

Transcript of Interview with Jacob Rader Marcus
Homestead Hebrew Congregation Oral History Project
Call Number: CSS#4

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Transcribers Notes:

...	indicates an incomplete sentence
(unclear)	indicates the word(s) could not be understood
(?)	indicates that the spelling may not be correct

Transcription:

Anne Sheckter Powell: This is May 18th, 1994. And this is Anne Sheckter Powell, interviewing Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus, who is the Dean of American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio. We're having a telephone interview, which will follow. This interview is being conducted as one of the series on life in the Homestead Jewish community done for the Western Pennsylvania Jewish Archives of the Historical Archives of Western Pennsylvania.

Unknown: Dr. Marcus residence.

AP: Is Dr. Marcus in?

Unknown: Yes, one second.

Jacob Rader Marcus: Marcus.

AP: Dr. Marcus it's Anne Sheckter Powell calling from the Western Pennsylvania Jewish Archives.

JM: Yes, but you'll have to speak more distinctly.

AP: Oh that's right, I'm sorry I forgot. Can you understand me now?

JM: I can understand you.

AP: Okay good.

JM: You see because I'm a little deaf.

AP: Well...

JM: (unclear) deaf.

AP: You stop...

JM: (unclear) We thought we could turn up my volume but we can't.

AP: Well you're actually, oh so you could hear me better. Well you stop me whenever I'm not clear to you.

JM: Okay, honey.

AP: And you're very clear to me so this will be marvelous. What we of course wanted to talk to you about were the early years that you spent in the Homestead area.

JM: You're not coming through.

AP: You're not hearing me.

JM: I'm deaf, you'll have to make it as loud as you can get it.

AP: All right. As I, I'll repeat, what we want to talk with you about are your early years in the Homestead area.

JM: That's all, they were all early there.

AP: Yes. Now, if you'll be kind enough, perhaps you can tell us the dates when you lived there.

JM: Oh, I know. I came there in 1900, I left in 1907.

AP: Were you born there?

JM: No, I was born in a village in Western Pennsylvania on the Youghiogheny River, a village that was later incorporated into Connellsville.

AP: Oh, I see. So how old were you when you came to Homestead?

JM: Four years of age.

AP: And what brought your, your parents came there I take it.

JM: What's that?

AP: Your, what brought your parents to Homestead?

JM: They were immigrants and they came to Homestead to open a store. My father had been a peddler up on the Youghiogheny and then when he came to Pittsburgh he thought he had enough money to start a store.

AP: What kind of a store?

JM: Gents furnishing, clothing.

AP: Now why did he, or do you know, why he left the Connellsville area to come to Homestead?

JM: Because the Carnegie steel mills.

AP: Ah, so that seemed like a good place to have a store.

JM: That's correct.

AP: Where did your parents come from?

JM: They were Lithuanian, Litvaks, both of them. They were married in this country.

AP: Oh they were.

JM: Yes.

AP: Did they meet in Lithuania.

JM: No, it was an arranged marriage.

AP: Ah. I see. Did they have other family in this Western Pennsylvania area?

JM: No, no. They may have had some friends. And the fact that they had some friends may have induced my father to come to Pittsburgh, where my father worked, and then the friends, I think it was the friends that brought my father to Pittsburgh who introduced my mother to my father.

AP: I see, I see. Now he, so he opened a men's clothing store there.

JM: Clothing and gents furnishing is the technical term.

AP: Gents furnishings.

JM: Yes.

AP: Where was that store, do you know?

JM: Well he first started in a modest room near the railroad tracks, and then very shortly after that he was fortunate, he got a good location on the main street in Homestead.

AP: Was that Eighth Avenue, do you know?

JM: Eighth Avenue, yeah.

AP: It was, okay.

JM: And it was only about two doors from City Farm Lane, which is, was next to the mills.

AP: I see. Did he, I lost my train of thought there for a minute, did you live, did you live above the store?

JM: No. We always lived in a private house in a different part of the city.

AP: Oh. Do you know where that was?

JM: Yes, it was near the, it was I think it was near the river, near the river.

AP: Oh.

JM: In a modest neighborhood.

AP: Well I think probably most of that neighborhood was modest at that time.

JM: That's right. Lower-middle class or proletarian.

AP: So your father probably, he sold his goods to the men who worked in the mills.

JM: Yes, that is right. Because there were foreigners, Poles and Slavs and my father spoke Polish and Russian, not all Jews spoke Russian. My father had been four years, or five years, in the Russian Army, he spoke fluently, the Russian fluently.

AP: Oh he did! He had gone, he had actually been in the Russian Army.

JM: I don't hear you.

AP: I said, so he had actually served in the Russian Army.

JM: Yeah, he could not escape his conscription.

AP: Uh huh. But he lived to tell the tale.

JM: Yeah.

AP: Now you, you were there from the time you were four until the time you were eleven.

JM: Yes, that is about right.

AP: Did you have brothers and sisters?

JM: I had two brothers and a sister, and we were all born in this village called New Haven.

AP: Oh.

JM: Across the river from Connellsville.

AP: I see. So by the time your parents came to Homestead they already had...

JM: We were all alive.

AP: A large family.

JM: We were three boys and one girl.

AP: So did you start to public school in Homestead?

JM: I, yes, I started school in Homestead.

AP: And your parents also went, what was the situation in terms of the synagogue at the time that you were there?

