

SUBJECT: Joel Gershenson

INTERVIEWER: Susie Pappas

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PLACE: Max M. Fisher Federation Building, Bloomfield Hills, MI

SUSIE PAPPAS: This interview is being recorded as part of the Albert and Pauline Dubin Oral History Archives. My name is Susie Pappas, and today is June 14, 2017. I'm interviewing Joel Gershenson 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 otherwise use this recording for educational purposes and for use as deemed appropriate by the Archives?

JOEL GERSHENSON: I do.

PAPPAS: Very good. Well, Joel, it's my pleasure to be able to meet with you today and have a conversation. I'm looking forward to hearing about your life. So, with that, let's begin with when and where were you born?

GERSHENSON: I was born on April 6, 1941, Women's Hospital in the City of Detroit.

PAPPAS: Okay. And who were your parents?

GERSHENSON: My father was William "Bill" Gershenson, and my mother was Sylvia Bronstein Gershenson.

PAPPAS: And what do you know about their early lives?

GERSHENSON: Well, my father came from a little Jewish shtetl in Poland called Gorshkoff[sp]. And my grandfather preceded him here. He came as a matter of necessity. He was—as I heard the story—a pharmacist. And one of his patients apparently was a Polish prince. And the prince was sick, and one of the folks from his family came into the pharmacy. My grandfather prescribed something. He took it home, gave it to the prince, and the prince died.

PAPPAS: Ooooh.

GERSHENSON: I have no idea whether it was the medication or not. But you can then understand why my grandfather scrambled to get out of Poland.

PAPPAS: I guess so.

GERSHENSON: So he came to the United States in 1904, and he landed in New York and stayed there. My grandmother wanted very much to join him. At that point in time, she had five

children. And she came across the Atlantic in steerage with those children and settled in New York. My grandmother was a Greenburg. And the Greenburg boys had come to Detroit. So they called my grandmother and said, “Why don’t you come here? You have family. We’ll take care of you.” So that’s what she did. My grandfather and my grandmother moved to Detroit.

PAPPAS: And what year was that, about, would you say?

GERSHENSON: I’m not sure, Susie. I really don’t know.

PAPPAS: Sometime after.... Yes.

GERSHENSON: But my grandfather, as I said, came in ’04.

PAPPAS: Right.

GERSHENSON: And my grandmother with the kids came in ’08. So I would guess maybe 1911.

PAPPAS: Yes.

GERSHENSON: Maybe something like that.

PAPPAS: Where did they settle when they came here, do you know?

GERSHENSON: I can’t recall offhand. I mean I know some of the places that they lived.

PAPPAS: Yes.

GERSHENSON: They came here, and one of their residences was in Highland Park.

PAPPAS: Oh!

GERSHENSON: On Grand Street. And they had a confectionery. So they distributed confections on the first floor, and then lived above the store.

PAPPAS: So your father—where did he go to high school?

GERSHENSON: My father went to Highland Park.

PAPPAS: Okay.

GERSHENSON: And he played basketball there. And he graduated from the school.

PAPPAS: So he had a brother that he was very close to as well, didn’t he?

GERSHENSON: Yes. In our family two brothers—my dad and his brother, Aaron—married two sisters.

PAPPAS: Oh, that's right.

GERSHENSON: So my mother, Sylvia, had a sister, Bernice, who married Aaron. And the girls' mother, whose name was Esther Bronstein, the three of them were as close as I could imagine a mother and two daughters being. So, in essence, we had an enlarged family of two married couples who were in one generation, and the mother and father of the two girls who were from another. So we always got together every week at our house or at Bernice's house. And the girls were always out with their mother running errands.

PAPPAS: Remind me about how many siblings you have. And if you want to, you can also talk about the siblings that Aaron had, because I know you all were very close.

GERSHENSON: Well, I had three brothers—had. Unfortunately, Richard has passed away. And we are very close in age. There's only seven years separating us between the oldest and the youngest.

PAPPAS: Who's the oldest.

GERSHENSON: I'm the oldest.

PAPPAS: Okay.

GERSHENSON: And we were lucky enough to grow up in a wonderful home, have wonderful parents. And I used to play with my friends when I was outside. And we had our own play group inside with my three brothers. So we did a lot of things. We played games. We reenacted television movies. We used chairs for horses in the cowboy movies that we recreated. We had a great time doing it. And as boys will do, we used to fight a bit. And when we couldn't find anything to fight about, we used to do wrestling tag-team matches.

