

Oscar's Story¹

FOREWORD²

Today is the start of my response to my children's request to tell my story. It is a simple one. I am the first American-born child in our family. My father was born in Russia-Poland and my mother in Austria-Hungary.

I plan to arrange the story as follows:

From my birth until we moved to Boston in 1917

From our return to New York in 1921 until 1928

From 1928 when I met Mary until 1941 [when we moved to] Washington

From 1944 when we returned to Neponsit

¹ For details about how this 2021 version of *Oscar's Story* was compiled, please see "The Making of *Oscar's Story*" by Vicki Mechner (née Weitzberg). The archived .mp3 and .doc files on which she based it are available upon request to vicki@mechner.com.

² Composed by Oscar C. Weitzberg and typed by Mary Weitzberg sometime between November 1994 and January 1995

My Beginnings³

I was born on August 6, 1907, to Rose [née Mayers] and Isaac Weitzberg in a tenement building on Stockton Street, near Myrtle Avenue and Broadway, in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. The building is long gone and has been replaced by public housing. As far as I know, Stockton Street's only distinction was that the Stockton Talmud Torah was located there and that Meyer Cogan was its headmaster.

My father was born on October 1, 1873, in Neustadt Mala-Polska, a small town in the southern part of Russia-Poland, now known as Nowy Korczyn in Poland. My father's parents were Chaim and Leah Pszenicagóra.

When my father immigrated to the United States in 1899, the immigration authorities at Castle Garden decided to Anglicize the family name to Weitzberg. *Pszenicagora* means *mountain of wheat* in Polish; the German equivalent is *weitzenberg*. Leah's father was Isaac Winograd. I don't know her mother's name. Chaim's father's name was Eliezer.

My mother was born in 1874 in Galicia, a region in the old Austrian-Hungarian Empire. I am not sure of the month or day. Nor am I sure of the name of the town or city. When I was a kid, I used to address the packages of Yiddish newspapers that my mother sent to her parents from time to time. I seem to remember the name Gnilowody. I am not sure whether it was a street or a town. Recently, I asked Rose Glick if she knew where my mother was born; she thought it was the same town as her [own] parents, Podhajce.

My mother came to this country years before my father did. She lived with her cousins, the Fixtells, as did her cousin and best friend Rose (not sure of her last name), who married Jack Zucker. My mother worked as a sewing machine operator making waists (which we now call "blouses"). Those were the days when operators owned their machines and carried them on their backs to work for different employers.

My father came to this country in 1899 after having served in the field artillery of the Russian army for five years. After his discharge from the army, he worked with his mother in her egg business for a year before leaving for America. (My grandmother had been the sole support of the family for years after my grandfather took ill and was bedridden and unable to work.) [In New York] my father boarded with a family by the name of Pincus, who were not relatives as far as I know. Later I met a son of the Pincus family. He was the football coach at the High School of Commerce, the bitter rival of my school, DeWitt Clinton High. It was through Pincus that I got my first after school job in 1925.

³ No audiotape; this is based on a typed original and hand-written annotations dated in early 1995.

Mother's Day 1997⁴

Hi! It's Mother's Day [1997⁵]. This is addressed to Mary, Laura, Vicki and Barb — the mother of my children and the mothers of my grandchildren. It is really dedicated to *my* mother because I think it is important for you to hear how a son remembers his mother.

Mother was born in 1874. She was only a year younger than Grandpa, my dad. She died when she was 67 years old, in 1941. She was lucky that she had a chance to hold each of her grandchildren, my children. She never had the pleasure of holding Leo's daughter, Nancy.

Let me tell you something about her family and then I'll tell you about my relationship with her. Mother was the oldest child in her family. She had two sisters: one was Dora and one was Pensha. Pensha came here to visit for a while and went back to be with her parents in Austria, in Podhajce. They lived on Gnilowdy Street somewhere in Podhajce, in what is now part of Ukraine. She had three brothers: Sam; Louie, whom I knew; and Yechiel, who had come to this country but had passed away before I got to know him, I think before I was born. Mother came to this country when she was quite young, 14 or 15, I think. She was lucky to be able to live with cousins who had preceded her. She worked as a sewing machine operator and, in those days, she had a sewing machine which she carried on her back from place to place where she worked because all that the owner of the dress factory provided was power for the machine — or, maybe it was just foot power (This I wouldn't know).

