no barracks facilities for me. When I first got there, where I lived is I lived on another airbase next to Yokota. I forgot the name of the air base, but I lived on a different airbase near Fussa, Japan. At that airbase, that's where all of the school teachers lived. Now, you may not be aware of it, but the military ran a school system, because a lot of the officers there brought their children with them. So, I lived in bachelor officers' quarters where all the school teachers lived, and I had my own one room, maybe with a hot plate and no fridge. I basically had to eat all my meals locally at the officers' clubs. I had just one room. Once there was an earthquake, and I thought it was going to collapse. [I was] running out in the middle of the night, holding a stereo. [laughter] Just in case, but they were always getting earthquakes in Japan. Luckily, most of them were not very severe, and I never experienced a severe one while I was there.

I would get in my car, sometimes car pool, and I would drive the thirty-five minutes from Fussa to Yokota. Then, I would go onto the base, and I would go in the detachment parking lot. I would work, do my work for the day, and then at five o'clock, I would get in my car and I was off to do whatever I wanted.

KR: Did you buy a car there?

BB: No, the Air Force shipped it for me from the United States.

KR: Your convertible.

BB: My convertible. That caused some problems because the Japanese drive on the other side of the road. So, it was really funny. Once in a while, I would go into the city, and I'd have someone with me in the front seat. I'd be by the curb, you see, and they'd be in a suicide seat and it would be an absolutely frightening experience, especially with Japanese drivers.

I worked in Japan on Yokota Airbase at Detachment 407, and they called them detachments. Outside the United States, they called them detachments, and they had a detachment in Finland where they monitored, they used sonar, not sonar, for the earthquake stuff. They would monitor for vibrations from a nuclear explosion.

KR: Seismograph.

BB: Yes, they'd monitor. They had detachments all over the world, and so mine was Detachment 407 in Japan. Very often, I'd go to the Yokota officers' club, because it was much nicer than the one in Fussa, where I stayed at the airbase.

We had various kinds of activities that I would do. I would go into Tokyo. It would take me two-and-a-half hours on a train, and I would go into Tokyo on the weekends and go around. I went to the officers' club in Tokyo, which was very nice. I met some interesting people in the officers' club. Once in a while, I would go to the Jewish Community Center in Tokyo, and that was also a lot of fun. I dated some Japanese girls. Once in a while, I'd go out on a date with tourists, not tourists, with the school teachers. The school teachers were very nice, too; the lady school teachers were very nice. All in all, it was a pleasant experience. I used to go off base, walk off the base, and you're right into the town of Fussa. You can go and walk over and have noodles, sure, anything like that, and they were very nice. I bought a motorcycle while I was in Japan, and I did get to tour, go all over Japan and tour with a motorcycle.

KR: What kind of motorcycle?

BB: I had a Honda four cylinder, one of these big Hondas, the 750 four-cylinder engine motorcycle. I belonged to [a club], with some of the members of the local motorcycle club. We went on trips. I went to northern Japan to Hokkaido, and we just went all over. One of the guys I was travelling with, his wife was Japanese and she would do all the translation for us. She could read the signs, and we couldn't. She would say, "Oh, you can stay here." She would negotiate for us, because I could never have done without a Japanese guide because the signs were all in Japanese and I couldn't tell the hotel from the bathroom.

KR: How did you meet this motorcycle club?

BB: When I went to buy a motorcycle, I parked it, and I just got to talking to some people and some other people. Eventually, we just formed a group of people who liked motorcycles, and we tended to have a reasonably good time with them. It was kind of funny because the first boss I had at Yokota, he was anti-motorcycle. You could not park a motorcycle in the parking lot, and you couldn't have a moustache. For some reason, he had a big thing against moustaches. It's really strange. He goes out, and we get a new commander. His name was Michael Lubin. Oh, the guy who goes out, he's a high school graduate, and his claim to fame was shooting down Messerschmitts over Germany in World War II. He goes out, and the new commander comes in. The new commander, the first thing I notice is he has a handlebar moustache. He's president of the local motorcycle club, and he has a Ph.D. from MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. So, there's a difference between people, you see, on the base.

I did in Japan just what I did in McClellan, except that I was in charge of an entire lab section. I was promoted to captain. I was in charge of an entire lab section, so I'd be responsible for once in a while, for going to a Japanese jail and getting out some of the enlisted people who had done something they shouldn't have done, and other than that, not very much. Once, I was officer of the day for Yokota Airbase, and my job was to act in the commander's absence and to take messages. I had a whole book of things I was supposed to do, given certain circumstances, and I wound up sleeping on a metal table because there was no place for me to sleep. I was with the sergeant who said, "I'll wake you up if there's anything important." I had volunteered to do it for Christmas and Easter holidays, because I figured they were all Christians that wanted to be with their families. All the Christians had volunteered for it too, because you get an extra vacation day if you do that, you see. They were all in line ahead of me, and I just got to do it one regular day. We were all friends. Everybody called each other by their first name, except I called the commander, "Sir," but other than that, everybody, we're all on a first-name basis. I had a very good time, except I wanted to get out.

