

**Oral History of:** Eugene Driker  
**Interviewed by:** Susie Pappas  
**Date of Interview:** June 21, 2018  
**Location of Interview:** Max M. Fisher Federation Building, Bloomfield Hills, MI

Susie Papas: 00:00:01 This interview is being recorded as part of the Albert and Pauline Dubin Oral History Archives. My name is Susie Papas and today is June 21st, 2018. I'm interviewing Eugene Driker at the Max M. Fisher Federation Building in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Do you give permission to the Leonard N. Simons Jewish Community Archives to publish, duplicate, or other wise use this recording for educational purposes, and for use as deemed appropriate by the Archives?

Eugene Driker: 00:00:39 I do.

Susie Papas: 00:00:40 Thank you.  
Let's start with when and where were you born?

Eugene Driker: 00:00:45 I was born on February 24th, 1937 at Woman's Hospital on Grand Boulevard in Detroit.

Susie Papas: 00:00:55 And your parents were?

Eugene Driker: 00:00:57 Charles and Francis Driker who had been in America for 15 years prior to my birth.

Susie Papas: 00:01:06 Tell me, where did they come from, and what do you know about their early lives?

Eugene Driker: 00:01:13 They came separately from Ukraine. My father came from a fairly good size city called Zhytomyr about 75 miles West of Kiev. My mother came from a shtetl about 75 miles South of Kiev.

They each left in 1922 and arrived in Detroit separately in the late Spring or early Summer of 1922. My mother had a brother here, and a sister here. My father had his father here already, who had been here for nine years. The family had been separated for nine years while my grandfather was earning money to bring the rest of the family over. The First World War

intervened, the Russian Revolution intervened. So, it took nine years for the family to reunite in Detroit.

Susie Papas: 00:02:17

Did they ultimately all -

Eugene Driker: 00:02:19

Yeah, my father's family reunited here. My father, his sister, and his parents. My mother came here as a 17 year old orphan. She lost both of her parents in this shtetl. She went to live with aunt, the aunt's husband was killed in a pogrom and decided that it was time to get away from, what was then, the Soviet Union, now Ukraine. They set out on an odyssey to get here.

It took my mother about a year and a half because she didn't have the papers, the documents necessary to get here. So, it took her quite a while to get here. She was left alone in Romania for almost a year, waiting for the paper.

Susie Papas: 00:03:14

How old would she have been at that time?

Eugene Driker: 00:03:14

17.

Susie Papas: 00:03:15

17. How did your parents meet?

Eugene Driker: 00:03:19

They met at the Dwyer School, learning the English. Dwyer School on Caniff in Detroit. They were learning English at night. They met, and they married in 1924.

Susie Papas: 00:03:32

Do you have siblings?

Eugene Driker: 00:03:34

I had an older sister, Ruth. Ruth Kroll she passed away three years ago. And I had an older brother, Jack, Jacob Driker. He passed away two years ago.

Susie Papas: 00:03:49

Okay.

Tell me about your early childhood.

Eugene Driker: 00:03:57

Well, my parents struggled to make a living. Very classic immigrant experience. We lived in a densely Jewish neighborhood. The area around Dexter and Davison. I started ... My earliest recollections were living on a two family house, the upper flat of a two family house on Monterey and Wildemere. I went to the Roosevelt Elementary School. Then, just at the end of the Second World War, my father accumulated enough money to buy a house, a single home on Leslie between Wildemere and Dexter. We moved there, and I transferred to the McCullough School. So, I went to McCullough probably for

the second through sixth grades. Then I went to Durfee, and ultimately to Central High School.

Susie Papas: 00:04:51

Yeah, Central.

There were a lot of Jewish families living in the area where you were living?

Eugene Driker: 00:04:57

It was a very densely Jewish neighborhood.

Susie Papas: 00:05:02

And Central High was also?

Eugene Driker: 00:05:06

Heavily Jewish school. Not entirely so. There were gentiles, there was a group of African American students, but it was, I would say 70% Jewish, and I would say the majority of the Jewish students were the children of immigrants.

Susie Papas: 00:05:27

So, did you go to Shul or the religious school?

Eugene Driker: 00:05:35

My parents, obviously, came from observant backgrounds in Europe.

Susie Papas: 00:05:35

Yes.

Eugene Driker: 00:05:41

But they shed that when they came to this country. They were devoted Yiddishists. They were cultural Jews, much more than religious Jews. So, in 1927, just a couple of years after they had arrived here. 1926, they were among the founding families of something called the [Sholem Aleichem 00:06:03] Institute, a Yiddish speaking, cultural organization.

Susie Papas: 00:06:08

Okay.

Eugene Driker: 00:06:09

It was in that milieu that I grew up. It was not religious based, it was language based and cultural based.

Susie Papas: 00:06:18

Did you have a bar mitzvah?

Eugene Driker: 00:06:20

I did, because everybody in the neighborhood was having one.

Susie Papas: 00:06:24

So, where did you have that?

Eugene Driker: 00:06:26

At [Beth Shalom 00:06:26] on Dexter and Tyler, I persuaded my parents that despite their secular leanings, I didn't want to be the odd man out. I took lessons from a Rabbi, and I had a bar mitzvah.

Susie Papas: 00:06:42 In your family, it sounds like you were more of a cultural Jew than a religious Jew.

Eugene Driker: 00:06:47 That's correct.

Susie Papas: 00:06:49 And did your parents take any part in volunteering? Did they do anything ... well...

Eugene Driker: 00:06:57 Absolutely. As I indicated, they were among the founding families of this organization, which was a major part of their lives for decades. My father became active in the Landsmanschaft movement. Are you familiar with that term?

Susie Papas: 00:07:15 I've heard of it.

Eugene Driker: 00:07:16 Okay, Landsmanschaft simply means an organization of people from the same town. There were about 40 Landsmanschaftn in Detroit at that time. Jews from this town, that town, the other town. My parents were active, excuse me, in the Odessa Progressive Aid Society. They didn't live within 500 miles of Odessa, but I suspect that there was more cache attached to Odessa than Zhytomyr. They were active in the Odessa Progressive Aid Society, very active.

