



Irwin Lachoff Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: -- Xavier University Library, New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Thursday, August 24, 2006. I am conducting the interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Irwin, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video-recorded?

Irwin Lachoff: Yes.

RH: Thank you. So why don't we just we begin -- a little redundant -- but with your name, where you were born, and if you could give us your age and tell us a little about the neighborhood you grew up in?

IL: My name is Irwin Lachoff. I'm an archivist here at Xavier University. 51 years old; I was born in New Orleans, 4th-generation New Orleanian... Three of my great-grandparents are buried here. We have been here for over a hundred years. I grew up in uptown New Orleans, near Jefferson Avenue and Freret Street. Lived there most of my life. It was only in the last 10 years that we started to branch out from there. I went to public schools, went to Allen School, McMinn Junior High, and Fortier High School. I went to UNO and LSU, became a salesman, didn't really enjoy that. So about -- at the age of 35 or so, I went back to grad school at UNO and became an archivist.

RH: So tell me how your family ended up in New Orleans.

IL: Well, all we know is that somebody already knew somebody else. I don't really know how they ended up here. I could never find that out.



RH: So, you... What groups or institutions in general have you been involved with? Pre-Katrina?

IL: Really, the only one is Beth Israel. My father was the Gabbai there for 35 years, so that's --

RH: Could you ex-- could you --

IL: All right, a Gabbai is the person who actually runs a service in an Orthodox congregation. He's the person that calls up the people to open up the ark, to get the honors when they're reading the Torah, or he decides who gets to lead the prayer. So he's the one that actually runs the service, in an Orthodox congregation. Beth Israel was the only congregation in New Orleans that had minyans -- services -- twice a day. In Orthodox Jewry you're supposed to have services twice a day, every day. And Beth Israel was the only congregation that did that. There are two Chabad Houses, which are even more strict than the Orthodox, but they don't even have services twice a day. But Beth Israel did, up until the time of the storm. And my father was the person primarily responsible for making sure that they had minyans virtually every day. It was a struggle for many, many years. He had to call many people, sometimes at 7 o'clock in the morning or in the evening, but usually they had a minyan.

RH: So can you tell me your most vivid memories of that community at Beth Israel?

IL: My most vivid memory was... Back around 1995 or so, my father had started to get ill, and I was starting to think, you know, he might die soon. Fortunately, he lasted much longer. But one of the big points of the services, the holiday services, the Haftorah, the person who reads the Haftorah -- it's the member of the congregation -- and it's a high honor for the members of the congregation. And very few people can do that, these days, because it's kind of hard to do. And my father was the person who every year decided who would get this particular honor. So this one year, he asked this particular



person, Myron Goldberg, to do it, and I approached Myron and said, "I would like to surprise my father and read the Haftorah on the second day of Rosh Hashanah." So we prepared, and we were all ready for this, and as the time came, just before my father was to call Myron up, Myron walked up to him and said, "I'm not doing it." And my father was shocked by this. He didn't know what was happening. And Myron said, "Well, the Rabbi knows what to do." And at that point my father thought the Rabbi was going to do the Haftorah, that for some reason Myron was mad with him and he didn't want to do it. So he's standing there, and it comes time to call up the person to come read, and usually that was my father, the Gabbai, who did this. But instead, the Rabbi did, and the Rabbi called my name, and my father was just shocked by that. And that's my greatest memory of Beth Israel.

RH: Oh my gosh, it must have brought him to tears.

IL: Absolutely. The other memories of my father and Beth Israel was him being on the bimah, in the middle, where everything was going on. And he was kind of hefty, but he had very thin legs. So several times while he was up there his pants fell down, and people got to see that. (laughter) That was rather memorable, also.

RH: (laughter) That would be. Is Beth Israel -- was that the center of your social life, too, or...

IL: No, not at all. Most of my friends weren't Jewish.

RH: So were there other places in New Orleans pre-Katrina that your...

IL: Well, when I was a kid I used to go to the JCC all the time, and I used to play basketball about 350 days a year, but it's been a long time since I've done that. And I was a member of the Jewish fraternity in high school. But other than Beth Israel, my relationship with the Jewish community has not been very great, up until Katrina.



RH: And there was a Jewish fraternity at...

IL: LSU, but I wasn't a member. That was actually too --

RH: But in high school, you said.

IL: In high school I was, yeah.

RH: At... Fortier?

IL: Yeah. Well, it was our citywide Jewish -- there were actually two. One was AZA, and that's the one I belonged to.

RH: So, do you have any memories of New Orleans itself, pre-Katrina, that kind of distill New Orleans for you? Like, your favorite things you liked to do in New Orleans, or...?

IL: Well, I used to love to go walk around in the French Quarter. My wife -- or my girlfriend, at the time -- used to go and walk around the park. I used to love to go to the zoo; I haven't been since. My favorite job I ever had in my life was, when I was a junior in college, I drove the train at Audubon Park.

RH: Really?

IL: I loved that job. (laughter) This part -- this part, we don't have to put on the tape. Can we stop the tape for a second? I'll tell you a little...

RH: Sure.

(break in tape?)

RH: OK. Why don't you tell me a little bit -- let's get into your evacuation story, and... When did you first hear about the storm? When did it kind of come on your radar screen, your personal radar screen?



IL: Well, that Friday before, which was the 26th of August -- during the day, you know, we were watching it on the computer. It was supposed to just go across Florida and make a quick turn to the left -- to the north -- and then go up around Tallahassee. But during the day, it kept going west. Then it took a little dip to the south. And by the end of the day, people were already starting to make plans to leave town the next day, even though they were still saying it would probably hit somewhere around Alabama. But by that afternoon, either my father-in-law or my brother-in-law had already made reservations for us at the Hilton in Lafayette. We did the same thing last year, when... I think it was... whatever hurricane that was, was coming. So we were making plans already, by Friday afternoon, to evacuate. We were going to leave Sunday. Saturday, during the day, we spent a lot of time getting ready, getting the things we needed.

RH: Why don't you tell us what you got at -- what "getting ready" meant and "getting the things you need" meant, you know? What kind of things did you need?

IL: Actually, since none of us really thought we were going to be gone long -- we only thought we were going to be gone three days, so we didn't get a lot of stuff. We went and got our prescriptions -- my father-in-law's prescriptions -- and a few extra things to take with us. But really, it wasn't a lot. We thought we were going for three days, like we did last year. That night, though, my wife had a premonition, I guess you could say, so she took a few extra things, like papers and stuff. She took our ketuba out, our marriage certificate. Things that we probably would have never ordinarily taken, but this time she took a few extra things. And so, Sunday morning, we took our cars and drove over to my in-laws' house and left our cars there and took their car, because it was a bigger car. We could all fit comfortably in that car. And so we headed out to Lafayette, and it took us seven hours to get there. Now, normally, it's a two-and-a-half hour drive. But seven hours -- we thought we were doing pretty good, because the year before it had taken us ten hours to get there. All -- and I didn't think it was coming. All day, my biggest concern on that Sunday, and even -- well, I don't know if into Monday -- but all day Sunday, my



biggest concern was whether we would be back by Tuesday afternoon, because Tuesday afternoon at Touro Infirmary -- mine and Cathy Kahn's book -- we were having our first book signing that day. So that was my biggest concern, whether we'd be back Tuesday.

RH: OK. Just say the name of the book that you wrote with Cathy Kahn.

IL: The name of the book is The Jewish Community of New Orleans, available at Amazon.com. (laughter) So, we got to Lafayette, and we had four rooms, for us -- my wife and I -- her parents, her brother and his family, and his wife's parents and sister. So all together, it was about 13 or 14 of us, plus three or four dogs, two or four cats. And we all went out to our annual hurricane dinner that night, and none of us thought anything really was going to happen, even at that late date, even though the Mayor had called for a mandatory evacuation. By the time I -- well, I'll talk about that a little later. But even at that point, we still didn't really think it was going to hit. So, Monday, of course, it did, and by the middle of the day we were hearing that there was flooding in Plaquemines Parish, and St. Bernard Parish, and the Ninth Ward, and East New Orleans, but those places always flooded. We still weren't greatly concerned. Later in the day, we started hearing about flooding in Kenner and in Lakeview, but, you know, when it rains here, every year you get floods in these areas. We still hadn't heard about the levees. It wasn't until that night, or maybe the next morning, that we actually heard about the 17th Street Canal levee. And it was the next morning that we saw that there was water in the streets downtown and in the French Quarter. But it wasn't that high -- it was maybe two or three feet deep -- and we still really thought it wasn't that bad. But that evening, we got on a website -- and I don't remember what website --

RH: This is Tuesday evening?

IL: Tuesday evening. We were on a website -- and I don't remember what website it was -- but it -- by that time, we had heard that the London Avenue Canal had also broken.



