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An Interview with Milton I. Schwartz

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project. Additional transcripts may be found under that series title.

Claytee D. White, Project Director
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Preface

Milton I. Schwartz was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. He enlisted in the Army the day after Pearl Harbor (age 20) and did a five year stint in the Pacific as a repeater specialist. After the war he returned to his job as a refrigeration mechanic in Brooklyn and was soon offered a job out in Las Vegas at the Flamingo Hotel, which was owned by Bugsy Siegel.

After three months in Las Vegas, during which time he had several conversations over dinner with Beldon Cattleman, Milton returned to New York to work with his father in the fixture business. After ten years he sold that business and bought into Design Equipment Construction, which brought him back to Las Vegas.

Milton started or bought many businesses over the years, but the one he's proudest of is Valley Hospital. He and his partners brought the first medical helicopters into Nevada and he feels that many lives were saved because of that. He also invested in Yellow-Checker-Star Cab Company, which he still owns.

Two on-going concerns that are important to Milton are his involvement with the Republican Party and the Milton I. Schwartz Hebrew Academy in Israel. Of the many awards and plaques he has earned over the decades, he is proudest of the birthday acknowledgements from the Academy. He believes strongly that the most important achievements of his life revolve around his religion and the children being educated in it.

Milton shares many stories, facts, descriptions, and anecdotes about Las Vegas in the decades since 1946. He built a house in the Scotch 80's, contributes to UNLV, and approves of city growth and the proposed changes in the downtown area. He has contributed much to the growth and stability of the Las Vegas valley.

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Milton Schwartz 5/3/04
Signature of Narrator Date

Address of narrator

Claytee D. White 5/3/2004
Signature of interviewer Date

This is Claytee White. It is May 4th of 2004. I'm doing an interview this morning. Could you please introduce yourself for me?

Milton I. Schwartz.

And, Mr. Schwartz, if you could please tell me where you're from and just a little about your early life.

I was born in Brooklyn, New York and I lived there for 20 years. On December 7th, 1941 Pearl Harbor occurred. I enlisted in the Army on December 8th, 1941. I was discharged on February 6th, 1946.

Tell me about life in Brooklyn as a young person and as a young man, just a little about your early life, your childhood, what that was like.

It was great. I had a lot of friends and went to grade school and high school in Brooklyn until I went away to the Army.

So in 1941, how old were you when you enlisted?

Twenty.

Twenty years of age.

It was one day after my birthday.

Okay. Tell me what the Army experience was like for you. Where did you go through basic training?

Fort Dix, New Jersey was basic training. Then I was shipped down to Camp Swift in Texas, a place called Bastrop, Texas. Seventeen days later, they gave a test to 3500 men. It was an IQ test. I was one of 17 people that were selected as a result of that test to go right back to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, where I went through an extensive electrical engineering course six days a week, ten hours a day. I graduated as a repeater specialist. A repeater is a piece of equipment that accepts radio/telephone messages from one island, amplifies it, and sends it to some other place.

So where did they send you after that training?

After that, I went back down to Fort Sam Houston until I shipped out and went overseas.

What did your parents think of you enlisting at 20 years of age?

Oh, they were very unhappy. I had three sisters. My mother had lost a brother in the First

World War. I was the only son. I didn't ask them. I just went and did it. When you're 20 years old, you feel that you can win the war by yourself.

Give me your parents' names.

My father's name was Samuel, and my mother's name was Gussie, G-u-s-s-i-e.

Did you have a lot of friends enlisting at the same time?

Yes -- who enlisted? No. They got drafted. I enlisted.

Okay. What about females? Did you know any females who joined at the same time that you were joining?

Yes. I have a twin sister. And there were two girls who were twins in class with us. One of them did join up in the WAVES.

Okay. Now, most of this interview will concern Las Vegas. But this is really, really interesting because in my class we just discussed World War II the other day. Tell me what kind of campaigns you were in or what kind of jobs you had once you went overseas. And where did you go?

First stop was Hollandia, Dutch/New Guinea. Then we went to Leyte in the Philippines. I was in many, many Philippine Islands: Mindanao, Samar, Cebu, Luzon. I can't remember any more.

Okay. That's good. That's wonderful.

So what was your work like?

I was a repeater specialist. I operated one of these repeater bays.

So you never saw a regular front-line action?

Oh, yeah, I did.

Oh, so you did that, as well?

Oh, yeah.

Okay. Go ahead.

In fact, I was wounded in Mindanao by a bayonet.

So you were that close to the action?

Yes.

So tell me what it was like when you got out of the military service in 1946. What had

the experience done for you?

The experience, you can't wait to forget about it. It's not a pleasure trip. And I went right back to work as a refrigeration mechanic, which was what I did before the war.

I was making \$1.75 an hour, which was journeyman's wage at that time. I saw an ad in the paper that if you're the best refrigeration mechanic and can prove it and are willing to come out at your own expense and you want to work a lot of hours, we'll pay you \$11 an hour and \$22 an hour for overtime. That was from the Flamingo Hotel -- Bugsy Siegel. I came out by train. Of course, it was cheaper. Three and a half days. I knew I'd get the job, which I did.

Interesting story. At that time the Strip was called Fifth Street. You know that? And Tropicana was called Bond Road.

What is it now?

Bond Road. There was no Sahara. It was called San Francisco Avenue.

The owner of the hotel that I stayed at -- there were two hotels on Fifth Street, the Last Frontier -- a different hotel than what's there now -- and El Rancho Vegas. I stayed at El Rancho Vegas, six dollars a night. If I gambled, it wouldn't have cost anything. But I wasn't gambling. And Beldon Katleman liked me because I worked 6 days a week, 16 hours a day. Well, the reason they paid that kind of rate is because they were behind on their schedule and Bugsy Siegel was afraid he was going to get killed, which later on he did. I'm sure you know that.

Yes.

