

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

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Transcribers Notes:

Side A ended abruptly in the middle of a sentence. Side B picks up at a different point in the interview.

Transcription:

Side A

AP: This July 9, 1993. Interviewing...

IG: Irwin Gross

AP: About his experiences in the Homestead area. We will try to begin at the beginning. So when was the beginning for you in Homestead?

IG: The first time I was in Homestead was probably February of 1943.

AP: Okay. So you first came here in 1943. What was that first experience? What brought you there then?

IG: What brought me to the Pittsburgh area was the US Army.

AP: Oh! Where were you before that...before you came to Pittsburgh?

IG: You mean where was I raised?

AP: Yeah.

IG: Cleveland

AP: Were you born in Cleveland?

IG: I was born in Cleveland. I came here in the Army and spent most of my Army service in World War II in Pittsburgh.

AP: In Pittsburgh? Why did the Army station you in Pittsburgh?

IG: That's where they wanted me.

AP: I mean what did you do in Pittsburgh?

IG: I was a veterinarian.

AP: Oh! I see.

IG: And we had an outfit here with about six or seven veterinary officers. We were buying meat and meat food products for the Army.

AP: You weren't slaughtering the animals or anything?

IG: No. We were in the packing plants and the canning factories and the dairies.

AP: So was Pittsburgh the area...why didn't they just leave you in Cleveland? Or were there just centers where they used people?

IG: The Army did things. It's hard to say why they did anything. But this is where they needed me and this is where they sent me.

AP: So they stationed you in Pittsburgh to be like a provisions officer or something like that.

IG: There were ten million men in the Army that had to eat. These men were stationed all over the world. If they want to eat in June, you gotta start figuring in January how to get food to them.

AP: So you were here stationed, did they have barracks?

IG: Never lived in a barrack.

AP: You just lived in regular housing.

IG: Yeah.

AP: I see so what, so 1943 was, you were already in the Army.

IG: Oh yeah.

AP: And how did you happen to be in Homestead?

IG: I was in the Army and the first place I stayed was at the Y.M.C.A. in downtown Pittsburgh and I met a fellow there who says, "Hey you want a date?" and I said, "Yeah!" So he took me over to Montefiore Nursing Home, and I met, well, it's a little more complicated than that, but at any rate that's where I met my wife, my wife to be, and her sister lived in Homestead. So the first time I was in Homestead was a visit to her sister's.

AP: Oh, I see, and your wife wasn't from Homestead either?

IG: No. She wasn't from Homestead but she had a sister living in Homestead and she had an aunt living in Homestead. So she knew Homestead.

AP: Was the aunt a native of Homestead? This aunt of hers who lived in Homestead, had she lived there...

IG: Oh the aunt who lived in Homestead, her husband Sam Hepps, I think was born in Homestead.

AP: Oh... so this is part of the Hepps family.

IG: The Hepps-Weinberger family. Their, Ruth's, brother-in-law was Harry Weinberger who was raised in Homestead and had a pharmacy in Homestead.

AP: I remember that, on Eighth Avenue.

IG: Yeah.

AP: I remember that.

IG: That's how I got to Homestead.

AP: I see, so you sort of met the Jewish establishment of Homestead when you started dating her. And then, what happened after that? How did you happen to come to Homestead altogether.

IG: This was in February we got, we were married in September of that year. I stayed in the Army until 1945, we were running in different, renting apartments and things in different parts of Pittsburgh. I went to Cleveland for a few months after I got out of the Army, then I spent a year in the Uniontown/Brownsville area working with a veterinarian. Then we came back to Pittsburgh and lived in Squirrel Hill. for maybe a year. Then eventually we bought a home in Munhall, which is just above Homestead. That was in 1950 we bought our first home in the Munhall area.

AP: Where was that?

IG: It was on Fairfield Street in Homestead Park.

AP: Oh, in Homestead Park. That was already a new house then.

IG: No. It was already an old house.

AP: Oh really?

IG: Yeah.

AP: A lot of Homestead Park has what looks like to be post-WWII built houses.

IG: This was, this was not post-WWII. It was a nice little house.

AP: Now why did you decide to buy in Homestead Park?

IG: We, well mainly, because Ruth's sister lived there. That's what really brought us there. And houses were more affordable there than in Squirrel Hill.

AP: Oh yeah. And so that's when you began to become a part of this Homestead community.

IG: Right. At that time we had two children and our third child was born in, not in that house, but from that house.

AP: Where was he/she born?

IG: She.

AP: Where was she born? I assume it was a hospital.

IG: Magee.

AP: Oh it was Magee, so you didn't go to Homestead Hospital.

IG: No.

AP: Was that common? Why did you not use the closest hospital for the baby?

IG: I think because the obstetrician was probably, was in Pittsburgh, and we used to hospital he was affiliated with.

AP: So you had a little ride to the hospital.

IG: Yeah.

AP: So let's see, that was in 1950 that you first moved here. Now were you a practicing veterinarian then?

IG: At that time I was working for the federal government, and I continued to work for them until I retired about some thirty years later. But all during that time I practiced veterinary medicine. Usually only in the evening.

AP: Oh I see, so you weren't a veterinarian for the government.

IG: I was.

AP: Oh you were.

IG: I was in charge of meat inspection in this area.

AP: So you used the Army experience to sort of carry on the...

IG: Well no, the Army used my experience as a veterinarian. Historically the Federal meat inspection program was run by veterinarians.

AP: Is that the Department of Agriculture?

IG: Yeah.

AP: So that's what you did for the government. Then you actually dealt with little live animals on the side.

IG: That was moonlighting.

AP: And did you do that for another veterinarian?

IG: No.

AP: You had your own little practice. In Homestead Park?

IG: No, for a few years I had a little outfit in Homestead on McClure Street.

AP: Not far from the synagogue.

