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Samuel Heilman
City University of New York

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Samuel Heilman:

**As Goffman Was Talking about Remedial Interchanges,
He Took a Glass of Water and Spilled It on Rosenberg's Lap**

This interview with Samuel Heilman, Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the City University of New York, was recorded over the phone on December 1, 2008. After Dmitri Shalin transcribed the interview, Dr. Heilman edited the transcript and gave his approval for posting the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives. Supplementary information appears in square brackets. Undecipherable words and unclear passages are identified in the text as "[?]". The interviewer's questions are shortened in several places.

[Posted 04-27-09]

Shalin: Greetings, this is Dmitri Shalin. Is this Sam?

Heilman: Yes. How are you?

Shalin: I am fine. How are you?

Heilman: I didn't realize you know Janet [Belcove-Shalin].

Shalin: Janet Belcove-Shalin? She is my wife.

Heilman: Yes.

Shalin: How did you realize that?

Heilman: I noticed when I saw your phone number. I once wrote a piece or an introduction for a book that she wrote.

Shalin: Interesting. Come to think of it, she mentioned you.

Heilman: It's a small world.

Shalin: She wrote her dissertation on Hasidim.

Heilman: Yes, I know.

Shalin: I imagine this is how you two connected.

Heilman: Correct.

Shalin: It would be interesting to reminisce some day. I am grateful for your willingness to talk.

Heilman: It's a pleasure.

Shalin: Let me ask you if it would be OK for me to record our conversation and then send you the transcript for your revision, editing, and redacting.

Heilman: Fine. No problem.

Shalin: Wonderful. You have seen my questions, right? So you know what I am up to. My project is evolving, and it is only now that I begin to see its various dimensions. It is a kind of metaethnography, if you wish – I am talking to master ethnographers and ask them to reflect on their craft, their training, their teachers, colleagues, times and places, and so on. Renee Fox tells me that you are one of the chosen ones who. . .

Heilman: I don't know if the "chosen" is the right word. But certainly Goffman played a large part in my intellectual life, and as it turned out, in my career.

Shalin: Great. Do you remember how you encountered Goffman's work, what impression his writings made on you.

Heilman: I started off as an undergraduate at Brandeis University. A number of my sociology professors had me read both *Asylums* and *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Then in my senior year. . .

Shalin: What is the time frame here?

Heilman: I graduated in 1968. I was there between '64 and '68. All sorts of things were going on there. Very liberal campus – Angela Davis was a graduate student; Abie Hoffman was expelled the year before I came. It was extraordinary intellectual atmosphere. One of the professors who came during the latter part of my time there, probably around 1967, was Larry Rosenberg. I really don't know what happened to him since then. He invited Goffman to speak to sociology department classes at the University, and that was really the first time I encountered him and his impish character. He was giving a talk to a small class about what was then called "remedial interchanges," which was the concept he later [developed]. He was sitting at a table in front of the class. Rosenberg had introduced him and sat at the side [of the table]. There was a pitcher of water and a glass. As Goffman was talking about remedial interchanges, he took a glass of water and spilled it on Rosenberg's lap.

Shalin: Intentionally?

Heilman: Yes. "Oh, I am so sorry," he said. Taken aback, Rosenberg said, "That's all right."

Shalin: [**Laughing**]. What a story!

Heilman: That, Goffman told us, was a remedial interchange or a supportive interchange. I remember we were struck – I was struck any way – by his ability to take everyday life and frame it in a way that showed you things you took for granted, that were part of the social contract of behavior. It was really fascinating. I don't remember a lot of the other things he said during that visit, but I can still see that whole encounter and how dramatically it defined the concept.

Shalin: It is so vivid.

Heilman: Absolutely vivid. Later on when I encountered him as a graduate student at Penn, I saw some other sides of him, both the darker and the vivid side. I will tell you about that.

Shalin: How would you describe his appearance?

Heilman: He was very short. I'd say about 5'7 or 5'8, about my height. He was not the kind of person who filled the room. He was very comfortable in being marginal. It was his marginality that enabled him to be sort of a fly on the wall and see things that others might not have. He had very strong feelings about what was going on. Once he started the talk. . . Well, by the time I encountered him he was so well known that it was harder for him to disappear in the room. I found that at the ASA meetings everybody was aware when Goffman entered the room.

Shalin: Was it in 1965?

Heilman: No, now I am talking about my encounters with Goffman in the 70s.

Shalin: The first time around that was. . .

Heilman: Around '66.

Shalin: He must have been still at Berkeley.

Heilman: It was either '66 or '67.

Shalin: He came to Penn in '68, I believe.

Heilman: Yes. The first time I encountered him I was an undergraduate reading his work. He wasn't quite as large a figure in the field. Even at our department at Brandeis there were figures who eclipsed him in stature. There was Lewis Coser, and Everett Hughes, Morris Schwartz, Kurt Wolf and others. . . Herbert Marcuse was there. I mean he wasn't really at the department but he taught a lot of people there. Goffman was by no means viewed, at least by me as an undergraduate, as a star. Goffman wasn't a major figure compared to them in those days.

Shalin: Would you say that his fame started in the early 70s?

Heilman: Yes, when "Goffmanesque" became an adjective. And also, when he made it into general press. I remember there was a story on him in *Time* magazine, a number of stories in the *New York Times Book Review*. I remember that in all of those places they had the hardest time getting pictures of him because he didn't like to have himself photographed, so they all used the same picture of him as a Berkeley faculty [member].

Shalin: Is it the one where he is sitting behind the desk?

Heilman: Yes, I think so. I don't see it in front of me now but it was very establishment like picture, not exactly the way he appeared later on.

Shalin: That might be the only one I had seen.

Heilman: Yes, it is hard to find pictures of him. He didn't like to have his picture taken for whatever reason.

Shalin: So when you first read Goffman, he immediately caught your attention.

Heilman: Not my attention. It was interesting, the book I liked was *Asylums*.

Shalin: Was it the first book of Goffman you read?

