

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE  
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. HAROLD DIFTLER

FOR THE  
VETERAN'S ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND SOCIETY  
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

INTERVIEW BY  
G. KURT PIEHLER  
AND  
BRAD MASON

KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE  
MARCH 20, 2003

TRANSCRIPT BY  
BRAD MASON

REVEIWED BY  
BRAUM DENTON  
MARK BOULTON

KURT PIEHLER: This begins an interview with Doctor Harold Diftler on March 20, 2003 at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville with Kurt Piehler and ...

BRAD MASON: Brad Mason

PIEHLER: And you were born on December 14, 1927?

DR. HAROLD DIFTLER: Yes.

PIEHLER: Uh, and your parents were Rose Slovis Diftler and Benjamin Diftler?

DIFTLER: That's right.

PIEHLER: And ... it looked like Brad wanted to even start off with the first question, so I'll—please, go ahead.

MASON: ... what kind of ... childhood was it like in Knoxville in the '20s and early '30s?

DIFTLER: Well, of course, I was born in Knoxville. I wanted to emphasize that.

PIEHLER: Yes, you were also born in Knoxville.

DIFTLER: I am very proud of that, not far from here, Fort Sanders Hospital.

PIEHLER: So it is very close to here.

DIFTLER: And growing up in Knoxville ... we—my father had a business, [a] jewelry store. And, he had come from Austria to ... Columbia, South Carolina—New York first, of course. Then he went to Columbia, South Carolina, because in World War I there was a naval base, and they had retail stores—he and my uncle, Max Friedman. And my mother was living in Charleston. Her family had gotten there, and I have no knowledge of why they were there. But, it is a very beautiful southern city, and I remember visiting there. They married and went ... to Columbia, South Carolina, and—why, I don't know. But, my brother was born in 1919 in Columbia, South Carolina, and they then moved to Knoxville. Also, I have no idea why they came here. But, my uncle was a very prestigious person, having risen to [become] a friend of Franklin Roosevelt. And I have some stories about that. But, anyway, he was sort of the leader of the family, you know. Wherever he went, he made all of the decisions for the family. If there was a dispute, he would settle them—a very wonderful person. And, so he and my father went into business here, in the jewelry business.

My father had been trained in Europe as a clock maker. And in New York he worked for the Gilbert Clock Company for a short time and then all this happened. And he ... had been raised in the early years in Vienna, Austria, and he and his mother came to this country, and she died here about the year before I was born, and I never knew her. But, anyway, he and Mr. Friedman started the jewelry store here and then they split up and my father retained the store, and Mr. Friedman had his own store which was on Gay Street, a block up. The ... building is still there

[at] Gay and Commerce, and they remained friends. And he had married my father's sister. And they had—my father had one other sister who lived here, and there are some interesting stories about her—sometime I'll tell you—but, then he had a brother who fought in World War I, but on the German side, and he was injured in a mustard gas attack ... American, ... and he was on a pension. The government, I think gave, the United States government gave those people injured in those years a pension. And he lived on that very comfortably, I don't know, but he lived here for a short time, then he and his family moved to Miami. And ... so, there's some more I could tell you about that sometime.

But anyway growing up in Knoxville was a very pleasant experience. A small town and [I] was very well accepted by my friends. My brother was a very big—had a very big interest in the Boy Scouts of America, and he—I did not join the Boy Scouts—but he was a member of the Boy Scouts, probably the only Jewish boy in the area that ever belonged to the Boy Scouts. And he was very interested in agriculture and had become a master of forestry. He went to the University of Tennessee, and got to go to the University of Georgia, and then after his—he got a Bachelor's degree, then after his service in World War II, in the Navy also, he went to Duke University and got a master's degree. Then when he got back and he was married, he took over my father's store. So, we always wished that he had pursued his forestry career, but he didn't. He died about two years ago in Knoxville—he had also run a very successful jewelry business here. His wife is still living here, that's another story. So anyway, growing up here we had a small Jewish community. We were all connected to the Jewish community center which was in a different location than it is now. And we all remained—became very good friends and we remain so now with people from that era. And my wife also became born in Knoxville and had a close family and, you know, an extended family, and all of them are very close. And so we are very happy that we still live in Knoxville, although our children don't, but we have a lot of friends here, her family, and what's left of my family, and because we lived in Knoxville in various parts of this southern city.

So, anyway, after graduating from high school, I went to junior high school. It was called, well first, the Grammar School was Park Lowry School, and then after that we had a junior high school here which was Park Junior, and then from there, I went to Knoxville High School where I was very active in ROTC. But, I never rose through the ranks very much, but I went the whole year—years—that I was in high school, in ROTC. And friends that I made there, now some of them are professional people here in Knoxville. Some have retired, but we remain friends through the old Knoxville High School. We have to go sometimes and sing the old Knoxville High School song, so on and so forth.

I can tell you a funny story. I was involved in a lawsuit. Being a dentist, you are very vulnerable to lawsuits, so if something doesn't work out right, so, one of my—the insurance company had a ... lawyer representing me who was a very close friend of mine in high school. So, he was defending me. So, he would unnerve all of the people giving depositions by singing the Knoxville High School fight song. We would both sing it at the depositions, and they all thought we were crazy. So, finally, we won the case. (Laughter) That's only to illustrate the fact that it was very strict code and camaraderie of the people who went to Knoxville High School, and who were in the ROTC.

PIEHLER: It was the ROTC connection.

DIFTLER: Yeah ... and also the fact that all of the high school experience, you know, we relived it, and so forth, as we get older, that's all, you know.... (Laughter) But anyway, John Burnett is a lawyer, and he's retired, he lives out in Sweetwater, and we see each other periodically. And when I see him walking down the street—and he'll see me—he'll salute and start singing the Knoxville High School song. They all think he's crazy! But, anyway, it means something to both of us, you see. That's just to illustrate, in a small town how, in a small community you—I feel, you know, that we feel connected in that direction. But, anyway, after high school—I graduated in 1945—went right straight to UT, they had the summer session. And, my mother had wanted me to be an engineer, and ... I just never liked the math or anything. And so I went into liberal arts with a medical slant. They had some very wonderful professors here who were advisors and ... finally one of them said, "Why don't you just take a pre-med course, go through chemistry and physics and all, and see how you like it?" I did very well, but ... except when the math came along, they said, "Oh, Diftler, you are not going to do well on the math, so you better do well on the other subjects." Well, I got through pretty well, had some very good instructors at that time, and had felt very close to UT for what it had done for me.

And, then, the—I was drafted at A-1 status, and I went to my uncle I said, "What can I do about this? I want to go through the—he said, "Well, let's go down and see this old friend of mine who is head of the draft board. Let's go down." He was always wanting to fix something, you know. So, we went down there, and it wasn't that I was not patriotic. But I wanted to finish—I had just started college, and I had one year, and it seemed to be doing okay. So, the draft board chairman said, "Well, thank you, Mr. Friedman, your nephew here has a good record, but we think we are going to have him go to the service." So, I said, "Fine, you know, if he wants me to go, I'll go." So, then he told me about the, as I mentioned before, about two openings in the Navy since I had a college background for one year. And, my friend and ... I took it. Wesley Sharp, who was physics major, and he became a Ph.D. in physics. And I have no idea where he is now. I think he left Knoxville after he graduated. He went to aeronautical engineering, I think, with a physics slant.

But, anyway, we went to Fort. Oglethorpe, Georgia, and, where we were processed with the regular army ... inductees, and then they split us off and put us on a train to California. The other fellows, I think, were trained somewhere in this area in the Army boot camp, or whatever they call it. But, we went to California, and went to naval training, and then the boot camp that we went to—which was very rigorous to me because being a little fat Jewish kid, I'd never had all that kind of.... (Laughs) But, I did okay. I lost a lot of weight and got muscles and all. We went through the obstacle course and all the training, and actually [through] the regulated proper diet, I lost weight and became more healthy than, you know, than the—(laughs) my mother had always served, you know, European—you know what I'm talking, about ...

PIEHLER: (Laughs) Very heavy food.

DIFTLER: So, anyway, I really enjoyed the boot camp. I was probably the only one in the group that enjoyed it because it was a new opening for me, and a lot of fellows from Texas there. And we had after boot camp—they had a selection of what you would like to do in the Navy.

So, having a sort of a medical slant, I picked the hospital corps. So I was accepted to that, and I went to the U.S. naval hospital in San Diego. Now all of this happened in a very short time, so when I got there, this guy said, "What are you doing here? You are in the Reserve, and you are going to be out pretty soon." And I said, "Why am I going to be out?" He said, "Well, after the war is over, you know, in 1945, and they are going to let all of the Reserves out, unless you want to sign up and ... for—you know, for the regular Navy." So, I said, "I don't know if I want to do that or not." I said, "I am going to finish my college degree and so forth." So they let me go to school. And at that time they were bringing back injured servicemen from the South Pacific. And that was a very emotional experience for me, seeing these fellows that had come in limping, and on crutches, and bandaged, and all that.

And they had a—and the naval hospital there is fantastic. And, right now, I was back there about three years ago, and it is the foremost in the world. I was looking for the little building where we were—and it's there, but it's just a guardhouse now. The whole hospital is completely rebuilt. It's Balboa Park in San Diego. If you ever get there, it is a beautiful place. So, I went to the fellow on duty, and I said, "You know, I used to guard this little area." And he said, "Well, that's too bad, you can't get in now, you know." So, (laughs) I wanted to go in and see it. He said, "If you get permission from somebody here you can go." Well, we didn't have time to do it, so ... But I did—I remembered walking that particular [area]. And he said, "Well, that's wonderful, but you can't get in now (laughs)." So, he was doing his duty.

So, anyway, after a short time, they pulled me out and said, "You know, we are not going to let you go through with this unless you sign up for two years, twenty years or fifteen years or something like that." And I said, "Well, do I have to decide that now?" And they said, "No, but tomorrow we have to know." So, I called my folks and I said, "You know, maybe I would like to be in the Navy." "Well, you come home, if you can get home." So the guy in the Navy said, "Okay, you're out." Because that's—you see on this thing here (referring to his record). So they processed me for the discharge, and actually gave me some veteran's schooling rights, you know.

PIEHLER: So you ... reported in 1945, in the summer. You mentioned going to Fort Oglethorpe earlier. When did you report to Fort Oglethorpe?

DIFTLER: Fort Oglethorpe was when I was drafted ... after the one year of college in '46.

PIEHLER: Yeah. '46. '46. That ...

DIFTLER: That's when the draft board sent all the inductees to the processing stage at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.

PIEHLER: And when were you discharged, 'cause you ...

DIFTLER: Well, I was discharged in—well, let's see it's right on here, it's ... June 25th, 1946.

PIEHLER: So you didn't—you only spent a few months in the Navy.

DIFTLER: Yeah, that's what I ...

PIEHLER: Basically, basic training and then a little bit of time.

DIFTLER: Yeah, actually the—March 20<sup>th</sup>, actually.

PIEHLER: That you reported.

DIFTLER: On the same day of '46, I reported—period of active duty—that was from March 20<sup>th</sup>, '46 to June 25<sup>th</sup>, '46.

PIEHLER: You had a very brief naval career—naval experience.

DIFTLER: Yeah, but with the things that I saw—I was really aboard ship at one time just to see what it was all about. They took us on it, but I can say I was aboard ship one time. But the only thing that I have probably of interest is the whole procedure of being drafted and ...

PIEHLER: Oh, I want to ask some follow-up questions. I want to go way back so we definitely make sure, 'cause you gave me an impression very early that he's a very colorful figure, your uncle, Max Friedman.

DIFTLER: Yeah, yeah.

PIEHLER: Could you tell a little bit about— more about him?

DIFTLER: Oh, yeah.

PIEHLER: Particularly, you mentioned you have some good Roosevelt stories.

DIFTLER: Oh, well, he was a big worker in the ... political arena. If he had had a formal education, I think he probably would have gone very far. But, he was well-liked and just the kind of person that would walk in and slap you on the back, and everybody loved him. He had a bald head and a prestigious-looking figure, and he was a jeweler. But, actually, he had—when he first came to this country, he was a barber, and a striking figure. And I do have some pictures of him, I think. But he always was very political in his dealings with everybody. A family person, as I say, when the family had any crises or anything he was right there. He loved his family, and he would settle disputes no matter the—he had some parts of the family that were just despicable but he loved them (laughter) because they were his family. You know, his sister's children, and whatever happened he said, "I don't like what they do, but I like them as a person," you know, and he would tell them that. And he helped a lot of them, he really did. But we always fell back on Uncle Max. And, in our thoughts, he was always a multi-millionaire, but he wasn't—because he acted that way. He drove big cars, he dressed, you know, flamboyantly, and his wife was—actually, she was the backbone of the whole thing. He was the front man, but she was always, you know—a very brilliant woman.

PIEHLER: What was her name?

DIFTLER: Her name was Jenny Diftler. My father's sister, aunt Jenny. And ... so, anyway, he loved—my uncle was a very good friend of Estes Kefauver. In fact, when Estes Kefauver would come to town, he would come to his store. And I ran into him many times, and he introduced me to him. And when he would come to Knoxville he'd come to visit—you know, I guess they were politically doing things. But, Uncle Max had a way with recording of the votes and so forth, sort of a ward healer as such. So anyway, somehow, he was on the Democratic Committee of the State, and Roosevelt was gaining his political career, he met Max Friedman. And, at one time, I remember this, they dedicated the Smoky Mountains, and President Roosevelt came here, I forgot what year that was, but the minute he hit—you know, he didn't fly in by Air Force One in those days, they came by train—and the car was here. They drove up to Clingman's Dome. My uncle said, two or three days before, said, "Get dressed, we're going to see ..." he didn't ask if you want to go, "but we're going to see the dedication of the Smoky Mountains. President Roosevelt is going to be here." So, my mother said, "Well, I'm not really....." [And he said], "You're going. Everybody is getting dressed, and I am coming to pick you up, and we'll go there." So we went, you know, that's the way it went. Which I don't regret, I mean I really—so we sat there and—have you been to Clingman's Dome?

PIEHLER: I haven't been there yet.

DIFTLER: Well, there is a big—and it's still there—it's a big stone façade built into the mountains and there was a podium they had there. And when Roosevelt hit Knoxville by train, he said, "Where's Max Friedman?" This actually happened, because it was written up in the paper, you may research the archives there, but the first thing he said, "I want to see Max Friedman." So, he went to—they went to get him, and he came, you know, he said, "Max, you are going to drive up to the Smoky Mountains with me." He said, "Well, I have my family to take." And he said, "Okay, well you'll meet me there." So, we met Roosevelt there.

PIEHLER: You met him personally?

DIFTLER: Right. You know, as a young kid, you know, and he was very busy at that time, but ...

PIEHLER: But it still strikes me that it must have been pretty thrilling to actually meet him at that time.

DIFTLER: Uh, yeah, you know, meeting may be sort of an engrossing enhancement of it. He was there. President Roosevelt and I, it was as close as this room, and then for a fleeting minute, you know, because he went on.

PIEHLER: Did you get to shake his hand?

DIFTLER: Uh, I think we did. My brother was more—and possibly he did. My family, we were all seated near him. So, anyway, the—my uncle was, according to the family, according to what other people told me, he was responsible for the phrase "New Deal". I don't have any documentation of that, but it sounds like my uncle because he was always playing cards and

doing all kinds of stuff. So when Roosevelt got all these people together—if you look through American history, he had a committee—people of the—you know, lay people that were—and he was getting advice on what to do with the country, because Hoover had, you know, just had his term and various economic policies. And Roosevelt came out with all these alphabet—WPA, A—you know, this and that. So, according to what I understand, Mr. Friedman said, “Well, why don’t we just call this a ‘New Deal’ now that we’re going to do all these other things?” So the phrase picked up. So, that’s a good story, but whether it really happened or not ... But, anyway, you know what happened in the Roosevelt era. So then he—my uncle, continued playing politics, and he was a city councilman here. And, he was—Dave Bloomberg—did that name mean anything?

PIEHLER: I’ve heard, I’ve heard that name.

DIFTLER: Well, they were the only two Jewish councilmen here and—from the city. Dave Blumberg was a big executive with Mass Mutual although he lived in Knoxville. But, he started this office here and he was president, national president of B’nai B’rith . And, my uncle was also aligned with an industrialist here in Knoxville, were very close friends, George Dempster.

PIEHLER: I’ve ... heard about him, Dempster’s dumpster.

DIFTLER: Yeah, he invented—you know what he invented? The dumpster that they load the trash, in the big—and the truck picks it up and takes it. Well, BFI does that today. So, Dempster had a big machine shop here, and they made those dumpsters all over the world. And, George Dempster, I met. [He] was a very, very prestigious man, only—he was my uncle, Max, only in a gentle way, see. They were very close friends. I remember, we had family dinners at my aunt’s home, Mrs. Friedman and Mr. Friedman, and she had lavish European cooking, you know. She was trained in all the—they were actually from the area in Vienna, in Austria, called Galicia. And in the Jewish vernacular it is called “Galitzianer.” [One who lived in Galicia] There was a certain type of personality that those people always had, very fiery and outgoing. You know, so—and their cooking reflected that, very spicy, they had sweet and sour things. And, I’ll never forget it because it’s something ...

PIEHLER: It sounds like it must have been quite—quite a scene.

DIFTLER: Oh, yeah

PIEHLER: With your uncle and aunt.

DIFTLER: All the nephews and nieces and all. Those that got along and those that didn’t get along—when you saw Uncle Max, everybody got along. I mean (laugh) ...

PIEHLER: And Uncle Max was the crucial figure for why the family came to Knoxville?

DIFTLER: Yes. I think that he somehow decided from South Carolina, I think that—I have explored this many times, I think that they were on their way to Florida, because all of the people from New York migrated to Florida, and I think their car broke down here (laugh). So this was



their route from the North, so they just stayed here. And, they were very well accepted by the community although they were different. My uncle was not a very, very traditional religious man, but he had that feeling, you know. And I think it was perceived by the local residents that he was a person of honor and one that was, you know, had feeling for people and was that type of person. And that's what was appreciated, no matter what he was. And, so, we were all accepted here. We didn't have—as far as discrimination, I can't recall too much.

We had an unusual feeling when we went to ... public school because when our High Holidays came out only two or three children and like in the North, the whole school closes. And here, one or two kids were going to be out, and we were stuck out like a sore thumb, and had to get permission, and then we'd come back, [other kids] said "How'd you get permission to get out of school?" And then we had to go through explaining all that.

So—it also happened to me in the Navy. When I was in boot camp, it was Passover holidays. So, nobody could get out of boot camp, but all the Jewish guys got out of to go the Seder, see. And they said, "Well, how'd you guys get out of here, you know?" I said, "You want to get out, become Jewish!" (Laughter) But they had Seder in the ... Synagogue there in San Diego for the servicemen. And so, naturally, we took advantage of it, whether we wanted to go or not, just to get up and get away. And we met some nice people there, and that was an interesting side item. So, that's that. As far as—I've always felt rewarded by having a prestigious uncle in this town, because anything that I ever got into any kind of problem or anything, I knew that he'd be right there for me and the rest of the family, too. So that helped, you know, growing up and stuff. I miss him very much, and, of course, he died several years ago. And he had a brother that lived in Harlan, Kentucky, of all places, he opened a—I say of all places—Harlan, Kentucky in those years was a coal mining area, they'd shoot first, and ask questions later, but he seemed to get along with the same type of person.

PIEHLER: Well, there was a ... substantial community, Jewish community, in Harlan County. I just know we have in the synagogue the tablet from ... Harlan County.

DIFTLER: Oh, really, I will have to look at that sometime.

PIEHLER: You've never seen [it]? You've never ...

DIFTLER: There ... were a lot of people in ... this area that did go to smaller towns, opened up stores. And one funny story—have you interviewed Sam Bayloff?

PIEHLER: No.

DIFTLER: You might want to call him. He was in the service a long time, and he is still here—and a very interesting background. They live in LaFollette, Tennessee, which was at that time—now it's a little bit more—but at that time; you could sneeze and miss it. But they opened up a very successful business there, he and his brother. I would suggest that—I'll see Sam, I'll...

