

**Transcript of Interview with Arnold Zuckerman  
Homestead Hebrew Oral History Project  
Call Number: CSS #4**

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Name of Interviewer: Ann Sheckter Powell

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Pre-interview Notes:

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Words not understood marked as [unclear]

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Transcription:

**Ann Shekter Powell:** Okay this is Ann Shekter Powell interviewing...

**Arnold Zuckerman:** Go ahead.

AP: You can give your name.

AZ: Arnold Zuckerman.

AP: Okay.

AZ: I grew up in Homestead Munhall.

AP: Are you willing to say when you, when you first, were you born in Homestead?

AZ: Yes, I was born and raised in Homestead. In 1925. On a cold January day, January 25th in Homestead Hospital.

AP: That's pretty specific.

AZ: Huh?

AP: That's pretty specific. You were born in Homestead?

AZ: Yes.

AP: You're one of the few people I've met so far who was.

AZ: Well, I lived on McClure Street as a youngster till I was about six then we moved to Margaret Street. And then from Margaret Street as I grew up I went to the Hebrew school there on Tenth Avenue. And I remember Mr. Davis who was my teacher. And I got bar mitzvahed there in Homestead, and we had a Friday to Sunday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, affair there. I was bar mitzvah Saturday and Sunday we had a dinner. And I had a little speech to say, and I barely got through with that.

And as I got older, I got a job on Eighth Avenue in 1943. And '44, '45 I went away to the service. I came back and I went into business on Eighth Avenue in 1947. I was in business there until 1964 when I went down to Smallman Street about 1989. All that time as Homestead had a very, very busy business area on Eighth Avenue, and our shul at the holiday time was filled to capacity and toward the end had standing room in the back. And most of the women were upstairs until later years when they started moving downstairs as the population decreased. And they had some very good rabbis there until, I think the last one that was there was Rabbi Pritzker, who moved to Canada, who had a nice family and lived next door to the shul.

The shul bought the home from Dr. McClain, who later became a judge. It was a lovely home the shul had bought and then the families started to pass on and some of them moved away. And as the years went on the families were getting smaller and smaller and a lot of families didn't come from Squirrel Hill to Homestead, they went elsewhere. And some of the families from Pleasant Hills, they started their own temple or synagogue out there so we had no one to turn to. But they did a very good job with what was left until recently. Up until this year, of 1993, where there was a limited amount and there was no use to carry on. We thought that what was left should be given to a shul where they could carry on the name of Homestead Synagogue, the plaques and all. And I think Beth Shalom will do a very good job and will carry on the name of the Homestead Hebrew Congregation Synagogue.

AP: Okay that was a great overview. I'm going to take you all the way back to the beginning. You said you were born in Homestead.

AZ: Right.

AP: So your parents were already there.

AZ: Yes, they came in 1920 from overseas.

AP: Oh they came from Europe?

AZ: Yeah.

AP: To, where'd they come from?

AZ: Homestead.

AP: No, where did they come from?

AZ: Uh, Russia. Bessarabia, which is a combination of the bottom tip of Russia and Romania.

AP: Of course.

AZ: So they came. And my brother, who was about five and a half years older than I was.

AP: So they brought him from Europe.

AZ: Yeah. He was born on the ship coming over.

AP: Huh.

AZ: So Homestead had had some good Hebrew teachers and they've had a lot of students and that's the way everybody came to this town, somebody brought them over. We had relations in Homestead.

AP: Oh that's, I was just going to ask you.

AZ: Yeah.

AP: That's why your parents came to Homestead.

AZ: Right. We had a big family already here and my grandparents were here.

AP: Oh, so your parents came after your grandparents?

AZ: I'm pretty sure, I'm not positive but I think so.

AP: Your grandparents were in Homestead already.

AZ: Right. I think my grandfather was at one time shamash of the Homestead shul. I would say in...

AP: Was he Zuckerman, too?

AZ: No, his name was Glick.

AP: So that was your mother's father.

AZ: Right. Father mother, I would say my grandfather might have been a shamash around 1919 in that area, 1920. With a derby hat and big long white beard.

AP: Oh you remember him?

AZ: Sure.

AP: What did your parents do when they came to Homestead?

AZ: My dad started off like other immigrants, couldn't speak but he could talk other languages. And then they had an uncle who was in the broom business, and they started off selling brooms on the shoulder, you know, at that time population along Ravine Street were on hills. So wherever there was a home, he ran up, he went up to the house and knocked on the door and couldn't speak two words of English, but he could speak other languages, you know, Slovak, Hungarian, he managed to get by. And then that was a little on the rough side, and he started in the fruit business with a horse and buggy.

AP: As a huckster?

AZ: Yup. And he had to buy a home for the horse. A stable as a home. So we, I don't remember that, I was already living on McClure Street, that was on Fourth Avenue and Homestead. And that's where all the Jewish families lived because before the mill took in over in the forties we had more people living down there from Second Avenue to Eighth Avenue. And it spread from City Farm Lane all the way over to Amity, or farther, Sarah. West and Sarah Street.

AP: All in Homestead.

