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NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH SAM L. AGRON

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Dr. Sam L. Agron in Montville, New Jersey, on October 14, 2005, with Shaun Illingworth and …

Todd Schaefer: … Todd Schaefer …

SI: … and also in attendance is …

Laurence Agron: Larry Agron.

SI: Dr. Agron, Mr. Agron, thank you very much for having us here today.

TS: Thank you very much.

Sam L. Agron: You're very welcome.

TS: To begin, could you please tell us where and when you were born?

SA: I was born in Ukraine, the city is Lugansk, L-U-G-A-N-S-K, on what I believe was the 27th of November in 1920. The city changed names once or twice during the Bolshevik times, the Communist times, but, now, it's back to the original name. It's in eastern Ukraine. [Editor's Note: Lugansk, or Luhansk (alternative spelling), was renamed Voroshilovgrad twice, from 1935 to 1958 and from 1970 to 1990.]

SI: Can you tell us a little bit about your parents, beginning with your father? Where was he from? What did he do for a living?

SA: Yes. My father was Joseph. He was born in, probably, a town called Chernigov [or Chernihiv] in … southeastern Russia, near the Ukraine border. He was a barber and hairdresser. … He cut hair for more than fifty years, maybe more than seventy, [laughter] because he lived to be ninety-two.

LA: … Yes. He owned his own shop at fifteen.

SA: Oh, yes, yes. He was very handy in many ways. He was an excellent gardener and I have a certificate … indicating that he was certified as an air raid warden in Chicago, where he lived during World War II, after having passed a government training course in that. … Back in the "Old Country," he also was a musician and … played several instruments. As Larry started to say, he had his own barbershop at the age of about fourteen, but that was preceded by perhaps a couple of years of apprenticeship. In those days, you went even to another town or city and lived with the master, as they did in the medieval days, and learned his trade. … He went to the Army, and had to serve the Tsar, when he was twenty-one. So, that would have been 1912, as he was born in 1890. … He was born in December, so, I'd say [in] early 1912, he was drafted and the army service was … rigorous. After several years, World War I broke out, and … he had about three more years of service, until the Revolution, and then Russia pulled out of the war. … So, he probably gave … six, seven years of service to what I like to think of as "that damned country." [laughter] After one year of service, a draftee was permitted to go home for his first

leave. … After he'd been in about a year, it would have been … at the end of 1912, … the whole unit … closed for the Christmas holidays. … Everybody was permitted to go home for a month. So, he returned to his town, a trip of several days … by rail. The railroad station was about sixty miles from where he lived. The train pulled in … about one in the morning; everything's shut down, snow, cold, winter, no shelter. He had to sit outside [with his] coat tucked over him, waiting for morning … daylight. … Then, he looked for and … hired a teamster, … who drove a … horse and wagon, for the long journey home. … [He was] glad to see the family. … The shop that he had started and had worked in was now maintained by his brother, … also … a barber. … After a couple of days of rest, he thought, "Well, I might as well be productive; … I'll go to the shop and work." [laughter] The chief of police came in for a haircut and my father served him, as he had done before. … He asked, "What are you doing here?" and my father replied, "Oh, I'm home on leave. I served a year already and we have the Christmas holidays and New Year's [off]. We have a one-month leave." "But," said the chief, "you're not allowed to be here. Get out of town." … My father … asked, "Why?" … The police chief replied … "Jews can't live in this area. This is beyond the Pale." "But, I've grown up here." "Yes, that was when you were a minor, but, now, you're over twenty-one and you are no longer under your father's … permit." … My father … asked, "Well, where can I go?" "That's your problem. Get out of here. You have twenty-four hours to get out of town." In the dead of winter … he somehow made his way to a distant relative, several hundred miles away, and had to spend almost a whole month away from his family… and then, back to the Army, to serve the Tsar. (I introduced this story rather early in my discourse here because I want to … set the scene for what life was like in Russia and much of the world at that time, for Jewish people). So, my father went on from there … continuing his military service. He was a medical corpsman. … He was taught to give first aid on the battlefield; … assigned probably because [of his] being a barber. … In … early days, barbers and medical practitioners were closely related crafts … going back to the Middle Ages. ... So, he knew something about sanitation and hygiene and how to use … different tools. … That was his battle duty, but when … not in battle, he was a member of the band. … I … have a picture of that. I don't know if you wanted to [see it].

SI: We can find it later.

SA: … He played the clarinet in the Army band, but he also played the balalaika. They had a balalaika band. …

LA: Balalaika.

SA: Oh, it was … a balalaika orchestra with a concertmaster and several hundred balalaikas, everything from piccolo balalaika to base balalaika. … I have a photograph of it. … He also played the mandolin and the violin very well. … Perhaps, if I may, at this point … step back a bit; his first violin, his father made for him. In that area, there was no place you could buy one. A visiting musician passed through the town occasionally. … Traveling musicians and entertainment groups would go from village to village. … Once, my grandfather borrowed the man's violin, made notes, traced it, took … all the measurements, and then, built a scaled-down copy, for a child of about six, and … my father learned on that instrument. … Let's see where we want to pick up now; well, [for] the three years or so before World War I began, his unit … would spend some time in the town of Mogilev, which was the capital of White Russia … north

and west of his area. … The Tsar used to visit there in the summer. He may have had a … residence there or something.

LA: Belarus, now.

SA: Belarus, yes, and the Army band … gave a concert in an open-air band shell … and he … played the … clarinet. … During the little breaks between pieces he would … look around … at the people [in attendance] and he noticed … two very attractive young ladies. [laughter] So, he … thought, "Well, when we take a break, I'm going to go over and talk to those ladies." … He did and one … he later married. She was my mother, … a very beautiful woman. … He said he was struck by how lovely her speech was. [She] spoke very literate Russian, because she was fascinated with the great writers and read them all. … So, he struck up a conversation and maybe they were in town for several days. He may have seen her once or twice, and then, [they] … corresponded. … After the war, he was able to return and they married. Now, I guess you want … to know about his war experiences? …

SI: Did he tell you anything about his time in World War I?

SA: Oh, yes, yes; … much fighting on the German Front; … some battles they won, and in some, they retreated. … He told me of the very severe winters; well, you know that. … [For] KP [kitchen police] duty in the … Russian Army, they had to wash the dishes (I guess they were metal dishes) … down in a creek. So, they'd take the breakfast or the other meal dishes and go down to the creek, break the ice on top of the water and scrub the dishes with ice water and sand, with their bare hands. … During the war years, there were active battles. [For] some, they were in the trenches … for quite a while, and the only shelter they could have was to dig a … horizontal … tunnel in the side of the trench, … several feet below … ground level, and … burrow in like a worm, and then, … burrow back out. … He said the ground was freezing cold and, soon, you felt … all the body heat drain away. That was the only shelter available.

LA: It would go down to twenty to thirty below zero, Fahrenheit.

SA: Oh, it was awful. … They … had … church service every Sunday, with … a Russian Orthodox priest conducting the service. … My father would have to attend as well. … Every sermon contained … a vituperating attack against the Jews, and father had to listen to that. "All our troubles," the priest would say, "[are] due to the Jews." If they lost a battle to the Germans, it was the Jews' fault. This kind of rot permeated the society. … My father had, formally, a fourth grade education, but he was self-educated and, in this country, he read the *New York Times* every day and [he] was interested in many … activities, spoke several languages. … Where he lived, he was the only Jewish kid in the school. … One day, in the fourth grade, they pounced on him; … pinned him to the ground and … smeared his lips, his mouth, with pork, knowing that he may not … eat it. … He was so hurt by this that he ran away and never returned to school. That was life in Russia, but, back to the war. He told me of some of the battles. … In one, they had defeated the Germans, and they had a burial detail. They had to round up the corpses and … dig a mass pit for them. … Latvian soldiers, you know Latvia was part of the Tsarist Empire at that time, had to drag the corpses and throw them into the pit. … He said [that] these Latvians were tall, up to six-foot-six tall … and strong guys. … They would lift the feet … of the German

dead, drag them to the pit and throw them in. … The German corpse was on its … belly … as it was dragged. … (It's … strange how these tales stay … in your mind a … lifetime. … I remember, as a child, hearing this story.) … My father continued, "The Latvians would say, 'Let the German swine plow the ground with his nose,' as they dragged them." [laughter] So, there was no love for Germans, either, among these Latvians. He told me … of a battle where they were outflanked. … The Germans were in hot pursuit … and my father was shot in the leg and … couldn't run. … He managed to grab onto an artillery piece, you know, with a gun shield on it, [which] was being pulled by a pair of horses and the artilleryman was driving. He jumped on and held onto the shield as the caisson … [went] bumpity-bump … over the rough ground, … standing with one leg shot … making an escape. … This is a sample of the kind of experiences that I heard about from my father.

SI: He was functioning as a medic for most of this time.

SA: In … battle, yes, and, when it was quiet, he was part of the band. … After the war ended for … the Russians, my parents were married and … went to live in Ukraine. … My mother was a very skilled milliner and designer of ladies' hats. [In] those days … the hats were very fancy, with veils and feathers and all kinds of ribbons. You've seen the … post-Victorian hats that they wore. … They opened a millinery shop and … also sold notions, perfumes, and things of that sort. … They were doing quite well … when my sister was born. She was two-and-a-half years older than I and they had a nursemaid for her. … Then, things began to … deteriorate. The White Guard; you know what the White Guard was? The Red Guard was the [Communist] Russians, the Bolsheviks. … There [on Dr. Agron's wall] are some posters from that era, very powerful posters that are now in museums that are quite [the] collector's items from that era.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: You were telling us about the White Guard.

SA: Yes, yes. … There are a number of stories here that I'm trying to put in … a little bit of a sequence, if I can; … their living quarters were in the back of the store. One day, my mother was in the back, with her baby daughter, and my father was in the front and he noticed two Cossack soldiers … walking up and down and … reeling a little bit. They were drunk and looking in the window of the shop, and then … came in. … One put a bayonet to my father's stomach and the other to his back and … wanting to rob the place and might just as well, run him through with the bayonets. He managed to … talk to them … while backing up towards the door and called my mother's name. … She came in and sized-up the situation and … pleaded, "Take anything you want, just leave him alone." They helped themselves to what they wanted and … ripped the wedding rings off … my parents' fingers. … So, things began to … get pretty unbearable. You see, you didn't have *pogroms* and things under the Bolsheviks, you had them under the Tsarist people, the White Guard, the Cossacks … but I'm afraid I'm getting into too much detail. …

SI: No, no, this is perfect. This is very good.

SA: Maybe it's a prologue, I don't know. [laughter]

SI: That was very interesting.

TS: Yes.

SA: … On another occasion, they (the White guards) stormed into the town … shouting, "Kill the Jews. Kill the Jews." … My parents managed to take shelter with some of their neighbors (Jewish acquaintances) in a cellar of somebody's house, entered through … a trapdoor, I guess, [that was] hidden, very little overhead space. … They were there with several neighbors and my sister, who was perhaps a year old, a year-and-a-half. … The White Guard were over their heads, walking on the floor above them, you know, with their guns and swords, whatever, and [they were] looking to kill Jews. … These terrified people were huddled in the basement and my sister, … an infant, … began to make a cry. … My father put his hand over her mouth as they said, "Strangle her, strangle her, … because she will betray all of us and they'll come down. They'll kill us all." But he couldn't do that; … he managed to stifle her, just give her an opportunity to breathe every now and then. … They weren't found. … I don't know if you can say it went from bad to worse, [laughter] but, on another occasion; now, you know, this may have been interspersed over several months'…, but there were … repeated incidents. Sometimes, the Red Guards would come in, conquer, drive out the Whites, the Cossacks, and the battles … were so intense that blood was running down the gutters of the streets, you know, [the blood] of the people fighting. … Once, my parents had to quickly flee. Where to? … You'd be caught on the roads. … My dad had to kind of fend for … his family somehow. … They turned to … an eye doctor in town, an ophthalmologist, a Russian, but, first, my mother gave her daughter to her housekeeper, who was a Russian Orthodox woman, and said, "Take her. If we come back, we'll come for her." … Kind of a precursor of, you might say … the Nazi times, but, also, it was an endless repeat of the history in Europe … of that culture, for a thousand years.

LA: It's hard to believe they would want to leave, Dad.

SA: Hard to believe what?

LA: That they would want to leave Russia, things going as well as they were.

SA: [laughter] Yes, and so, my mother went to this doctor, and they didn't have much time at all, and he … quickly bandaged her head and … eyes, down to her nose, her nostrils, and sat her on a chair on the front lawn of his residence, which was a clinic, also. … The Cossacks came, "Any Jews here?" … "No," and they said, "Who's that woman?" He said, "That's a patient. She just had eye surgery," and so, they escaped that one. … There were … intervals … when you could catch your breath, when these pro-Tsarist people or the White Guard weren't around. … My uncle … my father's younger brother, was arrested by, I guess, the "White Guard" people. … They sent him to a prison … perhaps in the state capital … which was an overnight train ride away. … My father learned of it because one of his … friends, who may have … been an official in the town, knew … these people. … He said, "You'd better do something quick if you [wish to] ever … see your brother again. … I can give you a note. I have a friend who is in the administration in the prison there. I'll give you a note; give it to him and bring a lot of money to bribe him and, maybe, you can get … your brother's release." … So, my father, as there were no

passenger trains, … hopped on to a … train of empty coal cars. … The train ran … nightly to the coal mines near the prison. … They'd load up with coal, then, return to this place. … He rode in the bottom of a dirty coal car all night; … made his way to the prison and saw the designated man. … He gave him the note and an envelope of cash. … The man said, "Wait here." … He brought the brother out and … said, "Get out, fast." … They ran … to the freight yards; … hid out until a loaded coal train heading for their area was passing by, then jumped on. … They lay down in the coal, trying not to be seen. … He learned later, … he had rescued his brother in the morning and, that afternoon, all the prisoners were executed.

SI: Wow.

LA: Wow. That was Milton, right?

SA: No, that was Issak's father.

LA: Uncle Al?

SI: Did your father ever reveal his sympathies? He probably was not sympathetic to the White Guards.

SA: … Oh, no.

SI: However, did he ever talk about the Red Guards? Did he say, "This is going to be better?" Did he have any opinion on that?

SA: He, himself, was neutral. You know, he was a war veteran, an Army veteran of the Tsar's Army, and, in those days, you didn't vote. There was no free speech, there was no [freedom of] expression, and so, he was certainly not engaged in any activity that would aid one side [or the other]. He just wanted to be left alone, permitted to live and, hopefully, have a family. Now, here's another of his brothers, a younger brother.

LA: Boris.

SA: Boris, yes, interesting story. He was a very well-educated man and, when the Bolsheviks came in and captured that area, they wanted to set up an administration. … They had a scarcity of literate, educated people and they often just talked to people and appointed them, and they appointed him the magistrate; he didn't solicit the job. They said, "This is what you're going to do. You're a man of education," and he wasn't … in any political movement. He sat there to adjudicate disputes between people, like a magistrate. … For the first time, the poor peasants were treated fairly … under him. … In the past, the poor … got no consideration. They were treated like dirt, serfs. … He was fair and evenhanded, and, outside of that, not really into politics. … About two AM in the morning, there was a knock on his door. … A man … announced that … he was from the Justice Ministry, ... administration, whatever, and that … "The regional boss for the whole district was passing through and stopping here for just a few minutes on the night train and he wants to consult with you about something important." … Boris quickly dressed, went out and, as soon as he stepped out, they shot him dead. …

LA: … The Whites.

