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Interview with Mr. Max Chavin, Russian immigrant, by Myron L. Lazarus.

Q This is a recording of the Oral History Program and we're interviewing Mr. Chavin, Max Chavin, and the interviewer is Myron Lazarus. And you say you were born in 1894.

A 1894.

Q And what was the name of the city in Russia?

A Lytepsk, Lytepsk [sp] and . . .

Q Where was that, is that near a major city?

A Oh, that's a big city, that's what they call in the old country a guberne [sp], means a major, like in here Dover. We got the gubernata-dor [sp], gubernner, the assistant gubernner and this is a . . .

Q What size city is this now in terms of population?

A Well, we had 60,000 Jews alone.

Q No kidding.

A And probably twice as many Gentiles. It was a real big city.

Q Now, what part of Russia is this in?

A What they call White Russia.

Q White Russia.

A You ever heard of Smolensk?

Q Yes.

A Well, it's not far from there. Smolensk goes into Russia and this is about the end of White Russia, our city . . . my city.

Q Uh huh. And you lived right in the city.

A Oh, yeah.

Q What kind of . . . what did your family do in Russia?

A My family . . . first of all, we were only youngsters. We went to the hader [sp], the eshiva [sp] . . . is that . . . can you hear me?

Q Yes.

A Eshiva . . . in our family work wasn't allowed. My father was . . .

Q If you were a child you mean . . . when you were young.

A Young, yeah. My father was a shohet, a . . .

Q Now, a shohet is a person who . . .

A Kills cows, cattle, chickens, pigeons . . . the kosher way. And the Jews were allowed to eat if he doesn't kill it, they [inaudible, interviewer interrupts] . . .

Q Was he a rabbi, being a shohet?

A No, that's not called a rabbi, they call that shohet. Shohet is a job, like. A rabbi gives you advice or he decides for you if it's right or wrong. See, there are certain laws in our Jewish life, if you was not allowed to eat meat and milk and by accident happened a little bit of milk fell in the platter of meat, you're not allowed to eat it. But if you go to the rabbi and explain him that you're a poor person and it's late for supper so he can say yes or no. A shohet is actually a worker. He is considered an educated man. He has to get examined . . . exams and papers that he graduated like. But he is not a rabbi. He may know as much as a rabbi but he can't do the rabbi's work.

Q Now, was this a prosperous sort of thing or . . .

A Very poor.

Q Very poor, um hmm.

A That was the reason my father left the old country when we began to get bigger. We would have to have more bread and a little bit more meat, instead of one pound a meat on the whole week . . . very poor. We didn't have a house of our own. At first when I was real small, my father tells me that he had a house that he built himself. But when I grew up and knew something, when I became Bar Mitzvah, we did not have, we . . .

Q You knew . . . learned better.

A We saw what . . . he went away in 1903.

Q Where did he go?

A America.

Q Uh huh.

A For two reasons as far as I understand it, the Japanese war and the poorness. It was clear he had nothing much to give him to eat, he thought America the Golden Medina if you ever heard . . .

Q Gold in the streets.

A Gold on the streets. So he go and he had start job . . . see, he had

friends and he was capable. He was a young man, he came to Philadelphia. And he did get a good job.

Q How big was your family?

A My family is four brothers and three sisters. Of course there was others before me and they moved out . . . upstairs . . . they died. I call it moved out. We were seven.

Q But your father left you in Russia with your mother?

A With our mother and . . .

Q Preparing the way for you to . . .

A And in 19 . . . he didn't want to send for us. He made pretty good money to send . . .

Q And sent it over.

A But he was afraid, he was a very religious man, it's the old type, I don't think you can understand him. He didn't want to bring us because we all become goyen, Gentile. You work on Saturday, [inaudible] we did. But he waited seven years . . .

Q Before he brought you over.

A Six and a half years. And if not an aunt of mine, this is my father's sister, we kept on writin' to her, the boys were getting big and . . .

Q When are we coming over?

A . . . and the mother is lonely, after all, she was a young woman, so she forced him to send after us. And he was sorry 'til he died.

Q He was sorry.

