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Ken Baronsky

SUMMARY

Ken Baronsky reflects on his memories of growing up in Seattle and tells the story of his great-grandparents' immigration to the United States. His great-grandfather, Mendel Baronsky, served as mohel, sofer, and sochet to Washington's Jewish community. Ken used archival materials, oral history, and research to write Zayde's Crossing, a novel based on his family's story.

Jeff Schwager: Hello, I'm Jeff Schwager, Oral Historian with the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. And today I'm interviewing Ken Baronsky who is the author of the new book, Zayde's Crossing, about his great-grandfather's journey from Russia to Seattle at the turn of the 20th century. Welcome, Ken, and thank you for speaking with us today.

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, thank you.

Jeff Schwager: So, let's begin by talking about you, and your background. I understand you were born in Seattle. Uh, what neighborhood did you live in, and what was that like when you were growing up?

Ken Baronsky: Well, I actually was born in San Jose. [Oh.] Um, but I grew up in Seattle. I was, uh, we moved to Seattle when I was just a baby. So, I don't remember it. But I was born in San Jose.

Jeff Schwager: Uh-huh. And, um, what was Seattle-where in Seattle did you live?

Ken Baronsky: Uh, we lived, uh, I mean, when I was a little kid, before 5 or 6, we lived on, uh, about 50th and 30, 30th or so. Um, not too far from the University Village. Um, and then we moved. Most of my, uh, life growing up, we lived in the Sandpoint area.

Jeff Schwager: Um, and what was that like when you were a kid? Is it, was it different than it is now?

Ken Baronsky: I, you know, I don't know what it's like now, because I've lived in California for over 30 years. [Laughing] Um, but my parents don't live in that house anymore. They still live in the Sandpoint area. Um, so I see it, and I, you know, it, it to me, it, it looks, um, the same that, you know, a lot of the houses have been torn down and redone and including the one I grew up in has been remodeled. So, the neighborhoods look a little bit different. But, um, for the most part, when I walk, walk through the neighborhoods, it's, uh, it's pretty similar. I guess one of the big differences now that you remind me, when I was growing up, the what is now Magnuson Park. It then was a naval base, so we, we had a view over the water. And so, we would see the Navy base and the parachuting. They would be practicing parachuting in the, in the lake. And, um, there was a golf course down there. And so, it was a functioning Navy base when I was growing up. And, uh, I went to Sandpoint Elementary School, which was, was right near there. And so, a number of the kids in my class were, um, you know, their, their parents were serving in the, in the Navy on the base.

Jeff Schwager: That's interesting. Um, tell me about your immediate family? Uh, what did your parents do? And did you have any siblings?

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, I do, I have, uh, my sister Beth is three and a half years younger than me. Um, my parents, Bob and Bobbie. Um, my father is from Seattle, born and raised in Seattle. My mother was raised in Los Angeles, and she, uh, she moved to Seattle,

um, when she was in college and, and met my dad through, uh, through a family member who was a fraternity brother of my dad at the University of Washington. So, they, they met there and then, uh, he pursued her, and back to California and, uh, and yeah, that was, that was, you know, kind of their early background. My dad was an attorney in Seattle. Um, and, uh, actually, I said I was born in San Jose. He was, um, he graduated from the University of Washington, probably 1961 or so, '60 or '61. And he was a law professor at Stanford, and that's where I was born. And then, um, shortly after that, he moved back to Seattle. He clerked for a Supreme Court judge in Washington. My mom was actually, I think, a typist for, for the judge also. And, uh, they lived in, near Olympia and Lacey, and then they moved to the house in Seattle that I mentioned.

Jeff Schwager: And what kind of lawyer was your father?

Ken Baronsky: Well, um, I would say, uh, from my perspective, he, he, when I was a kid, he was an old-fashioned lawyer because back in those days, um, probably the all the law of the state of Washington probably fit in a few volumes. And, uh, the lawyers then, um, kind of did everything. So, he did some litigation, he did contracts, he did wills and trusts. Um, he did, uh, you know, the judges would assign you pro bono. I remember he would get a call, and he would be defending a, you know, um, uh, defending a murderer case or something like that. So, things, you know, all over the place, um, very different than later in his career. He, um, he did a lot of real estate law, and a lot of shopping center leases. I think he did some of the early earliest shopping center leases in the Seattle area. And he also did some work in the, um, the alcohol distribution area. He represented the Washington State Beer and Wine Distributors Association. So that was, uh, that's a pretty interesting area of the law and business. So, um, those are a couple of things that come to mind.

Jeff Schwager: And how would you describe your childhood? What kind of kid were you? What did you enjoy doing? What were you, a sports kid, or a student? Uh, what was your passion?

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, I was, I was a student. I've always been a hard worker and a, and a pretty good student. Um, so I enjoyed that. And I was always into sports. Um, I played a lot of basketball, baseball. Um, tennis was kind of the family sport. Um, and we played, um, we played a lot of competitive tennis, especially when I was a kid. My, uh, my father was, uh, you know, grew up playing in the parks, but he ended up becoming a very good tennis player. And he had a scholarship at the University of Washington to play on the tennis team. And, uh, and he was quite accomplished. And my, uh, my sister also played tennis for the University of Washington, and she's still playing tennis. Um, and she's still very competitive in the, you know, in the Over 50. And I don't know, maybe now she's, she's, uh, she's probably in the Over 60 now. So, she's still, she's still doing it. Um, so as a, as a kid from, you know, age ten to, to 18 or so, through high school, I played, we played a lot of competitive tennis. My mom, also, um, was a very good tennis player. Um, I'd say, uh, the highlight of our tennis career was they used to have a tournament called the Family Equitable tournament. And, uh, we, they would play sections. They had 16 sections in the country, and it was a family tournament. It was mother/son, mother/daughter, father/son, father/daughter, all the, all the various permutations. And, uh, one year, my dad and my sister won their division and my mom and I won our division. And so, we got to go back east and play. They played the matches at the US open during the US open. And, uh, and we had a pretty good time, um, doing that. Um, didn't, didn't go very far in the tournament, but it was unusual that they had two teams. And I do remember they interviewed us on TV and when they came around to me and asked, um, you know, "Whether we like playing together and we played together a lot." I, as a teenager, I answered very honestly and said, "No, we don't play that much together because we'd never get along." [Laughing] Took the microphone right away from me.