PAPPAS: I know. I know. Boys sure like to do that.

GERSHENSON: Right. And we used to play rug football or knee football. So we were very active. My poor mother was the ideal woman to have a girl, and we drove her crazy. I'm surprised she wasn't prematurely gray. Or maybe she was. [Laughter] I don't know.

PAPPAS: It's hard to say.

GERSHENSON: But in any case, Aaron had a boy and a girl, and they were the same in age as at least one of my brothers. So we were very close. And Aaron was at our house or we were at his house playing sports and things like that all the time. Lisa did have a relationship. I had a nice relationship with Lisa, and she did with the boys. But, of course, she had her girlfriends.

PAPPAS: And her mother and her aunt.

GERSHENSON: Yes. Right.

PAPPAS: Okay. Did religion play an important role in your family?

GERSHENSON: In my family, no. My association with religion started at Temple Beth El, where my mother and father were members, which is sort of unusual because both my grandfather on my mother's side and my grandmother on my father's side were, at a minimum, Conservative Jews. My grandmother was a charter member at Adath Shalom. And my grandfather was at Shaarey Zedek.

PAPPAS: Oh, interesting.

GERSHENSON: I guess my mom and my dad had had enough of that by the time they were ready to have children. Now my dad was not religious, because his father had died when my grandfather was 42 years old. He had an infected bowel, and in those days they had no antibiotics, no penicillin to cure it. Well, they went to bury my grandfather. And, without any explanation to the mourners, they had them all throw shovels of dirt into the grave. Well, my dad did that, and he walked away from religion it bothered him so much. And the other thing that really turned him off is: He said, "Look, if there's a god, there is not a better human being than my grandfather whom God took." And living near us was a man who used to beat his wife on a regular basis. "And I don't understand why God chose the way he did between those two people." My mother, she felt that going to Temple Beth El, which is again where they were members, on the High Holidays was very important. So we would go with them to the High Holidays. My father reluctantly, but he went. And my mother.

PAPPAS: Did you have a bar mitzvah?

GERSHENSON: There's another part of the story.

PAPPAS: I know.

GERSHENSON: I was not particularly affected at all by my years at Sunday School at Temple Beth El. I guess.... I don't know. I didn't view it as something that was really important. The things that they talked about didn't really interest me. And I spent most of my time at Henry's Drugstore, from which I got a degree. [Laughter] And so when I was 11-1/2, many of my friends were being bar mitzvahed. And I knew that a bar mitzvah entailed gifts and a party. And I wanted some of that. So I told my parents that. Well, Temple Beth El didn't have bar mitzvahs until at least six months after that. So if I wanted to be bar mitzvahed, it would have to be at another Jewish institution. My grandmother was a charter member of Adath Shalom. So I was scheduled to go there for my bar mitzvah. I knew not a word nor even the Hebrew alphabet. So at 11-1/2, my mother and dad engaged an Orthodox rabbi to come and tutor me. I really liked that man. He was a wonderful man. His name was Mr. Baum.

PAPPAS: Okay.

GERSHENSON: And the one thing I felt so badly about was because he was an Orthodox Jew, he wouldn't drive on Saturdays. So he couldn't come to my bar mitzvah. But in any case, he was a very good teacher. And I learned what I had to learn by the time I had to learn it. I also was required to go to synagogue every Shabbat, every Shabbat that I could. And it was probably one of the luckiest things that ever happened to me, because I was mesmerized by Rabbi Siegel. He was a man who taught me to love and appreciate our religion. His sermons were filled with ethics and morality about our religion. And I sat there transfixed because he was so good at presenting the materials. And ever since then, I've been a Conservative Jew. And to be honest with you, I really enjoyed the warmth and camaraderie of a communal service on Shabbat.

PAPPAS: You stayed at Adath Shalom.

GERSHENSON: Yes, yes. Well, yes and no.

PAPPAS: Okay.

GERSHENSON: Let me back up and tell you about my high school experience.

PAPPAS: Yes. We were going to get to that. So good, tell me.

