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Nathan Shapiro -NS Rhoda Lewin -RL

**NS:** [My father was one of] five sons, all with beautiful voices, and they were always called upon at dedication ceremonies having to do with synagogues, cornerstone laying, and so on. To sing. My grandfather had a lovely voice and he was well-educated in Hebrew, and the sons also. The original Kenesseth Israel that used to be on Lyndale and Eighth, large shul, they sang the day that the cornerstone was laid for that shul, I don't know how many years ago that is. Maybe fifty? My paternal grandmother, Jenny Shapiro... Incidentally, our name in Russia was Maraissin. I had an uncle by the name of Morris; he shortened it from Maraissin to Morris. But I guess when my father was in line at Ellis Island, someone who checked him in, or possibly someone in the line ahead of him, told him that Shapiro was a good American name and to take that! It was not our name. Our name was Maraissin in Russia. My maternal grandmother, Jenny Shapiro was a very, very prominent person in the North Side of Minneapolis. She lived to be well into her eighties, a very active person and one of the people that poor Jewish families would turn to for help during the Depression and prior to the Depression. She was a do-er, and a very religious woman . . . went to both services every day. She had a certain seat in the balcony—Orthodox, of course. And when she passed away the Minneapolis Journal ran a large front page story on her. She was known as "the grandmother of the poor."

**RL:** When was that?

NS: She died in the mid-1930s. She was crossing the street to do something, or to see someone, and was hit by an automobile. For many people in those days, you know, bread on the table was a problem, and Grandma Shapiro, the major function of her life was to provide for poor people that didn't have anything, particularly immigrants who had just come over. My grand-father, Benjamin Shapiro, was a peddler with a horse and wagon in the early 1900s who would go to southern Minnesota, down to Lake Pepin. He wore a white beard, was also Orthodox, and very well received by the farmers in the area. He was an honorable man. There were many, many peddlers who thrived on the injustices they could create for the farmers. They clipped them as best they could and then they

would be on their way. But Grandpa Shapiro was always welcome. He would live in the farm houses, they would feed him, not kosher products, but milk and cream, dietary food. He wouldn't eat any pork or meat there. And he would bring back a wagon-load of fish from that area that the fishermen caught in Lake Pepin, mostly buffalo and carp and sometimes some different game fish, and then he would sell that in Minneapolis and pick up various notions and other things. I don't know if it was a way of bartering to make a living, but he made a fairly decent living. But no matter how much he made, Grandma Shapiro gave it all away anyway, gave it all away to the people that needed it.

## **RL:** She didn't work for the organized charity?

NS: She was her own charity. She was from the school that believed in wearing three petticoats and four skirts, voluminous skirts. A very bright woman. She was a descendant—on my maternal side, Grandma Bertha Dysanka—a descendant of a famous rabbinical family named Rothenberg, who I believe originally came from Holland or Germany. But this Grandpa Shapiro, who has always fascinated me because he was a very rugged man, when they lived in the Old Country he was one of the few Jews who was chosen for an important position by the Russian government. He ran an alcohol distillery for the Czar—the Czar owned everything—and made the finest, purest proof alcohol in all of Russia. If he hadn't, he never would have had that position! He was paid 250 rubles a month. They had a farm, cattle and servants, and that was something in those days. As for my parents, my father worked for the Leinenkugel Brewery. He was a coppersmith, as well as a silversmith, and he had magnificent hands. He could do anything creative. They lived in Chippewa Falls for five years, and my brother Monroe, known as Curly, was born there.

# RL: How did they get to Chippewa Falls?

NS: Well, originally, my grandparents lived in Milwaukee. My parents, my father came over here before my mother, and my first sister, who was Bess, was born over there. He knew what he could do and he wanted the kind of job where he could really perform. So, somehow, someone in Chippewa Falls either ran an ad, or something. And my father educated himself, immediately. As soon as he came here he went to night school to learn English, and filed his citizenship papers. He wanted to be a good American. And then, I think it was two or three years after he had arrived, they had save enough money for my mother and sister—Betty, she was called—to arrive, and they lived with my grandparents in Milwaukee for a short period of time, and then this job opened at Leinenkugel Brewery in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, and my father moved the family there and he became one of their top mechanics. In those days, they used to build all those barrels by hand, you know, and they needed a copper binding on them, and so on, and he was very good at it. My mother has told me that when they arrived in Chippewa Falls, she was as thin as a broomstick. She weighed ninety-some pounds. The voyage had been a terrible experience—in steerage, as you know, the way most of them came over—and if it had not

been for one of the ship's officers, my mother and sister would have died, 'cause whatever food they had was taken away from them by a group whose ethnic origin I won't mention, who rioted. They had no food, so they took it away from those who couldn't protect themselves! She was breast feeding my sister, and one day the ship's officer and the doctor went down below to look—after all, there was a responsibility there, even though they didn't feed them—and they stopped at my mother's side and instead of milk coming from my mother's breast, there was blood! So the doctor immediately said, "If you want to save this woman and her child you better do something about it," and they put her into either a second or third class cabin with food and proper care and attention, and they saved both their lives. The name of my sister was Patricia, and that was the name of the ship that Mom and my sister came over on. Then they went to Milwaukee and this position opened up and they went to Chippewa Falls and there they lived a good life. Lots of good food, primarily dairy products; the meat that they would order from a kosher butcher shop from Milwaukee or Minneapolis, most of the time, particularly in the summer, would come and it was already spoiled. But when they left Chippewa Falls five years later, she weighed 140-some pounds and looked beautiful. My sister Pat was ill most of her life, but at least Chippewa Falls helped to preserve her, and give her a few years. She died at the age of thirty-nine. Both my sister and my brother Monroe had rheumatic fever as children. He died at the age of thirty-eight. I have two sisters left, my sister Ann, slightly older than I am, who lives in Clifton, New Jersey, and my sister, Esther, who lives in Miami Shores, Florida.

