LEVINE: This is David B. Levine. I’m interviewing Dr. Ben Williamowsky for the Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project. It’s Thursday April 28th [2016] at about 11:20 am, and we’re sitting on the porch of Dr. Ben’s apartment in Leisure World, apartment 414 at 15101 Interlachen Drive, [Silver Spring, MD]. Dr. Ben, first, thank you very much for being willing to be part of this interview for the history project. I know that you spent a small portion of your life on Capitol Hill and that’s the part that we’ll focus on. But before that, don’t you give us a brief overview of your life from when you came over from Lithuania until you arrived on Capitol Hill. As many dates and specifics as you can put in fine.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Yes, my father left Lithuania about a year and a half before we did. [Chaim Williamowsky, Ben’s father, came to the US in 1925; Ben, his mother and siblings followed in 1927.] By we, I mean my mother and two older siblings. At that time, you had to show that you had a job where you could care for your other people that you brought over. And he was preceded by immigrating to the U.S. by two brothers, one who was in Texas and one was in North Carolina.

It’s a long story, I won’t go into it how we got to North Carolina, but they had a position for a rabbi in Hendersonville, North Carolina, which is the western part in the mountains near Ashville. From then because now another child was born and the salary for a rabbi—teacher, ritual shochet, (ritual killing of the animals for food). What else did he do?—cantor, teacher, etcetera, etcetera—he did it all. He needed a better position. At that time he was Orthodox and everything was Orthodox or Reform. There was a reform movement that had started before but there was no such thing as a Conservative although some of the modern orthodox people seemed to accept what they called the Modern Orthodox. Some of the—not the tenets—but some of the practices that Conservative Judaism is doing today. And my father was one of those, but he was Orthodox. And he came to a synagogue in Durham, North Carolina, and at that he added English to his extensive vocabulary. He spoke about seven languages. English was not one of them but he bought books anywhere he could find them, at junkyards or whatever, and taught himself English. And when he got to Duke University in Durham he hung out at the library, the School of Divinity with Professor Randolph Few who later became the president of Duke University. They became good friends.

LEVINE: How do you spell his last name?—Do you know?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Few, F E W. Randolph Few. As a matter of fact, he wrote a—if I can just interject a funny story to that—he wrote a book. He picked my father’s brain on things about the Old Testament. Duke is a Methodist school. And one of the people he recognized in the book was my father: ‘To my Dear Friend Rabbi Charles Williamowsky’. His name was Chaim. And my father said, “What, why did you put Charles Williamowsky?” He said, “Well, down here that sounds better.” So he says, “Well, if I write a book and I put your name in it, I’m going to have it dedicated to Rev Randolph Few.” [David laughs]
LEVINE: Your father spelled his name C H A I M?

WILLIAMOWSKY: C H A I M.—And, he was in Durham. And at that time in addition to his other things that a rabbi in that area did, he was also a mohel. He was a very well known mohel. I’ll tell you more about that when we come here.

LEVINE: A mohel is the person who does the circumcision.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Ritual circumcision. And in North Carolina he did that. For anyone who was a Jewish boy born he did the circumcision travelling from one part of the state to the other. Sometimes he got into south Virginia or to the northern part of South Carolina. One time a pediatrician cousin to someone who was being circumcised in Durham was at the brit milah, that’s the circumcision ceremony, and he saw my father and he said, “Rabbi, you’re good at this. How many of these do you do a week?” My father said, “A week?” He said, “I’ll tell you, I’m lucky if I do 10, 12 a year.” He said, literally he said to him, Dr. Douglas was his name, “Rabbi, you’re snipping away a fortune.” [David laughs] He said, “Go, you must have a committee in the synagogue, an orthodox community, etcetera that looks for jobs for people.” He said, “I’m going to look and you look also, and we’re going to get you up to our area.”

So from there we moved to Alexandria [Virginia]. By that time there were six of us, six children. We moved to Alexandria to Agudas Achim [the synagogue] which was in historic old town Alexandria [508 Wolfe Street]. I don’t know how familiar people are with that part of the city, but it was right next door to the [US Supreme Court Justice] John Marshall home, which has been preserved as an historic site. The synagogue was a mirror image to the Marshall home. Unfortunately, they tore that synagogue down and built condos. But, it was a synagogue. We lived on the second floor. The first floor and the basement were classrooms. The third floor was a custodian’s quarters. And after that there was a big tower. You could walk up to the tower and you could see all of Washington. All of Washington and all of northern Virginia which at that time was not anything beyond maybe Arlington and Alexandria.

And then as things were—a rabbi who had preceded my father in Alexandria had come to Washington and he left the synagogue he was with and he wanted to start his own synagogue. Several rabbis did at that time. One not far from Capitol Hill, Rabbi Green in Northeast Washington. But anyway, he told my father that they’re looking for a rabbi in Southeast because Rabbi Loeb who was there at the synagogue at [Ninth] and Pennsylvania Avenue is retiring. So, because of most of the brit milahs, he became famous; believe me you could talk to people today and they will remember my father for being a—some person put it very cleverly—“A rabbi/mohel.” [David laughs] He became, as I said, well known in most of the—you know … Washington with all of the hospitals—and in those days, brit milahs were done on the eighth day; it’s always done on the eighth day. But the child would be in the hospital until then. Now they send
them home the next day, sometimes the same day. Anyway they needed a rabbi, so that’s how we got to Capitol Hill, to Southeast Washington.

LEVINE: So now, you were born when?

WILLIAMOWSKY: I was born in 1925.

LEVINE: And when you left Lithuania you were?

WILLIAMOWSKY: I was one year and eight months old.

LEVINE: And then you were in North Carolina from when you were a year and eight months old until you were?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Until I was five.

LEVINE: Five and then to Alexandria.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Five was Durham, North Carolina and then Alexandria was 1937 when I was 12 because I had my bar mitzvah in Alexandria. From there we moved to Washington. The school that I went
to—each school was so different, from North Carolina, to Alexandria, to Washington. A very interesting side story, if I may, may I tell you this side story?

LEVINE: Sure.

WILLIAMOWSKY: In North Carolina if you show that you’re a good student you get A’s no matter what you do, if you’re picked out as a good student. I even got an A in penmanship. And my penmanship is the world’s worst. It was then and it still is, and it will remain so. But anyway, when we came to Washington the school system was a little more advanced. I can remember that Eastern High School where I entered high school in Washington, was difficult, their classes in physics and math and algebra, and chemistry, were so far ahead of what I had known before. Plus a strange thing called Latin which I didn’t know existed.—So the first time after, the first report card—and incidentally I was advanced a year further than I should be because Alexandria only had 11 years of school. So immediately I was a junior in high school when I should have been in ninth grade. So when I came home with my first report card, I got a B for the first time on my report card. My father went berserk. He said, “You’re turning into a bum. You come here and you go down to a playground and you play basketball with the kids and baseball and you’re not—no more. You’re going to come home and you’re going to study.” To him that was the end of the world that you should get a B. As it turned out either he tempered his feelings or I got less Bs. In Alexandria the school system was different. Eastern High School, was to me at that time a very wonderful school. The teachers were marvelous.