SA: These were the Whites, yes. … So, he left a wife, a pharmacist, who was pregnant and soon gave birth to a son. … The son, we learned … was killed in World War II. ... This gives you some idea of what it was like. Now, my mother had three brothers who immigrated to the New York area and one lived in Kingston, New York, and the others lived in Brooklyn. … One of them was in the American Army in World War II. … He was gassed at, was it Verdun? in one of the battles with the Germans. …

SI: Verdun was World War I.

SA: World War I, yes, yes. …

SI: He was in World War I.

SA: Yes, … but he worked. … In fact, later … he worked on the New York elevated trains as a conductor. … They were able to arrange for passage, get the tickets for us to come to America. … This was several years later, and I had come along. I was … a … year or two years old. … My parents were also taking care of their niece and nephew. ... These were … two of the four orphans of my father's oldest brother, who died of … a boil on his neck …

LA: Blood poisoning.

SA: … It got infected. They didn't have antibiotics or anything then. ...

LA: It was common. It was a common way to die.

SA: Blood poisoning, yes. He died, so, he left a widow with four children, three boys and a baby girl. … The oldest, [was] maybe … ten. … There was such terrible starvation at the time. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: We have been joined by Mrs. Agron. Please, continue.

SA: We're back in post-Revolution Russia, or Ukraine, actually. I shouldn't say Russia; Soviet Union, perhaps. … My father's brother [and] his wife had four little children. The brother died, probably of blood poising. His widow had, really, no means of support and there was also, in this period, terrible famine in Ukraine. Millions died; millions died of famine. The poor mother had almost no means for survival. She tried to buy tobacco, rolled cigarettes, put them on a little tray, with a string around her neck, and [she would] go to the railroad station and sell the cigarettes. … There's even a Yiddish song, a rather tragic one, sort of pathetic, about a woman in her circumstance [saying], "Cigarette, cigarettes, please buy my cigarettes, or I'll starve." … The police arrested her as she didn't have a permit. ... You couldn't win, no matter how hard you tried. Anyway, she soon died of starvation, probably, and perhaps also pneumonia. The four

children were separated. My parents took two and another relative took two. … A man, later, came … from America, sent by the maternal uncle of the orphans. … He took them to America, to Chicago, to live with their maternal uncle, who raised them. He never married. He raised these four orphans and his mother, their grandmother, also acted as a mother, kept house for them until they grew up, in Chicago, and they were all … fine people. … My mother's brothers in New York … arranged to have passage tickets sent to us and we left Ukraine, took a train to Mogilev, [also called Mahilyow] … several hundred miles [away]. … You traveled then in boxcars, no amenities, and the trip took several days. … If you were lucky enough to bring food along with you, you had something to eat; otherwise … you sat on the floor of the boxcar, hungry. All [of] the [family's] possessions were in a bundle … in a bed sheet … tied at the corners. … We were refugees and that was all we possessed. … During the night, when they dozed off, this was stolen. [laughter]

Rita Agron: It wasn't easy!

SA: ... So, we arrived in Mogilev … with two infants and … I was … two-and-a-half. My sister was about five now and my mother was about to give birth to another boy, who's now a physician. ... Well, my mother had a brother, her oldest brother, in Mogilev and he … had a wholesale fish business. … He had several children, a wife, and … was doing quite well. When his wife saw her refugee brother-in-law, sister-in-law and two infants, and the [sister-in-law] pregnant; obviously in a desperate situation … yet she didn't … admit us into their house. [laughter] … Yes. So, we stayed in Mogilev with our grandparents, who had a little three-room cabin, just a little … shack. … That was en route to embarking … by ship for America. … But first my father had to get … exit permits. …While Mother and [the] children … waited, he … went to Moscow … where he [was] rigorously interviewed and had … forms to … fill out. … He lied about his age, making himself about ten years older, because he was afraid [that] if he would give his right age, which, then, would have been; let's see, this would have been about 1923, … June or so of '23, so [that] my dad would have been thirty-two years old. He made himself … forty-three, because he was afraid they would, right there and then, slap him into the Army … without even letting him … return to his family. He knew … [that] these things happened, … red tape and so on, but he got it done and came back. … Then my younger brother … Michael, the physician, … was born in Mogilev and … was two weeks old when we set forth … for Riga, Latvia and the ship to America. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: You were going to tell us about your birth.

SA: I was born in Lugansk [at] the end of November, say, the 27th of November, in 1920. The calendars at that time, in Russia, [were different]. The old, Russian calendar was different from the calendar in the West, because Western countries adopted the Gregorian calendar. In the sixteenth century Pope Gregory [XIII], you know, started it. The Protestant countries lagged behind a couple of centuries … until they went along. Even the United States didn't adopt it until George Washington was in his twenties, or so. So, he was born not on the 22nd of February, but probably on the 11th of February, on the calendar then in use in the … Colonies. Anyway … there's this nonsense, confusion, about birthdates with the old calendar they had. Even now, the

Russian [Orthodox] Church celebrates Christmas in January … about ten days … later and also Easter. So, they're out of step. They're still using the calendar that Julius Caesar established, the Julian calendar. Okay, again, my mother's … time was approaching for [the] delivery and she was working on a hat, a fancy hat that she was sewing, by hand, for … the wife of a commissar. People were starving. There was almost no food. … The … currency was almost worthless. You couldn't buy any food, there was nothing to buy, and she made this hat because the commissar's wife promised … to pay her a *pood*, a *pood* is a Russian unit of weight, forty pounds of flour, a forty-pound sack of flour. That was worth everything. Now she was … sitting with her back to the stove. … In the old, Russian houses, they had a little shelf by the stove. …

----------END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE----------

SI: Please, continue.

SA: … This is the hours preceding my birth. My mother was trying to finish a hat that she had been … sewing for a commissar's wife, which was the only … source of possible earnings, and she would be paid in flour, forty pounds of flour, for the hat, and people were starving in the area. Somehow, the commissars had access to … provisions. [laughter] She was already feeling great pain and she sat with her back to the warm wall of the stove, oven, and she (I remember her words) … said [that] as she was sewing, her fingers … were flying with the needle because she tried to get the hat done. … When she finished … there was a blizzard and they couldn't use an ordinary horse and carriage, or whatever. … The militia was called and … they got her to the hospital … in pretty bad condition, … just barely above starvation level, and I was born. … I remember the story she … told. … They took me behind a cloth, a screen, when they heard no sound. … I was evidently … a stillborn, blue, and not breathing. …She felt devastated about that and she heard the doctors and nurses say, "Quick, get two bowls, two basins, one hot [water], one cold water." … You can be sure they didn't have faucets [for] hot water. [laughter] They probably had to get it from the fireplace and they dunked me into the cold water for a moment, and then, into the hot water, and slapped me on the back and, finally, she said it seemed like forever, they heard a cry.

RA: I'd cry, too. [laughter]

SA: So, here I am, and so, it was, like, a little over two years [later] that we were able to leave … on our journey to America. I think I vaguely remember sleeping in a room where the walls had rugs hung on them … in the Russian style. The rugs hang on the wall, tapestry-like rugs … heavier rugs, and the bed was up against the wall. So, possibly, I was … a little past two years old and, once or twice, I seem, in my youth, to have recollections of my paternal grandfather, who lived in Ukraine. … I seem to remember, he made me a pair of sandals when I was about two. … That man could just create anything. … I'm sorry, I regressed to Ukraine. … In those days, they didn't have radio or television, movies or anything, and this goes back to my father's childhood, so, you're taking about the turn of the century years, late nineteenth, the early twentieth century. You'd have a traveling minstrel or music man … go from village to village and entertain, and move on with his equipment, gear, and his horse-drawn carriage and this man had a hand-cranked organ and he would entertain the people with music. Well, this was then

marvelous thing. This was like, you know, [the] Barnum and Bailey [Circus] Show coming to town. [laughter] … He arrived, and he was a blind man … accompanied by a teamster driving the horse and he would sit next to him on the wagon. … Upon arrival he said, "Sorry, I can't entertain and I'm really [in a] bad situation. The organ broke and I haven't been able to earn anything [in] the towns I've been to and I have to travel yet another hundred miles or so, to my town, and winter's coming; I … can't travel then. … This is quite a load to haul." … The man continued, "I have no idea who even knows how to fix these." Maybe it was made in Germany; who knows? So, he [Dr. Agron's grandfather] said, "Look, it's no good to you in its condition and you … will be stuck over the winter anyway, and then, you don't know what [will happen]." He said, "Why don't you get home as soon as you can, before the snows come? Leave it here. Things are slower in the wintertime. I will look into it and see … what I can do," and that's what happened. Over the winter, he poked around and he found that some of the reeds were broken. … He fashioned his own reeds, carved them … from the right wood, and so on, and the organ played. … During that cold, long winter, they had organ music. [laughter] The blind musician … came back in the spring with his driver and inquired, "Do you have any news for me?" My grandfather said, "Try it." [laughter] … The guy couldn't believe it. He was so grateful. … My father's family lived in a house set on … a square block of land … in a region called … "Beyond the Pale." You know where the expression comes from, the Pale? You've heard the expression. …

SI: It was a general area where Jews were supposed to live.

SA: Good. That's the history of it and we use it in English as an expression [to signify] when you're outside of the accepted boundaries, and so on. … I don't think it was [Tsar] Nicolas II, maybe a predecessor Tsar, not too far before him, [but the Tsar] got together with his advisors … to decide, "What should we do with the Jews? They're a problem," you know. So, they decided [that] they will take three … actions. They will drive one-third of them out of the country, they will force another third to convert to [the] Russian Orthodox Church and the other third, they will simply kill by having *pogroms*. Those are the solutions. [Editor's Note: The three-pronged program of anti-Semitism described by Dr. Agron was established by Tsar Alexander III through the May Laws of 1882. The "Pale of Settlement" for Jews in the Tsarist Empire was established by Catherine the Great in 1791. Restrictions on where Jews could live, within and beyond the Pale, were reinforced by the May Laws.] So, they confined the Jews to [the] west of this line and you could not live … east of it, except if they needed you … your services. … My grandfather was a superb ladies' tailor, … furrier, and custom clothing [maker]. … When he was a young man … they had a contest in Ukraine, for patterns … to be cut … for ladies' fur coats. … He entered the contest, and won first prize. … Thus, his family was permitted to live there. He had a nice house. … In those earlier days …the residence was also the workshop. … There was a long table … at which several women worked and … lived there, too. … My grandma … prepared food for everybody and they ate at one long table. … They worked and Granddad worked with them. … He also was a horticulturist and farmer. … The square block around the house was a garden. He raised … his own vegetables and flowers. … When he was a young man … barges were floated down the … river … carrying grain crops. Once … down the river, the unpowered barge could not float … up stream. … So, usually, the barge made a one-way trip. So, he bought a barge for lumber, … took it apart and … built a mill to grind wheat, …

corn and so on; built the whole thing himself. … I wish all of these memories would come to … me at once, so [that] I wouldn't have to backtrack so much. May I go to his childhood? …

SI: Sure.

SA: This is my grandfather's childhood now. When he was very young … about a year or two, his father, my great-grandfather, was a miller. … He ground grain and made flour. … Then, they would transport … it in bags weighing perhaps … a hundred pounds. … The bags were put on two-wheeled carts, horse-drawn carts … and delivered … to bakers. … This mode of life … was … [closer to life] in Colonial days. …

LA: This was in the 1830s, 1840s.

SA: … Yes, but maybe even in the … 1700s … it was this way. ... So, he had two wagons filled with … huge sacks of … flour; … his assistant was driving the first wagon and he was following behind … along rutted, dirt roads, through forests and woods. …The front wagon was considerably ahead when a wheel on my great-grandfather's cart slipped into a rut and a bag of flour was tossed to the ground. … He couldn't call ahead. He wouldn't have been heard; the guy was now too far [ahead]. … He got off, tried to lift … the fallen bag himself, and … got a … hernia, from which he died. … He left a widow and an orphan about one-year-old, my grandfather. … [In] those days … about … 1860 … what could … his poor mother … do? Women couldn't work at that time. … They had to seek to get married, or … seek employment as a helper in … a family somewhere. … She managed to … marry … an older widower. … As he didn't care to have … her infant; … it was given to … a relative to raise. … He grew up … to become … a tailor, clothes designer, furrier, coat maker, farmer, engineer, … violinmaker. You name it, the man did it. … We've often said, in the family, "If only … he had had the opportunity to come to America. … He could have made a tremendous contribution." …

LA: And he did all that without a Rutgers education. [laughter]

SA: Without a formal education. … Oh, his wife, Esther, my grandmother, was beautiful, tall, blue eyes, blonde (she looked like a Swede) woman; a rather religious woman. She'd pray every day, and so, she was a very good mate; was able to … make the family function well. She bore … six sons, they had no daughters, and … [she] made a tremendous impression on her children, brought them up really well. I think that's probably sufficient. … I hope I won't have any more things [to say about that]. [laughter]

[TAPE PAUSED]

SA: We're retrogressing back to Lugansk, Ukraine. Right after I was born, it was the end of November, there were already blizzard conditions. Winter had set in. Things were dreadful. There was almost no food. … My mother was so run down … and starved that she couldn't feed me. … My father went out, early in the cold morning … to try to … buy … milk for me. … The militia seized him. … He protested, "I'm trying to get milk. I have a newborn who's not well at home," and so on. "No excuses. Come with us," and they took him to the train yards … opened a boxcar, and … said, "You unload … this boxcar … and you're not going home until you do."

