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William Helmreich Oral History Collection

Interview with Bill Neufeld and Franka Neufeld July 25, 1989 RG-50.165*0084

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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Bill Neufeld and Franka Neufeld, conducted by William Helmreich on July 25, 1989 as research for his book *Against all odds: Holocaust survivors and the successful lives they made in America.* The interview was given to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on Oct. 30, 1992 and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

BILL NEUFELD AND FRANKA NEUFELD July 25, 1989

WH: You were born in what city?

BN: ...Zawnercie...

WH: You have brothers and sister?

BN: I have two brothers...they both made it. And one was in camp with me and one was during the war in Russia, the one who is still alive. Jonas, my brother, died—about 6 years ago...my brother had two by-passes, twice passes, and I had one by-pass...

WH: (Your parents) did not make it?

BN: No...they died in 1943 in Auschwitz.

WH: ...and your other brother?

BN: My other brother who is alive is here in Milwaukee, and we were in business together until about 5 years ago...

WH: You're not retired, you're still working?

BN: I am retired...I was in construction...we started in 1954, my brother and myself...

WH: When did you come to this country?

BN: October 24, 1949. Exactly...

WH: When you came...were you married?

BN: Yah, my daughter was born in Germany...1946 we got married...I was not in a DP camp, I was in a private...home.

WH: Did you think about going to Israel after the war?

BN: Of course! ...and why we didn't go? Because we chose the easy way out...it wasn't so good in Israel. We took the easy way out. Right or wrong, I feel pretty guilty about it. I really do. I speak out about being guilty and not going to Israel...I was speaking for a class, I do talk about Holocaust, and I was speaking in a class, I would say 95% are non-Jews, or more, in high school, and a kid asked me "After the war, you had a chance to go into Israel, why didn't you go to Israel,

and came to the United States?" And that's a pretty tough question to answer to non-Jewish kids. I told them straight—I took the easy way out, I was wrong. I think I was wrong. I thought I was going to come here five years and go to Israel. Once you get a taste of the good living, you don't want to go back. I took the e-a-s-y way out. This is a fact...I would say that 90%, I really mean that 90% of our survivors planned to go to Israel...not everybody's dream was to go to Israel...they had all the messages not to come because it's tough, it's hard, (inaudible) to fight, and, so they took the easy way out.

WH: ...Franka, where are you from?

FN: Lodz, Poland

WH: ...who sponsored you to come here?

BN The JOINT, HIAS

WH: How is it that you wound up here, in Milwaukee?

BN: I came with Wolherman on the same ship, accidentally, and I went with him. My brother came to St. Paul first, he came 6 weeks before I did... so I ask in New York to go to St. Paul, and I went to St. Paul...I stayed in St. Paul for 14 months...and I couldn't find a job.

WH: What was that like?

BN: I will tell you, the truth how it happened. I came by train from N.Y. to Chicago, Chicago – St. Paul. The people from the Jewish Family Service picked us up and treat us like children, like private relatives, they did the best I have known, any people, anybody can do. They picked us up, took us to the apartment, it was a small apartment...but it was with new linens, not expensive, cheap, and dishes, and – but new, and nice. They didn't have to do that.

WH: They put food in the refrigerator?

BN: They put food in the refrigerator, and they treat me like my mother would...they came, they cared. And they were there to take me in and say "here," and "this" and I couldn't speak, and they came from the Jewish Family Service and took me out to their place, and they took a lady because Sandy was here and I didn't have no clothes...so they took a lady, and I hear the lady say, "Take this young couple, and take—." I said, "I don't need anything! I will get—." "Treat them, go down to the story and buy something for the kid." She was 18 months old. So they did, that's why I am working for Federation or any kind of a Jewish cause, because I

think what the HIAS and the JOINT did, what the Jewish Family Service did, it's really indescribable. I think that they're doing a good job. Very nice. Really nice. They really cared. They had volunteers, they had people to teach you how to speak English, they cared....

WH: Without that you would have been lost?

BN: I don't know if I would have been lost or not. I would have find my way somehow because that's me. But at least they were there, pick me up, take me, they tried. They tried...

WH: When you say, "that's me," are you also saying that that's also in a way, how you were able to survive the war? I mean, your personality that you would give yourself--.

