

DR. JOHN SLAWSON

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
FEDERATION OF JEWISH PHILANTHROPIES OF NEW YORK



PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by Barbara Friedman for the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York Oral History Project in August, 1981. Pat Galuten transcribed the tape.

Dr. John Slawson was Executive Vice-President of the American Jewish Committee from 1943 to 1967. His leadership of the American Jewish Committee was preceded by a distinguished career in social welfare. He was Executive Director of the Jewish Board of Guardians of New York, Executive Director of the Jewish Welfare Federation of Detroit, and Assistant Director of the Jewish Welfare Federation of Cleveland. In addition, Dr. Slawson has written authoritative works on human relations, juvenile delinquency, child welfare, mental hygiene, and Jewish communal affairs.

Readers of this memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editors sought to preserve the informal conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources.

The original transcript and tape are stored in the Oral History Project office for those who wish to refer to them. A more complete memoir of Dr. Slawson's life and career can be found in the William E. Wiener Oral History Library of the American Jewish Committee.

This is an interview with Dr. John Slawson for the Federation Oral History Project by Barbara Friedman. The date is August 12, 1981.

BF: Dr. Slawson, I'd like to know how you started your involvement with Federation?

JS: Well, I was an executive of one of the constituent agencies in Federation Jewish Board of Guardians. That was the first involvement I had with the Jewish Federation for many years.

BF: How did you get involved with the Jewish Board of Guardians? How did you happen to start working there?

JS: I was finishing a study for the ^{STATE} Board of Welfare of New York State at that time, it was way back. There was a very nice gentleman there and he knew I was just completing and he said "I'd like to see you go to see a man named Solomon Lowenstein." Solomon Lowenstein was the head of Federation at that time. Mr. Lowenstein and I became very friendly and I was very close to him until his death. He sent me to Cleveland, Assistant Director of the Cleveland Jewish Federation which was also new to me, and from there I managed to come to Detroit to head up the Welfare Jewish Federation there. By that time I was already pretty well known in the Jewish community and a man by the name of Harry Glucksman, who was the head of the Jewish Welfare Board at the time, said to me "I think you ought to come to New York and head up the Jewish Board of Guardians." It was an entirely different subject matter, but then I had had my training in the field of delinquency and I wrote a book in this field in 1926. I will show you later on. It's been republished a few years ago after fifty years. Now, that was at the beginning of my Jewish Board of Guardians which is a Jewish agency concerned with the prevention of delinquency in the Jewish area.

BF: And when did you begin there? What was the year?

JS: Board of Guardians?

BF: Well, I would say 1932.

BF: What was your feeling about the Jewish Board of Guardians, the people - how they approached you to head it up and the people that you worked with there? How do you feel about it as an agency?

JS: As a profession or as an organization?

BF: Well, as a professional organization in your field. Obviously, they were looking for the right person.

JS: Well, I wasn't too far away from that, I had prepared myself along that line, as a matter of fact, I had a Doctor's degree in Philosophy but I didn't go to work in that area. I worked for Federation through the Jewish Board of Guardians for some time and I found the Jewish Board of Guardians a very challenging kind of organization - a sort of organization within a larger framework and organization. I think we did some important work there. Are you interested in that aspect?

BF: Absolutely.

JS: Well, you may have seen in the paper that S.R. Slavson, who was my brother, died a few days ago at the age of 91. He is the "father" of group therapy in the United States. I brought him into our Treatment Program. We were the first organization to experiment in that area. The other was a very unique method of contribution. I think we actually were instrumental in the introduction of psychiatry into case work. It wasn't necessary to be a medical doctor to be a psychological worker. When I came there it was handled this way; the doctor was there for the diagnosis and the case worker was there to carry out the treatment indicated. This was a rather unfortunate arbitrary division.

We commenced to indicate (this to) young people from social work school and then it became a profession with a number of private practitioners.

