RABBI LEONARD BEERMAN
Interviewed at Leo Baeck Temple
on April 3, 1997
By Edward Hummel

ABSTRACT: Rabbi Beerman, who headed the congregation of Leo Baeck Temple for many years, was interviewed by Edward Hummel, a social worker also trained as a minister. The focus of the interview is on Rabbi Beerman's growing-up experiences and his decision to enter the rabbiunate, and some of his activities in that role both pre-and post-retirement. These included activism in the search for peace and, especially, his devotion to inter-faith activities in such work as that of the Interfaith Center to Reverse the Arms Race, and Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice. His activities have taken him into international arenas, as well as serving on boards of organizations addressing rights of human subjects in research. Among his titles is that of Rabbi in Residence at All-Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, where he worked closely with Dr. George Regis, who headed that church. (See Oral-history Interview with Dr. Regis, CSWA).

HUMMEL: I'm Edward Hummel, and I'm interviewing Rabbi Leonard Beerman who for many, many years has been the Rabbi and Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles. The California Social Welfare Archives is pleased to have you do this oral history.

BEERMAN: Well, I'll begin at my beginning. Someone else's hands brought me into the world in Altoona, Pennsylvania, a town of approximately 60,000 people in central Pennsylvania. My mother had been born in New York City in 1894. My father was born in Lithuania, and at the age of three he was brought to the United States to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, which was a town of approximately the same size, some 40 miles removed from Altoona. My parents married in February of 1920 and I was born a year and a few months later. The first six years of my life were spent in Altoona. My father was a salesman. He and his cousin, Harry Beerman (my father's name was Paul Beerman) were in the notions business. I've often said that was to become my occupation as well throughout my life. I dealt in notions. But they dealt not with ideas, but with products that came from remote parts of the world, very exotic things from Japan and China and on July 4th they moved outside the city limits and sold fireworks as well. When I was six, after I'd been in religious school in Altoona for a few months, my father took a position

as a manager of a small department store in Owaso, Michigan. Owaso, Michigan is located about eighty miles northwest of Detroit and was a city of 14,000 people. It was very small and in it there lived approximately seven Jewish families. We lived there for ten years. It was there that I think the most formative years of my life took place. A small town had a very embracing atmosphere and gave one a clearer sense of one's identity, I think, than the large city. But a town in which there was, at least growing up, for a Jewish boy, a considerable amount of anti-Semitism. We had a branch of the Ku Klux Klan and I grew up in a town which was predominately Republican. I remember that when we cast a vote in our class, our seventh grade class, in 1932 or '31 when Roosevelt ran for president, there were thirty-one votes for Herbert Hoover and one vote for Franklin D. Roosevelt. This was supposed to be a secret ballot, but afterward, my teacher, Mrs. Fleming asked, "Who voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt?" And when I raised my hand, she said, "See me after class." And she read me the riot act for voting for this dangerous radical. You know, growing up in Owaso, I learned that Roosevelt was indeed a dangerous radical. I learned that from reading the Owaso Press, the daily paper, which warned that under Roosevelt, my father's business was in danger; I also learned that his wife was even worse because she was going into coal mines, and she was a dangerous radical, too.

Of course, I learned about the real world, going to the movies every Saturday afternoon. For a dime, you could spend a whole afternoon there, which I did. And I saw Fox Movietown News which showed pictures of John D. Rockefeller, who was known as a generous man, giving a coin to his caddy at the end of a game. And I read the funny papers which came in the Detroit Free Press, which was brought into our community. They taught me that one had to be careful about Chinamen like Fu Man Chu or luring girls into something called white slavery, which I was too young to understand. But it was a very bad thing. They also had comic strips like Little Orphan Annie with Daddy Warbucks the munitions maker as one of its heroes. My parents, of course, taught me that

Franklin D. Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt were actually very kind and compassionate people. Although the communists were bad, they were not by any means as bad as the Fascists who were beginning to show their strength in Europe with the rise of Mussolini and Adolph Hitler. Our city, of course, was going through the Great Depression, and Michigan was especially hard hit by the Depression. The auto industry was shut down. In the nearby cities of Flint and Pontiac and Detroit there were sit down strikes and the Depression cut us all down. It wasn't just the poor people who were standing around on the street corners, selling apples. And some people said in the paper they sold apples because they didn't want to do anything else. But my father was cut down as well. My father's salary was cut in half. He was making fifteen dollars a week as a manager of a department store. He couldn't survive. We went back to Pennsylvania to live with my grandmother so we didn't have to pay rent. My father went out on the road as a salesman. So I learned in those early years of my life to have some compassion for all people in their vulnerability and to come to the feeling that the ethical obligation of human beings is that they ought to care for one another and to feel responsible for one another. That grew, I think, out of the values of my parents and out of the experience of my childhood and the recognition of the link that I had with all human beings.