A He didn't agree with our . . . the way we started. You know, you come to America, you get a job, my brother got a job, a younger . . . I have a younger, Dr. Chavin . . . and I got a job for \$3.00 a week helping somebody in a paint store and I had to work Saturday. To him was the worst thing if you worked Saturday.

Q What did he do when he was here?

A Shohet.

Q A shohet here. In New York?

A No, in Philadelphia. You ever heard of Swift and Armour?

Q Oh, certainly.

A He worked there. Made good money. He made \$20.00 a week, at that time was

a bunch of money, \$20.00. He sent ten to us a week. We were rich people. First we had one room as big as this sleepin' all around. Then we rented two rooms because he sent us \$10.00 a week. \$10.00 a week, you run the family.

Q In Russia.

A That's right. At that time . . .

Q What do you remember of Russia?

A Well, in what respect?

Q Well, [inaudible, both talking at once] . . .

A I remember my life with the Gentile boys. We did have fights. All the time. There was sections like they have gangs in here, but we wasn't so bad. When we met a bunch of boys . . . a bunch of Gentile boys . . . we got our crowd, with one whistle we could have ten boys, you know. They all stuck together. That I remember. I remember the shul that I went to. I know there was three shuls in one place and we used to go every day, sometimes three times a day. And when my father was away, somebody watched us. It's not like in here. You couldn't do a thing. I remember I was a little younger than him and I wanted apples, there was a place where apples grew on the other side of the fence. And I tried to steal it, you know. Somebody got ahold of my hat . . . a Jewish friend of my father and took it over to my mother. I cried him to give me my hat. He says, "You go to your mother, you're gonna get a hat." And my mother couldn't do anything, she was an angel. She didn't do anything. But only she said, "I'm gonna tell your father." That was enough. That's what I remember. And I remember automobiles already before I left in 1909, in 1908 . . . and trolleys.

Q Well, this was a good-sized city, this wasn't . . .

A And we had . . . they have it in here too about 30 years ago . . . on a Friday or on a Saturday, you used to walk on the sidewalk, people, one way and the other way, a beautiful street. And we were that big, you know, kids, and we went to see [inaudible] . . . And I remember when I was 15, I was a man already. I used to like girls at my age already, not saying that she would do the same thing. But I was 15 already. I left at 15½.

Q Uh huh. Do you remember your passage to this country?

A Oh, yes, every bit of it. We started off in Lytepsk and we landed in Leba, Lebada they used to call it. It's on the border of Germany and Russia. And we had to wait for at least a month before we get the transportation. And we were put together about . . .

Q Did you have passports?

A Oh, yeah, we had passports. We were legal, anyway . . . because we were a fam . . . I mean there was nothing wrong with us yet. We wasn't be-

longing to anyplace, we didn't believe in that, and we were trained in the house. And the only thing we believed was in the Bible, in the Talmud and in the [sounds like "Tanat"]. We didn't even know . . . we didn't know a thing about the others. So . . .

Q And you had a little money, too.

A Yes, we had all the money, he sent us all the money. You had to have certain amount of money to come in this country, but I don't remember how much mother had. She had enough. And we had ready-made pass . . . tickets, sent it from here. So when we come there, the only trouble we had, we had to wait. And the hotels were . . .

Q Now this is in Germany.

A No. Lebada belonged to Russia yet.

Q Oh, I see, I'm sorry. On the border of Russia and Germany.

A On the border of Russia and this I remember, we had a bad time because we had to sleep together with a lot of people in one big room, probably, or two rooms. And being a sort of a fellow that never saw a woman half-naked, it was something funny to us. My brother was a little younger than I am, we didn't like it. We got used to it later on, but we didn't like it. That's all I remember. And then we landed, we got on a boat by the name Estonia, that was a big boat.

Q Now, where was this boat? Where did you catch this boat?

A Was in Leba, but on the other side. You know, Leba is the parting place between Russia. I really don't know what the border is. We drove up there with the packs . . . we had some clothes . . . and we got on the boat, that's all I know. I imagine we show the papers . . . Mother show . . . she was the whole thing . . . and what the border is, I still don't know it. Of course right now they changed a lot with Russia and Germany.

