

Transcript of Interview with Marlene and Louis Epstein
Small Town Jewish History Project
Call Number: 2015.0183

Rauh Jewish Archives
Library and Archives Division
Senator John Heinz History Center
Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania
1212 Smallman Street
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15222

Name of Interviewer: Eric Lidji
Date of Interview: 07-15-2015
Place of Interview:
Length of Interview:
Number of Tapes: 1 audio file
Name of Transcriber: Leah Geibel
Date of Transcription: 10-25-2015

Pre-interview Notes:

Transcribers Notes:

Incomplete sentences are marked ...

Transcription:

Eric Lidji: Today is July 15, 2015. This is the Small Towns Project. I'm Eric Lidji and I'm speaking to Marlene and Louis Epstein and we are in their home in Sharon, Pennsylvania. So I'm going to start with you, Marlene, if you would tell me how your family got to Sharon.

Marlene Epstein: I don't know that I really know how that happened. My mother was born in Austria-Hungary.

EL: Okay.

ME: And she lived in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. And she came to Sharon on a visit and met my father, who was born and raised in Sharon. But I think they family came originally from Lithuania. And how long they were in Sharon before my father married my mother, I don't know.

EL: What did your father do?

ME: My father was a men's clothier, he had a clothing store that he inherited from his father, which was passed on to my brother. So three generations owned the men's clothing store called Sam Lorre and Sons.

EL: Where was it?

ME: It was in downtown Sharon. My grandfather was Sam, my father was George, and my brother was Sam, so it became Sam Lorre and Sons again.

EL: Do you remember the store?

ME: Yes, very well. I used to work there. On vacations I would straighten out the tie racks and I could sell ties because I knew how to fold a tie.

EL: What did the store look like?

ME: The store was a substantial store. It had Hickey Friedman and...

Louis Epstein: Hickey Freeman.

ME: Freeman, and what were some of the other brands that they had, dear?

LE: Hart Schaffner and Marks.

ME: And they had a full line of men's clothing, and we were the premier, it was the premier store in downtown Sharon.

EL: So it was a higher end store.

ME: Higher end store, correct.

EL: Where did he get his supply from, do you know? Remember?

ME: I think in those days, salesmen came around representing the various brands and he would pick from swatches. And that was a funny story because when we were first married, Louis picked a sport coat from a swatch and the sport coat came in, it was only good for the racetrack because it was so loud, but in a little swatch it didn't look loud!

EL: What was your mother like?

ME: My mother was very genteel, very ladylike, very pretty. Very sensitive. And I don't know what else you would like to know about her.

LE: A mother's a mother.

ME: A mother is a mother is right.

EL: What were her hobbies or preoccupations when she wasn't doing household things?

ME: Well, she, family came first. And then she was a volunteer with some of the volunteer organizations in town. Sisterhood in particular, I think, because our temple was vibrant in those days. And she liked to knit and crochet, and she like to read, she belonged to a couple of book clubs. And she was the original golf widow, however. My father was an avid golfer.

EL: Where would people golf here?

ME: We had a Tam O'Shanter golf course, which was the premier course in town. It was probably the only course at that time.

EL: It's still around isn't it?

ME: It's still here.

LE: Yeah, you probably passed it coming in on Route 18.

EL: When I went to the Nathans, I passed it.

ME: Right.

LE: On Route 18.

ME: Right, right. And Jack Kerns, who owned the golf course, was a friend of my father's, and my father golfed almost every night. He'd go out early and then come back early and then my mother and dad would go out with a gang of friends to a restaurant here called The Eagle's Grille in Farrell and that's how they'd spend their evenings. It was a close-knit group of about maybe six or seven couple, wouldn't you say, dear?

LE: Mhm.

ME: And they did things together, and their life was good.

EL: What are your early memories of Sharon?

ME: Well, it was, it is, a small town. Still it was even smaller in those days, but we had, we were not far from Pittsburgh and not far from Cleveland, so I never felt that I was limited by living in a small town. We travelled a little bit; in the summers we went to Atlantic City, and we went back to Wilkes-Barre on occasion to visit my grandparents, who eventually moved here. And life was good, I never felt like I missed anything because I lived in Sharon. We had lots of friends and lots of activities.

EL: Did you feel like a minority?

