RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT FISHKIN

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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Kurt Piehler: This begins an interview with Mr. Robert Fishkin on November 8, 1995 at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey with Kurt Piehler and

Tara Kraenzlin: And Tara Kraenzlin.

KP: I would like to begin by asking you about your parents.

Robert Fishkin: Okay.

KP: I guess first your parents came over from Russia.

RF: My father did. My mother was born here.

KP: What drove your father or brought your father to the United States?

RF: Okay, my father was the youngest of about eleven children by a second, the first wife and mother got worn out after eight or nine, something like that. And he was the youngest. His older brother, who was probably eight, ten years older than him, I've never gotten the dates positively, was getting old enough to be ... drafted into the Russian Army. This was around 1900-ish, a little after 1900. So somehow or another, nobody really knows, my father and his older brother were put on a boat, and they were sent to the United States by themselves--the two of them. And they had relatives here I suppose or something. And ... that's the way he got here. ... His parents, in other words, his father and his natural mother, because there was a previous, first wife, first mother, because he had a bunch of half-brothers. He had nieces and nephews that were much older than he. As a youth, this boggled my mind--you know, you can't do that! Nieces and nephews are younger, not older. But, of course, it was possible, because the length ... of the two marriages put together were quite long. So there were children who were old and children that were very young. And he was the youngest. But at any rate, somehow or another they ended up in New York, and my father had very little formal education. My memory is that he was seven when he got here, and I really don't know if he went to school or not. But he could read very well, and he was excellent at mathematics. And he was a pretty smart man. And he and his older brother worked at some jobs in New York here and there. And I think they had like a newspaper stand and then, my uncle, I'll call, his older brother, of course, is my uncle, and it falls more naturally because that was the only sort of uncle I had. He worked in a store that sold lamps, and his job was to dust the lamps. And then, sometime around 1912, or possibly a few months before, they came to Perth Amboy, and they bought this going business. It was a store, right in the down[town], in the heart what was the three or four blocks of what was downtown that Perth Amboy had. And it was a kind of a newspaper and tobacco store, and it had some notions and novelties and different odds and ends. The official starting date is 1912 and that's documented and ... I don't know, they didn't incorporate, but the ... name Fishkin Brothers was registered at that time. And that was the Fishkin Brothers, that was incorporated in 1939.

My uncle and my very young father, who I would assume in 1912, he was probably fifteen, sixteen or something like that, you know, somewhere around that age. Because shortly after they bought this from a family named Leiber and you should kind of park that name aside for many,

many years later. It will come back into the story. And they, you know, they grew and they prospered, and they got involved in selling photographic stuff somehow or another. There were many photographic studios in Perth Amboy in those days, because it was a really immigrant population. I mean, Perth Amboy was the super melting pot, if there ever was one, in those days. And everybody wanted pictures to send back to their families that were in Europe. And there were no polaroids then and no insta-matics, and since I sell cameras, I appreciate all this. So the studio business was a big deal. I mean, you wanted a picture of anything, you went to the studio and had it taken. People just weren't running around with their cameras taking pictures in those days. So one of the men, who owned five studios, Shulman, and also, mark that off to the side, talked my father and my uncle into being Kodak dealers so he could buy from them, 'cause he was buying from somebody out of town, and it was costing him too much money. And that's about all I know. And from there on in, we became gradually, over the years, [became] a very big photography store. We were also a big sporting goods store ... from those days till the beginning of ... World War II.

My father was drafted into the army, World War I, and he was in for a comparatively short time, and then the war was over. And he got out. And it wasn't something he talked about very much because I think he got sick, and you know, he just wasn't very happy about his military service. It was nothing to talk about, so he didn't talk about it, unlike me who loves to tell my little war stories, which aren't war. ... And both families, my uncle married ... a woman who had come from Europe, I 'm not sure where ... as a very young woman. She was a manicurist or beautician, something along that lines. She was Jewish. It was a Jewish family, and very Orthodox. My father somehow met this young lady from Brooklyn. And how they did that in those days, you know, with poor transportation and all, I don't know. But she was proudly a Normal School graduate. Normal School was a three-year college for education. So if you want[ed] to be a teacher, you went to Normal School. She went to Brooklyn Normal School or something. And she taught for a couple weeks or something. And then, they got married, my father and my mother. Both brothers built two-family houses that were pretty much similar in layout, like they had seven rooms on each floor. And they were both sort of in the middle of a block, and they were both on the west side of the street, but they were on parallel streets that were three blocks apart, ... which I found, much later on, to be very amusing. ... My mother was, of course, more educated and was grander than my aunt, because my aunt was an immigrant like most everybody, but my mother was [educated]. And this was very important to me, I was always very proud of the fact that my mother was born and educated in the United States, versus the majority of my friends whose parents both came from Europe.

KP: Your mother was very well-educated for her time.

RF: Yeah. And they were a poor family. They had a notions, they sold thread, but they had a fair-sized store, my grandparents, I remember them fairly distinctly, a store in Brooklyn, and they sold sewing supplies, you know, thread and notions and ribbon and everything you needed to sew, because, of course, people made their own clothes a great deal. I'm looking at you, because I think, being you're younger, it must be very amazing that people did all of these things themselves.

TK: It's interesting, though, especially to learn about, I don't know, I think it's kind of neat in a time where you bought things to make things, instead of always buying things that were already made.

RF: Yeah, yeah. That's ... where the term "off-the-rack" came from. ... This was, you know, kind of a new thing that there were dresses and clothing that existed and was on a rack. You came and looked at it, okay, you put it on, you know, like you do today. You either made it yourself or you would buy fabric and go to your handy-dandy dressmaker if you didn't know how to sew, and they would make you a dress. So the off-the-rack thing, that was part of women's liberation already, because women were working. They didn't have time to fool around with all of this. They wanted off-the-rack. A little side story. ... And then, both families produced children, my uncle and aunt being older than my father and my mother, of course, had older children, who were my cousins. ... They had four children altogether and the youngest of which is a Rutgers graduate, Class of '48, as a matter of fact, and he was one year older than I was. So we were, not only were we cousins, but in like early high school years, we were fast friends, and we would ride our bicycles together, and we went to Hebrew school together. He was very good. He had a marvelous singing voice, and he was in the choir in the synagogue. I wasn't very good. But the funny thing, in remembrance of this--I went to Hebrew school for three years after school, and he went longer and he stayed longer. But we used to ride our bicycles, and we used to talk Hebrew to each other in this polyglot town, you know. ... When we did it at the time, we didn't think it was anything special, but when I think about it now, you know, we see all these Spanish kids running around talking Spanish to each other, and there we were. We weren't talking Jewish, which was really the language of the American Jew as far as communicating. Hebrew was a scholarly thing, it was like Latin is, you know. The only thing it was good for was to pray with, you know, read the prayer books, but nobody talked it. But we actually knew basic conversational Hebrew, and we used to get a kick out of doing that.

KP: How much Yiddish was, in a sense, talked in the neighborhood?

RF: Oh lots, I mean that's what most parents talked when they didn't want the kids to know what they were talking about. See, we modern Americans are at a big disadvantage. We can't even use a computer to confound our children, because they know more than we do. ... Like my mother didn't really talk Yiddish, ... because she wanted to be the Americanized woman. My father did, of course. ... She could understand it, because her parents had talked Yiddish at home. I mean it was a natural language for many Jews. ... They would learn English quickly. If you've ever read the book The Education of Hyam Kaplan, it's a great book on how a Jewish man went to ... night school and learn to talk English. But at any rate. . .

KP: How observant was your family?

RF: All right. That's very interesting. The uncle and aunt's family, they were very observant. They were Orthodox, and they went to the Orthodox synagogue. Perth Amboy, small as it was, had five synagogues because the usual story is if there are three Jews, there's two synagogues. (laughs) ... So they were very observant, and my aunt was active in the Sisterhood of ... the Shul as we called it. That was the Orthodox. And it was a Russian-looking building with the two

copper dome tops and stuff. It was a pretty nifty building. And it was old inside, and everybody was old. I mean, that's my feelings. And we, in turn, belonged to a conservative temple, which was a newer building and ... was built in modern design. It was built in ... 1908 or something, but it was big and cavernous, and it was all stone. And, you know, it commanded a lot of authority because of its appearance. The synagogue was wood inside, and it had little wood columns, and it was really, I mean the Shul, so it was a great contrast in the physical aspects of the two places, and being in them was much different. The women sat upstairs in the Orthodox one. And the Conservative was considered sacrilegious, because the men and women sat together, and we had an organ that played music during the service. And the ark, which is where the Torah's Holy Scrolls are kept, had electric doors. You pushed a button, and it would zoop zoop. And this was really against the religion, because on the Sabbath, which ... was the most important day of all, except for possibly Yom Kippur, you're not supposed to do things like close an electrical circuit and have something happen. You're not supposed to play the organ. You're really not supposed to do anything. You know, you couldn't cook. You would cook, the women would cook before Friday evening and would just like keep a little fire going so they could heat it up. ... But at any rate, my mother followed the rules of kashruth, of keeping Kosher and all that. And my father was essentially Orthodox, but he had this modern young woman here, so he had to give in a little and belong to the Conservative temple. Now today, I belong to a Reformed temple, and I look at my Conservative temple, and it wasn't so Conservative, you know. It was very close to being Orthodox.

KP: No, 'cause it sounds like, I know a lot of Conservative synagogues don't have organs.

RF: Well, the Conservative thing is really not as well-defined.

KP: No, I know, because my wife and I have discussions on Conservative versus Reform.

RF: Yeah, well, see now our Reformed is more toward Conservatism because we wear (talith?) and yarmelkes mostly. Some people don't, 'cause you don't really have to. But we do. And we use a lot of Hebrew in the service. ... You know, being Jewish is a very important part of growing up ... and existing in this country, in my generation, at any rate. I mean, you always knew you were Jewish. ... At times, you may have felt it was a stigma, sort of, because people looked down at you in one respect. And they looked up at you in the other respect, because you had a going business. The kids I played with thought this was great. You know, we had a store full of footballs and baseballs and everything else. But they had better gloves and bats and balls than I did, because my father didn't think this was that important. (laughs) ... And, you know, it was hard times, you know, we grew up in the '30s and in the Depression. And there wasn't a lot of money to fool around with. I used to get my present, which was never clear whether it was a Christmas or a Hanukkah present, we only got one present, and that was after Christmas, always, because that was left. We sold toys, too, and Lionel trains.

KP: So you would never get them coinciding with Hanukkah.

RF: No, no. We got it after Christmas, what was left. And once in a while, I remember being particularly impressed that there was something I got that my father had got at the toy show in

New York. You know, there's always the toy show, like in February. In those days, I don't know when it was. But he saw this thing, I don't remember what it was anymore, but I knew it wasn't left over, because we didn't have this in the store. And that was, he made a lot of points. But ... so we both families, we grew up sort of simultaneously. And we used to spend time with each other on the holidays. You know, one would have the Seder for both families and particularly later on we were involved with each other. Of course, the business was ... a tremendous involvement, because these two brothers ran the store, and one was always there, and they were open long hours. They would open six o'clock in the morning to sell the factory workers snuff and cigars or cigarettes, whatever. Snuff was a big thing, because a lot of the men worked in plants where you couldn't smoke, so you used snuff instead. ... All the Fishkins did exceptionally well in school. ... Between us, there were seven of us, altogether. And it used to go, the teachers would have us like in a five-year run, because there was one in every year for five years. Two were older. ... And everybody was in the top of the class. ... My sister was the salutatorian. My cousin was a valedictorian, etc., etc. ... And we were known in the community, because we had a store with a sign out front and it had our name on it. See, this made you somebody. And then, of course, there's really not too much sense going through all of the little things that happened, but this gives you the kind of background that I came from. And Perth Amboy was approximately 42,000 or 43,000 people. And about ten per cent were Jewish. There were about 5000 Jews in the town. And there were a tremendous number of Polish people and lots of Italians. And the old-timers, the people who were there before the migration from Europe in the 1800's were mostly Norwegians or Scotch. They were sea-faring people, because it's a port city, and they were boat-builders and ...

KP: It was a very cosmopolitan city for its size of the city.

RF: Yeah, yeah.

KP: That's come through, I mean it was still an active port in the 1930's

RF: We still are. We still have ships come in, not as many. We mostly get oil tankers and stuff like that. There's still boats bringing in scrap metal for ... our steel mill, which used to be a copper mill. It used to be copper came from South America in ... these big ships and unloaded at the copper works. That was the biggest thing in town, the copper works. And it's typical Perth Amboy--everything had a nickname. The copperworks, which was really the Raritan Copperworks, was called (Guggies?), because (Guggenheimer?) owned it or maybe that was AS&R. It doesn't matter. But you know, everything got one of these localized names. You know, "I work in Guggies" or "I work ... on the railroad" or whatever. ... It was always interesting to me what the other kids in school, what their parents did. And I remember there was one girl, and this was like in the fifth grade, and she was really pretty. I thought she was the best. ... In fact, I remember her name to this day, Patricia something or another. And she disappeared, I mean, they moved away, so it isn't someone I've known over the years. There are other kids ... I know to this day, because we just all hung around in the same area. I never knew what happened to Patricia, but her mother was the jewel-keeper in the cable works. In other words, they used diamonds to cut the cables were drawn through dyes and they were made out of diamonds. And other tools like that, high-quality abrasive tools. And that was her job. She kept

this room where they kept all this stuff in. And I thought, "Wow, that's ... much better than running a sporting goods store!" It had to be very special, mainly because she was cute. (laughs) ... So we all, you know, ... grew up and we graduated Perth Amboy High School. And most of us went to Rutgers or NJC. My sister went to NJC, which is now Douglass. And my brother and two of my cousins and I, we all went to Rutgers. The other two, the older two cousins, one went to University of Pennsylvania. ... See, in those, days, women were really not too important, so my older cousin went to secretarial school or something like that, you know. She didn't go to college. And it was a question of money, too, because ... it used cost a couple hundred dollars a year for tuition. I just heard yesterday that to go to some college or another it now is $100,000, a nice, round, easy 100,000 bucks for four years. ... And then, the boys in the family, except for the older cousin, who was married already by then or something, yeah, I guess he was. But all of us, you know, went to college. We went to Rutgers. And then we promptly went into service at sometime thereafter. ... My older cousin and I were in the Navy and my other cousin was in the Army. ... But we went to high school during the wartime period. ... We started 1940-41.

War was declared, of course, on December 7th, which we, as Fishkins, remember this day very strongly, because our store, you know, this thing that made us all have money and live and whatever, and we all we lived comfortably. I mean, even in the worst Depression times when there wasn't much money, we never really worried about where we were going to get food for the next day and, you know, what we were going to have for fuel and so forth. And there were other families that did, ... you know. We weren't in debt particularly. Other than some mortgages that you never paid. You didn't. You paid the interest; you didn't pay principal. They didn't expect to get paid. And we had some property that we'd accumulated in the town. So we really didn't live terrible for Depression days. We had one car between the two families, because you didn't need two. One guy worked every Sunday, so the other one had the car. Whoever was off had the car.

KP: Were you open on the Sabbath?

RF: Yeah, yeah.

KP: Was that a source of tension, because your one uncle was very observant?

RF: ... Yeah, but still, you had to make a living. ... Even the Orthodox Jews, unless they're real almost zealots are very practical. I mean, the Jewish religion is kind of practical. Somewhere, if you look hard enough in the Talmud and the rest of the things, you'll find a reason that you can do it. It's a fun sort of, but that always, ... you know was hard for me to understand when I was very young, ... like eleven, twelve, thirteen, ... I go to Hebrew school, and I learn the Sabbath is so holy, and my father works on the Sabbath. And he even worked Friday night, which made it even worse.

KP: So you were open seven days a week.

RF: Yeah. On Sunday, we were only open part of the day. It varied from time to time. And Saturday, I don't think we were open at night on Saturday. We were only open one night--Friday night was the late night.

KP: So you did not have many late nights? I have interviewed some people, I think especially in delis, they were literally open around the clock.

RF: Oh yeah, sure, people worked constantly. It wasn't unusual, and you didn't feel sorry. You say, "Wow! He's lucky, he can work all the time, you know, he must be making money." ... So we went into the service in various ways. ... Okay in my senior year. Oh, the fire! That's right, I forgot about the fire thing. This was a big part of our lives. The Wednesday before Thanksgiving, ... I was in high school then, and this was right around the corner from where my father's store was. And we're coming out of school, and some kid says, "Hey Fishkin, your old man's store is on fire!" I mean, this was a common talk. That's the way people talked to each other. And sure enough, there's smoke coming out, I mean really smoke. It was the restaurant next door. They had caught fire ...badly, and it burnt our roof, pretty much. And things were beginning to get hard to get, so the tendency was you got as much merchandise as you could before. ... And the thing I remember most was sneakers. We sold a lot of rubber sneakers, and rubber was one of the first things to disappear, even before the war started, because we were supplying England with a lot of goods. ... People don't remember how much we helped England get started. The English don't either, I think sometimes. ... So we have lots of sneakers, and also, it's right before Christmas. And you used to get your goods in early for Christmas. And we had ice skates stacked up to the ceiling. And all of the stuff that was near the ceiling suffered a lot, I mean it got some of it got burnt a little, but most everything got wet and smoky. So this was a real disaster. And we weren't properly insured, because nobody really knew to do this. We had insurance. We weren't that smart, but they didn't understand or they couldn't afford to do it properly. And what happens when you don't have enough insurance, you become a partner with the insurance company. In other words, if you had, I think we had $40,000 worth of insurance. And the loss was greater than $40,000. But they don't give you the $40,000. They say, well if your total stuff was worth say $80,000, ... we're partners. We're insuring half of it, and you're insuring half of it. And, I mean, that's the way it works, really. So they determined what per cent of damage there was. And say if there was twenty percent damage or 30 or whatever it was, they would pay you twenty percent of your $40,000 policy. So even though you had $40,000 worth of insurance, you couldn't get the $40,000 unless it was a total loss, see. Then you got every penny, and then they theoretically, they didn't care how much you lost, because you were partners. And that's one of the basis of insurance, ... things like that. They do it the reasonable, their rule is they will do what a reasonable person will do. ... I've had some fun experiences with that.

KP: You've had further dealings with insurance, I take it.

RF: Also from a fire. It's a quickie story: We're getting married, and we got a lot of presents in advance, and my wife had bought ... extra clothing, ... so-called trousseau, and she lived with her mother in a small apartment over a store in downtown. And then we went ... off on our honeymoon to Mexico. We were very fancy. You know, I was considered to be quite wealthy at that time. I wasn't, but everybody thought I was, which is almost as good as being wealthy.

(laughter) So while we're away, there's a fire in the store down below. So my cousins, my older cousin particularly kinda, well, I hadn't mentioned that. My father ... died when I was a senior in high school. And, you know, I sort of ... took over being the man of the house for what time I was around. And my mother died about a year and a half later while I was in the Navy. So, you know, after that, we were ... three young people. We weren't really children anymore, but we were sort of, you know, people looked at us like orphans. And we stayed together, and we ran everything by ourselves. But we were old enough to do that, but people don't think you're old enough to do anything when you're in the child category. And all the people we knew were friends of our parents, so as far as they were concerned, we were children. And even though they had children the same age, they were children. You know, like my 38-year old daughter is still a child and my 33 year-old son is still a child. It doesn't change. ... My son works with me, and he's the third generation in our business. But I call him the kid ... when I talk to a salesperson, I say "Yeah, the kid wants to do this or wants to do that." He's only 33.

