Gershon Robinson

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Abstract: Gershon Lieb Robinson (1888-1986), the son of Isaac Robinson and Fredda Robinson, was one of ten children that was born and raised in Lithuania, which was a part of Russia in the late nineteenth century. In 1905, at the age of seventeen, Mr. Robinson immigrated to the United States to escape the draft for the Russo-Japanese War. He originally settled in Newark with his brother-in-law and soon began farming in Menlo Park. He would later become a butcher in New York and Rhode Island before purchasing a grocery store in 1911 on the Reading Railroad coal docks in Port Reading. The purpose of his store was to supply the ship captains and crews with groceries and supplies. His business lasted for approximately forty years before the store burned down in 1950.

Mr. Robinson married his wife, Rose Meyers Robinson, a fellow immigrant from Latvia, in 1912. They settled in a small apartment on Market Street in Perth Amboy before purchasing a house on Madison Avenue. They had three children: Lawrence, Zelda, and David. Mr. Robinson and his wife briefly retired to their summer house in Monmouth Beach following the closing of his grocery business. However, Mr. Robinson's issues with vision and blindness forced them to move to Metuchen in the late 1950s to be closer to their children and grandchildren. While living in Metuchen, Mr. Robinson worked at Hillside Cemetery until the age of eighty-six. He also belonged to the Association for the Blind, collected for the March of the Dimes, and was a member of the Congregation Beth Mordecai in Perth Amboy and the Congregation Neve Shalom in Metuchen. His son, David, owned the Robinson's Shoes Store along Main Street. He is buried alongside his wife at Temple Beth El Cemetery in Neptune Township.

In this interview, Mr. Robinson discusses his family and childhood in Russia and immigrating to America in 1905. Mr. Robinson also talks about the various jobs he had when he moved to America, including working on a farm in Menlo Park, being a butcher, and becoming a storekeeper on the coal docks in Port Reading. He concludes the interview by discussing his wife and family, World War II, and living in Metuchen.

R. Terwilliger: [recording begins mid-sentence] … get into the tape section of this.

G. Robinson: All right.

[1] Emily Binstein was a paid summer intern for the Metuchen Borough Improvement League (BIL).

R. Terwilliger: Well, this is going to be very enjoyable. I know you're going to enjoy reflecting on your life. Let me just check it [the tape] and make sure it is … [recording paused]

[clearing of throat] Today is May 18, 1978 and I'm interviewing Gershon Robinson in his home on James Street [James Place] in Metuchen. [SLIDES 1 through 3] What's the number of your house?

G. Robinson: Five.

R. Terwilliger: Number five, James [Place] in Metuchen. Now, Mr. Robinson, you told me you were born June 3, 1888 in–what was the name of the town in Russia?

G. Robinson: Smorgon.

R. Terwilliger: Smorgon, Russia.

G. Robinson: Lithuania in Russia.

R. Terwilliger: Right. And what was the name? Vilna? That was the town?

G. Robinson: The capital was Vilnius; the state of Vilna.

R. Terwilliger: And you lived with your parents here. Could you tell me the names of your parents?

G. Robinson: Isaac and Fredda.

R. Terwilliger: And Fredda. And what did your father do as an occupation?

G. Robinson: Tailor.

R. Terwilliger: He was a tailor. And your mother was just–was she a homemaker?

G. Robinson: Homemaker and gave birth to ten children.

R. Terwilliger: Ten children. Now can we talk a little bit about your early childhood in Russia? Tell us about the kind of school you went to.

G. Robinson: Well, I went to Hebrew school as a very youngster from the age of five to probably ten. And then I went to a Russian school, and I went there for three years. And after that, I helped my mother in the little business.

R. Terwilliger: What was that business?

G. Robinson: Lady's apparel or lady's trimming–apparel, lady's apparel. And then the Russia-Japanese War came along, and they were drafting youngsters, and they send them–had to go to Siberia [Russia] and some of them never came back. And I was an American by heart. I always figured that someday I'll go to the United States. And my parents didn't think I should go, but when the war came along–

R. Terwilliger: Now what war are we talking about?

G. Robinson: **Russia-Japanese[2].**

R. Terwilliger: The Russian and Japanese War.

G. Robinson: **Russia-Japanese, 1904.**

R. Terwilliger: Nineteen-hundred-four. And can tell me a little bit–you say they were drafting youngsters? What age are we talking about?

G. Robinson: **Well, usually you had to go to serve the Army when you were nineteen. But this is starting preferably eighteen and seventeen.**

R. Terwilliger: And your age [was] about?

G. Robinson: **I was about seventeen, just about. So my parents decided I should go to America because I <u>wanted</u> to go. And then when the war will be over, they send back for me, I'll come back. But my heart was in America. [coughing]**

R. Terwilliger: Before we jump ahead now to this big trip to America and you told me when we did our initial interview how you had always dreamed of going to America. You read *National Geographic* and it really seemed like almost a paradise country and opportunities for a young man. But I think it would be very valuable to us to stay in Russia right now and maybe to try to get a little bit of the atmosphere and feelings that you had as a young boy growing up in this country.

G. Robinson: **In this country or Russia?**

R. Terwilliger: In Russia; in Russia.

G. Robinson: **Well, I have nothing to mention too much. As I said before, I went as a very youngster to the Hebrew school. And then as I got older, so to speed up, I went part to Hebrew school and part to the Russian school where I learned the national language and national expression and all that.**

R. Terwilliger: And you practiced your Judaism all through the while you were growing up? You had the freedom to do this? There were no constrictions on you as a Jewish family at that time?

G. Robinson: **Well, politically, it wasn't so good. But actually, we got along in our own way. Our town where I was born and raised, and my mother was born there too, there were practically eighty percent Jews, eighty or eighty-five percent. But you always got along, we never had any trouble.**

R. Terwilliger: [muffled microphone] And this was rural country (farm country) that you lived in? [clears throat]

G. Robinson: **Well, after you left the city, after you went out, this was all farm and pine roots.**

[2] The Russo-Japanese War was fought in 1904-1905 over rivaling imperial ambitions in Manchuria and Korea. The Japanese victory decreased the prestige and influence of Russia in Eastern Europe, and the Russian defeat contributed to growing domestic unrest, which culminated in the 1905 Russian Revolution.

R. Terwilliger: Did your parents own their home there? You could own your home?

G. Robinson: Oh yes, you could own your home.

R. Terwilliger: And you could have a private business? And you didn't have to share any of this with the government as they do in the type of communistic–?

G. Robinson: Tax, there was tax. As you go to any country, they're taxed.

R. Terwilliger: Now would your family be considered a poor family, a moderate family, or a family of fair means?

G. Robinson: A family of <u>nearly</u> fair means because we had our own home, a big house, a two-story brick house, that was big stuff, very big stuff. And we have a little store, right in the marketplace, in the same town, which my mother and my two sisters prospered there and we went along nicely. But of course–

R. Terwilliger: Now your father's tailor business, was this a private business that he also had?

G. Robinson: Yeah, oh yes.

R. Terwilliger: And where was that located?

G. Robinson: In our home.

R. Terwilliger: In your home?

G. Robinson: Right in the home.

R. Terwilliger: And people came to him to have their clothes tailored?

G. Robinson: That's right, that's right. He had to buy the material. He usually went [unclear] material with him and all the trimming and all that. And he made up the clothes. He had, as far as I remember, anywhere from five to ten men working for him at the time; five to eight men, I would say, to be sure.

R. Terwilliger: Do you remember ever working for your father in this business? Did you ever help him out at all?

G. Robinson: No.

R. Terwilliger: No? Were you close to your father? Was he a man that you could sit and talk about your plans?

G. Robinson: No, no, no. I couldn't say that because the old-fashioned way, children were children and they had to obey and they had to respect [pause in recording] the first of the Ten Commandments. And that was it. Children were children and grown-ups were grown-ups.

R. Terwilliger: Well, if you were to describe your father to someone, what kind of a man would you describe him as?

G. Robinson: **A very stern person.**

R. Terwilliger: A very stern person. Was he the kind of person that you could get close to or was he the kind of person that was very private and impersonal?

G. Robinson: **Well, children and parents didn't have much to get together in those days, it seems to me.**

R. Terwilliger: How about your mother? Were you closer to your mother?

G. Robinson: **Oh yeah. Well, usually you're closer to mother, yes. That's the girl that feeds you. [laughs] Oh yes.**

R. Terwilliger: Do you remember sitting and talking to your mother about any of your feelings about leaving the country and going to America?

