

Transcript of Interview with Samuel Bernstine
Small Town Jewish History Project
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Transcriber's note:

During the oral history, Mr. Bernstine refers to Pennsylvania by the letters "P" "A". This is indicated in the transcription by those letters, PA.

Transcription:

Eric Lidji: Today is May 27, 2015, this is the Small Town Oral History Project. I'm Eric Lidji, I'm talking to Sam Bernstine, -steen?

Sam Bernstine: Stine is fine.

EL: Bernstine. And we are in the library of Temple Hadar Israel. So why don't you start by telling me how your family got to New Castle.

SB: Well it's interesting, Eric. My family was really from the center part of Pennsylvania, the Altoona-Martinsburg area, and my mother and father moved here in early 1956, and I had two sisters which they brought with them, Kay and Carol, and my mother was pregnant with me at the time. And lo and behold, I was born June 5, 1956, in New Castle. And I'm really the only member of my family who was born in New Castle. And right now, I'm actually the only member of my family who still lives in New Castle. Unfortunately I lost my mother when I was ten. She died of breast cancer and is buried here in New Castle. And I lost my father, it'll be ten years this December 3rd coming. And my two sisters live out of town, one lives in Las Vegas, and one lives in State College, Pennsylvania.

EL: What brought them to New Castle?

SB: My dad's employment opportunities brought him out this way and so I think for the family, which I couldn't fully appreciate, but it was a pretty significant move. Because nowadays a hundred and thirty mile move is nothing, but remember this was 1956 and my mother's family was from Martinsburg, Pennsylvania, and my father's from Altoona, Pennsylvania, and so I think it was quite an emotional and significant point for them to move from the center of the state to Western PA. By the way I was named after my grandfather, who passed away when he was fifty-six of cancer. And so I'm really named after Samuel Bernstine, my grandfather on my father's side.

EL: What were the employment opportunities?

SB: He had an opportunity originally to come here and work in a government capacity, so he was doing some work in the small government capacity, but his passion was always people, relationships, and sales. And so, soon thereafter he actually went into the retail business, and he worked for some various furniture stores. Actually in the Sharon, Farrell, Warren area. Warren, Ohio, Sharon, PA, Farrell, Pennsylvania. And they ended up with their final store in Hermitage actually.

EL: What was the name of the...?

SB: That was called Meyer-Frank Furniture. And their first store was in Farrell, PA, and they were very successful in the furniture business. My dad was an assistant manager

there and then he used to also go over to their store in Warren, Ohio, which was an hour away from here. So again, back in those days that was a trip. And then he finished his career there in sales with them at the Hermitage store in what is Hickory, Pennsylvania.

EL: What was your home like growing up?

SB: It was a very interesting scenario, because if you look at where the synagogue is here, it's a New Castle address but ninety-nine and half percent of the Jewish people lived in New Castle or Neshannock Township. I lived on the other side of town, called Union Township, still New Castle, but the other side of town called Union Township. And we were the only Jewish family who lived in Union Township at that time. Today I think there's just one or two families as well. So I really had the best of both worlds because I had all my, as they say, Gentile friends, at Union School District day in and day out, guy and ladies, and I played a lot of sports. And then I would come to the synagogue here to Hebrew School on Mondays and Wednesdays from 4:15 to 6 o'clock, and I would come for Friday night services with my mother, and then I would come for Sunday school on Sunday. So you know, like I had all these Jewish friends and all these different girls that I didn't see all week, but I'd see them for a couple hours. And I reflect back and it was, it was a good time.

EL: Was your family, what level of religious observance was there at home?

SB: Uhm, it was like, we definitely were not Orthodox but we weren't Reform. We were kind of Conservative. And what was unique was my mother actually converted, she was not Jewish originally and she converted to Judaism, but my dad being in the retail business worked out of town so it was interesting 'cause my mother kind of took the lead to model the right religious behavior for us at home. And I remember, it's pretty emotional for me, literally coming here every Friday night for services with my mother because my dad used to work late, and he would get off work and sometimes get here near the very end of the service and sometimes not at all. But my mother kind of steered us from the religious perspective. Of course, I lost her when I was ten, but that always stayed with me and then my dad picked that up and supported that as well. But it was interesting I felt because she had converted.

