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ALFRED NORD
JEWISH IMMIGRANT

Interviewed by:
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July, 1969

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ALFRED NORD

Mr. Nord was born in 1900 and came to the United States in 1921. He was an apprentice grocer in Poland. He was persecuted as a Jew in Poland. He traveled with friends through Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Holland. He became a grocer and a retailer of quality meats in the United States.

ALFRED NORD

Interviewer: Mr. Nord, where were you born?

Mr. Nord: I was born in Poland. It belonged to Austria at the time.

Interviewer: What part of Poland was that?

Mr. Nord: It was--I'll give you the bigger towns and cities, and you'll know where. Kractov(?)

Interviewer: Kractov(?)

Mr. Nord: Not Kractov, but I mean---

Interviewer: But you mean---

Mr. Nord: I lived close to it.

Interviewer: Uh, huh.

Mr. Nord: It was a small town.

Interviewer: What was the name of the town?

Mr. Nord: Bubbles.

Interviewer: And what year was that?

Mr. Nord: That was 1900.

Interviewer: 1900. What kind of a place did you live in? Was your family well off or was it poor?

Mr. Nord: We were middle class. We weren't rich, we weren't poor. We had a nice home. There was some land. We had cattle, and we were doing pretty good until the war came. First World War.

Interviewer: Were your family farmers? You say you had cattle.

Mr. Nord: Well, yes and no. We were in business too. We had a store. We had like a taproom, maybe, you would call. And we had some kind of a cow business. Everything. It wasn't just one particular thing; we did everything we could.

Interviewer: You had a taproom. What was the other business besides the cattle?

Mr. Nord: We had grocery business.

Interviewer: You said you were in a small business that was a retail business.

Mr. Nord: Yes.

Interviewer: What kind of merchandise did you sell?

Mr. Nord: Groceries.

Interviewer: Groceries?

Mr. Nord: Groceries.

Interviewer: You lived in what kind of a home?

Mr. Nord: It was a six-room home, a big home. That is, considering there, it was a big home. And we had everything. We had a horse and a wagon. We weren't poor people; we weren't rich. We were getting along good.

Interviewer: How many were in your family?

Mr. Nord: There was three of us. Four, and one of them passed away, a child.

Interviewer: Three children?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, that came over to this country.

Interviewer: What about your education? Did you get a---

Mr. Nord: Yeah, we had, we went to school, and then we had private tutoring. That took in everything. That took in Polish, German, Hebrew, and Jewish.

Interviewer: The private tutoring?

Mr. Nord: Yes.

Interviewer: What was the school, a public school you went to?

Mr. Nord: Yes.

Interviewer: How many years did you go to school?

Mr. Nord: Well, when I was 13, I quit. My father wanted me to go to school a little longer, but I had enough. So I went to work. My father says: If you don't want to go to school, then you had to go to work. You can't stay home.

Interviewer: Were you Bar Mitzahed?

Mr. Nord: Oh yes, after Bar Mitzah. After 13, I would quit. My people weren't too happy about me quitting. They wanted me to continue, especially Hebrew, you know, and everything. So I got a job in another big--pretty big--city, and I stayed there two years on that job.

Interviewer: What did you do?

Mr. Nord: It was a wholesale grocery store. I didn't like it. It was too hard work, everything, but I wouldn't give in. I just thought, I was going on my own; and I would stay there for two years. After my two years were up as an apprentice, I came home again and everything was---

Interviewer: So for two years you were away from home?

Mr. Nord: Except maybe come home for Rosh Hashanah or maybe a visit, and then go right back. Never complain, but it was awful hard work.

Interviewer: What were you learning your apprentice? To do what?

Mr. Nord: You see, you couldn't get license without apprenticeship. You have a book, see, and the people you work for sign it when you are through. It is like a degree in school or any other place.

Interviewer: What would you be able to do?

Mr. Nord: The same business as where I worked in.

Interviewer: I see.

Mr. Nord: Wholesale groceries.

Interviewer: Did your parents have to pay for this apprenticeship or what?

Mr. Nord: No. I worked there for two years, and I got the equivalent the whole two years as much as, let's say, \$20 for the whole works. I also got lodging.

