MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History Office

WALTER SONDHEIM, JR.

Interviewed by Francis Collette
at
Sondheim Residence
200 Bolton Place

OH 8044

October 19, 1971

Baltimore, Maryland

C 857

I. - Walter W. Sondheim, Jr.,
A. - Francis Collette
At the Sondheim Residence
200 Bolton Place
Baltimore, Maryland 21217
October 19, 1971 Cassette 059

A. This is going to be an interview progress report and biographical background on Walter W. Sondheim, Jr.

Address: 200 Bolton Place. Baltimore, Maryland, 21217; Phone number: 837-0862; Birthplace, Baltimore, Maryland; Date July 25, 1908. His mother's name: Mrs. Walter W. Sondheim, Sr., former Miss Fannie H. Berney. She was born in Baltimore, Maryland on May 8, 1881. Father's name, Walter W. Sondheim, Sr.; Birthplace, Baltimore, Maryland; His birthdate, May 31, 1877.

Walter W. Sondheim, Jr. was educated in Park School, Baltimore, Maryland. He graduated from Park School in 1925; went to Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania; graduated with a B. S. in 1929. To date, April 4, 1972, he has no publications that he claims. He has been quoted often. Travel: None claimed but he did travel while in the service - see attached biographical sheet. He married the former Janet E. Blum, February ~~25~~ 15, 1934. Has two children: John, born 1939; Ellen born 1943; two grand-children, one born 1966; the other 1968. Please see attached paper sheet for additional information.

A. Where do you want to start?

I. Start wherever you want to start. Don't you have some questions to ask?

E. You've been in Baltimore since 1908.

I. That's right.

E. You were here shortly after the Baltimore fire. You've seen the first World War here. You've seen a depression here. What has changed in Baltimore?

A. My! that's a hard one. I suppose . . . One of my problems is that my memory of my youth is probably less accurate than it ought to be. It's not so much an inaccuracy as it is that I don't remember much about my youth. And, that's not just a product of my present age. I never have remembered much about it. There are things that I know about my school days. All of my schooling was at one school - Park School. I remember very, very little of it and I think . . . . My wife insists that one of the reasons is because I was a product of a happy childhood and I think, perhaps, I did. I think it was easier to have happier childhoods in those days as there was much less turmoil and strife, much less polarization in the community.

Interestingly enough, I grew up on Bolton Street although I didn't go to school at . . didn't go to a neighborhood school. I went to Park School which meant going on public transportation practically from the time I started -- being taken at first and then going on my own on public transportation and I lived in a neighborhood in which none of my neighbors went to Park School

I. In those days Friends School still had a . . . .

In those days. . to start . . . many people could make many more sacrifices then to send children to non-public school partly because schools in those days, when I started school, were in turmoil because the feeling that the school system was inadequate and badly run. Those were the days when the schools were full of politics. It is not comparable to today's situation about public schools. There's a whole different attitude about it.

There it was a political thing and the schools were being badly run and my parents, at that time I know made substantial sacrifices to send both my sister and me to school. All this, of course, is hearsay. It's not something of my own knowledge. I didn't know why I went to Park School. It seemed the thing to do.

I think one of the reasons was an interesting thing and that is of the non-public schools, I lived one block and a half from Friends School because I grew up on 1600 Bolton Street and Friend s School was in those days at Park Avenue and Roberts Street -- Robert and Park Avenue - yes -- Park Avenue and Laurens Street -- not Robert -- Park Avenue and Laurens Street -- and Friends School, I'm sure it would be hard for the Quakers to believe today -- but Friends School had a quota and only admitted very few Jews and actually that's what led to the start of Park School. Park School started in 1912 and I started morning kindergarten there, I guess, in 1913.

I. So, . . Park School had been started by a group of people, many of them Jewish because of the fact that there wasn't a school in Baltimore - a private school in Baltimore, that admitted Jewish students on anything but a quota basis. Some of them, I suppose, were actually closed to them - I really don't know. But Friends School had a quota of some sort. I know that because my sister went there for one year but for only one year and then when Park School started she transferred there. That's how Park School started and the school, even to this day, 60 years later, is known primarily as a school where a large number of Jewish kids go.

But, it hasn't tried to keep that reputation in recent years but that's the way it started. But, my point is that I grew up in a neighborhood - a neighborhood that in a sense was less segregated than a lot of our neighborhoods today. I don't mean segregated in terms of black and white because, of course, I grew up in a society in Baltimore that was in many ways, shockingly segregated.