G. Robinson: **They didn't want to hear it.**

R. Terwilliger: They didn't want to hear it. And the war, there was news of this war coming and this is when you kind of decided in your own mind that it was time for you to leave?

G. Robinson: **Well, as soon as I was able to read history, geography, and especially read about different parts of the world, especially about the United States, and the drifts, because immigration to America, that was a drift, or very few went to South Africa. Some went to South Africa, but very few, but mostly Christian. Instead of going into the Army to serve the czar and then to come out after five years and you're a nobody anyhow, so they drifted away. And if one little family left, he brought the other one and the other one, the other one. Then whole families came here. I think in 1905 or 1910, immigration was very heavy and it would give–the real push was the Japanese War practically.**

R. Terwilliger: I see.

G. Robinson: **And then they had revolutions over there already. They had the big revolution there in 1903[3], and they left for a while. They were revolting against the czar and so on.**

R. Terwilliger: Now can you tell us a little bit about how you actually left the country? Where did you go from your hometown to leave?

G. Robinson: **My hometown? Well, we had the railroad not far from our town, really walking distance practically. But they usually took a drawstring to call a horse and carriage. But my father said, "No, I'm going to walk you. I want to [unclear], might walk with you." And he took me to the train, and I got on the train and the train took me close to the German border and we stow across the border. That was the way to go in those day because if you went out to the passport, the government knew that you escaped and you pay a fine. But if you escape that way without a passport, the fine wasn't needed.**

[3] The First Russian Revolution occurred in 1905 following a wave of mass political and social unrest, mainly directed at the government.

R. Terwilliger: Now I think this says something of your father. You said he wanted to walk you to this train.

G. Robinson: That's right

R. Terwilliger: He wanted to take this last walk with you before you left.

G. Robinson: That's right, correct.

R. Terwilliger: Well, he couldn't have been all impersonal and a hard, cold kind of man if he felt a real departure of you at this time.

G. Robinson: That's right. He felt he'd probably never see me again.

R. Terwilliger: Do you remember anything of what he said to you before he left you?

G. Robinson: Well, I don't think we had much to talk about. The only thing we would talk about is when war is over, we'll send for you to come back.

R. Terwilliger: And do you remember that he embraced you before he left you?

G. Robinson: Oh, of course, of course. He embraced me. He seemed to be contrite.

R. Terwilliger: And what were your feelings about–did you have any feelings that this might be the last time you'd see your father?

G. Robinson: Broken heart.

R. Terwilliger: Really? This must have been very, very difficult for you to do. That was a big decision to make at seventeen.

G. Robinson: Broken heart. Broken.

R. Terwilliger: That's really interesting.

G. Robinson: I knew that I wouldn't come back even if the war is over because they had revolutions in Russia and the Jewish person had no rights whatsoever. If you lived in a town where there was plenty Jewish, you could protect yourself. But when there were few in the town, they were very bad shape sometimes.

R. Terwilliger: Yes, very vulnerable to [unclear].

G. Robinson: Well, pogroms[4]. You know there were pogroms in 1902 or 1903. There were pogroms in Bessarabia [present-day Moldova] and they killed many Jews over there. And that was all–had to do with the government, political stuff and all that.

R. Terwilliger: So you escaped. You went over the border, to use a phrase.

[4] The pogroms in the Russian Empire were large-scale, targeted, and repeated anti-Jewish rioting that began in the nineteenth century and became much bloodier in the early twentieth century. An estimated 2,000 Jews died during a wave of pogroms from 1903 to 1906.

G. Robinson: **That's right. Not myself; when I came there, there were a lot of more. But we went the same way, must have been about fifteen or so.**

R. Terwilliger: And these were mostly young boys? There weren't women, young women?

G. Robinson: **Mostly youngsters. You're right. They're mostly youngsters, a few women there; mostly youngsters that escaped in the war.**

R. Terwilliger: And then where did you go from there?

G. Robinson: **From there, I took a train and went across Germany. Well, the train, that was all set by agents. You know in order to go, you didn't go by yourself. There was always an agent in your town. Like you have traveling agency here? Well, this was a kind of secret agent because you had to steal the border and all that. See it was all assigned. He [secret agent] also had men on the other side that–he took you there, put you on a train, and the train took you across Germany to Hamburg. And there, I remember I had to wait in Hamburg about three days for my boat, to the boat that I was assigned to. And I got on the boat and I think it was about twelve days to get to the United States.**

R. Terwilliger: Can you tell us anything about the trip over? Were they comfortable accommodations? Were you fed well or were you like cattle on a freighter?

G. Robinson: **Well, not that bad. But for a youngster, you get along, of course. Of course, if you travel second or first class, it was better. But third class, where I [was], you just had a bunk and that's all.**

R. Terwilliger: And did you get sick on the trip? You got seasick?

G. Robinson: **Yeah, I got seasick.**

R. Terwilliger: And did you have any bad weather that was rough?

G. Robinson: **No, I don't think we had bad weather.**

R. Terwilliger: And this took twelve days, you had twelve days to think about what you were doing and where you were going? Did you make any friends?

G. Robinson: **Oh yes, we made friends on the boat, of course, of course. But when [unclear], that was big stuff. You know you go by Boston, and then you go by Cape Cod and Long Island, and you could see land already. Oh, that was something special, passing September the tenth just about in the afternoon, about five or six o'clock, passing the Statue of Liberty. That I can never forget.**

R. Terwilliger: Oh, that must have been a beautiful sight.

G. Robinson: **September 10, 1905. I'll never forget.**

R. Terwilliger: Oh, that's great. What did you think when you saw the Statue of Liberty?

G. Robinson: **Just what I read about it! [laughter]**

R. Terwilliger: It looked just like you imagined?

G. Robinson: Yes, because I saw it in pictures and books. I saw that.

R. Terwilliger: And then where did you come into? What port?

G. Robinson: We came in Hoboken. It was called the German Lloyd. That was the name of the company, the ship line, it was the German Lloyd. We came into Hoboken and we had to stay overnight still on the boat. And the next day, they put us out in the big dock there, alphabetically. A's here, B's there, and all others through, they had it. I was in the R's. Now one thing I'll never forget, while we were there [unclear], we had to wait for a while, and I could see signs around, all around. And signs meant the same thing. I could see the letters, but I didn't understand what it meant. So I asked another fellow, a Jewish fellow alongside me, I said, "Can you read English? Can you tell me what it says on the sign?" "No." But there was a German fellow back in the day, "Yes, I can read English," he says. It says "[unclear] rauchen." You know what it means? No smoking. [laughter]

R. Terwilliger: Oh! Even back then? No smoking.

G. Robinson: No smoking. Oh, yeah, they were all there, all signs. That I'll never forget. So I've never smoked. [laughs]

R. Terwilliger: You have never smoked in your entire life?

G. Robinson: Well, maybe I picked one time a cigar. [laughter] But we have tradition: my father, my grandfather, my brother, my children, my son-in-law, and the grandchildren. Out of seven boys, only one smoked because he was in the Army there and he started smoking in the Army. But the other six, don't smoke.

R. Terwilliger: That's wonderful.

G. Robinson: Did you ever smoke Joe?

J. Robinson: No.

R. Terwilliger: No, Joe hasn't smoked either.

G. Robinson: Only your brother does smoke, no?

R. Terwilliger: I have to mention that we have a guest while we're doing this taping and it's your grandson, Joseph Robinson. And he's going to help us if we need help. Right, Joe?

Joe Robinson: Sure.

R. Terwilliger: Okay. Let's just check this [tape recorder]. [recording paused]

Mr. Robinson, you told me the actual processing was done on Ellis Island?

G. Robinson: Yes.

R. Terwilliger: Can you tell us a little bit about what that involved? What happened before you could be set free?

G. Robinson: Well, after, from the dock, they transferred us from–they had a special boat already to transfer immigrants because we were in the hundreds. I don't remember how many hundreds, at least, but it must have been at least about two to three hundred; at least two, if not close to three, or something like that. So they put us on. It was a nice day, September, and a small tug tied up alongside of us and took us to Ellis Island. And from there, they conveyed us up where we had to go, and we were all processed over there.

R. Terwilliger: Now you must have had to go through a certain physical to be sure that you weren't–

G. Robinson: Yes, they were always looking into your eyes for trachoma. At the time, there was a case. Anybody [that] had trachoma was sent back. They never let them in to the United States. And then I remember when this was all through, I went down a certain place, and they must have asked me whether I'm kosher or something like that because they handed me a loaf of bread, a new loaf of bread, with two-can sardines. After we left the ship, we had breakfast there, but you didn't have any food for the day. So they handed me a loaf of bread, and two-can sardines, and an apple pie (small apple pie). [laughter] I was so hungry, I had the apple pie right away and I took the two-can sardines and loaf of bread and I ripped it up and I brought it to my brother-in-law where I landed. [laughter]

R. Terwilliger: Now were you kosher? Did you always eat kosher food?

G. Robinson: Well, in my home I was always–we had kosher food. Of course, there was other food with kosher food in the house. But on my own, it didn't matter to me, on my own.

