

Interview with Robert Feder

Interviewed by Mathias Geiger for the Heritage Education Commission

Interviewed on October 26, 1990

Robert Feder - RF

Mathias Geiger - MG

MG: Today's date is October 26, 1990. This is Mathias Geiger doing an oral interview with Robert Feder who is a long-time resident of the Moorhead-Fargo community. He is an attorney in Fargo and is also a member of Temple Beth El congregation. Thank you for coming and doing this taped oral interview with us, Robert.

RF: Thank you for having me.

MG: I'd like to begin by asking you to share some of your own personal background in the community as it relates to just general information and to your religious experience in growing up and living here.

RF: I was born July 12, 1943. I am the oldest child of Betty Goldberg Feder and Paul Feder. My father is a native of Chicago. My mother is a native of Fargo. Her father, my maternal grandfather, came to the Fargo-Moorhead area in 1905 and was brought here by my maternal great-grandfather, of whom I presume we will speak more later. I grew up in Fargo, went to the public schools in Fargo, graduated from then Fargo Central High School in 1961. I got my undergraduate degree from Washington University in St. Louis in 1965 and my Juris Doctorate from the University of Nebraska in 1968. I practiced law in Omaha for two years and then with the United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, for two years out of Washington. Since 1972 I've been in private practice here in Fargo. I have a sister two years younger than I, a brother five and one half years younger than I, and another brother fifteen and one half years younger than I.

MG: [Laughter] A wide range of ages there.

RF: He was a surprise to everybody.

MG: [Laughter] Were you always a member at Temple Beth El when you lived in the community?

RF: Yes. Perhaps the best way to talk about this so that it is more easily understood is to give a very brief history of the formal, so to speak, religious environment in Fargo from the Jewish perspective. There was always, since territorial days, a synagogue in Fargo that was Orthodox. It was the only synagogue in Fargo. After the war--which war, you may ask-- World War II; unfortunately, we keep having them. During and after the war, my grandfather, Max Goldberg, came to believe that Orthodox Judaism in Fargo would be

something that would not be in the best interests of some people because of the very traditional practices of Orthodoxy. He thought it appropriate that a social center be developed and, accordingly, I think in 1944, Beth El Center was established as basically a social club, a JCC (Jewish Community Center) type of situation. Then because of the changing of the times and of the community and as the community changed, Temple Beth El grew out of Beth El Center. I think it was in 1947 that the charter was issued by the state incorporating us as a non-profit corporation. And so Temple Beth El, as a synagogue, a member of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Reform branch of Judaism, came into existence. Since 1947 Temple Beth El has been in existence and my family has been a member. My grandfather founded it, along with others, of course, and I've been a member ever since.

MG: Maybe it would be helpful if you were to give a brief definition of the different branches of Judaism in terms of Orthodox, Reform, Conservative.

RF: There are three major branches of Judaism throughout the world. The oldest, of course, is Orthodox Judaism, which has been extant in one form or another, not too many others, since probably the time of the rabbis. The Orthodox branch of Judaism is the most traditional, and they have a more literal interpretation of the Bible. They believe, for example, that any time God spoke in a direct way with a transitive verb to someone, that was a commandment. So they feel that there are 613 commandments in the Bible. They are very traditional in their beliefs and their practices and their observations on how they practice our faith have not significantly changed in many, many, many, many years.

The more middle-of-the-road, shall I say, approach to Judaism is the Conservative branch in the United States and the more progressive, or liberal, branch is the Reform branch. I want to be quick to add that what we believe, as Jews, does not significantly differ from Orthodoxy to the Reform. How we practice is markedly different. It's often said that when you get two Jews, you get three opinions.