After my father arrived here, automobiles were coming into fashion, and he went to work for the Minneapolis Gas Light Company, as it was known then, working on cars, I believe, repairing them. He was a great radiator man. He could take copper or chrome and design the exteriors of these radiators and repair them, as well as fender work and other work. And then my dad became interested in unionism and the company found out and he was fired. That was a very serious thing in those days, you know. And where could you go get another job? But due to the fact that he was so capable he went to work for a radiator company called Shotwell Johnson Company, and as he worked over the years, he became very friendly with two men by the name of Lindert and Christopherson. The three of them worked together, and eventually, I believe it was shortly after World War I, went into business, the three of them. I was old enough then to know the Christophersons and the Linderts. It was an excellent arrangement, and they opened an automobile repair garage, right across the street from the Minneapolis Club, on Eighth Street between Second and Third Avenue. I remember the building, because as a child, on a Saturday, my father would permit me to come and ride on the freight elevator. That was a great thrill . . . and then, of course, the movie afterward. They did the work for most of the Minneapolis Club members. My father became very prominent for his expertise. Their work was on Pierce Arrows, Packards, the fine old automobiles which were chauffeur driven, and even on some electric cars, I guess. And it didn't take very long before word got around that if you wanted fine, expert work done on your automobile . . . and in those days, if you dented a fender you didn't go to a car dealer and he put a new one on, you repaired it. And

my dad worked hard. They all worked six days a week. Christopherson took care of the books—he was the office man—and Lindert worked in the shop, and also promoted some business, and brought in more business. They were successful and they were making money, and their reputation spread as far as Aberdeen, South Dakota, and people were shipping parts of automobiles to them for repair work, so they thought, "Look, as long as there is such a good market in South Dakota, let's open another repair facility out there." So it was Christopherson who went to Aberdeen, and rented a building, and he ran that one. Unfortunately, that was bad judgement, because they had that business coming in anyway, you see, and Christopherson didn't have my father's expertise. He was a book man, so they had to hire people to do the work, and the work was inferior. Eventually it lead to both places going out of business, which was too bad, because my father had a lot to offer in that field.

When my folks first arrived here, they lived on Dupont Avenue North for a short period of time. But my father was a great believer in owning your own home, and the first home he purchased was at 908 Fremont Avenue North, which of course meant that we all went to Grant School, then either Franklin or Lincoln Junior High after it opened, and then North High School. My sister Ann was always a very ambitious girl, and where the rest of us were involved with the children our age on the North Side, most of her friends and associates were from south Minneapolis. Grace Gordon was one of her closest friends, who was Dr. George Gordon's daughter . . . he was famous . . .

# **RL:** Why was Dr. Gordon famous?

NS: This is the man who later became the principal [of the Talmud Torah]. Grace Gordon and a girl by the name of Ann Rothenberg, those three were together all the time. My sister Ann taught Sunday School at the Temple. She also took a course at Vocational High School in millinery; Vocational was something to give you a trade or semi-profession. And when she graduated she accepted a position as a teacher of millinery in the school system in New Ulm. I don't remember how many years she was there, but it was a great source of pride to us that we had a sister who was a school teacher.

#### **RL:** About what year was this?

NS: In the mid-1920s, probably. My mother and father were lovers of music, and their ambition was that the children should study and become professional musicians. There weren't too many fields open to us in those days, you know, unless you had a good WASP name, which we didn't have, so music was a wonderful field. There was Heifetz, and Elman, and all those great names. So my brother studied the violin and became an excellent violinist. He was concert master of the orchestra at North High School. I studied piano under Clara Williams and Elsie Wolff. Elsie Wolff, I believe, is still in Minneapolis; she married a violin teacher by the name of Chester Campbell. We had a lot

that a lot of children in our area didn't have. I studied at MacPhail when lessons were two dollars. Now that was a lot of money, besides buying a piano, and a violin for my brother, music, and so on. But as I stated, my father made a good living. We were one of the fortunate families, I think. We always had bread on the table, always. We always had enough to eat. Every Passover, my mother would take us downtown and we had new clothes. My sisters were older and they were working, too, and they helped, and of course we all lived together. I don't think my parents ever missed a top-flight concert, particularly if they were Jewish, particularly if it was Rubinstein or Elman or Heifetz. That was a very thrilling thing, to see one of their "cousins," shall we say. We did not have very good facilities in those days for artists to appear. It was an Armory. And I remember my dad and mother coming back from that concert and they were so disappointed because acoustically it was a real flop. It was Heifetz or Elman, I don't remember, but at the end of the concert he stated that he would never come back to Minneapolis to play in a barn! My parents were just furious about it. So down-graded, you know.

We all had high school educations. We all went to work at an early age. My sister Bess went to work for Powers Dry Goods Company as a young girl, probably sixteen or seventeen, and became quite expert in the . . . Let's see now . . . In those days they used to wear separate collars, girls did . . . I'm trying to remember what the name of the department was because she eventually became an assistant buyer under a very lovely lady by the name of Emma Wahl, who was the buyer for seven different departments.