That led to my father becoming one of the founders of the Jewish Community Council in 1937. He was, I think there was a committee of 20, as I recall, that in the face of Hitler's rising prominence on the world stage, there was a sense that the Jewish community had to speak with a more unified voice.

Susie Papas: 00:08:25 Was this during World War II that the Jewish community-

Eugene Driker: 00:08:30 Right before the War. It was a few years before the War broke out.

Susie Papas: 00:08:32 Right.

Eugene Driker: 00:08:33 But the winds of war were palpable, okay, 1937.

Susie Papas: 00:08:36 You were very young during World War II?

Eugene Driker: 00:08:39 I was. I was born in 37.

Susie Papas: 00:08:41 Do you have any feelings about-

Eugene Driker: 00:08:43 I remember the War. I remember my brother painting the basement windows black. He was an air raid warden on our

block. There was a fear that Detroit, as the arsenal of Democracy would be a target of German bombers. So, my brother dutifully painted all the windows in the basement black, so that in case of an air raid, we could all go down in the basement, turn on the lights, but the house wouldn't be visible from the outside.

- Susie Papas: 00:09:15 Do you remember actually your Judaism having anything that made you afraid during the war?
- Eugene Driker: 00:09:25 No. I had a sense that there was evil being perpetrated against the Jews in Eastern Europe. But I didn't understand, obviously, the dimensions of it. I was five or six years old at the time.
- Susie Papas: 00:09:45 That's so interesting.
- So, you go to Central High, and it's predominantly Jewish. But, do you remember other things about Central High? Were you involved with anything? What did you do in high school?
- Eugene Driker: 00:10:04 I was a class officer.
- Susie Papas: 00:10:06 You were?
- Eugene Driker: 00:10:06 I was the vice president of my graduating class, and I was involved, somewhat, in the social milieu of the school. In the middle of my high school years, my father bought a candy store on Dexter and Richton, without telling my mother. She almost plunged a knife into his head. We all wound up working in the candy store.
- Susie Papas: 00:10:34 You must have all been very popular.
- Eugene Driker: 00:10:37 That took me away from two years of social life at Central. So, I think about the 10th and 11th grade, I was working from three in the afternoon, 'til 11 at night at the candy store.
- Susie Papas: 00:10:51 Wow. Wow.
- Eugene Driker: 00:10:53 It was an iconic candy store in the Jewish community. It was originally [Sosins 00:10:59] Soda. Ralph [Sosin 00:11:01] and his family owned it during the war, then it became Danny's Sodas, and my father bought it from Danny.
- Susie Papas: 00:11:08 Oh, how interesting.
- After you graduate from Central, you go to?

Eugene Driker: 00:11:18 Wayne University.

Susie Papas: 00:11:19 [crosstalk 00:11:19]

There's lots to talk about with Wayne.

Eugene Driker: 00:11:23 Well, you know, I've often quipped that my father said I could go to any college I wanted to, as long as I could get there on the Dexter bus. There weren't a lot of choices for us. My older sister had gone to Wayne, my older brother had gone to Wayne. My parents were struggling to make living. The tuition at Wayne was \$100 a semester. I had accumulated a couple thousand dollars of savings from working at the candy store. My father, I think paid me \$15 a week. I put it all in the bank. I worked at summer camps. I'd been working since I was 12 years old. So, Wayne was the obvious choice. So many of my friends from Central and the neighborhood went to Wayne. It was like going a little further. You took the Dexter bus a little further. It was a wonderful experience. It's where I went-

Susie Papas: 00:11:23 Were there fraternities or anything like that?

Eugene Driker: 00:11:23 Yes.

Susie Papas: 00:11:23 Did you do that?

Eugene Driker: 00:12:30 I did. I belonged to the Sigma Alpha Mu Fraternity. I was a Sammy at Wayne. There were not fraternity houses.

Susie Papas: 00:12:37 No.

Eugene Driker: 00:12:38 We met at the Hillel house on Second Avenue. A few years later, we bought a house on Hancock, we scraped together a few bucks to buy a house. But, we could never make it livable. It was-

Susie Papas: 00:12:52 More of a gathering place?

Eugene Driker: 00:12:54 More of a gathering place. Yeah. It was not a house that you could cook a meal in, or put a bed in. It was a gang's den, kind of thing.

Susie Papas: 00:13:07 That's ... What did you major in in college?

Eugene Driker: 00:13:13 I started in the College of Engineering. I was a very poor engineering student, and lasted a year and a half in the Engineering school. Then I decided, "This isn't for me." And I

dropped out and I took a degree in Math. So, I got my undergraduate degree in Mathematics.

- Susie Papas: 00:13:36 How did you get involved in the law?
- Eugene Driker: 00:13:39 It's a good question. I graduated with a Math degree, what am I gonna do now?
- Susie Papas: 00:13:45 Did you go to work after that, or did you go right on to school?
- Eugene Driker: 00:13:50 At that time, you could enter professional school after three and a half years of undergrad school. They had something called a combined degree. You could actually attend law school, and get your undergraduate degree after your first year of law school.
- Susie Papas: 00:14:08 Oh, interesting.
- Eugene Driker: 00:14:10 I was a January grad from Central, so I was always off kilter. I didn't know what to do, my brother-in-law, my sister's husband, was a lawyer. He said, "You know, maybe you should try law school." My mother's sister said, "You know, you like to talk, you're good at talking. Why don't you become a lawyer?" At that time it was not very hard to get into law school. Certainly not hard to get into Wayne Law School. I often quip that they held a mirror up in front of your nose, and if it clouded up, you could get in the law school. It was pretty simple. So, I went to law school.
- Susie Papas: 00:14:48 But, did you immediately love it?
- Eugene Driker: 00:14:52 I immediately loved it.
- Susie Papas: 00:14:53 You immediately loved it.
- Eugene Driker: 00:14:54 From day one.
- Susie Papas: 00:14:54 It was for you?
- Eugene Driker: 00:14:55 It was Bashert . Okay? It was perfect for me.
- Susie Papas: 00:15:00 That's good. That's great.
- Eugene Driker: 00:15:00 I'm good at remembering details and lots of information. My math background stood me in good stead. There's certain similarities, there's logical steps in the law, as there is in math. So, I loved law school from the moment I started.

