

Transcript of Interview with Dorothy Bolotin
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Transcription:

Eric Lidji: Today is November 13, 2015. I'm Eric Lidji with, this is the Small Towns Jewish History Project and I'm talking today to Dorothy Bolotin in her home in Hermitage. We're going to be talking about Sharon, Pennsylvania. So you're not originally from Sharon. Why don't you tell me a little about where you were born and where you grew up.

Dorothy Bolotin: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio. Almost one hundred years ago. Long to live. And we were, you know, a modest family. We lived in a middle class neighborhood and I grew up at Euclid Avenue Temple with Rabbi Brickner, who married me. And moved to Sharon when my husband went into practice. We came here because my mother-in-law was an invalid, by that time she had, she was only in her thirties when she began getting ill. And she was an invalid for most of her life. And I think that's why we came here because if not I'm sure we would have gone someplace else probably. But we landed in Sharon, and it's been to raise my family, although none of them want to stay here. But that's okay. And I don't know I can tell you a lot about me. I'm nobody special. I went to Western Reserve University, and I graduated. We graduated one day, we were married the next day.

EL: Wow. How did your family end up in Cleveland?

DB: Oh always. My grandpa, we lived on a very narrow street in Cleveland, don't ask me how my grandfather got there, but my grandfather got there. You don't want me to go way back, but he came from Germany and he ran away from Germany because he didn't like his new stepmother. And he landed on a ship and got scurvy and in trying to mend him, he landed in New York City. How he came to Cleveland I don't really know. And lived on this narrow street. My mother lived on that street. My mother was married on that street. And I lived on that street. And I was married on that street. And we finally all moved away. But we all lived on Birchdale Avenue in Cleveland, Ohio. And it was, I can't tell you how we got there, I really don't know.

EL: And what year were you born?

DB: In the year of 1916.

EL: How did you meet your husband?

DB: You really don't want to hear this, but it's a story. I was fifteen years old, I guess, and somebody must have said you know you really have to get that younger daughter out of my hair, she's in the way. I'd like to go visit her sister but I can't because she's always there, so they threw a coin up in the air, he and another fellow, he was sixteen years old, and he was smart. He was in college already, and they threw a coin up in the air, and he got the coin. He got me at the age of fifteen. So he asked me to go to a dance, and I said I really can't go with you because I don't have anything to wear. And my

sister, who is standing there, and she said don't you dare say that, we'll find you something. So I did. I went to this date, I was fifteen years old when I met him.

EL: It was a coin toss.

DB: It was a coin, I was a catch.

EL: Was your family very religious growing up? Was your family very religious growing up?

DB: Absolutely not. We were Reform Jews. I think we were good Jews. We always know I'm Jewish. I'm still a Reform Jew even though it has changed, and I know it has changed a lot over the years and Reform Judaism as I see it today is not what it was when I was a child.

EL: What are the differences?

DB: Oh, many. We had a beautiful choir at the Temple. We never sang. The songs that that they're singing today I've never even heard. We did take Hebrew in Sunday school, and I went for twelve years to Sunday school. The same thing, every year we learned the same sentence every year. I never learned anything, it was a very poor religious experience as far as Hebrew was concerned. But I thought I had probably one of the best rabbis in the world leading our congregation.

EL: This was Brickner?

DB: Rabbi Brickner, yes. And I don't know that they make rabbis anymore. Rabbi Silver and Rabbi Brickner. These were unusual men.

EL: When you say Rabbi Silver, you mean Abba Hillel Silver?

DB: Yes.

EL: Okay.

DB: They were unusual men. They were, I think they came actually from Orthodox families, but came into the movement and they were smart, and they were bright. And every Sunday my father took me to Sunday school and he went to listen to the rabbi. But as I said originally, it's changed, much of it has changed. But I think maybe they learn more today, I'm not sure. But it was the education as I knew it. It made, I think it made a good Jew out of me, I think I'm a good Jew. I know I'm Jewish. I'm not much interested in Orthodox Jewry.

