

Oral History Interview: Michael E. Levine

Interviewee: Michael E. Levine

Interviewer: Mark Bowman

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Mark B: This is Mark Bowman here with Michael E. Levine. It is January 6, 2021 and we're conducting this oral history interview via Zoom. So welcome, Michael. We're glad to have this conversation with you. And I would ask if you would just begin by saying and spelling your name for the transcriber.

Michael L: It's Michael E. Levine, M-I-C-H-A-E-L, middle initial E, which stands for Elliott, and Levine, L-E-V-I-N-E.

Mark B: We are so pleased to do this oral history interview with you, Michael, and I'm just really going to ask you to start with your origins. Tell us about your family and how it was that you came into the world.

Michael L: Okay. It's a long story because I am 77 years old. Just to give you a touch of background history, I am retired now from a variety of jobs all through my lifetime, which I will touch on as we go through this discussion. But let's go back to the very beginning for me, which was 1943. I was born in May of 1943, and as I grew a little bit older into the 1950s and became aware of not just World War II, but the Holocaust, through things that I saw on television, and things I read, and all the movies that were shown at the Nuremberg trials of what the concentration camps were like I always

began to think, when still in the 1950s, at the moment of my birth in 1943 how many Jews were slaughtered in Europe.

And that's a thought that I have carried with me all of my life. It strengthened my Jewish identity knowing somehow that I was put on the face of this earth to keep the Jewish people alive. It's a heavy responsibility. I have friends I know from my synagogue, which I will talk about later, which were children of Holocaust survivors and said that their parents told them your job is to keep the Jewish people alive. So as I grew up I always had that in the back of my mind: I'm here to make sure there will always be a Jewish people. So being alive is about the survival of the Jewish people. That hung very heavily in my mind when I was still a preteen.

So the family I grew up in was in Crown Heights. We grew up in Crown Heights before the Lubavitch rebbe arrived. We lived in one four family apartment building on Sterling Place in Crown Heights just off of Eastern Parkway, a few blocks from the Lubavitch headquarters. But my grandfather, who was not a Lubavitch, just an Orthodox Jew, always said to me we were here first and they came to the U.S. later, but we the Orthodox Jews in Crown Heights were the first settlers of this neighborhood, we made it Jewish, and we made it a home for those who were escaping from—he never used the word Holocaust. He said escaping from the war. So my grandfather, who had emigrated from Russia, Belarus now—and my nephew and I are trying to figure out from searching the

websites when they came—they came around 1910. To him World War II, the Holocaust, was simply “the war.” It’s what he left behind and he wanted to make sure that we understood that we were in fact the Jews who settled Crown Heights and made it Jewish.

What kind of a neighborhood was it? It was the kind of neighborhood where, on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, all the stores closed. It was Yontif. You don’t see that anymore anywhere in New York City where all the store close. Probably 95% of the neighborhood was Jewish. You knew it was Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur because suddenly people who never wore suits would be wearing suits and carrying tallis bags with them under their arms, which they’re not supposed to do, they’re supposed to leave it in shul overnight on Yom Kippur.

And even something that a lot of my friends didn’t understand on Yom Kippur, the rabbi for the Orthodox synagogue to which we belonged would attend Yom Kippur services wearing sneakers. And a lot of the kids didn’t understand it and I had to explain to them, as my grandfather said, you don’t wear leather on the Day of Atonement, and that’s why they were, he and his sons, were wearing sneakers. It was so strange to see that, to see the rabbi and a whole group of young sons go to shul the night before Yom Kippur started with a tallis bag, tallit, as it’s called now, tallis when I was a kid because it was old Ashkenazi Hebrew, not Sephardic—I’ll explain that in one minute—and wearing sneakers.

I grew up learning Ashkenazic Hebrew because the Jews that came from Russia spoke Hebrew with a different kind of accent than the accent that was initiated in the state of Israel, which was the Sephardic version where different words are pronounced differently. And so to me it will always be tallis bag, whereas the word is tallit in current Sephardic Hebrew as it's practiced in Israel. So I will be using some words from my Hebrew-Yiddish vocabulary that frequently will go back to the Ashkenazic background, the original Russian roots of the family in Russia.

Interestingly enough, the grandparents came from Belarus all at different times, all four of them, but they all came from the same town in Russia, which was very, very interesting, in Lusk, which was outside of Minsk, and that is how my parents met. My father was born in Russia, my mother was born in America. That's how my parents met sometime, I don't know when, and I really don't know when they were married in the 1930s, at a social gathering for the families from Lusk. That's how they met, and when they were married. I have a brother who's five years older than me and then I came along in 1943, again, with this very heavy concern about I'm here to make sure there will always be a Jewish people, which became a conflict later in life when I came out and said gee whiz, I don't think I'm ever going to have children.

Let me describe what it was like growing up in Crown Heights for me in the neighborhood that we were living in because it was a very, I'm going to say, observant neighborhood, not necessarily Orthodox, but observant.

For High Holy Days everyone observed, everyone knew they had to go to shul, to synagogue. There were no ifs, ands or buts. A lot of people had to go to synagogue to say Yizkor, the memorial prayer on Yom Kippur for departed parents and siblings and spouses and children. Everyone knew that we had to observe the High Holy Days.

When it came to observing the Sabbath, Shabbos, that was completely different from family to family, from building to building. My grandfather, again, was Orthodox, his home was always Orthodox. No television, no cooking, nothing on the Sabbath. Downstairs in our apartment we did have television. We kids were not Orthodox, we were observant. We lit the candles on Friday night welcoming the Sabbath. We had the traditional chicken dinner with the Challah bread, and then it was like for us it was over at that point.