And my in-laws lived on the street that runs along the London Avenue canal, Pratt Drive. And we just lived five blocks away. So we started to get very concerned at that point. Just real quickly, though -- Tuesday afternoon, we still weren't really that concerned. My wife and I had actually gone to a movie. But anyway... But that night, we got on a website, and it -- you could go to your -- you put in your address, and it would tell you how much water was there. And we went, put in our address, and it said 12.5 feet. And we put in my in-laws' address and it said 12.9 feet. So, Tuesday night, we went to -- and we also saw some film taken on one of the -- I guess CNN or Fox, whatever -- taken driving along the interstate in Jefferson Parish, and it showed along Transcontinental, and the water was very deep there. And my wife works -- teaches at the school that's right near there. So that concerned us also. So by Tuesday night, we went to bed knowing that we didn't have a house, we'd lost both our cars, my in-laws lost their house, and that we probably didn't have jobs either. So Wednesday, we spent the whole day looking for jobs in Lafayette and looking for apartments for ourselves and my in-laws.

RH: So when you say you didn't feel you had jobs, you just felt like --

IL: Well, by that time, we knew everything had flooded, and we knew the extent of the flooding, and, "How are we going to have jobs?" I mean, "When will we be able to go back?" So we had to find jobs and a place to live. So, we had no luck all day Wednesday with that. And so Thursday we drove to Baton Rouge, looking for just a place to live, and that was even worse. You couldn't even drive around Baton Rouge, much less find a place to live. And so at this point, as I said, we didn't have a place to live, didn't have jobs... And so... At this point, I want to go back and tell you the bad part of the story.

RH: Well, yeah, I know that your father was in...

IL: A nursing home.



RH: A nursing home. And so tell me about... when was the last time you'd seen him?

IL: Well, as -- one of the things in preparation -- actually, every Saturday morning I would go over and visit. I would take him -- we would do a little bit of the crossword puzzle. He would -- he loved Smoothie Kings, so I would bring him a Smoothie King. But by this time, he was extremely ill. He'd probably -- even without the storm, he probably had no more than a month to live. So he didn't do much of a -- he slept most of the time. He drank almost none of the Smoothie King. So as I was --

RH: That was Saturday?

IL: That was Saturday. Which was not the right thing, since I'm supposed to be at shul on Saturday, but anyway... So, as I was leaving, I said, "Well, Daddy, looks like there's a storm heading this way, so we're going to be leaving town for a couple of days." And a look of -- a scared look came across his face. And I thought it was because he was scared of the storm, but that was -- because he and my mother were never worried about the storms, they never left town, except for once when I had to talk them into it. But they were never worried about the storms, so it shocked me to see that. So I said very quickly, "We'll be back in a couple of days, and I'll see you then." But now I realize, it wasn't the storm he was worried about. I think he was worried that I wouldn't be there when he died. And he was right.

RH: Like he had a sense that he wasn't...

IL: I think he knew he didn't have long, yes. So the next thing -- and I really wasn't concerned about his welfare at the nursing home. The year before, which was the first year he was there -- and we all evacuated then -- I'd gone over to the nursing home, and they said they had an evacuation plan, that they would go to a nursing home in Baton Rouge, but they would never institute this plan. They would only institute it if the Mayor of New Orleans ordered a mandatory evacuation. But they knew no Mayor would ever



do that, because no Mayor could guarantee that they could get everybody out of town in 24 hours. They thought it would never happen. You know, they assured me that they had several generators, that if it flooded, everybody would be moved up to the second floor. So I really wasn't concerned about the nursing-home part of his health at that point. Plus, it was on fairly high ground, so I really wasn't very concerned. So then, Wednesday afternoon, my brother-in-law called me -- my sister and brother-and-law live in Columbia, South Carolina -- and he told me he had gotten an email from someone, friends of ours whose parents were also in the nursing home, and they told him that they were evacuating the nursing home and they were going to Houston. Well, this was very scary to me. I knew he couldn't be moved to Houston. And it also concerned me that they were going to Houston; they'd already told me they were going to Baton Rouge. So all day Thursday, I was very worried about this. My brother-in-law spent all day Thursday on the phone, calling every hospital and every nursing home in Houston. Finally, he found out late Thursday evening -- he found out the hospital that they were taken to, and he also found out the nursing home that they were going to. And they told him he wasn't there yet, but that he was on the way. Some of the folks had made it, but he was on the way. Well, this was 24 hours later, and where the hell is he if he's not there 24 hours later?

RH: So, this nursing home evacuated everyone Wednesday.

IL: Wednesday, around 11 o'clock in the morning. I didn't know that at the time, though.

RH: And your -- but your brother got an email about that?

IL: He got a -- my brother-in-law got an email, yes. The people didn't know how to get in touch with me at this time. They would have contacted me; they just didn't know how to contact me. All the cell phones, local cell phones, were down, so they couldn't call me. So they found my sister's email address and they emailed her. So Thursday night, we were very concerned, and Thursday night, Friday morning, at about 2 AM, I had the worst



nightmare I've ever had in my life. It consisted of my father, who had died, wrapped in a white cloth, lying all alone in this great big open room. And it woke me up, and I was so upset I woke up my wife, and I was just yelling and screaming. She was trying to calm me down -- I had to call my sister at 3 AM in the morning, and I woke her up and scared her. She told me later on that she really wasn't that concerned about Daddy until she got that phone call from me. My sister's always been more one to look on the positive sides of things, while I'm the exact opposite. But anyway, (laughter) Friday morning, we finally found out the nursing home he was going to. I was on the phone with them, and they said they didn't have any information but he was supposed to be on the way. At the same time I was on the phone with them, my brother-in-law was on the phone with someone else at the same nursing home, and they finally told him that he had passed away, that he had died before they left. They told him, for some strange reason, that he had drowned. Which wasn't the case, but somehow something got mixed up in the story. At that point, my brother-in-law didn't want to call me or tell my sister, so he called my aunt, who is from New Orleans but she had evacuated to Houston, her and my uncle. And at that -- she went to the Jewish Federation and some --

RH: Could you tell me who this is?

IL: This is my aunt, Lee Kansas. Lee and Jacob Kansas. She somehow -- I'm not exactly sure how -- got the phone number for the head of the nursing home in New Orleans, who had evacuated to Houston. And she called him, and he told her, "Oh, yes," he had died Tuesday night. And he had lost my phone number, so he couldn't call me. And she said, "Well, here's his phone number. You call him right now." So my aunt called my brother-in-law back. They gave him about a half hour and he still hadn't called me, so at that point my brother-in-law called me and told me, and gave me the head of the nursing home's phone number. And I called him at that point, and he said, "Yes," he had passed away Tuesday night -- which he hadn't; he had actually passed away Wednesday morning. He said that his room was on the first floor but they had moved



everybody up to the second floor, that the electricity had gone out Monday. The generators were not working real well, so it was very warm, and he finally just succumbed, but people were there with him, they were holding his hand, and there were people with him. Which I also found out later was not true. I also found out he told this same story to the granddaughter of the other person who had died before they left. And this lady -- the granddaughter -- told me that she knows that wasn't true. One of the things he said -- "He was with his friends, and people who loved him" -- and he told that to this lady also. And she said she knew that wasn't true -- her grandmother lived all her life in New York; she had just moved her down here about two weeks before the storm, because... And so nobody there really knew her, (laughter) but he told her the same story.

RH: So in other words, he had a few stock lines he was telling everyone?

IL: Yes, exactly.

RH: And one of them was, "Somebody was with you," and the other stock line was that they were surrounded by friends.

