



Citation for this collection:

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Contact:

Special Collections, University of Delaware Library
181 South College Avenue
Newark, DE 19717-5267
302.831.2229 / 302.831.1046 (fax)
<http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec>
askspecref@winsor.lib.udel.edu

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This tape had a great many inaudible portions due to the fact that the microphone seemed to be placed too far from the subject, and also a persistent buzz which often drowned out the speakers.

Jewish

Interview with Jacob and Florence Bronfin, Russian and Polish immigrants, in their home at 2203 North Franklin Street, Wilmington, Delaware, January 5, 1969, by Myron L. Lazarus. Mr. Bronfin's responses are indicated by "A," Mrs. Bronfin's by "B."

Q This is a recording of the Oral History Program of the University of Delaware. We're interviewing Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Bronfin, and the interviewer is Myron Lazarus. Where in Russia were you from?

A I come from Kolchalutsk [sp], near the border.

Q What big city is that near?

A Lutsk, that's the big city. I'm from small town, but Lutsk is what you call the head.

Q The major city.

A The major city--they were boss. If they had any calls, they directed that city, you know.

Q How long ago were you born in Russia? In other words, how old are you now?

A I'm gonna be 75.

Q How long did you live in Russia?

A All my life 'til I went to United States.

Q How long was that?

A Well, it was 1911 I left home.

Q You came to this country in 1911.

A 1911, yes. [Inaudible--sounds like "Since the wheels are a little bit wet."]

Q Well, you must have a lot of experiences about Russia, then, since you lived there quite a bit.

A Yeah, yeah, in a small town, I had experience, yeah.

Q What did you do there? What did your family do in Russia?

A They was--had land.

Q They had land?

A Yes.

Q Uh huh. Did they farm it?

A They farmed it, yes.

Q Well, that's kind of unusual for Jews in Russia.

A That they had that farm I still got three farms there.

Q You do?

A When we see they kill the people in Europe, they sacked our land there, belongs to me, they killed them all off.

Q But it really isn't yours anymore. I mean, they've taken it away, I'm sure.

A I don't know. I'm the only one in the family lives.

Q Um hmm. But probably the land went to the state, don't you think? How is it that your family were farmers, because most Jews we interviewed . . . weren't allowed to own land. Being Jews, they weren't allowed to own land.

A Yeah, but you see, my father bought the land, and had fellows that worked together--my brothers, they had these fields that they . . .

Q And they were older brothers.

A My brothers and my father--the whole family, had three farms.

Q Three farms.

A Um hmm. Small, you know. We had people live in the houses and they went half and half. But we had property still left after they killed them, it's still left. Only one niece come to America.

Q Um hmm. Now when were they killed?

A In nineteen hundred and--you know--it was about 1940, something . . .

Q Oh, in 1940. They were killed when the Germans came into Romania. I see.

A They took 'em off one place, one place together these people, to one place and killed them. You know, like a . . .

Q Oh yes. How do you know . . .

A My niece--I brought her to America, and she told me about it. She brought me the picture, you know, where--we still have that picture?

B I know I have it but I don't know where it is.

A Well, she brought a picture where they killed them all, a mass grave. And she come back. She left German as a slave.

B You mean that picture with her with the stone?

A Yeah, yeah.

B Oh, with the other people and everything.

A Yeah, a few people, yeah.

B I think it's upstairs.

Q Well, how did she manage to live through it?

A She changed her name as a Gentile girl and she travelled to Harkov [sp], Russia, and when she got there, the government said she's a Jew, but she says she ain't. And one day she told 'em to call the head clerk in the city [inaudible]. And the people liked her and he says, "No, you don't bother that girl, she's a Gentile girl," and they let her go.

Q Then the people around knew, but they said . . .

A They didn't know her, but they liked her, and that guy took up for her. And she left Harkov as a slave, went into Germany, she . . . [inaudible] milk in the jars, to take them out in the road. In the road they used to say [sounds like "Toyshadofka"]--that's a Jew. She says, "I ain't no Jew." She went to church, they tried to take her. But when she got to Germany, they separated. This one was sent here, this one sent here, then nobody didn't bother her.

Q And now she's living in this country.

A She live in New Hampshire.

Q How many relatives did you lose there, who worked on the farm?

A All of 'em. All of 'em.