So the fire was really disastrous, but it was a blessing in disguise. We were really a small shop, we weren't a real store store. And we were known from around a bit. But we didn't have big, glorious magnetism of any sort, because ... we didn't advertise. My father, you know, didn't know how to make up ads. He would have learned, but he didn't think it was important, I guess, at that time. But then we had this fire. So very quickly, we got a much larger store, happened to belong to Melvin Silverman's parents. You see, these names keep coming back in. And we rented it temporarily. ... We moved by truck all the goods from this burnt-out store and we had a carpenter make quick tables, you know, just wood running on saw horses all over the place. And we took everything and stretched it all out. And we worked, I mean even as kids, we were there and we got some of our classmates to help us. And we were working on Sunday, December the 7th, and we were ready to open for our big fire sale. And we even had, my aunt came down, my mother didn't come down, well, my father was home sick all those years. He was captured in the house for four years before he died, because he had a heart condition. And they didn't know what to do in those days, so you just stayed home. We were on a second floor, also, so he couldn't walk up and down the steps. They never understood that exercise would have been good, you know. They just didn't have the knowledge that we have today. So he just kind of wasted away and died, which wasn't as terrible to me as it might sound, because I had a chance to get to know my father, because he was home all the time, we used to go and we'd sit and talk, you know. He would be in bed or in the wheelchair and we'd kibitz around and talk. You know, most people didn't spend that much time with their parents, because they were busy working.

KP: But you really got to know him.

RF: Yeah, and I'm surprised I don't even know more.

KP: Was your father pleased with his life?

RF: He wasn't pleased being sick, but otherwise, yeah, listen, he was successful. He had a store. And he had a half a car, and he had his own home, which was a two-family house, so it didn't really cost anything. And it was a nice house, big. ... And we had a baby grand piano. We had nice furniture. ... We always had a maid, maid lived in. I mean, we had a room and the maid

lived in the room and she was there. And my mother ... was active in our YMHA. She became president of the Ladies Division. You know, and she was a mini grande dame of the town. Everyone knew her and liked her. You find these things out when your parents die young, particularly. Everyone tells you how great they were.

KP: So your father and mother were quite respected in the community?

RF: Yeah. They were, particularly my father. To this day, some old-timers will come in and say, "I remember your father!" And half of the times I know they're wrong, because I look at them, and I know they're not old enough. They're mixed up. They're thinking of my uncle, who was around for ... many years thereafter. And it took me a lot of maturing to not jump down their throats and say, "You don't remember my father. He died before you were born." ... (laughs) I used to get very annoyed with that. That was my own problem. I also would get annoyed with people who said my father died so young, because when he died, I was seventeen, and he was my father, so he was an older man. So they said, "People die young." You know, so I felt that they weren't really being truthful. See because, I was big for truth in those days. ... I mean, it had nothing to do with the times, but I mean, I personally was on this search for truth. Everything had to be real. Everything had to be true. I didn't want any deludedness. And these people were saying how young he was. Well, he was under 50, and even then, I guess that was considered young. The life expectancy for a male in those days was probably something like 59 or 60. ... And now, you know, it's up to much higher numbers.

KP: One thing: You are saying you got to know your father but you put on your survey you were not sure of his political affiliation or was that more complicated?

RF: Well, I know his attitude was as a retailer, he didn't want to take sides. See, because, it was very important you didn't offend the customer. And everybody was a customer and he knew a lot of Republicans, and he knew a lot of Democrats. And he knew people in city government. In fact, he knew one guy so well that, and things were, ... they weren't horrible, but they were still difficult, I mean money wise, it was difficult. So he was talking to him, it was his friend. And the guy was a city commissioner, and he was complaining about his taxes on our home. So his friend, the commissioner, went into the tax place, opened up the book to the page where they have the assessments, and he changed the number. You know, very simple. (laughs) And so he changed what the assessment on our house was, and so our taxes went down. And of course, every year, he got a box of cigars. 'Cause I remember as a kid, ... they would give me a box of cigars, "Oh, you got to go over to Mr. So-and-so." Okay. He got a box of cigars. ... See, it was always hard for me to understand that my father had actual friendships with anyone, but his small group of Jewish social friends, you know, where we knew both parents, they were a little gang. As the guys in my store talk about my own social friends now. Some of the younger fellows call me a rat pack. See, ... they had rat packs in those days, too. But this commissioner, who was a fairly important man, in fact, they named the stadium after him, he was also the kind of like purchasing person. And we used to do business with the city. And he had a farm out in White House, a little hunting farm he'd call it. And we got a dog. An uncle that came in to live with us in order to work as a teacher in the junior college, what's now Middlesex Junior College started in Perth Amboy High School. And since the neighbor down the block was, ... superintendent of

schools. So my father said, "Look, I have ... my brother-in-law is graduating, and he needs a job, he is a teacher." You know, he went to Columbia. He was very well-educated, he went to CCNY and Columbia. So, of course, he got a job, but he had to live in Perth Amboy, so he moved in with us. We built a room for him, actually, eventually. At first, he was just ... sleeping on a sofa thing that opened up. But it got to be a pain, so they figured out how to, we had like an alcove off ... the living room, so we had somebody come in, put plasterboard across it and we found a mural like wallpaper mural, put it over it so it looked nice. And they made a little sleeping room for him. ... He was a young fellow, ... and he would go ... horseback riding in Roosevelt Park. ... There's still stables out there, I think. And so he brought home this puppy. And the puppy turned out to be a Gordon Setter, which is a big dog. And in the summer, we went down to the seashore for the summer. The two families together took one house in Long Branch, the same house year after year.

KP: And how long did you stay at the shore?

RF: Just for the summer. We would move down there. Both families and their maids.

KP: And who would run the store?

RF: Oh, the parents, the men stayed home.

KP: The men stayed home.

RF: They'd come down on weekends. Like ... whoever had the car, whoever's weekend it was to have the car would come down and stay, maybe took a few days off or something like that. But anyway, my father got stuck with the dog, to take care of him in the summer, and he wisely realizes this dog was much [too] big to be in ... a confined area that we were. We didn't have a lot ... of property. We had no property. The house was there and then the next house was there. There was four or five feet between houses. And the backyard was not much. So he gave the dog to his friend, you know, the guy who got the box of cigars all the time. ... In the short time we had the dog, ... and I don't think we had him more than six or seven months, but it grew almost full size. We had spoiled it so badly that--this would have been a good hunting dog--and they knew, they had several hunting dogs, and they knew how to train them, and they said, "We could never train this dog." He would go get the duck, you know the bird. He was a retriever, and he would play with it. You know, you're not supposed to do that. You're supposed to bring it back. (laughter) ... Finally, they kept him as a house dog. Kept track of this dog for years.

... You know, that's how, when you're in a small town, which was really a little city, Perth Amboy was not a town. But you knew people here and there, and you got things done that way. Also, my father used to amaze me, because he knew how to do little things like replace the plug on a lamp and stuff like that. So I asked him, I said, "How do you know how to do that?" He said, "Well, when I find something I don't know, I wait until a tradesman comes into the store, and when an electrician comes in, and I ask him what to do, and he shows me how." And I do the same thing to this day. I used to get a lot of my medical treatment free, 'cause all the doctors used to come into our store. A lot of them were involved in photography. ... I remember once I was in an

accident, and I got hit in the chest, and it hurt, so this guy who ... came in and he's a thoracic surgeon, no less. He was a really high class guy. And I told him. And he says, "Come on in the back." He says, ... "Open your shirt." ... He says, "You got a broken rib." He says, "Nothing to do for it. Just, it'll get better." (laughter) ... Another doctor who was a ... customer of ours, this was a real long time ago, when flu shots became popular. All of a sudden, ... he walks into the store, and he's got this thing full of needles, you know, hypodermics. And he says, "Who wants flu shots? Line up." And pow, pow, pow, he had them all pre-filled, and anybody who wanted a flu shot got a flu shot. ... I have ... an orthopedist who's been a customer of ours for a long, long time, and once, my neck hurt, so I told him, and he says, "Yeah, we can take X-rays, and get you a brace, and all, but take a Turkish towel, fold it flat, wrap it around, pin it in place." And he was in recently, and one of the other fellows in the store was complaining about a stiff neck. So I said, "I'm going to give you Dr. Schwartz's treatment for a stiff neck. And he's looking at me ... and I told him. And he says, "That's it. That's all you need." Well okay, we should get to the war and Rutgers before.

KP: Well, just a few more. How did your father feel about Roosevelt?

RF: Oh, they all love Roosevelt. Most Jews, ... traditionally in Perth Amboy, were Republicans, because we had a wealthy element ... of old German Jews were the ones who mostly had the money. The Russian Jews and Hungarian Jews that came over a little later came over to escape oppression. The German Jews came over for financial opportunity, you know. Germany for Jews was terrific in those days.

KP: Was there tension in the Jewish community between the Germans and the Russians?

RF: Only out of envy, I would say, and snootiness, I mean the German Jews, were really, they were very haughty people. And interestingly enough, ... the great-grand-daughter of Jacob Astor, you know, Mrs. Astor and her four hundred and all that, she decided to do research and she found out that Jacob Astor's father was a Kosher butcher in Germany. And ... they wouldn't admit that they were Jewish, really. You never knew the Astors were Jewish. I'm sure. I didn't think of it. But they were.

KP: That's interesting.

RF: Yeah, it was in the newspaper recently. And ... she apparently had some inklings or something, and so she researched it, and she found out. ...

KP: You mentioned the fire.

RF: ... Oh, the fire. So we decided, we took a three-quarter of a page ad out, which was a huge ad--FIRE SALE, ... and all of our stuff cheap. And people started to come from miles and miles around, because here we had, ... now war had been declared, you know, two days before the fire sale started, that's why I remember it. So we were all working on Sunday, and this one woman, who was a friend of my aunt's, we had hired her to be a cashier. So she was there, kinda learning

what to do, and helping to mark the goods. And we heard on the radio about the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and her son was there, you know. ...

KP: In the Navy?

RF: I think he was in the Army. ... I mean, he was okay. He wasn't hurt. ... So it became a very personalized and dramatic thing. There's a big difference ... [between] hearing something like that and then hearing it and knowing that someone you knew had a son there or a relative or whatever. You know, ... it made it very personal. And the whole thing ... was very dramatic, anyway, ... just Roosevelt talking, whenever he talked on the radio, he really was a marvelous orator. ... So you would hear the classic things that have been repeated time and time again.

KP: So your family listened to Roosevelt quite a bit.

RF: Yeah, yeah ...

KP: Nobody seems to have a memory this, but you may know this. The WPA guide for Perth Amboy, one of the things it describes Perth Amboy, which some people have pointed out how it was a funny city how the rich people lived close to the water low and the poorer sections were up high. And usually it's the opposite in most cities.

RF: ... The town, to this day, has a beautiful waterfront, and there are homes along the waterfront that are great. And I grew up in that area.

KP: Yes.

RF: See, ... I was ... in the southern section. ... I was just about within the proper area to be okay. And once you crossed over, it was a little corner of the city that's about twenty percent of the total area, and if you lived there, you know, that was good. If you didn't, you were living on the other side of the tracks, as it was called. And there were tracks that went through the town and divided it somewhat. But a friend of my mother's, who had a daughter my age, ... who didn't go to the right schools, because they lived on the other side of the tracks. That's all she wanted. She had one daughter, and she pushed her poor [husband]. Her husband had a gas and tire and car kind of place on the main drag, on Smith Street. ... And she only wanted to have a house in the southern section so her daughter could be with the hoy palloy ... in this town that didn't really have any hoy palloy. But ... that was very important.

... The social structure, maybe I was more sensitive to most, because I've talked to other people about this, and they didn't seem to feel it the way I did, was very stratified. You know, there were a couple wealthy people who were lawyers and doctors or maybe had wholesale businesses or something. And they were the people that everybody sort of knew. They were on say the board of the YMHA and the board of the synagogues and stuff like that, were active with the Red Cross or whatever. And then there were other people, you know, being a shopkeeper wasn't considered very fancy, because you didn't have to be educated to do that. Anybody could do that. ... So I always felt I was ... slightly below the few people. When we got to high school, ... we all

came from the southern section, but I went to one school and most everybody else went to another school, because I was on the edge of it.

KP: What about Jews in terms of the pecking order of Perth Amboy, and all of these different groups, in terms of the elections?

RF: ... Of course, Perth Amboy is really, somebody should do a political study on it because ...

KP: It's becoming a more fascinating place the more people I've interviewed.

RF: ... It is, and whenever you meet people from Perth Amboy or who were from there, you meet them anywhere in the world, there's a special kind of kinship that I thought was unique. ... Because, I married a girl from Perth Amboy, ... so I was very insular in that manner. Our families were tightly [knit] ... and all friends, everybody was Perth Amboy. That's all we knew. ... Even the few people that we would socialize [with] when we were out of town, it was because one of them was originally from Perth Amboy. In fact, ... the director of Public Relations and Communications, Artie something, I can't think of his name, with a "Z" his last name was, his wife was from Perth Amboy and was a friend of my wife, so we were friendly with him. He was part of Rutgers always. I don't know, he may have
retired. But the pecking order was a thing. ... The Jewish people, if you were important enough, I guess, you somewhat were admitted into ... the Protestant and Catholic hierarchies. ... Let's see, the banks were all controlled by non-Jewish people in town, ... but there was always, as long as I can remember, there was ... on ... the Board of Education, which was a five-man board in those days, there was always at least one Jewish person. And all political types of things like that were doled out, you know if you had a board of ten, you'd have three Polish, two Hungarian, you know, one Jewish. There weren't enough blacks to matter in those days. We had a very small black population. ... But we did have a black policeman, strangely enough. That I remember.

KP: Growing up?

RF: I remember him very well, because he was a nice man.

KP: And he was a regular police officer?

RF: Yeah, yeah, real policeman. And we had a woman, ... policewoman. We had a different name for her, but there was one.

KP: A matron?

RF: Yeah, yeah. And then, for a long time, there wasn't one. But there was then, because she had to take care of the kids and stuff that got in trouble. But then, there was a man by the name of David T. Wilentz, who was from Perth Amboy, and he was a reporter on the paper, sports reporter, and he was putting himself through school. And he became an attorney, and somehow he got involved in politics, and he took this Republican Perth Amboy town and delivered it to the Democrats. And this was in 1928 maybe or something like that. So this was a marvelous feat,

because it swung the whole county [that] had been Republican. But when Perth Amboy went Democratic, it was enough. I don't know what New Brunswick was in those days. It's really before my time. But the important thing is, as a present to this nice young attorney who delivered Perth Amboy, they made him Attorney General of the State of New Jersey. Ordinarily, it's a nice job, but it was his luck that Lindbergh's baby was kidnapped and Hauptmann, as history has told us, you've read about that. Of course, it's come to surface a lot in recent times. But he was the prosecutor. And normally, an attorney general didn't prosecute ... a case of this type, ... because he wasn't a criminal lawyer. They would hire a good criminal lawyer to do the job. But he decided he was young and ... he was brilliant and rambunctious, so he decided he'd try it himself. And he did. And he won. And it's the classic case, not because, I mean besides the fact that it was an internationally famous case, because Lindbergh was a huge hero. ... It was the ransom and the whole bit, and this was the approaching time of the war. Germany already was ... Nazi. I don't know how else to say it, but it was being run by Hitler and the Nazis. And ... already war had started, I think, or was about to start. So the fact that Hauptmann was a German immigrant and his wife was German and you had all these overtones and you had this Jewish prosecutor. And he won the case on circumstantial evidence. If you look in the law journals, this was the first capital case where a person ended up being executed that was convicted on circumstantial evidence only. And you know, that was a problem with a recent large case on the other coast of O.J. is you had nothing but circumstantial evidence. And it's very difficult, in a capital case, to make it work. And he did. And this was, you know, criminology was a new science. Nobody knew much about it. But part of the thing was matching up pieces of wood, the ladder in the guys attic. I know the case very well, because I was home sick with like Whooping Cough or something like that.

KP: So this is a very vivid memory.

RF: Yes, and I'll go further. ... My uncle the professor, we had *The New York Times*, naturally, for him, and we had *Time Magazine* also, which greatly shaped my life. I mean, the fact that we had *Time Magazine* when I was a kid, and I read everything cover to cover. I learned about sex from *Time Magazine*, and I learned a lot about science and everything else from *Time Magazine*. (laughs) So I was home sick, and *The Times* used to print the transcript of the case, the whole thing, I mean word for word, not little excerpts. It was even better, in a way, than watching O.J. on t.v., because you had it all printed there; you could read it. And I used to read it. I mean, what else was I going to do all day? The radio wasn't too exciting. There was no television, so I read the case. And then, in high school, I became friendly with Robert Wilentz, who is now chief justice, whose father was David T. Wilentz. Now David T. Wilentz, once he did this, became very important. Now he really had it. And also, ... the power structure was growing. Democrats were getting to be more of a factor, and he was right there. And he and Hague, who was the boss of Jersey City, they were the two bosses of the state. The difference was Wilentz never was a public official. He never ran for office in any way, and also, he was very smart. ... So there was never a breath of scandal about him. Now Hague, on the other hand, ran for office ... and he was mayor of Jersey City, and the whole thing was scandal-ridden. And Wilentz really didn't need to make money on it, because he was making money as an attorney. You know, he didn't have to; he wasn't even tempted. He was making more money as an attorney than he could have made as a politician. And most politicians in those days made something beyond their two or three-

thousand dollar salaries. So I've been close to the family off and on for many years. And ... I've heard speeches by Dave Wilentz at ... Democratic functions and stuff 'cause we used to go to some of those things. And then when Robert got involved in politics somewhat, he was an Assemblyman. And he was very good. ... He used to ask us to please come to these dinners. He said, "I'll pay." You know, he paid for the tickets and all so his wife would have somebody to talk to. ... You learn what it is to be a politician. I mean, from the minute he walked into the door, and particularly since he's Dave Wilentz's son, besides the fact that he was an Assemblyman, you know, this was almost as good as being a Kennedy. In a way, it was like the same kind of thing. ... And so his wife, who was a lovely woman, unfortunately, she died a few years ago, and my wife and I and another couple or two, we ... [would] go along to keep her company. ... Also, it would give him a chance to have some fun. He would tell us afterward who some of these people were, stuff like that. ... You got a little inside feeling.

And I'm going to ... digress for one second since we're talking about, because this is my all-time favorite story of Dave Wilentz. When we had our prom. And we had our prom as seniors, and since there were no older men around, I mean there were no college freshmen to speak of. I mean everybody was in the Service. You have to understand this, that everybody was in the service then. So everybody, all the seniors went out with senior girls. Because, normally, a senior girl would ask somebody, you know, the further the college away was, the better it was. "I could have a Harvard man, any man." (laughs) But that just didn't happen. So we all had our, there were four of us who were friends--Robert, and I and two others, one is my closest friend to this day and another was Robert's closest friend in those days. So there's two teams of two buddies. Their parents invited us to go down to their home in Deal. They had a house right on the ocean, right across from the Deal Country Club or Beach Club, whatever it was called. And it was a pretty outstanding little house. They bought it during the Depression for $9000, I found out afterwards. It had two lions, you know, concrete lions in the front. And we were seventeen-and-a-half at that time, and we weren't that sophisticated. ... So ordinarily, in those days, if any of the girls involved had been asked to go to someone's house for a weekend, the mothers would automatically say no. But since it was Wilentz's house, then everybody said go. (laughs) ... The four couples, we went down there, and we stayed in the house and one night, they had a formal dinner. And this really knocked me out. I mean, I came from a nice home. We ate properly, when we could, you know, and my mother would set a nice table. And we had silver, and we had some crystal, and all that jazz. But we walked in and we see this table and now there's eight, it was set for ten people and two servants, and the big master plates underneath ... the service plates that you never use with gold rims on them. And the whole works! And Dave Wilentz told a story ...

