

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Senior Citizens Project

Jewish Culture

O. H. 317

OSCAR ALTSHULER

Interviewed

by

Karlyn Bennehoof

on

December 2, 1983

## OSCAR ALTSHULER

Oscar Altshuler is 95 years old. He was born in 1889 in Lithuania, Russia, the son of Mayer and Pearl Altshuler. Information about his early life is somewhat limited because of the unavailability of an adequate informant. He and his parents arrived in the United States in 1900. Oscar's father is known to have been extremely learned; he taught Hebrew to many of the residents of the community.

Mr. Altshuler attended South High School and the YMCA Business School. He was the president of the Albro Packing Company, a food fabricating firm until 1962 when the firm was sold. After his retirement, he occupied himself with the stock market, a business venture in Israel, and a number of philanthropic endeavors. He is the only surviving founder of the Jewish Federation of Youngstown, a member of its board of directors, and the chairman of the board of the Youngstown State of Israel Bonds. Known as "Mr. Zionist of Youngstown; he has traveled to Israel on a number of occasions where he established a network of kindergartens for underprivileged children.

A bachelor until age 72, Oscar married Ann Manello in July, 1961. He has resided at Heritage Manor since 1980 where his medical needs could be provided, as Mrs. Altshuler could not provide them for him at home.

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INTERVIEWEE: OSCAR ALTSHULER  
INTERVIEWER: Karlyn Bennehoof  
SUBJECT: World War I, World War II, Discrimination  
DATE: December 2, 1983

B: This is an interview with Oscar Altshuler for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Jewish Senior Citizens. This interview is being conducted at Heritage Manor on December 2, 1983, at approximately 2:30 p.m.

Mr. Altshuler, were you born in Youngstown?

A: No.

B: Were you born in this country?

A: No.

B: Where were you born?

A: Russia.

B: Where in Russia?

A: In Tomaszów; it's Poland really, but it's part of Russia.

B: Is that in Eastern Russia? What part of Russia is that in?

A: In western.

B: What year were you born?

A: 1890.

B: What was it like in Tomaszów? Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood?

A: I was born in a town called Schavel. I don't recall much that happened along that time except we left that town and moved to Poland, which was part of Russia at that time. There we remained until about 1902 when we came to this country.

B: Do you remember what life was like in Russia, what the Jewish community was like?

A: My personal interest in the Jewish life was limited of course.

B: You were very young then weren't you?

A: Yes. I remember, for example, that our home was primarily nationalistic; that is, with the background of Zionism. My father was interested in that time very much with that movement. I recall at home that I wasn't able to participate. In fact, I wasn't told very much about what was going on because it was forbidden. That Zionist movement was forbidden in Russia at that time.

B: The Zionist movement?

A: Yes.

B: Was it an organized movement for a homeland?

A: Yes. That movement was forbidden. My father had operated a Hebrew school. He had three or four assistants in school with him. He personally conducted the Hebrew phase of it. There was one man for Russia, one man for Polish, and one man for German. I remember that part of it, but I cannot explain why my two brothers, who were older, went to the government school.

B: That would be like a public school?

A: It was a government school which was controlled by the government and conducted by the government. I remember just before we left I was to enter that too, but we left for the United States. It was regimented, we had uniforms. We were sort of like the military, where you wore a collar at that age and a belt. In general, the uniform would be of a soldier. However, the one thing I remember is that there was a first taste I had of anti-Semitism.

B: This was at the government school you're talking about?

A: Yes. The Czar had a summer home outside of Tomaszów. He would come there annually but at times he would come there for his vacation. I remember the school was preparing for him to come for his vacation that year.

This was an all boy's school, and they were rehearsing to welcome him, songs and a proper program. The Jewish boys were not permitted to participate.

B: Why was that?

A: Because it was discrimination. Jew were not permitted to participate in the government affairs. During the summertime the other boys were out in the yard, fenced in, singing and practicing for the Czar's arrival. The Jewish boys stood outside by the fence and were not permitted to participate.

B: Russia had a history of anti-Semitism.

A: Yes.

B: So this was a very common thing?

A: Yes. This was only an example of it.

B: What kind of an education did you get at that school?

A: It was primarily Russia, but my father, as I said, had a private school. They taught a few languages and children's schoolwork. That's about as much as I can say about that phase of it.

B: Did you get religious training at your father's school as well?

A: Not that I recall. I did not participate in the government schools because at the time I was to join we left the country. Incidentally, my father had left the country earlier. I remember because he found himself in difficulty with the government, because of extremism; he left suddenly for Germany. At least he said he was going to Germany when really he and my older brother went to the United States.