Q Well, how many were there?

A All of them. They all died.

Q These were your brothers?

A My brothers and my father and

Q Now let's go back to when you were in Russia. Did you farm yourself, or were you too young?

A I was too young, yes.

Q You were 16.

A 16, yes.

Q Uh huh. Did you go to school in Russia?

A No. I never went to school in my life.

Q Uh huh. Fine.

A And I had to come to America. I have a relative, I was 16-17 years old, and I had a sister, she's a good dressmaker, one of the best, and she give me the money to come to America, \$50.00, that's all it cost. And she give me the money. With that money I got here.

Q By yourself?

A By myself.

Q Let's go back to Russia. Did you get any Hebrew education in Russia?

A Not really. We was poor people and poor people don't . . .

Q Very poor. What kind of house did you live in in Russia? This is a small village, right? Or was this out on the farm?

A No, that was in house, small house. And we lived in the house, see we had no water in the house. In the house we was living, we didn't have no floors, no wooden floor.

Q It was a dirt floor.

A Dirt floor. And we didn't have no heat. We had like a built-in . . .

Q Fireplace?

A Like a fireplace. And we bought wood when it was green and we'd start a fire, it takes a long time to make a fire, because we didn't have enough to buy in the summertime. To dry it, we bought wood when it was wet . . .

Q Because it was cheaper.

A No, we had to buy it when we got the money. If you didn't have the money, you couldn't buy it and put it away--you just buy it when you have to. And that green wood we had to make fire, but when it started burning, it kept you

Q Do you have any experiences of Russia that you still remember?

A What?

Q Oh, for instance, did you suffer any persecution as a Jew . . .

A No, no.

Q Because it's still unusual that you find--you don't find Jewish farmers. It's very rare.

A Well, I got three farms there. See, my father used to [sounds like "shedu"] with the land, you know, buy up a little farm, then sell it And then after the war, the First World War, everything got burned up. The only way

was, is to buy land that was cheap and they could farm and they could have a safe living.

Q Your family wasn't connected with any other kind of a business but farming. You had no trade or sell anything . . .

A Well, we buy and sell, too. Like buy wheat and bought chickens, you know, small farm.

Q What do you remember of the town you lived in? What did the town look like?

A Well the town looked like . . . all shacks, straw roofs . . .

Q Straw roofs.

A Straw, you make it--not all of 'em, a few--we had quite a few with the straw roofs.

Q Were there many Jews in the town?

A At that time in my town there'd be about 300 families . . . my town was very small.

Q 300 families altogether in the town. But were there many Jews in the town?

A Well, I mean the Jewish people made about . . .

Q Dozen or so?

A Well, it was about 200 families. Because are maybe about 200 houses, Jewish houses. In bed I used to think of it in my mind, used to think of it--the Gentiles used to live in different places and the Jews all lived together.

Q I see. Did the Gentiles live outside the village?

A Well, around, all around, you know--not in town, most. Most of them lived outside of town. The Jewish people lived in town because they had business and . . .

Q Yeah. Most of them were tradesmen, retail . . .

A Shoemaker, tailors, and horse dealers, cows. Had little stores, you know. Was a few rich ones, but most of 'em didn't have much.

Q But the economy of the town was mainly from the farms.

A Sometimes they used to sell wheat, corn, and shoes, suits, you know, all different kind of stores people used to sell in a small town. Trading one with another, you know. There used to butchers go and swipe cows outside and kill 'em, sell the meat. And, oh, you know, like here, the same.

Q Was there a synagogue in the town?

A About three of 'em. Three of 'em, I remember--no, four. Four.

Q Did your parents teach you any Hebrew at home?

A Well, my parents, they was very religious. [Inaudible]

Q Well, you were 16 when you came here. What kind of a life did you live before that? I mean, you were a young man, really.

A Yeah. I used to go out and try to help . . .

Q On the farm?

A Not on the farm, I used to go out to try to help them buy a calf and . . . help to make a living, you know.

Q Uh huh. Do errands?

A Yeah. I didn't make much, but you always wanted to help to bring in a little money, to, you know, to care for the younger.

Q Now, you had your brothers, you have a sister?

A They all was young.

Q Oh, younger than you.

A Well, there were two sisters that was older than I.

Q Uh huh. And your brothers were older or younger?

