

INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH AND RUDOLPH BERNSTEIN
October 24, 1983 by Nat Leon and Debbie Pesses

Identical twins

They were born/October 30, 1892 in the small town of Garland, La. in St. Landry Parish. Their grandfather said that they were so tiny when they were born that they could both fit in a "soup plate". They were fed every $\frac{1}{2}$ hour with a mixture of milk and brandy.

Their grandfather(mother's father), Abraham Meyer, had come from West Prussia to America in 1876. He owned a large plantation in Melville, La. and grew all kinds of crops: corn, cotton and sugar cane. Their father, Samuel Bernstein, was the eldest of 14 children. He had a grocery store on the farm.

When the boys were 4 years old, their parents separated and there was no one to care for them. Their grandfather, who was on the Board of the Jewish Children's Home, got them admitted to the Home, even though they weren't actually orphans. A sister, Mary, aged $2\frac{1}{2}$ and a brother, Benny, age 1 also entered the Home. The children never again saw their father and didn't see their mother until they were 25.

LIFE IN THE HOME: They lived in a lower floor dormitory with about 30 small cots in one large room. A colored nurse helped to care for them and they remembered her as "old lady Mary". Often she would bathe 4 or 5 boys at a time in a large bathtub. They wore short pants and shirts which were often hand-me-downs from the older boys who lived in the upstairs dormitory. Girls were separated from the boys, even in the dining room, and there was little contact with them.

MEALS: When the bell rang they would all get in a line and march to the dining room. They remember that for breakfast they were served grits one morning and oatmeal the next. (To this day neither of the Bernstein twins will eat these two cereals). The food wasn't fancy but there was enough to eat. There were about 150 children in the Home at that time.

DISCIPLINE: Rules were strict and if anyone disobeyed they had to stand in the hall alone for 2 or 3 hours. They had to make their own beds and, when they were older, had to carry buckets of coal for the one large stove in the center of the dormitory. There was no gas or electricity - both of which were installed just before they left the Home.

In the courtyard there was a high iron fence which separated the boys from the girls.

RECREATION: Once a year there was a big Home Anniversary party which everyone looked forward to because there was a "feast". Once a year they all had a ride on a river steamboat and also a yearly trip to a big plantation in St. Rose, La. "for a big layout". A couple of times a year they would walk to Audubon Park. On Mardi Gras everyone marched to Louisiana Ave. to see the parade.

In the back yard they played baseball and they also had a drill-master for exercises. There were swings and playground equipment. There was a high brick fence which surrounded the back yard and one of the twins remembers that he bought a sickle for 15¢ and would "Jump the fence" so he could cut the grass in neighbors' yards for 10¢ each - to get a little pocket money. There was a library at the Home, but no playing cards or games and no radio (not until 1920). There were no birthday parties that they can remember.

There was a band at the Home. A German professor taught various instruments. No girls played in the band because "it wasn't ladylike for girls to blow an instrument. Sometimes the band gave concerts for the children or for Mr. Isidore Newmwn at his home on St. Charles Ave.

HOLIDAYS: The Home had a small synagogue. The home director, Michel Hyman, was a "sort of" rabbi and Sabbath services were held each week. They also had a Seder every year.

SCHOOL: In 1903 Isidore Newman built a school on Jefferson Ave. for the children of the Home, Isidore Newman Manual Training School. Before that they had attended Mc Donough #14 school. They remembered Mr. Newman as "a short fellow with whiskers". They also recalled Mr. Henson who was a teacher and Mr. Endicatt, the school superintendant.

HEALTH: There was an infirmary in the Home with a nurse there. Two doctors serviced the children, Dr. Coleman and Dr. Feingold.

FEELINGS ABOUT THE HOME: Being there gave them a sense of security and they were happy to have someone taking care of their needs. They learned to be independent and to take care of themselves which helped them later on. They left the home on July 27, 1902 (they said 1906) and both went to work in small grocery stores run by family members in Crowley and Natchez, ^{La. + others} (?) Their salary was \$10 a month. They returned to New Orleans in 1914 and shared a room in a boarding house on Carondelet St. They worked in clothing stores as salesmen in various stores downtown.

Their sister, Mary, left the home later and went to Normal School in Natchitoshes, La. to become a teacher. Her salary was \$60 a month. Their brother, Benny, "bummed around a lot" and then worked on a river boat. Later he became a river boat captain and entertained President Hoover on his boat. Both brother and sister are now deceased.

MILITARY: Ehen the war broke out, Joe went into the Navy and Rudy and Benny into the Army. Joe studied wireless telegraphy at Harvard as the Law School was used by the military. Joe was assigned to a battleship with about 3,000 personnel. He said the food was "lousey" so he volunteered fo the Submarine Service (only 28 in the crew and a good cook). Every day that the submarine went down to test everything, the crew got 50¢ extra "because you didn't know if you were coming back up again". All 3 brothers returned safely from service.

POLITICS: They enjoy talking politics and remember President Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Taft. They said that the only Governor who ever did anything for the state of La. and the people was Huey Long. Lots of governors promised things, but "they just put the money in their pockets". Huey built roads and a bridge across the Mississippi River. Before the bridge, the Southern R.R. and the Texas-Pacific R.R. had to cross the river on a transfer boat. This was a flat boat with a double track on it and they could put about 10 train cars on the boat. It was pulled by 2 tugboats and was the largest transfer boat in the U.S.

RECOLLECTIONS: They remembered playing softball at the Y.M.H.A. on St. Charles Ave. ~~They~~ ^{Joe} also heard Enrico Caruso sing at the Atheneum. ~~They~~ ^{He} couldn't afford the price of a ticket, so went upstairs on the fire escape and listened by a window. Later Caruso was entertained at the Elks' Club and Joe had the thrill of seeing him at close range. (Somehow, Joe got into the club).

In 1920 Joe married Alma Irene Mayer and Rudy came to live with him. Joe and his wife had 2 children, Joe, Jr. and Irene. The Bernstein twins presently live at 5516 S. Rocheblave St. and will be 91 years old on October 30th. They are in good health and enjoy doing a little cooking (Joe) and taking care of the yard (Rudy). They get along very well and can't ever remember having ^{had} an argument. They smile and laugh a lot and, as they say, "they're still here".

→ Rudy worked at Marion Blanche for 46 yrs. and retired at age 75.

Joe worked at Krane Co. for 25 yrs. and retired at age 80.