BN: ...right – we were survivors. We survived worst that that, we will survive, but it's so much easy, when you come to a city, Milwaukee, and you don't know anybody...and you have someone to take you around, to show you.

WH: So what kind of jobs were you looking for in St. Paul...?

BN: I did not have a trade. I was a kid. So I didn't have a trade....

WH: What year were you born?

BN: 1923...when I came over here I was 26, 27 years old...so when I came over here, and no real trade, we stayed 4 years in Germany doing nothing... so it was hard to get work...and people offered 75 cents an hour, not only a *greener*, - anybody for a dollar, dollar ten. This were the wages...so I know a landlord there who was a *alte greener*,[old newcomer] - and he had some apartment and he asked me along and help them a little bit, something, so I helped them...he painted, I painted...he give me 5 bucks a day and it's fine...I didn't know anything about painting or paper hanging, but I said, "If he can do it, I can do it." So I started off a little bit, but – for about 4 months I couldn't find no work. The JOINT supported me...."

WH: ...did you like have a group of people to hang around with when you first came here?

BN: Yah, we had all the *greeners* [newcomers].

WH: Did they all live in the same place, in the same area?

BN: Yah...

WH: Where did you meet?

BN: The park, or we had some meetings from the Jewish-...the New American Club.

FN: We were looking for each other...we didn't have no family so we--.

WH: No relatives anywhere?

FN: No

BN: Well, we – even right now, even as of today, we are feeling very comfortable...

Sure, I have other friends, but we do feel very comfortable, with your own people.

We speak Yiddish and you have fun with them.

WH: Of your 4 best friends now, are they all survivors?

BN: ...I would say two and two...

WH: Of your ten, fifteen best friends, you'd say the majority of them are survivors?

BN: Sure, of course...we travel together on vacations.

FN: There's one family we go – for 30 years already together...we make parties, dinner dances....

WH: ...Why did you come to Milwaukee?

BN: ...I ran out of place to go to work and my brother lived over here, so I came over here...so I found a job as a painter...and Wallerman came after me...

WH: ...when you go through something really terrible, and you actually make it, I think those people who make it together are bound closer together because of that.

BN: There's another little thing, (inaudible) you must not forget that Europe was a different kind of a life there. When we came over here, 30, 40 years ago....

Nobody knocked on somebody's door. And nobody called "I'm coming over."
You opened the door, "Good morning!" (inaudible) and "How are you?" And if I was sleeping, he came into my bedroom...(inaudible) we didn't have to call, there was nothing formal...this was way of European life, and now we became Americanized, we hate it because, you should call before, maybe somebody is there, and maybe he doesn't want me. Before, we never thought of this. You

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just went. He watches television, I watching television...(inaudible)...

FN: ...Even if I would invite somebody, and somebody else came, they always were welcome. They know it. They knew. And we felt the same way by somebody else.

BN: This is European...it's European way of being the way we are raised.

Somebody's there, I walk in, so what! Put another chair. *Essen sex, essen acht.* [Eat six, eat eight] See what I mean?

WH: ...one of the things I'm writing about is the sense of community that the survivors, in a way, brought over with them when they came here...

BN: Each and every one you gonna talk to, if they honest with themself, they will say, we wish it wouldn't be like this. We wish we can go back so we can not be as formal because life was nice. We didn't have to call. And not to go. You felt like going, you went, you come, you eat, you be, you do, you go. And now, it's very Americanized. Call before you leave.

WH: What else would you say means "Americanized?"

BN: Americanized, well...we used to be younger and maybe as we struggled, we were more charitable maybe. Easier charitable now than not. Now we afraid for the tomorrow. As people growing old charity begins at home...and I don't appreciate these things. Some people they can afford to help, and they don't... it used to be in Europe that you were more charitable, you give of yourself. *Tzedakah* [charity] was the first thing in your life.

WH: It's very important. I saw you, you were on the phone before with something to do with JNF. Do you raise money for them?

BN: Yeh.

WH: ...do you find that survivors tend to be more generous than the American Jews, or less, or the same?

