

Today is June 15, 2005. This is Brenda Henley interviewing Marvin Isreal. Where and when were you born?

In Greensboro, February 15, 1931.

When did your ancestors come to America and from where?

My father was born in TN, his parents were from Russia. My mother came from Russia when she was 14 years old. She lived in Chicago, I think. I have an uncle in Chicago.

Give me a little background on your father.

He and his brothers had a ranch in either North or South Dakota, and they raised horses. Evidently, they met, I don't know, they got out of the horse business. They lived in a sod house. You don't sell the house all you do is sell the doors and the windows. They the horses loose, they sold the doors and the windows and left. His younger brother met this girl that was 13 years old and wanted to marry her. He didn't have any money, so he went back and rounded up the horses and sold them to the army to get that lady to marry him. I don't think they got married, she was like 14.

This was his brother?

This was his youngest brother.

Tell me about your parents, how they met.

I guess, after they sold the ranch, my father went to MN. Minneapolis, I guess is where they met. My mother used to teach school out there somewhere, I don't know.

Was she teaching school when they met?

I'm not sure. I mean, he was in MN, I'm sure they met somewhere in MN. My father eventually went in the army. I know he worked for the post office some, in Minneapolis. I found an old picture that was taken in a bakery somewhere when he was 16 years old. Said "Baker Boy Israel". But I didn't know... I don't know, I always thought my father was drafted in the army and they put him in the calvary with the horses. And he hated horses, because he used to ride a horse 8 hours a day when he was at the ranch. So he got in the baking company and became a baker in the army. But I never knew he worked in a bakery before he went in the army, but evidently, he was. Then he went to France. He met my mother when he came back, I guess.

When and why did your family first come to this community?

My father worked for a company that made ovens. Electric ovens. Called Electricmade. There was a bakery here in Greensboro, Mary Lewis was the name of the bakery, and they ordered one of these ovens. My father came down to install it. He evidently worked for this company. He installed the oven and showed them how to use it, and she talked him into staying and running this bakery.

Where was your first home here in Greensboro?

It was on Walker Ave., about 1 house up from Tate St. It was a big old 3 story house, almost on the

corner. You know where the store The Corner is? It was right behind that. This was a great big old wooden house. It had porches that run all the way around it. We had an apartment on the second or third floor or something.

The bakery was on...

On Tate St., around the corner.

Who lived in your household then? Did you have boarders?

This was just an apartment. My mother, my daddy, my sister.

If you have siblings, where to they live today? Your sister died of cancer, didn't she?

Yeah.

How did you first meet Mary and what was her background?

Mar was from High Point, and she lived in a...there's a woman on Chaplain rented rooms to girls. She had a roommate and lived on Chaplain, and her roommate happened to be Jackie Kriegsman's girlfriend. So, Jackie introduced me.

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

I have 2. David lives in FL. He's an operations manager for a radio station. He's got 2 children. Married. Mark lives in NY, no children, has a doughnut factory, makes doughnuts. Has a franchise in Tokyo.

One coming up in Hawaii.

Maybe.

What is your occupation?

I worked for Burlington Industries when I got out of school. I guess about 6 years, I was a computer programmer.

Back then? That was kind of rare, wasn't it?

Well they didn't have a computer when I went to work.

But they hired you as a computer operator?

No, I working in the hobby end department, and they gave everybody tests to see if they could program computers, and I was one elected. So, anyway, I did that. Then I went to work for my uncle, who had a company called Jeanette Maternity. He moved down here, and he had...I started with me and one other person.

And that was in High Point?

That was in High Point. We looked for a place in Greensboro and couldn't find one. At that time there were just no, nobody had any empty buildings. We found that place in High Point, it was just a garage really.

And you made maternity clothes there?

We didn't, actually they were made by contractors and shipped in there.

What brand was it?

Jeanette Maternity.

Oh, that's right. Who was the Jeanette? Was it someone in his family?

No, he had bought the company a long time ago, and it was called Jeanette Frocks. And they made house dresses that retailed for \$2.98. I asked him, "how can you retail something for that?" And he said, "Fabric wasn't but \$.15 a yard." So, he, then, I don't know, that was a big department store in Minneapolis. They came to him and wanted to know if he could make some kind of maternity top or something. So he made one for them, and then got into the maternity business.

