

4-11-2010

## My Father Used to Refer to Erving as “Goofy Goffman”

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### Repository Citation

Bay, E. (2010). My Father Used to Refer to Erving as “Goofy Goffman”. In Dmitri N. Shalin, *Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives* 1-11.

Available at: [https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman\\_archives/4](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman_archives/4)

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## Remembering Erving Goffman

### Eli Bay: My Father Used to Refer to Erving as “Goofy Goffman”

This conversation with Eli Bay was recorded over the phone on January 11, 2009. After Dmitri Shalin transcribed the conversation, Eli Bay edited the transcript and approved posting the present version in the Goffman Archives. Breaks in the conversation flow are indicated by ellipses. Supplementary information and additional materials inserted during the editing process appear in square brackets. Undecipherable words and unclear passages are identified in the text as “[?]”.

[Posted 04-11-10]

**Shalin:** Greetings, is this Eli?

**Bay:** Yes.

**Shalin:** How are you doing?

**Bay:** I am well, thank you.

**Shalin:** Is it a good time to talk?

**Bay:** Yes.

**Shalin:** Great.

**Bay:** Hey, you are right on time and I am ready!

**Shalin:** [**Laughing**] I want to make sure it is OK if I record our conversation and then send you the transcript for revision, redacting, and so on.

**Bay:** Yes, although the line doesn't sound very good. Maybe we can use a better line.

**Shalin:** That's the line I have with a speaker phone. You can't hear me well?

**Bay:** Yes, it was breaking up a little.

**Shalin:** I hear you very well.

**Bay:** I can hear.

**Shalin:** Since you will be speaking for the most part, maybe it's OK.

**Bay:** OK.

**Shalin:** Please feel free to ask me questions. People do that all the time. Just want to let you know that this is a two-way street. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself, about your place in the family tree?

**Bay:** Frances Bay, Goffman Bay, Erving's sister, married Chuck Bay, who was my father's brother. My father was Harry Bay. So Frances was my aunt and Erving was a legend in our family.

**Shalin:** You said Erving was a legend. . . . I am sorry I interrupted you, we'll come back to it later, go ahead.

**Bay:** So I grew up at Dauphin, the same town that Erving grew up in. How old would Erving be if he were alive today?

**Shalin:** He was born in 1922 and he died in 1982, so he would be in his late 80s. Frances is three-and-a-half years older than Erving. She is going to be 90 [later this month]. So Erving would be 87 or so.

**Bay:** Yes, OK. He is just a few years younger than my own mother. I am the next generation. How old is his son Tom?

**Shalin:** Tom was born in 1951 [Tom Goffman was born in 1953].

**Bay:** I was born in '47.

**Shalin:** I was also born in 1947.

**Bay:** Where were you born?

**Shalin:** I was born in Leningrad, Russia, and I came to the U.S. in 1976.

**Bay:** My grandparents, both on mother's and father's side, came from Miletopol.

**Shalin:** That's Ukraine, or is it Belorussia?

**Bay:** Yes. They came in 1905 and settled in Winnipeg originally. My father's father went to Dauphin in, I guess, 1910 when he started the business. My father was born in Dauphin and I was born in Dauphin. When I was growing up, there were six Jewish families. During World War II, there were maybe

twenty or thirty, and there was even a synagogue. When I grew up, there wasn't.

**Shalin:** Was it in the 1940s that the synagogue appeared there?

**Bay:** Quite likely. And it was a town that had a very significant Polish-Ukrainian population. In fact Dauphin today has an annual Ukrainian festival. People come from all over North America to that Ukrainian festival in Dauphin. A good anti-Semitic thread runs through this Polish-Ukrainian community.

**Shalin:** Did you feel it personally?

**Bay:** Yes, it was "polite" anti-Semitism. Some of these [people] would come into my father's store and say, "Oh, you Bays and Buckwolds, the old Jewish families in Dauphin, you are 'white Jews,' and the Cohens and the Neepans, they are 'black Jews.'" Stories like that would [be told] and be meant as a complement.

**Shalin:** They meant it as a complement.

**Bay:** Yes.

**Shalin:** I read that in Manitoba there was a technical school where some 30 Jewish students boycotted classes because of an anti-Semitic teacher. I wonder if that might have been a factor when Erving was growing up.

**Bay:** I don't know anything about that, but I don't think so. When I grew up, there were about 8,000 people living in a middle of nowhere.

**Shalin:** You said Erving was a legend, and I wonder how you meant that.

**Bay:** He was known to be . . . you probably don't know that when he was growing up, they called him "goofy Goffman."

**Shalin:** Who called him that?

**Bay:** My father used to refer to Erving as "Goofy Goffman." There was a story I don't really remember, but I remember my father saying something about Erving and a chicken. You may want to see if you can find more about it. You know the concept of "kapouris" when you swing a chicken around over your head, [something] that is part of the ritual slaughter that religious Jews do?

**Shalin:** My wife will know more about it.

**Bay:** There is a story about Erving and the chicken, but I don't know the story. My cousin Sheila Katz at Winnipeg who is ten years older than me, may have some story about that. All I know there is some story about Erving and swinging of chicken over his head.

