

Ernie Fliegel
Narrator

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Interviewer

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Mr. Fliegel's restaurant

Ernie Fliegel **-EF**
Rhoda Lewin **-RL**

EF: So when I grew up, he had a gymnasium and I was boxing, we used to...

RL: Benny Haskell?

EF: Benny Haskell. Yeah, he had a gymnasium. He was a boxer, as you heard—and I said to him, “You know, when we came from the old country everything was so new here. In the old country we never got out of our neighborhood, of course, so we never had a fight, we never sold papers or anything. But in Minneapolis, on the way to school I’d have a fight, during recess I’d have to fight. I had to fight, to protect my brother Joe.” Joe was a fat little kid and they’d say, “C’mere, you greenhorn!” and bam! they’d whack him, ‘cause he was little and fat and a greenhorn, and he couldn’t talk back. And they’d whack me, too. So to protect him and myself, I learned to fight. And then I started selling papers, and when we bought the papers there was a fight, and on the corner—we’d call ‘em the Polacks—they’d come through. So I thought this was the way of life. And I really thought that in America, you’re supposed to fight. [Laughing] He [Benny Haskell] said, “That’s the darndest thing. I thought so, too!” [Laughing] And he got to be a fighter too. Most of the fighters were immigrants or first generation Americans. It was always fighting. Oh, it was terrible! Now my son never had a fight in his life. People say, “Did you teach your Bob to box?” I say, “No.” And they ask me why, and I say, “‘Cause he never asked me to.” And he never had a fight. He went to Blake School—and he was on the hockey team—so there was no need to fight. Nobody wanted to take anything away from him, and he didn’t want to take anything away from anybody else. But we thought it was a way of life.

RL: Did you fight with other Jewish kids, or was it just the non-Jews?

EF: The rivalry was with the Poles, or the Croatians. There was a colony by the river, on the West side—they called that the Flats—and also on the East side, where the Poles, mostly Poles or Croatians and Slovaks, they had one section and we had one section. The Jews shut off on Second Avenue and Washington, and they started on Third Avenue and Washington. And they had a good territory, because the Milwaukee Depot was on Third

Avenue. And every once in a while some kid would stray over there, you know, to shine shoes or sell papers, and a fight would ensue. And the same thing when they came over to our section. But we fought amongst ourselves too.

RL: Did you have gangs?

EF: No, no gangs. And no clubs or anything. And it was quite honorable, because there was never two on one, or a big kid pick on a little one. If that happened two other kids would come and help that little kid. There was honor, even amongst the kids. You never heard of anybody hitting a woman, and the worst kids we had—we had bad kids, too—never would hit an older person or a woman.

RL: Does anybody ever ask why you sold newspapers?

EF: Why? Necessity! You don't think anybody sold papers because they liked to! The same thing about boxing. We didn't box because we liked to box. We didn't start to be professional fighters because we liked to fight. It was necessity. You had to do that to make a living.

RL: You say making a living. Did you take your money home for the family?

EF: Well, I was the head of my family. I had my sister, my younger brother, and my mother. And my grandmother lived with us.

RL: What happened to your father?

EF: Well, he wasn't around very often [Laughing], so we were on our own. Nobody fought for fun. And you've got to remember that we didn't only sell papers when it was nice out, but in storms and rain and cold and 20 below zero. You'd get up early in the morning... Oh, gosh, that was no fun. But the beautiful part of it, when I think back, is nobody forced you to do it. It came natural. You were a boy and you had to go and help. When I was twelve years old, I remember that my mother was upset a little bit, she was crying, it was getting cold and we didn't have any overcoats. I would sell papers, and if I made sixty cents, I would give my mother fifty cents and I would hide a dime. Well, that would accumulate. On a better day I would hide a quarter. I saved twelve dollars that way. You know how long that must have taken to save twelve dollars? And I had that all in change, tucked in a pretty good safe place. And we didn't have any overcoats, and my mother was quite concerned. It was getting cold, so I told her of the money I had. Well, she wanted to know where I got it! [Laughing] We went to Holtzman's on Fourth and Cedar, and it was one of my proudest days. We each got an overcoat, four dollars apiece, my sister, my brother and myself. Twelve dollars. Now you ask me why we sold papers. [Laughing]

We had a fellow... Max Friedman on Franklin Avenue... oh, he was a wonderful man. You probably will talk to people that remember him. He had the coal and feed store on

Franklin between Sixteenth and Seventeenth Avenue. And coal—we burned soft coal, that was our heat, in our stove—was five dollars a ton. Well, we never had five dollars at one time. So we would get like two tons of coal, that's ten dollars, and we would pay fifty cents, pay a couple dollars down or three dollars or whatever we had, and then pay fifty cents a week. And I used to go and pay the fifty cents.

