

Transcript of Interview with Florence Heidovitz
Homestead Hebrew Congregation Oral History Project
Call Number: CSS #4

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Name of Interviewer: Anne Sheckter Powell

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Transcriber notes:

(?) indicates that the transcriber is unsure of the spelling.

[unclear] indicates that the word(s) are unintelligible.

... indicates that the sentence trails off.

Transcription:

SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

Anne Sheckter Powell: This is Anne Sheckter Powell interviewing

Florence Heidovitz: Florence Stahlberg Heidovitz

AP: About life in Homestead. When did life begin for you, I mean not in terms of ages, but were you born here?

FH: I was born here. I was born here.

AP: What brought your parents to Homestead?

FH: We had a family, my father had family here. Initially it was the George Siegel family, and they were cousins. Then, my father had an uncle, his name was, Hausrath my grandmother's brother, and they came to Homestead because of the Siegels, and that's where my father and his two sisters came. And his mother.

AP: Where did he come from?

FH: He came from Kalash (?), what is, what was then Austria-Hungary, it is now, then it became Poland and it is now Ukraine.

AP: So he came directly from the Ukraine to Homestead.

FH: Yes. Yes, and my mother was his childhood sweetheart. And when he left Kalash(?), the town that they were from, he had asked her father for her hand in marriage, and he was here for two years and then he sent for her. And they were married in Homestead, and George Siegel and his wife, Esther, were my parents' [unclear], they were married in the Homestead shul.

AP: So there already was a Homestead shul.

FH: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. It probably was in the 1920s, '21, something like that after the war.

AP: --- that's why I was saying we sort of need to place all these things. Now they started, their history all began here.

FH: It began here. And I think if you read the, some of the documents of the Homestead shul, the minutes of the Homestead shul, Mr. Grossman, Hy Grossman figured very

prominently, and my parents' first apartment was on his second floor. So they, it was right on Eighth Avenue, and actually many Jewish families lived on Eighth Avenue and below because that was before the war, you know that was before the lower end of Homestead was torn down to make way for the mill in 1942. But that was all residential, and many Jewish families lived there.

AP: So that was, was that the main place the Jewish families lived? Down on...

FH: Many families lived there, yes. And I think after, after the 1920s there were those that perhaps had businesses on Eighth Avenue and then they lived up, and actually we did the same. After I was born, my parents bought a home on Twelfth Avenue and that was on the hill, and many families then who had businesses on the main thoroughfare did live in Munhall or in Homestead that was up on the hill.

AP: So when your father came did he had a job?

FH: He was a tailor.

AP: Oh so he already had a skill...

FH: He had a skill and he was a very fine tailor, I mean he, and you have to know that in Europe they were very proud of the craft, and essentially my father, when he first opened the store, he really made suits. I mean, people made custom-made suits.

AP: So he opened a tailor shop in Homestead?

FH: Well, initially he worked for a place that is now the Rainbow Kitchen that used to be Gross' men's store for many, many years, and that was Daddy's first job, he worked for them. And then I guess after a few years he decided, certainly with the encouragement of the Siegels, to open his own place, and that's what he did. And primarily it was custom-made, tailored clothing. People would come in, I can remember as a child playing with the samples, you know every year they would get new samples in, and then of course he also had the cleaning and pressing which you know developed later.

AP: So this was Eighth Avenue?

FH: On Eighth Avenue, next to Sarah's drugstore.

AP: What was it called?

FH: Morry the Tailor.

AP: Morry the Tailor.

FH: That was, that you know, that was also typical of the way they talked in Europe, they gave your first name then they said who you were or what you did. And that's what they called it.

AP: That's right, that's how people got their last, their surnames.

FH: Exactly.

AP: So you really began, your whole history began in Homestead.

FH: Yes, very much so. Very much so, and I had very, you know, I do really recall at a very early age being on Eighth Avenue. I remember you know there were many, many families, I mean many Jewish families that had merchants that had their stores on Eighth Avenue and they lived upstairs or behind the store as well as moving up on the hill. And, so it really, when one went for a walk at every turn there was a friend and there was a Jewish family. And really when we had the holidays, most of Eighth Avenue was shut down, because most Jewish people observed the holidays.

AP: And they closed the stores.

FH: And they closed the stores.

AP: Were there Jewish businesses, I mean like you know kosher butchers or...

FH: Yes, yes. A family by the name of Kramer. They were very dear friends. They were friends but we kind of felt they were relatives, I mean they were. (tape cuts out) Yes, we did have a kosher butcher, and the family was Kramer, the name was Kramer and they had two sons, and I will say that they were not family but they really treated me as if I were family. And I do recall getting birthday presents from Mr. and Mrs. Kramer until I guess I was about six years old. And I guess they liked little girls because they had two boys. But, oh yes, we used to, the community, used to shop there, very definitely.

AP: And so where did you go, you were going to school then I guess, you went to elementary school nearby there?

FH: No, I, we lived in Munhall on Twelfth Avenue.

AP: Oh, by the time you started school.

FH: We lived on Twelfth Avenue, and the grade school was directly across the street from my parents' home. And then the whole complex that was the junior high and the high school was all in this huge block that was right across the street from where we lived so, I didn't have far to go.

AP: Now I assume your parents were observant, is that right?

FH: Yes, yes.

AP: So you walked...

