

Gerald Bubis
An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Ben Cohen
January 1994

COHEN. What led you into the field of social work? How did you decide that was what you wanted to do?

BUBIS. From age eleven on, I was in a Jewish Settlement House as a club member. I got involved in activities and went on to be a club leader and then AZA and then chapter advisor and part time staff and then a part time Hillel staff person and then later a full time Hillel staff person in graduate school. It had to do with the comfort and excitement of working with people. So that is what did it a long time ago.

COHEN. It sounds very much like mine. Tell me what positions you held in the field during your career?

BUBIS. My first full time position was at Hillel at the University of Minnesota as the assistant director. Then, following graduate school in the University of Minnesota post war (I graduated June 1950), I worked as the assistant director of the Jewish Community Center in Minneapolis and the camp director for the community of Minneapolis until 1953. Then I went west to become the assistant director of the Oakland Jewish Center until 1960. From there to Long Beach where I was the Center director from 1960 to 1967. The last year I was also the Federation director. Then a short stint with Jewish centers in LA, which I can explicate if you want. From there on, over to Academia starting in July 1968 where I staved until May of 1989 when I retired. Here it is January 1994 and it is great that we are having so much fun.

COHEN. Which did you find most gratifying personally, which of your positions?

BUBIS. I think there are two ways of answering. One is retrospectively and one is at

the moment. When I look back on the personal side, the greatest, most gratifying position was as a camp director. Ironically, that is the one we look back at with the most pleasure and memory. We, being my wife and I, think each position had its rewards and its excitement and its stimulation, but from the point of view of answering it in maybe a little more conceptual way, the role of the college in starting a graduate school, edifying and ramifying the impact. Having touched and been involved in a little or greater way with over four hundred people, most of whom are still in the field, I think has given me professionally the greatest lasting satisfaction for what I would take to be the impact of the importable advantage.

COHEN. I happen to know from my personal relationship with you, Gerry, the kind of impact that you have made on a hell of a lot of people. You know when that happens you are a very lucky person. What kind of obstacles did you encounter during your career, obstacles to doing the thing that you felt you were trying to do?

BUBIS. Well, again, maybe I have to divide my career into eighteen years in the field as against the twenty-one years in academia. I think in the field because after my stint in an interracial setting, I decided I would cast my wand, as it were, with the Jewish community. I had an ongoing debate, discussion, and a time of dispute with what at that time tended to be the conventional philosophic wisdom of the field: mainly, to help Jews become more American and to concentrate on the human and the humanizing aspects of whatever the service was that was being delivered, whether it was group work or casework or whatever. Early on I felt very strongly that this was because of the influence of a rabbi I worked for in Hillel, Norman Furman. That a healthy American who came out of a Jewish background would be healthier as a human if he or she

acknowledged Jewish roots, as well as American possibilities for the use of those roots, in specifically Jewish ways and in universal or communal ways that brought the requirement of the Jew to always be a good citizen and, at the same time, not give up the past and memory as the requirement for the season change. That involved a lot of battles, ideological battles and arguments having to do with what the purposes of centers were, and so forth.

Then there was another ongoing dimension that I found interesting, which was that some of this resonates today. The synagogue is a system, feeling that if the center became more Jewish, it was somehow encroaching upon the territory of the synagogue and, at the same time, the Rabbis would often attack the centers for not being Jewish enough. Those who represented centers were presented with the dilemma of “if you do, you are damned, and if you don't you are damned.” That was always interesting. I think one of the earliest articles I ever wrote was a debate with Herald Choice, now the department rabbi, on center and synagogue relations and contentions. Again, I am going back over forty years. He felt we were encroaching on his territory. Well, he doesn't feel that way anymore. So that is the first phase.