IG: Not far from the synagogue. Not far from Harry Weinberger's drugstore. Then after a few years I moved to an office in Squirrel Hill on Hazelwood Avenue, where Murray runs into Hazelwood Avenue.

AP: Where there's a Rite Aid or something now.

IG: Exactly, there was a building.

AP: So that wasn't too far, you just had to go across the bridge. I mean once you got down to the main street. Actually I'd like to ask you about some veterinary practice, but, okay let's do that for a minute. Did you notice a change in all those years in terms of how much people used veterinarians for their animals? I mean like when you started out did people bring in their dogs and cats to be spayed or did it change, did they bring them in more for care as time went by?

IG: People used, I really don't go back that far, but people used veterinary service pretty much. The big change I noticed was originally you'd see ten dogs and maybe two cats, now you see ten cats and maybe three dogs. Cats are very popular.

AP: That's right. So you could even see that just in terms of what you were doing. So you sent your children to school in the Homestead school system, or Munhall school system.

IG: All three children started school and graduated from the Munhall school system.

AP: And did they go to Sunday school and Hebrew school at the synagogue?

IG: Oh, yeah. They all did.

AP: What was that like raising children in I guess largely a, primarily non-Jewish area I guess?

IG: We frequently thought we were handicapping the children by not living in Squirrel Hill. And if we ever mentioned that to the kids, we were thinking of moving to Squirrel Hill, they carried on. They didn't want to leave Munhall. Although in each case there were probably two or three Jewish kids in each of the children's grades. They were really a minority.

AP: When you said you felt you were handicapping them, what were the things you thought of in terms of that?

IG: Jewish community center, Jewish friends, Jewish, more social activity.

AP: Did they have, did the Jewish community there offer anything in the way of Jewish activities for the children?

IG: Mostly it was limited to Jewish education. Sunday school, Hebrew school. There weren't very many social activities. The kids all had friends. We had a pool table in our game room. Ben had friends at the house all the time. The girls always had plenty of friends, but they were not Jewish friends.

AP: That's what I was going to ask. And you were concerned about that?

IG: We were concerned.

AP: What about dating? What happened when they were in high school?

IG: They didn't do a lot of dating.

AP: Did you permit them to, or would you have permitted them to date non-Jewish people?

IG: I would have permitted it. I think Ellen went to senior prom with, she had a date that wasn't Jewish.

AP: Was that part of what you were concerned about when you talked about handicapping them?

IG: That was part of it.

AP: Did they make any friends in the synagogue from the Hebrew school and the Sunday school?

IG: You know I often think about that. A lot of Jewish kids who were raised in some of the valley towns like Monessen and Charleroi and Brownsville, they had very, very close friends from childhood on and they maintained these friendships. I can't think of any close Jewish friends, or any close Jewish friendships that were maintained by the kids. And even recently I wondered about that. Although there weren't that many.

AP: Is it your sense that those other communities had larger Jewish populations?

IG: They may have been a little bit larger, but I don't think that was the reason. I don't know what the reason was.

AP: Do you have any speculations?

IG: Not really.

AP: Do you think the proximity to the city affected that at all?

IG: Not... I don't think so because our kids didn't have Jewish friends in the city either. They had a lot of friends but they were mostly non-Jewish. And I'm sure that concerned us at the time, but eventually, or apparently, it worked out well. They all three married Jewish mates.

AP: Which is an achievement that wouldn't necessarily happen.

IG: An achievement, but I think we were lucky.

AP: Yes, I think that's true.

IG: Because there isn't a hell of a lot you can do about it. But it worked out anyway and we were glad it did.

AP: It's just the variables that even people who raise their children within very intense Jewish environments, you just can't...

IG: This was not an intense Jewish environment.

AP: Now the synagogue was Orthodox was it not?

IG: The synagogue was Orthodox, it remained Orthodox.

AP: Were you generally observant?

IG: I, no, I can't say that we were generally observant. We kept kosher at home. When we went out we would eat just about anything. We, I enjoy the Orthodox service rather than a Conservative or Reformed service because that's what I was used to. But I wasn't a Sabbath observer, I wasn't very diligent in religious observance.

AP: Your wife had similar feeling about it? I take it you were both raised, you were raised in a traditional household.

IG: And so was my wife.

AP: And she was, too.

IG: Possibly even more than I was.

AP: So the things like the separation of the sexes was not a problem for you in terms of...

IG: No we were used to that.

AP: You were both used to that. Was that generally, would you think that was generally the case of the people in the congregation, that they were not what you would call strictly Orthodox.

IG: I think most of the people in the congregation were raised in an Orthodox tradition. They would have, they went along with it because "well, this is the way things were in Homestead", they didn't care that much. I think either way, eventually, you know the Homestead synagogue had a balcony where the women stayed. When the population decreased they allowed the women to sit on the first floor and put up a mehitza, or a curtain. And the women, there weren't enough women to use to balconies so they sat downstairs. When the population decreased even more, men and women started to sit, they started to mingle, and at that point nobody cared. But if anybody asked, we would certainly say, "This is an Orthodox synagogue." Because at that time, we didn't even have a rabbi by then.

AP: Oh.

IG: For many of the last years we didn't have rabbi, there were no children left, there was no school. And we would hire somebody for the holidays, and then almost anything went. As long as people came, we didn't care where they sat.

AP: So did you continue to have daily services, did you have a minyan for daily services?

IG: There was a daily minyan when needed but there was always a Saturday minyan and Sunday morning minyan.

AP: So you were able to maintain at least a weekend presence.

IG: Right.

AP: In terms of the seating, when the women and men were really separated, did they stay separated for everything, I mean like if there were, for minor holidays or things like Simchas Torah

IG: They separated for all the services.

AP: What about weddings?

IG: I can't recall for sure. I think for weddings they did not stay separate.

AP: Now there must have been families that, or I'm assuming maybe this isn't true, were there families that lived in that Homestead area who were uncomfortable or resistant to the idea of the separations of the men and women?