IL: Right. I later found out -- after they went back in mid-October, I saw some of the nurses' aides who were there with me, and I heard what actually happened. It was around -- they would check on everybody about every 15 or 20 minutes. He had been joking with people, around 7, 7:30 in the morning -- there was a particular aide there who used to joke about her name, and he was making jokes about her name. But then the next time they came back, right around 8:00, they saw that he had passed away. And they evacuated three hours later. So, it's now Friday morning, and I'd just found out my father passed away, and I was freaking out, and I insisted -- you know, it was just me, my wife, and her parents -- I wanted to be with some of my family. So I insisted that we drive up to Dallas, where I have another aunt and family there. So we drove up there -- it was a very long drive from Lafayette to Dallas. My mother-in-law -- we had to stop at a



hospital in Marshall, Texas, because my mother-in-law had an asthma attack, -- had an asthma attack, so... It was a very rough trip up there. On the way up to Dallas, sometime that day -- I think it was Friday -- I got a call from a Rabbi Isaac, from Zaka. Zaka is the group that goes in when there's the bombings in Israel -- this is the group that goes in and takes care of the people that have died, makes sure everything's done according to Jewish law. This group was also called in when the space shuttle blew up -- they were called in to help find body parts. So they're a very well recognized group that does this type of thing. So this Rabbi Isaac called me, and he said he was coming down, and he was going to get my father out of this place, and so we could take him and bury him and do what was proper. But it was late Friday afternoon, so -- this is a very religious organization -- so he wasn't coming until Sunday. How he got my name -- we still haven't been able to figure that out. Anyway, so, we got to Dallas on Friday evening. Sunday, he called and said he was in town; he was going to start trying to get -- I should go back. One of the things the head of the nursing home told me when I talked to him on Friday morning was that he was going to make arrangements for us to get the body out, that he would get back to me. I'm still waiting for that call. He never did call me back. So we're in Dallas -- Sunday, and Rabbi Isaac still hasn't done anything. Monday, Tuesday, nothing's happening. My father's body is sitting there alone in a freezer. Nothing's happening. Finally, Wednesday -- I think it was Wednesday -- my aunt just happened to be talking to somebody at the Federation in Houston who used to work at the nursing home -- who worked at the nursing home -- and she told my aunt, "Oh, we left the door open. You can go down there and get him any time you want." Nobody told us -- nobody told any of us that. So she -- at that point, my aunt got in touch with the Federation -- who was fantastic through all this, for all the Jews who evacuated to Houston. They got in touch with a nursing home in Houston; this particular nursing home owned another nursing home in Baton Rouge, the Welsh nursing home in Baton Rouge. They went down Thursday and got the body and brought him back up to Baton Rouge. Rabbi Isaac was supposed to show up Thursday night to prepare the body -- under Jewish law, a



body has to be prepared a special way for burial -- and I was going to go and fly in to Baton Rouge, Friday, September 9, which turned out to be the worst day of my life.

RH: I didn't think it could get worse, than I've already heard.

IL: I flew down Friday morning. The gentleman I work with here at Xavier, Lester Sullivan, he had evacuated to Baton Rouge. So he and his friend picked me up, and they were able to drive me around. They went to -- the funeral was scheduled for 12. We got there around 11, and Rabbi Isaac and the people who were to prepare the body hadn't shown up. We start frantically calling them, "Oh, they're on the way," "Oh, they got lost," and this is going on -- you know, there's people standing out at the -- local people standing out at the cemetery, waiting to help so we could have a minyan -- you have to have 10 Jewish men to have a minyan, so it'd be a proper burial. And they're standing out there in the hot sun, waiting. Rabbi Isaac finally showed up at 1 o'clock, and he hurriedly -- in 20 minutes -- got the body prepared. I don't know if it was done properly or not; I have my doubts. So then we finally -- and I have to catch a plane back to Dallas at 5 -- so we're very rushed. So we finally get to the cemetery. There's only 13 people there, two of whom are not Jewish. And I wanted -- Lester was one of them -- I wanted him to, you know, to be a pallbearer, but Rabbi Isaac wouldn't allow that because they're not Jewish. So that leaves 11. The other person there was my cousin, who is female. She had drove over from Lafayette -- she was from New Orleans; she was in Lafayette; she had drove up from Lafayette to be there.

RH: And who is this, this is --

IL: This is Faye Lala. She was the only relative there, so that left -- fortunately, some of the men had remained, so we did have a minyan, we did have 10 men. And also, listening in on Faye's cellphone, was my sister. And the Rabbi gave a nice little talk, and we did -- he had a kosher burial. And he asked me if I had anything to say. And I said this was the most disgusting thing I'd ever seen in my life, that under normal



circumstances there would have been 250 people at this man's funeral, that he was the epitome of Orthodox Jewry in New Orleans. He had kept that minyan going for 35 years, and he was one of the most well-respected men in the city, and I wondered -- and I apologized to the rabbi for saying this -- I wondered why God would do this to this man. And so at that point, pretty much, the funeral ended. And one of the local gentleman came over afterwards and said, "I knew your father. Whenever I had yartzheit" -- a yartzheit is when you remember your dead relatives on the anniversary of their death, and you go to services, and you pray for them, you say Kaddish -- one of these gentlemen came over and said, "I knew your father. When I had to say Kaddish, I would go to Beth Israel, and he was always there. He let me daven, and he let me say the prayers. He made sure I got called up to the Torah if it was one of the days when the Torah was read. And he was a wonderful mensch, and he was very good to me on these days." And there could be no finer epitaph for him than that. So we left in a hurry and got back to Dallas. At this point, my wife wanted to -- we had brought her parents with us to Dallas, but they didn't like Dallas, so they flew to Greensboro, North Carolina, to be with their son. And my wife was getting worried about her parents, so a couple of days after the funeral, we drove to Greensboro, a three-day trip. We stayed in Greensboro for a couple of days -- for about a week and a half, actually -- but my wife is a teacher in Jefferson Parish, and they had been called back to classes, so we came back to New Orleans... I think it was September 27th. We stayed with my cousin, Jackie Gothard, for about two or three weeks, until we finally found an apartment, in uptown, on Maple Street. (pause) Want me to talk a little about the Beth Israel now, what happened there?

RH: Well, tell me a little bit about when you first came back to the city, what you did.

IL: The first things we -- I still had an apartment, you know, I -- we'd just been married seven weeks before the storm, so I had an apartment, and I had a lot of my greatgrandparents' furniture that they had brought over from Europe with them. Well, the apartment had flooded. And one of the first things we did, we went to my apartment,



which was right off the Causeway -- right there, so we went there first -- and saw how bad it was. I had lost everything. The mold was up to the ceiling. We then drove to our house, and it was just unbelievable. I mean, just -- the devastation was just unbelievable. We just couldn't believe -- it was just jaw-dropping. And we got to our house, and we couldn't -- the keys didn't work, but the people that had gone around to check all the houses had broken in the back door. But since the time they had broken in, somehow the refrigerator had fallen over and was blocking the door, so it took a lot to get the door so that I could actually get in the house. My wife couldn't go in; she suffers from asthma, so she couldn't even get out the car. She got out the car, and she immediately felt it, so she couldn't get -- and the house -- everything -- the dining room table had collapsed. Somehow, the piano had fallen over, and the sofa was at an angle on top of the piano. How it -- sticking up in the air -- everything else had fallen down. You couldn't walk on the floor -- all the floors were just covered with junk and stuff. And the floors themselves had buckled, and they were coming up in many places. And so we left there, and I tried to explain what happened to her -- she loved that house. She loved that house. We had been making plans to enlarge it, because it was very small, only about 1,100 square feet. So we were making plans to enlarge it, but... We can't go back. We would like to go back... You know, we've since had it gutted. We saved some things -- we saved most of the wedding gifts. Since it was silver.

RH: How did that happen?

IL: Well, the silver and plates and that could just be cleaned. But most everything, we lost. All our clothes, and a lot of -- she lost all her books. She lost -- she had tons of picture books, you know, pictures she had taken over the years, you know? We lost all those. We just -- we just lost so much. And we -- she'd like to go back to that house. The house is in pretty good shape itself; you know, it's gutted, and there's nothing in the house except the studs. But the people on either sides of us had not come back to even gut their houses, so it's all overgrown, and we just can't go back there. And we drove



around, and -- even in Metairie, it was just unbelievable, the mess. Everything was just -- we were just in shock. It was just unbelievable. No other way to describe it. But it was always much worse in Orleans Parish than Jefferson Parish. And it still is.

RH: Is that right?

IL: Oh, yes. The water in Jefferson Parish had come down in a day or so. The water in Orleans Parish, which was seven feet high in our house, stayed in our house for three weeks. So... and it was like that everywhere in Orleans Parish.

RH: So when you came in, you drove to all your familiar homes, and...

IL: Right, yes. To see for ourselves. Even though we knew what to expect. But just to see it was -- just to see everything -- was shocking.

RH: And anything else that you did right when you came in, or...?

IL: No, we --

RH: Did you go over to Beth Israel?

IL: No, it was a very long time before I went to Beth Israel. Months and months. I think it was December before I went to Beth Israel. I want to say one other thing about my father. Like I said, he was the person who guaranteed that they had a minyan twice a day. When I got back, I couldn't say Kaddish for him; there was no place that had a minyan for three and a half months. It wasn't until mid-December that Chabad uptown started having a minyan in the mornings. Even then, I couldn't say Kaddish in the evening. And it was just shocking, and just -- I still feel extremely guilty about that, that I wasn't able to say Kaddish every day for him. You know, I had told -- when he first started to get really sick, I had told him, "Don't worry, Daddy. I'll be there every day to say Kaddish for you." And I wasn't. Not even probably half the time. (pause) I had to



go back and say that.

RH: So it wasn't until February that you could --

IL: No, December.

RH: -- December that you could get a minyan together?

IL: Mm-hmm. And that was just once a day, not even twice a day.

