



## **Citation for this collection:**

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Of the original 252 audio-recordings in this collection, 212 of these tapes were transcribed around the time of the original recordings (between 1966 and 1978). In 2012, Cabbage Tree Solutions was contracted to create transcriptions for the remaining tapes. Corrections to and clarifications for all transcriptions are welcome, especially for names and places. Please contact Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, for questions. [askspecref@winsor.lib.udel.edu](mailto:askspecref@winsor.lib.udel.edu)

Interview with Mr. Isidore Heil, Polish immigrant and Delaware businessman,  
August 1969 by Myron L. Lazarus.

Q This is a recording of the Oral History Project and we're interviewing  
Mr. Isidore Heil and the interviewer is Myron Lazarus. Mr. Heil, when  
were you born?

[The tape is unintelligible from 0050 on counter to 0718; the volume is ex-  
tremely low and when voices can be heard at all, there is such a fluttering  
in the voices as to make comprehension impossible. Apparently this was due  
to some malfunctioning of the recorder. After 0718 the speed of the tape  
is changed to 3-3/4 (from 7 1/2); the volume is increased and the flutter is  
less noticeable.]

Q Let's go on into your experiences in Delaware. And where did you live  
when you first came to Delaware, in Wilmington?

A I lived with my brother Max on East 4th Street, 300 East 4th Street.  
And I went to school for about two months and I wanted to go out and  
earn some money, I didn't want to go to school.

Q Um hm. You were 17, 18?

A 17 years old. So my brother had a brother-in-law in Newark, New Jersey  
and I went to work there, and I worked there for two years in Newark,  
New Jersey. I remember when I started in I was getting \$6.00 a week,  
and that's from Monday 'til Satur . . . 'til Friday at noon. I paid  
\$4.00 a week board and had to clothe myself. But they . . . I had  
board and room and they washed my clothes and everything for \$4.00 a  
week. Very fine people.

Q Um hm. What kind of work did you do? What was the work?

A Also in a liquor store. We used to bottle . . . big wholesale house,  
big wholesale house, one of the largest in the state of New Jersey.  
He was a brother-in-law of my brother's. And we had to produce a cer-  
tain amount of work every day. I mean, you have to do a certain amount  
of work every day. I worked for a year, then I became foreman and I  
got \$9.00 a week, which was considerable money at that time. That was  
in 1910. Then about 1912 I decided to come to Wilmington again. And  
I was with my brother Max for about a year. But my brother [sounds  
like "Ed"] wanted to go to Europe to visit the parents, so I took charge  
of his place of business until he got back. Then he got back, then I  
went in . . . I had another brother-in-law here that was located 4th and  
Scott. He had a little wholesale place, and I went as partners with  
him. I was there about three months and I didn't like the business very  
much so . . . we used to bottle beer and sell whiskey, but I didn't like  
it too much. I thought I'd like to own a grocery business. I used to  
deliver every . . . once a week to a man on the east side a case of beer.

We had a regular route that we covered. And I used to leave it in his store and I always saw a lot of people there. And all of a sudden I go there one day and I see it's closed, by a constable closed, like bankrupt. And I knew the fellow was doing a lot of business, I couldn't understand why they closed him up. I got to talking to him, he says he had a competitor that he was competing with, he was buying stuff at 10¢ and selling it for five, trying to put the other guy out of business and the first thing you know, he was out. I thought I'd like to take the place over, open it up, and take him in as a . . . I had a 60% interest and gave him a 40% interest. And I bought what was left for \$246.00. I was there about six months, we were doin' pretty good. That was already beginning of '14, the war in Europe started then, and things got pretty busy around town. A lot of people came to work for DuPont Company and Penns Grove, making powder and the east side became alive with boarders. And we handled meat and groceries. We did very well. And I opened another store at 5th and Union and put my partner in 5th and Union and I stayed at 7th and Lombard. Then I opened another place 22nd and Market and I put my younger brother in there, who was here already. And late 1916, the war was really brewing very heavy and it was hard to get managers. So I decided to sell out. So the fellow that I started with in the first store, I sold him my interest and sold the other two stores, and I was looking for a liquor place. So in 1916, when I got out of the grocery business, I bought a place 405 King Street from a man by the name of Samson Stern, he had a liquor store. I bought the building, bought the place . . . I forgot to tell you, when I started in the grocery business, I had \$700.00. When I sold out in 1916, I had \$7500.00. So I was a rich man then. I bought the place, I think I paid \$25,500.00. The bank give me a mortgage and my brother signed me a note and I bought the place. And I was there in business from December 1916 to July the 1st, 1919 when Prohibition came in.