Susie Papas: 00:15:21 How many years were you there? For three years?

Eugene Driker: 00:15:23 Three years. And the law school, at that time, was in an old house of Cass Avenue.

Susie Papas: 00:15:28 Interesting.

Eugene Driker: 00:15:29 The classroom was a garage. It wasn't quite Abe Lincoln, but it wasn't far from it. It was pretty much-

Susie Papas: 00:15:37 That a great image. I love it.

Eugene Driker: 00:15:38 Pretty modest quarters.

Susie Papas: 00:15:41 I'm gonna jump ahead to ... We'll go back to what you did after graduation, but I'm curious to find out at what point did you meet Elaine?

Eugene Driker: 00:15:53 We sort of saw each other at Central. She was a half a year behind me. I graduated in January, of 1955, Elaine was in the June class. I kind of knew her from afar. But, I think it was not until perhaps the end of my first year at Wayne, that one of my fraternity brothers was dating her, and he thought that she and I might make a nice couple. So, he gave me her phone number, I called her, and 59 years later, we're still married.

Susie Papas: 00:16:31 Wow. When did you ... At what point in your education did you get married?

Eugene Driker: 00:16:37 Let's see. I was finishing my first year of law school.

Susie Papas: 00:16:42 Okay.

Eugene Driker: 00:16:44 She graduated the College of Education and we got married within two days. She supported me for the next two years. She taught school in Livonia.

Susie Papas: 00:16:56 Okay.

Eugene Driker: 00:16:56 I finished law school. Then we moved out of town for a while.

Susie Papas: 00:17:02 Okay. So, let's hear about that. You graduate from Wayne, and you go to?

Eugene Driker: 00:17:07 Washington.

Susie Papas: 00:17:08 Tell me how that came about.

Eugene Driker: 00:17:10 In a quite a fluke. There was a note on the bulletin board at the law school, there was something then called the Attorney General's Program for Honor's Law graduates. If you did well, they had a special program you could apply for.

Susie Papas: 00:17:30 Yeah.

Eugene Driker: 00:17:32 I had done well in law school. I decided why not? Wayne did not have a placement office. The placement office was a bulletin board. And I saw the ad, and I applied, and I didn't think there was gonna be much of an opportunity because no Wayne grad had ever been accepted before. A woman from the Justice Department came, and I was interviewed, and on Christmas Eve of 1960, I got a telegram saying that I was offered a position in the Anti-Trust Division of the Justice Department.

Susie Papas: 00:18:09 How did Elaine feel about this move?

Eugene Driker: 00:18:12 Well, we both had some misgivings. Neither of us had lived away from home before.

Susie Papas: 00:18:17 Right.

Eugene Driker: 00:18:18 We were very young. She was 20 when she got married, I was 22. We were pretty green. But this telegram came about 6 weeks after John Kennedy was elected president. The chance to go to Washington at that point in history, for a couple of kids who were still riding the Dexter bus, was extraordinary.

Susie Papas: 00:18:43 Extraordinary.

Eugene Driker: 00:18:44 I said to my wife, "Let's do it." And she agreed. And we had to respond in a day or two. It wasn't like we had weeks to think about this. I said, "You know, why not, let's do it."

Susie Papas: 00:18:57 Did you say to each other, "Okay, let's do this for a few years, and then we'll come back." Did you always ...

Eugene Driker: 00:19:05 That's a good question. I think we thought we'd go for a year, and it would be like an experience. Going away to summer camp.

Susie Papas: 00:19:05 Right.

Eugene Driker: 00:19:15 We stayed three years, by that time we'd had our first child. The tugs of family brought us back, and professional opportunities

for me, I thought would be better for me in Detroit than in Washington.

Susie Papas: 00:19:32 I wonder if you feel the same way I do? I think that that experience of being away, away from family, making it on your own, is such a great growth experience. Did you find that?

Eugene Driker: 00:19:46 Absolutely. Especially for us. Again, we didn't got to Ann Arbor, or East Lansing, or Columbia, we lived at home during college. Neither of us had been on an airplane until our honeymoon.

Susie Papas: 00:20:02 I love it.

Eugene Driker: 00:20:04 Neither of us had been to New York until our honeymoon. To have a chance two years later, to move away and ... I was very close with my family, Elaine extraordinarily close with hers, we needed to have an opportunity to grow a little bit as a married couple in our own surroundings. It was-

Susie Papas: 00:20:26 I know.

Eugene Driker: 00:20:27 The professional experience was extraordinary.

Susie Papas: 00:20:29 And what an exciting time to be in Washington.

Eugene Driker: 00:20:32 Yeah. It was-

Susie Papas: 00:20:32 Were you there when Kennedy was killed?

Eugene Driker: 00:20:35 I was, we were.

Susie Papas: 00:20:36 That whole thing must have just been-

Eugene Driker: 00:20:43 It was the worst time in our lives, absolutely.

Susie Papas: 00:20:45 It was the best and the worst.

Eugene Driker: 00:20:47 Yes, it was-

Susie Papas: 00:20:48 Because I understand you met Robert Kennedy.

Eugene Driker: 00:20:51 Yes, we met Robert Kennedy, the day before our daughter was born. We were out looking at Dulles Airport, and we bumped into Robert and Ethel Kennedy walking the dog. He had beer parties for the new lawyers. I walked into the Attorney General's Office, which was the size of a football field. And he's sitting on his desk, not behind his desk, but, on his desk,

drinking a bottle of beer with pizzas all around. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. My parents were downstairs, they had just flown in from Detroit. Elaine had picked them up at the airport, and the three of them are waiting for me to come down stairs to report on my introduction to the Attorney General. My mother, an immigrant mother hearing this story, she was quite convinced that nothing was done at the Justice Department until Mr. Kennedy checked with Eugene Driker.

Susie Papas: 00:21:49

I love it.

Tell me what ... I know the draw of family brought you home. So, you come back, and tell me the next step.