GERSHENSON: I went to Mumford High School for my ninth and tenth grades. Obviously Mumford was probably one of the five best high schools in the country. And for some reason or other, my mother thought that I wasn't studying hard enough. But you would have study halls at Mumford, and you could go in and you could get all—if not all—of your homework done. So I came home, and I went out and played.

PAPPAS: Right.

GERSHENSON: My mother had friends whom she saw socially, and one of them suggested that I go to Grosse Pointe University School with her son. So I did in the 11th and 12th grades. And it was really a very different experience for me because I had grown up with and always been associated with an almost Jewish environment. And to go there where there were only a handful of Jews and all the rest Grosse Pointers, was something that—at first I didn't know how to handle it. But eventually I learned that they were no different than anybody else, and we never talked about religion anyway.

PAPPAS: Right.

GERSHENSON: And while all the time I was there, they treated me as one of them, and I never ever had a problem as a result of my religion. Now, after saying all that, here I was in this Jewish-minority school. So my mother insisted that I come back, and I'd go through the confirmation years. What did I do? I wound up back at Temple Beth El. So for the 11th and 12th grades, I stayed there. Then I went away to school.

PAPPAS: Where did you go to school?

GERSHENSON: I went to Tufts University in Boston.

PAPPAS: Okay.

GERSHENSON: It was a small school, and I was drawn there by the idea that a small school like Guppus[sp] was perfect for me.

PAPPAS: Alright.

GERSHENSON: And the school, all total, had like 3500 kids, and that included both the undergraduate schools and the graduate school. So I knew everybody on campus, and it was a wonderful experience. Then I went away—as I said, I went away to Tufts—and I came back. And then I was free to go where I wanted. And Rabbi Siegel was still at Adath Shalom, and that's where I went, and that's where I've stayed.

PAPPAS: Right. So when you were in high school, did you ever do any BBYO or any of those youth groups? Or did you do anything in—you did go through confirmation, though.

GERSHENSON: Susie, I basically did nothing. And I suspect that was because my friends weren't involved in any of those organizations.

PAPPAS: I understand. So when you were at Tufts, what was your major?

GERSHENSON: I majored in political science because I was just interested in the underpinning theories among the nations of the world: democracies, totalitarianism, and everything in between. And that was the way to learn them. I took a lot of theory courses, and I took political history courses which showed me how those governments functioned and how they dealt with the issues that they were confronted with.

PAPPAS: So you enjoyed that.

GERSHENSON: I enjoyed it very much, yes.

PAPPAS: So when you graduated college, what was the next...I mean did you go right into a career? Did you go on for more education?

GERSHENSON: I had worked summer jobs in construction. And this was like from 16 on because I went to camp up until I was 16 years old.

PAPPAS: Where did you go to camp?

GERSHENSON: I went to Camp Hiawatha, which was run by my aunt, my dad's sister.

PAPPAS: Okay.

GERSHENSON: And I went when I was seven years old.

PAPPAS: Didn't we all?

GERSHENSON: I never understood why my mother wanted to get rid of me so young.

PAPPAS: I know.

GERSHENSON: But that was where I went. I had wonderful years of summer there. And when I turned 16, my dad, who from his background came from nothing and was a proponent of hard work early on so you'd understand the value of a dollar and what it meant to work, so he told us after we were 16 years old: "Boys, camp is over. Your extracurricular activities in summer are over, and you have to get a job. I'm not going to tell you what kind of job to get. But you must work." And I started working every summer in the construction business, because I just kind of liked it. I kind of enjoyed knowing how buildings were built. And so when I graduated college, my dad, at that time, and Aaron were in business together as commercial land developers. So it was just logical for me to go to work for them, and that's what I did.

PAPPAS: Did you like it?

GERSHENSON: I loved it.

PAPPAS: Oh, good.

GERSHENSON: My dad always made it so fascinating when he talked about it that all four of his sons wound up in the business.

PAPPAS: All four of the boys all went into the business.

GERSHENSON: Right. We were together for 35 years, and we never ever had an argument. We always said that, Look, if everyone didn't agree on the deal, we'd just pass. It wasn't worth destroying or even damaging the bond that we all had together.

PAPPAS: That's beautiful. So when you were a young adult, you were involved with Junior Division?

GERSHENSON: Right.

PAPPAS: As well as being a member of the Young Leadership Cabinet? Do you want to tell me about how you got involved in these?