She was introduced to my father through a *shadchan* (matchmaker). Although he had come from Poland and she from Austria, they apparently spoke the same Yiddish, because the part of Poland my father came from was as far south as you can go in Poland to the river that divided ...

Apparently they were very suited to each other and they got married soon thereafter, on Dec 26, 1903. I understand it was a wonderful wedding in New York City. All the guests came to the wedding hall in carriages, which my father and mother had provided. As far as the food was concerned, they had prepared the food in advance and a great time was had by all.

I understand my mother had a couple of miscarriages before I was born. I came into this world on August 6, 1907. I was the first child of my father's family and my mother's family to be born here. So, I was an American. I was born on Stockton Street, in the part of Brooklyn called Williamsburg. The location was convenient for my father to go to work, because he would take the elevated train, which brought him to downtown New York, where he worked as a presser for a company called Wilkins & Adler, a top cloak and suit company. But later on, before I was two

⁴ This section is based on Mary Weitzberg's July 1998 transcription and her/their 1999 typed revision.

⁵ This is the first instance on this audiotape in which Barb Weitzberg can be heard prompting OCW with hints or, more frequently, with questions.

years old, Wilkins & Adler moved uptown, to 15 East 26th Street, and my parents were lucky to find a place on East 20th Street, within walking distance for my father.

I do have a memory of Brooklyn. I was just about two years old when we moved and I have a memory of riding in a trolley car and sitting on the grass in a park. More than that I don't remember. But from the earliest days I remember my mother singing to me and reading to me.

Leo was born on January 17, 1910. At that time we lived in a flat, in a building at 339 East 20th Street, which was called a "railroad flat." You came in to the kitchen, there was a bedroom to the right. If you turned to the left and went through another bedroom, you got to the parlor at the back of the house. We had inside plumbing, which was new in those days. In fact, I think some of the apartments in the building we lived in were those where you had to go through an outside common hallway to the bathroom. But [in our flat] we had everything: We had a coal stove and we had gas. [My Aunt Dora lived with us because we had a spare room, so called. We had two bedrooms and a living room and a big kitchen and a little alcove.⁶]

Mother and Dad would get up very early in the morning because my father went to work early. In those days the workday was very, very long — 14 hours — and my father had a responsible job because he was the head presser.

I remember that Mother had done all the cleaning and baking and cooking before I got up in the morning. And so, the idea of working and doing your work early apparently was something that became ingrained in Leo and me. Mother was a good cook and I used to help her bake. One of the things I noticed about her arm was that it was crooked. When I asked what had caused the crookedness, she explained to me that she had ridden a horse and fell off the horse and that's how she broke her elbow.

My mother was a very cheerful person and different than my father. She'd had an opportunity to learn how to read but my father, having been drafted into the army when he was 21 and served for five years in the Czar's army, had no time to go to school. And I think their lives were very, very hard. Mother would read from the Yiddish paper. She knew English and would read from the English paper as well. And more than that, I remember we had a . . . what we used to call a "lounge" — not a sofa; it was just you had a headboard on one side and could stretch out and use it as a bed or in any other way. We would sit on it and she would read to me from the Yiddish paper. She used to read to me stories about the *Rambam*. I learned later on that the *Rambam* was Moses Maimonides. Some of the stories she told when I was a kid, I heard more about later on.

⁶ This fragment was moved here because of the topic. OCW actually provided this information when seemingly having second thoughts about a statement (on page 5) about his mother's influence on him — almost as if Aunt Dora might have had an influence, too.]

My mother's house was kosher house and Friday night the candles were lit and the house was spic and span. But the only time my mother and father went to *shul* was on the High Holidays. At least that's all I can remember that they did, because my father had to work on Saturdays.

My desire for learning came mostly through my mother.⁷ But the thing I think was most important was the fact that my mother encouraged me to learn and be inquisitive. She responded to all my questions directly and she encouraged me to do the right things. For example, if I were walking on the street with her and I hunched my shoulders, she would tap me on the shoulder and say, "Oscar, straighten up!" and I'd straighten up. If I'd do what the other kids would do, get in back of the iceman's truck to filch a piece of ice, she would warn me that it was dangerous. Saturdays we didn't go to school, but Saturdays both Leo and I were dressed for *Shabbos*. We didn't go to synagogue, but we knew it was a special day.