Q Now you took this boat straight to the United States?

A Straight to the United States. It was about 10 days.

Q Uh huh. Was it a passenger boat?

A Passenger boat . . . bad one.

Q A bad one.

A We didn't have much to eat . . . I mean the food was bad and the waves were bad and we were not used to it . . . it smelled bad.

Q Were you in steerage? All the way down?

A Yes, we were steerage.

Q And then where did you land in the United States?

A We landed in New York, Castle Garden. My father came. We came here in 1910 before the holidays, the Jewish holidays. The reason I remember is this. He didn't want to take us to Philadelphia because he didn't prepare anything. He had friends in New York, a landslide. So we all packed in there on the east side somewheres and we stayed there over the two days of holiday. And of course they washed us up a little bit and we cleaned up a little bit . . . but a little bit, that's all. And we had to go to shul. He said that's . . .

Q First thing.

A [Inaudible] . . . my father, don't come anymore like that. Then we came . . .

Q You didn't stay in New York very long.

A Just over the holidays. The third day, we packed up, take the train, of course there wasn't automobiles . . . or was it a train? I don't think it's the trolley or the train . . . there were trolleys going from here to . . . from New York to Philadelphia, but I think we took the train and we landed in 4th and Fitzwater, if you ever knew where Philadelphia is.

Q 4th and what?

A Fitzwater Street.

Q Fitzwater.

A There we saw America. It was filthy, they had pushcarts . . . I never saw a pushcart in my life. And I asked my dad, "What are they doing?" He says, "Wait, you'll learn . . . you'll see it." And this wasn't a very good . . .

Q Well, a pushcart is where they sell things.

A No, is not the pushcart, it's the noise and the dirt. He rented a little apartment on Fitzwater between 4th and 5th and it wasn't a nice one. My father I suppose he couldn't afford it. After all, with nine . . . with seven children, seven, four and three, nobody wanted to rent to him. See, that was the thing, I guess. So he had to get the best. It wasn't very impressive. But we get used to it. We got used to it.

Q Did you go to school in Philadelphia?

A No, I did not. See, I was old already, I was 16. I got a job . . . [inaudible] a job . . . my father didn't want me to work Saturday. So what can I do? Everything in this country is Saturday. I wanted to become a watchmaker because I had friends in the old country and a cousin and wanted to train to be a watchmaker, it was a good trade. He says, "No, you have to work Saturday." So what does he do? He got ahold of

some wholesaler that sells buttons, pins, a peddler. So he got a basket full of these trinkets and put something on my head, "Go from door to door and ring the bell," I says, "I can't talk." He says, "Just say 'look'." Then he kept on, "Look." Well he knew I wasn't the only one, there's thousands of youngsters did that in 1910. And it was easy. There was no colored people, you weren't afraid to lock the door. In two days I didn't knock one door, I was shy by nature, I was afraid they would refuse me. And I brought the basket back again. And I started . . .

Q Well, you were a peddler, basically.

A Yeah. I brought it back the way I started it. So he said, "You won't be a businessman." So he put me in overalls, making overalls, a tailor. A factory, but they made overalls. I made good money later on. I didn't like the noise from the machines, they was electric machines and I . . . but . . .

Q Where was this factory?

A In Philadelphia. It would be, I think, in Spruce Street, Front and Spruce, as I remember, this was quite a while ago.

Q Do you remember the name of the factory?

A No. It was a Jew with a beard and went to the same shul that he went, downtown, and he talked to him, I suppose, and said, "Send over the kid," so I did. You walked over. We lived . . . Father was 700 block and Spruce was about 200 block, or three. This is my impression of America.

Q This was pretty much a Jewish community, though.

A This is . . . most of them got through this way.

Q How long did you live in Philadelphia?

A I lived 'til the First World War, 'til 1917, when I joined the Jewish Legion.

Q Uh huh. All this time, though, you were working in this factory.

