

**Transcript of Interview with Lillian Burcheson
Homestead Hebrew Congregation Oral History Project
Call Number: CSS #4**

**Rauh Jewish Archives
Library and Archives Division
Senator John Heinz History Center
Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania
1212 Smallman Street
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15222**

Name of Interviewer: Ann S. Powell

Date of Interview: August 26, 1993

Place of Interview: White Oak Pennsylvania, Interviewee's apartment

Length of Interview: Approximately an hour and 50 minutes

Number of Tapes: One

Name of Transcriber: Lauren Gargani, Melanie Root

Date of Transcription: February/August-September, 2010

Pre-interview Notes:

Transcribers Notes:

The two main subjects of the interview are Anne Sheckter Powell (interviewer) and Lillian Burcheson (interviewee). These two participants are designated by AP and LB after the initial introduction.

A third voice is that of Milton Burcheson, Lillian's husband.

A third voice is periodically heard on the tape and is indicated as Milton Burcheson, Lillian's husband. As this voice is not identified, this transcriber did not give it a separate line each time it appeared. However, the dialogue of the person speaking is cut off after the (Background) breaks in and begun again on a new line, so as not to confuse what the speaker is saying with what the (Background) is saying.

Incomplete sentence

Unintelligible words (unclear)

Unsure of spelling (?)

Transcription:

Anne Sheckter Powell:Sheckter Powell, on August the 26th 1993 for the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society Jewish Archives, interviewing...

Lillian Burcheson: Lillian Burcheson, I'm Lillian Burcheson. My maiden name was Seiavitch, and my...

AP: (unclear) So that's good, so we'll start at the beginning, and if you're willing to, if you could start off by saying when and where you were born.

LB: I was born in Homestead, January 1st 1916, and...

Milton Burcheson: On 3rd Avenue.

LB: ...on 3rd Avenue in Homestead. It is no longer existent, it was taken over by the steel works during World War II. And we had already moved from that area. We were living on 8th Avenue in Munhall. We had a milk dairy in Munhall also, as we did in Homestead. And I went to school in Homestead until eighth grade, and then I attended Munhall Junior High School and high school. And of course we always belonged to the Homestead schul, from as far back as I can remember.

AP: Okay now, going all the way back, when you said you were born in Homestead, on 3rd Avenue, were you born at home?

LB: Yeah.

AP: Oh, you were.

LB: Yeah, there was a midwife and, I think a doctor in attendance, because my birth certificate is signed by Dr. Moss and by a Mrs. Lebowitz.

AP: Were they, they were both Jewish?

LB: Oh yeah.

AP: And they were people from the community?

LB: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

AP: Were your parents the people who came to this area (unclear)?

LB: Yeah, they were immigrants from Lithuania.

AP: And they came directly to Homestead, do you know?

LB: Yeah, they had family here.

AP: Oh, that's what I wondered.

MB: Jacobson.

LB: My mother was a Jacobson, and the Jacobson family came first, and my parents came. My father came first, and then he sent for my mother. They had a child, born in Europe, and this is how our family started in that area. Well, my father had a farm—it was called Nine Mile Run—it is now a part of Squirrel Hill.

AP: Oh!

LB: And my uncle, Harry, who was my father's brother, ran—operated the farm for him. And they called it Seiavitz Home Dairy, because we had our own farm.

AP: Was it Squirrel Hill at that time?

LB: No—I don't know. I don't know.

MB: It under the Homestead Bridge.

LB: I don't know. This—this goes back, maybe, 75, 80 years.

AP: And they have their cows and the whole businesses right there?

LB: Oh, yeah. They had their own kind of cattle.

AP: You said your mother was a Jacobson—does that mean she's related to Harold Heidovitz?

LB: Yeah, his mother was a Jacobson.

AP: Right, that's what I thought I remembered. So you were cousins?

LB: Yeah, his mother was my first cousin. And Harold is once removed, or however—

AP: However they count that. And also then, how is Ruth Seivavitz related to you?

LB: She is my first cousin. Her father was my father's brother.

AP: Right, and he was Harry

LB: He was...right, right.

AP: ...who ran the dairy farm. At the same time as he was shamus?

LB: No, this was way before.

AP: Oh, I see, okay.

LB: Way before. He was a shamus much, much later in his life.

AP: Well that sort of confirms something, because someone said that they remembered that he had had the dairy farm, but they couldn't remember if he was delivering milk at the same time as he was the shamus.

MB: He worked for her father...

LB: No, no this...the farm was many, many years before he became a shamus.

AP: Now, do you remember that farm at all, or was that already gone?

LB: I vaguely remember it. I mean, we spent some time there. And, uh, there...

AP: Okay, first your father was on the other side of the river, essentially...

LB: No, my father always lived in Homestead.

AP: Oh, okay.

LB: But he owned this property.

AP: Oh I see...he owned this farm...

LB: And Uncle Harry ran, managed the farm for him. Uncle Harry and his family lived on the farm at that time.

AP: I see.

LB: Then, later, they moved to Homestead.

AP: I see. And then what was your father's...