----------End of Tape One, Side One----------

RF: He was telling stories about things and about people. And all of the Wilentz's have marvelous senses of humors, and they also can be rather cutting. You know, ... it was a most impressive thing. And so here we are at this elaborate table and a great man, you know, a guy whose name you've seen in headlines in the newspaper. And even though I've been in their house many times, and they would see us and we'd wave to them. They had like a side door that we'd go into the house. ... If they were entertaining, we'd kind of poke our head in and say hi, like

that. They had the first television set in town, and so we used to go over there for the fight. His older brother would make all of the younger guys sit in the back, because [of] his friends. His older brother is Warren Wilentz, who's also fairly well-known in the state. ... And then, I had a car and they had a car, so they said we should go to the Sea Bright Yacht Club. And I remember Mr. Wilentz gave Robert a $100 bill. "Go have a good time." So we went, ... and I remember there was change left afterwards. I don't remember if we ate there, or if we just drank and danced. And even though we were under age, you know, any better place you could get served in, a drink.

KP: It must have really seemed like a different world, this experience at the Wilentz home on Deal and this Country Club and this $100 bill.

RF: Yeah, their home in Perth Amboy was nice, but it was no different than mine. I mean, ours was on one floor, ... but they didn't have any more rooms and rooms weren't bigger. It was furnished somewhat similar. ... Their home was no great shakes. In fact, my house was physically bigger because it was a two family, so it was huge. But going to this home, which was really luxurious, I mean it had been an expensive estate that he'd picked up for a song. And ... they spent their summers there all the time until recent years when they all died or something. But that was always the place. In fact, Robert met his wife because her parents had the house behind them in their backyard. ... And he was a big-time attorney from New York, and she was very well-educated, very fancy lady, great woman. Well, enough about them, this is about me.

KP: One of the questions, especially with the fires, nobody's getting back to this question, is Perth Amboy is noted in the WPA Guide from the 1930s as being one of the largest cities with a volunteer fire department.

RF: Yeah, still is ...

KP: It still is.

RF: ... And it's the worst thing in the world.

TK: How so?

RF: Well, because volunteer firemen aren't trained firemen. Some of them are trained. But if you have a fire and there aren't enough volunteers around, you end up. And there's also, there are paid firemen who ... drive the truck, but once they get to the fire, even though they probably know more about doing fires, the volunteer fire chief, if he's there, takes over. And this has been a terrible thing, it's a political thing, because all of these firemen vote, and they all have families who vote. And they love the job, ... because one, they have a place to hang out and drink beer all the time or whatever. And, two, they used to get some money if you go to so many fires, you got a couple hundred bucks. And it was a great excuse for guys to get out of the house, get away from their wives or whatever. (laughs)

KP: And it still goes on to this day?

RF: ... Yeah. In fact, my partner in the store, well, after my father died, this partner, he was a young man who was an after-school kid. And he grew up quickly, and he ran the store. My uncle didn't, because my uncle wasn't all that astute. He worked hard, but he wasn't driving and clever enough to run a business that was growing. The fire sale put us on the map, getting back to the fire. After that, our store just became very well known, and we kept expanding and growing, and we burst the seams during the war.

KP: Even during the war you, how did the war affect the store?

RF: Well, there wasn't a lot of stuff to sell, but you know, you could get full price for everything. We had this OPA prices. ... That was to prevent price gauging. And I remember we had these lists. We had to list everything in the store--the prices and what they were. There was a lot of crazy regulations, but I remember like movie film, we used to get maybe twenty rolls a month or something, ... and we had reservations for it. People used to reserve the next roll of film so they could take movies.

KP: Did you cut back the hours at all during the war?

RF: Yeah, you did to save electric and also, it became, now there was a younger generation was involved, it was, and this fellow, Ray Shulman who was running the store, and then my oldest cousin for a certain number of the war years, was working in the store, too. ... After he got out of college, he was trying to get into pre-med. He never did, so, I don't know, he ended up working in a store. And he and this Ray, what I call my partner, because he was, eventually, [they] were classmates. They both finished high school at the same time. So of course, there was animosity between them like crazy because my partner, who was really very brilliant, but he didn't go to college. And this really bothered him. He wanted to go to college. He wanted to learn. And he had the mind for it. And my cousin went to college, and he was sort of like the pampered spoiled brat. He used to have a car. I don't really remember, but ... my partner only knew from working hard and continuously and trying to make the business grow. I mean, he was married to the business. It was an incredible thing, and I've tried all my life not to do what he did, but I still work. Even today I work over fifty hours a week, and I'll work extra nights. I take work home. And I've been doing this for a long time. But the war years, which this was of the start of our real war years was our store had a fire, and we had to, somehow we got it rebuilt. The old store got fixed up and put new fixtures in it. In fact, they're the fixtures in on our store today. To this day, we still have them.

KP: Really, they are from World War II?

RF: They were solid oak, light oak, so they're modern-looking. If you walk into our store today, and we've moved, we built a new building in the '50s.

KP: But you kept the fixtures?

RF: Yeah, they were hardly worn out. They have wooden drawers that are riding on wood rails, none of this roller bearing stuff or anything. And these drawers have been open tens of thousands of times, and they still work. You know, it's amazing.

KP: In the 1930s, how did your family respond to the rise of Nazism? And how did they feel about Zionism?

RF: I don't think they had a great deal of feeling about Zionism, but they knew, you know, there's no Jew who was alive in those days who didn't know what it meant to be a minority. I mean, you felt it all the time. ... I sometimes think maybe I was too sensitive, but it was there. I mean, when the customers came into the store, and I was ... a kid, and they would look at me and say, you know, "Can't I get this for a better price?" ... And they would say, "Can't I Jew you down?" And they didn't realize what they were saying. And that has become, really, a slang word. I bet in a dictionary that specializes in slang and colloquialisms, if you look up "Jew," it'll say "to bargain." And that bothered me a lot. I really resented that, and I used to despise some of the customers 'cause they would do stuff like that. ... And they well knew, you know, that this Nazi business was terrible, and ... that anybody who was oppressing Jews had to be really, they were concerned about that. I don't remember much more than that. ... Somehow, I don't know what we used to talk about, because we always ate together. It wasn't that ... the kids ate and then got shoveled out and the grown-ups ate. So we had all this time to talk. But I don't remember much. It was a very busy table, because my father was sick, so we had a nurse at times, and we had a maid, and we had my uncle. So our family, which was five people to start with, now became eight. And somehow, we all fit around this table in the kitchen. We didn't eat in the dining room. And we used to eat, and sometimes, depending on how my father felt, sometimes he would sit at the table. Other times he would stay in bed, and we'd bring a tray in, and we'd sit there and eat with him, and stuff like that. So it was a very busy sort of household because of this. And also, ... we had to be quiet ... in the evening, we didn't want to wake him up. ... To answer your question, I think that the vast, vast majority of Jews certainly didn't think that this Nazi business was a bunch of baloney, you know, that somebody was doing it to sell newspapers or something. ... And also, the fact that they knew what Germans were like. Even German Jews were difficult people to deal with. (laughs) So can you imagine what a German German was? ... We talk about it to this day, some of my friends, who are all my age or older, and all of them are, most of them are very worldly wise. They've travelled all over the world. And a couple of them, ... they've been to Germany, but they really don't feel comfortable there. I was in Germany for four or five days on a trip I made to Europe in the ... early '50s. I was single still--much cheaper to go single than married. In fact, I got married the next year.

KP: How did it feel to be in Germany in the early fifties?

RF: Not too good. ... We were in Munich, was the only place we went to. ... I went with another fellow, was my brother's friend, but my brother had died, so we became friends. Once, we, in the summer at the beach, and he said, "Let's go to Europe next year ... in the winter, sometime." So I said okay, and I forgot about it, you know. But he was serious, and we went. But anyway, ... this trip was a six-week trip of Europe, and everybody thought that we were in the military in civies, because what were two young guys doing running around Europe! And also, we were staying in

the best hotels, just about, because a friend of our parent's, ... my mother had since died, so ... I was on my own, but this woman was a travel agent, was a friend of the family. And she arranged this tour where a guy came and met us at every airport or train station.

KP: So you really had a VIP tour?

RF: Yeah, it was great. But it was so busy, and every moment was figured out in advance, almost. A friend of ours from high school days was in Switzerland. She was going to Med School or something, I don't know. So we wrote her. You wouldn't think of calling anybody at that distance in those days. It was ridiculously expensive. And you just didn't think that way. I'm not a phone person to this day. So we wrote her and said, we're going to be at the airport from two o'clock to four o'clock, say, and then we changed planes going from wherever to Italy. We were flying to Italy at that time, or to Vienna, I don't know. So she came out, and you know, we went through customs. I actually was in Switzerland for an hour on my passport, and we talked with her, and she said, "Why don't you stay a day or two? I'll show you the town. ... You'll stay in my apartment." She had like a two-room apartment. She said, "One of you will sleep in the bathtub, the other one will sleep on the couch." ... And all that. But then we realized that in order to do this, it was like a jigsaw puzzle. We'd have to move everything down the line, ... and we didn't know how to do this. (laughs) We were in these foreign countries, and who knew how to! So we said, "No, we can't do it." And I'm sure we missed the time of our life, because ... she was in medical school or university or something, and we would have had a lot of young people. It would have been great. ... And she was a good girl. She was a friend for a long time.

And wherever we went, I know in Rome we sought out the synagogue and we met some young Jewish men who were peddlers, and we realized that all the street peddlers in Italy were Jewish, which I never knew until I got there. ... It's one of the allowable jobs. And they passed it down from father to son. 'Cause we met these young guys, and they said, ... "We're illegal. We don't have a license to peddle." But they peddled anyway. You know, they opened up their jacket, have a watch. This was true. You'd see it like a vaudeville act, but they did. (laughs) Inside their jackets were lined with watches, pens, whatever. And they learned street peddling, and they said they were just waiting for an uncle or somebody to die so they could get the family license, so they could be legal. And it was a you know, it was a regular trade.

KP: You said you felt very uncomfortable in Germany. Were there particular incidents that that come to mind?

RF: ... Well, we had this tour, it was a trip to a wonderful small, white wooden church out in the outskirts, way out of town, I mean, in the mountains someplace. I can't remember where it was. I have all my documentation from that trip. I could always look that up. So the cab comes to pick us up, like a cab, it was a small car. And we see the guy driving it is missing an arm, and he's wearing a black leather coat. You know, he had a storm trooper's coat on. Because, that's what he had been in the war. And we're in the back of this little car, and we're going out of town. And pretty soon, we are really out in the wilderness. I mean, there's nothing there, but farmlands and stuff. And my friend, who was really a very funny guy, he was a great comedian, even

though he stuttered and stammered both. And he comes over and he whispers into my ear, he says, "This is no place for two Jewish boys to be." You know, here we're in this black car with a guy with a black thing, you know, and he didn't speak much English ...

KP: And he says to you this a not a good place for two nice Jewish boys.

RF: So sure, ... that was very much a part of your life. In fact, another thing that I really exemplifies the feelings of younger, this girl was a year older that I am. You see, all of these people that I talk about from high school days, I know where they are today. ... And she, unfortunately, was killed in a car crash a couple of years ago. But she was ... in our YMHA building had a roof garden, it was just a roof with a fence around it. But they called it a roof garden, because that's what they were called in places, there was no garden up. And the Hindenburg was flying over Perth Amboy on the way to Lakehurst. And she looked up at it, and she said, she knew some Yiddish. And she said in Yiddish, that they should go to hell--geh in dred is the word, I mean, it's a fairly colloquialized piece of Yiddish. And of course, less than an hour later, the thing blows up, crashed or whatever. She was in a state of shock. She thought she did it. But see, there was that hatred, already, toward the Germans. ... I can just see her. I wasn't there when she did it, but I heard this story afterward. I could just see her on the roof shaking her [fist], because she was a kind of a feisty young lady. She was nice that way. She had a lot of energy. So, then, I guess we should get to the real war.

KP: Well, we are actually, in terms of the war, how did the war affect you? One of the things you said about the senior dance which had really changed.

RF: Yeah, society was changed. You know, the social order was changed, and there was a closeness. See ... our class, which was the class of 1944, we just had our 50th Reunion last November. It was the most incredible thing I've ever been to in my life. ... I was on the committee, and I'm working with audio-visual stuff, and I had slide shows running. The crowd had such an emotional energy, when they got into this room. It happened to be the room was a little small for the number of people we had. Our original class was 424, and we had 120 class members, plus a number of spouses. But there was such a noise level, such an energy, people running around so happy to see each other, people I hadn't seen in twenty, thirty years. And we all felt so close, because we were a wartime class, the fact that the guys took out the girls. And also, the guys, themselves, had a great kinship, because you knew ... you were going to war soon. And some of them left early, four or five in our yearbook it said, ... these pictures are missing 'cause they went off, they ... joined the Navy, volunteered, or whatever, so they went in when they were seventeen.
... In fact, ... I wanted to volunteer, to join in a way, because I really wanted to be in the Navy, I think. And there was called a V-12 test, which you took, and if you passed it, you then went to college as an officer in the Navy, and the government did it. And I signed up for it, and I was supposed to take the test. And I knew I would have done well, because the questions were about science and math, and that was my good stuff. If they asked me languages and history, I would have been in trouble. But the day that the test was March 15th in 1944, which was the day my father died, so I didn't take the test. And there was no way you could make it up or anything. And then, you know, you think maybe it's fate, maybe, you know, it's a good thing, that you

shouldn't have taken the test, because you would have left early. I would have gone in, instead of going to Rutgers in that July right after we got out of high school I would have gone off and been in the Navy. And, you know, my mother ... was alive and it was traumatic for her, even though my father had been dying for years. But all of a sudden, she was a widow. She had no husband. ... And then it turns out that she wasn't well herself, which we never knew, because she didn't allow herself to be sick when my father was sick. Then she died a year and a half later of cancer. I mean, that's what the doctors said. They said, they couldn't understand how she hadn't been sick longer, because the cancer had progressed so much. But at any rate, so ... it made all the people in that class close to each other. ... My gang from that time, we stayed, we went to Rutgers, practically all of us, except Robert Wilentz, who went to Princeton [laughs] And, well, he was valedictorian in the classes. I mean, a lot of people think that he got where he is because of his father, but that's not the case.

KP: In fact, he did it himself, it sounds like.

RF: Yeah. He was destined for greatness, because he was really ... a charming guy, great personality, the whole thing. Every girl in town was crazy about him. And he's a good-looking guy, too. And I'm always flattered that people mix us up, until recently, when I got fat and he didn't. No, because we were same build, same coloring, and there was somewhat of a similarity. He had darker and wavier hair, but people would say, "You're the Wilentz boy." I said, "No, I'm not the Wilentz boy. I'm the Fishkin boy." (laughs)

KP: In your high school, all of the men knew they were going off to war. Did you do any of the scrap drives and bond drives?

RF: Oh, sure, sure. I don't know that I was involved in them, but we did them. ... You know they put up this equipment to do physical training on. ... They were very big for getting us stronger. ... Oh, and we had special courses, you took. ... I forgot the name of them. ... I took navigation, I think. ... You know, you took something that would be useful when you got into service. And also, of course, when it came to Rutgers, everybody was in the ROTC, and I was in the ROTC. ... I got drafted into the Navy, because I took another test, called the "Eddy Test". Once you passed that, ... you got a card. And if you were drafted or if you wanted to volunteer into the Navy, you just waved this card, and you automatically got into the Navy. Not many people are drafted into the Navy or the Marines, either. ... But I got drafted into the Navy, because I had the card. ... You went to school to become a radio technician, which later, they changed the name to electronic technician. We were the guys who fixed the RADAR and the SONAR and the radios and the transmitters, and as they would laughingly say, in the class, and the captain's electric shaver and toaster. And it was a great education. It was a very important part of my life, you know, going through this program.

KP: You came to Rutgers, though, before you went off to war. How crucial was the State Scholarship in coming to Rutgers? Would you have been able to go to college without it?

RF: ... Probably not. No, I don't think so, because there wasn't that much money in the family. ... My sister, of course, was two years ahead of me in school, and she got into NJC, and to tell

you the truth, ... she must have had a scholarship, because she was very smart. I mean, she was smarter than I was, class-wise. ... Yeah, I think she had a scholarship. ... In a way, I made money going to Rutgers, because I had a State Scholarship, and then I joined the fraternity right away. And I think I quickly became the exchequer, who was the treasurer, so if you were, you got your meals free or something like that. ... You know, it cost me next to nothing to go to college, and then I went into the service. And then when you came out, you know, it was gang busters. Everything got paid for. The book publishers had the times of their lives, because every course, they would tell you needed four or five books. You needed two. But you'd go to the bookstore, you showed them the blue book, they give you the all books and away you'd go. The slide rule I got. You know everything. I still have my slide rule. ... I went across the street to engineering college. [points] It was right over there.

KP: You were at Rutgers. Were you here for a full semester before you left for the Navy?

RF: No, not really.

KP: You didn't even finish out the semester.

RF: There were no semesters. It was on a quarter system. So three quarters were equal to two semesters. I was here for two quarters.

KP: You made it through what was a semester.

RF: It would have been like a semester, sort of. ...

KP: You mentioned before we started that Rutgers was a very different place than it would be when you came home, that there were very few civilians.

RF: Yeah, yeah. See, the capacity of the college was about a 1000, I think, if I, and before, it had been a 1000 civilians ... that lived here, and then you had commuters. And when I was here, the majority, say 700, were ASTP, which was the Army's training thing. ... And they were all over the place in their uniforms, and we civilians were ... a little small part of the campus. And there wasn't much social life. I don't really remember, because while I lived here, I used to commute to Perth Amboy to work and to do my laundry and stuff like that, because we still ... had our home, even though there were just three of us and two of us were going to college. And my younger brother was a senior in high school. ... But still we had the house, and we ran the house, somehow. ... Our tenant, ... his rent took care of paying for it. ... We got, I think the three of us got an allowance like of 60 dollars a week from the store. You see, that's how we paid for whatever we needed to pay for. Plus, my brother and I both worked in the store and we used ... to make a dollar an hour or something like that. When I first started as an after-school kid, we used to get a dollar for the whole week. And I was the richest kid in town.

KP: When a dollar could really buy.

RF: Yeah, yeah. In fact, years later, I became, not many years later, I was in the Navy and there was a girl who was in the class following me, and she was really magnificent. She was gorgeous. And I really loved her. And I took her out. We became very close friends. It never became a romance, unfortunately. And she told me that she was always so in awe of the fact that my brother and I worked, you know, because nobody else worked. ... Some of the guys ... sold shoes or something on weekends, but, I mean, we worked all the time. We really worked. We had jobs, and we worked there. ... Her father was a good customer, ... besides. ... Yeah, I used to write to her. Oh! I have very bad handwriting. And when I was in the sixth or seventh grade I got called in by the, I forget what she would have been. Well, she was supervisor. She wasn't principal, but she was like supervisor. And she knew my family. And she called me in, and she said, "Robert, your handwriting ... is very difficult to read, it's very poor. She says, someday, you're going to find a young woman, and you're going to want to write to her, and she won't be able to read you letters." She said, "Why don't you try and improve your handwriting?" Okay. And sure enough, I met a young lady, and I wrote to her. But she could read my handwriting! (laughs)

KP: Was this in wartime?

RF: Yeah, yeah.

KP: You were writing home?

RF: Yeah, I was writing to her when I was stationed in Chicago, and she ended up going to school in Madison, Wisconsin. And one or two times, I was able to get up there for a weekend. And once, she came to Chicago.

KP: And she could read your handwriting?