Eugene Driker: 00:22:00

Our daughter was, let's see, born in January of 1963, so in the Spring of '64, we moved back. Part of the reason, frankly, was because when I talked to some Washington D.C. law firms, they never heard of Wayne. It had then become a state university. Wayne State University Law School. "Where is that?" Most of my colleagues at the Justice Department were from Harvard, and Yale, and Columbia, and such. "Who are you from Wayne?" I kind of made a value judgment that, I thought I would do better professionally back in the city where Wayne had some credibility.

Susie Papas: 00:22:48

Right.

Eugene Driker: 00:22:48

That and the tug of family brought us back. I joined a law firm in downtown Detroit, called Friedman, Meyers, and Keys. At that time, there was a pretty clear demarcation between firms that hired Jews, and those that did not. It was just starting to change. Just. But, I had interviewed with a couple of firms that had never hired a Jew before. I think one of them was prepared to offer me a job. But Friedman, Meyers, and Keys seemed a better fit for me, and I joined that firm, and remained there for three years.

Then four of us from that firm, Don Barris, Herb Sott, Bill Barris, David Denn, and myself, five of us, left and started our own firm. So, we've had this current firm for 50 years.

Susie Papas: 00:23:54

That's an interesting thing, that your firm has been together for 50 years, when you've seen so many firms that back in the day, also were Jewish firms that broke apart.

Eugene Driker: 00:24:09

Sure, prominent names that are on the wall of this building, right?

Susie Papas: 00:24:12 Tell me, what do you think made it so that your firm made it? Stayed together?

Eugene Driker: 00:24:20 That's really hard to say.

Susie Papas: 00:24:21 Okay.

Eugene Driker: 00:24:22 It's hard to know. We had very strong leadership. Herb Sott and Don Barris were very talented people. Very hard working. They set a certain standard of how things were done. I've concluded I've been practicing law for 57 years, and I think the most important ingredient is not what law school you went to, but who your mentors were. Who your teachers outside the classroom were. We had the benefit of having some very creative, dedicated, hard-working people. I think it infused the personality of the firm. Law firms have personalities.

Susie Papas: 00:25:09 Yes, I think you're right. Okay.

So, I'm going to move on. Oh, yes, I ... This is a great question. You decide to come back to Detroit and when you come back, people were starting to buy homes interesting the suburbs. But you decided to stay in Detroit, and you have decided to stay in Detroit all through the years. Will you talk about that a little bit?

Eugene Driker: 00:25:36 Yeah. I don't think it was some great, soul-searching effort. We came back to home. Where are we gonna live? So we rented a flat, right behind the old Adat Shalom on Curtis and Livernois. We were on London, that little street that backs up to Adat Shalom. We decided we better rent for a year, and we'll look around to see what to do.

Well, at that time, the movement, the perennial movement of our community North was underway, and there was a lovely area East of Livernois between Seven and Eight Mile Road called Green Acres. There were a fair number of homes for sale there.

We had exactly one car, and Detroit's Public Transportation System was then, as it is now, scant. My office was downtown, do I really want to live 25 miles away and worry about how to get down town? We liked the feel of the sidewalks, and play grounds, and old building, so we found a beautiful colonial house on Renfrew for \$19,000. I had gotten \$1,000 when I left the Justice Department. My accumulated pension money. The \$1,000 was sufficient as a down payment. So, we bought a house in the Summer of 1965 on Renfrew, and Green Acres, and

we lived there for 10 years, and loved it. Wonderful neighborhood.

Susie Papas: 00:27:21 Okay, after your daughter, did you have more children?

Eugene Driker: 00:27:25 We have a son.

Susie Papas: 00:27:25 Was he born in Detroit?

Eugene Driker: 00:27:28 Yes.

Susie Papas: 00:27:29 You raised your kids, in this house on Renfrew in Green-

Eugene Driker: 00:27:34 We did.

Susie Papas: 00:27:36 Okay.

Then 1967, comes along, and all the problems with the riots. That was a big time when people were leaving.

Eugene Driker: 00:27:47 Right.

Susie Papas: 00:27:47 You decided not to leave?

Eugene Driker: 00:27:50 Our neighbors, we lived at 20144 Renfrew. Our neighbors at 20044 Renfrew, exactly one block away, were Barbara and Carl Levin. Carl was then a young lawyer for the Civil Rights Commission. He ran for city council while we were neighbors. He started his act of public life. They became very close friends, and our kids became extraordinarily close. Across the street from Carl was a very prominent member of the African American Community, Arthur Johnson, who was the head of NAACP in Detroit for many years, and a Vice President of Wayne State University. These were lovely people. People who cared about the city, who cared about diversity, who cared about neighborhoods. There was never any thought in our mind that we wanted to leave these people whom we liked, and who our kids liked. Why should we pick up ... Where are we gonna run to?

Susie Papas: 00:28:56 So, where did your children go to school?

Eugene Driker: 00:28:59 They started at Pasteur School which was on Pembroke, West of Livernois. They stayed there for a few years, then they both moved to Roeper. They commuted to Roeper.

Susie Papas: 00:29:11 So your kids went to Roper all the way through?

Eugene Driker: 00:29:14 At high school they ... The high school years at Roeper, at that time, were a little shaky, so Stephen went to Cranbrook, and Elissa went to Country Day for the last few years of high school. But, Roeper is really in their blood. That was the school that gave them the values that they carry today.

Susie Papas: 00:29:46 What were some of the projects that you were involved in, in Detroit in those years? That you were passionate about?

Eugene Driker: 00:29:57 Well, I became involved in a number of activities at Wayne State University. Became active in the alumni association. I thought Wayne was an undervalued jewel. The whole university. I thought so then, and I think so now.

Susie Papas: 00:30:20 I think you're right about that for sure.

Eugene Driker: 00:30:24 I helped start the first fund raising effort at the law school, and things of that nature. At the same time I was interested in Jewish communal life, so I became active in the Detroit Chapter of the American Jewish Committee.

Susie Papas: 00:30:40 Tell us about that.