LB: Ben. Benjamin.

AP: And what was he doing in Homestead?

LB: He ran a milk dairy.

AP: And what's the difference, like, this was the processing part?

LB: Yeah, processing and delivering.

AP: Oh, I see, okay. So, and where was that located?

LB: It was at 431 3rd Avenue in Homestead.

AP: You lived right near it?

LB: Yeah. In 1927 we moved from there to 8th Avenue in Munhall. At 528 8th Avenue in Munhall. And they operated the milk dairy from there. We no longer owned the farm, we got our milk from other sources.

- AP: Oh, I see. So when your father came, he had this farm, to be the source, for the processing...
- LB: Well, it was not immediately after he came. He worked, and, you know, I don't know, just what things he did, but he worked, and, you know, made enough money to bring his wife and child over, and, this is how they started a life for themselves in this area.
- AP: Do you know why he made...he set up the processing plant in Homestead?
- LB: No, no.
- AP: And then, is that were he generally sold...I mean, how large was the area that he was delivering milk to?
- LB: It was the Homestead area. I mean, we were not the only milk people. There was Rick's, in Pittsburgh, and there was Herm's...
- MB: Schultz.
- LB: ...and Schultz. There were others, we had competition. But we were one of the ones that serviced this area for milk. And later, we delivered in Squirrel Hill, and East End, and, you know, on the Hill District in Pittsburgh.
- AP: Oh so you really expanded into...
- LB: Later.
- AP: I mean, ultimately. Um, was your father a dairy farmer in the old country?
- LB: I don't know. My father—the only thing—no, my father's, my grandfather was a bricklayer, in Europe. And I think my father kind of worked with him. And then he went to the army. He was drafted, you know, and he was in the army for four years, and after he came out of the army, he married my mother. And they had a child when he came to America, they had first—they had their firstborn.
- AP: So your father was in—was that the Russian army?
- LB: Yes.
- AP: He was in the Russian army. ...finished up, and came out and told the tale.
- LB: Mm-hmm.
- AP: Okay, so let's see...when you started school, you were in Homestead, and then afterwards you were in Munhall. Did you notice a difference between those school systems?
- LB: Well, you know, they were different grades. When I was, you know, in Homestead, I started school there, it was the elementary. It was junior high school when I got to Munhall, so of course there would be a difference.
- AP: I guess part of what I wanted to know was whether there was...well, as a Jewish child, did you have any specific kind of experiences and were there any differences in the way you...
- LB: There were not...there were not many Jewish students, at the time I attended. There were some, but we were few...
- AP: Mm-hmm. Both in Homestead and in Munhall?
- LB: Yeah.
- AP: Uh-huh.
- LB: Yeah, I think in Homestead there may have been more. But in Munhall there were some, but not many. And...but we never experienced any, really, sociological problems.

AP: That was...that was part of what I was wondering about.

LB: I figured that's what you wanted to know.

AP: I just thought we should sort of go back and talk about the schul, cause you mentioned that your family was always involved in that community. Were they observant?

LB: Oh yeah. My father was always observant, but when he was young, and had to earn a living for his family, he was not shomer Shabbos. But when he wasn't working anymore...he stopped working because of his health—he was very observant. He was shomer Shabbos.

AP: So, was your mother...kept a kosher home?

LB: Oh yes.

AP: And, where were all the services for that...you know, the kosher butchers and everything like that?

LB: We had...we had like, three kosher butchers in Homestead at one time.

AP: Oh, really!

LB: Yes, yes. Mm-hmm. The...you know, kashrus was the norm.

AP: And, so, and there was enough of a community then to...

LB: Yeah.

AP: ...to keep three open. So, I guess the other thing I'm asking, then, is, was it your sense when you were growing up that most of the services that you needed even as a Jewish community were within that Homestead area?

LB: Oh, absolutely. We, we had a kosher butcher, we had, we had a rabbi, we, we had a shamus, we had a cheder you know...

AP: Did you know the cheder?

LB: We, my mother and father, fed--he didn't sleep at our house--but the shamus and teacher of the Homestead schul, Rabbi Krotin. We called him rabbi, but he really wasn't an ordained rabbi. He was a teacher in the schul, and in return for his meals, he taught us in our home. We didn't have to go to the schul to cheder?

AP: Oh. Now, did you have brothers and sisters?

LB: I had, I had two brothers and a sister. There were eight children born to my parents, but only four survived.

AP: Uh huh. So, he taught both you and your sister as well as your brothers?

LB: Oh, yeah.

AP: Did he teach you together?

LB: It was mostly one on one.

AP: Oh, I see. So, my next question, which was, did he teach you the same things as he taught your brothers, I guess you don't really know.

LB: No.

AP: So, he would, he lived elsewhere but he just came here for his...

LB: He, he slept, you know, he had...

AP: (unclear)

LB: Yeah, I mean apartments were not the usual thing. He had, a, a room in, with a family, and, uh, he came to our place for his meals.

AP: Was he a young man? It was very hard to tell, you were a child.

LB: I – no, because when his family came over they were adults and even his grandchildren were, were adults.