RH: Is -- just so few people returned? (pause) Just --

IL: Right, yeah.

RH: Or --

IL: Yeah, I know the Rabbi in Chabad had been trying for some time to get a minyan together. And he -- there was actually a little bit of a mixup. He called me in late November -- he was trying to get the minyan together -- I said, "Well, call me once you get a minyan." And he didn't, and they had a minyan for a couple of weeks before I actually knew about them having a minyan, you know?

RH: So, your father was buried in Baton Rouge.

IL: He was buried in Baton Rouge. In February, he was de-interred and brought back to New Orleans and was buried next to my mother. Reburied next to my mother.

RH: When did she die?

IL: She died in January of 2004. She --

RH: Just recently.



IL: Yeah. She -- on December 16, 2003, they told her they found a spot on her lung, and she died 40 days later. It's been a rough two years. My father was already ill, and that's when we had to put him in a nursing home, and I feel quite guilty about that, too.

RH: So, you're back, and you were back earlier than most people. Tell me a little bit about how you tried to put your life together once you came back.

IL: Mostly, we were -- well, my wife was working, so I spent most of the days at the house trying to save whatever I could and then make arrangements to have it gutted, you know, make arrangements with the insurance company, dealing with FEMA... We would go to the FEMA office and sit there all day, and then they'd tell you, "Oh, it's in the works," and you'd get nothing accomplished. A quick story about FEMA: for months and months and months, you know, supposedly you were supposed to get this initial \$2,000, plus \$2,400 for a home fee, you know, a rental fee. And we went there time after time and called and called, and nothing ever happened and nothing ever happened. And finally, in late November, I called Senator David Vitter's office, and four days later the money was in the bank. And then it happened again. We were supposed to get some more money, and nothing was happening, and I called Vitter's office, and once again, a couple days later the money was in the bank. Eventually we got all our money from FEMA.

RH: (laughter) Tell me, were there other people that you got in touch with when you returned here, or even while you were away? I mean, it seems like you really had to try to find your family, because you had this crisis of your father.

IL: Most of them -- you mean --

RH: More people finding you, and -- like, you said Lee found you, at least from Houston...



IL: It was -- I didn't really want to talk to people, so people found me. Most of them, my relatives are [inaudible]. The only person -- no, I didn't call him. I don't think I actually called anybody except my sister and Lee and Jackie Gothard. Those were the three people who really kept me going.

RH: Do you want to tell me about that? They kept you going?

IL: Well, every day I had some kind of question, and if my wife, Judy, wasn't there, the next person I would call was Lee, and she would always have an answer. My sister -- as I said, she was always -- all our lives, she always looked on the bright side of things, so she was often able to pick me up and make a little joke, her and my brother-in-law and my nephew. We did spend a couple of days with them on the way back from Greensboro, and that was good.

RH: Where was your brother-in-law?

IL: They live in Columbia, South Carolina.

RH: So, when you got back into the city, other than -- were there any friends or family or other people around?

IL: No. Jackie was here -- Lee and -- Jacob came, Lee's husband. He came back the week after the storm. But we rarely saw him; he was always working. We all went to services for Rosh Hashanah at Shir Chadash, and Jacob has a lot of rental property, and so he had a lot of crews out working, and the day of Rosh Hashanah he found out that one of the members of his crew had actually fallen and died, and he didn't even tell us that. We didn't find out until much later, until a day later, about that -- that that'd happened. It was so upsetting to Jackie, not being at Beth Israel for Rosh Hashanah that she started a movement -- she's the President of Beth Israel -- she started a movement to have Yom Kippur services for Beth Israel, and we had services out at -- I think it's a Comfort Inn out in Kenner. And that was the first --



RH: Is that right?

IL: That was the first Beth Israel service. The Orthodox Union sent down a Rabbi and three rabbinical students, who brought a Torah with them, and so we were able to have the full Yom Kippur service.

RH: Well, tell me a little bit about Beth Israel. Cause you wanted to go there a few minutes ago, so tell me --

IL: Well, Beth Israel is only about a mile from the 17th Street Canal. So you ended up with 12 feet of water in it. Rabbi Isaac, a man who never -- who supposedly came here, and was supposedly getting my father out of a nursing home and never did -- on the Tuesday after the storm, well, Tuesday a week -- September 2, I guess, 6, when he was supposedly trying to get my father out of the nursing home, he actually took it upon himself to go to Beth Israel and get the Torahs out of the synagogue. And he got the Torahs, and he called Jackie Gothard who was in Dallas, I'm not sure how -- and he said he's going to take the Torahs to Baton Rouge. And she said no, no, no, don't do that. We'll never see those Torahs again. And it just so happened that a lady who used to be the secretary for Beth Israel had already come back. She lived in a part of town that hadn't flooded, so she was home. So Jackie contacted her and had Rabbi Isaac bring the Torahs to her. The Torahs were ruined, they had been, you know, inundated with water for three weeks. So he brought the Torahs to her, and she called Jackie and said, well you know, these things are just ruined. So what do you want me to do? So Jackie called our Rabbi, and after being described -- having it described to him the condition of the Torahs, he said well, they need to be buried. So this woman, back in New Orleans, and I'm drawing a blank, I can't think of her name now. Becky, I don't know Becky's last name. Becky isn't Jewish, but she dug a six foot hole in her backyard and buried the Torahs for us, where they remained until mid-March. Our rabbi, Rabbi Schiff, came back, it's the only time he's been back, and he's not coming back. But he came back for the



burial of our Torahs. I think he feels very guilty about the fact that he left the Torahs there and didn't bring them up to the second floor. I don't think anybody else blames him for that, but I think he feels very guilty about that. And he -- we brought the Torahs back in mid March, and they were buried in the Beth Israel cemetery. They were buried in my Plot. My Plot was right next to my parents. It was a single plot, but I had gotten married, so we needed a double plot, and we thought it would be right if we buried the Torahs right next to my father. And they did, and Rabbi Schiff made a very emotional speech, talk at that time about the -- how disgusting it was about the Torahs being like that, and how disgusting it was, what happened to my father. He's not coming back though, I think partly because, I think it's because he feels guilty about the Torahs, and partly I think it's because his wife just didn't want to come back.

RH: So --

IL: He was a very dynamic Rabbi. He was a great Rabbi. We could certainly use him now, but I don't think he's going to be back.

RH: Does that anger you?

IL: No.

RH: I know people who don't return --

IL: No, it does not -- if we didn't have jobs, we wouldn't live here.

RH: Really?

IL: Really. And actually, if I didn't have my job -- my wife's a teacher, she could find a job anywhere in Louisiana, I'm sure, we know. A teacher she always taught with decided she wanted to -- she moved across the lake to St. Tammany Parish, and she immediately found a job. So we could move to St. Tammany, and my wife could get a job over there,



but I don't think I could find a job there. So if it weren't for this job at Xavier, I think we wouldn't be living here. But this is -- archival jobs are hard to come by. So you know, here I am.

RH: Right, right. So that's big words for a person who's in his fourth generation with roots here.

IL: Mm-hmm.

RH: So you have a fairly bitter taste in your mouth about the events?

IL: I don't know if -- the word isn't bitter, it's just not the problem. Bitter implies that you're mad with somebody, at the hurricane. You can't be mad with the hurricane. Maybe you could be mad with the Corps of Engineers, for building such lousy levees, which I certainly am, and most people are. It's just a freak of nature. I mean, I don't think it's anything to be bitter about, it's just a horrible thing, probably shouldn't be living here. You know, we're trying to find a home in Metairie, and you know, there's supposedly a storm that's starting to build up in the Caribbean right now. And I already got a call from my father-in-law, worried about that, you know. He's ready to leave town already. And I'm sure as soon as my wife hears about that, she's going to be very concerned also. As soon as that thing hits the Gulf, I'm sure we'll be going to Lafayette. We, several months ago, we made reservations at the Hilton in Lafayette for all July, all of August and all of September, and every few days we've been calling and canceling rooms. We're supposed to call and cancel tonight, which I'm sure we will, but I don't think we'll cancel for the rest of the month at this point. Who knows what will happen? I never, in my wildest dreams, thought this would happen. They always talked about the doomsday effect, that some hurricane would come and pick up the entire lake and put it in the city, and I never thought that would happen. I didn't think it was possible for a storm to have -- to be there that long to pick up the entire lake and move it into the city. And that's not what happened, it didn't happen. The levees broke, the crummy levees broke. And it



just seeped into the city, it didn't overflow into the city. It wasn't the hurricane's fault, it was the crummy levees, the Corps of Engineers. And it really isn't their fault, because for years and years, they built these levees with not enough money, cause Congress never gave them enough money to build the levees that they knew they needed to build. So maybe it's the Congress' fault. I mean, this is going back to 1969, they knew they didn't have enough money.

