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[American lives]

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Title American lives [Begin]: There's a girl who lives over...

Place of origin Chicago, Illinois Date 7/21/39

Project worker Abe Aaron

Project editor

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Remarks

W3607

Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FOLKLORE

Chicago

FORM A

Circumstances of Interview

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Abe Aaron

ADDRESS 5471 Ellis Ave., Chicago, Illinois

DATE July 21, 1939

SUBJECT American Lives

1. Date and time of interview
2. Place of interview
3. Name and address of informant
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

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6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

(Use as many additional sheets as necessary, for any of the forms, each bearing the proper heading and the number to which the material refers.)

FORM B

Personal History of Informant

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Abe Aaron

ADDRESS 5471 Ellis Ave.

DATE July 21, 1939

SUBJECT General

NAME OF INFORMANT Several

1. Ancestry
2. Place and date of birth
3. Family
4. Places lived in, with dates
5. Education, with dates

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6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

7. Special skills and interests

8. Community and religious activities

9. Description of informant

10. Other Points gained in interview

These items were gathered at 47th and Cottage Grove Avenue, from cab drivers and their friends, sign-painters, post office workers, habitues of the handbook located there. A.A.

FORM C

Text of Interview (Unedited)

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Abe Aaron

ADDRESS 5471 Ellis Ave., Chicago

DATE 7-21-39

SUBJECT American Lives

NAME OF INFORMANT Several

I

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There's a girl who lives over on Sacramento who teaches school over on the west side, over in the Polish neighborhood. One of the Polish kids, he had an awful bad pair of tonsils. You know how the schools nowadays have medical examinations and all that kind of stuff. Well, the doctor orders them tonsils to come out, an' the kid, he comes to school regular but his tonsils, they never come out. The teacher gets sore an' she sends a note home with the kid, sayin' he can't come back to school till he's got his tonsils out. This girl, she told me the story herself. It's true, so help me.

Next morning there's the kid back in school again, big as life. The teacher said "I thought I told you you couldn't come back to school again till your tonsils were taken out."

The kid, he says, well, his tonsils was taken out. But he'd been in school only the day before, and the teacher's sort o' sore. She says:

"How could you've had your tonsils out? -You were in school yesterday. What doctor did it? Didn't he tell you to stay at home an' in bed?"

But the kid, he says, nope, it wasn't no doctor who took his tonsils out, His old lady took 'em out. With a scissors. So this girl, she looks in the kids mouth. Sure enough, hold had his tonsils out.

That's how tough them Polacks are, tough an' dumb.

II

Tough? That one aint nothin' to the one I heard. This one happened in Morris' Packin'. A woman who's workin' there, she stops workin' an' goes to the toilet. She's in there a while, an' then she comes out an' goes to work again. While she was in there she'd had a kid. That's how tough they are.

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The kid? I don't know what happened to it. I'm only tellin' you what I heard. I know the guy who told it to me, an' he runs around with a girl who works in the same place with this dame I'm tellin' you about. She told it to him.

III

Well, I know one. And it's true, too; I know the dame. She didn't feel so good an' she went to see the doctor. The doc says she has bad tonsils, an' he cuts them out. But the woman keeps complainin' about how her throat feels, an' her husband, he takes a look—the doc's left a thread hangin'; you know how they do sometimes. So the husband, he says, “I know what's wrong with you,” an' he takes a pair o' scissors an' cuts off the thread. She aint talked right since' he cut off more'n 'e should've.

Naw, this wasn't no Polack neither, an' I know the dame. I know her old man, too.

IV

These two guys, they meet in the saloon. I'm standin' there drinkin' an' I hear them takin'. One guy, he's got a shiner, an' the other guy, he wants ta know how 'e come ta pick it up. He says, “Jesus, how'd you come ta get that?” This guy with the shiner, he says, “Well, ya see Joe, he meets me, an' `e gets t' arguin' with me. Get goin', I says to him, or I'll mess ya up.” An' Joe, he picks up a common housebrick, -a common housebrick! -an' `e lets me have it. So I ups an' lays 'im out stinkin'.

V

Remember when Louis fought Schmeling the last time? -knocked him out almost before it got started? I was listening to the fight at a gas station on Cottage out south here. Well, the fight's all over and the crowd's beginning to disappear, almost before it'd had time to get together, when along comes a Hebe. The Hebe says, “Well, how's the fight comin'?”

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The attendant says, "It's all over."

The Hebe stands there a minute not saying anything and looking sort of disappointed. He'd wanted to hear the fight. I guess; he didn't even know yet who'd won. Then he says, "What d'ya mean, it's all over?"

"Yep," the guy says, "Louis knocked 'im out."