… He was himself hungry … but he had to do it. … He … had been a strong man, because he grew up in rather good circumstances, as far as nutrition goes… but … [at] this time, he wasn't in excellent condition. … He had to carry all of the freight off on his shoulders, unload the whole boxcar. He finished … at night, without a break, more dead than alive, and he … returned home … to this hungry newborn with no milk. … My mother told me, all they had to feed me was water and saccharine. … Now, back to Mogilev we made our good-byes to my maternal family and took the train to Riga, Latvia. The railroad station was a mile or more from the docks, I was two-and-a-half, and I think I vaguely remember the picture. … My mother was carrying the two-week-old infant in her arms and … my sister … holding on to her garment. My father was carrying two pieces of luggage, with … everything we'd managed to put together … in Mogilev to take with us, and I was holding on to him. … We had to walk to the docks, no transportation, about a mile or so, in that condition … to the ship. … The ship took us through the Kiel Canal … to Southampton. We boarded a vessel of the Cunard Line … for what was perhaps a two weeks' trip to America; not in very comfortable circumstances. … When we got to Ellis Island … a problem appeared. The immigration authorities said that we could not be admitted because the quota from Russia for that year had already been filled … and we would have to go back. … Well, the ship company, the Cunard Line, should have known that. They should not have taken passengers when they didn't clear that these passengers can be admitted. … It was their responsibility for taking us back to England. … We had to stay … in Southampton, until the admissions would open up again in this country, and that meant about two years. … So, here … are these wretched refugees, and things at Ellis Island were pretty difficult. … My mother, … sister, and a baby who was barely … a couple of months old, were kept with women; … separated from the men. I was with my father … in the same dormitory space. … At morning medical inspection … my mother sensed that I was not well … but … we had to go back that day. … She feared to tell … the medical doctor. … So, she kept quiet. … She was afraid they would send them back and leave me here. … We got aboard the ship and [sailed] back. … On the ship, I developed a pretty bad fever and … it turned out [that] I had contracted the measles. … They quarantined … the family in one cabin, which may have been better than the … quarters we'd have had otherwise. [laughter] … I remember the little porthole. … They … picked me up about four feet … [to] look out … and see the waves. … In Southampton, an ambulance was waiting. … They came aboard with a stretcher and carried me off. [They] didn't tell my parents anything; just took me away. I didn't know what was going on. … I was in the hospital … about ten days … quite lonely. … I spoke no English. … The nurses … [were] called … "sisters" in English hospitals at the time, and they wore habits, as I recall, kind of white, with maybe blue stripes, and they would … order me … to do … something, "Sit down, … [do] this." I didn't understand them, so, "Whack," across the face. [laughter] They thought I was being disobedient.

SI: Can you remember that?

SA: I do, yes.

LA: You were, at this time, about …

SA: I was … two and maybe … nine months. … I remember, after about … ten days … as I sat … in the corridor, in a little baby … chair … back … to the wall, quite miserable, unable to talk to anybody, and feeling … very alone, … I saw my dad … approaching. Very emotionally, I ran

up to him and … cried out, "They beat me here." [laughter] Well … we were put up then with all of these passengers … who … had been returned from America, until we could be readmitted. … We were housed in an airplane hangar, which they called … an aerodrome. It was a World War I hangar … near Southampton, which Larry visited … years later, when he … took a postgraduate year at the University of Southampton. …

LA: That hangar, it's in the town called Eastleigh, E-A-S-T-L-E-I-G-H, just adjoining Southampton. … Your father gave me the postcard that he had from the 1920s from there when I went there, to Southampton, and the building was … the same.

SA: I remember that postcard, yes.

RA: Still there?

LA: Yes, yes, it's the same building. … You were there some forty years earlier. I don't know if it's still there.

SA: Wonderful, so it withstood World War II also. ... In this hangar, men were separated from women. I stayed with my father; the baby and my sister stayed with my mother in … separate quarters. We never lived together as a family [during] the time we were there. … My father, being a barber, had a useful occupation. … He worked and [we] … had to … be patient and … make the best of it. Now, my sister went to English grade school. She was old enough to … be in kindergarten or first grade. … We learned to speak English and, of course, we spoke "the King's English." … Later, when we immigrated to Brooklyn, we were made fun of, at first. [laughter] You know, we had to lose that accent. … I have a few memories of Southampton. I remember … my sister and I attended a Christmas party at … her school. … They had Santa Claus on the stage and gifts and [we] … sang carols. … It was the first such party I'd ever attended. … It was all quite new, remarkable to me, and … my sister … told us more about what proceeded at school. … I guess [there are] … a couple of other trivial things that I can … omit. At any rate, we were glad when … our exile was over and we finally came to America and settled in an apartment in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. A flashback: I remember my mother's brother coming to the dock to see the ship off when we were sent back to Southampton. … We … stood at the railing and he was in a crowd on the dock …standing on the dock below the ship. … Passengers … and their relatives … were shouting … to be heard and Uncle Harry, … who was very devoted to his family, impulsively … took out his gold … pocket watch with … a gold chain that they … wore then, on their vests, and … bunched it up and threw it to my father on to the ship. … Well … it fell into the [water], but …what a noble gesture! … Well, that's enough.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: We are coming back from our lunch break. I want to thank you, on the record, for a lovely lunch.

TS: Thank you very much.

SI: I would like to ask you about Zionism, particularly in the period before your family came to the United States. Were they aware of it or involved in the movement at all?

SA: The only thing I know about that subject is what I have subsequently learned, but, at the time, certainly as a child, I had almost no information on it, and they weren't living in a large center, where they would know of such activity. … Furthermore, where they were, this would probably have been frowned upon by the government, any such activity. … Those years … weren't really the earliest stages of the Zionist movement, which goes back to about 1888, would you say?

LA: Well, the first conference, I think, was 1896. [Editor's Note: The first World Zionist Congress was held in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897. Theodor Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement, published *The Jewish State* (*Der Judenstaat*) in 1896.]

SA: 1896. So, you see, this … was just a few years later and not much got through to … them, in the benighted Russian country. So, they didn't know much about that and there never was any consideration of a choice, other than to be with members of their family who had already immigrated to the States. … That's about the only comment. Of course, when I was maybe age eight … I began to be aware of the Zionist movement, through instruction at Hebrew school, which would be held after regular school. … There, we learned a few things about it and, gradually, the … awareness grew. … Very soon after … we realized how important Zionism … was, and, for a while, it was almost the only refuge … available to the Jews who had to flee Nazi Europe. You know, where six million were killed. …

SI: If we can go back to Ellis Island, could you tell us a little bit more about the conditions there? What did you, as a child separated from your mother, feel at the time? Were you separated all the time?

SA: No. We would see them in the daytime, spend the day [together], but we had separate sleeping areas. … There was no real family domicile, [just] the dormitory-style [quarters]. There's nothing we could do about that. I mean, we had to abide by whatever structures were set up. It was difficult at times, as you can imagine. I was kind of so young and my brother was … an infant, a few months old. There would be matters or problems … such as his diapers would have to be washed, things of that sort, and [there were] no private bathroom facilities. So, it wasn't easy on my mother to … manage that kind of thing, but I don't really have much of a memory about … day-to-day routine experiences. …

SI: Can you estimate about how long you were there? Was it a matter of weeks?

SA: At most, at most, a week, ten days. … That's all it was, after our first arrival.

SI: Were you quartered only with Russians or were you with people from all over Europe?

SA: Whoever was on the Cunard liner … probably from all over; it was a mixed bag, I suppose. … That was the first trip over. Of course, then, there was a second trip, on the liner *Homeric*, H-O-M-E-R-I-C, SS, steamship, *Homeric* of the Cunard Line.

SI: I would also like to discuss the aerodrome in England. Was it also set up with barracks?

SA: Yes. It was called an aerodrome, was it not, Larry?

…

SI: Was it an aerodrome?

SA: Aerodrome, sure … aerodrome, yes. [Editor's Note: An aerodrome (or airdrome) is another term for an air field, airbase, etc.] …

LA: It was the Eastleigh Airport, the Southampton Airport.

SA: Yes. …

LA: It's a hangar, like a giant hangar.

SA: Yes, yes. In the early days of, you know, blimps and zeppelins, the English may have had some small ones, which they would hangar there, too, but that was after our time, probably. Well, you didn't live in an apartment, you didn't live in a private home; [it was] dormitory style.

LA: Like a barracks.

SA: Yes.

LA: Men separated from the women.

SA: Yes, absolutely.

LA: So, your father was separated from his [family].

SA: Yes. We'd see them during the day, but, then, we'd go to our separate quarters at night and he was able to work, because … there was always a need for … a barber.

SI: Did he work only within the camp or did he offer his services to the general public?

SA: Well, they didn't call it a camp. We didn't think of it in terms of that. It was just a place where we lived. We could go into town any time we wanted. … We were free in the daytime. … Mother would go shopping and … my sister went to school.

SI: She just went to the local school.

SA: It was an English school. It wasn't just for … this community. … On … one excursion … we saw … beautiful flowers on a sloping hillside, behind a … tall wrought iron picket fence. … We … scampered under the fence and started to climb the hill … to pick a few flowers. … I

remember, we looked up and there … was the gardener, charging down the slope, [laughter] holding some garden tool; irate. … I guess we … didn't realize … the seriousness of trespassing. … We thought he was going to kill us. We … ran like scared rabbits and managed to … escape under the … fence just as he reached it. [laughter] … I used to have nightmares … over that experience for years. … [There are] one or two things that are too trivial to mention and, right now, I don't really remember other significant experiences in England. … We left there when I was about four-and-a-half, or something like that, five, four-and-a-half, yes, not quite five, yes. Well, that's about it. We liked the English people. They were well-mannered, courteous, polite. … My brother, an infant when we left Russia, was a beautiful child, blue-eyed; his hair was flaxen … whiter than blonde, and, I remember … we were with my mother in the street; … she was pushing a stroller … and a proper English gentleman … [with a] cane and so on, walked up. "Do you mind, madam, if I look at your child? He's so beautiful. I wish I could … kiss him." [laughter] So, these kind of silly incidents occurred. …

SI: Once you arrived in New York, you settled into an apartment in Brooklyn.

SA: Yes, settled into an apartment, and … my father … found a job the next day. [He] went to work. … In those early years, people moved about a lot. It would … seem that they moved almost annually, from apartment to apartment. Two years was a pretty long residence. They didn't have much in the way of furniture in their rooms. Some of the apartments, most … probably, didn't even have closets. ... You had maybe two suits, one to wear at work and one on the weekend, a Sunday suit, and maybe two pairs of shoes. … So, if you got a better opportunity, a better job or better rent … [a better] school, you just picked up and moved. So, we moved, oh, maybe every two years or so. … My father would look around, and … if he found an area that was much nicer, he opened a shop there. … He would move the family to that neighborhood. … I do remember some things of life in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. … The school's a blur. I don't seem to remember specific classrooms or teachers in the first few grades.

LA: Although, you did have one guy who was shell-shocked from World War I.

SA: That was in high school. … That's high school.

LA: … Didn't you have a teacher who wrapped you on the knuckles?

SA: No. … In these earliest years, residing there, I remember, we used to get an allowance on Saturday of five cents. So, we would buy a little, tiny … ice cream cone for two cents, just a slim little thing, with a little dab of ice cream, and … for the other three cents, we'd go to a movie theater, a block or two away. … The films were silent at first, and … I remember when talking pictures came in. *Wings* was one of the first pictures, a film about aviators in World War I, and everyone marveled at it. … I can remember a piano player at the front of the theater, where he would play the music to the silent films. … Also, I recall that, oh … some time later, well, within a year or two, I wanted to have a watch, a pocket watch. … An inexpensive watch, at that time, was … a brand called Dax, D-A-X, a big pocket watch. I don't remember how much it cost, three dollars, perhaps. … But I saved the weekly allowance of … five cents … [for] months and months, until I … had three dollars, and … was delighted to buy the watch. I was

ripped off a couple of times and the first experience I can remember was going into the theater. They had, at one time, a lottery where the number on your ticket stub might win you a prize. … When you entered the lobby … you saw posted the winning … numbers, half a dozen perhaps … and they had a little spread on the floor of the lobby with … several gift-wrapped boxes. … I'd never won … before but this week, as I came in and looked up, sure enough, my number was up there. I was so delighted … as I gave my ticket to the usher. … He quickly ripped it up and threw it in the … trash can. I said, "Wait a minute, it's a winner." He said, "No, it wasn't," or, "Go prove it." ... [laughter] I was so hurt and disillusioned … a little child's … trust and innocence shattered like that. … There was another occasion, and this was … [when I] lived in a different building. I remember they were planning to have an appeal for funds for an orphanage; … they had them [orphanages] in those days; these days, you don't seem to have them. Well, there were plenty of orphans around then and they needed financial assistance from time to time. So, they were going to make … an appeal … in the local synagogue after the service. … I remember, my instructor or rabbi asked me, if he … wrote the speech … would I memorize it and present the appeal from the platform. … I was maybe seven, eight years old perhaps. … I agreed to do it, in trepidation. … By our standards today … it was an almost primitive tear-jerker, you know, "The poor, little orphans, like little lambs, with no parents…" [laughter] … I just memorized what he told me to, delivered it with passion, and sat down. … In appreciation, the … orphanage sent me … a week or two later, a gift, a fountain pen, which, in those days, was quite something. … It was one of those, maybe, Waterman [pens] … orange in color; have you seen them? They are now antiques; … collector's items, the orange … ones. … Oh, I was so proud of that and I showed it to some friends and … soon, they came back with a wonderful suggestion. They said, "Look, we all have something we're proud of, some nice object. Why don't we all pool these things? We'll put them in a box and we'll hide it, like secret treasure." Talking to a seven … eight-year-old; … "Oh, sure," I readily agreed, gave them the pen and they put it in … a tin, chocolate box. … They dug a hole in the backyard, buried it in the ground, a secret among us. ... "Nobody's going to tell anybody where the treasure is." Well, the next day, I became a little concerned … and … went down to check on it and … began to dig and, of course, it was gone. They snookered me, the two kids my own age. [laughter] I never found it. So, this was perhaps … the second [time I was cheated].

----------END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO----------

SI: This continues an interview with Dr. Sam L. Agron on October 14, 2005, in Montville, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth …

TS: Todd Schaefer …

LA: Larry Agron.