RF: And she could read my handwriting. ... Because we did all of this ... I guess that we made some phone calls too, yeah. ... I used to see her around, but she eventually went to med school and became a doctor, got married, lived in Boston, and had children, ... so we used to send birth announcements to each other. We'd send presents at first when the kids were born. And then, you know, things drifted apart, and I didn't hear from her for a long time. I was in Cape Cod, and I went into a gallery, and it happens that the guy who was showing his pictures used to sell to our store years back, and I knew him. He was a really wonderful guy, and I kept trying to catch him there to see him, and I couldn't, so I left my business card. And I wrote on it, ... his name was Cy: "Cy, tried to see you. Blah, blah." I had seen him briefly the night before, but he was very busy, ... because they have gallery night in Cape Cod, this is wealthy, and there's just mobs of people. All of the galleries stay open in the evening, and you go around, wine and cheese. You know, it's a great thing. And you look at all of this art of various types, and they have some really good galleries there. So at any rate, ... I leave the card and there's a note to him, and then we go home. And a few days later, I get a letter from this gallery, it looks like, because the return address is printed stationery of the gallery. And inside is a note saying something about how I just missed you, and this, that, and the other thing, and this is my phone number and my address and here and there. And I'm reading all that, and I'm thinking, "This is very strange." You know,

... it can't be from this guy Cy (Freid?), and then I turn it over, and on the back piece of the paper, she said it was Jane. This was the girl. This was the girl that I was nuts about. So it happens, and she lived in Boston, but she had a home on Cape Cod, I found out afterwards. So with much difficulty, later on in the summer, I went to a business convention in Boston, and it was kind of the miracle of the voice mail, 'cause the hotel I was staying in, you had actual voice mail. In other words, you didn't leave a message and then somebody would call you up, you know the light would be lit on your phone, and it would say there was a message for you ... There was a light on your phone, and you picked it up and got the recorded message of the person that was calling, which was very nifty. And she had answering machines in her office and in her home and in her place on Cape Cod. And I kept missing her and leaving messages, and then she'd call me, and this and that. And finally, through answering machines and the voice mail, we made a date to go to dinner. And we never spoke to each other the whole time. The whole thing was done by recorded messages. And I said, "Wow, thank G-d for modern times!" And I really hate voice mail, in general. And we went to dinner, and it was a really wonderful ... that after all these years, that we still spent a whole evening talking about things and stuff and not just reminiscing. But just, we were still friends, you know, so many years later. It was quite an event. I've been back to Cape Cod a couple times, but I'm always chicken to call her, because I'm with my wife.

KP: Rutgers went through quite a change. I mean, you still had Dean Metzger and chapel when you were here.

RF: Oh yeah. We used to go to chapel. ... And it always bothered me a little bit, you know, here I am in this Christian church. And what am I doing there, but we went. And ... then we had the great philosopher and then Mason Gross. See, they were all part of my college years. And they were the first television academics. Oh, I can't remember the other guy's name. He was a round, rolly-polly guy, very funny, and he taught philosophy. But he was on television, ... on one of the quiz programs, like he was one of the judges or something like that. And then Mason Gross was also on some kind of similar educational-type program. But they weren't real, pure educational, they were still quiz programs, entertainment-type things.

KP: Mason Gross was thought of very highly. It sounds like you have a similarly high. impression of him.

RF: Yeah, he was a very impressive man. I didn't ever have a personal conversation with him that I can remember. Oh, Houston Peterson was the other guy.

KP: The rolly-polly philosopher

RF: Did you ever hear of that name?

KP: For some reason, I have. But I don't know where.

RF: Well, that's why. He was also, you know, there's always a darling professor that everybody wants to be in his class. I mean, I was an engineering student, and he was teaching economics or philosophy, what was it, philosophy, so I decided I would take a philosophy course just to be in

his class. ... You know, it's just like ... on all of the various school-type programs that are on television, there's always one teacher who everybody wants to take their course, because they're fun and they're exciting and, you know, and dramatic. And that's the way this guy was. He would lecture to a huge, an auditorium. He'd have 300-400 people in the lecture. And then ... he'd have people who'd grade the papers and stuff, something like that. But anyway, I went, and I like philosophy. I would have taken more if there was time.

KP: Why engineering? You had started out, when you first came here, in engineering.

RF: Yes, and I graduated in engineering.

KP: Were you always intrigued by engineering?

RF: Okay. I really wanted to be an architect, but along with bad writing goes bad drawing. And I knew that I never, never would be able to draw well enough. And of course, I really thought, ... in those days, it was true that an architect had to draw renderings, as well. I mean, not just, I could draw blueprints, but they didn't look so hot. And I took mechanical drawing as an engineer, and I just about passed. ... In all my classes, I mean I was a good student, I was really very bright, particularly in the practical engineering stuff, like hydraulics and electricity and stuff like that. ... Theory I was medium. But any down and dirty thing like physics--I don't consider physics theoretical. Most people may, but, you know, those things I was super at. I really was good at them. But we had to hand in reports. And in the reports, there were drawings, and the report itself, I used to write them, or print them, I think I don't know which. And I'd lose a point--and this is on a one to six scale. To lose a point's a lot--I mean I lost a point just because they would say SLOPPY. You know, I once got into a discussion, ... I think I did, anyways. "Why is it so important?" I said, "My work, the answers are correct. I understand the problem. I know how to do this. You know, ... I could design this, I could do this." They said, "Yeah, but you're going to have to present your thinking to somebody on paper. And you can't do that. You know, people are going to see a sloppy report like that, and they're not going to hire you. Or they're not going to promote you. You know, you're not going to get anywhere." So I did the best I could. ... No, I'm very proud of graduating. I tell people that all the time, you know, ... when I wait on customers, very often, we get into some little technical and I'll say, "I really know what I'm talking about, because I'm an engineer." (laughter)

KP: You are not making it up.

RF: ... No. And I've done engineering-type problems in the store. You know, ... it's a method of thinking. I mean engineering isn't just memorizing formulas, which I never could do, anyway. I used to derive them on the edge of the paper, because I couldn't remember them. I understood them.

KP: You entered the military January of 1945, really late, we now look back late in the war.

RF: Yeah, but it was the worst time of them war.

KP: Yeah, I've been learning that.

RF: That was a really terrible time. I mean ... we were losing in Europe. That was the Battle of the Bulge, I mean people were being killed like crazy. The casualties were huge. ... At first, the war was kind of romantic, and everybody's ... going to these islands ... in the Pacific, ... and there weren't any troops in Europe for the first couple years ... until Anzio and Dunkirk, which were the two fiasco attempts to land in Europe. Anzio was somewhat successful, I guess, but Dunkirk, that was mostly English. I don't think there were any Americans really involved in it. ... We were just ... building this monstrous Army, ... this big, huge Army. And of course, ... our ships were active, what Navy was left, because we lost a chunk of it in Pearl Harbor. But they were building new ships, and it took a while until we got to be ... really well-equipped and trained. ... We had no Army, and in a short period of time, you had to make pilots, which you couldn't do in 90 days. You know, they had the 90 day wonders, which were officers who went to quick school and they made an officer out of somebody who had some kind of background. ... But when you think about it, that we had to build 50,000 airplanes, that's what we built in a couple of years, you know, from small industry, you know, that make a couple of DC-3's now and then, which I've flown in a couple of times. ... And the amount of ships that were built, I mean, is just staggering. ... And people worked long hours. ... That's why everybody had so much money. They were working overtime. The pay rates were still tied into old times a lot. But if you were making three dollars an hour, which would be $120 for a 40 hour week, and then you worked overtime, next thing you know, you're making $200 a week or two and a quarter a week. ... And you're making 50 percent more than you would've been making if it wasn't wartime, even if you had a nice job, where you made three dollars an hour, which was pretty nice money. So there was all this money, and there wasn't a lot to spend it on. ... And a lot of it got pent up, and when war was finally over, all of this money became available--for housing, for cars, for everything. I mean it was boom times. But the feeling, everybody really was pulling for the country. You had some dissenters, and ... you had people who avoided the draft one way or another.

KP: Did you know anyone in Perth Amboy who had avoided the draft?

RF: Well, yeah. In a sense, my cousin who then had family, the oldest cousin, he got himself, besides working, and also, someone had to be in the store to work, because my partner person was drafted, and he was in the Army. He was in Europe for quite a while. He was a sergeant in the military police, somehow. ... He became the officer in charge, he became that guy. He did all the work for him. He did all the paperwork, and he did the thinking for him, and everything else. ... Unfortunately, a lot of officers weren't that well-trained. They didn't know what they were doing. So they would find a good non-com, bright guy, and they would let them do the work. In fact, ... the cousin that I used to ride bikes with, he ended up being something like that. He was, I forget, he was a sergeant in the Army, but he worked for the commanding officer. He used to sign the passes and everything. And he said, "Yeah, when I wanted to take a weekend off, I'd sign myself a pass and I wouldn't go. But, you know, that's the beauty, I think, of the American public, the people in America, even though we were in a very serious thing. But the humor and the gutsiness ... of the things you did, the insane things that people did ... were really something else. And you knew people who went through all these things, not many, I didn't know a lot. But in the fraternity after the war, a lot of the guys who had been in the fraternity whose names I had

heard, because they were gone, maybe ... sometimes when guys were home on leave, they used to stop in and we'd meet the upper classmen. Because in the six months, I became president of the fraternity, because there was nobody else to do it. I became, called the pryor, so I was like the youngest president they ever had. But then all the guys came back after the war, and one nice little, meek little guy, you find out ... he was the navigator on the flying fortress or something. They bombed the Ploesti oil fields. ...

KP: The impression I got is that very few people really talked about what had happened.

RF: No, they wouldn't talk a lot, but he'd say something like that. ... You learned from this guy that he had flown over Ploesti, which was like above, does that mean anything to you?

KP: Oh yes. I've interviewed people who've flown over Ploesti, oh yes.

RF: 'Cause that was a big deal, 'cause you had about two gallons extra gas. And a lot of them never came back. It was very dangerous. But this guy was ... Mr. Meek himself. He was a really nice guy, but he was very quiet, very unassuming, and physically, ... he was small and all that and he was flying one of these big planes. And then we had this one guy, this was, he was a German Jew. This was a Jewish fraternity. ... In those days, it was a Jewish fraternity--everyone was Jewish. Not now. ... I read my alumni news, and you don't know who these people are.

KP: When did the fraternity become no longer a Jewish fraternity.

RF: ... After the war, some years after the war they started to have problems with this, ... the fact that some of the fraternities, in a way, got help from the college, and you know, someone would start to figure out this isn't fair, so they had to become non-denominational. Also, in order to solve the black problem, I mean, blacks wanted to be in fraternities, too. Like, you know, I can't remember when I was in college, of the 300 civilians, I don't remember anyone being black. There may have been somebody, but I don't remember. And even afterwards, when I came back, I can't remember. I know we had one woman in engineering class which was ... wild. (laughter) But she was an NJC student, but they made a special exception for her to come over here and take engineering courses.

KP: The one woman who ...

RF: She wanted to be an engineer. This was in ... 1947-48. She was a pioneer.

KP: Did she finish the program, do you know?

RF: I don't know, I think so, she did all right in class. I forgot what classes ... they were. But she was okay. ... She was ... a nice girl ... nothing, I can't even visualize her to this day, I mean she wasn't outstanding in appearance or anything, but she was a girl, you know, and the rest of us were guys. (laughs) So there was that difference. ... And how the social life changed, ... before the war and after the war. Because, all of a sudden you have a fraternity now, where you had guys ranging in age from eighteen to 30. You know, some of them were significantly older. ...

... The six months I was here before the war, somewhere along the line, this one guy came back. He'd been in service and he got hurt in a training accident of some sort. He never really said what, but he got out. ... So he came back, and here I was, by this time a little eighteen-year old, and I was skinny, I mean I was a little guy, sort of. I was the same height actually, I weighed 122 pounds at that time. And this guy comes back and his name was Robert (Dince?), Jr. and he's a German Jew. And he really denied his Judaism as such, that's why he kept his name, Jr., which was not a Jewish thing to do. And he was a big, ... gregarious guy, but he liked me for some reason. ... So I'd be studying, because there was a lot of work to do and I didn't do schoolwork on weekends, I went home and worked. ... And so he'd come in and say, "Okay, Fishkin, we're going out to drink". So I said, "Okay." So I go. And we'd go out and have a beer. And then one night he walks in and says, "Okay, Fishkin. We're going to the symphony tonight." So I said, "What symphony?" And he says," In the gym, they have ... " We used to have all the famous orchestras here, even in those early days of the '40s. So he said, "We'll go to a concert." And I said, "Well, I don't have a ticket". And he said, "That's all right, you don't need a ticket". So we go, and we get there and he says, "You wait here, I'll be back." And he has a ticket, so he goes in and he gets somebody else's stub, and he comes out and gives me the stub. And we went and we sat way up in the bleachers. It was in the gym ... that's on College Ave.

KP: Yes.

RF: ... The fact that there were more of us didn't really make any difference, because there weren't any seats, it was these step-like bleachers way, way up in the heavens there. And wow, all of a sudden, I was introduced into a whole new world. I'd never been to a symphony before. I didn't know anything about classical music. Even though my mother was musical, she played the piano and my grandfather went to the opera all the time, but somehow nothing ... came through. And that was a big awakening to me, because this one crazy guy decided to take me to the symphony. And I've gone off and on ever since. Not lately. So as ... always, a college education is a lot more than the book learning, you learn social things like that. The funny thing with this guy (Dince?), is he ended up marrying a rabbi's daughter. Which none of us could ever believe, because he used to take out only non-Jewish girls from NJC. I mean, if they were blond and blue-eyed, that was the best. That's what he would look for.

KP: But he married the rabbi's daughter?

RF: Yeah, and she was a rabbi's daughter. I think I met her once, she was very plain and ... totally opposite of what he always, ... who he would date and the kind of things he would talk about. He had a tuxedo. I mean, he was from a wealthy family.

TK: I need to break a few minutes.

KP: ... When did you report to the Navy?

RF: Well, I got a draft notice, and we were supposed to go in November. It was right before Thanksgiving. I don't remember the exact date, but an early date in November. And then we got

another notice, in fact, it was kind of announced nationally that they weren't going to draft anybody for another month. ... They were going to let everybody who hadn't been drafted stay home for Christmas, Thanksgiving and Christmas. And so, our date became January 25th. And I went, and another fellow, that I knew, ... a Jewish boy, we were in the same gang and you know. In fact, I've known him since the third grade. And we went in together, into the Navy. He'd passed the Eddie program test also, but he wasn't a very scientific-type of student. ... You know, he was [a] regular person. He didn't have that channel of math and science and fixing stuff. And we both went in, and after about a month or two, he flunked out. He went off to radio school and became a teletypist. He was in Hawaii or something. ... See, he's another chunk. All these little chunks come back into your life. We were close friends, when he came back to Rutgers, and we were friends here, ... and we used to go to football games and do some things together. He never really joined the fraternity, but he used to hang out there, because he knew a lot of us that were there. My brother was in the fraternity, my cousins had been in the fraternity. And he met a girl in NJC. She was from Rahway, he was from Perth Amboy. But he met her there, and they had a quick romance going, and I remember he got engaged when we went to a football game, and he was worried about the ring, so I had to lock it in the trunk of the car. And he gave her the ring that night. I went to the wedding.

... And he ended up being in business downtown, so we used to have lunch together a lot then over the years. At first, we had some social interaction when I first got married, but for some reason--he moved to Metuchen, Woodbridge and then Metuchen and I stayed in Perth Amboy--so this little society split up. ... I never socially interacted with him that much. ... We'd see each other several times a week at lunch or this or that. In fact, the classic is we used to eat in this little delicatessen, and we'd sit in the booth, and we'd both be reading our newspapers. Of course, ... that's when you had a chance to read the New York newspapers. ... All of the restaurants always had newspapers for everybody to read. So we'd read the papers. And I remember, I'd come home, and my first wife would say, "You know, what's this?" I'd say, "Oh, I had lunch with Milton." She says, "What did he have to say?" I said, "Oh, we didn't talk." We just sat there and read our paper. And people knew this, people in town used to laugh. And he really liked to read the paper. "'Cause years later, ... when the restaurant went away, and we started eating different places, and he used to come in and eat in the restaurant directly across the street from my store, because it was a ... good place to eat. And he wouldn't sit with [us], and we had a table that was a bunch of guys that all had stores downtown, and it was like an eating club. You know, we all knew if we got there by one o'clock, the other guys would be there. And we had like eight people, put two tables together. But Milton, my friend, you know, that went into the service, he never would sit in with the crowd. Sometimes he would, you know, but mainly, he would go sit at the counter, and he'd read his *Daily News*. He was a sports fan, so he liked to read the sports articles in *The Daily News*.

... And so time goes on, ... we were active in the Chamber of Commerce together, and this, that, and the other. And you know, we're always involved somewhat. So he, his business started to go down. He had a big ladies' store, they sold ... pretty nice stuff, you know, everything, dresses. The original thing was they were a corsettier. ... His mother was a good fitter, and his father ... was a tailor. ... But his business started to go down the tubes, so he was smart enough that he closed the business down. He sold it off. You know, he had a big going out of business sale.

And then, he had nothing to do. So he tried to get some different kinds of jobs, and finally he said, one day he said, "Gee, I'm really getting bored, and I could use a little extra money. Can't you use me in the store somehow? You know, I'll do anything." And we were just getting our computer, and this was like around Novemberish, so I says, "Yeah, you know, busy times coming for the next month, but I don't know." I was very leery of it, ... having a friend as an employee. And I had another friend that I was really close to, and he knew him. He was a year or two older, than I was, but he was a real student of things, more so than I was, and we had lunch together all the time. So I said, "What should I do, you know, Milt approached me." So he says, it's a bad idea. So I'm thinking, so I said "Oh, I've got a solution." So I said, "You know, Milt, we're busy now before Christmas. I could use some help for the month. I said, you know, ... so at least you'll have something to do for a month, and then it'll be Christmas. And be into the next year, you'll find something else." And I asked my son, "How would you feel if I did this?" So, he said, "Gee," He says, "Uncle Miltie, how could I tell him what to do?" 'Cause the kids have known him. Their mother always shopped there and used to take the kids in when they were little. So I hired him. And, of course, he stayed 'til the day he died, which was last year. And then, after he died, my wife, who hardly knew him, ... said, "You know, you really should take his wife out to dinner and stuff, you know, see that she's busy. She works, so she has something to do, but my wife was very sensitive to this. So I said okay, and we've become close friends since. (laughs) ... And he owned a lot of property, so all of his tenants used to come in to pay him in the store, because they knew they could find him there when he worked for me. This is a friend of mine from like the third grade on. So then he died, and they used to come in there and say, "What should we do?" ... And sometimes, he wouldn't be there, so I would take the check, and a few people paid in cash. I knew where he kept his receipt book. I'd write out a receipt. So now, my bookkeeper and I have become the office for this real estate firm. It's really--I mean his widow and his sister, who are joint owners of this, can't get over it. They're just so grateful, because it's hard for them. And the people that they're dealing with, a lot of them are Spanish-speaking and we have people in the store who speak Spanish if we need translations.

KP: Rutgers actually had an article where you were spearheading an effort in the downtown to make it more Spanish-friendly.

RF: This is an old article.

KP: Yes.

RF: Word of the Day? Oh yeah. This was marvelous. Oh, how'd they find that.
I have this clipping too.

KP: At one point, they were very good at Rutgers at keeping clippings on alumni.

RF: ... Okay, ... this was one of the prouder achievements of my life, even though it didn't work. Because I was at a committee meeting of some sort, and I remember it was at our YMHA, and we were trying to figure out what to do, you know, how to make the Spanish community and our community work together better. And here we have these people who are teachers and

professionals of the Spanish community, and I realized I couldn't understand what they were talking about half of the time.

