

**Interview Subject: Irving "Red" Heller**

**Date Recorded: 4-21-12**

**Location: MDPL office, Art Deco Welcome Center**

**Date of Birth: 11-12-32**

Irving grew up on Miami Beach and eventually became the first Jew to attain the rank of Assistant Chief of Miami-Dade County Law Enforcement.

Irving's parents were poor immigrants who only spoke Yiddish. His father was a kosher butcher who lost two businesses during the Depression because his customers could not pay their bills. Several of his father's friends had come down to Miami Beach and opened businesses and did well. So his father came down and got set up then sent for Irving and his mother a year later.

They lived in an area south of 5th Street where hardly anyone spoke English. Irving spoke only Yiddish. He tells about his first day of school and not being able to understand the teacher. They didn't realize he didn't speak English until his father intervened. He grew up on Biscayne across from the Smith Cottages.

He went to Miami Beach High and talks about the high caliber of teachers who stressed academic excellence and preparing for college. After graduation he didn't have the money for college so he enrolled in the Air Force and served in Korea. After that, he came back to South Florida and eventually trained for the police Academy. Norman Kassoff (another interviewee) was one of his instructors. Irving went on to become the highest ranking Jew in 150 years in Miami-Dade law enforcement. Much of his career he has spent mentoring other Jews in law enforcement.

He talks a great deal about anti-Semitism, which he says he encountered a lot of during the period 1936-1947. He says that playing team sports, Jews and Gentiles, was an important lesson in getting along and working together.

He remembers vividly the soldiers training on the beach. At night, he and his friends, 8-9 years old, would run the obstacle courses and he feels the

presence of the soldiers were an important influence on his decision to go into the Air Force.

He was a Captain and Field Commander during the 1972 political conventions on Miami Beach. He was in charge of securing safety. They made a lot of arrests. He also talks about the Cocaine Cowboys time and answered the call after the famous shootout in the parking lot at Dadeland Mall.

He remembers well all the gambling that went on, including his father, during the S&G syndicate days. Irving hawked dog track programs for a penny a program and he and his friends walked the dogs for spending money or worked as pool boys.

Irving was a film buff from childhood and went to all the movie theaters on the Beach. Many of the stars would eat at a famous Italian restaurant called Piccolo's. His friend's Dad worked there and would tip him off when there was a movie star eating there. The boys would follow around John Wayne, Bob Cummings, Terry Moore.

Back to WW2, he remembers watching training with his friends and soldiers were being taught how to slit throats. They ran around with canteens and pretended to be soldiers.

Irving has done a lot of charity work and is very concerned about Israel. He spent a lot of time on professional assignment in Israel.

He is proud of being one of the first Jews to join the police force in 1958 and his work to open the ranks for other Jews to follow.