Many were starting either as Board of Guardian people or as sources for them, and when they were joining up the two agencies, the family and the agency for the Board of Guardians, , it seems, as I look at it, that, while the time I was there at the Board of Guardians they looked down upon us sometimes as usurping the family case work load. This time it became quite evident that of the two parties it was the Jewish Board of Guardians which was stronger, but the Family Agency with both lay leadership and actual operation. There was a Mrs. Sidney Borg, you might have heard of her name, she was a remarkable woman, not only intellectually but in every way. (Incidentally, she was the most beautiful woman in New York.) She felt that the family agency at that time did not constitute enough of the treatment aspect called for by the problems presented. You see, the Jewish group was always concerned about the percentage of Jewish delinquency on the streets in the community and one time the Commissioner of Police, I can't think of the name (Bingham, I believe) gave an interview in the newspaper and said that half of the criminals in New York were Jews.

BF: This was in 1930?

JS: This was before.

BF: This was before that?

JS: The Jewish Board of Guardians was really created because of that. First thing to do was to organize the Hawthorne School for Boys and the Cedar Knolls School for Girls and the therapeutic work in New York City, a building there we had. Your question was what again?

BF: Well, also while you're talking about Hawthorne and Cedar Knolls and when that was organized, what was the response from the outside community, other than the Jewish community? This was the Jewish community's response to the Police Commissioner's statement? Do you know how other people reacted to it and other professional people reacted to things like the Hawthorne School and Cedar Knolls School?

JS: Well, we had problems with the professional group. Miss Taussig was then the Executive of the Family agency, and she did not ideologically agree with this kind of specialization. But as far as the general community was concerned, we were very well accepted.

BF: Did the Jewish Board of Guardians break off from the family agencies? Later, one combined.

JS: Yes, the combination is a very recent affair. JBG never was part of the family agency.

BF: The Jewish Board of Guardians was first its own unit and it started because of this Police Commissioner's statement?

JS: The Police Commissioner's statement resulted in the building of Hawthorne School and later, Cedar Knolls for Girls. As that was functioning, it became obvious to a person like Mrs. Borg that it was not a preventive device, it was just a sustaining thing. For prevention you have to have a therapeutic program -- are you going to be interviewing anyone on the Board about it?

BF: Well

JS: I don't even know the name of the director.

BF: We know who that is -

JS: You see, I've been away from there all the entire time I've been here. I was there for twelve years and here about a quarter of a century so this is far away.

BF: You were there for twelve years and you obviously, your work there was very productive with the group therapy and psychiatric type of social work.

JS: It was the only place that therapy was lodged in -- and then it became a whole history, then it became group psychotherapy. There was a psychological aspect of the relationship between the people themselves profiting from discussing with each other -- I forget the name -- what is the name of it -- situations when a person looks at himself and reaction to others -- I forget the name of that.

BF: Projection?

JS: Well, it was in that area. That became a very interesting thing.

BF: Did other groups come to see how you were doing this or was it that you were training these people who were then going off into other groups -- and that's how it spread.

JS: There were various periods -- if you interviewed the new Executive head - he would tell you that therapeutic caseworkers became the dominant factor rather than the institution. We ^{helped} eliminate orphan homes. When I first came to New York there were orphan homes on the West Side. We've done away with that.

BF: You started mentioning something about the lay leadership, could you comment about that while you were at the Jewish Board of Guardians?

JS: Well, it's very important to have among the lay leadership a person or persons who have a professional understanding. Mrs. Borg had that understanding. Otherwise the lay head is a functionary, the inter-relation between the lay and the professional was very important. I think Federation itself is beginning to emphasize the functional aspect of the lay leadership.

BF: You felt it was very supportive at the time you were there because of Mrs. Borg - were there other people who also --?

JS: Walter Mendelsohn, whom you may have met, (he's now the head of this whole combine, he is a remarkable human being -- I hope you meet him), Judge Proskauer's office -- the lay people were people who really understood something about what we were trying to do. That was very helpful. That was necessary. We could not have gotten money from Federation, (since you're talking about Federation) for this kind of work if it hadn't been for the lay group headed by Mrs. Borg at that time. They don't create new things because it costs money --. Now, there was a period where we had a great problem with Federation - I don't know whether you're interested in that?

BF: Yes, very much so.

JS: There was a survey made by a professor at Columbia of some of its functions. He came out with a rather unusual recommendation. There ought to be a lot of combinations -- eliminate -- don't talk about it as variety but it's really duplication --

BF: It was never used.

