

Interview with Harry Eisenstat (by Brent Kelley)

June 22, 1992

Transcribed by Sarah Johnson, March 30, 2018

Woman: Hello?

Brent Kelley: May I speak with Harry Eisenstat please?

Woman: Sure

Kelley: Thank you

Eisenstat: Hello?

Kelley: Harry? This is Brent Kelley, I wrote you about ten days ago about an interview? Is this a good evening to talk?

Eisenstat: Yeah, I can talk now

Kelley: If it's not convenient I'd be glad to call back.

Eisenstat: Oh, it's alright.

Kelley: Okay, first let me say I appreciate this very much, I will ask you, oh probably a dozen...

Eisenstat: Well, tell me this...

Kelley: Sure?

Eisenstat: We get so many calls – what are you writing?

Kelley: I write up interviews for a magazine called Sports Collectors Digest. The interview appears usually about six months after the actual interview is done. One of the side effects is for the period of, oh, three or four weeks after the interview appears in print you will receive a pretty good increase in the amount of fan mail you will receive. One fellow told me his went from an average of four or five a week to about 25 or 30 a week for a period of about a month. I'm not trying to do an expose or anything like that – I'll just ask you some questions about your career and what you answer is what goes in the interview. Just trying to, more or less, inform the fans of today about the ballplayers of yesterday.

Eisenstat: Well the idea of increasing mail that doesn't encourage me too much.

Kelley: Don't care for that?

Eisenstat: Well, I'm always glad to sign but what has happened...what is your first name?

Kelley: Brent

Eisenstat: Brent? What is happening today is a lot of guys are using ballplayers – I get mail many times from the same people. Two, three, four times.

Kelley: That's abusive.

Eisenstat: It is abusive and the fact that they are using it and exploiting it and they're selling it. I'm not saying mine is worth so much or anything like that, it really isn't but I feel that way and I just don't like to get involved – I'm glad to cooperate but all of the sudden I get a flood of mail and I guarantee you, Brent, it will be a lot of the same that I've gotten in the past.

Kelley: That wouldn't surprise me and I agree that's a terrible side effect of this whole idea of sports memorabilia. Most of the fan mail you get from these interviews I've done in the past though have been honest to goodness true baseball fans who collect autographs as well. I do know for a fact that some of them have been the abusers but the vast majority who read the interview say 'well he's a nice guy' or 'I never even heard of him before' and they'll just sit down and write the person. They are just baseball fans, they're not trying to take advantage.

Eisenstat: I have no objection to baseball fans.

Kelley: I understand.

Eisenstat: Or collectors who have their own collection or have their kids collect them, that part I have no objection to.

Kelley: Right

Eisenstat: But I object to the same guys who send self addressed envelopes because I recognize the name immediately and what city it's from and so on.

Kelley: I object to that too and I don't know how to get around that. I'll tell you – I don't know if you know Davy Williams, played second base for the Giants in the 50s, he said he got from one fella one time 50 8x10 photographs of the exact same pose of him asking him to sign all of 50 of them. Davy's just a really nice fella and he said 'what the heck I know what he's doing' and he signed them all and said please don't do this again. He said it wasn't three months later that he got 50 more from the same guy. That's what gives everybody a black eye in this situation. The people that send you the repeated requests I don't know what they're doing, if they're selling them or...

Eisenstat: Can you send a copy of what you write to me before?

Kelley: Oh, by all means. In fact, I insist on doing that because I don't want misquotes, and sometimes it's not intentional, I don't want to misunderstand what was said. I don't want that to happen so I always send a copy before I submit it to the magazine.

Eisenstat: Okay.

Kelley: I will wait for your approval before I send it. Hopefully you won't disapprove but if you don't approve it doesn't get sent. You are giving me your time which I appreciate and I certainly don't want to do anything to cause you any embarrassment by saying something that shouldn't have been said.

Eisenstat: Well, we'll be glad to go along with it.

Kelley: I really do appreciate it. As I said I'll ask you about a dozen questions and you can answer as short or as long as you want to and if you choose that you don't want to answer the question just don't answer it. You came to Brooklyn at age 19 and you're from Brooklyn so was this your first job in baseball?

Eisenstat: Yes, I was signed by the Brooklyn Dodgers, by Casey Stengel.

Kelley: No kidding?

Eisenstat: And Al Lopez was the captain at that time. Then they sent me to Dayton which was one of their farm systems – Dayton, Ohio- the Dayton Ducks.

Kelley: The Ducks, huh? I don't know they were called that.