Then I think there was a second phase, where I was able to get involved on a national level as a person in what was at the time the American Association of Group Work, then later part of NASW. I got involved in the Association of Senior Centers because I had always done a lot of work with seniors and involvement's in what was then called the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service. I thought there was too much narrowness. People were too localized, too narrowly focused on themselves or the immediate community, and I got more and more drawn to the international area even

when I was still in the field. This was before I got called back. So those were some of the issues that I related myself to, all in the context--I hope--of concern for the betterment of the society and dealing with issues and relating to religious and community ways. I was quite active as a professional in the United Way and the like. The academic is a different issue because there I had the excitement of founding something, starting something. That is a story in itself because it was totally accidental and was never anything I aspired to do or to be. It turned on meeting Fred Gotschalk, who later went on to become the president of Hebrew Union college, meeting him in an artist's home in Jerusalem and later being offered the opportunity to start the school. There the challenges were on an interior level and an external level. I will explain what I mean by that. The faculty of HUC for the most part being Rabbis, especially my colleagues in Cincinnati, were against the establishment of the School of Jewish Communal Service. They didn't feel it fit into the mission of the college, but for very selfish reasons. They felt it was going to diminish their pay. They didn't know their college history very well either, because it so happens that in 1913 the college had sponsored a program of Jewish Communal Service which failed. Then in 1940 they nearly took over another program, the Graduate School of Jewish Social Work which has its own story. I don't know if you want it on this tape or not. There was a request by the then-director, Maurice J. Karp, to have the school absorbed by HUC when his patron, Felix Worton, died. The day that the papers were to be signed with the college he, Karp, who by that time was quite wealthy, asked the then-president of the college what Karp's retirement package would be, and with that he tore up the papers. The merger never took place and the school closed. Karp came to LA and become the

Federation Director. The point was that in the early days of the School of Jewish Communal Service I had this inner battle with colleagues and lay people who felt that Hebrew Union College, as a seminary, should not be sponsoring a school of Jewish Communal Service. That was one arena that was kind of interesting.

The second had to do with my vision premised on the notion that there were many potential partners for that school: the School of Social Work; later I had the same notion for the School of Gerontology, the School of Education, School of Public Administration. Our initial outreach was for a double master's degree, Master of Jewish Communal Service and Masters of Social Work degree with the University of Southern California. There the interesting issue was that the primary contracts, people with the power to decide what would happen, were Jews whose Jewishness did not always sit exactly comfortably. Let's put it that way. They tended to be more universalized and more assimilated Jews. There was a great deal of resistance to the notion of the double degree program with USC. Want an anecdote? The real key person in all this that made it happen was John Milner. He wasn't Jewish. He was Maury Hamovitch's backup when Maury was on sabbatical. It was while the dean was on sabbatical that this actually got effectuated in principle, then to be actuated in real life. It is important to note that HUC had a protocol with USC. HUC was designated the Judaic Studies Department for the University of Southern California and under that, had the power to develop any specific conjoint programs with any department or school within the university as seen fit by the players. So when it came time to bring this to life, John Milner was our hero. Samson Levy, the head of our graduate school at that time, Maury Hamovitch, the dean at that time of the School of Social Work, and myself met to

talk about a joint degree program. Maury started the meeting by turning more to Samson as the senior faculty man rather than to myself, and said, "Professor Levy, could you maybe tell me a little bit about your faculty and the like." Sam proceeded to go over the academic background of those of the HUC faculty who would be teaching in the communal service program over and above the kinds of social work and communal practitioners that I would be bringing in to flush out the Judaic faculty. It wasn't too shabby a list of people. Maury received the information, then went to close the meeting and Maury said, "Excuse me, I wonder if you would recognize the fact that your college is older than the University of Southern California and we don't enter into these partnerships lightly. I wonder if you care to review with me the background of your faculty before we finalize this, so that we can be satisfied that our standards will not put us all in great danger."

Then the second story that relates to what I am trying to get at, you know, having to do with the challenges and the issues. In our first class of the double master's degree students, there was among them a young Orthodox Jew, Gerson Silver. His father was a very famous Orthodox rabbi. Here was Gerson, to my knowledge the first Jew who ever came to USC wearing a head covering. You could see the fringes coming out of his clothes. Here he was going to be admitted into the double degree program. The question raised by the faculty at USC was how would he adjust to being in a school of social work, being as how he would be the only Orthodox Jew. My comment to the faculty rep was that it would seem to me that he was quite clear on who he was and the problem would lie in the simulated Jewish faculty and their inability and unreadiness to adjust to the presence of a person who reminded them at every moment by his

presence of who he was. Indeed that is exactly what happened. Some of the faculty freaked out.

