

12-5-2010

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Avron Katz

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### Repository Citation

Katz, A. (2010). After High Holidays Erving Made up Excuses Rather than Admit that He Missed School Because He Was Jewish. In Dmitri N. Shalin; Syva-Lee Wildenmann, *Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives* 1-6.

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## Remembering Erving Goffman

### After High Holidays Erving Made up Excuses Rather than Admit that He Missed School Because He Was Jewish

#### Avron Katz

This interview with Avron Katz was conducted in 2001 by his daughter Syva-Lee Wildenmann and presented as a student paper for the class on "Social Psychology from a Sociological Perspective" taught by Dr. Daniel Albas, professor of sociology at the University of Manitoba. To access the family tree of Syva-Lee Wildenmann and Avron Katz click [here](#).

[Posted 12-05-10]

#### November 28, 2010

Hi Dmitri,

It was a pleasure speaking with you earlier today. I have looked at a few of the documents in the links you sent and found them to be very interesting, I will look at more of them when I have a bit more time.

I have attached the two papers I wrote on my father's recollections of Erving Goffman, feel free to use them in any way you decide. I only wish my father would have had the opportunity to speak with you, as I know he would have really enjoyed reminiscing.

I would be happy to speak with you again if you would like, after you have read the papers.

Syva-Lee

My father, Avron Katz, grew up in Dauphin Manitoba at the same time as Erving Goffman. He lived only one block away from the Goffman family home and was two years younger than Erving Goffman. The two families knew each very well and Avron has many memories of Erving as a child. Here are some of the memories of Erving Goffman that my father shared with me.

"I remember Erving's parents very well. Max Goffman was a very rotund man. Anne Goffman was extremely short, probably only five feet tall, but she was a very beautiful woman. They both spoke with very thick eastern European accents. Max Goffman owned a ladies ready to wear store in Dauphin for a short while. Then he gave up the store to take a seat on the Winnipeg Stock Exchange. I remember that he traveled a great deal to Winnipeg, and was often not around. He was very successful in his career and made a great deal of money. I remember that the Goffman family was definitely one of the rich families in Dauphin at that time. Mrs. Goffman was very involved in amateur theatre. I have a particular memory of her performing in a local production of The Mikado. I remember seeing her leave

the theatre in full costume and make-up to go home to run an errand and then return again to the theatre. I was struck at the time by how attractive she looked all made up for her performing role.”

“The Goffman’s home was about a block away from our house. Because of their wealthy status, they had a large well appointed home. Their house had a barn in the back yard, which was pretty common for that time. My older sister was a very close friend to Erving’s sister Frances and I was friendly with Erving. As a child I spent a great deal of time in the Goffman home.”

“Even though Erving was older than I was, he didn’t mind spending time with me. I don’t remember him coming over to our house very much, but I do remember spending time with him at his house. We would especially spend a lot of time up in his bedroom. One pastime that we shared was one that we had to hide from our parents. Erving would get copies of Esquire magazine. At the time Esquire was the closest thing to a “girlie” magazine that we could get our hands on. I was about 9 or 10 and he was about 11 or 12. He would have me go through the magazines and mark the pages that had the sexiest pictures. Then we would sit together looking at the pictures and discussing them. The other thing that I remember about Erving’s room was that he used his room as a laboratory. He was always doing some sort of experiments in his room. I remember one time that he actually caused an explosion in his room. I think that he very often ‘drove his parents crazy’ with some of his antics.”

“I remember that we all called Erving ‘Goofy Goffman’, but I don’t think anyone called him that to his face. It wasn’t meant to be a cruel name, but rather an endearing one. Erving was small in stature. He was short, and lean and quite nice looking. I don’t remember Erving having a lot of friends; he wasn’t a very sociable person. He was an extremely bright young man and I don’t think he had a lot of tolerance for people that weren’t in his league. Many people found him aloof and distant. Even though he did spend time with me, I had the feeling that he was bringing himself down to my level in order to interact with me.”

“There were only a few Jewish families in Dauphin at the time. I had the distinct feeling that Erving was not particularly proud of his Jewish heritage. I remember one year during the Jewish High Holidays Erving and I both did not attend school as is customary for Jewish children. When school was over and the other children returned home, they saw us and asked us why we weren’t in school. Erving made up different excuses, but would not admit that he missed school because he was Jewish.”

"Another aspect of Jewish life in small town Manitoba was the difficulty in obtaining kosher meat. In order for meat or chicken to be deemed kosher, the animal had to be killed in a humane way by a professional slaughterer, called a 'shochet'. Because there weren't many Jewish families in Dauphin, the demand for kosher meat declined and the shochet left town. I remember one day when this turned into a particular problem for my mother, because she had a live chicken she wished to have killed and no one to do it for her. Erving Goffman was quick to come to her assistance. I remember him catching the live chicken, grabbing an ax and beheading the chicken. I think that my mother was a little bit shocked, because this wasn't exactly what she had in mind. After that incident, my mother began to order her meat from kosher butchers in Winnipeg."

"Erving was certainly a many faceted person because I also remember seeing a completely different side of his personality. I remember an instance where a cat had climbed up a tree and was afraid to climb down again. No one was willing to endanger himself or herself to climb the tree and save the cat. No one, that is except for Erving Goffman. He showed absolutely no fear in climbing up the tree and bringing the cat down to safety."