Eisenstat: Yes, the Dayton Ducks of Dayton, Ohio, and we won [intelligible] and lost six and won the pennant.

Kelley: This was in 35?

Eisenstat: 19...yes, 35. And then in 1936 I was sent to Allentown with [unintelligible, person's name?] and we won 21 and lost 8. And then the next year I was sent to Louisville – I went to spring training with the Dodgers and was sent to Louisville in Double A ball. I moved up to Double A and was with Brooklyn for about a month or so and we went to Louisville and we won about 12 at that time over about half of the year. 12 and 5, 12 and 6, I forget exactly. And in between those times I spent a little time with Brooklyn and pitched with Brooklyn.

Kelley: You actually pitched pretty well in 37 with Brooklyn.

Eisenstat: Yes, and then from there...at that time I was declared a free agent by Judge Landis. They had some rule at that time that you could farm a ballplayer out three times. In 1934 I pitched for the Dodgers for about a month. When I got out of school I pitched for the Dodgers for a month. The next year they sent me to Dayton, they felt that was considered a year and Judge Landis declared me a free agent. And then I signed with the Detroit Tigers.

Kelley: Was this the time when Judge Landis turned loose all of those Cardinals minor leaguers too?

Eisenstat: Yes there were quite a few.

Kelley: It was like 100 minor leaguers?

Eisenstat: Not that many. There was just a small group of us.

Kelley: Oh okay I guess that was maybe a few years later. And the Tigers signed you as a free agent?

Eisenstat: I was [unintelligible] heavily with Hank Greenberg, he was from New York as well. He lived in the Bronx and we were quite close. He knew that they needed left handed pitching and I would do well with them. And I did that.

Kelley: You did do well. I guess in 38 you were the #1 man out of the bullpen for the Tigers.

Eisenstat: I think we won nine and lost six. In 1938 and that was the year that Bob Feller struck out 18 men and established the world's strikeout record. And I beat him that day.

Kelley: No kidding?

Eisenstat: Yep, 4-1.

Kelley: Well that's very impressive.

Eisenstat: In fact I was with Bob at a dinner – every year they have a golf and tennis outing in Detroit, Hank Greenberg had died of cancer. And there was a cancer fund that was initiated by his son Steven Greenberg who was deputy commissioner of baseball...

Kelley: Very impressive young man

Eisenstat: Bright as hell.

Kelley: Yes, from what I understand.

Eisenstat: And they raised over \$100,000. People paid to play, with the various players, golf.

Kelley: That would be fun, that's an excellent idea.

Eisenstat: I was with Detroit in 38, I think I won nine and lost six, I'm not sure...

Kelley: That's what it was, yes sir.

Eisenstat: Don't - I'm not sure sometimes with the figures, we're going back a few years.

Kelley: Oh yes.

Eisenstat: In 39 I was traded during the season, they won a doubleheader against Philadelphia, I won both games of the doubleheader, pitched five innings in one game and four innings in another game against Philadelphia and got credit for both games. Hank Greenberg had hit three home runs and I wound up winning both games.

Kelley: That's nice batting support, isn't it?

Eisenstat: Yes. And then I was traded to Cleveland for Earl Averill. I came to Cleveland and he went to Detroit. And with Detroit relieved most of the time. [Maybe he meant Cleveland but he said Detroit.]

Kelley: Were you happy as a reliever?

Eisenstat: Yes as long as I pitched I had no objections to that.

Kelley: You did have some good games as starts, you completed a good percentage of your starts.

Eisenstat: I wasn't a steady starter but I filled in when doubleheaders piled up. And then with Cleveland in 39 – let's see...39, 40, 41, 42...and then I went into the Air Force. Yeah, I went into service.

Kelley: Yeah, 43 you entered...

Eisenstat: When I got out of service I decided I wanted to go into business. I had been in the hardware business while I was with Detroit and I liked it very much.

Kelley: That's what you entered after 46?

Eisenstat: And then when I got out of service I was still the property of Cleveland. And I decided at that time we wanted to raise a family and it was kind of hard so we decided to stay in Cleveland and went into the hardware business.

Kelley: You were just 30 years old when you left the game.

Eisenstat: That's right.

Kelley: Somewhere I read, and I don't know where, you worked in a defense plant during the war, is that correct?

Eisenstat: Yes

Kelley: Okay, I don't remember where I read that but I did see it some place.

Eisenstat: Just for a short period of time.

Kelley: Okay.

Eisenstat: That was just in the wintertime, then I went into the service.

Kelley: Okay, that was while you were still playing ball.