I'd have dinner after I'd get off work, eleven o'clock at night, and have to be back at work at seven the next morning. I'd eat at the -- they call it buffet now. They called it Chuckwagon in those days. Both hotels had Chuckwagon [diners]. So Beldon Katleman said, "I know why they call your boss Bugsy." I said, "Not to his face." He said, "Everyone knows this town cannot support three hotels." And we were building the third hotel way out of town.

Do you want to hear these little stories?

Oh, yes, please. Yes. This is the reason.

Incidentally, if my eyes are tearing, I told you I had drops so that it looks like I'm crying. I'm not.

Okay, good. I don't want to make you cry.

No.

So I'd like to hear more about both Beldon Katleman and about the employment process once you got here. What did you have to do in order to get the job?

Nothing. I never met Bugsy Siegel, ever. I met Virginia Hill. Ooh, was she gorgeous.

Please tell me about that, as well.

I can never understand why a gorgeous lady like that became a prostitute, which she was. I just can never understand that. She was absolutely -- when she would pass, men would go like this.

Now, I thought she was his girlfriend --

And remember, I was 25 years old at the time and single.

Now, I thought she was his girlfriend.

She was his girlfriend, but she was a prostitute before that.

Prior to, okay.

In any event, the job foreman had me braze some copper together, had me put on a pair of gauges on a compressor, asked me some questions, silly questions, and he knew that I knew my stuff. And he hired me immediately.

Okay. So how did you get to know Katleman so well?

I'd come there every night. He was the boss of the hotel. And he was always there at night watching the casino. And I'd come in every night and eat at the Chuckwagon. Occasionally, we started to talk. He liked me because I was a poor schnook working so hard. So I can't say I knew him so well. I knew him well enough to talk to him. And he used to talk to me.

Good. Now, did he have any connections, as far as you know, with the families?

As far as I know, I don't know. But I must tell you that everyone in those years was connected with the Mob. Many people say to me, "Why didn't you ever get into gaming?" And I would tell them what I'm telling you. If I have a dispute with someone, I'm going to call my lawyer. If you have a dispute with one of them, they take out a gun. I had just left the Army. I saw enough of guns. I have never, in all the years I've been here, because of that, ever been involved in a casino business.

There are some people, whose names I will not mention, high-ranking people in the casino

business today, who are still paying tribute to the Mob. And I know who they are.

And we still have those connections today?

Only a couple that I know of. But it would be surprising who they are.

Okay.

That, you're not going to get from me.

Okay. I won't even ask.

Tell me how the businesses were run at the time as far as you know. Did Siegel have someone here doing all of the work, all of the legwork, or did he come in and out of the town? How did he put all of this together?

He came in and out of town. I'll give you an example of how the Mob worked. When Caesars Palace was built, there were three partners: Jay Sarno, Stan Mowen, and Nate Jacobson. The head of the casino representing the Mob was a guy by the name of "Luttie" Zarowitz. Is that name familiar to you?

Yeah.

I was present when he said to Jay Sarno, the boss, "See this color carpet? That's where you walk. See this colored carpet? This is the casino carpet. That's where you don't walk. If you ever step over the line, you'll never get back to the other side." Right out in the open. And Jay Sarno couldn't walk into the casino in his own hotel.

So who actually operated it?

The Mob.

And it was that blatant?

Oh, absolutely.

How did the people who lived here accept that? How did they feel about that?

Many of them were connected with them, a lot of them.

So after the job of building the Flamingo --

We were finished -- I think they opened Christmas Day of 1946. Incidentally, a lot of people don't know that three months later they closed. You do know that. And then, of course, they opened up again. It's probably one of the most successful casinos in the city today.

Did you continue to work there after it opened, after construction?

No. I worked there from August to December.

So by that time, did you have a little nest egg with the kind of hours you were working?

I had a little nest egg. I brought it back to New York where my father was still alive. We were in what was called the fixture business. We used to make walk-in coolers and display cases for butcher shops. And then we branched out into supermarkets. This was '46. Ten years later, I had sold my company for a million dollars. I was a millionaire at the age of 30 whatever, 1956.

And then what did you do?

I worked for the company that I sold out to and invested some money. I had some good investments. I went into a lot of other businesses. I've been in over 200 businesses.

Wow. What brought you back to Las Vegas?

I bought a company in California called DEC, Design Equipment Construction. They did a lot of work in Las Vegas. So that's what brought me back.

When you left, did you ever think you would move back?

I don't remember what I thought at that time.

So that company was already investing and you were already working in Las Vegas as a result of that company?

Right.

So tell me what you did at that point. Did you start buying a home at that point?

No. In 1970, a few partners and I bought a nursing home on Shadow Lane, closed it down, and built it into a hospital called Valley Hospital. We bought some homes in the area, and I lived in several of them until '76. Then I built a home, where I live now.

Is that in that same area?

In the Scotch 80s.

I'm interested in one of the plaques that I saw on the wall. It was a plaque --

Incidentally, I'm what they call -- I forget what they call it -- distinguished person at UNLV.

That's right. I saw one of those plaques.

The plaque is over there.

Yes. I saw that plaque, as well. The one that was even more interesting to me was the one about helping people who are paralyzed from accidents.

Oh, helping them walk again.

What is that about?

People who have spine injuries -- I'm still on the board -- they have equipment that helps them walk.

Is this when the injury is new, or can it work also with an old injury?

Old injury, too.

The reason I'm asking is because I have a brother who lives in a nursing home now in North Carolina because of that kind of injury. So there are companies that make equipment that could help him?

Yes.

Okay. I want to talk to you more about that.

Tell me more about Valley Hospital and why you even thought of doing that, starting a hospital.

I had a friend of mine who was a union delegate, the sheet metal union in New York. He knew Al Bramlet. Does that name mean anything to you? Al Bramlet was the head of the Culinary Union. Al Bramlet wanted a hospital for his members. He was going to give us the contract, which he never did. By that time, we were open already. It was just another business venture.

I used to build pool tables for Micky Mantle, the baseball player. I used to sell surgical instruments, imported them from Europe. I've been in a lot of businesses. I had a company in Europe in 15 different cities representing American manufacturers selling American products in American military establishments all over Europe.

