

Transcript of Interview with Alan Samuels
Small Town Jewish History Project
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Transcription:

Eric Lidji: Today is May 27, 2015, this is the Small Towns Oral History Project. My name is Eric Lidji, and I'm interviewing Alan Samuel, Samuels?

Alan Samuels: Samuels.

EL: Samuels. So why don't you start by telling me how your family got to New Castle.

AS: Well, we started out, my great-grandfather, Iman Samuels, he was from Poland and I have a little thingie here.

EL: This is a newspaper article?

AS: Yeah, the New Castle News did an article about us. And basically my great-grandfather was born in Poland and he came, immigrated to Pittsburgh. From there he walked. And he ended up in New Castle, and he got tired, and he said well this is where I'm gonna start a business.

EL: Was he peddling, or he just started walking?

AS: Walking. Walked up the railroad tracks.

EL: Not selling anything.

AS: Not selling anything, he just walked up.

EL: What was he looking for?

AS: I have no idea. But he ended up coming up here in 1909; he started I. Samuels and Sons.

EL: Which was what?

AS: Iman Samuels and Sons, which was his two sons, Morris and Alec. Shoe repair supplies, and we sold to different shoe repair shops, back then when it was very big, everybody fixed things instead of buying new.

EL: So how long was the business around?

AS: It started in 1909 and it's still going on now.

EL: Really?

AS: It's 2015, so we're what, a hundred and six years old, around there.

EL: Was he married when he came?

AS: Uhm, I believe he probably, well I don't know. He started in 1909, I don't know. He probably, he met his wife, I think, was from New Castle, her name was Fannie Simon and they had five children. One died early in life, I think he was only twenty-nine or thirty; I'm still trying to find out myself whatever happened. Then the other two sons, Alec and Morris were the sons of I. Samuels and Sons. And then he had two daughters, Sadie and Reba, and they moved out of town, one to California and the other one here, in Ellwood City.

EL: So which was your father?

AS: My father was Sherman Samuels, and his father was Morris.

EL: Okay. Oh, so this was your great-grandfather.

AS: Yeah, Iman was my great-grandfather.

EL: You say Iman, how was it spelled?

AS: I-M-A-N.

EL: That's a very unique name.

AS: Mhm.

EL: So, Morris then, his son is Sherman?

AS: Yes.

EL: And Sherman is your father.

AS: Yes. And he also had another brother, his name was Arthur.

EL: Sherman had a brother.

AS: Yeah. Arthur, but he didn't, he moved on to chemical engineering.

EL: Okay. What year were you born?

AS: I was born September 27, 1955.

EL: And what do you remember of the store when you were a kid?

AS: Well, I was always an organizer, I would always get down there and straighten. I'd put stock on the shelf and straighten things up. My uncle hated that. My dad said I could

do what I want with his permission, but he, I was just always like organized, and I hated a mess. But I remember the store, and I remember like on the weekends, my uncle was very religious, he didn't come to, he didn't work on the Sabbath. My dad did because you know we were busy. Sunday a lot of store owners came to our business to buy stuff and you, everybody got together. It was a lot of fun seeing customers come to us and they'd come and buy merchandise from us.

And I don't remember the old temple which is by our office, but this temple was built in '57. Of course I was only two years old so I don't ever remember being in there, but I know in the heyday we had a lot of people, services, we had one congregant, Al Goldman, his father used to, his father lived to be over a hundred and he smoked everyday. I remember him. But Al, he was active with the youth, and we had Uncle Al Boys, and we had sweatshirts made. And there was a group of us who was active with B'nai B'rith and AZA and BBG, and they kept us coming on Saturday mornings. The services, we had a group in the back, we all sat there, I remember that. And the bar mitzvahs, that was a big thing, we always looked forward, of course, we always got a good feed after services and I do remember all that stuff. Then we had a lot of activity, we had a lot of programs and we had dinners, that's when you had Hadassah and the Men's Club and the Sisterhood, but that's all gone.

EL: Let's go back to the store for a second.

AS: All right.

EL: Has it always been in the same location?

AS: Uh it's been in, the original location was on Moravia Street. That started in 1909, it was a frame building which now is gone. Then they moved the business to the location now in the early thirties.

EL: Which is, where is it now?