PIEHLER: Actually, I'll—what I'd like is to give him one of my "Dear Veteran [Letters]" If you can drop him a note, you can probably give more encouragement than I can.

DIFTLER: Oh, yeah, and he'd be glad to talk, and you'd be very rewarded to talk with him. Sam tells a story, that his—he had a large family, too, the Sterns, and they—Melissa Stern, do you know her? She lives here in Knoxville.

PIEHLER: I think I've met her, but I ...

DIFTLER: Her husband died recently—a young couple. Well, her father, I think, was part of the Bayloff family, Melissa's. But, anyway, Mr. Stern came here with three sons or four sons, and they got on a train. And, whenever the train stopped, he'd kick one son out and say, "You stay here, and open a store." And then they went on, so that's why they had their stores all over this small area. (Laughter) So, anyway, Sam could tell you a lot more about that. But that's where I come from on, you know, the local community, anything, you know, you may want to ask me ...

PIEHLER: Well, let me just ask you a little bit more about ... your uncle. I am just sort of surprised his being so active in Democratic policies because East Tennessee is not a Democratic—I mean there are some pockets of Democratic strength—but it's not a ...

DIFTLER: Well basically, you know, I could sit here and tell you I think the Democratic party today is different today than it was then.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DIFTLER: But, we won't go into that, but ...

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DIFTLER: I think the Democratic Party, at that time, was more open to foreign, you know, people coming in from foreign countries. The Republican Party here is—has a reputation of being more traditional, and, you know, for not willing to accept Negroes, Jewish people, people of different, you know, interests. So, I think that was tailor made for him. And, he then got to be friends with George Dempster, who was also a Democrat, which was unusual, you see, for the gentile community. And, they banded together. And, one of the chief protagonists was Cas Walker. And, I have some stories about Cas Walker.

PIEHLER: Well, he was—you could probably say he was a very colorful figure, Cas Walker.

DIFTLER: Cas Walker? Oh, I knew him better than, than some of the other people I mentioned because Cas Walker was—well, when I came back to Knoxville from dental school, the very first thing that was the agenda of the Second District Dental Society was to put fluoride in the water.

PIEHLER: I was going to ask you about that later, but, but since you're on fluoridation ...

DIFTLER: Well, that just brings up Cas Walker. That's, you know ...

PIEHLER: Why don't you—now, why don't you talk about it, since you brought it up. And ...

DIFTLER: Well ...

PIEHLER: I have a feeling the story is already ...

DIFTLER: Well, right then, you know, I was on—they put the new dental graduates on committees.

PIEHLER: And this was what year?

DIFTLER: Well, I got—I graduated from dental school in 1953, and last week I just went—I came from that—it's where they gave us a golden grad certificate—fifty years since I graduated with my class. Half of them have died. And, we all had a good reunion. So, anyway, I came back here in '53, and my experience with the dental society—they introduced you to the dental society, and basically, back then—this I may have to tell you, but—not that I agree with it—but, the reason that you have to introduced was to see that you are not black. See, in those years Jewish didn't matter, but if you were—they introduced you, “This is Dr. Harold Diftler, just graduated from the University of Tennessee, and he's white.” Okay, you're in. But, that's—it's terrible, but, anyway that's the way it was. But, anyway, today it's very, very—to our reward—it's much better. But, anyway, the first thing they did was put me on the fluoride committee because that was the top.... They said, “You've just come from school. You know all about it so, you'll be on this committee.” Okay, so first thing I did I ran to my Uncle Max, and I said, “You know, can we get this, what can we do?” He said, “Ah,” said, “That's—I don't know much about it.” “Anyway,” he said, “looks like the bones are brittle, and they had all this bad stuff out, you know.” So, we wrote, we started writing letters to the newspaper that this is a good thing to vote on be good for the children—it's been proven for forty years in some town in New Jersey, Newton or somewhere, I don't know.

But, anyway, Cas Walker picked it up, and he said, “There ain't no way we're going to put fluoride in—it will kill all these children, you know, and all this stuff. It's poison.” You know, and I said, “Well, it's chloride—chlorine—in the water, too, you know, and that's poison.” “Well, that's alright, but you're not going to have chloride in this. It's killing all the cattle.” Some ... agronomist from UT here said that the cows were dying from eating chloride, so anyway, “We're not going to give it to the children.” So that's what we faced, you see. So, anyway, Cas Walker was very much against that. He would pick up topics of that nature to be against to get publicity. No matter what it was. If they wanted to give everybody a million dollars, he'd be against it and say, “Cas Walker was against this, and he was doing something!” So, we finally got together with a meeting of the dental society committee. And, somehow, Mr. Friedman had told me, he said, “You know, you guys went about it the wrong way.” You see, as a politician, he knew. He said, “You should have gotten Cas Walker in your meeting beforehand and let him think it was his idea, then you would have had it, you see, because he would have been the savior of ...”

PIEHLER: Of these children.

DIFTLER: "... of these children's teeth, you see. But, now, see you did it without asking him, and you'll never get it through." So, finally ... it took several years, and it was voted on and it passed.

PIEHLER: What year—when did you finally get fluoridation in Knoxville?

DIFTLER: I think it was not until somewhere in the '60s, I'm not sure about that, because I was busy working at that time. I had, you know, rotated off the committee, and I was not that much active in the dental society, not because of anything other than I was strictly in it to make a living. The family came along. I'd go to meetings periodically for lectures and so forth. That's that was a sort of time when you had to have CE credits, you know, continuing education credits. But, at this time I think you have to have so many which we used to keep, kept up with. But, anyway, those are some interesting sidelines about that.... But, the thing about Cas Walker, his daughter was a patient of mine. And, she died at a young age. And, she married a man from Israel.

PIEHLER: Oh really?

DIFTLER: Yeah. And, he was—I can't remember his name now, he was very, had a very deep Israeli accent. He was not traditional, would not, you know, communicate with anybody in the, in the community. But, I knew him because he'd come—I said, "What's this with you?" He said—well, he came from Israel, and, they—he fell in love with Cas Walker's daughter, and Cas Walker put him in his grocery chain. He worked for—you know, Cas Walker had a big grocery chain here, I don't know if ...

PIEHLER: I've heard ... stories about it.

DIFTLER: Yeah, but it fell, you know, when all the new Kroger's and all these new people came in, he couldn't keep up, and he had no organization because of the way he had structured it, and whatever happened, his firm died, you know. But, Harry, his son-in-laws name was Harry, but I forgot his last name. But, he was big, and helped him in the grocery chain, certain aspects of it. And, he had also had some other Jewish employees. And, anyway, we had done, started doing a pretty big project for his daughter, and she went on a cruise with her mother, and she died before she could get back. And so the project I had working stopped—no need to get that laboratory work done for her. She was very nice, I forgot her name. But, she used to appear on television with Cas Walker. And, you know, he had a Farm and Home Hour, and all this kind of garbage, you know. And, also, Dolly Parton was also part of it. But, anyway, that's the Cas Walker story as I know it. But, I had known him and, just to say hello, and he was very friendly, you know, the politician in him. And a friend of mine who was a dentist here was his dentist, and he had tried to save his teeth for him and all, ... and Cas Walker said, you know, "Do whatever you want to do." And he kept working with him, and finally, it didn't work out. And, so he, he was, some other story I am trying to think about him.

But, he and my uncle were friendly enemies, so to speak. Whatever Max Friedman proposed, he was against it. They were on city council, and one time Cas Walker was elected as mayor. And they had a recall vote because they didn't—they lost (laughs). And, fortunately, he had the good

graces to just, you know, walk away from it. But, that's some on the sidelights of growing up in this town. So, I ... went—my office is not too far from here, and I've had a lot on university professors as patients, and I see some of them around now. And so, in ... the year 2000, I sold my office to someone, and he has got it now, and I have been, you know, retired since then.

MASON: Uh ...

DIFTLER: I'm sorry?.

MASON: What's the back ... in that time, what was the Democratic political power around here, you know, was there a pretty strong Democratic ...

DIFTLER: In the State?

MASON: In, well in ... in East Tennessee, in Knoxville, especially.

DIFTLER: Well, you know, as far as—we had some pretty big people from the State of Tennessee, and naturally, I think this community helped—Estes Kefauver, Cordell Hull, who was a Democrat also, from Morristown. And so we did get, you know, people elected, and there are probably some others that I'm not thinking about. But, I'd say that somehow, I think the Republican majority came later after the 50s or 60s because in the early years, it seems, somehow, and I think it's through the efforts of George Dempster and my uncle, the Democratic party was stronger here then ...

PIEHLER: Than it is now, I guess.

DIFTLER: Huh?

PIEHLER: It ... was much stronger then than it is now.

DIFTLER: Yeah. And now we have—it's amazing how we have a Democratic governor, he was well-accepted here. (Laughs) So anyway, that's going to raise your salary. (Laughter) But, anyway, we think that Governor Bredesen is going to do pretty good things, we hope. And—but that was—I think it was stronger, stronger here—along with the Republican group that became stronger as time went on, I think. After the prestigious figures died away, Mr. Friedman, George Dempster, and those people, financially I think the Republicans became, with the newer members, became stronger.

PIEHLER: You were born in 1927, and the Depression starts in 1929. In the early—you were growing up in the 30s, how did your ... father do in business in the '30s?

DIFTLER: Well, you know, I don't—economics I don't know. We, we had a nice home out on the Magnolia Avenue, which is not the same now. But, I never knew the term "Depression." My father was a very strict European father. And, he was not in favor of lavishing money on me which he may not have had anyway. And, we didn't really demand very much, you know, in those years. I remember that my mother worked in the store also. Again, she was the brains

behind the whole thing. My father was, you know, the front man, and she would tell him what to do. Or, they would ...

PIEHLER: Did she keep the books, for example?

DIFTLER: Yeah, they kept—she kept the books. There weren't—in those years, there weren't much in the way of books to keep.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: I mean, the income tax was not as complicated [as] today. And, I do remember whenever they had a dispute about anything, I never knew what it was about because they always talked in Yiddish (laughter). You know, they would argue in Yiddish, but I didn't know what ... it was all about.

PIEHLER: So you didn't learn Yiddish growing up?

DIFTLER: Some, you know.

PIEHLER: You just, you just ...

DIFTLER: A few dangerous words.

PIEHLER: But it was more—because I had parents who talked in a different language growing up.

DIFTLER: Yeah.

PIEHLER: So when they didn't want you to hear and they wanted to argue, it was in Yiddish?

DIFTLER: Yeah, and they—my brother knew less than I did because he was always off in the woods somewhere. And, I was sort of a home kid. I was nine years younger. I must have been an afterthought or something. So, anyway, I picked up a few words. Now they couldn't get by me with it. But, back then, you know, they ... would have a dispute in business in the store somewhere, and I'd—when they were talking Yiddish, I ran off because I knew it was going to be an argument. (Laughter) But, they always seemed to work it out, and they worked together beautifully, you see. So, we had a car, we had an automobile. Willis Knight, does that mean anything to you?

PIEHLER: I haven't even—that that car I've not heard of.

DIFTLER: Okay, well, that was what we had. My uncle had a Pierce Arrow.

PIEHLER: Oh, that was quite a car!

DIFTLER: I say, he acted as though he were a multi-millionaire.

PIEHLER: Oh, a Pierce Arrow was a ...

DIFTLER: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DIFTLER: And, then they had Cadillacs, and he would let me drive it, you know, around the block. And I was always, you know, my mother would say, “Be careful.” [And he would say], “Ah, let him drive it, Rose.” My mother’s name was Rose. So ... I’d drive it around the block and I was glad to get it back. But, anyway, my aunt, also—if you want me to go into that, I will sometime, but that’s a pretty colorful figure of—my ... father’s other sister.

PIEHLER: Well, actually, why ... don’t you say something about her?

DIFTLER: Well, her name was Esther, and she was married to a fellow by the name of Harry Loef, L-O-E-F. And, he had two sons, and she was very much ahead of her time because she got a divorce. And that was a tragedy in the family. And my uncle patched that up. He said, “Well, if that’s what she wants to do.” He said, “You know, we can’t live unhappy, it’s a short life.” And I remember him giving the family a lecture because she was ostracized because she got a divorce and married a gentile. So, I—you know, back then, my God, what else is there? But, the fellow she married was a very lovely man. Whitey Thompson was his name, and he was as supportive to the family as my uncle was, you know. He was well-to-do, but he had the money, you know, there was not any—he was a very quiet man. Actually, what he did, he made carnival supplies. In those years, they had state fairs and they had little plaster dolls.

PIEHLER: Uh huh.

DIFTLER: They had a factory make them. And, he’d take us down there, we’d pick out whatever we want. It was down on Jackson Avenue, where the Old City is. And, he would take us kids, you know, and the family down [and say], “Pick out whatever you want, any time, come in.” And, you know, we were all—it was just plastic and they painted—no plaster not plastic, and they painted them, you know, and they were glistening, and all kind of stuff, so.... But, my Aunt Esther was a very fiery person. And she and my dad would get along sometimes, sometimes not. And they didn’t converse in Yiddish (laughter) and they would go at it. And, I think, in those years my dad used to need money to pay for merchandise, and Esther always had money. So he borrowed, and she would help, you know, she would loan him money, but she wanted it paid back, you see. So, sometimes he couldn’t pay it back exactly on time. He always paid her off, but she would—she came in the store one time, and I remember she said, “I’d like to have my thousand dollars.” A thousand dollars then was quite a bit of money, you see. He said, “Well, I don’t have all of it now, but I will after the Christmas sales, you know. [She said], “I want it now.” She took her handbag and broke a glass. So she was—I think she was maybe partly manic depressive or something. She was sweet as sugar one time, and then sometimes she’d be ...

PIEHLER: She could break a glass in a store.

DIFTLER: Yeah, yeah. See, so that was—you know, who knows back then. But anyway, she was always—I used to go sometimes and spend the night in her apartment ...

-----END OF TAPE ONE-----

---

DIFTLER: ... and they would all—my father said, “I’m so glad we left Europe in 1914 when Hitler was coming into power.” And, I don’t know what promoted him, how they had the money to leave Europe at that time. But, he and his mother left.

PIEHLER: They left in 1914?

DIFTLER: 1914, when he came to Ellis Island. And ...

PIEHLER: And your ... mother comes from, sort of, a Russian—Russia?

DIFTLER: Yeah. My mother, from Bialystok. And, her family—she had a widowed mother and four or five brothers. And, my father started them all off in their business, too. And, you know, he took them—they had nothing, you know, they, somehow they [had] education through high school or something, or maybe not even that. But, no further, no ambition to go further. And, they all went in business because that’s all the Jewish people knew. They had no technical or professional schools, so they all went in business. And they all, you know, they all raised families and did—in Knoxville. And, he had helped them all get started. And, my mother had, I said, four or five brothers, and they always circulated around the “old lady” they called her, you know, the matriarch of.... Her husband died in Europe, and I didn’t know anything about him. As I ... understood, he was a candle maker in Vienna, whatever that means.

PIEHLER: Did your—your family comes over before World War I? Did they have any family in Europe in the 1930s that were in touch with them?

DIFTLER: No ...

PIEHLER: Or they were in touch with.

DIFTLER: I never recalled any family that they had communicated with or ever spoke of in Europe, except my father’s brother who was in the Kaiser’s Army in World War I. And, he came over. I don’t—I think Mr. Friedman might have brought him over.

PIEHLER: Did he come in the ‘20s or in the ‘30s? Or you don’t know?

DIFTLER: It’s got to be somewhere around the late ‘20s, early ‘30s.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.



DIFTLER: He came with his wife and a few—couple of sons. And, they lived here in Knoxville, and—for a short time, and then they went on to Florida. And my father's brother was, as I say, a very colorful figure. And, he limped with a walking cane, and he dressed, you know, immaculately and everything. And, I think he lived strictly on—he didn't work, you know, and I think he lived on the government pension, and it couldn't have been that much. I don't know. But, anyway, we never knew ...

PIEHLER: You never knew ... how he ...

DIFTLER: Yeah. And he didn't work, never did work. But, they moved to Florida, and his sons became very successful in Florida. And, one son—well his two sons, one son was an itinerant artist and a very good artist. He went to Cooper Union in New York—you've probably—in those years they'd paint. And he had become, along with the influence of his father, a very flamboyant ladies man, and so forth. And, he had a art career in Las Vegas. And he was of the Las Vegas scene back then. He painted on velvet, which was a medium back then. They painted portraits, and we—I had seen some. And he painted people, and he made a pretty good amount of money. But, whenever he had a few dollars, he went to gamble. But, he was never really married, never had a family. But, and I did—he traveled to, all over, and he died in Mallorca in Spain, that was his place where he hung out. And, he also was in Cuba when Castro was fighting, and he'd painted Castro's picture. And ... he had been with the freedom fighters, and then he came back over the country, and he told people, says, "Castro is going to be communist. And, so, I left." He said, "They—I left the country." Said, "I didn't want to be associated with that." But—and then it did come out that he was communist. I think the United States might have missed the boat on that somehow. I guess in history you could see where they didn't support him, and the Russians came in.

PIEHLER: Your uncle, I mean he sounds like a quality ...

DIFTLER: That whole family is—is—you know, I've always felt a part of a colorful group of people. You know, and I've felt that I could hold my head up high because we were all very honest and hard-working, and we never had any kind of a background to be ashamed of. Also my—however, my wife's family, I could tell you a story there, and the gentleman is still alive. I could tell you about that story if you want an offshoot on that one. But, nevertheless, I always held my head up because my uncle gave me this support. And, I felt that I was part of something prestigious, because he made it look that way. And, you know, I always felt, you know, secure, so to speak.

PIEHLER: That your uncle could take care of things.

DIFTLER: Yeah. I mean that ... I had met a lot of people through him. And that it was—and I always liked the, the—you know, to know or to have some contact with prestigious people. And, that's why I hang around the University [of Tennessee], I think. But, anyway, he had instilled this in me. Of course, I never went into politics in any way other than just, you know, day to day work and so forth, which I was happy to do. Very, I felt very fortunate what the university has done for me and what I was able to do by being, you know, accepted in the university where I

could get the education. Of course, I had to work for it, but it gave me the opportunity. Which, I think these kids today have, and some of them are taking advantage of it, and some are not. You know about your students. But somehow my uncle always instilled in me, and my father also, and mother particularly, that, you know, “all you have to do—we will make sure you get to school, you just have to make good grades.” So, (laugh) I had that going, you know. And, I couldn’t disappoint them, and I worked hard, you know, because, whatever grade I made I had to work for it. It was not as easy as I thought it was for some people. But, anyway, I was finished third in my class in dental school and got an award, and so forth. Just for them, you know, not for me, but this was their reward for whatever sacrifice [they had] to put me through school. And, dental school then was expensive, now it’s ten times more, but....

So, anyway, I relived that last week when we met with the class. And, of course, Jack Williams was there with his, you know, pledge card. (Laughter) And ... see, I know him very well. And, so they gave us a nice certificate and a pin, and it was a nice ceremony and dinner, and so forth. And I’m glad I went. But, I was appalled to see that over half of the class had—had passed away. Good friends of mine because we lived very emotionally for four years to get through dental school. We helped each other, and knew a lot about each other. And, then we left school and we didn’t see each other. I had one comrade here, a classmate, and he died. So, I didn’t—most of them were from Middle Tennessee and around. So, then they called me last year and said, “We’re going to have this golden grads ceremony, and we’re going to send you a list of the class. And, it’s gonna be in March.” So, they sent me the papers to fill out, and the classes. I called back, and I said, “Hey, maybe you’d better move this up because I see half of the class is gone (laughs). They said, “You just be here, that’s all.” So, anyway, we had a nice—certain people got up and spoke, and it was emotional, and, you know. We never forgot what happened fifty years ago, because you go through, you know, so much in those years and remember the professors and problems we had with them, and the work, and the people who got kicked out of school. Back then they didn’t pussyfoot around, you know. If you didn’t do it right, you were out. And for any kind of a dishonest thing, you were out right away, there was no, you know, no negotiations, and if you didn’t make the grade, bang, you weren’t there the next quarter, so.... They would, in some cases, let you repeat the quarter depending on what they thought your abilities were, what happened, and so forth. We talked all about that. We were lucky to have made it, and most of us, I guess, survived pretty well. The ones that didn’t (laugh).... But, anyway, that’s.... Where do we go from here?