## **RL:** Not shirtwaist . . .

NS: It was something like that . . . but there was another term I'm trying to remember. You would buy, say, a black dress and you would put this collar around it, which was made of lace or something, to dress it up. She stayed a Powers for many years, but her health was not good. Eventually, we decided that possibly California might prolong her years, and by that time my brother and I were working and bringing good chips home, you know, as we all did. As I told you, my dad's business had gone to pot, and he eventually wound up in the confectionery business on Eighth and Marquette, where we all worked. That was my first job. I started when I was twelve, making sandwiches and malted milks. That was a good business. We made a living.

#### **RL:** What was the name of the shop?

NS: The New Butterfly. It was my father, my brother, my two sisters—my youngest sister tried, but she put in part time—so there were five of us, and we made a good living there. I was twelve when I started, and I never earned more in my lifetime in two or three years, until I went to work for Max P. Snyder who owned Snyder Cut Rate Cigar Stores. Jewish people in this community controlled the cigar business, as they did, I think, nationally . . . the making of them and in the wholesale and retail sales. In St. Paul the big people were

the Bergs, and in Minneapolis were the Nathansons, wholesale and retail, and Max P. Snyder, who later became a very prominent merchant and founded the Snyder Drug Chain. I was his second manager! I was a young boy, but I took to it, and Snyder was a great teacher and a great merchandiser. I suppose everything I learned about merchandising, I learned from that man. I was with him four years, and then he started communicating with some people in Indiana. Cut-rate drugstores were coming into vogue—this was in the late 1920s—and two men came to Minneapolis and sold him on the idea of opening the first cut-rate drugstore. He opened it on Seventh Street between Hennepin and Nicollet, where the Nankin is now located. I worked behind the cigar counter at the Minneapolis Recreation, which is no longer in existence. That was on Hennepin Avenue between Seventh and Eighth. I had a good job; I was making thirty-five dollars a week. That was good money in the late 1920s, early 1930s. And then one day he said to me, "I'm having trouble with this individual who's managing the store. He doesn't do as I tell him, and I think I made a bad choice. I want you to learn the drug business. So I said, "Gee, Mr. Snyder, thank you, when do I learn the drug business and how do I fit in?" "Well," he said, "the hours you're not employed here, you go over there and you learn the drug business." Well, it was infamous, I should say . . . Snyder's shift of hours was from seven a.m. until noon and then returning at six o'clock and working until closing, which was either eleven or twelve o'clock. That was one day. The next day you arrived at either eleven or twelve o'clock and worked until seven; that was your "short" day! Seven days a week. So you earned your thirty-five dollars, believe me—although it took a while to get thirty-five. I started at twenty! But that was good money for a young boy. So on the days when I was to be off from noon until six, I would go over to the drugstore, which was half a block from the Recreation, and work there for nothing, of course, because I was learning the business. Well, one Sunday, I was home—every other Sunday we had off, unless you were needed—and Mr. Snyder called me and he said, "Come down and get the keys. Mr. So-and-so, the manager, was fired." So I did, and he threw the keys at me and he said, "You're managing the drugstore."

Believe me, I don't think I knew a jar of Vaseline from a tube of toothpaste yet, because most of the time I was in the drug store I was back of the cigar counter in the cigar department. I tried to learn, but how do you learn the drug business on your so-called time off. But, I was the store manager. That lasted for quite some time, despite my lack of basic knowledge. We had to have a pharmacist work for us, and do you know what a pharmacist made in those days? Twenty-five dollars a week. And these were college graduates. I was getting thirty-five, so I was a highly paid store manager.

Then, in 1932, Roosevelt became president. You've read about 3.2 beer coming back . . . a non-intoxicating beverage. Now here was a new industry which was open to everyone, Jewish, Gentile alike, didn't make any difference. In the old days, prior to prohibition, most saloons were run by people of Irish ancestry. There were two or three in Minneapolis who were not Irish who did well, but they were already phased out, or passed on, except, I believe, for the Weil family. The Weils went into business, but not in

the bar business. They went into the liquor store business. And the name Weil, of course, brought them a fair amount of bottle business from the old families who remembered the name. But they were not successful, and they went out of business. You couldn't depend on a reputation that had been built twenty-five years prior to that!

Well, when 3.2 beer was legalized, my brother and I decided we wanted to go into business for ourselves. So we rented a space on Fifth Street between Hennepin and Nicollet from William E. Goodfellow, who was one of the founders of the Dayton's store. He was a partner of the Dayton family, an odd little individual. If we wanted to see him, we'd go to his home. He had a magnificent home with servants, and he wore a Prince Albert coat in the morning with striped trousers. [Laughter] He was really an odd duck. But he rented it to us, which was something. We had no background of business, no credit rating, we were just youngsters.