Interviewer: Did you live with the family?

Mr. Nord: I lived with the family.

Interviewer: I interview people, and they tell stories about discrimination against Jews in Poland. Did you find anything like this?

Mr. Nord: I didn't find it like that until after the war. Then it was bad.

Interviewer: What year was this?

Mr. Nord: That was in '19.

Interviewer: What was that?

Mr. Nord: That was in 1919.

Interviewer: 1919.

Mr. Nord: Yeah. See, things started to go bad. While it belonged under Austria, you see, the Austrian government kept everything in order. Well, they weren't allowed to take advantage

of anybody, especially Jews, see. In other words, if a man called you a damn jew, you could have him locked up, and he'd be punished for it. See, but after the war was over, Poland got back on their own; and they got pretty radical for programs and everything else.

Interviewer: What did you witness of this? What did you see?

Mr. Nord: Whad did I see?

Interviewer: What in terms of these programs and so forth?

Mr. Nord: Well, they did it up at night with logs and everything, and they were beating the minorities, especially Jews, small minorities.

Interviewer: Did you see this?

Mr. Nord: I was beaten myself.

Interviewer: In the street, or in your home?

Mr. Nord: Yeah.

Interviewer: By whom?

Mr. Nord: By the Polish people. And they were friendly to me. I mean, my old friends. I'd have never believed it.

Interviewer: You mean, people who were very friendly?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, that I knew. They just turned like a mad dog against me. For no reason.

Interviewer: Did your father's business, was it hurt by all this?

Mr. Nord: Yeah. Yes and no. Because this program was stopped. The government did stop it.

Interviewer: Do you know who initiated this program? Was it the government itself? Or was it just that the government let it go? And people just went along?

Mr. Nord: Well, when Poland got on their own, there was a General Haller, a Polish general in this country; and he came back to Poland, and he started all those programs and everything. And trains. He got an army with him, you know, and things were pretty tough.

Interviewer: You say he had been to this country?

Mr. Nord: Yes, and then came back to Poland.

Interviewer: Do you remember what his name was?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, Haller.

Interviewer: Why did he do this? What experiences did he have here?

Mr. Nord: He was just anti-semitic, that's all. And that was enough.

Interviewer: Yeah, I guess it was.

What other memories do you have of Poland?

Mr. Nord: Well, let me see. Well, I told you, I got this job. In 1919 we all saw the handwriting on the wall, and we started moving out; and we left everything we owned there, and it is still there. We never sold anything out of it, except maybe small things that we took with us, or maybe a copper kettle that we could sell, but the house and the land and everything is still there.

Interviewer: Now, you say you saw the handwriting on the wall. You mean in terms of the war?

Mr. Nord: Yeah. It started to get worse all the time, more anti-semitic, you know. The people didn't want to have nothing to do with you, too much. And the people that did want to do

business with you, they were afraid of their neighbors. See, there was some good people. There was some people who realized that after all, everybody has to live. And then, there was the ones that were pretty tough. Well, just like the Russians now. It wasn't any different there then.

Interviewer: Now, you left in what year, home?

Mr. Nord: 1919.

Interviewer: You left with your mother and father?

Mr. Nord: No. In the meantime, our father passed away. I left home, I went to Vienna. I lived in Vienna for almost a year. In the meantime my family here sent passports to my family there, to my brother and sister. They came over to this country while I was still in Vienna, and while I was in Vienna, they sent me a passport and whatever papers I needed, and I came over--Oh, about, eight, nine months after my family did.

Interviewer: Did they have relatives here that they met when they came here?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, the Keils' are our family.

Interviewer: I see. These were uncles? Your mother's family?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, my mother's brothers and sisters. As I told you, my father passed away. And also, my grandmother came. With my mother. You see, she lived with us.

Interviewer: Now, what was the route you took? You went from Poland to where now?

Mr. Nord: From Poland, I went to Czechoslovakia. In Czechoslovakia I spent a couple of weeks looking around to see if I can

do anything. The people were pretty nice there. I couldn't find anything to suit me or, just couldn't find anything. And from there, I went to Vienna. And that's where I spent almost a year.

