

# **DON'T CALL ME CHRISTIAN**

**PAUL LIBERMAN & JACK WASSON**

**TISHBITE PRESS**

DON'T CALL ME CHRISTIAN  
by Paul Liberman and Jack Wasson

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## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to Susan; my best friend, partner, and the love of my life. Thank you, dear, for 50 great years.

Paul Liberman,  
February, 2015



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## Foreword—The Story Behind the Story

By Jack Wasson

When I first approached Paul Liberman with doing “his story,” he was reluctant to say the least. As I already knew, Paul is averse to anything that can be considered “self-promotion” or “self-glorification.” I convinced Paul to sit down with me in his home and allow me to interview him with an MP3 digital recorder. I pointed out that, at a minimum, it could be a historical record for his grandchildren. That was the argument which sealed the deal. So we began to conduct a series of very personal interviews.

Before we finished the first day, I realized this was an extraordinary story which would be meaningful to a broad spectrum of readers. Not unexpectedly, Paul was surprised. “*I don’t understand. What’s so unusual about my story?*” He protested. “*It’s a typical Jewish story!*”

I’m certain you will agree with me that although there are many aspects of Paul’s story which are “typically Jewish,” there are many other aspects which are totally unique—at times even unbelievable.

For two girls raised in the White House, riding to school every day in a black SUV escorted by the Secret Service, might seem like an ordinary experience. However, the little girl who resides outside Omaha and waits with her little sister at the bus stop for the big yellow school bus might disagree. The point is, for every individual, their own life seems typical and it is only when contrasted to others that the dissimilarities become obvious. “Typical” is in the eyes of the beholder.

Some of this story is so unusual, the cover of the “pre-publication” manuscript carried the words, “*The True Story of Paul Liberman*” (my idea).

## Foreword—The Story Behind The Story

Throughout this project, Paul and I have been very much in agreement, except for those words I proposed for the cover. My logic was that the world is full of fiction and fantasy. Alternative reality sells, even in the universe of religion and spiritual things. I thought it was important that we declare right on the cover that this is a true story. How many times have I gone to a movie with my wife and we've turned to one another at the same moment with the question, "*Is this a true story? Did this really happen?*"

However, Paul was averse, once again, because he believed the words might appear too much like self-promotion. I relented with regard to the cover; but, rest assured, every event and account in this book was scrutinized for accuracy. The account of Paul's grandfather is taken from personal conversations Bernard Liberman had with Paul during Paul's youth. It is as accurate as a recollection can be after sixty years.

I believe you will find this story as special as I did and will enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

## The Past Is Prologue

My grandfather, Bernard Liberman, was born about 1894 in Minsk—the capital of Belarus. Belarus is a landlocked country in Eastern Europe bordered by Russia to the northeast, Ukraine to the south, Poland to the west, and Lithuania and Latvia to the northwest.

Within the Pale (the eastern territories and countries of the Czarist Empire, the “Russias,” as they were known), Jewish education was a coveted commodity available only to a few, and especially limited amongst the poor, which included the Libermans. The lack of educational opportunities centered on the complicated circumstance of the Jews living under the Czar’s government.

For example, law mandated that only one out of 10 children in public schools could be Jewish. This was one of the Czar’s measures employed to keep the Jews from becoming “too powerful” and exploiting the Christian majority population.

Wealthier Jews circumvented the law by paying for nine Gentile children to attend school in order that there would be a single opening for their own child. But, the poorer Jewish families lacked that option. The only alternative was a rabbinic education.

Bernard Liberman was the oldest son, and as was customary for the oldest son, he was in training to become a rabbi. One benefit of this training included education in reading and writing so the students could study the Talmud and other historic and traditional rabbinic literature. My grandfather was the only one in his family who could read—also not unusual. His classes were all provided through the synagogue school—the *Cheder*. An added benefit of his rabbinic studies was the opportunity to sleep on a bench at the synagogue. With seven kids in the Liberman family, this was not a small subsidy.

## The Past is Prologue

As the Twentieth century began, there were constant attacks on the Jewish population that lived in the Pale. This was nothing new. There had been centuries of hostility toward the Jews of Europe as far back as biblical times.

The roots of this hostility—or anti-Semitism—are disputed. My own opinion is that answers are located in the history of Europe. Without dispute, anti-Jewish antagonisms accompanied the spread of Christianity throughout the continent.

For centuries, literacy was the currency of wealth and power, and the Catholic Church was the bastion of European learning. Those who rose to prominence were primarily educated in the Church, or in church schools. Ostensibly, the foundation of this education was the Bible. Early on in the history of the Catholic Church, the Jews became identified with those who resisted God. With large populations of illiterate citizens looking for answers for every plague, drought, or famine, Church leaders pointed with authority to the Bible.

The “rejecters,” or “Christ-killers,” were presumed to be at the source of every problem. Of course, not only was the largest majority of the Christian population illiterate—unable to read or write—in German, French, or later Russian, but the “authority” of the Church was contained in a separate, dead language—Latin. It wasn’t enough that the population couldn’t read their own language; the Scriptures were in “*code*,” a code only those trained in the Church could read, speak, and write—or interpret.

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The two religions had thus emerged as foes—rival claimants to the same inheritance and the same legacy.

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Parallel to the development and expansion of the Christian Church through Catholicism, the European Jewish communities developed and maintained their own separate educational systems

## **The Past is Prologue**

that also orbited around the Bible (as well as the rabbinic traditions). Unwelcome within the Christian communities and centers of education, Jews learned early on to disengage from their surrounding neighbors, even evolving a separate language—Yiddish. Therefore, reading and writing revolved around Latin and the Church amongst the Christian population, and Hebrew and Yiddish in the Jewish communities.

Christians worshiped the Jewish God and based their faith on Jewish scriptures, but they largely rejected Jewish law, Judaic ritual, and Jewish nationhood. They claimed that Jesus Christ, the "son" of the Jewish God, had instituted a new covenant and a simplified set of standards that superseded the complex Judaic laws and customs. They asserted that Christianity had thus replaced Judaism as the true faith, and sometimes implied, and often stated outright, that Christians rather than Jews were now the "chosen people" and the new "Israel." The continued existence of the Jewish faith, however, and the refusal of most Jews to accept Christianity, cast some doubt on the validity of these claims, and implicitly challenged Christian credibility (and Church authority).<sup>1</sup>

The two religions had thus emerged as foes—rival claimants to the same inheritance and the same legacy. Early Christian writings tended to portray the Jews as a perfidious people who had rejected God's love, turned their back on God's salvation, and murdered God's son. The destruction of the Jewish state, the dispersion of the Jewish people, and the sufferings and persecutions inflicted upon the Jews were frequently cited as evidence of God's displeasure. In this tradition, the Jews became not just the rivals of Christianity, but the enemies of God himself.<sup>2</sup>

Centuries before my grandfather was born, in an effort to avoid persecution and improve their economic opportunities, thousands of Jews from Central Europe moved to the territories under Polish and Lithuanian control. Here, they had found something of a sanctuary. Although the Jews in Poland and

## **The Past is Prologue**

Lithuania were periodically subjected to indignities and persecutions, they were also protected at various times and in different ways by certain of the monarchs and the nobility. Jews performed valuable services for the crown, the landlords, and the economy—and all the while the Jewish community grew and flourished. By the sixteenth century, the Polish-Lithuanian lands had become the main homeland of European Jewry.<sup>3</sup>

The services Jews performed for the crown and nobility, however, were hardly designed to make them popular with the Christian masses. In rural areas, many Jews made their living as leaseholders—renting from their Polish landlords the rights to run farmlands, mills, dairies, orchards, taverns, and various other enterprises; and as tax collectors, financial agents, liquor dealers, and estate managers. In other words they were used as middlemen by lords and rulers to extract money from and supervise the affairs of the Christian peasants, and they thus attracted much of the contempt and resentment attached to such activities. In the towns where the Jews worked as merchants and craftsmen, they were often disliked and feared by their Christian counterparts who tended to view them as unwelcome outsiders and dangerous, industrious competitors. Such fears and resentments, as often as not, were reinforced by the anti-Judaic sentiments of the Christian church and its clergy. The Jews were widely seen as aliens, parasites, and exploiters—the purveyors of drunkenness, poverty, and immorality among the Christian people.<sup>4</sup>

Czarist Russia was historically isolated from the rest of Europe. It developed its own “approach,” which invariably included a peculiarly Russian xenophobia—fear of foreigners. For centuries, the Russians harbored and instilled in the native populations the fear and threat of outsiders. Always aligned with and supported by the Russian Orthodox Church, successive Czarist governments perpetuated anti-Jewish sentiments, making Jews the ultimate “outsiders” and “foreigners.” Initially, this was mostly a “theoretical” distrust of the Jews. Few Jews actually lived in

## The Past is Prologue

Russia proper. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Czarist governments supplanted the ruling Polish monarchs and much of the Turkish territories. With these subjugations, Russia “inherited” many thousands of Jews.

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With this development, the anti-Jewish sentiment was no longer theoretical for the Russians. Many “temporary” measures

Jews were strictly forbidden to travel “beyond the Pale”—the Eastern provinces—into the heartland of Russia.

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and decrees were instituted in these newly acquired territories of Eastern Europe. All of the measures were designed to keep Russia safe from the corrupting impact of the foreign, Jewish influence. This was a policy of containment.

For example, Jews were strictly forbidden to travel “beyond the Pale”—the Eastern provinces—into the heartland of Russia. Violation could result in capital punishment. The creation of the Pale, which came to be the foremost symbol of anti-Jewish discrimination, was in many respects an attempt to preserve the conditions that existed prior to the Russian expansion.

Educational measures were instituted limiting and even forbidding the education of Jewish children, further insulating and isolating the Jewish population. Many of the measures not only forbade Jews from entering “Mother Russia” but required entire communities of previously urban Jews to find “productive” work as rural farmers. Conversely, at times land was withheld and forbidden to Jewish landowners in an effort to protect the Christian populations from “exploitation.” The sum total of these ongoing measures had the effect of reducing the majority of Eastern European Jews to abject poverty, making them unable to freely move about, to engage in a trade, or to educate their children.

## The Past is Prologue

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<sup>1</sup>James Parkes, *Antisemitism* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1963), pp. 60-62; Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, *Why the Jews? The Reason for Antisemitism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), pp. 90-93; Edward H. Judge, *Easter in Kishinev—Anatomy of a Pogrom* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1992), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Edward H. Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-three Centuries of Antisemitism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), pp. 28-46; Paul E. Grosser and Edwin G. Halperin, *Anti-Semitism: Causes and Effects* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), pp. 49-54; Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), pp. 39-52; Judge, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>Bernard D. Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland: A Social and Economic History of the Jewish Community in Poland from 1100 to 1800* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972), pp. 24-30, 32-39, 41-48; John D. Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews: The Origins of the “Jewish Question” in Russia, 1772-1825* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986) pp. 4-8; Judge, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup>Israel Friedlander, *The Jews of Russia and Poland* (New York and London: G. P Putnam’s Sons, 1915), pp. 42-54; Klier, pp. 8-11; Weinryb, pp. 41-48; 56-70; Judge, p. 6.

## 1—Welcome to America

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the overt hostility of the Christian majority in Russia led many Jewish men, such as my grandfather's father, to emigrate. They were looking for better financial opportunities for themselves and their families. As was the case of my grandfather's father, these men frequently left their wives and children behind with a promise to "*send for them*" once gainful employment had been obtained. The reality was, many of these men *never* sent for their families. Instead they abandoned their wives and children, starting new families in America or wherever they ended up.

Sometime before the turn of the new century, Naftal Herschel Liberman, my grandfather's father, left from Minsk, Belarus, bound for the United States to obtain work. Because they could only afford a single passage, he traveled alone.

Naftal ended up in New York City while his wife, Hessie Freed Leiberman, my great-grandmother, was left with the seven children. A couple of years passed and the oldest child, Bernard, my grandfather who was 12 at the time, began to greatly miss his father. So, Bernard concocted a plan. He would write his mother a letter, forge his father's signature, and put it in the mailbox. Since Bernard was the only one who could read or write, no one could question his "official" letter, which said, "*I am in New York and I want you to come.*"

Of course, they took Bernard's word for it. After all, he had read the letter to them! The plan worked. "*Finally we can come!*" So, the entire clan packed up and embarked for New York City.

As my grandfather was the oldest son and his father was gone, plus the fact that he was the only one who could read or write, at 12 years old Bernard was the uncontested head of the Liberman expedition that made its way from Minsk to New York City.

## 1—Welcome to America

Somehow, they made the voyage by ship and landed in Boston, where many other new European immigrants first entered America. My grandfather was the spokesman for the newly arrived tribe from Russia. When the government official asked for the names of each of the passengers and heard “Liberman” the official started to write “L-i-e-berman,” but my grandfather corrected him!

*“In Russian you spell it L-i-b-e-r-m-a-n.”* In Russian, phonetically, an “I” is an “E.” That is the reason we have always spelled our last name Liberman—because of that first experience of my Grandfather Bernard with the government civil servant.

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“Oh, you’re Jewish. The Jewish neighborhoods are over there!”

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Hessie had the address where Naftal lived in some ethnic New York City neighborhood. Somehow, Hessie, Bernard and the clan obtained directions and made their way to the address in New York City, arriving with all their earthly belongings—everything the eight of them could carry! One day they just showed up at the door. *“Hello, we’re here!”*

I’m sure this was quite a shock! I can imagine Naftal’s face. *“You asked for us to come and here we are!”* To say he was flabbergasted would be an understatement. But, it was done. There was no turning back now.

That’s how the Libermans immigrated to the United States. If it hadn’t been for 12-year-old Bernard Liberman, my grandfather, our history would certainly have taken an entirely different direction.

Now Naftal had to get busy supporting an additional eight people—a wife and seven children. Remember, my grandfather, Bernard, was the only one who could read or write. Certainly, none of them could speak a word of English!

Time passed, and, of course, the Libermans were living in an immigrant Jewish neighborhood. Like so many others before them,

## 1—Welcome to America

the goal of the trip was to get to America. Once they arrived, the first place they saw was New York City. “*Oh, you’re Jewish. The Jewish neighborhoods are over there!*” Naturally, they would gravitate to those who also spoke Yiddish, which was their language. Everyone had to do their part to try and help pay the bills.

Time passed, and Bernard was a teenager. He worked hard to gain employment. His only education was his early rabbinic training back in Minsk. He could barely speak English. He could read and

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Naftal tore his lapel, the Jewish custom upon hearing of the death of a close family member.

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write in Hebrew and Yiddish, but that didn’t create a lot of opportunities. However, he made his way with odd jobs—anything to contribute. Eventually, when he was 17 or 18 years old, he obtained a job making and fixing jewelry. The thing was, in order to get all of his work done, sometimes the job required Bernard to work on Saturday—the Shabbat.

One Saturday, Bernard rushed home to join in the Shabbat activities after putting in time helping to support the family. In his rush to get home, he neglected to notice the *dust* on his shoes—from the refining of jewelry! He came home, and his father noted his shoes. It did not look like regular dust, but *another* kind of dust. Naftal knew what it was and that my grandfather *had been working—on Shabbat!* So Naftal confronted my grandfather, “*What is this about? It’s Shabbat!*”

Naftal didn’t even stop to consider what my grandfather was trying to do—to get and keep a career to help support the rather large Liberman family. My grandfather confessed he had been working on Saturday. “*I’ve got to have a job and that’s what they required of me.*”

## 1—Welcome to America

At that point, Naftal tore his lapel, the Jewish custom upon hearing of the death of a close family member. Then he shouted, *“You’re dead to me now. You’ve broken the Shabbat. Leave my home! I never want to see you again!”*

My grandfather loved his father and he would have done anything to please him. His father’s outburst must certainly have broken my grandfather’s heart, but he was told to leave so he left without protest.

Now, he was dead to his entire family: father, mother, sisters and brothers.

## 2—The Family Business

Bernard was on his own.

Employment was always difficult for the new immigrant Jews. First, there was the language problem. Few could speak English, and if they could, it was frequently with a heavy accent. There was no minimum wage or unemployment compensation. If you were the Jewish guy, you were always expendable. The Jews were the last ones hired and the first ones fired. There was also a lot of prejudice in those days. It was normal for the classified ads to specify, “*Good Christian man a must.*” This really meant, “*No Jews need apply!*”

Shortly after he had been declared dead by his father, Bernard was once again unemployed. Even when my grandfather had work, he was chronically *losing* his job. But, at least then with his family, he had a place to stay. Now he was on his own. This was the situation when he found himself sitting on a New York City park bench wondering, ‘*What am I going to do? Where am I going to go now?*’

It was a windy day. A sheet out of a newspaper flew by. It was the classifieds—the want ads. By this time, Bernard could read English, and he took note that it was a Chicago newspaper. He casually read the ads because he had nothing better to do.

That is when Bernard saw an advertisement for someone who could do jewelry work. He was trained to do this, so he thought, ‘*Why not? I have nothing and no one left in New York.*’ Bernard had only the clothes he was wearing. There was nothing to pack. Then and there, he struck out for Chicago with the ad folded up in his pocket.

Bernard journeyed all the way to Chicago to answer the ad. It never occurred to him that, by the time he got there, the job could have been filled! He took the chance, and they hired him! That’s how the Liberman family wound up in Chicago.

## 2—The Family Business

By day, Bernard was working on his new jewelry job in Chicago. One evening, at a party, a really cute American Jewish girl caught his eye, so he decided to invite her out to a party. Her name was Nettie.

The night came for their big first date. At the party, everyone was singing around a piano

when Nettie turned to Bernard. “*You can’t sing at all!*” Even so, he was definitely taken with her and, not long after they first met, they were married *in*

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It was normal for the classified ads to specify, “*Good Christian man a must.*” This really meant, “*No Jews need apply!*”

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*spite of* what she thought of his singing. But my grandfather was so devastated by Nettie’s criticism that, even after they got married, for the rest of his life, he would never sing another song.

Bernard continued to struggle to stay employed. After his experience with his father, he wouldn’t be involved in a synagogue, but he was always part of the Jewish community. All Jewish people spoke Yiddish, and that made you a member of the club. In those days, you *had* to speak Yiddish just to get by. The Jews came to America from countless European nations, yet everyone spoke the same language—*Yiddish*. It was a strong unifying factor. Sometimes, you could even get employment through contacts within the Yiddish community.

My Grandfather was bouncing around, trying to stay employed, scrambling to make a living. Then, through one of his Yiddish contacts, maybe at a party or something, he heard that electricity was coming to Chicago in a big way. He also heard it was going to be a growing industry for the future. He understood that, if he were an electrician, there would be lots of opportunities. It was the equivalent of high tech today.

Right before World War I, electricity was really starting to catch on. After Edison invented the light bulb, there was a

## 2—The Family Business

scramble to capture the most lucrative markets. Most of the growth was in New York City and Chicago. This was because the transmission lines had to be very close to the turbines that made the electricity—as close as one mile. To make it commercially viable, the producers of electricity needed as many potential customers for their product as they could find within a short distance. The densest population clusters were in New York City and Chicago. By 1870, Chicago was the second largest city in the United States.

During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a lot of mystery surrounding the entire electrical industry. This was further compounded because there was a competition between two types of electricity: DC (Direct Current) and AC (Alternating Current). Edison, the inventor of the light bulb plus numerous electrical appliances, bet heavily on DC. His major competition was George Westinghouse who promoted AC. The feud frequently spilled over into the public. Newspapers wrote stories about this “novel” new invention. Each side was quick to condemn the other system and played frequently on the public’s safety concerns. The invention of the electric chair and its use in lieu of hanging proved to everyone that “electricity can kill.”

Very shortly after first hearing about electricity, my grandfather quickly found work in the electrical field. Nobody knew anything about electricity, so he wasn’t behind. One time, he was carrying in a coil of armored cable—BX. He laid the coil of wire on the floor where he was working, and the woman customer told her children, *“You have to go into the other room while he’s working. I don’t want you to get hurt with this. Just don’t go anywhere near that coil of wire.”* That’s how much people knew about electricity.

## 2—The Family Business

It was 1915. Bernard was in his early 20s when he began working for an electrician, learning everything he could about the business. My grandfather and his boss were buying supplies, buying supplies, buying supplies—until they ran out of money. Now what were they supposed to do? They had no more cash. The solution: They took the supplies and sold them. They sold the inventory. That was easy because there was a lot of demand for electrical supplies.

They couldn't get electrical work, but they could sell off their inventory. My grandfather and his employer concluded that was the business they would go into—selling electrical materials and supplies. Bernard became partners with the man who had hired him.

The new partners began the business in 1915. Bernard continued in the electrical supply business. After that, he never again had to look for another job. There were always enough buyers for electrical materials to stay in business. After a few years, my grandfather bought out his partner for \$100.00 and then *he* owned the business. By that time, he was married to Nettie, and they had two sons. Marvin, my father, was born in 1918, and Harold, his brother, arrived in 1925.

The electrical field was growing, and now Bernard had work. However, he soon discovered a lot of people wouldn't buy from a Jew, and a lot of people wouldn't sell to a Jew. His English was poor, and he could hardly write. If you're Jewish, not speaking English very well, and you can hardly write English, you've got a problem.

My grandfather struggled with the business, and then came the Depression. He struggled, but he was only making \$8.00 a week. That didn't leave any money for heat. My grandmother used to wake up in the apartment with the water by her bed frozen. That's how cold it was in Chicago.

## 2—The Family Business

The Depression was under way and the creditors were closing in. My grandfather was barely scraping by. In Illinois, it took three people to force an involuntary bankruptcy. Two of his creditors signed for the filing, and the third one was about to sign to file. Bernard knew that the next day the third guy was going to sign the papers and he would be officially bankrupt and out of business.

My grandfather was broke and he owed everybody money. He couldn't sleep because the next day was the end. About 3:00 a.m. in the morning, he came up with an idea. He immediately called the third guy who was supposed to sign the next day. *"I'll pay you everything I owe you if you meet me at my place now, within the hour."*

My grandfather told him to come by at 6:00 a.m. The creditor was willing to do *anything* to get paid, so he came over. My grandfather got there early. He took a great big sheet of brown wrapping paper and all of his inventory "dogs"—all the inventory items he couldn't sell—and wrapped them up. Then he went to the catalog and found all the catalog numbers for these items. Whatever the book value was, he listed it and showed it with the catalog number and the price from the catalog, so that it could be proven. He listed all of this on a sheet of paper. Then, he packed the items in boxes.

The fellow was so grateful! My grandfather gave him a copy of his bill and told him to mark it, *"Paid in full."* The guy gladly complied with his signature and the date. Then the man took the boxes full of the inventory dogs and left. Needless to say, the other two creditors who had already signed the bankruptcy paperwork were furious. Their attitude was, *"You dummy!"* But it was too late. That's how the family electrical supply business survived and escaped bankruptcy during the Great Depression.

In 1934, my father, Marvin, was 16 years old. He was a regular American teenager who attended public school in Chicago. Naturally, he could read, write and speak English like a native. My

## 2—The Family Business

grandfather, Bernard, became very reliant on my father, especially in the business. In fact, the entire family was very dependent on my father. That made my father the knowledgeable person.

My grandfather did all the physical work of the business, and my father did all the paperwork. My father was always a man of common sense. It was a small family business with an uncertain future. Now it was going to continue because of my father.

My father and Sylvia Schreiber, my mother, first met when they were 14 years old. They were sweethearts all through high school. At my grandfather's urging, they finally married on my father's 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday. It was 1940 and, to my Grandfather, it was obvious there was going to be a war. He couldn't afford to lose my father to the draft and keep the business running.

*“Listen Marvin, you're probably going to marry Sylvia eventually anyhow. There's a war coming. We need for the two of you to get married. Perhaps the married men won't be drafted.”*

That's how it happened that, in 1940, Marvin and Sylvia Liberman, my father and mother, were married. Even though Sylvia was his childhood sweetheart, my Dad probably would have just gone along and gone along. Who knows if he would ever have married her if his father hadn't pushed the issue?

After that, the war in Europe began. It was a small business and my grandfather was still concerned about losing my father to the war. That is when my grandfather said, *“Marvin, having children would also help to keep you out of the war. You should have children.”* Sure enough, in 1941, my mother became pregnant with her first child, which was me—Paul Liberman.

I was born January 31, 1942, just eight weeks after Pearl Harbor. Then, my grandfather told my father, *“We have to get you another child, because one child may not keep you out of the war. You better have another one.”* So, 18 months later, Dean, my younger brother was born and my father was out of the draft. In 1949 and 1951, my two brothers, Marc and Mitchell, were born.

## 2—The Family Business

My father was working in the Liberman electrical company, which was kind of a bumble-along business. However, it was enough to support the family. My father was very good with paperwork. He was a very good administrator. Then he learned about government priorities and how to do the paperwork, which was the key during the war years to getting the materials which the business sold. He sent someone to Sears and Montgomery Ward to sell electrical items. He told them, “*We’ll package electrical supply kits for you.*” Sears was based in Chicago. My family would sell the kits at or near cost or slightly above cost.

That wasn’t how they really made money. My father had a right hand man, Lester Burger, who would take some of the merchandise and sell it on the black market. My father and Lester didn’t really care what kind of margins they made from buying and selling at Sears and Montgomery Ward. The *real* money was in scraping off some of the inventory—not delivering all of it—and then selling it on the black market. During the war, electrical parts, materials and supplies were almost impossible to get. My father’s right-hand man was a salesman who believed when the war was over, “*A lot of people are going to owe us a bunch, because we got them through the war with electrical supplies.*” It worked.



### 3—*Aluf*—The Israeli General

During WWII, income tax rates ran as high as 90%. My father and grandfather, Bernard Liberman, developed a business and a customer base that helped them survive the war years. After the war ended, it really paid off. My grandfather was always a very hardworking man. He worked like a dog all the time, doing intense physical work.

In 1947, Bernard's entire body was falling apart. He had so many different maladies and diseases, he could hardly walk; a stomach condition and a heart condition. His entire body was breaking down and he was only 55 years old. It was because he was doing all of the manual labor for the family electrical supply business. That's when my father said, "*Dad, I'll buy you out of the business. I'll pay you over 20 years from the profits of the business. If you don't make it, I'll own the business outright.*" Later, this deal was also amended to include my father's younger brother, Harold. After that, the two Liberman brothers owned the business together.

Bernard was certain his health was sinking fast. In 1947, he moved to Miami *to die*, or so he thought. All his life, he was used to working very hard. Now he had nothing to do and he was in Miami, waiting to die.

After the war, many wealthy Jews moved to Florida and retired to Miami Beach. They came from New York, Chicago and all over the East Coast. If you were Jewish and had money, you moved to Miami, Florida. At that time, they didn't know anything about Fort Lauderdale or Jacksonville.

In 1948, Bernard became absolutely captivated with a vision for the establishment of the State of Israel. Here was a man who was born and raised in czarist Russia. He was aware, firsthand, of the hostilities the Russian Jews experienced. Then all the reports came out about what the Nazis had done. Israel would be a place

### 3—*Aluf*—The Israeli General

for the Jews to go—a place of our own. It really captured my grandfather's imagination.

Bernard felt that, with the remaining time he had left, he had to do everything he could—to devote his entire life and effort—to raising money for Israel. So, he volunteered for the *Combined Jewish Appeal*, the *Jewish Federation*, and all the Jewish charities, and they put him to work. He was a volunteer and he didn't cost them anything. He was receiving what amounted to a stipend from my father for the purchase price of the family electrical supply business.

Bernard was working full time, and then some, for the charities, helping to sell Israel bonds, and raising contributions. He made appointments with the wealthy Jewish people of Miami Beach and the other Jewish communities. He was only a volunteer, but his passion showed through, which meant he was able to raise a lot of money.

He worked more than full time, raising money for Israel during the period 1947–1980. Eventually, he had a whole wall in his living room filled with plaques and awards that he had been given over the years for raising money on behalf of Israel and the Jewish community. This was really important work.

After the nation of Israel was founded, my grandfather was invited to visit with David Ben-Gurion in Israel, at the State of Israel's expense. While in Israel, he would have dinner with Ben-Gurion. He was a celebrity of sorts, because he was the most successful fundraiser in all of Miami, Florida. Perhaps there were bigger fundraisers in New York, but my grandfather was definitely “somebody” in the eyes of David Ben-Gurion.

Ben-Gurion entertained Bernard in appreciation of the countless millions of dollars that he raised. No one really knew how much money he raised. It was clearly well beyond many tens of millions of dollars over all those years. Out of appreciation, the Knesset did a one-time, very special honor for my grandfather. The

### 3—*Aluf*—The Israeli General

Knesset passed a bill designating him an honorary *aluf*. *Aluf* is Hebrew for “*general*.” My grandfather was made an honorary general in the IDF—the *Israeli Defense Forces*—for raising all of that money.

Golda Meir would invite political dignitaries for tea, but she invited my grandfather for dinner. He was really special in Israel. His immigrant experience fed his romance and dedication to the State of Israel.

All that time, Bernard thought he was dying, but he was just getting better. He was just keeping himself busy, but he was getting healthier all the time. Certainly, the early retirement was providential. It probably saved his life. My father and Uncle Harold had to pay him off.

My grandfather made it the entire 20 years and then some. It wasn't that much money, but it was enough for him and my grandmother to live on. They lived very simply.

Golda Meir would invite political dignitaries for tea, but she invited my grandfather for dinner.

For most of his life, my grandfather was separated from his family. Eventually, when he reached his 70s, he somehow reconnected with some of his brothers and sisters. However, they were scattered all over the country.

Once my grandfather stopped all the physical work, he began to recover his health. He worked on behalf of Israel until the end of his life. He lived to be 88 years old, and passed on in 1980.



## 4—“Jesus, Help Me!”

My father had his business in Chicago, and he was working very hard. He was always a common sense, upright man. He wasn't really an entrepreneur, but he was a very good administrator. Once my Grandfather was retired and in Miami, my father was in business with his brother, my Uncle Harold. Uncle Harold never cared that much for the electrical supply business, but it was a living. He did so out of respect for his father. Also, I don't believe he thought he could make as good a living doing anything else. That left it largely to my father to operate the business.

After the war there was a huge demand for electrical appliances, so they expanded the business to include electrical appliances. During the summer, before air conditioning, electric fans were also a big sales item. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the business had ten good years. Then, sometime during 1955-56, the business began to lose money.

During the ten good years, my father had to share the profits with Uncle Harold. For the times, it was a comfortable living; but my family was certainly not wealthy. The Jewish neighborhood where we lived consisted mostly of small businessmen earning better than average incomes.

After ten lucrative years, my father continued to plug away. When the company began to lose money, the business had savings to fall back on. My father was sheltering the family from this; and as a boy, I was oblivious to such matters. He continued drawing a nice salary, using what they had saved during the good years. As far as I knew, my father's business was doing fine. He totally insulated the family from the details of the business difficulties.

Every summer, from my earliest years, starting at about the age of 12, I worked in the business. Everyone understood—we had a family business and it was expected. I worked in the shipping

#### 4—“Jesus, Help me!”

room lifting and working as a stock boy. At 16, I could drive and would make deliveries.

From then on, after school, I worked a 30-hour workweek. After school, I would take two buses to work. I arranged my schedule to get out at noon. Right away, I'd get on the bus. By 12:30 pm, I was at the business. We always worked at the store until 6:30 p.m. We also worked Saturday mornings, but I actually enjoyed it. Every day I worked making deliveries. I was learning the family business.

When I was a teenager, I was making a dollar an hour. I was the only kid who had bucks in his pocket, which made me feel great. I also saved some money. Then I turned 18, graduated from high school, and it was time to go to college.

The expected decision would have been to attend the University of Illinois, which was a little less expensive. It was \$110 a semester for tuition versus \$160 a semester at the University of Wisconsin. However, the University of Illinois was a Greek school—it had a lot of fraternities.

At my high school, we did pledging and paddled pledges. The idea was to humiliate the pledges as much as possible. For four years, I was in a high school fraternity and became the president of my fraternity. By my senior year, once I was through with the presidency, I had come to the conclusion the entire fraternity system was distasteful.

*‘What were we doing?’* I recoiled from the entire idea of a fraternity. I had gone through it, and being the president was certainly great for dating. But, I made a decision. I didn't want to go to a Greek College campus. That's the reason I applied to the University of Wisconsin where fraternities were not such a big deal. There, it was possible to have a great social life *without* belonging to a fraternity.

Once I got to college, I worked at some menial jobs. All I had ever known was work. I felt very badly for my parents because of

#### 4—“Jesus, Help me!”

the cost of college. I waited tables in the girl’s private dormitories, which turned out to be good for dating. I even washed dishes at the sorority houses; whatever it took to make some money. Then, I got a job going door-to-door selling jewelry at the girl’s dormitories. I found different ways to earn money. Not only did I want to save my parents the expense of my college, but I also wanted some bucks in my pocket.

I had no idea that, back at home, things were drying up with the business. They weren’t losing big money, but they were dipping into the savings to keep things going. Even though I didn’t know, I felt the need to find work and take care of myself. That was when I started selling jewelry.

One day, a friend showed me a catalog that offered jewelry for sale. I tracked down the man behind the catalog. *“Look, I’ll go door to door and I’ll sell out of your catalog. I have the pictures of all the products. I’ll buy from you wholesale. I’ll book the orders, and you mail the product to them.”* We struck a deal. Eventually, I started making some decent money. It worked out real well. I was making good money on the jewelry, plus I was meeting girls in the process.

Then I thought, *‘I really need a car.’* I couldn’t ask my parents for a car. That is when I decided, *‘I’m going to go and buy the oldest wreck I can find. I’ll fix it up so it runs really well. Then, I’ll sell it.’* I knew a person could always get a little more money for a car on campus than in Chicago. The college students had never owned a car before, so you could charge a good price. That was also good for making a few bucks—the auto business.

I had the jewelry business, and I had the auto business. But, I was not a great student. At the end of my first semester, I called my father. *“Dad, I’ve gone to college. I’ve had the college experience. Now I think I want to quit. I want to get busy and make some money. You can’t make any real money here.”*

#### 4—“Jesus, Help me!”

*“Paul, I’m sorry to hear that. I certainly don’t have much of a job for you. With no education, I don’t know where you are going to find a job. These days, you need a college education.”* It was 1960 and I was 18 years old. What did I know?

He paused for a moment to let that all sink in, and then he said, *“You were driving a truck, and I think that is probably your future. You will drive a truck because that’s all the education you have. I don’t think anyone else can hire you beyond being a truck driver.”* He was working on my head and it was effective. This was his way of encouraging me to stay in school. This little “talk” convinced me, so I remained in college.

I originally enrolled in Business Administration, but after a semester, I was on academic probation. After two semesters, I was on final probation. I wasn’t even pulling a “C” average. This wasn’t a great surprise, because I was never much of a student.

During my sophomore year, another student who was a friend of mine saw what was taking place. *“Look, Paul, you are going to flunk out. Your problem is that on registration day, you’re just too ambitious for your own good. You haven’t caught on. You pick courses based on what is going to be interesting, and how you’re going to learn a lot and all those things. That’s not what you should be doing. You should be doing what other people are doing—find the easy courses and sign up for those.”*

Everything he said made sense. So, I asked him, *“Which ones are the easy courses?”*

Just like that, he gave me a list. I had to switch out of Business Administration, which had a lot of detailed work in accounting, mathematics, finance and statistics. I had been passing those courses, but not with good grades. That was my problem.

That list of “easy courses” saw me through the rest of my college career. In the process, I switched my major to Economics. From then on, I got As and Bs. Economics was very easy for me—loaded with big picture concepts. I could look at those charts and

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instantly, I knew what they meant. Nobody had to explain them to me. I could just look at the graph, and I would understand exactly what it was intended to convey.

When I came to my last semester at college, there was a course called *Money and Banking*. I had shown up during the first two weeks of the course and listened to the lectures. But, the professor never took attendance, and there was no midterm exam. The entire course grade was from a final exam. That left me thinking, ‘*No one knows if I’m here or not, right?*’ I had other things to do on campus, plus it was my last semester.

I started cutting that class, and nobody noticed. Then, the time to drop a course and enroll in an alternative had come and gone. I was locked in. I had been part of the class for four weeks, but no one had seen me in two weeks. I thought the professor would certainly take note if I suddenly showed up because, by that time, the group had shrunk from 50 or 60 students down to 18. It was so small that it would be noticeable if somebody new abruptly appeared. Now, I was *afraid* to show up. This was really disturbing me. Then I began to worry. ‘*Maybe I’m not going to graduate.*’

It was coming down to the final exam. Everything rested on that test. I hadn’t been to class since the second week. I was walking up the hill to class to take the exam, and I was feeling increasingly desperate. Then, I had a very unusual experience. In a single moment, out of the blue, I had a flashback—to something which had happened when I was 12 years old.

\* \* \* \* \*

I was 12 years old, and it was around the time of Passover. During a service at our synagogue, I took note that, for some reason, the Passover Prayer Book had an English translation. Normally, our Siddur—our prayer book—contained only Hebrew. However, now there was a separate holiday prayer book with everything translated into English.

#### 4—“Jesus, Help me!”

We were reading together the Hallel Psalms, in English, which made everything a lot easier to understand. I came to one of the Psalms, which says, “*The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.*” I was reading this, when I thought to myself, ‘*Who was rejected by the fathers of the faith? The only one I can think of that the Jewish people ever rejected was Jesus. So, that means that Jesus is now the head of the Jewish faith. But, that can’t be right because the rabbis would have told me.*’ At that time, I dismissed the thought. However, I always remembered it.

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The  
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I came to one of the Psalms, which says,  
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and therefore, my future. I hadn’t been to a lecture since the second week. I was walking up the hill to class, but I was growing increasingly anxious. At that precise moment, I had the flashback.

I recalled the moment when I was 12 and the precise thought I had when I was reading that Hallel Psalm. As I paced up the hill to take the exam, out of nowhere, another thought occurred to me—‘*Maybe Jesus is the head of the faith.*’

It was very strange. It just occurred to me. But, I was desperate. I needed help. I believed I was not going to graduate. ‘*This will be very embarrassing, and humiliating.*’ I didn’t know what to do. Then I suddenly burst out loud, “*Oh, Jesus help me!*”

Here I was, a Jewish guy all the way. I had a Bar Mitzvah and five years of Hebrew school. Now I was making this spontaneous appeal based on a passing thought from when I was 12 years old.

#### 4—“Jesus, Help me!”

I continued the walk to the exam room. I decided ahead of time that no matter what was on the test, I was going to answer with what I heard during the first two weeks of class. I felt I understood the professor’s basic philosophy from that first two weeks. At least, I hoped I did. That was my strategy and I went with it. That was what I put down on my final exam, regardless of the question.

They were all essay questions. When the grades were released, I had an A on the test. However I got a B+ in the course even though that exam was the only grade. I decided that was the ding because I hadn’t been to class. Apparently, the professor *had* noticed I was not there for his lectures. I never did figure out how I got an A on the final when nothing else counted, but received a B+ for the course. I was certainly not complaining.

I knew something really unusual had happened to me. Why did that idea come into my mind—to say, “*Jesus, help me!*”? However, once I got what I wanted, I didn’t give it another thought. I chalked it up to coincidence and it was gone. It may have been something. Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn’t.

Economics provided me with a liberal arts diploma, so I graduated college. Today, Economics is a very desirable degree. However, at that time, it was not highly valued. Business considered it more art than science. But, I did graduate from college, which meant I now had a future beyond driving a truck. I believed the prevailing wisdom—*if you have a college degree, you can get a job*. At one time, it was true. It was true in my parent’s generation. But, in my generation, it was no longer the case.