MG: [Laughter]

RF: The Orthodox, even amongst themselves, have differing views as to how to practice Judaism, but they are much more traditional. They, for the most part, will keep a strictly kosher home. They will not shave the corners of their beards as it says in the Bible not to do. They do no manner of work on the Sabbath, which, of course, would mean they do not turn on lights, and they do not operate automobiles. They do nothing which would increase not only their work but make somebody else work because the Bible says the Sabbath is a holy day. To keep and remember it is one of the commandments, and Judaism teaches that you should not ask someone else to do that which you think is inappropriate for yourself and, accordingly, they won't turn on lights and that type of thing.

Reform Jews, on the other hand, feel that the commandment says to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. How do we do that? Well, there's no dogma in Judaism, as you know. We have no higher authority that prepares tractates that says this is what you must do in order to be an observant Jew under these circumstances. There's all kinds of

commentaries on the Talmud and the Torah and the Mishnah and so forth. But a Reform Jew will say, "All right, it is Sabbath. How am I to remember and keep the day? How should I separate it from the other six days of the week?" Well, for me in my circumstance, living in, say, Fargo, North Dakota, in the latter part of the twentieth century, the appropriate way would perhaps be for me to do work for charity. If I do go into my office and if I do legal work, it's pro bono work--it's free. Or it would be maybe to read or to take my wife or dogs or other members of my family to a concert or to do something which would necessitate me driving or turning on lights. Maybe even if I have to get the lawn raked, I go out and work in my yard. But it's Sabbath and I know that and I remember that. The Orthodox would not under any circumstances do any of those. We believe the same about God and the oneness of God and the obligations that Judaism imposes on us to be all that we can be and to do unto others what we would expect them to do unto us, but how we reach these ends are quite different.

MG: It sounds like there's a real sense of a freedom of conscience--you have the responsibility but you're not limited in how you practice that responsibility.

RF: Exactly. Exactly. And that is why the Reform Movement came into being. The Reform Movement came into being in the middle of the nineteenth century in Germany. In an Orthodox setting the services are always in Hebrew and they're the same. The men and the women are segregated during prayer. The women sit in the balcony or behind a curtain or off to one side or whatever so that your full concentration can be on prayer and not on the well-turned ankle next to you type of thing. In the nineteenth century in Germany they thought, "Wait a minute--we are well integrated into commerce, we are well integrated into our communities, we get along with them. There is no sense in accentuating differences. There is no sense in not realizing that it doesn't make a lot of sense to live like we used to live when we were in shtetls. We weren't allowed to own a carriage or weren't allowed to live in this area or we weren't allowed to do this or that. Judaism is a religion and a way of life. It is not necessarily a limiting one. Therefore, we can still honor God, honor the commandments, and pray in the native tongue of the country. The Reform Movement came to the United States very shortly thereafter and depending upon whom you talk to, either the Conservative or the Reform is the largest numerically in the Jewish faith. The Orthodoxy is smaller.

MG: You mentioned that your grandfather saw the limitations, I guess we could say, of Orthodox Judaism in this community. Could you expand on that just a little bit?

RF: I wish that my grandfather were still here. He passed away last year at the age of 94, but I think that he, along with several others in the community, felt that in order to be an observant Orthodox Jew, you are to have prayer in the synagogue on the Sabbath. If it is 35 below zero and you live two miles from the synagogue and you are not to drive, it doesn't make a lot of sense. God does not want you to catch pneumonia or get frostbitten or suffer some other consequence. It was things like that. Remember that when the Jewish community in Fargo started, it was not that much different than any other semi-urban Jewish community. All of the Jews lived in a very small area of town. They were within four or five blocks of each other. The synagogue was fairly centrally located, and it was no

