

THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: SOL SCHARFSTEIN

INTERVIEWER: SUSAN MOORE

DATE: 1 APRIL 2004

SIDE ONE

SM: My name is Susan Moore, and your name
is -- ?

SS: My name is Sol Scharfstein, and I am
president of KTAV Publishing House, and KTAV Publishing
House was started in 1922, when my father came over from
Poland.

Okay. KTAV Publishing House was started in
1922. My father came over in 1921, and in '22, after
several disappointing jobs, he decided to open up a
bookstore on the Lower East Side, which was at 168
Rivington Street. The first two years we lived in back of
the store, and we were on call twenty-four hours a day,
148, I think, hours a week. That was the start of our
publishing house.

SM: Okay. Now that we know that KTAV does not stand for any kind of a radio station, can you tell us what KTAV, or "Katav," stands for?

SS: That's interesting. My father, after a year or so in business, decided that we would publish a Hebrew notebook. Now Hebrew notebooks are different than English notebooks. They have a double line, because we have vowels underneath it. Anyway, the Hebrew word for "writing" is "ktov," ^{LICHTOV} to write. So my father said, "Okay. We'll call it "Ktav."

SM: So, actually, what that is, is the Hebrew word for "writing."

SS: That is correct.

SM: So now you actually do a lot more than publish notebooks.

SS: Oh, much more. Now we have close to 1,000 items, and the variety sometimes astounds me. We publish scholarly books for universities. We publish

textbooks for Yeshiva. We publish textbooks for day-schools. We publish textbooks for afternoon Hebrew schools. In addition to that, we have a line of educational toys, which we publish for pre-school and kindergarten groups.

SM: In the *Hoboken Reporter* there was a story about your company making draedls. Could you tell us about the draedls?

SS: Well, that was actually my father's brainstorm. In 1922, most of the draedls came in from Poland. At that time Poland was alive with Jewish culture and Jewish publishing, and all kinds of Jewish activities. Anyway, my father said, "I think I can publish it. I can make the draedls in the United States." Now he couldn't speak English, but right near us there's a street called Centre Street. There was a street called Centre Street. It still is there. Now it's all Chinese. Anyway, that street was filled with German die-makers, people who made molds.

Anyway, so my father got "on his horse" -- not his horse, his feet -- and he walked to Centre Street. He knew they made dies. He walked from building to building, from store to store, from office to office, and finally he found a German called "Jephiner." I remember his

name very distinctly. Mr. "Jephiner" had a machine-shop factory, and he used to make dies for American Can Company. He looked at my father, and he and my father could converse, because Yiddish and German are quite similar. Anyway, they talked, and somehow or other there was a connection made. My father explained, and drew a diagram of, what he wanted and Mr. "Jephiner" said, "Yah, yah, yah, ich verste." That means, "Yes, yes, I understand." So he made the mold, and I still have that mold in my house.

Anyway, the mold is made. It's a four-piece mold, and you can turn out a draedl a minute. Now what has to be done is you take the lead, you put it, naturally, in a steel pot, and you melt it. Then you take the hot lead and you pour it into the mold, and it takes about thirty seconds for the lead to set. Then you open up the four-piece mold and you pull out the draedl. Now that draedl is incomplete, because it has a head on it where you poured the lead in. So that has to be chopped off, then you clean off the edges, and you have a draedl.

Now this draedl -- the first year we sold, I think, 20,000 draedls. We sold them for about a penny a piece, and that was \$200. The lead didn't cost us anything, because my father had friends who were plumbers, and when they fixed bathrooms they pulled out the lead pipes, and my

father and my mother -- My mother, by the way, was a liberated woman. She was liberated before "de Jong" and the other ones came along. Anyway, they worked day and night, and the first year they sold 20,000 draedls at a penny a piece, which was \$200. Now \$200, in those days, was great. Because a roll was a penny, and I think a quart of milk (and they gave you a lot of water, because they siphoned it off of the can) was about three-cents or a nickel.

Anyway, we had \$200, and that was the greatest \$200 they ever had.

SM: This story reminds me of when I was a little girl, my father was a fisherman and he had a special, little, old pot of my mother's where he used to melt lead to make sinkers.

SS: That is exactly the same principle.

SM: We used to have to make little holes in the tops of the sinkers, where the lead got thin, so we could put string through it, to go fishing.

SS: Anyway, the end of the story is we made draedls until about 1935, and about 1935 the Health

Department said (I think it was 1935) that lead was dangerous, so we had to discontinue the lead draedls and we went into making wood draedls. Now wood draedls are another story. We found a factory in Maine that turned the draedls on the lathe, and they made draedls for us. The wood draedls came all white, but the people wanted Israel -- used to send in draedls, but the draedls were a sort of brown color, and people wanted brown-colored draedls. So I remember my mother going into the drugstore and buying a dye called Rit. She would dissolve the dye, then stop up the bathtub and we'd throw in a thousand draedls, and we would dye the draedls. After they were dyed, we would take them out, lie them on the floor, and they had to dry.

Now my brother and I were tan, completely, because we used to use the ~~s~~ame bathtub, and we never could get rid of the dye and some of it was on our bodies. So although we were very poor, we had a Florida tan.

SM: What do you make the draedls out of now?
I see there are lots of draedls around here.

SS: Yes. Now we make the draedls, naturally, out of plastic. We used to make them in the United States; now we import them from Hong Kong. There's a

mold that shoots out twelve draedls at a time, and they're quite cheap and non-poisonous -- except when swallowed.

SM: You said you started your business on the Lower East Side. When did you move to Hoboken?

SS: Well, we started the business in 1922. From Rivington Street, if I remember correctly, we moved to Canal Street. We bought a building, and we were there on Canal Street for, oh, about fifteen-twenty years. Then from Canal Street we moved to East Broadway, and then from East Broadway we moved further downtown to Canal Street. This building was owned by a church that was given a deed by George Washington, and this church (I forget the name of the church) is one of the largest landholders, lease-landholders, in the Wall Street area. They only lease the land, and people do building on it. After 100 years (I think the lease is 100 years), the building and the land return to them.

Anyway, that Canal Street area suddenly boomed. When we moved in the building was half empty; by the time we moved out (or, they forced us to move out) the building was completely filled with people from Wall Street -- advertising agencies and other agencies. Anyway, they

wanted to quadruple our rent, naturally, that was too high, and we were looking for a replacement to move. Where I parked my garage [sic], one day I spoke to the fellow, and I asked him -- he asked me, "Where are you moving?" I said, "I don't know. We have to move somewhere. We're looking. We're looking in Jersey, we're looking in New York. We're looking in Brooklyn." He said, "Oh, my wife is a real-estate agent. Maybe we can help you." Anyway, we looked, and we couldn't find anything.

Then, at that time, my son was a vice-president of a box company in Hoboken. I can't remember the name of the box company. I'll get it for you later. So my son says, "Oh, let me look in Hoboken. It's close, and there are properties available." He showed us one building in Hoboken, we looked at it, and we asked, "How much?" The fellow gave us a figure (I think it was \$700,000), so we had an instant huddle, a football huddle, we called a couple of signals and we said, "Okay. We'll offer you so much and so much," and the deal was consummated right there. And it was a good move.

SM: What year was it that you came to Hoboken?

SS: I think it was 1983. At that time, Hoboken was a little bit of a backwoods town. It was quiet, it was nice. People were very nice. The streets were clean. It was an enjoyable -- it was a pleasure to be there. We were big-city people, and it took some time for us to get used to the slow pace of Hoboken. But it was a very enjoyable and profitable experience.

SM: Were there any real advantages to working in Hoboken?

SS: No, the advantage was mostly people advantage. It wasn't the hustle-bustle of the city. There were no elevators to contend with. The police protection was excellent. The garbage pickup was excellent. It was a happy experience.

SM: Any people in particular who stand out in your memory, that you worked with, that were particularly interesting or enjoyable?

SS: Well, we did meet one of our friends, called Abe Kramer. Abe Kramer owned some buildings in Hoboken, and one day he walked in, introduced himself, and

I think my brother knew him, because he was a graduate of Yeshiva University. My brother also graduated from Yeshiva University. Abe Kramer helped us a lot, setting up the building, doing some building for us, and repairing. This is really the only one that I know. Oh, we did have a neighbor next door, and he was in the shirt-making business. This was another -- he was a Hassidic man, and he was an interesting fellow. I can't remember too much about him, but we enjoyed each other.

SM: Now your building used to be right across the street from where I lived. In fact, I used to be able to see it from out my window. Now they're putting up a large apartment house there. What was it that made you decide to move?

SS: Money. We got an offer we couldn't refuse. Then there was also a business advantage. Normally, we did our own shipping and our own warehousing. And, we're aging slightly. At this point, I'm eighty-three years old, and we thought we could lighten our load. So we have a shipping agent who is doing all of our shipping, in Brooklyn, and all we have, now, in Jersey City, is a back office, where we do some editing. We do all our business,

and our bookkeeping, from Jersey City. But all the shipping is done from Brooklyn.

