

Interview With Nathan Spero

His Early Life, Pt. 1

J. This is Jane Latour at the Wagner Labor Archives on August 16th, 1995, interviewing Nathan Spero, former Research Department Director of the United Electrical Workers. Nathan, I'd like you to tell me a bit about your ...your birth place and your family.

N. Oh, I was born November 2nd, 1912 in Brooklyn, and I was the fourth member of the family: the first son. And then, a younger brother was also born, so there were five of us: three sisters and two brothers. And we were in a working class family. My father worked as a tailor in a shop, and my. ..well, my mother, of course, was occupied with five children. But she did work, when she could, as well to supplement our income. And there were trying times because, I remember lying in my bed in the bedroom and hearing my mother and father talk. There were seasons in the clothing industry then, as there are now, and when the season came which was slow, my father was laid off. And I could hear them worrying where we were going to get the funds. ..where we would get the money to buy what we need. So my mother was enchanted by the idea of opening up a little candy store and making out well. But once or. ..And once or twice, she did try it, but she had no capital, so she just had the few boxes of candy and it looked very unappetizing, and so it never worked out.

J. Um-hum. What neighborhood was that?

N. We lived in ...at 110 Gary Street. I think that was the Green Point area of Brooklyn;--

J. Um-hum.

N. a working class area.

J. Um-hum.

N. There were a mixture of Italians and. ..and other southern European groups there. But it was all white.

J. Um-hum. Where did you go to school?

N. Well, I went to a public school in the neighborhood. I think it was (P .S.) 168. And what happened was that, as my sisters got a little older, they did get jobs,

J. Um-hum.

N. and their income helped finance the family. And so we moved to the Stuyvesant area. It was at 475 Hancock Street. It was a nicer area. And at that time it was still all white. And we were there for quite a long period of time.

J. Now, did your sisters leave school to get jobs, or they had part-time jobs?

N. Well, my ...my two older sisters left school. And actually, my very oldest sister came here as a child and she never got to finish high school. And to this day, it bothers her no end. She feels inferior to me' cause she had to go and work. And my sister Mildred, the next older, did finish high school and she had a job as a bookkeeper. She was... Both of them were quite competent because when they worked, they usually handled the office, and... handled details, and... and took orders, and all that sort of stuff. So that was where we got the finances to upgrade our dwelling.

J. Um-hmm.

N. By that time, my father had died. He was... He worked in a factory, -clothing, as I said, --and he absorbed fibers that float ...that float around. And that was compounded by the fact that he smoked a great deal.

J. Um.

N. I remember him sending me out to get a Turkish brand called Myrad. I don't know if it's around. It was very popular then. And he died of... First, he had TB. I remember him taking me to a public health place to have me examined to see if I had gotten it, and I hadn't.

J. Um-hum.

N. But then, he died of throat cancer. And so...

J. How old were you then?

N. I was... I was about thirteen then, and my brother was about nine.

J. Um.

N. And ?? my sisters were working and bringin in some money. And then my mother found a job. She would sew together the leather... leather pieces that make gloves. And I would go down in particularly the Green Point area and pick it up from a contractor and bring the pieces to her. And she would sew them up. And she would get a nickel for each pair of gloves, as I remembered it, so that pair of gloves would take her about a half hour to sew and she would get a nickel for that.

J. So was your father in the Union?

N. My father was progressive but he wasn't in a Union, as far as I know. And in those days, I'm not sure, -you know -if they ...they would even know about Unions.

J. Yeah. How... how was he progressive?

N. Well, he read the Forward, if that means anything. He was interested in what was happening in the broad... He was interested in what was happening to the Zionist movement and the Jews.

J. Um-hmm.

N. And there were... pogroms against them. But I don't remember him being connected in any way with any trade union movement or any attempt to organize it. But he was ill so much of the time he couldn't.

J. Now, he was an immigrant?

N. Yes

J. Where did he come from?

N. He came from Vilna, (Lithuania; Balkan State taken over by the U.S.S.R. in 1940).

J. Um-hum.

N. and so did my mother. Vilna, at the time, was supposed to be the intellectual center of Jewish life in Europe, and he was a teacher there. But here, all he could do was work in a factory.

J. And what did he teach there?

N. He taught... He taught whatever there is to teach.

J. Um-hum.

N. He taught Engli- not English, of course, but he taught Polish and... and... and mathematics and history.

J. Um-hum.

N. He was like a eight year elementary school teacher.

J. And did he meet your mother here or there?

N. That I don't know.

J. You don't know.

N. No, he met her there. That I know.

J. Um-hum. Yeah.

N. They came over here. But I don't know how he met her.

J. Um-hum. And so you graduated from high school? Where did you go to high school?

N. I went to the high school in Alexander Hamilton High School. It was in Brooklyn. And that was a period of time when we were still very poor. And I remember going to school wearing just a jacket, even when it snowed. And my mother would say, "We ought to get you a coat." And I said, "Oh, no. It's not necessary." But then I did come down with rheumatic fever and was laid up for six months. But I seem to have recovered. But it... it had a small impact on my heart, but not lasting, apparently.

J. Now what were your favorite subjects in school?

N. My favorite subjects were not in school. They were outside of school. I liked to play ball. I liked to play basketball and punchball or softball. When I'd get home from school and go down the street and play. And I didn't particularly care, to tell you the truth,

J. Um-hmm.

N. ...about any of the subjects. I was... I had to learn them. I had to pass tests. I did fairly well, but they were of no interest to me. It took a long time before I did become interested.

J. So you weren't a reader? You were a...

N. I was a reader.

J. You were.

N. That I was.

J. Okay. What...

N. I used to... I know I read all of the time, at the beginning, books by a man called Burgess that dealt with the... the dogs, not Airedales... What is a dog like an Airedale? In any event,

J. ?? dogs.

N. ...he would write these books about dogs.

J. Um-hum.

N. And there were books written, at the time, about high school teams, -high school basketball teams, -paperbacks like Frank Merrywell and Nick Carter were being all over the City,

J. Um-hum.

N. practically all over the country by everybody... every young fellow, and I was doing all of these things.

J. Um-hum.

N. In addition, I was stealing books that my sisters didn't think I should read, they would hide from me, and I would find them and read them. So, no, I was a... I read all the time. But that was at night. And most of it had nothing to do with school.