

1 ORAL HISTORY OF: Jack Robinson
2 INTERVIEWED BY: Stanley Meretsky
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5 SUBJECT MATTER: Jewish community involvement,
6 personal business history
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8 MR. MERETSKY: Today is Monday, May 23, 2005. This
9 is Stan Meretsky, and I have the pleasure today of
10 interviewing Jack A. Robinson.

11 First, Mr. Robinson, I need to have you approve on
12 camera this taping and to remind you that it will be available
13 for approved viewing by the Jewish Community Archives as part
14 of our oral history project. Is that okay with you?

15 MR. ROBINSON: I'm delighted to do that.

16 MR. MERETSKY: Thank you. Our videographer is Loren
17 Sherman. So let's start.

18 Jack Robinson is a well-known and respected member
19 of the Jewish community, and of the general community in
20 Detroit, where he's also very active.

21 Jack, let's start right at the beginning. Where
22 were you born and what are some of your very first memories?

23 MR. ROBINSON: I was born in Detroit, Women's
24 Hospital, February 26, 1930, and have lived in Detroit all of
25 my life with the exception of two years which I spent in the

1 army. That was just when the Korean War was drawing to a
2 close.

3 I was born near a place that I lived. I lived at
4 the time on Medbury and St. Antoine, and we lived there for
5 about a year and a half, and then moved to Tuxedo and LaSalle,
6 and then my dad passed away two years after I was born, and we
7 moved to Sturdavent between Lawton and Wildemere. They're
8 called duplexes today. In those days it was called a two-
9 flat. We lived downstairs. I remember the Jewish expression
10 was we had someone living upstairs, and they were called the
11 upstairsica. We lived downstairs, so we were called the
12 downstairsica.

13 **MR. MERETSKY:** I've never heard that expression.

14 **MR. ROBINSON:** Yes. A lot of expressions that came
15 up in my life that are Jewish expressions. Having moved in
16 with our grandparents on Sturdavent, it was myself, my mother,
17 my brother Irwin who is seven years my senior, and my sister
18 Francis who's six years my senior. Both of them are still
19 alive. Francis moved to Washington in 1952. My brother Irwin
20 still lives in Detroit, just as I do.

21 I say Detroit; it's metropolitan Detroit. Over the
22 years, moving from the Linwood Dexter area. After I was
23 drafted, we moved to Dexter and Collingwood into an apartment
24 at that time. I got married also in 1952. Then we moved to
25 Oak Park. Then the next exodus was to Southfield, and then

1 fortunately our company moved further north, and at that time
2 I decided perhaps we should move further north, and since 1978
3 I've been living in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and enjoying
4 it very much I might say. A dream, a great dream to live on a
5 lake and in an area such as that. So it's been exciting.

6 But the olden days on Linwood, Sturdavent, where
7 within about a half mile radius pretty much all the kids that
8 went to McCullough with me, that went to Durfee, and that went
9 to Central. Along the way sometimes I see some of them, and
10 we can remember the old songs that we had there at McCullough.

11 **MR. MERETSKY:** You mentioned on the phone that you
12 knew the McCullough song, which absolutely intrigued me,
13 because I followed in your footsteps with McCullough, Durfee,
14 Central, and I'm an old Dexter boy. As I told you, I even
15 named my company after my elementary school. You had
16 mentioned a few of the words on the phone. If you've got a
17 second, I'd love to hear some more of the McCullough song.

18 **MR. ROBINSON:** Well, I've never been much of a
19 singer, but as I recall the words, sort of a tune:

20 In the mornings at McCullough, the brightest sun appears,

21 In the mornings at McCullough, the greater years.

22 And it goes on from there with a lot more words.

23 **MR. MERETSKY:** I need to find out a lot more about
24 that.

25 **MR. ROBINSON:** Central High, "Our hearts are ringing

1 as we sing to thee today," and that went on quite nice. Good
2 memories.

3 **MR. MERETSKY:** I was quite a few years later, but
4 followed in those footsteps.

5 You mentioned some of the articles about the shul on
6 Linwood. What shul is that that you attended?

7 **MR. ROBINSON:** That was Congregation B'nai Israel,
8 and it was Linwood and Buena Vista in a storefront. It had
9 moved from Mullett Street, which is down near the Hastings
10 Medbury area where I was born, and it was called the Old
11 Mullet Street Shul. From there later on it moved to around
12 Ten Mile near Greenfield, and then sort of disappeared. It
13 seemed to have lost its attendees. The old-timers died out.

14 It was an Orthodox type of synagogue. I had my bar
15 mitzvah there, and I used to go to shul a lot more often than
16 I do today. Having been brought up with our grandparents that
17 were born in what we called the Old Country, Lukovich, which
18 at times was Russian, at times was Polish, at times was
19 German. It depended on who came through and who won that
20 particular war or skirmish or whatever at the time.

21 That neighborhood was quite unusual. It certainly
22 did bring about a lot of appreciation of what it was and how
23 fortunate we were to be living in America. Of course our
24 grandparents instilled that in us. As I said, I lived with
25 our grandparents.

1 My mother, who was also born in Lukovich. She came
2 here in 1919. She and her four siblings, two sisters and two
3 brothers, were supposed to have come with my grandfather in
4 1912. He came here to the Golden Medinah to pick the gold off
5 the streets and got involved with a pushcart and picking up
6 junk in the alleys. There wasn't as much gold as he thought,
7 so he wasn't able to bring them over right away. The war
8 broke out in 1914, ran through 1918. By then he had enough to
9 send for them, and they were able to buy steerage and come
10 over.

11 The reason I know it's steerage is I went to Ellis
12 Island about eight years ago to look up just where they landed
13 and how they landed. At the time I didn't know that a couple
14 years later I could look on the Internet and certainly do the
15 same sorts of research. But I did find out the specific boat
16 they came over and the type of transportation that they had on
17 that boat. That's something that they used to post at Ellis
18 Island on the records. So they came over in steerage. He
19 worked hard and was able to bring the rest of the family over.

20 The rest of the United States went through a lot of
21 problems, but we in the Jewish community have made progress,
22 and I've been fortunate to be part of that progress that's
23 been made over those years.

24 **MR. MERETSKY:** Tell me about the growing up. Who
25 were your friends and your mentors, and were you involved in

1 high school in some of the Jewish groups?