Jeff Schwager: That's funny. I was also a big tennis player when I was a kid, although not as accomplished as you. Um, but, uh, I play out at Sandpoint now, uh, in Magnuson Park. Uh, there's a big tennis center out there. So.

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, I saw that. It's amazing. What's at Magnuson. All the soccer fields. And it's, it's great. I wish that was there. And the tennis center is beautiful.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. It's great. Yeah, I, I play there every week, so.

Ken Baronsky: Nice.

Jeff Schwager: There you go. Um, so, uh, what, what subjects in school were you most excited about when you were a kid?

Ken Baronsky: Oh, I liked, uh, you know, I liked math. I had an affinity for math, and I liked, um, and I liked writing. Um, so I did a lot of creative writing. I wrote for, you know, school papers and did things like that. Uh, those were reading. I was a big reader. Um, I wasn't so, I wasn't so crazy about the sciences. I wasn't, wasn't that, uh, crazy about, yeah, um, sciences was probably my weakness. It was, it was too much memorization, and I didn't like it that much.

Jeff Schwager: Uh-huh. Um, what schools did you go to in Seattle?

Ken Baronsky: Well, I went to, uh, I went to Sandpoint Elementary School through fifth grade. And then, um, in sixth and seventh grade, I bussed to Madrona and to Meany. They had a big, uh, program then, where they were, um, they had special programs at those schools. And so, um, I would, I was bussed of those schools, and they had, um, at Madrona and maybe Meany also, I can't remember exactly. On some days I would get bussed with some other kids out to Garfield and do some special classes there. So, I remember I was in a biology class there, and I was in a Russian class of all things there. Um, and, uh, and so anyway, I went there. Then in eighth grade, I went to Lakeside High School and that's where I graduated.

Jeff Schwager: Uh-huh. Um, and your grandfather, I understand, and also your great-grandfather, who's the subject of your book were both rabbis. Um, was your family, your immediate family still very involved, um, with the, with the Jewish community when, when you were a kid?

Ken Baronsky: Well, uh, first my great-grandfather was, was a rabbi of sorts. Um, he was a mohel, and a shochet, and a sofer. He had various, um, things. He wasn't, uh, a pulpit rabbi, at least in the United States. My, uh, my grandfather was not a rabbi, but he was, but he was very active in, um, the Capitol Hill Minyan for, Bikur Cholim when they had, you know, when they had moved to Seward Park, he, uh, was instrumental, I think in, in helping to keep the, the minyan going in, in the Capitol Hill area. Um, and my parents, um, were, um, they were active, they were founding members, I believe, of Beth Shalom Temple in, in, uh, in the area that I grew up with, the View Ridge area, I guess is where that is. Um, so, um, that's where I went to Hebrew school and that's where, that's kind of where my, my upbringing was, um, in Judaism.

Jeff Schwager: Um, and as you got older, did you share your family's, uh, feelings about Judaism or was there an evolution there?

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, it was definitely an evolution. I, you know, um, when I kind of reflect on it, my feelings about it, um, I think I, I took it for granted because my family was so, um, my grandfather especially, and grandmother were the patriarch and matriarchs of our family. And they had such a strong tradition that that our, you know, our Jewish holidays revolved around them and going to their services with them sometimes at Bikur Cholim. And, uh, and so I, I kind of took that, that part granted because it was just always there for me. The family was, you know, present. And I, I enjoyed that. The, um, the part about, you know, going to Hebrew school and doing those kind of things, I wasn't all that active in, in, um, kind of the Jewish community of my peers. Um, and so I didn't do the Jewish camps, and I didn't do the, um, uh, you know, birthright, those kind of things. But it was like I said, I, I kind of took that part for granted because it was always so present for me.

Jeff Schwager: Uh-huh. Um, and you went to UW after you, uh, finished high school?

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, I did, yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Following in your father's footsteps?

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, more or less. I mean, I literally, I literally did. Um, I, uh, I thought I, you know, it's sort of funny looking back on it. I didn't really have a well thought out plan. I thought, um, being a lawyer seemed like a, seemed like a good job. My dad, uh, really enjoyed doing it, and he was good at it. And so, I, I thought I would probably just go to law school and, and practice with him. Um, so that was kind of my, the sum and substance of my plan. Um, so I, I did my undergraduate and then I went to law school. Um, so it's funny, he was, he was a very good student. He graduated top of his class. So, I got the honor of, you know, walking in the door every day and seeing his name on a plaque as the number one student and, uh, no pressure. Um, and actually one of the first days of school, um, I went and I had a teacher, uh, Professor, Professor Peck, Cornelius Peck, who's kind of a famous professor there, was. And, uh, and my dad also had, had Professor Peck and, um, and I knew him. He was, he was the father of, of a woman that I went to high school with, Marion Peck. And so, I knew him anyway. So of course, he was an old school professor and he was Socratic. And he called on me the first day, and he told the story because he had, he had a little bit of a grudge because back in the days when my dad went to went to law school, they used to do, uh, a kind of a send-up where they would, they would spoof the, the teachers and he, he targeted, uh, Peck who rode a bicycle to school every day. So, my dad dressed up like him and rode out on the stage on a tricycle. And Peck told that story and then proceeded to skewer me in front of everyone. So, it was a, it was a rough introduction to law school.

