

# When Erving Goffman was a Boy



[draft]

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July, 2011

Like creating a mosaic, the bits and pieces of Erving Goffman's life yield a picture of a complex man who lived in troubled times and through his writings changed the way whole generations saw the world. Looking at that life I chose to focus on his boyhood, from childhood through adolescence. My purpose is here descriptive, an ethnography of a childhood recounting events of Goffman's early life and placing them in their social, historical and cultural context. That done, I will have a few words to say about the themes that I see in this narrative as well as some apparent connections between events of his boyhood and subsequent events in his adult life.

## **A note on theory and method.**

My method is simple: content analysis of available documents relating to Erving Goffman, as contained in the Erving Goffman Archive memoirs, historic newspaper archives, the Averbach Family Reunion Album and DVD, local historical accounts of the communities of Mannville, Dauphin and Winnipeg as well as historical facts about Canada and Jews in Canada in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For someone who wanted to keep his personal life and his past to himself it is ironic that Goffman was born into a family of devoted archivists. The Averbach Family Reunion Album and DVD provide valuable firsthand accounts of Erving, his sister, his parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, his considerable extended family clear into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some of these people had direct

contact with Erving. Relatives who did not have direct knowledge contribute bits of family lore, for example, that he was known as “Goofy Goffman” In addition, the many memoirs collected in the Erving Goffman Archive include additional interviews with his sister, cousins and distant nephew and niece as well as other people who knew the young Goffman in Canada. So there are eye witness accounts as well as second hand knowledge.

While newspaper articles and local histories were written (more or less) contemporaneous to the events they describe, the family albums and the memoirs are recent and reflect back on the past. Over time Goofy Goffman became a world renowned sociologist. These memories of the past may have been retrospectively reinterpreted by what the respondents learned in the present. Again, the archive memoires were produced as answers to questions purposefully targeted to producing those memories. Just as the memoirist’s memories of the past may be influenced by their knowledge of the present, so too may those memories be influenced by the questions asked. And of course all of these materials have been filtered through my own interests and understandings. I will address the problem of evidence and interpretation in a more detailed methodological appendix.

My theory is a variation of culture/personality theory, focusing on how the contents of culture intersect with stages of the life cycle. In the simplest terms, I assume the historic culture we are born into and grow up in creates an ethos, an *umwelt*, which must, in some way, impact the development of our personality, that our personal experiences can be seen as choices made within the opportunities, limitations and meanings of this cultural matrix. Finally, I assume these cultural and personal experiences of our youth are linked in some way to the manifestations of our adult personality. Perhaps the best statement is found in Gerth and Mills, *Character and Social Structure*.

### **MAX GOFFMAN and ANN AVERBACH**

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Canadians opened their doors to immigrants hoping they would cultivate the broad expanse of agricultural land that was made accessible by the building of the Canadian railway system in the latter part of the previous century. Among these immigrant populations were large numbers of Ukrainians who spread out across the country to farm. Along with the immigration of Ukrainians were a smaller number of Russian Jews. They were not farmers.

When Max Goffman (b. 1890) arrived in Winnipeg he was one of almost 120,000 immigrant Jews who came from Eastern Europe to Canada between 1900 and 1920. They were mainly

shop keepers and tradesmen and for the most part they settled in big cities like Montreal, Toronto and Winnipeg.

In Winnipeg Max met Ann Averbach (b. 1899) who had arrived from Russia in 1912. Max was an outsider, alone in the new world. Anne was connected to an established social network consisting of her mother, her seven sisters and brothers, numerous in-laws, aunts, uncles and cousins, nieces and nephews and all of these relatives were connected to various business associates and their families. Max was absorbed into this social world. [Zaslov]

Max's daughter, Frances, describes him as quiet. She says mother was the family disciplinarian.

He smoked cigars all the time and played cards. He was good at that. [He] had a sense of humor, but not acerbic like Erving.

Other family members describe Max as kindly, generous, sociable, congenial.

If Max was quiet and reserved, Anne was outgoing and quite gregarious. The youngest of the Averbach children, she was the most assimilated to the new world culture. She became the central figure in the extended family, involved in the lives of her siblings, her nieces and nephews, and upon her return to Winnipeg in the 1930s she was involved in the affairs of the Jewish community through Hadassah. The Averbach Family Album describes her as "Auntie Anne" whom the family turned to for assistance, advice, approval.

Soon after marrying, Max and Anne went west. The trains that crossed the Canadian continent made the cultivation of the vast prairie profitable by moving people and produce; they also created communities and then connected one community with another.



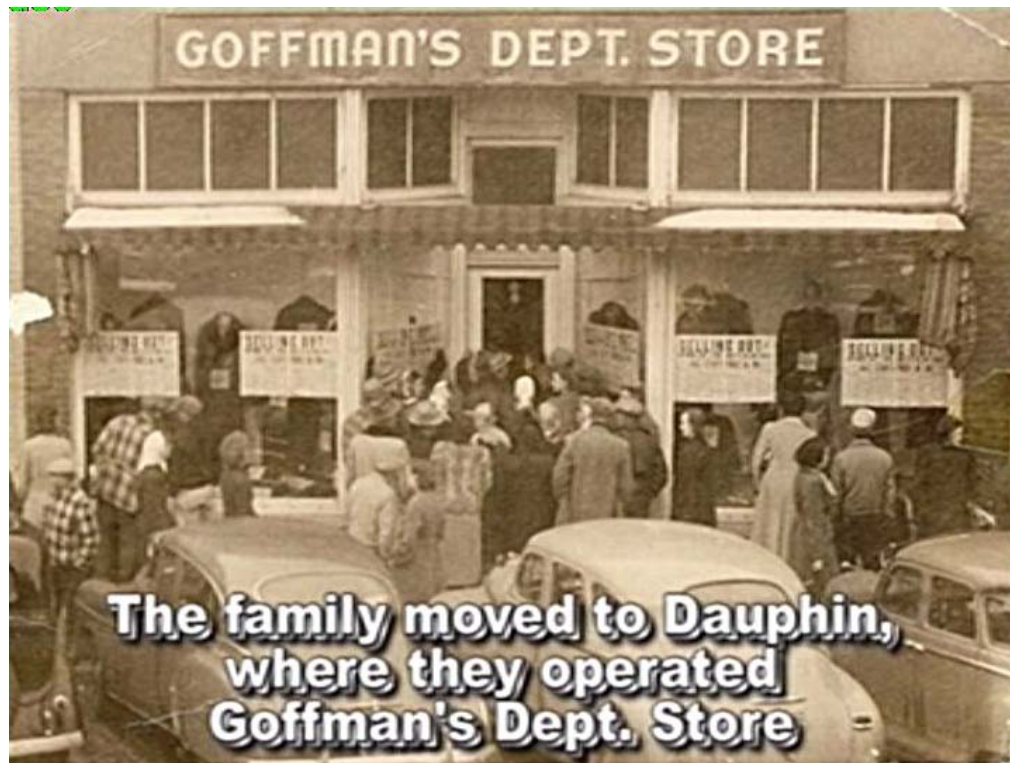
Mannville was one of a number of communities on the Edmonton link of the Canadian Northern Railway, about 800 miles west of Winnipeg. It had a population of about 300 people, a small village or hamlet probably characterized by those very aspects of social life Goffman

himself would elucidate years later in his thesis on the village life in the Shetland Islands. In this remote, rural environment Erving's father created his first economic opportunity.