IG: More than once there were meeting and votes about changing the synagogue from Orthodox synagogue to a Conservative synagogue, but it never passed. I myself would have probably preferred a Conservative, but then I felt, who am I to change this when I don't even go to services that much. The people who attend services should have more of a right to determine the traditions of the synagogue. And it didn't matter that much to me.

AP: Did it matter enough to some people that you lost them as members of the congregation?

IG: It probably did, but I think we would have lost some of those people anyways, because in this case the proximity of the synagogues in Pittsburgh were just a matter of going over the bridge and into Squirrel Hill, and there you can a selection of any number of synagogues.

AP: Yeah, even if you wanted to continue with an Orthodox one you could choose among them.

IG: Right.

AP: Did you use a lot of the services of the city itself, I mean did your children or you belong to things in the city?

IG: The kids went to summer camp at Chatham College as they were growing up. They were enrolled in some of the programs at the JCC.

AP: That was already in Squirrel Hill then.

IG: No, as I recall, when they were growing up they used the facilities in Oakland.

AP: Oh at the 'Y'.

IG: Yeah.

AP: Which was just a, did they go by streetcar?

IG: They with went by streetcar or they were taken and picked up. But to Hebrew school they went by streetcar.

AP: From Lincoln, from Homestead Park down to...

IG: From school, you know from daily school to Hebrew school.

AP: That actually raises another question. The shul was too far for you to walk to right? Generally speaking?

IG: Generally speaking it was. But in the 40s, there were some people, including the Weinbergers, who would walk down and would walk back. But eventually they started to drive.

AP: So, on the holiday, the major holidays, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, were there, in most of the time when you were involved were there people who were driving to shul?

IG: People who lived out in the Park almost always drove to the synagogue, people who lived in Homestead or Munhall, close to the synagogue, would walk.

AP: So that was pretty much always the situation. And I guess that probably entered into the decision as to whether...

IG: Like we had a rabbi who decided he was not going to live in Homestead, he was going to live in Homestead Park, and he was told you know it's a long walk, and I'm sure you wouldn't want to walk. "Oh," he says, "No problem, no problem." But there were times where he didn't show up especially in bad weather because he didn't walk, he didn't drive.

AP: He did hold to the thing of walking which meant that... which rabbi was that?

IG: We had so many I can't remember which one it was.

AP: Did the rabbis, I take it you were active in the synagogue.

IG: Yeah, for a while I was in charge of the Sunday school.

AP: Oh you were?

IG: Yeah.

AP: When was that?

IG: I don't remember the years, but it was back when we had more than just a few children in Sunday school.

AP: Who was the rabbi when you were in charge of Sunday school?

IG: I'm not sure, but the name that comes to me is Rabbi Pritzker.

AP: So how was it to be in charge of the Sunday school? Was it, did you have to decide on curriculum, what kinds of things did you have to do?

IG: I'm try to thing what I had to do. It doesn't seem to me that we did much about deciding about a curriculum. I think we left that up to the rabbi. Being in charge of the Sunday school was just, well we had meetings and we had to have somebody in charge of the meetings.

AP: Did parents come and complain about things? Were they involved with it?

IG: Yeah, parents would be involved when there were problems. We had some problem kids. In fact we had one kid who was being prepared for his bar mitzvah and he used to cause so much trouble that he was expelled, and after a lot of negotiations they decided to take him back and he was given private lessons by the rabbi, but he was so disruptive that he couldn't attend classes with the other kids. But he finally became bar mitzvahed and I can recall his father coming to a meeting and complaining that it's the fault of the school that if you bake a good cake, people will partake in it. And he thought we were not offering his son enough good cake that he could partake of, so he blamed us for his rotten kid. But this rotten kid turned out to be a pretty good person.

AP: I have a feeling, you know I went to cheder with one of, I'm almost thinking we might be talking about the same person. There was a point where girls were also bat mitzvahed there, or was it always just bar mitzvahs?

IG: I don't, I don't recall any girls being bat mitzvahed at the Homestead synagogue, there may have been, but as I recall it was only boys.

AP: Was there every any kind of resistance to that?

IG: Probably, there might have been some thought about it but I don't know that there was much resistance because I think everybody appreciated the fact that this was an Orthodox synagogue. And at that time hardly anybody was bat mitzvahed.

AP: --- it was very Reformed. And I don't know if they had bar mitzvahs.

IG: They didn't have bar mitzvahs, they weren't going to have bat mitzvahs.

AP: That's what I was just realizing, it was unlikely that they were going to have bat mitzvahs if they didn't have bar mitzvahs.

IG: That's a kind of recent development. Although the girls all went, most of the girls went to Hebrew school and Sunday school.

AP: Oh they did.

IG: Yeah.

AP: Did your, you daughter, you have - your children...

IG: We have two daughters and a son.

AP: And your two daughters went to Hebrew school as well as Sunday school.

IG: Yeah.

AP: And there were a number of girls when they went to Hebrew school.

IG: Yes.

AP: So did you have to hire teachers for the Hebrew school as well as the Sunday school?

IG: That was part of our duties, is hiring teachers.

AP: Was that hard to do?

IG: Not really, because eventually there were so few kids left it wasn't too difficult.

AP: Because you didn't need too many teachers.

IG: Right.

AP: What about Jewish organizations, were they in the area or did you have to go to the city for them?

IG: By the time I got (tape cuts out)

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE

TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

AP: Okay you were talking about, you said that they...

IG: About the Boy Scouts, by the time Ben, my son, was old enough to become a Boy Scout, he was a Boy Scout at one of the churches, there was no Boy Scout troop in the Homestead synagogue. I think there might still have been a Hadassah chapter in Homestead, but I don't think there was a B'nai B'rith chapter.

AP: Was your wife involved at all in...

IG: My wife was involved in all these activities, she was active in the chevra kadisha and the women of Homestead when we had parties or banquets did all the cooking, and she was active in that. We were active in many activities as there were in Homestead.

