

This is Brenda Henley recording Jerry Hyman. The date is June 17, 2005. Jerry, where and when were you born?

January 21, 1924 in Greensboro.

When did your ancestors come to America, and where did they come from?

My father came from Latvia, I don't know, I can't give you the date right off. And my mother's people came from Budapest, Hungary. And, I don't know, and then my mother came to Greensboro from NY, but she had a great-aunt living here, who was the first one of our family to come over.

Who was that? Was that Gertrude?

That's my mother's name. Helen Weiss. W-E-I-S-S.

You were born in Greensboro, where were you born?

St. Leo's Hospital.

Where was your house?

Leftwood St.

Who lived in your household?

Just my mother and father, 2 sisters, and myself.

Do you have siblings, you just answered that. Where do they live now?

I had 2 sisters, she passed away, living in Belle Harbour, FL, and my other sister lives in Atlanta, GA.

How did you meet your spouse? Your first wife?

At a lecture.

And how did you meet your second wife?

At a lecture.

What was your first spouse's background?

She was from Baltimore, went to UNC Greensboro.

What was Sue's background?

Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Was she associated with UNCG?

When she was married and lived here, she was associated with UNCG.

How many children do you have, what do they do and where do they live?

I have a son that lives in Madison, NJ, just out of New York. He's in some facet of the banking business.

Is that the only child you have?

No. Then I have a son who lives here, who was born here. And he's a dentist.

Getting onto the business aspect of the interview, what...

Did you want to know about my daughter?

Oh, your daughter...

My daughter, Linda, lives in Washington, and she has a high position with EPA.

OK, now we'll get on to the business portion of this interview. What has been your occupation?

Designing and building homes.

You're also into real estate.

Minorly into real estate.

Ok. What was the occupation of your parents and grandparents?

My father had an appliances store here in Greensboro.

What was the name of it?

Hyman Furniture. And, uh...what was the rest of it?

Your grandparents. What did they do?

My mother's father lived in New York, and he was a tailor. His wife was a housekeeper.

Who and where...let's see. Do you own or work in a family business?

I work in my family business.

Do you recall buying trips? Were there any Jewish salesmen? You really didn't have buying trips, did you?

No, no.

Did Jews have non-Jewish business partners?

No.

Did Jews employ non-Jews?

Well, yeah, I employed people, and it turned out they were not Jewish.

Would you have hired them if you'd known that?

Never entered into it.

Good, alright. Were there Jewish professionals in town?

Yeah, there were many. There were many Jewish professionals in town.

Did you, as a Jew, encounter problems with banks or insurance companies?

No.

Did your family own or invest in real estate?

Yes.

Ok, this is community life. Describe the neighborhoods where you have lived.

Sunset Hills and 1500 block of Madison Ave were the main ones.

And Starmount? Where you're living now.

Yeah.

Did your family own or rent its home?

They owned.

Ok, did you have non-Jewish friends?

Yes.

What was the attitude toward interdating or intermarriage when you were of that age?

Interdating was very prevalent, as was intermarriage. In my graduating class at Temple Emanuel, I think it had 12 people, and 10 of them intermarried.

Were there times when the community was growing or declining, and why did people come and go?

Economic opportunities. More people were coming in than leaving.

What civic organizations did you join?

_____ was the nicest thing when I was in high school. I was president of that. And then I went to college, I did not join a fraternity. Because I did not care to, just the status I had from the major group.

What civic organizations? Kiwanis...

Kiwanis, and I have been in Court Watch, evaluating the competence of the judges. President of the Home Builders Association. And founder of the Children's Museum of Greensboro.

Who were the Jewish spokespersons to the non-Jewish community?

Rabbi Rypins, Sydney Stone, Norman Block, omm, to some degree the Cones, Herbert Fulk.

Were Jews elected to public office or serve as civic leaders?

Ben Cone was mayor of Greensboro, and there have been other Jewish people in the different committees and such.

Did you or family members serve in the military?

No.

Did your community host soldiers during World War II?

Yes.

Do you want to elaborate on that?