Interviewer: You had enough money now to go from Poland to---

Mr. Nord: I had some money, yeah.

Interviewer: But your purpose originally wasn't to come to the United States but to find work elsewhere, Czechoslovakia?

Mr. Nord: No, I had the United States on my mind, because my family were here, and they were all doing good, and they didn't have to put up with anti-semitism and didn't have to be afraid. And we knew all about that so our aim was to come here.

Interviewer: When you went to Czechoslovakia, did you go alone to Czechoslovakia?

Mr. Nord: No, there was three or four of us, all boys. And when we got to Czechoslovakia, some other boys from other towns, we got together in a shule; there was about 80 of us already. You see, nobody wanted to stay in Poland, especially when they were military age. Youth doesn't want to fight for a country that's beating you, and doesn't give you a chance to live. So everybody left, before they took you.

Interviewer: What kind of work did you do in Czechoslovakia?

Mr. Nord: I didn't do anything. So when we got there, as I meant to say, we all got together in the shule, 80 some, and the city got together, that was Brostosolvonov(?), Bresborg, it was then, and fed us, they took care of us, they lodged us. And from there they got a train; we all wanted to go to Vienna.

You see, there was more facilities for everything in Vienna than there was in Brostosolvonov(?). You see, that's a bigger city, more people, and you could communicate with others. And that's where we got. And that was pretty tough living for about almost a year. Not counting the bedbugs and the people we lived with, you know. They wouldn't let us in---

Interviewer: You were about 19, 20?

Mr. Nord: Yeah. They wouldn't let us in daytime; they would let us in nighttime to sleep. So daytime we had to roam around.

Interviewer: Why wouldn't they let you in in the daytime?

Mr. Nord: Well, it was a small place. See, there was four of us. We lived with a woman, with an old lady. She had two rooms, and there was four of us lived with her. We slept in the kitchen, she rented--- So you know, there wasn't any room to roam around during the day. So she says: Look, I have no room. I'll let you stay here at night. You pay me just to sleep; and in the daytime, you got to find other places. So we hung around. We went to coffee houses, we played pool, we played a little hearts, whatever we could. We didn't have no money to gamble with, but we managed to do something. And we had friends. We could borrow a couple of dollars here and there to bridge over until we--- And finally the day came when I got my papers, and I had to get my visa from the Polish Counsul. And he didn't ask too many questions. He just gave us the visa.

Interviewer: Now, from Austria, where did you go?

Mr. Nord: We went to Holland, and from Holland--- What they

did there, that was funny. Now, everybody got a shower. You know that soap that you wash cars with, in barrels it comes, that kind of soap?

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nord: We used it, and it was as cold as the dickens. It was in wintertime. It was in January, and it almost was outside, and it was cold country; but we had to shower. And they took all our clothes and they put it in a hot steam.

Interviewer: This was before going into Holland? Or when you were there?

Mr. Nord: When we got to Holland. They wouldn't let us in.

Interviewer: To get rid of the lice and things.

Mr. Nord: Yeah. That's right. And what actually happened, that night before they passed us, the doctors, you know, we had to delice each other because we had plenty of it. It was awful. Well, the menfolks were all right; but the women, you know with long hair and everything, they couldn't get them all out, and they left them there.

Interviewer: They didn't cut their hair off?

Mr. Nord: They didn't cut their hair off, and they wouldn't let them on the boat. And that was the American people that wouldn't let them on. You can't blame them. So they had to stay there, well, til the next boat came and they got themselves cleaned up, and then they'd let them in again.

Interviewer: Now, you caught the boat in Holland? You say this was an American boat?

Mr. Nord: No. It was an Rotterdam boat.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Mr. Nord: There was American doctors and, you know, in case you had a sickness, they wouldn't let you in. If you had glaucoma(?), they wouldn't let you in. You know, they had to be careful. I couldn't blame them for that. But once they got straightened out, they would let them in.

Interviewer: And you went from Holland to the United States?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, straight to the United States.

Interviewer: What kind of boat was it?