AS: It's on Long Avenue.

EL: Okay.

AS: And we've done some improvements, we've changed our business practices. The bulk of my business is wholesale, but I am open to public now, which I started about twelve years ago. Anymore, a lot of our business caters to the Amish.

EL: Really?

AS: Yeah, that's probably sixty-five percent of our account base anymore.

EL: When did that start?

AS: That started, well, we had the Amish when my dad was around and I expanded it. I have Amish accounts in thirteen states across the county. And they have stores just like we do. They have shoe stores, they have clothing stores, and they cater mostly to the English, which we're considered the English, more than their own people. But originally the Amish just had stores for their own people and that's it but now it's open to everybody.

EL: Wait, the English is what the Amish call people who aren't Amish?

AS: We're, no, no, there's Amish, we're considered English, they call us English, if you ever watch like *Amish Mafia* for instance, they'll say, "Ah, the English", they consider, we're considered English.

EL: People who aren't Amish are English?

AS: Right, right.

EL: Huh. So I, just to make sure, how did that connection get made? To that market?

AS: Well we catered to the different harness shops, and they had shoe shops, shoe repair shops and different stores and like we started in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania, where we had a handful where my dad started, and then I decided to explore and I went into Ohio, which is the largest in the country.

EL: The largest Amish...

AS: Amish community, coming second would be Lancaster, then the state of Indiana's third and so on. And I started going to the stores, and it just kind of like blew up. I mean I got all these new accounts, and then in the past ten years I exhibited these Amish trade shows, and there's Amish exhibitors and English exhibitors. And it just kind of like took off there where now I have a total, between Amish and English, I have almost eight hundred accounts, which is a lot for a small business. Because right now it's a two-person show, it's myself and my bookkeeper and that's it.

EL: What year did this, did you start expanding into the Amish market, what years are we talking about?

AS: I would probably say in the mid-eighties, mid-eighties, and but it really took off in the late nineties, it really just, really took off.

EL: Early on the store was just a regular retail store?

AS: No. Well, back in the, when we first started we used to sell luggage, footlockers, and stuff, back in the early days, probably forties and fifties, early sixties. Because where our store was at was the shopping hub of, one of the large shopping hubs of New Castle's Southside. It was like another town away from the main town. But the, after about the

mid-sixties they went strictly wholesale, I kinda wish they woulda kept it wholesale/retail at the time, we might have a better following in the retail business in my warehouse than we would back then because we would have had a name for ourselves.

EL: Yeah.

AS: I mean we have a name, we had a name in New Castle. My uncle was very active in the AAA, the United Way, which before the United Way it was called the Community Chest. He was, he never had children, but he was very active with the New Castle school district, he was on the board of directors. So he was, he was very big, and my uncle, he was like, he was always laid back, the brother was laid back, my uncle was all shop, he just worked all the time. My grandfather would go up to the local pharmacy and hang out, he'd drink coffee and he always chewed tobacco and they had a spittoon, spittin' in that thing, I mean back in those days everybody was just laid back, he enjoyed himself. He enjoyed himself, my grandfather. I'm probably like in between because I'm by myself. I work seven days a week. I'm trying to break myself out of it, I don't want to do that, but unfortunately in this new society you can't get people who want to work.

EL: So why did they go to strictly wholesale in the sixties?

AS: That I can't answer. But we did have a lot of stores, we called on all shoe repair shops, shoe stores, small department stores, specialty stores, grocery stores, pharmacies. Anywhere we could do business. But after my dad passed, which was in '95, May of '95, I decided to expand it. My brother and I were partners, and then he left me in the mid-two-thousands. Around 2005, around that area. He remarried and moved to Pittsburgh and did something else. So I've been taking care of the business on my own since then. Originally I was the, my dad's son who went into the business, my brother, he is a C.P., he was working at an accounting company, and then he decided to come into the business and we were partners temporarily.

EL: Tell me about Long Avenue when you were growing up.