Eugene Driker: 00:30:42 It was an organization I knew little about. But, my sister became the Assistant Executive Director locally to Sherwood [Sandweiss 00:30:52] was the Executive Assistant-

Susie Papas: 00:30:54 What's your sister's name?

Eugene Driker: 00:30:56 Ruth Driker-Kroll.

She became quite passionate about it, introduced me to it. Its pedigree was certainly not congruent with my pedigree, right? These were ... The AJC was populated by German Jews, who had come to New York in the 19th Century, Wall Street, prominent investors, manufacturers, clothing merchants and so on. My family didn't come from that background. There was not a lot of East European blood in the American Jewish Committee. But, I think they recognized they had to change as well.

Susie Papas: 00:31:45 Right.

Eugene Driker: 00:31:45 The world was changing. Israel, by this time, was 20 years old. There was a movement to broaden the base of AJC. I found it an organization with a lot of substance. They had a lot of educational programs. They had a lot of very helpful

explanatory materials printed, materials about issues, current to the day. I liked it and I got involved in it.

- Susie Papas: 00:32:16 Were you involved also in the Jewish Community Council?
- Eugene Driker: 00:32:22 No. Elaine really carried, my wife Elaine, carried that banner for years, and years, and years. That was her turf.
- Susie Papas: 00:32:32 Then the Jewish Community Council became the JCRC?
- Eugene Driker: 00:32:36 Right.
- Susie Papas: 00:32:36 And now, they've-
- Eugene Driker: 00:32:38 Absorbed the AJC Chapter.
- Susie Papas: 00:32:40 AJC. What do you think about that?
- Eugene Driker: 00:32:43 I think it's inevitable. Jewish communal life, at this stage of our nation's history is very fragmented. It can't continue this way, there are not the resources. When you had a huge number of immigrants all trying to find their way in America, I think communal life, it was a certain pathway to acceptance, to status, to lots of things. That time is past in the country.
- Susie Papas: 00:33:24 Yeah, a lot of Zionism in those days, too.
- Eugene Driker: 00:33:27 Yes, yes. Just resources, the community doesn't have, I think the financial resources to have every kind of group. I mean, we've seen what's happened in recent years to the American Jewish Congress, different groups have gone by the wayside. So, the fact that there's some kind of rationalization of organizations, a merger, I think it inevitable and makes good sense.
- Susie Papas: 00:34:02 Did you belong to a temple? Where did your kids go to religious school?
- Eugene Driker: 00:34:10 Elaine and I tease one another that we had a mixed marriage.
- Susie Papas: 00:34:13 Okay.
- Eugene Driker: 00:34:14 I came from the [Sholem Aleichem 00:34:15], kind of cultural, secular Judaism, her background was [Shaarey Zedek 00:34:21]. So, what do we do? When we moved to Renfrew and our daughter was getting ready to start religious school, we joined Temple Emanu-El at 10 Mile Road and Oak Park, and we'd been members there for 55 years.

Susie Papas: 00:34:39 That was very comfortable for both of you? It was a-

Eugene Driker: 00:34:44 Right. It's a low key institution that got a strong social action component and it has suited our needs.

Susie Papas: 00:34:55 Okay.

So, I'm gonna go to something else. Because I could spend all day talking to you. Let's talk about your involvement with JVS.

Eugene Driker: 00:35:12 I knew very little about JVS. Ruth Broder, who was a friend, took me to lunch one day.

Susie Papas: 00:35:20 Do you know when? What year that was around?

Eugene Driker: 00:35:23 It was probably around 1990.

Susie Papas: 00:35:25 Okay.

Eugene Driker: 00:35:28 She started talking to JVS, she was active in it. Perhaps Brewster was too, I can't remember. She said it would be a good organization for me to get involved with. So, I think I went to a meeting to see what they were doing. I was kind of fascinated by the scope of the work they were doing. I had not worked with a social service agency before that. It was interesting to see what they did. I joined the board, and I stayed on the board for a number of years. Eventually succeeded Linda Klein as president in the 1993, 1994 time period. And I'd been an admirer of JVS since that time.

Susie Papas: 00:36:25 Okay.

So, I'm gonna go back to ... I want to ask you some questions about the city of Detroit. What do you think of this revitalization that's going on with Detroit right now? I know that there were past attempts to revitalize Detroit. What do you think about what's happening now?

Eugene Driker: 00:36:55 Well, it's rather stunning. Most of this I would not have expected to occur in my lifetime. I'm 81 years old. I'm still working, I'm still involved, I still care deeply about the city. But, as you know, in the last few days with the announcement that the Ford Motor Company is gonna revitalize the long vacant Michigan Central Station. That's something that I never thought I'd see in my lifetime, right?

Susie Papas: 00:36:55 Right.

Eugene Driker: 00:37:30 Few of us did.

Susie Papas: 00:37:30 Right.

Eugene Driker: 00:37:33 I was one of the mediators in the Detroit Bankruptcy which is about to celebrate, if one celebrates a bankruptcy, it's about to mark its fifth anniversary next month. It'll be the fifth anniversary of the bankruptcy. So, I spent 16 months working on resolving the bankruptcy with five other mediators. When we finished that task in, I think, in an extraordinarily short period of time, nobody ever thought it was gonna get done in 16 months. Elaine, my wife, was sitting with me in the jury box in the courthouse and Judge Steven Rhodes' courtroom in the bankruptcy court, as he announced his approval of the plan of adjustment. And I turned to my wife, and I said, "Geeze, I wish I was 25 years younger, because I'd like to see the next reel of this movie." Little did I think that the next reel of the movie would play out in the ensuing two, or three, or four years.

Last night, we were at the Federation's Israel Celebration on the riverfront, and somebody at the gate said they had sold 3,000 tickets. It wasn't that long ago that many members of our community would take great pride and tell you that they never come to Detroit. That they never go South of 8 Mile Road, right. They thought it was-

Susie Papas: 00:39:01 That was pretty amazing last night wasn't it?