When I went to school, my mother went to all the things that parents were required to do such as visit the school, act as helpers on trips (we'd go by train to the Bronx Zoo, Bronx Park, Central Park, museums). But I was always encouraged by my mother to learn to do things myself and to do them. So, for example, if I had an errand to do, to go to the grocery store, and the grocery was on the next street, so I would walk down to First Avenue, go to 21st Street and make a left turn, and there was the store. And she would instruct me as to what to get: half a pint of sour cream, a pint of milk. I would have containers. She wouldn't say a "pint," she'd say a "measure" or a "half a measure." And she'd give me a dollar bill and she'd tell me to be very sure to get the correct change; and I would have to repeat back to her what she had told me, to make sure I had gotten it straight.

Let me tell you about an event that took place in the public school one day. I was very lucky. There was a school across the street from where I lived and so when I was 3½ years old I just wandered into the kindergarten because one of my playmates was going to that school. I was in that kindergarten for 2½ years. Of course, in the process I had learned how to be comfortable in the school and to be a helper in the school. And so, as a consequence, whenever they needed actors for plays, I was invited to play. I was Santa Claus, Old Mother Hubbard, and so forth. I remember one day there was an assembly (I think it was an award assembly of some kind) and I knew I was going to be called up upon the stage. And so, when I was dressed that day, my mother pinned on my trousers a little medal of some kind where my watch pocket was. (In those days, in your pants you had a pocket watch place.) And I was up on the stage and one of the older boys was acting as a comedian. He was dressed as Charlie Chaplin (and, of course, we all knew about him and his funny little shtick) and he came over to me and said, "Oh Oscar, what time is it?" And I couldn't tell him the time. The very next day I owned my first Elgin watch.

⁷ This is the point in the recording where OCW commented about his mother's sister Dora having lived with them.

I remember going to my first Geography class and the teacher apologized about the condition of the geography books we had; they were small, tattered, well worn. And she showed us the one that she had, that was large, thicker, had more pictures and maps. And so, I wandered up after class and asked her the name of the publisher and where I might get one. I wrote down the name of the book, came home, told my parents and I immediately got enough money to buy the book. I got a couple of young friends to walk with me and we walked from East 20th Street between First and Second Avenue to the bookstore on 48th Street and Fifth Avenue. I must have been about eight years old at the time. So [I had] the sense of my making an inquiry of the teacher, getting an answer, telling my mother, and getting immediate support — because the important thing then was to encourage *me*, and of course Leo, too, to learn and to be good students. So, much of what I am and who I am goes directly back to my mother — and my father, of course. But it was my mother who spent most of the time doing these things because my father was working.

Most fathers worked — when they weren't on strike or out of work. My father generally was working because he was lucky, even when there was a strike and the place was shut down. ((Q: Do you remember how much money he used to make?)) Enough for them to save some; I don't know how much money it was. But I never felt that I lacked anything because . . . not that we needed very much; there weren't many things to do besides to go to the movies. It was easy for me to go to the movies because there was a movie [theater] on First Avenue between 20th and 21st Streets.

As far as my Hebrew education was concerned: I used to go to the store with my mother when I was in kindergarten to get a buttered roll and a pickle after school. And I used to see a man with a red beard standing there every day around that time. So, I asked Mother who he was and she made an inquiry and learned that he was a *melamed*. (A *melamed* was a Hebrew teacher who went to your home.) And so, I started to read or learn Hebrew about that time. In due course we had some competition because . . . Do you remember Tessie Greenfield, Hymie Greenfield's widow?⁸ She was living in our building; she was single and her parents came to this country to live with her and her sister. So, what do you do with a man who comes from the other side, so he can make some money? He's going to be a *melamed*, too! So, I switched to Mr. Weissman to be my Hebrew teacher.

Later we had a Hebrew School on Third Avenue, so life was pretty much, for me and my family, like being in a village, both on the street and in the house . . . because we had many cousins in the building. When I was small, either my cousins or Morris and Paulie Pflaum, who lived in the same building, his brothers were there, so I would go around and knock on the door on a Sunday or Saturday morning and they'd say, "Who's there?" and I would say Chaskele Vashtub" and they would let me in. ((Q: What does that mean?)) A "vashtub" is a wash tub! ((several female

⁸ The 1999 revision indicated that Tessie and Hymie were the parents of Aaron and Selma.

voices: That's how he pronounced Weitzberg as "Vashtub.") And Leo's reputation when he knocked on the door and he walked in the kitchen, was to say, "I never taste it." And so, he became known as "Leo never taste it." ... I have sadness ... We lived there until I was 10 and then we moved to Boston. I'll tell you more about that later.