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

RF: ... So I realized, what we have here is a communication problem. You know, and I said, I knew that the people, the Anglos, we'll call them Anglos and Spanish is the best way of doing this, because that's really what the problem, I feel, is and was. And the Anglos were very annoyed with these people who spoke Spanish and didn't speak English, and all that. ... And a lot of them used to say to me, "You know, our parents came over from Europe, and they spoke English." And I knew damn well that wasn't really true, because the women ... in the typical Jewish family that came over, they didn't speak English. You know, they spoke some, maybe, ... but a lot of them, ... they spoke Yiddish and they knew a little English, because it's a hard language to learn. And I was a lousy language student, so to me, Spanish was a hard language to learn. So anyway, I came up with, I thought about it, and I said, you know, I think part of our problem here is one, the Anglos don't understand how hard, they've forgotten. Most of them never knew how difficult it was for their parents to learn English, because they weren't born yet, you know, in the vast majority of cases. And I said, and I can't understand these learned men. There were two people at this meeting, who were I think one had a doctorate.

KP: Professionals who spoke Spanish as their first language?

RF: ... Yeah. And their English was very poor. And I really had difficulty understanding the nuances and things. So I started to think about it, and I came up with this idea of trying to teach the entire town English if they were Spanish and the entire Anglo population to speak Spanish. ... I realized that I wasn't really going to be able to teach them to do this. I figured, okay, some of the Spanish people will ... grasp upon this opportunity to improve their English or acquire some English, if they didn't know any. And I wasn't going to do this the way you teach, I was going to merchandise this, because that's what I know. ... And I figured out we're going to have the word for the day. And all the time I did this, I could never pronounce it properly--*la palabra para el dia*, which is word for the day. And I studied, and I invented this double interlocking oval-- you see, one was in English and one was in Spanish. And I studied magazines, and I saw what kind of logo was used by the vast majority of advertisers, in magazines in particular. And most of them use ovals--Ford, Esso, I used to know dozens. So I said, "I've got to make a logo." So I did. And then I got together, and I bounced this idea off of some of my friends, including the aforementioned Robert Wilentz, who thought it was a fabulous idea. ... He had been taking some Spanish lessons. He had somebody from Berlitz come in, and he took personal lessons, because they were going to Spain or something like that. So he said, "Yeah, Berlitz could construct the vocabulary for you. And I think they did, somehow. Somehow we got a basic vocabulary. See, I know in the military, they had a 600-word vocabulary, and they would teach it to troops that were going into a foreign country, because with 600 of the right words, you could communicate most of the things you needed to know.

KP: So you were going to do this with the whole town?

RF: Yeah. So ... I got the vocabulary, and then I got the newspaper or somebody to the artwork for me. And then I was president of the Chamber of Commerce, so I proposed this to the Chamber of Commerce that this was what we were going to do. ... And when I first brought it up, they weren't too excited, I could tell. So I said, "I've got to do something." So I did what, for those days, was a multi-media presentation. I mean, that was my business, right? I had four screens in the Chamber of Commerce meeting room, the board of directors, and extras, about 40 or 50 people, maybe. And I had a movie projector. I had an overhead projector. I had an opaque projector and a slide projector. And I ran around, and I took hundreds of slides of Perth Amboy. I had a convertible, and I had the top down, and I had the camera on a tripod, and I'd drive. I'd see what I want. I'd stop. I'd stand up in the car. I didn't even get out of the car, and I'd took the picture. And I took all kinds of buildings and stuff. And I made up a whole presentation about this town and about the problem and everything else. And I had the movie running, ... and then manually, I'd change the overheads and the opaque pictures. So I had all these going on the four screens, and I had samples of what I was going to do. And finally, they agreed to do it, and they would give me a little funding. And there was one man from Chevron Oil, he was their purchasing agent, and I used to business with them all the time, ... and he married a girl from my class, ... I think his second marriage. I'm not sure. And I bumped into him in San Francisco, and she recognized me and introduced me to her husband. I knew the name. ... For some reason, the name didn't stick. So we were talking. We went out; we went to have coffee or something, and I said to him, "What was you name again? ... Where do you work?" "Well, Chevron, I'm a purchasing agent there." ... I'd talked to this guy on the phone many times. Well, he said, "Look." He couldn't get the company to commit themselves. They were wary. A lot of people were wary about being involved. He said, "But what are you going to need to do this?" Well, I said, "I have to print circulars to hand out, like thousands of them." I wanted one to go to every kid in school and be in the banks and the supermarkets and then every store would be stacked up. You know, and each week, we're going to need I don't know how many thousands of sheets of paper a week. So he said, "We got lots of paper in the stockroom." ... And he gave me paper. And then ... the first week or two, we took them to a commercial printer, and it was costing a fortune to have them printed, even though we supplied the paper. So then, he says, "You know, we have offset presses here. We don't do anything with them." He says, "I'll have somebody print them for you." So he did all of this on his own. I mean, he could have probably lost his job for doing this or maybe the bosses gave him ...

KP: Or he had this latitude?

RF: Yeah. The bosses might have said, "Look--we can't get involved, but see what you can do for the guy. Help him out." You know, because Chevron was very paternal to Perth Amboy, because they owned one-sixth of the town, square footage, I mean square acreage. ... They're an obnoxious industry to have, a refinery, so they wanted the townspeople ... not to rise up against them and say that they were making too much stink--goodbye. ... So they helped, and a few other people helped. But mostly, I had to do it all myself. And I even had, in my slide show somewhere, my kids pulling a red wagon loaded up with the posters or these placards. ... This was a cardboard, was printed on heavy cardboard, and it was a permanent placard, and each week, we would change the sheet. ... This had the words for the week, because ... it was

impossible to get them changed every day. But somehow, we had a sheet that was pasted on, and it would have the words for the week. And this was the first week, we started out with good morning, good afternoon, goodnight, so long, and goodbye.

KP: How long did this continue? How long were you able to sustain this?

RF: ... I said this has to go on for the length of the school year.

KP: And did it go on?

RF: It did. It didn't work, because finally, the schools got a little tired of--we would deliver everything to one central location, and they were supposed to distribute.

KP: Yes.

RF: The paid secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, who never did any work in his life. All of a sudden, I got him. He wasn't too crazy about it, but he knew I had something going and so he figured well, maybe if this works, it'll make him famous, you know. I don't know, but he helped. He did as best he could. And I remember I was getting toward the deadline when things had to be ready for the first week of school, and I was so far behind, so I went to my partner, who thought I was a little crazy about all this kind of stuff, because he never was involved in any kind of community action at this point, and I told him, I said, "Look, I have vacation time coming, I mean, to this day, I'm owed hundreds of days of vacation. And I want to take a week off, and I'm going to do this thing." So I took the week off, and I used to go to the Chamber office every day, and I'd use the phones there, and I'd do the work. And I was calling up to get the churches to do it. They were the worst. I mean, ... I was overwhelmed that the churches wouldn't cooperate. I said, "All I want you to do is when you on Sunday, when you hand out whatever you hand out to your parishioners, give them one of these. You know, it's not going to cost anything. We'll print them. We'll deliver them to you."

KP: Why were they so resistant?

RF: They just didn't want to do it. And then, ... I've been president of the YMHA, so I figured, "Oh, they're going to go for this." And they didn't. I had a great deal of difficulty, they didn't want to be involved. They didn't think it was, I don't know. For some reason, a lot of them felt that this was very bad. And then, I started to get hate mail, you wouldn't believe. I mean.

KP: Hate mail?

RF: Against this program, I mean, why are you trying to do this? Why are you trying to teach Spanish to anybody? You know, who needs to know Spanish? And, of course, ... I had a dual goal--one to show the ... Anglos that it was difficult to learn a language, because okay, I was hoping it would get to be like a game, that people would say, "What's the word for the day, today?" And it could have. And, then also, where I really dropped the ball is I didn't get the Spanish community involved as much. I spoke to them, and I spoke to a few people, but it was

difficult. See, I couldn't communicate with them. And so ... I would let it go. I could communicate with all the Anglos, you see, so I worked very hard on them. And I got the banks to put it ... in their windows and all that stuff. And I got a lot of the men's stores to do it and doctor's offices, and you know, I wanted it every place where people congregated. And I sort of did it. I got them in a lot of places. But after a while, schools fell down. They wouldn't do it anymore. I don't know. But ... we did go for the 600 words, [it] got done. And we had a different color paper every week.

KP: Do you think it had any long-term impact?

RF: ... No, no. no. None at all. I couldn't get my local newspaper to publish it--*The New Brunswick Home News*--I'll never forget it. This guy came down to talk to me. I can visualize him. And he said, "Gee, that's a great idea." and he wrote this article, [looking at article] probably his name's on it. Yeah, it must have been this guy, Walter. And he said, "Yeah, our paper's going to do this." And they used to publish on the first page a box with the word for the day. Each day it would change, and it would be in both languages.
And I couldn't get the local paper to do this.

KP: The New Brunswick paper did this?

RF: Yes, and I couldn't get the local paper to do it, they said, "Well, ... They did it, yes, but they wouldn't run this symbol. They said, ... We don't have, any of our columns or anything, we don't do trademarks on them, or something like that. So I put together a collection. I went through *The Times*, and I cut out, now *The Times* really doesn't do it much, but they're there, and I found them, and I had two boards full of stuff, you know, from magazines and newspapers ... where there'd be a columnist like Walter Winchell had his picture and had a little thing, you know, with special type with a logo for Walter Winchell's column. And I said, "Look! All of these places put in the logo." And I said, *"The Home News* is putting in the logo." Because I felt the logo was very important. ... Finally, they did put in the logo, and they increased the amount of space. They put it on the first page. Because, they used to bury it in the editorial page, originally, put a little one-inch thing like that. ... And they were afraid to do it. For some reason, people were afraid of this. And I never anticipated having the type of problems that I did have.

I did anticipate the problem with the Spanish community, because I couldn't relate to them, and they weren't the least bit excited, except some of the younger Spanish-speaking teachers in the school system, one or two of them. I had one guy, we had W-CTC used to broadcast the word for the day, every day, and this guy would go there like once a month and he would record all of the [words], because he spoke beautiful English, as well as perfect Spanish, and Puerto Rican Spanish, not ... Spanish-Spanish. So he was perfect. And he was very excited about it; he worked hard on ... this thing. And he did ... all the recordings. Then we had a phone number, ... and I had a recorded message on it, which we changed, some. He did. He would go up once a week and change the message or something. I don't remember. ... And I used to publicize this number, you know, because I thought the kids would do it for fun. They would call up this number. It didn't cost anything. ...

KP: It sounds like a great idea, and it seemed like a great way to try to reach out to another community and forge understanding.

RF: ... Yeah. ... I really created this after having been to many seminars, you know, where large companies would invite the dealers for the evening, and they would put on a show. And I picked all the ideas from that and all ... the constant mail that you get in the store--all kinds of selling blurbs and stuff. And I said, "This is the way to do it, because if you try to do it as an educational thing, it's not going to be exciting, and it's not going to work." Well, this didn't work, either. But I did complete the job, and I can't believe I did that.

KP: I guess before leaving this and going back to World War II, are you surprised, I mean right now, there's been a lot of sort of public talk about making English the official language? Any thoughts on this debate, after your experiences?

RF: Yeah, ... I do have thoughts on it. And I think it's a cop out. It's because people aren't really willing to do this. The way to do it is not to legislate the language; the language should be sold. I mean, the people should be, it should be exciting to them to learn English. ... And we've dropped the ball there, because we're so, you know, we're so isolationist. Don't forget, I lived through isolation days in the '30s. ... "The United States should be involved with another country? I mean, send stuff to England? Heaven forbid!" You know, ... they used to have cartoons with like brick borders around the country. You know, nothing goes in or out of the United States! We don't get involved. ... Nobody wanted World War I, again. And, of course, they got a bigger present. And ... that was part of the problem, even at the Jewish community had when they would go to the American leadership, even Roosevelt, and they would say, "We've got to stop this Nazism in Germany." And it's been borne out that Roosevelt really could have done a lot more than he did. And here he was the idol of all the Jews, and he was really very bad, in this respect, at least that's the information you get today. But he had a big problem; he had a war to win. ... A lot of times when people talk about stuff like that, I'll say, "You know, all this idealistic stuff is terrific, except we had a war to win." ... And that was a very strong, powerful objective, and ... all secondary things. You know, the Hiroshima controversy--I have no use for people who say we shouldn't have done it. And most of the time, I'll say, "Were you there? Were you alive, then? Were you ... a thinking adult? Were you in the service?" And the majority of people that I know who ... think it was a terrible mistake to do the atomic bomb were not in service or else are younger and/or had no clue what was going on. They weren't involved somehow. You know, I always felt involved in the fact that our country was at war, because our city was a producer of stuff. You know, we manufactured stuff that was needed for war. We did metals. We had a shipbuilding company that made life boats and davits. And that's where my cousin worked, incidentally, the one who had a night job in heavy wartime industry, because that kept you out of service if you had a job, and particularly if you had a family besides. That gave you like two points. Family wasn't enough.

KP: But with the war industry combined with family.

RF: Yeah. I don't know if war industry was enough. You know, there was a draft board, and they would decide these things. They were five regular people, ordinary human beings, one of whom was Jewish.

KP: Really, your draft board did have someone who was Jewish?

RF: Yeah, right. In Perth Amboy, there was always. ... I mean, ... ten percent of the population--over ten per cent of the population were Jewish, and also, politically, they were always important, because they would give some money. And you had leadership.

KP: You mentioned earlier that World War II was very formative, even though you were in for a relatively short period of time.

RF: Oh, yeah. I mean, being in the service ... was a wonderful opportunity. I met people, guys from around the country. I met a couple people who ... we stayed friends for a few years. We used to correspond, and if they would come into New York for, two guys from Boston area. All of your friends were alphabetical. I only knew people in "E" and "F" and "G" because that's the way ... you were arranged and the guys you got to know. ... Three of the guys whose names I can remember, Feldman, Fike, and I don't remember the third guy. Oh, (Ehrenbaum?), or (Emberg?), something like that. ... Two of them were from the metropolitan area, and Fike was from Boston. And there was another guy from Boston. ... Most of us became engineers, too, because ... to survive this program, to finish it, you had to have an engineering type of mind. ... Afterwards, because I went back to school, I could compare the eleven-month course, to me, was definitely equal to two years worth of college engineering in what we covered. First of all, we were in class twelve hours a day, almost, and there was no, "Go home and do your homework," you came back to class and did your homework. And ...

KP: Did you go through basic training first?

RF: I had the shortest boot camp on record.

KP: How long were you there?

RF: 27 days. Boot camp was normally, in peacetime, it was sixteen weeks; in wartime it was less. But ...

KP: 27 days is very short.

RF: Well, there are a few little basic things. We never had boat drill, you know, ... if you can be in the Navy, you're supposed to know how to get off the ship or the boat. Swimming we didn't have. And we never had marksmanship at all. I mean, normally, you spent one day learning how to shoot a rifle, because even though you were sailors, you might have to shoot a gun or something. So we didn't do all that. There wasn't time. We did have fire fighting, which was a terrific thing.

KP: You had fire fighting? Some people have talked about fire fighting in the Great Lakes facility.

RF: ... Oh yeah. You would never. I mean, I don't consider myself a physical sort of person. I mean, yeah, I played football with the kids on my block. I was the worst one. You know, I wasn't a very athletic type of guy. I mean, I was very strong and I could, worked hard. ... So here, we marched. It was cold! I mean, I don't remember the temperature, but it was well below zero. And the Navy uniform is a terrific thing, except for real cold, it's not so hot. And we marched like a mile to get to this fire training thing. And, you know, you got these old salts. There's nothing like a pre-war sailor who was still there. These guys, ... they were so cocky. I mean, they knew everything, and they were so really, super-masculine, you know, knowledgeable kind of guys. ... You wouldn't go like this to them [makes hand gesture], because they would bite your finger off. ... And ... they were, what they really were were kind of nice rednecks. You know, they weren't bad guys, but they were something else. And the guys that they kept to train you. So they said, "Okay, ... we're going to set this thing on fire, and you can put it out." And they had this huge tank, it's about this high, and it's full of water. And they float gasoline on the top of it or oil---I don't remember which. And they light it, and you have this intense fire going, ... and you have the hose. And there's three or four guys on it, and it's got like a showerhead. You know, that's really what it is, you know--a spray. And they told you, "You just keep that spray in front of you." For one thing, it shields the heat. And then two, it smothers the fire. And you say, "No way ... this stupid little shower couldn't even wash my hair with." And then it put the fire out, and then you said to yourself, "Hmm." You could do this. You know, it took the fear away. And there were a couple other kinds of fires. And then, when we got there, the ice was so thick from the last group, that they would put these hoses on high pressure and they would point them at, and they were like jackhammers. They would chew the ice away so you had some footing, because otherwise, ... you were playing on an ice-skating rink. Yeah, that was quite a day. ... And it shows you that, you know, if you do something and you know what you're doing, you can do things that are impossible. I mean, if you saw this fire, you would say, "There's no way to put this out. You would need a hundred fire extinguishers or something." And yet we did it with ...

KP: How was the food and the other amenities?

RF: The food in the Navy was good.

KP: Even in the Great Lakes?

RF: Yeah. Well, those first 27 days. Okay, I'll tell you a funny story about that. Everybody always, you know, I mean people knew you were going in for weeks and maybe months sometimes in advance, and they'd say, "Don't volunteer for anything. Never volunteer." So, about the third or fourth day, we go into this some place or another. And this old salt comes out and says, "Um, you're going to learn knot-tying." You know, they would tell you--you're going to learn. Okay, you're going to learn knot-tying. And then he looks around, and he says, "Does anyone here know how to tie knots or do a splice or anything like that?" So I says, "Yeah, I do." So he said, "Okay, you can be my assistant. Come on up here." ... You know, ... I used to fool around with it, I used to do [knots], I like boats, I like water and I like sailing and all that stuff.

So I had a Boy Scout handbook, I think told you how to do this. I wasn't a Boy Scout. Some book, so I taught myself how to do splice, which is really pretty simple, but still nifty. I can still do it. And he says, "Okay, you're going to be my assistant." ... So I went around helping him, whatever, pass the ropes out to the men. ... And I showed some guys that needed help how [to] tie a few knots. And then he said, "I'm going to give you a card. ... When you go to chow, you don't have to wait in line." Because, you know, the entire being in service is waiting in line. ... He says, "You go right to the head of the line. You show them this pass, because I want you to get back here for the next session. I don't want you spending too much time eating." So I said, "Okay." And he said, "Also" phys ed, every day they have phys ed., he says "Do you want to go to phys ed?" "No, I don't want to go to phys ed." So he says, "Okay, here's another thing. You don't go to phys ed. He says, "... You're going to be mine for the time." ... And in our spare time, when we weren't teaching classes, we used to take little lengths of ... small rope, about this long, and we would bind the ends ... starts with an "F"; I can't think of the word. But anyway, we would do that. And what these were were for your ditty bag, which is a small canvas bag that you kept your toiletries and stuff. And it had four eyelets in it, and this rope would go through it, and tie it in a knot. So ... we made the ropes for the ditty bags. We had our own little industry there. ... I don't know if they were replacements or what, because your sea bag, you had a bigger rope on. ... But we didn't make those. We only made the little ropes. And I was fascinated with tying knots.

KP: ... In other words, during boot camp, you avoided phys ed?

RF: Well, I did do some phys ed. I remember ... we would box. We would put on these training gloves. ... And even though we sold boxing gloves in the store I never really--I mean I put one on, maybe, to show somebody--but I never really worked with them. But boy, ... we would go through a few things with these, ... they were one-pound gloves. They're called sixteen-ounce gloves. And the reason why they're so big is that the padding is heavy so [it] shouldn't hurt anybody. But the weight, you know, that extra pound and trying to move your arm around, you know, doing all that. And it ... was difficult. ... Oh, and we left boot camp, our whole company. And ... the other companies ... in Great Lakes used to make fun of us, because they knew who we were. You see, our company ended with the number four. It was 104, 114, 124, and so forth. Every four company were guys who were going through quick. And they were going to radio tech school.

