

**Shepsel Roberts**  
**Narrator**

**Rhoda G. Lewin**  
**Interviewer**

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Shepsel Roberts      **-SR**  
Rhoda Lewin         **-RL**

**RL:** What was it like when you were a little boy and you came to Minneapolis?

**SR:** Life was pretty rough. When I start thinking of the way we were raised...that's why I appreciate this country. What we went through in Europe, and coming here and everything. We came in 1921 before Pesach. Our first place where we lived was at 619 Lyndale Place which is just a block off Lyndale and half a block from Sixth Avenue North, Olson Highway. We lived there for maybe a year, and in wintertime you could go with a sled on the walls; it was all snow and ice. We had a little stove and we used to heat with those battery boxes and what not . . . whatever you could find. But luckily we weren't cold because we brought from Europe those perrintz, a great big quilt made of pure down from our own geese and ducks in Europe. You put those on and you could sleep outside when it's twenty-five below zero! You don't feel it, but once you got out of there, then you felt it. To make a living, my mother right away... she knew a lot of languages, so she wrote down in Yiddish, in Russian, in English, "Mister, how much cost a pound of chickens?" And she went down to a grocery firm by the name of LaPray and Graning, and they were just wonderful to her. That was on Sixth Street North and Third Avenue, on the corner there. At that time, a lot of places sold live chickens, and she went down with a little wagon, and she bought a dozen chickens and took it home. It wasn't that far; over the Seventh Street bridge, and you were there. And then we got a shochet to come and to slaughter them, and the only time he came was at two o'clock in the morning, because if the butchers found out that he came during regular time they would fire him. This man's name was Reverend Feigenbaum. I know his grandsons...I have brissed [circumcised] them. They call themselves Feigen. One is an accountant; he's with my nephew, Allen Sher, he's in that same office. So his grandfather used to come to us to shochet those chickens. And before we'd go to school, we'd flick those chickens [remove their feathers]. She started with a dozen, then twenty-four, just increased them, and we'd all get up two or three in the morning and flick those chickens.

**RL:** How many of you were there?

**SR:** We were three of us. My little sister was born here in this country.

**RL:** And how old were you?

**SR:** I was seven years old. And my brother was probably eleven, twelve. My older sister was already thirteen. We'd flick those chickens, and when we got through, we'd try to wash up. In those days, chickens somehow had lice. And I hate to tell you this, but when I used to go to school, I used to have to take the lice out of my neck and just kill them on my desk. Now I raise chickens, but I never see that. I haven't seen it for years. Whether it is in the feeding, or the sprinkling, or whatever it is, you don't see it. And we still have that chicken business.

We used to buy bread for a cent a loaf . . . like a rock . . . from the People's Bakery on Sixth Avenue North. Then we would take the hard bread, and we used to put it in a pail of water and give those to the chickens, and they used to pick at it and it would get a little soft, and that's how they ate that same bread that we ate.

When I went to Sumner School on Sixth Avenue North, they had a "foreign room." It was a wooden construction at the end there. That's where the foreigners went to try to learn how to speak, before they put you into a regular class.

There was a little delicatessen store on Aldrich and Sixth Avenue North. You'd go in there and for a penny you'd buy a green candy, about eight for a penny . . . pretty good stuff . . . and I was so jealous, because the boy that I used to walk with to school . . . he bought that eight for a penny and I didn't have the penny to go and buy that. This is how we were raised

From there we moved to Humboldt, and my folks lived for about forty-five years in that same neighborhood until the redevelopment came and took it all. We were always with the chicken business over there.

**RL:** How long did your mother go to buy the chickens with her little wagon?

**SR:** I don't know exactly how many years. Later there were a lot of Jewish peddlers. They used to take apples and oranges and fruit out in the country, and they would go to a farmer and they would trade a box of apples for a certain amount of chickens. By the time they got through—they left for two days—they had a whole truck full of chickens, and we used to buy from them. It made it a little bit easier. Nowadays, when you take a chicken, you wrap it beautifully in wax paper and everything, but in those days, fifty years ago, we just took the chicken, and nobody had it opened, like now, eviscerated and everything. You just had the shammas there and then you'd flick it and that's all. The buyers would do the rest themselves. I remember one incident... I was delivering some chickens on Girard, and I was carrying the chicken, with the newspaper around it, by the feet, and the head was sticking out, and here comes along a dog, and instead of grabbing the chicken, he grabbed me in the back! I must've been probably eight years old. They

took me to the General Hospital. And since then I was always petrified when I saw a dog. It just left that impression on me.

