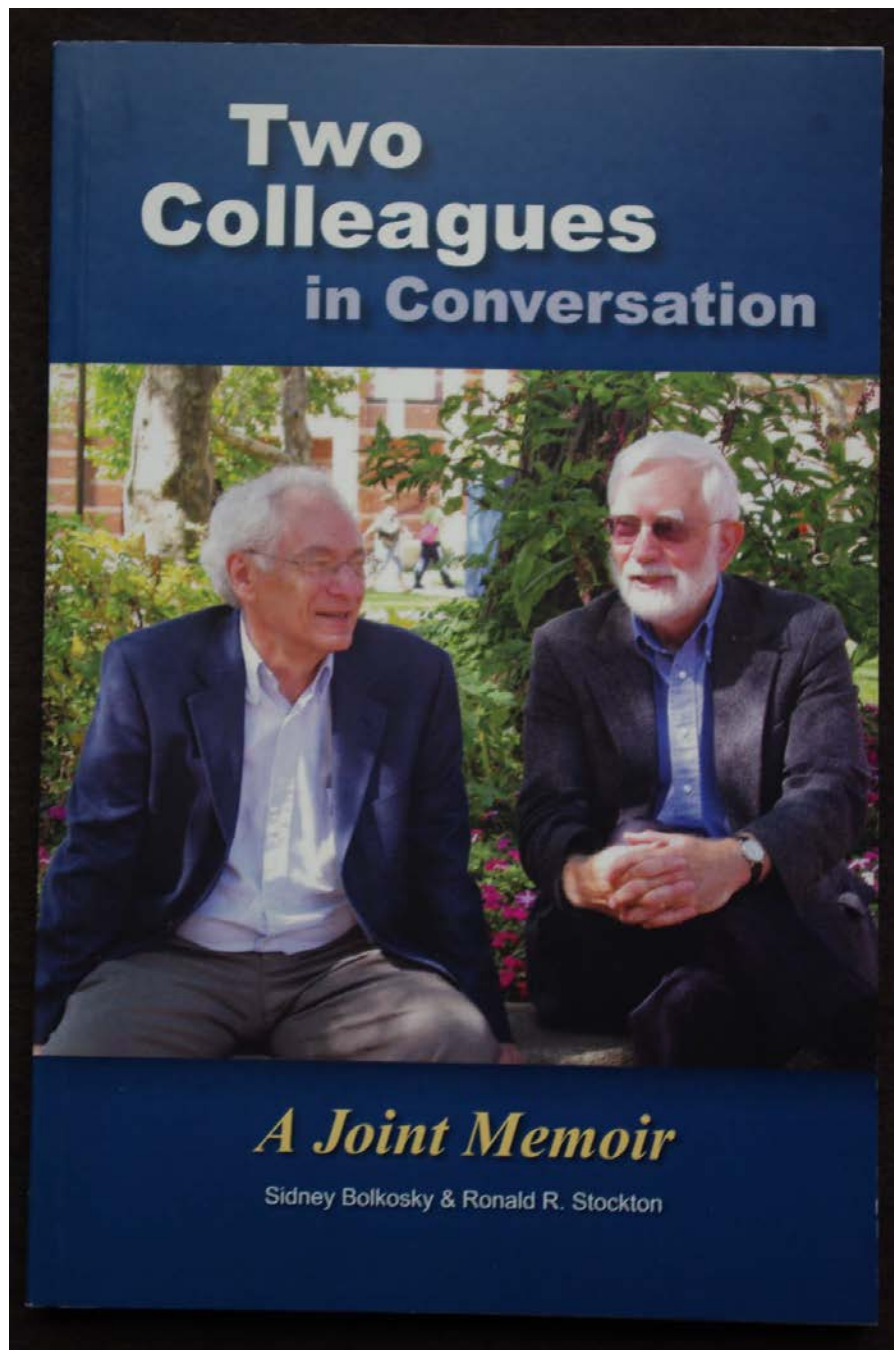


## **Sidney Bolkosky: Posthumous Legacy Lecture Ron Stockton**

Sid died before the Legacy Lecture program was created. Fortunately he and I had created a Joint Memoir while he was still healthy. I decided to edit down that Joint Memoir to focus on Sid's part. This editing is unfortunate because the Joint Memoir was a dialogue in which we bounced ideas and reactions off against each other. Turning dialogue into monologue creates some jumps that seem uneven. Still, this edited version covers the points Sid would probably have made had he delivered a Legacy Lecture. If you want to read the full Joint Memoir, it is on Deep Blue under my name. Here is my introduction, and then Sid's "Legacy Lecture."



## Introduction to Colleagues in Conversation: A Joint Memoir

Let me tell you how this project started. In 2007, I was in a used bookstore and saw a book by Francois Mitterand, President of France, and Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust scholar. Mitterand had asked Wiesel to interview him as his Presidency was coming to an end. With two such egos, the project inevitably evolved from an interview into a dialogue. It was published as a joint memoir. I was taken by this project and decided that Sid and I could produce something similar. As I said to him, “We have been around since the campus was young. There are no two faculty who are more different in their backgrounds than you and I are. We both have high visibility off campus, and both of us are dinosaurs. When we leave they will not replace us with people like ourselves.”

We had been at the University of Michigan-Dearborn for over three decades. Sid arrived in 1972, I in 1973. Sid was a historian specializing in modern German History and the Holocaust. I was a Political Scientist specializing in comparative non-western politics, especially ethnic conflict, political change, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We both were considered unique professors by our students. We both had solid reputations in terms of publications, classroom teaching, and service. We both were associated with major research projects, Sid for his Holocaust survivor interviews, which recorded in-depth interviews with over 300 individuals, me for the Detroit Arab American Study, the most comprehensive scientific public opinion study ever done of Arab Americans. We both had four books. Sid wrote *The Distorted Image* (1975) on how German Jews saw their position within Germany, *Mighty Myth* (with Greta Lipson, 1982) on how to use Greek myths in the classroom, *Harmony and Dissonance* (1991), a history of the Jewish community of Detroit, and *Searching for Meaning in the Holocaust* (2002), a reflection on meaning and interpretation. I had *A Time of Turmoil* (with Frank Wayman, 1983), a analysis of public opinion and voting behavior; *Decent and in Order* (2000), a study of church conflict; *Horse Prairie Cemetery of Sesser, Illinois* (with Clara Crocker Brown, 2004), an inventory and analysis of a graveyard; and *Citizenship and Crisis* (with others, 2009), a study of Detroit’s Arab American community after September 11. We both had taken our expertise beyond the academy into the public realm. We both had written high school curriculum units that were widely adopted, Sid on teaching the Holocaust, me on teaching the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. We both frequently speak to public groups and the media and are well known off campus. We both deal with sensitive topics.

We both had received various honors throughout our careers. Sid won university-wide awards for Distinguished Teaching, Distinguished Service, and Distinguished Research. He was also a Stirton Professor, the top honor the university grants to its faculty. I won awards for Distinguished Teaching, Distinguished Service, and Distinguished Research. We had both been honored off campus. I had received the Founders Award from the Michigan Conference of Political Scientists, for long-time service, Sid had received the Bernard Maas Award for Jewish Education in the Humanities, among others.

In other ways we were a matching pair. We both came from families unlikely to produce a professor, Sid from a father who was a junk dealer, me from a family of coal miners. Neither had what one would call a rich educational environment at home. By way of background, Sid was Jewish from Rochester, New York, the child and grandchild

of immigrants; I was from Southern Illinois with historic roots in Kentucky and Tennessee. Both were married to our college sweethearts. We both had two children. After the project ended, Sid became a grandfather when Miriam had twin sons. Sid died on June 14, 2013 after a long illness.

The conversations took place in the fall of 2007. They spread over several months and lasted over contact ten hours. At the time, Sid was 62, I was 66.

## **Chapter One**

### **Youth, Family, Upbringing**

**RS:** Let's start by talking about our lives and our background. Where were you born? What was your family like?

**SB:** I was born in Rochester, New York in 1944. I was an only child. My father was born in Brest-Litovsk in Russia. He emigrated to Buenos Aires, Argentina with his parents and three brothers in 1915. They were there for three years, and then they moved to Newark, New York, about 30 miles outside of Rochester. My father's uncle had come to America ahead of the rest of the family and started a junk yard. He convinced my grandfather to move to Newark and become his partner. My grandfather, who had been an architect, died within a year. He designed the Newark City Hall. You can still see his name on the column, at least you could 20 years ago. The business broke his heart from what I understand. He died when my father was 12. My father never went to high school. He took over the care and support of the family and dropped out of school. He and his mother would ride on a wagon and would sell papers. He was not the oldest but he was the most responsible and got involved in the junk business. He had his own truck and would drive around, buying and selling metals including huge oil tanks. He would be up each morning at 5 a.m., coughing and smoking, and return home around 7 p.m. He died at age 56, I think of smoking three packs of cigarettes a day and probably overwork. He just fell dead in the street. I was 20 when he died. We never got to know each other very well, but when I would have a music gig playing vibes or piano in some club, he would always come to listen. He was an awful businessman, and I recall taking trips to NYC and passing these tanks as he pointed them out with "I own those." But he negotiated with a handshake and when he died at age 56 of a heart attack, all that was gone.

My mother was born in Boston and she moved to Rochester when she was about eight or nine years old. She was the dominant force in the family. She was difficult to live with some time, excessively worried about me. Her sister, who had no children, and her husband were surrogate parents to me. They lived ten blocks from my house and had a cot. I would spend weekends at their house. My grandfather lived with my aunt and uncle and I was quite close with him as well. My aunt was an unusual woman. She always took an interest in what I was doing—unlike my mother. She read my masters thesis on Nietzsche, talked to me about my dissertation. She bought me books from the time I was a toddler. When I was 12 she bought me a copy of *Ulysses*. She had no idea what it was about. We were in New York together once and I asked her to buy me *Tropic of Cancer* by Henry Miller. My uncle knew what it was. He said, "I'll hold this for you."

My mother, on the other hand, was probably the most narcissistic person I ever met. She had no interest in what I was doing. She was always running. She'd go out at

10, 11 o'clock at night meet her friend and take me with her. She would go for coffee. She continued to do that even after our kids were born. We would come to visit her in Rochester and we'd arrive around 10 or 11 o'clock at night. The first thing she'd do was put her coat on and say, "Come on. We're going to the store." She'd go across the street. They were open 24 hours. When she got older, we finally got her into The Jewish Home for the Aged. What prompted that move was that she was shoplifting. The police all knew her and called us up and said, "She just walked out without paying." We went immediately to Rochester and there was a social worker in the room with her. The social worker said, "You have two choices. One is that you can go to court and be arraigned for shoplifting and the other is go in The Jewish Home." My mother said, "I'll go to court." And we said, "No. Wrong choice." So we got her in The Jewish Home. She was not happy. The previous Jewish home was the place you went to die. My grandfather died there. People they knew were dying all over the place. It was like something out of the nineteenth century. The new one on the other hand was very good. Hillary Clinton came to the Rochester Jewish Home when Bill was running for President. She spent the day there examining what kind of health care they had because it was really very good. They still are good, although now they cost a lot of money. My mother died there.

**RS:** You haven't mentioned your mother's parents.

**SB:** My grandfather was in the Workman's Circle. They had an interesting story. They both came from Ukraine. My grandmother was from Kiev and my grandfather was from somewhere else in the Ukraine. I don't know where. He was in the Russo-Japanese War and was taken prisoner by the Japanese. He was wounded twice and cared for by the Japanese. He told me once that the Japanese treated him better as a prisoner than the Russians did as a soldier. He loved horses. He came to Boston, my grandmother came to Montreal. I think she was 16 or 17. She was supposed to come to be married to some young man and the man didn't show up. So there were two other men who had also come to meet a woman for marriage purposes, and the woman didn't show up. So they took my grandmother home with them and I think through them she met my grandfather. She had a sister who lived in Rochester. She came to the United States not knowing anyone. She had the address of her sister so they moved to Rochester and my understanding is that on the train trip – they had two daughters at this point – my grandfather rode with the horse. He was so worried about the horse.

**RS:** Let the family take care of themselves.

**SB:** Apparently my grandmother was pretty tough. She could do it. She died when I was four. She was ill. Her daughters never forgave themselves because she died in a charity ward of some sort.

**RS:** They seem to be arriving about the time there were some really bad things happening in Europe. The Kishinev Massacre was 1903. Did you have any inclination that that was a factor in their immigration?

**SB:** Well, my grandfather didn't leave until after 1905. I'm guessing 1906. He left before the First World War. He never talked much about it. I mean, my grandfather would tell me all these stories about life in the shtetl [Jewish village] and in the army. He was a very gentle man. At one point he was a night watchman in a Genessee brewery and my mother used to bring him dinner. At 12 o'clock at night she would walk by herself and then she would sit with him a while and then she went home. She would ride in a wagon with him when he peddled. My aunt was more feminine and there are all kinds of secret stories about her. I suspect she had an abortion. I don't know.

**RS:** This was the aunt you were so close to.

**SB:** Yes. I spent a lot of time with them on the weekends. They ran a grocery store, so I would go after school and I would help run the store. I ran away from home once to stay with them. My mother and I used to fight a lot, especially when I started to date. We had a major argument one night and the next morning I packed and left, eight blocks away. My uncle was willing to adopt me. It created a tension between them and my mother, and they drew apart, but when my mother died we found all these letters. She and my uncle had corresponded and were very cordial, very affectionate in the letters, so something happened somewhere along the line that I don't know about. One day when I was there, the policeman came and took me to the court house where we met with the judge. I was sent home. There was a court order. I was not allowed to see my aunt and uncle again and we had to see counselors. Of course, I saw them anyway, but that was the court order. Years later Lori and I went to the counselor when we got married and we had trouble with my mother and it turns out it was the same counselor. He took out his file and the last thing he wrote about my mother was, she is "impossible." She was eccentric. Everybody talked about how "feisty" she was.