KR: It sounds like it was more of a workplace than being in the military.

BB: Yes, remember, we wore white coats. You're absolutely right. It was very much like a workplace, except you couldn't go where you wanted when you wanted and the stuff that we did was classified.

Once at Yokota, someone came to me and said, "You're Jewish, aren't you?" I said, "Yes." They said, "Well, we have some visiting people from Israel. Would you be interested in being one of their guides?" I said, "Okay." It was Rabbi [Shlomo] Goren, who was the Chief Rabbi of the army in the Israeli Army, and his equivalent rank was major general. He gets a car, a major general, and I act as a guide. We go around. We go to the hospital, and he visits the troops and everything. I'm sitting in a car in the front seat and driving, and behind me is an Israeli lieutenant colonel and his wife. He says to me, "Tell me where on the base the nuclear weapons are stored." I said to him, "Sir, we have no nuclear weapons here, and if we did, I wouldn't tell you anyway, because I'm a captain in the American Air Force and I'm not about to betray my country." I think I might have said some things that were very colorful, too. Anyway, his wife blushed, but he didn't blink an eye. Later on, the Israeli Army offered me a job, so I must have made a positive impression on what happened. [Editor's Note: Shlomo Goren served as the first head of the Military Rabbinate of the Israeli Defense Forces and then as the Chief Rabbi of Israel.]

KR: Did your unit have a cover story in Japan, were you weathermen?

BB: Yes, we were. In fact, they even called it the weather detachment, the weather detachment. That was where I ran into one incident of anti-Semitism, just one. I was eating at the officers' quarters, and a major comes over and says, "Can I sit with you?" I say, "Sure." I'm sitting down. I'm wearing my uniform and everything, and he starts talking about the Jews and everything they're doing and how the Jews have never gone into the military and this and that. I'm sitting there, and I and my father both served in the military. The guy was like some guy from Arkansas or something. I just sat there very calmly, and I nodded at everything he said. I didn't get into any arguments with him; I didn't get into fights. It wasn't worth it. I didn't want to cause any trouble. I just let him go on his way. He let me go my way. I just sat--we had a very cordial meal with him talking about the Jews. The entire time, he was talking about the Jews, and I didn't say a word. I just [said], "Okay," and that was the end of it. I think that might've been the only time that it was an anti-Semitic incident, although there were quite a few occasions [that] military people I ran into expressed admiration for the Israeli military, because that was after the Six-Day War. [Editor's Note: From June 5 to June 10, 1967, Israeli armed forces fought against a coalition of forces from Egypt, Jordan and Syria. Israel won the Six-Day War.]

I did that basically for two years. My mother came out to Japan, and she visited me. I had my car. We went to the World's Fair in Japan, Osaka. [It] took me three hours to get out of the parking lot. We went all over. We went to Kyoto, and we saw the Golden Temple in Kyoto. We went all over. I did some things on my own, too. I did some sightseeing on my own. We went to Nikko. Then, I said to her, before she went, "Spend a week in Tokyo by yourself." She says to me, "Why?" I said, "If I'm with you, the Japanese won't approach you, but if you're by yourself, you'll make friends." Sure enough, she had two marriage offers. She met a Japanese woman that she became very friendly with and went around with. She had a wonderful time, took a lot of pictures. She had a good time by herself. [Editor's Note: The 1970 World's Fair, also known as Expo '70, was held in Osaka, Japan.]

KR: When you were on R&R, did you ever get to go outside of Japan to somewhere else in Asia?

BB: No, I stayed in Japan. Now, the one thing that happened was that I became friendly with people in the Israeli Embassy because I used to go to the Jewish Community Center. Oh, let me tell you about one other thing that happened first. I used to go to the officers' club in Japan. One evening, I was sitting in the officer's club in Japan, and there were two elderly people who asked if they could have dinner with me. I said, "Sure." I sat down. One of them was Hans Conried, and the other one was Mel Blanc. You know who Mel Blanc is?

KR: Please tell us for the record.

BB: Okay. Hans Conried was a very famous Shakespearian actor who acted in a lot of plays and movies and on television, and Mel Blanc was the voice of Bugs Bunny. He did all of the voice characterizations. He did Bugs Bunny. He did Daffy Duck. He and Hans Conried were very nice to me. They were friendly, and they were telling me about their experiences doing voice commercials together. They were on a tour of Japan. They were just visiting different areas. I'll never forget--I got to meet them. I didn't get an autograph, but I got to meet Mel Blanc and I got to meet Hans Conried, which was wonderful. That was notable to meet famous people like that.

