

Transcript of Interview with Stanley Levine
Lowenstein Interviews - Small Towns
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[Insert here any basic notes concerning the project and any biographical background notes collected by the interviewer prior to the interview. This information may be found on pre-interview questionnaires in the donor files.]

Transcribers Notes:

Words not known will be marked: ---

Transcription:

Amy Lowenstein: Hi, I'm Amy Lowenstein. It's October 11, 2013 and I'm interviewing Stanley Levine whose family had a hardware business in Homestead.

Stanley Levine: Correct.

AL: Okay, you talk into this and I'll ask questions.

SL: Actually, we never lived in Homestead. But my dad and his brother had started out in the hardware business in 1922, and now as time progressed the business was successful, but they either collectively or individually realized that one business was going to have a hard time supporting two families. So during the depths of the Depression in 1935, my father identified a bankrupt little hardware store in Homestead. And you have to remember, if he had either drove or took a streetcar coming from Squirrel Hill to go to Duquesne, the main route was right down East Eighth Avenue in Homestead, so he became you know, a little bit familiar with the town.

AL: Where was he before he went to Homestead, in Duquesne?

SL: In Duquesne.

AL: Okay.

SL: They were in Duquesne together started in 1922.

AL: Homestead was the second store.

SL: Homestead became the second store. So for four thousand dollars they bought the business, the inventory, and they had a wonderful landlord, a fellow named Givio Wickerham, who was tickled to death to have them as tenants. Just as an aside, my dad had been in World War I, and I think that gave him a certain entre to a waspish landlord in Homestead, but when he could talk about being in France, it sort of elevated him out of the ranks of just the rank and file Jewish kid of that day. Because 1935, my dad would have been forty-one years old. So the business progressed. My dad was very bright, he was aware of things, and he always said, you know he could tell we were getting ready to go to war because starting in 1936, which was just a year after we bought this little store, he could see the hiring in the mill picking up and the whole town getting enlivened.

AL: The store was on the main street in the town?

SL: Yes.

AL: And was there ever, were there other Jewish stores in the town?

SL: Absolutely. We had Homestead Hardware, which was a fellow named Albert Dickstein, we had the Grinbergs, who were still, Eddy Grinberg's grandfather.

AL: What did they sell?

SL: They had a housewear, an electrical supply store.

AL: Were all these stores on the main street?

SL: They were all on Eighth Avenue. Eighth Avenue basically had a three block cluster from where you cross what they call now the Homestead Gray Bridge today, but then it was called the Homestead High Level Bridge. Going back then it was just a little two land bridge. I very distinctly remember when we would go to the Kennywood picnic you would be backed up all the way to the top of Browns Hill and it would take you forever to get across that bridge.

AL: And you took it to the airport, too.

SL: That's right. If you were going to the old county airport you had to cross that bridge which I guess was eventually was replaced five or six years later.

AL: So who else were the Jewish merchants there?

SL: Well we had in those days we had six furniture stores, I'm sure almost all of them were Jewish. We had Rueben's, we had Half, Irving and Bernard Half, Half Brothers, we had Phil Hilk, we had Katulius (?), who was not Jewish, they were Lithuanians. Somebody named Wolk had a furniture store, so I know there were five or six.

AL: What else, who else?

SL: Shoe stores, the same thing, six or seven. In those days you had the chain shoe stores, you had Tom McAn, two Islay's, you had...

AL: But the Jewish, let's keep to the Jewish.

SL: Okay.

AL: So there were Jewish shoe stores right?

SL: Mhm. Supowitz was there. Morris Wolf was there. Little's was there. There was a very big, Hymie Little who became so prominent up on Forbes Street.

AL: What was the Friedlander, Alene Lang had....

SL: Friedlander was there, they had; Leonard Grinberg had a ladies' shop; Friedlanders had a big ladies' and children's wearshop. You had Smitty's (?), you had... just on and on.

AL: Did any of these people live in the town?

SL: A few lived in the town.

AL: These people being the Jews.

SL: Yeah. Yeah I understand that. Historically, the Grinbergs were still living there.

AL: Did they always live there?

SL: I guess from the time that they came over.

AL: Right. In other words there wasn't a "native" Jew population in Homestead.

SL: Some of these Jewish businesses were already second generation by the forties or fifties. When I came in it was 1950.

AL: But there was a community, a Jewish community in Homestead.

SL: There was an absolute big Jewish community, maybe one hundred and fifty Jewish families. You have to remember U.S. Steel in Homestead did not employ Jews.

AL: Really?