SM: What made you come to New Jersey, rather than finding another place in Hoboken?

SS: Well, we looked in Hoboken, but Hoboken, at this point, is not very hospitable to business. They're more interested in apartments. I think a lot of businesses are leaving Hoboken. I don't think there are too many left. So we looked in a lot of places, and we had some real-estate agents. It's interesting how I found this place. I got lost in Jersey City, and as I was driving by I saw a huge sign on the side of one of the buildings and it said, "Space For Rent." So I called the owner, and he said, "Oh, we don't have any space, but right next to me there's a printer who may be interested in sub-letting some space." So we contacted him, and that's how we came to Jersey City.

SM: Now I understand, from what you said, that the apartment building that replaced you made a deal with you, so that you're getting an apartment in the building.

SS: Yes. One of the stipulations in our agreement was that we're getting one apartment. There was a problem with money, so the contractor who bought the building said, "Oh, I'll tell you what. I'll give you an apartment." So that's how the deal was consummated.

SM: Are you planning to move there?

SS: I'd love to move there. If I were a hundred years younger, I would move into Hoboken. Hoboken, now, has such beautiful, young, pretty, energetic people that I really envy them. I wish I had another life to live over.

SM: So you're not going to move into the apartment.

SS: Perhaps. I can't be definite.

SM: I thought I could look forward to having you as my neighbor. We could wave to each other, out the window.

SS: But the ^{*distance*}~~difference~~ between Hoboken and Jersey City is only a hop, skip and a jump. We can have a long-distance wave; a long-distance relationship.

SM: Thank you very much.

SS: If you want more baloney, I can tell you.

Maddy Urken
1100 Grand Street, Apt. 405
Hoboken, New Jersey 07030

March 25, 2005

Susan C. Moore
456 9th St.
Apt. 6
Hoboken, NJ 07030

Dear Susan,

Some time ago, you interviewed someone for the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library's Oral History project. The Friends recently received a small grant for the professional transcription of your interview and I was appointed to manage this aspect of the project.

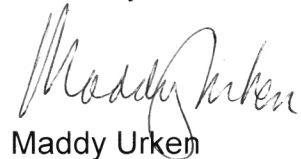
We would like to assure the accuracy of the transcription and ask that you help us complete this project by reviewing the enclosed printed transcript. The original tape and instructions for review are also enclosed.

We hope that you will be able to help us with this as soon as possible. If you cannot do so, please return the transcript and tape to me immediately or contact me to arrange for pick up.

If you have any questions or need to arrange for a pick up, contact me by phone (201 420 9427) or email (maddyu@optonline.net).

Thanks for your contribution to this important project!

Sincerely,



Maddy Urken

Friends of the Hoboken Public Library

Oral History Transcription Verification Instructions for the Interviewer

Part of the job of the Interviewer is to verify the written transcript of the tape you created when you conducted the interview.

Enclosed you will find the written transcript of an interview you conducted and the interview tape.

The tape is enclosed so that you can listen to it as you read the transcript.

Please review the printout carefully and make any necessary corrections above or below the line in which an error occurs. Use caret marks (^), and/or single-line strikethroughs to indicate where in the text the corrections should be made. Do not attempt to obliterate the original text. Please make all corrections in ink. If explanatory notes are required, use the page margins near the relevant text.

For example:

The printout shows:

There is a mstake in this sentence.

The tape says:

There is a mistake in this paragraph.

You correct the printout:

There is a ⁱm[^]stake in this ^{paragraph}~~sentence~~.

The goal is to have the written transcript be a word for word representation of the content of the tape. Do not correct grammar or make other "improvements" to the language of the transcription. Please do correct spelling, be especially careful to check the spelling of names of people or places or words in a language other than English.

When you are satisfied that the written transcript is an accurate representation of the content of the tape, please write the phrase *Transcription approved as delivered* or *Transcription approved as corrected* and sign your name with the date just below the last line of the transcript. Send the tape and the written transcript to:

Maddy Urken
1100 Grand St., Apt. 405
Hoboken, NJ 07030

or contact Maddy Urken (201 420 9427 or email maddyu@optonline.net) to arrange for a pick up.

Thanks for your continued participation in this important project!

Maddy Urken
3/24/05

→ This is where you would add a note or the location of a long note, e.g., see back of this page.