AZ: Yes. Well that was farther down, yes, but down there before the [unclear] there was a cutoff there where the bridge is, that was all mills. So then Homestead, they had to buy all those homes in the 40s. And people started to move up on the hill and out to the park and some went out to Pleasant Hills and that's how the families started to drift away. Some went to Squirrel Hill. At that time, until 1945 there was quite a bit of family, I would say 125 families in the synagogue. So there was no problem and you had some good women presence in the Sisterhood there. They all pitched in. There was a local community, everybody worked, everybody pitched in and everybody took their orders.

AP: So you went, you remember going to cheder there.

AZ: Yeah. I went to cheder and I went to Sunday school. Might not have been a good student, but I went. The rest of the of the boys were playing basketball and I was learning. And I could see the mistake I made now as an older man.

AP: You wished you had paid attention as a little boy.

AZ: Right, right. I could see the difference between my brother and myself. He had a good teacher and he can go through the book pretty good. Well I stutter going through the book. I know where everything is, but it's not, I should have learned then, not now. Now's not the time to learn, you have to learn when you're younger.

AP: Yeah, it's a lot easier.

AZ: Yeah, so that's, as a parent I can see what a mistake I made.

AP: Your brother had different teachers than you did?

AZ: Yes, well he was older. And at that time they got the best they could get. Don't forget there was more students at that time and there was families willing to pay on the side to get more professional type of teachers. And like anything else, the more you pay the better teacher you get. And toward the end there the congregation didn't have that kind of money to support a Hebrew teacher and a rabbi. Earlier you had some outstanding families who could afford to subsidize a little bit, then later on moved away or passed on.

AP: So when you went to Hebrew school was it the rabbi who was your Hebrew teacher?

AZ: We did have at that time a teacher when I was younger and a rabbi. And later on they couldn't get the teachers so the rabbi that came only had a limited amount of students so he took over and started teaching them and got them ready for bar mitzvah. If you only have a nucleus of ten students, before you might have had thirty-five, so a rabbi couldn't handle thirty-five students so they had a teacher. Sunday school, they always had a good Sunday school, the shul. They brought some teachers probably from Squirrel Hill over and could afford to pay them a little bit. But they did have a very good Sunday school.

AP: When you were bar mitzvahed it was 1938, is that right?

AZ: Yeah, I guess you're correct, in that area.

AP: Was your bar mitzvah like bar mitzvahs now?

AZ: Oh sure. Mhm. Usually had a affair at the shul and everybody in the congregation was invited. Whoever you wanted. And you had a nice affair. It was all sponsored or subsidized by the Sisterhood, you know you paid them, or they helped cater the affair.

AP: So they took care of all the [unclear].

AZ: Yeah, they had a regular big kitchen. The kitchen was nice. They used to work downstairs when I was a youngster then they made a nice kitchen in the social room in the back there that was very, very nice. But I didn't participate then. As I got older I moved away. My children, I have two children, and they didn't want to go over to Homestead so they went over here. I had a bus pick them up in the afternoon because I was never home, I was working.

AP: Now how long did you live in Homestead? When did you leave Homestead?

AZ: Well, I got married in 1951, but I went to Homestead shul. I was a member until about 1960 then I dropped out and went to Beth Shalom, but I came back to Homestead shul.

AP: You came back for like services?

AZ: No, I became a member again.

AP: Oh!

AZ: Because families were getting smaller, I mean they were running out of members so my brother and I figured we'll become members again. Because it isn't fair where my childhood was, why should I punish them because my kids didn't want to go over the bridge? So I felt that my obligation was still to be a member there at Homestead shul.

AP: Oh I see.

AZ: So I was a member there and at Beth Shalom 'til this all, and after all these years I'm leaving Beth Shalom also.

AP: Oh, because you're going to Florida.

AZ: Yeah, right. I have my own seats in Homestead, I have my own seats at Beth Shalom, also, so I've lost them and I've lost these. But we have a few plaques at Beth Shalom and we have a plaque for Homestead that's going to be in Beth Shalom also that we bought for our parents.

AP: Did you find the services very different between...

AZ: It's really not. I mean Homestead was very good services. The only there here they have a cantor that carries out songs a little bit deeper because of his voice. You know you have to have a good voice in order to enjoy the services. The services basically are the same because certain parts you have to read three times anyhow so what difference if you're reading them there or there. It's just the idea that cantor carries the melody a little different. That's why the services are so long.

AP: Yeah.

AZ: I mean let's not kid ourselves. A lot of people are objective to have it three times, they figure once is enough. But there's a reason for it and they don't understand it, that's the whole thing. I think I'm right, I'm not sure, I'm not a rabbi. But I'm assuming. That's the way I see it at the services at Homestead or Beth Shalom.

AP: So I'm trying to think back again. You moved after you were married to Squirrel Hill?

AZ: Well I lived at home until I got married in 1951. Well after I got married, I moved over to Munhall Road. From Munhall to Munhall Road.

AP: Oh I see. You came, you moved almost immediately after you got married.

AZ: Yes, yes. And my wife still came to Homestead because as a member of the shul, so did my brother and his wife and everything. And kids, we started having kids and my youngsters, I don't know if at that time they had a Hebrew school over there or a Sunday school, so my kids went to Beth Shalom where I was a member. That was the purpose of me becoming a member at Beth Shalom. What do I need all that shul for, I mean I was busy working, I could only go there three times out of the year, four times, five times. So but the reason I joined Beth Shalom also because of the youngsters.