SL: If you wanted to be Jewish and work in the steel mills you had to live in McKeesport because National Tube did employ Jews.

AL: That's interesting.

SL: But U.S. Steel, to the best of my knowledge, had hardly any Jews working for them.

AL: At any level.

SL: At any level. Certainly not as laborers, or working people, blue collar workers. So Homestead had a synagogue, I can't tell you when it was started, I guess around the turn of the century. And it was an Orthodox synagogue, and by the time I got there you'd get a call on Saturday morning and they were one short for a minyan. Depending on the time of the year I could or could not get away from business to help.

AL: Did your family and some of the families who did not live in Homestead, did they belong to the synagogue or support it?

SL: To the best of my knowledge, my dad never belonged to the synagogue in Homestead. My brother and I certainly never did but we would help them with making minyans from time to time.

AL: Mhm. Did you ever support them financially? I mean was there any, I guess any outreach to the business community from the synagogue?

SL: Financially, my sense was they never had a problem. They had their own cemetery, which was well run. To this day still looks very lovely. And through the cemetery, it was interesting, they were able to get money for the shul because even though people might have moved away, the fact that they had their parents buried in the cemetery, they had access to those people where if they needed to spend a hundred bucks to fix the fence they might send out a little mailing. So the combination of the cemetery and the synagogue, they were very self-sustaining. I think the synagogue itself did have an active sisterhood, I don't remember any particular brotherhood, but the sisterhood was active. You had a couple professional people in Homestead who were second generation, they continued to live there. A few attorneys, a couple doctors, the pharmacist fellow named Weinberger I can remember he had a lot of relatives, *mishpocha*, in town.

AL: So you were really in business there but you were in quotes "outsiders" as far as the actual Jewish community was.

SL: Right. Yeah we did. Our manager of the store for many, many years, he was a member of the synagogue.

AL: Still living?

SL: He died. His name was Milt Green. He died seven years ago.

AL: And so your father was sort of a newcomer to Homestead.

SL: My father was an absolute newcomer.

AL: They weren't, what I'm trying to say is that Homestead had had Jews.

SL: Oh yeah.

AL: So that another Jew moving in was no great big deal for Homestead.

SL: Right. I think though the fact that my dad was very much involved with the military organizations, the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign War, the Jewish War Veterans, not necessarily the Jewish War Veterans in terms of his acceptability in Homestead, but that probably...

AL: Gave him sort of a ---.

SL: Yeah. Just in passing, and I never really thought about it, he was not asked to join Rotary or Kiwanis, which were the, if you went down the social scales of the service clubs, those were the two most prestigious. He joined the Optimist Club.

AL: Were there any Jewish members of the Rotary or the other?

SL: Irving Half, I know for one, belonged to Kiwanis. Garson Friedlander belonged to Kiwanis when I joined. Leonard Grinberg belonged to Kiwanis when I joined.

AL: So they weren't, they didn't have any U.S. Steel policy, no Jews.

SL: No, but in those days the service clubs only allowed, I think, one member from each profession. So you could have one doctor, you could have one lawyer, one man from the furniture business, one man from da da da. So when I was asked to join Kiwanis in 1955, I had just gotten married that summer, I was very honored to become a member of Kiwanis. I was sponsored by Garson Friedlander, whose family had a store on Eighth Avenue for all those years. And that was fine. My brother about the same time joined the Rotary Club. Just in passing, to give you an idea of how times change, we both ended up being presidents of our respective service organizations. And we were both active, and we went to meetings and perfect attendance which was important.

AL: Do you sense any anti-Semitism in those meetings or anything?

SL: As a matter of fact, in the Kiwanis Club we had a very distasteful incident when we were, not anti-Semitism, but this was probably in the late sixties when we were bringing in our first African American member, they were black members in those days, we had two or three resignations. And I remember at a director's meeting we brought up the topic and a couple guys got up and walked out of the room. So yeah, we did. And even then I could sense who the anti-Semites in the group were and I just ignored them.

AL: But it didn't affect your business, per say, did it?

SL: It did not affect our business, per say. I'll give you a little, a couple incidents. There was a, the major Catholic parish in town was St. Michael's of the Archangel, if you ever happen to drive down Eighth Avenue going toward Kennywood, right across the street from where the Wendy's is now there's a church, and there's a big figure of the worker, this was the big parish there. There was a Father Altaney (?), he decided all the businesses should close from twelve to three on Good Friday. He came in and spoke to my father. My father was very respectful, "I'm very sorry but this is not our holiday, our help is all free to have the three hours off if they want to go to church services." And I guess Father Altaney (?), sort of threatened to boycott or something at that point, but nothing every came of it. So it was just bluff and bluster. And we always closed for the two days of Rosh Hashanah in those days and Yom Kippur of course. And my sense was that we built more respect from people for doing it than we did any ill will that I came down and you were closed.