A Yeah, in this factory, yeah, yeah. I begin to make \$3.00, \$5.00 a week, a week. And then I got onto \$17.50, I don't know where the 50¢ comes from. This was I worked for about three years and got \$17.50. I was a rich man. I used to give Mama most of it, she used to give me \$2.00 for moving pictures, a soda . . . there was no women involved then. And somehow my life was still the shul, I had to go Saturday. I want to tell you something. One time I'd been working late or I was stopped at someplace and talked. I came home, it was a summer night, like now, and we were on the third floor, and I come home, I says, "Mom, I'm so hot, give me something." "Wait 'til after supper." I says, "Mom, I can't." My mom was an angel, I said once already. So she gave me . . . she went downstairs talkin' to the women, and I went down on the couch. A couch is not what . . . like we have now. It was a flat couch, one piece. I can't explain to you if you don't know it. And I fell asleep. And I



didn't go to shul Friday night. My father came back and he gave me two slaps, I was 17 years old already. And I didn't say a word. And I didn't want to go to eat. He says, "You sit down and eat." And I sat down. That's typical. There was thousands of them, millions of them, Jewish fathers were that way. But I loved him . . . I admired him.

Q Tell us about your army career.

A Well, my army career, I'll tell you, is this. I'm proud of it. I didn't have to go to the army.

Q You volunteered for this.

A Yes. There were 4,000 American boys, Jewish boys, that was . . . Balfour Declaration, did you ever hear of it? If the Jewish boys from America will come to help us in the war, we will give him Palestine. At that time there was no Israel, it was Palestine. 4,000 of us, from Cleveland, from a whole sort of places . . .

Q What was the name of this organization again now?

A I don't remember. Volunteers, I would say . . . volunteers.

Q It wasn't called the Jewish Legion or anything?

A Yeah, Jewish Legion, or volunteers, I think Jewish Legion was later on. We had a patch on our uniforms, Jewish Legion. It was later on we got that patch, like soldiers have.

Q You were basically in the British army?

A Yeah, we were. So from Philadelphia there was only about 400 or 350 boys. We got together and we were sent . . . are you writing that down?

Q [Inaudible].

A And we were sent to [inaudible] Nova Scotia, that's Canada. We stayed there a month then we got our uniforms and we begin to be soldiers. The first thing the sergeant told us, not knowing anything about the army, after lights out, not to talk. Not to talk for young boys, not to talk when you sleep all in one . . . so we talked. Somebody got punished, shoveling coal, and I [inaudible] . . . now I wouldn't mind. But I learned it quick, I said my mouth is gonna be shut. I mean, I'm not gonna shovel coal. We stayed there a month and we were sent to London. We stayed there a week, I think, to wait. And we went to Plymouth, England.

Q What was the date that you went into this unit? Do you remember?

A The date was I think in February of 1917, I don't know the exact date.

Q 1917.

A America was not in the war yet. If not, we couldn't go, you see.

Q Right. And you were really in the British army.

A That's right. We were . . . we talked to us certain higher-up from Philadelphia . . . I mean American people . . . we were doing the right thing. We were proud of ourselves, gonna help kill the Kaiser and all that sort of thing. And when we got to Plymouth, we were soldiers . . . worked hard, bayonet. You know, you dig ditches . . . what is that, different name for it . . .

B [Unidentified person] Trench.

A Trench . . . no, it's not trench, they had a word for it.

B Foxhole?

A No, no.

Q That's another war.

A Fall in the trench when you're running . . . somebody fire at you, don't wait. Drop yourself in with the gun, hesitate for three minutes . . . or three seconds, something like that. That's how they train you. Never mind your feet or you're gonna get hurt or something, just . . .

Q Get in that trench.

A With the gun, they called it your wife. You have to sleep with that. You can't let anybody touch it. And we stayed there 'til about June, we were sent to Egypt, Cairo. Over there we got a general, he must have been a son-of-a-gun. He come to us one time and he said, "Men, you're gonna fight the Turks. Fight them with the gun . . . fire at him, I mean, fire. If he's close to you, stick him with your bayonet, and if you lose the bayonet, bite him." I shall [inaudible] . . . and drop dead if I tell you a lie. And this worried me all my life. [Inaudible] . . . "bite him." How can you bite anybody?