RH: So, when did you get back to work, here at --

IL: We got back to work in the spring semester, which started in early January. I don't remember the exact day. I think like January 12. Now, Xavier paid us the entire time. I was paid, and all the faculty, many members of the library are faculty members, so every member of the faculty on campus was paid the entire time. And most of the staff were paid most of the time. I think they may have missed one or two paychecks. The university has been very good to everybody, except for the people they fired. (laughter) They -- anyway, but they've been --

RH: You want to say something about that?

IL: Well, nobody really knows -- they fired some people because they knew they wouldn't have as many students. And it's never been made clear exactly how they decided who would lose their jobs, whether it was the department heads or somebody higher up. It appears to be the various department heads who simply got rid of people they didn't like. Because some people with tenure lost their jobs, and same thing happened at Tulane. Supposedly people with tenure can't lose their jobs, but this is an emergency, so people who caused trouble lost their jobs, even people with tenure. At Least here, I'm not sure how that happened at Tulane. But the university has made a very rapid comeback. There was about seven feet of water on campus, about 400 people were trapped on campus for two or three days after the storm. Most, about 150 students, you know, before they finally got them out. The university had about 70% of their students come



back in the spring, and the freshman class for this year is going to be down about a third from what the freshman class was going into last year, but it was the largest freshman class ever, about 900 students. Before that, the largest freshman class had only been about 750. They expect to have about 600 or so, so it really isn't too bad, so we're doing -- Xavier's doing pretty well, thank God.

RH: How do you feel about being around Xavier? I mean, do you feel --

IL: The university or the area?

RH: Just the university yourself. Your kind of interaction with it, you know.

IL: Everything around Xavier's always been pretty good, even before the storm and since the storm, everyone's very -- I would like to say though that as you drove around, you can see there's not much happening around the university. And that's our great concern, or at least my great concern. If there's nothing for the students to do around the university, that might spell trouble in the future. Can we stop for a second?

RH: Sure.

IL: [inaudible]

RH: OK.

IL: Sorry about that.

RH: You've done a little bit of describing of the Jewish community prior to Katrina. Is there something to you that's special or distinctive about the Jewish community?

IL: Now?

RH: Well just in general, and then maybe describe your interaction and your involvement in the Jewish community post-Katrina also.



IL: Well, before the storm, and even [inaudible] the storm, the most unique thing about the Jewish community of New Orleans, is the overwhelming number of Reform Jews in New Orleans. And it's always been like that. New Orleans is really the only city in the country where the East Europeans Orthodox Jews have never made up the majority of the Jews in the city, primarily because there's been relatively few East Europeans in New Orleans. I always felt a little bit like being Orthodox Jew, I always felt a little bit like the odd man out, even amongst the Jews of the city, because there's so few Orthodox Jews, you know. I'd have to explain to friends, oh, I'm going to services today, this is a Saturday morning. None of my friends did that. And --

RH: Just your Gentile friends.

IL: So even almost, for many, many years, I felt guilty about being Orthodox.

RH: Really?

IL: Really. Never told that to my parents, but I think they kind of figured that out. You know, I would rarely go to services, because you know, it's like a nerd thing to do, to go to services. It was an Orthodox thing to do. So I didn't, and I think that's the most unique thing about the history of the Jews of the city of New Orleans, the priority of the Reform Movement. I think I forgot the question.

RH: Okay. And are there any other things -- now you're telling me the primary thing of distinctive. Anything else, I mean, as a historian or in just your personal interactions, that you feel is distinctive about this Jewish community?

IL: Well, I think that's the primary thing.

RH: Okay.



IL: Since the storm, I would say at this point that I don't know what they -- Allen Bissinger said, but I think there's probably maybe 50% of the Jews that come back to town, I think virtually every congregation is in big trouble, except for maybe Shir Chadash and Gates of Prayer. I think both Sinai and Touro are in trouble. I don't know what the Rabbi there says. They're both older congregations -- especially Sinai, older congregations to begin with. And a lot of those older folks have gone and moved away to be near their children. So I think that's a big problem. So then I think we'll see a definite shrinking in the number of congregations over time too. At this point, well there's two -- supposedly two Modern Orthodox congregations in this city, Beth Israel and Anshe Sfard. Anshe Sfard is, was very small even before the storm. They continue to be very small, and plus they're fragmented terribly at this point. I understand they're about to try and start having services every Saturday, but I know there are members who won't go, because of the fragmentation of the congregation. So I think the congregation is in trouble even though just before the storm, a gentleman left them in a will a million dollars. So they've got plenty of money, and I think that's the primary reason for the fragmentation in the congregation. I think one of the -- I know one of the things the Federation is concerned about is the loss of Jews since the storm, and getting Jews to move here, and trying to come up with ways to get young Jewish people to move to New Orleans. And I think they are going to have trouble with that also.

RH: What is your relationship now to the Jewish community?

IL: Relationship?

RH: Yeah.

IL: I think primarily my relationship is through, as it always has been, is through Beth Israel. And also as a bit of a historian. Which seems like every time I write something or say something, someone gets mad with me, especially in reform congregations. Never mind. Do you know a gentleman named Bill Rosen?



RH: I know who he is, but I don't know him real well.

IL: He's the grandson of the long-time rabbi at Touro, Isaac Leucht. And Leucht was a bit of a curmudgeon, to say the least, as Bill Rosen is too. (laughter) And once I was speaking, and Bill Rosen was there, and I said that Isaac Leucht hadn't been ordained as a Rabbi, which he hadn't. And he wrote me a letter, a nasty letter, and he wrote it to my boss, he copied it to my boss, and he sent it to a bunch of people saying that he was, and that if you're not going to get your facts straight, you shouldn't be writing or saying this stuff. He's caused me some problems over the years.

RH: So telling the truth sometimes as a historian puts you in a pretty uncomfortable position with the myth and the lore of the city.

IL: Also, in the book Cathy and I just did, several people have complained that their father or grandfather, etc, aren't in the book. Cathy has gotten a lot more of that than I have though, but it happens. One of the things I regret, Cathy and I had gone to Beth Israel and taken some pictures of the interior, to put in the book because we couldn't find any, but we didn't put them in, because the pictures were just too dark. And there's almost no pictures of the interior of Beth Israel before the storm. It's hard to come by. I do have one, which I'd like to show you but --

RH: OK, and did -- even though they were too dark, you didn't lose those in the storm?

IL: No, she took them on a --

RH: Digital?

IL: Digital, got rid of them.

RH: So you have them?

IL: No, I don't think she does. I think she just erased them.



RH: Oh, oh no. So, tell me about, are you involved with Beth Israel now?

IL: Oh yeah.

RH: Are you helping rebuild, or are you involved in some of the decisions?

IL: Yeah, I think I'm the -- basically I've taken over from my father as the Gabbai sort of, chairman of the religious community, sort of, for what that's worth. Yeah, I'm still very involved. I'm going to be involved Sunday at this -- we're having a -- we're dedicating a Torah, a Young Israel congregation in LA is donating a Torah to us. And we're having a dedication. They're bringing it in, and we're dedicating it Sunday. And I'll be involved with that. And I'm involved with starting to get ready for the high holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and I'll be the person, just like my father was, who decides who gets to open the ark at various times, and who gets the honors, and who gets to decide who says the Haftorahs, so it's -- we're struggling. We have services, we've had services each of the last three weeks, but before that, we're having services about once a month. And we get about 30, 35 people at the most there. I think we have a pool at this point of people who are in town of about 50-something people.

RH: Really. How big was the congregation before?

IL: Before the storm there might have been not quite 200 members.

RH: You were really devastated.

IL: Oh yeah.

RH: You're down 100.

IL: But a lot of those people were elderly people who really were just members to keep their cemetery plots. And there were many times before -- there were times before the storm where we did not have services on a Saturday morning, so we were struggling



before the storm too.

RH: So are there any things that you think that you'd like to see more of right now in the Jewish community, as far as rebuilding?

IL: Well, I'd like to see Beth Israel settle on what they're going to -- cause I think everybody else is settling. We have to decide if we're going to move back, or if we're going to build somewhere else. We just bought a home, about a block away from Gates of Prayer, where we've been having services. This home is going to be for our Rabbi. We're about to hire a Rabbi also, probably right after the high holidays we'll hire a Rabbi. And we'll probably build a synagogue somewhere right around Gates of Prayer, or in that neighborhood also. There are still some people that want to move back to the old Beth Israel on Canal Boulevard. I don't think that's doable.

RH: Is there a reason why?

IL: Well, we're just too small for that space, to begin with. And I think it would just be too hard for everybody. We probably have the economic wherewithal to do it. But I don't think people -- I think it is probably just too tough for people to go back. It was very hard for me to go back the first time. I've only been in there five or six times. The last time was the last day to say Kaddish for my father. We went and had services there. We had about 20 people, it was the first time we've had actual service there.