AP: Oh he had, he was – he was not a single man!

LB: He was a – when he was eating, you know, with, with our family he was alone.

AP: He was alone but he was not unmarried.

LB: Oh, no!

AP: That's what I thought.

LB: He had, he had a family in Europe.

AP: Oh, I see.

LB: And, and, when we still lived in Homestead, he brought them over. And they, they lived in Homestead, and uh, then there – there really wasn't that much for them here. And, the son-in-law, um, found more opportunity in New York. And, the whole family moved to New York.

AP: Oh, I see. So, he was sort of saving his money so that he could afford to bring them over. Now did, he was – was he used as the rabbi for the whole synagogue or was there a...

LB: He was, there was a rabbi.

AP: Oh, I see.

MB: ... (unclear) was a really ordained teacher – rabbi...

LB: We had an ordained rabbi who was a hazzen and the whole, you know... The whole thing. And, he was a teacher.

AP: I see.

LB: And, the shamus.

AP: Did your uncle also teach when he was the shamus?

LB: No, no.

AP: So that wasn't the ordinary thing for the shamus to do, do you know?

LB: Well, I don't know, because after Krotin I think that's when Uncle Harry took over. I – I don't remember

MB: Your grandfather was a shamus for a while.

LB: Oh! Oh, Max's grandfather.

MB: Morris Glick.

LB: Morris Glick was the shamus for

MB: for a few years.

LB: For a while, then my Uncle Harry after that. But, Uncle Harry's duties were different than Krotin's.

AP: Hmm. And they were more limited – more confined to actually caring for the synagogue.

LB: Yeah. Yeah, and the cemetery.

AP: Now, there was a cemetery from the beginning I guess.

LB: For as long as I can remember.

AP: Were people so religious that they used a mikvah? Do you recall?

LB: I remember my mother saying, you know, that she went to the mikvah, but I don't know if it was in Homestead or where.

AP: Mm-hmm. That's what I was wondering.

LB: I, I really don't know.

AP: Hmm. But there were obviously people that were using...

LB: Yeah.

AP: Something, someplace. Uh, did you go to Sunday school, or did this rabbi...

- LB: Yeah, we had a Sunday school, and it was a member of the community, Ralph Grinberg,
- LB: That was
- MB: Bernard wasn't it?
- LB: I mean Bernard. Yeah, Bernard was the superintendent and the teachers were volunteers from the community. And, uh,
- MB: Big Sunday school.
- LB: Yeah, there – probably more than a hundred kids.
- AP: Did, did they – did the synagogue make up your... well let me see, let me ask more neutrally. Were your friends your neighbors who were your non- Jewish neighbors, or were your friends primarily drawn from the synagogue community? Or both?
- LB: My best girlfriend was Max's cousin. They lived in our area, you know, within the block. And, of course she was Jewish. And the kids in Sunday school. I mean, I didn't see them every day. But, you know, these were the people...
- AP: Yeah, I was just – I guess I was wondering if they were, then how you did make those connections with them. Whether there were a lot events at the synagogue that brought you that...
- LB: Well, we – every Sunday we saw them at Sunday school, and some of them went to the same school. I mean, it wasn't such a large community. Everybody knew everybody.
- AP: I assume that when you were in high school, you did not date non-Jewish...
- LB: No.
- AP: So, were – and given the fact that you also said that there were very – but you already knew your husband, is that right?
- LB: Yeah, uh, from way back
- AP: I see. But, he's not the only person you ever dated.
- LB: No.
- AP: Ok. So, what did you do since there were very few Jewish students in your class?
- LB: We dated boys from Squirrel Hill, we, you know, we...
- AP: How did you meet them? Were there organizations that you belonged to, or...
- LB: I really don't know, I mean...I don't know, maybe, you know, word of mouth – a girlfriend met some and fixed you up or, or you went to a party and, and you met, you know people, and uh, you know, they... They called you for a date. We had a, we called it a sorority. It was a group of girls from Braddock and Rankin and Homestead, and they had friends, and friends had friends. I mean, you know, the network worked.
- AP: Yeah. So, that's interesting because when you mentioned the other communities that made up this group, they were the other little towns...
- LB: Mm-hmm.
- AP: ...in the valley. Um, was that generally the case that these little communities interacted with each other?
- LB: Well, I know my brother in law, Max's brother, uh, belonged to the AZA's, which were ...they had in Homestead also, but Herb belonged to the one in Braddock. And, they were very active and very close. In fact, they had, like, a reunion many years later. And, it was really surprising how many came and, you know, showed up. And, there was a warmth.

AP: Mmhm. Yeah, uh, and though Braddock was really no closer than Squirrel Hill.

LB: Well, no, uh, most of our organizational things were Braddock and Rankin and McKeesport. There were some Squirrel Hill. I think that was at a later time, like when my kids...were...

MB: When we started driving a car and could get around.

LB: Mm-hmm.

AP: But before the time of the cars, you tended to go along the same side of the river...

LB: Yeah.

AP: (unclear) for those things. Um, now I guess you went to services at the...