Eugene Driker: 00:39:03 Yeah, yeah. Then, we spent some time there, we had a good time, and we went to eat in Capital Park, which, Capital Park, for 40 years, was a dystopian, absolutely empty place. We had to wait a few minutes to get into a lovely little restaurant, walked around the Capital Park area, and bumped into Richard Broder, Ruth and Brewster's son, who's a developer down town. Then we took a ride over to the train station, I just wanted to show my wife where this activity is going to occur, and there were cars all up and down Michigan Ave.-

Susie Papas: 00:39:47 It's exciting isn't it?

Eugene Driker: 00:39:48 ...all these restaurants. So, there's still a long way to go, we've got lots of problems in the neighborhood. We've got school problems, we've got problems of public safety. But it's a much different city now than it was five years ago.

Susie Papas: 00:40:03 It was interesting to go down town, and we parked in the parking lot at Franklin and-

Eugene Driker: 00:40:10 Atwater?

Susie Papas: 00:40:12 Riopelle?

Eugene Driker: 00:40:12 Riopelle?

Susie Papas: 00:40:14 Riopelle. And on one side, you see these beautiful, beautiful new condos.

Eugene Driker: 00:40:19 Right, right.

Susie Papas: 00:40:20 And as my granddaughter looked up she said, "Look at that castle is crumbling." So, you had these beautiful new places and you still have this work that needs to be done. But as you said, you never would have believed when you settled the bankruptcy that we would be going forward in such a way. Detroit is making wonderful strides.

Eugene Driker: 00:40:43 A tremendous come-back.

Susie Papas: 00:40:45 I assume you still live in Detroit?

Eugene Driker: 00:40:48 Yes, yeah.

Susie Papas: 00:40:49 Where are you living now?

Eugene Driker: 00:40:50 Same. We've lived in the same house for 43 years.

Susie Papas: 00:40:53 That's amazing.

Eugene Driker: 00:40:54 We live in Palmer Woods, near Woodward and Seven Mile Road.

Susie Papas: 00:40:58 Are you still on-

Eugene Driker: 00:40:59 Wellesley.

Susie Papas: 00:41:00 On Wellesley. That's great.

Eugene Driker: 00:41:01 Same house we've been in for-

Susie Papas: 00:41:03 Okay, so, let's go on.

In all of the volunteer positions that you've held, what accomplishments are you most proud of? We'll talk about volunteer positions.

Eugene Driker: 00:41:24 Well, there are really two, and they're really quite different. I served on the Board of Governors of Wayne State University for 12 years. That's the governing body of the institution. I owe Wayne a great deal, and I try to repay some of that debt through serving on the Board of Governors. It was very gratifying. A lot of work, lots of difficult problems. Many of which are exacerbated by inadequate funding, and anti- Detroit bias in some political quarters in the state. That was a very important part of my life. The 12 years from 2002 to 2014.

Then the other, I've been on the Board of Directors of the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst Massachusetts for 20 years. I've served as the Board Chair until last year, for five years. I love that. Got tremendous satisfaction out of that activity.

Susie Papas: 00:42:35 Well, how did you get involved with the Yiddish Book Center?

Eugene Driker: 00:42:41 Yiddish was my parents' native language. So, they each came to this country speaking Yiddish, of course, not English. Yiddish was the language spoken at home between my parents. They were not ashamed of Yiddish, they were not trying to bury it, or lose it, they were trying to preserve it. So, that's how they became involved in the [Sholem Aleichem 00:43:08] Institute, and it went to-

Susie Papas: 00:43:10 Is that a Yiddish?

Eugene Driker: 00:43:11 Strictly Yiddish speaking organization.

Susie Papas: 00:43:11 Is the Sholem Al-

Eugene Driker: 00:43:11 Yes.

Susie Papas: 00:43:11 Okay.

Eugene Driker: 00:43:13 So, I went to Yiddish school. I spoke Yiddish before I spoke English. Yiddish was my first language. I was able to read it, and write it, and was quite proficient in it. I was going to Yiddish middle school. On Linwood, across the street from Central High school at the old Workman's Circle building on Linwood and Web. But, then my father bought the candy store, and I had to give up, not only social life, but this schooling as well.

Then, a couple years away from it, I lost the feel for it. You know what language is like, you've got to use it.

Susie Papas: 00:44:04 Right.

Eugene Driker: 00:44:05 It seemed a little remote to me, and you want to become a Yankee, and you want to be like everybody else. So, foolishly, I let it go. Then year, year, years, years later, Elaine and I, through a strange set of circumstances wound up going to a Summer camp at Mount Holyoke College for a week, that the Yiddish Book Center was sponsoring. We met the founder-

Susie Papas: 00:44:05 What year was that, do you remember?

Eugene Driker: 00:44:05 1992.

Susie Papas: 00:44:05 '92. Okay.

Eugene Driker: 00:44:41 The founder of the Yiddish Book Center is a gentleman named Aaron Lansky, who dropped out of McGill University at age 20, to found the Yiddish Book Center. Got a MacArthur Genius Grant-

Susie Papas: 00:44:53 Did he come and speak to-

Eugene Driker: 00:44:54 He did. He spoke.

Susie Papas: 00:44:56 It was one of the most interesting, interesting lectures that-

Eugene Driker: 00:45:01 Well, he's become a dear family friend, as has his wife and two daughters. That reconnected me to the Yiddish language, to the Yiddish literature. Most importantly, to the culture that's embedded in those books.

Susie Papas: 00:45:19 So, were you able to pick the language just right back up?

Eugene Driker: 00:45:23 Picked it up, I'm still getting the Yiddish [inaudible 00:45:27] at home, and-

Susie Papas: 00:45:28 Did you have to study it again? Or you actually?

Eugene Driker: 00:45:31 I didn't, no, I took some classes with a small group here in Huntington Woods. A bunch of us took Yiddish classes for a while.

Susie Papas: 00:45:39 That's really so interesting.

Eugene Driker: 00:45:41 I don't have the fluency I had when I was 12 years old, but I can understand it.

Susie Papas: 00:45:49 So, besides ... Where is Yiddish ... Where is it in the world today? Besides the Yiddish Book Center?