More interesting on another level was another tension in the school. At the time the School of Social Work was very heavily psychoanalytically oriented. You are a graduate, you have gone through this. The whole approach of their methods course premised the notion of interaction on a one-to-one basis. So now for the archives confusing. Gershon's first year placement was in a community center, which is typical in most schools of social work. It is an option that is considered acceptable because it is rumored that people do grow in-groups and are able to develop as human beings through the group process. Lo and behold, his teacher would not accept his process records because they were not related to one-to-one relationships, but here rather focusing on the person growing through and within the group. I had gone to a graduate school which was quite eclectic. I studied a great deal with group work professors. To me this was not only an anomaly, but it did a disservice to what social work and social work and social group work was all about. So I am now confessing. I urged Gershon who was very, very bright, to spend the year writing fake records with imaginary cases of things that never happened, which he did very successfully. The statute of limitations is over. To me it bespoke the virginity of a set of premises that were just that. This isn't rocket science, we talked about human growth and behavior. It bespoke what at that time I found to be the case at USC, which subsequently changed. It was a grudging acceptance of the notion of the double degree and a grudging acceptance of the level and capacity of the students, given the setting in which they would work and when they were going to be in a casework setting. Over the years that

changed. Over the years I think HUC increasingly appreciated what USC had to offer and USC appreciated, I think increasingly, what HUC had to offer; and more than that, with the caliber of the students who came in. The third level, which is a field issue and remains so to this day, does have to do with the ambivalence that both professionals and Jewish Communal Service had, whether they are social workers or otherwise, as to the importance of weaving value-laden information or material and historic memory and possibility into practice. That is to say specifically, "Does a social worker have a right to ever confront a client with the possibilities of more fulfilled Jewish life and lifestyle? Does the community that workers represent have a call upon a client that goes beyond the client's pain or initial reason for approaching the agency? To this day that debate continues. I have experienced some agencies being on the other side. There is a very strong split, certainly in the casework agencies. To this day you have this notion of self determination, somehow presuming that if another person raises a possibility through optional behaviors, that this would somehow force the client to decide something against his or her will--something I have never understood and still don't understand. That is a field issue, it remains a field issue. It is not a new issue in Jewish studies, it's not a new issue in social work. Ironically for me, when one speaks with psychiatrists and psychoanalysts the impression I have, however ill founded this is, is that social workers more often than not tend to be taped and timed and fixed in place, whereas those very premises they draw upon for the academic conceptual arena mainly psychoanalytic, have moved to the point that psychiatrists don't have a problem with confronting a patient or a client with reality. This includes that the reality of group and culture and family is that which is as important a part of the self as the self itself is. Not

a good sentence but it works. So that is sort of an elongated answer to your question.

COHEN. Let me ask you a question on the lines that you were discussing, Gerry. I have a sense that schools generally, schools of social work generally, are doing less and less work in the group work area than they had been. When I went to school, the group work department was one of the outstanding departments in the school where I started, University of Pittsburgh.

BUBIS. The group work, as we understand that term in social work, parleys and evens to some degree in the organization. Hofsteter was there in your day. These two giants and these two methods. Somewhere I think something has happened that, subjectively speaking, I think is a disturbing development, mainly that the word social has been made secondary in that the greatest bulk of students in schools of social work are interested in private practice. It is a relatively cheap degree and it is a relatively quick entry that is, within the society, acceptable terms to a degree. Those other methods, which mother nature geared to society, people in society and groups, has the social aspect--a conceptual sense of what that word means, not the social pleasure, but societal element I think you are actually right. Do you have time for the quick anecdote?

COHEN. Sure.

