

Transcript of Interview with Milton Radman
Small Town Jewish History Project
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Eric Lidji: Today is May 22, 2015. This is the Small Towns Project, and I am speaking to Mickey Radman in his home in Latrobe. So why don't you begin by telling me how you got to Latrobe.

Mickey Radman: I was born and raised in Uniontown. I went to West Virginia University. After I graduated, I went into the military service, spent four years in the military service.

EL: What year was that, years for that?

MR: I went in 1953, came out in '57. Went into business with my father and my brother, who were already in an established business in Uniontown, retail. A year later, in '58, we purchased a store that was bankrupt here in Latrobe.

EL: What was it called?

MR: The store's original name was Klein Brothers, and we bought it and changed it to Allied Clothing Store. And I ran the store here and my father and brother were in Uniontown, and we ran it as a small corporation.

EL: So the two businesses were affiliated.

MR: Yes. We broke the affiliation probably in 1960, and I think it was 1962 that I closed the Allied Clothing Store and opened up a store called the Oxford Shop. And ran that successfully until 1982 or '83 when we, when I sold the store, and at that time we also had a ladies store then in town called Mick's Chicks, named during, was dreamt up by my son. Where he came up with that I don't know. But we used to get calls into the store for people who wanted to order chicken to take out. I don't know if they were putting me on or what, but we first open Mick's Chicks in the Oxford Shop because we had a, it was a young man's store. We catered to the high school, college crowd. There's Saint Vincent College here. Of course, at that time there were no malls.

EL: Like banquet, events?

MR: Like Westmoreland, Greengate. There were no malls.

EL: Oh, malls.

MR: So Latrobe was a basic shopping area, we had something like eighty-five retail establishments in downtown Latrobe when I moved here in '58. All in all the business climate of Latrobe was very good. We found a large Jewish community here, Beth Israel Congregation. I don't know the exact number of families that were here, but I think there was a population of about close to a hundred Jewish people living here in Latrobe. I'm not talking families, I'm talking people.

EL: Before we get too much more into Latrobe, I want to go back to Uniontown for a second, because that's another town that we're interested in.

MR: Oh you know they just sold their building.

EL: No, I didn't. Tell me a little bit about growing up in Uniontown.

MR: What a great town to grow up in. It was, we had a huge Jewish community in Uniontown. There were two congregations there. There was Tree of Life, which was Conservative, to which my family belonged. Actually it started out as an Orthodox congregation, and then it moved slowly to Conservative. And then there was a Reform congregation, and I forget the name of it. There were a lot of Jewish kids in my age group, a few years older and a few years younger, we had a BBYO. We had an AZA. We even had our own Boy Scout troop, we had a Jewish Boy Scout troop.

EL: Do you remember the number? The lodge number, or the troop number?

MR: Troop number six.

EL: How did your family come to Uniontown?

MR: My father's brother, they're from Mezrich, don't ask me how to spell it, in Poland. My father's brother came here first. Now how he got to Uniontown, I don't know. I'm assuming that there were other people from that small town already here and that's how he came here, came to Uniontown. And he brought my father over, which was a brother, they had, let's see, in their family there were four boys and one girl, siblings. He brought my father over... there were five, there were five brothers and one sister. And I don't have the pictures, we have a lot of pictures from Europe, but I have given them to my nephew. He and his sister are doing a family tree, and I felt that they should have this as an extension.

EL: What did the family do once they came to Uniontown?

MR: The older brother was named Sam, Samuel, he opened a, he had a retail establishment. And he brought my father over, of course my father didn't speak English, and so he gave my father some umbrellas and said, "Go sell 'em."

EL: What was your father's name?

MR: My father's name was Morris.

EL: So Morris goes to sell umbrellas.

MR: Goes to sell umbrellas. And Morris became like a peddler in the... At that time the Uniontown region was full of little small mining towns all around them, mining town, coke ovens, it was a large coal region, coal and coke region and of course there was a lot of farms. And my father didn't particularly care for peddling, so I guess Sam helped Morris open up a

ladies' store in Uniontown. And that lasted a couple of years and then my father went bankrupt, but he liked the retail business and he opened up a man's store, a workingman's store, where he sold work boots and work shoes and work clothes to miners and farmers.

EL: What was it called?

MR: Morris's. A unique name.

EL: Do you remember the store?

MR: Oh yes. I worked there as a child. My first job was to break up shoeboxes. They would sell a pair of work shoes, and they would take the shoes out of the box, throw the box to the side and wrap the shoes in paper, and the guy would go, and my job was to take these boxes and break 'em down and put them in a large container and the container was picked up once a week by the sanitation department for disposal. So that was my first job.