B: Was this the kind of situation where his life was actually in danger?

A: I don't know. First of all, I was too young and it hadn't materialized because he left before he got involved in that phase of it.

B: You say that the government of Russia was practicing anti-Semitism.

A: Yes.

B: What about the Jewish-Gentile relationship in the community, was it the same sort of thing, was there anti-Semitism there also?

- A: I don't recall. Except I believe there was a definite division between the two. Personally, I don't recall any activities that were unfriendly.
- B: Did you have a synagogue in your community?
- A: Yes. There was a large synagogue there. Although, I don't recall participating much because the Zionists had what they called the Zionist synagogue of their own. It was a small place where those interested participated in that service.
- B: Was there a large Jewish community there?
- A: I believe often, I would say yes.
- B: How long had your father been in Tomaszów?
- A: I don't recall, but I was at an early age, possibly six or seven years old when we came there, and we left when I was twelve.
- B: Do you recall how many generations had been in Eastern Russia of your family?
- A: I can't tell you that. The family really wasn't located so that I could really say I knew them personally. Most of our family was a distance from where we lived.
- B: You say you were born in Schavel and you went later to Tomaszów; Why did you leave Schavel?
- A: I don't recall that.
- B: You don't think that maybe it was because of anti-Semitic attitudes?
- A: I can't say that. I don't know why we left, but I know that I was born there. My life sort of begins with Tomaszów, when I was growing up there.
- B: When you were a little child were you aware that any pogroms were going on, not necessarily in your community, but anywhere around you?
- A: I don't think so.
- B: Did your family own any property?
- A: In Russia?
- B: Yes.

A: No.

B: Why did you finally come to the United States?

A: Primarily because of my father's difficulty with the government I believe, because of his interest in Zionism.

B: That had repercussions on your family?

A: Yes. My father and one brother came here, I think it was in 1901. The others, two brothers and a sister, came later, nine months later to follow him to the country.

B: How old were you when you came?

A: About twelve.

B: What was it like when you got to the United States? What port did you come to?

A: That famous port in New York, Ellis Island.

B: What was your first impression of this country?

A: I think I was sort of scared of a lot of that experience because my father had a brother who came here earlier to the country. When we got to Ellis Island where we expected the worst, as many experienced, we found that someone was meeting us. My father's brother met us in Ellis Island and he was able to divert our program from going through the procedures and the delays and we left and went to the city to visit with my uncle.

There is one thing I might tell you that I think would be of interest. Because my father had left in a hurry and we had difficulty getting passports to immigrate, to leave the country, and after waiting for a greater part of the year and not being able to get the material, my mother was able to arrange with smugglers to smuggle us across the border from Poland to Germany. We left one morning, the town we lived in was near Germany, so we didn't have to travel a great distance. I remember traveling in a wagon, the four of us: my mother, my sister, and brother. We came to a town called Chenstachov and stayed there overnight in a two or three-story building.

B: Was this still in Poland?

A: Yes. Early in the morning the smugglers came in and said that we should move fast. We got dressed in a hurry, we came down, and we were guided across the border from Poland into Germany. You could see the

- military, but whether the military was aware that we were being smuggled across or not, I don't know.
- B: Was this the Russian military or the German military?
- A: The military of Poland. Poland was part of Russia then. We saw the police on horseback, but the smugglers hurried us across the border and we came to a creek or ravine. When my mother got through that she fainted.
- B: She didn't take too kindly about crossing it?
- A: The excitement got to her. The two men, it was a shallow creek, they were prepared for it, they had their trousers rolled up. They carried her across and we then continued on to an inn which was in German territory and we were secure. We continued from there to Bremen, Germany, by rail. When we reached Bremen, because of the delays in getting along and making our short trip there, we missed our boat to the United States.
- B: After all of that!
- A: However, we had to wait two weeks for another boat, a steamer to take us to this country. We were concerned about the risk of traveling overseas at that time of the year. However, we went along and we reached the United States with some difficulty, but we made it finally.
- B: What were the conditions of the boat?
- A: I can assure you we did not travel first-class. The accommodations of the lower rate were quite poor. They were really deplorable. The facilities were extremely cruel. To add to the problem--mother expecting that the food on the boat would not be first-class, had prepared food, the kind that could be taken along and kept intact for the trip--when we got to the border, the gentlemen who smuggled across relieved us of the food.
- B: Sort of as a fee perhaps?
- A: I'm sure they were paid for their service. They were definitely paid for the service.
- B: But he decided to go ahead and go beyond.
- A: I suppose we had some pretty nice things taken along, such as preserves. We found those missing so we had to get along without that. We finally made it and came here in one piece.
- B: How long did you stay in New York City when you came to



Ellis Island?