JM: There was a synagogue, as far as I recall. And we had a rabbi, a very decent person, his name was Mendelson, and he was very kind. We had a cheder, a Hebrew school after class from about four o'clock to about seven. And the rabbi taught us in the Hebrew class, he taught us to read Hebrew, we were not taught any translation, we were taught probably some blessings and a few stories from tradition. It was an elementary training, but we all learned to read Hebrew and around seven o'clock, six o'clock, when it got dark in the winter, we observed services. In other words the children formed a minyan, of course there were less than thirteen, and they read the prayers for the evening prayer.

AP: Now you didn't do this with the adults, the children were doing this separately.

JM: This was done in the school, in the vestry room, which was called the cellar.

AP: And do you have any memory of where that synagogue was?

JM: No... it might have been Amity and it might have been Anne Street. After all I left when I was eleven.

AP: Yes, you were a very young boy.

JM: It was one of those streets about three, four blocks away from the mills.

AP: You went there what, to Hebrew school, four days a week?

JM: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, probably Friday also. But not Sunday as far as I call, I do not recall.

AP: So you have no memory of a Sunday school.

JM: No.

AP: I take it that your, were your parents observant?

JM: Yes. As far as I know all the Jews in the community, and they were more or less of East European stock if you include Hungarians, and they were all observant. In a little town like that, you can't stand out. We were all, everybody was observant.

AP: So when the...

JM: We kept a kosher house as far as I know.

AP: Do you remember if there were Jewish, let me see, when for example, the kosher food, was there a kosher butcher in the area?

JM: Yes. There must have been in Homestead, yes.

AP: I see.

JM: Because we always had kosher meat.

AP: And so your parents, as far as you can recall, didn't have to go out of the Pittsburgh area to get the supplies that they needed.

JM: No, no. We had a kosher butcher.

AP: Have you any idea, for example, where they bought their things for Passover, for example?

JM: No I don't. All I know is we had matzah for Passover. Probably everything was brought in from Pittsburgh and probably from one area, from one street, the Hill District. ...the Hill District, and occasionally I think my parents would go to the Hill District, I think, to shop.

AP: Uh huh. I was going to ask you if you have many memories of going out of the Homestead area into the...

JM: Very few because on a slow streetcar it took a half an hour to an hour to get to Pittsburgh. Today on the highways you get there in five minutes from Squirrel Hill.

AP: Yes that's right, it's very quick now. But it was a pretty much then a self-contained community.

JM: I didn't hear the last sentence.

AP: I said, then at the time that you were there people when lived in Homestead, they pretty much stayed in Homestead to take care of all their needs.

JM: Correct. As far as I know my parents never went to Pittsburgh except on a rare occasion to hear a chazzan sing.

AP: Oh.

JM: A concert of some sort, a religious concert that was a Chazzan Grafman (?) used to come I'm not sure.

AP: Did the synagogue in Homestead have a separate chazzan?

JM: No. Not as far as I know, because the man who was the school teacher was the chazzan and the schochet.

AP: Oh I see.

JM: He was an omnibus factotum.

AP: And he, this is Mendelson.

JM: Yes. That's the one I remember.

AP: And he was also the rabbi for the synagogue.

JM: Yes.

AP: I see.

JM: He was the omnibus factotum.

AP: Yes, it sounds like he was. Do you have a memory of other, of any interactions with the rest of the Jewish community when you were there?

JM: Well no, but everybody was orthodox, most of, a number were Litvaks, some were Hungarians. It was a mixed group but they got along very well as far as I know. Some were a little better dressed than the others. I can recall a woman, a Hungarian, more or less of a peasant type, but a Jewish woman, force feeding a goose.

AP: Oh!

JM: That's European. They force feed them then they have a very rich liver.

AP: Yes for chopped, what they call pate or whatever.

JM: Yes, whatever they called it. They called it gehakte leber.

AP: Yes, by Jews that's what they call it.

JM: So then of course I have a few memories of the Sunday school, the Sabbath, the religious school on the whole very favorable, I had no objection going to the cheder at night from four to seven. Although as I, believe I was a kid from eight, nine, ten, eleven, whatever I was and just one incident that might be interesting, I had an older brother who was praying the evening prayer, he was praying by himself. It was called Shemoneh 'Esreh, the Eighteen Benedictions.

AP: Yes.

JM: He was standing, and you're not supposed to talk, and another boy I don't remember his name, he was part of the Heeps family, H-double E-P-S.

AP: Yes.

JM: He came along and stuck a pin into my brother. My brother was standing at attention praying, he flinched but didn't say anything, then when he finished his Eighteen Benedictions, he walked over to the stove, there was a stove in the middle of the room where they heated, kept heated the cellar, there was no central heating.

AP: Oh so it was a coal stove.

JM: A coal stove, right right. And his skates were on top of the stove in order to, that's where he put them, probably to get the snow off them, and my brother who was at the time, oh I might have been eight, ten or eleven, my brother picked up a skate, walked over to Heeps who had pricked him with a pin and he slashed Heeps across the nose and almost took his nose off.

AP: Oh my.

JM: Because Heeps had disturbed his service.

AP: And what was the poor rabbi doing?

JM: What?

AP: I said what was the, what did the rabbi do?

JM: He was faced with a fait accompli.

AP: That's true. Did any girls, in your memory, attend the Hebrew school?

JM: Certainly not. This was before the nineteenth amendment, whatever it was. Women don't count.

AP: Did you have sisters as well as brothers?

JM: Did I have what?

AP: Did you have sisters?

JM: I had one sister, she was a twin of my younger brother.

AP: Oh.

JM: So there was a twin.

AP: Now was she given any religious education?

JM: None whatsoever.

AP: Uh huh.

JM: And didn't know the blessings as far as I know.

AP: Oh really.