We really didn't go to synagogue or to shul unless we had a wedding or a bar mitzvah or something that would bring us to shul. But Grandpa was there three times a day, for the morning service and the two evening services, for Shacharit, Mincha and Maariv, so he was there every day. But also as I was growing up Grandpa was retired, so he had more time for it. And I discover now in my retirement I have more time to be active in my synagogue, and especially in the middle of the pandemic we have right now I'm always online with Zoom meetings and Zoom gatherings related to the synagogue.

So let me explain what it was like for me growing up in this kind of mixed environment of an Orthodox neighborhood, 95% Jewish. We now do have the Lubavitches in the neighborhood. We see them with their long black hats and coats and they very much stand out from the traditional Orthodox Jewish neighborhood that I knew. And again, as I said, everyone did observe the High Holy Days, but not everyone observed the Sabbath.

I had several different synagogues that I went to. I had my grandfather's Orthodox, and it's called a shtiebel. Shtiebel, I believe, is Yiddish, not Hebrew, for little synagogue, little shul. It was the older men who came from Russia with him and formed their own congregation whose name I don't remember. It was a small congregation. They came from Russia. They established a synagogue.

The first thing you do when you come to a new country is you organize a burial ground. I remember reading this somewhere. And the second thing you do is organize a school, and the third thing you do is organize a synagogue. And they did all of this from a little building that they had purchased in the neighborhood right near where we lived, two blocks away. We were on Sterling Place, and I remember it was Howard Avenue in Brooklyn, a small building, two stories high. The men would daven, would pray on the ground floor of this building. And they took the floorboards out from the ceiling so the women's section would be on the second floor and the women had to look down. [*Dog barking.*]

[*Part 2.*]

Michael L: So Grandpa's shul, to me, it was an Orthodox shul in a two story building, again, with the men on the ground floor, the women on the upper floors. And this is where they had their benevolent society, where they had organized a hadar, a Hebrew school. The Hebrew school was not held in that building. They rented a storefront a block away. And they organized their burial society, which was probably the most important thing for immigrants coming to a new country, especially because they were at a point in their lives when they were aging. And let's face it, when you come from one land to another, yes, you need a place to pray, yes, you need a place to educate your young, but you need a place to bury your members because people die all the time, young and old.

And I'll never forget how important that was. My grandfather was on the burial committee for the synagogue and his name is even on the entrance to the plot at the Baron Hirsch Cemetery in Staten Island, which is a very old cemetery, and the names of all the officers and members of the burial society on a great big pillar as you go in, and Grandpa's name is right there. And I've always been so proud of it and pointed it out to the children of the younger generation, very few of whom care that much. Remember, they're fourth or fifth generation American Jews. They don't care that much about it, but I do. So I try to make sure the whole family understands that Grandpa was a member of the burial society, he was an officer in the synagogue, the synagogue was central to his life.

To me it was a very foreign place because Yiddish was spoken all the time, never Hebrew. The prayers that were recited were always in the Ashkenazic Hebrew, and I never understood fully what was happening because it wasn't English, which was my language. Now Grandpa would speak Yiddish, I would speak English, my parents would speak both. Somehow we all communicated. But I never felt comfortable there because this was Grandpa's place, not mine.

My father belonged to an Orthodox synagogue a block away from where we lived, and I recall it having been an enormous building, an enormous edifice. This is where I was bar mitzvahed from. And I remember that it was...entering on the ground floor was the chapel where daily services would be attended and then there was a double winding staircase up to a second floor where the main sanctuary was. And once you were in the hall, there was another set of steps that would go to the women's balcony. And I remember it being an enormous building.

Many years ago, I don't remember, maybe 20 years ago, I took my husband, who's not Jewish, to the old neighborhood to show him Crown Heights and I said I'm going to show you the synagogue from which I was bar mitzvahed. And we drove to the site and I couldn't find it. And I drove around the block and I couldn't find it. And I said wait, hold on, it has to be here, there's no sign of any demolition. There was a Pentecostal church in a very small building, 25 feet wide by three stories high, and I said oh my god, this is it because I recognize the winding staircase leading to the

upper floor. And I looked up, up, up all the way to the top and sure enough, there it was, a Jewish star in the top of the third floor letting the light in, a mosaic. A mosaic? Yes, a mosaic. And it was amazing to me that in my memory it was an enormous building. It was a simple little building. But as a 13-year-old kid being bar mitzvahed it seemed so big.

That was the synagogue from which was bar mitzvahed. I have a very bad singing voice and fortunately there were several young men being bar mitzvahed at the same time, and we were bar mitzvahed from my father's Orthodox synagogue because that's where the rabbi—and again, this is the rabbi from the Orthodox synagogue, not from Grandpa's shtiebel.

Grandpa understood that my father needed a more modern place, and he took me to that service. So again, I would go with my father during the High Holy Days, and we would go there for bar mitzvahs and other events that required going to an Orthodox synagogue. I felt a little bit more comfortable there because a lot of the people did speak English. But again, the service was always entirely in Hebrew. It's not the kind of service we have today, even in Orthodox synagogues, where you'll hear so much of what is introduced in English.

And I'll never forget the rabbi getting up on Yom Kippur before Yizkor, when he had the biggest audience, and he would stand on the platform, not the bimah. The bimah from which the Torah was read was in the back of the sanctuary facing the ark, and the ark had a small stage. And again, who knows how big it was, but to me it was enormous. It was probably only

around 50 feet distance. And he would stand on the platform in front of the closed curtains of the ark where the Torahs were kept and he would begin his Yizkor Drash with “meine tirere freundt, my dear friends.” And that’s all I understood. For the rest of it I didn’t understand a word. Because not only was it Yiddish that my grandfather spoke, one kind of Yiddish he spoke, Litvak Yiddish, and this was Galitsianer, I didn’t understand him. And again, I didn’t feel all that comfortable there because it was still a foreign place for me.

