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**Interviews with Dr. Charles Fisher, New York Psychoanalytic
Institute and Society Oral History Project**

CF: Some 20 years ago, Margaret Brenman sent out an announcement through the American that she was specifically interested in what analysts had learned from their own analyses about their motivations for becoming analysts. Not things like a way to make a living, interest in helping people, etc., but the more irrational aspects of their motivation. I'll try to deal with my own case later. First, in this respect I have to tell you a little bit about myself in chronological order. I'm the younger of two brothers. I'm the months younger than my brother. He is now dead. This means that I was a premie, a precipitate baby, born on a staircase. My father tells my birth story sort of like that of Moses in the bullrushes. My mother plays no role in it. My mother is always absent. Very early in my postnatal life, my father came to the hospital in Los Angeles where I was born, and there I was in a basket. This was before the days of incubators, and he said I was lying in the basket and I was dying, so he said, so he took me home and he nursed me, not my mother. My mother had a 10 1/2-month-old baby, my brother, to take care of.

AR: How did he know you were dying?

CF: I don't know. That was my father's diagnosis. He picked me up and he took me home and he prepared the bottle and he nursed me. And there was never anything said about my mother. So I grew up in Los Angeles.

AR: Had your family been in Los Angeles a long time?

CF: Not a long time. My parents were both immigrants. My father was born and raised in Roumania. He had a very hard childhood. His mother died when he was nine and he had a wicked stepmother. All I know about him was when he was nine he was apprenticed to a tinsmith, and in those days you were sent to a distant village to be apprenticed. He was sent away and he never saw his parents. He came to the United States. I don't know much about his life before that. It was about 1900.

AR: They went on foot across . . . ?

CF: Irving Howe told me how in Roumania large masses of Jews marched to the Hamburg ports to attempt to come to the United States, where they all thought they would become wealthy. It must have been about 1880-1900. He came around the turn of the century, maybe earlier, because he called before my brother and I were born. My mother came from Odessa and I never knew until much later just when.

AR: A mixed marriage.

CF: A mixed marriage. My mother came at 13. They met in night school and lived on the Lower East Side like everybody else. They obviously had a very unhappy marriage. There was a set of fraternal twins born before my brother and I were born. My brother was born in 1907, I was born in 1908. The twins were born a few years before that and they both died early. Somewhere in that interval my father left my mother, whether he actually deserted her or whether it was to go to California to see if he could make a living and send for her, it was never clear. I know he was at the St. Louis Fair, the St. Louis Exposition, in 1904, and my father had a passion for expositions.

AR: He was certainly adventurous.

CF: Yes. He was a tinsmith. In those days they were like peddlers. He was not a traveling businessman, but he was a traveler. When he left Roumania, he stayed in

Hamburg for a while. He was an uneducated man but he spoke about five or six languages. He spoke Roumanian, Yiddish, English, some Russian.

AR: Many Russians came originally from Germany..

CF: Yes. But he had a passion for world fairs because he could pick up prostitutes, at least that was my private opinion; I have some evidence for that. Anyway, he landed in San Francisco. He was in the San Francisco earthquake, which was in 1906. He woke up one morning and the city was shaking, plaster was falling off the walls, and everyone ran to the bank to get their money. That's the last I heard of the earthquake. The next thing I know he was in Los Angeles and he evidently sent for my mother. By this time the twins were dead. They died very young.

AR: Of what, do you know?

CF: I don't know what they died of. I have a picture of my mother holding one of these twins—it looked like it had marasmus. That's the only picture I have of my mother. So they settled in Los Angeles and my brother was born and less than 10 months later I was born. My father was a Jewish anti-Semite. His real name was Cohen. He had some Roumanian name. He got to Ellis Island so on his naturalization certificate he was Herman Cohen, but he had a lot of trouble with that name because wherever he went he would be the object of anti-Semitic comments, because of the name Cohen. My father did not look Jewish. A lot of Roumanians don't have Semitic names. He would get into fights and he once got into a fight with a man and hit him over the head with a wheel and almost killed him, so after that he decided to change his name. So he picked the name Fisher. Why did he pick the name Fisher? Because half the Fishers were Jews and the other half were not.

AR: There was a proper degree of ambiguity.

