

Transcript of Interview with Morton and Rosalie Opall
Small Town Jewish History Project
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Senator John Heinz History Center
Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania
1212 Smallman Street
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15222

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Elaine Malyn occasionally joins the conversation.

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Transcription:

Eric Lidji: Today is July 24, 2015. I'm Eric Lidji. This is the Small Towns Project and I'm talking to Mort and Rosalie Opall. We are in their home in Uniontown and we're going to be talking primarily about Uniontown, but we might talk a little bit about McKeesport as well. So, Mort, why don't you start by telling me how your family got to Uniontown?

Morton Opall: Well, my father was born in Russia.

EL: What was his name?

MO: Louis.

EL: Ok...

MO: Opallinsky.

Rosalie Opall: I'm getting a drink. Would you like some?

MO: He...in 1906, they escaped the pogroms in Russia and went to what was Palestine in those days. My father grew up there and with his brothers and sisters. He served in World War I as an aide to a colonel in the British Army. He learned English through being associated with British people. After the war was over in 1921, he worked his way across country, across the ocean on a steamer and jumped ship in New York...

EL: Wow.

MO: ...wound up in the hills of Pennsylvania where the streets were lined with gold, quote, unquote.

EL: Do you know why he decided not to stay in New York? Why he was looking for an opportunity.

MO: Well, first off, when he got off, he landed in New York, then he went to Baltimore where he had an uncle. His uncle staked him and suggested that Western Pennsylvania was where to head. That's how he wound up here.

EL: So, this would have been the late teens, early twenties?

MO: No, no. Early twenties.

EL: Early twenties?

MO: Right.

EL: Ok.

MO: He, he grew up in, he worked various jobs as a peddler and different things and settled in Uniontown. That's where I was born, 1937.

EL: How did he meet your mother?

MO: My mother's best friend was his first cousin.

EL: You're mother's best friend was his first cousin. Ok. Was this in Uniontown?

MO: No, in Baltimore.

EL: In Baltimore?

MO: That's where they met.

EL: Ok.

MO: He, they married in 1936, went to the Chicago World's Fair on their honeymoon, and my mother had \$200 mad money that she had put away. If he would've known that, we would've wound up in San Francisco.

EL: So, he started the store?

MO: He started the...actually, he had a store in Masontown. We were living in Masontown at the time I was born. My father got very sick and they lost that store. He came back to Uniontown and started another store here. It just grew from there.

EL: Did you know how he got into furniture?

MO: Yeah. By me. He was a wallpaper and paint store.

EL: Oh, really?

MO: And when I was in Penn State, I worked part-time, and they had a little bit of used and new furniture. When I was at Penn State, I worked for Wolf Furniture. I liked it, and when I came back from the service, we decided to concentrate more on the furniture.

EL: Do you remember the wallpaper business?

MO: Oh yeah. I'd like to have a penny for every roll of wallpaper I trimmed.

EL: I ask because the stores were very visually interesting. Do you remember the look of it?

MO: Oh, sure. I remember putting up the displays. I remember we used to sell wallpaper, five double rolls and twenty yards of border, which was considered a room lot, for \$1.99.

EL: Huh.

MO: And we would trim it and deliver it.

EL: Wow. What was the difference between paint and wallpaper at the time? Who used paint? Who used wallpaper? Was there anything like that?

MO: Well, no, because our customers were primary the steel workers and the coal mine workers, and they lived in company houses. More often as not, they slapped wallpaper on the walls, because the walls were never even.

EL: Yeah. Ok. What was Uniontown like in your childhood?

MO: Well, I just remember that I had a bunch of friends. We would play baseball and do things together. In the summertime, we would all go swimming at Gorley's Lake, which is now the Society of Brothers, or we would go swimming at the country...at the Summit Hotel. They would go swimming at the country club because I was not allowed in there.

EL: Huh. So, did the Jews live in a certain part of town in Uniontown?

MO: Yes, primarily. Mostly, all in one area.

Rosalie Opall: In proximity to where the synagogue was.

MO: We lived on Kerr Street before we moved to Downer Avenue. Downer Avenue had, with that and the neighborhood around there, there was a lot of Jewish people. Elaine lived two and a half blocks from me where we grew up.

EL: What did a lot of the Jewish families do for a living?

MO: All were merchants. As a matter of fact, I can't remember too many that weren't either merchants or physicians or lawyers.

EL: Do you remember the stores?

MO: Oh yeah. I grew up there. I had to. My father had a saying, "If you don't work, you don't eat." And if you could see pictures of me as a youth, I was pretty big.

RO: No, he's referring to other Jewish-owned stores.

MO: Oh, yeah. Most of the Jewish stores, if they had young children, they worked in it. I had specific jobs that I had to do.

EL: What were the jobs?

MO: I had, when I came back from school, I had to make sure the paint cans were filled in in the display, we had it downstairs in the basement where we kept the back-up stock. I had to bring it up. Any wallpaper had to be trimmed or anything of that sort, swept the store, mopped.

EL: Did you have brothers and sisters?

MO: No. Just me.

EL: It was just you?

MO: Yeah.

EL: What were some of the other Jewish businesses in town?

MO: Well, Dan Radman's father, Sam Radman, had a store across the street from us. Mickey Radman's brother, they had a store called Morris', which was down the street. There was Household Furniture, there was Cohen furniture, Arcade Optical, Amber...

RO: Turner's...

MO: ...Jewelry. Turner's Army Navy Store. There were numerous stores up and down the street.

RO: Dress shops.

MO: Yeah. A lot of dress shops.

EL: So, you had mentioned the country club, how was the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, generally, in Uniontown?

MO: Uh, like this. This was us, this was them.

EL: So you're pointing to your thumb and your pinky.

MO: Uh, I would guess a cordial relationship. I remember coming back to my father one time, I was real small, and ask him, "What's a kike?"

EL: What did he say?

MO: He was a bit upset, but what are you gonna do?

EL: Were there other incidents like that?

MO: Not a lot, but there were some I remember. I remember as kid, there were some older boys who were in the service and came back and they were bitching about how they had to go to war to save us Jews, or something like that. I didn't know what the hell he was talking about.

EL: That's interesting. How, was your family religious at all?

MO: No, no. I got what little religious education I got after I was married. The rebbitzin here.

EL: So, it wasn't something that was part of your father's upbringing.

MO: No. As a matter of fact, my father's and mother were, I mean we went to services. They went services Friday night...

EL: Really?

RO: [MO and RO talking over each other] It was, it was a social thing.

MO: Practically every night and then afterwards went to the movies.

RO: You know, all their friends went to services, they all went to services, and they went to either dinner or a movie before...

EL: Yeah.

RO: ...or after...

EL: What was the synagogue like when you were growing up?

MO: Strictly orthodox, and it was packed. We must've had, what? Three hundred families in Uniontown.

RO: Uh-huh. There were a lot.

MO: In our congregation. I remember a couple of the old-timers used to go around with their book and slap their hand, "Sha! Zol zayn sha!" whether we were talking or not! It was always, "Zol zayn sha!" ["Quiet! One must be quiet!"]

EL: Men and women separately, sitting separately?

MO: Uh, I don't remember that.

RO: Well, they had a balcony.

MO: They had the balcony, yes. And...

RO: ...and the mechitza.

MO: And some of the women sat up there, but...

RO: The kids had to sit up in the balcony.

MO: I'm sorry?

RO: The kids.

MO: We were the last couple of rows. We were, a lot of times we were in the balcony. I remember during high holidays, they used to have junior services down in the downstairs room.

EL: Did you have Sunday school?

MO: I had Sunday school. Yeah.

EL: Did you have Hebrew school during the week at all?

MO: Had Hebrew school during the week, yeah.

EL: How often?

MO: Five days.

EL: Five days?

MO: Yeah.

EL: And Sunday?

RO: Five days?

MO: Mm-hmm. I went to, you know...

RO: Five days?

MO: Sunday was Sunday school and cheder was, I think, five days a week.

EL: Wow.

RO: That's unusual.

MO: I think it was, wasn't it?

RO: (MO and RO talking over each other) I think that's most unusual.

MO: I can't remember. It's been so long.

RO: I don't remember. I know I went, probably three days.

EL: What was your...

RO: Seemed like five days.

EL: What was your general schooling like?

MO: High school was pretty good. We got the physics, I didn't take chemistry, but they had chemistry. They had, they had a pretty good school system in Uniontown.

EL: And you went to Penn State from there?

MO: Went to Penn State. Right.

EL: What was that like?

MO: Penn State was fun. That was my problem. It was too much fun.

EL: This was the late fifties?

MO: The only thing I can remember, you ask about the high school.

EL: Yeah.

MO: We had a principal who was a ordained minister, and I don't think he particularly liked Jews too much.

RO: Who was that?

MO: Dan Kovar (?). He didn't like me.

RO: I don't really remember a minister.

MO: He used to have the Lord's Prayer in raised letters on his wall. I was in the principal's office a lot of times. I noticed things.

RO: You saw it. I don't remember that.

EL: So, you went to Penn State in the mid, late fifties?

MO: Yeah. I graduated high school in '55, went to Penn State for two years, and joined the Marines in 1957.

EL: When, how long were you with them?

MO: Two years, my enlistment. I served with them, boot camp, then I went over to Okinawa, served fifteen months over there, came back and it was time to be released.

EL: Was that peacetime mission?

MO: Peacetime. I had a good time. I had a two-year vacation at the expense of the government.

EL: Did you, were you involved in anything, any Jewish groups in college?

MO: I was a Sammy, Sammy fraternity, Sigma Alpha Mu. Right up the street was a Hillel, which I think I might have gone maybe three times.

EL: At that time, were Jews only allowed to be involved in Jewish fraternities?

MO: No, but there were six Jewish fraternities at Penn State and if you wanted to be in a fraternity...I don't know of anyone who was Jewish who went to a fraternity other than Jewish ones, but I do remember the Sammys, when I was up there, broke the line and took in a non-Jew for the first time.

EL: Was that a controversial decision?

MO: It was a controversial thing. It was directed from the Sigma Alpha Mu national that they can and they did.

EL: The idea, what was the hope? What was the goal?

MO: I have no idea.

EL: Yeah, but was it your...

MO: I was not, I was not actively involved in management.

EL: Ok.

MO: I was one of the peons.

EL: Ok. So, did you know that you were going to come back to Uniontown at some point?

MO: Uh, yes. Yeah. My parent, you know, it was expected of me to come back and run the store.

EL: How did you feel about that?

MO: I didn't have feelings one way or the other. It was what I was expected to do.

EL: Did you have any desire to go to a bigger city or anything like that?

MO: Not really. There were thoughts, but no. You always think about something else, but this was it.

EL: Ok. Did you go into the city a lot as a child?

MO: Not too much. It was a major thing for us to go to Pittsburgh in those days. We were in Baltimore, where my parents' relatives were. We were in Baltimore probably more than I was in Pittsburgh.

EL: Just that it was difficult to get into Pittsburgh?

MO: No. It's just we had no reason to go there.

EL: Ok. There wasn't suppliers.

MO: Then the only time I started going there was when I was in B'nai B'rith, BBYO.

EL: Yeah. Could you talk a little bit about BBYO because that seems like it's an important part of...

MO: It was. That was main thing that we had as kids. We met. We had a nice chapter in Uniontown. They had chapters in all the little cities around. It was a chance for Jewish people to meet the opposite sex in other communities.

EL: How often would you do events?

MO: Three, four times a year. Five times. I don't...

RO: At least once a month.

MO: Yeah. There was always something going on.

EL: Ok.

MO: I was involved. I was president of our chapter. In those days, it was AZA and BBG.

EL: Yeah.

MO: It was very nice. I enjoyed it. I had a lot friends from other communities. I have a friend now that lives in the Mon Valley. We met each other. We got friendly in BBYO. We're married fifty-five years. They're married fifty-nine years.

EL: Wow.

MO: And we're still friends.

EL: That's interesting. So, let's switch over to you if that's all right.

RO: Ok.

EL: So, how did your family get to McKeesport?

RO: My mother was born in McKeesport, Pennsylvania.

EL: Really?

RO: Yes.

EL: That, this is, your parents are, they're names are...

RO: Her name is, was Ethel Weintraub.

EL: Ok.

RO: Her father, her mother died young, so I'm named after her mother, my grandmother. My grandfather had a confectionary store in McKeesport and my mother grew up and went to school there. She traveled to...my father is from Kalisch, Poland.

EL: Ok.

RO: And he came to this country, I guess he was born in, like 1896. He came to this country as a teenager, late teenager. He had family in New York and that's where he settled. He became a furrier. My mother went to New York one time to visit a friend from high school and that's where she met my father. They eventually married and they lived in New York. I was born, as were my two sisters, in the Bronx, New York.

EL: Really?

RO: This was in 1938, is right, right before the war. During the war with the rationing, people were not buying fur coats. Times were very difficult. I remember the war and the blackouts and as a young child sitting on our fire escape when they had air raids and air sirens and the air raid wardens with their badges. The blackouts had to be total blackouts. It was quite, quite, a little frightening for a young, young child. So, eventually, as I said,

my father, the business, the fur business dropped down to the bottom and he could find no work in the garment industry. Fancy clothes and furs were out of the question during the war. So they came back to McKeesport. I was about three or four years old. We moved into my grandfather's house. It was a big house.

EL: Where was it?

RO: On Sixth Street in McKeesport, right next to the YMCA. In this household, there were three families: my grandfather, he was a widower by then, my aunt and my uncle and two cousins lived in the upstairs of the house, and we had, my mother, father, and three girls had a basement apartment, and below us was the real basement. So, we all grew up together. My cousins and I looked at each other as if we were sisters and brothers.

EL: Huh. So let me make sure I have all the names. Your grandfather in McKeesport...

RO: Was Morris. His name was Morris Weintraub.

EL: Ok. And his wife?

RO: Rose.

EL: That's who you're named after.

RO: Mm-hmm.

EL: Ok. And then the...

RO: Then I had my...

EL: Family cousins.

RO: My Aunt Molly and Uncle Ben. Molly and Ben Mayer.

EL: Ok. And that's your mother's sister.

RO: My mother's sister and her husband. My cousins Rosalie and Stephen and there was...

EL: And your father was...

RO: My father's name was Max, Max Gland. Originally it was Glanternik.

EL: Ok.

RO: He changed it to at Ellis Island to Gland, but his brothers changed...two brothers said Gland and two brothers said Glant. G-L-A-N-T. There was always a little bit of confusion there.

EL: And the three girls were?

RO: My sister Claire is the oldest. She just turned eighty-five last year. My sister Arlene is two years older than me, seventy-nine. I'm the baby at seventy-seven.

EL: So what are your memories of McKeesport?

RO: Well, we had a large Jewish community and our lives revolved around the Jewish community. We were in close proximity. There were four congregations, they were two Orthodox, one Conservative, and one Reformed.

EL: What were the names?

RO: The two Orthodox were Gemilas Chesed, which is still in existence, and Sfard, S-F-A-R-D, one was on Third Street and one was on Seventh Street. My parents belonged to the Sfard.

EL: Huh.

RO: But, all my friends and peers belonged to Gemilas Chesed, so I was mostly at Gemilas Chesed and made obligatory visits to Sfard. Then my aunt and uncle and cousins went to the temple, which was just up the hill and across the street. Temple Israel, and it is still in existence.

EL: That was Reformed?

RO: It was Reformed.

EL: Ok.

RO: Then there was the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life was Conservative. The Tree of Life eventually merged with Sfard. That was a big deal. A Conservative and an Orthodox. Then, that merger eventually merged with the Temple. So now, there are two congregations in McKeesport where there was four.

EL: Hmm.

RO: So, there were many Jewish people. I went to Sunday school. I went to Hebrew school three days a week. All our socializing were with each other. BBYO was very important in my life as well.

EL: What kinds of things did you do?

RO: Well, in BBYO?

EL: Yeah.

RO: Well, they were always, we had meetings, of course, our local meetings, and we had many, we called them tournaments in various other cities in the whole Mon Valley.

EL: What is a tournament?

RO: Well, they got together and usually would have Friday night services and a party and we stayed at peoples' homes. Then, the next day, there would be all kinds of activities, depending on the season, outdoor activities, basketball, dances.

EL: Yeah.

RO: Then Sunday morning would usually be a brunch and maybe some meetings, seminars, and it was just a way for all the Jewish people in the whole area to...as a matter of fact, we met through BBYO. I was fifteen and he was sixteen. Both of my sisters met their mates through BBYO. Both of my cousins met their mates through BBYO. As I said, in my experience, we've met our mates as teenagers in BBYO.

EL: Was that the idea of BBYO?

RO: I don't know if, I don't think it was the idea of BBYO that people would eventually marry each other, but friendships were formed. As the people got old enough to drive, they met each other outside of BBYO. He used to drive in from Uniontown to McKeesport to, we would date, we'd double date, we'd triple date. Everybody really stuck together.

EL: What was a date back then?

RO: A date was going to a movie or...

MO: And then (unclear).

RO: They used to have non-alcoholic teenage night clubs.

EL: Huh.

RO: Around us in the Pittsburgh area that you could dance and socialize.

EL: So, it was sort of sophisticated.

RO: Yeah. So, it was a very nice experience. We've always been grateful and supported BBYO organization because of that.

EL: So there were thousands of Jews in McKeesport?

RO: Oh, I don't know about thousands, but, well, maybe six-seven hundred.

EL: Ok.

RO: Mhmm.

EL: Was there a Jewish part of town?

RO: Well, the Orthodox lived in the downtown where there was a Third Street shul and the ultra-Orthodox, of course, the shomer shabbos, they had to live within walking distance of the shul, so they were downtown. Then, when the Tree of Life, the Conservative synagogue opened up on another part of town, a lot of Jews moved to that end of town. Then there became, there was a new borough that opened up called White Oak, Pennsylvania.

EL: Right, which had a synagogue for a long time.

RO: The suburbs, well it didn't have a synagogue that...

MO: That was the Gemilas. It moved from...

RO: Yeah.

EL: Oh.

RO: The Gemilas moved from downtown McKeesport out to White Oak because a lot of the Jews were living there. For those who were shomer shabbos and still lived in McKeesport itself, they had, like, a satellite congregation for those people.

EL: Huh.

RO: So, it, it was a good... I feel like I had a good education. I feel in grade school, of course, we walked to grade school, we walked to high school. I didn't have too many non-Jewish friends. I would say that I had nice acquaintances, but we mostly hung together.

EL: Were there a lot of Jews in your class?

RO: There were a lot, there were a lot of Jews in our class, yes.

EL: Was McKeesport big enough that there were different, several elementary schools?

RO: Oh yes. Mhm.

EL: So, if everyone was living together, then those people were...

RO: There were several elementary schools and then we never really got together with other people from other parts of town until we hit junior high and high school.

EL: Yeah.

RO: There was only one high school.

EL: Ok.

RO: And there were two junior high schools. I was brought up, my family, we belonged to an Orthodox synagogue but they were not Orthodox, but they respected and tried to live...other than being shomer shabbos. My father had a fur shop in McKeesport. My mother worked for him. He did the actual work in the craftsmanship and she was the front person that dealt with the customers and the books. So I grew up in a working mother household. She came home from work all day and had to, you know, do the shopping and the cooking and the cleaning and the laundry. We girls pitched in as much as we could. Grew up three girls in one bedroom and one bathroom. My poor father, he's in the house with four women, it was really something. Today, the children have to have their own room, desk, and their own...

EL: What do you remember of the store?

RO: The fur shop?

EL: Yeah.

RO: Well it was up, it was above my grandfather's confectionary store in the heart of downtown McKeesport, so you had to climb up a flight of steps to get there. It had a showroom with mirrors where the women would come and be measured. My father made the coats. He didn't have a stock, an inventory, and sold coats. He made them for customers. So, that showroom was where they looked up the books and the styles and that's where they were measured. Then, he had a room where he did cleaning and storage, then he had a workroom. A big workroom. He had a seamstress that worked on the linings. It was hard, physical work because he had the fur pelts and he had to stretch them out on this big board and hammer them to stretch the pelts. So yeah.

EL: Were there pelts everywhere?

RO: It was interesting to watch that. So, it was interesting to watch that. Yeah, so.

EL: Where did he get his pelts from, you know?

RO: Oh, I'm sure, I guess maybe a wholesaler in Pittsburgh. Eventually...

EL: Did you go into Pittsburgh at all?

RO: We went to Pittsburgh once a year before, after Thanksgiving to shop for clothes for school. That was our major outing of the year as a family. But, I went to Pittsburgh as a teenager, a young teenager. I was in the Carnegie Institute Tam O'Shanter program. Are you familiar with that?

EL: Yeah.

RO: So, my cousin and I used to take the sixty-eight streetcar, this was on a Saturday morning, we went to the Carnegie Institute and we had these art lessons.

EL: Huh.

RO: ...in the auditorium of the Carnegie Institute.

EL: Was this with Fitz...Joseph Fitz...?

RO: Well, no. I'm not familiar with that...

EL: The name of the instructor.

RO: Oh, I don't know.

EL: There was a famous instructor, I can't think of his name.

RO: I do not remember that. So, then I was familiar with Oakland from taking the streetcar every week. While we were there, we went to the museums and the art gallery, and I saw the Cathedral of Learning, the nationality rooms. That's what eventually spiked my interest in going to the University of Pittsburgh. Through BBYO, I became more familiar with Squirrel Hill. We kept a kosher home and there were kosher butchers in McKeesport. All our needs were met in McKeesport. We didn't have to go to Pittsburgh like we have to go to Pittsburgh today for all our kosher food.

EL: Yeah.

RO: So, then, when we started dating, we're exploring other sections of Pittsburgh like East Liberty, Stanton Heights...

MO: Yeah.

RO: ...occasionally, downtown, but eventually, I went to the University of Pittsburgh and graduated with a degree in education. As I said, we were, I was fifteen, he was sixteen when we met, going to a BBYO tournament in Squirrel Hill. I got off the streetcar with my cousin Rosalie that I grew up with and he was in the car with a couple boys

driving in from Uniontown. He saw us get off the streetcar with our suitcases and maybe recognized us from previous tournaments and he said, "Do you know where the BBYO office is?" I said, "Yes." He says, "Well, get in the car. We'll go together." That's how it started!

EL: That's how you met.

RO: And the next morning...

MO: If she, if she didn't get in the front seat, and her cousin get in, I would have been married to Rosalie Olson.

RO: Then, the next morning, they had events at the Schenley Park...

EL: Ok.

RO: ...outdoor events, it was a beautiful summer's day, softball and whatever they had. We were walking together with a bunch of people and a softball comes out of nowhere, hits him in the face and breaks his glasses. It so happens my glasses were the same prescription. This was on a Saturday. So he had to wear my glasses for the weekend.

EL: So what did you wear?

MO: So I could drive.

EL: Oh, I see.

RO: So, we were forced to be together that weekend because he had my glasses and I couldn't see without them!

MO: Fortunately, one of my friends' father was an optometrist...

EL: Yeah?

MO: And he made me new glasses so I could drive home.

EL: Sounds like *haskofa protis*...as they'd say...

RO: That was really...what you'd call *beshert*.

MO: I was gonna say that. *Beshert*.

RO: So, that's when we started dating. Of course, we've had many, off and on. We weren't dating when he went to Penn State and I was at Pitt, we attended one football game together and it ended in a 7-7 tie. Fortunately.

EL: Uh...

RO: Even though he anticipated a victory, we went to a Penn State victory party.

MO: That's right.

RO: After the 7-7 tie.

EL: What year did you get married?

RO: 1960.

EL: Ok.

RO: Two weeks after I graduated from Pitt.

EL: Ok, and where was the wedding?

RO: I got married in McKeesport

EL: At Sfard?

MO: At the Penn McKee.

RO: No, because I had one foot in Gemilas and one foot in Sfard and my one arm at the Temple. We picked the Penn McKee Hotel in downtown McKeesport and all the rabbis from each congregation were there. We had actually two rabbis...

MO: Yeah, Rabbi Sachs...

RO: ...marry us.

MO: ...and Rabbi Chinn.

RO: Yeah. We had a traditional Jewish wedding with the, up on the chairs and we have a picture of the one rabbi from the Sfard dancing with me with a handkerchief.

EL: Yeah, yeah.

RO: Yeah, and me lifting up on a chair. They lifted him up on the chair and his mother's following him around, saying, "Don't drop him! Don't drop him!"

EL: So you, do you come immediately to...

RO: Then we moved to Uniontown.

EL: ...to Uniontown?

RO: To Uniontown. So, I've been in Uniontown since 1960.

EL: Huh. So what was the community like in 1960?

RO: Again, there were a lot of Jewish people and the Jewish community center. This was the main gathering of the Jews of Uniontown. They had two congregations: the Tree of Life Synagogue and the Temple.

EL: What was the Temple called?

MO: Temple Israel.

RO: Temple Israel.

EL: Ok.

RO: Ok, but everybody would meet at the Jewish Community Center. They had just built the swimming pool. They had a nursery school and day camp. It was predominantly Jewish.

EL: Did the community build it or was it a building that was there already?

MO: It was a building that was bought in 1948. Was it one of the Thompson?

RO: I can't remember.

MO: It was a, one of the coal barons of Uniontown had built this house. It was bought for a very low price in those days. They used to have poker games upstairs. They had a caretaker who also ran a restaurant there. We would come up there...

RO: Ale like a deli.

MO: ...order sandwiches. Like a little deli.

EL: Wow.

RO: Eventually, they had tennis courts and swimming pool and lots of programs for the children. Now we're down to about eight Jewish members. The center is for sale and it is in dire straits, but we continue to pay our dues because we so appreciate the beautiful times our children had at this Jewish Community Center.

EL: So, in the early sixties when you came back, was that, was the community smaller than when you were younger? Was that the peak of...

MO: When I was younger, it was a peak. It started dwindling, but it was still very big in 1960.

RO: (unclear)

EL: What was the...

RO: They had many organizations. Like I say, they had B'nai B'rith. They had the ZOA. They had Hadassah. They had ORT.

MO: Right.

RO: Each congregation had a thriving sisterhood.

MO: The Temple had PAFTY, I think.

EL: Was there an NCJW?

RO: No.

MO: Yes. Council. National Council of Jewish Women?

RO: Oh yea. National Council of Jewish Women. And ORT.

MO: Yeah.

RO: I remember they had a sick room loan closet at the Jewish Community Center where they had a room that they would have walkers and crutches, things for sick people that they lent out. That's, remember that? The sick room loan closet?

Unidentified woman: Oh yeah.

EL: So when did the community start to shrink?

RO: Well...

MO: As the kids got older, and as the mills and the mines played out, and the businesses got, you know, progressively hurting, the kids, our three children, your three children all went other places.

EL: This was in the eighties?

MO: Nobody stayed in Uniontown.

RO: The typical thing was, as our two families witnessed, each of our children went elsewhere for their careers.

MO: But there was nowhere to make a good, decent living in Uniontown.

Elaine Malyn: Also socializing.

MO: Yeah.

EM: There were very few...

RO: Yeah.

EM: ...Jewish people left here for them to...

RO: Right. Right. Now, see, this is not Uniontown proper. So, our children grew up in Laurel Highlands School District.

EL: Ok.

RO: For example, my oldest daughter, there was one other Jewish child in this big high school.

MO: That was, that was Elaine's kids.

RO: Yeah. Well she's...

MO: Yeah.

RO: Maybe two other, and then our son, there was one, two, two or three Jewish kids. My youngest, maybe another two. So, they were quite in the minority in their high schools. So, we turned to BBYO for them as well, but they, that wasn't as important to our children as it was to us, for some reason.

EL: When, when did the mills and the mines start to close?

MO: In the seventies.

EL: What were the mills that were here?

MO: Well, the mills were in the Pittsburgh area. There was one in Donora. There was one...Elizabeth. All around here and people would travel to them. The mines, there were mines all over the place right here in Fayette County. All these little towns were named after the opening, the mine. Continental 1, 2, and 3.

EL: Right.

MO: Which is, Continental was the mine. Oliver. There's Oliver 1, Oliver 2, Oliver 3, and West Oliver.

EL: Yeah.

RO: Besides coal, there were...

MO: or Leisenring, excuse me.

RO: ...there were coke oven operations as well.

EL: Right. When did you start to notice the impact on your business?

MO: Towards the seventies and eighties. When the mine... We geared our store towards the mill workers and the miners because they wanted to buy-the-pound furniture, the good, heavy, hard-wearing things, not so much the decorators, the lawyers, and the doctors, and the executives. They shopped elsewhere. We went for the miners, and as they became less and less, we had a smaller base.

EL: Huh?

MO: That's why we switched our business from a complete furniture store to a bedding store because everybody needs bedding.

EL: When did that happen?

MO: 1988. We became Opall's Just Beds. We opened up in Gabe's Plaza. We were hurting for the first couple of years, then it grew and it grew. Towards the end, we had a pretty good business going, and it was attractive to a chain from the Pittsburgh area. When the, a fella that was a salesman that called on us and them, came in and asked me, do I want to sell my store? I reach in my pocket, took out the keys, and threw 'em on the table.

EL: What year was that?

MO: Well, actually, it was 2005 when he approached me. We closed the deal in 2006, in June.

EL: Huh.

MO: At that time, the business wasn't fun anymore.

RO: So now we're snowbirds. We stay four months of the year in Florida, in Fort Meyers, and we're here the remainder of the year, from April through November we're here.

EL: Did you put your education degree to use?

RO: Well, as a matter of fact, my degree was in education. Yes, I didn't put it to use as a teacher, but as a merchant and a salesperson, it came in very, very handy because our philosophy was to teach the customer, the potential customer, the benefits of the product, and explain everything to them so they would understand why is this item \$200 and why is this item \$500. It came in very handy in that sense.

MO: And she was able to teach our salespeople. She was an integral part of our business.

EL: Let's talk a little bit about the Holocaust memorial. Tell me how that came about?

MO: Well, B'nai B'rith suggested that all the communities, as many as could, to put up some sort of Holocaust memorial. Most places were putting them in the cemeteries. We decided that we wanted to have something that was a little nicer since we had the Jewish Community Center. We approached the banker Jay Leff, who was a Jewish fella, and very instrumental in getting a lot of the things for this. With his help, we got the services of this Zeljko Kujundzic who was not Jewish, but he was a Gypsy. His family was also killed in the Holocaust. He knew what we were trying to accomplish. Jay got him to do this. Jay also made arrangements for a Lebanese businessman, who had coal. They did strip mining, and he had this heavy equipment. They gave us the equipment to use at no cost to us. So, we were able to haul the rocks from the quarries and the mountains to the center and use their cranes to put them up. This was...what was his name?

RO: Anthony Crane?

MO: Yeah, but what was the guy's name that owned that?

RO: I don't know.

MO: I can't think of it now. But in any event, they...this fella, the Lebanese businessman, was very instrumental in helping us build this monument.

EL: Very interesting.

MO: I remember Danny Radman and I were in charge of collect...of raising the money. We had the time to put this together. We needed \$10,000. In 1982, \$10,000 was a lot of money. We strong-armed everybody. We had all but about, I think, \$150 of our goal. We got a person, I'm not gonna name his name because I don't want this to be anything about him. But, this was the tightest men in town. The two of us strong-armed him at a coffee shop in Uniontown. Between the two of us, we got him to donate the last \$150 to put us over the top. Can you turn this off for a second?

[END TAPE ONE]

[START TAPE TWO]

RO: And the life of the sculptor is in there.

EL: Why don't you tell me a little bit about Hadassah, since you were involved with that?

RO: Oh, we had a thriving Hadassah chapter when I started, when I came here in 1960. We had many fundraisers. We used to have a rummage sale and a donor and all kinds of different fundraising, bake sales. We raised a lot of money for Hadassah. Elaine was the treasurer for many years, and I was the president for many years. Then it sort of...as the population diminished, so were the workers of Hadassah, and it was a very difficult. Nobody wanted to take over these jobs. So that's why we stayed in office for so many years. We used to have meetings once a month. They were often preceded or followed by a dessert and camaraderie.

EM: Fundraising.

RO: We had many speakers come in to talk about the good works that Hadassah did in Israel. It was a very viable organization, but, in later years, starting in like the seventies, membership dwindled, and interest died out. I don't know.

EM: And we all got older and nobody wanted to do anything.

RO: Yeah. Yeah. The workers, we all got burnt out.

EL: Yeah.

RO: Because we weren't only working for Hadassah, this was a small town. We had many hats that we were wearing.

EL: Right.

MO: Or in our case, yarmulkes.

RO: Yeah. Our, my situation was I was torn. I was a wife and a mother and running around doing things for several organizations and I was burnt out. And lot of people that were instrumental in holding these organizations together also got burnt out. So, therefore, there's nothing left in Uniontown, no B'nai B'rith, in name only.

MO: Yeah. The, one of the things...

RO: I can't remember the last time we had a Hadassah meeting. Even our Tree of Life is, our sisterhood is in existence, but we're down to half a dozen, eight members and we haven't had a meeting in three years.

EM: It's been a while.

RO: I mean, when we go to services on Saturday, we go out to lunch afterwards, maybe five or six women and Morty.

MO: A little harem.

RO: We'll conduct little bit of business about the various organizations while we're having lunch. It's...

MO: One thing you're asking, I was thinking about and I gotta add this in. When they had the 1967 war and they were trying to...and Israel needed money, badly. I chaired a rummage sale to raise money for this. We worked like hell to get everything together and the women of the town were the salespeople. We had everything there. You know you say "everything but the bathtub"?

RO: The kitchen sink.

MO: We had a bathtub. We raised quite a bit of money for the UJF for that. I remember going up to collect from a doctor that lived up in the mountains. He had a pistol, gave me a pistol to sell. Sold it to a sporting goods store and put the money in with that. We had everything and everybody jumped together to do this. The women worked like hell. A lot of the men helped schlep the things and do things. Of course, we were younger in those days and there were a lot of us. It was something that was important and we came together as a community.

RO: Yeah. We came together as a community, Israel bond drives, ZOA. Otherwise, each individual organization. Everybody belonged to all the organizations.

EL: Yeah.

RO: And there was a lot of camaraderie. But, then as the years went by, there were other factors that impinged on everybody's time.

EL: You had suggested that you became more religious after you got married?

MO: Mhm

EL: How did that come about?

MO and RO: Well...

RO: Osmosis, I guess. I was raised...As I said, I went to Sunday school. I went to Hebrew school. I went to synagogue regularly. I grew up amongst...although we were not shomer shabbos, I considered myself modern Orthodox, and I went to services. I was very involved with the Jewish causes.

MO: And I always had the last word. It was, "Yes, Dear."

RO: So he...when we first got married, I didn't drive to synagogue. Where we lived, I walked, we walked, and we went regularly to services. It's something he had never done. The more he went, the more he became more familiar with the prayers and more into it. First, he came because of me and then, gradually, it evolved into something that he was doing for himself, as well. Also, I encouraged his activities in the Jewish organizations and as he also supported me in my work with the Jewish organizations. It just evolved.

EL: Was it harder to be observant here that in McKeesport?

RO: It was very difficult to be observant here, yes. When we moved from this apartment where I was able to, it wasn't easy, but I was able to walk to services. We moved out of that walking area distance and we had one rabbi, who was that, Friedman, I think. He said, "You know, better to ride to services and attend the services than to sit home because you didn't want to ride." I started riding to services. Then we had a kosher butcher in Uniontown.

EL: Really?

RO: For quite a long time. I think until the late seventies?

EM: Two butchers at various times.

RO: Well, when I came, there was one, but you grew up with two.

MO: Gerber was the first, but then he sold out to Katz.

RO: Yeah. So, after that, we have to go to Pittsburgh to Prime Kosher or it was called Tel Aviv.

EL: Yeah.

RO: Greenblatt. We went on these monthly forays. That's when we bought a freezer.

MO: Yeah.

RO: And...

MO: I used to love to go to Greenberg. Was that his name?

RO: Yeah.

MO: They were on Fifth Avenue. Because, whenever we would come in, he would get me a seat in the corner and make me a corned beef sandwich. I sat there, enjoyed the corned beef sandwich while Rosalie did her shopping.

RO: But what also kept me grounded in the religious activities was, in the meantime, my family is still in McKeesport, very, very active in Gemilas Chesed synagogue and at the temple and at the Tree of Life. Every once in a while, we would go in when they would have a special service or kiddushes. We would go in and maintain that Orthodox aura, which we still do. We still do. We were just there not that long ago. There's a family event or celebration, someone's hosting a kiddush, so we go in quite often to attend Orthodox services. It keeps me grounded, but it's very difficult here in Uniontown. You really have to work at being observant.

EL: There, were you guys involved when the congregations here merged?

MO: They never merged.

RO: We never...

EL: They never merged?

RO: Never merged.

MO: I wanted a merger so bad I could taste it.

RO: We tried to merge, but we didn't.

MO: We did everything, I did everything that I could possibly do to encourage a merger.

EL: Why did you feel it was important?

MO: I felt that the people were burning out. We needed more people. You take fifteen from one, fifteen from another, and you've got thirty. Out of that thirty, you're gonna be able to have people who are going to work. Ever since we grew up, it was...we should have had three organizations, neither one would step forward, but it was us and the enemy.

EL: Yeah.

MO: And I hated that. I wanted...it should have been inclusive.

EL: When was this?

MO: When was what?

EL: When you were trying to accomplish this.

MO: Many times. I've been on a merger committee, at least since the seventies and the eighties.

EL: Yeah.

MO: And the few different times we came close, we almost had a deal, and somebody on our side or somebody on their side screwed it up. There was no...

EM: But, they had talked about a merger back in the sixties because I wasn't living in town at that point. My sister would tell me they were talking merger then and nothing ever developed. Then, through the years, there were all these other merger meeting, nothing ever came through.

MO: It was sad. Still feel that we may still have had a viable congregation had we been able to do something.

EL: When did conversations begin about closing the congregation?

MO: About five, six years ago, maybe longer. We used to call it the Last Will and Testament Committee. We decided what we wanted to do with our assets. What we were going to do with them, and we made plans. At least two years ago, two or three years ago, we put racks... We have a washroom at our cemetery. It used to be an old washroom.

RO: Building.

MO: Building. They repointed the brick on the outside and fixed it up on the inside with the slots. Now that we're closing the synagogue, we've taken all the names off of the plaques and we're gonna put them in alphabetical order. They're gonna be at the cemetery. Once they close this deal, which should be in the next few days, at that point, we will take the last of our plaques off the wall and relocate them to this room.

EL: Could you guys talk a little bit about your children because, especially your daughter, who has a very interesting job, I think?

RO: Well, our oldest is Barbara. She lives in Israel. She's...

MO: Herzliya.

RO: In Herzliya, Israel. She's a journalist who works for Gannett Publishing Company. She works for their newspaper called *Defense News*. She's the Mid-East bureau chief. At her first journalism job was with the *Jerusalem Post*. Now, thirty years later, our granddaughter is an editor at the *Jerusalem Post* in Israel.

EL: Did your daughter always have an interest in Israel?

RO: Oh, well, each of our children went to Israel when they were sixteen years old, through B'nai B'rith, the B'nai B'rith Summer Institute. When they were sixteen years old, they went for six weeks on a trip to Israel, traveled all over, and were steeped in the culture and life of Israel. She came home from this trip in love with Israel, and she said,

“I would like to spend at least one year of college in Israel.” That was...she was sixteen years old. So I thought, “Well, she’ll forget about it,” but she never did. She ended up spending one semester in her junior year at Tel Aviv University.

EL: Hmm.

RO: So her interest in Israel dated from the time she was sixteen years old. She married an Israeli and now she has her daughter Noa was born of that union. She lives in Israel, as I said, she works for the *Jerusalem Post* like her mother started out. That marriage ended in divorce, and she moved back to the United States. She met another Israeli fella and they’re married for, oh, I guess seventeen years, very happily. Zvi is an energy broker.

EL: Huh.

RO: He is CEO of a company called Petco. Israel buys a lot of their energy from the United States so he makes the arrangements between the coal, oil, and gas companies in America to ship their goods to Israel. So he has an office in Washington, D.C., and her home office is in Springfield, Virginia, with Gannett Publishing Company. So they do...he’s here quite often and she’s here at least once a year, so we do get to see them. But they love Israel and they have a son, there’s a fifteen year age difference between their son and her daughter. Pele, they’re here now as a matter of fact. They come every year for four to six weeks in the summertime. Next week, we’re going with them for a week in Georgia. The whole family is staying at a lake, at a house on the lake. But, they were here for two weeks in Uniontown. It was really wonderful. I can take that once a year, a lot of activities. So...

EL: Do you have other children?

RO: ...that’s Barbara. Now, our son, Eddie, lives in Philadelphia. He’s a CPA and he’s a senior position at a large accounting firm in Philadelphia. He married. He went to Drexel University.

MO: His specialty is...

RO: Construction.

MO: Real estate and construction.

RO: He married a Philadelphia girl and they have two children, Kayla, who just graduated last year from Rice University in Houston and is now a civil engineer. And their son, Evan, he’s graduating this December from the University of Pittsburgh as a mechanical engineer. Then, our youngest is Laura. She lives in Richmond, Virginia, with her husband, Frank. Laura is a CPA and she works as a, she used to work for the SEC and she climbed the ladder there to the highest level that you can get. She was, what do you say, stolen by a financial company in the south. She became vice president of compliance with this company. Now, she’s a member of a very large consulting firm called ACA,

Appliance...what is it called? It's ACA. They're consultants, all the participants in this company were former SEC employees, and they advise and consult with companies.

MO: They audit a company...

RO: Yeah.

MO: ...before the SEC comes in. They tell them what they have to do to make sure they are in compliance.

RO: Yeah, that they're in compliance. Yeah, Compliance Associates. They have a daughter who's seventeen years old, Megan, who is going to be starting, well, she's going to be a senior this year. So, one child is in Israel, one child is in Philadelphia, and one child is in Richmond. We spend...when we're here in Uniontown from April through November, we spend a lot of time visiting Richmond and Philadelphia and our children and grandchildren.

MO: Do you know that it's a shorter distance from Uniontown to Richmond than it is from Richmond to Uniontown?

EM: My parents always said that about Pittsburgh.

RO: Yeah. Yeah.

EL: All right. Well, thank you very much.

RO: So of the three children, two married Jewish and one did not. But, we like our son-in-law, Frank. He's very interested in our religion. In fact, he was instrumental in working with her daughter, who was his stepdaughter, Megan for her bat mitzvah. We would hear him in the next room with her going over all the prayers and things. So, he's very supportive of raising Megan...

MO: And when we have...

RO: ...as a Jewish girl.

MO: ...Passover Seder here.

RO: Yeah, he participates.

MO: He participates.

RO: Yes.

EL: Yeah.

RO: So, it's, it was sad for us, but it's working out.

EL: All right. Well, thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]