And of course, like everybody else, I sold newspapers. I sold in the afternoon. I worked at the Star Journal—it was just the Journal at that time—and I didn't have a stand. I used to go to all the restaurants, one after another, go in there where they're sitting ordering, or in a hotel when they're sitting in the lobby or what not. Also I used to have a building, the Lumber Exchange on Fifth and Hennepin, and I used to go from one door to the other to see who wants a newspaper. And then on Saturday night, after I got through downtown I would have a whole stack of papers and I'd walk, because it cost six cents to take the bus. I used to walk over the Seventh Street bridge, and I used to make all the Jewish Delicatessens. Malcoff's, Abe's, everything.

**RL:** How old were you then?

**SR:** Well, I was probably around twelve. So when I'd get through on Saturday night with all the delicatessens there, with the Sunday papers, instead of going home, I went to where the old Emanuel Cohen Center used to be. On that spot was a shul.

**RL:** The Elwood Shul?

**SR:** No, the Elwood Shul was across the street. This was exactly where the Emanuel Cohen Center was. Next to that shul was a house, to the south, and that house was Emanuel Cohen's. It was written on the door there, that that's where the house was, before the Emanuel Cohen Center was built. And upstairs of the shul lived a Rabbi Wasser. His daughter is Bernice, married to Dr. Phil Weiner—he's a professor at the university—and she has a daughter, Dr. Rachel Weiner, a specialist in pediatrics. So I used to go up there, and their grandfather would get up about two o'clock in the morning and I used to go into his bed and sleep until about seven, and then I used to be part of the minyan there because in those days, being a little shul, they had difficulty in getting a minyan. And then the Rabbi, 'cause I'd come, he used to teach me Hebrew. I did this every day after my Bar Mitzvah. The grandfather, he was such a fine man. Later, he used to come every morning on Humboldt Avenue and wake me up because he needed me for his minyan. Mother really didn't like it. She wanted me to sleep a little longer to get some rest. But he'd come upstairs, he'd tickle my feet, and I'd get up, and that's how I got used to going to shul! And they didn't have anything to eat themselves, I remember, but she gave me some bread and butter and a cup of cocoa. I was going to Lincoln Junior High School at that time.

Right across from the Emanuel Cohen was the home, the Jewish Children's Home. It was an orphanage. There was somebody there that I liked really well . . . Minnie Durand . . . so I used to look out of the window, and when she'd go out, I'd take off my tallit and I'd run out and walk to school with her. She happened to marry a cousin of mine, and she lives out of town.

So this is what I did in regard to selling newspapers. And then my father used to also peddle fruit. The chicken business was really two days . . . Wednesdays and Thursdays . . . when everybody bought a chicken for Shabbat. The rest of the days, you didn't sell any, so he used to peddle fruit and I used to go with him. And this continued until I finished Lincoln and went to North High. And then, when I was in twelfth grade I decided to go to the Yeshiva, so I finished high school in Chicago.

**RL:** And this was the Depression?

**SR:** This was 1931.

**RL:** How did you get along?

**SR:** My first ride I got was with Manny Giffis, who was in the wheel goods business. He was going by car to St. Louis – he had family there -- so I got a ride to St. Louis, and then with Werner Transportation from St. Louis to Chicago, because I knew the Werners very well. So, in 1931, I went to the Yeshiva. My first Shabbat in Chicago at the Yeshiva, I went and bought a challah, and I bought an orange, and with a glass of water, that was my first Shabbat! They didn't have a kitchen yet, and they didn't have dormitories. The Yeshiva paid me fifteen dollars a month for coming. Rabbi Shovin was already next to the graduating class, so he probably got thirty or thirty-five, but I was just a beginner so I had to get along on the fifteen dollars 'cause my folks couldn't give me anything. I had my first meal at 3:30 across the street from the Yeshiva, a little restaurant, and I ate so much bread with the meal that it lasted me until the next day! Then I came home, 'cause the Yeshiva started at that time at four o'clock, four to eight, unless you're in the last two years; then you have to spend all day. The next year they didn't have the dormitory yet, but they had a restaurant in the Yeshiva and that made it much easier. You could at least have a meal!