PIEHLER: Well, I wanted to ask you a little bit more about Knoxville in the ‘30s and, well, your parents, were they members of the Synagogue or the Temple?

DIFTLER: Well, they were members of the Synagogue. I’ll tell you, my father was not very observant whatsoever, and I don’t know why, but I think probably what had happened in Europe soured him, and he did not see—he wanted me to go and be part of the Hebrew School, and so forth, but he never went. I don’t recall any time going to services with him.

PIEHLER: Even on the High Holy Days?

DIFTLER: Anytime. And, he would disappear. And my mother with her family [were] very traditional, and you know, she went and made sure that I went, and I went with her and so forth.

But I always felt there was some split. Why wasn't my dad—and he wouldn't talk about it, and she wouldn't talk about it, either. But one thing is interesting about him is that he—back then, most everybody smoked cigarettes. But Friday night at sundown, he would put the cigarettes away and wouldn't pick them back up until after Sabbath was over.

PIEHLER: Really?

DIFTLER: That's ...

PIEHLER: That was a real ritual?

DIFTLER: Yeah. Oh, I mean, he wouldn't—you couldn't make him do that, see. So, one time—you know, I had never had a very close conversation [with him] because in those days he was raised as a Prussian person, you know, and you don't talk to children with emotional feelings, you know. They were afraid to release, you know, their, their frailties, so to speak, you know, they ...

PIEHLER: Very austere, very stern.

DIFTLER: Yeah, and my uncle was even more so, the one that was in the war, you know. He was trained in the Prussian army, and he carried himself that way although.... And, so, he said that his mother was dying, and she said, "Ben, I want you to promise me one thing, you won't smoke on the Sabbath." Why, I don't know. That was a whole Yiddish—and so he made her that promise. And I—you could not entice him, period. Until the day he died, he would always put that down on Friday evening before Sabbath and pick it up after Sabbath, never do anything on Saturday. He would work in the store on Saturday, you know, he always, somehow, he never had any effect from the cigarettes that he smoked, you know, like lung cancer or anything like that. What he died from was a stomach ulcer, it could have been from smoking, I don't know. But anyway, he had a bleeding ulcer. That's what we know. I don't know what the story is. But, anyway ...

PIEHLER: He lived a long ... I mean, he died in 1965.

DIFTLER: Yeah, he was 79.

PIEHLER: Yeah, so ...

DIFTLER: So, he was a fiery little gentleman, and he had emotional fits. But, he was a very kind person. And, he was never so proud of me—that he ever told me—as when I graduated dental school and I showed him some of the work we did there. Because he understood meticulous work because that's what he ...

PIEHLER: From the clock making.

DIFTLER: Yeah. So, that's the only time, I think, that he exhibited to me his emotional pride in something I had done. All through early school, you know, to hell with it, but he was so proud.

And I always felt good that I made them proud that I finished dental school, you see, and became a useful citizen, I feel. You know, and he knew that, and then.... I was in practice when he died, and my mother also—she died first. And, he lived one year after she died, and he didn't want to live anymore, they were so close. And she died because she had arterial schoratic heart disease, and it runs in their family. So, she died at UT Hospital. Well, actually, she died at home, but she was in UT Hospital for treatment, and they didn't have some of the things that they could do today, but you know how it goes. But, he lived a miserable life after that. And, he said he didn't want to live anymore, and he didn't.

PIEHLER: So, your mother died in 1964, and he passed away a year ... later?

DIFTLER: Yeah, you got those dates?

PIEHLER: Yeah, I have those dates. You know, people reading the transcripts won't have the pre-interview survey, so....

DIFTLER: Okay, so that's, that's a little bit about.... And, my brother was in the Navy. He was actually in World War II. He served in Panama. He was an officer in the Navy, and my father was very proud of that that he came home with his Navy uniform on as a lieutenant.

PIEHLER: He was a lieutenant?

DIFTLER: Yeah, ensign and then lieutenant.

PIEHLER: What was his—what was your brother's name?

DIFTLER: Nathan.

PIEHLER: And he—I want to just back up before we talk a little bit about his Navy career. He was a very—you said he was very active in the Boy Scouts?

DIFTLER: Yeah, he—we had a church that was on our street, Magnolia, still there, Magnolia Methodist Church, and they had a Boy Scout troop. In those years, I think, they all met at churches or places of.... And, he was always going off to the Boy Scouts, working on merit badges and all that stuff. And, his interest was in the horticultural area. And, he really loved—he would take me out in the woods area and show me trees and leaves and whatever. He could identify the trees, and I could care less, you know. I mean (laughs)... I always regret that. And my wife has also got a green thumb, and I can't—she won't let me near it (laugh). But, she raises, you know, flowers and plants. But he, she, and my brother used to discuss all this stuff. But, he was very, very interested, and he would raise orchids. He had a hot house in his home, and he'd bring flowers down to the business, and stuff like that. I would always look sideways at him. But anyway, he ... loved the forest so much he went into the forestry program here which only was two years. And, then, to finish it, they had to go to the University of Georgia. We had relatives there, and they, you know, were glad to see him come there. The Loeff family, remember, I said my Aunt Esther? One of her sons lived in Athens, Georgia.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: The University of Georgia. He became very, very well-to-do in the scrap metal business. It's actually—we used to call it the junk business, but he'd make it, you know, a little bit higher plane and call it “scrap metals” business. So anyway—or the “metals” business, he left the scrap out. But, anyway, he was very accepted by them, and he finished his school there. Then, the Navy called him to go to World War II, and he went to Northwestern University in officers' training. And he was on a crash boat. You know these John Kennedy PT-109 types?

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: That's what he did. And instead of sending him to the war zone with torpedoes, they outfitted these boats to help train pilots on aircraft carriers. They would fall off—he'd run around and pick them up, you see, because back then the aircraft carrier was a brand new fixture. And the pilots were being trained to land and take off, and if they had an accident or fell off or something happened, then they had a crash boat squadron that would go pick them up. And he was in charge of one of those, and that's what he did.

PIEHLER: And based in Panama during the ...

DIFTLER: Panama, yeah. And the funny thing about Panama—he was a very handsome fella, his son lives here in Knoxville now, and he looks somewhat like my brother but never as handsome. He was brown, sandy hair—where it came from, I don't know, just a handsome gentleman. And my mother used to get these letters from the girlfriend in Panama (laughs). And, I had to laugh, you know, she would hardly let me see them. But all these girls would say, “Well, they loved my brother.” He always said he couldn't marry them because he was Jewish, you know, and, they were wanting her to okay it. And, I think he fed them this BS, you know (laughs). And she finally—it was very—he lived a colorful Navy career, you know. All the nurses and the people down there and all, you know ...

PIEHLER: Do any of his letters survive from the war?

DIFTLER: Not his. If they do have them, my sister-in-law has them, and I don't know how you could get them. I didn't—I remember my mother would read them, and I don't know, maybe she destroyed them. I don't know what she did. But, we would get letters from him from Panama. Back then, they had no Internet, and it was hard to call on the telephone. And so the communication was by mail, you know.

PIEHLER: But, you were—when the war was out—I mean you had a brother in the service throughout the war.

DIFTLER: Yeah. Well, yeah, he, as I say, he was not in the European theater, and it was still, you know—many times he would write and say they had submarine sightings of German subs down there, but he was—according to my mother, he was in imminent danger; but he really wasn't as far as I was concerned, but maybe he was, I don't know. But, the difference in this

instance and other—even the Pacific conflict, see, he stayed where he was, they didn't send him.... But he was in—actually, he was in the service, I guess, from '41 on ...

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: ... or '42, something like that.

PIEHLER: And then he came back ...

DIFTLER: About '45 or '46.

PIEHLER: ... Did he come back before you went overseas?

DIFTLER: I think he came back before I was in ...

PIEHLER: In San Diego?

DIFTLER: ... left San Diego. He was in part of the time, and he was discharged. When I came back, he was running the store. And, he had married on Labor Day, I forgot what day it.... But we went to the wedding, and—I remember that—and then he and his wife had two children right away. And, they lived in an apartment near us, and then he was running the store.

PIEHLER: And he ran the store for the rest of his ...

DIFTLER: Yeah, my father and him together. And you can imagine what that was all about, so ... But finally my father just gave up, and he kept it. He improved the location and improved the type of business that he structured, different—my father was an old-time businessman, and my brother was ...

PIEHLER: Your ... store, just again, was originally located where?

DIFTLER: Originally it was down—you know where Harold's is?

PIEHLER: Oh, yeah.

DIFTLER: That little area there. Right now there's a music statue there to country music.

PIEHLER: Okay. So that—yeah, I have good—it was on Gay Street.

DIFTLER: Yeah, Gay Street.

PIEHLER: And when did your brother move ... the—or was it your brother and father that moved? When did you move?

DIFTLER: No, my father was out. He could not have survived to move to Market Street.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: And, I don't know the date. But after a few years, he said, "This ain't going to work down here anymore." For the kind of thing he wanted to do, so he took the bull by the horns and secured a location on Market Street. Which was uptown, you see. And, today it's sort of—you know, Market Street is coming back in a different way, but.... He began to, you know, make friends with professional people and take care of that kind of business. And the lawyers in town, he knew a lot of people. He was a very interesting person. I used to come by and, you know, he had—he didn't socialize a lot with people, but they would spend money on different things.

PIEHLER: And—but your brother ...

DIFTLER: He was not a social person.

PIEHLER: He never moved out west?

DIFTLER: Yeah, he moved to—and my sister-in-law still has the house in Sequoyah Hills.

PIEHLER: But did the business—did it move?

DIFTLER: No.

PIEHLER: So, he stayed downtown?

DIFTLER: Yeah, the whole time.

PIEHLER: Until he closed?

DIFTLER: He sold out. He became very ill, and they had an auction and sold it out, and he didn't live much longer. He waited too long to get out of business. The atmosphere was changing, downtown was changing and he waited a little bit too long.

PIEHLER: When did he liquidate the business?

DIFTLER: I'd say, '96/7.

PIEHLER: Oh, so it's quite recently?

DIFTLER: Yeah. I may be wrong on the dates.

PIEHLER: But it was ... not ...

DIFTLER: Maybe ten years ago.

PIEHLER: Yeah. Which is ...

DIFTLER: And they—he was very, very ill. He had a lung disease, and—of course he never smoked and lived a healthy life, but he came down with a.... And while he was very, very ill, it was painful to see because he was such a handsome, active fellow. To see him disintegrate like that.... And he went to the store, and they put it up for, you know, the auction. And right after that was done; he never really enjoyed his retirement.

PIEHLER: What rank was your brother in the Boy Scouts? Did he make Eagle Scout?

DIFTLER: No, I don't think it was Eagle. But, I'm not sure how far ...

PIEHLER: But he did—he stayed in it a long time?

DIFTLER: Yeah. Oh, he—he was there a long—and I don't know why he didn't.... I know he was always studying for these merit badges, you know, about Boy Scouts. And, I don't know to what degree he rose, but he was very active. He loved that because, I think, he was basically in that—they had many different categories, and he always was in the outdoor area. He loved to go to mountains and hike and everything, and I could care less (laughs). He wanted me to tag along.

PIEHLER: Well, I wanted to ask you—'cause you mentioned that boot camp really got you healthy. 'Cause you are very ... trim now and you said earlier ...

DIFTLER: Well, that's another story.

PIEHLER: You were, basically, by your own admission, a fat Jewish kid.

DIFTLER: Oh, yeah, I could show you pictures.

PIEHLER: Which I find hard—because usually it's the other way: people gain when they're older.

DIFTLER: Well, I was a mama's little boy, you know. And, back then if you didn't show a little kid that was chubby, then there was something wrong with your cooking or your—you know, something was wrong (laughter). So, I was a fat little kid all the way through school. I didn't participate too much in the way of sports and so forth, so.... And I went away to dental school. I was very, very heavy, and the—I weighed almost 200 pounds. And, when I got married, I was heavy. So then—well, going back as a young kid growing up, you know, they had sports in high school and so forth. In the university here at that time, they required physical education classes. I don't know if they do that now or not, but that was a requirement. And they were, you know, at the old gym here that there Memorial, Alumni Gym there ...

PIEHLER: Yes.

DIFTLER: There, we had classes.

PIEHLER: You had classes there.



DIFTLER: Yeah, and now they're redoing that, which I'm glad to see they're keeping it. And so I was, you know, enrolled in two years of that. Plus I never did get into University ROTC. But it was—I think it was either a trade off, if you were in ROTC, you didn't need to take the phys ed, or—so, I took the phys ed, and I went through that. You know, we played volleyball, baseball and had classes. Nothing like today, but anyway, it was—I remember it was running down the hill from class to change clothes, and all that stuff. So then I went—my family got sort of—said, “Well, it's time for you to start, you know, watching your diet and so forth.” See, I came from my mother's family with had a history of heart disease. So, I went on Weight Watchers, you know, when they first came out, you know.

PIEHLER: Well, that—what year was that? That was in the 1950s?

DIFTLER: Yeah, I went on Weight Watchers. And this friend of mine and I were both overweight. A Jewish kid of the Robinson family, Reuben, did you ever know him?

PIEHLER: No, but I've heard the ...

DIFTLER: Mitchell?

PIEHLER: Yes.

DIFTLER: His brother. We were contemporaries, went to dental school together. And so, and we were also friendly enemies, and so forth. But we—“Let's,” I said, “Let's go to Weight Watchers.” And so he went with a girlfriend. And we went to this Weight Watchers thing, and I—right after that program, that night, he said, “Well, I think me and so and so, his girlfriend, are going out to eat. You want to go with us?” I said, “Okay.” So he ordered everything that was against the ...

PIEHLER: The Weight Watchers ...

DIFTLER: And so I said, “My God, are you not going to follow that?” I ordered the salad, you know (laugh). I remember it to this day. So, he said, “Ah, shit.” So, anyway, I said, “Well, I think I'm going to stick to it.” So, I followed the Weight Watchers program which is easy if you do—because, if you follow what they tell you, you cannot eat it all, you see. It's a New York diet of some type, some organization. You'll eat a lot of things that—vegetables and salads, but you have to eat it on a regular basis. Now, I don't know what they do, but ... And in between you have to have so many glasses of skim milk, so many fruits, and stuff like that, and all this stuff. You see, because all I was eating was mashed potatoes, schmaltz, and all this (laugh), you know. So, I dropped that, and I started losing weight. See, so then, a group of friends started to run, you know they were running, running craze. So they said, “Why don't you come out and ...?” And I said, “I couldn't walk, I couldn't run half a block.” They said, “Well, we couldn't, either. Come out, we'll walk and then run and walk.” So I went into the training program. I got into that, started losing a lot of weight. And I ran three marathons. And, so, then I run every day today, you know, now, and do some extras to keep the weight down because I go to—my brother developed a—he had to have a bypass. And he was always thin. He was never really heavy. So

the minute that happened, I shot over to a cardiologist, who was a friend, and I said, “Well, see where I’m at....” And so he said, “Right now, you’re okay. You know, you have a little high blood pressure which is no big—but keep exercising.” So that was 1995, and I kept running and doing—and I’ve kept my weight pretty well, and, down.

So, they had a screening somewhere about ‘94 or ‘95, somewhere along there, and I had a little high blood pressure. Not really high, so I went back to him and he said, “Well, ... come back in six months, and if it isn’t any better, we’ll put you on medicine.” So I didn’t want to take medicine, so I didn’t go back. So then I had another screening back about ‘98 or ‘99—‘99, I think, it was close to 2000. So I was feeling a little funny, so I went and the blood pressure was pretty high. So, I went back to that office, and he had retired, Dr. Acker, and they gave me somebody else. So, he checked the blood pressure, and he said, “Yeah” said, “You know, it’s not too good,” he said. And he said, “Well, let’s do a blood test; see what, you know, what your cholesterol and all that is.” And that was all, fairly, you know, borderline. And he said, “Well, I think we better put you on a medicine.” And he gave me a treadmill test. Of course, they couldn’t get me off the treadmill because I was so used to running. And he said, “Listen, don’t come in here to work out (laughs). Stay on a few minutes, and then get off,” you know. So I was going on and on, you know. So, he said, “Well, don’t be too negligent.” Said, “I want you to take this medication.” So, he said, I—“And keep up the exercise.” So, that’s where I am right now. The blood pressure is way down with the medication. The cholesterol is doing okay because of diet. I try not to eat much meat or anything.

The basic diet—the doctor I have now, Dr. Besozzi, when they gave me him—his name is Myrwood Besozzi. So, I said to the nurses, “Is he a lady or a man, I don’t know.” And they said, “Of course, it’s a gentleman.” So, anyway, he said he was from Pennsylvania. His father was a coal miner, or whatever, there. And he went into medicine. We had a long talk about it. And he is Italian. So he said, “I know what you’re going through, so you’ll have to keep on your...” he said, “I have no recommendation because from what your diet and your weight and everything, you just have hypertension. So that’s where I stayed. But, basically, I was a fat, Jewish kid all the way through school. Basically ...

PIEHLER: So your ... brother was the outdoorsman? It sounds like ...

DIFTLER: He was outdoors. And, also ...

PIEHLER: Played—athlete?

DIFTLER: [He] Was not really overweight.

PIEHLER: Did he play any athletics growing ...

DIFTLER: Not as such, but basically hiking.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: And, as I say, the worst thing in the world for me is to go hiking. I enjoy nature and so forth, but from the car (laughs). But, he was just the opposite. He loved to put on hiking boots and go slop through the rain and whatever. But, anyway, that was—and growing up in Knoxville that was—I really never had a brother because he was always off at college, and he was in the service. And, so I was really an only child at the time. Have you ever heard of that story; My Brother Was an Only Child (laugh)? There's a book by that name.

PIEHLER: Now, I ...

DIFTLER: You can do without it. But, anyway, I—he always said my brother was an only child.

PIEHLER: What activities were you involved with? What did you do for fun?

DIFTLER: Well, ... we had here a photography club which I used as a hobby, I was, and I still basically—I'm getting into digital now. So photography, and also I was a member of the Jewish youth groups here and, you know, and so forth, and whatever. Because everybody else did it, you know. It's not that I was—you know, I went along with it. I'm sort of a go-along-with-the-crowd guy, you know, back then, mostly. And ... we stayed, I love the community, being in touch with other contemporaries. And that's the way we did it. I had a lot of friends, and we ... That was basically what I did. Went through the ... programs that they had, and, you know, went to conventions. My father never understood why you had to go out of town to a convention, you know (laugh). It basically costs money, you know. So, my mother prevailed, you know. She said, "Well, he needs to go be with other children." And so ...

PIEHLER: It sounds like your mother was the soft touch, at times in the family.

DIFTLER: Oh, yeah. She...was a little bit more open to what it took to get along with my father, never, you know—he was rigid steel. This is the way it would always be a hundred years from now. Never gonna change, you know. But, she was more aggressive.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, because you had mentioned that it was a big experience going to California.

DIFTLER: Yes.

PIEHLER: That you'd really not traveled ...

DIFTLER: We never went anywhere. You know, like today people get in the car and go, the transportation and the roads. If we went anywhere, it was to like the Smoky Mountains. See, the thing to do at that time to go to Gatlinburg. They had these hotels and all you could eat for a dollar. They had the Riverside Hotel, and the Mountain View Hotel. Back in those years, they had fried chicken and country cooking. Fried chicken and mashed potatoes, and salads, whatever, all you could eat for a dollar. You know, so that's what we would do sometime on Sundays. But as far as going for a long trip, or going anywhere, we did not—it was never really out of town, but maybe, a little bit—my mother took me to Charleston ...

PIEHLER: So that ...

DIFTLER: ... once in a while.

PIEHLER: That was the sort of furthest from home you had gone?

DIFTLER: Yeah.

PIEHLER: How about Nashville? Had you ever been to Nashville before?

