

Transcript of Interview with Robert L. Katz.
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:

Ann S. Powell: Now, now

Robert L. Katz: Ready for testing?

AP: We're ready for testing.

AP: This is Ann S. Powell interviewing Bob, I should let you say your name instead, so we can hear your voice.

RK: I am Bob Katz, and we live at 232 Vivian Drive, in Munhall.

AP: Okay.

AP: And now we're going to start. You said you came to Homestead later than your wife.

RK: We got married in 1955.

AP: And that's when you...

RK: And that's when I came to Munhall, Homestead area.

AP: You, you, where were you living before that?

RK: Aliquippa. Well I was from Aliquippa but I lived in various towns and I commuted during the holidays.

AP: You commuted?

RK: From different towns, I worked, when I came here from Munhall, I worked in Washington, Pennsylvania. Prior to that I worked in Butler, Pa. And prior to that I worked in Washington, Pa.

AP: And what were you doing?

RK: I was with Central Drug Company which later became Thrift Drug Company.

AP: And you were stocking?

RK: I was in store management in different towns.

AP: You were being...

RK: Transferred. Periodically, yes.

AP: Were you working in Homestead when you met Terese?

RK: No, at that time I was working in Washington, Pennsylvania.

AP: Oh, how did you meet?

RK: Blind date.

AP: And then did you stay with Central Drug? When you moved to Homestead?

RK: Yes, for 'til 1960.

AP: And you commuted from...

RK Yes, to Washington, to McKeesport, to Greensburg, to Ambridge,

AP: Did you, did you want to move to Munhall, was that the place of your choice?

RK: It was our choice, yes.

AP: Was it Munhall?

RK: Munhall, yes.

AP: And when you got married, did you get involved with the shul right away?

RK: I wouldn't say that, no. At the time I got married, I went to shul three days a year.

AP: And was that here?

RK: Here, oh yes.

AP: Then when you got married you became members?

RK: We became members.

AP: (unclear)

RK: Yes, the congregation.

AP: Your family was

RK: Are living in Aliquippa, Pa.

AP: And you have children here?

RK: Yes. Our daughter was born in '58 and our son was born in '64.

AP: Were they born here, in Homestead Hospital?

RK: No, Magee Hospital. We're living in Munhall. Our daughter lived in the other end of Munhall on Margaret Street. And when my son was born, we were living here.

AP: At what point did you get involved with the shul? Now you're very involved.

RK: Sort of.

AP: Until the end of it.

RK: Yes. I guess I started getting involved when my son was getting ready for bar mitzvah. In '77. I started going to Sunday minyans. And, I guess that how I got involved. And I'd take more interest at that time.

AP: It was really for your, for your son that you started to become. Was it, did they require fathers to get involved.

RK: At that time we had our son's bar mitzvah on a Monday, and in order for me to get an aliyah I had to put the tefillin on. And in order for me to put the tefillin on I had to take lessons, because I hadn't put it on for years, since I was bar mitzvahed.

AP: You had to learn to how to lay tefillin again.

RK: Yes, right.

AP: Was that true for everybody whose child was bar mitzvahed?

RK: On, Monday, we had it on Monday because of Memorial Day, we wanted the long weekend. Some of our family would rather travel on the holiday than the Shabbos.

AP: I see, and if you had the bar mitzvah during a regular Monday.

RK: A regular Monday or Thursday, you had to put the tefillin on in order to get an aliyah. Our rabbi wouldn't call anybody up unless they had the tefillin on, so I had to make sure those I called had the tefillin on before.

AP: That wasn't true if the child were bar mitzvah on a Saturday.

RK: You don't put the tefillin on Saturday. Because you had the mitzvah of being at shul on Shabbos.

AP: That's an interesting thing, I never knew that. You're the first person, I think that I think I've met in a long time that had a child bar mitzvah on a Monday. How was the rabbi when you –

RK: Rabbi Herschel Deutsch.

AP: Deutsch? He taught you again?

RK: Yes, yes.

AP: And that brought you more into the fold?