R. Terwilliger: I see. Well, when you left and were processed from Ellis Island, you went to live with your sister and brother-in-law?

G. Robinson: No, my sister wasn't here yet, but my sister's husband was here.

R. Terwilliger: Your brother-in-law.

G. Robinson: And I had twenty-five dollars. And a person told me if you have an address and twenty-five dollars in those days–if you had an address, off you went. But you had to have twenty-five dollars because otherwise, you'd be a beggar! See?

R. Terwilliger: Right, yes.

G. Robinson: In fact, I had more than that. I had a little more, but as long as you had that much. And from that, from Ellis Island, they took me in a slow boat and they dropped you off in–what you call–the Jersey Central [Central Railroad of New Jersey]. And over there–oh yes, I had a tag on me with an address that you had to carry. And so I came there, they showed me to get on the train and I got on the train. And the train went from the pier [in Jersey City] right straight to Newark. In those days, they were commuting from Broad Street, Newark right to Jersey Central. They were also commuting from all over [unclear] Perth Amboy, and Plainfield, and Morris, I don't know, wherever Central Jersey went at that time.

R. Terwilliger: And of course these were steam trains at that time, right?

G. Robinson: Pardon?

R. Terwilliger: Steam engines.

G. Robinson: Oh, of course, steam engines. It didn't take long; it's just right across the meadows and I landed there. There were two more young fellows with me and a Polish fellow, and he walked off. He wouldn't wait for anything because he was in United States before that. It was his second or third coming, so he walked away. He knew where he was. But there were two other, three boys and the hackman came over and gave us a motion that we go with him. So we went with him, put us in the carriage, and he took us up, and then he dropped one fellow, and I was the second one to be dropped off. And when he dropped me off, I had my bag with me and he asked me for a dollar. I thought I was getting robbed!

R. Terwilliger: A dollar. [laughs]

G. Robinson: A dollar! Over in Russia, it would be about fifteen cents or something like that for a little ride like this. A dollar! So I had to give him the dollar or he wouldn't give me my bag. So I gave him the dollar, but I run right upstairs [and] find my brother-in-law to tell him I got robbed! [laughter] A dollar for a little ride like that? So I went up there, I told him, and he said, "Shut up! [unclear]." [laughs] And I was there with my brother-in-law.

R. Terwilliger: He was expecting you then. Did he expect you come in?

G. Robinson: I think he was. Yeah, he must have been expecting me, absolutely. Then he brought my sister here less than a year later, and she had a little daughter, a little girl. And I lived with them for a while, but that was–trying many different things, it didn't work.

R. Terwilliger: You mentioned something about–you helped them farm an area in Menlo Park?

G. Robinson: Right here.

R. Terwilliger: Where the shopping center [Menlo Park Mall] is now.

G. Robinson: You see he was a carpenter. And then he went and became a builder, my brother-in-law, right when I came here. And we started building and we had a Depression at that time, and we lost out. And he lost everything what he invested, had to give up. So the last few dollars he had, we got here and lease the farm here, and he went farming. He thought he could do better farming. It was right where Parsonage Road and US [Route] 1 [is]; it was right on the other side.

R. Terwilliger: Right. It used to be called Lafayette Road?

G. Robinson: That was called Lafayette Road. You're right, absolutely. Lafayette Road started in from Amboy Avenue, it went all the way to Woodbridge. And that was all dairy country there; all dairy country. There were [unclear] cemetery, that was one of the biggest farmer–an American by the name of Canon [phonetic], he had

it. But then his sons wouldn't follow him up and they sold it out, I think. And where Bamberger's [Department Store] is now [formerly at Menlo Park Mall]– what was the name of that farm? There were the third-generation farm dairymen and they had the best cattle of everybody, the best farm. And there were Jensens across the street [along Parsonage Road]. Soren [Christian] Jensen [is] still here in Edison; he's here, Soren Jensen. I met him [unclear; clearing of throat] times. I was already a boy about eighteen and he was just a kid about ten years old. He could milk six cows; with my luck, I could milk one. [laughs]

R. Terwilliger: Oh my goodness. Was that the type of farming your brother-in-law did then, dairy farming?

G. Robinson: Dairy farming. But we didn't last very long because we couldn't make a go of it. You couldn't get even four cents a quart for your milk. And after you delivered it to Perth Amboy, so you got five / six cents a quart, but you had to ride a horse and wagon for that. You see, Raritan Township was mostly farms in those days and they were serving Perth Amboy on one side and New Brunswick on the other side. And the other farming products, like dairy–see, this was dairy farming, and the other side towards Plainfield was chicken farming. That was all chicken country over there.

R. Terwilliger: That's interesting.

G. Robinson: How far could your train go [unclear], you know the road system like you have trucks now delivering things. It's your own horse and wagon. The biggest thing we did have here, Amboy Avenue had a trolley car! That's for ten cents. If you walked over to the trolley, for ten cents you could go to Perth Amboy, or New Brunswick for ten cents. You didn't have to ride a horse and wagon. It'd take you about an hour and a half to two hours to get there [by horse and wagon]. You were there in about twenty-five minutes or a half an hour [by trolley]; you were there in Perth Amboy.

R. Terwilliger: That must have been really considered a great convenience.

G. Robinson: Oh yeah. Right about here somewhere was a double track. You see it was a single track and every five miles, one trolley used to meet one way and one the other one way. And they would–

R. Terwilliger: Have to pass.

G. Robinson: One would go past each other that way. Sometimes you came here and you had to wait for the other trolley car to come along. But that was going [unclear] right here somewhere, if I remember right. I know it was not far from Lafayette Road.

R. Terwilliger: Now when you were living or working on this farm, did you move out to this area then? Or were you still living in Newark with your sister?

G. Robinson: Oh no, we living out here. We [were] living out here at that time.

R. Terwilliger: In Perth Amboy?

G. Robinson: No, no. Right here on the farm.

R. Terwilliger: No, right on the farm.

G. Robinson: Not Perth Amboy. When we left the farm, when they left the farm, he [brother-in-law] went to Boston because he got a job as carpenter over there and he took my sister along. And I was left here, and I landed in Perth Amboy and I became a butcher boy there. [clears throat]

Joe, there's a card lying over there I want to show the lady where I worked in New York as a butcher boy. See it laying there?

R. Terwilliger: Um-hm. Oh, here it is! [reading from business card] Frank M. Bund. Is that how you say it? B-u-n-d?

G. Robinson: Yeah, that's the man I worked for.

R. Terwilliger: Bleecker Street?

G. Robinson: No, I worked on 9th Avenue.

R. Terwilliger: Ninth Avenue. And was this your–?

G. Robinson: This was a reference when I quit after working two years as butcher boy. [laughter] As butcher boy, I started in for four dollars a week. And I had to take care of myself, and I got pretty good, and I worked up to six dollars. But then after I quit this place, I went to Brooks Farm [phonetic], [unclear] I got sixteen dollars.

R. Terwilliger: A week?! Oh my gosh, you're practically wealthy! And it says on here, "To whom it may concern, Mr.–"

G. Robinson: That's a reference, you know in those days.

R. Terwilliger: Mr. George Robinson? Where's the George come?

G. Robinson: That's a good question. [laughter] My name is Gershon, and when I came there to work for him, so they asked me my name. I told him Gershon. So he couldn't think of Gershon, "George!" like that. So after I was called George, so all the other [unclear], there were four butchers in there.

R. Terwilliger: They probably couldn't spell Gershon.

G. Robinson: They didn't have to spell it, but he couldn't think of it. [laughter] So they called me George, and for a while I was called George.

R. Terwilliger: Well, it says here you've been in his employ for two years and has always been honest and willing and something more. "Any further reference as to his ability will be gladly given." And it's signed by Frank M. Bund. And the date is January 16, 1909, right?