Heilman: I don't remember if that was the first one or *Presentation of Self*. I read them both around the same time more or less. I wouldn't say that after I read them I said, "Yes, this is what I want to do" because at that time it wasn't even clear to me I was going into sociology. But they were certainly more engaging than Parsons' books or even the works of Coser that I was reading. There were other people who engaged me. The works of Everett Hughes engaged me then, the fact that he was one of the elder statesmen in the department and the field was [important]. And I was very much taken in those days by work of people like Erik Erikson.

Shalin: A child psychologist?

Heilman: Right. The book *Childhood and Society* had a profound impact on me, as well as Freudian kind of thinking. I would say that Goffman became much more important to me intellectually and also personally when I came to Penn.

Shalin: Did you choose your graduate studies at Penn with an eye to working with Goffman?

Heilman: Well, you have to keep an eye on what was going on in the 1960s. The Vietnam War was going on. My original plan had been to study sociology of medicine. I had been accepted to a joint program at UC Berkeley and San Francisco Medical Center that was headed by Anselm Strauss. I was offered a fellowship there. In addition, I had applied to Penn. Goffman wasn't yet there, but they also had what seemed like a program in sociology of medicine where I was offered a fellowship. But I couldn't take either of those offers because at the time I would have been drafted into the army. I had to find a way of not ending up in Vietnam.

Shalin: I want to make sure I understand. You were likely to have been drafted in either of those places?

Heilman: Yes.

Shalin: How come?

Heilman: There were no deferments for graduate students. As long as you were an undergraduate, you were deferred. That's why a lot of my friends at the time became school teachers – school teachers got deferment.

Shalin: How did you managed to. . .

Heilman: How did I stay out?

Shalin: Well, you don't have to go into that.

Heilman: I am happy to go into that [laughing].

Shalin: It is interesting.

Heilman: What I did was this. The first year I also applied to a rabbinical program. There were deferments for theological students. I found a Yeshiva in New York that I could go to. Then at night I went to the New York School of

Social Research that gave me a fellowship. There I could study with Peter Berger. . .

Shalin: You knew Peter?

Heilman: . . . Carl Mayer and Arthur Vidich. That was an opportunity to stay out of the army and study sociology. But after a year at Yeshiva I couldn't take it any longer. A group of us organized something called the "Chavurah," a new kind of rabbinical seminary that was a precursor to 'new-age' Judaism and also enabled us to continue to receive our army deferment. I was able to have it even though I was not in Yeshiva anymore.

Shalin: That was creative.

Heilman: By then I was getting my Masters, in 1970. At that time they had changed the draft [system] by starting a lottery. In a lottery I drew a very good number, [which meant] I would never be drafted. Now I could go back to the original offers I had, because in my judgment the New School was not a good place for me to get a Ph.D.

Shalin: OK, at that point you chose Penn.

Heilman: Yes, by then my life had changed enough and I didn't want to go to California. I chose Penn because of Renee Fox among other people and not because there was Goffman. I knew Goffman was there (though he was in the anthropology department and my fellowship offer came from sociology) but Goffman's work wasn't really my direction at the time. I was going into sociology of medicine. With Renee there I thought I would be well placed to learn the field. . . . Well, I contacted Penn to see if I still had this fellowship that they had offered. I learned that I still had that fellowship.

Shalin: So you enrolled in, what, 1971?

Heilman: 1970. I took my Masters from the New School, and was able to apply some of their credits for the Ph.D. [program] but not all of them. Then I went to Penn. It was at that point that I encountered Goffman. I encountered him through something called Center for Urban Ethnography. It was headed by a scholar named John Szwed.

Shalin: John . . .?

Heilman: S-z-w-e-d. He was sort of a social anthropologist who focused on jazz culture. He worked with Labov and Dell Hymes who were at the center. Goffman was also member of the center. I don't remember exactly how it happened. But at some point I was hanging around the center, with

Szwed and Goffman there. They were talking about religious institutions or something like that. I remember Goffman said it would be a 'gas' if somebody did a study on synagogue. I said, "Well, I could do that." I was very much involved with the synagogue where I was living. So I said, "If I had a grant, I could do that." They agreed to give me a grant, a dissertation grant from the center. I was still taking courses, but now I wanted to take some more courses from Goffman. But Goffman said I wasn't ready to take his courses, I had to do a lot of reading. So I started reading. He gave me a massive reading list. We reviewed it in the form of a tutorial held at his house, just the two of us. It was not on a regular basis – I would meet him every few weeks. That is in itself a story.

Shalin: I would love to hear it. It's a kind of backstage view of the. . .

Heilman: I'll come back to this.

Shalin: Sure, I don't mean to interrupt.

Heilman: At that point I was really moving away from doing the sociology of medicine which struck me as less interesting than I had originally thought. Now I was doing all those readings – he made me read papers on ethology, ecology, and all kinds of things he was interested at the time. I would go back and forth with him reading this material. When I finished I wanted to take a course he was offering but he said, "Now you don't need it."

Shalin: [Laughing]

Heilman: Then I got more things to read, and I got the grant. He said, "When you've finished the reading, then the grant will kick in." I didn't like that idea. I wanted to finish already. My wife was pregnant and I wanted to get my career moving along. I tried to persuade him to let me do the reading and start my research, my field work at the same time. He agreed to have a meeting at a restaurant in a place called "Smokey Joe's" where we would sit down and I would make my case. He would come to the meeting with Szwed, we would sit down, and I would offer my arguments for continuing reading while doing my field work and getting paid. We went to this meeting. I remember we went to the restaurant. He did his usual shtick with the waitress.

Shalin: What was the shtick?