Jeff Schwager: And so, you thought you would follow and practice with your father, but that's not what you ended up doing.

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, it's not what I ended up doing. Once. I, um, sort of funny, once I got into it. So, I had, growing up, I always had a job. I always had, um, I had different things that I did. Um, so I had a tennis racket stringing business in my, in my room. I had a stringer in my room. I strung for a lot of the stores around the Seattle area, Warshal's and some of the other sporting good's stores. I, uh, and then I, uh, I, I got an opportunity when I was, uh, probably, I think it was probably the summer of my, of my, or the, about before my junior year in high school. Um, a family friend had a, had a branch of a stockbrokerage downtown and he asked me if I would, I wanted to come in before high school very early, you know, the markets opened at 6:00 or 6:30 back then on

the West Coast and come in and, uh, basically stuff envelopes and give people quotes. You know, this was all before the internet. And, uh, and so I, I started doing that during the school year. I would go in at about, you know, 5:00 in the morning and I would work for two or three hours. And then I would, I would drive out to, to Lakeside. And, uh, and then over the summer, I was working there full time and I got a securities license. So I was, I don't know, 16 years old and I had a brokerage license. And we, we were, we weren't selling, we were just executing orders. And so, I worked there all the rest through, um, through undergraduate, I mean, through high school. And then through my undergrad, I worked, I worked for Schwab for probably six years. And, uh, and so anyway, the tie-in is later on, I took a summer job in law school with, um, Burlington Northern. I worked in their corporate department. Um, they had a very small legal department, just two people, a general counsel and a, and a assistant. And I got exposed to, um, kind of the world of, of high-end deal making. We were doing securities offerings. We had some mergers and acquisitions. We had, we were working with some of the top firms in the country, um, both in Seattle and also back east. And I just got exposed to a world and I was already interested in finance. Um, and so I started, I changed directions and, uh, you know, fortunately this was the mid-80s, the M&A market was, was very hot. And, uh, they were, you know, firms were expanding and looking for lawyers. And so, I was able to, to find a job with one of the New York law firms. Um, and I ended up joining them and, uh, and they, they opened up in Los Angeles. And so, I ended up joining them in Los Angeles.

Jeff Schwager: Mm-hm. And that that's, uh, one of the biggest and most prestigious firms in the country that you worked for. uh?

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, yeah, one of them.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. And so, you did, uh-tell me a bit about your career, uh, as a lawyer? Where were you? You were doing high end M&A work and billion dollar deals, that kind of thing?

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, big, you know, large deals. We worked on, you know, um, you know, multi-million-dollar deals, often billion-dollar kind of deals. When I started, um, we were doing, um, I was doing mostly finance work, um, in the public markets. I was doing a lot of IPOs. I took a lot of companies public, um, did a lot of work for underwriters who were underwriting those kind of work. We did, you know, the West Coast at that time was kind of the epicenter of the high-yield or junk bond market. So, we were doing a lot of junk bond offerings. Um, and, uh, um, and so that was kind of the staple of my practice for, for several years. And then, um, kind of in the '90s, uh, early 90s, the market, um, the market on the west coast kind of blew up. The business moved back east. I didn't want to go back east. And so, I, um, more or less changed my practice to, to working on mergers and acquisitions and, and work like that.

Jeff Schwager: Um, and, uh, so you're, you retired, uh, you're, you're retired now. Is that right?

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, I retired a few years ago.

Jeff Schwager: Um, and so, well, I guess this would be a good time then to start talking about the book. Um, I think a lot of, uh, professional people, a lot of lawyers dream of writing a book when they retire. You actually did it. Um, tell me about that?

Ken Baronsky: You're right. A lot of lawyers have a dream of writing books. [Laughing]

Jeff Schwager: Um, so let's talk about the book. What, uh, was it always in your mind that you would write a book? Uh, how did it come about?

Ken Baronsky: Well, you know, I had, I did have the idea when, you know, even in high school and college that I, I, you know, I had an idea to be a writer. Um, but it was, wasn't really my career plan. Um, and when I was working, there just was no time for anything like that. I was, you know, the kind of work I was doing was a 24/7 grind. So, um, when I retired, I, you know, took a little time just to kind of figure out what I wanted to do. I didn't really want to load up with a lot of, you know, more responsibilities. I really just wanted to take a breather. And then, um, but I did have this idea, uh, in the back of my mind about, um, about potentially doing a book that was based on, um, my Grandfather Ed, about his oral history interview that he did in the 1970s. He did. He did an interview. Uh, actually, my grandmother joined for the last part of the interview. Um, but that was 1974. And I remember, um, getting a cassette tape of the interview after they did it. And I had a little cassette recorder, if you remember those things. And, uh, same cassette recorder I used to, to learn my bar mitzvah, but the, uh, at 12 years old in 74 when that cassette tape came out, I listened to it a lot. And I used to spend a lot of time with my grandparents. I would sleep overnight there and see them quite often. And I was really fascinated with my grandfather's story of growing up in Siberia and, uh, and their, and their escape to Yokohama and then, uh, the early days of Seattle. Um, and I would ask him a lot of questions about those things, In fact, I mentioned earlier that I, I, I even took this class in Russian when I was in, in, uh, in seventh grade. And, uh, I was hoping that it, that was going to be a good connection with him, but it turned out he didn't really want to speak Russian with me, for whatever reason. He would, he would talk about his memories growing up with, um, you know, good memories. He, he, you know, he was a kid, so they were kid's memories and, uh, but he didn't want to, he didn't want to speak Russian with me. So that wasn't, that wasn't