I can remember he had a big ledger, and it was yellowed pages, and he would write with his pen and give you credit for the fifty cents. And every time I'd come in, he'd open that big book, and sometimes we'd need another ton of coal and we still owed two or three dollars. I was only ten or twelve years old then, and I would ask Mr. Friedman if we could have another ton of coal. "Sure, you're a good boy." He was a fine man! So we had people like that in our neighborhood. And also the grocery store... if you didn't have the money you could go in anyway. It was a little embarrassing [Laughing], but they had very few losses. People paid. There was no such thing as relief, you know. We lived in a neighborhood on Seventeenth Avenue right by the synagogue—that's where the Romanian settlement was—and there was one family where the social workers would come on occasion, and we could recognize them because of their dress, and it was a disgrace! The neighbors would all say, "That family takes charity." Because nobody was that poor.

We had a melamed... he wasn't a Rabbi, but he was a teacher... because we couldn't fit in the Talmud Torah -- the cheder, as we called it—after school, because of our selling newspapers. So we had a melamed come to our house after we had our supper, and we paid him fifty cents a week. Six times he'd come, for fifty cents for me and fifty cents for Joe. And that's how we boned up so that we could be Bar Mitzvah. So this poor guy would ride on a bicycle from house to house... he had a territory around there... in cold, rain, for fifty cents a week.

RL: What was your Bar Mitzvah like?

EF: We went to the synagogue and I recited a prayer. I stood up by the pulpit. Then we went home, and we had a chocolate cake—that's the only kind of cake my mother could make [laughing]—and ice cream. And we had the family. Everybody had a lot of family then, aunts and uncles and cousins, and that was the big thing. I don't remember if I got a fountain pen, but in those days when you were Bar Mitzvah, you got a fountain pen [Laughing] and I had a few little presents from the family. But now, when I think about how big those Bar Mitzvahs are today... they have them at the Waldorf Astoria with Paul Whiteman playing...

RL: Tell me about your newsboys' strike. Did you organize that?

EF: No, I didn't. I didn't organize it, because I was too young. That was in about 1916. We used to pay fifty cents a hundred for papers, then sell 'em for a penny apiece. Then we were given notice that on such and such a day the price to us would be \$1.40 a hundred, and we could sell 'em for two cents. So we'd only make ten cents more and

we'd have almost three times as much invested. But the worst part of it was, there was no returns. Before, if we were stuck with some papers, if there was a storm, say, we could return 'em and get credit for 'em. But now if there was a storm, we would be out of luck. So we went on strike and it lasted quite a while. I remember Ralph Van Lear was the mayor and Harthill was the Chief of Police. The kids used some violence at times -- they tipped over a couple of trucks and let air out of the tires, so the trucks couldn't move the papers out of the alley—and I remember the Chief of Police coming. They were sympathetic with us—both the mayor and the chief—but they told us in a very nice way that we have to behave ourselves, and no rough stuff! And we did cool down. There was one bad moment when poor Governor Burnquist sent out the militia to the news kids, and he never was able to live that down! He was a fine man, but ill-advised. We had a blind newsboy—his name was Weisman, and in those days that was before the white cane, so you couldn't tell he was blind—and when they came in the alley and asked us to disperse, they had guns—it was the National Guard—and we all ran, but Weisman couldn't run, so one of the young militia men hit him over the head with a club, and that was kind of sad.

RL: When did the boys start having regular routes?

EF: Well, at that time they had routes, too, but most people bought their papers on the way home from work, or on the way to work. There were home deliveries, but they didn't advertise them like they do now, and they didn't promote them. Most of us sold at streetcar stops. A car would stop and the windows would be open, and we'd run up and down. And you'd sell them to people coming off or changing streetcars, or in the office buildings. I remember Dave Silverman. He was a rich newsboy! He had the Security Bank Building on Second Avenue and Fourth Street South and he sold inside, so he was out of the bad weather, and he let me hustle outside, on the corner.

RL: How did he get that territory?