AS: Long Avenue was a very large shopping district. we had a lot of Jewish business down there if I remember. We had Bergman's Meat Market, which was all kosher; we had Alpern's Bakery; we had Gus' Menswear; we had Kantz's Department Store; we had Marlin's Furniture--that was a big hub down there; Simon Blau, which was a clothing store - men's, women's, and children's. There was several Jewish businesses down there, several. There was also several in the main course of New Castle, but most of them back then was on the Southside, and everybody lived down there. We had the temple, the synagogue was down there. We had a tour when we had our hundredth anniversary here at the temple we went down to see it, it's in a black church now, but they still have the Jewish letters on the building. But it's interesting; it was Orthodox then where they had the women upstairs and then men downstairs so when you walk through it you just kind of imagine what it was like in those days when the men and women were separate. And of course everybody got dressed up going to services, nobody gets dressed up anymore. But I do remember the days when we were active with B'nai B'rith and BBYO. It was

just, we had our different weekends and we all got together and it's a shame now that all the small communities like ours are folding up because everybody that lived here moved on to the bigger cities because we have nothing really here to offer in New Castle.

EL: Where did your family live when you were growing up?

AS: Well my father, he was from New Castle. My mother was from England.

EL: How did they meet?

AS: They met during the war.

EL: Overseas?

AS: Overseas. World War II. I think my dad bribed my mom. I mean he would always, he was like a staff sergeant. He took care of like the food and stuff. I remember my dad telling me he'd always get these surplus cans of peanut butter and take it to my mom's family and they met at like a, what are those like, when they had Jewish social things for all the Jewish troops. And he met her through there and my dad was telling his best buddy from Arizona, he says, "I'm gonna marry that woman!" And he did. And my mother, they got married on June 16, 1946. When he was discharged he had to call for it to get her over here and also to become a United States citizen, and they got married in Pittsburgh. I have an old film of them when they got married and I got to see my great-grandfather, which I never got to see, there were very few pictures of them. But I always like, I always look at the film where they got married, the guy was a little tipsy when he was making the movie, but I really, I still enjoy seeing a lot of the old family who I never got to meet.

EL: Yeah. So they got married, they come back to New Castle; where do they live?

AS: They lived, when they first moved they lived in an apartment and they didn't, my father didn't go into the business right away. They lived in different places. They lived in Louisville, Kentucky, where my father worked for Seagrams. And then they moved to Youngstown for a while, and I don't know what my father did when he lived in Youngstown. Then he ended up his dad asked if he was interested in coming into the business, and around the early fifties my dad came into the business. And then they had my, and then they started a family in '52, my brother came around, '55 myself, and then '58 my sister, Carol.

EL: So what part of town did you live in?

AS: We lived in the Northside of New Castle in Neshannock Township.

EL: So by that point there were still Jewish business in the Southside but the Jewish families weren't living there anymore.

AS: No, a lot of them were moving out. Moving north. The business, I'd say, probably start going down in the late sixties they started going down.

EL: Do you have any sense why?

AS: Well we had some racial problems down there. And we had some riots and some burnings and, of course, age. I miss the butcher shop because it was only less than a block from the store and I'd always go down there to get a corned beef sandwich, you know, I miss that, I miss that. I miss the Jewish businesses. We had a local restaurant up the street, at lunchtime all the merchants, Jewish and non-Jewish, but we all congregated around lunchtime. It was just really nice and you don't see that anymore, you don't see that anymore, because it's just, there's no businesses out there. I miss all that. And the temple, I try to keep active, I try to keep active. And, of course, we're a shrinking population here now in New Castle, it's really hard. My mother, she ended up in a nursing home in Youngstown. It's a Jewish home. And I became a little more active over there, they've been very good to me considering I'm not from Youngstown but they've been very good, all the rabbis and people around there. So I've been trying to keep up with them and I'll probably end up joining one of the temples over there. I'm an associate member of all three of them right now, but I do, I still like to keep my Jewish identity.

EL: What was the level of observance that you had at home growing up?

AS: Well, we, like when we first started my parents did keep kosher. And then they backed off. I remember this, I tell everybody this story, when I went to Sunday school my dad would always stop at Isalys and he'd get one or two pounds of baked meat, which it was really, it was ham. And, of course, after that we started, we didn't keep kosher anymore. But it was like once a month after Sunday school, he picked us up and, oh boy, this is good stuff. We never called it ham, we always called it meat.

EL: Do you have any sense why they stopped keeping kosher?