LB: Oh yeah.

AP:...synagogue all the time.

LB: Not every Shabbos.

AP: No, no, no. I meant over the years.

LB: Oh yeah.

AP: And I wanted to ask you a little bit about that. Um, I understand it was very, very crowded at one time.

LB: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, they were, uh...very strict about having a ticket and so on because the space was, was limited. I mean, it was, it was filled to capacity.

AP: So, what about children, who I assume did not have tickets? Were there separate services for them?

LB: Yeah, usually downstairs. They would hire a young rabbi or a student, you know, from a seminary or something like that. And, he would conduct services for, for the young, for the youth.

AP: Did you ever go to those?

LB: No, my father had...it, it was, uh, when they built the schul they, they sold seats and my father bought four seats in the men's area, it was segregated...

AP: Yeah.

LB: ...and four seats in the balcony for the women's area.

AP: (unclear)

LB: And, my family always had, we always had our own seats. So, my sister and I sat with my mother.

AP: Oh, I see. And they were, you say that he, they sold those seats at the beginning.

LB: and

MB: Yeah.

AP: And, so, you had designated...

LB: Yeah. Well they...

AP: They were the same seats every year.

LB: Oh yeah. These were our seats. There was a deed for them.

AP: A deed?

LB: Yeah.

AP: Oh!

LB: Mm-hmm. I don't have the deed but there was a deed.

AP: Oh that...did you ever see that?

LB: No.

MB: Yeah, I...I saw my father's deed. I think it's in my father's papers.

AP: Huh. So, it was really like a petition to a piece of land, or something.

LB: Mm-hmm.

AP: What happened to those seats as people moved out or on or something?

LB: Well,

MB: ...the, the um, population got smaller. They didn't have to be so strict about...

AP: Oh, I see. So, actually by the time people left that community, or whatever, there was a little more fluidity about what could happen to the seats after that.

LB: Yeah.

AP: But, they still owned...? I'm trying to figure this out, because if a person moved, for example, had you married and left the community, you would still theoretically own that...

MB: You could sell it.

AP: ...that, seat. And, could you sold it by yourself, or did it referred back to the schul?

LB: I think it referred back to the schul.

AP: Uh huh.

LB: I really didn't...

MB: ...sell it...

LB: I didn't, I didn't really have any, you know any experience, yeah.

AP: Yeah. It's just an interesting phenomenon, because if the person...it's the first time I've heard about this. About the deeds. And, so then the question arises about if you really owned that specific seat, what happens if you, if you weren't going to be there anymore. So that's why the question came to my mind. What about the other holidays aside from the High Holy Days? Were there other events in terms, for celebrating the other...I mean, do you have any memories of any of the other holidays being celebrated?

MB: Well...Yes, Passover services. Purim Services. They had a Purim ball every year in the old days.

AP: They had what?

LB: Purim ball.

AP: A Purim ball?

MB: Yeah.

AP: At the schul?

MB: No, at Turner Hall.

LB: Well, they usually had it in a hall.

MB: Turner Hall

LB: Turner Hall.

AP: And did everybody all dress up in costumes?

MB: Yeah, some of them did.

LB: Some of them did.

AP: Did you ever go?

LB: Oh, we went, but I don't remember getting in costume.

AP: Oh, OK. That was the first thing was going to be my next...Did anybody come really elaborate?

LB: Yeah, I mean...

MB: A clown suit, a few of them had it...

LB: Yeah. There were...

MB: A few of them had (unclear)...

LB: Yeah.

AP: Was that the most, um, celebratory event? I mean, of the holidays?

LB: Well, they had Hanukkah plays, and uh...

MB: Purim plays.

LB: ...Purim plays, and you know, communal things.

AP: Yeah. Now were your parents active in the synagogue?

LB: My father was active after he retired. And, my mother belonged to the sisterhood.

They called it "The Ladies Aid Society" when it was started. And, uh, she belonged, but, and she contributed, and so on. But, she couldn't, because of her commitment to the family... She could not be, what they called then "a society lady."

AP: Oh! Is that what they called it? Was there a, did you have a sense...I guess since your parents were not all that active at that time, but did you still have a sense that there were lots of politics and whatever going on at the synagogue?

LB: Oh, yeah! Oh yeah. Yeah...

MB: It's the point of election day.

LB: Yeah...

AP: The offices...

MB: (unclear)

LB: Yeah, for offices, and...

MB: (unclear)

LB: Yeah, yeah. They were very, they were very interested and very committed.

AP: Hmm. Did they end up in hostilities? Well, I don't mean fist fights, but I meant...

LB: Yeah, yeah. Oh yeah, oh yeah.

MB: (unclear)

AP: ...Everyone would get really angry, and...

LB: Oh yeah.

AP: ...and the aftermath would be...

LB: Mm-hmm.

AP: I don't know. What's your sense? Was that good or bad for the, for the schul? I mean, on the one hand, I guess it was lively. On the other hand...

MB: It was good...

LB: It was good. I mean, every...every, their prime interest was the schul. Everybody has different ideas. And, you know, some have to go by the wayside, and some...some are...