G. Robinson: That's correct, that's correct.

R. Terwilliger: That's beautiful! That really is something to keep!

G. Robinson: **Well, this thing was lying around. It was almost getting worn. So you see what I've done, I laminated [it] or whatever you call it. So now you can hold onto it at least. That thing was laying in somewhere but wear. I had other references too. [laughs]**

R. Terwilliger: A reference was a very important thing.

G. Robinson: **It was. Because when I came to work for another party: where did you work before? What were you doing? What's your ability? How long you had to take out insurance?**

R. Terwilliger: They didn't have phones to pick up then and to call and inquire. You had to have this kind of thing.

G. Robinson: **[clocking ringing in background] So that's where I worked after I went back farming in New York, in Manhattan, and worked there for about–in the winter, towards the winter. In the summer, they didn't have enough work for so many butchers. So when I was laid off, I went to Newport, Rhode Island. I had folks over there and when I went in the butcher shop there, where the really [unclear] trade was, I never saw a customer there. It was always ordered. [chuckling] And when I showed him that reference, you got a job! I got a job and I got sixteen dollars over there too in Rhode Island. I worked there a whole season and enjoyed it very much.**

R. Terwilliger: So you were kind of off to a good start then. You must have felt good about yourself and really felt that this new country promised something?

G. Robinson: **When I came to Perth Amboy and I didn't have a job and I found really a kosher butcher, a kosher butcher, found with him. And I got a job to work out my home at five dollars a month. See food and work and everything, five dollars a month, I had something. From there, I landed in Newark and I worked for butchers over there. And from Newark, I got away there and I got into New York and I got a job as a speaker there. I was a butcher boy, so I call myself a butcher boy.**

R. Terwilliger: A butcher boy. [chuckles]

G. Robinson: **Well, that's what they call it.**

R. Terwilliger: I know, I know.

G. Robinson: **And still, and still, I could only get four dollars a week; that's all I could get. And for that, I had to take care of myself, pay for lighting, clothes. And I used to save a dollar here and there.**

R. Terwilliger: You learned thrift at an early age then.

G. Robinson: **Oh, I did learn thrift! And once in the holiday, I used to send my grandparents (not my father and mother), my maternal grandfather, which I liked very well, I used to send him five dollars on holiday. And when they got the five dollars there, that was ten [Russian] rubles, that was a lot of money. And that was shown that I'm somebody at that time. [laughs]**

R. Terwilliger: Oh, that's wonderful. You had pride too! Well, then how did you purchase this store in Port Reading? That happened about, let's see, about 1910, was it?

G. Robinson: Pardon me, Joe. Go out in the garage and there's a couple of pictures [recording paused]

[recording begins mid-sentence] … and that was on the house board, I had two pictures. But when my wife passed away and the grandchildren were here, they got hold of a drawer with all of my pictures there and they went nuts over it, to find all prints and all stuff. Yeah, some of it pulled out here and put in here, some of them. [unclear] you know snaps that you take for years and all that.

R. Terwilliger: Oh yes, yeah. Well, can you tell me a little bit about how you came about purchasing this store on the coal docks in Port Reading? You told me the story about how that came about.

G. Robinson: Well, it came about, I was in Perth Amboy after I [clears throat]–see after I worked in Manhattan and Newport, I came back to Perth Amboy. I had a friend over there. It was my brother-in-law's brother that were pals together. So I came to him and I want to establish myself somewhere and I mucked around for a little while. And then somebody heard from somebody, there was a store down in Port Reading where an old man runs it, but he's getting too old and he has a daughter, son-in-law working there or something like that. And they are getting more robbed–he's paying the bills and they're pocketing it. But he wants to get rid of it; he wants to sell it. So I went down and I told the store, I looked at the place, and I gave him the deposit and I told him to stay in business for a while until I can accumulate the money that's necessary to buy it.

R. Terwilliger: You said that was $300?

G. Robinson: Three-hundred dollars, but I kept … [recording ends]

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

R. Terwilliger: [recording begins mid-sentence] … store in what month? September, did you say?

G. Robinson: No, I opened in April. And I built it up and I was already acquainted with my wife [Rose Meyers Robinson].

R. Terwilliger: You told me how you met her at a wedding, at a mutual friend's wedding, right?

G. Robinson: That's right, you're right there. I was already keeping company as well. And then as the winter came along, I felt that I'm somebody. I have a little business, I have a little income, maybe we can get married. We were married on Christmas night that year.

R. Terwilliger: That's beautiful. [clears throat] What year was that?

G. Robinson: Nineteen-hundred-twelve.

R. Terwilliger: Nineteen-hundred-twelve.

G. Robinson: I was married and we rented an apartment in Perth Amboy.

R. Terwilliger: Let's talk about the wedding first. You told me that you really had a nice occasion even though you didn't have too many relatives.

G. Robinson: We were married in Brooklyn. And we had a regular wedding, full wedding, but we had no parents there. She had parents in Europe and I had parents in Europe.

R. Terwilliger: You were married by a rabbi?

G. Robinson: Of course, of course, [unclear]. It was a very regular wedding, nothing [unclear].

R. Terwilliger: Did she wear the traditional white dress?

G. Robinson: Well, a traditional wedding dress, I'm sure, I'm sure. And then we opened up, I got an apartment in Perth Amboy and we settled down and that was it.

R. Terwilliger: That was the beginning. But when you looked at this lovely young lady, what made you know that she was going to be a good partner for you for all these years? What attracted you to her?

G. Robinson: Well, first of all, she came from the same family, same kind of family I came.

R. Terwilliger: I see.

G. Robinson: Same what you call–I came from Lithuania, she came from Latvia. But as far as a home, their home was just like our home. And she was an immigrant girl just like I was an immigrant boy, the same thing. And she was not a bad looking girl as far as look goes.

R. Terwilliger: I can see that in the pictures.

G. Robinson: And then she needed a home just like I needed a home. She was working as a seamstress in Manhattan. And she was here about the same time in United States as same as I was. And it wasn't love at first sight, but we kept company and we needed each other more than anything else.

R. Terwilliger: That's beautiful.

G. Robinson: The love part came after. [chuckles]

R. Terwilliger: I'm sure. And it grows, as you live together, we well know.

G. Robinson: And let's see, we were married in December. And September twenty-fourth or the twenty-fifth, we had a son.

R. Terwilliger: That's beautiful. And that was your oldest boy?

G. Robinson: He is right here in Highland Park.

R. Terwilliger: And what's his first name again?

G. Robinson: Larry [Lawrence Robinson].

R. Terwilliger: Larry. That was Larry. And you were still living in the apartment then in Perth Amboy when Larry was born?

G. Robinson: Yes, he was born in that apartment and our daughter [Zelda (Robinson) Sternberg] was born in that apartment. But then I bought, about in 1916, I bought my own home. And then there were already a two-family home, and we had our own home. And then Dave [David Robinson] was born in 1918, but he was born in Perth Amboy Hospital. At that time, we were already talking if you got to give birth, you got to go to the hospital.

R. Terwilliger: Yeah, before that, it was at home with a–

G. Robinson: All home with a doctor or doctors.

R. Terwilliger: Right. And the business was doing well at this time?

G. Robinson: It was thriving. The war came along in Europe and things were getting better here, everybody was working, helping Europe along. And coal was being shipped. I depended on coal shipping. I was on the coal docks, right on the waterfront. And there was a lot of business going on.

R. Terwilliger: Where did these ships come from, Mr. Robinson?

G. Robinson: Why, first of all, this coal that landed there all came from Pennsylvania, and Kentucky, and Virginia. And it came over by railroad on the Reading [Railroad] system, and it came on the docks. And these coal boats used to get loaded with it and be towed by tugs into New York Harbor or anywhere as far as Boston [Massachusetts], and even as afar as Newfoundland [Canada] and Nova Scotia [Canada] by sailing vessels and all that. They used to tow them up there because, you see, they had powerhouses there already in the state of Maine and New Hampshire and all that. And the powerhouses you couldn't power with wood; you had to have coal.

R. Terwilliger: Right, yes.

G. Robinson: So the coal was towed from these docks, like South Amboy has the same thing, Perth Amboy is also coal docks. And it was towed by tugs in these barges and they're unloaded. And sometimes they carried the load back like timber or something else.

R. Terwilliger: Yes, they didn't come back empty then? They always brought something back with them?

G. Robinson: Well, not always. There was nothing to carry back except timber sometimes. And that was carried mostly by sailing vessels. A lot of sailing vessels were going around in those days.