EF: Well, you bought them. If you owned a corner, you could get as much as fifty or a hundred dollars for it, if it was a good corner. They were sold not too often. They were mostly let down from older brother to younger brother, to family. Like there was one corner on Fourth and Nicollet that was a very profitable corner, and there were always adults selling papers there. And also on Fourth and Nicollet was Maurice Kroman. He was called the Millionaire Newsboy! The poor guy worked so hard, but that was a profitable corner. A corner like that, I don't know how much it would be worth. But you'd get fifty or a hundred dollars, and that was a lot of money, to sell a corner like that.

RL: What happened if somebody tried to muscle in?

EF: Well, it was an unwritten law that you're not allowed to sell papers on any other corner, but every once in a while some kid would sneak in. So you'd chase them off, that's all. But you had to be able to fight! Otherwise he wouldn't run.

RL: Do you have any idea how many newsboys there were?

EF: They were on every corner! They had a Newsboys Club, and there was a Newsboys Camp at Rockford. There was, I would say, hundreds of newsboys.

RL: Any newsgirls?

EF: No, never had a newsgirl. It was a little too rough for girls.

RL: Tell me about your boxing career. Did you fight over at the Pillsbury House? And when did you get started?

EF: The Pillsbury House, that was one of the first places. They had a wonderful man, Ed Curry. We called him The Chief. He was the head of the Pillsbury Settlement House and he was responsible for putting more young men on the right track. He provided a very fine place for them to play basketball, box, whatever you wanted to do. There was a pool table there, and a gymnasium to shoot baskets, and he used to have bean feeds, and he always had so many other things. And Pillsbury House Camp was the most wonderful camp. We went there for two weeks for three dollars! It was at Bush Lake, the first one. They'd weigh you in when you first got there, and then weigh you out after the two weeks, and it was not uncommon for little boys to gain eight and ten pounds in two weeks. Boy, you could get all the milk and bread you wanted, and all the oatmeal [Laughing], and boy, it was really fine! [Laughing] And you could fish and swim and hike, and they had overnight hikes. It's a shame they discontinued settlement houses as such, because I think they served a terrific purpose.

RL: So when did you turn pro?

EF: In 1922. I was working at a women's ready-to-wear store and I was boxing at the same time. I was working at Morrison's on 524 Nicollet. Manager Harry Greengard was a real nice guy, and every once in a while I would box. I was moonlighting. I'd make \$15, \$20, \$25, and my pay was only \$25 a week!

RL: For how many hours?

EF: Eight hours a day, six days a week. And Saturday, I think we were open 'til later. So he'd say, "You know, you're not going to be able to do both of these jobs," because I'd come in with a bruise, a swollen lip, or swollen nose. "It doesn't look good," he says, "you coming in with cuts and bruises." I'd say, "I'm sorry, I'll try not to get hit!" [Laughter] So finally, one day, he says, "You're gonna have to choose." And just that day, I had an offer of \$75 -- that was the most I'd gotten up to that time -- and I thought, \$75, and that's 15 minutes the fight lasts! So I told him, "Harry, I'm gonna keep boxing." He's gone, but his brother Lester, who lives in Florida, we're still in touch. That's 1922, when I started boxing professionally. We used to box at the Gaiety Theater and at the Elks Club and Athletic Club, and get \$10, \$15, \$20. And you could box three, four times

a week. My brother Joe, he did better than most of the professionals. He'd box almost every night.

RL: Just around Minneapolis?

EF: Minneapolis, St. Paul. Burlesque theaters, clubs—the Elks, Eagles, Athletic Club.

RL: Were there any other Jewish kids who were doing this?

EF: Oh, sure. There was a flock of 'em, right in our neighborhood. Billy Stern, he lived right near where your dad lived, on Eighteenth Street... there were three Sterns, Art and Billy and Sid... and Billy Stern was a good lightweight. And Jack LaBelle... he was a sweet guy, a good fighter, and he lived in our neighborhood. I can't think of anybody else at that time, but North Minneapolis had a lot of good Jewish fighters. They had Jack Joseph, Mike Cohen, Danny Dillon, and there must have been a lot more, too.

RL: Where did you fight Augie Ratner?

EF: I almost forgot my pal Augie! Augie was a good fighter. We boxed at the Kenwood Armory. That was a rivalry! We already had gotten to be pretty good fighters, but he was a few years older than I was, and he was already a boxing headliner, and I was just coming up, and it was quite a little rivalry there.

RL: In those days was it try for a knockout? Or was it a decision thing?