How do you even come up with these ideas?

People come to me with ideas. I started a company, which you may know, called Formula 409. I started that company. How did I come up with the idea? We met a "Farmer Brown" and his wife, mixing this stuff in a barrel. They had brown glass bottles. She would dip them into the stuff that she mixed, take a cap and screw on the top, take a label and put the label on. That was

the beginning of Formula 409.

Where was this?

Springfield, Massachusetts.

So where have you lived, other than Brooklyn and Las Vegas? What other places did you live?

California in Torrance. That's it. I had a cab company in Cleveland, but I never lived in Cleveland.

So is that also the same as the cab company here?

No. I have partners in the cab company here. The one in Cleveland, the only partners are my children.

How many children do you have?

Four.

And they're all in Cleveland? Where do they live?

One is a lawyer and an MBA. He has a house here and a house in Hermosa Beach. He'll be here any minute. He comes here Tuesday mornings. He'll be here until Thursday night. And I have a son in Voorhees, New Jersey. I have a daughter at Kingspoint in Long Island. And I have a daughter in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

Now, are all of them in business with you or just the boys?

Just one boy.

Just the one boy, okay.

Tell me about what kind of person Al Bramlet was.

He was a difficult man to do business with.

And let me tell you why I'm asking. I'm hoping you're thinking about some stories about him, really. I interviewed a lot of African-American women who worked as maids in the hotels here in the 40s and 50s, and they just thought the world of him. And I'd just like to hear more about that personality. They just knew him because he was head of the union and that union did things for them that made their life better.

Good.

So what kind of person was he to do business with?

Well, he promised us this contract and never delivered.

So that says it all?

Yeah.

Okay. How did you get involved with Yellow Cab?

I was the chairman of the board of Valley Hospital at the time, chairman of the board, president, and treasurer. And we were making what was called phantom income. We would have patients. They'd owe us money. They didn't pay us. Yet, we had to pay tax on the money that we did not receive. That's called phantom income. In those years, there used to be tax shelters that you could buy. This fellow sold me a tax shelter for Valley Hospital. He wanted to buy a cab company. I was a friend with the owner of this particular cab company. His name was Gene Mayday. He said, "If you can buy this company from me" -- I forget the price; I think it was \$3 million -- "I will give you one-third of the company. And if you run it for me, for 10 percent of what you're getting paid at Valley Hospital..." At that time I was getting \$650,000 a year -- so I ran his company for him for \$65,000 a year. That's how I got involved in the cab business.

Then shortly thereafter, doing what I do best, having one company was not enough, so we merged with Yellow Cab. Then we bought Star Cab. Then I personally bought Americab in Cleveland. That's how I got in.

If you had to give advice to high school students, young college students today who want to become businessmen, what kind of advice would you give?

Go to college. Get a job at the same time. Work hard. Be honest. That's my advice. If you're honest, it will pay you dividends your whole life. You never know when it comes to pay you dividends.

Did you ever take the time to go to college?

I went to college, but I never articulated. I have more credits, college credits, that I could probably have three degrees. But I don't have all the credits that you need for one degree.

Where did you attend?

They're all on the walls. Warden in Pennsylvania, Harvard, NYU. I did get a degree in the Army from Armed Forces Institute, which incidentally is a recognized university. That's about it.

Good. Did you send all of your children to college?

Yes. And they all have at least two degrees.

So they all have a graduate degree, as well?

Yeah.

Now, I noticed several plaques on your wall from Eastern Refrigeration Manufacturing, I believe. Now, what is that?

Here's another one here. I got this one from the Commercial Refrigerator Distributors Association. It's an association of distributors and manufacturers. I said we used to manufacture walk-in coolers and display cases.

So that's that original business from New York?

Right. And I was president of that, and I was president of this.

What do you do now? How many businesses do you have your fingers in right now?

Thirty.

How do you keep up with everything that's going on everywhere? How many secretaries? How many --

With great difficulty. I had Secretary's Day last week. I had 28 ladies for lunch. We have the list if you want to see it.

No. So are they all here in Las Vegas?

All here in Las Vegas. No, no, no. I have a company in Cleveland.

Cleveland, okay. But other than that, everything else is handled from this central location?

Right.

And so do you have another office location?

Oh, yeah.

Okay, I see.

3950 Tompkins.

So you have a house in the Scotch 80s.

That's where I live.

And then you have this location.

Right.

Now, this location is where you come to --

This is where I work, most of the time.

I see.

I go to the cab company once a day for a couple hours.

Do you have a driver?

No. I drive myself.

Would you ever have a driver?

I used to have a driver. I hated it. I used to work very long hours at that time, and I liked him. He was a nice guy. I felt sorry for him. He couldn't work my kind of hours. I've always been a workaholic.

I think it shows with that many businesses.

The town's been very good to me.

Yes. That's great.

I make more than \$11 an hour. And even the overtime was, what, \$22? Even more than that.

I'm interested in -- I know that your religious faith is very important to you.

Yes, it is.

And I know that you had a lot to do with the building of the new temple, synagogue.

Yeah, okay.

Tell me about that.

(End side 1, tape 1.)

Tell me about the new synagogue and how you were involved.

I'm just a monetary contributor. I used to be on their board years ago. I wouldn't say that I had a lot to do with the building of it.

Tell me the name of it.

Temple Beth Shalom.

Is it the largest in the area?

I'm not sure. It's close. It's either that one or Ner Tamid over on Emerson. I'm not sure if it's the largest or not. It may be.

I'm interested in knowing more about the religion and how that has played a part in your life, the kind of decisions that you make.

It'll seem corny, but --

That's fine.

I believe in God. I pray to God. I go to services almost every Friday night. I'm not a fundamentalist Jew. Some people are. I don't follow all of the rituals that fundamental lists do. But I contribute to just about every temple. I enjoy it.

Tell me the difference between "temple" and "synagogue." Is there a difference in the word "temple" and the word "synagogue"?