LEVINE: So you came to Washington. You were 14, 15 at the time.

WILLIAMOWSKY: It was 1939, April ’39. I’d just turned 14.

LEVINE: And where did you all live?

WILLIAMOWSKY: We lived at 1437 Potomac Avenue SE, which is more toward 15th Street, but between Pennsylvania Avenue and 14th Street which intersected there with Pennsylvania Avenue. And the eastern part went towards the Anacostia River, very, very close to 15th Street.

LEVINE: What kind of house was it?

WILLIAMOWSKY: They called them then row houses. They were all attached and they had porches. The porches were, you could go in the porches and sit—it was very small—and meet your neighbors that way. In the back there was a tiny little yard and steps to go down into the yard where you took the trash, etcetera. In that neighborhood, in Alexandria and Southeast Washington particularly, there were a lot of Jewish people. On our block there was a family across the street from us had a grocery store. There was
another one down the street that had a grocery store. I still am in touch sometimes with a couple of their siblings.

LEVINE: Do you remember the names of either of those people or the locations of the grocery stores?

WILLIAMOWSKY: The grocery store was at 14th and Potomac on the corner as it intersected with Pennsylvania Avenue. The Shuster family.

LEVINE: SCHUSTER?

WILLIAMOWSKY: SCHUSTER. As a matter of fact, one of the boys, I think it’s Robert Schuster—I’m not so good with names, but I should remember.—He became a correspondent for the Los Angeles Times, Washington correspondent. He then was with the London Times. I visited with him in London. Now he’s retired in Los Angeles. Some of his siblings, a couple of them I still see. Across the street from us was the Gordon family grocery store. Around the corner was a very well known man. His name was Commander Brendler. Commander Brendler was a commander in the U.S. Navy. And he was the director of the U.S. Navy Band that had a concert on Eighth Street SE every weekend. Commander Brendler was of a nice family.—His children, the older girl Alma is still alive in the Hebrew Home. His son passed away. And I see the grandchildren occasionally.

LEVINE: Brendler, B R E N D...  

WILLIAMOWSKY: B R E N D L E R.

LEVINE: Was that Navy or was he the Marine Commandant?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Marine. That’s the Marine Barracks.

LEVINE: So the concert would have been every Friday at what they call Tattoo.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Every Friday. Exactly right.

LEVINE: We still attend that. Let’s go back to the house. The house was a two-story house.

WILLIAMOWSKY: The house was a two-story house. It had one bedroom on the second floor. No bedrooms on the first floor. One place on the second floor had a little screened in area, something like where we’re sitting now, but very tiny. There was a cot there. We had a lot of children.

LEVINE: How many were you?
WILLIAMOWSKY: There were six of us, but my brother at that time had stayed behind us in North Carolina where he finished high school. Then he went on to college at North Carolina State. He stayed there. So really we had five there. Four sisters and myself.

LEVINE: How many bedrooms were there?

WILLIAMOWSKY: That is an interesting point. I’ll tell you why. I’m glad you brought that up. There was one, two, three bedrooms. The three bedrooms—there were four counting the porch that had a place in there. But my sisters, my parents, and we never locked the door. Never ever was the door locked. That may have been a modus operandi for everything in those days. The last person in slept on the day bed in the foyer. There was a foyer. The last person in. So you go upstairs you see, is there a bed empty, no, so you slept on the porch. It was not a fancy house.

LEVINE: So there were two sisters?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Four sisters.

LEVINE: Four sisters and you.

WILLIAMOWSKY: No, one of my sisters and my brother passed away at an early age.

LEVINE: So you would have been eight if your brother had come with you, right? Four sisters, you and your parents.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Yes.

LEVINE: So you were seven in the house; seven living in the house.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Yeah. My brother was, let’s see, my sister was two years older, the oldest siblings that came together from Europe, and my brother was five years older, almost six years older.

LEVINE: So you shared the bedroom with your sisters, or you had your own bedroom.

WILLIAMOWSKY: No, no. The last one upstairs was the screened in porch.

LEVINE: Right, but regardless of gender.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Regardless. There were some funny stories about my sisters, some of which I related in my late sister’s funeral just this past February.

LEVINE: Oh, I’m sorry.
**WILLIAMOWSKY:** My sisters, they were affectionately known as The Sisters. They had started to develop some ties when we still lived in Alexandria. Ties with sororities, Jewish sororities. They met a lot of people at that time, so they were very happy to move to Washington.

**LEVINE:** Uh huh, and your dad was the rabbi.

**WILLIAMOWSKY:** He was the Rabbi at the Southeast Shul.

**LEVINE:** And that was about five blocks …

**WILLIAMOWSKY:** That was at [Ninth Street] and we were at 14th. Up and down Pennsylvania Avenue going from that point all the way down to Eighth Street. Many of them were Jewish families, there were so many. There were the Jewish families plus Tony Torre. He was an Italian friend of mine. We became friends in high school, and he once said to me, “Let’s see, on one side of me is Saul Gordon. On the other side is Solly Iroff. Do I have to change my name from Torre?” [Interviewer laughs]

**LEVINE:** I grew up on a block that was all Irish and Italian except for us.

**WILLIAMOWSKY:** Again, the Jewish people they went down the block. It’s interesting that in the block on Pennsylvania Avenue between 14th and 15th there were two cleaning and tailor shops. Two of them owned by Jewish people who were very good friends of each other. And they were on the same block. It was—I don’t know, maybe I was not mature enough to understand whether there was rivalry or not. I just knew their kids all got along together. Were always together. Then as you went further toward Eighth Street the famous place of business which was recently in the paper because of a huge fire, Frager’s. Frager’s for their flooring and hardware, etcetera. And I kept somewhat of a relationship with one of the Frager boys who had a condo in Ocean City where we had one. I’d see him on the beach. Frager’s was a very well known one. Then the Bobb’s Liquor, that was at 11th Street. That was a very well-known liquor store. In that area I think he may have been the only liquor store. Most of the stores that sold alcoholic beverages were also grocery stores at the same time. His was as well. Then as you got down toward Eighth Street there was a kosher butcher, Mr. Silbert. Silbert’s may still be in business although three of their sons have not survived. They eventually moved up to Tuckerman Street in Northwest Washington.

**LEVINE:** They’re not there. Was Mangialardo’s, the Italian deli, opened yet?

**WILLIAMOWSKY:** No.

**LEVINE:** So they’re a little later. How large was the congregation?
WILLIAMOWSKY: Oh my, let’s see. When we got there, one of the things they wanted my father to do was to build up some interest, because I remember coming to services on a Friday night or Saturday and you had trouble getting a quorum, a minyan, ten men. At that time women weren’t counted [as part of the minyan] and very few came anyway. It was Orthodox and there was a machita. You know what a machita is? That’s a separation between the women and the men. My father being an Orthodox rabbi decided as he was following Rabbi Loeb who was a very, very nice gentleman, to do the same.