Heilman: I don't know – he would try to break the norms of behavior, sophomoric kind of tricks like staring at somebody a bit too long. Of course, later on I remembered reading how the waitresses had to move from the backstage into [public view]. He would do a little bit of that. Anyway, we

spent some time on small talk, then, without warning, he said, "You only have five minutes left." I said, "What do you mean I have only five minutes left? If I'd known that the clock was ticking, I wouldn't have wasted my time on all this small talk. I would have made my case right away." So I was really thrown off, which is of course what he had planned. By the time I had to make my case in five minutes I couldn't, of course, make the case. I remember we stood outside on 40th Street in front of the restaurant, and he said, "Look you are going to do the reading the way I said. With my son I have to do this back and forth, but with you I don't have to do this. This is what you are going to do." He had no intention changing the rules of the game that he had set up. And I ended doing the reading which he wanted me to do, which proved very useful. Not as useful, I think, as he had imagined. I did that, then I started the research and got the money from the grant.

As far as that class we are talking about, I would go to his house, we would sit together at his beautiful house on Society Hill. I remember there were just the two of us in the house. His wife (though I don't think he had one at the time) wasn't around. [When] he wanted to end it at some point, he would go through what in his work he called the "terminal squirm" – motions people make that give a sign the conversation had to end. But I had read about the terminal squirm and was very much aware of it but didn't want it to end there, so I would just sort of ignore all the signals he was giving.

Shalin: The opening of the closing.

Heilman: Yes, yes, the notion that it is coming to an end. So finally he realized it wasn't going to work and exasperatedly said, "Look, this is over now. We are going to end it this hour."

Shalin: You kind of played his game.

Heilman: Yes.

Shalin: Where was his house, by the way?

Heilman: It was on Society Hill, I think on Second Street. I remember it was the original, old part of Philadelphia. He built a beautiful townhouse. He had money at this point. It was very pretty house, sort of modern, but in the Colonial style neighborhood. He really never came to the university. He was in the anthropology department. He wasn't even in the sociology department. I remember when I finally gave him my dissertation, I asked what kind of a defense I would have to do. He said to me, "I don't consider the degree at sociology department at Penn such a bonanza that you have to do so much of a defense."

Shalin: Did you ever meet his son?

Heilman: I never met any of his family. I communicated with his wife after his [death].

Shalin: He remarried around 1980, I think.

Heilman: I communicated with his second wife, and she wrote me a nice letter back. I told her how much I would miss his books, how important he had been to me. That was the only contact I had that was in any way personal.

Shalin: I see. The tutorial class you took from Goffman was a formal arrangement?

Heilman: Yes, it was a formal arrangement. I think I got a credit for it. But I never really got to take one of his formal classes where he would lecture because I didn't have enough of background or, as he would tell me later, I had too much background.

Shalin: Interesting that he didn't want you in his class somehow.

Heilman: There was a fellow student of mine by name of Delaney. I don't know if his name had come up.

Shalin: No, I don't think so.

Heilman: He took the course. In fact, I'd been in touch with him. He is in some place in the West.

Shalin: Maybe I could find him.

Heilman: I am looking right now – yes, Michael Delaney. The last known address I have for him is <. . .>.

Shalin: Is it an email address?

Heilman: Yes. The other person I am sure you have been in touch with is Jonathan Imber.

Shalin: No, I don't think I have heard about him [in this context].

Heilman: You should be in touch with Jonathan Imber. He is at Wellesley. Imber was more interested in Philip Rieff. And Rieff, who was my other mentor at Penn, claimed that he was responsible for bringing Goffman to

Penn and giving him this Benjamin Franklin professorship. Rieff was also Benjamin Franklin professor. He was originally married to Susan Sontag, an important social theorist. I always thought that Rieff was sort of jealous that I had chosen to do the dissertation with Goffman rather than with him. But I am very glad I did because Rieff was really a stickler for all kinds of . . .

Shalin: . . . protocols.

Heilman: Yes, I would have been with him forever. I don't know how soon I would have been able to finish.

Shalin: Eviatar [Zerubavel] says more or less the same thing about Goffman so far as finishing the thesis or settling on a topic. Renee mentions the relationship between Rieff and Erving – what is your take on it?

Heilman: It was a very odd thing. On the one hand, Rieff was highly formal, very theoretical in his orientation. He had these pretensions of being British, which of course he wasn't – he was a son of a kosher butcher from Chicago. He also felt very strongly about bringing Goffman to Penn. He always stressed, at least to me, how important his role had been in bringing Goffman to Penn. Goffman on the other hand . . . I barely remember him referring to Rieff. I don't think he saw him [Rieff] quite as important. They didn't really do anything together, except maybe at the level of academic politics. That I don't know about, I don't follow it. Renee would probably know that better.

Shalin: What is your impression about Goffman's relationship with the department of sociology?

Heilman: Very limited. I think he had relationship with individuals, but he pretty much kept apart from it. He very much viewed himself at that point as an anthropologist. His office, when he went to it, was at the University Museum, which was an anthropology museum. I don't think I ever – maybe once or twice – saw him in the sociology department or at any affairs that the sociology department held. You had to find him. You weren't likely to run into him.

Shalin: Renee says that he was not a bad citizen, that he helped with recruitment.

Heilman: I am sure that he did that. I don't think he thought as highly of the institution as he did of Berkeley. There is no question that Berkeley was much more important in the field. [Ours] was a second rate department in a first rate university. There wasn't any big advantage for him to be identified with it. But he did maintain relationships with people he considered to be first

rate if that was Rieff or Dell Hymes. It wasn't really that he thought highly of the department.

Shalin: Probably Labov too. I understand that he married Gillian after Erving died.

Heilman: Really? You know more than I do.

Shalin: Unless I am mistaken.

Heilman: One other thing I have to say was that we always talked in those days who would have a lasting impact in the academic field – Goffman or Parsons. Would it be Parsonian structural functionalism or Goffman's kind of work, and many of us who were students of his were convinced that it would be Goffman. But I don't think any of us foresaw the decline of sociology, at least as I perceive it, that neither of them would be [that influential], that their impact, at least in a broader intellectual life of America, would decline. Parsons is barely talked about today. Goffman less so than most of us, certainly in the academy I know of, would have thought. Maybe his ideas became so much part of our thinking that. . .