No. But there are many Jewish sects as there are Christian sects. There are the Presbyterians and the Catholics and all of them. You probably know better than me. And we have reformed, constructionists, conservative, orthodox. That's four that I can think of. We're very different.

Where do you fall?

Conservative.

What does that mean?

It means I drive to the synagogue on Friday nights. The orthodox walk there.

So then they have to live --

It means that I don't have a kosher home. They do. I don't go on all the holidays. They do. I don't go to the synagogue seven days a week, three times a day. They do.

So do they pray three times a day?

Yeah, they do.

I know that you also have an attachment to Israel.

I do.

Tell me about that, how it started. Was that a family tradition? Did your father also have that same kind of attachment?

All Jews, no matter what their sect, have an attachment to Israel. For thousands of years, we were kicked from post to post. You ought to have some feeling about that being an African-American. You've been kicked around pretty good yourself. I mean, African-Americans

from slavery. We were slaves, too, in Egypt. So Israel is our only haven in the whole world where they have Jewish cops and Jewish cleaning people and Jewish prostitutes and Jewish post office people and everyone's Jewish. Boy, you get a bunch of them together and listen to them yell at each other. Wow.

Have you ever been to Israel?

At least 20 times. I hope to go in September again. I love it.

How long do you stay when you go?

A couple weeks. Then I rush right to business. I love it. I feel so at home.

And I also have a school named after me here, Milton I. Schwartz Hebrew Academy. You know about that.

How did that happen?

Again, it's going to sound like a corny story. Hitler tried to wipe out all the Jews, and I believe that we as Jews are going to do for ourselves what Hitler tried to do and failed. We're going to kill ourselves with intermarriage. Huge amount of intermarriage, Jews and Christians. I feel that by training kids from three, four, five years old to be Jews, they'll be Jews. And that's how it happened.

Tell me what that means to you, to be a Jew.

It's very important to me that the Jewish religion remains forever. And anything I can do in that regard, I will do.

And it's important that it remains pure, as pure as possible?

That it remains?

Pure.

Not necessarily. If it was pure, then I'd still be orthodox. So I'm not pure. Some people would call me a hypocrite. I don't think I am. I think that religion is a very personal thing, and I practice Judaism my way. I try to be good to all people because I want them to be good to me. It's that simple. On holidays, I always seek out a poor person to feed them at my house. I always do that. And it makes me feel good to feed someone, a stranger, someone I never met before.

So how do you go about finding that person?

There's an organization called Jewish Family Services. They come to the Jewish Family

Services. I call the Jewish Family Services, and I say, "Send me two, send me four." I feed them a nice meal on the holiday. And I enjoy doing that.

Do you also try to find ways to help them in any other way?

I've done that, too.

I'll tell you an interesting story. This has nothing to do with Judaism.

Good.

I had a company in San Francisco manufacturing florists' refrigerators, refrigerators for florist shops. One day I get a letter from a convict in Alcatraz. He said, "I've been in here for 30 years and I can get out now, but they won't let me out because I don't have a job. Who's going to give me a job? I'm a murderer and I've been here for 30 years. I have no relatives anymore. If you will give me a job, I'll be the best worker you ever had."

He touched my heart. And I hired him, a very quiet man. After a few months, he came to me and said, "You know, there are others in Alcatraz like that. They're in the same position. They're there. They've served their time. They can't get out because they have no relatives that will help them, and they can't get a job. If you hire them, I guarantee you'll never have a union. And they'll never do anything wrong because if they do, they know they're going right back for life." And that made sense to me.

It got to the point where I wouldn't hire anyone that wasn't a convict. We were making more money because these workers were terrific. Incidentally, a very large percentage of them were African-Americans. Unfortunately, there were a lot of them in Alcatraz.

Of course.

For whatever reason.

In the whole penal system.

The whole penal system. If you see one of my plaques, I was a member of the board in New York State on the penal system.

In any event, we made a lot of money, and I sold the company. That's what I do, I build up companies and I sell them.

Did you sell it to an inmate?

No. I sold it to a man and a woman. At the closing, she paid me. She said, "The first

thing I'm going to do is get rid of these convicts. They make my skin crawl." I said, "Lady, these are the people that made the numbers that you've just paid a premium for." She said, "No, I can't stand them." And she did. She got rid of all of them. In 18 months, she went bankrupt.

Wow. Okay. The plaque was from the advisory -- you were on the Advisory Board of Penal Institutions.

Right.

So was that one of the reasons that made you get involved, or was it just the letter?

The opposite.

Oh, good. Tell me about that.

Well, after I sold the company, this was offered to me by one of the assemblymen. I knew something about him. I liked these people. So I joined the penal group to help them. And I did.

Do you do anything else today? Are you still trying to help --

Not today.

Do you think drugs have made a difference in --

Oh, of course. Of course. Drugs fry their brains, and they'll do anything for drugs. And they can't help it. Once they get hooked, they're hooked. It's almost impossible to get off. It's terrible.

You also have another plaque of having --

I have a lot of plaques.

I know, yes.

I have a box of plaques that I haven't even hung up yet.

And I didn't even get a chance to look at any of these in here.

Well, you can stay and look at all of them.

Good. There is one for the Las Vegas Success Network. I have never heard of that.

It's a small group of successful people. They asked me to come and speak to them, and they gave me a plaque.

So what does that organization do? Do you have any idea?

It's a bunch of entrepreneurs that meet together to exchange ideas.

Okay. I was hoping it was something to do with students.

No.

Okay.

Incidentally, Susan's been here 17 years.

She told me.

She's beginning to think it's a steady job. She was married to an African-American. Did she tell you that?

No. No.

Yeah, she was.

Now, tell me about your marriages.

Oh, I don't want to get into that.

Okay. You received in 1999 one of the Distinguished Nevadan Awards from UNLV.

Right.

How did they select you? Why were you selected?