SI: Please, continue. You were talking about getting ripped off. [laughter]

SA: Well, these things happen in life and, when you're very trusting, they happen more frequently. … I … must have been initiated at a tender age into honesty and civility and so was very trusting. What other experiences? … I remember … at eight or nine, … my father had moved his shop … to the Crown Heights area of Brooklyn, … near Eastern Parkway and Albany

Avenue, then a lovely neighborhood. … We lived … three or four miles … to the north. … This day … was a holiday from school. … We always had in the house a … metal, tin box, into which you dropped coins for a charity. … My mother would do that regularly and, [when] the charity box was filled, you brought it to them. … At this time, the Jewish National Fund was collecting funds to buy land in Palestine … then a British Mandate. That … was Zionist [activity]. … I remember having a … little blue and white, tubular box, about six …inches tall [with] … a slot on top. … You would … ask people to contribute coins. … On that day, I walked from where we lived to my father's store, down different streets … Marcy Avenue, Tompkins Avenue, Kingston Avenue. … For several miles … I went … from store to store … asking people if they wanted to make a contribution. A few did, not too many. … I remember … entering a bar … where men were sitting around … having a good time, drinking beer, and I asked if they wanted to contribute. … "Oh, sure, come over here, come over here," this guy [said] and he … took out a dollar bill, … folded it up, as if to make it fit through the slot. … I thought, "Gee, this is a generous guy. … This is a wonderful contribution." "Here, come here," and I extend the box and he put the folded bill up to the slot, and then, pulled it away and laughed, great, big joke, "Ha, ha, ha, get out of here." … They all laughed. …To them it was very funny. … [laughter] A kid learns about life when people [do this.] … It was a joke to them. Okay, I did a good deed; they did not. So, that was one experience. Let's see, schools; … I don't remember much about … those school years until about [maybe 1929]. … Well, even before that, yes, in about 1926, maybe. I remember my father, always trying to improve the situation, moved us to Astoria. Do you know Astoria, in Queens, that neighborhood? … Today, it's largely a Greek area, very built up, but … at that time, it contained many … empty lots, empty fields, and people just beginning to move in. … He thought this would be an opportunity to grow with the community and build up a business. So, he opened a barbershop and we lived … in several rooms in the back. … We didn't even stay the year there. Today, it's so urbanized, has been for ages, but, when we were there … my mother … felt so isolated. … She said, "This is no community to bring kids up [in]." … So, we moved back again … to Williamsburg or to Crown Heights, or that area, but, see, one other recollection, to go back again to the Williamsburg [neighborhood]; oh, I can recall several incidents now, before I leave that area. I remember … two friends in the building, in an apartment [on the] … first floor. … They were twins and we used to visit each other. … One day, I knocked on their door, "You can't come in." Nobody could come in. They didn't appear all day. … The next day, they were gone; had moved out during the night, behind in their rent. People did that, some people. … To an innocent child … it was shattering [to] your faith in people. … You knew you'd never see these friends again … or know where they moved [to, and] so on. … I remember another incident when … I was standing on the steps in front of this tenement … building, it was a Sunday morning. People [were] gathered about socializing. … The father or … uncle of a girl … suddenly whacked me across the face … with a folded-up newspaper. … I saw stars! Well, evidently, the girl told him that she had been bothered by a boy. Without even checking … which boy it was … he hit the nearest one. [laughter] … Well, my Uncle Harry was standing near by. … He was my mother's brother … and took no crap from anybody, and he was ready to … tear this man [apart]. The guy quickly apologized and backed off … but I can almost still feel the ringing in my ear … now. [From] my childhood experience … I remember when they first installed the steam heating system in this tenement … building. The … apartments were what were called "railroad flats." … The kitchen was heated by a coal-burning stove; … the only heat in the apartment, except for … a vertical, tubular hot water heater, which I think … used gas, and

it was about four feet high [or] a little higher, and a kitchen sink. … There were windows between the rooms. The rooms were in line, in sequence … perhaps three or four … with the kitchen opening to the hallway. … At the far end … were the street windows and, in-between, maybe two or three very small bedrooms. … The windows in the walls, between the rooms … could be raised … for air to circulate the length of the apartment. … You … walked alongside them; … a railroad flat they called it. … I remember when they installed … steam heat. … They … drilled the holes through the ceilings and … floors for the steam pipes. … The steam … radiator … was quite a marvelous thing. You didn't have to have coal hauled upstairs or … to get up at five-thirty or six in the morning to add coal to the fire … and to dampen it at night. … So, that was an improvement in the standard of living.

LA: You didn't have a refrigerator?

SA: No, no, we didn't have one. My aunt had the first one that I knew of, and that was in about the year 1931 or '32. No, we had an icebox and the iceman … came, like, every other day carrying … almost a cubic foot … block of ice on his shoulders. … He had a wagon and, in the winter … [he] would sell coal. …

SI: Did you have many chores to do, like moving coal, things of that sort?

SA: Yes. Well, I did as much as a boy could do, I suppose. I don't remember, maybe they delivered the coal up to the apartment in sacks. … You burned paper or whatever other trash you had. I … remember the garbage collectors … who would collect garbage. They had a wagon, a horse-drawn wagon, again, a two-wheeler. … The wagon's … front and back sides … sloped down, like a hopper. … It was followed by flies galore. … A lot of the traffic was horse-drawn on the street.

LA: … Plenty of horse manure in those days.

SA: All over, of course, and I remember seeing dead horses lying in the street. The horse … carcass [would lie there] until they took … it away; very unpleasant in the city, yes, a different era. [laughter] …

[TAPE PAUSED]

LA: Trolley cars.

SA: Yes, trolley cars.

SI: I read recently about how unsanitary conditions in cities in that era caused outbreaks of polio, cholera and other diseases that could really disrupt a city. Do you remember anything like that?

SA: I don't remember any outbreaks, no.

LA: No polio outbreaks? …

SA: [Yes, there were polio outbreaks in the summer. Swimming pools often closed.] The apartments were kept clean, at least the ones I knew of, but … before my time, they had even worse conditions. … Who was that photographer who photographed this, in the 1880s?

TS: Jacob Riis?

SA: Jacob Riis, I believe, 1890s. I may have some of those photos in a book.

LA: *Tenements in Lower Manhattan*. [Editor's Note: Jacob A. Riis published *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, an exposé on the struggles of poverty-stricken tenement residents featuring illustrations based upon his photographs, in 1890.]

SA: People lived in … cellars, in coal bins, the whole family, no light, no windows, sooty … from coal. … They worked twelve, fourteen hours a day, in sweatshops. … It was a hell of a life and you played on the streets, various street games. …

LA: Were your friends mostly Jews or were they [from] other ethnic groups?

SA: At this time, mostly Jewish kids.

LA: Was the neighborhood a Jewish neighborhood?

SA: Mostly, mostly, and … there were … Italians and other immigrants. … I never was aware of the need to take a census. [laughter] …

LA: Didn't they have gangs, each have their own gangs?

SA: Yes. Your friends kind of were, like, I'll call it a gang, yes. You bring things back to mind. These are the friends you associated with and, sometimes, if you'd go around the block, there'd be another block gang. They'd jump … you and … beat you. … When we lived in Crown Heights… should I jump ahead? I don't know.

SI: Go ahead. We can always go back.

SA: … This breaks the continuity. … I remember …Crown Heights was a much more mixed neighborhood … [with] a lot of Irish people, some Italians and Germans. … In this event, I'm getting a little ahead of the story, … out of sequence, but, if you want, I'll go there.

SI: Go ahead.

SA: My younger brother … had even more difficulty. … It was a long street to our house. Our apartment building was at the end of the street and he'd walk … the long … block of … brownstone row houses [that are] common in Brooklyn and the Irish kids would jump … him and start beating him; … he was maybe ten at the time. So, I said, "Well, you know … the only way … to solve this, it has been my experience, is if I teach you to fight … them back." … I had

learned a little bit of boxing from my uncle, my father's youngest brother from Chicago, who had come to live with us in about 1931 or so, '32 … in the Depression. … Things were … worse there, people losing jobs and so on. So, he worked with my father and they lived with us. He had a wife and little daughter, a lovely girl, Estelle, now deceased, and he was quite a sports fan. … He taught me to box ... you know to block with the left, and so on, and he practiced with me. So, I gave my brother some instruction, you know, "Block, block, and then, when you see an opening" … So, when we thought he was ready, he … would walk this block. … I said, "I will be way behind you, so [that] they won't see me, and, if they bother you, I'll come right up … and see that this will be fair-and-square." Sure enough, sitting on the stoops of their houses, as he walked by, they jumped on him. … I came running up. … Their ages were … eight, nine, ten, maybe, yes, and I would have been twelve. I don't think I was thirteen. …

LA: And Mike was a little shorter than the average kid. …

SA: Maybe, yes. So, I said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute; you guys want to have a fight? You'll have a fight, but pick one, one-on-one, you've got to be fair about this; pick any one you want, and he'll fight him." So, "Hey," they called on Tom, or whatever his name was, "you fight him." … I let them go at it and my brother connected right into Tom's lips, at … his mouth, and he knocked his tooth out, right there, blood. Well, after that incident, they never bothered him. They left him alone and they called him "the Dentist." … [laughter] So, evidently, that was their system. … Yes, they had respect for him now, crazy world. Well, if I can now retreat to a … time three years or so [earlier]. … We had moved, then, out of Williamsburg to an area of Brooklyn which was on the border of Crown Heights. It was on Sterling Place … near Ralph Avenue in a … nice apartment building. … I remember being in the … fourth grade at that time. … It…was the first time I had a male teacher, which was a novelty. … It was an opportunity to relate to a male role model, which was a good feeling for me. … We lived there … [when] … things were getting bad in the Depression. This would have been; well, I remember, I spent my tenth birthday there, so, it would have been 1930 … or 1931, perhaps, as I would have been ten in November of 1930. … Let's see, I remember another bad experience …while playing a game … with the boys on the street. It was called "kicking the can." Have you ever heard of that? … [It was] a kind of "baseball;" you had bases, but [you] played it from the street curb … to the other sidewalk, across the … street. … I was on home base and it was my turn to … run to first base, across the street. … There were several … boys out in the … street and the one who would kick the can … could see the whole scene. … I depended on him completely. … It was a one-way street, traffic coming from my right, and there was also a parked car to my right. … He kicked the can and I dashed out to cross the street, right into the path of a car. [laughter] … I remember … the feeling of horror. I saw the car and I could see the … eyes of the driver; he was that close to me. … It was a split-second before I was hit, but, in that second, I remember … choices running through my mind, "What shall I do? Should I keep running? Should I retreat, stop and retreat?" and then, everything went blank. … I was hit in the knees and went darting, they said … thirty feet, and they had to pull me out from under another parked car. [laughter] I still have the scar on my knee. A good friend; … he had a clear view of oncoming traffic and he gives me the signal to … run. … So, I did. … My sister's girlfriend, who lived in the adjacent building, second or third-story apartment, was looking out the window, watching the game, and she saw this in horror. Nothing she could do. … They managed to carry me up to my apartment. … I was … in bed for a month. … They called the family doctor. I don't know what medication

I got, and so on. I don't remember having X-rays or that kind of treatment, but they put … my legs under a cardboard carton and they had … a blanket over it and maybe a lamp, like a desk lamp turned on, so [that] there was … a heat tent, sort of. … It took about a month before I was … better and I followed whatever other instructions the doctor gave me. … I remember the first time I tried to get out of bed, to walk. … My mother tried to support me and, as I took the first step … my legs collapsed. [laughter] So, it took … a while, but I recovered, and, you know … five years later, or so, I won a gold and a silver medal for track. [laughter] So, I did heal, evidently; amazing what you can do at that age.

SI: Did that kind of major medical crisis create a difficulty for your family during the Depression? Were you aware of that?

SA: No, they took it in stride. They took it in stride, and the doctors, in those days, were different from today. … They'd come to your house, even every day, to see what progress [you were making.] … They made house calls. … They took a personal interest in you, you weren't just a number on a chart, and [you] did the best you could. I don't remember how I made up school or whatever. Not too many other memories of that dwelling, … and then, we moved … about a mile west on that same street and the neighborhood was a little less densely populated, all row houses, Brooklyn brownstone row houses, mostly, and we lived in, like, a three-family apartment house and … went to school there. Again, I remember a problem with [bullies]. I was sitting on the front steps of the house and one of the kids from the neighborhood, an Italian boy … was throwing a ball and it bounces back, he catching it. He aimed it so it … bracketed my legs, and so on, just to be a nuisance. … I asked him to stop. He responded, "Well, make me," you know, that kind of smart-aleck talk. … He threw the ball and I tried to catch … it but it bounced off and ran down several steps to the basement entrance, on the side. He said, "Go get the ball," [laughter] big shot, yes, and I must have been … about eleven, eleven-and-half, and I said, "I'm not going to get it. It's your problem. You threw it." He said, "Well, I'm going to make you get it." I said, "No, you're not." He said, "Well, my brother, my big brother, is going to make you get it." So, he went … home, brought his big brother, [who] was bigger than I was and older. … "Get the ball." "I'm not going to get it." "Well, I'm going to make you," and he grabbed me, and so, we got into a fight and [I connected] right to the nose and as blood burst out of his nostrils, they turned and fled. I never had any more trouble with them. Again, my boxing training came in handy. [laughter] All these memories stay with you, and, let's see, we moved from that house to a house … on Albany Avenue, just a little off Eastern Parkway, which was closer, also, to my father's barbershop, and I remember … my father's store. He had … his younger brother, my uncle, working with him then. … Before that, [for] several years … he employed a very pleasant … Italian man. … Then, I didn't appreciate it; … how he … spoke against Mussolini. At that time, I didn't know what Mussolini was all about. … Later, I realized, this man was … a real democrat. His name was Sam also, but, since … these were desperate times, my father took his brother in and had to let Sam go. … There were some weeks, I'm talking about 1931, '32, when, at the end of the week's work, my father would pay his workman his wages and there would be less left over for him than what the employee got, and he had to pay two rents, the store and the apartment, family support and so on. It was a struggle; people don't realize it today, and I think he was a superb barber. I remember, in those days … men would … stop in the morning, on their way to work, and have a shave. There weren't safety razors [then]. … The barber … kept cups [on] shelves against a mirror; a cup for each customer,

with a little … bar of shaving soap and … brush … in each cup. … [He] … poured hot water in, lathered them up. … Some of those guys made a lasting impression on me. I remember a Mr. Klein, K-L-E-I-N, and he worked in Manhattan. He had a … business there; a handsome, tall man, with a goatee, [who] every morning, [would] come in for a shave. … What I remember now … vividly about him is … he said … he was eighty-three years old and still going to work every day. So, if this would have been '32, or so, … he was born [in] 1849, 1850. … [He was] among the people I met there. Well, then, my uncle worked in my father's shop.

LA: Excuse me, wasn't he in the Franco-Prussian War?

SA: No, that was somebody else, somebody else, [who] came along a little later. … My uncle's family, my Uncle Milton, his wife and daughter, little daughter, lived with us in an apartment, a nice apartment. It was a brown brick building, a block or two away on Albany Avenue. … Downstairs, on the street floor, was a pork store, a German butcher shop. … We lived in the apartment above … and then, [in] one more apartment over us lived the landlady of the building. She was a widow, a rather stout woman. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SA: So, we're living now on Albany Avenue in Brooklyn, just north of Eastern Parkway. … We lived in an apartment above a butcher shop. My uncle, who had come from Chicago, [with] his wife and daughter, were still living with us and shared the apartment. … This particular night, it was in early December, … rather cold, and my uncle was a block or so away, talking with some of his cronies, usually sports talk … in a drugstore where they had a pinball machine or something like that. … My aunt, his wife, had just come back from a movie [with] her sister from Chicago, who was finishing a visit and was going to return to Chicago the next day. … They were … in the kitchen … having a cup of tea before going to bed. It was close to midnight and we were already in our beds and, suddenly, there was a violent, "Boom." … We were in a deep sleep and my sister came into the room and said, "Quick, quick, Sam, there's a fire. Get out, get out," and I shook my brother, we slept in a double bed, and said, "Mike, get up. There's a fire." He said, "Where?" you know, deep sleep. "Get up," and then, we looked at the window and the flames were shooting up from below, from the store. Well, you know, there was a kind of chaos and my aunt … and her sister … grabbed her little daughter from the crib and … ran down a steep flight of stairs to the street. … By the time we roused, and … got ourselves together, my father, sister, brother, and myself, … we looked down the stairway and the flames were blocking the exit. We paused … a moment, and then, a gust of wind blew the flames aside and father thought, "We'll … have to use … this opportunity," and we ran down … just in-between the flame being there and then being [blown aside]. We rushed out on to the street, barefoot, in our underclothes, in the cold. … When we looked around … my dad realized my mother was still upstairs; in the confusion, and maybe even smoke inhalation … and the shock of it all … as we had been asleep … groggy. … My uncle came running, because he heard that, "Boom" … in that place where he had been and he saw the flames. … He thought his wife was upstairs, with the daughter, and so on, and he tried to run in, but they held him back. They wouldn't allow him to enter the burning building, but then he found … his wife. But my mother was still up there and … in a dazed condition; she walked … to the window and … saw the

flames, and she said, "My, my, the plants are going to be burned." So, she moved the potted plants away from the windows. [laughter] Can you imagine that?