Well, my mother would have Jewish soldiers over for meals. But also there was also sort of a center; Min Klein was very active with. They would give dinners and dances, and I think probably two thirds of the soldiers that came to these were not Jewish. It was wonderful.

Oh! I thought they were all Jewish.

No, the northern boys loved it, if we ever had any decent salami.

Did you participate in any sports?

No.

Did Jews ever have any sports stars? Local, I guess.

No.

Did you ever experience any anti-semitism?

Only mildly, in college.

Where were you in college?

At my first college, University of Alabama, one fella said that we don't need a Jew in this fraternity, and when he got up off the floor, I was made president of the dormitory.

Were there restricted organizations or neighborhoods?

Well, it was not open. You know, we didn't have many Jews at the Country Club. They would have one or two, you know.

Where and when did you attend school. We just talked about the University of Alabama. Where else did you go to school?

University of North Carolina.

Alright!

I took some special coursework at the University of Illinois School of Architecture.

Did you have any problems with non-Jews or religion in school? Well, you just told me that.

Yes.

Did Jews think that one or another university was better for Jews to attend?

I don't know.

Describe college life for a Jew, and were you involved in Hillel?

I was mildly a member of Hillel, but it was poorly run. The rabbi was inadequate, and most of the doers among the Jewish boys and girls did not attend Hillel. Some of the misfits, often from New York, that was their meeting place.

This section is about African American relations. If your family history predates the Civil War, did any of your ancestors ever own slaves?

We did not predate the Civil War.

Did you employ blacks in your business?

Yes.

In what capacity?

Well, in the building trades, there are a lot of blacks in that.

Manual labor?

Manual labor.

Did you have African American nannies or housekeepers?

Yes.

Did she prepare Jewish or Southern food?

Southern.

What kind of feelings did you have for each other?

Love.

Did you have black customers?

Yes.

Were you a landlord for black customers?

Yes.

Did you patronize any black businesses?

There was a repair company that I patronized. There were very few blacks in business.

Did the attitudes and practices of Jews toward African Americans differ from those of non-Jewish white people?

I think the Jews were a little more liberal. But they pretty much fit into the social climate, generally. Those that came from the Northern areas especially, were more at ease in the black presence, but I think the Southern Jewish population were not racist. But they did not feel that they could go out and scream and holler for the rights of the blacks, because then they were resented.

How did the community respond to the civil rights movement?

The Jewish community?

It just said "the community".

Generally speaking, they were for civil rights.

Did people fear and anti-Jewish backlash?

No, I don't think so.

Were you aware of synagogue bombings? Certainly not around here...

Not around here, but if you read the paper.

Did the rabbi's attitude differ from his congregants?

In the matter of blacks? They usually were more liberal.

Than the rabbis were?

Yeah.

In the Jewish life section, what was the religious background of your family and how would you describe your family's religious life?

Well, we were minorly observant, but the children and the cousins, all of them married Jewish.

What label would you use to describe your family? Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, just Jewish, or secular?

When you say family, you mean the total family?

I think it's just your immediate family.

I am Reform, my children are Conservative. We've discussed it. It's largely the influence of their mother.

What was the religious life of your grandparents, did they dress differently, keep their head covered? What was the religious life of your parents?

It was not obvious, my relatives who were Jewish. They did not alter the dress of the community.

They blended in?

Yeah, most Southerners did. What was the other part of that?

What about your parents? What was the religious life of your parents? About the same as your grandparents?

It was less, less traditional. They were Temple members. They went there High Holy Days, but they did not daven daily, and such as that.

Did your family speak Yiddish?

No.

Did the family share meals together? What was the most common food?

Meat and potatoes.

Good old Southern boy! What Jewish home ceremonies did you observe, like lighting the candles, kiddush, seder, Chanukah...

We lit the candles and did not say the Shabbat prayer. What else is there?

Seders? Did you have home seders?

No.

Did you build a sukkah?

No.

Did your family attend the synagogue?

Temple.

Oh, Temple. What did you like about the synagogue? The temple?

Well, it depended on the rabbi. If you have a positive rabbi, you get more out of it. If you have a rabbi that you don't respect, you tend to distance yourself.