problem to walk. There were enough people so that we had at least one kosher meat market, and it was a fairly well self-contained, self-serving community. But after the war the housing boom came. At that time Fargo was basically only two miles in length north to south and literally 13th Avenue South was pretty much the end of Fargo. Now it goes to 52nd Avenue, and geographically it's spread all over. Suffice it to say that I suppose the area of Fargo in square miles has quadrupled since that time. It made no sense if you wanted to live in Prairiewood or you wanted to live in West Fargo to walk five miles to synagogue. It was ridiculous, and I think things like that concerned my grandfather. Also, he basically felt that the Orthodox approach to worship by restricting women to the balcony or in back was not in good keeping with what he thought prayer was all about. My grandmother and my grandfather were married for 69 years, and there wasn't a soul that my grandfather cared more about than my grandmother. He didn't like being apart from her at all, particularly when he was experiencing something meaningful, such as prayer. I think that had another stone to add to it. Finally he just realized that if we were going to have a Jewish community in Fargo that was going to survive in this era of the twentieth century, that Orthodoxy simply would be a much more difficult path to trod and maintain that community.

MG: Thank you. I'd like to spend a few minutes kind of going over the history of the Jewish community in this area. One of the questions that I usually ask in the middle of January is "Why would anyone want to move here?" What was it that brought the Jewish community into this area? What were some of the immigration and migration patterns and what were some of the economic and political pressures?

RF: The greatest in-migration of Jews in the United States occurred during the period of time from 1890 to 1910, and it was during that period of time that a great many Jewish people came to Fargo. There were earlier in-migrations of Jews to the United States and Fargo and those folks were primarily German Jews. They were for the most part, for lack of a better word, bourgeoisie and urban. They were skilled in professions, in trade, and they had lived in an urban environment in Germany. During the 1890s when the next large wave of Jews came to the United States, they were not German urban Jews, but rather Eastern European--Polish and Russian Jews, who lived in shtetls--little villages, and were primarily agrarian. Why they came to America, of course, you well know. There were pogroms, and there was discrimination the likes of which we in this country simply cannot understand. We've never had Cossacks riding through our village, burning the village. We've never had laws passed that prohibited Jews from owning certain types of property, living in certain areas, practicing certain trades or professions, owning anything, or voting. Depending upon the political climate in Europe at the time, one easy way to ignite the so-called locals was, of course, to blame whatever ill was befalling them at the time upon the Jews and unite them against the Jews. Having them thus united, the political leader would then be in a much better position to steer them the direction that he wanted to go using the Jews as the uniting force.

MG: History repeats itself.

RF: Unfortunately, it is no different than what that madman did to the Weimar Republic or what any other despot does to rally his particular tribe. In any event, the Jews that came over to the United States in the 1890s were the rural Jews from Poland and Russia, and they were poor. They came up here for the same reason that the Norwegians came here or the Swedes or the Danes or the German-Russians that preceded them, and that was climatologically it was a similar climate. There was always a relative or somebody that they knew that had come here. The Jews came to North Dakota and Minnesota for no different reason than the Norwegians did. The Jews that came to Fargo, and my great-grandfather was one of them--great story--were different than the Jews that were here originally. The Jews that were here originally for the most part were German Jews and they were in commerce and they were established. A Jew is a Jew, and he or she is not a Christian and depending upon your stripe, broad or narrow, Orthodox or Reform, educated or not educated, to the Christian community, you're still a Jew and it doesn't make any difference. As a result, the Polish-Russian Jews that came here at the turn of the century were helped, not by the Christian community, but by the Jewish community. There were some feelings amongst the German Jews that, look, we're doing okay. We get along with everybody here. We don't look different than they do. We're getting along, and now all of a sudden all of these people come with beards and rags. I think that there was at that time some feeling that, yes, we've got to help them because they're loners [phonetic]. They're fellow Jews. But there were differences.

MG: They got here because of the geographic--

RF: --similarities to where they came from.

MG: And they showed up and it sounds like the reaction from the German Jews was "here are our poor second cousins."