DIFTLER: I loved Nashville.

PIEHLER: What about Virginia? Have you ever ...

DIFTLER: We never—anything more than, luckily, never to Florida, never to... My wife's family, they would meet—my wife's father was in the car related business, and they would always be amenable to road trips. And they would go to Florida, and they would go to Atlantic City. They—that was a big deal, to go to Atlantic City. And, I never had gone to those places. We—my father, basically because he was not adventuresome and probably didn't have any money to do those kind of things. So, we, basically—that's the first time I'd really been alone, going ... to California was like going to the moon, you know. And, when they threw us on this troop train. They...gave us meals, you know, all along the way they had cooks, military cooks there with diners. And, we slept in bunks on the train, and we went down to San Antonio, Texas. And, they let us get off the train for a little bit to walk around. I said, "Gee, I'm in Texas." You know, I had heard of it, but I'd never been there. And then we got to Los Angeles. They put us right on a train to go to San Diego. And San Diego was, you know, was really a wonderful climate. I had never been aware of that type of climate. And, in the short time I was there, it was just beautiful mornings. And then they regimented us pretty well, you know, in training and we had to march. You'd tell—I was a little bit used to marching because of the ROTC, you know, ... I knew the commands and all that. And so that was, you know, my awakening to the rest of the world, you see.

MASON: What was the ROTC like at Knox High while the war was going on? Was there any ...

DIFTLER: I don't think there was too much toward the end of ... well, the end of ... 72, 3. Pearl Harbor, I remember, was on a Sunday. And we—I remember listening to the radio back then, we didn't have no television, see. Can you imagine no television? Radio was a big thing. So, I remember listening and an announcement came across that we had just been attacked by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor. And who in the hell knew where Pearl Harbor was, anyway? We had no history. And finally, the next day we went to—I think I was in junior high at the time, and C.L. Northcutt was the principal. And he was a fellow from Missouri, and he was an educator in the city school system where he was principal, a lovely man. He called a big assembly, and we listened to the President's talk, you know. "This is a day that will live," a date, d-a-t-e, "that will live in infamy." And, we listened to that speech as a big assembly. And that was—I think that

everything went on as far as high school—dances, proms, and so forth. And we would listen to the news on the radio about the war, you know, talking about the battles and the casualties and this and that and the other about World War II. And then when my brother—my mother almost had a nervous breakdown when my brother went to the service. And then we were more intently listening to it although he was in Panama, you know. And, he was lucky to get that duty because he would, you know, I don't know if my mother could have withstood the fact that he was in the European theater at that time (laughs).

PIEHLER: So the war was ... very stressful for your mother. Because of the ...

DIFTLER: Yeah. For the—you know, let's look at it this way, that all she really had was her two children. Her husband was, you know, a support, but, emotionally, they were different. And, so this was what, my mother—I was going to say a Jewish mother, but any mother would be concerned about the children in a war, as what's going on now, you know, you read the newspapers daily that children are.... So, that was stressful, and also, as far as any relatives in Europe, I never knew of any. I'm sure there must have been some.

PIEHLER: But none real close.

DIFTLER: No. There's no ...

PIEHLER: Contact back and forth.

DIFTLER: But, I would want to tell you this. It's ... maybe a little sidelight. You know the Schwarzbarts?

PIEHLER: Yes.

DIFTLER: Well, his father, Arnold's father, and a brother-in-law, Julius Gruenberg were Holocaust survivors. They escaped from the camp where they were. Arnold's mother was used in some of the Nazi experiments, and possibly Frieda, her sister-in-law. Anyway, my uncle, Max Friedman, again, was instrumental in bringing them to Knoxville. And, somehow, he got them here, I think, with a guarantee that, you know, he would be their sponsor.

PIEHLER: He would be their sponsor.

DIFTLER: Yes. And Mr. Schwarzbart came with Arnold as a young baby. I remember that because they lived near us, and Arnold was the only child. And Mr. Schwarzbart was a tailor, but a European tailor, you know. Not one of these, you know, cut fifty suits out at one time, you know.

PIEHLER: Very meticulous tailor.

DIFTLER: Yeah. You know. Europeans are old timey. So he—Mr. Friedman, got him a job at Levi Strauss or some place. And he learned—American Clothing, you've heard of that?

He was the head of that tailor department, actually, before he died, you know. And, he was a lovely man. And the mother was, I forgot her name, but anyway she was a very nice lady. But somewhat—I think she had—today they would probably class it as [post] traumatic stress syndrome. She was very, you know—coming from where they came from, you would expect something. But she was a very lovely person. But, you know, something was just a little ... And then, Julius was a medical doctor in Europe, had medical training. And, Mr. Friedman got him retrained, and then he became a psychiatrist at Lakeshore. And his wife, Frieda—no Frieda, I think, was—Frieda was Arnold’s mother, and Mary was his aunt. And, they were lovely people, and they were about the only connection I would have as a young child with the European relatives. They were really relatives of Mr. Friedman, somehow.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: And Arnold—you know Arnold today?

PIEHLER: Oh, yeah, yeah.

DIFTLER: Arnold, you know. Well, that’s his background. But they were—we are sort of related. And Mr. Friedman had two daughters, Selma and Lily. And Selma had died not too long ago, and her daughter is Terry Hahn. I don’t know if you have met Terry.

PIEHLER: Oh, I know the Hahns—I know Scott Hahn.

DIFTLER: Well, it’s his mother.

PIEHLER: Okay.

DIFTLER: And, they are estranged. There’s some family problem there. But, anyway, Terry is actually my second cousin. And, I keep in touch with her because we talk about old times, you know. Her mother was Selma, and she was a lovely person. And, so, she ... tried to be as her father was for the family. See, she had that, you know, upbringing. And she was—had a very unhappy marriage. We won’t go into that. And then she had a sister who lives in New Orleans, Lily. And she was married to a lawyer here by the name of Joe Epstein, who was a sports broadcaster. And they met—a very colorful figure from Memphis. His father was a Cantor, you know. And Joe Epstein was also indoctrinated by his father-in-law to be a prestigious, helpful figure. And, I do remember my pride in [seeing] Joe walking down the street. He had come back from—he was in the Air Force, came back with his uniform with the propeller and all that stuff. He was—I forgot what he was in the Air Force, but he was part of the Air Force, the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force. And then, he was mustered out, and he became—[went] in business with Mr. Friedman. Joe had graduated from U.T. law school. And one of the professors came into the store there one time, and—are you running out of tape?

PIEHLER: Well, keep going. I have plenty of tape.

DIFTLER: Well, he came in to—when Mr.—he went into business with Mr. Friedman, and all—we would all hang around Uncle Max’s store. “Do you need anything, do you want

anything?" You know. If you got bar mitzvahed, you give everybody a watch, you know. And, so, he didn't give me one because my father had one, and so forth. But he gave me money, I think, I don't know what it was. But anyway, we'd always come by to see Uncle Max, you know. You always wanted to stay on the good side. I'd come by from high school, which was not far from there. I'd walk by the store and say, "Hi, how are you doing?" He'd say, "Come in Harold." He'd say, "How are you doing?" It made me feel accepted, you know. Here I was a little kid. "Come in Harold. Sit down and talk," you know, "How are you doin'?"

So, then Joe was in the store. He became affiliated with Friedman Jewelers. And a law professor came in one time. I remember this, a Professor Jones, I think it was, he had a walking cane. And he said, "Joe, what are you doing here? You are one of the most outstanding law students. You should be in the law practice." I remember that. But, anyway, they—he stayed with the store. And then he moved to New Orleans and was involved with shopping centers there. And, he died recently. So that's as far as World War II goes.

I had a very close friend—the Davis family, Blossom Davis. Can you imagine that name for a Jewish girl (laughs)? And the family is from New York, but her brother got killed in Wake Island. I remember going through that with her. He was a second lieutenant. They had a ... family with two sons and a daughter. They were close friends of my mother's. And, I remember when it was announced that he was killed in the South Pacific. And that was real tough on the families. And he's buried here. I said that one day—I said that I'd take you to the Cemetery.

PIEHLER: Now I will take you up on that.

DIFTLER: They have a monument there [for] Jewish War Veterans. You had several, and I knew Harris Tucker, who was a Jewish fellow here, was in the Air Force [and] was shot down. And, Herbert Davis, and I forgot who else, there was someone I did know. But there is a monument to them, you see. But that was our experience in World War II.

PIEHLER: I'm gonna ... change the tape because I—we're almost out of this one.

DIFTLER: Yeah.

-----END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE -----

---

DIFTLER: ... edit out all the bad words in it.

PIEHLER: We'll—you'll also see the transcript. This continues an interview with Harold Diftler on March 20, 2003, with Kurt Piehler and ...

MASON: Brad Mason.

PIEHLER: At the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. You ... were just saying, you—before we started recording ...

DIFTLER: Well, when I ... was in boot camp ... I—and this is to give you an idea of the association with World War II veterans, we had a World War II veteran. At that time, the war was over, and, as I say, they were bringing back wounded people to the naval hospital in San Diego. But, while I was in boot camp we had a company commander. They would give the recruits of that class to a seasoned Navy veteran to be company commander. And, he was to shape us up to be sailors, see. So, we learned a lot from him about life and everything else. I mean he would sit down and tell stories. And, also, he was very strict, you know, in the Navy tradition, and so forth. We learned that right away. Because he felt if you didn't know Navy tradition or have a basic structure, you're going to be wiped out any time. And he was like my father, you see (laugh). I forgot his name. But somehow I got on his good side because he always gave me midnight watch duty. I don't (laugh) know. I guess this little Jewish kid, he just felt.... So from twelve to two, I had to stand guard. I never got it during the day or anything, it was always twelve to two, midnight to two o'clock. So, one time on guard duty—and he explained to me how very important this was, see. We'd walk with a rifle, and we had to walk back and forth, you know, to protect this ... barracks. And, one was in front, and one was in the back. It was always—the back always changed, but I was always the one in front row (laughs).

So he—one night, you know, he was kind of a rouser, you know. And being in the Navy, he'd go out and drink when he was off. And, he'd come back to the barracks, you see. So you always had to challenge, "Who goes there?" And, "Let's see your identification," and all that. So, one night he came and he said, "Hi, it's me," and he tried to get in. And I said, "Well, let's see your identification," you know. So, I said—he said, "Well, you know me. I'm in the com ..." "I don't know from nothing," I said. "Let's see your identification, because that's what I'm supposed to do." So I think that probably got me in trouble, but I checked it and it was him. I said, "Okay, you can pass," you see. So instead of getting a commendation for that, I think all I got was his bad side, you know (laughs). Because he didn't want me to see him, he was a little under, you know, some alcohol, you know. A good ole boy, you know. He came in and ... it didn't bother me. But I said, "I want to see your damn identification." I said, "I'm supposed to." So he—then they had a muster every morning, see. To call the roll and see if everybody was there. So, he was a very formal guy, but he came to me, and he said, "I see you're here." Then, he'd go on to the rest of them (laughs). So, that's a little sidelight.

PIEHLER: You mentioned, you said to me that ... the guard duty was important. It sounds like you told a story amid that.

DIFTLER: Well, the guard duty was important because, you know, he was brought up this way during the war because we had—in those years, we had saboteurs

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: ... We didn't know that they let German soldiers off submarines to terrorize, like, you know, the Al Qaeda around here. You know, back then they were saboteurs. They were mostly spies. They weren't looking to cause trouble or burn down buildings or anything. So, you never knew that some of them might, you know, still be around and come into the Navy barracks. See, that's one thing that we said you need to get identification to see who's talking, who you're talking to, who's supposed—nobody is supposed to be here except Naval personnel.



And you never know, some little kid—here’s a high school kid with a gut doing guard duty, you know. They could put you away.... So, then I did (laugh) the same thing to him. So anyway, that’s why it was so important, you know. It never happened, but—during the boot camp era, we had entertainment, and they had USO shows. And they gave us everything, you know. And they had really good food, and ...

PIEHLER: You mentioned a lot about the food. What was it ... you mentioned your mother’s was very much old European and heavy.

DIFTLER: Yeah.

PIEHLER: What was—you liked the food in the Navy. And even in boot camp, what was so good about the ...

DIFTLER: Okay. I’ll tell you what. I can still smell it. We ... had bacon and eggs, which I’d never had before.

PIEHLER: You kept, your mother kept a kosher house? Cause you asked ...

DIFTLER: Oh, yes. Oh, my God. What are you talking about? And, (laugh), that’s another story about—so, they had bacon and eggs and pancakes. And we all served a time in the kitchen. And, they call it “culinary duty,” it was actually KP. It could have killed you, you know, peeling potatoes and taking out garbage and everything. So, I’d never had that at home. You know, no bacon, ever, you know. And it’s wonderful, you know, and good. Then, we’d take bacon and eggs flopped over, you know. And then they had pancakes, plenty of them. And I loved that. And then for lunch, they always had something like shit on a shingle, and I began to like it (laugh), you know, cause I—and, they had hamburger sometime, which I’d never had all that. But, I figured it was a good excuse, I was in the Navy, I had to eat it because it was a patriotic duty. I couldn’t say that I had to have kosher food, you know. So, they—it was really good American food that I never had at home.

PIEHLER: So, you grew up without eating hamburger at home?

DIFTLER: Hell no! Well, maybe kosher hamburger. But not like you see today.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DIFTLER: It was called Salisbury steak.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: You know.

PIEHLER: That’s what your mother would prepare it?

DIFTLER: Yeah. And my father demanded it. My father was a kind of person that you did not even put everything on one plate, you see. If it was—if you had three vegetables and a meat, the meat would go here, and each vegetable had its own little plate, see. So we had a bunch of plates after the meal ended. He would never eat like you eat today. He could never do anything ...

PIEHLER: He was very formal, so ...

DIFTLER: Formal comes with Viennese.

PIEHLER: So meals were very formal in your ...

DIFTLER: Oh, that was—mealtime as when, you know, everybody got together. There was none of this run and take off, you know.

PIEHLER: Or watching TV or ...

DIFTLER: No, nothing, you know. I mean, and if I had to go somewhere to play ball, kids come by to play ball in the neighborhood, or whatever you did in the neighborhood, you couldn't leave, you know. You had your meal, and if Dad wanted to talk to you—then you could go, you know. But you never jumped up after a meal and went off somewhere, you know. And, it probably was a—like he demanded a lot. My mother was brought up that way, too. Her mother was a very strict authoritarian, you know, a matriarch of the family. Because she had these five sons and two daughters that would drive her crazy if she wasn't (laugh). You know, she really battered them over the head. And, they paid full respect to her, you know. And, she was the grandmother, and when she died, they all went to hell, you know. But she held the family together. But, ... that brings—as far as the war, World War II. And we—my father used to curse Hitler all the time, you know. And we didn't have that communication. He was not the person who read the New York Times He would read his newspaper or he'd listen to the radio, you see. My wife's father took the Jewish newspaper, The Forward ...

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: And, he would read about what they recorded in the New York Times about Hitler... My father absorbed this from his contemporaries and from the news that came out of—and, he cursed Hitler for ruining a wonderful country, you know. We had to leave with what's happening. He never realized what would happen as it did happen, you know. And, of course, I've learned a lot from that. One reason that I have taken an audited Vejas' [Liulevicius, UT professor of history] course ...

PIEHLER: Oh, yes.

DIFTLER: It's wonderful. And, I've learned a lot about my father from that course, you see, because it let me in on all that ...

PIEHLER: What did you learn about—that's interesting, what did you learn that you understood your father and where he came from?

DIFTLER: Well, the community in Vienna at that time, you see—my father actually, was not a person to open up so much. But he remembered the sidewalk cafes, the Reisenrod, you know, the big Ferris wheel in Vienna. And it's part of his cultural life there. As a kid growing up, he must have been in the same, you know, culture that Hitler had.

PIEHLER: It also strikes me that your father missed some of that.

DIFTLER: Of course, you know. They hated to leave. He would have always loved to have stayed in Europe, you see. And, he couldn't understand America with the cowboys and everything. But, the thing is, when television first came out, his favorite program was a western (laugh). See, he would—you know, a lot of the old Jewish men; they loved to watch cowboy movies.

PIEHLER: Well, it's also interesting, I mean that's—I'm not completely sure I think cowboy movies did great in Germany in the '50s and '60s.

DIFTLER: I don't—but he was not there then, you see.

PIEHLER: Yeah, but it wouldn't—I mean, it wasn't that ...

DIFTLER: But, I'll tell you a little secret. My father, when business would get dull—see my mother was always there, you know, she knew all about it. But, he would leave the store. And I thought, "Where the hell is he going," you know. He was not the kind of fella that would have a girlfriend on the side. So, up the street there was a movie theater. It was called the Strand Theater. The building is still there. It is on Wall and Gay Street. And, they were strictly a cowboy theater. And he would go and watch cowboy movies, Tom Mix ...

PIEHLER: Oh, yeah.

DIFTLER: All these things in it. And, finally, one day I saw him come out of the theater, you know. You know like you see your father come out of a burlesque club (laughs). So, I said, "Dad where have you been?" (Laughs). He said "Shut up! Go back to the store." So, I went back and he came in, and mother said, "I know where he's been, he's been to the movies." So, she says, "As long as he goes to the movies, he's happy." And he loves—he loved the westerns. And, then when they started putting them on TV, he would sit for hours and watch them, you know, the ...

PIEHLER: But, he never would take you. You would enjoy ...

DIFTLER: Oh, no. As far as taking me to a movie or ballgame, forget it, you know.

PIEHLER: So, this was your father's, sort of, just ...

DIFTLER: Yeah. He was a loner. And he ... just did not get to the level of the children, you see. They would get up to your level, a level which you never could attain. But, always you

know that was the role model of the strict [father]. You know, we had the minor league baseball club here. And it was—they just recently moved it to Sevierville.

PIEHLER: Yeah, the Smokies.

DIFTLER: Well, it was not far from my house, the Bill Meyer Stadium. And, some of my contemporaries, their fathers would take them to the ballgame. My father would never take me to the ballgame. In the first place, it cost money. And ... well, I'd sit there and see them hit a ball. And he used to criticize my uncle. They played golf. He couldn't understand that at all. You hit a little ball around, and all this, and, you stay away all day, and it costs money to play it. He could never understand that. He never did that, you see. And, consequently, we never did it. We didn't have a role model in sports, you see. But, once in a while I would slip off and go to the baseball game, you know. I would get the money together. I had a paper route, see. I delivered papers. And, you probably don't remember Liberty magazine.

PIEHLER: I've heard of it. I ...

DIFTLER: Yeah. I was an agent for Liberty magazine. See, what they did, they hired little kids. You had a little plastic bag, and people who subscribed, in those years, you had it delivered by hand, it wasn't in the mail, see. So, I had a route to deliver Liberty magazine, see, in the neighborhood. I got paid for that. I forgot what it was now. And the newspaper route, I had that, too. So, I saved up a little money. I went to the ballgame, you know. And my father said. 'Where you been?' 'Ballgame.' 'You should stay home. Make the lessons.' That's what he said, 'Make the lessons.' You know, from school, if you weren't studying, you know, you were worthless. School and study. That was, you know—so, I broke out of that mold, really. But, anyway, it was ... a good influence, really. My kids, I still had a flavor of that role model in me. And with three children, girls, you know, they put me in my place, and I (laugh) ...

PIEHLER: But, it also sounds like you did not necessarily want to repeat raising your own family, what your father ...

DIFTLER: No, I'll tell you, my horror was to be like my father, you know. I liked him, but I didn't like a lot of other ... things he did. But, I liked my father. Really, did not dislike him. But, my horror was to grow up and be that kind of person. And I tried not to. And, actually, he was very good to me, because I couldn't have gotten where I was without my father. But, he never let you know you was good. Whenever he'd do something good, he'd put the screws down on you so you wouldn't think he was soft, you know? So, that's where I really felt that, you know, I really respected him and liked [him], but I didn't want to be that kind of person. My mother, yes. But, they balanced it out.

PIEHLER: Your mother, was she ... active in any other way, any organizations particularly in the synagogue or the Jewish community?