LEVINE: L O E B?

WILLIAMOWSKY: L O E B. He lived in the neighborhood for quite a while and was a good friend. He stayed on, I think, to do some teaching. But my father said the future of the congregation is attracting young people. So he used to have second services on Friday night, after the first, what you call the religious service. Young people would come there and they would conduct a service. We would do the conducting. One of us would be the rabbi, one would be the cantor, one would give a little devar torah, a little sermon, about whatever. And the place was packed. He got, people began showing up and then afterwards of course, they’d walk to somebody’s house and have a party. But he attracted the young people to the synagogue. Some of the older folks did not like that. They wanted to keep it traditionally the way it was. I can think of some of the people that ran things before he got there. One was the butcher, Mr. Silbert. Another was Mr. Zatz who had a grocery store on 16th Street about two blocks from where we lived.

LEVINE: Zatz?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Z A T Z. I’m still very good friends with his children.

LEVINE: Now when you moved to the Hill you had, at least in conscious memory not counting Lithuania, you had lived in three other places. Do you have any sense of what struck you as different or not different about the Hill?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Well there was more things available for Jewish kids if they wanted to interact with Jewish kids. In the south I had some wonderful, wonderful friends in the south. But except for the two or three families that had grocery stores in what was then the black section. Blacks were not allowed—when you think back to how terrible that was—they were not allowed into the city beyond a certain line after dark.

LEVINE: Now DC was also segregated in those days.

WILLIAMOWSKY: DC was also segregated, yeah.
LEVINE: But it was a different kind of segregation, so talk about that a bit.

WILLIAMOWSKY: I used to, and this was the first time that I had experienced this since I left North Carolina. In North Carolina I would go with—usually when I talk about North Carolina my accent goes to North Carolina …

LEVINE: My son lives in Texas now so I say y’all a lot. [laughs]

WILLIAMOWSKY: When we would go to North Carolina to visit some of my friends I was reminded that—my brother, I don’t think could even throw a baseball. But my whole life was, most of my life as a youngster, was spent playing ball. In Haiti, which was the black section, there were a couple of very well-known grocery stores. The Katz family. The Levy family. Moses Levy became a very well known person in politics later. I would go over to the Katz family. They had a backboard and a basketball in their back yard. We would play basketball. And the black kids from the neighborhood would come and play. I remember at that time saying to my friend Albert Sidney Katz, I said, “God, wouldn’t it be great if they came to Fuller School?” Fuller School was our grade school. They were, each one in his own right – I was going to say in his own skin, but that’s like a double entendre—was a much better athlete. They were much better athletes than we were. And that was my introduction to that. I remember as a youngster when we went to Alexandria saying to, actually to myself, “Gee well maybe they’ll be some black kids there and they’ll have some you know, better schools, better ball teams.” That’s what interested me at the time. But they didn’t. It was still segregated. Not till I went to college.

I’d like to talk about our family. That’s the way the world was. [Unintelligible.] My parents were racist because everybody was. And they suffered from that too with the Russians when they were in Lithuania along with their siblings. I and my brother and sisters, we were not so much, but we still were to some extent. Then our children came along and our children, I will tell you that racism is not in their genes or genre at all.

LEVINE: So now, in DC, how did you experience the racism? You said you could find Jewish kids to play with.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Right. Well, at some point when I joined a Boys Club league, a basketball league in Alexandria. You’re talking about Washington.

LEVINE: In Washington.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Oh in Washington I belonged to the Southeast Boys Club. Occasionally there would be a game which Phil Fox, remember the name. Does it mean anything to you?
LEVINE: No.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Phil Fox was the very well-known referee in the NBA. He was a teacher at Eastern High School and a basketball coach. And he also coached the basketball team at the Southeast Boys Club. He and a guy named Charlie Reynolds. Charlie Reynolds was I guess ahead of his time in that he would invite kids from the black school to come and play a game.

LEVINE: But Eastern itself was segregated. Eastern was an all white high school.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: And the time you were in Capitol Hill extended throughout your—you were in Eastern the whole time?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Yes. Then my father—oh incidentally the other places of business I started before to tell you up and down the block and going down Eighth Street and Ninth Street and Fifth Street the other way, and the Penn Theater which was owned by a Jewish person. The Penn Shoe Store owned by the Bergs who eventually became neighbors of ours here in Maryland. The Jewish merchants, they all had—today I could, if I could really give it some thought, I could tell you who lived on every block. They had a grocery store and a place to live. A place to live in the back of the store. There were no such things as a—oh the Goldenbergs who lived on 11th Street, they did not have a store. Mr. Goldenberg had a route where he sold shoe laces, ties and whatever. But he had a very, very grand house. It’s probably one of the finest houses there now. It’s 11th Street just south of Pennsylvania Avenue. It was like three stories. A large, beautiful house with steps that go up to it.

LEVINE: When you left—I want to stay on the Hill—but when you left the Hill that was still the situation.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Yes.

LEVINE: It had not yet changed.

WILLIAMOWSKY: No, no. The grocery chains had not taken over yet. The people that had successful grocery stores, when that happened then many went into liquor stores. Many of them went into building, like the Sam Eigs and the Kay family.

LEVINE: And so is your guess that that all changed when the Jewish immigration to the suburbs began, or what would have eliminated all that Jewish presence?
WILLIAMOWSKY: That’s what did it. They started moving to the suburbs and the synagogues, you either went to Southeast Hebrew congregation or if you lived closer to the Northeast you went to, we always knew it as Rabbi Green’s Shul at Eighth and something Northeast. And that was it. They tried to start a congregation in Anacostia at one time and it failed. People then started moving out. My father, shall we get to that point yet when we moved, why we left?

LEVINE: Not yet. What kinds of things did you have to leave the community in order to buy? Or was everything available?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Everything was available. And I can very vividly remember on Shabbat when I would go to services with some of my friends, with Saul Goldenberg, whose house I just mentioned and with Abe Duckel, David Tash, et cetera, all of who were children of the merchants. They went to services in the Southeast Shul. We would walk, walk from—with Shabbat] we didn’t ride. We didn’t ride, we didn’t handle money. They were all Orthodox. Some of them, a couple whose parents had businesses, they weren’t as strict as my family was. Myself, the butcher’s son, for instance, maybe one other person. We would walk to Capitol Hill to the Library of Congress. Every Saturday I would go into the Library of Congress and I would get—they had a rack of newspapers from all over. From every place in the world. The U.S. of course. And I would always get the Durham News, and I would read the Alexandria Gazette to see names of old friends. I don’t know whether I dare tell you this, you can bleep this out later if you wish, but one thing that we did, one of the guys talked us into, the Gayety Theater was at Ninth near Pennsylvania Avenue, Ninth and E or whatever it was.

LEVINE: In Northwest.