R. Terwilliger: And your purpose there then, to have that store on this dock front, was to supply these–?

G. Robinson: To supply like a grocer or butcher, to buy with the groceries.

R. Terwilliger: These ship captains with the needs for their trip?

G. Robinson: That's right, whatever they needed. Whatever I could sell there, I tried to have it in the store.

R. Terwilliger: So most of these seafaring men were New Englanders? They were from up north?

G. Robinson: The sailing vessels were New Englanders. But the harbor boats, where there are regular square boats, they were just ordinary coal barging, that's all they were, or retired–in those days, you didn't have no social security or, what you call, old people being taken care of–

R. Terwilliger: Pension.

G. Robinson: If you got old, you got yourself either living with somebody else in the country, or go on the coal barge, or work on the dock, or something like that. There wasn't a strong union in those days. They were working for a dollar a day. But they had a home on the boat and for a dollar a day, they got along very good.

R. Terwilliger: So am I understanding it correctly then, these barges would fill up with coal and then they'd be taken up into Perth Amboy where tugboats would–?

G. Robinson: No, no, we had our own tugboats on the railroad. They were taken mostly to around New York and to all the ships. In those days, all the ships–

R. Terwilliger: And then the coal was loaded on these bigger ships?

G. Robinson: That's correct. See, they come alongside, they would take a boat and bring it alongside the boat and they used to hoist it down and load the boats. All boats in those days didn't use–you didn't use oil. Let's see, what year we started using oil? Before the Second [World] War, we started using oil already.

R. Terwilliger: So most of the men that you dealt with in your business–

G. Robinson: Coal barging.

R. Terwilliger: –your customers were local people then? They weren't from around this area?

G. Robinson: No, they weren't from around this area. They were around in Manhattan or around the harbor.

R. Terwilliger: Well, I meant general area. They weren't from Maine.

G. Robinson: Well, the sailing vessels were from Maine.

R. Terwilliger: Yeah, and did you have sailing vessels?

G. Robinson: **Oh yes. The first ten years, before the First [World] War, we had a lot of sailing vessels. But after the First War, they all loaded them up with American goods and they went to Europe and they never came back. They stayed over there; they didn't think to bring back. So after the First War, there was hardly a sailing vessel that has to carry coal; it was all done by barges and steam engines and all that.**

R. Terwilliger: Do you remember any of these seafaring men from these sailing vessels?

G. Robinson: **Oh, I do, I do.**

R. Terwilliger: What kind of people were they?

G. Robinson: **They were the finest people in the world.**

R. Terwilliger: Really? Honest?

G. Robinson: **I could trust every one of them. Well, here and there, you'll find–**

R. Terwilliger: Well, there's always, yeah, but for the most–for generally–

G. Robinson: **In general, ninety-nine percent practically honest. I had already a couple that done me, that I trusted them and never got paid and all that.**

R. Terwilliger: Now was it a fair exchange? They didn't run up a tab or anything, or a bill? They always paid you for what they purchased right?

G. Robinson: **Well, I always got paid. Without them, a little trusting later, but I had a system of working out that never to get the pay to have to send it back. And I had a system that they mailed it when I got it back. I had little losses, but nothing to complain, nothing to complain.**

R. Terwilliger: And do you know how much time was involved in–how long did it take to get from up north to down to Port Reading?

G. Robinson: **Well you mean–**

R. Terwilliger: By sailing vessel.

G. Robinson: **By sailing vessel, it all depended on the weather. If they had the weather right with them, they could sail in no time. If the weather [was] bad, why they could get lost sometimes too. A lot of them got lost, oh yeah. I knew a fellow started out–we used to have a lot of fun kidding him, fellow by the name of Mitchell, he started out with a load of potatoes from Maine (you know Maine is potato country) to bring it somewhere here to Philadelphia or New York or somewhere. And somehow he got lost somewhere and he landed in the Caribbean on an island!**

R. Terwilliger: That sounds like a dream. [laughs]

G. Robinson: **Yes, he landed there. And by the time he got there, the potatoes were rotting away. They lost the whole load. They had to dump it; dump it and come back**

with an empty vessel. And I remember after a while, he used to come for coal, we all used kid Mitchell about the potato. [laughter] But that's what they used to bring back on those vessels. They used to bring back either timber [unclear] lath that you used to plaster walls with. They used to bring a lot of that, and timber, and rock (rock for monuments in the cemetery and for cobblestones to pave streets) for cobblestones; not those return, the return. That was the big thing in those days. And they used to carry coal back for powerhouses.

R. Terwilliger: Right. Did these men travel alone with just seamen?

G. Robinson: On sailing vessels? Oh yeah. They had a crew anywhere from five to fifteen men. It all depended on the size of–you know there were two masters and three masters, and four and five masters, big ones too.

R. Terwilliger: Is that what the head of the ship was called, or the sailing vessel, was a headmaster?

G. Robinson: Well, the captain.

R. Terwilliger: Captain, okay. He was called the captain. But they didn't have their families with them then? They traveled alone?

G. Robinson: On sailing vessels, they traveled alone. Sometimes they used to have–the captain used to carry his wife once in a while; once I'll carry a friend or a relative or something like that. [coughs] Sometimes some of them took a ride with them from New England; they came to New York and got off in New York.

R. Terwilliger: That's interesting. So you had a long day probably at your shop?

G. Robinson: Well, we closed at six o'clock.

R. Terwilliger: And what time did you start in the morning?

G. Robinson: I had to be there about eight o'clock.

R. Terwilliger: About eight. And so you probably had to get up, what, about–?

G. Robinson: Well, in the early days, first of all, I had to commute from Perth Amboy to Port Reading by train, on the Central Railroad [of New Jersey]. Then my store was almost a mile away from the office where the engines were running up and down (the engines that push the car loads with coal). And I had the good blessing that they took us down, all the workmen when they got off the train, all the workmen that got on the engine, they used to take them down to the docks. And I used to go down to the store with them. And I usually had to carry a bundle of newspapers; I had to carry something else. It was a struggle. The first ten years was a big struggle. But then, I got on a Roadster there and I had a little car. I had a Ford that I bought in 1917.

R. Terwilliger: Tell me, how much did you pay for that car?

G. Robinson: I think it was $328 or something like that. [chuckles]

R. Terwilliger: Yeah, I think you told me $325 in 1917.

G. Robinson: **And you know who sold it to me?**

R. Terwilliger: Who?

G. Robinson: **Applegate, our president from the bank!**

R. Terwilliger: Oh my goodness, no! J. Arthur Applegate[5]?

G. Robinson: **J. Arthur Applegate was working for Van Sickler [phonetic] as a salesman in the South Amboy end. And he worked for the Van Sickler [phonetic] and he sold me the car. Oh yes.**

R. Terwilliger: Oh, that's interesting.

G. Robinson: **He sold me my first car. And he said to me, he says, "Robinson, if I was you, I'd invest another twenty-eight dollars and I'm going give you the mount of the rims." See, a car at that time, the tire was on the rim and to take off the tire, you had to pull the whole wheel off and all that. But then after a while, they invented a rim that the tire was on a rim and all you had to take off is the rim and the tire. So for twenty-eight dollars, they took off the old wheel, the other wheels, and put on the mount of the rims. When I bought a home on Madison Avenue [in Perth Amboy], half of Madison Avenue went to look at the mount of the rims that you could take it off with a wrench and the wheel was still on the car.**

R. Terwilliger: Oh, that must have been really unbelievable when they saw that. [laughs]

G. Robinson: **Oh, big stuff. Oh, big stuff, big stuff; started out right.**

R. Terwilliger: So by this time then, you purchased your home on Madison Avenue? You bought a house there and you had three children.

G. Robinson: **I had three children and I built a garage in back for the car; in fact, a double garage. And we lived there until the 1930s. We lived there and then for some reason, we had to sell the home. We had to sell it to a friend of ours. He was next door, he had an apartment, it was a fire hazard and you had to have so much land alongside the building and my wife was already tired of having only two bedrooms. We had to have three bedrooms, so we sold the house and we went to an apartment where there were three bedrooms.**

R. Terwilliger: I see. In Perth Amboy?

G. Robinson: **In Perth Amboy.**

R. Terwilliger: Uh-huh. When did you buy the house at the shore then?

[5] James Arthur Applegate (1887-1981) was a successful businessman with his own automobile dealership in Middlesex County. He also headed the Chief Insurance Agency in Perth Amboy, was executive vice-president of the South Amboy Trust Company, and was president of the Commonwealth Bank of New Jersey in Metuchen. He married Adelaide Holms Thompson (1890-1971) and lived in South Amboy and Cranbury before settling in Metuchen in 1925.