EF: Well, you did the best you could. Survival of the fittest!

RL: Who refereed these fights?

EF: We had fine referees. We had George Barton, who was sports editor of the Minneapolis Tribune. He was nationally famous. He used to referee a lot of championship fights. We had Billy Hoke, he worked for the Tribune, too, and he was a good referee. And Labe Saffro, Johnny Sokol... all former boxers and good referees.

RL: When did you quit fighting?

EF: 1927. I had an accident. It impaired my eyesight.

RL: And then you left Minneapolis and went to...

EF: No, I was in New York when I first started boxing, but I didn't "leave" Minneapolis. I've never left Minneapolis. I wouldn't leave Minneapolis. I go away, but I always come back.

RL: Can you tell me about World War I. Did it really mean anything to you?

EF: Oh, sure. Before World War I, there was the Mexican War. The 151st Field Artillery, that's the National Guard Unit here... Mayor Leach was a Colonel, Colonel Leach, and the head of the 151st. They went to try to catch Pancho Villa, the bandit who had crossed the border into Arizona... or New Mexico. And I remember that was a big day for us news kids because the National Guard, the militia, lined up on Washington Avenue, and they were lined up for blocks waiting to board the train to go to Mexico. It was a hot day, and they couldn't get out of line. They had to stand in line because they were waiting to get on the train. The line was moving very slowly, and there was the Public Drug on Second Avenue and Washington, and I kept running back and forth buying cold drinks for them. And they would give you a nickel every time you ran and got them a drink, and oh, gosh, that was a big day [Laughing]. So that was about 1915. And the first World War, that started in 1914 -- that's when the Lusitania was sunk -- and we got into it, I think, about 1917. That was a big "extra." That was before radio!

And another thing for newsboys was election day. You had no way of getting election returns unless you walked downtown or took a streetcar downtown. The Minneapolis Tribune was on Fourth and Marquette -- it's still there -- and they would put signs out with the election returns, and I would say two, three thousand people would be around that section, and as soon as the "extras" came out some ran up, and you had built-in customers right there! And other boys would go out in the neighborhoods where they got a nickel for a paper! News didn't travel as fast as it does now. You had to get it from your newspaper and that's why the street circulation was so important. You couldn't wait 'til the next day, 'til they delivered the paper. The newsboy would run right out with them, even two, three o'clock in the morning, if you'd have an "extra." You'd run through the neighborhoods waking people up!

RL: That was on election night?

EF: Not only election night. Catastrophes, too. I remember that bad accident when they were building the Soo Line and First National Bank on Fifth Street and Marquette. It was the tallest building in Minneapolis at the time, and while they were building, an eleven-ton steel girder dropped from up on the tenth story and it just narrowly missed a streetcar! It was just when people were going home, and at that time there were 48 people on every streetcar, seated, and the rest would stand. If it would have hit that, everybody would've been killed! But they hit an express wagon and killed the horse, but the driver wasn't injured. Now this was only a block away from where we'd buy our papers, and we just happened to be there. That was a big "extra", a big accident like that! So those were the "extras"... the election, championship fights...

RL: When did you sleep?

EF: Oh, you didn't. That was secondary, sleeping. The first thing was to make a little money. Sleeping came if you didn't have anything else to do [Laughing].

RL: What did your mother have to say about all this?

EF: Mother? It was the way of life. You didn't know any better. I didn't know that anybody had it any better. All my peers, all the other kids, had it the same. Nobody had anything, so it was like normal. I didn't think that we were poor. I knew we didn't have anything, that's all [Laughing]. Nobody had anything.

RL: Would you talk about bootlegging a little?

EF: Sure, there's nothing wrong with bootlegging. Bootlegging -- the conditions, the circumstances -- it was an unpopular law, and bootleggers couldn't exist unless they had customers! Now, who were the customers? Lawyers, judges, doctors, businessmen! I remember one time Benny Haskell was raided and they got his books of his customers, and the leading citizens of our community, all their names were in there. In those days I don't think they printed the names, but they did say that the leading citizens were in there. The judge that would sit on your trial was probably your customer! Nobody stopped drinking, nobody that could afford it.

RL: So what was the outcome of the trial, in a case like that?

EF: Well, you'd go to jail. The law was that you went to jail, which was unfair.

RL: For how long?