**RL:** Was your father still in the confectionery business?

NS: Yes. And we found a bar. It was magnificent, a solid mahogany bar, which looked terrible with the accumulation of so many years of dirt and grime. We purchased that bar from someone, a name I don't remember, for seventy-five dollars, and we installed that. We didn't know what to call the place. But my brother, who was such a vibrant, intelligent, well-accepted individual, he had kinky hair as a boy, so instead of people calling him Monroe, a rather long name, they nicknamed him Curly, as a very young man, and that name stayed with him until he passed away. He was always Curly, and there were very few people who knew his real first name. So we opened this beer parlor, and we called it Curly's, right across from the Northern States Power Company. And we started out with nickel beers, as everyone did. Snyder's brother opened up on Sixth Street, and a great number of Jewish people in the community went into the business. They saw an opportunity here. And a year later when liquor was legalized, our famous and very prominent and wealthy Jewish people in the community, went into the wholesale liquor business, as you know. Phillips, the Goldenbergs, Lou Greenberg . . . here was an opportunity for people who didn't have opportunities that they were good at, to go into a business and show what you could do. So we opened this 3.2 beer parlor and served a wonderful Dutch plate lunch with cheese and ham and beef and so on, for twenty-five cents, and we clicked right away, due to this excellent twenty-five cent lunch and a good glass of beer. And there was art to serving a good glass of beer, too. Your glasses were chilled, you'd draw from your cooler downstairs, and so on, cleanliness of the place, the pipes that you would draw beer through . . . There is an art in everything, really. A great many of the power company people would come over to eat with us. Among them was a New England Yankee by the name of Sy Young, who was executive vice president of Northern States Power Company. He took a shine to us, particularly my brother. My brother was very handsome and his cheeks always glowed; we thought this was a great attribute. We found out later it was because of his heart had been damaged, there was too much blood flowing or something. A year went by and we were making a good living,

working very hard. I had left Snyders by that time, and we both worked back of the bar, drawing beer and serving lunch. And then the country went "wet" for liquor. Well, that meant quite an investment. I think a liquor license was \$1,000, something like that. You had to remodel, you had many things you had to do. And also, liquor stores were going to open. Well, here's a man like Sy Young who was one of the hierarchy of the community, who had never had any dealings with people of our faith, and knew what he had been taught—that was anti-Semitism—but who liked two young Jewish boys and thought they had a future. He came to us one day, and he said, "Now liquor is definitely coming back. You have space alongside Curly's for a liquor store. I will back you. We'll go into the off-sale liquor business." Well, I remember when his banker, who was a man by the name of Victor Rottraner (sp?)—he was vice president of First National Bank, a real anti-Semite from the old school, actually not much different from most of them around here in those days—called him . . . and the reason we know this is because Sy Young told it to us. Sy did it for a number of reasons. He was a very brilliant man. He had built power plants in China and in Canada, and Bob Pack, who was head of Billsby Corporation's Northern States Power Company, looked far and wide before he found Sy Young and brought him here, and Sy ran the company. Sy was advised not to back us because we were Jewish and shouldn't be trusted. "Well," he said, "I'm betting on people, not on their religion or anything else." And he proved to be right! So he gave us the financing . . . signed the notes at the ban . . . and we were in the off-sale business, with a store called Distiller's Outlet. And next door we got a license for on-sale, so then we were off to the races, and we ran an excellent restaurant and night club combination. We were the first people to bring in floor shows, and things of that kind, the big bands, and so on. The name "Curly's" after two or three years—and we were grateful for advertising—became prominent in the Northwest for out-of-towners, farmers, lumbermen and so on. It was called the Stork Club of the Northwest! The Stork Club in New York, Sherman Billingsly's place, you know, is nationally famous, and every Hoosier from out-state would have to go the Stork Club in New York. So we built an excellent volume of business and treated people fairly, and everybody got their money's worth, believe me. It wasn't an easy business, particularly after Hitler started rising to prominence and people would have a few drinks—we have so many people here of Germanic ancestry, and many of them were pro-Nazi, of course, as you know—and they'd get full of whiskey and there would be many occasions where both my brother and I were involved in battles, because if we didn't preserve order, if we permitted that minority, or majority, or any group, to run our place, we may as well go out of business. So we sort of developed a reputation along that line. You don't fool around at Curly's or you get thrown out, or are told not to come back, and don't challenge us. My brother was like greased lightning. He and I were about the same size, but he was so much quicker. He was left-handed, and they would look for his right to come, and the next thing they knew, the roof caved in. [Laughter] He socked 'em with his left, and when they went down, they stayed down. It was a ball that we were in! Life had all of a sudden taken on a great meaning to us. We were able to take care of our parents in much better shape and do things for people, as well as for ourselves, and we were becoming fairly well-known in the community because everybody sooner or

later went to Curly's. We developed what was known as Celebrity Night every Tuesday. Artists who were here . . . prominent people . . . would be invited to come and either have dinner or cocktails at our place on a Tuesday night, *if* escorted by Cedric Adams. Cedric would write about it in his column in the Minneapolis Star on Monday as to who would be at Curly's on Tuesday. And as part of the result of his prominence and popularity, we'd have the greatest names in show business as our guests, and you couldn't get within a block of that place on a Tuesday. And it would carry over and then we'd give them the in-talent, you know. Not any Dean Martins or Frank Sinatras, but people who had been in the motion picture field, and prominent at one time, and possibly were on the way down and needed some additional exposure, or maybe on the concert circuit. Well, in the meantime my sister Bess had gone to California. She was there for seven years, at the St. Francis Hotel in Los Angeles, and she had seven good years, which we were able to provide for her, due to being in business.

Then she passed away, and my brother Curly died in 1945, also in California. He was out there, because we thought it might help him. I stayed in the business until June 1947, and then I lost heart. He wasn't there. We were a team, and you break up a team, you know... So I sold Curly's in 1947. Now Friday night at Curly's was like an opening night. I'm gonna compare it to Orchestra Hall, the opening night of our shows. They'd come up in carriages . . . all the "carriage trade" wanted to be there for the opening, particularly the newspaper people. I don't know how many times your father [Lou Greene] may have been there.