Fortunately some of my friends who didn’t have Orthodox grandparents or parents living with them joined a Conservative temple a block away from Eastern Parkway, two blocks away from where we lived. And again, you have to understand how close-knit this community is. I’m trying to remember as a kid how often did I go more than three blocks away. Very, very infrequently, unless we were visiting relatives in the Bronx, otherwise you never left the neighborhood. So they joined the Conservative temple and they were bar mitzvahed from the Conservative temple.

And when I went to the Conservative temple to their bar mitzvahs I began to realize they have a different kind of a role here. The kids are all speaking English, the rabbi is speaking English, he’s introducing the service in English, they’re doing speeches, a d’var Torah, a Torah study is part of their bar mitzvah, and they’re doing it in English.

When I was bar mitzvahed finally from the Orthodox synagogue, my father's, not my grandfather's, my grandfather wanted me to go to Hebrew high school. So I went to the Hebrew high school formed by the rabbi of the Orthodox synagogue to which my father belonged, and I was very unhappy, because again, I'm not very good at languages. I didn't do very well at French in high school and didn't do very well at all, especially trying to read Hebrew without vowels, because when you're reading from the Torah there are no vowels. And I was so uncomfortable. And I kept saying to myself I'm glad I mastered English. How many languages do I have to master in one lifetime?

So I went with my friends from the Conservative temple to a youth group that they had organized for the postgraduates from—because they didn't go to Hebrew high school, they went to the youth group. It was a coeducational youth group. It was led by probably Orthodox background young Jewish people who spoke English. And they had all kinds of programs for the children. They talked about Israel, and they did Jewish music, and they did Jewish stories, and I said oh my god, I can understand all this. I feel Jewish here, and I understand it, and I'm not uncomfortable.

So I went to my grandfather and I said Grandpa, I don't want to go to Hebrew high school, I want to go to the youth group. And I forgot what they called it, but it was a coeducational youth group. So he said okay, go there if you want to, but I want you to stay in Hebrew high school. So I went there one day, and they always had the gatherings on Sunday, not on

Shabbat, but on Sunday, so that the kids—and they did take us places.

They took us to zoos and museums related to Jewish themes around the city. But Grandpa showed up one day.

So you have to picture this. I'm sitting there in a circle with chairs and one of the leaders of the group is reading something, I don't remember what, and Grandpa walks in through the back of the room. And he didn't have a long beard, he had a short Van Dyke, and he had his yarmulke on, and I see, oh my god, I'm mortified, Grandpa's here checking up on me. And sure enough, one of the youth group leaders walked up, approached him, and they started speaking in Yiddish, which was the smartest thing in the world. At that point Grandpa understood it's okay because I am in a Jewish place. If he's wearing a yarmulke and he's speaking to me in Yiddish it's okay because he is in fact Jewish, and my grandson is in a Jewish place. And he said it's okay, I don't have to go to Hebrew high school.

And that experience of going to the coeducational youth group had a major impact on my life because it made me feel that I could be a modern Jew in New York City and didn't have to be tied to orthodoxy. Because I did not observe the Sabbath. I had the television on. And Grandpa knew not to come downstairs to our apartment on Saturday, on Shabbos, because he knew the television would be on. We'd be watching whatever kids watch at that age at night. But the youth group made it possible for me to say I can be a modern Jew in America, I can fulfill that destiny where I'm keeping Judaism alive by belonging to this organization. And

the fact that it was coeducational was very important to me because at that time all of my friends were boys and girls from the neighborhood. I really didn't have any friends from outside of the neighborhood.

And that went on until 16 or 17 years old, and then people started to move from the old neighborhood in Crown Heights. And we moved to East Flatbush, and some of the families went out to Long Island, and life started to change for everyone. And I began to realize that my life is a little bit different, and that now that I do understand that I'm not going to be in an Orthodox synagogue, and that I would much rather be in a Conservative synagogue. I also learned about Reform Judaism because—

Mark B: Can you back up? What was the impetus of that moving?

Michael L: Oh, the neighborhood was changing. It was white flight. I'll be perfectly honest. It was white flight. The neighborhood, which is now mostly Caribbean, Blacks were moving in. It was a neighborhood which was close to Bedford-Stuyvesant where a lot of Black families originally lived. And I imagine that the housing was relatively inexpensive to purchase. It was purely white flight. We would have stayed there, but everyone started to move. And in fact it was an upgrading of lifestyle to move out to quote, unquote, I'm going to say it like a New Yorker, "Long GUYland." That's where my brother and sister-in-law went when they were married, Long Island. We moved to East Flatbush. People moved around a lot, but it was purely white flight.

Mark B: Got it.

Michael L: But that youth group left—even when I was in East Flatbush I no longer was part of that youth group. Not only was I distant from it, but the kids were already at that point starting to meet mates and get married, and I would double date with them occasionally, but I was not particularly interested in going any further with the dating. And I knew at that point, and I was so aware of the fact that I'm gay, but at that time it was a homosexual, and I didn't know how to deal with it. Because now I'm 17, 18 years old, and it's a whole different world when you look at...I'm trying to remember how long ago was that, '43, '53, like 1960, it's a difficult world to be 17 in.

