

Transcript of Interview with Hannah Gruen
Small Town Jewish History Project
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Name of Interviewer: Eric Lidji

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Pre-interview Notes:

Transcribers Notes:

The Walter referred to in the text is Walter Jacob, Rabbi Emeritus of Rodef Shalom Congregation. Irene is Irene Jacob.

Transcription:

Hannah Gruen: [recording cuts in] ...good ol' New Castle.

Eric Lidji: Today is May 15, 2015. This is the Small Towns Project. I am Eric Lidji, I'm here with Hannah Gruen and we are in her apartment in Shadyside, I guess. Shadyside, Bloomfield.

HG: Right.

EL: And we're gonna talk about New Castle. So why don't you tell me how the family got to New Castle.

HG: Got to New Castle. Okay I guess I should start with, you don't want an answer like the doctor who said to the patient, "What brought you here?" And they said, "My '45 Ford." Anyway, you know that he was the Chief Rabbi of the city of Danzig.

EL: This is your father.

HG: This is my father.

EL: Iwan ...

HG: Iwan J. Gruen. Actually called Iwan, I-W-A-N. And he knew that things were bad there, he was called in by the Gestapo and he realized that time was of the essence. It was 1938 already, I believe, and it was already late to leave. I think it was easier leaving from Danzig at that point than it would have been from Germany.

EL: Danzig was Poland at the time?

HG: Danzig was a free and independent parcel at that time, it was called the Free City of Danzig and that came I think as a result of the Treaty of Versailles following World War I. So it was its own entity but of course the Nazis came in and took over. So he knew that he had to do something and he fortunately had a lot of contacts in Europe that helped him make contacts in America to get him a pulpit. So once he was assured that he had a pulpit in hand, then he could go and get travel documents for himself, my mother, and myself, at age four, to leave the country. So we left and we stayed in New York for a few months, and then we went to the first congregation which was in Wausau, Wisconsin, a small town. We were there I'm not sure quite how long. It was a wonderful time for him to learn English properly.

EL: So he didn't know English when he came?

HG: Well he did, he did. But his, I told you he must not have given much of a sermon that year because I don't think they understood much of what he said. Anyway he had a wonderful tutor there, his English improved, he was very active in B'nai B'rith as he had

been in Europe. And as his English improved, he was always a good speaker, and once he got that together he went on the speaking circuit for B'nai B'rith and so he learned of other places. So we went from Wausau to Oshkosh, another small town. We stayed in Oshkosh, for again I'm not sure for how long, and then we went to Decatur, Illinois, another small town. And actually the Decatur pulpit was a temporary substitution for a rabbi who had gone into the chaplaincy, whom the congregation loved, and who the congregation had promised that they would only make a two-year contract with a rabbi so that he could return when he came out of his two-year serve. So my dad went, the two years were coming to an end, they got in touch with the rabbi who really didn't say much of anything, so my dad said he needed to make other arrangements, and somehow he got to New Castle. He'd made his commitment to New Castle when the rabbi wrote back to Decatur at the very nth hour saying he had taken a pulpit elsewhere. They wanted my dad to stay, my dad would have loved to have stay, but he'd made a commitment so we came to New Castle. So between 1939 and '46 we moved that frequently.

EL: So in '46 he came to New Castle.

HG: '46 he came to New Castle. '45 or '46. Maybe in, either '45 or '46. And he was on the pulpit there until he died in March of '81.

EL: What was the Jewish community like at that time, how many synagogues, what was the size?

HG: When we first came there were two synagogues, as there always have been.

EL: And what were the names?

HG: Temple Israel, that was us, and Tifereth Israel, that was them. So anyway, it was Tifereth Israel, they were on the south side of town, we were on the north hill, have you been to, you've been to New Castle.

EL: Yeah.

HG: So you know where our temple was, which is now a, it's a, some kind of fundamentalist group bought it.

EL: Oh... I didn't realize that's what that building was.

HG: Yeah, the white building on the corner of Highland and Moody.

EL: Yeah.

HG: And then if you go down to the next block you come to Hadar Israel, that's what they named it when they merged.

EL: So Temple Israel was a Reform congregation.

HG: Absolutely.

EL: What was the observance like back then?