WILLIAMOWSKY: In Northwest. And there was a guy who was a friend of one of the cohorts who made the trek who would not ride on Saturday. Bernie Tittlebaum was an usher guarding the upper, the second balcony. And the Gayety was a burlesque house. So we used to walk to the burlesque house and we’d go up the steps and Bernie would let us in and we’d sit there until somebody would chase us out. Then we’d walk home.

I’ll tell you one story. I think it’s a priceless story when I look at it now. I guess there are people that would have done this. As we were walking back one day, walking back was still Shabbat. This would have been at about Third and Pennsylvania Avenue. There was a trash can that they had on the thing there. Somebody, one of the kids, a young man, went to throw trash in there, and down at the bottom of it was a twenty dollar bill caught under the trash bin, a twenty dollar bill. Would you believe—here we had these four guys that—of course we stopped at the Library of Congress and we went to the burlesque house and we came back, but we would not handle the money. To this day I can’t believe that this is what
we did. They lifted up the bin. They tilted it and pushed the twenty dollar bill under the thing. One of the guys when we finished services at sundown, we would go to services Saturday also, ran down and we got the twenty dollar bill. It was still there.

**LEVINE:** That’s great. When it wasn’t Shabbat how did you get around or was everything you had to get to within walking distance?

**WILLIAMOWSKY:** Everything was in walking distance. As a matter of fact, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when, you know, the happy time was when the young people would find—would make—their own break in the ceremony. Now they have a designed break. In those days we just went right through. But they’d pick a fairly decent time to do it. We’d walk to Fifth and I and Sixth and I [Streets] because that’s where all the pretty girls were.

**LEVINE:** Northwest.

**WILLIAMOWSKY:** Northwest.

**LEVINE:** That’s where the temple is, where the synagogue is now.

**WILLIAMOWSKY:** Sixth and I is the new location. Down the street was Fifth and I. We would walk there and walk back. We were observant. As a matter of fact, Pete Silbert, the son of the butcher—we had a basketball team that played at the Jewish Community Center. We were good. We had a good team. We were at Eastern High School. He said, “Want to go out for the basketball team?” I said, “We’re not good enough to play.” “Well, let’s go out, we’ll have fun.” Phil Fox was coaching then. So we went out to practice, and they practiced. Then they have, you know in sports they have a cut. They get rid of some of the less talented. They start off with maybe 30 guys. The eventually put it down to 12 or something. We made the first cut. So I said, “The next practice was on Saturday morning.” And I said, “Pete, what are we going to do?” He said, “I don’t know about you, but I know what I’m going to do.” He said, “I don’t want to get killed. I’m going to go to shul and I’m dropping out.” So we dropped out. Not that we would have made the team. I don’t think we would have. That was kind of, again where we were from. We were [the same] as far as food is concerned. I know when I went to Maryland and I did play ball on Saturday, my father used to bring out kosher food from home so I would eat.

**LEVINE:** Were there streetcars or buses?

**WILLIAMOWSKY:** Streetcars. This was our greatest pleasure after school. We could do one of two things. Early on when I got there we used to go to the Virginia Avenue playground. That’s what my father didn’t like because I was turning into a bum. But then we joined the JCC, the Jewish Community Center
at 16th and Q [NW]. You didn’t have to join; you just became a member. This was a ritual. We would come from school, get on the streetcar. I would get on at 14th Street and take the streetcar, get on Pennsylvania Avenue and go all the way through Washington up 14th Street to Q. I would get off and walk the two blocks to the Jewish Community Center. Buses, I didn’t know what a bus was then. It was strictly streetcar travel. Then I would walk back and take the streetcar home.

LEVINE: Do you remember how much they were?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Oh my goodness. You used to get a school pass that was like 50 cents.

LEVINE: Let’s see, you were coming up [from the south]—although Hendersonville is high, Alexandria is certainly hot. How did you experience the changes of season in DC? I assume that you didn’t have air conditioning.

WILLIAMOWSKY: No, we did not have air conditioning. When we later moved, that we’ll talk about later, that was the big thing, we had a couple of window box air conditioners. No we did not have air conditioning. At that time it didn’t seem to bother anybody. I remember in Washington the big thing on Sunday was to pile into the car. My father had a—I think the car at that time was … I don’t think he ever had a new car. They were always used cars. I think it was a Chrysler. We would pile into the car, all the kids. Not my brother. There would be five of us. My mother and father, and we would go down to East Potomac Park. Do you know where that is?

LEVINE: Uh huh.

WILLIAMOWSKY: There’s this golf course there. And there was a swimming pool. A lot of the Jewish families would congregate on the lawn of East Potomac Park. Put down a blanket. Put down their food. They had a holiday. I remember driving there in the car, and the window down and my father—I guess to maybe make us feel not so bad about the weather—would say, “Es is ah machaya.” It’s a pleasure, the wind coming through. The wind may have been 140 degrees, but it just didn’t seem to bother anybody.

LEVINE: You don’t remember any, or do you remember any ethnic clashes in the neighborhood? Any times, because I know in my neighborhood when I grew up, although I was good friends with both the Irish and the Italians, every once and while they would decide that it was time to attack a Jew. Anything like that?

WILLIAMOWSKY: No, not that I ran into. I know when I used to go to the Virginia Avenue playground from my Southeast home, I had a … There was one incident where somebody was challenging me or whatever. But very fortunately there was a guy who later became a patient of mine. I
can’t remember his name, but he was the biggest guy there and told the guy to leave me alone or get out. So I didn’t. I think athletics helped that. I think it helped that because look, I was not the best by far. But that was part of my life. Some of the Jewish kids … And there were a lot of Jewish players at Eastern High School. Mo Schulman who was very, very good is what I can remember. They were all good athletes and I think that maybe contributed to it. I’m sure that people did have incidences. I remember once the older Bobb, Harold Bobb—Jack Bobb played football for San Diego I think—Harold Bobb who didn’t go to college because he had to work in the store. A lot of kids missed college because they had to work in the store. And I remember once that there was a fight on the playground because somebody had said something about Harold Bobb being a Jew or whatever, some disparaging remark. And Harold was no one to challenge. So there was a big to-do. Aside from that I can’t remember anything.

LEVINE: Any other just special memories of those years in your life on the Hill?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Oh absolutely, absolutely there’s some very, very wonderful memories. Next door to the synagogue there was an empty lot in which we’d play something …

LEVINE: That must be where the gas station is. [Reference is to Distad’s BP station at the southwest corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Ninth Streets SE.]