The other thing that happened was, as I said, I made friends with the Israeli Embassy, and I made arrangements for one of the relatives of the Israeli ambassador, one of the daughters that was there, she was fifteen or sixteen, and I took Hebrew lessons from her while I was there. I practiced my Hebrew. While I was there in Japan, I met with members of the Israel Embassy, and they got me a job in Israel at Nahal Soreq, which is the nuclear research institute.

This was another thing that happened. The Air Force had a regulation that they were going to send me--first, they had one regulation that said they had a ten percent levy on all their officers to serve as missile launch officers in Minot, North Dakota. That was one thing. Once I got the orders to go there, I couldn't do anything about it. I had to go. They sent me to missile launch school, which was a year, which meant that after I went to missile launch school, I picked up a three-year commitment which meant I had to serve four years as a missile launch officer, I had to serve three years more, and then I could get out of the service. I was petrified. That was the one thing that happened. The other thing that happened is even if I hadn't done that, they had a law that said once you deploy back to the United States, you have to serve a minimum of a year before you can leave the service.

What I did is I put in papers to extend in Japan. At that time, they were running into money problems, and they wanted people to stay put as long as they could. I put in for an eighteen-month extension in Japan, and it was granted. The day after it was granted, I put in for an early out to go back to school. The administrative officer, his name was Rick Post--I'll never forget it. He came over to me and said, "Berenbach, you're never going to get away with this," because the whole idea of putting in for that eighteen-month extension was that I could then put in for an early out and get out of the service on time, instead of spending an extra year and not go to missile launch school. Lo and behold, the Air Force didn't agree with Captain Post, and it was approved. I got out on time, and I was separated in California. [Editor's Note: The Soreq Nuclear Research Center is located near Yavne, Israel.]

KR: The Israelis that were trying to recruit you, what came of that?

BB: I got separated in California, Travis Air Force Base, California. I went to visit my mother. I flew to Israel, and then I stayed two years in Israel.

AN: What part of Israel was it?

BB: Well, I went to Nahal Soreq, which was somewhere south, which the nuclear installation, the guy who was in charge of it said, "Well, we'd love to have you, but your Hebrew is not good enough." He said, "Go to Ulpan for six months, come out of the Ulpan and then come back." I went to the Ulpan [for intensive language immersion] for six months. My Hebrew got better. It's not perfect, but it's better than it was. I went back to Nahal Soreq, and they said, "Sorry, your job's been cut. We can't hire you."

I was looking around for something to do. I used my veterans' benefits, and I signed up at Technion [Israeli Institute of Technology] for a doctorate in computer science, no, chemistry. I was working there. I was just biding time really. While I was there, I kept going around trying to find a job, and nobody was hiring. I could not get a job.

AN: What year was this Brian?

BB: 1971.

KR: Where was this?

BB: Haifa. I was at the Technion at Haifa. I found a place to stay, and I was staying in Haifa. Also, my relatives from Poland were in Haifa, so I got to see my relatives from Poland.

AN: On your mother's side?

BB: What?

AN: On your mother's side?

BB: On my mother's side. I had my motorcycle with me, so I used to ride my motorcycle back and forth between Haifa and Tel Aviv. I had a girlfriend I would see in Tel Aviv, but she was, again, not that interested in me. I would go to see her and come back the same evening, and it was about an hour-and-a-half drive on motorcycle. Once, I raced a Mercedes, and the Mercedes lost. He couldn't take the bend and he banged up the front of his car, and I kept going. That's a different story.

I meet my cousin, and my cousin's daughter is a lieutenant in the Israeli Air Force. Her husband is a captain in the Israeli Air Force. They said, "Would you be interested in being in the Israeli Air Force?" because I kept telling them I couldn't get a job. They said, "We'll give you to someone to talk to." Who did I talk to? I spoke to Rabbi Goren, who I had known from Japan, and now he was out of the military and he was private, but he was very powerful. He said--this whole conversation took place in Hebrew--no English at all. He says to me, "How would you like to be a major in the Israeli Air Force?" I had one or two friends in the Israeli Air Force, and I knew the requirement that if I went in I had to sign for six years. That meant I would be stuck for six years in the Israeli Air Force, with me going back to the United States, I would be stuck in Israel. So, I turned him down. Unfortunately, I had to turn him down, because I just didn't want to stay in Israel that long. I stayed in Israel a little longer, and then I got fed up because I couldn't get a job and I came back to the United States.

Oh, the other thing that was interesting that happened at Ulpan Akiva, when I staying in Ulpan Akiva, there was one guy who I got to be friendly with who was somewhat Orthodox. I said to him, "I'd like to find out what all this Orthodox stuff is about." He says, "Yes, you can come to services with me," and then the head of the Ulpan was a lady. Her father had been very big; I forgot her name [Shulamith Katznelson]. It was Ulpan Akiva Netanya. I forgot her name. Anyway, she says, "Well, we serve dinner at seven, and if you go to services, you're going to miss dinner." So, I said, "Okay." I just never bothered becoming religious. I dated one girl who was religious, briefly, and I took her around on the motorcycle and we used to go for rides. I said, "Can I meet your family?" She said, "No."