2 **MR. ROBINSON:** Well, growing up. There were
3 difficult times there, but I did not know they were difficult
4 times. We lived in a house with the family that I had, my
5 immediate family, which consisted of the four of us and then
6 my grandmother and grandfather, that's six, and I had two
7 single uncles. That's eight of us. There were three
8 bedrooms. And just to make things a little better for
9 themselves, they had a boarder. So it was a little tight in
10 that house. But I didn't realize that. I thought it was
11 great.

12 Eventually my grandmother died, two years later my
13 grandfather died. My uncle got married, the other uncle went
14 off to the war in 1941, and shortly after that, in 1943, my
15 brother went off to the war. So the house sort of became
16 empty with my mother, my sister, myself, and we brought in
17 some more boarders to help pay the rent and everything else.

18 The neighborhood was really quite unique because on
19 top of us lived Leo Greene and his family, Sally, who still
20 lives in town here, adjacent to us with Segals. Mort Segal
21 was a pharmacist and owned a drugstore on Seward and Hamilton.
22 Indirectly that's how I got involved in the drugstore
23 business. I started working for a gentleman by the name of
24 Nate Sossin who ran Sossin's Sodas on Richton and Dexter. It
25 was quite a neighborhood, a lot of apartments, a lot of people

1 all around us.

2 Working for Sossin's Sodas I learned how to become a
3 soda jerk, and I guess with that I had credentials to go to
4 work for Mort Segal on Seward and Hamilton, my neighbor. At
5 first I started just working there on Sundays. Of course this
6 was an increase in salary, too, because it went from 25 cents
7 an hour on up to 30 cents an hour. I worked there actually
8 all the way through high school and through college as an
9 intern in the pharmacy, and at the same time at age 16 I was
10 old enough to work in a retail store, in a ladies shoe store
11 on Fenkell and Livernois at the time, the Tamajian brothers.
12 So I learned how to sell shoes.

13 I heard that they were paying more in downtown
14 Detroit. I went to work for Baker's selling women's shoes,
15 and then at the same time working in the drugstore. And also
16 another company called Burland Shoes, which was on Library
17 Street between Crowley's and Hudson's. While going to high
18 school, while going to college I worked there on Mondays and
19 Saturdays because they paid 7 percent commission. If we sold
20 \$300 worth of shoes, that was \$21. That was pretty good. And
21 at the same time in the middle of the week I was able to work
22 at the drugstore. I think eventually I got more than 30 cents
23 an hour, but I had to work hard to get that education and be
24 able to become a pharmacist.

25 The main reason I went onto college is my family

1 kept nagging me. My older brother did not go to college, my
2 older sister didn't, so I was the first one in the family to
3 graduate from college here in the United States. My wife
4 Aviva also was the first one in her family to graduate. We
5 both graduated from Wayne State University. I graduated in
6 1948 and Aviva in 1954.

7 The neighborhood was just most unique. You knew
8 everybody. You would go to school and there were a half dozen
9 kids that you knew that you'd walk to school with. In those
10 days we had safety patrol boys, not girls. Finally in the
11 sixth grade I was able to become a safety patrol boy. I got
12 my AAA white belt that came across your chest and tied across
13 your waist as a belt.

14 **MR. MERETSKY:** A Sam Brown belt.

15 **MR. ROBINSON:** A Sam Brown belt. It felt like what
16 we call a real macher. I was able to direct others and look
17 after others. I very much enjoyed that. I think it taught me
18 some responsibility, not only for myself but very importantly
19 to look after others. Over the years that continued I guess.

20 **MR. MERETSKY:** Very interesting.

21 **MR. ROBINSON:** In the neighborhood you talk about
22 who lived there. There was Jerry Katinski who later became
23 Jerry Curtis. There was Steve Victor who was down the street
24 from us. Marvin Blake. Other individuals that were prominent
25 in the community. The Dobrinskys didn't live far. They were

1 on Cortland. The Hermelins I think were on Clemens if I'm not
2 mistaken. That also was near McCullough.

3 Along the way when we started going to Durfee, we
4 met other kids from Sturdavent, to Cortland, to Richton, to
5 Monterey, to Tuxedo, to Webb I believe, Collingwood. All
6 those streets that sound familiar. Today when you go back
7 they're a little different, but they're still the streets.
8 Narrow in those days, even narrower today.

9 **MR. MERETSKY:** After Wayne, and you graduated in
10 pharmacy, you went on into the army. What were your army
11 years like and where were you stationed?

12 **MR. ROBINSON:** Well, what happened, I was in school,
13 and as a result the draft was on at that time. However, if
14 you were going to college, you were exempt. After graduation
15 I had to notify them that I graduated. I also notified them
16 that I was married. I got married in 1952. I graduated in
17 June of '52, married in December of '52, and drafted by July
18 5th. They let me stay home July 4th. July 5th I was drafted.

19 The Koreans heard about that and the war ended in
20 August of that year. I spent a lot of time at Fitzsimmons
21 Army Hospital in Denver, Camp Pickett, Virginia. It was an
22 interesting stay in the army. I did not have to worry about
23 combat during those years.

24 Of course, being a pharmacist, they had a lot of
25 pharmacists. So they turned me into a medical lab technician.

1 After that they gave me a title of immunization officer, where
2 I gave shots. I was not an officer. I ended up being a
3 corporal when I finally got out.

4 **MR. MERETSKY:** So you had it relatively easy in the
5 army.

6 **MR. ROBINSON:** Yes, compared to the thought of many
7 then and even today if you're in the services, there's a place
8 where you have to go to fight. I was fortunate that I spent a
9 lot of time stateside as they say. Never did go overseas with
10 the service.

11 **MR. MERETSKY:** One of the things that I read about
12 you, that you were involved with photography in high school?

13 **MR. ROBINSON:** Yes. I was the vice president of the
14 Photography Club at Central High School. Before that I had a
15 desire and a big urge to become a photographer. I had the
16 square Brownie camera, and I graduated to the next type.
17 Before long I'd saved enough so that I was able to buy a Speed
18 Graphic, 3.25 and 4.25 Speed Graphic with the big flashbulbs
19 on top like we use now to light a room.

20 With that camera I was able to take some great
21 photos. Speed was no problem because you could stop something
22 as fast as 1/500 to 1/1000 of a second. I applied for the
23 position of staff photographer for the Central Student at
24 Central High School. I was accepted and for the last two
25 years I was the photographer. I enjoyed going to the games.