When I came home in the summertime, I bought an old car for fifteen or twenty dollars. I used to buy some fruit and vegetables, and go from house to house to peddle that for three months, and save up some money, and then go back to Yeshiva the following year.

**RL:** How many years were you there?

**SR:** 1931 and 1932 and 1933. Three years. And I was already interested in becoming a mohel, so I started to watch in Mt. Sinai hospital in Chicago in 1931. We had a great, great scholar in the family, Rabbi Kaplan. He was about ninety-five when he passed away just a couple of years ago. In fact, his grandchild just had a baby here, Joycie, she's a pediatrician, and he's an eye man. He was the one who took me into the Yeshiva and suggested that I should learn how to be a shochet, because my folks were in the chicken business, so I would have a job right away. So I learned how to be a shochet in Chicago.

Then, when I came back here one summer, instead of peddling food, I opened up a little store on Plymouth Avenue. And Mrs. Furman, Ione Furman, they lived upstairs, she says

to me, "You know, you should hire Tibey, because she's a religious girl and she doesn't answer the phone on Shabbat." And I says, "Okay." So I hired her in the store. It was during the Depression and I didn't have money to pay her. I owed her back pay about six, seven weeks, so I thought it would be cheaper to marry her than to pay her the back salary! [Laughter] I was very fortunate I was able to get Tibey; I don't think there is anyone like her!

And as soon as I came back here, of course, I got a job right away. I was a shochet for my mother. And then I started to pursue to be a mohel. And when my wife had the first child, Dr. Is Goldberg—if you know Dr. Stanley Goldberg, the proctologist, that's that family, it's my wife's first cousin—at one time Is delivered a lot of babies, and so he's the one that really taught me and got me started as a mohel.

**RL:** And how old were you then?

**SR:** I was twenty-one when we got married. Tibey was twenty. And it was very rough because of the Depression, and because I couldn't say no! Anybody who came in and wanted to charge, I couldn't say no, and finally I didn't have any money to pay my bills and I kept on borrowing from this one, borrowing from this one . . .

**RL:** You were borrowing from friends, or . . . ?

**SR:** That's a good question. I had an aunt that had a store on Broadway, Mary's. That was my mother's sister. Dr. Stiegler is in with Joe Geller, that's my cousin, and that's her son-in-law, so she was good to me. Whenever I went there she'd go in the back and pull out one of those shoe boxes and take out some money. Gave it to me, so I could keep going. Course I always paid it back. And finally, she closed the store, sold it practically for nothing. I owed so much money to everybody, and after I got a job at Armour's and Company as a shochet and I was getting thirty-three dollars and some change a week, and with a little bris, and Feinberg's Kosher Sausage, and this and that, I paid off everybody. I owed hundreds of dollars, and I paid 'em all, and after a few years, I didn't owe anybody a penny... and today, I'm successful! [Laughter]

**RL:** Yes, you are. But not in the grocery business. [Laughter]

**SR:** Not in the grocery business. But I still have a little food store, you know. We still have the chickens.

**RL:** Who owns the chicken business?

**SR:** At Maple Plain, on a farm, they raise those chickens for me. He's just the most brilliant man, he's blind, but I've been there for years now, so he takes care of those chickens for me. Now this is Sunday, and Tibey's going down. I have two brises so I don't go. And my two sons, they go, too. People call at the house, they've been buying from us for twenty-five, thirty years, you know, so we still take those orders. It's the fresh

chickens people like. It's dressed Sunday, early morning, and then in the afternoon, people have already picked up their order. It's one day, that's how fresh it is, and it just tastes a little different. So we still have that. And then we have a few items that we have frozen, called Empire chicken. I have that at the house in a freezer. Some people come. And I have a couple of other items, kosher salami, wieners, candles for Shabbat . . .

[End of interview]

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