AL: Did you sense anti-Semitism among your customers?

SL: Through the years, very, very isolated incidents. But the fact of the matter is we were selling a product, hardware, and our competitors were all Jewish too.

AL: They needed you.

SL: They weren't going to go up to the next town to buy five pounds of nails because they didn't like the Jews. And you have to realize that a certain segment of our customer base, a big segment, was southern European in their own right. These were first and second generation mill workers. So how many WASPs, we had as customers, I couldn't tell you, and where they shopped I couldn't begin to tell you. We really never, you know, they're an analysis of that.

AL: So but you wouldn't have information about living in the town and...

SL: Well, let me just go back for one second.

AL: Sure.

SL: I do know, and I just heard this from my brother in the last couple years, that my dad who was very, very active in the American Legion, was ultimately passed over for the presidency because he was Jewish. And whether or not he resigned at that point from it, I can't tell you. But I had never heard that until just the last few years.

AL: --- I'm just saying it because I kind of always thought that this is the way it was, you know there was this anti-Semitism that we all sort of understood.

SL: Well we grew up with it, there's no question.

AL: And we expected it, and so that Homestead wouldn't have been any different than from any other town.

SL: No.

AL: Except that, did it even have a WASP population?

SL: We had a, yeah.

AL: Did it have a country club population?

SL: Yeah we had a, I would say most of the superintendents of the mill, I'm sure were WASPs. And they had a Duquesne Golf Club which was, by Jewish standards, certainly nothing very elegant or deluxe, but this was, to many of them, this was a big deal.

AL: Did the Jews belong to Duquesne?

SL: I think they did take a few Jews in.

AL: I mean I know that in later years...

SL: But it was heavily populated by middle management people from U.S. Steel. And I don't have to tell you that that's one of the things that ruined the steel industry, I mean there were layers, and layers, and layers of redundant middle management. But it didn't make any difference in those days because nobody else was making steel.

AL: Where in the town did they Jews live there, did they live in a particular area?

SL: They actually, they lived all over Homestead and Munhall. After all, depending on when they came, this Milton Green, who I mentioned who was our manager, his parents were very poor, his dad was a watchmaker. I don't know exactly when they came to this country, but they lived in a second or third story apartment building above the state store in West Homestead. On West Eighth Avenue.

AL: So there wasn't a Jewish section, it wasn't big enough I guess.

SL: No, in fact that's how Milton happened to come and work for us. It was in the depths of the Depression, it was in 1935, we had just bought the business.

AL: Do you think there was a movement towards people moving from Homestead to Squirrel Hill as Squirrel Hill became...

SL: Some moved to Squirrel Hill in intermediate steps, some of them might have moved to Homestead Park, which was actually in Munhall going up the hill if you know where the two cemeteries, you go beyond that, that's Homestead Park up there. That's considered a nicer residential area. By the way, there were no, what they called hunkies, living up in Homestead Park. I can remember a letter to the editor somebody wrote the daily newspaper we had in Homestead in the sixties, that Homestead Park has been invaded by the foreigners. They weren't talking about the Jews then, they were talking about what we used to call the hunkies. So then some moved up to Homestead Park, I guess some started to move to Squirrel Hill.

AL: Yeah, because actually the driving distance wasn't that great.

SL: And there was a new bridge, the Homestead High Level Bridge. Plus the fact that as you know the years went on, some of these businesses had already been sold to another generation of people, most of who would have lived in Squirrel Hill.

AL: Well that's another issue, what about the decline of the Jewish businesses, or was it just part of the regular decline of the town?

SL: The decline.

AL: In all the towns.

SL: I think what really happened in Homestead for the most part was all of the merchants got old together. Most of them had done, either prospered or done well enough that how much business they were doing the last six to ten years didn't make that much difference. They were comfortable.

AL: I don't think people realize how much money these businesses in these small towns made.

SL: Oh there was no question. You know, I mean, you know it wasn't a secret there were fringe benefits to owning your own business.

AL: Absolutely.

SL: And these people, and they knew how to exploit it, they knew all the tricks.

AL: And also your children, they had a place for the children to go. I mean this, it's different in this generation, I know there are no family businesses so everybody's out on their own. But, so that your generation would have been the last real generation to go into the business.