Mr. Nord: The Rotterdam. It was a big boat. Nice boat.

Interviewer: And you had steerage class?

Mr. Nord: Well, we were way down. You couldn't go any deeper except if you did you would be in the ocean. (chuckle) And it was tough sailing.

Interviewer: What was it like? Were there rows of, tiers of beds?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, bunks.

Interviewer: One on top of the other?

Mr. Nord: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you remember how long it took you to get here?

Mr. Nord: Yeah. It took us 11 or 12 days.

Interviewer: You said there were other children in the family?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, well they came first.

Interviewer: Were they older than you?

Mr. Nord: No, I'm the oldest.

Interviewer: They came with your parents? With your mother?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, they came with my mother.

Interviewer: Basically, as far as the family is concerned, you came alone?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, I came alone, except with a few friends.

Interviewer: These friends, they were from Poland also?

Mr. Nord: The ones I came with from Vienna, they were from my own town. We were buddies at home, we went to heder together, school together, and we came here together. There were two of them, and they have both passed away already. They passed away when they were pretty young.

Interviewer: Now, when you came to this country, you came right to Wilmington?

Mr. Nord: I came right to Wilmington.

Interviewer: First you went to New York?

Mr. Nord: From Ellis Island, yeah. Well we were there, it seems, 24 hours they kept us.

Interviewer: What did you do in Ellis Island? Do you remember?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, it was a barrack. Til they could ship us out. See, it took a little time. And at first, well anyway, we had something to eat we enjoyed very much. We missed all these months. And we had fruit that we didn't see for a long time since we left home. The next day they put us in a train, and they put a ticket in my hand to Wilmington. And the conductor, when we comes to Wilmington, he says: Here it is. (chuckle)

Interviewer: You knew no English?

Mr. Nord: No.

Interviewer: Did your family meet you in the station in Wilmington?

Mr. Nord: No. No, they didn't. I came early in the morning. And do you know where Keils' place is? Eleventh and Tatnall?

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nord: Well, I had a card with me, and I showed the conductor, and Delaware Avenue, when it came to Eleventh and Tatnall, he says: Over there.

Interviewer: How did you get out to Eleventh and Tatnall? Did you walk?

Mr. Nord: The trolley car.

Interviewer: How did you know to take it?

Mr. Nord: I showed it to a cop. I showed my card to a cop, and he put me on the trolley car.

Interviewer: Where was the trolley running?

Mr. Nord: From the B&O.

Interviewer: From the B&O. Oh, I see.

Mr. Nord: See, the train let us off on the B&O station, and then I stayed there til morning.

Interviewer: That's Delaware Avenue?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, Delaware Avenue.

Interviewer: Where on Delaware Avenue?

Mr. Nord: Well, you know where the Acme market is there?

Interviewer: Near Union?

Mr. Nord: Yes.

Interviewer: Oh, yes.

Mr. Nord: Delaware Avenue and Union.

Interviewer: Near the car barn.

Mr. Nord: See, there used to be a station. Now's it's no more.

Interviewer: It isn't Union.

Mr. Nord: DuPont, isn't it?

Interviewer: There's a big, used to be a big trolley barn, bus bar there. That's right, it is Union.

Mr. Nord: No, it isn't Union.

Interviewer: That's right. There is a railroad bridge, isn't there.

And you took the trolley from the B&O?

Mr. Nord: From B&O to Eleventh. And then I could see this name, Keil. I walked right over there, and I walked around--- oh, for about an hour, I guess, an hour and a half. There was a little colored man, and I showed him the card. Well, he knew who I was probably. I surmised he knew. And he told me where my uncle lived, over there. He showed me with his arm, with his hand. And that was on the Boulevard.

Interviewer: When was this now?

Mr. Nord: 1920, 1921.

Interviewer: 1921?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, 1921. That's when I arrived, May 8--no May 21. Yeah, I left May 8---not May, January. So while I stayed there, I see my brother and two of my uncles pull up, and they come and picked me up.

Interviewer: At the store?

Mr. Nord: At the store. It was a Sunday, and the store didn't open, but they came looking for me. They were out to the station, but they didn't find me there. They probably found out that I was there and I left.