But at this point I want to tell you that all my life, until my mother died, I always knew that I could rely on my mother being there for me. And since I mentioned the fact that my mother had died in 1941, let me just tell you about that and with this I'll conclude this episode⁹ of my mother.

As you know, the Weitzbergs (Mary, Abe, Laura and Vicki) moved to Washington in 1941 when I took a position at the Hecht Company. I moved to Washington alone, before they moved to Washington. I came back to Neponsit, where [they] were living at the time, to celebrate *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, and I went back to Washington between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, and then back to New York a couple of days before *Yom Kippur*. In 1941, *Yom Kippur* started on a Wednesday evening and I had come in for a business meeting on Tuesday. On Wednesday morning I went downtown on business to Brooklyn, and then came back and had lunch with my mother, *erev Yom Kippur*. When I left her, she leaned out the window and waved to me as I went to take the train. And that was the last I saw her alive. Friday, after I had gone back to Washington, I had a call after dinner to come home, back to New York, quickly because my mother was in bad shape. By the time I got there late that night, my mother had passed away.

The funeral was on Sunday. ((Q: Did they know why she died?)) She was allergic; she had asthma and she was allergic to her own sputum. She used to get an inoculation, which my father used to give her, a shot in the leg. She was fine when I saw her, so I was shocked to hear what was happening. By the time I got home, she had passed away. The funeral was on Sunday. My father, Leo and I spent Friday night and Saturday with my mother's body in the house; then the people from the funeral parlor came and they prepared her for the funeral in our house. We had a procession from the house to the synagogue and the family walked behind the hearse to the synagogue. The doors of the synagogue were open, some appropriate prayers were said, and then we took her to the cemetery¹⁰. By the time we came back to the house, it was almost time for *Succos*. And so, we went to the synagogue [for services] and when we came back we had the meal. The meal we had that night was the meal my mother had prepared on Friday. And of course we didn't have to sit *shiva* because the advent of *Succos* took away the responsibility of sitting *shiva*.

And so, my memory of my mother has always been that of a wonderful person — warm, caring, and attentive to her children and husband and everyone because all the neighbors and friends and

⁹ One of several references in this audiotape to tape further reminiscences

¹⁰ Mt Hebron (added in the 1999 revision)

relatives, when they wanted counseling of any kind, would come to my mother and father. If there were problems, they would help solve them. They reached out to everyone in our family, young and old.

((Q: Do you remember anything that would be negative about her?)) Not really. I think the only time that there was tension between my father and mother was when she was a little concerned when he didn't close a drawer correctly. Or, when they played cards and she would lose, once, Leo tells me — I don't know; I've never been there —she threw the cards out the window.

Also, I think once there was tension between her and [Mary]. We had our own apartment by this time; this was after Abe was born. It was at that time that Mary thought that smoking was a good idea and I had taken up a pipe. I think this bothered my mother a great deal because I suspect that at some time my father used to smoke and she had persuaded him not to smoke anymore. I'm quite sure that when my father was in the Russian army he smoked like all the others. And I remember she said something to Mary about the *pipke*, meaning the pipe. I think my mother may have resented the fact that in those days young mothers didn't like older people to hold their babies. I don't think my mother and father ever babysat for Abe.

My mother was lucky that she saw Abe grow up as a nice, stalwart young man. He was six when she passed away. My mother had the pleasure of watching Laura on roller skates when Laura was one. And of course she had the pleasure of holding Vicki when we moved to Neponsit.

So, to all you guys who hear this, my children and grandchildren, and hopefully someday my great grandchildren, I want you to know that the one that started it all for me and, through me, all of you — as far as I'm concerned, was my mother, who had the most influence with me as I was growing up until I was 10. Of course, my father did have great influence on me, too, and that I'll tell you about later. But this is the end of the first episode in the saga, about my mother.

Back to New York

Well, maybe I'm going to be working this after all. . . . This is February 5, 2002. I am going to try to record the events that I remember took place back in 1919, when it was necessary for the Weitzbergs to leave the Boston area and come [back] to New York.