Eugene Driker: 00:46:01 That's a good question. It's had a tremendous revival, because my grandchildren's generation want to know where they came from, and they've discovered to understand that rich cultural component, they've got to understand Yiddish. Either the language, or the literature in translation. The first Yiddish novel was written about the time of the American Civil War. Between then 1938, there were thousands of books of fiction, and poetry, and plays. It all got shelved because most of the Yiddish readers were killed in the Holocaust.

Susie Papas: 00:47:00 Wow.

Eugene Driker: 00:47:01 The notion was, when Aaron Lansky was trying to find Yiddish books for his course at McGill University, couldn't find any. He put a sign in a deli, "Wanted, Yiddish Books." The next day there were 75 books on the floor. He said, "What does this represent?" And figured out that all these aging Jews who had all these Yiddish books understood that when they went, their kids would go down in the basement, see all these books that they couldn't read, and would throw them out. So, he decided, virtually single handedly, to save this literature.

Susie Papas: 00:47:39 Yeah. Did your parents ever speak English?

Eugene Driker: 00:47:43 Oh, they spoke perfect English.

Susie Papas: 00:47:44 Oh, they did?

Eugene Driker: 00:47:45 Oh, yeah. They-

Susie Papas: 00:47:48 But they also could speak Yiddish.

Eugene Driker: 00:47:50 Yeah, they spoke and wrote ... My mother never had a day of schooling in her life. Not one day. My father graduated high school in Russia, in Ukraine.

Susie Papas: 00:48:01 Wow.

Eugene Driker: 00:48:02 But, my mother wrote an autobiography by hand and my father was quite accomplished in terms of the written word, and the spoken word.

Susie Papas: 00:48:18 I want to go back to your kids for just a bit. Where are they living? Do you have grandchildren and what are your kids doing?

Eugene Driker: 00:48:28 Do I have grandchildren? I've been waiting for you to ask. Our eldest child, Elissa, is a clinical social worker and she lives in Huntington Woods. Her husband, Jay, is a hospital consultant.

Susie Papas: 00:48:46 What is their last name?

Eugene Driker: 00:48:48 She uses the name Driker, Jay's last name is Zerwekh. His son Matthew Zerwekh is the new Rabbi at Temple Emanu-El, come again.

Susie Papas: 00:48:59 No!

Eugene Driker: 00:49:00 Yes.

Susie Papas: 00:49:01 Your grandson?

Eugene Driker: 00:49:02 No, my daughter's-

Susie Papas: 00:49:03 Okay.

Eugene Driker: 00:49:05 This is a second husband.

Susie Papas: 00:49:06 Okay. Yeah.

Eugene Driker: 00:49:07 My son-in-law's son, has moved from Kalamazoo to Oak Park to become the Rabbi at the Synagogue, the temple.

Susie Papas: 00:49:17 That's wonderful.

Eugene Driker: 00:49:19 So, Elissa, has three children from a prior marriage.

Susie Papas: 00:49:23 Yeah.

Eugene Driker: 00:49:26 Charlie is 24, and is starting a PhD program in philosophy at SUNY Stony Brook in September. Caleb is 21, just returned from a Spring Semester at the University of Havana. He studied in Cuba for three and a half months. He's at McCallister College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Their younger sister Rebecca, just graduated from the International Academy in Bloomfield Hills, and she's going to St. Olaf's College in Northfield, Minnesota.

Susie Papas: 00:50:04 Interesting.

Eugene Driker: 00:50:04 She'll be close to her brother in Minnesota. My son, Stephen, is five years, younger than Elissa. He and his wife are both doctors. Stephen is married to Jennifer [Bookstein 00:50:19], whose

mother went to Sunday School with Elaine. I went to college with her dad.

Susie Papas: 00:50:27

And where are they living?

Eugene Driker: 00:50:30

They live in Huntington Woods as well.

Susie Papas: 00:50:32

Oh.

Eugene Driker: 00:50:33

Couple blocks away from [inaudible 00:50:34]. They have two daughters. Sophie just graduated from Cranbrook and she's going to Tufts in the Fall, where her father went to school. And the youngest grandchild is Emma, who's 15, and she's a 10th grader at Berkley High School.

Susie Papas: 00:50:53

That's wonderful. Really, really. So you have a lot of family times together?

Eugene Driker: 00:50:58

Yeah, we live maybe a 15 minute ride away from our grandchildren, so we're very much involved in their lives. It's not getting on an airplane and flying to Chicago.

Susie Papas: 00:51:12

I know. So many...

I guess, I'll go back to the questions. Are you getting tired of this?

Eugene Driker: 00:51:12

Not at all.

Susie Papas: 00:51:24

Okay good.

Eugene Driker: 00:51:25

I'm fine.

Susie Papas: 00:51:25

So, who are the people that were most influential in your life?

Eugene Driker: 00:51:40

I think, first and foremost, were my parents. They were very solid citizens. I'm glad that they're not alive today, because they'd be in tears seeing what's happened to their beloved America. They would be shocked at the events of the past two years. They voted in every election. My mother lived to 94, she voted in every election until the day she died. They were devoted American's and patriots. They never had much money, they had a succession of small businesses. You don't make a fortune out of a candy store. They lived a cultured life, they lived a life of literature, and music, and friends. Friends and family were the coin of the realm, rather than cars, and home,

and stuff. They were not much on stuff. That had an impact on me, I think the greatest impact.

Then teachers along the way. The Sholem Aleichem Institute had a very smart principle named Moisha Haar. H-A-A-R. He was a real educator in the modern ... Had a modern outlook about Pedagogy and about Jewish life and so on. I liked him a lot and he enthused me to learn more.

I had some great professors at Wayne, and undergrad school, and then law school I had a favorite professor, a guy named Donald Gordon, who became Dean of the Law School. He and his wife became very close friends of ours. We traveled to Egypt with them.