After WWI the increased price of wheat resulted in considerable prosperity in the area. Max became a shop keeper, providing dry goods to the prospering Ukrainian farmers. However, despite their common country of origin, Max and his customers were separated by significant differences. He was a shop keeper; they were farmers; he was a Jew and they were Christians. The Goffmans lived in Mannville, but were they actually part of the community? More likely they were marginal---outsiders---connected by a common language, Russian, but separated by the beliefs, practices and perspectives of religion and class.

Frances, the Goffmans first child, was born in Mannville January 1, 1919. Her younger brother Erving was born there three years later, June 11, 1922.

In 1926 Max and his family moved to Dauphin, Manitoba, then a community of about 4,000 people, some 200 miles north of Winnipeg. Anne had relatives in Dauphin. Max opened a clothing store. The ad for the sale of this store in 1950 says "Goffman's store for sale...same owner for 33 [sic.] years. Owner leaving for USA." [Winnipeg Free Press, June 9, 1950]



[Averbach Family Reunion DVD]

Max Goffman was a hard worker. His store survived the depression and it must have flourished because in 1937 he bought a house for his family in the North End of Winnipeg [Averbach Family Album] and eventually some rental property. [Winnipeg Free Press, June 9, 1950] He moved his wife, his daughter and his son to Winnipeg, but he kept this shop in Dauphin, commuting between his family and home on the weekends and his shop and work during the week. [Besbris; Winkin, 99] He appears a conscientious father. However, he was not entrepreneurial. He did not expand his business to Winnipeg; he did not open other outlets or branch out into new businesses like his brother-in-law's sausage company. Instead he worked in the same shop in a small, provincial town for 23 years, and when he finally sold it, he and his wife migrated to America to retire.

Family accounts generally ascribe "middle class" to the Goffmans. But this broad generalization obscures more subtle aspects of their social position in the larger community of Dauphin. Erving's father was an uneducated small shop keeper in a community whose members ranged from judges and doctors and wealthy entrepreneurs to farmers and laborers and the unemployed. [Little; Tucker] Using the classic Warner criteria of education, occupation, income (of which we know little) and ethnicity, this family was essentially lower middle class. For Warner, the lower-middle class consisted of lower-paid white collar workers, but not manual laborers, e.g., police officers, school-teachers, non-management office workers, small business owners.

There were some in the community who were not as well off as they were; but there were still others who were much better off economically, more influential, more respected, families whose names were recorded in the local histories where the Goffman name is missing. [Little; Tucker] His family was respectable though not influential.

Where the Goffman family fit into the scheme of things in Dauphin is important. The son of the influential owner of the grain elevator was likely to be treated very differently from the boy whose father owned a small dry goods store, especially in a small town and especially in early part of the of the 20th century. Compounding the issue of class was the issue of religion----in Dauphin Erving was a Jew in a community that was almost entirely gentile. [cf. E. Bay; Knox; F. Bay]

While Erving the boy may not have fully appreciated his class standing in the community, he certainly had the opportunity to look back at his own modest beginnings in those terms when, as a student of sociology, he studied with the Warner at the University of Chicago and used Warner's system of social classification in the research for his Masters thesis: *Erving Goffman, Some Characteristics of Response to Depicted Situations*, 1949. Furthermore, many of his early

writings focused on issues of class, although this focus disappears as he himself begins to accumulate wealth. [see, for example, Goffman, 1948]



[Courtesy Dauphin Public Library, n.d.]

### **GROWING UP IN DAUPHIN**

From the age of four to the age of 15 Erving Goffman lived in a small, provincial town, the only son of a Jewish shop keeper. It is possible to reconstruct some of the milieu of this community in the 1920s and 1930s---reconstruct the *umwelt*---and from this exercise learn something about Goffman's childhood.

Even though it was a small town---approximately 4,000 in the 1920s and '30s and only about 8,000 half a century later---the population of Dauphin was not homogeneous. There were descendents of the early English, Scottish and German settlers, a large population of Ukrainian Mennonites and between 12 and 20 Jewish families. [Little; E. Bey]



[Courtesy Dauphin Public Library, n.d.]

Like Mannville, Dauphin began as a community that sprang up along the railroad tracks at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Dauphin prospered and grew. By the early 1900s there were five grain elevators to handle the region's abundant wheat crop. A flourishing commercial district evolved. New stores and residences, hotels and boarding houses were constructed. Schools were built. At first two newspapers were established, one conservative, one liberal, but soon after WWI they merged.

Religion was a dominant force in the community. People were identified by their religious affiliation. Sermons were printed in the newspaper for those who might have missed the services. Houses of worship were built for Anglicans, Presbyterians and Methodists but none for the small Jewish population.

The first Jewish wedding held in Dauphin...took place in the fire hall where a canopy had been erected at the northern end of the hall. [Little, p.76]

Despite fluctuations in the wheat based economy the business center of Dauphin offered continued economic opportunities, and gradually, after WWI "a desire to enjoy life" emerged [Little, p.146; see also Wolfenstein] Sports and the sports hero emerged to capture popular attention. Opportunities for recreation increased: there were six tennis courts, a garden club, an auto club. Frequent dances were sponsored by a variety of sport and social clubs. Eventually a public swimming pool was built. Radio broadcasting was introduced and quickly became an institutionalized feature of everyday life. Movies went from silent to sound. There were four movie houses. Dauphin offered a diverse cultural environment for a growing boy.



[Courtesy Dauphin Public Library, n.d.]

Yet Dauphin was still a small town. In *Small Town in a Mass Society* Vidich and Bensman provide us with an understanding of what small town life was like in the period between the two world wars. Springdale (in America), was characterized by a rigid stratification system with the wealthy and the professional classes in positions of power and influence. Dauphin (in Canada) was likely characterized by the same system [cf. Little; Tucker] Discrimination, both blatant and subtle, was endemic. In Vidich and Bensman's American study the object of this discrimination was blacks. In Canada, during Goffman's youth, the object of discrimination was Jews.