a great connection. [Laughing] Um, but anyway, so that the oral history interview was, was, you know, I was, I'd listened to it many, many times and I had a lot of questions that I wished I'd asked him when he was still alive. Um, and even more now, but, uh, what, what ended up happening was my, uh, I have a cousin, Joyce Bloch, who, um, has, um, has kind of collected my great-grandfather's, um, um, records, photos. He, he kept a lot of records, um, a lot of interesting things. Hebrew, uh, Russian, um, um, documents that were very interesting. And I saw those documents. Um, probably she had a reunion party about-a family reunion-about, uh, maybe 15 years ago now. And she made a package of, of the documents, she photocopied a bunch of these documents that she had. And, uh, and so I saw those, and I didn't-they were mysterious. They weren't in, you know, they weren't most of them weren't in English. And I couldn't understand what they were, but they were fascinating looking. And I kind of made a mental note that I wanted to figure out what those what those documents were. Um, so after I retired, of course the technology has, has improved and I, so I went back, um, to the reunion package that I had, and I started scanning those and seeing what the, you know, modern tools can do with those. And I got some very interesting results. And it really just piqued my imagination. And I sort of put the oral history together with these documents that I had. And I said, I wonder if I could piece together, um, their story, their immigration story, uh, what it was like to grow up in Siberia at that time, what it was like when he was at war. What, what the, what was going on with the family when he was off at war, what it was like to, to leave and, uh, and immigrate to Harbin and to Yokohama. And then ultimately what Seattle was like in the early years. So, my novel only goes through 1928. So, it basically covers the, you know, turn of the century until about 1928. So, it's not, it's not really a biography per se, of my great-grandfather. It's, it's just a story of their, of this immigration period of theirs. And, uh, anyway, so that was, that was the, that was the concept. And I, I just started doing it. Um, I started writing, and I started researching the documents. And, you know, if I had it to do over again, I probably would do all the research first before I started writing [Laughing] because I had to rewrite a lot of things as I found out new things because I tried to keep it, you know, it's a, it's historical fiction, but I tried to keep it as close to the, to reality as, as I could. Um, just imagining the, the gaps of from, of, you know, in the framework. And, uh, anyway, so that was, that's how I got, got going on the project. And I found I really, I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed all the aspects of doing it.

Jeff Schwager: Um, um, why don't you give us a basic outline of, uh, the story as, as, as you see it? Uh, what are some of the interesting things about your great-grandfather that you learned and how his life progressed.

Ken Baronsky: Oh my gosh, we could talk for hours. [Laughing] But, I'll try to keep it brief. I mean, he, I knew that, um, I knew from my grandfather that he was, you know, he was born in Siberia. And, uh, Eastern Siberia, they were really at the edge of Siberia on the, on the border of Mongolia. And, uh, he, you know, he would say that winters were, were harsh, but the summers were nice. And, uh, and my, my great-grandfather, my Zayde. So, my story is called Zayde's Crossing. So, we called him Zayde. I did anyway. Um, Zayde was, was a rabbi in that town. Um, he, um, he actually, as I learned from my research, he was a, what they call a crown rabbi. Which means they, um, the, you know, if you were a religious rabbi, the community would elect you. But the Russian government, they regulated everything. And they, um, and they, uh, you had to be certified to be a rabbi. You got three-year terms, and they, the state, um, you had a role with the state, you would register births and deaths and marriages and things like that. They, you know, they kept track of everybody. So, he had that role, which was kind of a liaison, um, for this small Jewish community where they grew up, where, uh, where he served. Um, and, uh, and so that's, that's what he did. So, you know, my, one of my big questions from the research that my grandfather didn't know was where, where my great-grandfather trained. Um, he, my grandfather said in his interview that he trained somewhere in Russia, uh, probably near Minsk, but he really didn't know. So, I, I really wanted to, to figure that part out. And, you know, I didn't, you know, I knew that they had ended up in Siberia. And I knew my great-grandfather was born in Siberia. not, not where he was serving, but in a different part. And they were allowed to be in Siberia because, um, his, his father, my great-great-grandfather had been conscripted back in the old system for, you know, 20-some-odd years, probably maybe 25 years in total in the, in the Russian army, as they used to do. And your, you know, the privilege for that service, if you survive, is you get to, uh, you got to move to Siberia, where you got a little more freedom. [Laughing] But you had some probably some downsides too. So, that's how that's how they ended up in Siberia. And, uh, so it was interesting to me that he, he said he, that my grandfather said my, that Zayde moved back to, um, Eastern Europe, back to the Pale of Settlement, um, where the family had come from originally. But so, I had that in my mind, but I didn't really know where or, or what, but I pieced a bunch of information together that I won't, I won't bore you with here. Um, and I found out that the Baronsky family had come from a city, in what's now Belarus, called Borisov. And so, I did a lot of research about Borisov. I've seen some of the census information that confirms the family was there. Even my, my great-great-grandfather was there. And was, the census said he wasn't, he was absent because he was conscripted. So that it sort of put all that together. And I figured out the timelines and I ultimately, I was able to, um, have some documents that he saved that are beautiful documents. Handwritten Hebrew documents with stamps and really fancy signatures. And it turns out these are, um, certificates signed by rabbis in Borisov in 1899. Um, that give him his credentials as a shochet, and a, and a bodek, an inspector. Um, and so that's, you know, those were, it was like finding his diplomas and, and kind of figuring out that part of the mystery. What, uh, one of the things that, that I, I, I don't know for sure is why he, you know, he wasn't a full-fledged rabbi. Um, you know, I think they, they call it semicha is, is the word for your, your ordination. And, uh, and so he, he didn't have that. He still, they referred to him as a rabbi, and he functioned as a rabbi in Siberia. But he wasn't he wasn't a full-blown pulpit rabbi. His, his rabbinical certificates were, were as a shochet and

a bodek. Um, so I, you know, that's, that's one of the mysteries. I have some theories about why that was, but, but, uh, but, but it's hard to know.