"The Goffmans eventually moved to Winnipeg, and our family moved there also a few years later. The last memory I have of Erving Goffman was in Winnipeg in 1949. I had recently become engaged to my wife and we ran into Erving at a lunch counter in a downtown drug store. When I introduced Erving to my fiancée, I remember that he gave her a look of approval and then congratulated me. It struck me that he only congratulated me, not the two of us. I think his intent was to pay a compliment to my fiancée by congratulating me on making a 'good catch' "

"I never saw or spoke to Erving again after that time. However to this day I still am in contact with his sister Frances (Goffman) Bay. Frances lives in California and is an actress who has appeared in small roles in dozens of movies and television shows. She had a role in the recently released "The Wedding Planner" , and she also played the Grandmother in "Happy Gilmore". She also has had roles in television shows such as "LA Law", "Seinfeld" and many other popular shows.

### **Further Reflections on Erving Goffman**

My father and I read the biography of Erving Goffman written by Yves Winkin. My father concurs with much of the information that is written, but did have a few additional comments to make.

Chapter II of the biography begins with a description of the Goffman family as seen in a photograph taken in front of their store. My father does remember that the store was on 4th Avenue. He agrees with the physical descriptions of the family. Max Goffman was a rotund gentleman, and Ann was indeed a small thin woman. He remembers Erving as being very small and boyish looking, with a "Mickey Rooney" type of appearance.

The store owned by Eli Bay was on the same street as the Goffman store. The biography says that Eli Bay and his wife had two children, however my father remembers that there were in fact three children. The eldest child, Sam, died tragically in a car accident on the highway to Clear Lake, Manitoba.

The biography talks about the flamboyant style of advertising that Max Goffman used in his store. My father doesn't remember any of that but he does agree with Frances Goffman Bay's assessment that such advertising was contrary to her father's style. Max Goffman was a quiet, soft-spoken man.

The biography goes on to talk about how Max Goffman found his way to Canada. It mentions that when he was introduced to Ann that she had already mastered the English language. My father was surprised at this comment because he vividly remembers that Mrs. Goffman had a very thick accent, much more so than did her husband.

The biography then talks in quite great lengths about what it was like living as Jews in small town Manitoba in the 1930's. There were several churches, and one small synagogue. My father remembers that his grandfather, Isaac Katz, built the synagogue. He agrees that there were probably approximately 17 Jewish households in Dauphin. He, however, remembers that most of the Jewish families were in fact spatially situated near each other. With only one or two exceptions all the Jewish families lived within a three-block radius of each other.

My father agrees that there was no blatant public discrimination against Jews, only isolated instances. The next comment in the biography was of particular interest to us. Winkin states that only a lawyer like Alex Katz or a politician like Sam Solomon moved freely in all strata of Dauphin society. Alex Katz was in fact my father's father. We were surprised to find his name in this biography. At first my father disagreed with Charles Bay's comments that Jews kept to themselves and weren't really integrated into the larger society. I suggested to my father that perhaps he had a different experience as a Jewish youngster in Dauphin because of his father's status in the community. Like the biography implies, my grandfather moved freely in all strata of society, and so perhaps my father didn't realize that other young Jewish townspeople may have a different perspective. My father

acknowledged that that might very well be the case. He had never thought about it that way before. He said that he remembers (with pride) that my grandfather was highly respected in Dauphin, both the Jewish community and the larger multi-ethnic community.

My father chuckled at the mention of Sam Solomon as a politician as the biography states. He says that Sam was a tailor who made a run for city council and succeeded. He doesn't feel that he really had any status as a politician because people still thought of him as a tailor even when he sat on city council.

My father remembers that the Goffman family did live very much as secular Jews. The biography does seem to support my father's memories that Erving Goffman was not particularly proud of his Jewish heritage. He was surprised to read in the biography that Erving would drop a few words of Yiddish into his conversations because he has no memory of him doing that, and feels that it would have been very out of character for him to do that. Erving did have a Bar Mitzvah of sorts, but like my father, the Bar Mitzvah was really just a party, not any type of religious ceremony as Jews in Winnipeg would have.

The description of Erving, as a strong, bright and impossible child, brought a smile to my father's face. He definitely remembers him that way. The biography mentions an incident where Erving fed alcohol to a neighbor's cat and the cat spent the night up in the tree and refused to come down. In the original paper I submitted, my father makes reference to an incident where Erving rescued a cat that was up a tree. I found this very interesting and I wondered if, in fact, these two stories were merely two different interpretations of the same incident. My father believes that it is highly likely that Erving did in fact rescue a cat that was only in peril because of him.

The stories of Erving's chemistry experiments in the home appear both in the biography of his life, and in my father's recollections. The biography talks about Goffman's friend Hugh Fox. My father remembers Hugh and that he and Erving were indeed very good friends.

My father concurs with the biography that the "dirty 30's" were not as hard on Dauphinites as they were on the larger society. The biography makes no mention of Max Goffman's seat on the stock exchange, but my father is adamant that that is where Max Goffman made his money, not from his clothing stores. He remembers that he traveled a lot to Montreal to buy for the store, but he also traveled to Winnipeg to buy and sell stocks in the market there. My father was surprised to read that the Goffmans left as early as 1937. He seems to feel that they stayed in Dauphin longer than that, but

acknowledges that his memories are in fact childhood memories, so may not always be accurate.

While we were talking about Erving and those early years in Dauphin my father tried once again to reach Frances Goffman Bay by telephone. He was hoping that she might be willing to talk to me a little more about her brother. He was successful in reaching her husband, Chuck Bay, but Frances was unable to come to the phone. She was taking an afternoon nap to rest before a stage performance later in the day. My father told Chuck that I was working on a paper about Erving and that we had been discussing his biography. Chuck remembers being interviewed by Yves Winkin in 1991; he referred to him as "that Belgian guy". While I was disappointed not to be able to speak directly with Frances, Chuck did give my father their e-mail address. Perhaps I can elicit more information sometime in the future, which I would be happy to share with you.