The regents do that. A couple of the regents who I know recommended me, and all the regents voted unanimously to accept me. That's the way it happened. There were others. That was the year that I got it, Steve Wynn got it and Pat Mulroy. Do you know who that is? Head of the water department. A lady, a very, very smart lady. Three of us got it. In fact, their luncheon is next week. I'm going to their luncheon.

Do you have any other connections with the university, with UNLV?

Just that I've made some small donations. And I have a box at the Thomas & Mack. I have a box at the Boyd Stadium.

So do you go to a lot of the sporting events?

Especially the basketball games.

Okay. That's great.

Do you go to the women's games, as well as the men's?

Not really.

Okay. I saw a plaque -- or I think it was a photograph and several plaques that show you are very, very active in the Republican Party.

I was chairman of the Clark County Republican Party. I was finance chairman of the state

party. I was just elected a delegate to the national convention in New York. I've been to almost every national convention since 1964.

I saw a picture with Gerald Ford. Have you been close to any other presidential administrations?

Yes. Reagan, George Bush, George W. Bush, his father, and Nixon.

Now, what about the current Bush?

The current one, too.

Okay.

I have a picture that she's framing now.

How do you feel about the war that we are involved in now?

I wish we weren't in it. But I feel that we had to do it. And I feel we can't get out now until we finish the job. But I also feel that -- I wish we were not in it.

I think you're probably --

Having been in a war, you think twice before you go into another one.

It seems that you are also involved in -- well, maybe not involved. I see that there is a 1975 letter from Mayor Oran Gragson.

Oran Gragson was on my board at Valley Hospital, and we were dear friends.

What kind of person was he?

A sweetheart. A great, great man. One of the great men of Las Vegas.

Now, he was mayor for a long time.

Sixteen years. 1958 (sic 1959) to 1975. That I remember very well.

Tell me what Las Vegas was like --

And he could have been mayor until the day he died, but Bonnie, his wife, wouldn't let him.

Okay. When you first arrived for the first job in the late 40s, tell me the difference in Las Vegas at that time and when you came back in the 50s.

I've got to end this now.

Oh, okay.

I've got an appointment. But I'll be happy to meet with you again.

Good. I would like that.

And the next time I'll leave more time.

(End side 2, tape 1.)

This is Claytee White. It is March 9th, 2005. I'm with Mr. Milton Schwartz in one of his offices. How are you this morning?

Good. Thank you.

Could you give me your full name, please?

Milton I. Schwartz.

Okay. Mr. Schwartz, it has been almost a year since we've talked before. You left off talking about your career. And I just want to talk about a few additional things, some of the awards that you've gotten over the years. Could you please tell me about the business that you're most involved with today?

Yellow-Checker-Star Cab Company.

Okay. And how did you get involved with that?

It's a long story.

Good.

I was chairman of the board of Valley Hospital, which I had built and started with others. At that time we were making a lot of money at Valley Hospital, but weren't getting paid. Insurance companies don't pay you, and most of our money was tied up with insurance companies. And insurance companies like to collect premiums, but they don't like to pay out. So we couldn't pay our taxes. It was called phantom income. So we bought tax shelters at the time.

The person that we bought the tax shelters from was a man by the name of Jackie Saxon. He and I became friendly, and he wanted to buy Checker Cab Company, and he knew that I was friends with the owner of Checker Cab Company. He had tried to buy it, but was unsuccessful. And he said to me, "If you will go to work for me at Checker Cab, if you would buy the company for me for this price" -- and I don't remember what the price was -- "and work for me for 10 percent of what you're getting at Valley Hospital" -- my salary at that time was \$650,000 a year, which means that I would have to work for \$65,000 a year -- "I will give you one-third of the company if you would do that." And I went to work on Gene Mayday, and I did buy the company.

That's how I got into the cab business. That was in 1978.

Two and a half years later, I negotiated a deal with Yellow Cab where we merged the two companies. And that's how I got into Yellow Cab. Then in 1986, we bought Star Cab Company.

So did you ever regret giving up that \$650,000 a year?

Oh, I never gave it up. This was in addition to.

So now, how did you do both of those?

Oh, Lord. I've had 200 companies. I'm involved in 30 companies right now. How? With great difficulty.

So tell me about that tax on the phantom income. Do you pay taxes on accounts receivables?

Right. We had accounts receivable. We had booked profit, but hadn't received the cash to be able to pay the taxes. Eventually, you get the cash. It works itself out. But in 1977 and in 1978, we didn't have the cash. We were growing. So we bought tax shelters.

Explain to me what a tax shelter is because you hear about them all the time.

Well, it's properly called a tax-advantaged investment. I'm going back 25 years ago. I don't know of any tax shelters today. But then that was what people who were in my position did. Later on, the government declared it to be abusive tax shelters, and we paid interest and penalties. But that's all I can tell you about them.

Okay.

It sheltered income.

It was shelter from taxes?

Right.

Okay. Can you tell me what you consider -- in the business world, not your civic involvement yet -- but in the business world, what would you consider your major accomplishments?

Valley Hospital.

Why is that?

Well, we saved lives. We brought the helicopters to the state of Nevada. There was no such thing as a medical helicopter before that. We had to fight the city of Las Vegas and the Clark

County and the FAA in order to bring the helicopter to town. If they tried to do away with the helicopter today, there would be a revolution because we've saved thousands of lives. That's a major accomplishment. I'm proud of that.

Tell me about your academy, the academy that's named for you.

Milton I. Schwartz Hebrew Academy. I believe that we Jews are doing to ourselves what Hitler tried to do and failed by intermarriage. A tremendous amount of Jewish people intermarry with other religions. And in my opinion then and now, one of the ways to avert that problem is to teach young Jews to be Jews and the beauty of Judaism. So I helped found the Milton I. Schwartz Hebrew Academy, made a substantial donation, and they named the school after me.

What grades now?

From pre-K through eighth grade.

Do you plan for that to increase? Do you plan to go through high school?