EF: Well, 90 days. But some of them went to Leavenworth. It was a federal law, you know. You'd get a year and a day. Not only that, it was quite serious, because if you serve over a year, I think you lose your citizenship, in a federal case. It was a felony. So it was exciting. Of course it made big shots out of a lot of bums, but there were many fine people in the bootlegging business, honest, honorable people that conducted their business the same as any other business, and they were the successful ones.

RL: And after prohibition was over...

EF: Many of them had licenses and were in the liquor business, like my friend Benny Haskell. It's one of the finest stores in the country, that Haskell's Liquor Store. There was nobody finer than Benny.

RL: Can you tell me about the Depression?

EF: Well, we went into business in the 620 Club in 1933. That was the depth of the Depression, but even before that... Gosh, I'd go to New York, and the prices! I would get a suite of rooms at the Forest Hotel on 46th Street, which was a fine hotel -- Damon Runyon lived there, other writers, and sports people -- \$7.50 a day for two bedrooms and a parlor! Then I could take other people in boxing that weren't doing so well to dinner in a good restaurant... \$1 to \$1.50 for a fine dinner.

RL: Were you still fighting at this time? Or were you promoting?

EF: No, I was managing boxers and then I was promoting boxing. But talk about prices! At the Park Central Hotel, if you were single, you could get a suite for \$5 a day. Now they won't let you sit in the lobby for \$5! [Laughing]

RL: And so, in 1933, in the depth of the Depression...

EF: We went in business at the 620 Club. I'll show you a menu that Eddie Schwartz printed. I'm surprised that he didn't give you one of those menus. Eddie Schwartz sends out those gags, and on one gag he's got a menu that we had in 1941. Turkey wings with mushrooms and giblets -- 30 cents! [Laughing] Here it is.

RL: And that was already 1941.

EF: 1941! And Eddie Schwartz was our printer. Can you imagine how we had lunch for 25 cents -- soup and the main course and dessert and coffee, 25 cents? For dessert we had jello [Laughing] and people would complain, "Can't you get anything but jello?" For a quarter they wanted apple pie a la mode! And the sad part of it was people were looking for work and couldn't find jobs... people with education, wanting to wash dishes or be a porter. And we'd get some people who would say they'd like to work for a dinner, that they hadn't eaten. It'd make you feel so bad. We never turned any of them down. When they'd get through eating, they'd say, "What do you want me to do?" We'd say, "No, just forget about it. Glad you came in." It was very sad. While I was staying at the Mayflower Hotel in New York on 61st and Central Park West, I came out of the hotel... you talk about the Depression... and there was a big line in front of a wagon. It looked like a ticket- or box-office, and I thought they were lined up for a show, because even during the Depression some of the shows on Broadway did well and people got in line to buy tickets. And when I got closer, it was a bread line! Now, if you know 61st and Central Park West, it's a fine neighborhood, but things were so bad that people with education, people with talent, people with skill couldn't get jobs, they couldn't do anything. It was a terrible time. But fortunately, boxing wasn't so bad. There were enough people that were willing to buy a ticket to go to a boxing match.

RL: After you started the 620 Club you kept on promoting boxing?

EF: Yes, yes, we kept on promoting boxing... and other sports.

RL: Now the Radio Room was right next door to the 620 Club. Was that yours, too?

EF: Yes, that was our building. We had the store rented out to a record shop and when their lease was up we put a bar in and called it the Radio Room because Rollie Johnson, who was the leading sportscaster at the time, was a very good friend of ours and we had him join us, and he ran the Radio Room. That's before television.

RL: What year was that?

EF: It was towards the end of World War II.

RL: Were you friends with the other fellows downtown who owned restaurants?

EF: Oh, yes, it was almost like a fraternity. We had an association. They were all a bunch of nice fellows. We were all close friends.

RL: Curly Shapiro?

EF: Oh, yes, Curly was a sweet guy. Chuck Saunders of Charlie's, he was one of the finest. Art Murray was a sweet guy. There were so many nice fellows... Abe Borklin, Hymie Moses... really wonderful guys.

RL: Now about the Teamsters' Strike...