RH: When was that?

IL: What was the date? July, around the end of July.

RH: Just recently then.

IL: Yes.

RH: And you went back into that space?



IL: Yes.

RH: And specifically to say Kaddish with your father.

IL: Right, there's no lights, there's no air conditioning, so it was kind of tough being in there in mid July. I think it was a Thursday afternoon.

RH: You're really in a grieving process, you know.

IL: Actually, I'm doing better since we buried him. I'm actually doing better. But yeah, if we could find a house, we brought my in laws back. We found a house for them in Kenner, so -- and my wife wants to find a house near them so she can help them out. Right now we have to drive all the way from Uptown to Kenner, and it's a long drive. So we want to find --

END OF AUDIO FILE – PART 1

RH: Katrina's Jewish Voices. Irwin, do you -- you were just saying that you think had it not been for your wife, who you married seven weeks before the storm --

IL: July 10.

RH: And it was the last big event in Beth Israel, yes?

IL: Yes. I'll tell you a little story about that.

RH: OK.



IL: That weekend, you know, we had people coming in from out of town, that weekend there was another storm heading this way, Hurricane Dennis I think it was. And Friday, you know, the President of Jefferson Parish told people, oh you better start leaving, and they evacuated Plaquemines Parish, but by Friday afternoon, it started looking like it wasn't coming. So we were planning, we were going ahead. But Friday night, the hotel where everybody was staying started calling people and telling them not to come, that they're not going to keep their reservation, that the storm was coming. So Saturday afternoon, I called them in a rage, yelling and screaming and cursing them out, and I remember so vividly telling them you know that storm is not coming, they never come here. (laughter)

RH: So, did you have a reception?

IL: Oh yeah, we had a wonderful wedding. Maybe, you know, there was about 20 or so people who -- well, probably 10 or 15 people who didn't make it because of the storm. But we had the wedding in Beth Israel, and we had a nice reception. It was a beautiful Sunday evening. There was a breeze from the storm, a little breeze. It was very nice. And it rained most of the day, but by that time the rain had stopped, and you know, there was a beautiful evening, beautiful summer evening with a nice cool breeze on July 10.

RH: Wow, so you were just saying that you feel -- you're not sure, but you think that you know, had you not been married, and not left with your wife and her family, you may have stayed with your father.

IL: I probably would've stayed with my father.

RH: At the nursing home?

IL: At the nursing home.



RH: So that's one of those tough what do you do, once you get married and you have other responsibilities?

IL: Well the thing was, I didn't think any of this would happen. So maybe I would've gone to Dallas and been with my family in Dallas. I don't know what I would've done. And I don't know what I'd be doing today if it wasn't for her. I guess I probably would either have an apartment, or be living with Jacob and Lee. And having them -- being a real burden to them probably, instead of my wife.

RH: So you're pretty glad you got married?

IL: Oh, absolutely. And I think she is too.

RH: And that's been a kind of -- a one stable force in a sea of change, it sounds like.

IL: Yeah.

RH: Is there anything that you feel the Jewish community -- how do you feel about the Jewish community in this crisis, overall?

IL: I don't know what you mean by that. You see, I don't see it as a Jewish community, that's my --

RH: OK, tell me, tell me then.

IL: It's, to me it's a Beth Israel community, and a Sinai community, and a Touro community, and a Shir Chaadash community, and Gates of Prayer community.

RH: OK.

IL: You know, and then once in a while, one group might have a big thing, and they all get together. Like a couple of weeks ago, when the Prime Minister's brother was here, and we had a big community thing. The Israeli Prime Minister, I don't remember his



name anyway. But it's not a community, it's several communities, and I can't -- I have difficulties saying what's happening to the communities. Maybe someone at the Federation can say that better.

RH: Okay, Okay. I didn't -- I didn't know if you had a sense overall of -- that the community has been helpful to people --

IL: Oh, absolutely. The Federation has been very helpful, absolutely. The congregations have been very helpful to Beth Israel. Chabad lends us a Torah every week. Gates of Prayer let us use that room whenever we want, you know, so all the -- at first Shir Chadash asked us to go there. We didn't, maybe we can edit this part out. We didn't go there because we were afraid of too many -- they were trying to simply get us, as many of our members over there, since it's so close to us, fundamentally, you know. So that's why we didn't go to Shir Chadash. Maybe we can cut that part out.

RH: Well, Okay. (laughter) Well, it's a small community struggling too. You're a small community struggling.

IL: Every congregation is struggling, I think, except for the -- Gates of Prayer, they flooded, but they're back, and I think they're doing pretty well, actually.

RH: Right. I think Touro seems to have 85% of its people back.

IL: Really?

RH: Yeah, so actually they're feeling pretty good about numbers.

IL: I wonder about that. I don't think the numbers at Sinai are anywhere near as good as at Touro.

RH: Yeah, I don't know. I don't know that either.



IL: I don't think so. They say how many kids they had in their Sunday school?

RH: Where at?

IL: At Touro.

RH: No, I didn't hear that. That's a good -- that's a good point, that's your future right there.

IL: Well, they got a great Sunday school with hundreds of kids. And that would be interesting, to see if 85% of the kids are back in the Sunday school. I bet you they're not.

RH: That's a real interesting question. That's a good determiner of the future of a community, isn't it?

IL: Mm-hmm, oh yeah.

RH: Is there anything, any frameworks in Judaism that have helped sustain you through this crisis?

IL: I think just going to service every day helped me. I still go two or three times a week. You know, before my mother and my father died, I used to go to service at Least twice a week, thinking that you know, I should go and help make a minyan for somebody, for when the time comes, they would come and help make a minyan for me. Well, it didn't work out that way, but still, I think I have that responsibility. And so, and I enjoy going to services. Even though they're only 30 minutes, I still like to go. Sometimes some of those folks at Chabad can get on your nerves. (laughter) But not the Rabbis, it's the other people who are a little too religious.

RH: What does that mean, what is a little too religious mean?



IL: Well, this guy came up to me the other day, was that Monday or Tuesday morning when I was there, and he said, oh, we put tefillin on -- your tefillin isn't right, it has to be further down. And I said that's Okay, I'll wear it the way I want to wear it. And there's some times, they can get on your nerves a little bit.

RH: OK. Tell me if you've just, to just follow up on this question again, if there's anything else -- so you've been able to go to services more regularly.

IL: Yes.

RH: And you've been a little more intentional about it. Or you're -- how often does Beth Israel have services now?

IL: Well, we were having them once a month. This Saturday will be the third straight week we've had it. We might have it one more time before the holidays. I think once we get a Rabbi, and we're also thinking of trying to start a Kollel, which is when you bring in a family, and Jackie would be able to explain this better, but you bring in a family, and they kind of interact with the community, and try help build up the congregation. And so they're talking about -- we're talking about doing that also. And I think once we have a Rabbi there, I think we'll go back to having services at Least every week. Whether we'll ever be back to having services every day, it's a real long shot.

RH: So, is the --

IL: Although that's the goal.

RH: As the Gabbai --

IL: Gabbai.

RH: Gabbai, how often are you able to call -- is the prayer service different that you call, or do you call that services twice a day?



IL: Oh no, we don't have that service at all. We just have the Shabbat, the Sabbath service.

RH: OK, and is there anything else, are there any family rituals, Shabbat rituals?

IL: Well, we had our family Passover seders every year. And many years, we have 40, 50 people there. This year we had about 18 or 19. And I think everybody felt it.

RH: The absence of people.

IL: The absence of people.

RH: And where was that?

IL: This year it was at Eddie Gothard's house, Jodie -- I mean Jackie's son.

RH: OK.

IL: And we, once in a while the family has Shabbat services, we're having one in fact tomorrow night, Friday night. Friday night services. But once again, people are gone.

RH: You've had to -- it seems like, be a little more on the receiving end of help. Is that true?

IL: What kind of help?

RH: Well, I'm asking you. Have you been, through this crisis? Or that's not how you perceive? I know some people have gone to the Jewish Relief. You've not needed to do that.

IL: Oh, we did.

RH: You did?



IL: Yes. Well, not relief, but they gave out \$750 to everybody. I don't know what they call that, but they did do that. We didn't go to the Relief. But this is before we were back working, and we needed the help. This was before we were getting the FEMA money, you know. The three people I call on are my wife, Judy, Jackie and Lee. Those are my pillars. And when I need help, those are the people I call on.

RH: I've got you, Okay. Can you talk, let's move a little bit to New Orleans. Is there -- are there any ways that you, anything you and your wife do to try to make home home again?