We do plan to have a high school. One of our board members -- and I don't want to mention his name because he'll mention it himself very shortly -- we intend to mention it -- just said to me the other day that he's planning on investing between 25 and 35 million dollars to start a high school, which will be named after him and his wife.

That is wonderful.

Yeah. We need a high school.

What does it mean when you say "teaching young Jewish people to be Jews"? What does that mean?

I remember hearing a priest in the Catholic Church saying to me, "Give me the child until he's ten years old, he'll be a Catholic forever." That always stuck in my mind. That's probably true. Of course, I don't know anything about the Catholics.

So I subscribe to that theory. I want the child pre-K to teach him about the Jewish holidays, the Jewish heritage, the things that we should be proud of. And I think they'll be Jewish forever, that they won't intermarry, at least in such percentages as we have now.

What are those percentages?

I think I heard at one time 50 percent. That's not so good for us.

How do children qualify for the academy?

Well, it's not cheap. If you think education is expensive, try ignorance. Then you'll know what expensive is. They qualify by taking a test, depending upon which grade they enter. You know, they enter any grade. We have qualified people to test them. Then if they can pay the tuition fee, they qualify. We also have a scholarship program for those that can't afford it. That comes from donations from members of the board and others.

I want you to share some memories about early Las Vegas. But I'm going to ask you about your social and civic involvement. When you first arrived, what kind of organizations did you join?

None. I was a refrigeration mechanic working at the Flamingo Hotel. After three or four months, my job was finished and I went back to New York.

So what brought you back?

Well, I got jobs here. So I was commuting. Then we bought a company in California furnishing hotels. So I was spending probably half my time here. My residence for the first 20 years or so was in New York, but I didn't spend too much time there.

Which year did you make Las Vegas your permanent home?

1969. But in the years from '46 to '69, I probably spent half my time here.

What was the difference appearance-wise, socially? What was the difference in the late 40s and the late 60s? How had Las Vegas changed?

In 1946, what is now known as the Strip was called Fifth Street. What is now known as Tropicana was Bond Road. What's now known as Sahara was San Francisco Avenue. There were two hotels on the Strip. The Last Frontier and El Rancho Vegas. Quite a bit of difference. I could have bought land on the Strip for a hundred dollars an acre.

Did you buy any at that point? Did you purchase any?

No. Today that same land is 20 to 25 million dollars an acre. Not that I'm complaining. I bought some land. Of course, I didn't have the hundred dollars at that time. But I have a hundred dollars now.

In 1969, when you moved here permanently, what did it look like?

In 1969 when we started -- well, we started to build Valley Hospital in 1970, I believe. My total investment in Valley Hospital -- and I was the largest stockholder -- was \$75,000. Today if

you wanted to buy it, you'd have to pay probably \$250 million.

Are you still involved with the hospital?

No, I am not.

Where did you live when you first came here permanently in '69?

I didn't. I stayed at the Dunes Hotel. Before that, I had an apartment. It was called Central Park Apartments, which is on Sands Avenue. It's still called Central Park Apartments, I think. We had an apartment there.

Near the Sands Convention Center?

Yeah, behind there.

What was it like living in a hotel at that time?

Great.

So did they have a special room set aside for people who lived there permanently?

Well, I didn't live there permanently. I was commuting, remember.

Okay. I see. So now, when you finally made Las Vegas home, where did you live?

The first place was 1823 Pinto Lane.

Okay. So is that near Charleston and --

Well, it was on the corner of Kingsbury Lane, right off of Shadow Lane. It was part of the hospital grounds, yeah.

And that's still a wonderful area, Pinto Lane, Shadow Lane, the houses in that area.

Yeah.

So that was a great investment.

In '76, I built a home where I live now in the Scotch 80s.

So do you live now near where the mayor lives?

Right around the corner. He walks in front of my house every morning with his entourage.

Any gin? No. I'm just kidding.

No, he doesn't drink gin. Not in the morning. At least I don't see it.

Okay. So at that time did you begin, then, to participate in the civic organizations here in the city? Did you get involved with the Rotary Club or any of the other organizations?

I became involved in the Republican Party. I'm involved to this day. In fact, I was just an elector. I elected President Bush. You didn't elect him; I did.

You're right.

Of course, most people don't understand how the Electoral College works. In fact, I got a shirt from them right there. So I was very much involved with that. I became a member of the board of Temple Beth Shalom, which was then on Oakey and 15th or 16th Street. I became involved in the Jewish Federation.

What is the purpose of the Jewish Federation?

It's an umbrella organization that supports Israel, Jewish education, Jews in need, the JCC, which is the Jewish -- I can't remember what JCC stands for. That's the purpose.

So other than the Republican Party, when it comes to political organizations or civic organizations, you were not that active?

Yeah. I'm trying to think of some of these plaques. I became a member of the board of what was called the Pastoral Society, which is a non-Jewish group.

Now, I've never heard of that. Could you tell me about that organization?

Oh, it's such a long time ago.

Okay. Is it still operational?

I don't think so. I also became a member of the Board of the Diabetes Organization.

What about the university and your love of education? Did you get involved at all?

Only as a supporter of the university. That's about it.

Do you have any children that grew up here?

No.

During the time that you were here, Howard Hughes came to this city. Can you tell me, as a person living here at that time or moving back and forth probably when he first came, how he impacted the city?

By buying the five -- I think it was five hotels. He, in effect, was greatly influential in getting the Mob out of here. This was a legitimate company that had no Mob connections that was a real presence in Las Vegas. I think I answered your question.

Okay. As a businessman looking at the situation, looking at the Mob and looking at

how it's becoming a legitimate place, how does that impact your business and the kind of city that you would like to see? You probably wanted to see it as a more cosmopolitan city. So what did that mean?

I think it is a more cosmopolitan city right now. But Howard Hughes started it. Then other business people like [Sheldon] Adelson, [Steve] Wynn, and [Kirk] Kerkorian came in and started to get legitimate money instead of it coming from the Teamsters, which was Mob money. And today we're accepted by the public marketplace like any other business.