## 5—Practical Susan

During my third semester at the University of Wisconsin (UW), my roommate and I decided to have a get-together at our apartment. At UW, the drinking age was 18. A mutual friend fixed me up with Susan Dulsky, for this party.

Susan was a year and a half younger than me. In September of 1961, she was just beginning UW. After the party, I walked her home. She revealed that her father died when she was ten, and that her widowed mother raised her. During that first few weeks of school, she acknowledged she was overwhelmed. She really didn't have a father figure in her life, so she began to ask me for advice, and I started to coach her.

That was the beginning of the association. For Susan, I became a ready resource of information on how to navigate university life. She thought I was clever. She listened to what I had to say, and things seemed to work out for her. But, it was still a bit of a tumultuous relationship.

My routine was to go out with girls a maximum of three times, and then ditch them. Only a few girls would I date five times. On my second date with Susan, we were sitting in the balcony of a movie theater. I reached over to kiss her on the neck. Quite loudly, she blurted out, "*What do you think you're doing!*" The way she said it, the entire theater could hear her. That led to a colossal fight. We didn't go out again for two or three months.

After that, I needed a companion for another party, so I asked Susan, and she was okay with it. Then we would have another fight, and we wouldn't talk for a few months. This went off and on for a couple of years. I dated a lot of other girls and she dated a lot of other guys. That was typical in the 60s.

Susan was also not a great student. In fact, she was flunking out. I was vaguely aware of this. She called me for advice, and I

## 5—Practical Susan

gave it to her. Then, another couple of months passed when we didn't see one another.

One day, I was home for summer vacation when I got a telephone call. It was Susan Dulsky. I assumed she wanted to borrow some money. Why else would she be calling? Girls didn't typically call guys. *"Oh yeah. Hi, Susan. How are you? Gee, it's unusual for you to call. I guess you're probably calling because you want to borrow some money? Is that it?"*

I figured since her mother was a widow and she didn't have much money, that was the purpose for the call. *"No! Why would you think that?"* She had merely decided, *'If I don't call this guy, I'm never going to hear from him again.'*

Then she said, *"Why don't you come over? I haven't seen you in a while."*

So, I headed over to her place. After I arrived, we were sitting around her mother's apartment, visiting, when I said, *"Come September, you're going back to school. You will have to declare a major."*

She hesitated, *"That's the thing, Paul. I'm not going back. I flunked out."*

*"Are you sure?"*

*"Yes. I appealed it and everything. I'm not going to be returning to college."*

I thought for a moment. *"You know, maybe this is still solvable."*

She wasn't so sure. *"It sounds impossible to me."*

*"Susan, I have an idea."*

Now I had her interest. *"What's your idea?"*

*"Why don't you go to the board of deans and explain that your father passed away? Don't tell them you were ten years old"*

## 5—Practical Susan

*when he passed away. Just tell them, 'My father passed away, and I was very upset. That's why I flunked out. It was a terrible experience, but I think I'm over it now. If you give me one more chance, I believe I'll be okay. But I need this one more opportunity.'*"

Susan had nothing to lose, so she went to the board with my cockamamie story. It worked! She was allowed back into college.

I explained to her that was just the beginning of her solution. She needed a plan to do better. She was attempting to be a nurse administrator. That called for a lot of heavy-duty science courses that she couldn't get past.

When I graduated, Susan was in her junior year. I told her: *"You've attended the University of Wisconsin for a couple of years. It would be cheaper if you enrolled in a smaller school in Chicago such as Roosevelt University. You've always been good at languages. Why don't you get out of this nursing thing? You're never going to graduate. You are having chronic difficulties with all these science courses.*

*"Why don't you become a language major? Get your mother a degree. She's invested all this money in your education. Your mother is working three jobs to put you through college."*

At the same time as I was advocating this plan, I was aware I was coming under an obligation of sorts. I knew, according to my proposal, we were both going to be in Chicago together. I was the one that recommended she move. She was also aware of it.

However, the plan made sense, so Susan acted on it. She moved to Chicago and changed schools *and* her major. What I recommended, worked. She made all A's and B's in her new major—Spanish—and she received her degree in Languages.

Things were getting more serious for us. Now, we were dating, and I was aware that circumstances were closing in on me. Finally, at some point, I made a decision. *'I need to get out of this.'*

## 5—Practical Susan

It wasn't Susan. I was always genuinely afraid of *commitment*. That was the reason I only dated girls two or three times and no more. I did *not* want the *commitment*. For that reason, I became very uncomfortable with the direction things were heading between us.

Ultimately, I went over to her apartment and asked her to come downstairs. We sat in the car and I started in, "*Listen Susan, we're breaking up.*"

To which she responded, "*I'm not going to let you go.*"

"*Susan, don't you understand? I'm not going to call you anymore.*"

"*I'm not going to let you go.*"

I was firm. "*If you write me, it'll come back 'Return to Sender.'*"

She was steadfast. "*I'm not going to let you go.*"

I was frustrated. "*This is a ridiculous conversation. You don't have the say-so. Do you understand? You're never going to see me again. This is it. I have to do this. It'll be better for you.*"

Same response. "*I'm not going to let you go.*"

It went back and forth and back and forth, and her answer was the same. "*I'm not going to let you go.*"

In the end, I took Susan back upstairs to her apartment and left. That was that, and I went home. All the way to my place, I was thinking, '*What does she mean, she's not going to let me go? What does that mean exactly?*'

Once I arrived at my house, I began to pace the floor. I was really stirred up by this ridiculous conversation. I thought I was going to have a completed transaction. I was a free man. But no, she's not going to let me go! '*What am I going to do? She's not going to let me go! What does that even mean?*'