AN: Because you were not religious.

BB: She explained that I was not religious enough for her family, so I couldn't meet them.

AN: Brian, can you spell Ulpan?

BB: Akiva, A-K-I-V-A.

AN: Okay.

BB: Netanya. N-E-T-A-N-Y-A.

AN: That is north of Tel Aviv on the coast.

BB: Yes. It was right on the coast because I remember going to the beach.

AN: Yes. That is where Netanyahu lives.

BB: Right. So, Ulpan Akiva Netanya, the head of it was Shulamith Katznelson. Her father had been very big in the Israeli government. You could look it up online, and you'll find it. So, anyway, I stayed there, I stayed in Israel for two years.

KR: What was it like living in Israel?

BB: It was very nice. People behaved differently. You knew your neighbors. You knew all the people who lived around you. The big entertainment in the evening was going to a neighbor's house, and they would invite people over. Or you'd go to the main street and drink coffee and talk to all your friends. I really loved it, and the only thing that stopped me, if I had been married or if I married an Israeli girl, I would've stayed there. I wouldn't have come back. The only thing that drove me back was the fact that I was single and I was having difficulty, you wouldn't think, but I was having difficulty meeting nice young ladies.

AN: You also were not religious.

BB: Well, I wasn't religious either.

AN: That is what I am saying.

BB: So, that didn't matter to me.

AN: No, but I am saying you had to meet somebody who also was not religious because you could not get hooked up with a religious person.

BB: Most of them were not religious. Most of them were not religious. I did have, like I said, I had relatives in Haifa, my relatives [from] Poland, the architects, and they were uniformly nice. They actually let me stay at their place once or twice, their apartment, once or twice until I found a place to stay. It was interesting though. When you went to take a shower, you had to be careful because what they used is they used solar heaters and you have to be really careful how much water you use. If you use up too much, the poor people wouldn't have any hot water for showers and baths, so you had to be careful. I spent two years there.

The last six months I got really interested in the research. What I was doing was they were called resin beds. They were using the resin beds to do separations from the Dead Sea to extract the minerals from the Dead Sea. I worked, I managed, remember I said I liked computers, and so I did the partial differential equations and I solved the equations for doing bed separations. What my thesis adviser did is she took my research, she gave it to her other student and he got his doctorate on that research and I left and came home.

AN: Is this part of the desalinization program?

BB: I left, and I came home. At that point, I said, "How am I going to be able to get a job?" I came home, and I started applying for jobs. I started applying for jobs as chemical salesman with Mobil and stuff like that. Then, I put in chemical engineer and didn't get any hits, no job interviews. [I] crossed out chemical, put in nuclear, and I had three job offers.

AN: Do you think any of that was anti-Semitism at the time, or was that the recession?

BB: It was the recession.

AN: That was the recession.

BB: It was the recession. I got a job with--this was from 1973 to 1975--I worked at the United Engineers and Constructors on Archwood Drive in Philadelphia, and I lived in Lindenwuld. All the people there, or most of the people, were ex-military. There were a few people who had doctorates in nuclear engineering. I was what's called a nuclear analyst, and my job was to analyze safety, nuclear safety analyst, of the power plants that they were building. They were building several power plants, including one for Delaware and Maryland, Louisiana Power and Light, and so on. I worked on those.

The way you did a safety analysis--you couldn't very well test the plant and watch it blow up. The only way to do a safety analysis was to do a simulation, so I was doing simulations.

Lo and behold, I did one simulation of the Delaware-Maryland Power and Light, Delmarva. They were planning to put a high temperature gas reactor, which uses thorium. You probably don't know any of this stuff. Well, I can explain it to you briefly. The whole idea of thorium is no uranium. [It is] safer, right. The reactor operated at fifteen hundred degrees Fahrenheit, and the only material they could use at the temperature to support the reactor was carbon and graphite. Graphite gets stronger as it gets hotter. They had this graphite matrix, and inside the matrix, they had thorium pellets. The temperature got to fifteen hundred degrees, and then they used helium, which is inert, as the coolant, to go around and round. In an emergency, they had what's called an emergency core cooling system, and they ran water into the reactor. The water, in the event of emergency, the water would circulate and cool off the reactor. There was only one problem, as my simulation found. The reactor was fifteen hundred degrees Fahrenheit, and on the other side of that little pipe, one-inch pipe, you had water at seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit. So, you have water at seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit going into a reactor and hitting steel at fifteen hundred degrees Fahrenheit, and the temperature differential would shatter the steel. You could come up with all kinds of reasons why nobody had figured this out before.