A Younger.

Q Younger than you. And mainly it was your parents that worked the farm. And your uncles.

A The whole family worked.

Q But I mean, as far as turning up the soil, and . . .

A No, I was in America. I was in United States when they were--but they had to raise wheat, corn. Oh the whole family worked in helping to work

Q To work the farm.

A Yeah, they all know, because that's experience. They all know.

Q Uh huh. But I was trying to figure out, who actually did the labor on the farm since . . .

A Well, they all doing, they all working, trying to make a living. They all go and they had help, plenty, but they all worked there. Try to make the

best they can.

Q Yeah. Now, who was in this country who gave you the \$50.00?

A Not in this country, home. My sister. She was what you call a tailor. She was one of the best. She would take a little piece of cloth and pattern any size and any style you want. And she was quick, and she was making \$75.00 a year. She could make here \$75.00 a week here. And she lend me the money to come to America.

Q Well, why you? I mean, why not your brothers or . . .

A Well, I was the oldest boy, and they were single girls. And when I come here, well, I send her ship's card, you know, here from Delaware.

Q You sent them what?

A Ship's card, ticket to come here. She send it back. She didn't come. You know what I mean, a ship's card, it means I take you, I wanta bring you here.

Q But she gave you the ticket to come here, [inaudible] that you were gonna get her over here.

A Yet but she send me back. She had it, and she send me back. That was immigration--there was no immigration like--it was after this. And she send it back, she say . . .

Q She couldn't get over.

A She could, but she didn't . . .

B She didn't want to go.

A I read the card and it said, "It don't look so good if I go with the card in America," and she married in Europe.

Q And you came here alone?

A Yeah, yeah.

Q Where did you go--did you go to Germany to pick up the boat?

A No, I go right straight to Rotterdam.

Q You went to Rotterdam.

A And I took a boat from Rotterdam, New Amsterdam, that was the boat.

Q The name of the boat.

A Yeah, that's reason I got my . . .

Q Your \$50.00 the whole trip, you must have gone tenth class.

B That's the kind with sheep, sure, and sixty years to get over . . .

Q Did you stop over in Holland? Did you stay over?

A Stayed there for about a week, a week and a half, something like that.

Q Did you have a passport?

A No.

Q Then how did you get across Germany . . .

A Well, when I crossed into Austria, in [sounds like Marikeim], two people-- it cost me \$3.00, there was a night guard where they changed the guard, certain guard took the \$3.00, and he carried you over, helped to cross the big heavy [inaudible] . . .

B So you could go.

A To go, and . . . jump over the creek, and you know, on the other side they don't bother you. . . .

Q Only three dollars?

A \$3.00, that's all it cost to cross the line.

Q But you were only 16.

A Well, it makes a difference, the night time, in the dark. And then the guard, the one that has--he says to me, "What are you doing around here?" "Nothing." And he got me across the line.

Q But you went into Austria.

A Yeah.

Q Then how did you get from Austria to . . .

A Well, we took the train, and the train carried to [sounds like "Lambert"], or . . .

Q You did all this on the \$50.00.

A On the \$50.00.

Q You didn't work on the way or anything.

A No. Come to New York, worked for \$1.50 a week, from Saturday . . .

Q Where did you live in New York when you came? You were here alone, 16 years old.

A Well, when I come here, I wanted to pay her back that money. When I got in New York, a fellow had a--a fellow, you know, I went to Nickles . . .

Q Manufacturer?