Eisenstat: Yes, then I went into the service like a lot of other people did.

Kelley: One of your few starts with Cleveland you pitched a shutout, do you remember that?

Eisenstat: Yes?

Kelley: Remember who it was against?

Eisenstat: I think it was against Philadelphia. I believe it was.

Kelley: You remember anything about the game?

Eisenstat: No, I – well, we had a good defensive team.

Kelley: Yeah, the Indians were just short – I don't know what they were missing but they were just short of being a really good team.

Eisenstat: Yeah, we had good pitching at that time but Detroit beat us out of the pennant the last day of the season.

Kelley: That's a famous story.

Eisenstat: [Unintelligible] beat Feller 2-0 I believe and won the pennant on that.

Kelley: I interviewed Floyd about a year ago, very nice man. He could tell you almost every pitch of that game, I guess that was really the highlight of his career.

Eisenstat: What is he doing now?

Kelley: He's retired. Living a pretty quiet life. Very, very pleasant to speak with though and he wants to talk almost forever.

Eisenstat: And then I was in the hardware business for 20 years. Here in Cleveland in Shaker Heights... and then after the hardware business, I sold out in the hardware business and was vice president of national accounts for Curtis [sp?] Industries.

Kelley: Oh my goodness.

Eisenstat: Curtis Industries, they are the largest manufacturers of key blanks, automotive supplies and so on.

Kelley: That's a heck of an outfit.

Eisenstat: I still work one or two days a week, they wanted me to stay on and work on some of the accounts we had opened up over the years. We sort of had three careers – playing ball, I've been with Curtis going on 23 years.

Kelley: Three lengthy careers too.

Eisenstat: So I guess that is pretty much the story.

Kelley: Let's talk about your hitting, you were a heck of a good hitting pitcher.

Eisenstat: Well, I lucked out and got a few hits but I wouldn't consider myself an outstanding hitter.

Kelley: Well, a pitcher with a batting average over .200 is just as scarce as hen's teeth and you batted .211...

Eisenstat: Well, it's a different ballgame today.

Kelley: Even back then – don't belittle your hitting ability because you can look back at the pitchers in your day too and find the .180, .190 hitter but you don't find many of them around your average. Did you ever play anything besides pitcher when you were younger?

Eisenstat: I used to play first base as well.

Kelley: That's not surprising, you just didn't happen to swing the bat that good. What about your control? For a left hander you had outstanding control.

Eisenstat: Yeah, I could throw the ball pretty much wherever – I could throw the ball well.

Kelley: Yeah, evidently.

Eisenstat: I had excellent control because Mickey Cochrane was our manager in Detroit and he always thought that I had outstanding control.

Kelley: Is something you came by naturally or did you have to work at it?

Eisenstat: I always had good control, I never walked too many people.

Kelley: That's gotta be a pitcher's best friend, control.

Eisenstat: That's right, today many of them, well, there's a difference between being a pitcher and being a thrower.

Kelley: Yes, there sure is.

Eisenstat: Yes, high and low – I'm sitting here talking to you and I'm watching [Nathan?] pitch against the White Sox. And this kid has done very well, he's gonna be – he'll do better yet.

Kelley: You gotta wonder what he'd be doing if he had a little better support behind him.

Eisenstat: It's a young team and Cleveland is on the right track in what they're doing.

Kelley: It looks like it for a change.

Eisenstat: They didn't win by paying the \$2 million, \$3 million – with the Carter and Butler and some of the others, Candiotti, they didn't win with them. And when you're talking about places like Pittsburgh, Cleveland, they are small market areas.

Kelley: Yes sir.

Eisenstat: And you can't compete against the Dodgers – look at the Dodgers now. They've got payroll and the Mets, they're not winning. Paying the big salaries doesn't guarantee you're going to win it.

Kelley: It sure doesn't.

Eisenstat: [Unintelligible] went and bought this one and that one and they didn't win the way they should have.

Kelley: Yeah I think if you can build from within, they're getting some young players and seem to be doing a great job. I've been in Cleveland but basically I'm a Tigers fan but my second favorite team is Cleveland. I've followed them closely for years, it's frustrating. In the time you were there, in the majors, who was the best hitter or best player you saw? Your opinion only.

Eisenstat: Well, one of the greatest I thought – in fact I saw him a couple of weeks ago – was Charlie Gehringer. He's a Hall of Famer and he was a great, great second baseman. And I would say Joe DiMaggio, as far as hitters. Ted Williams, as far as hitters. Those are a few.