You worked for him for how long?

27 years.

And then?

I just messed around. Taking pictures and making pottery. I made pottery for a long time.

I know, I've got one of your mirrors that you made by hand.

I've been making pottery for 30 some years.

You also made earrings for awhile?

Yeah.

Marsha used to come to furniture market with some of your earrings on. They were made with paper clips.

I got all kinds of stuff. I used a 45 record and broke them up. And that was the back of them.

How clever! [muffled]

What was the occupation of your parents?

My father had a bakery.

And your mother?

She worked in the bakery.

The bakery was College Pastry Shop on Tate St.

College Pastry. What was the occupation of your grandparents?

I have no idea. Farmers, I'm sure. Well, my mother's father had, I believe, like a general store and grocery.

Did you every work any family business, the bakery?

All the time. Growing up, I had to work there. That's why I didn't become a baker.

Well, how did it rub off on Mark.

Mark came home one weekend and it was raining, and we didn't have anything to do. We started messing around in a file box with recipes, and I found a recipe for doughnuts. So we said, "Well let's make them." So we made doughnuts. I didn't think they turned out too good, but Mark really liked them. So, I guess...I don't know how many years, or how far away. He was in New York, and he needed some money. He needed to pay his rent. So he went to this guy's coffee shop, and he said, "I can make biscuits or doughnuts. Would you try to sell them?" One or the other, and the guy said, "Well I'll try the doughnuts." So Mark went home, and he took all the money he had, and he went to the health food store, and he took the recipe, my father's recipe. He said he bought organic flour, and instead of Crisco, he used butter. But he had to weigh it out at the health food store, because he didn't have any way to weigh it. And then he brought it home and made doughnuts. And then he took them to the coffee shop. About an hour later the guy called him back, said he sold them all, he wants to put in another order. That's how he started.

Isn't that funny? That's amazing.

After he got started, he started making them, and his roommate was the, worked for the United Press, or the Associated Press as a graphic artist, so he made him this. That's his first logo and everything. And Mark sent me that thing. That's where he lives. Mark sent me that, and I saw that, I didn't even know what his doughnuts taste like, but I said, "This kid's got something." So, I

Does he use this?

No, he does use that logo.

He doesn't? I like it.

Too cutesy. I like it too. But anyway, he...I got this, and Mary had already died. And she left me some stock in Proctor & Gamble, so I sold it...

Did she work at Burlington?

No, she worked at [muffled] and Proctor and Gamble bought it out. So, anyway, she left me the stock, and I sold the stock. And I went to New York, and once, he was making all this in his apartment. He

got up in the morning and had doughnuts everywhere. Drove his roommate crazy. So, anyway, his landlord said he'd rent him the basement of the apartment. He'd rent it to him for \$50 a month. It was, I don't know, probably as wide as this, and maybe halfway to the middle of this.

So, he had to put an oven in there?

No, no. Fried. Doughnuts are fried. I gave Mark all the money, and we bought a frier and a mixer, and all the stuff. And I built him a table, 2 tables, and stayed up there 6 weeks helping him make doughnuts.

So, he sold them, and people bought them.

He was down there for 5 years. I went to Lowes and bought, you know those fans you put up in the attic, I bought one of those. He had a window in that place, we put that in the window, and got an exhaust fan for the frier to take the smoke out.

I bet it would get hot down there, wouldn't it?

Oh, yeah.

With the frier. Ok, Who and where...did you and your children continue in your business? I don't think that's applicable. Did Jews have non-Jewish business partners? Did Jews employ non-Jews? This part's business, I mean. In your family business. Like in your uncle's business.

Yeah. Everybody did. There weren't any Jewish people. Except, well, he had salesmen on the road, and I think...I don't know. I don't even know if he had any Jewish salemen.

What did you do for him?

General manager.

Did Jewish merchants compete or cooperate with your uncle? I don't think anyone's competing with the bakery business back then.

Well there was Pat's Bakery. Remember that? Pat's? They were downtown. He was Jewish too.