### **Anti-Semitism in Canada**

Erving's youth took place during a period of heightened anti-Semitism. Although Canadians had welcomed immigration at the turn of the century, as the numbers of immigrants increased and foreign speech, dress and customs became commonplace attitudes began to change. By 1923 immigration policy created a category of "non-preferred immigrants" and Jews were on this list.

There have been many times when the Jewish community of Winnipeg [and the vicinity] had cause to feel both anxiety and concern when hostility was directed towards it—following the arrival of Russian Jewish refugees in 1882; through the official discouragement of Jewish immigration to Canada, later resulting in the limitations of a quota system; through the contemptuous parodying of Jews in the Winnipeg press; through the hatred and anger aimed at "foreigners," including Jews, in the latter stages of World War I and in the wake of the Winnipeg General Strike; through the revival of a nativist sentiment which saw the spread of the Ku Klux Klan onto the Canadian prairies,



including Manitoba, in the late 1920s; through the Depression 1930s which saw the assumption of power by the Nazis in Germany, the growth and activities of pro-Nazi organizations in Canada, including Winnipeg, and the increasing concern of provincial and federal governments about incipient revolution, which placed many political organizations and individuals, including Jews, under official suspicion...***[there was almost continual anxiety and insecurity on the part of the Jewish community*** [emphasis added] <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/transactions/3/jewishpolitics.shtml>

Ely Bay, Goffman's nephew-in-law, grew up in Dauphin. He recalls,

There was anti-Semitism between the Ukrainian [farmers] and the Jew[ish merchants]...It was polite anti-Semitism. Some of these [people] would come into my father's store and say, "Oh, you Bays and Buckwolds, the old Jewish families in Dauphin, you are 'white Jews,' and the Cohens and the Neepans, they are 'black Jews.'" Stories like that would [be told] and be meant as a complement.

Despite the descriptions of the virulent anti-Semitism endemic to Canada, Erving and his sister may have been protected from the harshest realities of the times. But they were not unaware. His sister recalls,

**Shalin:** ...So you say there was some anti-Semitism in town.

**Bay:** Absolutely. I didn't realize it, or I might have realized it because some kids could play with me and others couldn't. . . . I don't know how to put it, but of course there was anti-Semitism...

### **The Great Depression**

From 1919-1929 Canada had the world's fastest growing economy. And then everything changed. Manitoba----including Dauphin and Winnipeg----was severely affected by the world wide depression of the 1930s. But even before the crash of the stock markets in 1929 the economy of the Prairie Provinces had been undermined by the collapse of the wheat crop, which was affected by both drought and dropping prices.

Wheat constituted 60% of the prairie economies, almost 3/4 of it exported.

Between the depressed agricultural prices and then the breakdown of the world wide economy, almost 30% of the labor force was unemployed during this period.

Farmer's incomes were cut by almost 80%. In Manitoba per capita income was cut almost in half, going from \$456 a year in 1928-29 to \$240 by 1933.

<http://www.yesnet.yk.ca/schools/projects/canadianhistory/depression/depression.html>

The failure of the wheat market affected all segments of society. Yet just as it appears that the Goffman boy was protected from the most virulent aspects of anti-Semitism, so too was he protected from the worst effects of the depression. Again, his sister reminisces:

I didn't realize we were going through the Depression...father worked hard; [he] had to worry [but apparently the family did not]

Through the Depression years Goffman's father maintained his store, invested in his brother-in-law's sausage factory, purchased a home in Winnipeg, purchased rental property and may also have invested in the Winnipeg Wheat Exchange, although the failure of that market makes it doubtful that this was a source of great riches for the Goffmans. While there were many families that were bankrupt, homeless and unemployed, young Erving did not feel these spiraling economic forces directly. His cousin Esther Besbris says, "The Goffmans did not suffer much even during the Depression."

### **World War II**

The beginnings of the war in Europe signaled an improvement in the Canadian economy. Nonetheless the threats and fears of war, the changing geo-political events taking place abroad and the plight of European Jewry dominated the local newspapers and presumably the radio as well. The Canadian policy of restricting Jewish immigration resulted in Canada taking in just 4,000 of the 800,000 Jewish refugees from Europe. In 1939 an entire ship of 900 Jewish refugees was turned away from Canadian ports, an event that made international headlines at the time. Almost a third of these passengers later died in the Holocaust.

It is fair to ask: how aware would young Erving be of these historic events? We learn from his relatives how bright he was a youth and everyone who came to know the adult Goffman comments on how bright and observant he was, so it seems probable that in some way he was aware of the world around him even as a boy and certainly as an adolescent. There was at least one daily paper in Dauphin and the overnight train brought a number of newspapers from Winnipeg that could keep him informed of the events on the world stage. There was the growing influence of radio which programmed news along with entertainment and sports. There was whatever talk of the war and the plight of European Jewry he might have overheard as he moved through the community on errands and excursions. And of course there were his own everyday experiences as a Jew in Canada, informing him of the realities of "polite anti-Semitism" and possibly some realities that were not so polite.

There is no official record of how many times the sign "NO JEWS OR DOGS ALLOWED" was posted in Canada during the '30s and '40s ...A popular alternative, hardly less pointed, read: "FOR CHRISTIANS ONLY."

[<http://www.crownheights.info/index.php?itemid=18116>]

How did his family, in attitudes and discussions, react to these historic events and how did they communicate their ideas to their children? Among some Jewish families, the increasing pressures of anti-Semitism resulted in the growth of political activism. The Averbach Family in general were not activists although some were socialists [F. Bey] and Erving's uncle Meyer was known for his dedication to social justice [Averbach Family Album] His sister identified with the socialist movement both as a young woman and much later, as an accomplished actress.

[Frances Goffman]Bay became enthralled with Winnipeg's leftist New Theatre Group in the 1930s. "It was when labour unions were struggling to be recognized," she says. "I wasn't a labour sort of person. I'm a middle-class Jewish gal. But this theatre was so exciting. I'm a socialist today, if that means anything." [Johnson; see also Averbach Family Album]

Yet Frances says neither her father nor her brother were political. Erving's high school friend, Meyer Brownstone, remembers the young Jewish kids in Winnipeg being politically active, but he says Goffman was rarely part of the gang.