BN: There are two ways to look at that. The average American Jew, who makes as much as a *greener* will not be as charitable. The charitable, the average American Jew, the average American *greener* who is here, but the American Jew up there, gives a lot of money. There's 5% who they give 50 and 120 and a half million dollars. But the person who makes only \$30,000 dollars, he says, "I cannot afford it." He will go golfing, but he will not give \$50. for Israel, or JNF, or Federation

or buy Israel bond. He wouldn't buy that...you see, the refugees, the one thing about us, right after the liberations, they put most of them in a D.P. camp...and we are used to *nem*, *nem*, *nem* [take, take, take] but don't give. The UNRA give you, the HIAS give you, *nem*, *nem* ...give, give, give. And they became *schnorrers* [beggars]. If you know what I mean. So they came over here, and they also, what is the HIAS giving? You know, it's hard to get out of these things. I don't say all, but some of them. Now they have a hard time of – let go...(inaudible)...about newcomers, come to give, they give money. Milwaukee is a good town. Milwaukee has not too many a wealthy *greener*...

WH: ...how did you get into the construction business?

BN: Well, I was a painting contractor, and my brother was a carpenter, he was a cabinet maker at home...and I put myself together, I had people working for me as a painter...after two years, I want my own business...and I decided that painting is a bad business. It's drunken painters...and I work for some builders and I seen how the builders do. And this what encouraged me. There's one biggest builder in Milwaukee, he's one of the largest even in the United States, Tom Realty, and I was painting, -and four guys came in with the car, I'll never forget this, open four doors of the car, walked around, looked around, and five minutes, they are in the car, close four doors –pssht –I say... "This is the job I want." I hate to be a painter.

WH: ...How did you get into that position...?

BN: ...we had \$1,800 we saved some money and we bought him out...my brother was a carpenter, and I was a painter, and I support two families at that time. You see, our needs were not as big...we bought two lots...and we built one and we start the other one, and lucky us, we put in the first house, and sold it and made \$1500...we built two family...then four family...then ten family...

WH: ...(Discussing other real estate people and Vineland)...

BN: I'll tell you about some of our people. Some of our people were very aggressive.

FN: Hard workers.

BN: They knew how to finagle. How to make a bu-how they out-didn't outsmart, but they were a business thinking. If a person who went to a camp, he had to read somebody else's mind. If I look at you, I knew what you were thinking. I mean, I used to push all that psychology. I really don't know. And many of us, that's what they did. They came, they foreseen, they bought, they went, they run and they bought. Some of them didn't because they didn't have that drive, so they worked for the watchmaker, and the carpenter at somebody's place...(inaudible)

but our people as a whole, I must say, are not as—I've been working with Federation,-- as a whole, the United States, our people are getting lost that comes to give away money.

WH: What do you mean?

BN: They don't give the amount that they can afford to give, like Federation. Like buying Israel bonds. They do not...but then again, there's a percentage who give. But not as a whole. As a whole, they try to shine away...

WH: Have you been to Israel?

BN: Many times...six times. My son got married in Israel...but unfortunately they divorced...she's from Tel Aviv...she's a very nice girl, and I'm proud of her. But it didn't work out. And it's better like this.

WH: Where is he now?

BN: He is here and she is somewhere in Texas...anyhow, she was too young, and he was too young. He was 20, and she was not even 18...no children....

WH: Did he get married again?

BN: He is not yet...between then he met a non-Jewish girl and I wasn't so happy about it...

WH: Do you think that happens pretty often among survivors...?

BN: Too often, too many of our kids—too many of our kids intermarry! Too many! The trouble is with us, and I am, maybe I'm not religious enough, but I am Jewish, very Jewish, and if I see a greener or a no-greener (inaudible) Jewish kids, or any Jewish kids, who intermarries, I feel it's like giving me a shtuck right in here, because I feel first, it's not the same. It's not only you marry the person, but you marry more than the person. You marry the father and mother and brother and sister and the kids go there and they gonna see a Christmas tree and they gonna go to church, and they have relatives and they have cousins on the other side, and the whole thing is not the same. And that what bothers me the most. If you bring a girl who's not Jewish from Belgium, from Australia, where she's not got anybody here. And she's here, and she became Jewish, then she's Jewish. But once they living here, and she has a grandmother and grandfather, a sister and a brother and an uncle like we have. Maybe more. "And why did we get married?" "I be a son of a gun, I don't know." I cannot understand that. The Jewish girl says, "There are no Jewish boys," and the Jewish boys say, "There are no Jewish girls."