CF: Yes, that's right. On my birth certificate I was named Charles Cohen. Many years later I had it changed, but from the time I was born he was already Fisher. My father would not live in the Jewish section of Los Angeles, an area called Boyle Heights. We lived in a section of Los Angeles, lower-middle-class. Now it is close to the center of town but then it was kind of far west, and it was a Gentile neighborhood. We had an Irish family on one side and a family called Best on the other. My father was 40 when I was born, my mother 32. My father kind of retired early. He had social inhibitions. He was very shy and self-conscious and somewhat withdrawn. He bought a house and he was a skilled workman, and he built a shop in the back of the house. He made a fairly good living. In 1916 he bought a Model-T Ford, a Victrola—"His Master's Voice." He bought us toys. You notice I don't say much about my mother. As far as I know, she was always depressed, she may have had a postpartum depression, and I have very few memories of her. My mother committed suicide when I was eight by taking poison. In those days there weren't any barbiturates around but there were poisons, a stuff called bluing, bichloride of mercury. They would bleach clothes with it and it came in little bottles with a skull and bones. It wasn't a liquid, it was pills which you dissolved. Now, she got up early one morning, locked herself in the bathroom--about four or five in the morning--and I think my brother heard her in there and heard her vomiting and must have awakened my father, and by this time, my memory is that I was standing outside the door (describes the layout of the house).

AR: You were in the bathroom and the kitchen?

CF: Here's the kitchen, the bathroom was here, and I was over here somewhere, standing against the wall very coolly watching the following scene. My father broke down the door and I got a glimpse of a glass half full with the blue liquid. Then I recovered the following memory in analysis, and I'm not sure if it was a memory or a fantasy. I see him

carrying my mother out over his shoulder, and in the kitchen she starts to vomit and he drops her. She's lying on the floor in a pool of reddish vomit, and that scene ends.

I remember now my father calling the doctor, who told him to give her a raw egg, and the next thing I know an ambulance came and took her away. She lived for four days. She died on April 1, 1916. A few things are relevant to my future history. I asked my father, whom I was very fond of, I admired him—I was eight—what made my mother do that. He gave me a very strange answer. He said, "She did it because she had a bad dream." What a thing to tell a child!

AR: When did you ask him this?

CF: When I was eight. Within a day or two after that.

AR: Dreams are very powerful.

CF: I had no difficulty understanding that dreams were the royal road to suicide, the royal road to the unconscious. I had no trouble with that, but it was very puzzling. She had a bad dream. You understand, I spent my life with dreams, I dealt extensively with nightmares, and that little statement may have determined my career. That's associated with another scene. My brother and I and my father are sitting together and my father has a bottle of pills and he is calmly counting them, and he announced that my mother took enough to kill an army—16 pills—so I learned to have a cool and detached attitude.

AR: An experimental attitude.

CF: Yes, that's right. But my father was not a scientist, he was a very emotional, passionate man. He was very unhappy with my mother, partly, I had reason to believe, because they had a very poor sex life. I have some memories--this was a little house with two bedrooms, and there was a wall separating my parents' room from my brother's and my' room. I don't know how many experiences you telescope into a single memory, as Anna Freud suggested about memory, but at least on one occasion I knew that my father made sexual advances to my mother and she was pushing him away. That may have happened many nights because the amount of amnesia I have of my mother is extensive.

AR: Was this retrospective amnesia, after the suicide?

CF: This is what Greenacre talks about in her paper on girls, latency girls, who had some traumatic experience which served as screen memories, repressing everything that went before, but I have as much memory of the first years of my life as most people. It's just that I have lots of memories of my father and only a few of my mother. I thought my mother didn't speak English and I don't remember her speaking. She was silent, she had a white face, sort of blank, depressed, and I didn't think she could speak English because I don't remember her speaking it. I found out later, when I was in my forties, that she came over when she was 13. That's still on a borderline where it's possible to learn to speak English well without too much of an accent, so my mother may have spoken it very well. Furthermore, she may have been more educated than my father. My mother could write Yiddish. I think that was an unusual accomplishment for a woman at that time, wouldn't you say?

AR: Well, there were women who learned to write it.

CF: If she could write Yiddish at 13, she certainly could speak English. One of the reasons my mother was depressed was that they had no friends; she had family in New York, two brothers and a sister. She used to write to them and she used to write in Yiddish, but she had no Jewish connections in Los Angeles, and they were friendless because my father had reclusive tendencies and maybe my mother did, too. But all my memories of her are silence, she was a silent person. She hardly spoke, so I thought she

didn't know how to speak English. That was a big distortion. She was so depressed she didn't speak.