Goffman's professional writings do not address anti-Semitism, war, or the economy as subjects of sociological interest. The political arena is absent, even as a stage of action. The topics his sociology addresses are private troubles, not social problems: stigma, alienation from interaction, embarrassment, cooling the mark out, maintaining face, etc. [cf. Mills, *Sociological Imagination*]. So if these major social issues had any lasting effects on this boy growing up in those times the effects are more subtle than the sociological variables he chose to address as an adult. Perhaps distancing himself from Judaism and being drawn toward money reflect, in some way, his experience of these major social forces; the lasting effects were *how* he experienced these forces---as private troubles, not as social issues, as problems of identity rather than as problems of ideology. [see for example Miller]

However they may have influenced his life, these historic forces were part of the *umwelt* of his times. Where other Jewish sociologists of the same generation and quite similar circumstances focused on questions like inequality and injustice, Erving Goffman was not among this group. (see, for example, Goulder, Syme)

Isolated in Mannville, the move to Dauphin brought the Goffman family into a Jewish community, a social world whose members interacted daily, who intermarried, sold one another business, attended one another's marriages and funerals, attended various social gatherings and celebrated some of the Jewish holy days and milestones together through the course of the year. Frances and Erving now had regular access to aunts and uncles and cousins as well as the opportunity for friendship---and in Frances' case, romance---with others who shared and supported their beliefs, practices and circumstances.

The following account comes from the Winnipeg Free Press, [September 12, 1936 p.10] It illustrates the linkages between the small Jewish community in Dauphin and the even larger Jewish community in Winnipeg, a half-day train ride away.

Mrs. J. Averbach\* and Mrs. A. Silvert were joint hostesses at the home of Mrs. J. Averbach, 522 Alfred avenue, Sunday afternoon, honoring Miss Gertie Silvert, bride-elect of October. The table was decorated with golden yellow 'mums and lighted with matching tapers. Presiding over the tea cups and ices were: Mesdames J. Buckwold, M. Goffman, L. Sedletsky, J. Boroditsky, G. Silvert (Roblin, Man.), Corman, Silver, A. Averbach, M. Averbach, A. Gunn, F. Segal, E. Bay (Dauphin, Man.), A. Sucheroff. Assisting were Misses Diana Boroditsky, Bessie Sucheroff, Ruth Lobe, Frances Averbach and Mrs. H. Stein. The bride-elect was the recipient of lovely gifts.

\* \* \*

The numerous Averbachs from Winnipeg are all relatives of Mrs. Max Goffman. A. Silvert is Mrs. Goffman's sister; Gertie Silvert is Mrs. Goffman's niece. They are also from Winnipeg. Mesdames J. Buckwold, E. Bay, Corman, Segal and Gunn are all a part of the Dauphin Jewish community. [cf. Little; Katz] By the nature of the occasion, others mentioned were probably also connected in some way through various social, familial and business ties.

In his day to day association with this linked community Erving's identity as a Jew was publically declared although not necessarily privately embraced.

His sister remembers

**Shalin:** Would you say that Jewishness was important to Erving? Did he identify with Judaism, its history?

**Bay:** I don't think he did. I don't know, except for his Bar Mitzvah. The kids he played with were not Jewish. They couldn't be – there were only a few Jews [in Dauphin].

One of these Jewish kids, Avron Katz, remembers,

There were only a few Jewish families in Dauphin at the time. I had the distinct feeling that Erving was not particularly proud of his Jewish heritage. I remember one year during the Jewish High Holidays Erving and I both did not attend school as is customary for Jewish children. When school was over and the other children returned home, they saw us and asked us why we weren't in school. Erving made up different excuses, but would not admit that he missed school because he was Jewish.

Erving's friend from the 1940s, Saul Mendolwitz, says: "...he felt that he was Jewish yet he didn't want to be Jewish. He wanted to be something else."

Very few photographs exist to provide some visual picture of Goffman as a boy---or as an adult for that matter. One is a formal portrait of Erving, his mother and his sister dated 1929.



Averbach Family Reunion DV

Erving was seven, his sister was ten. They were living in Dauphin, but exchanges between family members frequently brought relatives living in Winnipeg to visit in Dauphin and took those in Dauphin to the larger city, so this portrait may have been taken in a studio in Winnipeg. All three are formally dressed for the camera, the women's hair carefully marcelled, Erving's hair plastered down flat on his forehead. Frances is leaning in toward her mother, looking off to the left with a very slight smile. Anne appears sad or tired; her left arm rests on her lap, her hand

touching Erving's arm. Erving's hands appear to be resting in his lap. He looks almost straight ahead, his eyes hooded. Like his mother, his mouth is in a neutral position. When I first saw this picture it reminded me of photographs in my own family album, pictures taken in that moment *just after* my mother told me to stop squirming, stop making faces, sit up straight.

The next two pictures are undated. They are informal snapshots of Erving and his sister in the front yard of their modest house in Dauphin. Erving and Frances appear to be a little older than in the formal portrait. There is considerable mugging for the camera.



[Averbach Family Album]

In the first picture, Erving and Frances lock arms and strike a pose. Frances arches her body in a dramatic arc, looking over her shoulder at her younger brother. He returns her gaze and takes a cocky pose with his hand in his pocket, a leg thrust forward and his head bent back, a jaunty scarf tied around his neck and his cap worn off to one side. A rolled paper tube in his mouth imitates a cigarette or cigar.

In the second picture Erving is alone. He is wearing the same outfit, with the same big “cigar” in his mouth. He strikes a pose, hands in his pockets, one foot forward. He is looking directly at the camera with something close to insolence, perhaps a bit cocky.



[Averbach Family Album]

Erving’s relatives provide us with a verbal picture of this young boy, one that accentuates his mischievous side. His sister and his cousins and his aunt acknowledge that he was bright and that he appeared to have considerable potential. A second cousin describes him as “bright but strange” and informs us he was known as “Goofy Goffman”. He was also known as “Pookey” [Katz; Wrong; Winkin 99]

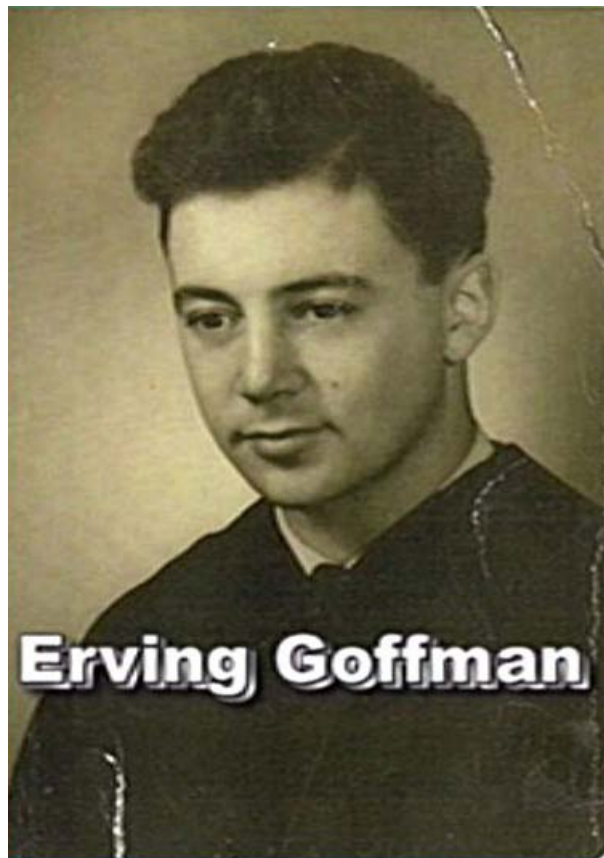
The Author of the Averbach Family Album writes,

[It was] common thought...that Erving would grow up to be either a genius or a gangster.