MB: Your father was vice president, wasn't he?

LB: ...followed. Yeah, my father was a vice president for many years.

AP: So, they didn't have a shortage of candidates. It sounds like they had more...

LB: In fact, 'bout 50 years ago, my father was elected vice president, and Jerry Schwartz was elected president. And they remained president and vice president until they died.

AP: But other people ran against them?

MB: No.

LB: No.

AP: Oh, when they had these offices...

LB: It...this...yeah. The population had decreased, and members were happy to have the officers. Cause there weren't that many people, uh you know...

AP: So when was that, when your father became...

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE

TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

AP: ...there, there wasn't as much of a population as before?

LB: The Jewish community was made up of business people. They had, uh, stores and shops and so on. When their children grew up and went to college they became professional people, and they did not go into the family business. And, those people, you know...it, it just dwindled.

AP: Because those people then left the community all together.

LB: Some of them. Some of them left, some of them, you know, just weren't even living in this area anymore.

MB: (unclear) ...a lot of them moved to Squirrel Hill.

LB: You know, they just weren't even living here anymore.

AP: That actually raises a question when you talked about that next generation becoming professional people. When you were growing up, things like the doctors that you used, were they in the Homestead area?

LB: Some of them.

AP: Oh.

LB: Some of them. There was, uh, Dan Schwartz, I'm sure you've heard his name.

AP: Yes.

LB: And, his uncle was, was the one that ...his name was on my birth certificate.

AP: Oh that's Dr. Moss.

MB: Moss.

LB: Yeah. And, um...

MB: Dr. Reese

LB: Dr... Well, Dr. Reese wasn't an original Homesteader.

MB: Oh.

LB: But, he lived in Munhall, and you know, he was one of the community that we, we used. And um, Dr. Moss' brother was a dentist, and Dr. Rosenbaum was a dentist...and ...

AP: And they were all practicing in the Homestead area?

MB: Yes.

LB: Yeah. Those were. Dr. Schwartz had a brother who was an OB/gynecologist. He didn't practice in Homestead. He wasn't even affiliated with the Homestead hospital, I don't think.

AP: But, I guess...But, did the Jewish community patronize the Jewish professionals in the area? You know, as much as they were using the other businesses that were there?

LB: I don't know what you mean.

AP: I guess I wanted to know if the Jewish community tended to use those Jewish doctors and whatever, dentists, who were in Homestead, or whether they were more likely or just as likely...

LB: They...they, they mostly went to Pittsburgh.

AP: They did...

LB: Yeah. You know...

AP: Is that because they had more confidence in...

MB: Everybody went to Dr. Naushill (?) for their tonsils.

LB: Oh yeah. I mean, I'm talking about the young people that became professionals.

They set up their practices mostly in Pittsburgh.

AP: Oh, yes right. But, I meant, when you, when that older generation...

LB: Oh, they practiced in Homestead...

AP: And, their clientele included the Jewish community?

LB: Oh definitely, oh definitely.

AP: That was what I was wondering. About whether that...

LB: Oh yeah.

AP: ...whether that maintained that kind of connection. Now let's see, after you graduated from high school, what did you do?

LB: Went to work...it was Depression.

AP: Now, where did you go? Where did you work?

LB: I worked for Freidlander's in Homestead.

AP: Did you sell?

LB: Yeah. And, I.I...it was later that I worked for the state, you know, for the welfare department. And I worked...it's hard to remember!

MB: Pasikov (?) brothers.

LB: Oh yeah! Yeah, I worked...

AP: What's that?

LB: Pasikov (?) in Pittsburgh.

MB: (unclear)

LB: You know, the... the uh...

MB: produce.

LB: Produce.

AP: Yeah.

LB: Yeah, I worked there. But, uh, I got fired. And...

AP: So, you were able to find a job during the Depression, though?

LB: Oh yeah. It was like 40 cents an hour, but you found a job.

AP: But, there were, you know you always, I mean...

LB: Well...everybody lived at home until they got married, I mean, there...I didn't have to maintain an apartment or anything like that. So, my wages were adequate for me, you know, for my needs.

AP: And your father maintained his dairy through the Depression?

MB: '47, until '47.

LB: Yeah, Oh yeah.

AP: That's when he retired?

LB: No, he retired many years before that. In fact, I don't really remember when my father was active in the business.

AP: Oh!

LB: That's how many years.

AP: So he was...

LB: He, he was asthmatic.

AP: Oh.

LB: And...

AP: He didn't really... So how did the family?

LB: Well, my mother worked very hard.

MB: (unclear)

LB: And my brothers. And they hired some, you know, they hired somebody.

AP: Your mother worked in the business?

LB: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

AP: So it really was a whole...

LB: And it really was a very hard business.

AP: And then you had to hire delivery people, I guess.

LB: Well, my brothers delivered, we hire people...

AP: But you didn't go into the business at all.

LB: Oh, no...no. No.

AP: You sound like that's un...

