

I came to Detroit in
1911 when I was
five years old.

I was raised in a Jewish family here in Detroit. I lived a life of a young Jewish kid growing up. I went to Hebrew school, to synagogue regularly. My family had a Kosher house and ^{I HAD} that sort of upbringing. We lived first on Adelaide street which is almost downtown here. Then, over the years, we moved north to Brady, to Garfield, to Palmer, to Euclid. then across Woodward Avenue to the Westside ^{CLERMONT} - ~~Claremont~~, 12th Street. This is of some particular interest to what we're talking about because it was always the Jewish community living in the ghetto. You lived ^{THOSE} in housing which ^{is} always the cockroaches and ~~the~~ bed bugs. Rats were part of the enemy that you had to ^{BE} constantly ~~be~~ chasing and avoiding and destroying. It's always been a part of my recollection of my childhood over the years. To the south of us, as we moved north in this pattern, the ² black community lived in their ghetto. Even as I recollect at that time, there were always black people living near us, but in their own little ghetto to the south of us. As we moved north, it was always the ² black people taking over the old ghetto housing of the Jewish people. Over a period of years, the Jewish people began to move into new housing.

I lived this kind of a life, ² Jewish life within itself. I didn't know any Gentile people, hardly at all. You didn't have cars, and people lived near where they worked and near where the synagogue was and with other Jewish people, also where all the relatives were. It was an insular life for

I became involved in the (S...)
AND WITH NEARLY 100% IN
BLACK PEOPLE DURING THE 1930's.

many, most of those years as a child. Then, I guess when I started to go to high school, Central High School, which is the old Wayne University. I went through ~~there~~ and the experiences there were tied into the Jewishness of my life. Especially, ⁱⁿ being singled out as Jewish and not being able to participate in the life of the non-Jewish students who politically ran the school. It resulted during the last part of my school ⁱⁿ a bloody battle that occurred between the roughhouse Jewish guys who had an organized gang (pretty much, out of which grew the Purple Gang in the late 1920's. They were our friends because they protected us. This battle between the WASPS and the Jews ~~there~~ did open my eyes to the nature of our society. Where we lived too, in the process of moving from place to place, ^{THERE WERE} always battles going on, usually ~~in our neighborhoods~~, between the Poles and the Jews. If you ~~would~~. go past the border line, you were likely to get beaten up. If they came over, some of the guys on our side would reciprocate.

II

When the Depression came and I was faced with it, I began to find out that the work that I was doing as a lawyer, ~~all of it~~, was on behalf of small companies, credit companies in particular who were trying to collect money from poor people who had bought stuff on credit. The more I did that kind of work, the more I felt that it was something I didn't want to spend my life on. ~~Over the next 4-5 years, from 1929-1934 or 1928-37, 1935, I made the decision to leave. Unfortunately, all the~~ ?

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different things my partners were doing in terms of making money, didn't go very well, and we went broke. I heaved a sign of relief at that point of how to get out of this rat trap, this cage that I'd found myself closed in. Then I began to find something else to do on behalf of people individually... human beings, not companies. Not just to collect money from people who couldn't afford to pay it.

I joined a number of organizations ~~around that I could find~~ the American Civil Liberties Union, very early, probably in 1935; then the Professional League for Civil Rights; ~~and~~ the Civil Rights Federation.

I saw people, unemployed, walking around, doing nothing, selling apples on the corner. These were people who looked intelligent and just didn't have any money. I saw my father losing his source of work, business. Then I began to read about it and began to understand what was happening. Not only here or out east but all over the country. I began to understand that people were being destroyed for no reason that I could see that was logical or intelligent. I then saw what I was doing as an individual, as a lawyer. I was working ~~in~~ behalf of the system that was destroying the people around me. I began to realize that I was becoming a part of this system. I made a decision I didn't want that. I wanted to fight on behalf of the people who were being oppressed and do something to help them. ~~That I could use law for. I could always use law for purposes I didn't want or care for. It was this~~

~~juxtaposition of life as it was around me, and as I began to learn about it being elsewhere. Some of the cause causing it. Contrasting that with what I was doing, my conclusion really became strong that I was going to do something about this as much as I can. The only thing I began to feel sorry about was that I had wasted all these years when I could have been doing something that I thought was something. At the time it seemed like a lot.~~

In that connection, for the first time, I met Black people. I'd never met black people on any social level at all. In these organizations were black people as well as white people. The aliens, non-citizens who were living here, many of them from different countries, different personalities, different cultures. I began to find out all the wonderful things they could teach me and I could learn from them. Their ideas were so different and they helped me to expand my view of life and of the world at the same time.