And so I just continued my studies. My mother had passed away. I was living with my father and stepmother and brother, and my brother was engaged and got married. And I found myself alone, having some contact with my friends from the old neighborhood, but not meeting very many new people to be friends with. When I finally did reach the point where I graduated from high school and went on to college, I went to Hunter College as undergraduate school. At that time Hunter College was in the Bronx, so I traveled by subway from East Flatbush all the way at the beginning of the line, the New Lots train, all the way up to the ending of the Pelham line.

And I went to...I'm trying to remember now what year I graduated—1961 is the year that I graduated from Hunter College with a master's degree in political science and with an undergraduate degree in sociology. And at

that point I wasn't 100% sure what I was going to do with my life. I was still living at home and I knew I had to go on further in school because that was the tradition in a traditional Jewish family in Brooklyn. You have to go to college, you have to have an education, you've got to get a good job.

And I had worked in the political science department very closely with some professors who were political scientists and sociologists who said you have an enormous interest in cities and the way cities are developed. And that is what—I didn't do really great in things like trigonometry. I was really horrible. I was as bad in trigonometry as I was in French. But I excelled and got all of my As in history and literature and social science, and political science. And they encouraged me to go to a new program at Hunter College in Manhattan for graduate school called the Graduate School of—the name has changed several times over the years, but the urban planning program, which at that time was in the sociology department. It's now the Graduate Program for Planning and Public Policy.

And I have maintained contact with that school. It's now 50 years old. I've maintained contact all the years with so many people—a lot of them are gone now—who had taught there and who were co-students of mine. One very curious side story, which I'll get to a little bit later. When I worked for the Lower Manhattan Community Board I recognized a name of a person who was a member of the Lower Manhattan Community Board. I

introduced myself and I said I recognize your name, and I once had a teacher with a name similar to yours. And she said to me that was my mother. I had taken sociology with her mother 50 years earlier at Hunter College, and 50 years later, like in “Casablanca,” of all the community boards in the world she comes to mine. And her mother was gone, but she had been the director, the chair of the department of sociology. So in our world things go around and around and around.

It was a very good experience for me being at Hunter College for two years in Manhattan. I got to see the city and I knew the city very, very well. I always came into the city when I was a youngster, when I was old enough to travel on the subway. And for kids growing up in Brooklyn, it was “the city.” Friends of mine who grew up in the Bronx would always say “we’re going downtown.” But for those of us kids who grew up in Brooklyn, it was “we’re going to the city.” We’d go to Greenwich Village, we’d go to Times Square, we’d go everywhere. I knew the city so well before I even entered graduate school, and it had a major impact on my life. I met so many people with whom I have continued to work. One of my classmates was once the director of the DEP, Department of Environment Protection of the City of New York, so you keep meeting the same people over and over and over again.

But all the years that I was in undergraduate school and graduate school I was always uncomfortable. I continued to date, double date with friends, and I would go to locations for lectures, to New York University here in

Greenwich Village, where I live now, and I'd always kind of meet someone and have a date or two, but never go further than that, because I was...like I wasn't comfortable, if I can draw an analogy to life in an Orthodox synagogue, I wasn't comfortable in the dating world, and I knew why. In the back of my mind I knew this is not for me. I don't want to spend the rest of my life with a woman. I had far more fun being with my male friends.

But I really didn't meet any gay people until I was in graduate school at Hunter College. It was a little bit different, a little bit more worldly. It was in Manhattan. It was near a lot of the midtown bars that I had heard about. And I befriended one person who I suspected immediately was gay. Something, you know, they say "gaydar." I kind of knew, because he is not talking about his girlfriends, and I'm not talking about girlfriends. And so I joined him one night, and we went to one of these bars, and I finally came out to him. And now this is like 20 something. I'm trying to remember here, what would I have been? Twenty-three, it took me, to kind of say okay, I think I'm gay, too, I'm far more comfortable here. Now that was kind of a formal coming out that I spotted someone, he knew I was trying to come out, he helped me come out. We were classmates, we were friends. And then he said okay, you have to tell me if you feel comfortable in a gay bar. I said I wouldn't feel comfortable alone because I don't know what to do. He said you don't do anything. Have a drink. That's it. He says to me what if someone—and I said to him what if

someone approaches you. And he said to me say hello and see where it goes from there. I was still living at home, so there was nothing I could do. I still had to go home at night.

Things changed completely in 1960—I'm trying to remember the years—1967, when I finished my first year in graduate school. I was working part-time at the time. It was a very busy schedule for me, going to school and working part-time at the same time. And I raised enough money to be able to move into “the city” for my last year of graduate school. And this is the turning point in my life. So here the Orthodox kid from Brooklyn, who's confused about where he's going, and what he's doing, and what's going to happen moves to Greenwich Village.

And as they say, that is the...what is the expression they use? The changer, the changer in my life, the lifestyle change which I was looking for. Having gone to the city so often with friends and on my own before I moved to the Village, I knew. I knew that the gay bars were located in Greenwich Village. I moved to Greenwich Village because I had an aunt, a very close aunt, who helped to raise me when my mother passed away, and she had moved into Washington Square Village, which was a brand new complex then, which is now owned by NYU, but she stayed there many, many years because they allowed the original tenants to stay, and I wanted to be near her. And in the back of my mind I wanted to be where these bars are, where I know these people go to. And in my mind's eye they were still the homosexual people. I know. And I would walk around

on a Saturday night, and I would see them in the Village, and I would see them going, and I would stand outside of the Stonewall, which is where everyone knew they were going, but I wouldn't go in because I was afraid. And I knew I had to go home that night.