IL: No, cause we don't think we have a home. We're in an apartment. It's not home, and it's not our furniture. It was a furnished place, fortunately, cause we didn't have any furniture. So we were lucky. The only thing we bought were a couple of lamps, that's the only thing that's ours, so there is no real idea of home for us, nearly ever. The closest thing is when we go to her parents', cause they're in their new home, and that's the closest thing to home, and her brother and his family will come over, and we'll have a family dinner. But we don't have a home. And we want a home.

RH: So, you're trying to buy a home, and so you feel like you can't really say you're settled again --

IL: Oh no.

RH: -- till maybe you're able to buy a home in Metairie and kind of settle there.

IL: Buy a home and get some furniture and yeah.

RH: So you're really living in an in between time, it feels like?

IL: Yeah, very much in flux.



RH: Right, do you feel safe in New Orleans? I mean, you've already said you feel like the levees might not hold, and you might like to get to Metairie.

IL: I feel relatively safe. My wife doesn't, but I feel relatively safe. I'm still worried about those levees though. Like I said, I never thought it would flood, and then they built these new things that they have on the canals, but they're not working. The floodgates they built, they're not working right. They just tried them out the other day, and they didn't work.

RH: So that kind of leads to the next question. You know, I mean how do you feel like the -- the city, state, federal government, how do you think they've handled this crisis?

IL: I think the biggest mistake was -- I won't say that -- the ultimate mistake was putting FEMA under Homeland Security. Is it FEMA? Yeah, FEMA. I think that really hurt FEMA, and that hurt all of us. Up until recently I had a rather high opinion of Ray Nagin. Now, I'm not so sure. But the --

RH: What changed your opinion?

IL: Well, the fact that since the reelection, and I voted for him, he still is not really doing anything. I think, the first step that has to be taken on the road home, if you will, is for someone to make a decision on what's going to happen. And the first thing that has to happen is for someone to say Okay, we're not going back to the Ninth Ward, but nobody has the guts to say that. Because whoever it is, even a black man is going to be accused of being a racist. They already called Ray Nagin Ray Reagan -- they've always called him that -- so I think he's afraid to put forward a plan, because that's the first part, first step of the plan. You can't rebuild the Ninth Ward at this point. So let's -- we should concentrate on Lakeview. Oh, that's where all the white people live, that's what you want to do. You're a bunch of racists, right. So I think that's the ultimate reason why nothing is happening in the city. Nobody wants to be the one to make that decision. They keep



saying oh, they're going to build everywhere. And they're building nowhere. There is no plan.

RH: Right.

IL: The plan right now is that they have a plan for each neighborhood, and each neighborhood will go at its own pace. I don't think that's going to work either, because once again, the Ninth Ward is going to fall way behind. I think this whole idea of racism is what is stopping us from moving forward.

RH: Talk about that. Cause I think people need to appreciate -- you're here at Xavier University, which is an historically black, and the only Catholic black university in the United States.

IL: That's right.

RH: And you have been here for how many years?

IL: Almost ten years.

RH: Ten years. So talk about what you mean when you say racism is, this call of racism, or what are you saying?

IL: That's what many people -- you know, they say that, you know, I'm not sure if you saw the Spike Lee thing, but you know, supposedly the Ninth Ward was -- mostly poor blacks were the ones that were hurt. But drive out to Lakeview, there are very few poor blacks that live out there, but yet everybody lost their home out there too. But it's always been this racism thing, even though, you know, for many years we've had black mayors.

RH: You mean the charge of racism?

IL: Yes.



RH: It's always been like if you criticize anything, you're called a racist. Is that what you're saying? I'm just trying to get an understanding here.

IL: No. Treading on dangerous ground here.

RH: Well, we are.

IL: I think blacks -- New Orleans has always been a very poor city, and blacks blame that on the fact that whites are the wealthiest people in town, and they control all the money, and they're not spreading it around, you know. We've had terrible schools for years and years. Was that because whites didn't want -- since most of the kids that went to the schools were black, is that because whites didn't want blacks having good education, or was it because they simply were -- well, I don't really want to get into that. But racism trumps everything in the city, and it stops everything in the city. As I said, Nagin since he's been elected, has been accused of being a whitey, if you will, even though, simply because he had white friends and et cetera, by these, for lack of a better term, black racists, who I think want to keep their jobs and their positions, by keeping poor blacks from getting a real education, and helping them move up in life. And I think that's the same people who are still around today, and I think even though I didn't even -- I wouldn't even watch the Spike Lee thing, I think that's -- he's just working, whether he knows it or not, for those people, to reinforce, you know, I know that's part of the show, is about how they blew up the levee on the Ninth Ward. That supposedly happened when Betsy came, they blew up the levee in the Ninth Ward. This didn't happen, and the people on the thing that say oh, I heard it. Well, they heard something, but what -- it's just maddening. You know, I think racism stopped forward movement even before the storm, it would stop any kind of forward movement for the city, because they would start -- oh, blacks have to be involved, poor blacks have to be involved in building new homes and building new buildings, and building new -- any kind of group or business that wanted to come to town. And since they didn't have the education, people didn't want to do that,



and so we lost business because of that. And now I'm ranting, and I'm --

RH: No, you're not ranting at all. You're not, it's a complicated subject, and it's hard to flush it out in an interview, or any other time.

IL: But you started asking me about how did the people react. And I want to say, give a little story. As I said on Thursday after the storm, we went to Baton Rouge. And when we were coming home, we heard all this on the radio coming home. First we heard Aaron Broussard, the President of Jefferson Parish, crying on the radio, begging for someone to come help them. Then we heard that there was a fire -- he mentioned that there was a fire at the Oakwood Shopping Center, which is across the river, in Jefferson Parish. And that was the time, at the exact time when supposedly the, well when the police in Gretna were not allowing people across the river -- across the bridge. Well, looters had gotten into the Oakwood Shopping Center and set it on fire. The Oakwood Shopping Center still hasn't reopened. The whole place went up in smoke, and that's when -- but nobody tells that part of the story. Anyway, Aaron Broussard was on the radio crying, begging for help. Then Michael Brown, who was the head of FEMA, came on the radio and said oh no, everything's fine, we're getting aid to them. And then, right after that, Nagin got on the radio, and that's when he cursed out, or whatever he actually said to George Bush, I'm not exactly sure. I think he cursed him out and said some curse words. And everybody blamed him for that. But later on, Nagin explained what happened. He had been at the Dome that Thursday, helping, trying to help out what he could, when he got a call from Michael Brown saying, oh, you got to come out here to Zephyr Field, in Jefferson Parish, we need to talk to you. He didn't tell him why. So they sent a helicopter, and he went out there. And Nagin got out there, and he saw that all this food, they had a buffet for everybody, and carving stations. Meanwhile, there's no food for anybody at the Superdome. There were trucks lined up and everything, and he blew his stack. And it's right there, and Michael Brown came over and said here, here's the President. And that's when he blew his stack at the President. Nobody ever told that



story about Nagin. He was just mad because here's all this stuff, and nobody's bringing it to these people who are starving.

RH: So, when you saw -- you must have seen, been watching the TV some that Wednesday, or did you --

IL: Actually no, we were moving around so much we didn't see a lot of TV.

RH: You didn't really get to see any of the TV?

IL: No.

RH: OK. Do you -- do you think it's in -- important to -- do you think like the story of Lakeview and Lakewood and those areas, they just haven't been told enough? That the devastation that you underwent --

IL: Yes. Yes, even though we're not actually in Lakeview, but yes.

RH: Well, you're in the Lakefront. Let's call it that. And that those stories, your pain is real.

IL: Yes.

RH: Your loss is as big as anyone else's loss.

IL: It's my understanding that in the Spike Lee thing, there's like five -- there's almost no white people, and none of them are victims. Most of them are people like David Brinkley --

RH: Doug Brinkley.

IL: Doug Brinkley, just criticizing Bush and Nagin, and not any victims, and not any white victims, from what I understand. Once again, I didn't see it.



RH: Well actually they -- I saw it. So they have a lot on St. Bernard. So you really end up with a fairly good balance of black and white, just because they've done the concentration on St. Bernard Parish, which is white. Essentially white.

IL: That's true.

RH: So it's not -- it's not quite as dramatic.

IL: And once again, anybody from Lakeview, did they even show anywhere on Lakeview? I think --

RH: It wasn't a story about Lakeview. It was a story about Lower Nine and St. Bernard.

IL: And all the pictures you saw on TV afterwards was all black people. I'm sure most people around the country think that New Orleans is 99% black, or at least was before the storm. And even though it was two thirds black, it wasn't completely black. I know, my story and the story of Lakeview has not been told.

RH: And it's a story still waiting to be told.

IL: Of course, anyone who tells it will be called a racist.

RH: You think so?