EF: We were right in there, because they were on First Avenue North, and our back door leads to the parking lot on First Avenue North. All that violence... and also the National Guard was sent out for that. Floyd Olson was governor, and he did a tremendous job. They used to come in our place -- our back room was a nightclub at the time -- and we would cook a big stew. One of the business agents came in and told us that they were short of money and they had to feed their men, and we would have like fifty at a time come in, and we'd put down stacks of rye bread and the stew and they would eat and go out and start fighting again. It was a war... it was actually a war... but we got to be very close. Our sympathies were with the Teamsters. I knew many of them and they were having a tough time. They were getting something like \$12 a week, \$15 a week, and they didn't have the hydraulic systems, so everything had to be lifted by hand, and they were very much underpaid. So it was an interesting time, 1934. I will never forget that. It was like a war. And the sad part of it was that the people from industry, the employers, they sent the white collar workers into this fight unprepared. The teamsters were strong, tough guys and here they send these office people in! It was actually man against man, and they didn't have a chance.

RL: Why did they send the office people in?

EF: Well, the boss didn't want to go himself [Laughing]. No trucks could move, no deliveries could move, and they wanted to move 'em. They couldn't hire anybody to do it, so they had to have their office people try to do it.

RL: To come down to load the trucks?

EF: Yeah, to load the trucks.

RL: And then the teamsters would...

EF: Oh, they'd knock their brains out. They were not fit opponents. It was unfair.

RL: Were any Jewish people involved in that?

EF: The Teamsters? None of the business agents. We had a few, very few Jewish teamsters. One, Lou Goldstein, he was a truck driver. And little Croppy Ginsberg. Wolk Transfer Company, of course, that was Jewish, but Izzy Wolk was in sympathy with the union. He was a wonderful man. Did you know Izzy Wolk? Or do you know Leo Wolk? Oh, gosh, Leo's father was something special.

RL: There were some people in the produce business...

EF: Yes, American Fruit Company. That was big. Morris Posnick, he was prominent in the American Fruit Company. I don't think Max Levine and Jack Sabes were in there yet in 1934. I think they bought it a little later.

RL: Moe Nathanson?

EF: Nathanson was in there, but Morris Posnick was the big player. That was a battleground, that market, that changed the whole picture! I think that did more for the Teamsters nationally than anything that ever happened, the fact that they won a strike in Minneapolis.

RL: Minneapolis wasn't known as a strike town, was it?

EF: No, it wasn't. That was the first big strike. It was not too good a union city.

RL: To go way back to the beginning for a minute, how did you happen to come to Minneapolis?

EF: A lot of people ask that question. First, my grandfather and his two sons had saved enough money to come to Minneapolis. The reason they came to Minneapolis is because there was a colony of Romanians here. It's no different than the Finlanders who went to Ely and the Germans around Milwaukee, and the Poles in Chicago, and the Swedes to Minneapolis. You went where the other people from your home town went. They landed in New York, of course, and it took about a year for them to send enough money for us to come over. Well, we just got to New York, and we couldn't go any further, so my mother got a job there in a sweatshop like you saw in "Hester Street" and we were there for about six months. In the meantime we saved every penny that my mother made, and her two brothers in Minneapolis, my uncles, Max and Sam Lorberbaum... Max was a purchasing agent at Minneapolis Moline, and his daughter Alene is married to Buddy Grossman, and Avis is married to Dr. David Staeth, who's chief of surgery at UCLA... they sent us enough money to come to Minneapolis. We lived in North Minneapolis for a while; we

moved in with them, with everybody sleeping on the floor and all over [Laughing]. Then when we got so we could rent our own house, we moved to South Minneapolis where the Romanian colony was. The first house we had, we paid \$15 a month... it was a nice house, too... on 1513 East Eighteenth Street. I still remember the address. That was right across the street from where your father lived. And almost everybody in that neighborhood was from Romania, and some were from our home town.

RL: And you were talking to me about learning English, weren't you?

EF: Well, when you came to this country, of course, everybody told you not to talk Romanian. And that's a sad thing, because Romanian is a beautiful language. Any language, you shouldn't lose. We spoke it fluently, but we were told not to. You've got to learn to talk English! And we forgot every word of it. I don't remember anything about it, and I'm sorry that I lost it. You had to become Americanized, though, so there was logic in that.

RL: Did you speak Yiddish, though, at home?

EF: Yes, but we tried to get our mother to... You know, I always blame myself. My mother couldn't read or write, because in Romania only the boys went to school in our town. The girls, they wouldn't let them go to school, and as a result they couldn't read or write. I should have seen, being the head of the family, that my mother went to night school, because so many of the immigrants went to night school, and they learned English. But my mother by that time was 35 years old, and I thought she was too old! When I was growing up, my mother was 21 years older than I was, so when I was 20 years old, she was 41. I had more influence over her then, when I was young, and she probably would have paid attention to me. I could've had her go to school and learn. But I thought, oh, she's already 40... [Laughing]. And just think how sad it is for an intelligent person not to be able to read and write. And there were many cases like that, of immigrants that came from small towns. If they came from larger cities in Europe they learned to read and write, but in a small town, like where we came from, the girls didn't go to school.