Shalin: That must be part of it. Also, it is so hard to imitate Goffman and his literary style.

Heilman: There is also a kind of revisionism. I remember somebody saying to me that I had used a lot of Goffman's ideas, particularly in my early books, and they found – maybe they were just pandering to me – that the way I used it was far more interesting and engaging than the way Goffman handled it. I don't see that, but I think Goffman's strength was that he gave us a vocabulary that was universal.

Shalin: So if I understand it right, even the topic of your dissertation was suggested by Goffman.

Heilman: He referred to it in a footnote to one of his books he wrote at the time. I think it was *Fame Analysis*. . . . I don't remember if it was *Fame Analysis* or *Relations in Public*. I still have tabs in the pages [showing] how much I used them.

Shalin: . . . Once you set up your project and started your field work – was there much of an interchange with Goffman or did he give you a long leash and eventually you emerged with the finished product?

Heilman: Very long leash. As a matter of fact, I probably met more with Renee than with him when I was doing the dissertation. I was seeing more of

him when I was taking that course and more of her when I was doing the dissertation. She was much more hands-on. But frankly, no one there who was on my committee really knew. . . . First of all, none of them had any kind of Jewish knowledge. So anything that had to do with the Jewish part of this setting, I was really on my own. In many ways that was a blessing and a curse. The blessing part of it was that it forced me to be creative in ways that I may not have otherwise been. As a beginning student in sociology I wouldn't have taken some intellectual leaps I took if the people I was working with really knew the field of Jewish studies. On the other hand, I would have had a stronger historical element in my book. In the end, when I wrote my dissertation, which became my first book, I did not think I was writing about . . . I was writing about the Jewish setting, but I thought I was doing symbolic interaction. Only later, after I discovered the reaction to my work from the Jewish world, [I realized what I was doing]. It sort of shaped my thinking and moved me in the direction of doing more work on Jews. Originally, I was not interested in what we call today "Jewish studies." My Jewish life and my academic life were separate. It was only Goffman who . . .

Shalin: . . . brought you back to the Yidishkeit.

Heilman: Right. He essentially said . . . The standard thinking in anthropology and field work in those days was that you are a stranger and you go someplace else and you learn to become a native. You learn to become a native in a relatively short time. But natives can never learn to become sociologists, field workers. Setting me to do this dissertation was standing things on their head: you can take a native and train him to be a sociologist, train his eyes on things that were native to him and see them in a different way.

Shalin: Is this how you cast the situation or was it Erving's idea?

Heilman: That's how I phrase it. I wrote a paper "Teaching Natives to Become Strangers." In one of the editions of my *Synagogue Life* I put it in as an afterword. When I was an undergraduate I had to read *Street Corner Society*, which was probably the first book that really turned me on to do the community studies. In that book one of the natives comes to the author and tells him that he would also like to be a sociologist, and Whyte basically tells him, "You can't do this, it's just too complicated." That was the standard point of view. It is easier for Margaret Mead to learn about Samoans than for a Samoan to learn what Margaret Mead [was doing]. That wasn't true, as it turned out. One can make a very strong argument that you can get a Ph.D. in five years but becoming a native takes a lifetime. It is easier to teach a native to get a distance from the life he or she leads than vice versa. So that turned out to be important. Goffman and Szwed were prepared to let me do

that. They said, "OK, you have that confidence. We shall teach you to look at things like an anthropologist or an ethnographer." I didn't know what ethnography was at that time. The rest is my career.

Shalin: This is extremely interesting. A couple of things, if I may. How would you describe Erving's relationship with Judaism. In some ways he was profoundly Jewish, the way Woody Alan is, on the other hand. . .

Heilman: Woody Alan is a perfect example. I think he was like Woody Allen. Woody Allen is a perfect reference because he would even act in that way. In his upbringing in Canada he noted how weak the Jewish community was there, how conscious they were of being Jews. Every so often he would make cracks about his Judaism that sort of . . . I cannot quote anything in particular, it has been a while, but they were Woody-Allen-like. He even had this kind of mischievous look in his eyes when he talked about being Jewish that demonstrates a love-hate relationship. The very fact that he wanted to have a study of synagogue says a great deal. He was willing to spend the money that the center had on this, it wasn't Szwed's idea. Szwed was in a sort of an administrative position. It was Goffman who said it was a good idea to do it, and Szwed said "OK, if he is willing to do it." It was his interest in it, and his take on it was very . . . I am just looking at it as we speak, at the comment that he made, it is in *Frame Analysis* that he referred to my work, and it wasn't the Jewish content of it that interested him.

Shalin: Synagogue was more of an object matter than a subject matter for him, although you can look at it both ways. But there was no ritual observance of holidays by Goffman that you know of.

Heilman: Nothing that I knew about. His only reference to it was that it was "a close study of the off-stage management of sacred religious objects."

Shalin: I see. What was the role of Renee Fox in your dissertation process?

Heilman: She was a reader, she was on a committee. She is much more avuncular, motherly. She actually turned me on to an article that turned out to be more critical to my intellectual development than to my dissertation work. That was Clifford Geertz's paper on the Balinese cockfight. From that on, I was very much influenced intellectually by Geertz's thinking and writing. She brought that to my attention. It was her ability to look at this material – she read my field notes, he didn't. He read my field notes but he didn't really comment on them.

Shalin: You submitted actual field notes?

Heilman: Yes I submitted the field notes.

Shalin: Was that a standard part of the process?

Heilman: I don't remember. In my experience of running dissertations, I was given much much more freedom than most. Part of it was that none of the people on my committee knew anything about the setting. I could say almost anything I wanted to, they had no independent way of finding out if that was true. They wouldn't go to an orthodox synagogue to see if that was true, and there were no other studies to compare with. So I might have as well have written about some ancient tribe that never came into contact with the humanity.

Shalin: Right, right. So far as I could tell, no one ever saw a page of Erving's field notes.

Heilman: You mean the stuff on crofters?

Shalin: Yes, starting with his dissertation and on to *Asylums*.