And, nothing really happened of any great consequence in Baltimore until the school desegregation decisions in 1954. But, segregation as far as religion is concerned, in living, and regardless of what caused it, whether it's as much a product of Jewish style and Jewish mores, I don't know. Some of it came about because of restrictions.

T. In those days, even in restrictions in deeds in a great many residential areas and particularly in better residential areas like Roland Park. But on Bolton Street . . this was . . I grew up there in a neighborhood that had really all kinds of people in it. It's an interesting thing. I think that's been a great benefit to me in my life and not so many people who didn't grow up in the inner city had that kind of opportunity. But, we have all kinds of people on my very block of Bolton Street. The Attorney General of the State lived there. A concert master of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra lived across the street from us.

I. Do you remember any names?

A. The concert master of the Baltimore Symphony was named Vanhulsteyn, I think. John C. Vanhulsteyn. I know that because I took violin lessons from him for a while but it was a boring business for him and for me, both. I didn't like playing the violin and he didn't like teaching it to me. I remember his only comment on my violin playing was "Ooh - it scratches." But my parents thought I ought to learn how to play an instrument; but they soon learned it wasn't a useful thing. But, Alexander Armstrong lived down the street. Dr. Amos Koontz who got to be a famous - not only a famous surgeon in Baltimore but a famous ultra-conservative physician politically. He and Mrs. Koontz lived next door to us for many, many years. I remember the Slingluffs that lived across the street; the Watsons who lived up the street. There were the Doyles who lived next door to us. It was a very close neighborhood and a very nice neighborhood and we got along extraordinarily well.

I. I went to a school that kept you late in the lay because we had athletics so that I don't know the kids in the neighborhood as well as I would have liked to and I think . . there were some

and they were nice kids and I just didn't get to know them well. I got to know them best when it snowed and we used to sled down the two hills from Bolton Street and Laurens down from McMechen Street. There were streetcars on McMechen Street in those days. I remember in those days there were always plenty of ashes in our houses.

Is this the kind of reminiscence you want? . . . . I don't know. This is meaningless. This is just anybody's reminiscence of Baltimore back in the '10's.

P. Park School was founded by Randolph Smith. It had a reputation of . . .

A. Eugene Randolph Smith! How do you know about Eugene Randolph Smith?

I. A little researching.

A. Oh, really?

I. Yes. But the school had a reputation . . .

(Simultaneous talking)

I. But the school had a reputation for permissiveness. Did you think it was permissive at the time?

A. Oh no. I think that progressive education got this

I.

reputation in later years. When I first went there, I don't think - certainly not by today's standards would it be regarded as permissive. I remember it more as being experimental than being permissive. I remember all of us got so used to being tested -- all kinds of standardized tests. This stood me in good stead when I got into college because when I got to college, (we had only been there a couple of days,) the Carnegie Foundation was running a series of tests of college freshmen and then you took a test again in your senior year. They were doing some kind of nationwide testing thing and Haverford College was involved in it and I remember that I went into Roberts' Hall at Haverford with all my classmates very shortly after we got there and we took this test . . it was some kind of test. It was a test obviously I had never seen before but it was of a type that I had seen before, I was familiar with it - the type - the different types of things. Some of them were geometric comparisons - comparisons of geometric figures. Some of them were sentence completion tests. Tests to test your vocabulary and things of this sort. Algebraic tests. Things of this sort. And, it was the first time that I had been in a testing situation where everybody else wasn't on the same level that I was, as being accustomed to testing. Back in those days, people were not as accustomed to tests I suppose as they are now and so I could plunge right into this test. I was hearing groans all around me of people who didn't understand the instructions or thought they didn't or were hesitant or embarrassed by it. It never happened to me, and I think not very wisely, Haverford posted the scores that people had gotten. I was kind of disgraced

I.

by being up in the first half-dozen or first ten or something, I don't remember where I was but it wasn't the kind of thing you wanted to do - you didn't want to be known as a brain among your peers in college so that I set out to prove that this was based on familiarity and I remember that I took the first ten names and I interviewed these classmates of mine and discovered that, maybe this isn't exact, but I think it was something like eight out of the ten that had had this kind of testing, they had also gone to some kind of a school where -- experimental school or progressive school or whatever it was called. And, this was my first scientific acquaintanceship with tests. It's something I fooled around with a lot in later times, in business and everything else but itdestroyed my faith in them. The familiarity with tests is a big help, I really think. You're studying psychology aren't you? (A-Yes.) I really believe this is true.