Jeff Schwager: Hmm. And so, he went from Siberia eventually to Yokohama.

Ken Baronsky: Yeah. So, I, I so the next he, so he served as a rabbi there until the war. So, he was there from the early 1900s until 1915, and then he was conscripted into World War I, and he was stationed, um, mostly up near Finland. So that's, you know, again, that's another 3 or 4,000 miles away the other way, um, west. And, uh, and he served there. He, I think it's at one point he was, he was on the front line, you know, in a, in a shooting capacity. But I think most of his service, he was kind of a scribe. He was, you know, was a little older then, he was in his thirties. So, he wrote letters for the, um, for some of the, um, other people who were serving. And he did some, you know, some other things of that kind of a clerical nature. And then after the war, um, he came back in 1917 at the, at the end of the war and uh, I think, you know, all hell was breaking loose because of the Revolution. Um, one thing is interesting. I found out that the town that he was in, Lenin, was actually imprisoned in that town. So, so all the con, all the, you know, all the prisoners were escaped, or were let loose. And, so, it was a pretty wild time, I'm sure, to be there. And, uh, and I don't want to totally ruin the story, but he, he did-he ended up getting put in jail, um, by, um, some of these Bolsheviks and, of course, he was on the wrong side of the war from their perspective. And, uh, he went to jail for a while and his, his wife, my great-grandmother, um, joined him to make, to try to prevent him from getting shot. And um, I think they, you know, their release was somehow negotiated, and I think, I'm sure that's when they decided it was a good time to leave. And so, they, uh, so yeah, they left. Um, not, you know, they said they didn't, it wasn't, um, like a sudden thing, like they left in the middle of the night. They planned for it. They took a lot of things, and they went first to Harbin for a short time. Uh, where my great-grandfather had an older brother who was a year older, Joseph. Joseph Baronsky, and he was a, he was a rabbi in Harbin and, and eventually in Tientsin, China. And so, that's another mystery-is I know they stayed with them in Harbin, but very short period of time. And then they went to Yokohama to wait to try to get to the United States. So, it's another one of those mysteries that I haven't been able to, to have a, you know, good answer of why they didn't just stay in Harbin and Tientsin, with the family there. Um, but for whatever reason, they had a plan to come to the United States and they, they waited in Yokohama to do that. There was a pretty sizable refugee Jewish community in Yokohama at the time, and my great-grandfather served as a basically the same capacity as a, as a sort of rabbi and, and all of his ritual skills he put to use there in Yokohama. So, I think um, that's what they did during their, their days in Yokohama.

Jeff Schwager: Hmm. Amazing, uh to think of, of that kind of journey and how many kids were there at that point?

Ken Baronsky: There were four. There were four. Yeah, there were four. Uh, the aunt, my Aunt Slata, was the oldest. Um, my Grandfather Ed was the second, um, my Aunt Dora was the third and an uncle, um, Sam, who was Zalman in Russia. He, I, I never knew him. He passed away in the '30s, even before my dad was born. So, uh, there were the there were the three, um, that I knew, I knew growing up. Um, and then, um, they had-she actually, when they left for, for the US, um, they went, they went, you know, not through New York. They went the other, the west route through or east through, uh, San Francisco. Um, my great-grandmother was pregnant. Um, and so she had, she had a child about three months after they landed in America. My, my Aunt Anne, um, who I knew growing up. And, uh, so, so they had four kids, but one was-they had a fifth one that was brewing.

Jeff Schwager: Ah-huh, and so they landed in San Francisco and eventually made their way to Seattle. [Yeah.] Um, and, uh, what do you know about, uh, does the book, the book continues to cover their lives in Seattle?

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, about half the book I'd say is, is the Seattle part. Um, and I found out a lot about that, um, about what they did there. I, I don't-I didn't…It's a little mysterious what their plan was exactly. They, when they did their immigration, um, documents they listed some family, my great-grandmother's family, that lived in Brooklyn, in New York. So, I think, you know, officially their plan was to go back east. But, um, the-I think what my grandfather said in his interviews was that the family was, you know, sort of supportive of them coming to the US, but they were a little skeptical that they were going to be able to find work. And, and whether the East Coast was a good place to go. And I my guess is my grandfather, my great-grandfather had a plan to, uh, find work in San Francisco because there was a pretty, you know, proportionately a pretty big population, Jewish population, in San Francisco at the time. But what, um, what I found in my research that I think is right, is that San Francisco was not really a big Orthodox community. It was it was more of a German, um, um, community. And, uh, I think what happened is the the Bikur Cholim Synagogue in Seattle, which was, which was Eastern, Eastern European, uh, Russian. They were looking for somebody like my, my great-grandfather, who had those skills to come to Seattle. Um, in fact, I, I got some, um, there's an archive in Saint Louis, I think, of the, of Rabbi Glazer, who was the rabbi at Bikur Cholim at that time. And his papers are archived. So, I did get a bunch of those papers and, uh, I actually got some minutes of the Bikur Cholim, um, board meetings where they were sort of imploring him to find this person to bring, to get, to bring to Seattle. And so when I read that, I'm like, okay, this is exactly the same time period that they were in Yokohama. So, um, so I think that's, and that's similar to what my, my grandfather said in his interviews that, um, while they were in San Francisco, somebody, probably one of the rabbis there got word to him that, that Seattle would be

a good place for him to go.