- A: Just a few days. We were sort of taken care of and freshened up a bit. We got going again by rail. We first came to Akron and lived in Akron for about two years before we came to Youngstown.
- B: Why Akron? Did you have family there?
- A: Yes, we had a large family there. Naturally, we went first to the place where we would have some assistance.
- B: Was there a large Jewish community in Akron then?
- A: Not large. There was a community, but I would say the community in Akron had only a small Reform temple and a small Orthodox synagogue.
- B: No Conservative?
- A: No, at that time there was no conservative temple.
- B: How did you finance the trip from Russia through Germany and finally to the United States?
- A: I believe our humble means made it possible. I don't recall them getting any assistance elsewhere. I know they were limited. When we got here my oldest brother, who had come here with my father first, was then about fourteen or fifteen at the most; he was making a bare livelihood. Our relatives helped, but we did not expect them to care for us completely. My father, being a Hebrew scholar who had no training other than that, and physically was a delicate person, his service here was of no value because of the small community and the limited number who could use that service. He was really helpless so he depended on my brother, who I said was then about fourteen, to provide for the family. At that age he was able to be on his own, maybe some of the family helped him to buy a horse and wagon, and started peddling junk.
- B: That's interesting. What sort of things did he peddle? What sort of merchandise did he deal with?
- A: He peddled junk to buy and sell, scrap iron, rags, and whatever comes along that they peddled in those days. This was true of many who came to this country then. They used this as a means of providing for their needs. He did not know the country, did not know the language. Once he was taken to some place by some boys or men, and they sold him some scrap out of a building and later he learned it was equipment in a machine shop that the fellows who sold it to him didn't own.

B: Oh no!

A: The police took him to jail. However, the family and friends took care of it. That was the way you got along in those days, you kept plugging until you got a few nickels together.

B: You mentioned the language earlier, that you didn't know the language here. Was that a very large barrier?

A: It has been a barrier for a long while. It is strange how you manage to pick up enough to get along. Although I had some time spent in school I was also limited. I remember I came into the Akron school and they put me in the first grade, although I was twelve. The next day or two I was in the fifth grade. There is one thing I knew rather better, that is German, because we lived near the German border. The teacher constantly embarrassed me by constantly asking me to answer questions that the others could not in German. I remember I was so embarrassed by that, that I was sort of singled out. I've been of a shy nature all of my life. That, naturally, was uneasy to come by when I was with a group of kids and I was an outsider as I was.

B: But she recognized that you had knowledge that the other kids didn't?

A: Yes, the first day that I went to school they assigned a teacher to spend all of her time with me. I was really made comfortable.

B: Was this a public school?

A: Yes. It was Perkins School in Akron.

B: Was there a different climate between the Jewish-Gentile relationship in America as opposed to the same thing in Russia?

A: There was not a division between the Jew and the non-Jew here. It was far greater over there than it is here.

B: What was?

A: The division between the Jew and non-Jew.

B: The anti-Semitism?

A: Yes. I'll say this in general, personally, I have never experienced much anti-Semitism. I don't believe I can point anything out, except the part about school, where

we were not allowed to participate because we were Jewish. Other than that I cannot recall an instance where I was really made uncomfortable or made conscious of the fact that I'm a Jew. I don't remember anything even in Russia.

B: I've been hearing more and more of that lately, that the anti-Semitism in America is not the kind of thing that people experienced in Europe and Russia.

A: I think anti-Semitism in this country is generally far less noticeable now than it used to be a few years back.

B: The anti-semitism here was more of a discriminatory nature where you weren't permitted to go to hotels or certain places, whereas in Russia it was more of a frontal attack, where you were actually in danger of being beaten up.

A: The very fact that people would turn on innocent people and kill them with stones, or rocks, or clubs is obvious that the attitudes towards the Jews there must have been quite cruel where they could do that sort of inhuman thing.

B: Did the townspeople in Russia also get involved when there was a pogrom or was it mainly conducted by the government?

A: It was known that whenever there was a condition that the people would find fault with the government, would have a reason to be unhappy, that to divert that attitude they would direct their anger against something that was Jewish. It was a common procedure because it was known on a higher level that was the way they could bypass the anger from the other people of the non-Jewish community if they found that there was a feeling against the government.

B: So the government would actually feed the anti-Semitism of the people . . .

A: Yes, that was a known fact.

B: Did you see any of that at all in America, where the anger of the Gentile community may have been diverted toward the Jew?

A: I don't recall anything. As I said before, some years ago there were some remarks made by the less informed person, but I've never experienced any direct discrimination.

B: Did your family become assimilated into the American society? I know that language was a problem, but were

there any problems from the old country to America that sort of prevented you from melting into American society?

A: No. You might say my only experience was that because of the position of the family financially, my brother who was fourteen and I was twelve, we were obliged to do what we could. In order to do that we tried to find ways of making a living. At that age we provided for the family. It became a son and daughter thing that it is your problem to provide for the family without being told or being asked. I remember when I was in the teens that we got into business. After I came over here, my brother and I got involved in the barrel business. In those days whiskey, oil, and vinegar were all shipped in barrels.

B: In the wooden barrels?

A: Yes. Then even merchandise like sugar and crackers were shipped in barrels. There were a lot of barrels emptied, and we bought them, and we had to find a market for them. We got into business and we were still in our early teens. When we got involved in that we bought a wagon that was especially built to carry empty barrels. We bought and sold barrels and after seven years of being in the barrel business here, we bought land on Prospect Street, off of Himrod Avenue. It was something like 160 feet frontage. We operated there for several years and we then got the business in Buffalo.

B: Buffalo, New York?

A: Yes. It was in a similar business. How we financed it I don't know, but we made a little profit right along. It's unbelievable how you can make gains with limited facilities, finances and language. There was a need to get along and we made our limited facilities take care of us.

B: What year was this approximately?

A: I imagine this must have been about 1916.

B: This was about the time of World War I?

A: Yes.

B: Do you remember World War I at all?

A: About that time we got into another business. We went to Pennsylvania and got into the food business, packing pickles and sauerkraut. There was a canning factory in that town of Springboro, Pennsylvania, and we leased that

place to operate in it. We were quite a business. We had more ambition than sense I think. We started operating that thing and we had a government order to pack tomatoes. We didn't have very elaborate facilities, but the government approved a contract to pack tomatoes. They sent a man down as supervisor and it was a very poor year and our plant was very small, but when we got the contract I was then given an exemption from military service.

B: You were given an exemption?

A: For that reason, because of the nature of the business that we were in.

B: In other words, you didn't have to go into the service?

A: Yes.

B: This was an aid for the war effort then? You were saying that what you were doing with canning tomatoes was more important?

A: Yes. I had a card, a government official card which relieved me of all military service in the Army. At that time they issued those cards. I got that purely on the basis of the business that we were in and without any special effort. The government, at that time, became more orgaized and people were more involved in World War I than they were in World War II. There was a spirit that anyone who would say a word against the war was almost stoned.

B: That was considered sedition wasn't it?

A: Yes. At that time we worked with an Irish man, an older man who knew the business. He worked for us. He was a peculiar individual. He would not want to be questioned. He was very secretive about his ways. The people in the community, being Protestant and he being Catholic, started to gang up on him because he didn't buy any government bonds then. Bonds at that time were being sold on the street corners. He said, "Oscar, what am I going to tell them? I'm not going to humble myself to them. I know I'm a good American and they can't tell me that I'm not." That type of individual had to be admired. He wouldn't allow himself to be taken in to being told what to do when he knew he was doing the right thing in the first place.

B: It sounds to me like this man had a lot of integrity.

A: He did. He was very ethical and very mannerly. He was honest. He had such a pride about him that it wouldn't

allow him to be questioned. He had a difficult time there for a while because they ostracized him as if he was a pest of some sort.

B: So he was experiencing discrimination because he was an Irish Catholic in a Protestant community?

A: When you speak of the Irish Catholic, we went for the first time to Pennsylvania and we settled there. We operated there until we sold out. The first trip my brother and I made to Springboro, I don't don't how we were directed to that man's home, a very fine appearing man. It was a home that was so well arranged. He was Catholic. It was one of the few times early in life that we got an experience when he told us that he had two daughters who were high school teachers but couldn't find a job in the community because they were Catholic and they would not approve of their vocation. He told us the details then and I realized I thought we were the only ones, but here is a man who has got a worse situation than ours.