It all started on July 4, 1919. My Uncle Sam Mayers had gone to Orchard Beach, Maine, with his wife, Molly, and his children, Leon and Estelle, to escape the heat in Boston. While there, Uncle Sam got a bug. It took some time to discover what the bug was; it was spinal meningitis and he was invalided from that point on. When Uncle Sam was unable to play the role he generally played at the S&L Dress Company, which he and his brother, Uncle Louie, had founded some time [before], and which my father joined and moved our family from New York in 1916.

In July 1919 I was not quite 12 years old and life for me was very easy, going to school and enjoying the summer and having fun. But with Uncle Sam being sick, things started to look slightly bleak. A number of events then took place, which caused us to change our style of living. After Uncle Sam took sick, there was a robbery and we lost all of the piece goods that had been received for the new season and there was no insurance. So, the goods had to be replaced and, after they were replaced, there was a crash in the wholesale price of silk goods, which made things worse.

So now, in the spring of 1920, changes had to be made in many ways. Among them was a plan to move our household, together with Uncle Sam's family, to Roxbury, in a house on Normandy Street where we would live together as a single family.

The summer of 1920¹¹ was supposed to mark my *bar mitzvah*, but my mother took ill as well. I had a special tutor to prepare me for my *bar mitzvah*. When the day came to recite the *haftarah* that I had learned, it was decided that I would be *bar mitzvah* on a Thursday morning. The only one who attended besides myself was my dad. I had an *aliyah* and recited the *brochos* for the *Torah* reading, but [there was] no *haftarah* on a Thursday morning, and there was no party.

Shortly thereafter, we moved to Normandy Street and life changed. I had finished public school at the Roger Wolcott School in Dorchester, and now I was going to high school. It didn't have a reputation, but lo and behold, it was an excellent school.

And shortly thereafter, at the end of 1920, with the business of the S&L Dress Company going downhill, it was decided we would move back to New York. And so early in the spring of 1921,

¹¹ The audiotape says 1919, but OCW was only 12 that year and the traditional age for *bar mitzvah* was never less than 13 years and one day. Also, the chronology (spring 2020 to end of '20) argues for 1920.

my father went back to New York to look for a job as a presser, the business he knew so well. My mother, my brother Leo and I went back to Brooklyn. I stayed at my Aunt Esther's house, which was a change from the way we had lived before 1921. I worked behind the soda counter that my cousin Hymie Greenfield had in the store on 14th Street between Second and Third Avenues. I became an experienced soda man. The place I worked at had the reputation of having the best malted milks in the country, which was attested to by the students of Stuyvesant High on East 15th Street. I tested many sodas, but of course I didn't come in contact with these kids [because] it was summertime.

When the summer came to an end, it was time to go to high school. I should tell you, of course, before I tell you about my entering high school in New York, what happened earlier: When my mother, Leo and I came back to Brooklyn, my father asked me to look at the place he had rented. I went to see the apartment with my father and I didn't like the building we were in or the rooms, and I told my father. I guess this must have been the first time that ... I told my dad that this was a lot different; this was a row house and not like the house we lived in in Dorchester, which was a three-family house.

Still, my challenge was to get into high school. And so, I inquired and I went down there one day toward the end of the enrollment period. I didn't know that it was going to be the last day for enrollment. And about five minutes to 12:00, the assistant principal came out and announced that there were no more places left for the four or five boys who were waiting outside to see him. Of course, the assistant principal went off to lunch and there we were, five strangers to each other and strange to New York. We had all come in from out of town.

Since I was the only one who had ever lived in New York before, I told them I remembered a high school by the name of "Davy Clinton." I asked the assistant principal's secretary where it was and I was informed that DeWitt Clinton was in Manhattan. She gave us directions and so the five or maybe six of us traveled from Brooklyn to 59th Street and Tenth Avenue in Manhattan that day. And I enrolled. Later on, I realized that traveling from Elton Street in East New York meant walking about a half mile to the elevated on the City Line, transferring at Atlantic Avenue for the Broadway Line, which came from Canarsie, then riding all the way downtown to Canal Street, during a period of construction to bring many lines together. All of us had to leave the train and walk outside with transfers to get to the Broadway Line, which would take me to Times Square, then on to 57th Street and Seventh Avenue, and then a long walk from 57th Street and Seventh Avenue to Tenth Avenue and 59th Street.