**RS:** What role did religion play in your life?

**SB:** We were not a religious family. My aunt did not keep kosher but my mother did until later in her life. My grandfather was the only religious one. We would attend synagogue services on the holidays. He was active in the Workmen's Circle, a leftist Jewish organization. In fact, we joined when we came to Detroit, mainly for the nursery school. I have some recollections of going to the services and seeing my mother sitting upstairs with the women. They sat upstairs in the balcony. I sat downstairs with my grandfather and my father. One or the other would put a tallis on my head and I would sit there and sleep or whatever. It was a practice I continued with Gabe and Miriam. There must have been eight synagogues within three blocks, so what you did when you were a kid on the holidays, you would just walk from one to the other, hang out with other kids. There was one called the Big Shul which was brought from Europe. It was a huge building. Stained glassed windows and some of the bricks were all brought from Europe and reassembled in Rochester. There was a pretty strong Jewish community in Rochester. It's since almost died off. We have a good friend who still lives there.

I had a bar mitzvah. I went to Hebrew school and hated it. So I had a private tutor who was an obnoxious, uncouth man. I don't know what they paid him. But he got me through. I managed to get through my bar mitzvah.

**RS:** What was the theme of your talk? What was your biblical passage?

**SB:** The passage I had was Isaiah 42, about Israel as a Light unto the Nations. I couldn't do it again, but I've since taught it in English.

**RS:** Was music important in your family?

**SB:** My mother played the piano so she wanted me to take piano lessons. Starting at 12, I took lessons for a year and then hooked up with a friend who was a saxophone player who later became pretty well known as a jazz player in New York. So we formed this band and my teacher didn't like that I was playing jazz, so I quit lessons. When I was 14, I convinced my father to take me to New York City to buy me some vibes. I had heard Milt Jackson play, so I decided to become a vibe player. We walked up and down 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and found a set of vibes for \$250, which was a lot of money then. That same set – they don't make it anymore, the company's out of business – would have cost \$2,000 ten or fifteen years later. I used to play gigs all around during high school and college, especially college. I would occasionally sit in with Chuck Mangioni and his saxophone side man, who had been a good friend through elementary and high school. That became a significant part of my identity as a teen-ager.



**RS:** You paid part of your educational expenses by playing.

**SB:** That and poker. (Both laugh) When I was a junior in college we had a steady gig on weekends playing in some club. When I was in high school I used to sit in at these Black jazz clubs. The one where I went the most often, the Pythod Club, burned down during the riots in 1964. Music became an important part of my life. I had no idea what classical music was. Zero. I had no sense of it whatsoever. I was heavily into jazz. So to have two children who are classical musicians was a little bit surprising for me.

**RS:** I remember Miriam as a little girl playing that cello.

**SB:** She started when she was four years old. We have a good friend who came to visit us and as he got off the plane it looked like he was carrying a baby. It was a viola he had made for her. He had sent to Hungary for the wood and Italy for the ebony and he made it. It took him a year. He wanted to give her something. He said he saw something in her eyes that reminded him of conductors that he saw in the 1930s who were émigrés from the Nazis. So he wanted to give her a musical instrument. The Suzuki method was just starting. There were basically no Suzuki cellists at the time. So she was one of the first

Suzuki cellists. By the time she was seven she was picked to go on a tour with six other cellists. They started at the Kennedy Center and they went to Symphony Hall in Atlanta, then Orlando, then they wound up in Carnegie Hall. We took her to Washington – I still can't believe we did this – but we left her and came home. We left her to travel with these strangers. We went to see her in Carnegie Hall, as did Marvin who was the maker of the viola. He met us there in Carnegie Hall. We met during the intermission on the stage. It was very exciting, although she called us from Orlando when we were at my mother's in New York. We got Miriam on the phone and she moaned, "Mom, I don't feel well." She was throwing up and her chaperone wasn't there and she had these two 10-year-old girls who were taking care of her. My mother immediately said, "You have to go right away, now." It was 11 o'clock at night. (Both laugh). "Now! Go to Orlando." So we left Gabe with my mother and went to New York the next day. By the time we got there, she was fine. My kids were very active in theater and in their music. They don't do theater anymore, which is much a relief. They're both professional musicians. Miriam still plays the cello and Gabe plays the violin.

**RS:** I saw both of your kids on stage. I was particularly impressed when Miriam played the lead role in *The Diary of Anne Frank* in high school. I never told you this but half the way through that play I got kind of spooked because I realized that if she had been there, she would have been there. I know you must have had a similar thought.

**SB:** Oh God. She looked so much like Anne Frank when she was 14. Anne was 14 when she wrote that diary. When I was doing Holocaust survivor interviews, I would get up in the middle of the night and check the kids. I had nightmares that they were on trains. When she was playing Anne Frank I didn't sleep. It was awful. She was good, but it was just awful. The director had me writing the liner notes for the play. I talked to the cast and tried to explain. But what are you going to say to a 14- or 15-year-old kid about this? At one point the director actually locked them in a closet in school and left them for two hours. I was furious. I was beside myself because we knew a Workman's Circle teacher who did that to little kids to show them what the Holocaust was like. I thought I was going to kill the guy. And he's a survivor. I said, "Why do you want to do to our children what they did to you? Why do you want to terrify them?" It obviously had an effect, but there are other ways to communicate that. So that was a rough time.



**RS:** You spoke Yiddish as a child. How did you learn Yiddish?

**SB:** Well, I never spoke it but I understood it. Especially when my parents didn't want me to know what was going on, they would speak Yiddish. It was not the first language

of the house, but it was close. And my grandfather spoke it. What I didn't know is that until he died, my father spoke Spanish. I never knew that until after he died but they had lived for three years in Buenos Aires. He spoke Yiddish, Spanish and, of course, English. I can do an interview in Yiddish. It's tough but it's possible.

**RS:** You seem to have survived the psychological stresses of childhood. This isn't easy.

**SB:** No. It's not easy. But a lot of it has to do with my uncle and my grandfather. They were rescuers in a way. When I was a very small child my mother would walk me over to my grandmother's house where my aunt and uncle also lived and she would leave me for the day. I don't know where she would go. She would go out and shop or whatever. But she was always off running somewhere. My aunt once told me that before my grandmother died, she said, "You have to take care of him," which I think she did. Later she got Alzheimer's.

**RS:** Do you still have ties to Rochester?

**SB:** I really don't. I have no family left there. Lori has a brother who's 85 and is in The Jewish Home.

**RS:** She was the baby in the family.

**SB:** Right. Her oldest brother died about a year ago. He was 86. Her second brother is 85 now. Her sister is 79 and then Lori came fifteen years later. I have been to see my old house, which is now in the heart of one of Rochester's ghettos that is primarily Latino. And there is a graveyard. It's on a street called Britton Road. Nobody ever said, "The graveyard on Britton Road." It was just "Britton Road." My grandparents and I think one great-grandparent are buried there. I don't know how the great-grandparent came to America. He died in the 1920s. So they obviously brought somebody over. I'm very fond of Rochester, but it's overlaid with childhood trauma – maybe not trauma, but unpleasantness. Lori and I got married a week before we graduated from college. We went to Highland, New York, went to commencement at the University of Rochester and then the end of that summer we came to Detroit where I did a master's. We escaped and we haven't been back since, I mean back to live. Of course we visited.

**RS:** How did you become a professor. Is the scholar a product of the child?

**SB:** I don't think so. The standard expectation was to be a doctor or lawyer. But a historian? (Laughing) My mother to the end of her life had no idea what I did. Never mind the Holocaust. She had no idea about that either. I think there were a few individuals who directed me. They were teachers. One was Hayden White, whom I met at the University of Rochester. Another was Marvin Bram who made the viola. We shared an office at Hobart. I don't think anybody in high school would have predicted that I would become an historian. I don't know what they would have predicted.

I switched from pre-med to history, took a course with Hayden White and changed my professional life. He convinced me to come to Wayne to study with John



Weiss for a Masters degree in modern European intellectual history. (I was moving from White to White.) After finishing that in one year, I opted to go to SUNY Binghamton for a doctorate. Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* overwhelmed me with her analysis of Eichmann as a banal, ordinary bureaucrat and her ten pages or so in which she stunningly (to me) described German Jews as more German than Jewish. The book caused an intellectual uproar, especially coming from Arendt, herself a German Jew who lived in a German Jewish enclave on the upper east side of New York in what was known as "The Fourth Reich." Reading Freud and other psychoanalytic literature, I managed to combine research on German Jews with that theory and with leftist anthropological work. Despite my advisor's admitted ignorance in all that, I wrote a dissertation that became my first book, *The Distorted Image*, in 1975.

**RS:** Were you a family of readers? Did you have books in the house?

**SB:** Just me. I read newspapers and magazines. That was it. I never remember seeing my father reading a book.

**RS:** What magazines did you get? Do you remember? We got *Reader's Digest*.

**SB:** We did too, and *Life* magazine. Occasionally I remember seeing *Photoplay*. But we got two newspapers. Rochester had two newspapers and we subscribed to both

**RS:** What did your family do for entertainment?

**SB:** On Saturday nights when I would stay with my aunt and uncle, we would get pizza and then watch wrestling on television. Gorgeous George was one of my favorites. On Sundays we would play badminton with the local kids.

**RS:** Wrestling! This brings back memories. We had the first television in our town. My mom won it in a raffle. It was big, 16 inches, the console type with a record player and a radio, and a rotator box on top to rotate the antenna that was on top of the house to locate the station. We had a big window in our living room and every Saturday night in the summer we would turn the television around to face out. All the neighbors would bring their chairs and sit in the front yard watching television. We would watch Sid Ceasar and the *Show of Shows*. Ninety minutes of pure genius, live every Saturday night.

**SB:** At 8:00

**RS:** Changing subjects, you were ill as a young boy.

**SB:** I was 18. I started to hemorrhage. I checked into the Emergency Room and my spleen was enlarged eight times. Nobody quite knew what that was. Was it an ulcer? Finally they took out my spleen and rerouted my arteries. I had hepatitis because of all the blood transfusions. Then exactly a year later the surgery procedure failed. Nobody in Rochester knew what to do. There was a young guy from the Strong Memorial Hospital at the University of Rochester who was like 32. He said to my mother, who was

hysterical, “I think I can help.” I remember him taking me in February to the other hospital. He stopped the bleeding. He came in the next morning and he said, “I’m going to take you into surgery.” I said, “I don’t want to have any more surgery, I’m not bleeding anymore.” He said, “It’s up to you, you’re 18.” I had turned 18 that day. He said, “It’s completely your decision. I think if you leave the hospital you’ll die in 48 hours.” So I said, “Fine, let me rethink this.” So I was in surgery for 10 hours and it was the fourth such operation they had ever done and two of the three had died. But this guy was a genius. He developed high pressure surgery in this tank. He also invented what’s called the Dal Schwartz Tube, what people use after surgery to clear their lungs out. He saved my life. There was no question about it. I remember waking up and looking out the hospital window – I had a private room – and seeing the Sears sign covered in snow. That’s the first thing I saw, and then I looked over and there was Lori. She was there just about everyday. I was in the hospital about six months. I got to know all the doctors and the nurses. I observed an autopsy. Just walked in. I became a pre-med student for a year and then I couldn’t kill the frog.

**RS:** So you never even got to a cadaver.

**SB:** No, not even close. I talked to the doctor and I said, “I think I’m going to have to not do this.” And he said, “Well, if you ever want to get into medical school, just let me know.” This told me a lot about admission programs.

**RS:** That surgery must have affected you psychologically in your view of the world.

**SB:** Absolutely. I thought I was on borrowed time, stolen time. To some extent I retained that feeling. When I turned 56 – my father was 56 when he died – I was convinced that that was the year to die. In fact, that was the year I had open heart surgery. I was positive that it was going to happen. By then, with my children and Lori, life was too full to give in, or so it seemed. It was a long year.

**RS:** Your friends were worried. We were afraid we were going to lose you.

**SB:** Well, I was very grateful. Just knowing people were worried helped. Everybody kept in touch. They were a great help to Lori, all of you guys were. One year to the day before I had surgery, Miriam got married. They spent their anniversary in Detroit. I remember waking up and both Miriam and her husband and Lori were there. There was an attractive young nurse who took care of me. I was on a respirator so I couldn’t talk and I was trying to say, “How old is she?” I was trying to set something up for Gabe. So Miriam brought me a pad and pencil and I couldn’t sit up, so she said, “We can’t read your writing under the best of circumstances,” so I started to sign because my mother had taught me how to do sign language.

**RS:** Why did she know that? That’s a very technical skill.

**SB:** My mother had a hearing problem. We had a neighbor who was – I don’t know what the correct term is these days – she was deaf and dumb. She couldn’t speak. And

she would come and sit and talk with my mother. So my mother taught me to sign. And Miriam caught it, she caught that I was using sign language. Of course nobody else understood it. But I think they got it from the writing. I'm sure the nurse thought, "Here's this old man hitting on me." We paid for them to go to dinner that night. They didn't know that and my son-in-law's response was if he had know that we were paying he would have gotten a better bottle of wine. (Both laugh)

**RS:** You had another health problem. Your back collapsed. That was a case where you might not have walked again.

**SB:** Yes. I collapsed. I couldn't stand up. It was the day that the lights went out all over the country.

**RS:** The power failure. It closed down the whole Midwest. What year was that?

**SB:** 2003. As a matter of fact, after the heart surgery I fell into a post-surgical depression. They did a study at Harvard that you can determine how long the post-surgical depression will last by how long the heart was out of your body. I wouldn't watch the news – this was after 9/11. I wouldn't watch the news. I wouldn't watch anything but old movies. And I was suicidal at one point. I went to a shrink. This was a psychoanalyst who was also a pharmacological specialist. He helped a lot. So that was that. Then the last medical problem was about two years ago and it was a return of the circulatory problem that I had had when I was 18. I was at the point where my blood count was 7.1 – the average is like 14. So nobody knew how I was able to even stand up, much less walk into the hospital. So it was emergency surgery. That was pretty much touch and go because I was in and out of the hospital three times in ten days. I kept hemorrhaging. That's when Lori quite literally saved my life. She called the doctor immediately and he said, "I'll be there in ten minutes." I don't think I would have lasted an hour. But it's been two years without a hospital visit.