I think the reason is that the people who had been doing the research on the reactor were physicists, not engineers, and also military people. I did the simulation, and I found that the metal in the reactor would shatter. You would get super-heated steam heating the carbon, and that would generate hydrogen, which would go to the top of the reactor and blow the top off the reactor and make the city of Philadelphia uninhabitable. That's what I discovered. That was one thing I found.

The other thing I found was the cooling towers that they were planning to use, they were called dry cooling towers. There was no water spray. The water was enclosed in pipes, and fans would blow air over the steel, the steel pipes. Problem number two I found was that the NRC [Nuclear Regulatory Commission] requires that you use a day twenty percent hotter than the hottest day ever recorded, twenty percent lower than the lowest day ever recorded. I went, I did it, I ran the simulation, and the pipes froze. [If the] pipes freeze, [there is] no cooling water, boom. [laughter] I reported that, so then they said, "We can do louvers and we could shut off the fans so it's just natural heating." None of it worked. The temperature differential was such that it would still freeze the pipes. So, that, plus the reactor blowing up because of the pipe shattering on the inside, the project was cancelled.

AN: What did they call that kind of power generation again?

BB: High temperature gas reactor, HTGR.

AN: It is in the dust bin of history.

BB: No, there were people still hawking it. In fact, I read an article in *Scientific American* hawking it, and I wrote a letter to the editor, "Good luck, Charlie." It was a very nice letter saying it's not going to work, and that was the very last day I heard of it. I still hear rumors of it occasionally, although, I think, like you said, mostly dust bin of history.

AN: Delaware Power and Light, because your research ...

BB: They didn't do it. Louisiana is still pretty because they didn't put one in. I was on the unemployment line along with about five hundred other people when the entire building shut down. I put us all out of work, which is what I did. I was a nice guy.

By the way, while I was working there, I saw evidence of anti-Semitism. The management went after this one poor guy who had two master's degrees. He had a wife and two children and he was Jewish, and they went after him with a vengeance. I don't know why.

AN: At Delaware Power and Light?

BB: No, at United Engineers.

AN: United Engineers.

BB: They were very anti-Semitic, the top management of the company, and I tried to bring in courses and they were all bent out of shape that I would bring in courses, maybe because I was Jewish. They have engineer in training. If you want to be a professional engineer, you take the engineering training exam, and then several years later, you take the PE [professional engineer] exam. Well, I tried to bring in people to teach the EIT exam, the EIT material, so that people, youngsters, could then take the test and a couple years later become professional engineers. You think they would encourage it. So, I went over to the Engineers Club in Philly and got myself a certificate on my own, but they wouldn't approve of it.

KR: You got your PE.

BB: No, I took courses and I got a certificate from some of the courses I took. I did not get a PE. I did, later on, get two certificates but not from that organization.

AN: This may be a good time to think of a question, a more overarching one, and I may be interrupting the flow here a bit. Basically, how did the military, your experience in the military, affect your later career? It seems that you learned a lot.

BB: I would say that my experience was a very positive one. I learned nuclear engineering, which got me a big job out of college.

AN: The government paid for it.

BB: The government paid for it. I learned to manage other people, which I had never learned. As a student, you do not learn to manage other people. You get a lot of responsibility very early in the military if you're an officer. I learned how to manage other people. I learned how to interact with professionals. I learned the correct way of interacting with people.

I would say that the one thing that soured me a little bit--well, the thing about the military I didn't like is they tell you when to go and where to go and it's kind of scary because they could send you wherever they want, whenever they want. For me, it was bad because I had a lot of trouble socializing and meeting young ladies to establish a relationship. So, I wouldn't be in one place long enough to meet anybody. Well, I could've done a, "Hello, how are you? Let's get married." I could've done that, but that might not have worked either because I couldn't find people. I did meet two nice Japanese ladies I could've married, but that would've had a very different life. That was the negative side.

Then, the other negative of it was that when I came out and went into the American workplace, I found the work ethic was not as good in civilian life as it was in the military. I found that the people I met that were in the military on the whole tended to be more ethical, more patriotic, more interested in country than in making money than those people out of the military. I found that there was an element of camaraderie in the military that you don't see in civilian life, loyalty, honesty, the people in the military. Obviously, you don't go into the military to make a lot of money, just like you don't become a college professor to make a lot of money. You don't go into teaching to make a lot of money. They were very honorable people, most of them, and they didn't deserve the treatment they got after the Vietnam War.

AN: I think that most people agree with that now.

KR: How did your career develop after you were laid off?

BB: I couldn't get a job as a nuclear engineer, because the entire industry here collapsed. All the nuclear plants had been cancelled right around that timeframe. I crossed out nuclear engineer, put in chemical engineer, sent out the resume into the wild blue yonder, and lo and behold I got a job. I got a job offer from American Cyanamid wanting me to do modeling and simulation of purification beds at their Bridgewater, New Jersey facility. So, why not? I'll take the job. This was in New Jersey, and it was a reasonable area. I go in for the job interview, and they hire me. The day I report to work, they say to me, "We have good news for you and bad news for you. The bad news is you're not going to do modeling and simulation of chemical purification beds. The good news is you're going to do power engineering because you're going to go and help and modernize our power plant."