RK: I would say so.

AP: So, what happened after that, did you become an officer or whatever?

RK: Well, sort of, yes. I became active and became an officer in the chevra kadisha, and then I became involved with the congregation.

AP: You started with the chevra kadisha?

RK: uh hu

AP: Did you participate with the

RK: No, no, I'm a Kohain.

AP: Oh, you are?

RK: Yeah, my position is, I'm secretary. I take care of the checks. I made deposits.

AP: So you, you, most of the people who were actually involved with the chevra kadisha were involved with watching the body

RK: In those days yes.

AP: Do they often stay with the body.

RK: Someone sat, yes. Because we used a local funeral home in those days, and we had someone from the committee stay with the body at night.

AP: So it wasn't a Jewish funeral home?

RK: No.

AP: You were...

RK: They prepared the body at the chapel at the cemetery.

AP: Because of the fact that you were using....

RK: A non-Jewish mortician.

AP: And after becoming involved with the chevra kadisha, you went from there to becoming involved with...

RK: Yes and I was a regular attendee, and I became involved.

AP: And were they eager, were they, were they a welcoming congregation?

RK: Oh, yes, yes, very much so.

AP: And they were eager to have other people become active.

RK: I felt at home here the first time I came to shul.

AP: Very nice. Did you come from an Orthodox kind of shul before?

RK: Oh yes.

AP: So that wasn't so much of a change?

RK: It wasn't much of a change but I felt more at home here than in my own congregation in Aliquippa. I was more comfortable here.

AP: Because of the community?

RK: I would say so.

AP: It's, it's a nice circumstance to have that happen. I have to think about it. So when you got, what does it mean to get active in a shul, I mean what is involved?

RK: Well, to become active in the first place, is to attend services on a regular, or a regular basis as far as your schedule is concerned. And become involved with the decisions of the congregation, and help with their steering committee, and help give a direction or take a direction.

AP: Were there a lot of decisions to be made? Did you have a lot of choices to be made?

RK: Well at one time it wasn't progressive enough when I first joined the congregation. There's opportunity to branch out into the Park and to Pleasant Hills, and some of the congregation was very much opposed to it.

AP: How would you have branch out?

RK: Because the younger families were moving out of this area and beyond.

AP: And what would the congregation have to have done in order to...

RK: Oh, have a satellite school room.

AP: Oh, I see.

RK: For the children, because that's the backbone of the congregation. That helps the congregation grow. Once you lose the children, you have very little congregation left.

AP: The kids bring them in.

RK: Yes,

AP: Why, why were they opposed to that?

RK: Change, some of the old-timers were very much opposed to change.

AP: Would it have changed the nature of the...

RK: Change the nature of the congregation? It may have changed it, eventually, from Orthodox to Conservative. And they have.

AP: Was that the concern?

RK: I think so with some of the people.

AP: Were there already concerns that if you didn't keep the younger children it would, ultimately, become a dying congregation?

RK: There was concerns, but there just were not enough concerns by those who could do anything. Just people were moving out of the community, some moved out to Pleasant Hills, and people were moving into Pleasant Hills from other areas. There was an opportunity to enrich our community with younger people.

AP: Why Pleasant Hills? Why was that an area that attracted...

RK: Well, it was a new area, a suburbia, close to Pittsburgh, yet it's far, far enough away. And for a lot of people it wasn't as far as Monroeville or North Hills.

Some people prefer that area who have roots in this area originally, either Homestead, Munhall, Clairton, Elizabeth, out towards 51.

AP: Now when you first moved here, you lived in Munhall?

RK: Yes.

AP: Not here, here in Homestead Park?

RK: No.

AP: How long did you live in Munhall before you moved to Homestead Park? When did you move here?

RK: I'd say, we moved here in '62. I'd say about seven years.

AP: Then you were primarily here?

RK: Yes, yes. We built this house.

AP: Oh, this was all ...

RK: This was just a piece of ground.

AP: So people just came here and built specific houses, it wasn't..