The Hebe spits. "Phyeh!" he says,, "Ya don't got nothin' for yer money anymore!" And then he walks away, I almost split a gut.

Remember when the Informer was plain' around town? I was down at T's Bookstore one day, about that time. I was broke and I was trying to get rid of some of my first editions. T-asked me if I had a first of the Informer.

I said, "No. Let's see, that's by Liam O'Flaherty, isn't it?"

"No," he said, "that's by Sean O'Casey."

I said, "No, No, that's by Liam O'Flaherty" I knew damn well it was, but Targ insisted it was by Sean O'Casey, so I finally said, "Goddamn! Well, Goddamn," I said.

Targ said, "Why, what's wrong?"

"Oh, the hell," I said, "according to you, I've been collecting the wrong author all these years." And with that one, I left him to think it over.

VI

There's a bookseller on South Wabash who don't like browsers. I was talkin' to him one day, an' he says, "Them browsers, I don't leave them around." If he saw a browser with a book, he'd go up to him and say, "I bet you don't have nough money to buy that book."

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He'd insult him out of the store. When he talked about his books he'd always say, "I got a good stock o' merchandise here, a good stock o' merchandise." That's all books meant to him, nothin' more, a good stock o' merchandise. He boasts he's read only one book in his life. He told me what it was, but I forget. He says, "I don't read books. I don't want to read books. I notice guys who read books don't do no good at sellin' them." That's the kind of a guy he is.

VII

During prohibition in this here saloon all you could buy was near beer; that is, if the barkeep didn't know you. If the barkeep knew you, you asked for near beer an' when he brought it to you he always asked you if you wanted it straight or spiked. If said you wanted it spiked, he took a bottle of alky out of his hip pocket and put a couple drops of alky in the beer. That was spikin' it, puttin' in those coupld drops. I used to get my beer spiked every once in a while just to see if his hand would slip. But it never did.

VIII

We was havin' a argument with this guy, b'cause he always claimed he'd gone through the ninth grade in school an' we know goddamn well he didn't. After a while it gets hot an' we trip him up an' he admits he quit school when he was in the third grade. He quit the third grade to get married. I said to him, "You're so goddamn dumb you don't know from Tuesday." Goin' through the ninth grade! Hell!

IX

There's somethin' for you. See that sign? "Quiet, please, Men Are Drinking." (In a tavern.)

X

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There's an elderly gent who comes to this hotel to dictate love letters to the public stenographer. It's a weekly affair. Sometimes the letters are quite intimate. All we can figure out is that because he doesn't write them the dame can't sue him because of them.

XI

You didn't grow up in the city, I can see that. I have. When I get on a streetcar and I seen an empty seat, I don't make a rush for it, I look for a puke. I [?] sit in the back of the car and I see a guy's eyes light up at the sight of a vacant seat and he makes for it, and I know there's a farmer."

XII

They say that house is really high class. They guarantee you won't got no disease there. But if you do, they fix you up; they pay the doctor and the hospital bills. Only they charge you like hell, they charge twenty-five bucks a crack.

Naw, I aint never been there.

XIII

I went down to Grant Park one night real early. There was some guest artist there I wanted to hear, this blind pianist. I sat right behind the rows they reserve for the critics. There was an old white-haired guy in the critic's row—I figured he was from one of the newspapers. He kept stealing looks at a paper he had with him all through the concert, and I got to wandering what it was he was so interested in. When the concert was over, he laid the paper down on his seat. I hung around a while, trying to get a look at it. Finally I did. What do you think it was?

It was the Form, the Daily Racing Form.

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XIV

In the city you're always looking for someone to make you. I never take a streetcar home on a date. I'll see a drunk, and I'll wager you money, if I see a drunk on the car, he'll sit next to me, he'll sing or he'll sleep on my shoulder or he'll talk to me. Why? Because he recognizes a kindred spirit? Why is it? My red nose? If a guy asks me where a place is downtown, I look him over, I wonder what's next. He says, "Where's 75th & Cottage?" and I tell him and invariably wait for somethin' else. Invariably he'll muscle you for carfare. I always suspect anyone speaking to me at a carstop.

XV

During prohibition T. and I had an old jalopy, and one weekend we took a trip up to Windsor, Ontario and back. We had a bottle of bonded liquor with us when we started out from Chicago, meaning to drink it on the way. At the last minute, though, B. wanted to come along. You know B., straightlaced and prim and moral as hell. We were trying to make B. for something or other that time—I don't remember what—and so we decided we'd take him along. Imagine carrying a bottle of bonded stuff, during prohibition, all the way to Windsor and back, without even so much as smelling it.