So that was like what did you like and what did you dislike all in one sentence, right? Describe your Jewish education. Like, were you bar mitzvahed, confirmed?

I was confirmed. Bar Mitzvahs were rarely performed back then.

Did you join a youth group?

No, there wasn't a really active one at that time.

Were boys and girls educated differently?

No.

Describe the synagogue service. Did you have a choir?

Yeah.

A piano or an organ?

Yeah.

How much Hebrew, Yiddish, or English?

Very little Hebrew.

Which prayerbook? The Union prayerbook?

Yeah, the Union prayerbook.

Who led the service?

The rabbi. Sometimes one of the more active congregants would come in.

Did the men and women sit together?

Yes.

Who were the rabbis and what do you recall about them?

Well, I think Rypins was too mild, but a lovely person. He blended in well with the total community, but he did not do that much for the young Temple members. He was more the community rabbi. And then uh...

Asher?

Asher was a very good rabbi, in many ways. I respect him. And after that...

Rabbi Task?

Task; I thought that he gave too much time to the community, even though he tried hard. I think that's what he got pleasure from, was going around the community.

Rabbi Harkavie?

I thought he was a faker. I thought that from the first, that he was a politician and a faker. Not a man of depth and devotion.

Ok. We'll quit there, we won't go onto Rabbi Guttman. What was the nature of conflict within the Jewish community?

Well, it was between Conservative and Reform. The Conservative became more Conservative, and this carried back into the Reform. Those of my generation feel as though there's so much Hebrew and tradition in it, they feel left out. I think that the people over 67 feel left out.

And there's a large group of those people too.

Yeah, yeah.

Did your community have a variety of Jews, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox?

There are very few Orthodox.

But at one time, there were some Orthodox.

Yes, and they met...

They all met at the same synagogue.

They met in the basement of the Temple.

Did the community divide between Germans and East Europeans?

That's the case all over the country, that the Reform were a little, did not care to socialize with the newcomers. But I'm glad to see they're coming up in the world.

Were there Jews who did not join the synagogue?

Yes, and there were Jews who did not join either.

Do you recall a mikveh? And did you go there? You were born Jewish, why would you have gone to a mikveh?

We were Jewish way, way, way back.

Who were the leaders of the Jewish community?

Ben Cone, mayor. I think you gave me that question earlier.

That was in the business part of it.

OK. Jacobs, uh, Sydney Stern, he was very conscious of the way that Jews were perceived in the non-Jewish world. I meant Herbert Fulk. No, Sydney Stern was a secure person.

But Herbert wasn't, you think?

Herbert was very...

Hmm. That's interesting. Do you recall anyone converting to Judaism or intermarrying with non-Jews?

Jerry laughs.

I think there are more intermarried couples here, than not. We'll skip the rest of it. Do you recall the formation of the congregation or the formation of the Temple?

The original Temple?

Yeah. Temple Emanuel was built after Lee St., and then Beth David, and then this building... Describe the community's attitudes toward Israel.

I think it's strongly pro-Israel. Does that answer that?

Yeah. Were you a member of a Jewish organization?

No.

Do you maintain networks with Jews in other communities?

No.

Did you attend Wild Acres?

No.

Did you gather with other Jews at summer camps or beach or mountain resorts?

No.

Do you consider yourself a Southerner?

Oh...that takes some explaining.

You were born in the south...

I was born in the south, and I consider myself a well-educated, well-traveled person.

But you wouldn't label yourself that... Do you think Jews in the south differ from other southerners?

Slightly.

How so?

Well, I think the Jews in the south have risen economically, because of enthusiasm and level of education. And have risen considerably from their beginnings.

Do you think that southern Jews differ from northern Jews?

See, that's not a fair question.

Why?

It depends where the northern Jews are. If they're in big cities, they tend to...

So, would a Jewish person from New York be different from a Jewish person from Atlanta?

Ok, I think the Jewish person from New York is more... I don't believe they're any more observant. Well, they're a little more observant because there are more of them in a smaller area. Whereas the Southern Jew there's maybe 15 here and 200 here instead of 2000. Is that answer it?

That concludes our interview.