[In] Bound Brook, New Jersey, the American Cyanamid facility at Bound Brook, they had their own power plant, and they did what's called co-generation, that is, they made steam and the steam was to heat. They used the steam to power all their processes, you know, put a hole in the wall, the steam comes in. They had a huge power plant with three boilers and turbines, turbo generators.

When I was there, I did some interesting projects for the years I was in Bound Brook. I did modeling. I did some optimization projects on, for example, for compressors and air conditioners, what's the optimal configuration. For the power plant then, I went to Pittsburgh, and they had contracted--I was involved in all of the negotiations--they contracted with Westinghouse to put a new control system into their power plant to control the boilers and generators. I was solidly involved with that for two years on the computer side. Westinghouse had courses, and I learned all this stuff. I learned all I never wanted to know about power engineering, about boilers, turbo generators, with the construction of a boiler, what they look like, what the insides are. I then developed a control system, so that the power plant operators would know, because they had a bank of boilers and a bank of turbo generators, which boiler to turn on, which boiler to turn [off], which turbo generator to turn off, which to be primary and which to be swing. Swing means a load can go up and down. Primary means it's a fixed load. You just run it up to max and leave it there. I even gave a paper on it in a convention.

AN: What years was this from?

BB: Oh, boy, now you're testing me, about '75 to about '79. In '79, I told my boss--I could see the handwriting on the wall. The plant was going nowhere. American Cyanamid was going nowhere. I said, "Well, let me try to transfer." I put in for request or permission to interview at the Lederle Laboratories Division at American Cyanamid in Pearl River, New York. Lederle Laboratories, they made Old Spice. They made antibiotics. They had a big plant in Lederle Laboratories. My boss said, "No, you can't leave, you're too valuable." I went over his head. I basically went around him and went to the manager, the head of the Lederle Laboratories, and I said, "I'd like your permission to interview." I got permission to interview, and I went for an interview. I got hired for Lederle Laboratories, and then I moved from Old Bridge, New Jersey up to Monsey, New York. I lived in Monsey, New York. That was right around the time I married my first wife, and so I lived for a bit with my aunt. We bought a house and I lived in the house and my oldest was raised until the age of four or five in Monsey, New York.

AN: Where did you meet her? I missed that.

BB: Where did I meet her? I met my first wife at a Highland Park Jewish singles event.

AN: Was this when you were still at American Cyanamid?

BB: When I was still at American Cyanamid and I was living in Old Bridge, New Jersey at the time.

KR: What year were you married?

BB: '79, I think. I have to think really hard about this. It's getting harder and harder. We bought a house in Monsey, New York. We lived in Monsey, and I would commute fifteen minutes to Lederle Laboratories.

At Lederle Laboratories, I worked on modernizing their pilot plant facilities for the manufacture of antibiotics, and I developed a pilot plant control system. Then, I went to England, and I helped install it in England, too. I don't remember what part of England. I remember going to England to do the installation and to talk with the management, and my boss came with me, Charlie Renney. He came with me. I walk in, and they turn to him and they say, "What are you doing here? We just asked for Brian." So, he piggy backed on me to get a free trip to England. I did that. I stayed at Lederle for quite a few years. Why did I leave Lederle? Lederle, I worked on the pilot plant, and I was working with bioengineers. I wrote a paper with another bioengineer on the instrumentation of a pilot plant facility. So, they said, "This is really good stuff. Let's do a proposal to modernize all of the Lederle Laboratories plants all over the world." I said, "Sounds good." We wrote a proposal, and we submitted it. [We] waited a month, two months, six months, a year; nothing happened.

While this was going on, I was taking courses in computer science at Polytech in Westchester. I was commuting two nights a week. I also started teaching computer science courses at Mercy College, undergraduate level, because a friend of mine was teaching at Mercy College and he got me in. I started teaching freshman computer science or computer science for non-computer science graduates, so that was a nightmare.

I was going to Polytech part time, and so I was at Lederle Laboratories. Absolutely, nothing's happening. Now, by this time, I have a solid handle on putting control systems into power plants and chemical plants. I could wait until I'm blue in the face. One or two of my friends had left Lederle. They said, "Nothing is happening here." I interviewed at Combustion Engineers in Bloomfield as a controls engineer. I was hired at a thirty percent salary increase. By the way, three years later, I found out through the grapevine that the thing had been approved. Three years after I submitted my proposal, it was approved, and by that time, I was on my way as a chemical and power plant controls engineer.

I was with Combustion Engineering in Bloomfield, New Jersey, and they were a big company getting smaller. While they were a big company, I was involved in computer control, and I got involved with computer control of power plants. I found mistakes that their people were making. I also found mistakes at Lederle that they were making, and I fixed the mistakes when I found them. So, I found some mistakes that were being made. I was a bit abrasive, I have to admit.