Guess what! I discovered I would have to leave before six o'clock in the morning, every morning, to get to DeWitt Clinton before eight o'clock — summer, winter, rain, shine or snow! Well, it didn't kill me. Because I became very familiar with traveling and making the most of time, reading the *New York Times*. And of course, the other thing I discovered was, because of the war

and the lack of construction, school would be part-time, only from about 8:00 in the morning until 12:00. But I guess it was the best thing that happened to me, because it now prepared me for really being a New Yorker. So long until I tell you about what happened after that. Because I really became a real New Yorker.

Flashbacks to the Rockaways

Good morning. This is Oscar. It's Friday, November 16, 2001, and I thought this would be as good a time as any to record my story. The heading for this should be "Flashbacks to the Rockaways."

The first flashback is the event that occurred earlier this week. On Monday, November 12, we were shocked to learn that Flight 587 American Airlines had dropped from the sky and crashed into houses in Belle Harbor. The center of the accident was on Beach 131st Street and Newport Avenue. This was really a shock because last December, Mary and I were guests of Estelle Fleischer, who lives in the sixth house from the corner of Newport Avenue and Beach 131st Street.

We had learned from a mutual friend that Estelle was safe. She had two guests, two nieces from Israel, and as soon as she heard the noise [from the crash], she jumped into her car and drove with her two nieces to her friends who live in Rockaway Park. But we didn't know any more until yesterday, when after many calls I was able to reach Estelle and to learn that the first four houses on the block were completely demolished and burned, and five of the residents there had been killed. The fifth house was affected also, but Estelle's house was saved by firemen who watered it down. In the process, they broke all the windows, kicked in the front door, and had to drive something through one side of the house. The house had a lot of damage, but at least it can be repaired.

As Estelle tells us, she is very, very lucky! She will be living with her friends in Rockaway Park, the Gellers, until her house is fixed up. Her nieces went to stay at a hostel in New York City. Estelle told us that one of the firemen said to her that she was very, very lucky and that he would like to take her to Las Vegas so he could use her luck to make some money! At least we can get a little laugh out of that. We're very happy and thankful that Estelle is okay.

The second flashback, of course, brings us to the fact that we had lived in the Rockaways — in Neponsit, which is the next number of streets beyond Belle Harbor, running from 142nd Street to 149th Street.

Neponsit brings back many memories because we moved to Neponsit back in 1941 and left it in 1986 (except for the three years we lived in Washington, from 1941 to 1944). The year 1941 was a very, very memorable year. First, we were expecting our third child. That was Vicki. She was born on July 5 at Maimonides Hospital in Brooklyn and Moe Goldberg was our doctor then, as he was when Abe was born and when Laura was born. The only difference was that, just prior to Vicki's birth, I had decided to leave Interstate Department Stores. When I told Mary's sister Henrietta and her husband, Eddie, of our move, they were heartbroken. The reason was that

earlier that year, Eddie, Henrietta and Mary had gone looking for a summer place at the beach, if possible, and they found one in Neponsit. This was about the last place they saw. It was a big house, 17 rooms and 6 baths, right smack on the ocean on Beach 144th Street. It had belonged to the Cuddihy family¹² but hadn't been used for many years and was used by the Archdiocese of Brooklyn for all of their senior bishops, monsignors, *etc.*, as a retreat. I had never heard of Neponsit before except once a couple of months before, but I'll tell you that a little later.

Well, I came home for lunch on the day that Eddie, Henrietta and Mary had seen the house (and Laura was with them at the time) and had Eddie bought it on the spot, for cash! He thought it could be converted into a two-family house, just as we were living in a two-family house in Brooklyn, on East 26th Street between J and K. It was only later on that he learned that there were restrictions in Neponsit to one-family houses, in that you couldn't rent part of a house or subdivide a house.

I came home from work that day and Mary told me the good news that we were moving to Neponsit and I said, "What! When?" And she told me the story. I was completely puzzled and slightly agitated, but I said nothing. I didn't know where Neponsit was. I had heard the name only once before. I used to play golf at Dyker Beach Golf Course in Brooklyn and didn't have a car at the time. A couple of times, one of the guys I played with, by the name of Finkelstein, said he lived in Neponsit and, after he dropped me off on East 26th Street, he went on to Neponsit. I didn't know it but Archie Katz and I and a couple of friends would play golf on a Sunday morning at Idlewild (which is now JFK airport) and as we passed a certain place after we crossed the Marine Parkway Bridge, we would hear someone say, "Oh there's Jack's brother's house," and I'd look out and there were two Spanish-type houses right on the street, which I later learned was Cronston Avenue, around the corner from the house we eventually moved to in 1944 at 452 Beach 145th Street.