AP: Uh huh.

AZ: And I didn't have time to take them. A bus would pick them up, bring them home in the evening.

AP: That makes it a lot easier.

AZ: Sure.

AP: And you say that when you wanted to go, they didn't want to go to shul over in-

AZ: Well, like anything else, they had their friends over here and what did they know from Homestead shul? I mean my wife knew, and we still were members over here until there came a point I'm thinking about where I'm going here, I'm at two places. And I'm not going there and I'm going over here, so I thought, my dad was then going there, so I dropped out. And I figured it isn't fair, me being a member here and born and raised over there. Why should I deny them the membership fee? So I joined over there. Then as my dad passed on, my brother and I went to services over there each Sunday.

AP: Oh.

AZ: Yes. So then my brother got sick, and he passed on, but I kept going to Homestead shul until they closed it. I felt I owed them that much because I wasn't doing anything Sunday morning and they were in desperate need of a quorum of ten people. So I used to pick up, coming over in the morning, I used to pick up two other guys or whoever I could find and I took them to Homestead. So between Bernie Stein and myself and Bob Katz and Smooke and Slutnick, we'd try to find people to occupy and have a quorum of ten all the time. Milt Green, whoever they could get together. Then we got Bernie Keisler came from North Huntington. Harry Mervis came from West Mifflin. These were all former members of the shul. Then Stanley Levine came up, Levine Hardware, you know Stanley.

AP: I don't know, but I know the name.

AZ: Yeah, and Sol Post used to bring some people before he passed on from Squirrel Hill. Anybody could find at Rodef when he had breakfast he brought over to Homestead. Sol Post did a lot of work after Jerry Schwartz passed on.

AP: Jerry Schwartz was the guy who was the president.

AZ: Yes, all those years he was a devoted worker. That was his number one, number one target, to keep Homestead going. He did a good job. And like anything else, did the best he could do 'til he passed on. Then Sol Post took over 'til he passed away.

AP: Was that Post from Post Shoes?

AZ: Yes. And his partner, Wolf, who sends out the statements and the meeting reports. He was the treasurer I think, Milton Wolf, nice fellow. Very nice. And he's still active



although he lives in Mount Lebanon. So he still takes the brunt of some of the work over there.

AP: Like your cemetery things.

AZ: No, he is strictly the congegation. Cemetery thing is Al Smooke, Bob Katz, Slutnick. And then Oscar, 'til he passed, Oscar was the number one man 'til he passed on. He had it for, my dad was treasurer there of the cemetery for about thirty-eight, thirty-nine years, and Oscar I would say had been handling the cemetery for forty-five years, fifty maybe.

AP: They were really devoted.

AZ: Yes. He was a good man. You know you have to give up time like anything else. If you have time, it's good to do these things. If you don't have time you can't be an active participant.

AP: It's very hard. It's time consuming.

AZ: Yes. Well Oscar was a single fellow but he had other duties, you know. Like [unclear], he had a family, but he always managed to make it his business that the cemetery looked good holiday time.

AP: So you're parents stayed in Homestead until...

AZ: No, my parents, we owned an apartment house on Munhall Road up here next to the Imperial House, and my brother and I and my sister lived in that building.

AP: Oh, you had a sister also.

AZ: Yes.

AP: [unclear]

AZ: Yes. She passed on, she's up at the cemetery also. And she passed away in 1958, a lot younger. She was a school teacher in Hayes there. And I'm the only one left in the Zuckerman family. And after all these years I had to make a decision if I wanted to stay up north or go down south where I have a daughter living, and I have a daughter in Memphis, so I thought that would be the easiest way to satisfy both.

AP: Yeah you'll be closer.

AZ: Because my daughter in Memphis will come down twice a year, at like Passover and Hanukkah, Christmas, whatever. They both land that time of the year. She's a teacher in the temple of Memphis.

AP: Oh.

AZ: Yeah, she was, she started off [unclear] school and it worked out very nice. And she's very close with the rabbi there and my son-in-law is on the board there, a young attorney. And they're both active and she [unclear] take a job as a first grade teacher. She has a degree, a master's degree, in teaching, so she does it I think a couple days a week and about five hours a day. And the other one also has a master's degree, and she's in sports medicine. So it keeps them both active and young. And I'm observing their good deeds.

AP: [unclear] Sort of going back again, I'd like to go back all the way to the time when you went to school. Were there other, you went to school in what, Homestead?

AZ: No, Munhall.

AP: Munhall.

AZ: We lived across, the border line was McClure Street. This side was Homestead, this said was Munhall. So we were in Munhall. I lived in Homestead until I was I think five years old.

AP: Oh, I see.

AZ: The reason my dad moved, we lived in a, our house was the first house facing an alley, and my parents were always worried I was going to run out in the alley.

AP: And get hit.

AZ: So they bought a home five seconds away, Margaret Street. And it worked out beautiful because we had an uncle who lived two doors up. So every night, my mother's brother.

AP: So this is Glick.

AZ: Uh, his name was, step brother, Burcheson. And my cousin is still a member, Max Burcheson, he lives out in White Oak.

AP: Lillian is his...