As I began to engage in political work, I was asked to speak from time to time at meetings. I was invited to speak at a black church on a Sunday morning. It was a church service. I forget what the subject was really. What I do remember is I put on my Sunday clothes, which means my older clothes, comfortable clothes, not the suits that I would wear... a shirt and a tie. I thought, "well it's Sunday, I'll just go over there." It was a storefront church. I had never been in a storefront church. I walked in in a shirt and

trousers without a jacket and without a tie. As I walked in, I saw all these people all dressed up in their Sunday best. I realized I couldn't walk out again. I sat down and everybody was looking at me. I felt like shrinking up into myself.

4. Finally, the pastor saw me and called on me to say a few words on the subject. He introduced it by saying that Mr. Goodman doesn't understand the custom about Sunday church and has just come from home. I felt so embarrassed. I began to realize that I just didn't understand the culture of the Black community. I wouldn't have gone to a White church the way I was dressed, but I did to a Black church because I didn't understand. It was ~~the~~ lessons of this kind over a period of years that helped me to feel comfortable with Black people. My parents commonly referred to a Black person as a ~~Schwartz~~^{Schwartz}.

I'm getting into about 1935, 35 and 37. These were great years in the sense that there were tremendous movements organizing all over the city. Organizing labor unions, organizing tenants. Trying to get food for people in some fashion. All these were real political struggles. Of course, most important was the labor union struggle. This was known as an open employment town with no unions of any consequence. They had been kept out for years. The laws in the state were such to make it very, very difficult for a union to even organize. Peaceful picketing was not permitted. Injunctions would be issued, people put in jail for peaceful picketing. There was no way in which working people could peacefully

organize a labor union except in the small side industries. The only way they had to do what we now consider a right under the constitution, that we believe is necessary to a democratic society, was not possible in a city like Detroit. Other means had to be used. Usually it was by violating the law. Going on a picket, ^{line.} Trying to close the plant in order to force the employer to bargain for a contract. So they'd be arrested, put in jail ^{AS} for law breakers. ~~A~~ A few of us at that time, who were concerned with organizing labor unions, were doing much of the work. There were only a few lawyers who would do it. Labor unions were considered Communist instruments at that time. The press and the radio were all in the hands of the employers. They completely supported the employers. There was no alternate newspaper here to take the side of working people or people who were being evicted from their houses. ~~Or those who were protesting for food.~~ There was no way in which a lawyer could make a living doing that kind of work because none of these people had any money to pay a lawyer. In addition ^{you BECAME} ~~to becoming~~ a social pariah in your profession. There was no such thing as a labor lawyer. Labor law was under the heading of master and servant in the books.

It was in this kind of atmosphere that for me presented just the kind of opportunity I was looking for ~~--to~~ ^{to} get into a political, legal struggle. As a lawyer, I could do that. To fight within a struggle with which I identified myself against those which I thought were completely culpable and oppressive.

~~Through the use of my skill as a lawyer.~~ It was a wonderful opportunity[^] ^{TO HELP} Instead of using the instrumentalities of law to help evict people from houses, to help take away their furniture if they failed to make the payments on it, that sort of thing, foreclose on contracts.

To my parents, anything I did must be right or else I wouldn't be doing it. That was helpful in many ways because as things became a little tougher, the CIO was organized, and it was attacked all through the country as a communist organization. I remember billboards in 1936 all over the country during the election saying "Join the CIO and build a Soviet America". The attack was going on all the time. I was involved in handling these kinds of cases. My name got into the paper quite often. I was representing the CIO. My mother and her friends heard about it. I'll never forget, one day she came to me and said, very cautiously, "Ernie, friends say you're active in the CIO, ^t that you represent the CIO. I hear them tell me that they're no good. Maybe you should think about it". She was hesitant to criticize me so she put it that way. I realized that I couldn't give a dissertation on the nature of society, and that there are two sides to much of it, [^] the workers and the boss [^] and that we were in a struggle for something that the workers believed in. ⁴ So I said, "Look, mama, do you think I would do anything wrong". She said, "no." So I said, "don't worry about it." That satisfied her.