FH: We always, that was glorious, we always walked to shul. And other families walked to shul. It was such an in-gathering, just as it faded, you know, right before the holiday, you know, you saw all families walking together. It was just a wonderful, wonderful feeling. And then those, for our family in particular, we had one part of our family, the Chetlins (?) that lived in East Pittsburgh and they had six children, and they would come and spend the holidays with us. My, when I say us, it was our home and then the Mandells, that was my father's sister, and the Hausraths which was my father's uncle, and the children were scattered between the families all dependent on... Janet, she was the only girl so she stayed at our home, and Norman stayed with us because he was close to my brother's age. And then every day we, the first day of yontif we, they all came to our home and that evening we'd go to my Aunt Mandell's, and then the second day we would walk to the Hausrath, who lived on Fourth Avenue, and we would walk down because after sunset we could ride home. But holidays were just wonderful because we were all together and it was such a celebration, and it was a sampling of everyone's foods and it was just a wonderful, it was like a retreat because we were all together and enjoyed it tremendously.

AP: So everybody was walking...

FH: Oh yes, most people, oh yes. It was really frowned upon if you, and if someone lived in Squirrel Hill and they didn't walk, they were respectful of those people who were observant and they would sort of park their car, not in front of the synagogue so that people wouldn't even see who had to use their car. And there were people that already lived in Squirrel Hill that had to drive.

AP: Now at what point is this that we're talking about that people are already living in Squirrel Hill?

FH: Late thirties, and then of course by the forties, the war, then people did migrate. But really in the early, you know '28, '29, the early thirties, people walked. People walked. You do have to remember those were Depression years too. So the shul was a source of great entertainment and it was very central to our lives. I think that was part of it too, they were difficult times, and the entertainment all centered around the shul.

AP: That was your community.

FH: And that was our community.

AP: But there were already some people at that point who were in Squirrel Hill?

FH: Yes, yes.

AP: But they still were coming to the shul?

FH: Well, it, you know parts of the families always came back. Understand, as you see that shul, from the very beginning, the eastern wall to all the way back and that entire balcony, every single seat was accounted for. And only if someone happened to leave for a moment could children join because there just wasn't room for the children. I mean it was really just enough seating for adults and it was very, very tightly allocated.

AP: So what's like, when you were a little girl...

FH: Well it just so happened that when I was a little girl I was fortunate because my mother's seat was at a point where it was at the bend and there was sort of a, where the two ends of the, instead of a rectangle, at the ends where it was mitered that little crack.

AP: You could sit.

FH: I could sit on that, so I always had a place to sit but not everyone did. They would sit on the steps and you know, and then there were services downstairs for the children.

AP: Even when you were a child.

FH: Oh yes, oh yes. Of course they wanted decorum, they wanted to the place to, the service to run smoothly. So children and young people really were downstairs, and don't forget it was Orthodox, so I think it was only in Conservative synagogues that they feel families should come in and sit together. You know men and women were separated.

AP: Yeah, I understood that.

FH: Women were all upstairs. Men were downstairs, as I was growing up. I think after the forties that's when some of the women decided that they were equal members and partners and they insisted on coming downstairs. And some did, and some women never did go downstairs, they felt that they wanted to stay upstairs.

AP: So some women came down and sat with the men?

FH: No. They had a mechitza. You know, a little curtain, and you sat behind that.

FH: So they preferred to sit in the back downstairs rather than sitting upstairs.

FH: Right, right.

AP: I see. Well what about like on minor holidays like Simchas Torah or something like that?

FH: Then everybody sat downstairs. Simchas Torah was yes, everybody sat downstairs.

AP: Did the women still sit behind the mechitza? Or did they just or did they sit all together again?

FH: No, they sort of sat in the back.

AP: And like for weddings?

FH: Maybe... maybe for weddings they sat together. But for services, you know when there was a service.

AP: Major services.

FH: Right. And many women, even though they were permitted or there was room for them downstairs, they preferred the upstairs. And then finally when there was just a very few upstairs they decided they might as well join the rest. It was a whole evolution of the women's movement, I guess, and we finally came down.

AP: Now when you went to elementary school since there were so many Jewish people, you were not alone as a Jewish child in the school.

FH: Well, I wasn't alone, but there weren't a great number.

AP: Did you find that was a problem?

FH: Oh yes. I think you had to be very, I think you needed to know the answers to some of the abuse that went on in the community. There were definitely, you know those were years when it was known that Father Alteny (?) at the, at St. Michael's would really say that the, Jesus was killed by the Jews, and he would preach this. And those children that went to those churches were, would really seek out Jewish children and really hurt them.

My brother went to school with these boys and they didn't touch him when he went to public school, but on his way to Hebrew school they would tackle him, a gang would get a hold of him, rub his face in snow. It was overwhelming. He was only one person. Yes, there was a lot of anti-Semitism, and I think a lot of anti-Semitism. And then even among the Jewish people, I mean there were some more observant, my parents wanted me to observe all the holidays, Sukkot, Pesach, Shavuot. And I did not go to school. However, there were some families that chose not to, and when there were only five or six in a class it was very hard to explain to those teachers why some went and some did not. And so we had to be strong enough to say that this is the way our parents observe the holidays. And it really, it was amazing to me how the teachers as I was growing up, I can remember when Christmas carols were sung. Well I didn't want to sing these Christmas carols, so I would just mouth them. And I remember the one teacher very distinctly bending down to hear whether any sound was coming out of my mouth. And she reprimanded me for that.

AP: In spite of the fact that she knew you were Jewish.