WH: And doesn't the Holocaust survivor say to his children, "After everything that I went through?"

BN: How long do you think my son, it took him to go and be open with a girl? Three years.

WH: He told you later that he had known her for three years?

BN: I knew he was dating a little. But he would never go in a public with her, because we didn't accept her.

FN: And some friends ours, they saw him once with her, and he was so ashamed. He was not just ashamed, he was afraid that my friends gonna tell us that he went with a *shiksa* [non-Jewish woman].

BN: He feels very guilty himself...if she would be Jewish, he would want to marry. But he still is hesitating, even he likes her, she's a nice girl. The only problem is...she's not Jewish.

WH: What is her nationality...?

BN: I don't know...she's not practicing...her mother wants to become Jewish!

FN: She is going to Rabbi (name?) to become Jewish. I never want to meet her. I said to my son, "You got a choice, me or her" because I don't want to have--.

WH: But you will accept her eventually?

BN: Now she's accepting...

FN: I will tell you – why...he knew her already for four years, then he came once and he said, "Mother I got to talk to you. She's a poor girl." I didn't know her. I never wanted to talk to about her. I didn't – never want to hear about any *shiksa*. So he said, "I got to talk to you. Mother, if you gonna call me, and you gonna hear a voice, from a girl, you should know that's Kathy. She moved into my apartment because she can't afford to pay rent because she goes to school...

End of Tape #1, Side A

Tape #1, Side B

WH: ...you have to make up...

FN: When my son talked to me, and he said, "Mother, please just meet her. Don't worry, I will not hurt you, I'm not marrying her, but just meet her. What is her fault – she's a very fine, intelligent girl. But what is her fault, that you are so afraid, that you were in concentration camp, and you are the one who suffered." I said, "It's not her fault, but I told you the reason why, and so many times! I said, "I told you so many times that why I don't want there should be intermarriages." So she wants to become Jewish. Even her mother want to become Jewish...I called up Rabbi [name?].

WH: Conservative?

FN: Conservative...And I told him the whole story. And he said, "Don't push her away. You're gonna lose a son, and you gonna lose her, but if she want to become Jewish, let her come. And I'm going to try to make her Jewish."

WH: ...do you think that this was an accident of fate that this happened...he knows how you feel...

BN: ...he never thought this going to happen...he tried to break up many times... he really fought it, I must say that....

WH: Where did he go to school?

BN: Milwaukee (University of Wisconsin).

WH: Is he in business now?

BN: He is with me.

WH: ...Your other son is an artist...is he married?

BN: Yes...he just moved here.

WH: He married a Jewish girl?

BN: Yah...

WH: And your daughter Sandy?

BN: She got four kids...she didn't want to accept this girl...but now, what can I

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tell you?...

FN: ...That's life, you know, as much - ...and Rabbi (?) ask him and her when they were there, "How do you want the kids should be raised?" And he said, "wanted they should be Jewish. They must be raised Jewish." And she said the same thing...

WH: ...you don't have much choice...

FN: That's right! What should I do?

WH: ...are you happy here in Milwaukee?

FN: ...no, I never liked Milwaukee. But he made here a living. I want to go to Los Angeles very much. In Los Angeles we have our other friends and they want A very much we should come to be there...I love it, I love it!...

WH: What stopped you or what prevented you from doing it?

BN: Because I wasn't ready to move...to start over, and you need a bank, and you need everybody else, so, it is hard to pick up and to...

FN: ... And our friends wanted him to invest with him...

BN: It was hard. In a little city like Milwaukee, you get known. Like a banker, and the city, and you want to buy a lot. Compared to others, I did pretty good...and it was hard to pick up and go. You were afraid. It's scary.

WH: How does the rest of the Jewish community relate to the *greener* here?

BN: Not too good...once the *greeners* tried to make money, it wasn't good.

WH: They were jealous?

