Interview with Mr. Jerry Bookstein  
Conducted by Marian J Krzyzowski for the Chene Street History Project  
May 25, 2013

MK: This is Marian Krzyzowski and I am at the home of Mr. Jerry Bookstein in Bloomfield Hills. I am here with Hannah Litow from the University and we are going to conduct an interview with Mr. Bookstein about Chene Street, about the Bookstein Furniture Store, about his family, and how they ended up in Detroit. I’d like to begin first by asking you whether…

(Break)

MK: So why don’t we begin by talking a little a bit about the family, the origins of your family, your grandparents if you know them, names, where they came from and so on.

JB: On the Bookstein side the family came from the Greater Warsaw area in Poland, town called Zyrardow which was near another town called Lowicz. The family came over in 1913; my father, his two brothers and my grandfather came. And in the following year five sisters and my grandmother came.

MK: Could you give us the names?

JB: Uh okay, my father, my grandfather’s name was, I’ll give you the Anglicized, Samuel. My grandmother was Leah.

MK: Do you know her maiden name by any chance?

JB: Uh no, we have access to that, but no I don’t remember off hand. Gallaner, it just came to me.

MK: Gallaner, good.

JB: And uh the family move into Detroit, the lower east side. King Street I recall.

MK: Do you know what year that might have been?

JB: Uh 1913.

MK: So they came directly from Poland to Detroit?

JB: Right they came on a German ship, which I saw pictures of. I saw the hand-written manifest of my grandfather and the three boys at Ellis Island.

MK: The names of the three boys.

JB: Hyman, my father. His younger brother, Harry, and his older brother Jack.
MK: So in terms of order Jack was the oldest and Harry was the youngest.

JB: My father is the middle.

MK: Your father is the middle?

JB: And there were five sisters

MK: And they were all born there too?

JB: They were all born. Everybody was born in Poland.

MK: Okay and their names?

JB: Ester, Emma, Rochel, Sarah, Anne

MK: Would you describe your grandparents as being religious observant Jews or assimilated Jews or how do they fit into that spectrum?

JB: My grandfather was all of those things. He was a religious man in the old country and they quickly assimilated in this country. And he became actually an atheist.

MK: Did he speak Yiddish?

JB: Until his later years which he became pious again and endowed the Yeshiva Hachmay Lublin on Linwood and Webb [Linwood & Elmhurst – MK].

MK: Did he speak Yiddish?

JB: Oh yes.

MK: Polish?

JB: Yes

MK: Russian?

JB: Polish and Yiddish. And of course English.

MK: And same thing with your Grandmother then I assume.

JB: Yes

MK: And what did he do in Poland? Do you know what they did?
JB: He was a hardware merchant and he owned several hardware stores over a large area in that general area.

MK: Do you know why he chose to come and why he chose to come to Detroit of all places?

JB: He had a brother, uh my Uncle Dave, who had come here; he was sort of a pioneer. He came to the United States a couple years earlier and he loved what he saw. And uh he came back and convinced everybody that this was the new world and that they should come.

Carl: Why did Dave choose Detroit?

JB: Not Detroit, I don’t know what city exactly. Not Detroit proper. But there was always hostility to Jews and Anti-Semitism was there and those were the days with the pogroms in Russia and the czar. So I mean the climate was, in spite of the fact my grandfather was fairly prosperous, fairly well-off. And why they came to Detroit is why most of the immigrants came to New York first. And many of them stayed in New York and the next most popular place was Detroit. Because Detroit was just the budding, manufacturing center and that was a popular place to go to.

MK: So you say they came through Ellis Island?

JB: Oh Yes. They all came through Ellis Island. Uh what else can I tell you? So then I can talk about what happened in this country unless you have any other questions?

MK: Uh no well I was just kind of curious where in Detroit they ended up, how they ended up?

JB: Uh I don’t know, but lower East side is where they ended up.

MK: King Street?