Kelley: You could build a pretty good team working around those three couldn't you? What about the best pitcher? You talked about Feller...

Eisenstat: You're asking about pitchers?

Kelley: Yes sir.

Eisenstat: I would say, I would choose Bob Feller as the best. I would choose Ruffing as a great pitcher.

Kelley: What about a couple of teammates at one time of yours – Tommy Bridges and Mel Harder?

Eisenstat: Schoolboy Row?

Kelley: Oh yeah. Mel Harder?

Eisenstat: Mel Harder was a great pitcher. Great curveball. He's a great friend of mine. And I'm rather disappointed that he didn't get into the Hall of Fame.

Kelley: I just had a book published and it's "The Case For..." and it's about players that should be in the Hall of Fame but aren't and I wrote about Mel and spoke with him a few times. He is certainly a nice, nice person.

Eisenstat: Oh yeah, Mel's a great friend of mine and he's a gentleman. Class guy. You don't read about from the years we played – maybe it's the environment today with the dope and the rapes and everything else...we never experienced anything like that. I guess it's the time itself.

Kelley: That's one of the things that disturbs me, you know, you can write nice things about people. There's no need to write the bad stuff, the nonsense. But I guess you're right, that's what sells and if that's what it takes I'll probably start doing something else because I'm not going to do that nonsense. Well, we talked about your fan mail way back when we started – about how much do you get? Do you have any idea? Do you ever count it?

Eisenstat: Oh, I get three or four a week.

Kelley: And it's autograph requests?

Eisenstat: Yeah, for cards, pictures and they send envelopes...

Kelley: Well I agree that there's nothing wrong with doing it but it is the people who abuse it who really make it bad for everybody. What about your career? Do you have any regrets or problems that arose, anything like that?

Eisenstat: No, I didn't have any regrets. I enjoyed it, it was great while we played. The only regret I probably have is that I didn't stay to get my college degree. If I were to go back that's the only thing I would do. I did a couple of years and that was it. But at that time you do things, you try to help out with your family and so on.

Kelley: Yeah, and it's awful hard to see when you're 20-21 years old too. I've got a boy...

Eisenstat: You make decisions at that time [unintelligible] maybe you wouldn't have made those decisions. But I don't regret that one bit.

Kelley: That's good, that's good. Having regrets is not a good thing. Would you be a baseball player again if you went back to when you were 18, 19?

Eisenstat: Oh yes.

Kelley: Good. One last question – is there one game that you performed in or you watched that stands out in your memory?

Eisenstat: Well the game that stands out that I would choose is when Bob Feller struck out 18 men and established the world's record.

Kelley: And you beat him – I bet that would stand out.

Eisenstat: And that was the year Greenberg had 58 home runs.

Kelley: Yeah, that's a season that would stand out. Did they pitch to him at the end?

Eisenstat: Yeah, he hit some balls – he got a couple of hits but he faced Feller at the end. He wasn't able to break the record, he had 58 home runs which was a great feat at that time.

Kelley: That's a great feat any time even with how many they're hitting today.

Eisenstat: He was a great hitter. He made himself a great ballplayer. He worked at it. Today a lot of the ballplayers don't work at it.

Kelley: Yes sir. Boy if that's not true.

Eisenstat: They come to the ballpark with their attache cases and their agents.

Kelley: And count their money instead of taking batting practice.

Eisenstat: Don't find out why they're not hitting or why they're not pitching.

Kelley: And then complain to the press. That's a sorry state of affairs. Well Harry, that wraps it up. First of all thank you very, very much. I will send you a copy of the completed manuscript – oh, it will probably take me four or five days. Maybe it will be the first of next week before I get it finished but I'll send it to you and I'll await your reply before I send it to the magazine.

Eisenstat: Fine.

Kelley: Now assuming you do approve and it gets printed, would you like a copy of it once it's published?

Eisenstat: Yes.

Kelley: Okay, would you like more than one copy?

Eisenstat: Well a couple of copies.

Kelley: If you have children or grandchildren, something like that.

Eisenstat: I have grandchildren, I have four grandchildren...

Kelley: We can send you half a dozen copies, whatever you'd like is no big deal.

Eisenstat: Well we can always get some.

Kelley: Okay.

Eisenstat: But you can send a couple of copies.

Kelley: Well we'd be very happy to do that. Okay Harry thank you very much, I really appreciate your time. I have enjoyed it and I will have this to you...oh, this is Monday – probably by next Monday or Tuesday.

Eisenstat: Fine.

Kelley: Thank you sir. Good night.

Eisenstat: Bye bye.