**Shalin:** The name of your cousin is Sheila . . .

**Bay:** Sheila Katz – K-a-t-z.

**Shalin:** Would be interesting to see if she has memories of that.

**Bay:** The story as I always understood it is that Erving was strange, bright, but strange.

**Shalin:** How come?

**Bay:** I didn't know, but that's what I knew. As a young child I remember [meeting] Erving's father, Max, who always had a cigar in his mouth. He started a ladies' store a couple of doors down from where my grandfather, father and uncle had a store.

**Shalin:** Did you know Max Goffman?

**Bay:** As a child, yes.

**Shalin:** Did he leave any impression on you?

**Bay:** I remember that he was very short.

**Shalin:** Like what? Can you indicate his height?

**Bay:** No, I can't, other than that he was . . . I have this picture in my mind, like the George Burns type of guy with a cigar always in his mouth. I was very small, I was a child, so I really have no idea. . . . I know how small Fran is, and I see from the interviews how small Erving was, so I imagine that Max was probably not much more than a few inches over five feet.

**Shalin:** Did you have a chance to look at the archives?

**Bay:** Yes, I read through a few of the interviews.

**Shalin:** How tall do you think Fran is?

**Bay:** Oh, Fran is probably around five feet, I don't know.

**Shalin:** Did you know Erving's mother, Anne Averback?

**Bay:** I have a very vague recollection of Anne as a child.

**Shalin:** Any stories about Erving that came your way once you grew older?

**Bay:** There is only one story that I know. A friend of mine, going back 40 years, Richard Apostle, was an acquaintance of mine from the university. He went to Berkeley. I remember meeting him, and he knew that Erving was in some way distantly connected to me because of my aunt. He said to me, and I don't know whether he heard it directly or indirectly, but the story was that a policeman came to the class Erving was teaching and told him that his wife jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge, and Erving said, "Fine, wait for me. I will finish the lecture and then go with you."

**Shalin:** It is unclear whether Richard was present at the time or heard it from someone else, right?

**Bay:** Right.

**Shalin:** It sounds like Richard might not have witnessed that.

**Bay:** I honestly don't recall.

**Shalin:** That's fine. This project is in part about the way our memory works, how the same events are recalled by different people. So hearsay and anecdotes are important. This story was obviously making a round.

**Bay:** Yes.

**Shalin:** And that's about the only one you remember.

**Bay:** That's correct.

**Shalin:** Now, Eli, I wonder if you have thoughts on the family dynamics. I spoke to Fran [Goffman Bay] and Esther Bersbris and Marly [Zaslov], and I understand that there were eight brothers and sisters in the family. Some of them did better than others, moved to the Southern part of town that was more affluent, others stayed behind. Any thoughts on how different parts of the family interacted?

**Bay:** As far as I know, the Bays and the Goffmans got along. I don't know the Averbachs . . . they lived in Dauphin but they were gone by the time I came along. It was a substantial Jewish community that moved from Dauphin to Winnipeg. The two old Jewish families that stayed were the Bays and the Buckwolds, and there was also the Breslows.

**Shalin:** How do you spell it?

**Bay:** B-r-e-s-l-a-w, I guess. There was animosity between the Bays and the Breslows. They didn't talk to each other. Apparently, Harry Breslaw worked for my grandfather, then started another business and went into competition with the Bays, and as a result there was bad blood.

**Shalin:** A commercial style conflict.

**Bay:** Yes

**Shalin:** Did they ever reconcile?

**Bay:** Interestingly, I grew up in Dauphin and I didn't know the Breslows. I mean it was a small town with [six] Jewish families, and I didn't know them. When my aunt died about five years ago, I went back to Dauphin, and I hadn't been back for 20 years, and one of the people who drove me was Ian Breslaw who was going to my aunt's funeral. When I grew up, there was no contact between the Bays and the Breslows.

**Shalin:** There were issues there.

**Bay:** Not with the Goffmans. Goffman and Bay . . . I don't know if you know the story, but Frances when she was eight years old apparently pointed out my uncle Chuck in the playground and said to her friend, "I am going to marry that man," and she did.

**Shalin:** It was destiny, you might say. Did you have a chance to interact with Fran?

**Bay:** Oh, yes.

**Shalin:** What's your impression of her? And you can redact any confidential parts of your reminiscences. How does she strike you as a person, as an actor?

**Bay:** I don't know if I want to have this on record.

**Shalin:** It's OK. You don't have to say anything.

**Bay:** Fran I am very close to. I have great fondness for her. She is a very nervous lady.

**Shalin:** Anxious?

**Bay:** Very anxious, and for many years she sacrificed her career to be wife and mother.

**Shalin:** She says that in my interview with her.

**Bay:** Her career blossomed after Josh [Fran's son] died. She started acting at 60. You must know that she got a star on the Walk of Fame.

**Shalin:** Oh, yes. I know she was inducted in the Canadian Hall of Fame. And I have heard about the tragedy with Josh.

**Bay:** What is interesting about Josh, when he died, I was living in Winnipeg and I got a call from my parents. They told me they were on their way to Winnipeg, they would be there in an hour or so, and they were coming with some bad news to tell my grandmother. When they came they told me that Josh died. But on the same day my cousin Jack, who was, I guess, three years older than Josh . . .