- A Manufacturer. I got \$1.50 a week, from seven to seven, six days. From seven in the morning, slave labor, \$1.50.
- Q What did you do?
- A Well, I didn't do nothing. The fellow who's there
- Q Well, what did you do--I mean in the factory?
- A I was crating bundles and do all kind of work, you know, then after I send to the machine, I sew, you know.
- Q You sew the material.
- A Material.
- Q According to the pattern.
- A Yeah, that's right. For \$1.50 a week.
- Q You weren't a tailor, though.
- A No. It was section work.
- Q Piecework.
- A Yeah. \$1.50 a week and then I got a friend there, he slept in the shack, and he was doing some cooking there, and I had to [inaudible], I got something to eat and to sleep. Slept in the shack. And I saved every week 50¢ I had to pay back. And it took me six months. I give to one fellow to save my money. \$1.00 a week. [There are several totally inaudible sentences here] . . . maybe cost him a quarter, and then he let me stay there and sleep in that shack. And he give me something to eat, I help him, I got a little eatin'. And I saved about \$1.00 a week, 'cause I owed my sister that money. I give it to a fellow to keep it for me. After six months he kept it for himself, he never gave me back that money. That was first money I made, and he got it. He didn't give me no money back and I had to scuffle and save a lot of money. . . . I need . . . to pay back.
- Q To pay back your sister.
- A Um hmm. I waited for six months to get it--you know, saved it, you know, I didn't spend that. And he [sounds like "betted"] with my money.
- Q Do you remember where in New York this was?
- A On Lolliver [sp?] Street, Lolliver Street, New York.
- Q Lolliver Street. And you lived where you worked.
- A Yeah, because that fellow there, he had a shack.
- Q What was life in New York like then?
- A Well, a greenhorn, what does he know? When I walked in the streets, I

I make myself a sign, and when I had to get back, I lost that sign. I walked for five, six blocks, all the blocks looked alike. I had a time to get back.

B New York is a big city, you know.

A 1911, that's fifty-some years ago.

Q What other job did you work at besides that?

A Well, after that I went to Ohio--worked a little bit on a farm, not much.

Q You went to Ohio?

A Yeah.

Q Well, why did you--I mean, how did you get to go there? I mean, did you know somebody in Ohio?

A Well, a fellow who was there, he says he was going to Ohio, was starting a business. I went with him.

Q This is a fellow that you knew in New York.

A Another fellow. He was a cousin. He says let's go to Ohio, he had somebody he know. I went to Lima, Ohio, started a business. I had some money; I lent him my money and he kept it, too--I never got it back.

Q Oh, my.

B My husband was very good-hearted. He lent everybody money and trusted them.

A The reasons I trusted them, I thought Americans are [sounds like "pure."] My father used to go to you, if you got \$10, \$20.00, I need it, and cousin got \$10, \$20.00, he might buy something, or make little--to help him get along. Well, I figured America's the same way. He got it and he kept it. And I

Q But he was supposed to set up a farm with you, is that it?

A No, a junk business.

B They went to junk business.

Q Oh, I see. In Ohio.

A In Lima, Ohio. And we would get rich. But, you see, he had never had much. I was very saveable when I was in New York. Another fellow--in 1915 I had [inaudible] . . . \$80.00. In 1915, before the war broke out. There was another fellow, you know, he was a sport. I helped him here and there, he needed a suit, he needed shoes, and he have to buy that. If I made \$5, \$6.00, it was all clear money. And I would save. The other

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- Q Peddled around that place. [Sounds like "You'd chase behind,"] by the railroad, you'd look at stuff, if their names were on it, you'd dig it out, they'd [inaudible - tape interference]. There must be at that time about 2,000 Jewish--about 2,000 family, maybe 1,000 families a nice town but not many Jewish people. Just a few.
- Q And after living there in Ohio, you went back to New York?
- A Yeah, after living in Ohio, after . . . I got broke. I got \$1900 made. And I went to Cleveland and walked around the street, 'didn't know nobody. But still after two days, when I went in Cleveland to get that [inaudible] train back to Fenwick, I walk up and I tell that person the wrong time. He looked at me, I looked at him, I was surprised to see him. He says, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I come here like a couple of days, I'm gonna eat some Jewish eatin', I eat some [inaudible] a long time ago, and see the city of Cleveland." And he says, "When you coming back again?" I says, "I come back in five or six months." I come back five or six months, ever so often, from my home town. Everybody wanted to see [inaudible]. And everybody treat me very nice. But I didn't stay too long. And I said, "Well, I got \$1900. I can get away from there, because if I stay there, I couldn't get no [inaudible]." He wasn't married, so I was gonna be the old bachelor no Jewish lady. I said I gonna leave--I got to New York.
- Q So you went back to New York. And what did you do when you went back there?
- A I worked in [inaudible].
- Q Where?
- A I went to New York, I stayed there about a week or two. I got a job at a junk shop, Flushing [inaudible] and Long Island Railroad. [Sounds like "I mashed my finger there, and got along . . ."]
- Q Did you have your own junk business or did you work for somebody else?
- A No, somebody . . . Flushing [inaudible], Long Island Railroad. I never went back to see the place. I ought to go by there. It's probably changed a lot.
- Q Uh huh. Now, how long were you in New York then?
- A About four or five months. Then I come to Delaware.
- Q Well, why did you come to Delaware?
- A Well, you know, I . . . meet my wife.
- B I brought him down here.
- Q C.K. You met your wife in New York? Is that right?
- A Yes.