FH: Yes. I mean it was just deliberate. And it's interesting that you know we lived here long enough our children were born and went to Munhall schools. And I can remember our Karen, when she was in the third grade, was out on Rosh Hashanah and this is the same third grade teacher that I had had, and Miss Neffley (?) was her name, and then she was out on Yom Kippur, and when she came back the teacher said, Miss Neffley (?) told her, she said, "You were just out last week. That was your high holidays." And she said, "Mother don't you think she ought to know by now that it's both?" And of course she spoke up and told her that she felt that she should know that both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are important. But she said, "Don't you think she ought to know by now?" Well, that's the way it was. They really didn't want to know.

But I will say that as I lived in the community, and as B'nai B'rith came through with a lot of their direction as how to enlighten the community. I thought this was very helpful in the Homestead community especially. I was very active at BBGs, and of course as an adult in B'nai B'rith. And we made several significant in-roads. I remember our chapter donating Jewish encyclopedias to the Carnegie Library so it would be there as a reference. We also, for many years, provided calendars for every teacher in the Munhall district and the Homestead district, so that they would know when the Jewish holidays. I mean it was subtle, but this was B'nai B'rith's way of enlightening. And I feel it was worthwhile.

And then it was absolutely thrilling, there were years where they initiated Brotherhood Month. And that was very important in our community. It was the very first time that the whole community was welcomed to come inside our synagogue and that I thought was a very significant happening. People came from many churches, and, if you recall, there was a time that the Catholic people could not enter another house of worship, but at this time they were permitted to come. And this was in the forties. It was in the forties. Mid-forties, because my children were already going to school. And it was just thrilling to see how they, visually, it was visually apparent that they changed their mind. I don't know what they thought our synagogue was like. I mean whether they thought we desecrated Jesus or whether we, I mean they didn't find any statuary hanging on the walls, they didn't find, and they found the explanation of our Judaica very enlightening and very thrilling. And later I heard many wonderful comments from teachers that I knew, that were my teachers, and then those who taught or children, who were so enlightened and so thrilled to have had that experience. And we did that at least three or four years. I thought that was wonderful. That was, you know, years before a community really realized that we were civilized, we had a contribution to make, and I thought it was significant. And of course as the population left, B'nai B'rith no longer existed, and of course that influenced.

AP: How much you could do.

FH: Yes. But it really, I pay great tribute to B'nai B'rith for having that and the Anti-Defamation League, who really knew how to come into a community and turn it around. It took generations. It took the third generation before they would listen.

AP: Yeah I can imagine that. But it was a shame that you only had it for such a brief period of time.

FH: Well it was significant. I wouldn't talk about it if I didn't feel a great fulfillment. It was a wonderful accomplishment for the people who lived here and so that we earned their respect, I think that's what happened.

AP: Now B'nai B'rith was in the Homestead, Munhall area.

FH: Oh yes, we had a wonderful women's B'nai B'rith group. Very fine, very active, you know we were very involved at every level. All the projects B'nai B'rith stood for that you know, they'd go to the veterans' home at the holiday times, and they would sell bonds, and all the things that, and they, B'nai B'rith and AZA, we had wonderful chapters here in Homestead. As a matter of fact, it drew young people from Braddock and Duquesne, and from Oakland, children that really couldn't find a place for themselves in the big city would come here because it was a very active group.

AP: That's interesting that instead of your going to the city [unclear]

FH: They came to us. And they always came because, maybe a cousin and if they came well then they brought a friend, or two friends, and those years we were still able to ride the street cars you know at ten o'clock at night.

AP: So they could just come on a street car and go back on a street car.

FH: Absolutely. No one, there was no carpooling at that time, they just made their way.

AP: Did you meet in the shul?

FH: Oh sure.

AP: So the shul was really the center of all these things.

FH: I believe Clarisse, I was president at the BBG's in Homestead, and I think Clarisse, my cousin Clarisse Mandel found in the minutes something where I had contributed fifty dollars to the shul because we met there and we felt we needed to make that donation.

AP: That was a lot.

FH: That's a lot of money, yes. But we gave fifty....

AP: [unclear] That's very responsible.

FH: I think we were. I think that's it. And you know the shul served, even during the war, they had wonderful dances for the soldiers. Imagine they came from Pitt to our

shul. You know there were the, the students there at Pitt were in training for officers training, or if they were stationed at the airport. And the Homestead shul used to have these dances that even, you know, it continued to be a mecca even that far along in the forties.

AP: That's interesting. I mean there were these other communities like Braddock, Duquesne, and whatever that also had something of a Jewish community.

FH: Oh they did!

AP: And they had their own synagogue as well?

FH: Oh yes, absolutely. Braddock had a wonderful, wonderful cohesive community. You see where ever there was this, there was a business community that's why people were attracted to Braddock, that's why they went to Duquesne. And that's where their shul was, you see.

AP: And then did these shuls, which were what, all on the same side of the river, I mean did your communities do things together?

FH: No. No, see that's so sad, no. Everyone wanted to have their own space. And I think had primarily, they were orthodox communities and they would have had to, and the bylaws said we were Orthodox, and that was significant. There was a time right before the war that there was a major vote and a major thrust in Homestead to convert it the shul, to be Conservative. And there was a whole group of professionals that just started to live out in Mt. Pleasant who needed a place to bring their children. They would have bused their children in. And I think even the other communities if they were to use our facility they needed to be able to ride. But the bylaws said as long as there were six votes not to change, and it was at a time when some of the old, the senior elders were still around, and they voted not to change it from being Orthodox and that was key.

I mean when we didn't change, then there were young families out here in the park, there were many families and they really, were really Reformed or they were Conservative and you know, if you came to the Orthodox they really let you know that if you didn't keep kosher you know that wasn't great. And they were very explicit about it. And these families felt uncomfortable. Well when this happened, when they voted on it to continue Orthodox then the families out here, there were carpools, there was a group that went to Rodef Shalom and to Beth Shalom, to Tree of Life, to Temple Sinai, and it all splintered.

AP: Now that was after the war?

FH: That was after the war.

AP: Were your parents still living?

FH: Oh sure.

AP: Were they still involved with the shul?

FH: Yes, oh sure.

AP: What was their feeling about it?

FH: Well, mother really felt that everybody, she wasn't judgmental. I mean for herself, she wanted that shul, and she wanted to observe, but she felt I mean she was not judgmental, she wouldn't tell you what to do. But by the same token she wanted to reserve the right and the privilege of conducting her life the way she wanted. But she was not judgmental. However, others were. And they were very vocal about it. But that was very significant. There was a fabulous Jewish community out here, I can't tell you how many families lived here.

AP: Back in Lincoln Park.

FH: Right here. Right here in Homestead Park.

AP: I meant Homestead Park.

FH: I mean across the street, up, you know there were really I'm sure about sixty families with children. But you see, they were young married and not all of them were Orthodox, so they chose, they just got together, nobody bused them, they just got together in groups and went in to whatever congregation they felt comfortable in.

AP: So not only was the seating separate but it really was Orthodox in all of its practices so that it wasn't. [unclear] to accommodate these other people.

FH: Yes. People felt uncomfortable. Right, they really wanted you to be observant all the way.

AP: These families who came up here after the war, were they the children of people who had lived in the area generally speaking?

FH: Yes, yes. And others. And other who (tape cuts out)

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

AP: So you were saying that people moved here who chose this area even though they hadn't come from a family in the Homestead area.

FH: That weren't an indigent family. It was very convenient you know. It's sort of central. I mean it was a mid-point between here and McKeesport, or between here and you know, it was so close to Squirrel Hill. So whether they were business people or professional people, they chose to live out here even though their families weren't originally from Homestead.

AP: That's interesting, I had assumed that most of the people who were up here had come from...

FH: Many. Most. Yes, but there were many who did not. But it became one family, they felt as if they belonged. I think that's why they enjoyed the area because everyone was made to feel welcome.

AP: Are there as many Jewish families here now as there were?

FH: No. No.

AP: Is that partly because of the changes?

FH: Well there's you know, you're talking, we're here about thirty-six years, a lot of things have happened. Look, if the shul is no longer here, you know Jewish families aren't here. I mean, we ourselves have belonged to Beth El for seven years.

AP: Oh it's Beth El that you belong to.

FH: Now. Because our children are there. When they were growing up we joined Beth Shalom, because the, after Karen was bat mitzvahed

AP: That's your...

FH: Oldest.

AP: That's your oldest daughter.

FH: Yes, we could see they could not afford the kind of education here. And that was really a very difficult decision, but when it's your child and you knew it wasn't just right. We loved the shul, but it wasn't right for her, so I saw to it that she got to her classes over there, and she was confirmed. And Barbara started Hebrew school at Beth Shalom, and she was bat mitzvahed there. And they both, and we went to services at Beth Shalom as well. And they were both married in that shul, so really we have some very, very good feelings about Beth Shalom.

AP: But, there was, you said your oldest daughter was bat mitzvahed here.

FH: Yes.

AP: So there, so one of the deviations from a very Orthodox was they...

FH: Yes, see that was tried. Yes, there were very few that were bat mitzvahed, maybe one other girl before her. And she wanted to be bat mitzvahed, and very, and it was sort of, the one young girl that was bat mitzvahed before Karen I think the rabbi selected that young girl to be bat mitzvahed, which was just wasn't fair because others were certainly as capable. And Karen made her wishes known and we had to really insist on it.

AP: So it wasn't a matter of course.

FH: No, in the beginning he did this as a token, and she thought she was as worthy as being bat mitzvahed as the other little girl so there was a little politicking, but it's alright, it worked out well and it was an exquisite evening.

AP: Now when you were a little girl did you go to Hebrew school?

FH: Oh yes. The reason for my going to Hebrew school, I didn't know, my mother's family was still in Europe and the only way I knew my grandfather was through correspondence, I mean there was no phoning. And my mother had to show him that she was rearing me to be the kind of Jewish child that he would expect. And it was very fulfilling, I mean I had a mission to learn how to write, and I did so that he could correspond to me.

AP: You wrote to him in Hebrew?

FH: Oh in Hebrew, yes in Yiddish. In script.

AP: Oh so you learned the things then you wrote to him.

FH: Yes, and that was very important to my mother.

AP: Now did you learn Yiddish in Hebrew school?

FH: Yeah.

AP: They taught that to you as well as Hebrew.

FH: Yes. Well, the way they, first of all you must understand that the teachers that we had were European, and they had European methods of teaching. It wasn't until later that they taught you to read Hebrew. You didn't know what you were reading, I mean very minimally. And they did not teach you conversational Hebrew, it was before Israel, also you know. And so now I had some Hebrew, [unclear], that sort of thing but not the conversational. But most of the people who, most of the families learned Yiddish and that was spoken in most of the households and so we were taught how to write Yiddish, and I was very happy about that. So I really went to Hebrew school long after most girls did. There was no bat mitzvah, there was nothing. You know, you just went with the

boys, they were bar mitzvahed and then you were, you went, confirmation was a bigger thing for the girls.

AP: So they had that.

FH: Oh absolutely. Yes they had confirmation, absolutely. It was lovely.

AP: That's from Sunday school.

FH: From Sunday school. And you know it was a full program, I mean we had picnics and dances and all sorts of activities. It really, they did everything they knew how to be creative and attract, they even installed a hoop in our little vestry room, I mean the ceiling was only I mean seven, eight, maybe nine feet, but there was a hoop and the boys jumped around and they had a team. But you know, they knew enough that they tried to accommodate the interests of the children. And the kitchen was a major attraction, everything, The Sisterhood made a great deal of money, there were always banquets, Mother's Day was always a marvelous event, Father's Day I don't remember having anything then, but there were always the Friday night services and the onegs afterwards, and the wonderful banquets that they had for the shul for Hanukkah, for all occasions. And there was even a time that the women did lunches for the businessmen in the Homestead, and they would come up and they would cook. So that kitchen really provided a source of a lot of income.

AP: So that stove had a lot of [unclear]

FH: That stove, that really, and then subsequently after the war they did build another kitchen on the, you know they remodeled the shul and it was on the same floor, and of course that was another story in itself. I mean if you were young married and if you really wanted to know how to cook, I mean all you had to do was volunteer on the kitchen committee and they would share all their secrets.

AP: Did that happen?

FH: Oh yes. Absolutely, absolutely. Many of the young marrieds did that and worked, and Mrs. Coltin, Bubbie Coltin, was a supervisor and that, the fun that they had preparing the meal could not possibly compare with what actually went on at the main event.

AP: Did you call her Bubbie Coltin.

FH: Mhm, we all called her Bubbie Coltin. And she was just that. She mothered everyone. Very, very special lady.

AP: I thought that's what you said, and I thought [unclear].

FH: She was a very close friend of my mother's. And they were very good friend til the very end. When both of them were too ill to visit one another and all they could do, I

mean this was when they were in their eighties, and they would call and talk about the good times they had. And my mother would always say we never said good bye, we were too busy crying. They were both, they were so sad that those years were gone. We have a lot of, a lot of wonderful memories.

AP: In spite of, you know you were talking about the problems being student, being a Jewish student in the schools, but you nevertheless made the choice to stay and send your children to the Homestead and Munhall schools.

FH: Well I lived in the area. We lived where, when our children were born so that they could go to the Munhall schools. I, something that was so significant particularly with my older daughter, Karen, after she was bat mitzvahed she was one of the early participants in SAJS, College of Jewish Studies and she had wonderful teachers at the time. And when she went through high school there were many times were she had to know who she was and why she did what she did, and I credit her going to SAJS I'm very grateful to them. I mean there was no doubt in her mind who she was, what she stood for, and why she did the things that she did. And there were many times that she was challenged in civics and she needed to speak up, I wasn't there. And that's why I felt that was the payoff for taking her, exposing her to that kind of teaching, because it wasn't really prepared both children for the real world, because the real world wasn't the comfort of living in Squirrel Hill where you had it all around you. Or East End. The real world is where you are a minority. But interesting enough she knew enough children in Squirrel Hill that she belonged to, at the time it was such a special thing to be in the sorority at Taylor Allderdice and she was!

AP: In spite of the fact that she wasn't in school there.

FH: Yes, because she went to Sunday school there and did piano lessons at the JCC and that sort of thing. And she went to Emma Kaufmann so she knew a lot of young people, so in that little social frame she had all the advantages.

AP: Now you didn't use the city the same way that your children did I take it.

FH: We really were, I did go to some things at the 'Y' when I was around twelve. I belonged to a little social group there. I still have a friend that I met when I was twelve years old and we're still very close friends. Not really. The city, I didn't get into the city until I was older. I was on the debate team, I was part of the varsity when I was a sophomore, and that meant that I was in Oakland three times a week. We did research on two school nights and on Saturdays.

AP: Why did you go to Oakland?

FH: We went to the Oakland library to research whatever I was debating.

AP: Because it was more extensive than the library here.

FH: Than here, yeah. But essentially, and then I guess through B'nai B'rith I did get involved yes, I went to dances that were at other congregations. But living out here made you sort out, you learned to make choices and you learned to be accountable for your behavior. You just were, it wasn't laid back, you had to be on your, you had to be alert at all times and I think it was good training for the real world.

AP: What about when you were in high school, or when your daughters were in high school in terms of dating?

FH: No, they never dated. They did not go to the proms at Munhall. I didn't either. But Karen went to Allderdice's prom. You know, so...

AP: Do you think the community lost people at the point where their children got... Did that affect at all like when the children got to the high school level and were dating, did Jewish people leave this area to live in a community that had more Jewish people for them?

FH: Not really. Not really, I think they moved for business reasons. Because as I said to you, the break came when they sent their children to a Pittsburgh congregation for their religious training. That was the break. And then they met children in, other people in their congregation and that's when, that was their social life. See, as to the class, you know, there were not, in my class when I graduated there were not any more than maybe eight, no more than ten Jewish children, in a class of three hundred.

AP: Oh really?

FH: That's all. And then of course there was Homestead. Homestead High School also had, now they're one,

AP: Now they're merged.