## **Chapter Two Religion and Faith**

**RS:** We have talked of the role of religion in our youth and upbringing. Now let's talk about it in a different way, as something in our lives. Are you a believer?

**SB:** No.

**RS:** What does that mean?

**SB:** I think it means I'm an agnostic. I consider myself a secular Jew. Lori and I attend services fairly regularly on Saturday morning, but our Sabbath service is very much a communal one. We belong to a congregation which has a lot of survivors in it and that's basically why we joined. And Miriam needed a bat mitzvah. Lori goes into the service and sits with friends and I go to the Torah study group, which meets in the school room. I drive the guy a little crazy, my friend and I, because we keep raising questions about the

text and why there are contradictory comments and what this means and what that means. He doesn't want to use text, he just brings in basically web pages on a particular reading for that week. I love doing it. I guess I'm a skeptic about God.

**RS:** Did you ever have a break with your faith?

**SB:** Well, when we came to Detroit we joined the Workman's Circle, which is a secular Jewish organization and it had nothing to do with any kind of a religious observance. We mainly joined because they had a great nursery program, which had both non-Jews and Jews in it. Our kids went there on a daily basis when they were very small. And then they went to Sunday school, which is basically as you said, an ethical, not ritualistic curriculum. I guess at the time I had serious questions. I don't know if it was a break, but after I was working with the Holocaust survivors they began to talk about their attitudes toward God and religion after the war. There are some very Orthodox Jews who believe that the reason the Holocaust happened was that the Jews in Europe were not observant enough or that Zionism was responsible, because there should be no Zionism until the Messiah. When I heard that, about the Holocaust, I just went sort of ballistic.

Even my son, who was twelve years old, had a Hebrew teacher who said something to that effect. Gabe asked him how he could say that when there were innocents and small children killed. The only response he got was that the teacher said, "It's very complicated. You don't understand." Gabe probably understood better than the guy did because he knew a number of survivors by that time. When he came out of Hebrew School, he said "After my bar mitzvah I'm not going back." We formed an agreement that he would read literature of Jewish content, but not religious stuff. That stopped after about six months, but it still was good. He identifies himself as a Jew but he will not attend services. I think that had something to do with it.

I also have a very strong Jewish identity, but it's not religiously connected. I don't think I have a break with it anymore. I have survivors who come up to me and say, "I stopped believing." They attend services every day or every week, but they're not believers. I think it has something to do with their families, their history, their feelings of obligation to those who didn't survive. So yes, I had somewhat of a disaffection.

**RS:** I remember when that happened. You told me how Gabe was upset, and you were upset on his behalf more than anything else. I think children can be damaged more than adults. For those of us who are a few decades into life, if something bad happens, we just move on. But if you're a young person filled with trust and hope...

**SB:** He still remembers that really vividly, twenty years later.

**RS:** As a famous rabbi once said, "Better a millstone be tied about your neck and you be cast in the river than you lead a little one astray."

**SB:** A rabbi said that?

**RS:** That was Jesus. (Both laugh)

**SB:** I don't imagine that anyone in my immediate family would be too upset at how I describe my attitude toward religion. There was never really strong faith. My grandfather was the only one, as I mentioned. My parents were not very religious. Lori keeps kosher. When we go out I have no compunction about eating anything. She tries to not eat meat. I don't know where this came from. We don't eat shellfish. She used to, but not any more.

**RS:** I know that you fast on Yom Kippur, 25 hours. That surprises me a bit. It doesn't seem consistent with other things that you've said.

**SB:** You know, it's just something you do. Gabe does it. It's a meditation day for him. We do it and go to services. We don't spend all day there. We come home and go back. I think it's a communal thing and the synagogue we belong to has a lot of survivors in it. So when you're there on that particular holiday, it's a very sad holiday, even though it's presumably a new beginning. I remember the survivors telling me what Yom Kippur was like in Auschwitz and they're all there. When I go into the service and sit with them, their heads aren't where we are, their heads are right back the way they were before. If you ask, "Did you pray in Auschwitz?," someone would say, "Are you kidding? Why would we want to pray?" Someone else would say, "Of course. That's all I could do. What else could I do?" But they're with their families. So I sort of feel a part of that community. But I've been fasting since I was 13. It's just something you do. I don't know anything else I would say that about, just something you do. It's certainly not religious. It's what we do. You have dinner at 6 o'clock. Service starts at 6:30 and the sun goes down around 8, so it's 26 hours. And then there's a break fast. The meal is the same every year. But it tastes good at the time.

**SB:** What about your experience? Did you ever have a break in your faith?

**RS:** When I was a young boy, 13 or so, my minister preached a sermon that salvation comes through Jesus. There is a text on this. He said that people who did not accept Jesus would not be saved. This did not have to do with Jews, by the way, but with people in distant lands who had never heard of Jesus. This made no sense to me and I told him I disagreed with him. I was polite, but I could not see why a righteous person could not be saved. It was a bold thing for a person so young. So early on, I had doubts about doctrine. I did have a break, though, a time when I lost confidence. It was when my grandmother died. She had cancer and we were staying with them. The minister came in and prayed for her. He was a very fine minister, and we were in a tradition that believed in divine healing, the laying on of the hands. We were not Pentecostals who believed in tongues or shouting but we did believe in healing. Everyone in the room put their hands on her, including me, and he prayed for her. Then he said, "If everyone in this room is a believer, she will be healed." Well, my father was not a believer, and everyone knew that. Later he became a believer but at that time he was not. I felt at that time that the minister was scoring points on my dad. I knew that my grandmother was going to die, and he was trying to guilt trip my dad into religious behavior. That caused me to question the whole nature of what religious authorities said.

The ministers of my youth were not well educated. They spoke of God, salvation, sin, damnation, that sort of thing. I quickly moved away from that. If religion does not

have a self-reflective, ethical, social justice dimension, it is not what I need. Did I have a break? I don't know. Maybe I just began to pull away.

**RS:** Do you think all religions share a core of values or are they very different?

**SB:** I don't know. My view of Jewish values isn't necessarily consistent with the Orthodox view and I'm guessing there are different levels of values Christians actually have as well. The same is probably true for Islam. I just don't know enough about them. Those values I admire are so basically different. I do believe you don't need religion to be an ethical and moral person. I don't believe you need to have some reward waiting for you to do the right thing. That's self-evident, but not to some students. We had discussions in class about why would you do this unless you had your reward waiting? I remember one student who was very upset. She and her family were atheists, but they all claimed they were doing the right, ethical, moral thing and the class could not understand where she was coming from. So again, it's not self-evident, but most people I know think pretty much the same.

**SB:** There's one survivor who was really ethical but hard nosed. And he used to speak at the Holocaust Memorial Center and he'd tell classes of high school students that all the evil in the world came from religion.

**RS:** That would be shocking for a 16-year-old child.

**SB:** That's what he believed. He made a very strong argument, religious wars right down to the Holocaust. He was also very leftist from the time he was a teenager, so that sort of explains part of it. That was his religion, to be completely anti-religious.

**RS:** Is there any aspect of your religion that you particularly like, or don't like?

**SB:** I don't like the religious police, people telling you how to behave, what to eat, when to attend services. I think it's dangerous, like any religious extremism. I like the historical tradition that draws people together in joyous ways, the social community. I like going through the book to find things like "do unto your neighbor which you would have them do unto you," which I think first appears in Leviticus.

**RS:** That's one of those universal teachings that gets passed around from tradition to tradition. Not many Christians realize Jesus was quoting the Torah when he said that.

**SB:** I like that universal dimension. And there are some aspects of the service that I enjoy. We belong to a Conservative synagogue which is very interactive, a lot of singing, dancing, celebrating at various holidays. So I sort of like that. But again, it's all very social. How about you? Is there anything you like or don't like about your religion?

**RS:** Do you have a favorite character in the Bible?

**SB:** I do, but I get it from Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*, my all time favorite book. The character is Tamar. [Genesis 38]. She is promised – well you know the story – she's promised to Judah's son and on their wedding night the son dies, so the second son has to take his place. That turns out to be Onan, who does not do what he's supposed to do and he also dies. Judah refuses to give his third son, so he tells her to wait. She waits and waits and she realizes that he's lied to her. She sits outside a town pretending to be a temple prostitute. He's on his way to a sheep shearing and stops and asks her what her charge would be. He has no money, so she tells him she'll take his staff and seal and he can send somebody back for it the next day. So they sleep together. He leaves the staff and the seal, and the next day he sends one of his servants to take the payment back but she's not there. Somebody in the town said, "We don't have any prostitutes in this town. You're wrong." So then she becomes pregnant and when Judah hears, he orders her to be burned. Then she sends him the seal and the staff and said that the owner is the father. So he realizes this is his sin and he said, "She is a more honorable person than I." She has twins, Perez and Zerah, who are the descendants of Judah who receives the blessing from Jacob in the end. But then according to Thomas Mann – everything he wrote was based on a lot of Talmudic research – she becomes a substitute for Joseph in Jacob's eyes and Jacob teaches her everything about family and about tradition and about the history. She passes this on to her children, who Jacob then realizes deserve the blessing because they, like Joseph, know the story. The rest of his sons couldn't care less. So she becomes kind of a matriarch of the clan, of the tribe. And she's not Jewish. She starts out as a Moabite, but she wants in. When Jacob finally gives the blessing, she's standing outside the tent and she's ecstatic when she hears. It goes to Judah because the first three sons have committed some terrible indiscretion and Judah's the fourth son, so he is the logical one to inherit the blessing. Joseph can't get it because he's become an Egyptian. Presumably those two sons are founders. That's shortly before they become Jews. Thomas Mann believes Tamar is the most heroic character because she stands up for her children.

**RS:** It's her determination and defiance.

**SB:** Right, and for the right thing. She should have gotten married to one of the three sons. Of course, why she would have wanted that, I don't know. But only because she had the sense that Judah will be the one to get the blessing. He's suffered. He hasn't committed any serious crimes like the two older brothers, who slaughtered towns. So yes, she's my favorite character. She and Job. I think I identify with him too much. (Laughs)

### **Chapter Three** **The Events of Our Age**

**RS:** We have spent our whole lives in war, the Second World War, the Cold War, Vietnam, the Gulf War, the Iraq War. How has this shaped you?

**SB:** I remember being frightened every night of an atomic bomb, thinking about bomb shelters, although we didn't have one. We had a basement. I was about 8 or 10 years old

and I remember that. I think the next experience was the Vietnam War, and that was when I was in college. The day I turned 18, I was in the hospital and I was proclaimed 4-F so I was spared. It was a relief, of course. Even at that point, I knew something about the war and the “advisors” being sent in. When I went to graduate school, that’s when I got involved with politics and protests. When I taught at Hobart and William Smith College in New York, which was before I had my degree, the campus went on strike. There was an infamous raid on a dormitory where I think three students had a tiny amount of marijuana and they were taken out. And somebody realized that one of the provocateurs was an FBI agent.

**RS:** Tommy the Traveler, a notorious provocateur. He went from place to place inciting incidents and getting other people arrested.

**SB:** Before the police could leave with their prisoners, five hundred students who were still left on the campus surrounded the police cars and let them go. This was like 10 days after the four students were killed at Kent State, so everybody was very nervous. The National Guard was called out. They were just up the street. We were at a bar and Lori and I left early because she was pregnant with Miriam. But the rest, the young faculty who were there were all called to the scene. One of them pulled out the distributor from the police car and waved it in the police chief’s face. They struck a bargain. They would release all students and there would be a depressurization and everyone went home. They did turn over one police car. Next morning at 6:00, 7 people were arrested and taken to jail. At 7:00 somebody called me and asked, since I wasn’t there, would I be the treasurer of the defense fund? What did I know? So I did, and somebody running for state senator grabbed on to this and made it his *cause celebre*. So it became very public and our phones were tapped. There were regular demonstrations in front of the flag pole. Ultimately all but two were released. Those two spent, I think, 13 days in the local jail. But from that point on, we went to Washington, we went to Philadelphia, we were involved in protests there. Our phones were tapped. So Lori would call her mother and they would speak in Ladino and I would talk to my mother in Yiddish and then I would ask if they got that, if they wanted me to repeat that on the phone? It was pretty blatant because of clicking. So I was involved a little bit. Then we got involved in the Gene McCarthy campaign. That was my political involvement in the Vietnam War. I was not involved in the Gulf War and have not really been involved in the Iraq War, except to talk to people about it.

**RS:** Let’s go to a different topic: How were you affected by September 11?

**SB:** That morning I was doing a survivor interview and the man’s wife came into the room and said something strange is happening on television. So we stopped and we watched from his house and I asked him if he wanted to postpone the interview. He said no. So we finished and then we went and watched what was going on. I was heartbroken, terrified, angry, what everybody else was feeling, and very confused. What are we going to do now? I had eight calls from survivors each of whom said, “We’re supposed to be safe here. How could this happen?” Yes, it was probably the most traumatic. Miriam was on an airplane flying back from England and they rerouted her to Montreal and they did



not tell anyone on the plane what was going on. When they got to Montreal, all the monitors were turned off. Nobody let them know. She wound up on a bus coming to Windsor and it took me six hours to get across the border to her. It was pretty frightening. It sort of remained that way.

**RS:** One of the major issues in our life is the issue of race, and the civil rights movement. Did any youthful views or experiences influence you?

**SB:** I went to an integrated high school. For me it wasn't a major issue, although I think it was more of an issue in that place than I realized. I think there was a real separation and in general the Black kids tended to be very active in athletics. All the sports teams were pretty much three-quarters Black athletes. We had one kid who made it to the Olympics. He was a runner. He broke Jessie Owens' record for the 100 yard dash.