- Q And then she brought you to Wilmington. Well, why--were you from Wilmington?
- B Yeah, I've been here all my life.
- Q And your family was here.
- B Yeah, that's right. See, I was working, and I went there for vacation.
- Q To New York.
- B To New York, yes. I had relations there, some cousins of my mother . . . "you come to New York, I'll introduce you to nice husband." So that's where I got that.
- Q And that's where you met the nice husband. Was it an arranged marriage?
- B No.
- A We married 50 years.
- B 50 years, we been 50 years . . .
- Q Where did you meet her, in New York?
- A Well, it's in a house, you know, house of Jewish friend.
- B See, it was more--couple of other fellows there, and . . .
- A You know, a kind of . . .
- B So he--I said, "That's the one I like."
- Q That's the one?
- B It's funny now.
- Q Now you came to this country from Poland.
- B I came 1911.
- Q How old were you when you came to this country?
- B I was 13.
- Q Uh huh. Do you remember anything of your life in Poland?
- B Not very much.
- Q Not very much. You came over with your parents.
- B Yeah, sure.
- Q Uh huh. Do you know why they came to this country?

- B Well, see, my father was here--let's see, how many years is he here, was here? I don't even remember.
- Q That's all right. But what did they do in Poland, your parents?
- B Well, they had farms, too.
- Q Is that right?
- B Yeah. Farms.
- A You know, they had grand little place, they raised apples, pears.
- B Do you remember what year Pop came?
- A In 1899
- B Something like that. He was here a couple of years, then went back. He couldn't make up his mind what to do. But finally, in 1911, they brought us over.
- Q How big was the family he brought--your mother, and . . .
- B Well, my mother and I have five brothers--six brothers, and I'm the only sister.
- Q And what did they do when they came to this country?
- B Well, my father had shoe store in Front Street.
- A Shoemaker, make shoes.
- Q Well, how did he wind up in Wilmington?
- B Well, he came to Wilmington, because I had uncle here, two uncles in fact.
- Q What were their names?
- B One was Shapiro--both of them were Shapiro, maybe you know--you remember them, I don't know. There's a Dr. Shapiro here, and . . .
- Q And what business were they--were they . . .
- A Shoemaking business.
- B They learned shoemakers and they had suits to sell.
- A We were a second-hand store . . .
- Q You mean they made shoes or they repaired shoes?
- B No, repaired shoes, and they bought shoes to sell, and suits, clothing, and that's how they made their living.
- Q And this was on Front Street.

B Yeah. 110 Front Street. Now it's nothing there.

Q That's right. What did you do when you first--when you got married and you came to Wilmington?

A Well, I got in grocery business.

Q You were in the grocery business. Where is your store?

A 219 West Third Street.

B Third and Tatnall, 219 West 3rd. Been there 50 years.

Q Uh huh. And you landed there, and that was your business for most of your life.

A I enjoyed it--got friends and [inaudible].

Q But most of your life was in this grocery store. Did you belong to any organizations when you were in Wilmington? Did you belong to the temple, or . . .

B We belong to Adas Kodesch.

Q Where did you live in Wilmington? Above the store?

B Yeah. On top of the store.

A See, when I come here, I belong to the [sounds like "Shula"].

Q This is Adas Kodesch.

B Yeah.

A When I was--well, I didn't have a teacher 'til--you laugh at me, but it's the truth--in Lima, Ohio, there was not too many Jewish people, but there was a big hall, you know, very big, in 1915. And I didn't have nothing, just had nothing--after the man took all the money, it was just bah. And there was a Shula. I went to the Shula . . . you know, go to Shula, and the fellow at the door says, "You got a ticket?" I says no. "You can't get in there." I never went in Shula. And that was kind of a kicker, you know. I didn't go no more. I think in there last time I bought a piece of chicken. I eat. And then one kid probably said, "No, Dad," I think it cost me about 10¢. But I didn't go to Shula no more. In Main Street, Lima, Ohio.