B: Unfortunately it is all over. It has to do with a lot of people, particularly in this country. In the early 1900's, we had anti-Semitism, we had organizations like the KKK who were anti-Black, anti-Jewish, anti-Catholic, just anti everything. This is the period where you first came to this country, but organizations like the KKK, first of all, weren't around a long time doing the burning of the cross. Most of the anti-minority group feeling would have been situations like you said earlier, discrimination where you couldn't go to a hotel, or certain companies wouldn't employ a Black or a Jew or a Catholic, or that sort of thing.

A: Yes, it was quite common then. I know something about that condition and I must admit that it has lessened a lot, that we're not subjected as much as we were. There may be some other form that has taken on, because if I am inclined to hate somebody, I am going to find something about him no matter how hard I try. I haven't seen as much of it, and I personally haven't felt it.

B: So it has been getting better over the years? Do you think the legislation in the Congress has anything to do with it?

A: No doubt. Today, I think the minorities, if they have just cause, will get a fair shake.

I remember we had a man employed in Pennsylvania for a few years time and then he left for some reason. He wrote a letter to me and told me that a man named Zachary, who was a known anti-Semite, was coming to

the city here. He said he would like me to meet him. I declined the opportunity, but I got the letter and that was the story he told me. He told me that a fellow that was a known anti-Semite was coming here and that he would like me to see him. I don't know what he wanted me to do.

B: Do you think that he felt that if that man would have spoken to you he might rethink his stand?

A: I don't know, but the fellow was too widely known for me to be able to influence him.

B: Do you recall his name?

A: Zachary. I'm not sure.

B: Would that be his first name or last name?

A: Last name.

B: When did you leave Springboro to come to Youngstown?

A: We lived in Youngstown all the while.

B: You were just working back and forth?

A: Yes.

B: What was the community like in Youngstown at that time?

A: At what time?

B: Around World War I, 1916, when you had this business going on.

A: It was a small town. To give you an example, before we got involved in the business they would have an annual homecoming week. There were street parades and many more things. We knew one thing, that we liked to make a few dollars. We knew that they would have peanuts sold, and my brother and I went and bought a large, burlap bag of peanuts and brought it home and packaged it in a barn. The next morning when the parade started we were out peddling peanuts, two bags for a nickel. We cleaned up our inventory and then later in the evening we found ourselves itching to make a few more dollars so we sold confetti. At the end of the day we had made \$35. We hit the jackpot. This was a tremendous amount for us to make.

B: Thirty-five dollars was a lot of money then.

- A: The sad part of the whole thing was that when we got through selling the peanuts we went down the street later on and we found that the peanuts were on the street. We didn't know that you had to roast peanuts before you sold them. (Laughter)
- B: All those people bought those peanuts. Did you do it again the next year? Did you roast them?
- A: No, at that time we had started the barrel business already.
- B: So you didn't repeat the peanuts?
- A: No. In the summertime I would sell flypaper. In those days homes weren't screened in and the poorer homes had flies you could slice with a knife. They would use flypaper to get rid of them. There was paper that was in two pages and you would fold them open and there would be like glue. There was a material used to attract flies and they would put it around the house. I sold that for a couple of years. Also, one year they had fans made out of paper and they would fold over.
- B: To keep cool?
- A: Yes, in the summertime. I did little things like that and got along. We didn't get hurt by it.
- B: That's interesting that your ingenuity can come up with so many things.
- A: It was the need to eat that made it necessary. We were also limited in our opportunities because we didn't have the experience and know-how and the language. We grew up in the dark. Things came up where we tried to do things.
- B: What was the religious atmosphere in Youngstown? Were there synagogues here?
- A: Yes, they were not as elaborate or large as today. I remember the Rodef Sholom had a small place on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Lincoln Avenue. It was a small, frame building. There was the Rodef Shomom and the Temple Emanuel, which was on Rayen Avenue near Walnut Street. It was a big structure, but one of the old-fashioned types. They served the purpose. I don't think it could handle more than three hundred or four hundred people.
- B: Were there more synagogues? There was Rodef Sholom and Emanuel, were there others?



A: There were at least two other Orthodox synagogues on the east, but they were small congregations. Later on there was the Anshe Emeth Temple. That was on Elm Street, near Wick Park.

B: Was Rodef Sholom an Orthodox?

A: No, Reform.

B: What was Emanuel?

A: Orthodox.

B: Anshe Emeth came later, what was that?

A: Conservative.

B: The reform and Orthodox were already here, and then the Conservative. Was conservative a later kind of development?

A: Yes.

B: Can you explain the difference between those three?

A: The Conservative congregation is really a more liberated Orthodox synagogue in conducting their rituals and services.