DIFTLER: A little bit, in the sisterhood, but ...

PIEHLER: Was she a member of the Hadassah?

DIFTLER: Yeah, she was a member of everything, but she was not very officer-active, so to speak.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: Whereas my wife's mother controlled the whole damn thing, you know . She was president of this and that and the other and liked to assert herself. My mother was very, you know, laid back. And, she belonged to everything, she was a belonging type person and supportive. And, I don't remember her doing a lot of work, no. This is what was colorful in my family. They had the Sunday night poker game. And all of the contemporaries ...

PIEHLER: Including your father?

DIFTLER: Yeah. Yeah, he loved to play poker. And, they had—I mentioned the Davis's, the Robinsons, the Siegels—he had a second-hand clothing store here—the Chasens. These people have all—their children have left, you see. The Chasens was in the scrap metal business. The Friedmans, of course. The Shaws, Professor Shaw was professor of agronomy here. And, his children were brilliant. One son was Admiral [Hyman] Rickover's assistant, Milton Shaw. He was on the basketball team.... And, they—maybe one or two others, and they would never accept strangers. It was a close little group. But once in a while somebody would come through town, and they'd let them play poker with them. And they would—and Sam Robinson, that's my daughter's, I mean my wife's, that's a slip, my wife's uncle, a very colorful man. And they would play poker, and I would—he would come and tell them dirty jokes. And so my brother and I, and he—we were almost contemporaries, we would stay in the other room. They didn't know we were there, and we would listen to the conversation (laughs). And ... it was always a Sunday night game. And Monday morning, the telephone would be busy. They would talk over the game. My mother, you know, and father, my mother particularly. She would talk to Mrs. Shaw about what the other one, how they didn't feel that they were quite honest with the game (laughter) or some kind of, you know, some kind of gossip, you know. And, I used to hear that on Monday whereas Sunday they had the actual game. And, but they couldn't—had arguments and everything, but they couldn't wait to get back on the next Sunday's game. Arguments all the time, you know.

PIEHLER: Arguments over ...

DIFTLER: Over nothing, you know (laugh). And, also, what they were doing in the community. It was like a support system, you know, a group like that.

PIEHLER: And this was just like a stag affair? This was—the women were absent?

DIFTLER: No, the women, women and men together.

PIEHLER: Women—did the women play poker?

DIFTLER: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Oh, so the women were playing poker, too?

DIFTLER: Yeah, women and men together. It was a social. They didn't go to movies, you know, together, and they didn't have like today you would have dinners or buffets. And so they played poker and all together, women and men, you know. And they—the women, would talk about the gossip the next day (laugh), you see. And mah jong and stuff, bridge—my mother never played that.

PIEHLER: It was poker.

DIFTLER: Yeah. Now the others might have played. They had a—they used to call it a minion, you know. They would take up for Hadassah. They had these card games or whatever for Hadassah.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm. The poker game does sound ...

DIFTLER: Oh, it was. I wish I could have recorded it back then. Oh, it would startle you. What they would—they would talk over the families dirty linen, they would get advice, they would get angry, they—I mean, it was just the whole ...

PIEHLER: And how many people were there?

DIFTLER: It must have been sometimes as much as eight or ten.

PIEHLER: Well, that's a pretty large ...

DIFTLER: Then, they would make a big deal out of serving. In the middle of the game, whoever—whenever they went to a home, they would serve lavishly, you see. And ... they would rotate around, you know, where—and at that time we had an automobile. And what sometimes I would do was pick my family up after the game and come home. See, I was driving then, and sometimes not. But I would always try to get there early so I could hear some of the ... (laughter). And, Mr. Friedman, again, was the leader of the whole thing, you know. And, if they had problems, they'd talk about them and he'd tell them what to do. And, you know, he'd say, "I'll see you tomorrow down at the office here, and I'll take care of it." Well, if a kid got a traffic ticket or something, don't worry about it. And juvenile delinquents, all the kids were getting into trouble. "I'll meet you at the lawyer or go through the court. I know the guy, I know the judge." He'd fix everything, see (laughs). And—but, that was part of my growing up.

And they would discuss the current situations. You know, the—at the time the war was going on, and they would really give their view of what was gonna happen, an intelligent view. None of them were really studious readers of New York newspapers, which you couldn't really get. The only papers that were delivered at that time were Yiddish newspapers. And, as I say, that had a lot of news that they picked up out of the New York Times. And, my father-in-law would read that. But he wasn't part of the poker game group. But, the thing about The Forward—did you ever read The Forward? I get it now.

PIEHLER: I've read it at the synagogue.

DIFTLER: Yeah, I get it now in English. It's a wonderful paper.

PIEHLER: Yeah, no I've ...

DIFTLER: But he would—it would come in Yiddish, and I—he taught me how to read the headlines. So, I could read the headlines. But, if the Knoxville paper had an article, he wouldn't believe it. But, if he saw it in The Forward, he'd believe it, you know (laughs). He'd say, "The Forward says this and that." And, I said, "Well, the Knoxville paper had that yesterday." "Ah," he said, "I'm not reading that." So, anyway, I don't know what else to tell you about my career in the Navy. It was so short. But, it was a very valuable time because it made—it improved my life.

PIEHLER: And it sounds like you really—you mentioned earlier—I don't know if you mentioned while we were on tape—you really enjoyed meeting the different—not only did you enjoy eating American food, but you enjoyed the different—you encountered people from all over the country.

DIFTLER: Yeah, I'd never known anybody from Texas, you know. And, they were a little different, because all the fellas from Texas were clannish. You see, Texas, as big as it is, you know, that really worked. Texas—everything in Texas is bigger, you know, and this kind of stuff. And, so after I got out of the service, naturally I came back to UT, and there was a Jewish fraternity here DVT. And, I came back to the fraternity. I was—my father had never understood that, but my mother allowed me the money to ...

PIEHLER: To join.

DIFTLER: ... become a member. And I made some very good friends, some that I'm still in contact with. We graduated from here. Jack Epstein, and—I think he's still practicing medicine. He's an OB-GYN. He was the exact opposite of a person that would be an ob-gyn. But, anyway, he's in Atlanta, and he's still practicing. His son, I think, is a lawyer. But we keep in touch with that group, and we had some interesting days and fraternity situations. Right now, they threw it off the campus.

PIEHLER: What was it like? You've been to UT really before—just as the war is ending, and you started in the summer of 1945?

DIFTLER: Yeah.

PIEHLER: And you went away briefly, and then you came back. How had the campus changed?

DIFTLER: Well, you know. The GI Bill brought a lot of people to the campus that never would have the opportunity for an education. Some of them should have not been here. And then

again, some would not have had the opportunity. And, they had barracks built here along the hill, you know. That was one thing. And I met—a lot of those fellas who came here on the GI bill ... would actually—you'd see them walking around with their flight jackets. That was all the clothes they had, you know, leather jackets. They were—you know, with the fur, they were aviators, you know, with the 8th Air Force and they had patches on there. And, I didn't have none of this, you know. But, I have a little sailor hat (laugh). So, they had actually been in the service a couple of years. And so, some of them married local people. And some were, you know, advanced. Well, I was younger, and these people were always older students because ... some of them had been married, some of them had been in the service longer. And they were, I would say I was nineteen or twenty, they were twenty-two or twenty-three. And, they lived in the barracks here. And some of them married local girls and lived at their home while they went to school. And, that's—the campus was changing in that direction, ... there were a lot more people here living in that type of circumstance.

PIEHLER: Was it intimidating to have these ... older students who in many cases were ...

DIFTLER: They were all good students.

PIEHLER: Yeah. But that—you didn't ...

DIFTLER: No, that, I mean that, Irv Katzman, who is a big lawyer now. I mean, big, he is very successful in Cincinnati. He married a local girl here. We took English together, and I mean he was making straight A's and all that stuff. And I said, "Irv, what do you lawyers ...?" And he said, "I don't know, don't you study?" You know. And he would write beautiful compositions. And, they were all great students, most of the older ones, because they were here for a career, a purpose. And that's what I learned when I went to dental school. I said, "This is what my career is going to be. It's what I can do here now. There's no sloughing off for me." Plus the influence of my father. So, I had no alternative. I didn't socialize. I never went to the—a lot of them went out drinking and raising hell and everything. And, I didn't have—I mean, when study time came.... I had a roommate who was in pharmacy school. Do you know the Joffe family here? I don't know, Sybil? Do you know, have you met her?

PIEHLER: Oh, yeah, I've met Cybil.

DIFTLER: Well, her brother-in-law was my roommate. And he remained in Memphis. He was a pharmacy student, a brilliant boy. He should have gone to med school. And, he also had the same study habits, I mean, you know.... And he worked also in the pharmacy, so I basically had the room to myself. Back then in the school dormitory, we had two bedrooms and a living room, three on a floor, and one central bathroom. So, my roommate was always gone. Except, he'd come in at night, and then, when I went to bed, he'd start studying, see (laughs). I'd say, "Turn the damn light off." He said, "Close the door." So anyway, he was a brilliant student, and he would work during the day after class at a pharmacy in downtown, and then he would study at night. So, it sort of calcified my, you know—there was no way I was gonna slough off, no matter what I had to do.



PIEHLER: So it seems like Memphis, for some—I mean, there were lots of diversions in Memphis.

DIFTLER: Oh, back then the only thing that I ever did, I had two friends, one was from—both of them were from Chattanooga, Emanuel Sir, S-i-r, no, he was from Manchester, Tennessee, a Jewish family in a little, small town, and, the other one was Levinthal, Deene Levinthal. He was from Chattanooga, and his father was a road builder.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: In those years, how a Jewish guy—you know, you had to pay off somebody to build roads. But, anyway, they had a car. And, also, when television came out, they went to Sears and bought a television. They bought on ten dollars a month and paid—and it was a lot of money, but they bought it and paid it off. And, we'd go up to their room and watch television. Ed Sullivan, you don't remember these, Ed Sullivan and Fred Allen and ...

PIEHLER: Oh, yeah. Fred Allen, I've heard of.

DIFTLER: And all of that. It was on—Milton Berle ...

PIEHLER: Mm hmm, yeah.

DIFTLER: I saw the all-original Milton Berle from the TV screen.... So Saturday evening, sometimes in Memphis—there was a place in Arkansas called West Memphis, and all of the big jazz giants gave concerts there. It was a black community. All of them, Lionel Hampton, do you know the name Lionel Hampton?

PIEHLER: Oh, yes.

DIFTLER: And all these fellas. And they would—I don't remember what the tickets were, but we would—he said, "Aw, come on with us. We'll go to West Memphis, Arkansas." So, we went over there and we went to the concert. And I didn't go many times, but it was really my first introduction to jazz. And we saw all the jazz greats who were just coming up. And traveling around, going to little towns, you know, like West Memphis, Arkansas, which is close to Memphis. So, that's about all we did, and that's all they did. You know, watch television and study and do ...

PIEHLER: I'm curious ...

DIFTLER: They were a quarter ahead of me.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, your parents had visions of you being an engineer. What led you to a career, and originally you started in pre-med? What led to dental school?

DIFTLER: Well, I went to pre-med, and my mother wanted me to be an engineer, but I never had any interest in it. Why an engineer, I don't know. So, she didn't put any pressure on me,

because why would she, you know. You're a graduate of high school with acceptable grades, and you know that it cost me a quarter? Eighty-five dollars a quarter. And that was hard for them to meet. But, I lived at home, see. So, somehow when I got here they had a registration, which was a horror back then, in the alumni gym. But, nothing like—you know, no computers then, you know. You go to the table. So, they gave me an advisor, and I forgot who he was. And he was—he said, "What [route] do you want to go, what college do you want to go to?" I said, "I don't know." And he said, "Well, why don't you start off with liberal arts?" So, he gave me a schedule and said, "Follow this." So finally, it was English and American history and Tennessee history and some algebra, math, and stuff like that. So, I struggled through that. So then they would recheck you periodically. So he said, "Well, how are you doing?" And I said, "Well, my mother wanted me to be an engineer, but I don't know." And, he said, "Well, why don't you try medicine, and see if you like it?" So, he outlined some chemistry courses. I did pretty good in the chemistry courses in Dabney Hall. And, do you know where it is over here?

PIEHLER: I think so. It's up—I know it's up in that part of the campus.

DIFTLER: Yeah, it's on the ...

MASON: On the back side of the hill.

DIFTLER: Huh?

MASON: It's on the back side of the hill.

DIFTLER: Yeah, it's Ayers Hall. Everything then was Ayers Hall.

PIEHLER: Yeah, yeah.

DIFTLER: And then, Dabney Hall. And they were the elite of the campus, you know. So, we matriculated to there. And, I did pretty well. And, I said, "Well maybe I think I'll just go through the pre-dental curriculum." For whatever reason, I don't know. My father sort of encouraged that because it was, you know, working with your hands. So he said, "Why don't you try ... pre-dental?" A doctor gets called out all the time, and everything. That's what they looked at, you know. This way you have regulated hours, you know. And so, okay. So, I did okay, and I was accepted at dental school and then they sent me off there, so I did that. But we also—another prominent figure in my life then was in the university fraternity here. It was Leonard Bellis. He was from Philadelphia, and I had never known too many northerners. Why was he here? Because he was a football player. He was an end on [UT football coach] Neyland's Rose Bowl team.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: And everybody liked [him], you know, Leonard was a good guy. But, we were close because he was in pre-dental also. So we studied together—a great big guy, you know. Leonard [was] a good student. So he also instilled in me the importance of making good grades. And, I didn't want to disappoint Leonard, he was a football player. So we studied. And we matched

grades, and so forth, because I never did supercede his four-point average, so to speak, ... or get to that level, but I did okay. And, I went to visit him a few years ago in Philadelphia. He and a neighbor went together and had a dental practice, but I think they are retired now. But was on a Rose Bowl team, you know. You've heard of General Neyland?

PIEHLER: Oh, yes.

DIFTLER: I knew General Neyland. Not closely, but I—enough to speak and he would say, “Hi, Harold.” So, you know.

PIEHLER: How'd you know him? From the ...

DIFTLER: Well, I'll tell you. This was not during class, school. But, when I started my practice which was actually—you know where the Golden Roast is?

PIEHLER: Oh, yeah.

DIFTLER: In that building, see. That was a medical building.

PIEHLER: So that was originally—your first office was in that ...

DIFTLER: Second office.

PIEHLER: Second?

DIFTLER: First office was downtown where the Hilton is.

PIEHLER: Oh, okay.

DIFTLER: Then, they started doing stuff to downtown, so this was—the builder of the building said, “Why don't you open your dental office here?” So I said, “In the middle of the university?” He said, “Yeah.” So I went up, you know, what did I know? One hundred and twenty-five dollars a month rent. So I opened up there, and we had a lot of the students. And it was very good. Built up a real good practice, a lot of professors. And then, after that, the campus got so, you know, as it is today and so forth. So a friend of mine on Lake Avenue—not Lake Avenue, this is Lake—but Concord Street.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: So, we moved over there, and that's where I finished up, and it's still there, the building is. So, we would go for breakfast on the way from home. I would stop by the Huddle House.

PIEHLER: I've heard about this.

DIFTLER: The Huddle House was right on Cumberland. And—so I met two outstanding figures in there. One was General Neyland. You know, you go to a certain place for breakfast periodically, you begin to be a part of the camaraderie, a group. General Neyland, a great big guy, sitting on a little bitty stool. And a Japanese wrestler, Horst Tenaka. So, we all became friends. The Japanese wrestler, I don't know what he was doing here. He was a great big guy, and ...

PIEHLER: Was he on a team?

DIFTLER: I don't know. He was either a performer, you know, and lived here or—I don't know. But, you know all with the beard and Japanese, a great big guy, and the General. And we'd carry on a bunch of bullshit, you know (laugh). And I said, "God, I'm talking to a legend here," you know.... And he was very nice, and that's how we became, you know, recognizable, but never got free football tickets (laughs). But, he went from the Army, you know. He was in Burma and, you know the whole story there. But, he would once in a while say something about the political atmosphere of the country and so forth. And, his son was Louis Neyland. He had several sons, a couple, I think. And his daughter-in-law was a patient of mine. And Louis was in the John Birch Society. I don't know what—they moved to Kingsport and she may still be there. He may be there, I don't know. But, she was a very nice person, and so I met her through him, and she was a patient of mine. Back then, dentistry today is completely different. I don't think you—so I—it's so technical and so intense that if you don't build up—we used to spend more time talking, you know.

PIEHLER: Well, it's sort of ...

DIFTLER: You've got to have a relationship with people.

PIEHLER: Well, it's sort of interesting because ... some of the dentists here, because ... never in New Jersey ever had a technician clean my teeth.

DIFTLER: Yeah.

PIEHLER: I was at the dentist, and our last dentist—I mean, she would go off on a 25-minute dialogue while she is cleaning my teeth ...

DIFTLER: Yeah.

PIEHLER: ... about what's going on with her family, and I'd get a word in edgewise.

DIFTLER: Yeah.

PIEHLER: So I know what you ...

DIFTLER: ... And I still have a lot of friends today that stayed with me. But, that's interesting because when I came out of school—while I was in school, they took the first girl, you know, for dental hygiene. That's where we were—grew up with them, and later, almost ready to graduate,

because in the whole first period of dental training, they didn't have dental hygienists. So, it was a new movement. And they were afraid to bring them in the schools like the girls, women, in the Army [issue], you know. But we were all behavior types, you know. And the girls were very nice, and they ... had a year and a half course and then they were able to take a certificate exam. So they graduated dental hygienists. So I came back here, and my father—if you've got time I'll tell you—when I was taking the State board, an old gentleman, H.M.A. Smith—that tells you how old, because years and years ago they used to have three initials instead of two. So, he wanted to retire and he sent a—and he was a very prestigious dentist in the state, in Knoxville, he had an office downtown. So, he sent a letter to the State board. He was wanting to sell his office. And so I got—the guy in charge of the State board says, “You know, Dr. Smith, is going back to Knoxville. Why don't you talk to him about his office? Maybe he'll let you work there,” you know. This was a big event. So, I told my father about it. When I got back to town, my father had already bought the damn office (laughs). He said, “You're going to work.” You know, 2500 dollars, he bought the whole dental office. Of course, that was a lot of money back then.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DIFTLER: And the equipment. I just walked in and started working.

PIEHLER: You didn't have to go through the ...

DIFTLER: Internship? I was thinking about going through a surgery internship.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: But, I came back here. My father said, “Here's the key, get your ass to work.” So, I had an assistant, office, everything all set up. All I had to do was pay the rent. So, it was in what they call the doctors' building.

PIEHLER: Oh, yeah. Norbert Slovis has a ...

DIFTLER: No, that's different.

PIEHLER: That's a different one?

DIFTLER: The doctor's building is torn down. That's where the Hilton is.

PIEHLER: Okay. I'm thinking of the Medical Arts Building where ...

DIFTLER: Yeah, it's near the YW and the Medical Arts is different, you see. See, that was the old—that's where I used to go for a doctor in ....

PIEHLER: That's a really old Medical Arts building.

DIFTLER: Yeah, that's—well I mean, that was a prestigious—it's the only one in the city. That and the Andrew Johnson Hotel were the two big things in this city. But, anyway, the doctors' building was where Dr. Smith's office was, and next door was the dental lab. So they—the dental lab, got me, you know, further instructed on procedures, you know. Things I didn't get at school. How to work really when it—in real life, you know. And, Dr. Smith, he took off with the 2500 dollars.

PIEHLER: He just left?

DIFTLER: And I had very, very well-known citizens of the city as his patients. See, he'd been here so long, and he had the very latest, I mean, the very greatest citizens. And here was a Jewish guy taking over. And most of them stayed with me, you know. Because I had all their records, and they liked the kind of work—of course, I was very progressive in those years. We knew techniques that he didn't know. Which was nothing today, but gold crown or how to save teeth. Our education in dental school was to save teeth, earlier it was to take them out.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DIFTLER: See ...

PIEHLER: You were, in some ways, part of that transition. That you could really ...

DIFTLER: Yeah, and we, Reuben and I, were the foremost in the city to do reconstructive work.