There isn't time right now to tell all of the things that happened at 452 Beach 145th Street between 1944 and 1986. I took a job in Washington and started work there on August 15, 1941. My mother passed away unexpectedly the day after *Yom Kippur* that year. Fortunately, I had had lunch with her the afternoon before *Kol Nidre*. That was a year our lives all changed, with sadness but always everything for the better.

So, the event earlier this week of the accident to Flight 587 in Belle Harbor brought back old memories of all kinds.

¹² Officers of Funk and Wagnalls, publishers

The Blabber, a Porkpie Hat and McCarthyism All Around

April 16, 1999, and we are sitting around in our living room [with] Francis and Vicki, who joined us for the weekend. We've had dinner and Francis was looking at a *Time Magazine* issue which is talking about the great minds of the last hundred years. I had seen it. And there was a piece on Albert Einstein with a quotation of J. Robert Oppenheimer. That brought many memories.

Some of us in the family may recall that back in [1954] or thereabouts, while Vicki was in junior high, she became involved in a publication, *The Blabber*. [One of Vicki's favorite teachers, Mickey Blechman, helped the young students by using a school equipment to copy the paper for distribution. There were a couple of teachers there who didn't like his independent attitude and irascible personality, and perhaps there were anti-Semitism and Communist innuendoes besides.¹³] And so they filed a complaint with the principal and, lo and behold, they found something in *The Blabber* which apparently was not to their liking, and as a consequence Mr. Blechman was put on probation, I believe, and there was a great much to-do about it. [Because of the newspaper] Vicki was involved in it, too.

The moment I heard that Vicki was involved, the first thing I did was I called the attorney we used at the office¹⁴, one Monroe Friedman. Like the great person he was when he was alive, he jumped right in to this, to get all the information and be responsive. Of course, Mr. Blechman had his own attorney, and in due course there were hearings; there was a trial. ((Vicki: There was a hearing before the Board of Education in Brooklyn, because this was a New York City school.)) He prevailed eventually ((but they transferred him from Queens to another school, in Brooklyn, a long commute from his home)). The day of the judgment, when he was found not guilty and the thing came to a head, I got a call from Mickey Blechman with the good news. I then called Monroe Friedman and arranged to come to see him at the office, which was on 40th Street and Park Avenue.

When I got there I noticed, near where I was sitting in the reception area, there was a big pile of coats. On the top of the pile of coats was a porkpie hat, which was the symbol of Mr. J. Robert Oppenheimer. And then I became aware of the fact that, while I was sitting there, the Board of Directors of the Institute of Advanced Studies was meeting nearby. That's because Mr. Herbert Maass, the senior partner of Maass, Davidson, Levy and Friedman, was the Chairman of the Board of the Institute of Advanced Study and it was he, Mr. Maass, and Sam Leidesdorf who had brought Mr. [Albert] Einstein to this country, and they were the ones who had set up the Institute

¹³ The details within [these brackets] summarize some of the back-and-forth conversation at this point of the audiotape and also in the five minutes after OCW asked if anyone had anything to add. The comments about "irascible personality" and anti-Semitism were moved to this point in the text by November 23, 2001.

¹⁴ Wilbur-Rogers, Inc.

of Advanced Studies with funds that they got from Louie Bamberger and his sister. And, of course, the purpose of this meeting was to discuss what to do about accusations that Oppenheimer was a Communist. [This meeting] was a showdown to get him out of the position he held at the Institute, which eventually he had to resign from. So, every time I see a porkpie hat, I always think of that meeting, and of course that brings me back to the *Blabber*.

While I was waiting to see Monroe Friedman, I thought I would pass the good information [about Mickey Blechman] on to Dr. Benjamin Fine, who was at that time the education editor of *The New York Times*. We had met him and his family through his children, who had gone to the same summer camp as our kids. I thought he ought to know and I called him. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Fine had to resign because apparently in his younger days he was a card-carrying Communist.

So, you see, all you have to do is read something in the *Time Magazine* and see a quotation of J. Robert Oppenheimer, and all these memories come back.

Now is there anything that anyone wants to add?