Q2 [Unidentified female interviewer] Was this a retail liquor store?

A Retail. When Prohibition came in, I closed up and I rented the store to the American Stores. In the meantime . . .

Q You mean American Pacific.

A . . . when I was in the liquor business, I knew it was gonna go dry, so I bought a place on French Street, a lot and I built a building, figuring on going in the automobile business, in the accessory business. And when we closed up, I had the place completed, and my brother Max says to me, "Look, what do you . . . Sam is not doing anything,"--he was also working for . . . he had a place of his own and it went out, it went dry, he said, "why don't we all go in the automobile business?"

Q But this was mainly your idea?

A Oh, yeah. So I said all right.

Q2 What made you go from liquor to automobiles?

A Huh?

Q2 Why did you choose automobiles?

Q Because, well liquor . . .

A In those days that was a new, coming business, you know. I had an automobile already, I had a couple of automobiles by that time, and I figured automotive business was the business. So I . . . we got together . . . my brother owned a couple of buildings on 11th Street and we bought three more buildings, tore 'em down and built the place. 11th Street was a little gravel road. Across the street from our place was a stable.

Q Now, what's the year, now?

A 1919.

Q O.K.

A And while we were building, 11th and Tatnall, I had the building completed on French Street, and we started in there temporary 'til the place was built, 11th and Tatnall. Then we took on the Chandler agency and the Cleveland agency and the Apperson agency . . . you probably don't remember those automobiles.

Q What are these cars? Automobiles?

A Automobiles. And we handled a few accessories. We had a couple of gas pumps outside, those that you work with your hand, like this, you don't remember that.

Q I've seen pumps like that.

A And many things I remember. We also handled tires. Those days there was . . .

Q Well, this was where the current Keil . . .

A That's right.

Q . . . Company is, um hmm.

A And we . . . you would put tires on on the street. You didn't have no place like a garage. And when you couldn't take a tire off a wheel, you took a hacksaw and sawed it off and put a tire on it.

Q Is that a solid rubber tire?

A No, no, they were a tire with a tube.

Q And you sawed it off?

A Take a hacksaw and saw it off of the wheel. We had no tools, those days, you know, you didn't . . . and those days they were [sounds like "clinchers"], it wasn't easy to take off. You had to use tire irons and hammers and things like that. Well, we were doing that for a while.

Q Did you do that yourself, too?

A Everybody worked. We'd go in there 8:00 and stay 'til 10:00 at night.

Q What kind of cars were these? You mentioned the various companies.

A Five cars . . . Chandler . . .

Q What kind of a car was that?

A Chandler car? It was a regular automobile, Chandler, manufactured in Cleveland, Ohio. And they made Cleveland, a Cleveland car, and a Chandler car. Their cars sold for about under \$1,000.

Q Was this a luxury car, this Chandler?

A No, no, it was a class of a Buick and a Studebaker. And there was so many different makes then that you wouldn't remember 'em. There was 200 different makes of automobiles in those days. Everybody was manufacturing something. And we handled accessories. When you got automobiles in those days, they didn't have any accessories on them, such as horns, we put on a Klaxon horn or a Pauch [sp?] horn, shock absorbers, spare tires . . . they had no trunk in the back. It was like a luggage rack in the back and you bought yourself a box and that was the trunk in the back. And on the side you put luggage racks if you wanted to travel. Well, we sold an awful lot of that to a lot of dealers. We were in the new car business for about a year and a half and the particular car we handled, Chandler, had a lot of mechanical trouble. And I got tired of fixing rears in cars. We had mechanics . . . so I decided to go into the used car business. So we gave up the agency about 1921 . . .

Q But you had other agencies, didn't you? You mentioned other companies.