GERSHENSON: Sure. The Young Leadership Cabinet—I'm sorry. The Junior Division I just walked into. I knew most of the people in the Junior Division because I grew up with them. And after that I was listening to Rabbi Siegel, and he gave a sermon on the eve of the outbreak of the Six-Day War. And basically what he said was: "You can do more than just give money." And one of the examples he used was: "You can go over and help out in Israel." So Lin and I picked up. And in January of 1977—I'm sorry....

PAPPAS: Was that like the first big mission that there was a big group of you that all went together?

GERSHENSON: No.

PAPPAS: No. Okay.

GERSHENSON: I'm sorry. In 1973 with the Yom Kippur War—

PAPPAS: Oh, okay.

GERSHENSON: That's when Rabbi Siegel talked to us. And Linda and I—I think I maybe pushed her a little bit—decided that we would go over to Israel to help. And we went out, and we worked on a kibbutz, which was only two kibbutzim from the Jordan border.

PAPPAS: Wow! Wow!

GERSHENSON: And we spent two months there. My work, I really, really enjoyed. I worked with the chickens, and I worked in the _____, which were the fish ponds. And they would harvest fish and package them up and send them to restaurants. Poor Linda was in the _____, in the children's kindergarten, and she was making chocolate sandwiches, which, you know, give a kid one, eat one; give a kid one, eat one. So when we came back from that experience, I had lost probably 40 pounds. And poor Linda had gained, I don't know, 15, 20 pounds. But from there, we took a UJA Mission. Now, we had just come off a kibbutz where we lived in volunteer housing. And if you hit the wall, the plaster wall, the plaster and sand behind the wall would fall out. When we got to the King David Hotel, we heard all these couples complaining: My room's too near the elevator. My room's too small. I don't like the view. Linda and I felt we'd died and gone to heaven. [Laughter] So everything's relative.

PAPPAS: Right, right, right.

GERSHENSON: And that was my first experience in Israel. When I came home, the fellows that I knew, like Stanley Frankel and Larry Jackeer, were already on the Young Leadership Cabinet.

PAPPAS: Yes.

GERSHENSON: And based upon I guess my experience, they asked me to join the Young Leadership Cabinet, which I did. And I've got to tell you that it was the most important organization I've ever joined in my life.

PAPPAS: Tell me more about that.

GERSHENSON: Well, it was comprised of a bunch of community leaders. So we were all kind of in the same boat. But I learned such a great deal from them because I hadn't really been in leadership roles in our community. I wasn't even in the hierarchy of the Junior Division.

PAPPAS: You weren't really even looking for that.

GERSHENSON: No, no. But between the programs we talked about, what we were supposed to do in the communities in terms of organizing programs, putting them on. Getting people to go to Israel, soliciting gifts for the UJA. And going to various locations on the map ourselves like Romania, Israel, Poland. We did it all. And the fellows who were on the Young Leadership Cabinet were the most wonderful guys. It was a serious commitment to them. We shared ideas, we shared ideals. And so it was just great. We had a wonderful, wonderful group of speakers who talked about all kinds of issues that were important to Jews. It was a wonderful experience for me.

PAPPAS: So let's go now into your experiences with the Soviet Jewry Committee. You were the founding chairman of that committee?

GERSHENSON: Susie, to be honest with you, I don't know what I was.

PAPPAS: Okay. Tell me about it, though.

GERSHENSON: But I must tell you that the people who really deserve the credit for starting any organization that had to do with the Soviet Jewry, two of them were Ray Scharfmann[sp] and Jerry Rogers. We were sort of—they were our protégés, and we sort of tailed after them. But again, returning back to the Young Leadership Cabinet, we heard a speaker talk about the situation, the desperation of Soviet Jews. So I think probably I raised my hand and said: "Look, we've got to do something about this." And one of my friends on the cabinet said: "You know, Joel, those who propose, do. So why don't you figure out what it is we should do and then do it." So after thinking about it, I said to myself, I think we ought to go to Russia. And the issue was to find some other couples who were willing to go. Well, Larry and Shelly Jackeer were willing to go. So it was two couples from Detroit. And then there were two couples from Boston, Massachusetts. There were some issues: First of all, the political climate was very dicey because in 1980, before we went, the United States boycotted the Olympics. And Russia was very upset by that. Secondly, getting into the country under those circumstances was very interesting. And one of the things we did to try to make sure that everything was going to turn out okay was to call Senator Levin's office. And when doing that, we talked with Ruth—I can't remember what her last name....