Heilman: You should talk to Michael Delaney. He worked with Erving a bit. Mike's is an interesting case. He was a Vietnam's veteran from Montana. I think Goffman was really interested in him. He had also some familiarity with puppets that Goffman was very interested at the time.

Shalin: Theater puppets?

Heilman: Yes. He might have seen something in Vietnam, I don't remember all the details. Mike could give you that better than I. I don't know if he actually got to read notes, but he had a lot of contact with Goffman.

Shalin: Michael was a graduate student?

Heilman: Yes.

Shalin: Did he write the dissertation?

Heilman: I don't know if he ever finished it. [Delaney, as I should have remembered from an exchange we had in 2007, in fact received his doctorate from Penn in 1979]. I don't even know what he does now.

Shalin: So Renee did play an important role in your education, introducing you to Geertz.

Heilman: Yes, and we maintained a friendly contact. In fact at some point I tried to bring her to CUNY. She was interested in coming, but it didn't work out for a variety of reasons.

Shalin: And you were conducting actual field work as a kind of "observant participant," right?

Heilman: Exactly [**Laughing**]. I was both – an observant participant and a participant observer.

Shalin: You were guided by a research plan.

Heilman: Yes, it wasn't so much a formal research plan. What I did was this: I was able to map my strategy and show them [committee members] my field notes so that they have some sense of where I was going, and then I would raise different issues and talk to them about different ideas. Gossip became a big issue.

Shalin: Institutional "loshon hora," so to speak.

Heilman: Right. That was my big insight at the time. I noticed after a while that I was collecting an awful lot of gossip. [I saw] that this was an important part of how the committees were all tied up together.

Shalin: Did you tell your subjects that you were researching them?

Heilman: I did, and this created an interesting set of dilemmas. I think I wrote a paper called "Just between You and Me." What happens when someone shares gossip with you and you end up publishing it.

Shalin: That would be interesting to check. Maybe you can send me a reference. I am now confronting a similar problem as the third parties' names are mentioned in my conversations and I have to figure out if those third parties, were they still alive, would appreciate that.

Heilman: Right.

Shalin: What are you supposed to do – ask the person, "Do you mind deleting this passage that reflects poorly on so and so?" And when you leave in positive comments and delete the negative ones, you engage in a kind of censorship.

Heilman: The veracity of it is also in question. When someone tells you about someone else, this might be true so far as the speaker is concerned but it may not be true [in reality].

Shalin: And then there is usually more than one perspective that can be brought to bear on a particular event, episode, rumor or whatever.

Heilman: That's what I encountered in my dissertation. I talk about the opinion of people in one synagogue about another nearby synagogue. When I wrote this, the rabbi from the other synagogue wrote me a letter saying it is not true what they said. I said that I didn't claim that it was true, I only said that this is what they say about this other synagogue. He wasn't happy about that.

Shalin: He didn't buy the argument that as a researcher, you simply report what you were told, not what the truth is.

Heilman: . . . What was [at issue] was that, while the people in the synagogue I studied had hard time getting a daily minyan [prayer quorum] they didn't pay the poor people to come fill out the minyan as the other synagogue did. The other synagogue didn't actually do that. They didn't claim that the other place did that. They only claimed that this is what my people said about the other side.

Shalin: And this is an important piece of data, of course.

Heilman: Of course. That was a scandalous piece of information. In hindsight perhaps I should have said in a footnote that I didn't know if that was true or not.

Shalin: That might have helped. Were there any other repercussions for you? Jews are voracious readers, some would discover your book, read it, and confront you . . .

Heilman: No. I mean, it did help that I moved out of the community after I finished. The truth is that people were actually quite happy with my presence because in some cases they wanted to be part of the book. When you write a study of the community which otherwise is not distinguished in any way, they might be immortalized.

Shalin: Were the names changed in the book?

Heilman: Names were changed but people on the inside could figure out who was who.

Shalin: That can pose a problem.

Heilman: That presented a moral problem and some personal problem. Again, the subject of gossip came up. There were things in my dissertation that I did not put into my book for those very reasons.

Shalin: Someday I have to read your study to understand your thinking, as I am grappling with some of the same issues. Coming back to your dissertation, once you finished your field work – how long did it last?

Heilman: Well, I got my degree in 1973. The field work was for about a year and a half.

Shalin: You managed to complete your course requirement, take your prelims in . . .

Heilman: Three years.

Shalin: That's light speed.

Heilman: Remember that I was given some credit for what I had done [before].

Shalin: So once you were finished, you gave the text of your dissertation to your committee. Who was on it besides Renee and Erving?

Heilman: Renee, Erving, and Otto Pollak, who had been the chair of the department when I was [there] . . . He was actually the one who gave me the money for my original fellowship. He was a Viennese Jew who told me, "You did a big mistake in your career. You should not be writing about Jews."

Shalin: It's "Pollock" as in . . .

Heilman: P-o-l-l-a-k.

Shalin: I see and Otto . . .

Heilman: O-t-t-o.

Shalin: Do you know if he is still around?

Heilman: I don't think he is alive.

Shalin: So you gave the manuscript to the committee members, they read it, and it sailed smoothly.

Heilman: It sailed smoothly. The only problem I had was that in those days everything had to be typed by a typist, she missed one page, and they didn't allow to add a fresh page.

Shalin: It couldn't be "11B" or something like that.

Heilman: They didn't allow that, so I had to go back to her and have her retype all the page numbers. It was a very long dissertation, something like 500 pages.

Shalin: I see. There was no official defense?

Heilman: No.

Shalin: They read it and signed it.

Heilman: They read and signed it, and that was it.

Shalin: And you got the papers proclaiming you a Ph.D. in 1974?

Heilman: In 1974. Because I graduated in August, the formal Ph.D. was awarded the following May. Ironically, by then I was already teaching at CUNY and didn't bother to come for the graduation. Of course I was doomed to go to other people's graduation ever since.

Shalin: Interesting. I defended my Russian Ph.D. in 1973, immigrated in 1975, then I enrolled at Columbia and repeated my graduate work there.