In our legal association, the National Lawyers Guild,

Black lawyers became members. The American Bar Association wouldn't take any Black lawyers at all. This was another difference between the established structures of our society and what was developing with the movement of the people under leadership at that time of Roosevelt. ~~Moving in new directions.~~ One important thing that happened to me was that in 1935, ~~I think,~~ I was campaigning for a person who had been a partner of mine at the time we dissolved. I said I would speak for him. I went out to some meetings for candidates for judge ^{WHO} were running. At one meeting in the home of a Black man, I spoke for my friend, and I listened to the other speakers. There were about six or seven speakers there that night sitting at a dining room table. The chairs were set in the living room for the people to listen. It turned out that there were only two or three Black people there. The fellow that called the meeting went upstairs and called some people so there were ten or twelve. ^{Hardly} any more than there were candidates speaking. One of the persons who came up to speak then was a man named Maurice Sugar. ^{THIS WAS} ~~AT~~ The first time I heard somebody speak about the nature of our society and analyzing it in a way that anybody could understand but which conveyed the important ideas. Suddenly it hit me that the only candidates I'd ever heard speak during this period were those that said, especially to Black people, "look I help Black people, I have a chauffeur who is a black man and so on." That's sort of the level of political speaking. This man came

out and talked about nature of society, Blacks and Whites. Why Blacks are where they are and Whites where they are. Why that need not be and how to change it. The power we had in electing him to be a judge. I soon found out more about Sugar. He was one of the organizers of the National Lawyers Guild. I went to see him. He was one of the two or three lawyers in the United States who were known as labor lawyers. He spent his life developing, fighting for, and working on behalf of labor unions. He had ideas about the nature of society. He knew all the great radicals of his time.

He then saw my interest in it and began to call on me to handle some labor work which I knew nothing about. I learned it in school and never read anything about it, but he said get into it and he'd give me some matters to handle. I began to handle them in 1936 and 1937. ?

In those days the police were solely under the control of the employers of this state. They dominated them top to bottom. In addition to which the employers had private detectives and agencies working full time for them. We called them later ^{we called them} as the strikes began, "goons, company goons". A lot of violence. A lot of it came from the police. So much of it had been directed to black people. They were treated differently. Let me give you something of that. In the first place, Black lawyers did not have offices in downtown buildings. Many Black lawyers of the community had their offices on Broadway just off Gratiot. They were treated in

court differently. They were usually called by their first name when circumstances didn't call for it. When Blacks, in the criminal courts, especially, ~~this is true~~, were witnesses or defendants, they were always called by their first name. Nobody ever called them Mr. so and so. At a point later on when I was handling those cases I began to call on Mr. so and so, and the judge would look up at you. He didn't stop you but he did wonder what was going on. Just like in the south at the time. Black lawyers had very few opportunities in practicing law other than criminal law, divorces perhaps, small business transactions perhaps. Other than narrow area that existed under the mainstream of the law. There were some very good lawyers who managed to survive at a somewhat higher level but that was very difficult. *

The treatment by the police of the black community was in complete disregard of their rights. They would arrest a black person, hold them for about as long as they wanted, a week, two weeks, sometimes even longer. If a lawyer attempted to get them out because no charges had been brought against them, they had not been brought to court, the police would transfer them from one precinct to another precinct and the judges would not acknowledge it unless you served the subpoena at the precinct where the prisoner actually was at the time. They played this merry-go-round.

All white policemen, they didn't want to go into the black community and try to start to solve a crime. They had

no communication with the black community. But they wanted to solve some crimes so as it wouldn't look bad for them. So they used the easy method... beat a confession out of them. That was typical. I don't know how many thousands of people went to prison for crimes to which they confessed but didn't commit. It must be thousands.

In those days you'd just try the man and put in a confession. The man gets on the stand and says I didn't agree to that, but I had to agree to that because it was beaten out of me. Most of the time the all white jury would believe the all white police force with the all white judges and all white clerks. I'd look through this confession and try to find something that I could prove was not true. Every once in a while, if you did that, it wasn't anything that made up for all the horrors of the past or what was going on, but at least you got some satisfaction in showing that these guys can and do lie. In those cases the jury would frequently acquit.

In the case of blacks, our attitude is based upon a culture which is deeply rooted in ^{the} Black equivalent to a ~~slave~~ the slave culture. That's so ingrained in our culture and in most of the other white cultures of the world. If you dig far enough you'll find it's still there in England, for instance. In Russia and even in China. All these instances arose. It's a part of culture as a whole, White vs. Black, particularly in western culture, probably more particularly the United States. England didn't have slavery. They had almost the equivalent

of it. France didn't have slavery. It wasn't based upon black and white either. We have to eradicate this 400 years of slavery which makes a distinction between the white and black color which emphasizes all the other attitudes and makes it something different from and greater than the kind of difficulty that people generally have in relating. It's also true in a different sense with Jews because of their religious tradition and background. The attitude of the Christian church toward Jews. The discrimination and oppression of Jews for centuries. Which included France and England, Russia, Germany almost all the other countries. Jews have a history which is ingrained into culture which cannot be eradicated in any short period of time, depending on whether you consider 500 years short or long.