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|----------------|----------|---|
| Susie Papas:   | 00:53:45 | I wanted to talk to you about travel. I wondered if you and Elaine were big travelers? And I also was interested in your traveling to Israel.   |
| Eugene Driker: | 00:54:00 | I counted up the other day for reasons I won't bore you with, that we've made two dozen foreign trips to five continents. Not a vast amount. We have friends who've been to 100 countries. But, we've had interesting trips over the years. Recent years we've gone to Argentina, which was fascinating, and way down to Patagonia, which was breath taking. We've been to Egypt. We've been to Kenya and Tanzania. We've been to Thailand, to visit a Detroit friend of mine. Italy a few times, France, Spain. Then 11 years ago, the Yiddish Book Center took a literary tour of Ukraine. So, Elaine and I started off on our own in Russia, in St. Petersburg and Moscow for a week, and then we hooked up with the literate tour of Ukraine. We spent about 10 days. |
| Susie Papas:   | 00:55:06 | Did you go back to any of the places that your parents were from?   |
| Eugene Driker: | 00:55:10 | Both of them. Exactly.  |
| Susie Papas:   | 00:55:11 | You did?  |
| Eugene Driker: | 00:55:12 | Yeah, that was very moving. Very moving. Yeah. I can't begin to tell you. Eugene Applebaum's father came from the same town that my father came from. I brought Eugene back a little jar of rocks from Zhytomyr, so that he would have a memento of that town.  |
| Susie Papas:   | 00:55:34 | So, what about Israel?  |

Eugene Driker: 00:55:38 Well, I had been there on four different occasions. Then, I decided for my 80th birthday, a year and a half ago, I really wanted to take the whole family. None of the grandchildren had been there. So, we spent quite a bit of time planning the trip, and all 11 of us went together.

Susie Papas: 00:56:00 How was it?

Eugene Driker: 00:56:00 It was fabulous. It was one of the great trips of my life.

Susie Papas: 00:56:01 That's what we're gonna try to do that for our 50th wedding anniversary. That was a wonderful trip.

Eugene Driker: 00:56:09 Very illuminating and I think the grandchildren got a great deal out of it. The first trip that I made there in 1979, the technology was seeing women packing java oranges on a conveyor belt. That seemed to be the height of their technological prowess, and when you see what's going on there now,-

Susie Papas: 00:56:36 It's amazing.

Eugene Driker: 00:56:37 ...it's quite stunning. Yeah.

Susie Papas: 00:56:39 (silence)

What do you see as the challenges of the Detroit Jewish community today?

Eugene Driker: 00:56:55 Well, I think the single biggest challenge is keeping our young people here. The Detroit Jewish community is, age-wise, I think, the oldest in the country, I think, other than South Florida. One of the reasons I threw myself into the bankruptcy so much, four, five years ago, was my own goal was to make Detroit a place where my grandchildren would want to stay. Unless we keep the young people here, there's gonna be 12 people who are gonna be able to drive at night, visiting 50,000 people in nursing homes. That isn't gonna work so well.

Susie Papas: 00:57:41 I think the kids are starting to come back. My daughter moved back, and my younger daughter's planning on it. It seems like everybody I've talked to has at least one child, at this point, that's coming back. I feel that that's-

Eugene Driker: 00:57:56 It's a good sign.

Susie Papas: 00:57:56 That's a very good sign. Very good sign.

Eugene Driker: 00:57:58 Well, there are jobs, there's excitement. There's ... Young people want a city.

Susie Papas: 00:58:05 And you want to know something else? And you know it from when you were in Washington. They want to be where family is.

Eugene Driker: 00:58:11 Yeah.

Susie Papas: 00:58:12 They really ... It's hard to ... It's exciting and fun to be on your own, but family is a draw.

So, I want to ask you a question, this is my question that I added to this. What would you tell your younger self from your vantage point today?

Eugene Driker: 00:58:40 On any topic?

Susie Papas: 00:58:41 Yeah, just here you are, you could go back and talk to your 16 year old self, your 20 year old self, your 30 ... What would you say?

Eugene Driker: 00:58:54 That's a very good question. That's a question that probably takes some thought. I'm not sure I could give you a meaningful answer.

Susie Papas: 00:59:03 Well, maybe you can call me up later and tell me that.

Eugene Driker: 00:59:07 Yeah, it's not easy to answer.

Susie Papas: 00:59:10 Right.

Eugene Driker: 00:59:11 There are the obvious answers. Well, spend more time smelling the roses, don't work so hard. Don't ...

Susie Papas: 00:59:20 Would you really not work so hard? I think you loved your work, or love your work.

Eugene Driker: 00:59:24 I do. I do, and I did. But it took a tremendous toll. My family paid a price for me being consumed by my profession.

Susie Papas: 00:59:37 But you're still working?

Eugene Driker: 00:59:38 I am, yeah.

Susie Papas: 00:59:40 How much time are you spending at work these days?

Eugene Driker: 00:59:43 When we're in town, I'm at the office ... I go in a little later, I'll go in at 10 o'clock instead of eight o'clock. Leave at four instead of six. We take some time. We have a small condominium in Northern Michigan that we're gonna spend July and August at.

Susie Papas: 01:00:02 Good.

Eugene Driker: 01:00:02 We spend some time in Florida in the Winter, so we take more time off, but with the electronic toys at our disposal, right, you can practice law from a cell phone, or an iPad and so on.

Susie Papas: 01:00:02 Yes you can, that is true.

Eugene Driker: 01:00:18 Which is both a curse and a blessing.

Susie Papas: 01:00:20 So, before we end. Is there anything that we didn't discuss today that you'd like to add?

Eugene Driker: 01:00:29 Only that the Detroit Jewish community is really a remarkable place. I'm not sure that everybody understands the level of care and support that our communal institutions provide. My former son-in-law, my daughter's former husband, Perry Ohren is the President of the Jewish Family Service. We were at his event the other night. I talked to Perry about the level of activity at that important agency, and I don't think every Jewish community has things like that. My wife's brother struggled with needs for communal support in Phoenix. And Phoenix is light years away from Detroit when it comes to a kind of deep communal support and activity that we have.

Susie Papas: 01:01:53 Well, we're very, very lucky, and I'll tell you, we're very lucky to have somebody like you in this community. You are very well deserved of that Lifetime Achievement Award. I thank you for spending this time with me.

Eugene Driker: 01:02:06 Thank you very much. My pleasure. Thank you.