Heilman: You more than paid your dues.

Shalin: You might say so. Robert Merton was my dissertation advisor but he wanted me to write about the emergence and institutionalization of sociology in the Soviet Union. [The idea was to show] how empirical research turned up data that cast shadow on Marxist theoretical pronouncements, which was the topic of my presentation at Merton's seminar on sociology of science. I told him I would prefer to continue my work on pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, and Mead. Our relationship was never the same after that conversation. In fact I never wrote a formal thesis and probably would not have had a Ph.D. from Columbia were it not for Alan Silver whom I met during my sabbatical year at Harvard [In 1983 I accepted a position at the Southern Illinois University]. Alan asked me why I didn't defend my dissertation. I told him my story about Merton, how I gave him a 300 page manuscript, part one of the three part dissertation on romanticism, pragmatism, and interactionism, and how Merton was unimpressed. After hearing my story, Allan said, "Well, I see you publish regularly, send me everything you published, and we shall

arrange an *extra muros* defense [based on publications rather than formal thesis]. And that's what he did.

Heilman: Wow!

Shalin: Otherwise, I would have never gotten my Ph.D. from Columbia.

Heilman: [Laughing]

Shalin: Was Erving instrumental in starting your career as a teacher?

Heilman: Not at all. In fact, I never really had much contact with him after that. He didn't help me find a job.

Shalin: Did you ask him?

Heilman: Not really. He wasn't the kind of person you could ask those kind of things, or that's what I felt.

Shalin: Meaning, he was too busy, aloof?

Heilman: There were many variables. He didn't take an avuncular interest in me. I knew that just saying that he was on my committee and that he was the sponsor of my dissertation [would be helpful]. Actually, the official supervisor was Renee. I knew that just using his name would be enough. And since he was such a loose cannon, I thought it in some cases . . . I think he did write some recommendations, but far more important were people like Philip Rieff and Renee, in terms of writing [on my behalf] or making contacts for me. After I got the job, I never expected to stay here very long; I saw this as a place to go from, but over time I would . . . I'd say of all the people I talked most to was Philip Rieff.

Shalin: He took more of a personal interest in you.

Heilman: He took more of a personal interest. In fact, when my oldest son was an undergraduate at Penn, he studied with Rieff. I remember he said to him [my son] in his distinctive accent, faked British accent – I forgot what course my son was taking from him – Rieff said, "You'll learn more about sociology by having an after dinner conversation with your father than you would by taking that course." It was typical of Rieff. There was a thrill for me that Rieff was the only professor my son and I both shared in common.

Shalin: This is touching.

Heilman: By the time my youngest son went to Penn, I don't think Rieff was teaching there any longer.

Shalin: Did you keep up with Rieff?

Heilman: I did. I kept up with him.

Shalin: More so than with Goffman.

Heilman: I saw him [Rieff] shortly before he died. By that time he lost much of his vision. He offered me to go to his library and take whatever books I wanted. It was a very sad spectacle because by then his house fell into disrepair.

Shalin: He was divorced at that time?

Heilman: Yes, he was divorced from Susan Sontag, he married another woman who by then was suffering from the Alzheimer's. It was pretty bad. He didn't have close relationship with his son. Jonathan Imber can tell you a lot more about that.

Shalin: Rieff's son has just published a memoir about his mother.

Heilman: Yes, but he probably won't publish much about his father, although he took over as the literary executor for his father.

Shalin: You've already told me some interesting things about Philip Rieff – anything else to add to his portrait as a man, as a scholar?

Heilman: Phillip Rieff?

Shalin: Yes.

Heilman: Tell me, are you writing about all kinds of academics?

Shalin: All these tangents turned out to be important as I discovered in my research of Erving's life and work. People I speak to bring up his colleagues who are prominent academics and intellectuals in their own right. I felt I should collect those stories as well. They are about Goffman and his age.

Heilman: Philip Rieff is really an interesting character, somewhat tragic, very bright. He had a very big impact on me intellectually for a long time that I had to, sort of, get over. He was a real elitist [who] never had a lot of people he felt comfortable talking to. In the department he was treated sort of

shabbily at the end. He didn't know how to get close to people, but once I would get to him, call him, you could never get him off the phone.

Shalin: He must have been lonely.

Heilman: Hours and hours. Then he moved more and more to the political right. As Renee would say, he would talk about the importance Jewish tradition while nibbling on Westphalian ham.

Shalin: So far as his scholarship, you say he was influential but you weaned yourself away.

Heilman: It was his teaching, the way he did "unpacking texts," as he called it. It was close interpretive reading of a text. For many years I tried to teach that way when I taught social theory at CUNY. It was very difficult, much more difficult with my students than it was with his students, because his students had a lot more ability to work with the text than my students. I remember him saying, "My former student is a professor of philosophy at Bryn Mawr." And I would say, "My former student is a house painter in Howard Beach." [**Laughing**]. We were on different planets, and here I was trying to teach the young man who was my house painter from Howard Beach how to read the text the way he was trying to teach the future professor of philosophy at Bryn Mawr. For some students it worked, but in the end I realized that I would have to . . . I didn't want to dumb it down but I had to change my approach to reach as many students as I could.

Shalin: But you stayed at your institution.

Heilman: I did because it was good to me. I got freedom to do what I couldn't elsewhere. Then life got more complicated, harder to move from one place to another. Being in New York turned out to be very good for my career. So I stayed.

Shalin: You also mentioned Lewis Coser. I met and kind of befriended him when I was in Boston in 1989-90 on a sabbatical leave at Harvard. Although he was quite old at the time, he came to my place. Did you take his classes?

Heilman: Yes, I did. I took sociological theory with him. He was the first person who taught me theory. I mean he was all right. I cannot say he was a major influence on me. He was very European, very influential, very much taken with himself. I actually found his wife much more interesting. There were many interesting people at Brandeis in those days.

Shalin: I didn't realize Marcuse was there.