JS: No, I don't think so, we didn't use it and I don't think that others did.

BF: You did not want to use it and be combined at that time with any other -

JS: Well, if we had been combined at that time we would not be in existence now because we couldn't have developed a specialty along that line -- family therapy as well as other therapies. There are times when combinations are good, but at that time the combination would not render the much needed service required. Well, we wanted freedom to develop. That did not always sit right, particularly with any given person at Federation. Federation was there, among other things, to get the funds and see that they were properly spent, that was all. And the reduction of agencies would help in the getting of funds, you wouldn't need as much to spend -- and if it hadn't been for

Mrs. Borg (she was very influential), I don't think we would have continued. The merger took place - that's the one that accepted. As a matter of fact the executive of the Jewish Agency Board of Guardians, of that whole thing --

BF: The Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services --

JS: That's right. He was a student with us at the Board of Guardians - I don't let them forget that. He also did some work at the Hawthorne School in that area and then in the merger. Of course, it would have been difficult with the merger for the two top executives to get along. I think they either retired -- Mrs. Taussig had family and so did Mrs. Borg -- so there were problems of that nature both between the Jewish organizations and the organization of Federation and also on a professional level. You need to explore and search for new approaches -- it was made possible at that time by the individuality of certain organizations. Most of them that had merged were very large and didn't care so much about that. Maybe now it's developed; I haven't been in the Federation work for many years but about twenty-five years as executive of this organization, A.J.C., that format operated. As a retired person, so to speak, I am engaged in research work which is not part of Federation at all. This has been going on for about twelve or thirteen years. What aspect would you like me to emphasize?

BF: You've already been doing a very good job about exactly the things we do want to find out about, the problems, the conflicts.

JS: Well, if you want to find out about the conflicts I can tell you what the basic conflict was -- of staying by yourself in order to keep alive on a level that you wanted to be. If you weren't able to do that you had a problem, but the Federation's contribution in bringing agencies together

eliminated - - - The Federations have really been playing a
vital role in the Jewish community in the United States.

There was great harmony in certain instances because we would not permit
ourselves to be taken over by the local group .

Do you have any idea what you would like to know something about? I have
that experience too, how to develop lay leadership in order to - -

BF: Well, it's really how you feel, you were saying before about the lay
leadership that there should be ^{some} professional people within the lay
leadership that understand what is being done.

JS: That is a professional understanding.

BF: Right, where do you feel the lay leadership, when you were at the Jewish
Board of Guardians, where was that drawn from, what kind of people, what
was the?

JS: Mrs. Borg organized the Big Sister movement -- and someone else followed her
with a Big Brother movement. It became a very interesting and important
activity for lay leadership who were very busy in business and professions
or industry to give some time to a relationship to some youngster --
she helped develop it. That was taken on immediately because of many Big
Brother and Big Sister organizations. There were a number of pioneering
things that were started in New York City.

BF: So the Big Brother-Big Sisters really started from this group, in other
words, this was the original - and others followed.

JS: In the Jewish - I don't recall that anyone else, Mrs. Borg was the first
one -- and was able to do it because the organizations she became head
of -- are given that opportunity for expressing the kind of things she was
interested in, so it wasn't just a question - it was a gift, the plaque is
an honor. It was a vital commitment. She was the one who'd bring a person

Jewish
in the courts to deal with/children and determine what would be the best approach to get them to lead a normal life in the community. This was an urgent great contribution. I presume that you will be seeing other agencies and they'll tell you what happened there. Federation played an important role in helping to eliminate orphan homes, we had many orphan homes , that institution. You have probably never seen it, a vast building on the West Side and the director of it was very proud of progress being made, not realizing that it was a terribly artificial kind of thing that needed another method. There has been a tendency to get away from keeping people in a home, ill people as well, delinquents as well, it started in my day.

BF: In other words, when you started you already were at the point , were trying to get them out of the home, out of Hawthorne and Cedar Knolls, is that right?

JS: Not Hawthorne. When they came to Hawthorne, they came there because of delinquency - what we were trying to do was to eliminate orphan homes. Do a treatment job on them rather than putting them in an institution. Of course, Federations have become very much involved in the problem of needs abroad, in foreign areas a very important issue -- and that's where we made the best contribution.