RK: It wasn't a plan, no. That's why the homes are all different.

AP: I thought it was a great builder who, who was nice enough to make everything different, that you all got choose. Now that was the same time people were moving to Pleasant Hills?

RK: uh, hu

AP: Were more Jewish people moving to Pleasant Hills than were moving here?

RK: I'd say so, yes.

AP: Why was that...

RK: Why was that? Oh, I think felt they could get more ground and feel more suburbia than here. This made them too close to Pittsburgh. Five houses back of us is the city of Pittsburgh. Just across the street.

AP: Is Homestead Park part of Pittsburgh?

RK: Well, Pittsburgh is right past our street, go around the corner to Fifth Avenue, about four houses is the city of Pittsburgh.

AP: Is it still called Homestead Park?

RK Well, this is called Gates Manor, it's in Homestead Park.

AP: It's a different...

RK: Yes.

AP: A different --, And what's the part called that's already Pittsburgh?

RK: Pittsburgh seven. But it has a Munhall post office, it's a Munhall post office. It's Pittsburgh seven.

AP: But that was irrelevant anyhow in terms of ...

RK: In terms of the congregation.

AP: It just sort of places things in some sort of context. At that point, there was already a point, I'm trying to put things back to a point where you were involved in the synagogue and the decisions that were being made. Was there an argument within the synagogue separate from, the thing about having a satellite thing, about whether to be, to continue to be Orthodox?

RK: Well, we had a president that was very strong and he had a following of old, or old thinking people, people that were very much in favor of him, and he was very much against it.

AP: Who was the president?

RK: It's just the president of the congregation. It's irrelevant.

AP: Did it make a split at all in the congregation?

RK: Not really, no, it's just we stayed under his regime, and we maintained what we had for a period of time. Our son was the last one to be bar mitzvah here.

AP: Your son

RK: In '77. Yeah, in '77

AP: They didn't have any more young people? That must have been a special kind of bar mitzvah.

RK: It was special to us, yes.

AP: I mean it must have been special to the congregation. It marked the passing of an era, I guess.

RK: It was. One of the members had a wedding here about six years ago. Their grandfather was quite involved with community, a pillar of the community, and they were living in Squirrel Hill and belonged to Tree of Life and but when she got married, she asked her parents to have her wedding at our shul.

AP: And did the old congregants come back to the shul?

RK: There was, a few of them did, a few of them that were involved. They came, they came for the ceremony.

AP: That raises the question about what was the Orthodox practice in the synagogue. Was the synagogue as Orthodox as a traditional synagogue in the city? Or were there differences in practices? I mean, did people sit separate for weddings?

RK: At weddings there were, I'm trying to think. I think for a wedding ceremony they sat together, and during regular services we sat separate. The women sat upstairs and in later years they sat in the back with a divider.

AP: What about things like minor holidays, like Simhas Torah.

RK: The women sat separate from the men.

AP: They always sat separate.

RK: Yes, in the past couple of years, they left the option for the women to sit if they want to.

AP: With the men?

RK: Yes, if they wanted to. A few did. My wife still sat in the back. I sat up in the front.

AP: So they, sort of managed to maintain somewhat the Orthodox practices?

RK: I would say so.

AP: When you became active in the shul, was Rabbi Deutsch still the rabbi?

RK: For a little while. He left here, I guess, right after my son's bar mitzvah. Same year I think.

AP: Was it hard for this congregation to hold a rabbi?

RK: Yes, it became very costly with the reduced amount of funding, and we had lay rabbis and we had, we had some from the community, from the congregation, some of the older members who were well qualified to lein, to read from the Torah, and to daven.

And later on we got a fellow in from Squirrel Hill who was well versed in reading. Mr. Abraham Ash.

AP: He would just come...

RK: He would come for Saturdays and for the minor holidays.

AP: And what did you do for the major holidays?

RK: We tried to get a rabbi and a cantor, or a cantor rather, when we didn't have a rabbi. We brought a cantor in from New York or the city later on.

AP: So, this was what, the late '70 s?

RK: Yes, we had a rabbi up until maybe the late '80s.

AP: And what happened after that?

RK: We, we, had a couple of young fellows, young fellows davening, davening for us, that was formally a yeshiva student. And the last year he davened was, let's see, I think 1990. And that was the last we used him.

AP: And the congregation kept dwindling ---

RK: Oh, yeah. We were lucky to have minyan on Rosh Hashanah or Shemini Atzeret. There was a problem having minyan there.

AP: Oh, really?

RK: Yeah, it was tough.

AP: Did people stay in the area, that didn't continue to belong to the congregation?

RK: A few families. Some belonged, some belonged to the Temple, some belonged to Beth El. They had family members that belonged to Beth El. And some of them had ties with Temple Sinai or Rodef Shalom.

AP: Was that?

RK: Some belonged to Squirrel Hill. They lived there.

AP: Did you have any people who came the other way?

RK: From the Squirrel Hill area?

AP: From the congregation –

RK: By second day Rosh Hashanah we had some, we can always count on to come here. And some of the children of the families came sometimes both days, sometimes second day of Rosh Hashanah.

AP: I take it more and more of the Jewish people moved out of this area, as time went by.

RK: Yes.

AP: And, for the most part, lost them, not because they were living here..

RK: No, no.

AP: They moved to other congregations ----

RK: No, no. Those who lived here and belonged to other congregations, as far as I know, never did belong to congregation here, they belonged maybe Reform forever, I don't know, for years.

AP: Did you have very many Jewish activities in this Munhall area, besides the shul? From the point that they came here of most of the things?

RK: They had a B'nai B'rith here when we first got married. And I think, I don't think they met too much longer here. I don't remember when they broke up. I don't belong here, I belong to the city. And as far as other Jewish activities, the sisterhood was very active up until the last few years. And the sisterhood was the financial backbone of the community, raising money all the time. And as far as other organizations, I don't think they had a men's club. Maybe before that they had a men's club. Maybe they were affiliated with other men's clubs, I don't remember, that was before my time.

AP: You, yourself, from the beginning, looked to the city for you other kinds of ...

RK: I belonged to the B'nai B'rith from the time I got married, yes.

AP: Was that, were a lot of people like that who were involved in other kinds of Jewish things that went to the city to do them?

RK: I guess some, I wouldn't say a lot, I don't know.

AP: You weren't tripping over them?

RK: No, no. After I got active, I must have had three or four fellows who lived in this area join our B'nai B'rith Lodge.

AP: When one person goes it makes it easier for people other to go, carpool....How did the synagogue ultimately come to a complete close?

RK: It came to a complete close because of the physical facilities. The boiler was on its last breath. We were using, for the radiator, the fluid to stop up leaks. We put about twenty quarts maybe the week before we closed. Just to make sure the radiator, to make sure the boiler runs.

There's too many repairs to be made. And we're, for example, without repairs, we're putting out an average of a thousand dollars in expenses, heat, utilities, and we're taking in three thousand a year, so without any repairs, we're losing nine thousand dollars a year. Without repairs, okay. That was our first deficit. And then, with the repairs, the boiler, and anything else, was four, five hundred, a thousand, two thousand, it could be anything.

And, fortunately, we got out before the big storm in March of this year, because our boiler couldn't have lasted that long and the roof was bad. They had to replace that, and the people that bought it had to do extensive repairs. And the building is being used now, so to us it's still a shul. You know the shul building. We don't go in it. We know its what it is.

AP: It's a church?

RK: It's a church, yes.

AP: Were you involved in try to find a buyer for it?

RK: Yes.

AP: How did you find...?

RK: Very much so. I was instrumental in getting a buyer, I thought of the church that was on West Street needing larger facilities. I saw they were very successful there. So I contacted a local realtor, and I suggested he contact these people because I didn't want to contact them myself. I figured that what had to be done, be done by a realtor. He contacted them and they were very happy to work with him. So, the committee and I took care of selling the shul.

AP: So, you actually found the buyer yourself?

RK: Yes, I gave the suggestion to the realtor, and it worked out to be fine.

AP: So that's how you find a...you need an active person who...

RK The committee talked about selling it two years ago. And they had, they wanted to talk to someone in Squirrel Hill, they knew different realtors. And the rest of committee just gave lip service, they talked about it, but nothing was done. So, I pulled the contract

out and said, "Sign this today, we use this realtor or I'll get somebody else today. We can't wait longer." and they all agreed that we use the local realtor.

RK: I felt that it was a local community, and we should use a local realtor.

AP: That's, it seems it was a local event.

RK: Yes, it worked out to our advantage.

AP: Have there been churches closing also?

RK: Three churches closed within, I guess, a block and a half area from our former synagogue.

AP: So you were very fortunate.

RK: Oh, and how, yes, definitely.

AP: What happened to the churches?

RK: They're still for sale.

AP: Oh, my.

RK: The timing was perfect.

AP: And once the actual synagogue was closed, you still have the cemetery society.

RK: Yes, we certainly have, what is called, the Homestead Hebrew Cemetery Association.

AP: Now how did they decide the things they did, like, sending the artifacts to Beth Shalom. How did they decide all those things?

RK: Well, they offered to take it for us and we had meetings, and the, the consensus, the majority of the membership agreed to give them the aron kodesh, the ark, and the torahs. There were other suggestions to send a torah, someone's grandson wanted one in Atlanta, this one's granddaughter in Miami wanted one, and we finally decided to keep them all together at Beth Shalom. It would be better for the community. And they are going to re-establish a chapel and call it the Homestead Chapel. Our congregation is up on the fourth floor and we're waiting to get that complete.

AP: Did anybody call the shul Rodef Shalom?

RK: Oh yes, for years.

AP: I mean did anyone refer to it by its formal name?

RK: Yes,

AP: They did?

RK: Most did when she was younger. But there was some people mistake it for the Rodef Shalom of Pittsburgh, the Temple.

So they decided to change the name, to use the name of the Homestead Hebrew Congregation.

AP: So it was always the Homestead Hebrew Congregation, Rodef Shalom?

RK: Rodef Shalom Congregation, I think, was all it was originally.

AP: So they tacked, they added that on?

RK: Yes,

AP: So that's how it got the name, I never knew. When I was a little girl it was just the Homestead shul.

RK: Yes, really.

AP: That was true of a lot of synagogues. Did your Aliquippa shul have a name?

RK: Agudath Achim, AA.

AP: Oh, it did.

RK: Yeah, AA. Same as Braddock.

AP: That was the Braddock shul. Oh, did the Braddock shul close before Homestead?

RK: Oh, yeah. Well they kept open up until, I don't know, they had services for the High Holidays here.

AP: In Braddock?

RK: The Litman family used to bring a rabbi in or a cantor or lay rabbi and have services. They financed it totally. They had about ten or eleven members there or families, not necessarily living there but they would come there for the High Holidays. And the Litman family, I don't know if they still do it or not.

AP: They were keeping that –

RK: Braddock shul by themselves, yeah.

AP: And I think it is a less substantial building than this one?

RK: I've never seen it.

AP: I think, I think there is only one synagogue in Braddock. Was there any connection at all, during all this time, was there any merging all these little synagogues together? Putting their resources together?

RK: Not really, because it wouldn't be feasible. You mean like they did in Beaver Valley, like Ambridge and Coraopolis and Aliquippa? They had more, like each town didn't have enough to maintain one building.

Each town has an average of ten to twelve families. So, collectively, they may have forty families. McKee's Rocks, Coraopolis, Sewickley, Ambridge, and Aliquippa, combined. So they rotate where they have their High Holiday services. They go from Coraopolis one year, and to Ambridge or Aliquippa.

AP: Oh, I see.

RK: That's Beth Samuel in Ambridge.

AP: The people have to meet at the different sites.

RK: Yes. Here you don't have the people living in the community. It wouldn't be feasible.

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