1 I guess I wasn't much of an athlete, but I was able to take
2 pictures of the basketball team and the football team and
3 baseball team and the games, and some of my friends were
4 playing baseball in those days, so it was fun in that
5 position.

6 Central High School also gave me an opportunity to
7 look towards being a leader in some areas. I was on the
8 reigning student council at the time and enjoyed a few years
9 there. I basically was excited about what was going on.

10 During those years also, when I worked in the
11 drugstore on Seward and Hamilton, there was a gentleman by the
12 name of Isadore Sobeloff, who was one of the first executive
13 directors of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit,
14 called the Jewish Welfare Federation in those days, and he
15 would come in every Sunday morning. I would reserve a New
16 York Times for him. In those days the customers would pay for
17 the New York Times one month in advance, and then we'd save it
18 for them. I think at the time the New York Times was quite
19 expensive. I think the Sunday paper sold for 25 cents, where
20 you could get the Detroit News, Free Press or Times for 15
21 cents. But that's how I found out from my employer, Mort
22 Segal, that that was Isadore Sobeloff. He was the executive
23 director of the Jewish Federation.

24 I started inquiring about the Jewish Federation and
25 what it is and what they did. I asked my mother, and she

1 said, Oh, those are very, very fine people. It's a good
2 organization. They do a lot, especially for poor Jews in
3 Detroit and people that can't get the help and type of care
4 that they need. She said, As a matter of fact, when you were
5 five years old, I used to take you to the North End Clinic on
6 Holbrook. I said, Oh, yeah, I remember, we used to go on the
7 streetcar.

8 We didn't have a family car. I didn't learn how to
9 drive until I was 19. The reason I learned how to drive was I
10 had sold at that time my camera, my enlarger, everything, so I
11 could register at college, and at the same time get a family
12 car. It was my car. I paid for it, and drove out of the
13 showroom on the Boulevard and 14th. It was Hettche Motor
14 Sales, a Ford agency. I got a 1949 Ford I remember. It had
15 an eight ball in the front, which I proceeded to bang up a
16 couple times, unfortunately. The car was very helpful.

17 Going back to the conversation with my mother about
18 the Jewish Federation, she said, As a matter of fact there's
19 one man there who's very active. He came from Lukavich. I
20 said, Oh, who is that? She said, Oh, that's Max Fisher. His
21 parents used to live in the same small city that I came from.
22 I said, Who else came from there? She said, Oh, there's that
23 fellow by the name of Ed Levy. A big fellow. He came from
24 there, too. And then she would point out other people, like
25 Julius Greenberg, who was a physician, or Louis Paul, and how

1 their families came from there as well.

2 She said, Maybe one day you can be active and do
3 something in the community. But first you've got to get your
4 education and move ahead. You know, whenever you do
5 something, if you can, if you make a good living, then you can
6 give some money away, too.

7 And of course as far back as I can remember, we had
8 the little pushka at home, the Jewish National Fund pushka,
9 and that was always very important. At the same time she was
10 prodding me to get involved in the community, she said, Do you
11 know that your grandfather donated to the Allied Jewish
12 Campaign? And I recall questioning how I would find out how
13 much he donated. By that time I was quite familiar with Sol
14 Drachler, and I asked Sol. We were printing blue books in
15 those days, and this was probably about 1965 or 1970. And I
16 asked him if he had a record of my grandfather and what his
17 giving was. So he dug up something from the thirties, and in
18 about 1936 or 1937 my grandfather donated \$5. And they had so
19 many other people who were listed there at the time. Most of
20 them were larger donors. The bulk of them were in the \$5
21 range, \$3 range, \$10 range.

22 I always looked up to my grandfather because I was
23 one of the youngest of the 13 grandchildren that he had, and
24 having lived in the house with him, I also became a favorite,
25 so whatever Jewish holiday it was, the kids would come over

1 and if it wasn't Pesach and it was milchik dinner -- that
2 means not meat but a milk dinner because our house was very,
3 very kosher. If it was a dairy dinner, he would pass out
4 pieces of Hershey bar to all of his grandchildren. There were
5 about 10 to 12 pieces in a bar, big pieces. I think it was a
6 full pound. When everybody had left, he would give me an
7 extra piece because there were still a few left. So I always
8 felt quite well treated.

9 Another reason I was his favorite is I could spell
10 his last name. His name was Aizikowitz. When my dad came
11 over, which was in also about 1912, as I'm told -- I really
12 didn't know my dad well -- when he first landed in the United
13 States, his name was Vetchurabin, which I have been told means
14 son of rabbi in Russian. He also felt that in order to be
15 successful in this country, he had to change his name. He
16 changed it to Robinson, which I guess was close to
17 Vetchurabin. So instead of sitting pretty much in the back of
18 the room, because if you recall in all the schools we sat
19 alphabetically, I was maybe the third row from the back with
20 the name Robinson.

21 There were a lot of good times we had in the old
22 neighborhood. The shul was close enough to walk to. During
23 those years while I was working at the drugstore and selling
24 shoes, in the summertime I was also able to work at what we
25 called Briggs Stadium. It then became Tiger Stadium, and

1 today it's moved elsewhere and it's called Comerica Park. If
2 you were 16 or you said you were 16, you could get in and
3 usher, and all it took to usher was a white rag so you could
4 wipe the seats. Sometimes somebody would even give you a tip.

5 When I turned and could prove that I was 16, I could
6 then work as a vendor at the ballpark, and not only baseball
7 games, but football games also. In those days the Lions were
8 great and they filled the park. The Tigers were great because
9 Hank Greenberg was there, Dick Wakefield and Hal Newhauser and
10 Dizzy Trout and so on. It was work, but it was really a
11 pleasure.

12 When I was able to become a vendor, they had a union
13 and I could not join the union, but they asked me to pay an
14 extra dollar, and I could then proceed to sell certain things.

15 The worst thing to sell was the fresh, hot-roasted
16 double-jointed peanuts. There wasn't too much of a demand for
17 that. The best item you could sell there was the hotdogs;
18 you'd make the most money. Or the Coca-Colas. They even had
19 them in bottles then.

20 Another item that sometimes they would permit the
21 lower level people to sell, such as myself, was what we called
22 bug juice. It was orange juice. It wasn't really a juice.
23 It was colored orange water, and it was about 10 cents a
24 serving with a top on it, and you'd go into the stands and
25 sell it.