WILLIAMOWSKY: … but an empty lot. The kids in Hebrew school they would run out and play baseball. It used to drive my father batty because in that time he was also the teacher and the mohel and the shulchat, etcetera, etcetera. He would have to get them in off the playground. And there’s one person who lives here, Hymie, Hymie, Hymie Rosenberg—Hymie was one of the kids that my father used to always have to go after to get him to come in to Hebrew school. So I see him once in a while at the synagogue near here. And we always talk about that. That’s something that I remember. And I remember also that my father, as he became very busy as a mohel, really was doing a lot of moving around. Sometimes I would drive him to, if he had about four or five circumcisions on one day, I would drive him to the hospitals. The Garfield Hospital, the Sibley Hospital, Doctors Hospital, the other hospitals, GW [George Washington] Hospital. Anyway, my father, we really in ways had to help him out. I was a helper—to this day I see kids, including Hymie that I helped teach them for their Bar Mitzvah to help my father out. The other things besides being friends with a lot of Jewish kids and the non-Jewish kids.

LEVINE: You said you were driving your father to these appointments. So you must have just been learning how to drive. Do you remember anything about the process of getting a license and learning how to drive in DC and making sense out of driving in DC?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Learning how to drive in DC was so—we had a stick shift.
LEVINE: Right, I still do.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Still do! Stick shift and I—I can’t even remember where I went to get my driver’s license. But it must have been uneventful because I do not remember that at all. Sometimes my father would walk to the hospitals if he had a bris on Saturday. For the Orthodox you don’t do it earlier. You can set it off but only for reasons of illness. I can remember vividly walking with him on a Saturday from Washington; I’m going to try and think of the longest one that we used to take—to Garfield Hospital. Do you know where that is? 13th and Florida Avenue NW. That’s a long schlep. And then very often he would try to arrange it so that the last one would go until dark would come, and we’d get a ride back or take a streetcar back with our pass. I told people that story and they said, “Well you couldn’t have money, where’d you get the money?” You had passes.

LEVINE: Yeah. Any other special memories about the Hill, either people or places?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Well I liked to go to the Library of Congress, maybe more after I left than when I lived there. But the schools all had field trips where you went to the Capitol. I don’t ever remember going at that age to the White House, but I remember going to the Capitol and taking the tour. They still have the school trips for people from all over the country, all over the world. And that’s what I remember about Capitol Hill, plus some friends whose father had a restaurant there. That name too escapes me. There were a lot of Jewish people. If I were to go through that area, the Baums, the Elvovs, the Eisenbergs, the Cohens, the Zatzs, the Schusters, the Gimbles. There may have been 30 Jewish businesses which were almost always a grocery store and a place to live.

LEVINE: That would have extended, from what you were saying, about a ten-block stretch.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Yeah, then going into Northeast. At Stanton Park, you know where that is? Stanton Park, I had a very good friend there, the Tolstois. George Tolstoi became a very well-known doctor and one-time president of District Five B’nai Brith. His son Mel was a musician. In those days in high schools, in high schools and even before high schools, one of the most attractive things to young people, and it attracted Jewish kids, so many Jewish kids. And I think for the same reason that Jewish kids never had a problem with, to play ball. They were part of that group. And I think it’s worth remembering certainly of these orchestras. In my Eastern High School. Mel Tolstoi and Leo Baum and Sal Elvov, and a couple of them who later became well-known for studio orchestras and traveling. One person, Ober was his name, I don’t think he was Jewish, but he was the trumpet player with Ella Fitzgerald. He used to travel. That was the big form of recreation. And so many Jewish people were musicians.

LEVINE: Tolstoi was with O I or O Y?
WILLIAMOWSKY: O I.

LEVINE: Anything else or are we kind of ready to leave the Hill, do you think?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Well, I was always sorry to leave the Hill. Each time we left a place that we’d lived it was, you know, the world was against us. My mother always sat and cried for a few months until she got used to the new place. And the children, the younger ones, didn’t speak to my father for a while because he took them out of their cocoons.

LEVINE: So, you were about 19 when …

WILLIAMOWSKY: When we left Southeast—can I go through that era when we left Southeast?

LEVINE: Yeah, sure.

WILLIAMOWSKY: The reason was that he [my father] left Southeast Hebrew Congregation, which eventually moved to Silver Spring, off of Lockwood Drive and Colesville Road. They have a Hebrew name now but it’s still called by many people, Southeast Hebrew Congregation. My father at that time was asked by Rabbi Levinson, the one who had preceded him at the Agudas Achim, who really talked him into coming to Southeast.

LEVINE: That’s Levit …

WILLIAMOWSKY: Levinson. He and a couple of other people had decided that Washington should have a Yeshiva, a Jewish school. They didn’t have one. People don’t believe that. This was in the late 1940s. Let’s see, how long did we stay in Southeast, whenever it was, in the 40s. When he left Southeast Washington he was asked to be part of this group of people to establish a Jewish school. It was a Jewish day school. Little by little it morphed into the Hebrew Academy and morphed into several other Jewish yeshivas and schools, and that was the beginning of it, and that’s why he gave up the rabbinate.

Somebody said, “Why did you leave Southeast?” And that’s why. That was always his love; I think his main love was teaching. The first Hebrew Academy was in—they moved to northwest, Georgia Avenue and Delafield Place. Then we found a place in northwest Washington and we joined the Beth Sholom Congregation which is now on Seven Locks Road [near Rockville, Maryland], a very fancy place. This was at 16th and Eastern [Avenue NW]. And there are still some of the synagogues along 16th Street. I don’t know if there are any synagogues that reopened or remained in Southeast Washington. I don’t know. Or Northeast Washington. I know that Rabbi Green in the synagogue Eighth and I they call it. Funny how the synagogues got their names. Fifth and I. Eighth and Shepherd. The Beth Sholom was on Eighth and Shepherd.
LEVINE: So, when you moved to Northwest, had you finished high school, had you graduated from high school?

WILLIAMOWSKY: I had graduated high school. I graduated in 1941. So I think that’s probably when we moved.

LEVINE: And then you went to the University of Maryland?

WILLIAMOWSKY: I went to the University of Maryland.

LEVINE: No time in between? You went …

WILLIAMOWSKY: First I went to a—in those days too, that’s a sign of the times and the culture in a home, except for the people that were well-heeled, you didn’t send everybody to college at the same time. And girls, women, God forbid they should go to college! Thank God things have changed and are changing more. Maybe not for—oh I can’t say that. [Laughter] Not for some people. But anyway, my brother who had graduated from North Carolina State, he’d gone back to college. He was still in his last year of college, just before the war. I had not; I had graduated from high school, so I started night school at GW [George Washington University]. I had a job with the B’nai B’rith as a stock clerk until my brother finished. And then he of course, he went to the Army. I then went to college. Four of my sisters never went to college.