BF: When you say needs abroad, do you mean with helping setting up various places abroad or do you mean bringing people in from abroad to here and helping them?

JS: Becoming concerned about it and making contacts with people abroad also in making funds available -- various periods, like in World War I and World War II there was terrific starvation -- the Joint Distribution Committee was organized - you know that - it is still functioning as a matter of fact, Frank ^{Weiler} ~~Wyle~~, the Chairman of JDC ^{a combination of New Yorkers} ~~this joint distribution~~

Committee

together with Federation had one campaign - - I think is a good thing.

BF: How do you feel now that Hawthorne at Cedar Knolls and a lot of places who you worked with are no longer just for Jewish children.²

JS: That's correct. I'm not so sure but I think - they have more non-Jewish.

BF: Right.

JS: I was wondering about that. I talked to a number of people involved with both kinds of facilities and I don't believe it's been detrimental, the cost has begun to be shared between Jewish Federation and what happened outside. It's a social function. I mean you get paid for each child that is taken up -- the role of the state and the welfare of the individual. Now I'm afraid we're going backwards. Now they are beginning to eliminate what they consider to be non-essentials, cut budgets, that would have made progress -- the state would have to come in -- there was a great deal of problems about the budgets. It has an impact on private function. There was a time when practically all the needs were met by the Federation and its agencies. Now there is very little. Compared to Mount Sinai Hospital, it was created by Federation and developed into a first rate treatment and research organization. It gets more money from public funds than it gets from the Jewish community.

BF: Now with some of the cut-backs -

JS: The cut-backs are going to make us, begin to bring back, something that was taken away before. How it will be, I don't know, but naturally there is some loss in being obliged to be dependent upon two incomes rather than one. But that's the tendency, --

BF: What do you think was one of the most memorable things that happened when you were working in Federation?

JS: While I was with the Jewish Board of Guardians. Well, we initiated the President's Conference on Children, which met every ten years in Washington and that was a focus of a great deal of innovation. I don't think it's in existence anymore. The question you asked me is a very difficult one to answer. There are "yes and no's" on many aspects. Public support is something we wanted all the time, but at the same time we want to have our individuality to progress in the same directions. That doesn't always happen in public agencies. I worked at another agency, my first job was the Department of Welfare in New York State. I was a psychologist there way back in the '20's -- they were beginning to become vitally interested in progressive measures. We always wanted to develop public agencies but there were flaws with implementation of treatment, but now I'm afraid we are going to go backwards again. Anything that is to go to the public agency, after a while the spirit seems to have scooted out. I don't know if the Jewish Federation is concerned with it or not -- I'm not sure but I believe that Hawthorne has more black children than Jewish children. But in my day - there was no one there but Jews. But they will probably tell you much more about the effect than I can.

BF: Were the homes kosher?

JS: You mean the institutions? Well the institution became less and less important. On the whole I would say that the Federation was tending toward recognizing kosher. We had a proctor system before I came. There ^{was} before I came -- ^{the} Council for Judaism. They were for hiding the Jewishness of the people. They carried very much weight, a lot didn't want the Jewish identity, but now we say it is healthy. At that time, they said that it brought too much attention to the Jewish people in the United States. As a matter of fact, Mr. Rosenwald, Lessing (it's William Rosenwald who works with us), he was on the Federal Agency Jewish

Community Board and resigned. He had to get out. So he and his brother were very far apart. One man was very Jewish and the other died. I saw a man the other day who still is a member of Council for Judaism -- they were sort of an offspring of the American Jewish Committee in the other direction.

BF: How was Federation in that whole aspect? In other words, were they trying to have a lot of Jewish content and make it a Jewish type of organization, or was it more of the assimilating into the rest of the country?

JS: Well, the healthiest thing, of course, is to have a factor of identity of the Jewish people, of sure footedness -- who they are and where they come from -- and the Council for Judaism type of thing wished to hide this. Are you asking from a Jewish point of view?

BF: I'm asking this as far as the Jewish Board of Guardians in the 1930's, the lay people, the people, was that very important, the Jewish identity, of course, at the time the Holocaust was starting.....