You start off - Because these things are limited in time, part of your score is not only on your accuracy but on how many of them that you complete and I proved, you know, by a great series, without a shadow of a doubt that my good score on this was a result of my familiarity with it rather than my lack of familiarity.

But, my recollections of Park School are a good bit of that type of experimental thing and I remember that your friends and people who knew you thought that, you know, there must be a little something funny about you if you went to Park School. And for a while people thought there was something wrong with you if you went there.

I.

They took the problem kid. I don't remember it as being terribly permissive. Although, I guess I didn't have enough to compare it with. I really wouldn't know. You know you remember small escapades of things that happen and of your catching a good bit of hell for yelling out in class or something of the sort. But I suspect that that was the exuberance of youth and that exuberance wasn't particularly limited to a single school.

I. Do you remember any of the names of the people you went to school with? I mean, have they come into the limelight recently?

A. Oh, I remember people who were in my class. Samuel Hecht was in my class. I can remember the names - the people - I'm trying to think of people who have come into the limelight recently. I can't think of that particularly in terms of limelight although I'm sure that many of them who have. It was a small class. I think my class probably had 20 people in it. It was quite a small school.

I. When you said you jumped on the public transportation I am sure you didn't mean the bus . . .

A. . . . Streetcar. I took the streetcar on Linden Avenue and I no longer remember the number. When I first went to school, this was before, I suppose, I'm trying to think how I got to school in those days... The school was out on what was known as Auchentoroly Terrace which is really a part of the drive through Druid Hill Park now. It was in a house that, perhaps, still stands there although I think not. This is where the school started on Auchentoroly Terrace near . . I mean . yes . . Auchentoroly Terrace near Mondawmin Avenue, which is now Gwynns Falls Parkway.

I. ~~It is now what is Gwynns Falls Parkway and~~ I ~~went in~~ worked in a portable school that they built. I remember you used to have to wear . . . I'm remembering this better than I thought I would on some things . . where you had to wear kind of a sleeping bag - the place was too cold.

I went there until I think the fourth grade and I think when I was in the fourth grade, the school moved to Liberty Heights Avenue which is where the Baltimore Community College is now; actually, the Community College bought the school from Park School and Park School moved out to the road that it's on now near the beltway.

T. As a Trustee of Park School were you involved with any of that sale or transaction?

A. As a Trustee of Park School - no. I was a Board Member at that time but I wasn't particularly involved in the transactions. I remember - see, I remember at the time I kept out of the transactions because it occurred at a time when I had some kind of a City connection. It occurred either at the time when I was on the School Board or when I was with the Urban Renewal Commission. I forgotten what year it occurred. But, whenever it did, I remember keeping out of it - had to keep out of it because we were dealing with the City and I didn't want to have any conflict.

T. To get back to the transportation - was it horse-drawn or electrified? Do you recall?

A. Well now, I'm not that old. It wasn't horse-drawn. It was electrified. It was those streetcars very much like some of the older ones I suppose -- not the oldest ones -- but the older ones that are in the Streetcar Museum below North Avenue Bridge.

I. I remember streetcars pretty well. It was, of course, before the days when they had only motormen. They had motormen and conductors and actually, it was a very pleasant thing morning and evening because I remember you had the same conductor and motorman pretty much most of the time. You got to know people and you got to know the people who were riding on . . but those were . . . in every way, I suppose, it was a pleasanter and easier life.

Although, I have to say that I . . You know, if you look back on the part of your life that was pleasanter and easier in terms of the way kids have to ride on busses today and the dangers inherent in it and the ruckuses raised on the busses and things . . I think that although I didn't come from what was known as a wealthy family in any sense of the word, my family was, you know, comfortable enough to afford sending me to school and things of that sort. They spent less money on some of the more elaborate things like housing like some other people did although we had a nice house on Bolton Street, but you begin to realize that there was a small percentage of people who had this kind of a life and that you really were having a sheltered and a reasonably trouble-free life, I think at the expense of some people who didn't have it as well.

I. The second interview is being conducted at Mr. Sondheim"s office at 9:00, Thursday, December 16,

Q. What examples of de facto segregation do you recall from your work on the school board?

A. Well, of course, when I went on the school board and up until 1954, Baltimore operated on a . . (Interruption) . Baltimore operated under a school system that was segregated - they had separate schools - no charge for colored or white by law and so that actually except for an exception - an exception I'll mention in a minute, there was no de facto segregation - I mean there was no de facto integration until the Supreme Court Decision.