Q How long were you in Egypt?

A 'Til 1919, beginning of 1920.

Q Did you see any action there?

A I would say a little. Our battalion was the 39th Royal Fusiliers, that's what we called ourselves. There was three battalions, the 38th and the 39th and the 40th, all Jews, all boys, no Gentiles. The sergeants were Englishmen, 'cause we weren't trained to . . . had to have somebody to train us. And the Australians . . . the Australians were in the cavalry. We were in the infantry. So they went ahead and killed the Turks and we followed. So we didn't see [inaudible] . . . And one Yom Kippur night, that was in 1918, I think, we got an attack on our company and we had to fire back, but we didn't see anybody. The captain kept [inaudible], he says, "Fire straight, if you hit it, you hit it." The main thing they told you is to watch your head. If you get a bullet in your leg or in

your hand, it's not so bad. But the head, if you get your . . . have your head down. Well, that's every soldier's [inaudible]. When I came back to America, I got \$60.00 and a suit of clothes, that's the bonus we got.

Q From the British army.

A British army. Well, we had a reception from the Jews in Brooklyn. They thought we were . . .

Q Heroes.

A We didn't think much of it, you know, but they did. And in fact lately I was in the synagogue right here in Wilmington and he found out that I was . . .

Q Who?

A Rabbi Krapf, he made a fuss of me and I didn't like it. I don't like [inaudible]. Well, in this country . . .

Q Your group was one of the first volunteers in that area.

A Yeah, yeah. In this country . . .

Q You didn't have to serve, then, in the American army.

A The war was over in 1920, the beginning of 1920. When I came here, I had no trade. You know, the overalls, that was already repulsive to me. And I don't think it was a trade . . . girls, Italian girls took it over when I came back. I went in a paint shop to work, helped in a paint and paper store in Philadelphia, everything in Philadelphia. Then I went and got married. So that's the whole thing.

Q You met your wife in Philadelphia?

A No, I met her in here. My sister . . .

Q In Wilmington.

A Wilmington. My sister had a shop for paint and she called me over, I should work for her. I was experienced. You know, you got a knack to sell paint and paper. So I came here and about three years later I met [sounds like "Gishik"]. Now we have one child . . . and then I had a little money and I bought a liquor store. I had it ten years. I made a few dollars. Then I got tired of the liquor store, it was a seven-day job, and I bought an apartment house. I still got it. You wanta buy one? I'll sell it to you.

Q No thanks.

A This is the whole story.

Q Um hmm. So were you in the liquor business a long time?

A Ten years.

Q Ten years. But mainly you're in real estate for most of the work.

A Well, no, real estate I'm 20 years. 1950 I bought apartment 'til now, and I want to get rid of it. I'm too old, already.

Q Um hmm. Where was it? Where is the apartment house?

A 1010 Madison, in a bad neighborhood, too. I want to lose \$20,000 on it. Maybe I'll sell it.

Q Were you active in any Jewish groups in Wilmington?

A Well, not too much. I [inaudible] . . . I don't know. I have . . . I'm a [sounds like "hozen"], if you know what that is.

Q Yes.

A You know Kutz Home?

Q Yes.

A I conduct service there every Saturday morning. And I belong to the Golden Agers. That's all.

Q Well, you must have a good voice if you're a hozen.

A I do have. It's not the voice alone. You got to know . . .

Q How to read.

A Oh, read, I went to the hader [sp]. You have to know this . . . the melodies, the Jewish melodies.

Q But most of your Hebrew education was in Russia.

A Russia. Here I didn't do anything. I read book sometimes. See that book if you can read it.

Q Is that in Hebrew?

A No, it's in English. Say it, what it is.

E [Inaudible]

A That's the kind of books I read. I don't understand half of it, but I . . . no, because he's hard to understand as a philosopher. [Inaudible].

Q Well, Rabbi Prinsky [sp] is a . . .

A Oh, he's my best friend.

Q Uh huh. How do you think Wilmington has changed when you first came here and comparing it to . . .

A Well, what you mean, the spiritual life or the . . .