AR: You don't remember her speaking to you in English?

CF: I have no memory of her speaking to me at all. The few memories I have of her were her washing my hair. My most pleasant memory I have of her has a sort of glow around it. She must have given me a bath. I remember she was carrying me out of the bathroom to bed and had put a towel around me, and that's the most intimate memory I have of her. Now when they'd go places--my father had a lust for living, he could never get satisfied. He would take us to vaudeville shows, take us to the beach in the summer. My mother never seemed to get involved in these things. My mother would take me shopping. Whenever the family-divided-up, I would go with my mother because I was the youngest; my brother would go with my father. My mother used to spit in her handkerchief and wipe my face, which I hated. We were very well taken care of as children. We were very well dressed when we were kids. My mother's suicide occurred when she took the poison. It was a terrible death. She died of uremic poisoning.

AR: Yes, it attacks the kidneys.

CF: My eighth birthday was on the 26th of March and she took the poison on the 28th or 29th, and she had made a birthday party, she had made a cake, and one thing I could never understand or be able to forgive her for is--how could she have done this so close to my birthday?

AR: It was her bad dream.

CF: Her depression was connected with childbirth. And I learned many years later, I was told by her sister that she hated my father, that my father had killed her and was responsible for her death. She was always pregnant, he was always knocking her up.

AR: She only had three pregnancies.

CF: That's true, but I remember she may have had a miscarriage of some kind when I was little, but they said she was pregnant all the time. My brother never enters into these considerations at all. I was so smart, and I had just skipped a grade, in February, I skipped a half year, then another half year. Then I caught up with my brother and so I was in the same grade as my brother, and my brother didn't like that. Teachers in those days didn't know anything about psychology and they were always making comparisons between him and me. In those days I was always the smartest one in the class. Anyway, to come back to what all this has to do with becoming a psychoanalyst--my father was my first patient. He would confide in me and I learned to listen to him. I never told my father my troubles. He began to tell me things when I was five, six, seven years old about my mother and he said he was going to get me a new stepmother, even though at other times he'd tell me that stepmothers are terrible people. He would also tell me some sexual things.

AR: When you were six and seven?

CF: Yes. All this is between four and eight, so I learned how to listen. I was obviously his favorite. He wasn't a bad father. He only hit me once that I can remember. He slapped me when I once said the word fuck to him. But I never figured my father really meant it. I must have been about 13 when I told him that I masturbated and he pretended to show some disapproval of that. My father was a very sensual man, very frustrated. I lost my mother when I was eight and my poor father was dying to marry someone else. He was by this time 48, and he was a very attractive, very handsome man, so he hired a housekeeper.

AR: Your mother was 40 when she died?

CF: Yes, 40. I was eight and my brother was nine. So my father tried to keep us and he hired a housekeeper, a very masochistic little woman who had a little six-year-old girl. She only lasted a couple of months or so. Somehow the child got drunk on beer. There were some big scenes and she disappeared, and shortly after that my father found a foster home for us with a Mrs. Goldberg, and we stayed with her it must have been a year, because my mother died in April, 1916, and in July, 1917, my brother and I were put in an orphanage where I remained until I was almost 18. We lived in a Jewish orphan home in Southern California. All I've been telling you I've told at least three analysts and a lot of other people, an every time I tell it I get upset.

AR: What do you make of that?

CF: There are certain trauma you just never get over. I've had a number of abreactions, of an odd kind.

AR: It must have been an incredibly puzzling experience for you.

CF: I never thought of it in those terms. It was certainly baffling. I'll tell you about an abreaction, a particularly bad one, of some significance. My mother was in the hospital for four days before she died and we were never taken to see her. A uremic death is not a pleasant one. I recently saw one. I had become very close to Margaret Mahler and she died rather quickly over a week's time, although she seemed to be doing very well before that. They operated on her because they thought she had an obstruction, but she didn't. She was an 88-year-old woman with cardiac and respiratory trouble. First she had cardiac failure, then respiratory failure, and then kidney failure, so what carried her away was an uremia, and I saw her and she already in an uremic coma, and they had put a white sheet over her and she was all blown up. You can get urinary retention with uremia. And it was a very shocking experience because when my mother died, we were taken to the funeral home and somewhere, I was in the car with my brother, and the car stops and a man comes to us and says, "Would you like to see your mother?" and my brother said, "No," and I, being brave, said, "Yes." So I go in and all I see is my mother in an open coffin with a white face and a white gown, all blown up, and I was very calm and detached, so when I saw Mahler, this was the only other person I saw like that, it was a very shocking, very upsetting experience.