Heilman: Marcuse was there. He was in the politics department. I took a class with him that was jointly taught by him and John Roach.

Shalin: I realize I already have taken much of your time, but with Louis – how was he as a teacher, his teaching style?

Heilman: Coser?

Shalin: Yes, Coser.

Heilman: He would lecture, smoke like a chimney. His German accent often conflicted with his English. Every so often he would revert to his German “r.” Sometimes it was a little bit difficult to understand what he was saying. He was a very imposing presence, as you know. But I would say of the people I was exposed to, I wouldn’t rank him in the top three. Others were much more [influential], I mean when I was an undergraduate. Brandeis really changed my life. It gave me a career, that’s where I found my wife – not in that order. It exposed me to the life of the mind the way I would have never gone into otherwise.

Shalin: It has a warm place in your heart.

Heilman: Yes, a very special place.

Shalin: And Marcuse, what kind of teacher was he?

Heilman: I really was not one of those people who got close to him. He was only there for a year, then he was forced out because of retirement or something, and ended up going back to California. His TA at the time was Angela Davis who became much more infamous in other ways afterwards.

Shalin: I remember hearing about her in the Soviet Union. And Kurt Wolf?

Heilman: I never took a course with Kurt Wolf. People that I studied at the time were Philip Slater who was famous in those days because of the concept of therapy groups, or T-groups. Then I studied with Irving Zola who did work on deviance. In those days you learned not only from people who taught courses in the department but people who had a presence in the department.

Shalin: So it was a place to be for an aspiring intellectual.

Heilman: Of course, with Everett Hughes . . .

Shalin: What was he like?

Heilman: I took a class with him. . . . For me he was a quintessential goy. He stood out at Brandeis, the department that was very heavily Jewish. The person I did my senior thesis with was Morris Schwartz who went on to become famous by his dying. At the time I was interested in him because of his work on mental hospitals. Everett Hughes was very Protestant, [had] interesting ideas. He would often reminisce about the past, the people [he knew]. One felt that he was part of the great intellectual chain of being in sociology.

Shalin: He was influential in Erving's life, which Erving acknowledged.

Heilman: Right, right. I think that is also what made it possible for me to have access to Erving, because Erving was not open to everybody at Penn by any means. The fact that I was exposed to those people played a role.

Shalin: In his willingness to work with you.

Heilman: Yes.

Shalin: Did you overlap with Eviatar at Penn?

Heilman: Probably I did, but I didn't meet Eviatar until afterwards, through his wife, I think.

Shalin: Yael.

Heilman: I brought Eviatar to Queens. Unfortunately, when he was at Queens, I was on sabbatical and was unable to persuade him to stay. He had the same disappointments in the students that I had after being exposed to Philip Rieff. But he didn't have the same patience to stay with them and looked for something better. I don't know if he found that or not.

Shalin: Did you encounter Erving after you left Penn?

Heilman: Probably at meetings, at the ASA. I remember seeing him in New York. But he didn't hang around a lot. I didn't really have a lot of contacts with him afterwards.

Shalin: It was just a casual passing by.

Heilman: I never had a feeling that I had a special relationship with him. Emotionally he was very distant. Was he that way with his son or with his first wife? You always felt, or I always felt, with Goffman – he would never look me in the eyes.

Shalin: Really?

Heilman: He had those darting eyes. I never felt that you could get really close to him. And he more or less said so when he told me, "I have to take those things from my son but I don't have to take these things from you," when he didn't agree to [my plan].

Shalin: His son became an oncologist.

Heilman: Have you talked to him?

Shalin: Not yet, although I spotted his works on the internet. I am thinking of sending him a word about this project, but I have some trepidations. Some things might be hard for him to read, especially about his mother who committed suicide.

Heilman: That was always talked about. Everybody talked about how he did work at St. Elizabeth's when his wife was there.

Shalin: What did you hear?

Heilman: I don't know if it's true but – what was her name – Angelica?

Shalin: Angelica Schuyler Choate.

Heilman: Yes. [The talk was that] while he was doing his research on *Asylums*, she was at St. Elizabeth's. Whenever one talked about that, one got the feeling, "Gee, that's rather odd. His wife is in there and you use this occasion [to do research]."

Shalin: His wife was actually there in the hospital while he was doing his research?

Heilman: That's what I heard.

Shalin: I spoke to Mel Kohn who shed some interesting light on the situation. [The offshoot of it was] that Erving was unhappy about the treatment his wife was getting from the therapists. . . . He left from Berkeley in 1958 but apparently Schuyler stayed behind with Tom.

Heilman: What brought him to Maryland in the first place?

Shalin: He went there around 1954-55 to do research on mental health.

Heilman: His dissertation was on crofters – did he not have an academic appointment?

Shalin: No, he didn't have an academic appointment. He wasn't sure he would have one until Blumer brought him to Berkeley in 1958. Until then, he worked at the National Institute of Mental Health. Anyhow, the fact that his wife was in therapy drew his attention to the field of mental health studies. Now, what is cause and effect here is hard to say, as those trade places all the time, but that is the hypothesis. In *Asylums* Goffman usually places "mental illness" in quotes, but . . .

Heilman: That was the common idea at the time.

Shalin: . . . but once his wife committed suicide, he drops the quotation marks and refers to a possible organic roots of mental illness. David Mechanic, with whom I corresponded, wrote that after his wife's suicide, Erving told somebody that had he written it again, his book would be different. My hunch is that all of his writing, starting with "Symbols of Class Status" that he had written at the time he met his high society wife, is autobiographical. His works constantly evolved. In *Presentation of Self* the body is but a hook on which society hangs some social manufacture, but in *Stigma* body is nearly destiny. Early on, according to Gary Marx, Erving doubted that women belonged to graduate school, but then he comes up with *Gender Advertisements* that highlights women's subordinate status, how society keeps them in their place. My sense is that these transformations had to do with the changes in his life.