FH: And with Karen also, there were very few, there were just five or six Jewish children, so her social life was not here. She had good friends, she had several good friends who were not Jewish that she went to school with and still keeps in contact with. But her main, her social, when she started looking for places to go and things to do with time away from studies, I really, I mean she belonged to the BBGs in McKeesport and I was in the car, I got her where she needed to be for whatever she needed to do. That was my job.

AP: So there were less of those things here when she was growing up.

FH: There was nothing. There was really nothing social as she was growing up. We had a wonderful swim club out in White Oak, dear friends of mine from McKeesport, and the whole McKeesport community belonged there, and that, we joined there just when Karen was eleven or twelve and Barbara was, you know, she's four years younger. And

that, I took them there every day. I got up in the morning and we just left. And there, there were children from McKeesport and Squirrel Hill. That was their social life.

And it was a lot of fun, and mine too because they were all my friends, and I just took them where they needed to go and we knew that when we built here. We knew. At the time that we built there was a fabulous rabbi here, Rabbi Jack Siegel, young man that was here, and was just wonderful. And he was such a stimulant. He was the first rabbi that ever came to Homestead that when you read the prayers he explained what these prayers were about. I mean that was such a phenomenon! No one really, you just read Hebrew, and you had to be quiet, and it was serious, but no one really told you why. And it was Jack Siegel, Rabbi Siegel that did that. So when we built here he was the rabbi and, but we knew, going into this we knew that, if that situation ever changed we would have to go where the children would be more comfortable. And that's what we did.

AP: You certainly did, you made a commitment and carried it through.

FH: Absolutely.

AP: And evidently for a good reason. Now when you grew up did you have non-Jewish friends, or was your circle of friends also...

FH: I had non-Jewish friends but, neighbors, but I always gravitated to Jewish friends, always. I mean my social life, that was just it. It was just, it was no question.

AP: I know we talked about this before, but I sort of wanted to ask you again, what was your sense during the Second World War of the Jewish communities being aware of what was happening to the Jews of Europe?

FH: Well I can remember, and my husband also remembers, this Rabbi Pinkas, who was not American, he was European born. And he of course had contacts in New York and in Israel and he was on the the bima and he would really cry. He was beside himself. He said, "You know what they're doing to our people." And he would relate some of these things, and frankly we sat there in astonishment. We didn't know whether he was overreacting but we always knew that he knew things that most of us didn't know because circles of rabbis knew certain things and after all the communication wasn't the way it is today. And it was unbelievable, I mean it was so hard to believe that they were doing this. But then again, my mother had family there, and we didn't hear you see, we didn't hear. And so we wondered what happened to them, we didn't know.

AP: So what happened was that the letters stopped.

FH: The letters stopped. And the last postcard, see my mother tried to get her family to come here but my grandmother, her mother died early in the, like 1928-29 and grandfather just didn't want to leave. So they, there were several visas that were sent and they did not pick up on it. And finally they wrote that Hitler is rapping on our shoulders and send them, we want to get out, and if we don't get your visa we'll try to head toward

Warsaw. But I don't think they ever got there. And now we know what happened in that town, and they just were wiped out.

AP: That was the Ukraine.

FH: Yes, well it was Poland really at the time when they lived there.

(tape squeaks)

AP: I got a little squeak on there, I just wanted to pull that closer to see it and I didn't realize it was going to squeak. So what, you had relatives in Europe.

FH: Yes.

AP: Other people in the congregation...

FH: Well I think many people had relatives. Many people had in Hungary, Romanian, Russian, I think a lot of people had relatives. And of course that pleading from the rabbi really, my husband really internalized that and I think that was why he felt that he needed to enlist and serve in the war even though he was, didn't have to. But he did.

(tape cuts out)

AP: (tape cuts in) saying that that was what you thought...

FH: Really, oh I know that. Because Harold was a student at Carnegie Tech at the time, now Carnegie Mellon, and he really felt that he wanted to do something. To, he wanted to drop the bombs on Germany, he wanted it to payback what they were doing to his people. Definitely back to that message that Rabbi Pinkas delivered was, really influenced him.

(tape cuts out)

AP: (tape cuts in) ...Israel was created was there a lot of euphoria?

FH: Oh I think so. I think so, absolutely. I think it was a fulfillment, and yes, there were many people who were involved at Hadassah and, although Homestead did not have a Hadassah chapter, but there were many people that belonged and understood what was happening, yes and it was quite exciting, and actually after Israel was established and then when they set aside the day where they honored the six million, that too was very significant to most people, especially to my mother because she did not know when her parents, her father died. And it was very painful at every holiday, at every yiskor, she said everybody knows when their, and she wasn't able to give, to pay that honor to her father, and I will say there were times that she was overwrought with guilt and with sadness and would often say you know, "Why was I left, why couldn't I go with my family?" And it really worried me because I really felt that she seriously was very upset

that her whole family was gone. But you know after that period when she was able to say the kaddish for her, and she said, "I'm able to say it for my family, along with the other six million." And that there was a time. That was a wonderful thing. And I don't know whoever, whether the leaders knew that but it was very significant that there was a time that she could pay that respect.

AP: Did your father also have family in Europe?

FH: No. No, my father's family fortunately was all here. Only one aunt remained, and we don't know what happened to her. But essentially my father's family was here.

AP: Did the war affect your father's business?

FH: I think he did well. He did well. I think that is when he stopped, he couldn't get fabric. I think that's when the custom trade fell by the wayside, or there was less of that. I think that's when the change was. But he was successful, he was very busy, they built the mill there were a lot of people working.

AP: So more it was the cleaning and whatever part more than the....

FH: Yes he was busy, the altering and that sort of thing did take place but he was very busy, I mean the whole community boomed because of the mill. Men worked around the clock. So it was, you know it really brought them out of the years of depression and stagnation. The whole town prospered.

AP: So it really...

FH: The whole town prospered no matter what business you were in, clothing, automobile, whatever. I mean all these people who were in business, they just, the business flourished because there were more people in town.

AP: And they built the mill in '42.

FH: That's right.

AP: To do additional...

FH: To make steel, definitely.

AP: Quite a time to build a mill.

FH: Well they needed to produce, and I guess the Carnegies, I mean, won the contracts and government subsidies. I do remember Roosevelt coming here to inspect the mill when it was done. And so it was very key. And you know the, during the war, it was very important the protection of this area. I mean we really went through air raid drills

because they really felt that if ever Germany would come over here and bomb this was one of the places they would sight. So we were, we were very much on alert.

AP: Do you think that had any effect on the relationships between the Jews and the non-Jews? The fact that...

FH: Yeah, I think that more and more we were united in one cause. It wasn't a religious thing, we all wanted to win. And we all, all of our sons went. So, yes, it had a unifying effect. They weren't so busy emphasizing the differences rather we had things in common, a common goal, a common thing that we wanted to achieve.

AP: You were in high school then?

FH: Yeah, I was a senior when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. I can remember I was editor of our weekly newspaper and usually Monday morning we would print the scores of whatever basketball, whatever went on over the weekend. And, I mean, I remember going in very early and just ditching the story and doing a lead story on the fact because it was Sunday the 7th and the paper went out on Mondays, and we had to get the staff together and rewrite the story and really overnight things changed so, those that were graduating were talking about enlisting, it all changed. You know it was very significant to the senior class.

AP: So there really was a, and people really did enlist...

FH: Oh absolutely. Absolutely.

AP: Incredible times to live through.

FH: Yes, yes.

AP: So was the decline, did the decline of the shul begin after the war, would you say?

FH: I would say that. I think once again, I pinpoint it to the time when they came back from the service, and there were a lot of people that came back to this area and some, now that's another thing that the war affected, some of the people, some of the men that went away met and married elsewhere and didn't come back. See that was very pivotal at that time, those things happened. Then if they came back and settled here and the shul didn't decide to become Conservative, that too was a reason that they left. And then of course if their homes or their businesses were down, you know below Eighth Avenue, and the government had bought up that (tape cuts out)

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE
SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

AP: Okay. Let's, we were going back in talking about your experiences when you were in school and the fact that, in spite of the fact that you were saying that they weren't all, they weren't all positive and you had a lot of obstacles to overcome in terms of being a Jewish child, that they weren't so negative that they were experiences that you would not want your children to repeat so that you were willing to send your children to the school in the similar kind of setting. And you were going to talk about why that was, or what was happening within those experiences that made that happen.

FH: Well it was a very realistic approach to the way this world is. I mean, this was nothing that you could run away from. This was something that one faced no matter what age or what situation you were in. I myself was never, I really was very happy of the fact I was Jewish. I knew why I was Jewish, I loved the customs. I mean fortunately this came from my mother and father, and even though I had to face, I would say discrimination, I really was taught to stand up and to be very proud of what I was.

I can remember when I was in high school I was on the debate team and there was a situation where we had some individuals, there was a conference at Saint Vincent's in Greensburg. And you have to know that that's a very Catholic town and a very Catholic situation. And the, this was a situation where you would judge, you would go in as a team, but you were judged individually. And there was a huge cup that one won if you had the most points. And you debated with your debate partner, but the points were given as individuals. And I can remember, my maiden name was Stahlberg, and I can remember the feeling of going into this Saint Vincent's with all this statuary with all these priests, and with all these obviously Catholic young men running around. But I debated and I did the best that I could. And I'll never forget, the one priest was judging me and he wanted the names of the, and wanted us to repeat our names, and my name was Stahlberg and he knew it was Stahlberg because it was written down and he said, "Your name's Goldberg?" And I said, "No. It is Stahlberg." And I spelled it out S-T-A-H-L-B-E-R-G. And I was very adamant. I want you to know that I won the cup. And I brought it back to our school which was just absolutely wonderful. Only one person could win that cup, and then each year it was rotated. But I consider that a great victory, that I went there with obviously people who were not pro-Jewish or whatever, but they did, obviously I, that was a small victory. But I'll never forget what experience it was standing up for what I really was. And felt that they should judge me on what my presentation was about.

AP: So you really developed a very nice, positive sense of yourself.

FH: Oh you had to. And really as I lived in the community and was active in the community, even after our children were going to school here, I was president of the Parent Teachers Association up here for about three years, and really got to know, when you're on a board and people get so relaxed and they're so involved with doing what they need to do for the school, they didn't see me as Jewish. And learned to respect a lot of the direction that I gave them and I can remember, once being there was a major contest for school board and there was a Catholic running and there was a Protestant running and it was so heated that I actually heard one of the women say, "Well you know what, we

ought to just put in a Jewish person there." And I thought, they've all come a long way. And I also saw that they are so intense about their feelings for one another even though they're both Christian, I often wondered where did they have time to hate Jewish people?

AP: So you're saying what the Catholics and the Protestants...

FH: Oh it was very intense out here, oh yes. And I think once you live among them, and understand what goes on in their churches, as a matter of fact even though they're Christian there's such a difference between the Methodists and the, I mean each of them, and they just want to be, they just you know, they just want to understand and respect their own, they're comfortable with people of like areas. But I really saw, as we worked together on things, that we overcame that, and it wasn't tokenism, they really genuinely had respect for each other and I consider that very valuable. And all those lessons were very meaningful to me as I worked, you know as I went on to my career, I was always in contact with so many people but I think these lessons of getting along and respecting the other person's values and desire to do something the way they were taught to do it. I think that the roots were here in this community and I think that knowing that served me very well.

AP: Now do you find that people who live in Homestead Park now tend to be people who lived in the Homestead Park and Munhall...

FH: Many, yes. And I think what is going to happen from this generation, what will happen five years from now I don't know, but really that was very typical of this area. Three and four generations lived in this area because they worked in this area. If they had anything to do with the mills either in a labor capacity or in a supervisory capacity. You know if your father worked, the son worked, the uncle worked, and, yes, generations stayed in the area and they were very proud to stay in this area, there was a lot of pride.

AP: So partly when you're here, you're part, I think what I'm hearing you say is that you're part of a larger community too.

FH: Yes, oh it was definitely a community. Right.

AP: Living here is different from if you lived in some other suburb like Mount Lebanon or something like that.

FH: Well, you know I'm here and I'm comfortable here. We are very comfortable here. But this isn't where our total interest is. We are where our interests are, and we're in Squirrel Hill, and in Pittsburgh, or in McKeesport, and we go where ever our friends or our interests are. I mean our involvement in the Munhall-Homestead Park community is practically nil. There was a time when the community was viable and the synagogue was viable and it was part of B'nai B'rith. Yes we were part of, we were involved in the community, involved in shaping it and trying to make it a fine place to live. And the community was enriched with the influence of Jewish people. But that's not there now. Other than in the business community there, you still see Levines on the avenue or Sol

Post but that's, it's minimal, I mean it's faded. The mills are gone. The shul is gone. It's, we're talking history.

AP: A sort of vanishing...

FH: This is history. And I don't see it coming back, it's never going to come back. But you see we were very realistic about it and chose an alternative way to have our cultural and our religious enrichment in other ways, in other places.

AP: And is that generally what happened with other people in the community as well?

FH: Mhm. Yes.

AP: Is there a difference, somehow in terms of the connection between the people who stayed in this area and the people who moved to Squirrel Hill and just kept their businesses open over here?

FH: In what way?

AP: Well I just wondered because some of the people moved to Squirrel Hill.

FH: Yes.

AP: And I guess what I was wondering is what made some people stay here versus the ones who moved and just came back to take care of their businesses?

FH: I think some had family here, and may have wanted to stay with their family. And others look toward the future and knew that it would never be, that it had peaked, and for their children and grandchildren, they wanted a more Jewish environment such that Squirrel Hill or East End offered them.

AP: So it was just these other little, whatever these other little ties were that had them stay or go.

FH: Well it was very personal. It depended on their family and, essentially, if their property was all purchased, if their business was gone, and if it's a situation, well Harold's father for example, he had a business and he had property and it was gone. Well there was no reason for them to stay here in Homestead.

AP: Oh they had some of the property that was taken by...

FH: Yeah, by the mill. Absolutely. I mean they had a home here that was up on Twelfth Avenue but once the, there was no reason for them to stay here. And they subsequently joined Shaare Torah, my father-in-law belonged to Shaare Torah and enjoyed that synagogue very much.

AP: Did Harold ever want to leave? Were you always together on this idea of staying in the area?

FH: Harold wanted after the war, he really looked at Houston and thought he'd like that very much.

AP: Oh he wanted to leave altogether?

FH: Yes, and he thought that was a growing city at the time. And I really wanted to come home. And it wasn't anything cast in stone it was just an idea, once you travel around, I mean we had no family there. All of our family was in Pittsburgh on both sides.

AP: But I mean in terms of the area, he didn't really have a sense that he wanted to leave this side of the river.

FH: Well, yes, we did. We lived, my mother and father lived in Munhall, and when it came time to, when we needed a home and we had the two children we did look in Squirrel Hill and it was a matter of what we could afford. And I think if we bought in Squirrel Hill it would be an older-type home that would need constant repair and there was a substantial Jewish community here and we would have a new home and you know, we just, when we evaluated it we ought to do this. And as I said to you it's been a very happy home, and we've enjoyed it. And we're still very comfortable here.

AP: That was a very nice story.

FH: Thank you.

AP: I mean all of it has a lot of substance to it and it's nice to hear a story that goes on, and it's actually a happy story.

FH: It's a very happy story. It was a happy community and if there were things that we wanted to participate in, whether it was enrichment or education or cultural things, Pittsburgh was so close that we were privy to it. And essentially we've always enjoyed the environment and it was a good, it had good values, and I think served us well and we moved on, in our work or in our relationships with other people other than the Jewish community.

AP: Well, this was a wonderful story and thanks for your time.

FH: You're very welcome.

AP: This has been Anne Sheckter Powell interviewing Florence Hiedovitz in her home in Munhall, Pennsylvania in July 1993 for the Homestead Hebrew Congregation Oral History Project of the Western Pennsylvania Jewish Archives or the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.