EL: What did the store look like?

MR: How can I explain it? That's tough, that's tough to explain.

EL: Was it long and thin?

MR: It was, yeah, basically long, thin. Maybe twenty feet wide, twenty to thirty feet wide and probably fifty feet in length, or even longer. And it had a basement, that's where the work boots and work shoes and stuff. So my first job was to break shoes, and then I graduated to sweeping the floor and washing the windows, the show windows. And between going to school, going to grade school, high school, Hebrew school, and working in the store, my days were pretty well filled.

EL: Where did your father get his supplies, his inventory?

MR: He got some of his inventory from the old Fifth Avenue wholesalers in Pittsburgh. And, of course, directly from manufacturers also. But we used to go Sundays into Pittsburgh. That was a real trip.

EL: What do you remember of the Avenue?

MR: I remember Goldstein's. They had wonderful corned beef. We always had a corned beef sandwich at Goldstein's, knaidelach soup and a corned beef sandwich. And then there was a bakery on the other side of the street, and we'd get a couple loaves of rye bread. And there was also, I think it there was another delicatessen that my father used to buy salamis from, and corned beef, and we'd take the salami and corned beef back home. He'd buy the real long salami and it would hang in our basement for weeks until it turned white, and then it was time to eat it.

EL: So you would cure it in the basement.

MR: You had to age the salami first. And in Uniontown, surprisingly enough, we had two kosher butcher shops.

EL: Really?

MR: Really. As I said, the original Tree of Life was Orthodox. It was divided. They had a balcony for the women, the women didn't sit downstairs originally. But as it aged, it got a little more Conservative.

EL: Was your family very religious?

MR: We're Kohains, and my father, being in the retail business he had to work on Shabbos. There was no question that was the shopping day in Uniontown, was Saturdays. Saturday, if you didn't do any business on Saturday you were gone. So, I went to shul on Saturday morning when I was in grade school, high school, even though I worked in the store, I was in services on Saturday morning then after that I would go down to the store on Saturday mornings. Even in college. I went to WVU, which was what, about thirty miles away, forty miles away, I'd hitchhike home every weekend and work in the store. I didn't see too many football games.

EL: Were you bar mitzvahed?

MR: Yeah, oh yeah. Oh yeah, we were all bar mitzvahed. I was a little guy when I was bar mitzvahed. I had to stand on an orange crate to see over the pulpit. My, my dear rabbi, beloved parents and worthy friends, I'll never forget that phrase, that's how my bar mitzvah message started. I had my second bar mitzvah in California, was it this year? No, no it was last year. What's the matter with me? It was last year, and at my bar mitzvah I said, I opened my, I gave just a little five minute talk, and I said, "At my original bar mitzvah, when I first started to speak, my opening phrase was, 'My dear rabbi,' and I looked at the rabbi, I said, 'beloved parents', I said, 'Alav hashalom, they're not here, and worthy friends.'" I said, "That's how I started and that's how I want to start here, but I'll change the words 'my parents' to my friends, you are all my friends." You know it's a large congregation in California, where my daughter goes to, she belongs, and they have welcomed us graciously into their congregation and I had my second bar mitzvah out there. I digressed, where was I?

EL: We were talking about religious observance, did you keep kosher at home?

MR: Yes. Yes, my mother had the two sets of dishes and we kept kosher. Like I said, there was two kosher butcher shops, we didn't have to go to Pittsburgh to get kosher meat. The only thing my father ever brought back, he liked the Pittsburgh corned beef better than he liked the Uniontown corned beef, and he couldn't get the long salamis, they only had small salamis in Uniontown. But I remember they had pickled herring in the barrels, and hotdogs that came in the barrels, that was fun. And the herring, schmaltz herring and all the good smells, the butcher shops were, if you were to go into that butcher shop today you would turn around and walk back out, you wouldn't buy a thing, with the sawdust on the floor, and the butcher there with his apron covered with blood and the chickens hanging, you know, it was a typical old time butcher type shop. The other one was a little newer, a little cleaner with no sawdust on the floor. But the old

one, boy, we liked to go in there because every time we went in there he'd give us a pickle. They don't make pickles that like anymore.

EL: Did your mother work in the store?

MR: Oh yeah, everybody worked.

EL: What did your mother do in the store?

MR: Sold. Everybody sold. It was a one-on-one type of business. Every customer had a salesperson. You know people just didn't wander around and pick up stuff. And anybody who walked through that door, it's not like today, you walk into a store today, you're lucky to see a salesperson. No, in those days, and of course we carried on that tradition here in Latrobe, when you walked into the store, you were personally greeted and you were assisted unless you said, "No, I don't want any help, I was to look around first." And then we'd let you be for thirty seconds.

EL: Tell me about your parents, what were they like?

MR: They were good people. They both came from Poland. My father married my mother over in Poland in Mezrich, and then he came back and she followed him. They both became naturalized citizens. Both learned to speak English. My father went to school up to the eighth grade, over in Poland, and he learned to speak English as quickly as he could. Of course, my father could speak Yiddish, German, Polish, Russian, Slavish, that's five languages, plus the English language, so that he could talk to these people when they came into the store.

EL: Were there a lot of immigrants in Uniontown?

MR: I'm sorry?

EL: Were there a lot of immigrants in Uniontown?

MR: Oh yeah. That's who worked in the coal mines and the coke ovens. You gotta realize at that time there was a great influx of Europeans into this country, we're talking the thirties. I was born in '31 so in the twenties and the thirties were a great influx of people from Europe. And what brought them here, was that they could find work. There was no reason for man to be out of work because of the coal mines, the steel mills, the coke ovens. I'm sure you've read the histories of the steel mills in Pittsburgh.

EL: Right.

MR: It's very interesting, I've read it, too, and it's, how those people struggled, and the coal miners were no different and they struggled. John L. Lewis came in with the strikes. When then miners went on strikes, we went hungry.

EL: Because they didn't, they weren't buying any clothes?

MR: No, they wouldn't buy anything. And then the coal mine owners got smart, and they opened up their own stores, what'd they call them? They were called the union stores or something like that and the miners could go there and buy groceries and anything that they needed including clothes and shoes and boots and books. Anything that they needed, they could buy at this union company store.

EL: Was that competition?

MR: Oh yeah, absolutely. The union company store, because the miners could go there and they didn't have to have money. They'd just chits were paid, and then they got what was left over. So they didn't have to have money to buy them. Then they'd take the money that was leftover, and they'd come to Uniontown. And we had a street in Uniontown called Peters Street, which was a block from our store. And it was nothing but beer gardens and taverns. I wasn't allowed, as a kid, I wasn't allowed to walk on that street. Because, especially on Saturday, because it was just loaded with the miners and the farmers, just drinking. They'd go down there and they'd drink, beer was a nickel, you know a big stein of beer was a nickel. And my uncle, third brother came over to this country, and he came right before World War II. He got two other, three other brothers got out of Europe just before World War II. Jake, Jacob, came to Uniontown, and he started to work for my father. He came into the store. He was funny. He became Americanized very, very quickly. Very quickly. Because he was young. He was the youngest of the brothers. And he worked with my father, and he was funny. I don't know how much, you probably know some Yiddish, okay, a miner or a farmer would come in, and of course everybody was greeted when they walked in, but my uncle had a famous greeting for them, "Did you kahk today?" Do you know what I'm talking about? No. That's means did you go to the bathroom, did you...

EL: Okay, right.

MR: "Did you kahk today?" And the guy would look at him, "What did you say?" And he'd say, "It's hot today." That's how he greeted everybody that walked into the store, men that walked into the store, he was funny. He got drafted. He served in World War II in the field artillery. He fought in Europe. He wasn't in the Battle of Bastogne, but he was serving in the artillery when the Germans had that push, but he wasn't at Bastogne. And he'd tell us the story that they were, he was in artillery, that they had lowered their guns to try and point blank the German tanks before they took off, and he had some interesting stories to tell. He's gone now, well, they're all gone. Another brother, Israel, emigrated to Uruguay, and the... one, two, three, four, the fifth brother, what was his name? Pasha, P-A-S-H-A, I think it is, emigrated to Israel. And then my mother, my mother had a brother that emigrated to Argentina, and a sister that emigrated to, why she ended up in Siberia, I don't know. But the rest of the family never got out of Europe. My mother took my brother and I back to Poland. We spent an entire summer in --- in 1937.

EL: Why?

MR: To visit her parents and my father's parents. So we spent an entire summer there. That was an experience and a half.

EL: Do you remember it?

MR: Oh yeah.

EL: What do you remember?

MR: Well I remember my mother's father especially, because that's where we stayed. He was a tanner. He tanned hides, he had a tannery. And it was a large compound and it stunk. Oh boy, did it stink. A lot of hides were cow hides, a lot of the cow hides were tanned in urine, in horse urine or cow urine. But it would stink. And we would fish off of the back of the compound, there was a small stream and we would fish back there, my brother, myself and there was a, I guess it would be a niece, called Chaimela, and we used to play with Chaimela. And she used to chase us because we would tease her. And the famous tease was, "Chaimela tsabrochen de bitch" [Translation: Chaimela broke the whip."] And you know, there's things that stick in your memory, you never forget them. And that was, "Chaimela tsabrochen de bitch." And she would chase us all over the compound. It was a large compound where they'd, where they cured the hides. And they living quarters and the manufacturing quarters where they did the hides, in fact, we brought one back home with us, when we returned. When I returned to this country I had to learn to speak English all over again.

EL: From one summer?

MR: Yeah, one summer. Basically I had to learn to talk English again because all we spoke was either Polish or Yiddish.

EL: You were pretty young, but did you get a sense of what was happening over there?

MR: Yeah. Absolutely, absolutely you got a sense because we weren't allowed out of the compound.

EL: Huh.

MR: We were not allowed to go out of the compound unless we were in the company of an adult. And that was very infrequently. The only time we went out of the compound was to visit my father's parents. And my father's father was a brush maker, he made brushes. And I don't remember much about my father's father because I don't remember much about my mother's father. I really don't remember him or his wife, but I remember Chaimela, because she was my age, we ran around. And it was a great trip. We went over by boat and came back by boat.

EL: Did the Jews of Uniontown live in a certain part of the town?

MR: How can I put this... There were the well-to-do and the not well-to-do, and the not well-to-do lived on this side of town, and the well-to-do lived on that side of town. It was kind of silly because my girlfriend lived on this side of town.

EL: On the nice side of town.

MR: But everybody sort of got along together. They had to basically. The kids got along. We just had a tremendous group. We used to go into Pittsburgh for AZA conventions. We'd bring a big group of kids in, basketball tournaments, Irene Kaufmann Settlement, that's where we used to go. That's where we'd play basketball. That's where the AZA convention was held at that time.

EL: Did the Jews get along with the gentiles in Uniontown?

MR: Yeah basically, yeah. Was there anti-Semitism? Eh... Did the gentile kids chase the Jewish kids? Eh... You know, did we have fights? Eh... Did we have competitions? Oh boy, you bet. Especially we had, there was a church basketball league at the YMCA in Uniontown, and we had our own team. We had, the congregation had a basketball team. We weren't bad, we weren't bad. Played on Saturday nights there. And it was a tough league, I mean we played hard, everybody played hard. Yeah, I had a lot of, my high school years were good years. When I was little, when I was in first grade, my mother didn't cut my hair. I was a blonde. And I had long hair. My mother never cut my hair for six, for five years, I never had a haircut, so you can imagine my hair was quite long, and I was a true blonde, I was really light colored, curls. So I went to first grade when I was five years old and I got teased just mercilessly. And I came home crying, and my mother finally got my hair cut.

But there was one kid there that, was he anti-Semitic? Oh yeah, very much so. He was an Italian boy and he used to pick on me and he would pound on me until I finally found a friend that was bigger than him, who became my guardian angel, because I was a little kid. I mean I was little, I was scrawny. But he remained that way all of his life, even up until, even through the eighties when we were still having high school reunions. He came up to me one day, at one of the high school reunions, and he said, "It's a shame Hitler didn't kill you all." No, that's true, that's exactly what he said. And I was going to punch him in the nose, right then and there, I hauled back to hit him. And at that time I was a hundred and eighty-five pounds, I'm a little heavier now. I was a hundred and eighty-five pounds and I was in great shape, I was in great shape. And I hauled back to hit him, and a good friend of mine, Tony Stavish grabbed me, and I told this kid, I won't mention his name, I told this kid that he's outta there, because he didn't graduate. He went through the ninth grade then he quit school, so if he would have graduated, he would have graduated with our class, so somebody invited him to the class reunion. And he made that statement and that was the last class reunion he ever came to. But yeah, there's, there's some anti-Semitism there. And we grew up with a lot. We had a large black neighborhood in Uniontown. We went to school with the black kids and had no problems, in fact, some of them were excellent, good friends, good friends.

I loved to sing when I was in school. There were a group of us that, we'd sing at the drop of a hat, we were a mixed chorus and we had a quartet and a mixed chorus and a glee club and we just loved to sing, we sang all the time.

EL: What kind of songs?

MR: Oh all kinds, we even sang Christmas carols. We didn't care, "Mickey, you're Jewish, you're singing the..." I said, "It's singing!" We sang on the radio station at Christmas time and we'd put on, man o'man, we went to all county chorus, and we just had a ball. And we had a quartet, four of us, Ron Barish, he's gone, Arnold Craig, he's gone, and Art Creighton, he's a black kid, and myself, and we just had a ball. We just had a ball. That was a fun part of growing up. Uniontown was just full of good kids at that time. It wasn't the kind of town that it is today. Today it's, I wouldn't, if I had to raise a family I would not pick Uniontown to raise a family in today. Forget that there's no Jewish population again today, just like here, it's disappeared. Everybody's gone. There's nobody here anymore.

EL: What, what was, were there movie theaters in Uniontown at the time? Was there...

MR: I'm sorry?

EL: Movie theaters. What did kids do for fun?

MR: What, here in town?

EL: In Uniontown.

MR: Oh, in Uniontown. Oh yeah, there were three movie theaters. Of course, a lot of our life revolved around the synagogue believe it or not. The Hebrew school, the AZA, and the Boy Scout troop. A lot of our activities were centered around the synagogue.

EL: How often was Hebrew school?

MR: I'm sorry?

EL: How often was Hebrew school?

MR: We went four days a week.

EL: Really, after school?

MR: Really. After school we went four days a week until we were bar mitzvahed, and then after bar mitzvah, nobody wants to go to Hebrew school. We went four days a week, and we had some great teachers. I remember this one guy who was from New York, and he was a soccer player, big guy, big guy. And he would get mad at me because I didn't prepare my lesson properly. And he would pick me up and he would lift me up and bang my head against the ceiling. He was a lot of fun, he was quite an athlete.

EL: Were there enough kids in Uniontown that, that there could be dating and things like that among the Jews?

MR: Oh yeah.

EL: Yeah.

MR: We didn't date anybody that wasn't Jewish. Not until we went to college. And then my father thought that the girl I was dating at one time was Jewish because he asked me, "Are you Jewish?" And this girl from Fayette City, I didn't know she was from Fayette City, Mon Valley, Fayette City. I said, "Yeah." He said, "Okay." I only dated her for a very short time. But yeah, we all dated girls in Uniontown.

EL: What do you remember of World War II when you were in Uniontown? You would have been twelve or thirteen when it started, right?

MR: Yeah. Well I remember V-J Day, not V-J Day, Pearl Harbor. Because it was Sunday afternoon, and we were listening to the radio, and I remember that announcement. Of course as a kid it doesn't make a real big impression on you. Then all of a sudden people started to be going into the military service and then you start realizing what's going on. And my brother didn't go into the service, he was three and a half years older than me. He has since passed away, about six years ago now, wow, that's unbelievable. And my brother went in at the very end of the war. And a lot of our Jewish, young people that were older than me, served in the military. We lost one, what was his first name... Bree was his last name. The B'nai B'rith lodge was named after him in Uniontown. And I went to school with his brother, he and I were the same age. And boy, you realize that seventy-five percent of my high school class has died? They're gone. It's unbelievable. But a lot of them, a lot of them served. Because there was a big group of kids around my brother's age, a little bit older, they were all in the military service, every one of them.

EL: Did life change in Uniontown? Was there scrap...?

MR: Oh yeah. We used to go around and collect newspapers, tin cans, and things made out of rubber. And if you collected so much you got a free pass to go to the movies. So we liked that, we used to go around and scrounge up tin cans and look for anything made of rubber, or what we thought was made out of rubber to turn in. Newspapers and, yeah, we did a lot of that as kids, kids did. And we had our blackout drills. Uniontown, don't ask me why we're having blackout drills, I haven't the foggiest idea why we're having blackout drills. But my father, of course, he was in working clothes, it was a working man's store, and sold work shoes, work boots that the miners and the farmers used. And that was a great boom to his business because he was one of the few stores that really catered to the working man at that time. And in 1938 and in 19... when Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, in September of '39, my dad started to take all of the money that he made, or the money that he was making and reinvesting it in inventory, especially work shoes and work boots. And I remember, Western, what was the, Railroad Express truck would pull up in front of the store and just dump off cases and cases of work boots and work shoes. And of course, we were, the store was located half a block from the rail yards where the trains would come in and unload all their goods. At that time trains brought everything, we didn't have trucks like we have today on the highways. It was all done by train. And there was a big railroad siding half a block from my dad's store where the rail cars would come in and be unloaded, and the Railway Express truck would pull up in front of my father's store and dump off, they'd just throw 'em off the end of the truck onto the street. And the street was Beeson Boulevard, and

right down the middle of Beeson Boulevard were the train tracks. It was railroad siding and was used for the industries, and coke ovens and industries on the other side of town, which shuttled back and forth. And there was about that much space between the curb and the track.

EL: About two feet.

MR: Not much. And every once and a while somebody would park in front of our store, train couldn't get by. They'd be cursing, honking. I remember one time a train came by and he wanted to go back, he came by and he was that close to the car and he had to stop because he couldn't get by. And he, the engineer and I guess the guy who was with him, the coal tender or whatever he was called, and he called over a couple other men, they lifted that car up and put it on the sidewalk to the train could go by.

Oh my, goodness gracious. But we just had cases and cases of shoes and boots down in the basement, just stacked to the ceiling. Safety toe, steel toe boots, miner's boots, rubber boots and the steel toe shoes. And I guess my father had the foresight that this was going to be something that this country would need. And of course World War II started and Pearl Harbor and then rationing came in almost immediately, and you had to have a ration stamp to buy a pair of boots or buy a pair of shoes, and we sold a lot of boots and shoes. Wow. And in order to replenish our inventory you had to turn in these stamps. And we had to paste them in the cards and then my dad had to, when his order, when he'd send in an order he had to put those cards with the stamps on, he was lucky if he ordered twelve pairs of shoes, he'd get six. He was lucky if he could do that. We, it was, he'd save up his gasoline ration coupon so he could drive to Pittsburgh and go down to Fifth Avenue and go from store to store seeing what he could get. And one of the things that was very hard to get were the red and blue bandanas, the handkerchiefs that the work, all the working men, that's all they used was the red and blue bandanas. And he would try to go around and scrounge those things up.

EL: What kind of car was it?

MR: At that time, during World War II, he had a 1939 Dodge, I think it was. It might be a '38 Dodge. The next car he bought was a '49 Chevrolet. And that car lasted, God, I don't know when we finally got rid of that because he turned it over to me and I used it all through my military service when I was in the states, well part of the time. And then my brother used it, and then my father finally had to buy two cars. My mother wanted to learn how to drive, and she couldn't drive. First time she took the car out she wrecked it. I mean she just couldn't drive at all, she had no aptitude for driving a car. My father wasn't a good driver either.

EL: What happened to your father's business after World War II?

MR: Oh, it thrived. My brother and I both went to college. I went to WVU. He came, he came to WVU after me. He got out of the service, and he went to Pitt for a while and went to Cleveland and came back and decided to come down to WVU because I was there. And he came down and spent a year at WVU and then went to Penn State, and he graduated from Penn State. I graduated from WVU. What was your question?

EL: What happened to the business?

MR: Oh. Then my brother went back into the business after he got out of Penn State. He went back in with my father. And, of course, I went into the military service. And he basically took over the business. And he expanded the business. He bought the building, the entire building. My father only owned part of it. He bought the entire building, and he took over the entire building, rebuilt the store top to bottom. And he became quite well-known for being a store that catered to big and tall people. And he had customers from as far away as Virginia, Maryland, Ohio, West Virginia, even some from New York. They would come to my brother's store because anything that a big or a tall man wanted in clothing, he had it. And he went up to size 72 in a suit. You know how big that is? He had some in a size 72 pants, for big people, and extra tall clothing for tall people. And did he specialize in that? I would say yes, he did. Even though the main floor of the store catered more toward the average person. And why he did that, I don't know. But the average person's clothes was on the main floor, and the big and tall was in the basement of the store, which was as large as the main floor. And boy did he, he was very, very successful with that.

EL: How long was he in business?

MR: Oh my, when did he finish? I guess he was in the business until the middle-nineties.

EL: Was there an economic reason for stopping or did he just retire?

MR: I think he just retired. He tried to sell the business and he couldn't find a buyer for it, and that's a shame because if someone would have bought that business, it was a really good going concern. There was no other place that big and tall men could go, really, to get the type of clothing he had. If you wanted half a dozen size 24 neck shirts, go to Morris's, they had 'em. If he didn't have them he'd get 'em for you. It was just that simple. You know if you needed a size 62 pair of jeans he had it. You didn't have to shop around, he had it. It was there in the store. He had his own tailoring shop. He had his own tailor who worked every day. He had a really, really good going business. So he finally closed up at, I think he eventually sold the building, and then his health declined and unfortunately he passed away.

EL: So let's go back to Latrobe.

MR: Yeah.

EL: So what was Latrobe like in 1958 when you got here?

MR: Latrobe was a bustling business town. There was, the population was about nine thousand, but it was a shopping hub. You know, Greensburg, to go from Latrobe to Greensburg to shop at the bigger stores in Greensburg. That was like us going to Pittsburgh today. And we had enough of a variety, like I said, we had eighty-some businesses here in town at one time, I'm talking men's stores, ladies' stores, shoe stores, department stores, furniture stores, appliance stores, anything that you wanted to buy you could buy here in downtown Latrobe.

EL: What was the industry in Latrobe?

MR: Specialty steel was the main industry, specialty steel, tool and dies, steel molds. At one time Latrobe, during World War II, was the high speed specialty steel alloy capital of the world. We put out more specialty steel than anybody else. This wasn't done with coke ovens or with the blast furnaces. These were electric furnaces and they ran twenty-four hours a day. And they would bring the ingots out, and you could hear, they would hammer them into shape and you could hear these hammers going twenty-four hours a day in town. There was a railroad siding right here, this was a railroad siding that went all the way down from the main, this is the main line, Pennsylvania Railroad main line right out here that went through town. And this is a siding that went down beside my house all the way down to the other side of town to service the industries on the other side of town. And then there's another siding, further down, that went into service the industries down here. This was a very high industrialized town. Was it prejudiced, the industries? Yes.

EL: They didn't hire Jews.

MR: Or blacks. There were, this was a highly industrialized town, there were no, when I got here there was one black family living in town, and he was a postman, mailman, that's it. There were no blacks employed in the industries, and that's highly unusual in a highly industrialized town.

EL: What's the reason for that?

MR: I would have to say that it was prejudice. There were no Jews. We had one Jewish engineer at Latrobe Steel. I think we had one engineer at Kennametal. And I think those were the only two Jews that worked at the industries here in town. Everybody else, the rest of the Jews in town were either business people or professional. We had two, there were two junk yards in town, both run by Jewish men.

EL: What were they called?

MR: One was called Wolff's and the other was Topolsky, I believe. Topolsky, Mr. Topolsky donated the land that the first synagogue was built on.

EL: And where was the first synagogue?

MR: Down, down in Jewtown.

EL: Where is Jewtown?

MR: Jewtown is in, on the north side of this town.

EL: Okay.

MR: It's that way. The old synagogue is still standing. That's, they because almost all, when that synagogue was built most of the Jews lived in that area of town. And then they spread out.

EL: Did you ever live over there?

MR: Did I live there? Yeah, I lived down on First Avenue. I never went to that synagogue because this synagogue here that we have now was built in '54, and I got here in '58. The synagogue was built in '54.

EL: What was the synagogue life like when you moved here?

MR: Very active. Extremely. They had a men's club, they had ladies' Hadassah group, had services, had Friday night services every week. There was Friday night services. We had a Sunday school. We had a Hebrew school.

EL: Was there a rabbi?

MR: No. We've never had a full-time rabbi.

EL: Lay led.

MR: Yeah, we did the services here ourselves. For the High Holidays we had, we always hired someone. At the beginning it was seminary students out of New York, of which one was Jackie Mason.

EL: Right.

MR: And another one was Steindel, Rabbi Steindel.

EL: Okay. The name's familiar.

MR: Well yeah, he was the rabbi at Rodef Shalom? Not Rodef Shalom, which one's on Centre Avenue?

EL: Centre Avenue in the Hill, you mean?

MR: No, in Squirrel Hill.

EL: You mean Temple Sinai on Forbes.

MR: It's a big one. You go up Forbes to the top of the hill, not Forbes, Murray Avenue and you turn right, isn't that Centre?

EL: No.

MR: No it's not Centre, okay.

EL: Beth Shalom?

MR: Is it Beth Shalom? It's a big synagogue that sits on a corner.

EL: Yeah, Beth Shalom's on a corner. It's Conservative?

MR: Yeah.

EL: Yeah.

MR: Okay, he was a rabbi there. He tells the story that, he was a seminary student, he flew into Pittsburgh, okay, he was hired to come here. And someone picked him up in Pittsburgh, I forget who, one of the congregants picked him up in Pittsburgh airport to bring him to Latrobe. He said they drove and they drove and they drove and he says I'm looking out and I see nothing but woods and cows and pastures, and my God where am I? But no, they had student rabbis here. And we had some professional rabbis that we hired. And you know Jonathan Schachter?

EL: Right.

MR: Okay, he was our leader from the last, eight, nine, ten years for the High Holidays.

EL: What would people do for bar mitzvahs or weddings or funerals?

MR: Use the rabbi in Greensburg.

EL: And who taught the Sunday school classes?

MR: We did. We taught Sunday school classes. We had a teacher come in from Pittsburgh for Hebrew school, and he would train our kids for bar mitzvah, bat mitzvah.

EL: You had said that at the height there was about a hundred people, is that right?

MR: Oh, at least, yeah. Yeah.

EL: And that was just at that congregation, there was, there was also another congregation in town, right?

MR: No. There was only one congregation in town.

EL: Oh okay, yeah. So there was about a hundred people in town.

MR: There were two congregations in Uniontown.

EL: In Uniontown.

MR: We had about, you would go to services on Friday night and the place would be packed. We seat eighty in our sanctuary. We have seats for eighty, and it would be packed, it would be full on Friday night. And this is every Friday night we would have services.

EL: When did it start to decline?

MR: I would say that it started to decline in the middle 1990s.

EL: Really, it lasted that long?

MR: Yeah, oh yeah. See none of our kids stayed.

EL: How come?

MR: There wasn't anything for them here. There was nothing. My kids didn't want the business, so they didn't stay. I have one child in North Carolina, one in Colorado, and one in California. The only, very few kids stayed. The Dunhoff boys stayed, Weiss Furniture. Dick Dunhoff, he stayed. In fact, he doesn't even live here anymore, he lives in Israel. He commutes. I'm serious, he commutes from Israel to here. He'll stay here for a month or so then go back to Israel.

EL: What were some of the other Jewish businesses?

MR: Oh, we had a lot of them. Really, we had a lot of Jewish businesses. Boy, I don't even know if I can remember them all. Let's see there's Goldman's, Art Goldman.

EL: What did he do?

MR: They had a men's store, he and his brother Lou. And when they closed up their store, Art became the executive secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, and his son now lives in California. Art's gone, his son now lives in California so he didn't stay here. Let's see I'm trying to go up the street here. The Frankel's had a furniture store. Of course, Weiss Furniture Store and Penn Furniture Store, so we had three furniture stores all run by Jews. Let's see, I'm trying to go down the street here. We had Paul's Jewelers, He was Jewish. He was the only Jewish jeweler. There were two brothers, Paul brothers, Phil and I forget the other brother's first name. But the Paul brothers, and their kids left. Then we had Lonstein's Department Store. That's the only Jewish department store. We had, I think it was called Ace Auto Supply. That was Jewish, run by Jewish. That was the only auto supply, or automobile, anything to do with automobiles that was Jewish. Men's stores. We had Glick's, and myself, and Art Goldman. Myron Lewis, Lewis Brothers. I'm going down the streets in my mind. I think there were only four men's store at that time that were Jewish. And we had the Rose Style Shop.

EL: What was that?

MR: That was a ladies' store.

EL: What was it called?

MR: Rose Style Shop. She's still here, Rhonda Bookman, the daughter, is still running the store, she's still here. Rose Style Shop. Dave Balk, Hollywood Shop. Oh, and Fineman. Debbie, no, do you know Debbie Firestone? Yeah, you know Debbie Firestone, her father had a store, a ladies' store here in town.

EL: Were there any restaurants or bakeries or anything like that?

MR: No. We had no Jewish restaurants, no Jewish bakeries. We had some fine bakeries though, but they weren't Jewish. I'm trying to think what else we had here in town. Oh, we had a hardware store that was owned by Jewish, Latrobe Hardware. That was Jewish. Then we had professional people. We had Ben Berkofsky, was a postman, a mailman. We had Sam Berkofsky who ran numbers and punch boards. He was a good guy.

EL: Where did he run his operation out of?

MR: His house. Yeah, Sam was into all kinds of good stuff. Nice guy though. He was one of the, one of the leaders of the community, really, he was, of the Jewish community he was one of the leaders.

EL: How so?

MR: He was, he was president of the congregation. He got things done. Sam was the type you know, we need this, [slams hand on table] got it done. You know, anything had to be done, Sam got it done. Sam and I fought tooth and nail, but that's all right, we still got along together. Let's see we had an attorney. [phone rings] Who's calling?

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EL: So we were talking about Sam Berkofsky. So we talked a little bit about the decline. You said the decline started to happen in the 1990s.

MR: Yeah, I would say so.

EL: And it was mostly because the children were not staying in Latrobe.

MR: Children did not stay, and people were getting older. And the older people were starting to move away or die. And we're now at a point where there's my wife and I and Jeannette Wolff are the only Jews left here in town.

EL: How many members are still at the congregation?

MR: Oh, we may have, twelve, fourteen.

EL: And what's the future of the congregation?

MR: Gone.

EL: Gone.

MR: Probably by this time next year there will be no congregation.

EL: How do you feel about that?

MR: Terrible. Just awful. This was my shul. And the wife and I are thinking ahead that there's not gonna be a shul here, our congregation is going to be gone, our kids are gone, why are we still here? We'll probably be gone. We'll probably go to where one of our kids live. They've been after us now for about five years to come live near them, because we've had some minor health problems where they, somebody had to come up, one of the kids had to come up. And to come up from North Carolina or to come in from Colorado or California, it's a schlep. Especially if you call them at two o'clock in the morning, "Your father's in the hospital, we need help!"

EL: All right, well thank you very much for your time.

MR: OK.

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