Moving to Greenwich Village in 1967 I took an apartment—this is unbelievable, I'm saying this for the record—a studio apartment for \$100 a month in Greenwich Village in 1967. There were still things like that available. Today you couldn't even rent the toilet in my building for \$100. So I lived in Greenwich Village now. I moved in 1967 during the summer. I worked full-time during the summer to make sure I had enough money to get through the following year.

Mark B: What kind of work were you doing? Where were you working?

Michael L: At that time I was working for my aunt, the aunt who lived in Greenwich Village and raised me. I was doing office work for her because she was a vice president for financial affairs. It was very unheard of in the 1960s for a woman to be a vice president for financial affairs. It was for a small manufacturing company in the area of Manhattan that is now the Flatiron District, which had factories there. They happened to have manufactured luggage and cabinets for computers. Yes, she was a vice president of financial affairs, but she always complained women get paid less, and she did. Men on the same rank always got more money than she did. And she tried to explain to the directors of the office that she's raising two sons and sending us through college, because at this point in time my father had

already passed away. And they said no, it can't be done. You cannot pay the same to a woman as a man. And when she passed away early in the year 1996, I think one of the greatest regrets she had was that although she had all the titles she wanted she could never match men's salaries. I think she would have been very pleased. Although she called it ladies' lib. She never called it women's lib. She would have been very pleased to know that equity of some kind has finally happened.

So here I am now living in Greenwich Village, summertime 1967, school is out, I'm working full-time during the day, and frankly I'm bored at night because I don't have very many friends. They were all married. All the straight friends had married. I have one gay friend, quote, unquote, who is living with someone on the Upper East Side, and I see them occasionally. But I have all of these nights on my own. And I said okay, let's take a walk. And guess where my feet took me to? That's bad English. Guess to where my feet took me?

I'm standing outside on the fence by Christopher Park across that little tiny street, Christopher Street, which is now a national landmark, which I had a small role in helping to designate. I was on one of the committees and spoke at a lot of the organizations in favor of designating Christopher Park as a national landmark. And I'm standing there and I'm watching all the guys go in, and I'm terrified of going in because I know this bar is a little bit different than the ones on the Upper East Side where everyone's

wearing jacket and tie and no one is allowed touch, and you could pass as straight.

I say these guys are all—and this is now the word we used in Brooklyn—it hasn't been invented in this generation. We used the word queer in the 1960s. And I said these are all queer folk going in there. I waited for the appropriate moment when a large group of young men were going in at the same time, I don't know, five or six, and I said okay. Because you needed to know someone in order to get through that front door. They would really look at you strangely if they didn't know you. So I saw this group of five or six men going in and I just slipped in right with them, walked right in with them, made believe I was part of the group. And we were dressed, you know, I don't remember. I think I was wearing chinos and a decent shirt or something like that.

Mark B: Preppie looking, uh-huh.

Michael L: Pardon me?

Mark B: I said sort of preppie looking, a bit.

Michael L: Yeah, right. We were the preppie group. There were so many different groups at the Stonewall. A friend of mine from the gay synagogue said to me at the 50th anniversary, the Stonewall 50th, he said well, didn't you have to wear drag to get in? I said now where did that rumor come from? And again, in my recitation of what it was like to be there the night of the raid I said the bar was an unbelievable place. And I'll jump ahead a little

bit because this is what I saw when I came in for the first time with this group of people.

The scent of cologne—because everyone wore cologne then, especially the preppie guys like me—of beer, of cigarettes. So here I am smelling from cologne, beer and cigarettes—I was a heavy cigarette smoker then—and I walk in and I say oh my god, I'm at home. I see young men holding hands, I see young men dancing together, I see young men kissing, but I also see lesbians. There were the lipstick lesbians and the lesbians wearing suspenders and corduroy clothing, there were drag queens. Of course there were always drag queens. Always drag queens there. They loved it, because they could be drag queens, and that was the important thing. Stonewall was the place you could be what you wanted to be. And what did you want to be? You wanted to be what you are. And here you could do that.

So here I am a preppie, a preppie looking guy, still in school, in a place where men can hold hands, can dance, and can kiss, something I never thought I'd see in a public place, along with the lesbians, along with the drag queens, and a lot of straight people who came there to have fun, because everyone forgets Stonewall was a fun place to be. The jukebox was always blaring, the beer was always flowing, the cologne was always smelling. It was full of cigarette smoke. I was so at home. So that's 1967. I lived the next two years enjoying work. Well, then I graduated from

Hunter College. I went to work for the City of New York in 1968. And now my favorite bar is the Stonewall.

And I had a whole routine. On a Friday night I would go to one of the uptown bars with some of the gay friends that I had met through my friend, to the bars where you wore suits, and we would sit around piano bars and sing, and sometimes I'd meet someone. But Saturday night was kind of the night that I would go to Stonewall. And then as time progressed way back into 1969, now I'm working for the City of New York for one year, I'm beginning to realize that I'm enjoying the Stonewall more than the bars with the suits because I feel comfortable here, it's at home, it's a block away.

So it's 1969 and it's June, and it's hot. And I had met someone the Saturday night before at the Stonewall who couldn't come home with me because he was still living with his parents, so he had to tell his parents that he would be visiting a friend. So he said let's meet here Friday night, June 29th—I'm trying to remember exactly what the date was. And so instead of going uptown I went and I met him there June 29th, Friday night, was standing at the bar getting drinks for the two of us, and suddenly the lights went up, the music went off, and it was quiet. You could hear a pin drop. It was the raid. And I turned to my date and I said what's going on? Someone shouted "raid." And he said don't do anything, we just leave. The police want the owners of the bar, not us. This young kid was obviously far more experienced than me. He knew what to do.