1 A lot of good memories of that, taking the Lawton
2 bus and then transferring to the Trumbull streetcar I think,
3 and I would get there and get back. Or you could get there
4 with the Dexter bus also. You might remember the days where I
5 think it was 5 cents to get on the city transportation, and
6 you could get two transfers for a penny each. You could
7 really put on a lot of miles for 7 cents. Sure do miss it
8 today.

9 **MR. MERETSKY:** I'm a few years younger than you, but
10 absolutely parallel a lot of things you're saying. I followed
11 in your footsteps in a lot of things.

12 **MR. ROBINSON:** Well, it was a good neighborhood. It
13 brought up a lot of talented people in that neighborhood that
14 were eager to work and eager to get ahead.

15 **MR. MERETSKY:** Who were your best friends then?

16 **MR. ROBINSON:** Well, in those days it was Skippy
17 Segal, who lived next door to me. Marvin Blake was a couple
18 doors away. The Katinskys lived across the street. Also,
19 Austin Kantor, Audie Kantor. He's the insurance man that you
20 probably see around town with the waxed mustache. Very
21 successful. Upstairs was Sally Green and her sister, Anita
22 Green. The Bernsteins lived next door to us and they had
23 triplets. I think they were born when I was 10 or 11, and
24 that was quite a happening in the neighborhood. The Feldmans
25 lived there, the Sectors, who were quite active in town. A

1 number of people who went through life, worked hard, started
2 out with nothing and became successful, able to support a
3 family and move on, as I was able to do.

4 **MR. MERETSKY:** You went on to Wayne then. Or it was
5 also DIT you were at?

6 **MR. ROBINSON:** Actually I went to Wayne the first
7 year. They raised tuition. I went there and tuition was
8 about \$75 per semester, two semesters a year, and they raised
9 it to \$90. I found they had a pharmacy school also at the
10 Detroit Institute of Technology, which was on Witherell and
11 Elizabeth, downtown.

12 **MR. MERETSKY:** The old YMCA.

13 **MR. ROBINSON:** The old YMCA, which today is Comerica
14 Park. I heard that tuition there was going to remain at \$75
15 per semester. In addition to that they did not have any night
16 classes, where at Wayne I was going to some night classes,
17 which prohibited me from doing the work that I wanted to do,
18 because at nights I used to work in the drugstores, except for
19 Monday when I sold shoes and Saturday when I'd sell shoes
20 also. So I transferred to DIT, and I had three years there.
21 I graduated from DIT.

22 About six years later the DIT College of Pharmacy
23 was absorbed by Wayne State University. At DIT I was vice
24 president of our graduating class, and at Wayne State they
25 contacted all the graduates from the College of Pharmacy and

1 said you're now a member of Wayne State University. You're
2 eligible to join the Alumni Association. We'd appreciate it
3 if you'd do that. So I think for \$10 we joined the Alumni
4 Association. Before long I became the president of the Alumni
5 Association, and eventually I headed the Wayne State Fund,
6 which was exciting fund-raising and meeting other graduates of
7 Wayne State and asking for a donation.

8 I'm happy to say I just heard that Alan E. Schwartz,
9 who also was a mentor of mine -- I mentioned Max Fisher. Sam
10 Frankel was a mentor and continues to be today. I still visit
11 with him periodically, as I do with David Handelman, some of
12 the other people in those days. Nate Shapiro, really I guess
13 he was the pharmacist that I most looked up to.

14 I recall my mother saying to me when I started the
15 College of Pharmacy, there's a Jewish man that owns a lot of
16 stores around here. Maybe one day you'll a store. He owned
17 Cunningham Drugstores and Shapero's and Shettler's. I'm happy
18 to say that she did live long enough to see that I had a
19 drugstore and then two and three and four, and before I knew
20 it 225 I guess, something like that.

21 **MR. MERETSKY:** It sounds like you were always driven
22 to be your own boss. It was always there in your head no
23 matter what that you were going to own your own store and go
24 from there.

25 **MR. ROBINSON:** Well, that was one of the reasons

1 that I got into pharmacy. The family was sort of driving me
2 to go to college. I used to read the want ads to see what
3 particular fields they were looking for individuals in, and I
4 noticed there were always ads, anywhere from 15 to 25
5 pharmacist wanted ads. Here I was working at Seward Pharmacy.
6 Then I knew other individuals around town that owned
7 pharmacies, whether it was the Hammerstein brothers -- they
8 had one on Sturdavent and Linwood. So I knew them because
9 that's where I had to go to get things for the family. There
10 was Louis Bernbaum on Fullerton and Dexter. George Vee on
11 Richton and Dexter. And Mr. Farber on Elmhurst and Linwood on
12 the way to school across from the Yeshiva.

13 So many people that I knew in pharmacy in those days
14 and they all had drugstores and they had the chance to put
15 their name on a drugstore. And it just seemed like that would
16 be something that I would enjoy. So I got out of school, and
17 didn't have much money, and also having spent four years in
18 the College of Pharmacy, I thought ideally I could just open a
19 little apothecary and do nothing but fill prescriptions.
20 Well, that was being an idealist. That was in 1952.

21 By 1957 I became a realist and opened my first
22 store. It was 2800 square feet. It was in Pontiac.
23 Fortunately I was able to get that location. It was next to a
24 supermarket called National Foods. I had worked not only at
25 Seward Pharmacy, before I was drafted I worked for about six

1 months at Birnbaum's on Fullerton and Dexter. When I got out
2 of the service, I worked for Sam Pearlstein on Puritan and
3 Greenfield. Sam was one of the first guys that realized if
4 you located a drugstore next to a supermarket, you had built-
5 in traffic. And in those days the supermarkets didn't even
6 carry Band-Aids or mouthwash. So we were their supplier of
7 health and beauty aids and you'd get prescription customers
8 there.

9 So I worked for Sam, had good experience. He had a
10 soda fountain also. So I guess my dream of becoming a store
11 owner of an apothecary soon dwindled. I went from being an
12 idealist to a realist. So my first store had a soda fountain.
13 It was 2800 square feet. It was on the corner of Perry and
14 East Boulevard.

15 Another sort of area of idealism I had to drop was
16 the name of the store. Robinson is eight letters. Perry --
17 it was Perry -- I chose the name Perry, everybody knew it in
18 Pontiac, and as a result I saved letters on the sign, which
19 held me well over the years because in those days neon cost
20 \$75 a letter. My brother always said you sold out the family
21 name for \$225. But it worked out well for me.