JB: King Street, yes. It’s about as low East side as you can get. And uh Jewish people went in there and they gradually, as you know, moved over the years north to 12th street area. So then my Grandfather… uh Henry Ford started to pay a $5 day, which was revolutionary, unheard of, $5 for a day’s work at the Highland Park plant. And people just flocked for this, so my Grandfather went and he worked there for a while. And he decided it was wonderful, but then he decided if he [Henry Ford] can pay all that money then there must be more opportunities doing other things. So he went into used furniture and he bought up used furniture at a used furniture store in that King Street area close by. And then from used it became new and not only did he start for new furniture, but little by little the whole family. All the brothers, brothers-in-law of the sisters, and then Uncle David, his family came. So the Bookstein family was really a furniture conglomerate, all relatively small individual stores, but it was all about furniture. And then there were stores on Michigan Avenue, on Jos Campau, Chene Street as you know. And those were, ultimately, on Grand River. And it was spread in all different places and various times initially the brothers and one or two of the brother-in-laws were all partners. Three, four of them would be in partnership in a given store. There was a store on Michigan Avenue at Washington Boulevard that three brothers and a brother-in-law owned. But none of the partnerships lasted,
eventually they all broke up and they all owned their individual stores. But the Chene Furniture on Chene Street, I believe, was originally it was H and J Bookstein using. But the H was probably for Harry and Hyman; I talked to my cousin Joe, who’s the son of Harry. So it could have been Harry and Hyman and Jack. But Jack was a survivor, and Harry and Hyman left. And Jack owned it until the day he died, he was there for many many years. I can’t put my finger on when he died. But I would say he died 19, early 60s somewhere in the early 60s, maybe late 50s early 60s.

MK: Jack or Harry?

JB: Jack

MK: Jack, okay. Uh I went back and looked at the Polk City directories, which list you know the business according to address. And I actually found the first note on the Bookstein furniture store as 1927-1928. That was the first store that appears in the Polk directories on Chene and that store or some or either it’s Harry, the brother’s, H & J, Jack appears all the way through 1969-1970 was the last year 1969-1970 was the last year that a Bookstein store existed on Chene.

JB: Okay that’s when he died. And he died and left a lot of his personal wealth in the store in a safe that another Uncle was the executor of the estate. And he found it and so that would be but he ran that store from 24.

MK: 27-28 to 69-79.

JB: I would say that the two brothers, the three brothers, were together in that store for 10-15 years at the most. And he ran it all the way alone to his death. And the youngest brother, Harry, was the first to die. He died at age 54 so he died in the 50s. So he died quite a bit before his older brother, and my father lived the longest.

MK: How long did your father live for?


MK: Can you say a little bit about each of these individuals, these three brothers, clearly you know your father the best but sort of personality, characteristics, what do they look like, what drove them in terms of their business and kind of how did all that look?

JB: Well, they all had different levels of ambition, I guess. They all sort of resembled each other, strong family resemblance. And uh my father was the most ambitious of them. And uh my grandfather was quite ambitious and ultimately my grandfather and my father, at some point I would say after World War II, they were in business together in Hamtramck on Jos Campau and so until my Grandfather died. But my father was the most ambitious; Harry eventually had a store on Gratiot, it was called Mitchell furniture. And uh Jack had, of course, the Chene furniture. My dad was involved over the years in multiple stores; one time he had half a dozen stores as time went on. And um…
MK: Was your father observant?

JB: No, the children all were totally reformed or indifferent or secular. There was no religious…

MK: So there was no knowledge of Hebrew or even Yiddish?

JB: No they all spoke Yiddish, and they were reasonably observant as to the main ritual and the holidays, things of that nature. But in terms of strict observance none of them were. And I told you about my grandfather and so at that period of time he also was just like that. And he had been very pious in the old country and I guess as he was contemplating, I guess his end days, he reversed.

MK: And he joined uh..?

JB: Well he got involved with a Rabbi who ran the Hachmay Lublin was the synagogue. And I know the rabbi, I know his name but it hasn’t come to me yet. Well he was a real proselytizer and he got a hold of my Grandfather and really took him in. And so he made a major grant for the building of the Synagogue. Much to the consternation of every one of his children, he’s giving away the inheritance to this thing and none of them were real believers. So well they certainly weren’t believer in the orthodoxy of the religion, they believed in Judaism but so there was a lot of upset at that point in the family and friction.