But, and I probably, you know our congregation has been sold. I think financially it ran out of money. And also our congregation was getting older. The people that belonged to the congregation were getting older. And they have joined up with Rodef Shalom in

Youngstown. Everybody is crazy about the rabbi. He's a very nice man. He really is a very nice man. To me it's a long way to go, every time I want to go to the temple I have to travel forty minutes to get there. Beverly and Allen, who are my niece, love it. They love it so much that they go two and three times a day. If there's something going on, they're going to everything. If they go to a bar mitzvah I say, "Do you know them?" She says, "No. But they rabbi said I should go so I went." But it's very nice congregation, a beautiful building in a terrible neighborhood. And they're stuck with it I think. They can't do much about it. But that's how I knew it.

EL: What did your father do for a living?

DB: Well I don't know exactly what he did. I think at the beginning he and a cousin of mine were in business, they sold, I shouldn't say trinkets, they sold things that you put on dresses and whatever you call that, I don't know. And of course like everything else, the Depression came along and he travelled, he sold ladies' ready-to-wear. Not very good financially, but it was what you did to make a living.

EL: Yeah.

DB: And then, I moved to Sharon, they finally moved to Sharon. He had to move, he wanted to move finally. And he could have moved to Akron, Ohio, which was, he was offered a job in Akron and must have thought about it for a long time and decided he should be near one of his children and decided that I should be the child he was near. So they moved to Sharon. And he died from surgery, he probably shouldn't have died, but he did. And he was seventy years old when he died.

EL: Was your husband born in Sharon?

DB: Yes, my husband was born and raised. And at that time when he went to school it was a very good school system, he had wonderful school teachers that were our good friends. And my daughter, my youngest daughter, always said she loved reading because they had so many books and she loved to go over there and read. And it was a good experience. I don't know what the schools are like today, I hear complaints, but that I don't know. But it was a good school system. And you know he was a good student and teacher's pet I suppose, whatever that is. And he was young when he went away to school, but he always lived in Sharon.

EL: What year did you move to Sharon?

DB: 1948.

EL: 1948. So after the war.

DB: Yes, right after, well after the war.

EL: So you had been living in Cleveland for a while.

DB: We went back. He met somebody, he met a very fine doctor while he was in service, and the man said to him, "Joe, go back to school, get some more education, you're too good for what you're doing." So he did, he went back to, he went back to Reserve, and we stayed in Cleveland for two years before he came to Sharon.

EL: What was his profession?

DB: Internist.

EL: Okay. What was Sharon like in 1948?

DB: Pretty much like it is now. It was a little town but it was, we had Westinghouse here which made a big difference. We had twenty-five hundred people or something worked for Westinghouse. And the minute Westinghouse closed that really killed the town. Everything here is called Buhl, B-U-H-L. Mr. Buhl really made Sharon. If you haven't been to our beautiful, beautiful park, of which I think there are not very many like it in the country, we take very good care of it. He had foresight, and he donated it to the city with the provision that you couldn't serve alcohol. A little old-fashioned, I think. I think they've gotten around it finally. But I think it was pretty much the same otherwise, in fact sometimes I think they do a pretty good job on the downtown Sharon, which of course has many, many problems. But they're trying to fill up these little stores, and they make a living I assume. And it looks better than some of the other little towns that are around. But otherwise it's the same. They paved the West Hill, the West Hill was a dirt road when I came over. Yeah it was a dirt road. That's been paved. And it's not really so different.

EL: Was it shocking coming from a big city to a small town?

DB: Maybe I was too young to know the difference. I just made up my mind, whatever my husband wanted to do because he was very good at what he did, that I would go where ever he went. It was okay, we talked about it a lot and made the decision to come here. I think it wasn't so terrible. I had a terrible time making friends when I came here, that I found very difficult. Maybe it isn't like that for everybody, but I was here six months and I said, My God, nobody comes in to even say hello. I don't even know who they are until one girl, maybe you know them, do you know the Gutmanns in Pittsburgh?

EL: Maybe. I know a Gutmann.

DB: They're the Texaco people. Nice people.

EL: I don't think so.

DB: Anyhow, Muriel Gutmann called me one day and invited me to lunch. I didn't even know who she was. She made my social [unclear], I always think of her. She's still living, too.

EL: Huh. Do you see her still?