So they used to call us "the old men and the kids with glasses," because the ones who ended up being in it were the young, scholarly types like me. And I did wear glasses at the time, but I don't think I wore them. I didn't have to wear them a lot. And then guys who had been in the field. You know, we had ... a math teacher. He flunked out the first month--he couldn't do the math fast enough. True. And it wasn't that it was complicated math. ...

KP: It was just a string of numbers.

RF: He couldn't do it fast enough. Because everything was speed. You had to do things fast. ... Or if guys who'd been involved with radio of anything, any sort. So they were the old men. And then the rest were young guys with glasses. (laughs) Which a lot of guys wore glasses, because,

you know, if you were a good physics student or a good math student, you could do this up to some point. And I learned a lot from it. ... I mean, the process of what we were, we were repairmen. We were going to fix these complicated machineries that nobody understood how they worked, anyway. But we did. We really did. And what it taught me was to analyze a problem and find a solution for it. You know, sure, ... if you tested every tube that was in the thing, there'd be twenty, 30 tubes in some of these things, you'd find a bad tube. ... And the guys who taught were really clever. ... They would fix a tube so that it would essentially test good, but it wasn't good, so you'd get fooled, because usually when a tube fails, the little heater inside doesn't work. Well, ... they took the pin in the tube, and they drilled it out, ... and then they put the solder back in it, so you couldn't tell. And this ... wasn't connected anyplace. Now this is something that normally wouldn't happen. I mean, a tube doesn't fail that way. But they created ... this incorrect tube. And ... I know my partner, this guy (Fike?) that I mentioned from Boston, we worked together. We were a team, you worked two men together in trouble shooting. And we found it, and the guy's like, "How did you know that?" But we knew, because the voltage reading some place else was wrong, and the only way that could be wrong was if this tube didn't do it's thing. So we deduced it. So you learned a lot about deduction and trouble-shooting and fixing things. And to this day, I say that anything that works, if it's broken, as long as I have approximately the proper tools and enough time, I'll fix it. You know, I don't need any diagrams or anything else. Diagrams help, but you will learn. And I fix things all the time. In the store, I used to fix loads of things. I still do, now and then. ... Cameras, I couldn't do, because it was too delicate very often.

KP: Were you in training when V-J day occurred?

RF: Yeah, yeah. V-E Day and V-J Day were two important days. V-E Day, I was in Dearborn, right outside of Detroit, and we were right next to the Ford plant where they tested the rockets that we had; ram-jet rockets, which made a tremendous noise. And this could happen at any time, day or night. And, you know, every time one came off the assembly line, they would test it. ... (makes noise.) And we were a ... small base, and we were in this barbed-wire-enclosed area, and ... these were these temporary type, not quonset huts exactly. I don't know what they were doing there, but that's where they put us. ... I think originally, it might have been a school for some other purpose, and then they converted it. This was the second school you went to, where you started. The first month, you were in a school that taught you basic math.

KP: Where was that?

RF: That was in Michigan City, Indiana. That was in the little Naval Reserve Armory, we're 300 people in the whole place. And it was a fun thing. And there, you were very shielded. I think we got out one day in the whole month that we were there. And they took us to a dance at a country club, and I met this nice girl there, and I danced with her. And then, I ended up, there was no way of seeing her again, because that was the one time you were going to be there, and then you went some place else. And I ended up, it was a measle epidemic going on. ... No, I'm sorry, it was a Scarlet Fever epidemic that was going on. And all of a sudden, I have symptoms. So I go to the sick bay, and they say, "Gee, we think you have Scarlet Fever. We're going to ship you up to the hospital in Great Lakes." And there's three other guys that did have Scarlet Fever.

And we went in a four-person ambulance. And then, when I get there, the doctors keep looking and looking. He says, "I don't know. You don't look like you have Scarlet Fever. I don't know what you got. We'll put you in isolation for a day." And the next day, they said, "You've got German Measles." So they put me in a ... ward there. This hospital was a series of small buildings. Each building was for a disease. So you went to the German Measles building. And everybody had German Measles there. And what I know for sure is I am immune to Scarlet Fever. Because ... we had double-decker bunks, even in this hospital, and the guy, ... most of us didn't really feel so bad, because German Measles is four or five days and you're better. But this guy was sick, and he used to lie on my bunk, because he didn't feel like climbing up to his. I figured, "What's the difference?" So sure enough, the next day, he's got Scarlet Fever. He doesn't have German Measles. And away he goes. And I had been involved with the three other guys in the ambulance with me had Scarlet Fever. ... And so then I went back. And the course was at such a rapid pace, even though I was only gone a week, I had to wait until a new class formed and start over. So what are they going to do with me? I can't go to class. So they say, "Well, you'll help out in the sick bay. We've got a lot of sick people here." So, every time there's a Scarlet Fever person, we had to pack up their belongings, because they were too sick. Because wherever you went, everything you owned went with you--your sea bag and all your goodies, belongings went with you. So that was my job. I would pack up the sea bags of the guys who were sick. And I never got Scarlet Fever, so I know I'm immune. ... So I lost one month that way. And then, another month was when my mother died or something. I lost another week, so I was set back again. And then, it was springtime. So now, they let us out in the afternoon. ... It's a little town, Michigan City. ... It reminded me somewhat of Perth Amboy, because we have a Navy Armory there, too. And ... I see this girl, and I said, "That's the blonde from the dance that night." So I go over ... and we recognize each other, and she says, "What are you doing here?" Because they knew everybody was there for a month and then you went away. And this was two months later. So, I said, "Well, I got the German Measles." And she got hysterical. And I figured, ... "What's she laughing about?" ... I was sick for a couple of days. You really felt sick. And so she said, ... "I had German Measles."

KP: So you might well have caught it from her.

RF: I did. No question I did, because nobody else in that whole small group had. They didn't know where it came from. And that's the only outside exposure we had. ... And you know, it was all very innocent dancing. I mean, I never kissed her or anything, but still, you're that close together, and it is an airborne thing. So that was one of the funny little things that happened to me. ... And some of the instructors we had, and they were maybe a year older than we were or two years older, they were so good. ... I had this one guy, I'll never forget him. His name was, last name was Cohn, and he was blonde, and he was ... kind of tubby. And he taught us screwdrivers. And at that time, there were only two kinds of screwdrivers. Those were the straight blade and the Phillips that have the four plates on it. And he would tell this story of how the Phillips screwdriver got invented, which he invented. I mean, it was just a make-believe story. ... And by the time he was done with this very short story, you would never forget a Phillips screwdriver in your life. I mean, 'cause the guy's name was Philly Phillips. "That how it got it's name." ... He says, "He kept breaking these other screwdrivers, so he figured if he put two blades together like that, it won't break." And that, to me, was magnificent teaching. I mean

he made it funny, but he made his point. And we learned, I mean you learned so much in such a short time. And these guys, what they would do is they would take guys out ... who went through the course. And if they felt they were good, ... they would send them to six-weeks teaching school. I mean, that's what we called it. And then they would send the guys back. And they made most of the professors I had here [at Rutgers] look sick.

KP: Really? You found the teaching much better?

RF: Well, it was simpler teaching. But, we were being taught a complex subject.

KP: Yes.

RF: And these guys made it real. I mean, when I came back and I took a ... one-semester course in electricity, which was part of being, I was mechanical engineering, not electrical engineering. And, I mean, the thing was child's play for me, ... because I could look at a schematic, and I could feel it. I mean, you know, it wasn't just lines to me. I could see those electrons flowing through and coming into a resister and slowing down. And I knew exactly what they did. And I tried to impress that upon my kids. I said certain things that are slightly, 'cause electricity is a very difficult subject. I mean, you know, what does it look like? I don't know. You know, what is it? Nobody knows. I mean, you know, but it's nothing like. It's much easier, that's why they use water analogies all the time. But I said, "Gee, you got to learn to feel these things, to understand them and to know them, ... and like visualize them in your mind." And I could do that with that. I mean, I could look at a circuit today, or I've devised some things at home every now and then. ... And I draw it after I'm done wiring it, so if something breaks, I know ... what I'm doing. You go down into my cellar, you see a bunch of wires hanging in midair with a drawing behind it. That's my volume control in the kitchen for the speakers that are plugged ... into the den or something like that. And I love doing things like that.

KP: It sounds like you really regret not being able to practice mechanical engineering.

RF: Yes, yes I did. And even more important ... is my thinking was so right. Everybody said, "You spent all this time in the Navy on electronics," because by the time we got out, we were called electronic technician's mates. And I says, "Yeah, but there are lots of guys like that, and they're all going to become electrical engineers." I said, "I'm going to become a mechanical engineer, but I'm going to understand electronics, too." And I said, "What I saw there, I visualize being able to control things by remote control--electrically." Robotics is really what I'm talking about. And I didn't know it then, but I said, "That's what I want to do." And when I came here, you know, I went to my advisor and said, "I want to take courses in remote control theory. And they really didn't have anything like that. They had something on controls; an electrical course, which I took, but that was just starting and stopping motors. But had I pursued that thought, and you know, if I was able to guide myself, I would have been a pioneer in robotics and so many other things that depend on feedback. ... I said, ... "Mechanical machines are going to be controlled electrically." And, of course, I was a dead on. ... I wasn't even a little off the target. And I knew how, I mean I kind of knew. They all use the same thing. We had this one thing, where you turned this little crank, and this huge antenna on top of the ship, which was called a

bedspring antenna, because it was the size of a bedspring. And you could turn that thing, ... you know, like I could turn this--even easier. ... You just ... moved a half a degree and you could control it. So I said, "Wow--if you can do that, you can turn the wheel on a lathe; you can make a drill press; you can go up and down; you can do all of these things. ... And the whole way it worked, is when it turned up there, it fed a signal back to tell you where it was and tell this mechanism where it was. And that's the whole principle. You know, ... it was called a (Selson?) motor. It was a very simplistic thing. And it was used a little bit, but you know, not a lot. It just happened to work great for antennas.

KP: After you finished your training, what happened to you? Because you were in the Navy for a while.

RF: Not very long, because my eleven-month school ended up with the breaks, ... the two months that I lost, once when I went home for emergency leave and then, oh that's right, I got emergency leave before my mother died. I was trying to get the timing straight in my mind. That's what happened. And this dopey chief is sitting there with the officer, and they're trying to decide. They said, "Yeah, we got this thing from the Red Cross. Your mother's sick, and they want us to let you go home." So I knew my mother was sick. She had been sick for a while. And the chief says, ... he says, "You know, there's really no sense in letting him go home now. His mother has cancer, and she's going to die pretty soon. And then we'll have to send him home again." I could have killed this guy. I didn't know she had cancer. And ... finally the officer, I think, prevails and says, "Well, let's get him out of here, let him go home, five days." And I had no money, so I hitched a ride on a plane and so I hitchhiked to the airport. People in the Midwest were great. This wasn't even quite the Midwest then. I don't remember where. Yeah, I guess I was in Dearborn still. ... We never took public transportation, you just walked out of the base. You stood there and cars came to pick you up and took you away. ... It was so terrific. ... I went on a strange time of day, it wasn't like when normally you would get out for weekend passes or anything. So this little black Ford Tinlizzy comes along and there's an elderly couple in it and they said, "Where you going?" and I said, "I'm going to the airport, I have an emergency leave. I gotta go home, my mother's sick". You know, and those three words, those three things put together, and you're in uniform, would get you anything you wanted. So they drove me to the airport. They said, "Oh, yeah, we're going right by it". And I knew they weren't, because they kept looking for the turnoff. ... You know, they were going someplace else, but they were so nice, they took me there. And then I walk in and I announced, "I want a plane to go to New York". So the guy said, "Yeah, we got a plane, it's out there. It's reeving up and ready to take off. Maybe if we get you out there quick, we can catch it before it leaves." So we jump in the jeep and go zooming out and...

KP: Was this military or civilian?

RF: ... No, military, ... it was an Army base. ... And we ... opened the door, it was a small plane. And I hop in, and there's three or four other soldiers, and one was a WAC, a woman-red hair-like yours almost, but redder [speaking to Tara Kraenzlin]. And she'd been traveling for four days from Seattle, she was going to New York, too. ... Finally, the motor stopped and the pilot comes out and he says, "What are you doing here?" ... He says, "You gotta have a parachute." I

say, "Oh." He says, "We're not [going], the radio's broken, we gotta fix it before we leave." So I was thinking, "I'll tell him I'm a ... radio technician, right and I'd fix the radio," ... but we were still in the theory part of things. So we go back to the hanger. I tell them, "I need a parachute." So they say, "Okay, dollar deposit". They give me the parachute. So I take the parachute and go back on the plane and I sit down. And what was the parachute good for? Sitting on, because there were no seats on this plane, everybody sits on the floor. And I'm thinking, "You know, this is pretty dumb, I don't even know how to work this thing, other than what you saw in the movies." ... But I now had a parachute for a dollar, and this was a deposit. (laughter) And the parachute was probably worth 500 dollars. (laughter) So finally the plane takes off, and ... I'm sitting there and I feel water dripping down my neck. So I look up and ... there was a metal plate in the top of the airplane where there had been a dome, you know, one of these little bubbles. ... I found out when we were traveling that this had been a training plane for navigation or something. And so they'd look up through there to check out the stars or whatever, I'm not sure what. But anyway, there's something dripping down my neck. So, this is where the red-headed WAC comes into the story, she's chewing gum, so I said, "Gotta piece of gum?" She says, "Yeah." So I chew the gum up. (laughter)

KP: So you sealed up the crack?

RF: ... I sealed up the crack and the water stopped coming in. So anyway, then we land and so I get out and look around and I said, "This isn't New York." And so she said, "Yeah, it's Buffalo. ... We're going to Buffalo, where did you think you are?" I said, "You're going to New York." ... [She said,] "Well, Buffalo's in New York." But to me New York, there's only one New York, New York City. (laughter) I said, you know, "What's this state nonsense?" So I said, " Oh, ... what do I do now?" So I go to Traveller's Aid or something, because I ... don't think I had enough money ... to buy a ticket or something. ... I had gotten some money from the Red Cross somewhere along the line. So I go to Traveller's Aid and I said, ... "What do I do? ... I gotta get to New Jersey, I gotta get to New York, first. That's the only way to get to New Jersey, to go to New York." So they said, "Well, there's a train, blah, blah ..." So I said, "Well, I guess I have to take it, so how do you get to the train?". And they said, "Well, you have to go downtown to the train station." I said, "Well how do you do that?" They said, "Well, there's an airport bus there. It's empty, but he's going back and he'll take you part of the way or something." So I get on the bus and I say, "I gotta go to the train station." And he says, "Well, I don't go to the train station." So we're talking and I tell him and so he says, "Well, ... I'm gonna go by the train station, I'll slow down and I'll stop for a moment and you just jump out and go." So I said, "Okay." So he took me to the train station. But I've never forgotten how nice people would be when you were in trouble a little bit. I mean once, I got the money that I could have bought a ticket if I had to, I was doing this for speed, not for economy. And two, the people that went out of their way for me. You know, then I get on the train finally, and I get to New York and so I said, "Okay, now I have to get to Perth Amboy." There's no train at this time. So ... somehow, I get down to the Holland Tunnel, and I figured I'd hitch. So I'm standing there, I'm standing there, and I can't get a ride.

So finally I got a ride and somehow I got back to Perth Amboy, I don't remember the rest of the story. But, then the next day or two, I mean I went to see my mother. I said, "Gee, I think I'll go

out to Rutgers and see the guys at the fraternities, and see whose around still." And I said, I had a car, and I could drive and all this and that, but I'm not going to take the car, I'll use up gas. There was gas rationing and we were ..."C," which was the worst. You know, you got a couple cupfuls all week or something. So, I figured, "I'll hitch." So I put on my ... Navy uniform, [which] is very visible, even more so than an Army uniform, with the white hat and the whole thing, ... whichever hat, the dress hat or the white hat. And I go and I walk uptown and get on the street that goes to New Brunswick. It's called "New Brunswick Avenue" it must go to New Brunswick. But, I knew my way. And these cars are going by and nobody wants to pick me up, ... and I even recognized some of the people in the cars, but they didn't recognize me. I said, "This is ridiculous." ... I know there's a bus, but I never took it, I always drove. ... So finally a guy comes along on a motorcycle and he said, "Where you going?" And I said, "I'm going ... to New Brunswick, I want to go to ... Rutgers". He said, "I'll take you there." So it was a young guy. I hop on the motorcycle, and we go. And again, the Navy uniform wasn't designed for riding on a motorcycle, I mean, it was cold. I mean, the wind was driving me nuts. But I got there, and, then I said, "None of this!" So I took a bus home.

KP: So you found it was much easier to hitch in the Midwest?

RF: Oh yeah. People were excellent! Even in Chicago, which was a Navy town, I mean more so than San Diego. There were more sailors in Chicago than anywhere, because it was a crossroads, first of all. Everybody going from one place to another ended up in Chicago. And there were a lot of bases. There were ... small bases. I was stationed in Navy Pier, which ... sticks out into the water. ... And I was there for ... seven months. And, you know, people in Chicago, you know, it's a big town. It's a hick town compared to Manhattan, but still it's a big city. And it's got subways and ... the loop and all that stuff. And we rode everywhere for nothing. I mean, ... your uniform was your badge. You could take all public transportation free. And we used to get around, but I'll never forget--I was waiting for the train on the Loop. And it's up in the air, it's like an elevated track. And there's a couple there, you know, be about what my parents age would be, I suppose. So we were talking, and they realized I was Jewish, and this was before Passover. So they said, "Where are you going for Seder on Passover?" So I said, "Gee, I'm not sure." I said, "Some friend or relative or somebody knew someone in Chicago, and I was supposed to contact them, and they probably were going to invite me for Seder." [So they said], "Well, if it doesn't work out," he says, "you can come to our house." And I'm thinking, "Can you just see anybody in New York City, even in those days, you know, meeting a perfect stranger, even though you're in a sailor suit, and inviting them to your home for Seder?" I mean, you know, ... they would cart you off to the looney bin. (laughter) And here these people were. They didn't know any more than I told them, you know. And I didn't look any different than Charles Manson might have looked.

KP: Did you go to their house?

RF: No, I didn't, because this other friend ... came through.

KP: But it seems like it really touched you.

RF: Yeah, you know, that people would do this.

KP: Did you have any dinners? A lot of people remember very fondly being invited to dinners on Sunday afternoons.

RF: ... No, ... I never did that, really. ... But this party, this once-a-month party was a terrific thing. ... You know, this was a club, like a golf club kind of place, it was a nice place. And they would have this band, they'd get all the girls from the town ... to come. ... And it was really ... so chaste it was ridiculous. ... And also, the USO's all over country. ... I never really met anybody, but a few people, a few women I would dance with. But a lot of guys would find dates at the USO, and so a lot of them would end up getting married and stuff. I mean, you know, this was just really nice. And people were wonderful. And I think the war really brought out the best in people in a lot of ways in the community compared to, well, today times are different somewhat. But I mean, even compared to when I came back after I was still in the same age bracket.

KP: You noticed a change, that attitudes changed after the war.