G. Robinson: **I didn't buy it. I bought a lot and we built the house on it, yeah.**

R. Terwilliger: Oh yeah, right. In Monmouth Beach, right?

G. Robinson: **That's correct.**

R. Terwilliger: And you told me that was because your daughter had contracted polio.

G. Robinson: **She was a polio kid when she was a year old.**

R. Terwilliger: Uh-huh. And the doctor recommended–

G. Robinson: **Recommended hot sand, surf and sun.**

R. Terwilliger: I see.

G. Robinson: **And she's a fine lady now. She has four nice, grown children. [gestures to the pictures on the wall] That's her children on the wall there, you see it? These are Dave's children, and these are our daughter's children. They're all in their thirties now. They're professionals now. They're all doing nicely.**

R. Terwilliger: How about <u>your</u> family during the Depression in the [19]30s? Did this have any profound–?

G. Robinson: **My family over in Europe?**

R. Terwilliger: No, your own family here, you as a person. How did the Depression affect you?

G. Robinson: **During the Depression, we just tightened our belt and we kept going on.**

R. Terwilliger: You managed to hold onto your business through the Depression?

G. Robinson: **Oh yeah, oh yeah, all the business carried on. I was already in the money at that time because in the [19]30s, there was already Rutgers [University in New Brunswick] here. Let's see, all the children were [in] high school in Perth Amboy; they're all high school there, all school and high school. And then our oldest son joined Rutgers in 1929, I think. And I had enough money to take care of him. And in those days, when we came to take money to the school, they all need a check. I think something like less than $200 paid for a quarter; I don't remember for what term in those days.**

R. Terwilliger: It's unbelievable. [chuckles]

G. Robinson: **And then our daughter went to Hillwood Lakes in Trenton. She went there as a schoolteacher. And we had enough to carry her through and then David, the youngest too, they went–let's see, Larry graduated in 1933 and Dave graduated in 1939 [from Rutgers University].**

R. Terwilliger: That's wonderful. So you educated all three of your children?

G. Robinson: **Oh yes, oh yes. They're both Rutgers graduates and our daughter graduated–what do you call that college?**

R. Terwilliger: Trenton State[6]?

G. Robinson: Trenton College for teachers. I'm not sure, I have to look. Instead of three years, four years–and she was teacher in Woodbridge Township in Iselin. She was teaching in Iselin until she got married.

R. Terwilliger: That's wonderful, that's wonderful. Let's just stop for a minute. [recording paused]

I wanted to ask you about how World War II affected your family. Obviously your boys were of the age where–?

G. Robinson: First of all, my people were wiped out in the First War.

R. Terwilliger: Your family in Europe?

G. Robinson: Well, they lost everything. They lost everything in the First War because the Germans came riding the train in there and they burned the town down and my people had to run for their lives. My father, mother, I had brother and two sisters, they had to run for their lives and they run into south Russia, close to Siberia. And they stayed there until the war was over, and then they started driving to go back to where they came from. And they had to come back, and they came back and it wasn't any more than turning Russia into Poland. And my father came back there, there wasn't a brick left on the whole home that they had. There wasn't the little store that they had; there wasn't a brick left of anything. Where the store was, some peasant took it over and he was making a little store of it. And the home, there was nothing in the foundation because people had–everything was burned down. They had to have some finish so they took away the bricks, and the rocks, and foundation, and built up their own home. So when my father came there and he didn't have a place to put his head down, he had a friend–it was in the winter and in two weeks, he [father] passed away.

R. Terwilliger: Oh, it must have been too much for him to be so devastated.

G. Robinson: Devastated. Well, he lost everything.

R. Terwilliger: Oh, that's too bad. Did you keep a correspondence up with your parents in Europe? Did you write?

G. Robinson: During the war, you couldn't reach him. But after, we could reach him. We sent him help and all that. We sent him food packages and all that. You know during the First War, how [President] Herbert Hoover had food packages and you pay ten dollars here, they got a food package in Russia. And I kept sending food packages one after the other and that's what happened. But when they came back home, they couldn't get started with nothing. They came back home, let's see, one sister got lost; she got typhoid fever and she passed away. Then the other one got married and settled down in a different section all together. So they came home with my youngest brother, and they finally bought out that peasant that

[6] The college was established as New Jersey State Normal School in 1855, and later became known as the New Jersey State Teachers College in 1929. It is presently known as The College of New Jersey.

opened up the little make-believe store and they started business again. And I sent for my mother and brought her here. As a citizen, I had a right to bring a mother, but I couldn't bring my brother. That was the law at that time. That's the law that stopped immigration at that time because immigration–the laborers started kicking about … [recording paused]

And they started life there again. My brother built up some kind of [unclear]; he had a home, a little business. But I brought my mother here. It must have been in 1922 or something like that. She was with us for about seventeen years until she passed away in her eighties. And she's resting in our plot in Asbury Park, I have a plot over there [at Temple Beth El Cemetery] in a place called Shark River Hills there. That was my mother. My brother, I sent for him. But he already got himself established, got married, and had two children. And he always put it off. He was going to America someday until the Second [World] War came along. And I have to tell you, the Second War, [Adolf] Hitler got them all: my brother, his wife, her mother, and they had two daughters, not the older daughter, but the younger daughter. She was out in the street playing and peasants saw what was going on there so she escaped with some of the peasants and she remained alive. And she's an Israeli resident now; but she came to Israel.

R. Terwilliger: I see. But both your brother and his wife and the rest of the children [died]?

G. Robinson: All of them.

R. Terwilliger: In concentration camps?

G. Robinson: Not concentration, just–

R. Terwilliger: No? Wiped them out? Killed them outright?

G. Robinson: Wiped them out, absolutely, like [unclear] six million people disappeared and all that.

R. Terwilliger: I know, I know.

G. Robinson: Not only in Germany, but over there. They just–they made a bonfire and they shot them and burned them. That's what they did.

R. Terwilliger: Oh gosh.

G. Robinson: In turn, my wife had a brother in Latvia, the same thing over there. All disappeared, the whole family. All disappeared.

R. Terwilliger: Oh gosh.

G. Robinson: How they disappeared, they know all about it, but there's nothing to talk about.

R. Terwilliger: Right.

G. Robinson: But one little girl remained alive. And she lived through the war and after the war, they want to go to her own home in Israel. And it's a long story how we reach there, how we found out that there's still one living there and she finally

made Israel. I want to bring her to the United States, she said, "Excuse me Uncle, what happened here could happen anywhere." She said, "See, Germany was one of the greatest countries in the world. If that can happen in Germany, it can happen–and we are going to Israel." And she made it in about–it took her–she landed on a Greek island and she almost drowned on the boat and all that. But she got there. But anyhow, she is a mother of two daughters now. We had her here about five–when was it?–about four or five years ago. It was to your Bar Mitzvah, wasn't it, Joe? Yeah, they were here, her and her husband. And she has two daughters and they're both in the Israeli Army; one is a lieutenant, one is a colonel or whatever [unclear].

R. Terwilliger: That's interesting. That's an interesting story.

G. Robinson: So I was in Israel twice already. I was there in [19]54 and I was there in [19]67.

R. Terwilliger: And did you visit with her when you were there then?

G. Robinson: Pardon?

R. Terwilliger: Did you visit with her when you were there with your niece?

G. Robinson: Of course! That was the main thing we were going over there. [clock ringing in background] They went over here on <u>their</u> twentieth anniversary.

R. Terwilliger: I see.

G. Robinson: They were only here about four or five years ago, over here.

R. Terwilliger: Well, then I asked you before that when World War II came along it probably–your own sons were drafted? Or did they join the service?

G. Robinson: Yeah, they were [unclear] during the war. My oldest son [Larry] was married and they had to break up his home and go in the Army.

R. Terwilliger: He was drafted into the Army?

G. Robinson: Absolutely. My daughter was married, and her husband was drafted, and he had to go in the Army. And they [sons] just graduated out of Rutgers and they gave him an invitation to take a trip on a battleship. And he [son, David Robinson] went out on the battleship for a trip for a month and there they held him with–this is another training you get, you got to get more training. And he took up the training in the Navy and he became an ensign. And then when he became an ensign, they say you had to get a little more training and they sent him out to San Francisco [California] to get on the flagship [U.S.S.; United States Ship] *Augusta* at that time. And he was already–well, what was his rank at that time?

R. Terwilliger: An ensign?

G. Robinson: No, he was more than an ensign already.

R. Terwilliger: First lieutenant?

G. Robinson: **First lieutenant. First lieutenant and he was an assistant navigator in the *Augusta* with Admiral [Ernest] King for two years.**

R. Terwilliger: Now was it the *Augusta* that [Russian leader Joseph] Stalin and [British Prime Minister Winston] Churchill–wasn't that where the big three met?