## RL: He was a teetotaler.

NS: But Bill Stevens was there. Stuffy Walters was there. Gitsy Moore would come in. Dave Silverman, of course, and the columnists. Bob Murphy was head of the theatre section and John K. Sherman of drama and books, and John and his wife never missed an opening on a Friday. All these people became very dear friends, and the write-ups that would appear about these artists in the Sunday paper was unbelievable. Like Skrowacewski gives a good concert! It was a thrilling business... as an endeavor it was successful. And in the meantime we became involved, bodily and financially, in the various Jewish drives that were going around the community. We became interested through men like Amos Deinard, who was the crown prince of this community, as far as I'm concerned, and will remain so as long as he is alive. I never knew George Leonard very well, but we got to know Amos Deinard and Ben. [Note: This was the law firm of Leonard, Street and Deinard.] And through Amos's efforts I devoted a great deal of time to these fund drives, at the point where he would take various sections of the city, you know, and we'd go door-to-door to the merchants... not to the homes, to the merchants. This went on for a number of years and later I went up the ladder and headed certain sections of the drive. But also during that period of time, I felt that a certain amount of my effort belonged to the community that was good to us, and I became involved in many civic endeavors. My first work along that line was in a civic club called the Cooperators...

the Cooperative Club, which was later changed to the Sertoma Club... called "Service to Mankind"...like the Lions, Kiwanis, whatever. In those days – now this is in the 1940s -we Jews were never invited to join civic clubs, service organizations. None of us were. But now here was an open door where I could prove, through some friends who were helping to organize the organization... so I was asked, and I was very excited about it... and I really went to work with the help of a newspaper man and radio people like Randy Merriman and Carl Karnstedt, and John Ford. We put on annual programs and raised thousands and thousands of dollars and developed this Christmas in June thing for dolls, to give to poor children. Years ago when we first started we personally would deliver the dolls to poor homes and poor children. It was a heart-breaking and also thrilling experience. I'm not gonna' call these "Christian endeavors" because the name of our program was "Christmas in June"... it was a civic endeavor. I worked so hard that I held every office that they had to offer, including lieutenant governorship of three states for Sertoma. Then, through my efforts, Sertoma damn near became a B'nai B'rith! We had the three Juster son-in-laws as members, Norm Blum, Bernie Wayne, Don Graceman. The doors opened wide, almost too wide, to the point where about half of the membership was Jewish. Unfortunately, most of them didn't want to put in the effort that they should have. They were happy to be invited, but we couldn't get much out of them in the way of work. They were all busy, you know. Norm's a doctor, Bernie had Juster Brothers, Don had to sell soap. It didn't seem to click. Well, as the years went by I gradually dropped into the background with Sertoma. There were other organizations that I wanted to join that later opened up to me. In 1951 I went into the insurance business, having met a wonderful man by the name of Milton F. Busher through my work at Sertoma. He was a general agent of Equitable of Iowa.

**RL:** I was going to ask you about those five years... You said you sold Curly's in 1947.

**NS:** Yes. I wanted to go into the theatre business. Although we had made so many friends and acquaintances in our years at Curly's, the theatre industry in Minneapolis was a monopoly. You could not get a theatre license; there hadn't been one granted to anyone outside of the inner circle for at least twelve years. People had tried and tried and tried.

**RL:** Who was monopolizing it in those days?

NS: You had the Bergers, and Rubins, and the Franks, the "old guard" at the theatre. It was completely controlled, it was a monopoly. I'm not saying that the liquor business in the '40s wasn't well controlled. We had organizations and associations. It was something valuable and we protected what we had. And you developed some excellent political clout during those years, which the theatre men were able to do, the liquor men were able to do, and so on. I did spend a lot of time, too, in various associations, along with a wonderful man and a great friend who is deceased, Art Murray, who still, today, has left a great name in the restaurant business run by his widow and his son, Pat. Art and I worked very, very closely together; there are many, many problems that we worked on. But at any

rate I wanted to go in the theatre business, and I wanted to pick someone who knew the theatre business well and that had been successful. So I went to Ben Berger and he and I opened the Cedar Theatre together in 1948. It was exciting; I had broken the monopoly. Berger was still part of that monopoly, but he realized the time was probably running out for them. The Evans wanted to go into business, too, and they had applied for a license on Nicollet Avenue.

#### **RL:** They were...

**NS:** They were (?) partners. Now, whether they had broken their relationship at that time or not, I do not remember, but they made application for a license on Nicollet somewhere out near Lake Street, I believe. And when mine was granted they got theirs later, too. Now, the only reason I was able to receive a license was that it was going to be built in an area which was beginning to fray on the edges, primarily Scandinavian, on Cedar Avenue not too far from Seven Corners, and they wanted something new... the banker wanted it. There was a place the Pillsburys built, called the Pillsbury House, for poor boys, to get them off the street, and create athletic activities. Well, this became such a battle. The council didn't know which way to turn. The power of the community was back of me. John Cowles, Sr. was directly involved, because J.D. Holtzerman, who was in business on Cedar Avenue, was a fellow club member of the Cowles, and he told them what was happening, and that he should break the monopoly. Shapiro wants to open here, and we need this theatre to help up-grade the area. So Cowles ran an expose on the theatre monopoly, in spite of all money they spent in the paper in advertising. Well, it got to the point where there was this mass meeting at the Pillsbury House, and a parade on City Hall, putting pressure to bear on the Council to issue that license to me! That parade was led by John Pillsbury, who is now president of Northwestern National Life Insurance Co.