22 **MR. MERETSKY:** It's really funny how these things
23 flow and how you get involved with them. To pick a name like
24 that, it's how or where do you pick these names from, instead
25 of using your own name. It's very interesting.

1 **MR. ROBINSON:** Well, you never know how life will
2 lead you in different directions. In the early '70s we went
3 public, in 1973. Shortly thereafter discounting became a
4 thing in the drugstores. If you recall, there was Revco, the
5 first discount drugstore, and many others that came around.
6 So we had to lower our prices and as a result we were not
7 showing the type of gross profit margins that we were before.
8 The prescription business was still holding up, but the
9 discounting was in the over-the-counter items.

10 As a result I searched around to see what we could
11 do to improve our margins, and decided I would go into the
12 auto parts business, only within the confines of our
13 drugstore. So we added another door to our stores. And by
14 then our stores are about 7000 to 8000 square feet and we
15 added auto parts. So in about 1975 I started putting auto
16 parts in some of the drugstores. By 1985 I had 255 free
17 standing auto parts stores, and we were in eight states. The
18 drugstores were just in Michigan basically. So we had to have
19 a name for them also. When they were in the drugstores they
20 were called Perry Auto Home Drugstores. Then when we had them
21 free standing, we named them Auto Works. We kept the same
22 red, white and blue as we had in the drugstores. Those were
23 always our colors.

24 And then along the way, looking for stronger profit
25 margins, we went into the health care business as well,

1 providing items -- it was called the home health care
2 business. And we had some units that would take care of
3 things that people needed at home, where they could come into
4 the smaller stores and acquire canes, crutches, walkers. We
5 would deliver to their home beds or oxygen tanks and items
6 like that. It was exciting, very exciting.

7 **MR. MERETSKY:** Tell me where you met your wife. I
8 think that's a very interesting story.

9 **MR. ROBINSON:** Well, I was going to school at the
10 time and I was very active in the Jewish pharmaceutical
11 fraternity, called AZO, Alpha Zeta Omega, and we had a chapter
12 at DIT, a chapter at Wayne State. We combined the chapters in
13 my senior year. One of the fellows was dating another girl.
14 Rudy Keller was his name as a matter of fact. Rudy said, Hey,
15 if you want to go out some night, let me know and I'll fix you
16 up with my girlfriend's girlfriend. His girlfriend at the
17 time was Linda Fuller. He didn't marry her.

18 So it was time to take my wife out, and that
19 afternoon I got quite sick. I knew I couldn't go out, and it
20 was rare that I got sick, but I was really coughing and
21 sneezing and totally exhausted I guess from working the long
22 hours and going to school. So I called a friend of mine, a
23 Jewish fraternity brother, and asked him if he would
24 substitute for me, that Rudy had a real hot date that I was
25 supposed to go out with, but I'm too sick to make it. So this

1 fellow, who will remain unnamed, took out Aviva.

2 By Monday morning I was feeling better. I saw him
3 at school, and I said, How was your date? I don't think
4 you'll like her. Then I saw Rudy, and Rudy said, Boy, you
5 missed a good time Saturday night. I said, well, I was so
6 sick, but So-and-so told me I didn't miss anything at all. He
7 said, No, no, no, he's wrong. Take her out.

8 I guess about three or four weeks later I went out
9 with Aviva and she was sort of quiet at the time and different
10 from a lot of the other girls. We continued dating. She was
11 17 at the time and I was 20. She graduated from high school
12 and went to University of Michigan. She was there for one
13 year and we became engaged. We were married in December of
14 '52. So it was pretty much two years that we had been dating.
15 That's what you did in those days; we dated. About seven
16 months later I went into the army.

17 **MR. MERETSKY:** So you don't want to tell us who the
18 friend was who took her out that one night.

19 **MR. ROBINSON:** No, I won't give you his name. But
20 Rudy Keller was the shadchen in this situation. This year we
21 will have been married 53 years. So I guess it was the right
22 move.

23 **MR. MERETSKY:** Yes. Certainly sounds like it.

24 **MR. ROBINSON:** Fortunately we've had three
25 daughters, three sons-in-laws, and six grandchildren.

1 **MR. MERETSKY:** One of your daughters I read is a
2 doctor.

3 **MR. ROBINSON:** Yes. Beth Swartz is a pediatrician.
4 She practices here in the Detroit area for Ford Hospital.
5 Then I have two daughters that live in Colorado.

6 Over the years we became skiers. As a youngster I
7 didn't know anything about skiing, but at age 37 the family
8 took a trip out to Boyne Mountain. We left on a Friday, came
9 back on a Sunday night. It was exciting. So we decided we'd
10 try again. Then friends of ours, Dr. Arthur Shufrow and his
11 wife Norma Jean, suggested that we go with them on a trip to
12 Aspen. When we went out there, we didn't know what was going
13 to be involved, but these were huge mountains. That was in
14 1968. We got in a class and learned how to ski.

15 Before long a good friend invited us to stay at his
16 place, a fellow by the name of Don Resnick, who's Resnick
17 Electric. It turned out that he was a landlord of mine at
18 store number 2. He invited us to stay at his apartment north
19 of Nell in Aspen. By 1973 we bought a condominium there. By
20 1983 our kids were married, and we decided that we needed a
21 house. We traded the condominium into a deposit on a home,
22 and we've had a home there ever since.

23 Skiing maybe 20 days a year, something like that.
24 This year we will spend one month in Aspen in the summertime.
25 It's a very relaxing place.

1 The Jewish community there is just beginning to
2 grow. We have the first chabad. The Lubavicher rabbi has
3 settled in town. A skiing rabbi at that. And of course we've
4 tried to be close to the Jewish community here and there. As
5 you know, it's been very fortunate for us that we have been
6 here, meeting so many people and being able to participate in
7 the community over the years.

8 **MR. MERETSKY:** What was the first Jewish
9 organization you got involved with?

10 **MR. ROBINSON:** Well, actually the first one was
11 Habonim. They had a meeting place on Linwood and Grand. It
12 was above a fish store I believe. I remember meeting there
13 with some of these older guys, David Mondry and Mike Zeltzer.
14 Also my mother was active in the Arbiter Ring. So we'd meet
15 some of those people there.