G. Robinson: **You're right. You're absolutely right.**

R. Terwilliger: Was he on the ship?

G. Robinson: **Not Stalin. Churchill and [President Franklin] Roosevelt.**

R. Terwilliger: Oh, Churchill and Roosevelt.

G. Robinson: **Churchill and Roosevelt. In the North Sea, [unclear] he was on with Roosevelt with Secretary [of the Navy William Franklin] Knox and all that. And then they appealed for naval flyers, so he signed up for flying.**

R. Terwilliger: Hold it right there a minute. Let's make … [recording paused]

G. Robinson: **[recording begins mid-sentence] … and one day he comes home for furlough and before leaving, he says, "Dad, I'm off the ship." "You're off the ship? What happened?" He says, "I'm going to be trained for naval flying." "You're going naval flying?" I said, "No matter how high you jump, you're always on the floor." [laughter] Well, he says, "That's why I'm taking off." And he was sent down to [unclear] Florida. In about a year and a half, he was trained and he was put up in the [Navy] flattop *Essex*, on the *Essex*. And they shipped him out to Japan and his rank was Flight Lieutenant Commander David Robinson. Flight lieutenant commander, the top man! And he was there until the war was over.**

R. Terwilliger: Well, he probably had some stories to tell.

G. Robinson: **He had quite some experiences, a lot of stories. All things to tell, but they never–**

R. Terwilliger: He was the squadron leader of his–

G. Robinson: **Of course, not only squadron, but flight lieutenant commander. They still have reunion sometimes, every five years [to] meet some of the men that he was with. A lot of them are gone already [unclear].**

R. Terwilliger: Do you think David enjoyed flying?

G. Robinson: **He did enjoy flying, I'll say that.**

R. Terwilliger: Does he fly today anymore?

G. Robinson: **Pardon?**

R. Terwilliger: Does he still fly?

G. Robinson: **No, no, no, [unclear]. And while he was being trained, for a while he was in Atlantic City there for about two or three months. So he used to come fly over**

Perth Amboy with his plane. He used to come fly all over Port Reading or Perth Amboy and all that, and we used to see him. [laughs] You knew already that he was flying around here in his plane there. And then when the war was over, and the *Essex* came back to San Francisco, he took off his uniform and he said, "I don't want to have a wife in Newport, Rhode Island or San Diego or Norfolk, Virginia and settle down," and he never gave up. He said they hit us through the air; they got him through the air. In fact, that's what he told me. I said, "David, you are going flying?" He said, "Daddy, you know they hit us through the air. We got them through the air." That was the answer he gave me; that's it.

R. Terwilliger: Yeah, right.

G. Robinson: And he settled down and that was it.

R. Terwilliger: That was the end of the flying portion.

G. Robinson: And then, let's see, he came back in [19]45. [talking to grandson Joseph Robinson] And when did your parents get married? What year?

J. Robinson: Forty-eight.

G. Robinson: In [19]48, yeah. And he met his girlfriend right at the old neighborhood. She's in Perth Amboy. She was also born in Perth Amboy and raised in Perth Amboy. And that's the story.

R. Terwilliger: For David and Fredda [Robinson].

G. Robinson: But he never went for flying anymore.

R. Terwilliger: Well, he did what he had to do. He finished it. That was over.

G. Robinson: That's right. He still has his [unclear] and he has his uniform and he has all his citations–he has a lot of citations. I said, "I think it's getting [unclear] somewhere." [laughter]

R. Terwilliger: When did you come to Metuchen?

G. Robinson: I'll be here twenty-one years.

R. Terwilliger: Twenty-one years.

G. Robinson: The reason I came to Metuchen, maybe I would have come after anyhow on account of my vision. You see my [unclear] days were over and you leave there, and then you kind of want to go to the children and go back–why it [the travel] was problems. So the children suggested I move closer to them.

R. Terwilliger: Right.

G. Robinson: And after my oldest son found this little home [at 5 James Place], he said, "Here it is." And I sold that one and bought this one and we are here going twenty-one years now. [SLIDES 4 through 6]

R. Terwilliger: Can you just stop for a minute? [recording paused]

I forgot to ask you how your business in Perth Amboy ended. How did it terminate?

G. Robinson: Well, that's a very good question! [laughs] I was there almost forty years. I was fifty years old by myself and I really had a struggle, but I enjoyed it because it wasn't so much selling stuff, it was getting stuff there in the early days before I had a car. And then we brought over my wife's brother from Europe after the First War, and he fell into my business and I broke him in. And he was with me twenty-five years in my business.

R. Terwilliger: That's wonderful.

G. Robinson: So, things were going along pretty good. He raised his family; I raised my family. We didn't get rich there, but we didn't go broke at any time. We got along pretty good. We were thrifty. The best part about that business, the overhead was very minimum. In the early days, when I was on the boat[7], my rent was five dollars a month. [laughter] When I had the other store–I had a concrete store that the company that we have–I think I paid something like ten to fifteen dollars, including the–

R. Terwilliger: The electricity?

G. Robinson: Electricity and all that. So our overhead was minimum. So instead of spending for overhead, it was our profit there in that way. And we got along pretty good. And the way we finished out–as the years went by, the tides were getting higher and higher there and November 25, 1950, there was such a high tide that the store was–about the third / fourth quarter, and I was down at the shore, it was on a Saturday and my brother-in-law went to the [unclear] to open the store. And when you came there at eight o'clock, you couldn't go down, the tide was too high that nobody could go down there. So he stood there waiting for the tide to recede. So while they're waiting there, about nine o'clock, what do you think happened? The store is afire! A third of it was underwater and when the water struck, I had refrigerators there, when it struck the motors, it made a short and it caught fire … [recording paused]

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

R. Terwilliger: [recording begins mid-sentence] … it takes about three minutes.

G. Robinson: All right.

R. Terwilliger: I'll check it before we start. [recording paused]

[7] Mr. Robinson's first store was located on a house boat for three years before it burned down. He built a shack to replace it on the coal docks in Port Reading. That shack lasted until 1950 when rising tides short-circuited the wiring and the building burned down.

So your oldest boy, Larry, again found this house for you here in Metuchen because you were having this problem with your eyes that kind of limited you as far as traveling and driving. You probably couldn't drive at all anymore, could you?

G. Robinson: **Well, I tried to, but it didn't work out. In fact, my wife took it over and she was driving for a while. That didn't work out either because she never drove anything but a baby carriage. [laughter] And then when she started driving, [she] must have been already about sixty-five or so.**

R. Terwilliger: Wow, she was quite a gal! She learned to drive at sixty-five?

G. Robinson: **She tried and tried and finally made it.**

R. Terwilliger: Oh, I like her.

G. Robinson: **But she finally had to give it up because her driving was not too good and nothing happened and that was over.**

R. Terwilliger: Quit while you're ahead kind of thing.

G. Robinson: **So is it [tape recorder] going on now?**

R. Terwilliger: Yes, it's going on now.

G. Robinson: **So when I came here, I started to look around for work. I couldn't work in a butcher's anymore because my vision was so that I couldn't see nothing on the scale. I couldn't read any orders.**

R. Terwilliger: You might chop a finger off too. [laughs]

G. Robinson: **So I have been eviscerating chicken cut. I was cutting meat all right and I was doing the work there, but I couldn't see on the scale. I couldn't see anything and I couldn't read my orders. So when I first came here, I didn't look for a job in the market anymore. So I got a job on the cemetery here. You know there's a the cemetery back here? Did you know there's–?**

R. Terwilliger: Hillside Cemetery.

G. Robinson: **That's correct. I worked at the cemetery there for a couple seasons there (a dollar an hour) doing everything you have to do in the cemetery.**

R. Terwilliger: That's wonderful.

G. Robinson: **Even graves and all that. Then I heard that there's a shop for the blind here, and I got in the shop and I worked in shop for the blind.**

R. Terwilliger: Wonderful!

G. Robinson: **I must have worked in the shop for the blind for about ten years at least, if not twelve years, until my knee started bothering me. And there wasn't much work in the shop and it was hard for me to travel on buses, to get up and down. And**

there wasn't enough work, so I thought I'll give it up. And I gave it up, I think, about four years ago. I gave it up.

R. Terwilliger: That's when you retired, four years ago?

G. Robinson: Well, call it what you want.

R. Terwilliger: And what's your age? You are going to be ninety?

G. Robinson: I'll be ninety.

R. Terwilliger: Ninety?

G. Robinson: Ninety at the end of this month.

R. Terwilliger: The end of this month. So gosh, you really retired at eighty-six, right? [laughs]

G. Robinson: Well, I wouldn't call it retired.

R. Terwilliger: No, that was really when you stopped.

G. Robinson: Yeah. Our biggest thing in our life was when our children were all in the war, all the three of them, all the three of them.