ME: No, I didn't feel like a minority, I didn't think prejudice reigned in my life. We had a school group of non-Jews with whom I walked to school with every day. And we were all close friends, and I didn't feel prejudice at that point.

EL: Hmm. That's interesting. Did the Jews live, Sharon seems like it's pretty small, did the Jews live in a part of town or...

ME: I would say the Jews lived in a section of town on the East Hill, not too far from the temple.

LE: But before that, you're not going back far enough.

ME: Well when I, you have to talk, because when I was, when I was born the Jews that lived downtown where you're going to say they lived, I lived up on...

LE: Well, you finish.

ME: Okay. But are you talking about where they early Jews lived, or where I lived?

EL: When you grew up where did you live?

ME: When I grew up, I lived on Highland Road. That was our only home, and it was in a fairly affluent neighborhood. We had a lot of non-Jewish neighbors, but we were friendly with the neighbors.

EL: Was your family religious?

ME: I wouldn't say they were religious. I'm more religious today than I was then.

EL: What was the relationship to Judaism?

ME: Oh, they always felt Jewish. And my dad was on the board of the temple, but they weren't as active as Louis's family was, and I became more active once we were married.

EL: Okay. So let's jump over to you real quick.

LE: Okay.

EL: So how did your family get to Sharon?

LE: Well my mother's family probably came here first. And they were sent over by a relative from Lithuania and entered the country through Philadelphia and somehow had a friend who sent them to Sharon. My grandfather on my mother's side, my mother's father, started out peddling groceries from a horse and wagon to the various farmers around Mercer County, which is where we are. My father met, met them through some cousins and he came, his family was from Sheffield, Pennsylvania, which is up in the north woods near Erie, between here and Erie. His father had a clothing store, also from Lithuania, they have the same roots. And my dad came here and married my mother and joined the family business, which was the wholesale grocery business. My mother's family business.

EL: What was the name of the business?

LE: It was originally called Nathan Rosenbloom and Company; my mother's maiden name was Rosenbloom, and then later was changed to Golden Dawn Foods.

EL: And Nathan is the Nathans.

LE: That was my mother's father, no.

ME: No, no.

LE: The Nathan Rosenbloom was, his first name was Nathan Rosenbloom.

EL: Okay. So Nathan Rosenbloom was your...

LE: Maternal grandfather.

EL: Maternal grandfather. And, and your father's name was?

LE: Samuel Epstein.

EL: And your mother? Your mother's name was?

ME: Bess Rosenbloom.

LE: Bess, Bess Rosenbloom.

ME: Epstein.

EL: Now you were gonna tell me how, where the Jews lived originally.

LE: Okay, the Jews originally lived in the downtown area in the section around Shenango Avenue and Vine Street. And that's where one of the original shuls, the temple was called a shul then, in that same area, which we used to call the flats. But it was near the downtown Sharon area.

EL: So the congregation shifted from Orthodoxy to Reform over some period of time.

LE: Right.

EL: That's very interesting.

LE: And my dad was actually one of the ringleaders, if not the ringleader, in converting the congregation from Orthodoxy to Reform.

EL: That's really interesting. Do you have any idea what motivated that?

LE: Well, I think a realization on his and some other leaders' parts that the young people were not going to embrace the kind of Judaism that was going on then. That it had to happen or they would lose, lose the young people.

ME: Can I interject on thing?

EL: Yeah.

ME: His father's mother, Louis's grandmother, was ultra-Orthodox. She had a Shabbos goy who shut of the lights on the Sabbath, she didn't ride the elevator and it was unusual that Louis's father, coming from that background, was able to make this transition. But he realized the implications and she, she used to call him the Shabbos goy, but only kiddingly.

LE: But she said lovingly, "My son, the treif." Lovingly.

EL: Right.

ME: The treif is the way she said it, you're right.

EL: What are your memories of Sharon from your childhood?

LE: Well, I had pleasant memories. I grew up in the flats area downtown and walked to school every day and had good memories. There were instances of anti-Semitism, which you know will happen among all kids and the like, but it wasn't anything serious and we were never really persecuted.

EL: Anything noteworthy?

LE: I can't think of anything and I have good memories of the relationship with the other kids in our childhood.

EL: What did most of the Jews do in Sharon?

LE: Most of them were in the retail business.

EL: And this was on the main street? What was the main street?

LE: State Street.

EL: State Street. Do you remember the businesses?

LE: Well Sam Lorre and Sons was one of them. Our company, Nathan Rosenbloom and Company, there were a few.

ME: The Cohen's store.

LE: One family that was in the scrap business, the Goldbergs, they had a fairly large business.

ME: The Cohen's had a ladies' ready-to-wear store.

LE: Yeah. That was a family by the name of Ben Jaffe. What else? Gerson's Jewelry, some were in the jewelry, typical businesses that Jews were in.

ME: Szabo's Jewelers.

LE: That was a jeweler. Clothing, jewelry, scrap iron.

ME: Silverman's Shoe Store, Silverman's Shoe Store.

LE: Shoes, yeah.

ME: There were quite a few Jewish merchants.

EL: Okay. So how did the two of you meet?

LE: We lived across the street.

EL: So you knew each other as kids.

ME: No.

LE: Not really because there's a five year difference in age.

ME: I'm telling this story, we're going to have a sixty-fifth anniversary, and I'm going to use this story. My mother, I owe a debt of gratitude because she knew Louis was home from college visiting, but she also knew that she was invited over to meet a mutual friend, so as I said she knew Louis was home from college too. So she took me under the pretense of meeting the mutual friend, hoping Louis would notice me, and fortunately he did.

LE: And it took!

ME: And we've been married sixty-five years now.

EL: That's a very strategic, very strategic meeting.

LE: Yes.

ME: Very.

EL: So, so you were coming back from college, is what she said, so was there an expectation of you to go to college. I mean, did your parents go to college?

LE: Yes, my dad did. My dad graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, with Towne Scientific School, he was a chemist and started his career through the Bureau of Standards in Washington. And then after meeting my mother he moved here to marry her and went into her family business.

EL: And where did you go to school?

LE: I went to school at the University of Rochester in upstate New York.

EL: And what did you study?

LE: So I studied science and mathematics. I started out originally probably as a premed and became disenchanted or decided not to go into medicine. Because I liked the mathematics and the hard sciences more so than the biological sciences. I found that out.

EL: Did you intend to come back to Sharon?

LE: I think so.

EL: Was that unusual for your generation?

LE: No, it wasn't. It was not unusual to go into the family business.

ME: He has a brother who is a doctor and he would never have thought of coming back to Sharon.

EL: Because?

ME: It just was a small town, it wasn't what he wanted. He moved to California.

EL: Yeah. And where did you go to school?

ME: University of Michigan.

EL: Okay. And the same question, did you intend to come back?

ME: Yes. I met Louis when I was young.

EL: Oh, okay. What was the congregational life like when you guys were growing up?

LE: Well, the year we were married, we were married in 1950, our congregation was probably at its peak then. We had many more members, how many members did we have? Three hundred or so?

ME: That's what, three hundred was what was stuck in my mind.

LE: Yeah I think we had three hundred members, and it was a vibrant, active congregation. Since then, of course, it's shrunk tremendously, and that's the reason that we joined the Rodef Shalom congregation in Youngstown.

EL: When you say vibrant, I mean, what did it look like on an average Saturday or an average High Holiday?

LE: Well our big service was Friday night.

ME: Friday night.

LE: But we always maintained a Saturday morning...

ME: Minyan.

LE: Minyan that was totally Orthodox. So we hedged and had both groups and they lived happily together.

ME: What Louis's father thought in terms of making this a Reform congregation, he met with, was it Stephen Wise? In New York.

LE: Yes.

ME: And he said well we have these congregants who couldn't possibly make the transition, we're small, we don't want to build another shul. So Stephen Wise advised us to have an Orthodox chapel in our temple. So the Orthodox were satisfied they were able to pray, and we were able to maintain our Reform congregation, and we had a lot of outstanding rabbis over the years.

LE: Everybody was happy. It worked out.

EL: And the rabbis served both contingencies?

ME: No, no.

LE: No, the Orthodox didn't need a rabbi really.

ME: They did their own thing.

EL: Yeah. What about for, you know if there were...

ME: They brought in a rabbi for the holidays.

LE: They brought in a cantor for the High Holidays.

EL: And if they had weddings or funerals or anything like that?

ME: I assume they brought in rabbis then, too, I'm not sure though.

LE: I don't, I don't think so.

EL: So when the, when Sharon and Farrell merged, did the Farrell contingency just sort of connect with the Orthodox group?

LE: Exactly right.

ME: That's, that made it possible for Farrell to come here.

LE: Exactly right.

ME: Otherwise it would have been a very difficult thing, but they went to Orthodox minyan, they swelled the numbers and it worked out fine.

EL: It's a very interesting arrangement. Did it feel that way at the time?

ME: We didn't realize how unique it was. But it was a very good idea because there would have been a revolt and another shul built and it just wouldn't have suited us.

LE: Yeah, it worked out very well.

EL: What was the Jewish social life like, was there AZA, BBYO, things like that?

ME: Yes, yes.

EL: I'm very curious if you could talk a little bit more about that, because it seems like that's a very important part of small town Jewish life in this region.

LE: Yeah, well there really weren't enough Jews to have a vibrant Jewish life and that, of course, precipitated our joining with Youngstown. And as a kid I dated a lot of girls from Youngstown because there wasn't a critical mass of girls to date here and that was true of all the community life in general.

ME: And the BBYO and the AZA were regional rather than just local.

LE: Exactly.

ME: So we met, we met other young people.

LE: We either met kids from Pittsburgh or joined with Youngstown.

EL: And where all, what all did you do in these events?

ME: Well they had activities and we participated in them somewhat, it wasn't our whole lifestyle.

LE: Dances and social things, yeah.

EL: Yeah. So you guys got married in 1950.

LE: Mhm.

ME: Mhm.

EL: And how many kids did you have?

LE: Three.

ME: We had three children, we lost a daughter.

EL: Okay.

ME: She was married to a hematologist oncologist, and she got a rare kind of cancer, it was ironic.

EL: Huh.

ME: She went through a bone marrow transplant, she lived three years and then didn't make it. But she left two children, and we see them, and the family will all be together at our anniversary party.

EL: Was your children's childhood very different from yours?

ME: Well our kids all...

LE: I think it probably was.

ME: They all went away to private schools.

EL: Had the schools changed by then or it was just a...

ME: The schools, in our opinion, weren't, weren't as professional and adequate as we had wanted them to be, and we wanted their education to be a better one.

EL: Yeah.

ME: So our son, really, had the idea of going away to school. And then when we saw what he accomplished, we encouraged our daughters to go too. He had a more fulfilling experience than they did. But they all went away to private school.

EL: That's interesting. And so is the business still in existence?

LE: No, we sold the business, oh about twenty years ago, to a company in Buffalo, it was a division of Loblaws from Canada, but it's since gone under. So the business is not around anymore.

EL: When did the community start to shrink?

LE: Well, I'd say the year we were married, 1950, the community may have been at maximum.

ME: That's when they built the temple though, dear, in 1950, is when the temple was built.

LE: But at that point though, from then on it, it really began to shrink, in my mind.

EL: What were the causes?

ME: Young people weren't coming back to our community.

LE: Yeah, that's exactly right. When the young people went to college and finished and went into their careers, they didn't come back to Sharon.

EL: Was there a reason for that?

ME: There just wasn't...

LE: Economic.

ME: And it wasn't...

LE: Economic opportunity.

ME: And it wasn't enough to offer socially either.

EL: Was it that Sharon was declining or that there were just better opportunities?

ME: Better opportunities.

EL: Yeah.

LE: And Sharon was beginning to decline, also.

ME: And Sharon was probably declining.

EL: What, industrially?

LE: Mhm. The steel business, those are all gone now. We used to have three, two mills here, Sharon Steel Corporation was here.

ME: Westinghouse.

LE: Westinghouse had a big transformer plant that employed six thousand people. That's all gone now.

EL: Yeah.

LE: So there was an economic decline.

EL: When did it, when did the idea or discussions of merging with Youngstown begin?

ME: I can't remember how long we've been merged now, it's been a year or two?

EL: Something like that.

ME: And it was interesting, I just happened to be socializing with Rabbi Muller, and I said, "Rabbi, our congregation is shrinking, your congregation is shrinking, we ought to think about merging." And he said, "Marlene, that's a good idea, we'll have to work on that." And then the next thing I knew we started to have joint outdoor services at various homes here in Sharon and some in Youngstown. And our Sharon people said that Youngstown people will never come to Sharon, and they showed up in larger numbers than we did going to Youngstown. There was always this little bit of a bias that Youngstown looked down at the Sharon community and that the merger wouldn't work. But, as they got to know some of the Youngstown congregants, things became easier and then when we started to really shrink and we had financial problems, the merger was easy because we already knew some of the Youngstown people and people were comfortable. They knew Rabbi Muller and he's very charismatic, and so the merger was easy just because we laid the groundworks for it, not knowing we were laying the groundwork.

EL: Yeah. It seems like there's a lot of fortuitous things in the history of the community.

LE: Mhm.

ME: And, excuse me, and then Rabbi Muller did a very smart thing. When we talked about merging and the merger was voted on, he met with small groups of people.

LE: Parlor meetings.

ME: Parlor meetings. And we sort of filled him in on who's who and what's what, and so he got to know the people so when we had the first joint service, it was easy, we felt very much at home.

EL: That's very smart. Were there any notable rabbis here in Sharon that you remember?

LE: Yeah, yeah, the rabbi that married us, and he was in pulpit in 1950, it was Meyer Abramowitz. And he was really a nice guy, intelligent, and a people person.

ME: And he got Reform Judaism. He was the first Reform rabbi that we had.

LE: He helped engineer the conversion from Conservative or Orthodox Judaism to Reform.

ME: And then we had another rabbi who was very charismatic, Martin Syme

EL: He's well known isn't he?

LE: M. Robert Syme. Yes he, he's...

ME: His son was, was also a rabbi.

LE: He had a large pulpit in Detroit after he left.

ME: After he left, yeah.

LE: First in Butler, then he went to Detroit. Mhm.

ME: And I would say of all the rabbis we've had, Rabbi Muller is far superior to any of them.

EL: Huh.

ME: He's just very, very creative, and every week, whether there are three people there or twenty-five people there, or fifty people there...

LE: He has an original sermon.

ME: He has an original sermon. And he works on it and you know, he doesn't think, well I'm not gonna have a crowd tonight so I don't have to worry, he worries every week.

EL: Well are there any other things you can think of that we should talk about?

ME: The Jewish community has always been close knit. All of us are like one big family and we share in the simchas and in the sad occasions. I would say that it's a warm, close-knit community, wouldn't you dear?

LE: Yeah. And I think that's somewhat typical.

ME: Of small towns? I guess, I don't know.

LE: I think it is.

EL: Yeah. What do you think the future will be?

ME: Well now that we've merged we're more involved in Judaism than we've ever been, but unfortunately...

LE: But, in general, the future is we're losing population. We're still gonna be here, I'm talking Youngstown and Sharon, but the young people are not coming back there and there's a slow process of attrition, in my mind.

EL: Do you think that there's some consequence to that aside from just a community that was there that's no longer there, is there some larger consequence to a small community disappearing?

LE: Well it's not good, it's an unhappy thing. And the only answer to it is to join into larger groups. First we joined with Youngstown, and if that there's more attrition there then we'll join more with Pittsburgh or Cleveland Jewish life.

EL: So those sorts of hypothetical conversations have already been thought about?

LE: No.

ME: No, not really.

LE: No.

EL: Okay.

LE: And hopefully they won't have to be.

EL: Right.

ME: And when we sell our community, we had somebody from Pittsburgh move here recently, and they called and they said can we survive in a small town like Sharon? Well, what's life like? And we said we don't know any better I guess, but we love it here. And they moved here and they got along fine. They had a little bit of an adjustment because their kids had gone to parochial schools or day schools.

LE: A Jewish day school in Pittsburgh.

ME: And they didn't have that here, as a matter of fact they moved into Hermitage and there weren't any Jewish kids in one of the, their children's classes, so that was a big adjustment.

LE: And they encountered a little anti-Semitism from the other kids in school.

EL: Really?

LE: Which they weren't used to.

EL: Yeah.

ME: But they got over it, and the kids benefited in the end, they learned how to live with the community.

EL: Alright, well thank you both very much.

LE: Oh, you're welcome.

ME: Thank you.

LE: You've been a good interviewer.

ME: Yes, excellent.