We walked out into the street and I was totally shocked when I saw what was happening. There was a complete ring of police cars facing the entrance with their lights on the patrons as we came out. I was terrified. Remember, I'm working for the City of New York now. I am a provisional employee, I'm not a permanent employee. I hadn't taken the civil service exam. And the only thing on my mind is what happens if someone finds out that I'm gay. Terrified for my job, because I loved working for the city as a city planner.

We'll go back to Stonewall in one moment. I just want to talk a little bit about what working for the city was. I was given one of the top assignments, one of the choice assignments at that time in 1968, when I first came to the City Planning Commission, because I lived in Greenwich Village, and that was to work on the issue of artists living in loft buildings in what was then called Hell's Hundred Acres. The fire department, the police department, everyone wanted them there to keep the buildings safe. It was known that there were fabrics, and cotton boxes, and unsafe conditions in these old buildings. A lot of them were vacant. And artists were living there illegally, but keeping the area safe from any major safety issues.

It was a choice assignment. It ended up being, ridiculous as it sounds, the highlight of my career. My first year working as a city planner after a 50 year career is still, the work I did in Soho, because Soho today, as you know, is a major, major component in New York City's lifestyle, in New

York City's economy, and the City of New York is currently now contemplating zoning changes to allow people to live in Soho as a right, meaning not just artists, and to allow large-scale commercial uses such as department stores and large-scale eating and drinking places. Many, many issues associated with Soho today. And what the City of New York keeps saying over and over again is Soho has changed in 50 years. And I get up at the public hearings where I say don't go too far, don't change too much of Soho. Don't allow everything as a right because I'm the one that wrote the original zoning legislation. And everyone sits back in their seat and they say so you're responsible for all of this?

So now I'm working for the City Planning Commission and enjoying all the work I'm doing. I'm out there surveying the streets in Soho, and trying to figure out where the artists live, and having a really great time meeting some of the most wonderful, talented people I've ever known, a lot of whom are gone now because a lot of those artists were gay and they died of AIDS real early on in the first wave of deaths from AIDS. But I was invited to dinners there all the time, and I was known to the gay male community in Soho as the guy who's working on our district.

So now here I am at the same time in the Stonewall worried about my job. I'm enjoying it enormously. We're standing out in the middle of the street. The police cars are facing us with the lights blaring in our eyes, and I say to my date let's get the hell out of here as quickly as possible. We walk a few blocks away and suddenly my date turns around and he says to me

let's go back, we're not leaving, the kids are staying. And I have recorded this history in great detail of what it was like to have been there. It's on National Public Radio. I've been interviewed in other locations about what it was like when we went back, the dancing in the street. I didn't see rioting. I hate to use the word riot. It was a rebellion. I understand that there was some violence or garbage pails thrown around. I never saw that. I saw the kids dancing in the street on a Friday night.

We came back on Saturday night and we saw everyone dancing Saturday night. But Sunday night already it was a problem. The mayor called in the tactical police force, which is the anti-riot police force with motorcycles and white vest protection and it started to get dangerous then. But what we gay kids were saying at that time—and I consider myself a kid then—is we're here to stay, and we're going to come back every night until you accept who we are and what we are. And that's how I have always concluded my speeches about what Stonewall meant to me, Stonewall 50.

And it became more apparent year after year after year how important Stonewall was to my coming out to the world. We're here, we are, and you have to accept us because we're not going away. And that was a remarkable turning point in my life. But again, I was still worried about my job. The Monday after the Sunday when the tactical police force came in there was coverage in the newspapers and on television, and I got phone calls from my family members to say are you okay? We know you go to places like this. They knew. What, was I wearing a sign?

When I came to work on Monday my coworkers at the Department of City Planning said so what was it like being part of all of these, as they said, riots? And again I said am I wearing a sign? I said they weren't riots, they were rebellions. We danced in the street because we don't want to be thrown out of bars where we feel comfortable. And every one of my coworkers accepted it. There was no problem. Absolutely no problem. Everyone seemed to know that that was my lifestyle and this is where I was comfortable.

Mark B: Great, good.

Michael L: Unbelievable. This is, again, Department of City Planning, liberal people, were always arguing for equal opportunity for all and affordable housing. It was the right environment for me to be in at a time like that, when nobody questioned, to the best of my knowledge, no one questioned me. No one ever said "the fag on the 14th floor." Everyone kept saying what was it like to be in this riot? We saw it all on television. And I had to explain it didn't start as a riot, it started as a rebellion.

I finally took a civil service exam a year later in 1970. I passed it with flying colors and I was appointed to my permanent title. And over the years I continued to take additional civil service exams. There were five levels. I only had to take four exams because I was one year a junior planner and there were four levels going up to the top of the rank, and I took all of them and passed them. And ultimately I became a manager, and I became the director of administration for the Department of City

Planning, from which I retired in 19—and I'm trying to remember the year—the year I retired was 1998, and I was director of administration. And then from there I went on to other jobs. I went on to work for the Fund for the City of New York, teaching urban planning to graduate students, Pace University, teaching planning to undergraduate students. And I worked for Lower Manhattan Community Board One until two years ago, which would have been 2018, and now I'm fully retired.

All of these years since Stonewall I felt very comfortable being gay. It was the crossroads of my life being in Greenwich Village. And after the 1969 rebellion Stonewall did not reopen. Of course it reopened later on.

Stonewall was originally the two building—it started out as one building and it was called the Stonewall Inn. And then when it became a popular location they took over the adjacent building, which had been a garage, so by the time I went there it was two buildings. Then when it closed it turned into a bagel place, I think, and some other kind of a store. And then when it reopened it was only the original building where the Stonewall Inn was, which is there today, which is suffering terribly as a result of the pandemic.