IL: Yes. If it's just Lakeview, oh, you're just showing all the white people, the rich white people, who probably all moved and are living in Metairie now, who got houses. And there's only black people left in Houston and wherever, which is probably pretty much the case, because other people didn't wait for someone to do something for them. Of course, they don't have anywhere to come back to, that's true anyway. Once again I'm gonna --

RH: You know it's complicated too, right?



IL: It's extremely complicated.

RH: Well, what do you feel about demographic changes with the city? Do you think there will be demographic changes, do you think it will be a whiter city?

IL: Oh, there definitely has been.

RH: Is that a good thing? Do you have any thoughts on that?

IL: At this point, it's a whiter city. Eventually, I don't -- I think it will be for quite a while a whiter city. Not that much more, maybe 55-45, 60-40. Before it was almost 70% black, which kind of contradicts what I just said about, anyway, whether it's good or bad, it's just what is.

RH: Has the hurricane made you change the way you make -- you think about city government or federal government?

IL: Well, it's lowered my opinion of it all, but I never had a very high opinion to begin with.
(laughter)

RH: OK.

IL: I'm pretty much a libertarian, so --

RH: So, get government -- so in one way, the libertarian view's been vindicated, because the people who have moved forward seem to be the people who have just started doing stuff.

IL: Right.

RH: Do you feel that way?



IL: Absolutely. The government isn't doing anything, or not much to get us back on our feet.

RH: Let's move on a little bit, and tell me your vision of a settled and a future that is livable for you?

IL: Well, a little house with our cats. Sitting on a sofa, watching TV with my wife. That's what we always like to do. Coming in to work, maybe writing a few more things about the history of the Jews of New Orleans. Getting a car. I still don't have a car, that would be nice.

RH: What are you doing, how are you getting around?

IL: We just have my wife's car. She insists that we should wait until we buy the house before I buy my car, because that would affect our credit rating if I bought a car.

RH: Oh, Okay.

IL: I don't quite agree with that, but anyway, that's pretty much -- eventually, I would -- I've lived out my life in New Orleans, in Orleans Parish, in New Orleans. I'm not a Jefferson Parish person really. So ultimately, I think I would like to move back to New Orleans. I would like to move to Uptown New Orleans and live there, but we just can't afford that. It's just so expensive up there. My wife isn't too crazy about that idea either though.

RH: You're uptown on Maple right now?

IL: Mm-hmm.

RH: And you say the furniture in the apartment's not yours?



IL: No. It was being rented by a girl who was going to Tulane. She was from some country in South America. And after the storm, her parents were so upset, not only wouldn't they let her come back to school, they wouldn't even let her come back to get her stuff. So she had a TV in there, and a bed and a sofa, and all kind of furniture, and that became our furniture. Well, we're using it, it's not ours.

RH: What are your fears for the future?

IL: That it will flood again and everybody will leave. And I think there's a fair possibility that will happen in the next year or two.

RH: Is there anything, if you could tell the Mayor what you'd like to tell him, or the President, or FEMA, what you'd like to tell some of these people about the situation?

IL: Start building so people can live here. That's the first thing that needs to be done.

RH: And what are some of the ingredients to that dream?

IL: Well, it's a question, you know, the LRA money will start coming through soon. So people will start building their own homes, although I think people will be surprised how little money they get from that. I've figured out we -- even though we had 53% damage to our house, according to the study or whatever, we would only get like \$10,000 from them. So we just have the house for sale. Hopefully we can get \$60,000 or \$70,000 for it. Anyway, people start building on their own, but I think the government, some government, the city, the state, somebody needs to say Okay, we are going to rebuild homes, not a housing project, but homes here, wherever. East New Orleans, although it's dangerous there too. Maybe Gentilly, some place. But the problem is picking that place, because people are going to yell. And I don't think anybody -- I don't think anybody in the city or the state has the political will or guts to make that call. And I think that's --



RH: You mean, like a housing project? Is that what you're saying?

IL: No, I don't want to call it that.

RH: Or when you say homes, what do you mean?

IL: To knock down a bunch of homes that were flooded and build up homes -- build up like a housing area. You know, how people came in and built track homes in the '50s. Just build a bunch of track homes where people -- they can be those quick homes that they build now in like two weeks or whatever it is, or two months, just build a bunch of those so people can come home. People need to have a place to come home, and that will, I think, hopefully get the ball rolling. People, supposedly people want to come home, they just don't have a place to live. And that has to be the first thing, a place to live.

RH: What are the strengths that you'd like to see preserved?

IL: The strengths of New Orleans?

RH: Yeah.

IL: Mardi Gras, the -- well, it's really our weakness too, but really the bon temps rouler feeling of the city. It's killing us now, but I think that's what we are. And we have to preserve that while working, you know. Most people in New Orleans don't like to do a lot of work, and that's a big problem for us. But somebody has to go to work.

RH: So what changes would you like to see?

IL: I don't know how to answer that. Changes in what, what kind of changes?

RH: What changes would you like to see, if you could run New Orleans? You just said, it's kind of interesting, its strengths are its weaknesses on the other side of it. So you want to preserve the bon temps rouler, but you also want to --



IL: Well, I would want to do -- find some way to get Toyota to build a plant in East New Orleans or somebody like that. We need real jobs in the city, not just jobs working downtown in the hotels or at the casino.

RH: Not just tourist industry jobs, but real jobs with a living wage?

IL: Correct, we need to bring some industry to the city. If -- that's what we need to do, but it's a whole question of employees even before the storm. Where, if there was a Toyota plant in East New Orleans before the storm, where would they get capable employees to run that plant in New Orleans? People would be coming from across the lake, Jefferson Parish, they just didn't have the proper manpower in Orleans Parish. And that's a -- something having to do with the schools, once again. And building good schools is a real problem, and very difficult to do. And I don't know how to do that. My wife's a teacher in Jefferson Parish, and they already see the effect of having kids from New Orleans out there. You know, you have a mother that's 16 and no daddy. She says over and over again, the first thing we need to do is get these kids daddies. That would help a lot.

RH: So maybe the charter school's a good idea?

IL: I think so, we'll have to see.

RH: Is, for you, try to tell me some of the biggest changes in your life since the storm.

IL: No home, no father, just not being -- not having a home. We haven't been home for a year.

RH: Not having a place to call home, not really having a sense of home, it seems like you're telling me.



IL: It's not exactly living out of a suitcase, which we did for a month, but it's like that. I mean, you never realize how important a home is until you lose it, and you can't find another one.

RH: Have any of your priorities changed since the storm?

IL: I was a pretty -- I guess I still am -- a pretty laid back person. All I wanted was to be with my wife, come to work, and do a little research on the history of the Jews in New Orleans. And I guess Beth Israel has become more of a priority to me. I feel like, I guess the word is, in memory of my father, I need to do that, which my wife thinks I'm spending too much time with that, which is really funny, because my mother always complained about my father spending too much time with the shul. And now my wife is doing that.

RH: Well, that brings a little normalcy into your life. (laughter) Are there any things you've learned about yourself in this year?

IL: I think I learned that I can handle things better than I ever thought I could have. I always thought I was kind of a nervous person, who'd kind of go -- if some kind of emergency happened, I wouldn't be able to handle it. But I think I handled it pretty well, I think. Except for that day driving to Dallas.

RH: Except for that day driving to Dallas? What was --

IL: The day we found out my father died. My mother-in-law was -- she's kind of slow at things, and we stopped in Alexandria to get lunch, and she was dawdling, and I kind of yelled, and I wanted to get going, and my wife got a little mad with me, and then we had to stop for her, when she got sick. And even -- I was a little upset, I didn't say anything, cause she was sick, but it still upset me, and my wife could tell. And she got mad about that. But you know, my father just died. Well, he hadn't, I'd just found out he died. And that was a bad day.



RH: Yeah. Are there anything about your life that since the storm, I mean, you just told me that you're going to be more involved with Beth Israel, but any kind of things you want to do differently? Any kinds of ways you want to be different?

IL: We were always kind of, you know, stay home type. I'd like to get out a little more, travel a little. My wife won't fly, so we have to drive. But I would like to get out and see a little bit more of the world, or at Least the country.

RH: And are there any things that you took for granted that you'll never take for granted again?

IL: I don't know.

RH: OK.

IL: I don't want to answer that.

RH: Well, we're here at the end. And you've given me a lot of yourself, and I appreciate that. And I don't know if there's anything you want to add, that you feel like you want to say about -- I mean, here we are at the one year anniversary, and you've had one hell of a year.

IL: Actually, it's been one hell of two years. Starting with when my mother got sick.

RH: When your mother got sick.

IL: So much has changed, it's really mind boggling to me. And I don't know where I'd be without my wife.

RH: OK. Irwin, thank you so much.

IL: Thank you.



RH: For this interview, I really appreciate it.

IL: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]