BN: Very much so. Of course, why shouldn't they? I met friends who are — when I came here and I was painter and I was a *greener* and they helped me do this and now — I have out-done these people. I am way ahead of them! With everything. So they a college graduate, and there's a *greener* who finished maybe seven classes grammar school and came as a *greener* and no language, and they remember how I used to speak, and — "Look at him now!"

WH: Why do you think you made it?

BN: Lucky...also...we made it because you build the work and you expand, and you made it...

WH: Would you say that you had a stronger desire to make it than the average American Jew?

BN: Well, I have – yah. My mind, even right now, when I am retired, I'm still working. No, it's true. We business-minded people. And even in camp, we did a little business Trading bread for potatoes, for cigarettes with the Geman, with the Pole, with this guy, with that guy, we somehow were finagling trying to do business...

WH: Where were you, what camps were you in?

FN: The first thing I was in the Lodz Ghetto. Then...Auschwitz.

WH: In '44?

FN: Yah...I had four brothers and two sisters. And I am the only one left of the whole family.

BN: When the non-Jewish refugees came to the US they went to a factory – to whatever work they did, and they keep on still working there. 80% or 90%... when the Jewish man came in here, the *greener* came over here, they went to a factory, and 80% got out of the factory, and went into business for himself, because the mind was working. "How will I support my family?" Working here I cannot support – and I can't send the kids to college, I cannot buy a house, and how can I retire?" and we think already so far ahead what our grandchildren going to do. So 80% got out of that and did some business. Some made it, and some didn't. But they tried. I would say 80% tried to do something. A grocery store, a junk yard.

WH: ...isn't it amazing to you that after everything that happened to them that they still had the strength and the energy to come here and do that?

BN: No. People forget. When a Jewish kid like myself went to camp he was 18 years old. When war broke out, I was 16, some younger, some older, we were some educated, disciplined, we knew the Bible, the Bible –we knew about religion. And the home. The home, the upbringing is home (inaudible)... a little business, about living and living, and being a human being, to give *tzedukah*,[charity] be a *mensch*,[human being] and this is very important to be a *mensch*. And when we came to camp, I think 80% were *menschen*, [human beings] only 20% turned animals. And the day we got out of camp, two days

later, they were the same people they were before...we became *menschen*. We came to the table and sit and eat. Two days after camp!

WH: How come?

BN: We eat with a spoon! With a fork. Decent.

WH: You mean the way you had been brought up was so strong that it took over almost immediately after the war ended?

BN: That's it. Nothing! And I often wonder why didn't we go right after the war and kill people, rob, steal. I didn't touch anybody. I didn't touch a German...Jewish people were decent! As a whole...

WH: ... What camp were you in?

BN: I was in (?), Buchenwald and Gross-Rosen and (inaudible)...

WH: ...in your community here, what proportion of survivors would you say had like, serious mental problems as a result of the war?

BN: ...5%? Maybe not...

WH: ...doesn't a person dream at night about the war?

BN: Yes. Sure. But wait a minute. Do did the people who went – you trying to tell me people who are for how many months in Iran and the kidnappers –

WH: Terrible.

BN: But wait a minute! They were blindfolded, even worse than us! They didn't know whether they coming or going. At least we went to work back and forth. We like animals, went to work. They sit there and in the worse! ...(inaudible)... We didn't have the time to think as much as these guys had. They were sitting there. And blindfolded.

FN: They were not as hungry as we – we didn't have a piece of bread to eat.

BN: ...the hostages didn't have food? How do you know? They had terrible!

FN: They had terrible but not as bad as us.

BN: And people who were in Vietnam?

FN: No! ...(inaudible) ...nice people, and they killed people. You were in a different kind of camp.

BN: (BN laughs) I was in the worse camp, what are you talking about?

WH: One thing I will say is that your suffering lasted longer.

BN: Well, she doesn't want to hear the truth, that's the problem.... (inaudible) people, the hostages who were in Iran, blindfolded, for how many months? Four years? Three years? ...you try to tell me, sitting back and blindfolded, you know what's going to happen to you, it's good? (inaudible) The only thing is they hope they gonna more survive than we will. We knew we gonna be dying...

FN: We knew one thing, that we gonna die.

WH: They at least had a country...

BN: Exactly...but the only thing what we had is, say they survived, they came out, and they say they disturbed also. And maybe they are. But I don't see many of – "Is your father, was in camp?"