His sister says,

[He] was a real prankster as a kid. They never thought he'd amount to anything.  
[Posner]

His sister describes him as a scamp, adventurous, fearless and curious. He would get into all kinds of trouble. One example of this trouble involved a dead chicken, a complicated story in which five year old Erving, imitating stories he had heard about kosher butchers, presented a dead chicken to his mother. How he got it no one knew. This story appears five times in the archives in different versions; it obviously stands out as one of young Erving's major contributions to family lore. [E. Bay; F. Bay; Besbris; Frankelson; Katz] There are also stories about him climbing on the roof, climbing trees, stealing crab apples from a neighbor's yard, throwing records down the basement stairs, doing chemical experiments in his bedroom and/or in the basement. Goffman majored in chemistry in high school and when he first enrolled at the University of Manitoba, so were these chemical experiments mischievous or precocious?



[Averbach Family Album]



## HIGH SCHOOL YEARS

In 1937---in the worst year of the Manitoba economy---Max Goffman moved his wife, his daughter and his son to Winnipeg, a move intended to provide better opportunities for Erving's education and for Frances' theatrical aspirations. Erving was 15; Frances was 18.

Compared to the rural hamlet of Mannville and the small town atmosphere of Dauphin, Winnipeg was a big city, with a population of a quarter million people in the 1940s. Over the years the Goffmans had made frequent trips to Winnipeg to visit relatives. But the transition from small town living to big city life was a significant change and it came just as Erving started high school.

Equally significant was the size and density of the Jewish community. With each move since Erving's birth the size and density of the Jewish community his family was part of increased. It was estimated that in the 1920s only about 4% of Canada's Jewish population lived in rural areas, so the tiny hamlet of Mannville, with its population of 300, at most had two or three Jewish families, the Goffmans included. How did they maintain their identity as Jews in that situation, almost a thousand miles away from family and kinsmen? Did the growing anti-Semitism in Canada forge that identity by exclusion rather than inclusion? Did Erving Goffman sense he was an outsider from the very beginning?

The move to Dauphin brought the family from isolation into a Jewish community. In Dauphin there was no kosher butcher and only a part time synagogue, a hall that was rented for important occasions such as Erving's Bar Mitzvah. But there were other Jewish families to interact with on a day to day basis. There were Jewish merchants who dominated the commercial district where Max opened his store. Shopping and schmoozing were everyday activities. There were parties and dances and weddings that made the society pages of the local newspapers. Even so, the Jewish population was small (between 12 and 20 families or roughly 100 people) and his sister tells us that Erving's friends in Dauphin included gentiles as well as other Jews.

For the most part the Jewish community of Dauphin was a secular community and Mrs. Goffman did not keep a kosher kitchen. [Zaslov; E. Bay; Katz] But did this distinction have any particular relevance, given the anti-Semitism that was engulfing Canada? In large measure the identity of "Jew" came from and was reinforced by the outside world, from other people who reacted to the "idea of the Jew" and made no distinction between *secular Jew*, *religious Jew* and their stereotype of *The Jew*. [Sartre] In this way, Erving's "Jewishness" was what he would later call---in Stigma---"marks of the tribe." He was a Jew because he was descended from Jews, he associated with Jews and other people reacted toward him accordingly, treating him as a Jew. He had no choice.



Winnipeg's Historic North End

[Photo: The Winnipeg Tribune / University of Manitoba Archives]

When the Goffman family moved to the North End of Winnipeg they moved right into the center of a very large, self-contained Jewish community that was not unlike the *shtetls* of Europe.

In the case of Winnipeg Jewry in the interwar period, that territory was the north-end of Winnipeg, which, in large part after 1920, consisted of the Ward 3 division in municipal politics. In 1921, more than 84% of Winnipeg's Jewish population lived in that Ward; in 1931, 88.7% or 15,283 persons; and in 1941, 86.4% or 14,718 people. In 1921, the centre of Jewish population was Selkirk Avenue; in 1941, 85.9% of Winnipeg's Jews lived within a 1 mile radius of a point on Aberdeen Avenue midway between Aikens Street and Salter Street. The transmigration of Jews across the city...barely had begun by 1941.

[Winnipeg Jewish Community 1919-1939]

Selkirk Avenue was the center of Jewish social, commercial and religious culture. Almost all of Anne's relatives had their businesses on Selkirk Avenue, or located a few blocks on either side. The Goffmans and the various Averbach families all lived within that one mile radius where some 15,000 other Jews lived. [Averbach Family Reunion; Frankelson; Zaslov] The Jews of

Winnipeg were free to move to other parts of the city, and after WWII many did. But when Erving was coming of age he lived in what can only be described as a ghetto, a socially isolated, self contained, Yiddish-speaking enclave effectively cut off from the larger society by custom and practice if not by law. Was Erving eventually drawn to Wirth's sociology because Wirth's descriptions of ghetto life resonated with the experiences of his youth? Is there a warrant to ask such a question? To speculate in this way?

When Erving arrived in Winnipeg in 1937 he enrolled in St. John's Technical School where, in November, 1937, 18 Jewish students walked out of their classroom protesting anti-Semitic remarks made by their mathematics teacher. They stayed out from Wednesday afternoon until Friday morning, when they accepted the teacher's apology. [Winnipeg Free Press, Nov. 06, 1937 pp. 3,4] Erving's name is not listed among those boys' names, although he could have been in that classroom since his high school major was mathematics and science.