AS: I just think, I think it was the cost, because the cost of kosher food is almost double. I still like kosher chicken, I mean there is a difference in it. It's very hard in a small community especially when you don't have a butcher, a Jewish butcher, you're just limited. But I think you, it costs a lot to stay kosher even in Pittsburgh. It's gotta be hard. And I mean there's people that keep kosher at home, but when they go out they don't.

EL: And you said that he worked on Saturdays.

AS: My father worked on Saturdays. In the later years he started going to services.

EL: Because the business could take care of itself?

AS: Well, it was my brother and myself, we were doing it. And then he went to services, and in my dad's later years I spent a lot of time with him. He was active in a lot of organizations. He was very active with the veterans. He was a member of the Masons and the Shrine.

EL: Was it unusual for Jews to be members of those organizations?

AS: Not really. I mean, in Cleveland they have a Masonic lodge which is predominantly Jewish. The Erie Zem Zem Shrine they have a lot of Jews. Pittsburgh, there was some prejudice there, and I didn't know that until after I joined. I still kept it there, but I always wanted to transfer my membership to Erie because of that. And it's a shame there's still a lot of anti-Semitism around here. I mean it's all over the country, it's really hard. Some people just don't understand, and it's just the way they've grown up. It's the same thing with people who are on public assistance, I mean, they can better themselves if they want to. There's some people who have, you know. But I don't know what the answer would be.

EL: Did you guys go to Friday night services?

AS: We did. We did. I remember I always enjoyed going to Friday night services, especially singing Lecha Dodi, I always enjoyed that, I always enjoyed that. And then we had the oneg afterwards, and we had good cakes and cookies, and hot tea and coffee. And, you know, we had a lot of people back then going, but again, as years progress we get less and less people and then we merged the two congregations in town which was a bitter, a bitter merge.

EL: When did the merger happen?

AS: It happened in the late nineties, I think, I can't say, but I remember just we did all this stuff, and it was just handled poorly. We kept like the Friday night services were going to be Reform, and then day services were going to be Conservative and very few of the temple members would attend. I mean you'd see them over the high holidays, and they'd stay two hours and leave. And like I said, like I would go over to Youngstown, I went to Youngstown for Yom Kippur. And I love the services, they started at ten and they ended at noon! Our Conservative would start at nine and it would end at like one thirty or two. So that's one of the nice things about Reform, but I still like the Conservative movement over the Reform. Reform is nice because it's a short service, but they don't really do anything. They have a choir, a non-Jewish choir who does all service, the only that participants do, the congregants, is responsive reading, and I like the singing.

EL: What, so which of the congregations were you involved in growing up?

AS: Tifereth Israel. The one we're in right now, then when they merged it, they changed it to Temple Hadar Israel.

EL: Okay, but it was this building.

AS: It was this building, yes.

EL: So what was the service like back then?

AS: In what way?

EL: Well, was there a lot of Hebrew?

AS: Yes. There was a lot of Hebrew, a lot of Hebrew.

EL: Were the men and women separated?

AS: No. We weren't separate, we sat together.

EL: There were bar mitzvahs, obviously.

AS: A lot of bar mitzvahs.

EL: Were there bat mitzvahs?

AS: Lot of bat mitzvahs too. Those were usually held on Friday night.

EL: Sunday school?

AS: Sunday school, yes.

EL: Was there Hebrew school during the week?

AS: Yes we did. I remember the Hebrew School. It was Rabbi Schwartz and his wife was teaching us, I remember that.

EL: Did you like it?

AS: At that time, yes.

EL: Really?

AS: Yeah, I did enjoy, as a matter of fact, right now, I'm fifty-nine right now, I'd like to learn more because when I go to services I'm not gifted, some of our congregants could do a service, I couldn't do a service. I mean I, you know, I did haftorah, I did, at my bar mitzvah I didn't do the musaf, I just couldn't get it. I learned it afterwards. But I like, I like to learn more of the service and the songs. Of course, they've all changed over the years, every rabbi has their own shtick on that. But I did enjoy going to services back then. Now it's more like a chore.

EL: Who was the rabbi when you were a child?

AS: When I was a child we had several rabbis, when I was a child it was Rabbi Galberman.

EL: Galberman.

