

AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

Confidential ☐

Non-Confidential ☒

JUNE 9, 1988
(DATE)

1. BROOKS SIDNEY HALLE
(LAST NAME) (FIRST) (MIDDLE)
2. I live in OMAHA, NEBRASKA
3. My father's name SIDNEY HALLE BROOKS, SR.
4. My mother's maiden name was IRMA BERTHA BING
5. Do you know when your first ancestor came to the U. S. A.? ALL OF MY GRANDPARENTS WERE BORN IN THE UNITED STATES. I DO NOT KNOW WHEN ANY OF THEIR PARENTS CAME TO THE U.S. MY GUESS IS 1840'S-1850'S
6. Where did he come from? Which part of Europe? ALL CAME FROM GERMANY. V. CHART
7. Where did your first ancestor settle? I DO NOT KNOW. BUT ALL GREAT-GRANDPARENTS LIVED IN CINCINNATI
8. Did he stay there or did he move to another state? GRANDPARENTS MOVED TO BUFFALO, N.Y.
9. Was he an Ashkenazic or a Sephardic Jew? ALL WERE ASHKENAZIC JEWS.
10. How long did he speak the language of his birthplace? I DO NOT KNOW ABOUT THE GREAT GRANDPARENTS. MY GRANDPARENTS SPOKE FLAWLESS ENGLISH
11. How long was he still in contact with his relatives of the country he left? I DO NOT KNOW. I DOUBT ANY OF THE FOURTH GENERATION LEFT MANY BEHIND.
12. Describe his adjustment to the new country, his Americanization. THE WHOLE FAMILY AS I KNEW + HEARD ABOUT THEM WERE PASSIONATELY AMERICAN - THOUGH MANY STILL SPOKE GERMAN.

13. Do you know anything about the migration to this country of the different members of your family? *No.*

14. Did anybody in your family participate in past American wars?

NOT TO MY KNOWLEDGE. MY FATHER WAS "ON CALL" + REGISTERED WWI BUT NEVER CALLED. HE DIED WHEN I WAS 3 1/2 YEARS OLD.

15. Was anybody a pioneer, an Indian trader, a first settler in a newly acquired territory or state? Please describe. *No.*

16. Did anybody in your family hold an important office as a state official, soldier, etc.? *No.*

17. Describe the various professions and businesses or jobs of your ancestors in this country. Tell how your ancestors made their living in Europe and in this country. *I KNOW NOTHING OF EUROPE. PROBABLY SHOP-KEEPERS IN TOWNS LIKE BINGEN - ON - RHINE WHERE ONE SIDE CAME FROM V. CHART MY GRANDPARENTS + FATHER WERE IN THE FURNITURE BUSINESS. BING AND NATHAN AND BROOKS FURNITURE CO. BOTH IN BUFFALO*

18. What do you do for a living? Tell us about your own economic activities in the past.

I WAS ORDAINED A RABBI AT HUC IN 1946. I RETIRED IN 1985 AFTER 6 YEARS IN MY FIRST PULPIT - SPRINGFIELD, OH. AND 33 YEARS AT TEMPLE ISRAEL, OMAHA, NE. NEVER INVOLVED IN ANY OTHER OCCUPATION.

19. To what organizations, Jewish or non-Jewish, did your ancestors belong? Describe. ROCKDALE TEMPLE, I.M. WISE TEMPLE (CIN, OH) BETH ISRAEL (ATLANTIC CITY, N.J.) AND ALL AFFILIATES OF THESE. MY MOTHER WAS A LIFE MEMBER OF N.F.T.S. N.C.J.W. AND SERVED AS BOARD MEMBER OF BOTH. WAS RED CROSS VOLUNTEER FOR 55 YEARS.
20. How "Jewish" were your ancestors? What was their relation to the synagogue and to religious life? SYNAGOGUE OR TEMPLE WAS PRIMARY JEWISH FOCUS IN THEIR LIVES. EARLY DISCIPLES OF I.M. WISE + PHILLIPSON. CLASSIC REFORM AND VERY LIBERAL IN ALL THINGS. EXTREMELY CHARITABLE.
21. What are your Jewish and non-Jewish affiliations, religious or otherwise? BIOGRAPHY ENCLOSED.
22. What Jewish ceremonies or rituals do you observe? AS MANY AS I CAN HONESTLY AFFIRM. I DO NOT BELIEVE IN PIDYAN HA-BEN, for example. OR YIZKOR ON HOLIDAYS DOES NOT APPEAR TO ME MANDATORY.
23. What Jewish education did you receive, if any? HOME, REFORM RELIGION SCHOOL, PRIVATE TUTORS IN HEBREW, HISTORY, JEWISH THOUGHT ETC.
24. Did any member of your family found a Jewish congregation, society, educational or welfare institution, or a lodge, etc.? NO. EXCEPT ONE MIGHT SAY ABRAHAM + MIRIAM NATHAN WERE GENEROUS SUPPORTERS OF I.M. WISE IN HIS EFFORTS.
25. Are there intermarriages or conversions in your family? NONE
26. What was the attitude of your ancestors towards Orthodoxy, Reform, Zionism, or other Jewish movements? MY ANCESTORS WERE NOT EITHER "ORTHODOX" OR ZIONISTS.
27. Are there any marriages in your family between Sephardic, German-Jewish, and East European Jews? YES. MY SON MARRIED AN "ORTHODOX" GIRL. THEY ARE MEMBERS OF A REFORM TEMPLE.