A Yeah, Apperson car. They stopped making the Apperson car [inaudible]. We started in the used car business and we did very well in the used car business. I used to go to Philadelphia about three days a week, buy cars, bring them down, sell them. We were doing very well in the used car business. And about 1926 I decided to go back into new car business and we took on the Nash agency. We had the Nash agency . . . we gave up the used car, but we had the Nash agency 'til March of 1930. Then the Chrysler was available. And I give up the Nash agency and took on the Chrysler. And we had the Chrysler from 1930 to about 1961, when we give up the new car business. We added different lines to our business, such as air conditioning, home appliance, a lot of other things.

Q Furnace, oil . . .

A Yeah. The reason we give up the Chrysler, we had a place on Delaware Avenue, a big place, Delaware Avenue and Adams, and the state wanted it for the freeway. So we had to sell it to 'em, or it would have been condemned. Then we built a place on the Governor Printz Boulevard for our service station and the state had to have that. So in order to relocate, it would take about a half a million dollars to relocate, so

we decided to go out of the new car business. And we've added different lines to our business. I retired and I . . . when we give up the Chrysler agency, I retired. And I have been retired since.

Q So cars are your line.

A Well, no, I . . . I was president of the company, and I myself made it up years before that that at 70, a man retires, with a pension. I didn't want anybody to hang on over 70. So we made it an agreement that a person reaching 70, he must retire. And I retired . . . in fact, I retired a little bit before I was 70. I wanted to get out of it. I didn't . . . when you get to be around 70, you don't want a lot of aggravation and things like that, so the best thing is to get out. And I got out and my brother got out, too, my brother Sam. And the business carried on. I had a son-in-law that was in there, nephews in there, and we turned it over, a little bit, to different interests, and they're still in there. And I retired. But I kept myself active. I do a lot of fishing, I play golf three times a week and I like to do some fishing and I do a lot of trap shooting. A lot of trap shooting.

Q Well, tell us about your experience in Israel.

A Well, when Israel was trying to get up a team in 1961 for the Maccabeaus, they . . .

Q Now, what is the Maccabeaus, is this part of the . . .

A Maccabeaus is the same as the Olympics. There was 2200 contestants in Israel. So they picked me as one . . . we had to qualify for the team and they sent us to Fort Benning, Georgia for qualification. And out of many of 'em, there was six of 'em taken. I was one of the six. Incidentally, there aren't too many Jewish trap shooters in this country. And I done a lot of trap shooting. I won the state championship here five times and I've shot a lot. In fact, I shot yesterday. Yesterday afternoon I went to Delaware County, Pennsylvania and I shot. I still shoot. I'd like to show you some of my guns when you're through.

Q I'd like to see them. Why do you . . . why did you become interested in that?

A Why, I'll tell you why. When I was on King Street, I had a man working for me and he was a great trap shot. Says to me one day, "Would you like to go to a shoot?" And I said yes. I was always interested in shooting a little, so he took me to Maryland, about 30 miles away from here, and there was a 75-bird match. I didn't have a gun, he had a gun, and when he got through, then I shot. And I got the bug. From that time on, I bought a gun and I kept shooting. And I must have shot at least 3/4 of a million rounds of ammunition in my time.

Q Sounds like it's a good interest, it's . . .

A I shot at the Grand American . . . a lot of shoots . . . a lot of places. And I used to . . . I like fishing and I have my own boats.

I used to go out fishing. It kept me busy, and I also was very much interested in the Y.M.C.A.

Q The Y.M.C.A.?

A Um hum. I'm still a member there. I've been a member since 1922. I was on the team in the Y.M.C.A. for about 30 years, volleyball and handball. We played in several tournaments. We have a terrific team here. And I still belong to 'em, but I quit the Y.M.C.A. about seven or eight years ago. I got bored with that stuff. But I'm still a member.

Q You remember Wilmington quite back. What memories do you have when you first came to Wilmington, as a city and so forth?

A Well, I can tell you, when I first came to Wilmington, there was only 75 Jewish families here to start with.

Q And they were located where?

A I'll tell you where most of 'em lived. Second Street and on Washington Street up as far as 4th Street--you know where the old Bichor Cholum [sp] Society was? The Topkises lived there . . . between 2nd and 3rd on Washington Street on the west side of the street. And that's where most of them lived. The Topkis family was pretty prominent in those days. And I can tell you this, I knew at least 90% of them by their first name, believe it or not. 75 families, you go to the same shul, and you get to know everybody.