AS: Yes. He wasn't from New Castle, but he was our rabbi, and he was very nice, he was very nice. We enjoyed it. And he was there for my bar mitzvah and was there for my confirmation.

EL: Was the congregation a major factor in your social life or did you have another social life outside of the congregation?

AS: I had a social life outside the congregation. It was more of [unclear] here for the holidays, I went to services, my parents they wanted us to go, especially Friday night. And my brother, I went more than any of them, my brother was active in sports and my sister was very smart and she was doing other things.

EL: How did the Jews get along with the rest of the town?

AS: Overall it wasn't bad, overall it wasn't bad. The churches, because it was predominantly Christian Catholic in New Castle, and unfortunately they had an association, a clergyman association and basically it's nonsectarian. And they wouldn't leave the out Jesus when they did a prayer at the meetings, and it's not sectarian and so over the years rabbis never joined because they wouldn't respect other religions, which is a shame. I know Pittsburgh, they're respectful, Youngstown, they're respectful. I know there's two of the rabbis in Youngstown teach at university, I mean Youngstown State. And they had a lot of weekend programs with the rabbis and the priests and everything and it was nice, I just wish they had that in New Castle, but again, we're small, we don't really have much activity. And like I said, I'm trying to be more active in the Youngstown community. We had a B'nai B'rith Lodge here for years, the Nathan J. Love Lodge, which disbanded. When my dad passed, he was very active with B'nai B'rith and Zionists and everything, I decided to, not merge it, but close it and, well, go to Youngstown. I didn't want to just close it, I wanted to move it and try to keep the few members we had left over there.

EL: Were you successful?

AS: Well, it's only been, it hasn't been a year yet. I'm trying to get a program together. It's just hard. Nobody wants to participate. But you know, back in our years when we were active at the temple we always had some kind of activity with the whole region, you know, Beaver County, Allegheny County, Mercer County, you'd have people all over probably within a hundred to hundred and fifty mile radius with the B'nai B'rith. And then we had a lot of youth, but again, it's not the same anymore.

EL: How did the merger come about? Did one side approach the other?

AS: Well, I'm not exactly sure but I think, working something in the aspect, it just unfortunately wasn't, there was just a lot of animosity, or a lot of fighting between the two. And the temple only had like ten families and they just couldn't support that building, it cost so much so they had to merge. But they did all this stuff, we had to get new books, and the thing is when we merge we get all these new books and we had the separate services but they never attended. And that's, that's what was a crying shame. They spent all this money. We had all the stained glass windows from the temple moved over to ours, which made our congregation really nice, it really added a lot to the sanctuary; it just added color, you felt good.

EL: Yeah.

AS: But again, going to services, it was a lot of fun the one day, but with the few, few congregants we have now, it's like just even trying to get a minyan even for high holidays was hard.

EL: Was there much interaction between the two congregations before the merger? In the decades before the merger?

AS: Well the people got along well. I mean, it's just, the temple did not want to merge. They wanted to stay their own little entity.

EL: Right. I guess what I mean is were there ever events that all the Jews of New Castle were together?

AS: Uh, they did. They did have a large event; it was called a Sweepstakes Dinner. You talked to some of the other congregants. And the thing of it is, it was all the shrimp you could eat. But it was open to everybody, Jewish and the whole community. But the bulk of the people that were there were, of course, non-Jews, but we did have a lot of Jews there. They love having their shrimp. They would be receiving us in and, I remember there was Sander Rubenson, he was like one of the head people, and he'd have a big bowl of shrimp while he was checking them in, chowing it down because it was all you can eat!

EL: Was the decline...

AS: And it was a fundraiser for the temple.

EL: Oh okay. Was the decline in membership and attendance gradual or was there a big drop off at some point?

AS: I'd say it was gradual. But when a lot of people started moving out it just got really hard, and it's just really hard to maintain a congregation when you only got a handful of

active people, like my mother. I mean, she had an English accent, but everybody loved my mother, and she was very active. When she had to leave to go to a nursing home, I was going through all the papers because you can't keep all these papers, and she was very organized, I think I take that off my mother, but she was, she organized the bar mitzvahs they had here. She'd have everything down: how many people were coming, how much food we have here, how much noodle pudding we make, how much, how much tuna fish we need to have, how many plates, I mean she had everything down in writing, how much. And she was a fantastic cook, you can see looking at me. But it was very active. You had a bar mitzvah or something. We didn't have a lot of weddings here. There wasn't a lot of wedding, but they were active in the kitchen, the ladies of the temple.