# RL: And they organized it at Pillsbury House?

NS: Yes, we all worked together for the Southside Businessmen's Association, which I later headed. And it was beautifully done. Breaking a monopoly like that was a very difficult thing. The community that was involved, all people I had known all my life, they had something very precious they were fighting to protect. They knew that if one license to an outsider or newcomer was granted, a monopoly was wrecked, and the more competition you have, you know, the less business you do. It's the old story. Well, we got our license and after I received my license I got calls from a number of people in the business. Would I be interested in an arrangement where they could run it? You know, I could sit on my heels in a fancy office and make a lot of money and so on. I had a number of those calls, and the one I chose was Ben Berger, because once they knew I had it, then they were interested in my becoming one of them. Would you join the Variety Club and so on and so forth, up until then... Well, we decided that I would manage the theatre and Berger would do the booking... you see, buying the pictures, etc... Well, I did for about a year and there was no thrill... no excitement... Leading children across the street on a

Saturday afternoon after the matinee was fine, but there were no kicks. So I told that to Berger and we put in a manager and our association lasted for a number of years, and then I sold out to him. Then, in 1950 and '51, through the efforts of this good friend, I entered the insurance business. I was forty years old when I entered, and... that story speaks for itself.

**RL:** Yes. Can we backtrack a minute? One thing I wanted to ask you about was the Teamsters' Strike. You mentioned that your father had been involved in labor organization. Were you involved?

NS: In the Gas Company, I was too young. But I remember the Teamsters' Strike very well. We were in business on Fifth Street at the time. I remember the National Guard marching past our door on Fifth Street. I remember the rioting and the battling in the market area. We were told not to go there. Some of the deputies who carried pistols and were paid \$5.00 a day to break the strike would eat in our place. We saw the class that they were, and wanted nothing to do with them. Our sympathies, of course, were with the strikers, but not to the point where we played an active role. No, that strike was a godsend; it cost some lives, much property damage, but it helped to straighten out a situation that needed correcting very badly.

**RL:** Now when you were a boy growing up on the North Side, you've mentioned, a number of times, how much anti-Semitism there was. Apparently you were really conscious of that?

NS: Well, I make that statement because I know what it was citywide. When my father and mother purchased their home on Fremont Avenue, we lived in an integrated neighborhood. There was even one black family... though it was primarily Scandinavian. Some of my best classmates and buddies were Petersons and so on, boys that I walked to school with and played ball with. Clement Swanson, he played second base, was a real rugged ball player. He saved my neck a couple of times, because when we would go to see our school play ball, particularly at Schiller, which was all Polish, you better have a couple of good bodyguards around you, because whether the Polish people won or lost, if they won, they beat the Jews up to celebrate a victory, and if they lost, they did it in anger because they were defeated. But gradually the Christian element left the block and left our area. We encountered a considerable amount of anti-Semitism at Curly's even though we were accepted by 90-95 percent of our trade. The Jewish people don't drink very much so our trade was practically all Christian, and we got along fairly well with everyone but now and then you'd get a bad one. Look, if ten percent of the nation today are anti-Semitic that meant out of every one hundred customers you had ten bad ones. Well, do you know what ten bad people can do to a place? But it wasn't to that degree, of course. As I said earlier... we would try to explain... and if that didn't work, it became a battle. And once the going got rough, we didn't stop at anything, because Hitler's name always came into it. We were fighting Hitler in our own place of business! We cracked a lot of skulls... we

really did... I don't mean we fractured any, but we blackened their hides... because fury would overtake you. And then the hatred for the individual who would make these comments... the words "Kike" and "Sheeney"... a great many of those same people would come back and apologize. They did not realize what they had said, they didn't mean it, could they come back in... they would behave... and they would become good friends of ours, really. That died out as our situation in Minneapolis improved, but you never knew when it was going to happen, and you had to have eyes in the back of your head, you were always walking on ice cubes. Take my word for it.

**RL:** Let's go back now to when you were a little boy. You and your brothers and sisters, did you have any Jewish education?

NS: Yes.