AP: But were there enough for you to sustain a Jewish life there?

IG: There was. It seems to me the problem with Homestead was not one kid ever returned. Once they grew up, they left Homestead. And as their parents grew older they left the area or they died and nothing was replaced. Not one kid ever returned to Homestead.

AP: Do you think that was just an inevitable process?

IG: I think so.

AP: It's not like you can sort of think back and say, if we had done this versus that.

IG: No, it was inevitable. You can see it in most of the little towns around. I think people because more affluent, they were better educated, and they just left.

AP: Actually going back and talking about education again, having sent your children to the Munhall schools, and also your mentioning that you had to send your son to a Boy Scout troop that you met in a church, did you have a sense that it was hard for them to resist the Christian influences around them?

IG: I don't think it was hard to resist the Christian influences. My personal feeling is that I would have been happier if they had more close Jewish friends. They had a lot of close friends, but they didn't have close Jewish friends. But you know, when I was raised in Cleveland, this was not a particularly Jewish neighborhood either.

AP: Where did you live in Cleveland?

IG: We lived on the edge of the large Jewish community. But at least half of my friends growing up as a kid were not Jewish kids.

(phone rings)

AP: I'll stop this for a minute (tape cuts out)

AP: So we'll sort of continue on this thing about your own experiences when you were in Cleveland, when you said about half your friends were not Jewish when you were growing up.

IG: That's true.

AP: I think you were going to contrast it with the way things were for your children or about how it felt to be living in an area where you were not...

IG: Well I thought it would be nice to have good solid Jewish friendships, and that we were cheating the kids out of that by staying in Homestead, but anytime we would talk about it they weren't eager about leaving the Homestead area.

AP: And in retrospect do they still feel the same way?

IG: Yeah, you know, they say, they belittle the Munhall school system, but I'm not sure they mean it. They did okay. They all went off to college and they did well enough. Certainly at that stage of our lives we weren't prepared to be sending the kids to private schools. And I'm not so sure that Allderdice would have given them a much better, maybe they would have had a better education, but they did well. You know, they did well on their college boards, and they did well in college, so I don't think the Munhall school system was that bad. Although when they get together and reminisce, they talk about how lousy the teachers were and how prejudice they were.

AP: Oh they do talk about...

IG: I mean prejudice in the sex education, things, you know conservative.

AP: Oh, but not in terms of...

IG: No, there were a few incidents, one of the teachers used to make it very difficult for the kids to get the streetcar on time to go to Hebrew school. It was... it wasn't terrible.

AP: When something like that, no what about things like when they were absent on Jewish holidays, was that a problem?

IG: I don't recall it being a problem. But they were absent.

AP: And did they find a problem with Christmas and Easter at all, or did either you or they have any experiences of anti-Semitism?

IG: Nothing really terribly traumatic. I mean, you know when I was raised, we sang Christmas carols in public school, in fact in public school they would have Christmas plays and Christmas trees and I think you can handle that and live through it.

AP: Yeah, that's probably a common experience.

IG: It wasn't so bad.

AP: And your children went to school in the 50s and, I guess in the 60s really, when all that was changing in terms of the Supreme Court decision about reading the Bible and all of that. I guess, were they, they were probably in school for part of that.

IG: They were. Every Christmas the borough building was decorated from the top of the chimney to the foundation. They had a religious scene, a manger in front of it, which was wrong, but I don't find it terribly offensive, if they want to spend a few of my tax dollars on that I don't really care.

AP: What about other people? Did people talk about that at all in the synagogue communities, things like that?

IG: Apparently not too much, I think they decided they're living in this Christian community and nobody's bothering them too much and they won't rock the boat. And you know, the president of the synagogue for many many years was Jerry Schwartz, who was a good friend of ours and an attorney. And he was well aware of these things, and even he didn't make too much of a fuss about that.

AP: Because that was the sense of how you live in a community like that, having chosen to be there.

IG: Well, historically the Jews had businesses in Homestead and Munhall and it wouldn't have been very good public relations to demonstrate your feelings about the way their tax moneys being spent on religious ceremonies. And I can't get worked up over stuff like that.

AP: Do your kids, is their attitude different than yours?

IG: No, I don't think their attitude would be different about that. Although, Mindy for example, in the Passover service when she was reading the section of the man who had four sons, she would always read the man who had four children. She was always pretty conscious of that.

AP: Recently? Or a while ago?

IG: Even a while back.

AP: So that was her own sense of...

IG: And when she was first married and she applied for a library card they wanted her to get her husband's signature before they'd give her a card, she reported them to the Human Relations Commission.

AP: Where was this?

IG: In Pittsburgh.

AP: In Pittsburgh!

IG: She wouldn't put up with that.

AP: I'm really surprised, I didn't even know that was a situation. In the Carnegie Library?

IG: Yeah, they wanted her husband's signature before they'd give her a card. She was, she was furious.

AP: Oh, but that's, I guess something...

IG: She still would be.

AP: Well I'm sure, she probably doesn't feel less strongly about it now than before if she had a sense of that in the first place. You talked about all the Jewish people who had businesses in Homestead, did you do your primary shopping in Homestead or did you go downtown or whatever?

IG: No, most of our shopping like for clothes, that was when people still went downtown to Kaufman's and Horne's to shop. They didn't have all these shopping malls around. As I recall, we always bought the kids' shoes in Homestead from Sally Post, and we bought groceries in Homestead, but meat, well we bought kosher meat, and you couldn't buy any in Homestead.

AP: So there was never kosher butcher shop during the time that you were there.

IG: During the time that I was there, there was not. There may have been earlier. But when I was there it was long gone. But I would sit in shul with Harry Weinberger, who was raised in Homestead, and he would point out Mr. So-and-so in the olden days had a bakery shop, and Mr. So-and-so had a grocery, and everybody either had a retail store of some kind, and I would say to him, "Harry, if all these people had stores, who were the customers?" But apparently there were, that's when the Jewish community was below Eighth Avenue, and that neighborhood was torn out to make room for the steel mill but that was before I came to Homestead.