PAPPAS: I don't really know.

GERSHENSON: Oh, okay. And we asked her what's the worst thing that can happen to us if we go to Russia and if they have problems with whatever it is we're going to do there? Ruth checked, and she got back to us and said, "The only thing they're going to do is throw you out of the country." We figured if that's all they're going to do.... So we got our passports and our visas. And based upon the information that we received from the National Conference on Soviet

Jewry, we took religious articles, we took medicines of all kinds, and we took items that we knew would sell on the black market to give to the Refuseniks so they could have money. The Refuseniks who were people who opted to try to go to Israel and who made application. The government saw this—and this was right after the Yom Kippur War—so that the people in Russia knew about the bravery and the successes of the Jews there. And they knew that they had a home if they could get there. And when they did get there, if they could get there, life would be entirely different. Well, when they registered to go, the first thing that happened was the Soviet government fired them from their jobs. The second thing they did was toss the kids out of school. And they were completely isolated and ostracized. So you can see how difficult it was. And there was an anti-Semitic feeling anyway in Russia.

PAPPAS: I'm sure.

GERSHENSON: And it caused Russia a great deal of pain because who did they fire? They fired Jews. Well, who were the most intelligent, innovative scientists and engineers? The Jews. So they basically cut off their noses to spite their face. Well, when this happened to the Jews, they said to themselves, We don't even understand why we're being persecuted. They weren't living Jewish lives. So they said, You know, if we're going to get persecuted for this, let's find out what it means to be a Jew. So they started studying. They started practicing on a very beginning basis their religion.

PAPPAS: How interesting.

GERSHENSON: So that's why we brought in the religious articles that we did. And there were two different experiences that we had. The two Detroiters were involved with and followed directions of the National Council for Soviet Jewry. The two people from Boston were involved in the Union for Soviet Jewry.

PAPPAS: They're two different....

GERSHENSON: Two different—right. And, boy, they had two entirely different philosophies. Our group says don't ever get confrontational. Whatever they do, you let them do. Because the most important thing is that you get to visit the Refuseniks. It was just the opposite with the Union of Soviet Jewry. Contest everything. Don't take any, you know, nonsense or interference or obstruction by the customs officials. Well, when we went through customs, they took a look at, for instance, my articles, the religious articles, and they said, "Three prayer books! They're all the same? What do you need them for?" And I said, "No, they aren't all the same. Jews pray three times a day, and each time they pray they use a different prayer book." Which, of course, was nonsense.

PAPPAS: But that was really a good thing to say.

GERSHENSON: Right. [Laughs]

PAPPAS: You had thought that one out ahead.

GERSHENSON: Right.

PAPPAS: I like that.

GERSHENSON: So we brought prayer books, taleisim, kippots, Torah pointers, and...yes.

PAPPAS: Prayer shawls, yes.

GERSHENSON: And not only that. But they told us about people who were sick and what medications they needed. So we brought in medications for the people who really needed it. The people from the union did exactly what the mother agency told them to do. The men were taken to one room and the women in the other. They were strip-searched. And I'm telling you that according to them, they went into every orifice that you could possibly go into. And they took all their stuff away from them. So I don't know why they got these instructions. But it cost them. It cost them dearly. In any case, we got through customs. And that was our second hurdle: To get through customs without having anything taken away from us. During the day we would go with the entire group. There was a group that we were a part of. And we would go see the Kremlin and all the governmental houses and the museum and several other things. Cultural experiences. No military experiences, but governmental houses. And in the evening we would skip the activities and the four of us would leave, and we would go to try to visit Refuseniks. There were cabs all over Moscow. And we didn't really know how to stop one of them. We couldn't speak to them.

PAPPAS: Right.

GERSHENSON: So we got the bright idea of taking a pack of cigarettes with us, American cigarettes. And that was like finding gold. So when a cab came by, we just held up a pack of Marlboros.

PAPPAS: That was such a good idea.