The Jones Brothers Bakery.

Yeah, but that was before. But Pat's was the same kind of bakery. You know, just a small bakery.

I don't even remember them. Where were they located?

Greene St. But he was Jewish too.

Was his name Pat?

Yeah. He was, he had...Pat's Bakery was the name of it.

Did Jews have a loan or credit society... Did the Jewish professionals in town manufacture also?

Yeah, Cones.

Yeah, really. Cones, Cones, Cones. Did Jews run into problems with banks or insurance companies in your business? Did your family own or invest in real estate? That wasn't their building on Tate St., they just rented that?

They offered to sell it to him for \$15,000, and he wouldn't buy it. He paid \$75 a month rent, isn't that something?

Yeah. What about the equipment? Did that belong to your dad?

Yeah, that was his.

Describe the neighborhoods where you lived. Was there a Jewish neighborhood?

The neighborhood I lived in was not Jewish.

It was a college neighborhood, wasn't it?

Well, later on, after a couple of years, we moved further out Walker Ave. Where my mother lives. Next to a Lutheran Church.

Wasn't too Jewish was it?

No...

Now you said there was a Jewish man that lived across the street. Was it Eli Solomon?

No. Solomon, well there were Jewish people. Solomons lived about a block closer to town. And Stein, Max Stein, remember him? He lived...

The one who had the dirty book store, right?

Yeah. He lived on the other side of the street. A little further down on the other side of the street from the Solomons.

So he lived on the same side as the Solomons.

No, the other side. A little bit further down. About ½ a block closer to town. Back the other way, from where my mother lived, up the hill and to the right, about, just down Chapman...

[muffled] over there on Chapman.

The Bates lived on the corner.

Victor and Emma.

Lived about a block away, and then, Min Klein.

So, yeah, there was

It really wasn't a Jewish neighborhood!

We never really had a quote Jewish neighborhood. There were areas in the city where more Jews lived, but it's never been like a gated community.

Yeah. Well I always considered Starmount where all the Jewish people with money lived.

Yeah. But I think it had more to do with money than with being Jewish.

Did you have non-Jewish friends?

Yes, all of my friends were not Jewish.

What was the attitude toward interdating and intermarriage? Since you intermarried. How was that? How'd your mom take that? Your mom and dad?

I think my father could care less. I don't think my mother was too happy, to begin with.

Well, she saw a lot of that.

Yeah. I'm sure she didn't like the idea to begin with.

Were there times when the community was growing or declining? Why did people come and go? Probably just recently, because of the textiles and...

Yeah, but I think most, you know...

Businesses bring the people in.

Well, even now, look where all the Jewish girls are going. They're all going to Atlanta. To find men.

That's true, that's true.

My sister graduated college about 1944 or something. The next day, she was off to New York and never came back.

Mark never went to college. He went straight from high school. That stuck in my mind. This little kid heading off to the big city all by himself, I thought, "Golly, he's got more nerve than anybody I know."

What blew my mind was him going into this retail business up there. And he ended up having to remodel the whole place, and he ended up as his own contractor.

What kind of place was it?

It was a toy store. Where he is now, in New York. It was a toy store when he rented it. He hired this contractor to do something, you know, and the contractor told him how he was going to do it. So, he

hired him, but the contractor was not very good, so after about 2 weeks, Mark fired him. But he kept all his help, and Mark did his own contracting. Well, you know how unions are in New York and everything. He didn't have one bit of trouble with the union. Nobody was union. But he worked on that. It took him about 4 months to remodel it, but he did it all himself.

Where did he get the money to put in all his equipment?

From David. David invested \$50,000. It was completely gone. I went up there, and I had \$20,000. I said, well, I'll give you this, and this will be some operating funds. Well, heck, it was gone before he even opened the doors.

He made that back though.

He had absolutely no money at all. And he would get, the biggest portion of his business when he started out, was the wholesale portion of his business that he had developed in the basement. So that was his business, and they paid after 30 days. And then some of them longer than that. So he had no money.

Ok, let's see. Did you have non-Jewish friends? We already did that. Were there times when the community was; well, we already did that too. What civic organizations did you join, and was there a Jewish country club?