His high school friend, Meyer Brownstone, does not remember Erving being politically active even though Meyer and other young men of their acquaintance were. His sister emphasizes, "Erving was not bothered with politics." The currents of social activism that were stirring in those times and in those places did not apparently stir young Goffman. He marched to a different drummer. Brownstone describes his friend as the kind of guy who listened to Wagner at home, alone, in the dark: loveable, but a recluse---traits that also characterized the mature Goffman. (see for example, Irwin)

The move to Winnipeg gave Frances the opportunity to expand her theatrical talents. Introduced to the world of drama in school in Dauphin, acting became her passion and she received considerable acclaim for her work. Both parents supported her budding career, and soon she was receiving rave reviews for her acting.

The New Theatre production is also notable in that it gives Frances Goffman, a young Winnipeg amateur, a chance to show her mettle. Miss Goffman has an abundance of temperament, but she proves in her handling of a scene of hysterics that she is able to keep it under control. There are a number of amateurs in Winnipeg able to let themselves go, but they have a distressing habit of letting their performance go, too. If Miss Goffman is willing to study and to learn, we should be hearing big things from her in the future.

She richly deserved the honor of best actress in the festival. And

[Winnipeg Free Press, March 7, 1939]

Despite the growing popularity of movies, in the 1930s and 1940s Winnipeg was very much a theater town. There were over 100 theaters, amateur and professional, many of them located in the North End. Long reviews of performances, like the one excerpted above, were regularly published in the local newspapers and Frances' name appears frequently in the years before she left for Hollywood to eventually work in movies and television.

Discussion of his sister's acclaimed career must have been a frequent topic in the Goffman household. That acting career began in Dauphin, so it is likely her younger brother was introduced to ideas like *front stage* and *back stage*, *performance* and *playing a role* even before the family moved to Winnipeg.

In addition, Erving himself acted in at least one high school production, *Hamlet*, where he played a bit part as a grave digger. [Besbris; Brownstone] School productions often require actors to play multiple roles so his own acting experience may have been even more extensive. This is the only example in the archive but it demonstrates his personal involvement in the world of the theater in addition to the exposure his sister and the larger community provided.

Clearly the idea of dramaturgy was planted and cultivated in his youth. Learning to see the world as a stage and people as actors speaking lines was not necessarily something that appeared to him after his field work in the Shetland Islands. More likely it was a language that he knew and employed frequently when he was young and profitably when he became a

student of sociology. His creative genius was not the discovery of the language of dramaturgy but how he developed that metaphor as a method of describing social life.

The extensive theatrical scene in Winnipeg included the Queen Theater, a Jewish theater on Selkirk Avenue. Vaudeville acts from as far away as New York City were brought in to perform there. Vaudeville consisted of an eclectic variety of short performances that included acts such as popular and classical musicians, dancers, comedians, trained animals, magicians, female and male impersonators, acrobats, illustrated songs, jugglers, one-act plays or scenes from plays, athletes, lecturing celebrities, minstrels, and sometimes silent movies.

Once one of the most popular forms of entertainment in America and Canada, vaudeville declined and then disappeared altogether through the 1930s and '40s, a casualty of changing economic times and the popularity of movies, and in particular, movies with sound. However vaudeville was still popular when Erving was a boy and the Queen Theater was only a few blocks from his home. [see also F. Bay]

Both silent movies and the vaudeville stage gave Erving an opportunity to learn about slapstick comedy, a genre of amusement that relies on activities that challenge the boundaries of propriety and common sense. At the heart of a much of slapstick is “one-upsmanship”, an interpersonal put-down, where one actor makes a fool of the other by breeching normative expectations. Given the wide popularity of this form of comedy in Erving’s youth, there is a good chance he was exposed to it, and once exposed, possibly influenced. We learn that later in life Goffman collected records of stand-up comedians and radio bloopers, suggesting an interest in comedy of this kind. [Scott] Certainly elements of slapstick echo through accounts of his adult life, for example, various stories in the EGA memoirs about how Goffman would deliberately breech some code of interpersonal conduct and leave the other discredited, deemed, disoriented and/or embarrassed.

Sometime around his Bar Mitzvah, Erving began that change from “young boy” to “adolescent.” Relatives remember the young boy as sensitive and vulnerable, even as he was cocky and mischievous. His older sister tells of easily bringing young Erving to tears by telling him scary bedtime stories. But, Frances says, he was also sensitive about displaying his emotions even when he was quite young.

His cousin Esther remembers him as a sweet and loving boy who went out of his way to bring her a small gift when she left Dauphin after a visit with the Goffmans.

The Author of the Averbach Family Album writes,

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.

And at his Bar Mitzvah he read a poem that he wrote himself, called “Ode to Mother”.

The adolescent Erving became remote and inaccessible and seemed estranged from his family. [Besbris] He hung out in his room, reading and listening to music and amused himself with a pool table his parents bought for him and set up on the veranda of their house. [F. Bay] He had a few friends, but he didn’t hang out with a gang. [Brownstone.] In High School he was seen walking by himself [Besbris] Another relative reminisces: “He was really not a friendly type. He was very much his own person.” [Zaslov]

Of girl friends of this time (or any other sexual activity) we know little. His older sister was old enough to not be interested in the affairs of her little brother--- she stresses that there were *three and a half* years difference in their ages. There are (at present) only two accounts from his contemporaries of that era--Meyer Brownstone, who went to high school with him and Avron Katz, who was a neighbor in Dauphin and a few years younger than Erving.

The closest thing that we have in the archives that addresses Erving’s sexuality in the days before college is Avron Katz memoir, written in 2001, dictated by him to his daughter for her social psychology class at the University of Manitoba.

I do remember spending time with him at his house. We would especially spend a lot of time up in his bedroom. One pastime that we shared was one that we had to hide from our parents. Erving would get copies of Esquire magazine [which began publishing in 1933]. At the time Esquire was the closest thing to a “girlie” magazine that we could get our hands on. I was about 9 or 10 and he was about 11 or 12. He would have me go through the magazines and mark the pages that had the sexiest pictures. Then we would sit together looking at the pictures and discussing them.