RF: Exactly. Exactly. An obligation to help. And they did, they surely did. My grandfather tells a wonderful story that when my great-grandfather died, my grandpa was still a very young man--I think he was 14, 15 or 16 years old. They had virtually no money because my grandfather had only been here a couple of years--that's another story perhaps you want me to tell in a minute. They didn't have enough money to bury him, and he borrowed \$10 from Matt Segal. He had Matt Segal Clothiers. He was the father of Jerome Segal, who operated the store for many years. Jerry is still alive. He is in his mid-80s. My grandfather tells the story that he had to go to the community to borrow money to bury my great-grandfather.

MG: And it was given readily, it sounds like.

RF: No question. No question.

MG: Now, when your great-grandfather came here, he came alone, didn't he?

RF: Yes. Wonderful story. My great-grandfather was born and raised in an area around the Russian-Polish border, which they changed all of the time, so sometimes he would say

he was Lithuanian, sometimes he was Russian, and sometimes he was Polish. He was born near Bresletosk [phonetic], the nearest decent-sized city in that area is Brest. He had married my great-grandmother and had had at that time three children and thought that his future was going to lie elsewhere. The pogroms had resurfaced, and he had seen what had happened to his relatives and family, and so he left my great-grandmother, my granddad, my great uncle, and my great aunt. Unbeknownst to him, my great-grandmother was pregnant. He came to the United States through Ellis Island, and began to work his way across the country. He had heard that the land was very rich and fertile here so he had a goal of getting here. Unfortunately, he ran out of money in northern Minnesota on his way over here, and he hired on as a cook in a lumberjack camp. He contracted pneumonia, and instead of cooking and taking care of the lumberjacks, they cooked and took care of him. He survived his pneumonia and found his way into Fargo. He looked around for a job and because he'd had some experience living in a shtetl with chickens and cows, he signed on with a man who had a little feed store on Main Avenue, then called Front Street--818 Front Street in Fargo. In those days, everybody had a barn in back of their house and chickens and cows and so forth, so this man sold hay and chicken feed, and my great-granddad went to work for him. He said, "Listen, I have a wife and three children in the Old Country. I would like you very much to please pay me half of my wages and save the other half. When I have enough money for tickets, I will send for my wife and my three children." The man said, "That's fine. I will do that." So for two years my great-grandfather slept in the store in the hay and delivered the chicken feed and the cows and did all of those things, and at the end of two years, he said to the fellow, "Well, Lars (or Sven or whatever his name was), I think by now I should have enough money to buy tickets for my wife and children. By the way, I got a letter and I now have another son that I've never seen. So I've got three children's tickets and one adult's steerage ticket I've got to buy. May I please have all my money?" The fellow looked at him, and he said, "Well, Mr. Goldberg, I'm very sorry to tell you that I have not saved all your money at all. I've either squandered it, I've lost it, I've gambled it, or I've consumed it with alcohol. But in any event, I have no money. But I have some pride and what I'm going to do is instead of giving you money, I'm going to give you my store. Here's the store. I'm old anyway--I'm out of here. You know who the customers are. Okay, it's your store."

So my great-grandfather stayed and worked for another three years and got enough money to send over to my great-grandmother. She brought my grandfather who, at that time, was about eleven years old, my two great uncles, and my great aunt to the United States. Because there were Jewish quotas at the time, and there always seems to be Jewish quotas, they could not get into the United States, so they did not go through Ellis Island. They couldn't get in. They went to Montreal. So my grandpa entered North America through Montreal. They worked their way across the lower provinces of Canada and came down from Winnipeg. My grandfather arrived here in September of 1905 with his mother and two brothers and a sister. It was very shortly after that, a few years, that my great-grandfather had a recurrence of pneumonia or tuberculosis and died, leaving my great-grandmother a widow at age 41 and my granddad in charge of the family. I think my granddad was 14 or 15 years old. He had only two or three years of schooling in this country, but he was industrious and the premium on education that had been instilled in him, perhaps even genetically, was very strong. He saw to it that every one of his siblings

graduated from high school and one graduated from college, which in the teens was something--for an immigrant to be able to graduate from college. So that's how my mother's family got to Fargo.