I'm sure Starmount was a Jewish country club.

Yeah. Well, were they ever not allowed in any country club or anything.

Greensboro Country Club.

They were not allowed in...

That's the reason Starmount was built. Cause they weren't allowed in Greensboro.

I never knew that. Really?

Jews could not join Greensboro Country Club. That's why they built Starmount.

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

I guess Rabbi Rypins.

Of course. Were Jews elected to public office or serve as public officials?

Yeah.

The Cones. One of them was mayor...

Yeah.

Did you or family members serve in the military?

My father did, and I did too.

Did your community host soldiers during WWII? Well, Min Klein did.

Oh, yeah. The place was full of them.

The Temple used to have a place downstairs where the guys could go, didn't they? Did you participate in any sports and were Jews ever sports stars?

I played football in junior high school.

Where'd you go to junior high school?

Lindley Jr.

I did too!

I went to Lindley Elementary and then Lindley Jr. and Greensboro High School.

Did you have any experiences of anti-semitism?

Yeah.

Really? In school?

Yeah, you know, I felt it.

Were there any restricted organizations or neighborhoods?

I'm sure there were, I didn't...

Were you ever challenged as a Jew?

No.

Where and when did you attend school? Well, you told me.

Yeah.

Did you have any problems with non-Jews or religion in school?

No.

Religion was not... you know.

I think I was a wise man in the Christmas play. I mean they didn't say because you're Jewish you can't...

And your mother didn't say you couldn't be in the Christmas play?

Oh, I don't think she liked it. But, you know, I ...in my class Seymour Bates and I went all the way through school together.

Is that Louie's brother?

That's Louie's older brother. Yeah, he was the same age I was. He was with me all the way through school.

Did Jews think one or another university was better for Jews to attend? Did you go to college, and if so, what was college life like for a Jew? Were you involved in Hillel?

I went to Carolina at Chapel Hill, but I wasn't involved in Hillel. And I went in the service and came out and worked a year, and then decided to go to school. So, when I went I was...

Did you major in computer science?

I was in business. No, they didn't have computer science. They didn't have computers. I was older, I was like at least 3 or 4 years older than the average freshman. In fact, I went down with Jackie Kriegsman, and we were roommates.

Was he older than you?

He was about a year and a half older. But he was there, and then Bobby had gone before. Bobby Kriegsman went in the service too. And he had gone to Chapel Hill before as a pre-dental, and then he went back. He had like one semester, I think to finish before he went to dental school. So we all three went down at the same time.

If you're family history predates the Civil War, did any of your ancestors ever own slaves?

Naw...I don't know. Because my grandparents were farmers in TN.

They possibly could have.

They could have. I don't know anything about it.

Did you employ blacks in your business?

Yeah.

In what capacity?

Everything. Just about every capacity.

Do you think there are differences between Northern and Southern Jews toward blacks?

I don't know. I know when I was in high school, my mother used to go to New York every summer to visit my sister. I'd go for 2 weeks, and that's when we had segregation. And it just depressed me that in

New York, they were still prejudiced up there. It just wasn't as open as it was here.

How did the community respond to the Civil Rights movement? Oh, we don't need to get into that.

Describe the Jewish background of your family. How would you describe your family's religious life?

Not very strict.

Pretty Reform, huh?

Yeah.

What was the religious life of your grandparents? Did they dress differently, keep their heads covered, what was the religious life of your parents?

Grandparents, I don't know.

Your parents were pretty Reform, too, weren't they?

Yeah.

Did you ever speak Yiddish or did anyone in your family ever speak Yiddish? Didn't your mother speak Yiddish?

My mother and father spoke a little bit.

I thought your mom did. Because they had Yiddish books and newspapers. Did your family share meals together, and what was the most common food you ate?

Yeah, we had meals, about every meal together.

Your mom was a good cook, I mean, she taught me how to eat without salt. She did! I mean I used to just pour salt on my food, and she said, don't do that.

My sister-in-law now, if you give her some food, she doesn't even taste it. She salts it, then she tastes it.

I had a friend like that. Bothers me, too. Did your family keep kosher?

No.

What Jewish home ceremonies did you observe?