GERSHENSON: Chesterfields or whatever. And the cab stopped, and we told them where we wanted to go. We would tell them probably a block or two from where we really wanted to go. And we went in to the appropriate apartment house. We went up to the Refusenik's apartment, and we knocked on the door. The whole purpose was to give them the articles that we had brought in. To talk to them about their experiences so we could understand what they were going through. What their jobs were before this all happened. And to tell them from our perspective that we are committed to them. And we will do whatever we possibly can with our government and world governments to get them up out of Russia and to go to Israel. That was a mission that we successfully carried out. One night we were in a man's apartment. His name was Jackeer, but we found out he was no relation to Larry Jackeer. And it was like two o'clock in the morning. We were ready to leave, and we said to them: How are we going to get home? I couldn't imagine that there was anybody out there. And he said, "I tell you what: You go out there, and you walk down the block, and there will be a cab waiting for you." Sure enough, there was a cab waiting for us. So the Soviet government knew exactly what we were doing. And thank goodness they never tried to stop us.

PAPPAS: Did you go more than one time?

GERSHENSON: We went every day we were there.

PAPPAS: No, when you were there.

GERSHENSON: No. One trip to Russia was enough for me.

PAPPAS: How long were you there when you were there?

GERSHENSON: I would say about eight days.

PAPPAS: Yes. And you felt like you accomplished what you were....

GERSHENSON: Yes. Now I've got to tell you that it wasn't a very safe feeling. I mean we weren't scared, but we were uneasy the whole time we were there. But when we went to bed at night, we figured our room was bugged. So we talked, and the last thing we would say before we pulled the covers up is: Goodnight, Comrade. [Laughter] Now one day—I should show you how this all worked in one instance. One day I decided that I wasn't going to eat the food. The food in Russia wasn't very good, except for their ice cream, which was so loaded with cream that it was just incredible. So I went up to the room, and I shut my eyes and started to go to sleep. The door opened, and somebody came in—a man—and he went to the telephone and he started unscrewing the speaker. So I waited until he really had this thing apart. And I sat up like I was startled in bed. And I said, "What are you doing?" And I mean he took one look at me, and it was Uh, uh, uh....

PAPPAS: He hadn't seen you in the bed?

GERSHENSON: Huh?

PAPPAS: He hadn't seen you lying there in the bed?

GERSHENSON: Oh, he thought I was asleep. And obviously he was coming to plant a bug in the phone. So as quickly as he could, he put the phone back together again, put the receiver on the body of the phone and left.

PAPPAS: Wow!

GERSHENSON: So it was an interesting, interesting experience.

PAPPAS: So when you came back to Detroit, what were some of the activities that you did for the Soviet Jews?

GERSHENSON: The first thing we did was report back to the council to tell them what had happened. And we wrote up a journal as to what we experienced and who we saw and what they told us.

PAPPAS: Yes.

GERSHENSON: Then we were asked as speakers—because this was such a novel experience—is to go around and talk to various groups, which we did.

PAPPAS: There in Detroit.

GERSHENSON: In Detroit, yes. And we convinced them, a number of them, to do the same thing we did: to go to Russia, to carry materials in that were Jewish in nature that the people needed. And they did. And they wrote up their experiences, and people would thank us. And it felt like they really performed a mitzvah. I mean....

PAPPAS: Who coordinated those trips after you came back. Did the Federation do it for you?

GERSHENSON: No. Federation had nothing to do with this. It was the National Council.

PAPPAS: Okay. Because I remember there were people going back and forth bringing things.

GERSHENSON: Right, right.

PAPPAS: Right.

GERSHENSON: And they just felt so good about what they did because it was really a hands-on experience to help Jews who were in serious trouble.

PAPPAS: Absolutely. So were you involved with the march for Soviet Jewry in Washington in December of 1987?

GERSHENSON: Right. That was one of the wonderful experiences that we had. There were any number of representatives from Detroit. And we were on that plane, and we went to Washington. And the Mall was swarming with people. I mean just packed. And there were a number of speakers, including Refuseniks who talked to us and who basically thanked, you know, their brothers and sisters for helping them out. And it was...as I said, it was such an emotional experience. Because everybody knew that Jews were hopefully on the verge of getting out. But there were some of us who I guess some people would say risked their lives. I didn't feel like I was risking my life. But some people probably did to help their brothers and sisters who were really in trouble. And that doesn't happen very often in the 20th century—or the late 20th century.

PAPPAS: At that point, then Jews were allowed to come out.

GERSHENSON: Yes.

PAPPAS: How did that come about?

GERSHENSON: Well, if you'll remember Senator Henry Jackson.