MG: A long pilgrimage.

RF: Oh, and, of course, the stories grandpa would tell about coming over on steerage. My great-grandmother, of course, in my grandpa's eyes, was a very beautiful woman. She was pursued by not only the drunken sailors on the ship but the other men on the ship and how he had to fight for her honor, and how they would sit in this smelly hold in steerage with nothing to eat and people would try to steal their money. It certainly wasn't an easy trip coming over nor was it easy to make it once they got here.

MG: Yes, a challenge here, too. What was it like for you growing up, as a Jewish boy in a non-Jewish setting?

RF: Frankly, it was very easy. This is a wonderful community. There isn't a place, I think, anywhere that I would rather be. As a Jew, maybe it would be nice to have a larger community and to have more Jewish people around and all of the things that brings, like a good kosher delicatessen.

MG: A lot of us would vote for that. [Laughter]

RF: But growing up in Fargo in the '40s and '50s was very pleasant. I'm very, very fortunate in that I did not feel very much, if any, anti-Semitism. I had one teacher that was an anti-Semite, I think. But outside of that, there were very, very, very few instances, if any, that I can recall where I was treated differently because of my religion. Most of my friends just assumed that while I was Jewish, whatever that meant, it was just another form of being a Lutheran, and that's perfectly all right. We didn't celebrate Christmas the way they did. We had Hanukkah, but it was the same thing. And I did the same things that they did. You know, I went to the same movies. We played ball together. We went to the same extra-curricular activities. They slept over at my house, I slept over at their house. Our parents were friends and played bridge together. They took turns chaperoning our parties. There were no problems in the religious sense growing up at all. I want to say that I think that is because there has always been an understanding, there has always been an openness and a learning amongst the different people of this community. Maybe it's easy to do if it's such a homogenous community and your threshold of tolerance is so high because almost everybody else is exactly like you. Maybe it's because we look the same as everybody else. We are not black, so we aren't as visible. We aren't yellow, so walking down the street, as long as I was clean and neat and I didn't offend anybody, they didn't care if I walked down the street. I was not a visibly different person. But since we are all born ignorant, we have to be exposed to some kind of training and some kind of knowledge to develop our own prejudices or lack thereof. In this community, for the most part, people saw the chairman of the United Fund Drive, or they saw the merchant, or they saw the fellow who was giving blood at the blood drive, or they saw a person who was doing something that

was good, who happened to be Jewish. They didn't see a Jew, and as a result, this community has always been a very good place to be a Jew in.

MG: I remember one of the former rabbis at Temple Beth El, Rabbi Kravitz, talking about one [member] of the congregation who was a well-respected businessman in the community. One year the Chamber of Commerce asked to honor him as the Grand Marshal in the Christmas Parade, not really thinking of him as a Jew, but thinking of him as a respected member of the community.

RF: Sure. That's simply the way it has been. I'm very fortunate to have grown up here. I did not experience any sort of problems.

MG: As you think back, what were some of the religious holidays like?

RF: I don't think my religious holidays were any differently experienced by me than the religious holidays were experienced by somebody who lived in Minneapolis or Chicago or St. Louis or any other midwestern environment where there were lots of Jews. Judaism, as you well know, is a faith where much happens in the home and my holidays were the same as anyone. I mean, on the high holy days we always had meals, before we went to services, at my grandmother's house, and then when my grandmother got older, at my mother's house. We always went to services together. After services, the next day after the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we would always come back and have another big meal. You'll hear "and we had another big meal." Yes, we do a lot of that, and we eat very traditional foods. We have the same foods. It's wonderful, wonderful. So I don't think growing up here we experienced any difference. We're smaller and that has had some differences, but outside of that, no different than anywhere else because much of Judaism is a home experience. We still have services. The numbers there are much smaller than they used to be, but we still have services. And we still go to my mother's table and the holidays are very much the same. That's the beauty of it that every Passover, and the older I get, I guess, the more I appreciate it, but I sit at the same chair at my father's table, as I have for, I don't know, many, many years. I think that I am reading and reciting the same things that not only I have done every living year that I can remember, but every living year that any other Jew has ever been in existence. At the same moment, with respect to the sun, I am saying and doing the same thing that Jews from Kurdistan to South America to Australia, to Japan, to Russia are doing. I would feel that way if I were having a Seder in Cogswell, North Dakota, which by the way, is where my wife is from, as I would in the most Jewish section of Brooklyn.