LB: Well, I helped, you know, when I...when I was in school, I mean. You come home from school, you...you helped! You didn't sit. There were no TV's, I mean, you know, you weren't a couch potato. Many families didn't even own a couch.

AP: Much less a chair. Let's see...when did you get married?

LB: In 1944.

AP: During the war?

MB: You were both the same class in high school.

AP: You, you were both in Munhall?

LB: Mm-hmm.

AP: You and your husband were both in that. So, you are one of the rare people who actually had a Jewish young man who was near by, or immediately adjacent. And then, after you got married, you got your own place in Homestead?

LB: We, we lived with our parents when we were first married. Then we bought this big house, and my parents lived with us.

AP: Oh, I see. So, did you stay in Homestead, or Munhall, and the Homestead area...

LB: Until we moved here.

AP: Yeah, but I mean, when you bought that house, did you buy the house there because of your parents or because you wanted to stay in that community?

LB: We did it because it was close to the schul for my father. It was within a block of the schools for our daughters, and this is why we chose to...

MB: It was close to the shopping.

LB: And this is why we chose to live there.

AP: And, then you sent your children through the Munhall school system

MB: (unclear)

LB: Mm-hmm.

AP: How was that? Were, were their experiences similar to yours?

LB: There were very few Jews.

MB: Very few, only about 2 or 3.

LB: Very few Jewish people. But, they belonged to the B'n, to the um...

MB: BBGs.

LB: The BBGs and, you know, that kind of... And, you know, they're Sunday school friends and so on.

AP: But, of course you were raising them in a dwindling community, the one in which you had grown up.

LB: Yeah.

AP: So, did you find that a more difficult thing to do?

LB: We didn't know it at the time.

AP: Uh huh.

LB: In retrospect... We, we think, you know, that maybe we should have lived in Squirrel Hill where there were more, but at the time, it was fine.

AP: Why do you feel that way in retrospect?

LB: I don't know. I mean, sometimes Ellen said that, uh, you know, that some of her friends were, like, Judy Cane and so on. You know, she didn't have a best friend that was Jewish like I did when I grew up.

AP: Uh huh. And, so she had...

LB: Yeah, I mean...

AP: Did you find that you had to, that you did, or that you had to use the city a lot more for the children than you did for yourself when you were growing up? I mean, did you have to...

LB: No, No...

AP: (unclear) Services or anything? Well, when like you said she was only going to BBG, was that any, what did you have in? How many children did have?

LB: 2 daughters.

AP: 2 daughters. So, did they belong in the area? In the Homestead area?

LB: Their BBGs were in the Homestead area

MB: No, they were in Squirrel Hill. We used to take them to Forbes Street.

LB: Wasn't, wasn't Ellen's, um...you know, with Mimi Gross, and...

MB: No, we used to go to Squirrel Hill to the meetings. It used to be on the second floor somewhere.

LB: Ask me what happened fifty years ago, I can tell you.

MB: You remember taking them!

AP: But, by then you were driving. And so you stayed there, until...until you decided to sell your house.

LB: Well, when we moved in... We, we had Ellen, my parents lived with us, I had a niece who was going to school in Pittsburgh. And, uh, she was living with us. And, the house was full. And, then...

MB: We had Sheila...

LB: We had Sheila. And, uh, my parents passed away. Ellen got married. Lois got married. My niece got married.

MB: Sheila went away to...

LB: Sheila went away to school. And there was just

MB: (unclear)

LB: Max and me at home and it was

MB: Two of us.

LB: ...so, it was just too much for us. And somebody asked him if he wanted to sell the house, and we decided that maybe we should.

AP: And then you decided to leave the area at that point.

LB: Well, we didn't make a decision. We sold the house, and the people that we sold it to needed the house very quickly because they were expecting their sixth child. And, so we shopped around for another house.

MB: A small house.

LB: A small house. But, all the homes that they showed us had a lot of ground. And this is what we were trying to get away from. So, Mr. Litman, who owns this building, is a friend, or a business acquaintance of Max's, and he... Max called him and he said, you know, that he would have a vacancy for us. And this is how we got here. And it was convenient for Max to drive to Clairton. And, I, at that time, was working in Pittsburgh, but, I asked for a lateral transfer, because they had an office in McKeesport.

AP: This is the state we are talking...

LB: Yeah. And this is how we got here...

AP: I see. And then, did that end your association with the Homestead schul?

LB: No. We went to services and their dinners, and their functions and so on.

MB: Then Sheila got married.

LB: Yeah, then Sheila... Ellen and Mike, our older daughter... joined Beth Shalom. And, when Sheila got married, she was married in Beth Shalom. And, they gave her a free membership for a year. And, we went to the services that year. And, we thought it was so nice to be with Mike and Ellen, so we paid dues in Homestead. We kept our membership in Homestead. And, we joined Beth Shalom. So, to... to celebrate the services with Mike and Ellen. And, that's...

AP: And that was sort of how....

LB: Yeah. In fact, you know, they have two schuls in McKeesport. They have...

MB: Three. Two schuls and a temple. Tree of Life and Gemilas Chesed and Temple.

LB: Oh, that's right. They have...