**Shalin:** . . . tried to do the same thing.

**Bay:** Yes.

**Shalin:** I heard the story.

**Bay:** Very interesting, on the same day.

**Shalin:** And they are completely unrelated, apparently.

**Bay:** Yes, and there was no contact with one another. . . . I was close to Josh. I remember going to visit him once in New York. Josh was a very obese guy. He was very bright. I remember once driving with him from Boston to New York, on a long weekend. We got into the car and Josh put on a pair of racing gloves and then started driving. We passed every single car on the road. . . . Chuck was very strong. And Frances was always . . . she was a 1950 style wife, always giving in to her man.

**Shalin:** Family comes first, man's wishes are paramount.

**Bay:** Yes.

**Shalin:** That's the pattern of the time. . . . So there was no acting while she was tending to the family.

**Bay:** I think she did some plays here and there. Her career started off in theater and then she sacrificed to be wife and mother.

**Shalin:** And Chuck died about six years ago?

**Bay:** Yes. In 2002, I believe.

**Shalin:** What you are saying is consistent with what I have been told.

**Bay:** OK. We talked about Max and Anne and Fran.

**Shalin:** . . . Did you have a chance to read Goffman?

**Bay:** I read *Presentation of Self* when I was a student.

**Shalin:** What was your impression?

**Bay:** I actually studied Erving. I had a professor, it was a communications program, and we studied Jacque Ellul, Marshall McLuhan and Erving Goffman.

**Shalin:** Where was it?

**Bay:** The University of Manitoba.

**Shalin:** He was already well known.

**Bay:** Well, not really. Sheila Lindsay was an unusual professor, who actually [gave] the most stimulating course I took at the university. But I got more stimulated by Jacque Ellul and Marshall McLuhan.

**Shalin:** Which course was it?

**Bay:** It was a communications course in sociology.

**Shalin:** Any impression about Goffman and his book?

**Bay:** The perspective that Erving brought . . . well, I cannot honestly

comment other than the fact that it was a startlingly different perspective on how to view interactions. . . . And I had a special connection because I could say, "My aunt is Erving Goffman's sister." But other than that . . .

**Shalin:** And you liked it?

**Bay:** I did like it, but from my own perspective I got turned on to Jacques Ellul, a French social historian who had a profound impact on my thinking to this day.

**Shalin:** And his last name is . . .

**Bay:** E-I-I-u-l.

**Shalin:** Later on, Erving's work was not of particular significance to you.

**Bay:** No, I can't honestly say that it was.

**Shalin:** If you saw the interviews, you would know that some of Erving's students, like Sherri Cavan, changed her views of Goffman's writing. Did you hear about a member of the Averbach's tribe who was a bookie? His name was Mickey.

**Bay:** No. I am not connected with the Averbach branch.

**Shalin:** Anything else, Eli? Any wisdom you can share about the project – is it silly idea?

**Bay:** No, I always had an eye out for Erving because of the family connection. Yesterday I actually tracked that quote on Goffman from the Freud family.

**Shalin:** I appreciate that. I was not aware of it.

**Bay:** Yes, that struck me. I thought it was quite interesting.

**Shalin:** One more thing, if I may, you mentioned Sheila Katz . . .

**Bay:** Yes, I may have . . . let me see if I have her phone number. Marly Zaslov would [know her]. They grew up together and were like sisters. I have her [Sheila's] email < . . . >.

**Shalin:** Very good. If you can think of any other people in Dauphin or Winnipeg who might have memories about those places, pass me a word.

**Bay:** OK, sure.

**Shalin:** I am most grateful for your willingness to share your recollections. I can send you the transcript as an attachment.

**Bay:** Yes.

**Shalin:** And then you can edit and redact it.

**Bay:** OK. You can go to my website < . . . > and see what I do. I've been a pioneer in my field. I teach people skills for self-regulating, control of emotional, mental and physical reactions, stress [reduction].

**Shalin:** Very interesting! I do study emotional intelligence

**Bay:** Aha!

**Shalin:** And I have emotion survey on the web tracking the affective spread of individuals and groups.

**Bay:** What's your website?

**Shalin:** I'll send you the link. In the first message I sent you there is the URL for the Center for Democratic Culture. Once you enter the site, you will find several red buttons, one of which is "MoodCounts." It's an anonymous survey, you fill it online and get a three page printout with your affective profile. The idea is to track our mood swings. It's an odd survey but given your interest, you might want to take a look.

**Bay:** Yes, I would indeed.

**Shalin:** I can just send you the link.

**Bay:** Super.

**Shalin:** Erving's interest was in emotions, in how we control our emotions or fail to control them, how we become affectively delinquent, show the right amount of enthusiasm that the circumstances demand, and so on. It's interesting that the ability to control one's body and emotions is of interest to you too.

**Bay:** It is interesting.

**Shalin:** Thank you so much.

**Bay:** OK, nice to talk to you.

**Shalin:** Bye.

**Bay:** Take care. Bye-bye.

**[End of the Recording]**