AP: That was during the war that they did that.

IG: They did probably starting in '39 and continuing on through the war. But that whole area was torn down. And that's where a lot of the Jews lived.

AP: Oh so I see, they had to move not only their businesses they had to move their homes.

IG: Well I think the businesses. Well yeah, in that area the big businesses were on Eighth Avenue, those people had to move their businesses and their residence.

AP: Well you weren't there then, did you have the sense that they, did they leave, did they lose the Jewish population?

IG: I would think that some of them went to Squirrel Hill, and some of them went to, out into the Park, Homestead Park. And some stayed around Ninth, Tenth, Eleventh, Twelfth Streets.

AP: Did you have, did you go to Squirrel Hill for your, to buy your kosher meat?

IG: Oh yeah.

AP: Did you drive?

IG: Not always. I didn't have a car until, until Ben was a year old.

AP: Ben's is your youngest?

IG: Ben is our middle kid.

AP: So before that, the public transportation was good enough.

IG: The public transportation was good enough to get me over to the Northside at seven o'clock in the morning.

AP: Is that where you worked? On the Northside?

IG: Herr's Island.

AP: Oh I see, so you didn't actually work in a federal office building downtown.

IG: We worked in stockyards.

AP: Oh I see so you were out there in the field.

IG: Or meatpacking plants.

AP: I actually would like to go back and ask you something about the war. Did you have any sense, well let me ask you two things, when you were in the Army, were you going to synagogue and whatever when you came to Pittsburgh, or were you going back to Cleveland for that?

IG: Some years I would, a few years I would go back to Cleveland, most years we would go to either Brownsville or Homestead.

AP: And I guess the other, the question I had was, you know now we talk about the Holocaust in retrospect, do you remember having any sense of what was happening to the Jews of Europe while you were in the Army, and within these Jewish communities?

IG: I think we were all aware of vaguely what was going on. And we didn't do a lot about it, except I don't know anyone that wasn't anxious to go to the Army. And maybe the reason they were so anxious is because they felt somehow this could help the Jews who were stuck over in Europe. But I can't recall, you know, mental torment over what was going on.

AP: What about after the war when Israel was proclaimed, do you remember that at all?

IG: I do remember that. There again I was never a real active Zionist. But I remember it with pleasure, and we were pleased and delighted that this was occurring. We knew the troubles that they were facing, and the meetings at the U.N. and the establishment of the state of Israel. But not being very active in the Zionist movement I really wasn't a part of that. But I was certainly aware of it.

AP: But like the synagogues didn't have celebrations or anything like that?

IG: I don't remember anything like that.

AP: Yeah. I was wondering about what the impact was on the Jewish population outside of what you were saying about the Zionist activists themselves.

IG: Well, they were radical. There was a lot of people who were active...B'nai B'rith, Jewish War Veterans. I was never a big member of that kind of activity.

AP: Did they exist in Homestead? Things like the Jewish War Veterans and B'nai B'rith?

IG: I think there was once a B'nai B'rith chapter...not during the time I was in Homestead. I think when I was in Homestead there was still a Hassadah chapter but that eventually was dissolved. The Sisterhood was active.

AP: So that was the probably more the focus at least the women who were part of that community?

IG: Oh, the women of the community were very active.

AP: More than the men would you say?

IG: Oh, I think so. At least, in helping the synagogue the women were more active. The men were more active in the formal aspects of the religious ceremonies. But the women were active in the Sisterhood and parties and things.

AP: And you mentioned that they also dealt with cooking and baking. Were your daughters married at the Homestead synagogue?

IG: No. But our oldest daughter was married at our home by Rabbi Pritzker. They brought the chuppah over from the synagogue.

AP: Oh, interesting! Now how long did you live in Homestead Park?

IG: We moved to Homestead Park in 1950 and we left there about twelve, thirteen years ago. We lived there thirty years.

AP: So you lived there until 1980?

IG: Yeah.

AP: What made you leave there?

IG: The fact that almost everything we did by then was in Pittsburgh. The kids were gone and it seemed to me it was kind of crazy to be...I'd go to the office, go down the hill, go back up the hill, turn around and go back down the hill to go to a movie. Everything we did was in Pittsburgh. Most of our friends were in Pittsburgh by then.

AP: So a lot of that community...were most of your friends when you were living there people from that Homestead Jewish community.

IG: Many of our friends were from the Homestead Jewish community but we always had friends in the city and, ah, we lived...our second house that we owned in the Homestead area was on Wayne Road and on that street Ruth's, my wife's, brother and sister-in-law and two children lived and on the other end of the street, Ruth's sister and brother-in-law and three children lived. So these kids, these cousins, grew up knowing each other very well and they remain friends even to this day.

AP: I see. So your children actually had another kind of a little Jewish community.

IG: Oh yeah. The seders and the high holidays we would eat at each one another's homes and that was really our...much of our social life there...was with family.

AP: And they all left also?

IG: Well, Hazel and Harry...when Harry retired...they moved to Florida. By that time their children were scattered all over. Ruth's brother and sister-in-law, Ernest and Betty, stayed in Munhall after we left but eventually they moved to the same building we're living in.

AP: Here?

IG: Here. So there's no one left in Homestead...of that group. Then...there are very, very few Jewish families left in Homestead.

AP: So you were there.as the congregation was in decline. You were there long enough to see that happen

IG: Oh, yeah.

AP: And you were a member of the congregation all that time until you moved?

IG: Except for the last few years. Well, we were members all the time but only in the last few years did I not attend high holiday services there.

AP: Where did you go then?

IG: We went to Tree of Life where the kids went. And a couple years we went over to the B'nai Israel to see how it was.

AP: Where do you go now?

