INTERVIEW WITH MENACHEM KELLNER
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Professor Kellner, we are going to start with a personal introduction. Please tell us about your life: Where did you grow up? Where were you educated? What did you study in college?

I was born into the home of an Orthodox rabbi, whose wife became observant out of her love for her husband. She functioned as a rebbetzin all her life, but I never had the impression that it really was her chosen role in life. Being a rabbi’s wife was the role she accepted in her life, and therefore she made certain sacrifices in becoming a rabbi’s wife. Her husband also had to make certain sacrifices, because my mother basically said to him, “Marry me, marry my dogs.” So, my siblings and I were probably the only children of an Orthodox rabbi in North America who grew up with lots and lots of dogs, which has a certain amount of impact on the way we view the world.

I think it’s best to characterize our home in the following fashion. There were things which we thought while growing up that Jews simply could not do. We knew that some Jews did these things, but we also knew that we weren’t supposed to do them. For example, you weren’t supposed to violate the Sabbath, you weren’t supposed to eat non-kosher food, you weren’t supposed to cross picket lines, and you certainly were not supposed to vote for Republicans. As a child I knew that there were Jews who did not keep kosher and did not observe the Sabbath, but it was only much later in life that I discovered to my surprise that there were indeed Jews who were Republicans. So that says a lot about the nature of the home in which I grew up. My father, as I said, was a rabbi, born and trained in Hungary. His family very slowly came over to the United States after World War I. His father, my grandfather, had been a Jewish chaplain in the Hungarian army.

Oh, really? How interesting!

Yes, and for years and years, I said to myself, “Well, if he was a Jewish chaplain, he must have been the only Jewish chaplain.” So I told people he
was the chief Jewish chaplain of the Hungarian army. But, I came across a book recently from which I learned that there were something like sixty to eighty Jewish chaplains because there were several hundred thousand Jews in the Royal Austro-Hungarian Army. But my grandfather came back from the war and, I am told by people outside of the family, insisted that everyone in his shtetl leave Europe. And he took his own advice, came to America, and over a period of ten years, managed to bring the family over.

And when was that?

Right after World War I. They still got in despite the restrictions imposed in 1924. My grandfather settled in Passaic, New Jersey, and became the rabbi of a congregation called “Hungarian Hebrew Men”—a name which always amused me when I saw the sign. I assume that the synagogue had a Hebrew name as well, but I do not know if I ever knew what it was.

My father, who was born in 1908, actually wanted to be a historian and he enrolled at Columbia University where he went to graduate school in History specializing in American history. His undergraduate degree was from Yeshiva College, as was his rabbinic ordination, while his M.A. and his “A.B.D.” were from Columbia, where he studied with Allan Nevins. But marriage (in about 1935), family, the Second World War, all of that intervened and he took advantage of his rabbinical training to be a rabbi. And so he spent his career in a variety of synagogues. He used to say that rabbis and football coaches travel around a lot. So, growing up we lived in lots of different cities. My father served congregations in Baltimore; Miami; Albany, New York (where I was born); and Long Branch, New Jersey. In Long Branch my parents founded a day school (in nearby Asbury Park), which is today one of the largest day schools in North America. It seems that they had done the same thing in Albany. My father then worked in Jewish education in Washington, D.C.; New York City; and finally in St. Louis. In Washington and in St. Louis he also served congregations in a part-time capacity.

I am confused because I thought you went to school in Skokie, Illinois, and therefore assumed that the family lived in Skokie.

Well, I went to high school in Skokie, Illinois. At the time, there was no Jewish high school in St. Louis and the Hebrew Theological College in Skokie was the closest yeshiva high school to St. Louis. It was also a school which reflected my parents’ values: Zionist, and supportive of secular education.