**RS:** What percentage of students were African American?

**SB:** Thirty to forty percent. It wasn't inner city, but not a suburban school. It was on the edge of town. It was the largest high school in the city. It had 3,000 students. It was a WPA Project [Works Progress Administration]. The Civil Rights movement and race issues came home when I was in college in 1964. They were the first riots in the country. It stunned everybody. There's a book on Rochester called *Smug Town* and it was written in the '30s or '40s and it indicated that there were subliminal problems in the city that nobody wanted to talk about and one of them was the race issue. When the riots started it really stunned everyone. Lori and I were at the University of Rochester campus and her parents lived in the inner city. They would go for walks around the block and the one time they got scared was when the National Guard came in because they remember them in the war. So Lori sort of grew up with Black friends. I think that sort of galvanized us in the city. I used to sit in at a Black jazz club. I think there were three white people in the place. But later I went there and saw the place filled with angry young men. I realized that we weren't going to get in there anymore.

**RS:** Something had changed.

**SB:** Something had changed. It later burned down during the riots. When I got to college, it was very safe. There was nothing going on. When I got to graduate school we marched in Washington twice. We went with Martin Luther King – not with him – it was the March on Poverty. A friend and I got on a bus with some other students and spent 24 hours in Washington. Andrew Young showed us around. Basically what he said was, why don't you go see some of the sights in Washington, because we were in the way. All I remember is they put up these shanties. So after a number of hours trying to figure out what we could do to help, we went to the Washington Monument and just wandered around Washington. That march was a flop. He had marched in Chicago and the people were very attracted to him, but the civil rights movement was on its way downhill at that point. So that's pretty much my youthful involvement. I don't think there's been much more. Well, when I was in Binghamton there was an Interracial Center. We worked with a social worker who was a young Black guy and there was an interracial couple that lived

in a trailer. They called us to come right away and this guy had pulled out a gun because his neighbor had been calling his children names, racial slurs. He was drunk and he had this gun and his wife was panic stricken. His kids were in the bedroom. We were trying to get the gun away from him and our partner, the social worker, finally managed to do that. I think Lori was terrified. I was just too stupid to be that scared. Like Rochester, there were all kinds of racial tensions. What about you?

## **Chapter Four**

### **Favorite Books, Films, and Public Figures**

**RS:** Do you have any books that influenced you as a younger person?

**SB:** I had an eclectic interest and it actually turned my career around. I was heading to Rutgers University to study classical history and wound up having a seminar on fascism at Wayne State University where we read Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. This was when it first came out. I was astonished. One of the things that surprised me was maybe 10 pages of treatment of German Jews. A whole new world opened up to me the first moment she was talking about Eichmann and the perpetrators in general. Then when she said "our German Jews" it was a revelation to me.

**RS:** What did she say that was so shocking?

**SB:** She, being one of them, described them as very German, far more German than Jewish. They were cynical, sarcastic and critical of Eastern European Jews to the point of being anti-Semitic, some of them. And that's a deeply rooted European cultural division that has carried over to the United States. I was so taken with this that I wrote a dissertation on that. That was one book. Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* was another.

Between those two books, my dissertation was based on having read some of her stuff and on more research on German Jews, but it was very psychoanalytically oriented. I just leaped into the study of psychoanalysis. I'm not a Freudian, but I'm a great admirer of his. So those two themes were very influential. Both were relatively short books. From there I worked with *Joseph and His Brothers* by Thomas Mann. I think I identified a lot with Jacob, who was the trickster, and to some degree Joseph, who carries on after his father. These opened up a whole different aspect of my Jewish identity I had never even thought about. Those three – there have been lots of others – were pretty influential.

**RS:** What about movies? Do you have any movies you like?

**SB:** My first thought is *Casablanca*, of course. But of the really good movies, a sort of semiprofessional one, is *The Sorrow and the Pity*, which was long, but another one of those shocking movies about the Holocaust. Another is *Judgment at Nuremberg* with Spencer Tracy, and *On the Beach*, about the aftermath of nuclear war. They had a major impact on me. I guess the other one would be *Shoah*. That's an old wound. For me it's got problems.

I loved *Tootsie*. I remember just laughing at that. We were in New York once with my brother-in-law and sister-in-law. He had taken us to a play and then we went to the Russian Tearoom. Gabe was about 13. There's a scene in *Tootsie* where a waiter comes to their table and he's dressed up like a woman and Dustin Hoffman says to the waiter, "nice blouse." So the waiter came to our table and Gabe said, "nice blouse." The waiter knew what he was talking about and we all cracked up. Gabe knew the whole movie by heart. It was one of the rare movies that I really laughed heartily. I don't do that very often. But the serious ones, *Nuremberg Trial*. The other Nuremberg movie is Marcel Ophuls's *Memory of Justice*.

**RS:** I've never seen that.

**SB:** It's long, down to earth, but it's a wonderful film. He was a great filmmaker *The Graduate* is a film that our students don't know. I have seen it thirty-two times. I used to use it in a class. Recently I mentioned it, and not a single student had ever seen it. What a loss.

**RS:** What public figures do you admire?

**SB:** Bill Clinton. I thought he was one of the smartest, most savvy, well intentioned politicians I can ever remember. He got a terrible raw deal. I came to admire Bobby Kennedy. I think I fell victim to the propaganda. I mean, I see him as this almost saintly figure. I don't think he was a saint. But I think he could have been a very good thing for the country and if anybody could have turned around what's happened since, I think it was Robert Kennedy. Those are political figures.

**SB:** I liked Paul Newman because I think he was a great actor and a philanthropist as well, and sincere. It's why I like Dustin Hoffman, because of *The Graduate*. I don't think he's ever surpassed *The Graduate*. I thought that was one of the great roles.

I admire one survivor who's since died. He had no *mazel* – as my mother would say – he had no luck. He was fourteen when he went into Auschwitz and it went downhill from there. He died this year. He had a sad marriage, his son contracted a disease and all kinds of terrible things happened. But through it all, he had a great sense of humor. He was obsessed with the experience of the Holocaust, but he overcame a lot. I don't usually talk about survivors as overcoming, but I think he actually did.

I admire my son, because he's a *mensch*, a decent human being and he's very talented. He doesn't want to compromise. I guess he wouldn't be a hero, but he comes close. Trying to think of anybody here on campus. Bernie Klein. I admire his sense of humor.

## Chapter Five Teaching and Research

**RS:** We've both won teaching awards and are said to be good teachers. We both teach sensitive topics. What problems do you encounter? What are you trying to do in your classroom and what do you hope to achieve?

**SB:** Yes, we do. Theoretically I want to help students think better, more critically and more generously. I remember a colleague who wrote that he hoped to produce students who could appreciate the mathematics of Euclid, the tragedy of Oedipus and the poetry of Sappho. He meant the scientist, poet, humanist. He had students who had no idea what this stuff was about. It still remains to me a challenge to get them to appreciate the variety of the texts more and to learn how to write better, communicate better. In terms of the sensitive subject, I really don't believe that teaching about the Holocaust will stop genocide. It hasn't up to now. But if one or two or ten students sees a pattern of behavior or recognizes the pattern of thinking in perpetrators, whether they be bureaucrats or racists – most of them were not racists, I don't think – most were just indifferent to the plight of a human being. If they recognize that in one behavior, if they say, "this reminds me of something," then I have achieved something.

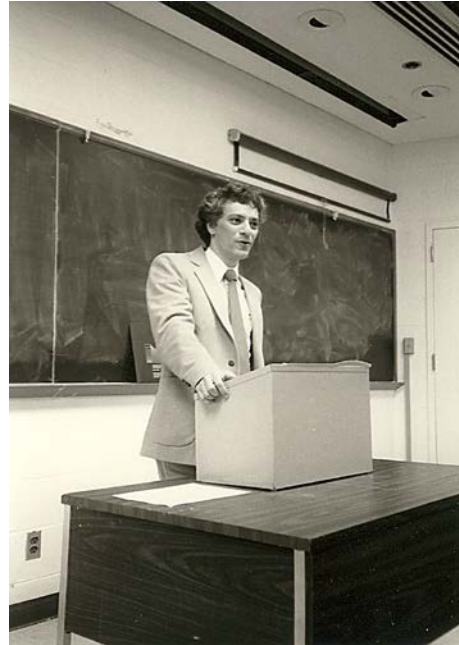
I had a student once – I may have told you this. We used to come to a six o'clock class and he had a white shirt and tie and jacket. He clearly had come from across the street. [Reference to Ford Motor Company]. He'd sit for the three hours and he'd get up and leave and never speak. One evening I had lectured for three hours about the railroads and the profits businesses made from the Holocaust. Everybody got up – there were about 50 students in the class – and walked out when we were done, and he just sat there. So I thought he was ill or something. He sat way up in the corner every week, sort of the last seat. I went over and said, "Are you ok?" He said, "Do you remember the Pinto?" I said, "The Pinto, the car? The one that blew up?" And he said, "Right. I was an engineer on that. When we planned the car, we knew that one in maybe 10,000 cars, if we didn't put a particular bolt on it, was going to blow up and catch fire and could kill people." I said, "So what was the big deal? You put one bolt on." He said, "Well, the bolts were 50 cents a piece. If you're making a million cars, it's a lot of money. I was involved in the planning of it." Then he started to weep. I thought, you can't think he's committed genocide. On the other hand, he made a connection between a railroad bureaucrat who was sending a train somewhere that was going to kill people and what he had done. I thought, that's something that he will recognize in a committee meeting and maybe face a similar decision. That's pretty much the most you can hope, one at a time.

One of our former colleagues, he retired a few weeks ago, came over to Lori and said, "Tell Sidney not to wait, he's wasting his life." This person thought being a teacher was a waste of life. I don't think that. Occasionally I get, as you do, messages from former students who keep in touch and occasionally say "I remember this in class, I remember this book." That's very important to me. That's gratifying. It's been far from a waste of life for me.

**SB:** What do you do with students who are clearly opinionated at taking media censored information, rumors, gossip, web sites, whatever, and won't look at the source material the way you want them to look at it? On occasion I get students like that, in the course on the Bible, for example. Not a lot, but a few, who simply would not talk about social context or political context of chapters in the Bible. What do you do with these students? I haven't had this, but I can imagine having a student come in and say, why are we studying this, the Holocaust didn't happen. I don't know what I would do at that point.

I taught a course on the Bible in history, why it was written when it was, who wrote it, what their political goals might have been. I had maybe four or five students who were upset about this. Two who were Evangelicals kept saying, you can't read the Bible this way, it's blasphemous. They didn't drop the course. I had a couple of African American students who were involved Baptists who were fascinated with this and kept coming in and talking about what this meant. They went to church raising these questions with their ministers. I'm assuming they didn't get ex-communicated or whatever.

**SB:** In the Holocaust class the most problematic students I've had Jews who come in with that arrogant attitude, "We already know this, what can you tell me that I don't already know?" Of course, they have no idea what the historical event was about. They take it from Sunday school, or whatever. They don't do well. They don't listen, they don't think. Some of the best students I've had have been Muslim students. The overwhelming majority have been non-Jewish, sometimes retirees but 75% in their 20s. I guess that matters to me as well, to get them to think in terms of the complexity of an issue, to see it's not black and white, to avoid the "terrible simplifications."



**RS:** What is your philosophy or strategy of writing? What do you hope to achieve?

**SB:** I've done four books. One is a children's book. It interprets Greek texts for middle and high school students, which is pretty sophisticated. The editors and publisher didn't bother to read it. We talked about homosexuality in Greek culture and about misogyny. They never came down with a need to change anything. So that was one. Another book is on German Jews. I mentioned that earlier. The last book was on meaning and the Holocaust. That was based on the survivor interviews, although not exclusively. That's probably what I'm going to try to do when I take my sabbatical next semester. I do a lot with oral history, although I do try to use documents if I can. I tend to distrust oral history by itself. It's not that anybody's lying, but oral history is not as good as historical documents. Some support from written resource is standard. I'm very careful with choice of words. I think that words don't have as much importance anymore and I think that they should. I guess this comes from studying about psychoanalysis because every word is carefully selected. And it also has to do with listening. So I'm a slow writer. I can write things in a hurry and then I go back over some things fifty times. I'll keep going back and changing it one word after another. So that's my approach to writing -- very cautious and meticulous.

**SB:** A number of years ago I was having difficulty with depression. The therapist said, "You expected to interview Holocaust survivors for 20 years and not get depressed?" In

one of the sessions, I called my father a “survivor.” And all of a sudden, the therapist just looked at me and said, “Did you hear what you said?” He reminded me that I really didn’t know that much about my father. His suggestion was I was trying to find out through survivors more about him. There is clearly that personal dimension. The Voice/Vision web site [<http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/>] that we’ve set up has over three hundred interviews, about 80 of them on-line. We get a million hits a year from people all over, Saudi Arabia, Israel, England, all over Europe, all across the United States. The average stay is 20 minutes. So as a rule, there is great curiosity just to know about personal history and how it fits into contemporary life.

**RS:** I’ll tell you what I think. I think we are priests. Our profession grew out of the priesthood, and you and I are priests. We are trying to save souls. We are not just doing abstract academic research. You and I have not dedicated our careers to exchanges with other scholars. We exchange with our students and with a broader audience. Of course, we want our colleagues to respect our work, but that is not what we are doing.

**SB:** And we’re unabashed about it, although I spend a good portion of the Holocaust class trying to be as objective as possible, not getting emotionally involved. All of our educational programs are done with survivor excerpts. I deliberately try to avoid the tears and the breakdowns so often associated with that history.

**RS:** Which would be easy, given the stories.

**SB:** Fifty percent is an academic project, but the other 50% is not. It’s a human exploration. I don’t claim that I’m good friends with the survivors but I know them, and have relationships with them.