AZ: Right yeah, Lillian, they have two girls.

AP: So this is all the...

AZ: Yeah, that's how we got to Homestead, and we all stuck together and they Averbachs, who were, their father was the gentleman who controlled the family. He was the, whatever, if you had a problem you went to him and he gave you the decision.

AP: Really?

AZ: Yes, he was a very educated man and well versed. And if you had a problem you went to him and he would think about it and give you the answer.

AP: And was he a member of your family also?

AZ: Yes, they're relations. Yes, their son is living on [unclear] Street, used to own Flavor Rite, Louis Averbach.

AP: Yes, I called him.

AZ: Yeah, did you get a report from him?

AP: I haven't talked to him yet.

AZ: Yeah, he's...

AP: Yeah, I haven't met with him.

AZ: He's a little older than I am, and he can give you, he can go all the way back to his childhood, which I think he's probably about ten years older than I am, eight, nine, ten years older than I am. And he would remember the other generation that left earlier than when I came into the synagogue, the schools.

AP: But you remember people going to his father and [unclear].

AZ: Just our family, just our family.

AP: Oh, I see.

AZ: After all he was well versed and educated, he was the oldest. And he was in business with my uncle, my mother's stepbrother. The Burchesons. They were right on Eighth Avenue between Dixon and an alley on Eighth Avenue there.

AP: What kind of store did they have?

AZ: Well they were, years ago when I was a youngster, hay and feed and grain.

AP: Really?

AZ: Well, you're going back in the twenties, horse and buggy days.

AP: Right.

AZ: But that was already winding down, and he was in the produce business also. And then after the produce business he went into the beer business. And one allied line lent into another one.

AP: Were all this businesses in Homestead? The produce and...

AZ: Yeah, it was right on Eighth Avenue.

AP: Oh so they were always, they stayed there in terms of business, they just changed what it was.

AZ: Sure. Nobody moved out of Homestead only toward the end. My parents because my brother moved out and they moved into his apartment.

AP: Mhm.

AZ: And you know, like anything else they get older you want to keep an eye on them. We were all living over here so it saved us from running over there.

AP: What did your father do after he gave up the horse and buggy?

AZ: Oh well he was in the wholesale fruit business, he started learning, he started to learn how to drive a truck. Like anything else, progress is made. So he had a truck, and he was in the wholesale fruit business. He was in that business until 1964, and we left Homestead. We went down to Smallman Street, and we were in the artificial Christmas tree decoration business and importing baskets.

AP: What was that called?

AZ: Sam Zuckerman and Sons.

AP: Oh. Makes sense.

AZ: My dad was still the president, he was the older of the three of us, but he was active. He was the brains of the family. Although he came to work every day. He did his book work the way he thought he had to do it. And I was always running, I was on the road. And my brother and him were always inside.

AP: Now did you work with your father all the years you were in business?

AZ: Mhm.

AP: From the time you started...

AZ: We had a family affair. Mother, sister, we had a close knit family.

AP: Oh, you were all, you were all involved.

AZ: We had a close knit family. My dad was in the wholesale fruit business. I was in the retail fruit business on Eighth Avenue. And everybody pitched in to give me a lift. And it was too much for me to handle. Even my brother gave me a lift, and he was working on the road as a salesman. But we all stuck together, and like anything else you built a home if you put in good mortar and good brick and it goes up. But if you just put a sloppy brick and sloppy mortar the house is gonna fall down. But ours was a pretty solid house.

AP: That's pretty good, that's pretty nice.

AZ: Yes.

AP: Did the Jewish businessmen have any kinds of associations outside...

AZ: Well we had a very good relationship, the United Jewish Fund of Homestead was pretty strong, pretty sound and had very good, successful business men there on the avenue. They had some meetings, they raised some nice money. They raised money at Passover time to give to the needy, to the poor. There was no one objected, they all pitched in. You had to have somebody knock on their door and tell them the purpose, they always gave. Homestead, I think, had a very good nucleus of Jewish merchants in the Chamber of Commerce of Homestead. They were very strong, they had a very good job, the Grinbergs, the Friedlanders, you had Hadburgs there, you had Meigners [?]. You could go from one end of Eighth Avenue all the way down and turn around and come back and on both sides you had quite a huge population of Jewish merchants. Not that they all lived in Homestead. Squirrel Hill, where ever they lived, they all pitched in.

AP: And they supported the community there.

AZ: Yes. If you told them what the purpose was they always pitched in and gave their contribution. And you didn't have any problems with anybody.

AP: So then, like when you raised money for the people who were needy during the holidays, how was the distributed? How did they get it?

AZ: Well I guess the ones that collected the money knew who needed the money. And then they sent somebody over to the Lechem Aniyum in Pittsburgh here, after all there's ways of channeling money if you want to give money away. I mean, you don't have to advertise it. Anybody will take money if you know they need it.

AP: It's just sometimes, I was just trying to [unclear]

AZ: Some people might be embarrassed to ask for it, but if you're in the community long enough I think people understand the needs.

AP: Were, were you aware of poor, very poor Jewish families in the Homestead Jewish community?