Interviewer: How are you related to the Keil family?

Mr. Nord: Well, my mother was their sister.

Interviewer: What kind of a store was it in 1921?

Mr. Nord: They started automobiles. They had the Chandler and Cleveland automobiles they were selling. Also parts like bumpers and everything. You bought a car then, you didn't get the bumper with the car. You had to buy it separate, and the horn separate. You just bought the car.

Interviewer: They were accessories (chuckle).

Mr. Nord: Right. If you wanted a spare tire, you had to buy a spare tire.

Interviewer: There are plenty of accessories now, too, but not them.

Mr. Nord: That's right.

Interviewer: Ok. What did you do when you came to this country now? Did you live with the Keils'?

Mr. Nord: Well, no. No. They gave us an apartment there, and we got jobs. I made \$2 a week from the beginning, and then I got a raise to \$3. (chuckle)

Interviewer: You must have done pretty well. (chuckle)

Mr. Nord: Well, anyway, it was a depression time at that time, and it wasn't the money did me any good. But I wanted to learn something, and I stayed there until things got a little better.

Interviewer: Where did you work and what kind of work?

Mr. Nord: Groceries. Meats and groceries.

Interviewer: Where was that?

Mr. Nord: In other words, I was doing the washing up and everything.

Interviewer: Where?

Mr. Nord: Seventh and Lombard. He was also an uncle of mine, Jake Sweinger(?).

Interviewer: You sort of got apprentice wages there too?

Mr. Nord: Yeah.

Interviewer: Is it also an uncle from your mother's family?

Mr. Nord: Well, she was my mother's sister, his wife.

Interviewer: Now, you say you worked there two years?

Mr. Nord: I worked there two years. Then I quit. I went to New York, and I worked there for six months. The money was good. I was making close to \$50 a week.

Interviewer: Doing the same thing?

Mr. Nord: Doing the same thing.

Interviewer: Where in New York?

That was quite a difference.

Mr. Nord: That was quite a difference. It was Cutona Park Avenue. Did you live in New York?

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Nord: Do you know where Cutona Park is?

Interviewer: No.

Mr. Nord: That's in the Bronx.

Interviewer: What brought you to the Bronx?

Mr. Nord: Well, these friends of mine lived there. That I came together with. They wrote to me to come down; they were already in business by then. And I came down, and they got me the job. I liked the job very much, and the people were very nice to me, very nice.

So for Passover, they closed up for a week. You see, it was a Jewish grocery store. And I came home for Passover for a visit, so who comes up--the uncle that I quit. He says: Alfred, how you making out. I said: I'm doing fine; in fact, I'm living good. I go to shows once in a while, I live good. Two of us live together in one little apartment, and we're making out fine.

In fact, I was saving money, you know. In those days the prices, you know, you could live on \$10 a week. He asked me how much I was making, and I told him. I don't know if he believed me or not. (chuckle)

He says: Well, I could use you if you want to stay. Well, I wanted to hear other things--how much money he was going to pay me. (chuckle) Just to stay.

He says: I can go as high as \$35 a week. Well, I thought it over, and I figured for that little difference to go to live in New York and stay by yourself and do your own cooking and everything, I might as well stay.

So I says: I'll think it over. I'll let you know in the morning.

So he says: Well, I wish you would think it over, and I'd like you to come back.

So I told him: I'm coming in in the morning.

This was Sunday, and I called up the people in New York I'm not coming back. They felt bad about it, because, you see, you get a new helper and it takes a long time to get used to it, especially Jewish groceries.

You wouldn't believe that, but those people, every one of them that dealt there, came in with a couple of dollars and some of them five dollars for a present for Passover.

Interviewer: To the store?

Mr. Nord: To me.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Mr. Nord: You know, I made a couple of hundred dollars there. I says I was a millionaire there overnight with \$200 tips. But that's the way they are there.

Interviewer: Why tips?

Mr. Nord: Well, I worked there, you see. I used to deliver their orders; I waited on them. I was maybe nice to them, I don't know. And for Passover they give you a tip, just like Christmas you give presents here.