JM: Bear in mind, as a matter of fact, bear in mind that my parents were Europeans and they, women didn't have much, weren't given very much in those days.

AP: No. What about your mother? Was your mother able to read Yiddish or Hebrew?

JM: Oh yes. My mother was, came from a better family than my father. Her father, my mother's father was the local physician, although he was not a diploma physician, he was a physician who had trained, he was an apprentice physician, and her family was a family with some Jewish culture and general culture and my grandfather on my maternal side, that's my mother's father, my great grandfather was a Talmudic genius, as a prodigy, as a child. So I inherited magnificent genes.

AP: Yes you certainly did. Now they, none of them came to America, is that right?

JM: My father, grandfather did, the physician.

AP: Oh he did.

JM: The doctor. He came to America and decided that America was a godless country and returned.

AP: Oh!

JM: He brought two daughters, one of the daughters went back, she later married and came back to America and lived in Connellsville. But my mother stayed, my grandfather walked out and left her, and she got a job working in a factory, but a better class factory, it wasn't a sweatshop. She worked in a factory owned by German Jews where they made women's garments as far as I know. And my mother was there until she came to Pittsburgh, and I don't know exactly when and how, maybe that's when the marriage was arranged. She married my father.

AP: I see. So when she was working in the factory, that factory was not in the Pittsburgh area.

JM: No, she was working in New York City.

AP: I see, so she had come from New York here.

JM: It was a better factory and the factories owned by the German-Jews who made women's garments were often very modern, light, good light, good ventilation.

AP: So it's not like we think of with the sweatshops.

JM: No, sweatshops, there were a lot of sweatshops, I've seen some figures, there were a thousand sweatshops in New York City, but there were also some factories that were first class factories and very modern.

AP: I see.

JM: And I get my information from an article published in 1893, when the National Council of Jewish Women was organized, and they invited a distinguished educator, a woman, Jewish woman from New York City to speak on the problem of the Jewish Woman apparel worker in New York City.

AP: I see, well that's very interesting because I think we all have a different image...

JM: We have an image of everything as sweatshops.

AP: Exactly, that that's the only...

JM: (unclear) emphasize the genre.

AP: Exactly, exactly. And you don't get the broader spectrum of everything that was happening. But to come back then to the Homestead experience, do you have recollections going to services with your parents?

JM: No, I don't recall. I probably did. I do know when there was a bris, a circumcision we all went because we wanted the cake. There was always cake at a circumcision.

AP: And a little wine.

JM: I'm sure that if my father went, we went. Because later when we left Homestead and went to a different city and I was growing up, I was eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, always went to service with my father. My father would certainly take us to services. I presume, I do not know, I cannot recall ever once having been at a service. It may be because I was never in Homestead older than eleven.

AP: Exactly.

JM: --- I do not know.

AP: Do you, did your father keep his business open on Saturdays?

JM: Of course. Everybody was open Saturdays, nobody was closed on Saturday, nobody. We were all merchants, we were all open on Saturday, that was a big day the workmen got paid from the mills and they came in and patronized the Jews.

AP: I see. Do you have any idea what holidays they closed, did they close the stores at all?

JM: Yes. I'm pretty sure at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur they were all closed.

AP: I see.

JM: Positive. There was a lot of social control, and nobody would dare be open as far as I know, I think I would recall.

AP: What about, do you remember any kinds of community, Jewish community, observances of any of the other holidays?

JM: I didn't get the last sentence.

AP: Yes. I wanted to know if you have any recollection of the Jewish community observing any of the other holidays?

JM: No recollection.

AP: Uh huh.

JM: Except Fourth of July. Fourth of July everybody went almost berserk, they went to my father's store or one of the other stores and bought a nickel plated revolver for three or four dollars, bear in mind this was almost a hundred years ago.

AP: Yeah.

JM: I'm in my upper-nineties. And they got ammunition blanks, and walked up and down the street on the Fourth of July strictly at night, shooting up with their cheap revolvers.

AP: Huh. This is Jews and non-Jews.

JM: What's that?

AP: This is the whole community.

JM: Not the Jewish community, the goyim, the Gentiles.

AP: Yes, I understand. Do you recall any of your relationships with that non-Jewish community?

JM: Only this, we looked upon them as superiors, because we were the children of immigrants.

AP: Oh.

JM: We were humble. And we thought that they were Jesus H. Christ. Later on, years later, I went back to the city, and these Christians who we thought were God's elect, were just ordinary Christians with ordinary jobs and we were college men and we were far superior to them.

AP: Mhm.

JM: Is that clear?

AP: Absolutely.

JM: Everything was relative. But as we were growing up, and the children of immigrants (unclear), we stopped at the native Americans, who were very superior, elite, and our superiors, whatever that meant.

AP: Did your parents speak Yiddish at home?

JM: We spoke Yiddish at home, oh I would say for many years, so that Yiddish was my mother tongue. Despite that fact that I was born here and my parents were married here.

AP: You mean that was...

JM: Up to the present day I know Yiddish. I cannot speak Yiddish because as we became articulate and we started going to the public schools as little kids, we always answered our parents in English not in Yiddish. So none of my siblings spoke Yiddish, but all understood Yiddish well.

AP: I see. But when you were a child before you went to school, were you taught Yiddish before you learned English?

JM: We were not taught Yiddish.

AP: You just picked it up.

JM: That was the language in the house.

AP: Okay you just picked it up.

JM: And if we didn't know Yiddish we couldn't eat.

AP: Do have any recollections of public school in terms of how it was to be a Jewish child in a largely non-Jewish...

JM: Yes. We didn't experience any anti-Semitism, everybody was a foreigner.

AP: I see.

JM: The school we attended were mostly Slavs and Poles, one or two things were outstanding. I was a slow learner, that I recall. And the, I remember my teacher and the principal of the school trying to get me, trying to teach me to read a word, and they had trouble. But they persisted. And then another thing I recall that I will never forget, when I was about six or seven we heard a report that one of our schoolmates, who was a bad boy, a Gentile, had been sent to a reformatory. Bear in mind he could not have been more than six or seven years of age.

AP: My.

JM: Maybe eight.

AP: Do you have any memories of your parents talking about crime in the area?

JM: What?

AP: Crime.

JM: I was a criminal.

AP: You were the criminal.

JM: Yes, what happened once, I came home walking from school when I was about seven years of age and there was a peddler, in those days baker's peddled their goods. I saw a pie. We didn't have pie at home, pie isn't a Yiddish (unclear), so I stole a pie, the baker saw me, chased me home, and my mother had to pay for the pie. A huge pie, five cents. Then I also ran with some Gentile kids and they would steal soap from the boarding houses, where the Slavs were boarding, they would steal soap because they were so impoverished that they couldn't afford to buy soap, and I'd run with them, we were in a gang.

AP: Oh my.

JM: And Halloween night, gangs, these, we were all kids six, seven, eight, nine years of age, would go along the allies in Homestead with huge poles and would turn over outdoor johns.

AP: Oh, oh I see. The outhouses.

JM: Is that clear?

AP: Yes.

JM: That was the fun on Halloween night. There was also an Irish gang in town of young men, boys rather, when we would try to sell newspapers on a Sunday, they took our papers away from us. They controlled the newspaper business.

AP: What did they, did they charge protection if...

JM: No, no, they just simply took our papers away.

AP: They just took them.

JM: We were out of business. And when I was eight years, seven years of age, that would be 1903 I think, I was seven years of age, my father gave me a batch of buttons, campaign buttons, Theodore Roosevelt and a man named Fairbanks were running for office, national office, and I sold all my campaign buttons.

AP: Oh you sold them.

JM: And when I came home and wanted to give my father the money, I sold them mostly in saloons, I was seven or eight years of age, I reached in my pocket, my purse was gone. My purse had been picked in saloons by professional pick-pockets.

AP: My heavens. So it was really a, you certainly had a streetwise kind of experience there.

JM: I don't hear you.

AP: I said you were sort of like a streetwise child growing up in Homestead.

JM: I was very streetwise and some of these people with whom I ran, kids, also seven, eight years of age, not only stole soap from the boarding houses, would go into a drug store and there was some candies exposed, chewing gum and other things, and we'd steal those. And that continued as long as I, I must have stopped when I was about oh, nine, let me figure now, let's say about 1906 I was nine or ten years of age. By that time my whole life had been changed. My father bought me a membership in the Carnegie Public Library. That was one of the first libraries that Carnegie built.

AP: Yes. But he had to buy a membership?

JM: Yes because it wasn't books, it was a gymnasium and a pool.

AP: Oh and that part of it was not free.

JM: No.

AP: I didn't know that.

JM: And then I began to read, and by the time I was, let's see 1906, I was ten years of age, I had read dozens of books by an English writer called George Henty, H-E-N-T-Y. You see my genes had begun to...

AP: Make themselves known.

JM: Make themselves known and I was a voracious reader, and my whole life has been dominated by that because I read history books, and when I began to move forward in life and make a career I have made it as a historian.

AP: Yes, you certainly, so you started that early in your life.

JM: Yes, that is correct. When I was in, when I left Pittsburgh and later on became a freshman in high school in West Virginia, I was always the best student in the history class, and that was also true at the Hebrew Union College.

AP: Well obviously because you've had a very distinguished career.

JM: Yes.

AP: But you had certainly a different kind of beginning. How did your parents...

JM: You'll have to talk up.

AP: What did your parents do, or what was their reaction to your friendships with these non-Jewish misbehaving children?

JM: Among the East European immigrants, this applies generally, nobody paid any attention to the children. They were totally ignored and they grew up by themselves for better or for worse. There was no concept of rearing children. You had to know the blessings. If you were bad you got a smack, physical punishment was frequent. Frequently also severe. In other words the mores and traditions and customs of Europe were brought over here, at least I assume they were. Spare the rod and spoil the child.

AP: Was that also true of the teachers both in the synagogue and in the public school?

JM: No. Nobody ever laid a hand on me.

AP: Or, oh.

JM: In New York and other places, the rebbes in the Hebrew school used to beat the kids, nobody ever beat anybody in Homestead.

AP: In Homestead.

JM: Rabbi Mendelson was a gentleman and courteous.

AP: Oh that's wonderful. What about in public school? Did the teachers physically punish the children?

JM: Yeah, there was always a rattan, I was never punished with the rattan, as it's called.

AP: But there were children who were.

JM: I presume, I never saw them whipped.

AP: You never saw it.

JM: But I knew there were rattans around. That I recall very definitely.

AP: I see. What about Christian holidays like Easter and Christmas.

JM: A lot of the Slavs were Greek Orthodox. And when their holidays would come around and they were different from the Protestant and Catholic holidays, these Greek Orthodox Russians would celebrate with lights and little miniature houses and the like, and it was all picturesque, but we paid no attention to them. We also didn't pay much attention when the Poles had a wedding, these Polish weddings lasted sometimes six, seven days. They got drunk, but they danced for six, seven days in a hall, and we'd come around sometime and watch these things. And all these Jewish families in town including ours had a servant in the house, for the very simple reason you could get a

Polish or any type of East European Gentile girl to work for three dollars a week, starting at six in the morning and going 'til eight at night.

AP: She didn't live with you though.

JM: What's that?

AP: The servant did not live in your house.

JM: Yes they did. They all lived in the house.

AP: Oh they did. Oh I see.

JM: They stayed in the house and worked in the house.

AP: I see. So and did your mother also work in the store with your father?

JM: Yes. Primarily Saturday night, but she also in the house did the cooking and everything. And I recall one particular event, it was Halloween night, it was a Saturday night, I think or something like that, and I had a false face of a devil. I came home about eleven o'clock, ten at night, the maid was sleeping in the kitchen, probably had a cot. When she saw me she starts screaming in Polish, "The devil!" (unclear). She started to scream. And my mother came home then, tired, frustrated, working hard, Saturday was the big day in the store, and she gave me a severe beating. Neither of my parents believed in sparing the rod until we started to grow up, and I was punished severely at times even as late as my thirteenth year.

AP: Oh, until you were bar mitzvahed.

JM: Yep, that same year I was beaten pretty badly by my father, though I never held it against him. I was devoted to my father. But that generation, it was a generation also of not poverty, but hard times, panics, it was before the Federal Reserve could control panics. And my father had a lot of financial troubles, a lot of troubles. And he was a very unhappy man, though he was devoted to me and devoted to his children, but when you're unhappy you take it out, and you whip and hit people.

AP: Yeah. It was a very hard life.

JM: It was a hard life. These immigrants had a tough life, don't you ever believe otherwise. There may have been some homes, and I think there were some where there was no violence, where the parents were more cultured and didn't raise their hands against the children. My home was not that type of home.

AP: And that was both your parents who would do that.

JM: Yes both.

AP: And you don't remember, let me see if I understand this correctly, pretty much you remember growing up on your own, you don't remember spending a lot of time with your parents.

JM: None whatsoever. May I make that categorical statement?

AP: Yeah. Well I just wanted to be sure.

JM: The only time I recall, I don't know whether it was in Homestead or a later time, it might have been in Homestead. My father would open up a Hebrew bible, he knew Hebrew quite well, he was not an ignoramus, and he would read from the Prophets and tell me how wonderful their teachings were. So although my father's family were all farmers, but even in those days in Russia, because they did not go to public school, children got a Hebrew training until they were thirteen, so they were, parents were at home in Hebrew.

AP: Did your father also make a Seder during Passover?

JM: Yes I'm sure of it. I don't recall it, but he wouldn't have dreamed of not having one. I don't recall.

AP: Do you have any, did you have any idea of children who were poorer than you?

JM: No, we were all very humble. But in period from 1900 to 1906, '07 was a bad year, my father went bankrupt that year. 1900 to 1906 the mills were going full blast. People were well paid, they worked twelve hours a day for a dollar. And my father made some money, and everybody was more or less prosperous. There were no poor people as far as I know in the Jewish community. And if you would ask me how many families there were, I'm guessing now, I would say at least twenty families in town, maybe twenty-five.

AP: And that's...

JM: They had their own building, their own shul building.

AP: So it was enough that you felt you were part of a community.

JM: Yeah, we were definitely part of the community. We knew we were a Jewish orthodox community. And we had various types of East Europeans and Central European Jews, but no Germans as far as I know. Though we had some Hungarians that spoke German.

AP: Oh because of the occupations and the changes and the borders.

JM: Yes.

AP: I take it that the, was it a panic in 1907, it was a depression?

JM: Yeah but not, we didn't experience it until we left, by 1907 we were out in Pittsburgh, then my father who had made money and opened a little department store on the Southside, Birmingham, lost everything and became bankrupt. 1907 was a bad panic year.

AP: Oh so he didn't leave, you didn't leave Homestead because of this panic, you left before that.

JM: Well conditions began to be bad in Homestead, we were not making any money, and father was eager to improve himself so around 1906 or '07, I do not know when, probably '07, he moved out of Homestead, went to Birmingham at the Southside of Pittsburgh, on the other side of the Monongahela, and he opened a small little department store.

AP: Oh.

JM: And within a year or so he was bankrupt.

AP: Huh. What did he call, was the store just called Marcus's when he had the store in Homestead.

JM: I think he had A. Marcus out on the thing, I think, I'm not sure.

AP: And then when he, well I guess he didn't have this little department store very long...

JM: Also he may have had his name on the door, or the windows or above the door, I do not recall.

AP: And you don't know why he chose the Southside.

JM: Say that slowly.

AP: I said, do you know why he chose the Southside as the next place to go?

JM: Because the Southside, all the Southside is, you can tell if you're a Pittsburgher, was steel mills.

AP: Of course. But that would be similar to Homestead.

JM: Jones and Laughlin, Oliver, Mesta Machine, I remember the names.

AP: Yeah, that's right.

JM: Later on of course you had a Jewish outfit, the Levinsons.

AP: Right, exactly. You're absolutely right on all of those.

JM: I knew the Levinsons.

AP: Yes, so do I. Or some of them anyhow. But did the Southside seem to be a more prosperous area than Homestead?

JM: No. We were there only for about a year. And then my father became bankrupt and he moved out to West Virginia hoping to improve his lot.

AP: Uh huh, and why did he chose West Virginia?

JM: Somebody must have told him. And he went from the frying pan to the fire. And he suffered for years and years until World War One broke out. Then we couldn't make a living in Wheeling, we moved out into the mountains where there were no Jews, in a village, there my father made enough money to retire on.