LEVINE: Since you left Capitol Hill, have you gone back? Do you keep any relationships?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Let me tell you an interesting story if I may. Many years ago after we had moved, I had a visit from a young friend from Israel. Happened to be the sports editor of the Jerusalem Post. He knew more about sports in Washington and the United States than I knew about it even though he was from an Israeli newspaper. He said—Ronan was his name. He said, you know, what he’d like to do when he came. I said, “Ronan.” I knew his uncle very, very well. He said he was going to make a trip to the States. I said, “You’ll come and stay with us.” Which he did. He said one thing he’d like to do, he’d like to go to a Redskins game. They were playing then at RFK in Northeast. Could I arrange that? I said, “Yes, as a matter of fact I have tickets.” At that time I did. We went to the game. I thought it would be interesting to take him to the game on the subway, which he was not familiar with. I don’t think he’d ever been to the States. We went on the subway down to the Armory and went to the game. I was so impressed that he knew who the ballplayers were. Joe Montana was his favorite and that’s who they were playing, the San Francisco team.
Then when we got out of the stadium the people were waiting to get on the Metro at the Armory. There were thousands, thousands of people. So I said, “Ronan, if you don’t mind walking, let’s walk down to the next station which is Potomac Avenue. While we’re doing that I want to stop and see the house where I lived.” So he said, “Yeah, I’ll do that.” Israelis, you know, you don’t have to tell them to walk, they’re walking forever. So we walked down. I pointed out some places to him. This is where Abe Cohen and Willie Cohen lived, and Abe Cohen now lives in Argentina and I went to visit him. And this is where the Zatz family was, and this was—anyway, I was pointing out all these things to him. Went by the Washington Boy’s Club. I thought he’d be interested in that because he was sports.

And then we got to my house, and I said,” Gee, I would really love to go inside.” So, what the heck. Went to the door and I knocked on the door and a very nice black lady came to the door, very nicely dressed. And she said, “Good afternoon, what can I do for you?” So I said, “So let me tell you why I’m here.” I told her the story of taking my friend from Israel to the ballgame and walking to go to the Metro and then I thought I’d stop at 1437. And I said—I was trying to figure out how would I ask her if I could go into the house. She said, “Would you like to come in and look at the house?” I said, “You know that, absolutely. I was about to ask you that.” I went in to look at the house. It had not changed except in the foyer there was no day bed there, which was always there. The kitchen had been modernized, in fact very beautifully modernized. It had been broken out to the back porch. Remember the porch I said was in the back. It had been broken out and the kitchen was made bigger. We went upstairs and everything really was the same except that it was modern and certainly looked nicer than when we were there. It was very nice of her to do that. That’s the only time I’ve actually been inside that house.

LEVINE: That must have been either in the 70s or the 80s because the Metro opened in ’76. This may be hard to answer, but in that walk did your sense of the neighborhood … What did you sense in terms of difference in the neighborhood?

WILLIAMOWSKY: The houses were still the same. They had not gotten into tearing down houses and building apartments. Maybe they have now, I don’t know. But the houses were the same. When I pointed out the houses that I spoke of and the little mom and pop grocery stores, the grocery stores are not there anymore. But they had been just converted. They were houses now.

LEVINE: So the storefronts, it’s not that they’d become a different kind of shop. They were gone.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Right. There’s a well-known joke about the person who wanted to buy Macy’s and he had built himself up from, you know, a small store where he lived and whatever, etcetera. He came to see Macy’s and he looked it over and he says, “No, I don’t want it.” He says, “You don’t want it. Is the
price too much?” “No, the price is good.” “Why don’t you want it?” “In the back there’s no place to live.” [Laughter] You probably heard the story.

LEVINE: No I hadn’t, but it was clear. [Laughs]

WILLIAMOWSKY: That’s really where the people …

LEVINE: You said that was the only time you came back and went into the house. But have you gone back to the Hill at other times to look around?

WILLIAMOWSKY: I’ve passed by there, you know. And I used to go to Eastern Market quite often. The last time I was there was after the fire they had, they had to rebuild it. And we have friends who bought up a grocery store. They also had a grocery store, now it’s strictly wine and liquors. Very successful on Capitol Hill at Third and Massachusetts Avenue [NE].

LEVINE: Uh huh, yeah, Schneider’s.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Schneider’s, yes.

LEVINE: It’s the major liquor store on the Hill.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Oh yeah. And the father, Abe Genderson—what’s today’s date?

LEVINE: 28th.

WILLIAMOWSKY: 28th. On the second he’s coming back from Florida. His two boys who now, two of the three, run the stores. One of them is an attorney with the big former Edward Bennett Williams law firm. But the two boys turned the grocery, half pint liquor store into really an upscale [store]. They have—and Abe used to drive them nuts, he said, “You know the party they had at the National Press Club? You know how much they must have paid out to get that? $100,000.” I said,” Abe I’m sure they got it back in spades.” Their clients are on the Hill. Most of them.

LEVINE: I saw something somewhere that said you still were in contact with the Eastern High School Alumni Association?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Yeah, that’s interesting. But just to complete the story of the Gendersons, the two boys who were living in Potomac, they sold their houses and they now live on Capitol Hill. Near the Market. I keep saying to myself I want to go back to the Market. I used to love to go there. Do you ever go there?

LEVINE: Oh yeah. We live a block from Eastern Market.
WILLIAMOWSKY: Oh well, yeah that’s right, [North] Carolina Avenue [SE]. So, let’s see, what did you just ask me?

LEVINE: About whether you retained a relationship with Eastern High.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Many years ago, every year they used to send out a letter, I can’t remember the name of the person who used to send it out, inviting you to come to your class reunion, and I never went. And then when they had the 50th Class Reunion, 1991, I said, “You know I think I’m going to go.” And I had not been in touch with anybody from the high school, maybe a couple of people. One was Morris Cohen. He married Dottie Zatz of the Zatz family that I mentioned. And the Cohen family were at 16th and A [Streets] Northeast. They had a grocery store. But Morris Cohen is a dentist and I called him up. I said, “Mo do you still, do you go to the, did you get one for your 50th reunion?” He said, “Yeah. I go every year.” I said, “Come on, every five years. You’ve got to be kidding. Why didn’t you ever tell me?” He said, “Well, I don’t know, you were only there for a year and a half.” So I went to the reunion. The people that I knew, the Jewish people that I knew were Mo Cohen, Mo Silverman and Harry Dubin who’s also a dentist. Morris Cohen’s a dentist. Those were the people. Aside from that a couple of the Italian guys, the Petro family who were very well-known for their, not for anything. Well a couple of them did something great. One was a very successful professional boxer. But they were best known for their tearing up neighborhoods. I saw a couple people I knew. Every year after that they decided anybody after 50 years would be invited every year. Every year, every year. And I never went back.

LEVINE: I understand. I’ve never gone to my high school reunion. Even the 50th! We lost the Williamowsky family to Northwest. I think for the sake of the tape and people, why don’t you give us a quick overview of your life from, you know what, of the last 80 years. I guess, last 70 years.