EL: And you guys were at Tifereth.

SB: Yes. In this very building, which is Tifereth Israel Synagogue originally, and then one block down was the temple, and then we merged, and now we're Temple Hadar Israel. That was Temple Israel, this was Tifereth Israel Synagogue. Now my father, I remember him telling me, when we first came to town they didn't really know where to join so he kind of led me to believe initially they either were or they did join at the temple, no disrespect to the temple people who are fine people, but my dad said that our family doctor kind of had a little conversation with him and persuaded him, which I don't think was too difficult to do, that he should really be a member here rather than at Temple Israel.

EL: For what reason?

SB: I'm not sure that that doctor was our family doctor, he delivered me, brought me into the world, and he was a pretty respected board member here so maybe there was a little influence there. His name was Dr. Nathan Ginsberg, Nate Ginsberg was his name. Wonderful family, and he was very good to my family and especially my mother during her illness. And I don't mean to dwell on that for this discussion, but it's pretty important to me. Back then, you know they didn't have the facilities that they have nowadays for you know, day centers and health centers and you know old age homes and that. So there is a facility in town, it still exists, but it's called, it was called Golden Hills Nursing Home. And it was really tragic, but my mother was put in there at like thirty-nine, forty years old, and back then you just didn't put people in those kinds of facilities at that age. But we had no alternative because there wasn't other mechanisms. And Dr. Ginsberg was pretty instrumental in being able to orchestrate that and help us make that happen.

EL: So after your mother died your father took over the religious responsibilities?

SB: Yeah, he did, and in fact he was a Sunday School teacher here a couple of years. I actually had him as a Sunday school student, which was interesting. My father certainly was not the most religious practicing Jewish person in the world, but he was very proud of his Jewish heritage and his Jewish religion. And he felt it was very important to attend Hebrew school, to attend Sunday school, to attend Shabbos services. And he made it a point to make sure that after my mom passed when I was ten that I was schooled in Hebrew to get my bar mitzvah at thirteen.

You know towards the end before he got real sick we used to come to the services together on Saturday mornings which was nice. And to be honest with you I'm the current president of the temple, one of the reasons I took that responsibility is there were so many people in this community, Jews and non-Jews, but particularly the Jewish people in the synagogue were very good to me and my family, especially when my mother took ill and when I lost my mother. With my dad working out of town they kind of looked after me and kind of made sure I went down the right road and they provided me with transportation to and from the shul. Because remember I was on the other side of town, so it was a little difficult to get here. They always provided me transportation, meals, they just, you know, they were kind of just like a second, third, fourth set of parents.

EL: When you were a kid.

SB: Right. And so I feel that I need to give back, and I need to remember those people for what they did for me and my family, which is why I've committed to be the current president, which I'm in my fourth year now.

EL: Being on that side of town, you had mentioned earlier about sort of having a second social group on that side of town, how did the Jews get along with the rest of the town? How did the town get along with the Jews?

SB: I think it was fine. You know when I think back, what I knew of the Jewish kids in Neshannock and New Castle is they were tight and they were friends, but they also had friends of the non-Jewish faith that they socialized with too. But I didn't see that a whole lot cause the only time I typically saw them was in a Jewish environment. But I know for a fact, because I became good friends with some of them, that they in turn certainly had friends outside the Jewish faith. I do know though, one thing that I found, I wouldn't say comical, but interesting was a lot of those kids couldn't believe that I was the only Jewish guy on the other side of town. And they were like, well how do you get along with everybody and who are you friends? You know, because I think for them they had a comfort zone of their own niche, I wouldn't say clique, but their own niche, but then they went outside of that circle. Whereas for me, I had to be outside of that circle because I had no alternative, and I actually think that some people were concerned or felt bad or sorry for me, but I'm serious, Eric, I kind of had the best of both worlds you know? In my mind.

And to this day I would not change that one iota because it taught me a lot about respecting people for their differences versus their similarities and appreciating different cultures, you know different beliefs, different faiths. And in fact, right, wrong, or indifferent, I ended up marrying a Catholic girl, and we're going to be celebrating, happily, our thirty-sixth wedding anniversary on June 2nd. And we have one son whose name is Aaron and he just got married, it'll be three years in August, to a Polish-Catholic girl named Alyia and we're, today is actually our first grandchild's eleventh week birthday, if there is such a thing. He's eleven weeks old today. So I've been very fortunate. I've learned to respect different faiths, different cultures, different beliefs. And I've always told my son my philosophy in life is when you build a relationship with somebody, whether it's, you know, marriage or just friendship, the way you test friendship is its easy to love, respect, and hang around and have fun with people who think the way you do. When you really find out how much love, patience, tolerance, respect you have, is when you learn to get along with people who have very different views than you. And if you think about it, and I don't mean to be overly philosophical this afternoon, but the world can learn from that lesson, unfortunate as we look at things today.

EL: So after you finish high school you went to Penn State?

SB: Yeah. Kinda wear that on my sleeve, and my head and my shirt and my shoulder, but, and that's interesting too because even back then, I graduated from high school in 1974, it was expensive to go to college then and my family didn't have a lot of money. So there were Jewish people in the community who literally made jobs for me in the summer, I mean they found work for me in their places of business that God only knows why you would pay anybody to do what they had me do.

EL: Like what?

SB: Like Art and Sybil Epstein had a junkyard business downtown, okay? They didn't have any work for me in the summer and there was a big fence that went around the

place, okay. They had me paint that fence with black asbestos tar roofing. And that was a summer job because it was both sides of the fence and it was that thick stuff, hot summer and there were weeds growing through the fence. I mean, trust me, they didn't need that fence painted. They were just trying to help me out going to college. Stan Krauss, another gentleman from the Temple and if you look up the history on Stan, very prominent in the sixties and seventies, knew Golda Meir and did a lot of fundraising for Israel. Stan had a building downtown, a central building, and, you know, he had guys doing maintenance and cleaning but he used to tell me to come down there after school and work four or five hours a night sweeping the garage, you know, things that needed done but I don't know how important they were. Gus Levonski had a men's dress store downtown, and at thirteen he hired me to work in the dress store. And you know I played basketball, and they worked around my schedule.

But anyway, of tangent there, so those people helped me generate some money to help me go to Penn State. And I went to Penn State in Sharon, Pennsylvania, and at that time it was called a branch campus, now it's called a commonwealth campus. But it's called Penn State Shenango, and I went there from September '74 through May of '76. That was my first two years, and it is Penn State. And then I transferred, which then they had a two-plus-two model, so you went to the commonwealth for two years to live at home, save some money, not have as much expense in room and board, be closer to your family. And then I transferred to University Park for my junior and senior year, '76 fall to '78 May. And I graduated in four years from Penn State.

EL: Just going back a little bit, I was thinking about these dates that you were giving. Did the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War have a big impact on you?

SB: Yeah they really did. And I mentioned Stan Krauss because funding was an issue, and Stan was a great fundraiser and really believed in philanthropy. And he really got out in the Jewish community throughout the United States and raised a lot of money to help Israel. But I remember the 1967 war, you know I lost my mother on May 12, 1967, and I remember the war in '67, you know the Six Day War. 1973 being attacked on the High Holidays and, yeah, it was very impressionable and to this day I continue to monitor what happens in the Mideast. It's sad that as much as things change in the world, and we talk about how constant change is, how much in some ways some things are very much the same.

EL: Had you thought about Israel much before those events?

SB: No. I really hadn't. Just a young man growing up, a young boy, I guess I should say. But those, those were pretty impactful because 1967, I was eleven, ten and eleven, and then '73 I was a junior in high school, and so forth. So those, they really helped I think define my identity and make me realize, and perhaps appreciate, how significant it is to be proud of your heritage and faith regardless of what it is, but in my case the Jewish faith. And I will say this to you, the school district I lived in, people were very nice to me, but there were definitely some people who would sort me out once and a while as being the only quote, unquote, Jew in the neighborhood or in the town, or excuse me in

that township, or in that school district. Of course I had two older sisters but once they moved on I was the last one. But that never bothered me. I kind of, I don't, I think notoriety is the wrong word, but I kind of liked being different if I was different. I guess I would say I kind of liked being perceived as being different because once people got to know me I think they realized I wasn't different at all.

EL: Mhm. What made you decide to come back to New Castle after college?

SB: Well I came back home, took a job here actually with a Jewish company, the Weiner family, Jay Weiner and Bruce Weiner. Jay is deceased and his wife Roz, but Bruce is still living in the Pittsburgh, I think Sewickley area.

EL: What did they do?

SB: They had a luggage factory.

EL: Oh, this was the big luggage factory.

SB: Airway luggage. But Bruce, their son, actually opened up a handbag factory. So I worked for him, and it was called Chapel Purse Handbags in West Pittsburgh, PA. But interesting, I came back, and then my wife and I got married in June of '79, and we left in November of '79 to a little community called Minerva, Ohio, which is east of Canton, Ohio. It's about sixty miles from here, hour and a half, small community. And I went there for employment because I took a supervisory position with a company called T.R.W., whose corporate headquarters are actually in Cleveland, Ohio.

And interesting enough when I moved into Minerva, once again it must have followed my pattern of life, very rural farm area, no Jewish people at all in the community. And I'll never forget the day we moved in, my wife and I took a walk around the neighborhood and this elderly fellow stopped me and he said, "Hey", he said, "I'm Jim Hedrick." And I introduced myself, "I'm Sam Bernstine." And he said, "What'd you say your last name was?" And I said, "Bernstine." And I guess I'm a bit naïve, I wasn't picking up on it, but later on I figured out it was an issue for him that there was quote, unquote, a Bernstine, you know, living in the neighborhood. But we were fine. I think it was just they weren't used to that and so he perceived right away that I was a big shot from T.R.W. Cleveland that they had planted in Minerva to do an investigation or something, which wasn't the case at all you know.

So we lived over there from 1980 to 1999, and then November of '99 we actually moved back here to New Castle. And my father was starting to have some physical problems, and my wife's parents are from back here and my son was going into ninth grade so it was a good time to move back. And so we came back to New Castle in '99 and moved into a house we built in June of 2000, we've been back here fifteen years. What's interesting about that though, now there were synagogues in Canton, but I didn't know anybody in Canton so I maintained my membership with this synagogue even though I lived in Minerva, Ohio. Now I didn't come back here every week for Shabbos services,

but when I was back here I would visit and I would come back with my dad and so forth you know? But so I always maintained some identity with this synagogue. And then of course when I came back in 2000, I got a little more engaged and never envisioned that I would ever be the president of the temple because back when I was a kid if you were the president of the temple that was a big deal, okay? I can tell you, Eric, with all due respect, being president of the temple now is not such a big deal, you know? There's a lot of responsibility, I don't mean to demean the importance of the role, but it certainly doesn't carry, at least in my eyes, the mystique in 2015 that it did in 1967 or when I was bar mitzvahed in '69.

EL: What's the difference between your experience when you were a ninth grader and your son's when you came back in terms of the size of the congregation and the offerings?

SB: Yeah, well a couple things. Now he's visited here with me but we actually didn't raise him Jewish, even though his name's Aaron. He was named after my great-uncle. But he's been raised Catholic, in my wife's faith, but comes to the synagogue periodically for holidays and things. I'd say the biggest difference was, and there were some similarities too, but the biggest difference was when I was here as a ninth grader there were three hundred plus families and everything looked very robust, and you could never, never, never envision that we would find ourselves in the situation now where we don't have three hundred families, we don't have three hundred people. We have seventy people approximately, total, left in our whole congregation. And that's after a merger of the temple and the synagogue. But so the size and the Jewish influence had significantly diminished in the local New Castle community by the time my son moved back here in 2000.

EL: What do you mean by influence?

SB: Well, there was a lot of Jewish businesses. So when you went downtown and you went to a store, a high percentage of the time the store was owned by Jewish people. There were significant Jewish leaders present in the community in different community and civic responsibilities and positions including the sheriff of this town was Jewish at one time.

EL: What was his name?

SB: George Ziegler. George Ziegler. And you know when my son came back all that had, I wouldn't say completely evaporated, but it certainly had diminished and in fact in the last fifteen years it's really, really deteriorated so that ironically some of the stores that were Jewish owned, if you go downtown they're not even there anymore. Let alone the families not there, the buildings not there.

EL: When did conversations about, well let's go back a second, did you have any first hand experience with the merger?

SB: Yeah I did have a couple experiences. One last thing I want to say, to just go back if I could about my son, one thing that unfortunately hadn't changed, because he had the last name Bernstine, even though he wasn't being raised Jewish, I know that he felt, at time, some, what shall I say, some less than friendly commentary from you know students and people in the community on that side of town. Not that they're bad or, you know, kids are kids and when they find out there's one guy with a Jewish name, whether he's of the Jewish faith or not, you know he had to deal with that.

EL: Do you think it was stronger than what you had to deal with?

SB: No. I don't. I really don't. I think actually, from a school district standpoint, culturally the Union school district changed too, now there's a lot of African Americans and there's a lot more diversity in that school district so I don't think it was as big a deal for him as it was for me. But there was still an issue now and then. But I'm sorry, you had asked me...?

EL: The merger.

SB: The merger, yeah. That was a very sensitive issue around here and it was a very sad issue because there were wonderful people at Temple Israel, and there were wonderful people at Tifereth Israel. In my mind, they both were so proud of their particular focus on Judaism being Reform at Temple Israel, and being Conservative Orthodox at Tifereth Israel, that they had a really, really hard time figuring out how to come together and collaborate.

And you may or may not know the history, but frankly it's kind of embarrassing. But there was actually a lawsuit to stop the merger and it was at one point successful in doing that. But what's really sad about that is you know, there's a lot of hard feelings to this day and people are still bitter about some of that. For a guy like me, I look at it as these were just good people, unfortunately on both sides, who felt so strong about their vision of the faith and the religion that they had a hard time compromising. It doesn't mean they were bad people, although there will be people on each side that will tell you the rotten things that other people did to them. But see, to me, that goes back to what I was talking about earlier. I had the advantage of living in the township, where I lived in that environment, it wasn't Reform and Conservative, it was just Judaism and non-Judaism, and I learned very quickly how to respect each other's faith and get along with people. So that merger thing, it hurt a lot of people and we had friends, I don't want to say on both sides, but we had friends from both synagogues and I thought that was sad. But then there finally was a merger in 1997.

And here we are today with the remnants of that and we're down to seventy people. And you know to be honest with you, Eric, to this day there's still some people that you know feel a little uncomfortable coming into this building or feel there's still a little bit of "we" and "they". But I've worked really hard as the president to talk about the fact that we're focused on quality not quantity. And we are small from a quantity standpoint, so you

know we're all Jews and we just need to help each other and support each other, and as well as help the community and support the community with non-Jews as well.

And that's kind of been my mantra in my four-year term, quantity, or excuse me, quality versus quantity. And one thing we've done though to try to respect both faiths is we run two Friday night services a month and we run a Saturday Shabbos service every Saturday. But the two Friday services are focused in the Reform discipline and the Saturday service are focused in the Conservative discipline. But we don't make a big deal out of it, but everybody knows we encourage both sects of people, Reform and Conservative, to come to both. But the other thing we've done to try to increase some interest is we also do adult education. So one week we run a service, one week we run adult education. Now in the summer, we don't do Friday night services because they never did Friday night services in the summer at the Temple, so we stop them just for the summer then we resume. We just finished our last Friday night service last Friday, 'til the High Holidays, and then we'll pick up again in October.

EL: When did discussions, even if they were informal, begin, when people started saying that they needed to think about the future of the congregation, or you know?

SB: Well it's probably been going on since the eighties because remember the merger actually happened in '97, but there was a merger attempt a decade plus before that that wasn't successful. So there was a realization probably, I graduated from college in '78 from Penn State, probably in the early eighties there started to be a realization that we're really shrinking as a community, and it makes sense if we could pull our resources. But it never really happened until 1997. I remember my dad saying, you know, he said it's just a shame because back then you know that was in the nineties, he said in twenty years it won't matter anyhow because he said there will be very few people living.

And I never really grasped the impact of that statement and maybe he was off a little bit, but not much because you know the merger happened in '97. We're now eighteen years into the merger, 2015, and we're down to seventy people. And of those seventy, I should qualify that, about fifteen or twenty are shut-ins, you know they're in nursing homes or they can't get out of their own home. Unfortunately I'd say there's about twenty-five or thirty others that don't practice on a weekly basis. They wear the label of Judaism, I'm sure they're proud of it, but they don't necessarily come to shul other than the High Holidays. So we're really working, Eric, with about twenty to twenty-five people who come to shul on a regular basis. And when I say a regular basis I don't want to mislead you, that doesn't mean we have twenty or twenty-five people in here on a Friday or Saturday night because we have less than that.

EL: When did people start talking about potentially closing or potentially selling the building or...?

SB: Yeah, depends on who you talk to. I don't think there was a realization until probably the last twelve months that we were really going to be confronted with maybe having to close the congregation down at some time. And I don't know how much you

know about our current situation, but I'm pretty proud of it because I think we've taken the best of both worlds. Given our small numbers, we don't have a lot of money, but the biggest problem we have is we're going to run out of people before we run out of money, which I think is happening in a lot of Jewish communities in Western Pennsylvania and Eastern Ohio. But this building has a lot of emotion significance to a lot of people.

So what I've been able to do, with board approval and congregation approval, is ultimately get the gentleman next door from California, who's interested in buying the building, and that's in process now, we just have to get a zoning change approved and the building will be his. But to me, such a deal, he's gonna buy the building, we're gonna get the money, we're gonna be able to use it to secure our cemeteries from an endowment standpoint with the Jewish Federation of Pittsburgh, who by the way has been very helpful to us, and in the same token he's going to let us continue to use this building to run our services for a measly five hundred dollars a month. So I'll give you an example, I get a gas bill in the winter for fifteen or sixteen hundred dollars for a month. Okay, I can run services in here for five hundred dollars a month or six thousand dollars a year. So what I've been able to say to my congregants is look, don't be in denial, you know we're definitely downsizing, we're definitely a congregation that is, you know, gonna one day not be here.

But as an interim action to protect our finances and keep our legacy alive and our footprint on the Jewish community in New Castle, we can continue to come to the same building and practice our faith just like we always have. Somebody else might own the building; somebody else might pay the gas bill, but my mantra in the last bulletin, I write an article for a bulletin we put out every two months, I said you can pull into the same parking lot, park in the same space, walk down the same hall, put on the same head covering, walk in the same sanctuary, sit in the same seat, pick up the same prayer book and listen to the same rabbi, so what's changed? But it'll be interesting. Frankly, to see how people really deal with that because I expect the official sale, if the zoning gets approved, to probably happen sometime between October and December of this calendar year. And some people have already said to me, "Well I hear you, Sam, but you know when you walk in here it won't be ours." And I said, "well, I guess legally that's correct, but God's still going to be with us and we're still going to be talking to God from the same place we've always been talking to him from."

So I'm actually, I would feel very, very bad if we had to sell the building and close the congregation down, but what I'm trying to do, there's a lot of people in this congregation that are seventy, seventy-five plus years old, and I'm only fifty-nine, but often times I'm the youngest guy in the service. My goal is to keep this facility alive and vibrant as best we can and practice our traditions and our faith in Judaism, provide people a local opportunity to come to this temple and the synagogue if they want until they leave this earth. And, unfortunately, to use my dad's analogy, in another five to ten years I don't know how many people will be left. And who knows if I'll even be here, but I'll be fifty-nine June 5th, and you know, we appreciate people like you coming in and talking to us because for a lot of people this is really the last straw for them and this is their way of

feeling that there is a legacy and they can leave a footprint and be remembered in a positive way.

And I'll tell you, not because I'm Jewish, and a lot of other nationalities in New Castle have done a lot of great things for this community, but back in the sixties and seventies, fifties, sixties, and seventies, Judaism was very vibrant in this town. It was very influential. And people were in key, not only business positions, but leadership positions and well respected in the community and raised a lot of money. And so I think we really have a lot to be proud of as far as the impact that the Jewish community has had on New Castle and Lawrence County, and I hope that doesn't get lost. And I guess with the efforts of people like you and Susan, this is a genuine intent to you know, maintain that and observe that.

EL: Alright, well thank you so much.

SB: Yeah, my pleasure, and thank you for everything you're doing not just for New Castle but this whole project that you're committed to.

EL: Absolutely.