RF: ... Yeah, afterwards, ... people tucked the war away quickly. I mean, you know, you were happy it was over, and everything was back to normal again. ... Everybody could go about scrounging, and making money, and doing whatever. ... And some of the aggressiveness you learned in the military maybe went over into your everyday life. But guys would, your talking about them not talking about the war, very few ever talked about real battle. They would talk about, you know, meeting girls. They would talk about tricks, and ... fun things ... in training camp and stuff like that, you know, craziness. But the real battle, I started to tell you about ... the guy who was a German Jewish refugee, and he still spoke with a bit of an accent. And he was in the Army. And somehow or another, they sent him to Germany. I mean, somebody was not using their head. They should have sent him to Japan. And he said, "They're out on a patrol and they heard trucks coming. So ... they jumped into the gullies on the side of the road ... and ... disappeared into the underbrush." And he could hear them. They were coming along, and ... they were looking. And he says, ... "And they were talking in German," he understands. ... [The Germans said, "I think there's some Americans here. Maybe if we find some, we can shoot them." Or something to that [effect]. And he said, ... "He sunk into the ground even further." I mean, can you imagine being more scared then, particularly since the Germans figured if anybody heard them, they wouldn't know what they were talking about. And just the whole situation--I can visualize it. I can just see.

KP: Is this person, Ditz, the German Jew refugee you mentioned earlier?

RF: No ...

KP: This is someone else?

RF: Dintz ...

KP: Was born in the United States.

RF: He was born in the United States, and he never, he got hurt in training, and that was it. But the German Jewish refugee, he was in the infantry? And he was a Rutgers graduate. Do you know his name?

RF: Oh boy--I don't. I mean, it may come to me.

KP: If you know it, I'd really be curious, if he's still alive, to try to interview him.

RF: Yeah, he could tell you stories.

KP: Because I could get a whole different perspective.

RF: You'd get a whole total different viewpoint. I mean, you know, he was a bright fellow. He's a very nice guy. Boy, I don't even know where my old stuff is. I've moved so many times that I just keep condensing it into smaller boxes.

KP: I'll ask you that later. After V-J Day, what happened to your unit?

RF: ... I was going to tell you that. .... It doesn't really make any difference. The story's the same. That's how I got to tell you about being ... outside Detroit in, I forgot the name of the place already. Anyway, so we had two classes ... of people there. There was an A company and a B company. The B companies were boots, that was us. We were still considered boots, because we hadn't been in that long. In fact, at that time, I'd been in two months, two and a half months, something like that, three months. It had to be V-E Day, because I wouldn't still have been there. And then there was the A company. These were Marines a lot or sailors who'd returned from duty and in a lot of cases had suffered trauma, you know, battle fatigue, so they wanted to get them out of the fighting business and into something simpler like doing repairs, like we were doing. So they would recycle these guys through the course. And the night that it was announced, I guess V-E Day, they ... didn't wait to be told or anything, because an announcement came over later on that all of the A companies got liberty that night and the B companies would take up the guard duties and to report, blah, blah, whatever. ... And another nice thing about the Navy, I guess the Army, too, I guess, is you have guard duty all the time. You don't know what for, but you're always on guard. So, it mostly was fire guards and stuff like that. So I drew what they called perimeter guard. I was supposed to walk along this fence from one side of this place to the other side of the place. It was long, you know, ten blocks, maybe or so of fence. And see that everything was okay on the fence. ... And the A company, the guys who'd been in combat and come back, they didn't wait for the announcement.

----------End of Tape Two, Side One----------

KP: You're on guard duty at this fence

RF: Yeah.

KP: Walking up and down.

RF: Yeah, and also, ... I would go back to the main gate and see what was going on. And then the guy started coming back, because you had to be in by ... two o'clock or something like that. And so they were coming back, and they looked like disaster. I mean, their uniforms were all messed up. ... I noticed a lot of guys were all red around the mouth, ... and you could see, you know, your skivvy shirt showed between the V collar, and it was solid red. So I said, "What happened?" He said, "We were kissing all the girls." This was lipstick. They were all covered with it, and it was a riot! And you know, the stories went on afterwards. Guys did everything under the sun. ... It was just complete mayhem, and that was V-E Day. And V-J Day, of course, everybody knows the famous pictures ... in New York. ... So that was very exciting, you know, to see all these guys come back and they were ... drunk and this, that, and the other thing.

The next day, I'm told, "You've got to report to blah, blah, to captain's mast." So I go. ... And captain's mast ... is equivalent of ... being taken to your ... local police station, ... a municipal judge kind of thing. And it goes on your record. So they said, "How come your sector, all these windows were broken?" You know, the buildings that were on that side of the fence. I said, "I don't know. I didn't see anybody break into the buildings." I said, "After all, it took me 25 minutes to go from ... one end to the other. So they said, "Why didn't you use the bicycle?" I said, "What bicycle? No one ever told me [of a] bicycle. They just told me to cover the fence." So they were really, ... I guess they realized that they had done some dumb things, and that the base was bashed apart a bit. ... And they had to talk to somebody. But I think I finally talked them out of putting it on my record or doing anything. I said, ... "Nobody told me what to do." So they said, "Okay." ... And I was really upset, I mean, because the captain's mast wasn't like staying after school for one day. ...

KP: No, no.

RF: It was a legal thing. You know, you had a quick, quick jury made up of two or three officers or something. And the other funny incident with this type of guard duty bit, two of them. When I was at Navy Pier, I once got guard duty on the front gate. So you report, and you know where the front gate is. You go, and they give you a belt with a holster, and it's got a 45-caliber pistol in it. And I didn't even have rifle training. (laughter) So I took a pistol out, and I knew a little bit. We sold guns in the store, but not hand guns, only long guns we used to sell, shot guns and rifles. So I'm looking at the thing, and I take the clip out. There's no bullets in it. And I say, "Oh boy, is this stupid!" I mean supposing somebody really tried to get in here or there's some kind of problem and I have a gun without bullets in it. You know, 'cuz I could see me--POW POW POW--shooting all the bad guys down. 'Cause we did have classified stuff there. The RADAR ... that we worked on was classified, but it was really ... already out-moded, see. They gave us to play with the stuff that they couldn't use on the ships anymore. But technically, it was classified.

... And then, ... when V-J Day came in about three or four days, I was in school, in Navy Pier with my unloaded gun. (laughter) And they said, "Okay, school's over. There's no sense going further. ... You're going to be discharged ... in a month or two and we'll find something." They

didn't know what they were going to do. So we sat around and did nothing for about a week. And then, all of a sudden, they said, "School's started again." Someone realized that a lot of people volunteered in the Navy in order to get into the Eddie program. So they had, in a sense, made a deal. You know, you come into the Navy, and we'll put you in the Eddie program, and we'll teach you all this stuff. They said, "We have to finish teaching you the stuff. So we went back to class. And, of course, the classes would get smaller and smaller, because they started to take guys out due to age. You know, if you were ... 32, you got out before a guy who was 22. Or for whatever, and guys were disappearing all over the place, so our companies were getting smaller and smaller.

Now, of course, we had guard duties, see. You had to have every night, every two hours, somebody had to get up and walk around our area, which consists of five high beds. They weren't double deckers; they were quadruple-deckers. The top and bottom ones they didn't use, because they found that people got sick. They were up too high, and it was draftier or down to low and it was too dusty. They had a lot of problems at that facility. They had to build these walls, because it was this huge warehouse. It used to be an empty warehouse like a mile long. It had railroad tracks going down the middle of it, and there was one storage area on each side of this road that went down the middle. And on the second floor and the first floor, trucks could ride. It's huge! ... So wind streams would develop inside the building, so they had to put these doors up. There [are] two doors, which broke it up into three general areas. And then each ... block of these bunks was a company.

And we were a 120 men in a company. So you got guard duty maybe once or twice a month, you know. Two hours was no big deal. But then the numbers were getting smaller and smaller. And I was company clerk. My job was to assign the guard duties and the work details. So pretty soon, ... mathematically, I said, "We can't do this. There aren't enough people to go around. (laughter) ... Guys aren't going to get any sleep night after night." ... I don't remember what the trouble was. So I went to the guy at the next company. And this is all in one room. I mean, there was no wall between company one, two, three. And then, maybe there was four, five or six companies, and then there was a wall and a door in the wall. So I go to the guys on either side, and I say, "How are you guys fixed?" So they said, ... "We don't have enough people. We're not going to be able to do the guard." I said, "Let's go see the captain or whoever was in charge of the place, and we'll explain that we got this problem, and if we pool our resources, ... and the three companies, we'll have two guards, instead of the three companies having three guards, and everything will work out." And I said, "Later, if it gets worse, so three companies will have one guard." So we go, and this guy was an educator, because this was a school, and he was young and they made him a captain or something. And he was, you know, in his thirties. He looked like any principal or teacher would have appeared. And we tell him the story, and he says, "You know, you've got to have a guard for each company. It says so." And he wouldn't do it. So I said, "Okay." And we walked away and I said, "Look--what we'll do, is we'll tell the guards that whatever area they're in ... we'll patrol it like we're supposed to, but we're going to have two guys, instead of three guys or whatever. And if they're at what's supposed to be 104," You see, ... someone would come around and say, "Where's the guard for 104 or something like that." I said, "You tell them you're the guard for 104." They're not going to ask for the next one. And, you know, they just stop every now and then. So whatever area you're in, ... we knew the

difference, I said, "That's what you tell them." And so we decided we'd do this. And we did it, and, of course, it worked. And there were no fires. And that's all this was for. This was a fire guard.

We had other guard duties. You would walk around downstairs where the equipment was and the classrooms were, and that was to see that nobody fooled around with the equipment, not that people would go in. But even a disgruntled student say, might want to go down and smash the machine, because he was mad at it. But at least you had a guard to prevent that from happening. ... That made me think about the stupidity ... of some of the people who are entrusted to do big jobs. I mean, this guy ran a school with thousands of people in it, and that was his answer, you know. "You've got to do it by ... [the book]." I said, " You're going to have somebody that's going to have to relieve themselves." And I don't mean that in the way that it sounds--relieve themselves from guard duty. I said, "You know, mathematically it's [not] going to work out." I said, "I'm taking guard duty, and I'm not supposed to." But just everybody had to do it. So ... that was the military, ... for every story of beautiful cleverness that the military and the guys in it really do, there's another story about the stupidity ... of the house that the thing lives in. You know, the set of rules that are set up and nobody wants to mess with them. ... Those are my real war stories. I mean, compared to most people's war stories, they're kind of insignificant, but they were meaningful for me.

KP: So you finished the class.

RF: Finished the job. ... So they said, "Okay, now we're sending you," in great wisdom, because the story had always been that if you lived in the East, they were going to discharge you in the West or down in Texas or some crazy place, but, of course, that cost a lot of wasted money, because they had to pay for your train fare. So they said, "Okay, you're finished now. We're going to assign you in bases near where you're going to be discharged." So all the guys from the East Coast are going to go to Bayonne. There's a Navy shipyard there. And I said, "Wow--they're really getting smart!" And then we would get discharged from Lido Beach, which is near Coney Island, which you know, you had to go through a place that was set up as a discharge center. It was a whole procedure. ... So that's what we'd did. So we get there. Here, I think there were sixteen of us. And we were bright. And we were ambitious. I mean, here we'd gone through all this schooling. We were just raring to do something. And we were getting a little bored, too when the war was over. And we knew we were getting out in twelve days or fourteen days, but if we had to be there every day, we wanted to do something.

... Okay, so we have to report to this place. It's a huge warehouse, you know, like Navy Pier West, ... but in some ways smaller, but still huge. And there's the typical, the old chief in his dungarees. You see when a chief wears his uniform, his dress uniform, he looks like an officer. But in his work clothes, he's wearing blue dungarees, just like everybody else. ... So he comes and he explains to us what we're going to do. He says, "You see down there, the end of the place?" There's this huge wall. I mean, it was like three stories high and several hundred feet wide. And stacked up are chests, one on top of each other, all the way up to the ceiling. So he says, "See those chests? They're spare parts chests from ships that have sunk." In other words,

the smaller ships had a tender. You hear of a submarine tender or a destroyer tender. Well, that carried all of the extra supplies for these ships, which were very small and couldn't carry much. So they had chests of spare parts for the all the electronic equipment. So of course, a lot of the ships were sunken. During the war, they were too busy to do much except eventually, they all ended up there in Bayonne. I mean, somebody always has to figure out what to do with something--it goes to Bayonne. So they stuck them all up. And he said, "I'm going to go, and I'm going to get a chest, and I'm going to bring it down." So he goes with his forklift, because they're on pallets. And he goes up, you know, picks up one chest; brings it; comes back. And there are a couple pallets there. And he says, "You're gonna open the chest, and you're going to take all the little parts out," and then, ... you probably haven't seen anything like this, because they don't have them any more. In New York, ... at the phone stations, they used to have a rack with the phone books, and it was like this wide [hand motion] and it was full of books.

KP: Yes, I have seen them.

RF: ... Okay, some place they must have something like that still--in office buildings, maybe. So they have something like that, and it's huge with all these books, and they said, "This is the conversion of the American Navy numbers to NATO numbers." I mean, this was the end of the war, already getting ready for the next war. (laughter) They're figuring out to have a universal numbering system for all the parts, so if the British need them or whoever our allies might be. So he said, "Okay, so you're going to get the part, and you're going to look it up in the book and see if it's got a number. If it doesn't have a number, ... you're going to open up the package and see what it is and figure out." Because we knew from resisters and condensers and different parts. "Figure out what it is, and somehow, you're going to find it, and you're going to assign it the NATO number," so he said. It was like a big game; it was fun. So we were tearing, we were working, and you know, we're smart. I have to emphasize this. We really knew what we were doing, and this was a very simple job, actually. And we did it, and it was like a game, and the idea was to get it done. See, we wanted to get that whole chest done before this dumb ox chief came back to us. And so, we did that, and by the end of the day, we had a pallet with a little mound of stuff on it. He comes with his forklift, and he takes the pallet away, and I don't know where it went, but they take it away. That chest was done. And the next morning, he brings another chest. So, and we do the same thing. But, you know, being bright young guys that we are and mathematically inclined, we start figuring 26 years, we'll be done, or something like that. (laughter) I mean, ... we calculated the number of, the rate we were doing with the sixteen guys. So, of course, we did it for like twelve days or something. And I went home and got my car, and I would bring it to the base, and every night, we would go out. And I would take the guys, there were two of us who were from New York area. The third guy, I don't know what happened to him. And this one guy, I'll never forget. He was from Paducah, Kentucky. Now Paducah is not a little town, but it's ...

KP: But it's pretty isolated.

RF: Pretty isolated. And, ... he was bright enough to do well in the course, but sophistication: minus three. And ... he was a nice guy. ... We really had affection for him. We liked him, because he was a good guy, and ... you know, he was innocent. And he was a big guy, sort of. ...

See, I used to know his name. Now it's, you know, 50 years is a long time. It's not quite 50 years.

KP: But this is probably the first time that he'd been really out of Paducah.

RF: ... Oh yeah, but he'd been in Chicago for seven months. It's not like he'd never saw a big town before.

KP: Yes.

RF: And we used to go around to places and stuff. So we got him in a car, and a couple of the guys. I don't remember, I think one of them was from Chicago. And we took them on a tour of Manhattan, and I showed them the East Side and the West Side and this and that, and I wasn't that good, but I knew a little bit. And then, we ended up in the Village. And Chicago is a very chaste sort of place, compared to the Village. And we went to some kind of girlie show. I don't remember what it was, in a little night club, and he was beside himself. ... "I don't believe what I just saw! You know, how could you? What a town!" He says, "This is great!" ... He was absolutely flabbergasted. So that was the end the war; that was the end of my war.

So then we, oh, one last bit--then we finally, it was discharge day, so they schlep us to Lido Beach, and to the discharge center, the Navy Discharge Center. You stand in a line, always standing in a line, and we're talking, and a guy says, "You know, if you've been overseas for anything, if you've been out of the continental United States, you get a $200 bonus." So I said, "What?" They said, ... "Did you ever, under orders, take a train from Chicago?" I said, "I was in Chicago." You can't be more in the United States than Chicago. I said, "How am I going to get outside the continental limits?" So, he said, "Did you ever take a train from there to New York under orders?" So I said, "Yeah." When I was transferred to Bayonne, we took this, there's this one central train that goes through Canada in order to get to Buffalo. You know, you've got a choice which side of the lake you're going on from someplace, I don't know, from Detroit area, I guess. So I said, "Yeah, I went through Canada." ... So I got 200 bucks, you know, and it was legal, and I was entitled to it. But that's the way the law was written. Guys said, a lot of guys in the Air Force kind of knew about it, and they would purposely fly out beyond the six-mile limit or whatever it is, you know, if they were doing practice runs of some sort. And once they went over that, they would mark it down on their records. They'd been out of the country--200 bucks! And then you got out; then you went back to college.

... Oh--another big decision I had to make, ... I really liked this stuff, I mean, RADAR and SONAR and all that stuff was great, and I would have loved to play with it. I mean, to use it. ... We'd fiddle with it, but ours wasn't, half of them weren't even connected to anything, so ... they didn't really work as such. And they kept saying, "We want volunteers to stay in for a couple of extra months," and you could go to Eniewetok to the atom bomb experiment. So I said, "Wow! That would be exciting. I want to do this. But then I said, "If I do that, I'm not going to get back." They said, "The soonest you'll be back is October." And this was like in say June or July. I don't even remember. So if I do that ...

KP: Of which year?

RF: Of 1946, the year ... I was getting out. So, I said, "If I do that, I'm going to miss the first semester, and then I'm going to start school in the middle of the year." And I knew that was always craziness. You know, you were out of whack, you were out of sync with everything. You know, you didn't start school when you were supposed to. You came in the middle, and you'd be lost. I mean, you couldn't start courses from the beginning. It would be a tremendous waste of time, ... because you're very anxious to get your life going, you know. I'd lost a whole year of my life. It was a year and a half, but scholastically, I was one year behind. You know, I was originally going to be the Class of '48, but since I was in service, I would end up in the Class of '49. So academically, I lost a year. Calendar-wise, I lost a year and a half. And it works, because we went back from the quarter system to the semester system. So my two quarters gave me ... almost a year. And by taking a couple extra courses, I was able to do it. I don't remember anymore. ... I took physics lab at night or something, chemistry, something. I had to take one course at night to make it all work out. I had a heavy load. I took a lot of courses. ... So I said, "I don't think so. I'd better not. You know, ... I've got to get back to school, and graduate and go to work," 'Cause, you know, my brother was going to go into the store, and better be ready to do something. So I didn't go. And, of course, in retrospect, that was the second smartest thing I ever did, because many of the people who went to Eniewetok unfortunately got radiation that they didn't know about or didn't think about. And I probably would have been fine, because I would have been inside the ship, you know, working my dials or something like that. And I think ... the guys who went on land afterward to track stuff and measure stuff were probably the ones who got most of the sicknesses.

KP: But it was really an exciting opportunity, you thought?

RF: Oh yeah, oh yeah. ... I mean, can you think of it? It was like a dream; to go on a great experiment; to see, to learn about the ... atomic bomb and to watch it, and do it. And then, also, to be at sea. ... I grew up next to the water. I lived four blocks from the water in Perth Amboy, and as a kid, we used to play down ... on the waterfront. ... They were building a beach, which means they had to pump sand in, and they boxed it off. And they used to leave their construction barge--it was small, but it was inside this like artificial lake where they were going to pour all of the sand and fill it up. I don't know how they got the boat out of there in the end. I guess it was small enough that another crane [could lift it]. But we used to sneak on it after hours in the summer. And we would push it back and forth, you know, somehow pull the ropes. But it was very exciting, to be fooling around in the water! And I like things like that.

KP: So you really would have liked to have served on a ship.