RL: Do you remember anything about life in Romania before you came here? Could you tell me about it?

EF: Oh, sure, I remember a lot about life in Romania. One story that I like... My grandmother was the head of the family. She was the most wonderful woman. And I can remember that most anything that happened, my grandmother had something to do with it. We lived on a street where the farmers would take their cattle to market to sell -- this little market in this town -- and when the cattle would go by, my grandmother would give Joe and me a dishpan to follow the cows and pick up the dung. We'd bring that home and she would make a paste out of it. We didn't have a wood floor, we had a dirt floor, and you can't sweep a dirt floor, it would be dusty. So they would make a paste out of cow dung -- just add water, and it would be like cement -- and smear it over the floor. Now

after you have 30, 40 applications, it would be just like cement. And it was clean! People will ask, didn't it smell? And I say no, it didn't smell [Laughing]. Maybe we didn't know any different. But can you imagine people living like that in this day and age? I never saw an electric light when I was in Europe, and the stove was in the wall. I can remember the women doing their washing in the river -- the river ran not far from us -- and lugging it back and forth, because there was no running water. Your drinking water you had to bring from a well that was two blocks away from our house, and that was quite a chore. The bathing would be in the river, weather permitting. And the food... I can remember my Aunt Celia used to call me and say, if you come to our house for dinner Friday I'll make mamaliga for you. Cornmeal mush! [Laughing]

RL: And that was a treat?

EF: No, that was not a treat! But when you came over here and became Americanized and fluent and rich, then mamaliga was a luxury 'cause you didn't have to eat it three times a day! So I'd say to my Aunt Celia, "I'll come to your house for dinner but on the condition you don't make mamaliga!", because I had it coming out of my ears [Laughing]. We would have mamaliga for breakfast with milk, and for dinner, which was at noon, with a stew or with some cooked meat, and then for supper they would add sugar to it and bake it and they called it malai. But we didn't know any better [Laughing]. It was fine. But after we got over to this country, and we knew that there was something else outside of mamaliga [Laughing], I didn't want to eat mamaliga any more.

RL: Right. You mean you took baths when it was warm enough in the river, and the rest of the year you didn't take baths?

EF: Well, you had a big washtub and you'd put it right next to the stove, but not very often. There was a Mikvah where they would go once a week. I think it cost a little money to go there. A Mikvah is like a pool, for taking a bath when it was cold, but I never went to one. Maybe my mother did or my grandmother, but I don't remember them ever going to the Mikvah. We just had the washtub there and we took a bath. [Laughing] They didn't know you had to take a bath once a week!

RL: How big a house did you have?

EF: In Romania? Well, the only thing I can remember is a large kitchen -- to me it seemed large, because when you're small, everything is large -- and something that looked like a sitting room or a parlor, and one bedroom. And there were five of us living there.

RL: What business was your grandfather in?

EF: My grandfather did nothing. I don't want to say he was a bum but he never worked. The kids always took care of everything. He was a butcher by trade, but he didn't like the way business was run, so he didn't work, and when he came to America he got a job in a

butcher shop, and when the boss told him to do something, he took his apron off, and he never did work.

RL: But your uncles worked...

EF: Sure, both of my uncles. He was like a Duke [Laughing]. He didn't do anything. He used to go to the synagogue. That was his place! He'd go early in the morning. And when he died, all the old Jews envied him; he died with his tallis and tefillin on. Every morning he would put on his tallis and tefillin and daven (pray), and one morning he just toppled over on the bed. And I can remember at the funeral people said, oh, if it could only happen to them, to die that way, that means you go straight to heaven! You don't have to stop at any wayside [Laughing]. So that's all I remember of him. He used to go to shul every day, and he had other cronies that used to go.

RL: Well, that was an honorable "profession" in those days. Tell me about your education. You went to Adams school...

EF: Adams school. And I went to South High School and I dropped out when I was a sophomore, which you of course regret the rest of your life. A formal education is so important. I miss it.

RL: Why is that?

EF: I don't know. Sometimes when I'm with people who've had a formal education, I can feel it. I don't know... Maybe it shouldn't be that way... but I miss it.