And that great big sign The Stonewall Inn was still up until...I don't know when it disappeared, but you could still see the Stonewall sign until they changed completely, and now that they've reopened they don't have that original sign way up at the top of the building, which I know has been captured in photographs.

So now here I am without the Stonewall to go to. And it was fun to explore other bars and other locations, and there were gay bars all over the Village, and I'm visiting all of them, and I'm making friends. Everywhere I go I'm making friends, people that I'm still friendly with today, some of whom have passed away from AIDS, some of whom have passed away from other illnesses, heart disease, cancer mostly, but others of them are still alive. And I've met a lot of people over the years in all of those bars, and then you would meet friends of friends, and friends of friends, and your whole social life would open up, and you would find that being gay is—and this was an expression way back then in the 1960s and popularized on television—it was fun to be gay and Jewish in New York City. It was a great time for us. All of the TV shows were using Yiddish language. The major stars of all the television shows were Jewish and so many of them were gay. It was a wonderful thing to be gay and Jewish at the time, and to be out to my family and to be out to everyone. It was really a great, great time to be a gay Jewish New York male.

Mark B: So coming out to your family went smoothly and relatively easily?

Michael L: Well, yes. It went relatively smoothly because they knew. They said to me things like well, we would prefer that you really would get married and have children, but if this is what you want, this is what you want. There was never any talk about sending me to therapy and changing me, never. They all kept saying we knew. We knew all along that you're gay. And cousins of mine even to this day said they were so happy because as the

AIDS epidemic began to become more and more serious my cousins were saying isn't it wonderful that Michael is dating people and he's not going to dangerous places—which is not true. I'll talk about that in a minute. They didn't want me going to—they wanted me to be dating guys that would be safe. Again, the coming out process was not difficult with family.

And I am close to my cousins, those who are still alive, and my brother, and sister-in-law and nephews and nieces. My husband is a nurse and when I would go to family affairs—because we've been married now more than 30 years—if I would go to family affairs and Ray couldn't come with us because he was working, his schedule varied every week, my nephews and nieces, who were little kids at that time, now they're in their 50s, but they were little kids like 13 or 14, they would say where's Uncle Ray? Where's Uncle Ray. It was accepted by everyone. I'm very fortunate. Very fortunate in that way. No one has ever disowned me or had a problem, other than well, gee, we were kind of hoping you would have children, but if this is what you want, this is what you want.

Mark B: Were you doing any religious practice in those days?

Michael L: So now we're getting to that part of the story. So now it's 19...so Stonewall closes in 1969 and in 1971, '72, '73 these were very, very lonely years for me in terms of being a Jew. When I moved to the Village, even when I was living in East Flatbush before I moved to the Village I

had lost all the contacts with the original shul, the original shtiebel, the original youth group that I had been to. I really had no place to go.

In East Flatbush my father was going to a synagogue there, and my brother, we would get together and we would all squeeze into a shul somewhere that my father would get a seat. And then even at times I would go to my cousins' houses in Long Island to spend the High Holy Days, but I didn't have a shul of my own. And that carried me through...East Flatbush, went into Manhattan, and then '67, '68, '69, '70, all the time and as I'm coming out now I'm kind of leaving my Judaism behind because I have no place to go.

I tried all of the synagogues in Greenwich Village—the Village Temple, the Brotherhood Synagogue. I'm forgetting some of the names. There were around four or five in the neighborhood here. And there's an Orthodox synagogue on 13th Street. I tried all the ones here within walking distance of my neighborhood, but I never felt comfortable. The second I would walk in, you know, you would go to the Oneg Shabbat program after the Friday night service and I sat there alone. And then someone would come up to me and say are you new here? I'd say yes. Are you single? I'd say yes. They'd say oh, do I have a girl for you.

Mark B: *[Laughs.]*

Michael L: And that was the end of it.

Mark B: Right.

Michael L: I said okay. I said well, thank you very much, but not at the present time, and then I never went back. And this is now an extremely important turning point. In 1974 it was just before Rosh Hashanah and I'm standing in Marie's Crisis gay bar on Grove Street in Greenwich Village with some friends I met there. One of them was Jewish. And he said to me Michael, did you know that there is a gay synagogue? And I said, what? Why have they been keeping it under wraps? He said well, they've been in existence for one whole year. They held a High Holy Days service last year in Brooklyn and they're holding a High Holy Days service this year in Manhattan, would you be interested in going? And he said to me I can't go, I'll be with my family, but why don't you go? It was really strange. So I didn't go on Rosh Hashanah though, because I went with friends from my building to the Village Temple which had rented space at New York University, the old Loeb Student Center, which has now been demolished for an extremely large and ugly building. But they held in their auditorium a Rosh Hashanah service open to all and I went with a neighbor of mine. But when it came to Yom Kippur I said I'm not going out to my family on Long Island, I'm going to try this gay synagogue.

It was located in the Church of the Beloved Disciple, which was a gay church way back in 1974 and on 14th Street just between, I think it was, 9th and 10th Avenues in Greenwich Village here on the south side of 14th Street. I can still picture it today, and it's so many years ago. And the service was held on the second floor. Because it was in a loft building.

You had to walk up a flight of stairs. And so I walked through the door and I kept saying oh my god, am I in the right place? I felt as nervous as I did when I went to the Stonewall for the first time. But there was no one else there walking in. I had to walk in on my own.