RF: Oh, yes, yes. I would have. I mean, I really did. I mean, ... once I was close, I mean here was an opportunity to be on a ship. I really wanted to be on a ship, because I love boats. ... In fact, I was going, I was in a bookstore in, I guess it was Cape Cod, last Fourth of July, ... and there are a couple of knots I don't know how to make, that I've always wanted to know. So I found this great book on knot-tying. ... And my son is an active sailor. ... He crews on a racing sailboat out of Perth Amboy. And that's ... his whole life is ... this racing in the summer. You

know, it's not his boat, but ... it's exciting because it's a good boat; it's a fast boat. ... I've gone ... once on a racing boat in one of these bay races. It was very exciting! ... And he's, you know, ... he's brighter than most of the other guys, so ... he does the hard work part. He tends the ... jib and the spinnaker which is kind of hard work. But he's a good tactician, ... and he helps the captain think how to organize the guys and all that. ...'Cause they got to be really like ... it's like a basketball team. I mean, they got to really work together to win. It's a tight contest. And so anyway, "I'm going to look through this book, and I'm going to learn the knot I want to know." I wanted to do something. "And then I'll give this book to my son." But I've never gotten a chance. I look at it every now and then, but I haven't studied all the knots and tried them out, you know, the ones that I don't know how to do. I only know three or four knots ... that's all. But there really are only a few knots. They're all variations. ... I have two friends who share this home up in Cape Cod, so we go. We scrounge up there a lot; we visit them. They always invite us, ... 'cause when I'm there, I fix things for them. We have projects, see. And ... one of the two husbands involved is a very good mechanic, himself. But, you know, it's better when you've got two people doing some of these little jobs. So we always work together. And the other guy's a dentist. And he's all thumbs. ... We asked him recently, ... "How do you manage to do all that delicate intricate work in somebody's mouth?" ... He says, "It's very difficult for me." (laughter) I'd never use him for a dentist. No, I'm sure he's very good. ... But it isn't something that came natural to him. And it's amazing, I mean he spent his whole life--he's older than I am--I'm 69, he's 73 or something like that. His war story's a riot! He was lost. ... They never knew where he was. I mean, he was in the Air Force, and they kept sending him places, and ... he looked like in MASH, you know, some of the times there would be a guy who would show up at the base and nobody'd know what to do with him and why was he there. ...

KP: That was his story?

RF: Yeah. He was in Egypt, and he said, "I went to these places, and they didn't know what to do with me, so they would find something for me to do. And then they would send me someplace else." ... He didn't fit into any category, so they didn't know what to do with him. At least, that's his story. ... Yeah, that's about the end of my war experience.

KP: You obviously used the G.I. Bill, but did you ever use the G.I. mortgage?

RF: ... No. By the time I went to build a house, first of all, I think ... the house was too expensive, it was $28,000. I built this really nice house from scratch. I designed it, ... see, my old architects training. ... I did, I really drew, there was never a plan for this house. There was no blueprint for it. I just drew ... a drawing of ... where all the closets and windows should be, and everything. I specked out sort of what I wanted done. And ... the builder said, "All right, we have to have a plan." He says, "I'll take your drawings to this architect friend of mine. For a 150 dollars, he'll make us a blueprint that I can get okayed by the city. And we never had a book of specifications. ... I knew that much, you had to have a book that tells you what the doorknobs are supposed to be made out of and all that stuff. He said, "Well, we'll use a book from some other house that I did." He says, "You know, you'll tell me what you want, and I'll do it." ... It was most incredible! The house was built, you know people ... buying a piece of raw land and building a house is always fraught with all kinds of problems, and you've got to be very careful to

have proper agreements. We never had an agreement. We shook hands on the deal, and that was it. And he never said, progress payments, what he wanted, and every now and then, I said, "Do you need money?" He said, "No, I'll let you know." And I got a mortgage commitment, and I don't know what I showed them, but

KP: So, in other words, you had this house built on a handshake, and then you paid him and ...

RF: I got a mortgage. ... I think at the time, ... G.I. Bill wouldn't give me enough mortgage, because I got, I think on a $28,000 house I had a $24,000 mortgage, something like that. But the guys at the banks know me, ... so, and, in fact, I remember this from being on the Board of Directors of the Chamber of Commerce, and ... I was president of the Chamber of Commerce for two years. ... And there used to be a separate, like a retail division, and I was president of that, too. I was president of everything that I was ever in. Any organization I've been in, I ended up being president. My high school fraternity, college fraternity, and you know, Chambers of Commerce, and YMHA, all those things. And I was always proud of that, too, that I was able to show enough leadership capability as a member of a board, 'cause I always talked, opened my mouth, as you can tell. (laughter) And so I called up the banker, and I said, "I need a mortgage on my house." And he said, "Well, we're really kind of tight, we're not giving out ..." This was in the '50s. He said, "We're trying to cut down." He says, ... "Where's the house going to be?" "Perth Amboy." "Oh, Perth Amboy--we'll do it!" And I said, ... "What's the rate going to be?" He said, "Well, the rate's usually ten or eleven per cent, but in your case, it'll be nine percent." I'm making up the numbers. I don't know. It was two points better than anybody else. ... He said, "We know you. You've got the store and blah, blah."

KP: So having that store really helped.

RF: Yeah, it makes a big difference in your life.

KP: And having the reputation that you have been there for years.

RF: Well, it's 83 years that we've been there.

KP: And how long do you hope the store to continue?

RF: Forever! I don't know.

KP: And you're still in Perth Amboy?

RF: Yeah. We're very unstable. We're in our second location in 83 years, which is around the corner.

KP: Well, to be honest, I have to confess, I've never been to Perth Amboy.

RF: You should come. It's quite a town.

KP: And I've now interviewed all these people, and I have become intrigued.

RF: You ought to take a ride there. In fact, if you come during the day, call me. ... I'll take you to lunch. I'll show you the town.

KP: Oh, no, I might do that.

RF: [To TK] Yes, go ahead.

TK: You were mentioning before how this store had changed. Is it the same type of store that it was?

RF: Well, it's become very big in photography. ... I mean, the store is gigantic for a photography store. We're the size of ... what would have been a mini supermarket, years ago. It's 57 feet across. And it's a hundred feet deep, and we have a very high ceiling, which makes it--it's a wood ceiling like the type of ceilings you see in a church, laminated wood beams and real wood. ... Our ceiling is the roof. What you're looking at as the undersides of these boards is the roof. Beautiful wood, all cedar stuff or whatever. So it's got a huge feel. When you walk in, you feel like you're walking into a store that's bigger than it really is. ... Right now, about 80 percent of it is photography. And I mean we have everything. You know, there's no question. If somebody wants something, and we don't have it, they either really didn't want it in the first place or it isn't made anymore. That's what we tell people. Of course, we don't have everything. ... We sell to commercial photographers. We sell studio equipment. We sell to schools, I mean Rutgers is one of our big customers. They buy alot of their photographic materials from us. ... In fact, we're just getting an order in now to ... re-equip the darkroom for the photography class that's down in, they're over on NJC side someplace, Douglass. I'm not sure where they are. I haven't been there yet, but the guy that's in charge of it, he comes to the store all the time. ... You know, they put it out for bid, but we get the bid. We've done a number of schools, their darkrooms. This is a big deal--tens of thousands of dollars worth of stuff. ... We're good at it.

KP: Have you ever thought of leaving Perth Amboy? Have you given it ever

RF: Oh yeah. I have a study in my, I carry it with me in my briefcase. I don't have a briefcase, I have a sac-like case. And I carry stuff back and forth. And one of it, is a couple zip code studies I've made of our present customers to try and figure out where would be a better location. I really was getting fed up with the town, but in the last year, things are starting to go up again in Perth Amboy. So I don't know.

KP: 'Cause you and your family have remained very committed to Perth Amboy.

RF: But I don't live there anymore.

KP: Yes.

RF: In fact, ... I've mentioned several times my first wife. That's because we got divorced. We got divorced when my son ... Sam was thirteen, right after his Bar Mitzvah. We waited, very friendly divorce, we said, "Okay, we can get divorced, but we'll wait until after his Bar Mitzvah, because it'll make a mess out of his Bar Mitzvah, otherwise." So we've been divorced for over twenty years. And I met another woman, got remarried, and now I live in Mountainside, because she wasn't going to live in Perth Amboy. No way!

KP: But if you hadn't been divorced, you might well have stayed.

RF: Well, no, it really became, ... the school situation became impossible for our kids. My daughter who never graduated high school, because things got, it just wasn't good. There weren't kids for them to socialize with that were their intelligence and background. There were very few Jewish kids left in the town. Okay, they don't have be Jewish kids, they could be any kind of kids, but it became that ... the teachers even were even somewhat apologetic. They said, "Your daughter is so fabulous ... as a student. I wish everybody was like her." And she said, "And they aren't." You know, so that tells you something. It became, and ... my first wife decided that ... it was time to get out of town. And we had some silly, bad experiences. I don't know. There was this guy who was courting my daughter. He was a young Spanish fellow. He was okay, except his brother was in jail for murder. And, ... you know, she was young and rebellious ... and we felt she would get into some real trouble if she hung around.

KP: Is this the daughter who went to Rutgers?

RF: Yeah. ... So what happened is we found out somehow that she could enter NYU as a junior. They ... a special[[program], for very bright kids. So we said, "Oh, that's great." ... This was after the divorce. ... My wife said, "I'm going to move to Highland Park. We're going to have a good school system and ... there's a good population for the kids to interact with. ... We took a calculated risk when we built the house. We already knew about what you could call the Spanish problem. ... And I said, "No, ... I think we should stay here. We have a position in the community, and our kids ... will be big fish ... in a little pond instead of little fish in a big pond. And I think that ... they're smart enough, and they're tough enough that they can do this." And I spoke to a friend of mine who's an educator a couple of times, and I said, "What do you do with exceptional children who are truly exceptional?" ... When you say exceptional children, you usually mean those that are brain-damaged or something else. But I said, "What do you do with a kid that's really smart?" ... So he said, ... "You don't have to worry about that." He said, ... "They're going to do fine no matter what. Whether you give them good school or bad school, they're going to learn on their own." And it's true. She taught herself to read. And ... a lot of people, particularly proud parents, will force-teach their kids to read. You can teach a two or three year old to read if you work at it. ... But we didn't do this. It wasn't our idea to do this.

KP: It was a natural thing for her to do.

RF: We used to read, as we read to the other two kids. You know, bedtime stories. Everybody reads their kids bedtime stories, at least in modern days. When I was a kid, I don't think anybody ever read ... me bedtime stories, you just said, "Go to bed." And we went to bed. (laughter) ...

But she taught herself to read, you know, from reading Cat in the Hat and the rest of the Suess books and stuff, which are easy reading. And after a while, we saw she was reading them, and then we said, "Well, maybe she memorized them." ... Because there's a limit to how many books you can read, and we used to really, consciously, one of the two of us read each kid a story every night. ... And particularly since she was the eldest, she got different stories maybe than the other kids. ... It's hard to remember in detail. But next thing you know, she's sitting in our, we had a big couch that was "L," like it came at an angle and it covered a whole wall, and ... eight, nine people could sit on this couch. ... And on Sunday mornings, she would be dressed up. She'd have on her white tights and her little short red dress and whatever. ... She was maybe eight years old, and she'd be sitting on this huge couch, and she was a little girl. I mean as a girl, she was very little. And she'd have her legs crossed over very lady-like and properly. She'd be reading *The New York Times*. And she'd was reading, and she knew what she read. It wasn't that, you know some people, they can read, and than young kids than hour later, they don't know what they read. But you could ask her the next day what the article was about, and she would know.

KP: So she was reading *The New York Times* at eight?

RF: Yeah. ... She graduated Rutgers Phi Beta Kappa, as a reluctant student. She really didn't want to be a student. I don't know what she wanted to be. She wanted to be an artist or something.

KP: What is she doing now? I'm just curious.

RF: Well, ... she makes a lot of money, relatively speaking. She's a prop person. She's a prop, as they call them ... in video for commercials, and she works on feature films once in a while. She's the person, if this ... was the script, she would have gotten the mike and this and that and set them up. And then if somewhere in this, I was to knock this over, she would know where it went, when it was supposed to go back. They take polaroids of everything. And you know, ... it's somewhat of a brain game, but mostly, it's schlepping.

KP: Yes.

RF: Yes. And she's been doing this for quite a time now. ... And she likes it. You know, it's what she does. And she's up a little notch. I mean, sometimes, she's like crew chief or something. But, you know, she should be doing something far more brainy. But this is what she does. She'll have to change, ... because she'll get too old. Physically, I mean the job is very demanding. And she's, you know, not a big muscular, she's a very feminine, average-size woman. ... And you would never believe she can do the physical things she can do to look at her. ... In fact, she'd been doing apartment painting for a while in between some other jobs. And from using the roller all day, I went like this to her, and it was solid rock, I mean. But she's a good girl. She's really a treat.

KP: Do you wish any of your kids had joined the military or had the military experience?

RF: No, no. ... All right, we did have such a problem when the kids were draft age. You know, my oldest son, ... he didn't go for his draft card. I didn't like it, particularly. I guess I felt enough of that old-school patriotism or something. But, my wife would have nothing of it. Tell them, "I'll take him to Canada." I mean she was really, Vietnam was about over, I guess. I'm trying to figure out--he's 35, so when he was 18, I don't know. But anyway, she was adamant, and he was too. ... All three kids are very peace-oriented. I mean, they don't understand war. I mean, who does?

... It was a way of life, and when you sort of did it, you figured, "Well, you know, I did it, and everything was fine. I got a lot out of it." And really, I did. I mean I got a free education. I learned a lot of other things I never would have known. And I met people that were fine. Because, we were really a micro slice of humanity. ... The guys were somewhat all the same, because ... we all had IQ's that were probably like from 125 to 145 or 150, something like that. We were all interested in mathematics, and science and stuff like that. Some of the guys, I had one guy, whose really a riot, he wanted to go into submarine service, and he was really an unimposing sort of guy, I mean Mr. Un-Macho. But he was not sophisticated. He was not probably well-read or anything. And he asked me, he says, "I want the ... two to four guard at night," 'cause I used to assign. And that's the worst thing, because you go to sleep, you wake up, and then you go back to sleep again. ... And so I said, "Well, why do you want that?" And he said, "Well, I've gotten permission to use the organ." At the end of Navy Pier is this huge auditorium, and they have this big monster organ. And he used to go there in the middle of the night and practice so he could play the organ. ... You know, and he wound up with submarine duty ... with Congress. ... People are ... so different. They're so unusual.

KP: Had you travelled much before the war?

RF: No.

KP: So your going to Chicago was a big deal.

RF: Yeah, ... I'd never been to Chicago. I'd never been anyplace outside of New Jersey and New York City, you know, and Brooklyn, where my grandparents were. ... You know, some things, I can't remember if they were before the war or after the war. ... We used to go camping up in the Delaware Water Gap when we were young guys, but I think that was after the war. Sure, there was no before the war. We were in school. And I worked in the summer. ... And one of my friends had a sailboat he bought for like fifteen or 25 dollars--it was a nice sailboat. We used to go sailing sometimes. That's how I learned to sail. We would read the book, and then we'd go sailing. You know, it would tell us what to do, then we'd get in the boat and do it. My wife's saying, "Oh my God--quarter after seven!" She'll think I've been kidnapped. ... I don't know. Unless there's something specific,

KP: I don't know. Is there anything we forgot to ask?

RF: I don't know. I could talk forever, probably. Okay.

KP: Well, I have been very curious about Perth Amboy, so one day, I may take a trip there. There was another article about you and you efforts to save the bus, so I may take the bus there.

RF: This one? I don't even remember this one. Oh yeah.

KP: So I may take the bus from Metuchen to Perth Amboy, which I always see in Metuchen.

RF: You know, just make sure there's one going back. ... You know where else? There should be articles about me when I was the champion of [Sunday closings]. ... They were changing the Sunday closing law a while back, and we wanted to be closed on Sundays. But what we did is to bring attention to it and how important it was, we violated the law and stayed open on Sundays. And I was the leader of that movement. ... Oh, I had the press call me. And this was before television, I guess, because no television.

KP: This was in the 1950's?

RF: Yeah.

KP: And you wanted to keep Sunday closings.

RF: Closing.

KP: Why?

RF: Because I didn't want to work seven days a week. (laughter) Simple. And most of us were, you know, small merchants that we sort of had to be there if the store was open. ... If not, we'd have this extra expense. You know, ... when you have salespeople, not clerks, it's very hard to revolve them and get weekend people to work for one day or something. So it would've been a difficulty for a lot of us. And we used to do it ... before Christmas, and we did it on purpose, hoping that the law would get straightened out, because the law was very peculiar, and there was no consistency to it. But, it never happened, and Sunday openings got to be a permanent thing, except in Paramus.

KP: Yes, I actually interviewed Roland Winter, and he was involved in the Woodbridge case. And he mentioned that the Perth Amboy merchants really wanted to avoid Sunday opening; they really fought Sundays.

RF: And we spearheaded this Sunday closing thing, and then, it came up later on, many years after that. And it was another guy from Perth Amboy who was the perennial president of the retail group, because no one else wanted to do it. ... The membership had really fallen off. But he was also on the Board of the Chamber of Commerce. Everybody kept him on for sentimental reasons. He was an impossible guy. ... But he was called, "Mr. Perth Amboy." ... But he just couldn't understand when the town started to go downhill. I mean, he blamed it strictly on the

Puerto Ricans and the Spanish-speaking people. And he was vehement. I mean, he was terrible about it. And I used to fight with him all the time.

KP: He could not see the rise of shopping centers and suburbs?

RF: No, No. Neither could ... our mayor at the time. We wanted, I forget what we wanted. We wanted to do something, and ... [we] said, "We've got to combat the malls. We've got to have, you know, more parking or better lighting, stuff like that." He said, "Oh, you don't have to worry about the malls." He said, "They're far away. Menlo Park is six miles from here. Nobody's gonna go those malls." In fact, he's a funeral director.

KP: You said the city's sort of looked up recently?

RF: A little bit. But it's changed so. I mean there are hardly any, I mean we used to have chains there. ... We still have a Lerner Shop, somehow. That's about the last nationwide chain we have. ... But, ... there are shops. There are no more large stores. There's no department store. My store is probably one of the biggest. There are probably maybe two other stores that are physically my size. But otherwise, most of them are relatively small. And I'm on a side street, right off Smith Street. That was a big gamble we took. Everybody said, "What? You're going to move off Smith Street? You're going to go around the corner on a side street?" And we did, and of course, it worked out for us. But, it's hard work, being a retailer. It really is.

KP: No, I know. I mean most retailers, they barely make it. If they make it a generation, that's often considered a success. Because I know in Metuchen, the clothing store is closing down, because the sons do not want to take it over, apparently.

RF: Yeah, that, too. ... See, we're in a highly specialized business, and there just isn't another camera store. I mean, the camera stores in New Brunswick, Freese and _____, they're okay, but they're not like we are. Years ago, Freese and we were parallel, but he sort of stood still, and we went ahead.

KP: Yeah, I've been in the Freese store.

RF: He's a good guy. ... Well, it went through some family things. The guy who was running it for a while, he went to Europe. He got married to a Frenchwoman. And late in life. ... I don't know the whole story, but it sounded very exciting. (laughter) And he lived there for a while, and his brother ran the store. But his brother didn't do a good a job. They opened two other stores, and that didn't work out. ... And I don't think he really has a lot of drive. ... His father used to be in it with him--the two of them. And as always, as I said before, all these contradictions of people, he computerized before they had a PC, I mean he had it on the wheels going around, and ... he studied it, and he did it all himself. He got Rutgers students to help him do some of the programming and stuff. And he built a room to put it in, because in those days, you air conditioned a room and put a vibration base and all that. I don't know how many years ago it is, but he's been computerized ever since then, and his accountant also used his

computer. See, he sold him time on it, because what he had, could have run a small city, I think. (laughter) We computerized five years ago. And our system is far beyond his.

KP: Well, thanks a lot.

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

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