MB: Three

LB: Three. Yeah.

AP: They still do?

LB: Yeah.

AP: Huh.

LB: One is Conservative, one is Reformed and one is Orthodox. And we... [knocking on door] Come in!

MB: It's John.

AP: Go ahead. You were saying they have three synagogues or something?

LB: Yeah. And because both of us are retired and so on, we volunteered at the temple for their bingo. And we made a lot of friends in the area from going there. And they would love to have us join them for services. Their community has dwindled also. But we still want to be with Mike and Ellen.

AP: Yeah, I can understand that. I'm surprised that this community has managed to maintain itself enough to...

LB: Well, they're struggling, too. They're struggling, too.

AP: But that is pretty substantial to have maintained three synagogues!

MB: They're all active. They have a lot of activities. Their Rabbi Chinn has the Gemilas, you know. He's, he's a very active...

AP: That's right. Were you married in the Homestead synagogue?

MB: Yeah.

LB: Mm-hmm. Rabbi Weiss... No! Rabbi Shapiro

MB: From the...

LB: Uh, Rabbi Pinkas was our rabbi at the time. And he went to New York.

MB: New York.

LB: And, we didn't want to change our wedding date. So, we had Rabbi Shapiro...

MB: From Poale Zedeck.

LB: From Poale Zedeck . He, he officiated.

AP: Do you remember if, when you were married, were you married in a sanctuary?

LB: Yeah.

MB: yeah.

AP: Yeah. Did the men and women continue to sit separately even for wedding ceremonies?

MB: They sat...

LB: No, they sat together, I think.

AP: Oh, they sat...

MB: for ceremonies, yeah.

LB: Yeah.

AP: Oh they did sit together for ceremonies.

LB: Mm-hmm.

AP: So, it's different from the strictly, strictly Orthodox Jewish...

LB: Yeah, I am pretty sure they sat...

MB: Yeah, they sat together for weddings and stuff. Only during services did they have the mechitza in the back.

AP: Mm-hm. Well, now, when you got married, the women were still sitting upstairs, or?

MB: Yeah

LB: Oh, yeah.

AP: Yeah, they just weren't for the weddings.

MB: Mm-hmm.

AP: What about other little minor holidays? When they had other kinds of...well like Simchas Torah? Did the women sit separate for that?

MB: Mm-hmm.

AP: They did. So, for minor, even minor holidays if the women came...

LB: Yeah.

AP: They sat separately, but for a wedding...

MB: They could intermingle.

AP: They, they mingled together. Did either, did one of your...I know you said one of your daughters got married at Beth Shalom.

MB: Yeah.

LB: And the...the other one at William Penn Hotel.

AP: I so, OK, neither of them got married in the synagogue. Was your brother bar mitzvah'ed there?

LB: Oh yeah, both of them.

AP: But those were regular services, so...

LB: Oh yeah, yeah.

AP: Was it...were the bar mitzvahs similar to the way they are now?

LB: They, they weren't lavish like they are now. They, they, you know, learned their haftorah, and they said a speech, and the relatives came to the service, and they had a kiddish, and then they went to the bar mitzvah boy's home, and the young ones ran around...

MB: And the old ones drank and ate!

AP: Did the whole community come? I mean, was it generally open to everybody?

MB: Yeah.

LB: Oh, in the schul?

MB: Yeah.

AP: Yeah.

LB: In the schul, yeah. But, they, you know, only...

AP: Family

LB: Only family came back to the home.

AP: Right, uh huh. But, when you had, like, the kids... Were there a lot people there on a, with a... I assume it was usually on a Saturday...

LB: Yeah, it was always on a Saturday.

AP: Yeah. And, so, that whole...

LB: Oh, yeah. I mean relatives came, I mean it was...

AP: Now, I was just trying to figure out if the community itself would have a large turnout on a regular Saturday, or on a Saturday at least when (unclear)

LB: Yeah, they did. They did.

MB: They had good turnouts on Saturdays.

LB: Yeah, they did.

AP: So that was before you issued any invitations, you had a whole sense of ...that all people would be (unclear)

LB: Oh, there were no invitations sent out. You know ... Beryl's son is going to be bar mitzvahed, or whatever, and everybody's invited. And, and the regulars came and the family, you know, made it their business to be there.

AP: Were you active in the schul?

LB: Yeah. Maybe not as active as some people, but, yeah.

AP: Did you enjoy it? I mean, did feel that it was a real...

LB: Oh yeah.

AP: ...community? That it...

LB: Oh yeah. Yeah.

AP: What about your daughters? Did they, um, how did they feel, being this younger generation, about going to an Orthodox synagogue?

LB: It was a way of life. I mean, nobody... It was just... it was just...

MB: The way it is.

LB: The way it is. The way it was.

AP: Did you send them to Hebrew school also?

LB: Pardon?

AP: Did you send them to Hebrew school also?

MB: Yeah.

LB: Oh, yeah.

AP: Uh huh. Were there... and so there were enough children while they were growing up for you

MB: yeah.

AP: Did they bat mitzvahs when your daughters

MB: Yeah.