BUBIS. My professor was Geaser Mattger. A lot of Pittsburgh people were in the twin cities when I went to school. Gertmde Wilson did a land breaking landmark study, an educational alliance on professional practice, back in 1950 or so. This had to do with how many groups would a group worker staff. In those days it was even intended to have a master's in social work and group work actually working with a club. Then the

staff wasn't working directly with how many people that person supervised. It was really a push for professional standards in the settlement house. I was at a national conference where I met her for the first time. She asked me who I was and I told her. Then she asked where I studied and I told her. I had studied with her protege. Gertrude Wilson was a very big bosomed woman so when she heard this she stroked her bosom with pride. She said, "you are one of my grandchildren." That was my introduction to her. We became very close when she moved to Berkeley. I don't know if anecdotes fit in here.

COHEN. What social movements or activities were you involved in which seemed important but didn't lead to the goals that you wanted to obtain?

BUBIS. Well, after the war I was very involved politically in the Wallace campaign. History tells us it was unsuccessful. I was involved in something called the American Veterans Committee. You might recall it was an attempt among the veterans to break the back of the Conservative American Legionaires and veterans of foreign wars and move away from the notion of veterans having a call on the government for benefits and, rather, have the society have a call on the veterans for service. The whole premise behind the American Veterans Committee was to change into a service-oriented entity. Its back was broken by the Communists in those days, so it died an early but glorious death. I was active in the Federalists--all of the right causes, but at the wrong times. I never lost my optimism. I went on to become very active in activities for seniors. That was much more successful. It was more conventional and more acceptable.

Then in late years, the last fifteen years, I was quite involved with a peace movement

from Israel, with which I am still engaged in various elements of dimensions. There I think we have been very successful because the government we wanted to come in is in, and right as we talked in January 1994, we are in the middle of what I hope will be a successful peace process, difficult as it might be to archive. So those have been, I guess, the highlights of organizations that I engaged in aside from professional.

COHEN. Well, I would just like to say for the record that I have always felt that you were an extremely courageous guy, who took strong stands in the areas that you believed in. I am so happy to know that you feel that things are moving well in Israel toward what your goals have been.

BUBIS. There is a lesson there. There is a lesson for practice, which is that you mustn't give up. If you have a vision, and your belly and your head tell you it's right, you have an option, which is to try it. When one doesn't get ratified by the world around you, you give up on it, either despair or cynicism or whatever: defeat. I think the lessons that I have learned are that a lot of issues related to social movement and social change are issues related to timing and readiness. If you see yourself as a change agent, you have to understand your role in trying to prepare the readiness. It is like making way for that which is yet to be, which you may never see. If you are tenacious about it, then you continue. There I owe a lot to Gisella Konopka, who is now well in her eighties and is still working on adolescents and prisons, and the like. She has never lost her optimism: she is a woman who came out of Germany. It taught me a lot about tenacity and self-affirmation, which sometimes cannot be confirmed by a group or an organizational society at a given moment. It is either too unpopular or not ready. You have to have a servitude about yourself.

COHEN. What is your view on measures of what a social work professional can undertake to protect programs and policies?

BUBIS. I must say I am now a card-caring member, which I have always been, of NASW and its predecessor organizations. I have been since 1948. I do not resonate to the agenda of NASW, not because of any strong disagreement with it but rather, I guess, because of society and the field being as complex as they both are, there is much more sense of segmentation than there is unifying of purpose. I think that is understandable. NASW is very large now. I think it gets involved, understandably again, in a lot of institutional maintenance. The end result is that the camaraderie of the past is gone. The interdisciplinary or interesting or inter-methodological groupings are gone with the disappearance of the group work. Within NASW, there is this association for the study of groups. It doesn't have the same kind of forcefulness. So it is an organization that I suppose has grown to be larger than any of us ever thought it would be. It's really not clear to me what kind of impact it has. In all fairness, because I am not active in it, I really have no right to judge it as compared to what I felt about it in the days when I was active. My sense there is that an organization tends to reflect a society. This is a segmented society, so you get the so-called minority groups and that never includes the Jew anymore. My definition is of the other minority groups: You get the demands, all understandable, of the gays and the lesbians. It is a fractionated world with no vision of oneness or wholeness or completion that I would wish was there also. Then the other has to do with the fact that as more and more of these people have been in private practice, the agenda of concern has to do with issues that protect them. For example insurance cases and malpractice issues and issues of certification