I graduated high school in Altoona, Pennsylvania and worked for a year because I didn't have enough money to go to college and then I worked in a shoe store. I made eight dollars a week, working six days a week, ten hours a day. And then in April of that year, my parents made the big decision that we were going to move to State College, Pennsylvania, where there was a college, Penn State. This could guarantee that I would be able to have a college education, since I could live at home, and so could my younger sister and brother. We were five years removed from each other. In order to make a go of it, my parents had to take in roomers: we always had four college students living with us and each paid twelve dollars a month. The rent was fifty-five dollars a month on the house that we rented, so the students almost paid our rent. They paid, I think, about three

or four dollars a week to live in our house. Ultimately, one of those students, many years later, would end up becoming my brother-in-law. He would marry my sister. But it was there that I went to college to Penn State.

I was confused, I would say, by some of my learning. My natural interests were in literature and history and in philosophy, but living in a college town, my parents became friendly with members of the faculty and in particular the head of the department of Biochemistry became a friend of my father's. He expressed some interest in me and my future and encouraged me to go into the sciences. On the one hand, I was flattered that a man of his position and distinction would have some interest in me. On the other hand, I was confused because I really didn't have any interest and I didn't feel I had any aptitude for science. In this confusion, and living in a college town, I went to school almost twelve months a year to summer school as well as the regular classes so that I was within a few grade points of graduating at the end of two years. Because I threw myself wholly into my studies and took too many classes in my zeal to learn, but that's the way I was in those days. Confused about the direction I would take, I went to the Psychology Department of the college and had a work up done on my aptitudes and interests and a psychological inventory taken.

The head of the department at that time was a man who had developed a personal inventory test. Sure enough, the studies that were done on me showed that my aptitudes led me toward history, philosophy or psychology and that I should probably be aiming at college teaching. When I had this final interview with the head of the Department of Psychology, he said that I showed all of these aptitudes, (we're now talking about the spring of '41). I can still hear him saying this, "For a Jew, you have to be a genius to get a position on a college faculty and whereas you are bright, you are not a genius. So that will pose a problem for you." I was very disheartened by the results of this test. I decided I was going to leave home and that I was going to "bum around the country." I had some premonition that war was coming to us, the war was already going on in

Europe against the Nazis, and I would be caught up in the war; something would happen to me, and this would be my last chance to see the country. Furthermore, I insisted that the only way to see the country and really experience it was to see and experience it without money, that if I were a tourist and had money at my disposal, I wouldn't really be able to enter the experience of the country fully. My father argued with me and finally convinced me I should take at least five dollars with me.

I set off in May of 1941 with five dollars and I guess I had seen a movie which showed that people kept money at the bottom of their shoe to protect it, and I placed the five dollars in the bottom of my shoe. And I began hitchhiking and I remember I broke, and I was offering to work for food. I heard that was the way you could get food, you offered to work, to wash dishes in restaurants and things of that nature. I never got a job washing dishes in a restaurant but I was able to get day old baked goods and I was able to get fruit that was being thrown out of grocery stores for being overly ripe. That's the way I subsisted. I actually had to break the five dollar bill, crossing the Ohio River from Cincinnati to Covington, Kentucky. It was a footbridge and they charged two cents at the end of the walk to have crossed the bridge. I can still see myself sitting down and taking off my shoe and giving the man a five dollar bill, thinking maybe he wouldn't make me do that, but he did, and I ended up with change, $4.98.

Anyway, I gravitated; I traveled in many places but I found myself ultimately drawn back to Michigan, which I had been forced to leave. I failed to mention at the end of my junior year, in 1937, I went to the bank with my father and took out the $82 that I had in a savings account. I gave it to my father because he needed the money to keep our family going. So I was uprooted from this place that I loved and from friends. I had been elected to a certain position in the high school. I was uprooted from that by the Depression and even though I knew my father was helpless, I nonetheless bore some hostility toward him for having somehow been responsible for ripping me out of a place that I loved and taking me to a strange city where I knew no one. Owaso was a town of

14,000. Altoona was a town of 60,000, which I had left at the age of six and was thrown now into a huge high school of 4,000 students where I knew no one. So I was somewhat embittered by that.