PIEHLER: Which is now—it's expected, but ...

DIFTLER: Oh, my God!

PIEHLER: When ...

DIFTLER: Who can afford it today? Back then, 2000 dollars was a big hit. Today, I pay eighteen, twenty thousand dollars, when I got out of dentistry and had my work redone (laughs). You know, I was working—"all shoemakers go barefooted," you know. Well, I went to the dentist. And I said, "Well, that's what I want to do." He said, "Well, I, this is how much it is." I said, "My God," you know what I mean (laughs)? So, I never knew—then, of course, my prices were not what they are today. Even a couple of years ago, see. So, but anyway, that's where I started. And I started—back then, I don't know if you've ever had a porcelain or gold crown done, but ...

PIEHLER: Well, I've had some bridgework. I've had two bridges.

DIFTLER: Well, I charged thirty-five dollars a crown. And, my God, they thought I was the biggest robber in town (laugh), you know. Cause they were paying ... five dollars for a filling or fifty cents for an x-ray. And so, here we came in from Memphis with the big, new stuff, you know, which is nothing. Technology today is completely—that's one reason I sold, because I couldn't keep up with the technology. And there's so much going on today. And it's so

expensive, also very valuable. So, anyway, that's where I started working there. And then after I came from there, I came to the building here where the Golden Roast is. And, then I went to Concord Street. But, what I was going to tell you about the hygienist. I started working, and I couldn't afford one. I didn't know what they charged. And they—one day this girl comes in town. A beautiful girl, she says, "I'm a dental hygienist, and I want a job." And, I said, "My God, I don't have room for you." I know of the program because they started—see, I graduated in Memphis, and her husband is a physician at UT. She says, "I'll tell you what I'll do. Let me look at your books." So, she looked at—and she said, "I'll come in Tuesday, and I'll start to work. If I don't do anything ..." you know. She came in and built up, and she was so busy, you know, because she kept—people liked her, and it took the pressure off of me. I was free to do other things. So, she actually did it instead of me making the decision. And, we ...

PIEHLER: It sounds like she also helped build the practice up.

DIFTLER: Oh, yeah. It worked both ways. Because she was very good, you see.

PIEHLER: She was very ...

DIFTLER: Her husband was Doctor Beasley who is still at UT hospital. And he was my mother's doctor. He was a cardiologist. He was—J. Willis Hurst, does that mean anything to you?

PIEHLER: Who was he?

DIFTLER: He was Lyndon Johnson's cardiologist. And Al worked with him. He was drafted when they had the Berlin crises. And they left town. And then when he came back, he moved to Atlanta, and he worked with J. Willis Hurst. And Sandy is—they live back in Knoxville now. He came back to UT as head of medicine. And so that was, you know, one of the, you know, one of the spin-offs of meeting people. But, she worked for me for five years. And, she built up my office, and she enjoyed a good practice herself. She did it all herself. She called people and said, "Well, if they don't like me, I'll leave," you know. And I said, "I've only got two rooms." She said, "When you move, you'll have another one...." And then—so, of course, I've always had others, you know. But—so they still—we still see each other. He's a big worker in the opera board. He sings. I didn't know he did, but he's a valuable citizen of this city.

PIEHLER: I'm curious. One of the comments you said, ... although ... Brad isn't going to be a dentist, I don't think, ... and I'm curious because other professions, including, you know, this teacher, I mean, we—there's things they teach you in school, and then there's things you get passed down informally, ... and then there's mentoring, or just—and, the lab is—you haven't done an internship, and so this lab ...

DIFTLER: Well, the dental laboratory, you see, they—the dentist does—of course, we were taught to do laboratory work.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: But, dealing with people and dealing, all day long, you cannot find time to do all the laboratory work. Of course, we still did some. But the dental laboratories next door did the work where they made the dentures. Back then, the big deal was to make dentures. Today—I almost quit making those, you see, because we saved all the teeth. And those kind of surgical things became specialties. And there were people that did dentures, you see. And that was not my interest because it was a very, very difficult field, and I am not interested in it. But, the laboratory did that kind of work, plus they did casting work, you know, for gold fillings. So, the man—Oliver Labs—the man who ran that, said “Well, you guys out of school ... you know a lot, but you don’t know how to make a living.”

PIEHLER: Well, that’s—because I had a friend of mine who is a lawyer.

DIFTLER: Yeah.

PIEHLER: And I just—he was asked to do a very complicated estate.... And he ... came up with this—then, you know, gave them his fee, and then his family—he had a good friend of the family who was a legal clerk and was aghast at what he had charged.

DIFTLER: Yeah.

PIEHLER: ‘Cause she did this for a living, and she knew what this was really going to cost, like ... you’ve really like—you’re not starting off on a good foot. And, it sounds like you’ve learned ... some lessons about making a living. What were some of them?

DIFTLER: Well, you mean about making a living? The fact that you have to cut a lot of corners, you know. Academically, you can—you know, they teach every step. Well, in the actual business world, you see, all this—for the business to survive and do a good job for the client, you had to—he showed me how to skip a lot of those steps that weren’t important to ...

-----END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO-----

---

DIFTLER: ... well, it certainly seems that as far as technically waxing and polishing up things, you don’t need to do, ‘cause you tear it up, anyway. Polishing and waxing and things were for the professor to say, “Oh, how wonderful, you have the dexterity to make it look so pretty.” You don’t need to have it that pretty. You know, you need to have the technical principles done, and then go ahead and cast the plastic to make it. And it—they polish it then, you see. The technician does that. I don’t have anything ...

PIEHLER: Yeah. You don’t ... so this isn’t skimping on patient care.

DIFTLER: See, he said, “This is what you’re gonna have to do.” Also, he had experience with people. See, what kind of experience did I have with people? A student all these years. And he said, “Well, you need to—you have to discuss with the patient what their outcome will be, what they want, and how much it’s gonna cost. You need to tell all that up front, you know. You just don’t—you know, it’s not a dummy you’re working on like in school. You know, you have to



discuss things and keep out of trouble.” He kept me out of trouble, because we had worked out the problems in the very beginning, you see. What the patient was going to expect and what I could do for them, you see, because they expected things that I couldn’t do. [He said], “This is all I can do, see, the rest is up to you. And, what do you want to look like? You know, there’s certain things we can change. In the way—what color tooth do you want?” In school, we didn’t have to match a tooth to the dummy, you know. Did you ever see—you know, you couldn’t get away with that. So, if it’s not what—if the lady wanted to look twenty years younger, you know, and all this. So, he taught me all that, you see. And, they did a lot of the work that took ... my time that I didn’t need to do. And the person would pay for the service, and he’d pay his lab bill along with it. So that—those kind of things were what—it’s just real life, you know.

PIEHLER: It sounds like he gave you some real coaching on ... running a practice.

DIFTLER: Yeah, I mean I—we became friends. And he saw I was a young guy, I didn’t know nothing, you know, except what they taught me in school. So he would ... help me, and I was very lucky in that respect. And he was a very nice old gentleman. Had a lot of work—had done a lot of work ... in the dental field and was well respected. And, of course, I used—he was actually a good customer, too, you see. So—and that helped me with the patients, and they knew that—he gave me—if anybody broke something and they had to—he’d do it right away for me, and that made me look good. They’d bring people—you know, most of the time you had to wait without your teeth for a couple of days. You know, he’d fix it right there. And, they thought I was doing it, see. So, you know, all these things—you know, back up is what’s always amazed me, because I had good technicians, I had good—but, it’s like a good general, he’s got good officers underneath him, you see. And hope it pays off (laughs). But, that’s what I learned about real life. And, of course, you know what I’m telling you is where I came from, a little, fat, Jewish kid. All these years to—I think that Reuben and I were the foremost dentists in the city at one time, see. And you can only keep that up, because things change so much. And, of course, we kept our CE credits and went to conventions and courses and all. But, you know, as years go on, the—you can’t really—unless I had a son or son-in-law, somebody who wanted to take over the business. That was, you know, what I felt at the time. There’s a time, you know, to say goodbye.

PIEHLER: None of your daughters were interested in ... dentistry?

DIFTLER: One of them came down to work with me one time. She never came back (laughs). No, they were not interested. One of them was a professional dancer, one of them is a social worker and a therapist, and one of them is a yoga expert (laugh). She’s the happiest of all. She’s single, and she—they both—two of them live in California, one lives in Chicago. And the therapist is—I had to laugh, she has on her business card, “Family therapy, drugs and alcohol.” And I just laughed, and we laughed. And I said, “You were all involved in all this when ... you were growing up. I had to go down to the police station ... you were stealing doughnuts from a ...” She and a girlfriend were stealing doughnuts from this little grocery store next to the high school as a joke, you know. The girlfriend became a pediatric specialist, and she’s become this! And I said, “You know, I never thought you’d have this on your card,” you know. You never know. Kids go through growing stages, and hopefully they mature into valuable people. You know, you have to expect that. And, I think a good parent knows that there are certain times ...

in development and maturation that you're gonna have disappointments, you know. And, hopefully, they'll, you know, learn cause we learned, you know. I don't think I ever did anything of that nature back then, because I was afraid I'd get killed, you know. Oh, if my father had ever found out I was stealing doughnuts he'd cut my hand off. But he kept me straight, you know. But, that's where it is today.

PIEHLER: Where did you—your wife is also ... from a Knoxville family?

DIFTLER: Yeah.

PIEHLER: How did you ... meet?

DIFTLER: Through her brother. Her brother and I were very good friends. And he was a wild guy as growing up. And I always admired him. I still do today. We're very, very good friends. And the family we knew, you see, because it was a small.... And I knew that she was a little bit younger than me. And she went away to school. She went to Wisconsin and went to Ohio State, went—never did—yeah, she went here. She was in fine arts here, and went to Wisconsin in fine arts. And she's a very, very talented artist. But then she became interested in social work and became a social worker after the kids, got older. And she does, you know, oncology therapy now. She's a very dedicated person and very well accepted for her ... intelligence in that respect. But, she grew up in a ... Jewish princess atmosphere. You would never think that she would develop this way because she was—her father idolized her. The two boys were okay, but girls were different, you know. And he idolized the girl. And she had everything she wanted, a real Jewish princess, you know. And then after we were married ... I was always attracted to the family and her because we were all good friends. It was a lovely family. And so—somehow, we were—I was over to their house a lot, you know. And we just—one thing led to another and then we got married. It was a big Jewish wedding in town.

PIEHLER: In 1954, you ...

DIFTLER: That's it. February 21<sup>st</sup>. February 21<sup>st</sup>.

PIEHLER: February 21<sup>st</sup>? So, you're closing in on your 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, next year?

DIFTLER: Yeah, next year, yeah. So. She wouldn't like for me to tell you this, but I felt that we stayed together all these years because nobody else would have either one of us (laughs).

PIEHLER: You may—that might get edited out (laughs).

DIFTLER: But that's—I say that sometimes, she just.... But I say a lot of things that she.... You know, she's a very—you know, women are very sensitive to some of the things men say as jokes. But women are pretty sensitive to it, you know. You know what I'm saying (laughs). I don't mean what it means to them, you see. So, I've learned with three girls, man, I've ... had another upbringing other than my father, you see.

PIEHLER: I'm curious. It sounds like you—the decision for you and your wife to say in Knoxville was a conscious one. Have you thought of going elsewhere?

DIFTLER: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Particularly, after dental school?

DIFTLER: Well, I think their education that we gave them took them out of town. See, my oldest daughter went to—two of them graduated from here in human services. You know Bob Kronic and all? You gotta meet him. You need to meet him. He's off the wall. He's ... a wonderful professor, but he's—you need to meet him. He's in the School of education. I forgot what his—counseling, maybe. Dr. Kronic, he's an interesting guy. But, anyway, they—then the youngest one was always—we gave her dance lessons, and she did very well in it. And she worked for the dance studio. Dorothy Floyd was the name. I don't know if you.... And, then when it was time to go to college, she decided she wanted to pursue a dancing career. And so she had to audition. And the best one close by was Florida State. So, she—they accepted her, and she went there, and she went on from there to dance in a professional company in New York and Europe and so forth. Then, my middle daughter graduated here and she was not that good a student, but, she had a boyfriend that was living across the street from us. And he was—the fella that lived across the street from us, you know, is Lindsey Young?

PIEHLER: Oh, yeah.

DIFTLER: And he always had rooms that he had people stay in his house. You know, he's a bachelor, and he had a room that he rented out, an apartment. So, Larry Pacheko was—came from a Cuban father and American mother and was a very nice young fella. He lived there and my daughter would take a sunbath outside, you know, back there. And he would be on the other side. Sooner or later, they got closer and closer together, you know (laughs). So, they became friends, and he was a good influence on her. He was a good student, and he influenced her to study. And she did very well. And when she graduated, she wanted to go to the University of Chicago. I said, "You'll never get in there," you know. And, by George, she did. It cost a mint, I mean.... She went to graduate school there, and she stayed there. And her husband is a horticulturist in the city. They ... all made us very proud, and opened up our lives to many things.

PIEHLER: I know, I mean, they've done very diverse things, but very interesting....

DIFTLER: Yeah, go ahead.

PIEHLER: But you and your wife didn't think of going elsewhere when you got married?

DIFTLER: No, we—the thing to do was to stay here in Knoxville, see now, to build a career. Our families were here. We had built a life here in Knoxville. We had our family. You see, this is the thing that she doesn't like is the fact, and I don't really, is the children and grandchildren don't live in our city. We have to go so far to see them.

PIEHLER: Your wife would really like them to stay.

DIFTLER: Oh, yeah. I would, too. But the opportunity is not here.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: My—as I say, the middle daughter’s husband is very well liked by the mayor of Chicago, and as long as he likes him, he’ll have a good job there and may—he’s a wonderful man. He’s done a lot for the city, you know, as far as their conservatories and everything. His father was a college professor, and he was one, he—his claim to fame was—he’s passed away now—he did a wonderful translation of Dante’s Inferno. And, I may still have some of his books. I don’t understand them at all. But, anyway, he was acclaimed for that. And, Adam Schwerner, his father’s name was Armand Schwerner, if you ever get to read any of his writings. He was a professor at some college. I forgot where it was at. And, my middle daughter, as she was doing her, you know, dancing, she met an actress by the name of Deborah Winger. And she was her physical, therapist or trainer for a ... number of years. So, Deborah Winger, you’ve seen her in movies?

PIEHLER: Oh, yes.

DIFTLER: I’ve met her, and she’s a wonderful person. She’s also a Kibbutznik, you know. She lives in Kibbutz in Israel.

PIEHLER: Oh, I didn’t realize, oh, I think I did know that, yes.

DIFTLER: And she’s had an interesting career. So, Officer and a Gentleman, see that movie?

PIEHLER: Yes, I remember that.

DIFTLER: And David Keith who lives here in Knoxville? He was in it. So, anyway, she said she wanted to get a—she was—you know, dancers can only go so far. She said, “Why don’t you move to Los Angeles?” Said, “I’m going to Los Angeles.” And, her father was in a kosher frozen food business there. And they had her over for holidays and everything. It was an interesting story. So, it was a good break for my daughter. They became friends. And she made a movie in Florida which didn’t do too well. And my ... daughter was the director’s assistant, they got her a job doing that. So, when she went out there, she married a—met and married a movie editor who’s now had a nomination for an Academy Award. Not this year, but—The Insider, he did that, and also Ali.

PIEHLER: Oh, okay. Oh, yeah.

DIFTLER: ... He’s a very, just like my father. I mean, she married my father. He was very uptight, from Philadelphia. He was a wonderful craftsman, artist. But his temperament is that way, you know. And I love him to death, a wonderful guy. In fact, we just got back from out there. So, what you get from children, you know is really your life itself. And so we—then my other daughter, older daughter, lived in Miami for a long time, and she moved to Pacific

Palisades. She is very big in yoga. But everybody laughs, but it's a very important thing to her, and it's getting to be more accepted today.

PIEHLER: Well, my wife takes yoga every week, so I ...

DIFTLER: Well, Phoebe, my daughter, if she comes here, which she will, I'll have her meet your daughter, I mean ...

PIEHLER: My wife.

DIFTLER: But she's got a very interesting group of friends and we meet. We were just out there, and I'm always very conservative. So she said she wanted me to meet her friend who is a breathing expert. I said, "I breathe okay" (laugh). So he gives lessons in breathing. John Sahakia he is part Armenian, handsome fellow, you know. He used to be a model, and his wife is a make-up artist. So here I am taking a course in breathing. He wanted to show what he could do. Very interesting. So, she has that type of friends. A lot of people—she teaches yoga, [and] a lot of her classmates are people in the entertainment industry. So, she's very, very happy. She worries about not being married. And so whenever the other two daughters have problems, you know with children, husbands, I say, "See, see what you're missing?" (Laughter) "You're happy and you're on your own, you know." But, anyway, that comes from being a fat, little Jewish kid. That's what I got, you know. Military career—I never knew that I would go back to California with family there. See, when I went out there ...

PIEHLER: But, it sounds like California did leave quite an impression on you.

DIFTLER: Oh, it very much so. It's a wonderful place. Los Angeles is too crowded, actually. You can't get around. There's a lot of things I would like to see there. I did see and go into the Museum of Tolerance one time. It's hard to get there. I mean, you just don't go downtown ... from where they live, but I got there, and I went to a nice service in a very historic temple there, the Wiltshire Boulevard Temple. And I've done a few things—we've been out there many times. It's a long way out there [on the] airline.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, I want to ask you a few more questions about the Jewish community.

DIFTLER: Yeah.

PIEHLER: What was your sense of the support for Zionism in the '30s and '40s?

DIFTLER: Well, that was the thing to do.

PIEHLER: So there was a—was there any division over Zionism?

DIFTLER: No. No. It was a solid front that I could—there was—nobody ever took issue, and many people did not know the history of Hershel and his writing. But Zionism—the thing is if you were a member of the ZOA, nobody wondered, it was just automatic.

PIEHLER: And that was even with the temple and synagogue, that was both sides?

DIFTLER: Yeah. I would say so. You know the—going back to my kids, again. They were all involved in the neighborhood youth group. And, they enjoyed it. They built a lot of friends, and they did their part, you know. They were not rebellious kids except the oldest one. We had a little problem.... They all did their thing, you know, and grew up in the '60s, which was, you know. I could have never gotten away with that, you know. Going around wearing blue jeans and all that. My father—I had to be dressed respectable, you know. Not lavish, but I mean you didn't go around like a bum.... But he would be embarrassed for us, you know, not that we would be embarrassed, he would be embarrassed. (Laughter) So—but, they did very well. And went to that and they made a lot of friends. They were—the Zionist youth group, they were all—it was just the thing to do. Nobody questioned it, and my mother-in-law was a big leader in Hadassah and all that. And you just did not say no to her, you know. I'm a life member of Hadassah, and the Hadassah Association because she said, "Here," and gave me a check when we got married. I'm a ... (laughter). You know, so that's the way it goes on, you see. And I'm just beginning—in some—in one of Vejas's courses, they had the writings of Herzl. I'd never read it, you know. Herzl, he was a journalist, you know. I thought he might have been an emissary of God or something. (Laughter) But, so, I'm beginning to be educated in those things.

And I—the more I know about Zionism, I agree with it. I think that their premise is okay, and I think that the state of Israel—I'd do anything, you know, for—whatever I could do. I think it is something that not only is—if it wasn't there, I don't think the Jewish people would have—I don't feel like I want to go there, but I've been there. But I wouldn't want to live there. I'm not that kind of a, you know, an adventurer. But what it does for me and the Jewish community ... is it gives a basis for life, you see, because there is always something to work for. Those people are doing a wonderful thing for democracy, you know. When I use the words "those people," I think of—who was the presidential candidate, Ross Perot, when he said, "You people." That's not what I mean.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DIFTLER: But those people, I'd say, are people that are different than I am in the respect that they have probably—some of them have come from this community to live there and from other communities in the Jewish community like ours or maybe more intense. And I don't know what their motivation is. Either they do it out of guilt, or they have a mission to perform. It is not my reason to put a label as long as they are happy with it. But several—a couple from Knoxville have you known the Goodsteins?