and life insurance at the bottom line are much more gate keeping, to keep people out in many instances, and or to assure that insurance co-payments take place in the light; and, again, that social vision of the early giant is not there. I think the *Journalist* is a good journal, but again it has become more and more research oriented. It lacks the philosophic premises which seems to me should underpin the reason people go into that field in the first place, which is for the betterment of the human condition to the modification of social issues.

COHEN. Are there other works?

BUBIS. No. I think that is true and the take on them means much more narrowly gauged research, much more narrowly gauged reportage and evaluation and less and less of the visionary stuff that attracted me to social work in the first place. I no longer identify that strongly.

COHEN. I had a couple of other questions but I think you have already covered these. One last question. Do you have any personal papers, pamphlets or items that can be made available?

BUBIS. I gave all of my material to the American Jewish Archives where there are ninety boxes of everything. If anybody' wants to look at my writing, how I went about building the school, the philosophic things the work I did, or any of that, it is there in Cincinnati, Ohio, 3101 Clifton Avenue. I have nothing else.

COHEN. That is too bad.

BUBIS. Well, it is there for us to use.

COHEN. Gerry, do you have anything else that you would like to add to this?

BUBIS. No. I would say this. I have no idea if anyone will ever listen to this tape or

transcribe and read this.

COHEN. It will be transcribed and you will get a copy of it.

BUBIS. My only comment would have to do with the fact that I believe professions and studies and methodologies have to remain developmental and open ended and never become self satisfying or smug or conclude that they have now achieved the apotheosis of their knowledge and their wisdom and the like. Here again I am not comfortable. This could be as much out of ignorance as anything else. I am not comfortable with professional schools who don't have a strong overlay of diversity and ethical and the moral as a frame for practice because practice to me can otherwise degenerate down into techniques: everything from how to achieve a good orgasm, to run a good meeting, to get people to sign a petition without any long term goals. A moral under pennies. I would like to share more from the heads of the schools of social work with these as to their visions for the world and their visions for their students and the world their students will work in. I was involved in a very small enterprise and all of a sudden got in academically. I think I understood that teaching includes touching people's hearts and spirits and souls, whatever turns you on to elevate them about their own potential as human beings. When I look back on my own education, that to me is what happened to me in graduate school from Gisella Konopka and Ruby Purnel and other people. The other professors that I had--I have a great deal of trouble even bringing forth their names because they didn't touch me. They tried to teach me, but they didn't touch me. My wish for, my hope for a school and for a professor is to understand what the word "profess" means, to stand for something and to not assume that because you stand for it, that every student will in turn stand for that which you do. At least you then give the

student some piece of the whole of a person to contend with and in that process evolve his or her own professing of values and goals. A professional school doesn't do that. To me the professional school is stable and I think the school of social work that ends up producing the greatest number of its graduates going into private practice is a failed system, given the fact of their historical auspices and historical mission. There I despair and accept it because it isn't an impartial society that is in need of a little bit of help. So that is that is that.

COHEN. I thank you very much for taking the time for this interview.

ABSTRACT

Gerald Bubis obtained an MSW from the University of Minnesota, after experiences from childhood on working as club leader and later for Hillel. Following his graduate study, he was a full time assistant director of Hillel at the University of Minnesota, then sequentially with the Jewish Community Center in Minneapolis, in Oakland, in Long Beach, and in Los Angeles. In 1968, until his retirement 23 years later, he was with the Jewish Communal Service of the Hebrew University Adjacent to the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Here he established that program and, also, a joint degree with the USC School of Social Work leading to an MSW and a master's degree in communal service. This interview describes the establishing of that program and some of the philosophy and views that governed this participation in that program as well as his general professional activities.