IG: Last year we went to Tree of Life. This year I would seriously consider going to Beth Shalom and becoming a member there. I'm not crazy about the Tree of Life service.

AP: It's too untraditional?

IG: It's...the sanctuary is huge...it's so big. You know, the nice thing in Homestead when you walked into that synagogue you actually knew every person there. And that's nice.

AP: Yes, it is. And I assume that's part of what everyone wants.

IG: You knew every person in that synagogue.

AP: Did its decline create any kinds of tension among the remaining people? Or is there just always a certain amount of tension in running a synagogue?

IG: It did create...you know, after we gave up having a rabbi we didn't even have officers in the synagogue. It just ran. That's after Jerry Schwartz died. Jerry was president forever. He was like one of these banana republic dictators. He took on his job as long as he lived. Nobody would take it away from him.

AP: Even if they wanted to.

IG: Jerry was a bachelor and he wasn't the world's nicest guy. I used to tell Jerry that he makes it difficult for even his friends to like him. But he was a nice guy and people would put up with his high-handedness. He meant well and he certainly has the interest of the synagogue in his heart. But after Jerry died...well, even the last few years when Jerry was living we knew something had to be done with the synagogue. But nobody would mention selling it as long as Jerry was living. He wouldn't even hear of it. And after he died the synagogue continued for many years...but without officers. We didn't have a president, we didn't have a vice-president. Somebody would...we had Milt Wolf and Milt Green and Bernie Stein. They would collect the dues and pay the bills. But nobody elected them.

AP: They just took the responsibilities on themselves?

IG: But nobody fussed about it. I thought it was pretty damn nice of them. But there's always people that criticize. But the shul ran for years without official officers.

AP: The people who were criticizing. They were criticizing the fact that these people were self-appointed? Is that?

IG: Yeah. Every once in a while...we should have the books audited...it just grew like Topsy. It just went along.

AP: I guess the financial situation got more and more difficult.

IG: I don't think the financial situation was terribly difficult ever.

AP: Oh!

IG: It was the feeling that you're throwing money...you know, the problem became...heating the building became very expensive. And the building was only being used on [unclear]. Only the last few months was there not a Sabbath minyan but even to the last days there was a Sunday morning minyan because they could get ten or twelve or thirteen men to come to services. And then there was the question of repairs and maintenance. The money was there but they didn't think it was right to just spend it that way.

AP: It probably was hard I guess for the last people to actually take that action.

IG: It was. They talked about it for many years you know. It was always just twelve or thirteen men who wanted to continue. And who's going to say no to them?

AP: As long as it was still in their names, it's hard to pull the rug out from underneath people who made that a part of their lives.

IG: I have an idea that if Jerry Schwartz had lived they would still have the synagogue going. Although it really wasn't a going concern. But it would still be operating.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE

AP: Okay. We can go back to the sort of sad story of the death of the synagogue. But you were saying that probably that last dozen or so people in least

IG: The last dozen or so people kept the synagogue going for several years. They would have a Saturday minyan most Saturdays and most Sundays. And they would meet there and have a service and have a drink of whiskey and a piece of cake and nobody said anything...close the place down. I always figured if these guys wanted to run the show, let them.

AP: Now did you maintain some kind of a contact with them after you moved?

IG: Yeah. I would attend minyan services occasionally. I always felt that I was a member of the synagogue. When things got real rough, Jessie Savage would call..."Could the doctor come to services tomorrow?" If I could, I would. But I figured when she called me, there was big trouble.

AP: It means that the people nearby were not available.

IG: Somebody went to Florida or somewhere on vacation and they can't even get the *tenth* man.

AP: Were you involved in any of the discussions at the very end when they decided to close it?

IG: I went to some of the meetings but I can't say that I was involved.

AP: Were they emotional meetings on closing?

IG: Not terribly. I mean there were some women who came down...they wanted to know what was going to happen to the plaques and what was going to happen to the torahs and everybody knew somebody who had already left the community who would love to have a torah for their new community but nobody was willing to say, "Okay give them a torah or send them a torah" They'd all say, "Who am I to give a torah" But I

think the way... whoever handled it and the way it was finally handled was quite satisfactory. I think giving the religious objects to Beth Shalom was a very good thing to do. It's a reputable congregation. It's going to be here a long time and I can't think of a better place for these things to wind up at. And whoever did it deserves credit. And that almost worked by itself, too.

AP: So there weren't big...

IG: There weren't any big meetings. Nobody voted on it. It just evolved. But it worked out pretty sensibly.

AP: And there you are for the whole span of the life and death of a community.

IG: But if you really want to see the whole span of the life and death of a community, you go to the Homestead Cemetery. And there laid out is the whole history of the community.

AP: And the cemetery is still functioning...

IG: The cemetery still functions. And I think it's financed so it will continue to function. But the whole history of the community is visible there.

AP: Did you have a cemetery committee as well... was that one of the?

IG: Yeah. Sure that was a big active committee.

AP: And you said there was a chevre kadisha as well.

IG: Because years ago, when a Jewish person died in Homestead, he would be buried from Propocovich's Funeral Home. And the Jewish women and the Jewish men would go over there and prepare the body.

AP: Oh, how interesting! So they tended not to use the Jewish funeral homes that were in the city. They used the local funeral homes.

IG: Yeah.

AP: And they made the kind of adjustments that had to be made to accommodate a Jewish funeral.

IG: Propocovich knew just what to do.

AP: Probably more than some Jews know. So was your wife... your wife was a member of a chevre kadisha

IG: Yeah

AP: So she actually was involved in preparing bodies?

IG: In sewing shrouds and washing the body and preparing the body.

AP: Hm. How very nice. It's quite a mitzvah.

IG: It is. But Propocovich...it was his funeral home.

AP: And then did they sit with the body until it was buried?

IG: I'm not sure that they did because I wasn't active at that time. The only activity I had was working.

AP: But you would have known if your wife was gone all night long.