16 But from a Federation viewpoint, I think I got
17 involved because in 1949 the Alpha Zeta Omega, the Jewish
18 fraternity, was asked to have all their members solicited for
19 the Allied Jewish Campaign as we called in those days, and I
20 was solicited. I thought I was very fortunate going to
21 college, being a first year college student, being employed.
22 I had a few dollars. So I asked what do you think is right?
23 What are the other boys giving? They said, Well, we can't
24 tell you but what can you afford to give? I said, Do I have
25 to pay at once? They said, No, whatever you can give. So I

1 pledged \$3. I found out that I was the largest donor at the
2 time for a college students from AZO.

3 The next year a fellow by the name of Max Millman --
4 Max Millman and Harold Elias owned a chain called Max Drugs.
5 Max came down to school and said, You know that Allied Jewish
6 Campaign you contributed to, we would like you to head it on
7 campus next year, because we're getting older and we need some
8 younger people. I said, What does that involve? He said, You
9 just pass out these cards like you signed, and ask your fellow
10 AZO brethren if they will contribute. I said, Okay, but tell
11 me more about the Allied Jewish Campaign. I only know what my
12 mother told me about the North End Clinic, and that they have
13 a Jewish Community Center. I'd been to the center. They also
14 had a camp. It was called Fresh Air Camp in those days, and
15 eventually Camp Tamarack. I told Max I would accept it.

16 There was another guy by the name of David Dunsky
17 who had a drugstore in Pontiac. It turns out that he was the
18 chairman of the Pharmacy Group, so I would report to David.
19 And that's how I got involved, was in 1949. Then over the
20 years I got more familiar with the organization, working with
21 Bill Avrunin and working with Sol Drachler, and getting
22 involved from heading the fraternity at school, then the
23 Pharmacist Division. In those days the Professional Division
24 consisted of all professionals: pharmacists, doctors,
25 dentists, lawyers, rabbis, cantors, teachers, accountants, and

1 that was an area that I got involved in, and over the years I
2 just moved up in the ranks, and eventually became head of the
3 Professional Division, sort of followed in the footsteps of
4 guys like Sam Frankel and Alan Schwartz, Bill Berman, David
5 Handelman.

6 Another fellow from the drugstore business was
7 Morrie Karbel, who ran National Wholesale Drug Company. They
8 were suppliers to all of the stores.

9 Knowing all of these people that I first met through
10 working with the Allied Jewish Campaign, they became good
11 references when I had to get my first store and the landlord
12 wanted to know, well, how are you going to pay the rent? I
13 said, I don't know. I guess I'll work hard. The rent then
14 was something like \$1,000. You needed somebody to co-sign the
15 lease for you. I said, tell me what the lease is about. I
16 didn't know that much about it. I said, Well, why don't I
17 talk to my father-in-law. Maybe he'll co-sign it. So Abe
18 Freedman did co-sign the lease.

19 So I was able to rent this store from some people
20 who were active in the Jewish community at that time: Harry
21 Davidson of Linwood Pipe and Supply and Harry Sheffman. The
22 two old-timers -- I was 27 at that time -- they were probably
23 about 65 to 75, about my age now. They would come and visit
24 me once a month.

25 Well, Jack, how you doing? You going to pay next

1 month's rent? Yes, yes. I opened in July, and frankly in
2 December I called them, and I said, I'd like to not pay rent
3 this month. Why? What's wrong? I said, Well, I need to put
4 in merchandise for Christmas. I want to sell something other
5 than just the health and beauty aids and prescriptions. I
6 hear that you can do well selling other items, and if I don't
7 pay you, I can buy them and make a profit. Oh, okay. It
8 sounds as though you're a good merchant. We'll let you do
9 that. But remember, you've got to pay us double in January.

10 Well, sure enough, it worked out, and I got excited
11 about merchandising a drugstore. That store was 2800 square
12 feet, but before long -- that was in '57 -- I thought if I
13 could fill 75 prescriptions a day I'd be doing quite well.
14 After the first year I was doing that, and frankly I got a
15 little bored. So I found another store in town that was in
16 bankruptcy and was able to acquire him.

17 In those days I put in a soda fountain. He didn't
18 have one, so I did. Of course as you know, soda fountains
19 sort of dropped out of the picture by about 1965. I had four
20 stores by then, and we removed all soda fountains and devoted
21 it to other type of merchandise.

22 I was very fortunate that there were people in the
23 community that acted as mentors and it was a very exciting
24 community. It's even more exciting today. We went on from
25 Sol Drachler. We are very fortunate today to have Bob

1 Aronson, who's doing an excellent job. A lot of new young
2 leaders. Peter Alter is the president today. We had our
3 first female president, Penny Blumenstein, not too long ago,
4 and we're making great progress. Having a type of budget the
5 days when I was president of the United Jewish Foundation, I
6 never dreamed that we could be raising the type of dollars we
7 are now, and spending them very judiciously as the community
8 always has.

9 **MR. MERETSKY:** Jack, one of the things I wanted to
10 ask you about because of your activity with Federation was
11 your first trip to Israel?

12 **MR. ROBINSON:** My first trip to Israel was in 1966,
13 and it was a trip that was put together by Elkin Travel.
14 Elkin Travel was very popular then. The whole trip for my
15 wife and myself, which was one week including the buses and
16 the meals and St. Paul's fish and everything we had there,
17 cost us around \$1400. That was the whole week away, the
18 flight and everything. It was a great introduction to Israel.

19 My first language was Yiddish because we lived with
20 our grandparents and they spoke Yiddish, and they spoke to my
21 mother and uncles in Yiddish, and of course they figured we
22 wouldn't know what they're saying. But that was the first
23 language I learned. When I started McCullough I didn't know
24 what a spoon was. It was a leffel. A knife was a messer. I
25 just did not have a full grasp of the English language.

1 So when I got to Israel I could speak to most of the
2 people there because in '66 many of them knew Yiddish. Today
3 they don't know it as well. I could speak to the telephone
4 line man or the guy coming out of the street sewer or piling
5 bricks; most folk spoke Yiddish. So I had a great trip then
6 in '66.

7 Recently having been there -- let's see, it was
8 after the Yehudah Street bomber, and that was December of 2002
9 or 2001. Anyway they don't speak Yiddish there as much
10 anymore, but the first trip was in '66.