**RL:** Now, that was before the Talmud Torah?

NS: No, I went to the Talmud Torah. First, there were Rabbis who came to our home. But as I told you, my parents wanted us to study music. No Hebrew. My brother, being almost five years older than I was, went to work long before I did, so he didn't continue those studies. But I was taught by a number of Rabbis who would come to the house. And then came Talmud Torah, and I believe that was two hours a day, five days a week, after school. Believe me, I didn't enjoy it. I would rather have been out playing ball! I wouldn't do it to my children and I wouldn't permit my grandchildren to go through that. A full day's schooling is enough. And did it make a better Jew of me to have that background and education? At one time I could speak, read and write Hebrew. Today, I don't remember a word and I cannot read it. Was it wasted? I don't know. I know I have a very close feeling, not only for Israel, but when I refer to people whom I have never met, who are Jewish, they are my "cousins." Sometimes at various meetings -- I service many, many groups of multi-employer Taft Hartley Trusts in hospitalization, in group insurance and many times at these meetings, there will be a headline in the paper... or they will be discussing someone that happens to be Jewish... and I've used the expression so often that the Trustees themselves will say "Hell, that's one of your cousins but we don't hold you responsible." This has been, as of now, a very serious conversation. I don't want you to think that my life has been overburdened with anti-Semitism in trying to make a living, and so forth. We have had a wonderful life here in Minneapolis. There isn't a city like it, I don't think, anywhere in the United States. I wouldn't leave it, except for winter vacation, under any circumstances. We love it here. People have been very good to us. The general demeanor of the people today, of all people in the community, has made life, I think... except for the excitement that there is in the world in all these major changes that are taking place... it seems to me, being of Jewish faith and raised in the city of Minneapolis today should be an extreme pleasure for young people. I encountered very little anti-Semitism in grade school and in high school, very little. I was in various class plays, I played piano and sang at the PTA meetings and so on, and had a full head of golden wavy hair, so I was teachers' pet most of the time. It was after we got into business, and being in a business where you actually made your living in a business that was hazardous... You know, there's so many people that cannot handle it, and they do things "under the influence" that they would not do if they were sober. And you have to work hard. The Sy Young deal, he was a WASP from the old school in New England, born and raised in Maine, and came out here, who gave us the financing to help us develop. And, I'm happy to say, he was right in his being able to "read" people, because at a dinner party in our home one night which was attended by a number of notables including Hubert Humphrey, who was then Senator, and a mayor, I believe Orville Freeman, was there -- we had a circle of friends, whether they were business or in politics, and I've always loved Hubert ever since I met him in 1945... we grew very close together, so they would come to our house quite often -- we lived on West Minnehaha Parkway and there was a sunken living room, and I remember Sy Young was standing about two or three steps above the living room and he said, "I want silence." There were probably, who knows, twelve couples, fourteen couples, maybe more, and he told a story to everyone present there. I think Bill Boyer was there at that time... yes, Bill was head of the Chamber of Commerce then, I think... and Sy told a story of how he had taken a liking to Curly and me, how he was warned by his bankers and other friends not to, due to our religion, or something, and... I'll never forget the beautiful thing that he did that night, and I wish I had a recording of it.... he went into the amounts that were involved, and how much he received. It established in his own opinion his ability to choose the right people! For everyone who was there... as I have told you, all dear friends but very prominent people, it was a lovely thing to have happen. We were thrilled... and my family was there, and they were thrilled, too. I was raised in Jewish Orthodoxy, but my wife, Adele, was raised in a small community, in Mondovi, Wisconsin, in Lutheran Orthodoxy. She was confirmed in Norwegian! Well, here are two faiths in direct conflict. I think Susan was probably seven or eight or nine when this began to rear its head. We didn't worry about this before then because you didn't have to make a choice.

RL: And you were still a member of Temple Israel?

**NS:** Right. Which was quite a switch for me, too, 'cause I was raised in a conservative, orthodox North Side synagogue.

**RL:** When did you change?

**NS:** Oh, probably '48 or '49, something like that. I thought it might be of assistance to both Adele and me; she would go to services with me and I would go to Christmas Eve services with her at Pastor Youngdahl's church. Then some things began to happen and we went to our dear friend whose name I mentioned earlier, to ask his guidance -- that was Amos Deinard -- and he took a great deal of time with us. And you must remember that the senior partner of his firm, who had a Jewish accent you could cut with a knife, was one of the founders of Unitarianism in the city of Minneapolis, George B. Leonard.

Amos's brother, Benedict, was very prominent in Unitarian circles in Minneapolis -- the son of a Rabbi! Ben was married, I believe to a gentile, and I believe George Leonard was, too, 'cause their son, George Leonard's son, John, is about as Jewish today as I am Chinese. I don't know about Ben's children. Well, we joined the Unitarian Church, and they had a wonderful man there by the name of Carl Olson. He and I became very good friends. He was a close friend of Amos and a close friend of most of the Jewish leaders of the city of Minneapolis; they worked very closely together. And believe me, it was an eye-opener for me, to know that there were such decent men in the religious field. Most religious people I knew were steeped in dogma and it was Christianity 24 hours a day. If you weren't a Christian, to Hell with you... but Carl Olson was a different breed of cat, he was a beautiful man. He worked closely with Jewish community leaders in helping to solve problems. So we joined the Unitarian Society. My daughter Susan became involved in activities, she sang in the choir, she's a doll. There's very little Christianity in the Unitarian Society. I don't know if you've attended any of their services, but it's not even a church, it's a society. My son goes there on Sundays now... but that's another story. I missed Dick, but Susan found a happy home. She's very happy in the Universalist Unitarian... they joined forces a few years ago... and Susan does a great deal of good work. Adele and I do not go there; we've drifted away from religion, per se. I helped to subsidize the Temple (Temple Israel), but I think it's my civic duty to do it. We also helped subsidize the Unitarian Society because it's been good for Susan, it's good for my grandchildren and for not being steeped in dogma and hatred. There is a great deal of affection and love for your fellow human beings, which is preached not out of the side of your mouth but full faced here, and it's practiced. Dr. Bill Benjamin calls on me once a year, and he's very active, he's a lovely man. He's, I believe, a surgeon on the staff of the Methodist Hospital. When I looked over the roster when we first joined, I noticed the Schanfield name. However, I never saw Morrie at a Sunday function or at a dinner, though he was a member. Of course, the Deinards, and there were, oh, possibly half a dozen names of other Jewish people who didn't find what they were looking for in their own synagogues or temples and tried the Unitarian Society, but how many of them there are today, I don't know. The name Shapiro is on the roster because, as I said, we contribute. My son Dick was a student at St. Thomas Academy which, as you know, is completely Catholic, and I played a fairly active role there, too, in my friendship for Art Murray, with Father Flynn who was head of the academy... Father Widman... I got to know them all very well, and enjoyed their company very much. They are lovely people. Over the years, I have been close to many Irishmen!