When I interview people, they tell me that they liked it better when the Mob ran the city. Why do you think people say that?

I think that's utter nonsense. What they are talking about is the nostalgia of the fact that everybody knew each other. But that's nonsense.

I had an opportunity to invest in places like Caesar's Palace because we furnished Caesar's Palace in our business. And I didn't. And, yes, I could have made I don't know how many millions of dollars, and I have no regrets.

I'll never forget at the opening of Caesar's Palace, one of the mobsters said -- I just would rather not mention his name. His family might still be alive. I don't know -- said to Jay Sarno, the owner of the place, "This carpet is this color. And this carpet is this color. This carpet represents the place where the casino is. If I ever see one foot on this color carpet, that foot will not be part of your body anymore." I heard him say that to the owner of the place that he cannot walk on the casino grounds.

Yes. They were openly the owners of the town, certainly of the casinos.

So having a business like a cab company in a town like this, which is all about visitors and all of the convention nearby, compare this to a cab company in another city, like Cincinnati or Los Angeles -- well, not Los Angeles -- Cincinnati or another city this size.

Okay. I have a cab company in Cleveland, Ohio. Here 93 or 94 percent of our business is tourists. In Cleveland, Ohio, it's just the opposite. We have no tourist business in Cleveland. Have you ever been to Cleveland? What tourist would ever want to go to Cleveland?

No, I can't say I have.

So that's one comparison. Another comparison is that in Cleveland we lease the cabs to the

drivers. Here we employ the drivers. That's a major difference. Here we have a tremendous amount of regulation. In Cleveland we have practically none. The regulation is good. I hate to admit it as a conservative Republican. But it's good for the public.

Tell me why.

The taxi authority is very careful to make sure that cabs are clean, that the cabs are insured, that the drivers don't take drugs, that the drivers know what they're doing, and that the drivers don't cheat the public. They're a pain in the neck, but they're good for the public. And that's what they're in business to do, which I admit. So these are all some of the differences. The quality of the cab ride here is no comparison to the cab ride in Cleveland. And I own both companies.

So tell me the difference.

There we have older cabs. We get inspected once a year. Here we get inspected every day. They're all ex-cops riding all around town to make sure that no one's cheating the public. There are cheater lights in the back of the cab.

What kind of light?

Cheater lights.

What is that?

If a passenger is in the cab and you can see the passenger and if the meter is not on, you can see it from the back window. Sometimes passengers or drivers try to make a deal if they know a ride is going to be \$30. They'll take a chance and say to the passenger, "Give me \$20 that I can put in my pocket. You'll save ten dollars and I won't put the meter on." Then that way the company gets cheated, the driver makes \$20, which he doesn't pay tax on, and there's a conspiracy against the company.

And the taxicab authority has people to make sure that --

That are riding around to make sure that that doesn't happen.

So the regulation, then, helps you, as well as the passengers, for safety?

But mainly, they're in business to help the public. And they do.

Wow. That's interesting.

When it comes to a driver here versus the driver back in Cleveland, what does it mean that you are an employee rather than owning your cab? Owning your cab is like

owning a business?

Well, at neither place do they own their cabs. In Cleveland they lease the cabs. And we own the cabs in both places. So what's your question?

I guess I don't have a question anymore. What is the difference between leasing the cab and being an employee?

A lease driver is an independent contractor. He is supposed to pay for his own insurance. And here we pay for the insurance and at least it's insured. In Cleveland you can't be sure.

Okay. Tell me about becoming a Distinguished Nevadan, how that happened and when it happened.

I was recommended by one of the regents. As I'm told, the other regents voted on it, and they unanimously approved it. That's how it happened.

So what are some of the qualifications that a person has to -- what are some of those checkpoints?

I think you've got to ask UNLV, not me.

Okay. Well, how long ago was that?

I think it was 1999.

Of all of the awards that you've received -- and this is a difficult question -- give me some of the ones that are most precious to you.

I'll show you. This is my birthday card giving to me by all the students at my Schwartz Hebrew Academy.

Wow. This is wonderful. I'm looking at a birthday card that's probably -- if you unroll it, it's, what, nine feet long maybe? Maybe more than that. Which year was this given to you?

Last year.

When is your birthday?

December 7th. Here's another one.

So this one is, "The world abides only for the sake of school children."

Right.

Where did you receive that?

Oh, a couple years ago.

What about political awards from the Republican Party? Which one of those --

I've gotten about every kind of award they could give you. I was chairman of the Clark County Republican Party. I was Republican of the Year in 1994. I was president of the Republican Men's Club. I was finance chairman of the state party. I have been a member of the Central Committee for about 50 years. I was an elector, elected twice.

So right now, which positions do you hold politically?

I'm just on the Central Committee, and I'm still a member of the Republican Men's Club.

Which political office would you run for?

I have never run for political office.

Which would you want to run for if you right now decided you wanted to become a politician?

I wouldn't decide and won't run.

Okay, great.

I don't have the time for that. When Oran Gragson was mayor --

(End side 1, tape 2.)

-- he wanted to make me a judge. You didn't have to be a lawyer at that time. Seymore Brown, for instance, was never a lawyer. He was a cop. And he was a judge for a long time. So Oran wanted to make me a judge. And I didn't have the time. And I said, "Thanks a lot, but no thanks."

Would you do anything differently today if you had it to do all over again? If you look back at political, civic, personal, business-wise, would you do anything differently?

Oh, and how. I never would have sold Valley Hospital.

Oh.

Yeah. I really enjoyed that.

Why did you decide to sell it?

Ted Kennedy was running for president in 1979. He announced that the first thing he was going to do was put in national health insurance. And if he did that -- we were a for-profit hospital -- that would have put us out of business. And I was sure at that time that he was going to

become president. When Reagan became president, if I had waited another six months, I could have got another \$50 million.

How has the business climate changed for you as a businessman in a city like this? How has it changed over the years? What would you say the major changes have been?