11 I went back there after the Six Day War, which was
12 June 6, 1967. It was after the Six Day War and after the
13 riots here. So it was towards the end of the year. I then
14 went back again in '68. We were there in about '72.

15 Then there was the Yom Kippur War in '73. We went
16 there afterwards in '74. I remember going to the Bar Lev
17 Line, which is along the Suez Canal. It was named after
18 General Bar Lev. They flew us there from Tel Aviv. It was
19 quite an interesting flight. In those days they took us up to
20 the area between Israel and Syria in the Golan Heights. That
21 was another trip that we took.

22 And there were a few more in between. I'll never
23 forget the 1984 trip. That was very, very moving because I
24 remember going to Israel where things were so lively, and I
25 was chairman of the Allied Jewish Campaign that year, and led

1 a group that was combined with another group throughout the
2 country. The leaders of the groups were all chair people of
3 the campaign. It was quite a difference from leaving Israel
4 where things were glowing and beaming and the country was
5 flourishing, and it was so exciting and nothing but the future
6 ahead of us, and going to Poland, just getting into the
7 airport in Warsaw, and maybe one out of six fluorescent bulbs
8 were burning. The rest in this Communist country were not
9 lit. The bulbs were there but they were burned out.

10 From there we flew to Krakow and I remember being on
11 a plane, and we weren't permitted to stand up on the plane or
12 leave our seats. We were told you will sit, and that's it,
13 and they had the Communist officers, about three of them,
14 covering the different lengths of the plane, and they were
15 patrolling with their rifles at hand, and we just could not
16 get up. There were a lot of highjackings going on at that
17 time.

18 When we got to Krakow, then it was Bergen Belsen,
19 Auschwitz, and going from this great uplifting feeling in
20 Israel, it was such a dramatic difference to the death place
21 of so many of our brethren.

22 **MR. MERETSKY:** Did you visit any of the villages
23 that your family came from?

24 **MR. ROBINSON:** I visited Vishkov, which is outside
25 of Warsaw, and that's where Aviva's family came from. Her dad

1 and mother came from there.

2 Her dad came to this country after trying to stay
3 out of the army. He and a fellow by the name of Max Bross and
4 other fellow by the name of Mondry, David Mondry's father, all
5 came from Vishkov. They of course had the Vishkover Aid
6 Society, just like our family came from Lukovich, and we had
7 the Lukovicher Aid Society. We used to meet at the Jericho
8 Temple on Clairmont between Linwood and Lawton. It was on the
9 south side. I remember taking a streetcar there all the time.

10 I visited Vishkov. When I met my wife, I went to
11 the Viskhover Aid Society meeting, and they were all Jews, and
12 they were all short, and they were the smartest Jews I've ever
13 met. Short and smart.

14 Of course the Mondrys became very successful, the
15 Brosses successful. One was Highland Furniture, the other one
16 was Highland Super Stores. They were both in Highland Park.
17 My father started a millinery store, also one in Highland Park
18 and one in Hamtramck. They were very ambitious, energetic
19 people from Vishkov and from Lukovich also. Fortunately for
20 Detroit we've been that way.

21 The visits to Israel, I think it's so important that
22 we continue doing that with the new generation. You just get
23 a feel for what the Jewish people are about and what they're
24 for, and it's been very exciting, just meeting people and
25 working for a cause and trying to stay together under all the

1 tough situations that we as a people have faced throughout the
2 years.

3 **MR. MERETSKY:** I loved you line in one of your
4 speeches about the elephant, how different groups see the
5 elephant. Do you want to comment on that?

6 **MR. ROBINSON:** The question was asked from a group
7 of three. The gentleman from Great Britain said, well, when I
8 think of an elephant, I think of hunting. Then they asked the
9 Indian fellow, what do you think of when you think of an
10 elephant? He said, well, I think of an elephant as one who
11 can do a lot of work for us. And the third one the Jewish
12 response was when I think of an elephant, I wonder whether
13 he's Jewish. I think it was something like that.

14 **MR. MERETSKY:** I'll dig it up for you.

15 **MR. ROBINSON:** If he's an elephant, we must solicit
16 him.

17 **MR. MERETSKY:** You've also been involved in many
18 non-Jewish groups: Detroit Institute of Arts, the Detroit
19 Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra Hall. You were involved in the
20 saving of Orchestra Hall.

21 **MR. ROBINSON:** Well, I think it stems from the
22 Jewish organizations. Being active in the community you
23 become known. Certainly my first loyalty was to the Jewish
24 Federation of Metropolitan Detroit and the Fresh Air Society
25 and the Jewish Community Center, and at one time I was active

1 with the Jewish Family Service and Jewish Vocational Service.
2 I was not active there, but all of our agencies, especially
3 the Old Folks Home. I became one of the original founding
4 members of Jewish Federation Apartments with Sam Hechtman and
5 Joe Jackier. At the time I was also on the board of Jewish
6 Family Service and Edythe Jackier was the president there. So
7 I was very much involved there.

8 We went public, and as chairman of a public company,
9 the non-Jewish community looks to see if they can get you and
10 your organization active.

11 It was also a time when suddenly the Detroit
12 Institute of Arts, where my wife is on the board, the Detroit
13 Symphony Orchestra, decided they would have some Jewish
14 members on the board. The first Jews to break through there
15 were Max Fisher at the DIA and the DSO, Alan E. Schwartz at
16 the DIA and the DSO, and also Al Taubman at the DIA, and then
17 they were looking for other people in the corporate world.

18 I had a very fine gentleman who headed the Detroit
19 Edison, Walter McCarthy, who's the chairman of the Detroit
20 Symphony Orchestra. He asked if I would join the board, which
21 I did. I was gladly welcomed by Alan E. Schwartz and a few
22 others we've added over the years. We've added to the
23 strength and growth of many of these organizations around
24 there. Now even we're welcome at the Detroit Athletic Club if
25 we want to join.

1 I felt it very, very important to support Jewish
2 charities and organizations, but at the same time it's
3 important to support and be active in the community's other
4 organizations that are around town.

5 **MR. MERETSKY:** You were involved with the Round
6 Table.