Interviewer: I don't give somebody you works in a store any presents, though.

Did you remember how Jewish grocer was different than other grocers at the time? Do you remember what you sold?

Mr. Nord: Well, we sold Passover, partifular stuff for Passover, and we sold buttermilk, cream you know, fruit, and everything. Here we were selling meats and everything. In New York we didn't sell meats; meats was in a butcher shop, and groceries was in a grocery shop.

Interviewer: In other words it was similar to any other grocer, but it was kosher.

Mr. Nord: Yeah, and it was a little different, it was a little different. I'll tell you, the New York Jewish population, they were use to different likes.

Interviewer: Than here, you are talking about.

Mr. Nord: Yes. Yes. Delicatessen and everything.

Interviewer: But you didn't sell delicatessen?

Mr. Nord: No. No.

Interviewer: That's the only thing left in terms of Jewish grocery stores are Jewish delicatessens.

Mr. Nord: That's right. See, all the other ones either went into business or went to work for A&P or the supermarkets.

Interviewer: Now, how long did you work with your uncle?

Mr. Nord: Four years, all in all.

Interviewer: This was pretty much the meat business?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, most of it was meat business. Then I made up my mind and I told him: There's no future here. You know, your paying me as much as you can, but I can't work for that. I got to look out for myself. So I opened a store. I made out very good.

Interviewer: Now, where did you open your store?

Mr. Nord: I opened 13th and Walnut. And I'll tell you about the American people--they are terrific. When they like you, they like you. They patronize you, and you treat them right, they know it.

Interviewer: How long were you in this store?

Mr. Nord: I was there 11 years, and I made out very good until the Depression came. Unfortunately, I invested all my profit in the Stock Market, and that went, and with the store together.

Interviewer: Was this the kind of meat market you are familiar with now? High quality meat?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, I sold high-quality meat there. And it was a poor neighborhood--well, middle class. It wasn't as bad as it is now there. Nice families living there. You know, one or two people but--- And nice colored people, very nice. And

they came in and they bought, no trouble, everything was fine.

Interviewer: Were you living with your family, your mother?

Mr. Nord: Yes, but between time, I got married.

Interviewer: Was your wife from Wilmington?

Mr. Nord: She was. She passed away since. She came from Hungray. That's a neighbor of ours there (chuckle). In other words, it used to belong to the same country, Austria, Hungray, Poland, all them.

Interviewer: Now, after the depression, what did you do then?

Mr. Nord: Well, I opened a store 10th and Adams. I saved a little money where I could, you know, left over that I had, and bought new fixtures and opened a real nice store. At that time it was a real nice store. Unique fixtures, and nice vegetables, all the best groceries. But it didn't go over too good. You know, there was a new man there and during the Depression. And you know, everybody was afraid for a new man was going to rob them or something. It wasn't till maybe a year later--I almost lost every cent that I had--but people started to come in, just show their faces. Walk in, maybe buy something, and walk out. After a while, things started to look up pretty good for me. You know, people started to talk to each other: Hey, there's a pretty nice man there on the corner. (chuckle) He's got good stuff, too. And you know, things like that spreads around a neighborhood. And after a while, I made a good living. In fact, I started to save a dollar.

Interviewer: You sold just meat there?

Mr. Nord: No, I had vegetables, and groceries, and meat. When I was on the east side, I only had meat.

Interviewer: Now, how long did you stay in that particular spot? That was your last store?

Mr. Nord: That was my second and last store. I left there in 1966. That's when it started getting tough again. The neighborhood changed, they started tearing the building down, it was nobody to do business with any more because the people moved away. And I had some pretty good delivery business, but not enough.

Interviewer: And then you retired after that?

Mr. Nord: Yes.

Interviewer: Have you been active, by the way, in organizations?

Mr. Nord: Well, I belong to B'nia B'rith, and not too much. Not too much. I like to play pinochle and go fishing.

Interviewer: Fishing?

Mr. Nord: Yeah, I fish every week.

Interviewer: Well, I want to thank you very much, Mr. Nord.

Mr. Nord: Your welcome. You don't offend.