KR: What were the mistakes?

BB: At Combustion Engineering, they were building distributed computer control systems to control the ethylene plants. They were building ethylene plants, and they were very big in ethylene plants. Number one, they were using Assembler, the Assembler language. Number two, what they had done is they had broken into the operating system and modified the operating system, because the regular computer was not going fast enough for them, the operating system was not going fast enough, so they had modified the operating system. They had a new computer. They went from the thirty-four to the forty-four [kilobytes]. They had all these meetings, and they said, "Brian, you have to go into the operating system and find out what's wrong and fix it." My question was, "Why bother? The forty-four is twice the power of the thirty-four. What about just using the unmodified operating system?" This was after three months of them playing and playing with consultants. They tried it, and, lo and behold, it worked. Some of the consultants didn't like me because of that--I had basically put them out of a job. That was one thing they did.

Another thing they did was really stupid. I had just come off designing a control system for Lederle Laboratories. They were doing the graphics for a control system for their new ethylene control system. The guy doing it--I still remember his name--Thomas Osucha. He said, "Type A-5." It was like a game of Battleship, and you put a little piece of a symbol up there. "Type in E-7," put another little piece up in there. I said, "You can't do that." They said, "Just shut up and do your job." That was the other thing they didn't like. By the way, later on, Thomas Osucha tried to bring bibles into China, and he was arrested. The last I heard was he was a missionary. He was a religious missionary. [laughter]

AN: Wow.

BB: I did that for a couple of years. I transferred to the computer controls group, and they got bought by ASEA Brown Bovari, which was very large, ABB. One of the managers there had opened up a facility in Raritan Center and said, "Well, would you be interested in working at Raritan Center?" because I had designed a simulation system for simulating power plants and chemical plants. I said, "Sure." By the way, they funded it [with] a couple million dollars, and we had this beautiful thing called CETRAN, or Combustion Engineering Translation, which was to design and simulate chemical and nuclear power plants and chemical plants. I transferred to Raritan Center. This new vice president started up a division, and we were installing power plant training simulators for nuclear power plants all over the world.

AN: Did your family move at that point?

BB: No.

AN: They were still in Bloomfield, right?

BB: My family was never in Bloomfield. We went from Monsey, New York to Edison, New Jersey.

AN: Oh, you went to Edison.

BB: We went from Monsey [to Edison]. So, I went from commuting south to commuting north.

AN: Okay, right.

BB: I wound up working six miles from where I lived.

AN: Oh, nice.

BB: That was nice for a couple of years. The business model wasn't very good.

AN: So, Brian, now you are with ABB at this point.

BB: I am with ABB at this point. Combustion Engineering got bought by ABB. ABB swallowed more than they could chew, because we used to have a facility at Windsor, Connecticut and it turned out it was a superfund site because they had been handling uranium fuel for the military and the backyard of the Windsor site would glow in the dark when ABB bought it. Oh, the other thing they had was they had a huge liability because the Combustion Engineering boilers that were being sold had asbestos in them, and they had some massive asbestos lawsuits against them. When ABB bought them, they didn't know it, and they picked up all these liabilities.

AN: Wow, that is a lawsuit.

BB: That may be one of the reasons that Percy Barnevik, who was the head of ABB, lost his job because of all these liabilities they picked up. I was working at ABB, and the business model was not doing too well. They were shutting down the Raritan Center facility. They asked me if I'd like to relocate to the headquarters at Windsor, Connecticut. I went up to Windsor, Connecticut with my wife to look at sites, and she didn't want to be there. She said, "I don't want to be here because we will be away from my mother, and you will mistreat me if we're away from my mother." That's what she said. Now, some background, I didn't know this at the time, but she was bipolar. Eventually, it blew up and it exploded, and we got a divorce and all that.

AN: Was the mother in Highland Park or something?

BB: What?

AN: Was the mother in Highland Park or something?

BB: The mother lived in Edison.

AN: Her family was [there].

BB: Yes, and she was behaving peculiarly even then, but her family was hiding it from me.

AN: Right.

BB: Instead of being open about it. She refused to move to Windsor, Connecticut. We looked at beautiful houses. She refused to move. So, I took a ten-thousand-dollar pay cut and started consulting and joined the consulting firm in the local area. Then, for a couple of years, I consulted.

Then, I joined ADP [Automatic Data Processing] as a consultant, and I stayed there for about two years. I went into see the vice president, and I told him, "Your system is going to fail." He said, "What can you do to make it go faster?" I said, "You don't understand; it's going to fail." We went around and around, and I got demoted and laid off. A month after I got laid off, the whole division was shut down, and he was fired.

AN: That's the payroll people.

BB: The payroll people, ADP.