Q That was the temple you belonged to, the shul?

A Adas Kodesch, 6th and French. My brother was on the building committee when they built it.

Q This was Max Neil.

A Max, yeah.

Q What else about the city do you remember, not just the Jewish community, I mean was it more of a thriving city or . . .

A Yeah, I think it was. Very nice little city, very nice city.

Q Besides the temple and the "Y" and your sports interest, did you belong to any other community organizations?

A I belonged to the Federation all the time. I was director of the Federation for many years.

Q You were a director of the Federation.

A And I was also chairman of the nominating committee for about 10 years. I was also on the special gift committee many years.

Q How, this is the Jewish Federation.

A Yeah.

Q I see.

A And I'm still a member of it. And the Community Center, when it was first organized, I was a member and I'm still a member.

Q2 You had said that you didn't know about anti-Semitism until you came to the United States?

A He knew very little of anti-Semitism.

Q2 Here neither?

A Ma'am?

Q2 Not in the United States either?

A Well, I haven't noticed very much, I'll tell you the truth. I'll tell you, I associate a lot with Gentile people in the sport, you know, and I notice very little anti-Semitism. I really . . . some of my very best buddies, friends, are Gentiles. Always have been. I have very many nice Jewish friends, too, I associate with, but most of my friends, like at the Y.M.C.A. you'll find mostly Gentiles. And some of the Jewish boys played there, like . . . several of them who were on our team since died . . . Al Jacobs that built these houses, Al Jacobs, these apartment houses here on . . . he used to play with us and he's since died. Several of 'em.

Q When did you meet your wife?

A When I met my wife? When I first came to Wilmington. Her parents were very friendly with my brother Max and after I was here about two or three weeks, they came to visit us. And I knew the girl very well and I went away from Wilmington for two years and when I got back I went in the grocery business. I needed a cashier--we sold for cash only. And I met her on the street, on Market Street sometime, you know, and I said, "Would you like to be a cashier?" She said, "Yeah." So she came in, she was cashier for us for about two years and I married her. That's how I got revenge on her.

Q She was from where?

A And this is our 53rd anniversary of being married. See that picture over there? That's our fifty . . .

Q When is your anniversary, though, you mean this week? Which is . . . you mean this year.

A Our anniversary was the 29th day of December.

Q This year is your 50th anniversary.



A This . . . 53 years ago . . . this is my immediate family. See, this is my daughter, one daughter, here's another one . . . no, this is my . . . Sybil, June, this is her daughter . . . this and this is my great-grandchildren . . . there are my grandchildren, this one, this one, this one, this one, this one and this one. This is my son-in-law, Mr. Harris.

Q Beautiful family.

Q What was your wife's maiden name?

A Goodman. That was taken right here three years ago. I have two great-grandchildren and eight grandchildren.

Q Um hum. Well, what are you doing with yourself now?

A Well, about nine, nine-thirty, I go to the store. I got a lot of my own things to look after. I have my office there and my friends come to visit with me. At 12:00 I come home, have lunch, take a nap, go back about 2:00, and about 4:00 I'm back home. Then I go . . . the kids come over, the grandchildren, I go to see them, that's the way we spend our time.

Q Um hum. Why do you think the Keil family has been so successful here in . . . what do you think is the reason for it?

A Well, I don't find any particular reason with the exception we always had a pretty good name, we always give 'em good service and . . . why do you think Wilmington Dry Goods is successful, because they got good service. I'll tell you, when I opened on King Street, I can't think of this fellow's name, he was manager for J. K. . . .

Q Kuhn?

A No, that was before Kuhn, long before. I'm talking about 1916, 53 years ago. How old are you?

Q 43.

A So you know . . . but . . .

Q What about him?

A Kuh?

Q What about him?

A Well, he was successful because he never went back on his word. When you bought merchandise in his place, you didn't like it, you took it back and got your money back.

Q Um hum. Has this been the policy of Keil's?

A That's been our policy. The customer was never wrong. I used to tell

then it didn't make any difference if a man bought a set of tires and went from here to Delaware City and came back and says one of his tires blew out and we knew right away that it was cut in half, don't argue with him. Give him a new tire. 'Cause if you didn't, you'd never sell him again.

[END OF TAPE AND INTERVIEW]