**RS:** Let me ask you about the Honors Program. You founded this program. You’re the godfather of it. Just this summer I organized a group of immigrant students to write letters to their great-grandchildren telling them about their immigrant experience and the process of adjusting to American society. Two of them from non-Western countries said that the Honors Program played a major role in helping them understand the Western way of thinking. They felt that Honors had helped make them successful in this country.

This program focuses on reading classic texts, which I realize is out of vogue these days. What thoughts do you have about this program and what is it trying to do? How did you create it?

**SB:** Well, it’s ironic. When I was at Hobart I was working with some of the brightest intellectuals in the country. *Everybody* at Hobart, every discipline, taught in the Western Civilization program. It was the required course for all Hobart students. I came with seven young faculty members who were all rebels. We created a counter-culture course to tear apart the Western Civilization program, because we didn’t think it should be required. We were reading everything from Marx to Theodore Roszak, Albert Memmi to Freud, Norman O. Brown to Herbert Marcuse, Simone DeBouvoir to Emma Goldman, LeRoy Jones to Bobby Seale. It was a wild time and one that prepared me for teaching about both western culture and the counter-culture. Then I came here with the express

mission to create a Western Civilization program. It was a new curriculum and it was supposed to be interdisciplinary. It was going to be a staff of eight people of different disciplines. But by the time I got here, it had been reduced to one year instead of two years, and the staff was cut in half. We had a mathematician; we had people from the humanities; people from social sciences. The idea was to try to get students to think analytically and critically and not take anything for granted, including and especially Western civilization. When we read Plato, I tear him apart. He's misogynist, I think he's overly competitive, I think he's got authoritarian strains that are scary sometimes. That's the approach we take when we look at the Greeks. We take the same approach with the Bible in the first course. So it's a critical approach to the West. Our approach is, "Look at how provincial it is, but here's how we can think about it." That's how every one of these courses is supposed to go. The specific content is secondary to that. They're all methods courses. And when the university curriculum fell apart, it seemed that there needed to be a place where students could still do that. There was a nominal honors program, but there was no program, no curriculum. There was just a bunch of students and they could take a course and say, "Here's my honors course." Then Gene Grewe, the Dean, asked me to head the Honors Program. I said, sure, and applied because he asked me to do it. So that's how we got started. It was a long time before it really started to click, and it clicked because we got people like Gerry Moran and you teaching tutorials, and Michael Rosano. We got good faculty who came in and were dedicated to helping. We used to admit 30 students per year and then the Dean and the Provost wanted to grow it. So now we take in 80 and that I think is far too many.

**RS:** How can you possibly have a discussion-based class with so many students?

**SB:** Well, with 80 students a year, if we have five sections of each course, we have 15 students in each section. On the other hand, we're now struggling over what the enrollment cap for sections should be. The Dean wants to raise the cap to 20 or 25 and that would defeat the purpose of the program. And there used to be team-taught courses. It's going to be done one more time, next semester. Then it's over unless we can rally the troops. The faculty are very upset about that, and the alumni are very upset. The two things they remember the most are the class sizes and the team-teaching, and to have them go away... Anyway, that's what the program is supposed to be. It's very laid back but very intense. It involves a lot of writing. The "propaganda" is we want to help students think better and write better. Ninety percent of the time there's demonstrable evidence to show that after a year, the quality of the writing is up by a quantum amount. So I'm generally pretty pleased with the way it's gone. But it's more than just Western thinking. I've been through the culture wars a few times actually, and I think for the time being people are going to be satisfied. So that's the honors program.

**RS:** You have mentioned Voice and Vision, your holocaust survivor interview project, but could you say more about it? How did it get started? What are you hoping to do with it? You've interviewed over 160 people.

**SB:** We have 300.

**RS:** You did 160 and other people did those others?

**SB:** About 200 were mine, probably more.

**RS:** So what got you involved in these interviews? This has taken a couple of decades.

**SB:** More.

**RS:** It's not easy for you psychologically, and it's not easy to get these people to talk.

**SB:** It's easier now. In the beginning nobody would talk. They were suspicious. "What are you doing this for? Who are you anyway?" One man at the end of the interview said, "Why are you doing this? You're not Jewish." I said, "Nobody ever said that to me before." We wound up doing 19 hours of interviewing.

**RS:** With one person?

**SB:** With one person. I had to interview three people for my dissertation, German Jews. I hated doing this kind of stuff, but I thought I should. After that television mini-series, *The Holocaust*, I taught a course on the Holocaust, about which I knew very little. This was 1978. People kept calling me to talk on the subject, even though I was a critic of the program. Then somebody called and said, "We want you on this committee on Holocaust Education." A group of survivors was trying to create a Holocaust Memorial Center in West Bloomfield. I was invited to represent the Workmen's Circle on that committee. I said, "Sure. I'll be glad to help." So I went to this meeting and met Dr. John Manes, a survivor. We met at John's house. The meeting was supposed to start at 7:30, so 7:30 comes then a quarter to 8. We had what became a tradition, a *l'chaim*.

**RS:** A toast.

**SB:** Yes, a toast. He would give me a glass of schnapps of some sort. So I said, "Who else is coming?" He said, "Oh. Nobody else is coming." I said, "It's just you and me?" He said, "It's actually just you," because he wasn't going to do any interviews. He said, "I'll call them and I'll set the meetings up for you, but we don't have any volunteers." So I said ok, and a couple weeks later I did three interviews in one week, which is completely crazy. So that's how it started. I just got into it. We tried volunteer interviewers who lasted a couple months and then they didn't want to do it anymore. So I continued. At first the survivors were skeptical. Why shouldn't they be? But gradually they became like family to my family, attending my children's bar and bat mitzvahs, their concerts (both are professional string musicians) and eventually my daughter's wedding. We, in turn, attended similar occasions as well as holiday dinners, Passover seders, and even joined a synagogue because many of them belonged to the congregation.

**RS:** So this was linked to the Holocaust Memorial Center?



**SB:** We had originally planned to have a cooperative relationship with the Center but because of differences of opinion between the Director of that Center and me about how to use the material, we decided to bring the project here. The issues were whether the interviews should be allowed out of the building, whether we should let students come and listen to them. If you're not going to let them listen, what are you doing this for? Just to stick them in a vault? For a couple years we gave the Center copies of whatever we had. Now we give copies to the Holocaust Center in Washington, D. C. Basically I wanted to have it here where we could do a professional job. We moved the project to campus in 1983 after two years of interviewing. We started doing videotape interviews and the university began to provide unbelievable support: studio time, tapes, financial assistance and intellectual and moral support. The administration and faculty colleagues rushed to corroborate the work and eventually, in 1994, we founded the Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive. The website receives about a million "hits" a year from all over the world. We get hundreds of inquiries from researchers, students and scholars like Christopher Browning who visited our campus after using numerous interviews for his last book. When he was here, he met the survivors and talked with them as a group.

**RS:** You're going to Israel in a couple months to do even more interviews, aren't you?

**SB:** One month. There's a special group who were rescued by a British man who saved almost 700 Czech Jewish children before the war started and a dozen or so live in Israel.

**RS:** Changing topics, we both did a curriculum unit. Your focus is on teaching the Holocaust. What were you hoping to achieve with your unit? And what do you think your unit contributes that had not been previously available? Do you have any pedagogical techniques that you use to help students understand the process that you're trying to study?

**SB:** The unit has 18 lessons, although it can be broken up to smaller amounts. There were three of us who co-authored it. One is a high school teacher who contributed some pedagogical techniques. The other was the director of social studies curriculum in Oakland County schools and he proofed it. Then I was responsible for the content. We didn't think anybody was going to take 18 days in a world history course for it. In a course like that, they go from the big bang to the day before yesterday in one semester.

We decided to use videotapes. One of the benefits of using the videotape is that it personalizes the history. I mean, there's history with the capital H, the history of the Holocaust, and history with a small h, which is really memory. When a 15-year-old kid in a classroom hears a survivor on the videotape say, "I was 15 years old when I got off the train to Auschwitz," there's usually some sort of a connection and they're drawn into this personal story of a real person. So I think that's useful to be able to use those testimonies, although I don't think you can get a history of the Holocaust from survivor testimony. You can get that person's experience and frequently a student will know more about the history of the Holocaust than a survivor will, because they only know what's happening around them, which is more than enough. It takes forever to communicate that. But you can get a sense of what life was like before, how it was disrupted, what the

impact has been long term, for example for the raising of their children, things like that. No written sources can communicate that the way an oral conversation does.

What I hoped to do with this was to bring a professionalism into the high schools. High schools don't teach about the Holocaust. They watch the *Diary of Anne Frank*, or they read it, or they watch some movie. We found when we did an impromptu examination of high school history textbooks, that the average textbook had 70 words on the Holocaust or on World War II. Everybody claimed it was too difficult to talk about the ubiquitous complicity of Europe – not just Germany. It involved the bureaucrats, the architects, the police, whatever. I think that it's possible to do that in high schools. And that's what I hoped to do. So I went to primary source material, Nuremberg trial records, and documents from companies, like the company that made the crematoria. Those records are astonishing. The crematoria were used so much that there were cracks in the chimneys, so they had to bring in engineers to fix the cracks in the chimneys. And they explained how they did that. They were witnesses in the trials. They were not on trial.

**RS:** This sounds very technical, very different from the typical high school class.

**SB:** The problem with teaching about a business or a history of bureaucracy is that it can be boring. And I think the survivor testimonies mediate that kind of boredom. On the other hand, when you find out somebody was calculating exactly how much the SS had to pay the railroad companies to send 6,000 Jews to Treblinka, you learn something. The fare depended on how old the people were. Children under 12 went for half fare, children under 4 for free. That means every person on the train had a name, an age, where they're from, what their occupation was, whether or not they could be used for labor. Somebody had to keep all those records and somebody had to do the calculation of how much money it would cost. No money, no trains. Of course, the SS took the money from the Jewish community and paid the railroad companies. They made a fortune. And it didn't get in the way at all of the war. It didn't interfere at all. It's one of the reasons those trains took so long. Every train had a priority assigned to it. If it was a war material train, it took first priority. If it was a harvest train or a passenger train, it got second priority. Jewish trains had no priority. So if there were two trains coming at the same time and they arrive at the same crossing, the Jewish train had to get shunted aside and wait for three or four hours. They were dying of starvation and thirst and disease and they had to wait. If there's a second train coming in ten minutes, they had to wait another few hours. I don't even think there's any anti-Semitism involved. It's just strictly bureaucratic procedure.

**RS:** Are students capable of understanding this? These are young kids, 16 or 17.

**SB:** We had really good feedback. It was one of the National Diffusion Network preferred curricula, so people were using it all over the country. The material is set up so that it's fairly easy, straightforward and understandable. But that's what I hoped to do. Instead of saying, "Here are these monsters. Here's Hitler. He hypnotized the whole nation." None of that is accurate. Hitler was necessary but not sufficient. There were 12 million civilians involved in one way or another. That's what I wanted to do, to make that point, and for the most part I think it works. There's a mock trial of a doctor based

on three doctors' trials. The testimonies come right out of them. There's one doctor who's a witness and when he's asked about Dr. Mengele, he said, "Oh, I think he's a good physician. He was a conscientious doctor. He did his job." This is a doctor who refused to do any experiments and refused to work the platform to separate people. But he was a doctor and he thought Mengele was an ok guy. I just don't get it. Anyway, that was the curriculum. At this point, it's out of print.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Jews and Anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and Israel**

**RS:** Throughout history Jews have always had difficulties wherever they were. How do you explain that and what insights do you have on that?

**SB:** Let me throw out an historical perspective. I think an initial enmity toward Jews started around the fourth century A.D. There was lots of conflict and warfare in the ancient Middle East, but it's not just the Jews who are getting pounded on in warfare.

**RS:** They weren't being singled out.

**SB:** They weren't singled out. There were conflicts between empires. But by the fourth century it's a religious question. Part of it has to do with vying for converts between Christianity and Judaism. That was a big thing in Alexandria, for example. Jews were worried about losing people from the flock, Christians were worried about the new religion dying out. For some at least, Jesus had said don't go to anybody but the Jews. Be sure to get the Jews. So it starts out as a religious thing, I think, and then it becomes a kind of cultural problem. So now we've got Jews in the Roman Empire who are alien. They dress differently, they speak differently, they pray on the wrong day, they have this unusual worship that most of the host country is not comfortable with. They eat differently, they eat separately, they're isolated. It grows worse because of the economic situation. They're forbidden from taking part in a vast array of professions. They can't join the guilds. They can't own land. So it becomes a kind of separate entity and there's a kind of mythology that grows up along with it. Because they're isolated – obviously this is much too simplified – they become mysterious, and as a function of being mysterious they become conspiratorial and dangerous. That mythology is fostered by some churches, not all.

**RS:** How did that work, the role of the churches?

**SB:** One of the times I was in Germany I remember walking into a cathedral in Cologne, a beautiful cathedral, and looking at some of the stained glass windows with paintings of the crucifixion and resurrection. I thought, if I was an illiterate peasant, I would walk out saying, "find me Jews to kill because they killed our Lord and look at how awful it was." By the time it gets to be the early modern period, where the culture becomes more secularized, if Jews become assimilated, they're taken into the culture. They become Germans, for example. They're the most assimilated Jews in the world, German Jews. That's around the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They come flocking in from the

east because they're running from Cossacks. Then I think the nineteenth century is sort of the final, lethal piece in this puzzle because Jews are considered to be a race. Once you become identified as a race, there's nothing you can do. You can't convert. In the Middle Ages, if you converted you were fine. You could become a priest. You could become a bishop. In the secular period if you took on the trappings of what it meant to be a citizen of that particular nationality, you were accepted. But if you're a race, there's nothing you can do about it. It's like blue eyes and blonde hair. You can't change. So the logic in the nineteenth century is kind of pseudo-scientific. The only thing you can do if you want to get rid of people is to kill them. By this time a mythology has grown up. It moved from conspiratorial groups to international conspiratorial groups – *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example. And there's a sexual theme that comes into play. When it becomes racial, people fear that Jews are going to pollute the race, the so-called "Aryan" race. The elements of the Holocaust are sort of ideologically fixed in the nineteenth century. That doesn't mean there's going to be a Holocaust. There's nothing inevitable about it. The practical aspect of it seems out of the question. How are you going to kill all the Jews in the world? Nobody can imagine or dream about it. Even Hitler couldn't imagine that. But the logic is there. Himmler is reported to have said, "If you have lice in your house, you don't invite them next door." In other words, you kill them. So that's how I think it sort of develops historically.