And as I walk up the steps I hear the sounds of a Jewish service. I walked in just at the right time. I walked in just as the Torah service was beginning, and as the Torahs were being paraded around the room in procession before, and then the Torahs are placed on the bimah table, the stage table, and the Torahs are read from. And there were a series of beautiful, beautiful introduction songs and chants and music that accompanied the Torah being carried around the room. It's a great honor, an honor that I participated in enormously as president of the gay synagogue years later, where I organized the Torah procession, and led it.

And the second I walked in, heard the music, walked up the steps and saw the Torah being carried around the room I said oh my god, this is like the Stonewall, I'm home again. And at that very service I met people, because now this is Yom Kippur morning and the Yizkor service is after the Torah service, the memorial service, and then I met people leaving for the break, and they said why don't you make sure to come back at night, we have a break-fast after the evening service because...

[Part 3.]

Mark B: Just a second. Go ahead.

Michael L: So Friday night services were unbelievable for me. I felt so totally at home in a synagogue, something I had not felt for so many years, since I was a teenager in the youth group at the Conservative temple way back in Brooklyn. It was the best of all worlds for me. The service was led by a Hassid, someone who came from a Hassidic family who had studied to become a rabbi but would not take Smicha, the official graduation as a rabbi, because he was gay and felt that it was a conflict. Remember, this was the 1970s.

He led the service and he had a substantial portion of traditional parts of the service in it to make me feel comfortable. We had the Psalms introduced in the Kabbalat Shabbat, Psalms introduced in the service. We had the silent standing prayer. We had a sermon. We had a lot of the familiar songs at the end of the service. And when the service was over—and again, don't forget, the service was in English—the prayers were all in Hebrew and it was in Ashkenazic Hebrew, not Sephardic Hebrew, which made me feel comfortable. Everyone spoke English and everyone had an opportunity to participate in the service because although he was leading it, he would call on people from the congregation to read some of the different prayers and other songs that he had compiled because we didn't have an official siddur, it was all, as we say, quote, unquote, “mimeographed” paper at that time.

And then following the service we had an Oneg Shabbat with coffee and guess what, Entenmann's cake. Whatever happened to serving

Entenmann's cake after services Friday night? The Oneg Shabbat and the Oneg Shabbat programs in our synagogues today, they have salads, they have healthy things like fruits. I want cake. And I'd love to start a movement saying the only thing I want on Friday night is coffee and Entenmann's cake.

This went on for many years, this comfortable, comfortable service for me. This was 1974, the Friday night right after Yom Kippur. And I was so comfortable there I made it a point to be there every Friday night. And some people have even said Michael has never missed a Friday night service since 1974, except, of course, when Ray and I went on vacations. I would always go to a service on a cruise ship if I could find one. We once even went to a Friday night service in Curacao, of all places, which was led by a rabbi who came from Brooklyn, so I felt comfortable there. But I tried never to miss a Friday night service because I felt so at home.

It was quote, unquote, "boys and girls," mostly men, some women. Practically everyone was gay. There were a few straight people. It was a totally comfortable home for me. By 1975 I was already an active member. I had joined several committees for different parties. We had a Purim party, we had a Hanukah party and dance, and we had a fundraising committee, and I joined that. We were renting space in the back of Church of the Holy Apostles, and we wanted a home of our own that we could have on a permanent basis.

And I joined that fundraising committee, and we raised a lot of money. We raised \$32,000 in one year, which made us very secure, at least for the 1970s, to be able to take space at the Westbeth Complex in Greenwich Village, which was at the very, very end of Bethune Street. And we took over a space that had been occupied by the Guggenheim Children's Museum. When the Westbeth Artists Housing Complex was complete they had put a series of galleries in the building in addition to the joint living-work quarters for the artists, but the galleries were never successful, and we were able to secure that space and rent that space for so many years until we moved into our own space two or three years ago in 2017 or 2018 on West 30th Street, where Congregation Beit Simchat Torah is located now.

And the main reason we always felt that Westbeth kept us in that gallery, the children's gallery, which was up the ramp in the back of the building, was because we were probably the only tenant who paid our rent on time. And that became kind of a joke, that they could count on us to pay the rent, and they didn't know if they could count on the starving artists to pay their rent.

So I joined many, many committees, and in 1975 I put my name in to run for the board of trustees. At that time we had a board of trustees, not a board of directors. It was the legislation that we filed when we incorporated and it required a board of trustees according to religious law. We have since changed that to a board of directors. I was elected in 1975

to the board of trustees and I became secretary immediately that year, and I served as secretary for two years, and was chair of the board for three years to 1980. And so I am one of the early, early, early leaders of the congregation and one of the very few—I think I'm the oldest surviving past president of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah.

Everything we did there in terms of our parties, in terms of our services, we spent many years preparing our own siddurim, the prayer books for the different High Holy Days and for Friday night. And the books that we published, the prayer books that we published were borrowed from us to other gay and lesbian congregations across the nation because we were trailblazers. In New York City, which is the location of so many Jews of all different stripes, conservative, reform, orthopractic, nonreligious, nonbelieving, we had so much talent that the prayers that we wrote for our own prayer books became known throughout the entire gay and lesbian community, and our prayer books were shared with the rest of the world because they were so significant.

I gave up being chair of the board in 1980 and left the board after being on it for five years because my duties and responsibilities working for the City of New York became very extensive. I was at this point in the management service, which I mentioned before, and I really needed to be able to devote my evenings, if necessary, to doing work for the synagogue, so I did not seek reelection in 1980. In 1990 I sought reelection for one year when Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum came to our congregation after a

search by a specially appointed search committee to seek a rabbi. And they worked for more than a year or year and a half.

[End Part 3; End of recordings.]