MG: A sense of the communion of the faithful. You identify with the tradition.

RF: Okay, the tradition. Absolutely. It doesn't make that much difference if you're celebrating Passover in a community where there are thousands of other Jews or just scores of other Jews.

MG: I'd like to talk a little bit about the present situation for the Jewish community in the Red River Valley. I have the impression that there are fewer people now than there were,

let's say, 40-50 years ago. Isn't Temple Beth El the only synagogue, Reform synagogue, between Minneapolis and the west coast?

RF: Well, close, yes. We have experienced a very steady decline in our membership. Growing up, we used to say we had 125 families. Then we'd say we had 100 families. When I was president of the congregation a few years ago, we had around 75 families; and now we are down to approximately 50 families. When I say family, I mean an entity, a unit. It can be anything from a wizened old widow, who is 85 years old and maybe knows what's going on and maybe doesn't, to the more traditional nuclear family with a husband and a wife and three little children. So we're getting much smaller. Ever since we have been in existence as a formal synagogue, we have always had a full-time rabbi until four years ago. It was the only Reform synagogue between Minneapolis and Spokane, north of Omaha, that had a full-time program, a rabbi. We have a Sunday School, we have a Hebrew School, we have an administrative secretary, we have an ongoing program of Jewish education for our children. It's getting smaller and it's a struggle. We now have a student rabbi who comes in every other weekend and, hopefully, if I'm lucky, I'll get the endowment built up enough so that we will be able to have a full-time rabbi in the community.

The Orthodox synagogue is still in existence. It has not had a full-time rabbi since Temple Beth El was formed back in the '40s, and their membership is exceedingly small. I think perhaps there are four people who are members, maybe more, four families, five families, and an occasional Orthodox person will be in the community for one reason or another who will attend services over there. It is a struggle for them to make a minyan--that means ten men--which is what you need. I say "ten men" and that means males who are counted for a prayer service.

Yes, we're small and I hope that we will reach a plateau. We got that way because our community changed. Back in the '40s and '50s and to some extent the '60s, our congregation was made up of people who were for the most part merchants. They were in the business community. We had the home-owned Jewish department store--that was Herbst's. If you wanted to buy a pair of men's pants, there were seven or eight locations in Fargo where you could buy a pair of pants, and about six of them were Jewish owned. Now, there's only one male clothing store that is locally owned in Fargo, and that's owned by Eddie Stern and his family. Mr. Stern's children, all of whom are dear friends of mine and I love them greatly, are Presbyterian. Mrs. Stern was Presbyterian. Eddie was Jewish. He grew up in Valley City and married a lovely, lovely lady by the name of Louise McCutcheon. They had five children, all of whom followed the faith of the mother, not the father. So my friends, John and Rick Stern, who are running the stores in Fargo, are Presbyterian. That is sort of a microcosmic example of what happened to our community. We still have a couple of merchant families, but for the most part our membership now is made up of academicians at the universities, who leave if they don't get tenure, a few physicians, and a lawyer or two. There aren't that many people who go back three or four generations in our congregation. I hope that this means that we have stabilized. I hope.

MG: Have many of the children that you grew up with just moved out of the area as well? Has there been a decline in population for that reason also?