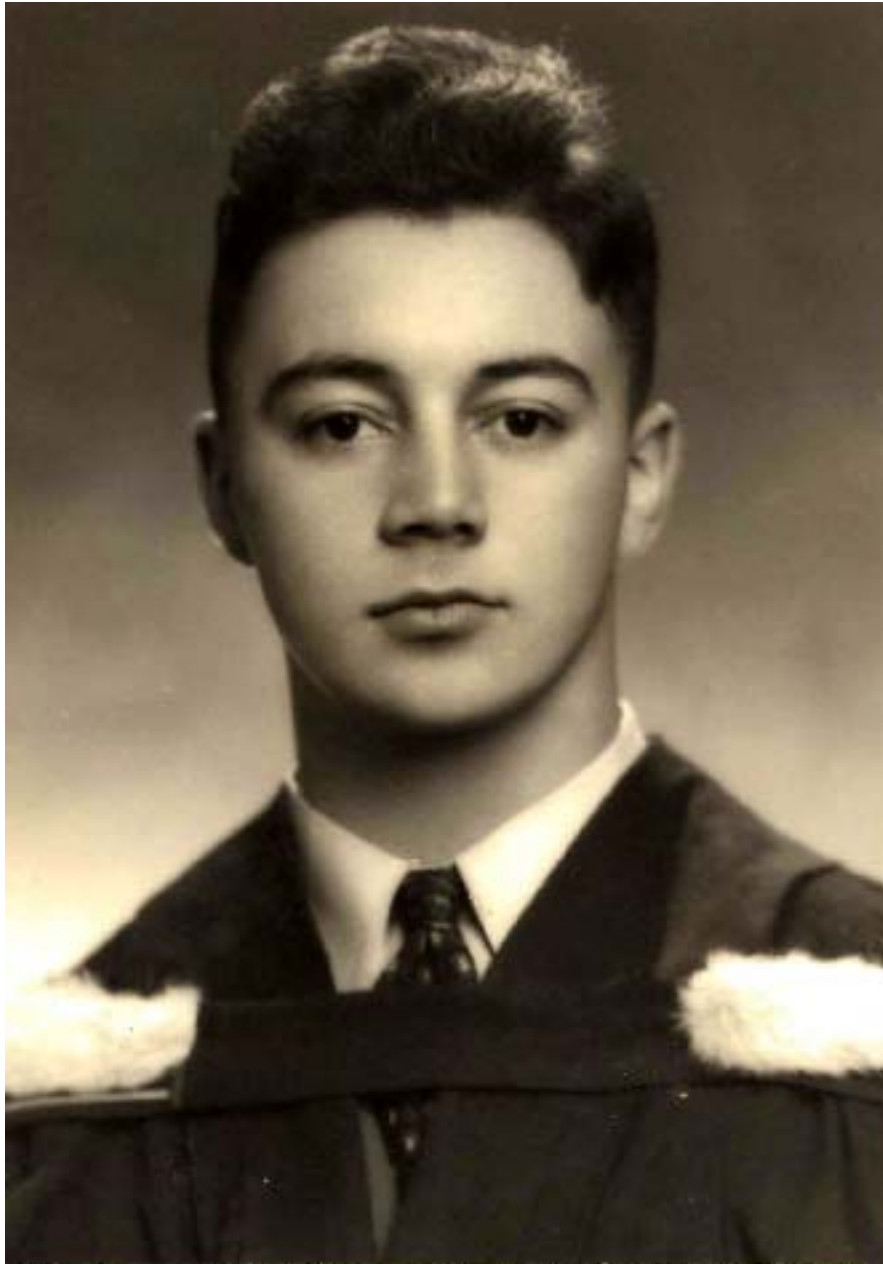
In the years after high school Saul Mendlovitz suggests Erving’s interests in girls were quite ordinary. If he was a bad boy, it was not in that way.

Erving’s did have a reputation as a troublesome, mischievous prankster which began in his boyhood and continued into adolescence. Two stories dominate the lore of this latter period. In the first, cast as a gravedigger in his high school production of *Hamlet*, Erving substituted real alcohol for the stage prop with “disastrous consequences”. [Brownstone]

A second account is provided by Ives Winkin:

May 1939, prom night at St John’s Technical School, largely open to the sons of Jewish immigrants (there are 17, 000 Jewish households in Winnipeg in 1939). All of a sudden, there is a smell of rotten egg: That's 'Pooky's' farewell to his classmates. So the story goes. Goffman is crazy about chemistry; he is a brilliant student but rather mischievous. [Winkin99]

Like slapstick comedy, practical jokes require breaking the rules in a purposeful way, to astonish, to ridicule, to frighten, to gain control---to be on top and in power.



[Averbach Family Album]

One more influence in Goffman's life was his uncle, Mickey Book, born Michael Averbach. The Averbachs were a large family. Some were entrepreneurial, some were professional, some were small shop keepers. Uncle Mickey was unique: he was a bookie and a card shark, familiar

with the carnival scene in Canada. The Averbach Family DVD describes the bookie operation he ran, first from behind the restaurant he and his wife operated, than along the length of the Canadian Railway, which was how he came to be known as “Mickey Book”.

Marley Zaslov describes the role Uncle Mickey played in the family:

He played cards, he ran a card game. He was the youngest son born in 1897, he married a woman whose father operated a popcorn stand in Winnipeg at what was a Coney Island kind of place. He married Elsie and they went on the circuit, or I call it a circuit, a fair circuit. He ran card games. I am reading here, “He had considerable charm and was very personable.” He was almost like an Erving, and as a matter of fact, that’s what Erving looks like. Mickey was quite small, he wasn’t a big man, he wasn’t a tall man at all.

But he was the rogue in the family and when he came to Winnipeg he stayed with his favorite sister, Anne Goffman.

Frances does not remember any special relationship between Erving and his uncle Mickey; indeed, she does not remember Erving having a particular relationship with any of his numerous relatives. Yet Mickey Book’s presence in the family must have had some influence. Erving’s love of cards could have come from his father who played poker frequently with his cronies. But it could have also been influenced by his relationship with his uncle.

And of course we know that in 1952 Erving would publish “On Cooling the Mark Out” a paper that relied heavily on field work done by professor of linguistics David Maurer, *The Big Con*, and criminologist Edwin Sutherland, *The Professional Thief*. But Goffman’s interest in and understanding of the confidence game could have relied on stories his Uncle Mickey told about carnival life and whatever experiences Erving himself might have had with the carnival. After all, the Goffman Archives are not comprehensive, only indicative. If it is possible is it probable?

## **INTERPRETATIONS**

There is much more in the Goffman Archives pertaining to these early years than I have excavated here---many more observations to extract and many more interpretations to offer. I will suggest some themes that stand out for me. For the most part, these are themes of transformation.

From provincial to cosmopolitan: This path starts in the rural hamlet of Mannville and continues through Dauphin and Winnipeg. It continues on to Toronto, Chicago and Paris. After a year in Paris his credentials as a cosmopolitan are surely established and thereafter, in Berkeley and Philadelphia, in the States and abroad no one ever thought of Erving Goffman as anything but a sophisticated cosmopolitan. Yet there was always a bit of the provincial that seemed to stick to



him: the casual “cab driver” style of his dress, his indifference to shaving, his fondness for the informality of the deli. [see: Bershad, Brownstone, Frankelson, Imber, Lidz, Ledger, Segre and others for many examples.]