The casino business now is big, big, big business. There's just no comparison to what it was in those days. Now they call buffets buffets; back then they were Chuckwagons, as an example. And the hotels were two stories high. When the Desert Inn opened, on the second floor they had a nightclub called The Sky Room. Second-story sky room. Today you go to the Stratosphere, and it's over a hundred stories high, but they don't call it The Sky Room. I'm just giving you some of the changes.

Do you see changes in the attitude of the people you deal with in the business world, how you did business with a handshake, those kinds of things? Do you see changes there?

I had a partner for 35 years in real estate. He was an attorney. I'm not an attorney. We had probably a hundred million dollars worth of real estate together, and every once in a while he would say to me, "You know, we should have an agreement." Our agreement was a handshake. We never had an argument in 35 years. He never cheated me. I never cheated him.

That's better than most marriages.

Yeah, that's true.

Thirty-five years.

Yep. And it was on a handshake. I like to do business that way. Of course, it's not too smart.

Can you do it that way today?

No, I'm afraid not. I wish we could.

Some people here, especially those just moving in from Southern California, Northern California, still see Las Vegas as a town, not the city that Los Angeles is, not the city that San Francisco is. How do you see Las Vegas today?

Well, I think we have 1,700,000 people now. That's a big town. We now have pollution, which we didn't have before.

Sometimes I think they're equating it to the kind of social life, the kind of

entertainment, the opera, the ballet. What do you say to people like that?

I think that one of the things that the mayor is working on is a cultural center downtown. And I welcome that.

Being the Republican that you are and the dedicated Republican that you are, how do you see the current administration in the city, the city government and the county government, as well?

I wish the city and the county would get together and have one government. It just doesn't make sense. But it'll never happen because neither side wants to give up power.

And they would never be able to share power.

No. The only place that they ever shared power was creating Metro, the police department. As far as I know, that's the only one. And that makes sense. They saved money, and they have better administration of the police duties.

So if someone would ask you today, "Where is the power in this city" -- the casino industry is legitimate. So is the power the city government, the county government, or is it business?

It's a few businessmen. You want me to name them?

Yes.

Terry Lenney, Kirk Kerkorian, Sheldon Adelson, Steve Wynn. That's the power, the real power.

Now, how do you see that? Being the very influential businessman that you are, community leader, how do you see this kind of a city?

I recognize it. I've just told you that. With their contributions and influence to what Jon Ralston calls the "Gang of 63" up in Carson City, they make huge contributions. I guarantee you that they get the ear of the legislature when they need it or want it.

And I would also think that there are other very, very influential people that also could do that? Do you agree?

Yes. I think his name is [Rossi] Ralenkotter, the head of the convention center [Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority]. I would think that he has that power.

What about you?

If I want to talk to a legislature, they listen to me.

How do you understand Las Vegas' national visibility?

Everyone in the world knows about Las Vegas. When you're out of town and people ask you "Where do you live" and you say "Las Vegas," a smile comes to their face. It's a feel-good smile.

Is that the same smile that you would have gotten in the late 60s, early 70s?

We weren't as well known in the late 60s as we are today. Today everyone in the world knows about Las Vegas, and everyone who has not been here dreams about coming here.

Now, this is a gambling town. How do you feel, especially with your attachments to your religion, to education, how do you see a gambling town? How does that make you feel when someone talks about Las Vegas as "Sin City" and "what goes on in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas"?

People gamble in every town in the world. People like to gamble. The only thing is, we're legitimate. Incidentally, at no time from 1946 till this day has there ever been a scandal that the games in Las Vegas were not absolutely honest. That I have to give to the mobsters. They recognized that if there was the slightest rumor as to the legitimacy of the games, that would be the end of their racket. That's never happened to this day.

So the regulation that we have of the gaming -- and we do have the finest regulation in the world, which I'm sure is a pain in the neck to the people who own the casinos -- is recognized as being for their protection, just as I recognize that the taxi authority is for my protection.

A few minutes ago, we talked about the city and the county. Our mayor and his administration are trying to do quite a bit to improve downtown.

I think he's doing quite a bit.

Yes, he is. And I admire everything that he's doing. How do you understand or look at things like Neonopolis, Fremont Street Experience, and the other developments?

Well, you mentioned two of the items that were not successful. The Fremont Street Experience possibly is reasonably successful. Neonopolis is a flop. But what the mayor is doing now is that high-rises are going up all around downtown. What are now slums are becoming high-rise residential and offices. Ten years from today, downtown will look a lot different than it

looks today. So he's doing a lot of good work.

He's getting the bad press right now because he likes to drink once in a while. He's a great mayor.

I agree. I agree wholeheartedly. The reason I mention Neonopolis is I have been to Neonopolis recently three or four times. Being the businessman that you are, how would you change Neonopolis?

I just never thought about it. I don't know how to answer that question. You know, I once had a partner. He had an answer to all questions. Ninety-five percent of the time, they were wrong. But he always had an answer. I don't have an answer to all questions.

Okay. I appreciate that. One last question. What do you see -- and you probably answered most of this -- what do you see as the future of Las Vegas? I'm talking about the county and the city?

The greatest growth that we have had in the almost 60 years that I've been here is right now. So I think that the town is just starting now. I can see us growing right up to the mountains on all sides of us, I hope in my lifetime.

So you see growth as a good thing even with the smog?

Right. I think that what they should do is do what Yellow-Checker-Star did and force all the vehicles in the city to use propane like we did, which is a non-pollutant. Probably 75 percent of all the pollution comes from automobiles. You eliminate that, and that's the end of the smog.

How expensive is the propane?

It is not expensive. It's just about the same as gasoline. So if gasoline's expensive, propane's expensive. How expensive is a person that dies because of lung diseases? What's the price of that?

I appreciate this. I thank you so much for your answers.

My pleasure.

Is there anything that you would like to add? These interviews are going to be used for educational and research purposes. Historians and other researchers will actually come to the university and use these. So is there anything else that you'd like to end with?

Have a good day.

Thank you so much.

(End side 2, tape 2.)

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