RF: Oh, absolutely. There were four Jewish kids that were exactly my age, or they were in the same grade as I was, growing up. I'm the only one in Fargo left. The year behind me there were maybe seven or so and there is only one in that class. In my sister's class--she's two years behind me--there were about, I suppose, six, seven, eight kids--none of that year are left. When they went away to college, they developed careers and they didn't come back, much the same, I'm afraid to say, as we are currently experiencing in this area. Our children get educated and, unfortunately, there's not a heck of a lot for them to do back in this neck of the woods, with our economy the way it is and everything else, so we are a brain drain. We educate ourselves and our children and then we leave.

MG: Leave, yes. Typical for this sort of an area. What is your impression of the relationship of the Jewish community to the Christian community? My hunch from observation says it probably runs the gamut.

MG: You're right, man. For the most part, and again remember what I said--that when you get two Jews together, you're going to get three opinions--so I am simply offering my view and it doesn't necessarily mean it's the view of every member of my congregation. From my perspective, I feel that we're very, very fortunate. We have wonderful Christian friends in this community by and large, and we are accepted as siblings and children of the same God and the fact that I happen to be Jewish and you happen to be of the United Church of Christ or he happens to be a Lutheran, so what! There are distinctions without diminishments. There are differences without any negative connotations. One is no greater or better than the other. For the most part, our relationship is just that. We've had pulpit exchanges with many, many congregations and it's a joy to behold and it's a very moving experience when they come and share our worship and we go and share theirs. In the main we're very, very fortunate.

On the other hand, unfortunately, there are those people who are in positions of leadership in the Christian religious community who still deny the right of the Jew to hold to the faith that has sustained us for 4,000 years. There are those who believe that Judaism is not a religion, that Judaism is some ethnic classification that has ethical tenants ascribed to it, but there is no religion there. That having failed to accept the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed, which, of course, is the only religion, then you don't have a religion and you are therefore a lesser cut of meat. You are some kind of second-class citizen and fair game for proselytizing by whatever means. Those people are the people that heighten my awareness of intercultural and intracultural relations in this community. It's a sad commentary for me to say in 1990, almost '91, in this wonderful community, that there are people who think that Jews don't have a religion. It's pathetic, and I don't know who's going to listen to this tape, if anyone and when, and I don't want to leave the wrong impression, but it would seem to me that as long as Jews believe that their religion isn't any better than anybody else's. We do not proselytize. We don't have missionaries that go out and say, "Come and be Jewish, otherwise, you won't get into heaven or God won't listen to your prayers unless you do them in Hebrew." We think that that is inappropriate. We

think that if you're a Lutheran, mozeltoff! [phonetic]--live and be well and be a good Lutheran. If you're a member of the United Church of Christ, God bless you, be a good one. Just cut us the same slack that we cut you. Let us be Jewish. We don't want to offend you. We don't want to change you. We don't tell you what's right and wrong. You just--

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

RF: --need to practice your religion as we think you should have for yourself, which is absolute and complete freedom as long as we don't hurt each other. If we hold to that, what skin off your nose is it? Yet there are a few folks around here, and I don't think they are just Fargoans--unfortunately, it wasn't too many years ago that the president of the Baptist movement said that God doesn't listen to the prayers of the Jews. I mean, that's absolutely absurd. What did he think? When Jesus was born, he was a Baptist. It's absurd. It just shows the ignorance of the person. Those people concern me a great deal because not only do they have a fervor about their own faith, but their fervor includes assuming that it is the only one. If you don't have exactly their interpretation and their twist in your mind as to what is going on, you're not only wrong but you're a heretic, you're some sadicious, treasonous miscreant. They feel obliged to infiltrate our schools with prayer in public schools, they want to legislate their particular brand of morality, and those kinds of people--they may be well meaning--are a danger to the principles upon which this country was founded. I, for one, am intolerant of intolerance and when they tell me that I have to pray in a public school and that it's a "Christian country," that's offensive to me. This is not a Christian country. This is a democratic republic whose first amendment to its constitution--and maybe it's the first amendment because it's so important--guarantees me and you and all of us the freedom to practice our faith. Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion. So those folks make me vigilant, and unfortunately we have a resurgence of this type of thought. They wrap themselves in the flag. They wrap themselves in the Bible. Thus armed, they march off and if you happen to disagree with them, you're some Satanic whatever and they won't listen to you. They won't give you the opportunity to explain--look, you want to believe that, believe that, but don't try and force your belief on me. Don't try and legislate that we have to have prayer in the schools. Don't try and legislate that we can't have the freedom that we want to do whatever we want to do so long as it doesn't hurt or bother anybody else. I'm sorry to get wound up, but those folks push my button.