**RS:** Where did that racial idea come from? Do you have any idea? Because it's not found earlier, or is it?

**SB:** Well, you frequently hear Jews called a "race," but nobody knows what a "race" is. I think it substitutes for a nation, or people. This new way of thinking starts around the mid-nineteenth century, and in different countries. Houston Stewart Chamberlain is English. Count Gobineau is French. There are a number of German theorists. Germany was the most enlightened of the Enlightenment countries (although it wasn't a country yet). Oddly enough, they're the least anti-Semitic because people like Kant and Lessing, and Schiller were the source of the Enlightenment, Enlightenment thinkers.

**RS:** We have a colleague – this makes me feel very uneasy – who says that the Holocaust is byproduct of the Enlightenment, that where you had more conservative religious thinking, they viewed Jews in terms of religion, not in terms of race. This is not a marginal theory, as far as I can tell. There are a lot of people who feel that it grew out of this process of rationalization. As someone who identifies very much with the Enlightenment, I don't like this conclusion, but I wonder what you think of it?

**SB:** I think there's some truth to that. From the Enlightenment you get objective thinking, scientific thinking, bureaucratic thinking. Bureaucracy's a great thing. It's what makes us more efficient and in some ways more progressively advanced than pre-civilized primitive culture. Where would we be without bureaucracy? We wouldn't be here. But it can be taken to an extreme. When an objective way of thinking about the world becomes inclusive of human beings like Jews, then it can be a problem. When you apply bureaucratic rules like, "keep your private life separate from your professional

life,” don’t get the two mixed up and be sure that everything is done according to the rules, don’t step outside your own purview, you’re an expert on what you do, don’t worry about the next office. Trains are on time, whatever. I think then we get into trouble. There are a number of really good books that make that case and it goes back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which I think is more intelligent than saying it’s got roots in religion. I mean, Luther didn’t help, but...

**RS:** He was a pre-Enlightenment thinker. He had *religious* hostilities.

**SB:** His work on *The Jews and Their Lies* is a very careful scholarly analysis of segments of the Torah, where he takes the language apart and reinterprets it to say Jews have lost their connection with God. That’s why they’re going to be punished and if you see one you know you’ve met the devil, and all that. It’s a religious tract. It shows his considerable learning in theology.

**RS:** You are being very kind. It may be scholarly but it’s also a nasty piece of work.

**SB:** But it certainly is not in any way connected with the bureaucratic aspect of what happened. But the Holocaust managed to avoid it in some respects. Some 12 million civilians were involved. These were not only party members, not in Nazi uniforms, who were involved in one way or another. So I think it’s got a long history. It’s completely irrational and not a little flash in the historical pan. It’s gone on for fifteen hundred years or more and it’s led to some terrible, terrible events. So you wonder how a whole continent of people could... I mean, Germany was the most literate country in the world at the time, so you wonder how they could be caught up in this sort of absurd series of legends. I once was in Canada doing a series of workshops on teaching the Holocaust. I had somebody come up after six hours of lecture. He’s walking around me while other people are asking questions and he said, “do you have horns?” I thought, “It’s a joke.”

**RS:** But it was not a joke.

**SB:** It was not a joke. He had come from some frontier area in Canada, was now living in Brunswick and had been taught that Jews had horns.

**RS:** Amazing.

**SB:** And I said, “I have a good barber.” (Laughs).

**RS:** What else could you say?

**SB:** Ultimately, it’s completely irrational and it’s really disturbing because of that. You can’t argue with somebody about it, if somebody’s diehard. Anti-Semitism is a misnomer because it implies that there’s a “Semitism,” that there are “Semites,” which could include Arabs as well as Jews. It’s anti-Jewish. It’s a problem of how you define a Jew. This problem has bothered two groups more than others. The Nazis couldn’t figure out a definition, and the Jews can’t figure out a definition. You ask two Jews to tell you

what a Jew is, they can't agree. It's not a fact. It's an opinion, how you define a Jew. But it's anti-Jewish, not anti-Semitism. I remember a couple of experiences when I was in high school, anti-Jewish encounters. They were never violent, although one came close. Some guy gave me a ride when I was hitchhiking and he pulled up to this parking lot and there was a bunch of hoodlums. One of them came over and he said, "So you picked up a kike." I was really taken aback and the driver said, "I'm just going to drop him off." That was it. That was the most vivid for me, because I was scared then.

**RS:** It came out of nowhere.

**SB:** Just out of nowhere.

**RS:** How old were you?

**SB:** I was 15.

**RS:** Back when people used to hitchhike.

**SB:** When it was safe.

**RS:** Yes, exactly. I did it myself.

**SB:** That was the closest I've ever come to anything violent. As I said earlier, we grew up in an integrated high school. I would think maybe 30% of the students were Jewish, maybe 30% or more were Black. The minority students were white, Anglo-Saxon, Italian. Again, there were 3,000 students. My kids used to experience it and they never told us. We used to hear about it on parent-teacher night.

**RS:** What kind of experience?

**SB:** Name-calling.

**RS:** They were trying to protect you.

**SB:** Yes.

**RS:** I've heard this before, children trying to protect their parents.

**SB:** When they were in elementary school. I don't think it was in high school, but I don't know. I suppose I should ask them.

**RS:** I was in the German Jewish Museum in Berlin a few years ago. It's a wonderful museum. There's an anecdote on display. Hannah Arendt's husband came home and said, "The Nazis are making threatening comments about the Jews but we don't have to worry because this would be totally irrational. The costs – diplomatic, economic, political -- would be enormous and no one would ever be willing to pay those costs." She

said, “You’re absolutely wrong,” which is interesting because this happened early on, well before anything bad beyond legal regulations and harassment. I think this is your point, that this doesn’t make sense. It is not a rational thing. There’s something beyond that. I find the Holocaust beyond comprehension. I recently read Ron Rosenbaum’s book, *Explaining Hitler*, in which he discusses the various writers, mostly Jewish, who have tried to explain exactly why the Holocaust took place. The only one that makes sense to me is the “No Hitler, No Holocaust” argument of Milton Himmelfarb. His political views are not mine, but he has convinced me on this point.

**SB:** I would just add that Hitler was necessary but not sufficient. If it was just Hitler, it wouldn’t have been enough. You had to have an enormous administrative system.

**RS:** Someone said that if you had put a person to sleep and awakened them 20 years later and told them what happened, they would have said, “Those damn French. They would do anything.” Germany was the last place where you would expect such a thing.

**SB:** I interviewed some German Jews and they still can’t believe it, long after the horror. But most of them don’t go back to Germany. With the French it’s got something to do with the Dreyfus case. There’s a long history in France, and less of such a history in Germany. It’s unthinkable to think about street violence in Germany. Even when the Nazis were in power there wasn’t street violence because the Germans wouldn’t tolerate it. If you followed the law, and the law says “the Jews have to go,” that’s one thing. But if you just walk around the street beating up German Jews, that’s not good. *Kristalnacht* lost support from the Germans because there was a public display of violence.

**RS:** Lenin once said that the German workers would never take over a train station unless they had bought tickets. (Both laugh).

**SB:** I altogether agree. That’s what makes the Holocaust different from other mass murders and genocide and that’s what it has in common with Rwanda. It’s very organized. Large parts of the society were involved in the killing, either that or turned their backs. People were either too afraid or too indifferent to interfere and there was an ideological goal to kill the whole population. Those are the three unique aspects of the Holocaust that differs, say, from the Armenian genocide. There wasn’t such a clear, systematic approach with the Armenians, or the Indians of Central American for example. That was also kind of randomized. But this was carefully planned and I think that’s what makes Rwanda so scary. Yes, that’s pretty much it.

**RS:** I just finished a biography of John L. Lewis by Saul Alinsky. Lewis considered him anti-labor. During the Flint sit-in strike in 1937, which was organized by the UMW, Coughlin sounded like a GM spokesman. He may have been pro-worker in the sense of Mussolini, but he was anti-union, which to a worker means anti-labor. He may have been influenced by the 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of Leo XIII, which called for Catholic leaders to protect the workers and even create unions, but not worker-controlled unions. I have my students read that encyclical in my course on Religion and Politics so it’s fresh

in my mind. It is a very significant document. It led to Dorothy Day and the Catholic worker movement, but by logic it was paternalistically pro-worker, not pro-union.

**SB:** 1937 was later. He had turned against Roosevelt and shifted to the right at that point, so it's possible we are both right on this issue. A prominent Jewish judge whom you know said that when he was a kid his father drove him up to Coughlin's Triangle Tower. This was at night. He took him over to the tower and there were the Ten Commandments, *in Hebrew*. He looked at him and said, "How can he be anti-Semitic? It's got Hebrew on the Tower." The father used to give money to Coughlin.

**RS:** Amazing. I wonder if those Commandments are still there.

**SB:** The Tower's still there. Now they have Holocaust memorials in that church.

**SB:** Your mention of your first awareness of the Holocaust got me thinking. I have very vague recollections of when I first heard about it. We have no personal stories but many years ago my mother said that they used to send packages to family members in Poland. They would get letters back until 1943, and then they stopped. But that's it. Nobody ever talked about it in my house. I never read about it in high school. Even in college I don't think I had a course that even touched on the Holocaust.

**RS:** There were no courses when we were students.

**SB:** Western Civilization courses might throw something in, but nothing very significant. I was a graduate student when I started to learn about it. Again, it was Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. This was 1966. Eichmann's trial had been in 1961. The book was published in 1965. I still have my copy with notes in the margins. I won't give it up.

**RS:** Is this what led you to create your Holocaust course? That was not your original area of expertise.

**SB:** That course was started in part because that awful television show, *Holocaust*. Media people were calling the university asking for someone to talk about the Holocaust and there was nobody else around.

**RS:** You must know that for many people that program was powerful and moving.

**SB:** Yes. A hundred million people watched it. One of our retired colleagues, Rick Axom, identified the sets as the same sets they used in soap operas. That's what it was to me. It was like a soap opera. I mean, one family is in all these major places? And when Meryl Streep, who is a wonderful actress, goes to the gate at Dachau and knocks on it and wants to get in because she wants to become a prisoner, that's ridiculous. I think Topol was in it and all I can think of is Topol was in *Fiddler on the Roof*. It was a trivialization. I was a critic.



**RS:** I know you've been very critical of badly trained interviewers and of Holocaust tourism or whatever you call it, people who seem trivialize it in their research.

**SB:** All of a sudden, there are media presentations. There are movies getting academy awards, and best selling books. I remember going to see *Schindler's List*. I thought it was a very good movie, but I'm not sure it was about the Holocaust. It was a very entertaining, very uplifting movie. You walk out of the movie and you feel wonderful, these people putting stones on his tombstone. It was great. But when I teach my course, if somebody walks out with a smile on their face I think I've done something wrong. I remember we were sitting behind some people who were saying that there were more Armenians killed in the genocide in Turkey than Jews killed in the Holocaust. As we walked out, I asked them, "How do you know that?" "Well, it says so in the Holocaust Memorial Center." But the Center doesn't say that, so that was a mistake. So we watched the movie and I thought to myself, "Those people still think what they thought when they started out."

**RS:** It didn't change them in any way.

**SB:** Not at all. They learned about 1,200 people who were rescued and they didn't learn anything significant about the 5,000 Cracow Jews who weren't. It's easier to get the information through a story about a hero and a rescue than it is through books or interviews. But that's not it, that's not what it was. If people want to do interviews they need to do some research. It'd be nice to know where Europe is and where Warsaw is. It'd be nice to know a little bit about the experience in Auschwitz. When I go into interviews I take a street map. It's the details that are important. The interview projects, most of them, don't do that. They just take these people and throw them into the room. I worked with this quite famous group, and we were supposed to do an interview with a survivor. There were ten people in the room and each one was given ten minutes to do it. It was a hidden child. I introduced the woman and we had talked at lunch and none of them knew what a hidden child was.

**RS:** Ten people, and not a one knew.

**SB:** Not a one knew.

**RS:** So they had not been prepared.

**SB:** Not a thing. They had her name. They knew where she was from. But half of them didn't know where Hungary was. So I did the interview. I was supposed to sit behind her and instead I got next to her. That upset the people who were running the training. I said, "You can't do this. This isn't right. You can't put them in this situation." It's hard for survivors and to add to the difficulty by being completely ignorant just supports what they think about Americans, that they don't know what they're talking about so why should they want to listen. I'm worried about the Americanization of the Holocaust. It reduces it. *Schindler's List* was a good movie. It was entertaining. But understanding the Holocaust is not entertainment. In many respects it's boring. You have to get down into

the nitty gritty. But that's what it was about. If people want to know how it happened, then they have to know the nitty gritty.

**RS:** You mentioned that you began to teach your Holocaust course after that television program. That's a big project, developing a course.

**SB:** Well, it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. I was teaching the course before I was doing interviews. I remember putting the course together. I spent weeks reading the Nuremberg Trial accounts. I thought it was crazy. The most troubling thing is that the course always enrolls over 40 students and I always wonder why they're there. [Note: 40 is the standard room size]. I mean, I *get* the Jews in the class – all three Jews, there aren't that many. There will usually be a half dozen Muslim students and the rest are just traditional students. I always walk in and think I'm going to see somebody with jack boots and a swastika. I've had the jack boots, the people in military garb. They take the course because they think it's going to be a military history course. But I've never had a Holocaust denier. One student was very upset, a German student whose grandfather had been imprisoned by the Russians until the late 1950s. She happened to say that her grandfather came home and said it was the Jews who kept him in prison and her whole family knew that it was the Jews. There was an older Jewish woman in the class and she just erupted and chewed her out. The German just got up and ran out in tears. She never came back. That was awful.