To get back to my journey, I was hitchhiking and was offered a ride just outside of Detroit by a man who said he would take me, that if I would go with him all the way to Lexington, Michigan, which was 275 miles or 250 miles, he would buy me a steak dinner. He wanted some company. He was going to Lexington and back again. I said, "Sure." So I rode with him to Lexington, and then, on the way back, we passed Flint, Michigan. On the outskirts of Flint there was a factory that had a big sign that said "Employment Opportunities," and I got out and got in line at the AC Sparkplug Factory on the Dixie Highway, I think it was, and I got a job in the AC Sparkplug Factory. At that time, it had been converted into making 50 caliber machine guns for the United States Army, weapons that would either be sent to England as part of the lend-lease program of that time or to be used for the building up of U. S. armaments. Although our country was officially opposed to engagement in the war that was raging in Europe, Roosevelt, I would learn later, was at work trying to build up the United States, the military capacity of the United States. I worked on the final assembly line in the factory through the summer and fall of that year. I lived at the YMCA and the factory was working at such a pace that we were actually working seven days a week, twelve hours a day. I was getting overtime pay every day and on the seventh day I was getting double time and I thought it was just terrific because I was sending all this money home to be saved. I was making seventy-five dollars a week in those days.

I became part of the union in the union of automobile workers. I was working in a factory of at least five thousand people and I learned I was the only Jew. There may have been others but I never met them. Certainly not on my shift. And I ran into a great deal of anti-Semitism, a very virulent kind that often got me into fistfights and I hadn't realized that the factory was only fifty miles away from Royal Oak, Michigan. Royal Oak was the

seat of Father Charles Coughlin. He was a very fiery, and dynamic preacher, a Catholic priest of strong pro-Fascist ideas and sympathetic to the Nazis and not too friendly toward the Jews. Of course, Royal Oak was not far from Dearborn, Michigan where there was another famous anti-Semite by the name of Henry Ford who had been helpful in distributing the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a sort of historic canard against the Jewish people. Anyway, this experience of anti-Semitism was sort of stunning to me, astonishing, and it led me to begin to go to the public library with the little free time I had. I had to become friends with some people who lived at the YMCA with me, other people who were working on various things. One afternoon, we were having a talk in my room at the Y, and the subject of religion came up and around the room one by one a man said, "I'm a Baptist.." "I'm a Methodist." "I'm a member of the Church of Christ." And when it got to me, I said I was a Jew. They were shocked. They hadn't known it. One of them finally said, "If we had known you were a Jew, we wouldn't have had anything to do with you." He was someone who came from southern Indiana, not far from Paduca, Kentucky. And they then walked out of the room. So the time I spent with my friends, my so-called friends, I began spending at the public library. And I found myself drawn to the few shelves that this library in Flint, Michigan had on Jewish subjects. And I began reading Jewish history trying to find out something about the origins of anti-Semitism. I began reading Jewish philosophy. I began reading Jewish literature. And suddenly I began to feel that maybe this would be a convenient focus for my interest in philosophy, history and literature. Maybe there was a place for me there somewhere.

When Pearl Harbor came, I was working still in the factory and shortly after Pearl Harbor, I decided I was going to go back to college and that I should get involved in this war. So I went back to college, to Penn State, in February or January of 1942. I enlisted in the Marine Corp, which permitted me to graduate. I actually graduated in 1942. But I also began to see the rabbi in our town and talk to him and began to think maybe I could become a rabbi. And that maybe this was the place that I could continue to develop my

interest in Jewish philosophy, history and literature. I began to study. Upon college graduation, I served briefly in the Marine Corps. I think it was about a total of a year. I never got out of this country. When I left the Marine Corps I was in Officer Candidates School. I actually failed Officers Candidate School. I had trouble getting over the hurdles and that sort of thing. I was not a particularly athletic person. I did very well on everything else. I learned how to shoot a rifle, how to take weapons apart and all those things I did quite well. But I wasn't good in the athletic dimensions of being a Marine. So I failed Officers Candidate School but they gave me an option. I could either go into the Marine Corps as a non-commissioned officer because of the training I had been sent first to Paris Island and then to Quantico, Virginia for my training. Or I could get an honorable discharge. So I decided that I would try to get in the Navy, in Navy Intelligence to learn Japanese. It had been set up for Phi Beta Kappas, and I had been a Phi Beta Kappa. In the morning, when I had been discharged, I went to Washington, which was just some thirty miles from Quantico, I learned that the program was closed. There were no longer any openings in it. I tried to get a position in the Air Force in Philadelphia in an office, and when that failed, I took the six o'clock train and went to Cincinnati, Ohio where the Hebrew Union College, a rabbinical seminary for the training of reformed rabbis was located. And I made application to enter the Hebrew College and they were willing to accept me.

I've skipped over the studies that I did in Hebrew working with the Rabbi in State College and some aspects of that. But it would depend on what my draft board back in State College would do. I put myself before the draft board and they gave me a deferment to go to rabbinical school. As I realize now, I did all that without calling on anyone for assistance or anything like that. I did it all on my own, rather innocently, and put myself at the mercy of the draft board. For whatever the reasons, they gave me the deferment and I then began rabbinical school in Cincinnati. The ideals and the values that I found in my Jewish heritage were essentially rooted in the ethical concerns of my

religious tradition, which led me to recognize a sense of mutual accountability that we have for fellow human beings, the recognition that we are all inherently creatures of dignity, and that we had a responsibility for one another. I think it was the ethical ideals of Judaism which I then began to appreciate with greater depth and passion as I learned about the Jewish religious traditions, as I studied the sacred literature of the Jewish people, as I was inspired especially by the message of the prophets. Which had a significant focus in the teaching at my rabbinical school at the time. As a student at the rabbinical school, I became even more radical that I had been in college in my thinnki9ng because I knew something about the plight of the poor out of my own personal experience, out of being able to see what had happened to the people in the town in which I had grown up in Michigan, and the terrible injustices that rendered millions of people essentially useless in their own eyes and in the eyes of their fellow human beings. I came to the conviction that I couldn't rest unless I was doing something in my life that was helping to reduce at least somewhat the store of human suffering in the world. In effect, that became my theme song, maybe my sermon as a rabbi.

I was ordained and while I was a student at the Hebrew Union College, I took a year off to study in Jerusalem. I had money coming to me from the GI Bill of Rights. My military service, as brief as it was, provided me with this privilege. And I used to get $110 a month and with $110, one could live comfortably in Jerusalem, as a student at least. I attended the Hebrew University as a graduate student in the fall of 1947, but my studies were cut short, because on November 29 of 1947, the UN reached the historic decision at what was then called Lake Success in New York, that Palestine should be partitioned into two independent states, one Jewish and one Arab. The Jews greeted that opportunity with great joy and accepted it happily but the Arabs refused to accept it and after the UN decision, fighting broke out. Arabs began their attack against the Jewish community of Palestine. It was a very intimate war in that it wasn't happening in a remote place, thousands of miles away as happened in most of the wars that were fought

by the United States, except for the Civil War. It was happening in our neighborhood and so we, I was married at the time to my late wife Martha. We enlisted in the Haganah which was at that time the illegal underground army in Israel. We felt we had an obligation as long as we were there, to help to at least defend our own neighborhood if nothing else.

I had had certain somewhat pacifistic ideas but I was trouble inwardly by the notion that maybe my almost instinctual pacifism was rooted in an essential timidity and not really a genuinely held conviction. Maybe that is part of what lead me to enlist in the Marines and certainly in part what led me to enlist. I was a troubled soul. You know had I been as sophisticated or as well off as I am today I would probably had gone to a therapist of some kind and I probably needed it. But instead I tried to work out my problems by acting them out in one way or another. It was in the Haganah in which I served for about five months I think, that I came more and more to believe that pacifism was a genuinely held conviction of mine.

We left Palestine and came back to the United States and I continued with my studies for another year and was ordained as a Rabbi. I felt a great need to be an independent rabbi so I refused the offers to be assistant rabbi at large congregations in Pittsburgh and Cleveland and instead took a position in Los Angeles, California, with a brand new congregation, which had never had a full time rabbi. It had about twenty-eight families and they thought that if they had a full time rabbi they could grow because the Jewish population of Los Angels was burgeoning in those days, in the late forties. I had never imagined California as a place I would ever go to; it had never entered my consciousness. When I came here for an interview I had never seen anything quite so beautiful. Those were the days when the air was clear, no smog, and you could see for miles around and the buildings were so full of color, a color I had never seen in Pennsylvania or Michigan or Cincinnati, Ohio, filled with all of its grim and grit encrusted over with layers of the years. I was met at the railroad station and driven up

Sunset Boulevard into west Los Angeles and I had never seen anything like that. In those days, there was a bridle lane that went down through the middle of Sunset Boulevard in Beverly Hills and it was beautiful.

I took the job, and we drove out here in the summer of 1949, and it was here that we became a family. My children were born and I immediately threw myself into not only developing a new congregation but into the life of the city and the concerns of the time. The war had ended and we had entered the beginning years of what would come to be known as the "Cold War." Churchill would announce in a speech he gave in Fulton, Missouri, that an Iron Curtain had been drawn by the Soviets down across Eastern Europe, separating the East from the West and Harry Truman would pick up the same theme. I believed that whereas Soviet Russia was indeed a tyranny, we would waste our energies if we were to throw them into a military buildup which would exhaust our resources in our effort to contain the threat of communism. Of course, everyone was convinced at that time that the communists were bent on world domination, wherever they were, and we couldn't rest unless we were bringing them to heel. So that was something I tried to fight against. Of course, those were still the days, significant days in the struggle of civil rights. When I arrived in town, there were still areas of the city where no blacks were permitted to live. Certainly, where no Jew was permitted to live. The struggle for civil rights and civil liberties is something that linked us with all people. It wasn't just a Jewish concern but a general concern, and I became involved in those activities and of course formed some of the deepest and most enduring friendships that I have had all of my life. I think we did exhaust our energies as a nation in stalking the communist threat so that some of the best minds couldn't be sure what the best use of their talents and intelligence could be. I think we have been impoverished more by the enormous exhaustion of our monetary resources in permitting deep social cleavages to occur in our own country and continuing the impoverishment of millions of human beings in the midst of a nation that is the most powerful and the richest in the world. To

me it was a fundamental and moral contradiction, and I felt that, as a Rabbi and a Jew, I had a special obligation to be addressing these issues. Out of the historic experience of the Jewish people, the experience of alienation and rejection and suffering -- which certainly diminished over the course of the years – there nothing more appalling than the Holocaust the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis. But even the anti-Semitism I had experienced as a child and that so affected the psyche of the American Jew is something that began to diminish with the passage of time and with the work of enlightened people of all kinds against it. So the Jews themselves began to occupy a more privileged position in our society. But somehow, and I think wonderfully, although the characteristic pattern is that as one rises on the economic ladder, one tends to become more conservative politically. Conservatism generally places much more emphasis on individual rights and individual liberties, and one is not always as sensitive to the rights and disabilities of groups, in particular, groups that are excluded from the comfort and privileges that some have attained. In spite of that, Jews have continued to remain liberal, at least in their political attitudes, sensitive to issue of minority rights, and civil liberties and civil rights in general.

The sixties of course sort of saw the war in Vietnam. The Vietnam conflict, which had such a devastating effect on the country, is one that engaged me fully. I suppose I was one of those who was prematurely opposed to the war in Viet Nam. But it was there. I remember in the middle 'Sixties, going down near the University of Southern California, to Exposition Park, for a demonstration. It was there that there was a young Episcopal priest who impressed me so much because of his voice, he had a touch of the South in the voice. And he had what I describe as a very athletic way of speaking. His body moved as he spoke. It was a demonstration against the war; a Navy officer brought in a black coffin draped with an American flag and declared his opposition to the war and said that he was leaving the Navy. It was the kind of thing I wouldn't ordinarily have wanted to be a part of, but it was there that I met George Regus for the first time. He was

this young Episcopal priest, still probably in his early thirties. That was the beginning of a friendship that would bring us together, first as two members of the clergy who were linked in common cause in our opposition to the war.

We would be sent on a trip to Paris by an organization we were affiliated with at the time - clergy and laity opposed to the war in Vietnam. Clergy: and Laity Concerned, it was called: CALC. They sent us to the Paris Peace Meeting where the six delegations to those meetings began their deliberations by having a big argument over the shape of the table they were going to sit at, which went on for weeks. And we met with all of these delegations -- all of them, including our own. Then we went back to the State Department in Washington and came back here and reported on our findings and conviction that the United States had no place in Vietnam, and that we were being lied to about what was really happening in there.

What began as a friendship, a friendship rooted in a common cause, eventually spread to our families and ultimately brought our congregations together. We began to do things together as congregation. Years later our two congregations would link together and form a corporation to do some work in downtown Los Angeles to buy some defunct, filthy hotels and remodel them and make them available to the homeless. We were able to form and church/temple corporation to do that kind of work. It was out of this friendship that with the help of our friend, Harold Willens, a local businessman and our friend, Jane Olsen of Pasadena, we devised the idea of establishing a center opposed to the war -- or rather to reverse the arms race. This was after the Viet Nam War because the new danger that we had become aware of even earlier was the threat of nuclear war and the building up of armaments in the development of the capacity to kill each other thousands of times over. The other, being of course, the Soviets and ourselves. So this issue led us to a major conference which was held first in a synagogue and then moved to Pasadena where more than a thousand people came on two separate days and we spelled out the issue.

I should pay tribute to our friends, a friend of George Regus and myself, Harold Willens. Harold Willens had been very close to President Jimmy Carter and had been appointed to represent the United States at the UN conference on Arms. Carter had been a very enthusiastic believer in the need for nuclear disarmament and had promised Harold that he would attend this UN conference. But when the time came, Carter's views had changed and rather than be willing to demonstrate his concern about the need for reduction in nuclear weapons, he did not attend the conference in 1978, which was held in New York. Willens was so disheartened by this that he began to think that politics and political officials, government itself was not the means by which one could bring about a transformation in American thinking about the reliance on nuclear weapons for security. Although he, himself, was not a person identified with Jewish religion, he began to think that maybe it was the religious forces of the country that could be the instrument of peace -- in the sense the instrument to create what he called a paradigm shift in American thought about nuclear weapons.

So it was he who brought this idea to us, and then we acted upon it, all of us, and we had an exciting, dramatic conference. It was at a time when most people were not thinking about the danger of the building up of nuclear arsenals. But out of that conference, we decided to establish the Interfaith Center to Reverse the Arms Race. That was a joint project of the Leo Baeck Temple and All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, the church in which George was director. That institution's influence radiated out into the general area of southern California and we developed the cooperation of many hundred of people in different parts of southern California and even beyond. It served as a model for other endeavors in other parts of the country as well. Of course it brought Leo Baeck Temple and All Saints Episcopal Church even closer together, the members of those congregations closer together. All Saints in Pasadena became a kind of second home to me, and I felt so much at ease there and had so many friends there in the community of the very warm and loving community of All Saints Church. Our work in

the Interfaith Center lasted for about ten years. Then as the ostensible threat of nuclear war diminished, although the number of weapons continued to remain high, the ability to gain support for the institution also diminished and we were forced to close our doors.

But the work of the Interfaith Center brought George and me into work that took us all over the world because we established contact with those who were concerned with the same issue in Europe. We had met with scientists and others in Russia itself and all of the European countries.

I myself, in the...I skipped over this...to go backwards for a moment, to get back to the war in Vietnam, I just remembered this important episode. I was invited to join six clergy: Catholic, Protestants and myself as a Jewish representative, on an urgent trip to visit supposedly important officials in England, Holland, Germany, and the Pope, to issue a plea to them to use their influence with the United States government to bring an end to the war in Vietnam. It was a marvelous group of people. Among them was the bishop of North Dakota, the bishop of Philadelphia, Robert Macafee Brown of Stanford, Harvey Cox of Harvard Divinity School, among others. We traveled together on a whirlwind journey and that was my first trip to Germany. After meeting with the archbishop of Holland in the Hague, we took the train that brought us to a place where there was a conference in the German church.

There were three thousand delegates at this conference and they had given us thirty minutes of time on their program. My colleagues decided I should be one of the speakers at this conference, so Harvey Cox was one and I was the second. I had never been to Germany before and it was an uncomfortable feeling for a Jew to be coming to Germany. I remember this meeting where they applauded by pounding on the table and the only time I had seen that was in the anti-Nazi films made in Hollywood where the Nazis would pound on the table to indicate their applause. But I was to speak to them and my translator, I learned, since I was speaking in English, not German, would be Everhard Beck. He was the Protestant pastor who had received the letters of Dietrich Von Hoffer,

and had presented them to the world. Von Hoffer, of course, was the anti-Nazi pastor who went to his death because of his opposition to Hitler. It was a very moving moment for me to have each of my words translated into German, and it was a time for me in addressing these German clergy and laity, to speak of their obligation not to be silent about the war in Vietnam, as the German Church had been silent once before. And I quoted the words of Rabbi Leo Baeck. Rabbi Leo Baeck, after whom my congregation had been named, had been the leading rabbi of Berlin when Hitler came into power. He had once written an essay in which he spoke about what he called "romantic religion." Romantic religion was a religion, which focused primarily on the interior experience of the individuals and less upon what was happening in the world about them. And they develop a great deal of piety. He said that a spirit could be characterized not only by what it does, but no less by what it feels, and what it is able to observe with an assured and undisturbed conscience, sometimes permitting the worst outrages to occur in silence because of the concern with the inner world of piety.

I tried to prevail upon them to speak out and not be silent. They felt that because of what they had done in being silent they had lost all moral credibility and they had no right to speak to anyone else because of what their country had done under the Nazis. In any event, it was a very moving and soulful moment for me to have this experience.

Now we are going back to the 'Eighties and my work with George Regus that took us to all parts of the world together. I think that friendship has been one of the most significant things in my life, my friendship with George. We have been together in moments of sorrow and triumph and near to each other at all times. In fact, when I finish talking to you I am going to be going over to meet with George for one of our regular meetings. We are now both, of course, retired.

Last year I was invited to give a talk to my rabbinic colleagues at a conference of the Pacific Association of the (muffled term) Rabbis. I was asked to talk on the subject

of the meaning of success in the rabbinate. Strangely enough, it is a subject that I had never given any thought to. Certainly, when I became a rabbi, we spent a great deal of time thinking what it means to be a rabbi, what it meant to be an authentic Jew, what the responsibilities of a Jew were. That's something I gave a great deal of thought to, but I never thought of what it meant to be a success.

In addressing my colleagues at this convention, and I'm remembering it imperfectly now, a year-and-a-half later, I said that "To be a successful rabbi, you have to be a failure," that the function and goal of the rabbi was to be a brilliant failure because of the dreams and the values that the rabbi affirms. First of all, to be a rabbi is to be engaged in a quest not yet realized. It meant that we believe in a truth that was ever beyond our reach, that we would try to find it but we would always stumble, we would always get it imperfectly, and that we would never really have it fully. That was a kind of failure. In addition to that the values that the rabbi affirmed and that tradition had given to him were daily being mutilated and ignored and coarsened. The things that were most precious in our lives, we were constantly seeing going down to defeat in the lives about us. Yet in spite of that, we felt we had been called; we had an obligation that there was something exquisitely precious about this sense of mutual accountability that we felt for every human being and the conviction that we could not rest until we were helping to better and beautify the experience of human life. We would always fail and yet we could never rest in our quest for the unrealized and still unattainable."

This past week I've had a victory -- and I'm not used to victories in most of the causes I have associated with. I have been involved, as to indicate one of the things in which I have been engaged in the last year in my retirement...I retired ten years ago, approximately, and in my retirement I have been engaged in a number of things. I continue to be a rabbi. I do occasionally visit the sick and do some counseling and conduct a wedding or a funeral on rare occasions, and I serve on a number of boards. I

serve on two boards which deal with the ethical issues of medicine. I am on the bioethics committee of St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica and I also serve on what is now called the Institutional Review Board of Cedars Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles. The bioethics committee, of course, is dealing with ethical issues that arise in the care of patients in the hospital of St. Johns. Many of those issues have to do with end of life issues – how to deal with dying patients, a matter of major concern now throughout the world.

The Cedars Sinai Board, the Institutional Review Board, is of a different order. There we are dealing with all the research that is being done at Cedar Sinai Hospital and our concern is to protect the rights of human subjects, human beings who are used as subjects of this research. We are not involved in the day to day care of the patients of the hospital and the issues that arise there but rather the rights of the subjects of research projects protocol. These institutional review boards have a very interesting history. They really arose out of the Nuremberg trials where we learned the horrors of the medical experiments conducted by the Nazi doctors on uninformed, often generally unwilling subjects. Then we were to learn that even in our own country there were medical experiments being conducted in which the rights of human subjects were being violated or they were not necessarily giving their consent. Furthermore, there were experiments that were life threatening that were being conducted on human subjects in this country. One example is the discovery, that in New York State, I think it was in the fifties, the early fifties, they were injecting cancer cells into elderly people to test a potential drug for cancer. Our federal government set up a system to protect the rights of human subjects and insisted that everyone had to give their informed consent to any experiment; furthermore these experiments could not be conducted unless the life and the rights of these human subjects were properly protected. There had to be some clear declaration that this did not constitute a danger to the life of the individual without a possible benefit,

at least awareness of the danger. So that's a committee or board on which I have served for many years and continue to serve in my retirement.