I think it's fair to say that the school board's point of view could best be described, in general, as liberal over that period of time so that any opportunity to encourage, or to lessen the impact of a segregated system, was something that was welcomed by the board. For some time, and I really don't know when it started, perhaps before I came on the board in '48, but I'm not really sure, the system - - There were integrated teachers meetings. It seems strange in today's world to think that this was anything that was very earth shaking but as recently as post World War II, this was considered a major step forward. Previous to that, the teachers we had, there were, of course, colored teachers in colored schools - to use the vernacular of the time - and white teachers in white schools and they met separately, they had separate organizations and it was only after World War II - and I don't know exactly when it happened - perhaps before I came on the school board but possible it was afterwards - that the Superintendent

I.

on his own initiative merged the meetings of teachers

= INTERRUPTION =

So, we had the situation of teachers meeting together and I think a spirit of trying to run the schools on ~~an~~ as equal basis as possible. But as far as desegregation was concerned there really was none until the year 19 52 -

There were two assaults made on the segregation of the schools in - - the most important one was the case involving Poly students. Poly had then, as it has now, an "A" Course and a "B" Course. The "A" Course, I think, perhaps was the most prestigious thing in the city school system and perhaps better known and while I'm not in a position to evaluate it today, really, more prestigious than it was today. This was a course in which a student - boys went through a specially structured course that enabled them to go, after graduation, to the sophomore class of top engineering schools in the country. This course had been going on for many years and the Urban League decided to make a test case of segregation - of the segregation of the schools - on the exclusion of colored boys from the "A" Course at Poly. And, they were ~~thrown~~ EXCLUDED of course, because Poly was the white part of a segregated school system.

The Superintendent, not - I have to say - I want to make it clear - it was not because he was sympathetic with segregated school systems because indeed he wasn't, but because it was the law - organized course at Douglass High School which was to be comparable to the Poly "A" Course; and set this up and offered it as a substitute for the Poly course.

A. A suit was brought on behalf - oh I've forgotten - I think 5 or 10 young colored boys who were qualified without question - they were very carefully selected - qualified without question for admission to the Poly "A" Course. And, they applied for the Poly "A" Course and were turned down and told that the course would be available to them at the Douglass High School. They then asked for a hearing before the school board on the basis of the fact that no course that was set up at Douglass would have the tradition behind it, the excellence behind it and that, in general, it was impossible to set up a course really comparable to the "A" Course at Poly - to set one up overnight.

The school board had a tense and dramatic hearing about this and it was really one of the remarkable experiences of my life. Judge Roszel Thomsen, now Judge - retired Chief Judge of the Federal District Court in Maryland was President of the School Board at the time and he handled the whole situation and the steps leading up to it and the hearing itself in truly exemplary manner. He was tremendously admired for it.

I. Do you recall the individuals or groups that were for and against?

A. Yes, I have some recollection of that. Actually, I still have a stenographic transcript of that hearing. The groups for it - The Urban League handled the case. NAACP, which in those days was looked on as a fairly radical group to a lot of white people, asked to present a case and after consultation with the Urban League - - the Urban League

I.

and the NAACP were more competitive in those days than they are today, much more competitive - and the Urban League ~~asked~~ said that they wanted to handle the case alone. I think they sensed they had a victory and they wanted the victory to be theirs. The NAACP protested this but the way the hearing was set up ~~the~~ NAACP - the Urban League was allowed to put on the case and after the case was put on there was an opportunity for anyone else to speak who wanted to speak and so the NAACP was relegated to speaking at the end of the thing just as part of the audience. And, its interesting to note the chief speaker for the NAACP at that time was a man named Thurgood Marshall, who was brought down from New York. And, I remember his presentation very well.

Opposition - let me say I have to qualify the word opposition - What the superintendent did was to defend the premise that he could set up an equivalent course so that the administration of the school was in effect; you might say, was in opposition. But not really, not truly in opposition to it although they put on a case saying that they could duplicate this course. There were some questions raised by the Alumni Association of Poly ~~who~~ which was an extremely active alumni association, that can't quite be qualified as opposition. There was a complete absence of bitterness, vindictiveness in the whole hearing but I would say that, in general, that they put up a case, raised questions that put them in the position of being opposed to it; although I think that a review of the testimony might indicate - might not classify them as opponents.

