

**Transcript of Interview with Marcia Myers
Small Town Jewish History Project
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Transcription:

Eric Lidji: This is the Small Towns Oral History Project, my name is Eric Lidji. I'm with Marcia Meyers. It's April 15, 2015 and we are in the library of Temple Hadar Israel in New Castle, Pennsylvania. So why don't you start by telling me how your family came to New Castle.

Marcia Meyers: My mother and my uncle, sorry, came over in, I could start with my grandfather. My grandfather came over from Russia in 1917.

EL: What was his name?

MM: His name was Abram, A-B-R-A-M, Katz, K-A-T-Z.

EL: He came over from Russia in what year?

MM: In 1917. He came over, it's all on here, he came over on a ship called *Nordem*, departing from Rotterdam, Holland. And he was, I'm sorry that was grandmother. My grandfather, I'm sorry I messed this up for you already. My grandfather came over from Russian in 1913, sorry.

EL: From Topolno.

MM: Yeah. And he was sponsored by a cousin of his, Frannie Herlinger, who had already come over, but I don't know her history. And they landed in New York on Ellis Island.

EL: Did they come to New Castle?

MM: They didn't come to New Castle right away. He spent some time in New York City, then his brother-in-law came to New Castle from New York and started a bakery business in New Castle.

EL: Do you know what it was called?

MM: Yeah it was the Alpern Bakery, A-L-P-E-R-N.

EL: What was his name? The brother-in-law.

MM: The brother-in-law way, oh my gosh, what's his first name, I've forgot his first name. It'll come to me, I can't remember. Anyway so then when my grandfather came to New Castle and started working at the bakery with his brother-in-law and Percy. P-E-R-C-Y, Percy Alpern. And then they changed the name of the bakery and called it the Alpern Katz Bakery, another clever name.

EL: So that was your mother's father.

MM: My mother's, yeah, father, yes.

EL: And on your father's side do you know how they came?

MM: I know that their ancestry was in Lithuania, but I don't know. My father was born in the United States, I don't know the...

EL: What was his name?

MM: William.

EL: William Meyers?

MM: Right.

EL: And your mother's name?

MM: Bella.

EL: Bella, Bella Katz Meyers.

MM: Correct.

EL: Okay. So do you know how your father got to New Castle?

MM: My father lived, his family were from Youngstown, Ohio, and when the young people, the young people at that time from New Castle and Youngstown were like very close 'cause you know geographically it was close. They used to go back and forth for dances and that sort of thing and my mom and dad met that way. And after they got married then he moved to New Castle.

EL: And what did he do?

MM: My dad?

EL: Yeah.

MM: He worked in shoe stores prior to opening his own when he lived in Youngstown.

EL: Do you know what year your parents were married?

MM: Um, yeah actually I have it here somewhere. I have their marriage certificate. I should know that off the top of my head but I don't. I know it's here. Yeah, 1935.

EL: And who was Rabbi Pinchas Katz?

MM: He was a rabbi here in New Castle.

EL: So how many children did your parents have?

MM: Three. Three girls.

EL: What were the names?

MM: Shirley, and then me...

EL: Marcia.

MM: And then Marlene.

EL: What year were you born?

MM: 1943.

EL: And what about the others?

MM: My older sister Shirley in '38, and Marlene in '48.

EL: Were your parents religious?

MM: I would say that they were religious, my grandfather came from an Orthodox background. So yeah, you know at the beginning of their lives here they were pretty much into the Orthodox movement, but you know as the years rolled on it, and then joining here of course. Well actually there was a synagogue on the southside of New Castle that was an Orthodox synagogue because I remember all the women sitting upstairs and the men were downstairs, that kind of thing. But when we gave up that temple, I mean that synagogue, because it was getting too small, they built this one I believe in 1954 and it just evolved into a Conservative movement here.

EL: Do you remember the name of the one on the southside?

MM: Tifereth Israel.

EL: So that's where you went when you were young?

MM: Mhm, yeah. Yeah.

EL: You were about to say something.

MM: This, this temple was Tifereth Israel until we merged with the Reform temple in I think it was 1997 or so, we'll have to check that for sure. And then we changed the name.

EL: To Hadar Israel.

MM: Yeah, to Hadar Israel.

EL: What sort of observances were there in the home?

MM: Friday night Shabbos dinners and going to the temple on Friday night. Saturday morning services.

EL: Every week?

MM: Almost, yeah. Yeah it was pretty much, yeah pretty much what we did all the time.

EL: Were there bat mitzvahs?

MM: There were not bat mitzvahs when I was a young girl. It was really all the boys. I went to Hebrew school, but bat mitzvah was not the thing. So none of the three of us.

EL: None of the three of you.

MM: No, no. Though I've been kind of sorry about that, but you know, I didn't do it later in life, I never got around to that. But no, I had, my mother's sister Rose who's still living, she's ninety-five, She lives in New Castle, but she's unfortunately not able to get around anymore, she had three sons and we were all about approximately the same age. But then they all had their bar mitzvahs of course and you know, big splashy parties and that sort of thing, but not the girls so much.

EL: Did your parents keep kosher?

MM: Yeah. Yeah we did. You know what was interesting about that is that we kept kosher in the house and then it just sort of evolved into not observing that when we were out. So that sort of just totally went away because none of, my sister nor I, nor my sister do we keep kosher. And yet it's sort of like when we go out we eat whatever we want, and yet oh we won't eat any, don't want to eat any ham or any of that stuff (laughs), but we eat shrimp, so you know it's kind of hypocritical, but we all got, sort of got away from that.

EL: When did your father start his store?

MM: I believe in was 19.. it was in the late forties, I think it was like around 1948? I don't know, it's probably in one of these books, I'd have to look it up.

EL: Where was the store?

MM: It was down on the southside of New Castle, which was the, it was a great, great place to live because it was a great melting pot. All the Jewish people lived there and had their businesses. It was one long street, it was called Long Avenue. And almost all the businesses there were owned by the Jewish people in New Castle, but there was a great mixture of Italian and Greek and Polish, and everybody was just sort of very friendly with each other. You could walk everywhere that you needed, anything to any grocery store, to the shoe stores, to clothing stores, they were all just right there. And that's where all the shopping was done. I remember having, I worked, we all worked at the shoe store. And you know especially on the weekends. And I remember on Saturdays, the place, the whole street was just so busy with customers and they would just line up outside of the shoe store waiting to get in. It was just you know, it was crazy. And of course that went away after many years when the, when the suburban areas started being populated and there were strip centers and malls began to emerge and it sort of wiped out all the local little businesses.

EL: When did that start to happen?

MM: Um, I think that was in the... Let's see, my dad died in '58 and mom kept the business for probably a good five, or six, or seven years I think. But that's what, so we're talking somewhere in the mid-sixties, mid to late sixties.

EL: So did she close it for necessity?

MM: She closed it for necessity, yeah. She just, you know, there just weren't any customers anymore. The businesses were closing all around her and she, she kept plugging away but she just had to give it up. It was just not working, it was not worth it. She still had to pay rent and all that sort of thing. So she closed the business then she went to work at a shoe store! There's one of the Strauss family that also were members here, had a shoe store. And they had it in one of the malls that actually opened in downtown New Castle so she went to work for them, which she enjoyed for quite a few years.

EL: Is the building still around?

MM: Yes it is. It is now a Mideastern restaurant, (laughs) Yeah it's really, and well we used to go to that Mideastern restaurant a lot, but for reasons I'm not even gonna go into, we stopped going to that Mideastern restaurant here in New Castle. But it was kind of, it was really kind of fun being in that even though it was, you know someplace that we were eating dinner now, but to know that the building was still there. And I think all the buildings are still there.

EL: On Long Avenue.

MM: Mhm. Yeah, it would be kind of interesting to ride down there and take a look, but yeah all the buildings are still there I believe.

EL: What were some of the other Jewish businesses?

MM: The other Jewish businesses were, right next door to us was, where my father rented from a gentleman who had a barbershop. And his name was Ty Cobb, C-O-B-B.

EL: Like the baseball player?

MM: Like the baseball player, that's right! And then right next to that was a small department type store and the name of that was Simon Blau, B-L-A-U. And they sold women's clothes, children's clothes, men's clothes, men's work boots and that sort of stuff. And across the street from our store was a really nice men's clothing store and that name was Oscar Levine. They had a really nice business going. And next to Oscar Levine was our competition. It was a shoe store, and the Jewish people that owned that, their last name was Haenick, H-A-E-N-I-C-K. And the owner's first name I can't remember, Sybil would know. Anyways, then down the street was another small department store, and the family that owned that, their last name was Kantz, Morris Kantz was the owner of that. And they had a large store actually, and he had just, he didn't really hang up his clothes like you would see in a lot of stores, they were all just on tables folded, just table after table after table. It was great fun, a great fun store. And then next to our shoe store there was Marlin's Furniture Store. And they sold, well, they sold everything you know, living room furniture, they also sold appliances, carpeting, everything you can imagine. And down the street was the bakery.

EL: The Alpern Bakery.

MM: The Alpern Bakery. Oh, yeah, then further down the street was a dress store, who was the sister of Percy Alpern. And she had a dress store, quite cleverly called Alpern's Dress Store. And next to her was her brother's dental office.

EL: Huh.

MM: Uh huh. And what was his first name? These names will come back to me. Anyway, next to him was the kosher butcher.

EL: What's the name?

MM: Also clever, Berkman's Meats, I believe, or Berkman's Kosher Butcher Shop. And the owner was Norman Berkman and his wife Nora, I believe. The dentist's first name was Gerald.

EL: Gerald Alpern?

MM: Yeah. And I told you the name of the dress store was Fannie, Fannie Alpern was the owner of Alpern's Dress Shop. And let's see, oh, and further down the street was Sylvia Moresky, it's M-O-R-E-S-K-Y. She owned a tobacco and candy store, also cleverly named Moresky's. And, I think, I think that, there were others, but they were owned by, there was a store called Star Market, and they were owned by a Greek family who actually still live next to the temple here. And there was a Joseph's Supermarket also owned by a Lebanese family who still own grocery stores here in New Castle. But I think I have all the Jewish merchants for you.

EL: Can you describe your family store? What did it look like inside?

MM: It had, like a, what looked like, it's so funny, too, because when I was little and young going there the entry way to the store seemed huge, but when we went back several years ago, you know it's like this big. But we had windows on both sides, rather large for that time, and you entered and there were rows of attached chairs back to back, two of those, and then one that perpendicular to those rows toward the back of the store. The counter where you checked out was to the left when you walked in and then there was another display area to the right. And then all the walls were filled with the shoe boxes, and then there was a back room where we kept the extra stock. And there was a basement, also, where we kept like the winter boots and that sort of thing, which I hated to go down there, just hated to go down there. I would just run down there and grab what I needed and run back up. Because I had to, well not just me, my sisters worked there too, but we helped our dad and our mom in the shoe store all the time, and sometimes when they went away to New York to a family wedding or a get together or friends or whatever, we would actually stay in the store and run the store all by ourselves, which was like, oh my, well I was in high school and I was doing that kind of stuff. So yeah, I remember it well. It was great, it was a nice looking store.

EL: Where did they get their supply?

MM: From Pittsburgh. They would, they had a fellow from Pittsburgh who had a wholesale shoe business and he would actually come. And he would come in with his big satchels of samples, oh that was the most fun time because then we got to pick all the shoes that we wanted and my dad would order those special for us and put them away for us. And yeah he would come, oh that was the most fun time, when we saw all the new shoes. And then he would take an order and they would be delivered in you know big cases.

EL: Was this Fifth Avenue? Was he on Fifth Avenue?

MM: He was on Fifth Avenue! I wish I could remember his name. All I remember, even as a young girl was that he was like, he was always dressed in this beautiful suit. And it was rather, you know, I could say the word now, I don't think I ever used this word then, but he was like a really handsome man. And very tall and really nice, but he was like you know, your typical salesman. He knew what to say and how to persuade people to buy his stuff.

EL: Would you remember the name of the store if I...

MM: I would, I would yeah.

EL: Was it James Cohen?

MM: No.

EL: Was it Arlen?

MM: Arlen...

EL: Arlen Shoes?

MM: I don't think so.

EL: Was it Comins?

MM: No. There's still a lot of them there, huh?

EL: No, those are all gone, but those are the only shoes that we know.

MM: Oh they're gone, but those are the ones that you know.

EL: Yeah.

MM: Oh shoot I wish I could remember his name, but yeah it was Fifth Avenue, but it was so many years ago he's probably gone.

EL: Did you guys ever come into Fifth Avenue?

MM: I do not remember, you know what's funny about that is that I can picture Fifth Avenue, and I can picture the store, but I don't remember that we went there specifically to order shoes there, I think that we had gone to Pittsburgh because we had family there. And we probably came down Fifth Avenue then because I don't know if the parkways were in existence at that time, I don't know, it's a long time ago. Yeah, so I remember exactly where he was, it was like the lower part of Fifth Avenue and I wish I could remember his name, but I can't.

EL: What are some of the other changes you've seen in New Castle since you were, since that time, from them 'til now.

MM: Oh changes. You mean business or just in general?

EL: Just in general. Well yeah, for instance the Jewish community, how has that changed, if it has?

MM: Well it changed a lot for us because we merged with the Reform movement, so there was a lot of that transition to get used to, but you know when a lot of that stuff was going on, after I got out of college, I left New Castle for a good number of years so there was a lot of stuff that I missed. And of course you know, what I've seen since I've been back, which is a lot of years also, is that you know, the children, the offspring of my parents have mostly graduated high school, went to college, moved away, got married, stayed away. So you know, typically what I, what I've noticed, or what I've experienced is just the diminishing population here in New Castle and the lack of Jewish businesses. Although there still are Jewish businesses in town, but I don't know, I don't see a great deal of major interest anymore in the, there's only just a few of us that are still active in the Temple.

EL: When you were growing up did you have a desire to raise a family here, or did you want to get out of New Castle?

MM: I did not have a desire to, no. I was busy going to, following my mother's first cousin, Rose Brooks, lived in Riverdale, New York. And she came for a bar mitzvah many, many, many years ago and we got to be pretty friendly, and she said, "Oh you know you need to come to New York." So of course that's the only thing I could even think of doing at that time. No, I never really thought that I would get married here and have children. Not that I was terribly opposed to it, but once I had a taste for something else, it wasn't New Castle that I missed really, except for my family. But I didn't really miss the city at all.

EL: How did the Jews get along with the non-Jews in New Castle?

MM: You know, I think on a whole pretty well. I know there were, not too many years ago, there were situations at one of the suburban high schools here where there was some blatant anti-Semitism going on.

EL: But when you were growing up?

MM: When I was growing up, well, I could say not too much that I personally experienced except for one time I think I was in the ninth grade. There was a teacher that was pretty blatantly verbal about Jews. And my sister, my older sister, she had a couple experiences with some fellow students at the high school.

EL: Anything you would want to go into detail?

MM: Um, I think that my sister Shirley had experiences with a couple girls at the high school who called her a dirty Jew.

EL: What was yours with the teacher?

MM: Sorry... it's still hard to think about that stuff. My experience with the teacher, I think it was around Easter time and she was talking about Easter. And she said there's only one person in this class that you have to be leery of or worried about, not worried about, but you have to be afraid of I think is what she said, you know and she pointed to me. So I went home and told my mom and she went to the school, and you know told the principal or whatever, and of course nothing was done about the teacher. But anyway, I'm sorry.

EL: No, it's fine.

MM: I think it's, you know we just had a Holocaust program here, I think it's just all still on the surface and never kinda goes away.

EL: But you were saying on Long Avenue that it was a real melting pot.

MM: Yeah it was. But that was you know, when I was so young. These things like happened after we were teenagers or in high school, but I do remember that everybody seemed to, unless I was too young to know it was happening. And if it was happening then probably it was being, my parents were probably just not talking about it or saying anything to their children about it. Probably just shielding them, shielding us from any anti-Semitism that they may have experienced, I don't know.

EL: Why did you decide to move back to New Castle?

MM: Well I lived in New York for a while and then I moved back to, I lived in Pittsburgh first and then I moved to New York and then I moved back to Pittsburgh for a while. And my older sister, we were very close, and she lived in Mount Lebanon and so did I and I was working there. And then, her husband decided that he wanted to, he's a pharmacist, but he was vice president for years of Thrift Drugs, and he decided he had an opportunity to open his own business and it turned out that it was in Arizona. So they moved to Arizona and I was like not happy. And I had a sister here and my aunt in Youngstown and my aunt here and cousins here and I just thought, I think that I want to come home and be close to them, so that's what brought me back here. But I can't say that I, that I, I mean I've been happy here for the most part, there's still that thing in my that wants to go back to New York. I want to go back there and go to Broadway plays and continue what I was doing.

EL: Was the, so Pittsburgh was never a draw when you were young.

MM: Oh, when I was here first you mean?

EL: Well I'm curious to know, did you feel like you lived in a small town, and if so was Pittsburgh the center or was Youngstown, or...

MM: Youngstown was never really the center, not for me. No. But Pittsburgh, no, you know, our youth groups here did more with Youngstown, Beaver Falls, and that sort of thing, but not that much in Pittsburgh. I didn't think about going to Pittsburgh until I was finished with college and then moved there because my sister was there. And then that one led to going to New York. But no, I don't know that I longed to go to Pittsburgh, you know, it wasn't like anyplace that I thought oh that sounds like the greatest place to go to. Although it's a great city.

EL: Were the youth groups Jewish youth groups?

MM: Yes.

EL: So what all were there?

MM: There was a temple youth group, and even though there was a little interaction, the synagogue kids and the temple kids did not really interact that much. But there was B'nai B'rith Girls that was active, and we went to conventions and all those kinds of things. But we were again interacting with Butler and Beaver Falls and some Pittsburgh, but not a whole bunch.

EL: What other groups were there in Pittsburgh?

MM: In Pittsburgh?

EL: In New Castle.

MM: In New Castle? The boys had AZA and we had BBG and temple youth group.

EL: Was there a Hadassah?

MM: There was, yeah, there was a Hadassah, yes, and it was really, in my mother's heyday you know when she was a young married woman with children, all those ladies of her generation were extremely active here. And Hadassah was a big thing. And the temple Sisterhood. I mean the synagogue Sisterhood was huge also.

EL: Were your parents Zionists?

MM: Um, no.

EL: Were they just agnostic or were they actively not...

MM: No they weren't agnostic, they just, I never really heard much about that, about conversation about that at all.

EL: Well is there anything else about Jewish life in New Castle you'd like...

MM: That I want to talk about?

EL: Yeah.

MM: No... not really. I don't find it, I don't really find it all that stimulating, but it certainly isn't anyone's fault exactly. I just don't think there's enough, there's just not enough people anymore. You know our Saturday morning services if we get a minyan we're like lucky. Friday nights pretty much gone. I think the saddest thing about Rosh Hashanah Yom Kippur is the fact that you know, not the attendance is down to about the same amount of people that we get for Saturday morning services and it's kind of sad to see. But we don't have, you know our president here is a really great president and he really tries to keep it all together but we just don't have the participation like we should, you know. So I don't find it very stimulating anymore.

EL: Well thank you so much talking with me.

MM: Oh you're welcome!

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