JS: It wasn't very important even to this organization -- I established the concept, the integration of the units -- that developed themselves and not the abolition of the distinctiveness which made it possible to improve to do research on it. Now I haven't been around agencies that receive most of their funds from the public agencies -- it's a healthy thing -- but I'm not sure exactly what the results are. This thing you were asking me is that there was very little concern about the Jewish aspect. We have here a whole department of Jewish Communal Affairs which -- in the olden days -- definitely didn't want any distinctiveness.

BF: Was this true of Federation at this time too, that they did not want to be distinctive in that way, more in the area of the professional doing a top job professionally rather than ...?

JS: Well, it's developed over the years now where any organization is about as good as the lay leadership is. I think it's continuing -- the vision was artificial -- the lay person without professional training cannot engage

in the kind of operations a trained person can. There are many areas where the wisdom of a lay person is essential. About this business of the degree to which symbol of one kind or another would strengthen or weaken. There was confusion about that. My view has always been it strengthens, I think Federation today is getting involved in the educational program.

BF: There is a new program with the idea of Jewish education being very . . .

JS: Very important.

BF: I was wondering about the lay people you have talked about, such as Mrs. Borg and how well informed and how wonderful she was in the field. I was wondering how the lay people were, where were they drawn from, in other words, were they people who were assimilating into the society of New York or are they people from the German/Jewish background or any peoples from Eastern Europe?

JS: In the early days, most of the population, Jewish population in NYC was of German background. They created the temples, various things. The Eastern group came over on the last immigration we had here of Eastern Europe. They brought orthodoxy and the Jewish way of life which was different from the assimilationist person. I think that's much healthier -- I believe that now -- but even there we would have to have a lot of things in hand -- in order to keep the general Jewish community interested. I don't know of any public institution supported publicly that a Jewish Group were in, that did have kosher. It developed much more as time went on -- if you don't have a philosophy like that these things don't matter. If you have a philosophy of identity, these things begin to enrich what's going on. That is the tendency today. I think the horrible experience of Hitler, the Holocaust, (I'm doing some research work on something that brought to realization of what can happen), caused them to take stock of themselves. I had an experience as to Mr. Altschule, Frank Altschule, he just died at the age of 94. He and I got

very chummy and it was a revelation to him to be a Jew and to understand its meaning. ~~and~~ ^T the ethical aspect of Judaism was something that was never brought to him. The only thing you ever heard about was the persecutions and the starvation, poverty. He became a strong supporter of the American Jewish community. There were a few of that type that still give very good service, very helpful, generous.

BF: In the 1930's the lay people that you worked with ~~the~~, were they aware of these things or were they more like Mr. Altschule?

JS: Altschule wasn't aware at all because he was really brought up in a Christian community and only came to his senses when he saw what was happening to his relatives and his friends in Germany. We had two movements at that time, one that was to prevent this from happening, to go in if necessary - and do it ourselves if we had to, and there was another that said it was a problem of the state, it was a problem of the public agencies, that - - - - of the state, let them do it. But that was dying even in my early days. A great aspect of Judaism is the degree ^{to} which the self-help aspect -- it's on that basis -- Federation agencies are functioning.

BF: Self-help is actually the basis of all of this, as you were saying when they saw the need that there were many delinquents, Jewish delinquents --

JS: -- it was not good for the name of Jews, ^T that was a lie by the way; that wasn't true. It started a movement which is now called the Jewish Board of Guardians. What else would you like to know?

BF: ~~I would like to know something else, but I think I'm going to turn this on the other side because then we won't have to interrupt it.~~

Why did you decide to leave Federation and Jewish Board of Guardians when you did? ^P and go to the American Jewish Committee?