B: But the conservative still wear the Keepah and the talis?

A: Yes. Today, the Conservative rabbi rides on the Sabbath. The Orthodox would never think of that. The foods have become more liberal in their serving.

B: Can you explain what kosher means?

A: Kosher means that the laws were made years back when there was no refrigeration, there was no sanitation, where a man would come in the house and sit down at the table with his hands dirty and didn't know the difference. It is really a form of cleanliness, of health service, in my opinion. Pork is known that it is possibly subject to more diseases than any of the other meat or any animal. They would use that and it created a lot of sickness, a lot of problems. You would go down to the Middle East or any other countries today, they've got the meat hanging out and it's summer. On the outside there is a tree with the flies parked on it and you can slice it with a knife. This was true in those days. In order to make the Jew respect these things and to accept them and follow them, they made it a religion; otherwise, they would not have accepted those restrictions. Kosher really means these things which I have

mentioned, more or less.

B: The cleanliness sort of thing.

A: And prevention of disease and sickness. We've traveled a good deal and we've been in India and places. I remember traveling to India, and we didn't spend too much time there, it's a big country. We were in New Delhi and we went to see the Taj Mahal. We passed an open door market; there was a table there and flies completely engulfed it. My wife asked the driver, "What's that?" He said, "That's a fish market, it's fish?" She said, "That's the fish they have? What about the fish that we get in our hotel?" "That's it," he said. We couldn't eat fish then all day.

B: I guess not.

A: Actually, in fact, for the rest of the trip. That is common. In hot weather they would serve lemonade and I don't know what they would put in there, but whatever the liquid is, it was sitting in a jar on the table, in that hot weather, no refrigeration, nothing to protect it and they would buy those drinks and drink it right there and then. If we would take that we would get sick. They're immune to those things.

B: So kosher is more designed to prevent illness and disease?

A: Originally. In those days they had no refrigeration. In the Middle East, in Jerusalem, the weather gets pretty hot; if they try to eat food of that sort they would die like flies.

B: Does kosher apply to anything other than meat?

A: Any foods.

B: Anything at all?

A: Foods like that.

B: I've heard of kosher pickles, but things like olives or . . .

A: Kosher pickles, really, I've heard all. It is a huge joke.

B: Yes.

A: It's extra spicy, that's all it meant.

B: Yes, I had a feeling that that was a little bit different from the Judaic kosher concept. But anything at all,

coffee can be kosher?

A: Yes. They have dietary laws that are quite broad and they interpret it. It's very much involved. The man who slaughters the cattle or chicken is trained to understand what counts as something that they should not permit to be used. They will very often have a chicken and they'll slash it and they will not permit it to be used. They have symptoms there that dictate whether it's okay or not. They're sound.

I remember before your time, Dave Jenkins, the attorney; He later became the judge. I remember I was talking to him one time and he said, "The more I study dietary laws, the more I'm impressed with the understanding the people had those days about how to interpret things so they would not use them under those conditions, heat, without any facilities they would not use things that are detrimental to their health."

B: You're talking about centuries ago?

A: Yes. That's really how kosher originated.

B: My understanding of kosher, I don't know much about it, but I thought it had something to do with, in the religious aspect, that you weren't supposed to eat the blood of an animal.

A: We're not allowed to eat any blood. A kosher chicken means they spray salt on it to remove the blood. If you take these regulations in that are quite broad, I think in the end they make good sense.

B: Yes, I think they do too. We've discussed the difference between Orthodox and Conservative with the Conservative being more liberal than the Orthodox. What is the difference between those two and the Reform?

A: Personally, I think what it means is that it is more liberal than the other two.

B: More liberal?

A: Yes. They don't wear the yarmulke; their prayer book is entirely different.

B: It is?

A: Yes. I'm not an authority on those things and I'm not going to attempt to give you information that I might be wrong on.

B: No, I just wanted a general idea.

A: For instance, the passover, we conduct eight days of Passover, they don't.

B: There is just a difference in the way they observe the holiday?

A: There are more fundamental things, I think, that a rabbi could give you.

B: I just wanted a general idea of what we were talking about. How had Youngstown changed over the years from when you first came to the city?

A: What area?

B: In the Jewish community itself, as Youngstown as a whole. You say when you first got here it was a small town?

A: Youngstown was cobblestones when we first got here.

B: Was it really cobblestone?