IG: She wasn't gone all night long. But she was pretty active. She was young and she was strong and she was willing.

AP: Was it hard for them to get people to become a member of that?

IG: I don't think so. They had good, decent people. They would do anything that was right and needed to be done.

AP: So your sense of this community is that it was generally a nice and cooperative one?

IG: Oh yeah. It was.

AP: What about the rabbis? Are there any that you remember particularly well?

IG: I remember Pritzker well because he was really a nice guy and he was around much of the time when our kids were in school. He was from Cleveland...I didn't know him there. I remember with Pritzker when the movie *The Ten Commandments* was playing I asked him if he saw the movie. He said, "No I didn't see the movie but I read the book."

AP: You said that you had a lot of rabbis...that there was a lot of turnover. Was that because the synagogue couldn't pay them enough and they would go on to something else or was it because the congregation wasn't satisfied with them and kept trying somebody new.

IG: No. Most of the rabbis left and weren't sent away. But if anyone was treated shabbily, it was the congregation rather than the rabbi. We'd have contracts with the rabbis and, if something better came up, they would break the contract. And we would allow them to. But Homestead wasn't a great spot for a rabbi. We'd have young rabbis and we'd allow them to teach at Hillel...just do about anything to keep them here. But, you know, it wasn't a very prestigious position for a rabbi.

AP: So it was more the prestige than the salary?

IG: I think so. because we certainly didn't demand a lot from them.

AP: How did you chose them? Were you involved in that at all?

IG: No, Jerry was.

AP: You mean he picked your rabbi?

IG: Well, Jerry would usually go to New York and talk to one of the...somebody at one of the yeshivas. And we would have a new rabbi.

AP: And were people generally pleased with the rabbis that he brought?

IG: In most cases. In most cases we were not pleased...we were willing to accept him. We weren't looking for an outstanding, aggressive rabbi. We had one rabbi, Jack Siegel. He gave us a pretty hard time. He was a young fellow. He wanted to do a lot of things. There wasn't a lot to do in Homestead.

AP: What did he want to do?

IG: He wanted to do the things that big city guys do, you know...classes and... He was ambitious and willing. I don't know that the community responded well enough to him. But he went on to a pretty big synagogue...I think in Texas.

AG: Could they have responded or they just [unclear]? There wasn't a realistic expectation probably of what this community could do...

IG: No but it was an expectation. He was a young kid, he was American born, he was well-educated. He wanted to make a big thing out of this. He couldn't do it. There was no way that this community could grow at that point.

AP: When was he there? Do you have any idea?

IG: It must have been in the '50s. He was single. He...I don't know if you've heard the names the Coltins and the Steins?

AP: I have.

IG: They adopted him. Mrs. Coltin became like his mother. But they remained very, very close friends. They went to his wedding in Texas and every time a kid was born they would go down there. He was one of the better rabbis that came.

AP: A little more dynamic than the others?

IG: Yeah.

AP: Did rabbis do...did they like give sermons then? Or was that not....? You know, what was...

IG: They would give sermons on the High Holidays. Some of them would give sermons.

AP: Always in English? They all spoke English?

IG: Oh yeah.

AP: I mean...because you mentioned that he was American born so I'm assuming that a lot of them were not.

IG: Well, when I first came around I think...Rabbi Joshua Weiss, was the rabbi.

AP: He was there when I was there.

IG: Yeah. But he was a very decent, nice guy. I don't even know if he was an ordained rabbi. But he certainly gave the impressions of being one.

AP: Where would they have gotten him if he had not been ordained? Or how could they have found him?

IG: He was just very well-educated.

AP: Oh, I see. Oh, he went on to another synagogue.

IG: I think he left Homestead and went on the B'nai Emunoh in Squirrel Hill.

AP: And stayed there until he died. So if he wasn't, he had at least two synagogues under his belt.

IG: Oh, I don't think it was that he kept it a secret. I think it was you know...he wasn't one of these young American....and I'm not sure again that he was an ordained rabbi.

AP: Were all the rabbis...he brings something to mind...he was a moyl as well. Were all the rabbis moyels as well?

IG: No. He was. I don't of any others that we had.

AP: So that wasn't something that....?

IG: We also had a rabbi when Homestead Cemetery was a pretty vital part of the synagogue. After we hired him, we found out that he was a Cohen and he's not allowed

to set foot in the cemetery. So we bought him a loud speaker that he could carry the power pack on his back and he could stand on the outside of the cemetery and speak over the fence.

AP: What was the role that rabbi was supposed to play in the cemetery?

IG: Oh, he would officiate at all funerals.

AP: Oh, he couldn't come to the funerals! Of, course. I wasn't thinking about that. So every time there was a funeral this rabbi would stand outside the funeral away from the gravesite with his loud speaker and everyone would gather around the grave and he would I was just thinking about the visitations before the holidays and I couldn't think what he needed to do then but I forgot about the funerals. It's an interesting thing. I never thought about rabbis who were Cohenim. That must have not been that uncommon of an experience to have happen.

IG: It was a surprise.

AP: Because you didn't know it.

IG: We didn't know it until afterwards.

AP: What about funerals. Were they different than they are now?

IG: I don't think. In many cases, people would sit shiva and they would have services at their home and they would get minyans together.

AP: With caskets...did they adhere to the thing of just plain pine boxes?

IG: I think in most cases but they weren't really plain pine boxes. They were wooden boxes but they were finished and varnished...those that I can think about.

AP: And they were closed?

IG: Yeah.

AP: No one every got into...?

IG: No, they were closed.

AP: And they were pretty fast from the time the person died until the time he was buried. So the funerals were as traditional as...?

IG: The funerals were pretty traditional.

AP: Well, we went from the death of a congregation to the....But as you say the cemetery is an important part of what happened. And I guess that when the people who were members of the synagogue and their families in the next generation die off that will be the end of it in terms of anybody else being buried in the cemetery?

IG: There still is an active cemetery committed. I don't know how long this will go on but there's money enough to run the cemetery.

AP: Now your parents were in Cleveland...is that right?

IG: My parents are buried in Cleveland.

AP: And what about your wife's family? Are they here?

IG: They're buried in McKeesport. We will probably be buried in Homestead

AP: But you and your wife have had no...aside from friends...have no reason to go to the cemetery yourselves...

IG: In Homestead?

AP: Yeah, in the course of your life there, you didn't go to there during the holidays or before the holidays or anything like that.

IG: No, we had no reason to go there. Except now, Ruth's brother's buried in Homestead and his widow lives here and we'll probably be buried in Homestead. But we have no parents or immediate family buried in Homestead.

AP: So you really were not involved....

IG: Except, you know, as you walk around you know all these people.

AP: Yeah, I think it's very hard to go to a cemetery without saying I know him or her. But I was going to ask you...and you may not know...but did people just go on an individual basis before the holidays or did they have like you see now with the bigger communities as more formal...?

IG: No, it was individual. They'd have...well, that was one source of income for the Homestead rabbi...was the visitations during the high holidays.

AP: Because they would pay him to say the prayers. Were there also the other little old men who would come?

IG: Yeah. They've died out. Now they're little young men. They all used to be older than me.

AP: But there are still men who do that...so at least they are still available. That's right...your perspective changes as time goes by. So on the whole...well, obviously you wouldn't have lived there so long if you hadn't found life in that area a pleasant....

IG: Oh, on the whole I think it was a nice neighborhood. It was a nice community. The best thing was the children growing up knowing so many cousins so well. They're still in touch. Ruth's sister, who we were very fond of...her children call Ruth, that's my wife every couple weeks...each of them. You know, they're very close. They're close to me.

AP: That's a very nice kind of connection which probably living close enough together...

IG: Well, they live in Connecticut, in Allentown...but we see them frequently. They visit, they call. We attend each other's simchas. They're nice, close, good kids.

AP: Did you also make any friends with the non-Jewish neighbors that you probably had?

IG: You know, when we moved to Munhall I thought, "Boy, we're going to live in suburbia and everybody loves each other and your neighbors are going to come to the fence and talk to you." I found out that most people there were crazy. A branch would be growing over into somebody's yard and they would have a bitter feud over it. One guy, the street light was shining in his bedroom...they put up a new light...and he'd get a big stick with a paint brush and he'd paint one side of the bulb so that the light wouldn't shine in his bedroom..

AP: Oh my goodness!

IG: But they weren't very neighborly. That really surprised me.

AP: So you really, as it turned out, depended on those family connections...

IG: We were very dependent on family. Every holiday we were together. Vacations were together. We really were close.

AP: Well, that's a nice story. I actually should ask you for free reminiscences. Are there any areas that I sort of missed come to mind or any thoughts, if you would sort of throw them in before we close.

IG: Only that I think the Homestead community is so typical of so many of the western Pennsylvania communities. Brownsville, for example, where my wife was raised, they must have had 125 Jewish families at one time. Now there may be two left. And there again I won't say not one kid but very, very few kids remain there. And there again the synagogue was sold and became a church. The religious objects were sent over to a synagogue in Mt. Lebanon where they're being maintained. But the community is gone.

AP: So there really isn't any difference between...in some ways

IG: You know, the same thing happened in Braddock and Rankin...all through the valley towns.

AP: Was there any kind of connection between those Jewish communities in those towns?

IG: Not...there may have been once...you know in the earlier days. There might have been one group of teenagers being entertained by another group but I don't know of any.

AP: So as they ...like, when you came there, which was in the 50s, and when they were no longer able to maintain, for example, Boy Scout troops or the other Jewish organizations, they didn't make sort of a valley Boy Scout troop or a Jewish Boy Scout troop or a valley B'nai B'rith or whatever.

IG: No.

AP: They just sort of stayed in their own communities.

IG: You know, and then communications and transportation improved. And I'm sure a lot of people who were active in B'nai B'rith in Homestead...if there even was one...joined a Pittsburgh chapter.

AP: That would be easier to do in Homestead than in a place like Brownsville.

IG: Well I think for a while the Brownsville people worked with Uniontown people.

AP: They did.

IG: Just from stories that I've heard from my wife. Brownsville people...Brownsville kids...would date kids from Charleroi and Fayette City and Belle Vernon and those places. And I think the shuls would have social activities together.

AP: More so it seems than what you...

IG: More than around here.

AP: That may be because the city, as you say, was so proximate...

IG: It was...it was easy to get to.

AP: Did the Braddock and Rankin Jewish communities decline before the Homestead one did?

IG: Yeah

AP: Do you have any idea why that was?

IG: I don't really know for sure. But I know that they declined...and they declined...that they became a lot worse quicker than Homestead did.

AP: That was the nature of ...was that the nature of the Jewish community or do you think it was the nature of the community around there?

IG: No...I think it was the nature of the community itself.

AP: That they were...were they less well-to-do or less diverse?

IG: The Braddock community was a very thriving community but by the time that I knew Braddock it was a terrible place.

AP: So, it was already into decline then. So that decline has been going on for a lot longer than...

IG: At one time the stores were beautiful.

AP: But that was before the war?

IG: It probably was before the war...before 1940.

AP: Because you were saying that by the time you knew it, it was already in...

IG: When I first knew Homestead, the stores were still very nice...the street was busy. That declined as transportation improved and as shopping malls were built. That's what hurt all these little towns. And as the businesses declined the Jewish merchants left and the Jewish community declined.

AP: And those things all are linked.

IG: You know actually many of these communities were...the parents came from Europe, established small businesses, raised a family...and the family never returned so it was one generation.

AP: You were talking about that process of the parents...the immigrant generation...starting little stores and...I just want you to finish that thought.

IG: This is ...it was like one generation. Hardly any of the kids were little storekeepers.