MK: So they lived on King Street originally, the stores blossomed across the city. Residence-wise where did Sam and Leah live after King Street, where did your dad and your brothers live?

JB: Well every moved north and west which was the entire mo0vement of the Jewish population into the 12th street area but none of the Booksteins lived in the 12th street, my Mother’s side they lived in uh.. Nobody lived on 12th street, but it was all part of this migration. But the ended up in…my grandparents lived on Grand Avenue, west side Dexter-Davison area.

MK: Do you remember the address by any chance?

JB: Uh no. But I remember, my parents lived for a short time on Webb and then I was born on Glendale. And by when I was age six we moved into Oakland Boulevard so that’s where I grew up 2434 Oakland Boulevard. I remember my phone number too, Hogarth 2024 very simple numbers. But if you ask me what, something from last week I might have to struggle with it. And uh they lived in the broad streets, some of the family members lived around Broad Street but all in Northwest.

MK: Did any of them live in any of the stores, above the stores, behind the stores?

JB: In the old country, I’m sure.

MK: Yeah, but in Detroit?

JB: Not that I’m aware of that any of them lived in the same building.
MK: Did you ever see the Chene Street store?

JB: Only pictures of it, which I could not find. I have some pictures, but not of the store. In my mind I can see a picture of it because we got so many pictures.

MK: Well if you come across it, please call me…

JB: There was also a D. Booksteins that’s David Bookstein, that’s my father’s uncle, my great-uncle. He ran the store under D Bookstein, but I think that was on Michigan Avenue.

MK: Can you describe the store even from the photo you remember what that Chene Street store looked like?

JB: Yeah, it looked like typical furniture store probably had a 50-foot front with a neon sign over it?

MK: Did it come out perpendicular or was it on the building somehow?

JB: The Sign?

MK: Yeah

JB: That’s a tricky question, it could have been both. I would say on the building for that one.

MK: Was it a one-story, two-story?

JB: Typically, a lot of the stores were two stories, but I can’t remember if it was one-story or two-story.

MK: And I assume there were picture windows in the front?

JB: Yes large glass windows, display windows. I spent most of my time in the inner-city and I grew up in that business I spent a lot of time in Jos Campau in Hamtramck.

MK: Do you remember the address of the Campau store?

JB: I don’t remember the address, but it was the corner of Belmont.

MK: What side of the street, east side or west side?

JB: East side I believe, yeah.

MK: Were you aware of the competition, I mean there were a number of furniture stores on Chene Street and Campau for that matter, Jewish-owned. I’ve interviewed the Margolis family; they had some stores in both places. There was also a Raimi appliance slash somewhat furniture
store on Chene Street. There were non-Jewish stores: Maliszewski had a furniture store. There were a lot of furniture stores there; were you aware of that?

JB: Yeah, the concept was the more competition you had, the more collection of stores you had a in a given area, the better it was. And that concept still there in a shopping center today, but in those days not only retail stores but furniture stores. So it got to the point where several of the family members, our family members, were on the same street. So when the store on Michigan Avenue, when the three brothers and the brother-in-law the partnership split up, my dad opened across the street and down the block, he opened two stores. And that’s the way it was done and Jos Campau, the sisters, my dad’s sister’s husband opened right across the street so that’s the way it was done.

MK: Was it also called Bookstein?

JB: No that one was called on Jos Campau, no what’s the name of that store, I forgot. Right across the street on Jos Campau and Belmont but their name was Novergrad. But competition was a thing amongst family members. So you could see the same family having in the area.

MK: So you said your father was ambitious, did he go to high school or college? What was his education?

JB: No, uh he, they all quickly learned to read and write English, and he was in a public school system for a while. And they learned quickly and that was, they wanted to assimilate. I had at one point during World War I, my father joined the Palestinian, and he went to Palestine. I forgot what they called it but there was an organized Jewish movement of young people from this country who joined the Palestinian, I can’t use the word Palestinian, the Palestine Jewish army. I have several of those, I didn’t put them aside, but if you are interested.

MK: I am actually

JB: I have a great one of my father who’s in the first row of this with his uniform on.

MK: No that’d be great.