Home ceremonies? We lit candles on Friday night, and also Chanukah candles.

Did you build a sukkah?

No. And my mother always lit, what do you call it, the candle that you burn for 24 hours?

Yarzheit candle.

Yarzheit candle.

Did your family attend the synagogue?

The Temple.

What did you like about the synagogue. The next question is what did you dislike.

I didn't want to go to Sunday school, didn't want to go to services.

Describe your Jewish education. Were girls and boys educated differently?

No.

Did you have a bar mitzvah?

Yes.

Were you confirmed?

Yes.

Did you join a youth group?

No. Did they have a youth group?

Describe a synagogue service. Did you have a choir, a piano, an organ? Was there a lot of Hebrew?

No, there wasn't a lot of Hebrew. We had an organ and a choir.

Who led services?

Rabbi Rypins.

Did men and women sit together?

Yes.

Who were the rabbis?

Rabbi Rypins.

What do you recall about him?

White hair. And very...boring sermons. Sermons that...his problem was that he didn't use notes. He started out and the first 5 minutes were great, then he wandered off into nowhere.

I've heard that about him.

And you know what? When you came to the portion in the service where the next part was going to be the sermon, you could see the people getting up and walking out.

Oh, no. So, what was the nature of conflict within the Jewish community?

I really didn't know. I wasn't that involved.

You weren't that involved in the politics?

No, I'm sure there were some.

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

Well, they used to have Orthodox at the Temple. And their services were in the assembly hall.

Yeah.

And they went on forever. You know, High Holy Days, they just kept going forever.

And y'all had the organ?

Yeah.

I remember that. Someone was talking about they complained because they could hear the organ. Did the community divide Germans and East European Jews?

I don't think so.

Were there Jews who did not join the synagogue?

I didn't know, but I'm sure.

Who were the leaders of the Jewish community?

Cones.

Do you recall anyone converting to Judaism?

Mary.

Did Mary convert?

Yeah.

Well, good! Did she have a mikveh?

No, she didn't.

That was before Conservative, then.

Yeah. She went to classes with Rabbi Rypins. Yeah, she converted.

Did men or women intermarry more often than they do now?

I don't think so. Probably more now.

Probably so. How did interfaith families raise their children? As Jews or Christians?

Well, I don't know, we raised ours as Jews.

Because Mary converted. Do you recall the formation of the congregation or the building of the Temple?

No.

What about Beth David? You remember them building Beth David.

Yeah, because all these people left the Temple to join Beth David. You remember Max Zader? He had the movie theater, the black movie theater down on E Market St. He owned the movie theater down there, the only black movie theater in town. Maybe he had two. And so when he built that theater, oh, he also owned Standards Theater Supply.

That's where I remember that name!

Yeah they used to be really big in theater curtains. He's the one that put theater seats in there.

Did you hear people talk of the following events: The Leo Frank Case?

No.

Joseph Needleman incident?

No.

Ku Klux Klan?

I don't remember any talk about that.

The rise of the Nazis? The Holocaust? You know, I never, in school, we never studied that. When I went to work at the Temple, I started reading about it, and it just fascinated me. I read everything I could get my hands on. I used to have these dreams...

Describe the community attitudes toward Israel. Have you and your family ever been involved?

No.

Were you a member of any Jewish organizations? Like B'nai Brith, Haddassah, Ladies Aid?

No, huh-uh.

Did you maintain networks with Jews in other communities?

No.

Did you gather with any other Jews in summer camp or beach or mountain resorts?

No, I went to YMCA camp.

Do you consider yourself a Southerner?

Yeah. I guess since I was born here.

Yeah. Do you think Jews in the South differ from other Southerners?

From other Southerners? I guess they do, because they tend to stay together.

That's the next question. How so? You think they do? They stick to their own?

Yeah.

Do you think that Southern Jews differ from Northern Jews?

Definitely. I don't know. You know, Mark, where his doughnut plant is, is in an all-Jewish neighborhood, and he doesn't even like it. Mark doesn't even like it.

Doesn't like his neighborhood?

No.

Ok, ok, that wrap's it up folks! Did you have anything else you wanted to say?

No.