AR: Did your father cry? Do you remember him crying?

CF: I didn't see him cry. We used to wait for him on the front lawn of our house. We knew he had gone to the hospital. We'd wait for him to come home and give us a report. Finally, the fourth day came and we knew that she had died. So we went into the living room and he told us that she was dead and then he began to cry, and at that moment I threw myself on the floor and I started to cry and I checked myself. I said to myself, "What are you crying for? You didn't love her and she didn't love you," or something like that. The scene ends then. I remember my brother crying, not my father. Then years later, I was in California and my brother and I went to the cemetery to both my mother's and father's graves. We talked. We talked about the day when our mother committed suicide. He remembered things that I didn't and I remembered things that he didn't. One of the things that he remembered that I didn't was that our father cried, he wailed a long, long time. You could hear him a block away. I repressed that. It was a massive repression.

AR: So you stopped your own crying.

CF: I stopped my own crying. Years later, after I went into analysis with Edith Jacobson, not too long after I started with her, there was something about it and a lot of time was spent around the few days around my mother's suicide, and suddenly I began to wail. This wail was coming out of me. I was detached and listening to it, and it went on for

the whole hour, I couldn't stop. It went on and on and on, and it was my father's wail. I did that in two sessions. And that was a very important therapeutic experience. I always ask patients where they feel their depression and some people say in the head, some say in the belly, but I had the distinct impression that mine was in my belly. I used to outline it. It was over on this side, it was an introjected lump, and after that experience, the lump disappeared, it palpably shrank. My father made a number of attempts to get remarried, but after he put us in the orphan home, he told us that in a short time he was going to get a new mother for us, but he never did. From then on he was a broken man and I guess guilt-ridden, and he just went downhill. He continued to work at his trade. He would come every Sunday to the orphanage and visit. We were not allowed to go out or to go home either. There were three modern cottage-type orphanages in the United States (Jewish)—the first was in Pleasantville, New York, the second in San Francisco, and the third one in Los Angeles, built maybe around 1912. I went there in 1917. It was beautiful. There were big stucco buildings, there were cottages, a ten-acre paradise, full of fruit orchards, orange groves, and there were cows and chickens, and the plant was beautiful and we were not treated badly, we were well taken care of—it was a Jewish charity. By the way, this was before modern social work. There were no social workers, the superintendents tended to be rabbis. We had an old man rabbi, he was about 65 and he knew nothing about children. His wife, who was some kind of bitch, ran the place, and they had ignorant, untrained female matrons. There were about 100 kids. It was a small institution and we had everything there but love, unless you could eke some out from somebody in some way.

AR: Were there counselors?

CF: There was a housemother, either widows or old maids, who had had nothing to do with children. Some of them were witches, some were very nice, none of them were lovable, except one, and I was already grown up by then.

AR: And you went to school from there?

CF: Yes, we went to public school. The public school adjoined the ten-acre plot so all the kids at school knew who the orphan kids were. One of the worst things about being in an orphan home was that you knew you were inferior and there was a stigma attached to it. And you know that they closed up the orphan homes. There were Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant homes, and the Jewish charities were always far in advance ideologically of the Catholic and Protestant ones, but it was finally around 1940 concluded that orphan homes were not as good as foster homes, a dubious proposition, because a good orphan home is better than the majority of foster homes because it has a certain stability and you have friends, other kids, and you make close relationships. There were things that weren't too bad about it, being in an orphan home, but it was bad enough. You spent your whole life waiting. You were supposed to leave when you were 16. There were no social workers. They kept me there until 1926, a year longer than most of the kids. I was the first kid there who went to college. When I came there, everyone agreed that I would be.

...

AR: The group decided that you were somehow special, from the very beginning?

CF: The authorities did. Everyone said I would be the first one to go to college. It was true, I was.

AR: You knew when you were nine.

CF: Yes. I would bring home report cards, all A's. So how I would go to college or what would become of me, that wasn't clear.