RA: That's what I would do.

SA: [laughter] … Then, when she realized … her predicament. She was joined by the landlady … from her apartment over … ours, [she was] a bit obese. … There were these two women trapped up there. What to do? … The stairs were now covered in flame, [they] couldn't go out the front way, so they went to the rear of the kitchen … where there was a fire escape … over the rear yard. … The flames from the windows of the store beneath were coming up, so [that] the fire escape was almost a grill. … People had come into the backyard, including … firemen. … The next building was a twin building, sort of, to ours. … It, too, had a fire escape … with a space of … three or four feet between the two fire escapes. … They shouted … to them to get out on the fire escape, climb over to the one on the … adjacent building … so they could … be rescued … by a ladder. … They couldn't stay, really, on … our fire escape. So, they tried, and can you imagine it? My mother got up on the rail of the fire escape and she had to hold onto the brick and try to leap onto the rail of the other one, you know, [the] railing, and they kept [shouting], "Come on, come on, don't wait," and she did make it, and they rescued her. Now, the woman, the landlady, as I said, was older and a little heavy and she had to make the leap, too. They had no nets, and she did fall and she broke her legs and hips. She survived, but she was badly injured. Now, neighbors told us; in the back, there were buildings that … overlooked the back of our yard. They told us that they had heard a loud, "Boom," and they looked out the window and … saw flames, and they saw a figure of a man running out of the building, across the fences and running away. … The fire marshal said, "This was a set fire." They poured gasoline on the floor of the butcher shop, and then, lit it, because they weren't making enough money. They wanted to collect their fire insurance. They didn't care that all those people might be killed. …

LA: Did they ever get the guys, by the way?

SA: No. It was a hired [person]. You know, these people, they're arsonists, would set [fires]. [In] those days, [it was a] common enough thing; it happens today, too. So, there we were … standing on the sidewalk. People [were] just looking; nobody made an effort to help. Finally, the wonderful man, Mr. (Goldblatt?), … he was the pharmacist a block or two away across the street, … he commandeered a car and took us to his apartment. We were shivering, freezing, and we had to go on from there. We had to find other quarters and [we had] lost so many things. … I remember, my sister … told us, about ten days later, her teacher in school said to her, "Why don't you change your dress? You wear the same dress every day." She said, "This is the only dress I have." [laughter] They were all burnt.

TS: What about the shell-shocked teacher?

SA: That came later, "Andy Gump," but, you know, a wonderful thing about living in this area was the fact that they had The Brooklyn Children's Museum in a nearby park; … maybe half-a-mile away … a little park, a square block, or so … and there were two buildings. … They were old mansions, built … maybe … in the 1820s, 1830s, like three-story ones, and they were

converted to a museum for children and they had activities for children. One of the most valuable … gifts that I ever had was to be able to know that place, and we had nature study there and I first learned … about rocks and minerals there. [I] became interested in geology. They … had study sets, wooden boxes that … held three specimens of minerals, with a little booklet describing … their features. … We would borrow them, as you would borrow books from a library, take them home, and then, bring them back in about a week. … One of the docents would quiz you … about this mineral, where is it found, what it's used for. … If you did all right, you got so many credits, and your name was on a chart and they put a star … next to it. When you got … a string of gold stars, there was … an award. … They also had birds mounted in boxes, about a foot square and … half as deep; glass front and stuffed birds [from] all over the … country. … On the back of the box [was] the text … about this bird, where it lives, the eggs, the shape, the color. … I'd take it home for a week or so, keep it on the bureau in my bedroom, lovely to look at the whole week; next week, bring it back, be quizzed on it, … get my gold star; and insects, [I] learned about them, too. Saturdays, they had wonderful movies. Today, we wouldn't even want to look at them, …technology has improved so much, but they were wonders for us, [films on] travel in the Amazon jungle, in Africa and the Grand Canyon, and, for kids who … didn't have exposure to those things, they opened worlds to us. … In the summertime, they took us on field trips, nature trips, and we would … carry, each of us, a net, a butterfly net, and a little glass jar with cyanide poison in it, and we would catch butterflies and other insects; put them in the jar, bring them back, and … mount them on mounting boards and strips of paper, keeping them there for about a week. … They would set and the wings would stay open … whether it's grasshoppers or moths, butterflies, whatever insect, beetles. … I had a large insect collection then, and … [I] learned all about them. … We visited … parks in the Bronx and in Queens, and then, [we] even went to the Palisades, at Fort Lee, New Jersey. … I remember, we went there before the George Washington Bridge was completed and that went up in, I think, '32. [laughter] … We took a ferry boat across [from] Dyckman Street, Upper Manhattan, to Fort Lee and we had to climb all the way up. … Then, it wasn't as built-up; well, not at all. It was sparse. It was woodlands and, in the spring, on a trip there, we'd go in the woods and see the first plants, skunk cabbage. Do you know that one? That's a very early spring [plant], and you learned to recognize [these plants], and so, this was a great opportunity to learn about the world and about nature and I think it probably was the start that got me interested in the natural world, yes. … I wish they had more of those things for kids.

SI: Did your education support and nurture those lines of inquiry? Did you have good science programs in your school or did you study science mostly through the museum?

SA: Well, science didn't start very early; at least I don't remember [it]. I remember, the first experience with a science course was in junior high school. In junior high school, I found out that there was an astronomy club and I wanted to join that very much. Junior high started in my seventh year and, in one semester, we did what they called rapid advance classes. I did the seventh year in one semester and the eighth year the second semester, and then, the ninth year was a full year, and so, I had two years in junior high, but I did three years of work, and then, entered as a sophomore in high school. … [However], in junior high school, I wanted to get into this astronomy club right away and went to the teacher, … the faculty advisor. …

LA: Advisor?

SA: Advisor for the club. [The school clubs met one period each week and there were forty students in the club. I asked the faculty advisor if I could be admitted.]

----------END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE----------

SA: … He replied, "The room won't hold any more," and I was just devastated. I said, "Oh, please, can you squeeze in one more?" and so, he let me come in and I was … fascinated with the talks that we, the students, gave. … I gave some, and then, in the second semester, they elected me … president. … In my second year, the next two semesters, I was the president of the astronomy club, again. … At the end of the year, he would give a quiz, a short-answer test … a hundred questions or so, and the winner would be awarded a prize, a book on astronomy, a textbook or something similar. … I won the prize both years and … the faculty advisor was so encouraging. He wrote in the first book; [it] was, I think … *The Stars for Sam* [by William Maxwell Reed (1931)]. That was the title. It was a very popular book, at that time, about space travel and astronomy, for school kids that age. … In the second year, he gave me a college textbook by Duncan, one of the most widely used college books on astronomy, as the prize, and he inscribed both books. I think I gave *The Stars for Sam* to our son, I think so. … He wrote, like, … "To Sam Agron, … of whom we expect much." You know, that's an inspiring thing for a kid to hear, a thing like that, and then, the second time, I think he wrote in Latin. He was a Latin teacher. He wasn't a science teacher, he was a Latin teacher, but he was faculty advisor of the astronomy club. He wrote … "*Aspera Ad Astra*," something like that. I didn't know what it meant. I had to have it translated, "Through difficulty, to the stars." Now, that's a powerful influence for a kid. … He had a telescope and we would have observations on clear nights … on the roof of the school. It was a very large school building, the John Marshall Junior High School, PS 210, and so, we'd have observations and, I remember, he once invited me to his home and so on. Well, he went on, later, to become an assistant superintendent in the Board of Education of New York City. … He was a short man, but just a delightful, delightful person, and I kept in touch from time to time. … I don't know if I saw him again … but I did speak to him on the phone during the war … once. Later, he was very pleased to know of my appointment at Rutgers. A great influence on me; and I had several other good teachers. … If I may fall back to my pre-junior high school experience, and then, maybe, we'll resume that? … In my last public school, before junior high … (PS 167), … on Eastern Parkway and Schenectady Avenue, … I had a sixth grade teacher who was like a Teutonic monster, [laughter] Miss Truelson was her name, a spinster woman, the terror of the school, discipline, you know. …

LA: Teutonic monster.

SA: Well, she was. She used to boast [about] how nice she had been to one of her students. She invited her to spend the summer at her home in New Hampshire, with the teacher's sister, and then, as she went on, you got to realize [that] the girl was a servant for them, free servant, all summer. … Anyway, she was a disciplinarian and the students were terrified of her. I have only bad memories of her. [laughter] On one occasion, she had to go to the office for some business, so, she called her pet, (Herminie?), a slight girl, and she said, "Herminie, you stand up here in front of the room and everybody is to sit like this at his desk and look straight ahead. If they as much as turn their eye [to] either side, I want you to report them to me." [laughter] I didn't like

that too much, but was going to obey, more or less. My offence was looking to the side once or twice, and I could see the horror on the girl's face when I did that. Can you imagine such discipline? … I sat there, but I looked around. She was gone maybe ten minutes and expected everyone to sit that way. She came back, "Well, Herminie, did everybody behave?" "Yes, Miss Truelson, everybody except Sam Agron." "What did he do?" "He was throwing spitballs," which wasn't true, but this little monster of a girl [lied]. [laughter] So, this terror of a teacher comes stomping down the aisle, grabs me by my tie and collar, lifts me out of my seat, and slaps me across the face. Well, you know, I think, maybe subconsciously, I may have had reverberations of an experience as a seven- year-old, a girl's father whacked me across the face with a rolled-up newspaper, when I was totally innocent. Outraged, I said, "Keep your damn hands to yourself, you bitch." [laughter] I did. Can you imagine? Now, I didn't anticipate that; it just came out. I was so angry. I was innocent, truly innocent. I never did that. This [girl] had lied. … The teacher gasped; … dropped me, retreated to the front of the class as the students watched in shock. A moment later, the principal came in and I figured, "Well, this is curtains." [laughter] But she never said a word to him, never said a word. … At the end of the term, I was one of the few people, not many, who, beyond the sixth grade, were transferred to a junior high school. Now, most stayed on to the eighth grade. I know that very good students were transferred out, because we moved into "rapid advance classes," where you did two years in one, and I thought to myself, "Surely, she couldn't think of me as superior. She must have thought, 'Well, good riddance.'" … Anyway, again, it was my good fortune to have been given the opportunity to go to that junior high school, [one of] life's little blessings. … There, I remember, Mr. (Brickner?), my physical science teacher. I joined the science club, where we had projects. I wanted to make my own telescope. … I had to buy a lens (I had no facilities there to do anything more, a kid in the seventh grade) from an optician … a round eyeglass lens of the proper dimensions, characteristics, [and] so on, which I learned about, and then, wrapped it in a mount of cardboard-like, stiff paper?

RA: Mâché, papier-mâché?

SA: Not mâché. …

SI: Construction paper?

SA: Sort of, yes, [for] posters, and I cut little strips, about two inches wide, and then, [I] would stand up the lens and wrap it around, and then, glue it and [put] another strip around and, gradually, built up a little housing for the lens. … Then, I got, from a store that sold linoleum, (the linoleum was wrapped around long cardboard tubes). The lens was a low diopter lens. That means of long focal length, over sixty inches. … I put the lens at one end of the tube and got a small magnifying lens for the eyepiece. So, this teacher helped me make my own telescope then, which I painted black. In my apartment, at night, I would open a window from the top and poke the tube out … looking at stars. I had the unusual experience, one night, (I don't know if it happens to one person in a million) when looking at the sky through the telescope … a meteor flashed … across the field of view. … I could see the trail widening, thinning, and then, trailing off into smoke, dark smoke. Now, how many people can say they've had that experience? [laughter] So, as a kid, it really did a lot for me. … Those were some of the experiences during junior high school, some of the teachers. …

TS: When you reached high school, was there an astrology or geology club that you became involved with?

SA: Oh, don't say astrology.

SI: Astronomy.

TS: I am sorry, astronomy.

SA: … I'll have to jump ahead, many, many years now, decades, because that word triggered … a memory. [laughter]

TS: My apologies.

SA: Don't apologize. You're quite a normal person, but what I'm going to tell you, as you'll see, wasn't a normal thing. … I taught astronomy, introductory astronomy, for a number of years, here at Rutgers, and I remember once… on the first day of class, about twenty minutes into the lecture, the door opened. There stood a guy, all out of breath [Editor's Note: Dr. Agron imitates the student] … having run up several flights of stairs. "Is this the astrology class?" he asked. I said, "No." He said, "Oh, excuse me," … and left. I don't think he ever came back. He was looking for the astronomy class, but I was so annoyed that he had called it "astrology"; that I would dare teach an astrology course. [laughter] So, my response was, "No," which was true. … I may have lost a student, but the class was almost full anyway. … It still resonates…, "astrology." We're back to …

SI: We were talking about junior high.

TS: Were you involved in any clubs in high school? You had been involved in clubs in junior high.

SA: Yes, I joined the chemistry club. I may have been president of that, I don't recall, and, also, the photography club, and I remember one incident. Incidentally, the high school was very good. It was [the] Samuel J. Tilden High School in Brooklyn. They tell me, today … it's way down, but then it was … almost new … with a lovely … modern building, recently dedicated by Eleanor Roosevelt. But because … they were so crowded … that year, my sophomore year, I attended the annex. … The annex was in rented spaces … a block or so away from the … children's museum, … within walking distance from my home. Actually … the classroom spaces … were in a Reformed temple … with enough classrooms and offices … to take care of several hundred students from the area. … After a year there, I went to the main campus. … You'll have to forgive my digressions here. … You'll remind me, because, once I tell this, I'll probably not get back to the annex, please remind me to mention the photography club. At the annex, we had a very good art course and the instructor was Mr. Brill, B-R-I-L-L. … I appreciated these opportunities to study … courses other than the ordinary … ones. … We had a very good course in speech, taught by a marvelous speaker. … Her name was Mrs. Goldman and she … spoke, oh, … delicious English. It was a pleasure to … listen to her … that … whole

semester. We learned phonetics and that, too, I felt, served me in good stead. … Mr. Brill … [gave us] wonderful art exercises, projects, lettering and so on. … It was an all-boys class. … One thing he … said to us, I will never forget, … we were all boys, … sophomores. …

LA: You were younger, though, normally fifteen.

SA: No, fourteen.

LA: You were probably fourteen. You were a little younger.

SA: … It doesn't matter. … At the beginning of the course, he said, "Let me give you boys advice [for] here in high school. … If worse comes to worst … find a hole in the wall and leave the girls alone," [laughter] … and it's never left my mind.

LA: Well, you could find a holy girl.

SA: [laughter] Paternalistic advice from a teacher.

LA: They are always around.