Q And that was the end of your religious life there.

B You ought to know Dr. Levy, he's my brother. And there's another brother, he . . .

Q Is that Leon Levy.

B Yeah. And there's Abe. . . .

Q Your maiden name was Levy?

A It's a joke to tell the truth, but that is true.

Q What was Wilmington like when you first came here?

A Well, you know, you get used to it. When you're in a small town, it's very hard when you get in a big city. When I went to the big city, I stayed there a month, I said, "My, I can't stay in that big city." I like a small town where everybody knows one another and the life is different. And it was hard to get used to a big city.

Q Well, you didn't think Wilmington was a big city, did you?

A No, but when I went to New York, that was a big city. If you got [inaudible--tape buzz] . . . they look at you. They say, "What in the world does he have?" [Inaudible] . . . they don't tell you, but you can tell by their looks.

Q Both you and your wife worked in the grocery store.

A Yes, that's right.

Q Well, tell us about what Wilmington looked like?

A Well, when I come here, it was a different size, see? [Inaudible--tape buzz.] . . . feel more like home. You know, more friendship, you know. It was friendship, too, where I worked, but between . . .

Q Well, I suppose the grocery store took most of your time.

B Oh sure. Sure.

Q An all day affair.

A Oh yeah. I mean, we had to make a living. I mean, you have to work, you can't . . . well, I was--I sell ice, you know, have ice in the place there. I sold wood. . . .

B Wood, coal, oil--you know, little bit of goods and things.

Q And when did you retire from this?

A We never retired.

Q You still have it?

B We still have it yet.

A I don't even . . . I call myself 21, I don't even call myself old.

Q But you still have this . . .

A Yeah.

B In fact today my daughter and her husband picked him up and brought him home, 3:00.

A This morning I work.

B He work--Saturday morning there's no buses, so he walks. And Sunday morning the same. But Sundays he gets somebody to take him home, one of the children.

Q Did you belong to any clubs or organizations in Wilmington?

A No, except for the Shula.

Q Just what?

A Just in the synagogue.

Q Do you belong to the B'nai B'rith or anything like that?

A No. I don't belong to nothing except the Shula.

Q Well, how do you think life has changed since you first came over here to Wilmington now?

A Well, to me it's same thing because go work . . .

Q Pretty much working most of the time.

A Yeah. It's changed, but I think we've changed . . . compared to now . . . you go along and look out for yourself.

Q Do you like Wilmington as it is now?

A Yeah, pretty well, yeah. Used to it.

B Well, where you live, where you make a living, that's where--you know, you get used to it.

A Don't bother nobody, just enjoy my life. I enjoy it.

Q Well, how many children do you have?

A Four.

Q Four. That's how many sons and how many daughters?

A One.

Q One son? And three . . .

B Three girls.

Q And what does your son do?

A He's a principal.

B A principal at school.

Q In New York?

B Yeah, he did graduate as a rabbi, but you couldn't get much what he wanted to do--it's very religious. And he couldn't get what he wanted, so he took the job in school, and now he's principal.

Q Is this a public school in New York? Or a Hebrew school?

B No, a public school. And after school . . .

A You know, a next-to-principal, what do you call that?

Q An assistant principal?

B Assistant. And after school he go to Shula and learns the boys to become rabbis.

Q Well, he's not doing this now, is he?

B Yeah, he's doing this now, too.

A You see, he does this . . . he's used to it . . . puts in two, three hours a day.

Q How old is he? I mean, he's . . .

B Well, how old is he now--about 34. He's the youngest, younger than Mary.

Q So your daughters, you say you have three daughters, and they live in Wilmington?

B Yeah.

A Who?

Q Your daughters.

B Two live here. Two daughters live here and one lives in Baltimore. One lives out New Castle, College Park. Her husband is in Real Estate. Hirschhorn their name is.

Q Now, how many grandchildren do you have?

A 14.

Q You have fourteen grandchildren. And where did you live before you lived in this house?

A 219 West Third Street.

B We lived with the store, upstairs.

Q And you moved here, when?

A About 23 years, 24 or 5 years.

B 24 years.

Q 24 years ago.

A 24 or 25?

B Forgot already.

Q Well, I want to thank you very much, then for your reminiscing about your life.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]