MG: I think it is a legitimate issue and concern, not simply to the Jewish community, but to the whole religious community. What do we say about ourselves when we deny someone else their religious experience? I think that's something that we all have to wrestle with. I know how you feel because from time to time I've had that experience, too, as a member of the United Church of Christ. My expression of faith does not fit in with what they believe to be normative, and for me that's personally painful.

RF: At least, my friend, you have a Christmas tree in your front window and you believe in the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity, and so you are just a little mistaken in their view. I have none of those things. I do not have a Christmas tree in my house, I accept Jesus as a son of God in the same vein that Moses was, as Abraham was, as you are. But I cannot

accept a virgin birth, and therefore in their eyes, I am really missing the boat and I am probably Satanically inspired because I refuse to listen to this. I am offended when I am proselytized, and I'm a real danger to what they think the moral fiber of this country ought to be. And to that end, they want to change me. They don't want to change you, they want to change me. They want to legislate for me in the area of religion, which is, in my view, blatantly unconstitutional and morally offensive.

MG: I think that's something that people need to hear and be aware of, that that's probably the down side of the religious experience.

RF: I want to emphasize that--you're right, it is a down side and as long as we have caring, sensitive, people-loving people in this community that are in the majority, and of course they are, things I hope will stay the same and be well, as they are now. We have many, many, many Christian friends that when an act of anti-Semitism surfaces--a statement, an insensitivity--they, not a Jew, but a Christian minister or a Christian member of a congregation, will be the first to stand up and say, "Excuse me, I think that perhaps this insensitivity was not recognized by you as such. This is offensive to some members of our community here in our city and perhaps we could look at this problem a different way and solve it without offending other people--accomplish the same thing but in a way that is less intrusive upon somebody else's beliefs." Thank God there are people like that. There are many of them around here, you among them. And for that, we're grateful. So, yes, I'll get off my high horse by saying that those folks that give me concern are few in number. Unfortunately they are vocal, they're very visible, and they wrap themselves in the flag. Then when you disagree with them, you're also unpatriotic, which of course is not the case at all.

MG: We're about at the end of our time. I'd like to give you a chance to share anything that you would like to share about your own personal religious experience or the experience of the Jewish community in the area. Anything that we didn't touch on that you think it's important for people trying to understand the religious heritage of the area need to hear.

RF: You told me that this tape is turned on at the beginning and turned off at the end and there's no editing and there's no going back.

MG: Right. [Laughter]

RF: I really don't know what else I can add other than to say in sum that the Jewish people in this neck of the woods are very fortunate to live in this neck of the woods because of the other people that live in this neck of the woods. They're wonderful, caring, loving, sensitive people who recognize that just because there may be a difference that doesn't mean that it is a diminishment in one's worth, and it's really a very good place to live as long as we are willing to listen to each other and learn from each other. I think the best thing we can do is to continue to follow the Golden Rule that we all believe in and that is "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." I think for the most part we are very fortunate that

others have done unto us as we would want them to do. And so we're very grateful and appreciative. Hopefully, it will stay that way.

MG: Amen to that. Robert, thank you very much for taking the time to do this. In the depths of sincerity, it's been a marvelous hour and a very stimulating hour. So, thank you for taking the time to do this.

RF: It was a pleasure. Thank you.

[End of Interview]