HG: Well, I always thought our observance was, you're too warm let me turn some, let me get this a cooler for you if I can. I always thought that our service, of course I got used to our service and I loved it, we used the Union Prayer Book, which was very Reform. I think that my dad probably added some Hebrew into it because he was a product of course from whence he came, which was not Reform, but liberal as they called it in Germany. And I always felt that we always geared, ever so slightly, more toward Conservative. Very slightly. Because when I was at Temple Emanuel in New York for instance, I found that far more Reform than what I heard in my temple in New Castle.

EL: The German Reform Jews, Liberal Jews in general were more observant than what we would...

HG: A bit more, a bit more yeah. And I can remember once saying to my dad, what actually was the major difference between Liberal and Reform, and as near as I can gather there were two big differences. One was that in Liberal, where he was, the men and women sat separately. The women were upstairs behind the curtain. But they had a huge pipe organ and choir.

EL: [laughter] Wow.

HG: Yeah, interesting.

EL: What was the observance like at home?

HG: In our house?

EL: Yeah.

HG: We had a kosher home. Although my parents ate out.

EL: Did they eat kosher-esque out?

HG: They never ate any pork products.

EL: Huh.

HG: They ate shellfish.

EL: In the home did they get kosher meat?

HG: Yeah.

EL: Was there a butcher in town?

HG: There was, when we came there was a kosher butcher and when he closed up another kosher butcher came in from, who I think originated here in Pittsburgh. And then of course there was no kosher butcher anymore. People brought kosher meat from Youngstown, and I used to shop regularly when we had three kosher markets here in Pittsburgh, which we don't have here anymore either! And used to take stuff to New Castle, plus they had some people that they knew in New York that were in the kosher business and in the wintertime they ordered stuff in. So they always managed to maintain the kosher home. Changed dishes for Passover.

EL: Really.

HG: Changed dishes for Passover.

EL: Did they have milk and meat dishes?

HG: For Passover.

EL: But what about during the rest of the year?

HG: Oh yeah.

EL: Really.

HG: Yeah.

EL: And Sabbath observances?

HG: Um, well Friday night at home, but we always had Friday night services in New Castle, there were no Saturday morning services. Everything happened Friday. Bar mitzvahs, bat mitzvahs when they began, and then there was religious school on Sundays.

EL: Was there any religious school during the week?

HG: Just the bar mitzvah boys, they were taught privately and most of them were taught in our house.

EL: So your father was also in charge of the religious school

HG: He was.

EL: Was he the only teacher?

HG: No, no. They had teachers, he was like the principal of the school. He taught confirmation class. You know obviously I'm biased, I thought that he was a terrific speaker and I thought he had a great mind. He was not good with little kids, that was not his forte. He wasn't that great with his own little kid, let along the kids at the temple. I have spoken to people that I am still in touch with and they'll all tell you that, half of them will say they were scared of the rabbi at the temple. But when they were in the confirmation class they will unequivocally say they loved it and it was the only year of their entire Sunday School that they felt they learned anything.

EL: Did you have him as a teacher?

HG: Yeah, I had him as a teacher, but you can't, you know, I was a rebel without a cause, but I thought I had a cause [laughter]. You know I was an only child, I was in a small town, I had very European parents in oh so many ways. My dad had a great sense of humor, loved to laugh, loved to tell jokes, but he was fairly rigid about a lot of things. And one of them was that I had to go to services on Friday night because if I didn't go, how could he expect any of the other kids to go. So I went and of course none of the other kids went anyway! So by the time I got to high school I had become a better negotiator, maybe was starting to grow up just ever so slightly because Friday night when you're in high school, that's football night. Football night, Friday night you go to temple, not the football game. So we were able to do some negotiating that I could go to X number of football games if I came to services the other Friday nights and that was fair so we worked out a compromise.

EL: Were the other ways that being the daughter of the rabbi impacted your life?

HG: Well I felt it did because we were always on display. You know I think in a larger congregation the rabbi and his family can get lost a little more than they can in a, I don't know I think that our, in its heyday we probably had a couple hundred members at the temple. I don't know if we ever had more than that. I may be inaccurate, but I want to say the temple maybe seated about two hundred and fifty and maybe occasionally on the high holidays we were close to being full. But that was only in the earlier years, because after that it went down.