28. Do you have a family tree and pictures of your ancestors?
THE BEST I HAVE IS ENCLOSED. IT WAS PREPARED BY MY MOTHER, IRMA B. SCHWARZ, WHO DIED - AGE 90 - SEPT 22, 1981
I HAVE LIFE SIZE OIL PORTRAITS OF MY GREAT GRANDPARENTS (NATHANS)
29. Do you have any material that you would give to the American Jewish Archives, or lend it for copying, such as letters, documents, clippings, memoirs, scrapbooks, etc.?
IF I FIND ANYTHING NOTEWORTHY I WILL SEND THEM.
30. Are you in possession of letters memoirs, diaries, business papers, and so on? Describe them. SOME LETTERS + DIARIES BUT LITTLE IN THEM OF HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE
31. Describe your own Jewish education. V. ANSWER TO NO 23.
BEYOND THAT I SPENT 8 YEARS AT HUC + CONTINUED ATTENDANCE AT MANY SEMINARS + COURSES. FOLLOWING 1946 ORDINATION I TRAVELED WEEKLY FROM SPRINGFIELD TO HUC FOR 6 YEARS TAKING COURSES IN SUBJECTS OF INTEREST + WITH GREAT TEACHERS OF MY CHOICE.
32. Have you or your family experienced any special acts of friendship on the part of non-Jews? TOO MANY TO RECOUNT.
33. Have you or your family experienced any acts of anti-Jewish prejudice?
YES, BUT NONE OF ANY SIGNIFICANCE
34. Have you or any member of your family published a literary work in English, Yiddish, etc.? NO.

35. Will you write a page of interesting anecdotes dealing with your parents, ancestors, and their generations? Please make a distinction between what you know to be true and what is hearsay.

In effect, I was raised in a single parent family. My father died in a flu epidemic at 44 years of age on June 20, 1923. I was born April 3, 1920. So my "family" was my mother Irma B. Brooks and my grandmother Irene Nathan Bing who died June 1, 1938.

Therefore the major influence on my life was my mother. My home was not a ritualistically observant home but the Sabbath was never overlooked. Attendance at Temple Services was never a matter of discussion. From the time I was able to do so I went with my mother and grandmother.

Certain odd things were practiced on Sabbath. Neither my mother nor my grandmother would sew on Sabbath. I do not know and was too young at the time to ask the reason. Both my mother and grandmother fasted on Yom Kippur and Idid also from a very early age and also sat in Temple all day.

We lived in Buffalo, New York and were members of Beth Zion where I began my Religious School education. I idolized Rabbi Joseph L. Fink our rabbi and it may be that it was from him that I acquired my first role model of the rabbi. During this time Hyman Judah Schachtel was a student at HUC and occupied the pulpit when, in summer, he was on vacation. I wanted to learn Hebrew and it was he who taught me to read Hebrew letters.

I still have a Tanach inscribed to me as follows:

ס"ת תורה נביאים כתובים

To my first pupil

Sidney H. Brooks

from

Hyman Judah Schachtel

February 15, 1931

Was that the beginning of my "Jewish" education? Maybe. I had a professor for many years, God bless him, (Jacob Rader Marcus) who said one day: "If Hebrew were the key to Judaism, every Haifa student would be a prophet!"

At that age, 11, my mother and Grandmother and I moved to Atlantic City, New Jersey and I came under the influence of Rabbi Henry M. Fisher, of blessed memory. He was a spiritual father to me. I adored him. He taught me more about pulpit presence, voice control, bringing out the beauty of the words and phrases of the liturgy, conveying a spirit of prayer to the congregation than anyone else in my life. I studied with him until I had, frankly, reached the limit of his Hebraic capacities. Still in all, I bless his soul because he was, in his way, a great rabbi and pastor.

I have included these names because, though not related to me, they were my spiritual ancestors.

After studying with Rabbi Fisher I went to the Conservative Rabbi Reuben B. Weilerstein and for years went at night to learn from him. He gave me enormous time, love and help. He was not a good preacher but he was an erudite scholar and I soaked up every word I could from him. We were friends and in contact with each other until his death many years later.

I could not have been more than 12 or 13 at this time. When I was 11 years old Rabbi Fisher allowed me to conduct a full Sabbath morning service! How many rabbis today would trust so young a lad with that assignment.