Jeff Schwager: Uh-huh, and so your grandfather at this time was a teenager, is that right?

Ken Baronsky: Yeah. He was, uh, he was about 15 when they, when they traveled.

Jeff Schwager: And I imagine he did not know English when he got here?

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, I don't know. I think he might have known a little bit. I don't, I don't know, it's interesting. When they were in Yokohama, he was um, you know, they were planning to come to the US and the kids were actually at Catholic schools in Yokohama. There were French Catholic schools for the girls and for the boys. And I think they might have studied some English there. They, you know, obviously they knew they were coming. So, my guess is they were prepared. But um but yeah, that's what um, that's what I thought is when they got here, it probably was difficult, like it would be for any immigrants that that come not speaking English to, to, to work right into school. And I think, um, I know he went to high school for a little bit. Um, and he didn't, he did not graduate from high school. Um, and I don't know if that's because they needed, they needed him to work, or if he felt like he needed to work or, um, he just didn't, he, you know, probably might have felt like he was behind because of the language difficulties. I don't really know.

Jeff Schwager: And what sort of work did he end up doing, uh, as an adult?

Ken Baronsky: Well, he, um, I know in the early years, he, um, he worked, um, I think he, he worked well, I know, I know as a, as a kid, he talks about it. He worked at various things. He worked actually for, um, he worked for Mayer Brothers, the, the clockmakers, the jewelers, you know, the, you know, the big fancy clocks in Seattle. Um, I don't know how many are left now, but there were a lot when I was a kid and, uh, he worked for that company. They had a, they had a business selling, uh, medals and medallions and things like that. And I think he worked there, um, uh, polishing those up and fixing them and maybe selling them. He worked for a guy who had sort of a surplus business and, uh, he said he was, um, he would- because he could speak Russian, he would go and they would, you know, we were on the same side as the Russians in World War II. And so, he would go and they would sell some of the stuff to the Russians. And he was doing that. He had worked for a guy who, during the Depression, who was kind of a junk dealer, um, and he worked for that guy for a few years. Um, he worked for Prottas and Leavitt, which was a furniture, furniture store family. They had several stores in Seattle. He worked for them for quite a while. Um, and then, uh, after he married my grandmother, he, uh, um, uh, so this is past my story, so I don't have all the research on that part. But I know from my dad that he, at one point he took over a grocery store that, um, that my grandmother's, my other great-grandfather who was in Seattle, Hyman Handlin, had a grocery store and my, and my Grandfather Ed and his brother-in-law, uh, took over that store for a while. But I think that was kind of in the era when, you know, the bigger grocery stores were driving the little grocery stores out of business. So, I don't think it was that successful. Most of the time, most of my life, uh, when he was working, he was a salesman and he sold, um, appliances, he sold appliances at some of the big stores around Seattle. So that's, uh, that's what he did.

Jeff Schwager: So your father's success must, must have been, uh, a real thrill for, for his parents, uh, being number one in law school at the University of Washington?

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, I, I don't know if you've listened to my grandfather's interview, but there's, there's a pretty funny portion of that interview when, uh, they, they start talking to both of my grandparents about him and they, um, they're very proud of him. They, you know, they say he, they were, they were poor, he did it all on his own, he was a self-made guy. And, uh, he, uh, there's a point where my grandfather starts bragging and says, "He was second in his class." And my grandmother corrects him and says, "No, he was first in his class." [Laughing] [Yeah.], Yeah, they were definitely very proud of their family, everyone, really.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. That's, uh, an amazing, uh, immigrant story. Uh, that's so, uh, not typical, but sort of aspirational for, uh, Jews of that era. Um, it's a great story.

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, it's, I find, I think it's a, it's a super interesting story. I mean, one of the things that just I'm just impressed with is that you just realize these people were born at a really difficult time in history. I mean, they going through, you know, it's not bad enough being a Jew in Russia at that time, in the Russian Empire. But then you, then you get the different wars, you get World War, World War I, you get the Russian Revolution, you get the Great Depression, you get World War II. I mean, it just was one, one thing after another. And I look at our, you know, my time, my time frame so far, and even my parents, and, and we've had it, we've had it pretty good compared.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah, definitely. Um, so I'm curious about your, uh, your research process aside from, uh, your grandfather's interviewing and it's, you know, very exciting for the, for the Jewish Historical Society that you're able to, to sort of use that as, as a basis for, uh, or an inspiration for, writing the novel. But, um, I'm curious about your sort of literary research. I mean, were you a

fan of the genre of sort of Jewish historical fiction? Who did you draw from and read to kind of fill in the gaps of, of your family's story?

Ken Baronsky: Well, I am a fan of the, of the genre. Um, I read, uh, you know, I read a book that, I read actually several books while I was doing the, the project. And, uh, one of them that I, I really enjoyed that, I just, it really struck me was a book called, um, it's called The Bridge. My-it's something about a bridge. And, um, it's-I might have it here somewhere. Uh, The Invisible Bridge. So, um, Invisible Bridge is a really good book. It's about, it's a, it's a, it's a similar kind of story, but it's, it's a more World War II, and it takes place in Hungary. And, um, it's, it's written differently. Um, it's more, it's more dramatic than my book. I think they, I think these aren't, these were based on real characters, but they weren't real characters. Um, and so the writer, she embellished more and made it, and made it more as more of a, um, you know, a literary arc, I would say, because that's how it's crafted. And I really, I really enjoyed that book. It's much, it's, she's a much better writer than I am. So that was, that was a pleasure to read. Um, and I read another book by Henry Roth. It's in Brooklyn. You read that book about him, uh, about him as a young child and he. And he's got a kind of an abusive, uh, [Yeah.] father.

Jeff Schwager: Let's Call it Sleep.

Ken Baronsky: Let's Call it Sleep. Right. It's I just that was another book that really stuck with me. So those, you know, those books are, are different, but they're immigrant stories and they, uh. Um, but yeah, I like the genre. So that's a couple I read.

Jeff Schwager: Uh, and how much do you feel like you had to kind of fill in the blanks in writing your book? Was, was it a lot or did you feel like, uh, the story was there for you?

Ken Baronsky: I would, I think the framework was there for me. Um, but I had to fill in a lot because I'm, I was writing in a, in a narrative style. Um, that, um, you know, I didn't have that many details. I mean, an example is, you know, one of the stories that was vivid to me was my grandfather talking about, um, and I can't remember if this was in his interview or he just told me about this, but he, he had a memory of as a, as a young child, probably five or six, his father took him on a, on a sleigh in winter. And they went out to a farmer's place. You know, a few miles away. And, uh, they slaughtered. He slaughtered a cow there. And, uh, they slept overnight, and they, they went back. And so, he-so, I don't know much about that. You know, that's about all I know. But I wrote a chapter about that. And, uh, and so, yeah, I had to make up, and imagine what the, you know, what is, what's the sleigh like? How do they, what is it like? How, you know, how long does it take to get there? How many times do you have to stop to, to feed the horse and, um, let them rest. And, you know, I learned about there's, there were waystations and you can find out, you know, now, now with AI, hopefully reliably, you can find out a lot of these details pretty easily. You can ask it, you know, "How, how would you do it? How would you do a trip like this where, you know, where are these waystations?" Um, and, uh, and then, you know, I would imagine what the dialogue would be with the farmer and what and what my grandfather's, um, how he would behave in this kind of thing. So, you know, I, uh, I thought that's, that's a chapter I really like. And so, to, to answer is I made up a lot of it, but I, it's the, the story, the, the story is real. It's just the details; the details are all made up.

Jeff Schwager: Um hum. That's great. Um, have you, I assume you've shared the book with, with your extended family at this point?

Ken Baronsky: Well, it's, it's not actually out yet. So, it's going to, it's going to come out, um, in, uh, the beginning of May. So, I'm still working on the, the, on the, the book production. Um, it's self-published. So, the book production is, uh, is quite a lot of work. It's very interesting to me to see how, how it works. I've got a book designer who's helping me. And so, she's guiding me through the process. And, uh, and we're getting very close. We're, you know, picking out Amazon keywords today. And we're, I'm getting, I'm getting some proofs of the actual book next week, so I'm pretty excited about that. And yeah, it's been, uh, it's been a, it's been a long, fun project. Um, I did have some early drafts. I had a group of about ten people, uh, mostly family, but a few friends, a few non-Jewish friends. The book is the book's pretty Jewish, so I wasn't sure that non, non-Jewish people would, would find it interesting. My friends, they're friends, so of course they told me they thought it was interesting, but we'll see. Um, and, uh, but they were helpful and gave me some feedback and some good ideas. That was a while ago. And then, um, my dad's been very involved in reading it. Um, and so he's, he gives me ideas, we debate different questions and different things. That's been one of the really fun parts of the project is connecting on this, on this topic because he's very interested in it. Um, I have, uh, my cousin Joyce, who I mentioned. Who-the one who did the reunion package. Joyce, um, has she's kind of been my, uh, my kosher expert because she's because she's observant and she keeps kosher. So, she, she's read the book cover to cover a few times and told me all the, all the kosher details and religious details that I, I didn't know, that I got wrong. So, we tried to, tried to clean that up out of respect for my great-grandfather, I didn't want to have those errors in there. And, uh, um, and yeah, and I, you know, I, in the course of all of this, I built a website that's got, um, all of these documents displayed. Oh, you looked at the website. That's right. [Yeah.] Um, and so I wanted to kind of create something. I realized not everybody reads anymore. Not everyone's going to read a book. So, um, especially for the family, I wanted to have the website to display these documents that I'm trying to preserve and,

and decipher. And so people who, um, if they want to engage on that level, they can.

Jeff Schwager: Um, uh, you know I, I skipped over this question earlier, but do you have kids yourself?

Ken Baronsky: Yeah, yeah, I do. I have two daughters and one's, uh-Sara's 30 and Anna's 27.

Jeff Schwager: Uh, have they read the book? I'm curious what the next generation would think?

Ken Baronsky: Uh, Sara read an early, early draft, and, uh, and, uh, she gave me some, some good feedback. Um, Anna, I'm not sure Anna's read it. Anna is a, a designer, though, so she's helped me, um, some with the website and she's been, you know, helping with some of the design elements of the books. There's some images in the book. And so, um, I've gotten pretty proficient at, uh, trying to clean up some of these photos that are, you know, that are some are kind of in disrepair. And so, I didn't want to, um-I wanted to present them as best I could. So, she's been helping me with some of that technology. So, part of the project, project has been me learning some of these modern tools and how they, how they work. They're pretty amazing.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah, yeah. Was it, uh, did your daughters know this story already? Was it sort of family lore that had been passed on, or is it new to them?

Ken Baronsky: I think it's new to them. Um, and there, and honestly, there are aspects of the story that, that none of the family knew. Which is-it's interesting to me that, you know, uh, like take my great-grandmother, Frieda Heifitz. She, she died, um, she dies just after the story ends. It's one of the reasons I ended it there. So, she dies in 1929. Young. So, she, she died before any of my parents or his siblings were even born. So, they didn't know her. Um, and they didn't really know that much about her or the family. And so that was a lot of the research I did was, um, trying to find out about her and her family and, uh, and, uh, oh, we don't have time to go into it, but I did end up connecting with, with some of her family. Um, one of my contemporaries who's a cousin who, who immigrated in the '90s from, from Russia and she had a whole treasure trove of information about the family that that stayed behind in Russia. Kind of grim, as you can imagine. But, um, um, but yeah, that was, um, so that was interesting. But it intrigued me that even my, um, my dad and my, um, my aunt, his older sister who's still alive and had a lot of, um, photos and things. And we talked about a lot of things. They just, I guess the families just didn't really talk about some of these ancestors when they were growing up because they didn't really know very much. So, um, so I think I've, you know, I think that's one of the reasons they're interested in this is because these are a lot of questions that they, they didn't know the answers to. Like where, like where Zayde studied and where the Baronsky family originated. I mean, that wasn't even a thing that was in our, in our, uh, memory.

Jeff Schwager: Mm-hm. And when, when did, uh, Mendel, when did he pass away?

Ken Baronsky: He passed away in, um, 1970. So, he was, and he was born in 1880. So he was, he was, uh, he was almost 90. He was, I think he was late, late 89. Uh, so I, I knew him when I was, you know, a kid, I, he, he died when I was about, I would have been about seven. And, uh, my dad used to take me there sometimes on Sundays he would visit Zayde when he was living with, um, his daughters, my great aunts. And, uh, so we'd visit him on Sunday. He was in a wheelchair then, um, he'd lost a leg late in life in a car accident. And, uh, I, you know, I, I remember being there. I don't remember talking to him that much, but, um, I my, my biggest memory of him was he would kind of motion and I would wheel him into, um, his room and he kept a stash of Hershey Bars in a, in a high dresser and we would share a Hershey Bar. Uh, so as a kid, that's what I remember. Um, but my dad tells me that he was known for having a sweet tooth and that he used to, he used to walk around with a pocket, full of, uh, of, uh, like hard candies that he would, uh, give to kids and things like that. So that's, that's, that was my interaction with him.

Jeff Schwager: Um, uh, a couple other sort of broader questions and then I'll let you go. Um, uh, immigration is such an important topic in our country today. I'm curious what insights uh, learning all this gave you into the, the sort of immigrant experience and how they apply to people today?

Ken Baronsky: Yeah. Well, without, without getting overly political about everything, the, um, there's no question that there are a lot of parallels and, um, and it resonates a lot when I see what's going on with the, with the reaction and the, and some of the views about immigrants. Um, I see this as a, you know, I don't think it ever was easy to immigrate. And, uh, and I know that even in this time, um, you know, my, my great-grandparents, um, and their family when they were, they were very lucky in a lot of ways that their timing was good. Uh, 1920 from Yokohama was probably the last time that you would be able to, to, to, to make it to the US from there. Um, because that got shut down right away and that the, you know, Hebrew Immigrant Assistance Service, HIAS, which is still going. They, you know, they were providing assistance to these refugees all over the world. Um, they shut down their office there. Uh, right. You know, very shortly after 1920. And so there were, there were other ways to make it to America, but you couldn't do it then. So, it just, you know, it just, um, you just can't help but think how fortunate you are that that you know, that I am, that they made it here. Um, because it wasn't, it wasn't a done deal. And I, you know, I, I can't help but feel for all the families

that are going through similar kinds of crises all over the world, um, and looking for, looking for a better place. Um, that, uh, you know, just, uh, you know, shutting our doors and even kicking people out of the country just seems, seems really wrong to me.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah, I think that's one of the important things about a book like this is that it really humanizes what that experience means, for anyone who, who has a chance to read it. Um, I guess the other thing I wanted to ask you is, um, looking so deeply into your family's experience, um, what sort of insights you gained into the Jewish experience, uh, writ large and what it means, uh, transferred to, to being a Jew today in the world?

Ken Baronsky: Oh, that's a, that's a big question. Um, well, you know, I do feel, I guess maybe it's a function of, of maturing and, or just getting older and facing your mortality. It the, the, uh, the, the Jewish, um, roots really resonate with me, um, more now than they did, uh, earlier in my life. And I have, I think, more respect for how strong those ties are and how meaningful they are. Um. Um, especially with what's going on here and elsewhere in terms of, uh. You see some of these cycles repeating themselves, the increase in antisemitism and some of these things that it's just hard to believe that it's, it's happening. Um, and you just, um, so you realize that your connection to this, and that things are precarious and this is, you know, not to, not to, uh, make light of it, but this is your Tribe. So that's yeah, you need to, you need to, you need to be part of that.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. Well, thank you so much for talking, Ken. It's a real pleasure to meet you and to hear about the book. And I look forward to having a chance to read it when it's published. So, thanks a lot.

Ken Baronsky: Okay. Thank you. Jeff.

Jeff Schwager: I'm going to shut down and then I'll just talk to you for a second. I'm going to stop the recording and.

Ken Baronsky: Okay.