DB: Well I had the shock of my life. We went to the Cleveland Symphony and finally gave it up for the Pittsburgh Symphony. And I went to the symphony one Sunday and she was coming in with a friend, and I said, "Hi Muriel." And when she didn't know who I was, I thought this is something strange is happening, and she's been going downhill ever since. I think, I understand she's back at home with a caretaker. I'm pretty sure she's still living.

EL: Did you have kids when you moved here?

DB: Say that again.

EL: By the time you moved here did you have children?

DB: I had two children. David was born while Joe was in service, and Ruth was born, well I was afraid I wasn't going to get pregnant, he was going to be sent overseas so I hurried up. They're thirteen months apart. And Ruth was born, and he was still in the service. And to get a name we used to write each other names, and then we would cross them off, write a name and cross it off. Yes, the third one was born while I was in Sharon.

EL: Okay. So you came here with two children.

DB: I came with two children.

EL: Okay.

DB: But I went back to Cleveland to have my third child.

EL: Just because of the hospital?

DB: No, I didn't, I take that back, no I was in Sharon.

EL: In 1948, when you guys moved here, the synagogue was transitioning to Reform, right? It started out Orthodox Conservative....

DB: 1950. I'm afraid I don't have a picture, of Dave Ecker digging up the earth for the cornerstone.

EL: Of the new building.

DB: Of the new building, yes. And the land was given to us by one of the Rosenblooms, I don't know which one, but he did give the property to them, that we recently sold.

EL: Yeah. But was it changing at the time, the congregation?

DB: Oh by that time it was already, 1948, did Meyer Abramowitz come in 1948?

EL: He was later.

DB: About the same time it was beginning to change and I don't remember the rabbi, I think Syme.

EL: Rabbi Syme.

DB: Yeah, I think he was before Meyer Abramowitz. When he came they became very close friends, they were very nice people and he stayed here eight years and during that time he saw that everybody took their yarmulke off, which I think Joe was a put up job to take his yarmulke off. And they've gone back to it, now you can do what you want, you don't have to wear them but they do wear a lot of yarmulkes.

EL: And they changed to the Union Prayer Book too, right?

DB: They did, indeed. And that changed now, I can't even keep up with them. The book changes every year, they just bought a new book I think it just came out over the High Holidays. I'm pretty sure. As long as the rabbi tells me what page I'm on it's okay, but they jump around a lot with this book.

EL: Why did the congregation change? It started out Orthodox then became Conservative and then became Reform.

DB: I'm not really sure about that. My father-in-law was a non-believer so he didn't want to have any religion. And his father was still living. I don't know, I think he was Orthodox. We used to have, we used to sit in one room, they had fast service in the other room and then we went to eat. But he was really not, and my mother-in-law being in invalid, she really didn't get too involved. I can't exactly tell you how it changed, except I think the Reform movement was just becoming more popular at that time.

EL: And the Farrell congregation was always Orthodox.

DB: Always a separate congregation.

EL: What was the relationship between the two congregations?

DB: They were good friends. They did their thing, and we did ours until such a time as they couldn't afford to be a congregation. And I thought we came together very peacefully and maybe at that time we sort of changed a few things so that they were happy and we were happy. I thought it worked out very well actually.

EL: Do you remember a kosher butcher in town?

DB: I don't think there was a butcher. We had a fish shop I know. I think we had to go to Cleveland for kosher meat. I'm not sure, I didn't keep kosher, but I don't ever remember a kosher butcher. I do remember the fish market.

EL: What were some of the Jewish businesses at that time?

DB: I didn't hear you.

EL: What were some of the Jewish businesses at that time?

DB: Businesses?

EL: Yeah.

DB: I mean I thought the business was steel, as far as I knew it, Sharon was a steel town. And when steel of course went out, then we didn't have much of an industry actually. There was, you know you talk about a fish market, there was a fish market, there was, Reyer's came in and opened a great big shoe store. And we had ready-to-wear, we had men's things, but as far as an industry was concerned, I don't think there was an industry.

EL: But what I mean is, that the people who are in the congregation, were they mostly professionals or were they mostly business owners?

DB: Mostly business.

EL: And do you remember any...

DB: We had a few, well we had a few dentists and physicians, but I would say mostly they were in business.

EL: Yeah.

DB: With a few exceptions.

EL: Yeah. What were some of the businesses?

DB: Well, the famous one of course is Reyer's. They used to come from Cleveland and Pittsburgh to shop, they still come. Except if Harry were living, he'd probably turn over in his grave, but they boys are running a different kind of business. I think you have to today, they couldn't survive otherwise. But it's a big, big, big shoe store. And then we had, Luries, of course, had a men's clothing store, a very nice one. And the big food chain was Golden Dawn.

EL: That was the Rosenblooms, right?

DB: That's the Rosenblooms. And our good friends, the Epsteins, Lou didn't put them out of business, they sold the business and of course there was a lot of hard feelings over that, of course. But he made a very good move I think, he was smart and did what had to be done at the time. And we have, I think there's still one Golden Dawn still in business, I don't know, but they're not in business of course, but they were the big food chain. And I guess then there were little businesses. People with little things, there were other shoe stores, but not as big as Reyer's. And there were, what's her name, Florence Alpert's [?] husband, I'm having trouble remembering his name, they had a ladies' ready-to-wear. A very nice ladies' store. I can't remember his name. But other than that I think mostly there were individual businesses of one kind or another that disappeared.

EL: How involved were you with the congregation? How involved were you with the congregation?

DB: How was I what?

EL: How involved were you? Were you at the temple every day?

DB: Oh I didn't go every day, no. That's my niece who goes every day. I didn't want to go every day.

EL: But you were very involved.

DB: I was the first woman president of our congregation.

EL: Right.

DB: And I didn't need to be there every day, of course not. We had all the organizations, we had Hadassah, we had Sisterhood, and we functioned. And while I was president our big thing of course was music. So I, we had some wonderful musical programs with a man by the name of Edgar Groves. And he was in charge of music for the [unclear] schools. And we put on productions that were fantastic, for which we never charged, and we filled up the auditorium with them. It was really super. He, we still talk about it sometimes. But we were a functioning organization. We didn't have to be there every day. I don't know why, there is something going on, I never saw so much stuff going on all the time. If you did that you wouldn't do anything else.

EL: Yeah.

DB: And I don't want it to be that I don't do something else.

EL: Are you a musician?

DB: No, I'm not a musician, but I love music. And it was what we, my husband liked music. And we had season tickets, many years, we finally had the best seats in the house at the Cleveland Symphony, which I still think is the best, with all due respect to

Pittsburgh. But I did change to Pittsburgh because we had a ride and we rode with friends and it was fine, and we ended up with the best seats there too! Upstairs, the best seats. And, but no, I'm not a musician.

EL: Was it, you were the first woman to be president of the congregation, was it a big deal at the time?

DB: Sometimes I think it's hard getting a president, if you want to know the truth. I can't honestly tell you why I was elected except that I was, and I think it was kind of a shocker for them to have a woman president. But, and there were others after me of course, there were others who came after me. But I was the first one, and it got harder and harder to get men. Men were busy with their businesses, and they lost interest, mostly I think they lost interest and they just didn't come, and left it to the women to take care of it.

EL: Huh.

DB: And I thought they did a pretty good job. We had a wonderful Sisterhood, and they did fantastic catering, and I don't think that exists so much anymore. They do it at Rodef Shalom. But that woman who was in charge of it, which I can't think of her name, just died not so many years ago, maybe a year or so ago, and she was like the Rock of Gibraltar. Her food was fantastically good. I don't know what they do anymore. They use the caterer a lot.

EL: Was it hard to keep rabbis?

DB: Not really. I remember we interviewed a lot of rabbis, were they all good choices? Probably not. But it got harder to get men rabbis. Did we have the first female rabbi in Sharon? I'm vague about that. I can't even think of her name, but I just think it got harder and harder. And I think, I don't know anything about the rabbinate, but I think it's harder and harder. I know a bunch of them that go into it and don't really want to stay, they'd rather do something like teaching or leading of a course or being in a college atmosphere rather than leading a congregation. I don't know how hard it is to get a rabbi.

EL: I was just curious if as a small town it was hard to attract rabbis?

DB: Not while I was there, we didn't have much trouble. Meyer Abramowitz probably was the best rabbi we have had. And he was here eight years, I think that's a long time for a rabbi.

EL: Yeah.

DB: And I don't know how long they, and maybe in a big congregation they stay, but I don't know of anybody that stays years and years and years. Maybe they do. What's the rabbi's name at the Reform congregation in Pittsburgh?

EL: The current one?

DB: Mhm.

EL: Rabbi Bisno?

DB: No, he hasn't been there so long, has he?

EL: No. Maybe about ten years.

DB: Has it been that long? I'm not really up, I don't know, but I don't think it was hard to keep a rabbi then.

EL: When did the membership start to decline?

DB: We all got older. I think really, and basically I think it was when we all got older. All of a sudden you looked around and everybody, even today, I look, we have nothing but old people who belong to our congregation. They were too old to have children, and their children didn't want to stay here. We have very few children that come back to Sharon to stay.

EL: How come?

DB: Staying in Sharon? Would you want to be staying in Sharon? There wasn't anything here for them. They went away to school, and they got educated and they didn't want to come back. What were they going to do? I have one who's a publisher, I have one who taught in the university, they didn't want, not here. I can't imagine that they would come back. They never, in fact, when David, my oldest one, when he went away to school I think he was the first one, they never came back. They went away, and that was it.

EL: Was it the same way with a lot of people's children?

DB: The only one I'm thinking, I think sometimes Louis Epstein, of Golden Dawn. When he came back he stayed. Not too many I can think of that really came back and stayed. Reyer's, those boys grew up here and I guess stayed. I don't think so, it's not like a big city where they go and they can go do something else. There's not a lot to do here. You go into business and if you don't go into business, what do you do? I don't know. We do have a byproduct of Penn State here. It's local, and I suppose you can get some kind of an education, it's not the greatest, but their teachers I'm afraid mostly come from around here. It doesn't mean that they're bad, it just means that they're, I don't know anything about them.

EL: Were your children raised differently than you were raised?

DB: Were they raised what?

EL: Differently than the way you were raised?

DB: I had a very nervous mother, I hope I was different. I really, I'm afraid to do anything, I can't ride a bicycle and I don't swim and I don't do a lot of things because my mother scared me to death. No, I tried not to, they all do whatever, of course my oldest child is seventy-one years old, and guess what he's doing? He's lifting weights! He says, "Mother, I'm the only one in my age group!" He weighs one hundred and thirty-five pounds, and if he gains another pound he goes in different age group and then I have a competitor, a hundred and thirty-five pounds. And he went to California, he didn't win, of course, he says, "I won't win, I have competition." The next one is going to be in Savannah, Georgia, I said, "David, you're too old to be doing that." It's okay, he like to work, and he exercises a lot, he does like to exercise. Ruth doesn't want to do any of that I don't think, and Susie does, she does a lot. She has a private trainer, and she goes to exercise class, and she does exercise a lot. But I don't think I have any athletes. And I have nobody, thank God, that wanted to play football. So I didn't have any of that.

EL: How observant were, was the household?

DB: David?

EL: How observant was...

DB: How observant are my kids? Well David isn't observant, he's not married to a Jewish girl, but he knows he's Jewish and he knows the holidays, he's very, you know, he knows [unclear], but they don't do anything. She was a, I don't know what she is, I was about to say she was a Mormon. There's no religion really in their house except he knows who he is, he does know who he is. And I think if he found a Jewish girl he would have married her, but he didn't find a Jewish girl, I can't help it. But Ruth, they belong to a congregation. They move a lot and finally they ended up in Charleston, South Carolina, where she said it was eighty yesterday.

EL: Wow. When they were kids were they very involved in AZA and BBG?

DB: Not, in youth group, but not in, not in AZA so much.

EL: BBYO?

DB: Even then I don't think we had so much BBYO, it was youth group, what was the Jewish group?

EL: NFTY

DB: NFTY, yeah. They were NFTY people and they went to Camp Harlam and ended up as counsellors.

EL: Where is that?

DB: That's in, is there such a place as Kunkletown, Pennsylvania?

EL: Maybe.

DB: It's about ninety miles from New York City.

EL: Okay.

DB: I can't think, Stroudsburg.

EL: Okay.

DB: In that area. They, Ruth became, and, of course, they made fast friends. And I can't think of Friedman, what's his first name, a rabbi in Boston. What's his first name? His last name is Friedman, and still is a rabbi I think. Anyhow, he's a very good friend of Ruth's, Irene Friedman, they're good friends. They made fast friends. David didn't camp or any of that.

EL: Yeah.

DB: But Ruth and Suzie went, they liked it, it was fun. I didn't make them go, they went because they wanted to. And I gather they're still filling the camp up.

EL: Huh.

DB: Which is maybe unusual, I'm not so sure, I don't know what kids do in the summer anymore except cause trouble.

EL: When you first moved to Sharon how did the Jews and the gentiles get along?

DB: We always got along.

EL: Yeah.

DB: Always got along. In fact, I remember Joe used to say the minister of some church lived across the street from them and they were always good friends. I think they got along well. If you talk about religion, then maybe you're getting into something else, but they know we're around. I don't know how much they really care. We don't bother each other.

EL: Were there a lot of Jewish leaders in civic organizations in Sharon?

DB: I think mixed up like in any other religion, I think. I don't think it was based on religion. I think, like my husband belonged to Rotary, he liked where he went to Rotary and I don't think they talked about religion very much. I don't think it was a problem. I

don't think it was a problem, actually I wasn't aware of it being a problem. Do you have a problem in Pittsburgh?

EL: Between Jews and gentiles?

DB: Mhm.

EL: Today?

DB: Mhm.

EL: Not that I know of.

DB: No, I don't think there was any that I know of particularly. I didn't say they liked us, I just say we were around and we did our thing. Maybe they were, sometimes I think the Orthodox were more prominent. Well I shouldn't say that because I actually think Orthodoxy is coming back again, so I'm not so sure. But we just did our own thing, I don't think anybody bothered us that I'm aware of.

EL: Was it hard when the merger happened?

DB: No, it was a very peaceful merger. It was a good merger. And they were glad to come and join us, and we tried to make it comfortable for them. No, I just think it was a very peaceful joining, and of course it ended up that maybe they had as much power as we did.

EL: Sometimes it's not peaceful. What do you think made it peaceful?

DB: We're nice people. I think we just were, we were ready, and they were ready. They were ready to do something; they had to do something. And they, we were obviously the best thing to be done. And we were, in our services we made room for them also I think do whatever they wanted to do.

EL: They had some autonomy.

DB: Yeah. And I thought we were, I thought it was very peaceful.

EL: I heard that they had a service downstairs and then there was another service upstairs.

DB: Well during the High Holidays they were separate. We got somebody in for them to lead their services, yes we did. And as far as I know we did that to the end. Until we couldn't afford to hire anybody.

EL: Yeah.

DB: But yes, we did get somebody in for them. And they ran their own service.

EL: When did it become clear that the synagogue was gonna have to close?

DB: For too many years. Oh, it was obvious we couldn't keep on going, we couldn't keep doing what we were doing. There just wasn't any money. If you ask people to pay dues, which we do, they didn't have the money. They were older people, they had a little money to live on and that was it and they weren't going to give it to the temple. I think it was obvious that financially they couldn't manage it.

EL: Yeah. Was it sad?

DB: I felt sad. This was my home, and this is where I went to religious services, and I really find it very convenient and I did like it. I think that everybody pretty likes the move. They're very happy with the move.

EL: Yeah.

DB: And the ones that are really interested do go. And they do go on Friday nights. And I think they get, they have a little chapel there, and I think they get, you know for that kind of a congregation, as many people as they can hope for. If you get forty people to come a Friday night, I think that's pretty good.

EL: Yeah.

DB: And so I think they do, I think most people are happy with the move. And they love the rabbi, I'm telling you they love this rabbi. I don't know if know the rabbi, he's a very nice guy. And sort of meets all of them, he's very good at his services, good, and I think they're happy with the move. It was a good move for them.

EL: Alright, well thank you so much for your time.

DB: It was a pleasure to come, I hope I was able to be helpful to you.

EL: Very much so!

DB: It was nice to meet you.

EL: Same.

DB: And now that I think about it, I don't remember being at Beverly's, isn't that funny.

END OF INTERVIEW