Q Well, let's say first the Jewish community.

A Not much. They do a lot more. And I'll tell you why I think this will be [inaudible] . . . I came here in 1920 back and they had nothing in here. They didn't even have a Jewish school. So there was a fellow by the name [sounds like "Shtiftle (sp)"] and [inaudible] I forget his name. Us three, we wanted to establish a Hebrew or a Jewish school. You know, the kids didn't know anything. And coming from Israel [inaudible] see, now they speak Hebrew, it's a beautiful thing. So we started all three together and we brought down a teacher from New York. He was a poet, a Jewish one. Not a Hebrew, is two different . . . a Hebrew that talks . . . I mean, teaches you Hebrew. But a Jewish teaches you to write Jewish and to talk Jewish. You know, like your grandfather spoke. We brought him down . . .

Q This was Yiddish you're talking about.

A Yiddish. For twelve dollars a week. We had a lot of customers. But you had to pay him \$12.00 a week. So we went around every Friday or Thursday, collect 50¢ from people . . . from people that they send their kids and some of them, well-to-do and they didn't have no kids to send, and we couldn't make it. Couple of weeks he stayed and we couldn't pay him \$12.00, he says, "I'm sorry, Max," the other fellow, "I'm going back to New York. In New York I'll get a job, at least I'll get \$10.00 a week to live on." You had to live in it. Now there are three schools. Three schools. In Beth Shalom a big school and people pay and three teachers, they get about \$8,000 a year. Not \$12.00 a week. And the one in Beth Emeth, a teacher, and in Adas Kodesch, there are two or three teachers. See, this is the difference. And they have a home . . . and they didn't have even a "Y" when I came. You know, the 3rd and . . .

Q [Inaudible] . . . in Newark.

A No, we had to . . .

Q And also Dover there is.

A They didn't have any?

Q Well, they have now.

A Oh, I mean . . . Wilmington had about 100,000 people, I would say about 7-8,000 Jews when I came here . . . there'd be more now. You know, they have that place on 3rd and King. It's closed now, they condemned it, it's old. In the bottom is a shoe store and the top is a hole.

Q [Inaudible].

A Yeah, we used to go dancing once in a while on Saturday night or Sunday, have a lecture there, a Yiddish lecture, this was the Y.M.C.A. in 1920. In 19 . . . I think 1934 they built on French Street a big Y.M.H.A. But it's changed. I don't know, the young people are not half as religious

as we were, but they believe in teaching their kids the Jewish nationalism. That's what changed. Of course economically they changed a lot. Most of them were very poor. You can't find a workingman, a Jewish workingman, now. They're all in business or something. The Lazarus came in here and made out pretty good, too. We knew Lazarus before he got married. I think it was Joe.

Q Well, both of them, you're not taking [inaudible] . . . [Tape is stopped.]  
You're brother . . .

A Sidney Chavin, Dr. Sidney Chavin . . .

Q Is your brother and he . . .

A And I have a nephew Dr. Favel Chavin, a famous orthopedic . . . everybody knows him. All educated in this country.

Q Uh huh. How did they manage to get through school?

A He worked Friday, Saturday and Sunday and he worked hard the whole . . . I mean, studied all week. Well, he was capable.

Q He came to this country when?

A The same time. 1910, he was 14.

Q What's his first name?

A Sidney.

Q Sidney. Um hmm. He came to this country at 14.

A 14 and he started going . . . he liked schooling. I liked girls and he liked schooling. It's no joke, I mean it. He went to prep school in New York and then to Jefferson.

Q Jefferson Medical College.

A Medical College. And his son graduated from Temple as a doctor. In fact, my Sidney was interning here in Delaware at a hospital and his son was interning in King's Hospital in New York.

Q Do you have any other family that came here?

A Not in . . . oh, I have one brother in New York, an accountant, he's retired now, he's over 60. In fact they made him retire before that. But at 60 they have to retire. And I have one sister there in Philadelphia, that's all. And my mother and father moved out . . . I hope.

Q Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chavin. Want to hear what you sound like?

[END OF INTERVIEW]