EL: Did it ever occur to you to leave New Castle, or did you always know you were going to stay here?

AS: I knew I was gonna stay here when I went into the business. My brother moved on, my sister didn't want to be in it, she moved to D.C. And there's time I kinda wish I did something else, but now I kind of enjoy it here. I mean we aren't far really from going into Pittsburgh, Cleveland. And I mean, in my case I'm single. I'm trying to find some, a mate, and I don't know it's probably late now. I haven't really found anybody. I mean it'd be nice to find a nice Jewish girl, but it seems that's not the case. And even a non-Jewish girl, a lot of the temples I've noticed a lot of mixed marriages, a lot. And they're of course, all accepted, because everybody's hurting.

EL: What's your involvement with this congregation?

AS: Going back, my grandfather, Morris, him and a couple other congregants started a cemetery. He was part of the chevra kadisha. And he was very active with that. My dad, he was on the board of directors when they built this building. My uncle, my grandfather was active with that, my uncle active in religion. I mean he went to services all the time. My father didn't go a lot. He'd go maybe once a month, he'd go to services because he had the business to take care of. I became a board member about four or five years ago, I ended up being the house chairman. And I did a lot of stuff here. It was hard, and I can see why nobody wants the job.

EL: What kind of stuff are we talking about?

AS: Well I did like, I did the maintenance, I did the yard like, I cut the grass, I did my time, I didn't charge nothing. I edged all around the whole block, I mean the grass was growing all over the sidewalk. The maintenance person who was there wasn't doing his job. He's like, "I can do that!" Well, you were here all these years, why didn't you do it then? Power washed the sidewalks, just made the place look really neat. Make sure everything is weed-whacked, edged up. I put all new lighting in the building, try to save on the utilities. We were looking at replacing air conditioners and the boiler system which is on its last legs. And, of course, we just don't have the money to do it. But when I went on the board, I told 'em I'm gonna treat this job just like I treat my home. And we

do it right, or don't do it at all. Because in the past the former house members, they just did what they needed to get done, and then it just broke a couple of years later. I mean either you do it right, or don't bother. You know I learned that, I learned that lesson.

EL: What's your involvement now?

AS: Right now I resigned from the board. It was just too much maintaining my business, that's number one, that's my livelihood. I'm not saying I was used. I did care, I did care. Our former rabbi, he had some issues, and I had some problems with him. But I, I always wanted to keep this place clean and neat and even though we had a custodian, he just wasn't doing his job. And unfortunately he passed recently, passed working here at the temple, he was cutting grass and he had a heart attack. But I was taking care of the yard, and it just got too much, I was up here more than I was at my place of business and I had to move on. And they got a new caregiver from, a new board member is taking care and he's doing a good job, I mean he doesn't do, he doesn't do what I did, but I was always up here cutting the grass, and I liked it looking neat. Even the neighbors came up to me around the building, says man this never looked so good. And that made me feel good because I took pride, I took a lot of pride in it. And I donated a lot myself, I had the chapel painted. Everything was in honor of my mother. I had a little stone garden in the front of the building done in honor of my mother. I mean I donated a lot of my own money on some of these projects, and I had friends in different trades who would help. When we had some electrical issues I had a friend down south who came up and helped me out. He wouldn't take any money, he just did it. But it just got too much for me.

EL: What do you think the future of the congregation will be?

AS: I'm giving it maybe one, two years. We're losing the older members left and right. We're having a hard time getting a minyan, I mean I'm trying to say Kaddish for my mother and I can't because we can't get ten Jewish people. So a lot of times, when time permits, I'll go to a Youngstown congregation when I'm able. I haven't, to be honest, I haven't said it a lot, and I, it bothers me, but you know, I was always there for my mother, always. And I had a lot of adopted parents at the nursing home, they said I'm gonna wish I had a son like you cause I gave, even though my mom, she had Alzheimer's, she'd get hugs and kisses all the time. And all the other congregants said hey you want to be my son?

EL: Well thank you so much for your time and your memories.

AS: No problem, thank you, Eric.

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