SA: Oh, we respected our teachers. …

RA: You're embarrassing me. [laughter]

LA: Hear that, Posterity? [laughter]

SA: That was one way of helping us to become gentlemen. So now … continuing with my junior year at the main campus of Tilden High School … where I was in the photography club, … where the physics teacher was the faculty advisor. He was Mr. Menzies, very tall, kind of serene, a strict-looking, serious man with large eyebrows. … We had fine darkroom facilities. … There was a rule that no girls were allowed in the darkroom. … I remember once working with some … trays and solutions, and there were also a couple of other students and … in one corner of the fairly large room was the president of the photography club … with his girlfriend. In walked Mr. Menzies, the physics teacher, faculty advisor. … There was only a red light on in the darkroom. … Mr. Menzies looked around and … saw the girl cringing in the corner. He … demanded, "What is she doing here?" … The president of the club … trembled, … "Oh, Mr. Menzies, I was just trying to teach her how to develop." [laughter] Well, I don't think he lasted long as president of the club. Okay, so, there's some humor in my discourse! … The high school was, I think, four miles away from where I lived and we … usually walked to school, four miles each way. When the weather was very cold or inclement, we walked several blocks to a more or less … main street, … Utica Avenue, … where there would be cabs. … Five of us would pile into a cab and … would … pay a nickel each for the ride to school. … Money was … scarce at the time (1935 – 1937) so, ordinarily, we … walked to save the nickel. … Gee, this money … problem, … these things are so interconnected and they bring back … incidents that I should have mentioned before, if you'll [allow me]. …

SI: Please, go ahead.

SA: Yes. … At about age thirteen, I wanted to make a telescope and needed … some money to buy … lenses. … I saw an adult … near the subway station … recruiting boys … to sell magazines, like *Liberty*. … Do you know that magazine? It sold for a nickel, and the *Saturday Evening Post* sold for five cents, too. He would … give you a canvas bag, which you … carried over your shoulder, … and a number of copies. … You stood … near the station, on the street, and … tried to sell them. … I don't know what … I netted from each … sale. It … sold for a nickel and he had to … receive some of that. … On my first day … two women hailed me … from about fifty feet away. I … thought, "Oh, wonderful, I'll sell a magazine," as I ran … towards them and asked, "Which one would you like?" She … asked, "Where is your badge?" I said, "What badge?" "Newsboy's badge?" I said, "I don't know anything about [that]. The man never told me." She said, "You don't have a newsboy's badge?" I didn't know about it, but she wrote … out a summons and my father and I had to go to court. Can you imagine that? Father had to take off from work to go to court. I don't remember whether there was a fine connected with it or not. So, that was the end of that enterprise. Well, I did get … a badge … and I thought, "I can't rely on selling a magazine here or there." So, I got a job delivering the evening newspaper, … the *Brooklyn Eagle*, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, … an old, established paper, going back to the nineteenth century. … They had a distribution structure. … There was a manager behind a storefront, and … maybe a dozen or more newsboys came there for their supply of papers … for their individual routes and delivered them to homes. … The paper was three cents … and I got a cent for every paper I delivered. The Sunday paper was a nickel and I got two cents of that; … paying the manager… the balance. … When I … started the job, it was … cold … getting into winter, and it … got dark … early. … I wasn't familiar with the houses and … I … couldn't see the addresses on some … individual brownstones; I had to walk up many stairs. … In the apartment buildings, I had to … bring the papers to the individual apartments, lugging my heavy bag up and down the stairs. … On Sundays, the canvas bag of papers was huge … and so heavy … I could hardly carry it. … I would finish … late … because of the darkness, and was exhausted when I got home; … and then there was homework to do. So, it was very difficult. … Sundays, I remember, I was supposed to pay the … manager, in advance, for the week and then, collect from the people. … Often they … weren't home, … and I … would be out the money, which I needed. … If I'd ring the doorbell … Sunday … morning, they'd give me hell for waking them. … What was I to do? … "Come back," … they would say. … It was quite an ordeal getting reimbursed. … One very cold Sunday morning, I remember … with my ungloved, bare hand … I grabbed the outside doorknob, a brass doorknob. … My skin froze to it instantly and I actually tore some skin off as I tried to remove my hand; … it was that cold. … After several weeks … on the weekly round to make the collections for the week … I was told, "We paid already." I said, "No, you didn't." … They said, "But, your boss was here this afternoon and he collected the money," and they … refused to pay again. I don't blame them. Well, I found out that during the day, when all us kids were in school, he went around to all … customers making the collections and absconded with all the money, leaving us holding the bag. He left town, … another an opportunity for a trusting boy to learn about human nature. … I thought, "Well … I can't continue this job. … It's taking too much out of me. It's just not worth it." … I never did make it there, but I was helped by a lovely [woman]. This woman had an after-hours, that's after [the] regular school day, Hebrew school; … oh, boy, what a big story. I hardly know where to begin. It was a school which started in several rooms in kind of like a

suite of what would have been a series of offices, and the principal was a Mr. Newman, the teacher was just a lovely woman, just a lovely woman. … She was from Odessa, I think, Ukraine, immigrated. … Let's see, her name was Frieda Inselbuch, I-N-S-E-L-B-U-C-H, and she lived on Prospect Street, in one of the very elegant, tall apartment buildings, elevator apartment buildings; … a very highly educated woman, accomplished in many languages, as well as her religious studies. … I liked this school, because … the conversation was in Hebrew; … you learned by speaking the language. … Even today, when … some seventy years later, I can conduct a conversation. … Remember, Rita, when we went to Israel? We took the limo from the airport into … Jerusalem [with] your sister and [her] husband and there was the driver and his brother … I struck up a conversation with them or they … with me, and I talked with them in Hebrew. So, it came back, and that was a wonderful gift. She was so enlightened and … cultured in European culture, you know, French and German and Russian, lovely woman, and then, one shocking surprise occurred. Suddenly, one afternoon, after school, we're there in class and the principal of the school, well, … this Mr. Newman, came in with the mother of one of the students and said that she [Frieda Inselbuch] was being dismissed, because she wasn't good, and he began to say terrible things about her. … I was just shocked, almost speechless. The kids were shocked and … didn't know what to say. … Finally, I felt I [had] had enough. I stood up and said, "These things you say are all damn lies. I don't want to hear any more of it." … This kind of broke up the discussion. … My teacher, on the verge of tears, came over to my desk. I stood up and, I remember, she hugged me, very moving experience. … So, she left. Mr. Newman remained, and then the complaining woman was put in charge (or something like that) and … the operation soon folded, but Mrs. Inselbuch opened her own school several blocks away and it succeeded grandly. … She permitted me to do tutoring … for students who needed the additional help and, in those days, I was paid the grand sum of twenty-five cents an hour, which was a lot. It was very fine and it did help me with expenses. Occasionally, … as my hobby was collecting postage stamps, I would want to buy some … from the pennies I could save. … Her school … conducted Sabbath services on Saturday mornings for the students, and she would walk from where she lived, which was several miles away, on the Sabbath, all the way there and … back; … being Orthodox, she wouldn't ride on the Sabbath. … She gave me the job of [serving as] … a sextant. … I set things up and seated children and placed … the prayer books, in the right places. … I felt I was doing a very valuable service. Sometimes, [in] very cold weather, [if] she couldn't make it, I would take care of the whole … service myself. So, she had a profound effect on my development of good values and character. Oh, incidentally, after she left … the first school, having been dismissed there in such an ugly, ugly fashion, and … opened … her own school, there was a dedication ceremony and rather important people from the Jewish education world were there as guests and speakers … as well as parents. … My father was at work and my mother was a little reluctant to attend. She thought … "The principal … had been saying such things," … so, she was reluctant to … attend and I went there myself. … Mrs. Inselbuch … asked, "Where is your mother?" and I said, "She just is confused about the whole thing and she is reluctant to come." Well, here [are] all these parents, the guests and so on; she … led me out by the hand, hailed a cab, went to my house and spoke to my mother … while everybody was waiting. … My mother perhaps had not met her before, she had [only] heard about her, from what I had told her. Now, se said to my mother … "Well, I can see that the expression … 'the apple doesn't fall far from the tree' [is true]," [laughter] which was perhaps the right thing to say to my mother, and she readily agreed … to go along … and her appreciation of her grew.

RA: I think that's a very emotional story.

LA: … Did you ever find out what happened to Mrs. Inselbuch?

SA: Of course. Several years later, when I would have been maybe fifteen; oh, yes, the original school … soon folded up, and Mrs. Inselbuch moved back into the original facility. … Then, about a couple of years later, died in her sleep. … She was just such a beautiful, wonderful person. I remember visiting her home once and she had a canary or two and the door of the cage was open. The birds flew freely around the apartment and … back into the cage. … So, she died in her sleep. It was her heart, yes. She was maybe in her late forties. It was very tragic. I remember … at the funeral, the hearse stopped in front of the school, all the children were there, and some parents, and … the cars were all … filled. … I was the only student to be a member of the funeral party and the only seat left for me was next to the chauffer of the hearse. …

LA: … Was she a widow?

SA: Who?

LA: Mrs. Newman?

SA: Her name was not Newman. Her name was Inselbuch, Frieda; Frieda Inselbuch.

LA: … Was she a widow?

SA: No.

LA: She had a family, kids?

SA: No, had no children. Her husband [and family], they were some kind of big business people and she didn't need this to make a living. She just made a tremendous contribution. … I remember, they put on a play once, it may have been a Purim play, and my father was enlisted … to help backstage. Back in Russia, before the war … being a barber … he done make-up for … actors in the theater. … He once made a false beard … for one of the actors in the play, maybe Haman. … He helped … put the show on. … She wrote a play herself, and I think it was in Hebrew, yes, and she gave me … a copy … inscribed to me, which I … was very moved by. So, I think I've been very fortunate in having come across several just wonderful people who have contributed so much.

LA: This (New York) was also the greatest school system in the country at the time.

SA: At that time, it was good, very good, yes. So, where are we, "Lost in Brooklyn"? [laughter]

SI: Going back to the 1931-1932 period, times were desperate, in general, because of the Great Depression, but, then, the hard times were punctuated in your own life by this fire. How did your family bounce back or rebuild from the fire?

SA: You know, compared to the *pogroms* and things in Russia, and the wars and all that, that was just a pimple, to survive [the fire]. … My mom would look around, she would see people a lot worse off. … They had to be helped. … While the fire was tragic, they were thankful that there was no loss of life. … You've got to look at the better side, or whatever. …

SI: In that period, during the depths of the Depression, how did people view Franklin Roosevelt, both when he was campaigning for President, and then, after he was elected President?

SA: Well, we supported Roosevelt. The family… [all] were Democrats and we thought he was trying to help the country to do what is good and necessary. [We] supported him. In fact, I think the last time he ran, when was that, '44? I voted for him. Yes, I wouldn't have been able to vote in the previous election, because I turned twenty-one just after the voting, but I did vote for him later.

LA: It was a relatively close election.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SA: … With regard to the question [of] how people felt, and so on, about various things in the Depression, we didn't feel particularly deprived or poor, because material things don't entirely determine whether you're in poverty or not. … You can have a lot of material things and be impoverished, spiritually and in other ways. So, my mother blessed every day that she was in this country, yes, … and then, she realized one of her duties is also to be a teacher, to teach us. … I remember one occasion, … when I was in junior high school, she came home, it was already getting dark, and we had just returned from school and she came home from grocery shopping. They didn't have supermarkets then. … The grocery store was several blocks away. She carried two big … tan paper bags … they … used for groceries, and set them down … to get things set up for supper, and she checked to make sure she had all the items. … They didn't … issue receipts in those days. The grocer … wrote the price of each item on the outside of the bag, … which she quickly checked … added up the figures, and … counted her change. … She had been given two cents too much. … She said, "Children, I have to go back to the store. I'll prepare dinner when I come home; I have to return this to him." It couldn't wait until the next day. It didn't belong to her. She had to return it. So, you see … that influence never left us, all of us, and it's invaluable. … I can … follow up this train of thought with an incident that occurred earlier in the taping here, that I referred to. When we arrived as refugees in Mogilev, on our way towards, eventually, America, we hoped; … we had lost everything. … There were four of us, and my brother to be born imminently. My mother's sister-in-law, … although prosperous, didn't want to admit us into their large home. … Years later, … in the days that we were just talking about in Brooklyn, when I was going to grade school, junior high school, [and] so on, things had deteriorated greatly in the Soviet Union and the Communist government, of course, tried to destroy private businesses. So, they would raise his [my uncle's] taxes. He owned a large house; [they] raised the taxes, … he had to pay more … and, soon, they'd raise it again. He couldn't … keep paying, so, he'd write to his relatives here, "Please, send me some money. We're going to lose our home. We're going to lose everything." … My mother would go to other relatives, her sister, her brothers, "Please, let's put together a package." They needed food by that time, even

clothing, shoes. "Send cash, whatever … send it over to them." … My mother was asked, "Look, after how she treated you, why are you doing all this for her? Why are you chasing around [on their behalf]?" and my mother … replied, "The unkindness that she displayed towards me, I will … repay with kindness."

LA: The Golden Rule. … What, did they eventually get killed by Stalin?

SA: Oh, yes, they were killed by the Nazis, later on.

TS: Oh, the Nazis. … This is in, probably … Ukraine?

SA: No, it was White Russia, Mogilev, and whom the Nazis didn't kill, Stalin killed probably. [laughter]

SI: Is there anything else you would like to say about high school or shall we move on to college?

SA: … Let's see; Larry keeps reminding me of this French teacher I had in high school. … I forget his name now, but his nickname was "Andy Gump," because he looked like the [cartoon] character. … He had been a World War I soldier … over in France, and I think he'd been shell-shocked. … After the war, … [he] recovered from that and became a high school teacher. … One wall of the classroom was lined with windows with a fairly wide windowsill, maybe eighteen inches wide, [running] the length of the room.

----------END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO----------

SI: This continues an interview with Dr. Sam L. Agron on October 14, 2005, in Montville, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth …

TS: … Todd Schaefer …

LA: … Larry Agron …

RA: … Rita Agron.

SI: Please, continue. You were telling us about your French high school teacher.

SA: Yes, and he would hop on to the windowsill and pace the length of the room, back and forth, and lecture from there. It was one of the quirks that, we had no choice about, I suppose, we put up with it. …

LA: When he heard a noise, did he suddenly start?

SA: I don't recall.

SI: Did he discuss his World War I experiences?

SA: … He mentioned it. Well, I don't recall specific experiences. … I was going to mention that another teacher that I remember taught physiography, which is earth science, plus meteorology and some astronomy, and I took that course and I enjoyed it very much. It was a Mr. (Diamond?). He was a very good, inspiring teacher. Oh, yes, [when] I was in, probably high school, I don't think it was junior high, I joined the Greek club. You ask, "Why?" Because, being interested in astronomy … where the Greek alphabet is used to designate the stars in the constellations, and you come across Greek words, now and then, in literature or science, and I wanted to be more familiar with it. … This is something you would not … find today. The faculty advisor of the Greek club was a Mr. Mullins. … He was a gym teacher, a gym teacher, he was not an academic teacher and he knew Greek and he knew Latin. … I asked him, "Where did you study this?" He … replied, "Well, when I went to high school it was required, Greek and Latin." So, this is kind of a throwback, back again to World War I, days past. Now, was there another? …

SI: The Franco-Prussian War veteran?

SA: … Was that a reference to that?