AP: were growing up?

LB: Ellen did not.

MB: But Sheila...

LB: But Sheila did.

AP: Is that because it changed between...

LB: Yeah.

AP: ...your older daughter and your younger?

MB: Mm-hmm.

LB: Yeah, the...I was never bat mitzvah. I mean, girls just weren't.

AP: Right.

LB: And, Ellen wasn't, but by the time Sheila got to be that age, it was already the trend.

AP: I see. Even though it was an Orthodox synagogue they were doing...

LB: Oh yeah. Yeah.

AP: And there were enough people for a Sunday school as well? A lot (unclear)

LB: Oh yeah.

MB: Yeah.

AP: ...went to Sunday school.

LB: Oh yeah, they went to Sunday school.

AP: ...or, or Hebrew school. OK, I guess just sort of to sum up because I am sure I missed things...Let me ask you two things. One is, do any characters, or you know, people, stand out in your mind? Any of the rabbis, any of the members of the congregation, in any kind of way?

LB: They all do. They all do. I mean, I remember them all.

AP: Uh huh. I mean, were there any that you found particularly...

LB: There was... I don't know. I mean,

AP: ...attached to?

LB: There was Racusin, there was Goldberg, there was Pinkas, there was...

MB: Weiss.

LB: Weiss. I mean, you know. You know, they came and went.

AP: Is that because it was...is it your sense that...why, why was there a succession of them?

LB: Well, some...there were always...people that weren't happy.

MB: Politicking

LB: You know.

AP: So, it was some of that politicking (unclear)

LB: Yeah. Oh yeah. It was very existent. And, and some, you know, their families were growing up. They wanted their children to be educated maybe in a larger city, or something like that. There weren't...there were always reasons.

AP: Some left for other opportunities, some left because...

LB: Whatever...

AP: ...the congregation...

LB: Yeah, you know.

AP: But, do you remember any of them particularly fondly?

LB: Pardon me?

AP: I said, do you remember any of them, either with a sense of relief that they left or with a sense of regret that they left.

LB: the only one that I remember that we weren't happy with was that one that went to Bobby's bris. What was his name?

MB: Fox

LB: Yeah.

AP: Fox

LB: Yeah.

AP: I never even heard of him.

MB: Yeah, he didn't...he only...

LB: He was here a very short time.

AP: Oh, that's why I never heard of him.

MB: He didn't move to Homestead. He didn't come with his family.

LB: He didn't come with his family and he didn't stay very long.

MB: He didn't stay long.

AP: So that was just a stay.

LB: Mm-hmm.

MB: I don't think he made it a year.

AP: Hmm. And any that you remember particularly fondly?

LB: I don't...we...they were all nice. They were all nice.

AP: That's a...that's sort of a nice commentary that, you know, you had a succession of leaders that you were, that you were pleased with. Were there any families that you were particularly close with over the years? Or that, maybe you were not even that close with, but sort of stand out in your mind, for...for some...

MB: Well, all the Jacobsons.

LB: Well, the Jacobsons were my relatives.

MB: (unclear)

AP: Yeah.

LB: And they were, there were

MB: (unclear)

LB: Yeah, we were a close family. In those years, within the family... was your friends and your relatives and your confidants and everything. It wasn't...

AP: So that really was your community. Was that family within that community.

LB: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, if...if, say my parents had a problem, they would discuss it with my uncles, my aunts, and so on. And, everybody helped everybody.

AP: You must have had huge seders. Did you have them all together?

MB: Mm-hmm.

LB: We had, like, 30 people at a seder.

AP: You did have huge seders!

MB: Mm-hmm.

LB: And, I can remember when our Pesach dishes did not match. But, the food was out of this world.

AP: Well, if your Pesach dishes were like ours, they came from the 5 and 10. You always had to go down and get...

MB: Grinbergs

AP: ...get something extra. What about people in the community who didn't have families? Were they sort of picked up by the rest of the community in some way? Do you have...

LB: Usually, usually.

AP: ...any sense that...

LB: But we didn't...we didn't have many of those. We didn't have...

MB: Most everybody in Homestead was related to somebody else in Homestead. The congregation held a lot of families.

AP: Did you speak Yiddish?

LB: Yeah.

AP: You did.

LB: Very fluently. I did...I probably...You don't use it, you lose it, you know.

AP: Yeah, you certainly do. But, that was a language that was used in your home?

LB: That, and you know, the broken English.

AP: Yeah. Any other...little recollections or anything that I might have missed? Or observations?

LB: I don't, I don't know. I don't know where...I don't know if I've been of any...

AP: Oh you have! I just wondered if I had missed something that maybe...

MB: Well give me that, and I'll give her a little...

AP: Yes and I will give you your very own tape.

LB: Here, dear.

AP: This has been Anne Sheckter Powell interviewing Lillian Burcheson with her husband Milton, who appears on another tape, for the Homestead Hebrew Congregation Oral History Project of the Western Pennsylvania Jewish Archives of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. The three of us have been talking in their living room, in their apartment in White Oak, Pennsylvania, in August of 1993.