**SB:** Another thing, I had a Yemenite student. She said, "What do you do when a friend of yours says, 'Why are you taking this course if you don't have to?'" I said, "What did you answer?" She said, "Well, I showed her all the books. I told her what was going on. I told her what we were learning and she wouldn't listen because she had this web site that she kept going to." I told the student, "Well you can't fight with this. It's not going to go anywhere." The same student went to the Holocaust Center here. She took notes and she found all these mistakes.

**RS:** Based on your class and the reading.

**SB:** Yes. I said, "What did you do?" She said, "Well, I thought that given who I am it would not have been a good idea to have any criticism."

**RS:** To point out that these numbers are wrong, this date is wrong.

**SB:** So she didn't. But I thought that was great.

**RS:** You always have Muslim students. What have you found about those students?

**SB:** They're probably a self-selecting group. In the most interesting class I had, three students waited until after class before they brought this up. The last book we read talks about superfluous populations and stateless people. Their question – this is many years ago – was about the Palestinian situation. Of course, there's no plan to kill them or exterminate them. But yes, they are a stateless people. Somebody sees them as

superfluous, either Israeli Jews or other Arab nationals who won't allow them into their countries. Somebody sees them that way, but the state position was the main point. That was one in which we had several weeks of conversation.

**RS:** Those students trusted you enough to ask that question. I have a lot of Arab students, born in this country, very comfortable with their American identity, who want to play a role in public affairs. I tell them, "Take Professor Bolkosky's class." So I send some of my best students over to you.

**SB:** They've always been really great. In the Voice/Vision Archive we had a young Arab American woman as a student intern, Ayella. She is a covered Muslim. She was an ideal representative of the project, speaking on its behalf and doing extraordinary work with the tapes. I had one student long ago who over Spring break went back home to Lebanon and he took Elie Wiesel's book, *Night*. He said every night he would read it to his family. Everybody was very moved. I said, "Do they all speak English?" He said "No, I read it in Arabic." So I set him up with a correspondence with Elie Wiesel and it looked like he was going to translate it into Arabic. Wiesel was very excited. I don't think it ever happened, but they did have a correspondence. It was terrific. This young man made contact, and Wiesel was very gracious.

**RS:** What do you see as the link between the Holocaust and the creation of the Jewish state in 1948, the creation of Israel?

**SB:** I get really annoyed when people say something good came out of the Holocaust, the state of Israel for example, because nothing good came out of the Holocaust. I don't know a single survivor who would say, "If it meant the creation of the state of Israel, I would sacrifice my family." They wouldn't. There's nothing good related to the Holocaust. The two of them in my mind are not connected. I suppose there was international sympathy because of the Holocaust. That couldn't have hurt. But I think the state was coming whether the Holocaust occurred or not. The Holocaust ended in May 1945, so that's the end of the course and we don't discuss Israel. People like to make those connections.

**SB:** Everybody's trying to find meaning. You can't, or at least it's very difficult. There is no meaning at all. My last book was called *Searching for Meaning in the Holocaust*. I don't think there is any. We were talking before about how to approach the Holocaust. It's a very difficult topic. You and I probably teach the hardest courses in the university.

**RS:** I think so, yes.

**SB:** It's like a minefield. My approach is to always concentrate on the perpetrators. Three fourths of the class is on the perpetrators. There is little you can learn from the victims. You can learn about the irretrievable loss, and total, systematic, cold blooded indifference. But on the other side you have businessmen, bureaucrats, civil service people, doctors, workers, plumbers, teachers, construction engineers, the whole society, judges, lawyers, chemists. My approach is just to detail the careers of such people to see

how they fit into all this. Eichmann never literally killed anybody. He just made sure that many people got on the right trains to the death camps. They may not have even been anti-Semitic, but just following the routine rules of the company or their country.

**RS:** You make this point in your book: anti-Semitism doesn't explain what happened.

**SB:** Because for the Nazis it wasn't a religious issue. It was a racial issue. So that kind of anti-Semitism just does not explain it. Maybe 10% of the Germans were die-hard resisters and 10% die-hard Nazis, but the rest were just trying to get through the war one way or another. You need to examine the victims, but it doesn't produce the kind of the information that a document does. The memories are frequently flawed. They only know what their very narrow experience was. Maybe you can learn about some resilience, like choiceless choices. Every choice is a wrong choice. It's like *Sophie's Choice*, where she has to decide which child will die. The Holocaust was unprecedented. What makes it that way is the total involvement of society, the planning, the execution, carefully organized, administratively ordered. Raul Hillberg called it "the destruction process, the ongoing, total annihilation of the Jews."

**RS:** He's your favorite Holocaust scholar, isn't he?

**SB:** He was. He died about a year ago. He did not like to use testimony. He didn't trust it. I once had a correspondence with him and I said, the documents that he sort of worships are really people putting stuff down on paper. You can't question the document. You can raise questions about it, but you can't question a document. It is real. But you can question a person. I don't think this sort of thing has occurred anywhere else except maybe Rwanda. I don't like comparisons with other genocides or mass murder, they just don't work. To talk about Israel, they need to be disconnected. That's a very painful topic for me, as you know, I never talk about it. I've read accounts of nineteenth century collective visions in the *shtetl* when the nice people come running out of their houses and see Karl Marx in the sky and Marx tells them to go.

**RS:** He's Abraham calling them to the homeland.

**SB:** And they go. Can you imagine? It's like a Woody Allen movie. They went to found a socialist state. I've read of organizations like Organization for Retraining (ORT). They were retraining Jews and Arabs to become farmers, industrial workers, and it as always meant to be a joint process that Arabs and Jews would build the country together. This was the dream very early on. I think that the essence of the Jews who went in the beginning was that their Jewish identity was grounded in ethical values. They tended to be secular. I suppose ultimately some of it might derive from the Bible, but it's the secular aspects that they were looking for. Their focus was on secular issues, communal issues. I don't think any political entity exists that was not founded on violence. For me, it's a sad state. I think that Israel behaves like all the other states. It's difficult for me to trace the origin of Arab-Jewish hostility. I don't think it even matters anymore who fired the first shot. I think Jews need a state. I think Palestinians have the same need for the same kinds of reasons. It's a mystery to me how people are going to resolve it and that's

one of the reasons I just don't want to talk about it, it's so depressing to me. I'm very disturbed by the settlements to the point of literally pulling my hair, I just can't understand what rational people over there are doing. But I'm also disturbed by children who might be raised with a kind of demonic picture of Jews. I'm upset about the lack of concern for children on the one side and lack of concern for human life on the other. That's one of the reasons I'm still ambivalent about going on this research trip to Israel next month. Every place I look I'm afraid I'm going to be depressed. I won't talk about it with anybody. It's not just you. I won't discuss it with anybody.

**RS:** Let me ask you another question. This is a difficult question. By any objective assessment, the Jews of America are in a Golden Age. They identify very strongly with this land and with their role in it. But you studied the German Jews who were very similar. I remember once you said to me, "The German Jews loved Germany as much and maybe more than the American Jews love America." I was stunned a few years ago when I had a Jewish leader talk to my class. A Black student had critiqued Israeli policy, and the speaker said to him, "You have absolute certainty that there will be Black people in this country in fifty years, but I cannot be certain that there will be Jews in this country in fifty years, and I have to save Israel for the sake of my children and grandchildren." I told that story to another class a couple of years ago, and one of my Jewish students said she was taught in Jewish school that it was "not if but when" the American Holocaust would occur. What is your thinking on this? Have you encountered these views?

**SB:** First of all, the Holocaust is very specific. It was planned. There was an organized structure to carry out the plan. It involved everything from the civil service to government to workers, and it was total. I really can't imagine something like that happening in the United States, not least of all because of the Constitution. America is not Germany. It's not the same. My mother used to say, "Never say things like that."

**RS:** Because you're inviting a problem.

**SB:** As soon as you say it, it'll happen. From an historical, sociological and political perspective it's just not feasible that there could be another Holocaust of that sort. I don't think it could happen to any group, but certainly not to Jewish Americans. I can't see it happening, even if there was a war. We haven't imprisoned Iraqis in this country, and I don't think that's going to happen. But in Orthodox Jewish schools, when they teach the Holocaust they teach that it was God's punishment.

**RS:** For secularization.

**SB:** For Zionism and for abandoning the commandments, which drives survivors up the wall, as it should. So I don't think that that's an accurate view of what Jewish kids are being taught. I have a special problem in teaching the Holocaust with some Jewish students. They come into class. They've learned about the Holocaust and they think they have it all down. So they don't read, and they come up with the idea that this is a function of anti-Semitism, and there's always been anti-Semitism, there always will be anti-Semitism and that's the end of it.

**SB:** I have some survivor friends that are extremely right wing. When I talked to them one day and some awful bombing had taken place in Israel, a massive strike of some sort, and there was Israeli retaliation, I cited something from the Bible which said that's not what you're supposed to be doing. Their response was, "Why do we have to have a different standard than every other state?" It's not a bad question, but my response is, "Because we're who we are."

## **Chapter Seven**

### **The University of Michigan-Dearborn**

**RS:** Why did you come here? What were your first impressions of the campus?

**SB:** I was teaching at Hobart and William Smith College in Geneva, New York and got a call from Peter Amman. I had been his teaching assistant at SUNY-Binghamton. He said, "Can you come give a talk? We're trying to find somebody to head up a Western Civilization program." They'd just instituted a new interdisciplinary curriculum. This was a Sunday night. I said, "Sure. When do I come?" He said, "Can you get here on Wednesday?" So I threw together a talk. I came here, gave a talk, did the twenty-minute, down-the-hall scene, meeting everyone. At the time, it was very exhilarating because I saw Bernie Klein and Don Anderson in Political Science, Fran Cousens in Sociology, Ed Sayles in Philosophy, then Don Proctor, a historian who was chairman of the Social Science Department. You saw somebody from a different discipline in every office in the same hallway. By the time I left that night, Peter said he thought they were going to offer me a job. I didn't hear for another three months but then I got the offer. What could be bad except it's in Dearborn? I can't go teach in Dearborn. It's got a terrible reputation because of its racist and anti-Semitic history.

**RS:** You were aware of that reputation?

**SB:** Oh yes. I was aware of that. But it was a job and I hadn't even started to look for another job yet. I had a year left on the other contract. So that's pretty much why I came here. I didn't think we were going to stay.

**RS:** What year was that?

**SB:** 1972.

**RS:** A year before I came. What made you stay? I was discouraged when I came here. Were you discouraged?

**SB:** Yes. I was discouraged because I didn't think it was a real university. There were no dorms, no housing. I liked my colleagues and I loved the job because it meant putting together a new curriculum with people from different departments, from math to humanities, and everybody was teaching together in the same courses. There were three

historians, somebody in philosophy, somebody in math, one person in literature and then eventually somebody in anthropology. It was lots of fun. We would sit in staff meetings every week and we would talk. Everybody was responsible for working up lesson plans for the rest of the staff on their own fields of expertise. So I did a thing on Nietzsche, for example. That was the first thing I did. Also on the Greeks. Somebody did something on Kafka. The odd thing was to be supervising Peter. That was unnerving because I had just been his graduate assistant and now all of a sudden he's under me.

**RS:** And Peter was a nationally prominent scholar.

**SB:** He was. So I liked the colleagues and the students as well. First course I taught was in the summer and that was a European Intellectual History course. I thought the students were as good as those at Hobart. They were all juniors and seniors. UM-Dearborn had started as an upper level transfer school for people coming out of community colleges. I think they started a four-year program the year I came here. I didn't have any freshmen. And they were very eager. So I wasn't terribly discouraged. But I still didn't think I was going to stay. I think the job got more interesting. My colleagues got more interesting. I was amazed at the kind of academic freedom we all had.

**RS:** We really were present at the creation, weren't we? We were starting from scratch. We were conceptualizing what a university was.

**SB:** I taught a course on the ancient Middle East. Students learned to read ancient Middle Kingdom Egyptian. I was carrying this huge book around – it cost \$15 at the time. Now it's \$160. You really have a hard time finding it. They had to learn the first eight lessons of this book, Gardner's *Ancient Egyptian Grammar*. It is what Freud used to learn hieroglyphics, and nobody said, "You can't teach this course because you don't have any background in this." So that was pretty much the general tone. You could do almost whatever you wanted. People trusted each other and if somebody wanted to teach a course on something they weren't an expert in, they were allowed to do it. Nobody said, "You can't do this." I really liked it. I decided to teach a course on *Finnegan's Wake* and I had no credentials to teach *Finnegan's Wake*. It made up for putting history in the Social Sciences instead of the Humanities. In my undergraduate and graduate work, history was the humanities. You just took that for granted. All of a sudden, it's in the Social Sciences, which means quantitative studies and all that.

**RS:** Was that good or bad?

**SB:** It didn't matter. I think the disciplines were randomly distributed in the departments to foster what was supposed to be an experimental campus. So instead of having sociology in the Social Sciences you had it in the Behavioral Sciences. It's in the wrong department, but nobody was really certain. Nobody said, "You can't do this because it's not statistical enough." So I used a lot of literature. I actually taught a history of psychoanalysis one year. That kind of freedom was one of the reasons I didn't start looking right away for another job.

**RS:** I have always thought I would like to teach a course called “Six Books I Read in the Last Year that Really Made Me Think.” I would love it and the students would probably learn from it. In the past, that probably would have been approved, but today probably not. That creativity was very much there.