PIEHLER: Oh, I know. No, they are ...

DIFTLER: They are—that's what they want—David, I know, is completely different from a (unclear - speaks Yiddish) you know. And we had another family that lived here, the Sayah family. The Sayah family and their son went to—they had twelve kids. David, he used to put on little plays in our garage. And I never knew how he got into this. But there are several, you know. I think that I would not want to do it. I wouldn't want my kids to live like that. But I

couldn't tell them what to do, and I don't think they have that outlook. But I admire it, you know, because I think what it does for me and the community is more than I could do, you know. But the state of Israel, if it would disappear, I think you would find the Jewish community in this country would be diminished 'cause that's ...

PIEHLER: I'm curious, you were president of Heska [Amunna]. What was it like to be president?

DIFTLER: I made a lot of enemies. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: I got a sense that being chairman of the board or chairwoman of the board or president is ...

DIFTLER: I never wanted chairman of the board because, you know, I cannot conduct the meetings because I don't hear very well. I don't know if you realize that, but I've never had any hearing on this ear [beginning at] 13 months.

PIEHLER: Really?

DIFTLER: And right now I have a hearing aid in, but I don't wear it a lot. But ... I carried on hundreds of conversations [where] I couldn't hear what the guy was saying on the other side of me (laughter). I could carry on a conversation, say "yes", "no" or—he thinks I'm listening, but I don't hear one damn word he's [saying]. (Laughter) If they seat me like that at a banquet, my wife says, "You damned fool, why don't you tell them you want to sit on ..." [I] said, "I don't like to call attention to it." But as of recent years, I got a hearing aid and otherwise—I can, you know, do—but I couldn't hear as well. And so all through my career in dentistry and school and everything, I always sat up close to the front because I couldn't hear, but I could always see. And so that—I don't know how we got onto that.

PIEHLER: Well, you were saying that you made a lot of enemies in your year as president.

DIFTLER: Well, yeah. And I didn't want to be the chairman of the board because you have to conduct the meeting, and I couldn't hear what was—this was before I got the hearing aid. I was always very vain. I wouldn't want to get it. So I couldn't conduct the meeting. I was also principle, I mean president of the symphony society here. And I conducted that meeting okay, but ...

PIEHLER: Seems like they were much calmer meetings. (Laughs)

DIFTLER: Huh?

PIEHLER: Seems like the symphony meetings were a lot calmer.

DIFTLER: Absolutely. You know, you've got to be on your toes with these Jewish members. You may not know what I'm talking about. (Speaking to Brad) But, they will kill you, you know. (Laughter) And you don't recognize one or you don't hear the inflection, you know,

there's a lot to it. But the president—what we did at that time, we conducted the affairs of ... the Rabbi's religious committee. And I'm not that knowledgeable of religions, but, you know, we always—the easiest and most successful thing for me was to support the Rabbi. Because whatever he said goes, I mean, that's his job. If he wants it this way, that's the way it's gonna be, and then he sinks or swims. You know, I'm not going to tell him what to do. That's the trouble. A lot of them, you know....

PIEHLER: Yeah, I've gotten a sense at Heska Amuna had some of that, opposite of what most ... (laughs)

DIFTLER: Well, we had some—one of them just died recently, Rabbi D[Noah] Golinkin, who was a scholar. It really—this was not the community for him, but he did ... a lot for Hebrew literature, I mean ... learning, you know, how to read Hebrew, and so he wrote a textbook. If you ever want to get one of these textbooks, it's easy.... And I—you know, they chewed him up and spit him out all the time. And I was—Ruben was president one time. Ruben actually got him, and I said, "Well ..."—he went to hear him and watch him and offer a job—"So you probably, you never should have done that." Because, I think, he was a different personality type. But, anyways, before him—I forgot the ones I dealt with. But, I was sort of a buffer between the people that wanted to tell him what to do and the Rabbi, you know, I said, "The Rabbi's it ... whatever he says, he's your Rabbi, and he's the expert, I'm the volunteer." And, that's the way I was with the symphony. Because the conductor knows the music, whatever he wants to do—if he's not good, you get rid of him and get what you want. But, as far as I'm president, he's the king. You know, and that's the way we worked. We—it worked together we did pretty well.

PIEHLER: There was, as I said, not all, I think, at the synagogue agreed with your ...

DIFTLER: Not at all. You know. I made a lot of enemies. And to this day there are some people I don't speak to, and they won't speak to me. Which is bad, and it's their loss, I feel. But, anyway, sometimes in very hot meetings you'll say something you shouldn't, and you can't take it back. Words hurt, you know. And I've felt it both ways. And I—suddenly at one time I felt, I don't need to put myself in this atmosphere because it just brings out the worst in me. And I tapered down. Right now, I go, and whatever they do is okay with me. I support the synagogue. In fact, I was there this morning. And, the Rabbi is gone to Chicago. There's a funeral. He went with one of our.... And, I like him. He's—I think he's good for this community. And, he's—I don't know who he worked with, and I don't even know who the president is. I think it's Bessman, Ted Bessman.

PIEHLER: Yeah, it's Ted Bessman.

DIFTLER: But many times, we—the Rabbi had us—and I didn't ever like to be in the forefront of the community, but as president he would have us sit on the bima.

PIEHLER: So that—yeah.

DIFTLER: And when you do that, you make enemies. No matter what happens, there's somebody says, "Why is he up there? I should be up there," you know. (Laughter) You know



how it goes. And I didn't want to be there, you know. And then it starts in a meeting, you know, you'll say something, [and they'll say], "Well, what the hell do you know? You don't know anything about it." I was criticized because I was president of the symphony. "You don't play an instrument. You don't know anything about music." I said, "Well, I appreciate it, that's all—you know, you don't have to—the worst person in the world to be a president of the symphony is a musician, see."

PIEHLER: Particularly if the musician who is not very good.

DIFTLER: Well, you know, and I supported the musicians and the conductor and that's ... where it's at. And if they have a fight, let them fight it out. You know, they, there was a conductor here in this little town, probably from my ... background where I saw his work. He was before you came. He was a brilliant young fella. Arpad Yo, he was from Hungary. And the original conductor was here for many years, and he was a disreputable person. But, he brought the symphony to a certain image, and Arpad was from an Indiana University and Hungary.... So I said, "That's the guy we want," because the musicians loved him. He came here to give a concert and they couldn't, they—you know, they didn't have anybody with that talent and knowledge, you know. He had the score in his mind. He never used a—what do they call it?

PIEHLER: The chord?

DIFTLER: He had memorized it. He knew it all, you know. He had a photographic memory, and they loved it. And ... so they said, "You can't bring a guy like that into this community," you know. "Not East Tennessee with a Hungarian accent and—you know, European." I said, "Well, that's where you guys are going to have to really perform," you know, "If you have a good symphony, and it's acclaimed, and I don't care who it is." You know, so we supported him, and he did very well. And then the next one, after he left, was another Hungarian. And they grabbed him. He was good. And, of course, all the conductors and this one here included—I'm off the board for a long time now, but Kurt Trevor is leaving, and they have a new man coming now; I forgot what his name is, he's from Pittsburgh. But the conductors all have one disease ... they're all womanizers! (Laughs) Yeah.

PIEHLER: At least the ones you've encountered.

DIFTLER: Absolutely. So, Arpad—you know first thing, they, they're very prestigious. And these little violin player ladies ... they all, you know, ingratiate themselves to the conductor. And they pick up on it, you know, and that's all—so, I said, "Arpad, you know, you're really going to have to watch this stuff here." He's living with this girl from Indiana who's a wonderful singer. And I said, "The first thing you ought to do is either stop that or get married, you know, 'cause I can't fight that, you know, these East Tennesseans." So, I don't know if they ever got married. Nancy is a—they had an announcement in the paper and a picture. And, I don't know if they ever got married. Anyway, she ... left after a while. Anyway, I said, "In this community ..." you know, at that time it was not accepted. And so ...

PIEHLER: This was back in the '60s.

DIFTLER: Yeah. '60s, '70s or so.

PIEHLER: That's ... when you were active with the symphony?

DIFTLER: Yeah. Running—doing that and running a dental practice. And see, I was told to get into civic work in your dental practice. And I did, and we had—one of my good friends is the announcer here on WUOT, Norris Dryer, and ...

PIEHLER: Oh, yeah.

DIFTLER: Norris—I mean, he was my advisor on Arpad—Norris plays in an orchestra, and he said, “You hire him, we’ll have a great orchestra.” And so we all voted. I engineered that. But I had a lot of battles, you see. But, nevertheless, my training at Heska Amuna, (laughs), plus my father, the Navy, and everything else has colored the person that—as far as the European theater goes, that’s about all I can tell you about that. But, we’re all intensely interested in the war and—the one thing about this community, we were tremendously patriotic. Nobody ever questions what the president says. Like, this is foreign to me to see the protestors. I don’t know how—that’s—they—I mean, you just don’t do that. You know, whether you like [George W.] Bush or not, I think if you don’t support it, you give support the enemy, you see. And I—we could talk about that. I mean, people have different views, but I think that that’s something that frankly—did you hear [Senate Minority Leader Tom] Daschle yesterday? Have you heard the flap ...

PIEHLER: Yes.

DIFTLER: Well, I think he’s dead, you know. Because he’s—I think that for him to get up and say what he did instead of saying, “Well, you know, I may disagree in principle but we have to support the president, that’s ...” But he was speaking to a labor union, and he said what they wanted to hear. They didn’t like Bush. Meanwhile, there’s a war going on. And, you know, we could all perish in this. And he’s giving out, you know—so I think he’s killed himself. I think he—the presidency, and even the Democratic Party, I think. But that, politically, along with, I think, the war in that—I grew up, you see, I’ve seen—what have I seen? I’ve seen Pearl Harbor. Before that maybe a little bit of the Hitler era. We had Pearl Harbor and the Japanese, Vietnam, and the Berlin crises, and then—9-11, I needed like a hole in the head. With all this other stuff, and now this? So, I’ve seen a lot of different—Martin Luther King. I remember when he was assassinated right on TV. It was in April of that year. The Kennedy assassination. I saw the whole thing on television. I say the guy get shot on television, you know. And all through that, so—you know, I need this right now like a hole in the head at this stage of your life, you know. But as long as you live, you’re gonna see problems, I forget, Martin Burber.

PIEHLER: Oh, yes, yes.

DIFTLER: “A man always has problems.” He said. I think that’s from him. I may be wrong. Of course, I can’t understand his writings, either. Have you ever read any?

PIEHLER: I tried to read ... I’ve ...

DIFTLER: It takes ...

PIEHLER: You have to concentrate very ...

DIFTLER: You need to have ...

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DIFTLER: ... someone with you that can discuss it, but I think that came from him, I'm not sure. But, anyway, as long as you go through life, you're gonna have crises and problems. And that's what you learn from each one, is that you survive. I can philosophize all day long, you know. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: I'm curious, though, one thing that's intrigued me about Knoxville, because—just as a newcomer, some things work really well, and some things I just can't believe people are annoyed at. And one of the things that struck me is how well, you know—the symphony has had a, it strikes me, ... some ups and downs, but it's still a very solid organization. Musically, it gets quite a bit of support compared with something like the art museum which has had a much more checkered—is not as solid of an institution, is a younger institution. How do you explain why the symphony has done so well over such a long period of time?

DIFTLER: Well, I think that in a Southern community ... it's conservative. In other words, you don't—what are you gonna do if you don't—it's here, so you support it, you see. It's just blind faith, so to speak. And the same thing with the ... synagogue. It changed completely from when I grew up. But, I still support it. I may not understand it. I go there now, and half of the people or more I don't know.

PIEHLER: Well, 'cause one of the things Wendy Besman writes in her book [[A Separate Circle](#)] is how it's a whole new group. I'm included in that, my wife and I are included in that. We're ...

DIFTLER: New people.

PIEHLER: We're new people.

DIFTLER: Well, you know, that's what, you know—I think the worst thing in the world is for something to stay the same, you see. Of course, people get upset over the people that know and now they don't know, because the atmosphere has changed. And, I don't know where that's coming from, see. I would have to say in my defense or whatever I'm always interested. I have an open mind, I think, you know, I don't know. I feel that I do compared to a lot of contemporaries, you know. I welcome the change. I like to meet new people. I like to—but some people are very upset with change, you see. And ... it ain't gonna stay the same. I don't care what you do, whether you like it or not, it's gonna change. See, change is coming whether you like it or not, you know that. You'll see that yourself. Right now, you're as far as I'm concerned, the elite, the new (laugh), you see. But as time goes on, if you don't keep up with it, they'll kick your ass out, you know. Because you know right now how you feel about the ...

community and so forth, and that's the way—you're gonna make it the way you like it. It's not in anyway the way I remember it.

PIEHLER: What has changed at the synagogue?

DIFTLER: Well, I think the fact that the people have come in—at one time, it was a very sterile community.

PIEHLER: In what way?

DIFTLER: Knoxville inbred.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: And here these people come in from all over, and they are bringing new ideas. They were raised in a different atmosphere, and they polluted us, you see. If you want to look at it that way, you see. (Laughter) And that's what's changed. The new customs. You know, when I was a—if a woman ever got up on the bima, man, my mother and the older—my wife's grandfather, he would die right there, you know. He was a very prestigious old gentleman, you know, with a long beard. And his name was Joe Green. Actually, his name was Alexander Glembutski, but when he came to Ellis Island, they couldn't pronounce it, and they gave him the name Joe Green. But anyway, the thing was that you asked me about what's changed in the community, I think that that's what [changed], it's the new ideas ...

PIEHLER: How much ...

DIFTLER: ... and new backgrounds.

PIEHLER: How much of a struggle was the egalitarianism and women on the bima at Hesk Amuna.

DIFTLER: My mother-in-law never did agree with it, for whatever reason. She was a very unusual person and very authoritarian. But she would—as my father-in-law said, they would rather go to a Catholic church than go to the Reform temple. You know, that's what the old timer's did. My father—I don't know where he came in because he wasn't involved with anything. My mother would feel that way. Then, her son in Memphis who has made—he's a multi-millionaire, they joined the Reform temple. But she never told me that. See, Frank is a very good friend of mine, but we don't discuss that. You know, we're boyhood friends. So, we went down to a bar mitzvah. I figure we're going to the orthodox or conservative—and, we walked into the temple, and I said, “What in the ...?” And she's sitting there. (Laughter) And you'd think it's the most wonderful thing in the world. And I said to my wife—my wife said, “Shut up.” (Laughs) So, you know, she, in a way, accepted it, but she was the kind of person that did not want you to understand that she accepted it because you might do it, you see. (Laughs) So that's the face of this community. I think ...

PIEHLER: Do you think the split between Reform and the temple and Hesk Amuna has diminished over time? Or ...

DIFTLER: Well, it's not diminished. I think it's more friendly. And I don't think—frankly, a lot of people disagree with me, I don't think it could ever consolidate. Because I think that it's a different atmosphere. It's a different seminary. And they are colorful. I respect, you know, that. And I ... read a history of the Jewish community in Chicago. If you ever want to get a—you know, they are all Germans there. And the Germans have their ... different mentality. And we Russians and ... people from other parts, Poland and all, we're not gonna read German. You see, that was from Hitler's.... But they have—and that's the way the Reform Jewish community looks upon the Orthodox, see, you know, they don't want to be concerned with them. But—and I think that was more so here in those years. And the community did not fight, but they'd say, "Oh, he's with the Reform, you know." That means he's—as soon as you got money, you'd go into the Reform. But ...

PIEHLER: Well, the Reform ... it's not unusual to hear, was very reformed. I mean, until fairly recently.

DIFTLER: In comparison.

PIEHLER: Well, I read in the Besman book that ... their services were on Sunday.

DIFTLER: I don't remember that.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DIFTLER: You know, and between you and me, and you may want to edit this. I don't care much for her book. I don't think she's ...

PIEHLER: She ...

DIFTLER: She left out a lot.

PIEHLER: She missed a lot. Well, that ...

DIFTLER: She just wrote a book.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DIFTLER: And I think—she interviewed my mother-in-law who gave her a lot of good information as she saw it. But, I think there's still some essence that she really missed, but she got some historical facts.

PIEHLER: Well, what essence would you want to amend to the story?

DIFTLER: Well, I think that in her book there were many more people, colorful people, that she did not get to and did not dwell on. She dwelled on the crust of the—or the, you know, surface of the ocean. There's a lot more below that, I think. Maybe the people aren't here to give her that information.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

DIFTLER: I don't know it all, you know. But, there were others that may have—I think she, as she saw it now, she wrote it. You know, and I think there are some different things. But, there's a difference in—and as far as the community center, you know, the Arnstein community center? That, I think, is becoming more a community center for the neighborhood.

PIEHLER: For Knoxville?

DIFTLER: Yes, and which it should be, you know. If they want to have a Jewish slant, then okay. But that has no—really it should not associate with ... (recording breaks up) Some people have proposed to make one big building, have everybody together. I would not like to see that, and maybe there is some merit to it to save money, that's—so you don't save money. What good is it, you know? The money is not the whole problem. If you save money, sometimes you will lose a lot of things. So, some of them may look at it that way. But, I like Rabbi [Beth] Schwartz. I think she's meeting a lot of opposition there because she followed somebody who was more accepted. But she's a woman, you can't get away from that. Some people in the back of their minds always have that as a problem for them. And there's still some old hands that may—they won't say that, but that may be a problem. But, I think she's a wonderful person. I like her very much. But, I would never join there because of tradition and where I've always been. And, I'm sort of a guy who stays in one row, you see. (Laugh) What else? We could talk about the war, you know ...

PIEHLER: Well, we—I mean, is there more we should have asked you about war?

DIFTLER: Well, all of that was going on underneath my growing up, you see. And I think it was something that we were always concerned with. I don't think we had the ... terror alerts that we have today. We never thought—the only thing that the Germans would probably—[they] brought spies into the country. They weren't going to go around shooting people. They were trying to spy on, you know, industry and things.

MASON: Anybody in the community here, in the '30s and even into the '40s, did you have a sense of how bad things were in Germany for the Jewish community there?

DIFTLER: Not really, because—I didn't. I don't know if the other people—of course, some people—my father went to New York periodically to buy merchandise, you see, for the store. In those days, you had to go there to buy things and really had to gain favor to buy them. But he brought back stories that he'd heard in New York about what Hitler was doing. We never—there was not that open a communication. We never—you have to remember [the lack of] communication. Here we can sit and watch the war where we couldn't do that before. And it's in our minds. We hear on the radio, and we, you know—like they had the radio serials that were

programs on the radio, and your imagination was what you saw. And here, if you go to a movie, you don't have to imagine anything. So that's where we really saw the war is when they would have a news broadcast. You would imagine what was going on and all. But what we hated to hear, they always gave a casualty report, whether they were accidents or not, and everybody was sad about that. Then they started bringing men back, and they had, you know, military funerals and things like that. Now, if you've gone by the Veterans' Cemetery out there—that was not there, and I went to a couple of funerals there. It is very impressive. So you know what life's about? Just waiting for an impressive funeral?

PIEHLER: ... Was there any civil defense programs here in Knoxville?

DIFTLER: Yeah. Well, you know that's interesting. They had, later on, blackouts in the city. And we had to go through a drill where you turned out all of the lights and the shades and everything. And they had wardens who went around just to the people that you knew, you know, in the neighborhood. I remember some of those that we had to sit in the blackout, but it was not a whole lot—and it was sort of far-fetched because, you know ...

PIEHLER: You thought it was far-fetched even at the time?

DIFTLER: Yeah. I mean, you know, they said, "Well, it could happen ..." But you know they were barely getting to England, you know, to bomb England. And they're going to come over here? You know they didn't have the technology. Well, we didn't know. But they wanted to get a civil defense here. And also, I remember that gas masks were mentioned. I never saw one, but they ... had people who were in charge of the neighborhood civil defense, a committee or an office here. I remember that. That was back in, what '43?

PIEHLER: What about—did your father have any run—I mean, there were price controls during the war. Did your father have any run-ins with the Office of Price Administration?

DIFTLER: Not that I know of, and—see I was telling, was it Brad that my father ran a jewelry store ...