Interestingly enough, the case was going so well when you ask about opposition, I now remember that Thurgood Marshall put on such an impassioned plea and became highly emotional about the case, although the case - Judge Thomsen had kept the case, the presentation of the case, on a very low key so that it was a very factual, although I think the very low key made the presentation very dramatic. And, the presentation on behalf of the Urban League, incidentally, was handled by Marshall Levin who was then a young lawyer in Baltimore who has recently been made a Judge of the Supreme Bench of Baltimore City - just recently.

Thurgood Marshall got quite emotional about the case and suggested that the school board was afraid, which indeed it wasn't; nd, interestingly enough, in retrospect, in fact I remember thinking at the time, most of us thought at the time that he almost killed the case; by becoming over-emotional and by, in effect, accusing the school board of more bias than it really possessed in its own heart.

What happened was that the school board then voted on the admission of the students to Poly; and in an extremely dramatic vote, which was quite close, the man on the school board who cared most about this in terms of - who had a strong feeling as any person on the school board I should say, perhaps not cared most - was Professor Truman Thompson of Johns Hopkins University who was a member of the school board and an engineer and who I know personally, and who stated at the time that he

I.

was vigorously opposed to a segregated school system and felt that we should not have one, still found himself in his own judgement to - - found in his own judgement that an equivalent course could be set up; and therefore, voted against the admission of these young men.

This was interesting, because it was, perhaps, the most legal vote on the school board at the time. He did it out of what he thought was his own knowledge. Those of us who voted to admit the boys, I am sure, were motivated somewhat by the fact that it was an opportunity to breach the walls of segregation, as it were and provide an opportunity within the law to move the school system forward to some extent. Because, actually, although we were prohibited by city ordinance and state law from having . . . running any part of the school system on a desegregated basis, there had been recent Supreme Court decisions that said the facilities had to be, if they were separate, had to be equal, and that, of course, is the thing on which the Poly case hinged.

Well, anyhow, the Poly boys were admitted and several of them went to Poly the next year and nothing happened. These two things were important because I think they paved the way for the desegregation of the school system.

Now, I suppose you would like to hear something about 1954. Well, in early May of 1954, Judge Thomsen was appointed by the President; it had been somewhat earlier that he had been appointed by the President, and it was confirmed by the Senate in early May of '54 to be a Judge of the United States Court for the District of Maryland.

. He was sworn in fairly early in May of 1954, and in about the middle of the year - the middle of the month, I was appointed by the Mayor, actually the Acting Mayor, the Mayor was sick, that's an unimportant part of history, to be President of the School Board and it was confirmed by the City Council. I was sworn in on . . I think on May 26th, although my appointment had been announced on May 13th. Oh, I guess the time in between was taken up by confirmation of the City Council. I've forgotten the exact date of the Supreme Court Decision but I think it was it was pretty near - - I think on the 17th, I think on the Monday following my appointment and before my swearing-in; so that I got a ~~good~~ blood bath ight at the start of . . by action on the school board.

The story of the school board's action at that time has been told so often that it really has been documented elsewhere. Elinore ~~Panquist~~ PANCOAST made a study of it. A number of articles have been written about it.

A. Do you feel these articles have been accurate?

I. They were highly accurate. The story that Elinore ~~Panquist~~ PANCOAST did ~~is~~ NOW for the Ford Foundation a year later which chronicled both the events that led up to the desegregation of the schools and the - what seemed then to be great trouble with the schools but in retrospect was very modest trouble.

I. They were very accurate and much more accurate than my memory about the things that happened. I think all of us on the school board were interviewed to death for a year after that about what had happened. But, in brief, what happened was the school board met; there was a ~~loud~~ LOT OF telephone discussion I must say. We had a history in those days of trying as hard as we could to have a minimum of controversy on the school board. We felt that it was important that the system be run on the basis where - - well, let me say, that I think there was understanding that a public school system at best is going to be subject to a good bit of controversy in the city and the school board, itself, serves the city best if it doesn't become the center of controversy. I happen to still believe this is true - that this is the way the kids get served best. And, that is the criticism that I have of the way the school board operates at present: SO LITTLE RESTRAINT on controversy within its own body.

But there was a great deal of discussion over points of view over the telephone. We met once and asked the City Solicitor for an opinion as to the effect of the Supreme Court Decision in Brown vs. Board of Education on City's ordinance requiring separate schools for colored and white. And, I want to point out I still use the vernacular of the time when I talk about colored and white.

I. We had a letter, a brief note from the City Solicitor Thomas Biddison, who said that the Supreme Court's Decision made the city ordinance unconstitutional and invalid; and the school board was, in effect, free to do - - was not bound by the city ordinance.