WH: ...The whole point of what I'm doing now is to show that the majority of people did not have these long-standing problems.

BN: I mean, sure we came out and we suffered more, but the will of survival put us all together and we kept on rising...

WH: ...if you had come here right after the war, rather than Germany, if you had come here in '45...do you think that your adjustment to American would have been easier or harder? Did that experience of being in Europe in Germany, for a couple of years, both of you, before you came here, did that change the way you saw American when you came? Was that like a way-station, a transfer station? A way to get adjusted? Because, like you said, you were living in a private place for a while. Did this make the change over here easier or harder? ...

BN: ...I really don't know. Maybe I would go to school. Maybe I would become an accountant.

WH: Are you sorry you didn't go to school? Or are you happy?

BN: Oh, sure. Very much...

WH: ...but this way you did better.

BN: I don't know...

WH: So why are you sorry?

BN: Come on now. It's good to – know the language. It's good to know how to write and read and know, and –

WH: ...When you get done with it all, what do you think is more important, to make a really good living or to make a lot of money or to have education?

BN: I think that education is very important.

WH: But it didn't help in the camps...?

BN: Well, if you want to look at that way, but you see, there are many of ours that have lots of money, a LOTS of money, but they didn't know how to behave and talk and they come in, they're very shy, because if they come in public, they wouldn't open their mouth because they ashamed the way they speak English. And if there is a conversation about AIDS, or space, or business or something which they don't know anything about it, they were afraid – they would not open their mouth...they shy, backwards, because they haven't got the education. They may need the money they have but that's all they have.

WH: ...How are you different than these people? In what way?

BN: I don't know...

WH: ...Are you a risk-taker? Or do you think it over very, very carefully?

BN: Well all depends when. Now, I would think it twice, because I'm ready to retire. Before, I would take – of course! Running, and going and coming.

WH: ...in your opinion, do you think that what happened in Europe could happen here?

BN: I suppose so. They don't like us too much.

WH: Nothing changes.

BN: They do not like it. And it's not such a *metsieh* [bargain] to be a Jew.

WH: ...Not such an honor...do you think that you'd rather have born not Jewish

sometimes?

BN: Oh, many times...(inaudible). When I was in camp, and when I speak, I always say, when I was in camp, and I thought that if I ever survive, IF, IF I ever will survive, which I never thought that I will, but if I will, I deny myself being Jewish. And I will run away and say that I hadn't anybody (inaudible) Jewish. BUT the minute I got out of camp, I forgot my promise, and I switch foreign people, and I would be glad to be Jewish and be alive.

WH: ...when you talk about the war, right, you may not agree and everything, but you have each other to talk to. (inaudible)

BN: We don't talk about it all the time, but when six *greener* come together...we have a party, and we have everything, and we talk about money and business and *gelt* [money] and the kids, and at the end, turn out, concentration camp. We say, "Remember John L. Schwartz?" "Was that one, who was in camp?" "What camp?" (clapped hands) Bingo! (inaudible) "I was in this camp." "How was it?" And whatever.

WH: It's an inexhaustible topic, right?

BN: Always.

WH: Do you ever talk about like, "David, who make it?"

Of course! ...you know, I just think about Wallerman, yesterday. ... I was with BN: him in the same camp in (inaudible) a very bad camp. And I used to...help the carpenters, I used to climb, I always used to get into something – whatever they call, I was. Say, an "electrician" – I was. I didn't know anything, but I seen it in camp because usually you were a helper. And people were afraid to say that. So I was working, building the buildings for the factories and I was working on the top, and I was a good climber, I could climb like a cat, and while I was there the Nazis, the S.S. didn't come up there, because they wouldn't go up there, they were afraid to walk up there...I worked with all private people, civilians...so I used to get from them get the bread, and sell them the butter and trade for them. They wouldn't trade themselves, they were afraid, so I was the middle man. ...once I bought myself a piece of cake and while I'm (inaudible) working downstairs...I called (Wallerman) and we went into a corner and I split with him a piece of cake...I really had it a little better than he had in camp. I was even more aggressive. I don't know – maybe, - I really don't know why. It's luck. It's lots of luck....

End of Tape #1, Side B Conclusion of Interview