RL: In what way do you miss it? Do you think you would have lived your life differently?

EF: Well, if I had an education, I wouldn't have boxed. So that one leads into the others. It's like evolution. You're not much without an education. Of course, I've been self-educated, but there is something about a formal education... But then I know a lot of people, educated people, that don't wear it well... [Laughing]... but most people do.

RL: Out of your bunch there on the old South Side, who finished high school and went to college? Were there very many of them?

EF: Well, your father, Lou Greene, finished high school. Like I told you, Dave Silverman, who was managing editor of the Star, and Joe Seeger, Angelo Cohn, Victor Cohn, they all graduated high school and went to the University. Most of them didn't, but many of them did.

RL: Were there a lot of other people from your village in Romania who came to Minneapolis?

EF: Sure. I told you about Benny Haskell, from the same town. Eddie Rose. Sam Rubenstein, a sweet guy -- we used to call him Fearless Fosdick -- who had Excel Garments, he came from our town. Oh, there was a number of them. Of course, most of them are gone now.

RL: A lot of them went into the garment industry, didn't they? Eddie Rose, Sam Rubenstein...

EF: Oh, yes. And Steinfeldt, he was a very fine tailor. That was a Jewish trade, tailors. Like in New York, the garment section, that's all Jews, and First Avenue North here, was mostly all Jews in the garment business.

RL: They had some union problems too, didn't they?

EF: Oh, sure. Those sweatshops were real bad. Was it as bad in Minneapolis as it was in New York? You wonder, yet there really were sweatshops here.

RL: When were the garment workers organized? Do you remember?

EF: Well, Samuel Gompers, he was the father... and that had to be probably in the early 1920s.

RL: And when did that spread to Minneapolis?

EF: I couldn't answer that.

RL: It was earlier than the Teamsters, though?

EF: Oh, yes. You said something about Ellis Island. That was the most terrible place. But when we got up on the deck, when we were waiting to debark, that was the first time we saw daylight in more than two weeks! We were in the hold, in steerage. And I noticed that people were crying. They were pointing to the Statue of Liberty, and most everybody was crying, and I asked my grandmother why they were crying -- this made an impression on me, because I used to go back to New York and go and look at the Statue of Liberty -- and she says they're crying because in this country you don't have to be afraid. That was kind of touching. But then on Ellis Island they were so cruel! We hadn't had a bath all the way across, and my grandmother, there was a toilet that was like a block long... Ellis Island was like an institution, like a penitentiary, with bars around it. And it took time to process you. You had to have a physical because at that time there was an eye disease, trachoma. It started in Europe, and they were trying to keep it out of this country because it was the biggest cause for blindness. So they would examine everybody, especially the older people, and if you had any slight indication of trachoma they'd ship you back. My grandmother was in the doctor's room for a long time and we were sitting outside waiting and we were scared stiff, because we saw families crying because they would have to be shipped back. Finally my grandmother came out, and she was all right! But we'd already

decided we would go back with her if she has to go back! And I started telling you about this toilet. It was so sad. We hadn't had a bath, so my grandma took us kids in and took our clothes off and washed us in the sink -- just washed us and wiped us -- and somebody called the guards. And two guards came in, just like the Gestapo! They were the cruelest thing, and they pushed us around and shoved us out. I have very unpleasant memories about that 48 hours that we were in Ellis Island. It was just like a prison. They treated you like dogs!

RL: Had somebody come to meet you?

EF: You had to be identified. My father, if he had showed up that same day, we might have been able to get out. But he showed up like two days later, and then we got out. And then after we left, we didn't see him for a while either.

RL: Did they have translators there to help you?

EF: Nobody. They just pushed you around. That was the sad part of it. "Hester Street" showed a little of it. No translators, no help. Now they have the Traveler's Aid people, like translators. But nothing, nothing. They just pushed you, and fed you slop. But the food wasn't much worse than on board ship, because that was terrible, too.

RL: Were the meals part of the passage?

EF: Yes, sure. You lined up like cafeteria style, but even though our standards weren't so high, we couldn't eat that food.

RL: And you spent the whole two weeks below deck?

EF: Below deck. You were never allowed up.

RL: Why not?

EF: Because the paying customers upstairs, they didn't want the peasants up there. The rich people were up on first and second class. We were third class. Second class could go upstairs, but third class couldn't.

Can't think of anything else.

[End of interview]