I was in business with one years ago by the name of Bill Donahue, just a beautiful guy. Harold Brough, of the O'Briens... when I would go to New York -- many of them left here and lived in New York -- I'd spend two or three days with them, have the time of my life, 'cause they are all either Yale or Harvard grads, and so on. To me, it was really something, coming out of North High School with an extension course at the University of Minnesota. Just lovely guys who, if they enjoyed your company and wanted to be with you, that was it! They didn't care what your background was, whether you had the

education they had, or the money they'd have. Dick had four years, I believe, at St. Thomas Academy and lived at Ireland Hall. The only difference between Dick and the Catholic students was that he did not have to get up for services in the morning! He met a lot of fine boys there. And he went to the University and he met a girl who was -- I think they were Congregationalists -- Grace Billings. Her father is fairly prominent in advertising. They were married in the Unitarian Church. You find a meeting ground, really. Dick was not steeped in religion; I didn't think it was necessary. I had enough of it, I thought, for all of us. His name is Shapiro, so he didn't drift very far. Susan, now, we celebrate Passover here in the house, or at Susan's! Susan, this year, made the Seder with some neighbors by the name of Noreen. I believe they are Catholic. If not, their name is certainly Irish! We had a delightful evening. The year before we had it here in the house. The grandchildren come. My grandchildren love to hear Jewish tales. What will happen there, I don't know. Will they become integrated to the point, or leave anything that's Jewish, I don't know. I don't think it's that important any more, particularly since we have Israel. That may seem a strange statement to you, but intermarriage and total integration of the Jewish people wouldn't have happened in this country if there were an Israel. I think eventually we would have been washed out as we have in many nations of the world, where there are no traces left of us. I think Israel saved that. What will happen there, of course, is another story. I worry very much about it, all those years of effort and so on. But it has done something for all of us; who in our lifetimes will ever forget 1967? You can take your Einsteins and you can take all your great scientists, like Jonas E. Salk and all of them, and give Israel one good war for six days, to prove to the world that here are people who can rise to an occasion like this -- and with forty million Arabs! There wasn't one of us that wasn't nine feet tall! And if it weren't for the political ramifications, just a year ago on Yom Kippur, they could have been in Cairo and Damascus.

My sister Ann, who left Minneapolis and went to work for R.H. Macy Company in New York, then met a wonderful man who was in medical school name Irving Ehrenfelt, has made a great name for herself as well as her husband and her children in her civic activities in Passaic, New Jersey, but has never neglected her work for Israel. Again, she felt that there was an obligation to the community, and she and Paulette Fink worked very closely together for many, many years, and my sister still is national vice chairman of the UJA. My brother-in-law, Dr. Ehrenfelt, developed the "key man" program which was later adopted in Minneapolis, where on Sunday everybody would be home and you would be visited by different individuals for your contribution.

My sister Esther, who was a very unfortunate girl, had one son, Steve, who, due to her divorce, we all had a hand in rearing. February the 12th of 1968 he left for Vietnam... he was a pilot. February the 19th my telephone rang. It was Florida calling. He had been shot down that morning. Well, it's pretty difficult to get information on it, in a war zone, so I called Hubert. He was vice president, and he got on it right away. At 5:30 that evening my phone rang and it was Colonel Hunt, Hubert's military aide, and he told me they had verified that his helicopter had been shot down and exploded upon hitting the ground. I'll

never forget this. I said, "Colonel, what are the odds against anyone coming out of that?" And he said, "Mr. Shapiro, I've just completed a tour in Vietnam. I fly helicopters as well as other types of aircraft, and when a helicopter explodes in landing, there are no odds." That boy had six or seven days over there before he was killed. That was my sister's son and only child. She lives in Florida. She has been fairly successful in interior decorating; she was a graduate of the school of interior architecture at the University here, I believe one of the last classes before they disbanded that program. In fact, she services most of the Minneapolis and St. Paul top bananas who have their apartments there.

#### **RL:** What's her last name?

NS: Cohen, Esther Cohen. She takes care of Rose Phillips, Bert Warner, the Spiegels, and so on. She does excellent work, and word gets around. Her life of course is... you have one child and you lose it... so you know what happens to you. My dad passed away in '39, my mother passed away in '53. I have not entered an orthodox synagogue since my mother died. When we go to services we go as a family. My father and my mother, and my brother and I, were very close, we were like two peas in one pod... but I tried it, and I was lost. I think that was one of the reasons that we joined the Temple. I thought I could get a different feeling out of it, but it really didn't have much meaning. I don't know what else you want to know, what else I could fill you in on... but I will tell you this. In spite of some of the somber recording that you've done about various anti-Semitic incidents and so on and so forth, I want to repeat once more: I've been lucky and blessed to have been born in this community and to have lived here. And I've had a good life. I was sixty-five .re cal last Monday and I have my Medicare card to prove it. The life line in our family has been relatively short, so I've beat the averages.

[End of interview]