7 **MR. ROBINSON:** Yes, the National Conference of
8 Christians and Jews, the Greater Detroit Interfaith Round
9 Table, which today they changed to the National Conference of
10 Community and Justice, because we started adding Muslims and
11 Hindus and other religions to it. Originally it was organized
12 in 1929 to eliminate a lot of the bigotry and bias that was
13 going very strong with the Christian community, usually
14 against the Jews. By about 1990 we had eliminated a lot of
15 that. It's coming back again, but between Christians and Jews
16 we had formed a good bond. As a result we started permitting
17 others to join the organization in an attempting to eliminate
18 this bias and bigotry and provide diversity in the community.
19 So NCJJ changed their name.

20 It's an organization that Alan E. Schwartz was
21 active in getting me involved. At the time they were set up
22 with a Jewish chairman, Alan E. Schwartz, a Protestant
23 chairman, Chick Fisher of National Bank of Detroit, and a
24 Catholic chairman, Walter McCarthy of Detroit Edison. There
25 came a time when Alan E. wanted to retire and he asked if I

1 would not take over the chairmanship, which I did. Following
2 me was Alan May, who is still quite active there. And most
3 recently Steve Strom of the Handleman Company has taken over
4 the Jewish seat or chair you might say.

5 I've always felt and I've mentioned it before, as
6 Winston Churchill stated, you make a living by what you get.
7 You make a life by what you give. I felt that it sums it up
8 very much so. We've had a lot of our Jewish sages say
9 different things in the way of supporting tzedakah, charity,
10 but I think my hero in that one statement was Winston
11 Churchill. I used it quite frequently when I was chairman of
12 the Allied Jewish Campaign.

13 **MR. MERETSKY:** As you've said, there were always
14 three big parts of your life: the synagogue, the community
15 and tzedakah. You've said that in several of your speeches.

16 **MR. ROBINSON:** Well, with the synagogue, it's the
17 faith. It's really faith, hope and charity. We have the
18 synagogue, we have our family or community, which is the hope,
19 and tzedakah is the charity. I've always recognized it. All
20 three have been very important to me.

21 **MR. MERETSKY:** One of the other things I read, that
22 your whole family gathers at Thanksgiving time to make your
23 decisions about donations to charities for the year. I
24 thought that was very interesting that you involved your whole
25 family and they each take their part of it, and you plan it

1 together.

2 **MR. ROBINSON:** We set up a Jack and Aviva Robinson
3 Family Support Foundation, which is overseen by the United
4 Jewish Foundation. So it's a fund that we've endowed, and
5 there's a certain amount of the corpus that must remain there,
6 and then the earnings, hopefully -- many of the years there
7 have been some good earnings -- we've been able to distribute
8 that.

9 The reason I gather all members of my family,
10 including the sons-in-law, is that I want them also to
11 understand what tzedakah is and how good you can feel about
12 giving funds away to support different things that you feel
13 very strongly about, and how fortunate we've been to be able
14 to take ourselves from a few dollars to many dollars. As a
15 result, this has been set up so it will continue on after we
16 pass away.

17 There are also philanthropic funds that are set up
18 where you actually don't need as large a board. The Family
19 Support Foundation is set up so there always must be a
20 majority of Federation, members of the Jewish Federation that
21 outnumber the family. So we actually have four official
22 members of the Robinson Family Support Foundation: my wife,
23 myself, my son-in-law Steven Swartz, and my daughter Beth
24 Swartz.

25 By the way all of our sons-in-law, since I don't

1 have any sons to carry on the Robinson name, the sons-in-law
2 all adopted their middle name as Robinson.

3 **MR. MERETSKY:** Oh, that's nice.

4 **MR. ROBINSON:** And actually two of my daughters
5 still maintain their Robinson name. My daughter Beth was
6 married a couple years and decided it would be easier to
7 explain that she is married by adopting her husband's name, so
8 she's Beth Robinson Swartz.

9 It's very exciting having this meeting. We can all
10 get together and we have our five members of the community
11 that are also on this board. It has to be approved, but of
12 the charities that we donate to probably about 65 to 70
13 percent of the funds go to Jewish charities and the other to
14 the general community. There's a lot happening out there,
15 whether it's supporting the Jewish -- the National Asthmatic
16 in Denver, which is non-sectarian really. We're deeply
17 involved in supporting cultural groups.

18 **MR. MERETSKY:** Well, the DIA, the glass gallery down
19 there is named after you and your wife.

20 **MR. ROBINSON:** We were very fortunate that we were
21 able to support that.

22 **MR. MERETSKY:** It's a beautiful gallery. I've
23 enjoyed it many times.

24 **MR. ROBINSON:** Hopefully the DIA will be completing
25 their renovations by 2007, and we'll be able to see the whole

1 new Detroit Institute of Arts. Looking at the plans, it's
2 really great, and I think we'll all appreciate it. It will be
3 easier to maneuver. Our gallery will be open again, and I can
4 visit some of my old friends, 78 pieces of glass that we
5 donated.

6 My wife is also active in New York at the Museum of
7 Arts and Design. Being an artist she can offer a lot of good
8 input. In fact I go to meetings, some of the meetings, if I
9 go to a DIA meeting or if I go to New York Museum of Arts and
10 Design, I get to wear the badge that says "spouse". My wife
11 has the name badge.

12 **MR. MERETSKY:** Let me just ask you if there's any
13 last comments or memories that you'd like to share before we
14 kind of wrap up here?

15 **MR. ROBINSON:** In conclusion I'd just like to say I
16 feel very fortunate that I was born a Jew. I was able to live
17 in a great city like Detroit with the great Jewish community.
18 It's provided me and my family with a good opportunity for
19 growth, and I was very fortunate that I was able to be
20 nurtured by a grandfather, grandmother, my mother. Being the
21 younger in the family, I guess my sister and brother always
22 looked after me because I was the youngest.

23 In those days also we had additional support, aunts
24 and uncles that lived all around us. From Sturdavent I'd go
25 further south to Tuxedo, further north to Leslie. You know,

1 I'm talking about seven or eight blocks, walking blocks.

2 I had an aunt and uncle that lived on Fullerton east
3 of Woodward. I remember sleeping over there that night,
4 December 7th, 1941, and that's where I was when Pearl Harbor
5 was hit.

6 I've got fond memories, and different things that
7 we've lived through have been uncomfortable and not to happy
8 to have experienced them, but all in all, life has been good.
9 Tomorrow is another day, and I've enjoyed work, hard work,
10 being enthusiastic about what I'm doing, and as a result I
11 guess I've had a lot of good luck.

12 **MR. MERETSKY:** Thank you very much for joining us
13 today and sharing all your memories with us.