LA: A fellow who would come into the barbershop. …

SA: Oh, no. That was a Mr. Werner, yes. He was a very interesting gentleman, either a widower or a bachelor. He was then close to eighty, I suppose, or in his eighties.

LA: So, he would have been born [in] approximately 1848, 1850.

SA: So, he would have been, yes, then, he was in his eighties, … yes, [the] 1850s, I suppose.

LA: He was in his twenties when that war was fought.

SA: And he was from Vienna, Viennese, and he fought in the Franco-Prussian War, for, who was the Austrian Emperor, Franz Josef, at that time?

LA: Well, was that Bismarck, at that time?

SA: … Oh, excuse me, you may be right, okay. …

LA: He was on the German side, I assume. [Editor's Note: Otto von Bismarck served as the chancellor of Prussia during that conflict. Franz Josef I was the Austro-Hungarian Emperor at the time.]

SA: Yes, he was German and he would spin marvelous yarns, which I heard, as a young teenager. He drew diagrams of their uniforms, armaments, artillery pieces, and ammunition. … One day, he thought it … was time to … select a gravesite for himself and he went out one day and picked one. Later, he thought it over, and … said, "No, I don't like that site. It's down where there's too much drainage." [laughter] He … said, "I'm going back to change it to a higher one."

Now, isn't it amazing how these thoughts come back to you, unsolicited, after so many years? But, I guess, deep in your mind, they're associated with … the man and, when he comes to mind, the baggage comes with him.

LA: Did he talk about the war?

SA: About [the] Franco-Prussian War? Well, Larry, I don't recall any more details. He probably did tell me more things. …

LA: And you did see Civil War veterans marching.

SA: I did once, in a parade … on Armistice Day perhaps, on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn. Riding in some of the open limos … were … Civil War veterans. … That would have been, let's say, what? '32 or so, some would have been alive then, yes.

LA: That's sixty-two years after the war ended, so, they could have been in their eighties.

SA: Oh, yes, yes. There is a connection. Think about the changes that have occurred in this country, even in my lifespan. I remember, about the late '30s perhaps, or even 1920's, the population of this country was maybe 120 million, 115 million, and, now, what is it? More than two-and-a-half times that. …

LA: Three hundred million.

SA: Yes, within my lifespan. Can you imagine the pressure this has put on the environment? We don't realize how the Earth is being despoiled, and people don't take that into their consciousness. They don't see it. Can this go on? I doubt it.

LA: When you were born, there were, what, two billion-plus people in the world, something like that?

SA: It may be.

LA: And, now, it's five. …

SA: Six-plus … and then, there'll be eight billion by 2050. It's just inconceivable.

TS: What do you remember about your decision to attend college? You began college at Brooklyn College.

SA: Yes … Brooklyn College; and, if I wanted to go to college, it would have had to be Brooklyn or maybe another college in the City University system. I considered them and was accepted at both. … When I graduated high school in 1937, I was to enter college … in September and I needed to earn a little money that summer … for college expenses and so on. So, I set out to look for work [in] Manhattan. … The newspapers, the *New York Times*, etc. … would have ads, "Christians only" job ads, "Jews need not apply," and … on Park Row, in

Manhattan, where a lot of employment agencies were located, they had … sandwich signs on the sidewalk … listing job openings … saying, "No Jews," that kind of thing. … So, I had to really search a great deal. … Finally, I got … a job through the help of the Jewish Employment Agency … at a neckwear company, (Stratford?) Neckwear Company in Manhattan. … They manufactured ties … in a loft building on West 27th Street. They had the whole loft. … I worked for … twelve dollars a week, which … I was lucky to get. … Just several years before that … my friend's brother, who was a little older, graduated from City College as an electrical engineer and, with great difficulty, finally, found a job at six dollars a week. Today, we think it's unreal, but that's the way it was. … My main task was … to fill the orders. … We shipped ties to stores all over the country, department stores, … haberdasheries, [and] so on. … In the stockroom … the ties were kept in … bins, all different patterns and colors. … I … took the ties from the machines and stocked them. … Then, I filled the orders, put … the ties into large cardboard boxes, or cartons, … addressed them, wrapped them, and then, carried them to the post office several blocks away. … At the end of the day … after everybody went home, I … used a brush about four feet wide … to sweep the entire factory floor, all the sewings, and waste fabrics and threads, and so on. … You can imagine that when I got home at the end of the day, [after] an hour on the subway, for … the first few days, I was too tired to eat supper. I just collapsed. … I had to promise these guys, before they would hire me, that I would stay with the job and not go to college, but, you know, I was desperate enough to say, "Well, that's what I will be doing." [laughter]

RA: You have to say, "May God forgive me."

SA: Yes, but I got … to see how hard everyone worked there … in the factory and the terrible, terrible pressures that they worked under. … I remember, in order to save time … I'd … take a brown-bag lunch from home. … I would take the subway and … pop up to the street on … 28th Street … and Seventh Avenue … where there … was a Nedicks. … There for a dime, you could buy a little glass of orange juice, a doughnut and a cup of coffee. I … had my breakfast that way. … I worked there until college began and that was '37.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SA: 1937, that's when I worked in this tie place. I was not quite seventeen; I turned seventeen in November of that year.

LA: Yes, the historical record must be preserved in its integrity exactly. [laughter]

SA: Let's see; then, I entered college in … '37 and, oh, I must tell you something relating to high school. … Perhaps twenty years ago, maybe less, twenty years ago, I would have been sixty-five, maybe I was closer to seventy? I don't recall. Tilden High School was … having a reunion of graduates from the whole metropolitan … area … at …the Hyatt Hotel in New Brunswick.

LA: Yes.

SA: I knew one other person who graduated from Tilden here in New Jersey. … She was a classmate … then living in Cedar Grove. … I asked her, "Would you like to go to this reunion?"

She said, "Sure." So, we went there … in the ballroom … were a number of round tables each with a centerpiece bearing a placard and the class year. … So, ours would have been '37 and we sat down there and … remained by ourselves … as all the tables began to fill up. … There were classes from the '40s, the '50s, the '60s, the '70s, whatever, and then … three people came over and … asked, "Do you mind if we sit here? Our class tables are filled up." … We said, "Not at all. Pull up a chair." As they sat down … one asked, "By the way, what year are you?" I turned our placard around … '37. The guy said, "1937, I thought all you people … were dead already." [laughter] So, I said, "No, I'm very much alive, and probably in better health than you are." He said, "I think you might be. I have a bad heart." [laughter] That's a digression. Okay, now, let's see, back to college. …

LA: You mentioned [that] the teachers were high-caliber, but they were tough and not particularly strong on amenities or courtesies.

SA: I'm not sure that I would agree with the way you actually put it; Brooklyn College, we're talking about now, yes. Lovely campus; it was all new at the time. …

LA: But, you would fend for yourself. You would get relatively little help.

SA: Well, first of all, the requirements to get in were very stiff, very competitive. You had to have an overall high school average of eighty-eight, for all of your high school courses. You had to have five years of languages in high school, a three-year and a two-year language. You had to have several years of science and math and, you know, all the others … it was difficult. We were good students and the work was very rigid, but I think … the high standards maintained were as much due to the students and their preparation as … they were to the faculty, maybe even … more. There were some good faculty, but others were hacks and I heard later that many of these people were political appointees and that you had to go through Borough Hall to get your appointment. … This was told to me by a faculty member years later, when we were colleagues on a field trip. But I had … a few good teachers, maybe. … I was there only two years.

LA: One or two; that's not too many.

SA: Yes, but, yet, my grounding was good, because, when my family moved to Chicago, in … 1939, and I joined them that fall and entered Northwestern for my last two years, I found [that] my preparation had been a sound one. I … had a good preparation. Another good thing that they had at Brooklyn College, as well as in high school: one of the English semesters was speech. … Some students needed it, too. … When, I listen to … teenagers, high school students, they often sound dreadful, "like" and this [type of thing], and so on. ... Many talk so fast. … So, I derived much good from my education in New York City.

TS: Did that make for a smooth transition into Northwestern?

SA: Oh, it was very easy for me. The coursework there was not difficult. I mean, I had to apply myself, yes, but I think a 'B' student, at that time, a strong 'B,' at Brooklyn College was certainly an 'A' student at Northwestern, yes, absolutely, but there were differences that I noticed. The

attitude at Northwestern was more gentlemanly, you know. You were treated like ladies and gentlemen, with courtesy. However, you were aware of … just beneath the surface, a little bit of anti-Semitism. Northwestern started out as a Methodist school, and perhaps it still may have some kind of relationship with the Methodist Church. My paleontology professor there was an ordained Methodist minister and, if you go back to the late nineteenth century many professors and some geologists were ministers. … He was pretty good, but, nevertheless … I was aware of biases. That's part of the culture, part of the culture, but I also had some wonderful instructors, wonderful. Dr. Charles H. Behre, who was a really great man, helped me so much later in my career, and others. I got a first-rate … education there, … good school. We went on field trips to surrounding states.

TS: Were you involved in any political, religious or Greek organizations in college?

SA: I had no time for that. I was busy with coursework, studies, and, also, I tried to work when I could, sometimes on … weekends or … before holidays. I'd get … work sometimes in a liquor store … standing … behind the counter or bringing … beer in from the refrigerator, assisting any way I could just to make a buck, which I needed for school. I did some tutoring and I worked … some weekends, in a department store, selling. … I remember … Goldblatt Brothers was one of the biggest department stores in the city. They had several branches and I worked on a number of jobs. Let's see; … I remember, one Saturday, they had a big promotion, a big sale. … They put me at a table … selling specific items of clothing, I don't remember [what], and they told me [that] if I … had above a certain dollar value in sales, I would get commission, above the three dollars a day … salary. … Now, I had to … pay for car fare, lunch and dinner out of that three dollars. So, how much was left for savings for college? [laughter] It was hard work and I really hustled [throughout] the long day, from nine until nine, and I did well in sales. … At the end of the day, the department boss cheated me out of the additional … commission that I had earned. He took the credit for the sales. You had no appeal. And then, somehow, I got a call. Maybe they heard me speaking … about other things, people talked to me. … I forget how the connection was, but I found myself placed at a desk … in an office adjacent … to the office of the president of the department store. … This was the customer service department. We spoke to customers and handled complaints. … One day, I had one very difficult person, just tried to give me a really bad time, and I was as courteous and helpful as … I could be to him. Later, the main boss walked out of his office to me and … said, "That was me on the phone. I was just testing you. … You handled everything beautifully." … Well, let's see, Chicago, other jobs? … Well, again, … this liquor store, I would even deliver orders and I remember … it was busy before Christmas. … [I would have] to deliver a case of beer, liquor, or whatever to different apartments. … I remember this incident well. [He] looked like an Irish guy, a little bit drunk, I brought … the stuff that he'd ordered and … he paid me and launched an anti-Semitic tirade against me, [laughter] and here I am, just a kid, delivering his order.

LA: … Why would he assume you're Jewish?

SA: Well, he probably knew the people that I worked for. I don't know; who knows? … You run into this thing all the time, you know.

SI: In the late 1930s and early 1940s, in either the New York area or the Chicago area, were you aware of any German-American *Bund* activity or pro-Hitler sentiment?

SA: … Yes. My mother's brother … Richard Greenspan was in the American Army … during World War I, and was gassed. Then, he was … stationed in Germany, in the Army of Occupation. … He returned … home with a German bride. Actually … her family had settled in the Rhineland. … She told us later, her father immigrated there from Holland, so, they were really Dutch people … She was a nice enough woman, I suppose, but some of her relatives, brothers, family … belonged to the Nazi *Bund* … which had a big camp out on Long Island, and I think they had [one] in New Jersey, also. … So, my family kind of cooled off towards her. They weren't very pleased with that, but, well, I had nothing against her. There was a lot of anti-Semitic propaganda current in society, you know, a lot of that. … Big people in the government were [anti-Semitic], really, Joseph Kennedy and [other] politicians.

LA: Do you remember the Louis-Schmelling fight?

RA: There was an article about it in the paper last week.

LA: Joe Louis-Max Schmelling, the second fight?

RA: Yes.

SA: Well, I remember, yes, but I can't give you many details. Of course, the sympathy was all for Schmelling.

LA: For Schmelling? You're kidding.

SA: Yes, among these German people.

LA: Oh, among the Germans, yes.

SA: And many other whites, many whites, too.

LA: Really?

SA: Yes, yes.

LA: Even in New York?

SA: Those who maybe weren't well-disposed towards Germans, as well as other minorities, might have been for the other man, but, by and large, they favored … Schmelling, and, certainly, [if] you go out to Wisconsin, Chicago, [there were] a lot of Germans there and there was considerable *Bund* activity there. You know, we just [felt] sorry for those people, that they were so hostile and unenlightened … but, at the same time, concerned that they might cause trouble in this country.

SI: Did you ever see any rallies or marches?

SA: Probably, but I don't remember them. I certainly saw them in newsreels and in the papers and I don't know if I witnessed any. …

LA: You didn't have occasion to go up to Yorkville in those days? [Editor's Note: The German-American *Bund*'s headquarters was located in the Yorkville neighborhood in Manhattan.]

SA: No, I don't recall being there. No, I don't recall being there. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: You were going to tell us the story about your uncle.

SA: Yes. This uncle was a good man. He immigrated to America before my mother, his sister and family came here. … He would sometimes meet ships at the docks in New York. When … immigrants … came off the ship … who were not met by family or anybody, he would take them … in tow, rent an apartment for them, … pay the rent, … buy groceries and set them up. Now, going back a few years, he grew up in Mogilev, White Russia. He was a veteran of the Russo-Japanese War, in the "good service of the Tsar," ha-ha, and then, he immigrated to the United States, where he was a house painter and … decorator, and he painted murals and *trompe l'oeil*, you know, the beautiful landscapes and whatnot. He had his share of trouble with anti-Semites, some violent, and, at times, he responded in kind. When … a young man in Mogilev, White Russia, he returned home one late afternoon, entered the little house of his parents and found two Cossack soldiers beating his elderly mother. He grabbed them by the scruff of their necks, slammed their heads together and throttled each one of them in turn, this is what I've been told. Then, he dug a hole in the backyard and buried them, covered it up and … fled the country. Of course, the men never reported back to their barracks and there was no further evidence, so, the police never learned of this. … There was another incident with the same Uncle Harry. … One morning, on the holiday of Yom Kippur, holiest day of the Jewish calendar, he walked with his … six-year-old son to the synagogue for services. … A few doors before the synagogue, they passed two men who were lounging against the building and he related to me [that] they were local Polish people from the area and, as they walked by … a barrage of vituperative anti-Semitic curses were hurled at them. So, my uncle told his son to take shelter in a doorway nearby and he, again, grabbed these two men by their necks, slammed their heads together and bloodied them up, lifted each one off his feet, turned him upside down, and … this is what I've been told, dunked … each one's head … into a milk can that was standing on the sidewalk in front of the building, the two of them. He then shook his hands off, and … told his son, "Come, … son, let's go to services." They went in … washed their hands … and sat down to pray. [laughter] Now, did he do the right thing or the wrong thing? You have to decide for yourself.