In addition to that, I have been given a position at All Saints Church in Pasadena. They call me somewhat playfully, but I think truthfully, the rabbi in residence at All Saints Church in Pasadena. And as such, I go there annually to do some sort of teaching. I've given a series of courses there and I have also participated in major events in the life of the church. I do some lecturing and teaching, but for the last year, I have been engaged in one particular project and that is the effort to get the City Council of Los Angeles to rule that where the city has a contract with a company to perform certain services here, or where the city has granted a significant tax subsidy to a corporation or company of a hundred thousand dollars annually or more, those companies be required to pay a living wage to their employees. In effect the City of Los Angeles has been subsidizing poverty. We have given contracts, let us say to the janitorial company that cleans our downtown library, to the company that provides the parking lot facilities at our airport -- the airport is owned by the city -- to the restaurants that serve the airport, to the company that even collects money on the parking tickets. You know, that is a multi-million dollar contract that has been issued to the Lockheed-Marietta Company; it's a city contract. It's privatizing, but, nonetheless, these are contracts with the city and many of these companies have been paying a minimum wage, which means a wage no one can live on, which means that when these people need services medical care and so forth, they fall back on us again.

We give an advantage to the company to be able to do business here, or a tax subsidy, and then addition we support their employees with services they can't afford to purchase themselves. Here was an effort to pass what we call the "living wage ordinance," and it was an effort led largely by the labor unions, but also involved were the clergy who came in more than a year ago and formed a group called "CLUE," Clergy

and Laity United for Economic Justice. It brought together some wonderful colleagues, and I have been involved with that as well. Just two days ago, after a long struggle, and massive opposition from the mayor and the business community who put up a lot of money to fight against this ordinance because of their perception it posed a danger to business in the community. The City Council passed the resolution over the mayor's veto. It will provide a minimum of seven and a half dollars plus health benefits, or eight and a half dollars without any benefits to the some five thousand people who work under these contracts.

I say I am not used to victory so that the accomplishment and the recognition that it can radiate out into other communities, leaves a sweet taste. It was a very dramatic accomplishment and it demonstrated for me is that moral conscience does have a place of honor at the City Council of Los Angeles. It's a great tribute to those who worked to accomplish it. Just a few days before the final vote, the LA Times conducted a poll that showed that 70 percent of the people polled supported this ordinance in the City of Los Angeles, which shows it wasn't a wild idea or dream.

But one is still left with the abiding problems. The abiding problems are the ones I haven't even talked about, having to do with, one could say, the existential sense of the beauty in life and being able to die without being embarrassed about the way we have lived our lives. I have so much to be grateful for. I've talked about the sorrows of my life and the many losses, the very painful experiences. Looking back on all of these years, I have so much to be grateful for. That's at least a brief introduction to me.

HUMMEL: Wonderful, wonderful. As you were talking, I was thinking to myself I hope that in addition to whatever else you might choose to do, this should be put into print someday -- sooner rather than later. It was really very moving to hear you tell your story and I was thinking to myself as you were speaking of this Interfaith, I really think it

would be so wonderful to have your oral history and George's and some of the other persons of different faiths. I just want to share that because I think it would be a wonderful gift to those both who are your contemporaries and those that are following; there are just some wonderful, beautiful and important words there, and a life lived.

BEERMAN: It's wonderful of you to be doing this.

HUMMEL: I think, as I have gotten into it, I realize how important it is. I'm struggling right now. My wife keeps getting on to me about getting too overextended and going in too many directions…

BEERMAN: Tell me about it.

HUMMEL: I'm sure you know that feeling. I am really going to continue to focus on doing interviews, for example, yours and others, because I think this whole interfaith work is so important to really stay with. I think the more I have been exposed to it, the more critical it is.

BEERMAN: You're going to have to forgive me….

HUMMEL: Yes, thank you for your time..