PAPPAS: Yes, I do.

GERSHENSON: Was very, very instrumental and very vociferous about letting the Russian Jews out of the Soviet Union. And he convinced the Congress that that's what they should do. And they passed a motion to, you know, _____. Apparently there were some political jockeying. Probably some things that the Russians wanted from us. And the *quid pro quo* for that was to let Soviet Jews out. So they came out by the thousands.

PAPPAS: Yes. We got quite a few of them here in Detroit.

GERSHENSON: Right. And so many of them went to Israel. And who were they? The scientists, the inventors, the people who were so instrumental in building the economy of Israel. And if the Russians had not been so anti-Semitic—which was an impossibility because they've got this anti-Semitism in their mother's milk; I mean this was the DNA factor—they would have been so much better off. Yet they couldn't let it go.

PAPPAS: Right, right. Well, that is really amazing. Were there other successes that you felt came from this experience?

GERSHENSON: Well, obviously, Susie, the fact that ultimately any Jew who wanted to leave was allowed to leave was all the success that anybody could ever want.

PAPPAS: That's true.

GERSHENSON: I had a wonderful opportunity to meet Natan Sharansky when he came to Detroit and talked. And I developed a relationship with a Refusenik who nobody would ever know, and his wife was suffering from cancer, and she was taking chemo. Well, I talked to Dr. Vee[sp] here who was a cancer doctor. And got his advice on what medicine and so on that she should take. And I communicated that to my friend in Russia. So hopefully.... And then we lost touch. So hopefully his wife recovered.

PAPPAS: What would you say...who are the most influential people in your life?

GERSHENSON: I have two right off the top of my head. One is my father. My dad was an immigrant who turned into a successful businessman by hard, hard work. An imaginative mind. And he gave back, which was so important. My dad always gave back. He was a DSR commissioner—Detroit Street and Railways with respect to buses and transportation. He was involved one year as the head of an organization called the Hope Ship. The Hope Ship took doctors who had a specialty to a particular country in the world that needed them, where people were really suffering. And the doctors had two aims: One was to cure as many people or treat as many people as they could while they were there. And the second purpose was to train the local doctors so when they left, there would be somebody to carry on. He did that for—he was

chairman, I think, for a couple of years with Henry Ford. And another thing he did was to build the Pontchartrain Hotel. Now my dad always told me, he said, “Joel, this is my gift to the City of Detroit for the life they’ve allowed me to lead and to become an American citizen and what that meant to me.”

PAPPAS: How interesting.

GERSHENSON: And then after my uncle and father died of cancer, my mother and my aunt donated a deep-tissue machine that helped to alleviate or destroy tumors, cancer tumors, to the Karmanos Cancer Fund—Society.

PAPPAS: So you said there were two people. So your father was one.

GERSHENSON: Oh, I’m sorry. Yes.

PAPPAS: No, that’s okay.

GERSHENSON: The other one was Rabbi Siegel. He taught me to love and appreciate religion—as I told you. He talked to me about the ethics and the morality of being a Jew through his sermons. And I got to know him, and he was a kind, gentle, inspirational leader. And he was responsible for Hillel Day School.

PAPPAS: Oh, wow!

GERSHENSON: Yes. That was his idea.

PAPPAS: It was a good one.

GERSHENSON: He was in the fundraising campaign. In fact I think between Rabbi Siegel and Rabbi Adler of Shaarey Zedek, I would venture to guess that we had the two most prominent rabbis in the Conservative movement living here in Detroit.

PAPPAS: You’re probably right. So is there anything else you want to add? You’ve had a very interesting life, and I don’t know if I’ve skipped over anything that you want to talk about.

GERSHENSON: I just want to—another thing about my dad because I just talked about his giving. He was so street-wise and he imparted such wisdom to his sons. He told us that I don’t care what you have materialistically, you’re no better than anybody else; because materialism isn’t what counts at all in the value of a human being. Secondly, every person has value. Third, you must work from the bottom up when you take on a job. And there were many other things. Don’t ever ask anybody to do something that you aren’t willing to do.

PAPPAS: Well, those are good words.

GERSHENSON: And you live by all of this teaching—at least I did, I think my brothers have. And I can’t tell you what a difference it’s made in my life.

PAPPAS: Well, thank you so much.

[End of Interview]