[TAPE PAUSED]

… I graduated from Northwestern with a BS degree in June of 1941 and I set about looking for employment. … I learned of a job opening with the (Frasier-Davis?) Construction Company, out of St. Louis, and they had a twelve-million-dollar contract to build a several-mile long segment

of the Delaware Aqueduct, bringing water from … [the] Catskills to the New York City system. … It crossed under the Hudson River … ran through Putnam County and then Westchester County, and so on. … The stretch that they were going to do … required three geologists for … three, eight-hour shifts out of … Carmel, in Putnam County, … a small town there. They were digging the tunnel for the Aqueduct underground, as large as a subway tube … and then, bringing the … excavated rock in trucks to a crushing mill, where it was …crushed … to make aggregate. … This was then mixed with cement to make concrete to line the Aqueduct tunnel … for ten miles. They couldn't use all the stone. Some … was flaky or might have cleavage and would split, and the lining could crack off. So, they … needed geologists to stand at the crushing plant and make a quick inspection of the load in the large trucks … and assess the load. … If there was, in our judgment, too much unsuitable rock, we … rejected it and they would have to take it … away and dump it in the reservoir. … The suitable rock … was moved on to the crusher. … They worked twenty-four hours a day. So, I and two people that I knew, … young geologists from the New York area, worked at this. One had the day … shift, one … the swing shift, and I was the third to come on the job, so, I had the night shift, from midnight to eight AM. … We boarded in a private home. They turned the … living room … into a little dorm, with cots. … A number of people, engineers, construction [workers] lived there. … Working the night shift I had to sleep most of the day; it was not easy, with traffic and the light. … The job went on for a couple of months … until the contract was completed. They kept me on longer than the other two. … One went down to Washington, DC … to work for the US Geological Survey. Incidentally, our salary at this construction job was forty dollars a week, which was great in 1941. … The fellow in Washington, D.C. was established after a few weeks and … said, "Come on down. They're hiring people. You ought to be qualified. … You have a bachelor's degree, with a geology major, and the Survey would hire you. … If you come down in the morning, I'll take you to work and … you can be interviewed." … So, I finished there in New York; … took the night train … arriving in Washington early in the morning. … When I made my way to where he lived … I wasn't too happy to see so many guys crowded into one room. I don't think they had one drawer for each [man] … forget about closet space, and they were standing … in line … to use the bathroom, each holding his towel and soap and … toothbrush. That was Washington, DC! … Lots of people were coming in, because, while we were not yet in the war, we were already gearing up, helping the Allies and so on. … So, I went, was interviewed and they … offered me a starting position. … It was at the first … the lowest professional rank. … The salary would be … twenty-eight dollars a week. … I … thought, "Twenty-eight dollars a week, and I have … living expenses and I am several thousand dollars in debt from my undergraduate college." I had to borrow money to finish college because even my part-time jobs weren't sufficient. I … concluded that I could not afford to work there. I … had to clear my debts … first, and then, I could take the luxury of a job like this. So, all things considered … I decided this would not be the best move for me. I went back to Chicago … to look … for something that would permit me to earn … more. … I inquired at the Labor Department offices … where they … advised people … of the needs for all kinds of workers. … They were beginning to build ships and munitions and other … defense needs. … They told me, "We need shipbuilders desperately. The industry has just about been extinct since World War I. We haven't … been building any. People don't know how to [do it]. … We're just beginning… and [there is] a desperate shortage. … The government is now … starting programs to teach people shipbuilding and shipfitting and ship lofting" (how to make the patterns for the ships and do the steelwork)." … Also, the earnings were much better, [you could] work overtime, and so

on. … So, I decided … to take … a six-week course, which was given at … Lane [Technical] High School, way at the … western part of … Chicago. I … worked at a part-time job, morning into early afternoon, then … went to school … to take the course until ten at night; and … hoped for a job. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SA: I then found a job at Carson Pirie Scott, in their warehouse; this was a fine department store in Chicago. … I worked there mornings until almost mid-afternoon. … I would … have to take several trolley cars to get to the high school, and … after ten at night, have to take several cars to get home. … Since I had studied mapping and surveying in my geology courses, and also drafting, I had no problem with blueprints and that kind of thing. … It was a breeze and I enjoyed it very much. … The course was taught by a very good teacher. … When we were about to finish, we … started applying for employment. … I wrote to … three shipbuilding companies. One, in Pascagoula, Mississippi, Ingalls Shipyard, was building naval ships, or … maybe even … Liberty ships which were starting at that time. … Then, I wrote to Moore Dry Dock Company in Oakland, California. They were building Navy ships; and then, to a smaller shipbuilding … company in Wisconsin … which was building ships for the government, too. … They sent you forms … to be filled out with a lot of information about yourself. … I got replies from all three. … The Ingalls Shipyard said, "Yes, if you come down, we have a job for you." The one in California said the same thing, "If you come here, we'll hire you," and the one in Wisconsin simply wrote back, "We don't hire Jews." Now, this … was a country gearing up for war; [laughter] yes, afraid I'd pollute the place. So, I don't know, maybe the *Bund* was stronger there in Wisconsin, but these things didn't come as surprises. This was our culture, this was our civilization, for centuries and centuries. … I decided … California would be the … most comfortable place … and the more interesting of the two. … I bought my railroad ticket, no air flights then, and it was to be a three-day railroad trip. … I had lovely friends, … a married couple, … in Chicago, and they made me a little farewell dinner or luncheon on Sunday afternoon, and I was to leave Monday morning on the train. … So, at dinner, we turned on the radio and we heard about Pearl Harbor, while it was happening, right there. … I had my ticket and the next day I … was to be on that train. … I … packed all I could take in one, big suitcase and my dad walked me to the El train station and [we said], "Bye-bye." … I remember, as we … travelled farther west, they began to draw … the window shades at night on the train. … They didn't want any lights [shining out], I guess. … They were afraid … the Japanese might do the same thing to the West Coast that they did in Pearl Harbor. … [I] got … to Oakland three days later and went to the Moore Dry Dock Company. … I was hired. I worked then, mostly, on a [submarine tender]. They were building two big submarine tenders. … They are very large ships. … In Asia or the Mediterranean, or wherever the submarines … operate … they don't have to go back to the United States for routine maintenance and R&R for the crew. If you're out in New Guinea, who knows? they pull up to the tender and the men come aboard. They had … a hospital aboard, a library, recreational facilities, a repair shop, machine shop; and they had … two huge … cranes, with the arms that swung out over the water, mounted on a large kingpin post. … The arms could swing out and … raise a submarine half out of the water … to do repairs on it, on the anchors, the propellers, or whatever, and they carried spare propellers for subs. So, that's what I was working on. … The yard also built submarine rescue vessels … equipped with diving bells, although this ship also had that. …

----------END OF TAPE THREE, SIDE ONE----------

SA: … Mine was a special crew. … I was what they called … it's "leader man." … [I was] in charge of ten, twenty, … as many as thirty men, and … was their foreman. … I directed them in a variety of jobs … in … different areas of the ship … doing shipfitting. … My crew … was assigned the most difficult jobs, that they felt couldn't be done by the other crews. … I would distribute my workers all over the ship on the different jobs, from stem to stern, from keel to … bridge, and I would explain how it's to be done to them and so on. … I'd make my rounds during the day, walking, climbing ladders up and down, … miles and miles on steel every day, then checking up on them, and so on, … and they usually knew where they could get me if they ran into … problems that they couldn't solve. … After doing that … after, say, a year or so, we were pretty far along; the ship was being readied for outfitting and … would soon be joining the fleet. … You know, really, you get to love a ship. I knew every nook and cranny, everything on it. So, I thought, … "I'd like to serve on that ship, [laughter] and I'd know more than anybody aboard, everything about it," and I was, in the back of my head, beginning to think, "Maybe I ought to join the Navy and ask to serve on this ship." Well, meanwhile, all kinds of difficult jobs came up. Some were really [difficult and] I took great pride in [completing them]. … I don't know if you know what bilge keels are on a ship. Around where the sides come down and turn into the bottom, that's the bilge, the curvature. They have, coming out on an angle like this, into the water, like, girders, maybe this high, like an I-beam. Do you know what an I-beam is? … It has two flanges. They can cut off one of the flange and the other flange, … in those days, … was riveted … to the ship. So, you had to space the rivets, in a pattern through the steel, zigzag etc. There are various riveting patterns and various welding patterns and you had to know all of these and had to know how to … read them on blueprints. … The bilge keel had to conform to the curvature of the bilge … wherever it was set-up. So, this is just one small example of the kind of jobs they … gave me. To do it, I had to … know the ship from the inside, because first you have to drill holes through, and then, this I-beam, which is twenty feet long or more, thirty maybe in sections, has to be put up against the ship. … Then the rivets put through holes that go through the flange of the beam, through the skin of the ship, and riveted inside and outside, hot rivets, you know. … You have to lay out the pattern on the ship's side, the whole length, whatever the pattern might be. … The drillers then come along and drill the hole, pre-drill it, for the riveters … who put the hot rivets in … and then, with … riveting-guns … mold the hot steel rivets to fit tightly. … Inside the ship … are bulkheads, frames, brackets and all kinds of things. … At the bottom, actually it's box-like steel, like egg crates. They store … fuel and water there and you don't want it to slosh about … thus these four-foot cubes with perforated and open-access holes. It's just a maze of complex steel. … If you drill a rivet hole and … it hits the frame of the ship, what … use is that? … So, I had to know every structure intimately … exactly where it is, … outline it, and then, center-punch where they're to drill. … If there was a mistake, there … could be hell to pay; they couldn't just use any old layout person for that. … That was just one small part. On the top deck, they had … exposed deck … made of armor-plated steel, so that bombs would not go through into the interior of the ship. … This was specially-treated armor-plated steel. … Another leader-man laid out a hatch opening to be cut in the steel. The opening was maybe eight feet long … and four feet wide, and they had to cut a hole into the deck, top deck, so that … they … could put a gangway, a stairway, down to the deck below. … There was going to be a hatch to cover it, but they had to cut a hole through the deck into the

room below. So, he laid it out. They burned the hole through the steel deck, lifted up … the plate of steel and … found they had laid out the hole right over a bulkhead, going across the room, right under the middle of the hatch, in the wrong place. To replace the steel, they had to … go to Pittsburg. It had to be made up in a special batch of steel. They waited several months … for it to be shipped by rail to California. … I mean, that piece of damage cost, at that time, maybe fifty thousand dollars, and all the time lost! So, you know, one slip was terrible. The king posts that go in … are tapered down and up from their … widest diameter and they go down through several decks, and … up in the air, and the crane arm swings around … the post. I had to lay out the holes in the decks for … the king post to go down through … several decks below. The problem was, at each deck, that circumference is smaller, the diameter is smaller. … The ship was not in dry dock, was not horizontal; it was on the ways, on an incline. So, if you used a plumb bob … to plumb a vertical line from the center of a hole above, it's not going to hit the center of the hole below, which has to be offset, depending on the height. … If you do it wrong, you're going to make holes in decks where they shouldn't be … out of alignment. … When the king post comes down through the decks … in the spaces below … it has to be welded to bulkheads on each side, as well as … around the decks. So, on the vertical bulkhead … the cuts must taper to accommodate the tapered cylinder. You know that is a lot of layout work, several decks, and it's all got to be done well … to an eighth-of-an-inch. Then, they drop … the king post down, and … weld it all around. You can't have a big gap and so on, and these were the kind of jobs I'd have. … Often, I didn't sleep at night, thinking, "How am I going to do this?" and [it was worse for] the even more difficult … jobs, as when I had to … lay out … the holes to be burned out in the fo'c's'le section, where they wanted to cut the holes for the hawse pipes. You know where the hawse pipes are? This is where the anchor chain drops … from the locker in the fo'c's'le, down into the water, and … each link in the chain [weighed] about eighty pounds, yes. Each link was about a foot long or more, heavy steel, about two-inches … in diameter. When that chain starts running, hundreds of feet of it, with an anchor of several tons, … a great deal of friction is created. … The hawse pipe is a very heavy, cast-iron casting. … It's irregular in shape, … resembling an ear, but it's also three-dimensional, because the ship's form flares … backwards, forwards and top to bottom. … You've got to … center punch, hammer all the points for them to follow along the lines they burn the hole through. … There are all kinds of structural elements in back … of the skin of the ship, so … when it comes out and the cranes put this multi-ton, cast-iron, hawse pipe casting in there, it's got to fit snugly. Then, they weld all around. … Such jobs give you sleepless nights. … I did that a … number of [times] … on jobs of all kinds, deck supports, gun supports. … When they needed layout patterns made … I was called on, and supervised the guys. We had a generally, nice crew of men … but one experience … came as a disillusionment to me. It involved one member of the crew who was a Mormon. … He had four kids back in Salt Lake City and he came to [the] San Francisco-Oakland area to work in defense work and he was a good worker. … Now, I knew … about Mormon history and … [the] story of Nauvoo, Illinois, and what they went through in their search for the "Promised Land," until they found Great Salt Lake. … I knew of the terrible things that were done to them in Nauvoo. So, I had very … good feelings towards this guy. … Then, they hired a young black … for my crew. Clarence was about nineteen, a really fine … kid, came up from Los Angeles to work. … He was new and I wanted … to get him started with others, so [that] he'd learn from them and [help] those who needed an assistant. … He was … so eager to please them, to do his job. … One morning, I had the crew lined up … as I was giving … them their assignments. … I said to the Mormon fellow, I won't mention his name now, "I want you to work with Clarence today. He

will be your assistant and you show him what you want done." He … reared back and said, "I will not work with a nigger." Can you imagine that? I was … shocked, shocked. Okay, so, he worked with somebody else. … A few days later, this black … fellow was sent down between the ways, where they had … grinders and grindstones and various things for the men to sharpen their tools. … I sent him down to sharpen some chisels. … There was a waiting line to get to the grindstones. So, he took his place in line and some redneck, … a lot of them at that time were migrating from the "Dust Bowl" area to California, … evidently picked on … Clarence and … as I heard the story a little later, punched him to the ground, straddled him and began pounding his head into the asphalt; for what reason? You see? Well, I was so furious with that, I went to the office of the superintendent of the yard and demanded that something be done about this, and so forth. I don't remember what the follow-up was, but it was a more rough time. … I remember, this just came to mind now, it's neither here nor there, but it shows how careless and thoughtless some people were, [and] still can be today; … there was … scaffolding along the sides of the ship, along the ways. It was several stories high. … The welders wore … leather … suites and … a helmet [with] dark glass [that] they … looked through, and they carried their welding torches. … There was a woman welder on the ship, and women began to be employed now. You saw them more and more in defense industries. ... It was a good thing. … So, she was welding, and then … turned away. She had finished … and turned away to face the rail, … when one of these … redneck characters … not knowing it was a woman, came up behind her and goosed her. … She flew off the scaffolding and was killed. So … these things happened, human stupidity. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: This concludes this first session of our interview with Dr. Sam L. Agron on October 14, 2005, in Montville, New Jersey. Thank you very much. Thank you for your time and hospitality.

SA: You're welcome.

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

Reviewed by Stephanie Ruffo 12/10/05
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 6/21/06
Reviewed by Sam L. Agron 8/6/07 and 2012