R. Terwilliger: Yes. Oh, I can imagine as a parent that must have been–

G. Robinson: But Dave had it very good. You see, he wasn't married and he had a good service in the war. He enjoyed it, his navigation while he was in the *Augusta* with Admiral King. And then he was glad he went flying and he enjoyed that too.

But Larry, he had a hard training and a hard going across. He was very seasick and he was in Scotland, and then they had D-Day [invasion] when they had to go across and they got hurt a little bit. And he went through Germany at that time. He landed in Germany and he saw what was going on there. When he came back, his wife said, "Don't ask him anything what happened over there. He doesn't want to hear no more about it. He never wants to talk about it. It's over and that's all forgotten." Because he had no reason to be drafted at all because he was married already, and there were other boys like him that were drafted, never made it. Somehow or another, politics in Perth Amboy, they had to get somebody. See, Perth Amboy assigned him. But our son-in-law [Maurice Sternberg], he had a very good service because was a doctor (optometrist) so they had a doctor title to put him in the Paris Hospital where he was taking care of wounded people and all that. He had a good service and–

R. Terwilliger: Everyone came back safely though? That's something you must be very thankful.

G. Robinson: Everyone came back safe. That was the best part of the–so then I leave the store right after they came back. I said the children are here and business is not so good anyhow because the coal business was dying anyhow, you know everything was going to oil. And the barges were no more the same barges, used to be small barges with big families on it that you could sell food. And the barges were getting bigger and no families aboard. So business was getting not too good

anyhow. We had to go and stretch ourselves to get business from Perth Amboy, South Amboy, other ports and all that. So when that went, I said, "All right, the children are home. Thank God everybody is all right." And we left Perth Amboy and we went to live for good down the shore. And I probably would have stayed down the shore if it wasn't for my eyesight. Maybe yes, maybe not, probably would have come to the children [unclear]. So we are here twenty years and I have a lot to be thankful for, the way things worked out.

R. Terwilliger: Well, you celebrated a big anniversary here, you and your wife.

G. Robinson: We celebrated our sixtieth anniversary.

R. Terwilliger: Your sixtieth anniversary.

G. Robinson: Oh yes. We were going to celebrate almost our sixty-fifth in a few months. See, if she was here on Christmas, we would have celebrated–in fact, we were sure we were getting all ready for the party. We were already planning a party, sixty-fifth [anniversary].

R. Terwilliger: But you told me when I last visited with you that you were thankful to God the way Rose went? She died very peacefully and you had a good life together.

G. Robinson: That's right.

R. Terwilliger: It certainly sounds that way.

G. Robinson: That's right, that's right. A good life.

R. Terwilliger: And you shared a lot.

G. Robinson: And she lived like a lady and passed away like a lady.

R. Terwilliger: Yeah, I thought that was beautiful when you said that.

G. Robinson: She was <u>so</u> sick internally. She had to take so much medication and she didn't want people to know how sick she was.

R. Terwilliger: I know.

G. Robinson: And to me, she used to whisper, "I wish it was over. I wish it was over." And she had her wish, she had her wish, passed away during the morning sometime. I don't think she could even call my attention, you know in the corridor. She laid back on the bed and that's the way I found her in the morning. So even to pass away, you've got to have good luck.

R. Terwilliger: Well, that was, as they say, dying with dignity. And I think we all wish for that kind of an end for someone we love so dearly.

G. Robinson: That's right, that's right. Think of all the people that die with cancer, they have to face that.

R. Terwilliger: Oh yeah, that terrible ordeal.

G. Robinson: **So many we lost in our family, people with cancer condition that had to face it; young people too.**

R. Terwilliger: Oh, I know. It's a dreadful disease! It really is.

G. Robinson: **You know, you can't recognize a terminal case until–**

R. Terwilliger: And the spirit to go on. You know there's always that hope that maybe tomorrow, someone's going to find something that will cure it.

G. Robinson: **I belong to the Association for the Blind of Middlesex County. I've been a member for twelve years or so. It's a nice organization and there are two people over there that are afflicted with cancer, and you know they can't make it. It's a terrible thing (brain tumors) because one is in Iselin here, a roofer. He is not blind, but he helps the blind. He's a Lion. You know the Lions help the blind? And the poor fellow is struggling [unclear] terrible.**

R. Terwilliger: Well, sometimes you wonder. You know it really questions your faith because you would normally think people shouldn't have to suffer like this, but just the example this man sets for other people.

G. Robinson: **I just lost my wife's nephew, her brother's son, an orthopedic surgeon in Toms River that raised a nice family of four children; fine wife, fine home, fine living. Once he starts feeling shaken, within nine months from the first day that he knew that there was something the matter with him, he was gone.**

R. Terwilliger: What did he have cancer of? Just he had cancer throughout his body probably.

G. Robinson: **I don't know exactly. I never discussed it with anybody.**

R. Terwilliger: Well, this is too sad a note to end it on because you've had such a good life. I want to ask you something about, if I said to you, what do you attribute your successful life to? What do you think are some of the important things about living a good life? Can you tell me? I have to know. I'm a young person; I've got a long way to go hopefully.

G. Robinson: **Well, to being thrifty and secure myself, and secure the family. That's the best thing I can say.**

R. Terwilliger: And tell me what you told me once before, what was being in good standing, was having coal–you tell me, coal in the basement?

G. Robinson: **Oh! [laughs] In the old days, if ordinary people had three squares a day–we call it three meals a day–and if they put away the coal in the summer because in the winter, sometimes it's hard to get coal. If they [unclear] coal in the cellar, and if they had a porch for the summer to sit on the porch–**

R. Terwilliger: That was a good life.

G. Robinson: **That was a good life. We're not talking about people in the money. We're talking about the average person, the average person.**

R. Terwilliger: And you have no regrets? If you had to do it over again, is there anything you'd change?

G. Robinson: Well, you know you can always improve on something. [laughs] From all the experience and all that–

R. Terwilliger: You're sharp. Isn't he sharp?! There's no way I can trick him into telling me anything! He really is.

G. Robinson: My success, yes, to being thrifty, and secure yourself for a future life or a future day.

R. Terwilliger: Well, how about your good marriage? What do you think made a good marriage? Today, we have people divorcing and separating and having affairs.

G. Robinson: So if you divorce, what are you going to get again? You might get something worse. [laughter]

R. Terwilliger: Right. And how about your own marriage though? What do you think made it? Why were you and Rose in love for all those years? Did you share?

G. Robinson: Well, she needed a home, I needed a home. We were both the same kind of people, come from the same families and–

R. Terwilliger: And you worked together, didn't you?

G. Robinson: Of course, we worked together! Well, of course we worked together. The only thing she couldn't help me in Port Reading because it was hard to get to Port Reading in those days. And she'd done her part raising a family and I've done my part to take care of the family.

R. Terwilliger: Right.

G. Robinson: That's about the best we could do. Today, you've got to have both working. The wife has to work to help along because–

R. Terwilliger: The cost of living today is–

G. Robinson: Because [of] the cost of living, especially if you raise a family and you have to have children educated and all that.

R. Terwilliger: Yes, it's much different today. There's a lot more pressures on both parents than there were in those days.

G. Robinson: Oh yeah, yeah.

R. Terwilliger: But I want to thank you, Mr. Robinson.

G. Robinson: Oh! What are you thanking me for?

R. Terwilliger: It has been a beautiful experience for me to share something with you and I know that we're going to place a great deal of value on your life history for our project that

we're working on in the library. So I want to thank you and wish you well and happy birthday a little prematurely. Okay?

G. Robinson: **Thank you.**

R. Terwilliger: Okay? [laughs] Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

INTERVIEW SLIDES

SLIDE 1: Gershon Robinson being interviewed by Ruth Terwilliger inside his home at 5 James Place, Metuchen on May 18, 1978.

SLIDE 2: Gershon Robinson being interviewed by Ruth Terwilliger inside his home at 5 James Place, Metuchen on May 18, 1978.

SLIDE 3: Gershon Robinson being interviewed by Ruth Terwilliger inside his home at 5 James Place, Metuchen on May 18, 1978.

SLIDE 4: View of Gershon Robinson's home at 5 James Place, Metuchen on May 18, 1978.

SLIDE 5: View of Gershon Robinson's home at 5 James Place, Metuchen on May 18, 1978.

SLIDE 6: View of Gershon Robinson's home at 5 James Place, Metuchen on May 18, 1978.