-----END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO-----

---

PIEHLER: This continues an interview with Harold Diftler on March 20, 2003 with Kurt Piehler and ...

MASON: Brad Mason.

PIEHLER: At the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.... You were saying that in your ...

DIFTLER: Yeah. Go ahead.

PIEHLER: That your father didn't have any run-ins with the Office of Price Administration.

DIFTLER: Well, no. As I say, when he went to New York to buy merchandise on the black market—that's the only way he could get, I guess. You had to really have a good friend in the industry to buy merchandise and.... Of course, Oak Ridge, which you haven't mentioned, I remember ...

PIEHLER: I was—that was my next question.

DIFTLER: Oak Ridge was nearby, and we thought they were building a synthetic rubber plant, that's what they ...

PIEHLER: That's what you thought it was?

DIFTLER: Yes.

PIEHLER: That was the rumor ...

DIFTLER: That's what they told us, yeah.

PIEHLER: That was sort of the semi-official ...

DIFTLER: Yeah, synthetic rubber. So then the bus station was on Commerce Street, two blocks up from my father's store. And every day they would have these big carools of buses of workers, leaving one shift off and picking up another shift. And then the shift they left off had a lot of money, they made a lot of money, and they would come down [to] that area, and they would buy jewelry [for] girlfriends, wives, themselves. And he had to have a lot of merchandise, you know, for a big clientele because he was right near the bus station. They got off and got their payday, they came off that way. Also, the railroad workers were very, very good economically. They were paid well by the railroad. They all had to have a certain pocket watch, you know. And he sold those. You could have kept every one, because they'd [be] worth today—he sold them for fifty dollars, they're worth thousands today. And I collected some of them. And so that was a good business then. They—I don't remember him having trouble with price controls.

PIEHLER: So your father actually did quite well, it sounds like, in the war.

DIFTLER: During the war years, all of the merchants made a lot of money.

PIEHLER: And Oak Ridge had a lot—it sounds like Oak Ridge had a lot to do with it.

DIFTLER: A lot of big economic influence in the city of Knoxville, because when they were building it, people that never had a job—see this thing in the Roosevelt era with the CCC, they were ready to go to work for Oak Ridge. And then, also, we had TVA here.

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.



DIFTLER: Norris Dam was built, and they had electrical power here. If we hadn't had that, I don't know if they could have ever built Oak Ridge, but they did. That was the foresight of Roosevelt. He harnessed hydro-electric power. And, my uncle always said that, "I don't know hydro-electric power from salami," you know, but he said, "That's—they're gonna make this valley here. Because they're—have these big ..." And he took us to Norris Dam. And he might have even known Senator Norris. I'm not sure, he knew everybody else. And they built—they named it for him. And we went out and saw when they were putting the big turbines in. And he said that this was going to make the economic situation good here. And then the farmers were raising hell. It was taking up their property and government and everything. But see, that's where this immigrant—as I say, this is why I always had respect for my uncle, he saw the future. And he said, "That's what's gonna happen." The guy that can see the future has got, you know, got it by the tail, you know. And that's what—and I don't know where he got it, because he was never really formally educated, and he came from Europe. But he was just—had that kind of mind. So, he always backed those programs where it was a lot of resentment.

And so, when Oak Ridge came in, the people didn't really complain about Oak Ridge because it was economically—all of the department stores and everybody—and all these guys were not working, because, you know, the Republicans had ruined the economy back then. And the CCC had been training these young people, and they had a work crew here. And that was—along with the hydro-electric power and the work force that made Oak Ridge, that won the war for us, I think. And, although how horrible it was, we never knew what was going on over there, you see. And then after the atomic bomb was exploded when ... Truman had done it, then they said, "Well, it was made in Oak Ridge." It was—all these articles came out.

PIEHLER: Were people surprised that we had this here?

DIFTLER: Oh, shocked. [In the] first place, they didn't understand it, you see. And, my father spoke with a very broken accent, and he was—the big cafeteria there that everybody ate at in town was called the S&W Cafeteria.

PIEHLER: Oh yeah, yeah.

DIFTLER: And it was a wonderful place. When I was a kid, they gave me thirty-five cents on Saturday. I'd go there and have dinner—have lunch—and go to a movie on thirty-five cents. And I had more than I could eat, really. That's where I—so anyway, a friend of his—they went to the S&W to eat one time, and my father was talking in Yiddish, you know, in half-German, half-Yiddish. And then this fellow said, "Listen Benjamin ... throw in nuclear fission and then go on with the conversation." And he said, "Why?" [And he said], "They'll think you are one of the experts." (Laughter) So he didn't know a nuclear—we never knew what it was, you see. And then when the bomb was exploded and Truman had made that decision, it was in August, I think. In Nagasaki or Hiroshima, I've forgotten. And then they said, "Well, Oak Ridge had a significant part in that." Then we knew what was going on. Well, we knew it had made this bomb, and then they started showing pictures of it and propaganda and stuff. And then, Truman had a hard decision, but it was the only decision. But Oak Ridge was [a] very important thing. And also, even now with the environmental situation. I don't know what's going on out there, but there's something that we don't know still is going on with the environment. And, hopefully,

it is going to be good for us. You know nuclear waste is a big problem. There is a big movement to redo a lot of their ... underground storage, you know. I don't know what's happening at Oak Ridge—still don't know.

PIEHLER: Anything else ... that we forgot to ask you?

DIFTLER: No, the only thing I can tell you is, right now, this message says, "U.S. Troops open fire on Iraqi troops signaling the ground war has begun." You see, I get a message here. They've got to tell me because I'm—that's America Online that has this ...

PIEHLER: Instant messaging.

DIFTLER: So they're firing on each other. Anyway, what else?

PIEHLER: Is there anything else about the war that we ...

DIFTLER: No. I think the significant thing is that the undercurrent and lack of communication and understanding of the war. And also, Oak Ridge [was] a big part of World War II that happened here, you see?

PIEHLER: Well, it's just an observation, but it strikes me even though your time in the service was only several months, it still had a really decisive impact in broadening ... your world.

DIFTLER: It was a big impact on a little Jewish home kid. And to get out and see the world—and I'm glad I came back. But, I sort of—in the back of my mind, I probably wish I had stayed in San Diego, because that's when the aerospace industry was growing. I could have gone to school there. Possibly, I could have had another life there. But I don't regret it because Knoxville's been good to me. And I enjoy a small community, and it's always—people moving in now has made it bigger, but we're still a small community.

PIEHLER: Oh, no we're ... particularly the Jewish community. It's a very small community.

DIFTLER: You know, I mean even the city, as big as you see West Knoxville and everything, it's different than Chicago.

PIEHLER: Or definitely L.A.

DIFTLER: L.A., that's where I go, see. And New York—I have a brother-in-law in New York. And I like—you know, you gotta go to New York periodically, as I told you the other day.

PIEHLER: Yeah, I ...

DIFTLER: You recharge your batteries, because that's where it's at, see. But, and I—the first time I went to New York, I was just, I was so amazed, I was almost sick. I mean, it's unbelievable. But I found the most wonderful people in New York, you know. I always heard about these abrasive people, and I found the most wonderful clerks in stores and little coffee

places on the corner and all in New York. And I love New York. But it's—on the one hand, I love it, and on the other hand I hate it. I've been there many times, and I ran the New York Marathon there. Had, you know, over ...

PIEHLER: When did you run the Marathon?

DIFTLER: '85.

PIEHLER: Oh, that's quite recently.

DIFTLER: Yeah 1985. Now that's a long way.

PIEHLER: Yeah, but not—it's not ancient history. (Laughs)

DIFTLER: Well this was—I don't want to do it anymore. But I did Birmingham, Chicago, and New York.

PIEHLER: I mean New York is a real ... (Laughs)

DIFTLER: I did a lot of training and I enjoyed it. You know, the family—I was never an athlete, you know, [they said] “Who is this guy,” you know. And my friends and peers—you see, I'm always influenced by peers. So they said, “Come on and start this running program.” So we all went together. You know, we'd meet together. You know, guys go drink together, shoot pool, or some—we ran together. And we would talk and tell all kind of stories. And so we started building up our time. And so, one of them who left town here and lives in New York, upstate New York, he ran in the Boston Marathon, and he—and I said, “I'm not going to do that. In the first place, I don't know if I could qualify for it.” But anyway, I did the marathon just to do it, and also the fact it gave me some status in the community. I've got this certificate, you see, and some people always amaze me. It's an endurance thing, and you have to train for it, but anybody can do it if you want to do it.

PIEHLER: Well, I know Heather Hirschfeld. Do you know Heather?

DIFTLER: Oh yeah.

PIEHLER: She's running the Boston Marathon this month.

DIFTLER: Well good for her. Yeah, I saw—she and Dr. Zomchick. Yeah they run it. Zomchick was a patient of mine.

PIEHLER: Oh, okay.

DIFTLER: A funny story about Zomchick is that his—he brought his mother to me one day. Did you ever meet his mother?

PIEHLER: No.

DIFTLER: Crusty old lady. I think she'd been married three or four times. I don't know where she came from, but anyway. To his credit he really takes care of her. I think she is still living here. So she had a horrible situation to do. So we got her to go ahead with it. And so when he would come in the room to, you know, I would tell him what we had to do. I'd call him Zomchick. So she one day, she grabbed my sleeve and she said, "It's Doctor Zomchick to you." (Laughter) He never said anything because we were friends, but she said, "I'm always going to show some of these doctors, I'm ..." I'll always remember that. He's a wonderful guy. But he and Heather run some.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DIFTLER: She helps to get, you know, motivated. It's always good to run with somebody because you—the first thing you know you're talking along, like were talking here.... But it's a, you know, it's—you know, the kind of thing that's like talking, or smoking, or anything else. It's very—you get dependent on it. Of course, if I don't do three or four miles during the day sometimes, I feel worthless. I don't want to get you started on this 'cause you'll never—it's good to have some exercise.

PIEHLER: Well, I try to just walk and go to the gym regularly, so ...

DIFTLER: Well, walking is very good.

PIEHLER: No, I've been away so I haven't been—I was here only yesterday and was home, and I was wondering if I'd be able to get to the gym because it's—I walk and ...

DIFTLER: That's good. You don't have to run. In fact, we go to a meeting periodically—my wife helped organize the group that—it's sort of alternative medicine. You see, alternative medicine is looked upon like, you know, sideways. It is getting more accepted, and these are all people who believe in mind-body things, meditation, this and that and the other. And there is a cardiologist there from New Jersey, a Dr. Sinatra, I accused him of being in the mob, you know. (Laughter) But he recommends certain vitamins and supplements that he makes. So I said, "Well, you've got a monopoly on this, you've got a—the government is going to be on you." And he said, "No," he said, "it's what I want people to have, you buy it or you don't buy it." So anyway, he said, "Well what do you do for exercise?" And I told him, "I run three or four miles a day." [And he said], "Oh stop it immediately." Said, "At your age, stop. You must just walk. You get as much benefit out of walking." I said, "I don't think so, and I'm not going to stop it." He said, "Well you better take more of this particular vitamin." But anyway, we could talk about alternative medicine and it's—you know, Duke University has a whole alternative medicine ...

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DIFTLER: And I've been there just for conferences and my wife has too. And the reason they put it in—Andrew Weil, do you know Dr. Weil? If you read any of his books—The Seven Ways to Optimum Health—Duke put it in because they felt that they would be liable for lawsuits if they didn't offer the patients alternative as well as traditional medicines, so they put a big

department in. Anyway, we don't need to get into that. But to show you that I don't think I would be that open to new things had it not been for ... where I came from and, in fact, going to California during the war, or after the war, into the service, as well as coming back into the community. I think that—not that I am more unusual except that I have been exposed to a lot of different things. The exposure to the rest of the world would help ...

PIEHLER: 'Cause you might not have gone to California for a long time if you hadn't gone into the service.

DIFTLER: No, I probably wouldn't have.

PIEHLER: 'Cause you're not—your family were not big travelers.

DIFTLER: Oh! Perish the thought. We wouldn't even go to Atlanta, you know. But the only time I started going to Atlanta was when we had—today, going to Atlanta is nothing. You can go there in three hours—we had real good dental meetings there. So I started going to Atlanta with my wife. We had family there that they had never met. So, when I started going there, they became more, you know, ... together. But, anyway, that's it.

PIEHLER: Well, thank thanks a lot. Are you sure we can't take you to lunch?

DIFTLER: Oh no, thanks, we'll make it a ... (Tape Paused)

PIEHLER: 'Cause you mentioned—actually we didn't cover the black community.

DIFTLER: Well, I can tell you a few things about that. Are you ready?

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DIFTLER: Well, you see when I first came to Knoxville, I was the only white dentist that accepted black patients along with everybody else, you know. It didn't matter to me. If they didn't like me because of that, the hell with it, you know. And, I never had a complaint. Some people may have left, maybe not. But, I met some wonderful people from the black community. And, the reason for that was that I was always around black people. And I hate to keep saying black people because it categorizes. But, my father had always had people working for him in his—he didn't know the difference, you know. I mean, he knew they were black. And some of them were just, you know, basic homemakers or people who were [in] maintenance. But, he always told me that they were respectable people, and that some were bad and some were—and I don't know where he got this because he so concerned ...

PIEHLER: But about race, he wasn't ...

DIFTLER: Yeah. Well, he yeah. But in Europe, you didn't see black people. So he didn't know the difference. But they always were in our home. You know, we had a lady that worked in our home when my mother worked. Sometimes I was taken care of by the lady. And, so, I didn't really discriminate, I didn't think. I think there is always an element of prejudice in us.

But when I opened the office, I said, “Hell, ... I knew a lot of the people.” And they came in. And one or two of them, once in a while, would say, you know, “We feel so wonderful that you have allowed us to come take care of the latest technology.” Because the black dentists were—somehow they didn’t—I would probably not go to a Jewish dentist (laughs), you know. I just say that as a joke. But they didn’t want to go to a black dentist, because they felt that they weren’t as educated as we were, see. So I said, “You know, people are people. I mean, your money’s green. That’s all I’m interested in now is to do a good job and be paid for it, see.”

PIEHLER: When did black dentists get accepted in the dental society?

DIFTLER: Not—when I was taken in, as I told you, they were not accepted. They had their own.

PIEHLER: Yeah, you mentioned that at the very beginning.

DIFTLER: But, eventually, and I don’t know exactly, but now they couldn’t get away with that. I think during the Kennedy era.

PIEHLER: So, it was not until the ‘60s, then?

DIFTLER: Yeah, I’d say at least the 60’s. And the—today they got black patients, I mean, students in the dental school. I was just there, and they have Asian students, which we never had. We only had white East Tennesseans there or Tennesseans in the—we didn’t have anything like that. Now it’s—the Dean made a speech at our meeting and he said that he found some of the most wonderful dentists in communities that was not what we had in the past. You know, he said that they are very talented. And he spoke of the—not obnoxiously, but as a matter [of fact]. And, a lot of guys don’t look at it the way I do that were in my class. You know, they say, “Oh, how wonderful I am. I accept everybody.” But that’s not the case, you know. They—that was their background, and they’re afraid of competition you know. Like I was telling Brad, when the Chinese came into California, there was a big problem there because they were taking jobs away, or they would work cheaper than the white laborers there, you know, and all that. But, anyway ... the Ku Klux Klan was actually here in Sevierville. And it was called the White Caps of Sevier County. Did you ever read that book?

PIEHLER: I’ve heard about them.

DIFTLER: Yeah.

PIEHLER: How active were they?

DIFTLER: Well, they [were] obviously more active than—we were shielded from here because of the communication. They had actually lynched people there, and it was a meeting ground for the Ku Klux Klan.

PIEHLER: This was in the 1920s and ‘30s?

DIFTLER: Huh?

PIEHLER: Was this ...

DIFTLER: Yeah, I'd say it was in—but that was before my era. And the—but I did remember a lot of talk about that. I'd heard from the black people at work and they were scared to death still. And they found a haven amongst the Jewish people because the Jewish people always respected—I don't know any of the people of my contemporaries or peers that were discriminating. But the black people were servants; they were not really professional at this time. They didn't have the opportunity. But, they always took them into their family. And they were part of the family. They worked with them. And I remember many times my father would take food over to the maid that worked for us in her—you know, Christmastime or something like that or do something, you know, or drop money to her or something. And he was tough on one end but ...

PIEHLER: He had a soft ...

DIFTLER: So—but then, even today, I got a letter the other day from a lady who is part of the black community here that I took, have taken, for thirty years. She said, "I miss you so much. I don't feel comfortable going—I don't know how I'll be accepted by the other white dentists." I said, "Ah, today, you know," I wrote her back. I said, "You just let me know and I'll—you can go to my dentist. I'll tell you that—he'll take you." But it was a part of something that they did not have, you know, available.

PIEHLER: Well, I'm glad ... good work. (Referring to Brad)

DIFTLER: Yeah, we were talking about that. And, you know they had—you know yourself about the soldiers in World War II who were black and how they distinguished themselves. Aw, just give them an opportunity, and they'll do everything, you know. And I think it was a lack of—a fear of competition, the white, you know the whole smear of discrimination. But I think that this community here—you know, the University had black students here when they were raising hell in Mississippi and Alabama and over there. 'Cause I used to see them here, you know. They were graduate students and they—this University was very progressive and nobody had a—the townspeople knew it, nobody raised hell here. The only thing that happened here was the—when Nixon came. You heard the whole story?

PIEHLER: I've heard about the Nixon visit.

DIFTLER: You—that was a disgrace to the city and all that. But, then I remember when Lyndon Johnson came here, not—I shook hands with Lyndon Johnson. I have a picture I took of him—I was always into photography—in front of the Student Center— they brought—my office was down there, you know. So, I came up for Lyndon Johnson's Appalachian Tour. You know they had the—down by the Civic Coliseum was all blighted, it was terrible. And he had this Appalachian program, you know, and he came to visit. And all of a sudden the crown pushed me in the middle with my camera. And there I am in front of him just about as close as you. See, I could have been anybody with a gun, you know. So, I just stuck my hand out, and he

grabbed it and said, “How are you, son?” And, he was a great big guy, you know, a big hand twice as big. And I said, “Could I take a picture?” He said, “Yeah, go ahead.” So I took a picture of him. And I’ve still got it. I showed it to Dr. Appier, you know her, one day when I took her class.... But, I took and processed the picture. I still have—and his daughter was with him, Linda. And so that is interesting to me, too, that that happened. And he—I went this summer, or not summer, but back in January, we went to Austin, Texas, to the Johnson library. And, have you ever been there?

PIEHLER: Yes.

DIFTLER: It’s a fantastic place and brought back a lot of memories of that. And my wife said, “Well, maybe they want your picture.” I said, “Ah, they got better pictures.” (Laughs) But it’s ...

PIEHLER: We’d love to—when we put the picture on the Web, we’d love to scan it. That would be a great picture to scan.

DIFTLER: Of Lyndon Johnson?

PIEHLER: Huh?

DIFTLER: My picture?

PIEHLER: Yeah.

DIFTLER: I’ll bring you a copy of it.

PIEHLER: Yeah, we could scan it in.

DIFTLER: I’ll make you a copy of it.

PIEHLER: Yeah, that would be great.

DIFTLER: Yeah. And it’ll be a—won’t be the actual photograph, I don’t have the negative anymore, but I’ll get you a copy. It’s something to have, really. It’s a good picture. I think it’s one of the best pictures I’ve seen of him. His head is turned and—a natural picture. But, anyway, that’s what you got so, I guess, you’re tired of me.

PIEHLER: Well, since you, no—I wish we could feed you lunch.

DIFTLER: No, we will go to dinner one night. I don’t eat much during the day.

PIEHLER: Okay. That’s fine. I just ...

DIFTLER: You know, I’m very vain. I don’t want my figure to be ... (Laughs).



PIEHLER: Well ... thanks again. I ... really appreciate ...

DIFTLER: Well, if there's anything that I can ...

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Braum Denton 10/22/2004

Reviewed by Mark Boulton 11/1/2004

Edited by Kurt Piehler 12/1/2004