WILLIAMOWSKY: I’ll pick up when we went to Northwest Washington. That was at 15th and Webster, incidentally. The Hebrew Academy had started at Decatur and Delafield and Georgia. Then each year they added a grade. My father was very immersed in that. They added one each year. When they got to the sixth grade, then it became too much for him. He was very busy as a mohel. To this day people, if he were still living, people would meet him on the street and people would still say to me, “You know your father did my bris.” And my father always told the story that Carl Bernstein met him once. Carl Bernstein told me the story. And Carl said, he bumped into my father, he said, “Rabbi you remember me?” This was Carl was famous already. So he said,” I’m Carl Bernstein. You did my circumcision.” My father said, “I never remember a face.” [laughter] I still see Carl once in a while and every time I see him, in unison we say, “I never remember a face.” It got to be a little too much. [My father] died at a young age. Of course in those years we thought somebody was old if they were passed 70. When he gave up
being a mohel he became a chaplain at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital. He didn’t drive a lot. He was a terrible driver when he did. I remember anybody who was around, I, not my brother (he was in the Army and then on his own career). We would often drive him out to St. Elizabeth’s Hospital. Do you know where that is?

LEVINE: Yeah.

WILLIAMOWSKY: He was a chaplain there. He was the Jewish chaplain. And then there was also a chaplain, worked for the government. It was a job. Not a volunteer thing. He got paid. He also went to the VA at that time at Mt. Alto Hospital. You know where that was?

LEVINE: No.

WILLIAMOWSKY: That’s at Massachusetts and Wisconsin Avenue. It’s now apartments there. But anyway, he did that. There’s a very funny story if I may. I told you my father had a great sense of humor. I was told this story by a young chaplain, a Catholic chaplain, who had come to St. E’s. He told me about my father. He said, “Your father has a great sense of humor.” I said, “Yes I know.” So he said, “When he first got there, it was in December.” He said to my dad, “Rabbi, this holiday of yours that comes in December. I see it’s spelled so many different ways. Is it pronounced Hanukah, Chanukah, Cannikah?” My father said, “No. It’s pronounced Cchristmas. Just like you pronounce Christmas.” And that’s the story that we tell.

Then when we moved to Northwest, I started—my brother had finished school—so I enrolled at the University of Maryland. I was there until 1944 when I then started dental school in Baltimore. But there’s an interesting story involved there that has to do with Maryland. I told you that my father used to bring me kosher food to eat. In time I became not as strict as maybe he would have liked me to have been. But anyway, one game we played was in Charlottesville. We played the University of Virginia. They had V-twelve programs. It’s a program that the Army had one V-twelve and one V-twelve Navy. They sent you to school and then you give them back the number of years that they sent you to school. So they had a very good football team and we didn’t. So we were beaten, I can remember the score, 35 to nothing.

Now when we came home, some us had gone down on the train with the team, and the other people went down on the bus. I was fortunate enough to be on with the guys on the train. So we went to the game and we lost. After the game the coach told us that—now he was an anti-Semite. The coach, Doc Spears, he said, “Anybody wants to go back on the train can go back tonight, the others can stay overnight and go back on the team bus tomorrow.” Four of us decided we would take the train; I wanted to get home; they wanted to also. One of our very good friends who was a very good ball player, Ed Herson, had split his lip and knocked out some teeth. He later became a patient of mine and I made him new teeth. A kind of
serendipitous thing. Anyway. But as we got on the train, it was a troop train that was coming from Tennessee. People were lying in the aisles. One guy was lying up on the baggage thing and we had out duffel bags. Ed Herson, my friend, had laid his head down on my chest, on my sweatshirt. He was bleeding. I said, “When we get home I’m going to call my father. He’ll pick us up at Union Station and then I’ll drop him home and I’ll drive you guys back to school. We’ll all go back to school.” I was living at the school then too. At Union Station we get out. My father’s there waiting for us. He said, “What’s that? What is that?” I said, “This is blood.” “Blood, what blood, from what?” I said, “Blood. My friend broke some teeth and split his lip.” “Blood, doing what? What were you doing?” “We were playing football.” He said, “No more. No more. Finish, no more.” I said, “Pop, why do you think you’re not paying tuition? You’re not paying for the room and board. That’s why I’m playing football.” He said, “I don’t care. No more.” Of course I continued. We did drop him off. That was a funny story.

LEVINÉ: So no Bs and no football. [laughs]

WILLIAMOWSKY: Oh right. Then an interesting thing happened. One game against Wake Forest was on Shabba’s Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur, you know, can never come on a Friday or a Sunday. Did you know that?

LEVINÉ: No, I didn’t know it cannot come on a Friday.

WILLIAMOWSKY: The reason it can’t come on Fridays is you can’t cook to break the fast. The reason it doesn’t come on a Sunday is you can’t prepare for the fast. But occasionally it comes on a Shabbat. No way I was going to play. There were some other Jewish boys on the team. Only one other besides myself opted not to play. But anyway, I turned in my uniform. And on Monday I got a call from the assistant coach. A guy we liked very much who was not anti-Semitic. Rubini, Frank Rubini. He said, “What’d you do? Why did you turn in your uniform?” And I told him.

LEVINÉ: What’s his name?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Frank Rubini. R U B I N I. He later became the director of the Montgomery County Park and Planning Commission. Very, very nice guy. He said, “Why’d you do that?” So I told him. He said, “You didn’t have to do that. Just come and tell me. Tell me.” I said, “Well, I didn’t want to come and tell Doc Spears because he would say, I know what he would say, you Jews are always making trouble.” Really, he was that blatant about it. So Rube said, “I said come to me. Anytime an issue like that comes up, you come to me.” So I was reinstated.

LEVINÉ: Good. So you went to dental school.
WILLIAMOWSKY: I went to dental school in Baltimore. That’s where I met my wife. I’d actually met her at College Park.

LEVINE: Her name is M I N N A …

WILLIAMOWSKY: Minna Salit Williamowsky. Minna Salit, now Williamowsky.

LEVINE: S A L …

WILLIAMOWSKY: I T. I met her, I went back to College Park, I was already at dental school, first year. I went back to College Park to meet a friend of mine that I’d made at College Park. He was in the Navy. Leonard Eisenberg. I said, “So I’ll meet you there Leonard, you know, rehash old times and tell each other lies about how good we were.” We met. While we were there talking, good to see him. He had been in the South Pacific. And Minna came by. He knew her from Baltimore and introduced me to her. She said to me, “Where are you going.” “I’m just going with Leonard. But he has to meet somebody at his fraternity house or something.” She said, “Well here, carry my books and walk me up to the sorority house.” Which I did. That started the relationship.

But unfortunately she had a brother-in-law who was a dentist, an oral surgeon who was killed in the service. One of the few Jewish dentists and the first one in the Jewish organization, the dental organization that I belong to. He was killed. Her nephew, his only son, was four years old. Her sister was a basket case. Then shortly after that Minna’s mother died at the age of 49. Her father was very ill, eventually he died at 59. So Minna became the caretaker of Barry, this child. Barry to this day considers us, I think, as much his parents as he did his mother. He never knew his father. In fact, Barry, when he retired, he retired as the Executive Vice President of Merrill Lynch. So he’s very well-known in the financial circles in the country. Anyway, that’s …

LEVINE: So you practiced in Maryland.