From petit bourgeois to affluent: Starting out from modest beginnings, by the time Goffman is Goffman he has an upper-middle class education, a professional job and salary, book royalties, speaking and consulting fees, what he makes on the stock market, what he makes (if anything) gambling and what his wife left him in her will. The petit bourgeois circumstances of his youth heighten the considerable social and economic success of his life and the distance he traveled.

From Jewish to Episcopalian: While their parents encouraged his sister to marry a Jew, Frances does not remember that same pressure existed for Erving. When he did marry he did not choose a wife who would contribute to and maintain his identity as a Jew by her involvement in the Jewish religion or the Jewish community. Rather he selected a wife whose religion reflected the established power structure to which heretofore he had been an outsider. There is no evidence that Erving adopted his wife’s religion nor is there evidence that she converted to his. Indeed, her funeral services were held in an Episcopalian church. However, this examination of his boyhood and youth illustrates Goffman’s complicated relationship to Judaism and his identity as a Jew, an identity he might not have chosen for himself if there were an option.

From outsider to insider: The trajectory of Goffman’s life and career goes from the edge of nowhere to the pinnacle of an institutionalized power structure, the American Sociological Association, and international recognition as a Canadian/American/North American writer. As a Jew he was an outsider to Canadian culture from the beginning. As an adolescent he chose to distance himself from his family and he was seen as a recluse by his friends. By the time he married he was so distanced from his family that none remember being invited to his wedding. [Frankelson; Besbris; F. Bay] He chose the role of the outsider for himself in his early fieldwork, in his relations with colleagues at work, both in Berkeley and Philadelphia, and with the public, eschewing pictures and publicity. Yet near the end of his life he accepted the nomination for the ASA presidency and when he was elected he took these responsibilities to heart. [see: Kriesberg; Daniels; Huber]

Irwin Deutcher recalls

I was a member of ASA council when he became president elect and we were all deeply impressed by the serious concern he showed for the ASA and the deep responsibility he felt in his behaviour as ASA president. I among others was surprised by his attention to organizational details.

From victim to victimizer: From everything I have read about Canada, the anti-Semitism that existed before Goffman’s birth until after he had left for Chicago was entrenched in every part of the society, sometimes open and virulent, always present even if covert. The Jewish

communities of Dauphin and Winnipeg must have provided Erving some protection from the everyday degradation of interacting with the gentile world. But this was an insular existence. It would have felt like a cage to a bright, ambitious young man. I think that---to deal with his anxieties and his sense of vulnerability and to assuage his feelings of relative deprivation, all feelings common to adolescents in general---Erving developed a persona, a *shtick*. Like a vaudeville actor he became the one who pulls the rug out from the other guy, upsets his expectations, shows the other to be a fool, preferably before an audience. This is the way a powerless person can gain at least momentary power over a dominant other; the outsider can take center stage.

Erving's youthful reputation as a prankster also testifies to this theme. In a world that was beginning to revere the athlete and depreciate the intellectual, did he retreat into his books and harbor resentments, resentments that expressed themselves in the high school stink bomb prank?

There is also the question of bullying, especially in high school. The widespread existence of anti-Semitism, the relatively powerless place of his family in the social structure of the community, his small physical stature, the fact that he was not involved in sports, the fact that he was a loner---all may have contributed to his being the victim of bullying as a youth. Such experiences would have to leave a lasting impression.

A few years after high school Erving expressed his concerns about bullying to his friend, Dennis Wrong:

He was at the Film Board only because he didn't want to be drafted into the army, which he would have been. He thought that because he was Jewish and very small in stature, he would be a target for hazing [bullying] if he were in the army. He quite legitimately thought that, so he took a government job.

Was the stink bomb a "fuck you" to his high school tormentors?

There are also some notable constants in this mosaic, themes that appear in his youth and seemingly change little over time.

An a-political life: Despite the tenor of his times and the various opportunities that were part of his world Goffman remained a-political throughout his youth and into his adult years. Despite the radical politics that characterized the North End of Winnipeg in the 1930s, despite his friend Meyer Brownstone's urgings, despite his sister's involvement with radical theater and then despite the radical movements that engulfed Berkeley in the 1960's Goffman gave no outward allegiance to any social or political cause, for or against. To people who were radical, he

appeared quite conservative. To people who were conservative he appeared to be some kind of radical rule breaker, an interpersonal anarchist.

Impression Management: The sensitive, vulnerable child gave way to a reserved, remote youth. One theme that comes through the various memoirs attesting to his childhood and youth is his control over his emotional displays. I doubt if he thought of what he was doing in terms of “impression management” although he might have thought about it in other terms, such as “faking it”. But I believe that he felt the need to control information about himself from others who might pry or judge him or use it against him. His grasp of theatrics as a production of impressions provided a way to protect his privacy.

This control over his emotional displays is reflected in the memoirs of people who were around him in Berkeley after his wife’s death. A variety of different accounts of this period exist [e.g. Cavan] They all reference what people saw as Goffman’s “dispassionate” response to the news. What we might have been seeing was impression management: dispassion masking passion

Meyer Brownstone writes,

...several of Goff’s students who had studied with him in California were in his classroom when the tragedy of his wife’s death was announced. They reported that Goff walked into the classroom and just went on with his next lecture. Those students were great admirers of Goff as a teacher, researcher and writer and asked me to explain what they considered a very puzzling and for them negative response to a personal tragedy. I did not attempt to explain but recounted to them my own memories of Goff as a warm and feeling friend who should not be judged in any way and certainly not by students who saw or knew very little of Goff as a very unusual and gifted person.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Erving Goffman Archives hold an amazing amount of information on the life of Erving Goffman, from birth to death and all points in between. Close analysis of this material makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the man and his works. Like each of us Goffman was embedded in his historic times, influenced or not by the prevailing currents of culture, acting in ways that asserted his unique personality. We can appreciate his contribution to sociology without ever knowing anything about him as a person. But knowing him as a person adds another dimension to our understanding of his work. We can find layers of meaning that would be otherwise obscure. We can ask questions we might not have otherwise considered.

**Addendum:** I would like to add these three other pictures of Goffman: a youthful Erving, a mid-career professor and a senior scholar



a.



b.



c.

a. source?

b. Source: [<http://www.asanet.org/page.wv?name=Erving+Goffman&section=Presidents>]

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I want to thank Professor Dmitri Shalin of the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, whose inspiration and unflagging effort has created the Erving Goffman Archives. He has done all the work of contacting respondents, interviewing, transcribing, editing and posting these memoirs as well as managing all of the other documents in the archive. It is a great pleasure to be associated with him in this endeavor.

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