One Friday night in 1938 Rabbi Fisher was stricken ill in the pulpit and he was rushed to the hospital. He required emergency surgery. He refused to be operated upon until I was sent for and I stood beside him. He turned to me and said simply: "Please, Sidney, take over the congregation until I am well." In those days many rabbis vacationed in Atlantic City during the summer. So I recruited a different rabbi each week to deliver the sermon while I arranged the services and did the pastoral duties as best I could. I had never been in an HUC classroom! Thus I met the g'dolei ha-dor, great preachers who were kind to me and preached each week. I recall some names: Nathan Krass, William Rosenau, Louis Wolsey, Solomon Starrels, William Feinschreiber, David Philipson and Julian Morgenstern are among the names I recall now. I learned so many styles of preaching from listening to these men even though I was only 18 years old.

I was always over idealistic about the rabbinate and wanted to meet some of the great rabbis personally. Rabbi Fisher introduced me to Rabbi Louis Wolsey who grasped my hand when told I aspired to the rabbinate and said: "Allow me to be the first to offer my condolences!"

On the other hand when I was about 11 or 12 I met Dr. Julian Morgenstern who, in spite of my youth, treated me with respect, kindness, and with careful guidance from that moment to the end of his life.

In my seventh year at the College I had met Jane and we were to be married that June. It was expected to, more or less, have Dr. Morgenstern's permission. Nervously, I went to see him. Telling him of my intentions he then launched into a long lecture on how important it was that I pay 100% attention to my studies which would form the foundation for my rabbinate the rest of my life. "Can you manage to do this", he asked, "if you are married?" I replied that I thought I could pay a lot more attention to my studies if I were married than if I were not! He threw back his head and laughed heartily and extended his congratulations.

I repeat: I am aware that the above does not directly deal with my parents and ancestors. I had no real family except my mother and grandmother. And I still feel my teachers were my family.

36. Tell us the story of your life on the following pages, emphasizing your Jewish associations, your participation in civic affairs, the nature of your economic and professional work, etc. Tell it in your own words.

With apologies for some repetition, I must record something of my intellectual, spiritual and emotional development which led me to the rabbinate.

As stated above I came from a home which was ritualistically sterile except that no Sabbath or holiday went without notice and attendance at worship services. The candles were lit every Friday night. I do not recall Kiddush until I brought such home from Religious School.

I look back now with wiser eyes on the young lad I was then as if he were a different person. I was in spite of my declared intention to myself and others to enter the rabbinate still ambivalent. My best subjects were in sciences. I excelled in physics, biology and chemistry. I attended the conventions of the AMA with passes given to me by my doctor. I watched surgery. Yet, I could not quite project myself into that role of physician as comfortably as into the role of rabbi as I saw it modeled by my rabbi. I needed counseling. But, in those days, there was none worth the name.

I went from Atlantic City to Cincinnati alone and enrolled in the University of Cincinnati and at HUC as a special student to learn the materials necessary for the entrance examination. I took two chemistry classes at UC.

One day I was summoned to meet with Dr. Henry Englander who confronted me with a transcript of my UC record. He questioned my courses in chemistry. I told him I loved it. He replied by saying: "Young man, make up your mind. Are you coming to us as a regular student to study for the rabbinate or are you intent upon being a physician." My answer: "I'm coming to you, if you will have me." That was the point of no return and, now considered, an example of terrible counseling. Dear Dr. Englander was wrong. My background in science has stood me well to this day.

I wanted above all to be a congregational rabbi which would give me the opportunity to teach, to guide, to work in social affairs and use my knowledge of Judaism to make our society a bit more humane and just.

Every professor but one at the College left an indelible mark upon me. I studied hard. I had to. I knew and know now I am not the brightest of mind. But there is not a day I do not feel my indebtedness to historical forces I learned from Jacob Marcus, theology from Heschel (with whom I studied privately for years) and Cohon, the marvelous insights and logic of what little Talmud I could master from the philosophy of Atlas and the Talmud of Guttman. And others.

But one man led me to a new path. Dr. Abraham Franzblau opened my eyes to the psychological and psychiatric wonders of life and what I could do as a counselor. I took both of his courses twice! After ordination I studied not only rabbinics by myself but I read voluminously in the areas of counseling and psychotherapy. As a result I think I was able, and still am, to help many of our folk find their way to happier lives.

I also formulated a rule for myself: No matter who came to see me in my office or elsewhere I would try never to let them leave without teaching them something about Jewish thought. Just a word, a book, an idea or a spin-off from what we had been discussing.

I found retirement easy. I had much to do. And still have plenty of projects in mind. However, I sadly record that my successor caused me deep spiritual and emotional pain.

On the campus of the HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
Cincinnati

However, his service to our congregation is finished and I look forward with certainty to the healing of the split his ministry caused in a fine congregation and to welcoming our new rabbi July 1, 1988, Rabbi Aryeh Azriel.