**SB:** One conflict that I remember having was about fifteen years ago. Gerry Moran proposed a course for the Honors Program and there was one other faculty member who said, “I’d want to see more about this, a syllabus.” They want to see a reading list. They want to see a more in-depth proposal, and I went berserk.

**RS:** With Gerry, you should just say, “If Gerry wants to do it, then ok.” You know whatever it is, it’s going to be a great course.

**SB:** If Gerry wants to do a History of Broommaking, that’s fine with me. So I really lost my cool. I think that’s the only time that happened. I think we all have a history with each other and we really do trust each other in terms of our academic credentials. If Gerry or you or whoever wants to teach a tutorial or a course on whatever subject, it seems fine with me. In the past, it would have been easy to get a course like that approved. Now we have to go through the curriculum committee.

**SB:** In 1981, when I started to do the interviews with Holocaust survivors, immediately the university was supportive. To be frank, I was stunned. Studio time if we needed it. They came up with cash for tapes and tape recorders and it just got stronger and stronger. The project grew because the university gave the support that it had. I will forever be grateful for that. It came from the Provost, first Gene Arden, and then Robert Simpson, who became the Provost after Gene. Then eventually the support got stronger with Dan Little when he came. I think the administration sees it as the only connection this campus has with the Jewish community in the northwest suburbs. Whatever the reason, that support has been there from the beginning, right down to Greg Taylor, who is the engineer in the studio. He was a student when we started this and has been with the project since it began. Even now when we do an interview in the studio, he’s the person who runs the control room. I’m constantly amazed at how deep that support has been, just as I think the institution supported the Center for Arab American Studies, although that may have been more of a battle. Did you have any obstacles in your way? I was on the College Executive Committee some of this time, as you were. I think there were some stops and starts.

**SB:** Do you think it’s ironic that the two of us are doing this work in the same department in the same university? It’s almost like we do *this* for *them* and we do *that* for *them*. We’re an equal opportunity university.

**RS:** This is one reason why I thought you and I were perfect for these conversations. Our careers have been circling around some similar themes and issues, but in very different ways.



**SB:** Our two projects and the senior scholars program have done an awful lot for public relations for the university. That program allows retirees to take classes for a modest registration fee. I think there are over a hundred people in the program. I think you and I are two of their favorite professors.

**RS:** It gives us external visibility.

**SB:** Yes. People in *The Jewish News* get information from some of us. They have done stories featuring both of us. They know it's a wonderful place with great teachers. I wouldn't be surprised if somebody tried to get a feature piece on that program.

**RS:** Dearborn had a bad reputation. Henry Ford had a bad relationship with the Jewish community and Orville Hubbard had a bad relationship with the Black community. That had nothing to do with the university, but we got blamed for it. It took us a long time to work those things through, and there are still some residual bad feelings.

**SB:** I still know people who won't buy a Ford. They're pretty old by now, but still...

**SB:** In the 1970s I was riding with a senior Humanities colleague who went on at great length about how ridiculous it was to talk about women's history. They were just part of history. He thought it was an artificial distinction. As a junior faculty at the time, I thought, "I don't want to get into an argument with this person right now."

**RS:** You were not tenured. (Both laugh).

**SB:** He's since retired. We were on the cutting edge of this. We were right out front. We had Elaine Clark, Leslie Tentler, Norkio Kamachi. All were very dynamic and in some cases very controversial. They were wonderful scholars and wonderful teachers. What always surprised me was that we had these really good people that were here and for the most part they stayed here. I'm sure a number could have left. I had an offer at one point and I just wouldn't go. It was hard to pick up a family at that point. We had established roots in the academic, Jewish and non-Jewish community. It was flattering to get an offer but I didn't even give it a single thought.

**RS:** What about today? What are the problems facing the campus?

**SB:** Money. I think we're always concerned about compromising the standards of the admission program and a lot of faculty are concerned because they get discouraged in the classroom. Kids who can't write, don't speak, can't read with any sort of critical, analytical style. I worry about that. It's potentially a major problem.

**SB:** We have increased the number of scholarships. We may be one of the leading five universities in terms of the percentage of money we give to scholarships. But tuition has continued to creep up. Not as quickly as many other Michigan schools, but there it goes.

**SB:** I had federal loans for those going into teaching. We had ten years after the final degree to start to pay back. We would pay ten percent a year or something like that. It was a federal loan. I don't know that I could do it now.

**SB:** Do you think there's still a hangover from the Orville Hubbard days, that Blacks stay away from here because of the reputation of the campus?

**RS:** I think it's going to be very hard to overcome that, to make the campus welcoming to Black students. And Wayne State is in Detroit and is seen as very friendly to them.

**SB:** That is also true of Jews. Now for the Jewish community at least, we're perceived as the Arab campus. Jewish students automatically assume that this is a hostile environment. I think there's a terrific opportunity to make some inroads in that community, because if our tuition is creeping up, Ann Arbor's has grown in leaps and bounds and we could be the leading second choice of this region.

**SB:** The problems have been few, as far as I know. The campus needs to get the word out, that we are a welcoming environment.

**SB:** It's like a refrain every three or four years that comes back and it gets more intense each time. There's even been talk about alternative Honors programs, one for African-American culture, one for women. I respond, "Do whatever you want but don't come near *my* Honors program." If it ain't broke, don't fix it. You keep fixing it, of course, but that's not the problem.

**RS:** You and I spend a lot of time working with students. You have mentioned that. I have mentioned that. What are your experiences?

**SB:** Pretty good. Our previous chancellor funded a request to take two students as interns to the Social Science History Association Conference. He did it for two or three years and Dan Little has continued that. He's given us a little less money, but still.

**RS:** You take the students.

**SB:** Yes. They're required to attend the Holocaust sessions at this conference and a few other sessions, and to take care of audio-visual needs for the ICPSR in Ann Arbor [Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research]. That's always been a wonderful experience. Students get money to go to professional conferences and they make comments. Several years ago someone went up to our Chancellor and said, "You have great graduate students," because they had both made comments. Dan said, "Not only that but we have great *undergraduate* students." They were both undergraduates. So that's been a very positive experience. Working with Honors students has been great for the most part, although when something goes wrong – when there's a case of plagiarism or whatever – it's doubly discouraging. Generally, I've had good non-academic interactions with students. I have also had good experiences with independent studies, so many I can't count them anymore, and with very small classes occasionally. I

still maintain that we get some very good students here, although I think that we've eroded. As we've said before, I wonder where things are going to wind up because of tuition. For the most part I think our students are pretty sharp.

**SB:** I don't have anything quite so dramatic. Occasionally students come up with things we have never thought about, and that's always a pleasure. Now and then when I teach the course on the Holocaust we'll get a survivor and that's sometimes unnerving. They know experientially what I'm trying to talk about. Once we had a sort of confrontation over Hannah Arendt. There was a survivor in the class. For two weeks we talked about the book, and I said, "Everybody understands that her position on Eichmann was that he was not a monster. He was a kind of banal person." The survivor just exploded. "How can you say that he wasn't a monster?" He had sat there for two weeks and participated in the discussions, read the book, and then he just couldn't take it. He was from Czechoslovakia, which became Hungary, and Eichmann was responsible for sending him and his family to Auschwitz. I was completely taken aback because it came from what I thought was out of nowhere. I should have seen it coming. I mean, you could see his face getting red. Just as your Israeli-Palestinian conflict course has at least a Detroit-wide reputation, I think the course I teach on the Holocaust has a similar reputation, for better or for worse. Sometimes it gets to be a burdensome thing. Gabe performed at the Fair Lane recently and people were asking, "Are you Gabe's father?" I prefer that to "that strange Holocaust guy." I wish I were known as something else.

**SB:** You can make a sophisticated, intellectual argument all you want. It's not going to go much deeper than the surface.

**RS:** The reaction was visceral, not analytical. And our job is to make it analytical, to analyze, to put it into context, to give some historical perspective.

**SB:** In both of these cases it may be impossible.

**RS:** I think it may be. Some people just can't move beyond their fear and anger.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Reflections on Marriage, Family, and the Future**

**RS:** We both married our college sweethearts. Jane and I will celebrate our forty-fifth anniversary in two days, and you and Lori are not far behind. What observations do you have on marriage, parenting, any of those topics?

**SB:** Actually I knew Lori in nursery school, but we weren't sweethearts at the time. Lori and I started to date when we got out of high school and went to college. It was my illness that kept us together. I'm not sure we would have stayed together if it had not been for that. Everyday for six months she was in the hospital on a daily basis, staying by my bedside. I almost died. It was pretty awful. We went to college together, of course, and there didn't seem to be any question that we were going to get married. Then

we ran away. We had a wedding and I accepted an offer to Wayne State for a one-year scholarship to do a Master's degree. We got out of Rochester as quickly as we could and never went back. I couldn't possibly live there.

Lori's family came from Macedonia. They were descendants of Spanish Jews, or Sephardim. They spoke Ladino, a fifteenth century dialect of Spanish sprinkled with Hebrew. Her father's family located in or near Skopje and her mother's in Monastyr or Bitola. All this became part of Yugoslavia after World War I. For some reason, Rochester drew a large Sephardic population from Monastyr. When we were married, it seemed like a mixed marriage since Ashkenazic Jews [European] had little to do with the Sephardim. The two cultures differed in numerous ways, even in religious rituals and customs. A Sephardic service sounds like a mosque — the melodies in particular. The prayer books have a significant amount of Spanish, written in Hebrew script. It took years to overcome some of those differences. For example, Eastern European Jews name their children after dead relatives; Sephardim name after living relatives. A problem.



I think the biggest decision in our lives was to have children. Lori's the most natural of mothers that I ever met. We pretty much followed our instincts but she was caring, nurturing, maternal, all the things you're supposed to be as a mother. Both kids acknowledge that. Gabe once said that whenever there was a question about parenting, Lori and I would think of what my mother would do and do the opposite. That was our philosophy of parenting as far as he could tell and there's some truth to that, I think. Neither of us got really attentive, loving, parental guidance. That doesn't mean they didn't love us. They just were not capable as parents. I just followed Lori around and did whatever I was supposed to do. If we would leave the bedroom when Miriam, my oldest, was starting to cry, one of us would go back in the room and sit on the floor and read a book until she went to sleep. That's the extent to which we didn't want to upset our kids. Gabe once had a friend who said when he did something bad his father would hit him. Gabe said, "I've never been hit in my life by parents." His friend said, "What do they do to punish you?" He said, "They stop talking." So that's pretty much our household.

Subsequently and especially in the last seven or eight years, I had heart surgery and back surgery and Lori's been a phenomenal caregiver. She's literally saved my life at least twice, getting me to the hospital. At one point I was out cold and she called 9-11. But we've had a pretty strong bond since the time we were 17, which is a long time. We've been married 42 years. Not quite as long as you but we're catching up.

**RS:** Do you have any secrets to share with whoever reads this? Marry the right person, right? (Laughter).

**SB:** People used to think when Lori and I were in high school that we were brother and sister. We used to do our Latin homework together. The night we graduated, we had just completed our high school commencement ceremony. I was looking for her and she was looking for me and one of us turned around and the other one was there. So we gave each other a big hug and she started to cry. She was leaving for New York with her sister and brother-in-law and nephews and niece and that was the moment I think that we both knew. She was going to the University of Rochester, I was going to the University of Buffalo. We decided to go to the same university so we would not be separated. She was far smarter than I was and she still is. But the culture of the day got in the way.

**SB:** I think Jane and Lori both made the decision to stay home with the kids.

**RS:** Let me ask you, what would you like to be on your tombstone?

**SB:** I've thought about this a lot because of these conversations: "Mensch." It means a decent human being. But it has connotations of generosity and caring and all that. I think if there's a word on my tombstone, that'd be nice to have.

**SB:** I mentioned this earlier, that after years of trying to study this question to which I have devoted my career, I've never been able to see anything rational or reasonable in the whole issue. It has no logical basis in history, no basis in religion, no basis in cultural or social practice. It's just there like other forms of hatred or racism. It grows more and more disturbing as I get older. Like other things, when coupled with political and religious extremism, it gets more disturbing and dangerous. Both sides in the Middle East seem to me to have lost their humanity to some extent and their sense of what one Holocaust historian once called the sanctity of life, which I think I believe in. We know more and we know it faster. That makes me feel that things are getting worse. On the other hand, given that we each teach these very difficult subjects, history has always been a depressing, bloody mess, just more secretive and further away from us. It didn't get to us as fast. Word of mass murder in 1941 or 1942 took time to arrive and then seemed unbelievable until after the war. Maybe the capacity for mass destruction has grown more real and more imminent than ever before. Much of what I hold dearest – children, peace, community – what Marx called species consciousness, the treatment of humans as fellow creatures, seems to have slipped away or is in the process of disappearing. My work on the Holocaust has to do with objectification of both perpetrators and victims. If there's a reason to write the curriculum, it's the hope to prevent the creation of either of those categories. That the students, I hope, will not become victims and will not become perpetrators. I was very moved by the story of the two men you met on your trip to Israel who refused to dehumanize and objectify.

**RS:** We are about finished with this project. Do you have any final thoughts?

**SB:** I was reflecting on our conversations. First, I was a bit surprised at how similarly we feel about the Middle East conflict. I have very deep feelings about this, partly because of what I know about Jewish history and about my own Jewish identity. I don't believe

that my identity or history are defined by the Holocaust, although it certainly forms an integral part of both of those, but that's not all there is. More immediately there have been recent intensifications of anti-Semitism and racism. I think some on Arab web sites, but others from more traditional hate groups. They've taken the forms of old fashioned conspiracy theories that come from 200 years back. Some of them are updated, like the myth of the Jews staying away from the Trade Center on September 11. It occurred to me that Marilyn Rosenthal's son probably didn't get the e-mail that day. [Note: Marilyn Rosenthal was a faculty member at UM-D. Her son Josh was in the second tower when it collapsed. He had just helped some other people get onto an elevator and escape].