AZ: I mean you might have one or two families, I mean nobody knew about it, maybe the rabbi or the president of the synagogue. He wasn't going to go out and advertise it. In the first place, I was too busy minding my own business, working. I know when I went to work at eight, and I know I left at six o'clock, I didn't stop I just kept working. That's why I...that was my baby see to take care of that. My brother and dad, if they needed a minyan, they would go. Holidays came, sometimes I had to work, the smaller holidays, but it wasn't that easy getting good help so you had to watch what you had there. My brother and dad, one of us out of the three were there we knew what we had to do.

AP: Were the stores, the Jewish stores, were they close on the major... [recording cuts out]

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BEGIN SECOND RECORDING

AP: [recording cuts in] -on the Jewish holidays, you say the, all the people...

AZ: They knew. The Jewish people educated the gentile people to let them know when the holidays arrived. They advertised in the *Homestead Messenger* or they had big signs in their doorways. And it all depends how big of a business you had. If you had a small businessman and you took care of the business yourself, you were automatically closed for two days. But for some of them that had a lot of help, and they weren't there, the second day maybe some of them opened. But mostly the first day every, the whole town was closed.

AP: So you would go down Eighth Avenue and...

AZ: You could see, you could see, you could tell by the amount of cars on the street. And after all, how big is the town altogether? You go from McClure Street to Twelfth Street which consists of one, two, three, I'd say one block, two blocks, three, maybe four blocks in length of Eighth Avenue and both sides you could see, especially if everybody is down a pay week, your off week, for sure everybody was closed. So there was no need to be open because there was no money around.

But Homestead itself was a good town. The steel mill kept the town alive because there was enough activity, people working and making a nice wage, most of the families had the husband and wife working. And their standard of living wasn't like it is today, you know. Some of the people didn't need fancy homes then like the younger element does. They can live close to the town, half the price, they were satisfied because they didn't know any different. Their needs were less than they are today and their demands are less and they didn't have the money like they do today, the inflationary prices are today. And anybody was satisfied as long as they had a roof over their head. Didn't have to be a fifty

thousand, hundred thousand dollar home, they could be satisfied with an eight, nine thousand dollar home as long as they could afford to live there. Homes were clean.

AP: So a lot of these steel workers actually owned their, the mill workers owned their homes.

AZ: Oh sure. If they were making a decent wage, why wouldn't they have a home? Sure. A lot of them lived in Munhall Garden, Homeville, which is West Mifflin today. West Homestead, you got Calhoun. Even from West Homestead they branched out out West Run Road to Calhoun Park there. There's some nice homes in our Homestead area. Although today the young ones left town because they don't have jobs so the properties have, haven't been taken care of properly. The older ones don't have the means and don't have the strength. Anyway they get the job done if their kids come back and help or pitch in and pay for it, because they're all living on a pension or Social Security around the town.

AP: What about relations between the Jews and non-Jews?

AZ: You mean as far as getting along with everybody?

AP: Mhm.

AZ: We never had no problems there in Homestead. Maybe as long as I can remember we might have had one or two incidents where these young skinheads or something put signs on the door, you know, just recently.

AP: Oh now?

AZ: Until the last couple of years.

AP: I meant when you were growing up.

AZ: Oh we had no problems. For the first place, we all stood up to our right. At school if somebody called me a Jew, we took care of them, we called them in the back of the school and we gave them something to remember us by. So they didn't start with us, you know.

AP: Did you have this kinds of...

AZ: Oh once, an isolated case. A kid maybe didn't like me and called me a dirty Jew or a Hymie or something, I didn't say nothing. So during recess I'd call him back, I'd tell him, "Hey somebody wants to see you back here, will you come around the back?" I made sure somebody got to him. If I didn't get to him it was somebody else, so somebody else took the blame for me and I took the blame for somebody else. So we taught 'em. Because we went to school, Munhall School, where our population, we maybe had, in that school, maybe graduating with five Jewish kids, was the most you had

of two hundred and fifty. So we had to stand on our own two feet. Maybe two of us boys and three girls. So we had no problem. I think everything was pretty nice in a small town, nobody knew from those things then. Until just recently, last couple of years, you might have some isolated cases where they put some papers up on the shul or in the business section, but other than that everything is okay in Homestead because you all got along. You went to school together. Am I doing pretty good? Have a good time. Is there anything else you'd like to know? As much as I can help you.

AP: Oh you're doing very well!

AZ: Well I didn't think I could fulfill the duties there.

AP: Well [unclear] interesting to hear all these stories. I did have a thought, I already forgot what it was. But I guess I sort of wanted to talk to you a little more about the school and, oh I know! Since there were so few of you who were Jewish when you went to high school, I'm assuming and you can stop me if I'm wrong, that your parents were very traditional Jewish people.

AZ: Well my parents were Orthodox.

AP: Okay, they were Orthodox. So what did you do about a social life? In terms of like when you were dating?

AZ: Well at the Homestead shul we had AZA.

AP: Oh you did.

AZ: Yes, we had a nice AZA group there, and we brought a lot of kids over from Squirrel Hill, and they girls had a group also. We used to have Saturday night dances at the synagogue, and I used to bring records I used to get from these vending companies, and you know we had a good time. Or like anything else, when we were younger we went to the shuls, we got older we went down to the 'Y' in Pittsburgh, or some of the girls that came from Squirrel Hill over to Homestead had parties at their homes. And we had parties at our home.