But we did get back at B. another time, we fixed him good. T. and I and B. were together on a trip—it was to Fort Wayne that time. We stopped at a hotel, and T. and I had one room and B. had another. We watched, and when B. was out of the room. T. slipped in and put a batch of ice cubes in his bed. Afterwards, when B. went to bed, he jumped out quicker than he got in. Being so straightlaced and prim, he was too embarrassed to call for dry bedclothes from the hotel but came instead and pounded on our door for us to let him in. We had the lights out and made believe we weren't in. He spent half the night in the hall outside our door.

XVI

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Once T. and I went to a Polish carnival. We got blind on Polish pop, if you know what that is. We'd been drinking whiskey and gin before we went out even. So you can imagine what we were like.

Out at the carnival they had a giant swing, and we decided we'd ride it. I was the first to start heavin'. Together we cleaned that whole park out. The guy that was running the swing, even he had to lawn the machine.

XVII

You remember Indian Joe who used to run a speed trap outside Chicago here? They got him finally, the automobile association did, I think. I know a guy who pulled a fast one on him.

Indian Joe used to have guys stand at the railroad crossing at night, and when cars stopped for it, one of these guys would slip up behind a car and cut the wires to the tail light.

Then Indian Joe would pick them up and took them a heavy fine.

C. got caught that way. C. talked Indian Joe into believing he was a Chicago business man, driving a friend's car, and Indian Joe took a check from him for the fine. C. signed the check "U. R. A. Pratt." Indian Joe didn't know he'd been screwed till he went in to cash the check and the bank teller laughed at him. Then he traced the car and went looking for C. with a gun. C. kept out of his way though.

XVIII

C. was a gangster. He'd never been in the really big, time though. Here's another story about him for you. A pal of his was indicted for murder once and skipped to Wisconsin. After he'd laid low a while, he came back to Chicago and got a hideout in one of the

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suburbs. Instead of hiding in it though, he went riding on the streets. It sounds screwy as hell, but he was picked up one day, not for murder but for speeding. He wasn't recognized and of course he didn't give his right name. C. heard about it right away.

C. had been an assistant or deputy or something in the district attorney's office years ago, before prohibition, and he'd managed some way to keep his badge—probably claimed to've lost it or something. Anyway, soon as he heard what'd happened, he calls up this police station. He gives his right name and everything. He tells them they've picked up a guy for speeding who's wanted for murder in Chicago, he tells them the guy's right name and he tells them this is the district attorney's office and they're sending him, C., out to bring the guy in, will they turn him over? -they'll do the same sometime when they pick up someone these other coppers want. It was okay.

So C. goes out and flashes his badge and they turn the friend over to him. The two of them jump into C's, car and beat it back to Wisconsin. This friend of C's, he was caught later and sent up. C. got away with it and nothing ever happened to him. He died of heart failure one day, he was about fifty or so. He left a wife and scads of kids. They're poor as hell; they don't have a dime.

I'll tell you what I saw C. do one day. I saw it with my own eyes.

I was pumping gas in those, days, and C. used to hang around the station. He'd try to sell cars to fellows who looked right to him, and one time right at the station, he sold a guy a car. Gave him a song and a dance about a guy who had a car and had to get rid of it cheap because there was, sickness in the family. He told the guy to wait, and then he went out and stole a car like the one held described and brought it back and collected.

XIX

This guy, Ray, he's the kind o' guy who'll never pay a bill unless it's a photo finish. There's nothin' close than a split-second lens, I say.

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XX - Signpainter Talking

The trouble with workin' in the taverns is, they're always wantin' somethin' extra, somethin' for nothin', that old egg in their beer; an' sometimes, when y're letterin' up a joint, ya have t' give it to them. B' cause they threaten, t' throw the beer out if ya don't give 'em what they want, an' ya undo all the salesman's work. Pretty soon, then, the brewery'll be throwin' you out.

XXI - Signpainter Talking

This guy I'm workin' with, his boss owns a coal and ice business. He has a colored lad workin' for him as a coal hiker. This colored lad's about six foot five, an' heavy; he's all muscle an' bone, no fat. The boss gets the idea a picture of this colored lad hikin' coal oughta be used for advertisin' on the bulletin we're paintin'. So the lad I'm workin' with snaps a picture. The hiker's pretty pleased; he comes, up to the boss and he says, "Mr. W. you gonna put me up on that sign?" Mr. W. says yes, an' the colored lad's pleased an' goes off laughin' to himself. "That's fine," he says, "that's fine."

But he's workin' away there in the yard, an' while he's workin' he's thinkin' it over. Pretty soon he comes back. He says to the boss, "Mr. W., I been thinkin' it over. I don't care if ya want to put my picture up there, but will ya change it just a little bit.?"

So Mr. W. asks 'im why.

Well, ya see, Mr. W.," he says "It's like this. I owe a lot o' people in this town lots o' money, an' if they see me up there on that sign, why, they they're gonna know where to find me."