A: The best kind of street. There was an American Hotel where McKelvey's is located. The last on the street was a hotel that was a frame building. There were townhouses then; they rebuilt later and it has been torn down since. I remember when I was somewhere out of town and a man told me that he stayed in Youngstown in townhouses. He said the beds weren't harder than a table, but not softer either. I remember they were very poor accommodations. We were a small town community without any apology.

I remember the saloons in those days; a man named Moore, who was the defender of the saloons, spoke of the saloons being the poor man's club. They would go in and get a glass of beer for a nickel and sit there for hours and visit. With that, they would get a free lunch.

B: For a nickel?

A: They would get food with that. We had all the shortcomings that came with a small town. Being a mill town, we had the poor element. In those days a man earned nine dollars a week with a family and was quite ordinary. I went to work for a merchant on East Federal Street one summer and I was earning three dollars a week and worked long hours. Youngstown has changed for the better all the way through. We were very poorly equipped, the life was far from what it is today, and of course, when we speak of the unemployed, the poor, it's

sad. In those days many people who were considered poor were more or less a part of the population and accepted. That's about it, I believe.

B: What was Youngstown like during World War II? Do you remember during the 1930's and the 1940's? What was the atmosphere during the war?

A: World War II?

B: Yes.

A: I can't recall.

B: Let me just ask, was the Jewish community in Youngstown aware of what was happening in Europe with European Jewry?

A: At first we were not.

B: That being the 1930's?

A: It was later that it became known to any great extent. The atrocity and the butchering was well known. Then we became aware of the fact that all this was happening.

B: Would that have been around 1940 or later than that?

A: About 1940 or earlier than that.

B: Earlier than 1940?

A: The war started when, World War II?

B: Hitler came to power, I believe, in 1932, but he didn't really . . . I don't think anybody in this country was aware of the persecution that was going on until the late 1930's.

A: But Hitler came in with a well-known background that as far as the Jews are concerned, his was "death to the Jews".

B: Everybody was aware of that though, that he was that way?

A: Yes. I can recall that in New York I was at a meeting there, it was a Jewish affair, and there was a Dr. Wise who was a leader of the American Jewish Committee.

B: Would that be Rabbi Stephen Wise?

A: Yes. I recall he was in Germany while this happened. He had a conversation with a few people and when one of the German-Jewish women came out to another country and she had her children with her and she told him

she was going back to Germany, going home, he said, "Are you going to take all this with you knowing what's going on?" She said, "Certainly, how could I get to my friends' place without my Jewry? They wouldn't know me, so to speak." He said they didn't realize the danger and the suffering they would be put through. I can give you one example where a man who was from Germany who became more conscious about things who came away and met people there in one of the German communities and they felt that the danger was so great that they better consider leaving. They met and decided to leave. One in the community, a Jew who was very well established financially, called this man the next morning and said, "Did I hear right that you are considering leaving?" He said, "Yes." "What do you mean?" he said, "You and I were here several generations, eight or nine generations, and we're going to be hurt by anybody? We are Germans. We can't be discriminated against." They stuck by their decision and they left, and they got away. A short time later the things they predicted did come about and the man left the country. He was extremely wealthy and had a lot of investors outside of Germany. He got along quite well. He said he got into little countries and thought he was secure, and finally Germany hit those little countries and he was gone for a second time. Then he left for Israel, which at that time was Palestine, and he had nothing. He came from Germany a pauper after being the one that wanted to stay in the area.

B: Do you know what that man's name was?

A: No, I don't. There are many stories that are true, they are not stories, they are incidents that happened. The proud German was not the man who would never believe that Jews . . . They thought he [Hitler] was attacking only the East European Jews, but he attacked them as hard as the old people. Hitler's program was to make the world clean of Jewish life. There were a lot at that time that heard and knew and met people who were involved in it.

B: What was the general reaction of the Youngstown Jewish community, what was the general reaction to this sort of knowledge?

A: We were helpless to do anything, all we could do was give money. Some were more generous, some were less generous, but they gave small amounts. Some felt, well, I come first, why should I go and give up my good dollar when I'm not involved in this. I got a telegram from Stephen Wise about the time that Hitler became the all-powerful man in Germany. They called for a country-wide protest. It was a two-page telegram explaining what was going on and that action should be taken. That was about the first time that they really started

organizing campaigns to save what was left or who would be left of the victims of Hitler.

B: Would that be around 1942?

A: I thought it was in 1933, wasn't it?

B: No. War was declared in 1939.

A: Then it must be about 1942.

B: Rabbi Stephen Wise, at that late date, did try to get something going to save people?

A: He was in Youngstown, I knew him personally. He came to Youngstown following World War I. Should I tell you about his business here?