My parents would go away, and my bubbe would stay at the house and cook for five fellows. I'd get five fellows, we'd get five fellows up to our house and over the weekend, and she'd cook for us, and Saturday night we'd have a party at my house. We got to the age where we could drive, which we could go to Oakland and pick up some young ladies and bring them over to our house, you would call them in advance, tell them we're having a party at my house on Saturday or Sunday night, all depends when the school [unclear] if it was over Hanukkah or something like that or Christmas, New Years. And if somebody else's parents went away we had a party there, like a New Year's Eve party. So we always managed, we had a nice group of fellows over there. Homestead was not lacking youth, we had plenty of young fellows. AZA, we had a good AZA basketball team there. We drafted a few fellows from Squirrel Hill, but we got along.



AP: So you were really able to live a whole Jewish life.

AZ: Yeah! I wasn't lacking anything. I didn't know what Squirrel Hill was all about. I went to school out there, I worked out in Homestead so I didn't know across the bridge what was going on. I missed a different life altogether by not living in Squirrel Hill, but I didn't miss nothing. I was occupied all the time between work and going out. And I could, after all time kept you going too in the business, you didn't have the free time.

AP: Now the war started while you were in high school, right?

AZ: Right.

AP: And you were able, you said you got to an age where you could drive, so you were still able to get a car during the war.

AZ: Well yes, my parents had a car and we had good car agencies in Homestead that favored some of their good accounts. And we always got a car with no problem.

AP: Was the war still on when you graduated from high school?

AZ: Sure. It was 1943.

AP: 1943. Were you drafted?

AZ: No, I was deferred until 1946 when my brother came home. The week he, two weeks later I had to go to the service.

AP: But the war was over.

AZ: I was in Guam.

AP: Uh huh.

AZ: I went to Guam.

AP: So your brother was actually in...

AZ: He was in it, when was the war, December 8th?

AP: Mhm.

AZ: He was the first group from Munhall to leave. He was away about, over five years.

AP: Oh my goodness.

AZ: He went as a private and came back as an officer. Didn't know anything about a gun.

AP: Really?

AZ: Well, where did we know about guns?

AP: Oh, I thought you meant he didn't know by the time he came back.

AZ: No, I'm saying when he was in OCS he had to take a gun apart and put it together. He knew as much about a gun as, because we didn't know from hunting. You know a lot of kids I associated, I'd go to school with, hunting season came they had to go hunting, just couldn't miss it. But we didn't know from that. But he learned, and so did I when I went to the service.

AP: Mhm. Although he probably had to use his gun.

AZ: Pardon me?

AP: Did your brother have to use his gun?

AZ: No. He was a quartermaster.

AP: Oh.

AZ: So he had to make sure there was enough food, enough everything all the time. And I didn't have to use a gun. I was a PX manager, I was more on vacation than I was in the army. I was away eighteen months.

AP: Do you remember anything in the community, in the Jewish community, during the war in terms of what was happening to the Jews in Europe? Do you have memory of any conversations or awareness?

AZ: No, no.

AP: And did your parents still have family in Europe?

AZ: My dad, yeah. My dad went to Russia.

AP: Really?

AZ: Yes. Oh I don't know how many years ago, twenty years ago. And another fellow went to Russian, and they stayed in a hotel, my dad didn't stay at their homes. And while he was there he got them all little ice boxes and stoves, and he left all his clothes there.

AP: That he brought over?

AZ: He left everything he took for himself, came back with the clothes he had on his back, no suitcase, no nothing.

AP: So he found everybody there.

AZ: Well the only one he didn't see was a sister, who was in a wheelchair, and they wouldn't let, she couldn't travel the eighty miles to visit. And it was a pleasant trip for him to see them, but it wasn't very healthy for him. But they all went to Israel. And I took him to Israel, and he saw everybody but the sister in Israel.

AP: So these people all survived the war.

AZ: Yeah. Well they were in Russia don't forget, way far away. The far end, yeah, it wasn't Poland or Germany.

AP: The Germans did come in the Ukraine.

AZ: Yeah, but I don't think that far over. And you know like anything else, they didn't talk about it and I didn't ask about it when I visited them.

AP: No, of course not. But I meant they were still alive, they managed to make it through. But you were talking about, we're going to skip around a little bit as thoughts come to my mind. I guess the first thing I wanted to ask you was you said, you talked about all the rabbis at the synagogue...

AZ: Well there's a lot more of them but I forgot them.

AP: Are there some you remember particularly fondly?

AZ: I remember as a youngster there was a Rabbi Pinkas stayed at our house.

AP: He stayed at your house?

AZ: Yeah. They brought him, and my mother's house was strictly kosher, and he was a single fellow, and he stayed at our house. And mother made sure he went to evening school at Pitt and got a degree and he got married.

AP: You mean while he was the rabbi he was going...

AZ: Yeah, well he had a degree, but I mean other studies at Pitt, you know.

AP: So he was doing it while he was the rabbi of the congregation and he was living in your house.

AZ: Yeah, until he got married, then he moved out.

AP: Huh.