JS: Well, that was in 1943 and we began to perceive the conditions in Europe --

especially the Holocaust and I began to feel that as important as the job at Board of Guardians, at that time '40 - '43, the most single important thing for Jews throughout the world was what we call now the Holocaust and to do everything possible to avoid it happening again. That's one of the things I'm working on now is to determine just how it was possible for the kind of brutality, the disdain for human life, that ensued in the Holocaust period. I'm working now on subjects in order to find out what motivates altruistic action even in the horrible environment that was in existence in the Hitler Europe of that time. Why did they suffer these Germans and other lands conquered by Hitler? They put themselves in the position of being destroyed themselves, a big offense then as there have been such people. What kind of people, we want to know, are these as compared to their neighbors⁷. Because we know more about the bad things than the good things in people, delinquents -- the authoritarians and so forth -- we do not know about the people who risked their lives. Some actually did, for the Jewish people. We want to bring out a number of mechanisms that resulted in either the aggressive kind of hateful conditions that ensued and just exactly what caused the so-called good samaritans to act the way they did, not that there were many people, the kind of upbringing and so forth.

BF: Were there other people at Federation who were also very interested in this? Was there any way that you could have gone through Federation working on this, or did you have to come to the American Jewish Committee?

JS: Federation, at that time, or even today, is not really working in the research field, they are working in the operations field.

BF: Were you working in the research field in 1943 or were you trying to do something more -- ?

JS: Well '43 when I came here anti-semitism was the highest and there were predictions of something happening - the thing that I threw myself into was the psychological analysis of the problems, and I made a number of studies, one has become very famous, called The Authoritarian Personality. I was responsible -- an important finding by this group was that the anti-semitic, more so than others, was a person that would be described as authoritarian, meaning by that that things had to be his way and he had very little relationships with outside people. The whole idea of making anti-semitism somewhat of a mental health problem I think helped a great deal to make it unfashionable. They used to boast about this - - - - -
Your question was, were we engaged in that kind of thing? No we were not, because very few in our field did research at that time.

BF: Besides doing research, was there a lot of concern about the Holocaust in Federation, with the lay people and the professionals? When you were leaving in 1943, were there other people in Federation who might not have been interested in doing the research but who were concerned about doing something? Was there much discussion about what was going on in Germany?

JS: The discussion was in the special agency, American Jewish Committee.

BF: But in Federation?

JS: I think there was a cognizance of this thing, but I don't recall any actual action that resulted with Federation - but there were several philanthropic fields and the development of these agencies. This agency was organized in 1906. It was the pogroms all over Europe at that time -- at that time Odessa - Jewish group who started the American Jewish Committee to help their brethren -- I don't believe that's considered philanthropy. That's considered self-protection. These people on Wall Street, wherever they would be in thinking, would become very important protagonists in this work we were doing. Not very much in the philanthropic field, but this area in civil

rights and so forth.

BF: I guess what I wonder about is, I understand that Federation was philanthropic and that they were concerned about helping the people here. I just wondered whether there was any kind of turmoil, other than Joint Distribution Committee's spending money, whether the lay people on the Board and the people that you spoke to at Federation showed any awareness.

JS: Which group? There was always a group that was not concerned with that kind of thing. We were Americans. We had to do something related to America. The concerned group was a minority.

BF: That was a minority?

JS: Oh yes, today the Holocaust is a subject for discussion in every area. Artists are working in it -- it has done a great deal. Unfortunately, we had to have it, of bringing Jews together on the basis of self-protection. The Federation's direct services were not so much in that area. It was difficult to work in both areas.

Of course, now there is the JCRC which is more of a community and self-protection type of group in the NY Jewish community. It is an umbrella group, and the American Jewish Committee works with them combating anti-semitism and missionaries and that type of work.

The agency AJC was organized in 1906 but it didn't have a strong group approach to the problems in Europe that began in the beginning of the century, so you had people like Warburg and others who began to become concerned about it; all became concerned about it after it happened, to relieve. Not very many became concerned about preventing its happening. I don't know exactly whether Federation is intending to go into that at the present time.

BF: I don't know either, I just wondered what it was like at the time it was going on. You were involved during the Depression and during the early parts of the war and during the time that the information was coming about the Holocaust, and I just wondered what the reaction within Federation was to it.

JS: First, most of our leadership in AJC was Federation leadership and were very much concerned. They have been generous and supported it. But I don't think that they get at the essential aspect -- why we are plagued with anti-semitism - for 2500 years. It starts in any country in the world, like a disease -- we are involved in research in that area - when it starts. I suppose the leaders of Federation were also leaders in that type of work.

BF: So there were leaders involved in Federation also involved with American Jewish Committee.

JS: Yes.

BF: I asked you before about what your most memorable impressions were. What was one of your disappointments with Federation? Did you have any disappointments with Federation?

JS: Yes, I had some very many disappointments. I did not think they were competent in that horrible situation. Reform Jewish Communities, their support was not generous in the early days.

BF: Not generous to whom?

JS: I'm not sure that Federation leadership as such -- Even in AJC we couldn't comprehend the terrible, desperate conditions that were created by anti-semitism, even if it were not here. We were not sure that it can't be here -- but are you asking to get a distinction between the old-time

leadership and the current leadership.

BF: Yes, that's part of it, differences - similarities --

JS: Similarities, they were all Jewish - knew they were, and a good degree of all knew it could happen here, and they became generous supporters of this type of agency - if you ask me was there enough of that response, I don't think so. Especially when I got attached to it there were certain organizations like AJC or Federation. That was sufficient for them.

BF: Did you feel during your time working for Federation, in that time, that there were changes from 1932 to 1943, did you see changes going on within Federation other than that the Jewish Board of Guardians - where you brought in the new therapy and psychiatric social workers, changes in the views of the leadership of Federation?

JS: With respect to what?

BF: Well, just changes in leadership in the outside community, the world problems, what was going on internally, was there a development of any sort in those 12 years?

JS: Of Federation leadership? Yes I think there was -- sometimes, like Altschule as a result of him seeing himself what can happen. Until that time for him or anybody else it was impossible that it could happen. So he got involved. We have a lot of young leadership now that were elected here that will do well in the philanthropic areas as time goes on -- many more young people than I figured we could get. The atmosphere is full of this business of confusion and violence and anti-Semitic action. When you go to a meeting of AJC, you find it full of a lot of young people who are assisting in a substantial way in this type of work. I don't believe that they get as much kick or satisfaction when they're working in the general agency where most of the clientele is not even Jewish -- measly budgets - probably not.

BF: So when you were there did you feel that you had more chance to really do some good and undivided work, and if you were not controlled by State or Federal regulations, given the budget that you had --

JS: Oh yes, especially right now -- it hit us from every side -- I definitely think so. There has to be a demonstration. I think that that is so. They just refused to believe that there were annihilations and camps of destruction -- even in our group at that time. ^{People are} Much more knowledgeable about these things ^{today}.

BF: What do you think about the relationship now between UJA and Federation now that they ^{have combined?} ~~can blend?~~

JS: I have two answers to that. It may be they'll raise more money together, I don't think so - spend less in the campaign -- would you repeat the question again please?

BF: What is your feeling about the relationship between UJA and Federation?

JS: I suppose one criteria is--are they getting any more money than they did before when they were individual, I don't know -- otherwise I see no reason why there shouldn't be collaboration, it's just that you can collaborate better in your specialty and your knowledge of it. Federation, I think is carrying on a leadership training. We have younger people who are well situated and eager to do something -- be able to make that possible.

JS: Tell me, in this study that you're making, is an item by itself in your project? What purpose are you interviewing people for?

BF: Well, our purposes are for Federation to study, for ourselves, for social service people who want to see how these things developed, how various agencies have developed and find out about the opinions of the people who worked with these agencies, for the American Jewish community itself, to see how people work together, for people from other countries.

JS: That -- ^{is quite an effort.} distinction has been eliminated -- East European people are making

very big contributions -- One of our problems is also we're too good.

I noticed that in analyzing the responses to the studies I've made recently, the thing that really comes to the top all the time is the success of Jews in business and industry. They're not even conscious that that's the cause of antisemitism there -- But they do point that out every time you read a survey that has been made of these interviews you will find that is one thing that sticks in their mind. There is no reason why a Jew shouldn't be successful if he is able to do it. And it is with all classes, it is with the higher classes, too, because there is great competition in the top industry in the United States. All these connotations of Judaism in many instances have been produced in various psychological studies -- in the power aspect it's even more so.

There is less antisemitic talk, less antisemitic symbols outside -- there are the instances. But even those people who are when you get down to the bottom of it, you're going to find a certain kind of antisemitism on the basis of power. It's a competitive kind of thing. How you treat it is another matter. Certainly Jews don't want less power. But the whole situation is developing on Israel. Suddenly, the Jews in America have become a very potent political group, in and of themselves in respect to elections, very strategic in certain places. One would say that it's a good development. Well, in a way it is, but that is referred to all the time.

BF: How do you see Federation's place in the 20th century, with American Jewish life?

JS: Federation has got to respect more of its resources in this area. Everything that goes with it. Once [anti-Semitism] happens, nothing else matters. Federation's not just New York but others are becoming concerned with the problems. We're talking about now -- they're changing you know, function, too. The purpose of this kind of thing you're doing is a great innovation in relation - five years ago, ten years ago I think the younger group coming into the leadership of Federation is trained, well oriented, is going to push it ahead. I haven't been around Federation in a long time, but it seems to me that they all should do something about priorities and preferences, even on a fund raising basis. You take the Yeshivas, the conservation and orthodox Jewish affairs in NYC, tremendous contributions from Jewish people, the UJA is no longer something that is wondered at. Which has not happened with any other group in U.S.

BF: So you feel that they will continue to be more powerful -- but you also think they should be looking into anti-Semitism?

JS: I think they will. I think they should certainly increase the funds for that. We used to think that anti-Semitism had abated. There were signs of that. For 2500 years that has happened, and anti-Semitism came back again. In Germany, I was told by people who lived there before Hitler, the people who counted didn't think that anything like that would happen -- had very important government positions, and then when it did happen, they weren't ready to see what kind of a possibility Hitler could be. In the United States you know, you exposed it -- He was working so many years behind the scenes and the time came and there he was. I don't think the U.S. is free from that kind of danger. Once that is destroyed temporarily, we'll sit back in our chairs and say "Now we're finished." When the time came, there he was.

F: Were there any type of Federation agencies in Germany in the 1920's?

S: Yes, there were.

F: Special Jewish Social service agencies?

S: Yes, as much as we have them. They never found any reason for doing that, they were very well situated, didn't see any basic problems.

F: How do you feel Federation's role is now in the total community, in other words, the non Jewish community?

S: Between the Jewish and the non Jewish?

F: How the non Jewish community looks upon Federation?

S: They look upon it with a great deal of respect because it's a well organized group and doing important things. Nothing in the Christian community even approximates the type of work. I think the Jewish action in the area we are talking about is very good.

F: How do you feel about the relationship between the professional and the lay leadership?

S: Difference between them -- a good question. Now I have a feeling that the professional persons become much more cognizant of the importance of a strong and committed lay leadership and they are acting along that line. And I believe on the part of the laity you begin to have much more respect for training.

F: How do you project the role of Federation in the future?

S: Very difficult to tell. I think the combination that we ought to continue to have, because that's an aspect of strength that you have to have, and the Federation has to become more respectful of diversity and specialization. The public agency development is another thing that they have to look into. I assume that Federations are studying the next steps. I think they are aware of the changes. Federation has a very good future - not resistant to change -- certainly there have been changes in leadership.

In the very olden days Federation was very much restricted to a class. I think that is being disposed of gradually, not layers or classes but as one. I suppose if you want to know more about it you can talk to executives of other Federations.

BF: I thank you very much, Dr. Slawson. I appreciate your time. It was most informative.

JS: You were very stimulating.

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies

On AUG. 12, 1981, an interview conducted between
(Date)
JOHN SLAWSON and BARBARA FRIEDMAN
(Narrator) (Interviewer)
was recorded on tape cassette 3.

Because of my interest in the preservation of historical resources and in making this material available,
I, John Slawson, hereby grant as a donation to the New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies whatever right I may have to the interview(s) that I have listed below.

I agree that the names contained therein and any material listed below may be published or used at the discretion of the New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies for use in any book or literary or artistic production, and in any or all media and for any other purpose.

Item: Interview dated 8/12/81

John Slawson
Narrator (signature)

165 East 56 Street, N.Y.C. 10022
Narrator's Address

Barbara Friedman
Interviewer (signature)

Date: 1/5/82

Interviewer's Address