AN: Frank Lautenberg, I interviewed him once. [Editor's Note: Paterson, New Jersey native Frank Lautenberg (1924-2013) spent the early part of his career as a salesman and then chief executive officer at Automatic Data Processing (ADP), before going into politics and becoming a U.S. senator.]

BB: Yes, they ...

AN: I worked for the *Wall Street Journal*. I interviewed him once.

BB: To give you an idea of ADP, at one point in time, the tax law had changed. They had to write new software for the new tax law, and they couldn't find the source code. They only had the executable. They were not well managed.

AN: That is in the early '80s, right?

BB: Yes. I left ADP in '91. From '91 to 2000, I was a floating consultant, and I consulted with two or three companies. I consulted with TRECOM, and I consulted with a couple of other companies. Then, in 2000, I got tired of consulting because the desk I was sitting at was never my own. I got tired. I could not go to the Christmas parties and I could not have my own desk and I could not have my own email. I just said, "Okay, that's it. I'm not going to consult anymore." I joined Siemen's Corporate Research as a consultant.

AN: Oh, good. In Menlo?

BB: In Princeton, New Jersey.

AN: In Princeton.

BB: Yes.

AN: You worked there for how long?

BB: I worked from 2000 until 2013, and I retired in August of 2013 when I turned seventy.

AN: Well, you got into consulting back when people were doing that. People could retire from a corporate career early and then move into consulting when consulting was kind of a new thing, right, in the '70s and '80s.

BB: One of the big things was, remember the year 2000 thing?

AN: Yes, Y2K. [Editor's Note: Y2K was the fear that computers were not going to properly adjust to the year 2000 after 1999.]

BB: Y2K. One of the things I used to do was I was very big in modeling and simulation, so I used to do consulting projects doing modeling or simulation. I remember once I was consulting to Metro Media and they were the ones burning CDs [compact discs] with inventory for Tower Records. You go over to a kiosk and you'd punch in the record you're interested in and it would show a picture. They were doing that. It was called Muze, M-U-Z-E. The process of burning a CD was taking three days. I said, "What's your process?" They didn't have one. So, I used modeling and I just modeled a process and I sat down and we looked at it, and we got it down from three days to three hours.

AN: Oh, wow. Your children-

BB: Three boys.

AN: Three boys. They were all born when you were working.

BB: One was born in Monsey.

AN: That is what I was going to say, the oldest.

BB: Yes.

AN: That is the Harvard guy.

BB: Yes, and the other two were born in Edison, New Jersey and the other two were at JFK Hospital.

AN: Okay. So, you have the secret Harvard graduate. Are the two others in science or math or anything?

BB: My middle son, Jason, when he was in high school and he went to JP Stevens, they had a program in electronics, a four-year program, and it was run by one teacher, not a professor, a teacher. My son loved it. I had a fight with my son, that he should take calculus and he didn't want to. I wanted him to take "AP Calculus," and he didn't want to. So, I called my cousin Martin, who was an engineer, and I said, "Can you please explain to my son that it's important to take AP Calculus?" because he wouldn't listen to me. I was his father.

AN: Yes, you are the father.

BB: So, he took "AP Calculus." Then, we went to various colleges when he was looking. We went to Rowan, and we sat down in the audience of this big auditorium and the dean of the engineering gets up and he says, "The first thing I want you to know is we expect all our students to have had calculus before they come here." I said, "Whew." [laughter] Because he had taken electronics in high school, he was Dean's List in electrical engineering his first two years. He was Dean's List.

AN: Oh, great.

BB: After that, he kind of tapered off because the high school program would only carry you so far. He got a bachelor's degree, and he wanted to do a master's. A master's at Stevens in electrical engineering would have run about thirty thousand a year.

AN: It is almost [time to end for today].

KR: Yes. Let us wrap up. We have reached the end of our time for today.

BB: Okay, we will stop with my middle son just with his completion of schooling.

KR: Okay.

BB: My middle son, I said, "If you get a free ride, I'll pay for your car. I'll pay for your car insurance. I'll pay meals. I'll pay for lodging, but you got to pay for tuition on your own." He got himself a TA at Stevens Institute. He was in charge of the lab where the students come and do electronics projects. He got his master's degree in electrical engineering at Stevens, and then his first job was at Siemen's, which was my company. Something which is just kind of weird is that I had a friend, my friend George Lo, who was a director on the other side, the other building, he hired my son. Lo and behold, guess who comes to work for me, his daughter, Ren-Yi Lo. My son was working for him and his daughter was working for me and it was purely accidental.

AN: Cool.

BB: If you want to wrap up, that's a good spot to do it.

KR: Yes.

AN: Yes.

BB: Okay.

KR: Thank you so much, Mr. Berenbach, for coming in and doing this interview today.

AN: Can we schedule an end to the interview?

KR: I think we should end, yes.

AN: Okay.

KR: Okay, all right, let us stop for today.

BB: Okay.

--END OF TRANSCRIPT---

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