AZ: And there was another rabbi, Rabbi Weiss who lived here. Rabbi of B'nai Emunoh was a very nice fellow. I remember him very well, when he first came here from East Pittsburgh, I remember the home he moved into. It was owned by a member of the shul and his family.

AP: Did they rent it out? Is that, I mean...

AZ: No, he bought a home from another family who was moving out. He bought their home, it was a nice home.

AP: But you said something like the shul actually bought...

AZ: Yeah, next door to the shul, with Doc McClain, with the dentist, he became the burgess of the town. He had a county job and he moved out somewhere. His son was Jeb McClain.

AP: Oh I see, so here you are, the little, what are they called, the mayors now, they're not burgess...

AZ: Well yeah, they give them titles, it's the same thing, burgess, mayor.

AP: Right, exactly. So the guy who was the burgess of the town, left the town.

AZ: Well he got involved in politics you know, he was voted out, and he moved into the county, which is a bigger job.

AP: Were the Jewish people involved at all in Homestead politics?

AZ: Yeah there were board directors, school boards. I don't know if Homestead ever had a Jewish mayor. That might have been before my time. A truant officer was Jewish, you know he'd come visit you at home. There was a health inspector who was a Jewish fellow, Mr. Weiss, lived right back of the shul next to Jerry Schwartz's house there.

AP: So there really was a truant officer?

AZ: Yes, something like that, yeah. They were active. You know, in Homestead, the Jewish people. They were in politics. We had a fire chief who was Jewish in Homestead, Fire Chief Samuels. A detective was Jewish, Schwartz, in Homestead. Homestead wasn't an easy town to be in politics, [unclear] in the valley you know, they had tough opposition.

AP: Oh really?

AZ: Sure.

AP: I thought they were simply democratic?

AZ: No. They used to fight the other towns, all these valley towns, Braddock, McKeesport, Duquesne, Homestead. It wasn't that easy. Monessen. All these steel towns, you had some radicals there, also who were fighters. Oh yeah.

AP: [unclear] too much of your time. I did want to ask you a few other things, you know going back to the thing about buying the rabbi the house. That was after Rabbi Weiss, was it that the rabbi had a house bought for him?

AZ: Well I think when Doc McClain wanted to move out they thought it would be a good deal to buy the home. The price wasn't that high, and it was a beautiful home with a lot of grounds next to the shul would be an attraction to bring a rabbi here.

After all you know, it's not that easy getting a home for a rabbi. The rabbis today doesn't want to walk from Squirrel Hill to Homestead. Although they try to take their kids to Hillel, you know, for students and the rabbis themselves teach for Hillel. So it was close enough so we could have the rabbi on the holidays. As years went on, you didn't have the membership, so what good is a rabbi if you don't have people for him to congregate with? And then they ran out of money, basically you got to have a group to support a rabbi, you know, and some of the merchants that had money left town, you know, or passed on. And so you had younger elements who were trying to make a living to survive so they couldn't subsidize the rabbi. Any big shul today needs subsidized, either from the cemetery or they need a support to finance any deal today. That's what it amounts to.

AP: So I take it at some point before they shul was sold, the house...

AZ: The house, I think, was sold before. When they ran out of rabbis, they didn't need the house anymore so what's the use. If you're renting it out you might as well sell it because eventually they saw the writing on the wall. I didn't get active in the Homestead shul on Sundays until maybe nine years ago. In that time that I left, I was a member but I never went there so I couldn't put it together as sufficient as maybe Allen or Bob Katz who were there all the time, or Milt Slutnik.

AP: When you went back to, when you started attending back there did you go to the High Holy Days services also?

AZ: No, no because I was a member here.

AP: So you would go here for that and then you would just go back there for...

AZ: Every Sunday.

AP: And your wife didn't go.

AZ: No. No women went.

AP: Did any women, I was going to say, did any women...

AZ: No, no. At Beth Shalom women come, but not Homestead.

AP: Uh huh. So it really stayed very Orthodox to the end.

AZ: Well, yeah, a little bit of leaning. Basically I would say yeah ninety percent Orthodox, because the fellows that were coming over were strictly from the yeshiva so they had a percent.

AP: Oh the ones who were...

AZ: Substituting in, yeah. Were coming out to the cemetery, you had to get a rabbi somewhere, so you'd call the yeshiva to send somebody over.

AP: Oh yeah since you didn't have a regular [unclear].

AZ: No.

AP: In Homestead do you remember, did they have problems getting rabbis?

AZ: No, in earlier times there was no problem because there was always one in. There was always a full house and towns were all sticking together until the last, I'd say, twenty-five years. The towns started to get smaller you know, all these small towns, all the businessmen that lived in Squirrel Hill, they had a business in McKeesport, they'd drive up thirty minutes and come back thirty minutes and they always had somebody to open up for them so if the weather was bad they went to work eleven o'clock. So they still became, they still belonged out there, but they didn't go out there, they had, they stayed in the city. If you lived in an area, you supported it, that's the way I looked at it.

AP: Yeah. You said people started moving to Pleasant Hills.

AZ: Well there was some families that came into Pleasant Hills, the last, I would say, thirty years. Well Homestead always thought they would get the people from Pleasant Hills, would come to Homestead, but it didn't develop. They formed their own group out there.

AP: That's what you were mentioning.

AZ: Yeah.

AP: Did that siphon people off that way?

AZ: Well we, at that time thirty years ago, they thought they'd get most all the people from Pleasant Hills to come to Homestead. As far out there in Lincoln Place, Homestead Park, Lincoln Place, might have had one or two families came down from Pleasant Hills, but they didn't explore it. People probably from Beth El came over and took some of those members or Temple Emanuel in that area. So we, Homestead lost out there, and then younger groups got together and they started meeting in a public hall somehow and they started a little congregation like they do out in Allison Park, North Hills. You have to go out and try to get it, I'll look for a shul eventually maybe in Fox Chapel.

AP: Mhm.

AZ: So I probably maybe [unclear] eventually. But you got to have a group together to get it started. But I thought Homestead did a good job as long as they did. You know, we were close to the city and so [unclear] down to maybe four or five Jewish families living in Homestead at the present time.

AP: Do you think that the fact that it was close to the city was a help or a hindrance in keeping...

AZ: Toward the end it was a hindrance.

AP: Mhm because [unclear].

AZ: Sure. Everybody lived out there, if they weren't going to travel to Squirrel Hill, why travel to Squirrel Hill when you've got it in your own back yard, your own yard? You walked out, I lived on Meyer Street, it took me five minutes I was in the shul.

AP: Sure.

AZ: Five minutes to get home, no car, no nothing. Don't need nothing. Today, if you live out of the city you've got to go to a small town and you have to drive. Some people don't want to drive on the holidays.

AP: I take it once people started moving up to Homestead Park there were all these people who were driving to shul.

AZ: Yeah. Some of them walked only because of the age factor.

AP: That's a big walk.

AZ: Well you can walk it in thirty minutes. When you're young it's nothing. I used to walk to football games out on West Run Road there, that wasn't so bad from Munhall. When you're young it doesn't mean anything, if the weather's nice, and the holidays were in September, October.

AP: Older people were probably not moving out to Homestead Park, right?

AZ: No, I mean they were, their roots were around the shul. Tenth Avenue, Ninth Avenue, Eleventh Avenue, Twelfth Avenue, you still could walk it. Munhall, Ninth Avenue Munhall you could start from McClure and go over to Andrew, you could have a minyan right there. I can name you family after family from St. Francis church all the way over to Andrew Street, Ninth and Andrew there. There's always families there. In that one row there from St. Michael's to Andrews Street you could get ten families almost. Back in the fifties up until about the sixties, families started drifting away, yeah.

AP: Now [unclear] kosher, when she had to buy her kosher meat, was she going to Squirrel Hill?

AZ: We had kosher butchers in Homestead. On Dixon Street, there you had the Kramer's then you had Mermelstein's there on Fifteenth and West. Yeah if you went up West Street, Kramer's family moved away then then there was Benny Mermelstein, then after he got out, they had to go to Squirrel Hill. When [unclear] you'd go over and buy a week or two weeks, in that time before the freezers you needed a butcher right on the spot. And everybody, freezers came in and everybody started buying freezers because they could throw in enough food there to last them a month.

AP: Was there a point when your mother was still there, and there was no longer a kosher butcher in that area?

AZ: Well she came to Squirrel Hill.

AP: Then she came to Squirrel Hill.

AZ: Sure.

AP: So those kosher butchers were gone before she would have left to come to live in Munhall.

AZ: Sure, she used to here to get the chickens and everything, sure. With a car how long does it take, five minutes? Yeah.

AP: With a car everything's [unclear].

AZ: You'd call on the phone and you'd tell them to have it ready and they had it ready. I used to get delivery here once a month to my house. Which [unclear] bring me meat every time I'd call them.

AP: Oh they used to deliver it?

AZ: Sure.



AP: The kosher butchers did?

AZ: Sure. When I got married I was tied up with a butcher on Wylie Avenue, brought it to my apartment or brought it here. 'Til they went out of business and I had to go to Prime Kosher, Kosher Mart over here, Kosher Mart. I like personalized attention, you know where the guy knew what kind of food, meat you liked, and you gave him an order on a Tuesday and he brought it on Thursday. And the next time he came you had the check ready for him, so I knew the guy, so he wasn't worried about the money. He delivered to my brother, he delivered to me.

AP: Did they deliver to Homestead also?

AZ: No.

AP: No.

AZ: Well these guys weren't looking for business, they did it because of me and my brother.

AP: They were...

AZ: So they brought it to my house. When I lived in an apartment or lived here. Same with my brother. What I'm looking for is a guy that wraps it, packs it, and gives you what you want. I don't know anything about meat. As long as my wife didn't have a complaint I wasn't looking for anything. So now I have to go over here to Kosher Mart.

AP: So you still keep kosher.

AZ: Huh?

AP: You still keep kosher.

AZ: Yeah, why not for the same price. This is my brother-in-law and my wife.

AP: Well, they're here and we'll stop and let you enjoy your company. Thank you very much. [tape cuts out]

AP: [tape cuts in] This has been Ann Sheckter Powell interviewing Arnold Zuckerman on his front porch in Squirrel Hill in July 1993 for the Homestead Hebrew Congregation Oral History Project of the Western Pennsylvania Jewish Archives of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

END OF INTERVIEW