JB: He did that, no one else in the family did it but he did it. For the obvious reason was that he wanted to stay out of World War I. This was deemed more benign issue there and less conflict.

MK: So how long was he over in Palestine?

JB: I think a couple of years maybe. He described himself as one of the most popular guys in the brigade because he didn’t smoke cigarettes, everybody else did and he gave them the cigarettes.

Carl: Your dad was in the Palestine Jewish army? For two years?

JB: Yeah
Carl: For what years?

JB: Uh well World War I was from 14-17? Well he would have had to be, my dad was born in 1898. Well if he was 20 years old, it would be right during World War I.

MK: How did he hook up to it, was there recruiting going on in Detroit for the Jewish?

JB: Right and there was a whole bunch of Detroiter's. In fact I think at the Jewish Center, I saw, they had some kind of history here a few years ago they had pictures of all these Jewish boys out of the Detroit area who had signed up and gone to Israel and at that time it was Palestine.

MK: Did you know any of the other store owners like the Margolis family?

JB: I knew of them and actually Margolis live don the same block in Oakland Boulevard that we did. So you know we were weren’t close but I actually knew the Margolis’ daughter who married a friend of mine

MK: Rose?

JB: No, her name is. Her married name is…

MK: Sylvia?

JB: Tisdale.

MK: Oh, ah yes.

JB: Alicia

MK: Yes Alicia.

JB: She’s a psychologist and also she’s a, not a fortune teller.

MK: No that’s the other one, that’s Char.

JB: Oh so you know those?

MK: Yeah

Carl: Were they working with David or Margolis’ grandparents?

JB: Uh no. Margolis is a fairly large family in the Detroit area

MK: The Margolis who started the store was Louis Margolis. He came from Poland from Wilno or you know from Russia at that point. I interviewed his grand-daughter, Rose’s daughter, who helped with the store. So I know a little about the Margolis furniture. So I wanted to ask you, you
know they had some sort of a strategy opening up additional stores they had a deal with each of
the kids would get a store and they would take half of the profit would come to the person
managing that store and the other half would go to a central company kind of coffer, is that
similar to what’s happening with the Booksteins or not?

JB: No

MK: No?

JB: I’m not aware of anything like that, no.

MK: Because Margolis had one on Van Dyke, Chene, and a couple on Campau. And each of the
kids got one of these stores and that’s how they did it.

JB: Sort of like a conglomerate?

MK: Yeah

JB: No as far as I know they were just straight up partnerships. And the last one was the one with
my grandfather, my father, and Jos Campau store. And that ended by the time my grandfather
died in 1943.

MK: And where is he buried?

JB: Where is he buried? He’s buried at the old on Gratiot the Chesed Shel Emes.

MK: Mhm

JB: Yeah, he and my grandmother; all my grandparents are buried there.

MK: Okay. I was just curious, because as you know there’s that Beth Olem cemetery up there
inside the Cadillac plant.

JB: Well that’s the, you know I tried to go there once with my nephew and uh it was closed, but
that’s the oldest cemetery.

MK: Yeah

JB: That’s actually in Hamtramck.

MK: Yeah, well it’s actually in Hamtramck, part of the plant though

JB: Because when General Motors wanted to build a new plant there was issues, but the
gravestones there most of those people were buried before 1900, weren’t the?
MK: Yeah I think the oldest; the youngest on there is 1947, because they stopped burying people there in 1947. But yeah it goes back to the mid-19th century. 1840s, 1850s…

JB: So that was a different era we were talking about. Were there a lot of German Jews?

MK: Almost all German Jews.

JB: Yeah, the German Jews came first to this country.

MK: No I didn’t see any Eastern-European kind of names or there’s no Yiddish on any of the tombstones. They are all Hebrew or English.

JB: Yeah the German Jews at that point, if you’re going back to the 1850s or the 1870s, I mean the anti-Semitism there was probably no different than any place in Europe. There was no Hitler. But they did in many cases come early and some of them with means and founded some of the many Wall Street firms and you know you’ve heard the name Lehman and Loeb and Goldman and Sachs and all these people came early.

MK: What about your mom? How did your father and mother meet? Kind of what the circumstances, when?

JB: Yeah my mother and my mother’s parents, my maternal grandparents, were probably more from the Russian-Polish border but probably more northerly maybe up near the Belarus or the Bialystok in that area. That’s a guess, but no one has that history.

Carl: But that’s Poland or is that Russia?

JB: Well

MK: There was no Poland back then. So it was either Poland, there is a Russian-partition, a Prussian-partition, and an Austrian-partition. So you had Galician was Austrian, Silesia which is now Western Poland was Prussian, and then Warsaw and that area was Russian, Wilno.

JB: So the actual creation of the country was?

MK: 1918

JB: 1918? After World War I.

MK: Yeah

JB: So they were in that general area. So they moved to Toronto, my mother was born in Toronto. And she and my dad married in 1925.

MK: What was her name?
JB: Lillian

MK: And maiden name?

JB: Sedlesky. And I don’t know how she met my father; she obviously visited the city here. Well ultimately, her parents, my grandparents and her sister, my mother had one sister, they all moved to Detroit. That’s where they all met and then my mother did some schooling. She must have gone through high school in Toronto and then moved here.

MK: What about Harry and Jack? You described your father; can you describe both of those brothers?

JB: Yeah, well Jack and his wife Nellie never had any children. And uh…

MK: What was his personality like? What kind of person was he?

JB: He liked to smoke cigars. He liked to drink. His wife was an aging beauty, she was one of these women that were gorgeous when she was young and I knew of course she was a handsome woman. And uh their marriage was not the perfect marriage from all observations, but you know they accepted it. Today people run away from a marriage in a minute, but in those days there was no divorce. You know they got along. We visited occasionally, but I had a closer relationship with Harry and Judy, his wife Judy, who was a Saffron, Judy Saffron. I was very fond of her. Harry was a nice man and he died early as I said he died at 54. So I knew him since he was a young man, but his three sons are all very interesting and we are all in contact to this day.

MK: What are their names?

JB: The oldest one is Joe; he’s a doctor, Joseph Bookstein. He was a very distinguished professor of Radiology at Michigan for; he was the number 2 man at Michigan for many years. And in 1975 he went to Lahoya at UCSD where he lives today. And then the middle brother, who’s my age, Daniel he lives in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. And the youngest brother, who’s 17 years younger than the oldest brother, he’s about 65. He was brilliant; he was reading the newspaper at age two…

MK: What was his name?

JB: Graduated from the University of Michigan at 16. Fred.

MK: Fred?

JB: Fred Bookstein. You may know that name.

MK: I know him.

JB: You knew him?
MK: Yeah I knew him. He went to Cass.


MK: Yeah he was my year at Cass.

JB: Okay.

MK: Yeah and he was at Michigan when I was there.

JB: Okay.

MK: Yeah I remember Fred Bookstein, he was a genius.

JB: Yeah he’s a genius.

MK: Yeah I can see him, he was a genius. I can remember, I used to talk to him a lot.

JB: Yeah so he had…

Carl: Did that come up when you were going to interview my dad?

MK: No that didn’t connect at all until now, when you were going to give a description, for sure I remember Fred Bookstein.

JB: So yeah he is Harry’s youngest grandson and Fred also owned, so you know he was a professor at Michigan, but he was like a special study. They created things for him, because yeah he got a Masters at Harvard and they kicked him out. It was disputed, because he was told to leave or whatever and they cancelled his program. I don’t know what the details were. But at Michigan he ended up, he always had like a special, small group of students, and he ended up being a specialist in Morphometrics, which has to deal with the construction of the brain and how it has to deal with mental illness and various different issues like that. And he has written on this subject extensively and he owned on Hill Street, he owned that mansion there. It was well known. Did you know?

Carl: I was in Fred’s house before.

JB: Yeah yeah what was that called? Because it was a historic home, it was built in the 1890s or something.

Carl: I love the house, but I don’t know anything about it.

JB: And yeah it was a huge house, maybe 8 bedrooms or one of those places. And his wife and he took in; it was like a B and B, bed and breakfast. And he owned that for about 25 years and then he left Michigan. And I would say he left Michigan about 6 or 7 years ago. And along the way, in his later years at U of M, he became a professor at the University of Vienna And he
taught there about 10 weeks a year and they gave him a full professor. But now in the last five
years he’s settled up at the University of Washington in Seattle and yeah that’s where he’s at and
I don’t know what he’s doing.

MK: Small world.

JB: Yeah.

MK: And again about Harry, what was he like? Personality?

JB: Again very friendly, easy, quiet guy. His wife was dynamic, very bright woman, a real
driver. She drove everybody and she ran the show.

MK: You mean at home or also in the business?

JB: No she was not in the business. But she was very bright; she was actually a part of the
Saffron family business, Saffron Printing. And then she left that business, but no she was not in
the furniture business. But then she was in the business of running that family, yeah nice person.
And he was quiet and friendly and that’s about all I can say about him. I don’t think he’s
anything like any of his sons, I mean he looks exactly like Joe looks like, his father did.

Carl: I think Joe looks like Judy. I remember Joe looked like Judy.

JB: Yeah that’s true too, but the personality is quite a bit different.

MK: Getting back to your family, so your folks both married, how many kids were there? What’s
the sibling constellation?

JB: I had one brother. His name was Marvin and he died at age 41. And he died in 1984
unexpectedly.

MK: Was he living here in the area?

JB: Yeah he graduated U of M and actually he went to law school for a couple years and gave it
up. He got married and went into the furniture business with my father, which he would never set
foot in that store. I grew up, at 13 I was setting up baby cribs. And I wasn’t allowed to go to the
University of Michigan and anything like that but he had it all. He went to Cranbrook. Anyway
he surprised me and he went into the furniture business.

MK: What did you do?

JB: Well I was in the furniture business.

MK: Did you go to high school?

JB: Central, Central Detroit.
MK: The old central or the new one?

JB: The Central on Linwood.

MK: Oh okay.

JB: The old Central is old Main Waynes State University. So and then I grew up in the business and I went to, but I wasn’t too happy and I got out of the business and became a financial advisor.

Carl: Well you also…. He went and graduated from Wayne State

JB: I went to Wayne State I graduated Wayne. Then I went to, since I was never allowed to go away for school, I took off a couple summers after that and drove and went to Harvard and took classes in the summer. But my dad couldn’t understand why I did that. I came back and it was a tough period in the furniture business and I had been married a couple years. I just decided it was enough furniture. So my brother-in-law said, he was a business stockbroker already, that it’s a good business. I was always interested in business, but never in the financial markets or anything like that. But I joined the securities business in 1960 and that’s where I’m at.

MK: And your wife, you met your wife here in Detroit?

Carl: Barts, and you went back?

JB: Yeah so I did, I had a little burnout after about 10 years or so. So when my brother got back in and he seemed to like it, my father said he would step aside and let us run the business. You know there’s always the conflict between a father and sons or there can be usually. So he said he would step back and he was ready. So I came back in and we did it together for about…

MK: Which store?

JB: Well we came back in to Jos Campau and we had a store on Grand River and Joy and then we had a story in Roseville, Livonia, and Pontiac. So we expanded the business. My father had actually, at one point, 6 stores. And in the recession he cut down. I was gone and he cut down to 2 stores and then we went back to 4 stores. But that was enough of that and it was too difficult so we closed the business about 1980. My brother went back to law school; he had to start all over again. And he died about two months before graduation from law school. Then I went back into the securities business so and I am still in it today.

MK: Besides Carl any other kids?

JB: Two daughters. Margaret Bornstein, and her husband is my partner in business, and Jennifer Dryker, who’s a doctor and she’s married to Steven Dryker who’s a doctor.

MK: And Michigan, are they all in Michigan?
JB: Everybody’s here.

Carl: My two sisters live in Huntington Woods and I live in West Bloomfield.

JB: Four minutes from here, five minutes.

MK: That’s great.

JB: So they’re all here.

MK: I want to get back to the business itself. Was there a sort of vision around what kind of furniture, you know, what was your niche in this retail business?

JB: What the business was in those days, and it was pretty universal, was a lot of handling and dealing. It wasn’t like you’d walk in the store and see the price either that or it’s on sale and then no questions asked. Prices were put at a generous ticket with the expectation that you, it’s still practiced in many parts of the world, but uh and prices would be discounted from that. And that’s basically the way the whole business was, until probably sometime in the 60s, some of the operators started as a one-price, what it was marked if it was on sale but there was no handling. It was basically a blue-collar business; the customers were blue-collar customers. It was not a high-end business, although some people did go into the high-end business. A lot of them, they all started out in the lower end, but Bernie Moore, who’s a friend of ours, runs Gorman furniture, which is a high-end. He started out on Fenkell and Livernois, you know as a low-end business, but today he’s a high-end business. Art Van, a lot of the people who all built big businesses all went through a training program at my father’s store. There was an operation called Crown Furniture, do you remember that name?

MK: Oh yeah

JB: Uh Art Leiboff, he worked for my father there. And uh I think Art Van, I’m not sure if Art Vann himself worked for my father, but my father.

Carl: Did you say your dad sold blue-collar furniture?

JB: To blue-collar, yeah.

Carl: Because I always thought it was more middle-class to high-end.

JB: Not high-end, middle-class.

Carl: Middle-class, okay.

MK: It probably went along with, as people’s incomes increased…
JB: I would say probably from low-end to middle-end, we never really got to the high-end market.

MK: Who were your suppliers? Where did you get your furniture from?

JB: Well there’s many national, I mean the center initially the center of the furniture market was in Chicago. That all moved down to Highpoint, North Carolina, but all the manufacturers came mostly out of North Carolina, it was the biggest producer. And names like Bassett, and Hooker, and some of the high-end names are still around. But uh a lot of furniture comes in from China now, pretty well made, and some from Vietnam. That’s what they tell me, but in our day it was all domestically produced.

MK: What about the sales staff? Was there an intentional, let’s say recruitment, from sales from the particular neighborhoods that the stores were in or did that matter? How did that work?

JB: No, wherever you thought you could get a good person from, you know. The whole city was smaller than today, people are spread out you know. They are not going to drive 20 miles to work if they don’t have to, but that day they were all generally city people and occasionally you’d have in Hamtramck, I remember one of our good employees was a woman who worked 3 blocks away, you know. But you know they came from all over.

MK: Being in these blue-collar neighborhoods, I assumed they are primarily Catholic or Polish or Italian or Irish, was there any feeling of anti-Semitism conflict? Was there any of that experience in any of your experience?

JB: Not particularly in the business, there was a degree before my time, not exactly before my time, but there was anti-Semitism in the late 1930s and early 40s when you had Father Coughlin here and Henry Ford at one point. And that was sort of all around, you know. I remember being accosted by some kids like “Dirty Jew” or stuff like that. But by the time I got into the furniture business the 50s/60s there was no issue with customers like that. And in Hamtramck, my father spoke Polish and a lot of the sales went over big that he could speak Polish fluently. But there wasn’t too much.

MK: Did your mother speak other languages, other than English, or no?

JB: She could speak a little Yiddish. She could understand quite a bit and her parents spoke Yiddish.

MK: Did they speak Yiddish together?

JB: Only when they didn’t want me to hear, you know. In front of the kids they would speak Yiddish, but they could speak, they were conversing. But no accent or dialect or anything.

MK: Beyond not being associated with a temple or synagogue…

JB: Oh we were.
MK: Oh you were, who were you associated to?

JB: The Temple Israel. Some of the family members went to Shaarey Zedek. And uh.

MK: Were there any other sort of organizations, communal groups, Jewish groups that your parents or your grandparents, or your uncles were active in?

JB: Well one uncle got involved with the, what is the place where we’ve gone for Yom Kippur and uh the Drykers are very involved with it? It was part of the…

Carl: Shalom Aleichem

JB: Shalom Alechem is labor Zionists. Uh they were a group, almost like I don’t want to say socialists, communists, you know, they were very secular. And so one of my uncles and aunt were founding members.

MK: Which one was that?

JB: Tucker and the daughter and the sister and her husband was Jack Tucker, who was an attorney. And uh that service, we’ve gone, we continue to go occasionally. Because we had a family member that was interested and now we have my youngest daughter’s family, the Dryker family is also part of the founding of that synagogue. But that’s totally secular and the service is conducted in Hebrew, but some Yiddish also.

Carl: But you’re more reformed in your orientation, I would say.

JB: I am

Carl: You’re not from an atheist standpoint. You said your grandfather became an atheist at a point. And Papa Ha, your father became Atheist to a point, but I would never say you were Atheist.

JB: I don’t know what I am, I’m…

Carl: You have an agnostic childhood

JB: Agnostic is a good word, but I’m I feel like I’m really Jewish. I mean I have strong feelings about Judaism. But that mean’s I’m a secular Jew and I’m not one to do a lot of praying.

Carl: His wife, my mom is conservative.

JB: She’s conservative.

Carl: We’ve always belonged to Adat Shalom and he goes too.
JB: Yeah I mean my wife was a member at adot-shalohm, which is a conservative and so we’re more observant in that respect. But in terms of her underlying beliefs we’re not sure she’s much different than I am.

Carl: No she believes in God.

MK: Uh beyond, I mentioned Margolis, there were a number of you know well-known Jewish-owned stores in that Chene Street, Campo stretch, Max’s Jewelry, the Rosenbaums. Did you know the Rosenbaums and that family?

JB: No, but I remember Max’s jewelry.

MK: They were both on Campo and Chene.

JB: There was another Harper furniture did you come across that? That was the Goodman family.

MK: No, actually I bought furniture at Harper.

JB: And Harper in the modern era moved out to Royal Oak and had a very big store there. There were two brothers that the mother ran the store in Hamtramck in the old days, she was a real ambitious woman. Her two sons ran the much bigger store in downtown Royal Oak and one of them died. And I don’t know if that store is still there, Harper furniture in downtown Royal Oak?

Carl: I’ve never even heard of it.

JB: On Main street, one of the big…

Carl: Never even heard of it.

JB: Uh there was, what else was down there?

MK: Do you ever come across the Lowenberg brothers? Their store, they had a store on Mont Elliot, near the boulevard and that store was open in 1916 and it lasted for a long time and I haven’t been able to find anybody from that family.

JB: No, Lowenstein…?

MK: Lowenberg furniture. Lowenberg brothers.

JB: I haven’t heard it. There was famous furniture, which was owned by someone famous, I forgot, he’s gone. And the Gardner-white people, but they were not in that neighborhood. They’re all over now. I knew that person, that’s the Conn family. I can’t remember the Famous Furniture. Do you know that store?
MK: Yeah I know that store, yeah. What about non-furniture, you know, business people, did your dad or your uncles at all socialize with other business people that had retail stores? Particularly in that East side area.

JB: In the East side area? I can’t think of any off-hand. No I can’t really think of any. There was…

MK: And the Schwartz department was near Bookstein’s. There was a Lenhardt Hardware store very close to that Bookstein store, the Lenhardt’s were Jewish too. So there were, that Northern end of Chene Street was a more than half Jewish store, probably up until and through the 40s. And then in the 50s it began to, you know, change so I was just curious. In the list that I got out of the Polk directories, um Jack is listed, as probably from 1937 on, Jack is the number one listing for that Chene Street store. Does that coincide with what…?

JB: I think yeah. What did I say 10-15 years as partners and the store you said was 1924?

MK: 1927.

JB: 27 and 37 is the date you just mentioned?

MK: From this Jack.

JB: Yeah so the first 10 years it was a partnership and then all the way to 1970 it was his store alone.

MK: I think I’ve asked all the questions I would ask. Uh and Hannah do you have anything that you wanted to ask?

Hannah: Haha no it’s okay. No this has been very interesting listening to you speak though.

JB: I didn’t know I had that much to say.

Hannah: Haha no.

JB: Well you said you want to come over. So

MK: No this has been very helpful and what I’ll do is I will, if you’d like, I can send you a copy of this interview. And you guys can have it.

JB: Yeah that’d be nice.

MK: And you can play it on a computer.

JB: Yeah that’d be nice, because in some places we should have that anyway so.
MK: What I’d like to do now then is turn this off and take a look at these photos and begin to go through these photos and maybe document them and write up what’s in them, who’s in them, and so on. Is that okay?

JB: Fine I’ll bring them down.

(Break)