WILLIAMOWSKY: I practiced in Maryland. When I left College Park I didn’t open up practice right away because I graduated in May of 1948 on the day that Israel became a country. Same day. The keynote speaker was Mayor D’Alessandro of Baltimore, on May the 18th, who was the father of Nancy Pelosi. Did you know that?

LEVINE: Uh huh.

WILLIAMOWSKY: I told Nancy Pelosi that story at a function at Tel Aviv University. She said, “Hey everybody, listen to this. Come here, Ben has something to tell you.”
We didn’t move right away. Her father was very ill. So I used to, every day, take the bus from where we lived. I lived with Minna’s family and I often made a joke about the fact that the reason I married her was that the streetcar stopped running. I was living in a fraternity house. And the streetcar stopped running too early. I’d have to walk home. So I decided, oh what the heck, I’ll marry her and we’ll live there. I used to take a bus every morning. God, I’d be up at six o’clock in the morning and take a bus down to the train station. Take the train to Union Station. Take the streetcar from Union Station to Georgetown, Wisconsin and P Street [NW]. There was a clinic there. A public health clinic at the old Addison School. Interesting enough the Hebrew Academy, when it expanded, expanded to the school.

LEVINE: Took over.

WILLIAMOWSKY: No. They shared—well there was a fence and the Hebrew Academy had one side—one’s kids played in one school, in one schoolyard, and the other works for this Addison School. I had a job in the Public Health Service. And then Mr. Salit passed away and we moved to Washington. The first place we lived in Washington was at Meridian Hill Park. Meridian Hill, across from the park and that was an interesting story. It was during the time when the war had just finished, 1948. You couldn’t get apartments. My mother said, “Call Charlie Sheffries.” Charlie Sheffries, they grew up together as kids in Lithuania. In the shtetl in Lithuania. And Charlie Sheffries was a big builder. So she said, “You call him and you tell him that the Nachama said to call him.” So I called him. I had to stutter as little bit to kind of explain who I was. He said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, yes, I know who you are. Yes, how’s your mother?” “Yes fine,” I said, “She said to call you. I need an apartment.” “When do you want it?” I said, “Now.” He said, “Okay.” He said, “Here, I have four apartments. Four apartments that I can make ready.”

LEVINE: She said Nachama?

WILLIAMOWSKY: Nachama.

LEVINE: You mean the wise?

WILLIAMOWSKY: No, no. Nachama is a Jewish name for Naomi.

LEVINE: Ah ha. Good. And now you’re here in Leisure World.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Well, when I opened my practice I went to work for a—after I left the Public Health Service, I went to work for a dentist in Washington. That was a nice experience because his name was Aaronson. He was the first dentist in the phone book under the A’s. So when I used to work in his office in the evenings, and was still working for the Public Health [Service], he would get calls from people who had emergencies. And I tell you, I ran into the most interesting people. I could write a book
about them. One was a guy named Doctor Shybeky. Doctor Shybeky was a lobbyist, I didn’t know it at the time, for the peat moss industry. You know from peat moss, you know that’s what they make these things from [Dr. Ben points to several artifacts.] Peat moss, they make all kinds of things from peat moss. Maybe this and this and this. I didn’t know that. He always wore a black hat and a black, not a coat, but a cape. Had a stick with him. A walking stick. I didn’t want to get too much into his background except he was on Capitol Hill and he was staying at the Drake Hotel. Is the Drake Hotel still there?

LEVINE: I think so. [The Drake no longer exists as such.]

WILLIAMOWSKY: And he was staying there and the owner of the Drake Hotel, he had a toothache. He looked, “Hey Aaronson.” So he came to me. He became a very fine patient. His son was in the Army and he was the director of the school of languages in Colorado, for the Army. U.S. Army. I enjoyed him. Very sinister and I kept saying to myself, “I wonder if he’s with the Secret Service or the CIA? Or something like that.” But I never asked. But one day he said to me, he called on the phone, he said, “Shybeky.” That was his conversation. Shybeky. “Do you know where is O’Donnell’s Restaurant?” I said, “Yes.” He said, he tells me where is 14th and E Street [NW], I think it was. Do you remember when it was there?

LEVINE: No.

WILLIAMOWSKY: It was a seafood restaurant. He said, “I will be there in the bar at seven o’clock. You will come and bring your wife.” Hangs up. I said, “What am I going to do? I don’t want to lose him as a patient.” So I think it was a night when I wasn’t going to work anyway. So I told Minna we’re going to have dinner at … I didn’t know dinner. We’re just going to meet him at O’Donnell’s. She said, “Well we might as well eat while we’re down there.” I said, “That’s not a bad idea. Okay.”

So, now we walk in there. There’s Shybeky sitting at the bar with the black cape. And the black hat’s still on and the stick. It is like something out of a movie. He’s talking. He said, “Would you like something to drink?” “Yeah.” Minna said. She had a coke. I told her not too long ago that’s what’s wrong with her now. She never drinks. Never drank or smoked. She had a drink and then I had a drink. I had a mixed drink. And he said, “Do you drink alcohol?” I said, “On occasion and this is an occasion.” Now we’re just chatting about nothing in particular and I’m still saying to myself, “What are we doing here?” When he takes out of his pocket a handkerchief, and inside were diamonds, diamonds. To me there was like $100,000 worth of diamonds. I thought, what am I getting myself into? He said, “Do you like these? Do you think these are nice?” So Minna, she’s very astute about such things, women more than men anyway, and she said, “They’re beautiful, but they’re not diamonds.” So he says, “What do you mean?” She said, “No they’re not diamonds.” He said, “But I don’t—they’re probably very nice wherever they came from.”
Folded them up and put it back in his pocket. Then I couldn’t resist, I said to myself, “What were those beautiful gems.” He said, “I’m a lobbyist with the peat moss industry.” And he said, “Here.” And he gave me, gave Minna one of his pens, because at that time ballpoint pens, that was all the rage. That’s what that was made from. From the product. I don’t know how they did it, but the peat moss industry. That’s what these stones were from. Whether they were zircons or marcasites, whatever.

LEVINE: I’m sure you have hundreds of stories.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Hundreds of stories. There’s another guy, Robert Foster, who was a congressman from, I think he was out of office, from Ohio who came to me and he lost his teeth on his way driving back to Ohio. Or Indianapolis, Indianapolis. Anyway, yes, there are a lot of stories.

LEVINE: This has been wonderful. On behalf of the Overbeck Capitol History Project, thank you very much. I think that what you’ve given me illuminates a whole area that up until now, from what I understand the archives, are very light on. This will be quite valuable.

WILLIAMOWSKY: I hope I didn’t stray too much away, didn’t go too far away from Capitol Hill.

LEVINE: No, this was wonderful. Given the short amount of your life that you spent there, this was incredibly rich and full. I appreciate it.

WILLIAMOWSKY: Thank you.

LEVINE: I’ll keep in touch with you so you know when we’ll have the transcript. Thank you very much Dr. Ben Williamowsky.

WILLIAMOWSKY: You’re quite welcome and I thank you for including me.

END OF INTERVIEW