B: Certainly.

A: I got a telegram one day from his office saying that Dr. Wise would be in Youngstown and would be available to the Zionists between five o'clock and seven o'clock that day. He was scheduled to speak for a teacher's institute that afternoon and evening so in between time he would be available to speak for the Zionists. At that time we organized a dinner at the Ohio Hotel, in that short time. In World War I, he was one of the members of a delegation of seven who went to plead for the minorities' rights. When he came back here he came to this affair and I sat that time with Bill Maag. Do you remember him?

B: No, I don't.

A: He was the former editor of the Vindicator. Wise spoke at that time and the Vindicator then wrote the story that he spoke at an afternoon and evening teacher's program, but I remember it said that at neither place did he speak with a personal enthusiasm or interest that he did when he spoke to the Zionists. We had about 25 or 30 people. If you ever want to hear a man who could deliver an address on a high level . . . and I think he could move mountains with his voice; he was one of a kind. I met him a number of times.

B: He was very well respected among the Jewish community then?

A: First of all, he was a very good friend of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt named him as an ambassador to some foreign country one time and he declined to accept because he didn't feel that that was part of his life. I remember hearing him one time in Atlantic City at a national canners convention. There were

2100 people there, and there were possibly not more than one percent Jews. He started out explaining that he was six years old when he came here and he brought his family with him. He apologized for his English, and he is known to be one of the finest speaking persons. He just about knew the English language to the last bit, I think. He had the nerve at that time to attack the Ku Klux Klan.

B: That did take a lot of nerve at that time, yes.

A: He had the support of the audience, but I know many there were his enemies. He was a bold fighter for the Jewish cause. He was one of them and he knew that they were not entitled to the treatment they were getting. He didn't mince any words in saying so, but he had a way of expressing himself and a voice that would move any audience.

I got a few words in there for Zionist work; that is my main work. My credential for doing these things are limited because, as I told you, I started work quite early and had very little time to go to school. However, I was always sticking my nose into these things that I felt keenly about. I got involved in the Jewish community life here in many things. In fact, you spoke of World War II; I was appointed in World War II as a member of the National Committee on the Pickle Industry. The government used a lot of pickles in those days, abroad and here. They demanded a certain percentage a pack.

B: A quota?

A: Yes, a quota for pickles and sauerkraut. We were in that business rather extensively coming from the peanuts, and I was on the national committee for that industry. I really felt good about it.

B: Certainly, that was an honor.

A: Do you want to ask a few questions?

B: No, that's all right. I was going to ask you about the Zionist movement and what your involvement was and you already got into that so you can go ahead and talk about it.

A: I had a toss-up in my life for that and the things I was doing here for livelihood. My father was in art design, as I said before, and in 1914 I went to a convention in Rochester, New York. I was 24 years old. I attended the First American Zionist Convention, which



was a miniature thing compared to what it is today. The national budget at that time for the United States, for all American Jewry, was six thousand dollars.

B: Six thousand dollars for all of American Jewry?

A: Yes. American Zionist, not Jewry.

B: That's still very little money, even then.

A: It was very primitive, very few supported it. At that meeting someone suggested that we raise that budget to \$7500. The delegates got up and yelled if we did that we would be bankrupt before the year was half over. We couldn't raise that sort of money, it wasn't here. A man from Europe who was a member of the international committee, came to the convention and he got up and said, "I'm coming from the international committee meeting in London and we discussed your problem. We know you're a poor community, but we also know the potentials here and we want to support you to enable you to do a little better than you've been doing." He pulled out a folder and there was a check for \$2500 towards our budget from Europe.

B: How nice.

A: With that they accepted the \$7500 budget. But it didn't end there; six weeks later World War I broke out. It was August 1914. After that meeting Justice Brandeis sent a letter saying that after studying the Zionist question for two years he had come to the conclusion that Zionism would be good for Palestine and that Palestine would be good for the Jews. He was willing to associate himself with us. His endorsement gave the movement tremendous impetus. Since the European Zionists were the ones who led the worldwide Zionist movement, the only man from that group was the man who brought the voucher.

B: What was his name again?

A: Schmarya Levine. The convention adjourned and six weeks later the war broke out. They drafted Brandeis to be the world chairman of the movement.

Are there any other questions you would like to ask?

B: No, not right now. I'm going to look over this material that you gave me and I'll listen to your tapes again and perhaps I'll be back for a second interview, if that's all right with you. It has been fascinating talking to you, Mr. Altshuler.

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A: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW