

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

Library and Archives Division
Senator John Heinz History Center
Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania
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Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15222

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Date of Interview:

Place of Interview:

Length of Interview:

Number of Tapes: 2

Name of Transcriber: Kristi Tyler

Date of Transcription: 08/24/15

Transcription:

Anne Powell: Ok. We'll try.

Marshall Gordon: My name is Marshall Gordon. I was born in Homestead in 1932.

AP: Ok. Let's stop and see if this is working... Why don't you go back and say what you were starting to say to me about funerals.

MG: Well, there are things that happen that bring back memories of Homestead. Usually it occurs when you go to a funeral of an old Homestead-er. I attended the funeral of Oscar Cohen. I would walk up to a number of people and say, "Do you remember me?" A number of people would walk up to me and say, "Do you remember me?" Then we would each recall some kind of a story from our childhood. One of the people I talked to was the people who had purchased our house when we moved out of Homestead in 1952. They had to be relatives. We sold the house to them. I said, "Well," I said...

AP: (Tape turned off briefly)

MG: Relative of ours that had purchased our house...

AP: And they're still your friends...

MG: Oh yeah. I told her that I had ridden by the house and remember looking out my window at a ballfield and watching the kids play. The ballfield now is the site of a church. No more ballfield. And she says, "Well, that was my bedroom when I grew up in that room, too." So, we kind of chatted about looking out the window and what we used to think about when we looked out the window. This was a cousin I didn't know very well, frankly. My memories as a kid in Homestead were... things pretty much revolved around the synagogue and that was a fairly large congregation at that time. By the time I was around six-years-old, I went to Hebrew school. We went to Hebrew school every day after school, Monday through Thursday, from about 3:30 until about 5:30. The Rabbi used to teach us how to read.

AP: Who was the Rabbi?

MG: The Rabbi at that time was Rabbi Pincus. Rabbi Pincus lived near us. We lived where... originally lived on Louise Street in Homestead. Rabbi Pincus lived a few doors down. Then we later moved to Tenth Avenue. But, I remember going to Hebrew school when we would congregate in the alley behind the synagogue and play ball until it was time to go in. Often, the rabbi would call us and we would ignore the calls and we would continue to play. The rabbi would call us again and we would ignore the calls until he finally lost his temper and often we would go home to the message that the rabbi had called and said, "Marshall wouldn't come in when it was time to go to Hebrew school." The lessons in Hebrew school were really about learning how to read that book as fast as you possibly could. You did not learn to understand at all what we were reading.

Normally, as we got older, we joined the choir. The choir was really part of our Hebrew lessons so that we would learn how to read and that we would learn to sing, and that on the High Holy days, we would be on the bima singing. Up until the time that our voices changed, we sang soprano, most of us, and as we got older, the choir got a little more stature, and we had a few basses. By the time I was in high school, we had a fairly decent choir.

AP: Were there girls in your Hebrew school classes?

MG: No. All boys. There weren't many girls of our age in Homestead at the time. We were still a minority in the school. As I recall, there were four boys and one girl in my high school class, four Jewish boys and one girl. And, of course, none of us took out the one Jewish girl, so if she wanted to go to the prom, she had to find somebody from outside of town, to any of the school dances.

AP: Were you, did you date non-Jewish girls?

MG: Did I what?

AP: Did you date non-Jewish girls...

MG: Yes.

AP: When you were in high school?

MG: My parents didn't like it.

AP: I was going to say, what did your parents think...

MG: My parents didn't like it and I pretty much did it on the sly. I would go to a dance with a non-Jewish girl and not tell them that I had gone out or any of that sort. I guess it was that very reason that they sent my older sister to Taylor Allderdice to go to school because there was only one Jewish boy in her class. She didn't like him, and he didn't like her.

AP: So, when you were living in Homestead, your older sister was going...she was taking a streetcar and going to Allderdice. What do they do? They pay tuition?

MG: Yeah. Yeah. They wanted her to meet Jewish boys. They were, I guess, less worried about me meeting Jewish girls because they figured I would find one somewhere along the way. But, girls didn't seem to have the choices that boys had. So, I guess, they depended on me to do the proper choices. One of the interesting things I remember about Hebrew school was that, once in a while, somebody would bring a chicken.

AP: A live chicken?

MG: A live chicken to the rabbi and ask him to kill it. Rabbis, in those days, performed all the functions from circumcision to killing chickens and weddings and funerals and the works. And the rabbi would get up and say, "Continue to read," and he would go downstairs to the basement and he would kill the chicken, and the person would be off with their chicken. I remember one time very clearly that we gathered at the steps and watched the process. Unbelievable. He killed three chickens at that point, and he would hold the chicken, rub its neck, and rub its head to calm it down. He told us later if the chicken makes a sound, it's not kosher.

AP: Really?

MG: And he would take out his knife...

AP: ...Yeah. It has to be so swift that so it calms...

MG: Swift and painless, (unclear) and painless. He would talk gently to the chicken, rub its neck very gently, and then say the appropriate prayer, then with a quick flick of the wrist, he would cut the throat and then immediately throw the chicken into the paper bag, and hold the bag, close the bag and hold it and the chicken would be, you could hear it jumping around in the bag. And there was one time that he did miss, the chicken squawked, slipped out of his hand, and literally, it was a chicken running around with his head chopped off and it just jumped all over the basement of the synagogue until the rabbi was able to chase it down and put a bag over it and hold it.

AP: Did you see it?

MG: But, my guess is that chicken was not kosher.

AP: Yeah. I would say so. Did you see that?

MG: Yes, yeah. We saw it. Never forget it.

AP: Did you continue to eat chicken?

MG: Oh, yeah. Well, the chicken looked different when it was de-feathered and cleaned. I also remember taking chickens, two occasions, while my mother was cleaning a chicken, in those days, you didn't buy 'em in cellophane or Styrofoam. She would clean the chicken herself and if she found something in the chicken that she didn't recognize that she thought would make it un-kosher, she would take the chicken, give it to me and say, "Go up to the rabbi's house and ask him if it's alright." The rabbi would inspect the chicken and say, "Yes, it's fine." They were that careful about the kashruth part.

AP: So your parents, or at least your mother was really, was observant.

MG: Yeah. My father was the vice-president of the synagogue...(unclear).

AP: Did you go to Sunday school?

MG: Hm?

AP: Did you go to Sunday school, also?

MG: Yes. Oh yeah. My sister was one of my teachers.

AP: That must have been fun.

MG: Yeah. That was fun. Went to Hebrew school four days a week and Sunday school, then we used to go to services Saturday morning. We really were required to do that. But, it was, in a sense, a little bit of self-protection because there was a lot of discrimination against Jews in the small town of Homestead. We were called names, we weren't always welcomed to be on the baseball teams, and so we were kind of a gang amongst ourselves. So, when we went to Hebrew school, it was us together. When we went to Saturday morning services, we were all together. When we were in the choir, we were all together. We were sort of a clique, often ostracized. You asked did I date non-Jewish girls. Some of them didn't want to date a Jew. Some of them didn't want to dance with a Jew. So, we always had the feeling that we were a little bit different than everybody else. My parents were both European-born, not really communicative about things, personal things, like that. I remember coming home once in tears cause I had gotten into a fight. Somebody, two bigger kids had beaten me up, called me a dirty Jew. I came running home, I was in tears, and, you know, my mother explained it away, saying, "Oh, you're better than they are." That really wasn't a good enough answer, really, why did they call me a name and then why is it. I don't think we ever got the answer to that question in Hebrew school or in Sunday school. We learned that we were a chosen people, we learned that we were chosen to receive the Law, but we never got the answer to the question, why do people hate us? Why do people beat us up?

AP: I'm not sure anybody has the answer.

MG: That's right. And we didn't have the kind of parents that could communicate that to us. I haven't had that experience with my own kids who grew up in Mount Lebanon, but we were able to talk about the possibility that it could happen.

AP: Did they have those kinds of experiences though?

MG: No, they've never, to my knowledge, had that kind of experience in any school situation. Mount Lebanon is, even though it is a very Protestant, WASPy community, I think, at least when we lived here, everybody was very accepting and open about people's differences. I understand it wasn't always that way in Mount Lebanon. And I am also very much aware that blacks are discriminated against in Mount Lebanon. I was a member of the community relations board here and went through a cross burning in Mount Lebanon, went through a study that I conducted of the quality of life of people in this town. The only people who really a problem were the blacks. Jews felt very clannish

in Mount Lebanon, felt that they had their own community, and that they weren't that interested in the outside community, but they didn't really feel discriminated against. It was more discrimination by choice than anything else. Getting back to Homestead, I remember the annual visits to the cemetery. We went to the cemetery every year. Oscar Cohen was in charge of the cemetery.

AP: The man whose funeral you just...

MG: The man whose funeral I attended. Oscar was president of what they called Chevra Kadisha, which is the Holy Society. There was an old man named Harry Seiavitch who was the shamus of the shul. Harry always was a cousin, a distant cousin of mine, my mother's, and he always seemed like he was a hundred years old. He was a little old man and he did everything at the synagogue. He mopped, he swept, he was in charge of all the holy artifacts, the torahs, and the torah crowns. He was the janitor, he was the keeper of the books, the keeper of the records, and when we had daily services, he led the services if the rabbi wasn't there, sometimes he done it when the rabbi wasn't there. And he could say that service faster than--saw that guy on television who talks faster--a mile a minute? That's the way, as we called him Heschel, conducted the service.

AP: So you got to go home earlier when he did the service?

MG: Absolutely. He wanted to get out of there. Harry was also the keeper of the cemetery. I think he was the gravedigger. He did a lot of the grave digging himself.

AP: My heavens...

MG: In his earlier years, later years, they, of course, they had bulldozers and things, but I think Harry did the grave digging, planted the flowers, kept the flowers, cut the grass. He was the mainstay and you'll probably talk to his daughter Ruth...

AP: Right.

MG: ...if you haven't already. The Seiavitch family, of about six or seven kids, lived one door away from the synagogue. They were there, I would think, twenty-four hours a day.

AP: Did the rabbi have a house there also?

MG: Not in my memory, the rabbi lived in Munhall, and he lived on Twelfth Avenue. First rabbi lived on Louise Street. That was Rabbi Pincus. Then, the next rabbi, remember, was Rabbi Weiss and he lived on, I think, Twelfth Avenue, was it? Fairly good hike, and he did walk on Shabbos. They walked to the synagogue all the time, but it was not next to the shul. No, surprisingly, because all the rabbis were Orthodox.

AP: Yeah, and the shul didn't own a house for him...

MG: Right

AP: ...they would find something in the area themselves, and I take it the Seiavitches' house also belonged to Seiavitch then.

MG: I really don't know.

AP: Yeah. I'll find out.

MG: It may have been owned by the synagogue and provided to him in payment for his services. They lived a very meager living, really, so I'm guessing, maybe, the house was part of his salary. But Harry was really known to everybody and the mainstay of the synagogue and everything was in his head. You wanted to know something, you ask Heschel, and he usually knew. He lived to his late 90s.

AP: Oh?

MG: And I think he worked almost up to the last ten years of his life, at least. But, you know, quite a memory, Harry. I remember Rabbi Weiss, who followed Rabbi Pincus with a few intermittent rabbis, whose names fail me, he used to make wine on Passover and sell it. He had his own winemaking equipment, the wine press. We used to tease him a little about whether he made it with his shoes off and stomped on the grapes. He, as a sideline, he used to sell wine. He, too, I'm trying to think, this would have gone into the 60s when he was the rabbi in the synagogue, you'd better check that. But, he also was a schochet, killed the chickens, the mohel, performed circumcisions, and did all the weddings and ceremonies and he circumcised our three sons.

AP: He circumcised one of mine.

MG: And then one of our sons was, had his circumcision on Saturday and Rabbi Weiss walked from Homestead to Montefiore Hospital...

AP: Oh my.

MG: ...to perform the operation and walked back. I don't know why it was Saturday. I guess because it was the eighth day, but I know he walked all the way from Homestead to Montefiore Hospital...

AP: I didn't even know you could have a bris on a Saturday.

MG: That's my memory of it. Our first son, he had to walk to the circumcision because it had to be done on the eighth day, and I guess you could do it on a Saturday.

AP: I guess it takes precedence over...(talking over each other)

MG: ...so it allowed you to do certain things. I remember the gang that, the Jewish kids that I grew up with in Homestead, we were very close and inseparable. Once we went our separate ways, we don't see each other...

AP: That's what I was wondering about...

MG:anymore, very seldom. One lives in Detroit and comes back every year to go to the cemetery. I would say in forty years, maybe we've seen each other three times. Another friend, his name was Norman Fisher, might as well throw all the names around...

AP: Yeah. Right.

MG: ...his family doesn't live here anymore. Bill Sherman, whose parents owned the drug store in Homestead Park, Sherman's Pharmacy. Bill comes back about every ten years to visit relatives, and we see each other then. But, he basically comes back for a memory tour. He just goes up to the old drug store, visits some relatives, visits me, visits whoever else, and goes to the cemetery, then moves on. Lenny Stahlberg, who was a close friend of mine, he is the brother of Florence Heidovitz, who you'll...

AP: I...yeah...who I've already spoke to as a matter of fact.

MG: Yeah. You may to talk to Leonard, too, if you can find him. Leonard still lives in the area. I would say, I haven't seen Leonard in forty years. We moved out of Homestead during my second year in college. We just decided that the house was too big for us now. I was the only--my two sisters had married, and I was the only one living at home. So, we sold our big house, and took an apartment in Squirrel Hill. And, I was no longer in school, of course, I was in college. So, we moved out in 1950s. My father was in business in Homestead until then. When he retired, he had the automobile business, sold cars to all the rabbis as well as the priests and ministers.

AP: Did they all get a, what do they call that, a clergyman's discount?

MG: Yes. They got a clergyman's discount.

AP: And there were a lot of clergymen to give a discount to.

MG: Yeah. Yeah, but also I remember Rabbi Weiss was probably the worst driver in the world. He was always in there complaining about dents and nicks and scratches in the car that he put on himself. He was notorious for being a bad driver. Rabbi Weiss, who was the rabbi at the time of my bar mitzvah, and my dad were very close friends. I remember very clearly when my dad died, he was the rabbi at the funeral. He was no longer the rabbi in Homestead. He had moved onto another congregation.

AP: He was at B'nai Emunoh.

MG: Yeah. He made just a very moving eulogy. He spoke in a very thick, foreign dialect, which he never recovered from. I guess he was born in Hungary. He spoke in a thick, foreign dialect and some of the interesting phrases that he used in the eulogy of my father, all in English, of course, came out kind of funny, saying that my father was a charitable person, he said, Sam Gordon would reach into his pocket and never come out with change.

AP: [laughs]

MG: I guess the nicest thing, he said, if I could use one word to describe Sam Gordon, he was a mensch, and, of course, everybody knew the meaning of that word.

AP: So you had more personal relationship with Rabbi Weiss than you had with Rabbi Pincus?

MG: Yes, because he was during my adolescent years, when I knew more questions to ask. He couldn't answer 'em any better. But, yes, I had a more personal relationship with him, and my sister was very close with one of his daughters. They were contemporaries in age. We just kind of knew him a little better, even though Rabbi Pincus' daughter was a contemporary also of mine. She was the second Jewish girl. I forgot about her. Nobody would ever have anything to do with the rabbi's daughter, of course, it was fear there. [both laugh] Fear and trembling.

AP: ...A preacher's kid...

MG: Absolutely. Fear and trembling. Well, let me think, what else? General life? You want to talk about general life at Homestead?

AP: I want to ask you a few things, going back. And you said your parents came from Europe?

MG: Yeah.

AP: Where did they come from?

MG: My dad came from Russia, originally settled in Philadelphia, and was in business in Philadelphia. Then, his business was torn down by urban redevelopment, and so he somehow moved to Pittsburgh, and I never did find out why he selected Pittsburgh. He had two sisters in Philadelphia, and that's why he selected Philadelphia when he came over. He came over when he was about seventeen and he came over escaping from the Russian Army. He was about to be drafted into the Russian Army. My mother came over as a little child with her family and they settled in Homestead, again I don't know why. But they had a grocery store in Homestead.

AP: Oh, where was that?

MG: Dixon Street.

AP: Oh, down below the...

MG: ...below the tracks, yeah. (talking over each other)

AP: ...down below Eighth...

MG: No, right above the tracks. And my mother remembers the Homestead Strike, remembered the Homestead Strike...

AP: Really?

MG: It occurred when she was a very little girl and because she was a very little girl, she was selected to sneak food into the mills. There's a place down by the mill there, which they call the hole, and that's what the people used to go in. Well my mother remembers being given big baskets of groceries...

AP: ...from the store?

MG: ...from the store to be taken into the mill and she was told very specifically what route to take, how to get in, how to get out. The memories were vague, but she said there was a big strike, and I was the smallest one, and so I was told to take the food in. That was one memory. The other was when she got a little older, how she met my father, when he moved to Pittsburgh. He held down three jobs, one was as an elevator operator at Westinghouse, which he did all night.

AP: Was this out in East Pittsburgh?

MG: It was in Braddock, I think, one of the Westinghouse plants. I think it was in Braddock. The second was as an insurance man and he sold life insurance. In those days, you sold life insurance, then you went around and collected ten cents a week.

AP: That's called a debit man, is that right?

MG: Yeah, and the third one was he drove a bakery truck. He delivered bread and he met my mother while delivering bread to her store, grocery store, in Homestead.

AP: How do ya like that?

MG: He was a vegetarian. He would not eat meat. He had a watch, which I saw and lost, we lost it. He showed it to me once. It said, "thou shalt not kill," so he was against killing of animals of any kind. My mother said she would not marry a vegetarian. She said it was just too different, so they literally broke up because of his beliefs. I guess he was love smitten because he came back two weeks after they broke up and said, "Make me a steak, I'm comin' over." He was carnivorous ever since.

AP: Well, there's an awful proposal.

MG: That's right, that's right.

AP: That's quite a story. So, then, he decided to live in Homestead?

MG: Yeah, and then he and my mother's two brothers went into the automobile business together. They opened up an automobile dealership, and they sold, I think it was, Willies, and then they sold Packards, and then they went into Chryslers and Plymouths. They were partners for many years.

AP: Was your mother a Jacobson? Is that...

MG: Yes. My mother's....

AP: ...that's the Jacobson part of the thing.

MG: Yeah, then her two brothers went into business with my dad and eventually, the business went bankrupt and my dad bought them out. It was at one point called Jacobson and Gordon when he bought 'em out it became Gordon and Jacobson. One of the brothers retired and so there were two of them. Then, ultimately, they both retired.

AP: How did they decide to go into the automobile business? They just...

MG: ...I never got that answer. I don't know. It was very new and this would have been probably around 1940. It was very new.

AP: Just before the war.

MG: Yeah.

AP: And then they had no cars to sell shortly thereafter.

MG: Yeah. Yeah. Then, the business prospered. It did very well, and it was located right outside the mill gate, right across from the entrance to the mill. So, all the mill workers bought their cars there and left them there during the day to get them serviced, pick 'em up at night on the way home.

AP: So a lot of the mill workers owned cars?

MG: Yeah.

AP: ...after the war...

MG: Yeah, well times were very prosperous, salaries were good, production was very high, and there was, it was an era of very good time immediately following the war, from 1946 on. My dad retired around probably around 1962 or 1963.

AP: And, what? Sold the business?

MG: Yeah. And he died shortly after he retired. He died in '65, I think.

AP: And you said you lived up on Tenth Avenue, your supervisor, what was that called? Supervisor's Grove?

MG: No, it was called the Supervisor Row or Mill Executive... I don't remember. There was a string of houses that were all part of the--owned by the steel mill, one of which was a huge mansion.

AP: Oh, they BELONGED to the steel mill?

MG: They belonged to the steel mill and they were given to the supervisors to live in as part of their job. Now this was in Munhall, see, and not as opposed to Homestead. Munhall, historically, I believe, Munhall was formed by the steel executives as a place where they had a certain amount of political control and could control the taxes. So, they bought a lot of property, and they pretty much owned the politicians in town and they could control the taxes. So, they put up their homes where their favored employees there. So, Munhall was the area which, where the wealthier people lived and Homestead was where, basically, the mill workers lived. That's my historical understanding.

AP: Did you know those supervisors? They were your neighbors.

MG: No. Never met 'em. I have one memory of when Ginger Rogers came to town and visited my neighbor across the street, who I never met. We heard she was coming, and the whole gang of kids were just waiting and waiting, and up she drove in a big limousine. We all ran up to the house, waved to her, she waved to us, then she rang the doorbell, and disappeared. I never met my neighbor.

AP: And you didn't know why Ginger Rogers came to this...

MG: No, no. Somehow the word got around that Ginger Rogers was coming to visit and I didn't even know his name.

AP: Oh, so you didn't have that much to do with your neighbors?

MG: No. Matter of fact, we had no neighbors, once we moved out of Louise Street. Louise Street we had neighbors. Several neighbors were my family. We had kind of a little enclave there, a couple of Jacobsons lived in, right around in there. When we built our new house, one side was this empty field where we played ball, and the other side was a municipal park.

AP: Oh, I see, so you were...

MG: Then across the street was the superintendent's house and then caddy-corner across the street was the library. So, really, we had no neighbors we grew up with. I remember we used to walk from our house to the synagogue and as we got closer to the synagogue, I could probably give you names of people whose houses were on...

[END TAPE ONE]

[START TAPE TWO]

MG: ...to the synagogue every day as I went to Hebrew school I could generally wave to the Cohens on one side and that was Oscar Cohen and his father and two sisters. I could wave to the Grossmans who lived a block down.

AP: Is that Mr. Grossman who wrote all, who was the secretary, who wrote all those stories and everything?

MG: Right. Right. Rubensteins, who were my cousins, who lived there, too. That was Sam Rubenstein. I guess I'll give you the name of Lester Rubinstein, who was his son, it was relative of mine that might be able to give you some Homestead insights. Then, of course, passed the Seiavitch house, and they...

AP: So it was a little...

MG: ...so it was like a Jewish enclave within the vicinity of the synagogue, but, interestingly enough, the rabbi didn't live there.

AP: I know. That's what's surprising. He'd rather walk, well he got himself in shape to walk to Oakland for your bris.

MG: Maybe. [Both laugh] Maybe.

AP: So he didn't have too soft a life... Yeah, well talking about this little community that you had, did that make you feel secure as a youngst...

MG: Yeah. Made me feel comfortable because, as I said, we felt kind of ostracized. So, the synagogue was really the place where we felt we could do anything we wanted, we could say almost anything we wanted to. I remember a couple of us kids one year in Sunday school put together a little Sunday school newspaper. Wrote it, distributed it, took it to Sunday school every Sunday and passed it out to people with just little gossipy items about people and things that were happening. The synagogue was really the center of our life at that point. I remember that there used to be some talent shows that we would put on at the synagogue, people, congregants, sang and danced, there were seders, community seders that went on...

AP: Oh, really?

MG: ...everybody was invited to. There was usually a little break fast, serving food after Yom Kippur. I'll have to remember the liquor, yeah. Anytime there was a yahrzeit and there had to be a minyan for yahrzeit, the person who had the yahrzeit would bring a bottle of liquor. After the service, they would sit down, open up the bottle, and these guys, particularly Heschel, and some of the older men, Mr. Grossman, used to drink water glasses of that stuff. My dad included. They just poured it into the water glass.

AP: They didn't dilute it?

MG: No. Didn't dilute it with anything and they just after the service, after the yahrzeit, after you say your Kaddish, then had a drink. My dad always brought a bottle, and I recall he was going to morning services when he had a yahrzeit and bring a bottle for the morning service, too. This was before he went to work.

AP: Do you remember the brand?

MG: It was...well, it was usually a bourbon, some kind of bourbon.

AP: Oh.

MG: It wasn't scotch.

AP: No.

MG: It was usually bourbon (unclear).

AP: Oh, I remember. It was Four Feathers.

MG: Could have been. Could have been. Four Roses, maybe.

AP: Four Roses, whatever it was. I think Four Feathers was...(unclear)

MG: Yeah. I do remember, I couldn't believe how they drank that stuff because, when I tried a little sip, my throat would go crazy. These guys would just swallow it down. So that was another kind of occasion that (unclear) my dad did before his yahrzeits. I always remember that when somebody died, tradition says that you go for thirty days and then you would go for a year and on occasions when we had somebody die or a relative, they would go for the thirty days, three times a day, but after that, they would hire somebody to say the Kaddish for them. That was usually Heschel. They would pay him a certain amount of money and he would say Kaddish for them so they wouldn't have to go everyday for a year. My dad did that and a couple of my relatives, I remember, doing to the same thing. The other thing Heschel did, you may have heard this one, on the High Holidays, he used to auction off the aliyahs.

AP: I remember that, but I haven't heard it.

MG: Oh ok. Well, Heschel was the auctioneer. He (unclear) and everything. You auctioned off the honor of opening the ark and there are certain parts of the book where...which are more desirable than others, those are the parts, I guess...

AP: (unclear)

MG: Well, there are the parts when more people are there. [Laughs] I found that out. I used to ask my dad, I said, "Well, why is that one more expensive than this one?" The answer was, "Well, people walk out, people come back, but for that one everybody is in." I guess it's the first one or something. There were bidding wars and the status thing was too big. Buy it and give it to somebody. So, sometimes you would buy a series of aliyahs, which may mean three or four of them, and Heschel would auction in Yiddish. He would say...

AP: *Di [sic] ershter mol...* ["The first one," i.e. the first aliyah]

MG: *Di ershter mol, di ershter mol, di tsveyter mol. Fuftsik toler, tsvantsik toler* ["The first one, the first one, the second one. Fifty dollars, twenty dollars..."], whatever it was, and he would sing it out like a real auctioneer. He was great. Then the bidding wars between the wealthier in the synagogue, and then, usually one that you bid against had won and would give it to you. So it was kind of a game.

AP: Oh, I didn't know that.

MG: I guess the wealthiest man in the synagogue was Joe Frank. Have you heard that name?

AP: Ah, I remember.

MG: Ok. Well, Joe Frank was probably the wealthiest man in the synagogue and he was also a notorious racketeer. That's where his money came from. Yeah, Joe was a big bidder. My dad was usually a fairly big bidder and they used to bid against each other. That was part of the game that they played. Whoever won, the first one went to the other guy as a gesture.

AP: Did you know...So you knew Joe Frank?

MG: Yes, very well.

AP: Was he a nice man?

MG: Very nice, very close to the family, close to my dad. I remember I was a little kid when he was on trial.

AP: Did they try to deport him?

MG: They tried to deport him. I mean, I just read the paper, and I was shocked cause, according to the paper, he was not only in charge of gambling, he was in charge of prostitution, and owned all the brothels on Sixth Avenue, he was in charge of all the number writing. He was just accused of everything. I said to my dad, I says, "That's Joe. His picture's here." And he said, "Oh, its frame up. It's a frame up." [Laughs]

AP: So, people didn't really think that he was the big gangster... (unclear)

MG: He obviously was, he was convicted. My dad did go down and testify as a character witness for him, but Joe was... I was in AZA at that time, which was B'nai B'rith organization. He always bought the basketball uniforms.

AP: Was it an AZA in Homestead?

MG: Yeah.

AP: Oh. So there was a chapter there?

MG: Oh yeah. Yeah.

AP: Was it just Homestead, or Munhall/Homestead?

MG: Munhall/Homestead, Homestead Park. But, it was just that area. There was also one in Braddock.

AP: There was another one in Braddock when you were growing up?

MG: One in Braddock, yeah.

AP: That's interesting...

MG: ...One in McKeesport. Yeah, there was one in McKeesport. When I was BBYO director there were two in McKeesport, but even when I was BBYO director in the late '60s, there was BBYO chapter in Homestead, co-ed.

AP: Huh...

MG: Boys and girls.

AP: Oh, so that's what they did, they...

MG: Yeah, because there weren't enough boys and not enough girls for separate groups. So, there was a co-ed chapter.

AP: Were your sisters in BBG?

MG: Yeah.

AP: And that was...

MG: Well, my older was, my middle sister was not. The middle sister, who went to school at Taylor Allderdice, joined a sorority.

AP: Ah, yes.

MG: That was...my older sister was very active in BBG.

AP: And was it in Homestead?

MG: In Homestead...

AP: Even though she went to Allderdice...

MG: No, it was my middle sister who went to Allderdice...

AP: Oh, it was your middle sister who went to Allderdice, that's right...

MG: ...the older sister went to Munhall. Yeah.

AP: You went to Munhall?

MG: Munhall, yeah.

AP: Oh, ok. What about the teachers? You were talking about the anti-Semitism...How did you, how was...

MG: Well, there was one Jewish teacher in high school, Bob Markowitz, who changed his name to Markley and at one point in time. And, one of the things I remember about Bob was that teachers had to read the Bible before class. Bob never read it; he always had a student do it. Bob was a very popular high school teacher. He taught history and he was also an assistant football coach. I was told he wanted to be the football coach, but because he was Jewish, he couldn't be the football coach. He was an assistant coach and he was...the unusual thing in those days was any Jewish athlete, Bob was very athletic, and apparently played football somewhere and he was a teacher and coach but he could not be...at least that's what we were told, that Bob could not be the coach because he was Jewish.

AP: So, that's, generally, what the community believed that that was why he didn't become...

MG: Yeah. The Jewish community...

AP: ...Yeah, that's what I meant. That's what I meant.

MG: I don't know if he was good enough to be a high school coach

AP: But they had enough of a feeling that there was anti-Semitism...

MG: ...Well, yeah. Anytime they'll say...the Jewish community always felt that there was hidden or overt discrimination against Jews. And we were always kind of on our guard, no matter what. I think we as kids were taught to be on our guard, particularly when you were the minority in a small town.

AP: Did that affect your feeling by being Jewish?

MG: Ah, sure. It had to, and always questioning, well why am I Jewish? Why do people not like me because I'm Jewish? I'm not, I'm not now a religious person, despite the fact I have a very...I can read as fast as the next guy, I'm fairly good at Jewish history, and I don't (unclear) the synagogue much right now. I'm a member, I belong, all my kids were bar mitzvahed, they are more observant than I am.

AP: That's interesting.

MG: I worked for the Jewish community for eight years when I was with B'nai B'rith, and I probably wouldn't want to work for the Jewish community again. I guess I shouldn't say that on tape. You can erase that piece. [Both laugh] But I always felt a little uncomfortable working for the Jewish community in that I felt Jewish people who hired a person to work for them felt like they owned that person, and that the demands were far greater. Now the demands are always great on a social worker, anybody working in a non-profit environment, but it didn't seem as true when I was working for a secular organization. So, I wouldn't, wouldn't say that I'm bitter. I've identified as a Jew, I would never not pay my dues, or quit identifying with the synagogue. I guess I would describe myself as a secular Jew, as opposed to a religious Jew.

AP: That's interesting.

MG: I don't know if that's because of the way I brought up in Homestead...

AP: Yeah. It's hard to...

MG: ...on my guard all the time and it may well have affected me that way. Now that you asked the question, I'd like to ask the same question of my contemporaries, if I ever see 'em again, the kids I grew up with.

AP: Yeah.

MG: The one girl in the class was Clarisse Mandel, she's now Clarisse Katz...

AP: I'm going to talk to her...

MG: ...Ok. Ask her. I think she's very highly identified, probably, maybe...I wouldn't say her parents were more religious than mine, my dad was the vice president, but my dad was not Orthodox in the sense that he worked and rode on Saturdays. He didn't have any problem eating pork or anything outside the house, inside the house, never, of course. I would not say he was Orthodox Jew, he was an identified religious Jew, of course, and when he came to this country, what he told me was the only thing he brought with him was his tefillin, and I still have it.

AP: Well, there you are.

MG: That I have.

AP: The other part of the heritage. Was your mother, would you say your mother more observant than your father?

MG: Well, neither one of them were very well educated. My mother not only was not educated, secularly, she was not religiously. Most girls weren't. When she was a little girl, she couldn't read Hebrew, she didn't go to Hebrew school, and so I don't think my mother thought much about it. She was Jewish because she was born Jewish and married to a Jewish man. She was a virtual illiterate when it came to Hebrew.

AP: So, when she came to services...

MG: Just sat there...

AP: Did she read Yiddish?

MG: She spoke Yiddish.

AP: But she couldn't read it?

MG: She could read Yiddish, but the prayer book was Hebrew...

AP: ...Well, there were, like...

MG: ...the letters are the same.

AP: Do you know the tahina, which is a Hebrew...a Yiddish prayer book for women?

MG: No.

AP: Oh.

MG: No, no. The Yiddish words are totally different. The language is different, even though it's the same letters. Besides, what went on in the synagogue is you read those prayers as fast as you could, and even if she could read, she could never keep up with... There were very few women who could.

AP: So, but did she go?

MG: Oh yeah. Yeah. In Homestead, at that point, the women sat upstairs...

AP: Yeah.

MG: ...and the men sat downstairs.

AP: In fact, I was wondering, like, when you had those third seders, did the men and women still sit separately for the seders?

MG: Oh, for the seders, they were down in the basement.

AP: So everybody sat together in the basement.

MG: Yeah, yeah.

AP: So as long as it wasn't where the...

MG: As long as it wasn't in front of the ark, right.

AP: I see. Yeah.

MG: You could...but you didn't sit together.

AP: For Simchas Torah, for those minor things, do they still sit, when aren't so many people, do the women still go upstairs?

MG: I don't think they do that anymore. I think the synagogue itself has changed.

AP: Yeah.

MG: I remember going back once and they had, what you call it? A mechitza. The women sat downstairs 'cause there weren't that many, but they still had a curtain.

AP: They still had them separated.

MG: But the last time I went to the wedding, there was no separation.

AP: Oh, so everybody was sitting together.

MG: So I think that, ultimately...

AP: Before that, it wasn't that way in its heyday.

MG: Right. In its heyday, the women sat upstairs.

AP: And that didn't bother your parents?

MG: No. It was just the accepted way of doing things.

AP: That was just the way of doing things. Yeah. You know you were talking about when you heard they had a BBYO that you were in charge, did you see any differences between kids of other small towns and the ones in Homestead?

MG: No, not really. I highly identified with them, of course, because my territory took in Beaver Falls, and Butler, and Brighton, and New Kensington, and Aliquippa, all those small towns up and down, now we're talking about 1966, late '60s, and I traveled to all those towns. There still was a very strong need for kids in small towns to be clannish, to be with their Jewish contemporaries. A few were being rebellious, and part of the rebellion was to bring their Gentile friends to the BBYO events. Part of the rebellion was for the girls to date Jewish boys and bring them to the dances. The parents were desperately trying to keep their kids identified as Jews and trying to keep their daughters away from the non-Jewish element. And that's part of the thing they depended on me to do as the BBYO director. The nice thing about being a BBYO director then, I can speak from interesting contemporary experience because my son was a BBYO director in Virginia not too long ago. Very different.

AP: Uh-huh.

MG: But the nice thing about going to the small towns was that I was very much welcomed as the person who was there to bring some Judaism to their kids. So, they would just go all out completely when anytime we had a tournament in Butler or New Castle or Beaver Falls. The community would just come together and cook all the meals and the lunches, help run all the programs, and do all the home housing we needed. So the communities were very, very tight. The difference now, my son's experience, and he was BBYO director in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina.

AP: That's the whole region?

MG: That was his region. See, I was western Pennsylvania and West Virginia. He was BBYO director and he said, all their events are held in hotels. A major concern is drinking, drugs, and the Jewish aspect is almost secondary. They want their kids to identify with other Jews, but they're far more concerned about drugs, and they look to BBYO as something who will save their kids from that kind of environment because of

the cultural programs and all those kind of things. Whereas, in my day, they looked to BBYO to keep their kids Jewish.

AP: Yeah. So the kids in Homestead were really as isolated as the ones in the more, you would think, I would think, of as the more isolated communities, you know like these of Beaver Falls. It's not across the bridge from Squirrel Hill, but...

MG: Well, we as kids hardly ever went to Squirrel Hill. Everything was self-contained in Homestead. When I was...we would go to places like Braddock and McKeesport or Uniontown for tournaments. That was basketball, softball, those kind of things. But, socially, we hardly ever went to Squirrel Hill. When I became BBYO director, there was more going on for the kids in Homestead in Squirrel Hill. They spent a lot of time in Squirrel Hill. Transportation was a little bit easier, and a lot of them had cars by then. That helped. We didn't have cars when we were growing up (unclear). I usually had a car because my dad was in the business, but I was the only one.

AP: Yeah. A high school boy with a car...

MG: And I shared that with my two sisters, but that was only because my dad was in the car business. He made one available to the three of us. But, we never went to Squirrel Hill.

AP: What about...

MG: We were more likely to go to Braddock than Squirrel Hill.

AP: So, your mother kept kosher...on her kosher meat? Did she go...

MG: Squirrel Hill.

AP: She went to Squirrel Hill for that. So she went there for that kind of shopping.

MG: And we also had a relative in the meat packing business. He used to...he wasn't strictly kosher, but he would have a cow butchered for the family.

AP: Hm. You're very own cow.

MG: Yeah. Well, he sold it, of course, but we got it from him and then we also went into Squirrel Hill to buy meat.

AP: So your mother didn't have to go as much, though, as...so you didn't really use the city a lot? You didn't go...the IKS or any of those kinds of things?

MG: Well, it was a big thing. We used to go to the baseball games. Sometimes, we walked to Forbes Field from Homestead, yeah, or we'd take a streetcar...usually a streetcar, once in a while, we'd walk. Only for a special occasion would we go.

AP: So, it really was very self-contained...

MG: Very self-contained, yeah.

AP: Interesting.

MG: Yeah. Even through AZA, the kids that we knew through AZA were more likely to be the kids from Braddock or McKeesport than from Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh.

AP: What about your sisters, since they went to Allderdice? Would that give them a whole different take on things?

MG: ...The one sister went to Allderdice.

AP: I'm sorry. That's right.

MG: Yes. She became a little more detached from the community. She was a very outgoing type, and she made friends very quickly and very easily. So, she spent a lot of time going into Squirrel Hill and spending overnights with her friends in Squirrel Hill, sometimes bringing them home for weekends. Did it change her perspective? Are you asking were they more observant than me or...

AP: I don't know. I mean, I'm wondering if...I'm assuming she was making Jewish friends in the city, if they were different from the circle that you...

MG: Yeah. None of us were, economically, very wealthy, and if we were, we didn't show it. If you go back, I guess, to the Shylock image of Jews being acquisitive and moneygrubbers. So if our families had money, we didn't throw it around very much because, again, fear...

AP: ...It was (unclear) fear.

MG: Yeah. The kids that my sister associated with in Squirrel Hill were far different. They had money, cars. They had the cashmere sweaters and they did show it. They were not afraid to show it. They lived where they were close to a majority...at least there were far more Jews in Squirrel Hill and I guess her values became a little bit different, than those of mine and my older sister. We were more of the small town type.

AP: Were you glad you didn't go to Allderdice?

MG: ...Became kind of a bigger...big time kid. Am I glad I didn't go to Allderdice? Yeah. I don't regret that at all.

AP: So you, even in retrospect, you don't regret having...

MG: ...having grown up as a minority in a small town? I think it taught me a lot. It taught me...maybe it taught me how to insulate myself, which is positive or negative, but it taught me how to get along with all kinds of people, taught me how to defend myself when I had to, and it taught me the importance of being part of a group.

AP: Not bad lessons.

MG: No, no. Small town life was different than it is today, I think. Not a lot of the people live in small towns work there, too. Yeah.

AP: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Everybody's more mobile than they were.

MG: Yeah. So you're not as identified to your small town as we were.

AP: Mm hmm. Because they don't have that same sense of communities that we had.

MG: The Jewish people that we knew in Homestead were...we went to the shops, we shopped at their stores, and we saw them in all kinds of lights. We saw them professionally. They were doctors. They were lawyers. They were dentists. And we saw them in that light. Kids don't see that anymore, usually, in their hometown.

AP: No, there's not that. Everything's sort of atomized. Were there...(unclear) because we're almost done, were there Jewish laborers, like, people who worked in the mills or anything? Do you know?

MG: Yes, but very few. We knew who they were and...we were, I guess, always kind of surprised to know that they existed. But, there was a mechanic, who worked for my dad who was Jewish. I think there was one person who worked in the mill, one out of...

AP: ...out of the whole community.

MG: Yeah. Generally, they were shopkeepers, businessmen, or professionals.

AP: Yeah, that's what...that's...

MG: ...There were a couple, and I remember being surprised that a Jew would do that kind of work.

AP: Was it hard for them, do you think, to fit in with the rest of the Jewish community?

MG: I don't remember it being hard for them. They were very well accepted.

AP: Oh that's...So the community itself didn't make distinctions on what people did.

MG: No, I mean, there was a tailor. I know people who did service kinds of jobs and in the shul, everyone was alike.

AP: Oh, that's nice. So (unclear) that too? Did you have non-Jewish friends, too?

MG: Did I?

AP: Mm hmm.

MG: Yes, and they were special. So they were not a lot, but the ones I had were very special and some of them I still see and talk to.

AP: That's interesting. These were, like, schoolmates?

MG: Schoolmates. Yeah. Yeah, and we just kind of found out we had common interests and we paled around, but they were different. They were a little bit separate. But, then, I can name one or two.

AP: Yeah. Did you...did Christmas and Easter bother you at all? You didn't...

MG: Oh, did it bother me?

AP: Or maybe I should say how did you feel about it?

MG: Easter never, Christmas...again, I felt excluded and I don't know that I wanted to observe it. But, I kind of looked at another kids' homes at the trees and then all the presents and things like that and feel excluded, and different. I don't know that we were bothered anymore at Christmas as Jews by anti-Semitism, but, internally, I think I always felt, gee, that's something we don't have, you know?

AP: Well, the celebration going on...

MG: Yeah...

AP: ...and it being ubiquitous at that time...

MG: That's right...

AP: ...and in your schools...

MG: ...and the schools, we sang Christmas carols, and I remember always just moving my lips as I was always afraid to sing and afraid not to sing.

AP: Did they pressure you to sing? Do you think you could have not sung if you had been...

MG: ...if I had been a little more courageous? [Laughs] I guess you always have the feeling that if the rabbi ever caught you saying the word "Christ," he would say, "What did you say?" On the other hand, you didn't want to be different than the other kids.

AP: Right. Right.

MG: So, I pretty much moved my lips...

AP: So, it was your own, your own internal...

MG: Yeah. It's hard for any kid to be different....

AP: Sure...

MG: ...any way, shape, or form.

AP: Well, I'm not going to take up more of your time.

MG: Ok, this was fun. I enjoyed it.

AP: Oh, good. I'm glad you enjoyed it. I enjoyed it. This was really...you have a lot of interesting perspectives and nice...

MG: Good, strong memories...

AP: ...and they're strong memories. So you're not really...there's no (unclear)....

MG: ...the memories are both living in a small town and living in a Jewish community, a small town. So, I guess I lived in two enclaves.

AP: Yeah. That's right. It was sort of the small world...

MG: The small town was very close, Homestead itself. The broad community was a close community. Munhall, I would have to say, Munhall. But the Homestead area was a...it was a good feeling growing up, despite the fact that there were times when people called me names, despite the fact that there were times when people said they hated me, the times people said, "Get out of town."

[END OF INTERVIEW]