There is one more thing I want to get your take on. The man who taught us about the life behind the curtain guarded his own backstage zealously. No pictures allowed to be taken, his archives were sealed, interviews with Goffman were virtually unheard of. What's your take on that?

Heilman: Maybe that, or he was very conscious of the fact that to be an observer of society he couldn't be part of it – he had to be outside. Protecting his backstage or his identity allowed him to remain marginal. You know he was writing a book on gambling when he died, on risk taking. He was a big risk taker. As a skier he was a big risk taker.

Shalin: He was into that?

Heilman: What I learned is that he was a skier and a terror on the slopes.

Shalin: Very interesting. I have not heard about that.

Heilman: He was willing to take chances.

Shalin: Nietzsche is talking about turning one's life into an artwork. Goffman's life project was that of a [radical] participant observer

who was breaching trust and violating conventions to find out about the interaction order. His demeanor indicates his desire to push the limits to see what will be tolerated and what will not. It's a life as a nonstop experiment.

Heilman: Yes. Absolutely. I also sensed that he had very rich private life.

Shalin: That is an enigma for me. I don't quite sense what Erving was like in private, in his intimate moments. There are occasional remarks in his works that are tantalizing but one can only guess what they mean. . . . We know Erving's theoretical corpus, we learn more about his behavior in public places, but his intimate life is a mystery. So when you tell me about his willingness to take risk on the slopes . . .

Heilman: Well, I don't know that it's true, only what we had heard.

Shalin: The connection between his work at St. Elizabeth's and his wife's treatment there is intriguing. That's what you heard, right?

Heilman: Oh, yes. That was pretty much an assumption that his wife did get treatment there.

Shalin: I should ask Renee what she knows about that. Schuyler had money to get treatment at a private institution, but if she actually was a patient at St. Elizabeth's while her husband was doing there his reach, that adds a new dimension to the story.

Heilman: That was the rumor.

Shalin: This will be final thing – and I am most grateful to you as certain things I learn are entirely new to me – how would you describe Erving's life project? It must not have been easy to carve out a persona for someone like Erving after he discovered conartistry at the heart of the human condition. Did the manner in which he presented himself in public have anything to do with his signature insight into the presentation of self? To the extent that you have any wisdom to share on the subject, what's your take on Erving's existential persona?

Heilman: It's hard for me to say at this point, so many years after I had contact with him. He was a very private person. For someone who studied behavior in public places and whose interest was in the taken-for-granted elements of everyday life, he was an extraordinarily private person. I think he really embodied marginality, the marginality of the social scientist, of the student of society who is both inside and outside at the same time. He was an insider and outsider at the same time. At least when I encountered him, he seemed to be both of those. Certainly the way he lived at Penn, the way he

interacted at Penn, [showed him being] both an insider and outsider. He was an insider by virtue of his appointment at the institution, the prestige that he had, but he also lived like an outsider there. He worked from his home, he was seldom seen around the campus, he didn't really present himself as a member of the University of Pennsylvania community. He was not a figure you would know, "Oh, yes, he is at Penn." He was really a combination of [someone] famous and unknown. I think throughout his life he sort of played these types, reveling in his unknowingness, in his unknowability, and at the same time he was very much aware that his work was widely known, that his name carried a lot of cache and weight in a variety of places. I think he was, to take a cliché, an enigma wrapped in a mystery.

Shalin: Sherri Cavan asked Erving why he wanted to run for ASA president when he had shown no interest in any kind of organizational work in the past. According to Sherri, he said, "Well, this is one way I can validate myself in the field."

Heilman: It's odd. He did both of those things. He paid the price for this because . . . the double character of his life did him in historically.

Shalin: This is an interesting observation. He was a stranger in a Simmelian or Schutzian sense, yet he secured a perch for himself, a place [at the center stage of society].

Heilman: From the beginning of the dissertation that he chose to write he put himself in a really very remote place where he was bound to be an outsider.

Shalin: Indeed, he went as far away as he could.

Heilman: He was really a hard figure to get close to. I don't think he was easy to his wives or his children. He had a daughter too, right?

Shalin: Yes, she is at Princeton, doing field work for her dissertation in sociology.

Heilman: Really? She goes by name "Goffman"?

Shalin: I think she goes by the name "Alice Goffman."

Heilman: She was quite young when he died.

Shalin: Maybe a year-and-half. Erving died in 1982.

Yes, the last thing, if I may – you wouldn't happen to have any mementos related to Erving – letters, comments on your papers? I have hard time even finding a sample of his handwriting.

Heilman: I don't have anything that I could put my hand on at this point.

Shalin: No signs of his embodied existence.

Heilman: Yes, this is typical. . . . No, nothing I could think of offhand. I will let you know if I [come up with something]. He is a phantom.

Shalin: In some way he is. Born in 1922, dead in 1982, he breathed through life leaving a few traces, but as you pointed out, there is no Goffman School of Sociology.

Heilman: While we were talking, I looked Alice Goffman on line, and she didn't have her picture either.

Shalin: She doesn't.

Heilman: So there you go. It's in the genes.

Shalin: I wonder if Tom is the same.

Heilman: Hard to find his picture too, I suppose.

Shalin: I don't know if you know Paul Rosen.

Heilman: I do.

Shalin: He knew Erving, had a picture of him. He said he would try to find it.

Heilman: Paul isn't young either.

Shalin: No, he isn't. He might have retired. He is in a psychology department, and he does interesting stuff.

Heilman: Yes, yes.

Shalin: I am mulling over the possibility of sending to Tom my paper on Erving.

Heilman: Might be better to send it to his daughter. But she didn't really know [her father].

Shalin: I have heard that she avoids conversations about her father, so I wouldn't want to intrude.

Sam, thank you so much for being there, for remembering things.

Heilman: Pleasure.

Shalin: I know stirring up all those memories could be difficult. I will transcribe the recording and send it to you. If other things come to your mind as you edit the transcript, please feel free to include that.

Heilman: All right.

Shalin: Thank you so much.

Heilman: OK.

Shalin: Bye bye.

Heilman: Bye.

[End of the recording]