EL: So it was still on the increase when he moved there.

HG: Yeah, right. And it did, but you know it was hard to tell in terms of the entire Jewish population of New Castle, because there were many dual memberships. And there were many people that belonged to both the temple and shul. And why was that? Well, some of the men had married non-Jewish women who had converted who weren't gonna go to the shul and yet they grew up in the shul so they had attachments. And there were quite a number of families like that that belonged to both. And some of them came to the temple, we only observed one day of yontef and then they went to the shul the second day.

EL: Huh.

HG: And interestingly I think the first or second year that we were in New Castle, or maybe not the first or second year, but somewhere along the way my dad decided that he was gonna go to the shul for the second day and he was so highly criticized by his temple members for having done that. I mean that it was terrible.

EL: So he only did once?

HG: I don't know, I honestly don't remember whether he went back again, I know in his later years he didn't. But we used to have conversations in his later years because we had, once I finally became an adult, we two had a really terrific relationship. And we talked about many things, and one of the things I asked him once was if you had it to do all over again, would you still have told the people that were trying to find you employment in America that you wanted a Reform pulpit, knowing what you know now, or might you have requested Conservative? And he no, he said I'm very happy with the way it turned out.

EL: That's very interesting. I wonder why.

HG: I don't know.

EL: What was the physical building of the synagogue like? Was it an old building?

HG: Well I don't know when it was actually built. You know I, most of the stuff that I have you know is down in the archives.

EL: Yeah.

HG: And I still have some papers and some stuff around and one of them that I found, I was looking up some things, is a kind of a New Castle history, which you've probably seen that was done by Lynn Slovovsky?

EL: No.

HG: Who is now deceased. And he may, if you wanna halt a minute, let me see, that may tell the year in which the temple was built, but I'm not sure. Eric, if you need more water give a yell.

EL: Oh I'm fine.

HG: Good. I tend to be pretty informal. Let me see, here it is. This history of the Jewish community of New Castle was prepared September 1980.

EL: Okay, so maybe we can make a copy of that and include it in the files.

HG: I can't imagine that Susan didn't already have that, but that's fine.

EL: Okay.

HG: Um, let me just look quick. See he talks about the number of third generation people. He was from Tifereth Israel and I see that he's writing about the history of that synagogue and where it was.

EL: So what was...

HG: Oh here, [reads from book] meanwhile two other Jewish con- two other had come to being, one known as Beth Shalom, I never even heard of that, lasted only a few years in the 1920s.

EL: That's interesting.

HG: [continues reading] It was composed of a small group of persons who met in a house on the north hill and who favored the establishment of a Conservative congregation, according to one of its members Louis Sandler, oh I knew him, retired, da da da... other congregation was Temple Israel which was established in 1926 by members of the community who wanted to practice Reform Liberal Judaism.

EL: Okay.

HG: Early meetings were held in the home, a charter was granted in March 1927, ground was broken in April.

EL: So it was a pretty young congregation by the time your father got there. About twenty years.

HG: The temple was dedicated to the memory of Rabbi J. Leonard Levy of Rodef Shalom temple in Pittsburgh. And ceremonies held November 4, 5, and 6 in 1927. Among the guest speakers was Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver of Cleveland. Here, Temple Israel had twenty charter members and there were forty-four members on the rolls at the time. I don't have to read this to you. I have another copy, this I will give it to you, remind me to. Anyways so that will tell you something about that.

EL: So you, let's talk a little bit about the Jewish community in general.

HG: Okay.

EL: Were there a lot of Jewish businesses in New Castle?

HG: I think so. I think, well I don't know about a lot, I don't know how many businesses there were in this small town. But there were probably, yeah there were. I'm trying to think of when we first came what I can remember. Lots of professionals, physicians,

dentists, attorneys. I'm trying to think, there was a Jewish, there were two Jewish pharmacies that were owned by the same person.

EL: Do you remember the name?

HG: No, but I can find out because their daughter lives here in Pittsburgh and is one of my oldest friends, her dad was the pharmacist. He opened both of those, I can't remember, but I can find that out.

EL: I think, was there a Jewish business, not business district, but a lot of Jews who were on, I think it was Long Avenue? On the south side.

HG: Oh Long Avenue was south side and that's where the butcher was, and there were. I know there was a Marlin Furniture Store and, MA-R-L-I-N, and there still are Marlins in New Castle. There was Blau's, B-L-A-U, they had clothing. There are no more Blaus in New Castle. Oh, there was a movie theater down there. The State Theater, which was owned by, I think, the Markley family, and there are no Markleys in New Castle anymore. Although I'm in touch with a member of that family who lives in Youngstown. So there was a theater, and there were probably at least two or three other businesses that belonged to people that belonged to the shul, and I did not know all of those people.

EL: Did you not spend as much time on the south side of town as on the north side of town?

HG: Yeah I didn't.

EL: Okay.

HG: I think the only thing we ever went down to the south side for was to go to the butcher.

EL: Was that, in general, was that a split in the Jewish community? Were the Reformed Jews living on one side of town and the Orthodox Jews living on another side of town?

HG: I don't think so.

EL: Okay.

HG: I think even those people that had businesses on the south side, I think the bulk of the people lived up on the north hill.

EL: Do you remember an Alpern Bakery?

HG: Alpern... I remember the name Alpern. Alpern Bakery, I don't.

EL: Katz, maybe a Katz Bakers?

HG: Nope.

EL: I'm trying to see these other names that we got.

HG: I don't remember any Jewish bakeries in town.

EL: Do you remember Haenick's Shoes?

HG: Yes, I do. They were on the south side that was another one, they were shul members.

EL: Moresky Tobacco and Candy?

HG: Yeah. I know that name Moresky, see they were also shul members.

EL: Yeah. So you went to public schools there?

HG: I did.

EL: What was the interaction between the Jewish kids and the, how many Jewish kids were there in the class, do you remember?

HG: Well I graduated high school in a class of about four hundred plus, a little over four hundred and there were either five or six Jewish kids in that class.

EL: Wow. And I'm guessing of those only some were Temple Israel members and some were...

HG: Well let me think... one of them is, did you meet Lee Silverman at all?

EL: No.

HG: Oh you know what his wife didn't graduate with me actually. She graduated ahead of me. Walter Burkman, Rose... three were shul members and two were temple members.

EL: Did the Jewish kids and the non-Jewish kids get along?

HG: Yeah I think so. Yeah I don't think that was ever an issue.

EL: In general in town did the Jews and the non-Jews get along?

HG: Yes I think so. And you know I think that was one of the primary issues with which my father dealt. He was very, very ecumenically interested. And formed strong relationships with the other clergy in town and met a young priest who originated in

Pittsburgh who came as an assistant priest, I think, sent to a parish in New Castle. They met at a Kiwanis meeting, I mean huge age difference between them, and they formed an unbelievable kinship. And the priest wanted to learn more about Judaism, and they developed a really interesting relationship. He used, later he went to Rome for a couple of years, when my parents were in Rome they went out with him there, then he came back he was with the diocese here then he had a parish.

EL: What was his name?

HG: His name is Reverend Richard Ward. And I always say once a year I have my annual ecumenical dinner here. I have Walter and Dick for dinner one night and the three of us have dinner here. And he was a great guy, he's retired now of course. But when he moved to Pittsburgh the congregation liked him so much that at one time you know it was called Brotherhood Week, then it became known as, it's not Brotherhood Week anymore, it's... I don't know it's something else. Anyway, they always wanted him to come back and be the speaker. Human Rights Sabbath, that's what it's called. And so I can still remember going to New Castle for the weekend because I knew he was coming in, too, to speak. And it was great because he got up on the pulpit and the looked out and the first thing he said was, "You know this is a very important night for me, this is my bar mitzvah year, this is my thirteenth year that I'm here."

EL: Why was this interfaith effort so important to your father?

HG: I don't know. I can't really answer that. I mean I think he felt very strongly, I don't know whether what happened in Europe influenced that, because I have a feeling he did not, he wasn't that well oriented in that direction when he was in Danzig. Of course that was different and I can't tell you, I don't know what happened in Danzig. But he really, I know that he felt that that was exceedingly important to do that sort of thing. And in fact, when he died, he died very unexpectedly.

EL: Your father?

HG: My dad died yeah, he was in the car coming home from the doctor, and he had a massive coronary and he was dead on arrival at the hospital. Died on a Wednesday, had given a sermon the prior Friday night. So I ran home and said to Mom we need to make funeral arrangements you know, what do you want to do? And we sat and talked about it and obviously the first person we called was Walter and of course he was going to come in with Irene and I said, I thought about it for a while, and I said you know I have something in mind that I think he would have liked, but it has to be okay with you. What is it? I said, Walter will be the mainstay, but I think he would like it if we invited both Dick Ward and Reverend John Slote from Westminster Presbyterian to participate. And she said great and that's what we did.

EL: Huh. When you were growing up did you, were you conscious that you were in a small town, did you have a desire to get to a bigger city?

HG: No, not really. I had no problems, in fact I think it was a great town to grow up in.

EL: In what way?

HG: I, it was small, I mean we didn't lock our doors. We were very friendly with the neighbors, we lived in several houses, and I always said our first house we lived next door to an Italian Catholic family, they had eleven kids and I was the twelfth. And they would call the house and no matter, Mom, Dad, whoever answered we're trimming the Christmas tree, send her over. I always trimmed the Christmas tree with them. The two kids that were closest in my age would usually come one night of Hanukkah and light candles with us. And you know I have always said if everybody grew up like that we would have far less problems on this earth. I'm still in touch with that family in New Castle. And I've always found it interesting, I mean the bulk of my close friends always have been and continue to be Jewish, I mean it just happens that way, but I have, I still maintain relationships with non-Jews. And there is a difference and there's not a difference. It's very hard for me to explain.

EL: I had heard from someone that there was Jewish country club in New Castle? Do you know anything about that?

HG: There's only one country club in New Castle, and everybody who belongs to a country club belongs to it, it's called the New Castle Country Club ironically. It's a very clever name.

EL: What was the relationship with Pittsburgh, did you ever come to the city for events or for supplies or for anything like that?

HG: I didn't. And my dad came to Pittsburgh any number of times because he had no Jewish stimulation in New Castle.

EL: Yeah.

HG: And so when the rabbis had their regular meetings here, I don't know how often, he really looked forward to that. And what he loved the most was to come to a rabbinical meeting and challenge Freehof. [laughter]

EL: [laughter] On scholarly points?

HG: Yeah on something or other, you know, he would always try and, I mean he didn't do that just to put him on, he was serious about it. He would ask him a question and Freehof was great. Usually he answered it, but if he couldn't answer it he'd say, you'll get an answer from me, and he always did. I don't know if he called him or wrote him or what, but, yeah, he loved to do that.

EL: Did your father have aspirations to make it to a larger congregation?

HG: Oh my, yes. You know what, yes and no. He was thirty-nine years old when he came here, so he wasn't exactly a youngster. And I think at that point in his career – having a totally upheaval, not knowing the country, not knowing the language, having to leave an entire family behind, I think was not easy for him emotionally. And I think he had a lot of tensions and anxieties that built up, really I think until he got to New Castle. I think he was always a little on edge. And even from New Castle a couple of times he went on some interviews, I don't think anybody except Mom and I ever knew that he did that, and he went once somewhere outside of New York City, I can't remember where but he was very impressed. He liked the location, he like the idea of being closer to New York, and he apparently had a very good interview there. And before he left, somebody, I don't know if it was the congregational president or the chairman of the search committee, but someone came up, took him aside and said, "I want to tell you, I thought that your sermon was absolutely outstanding. But I'm going to tell you now that you will not get this pulpit because you still have an accent."

EL: Huh.

HG: So that was that. And he'd been at a couple of other places but I think that kind of clinched in for him. And I think he really thought long and hard and decided that in New Castle he was known there, he did all this ecumenical stuff, he was on the Kiwanis, he was on the board of the Cancer Society, he was in a nice place professionally in New Castle. And I think he really decided that at that point in his career he would rest more easily and be far more comfortable as a big fish in a small pond than trying to be a small fish in a bigger pond.

EL: You had said that you continued to go back to New Castle over the years. Did you get a sense of the Jewish community starting to shrink?

HG: Yeah I did, I mean people moved away, very few of the kids graduated and came back to New Castle, they left. I left.

EL: Would it ever have crossed your mind to stay there or live there?

HG: Not for one red second.

EL: Because?

HG: Because there was nothing there, I mean if I would have had a job when I grad-, I graduated from college in 1957, I could have probably gotten a job in New Castle, I have no idea. And in 1957 if I would have gone back to New Castle I would have had two thing: I would have had a job and my parents. End of story. So no, and I mean I had a good relationship with my parents but I was always a pretty independent sort. You know I had my own mind about things, sometimes that was good, sometimes not so good! But you know when I was a kid and they had so much adjusting of their own to do that I don't mean for a minute to say they weren't attentive parents, because they certainly were, but to a certain degree I had to fend for myself, and that was fine. And so I developed my

own critiques and criteria and when I graduated I got my first job here in Pittsburgh and I've been in Pittsburgh since October of '57. But I never showed up much at Rodef Shalom until in the 90s actually and it was almost embarrassing because I'd meet people and they'd say, "Oh are you new in town?" Well, to you I am. Because between '57 and '81 when my dad died my religious needs were met in New Castle.

EL: Huh. Do you think your father would have stayed until he died in any regard or would he have retired at some point?

HG: That's a good question. They had talked about retiring somewhat earlier and at that time when they even considered it, they were talking about retiring and moving to Pittsburgh. And but then, I don't know, he wasn't really ready and things were good there in New Castle you know, the congregation loved him, they didn't pay him anything, that was great as far as they were concerned.

EL: Literally or figuratively?

HG: They didn't pay, lousy salaries there. And I'll tell you the truth, I think he was reluctant to ask for raises because it was still part of that old lack of confidence, but he had found a home there and I think he was comfortable and he did great things there. And I think they were rewarding. And he could go away for two months in the summertime and nobody bothered him. The congregation was small enough, it wasn't like here where you have somebody dying every other day and you have to be on call for funerals. And I think as he got older I think he was fine with that and obviously, I don't know if the congregation would have suggested that he retire, I mean when he died he was eighty.

EL: Huh.

HG: So...

EL: And you said that your mother stayed in New Castle after your father died?

HG: She did.

EL: For how long?

HG: Eleven years.

EL: Why?

HG: Because that was home for her and I think she thought she owned the temple, I really do.

EL: This was-

HG: I thought she should come to Pittsburgh, but she had, you know she was at that point not quite as mobile as she might have been and you know, she had her doctor, her dentist, she had her cleaning lady, her hairdresser, she had the person that took her to drive for groceries, and she had her temple one block away because we lived on Moody Avenue.

EL: Did, was your father the last fulltime rabbi of Temple Israel?

HG: He was. He was.

EL: So after that they only had student rabbis?

HG: They only had student rabbis, yes, they did, they only had student rabbis, they got a fulltime rabbi for a couple of years after the merger but not at Temple Israel.

EL: That's very interesting.

HG: They had student rabbis and then, now wait that's not quite true, they had an older retired rabbi from Cleveland who came once a month or something like that and did the high holidays for them. That went on for a number of years. But they never had a fulltime rabbi there again. In fact, interestingly, when my dad died, my dad's buried at Westview, and the, there were a number of people in the congregation that weren't very vocal about it, but under hush-hush tones said, "Why isn't he buried in our little Temple Israel Cemetery?" And it wasn't really until more recent years when people have asked me that question. And I say I have no hesitation to tell you exactly why he was buried on Westview, when he came to one of his rabbinic meetings once, he came back to New Castle, well he stayed with me, went back to New Castle and he said, "I'll tell you what I did today, I bought a condominium." I said, "You bought a what?" "A condominium on Westview." And gone out with Vigdor Kavaler at that time, bought the plots, and talked about it at home and said, "I'm going to tell you something, as I sit here today, I know that when I am no longer here that is going to be the end Temple Israel. And I do not want to be buried in a cemetery that no longer has a synagogue."

EL: Wow. Well I think that covers everything, is there any other topics that we should discuss?

HG: Well that's up to you, I've probably gone far off field and told you stuff you probably don't even care about!

EL: No, everything was fascinating. Alright, well thank you very much!

HG: I mean is there anything else that you want to know?

EL: I think that's, I think we covered all the topics.

HG: Okay [cuts out]

END OF INTERVIEW