It's interesting that there was practically no hesitation on the part of the school board in deciding to desegregate the schools and to do it immediately. We talked about it some. I think there was a genuine feeling that, one, we had a city that was somewhat prepared for it; two, that the law was the law and not subject for debate after the law was passed. I think we knew that there would be opposition. I remember one discussion that some of us had that the way to avoid the opposition - to avoid opposition or to meet opposition was to do what had to be done legally and not give credence to the theory that this was something that people had an opportunity to vote on and discuss.

I have to say that in retrospect that I think that this was a very wise thing for us to have done because debate could have gone on forever ~~such~~ as subsequent etc. events have shown in other parts of the country; and that those people who sincerely in their hearts believe this was an unwise thing-that a desegregated school system was bad for the country have really over the years been given a false hope of thinking that discussion had something to do with it when the Supreme Court has spoken. And, I think

I.

the way to have respect for the law, personally, is to observe the law. I don't mean that just for myself but it's just as true for other people like the school board.

I have to say that I do believe that our school board was somewhat relieved by the Supreme Court Decision in terms of the fact that none of us, in our hearts, really believed that the best education could be obtained in tho long run in a segregated school system.

So, we met in a meeting that . . to say that the meeting was not prepared in advance is not to tell the truth TO SAY THAT T/C. TWAS SPONTANEOUS IS WRONG. We decided what we were going to do. John Sherwood had prepared a brief resolution in his own handwriting and we opened the meeting as a standard school board meeting and asked for . . . I think that we read the City Solicitor's letter and John Sherwood presented a resolution which in effect said that the schools would be opened the following September on a desegregated basis and asked the Superintendent to bring as rapidly as possible to the school board his plans for desegregating the schools the next September. It was passed unanimously. All of this could not have taken more than a minute and a half and we went on to the routine business that was prepared for the agenda - transfers, appointments, and all the other things a school board meeting had covered.

I. I'll never forget a reporter from the Afro-American. And, it's interesting . . I'm pretty sure, almost certain that it was Betty Moss, her name then was Mrs. Betty Phillips, now Mrs. Moss who is now a member of the school board, was a reporter of the Afro-American at the time and she came rushing in, and I have to say I'm sorry for Betty Moss - she missed the historic event because she arrived at the school board meeting after it was all over. And, I remember this occurance.

When this happened, I don't think any of us has this sense of - you don't have a sense of history when history is happening. It was a very exciting thing and there was a good out-pouring of pride on the part of Baltimoreans that Baltimore was the first city to do this. I think Baltimore was the first city, the first large city, certainly, to respond in this affirmative way to the Supreme Court Decision. The District of Columbia came just afterwards. And, John Fischer, who was Superintendent of schools, and who played a tremendous role in this whole thing came back a week or two weeks later, I don't remember the exact chronology, with a plan for opening the schools on a desegregated basis and indeed, we did open ~~it~~ on a desegregated basis in September. And, we had some trouble, ~~with~~ all of which has also been well documented, by a number of people. There have been an awful lot of studies made. Gertrude Samuels, I remember, the New York Times came down and did an article on it. We were all kind of celebrities for a year on the school board and in the school system. Because, one, the speed with which we desegregated the schools and two, because of the trouble we had in September and I think the thing for which we got to be

I.

pretty well known was the fact that the trouble got put down and ended as quickly as it did. It started, it's been documented, in an elementary school on Washington Boulevard, where some people - some mothers were upset about this and began picketing the school and keeping their children home. And, then it spread to Southern High and to Mervo and to some other places with the kids having a kind of holiday parade through the streets. It really wasn't rough - it was- there was some name calling and some confrontation on the steps of the Court House near the Battle Monument.

That was one of the turning points because I was standing near Commissioner Ober, who was Commissioner of Police at the ime, and a rotten tomato just missed Commissioner Ober's ear, and this upset him. Commissioner Ober said to me - I can't remember all the meetings we had with the police - I remember having private telephone numbers to call if I got in trouble - they were a little worried - I was subjected, and I suppose most of the school board member were, but because I was President of the School Board, I got a fair amount of abuse and the police were concerned about picketing my business, about trouble at home and things of this sort and I carried around telephone numbers, private telephone numbers and I never had to use them. I never had any of that trouble. I got abusive telephone calls, of course. I got some abusive mail - some of it anti-Semitic, most of it just anti-black. Suggestions for possible candidates of marriage for my daughter and things of this sort. Somebody called me a Judas goat. I had never heard what a

I.

Judas goat was, I had to look that one up; but, really it was not -- it really wasn't as bad or as dramatic as I thought it was at the time, I guess.

The trouble in the - - Col. Ober, the Commissioner of Police, was really a hero in this - a hero because he did what he thought was right even though he had question about the school board. He said to me once that he thought - in the middle of this he said. "You know, Mr. Sondheim, I want you to know that I - " I almost remember his words. He said, "I'm not sure I think that you did a wise thing, that you didn't move too hastily, that you should have prepared Baltimoreans better for what - for a desegregated school system." But he said, "That's not my job. That's the job of all of you to run the schools. It's my job to run the Police Department. " He said, "I'm not going to stand for violence in Baltimore. My job is to keep law and order." And he said, "Nobody in the Police Department is going to take sides in this issue about whether you made a wise decision or not."

Well, you've got to respect a man who said this. And, it's Commissioner Ober that IN THE LAST ANALYSIS HE stopped the trouble we had in the schools.

This thing spread to a lot of schools. Some of the memories of it start coming back to me now. Is this what you want to hear now.

A. This is it.

I remember - you remember a lot of isolated instances. I remember meetings with police officials to discuss what we were going to do. Some of them wanted us to close the schools; and a number of us felt, I know I felt very strongly, that absolutely wouldn't do. This is what segregationists, which is what the people were, wanted us to do, which was to close the schools, and John Fischer and I sat down one day and decided that that was absolutely the worst thing to do. We prepared a statement, I remember, saying schools were open and were going to stay open, that the worst thing to do was to close them even if there were no kids in school. But, of course, some of the schools for those few days, attendance went down very severely.

One of the things that broke the back of it, interestingly enough, (in today's world it would not be as successful, I suppose.) — One of the most important things was the discovery by a couple of people who had worked on this (I have forgotten who all of them were - one of them was Leon Sachs -) who dug up ~~got~~ a law which said that it was illegal to interfere with the operation of the school system. It was an old law on the books of Maryland. Actually, it was the thing that stopped them finally, because . . they told Commissioner Ober about this and Commissioner Ober took this law and went on television one evening - and I've forgotten which evening of the week it was - my memory in the sequence of days would have to be refreshed - but as I say it's all been chronicled - went on television and said that such a law was on the books and his job was to

I.

enforce the law and starting 9 o'clock the next morning, he was going to enforce the law. This is what broke - this is what really broke it. His policemen went out to the school on Washington Boulevard for example, I wasn't there at the time but someone was there from the school system. I've forgotten where I was. I was probably down ~~the~~ at Southern High School or someplace. At 9 o'clock, they said to the mothers who were picketing the school - okay ladies, this is it. It's 9 o'clock the school bell rung and that's it, and the picket line folded up and went away - didn't come back.

It was, you know, that simply dramatic that this thing happened. I do remember, though, we were sitting in John Fischer's office - the morning before this, because it was at that time we were there to get this report on that law - as I remember it. We were sitting in John Fischer's office - now before I say the next thing I have to go back and say that one of the things that was - - one of the best things about the whole situation was the calm and restraint shown by the black community. We had talked to a number of the leaders and put it on the basis that this was the white man's problem and they kept a very low profile at this time that this would be the best thing. And, I just can't - you know - now I remember - the admiration I had for the restraint that was shown at the worse kind of provocation because the name calling that went on and the things that were said were enough to provoke anybody and this thing, I think because they felt that the city administration and particularly the schools were doing their part - were doing what they could to straighten the matter out - that they exercised restraint.

I. But, now, to get back to the time in John Fischer's office, we were sitting in John Fischer's office talking about the law thing and into the room barged Clarence Mitchell. Clarence Mitchell, who then as now was the top official for the NAACP in Washington. He's a Baltimorean and his wife is Juanita Jackson Mitchell and their son had been entered in the junior high school on Hilton Street - south of Edmondson Avenue which had not only been a white school up until that September but was still an over-whelmingly a white school, in an extremely conservative area, and an area that was very much opposed to desegregation of the schools. And, they had a principal who at the time was not very sympathetic, I might say, to desegregation, and a picket line had been established there and Clarence Mitchell was out-raged. He just wanted us to know that he was going to establish a counter-picket line. Well, this was just about all we needed, and I talked to Mr. Mitchell and some other people talked to him and he was so upset about what was happening to the school where his son was going and that there were pickets outside. And, I might say that there were some pretty vicious picketing outside that school with some automobiles. I remember he had some license numbers of some cars. I can't remember exactly what had happened. I do remember the police were particularly concerned about it.

Someone called the Afro-American, then and talked to I suppose, Mr. Carl Murphy who was then the publisher of the Afro-American and if you were to pick a single leader in the Negro community

I.

It was Carl Murphy, Mr. Carl Murphy. And, the counter-picketing didn't occur. I'm a little hazy on exactly why not but I think it was a combination of our trying to convince Mr. Mitchell that he shouldn't do this and I think, perhaps, Mr. Murphy getting hold of Mr. Mitchell and talking him out of it. This was the day, I suppose, this was the day before the trouble ended.

There were a lot of other things that happened in that period of time, some of it personal - Bryant ~~Bowls~~ Bowles who became famous in Delaware as - he was the National Association for the Advancement of White People - National States Rights Party or something. There is a man who is still active in Baltimore from whom I have some choice correspondence in the file, who had two sons in Southern High School, who led, I suppose who led the National Association of the Advancement of White People and something else - the National States Rights Party - he's run for office a couple of times. A man named Luthardt: Who is still in Baltimore - ever hear of him?

A. Yes.

I. Charles Luthardt. He had some uncomplimentary things to say about me and I suppose still does. I'm not sure he didn't sue me. You got sued pretty regularly on the school board in those days and I think he sued me for something.

A. Oh, I know, I said something on a television program. Somebody put on a television program about this a year later. They had some film clips that showed Mr. Luthardt being hustled into a police car, perhaps, or something. I really don't know exactly what it was and we got sued on that.

But, there are a flood of memories of what happened in those days. Bryant ~~Bowis~~ Bowles speaking down in Anne Arundel County because he couldn't get a permit in Baltimore - highly inflammatory person. I think he ended up in jail in Texas for killing someone - I'm not sure.

But, in retrospect, our troubles lasted only a few days. The kids were magnificient! The kids at Southern High School were great! The Captain of the football team and the President of the class walked out of Southern High School, I remember seeing them - actually acting as kind of a body guard escort for colored kids. You know, a magnificient example. The thing brought about almost an air of good feeling in Baltimore. It's hard to believe and a great shame that that's been lost. It's tough to talk about those days which have a certain kind of glory about them in view of the ~~thousands~~ tension that we have in our cities today.

A. Do you feel that the various medias gave you fair coverage in that - television, newspaper, radio?

Q. Well, I suppose, I'd have to say yes although there were vigorous attempts on our part to minimize the inflammatory headlines. And, I don't know anybody in public life, in any of the things that I have done since, anybody I know in public life or anything else, is ever satisfied with the headlines in the newspaper.

I remember getting very upset at the time about, and I don't remember whether it was the Sun and the News-American, about the inflammatory nature of the headlines; because, as usual, (and I suppose this is part of the trade although I can't always agree with it.) Newspaper pick the most dramatic things that were happening and made them into the stories and some of the less dramatic things that we thought perhaps more important didn't get the prominence. We met with the newspapers regularly during these periods of time. We met with the newpapers before the schools were desegregated. There was one editorial writer, now dead, on the Baltimore Sun who raised a lot of questions about moving too quickly but his collegues all said that he was wrong. He - I think he turned out to be wrong.

I don't think Baltimore would have been any better off if we had - if we had delayed what we did. And it worked very well for a while.

The trouble that the schools have - I mean anyplace - I'm not just talking about Baltimore. It can't be traced to what happened in 1954.

I. They are a reflection of a spirit . . of a demand on the part of people that there be nothing but first-class citizenships in America and the turmoils that follows because of that is an enormous turmoil.

I could talk, you know, for . . . No, but I'm just talking again about something I . . You remember something so vividly. I was just remembering where I was sitting in John Fischer's office the day Clarence Mitchellwalked in there - sweat pouring down his face . . so upset and understandably upset. This was his kid that was having something done to him! And, insistent that this wasn't going to happen and I remember just where I was sitting on the couch when this happened, and it was a dramatic moment and you remember certain things like that.

A. Did you feel it was much anti-Semitic attitudes in town at that time?

I. Well I think that a fact that a Jew was President of the School Board - the only Jew on the school board was the President of the School Board - there was a good ~~feel~~ Bit of it and Anti-Somitism and anti-Black feeling has always been linked somewhat in this country. And, a lot of the personal mail that I got was anti-Semitic in nature . . Some anti-Semitic leaflets handed out just as there were yesterday in Baltimore.