AP: Where was that? Where was the village?

JM: Central West Virginia. It wouldn't mean anything to you, it's about ten miles outside of a town called Fairmont.

AP: Yes, of course.

JM: Between Fairmont and Mannington. He made enough money to retire and you ask, how much of an income did he have when he retired, he had a thousand dollars a year and could live on that comfortably.

AP: And did he stay in this little town in West Virginia?

JM: He stayed there until he made the money and then he left.

AP: Oh he did. So you grew up in a town where there were no Jews.

JM: And the town was called Farmington, we were the only Jews in township, that means thirty-six square miles.

AP: And so were you able to have Jewish observances there?

JM: The nearest town with a shul where my father and mother and my older brother were active was twelve miles away, but there was an inter-urban streetcar line, and for a while my father got his kosher meat from this town Fairmont. But after a while it was so unsatisfactory that my father began to buy meat, no pig meat of course, no swine's flesh, from the local butcher who butchered every day. But in general my father tried to keep a kosher house, and when he had to kill a chicken he slaughtered it and recited the blessing, he was a shochet, he acted as a shochet.

AP: Yes. When you were living in these various towns, since you had a number of experiences of being quite a minority...

JM: Where?

AP: When you were living in West Virginia.

JM: Yeah I see. They had no use for us and they would not patronize my father.

AP: Oh so West Virginia was a more difficult place to live than...

JM: That's true, but my father made money during the war.

AP: I see.

JM: They had to come to my father's store because he spoke Polish and Russian, and these were Poles and Russians.

AP: Who were living in West Virginia?

JM: Yes.

AP: I see.

JM: They weren't living in West Virginia, they were working in the coal mines. And they were also dependent upon my father if they started killing on another, my father was the interpreter for the local courts.

AP: Huh. I see, but it was a harder life as Jew there I take it.

JM: Well, by that time I had very little, I had no problems. I went to the Hebrew Union College when I was fifteen years of age.

AP: Fifteen.

JM: The college took students as freshman in high school.

AP: Oh so you didn't go to high school.

JM: It was a nine year course.

AP: I see, so you didn't go to high school in West Virginia, you...

JM: Yes I did, I had one year.

AP: And was it unpleasant?

JM: No. Although the principal of the high school was a Jew, he also taught Greek, and he chewed tobacco. However, chewing tobacco was more or less a matter of local pride. The largest tobacco chewing company in the world was in Wheeling, West Virginia, where we lived called Mail Pouch.

AP: I thought so.

JM: And the teachers were normal school graduates, most frequently incompetent and ignorant, so that I failed in geometry and I failed in algebra. And failing in algebra profoundly influenced my life, I had no background. However when I left West Virginia and went to the college as a fifteen year old student and went to a first class high school in Cincinnati, where I had failed geometry in West Virginia, I made a ninety-five to a hundred in Cincinnati.

AP: How did you get the idea to go to a school of that type and that time?

JM: I had no ideas at all. The local rabbi, knowing I could read Hebrew, and liking me very much, he saw something in me that I probably didn't see in myself, and he urged me to go to the Hebrew College and that's where I ended.

AP: I see. So it was through a...

JM: At the age of thirteen, I started to study with him, and at the age of fifteen I was a freshman at a nine year theological school.

AP: So this rabbi, this was a rabbi in Fairmont, is that right?

JM: No, no in Wheeling.

AP: Oh this is in Wheeling, okay.

JM: In the mountains, I was already a student at the college.

AP: Oh I see.

JM: But I spent my summers at home.

AP: How did your parents feel about you going away as a young man?

JM: Didn't bother them at all.

AP: Uh huh.

JM: For my father it was a chance for me to get an education, and my mother wasn't particularly interested.

AP: I see. Did they charge tuition?

JM: No. Oh no. Not only they didn't charge tuition, you could borrow enough money to live, or if you worked real hard you could make a scholarship.

AP: I see.

JM: I made scholarships about half the time and borrowed the other half of the time. But when the Depression hit in the thirties and I owed the college money, it took me ten or fifteen years to pay my debt, and my huge debt to the college was about a thousand dollars.

AP: I'm sure it seemed like a very huge debt at that, it probably seemed like a very huge debt at that time.

JM: Well I didn't worry about it, I didn't have it. And because, by the end of the Depression I was teaching, I was already an instructor at the college, I was appointed from the student body to be a full-time instructor, and by that time I didn't worry about paying the college. You can't get blood out of a stone. I didn't have any money.

AP: No that's true. Were you happy there as a young man?

JM: Was I what?

AP: Were you happy living away from home as a young man?

JM: Well when I left I cried all the way up to Cincinnati, and had I known how difficult it was going to be I'd have cried even more. I was not a student in the traditional sense. I had certain capacities, but I worked very hard at college, I worked very hard. I've always had to work hard because although I have excellent genes on one hand, on the other side shall I say, my background was a farm family and I'm not as quick and fast as some others.

AP: Well you seem pretty quick to me. But that's a very inspiring story because you're really a person who made, who essentially created his life, and it certainly could have been otherwise.

JM: I have created the whole field of American Jewish History, there was nothing, absolutely nothing before me of any significance.

AP: I know that. I know that.

JM: I created the American Jewish Archives and other things and we have an archive now of about nine million pieces of paper and I've written about twenty-five or thirty hard cover books.

AP: But the original intent when you went to school there, the objective...

JM: Was that word intent, I don't understand.

AP: They were, the intent, the training at the Hebrew College was for people to become rabbis.

JM: That is right, and I trained to be a rabbi and before I graduated I was invited to stay on the faculty as a member of the faculty, and the price that they gave me, that they paid me was sixty percent of the going price for a rabbi. So I started with an annual salary of two thousand and a time when the rabbi got twenty-four hundred dollars.

AP: I see. But you decided that being a scholar was more what you were interested in.

JM: I can't hear you.

AP: I said, I take it what you discovered in the course of your studies was that it was rather than the rabbinate you were interested in history.

JM: I was not interested in rabbinate, never wanted to be, and never was a full-time rabbi. All my life has been with the college since 1911, except for two years, I was with the American Expeditionary Force as a soldier in France.

AP: Oh.

JM: And also I spent four years in Europe getting a degree at what was possibly the biggest university in Europe. That was the University of Berlin. I left the college on leave-of-absence to go to Europe and to get a better education.

AP: When were you, and so you've always seemed to have an image in spite of everything of...

JM: I always had what?

AP: You always seemed to aspire to some, something larger in terms what would happen...

JM: Sure, I wanted to be somebody, I was a very ambitious boy.

AP: Were you when you were young?

JM: No.

AP: No.

JM: No, no. Except, by the time I was an eighth grader in West Virginia, in Wheeling, West Virginia, by that time I had begun to hit my stride, and I was probably the best student in the eighth grade. By that time I was twelve years of age I guess. I had begun to hit my stride. And then the following year the rabbi in West Virginia trained me to go to the college. He started when I was thirteen, at fifteen I went to the college. And I never, I came in in 1911, and I have never left the college.

AP: What were the years when you went to the University of Berlin?

JM: '22 to '25 but I went to other universities, credits are interchangeable if you want to put it that way in Germany, and so I went to two universities, I went to the University of Thiel on the North Sea for a semester, but most of the time I spent in Berlin, and there was also a Jewish college that trained rabbis (tape cuts out)

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE

TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

AP: (tape cuts in) in Germany?

JM: Very much so, and I kept a diary and recorded it, but I thought they were crazy, when they, Nazis started that was 1923. So I have a diary which is in the archives, and I recorded all of that.

AP: Oh you did.

JM: I saw anti-Semitism on every side, but I poo-pooed it.

AP: Because you...

JM: I hadn't, I never dreamt in my wildest dream there would be a Holocaust. That had never occurred in history.

AP: No, who could have imagined such a thing as that. Did the Jews who you knew in Germany feel...

JM: You'll have to talk louder if you want me to hear you.

AP: Okay. When you met Jews in Germany, who were German Jews, were they as, as aware, as sensitive to the anti-Semitism as you who were coming from...

JM: I was not sensitive, I thought they were crazy. It didn't disturb me and I don't think the Germans worried about it either. This was the Weimar Republic, it was liberal, they didn't dream that anything would happen.

AP: So everyone sort of thought of it as an aberration.

JM: That's right. An aberration.

AP: Did it seem very different to you at that time from the kinds of anti-Semitism you had seen in the United States?

JM: I thought they were crazy. I had experienced anti-Semitism in the United States too, when I was a kid living in Homestead, as a matter of fact.

AP: In Homestead?

JM: On one occasion. We made an excursion to Connellsville, and on the way back I was about six years of age, maybe seven, and I put my head out of the window in McKeesport where we stopped to leave some people out. And somebody screamed at me, from outside, "Put your head in you goddamned Jew." I was seven years of age.

AP: And you had never heard anything like that before.

JM: I don't recall, because I lived in a tight little community among Jews and Slavs and Poles. And these Poles, when I knew them, they didn't have any kids, there were a lot of unmarried ones and I had no Polish associates.

AP: So your experience...

JM: I associated only with Jews in Homestead.

AP: Except when you were in school.

JM: I, yes, in school I had no Gentile friends.

AP: Oh, you did not.

JM: No, I have no recollection ever of speaking to other children.

AP: Well what about these kids that you used to run, that you got in trouble, that you got in trouble with, they were not Jewish right?

JM: The kids were all Gentiles.

AP: Uh huh.

JM: Gentiles from humble homes. Proletarian mill workers and the like. Sat at the bottom of the heap.

AP: Right. So those children that you were...

JM: I ran with some of those yes. That is right. In fact my, I recall now, you might say my constant companion was the son of a Scotsman, and he had a humble position in the steel mill.

AP: So there were, you did have some interactions with non...

JM: Yes, but I wasn't conscious of being a Jew and he accepted me as a, as a buddy.

AP: Just as another immigrant's child.

JM: Yes.

AP: So your experiences in Homestead in terms of anti-Semitism were different from your experiences when you moved to West Virginia.

JM: I don't recall at any time that I ever was reproached in Homestead as a Jew. Bear in mind it was mill town where everybody was a foreigner. You were a hunky, or a, and that was it.

AP: So...

JM: Most of them were Slavs and they were all called hunkies.

AP: Yeah, I thought those were Hungarians. Were, in West Virginia was it a more insular community?

JM: West Virginia, I'm trying to think, yes, there was more prejudice. I can't think of instances, but there was more prejudices. By that time I was already twelve, thirteen, fourteen years of age. But I didn't experience any in the public school, in high school, I didn't experience any in the public school either because I was a top student and the people around me who I associated with were all lower-middle class or the lower class.

AP: And they didn't resent your abilities.

JM: No.

AP: What about your...

JM: Though I didn't associate with any of them.

AP: What about your brothers and sisters, and sister, did they have, were their experiences all similar to yours?

JM: No, my older brother graduated from public school, went to a private college that trained you to be a clerk, and became proficient. Got his first job in a steel mill office and the first week they found out he was a Jew and they fired him.

AP: Ah.

JM: Wouldn't let him stay.

AP: Was that United States Steel?

JM: That was characteristic probably.

AP: Pardon me?

JM: Nobody wanted Jews. So that was that. But I didn't run into any prejudice at high school as far as I know.

AP: It was when people tried to find jobs out in that general job market that they...

JM: That's right. But when I came to Cincinnati, we ran into some prejudice in the high school.

AP: Oh. But you didn't go to that high school, did you?

JM: I came as a sophomore, and I had two years to go in high school in Cincinnati.

AP: Oh they didn't run the Hebrew university.

JM: They started as a freshman in high school, I started as a sophomore or junior.

AP: I see. But you were sent to a public high school.

JM: Yes. Hebrew Union College met from three to six at night.

AP: I see. I thought...

JM: You went to the high school from eight to two, and the university from eight to two, and then you went to the college from three to six for nine years.

AP: I see. Oh, so it was run in conjunction with a secular program.

JM: That is correct. I went to two schools at one time. And when you went to university and you went to Hebrew college, you went thirty hours a week for which to prepare, fifteen hours at the college and fifteen hours at university.

AP: And you say that going to school in Cincinnati you also encountered anti-Semitism there.

JM: I, what happened is the Gentiles wanted nothing to do with Jews. And there were fraternities, and no Jews in the fraternities. They were kept away from them. There was no social contact there at all. And the Jews lived by themselves in the university, and because they were excluded they established, Jews joined an anti-fraternity organization. And there was such an organization at the university. Anti-fraternity.

AP: That's interesting. So you, you had a variety of experiences just in the course of growing up before you developed this wonderful career you would go on to have.

JM: Yeah. That's right.

AP: And it was certainly in a world beyond the traditional Jewish world.

JM: Certainly.

AP: So, I guess what I'd like to do is ask you now, rather than just to follow my own questions, whether you have some kinds of observations or comments that you would like to share.

JM: No, I have no comments. Except, Homestead, getting back to Homestead, was a city of poverty, I can still recall two things that I'll tell you, then I'll let you go. The poor people along the railroad tracks, and railroads ran right through the town near the river, had big long poles. And as the gondolas moved into the steel mills with coal, the people, these were Gentiles not Jews, Jews never did this, pushed coal off the top of the freight cars and got their winter supply of coal.

AP: Hm.

JM: That was one thing.

AP: What an image, my goodness.

JM: Let me see what else, oh yes. Once in about 1906 Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show came to Homestead.

AP: Oh!

JM: Buffalo Bill was still alive. And so we went out to, we got money from our parents, maybe a quarter, went to the circus and saw Buffalo Bill, the real original Buffalo Bill.

AP: Where was that?

JM: Homestead.

AP: I mean do you remember where in Homestead there was a place large enough for him to appear?

JM: Well there was always a lot somewhere where Buffalo Bill's circus could be.

AP: I see. Oh how, so I assume that was quite exciting for the town.

JM: Yes.

AP: Let me ask you something else, did these towns as you remember, did you ever have any connections with the Jewish communities of the adjacent little towns along...

JM: Did I ever have any...

AP: In other words, did children or families come from Braddock or were you taken to...

JM: I don't get a word, I'm not getting a word from you.

AP: Okay. Let me try this again. The communities adjacent to Homestead.

JM: No relationship to any of them.

AP: None whatsoever. That was the question.

JM: Duquesne and Braddock, but that was a million miles away. But on occasion, I think we went to Kennywood Park, I think, I don't recall.

AP: Uh huh. So you don't remember there was school outing the way there were in subsequent years.

JM: No, no, no. Nothing like that. Conditions were very primitive in the mill town.

AP: Uh huh. Was it, I guess it was not the poorest place you remember living.

JM: I can't hear you.

AP: Was Homestead the poorest place you remember living?

JM: The poorest?

AP: Yeah.

JM: Well not necessarily. Farmington, West Virginia, they were impoverished West Virginia hillbillies, though they weren't hillbillies, they were relatively poor people. The cashiers at the bank in Farmington, West Virginia, got fifteen hundred dollars a year. That was a good salary.

AP: Those were also immigrants who lived in Farmington?

JM: No, no. They had Anglo-Saxons in the bank.

AP: Oh yeah, the bank, I know. But I mean...

JM: There was a bank in Farmington. The village of eight hundred people. He probably got the biggest salary in town, he got fifteen hundred dollars, or twelve hundred dollars. When I went to a physician in West Virginia, in my village of Farmington, he charged fifty cents a visit.

AP: Huh. Fifty cents, for the doctor.

JM: Yeah.

AP: So it sounds like the bank clerk did better than the doctor did, in terms of his income. Let's see, I guess that sort of covers what I, what we...

JM: Well I'm glad you called, honey.

AP: Oh I'm very happy to have had this chance to talk to you.

JM: I hope I was of some help to you.

AP: You were, this was a, you have a wonderful memory.

JM: Yes, I do.

AP: You certainly do, and you have this in a wonderful context, and it's of course a great privilege to have a chance to talk to you.

JM: Well I'm glad we had our chat.

AP: And I'm happy you that you have a Pittsburgh, that you have a Homestead connection.

JM: Yes dear.

AP: Okay. Thank you for your time.

JM: Okay, bye-bye.

AP: Okay, goodbye.

AP: This has been Anne Sheckter Powell recording for the Jewish Archives of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Archives, talking to Jacob Rader Marcus who has been the archivist of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, in May, May the 18th, 1994.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO