Erving Goffman's Early Years:

Recollections of Family and Friends

By Michael Delaney

The following brief account of Goffman's youth and early family life is mostly based on interviews and remembrances posted at the *Erving Goffman Archives (EGA),* industriously conducted and collected from family members and boyhood friends by Dmitri N. Shalin. Primary sources cited include **Frances (Fran) Bay**, Erving's sister; **Eli Bay** (Frances Bay's cousin-in-law); two maternal first cousins, **Ester Besbris** and **Gertrude "Goldie" Frankelson**; **Marly Zaslov** (Goldie Frankelson's daughter); **Saul Mendlovitz** (a boyhood pal of "Goff"); and **Meyer Brownstone** (Goffman's high school friend). See also the one-page biographical summaries for Anne, Frances, and Erving Goffman posted on the *EGA* site. I should note that Sherri Cavan, drawing on these *EGA* remembrances, covered a number of the same "biocritical" points in her talk at the Couch-Stone Symposium I attended (thanks to Dr. Shalin) in Las Vegas in April 2001. Also cited is the informative article by Yves Winkin, "Erving Goffman: What is a Life? The Uneasy Making of an Intellectual Biography," in *Goffman and Social Organization: Studies in a Sociological Legacy*, ed. Greg Smith, Routledge 1999.

Note that the pdf document format used by *EGA* does not produce consistent formatting for displaying and printing documents on different computer platforms; consequently, citations to page numbers are not given. A few "silent" corrections of inadvertent misspellings and inconsequential typos have been made.

Erving Manual Goffman was born on June 11, 1922 in the small Canadian town of Mannville, Alberta. Four years later, in 1926, the Goffman family moved eastward to Dauphin, Manitoba, a town of about 4,000 residents located approximately 200 miles west of Winnipeg, the provincial capital. (Yves Winkin)

Erving's father, Max Goffman, "a short, stocky man," immigrated to Canada from Ukraine some time before the Russian Revolution in order to escape from "the pogroms in the Russian [Czarist] army," in which he had served as a sergeant, according to Winkin. Max Goffman apparently emigrated unaccompanied by other relatives, and little is known about the paternal side of the family. Erving's mother, Anne, some nine years younger than her husband, was the youngest sibling of the extended Averback family, of which more below. (The family name is sometimes spelled "Auerbach."). Winkin reports that Anne arrived in Canada in 1912; she and Max married in 1915 and had Frances four years later (1919, with Erving following in 1922. Like her two children, Anne was of comparatively diminutive physical stature; as Ester Besbris said, "She was a tiny lady (but we would say she was ten feet tall), a beautiful beautiful woman." Max was somewhat taller.

There were two things that everyone recalls about Max Goffman: his omnipresent cigar (Eli Bay likened him to George Burns) and his love of cards. Frances Bay recalls that her father was good at cards and often played poker with his male friends — a trait he passed on to his son. She considered him to be a warm father with a good sense of humor. He was on the quiet side and not given to making tart remarks. Her father felt a lot of things emotionally, Frances remembers, but did so without openly expressing his feelings. Anne ran the household and Max left disciplining the children up to her, tending to go soft on them. Anne was more of a strict, old-fashioned parent, especially with young Erving (no doubt with good reason); she would spank him for his recurrent misdeeds over Max's objections. Overall, Frances says, "My parents were loving, strict and warm."

Over the years, Max Goffman owned and operated several clothing and general merchandise stores in Dauphin and elsewhere in the vicinity; one was a dry-goods store featuring ladies ready-to-wear. Frances Bay describes the family as being "comfortable" (well-off financially) and on the upper end of the local middle-class scale. (Being Jewish may have complicated the family's social standing in the community somewhat, given the time and place they lived in, although the

family remembrances cited do not lay stress on that issue.) Meyer Brownstone contends that the Goffman family was considered "bourgeois" in comparison with other local Jews at the time (especially during the Great Depression years). Max certainly was a good provider for his family, Besbris adds: the family did not suffer much financially even during the Great Depression; they lived simply but comfortably.

Goldie Frankelson warmly remembers her Uncle Max as "a wonderful man of the world" who was fond of tea, poker, and singing Jewish songs. After each visit to Montreal where he bought dresses for his store, he would bring her back a dress as a gift. Ester Besbris likewise characterized Max as generous; in financially straitened times, relatives would go to him for a loan even when their own close kin refused to do so. Max was gentle and doted on Anne, Besbris recalls. All in all, one gets a sense of Max as an affable and kind-hearted man.

As for Anne, Goldie Frankelson thought of her as "always fantastic ... just awesome" — "The most wonderful woman in the world." Goldie's daughter, Marly Zaslov, stated that Anne was very much North Americanized in her style of thought-expression and dress, whereas her sister (Marly's grandmother) was much more old-world in outlook. Zaslov describes Anne as a strong woman, a take-charge type, a planner and orchestrator who "moved everything along" (for instance, orchestrating weddings) and that she "had a great eye and great taste." (Of course, by occupation, Max would also have been up on clothing styles.) Zaslov says that Anne was the matriarch of the Averback fold; all her nieces and nephews looked up to her and would go to "Aunt Annie" for advice and consolation and such.

To Ester Besbris, likewise, Anne Goffman was an amazing woman, "almost indescribable." She was familiarly called "Aunt Anne" to everyone and her table was always open to all. "Just an amazing, perceptive, bright, warm, generous woman." Anne was always baking things and she also sewed dolls' clothes. When Anne wrote something in a letter, Besbris recalls, you could truly hear her voice in it. She had a special gift for that, despite her modest formal education. Unlike Ester's mother, Anne read and wrote English. She loved music and loved to dance. When

older and less able to dance herself, she would watch other dancers with joy. She took pleasure in other people's pleasure and appreciated their enjoyment of life.

Frances Bay also mentions that her mother loved music and had many records. (At one point, young Erving dropped a carton of records while going downstairs to his basement retreat, breaking some, for which he was duly punished). When she was seventeen, Frances dropped out of school to pursue her love of acting; she reports that her parents were very supportive of her acting career (which proved to be quite successful). Her mother even made her costume for her first role as a Chinese princess. (Source: one-page Frances Bay biography.)

Of Dauphin's population of around 4,000, there were a dozen or so Jewish families, according to Frances Bay. The two Goffman kids were brought up in a religiously mixed neighborhood, and Erving's boyhood friends were non-Jewish. Eli Bay, who also grew up in Dauphin, recounts that it had a significant Polish-Ukrainian population and that there was an appreciable amount of "polite" anti-Semitism, e.g., joking references to "White" (good) Jews and "Black" (bad) Jews. But whatever anti-Semitism there was seems not to have been particularly virulent (as it reportedly was in much of the region in that era). As Fran grew to marrying age, her father decided to move the family from Dauphin to Winnipeg, so that Fran would be around Jewish marriage prospects and not marry a Gentile (such as her onetime boyfriend), as he feared. (He told her that he loved her very much, but that he was afraid for her if she were to marry a Gentile.)

According to Ester Besbris, the Goffman family celebrated the major Jewish festivals (officiated by a visiting rabbi from Winnipeg), but were not all that religious. The family did not keep a kosher household, but then Dauphin never had a kosher butcher. Besbris states that Max and Anne were not political. Their daughter Fran, however, recalls being very much involved in leftist politics of the labor-farmer socialist sort that was widespread in the Prairie Provinces in the Depression-era 1930s. Her New Theater Group put on such radical plays as Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, the plot of which turned on a group of cab drivers making preparations for a

union strike. (Meyer Brownstone noted that most local Jews were working class and tended to be politically radical; many were dependant on welfare during the Depression.)

Frances Bay says that her parents spoke English with accents. They mainly spoke Yiddish at home, but Erving did not (although he retained some of the language in his adult years). Her mother had more formal schooling than her father, who was comparatively uneducated.

By her lights, Ester Besbris recounted, the Averback family as a whole considered self-presentation (i.e., status-displaying) important, including such things as having fancy books on hand to impress visitors. (This was a theme Goffman took up in some of his earliest writings on status symbols and displays, notably the account in his Master's Thesis of upscale living room decor and accouterments in houses in the tony Hyde Park area of Chicago.) Some of the Averbacks were well-known in the community and became socially snobbish, concerned with "name" and their social doings, Besbris adds. Goffman must have observed this, she thinks, but he never put on airs himself.

Marly Zaslov adds that "It was all image with the Averbacks." The Averback brothers tended to marry women with "society" attitudes, evincing the high-and-mighty complex. There was a definite class line drawn between the more upscale and downscale branches of the family, a line that included where they lived in Winnipeg. (Some lived above or behind the stores they ran; others lived on the "better" part of town.) The more uppity Averbacks had strong ideas of how one ought to conduct oneself, keeping up one's image and appearances; propriety and decorum were to be maintained. But Anne, "the good one," had no such airs.

Ester Besbris likewise maintains that the Averbacks as a whole had dramatic presence, being given to role-playing with their status-games. Intriguingly, her son even referred to a "damn Averback gene" for dramaturgy, a histrionic streak or tropism for show business. Her grandson even gave up medical school to become a sports announcer, Besbris rues. Marly Zaslov also notes that all eight of Averback siblings had an artistic bent, whether for singing, dancing, or acting. From an early age Goffman was exposed to the magical worlds of radio, cinema, and

theater, which surely had a profound effect on his imagination, especially coming from a small, isolated outback town as he did. And later, thanks to his sister's acting and broadcasting career, he doubtless became acquainted with the "backstage" of theater of radio, where the preparation and production work goes on, as Sherri Cavan nicely pointed out in her talk at the Couch-Stone Symposium. Such backstage exposure readily leads to underscoring a distinction between the mechanics of putting on the show and the showy business of the "show" itself. That is, in terms of phenomenology, the "making" and the "spectating" of the dramatic production are radically distinct, even during the real-time duration when they coincide. The same can be said of cinema. From Winkin we know that Goffman worked for the Canadian Film Board during World War II, although it is not clear how much he was actually exposed to the filmmaking process there, as distinct from the distribution side.

During the Depression, Fran Bay recalls, the entire Goffman family would go to a theater that was only two blocks from their house. (The princely price of admission: fifty cents for the whole crew.) Goffman loved seeing plays, Fran remembers, and took theater quite seriously. Goffman became particularly fond of burlesque, Sherri Cavan noted in her talk, sagely adding that he doubtless picked up on the extravagant frame-capers of pratfall comedians and other "outlandish" burlesque acts, both as a source of imaginative inspiration — he was much impressed with Bergson's theory of laughter involving incongruous transpositions of the organic and mechanical — and as something of a model for his own frame stuntsmanship in later life.

In another fascinating insight into early familial influences on Goffman, Zaslov relates that everyone's favorite Averback uncle was Uncle Mickey, the second youngest sibling after Anne. Mickey (nickname for Michael) was a card sharp, a bit of a con man, one suspects, if perhaps more on the order of a carny. (He was married to the daughter of a man who ran a popcorn stand at fairs.) If not quite a swindler, he definitely operated on the shady side of things, running a bookie operation and organizing illict backroom card games. Mickey, like Erving, was charming and personable, Zaslov says. He even looked like Goffman, being quite small and short. In the

wider family circle, he was delightful as the "glamourous one." (Ester Besbris described him as a "gorgeous rogue.") Uncle Mickey always stayed with the Goffman family when in Winnipeg.

Among the extended Averback clan, Ester Besbris recalls, young Erving was always considered special, generating lots of stories that everyone loved to hear. (Here, early on, was the beginning of the Tales of Goffman. Little Erving, by inclination it seems, was almost destined to be "legendary.") Her family in Winnipeg kept hearing tales of Goffman's exploits: taking a clock apart to see how it works, filching crabapples from a neighbor's tree, his boyishly seriocomic attempt to imitate the kosher ritual of slaughtering a chicken. These early stories showed his inquisitive mind at work, his constant need to explore things. Besbris adds that Erving was considered a math and science genius during his time at St. John's Technical high school in Winnipeg. In a one-page summary of highlights about her cousin posted on the *EGA* site, Besbris comments that many of these laughable stories "were probably not recognized for the formidable mind at their root. The common thought among most in the small town of Dauphin was that Erving would grow up to be either a genius or a gangster." (Interactionally speaking, Dmitri Shalin remarked elsewhere, he seems to have wound up as something of both.)

Frances Bay recalls that her brother, as a kid, was adventurous and fearless, so curious that he got into lots of trouble. He was very active, a scamp, and he would try anything, leaping on top of roofs and the like. There was periodic sounds of explosions emanating from his basement redoubt, thanks to the youthful experiments he conducted with his chemistry set. Everyone expected young Erving to become a big-name natural scientist. In fact, his first major as an undergraduate at the University of Manitoba was chemistry, and that subject left a lasting impression on his mind, including his eventual analytical procedures, as Daniel Albas persuasively argued in his presentation at the Couch-Stone Symposium.)

According to a number of family accounts, Erving could be both boisterous and withdrawn, and was definitely prone to mischief. Ester Besbris recalls that Erving liked to hole up in a basement den and listen to classical music records with his pals. Meyer Brownstone likewise

recalled that "His favorite way of spending time was to listen to Wagner at home, alone and in the dark." Saul Mendlovitz also noted young Erving's liking for classical music, including Bach, other Baroque composers, and Beethoven's quartets. Eli Bay described his reputation as a kid as "strange — bright, but strange." (Eli Bay's father, a store owner and friend of Max's who was also named Eli, referred to Erving as "Goofy Goffman.")

Young Erving was also not above a bit of mischievous spying on others' doings. At one point, Goldie Frankelson and her fiancé were making out in a bedroom, only to have Erving pop up in a window facing the adjacent veranda, crowing "Hi-i-i! I am watching you! I am watching you." (Goldie thought it funny.)

Then there was the high school production of Hamlet in which "Goff" and his friend Meyer Brownstone were featured in the gravediggers scene. As Brownstone relates, the gravediggers "were to appear in a rather drunken state drinking liquor on stage. We were provided with a bottle of 'Wynola' — a Jewish answer to the more expensive Coca-Cola. In fact I managed to put some booze in the bottle — of course for the sake of authenticity so we [could] have a rollicking good time of it: 'Alas poor Yorick' but fun for Goff and Meyer."

Given Goffman's latter-day reputation as a something of a cold-blooded cynic, with his stripped-down dramaturgical perspective and all, it is of interest that, as a boy, Erving had a strong emotional, indeed emotive, streak in him. In her one-page account of young Erving, Ester Besbris (who was his "sweetheart" when they were both around seven) recalls: "During a visit to Winnipeg, after some prodding, he would movingly recite a very sentimental poem about 'My Pal' which never failed to bring tears to the family audience." When quite young, Frances Bay recalls, she and Erving shared a bedroom. Fran would tell him stories that would make him cry. As a youngster, she says, he was sensitive, sentimental, and emotional — "far more than he wanted to admit." She and other family members still recall Erving's "Ode to Mother," a tender, warmly sentimental speech he presented on the occasion of his bar mitzvah. When he became older, however, he no longer showed his emotions.