XXII - Signpainter Talking

There's a guy, he's a helper workin' for the General Outdoor Advertisin', who's keeper of the door down at the union when we hold our meetin's. When someone's sick an' got

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hurt or somethin', whenever some member's in distress an' we're takin' it up, tryin' to do somethin' about it, this boozehound—he drinks like a fish—, he pipes up: “I recommend we pass the hat.” I never seen it fail, he always wants to pass the hat. He's a hundred percenter. By that I mean he's a hundred percent boozehound.

XXIII - Signpainter Talking

I was letterin' a saloon; it was a tavern an' restaurant, a good one by the way. It was under the wife's name, but the guy himself was a policeman. A policeman aint supposed to have anythin' to do with that kind o' stuff, ya know. I thought I'd feel them along their own line. So I said, “It's too bad that policeman got shot.” We was talkin' about that tavern hold-up where the undertaker got killed and two cops got shot. They picked up the hold-up guys an' their moll in Detroit next day.

Well, ya could o' knocked me over with a feather when the old lady pipes up. She says, “That kind o' stuff's no good. I don't want none o' that hero stuff. That don't go. It's like my mother always said: he's just a nine-day wonder; nine days in' they'll forget all about him. He had no business shooting anyway—” She was talkin' about the copper that was sure to die— “b'cause they had the drop on him. He chould've put his hands up an' kep' quiet. He wasn't even on duty. If they hadn't started shootin', the stickup men wouldn't've started shootin' either, an' not even the undertaker would've been shot.”

XXIV - Signpainter Talking

Another joint I was letterin' up, I got to talkin' with the owners who's tendin' bar, an' I ask 'im if he's in the union. For answer he points to the union insignia up over the bar.

After a half hour, or maybe an hour, he pipes up: “But before I got in I broke one guy's jaw.”

I ask 'im how come.

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So he tells me. "Well," he says, "when I opened up, this guy, 'e comes in an' wants money, 'e wants the money right away. I tell 'im 'e'll get it when 'e gets it, an' he says he'll picket. So I say, go ahead an' picket. I was willin' to play ball with 'im, but I wanted to show 'im ya can't catch flies with vinegar; ya gotta use a little sugar, too. He picketed for exactly forty-three minutes. I couldn't stand it no longer, so I go out an' hit 'im an' I break his jaw. He aint never been around again."

I ask him: "Everything all right now?"

He says, "Yeh."

He was big enough to break a guy's jaw, if he ever hit him.

XXV - Signpainter Talking

I was workin' out in Beverly Hills one time, letterin' a saloon, an' I get to jibber jabberin' with the owner. I ask him what he does with the change people leave on the bar. He says, "Hell, the people around here don't leave no change on the bar, or anywhere else. They collect the change!" The silkstockin' neighborhoods are the cheapest in the world.

XXVI

A butcher once told me the same kind o' story. He'd been down in a Bohemian district before an' done so well he thought he'd go after the better class trade. An' all the time I was letterin' up his window, he kept gripin' an' [wishin'?] he could get rid of his lease an' get back to the place where 'e'd been before he came out there. A big now jallop'y'll pull up to the door an' a couple in evenin' clothes, top hat an' everythin', will come in. They'll price everything the guy's got an' take up 'is time an' go out with maybe a nickel's worth o' sausage an' a dime's worth o' cheese. An' there wasn't no crap in what he was saying, either; I seen it myself.

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XXVII

Listen to this one.

I was letterin' up a tavern once, an' there's a guy there—a patron—hangin' on the bar an' watchin' me work. I'm pushin' away at the brush, an' pretty soon he comes over an' starts to talkin' with me.

There's a lad across the street, an' this guy, he calls my attention to him. “See that fellow over there?” he says.

I say yeh, I seen him.

“Well,” this lad says to me, “that guy aint no good, he just aint no good at all.”

“It that so?” I say.

So he says, “Yeh,” an' for a while he don't say nothin' more. Pretty soon he pipes up with the story. This lad across the street, he's an awful boozehound. But he's got a brother who takes care of him an' tries to straighten 'im up ever so often. This brother, he takes the lad out, fits him out in new clothes an' cleans him up an' gets him a decent place to live. An' as long as the brother's around, the lad aint to be seen. As soon as the brother goes, though, the first thing the lad does is hock his new outfit an' buy himself a bottle.

When I'd heard that much, I thought it was the usual thing, the lad was no good because instead of takin' advantage of his new start he buys himself a bottle an' I say somethin' about that, “Naw,” he says. “Ya know what 'e does? 'Ebuys a bottle, an' then 'e goes off somewheres an' drinks it all up by himself. I tell you 'e aint no good, “E just ain't no good, that's all.”