SL: Exactly. I mean I would say in hardly any of these cases were there children coming into the business. Because the whole world was opening and all of a sudden they could go to medical school, they could go to law school, they could get jobs.

AL: Right also the businesses weren't making that much money. They started to decline didn't they?

SL: Right. The businesses, right.

AL: The small businesses.

SL: Well our own business, our nephew came to work for us for a couple years. Finally he and my brother had a frank conversation, is there any future for him in the business? And the answer was no. So we were probably representative, for the two of us, it was fine, but to bring in somebody with a growing young family wasn't going to work.

AL: I mean this is where it's part of the decline of the Avenue, I mean it's a while economic chain,

SL: Same dynamics.

AL: It's all connected, it's all, and I think it's, to me, from doing the Avenue project and I also felt this from my own observations is that it really, it's a huge change not only for the country economically but for the Jewish community.

SL: Oh no question.

AL: It really had, I don't think that you have, maybe I'm wrong because I'm not really into it, but as many people earning the kind of money that the Jews made. Their children, a lot of them, I'm talking about the doctors, the lawyers I'm talking about. The kids who, average kids who couldn't, you know what I mean, they were thrown into a different world. Didn't mean they didn't make it. But you could be an average kid and go into these businesses, our age, go into your father's business.

SL: And you'd do well enough.

AL: You'd do well because the business. So Homestead wasn't any different any other way, the decline was just the general decline?

SL: Yeah. Plus, in this particular case, Homestead you had the decline of the steel industry. So that just, even though it started in the mid-seventies when they finally shut down in the early eighties, I mean it was unfathomable.

AL: Did Homestead, the proximity to Pittsburgh, too, did that make a difference? Malls, shopping, things like that.

SL: Yeah. If we go back to the fifties and sixties, that was not an issue yet.

AL: When did it, when did the, I assume that we're talking about the Jewish businesses and probably the town as a whole, when was the peak of prosperity?

SL: Fifties and sixties certainly. Maybe just a couple years in the early seventies.

AL: Mhm.

SL: And it plateaued probably for ten years, then a really precipitous decline.

AL: Are there any Jewish businesses left?

SL: No.

AL: Except for Levine Brothers.

SL: In fact we were the, well there's Casper's who's not Jewish, and Levine were the two what I call substantive businesses, the two that's the last survivors. So this is Homestead, it's been replicated in fifty or seventy or a hundred and fifty other Western Pennsylvania communities. Let me just digress for one minute. Historically, when you

talked about proximity to Pittsburgh, I think McKeesport, Braddock, and Homestead were considered the three really thriving business communities.

AL: What about Duquesne?

SL: Not so much Duquesne, Duquesne to a lesser extent. So that's the story of Homestead. As far as the congregation in Homestead was finally to the Community of the Crucified probably sometime in the eighties. They turned over their artifacts, their memorial tablets to Beth Shalom.

AL: Oh, Beth Shalom?

SL: Beth Shalom still has what they call the Homestead Hebrew Congregation little synagogue.

AL: What street were they located on?

SL: But the morning minyan services were held there.

AL: What street were they located on?

SL: They were located just a block up from the main drag, they were up on Ninth Avenue. The building is still there.

AL: Really?

SL: It's you know the Stars of David is covered up with crosses.

AL: Has anybody ever taken pictures of the building now?

SL: I was actually in there two years ago. New Light Men's Club had a tour of the old Jewish, the East End, we went to B'nai Israel, and Adath Jeshurun, and we ended up in Homestead, and we knew the people there were nice enough to show us the old synagogue.

AL: Hm. I wonder if anybody's taken pictures of these things.

SL: I have absolutely no idea.

AL: It would be interesting to check that out.

SL: Yeah. But the cemetery is still in good repair. They might have one or two burials a year.

AL: Who controls the cemetery now, do you have any idea?

SL: Who controls it? A fellow named Zuck. I could get you the names.

AL: I was just curious, is it run by an organization or is it, is there...

SL: I would think they still maintain their own sovereignty. It's not a part of the Jewish Burial Association.

AL: I wonder what their plans are for the future.

SL: Well, you could probably talk to somebody and they'll tell you they have no succession plan, it'll just happen however it happens. But my good friend Milt Wolf, he was involved with them a little bit, I think he might have been the secretary or treasurer. This is a funny aside. Sometimes somebody would die and they were going to bury them in the cemetery, and Milt would check the books and say by the way you haven't paid your dues for the last four years, so all of a sudden you get a big check you know. So then the funeral would happen that afternoon.

AL: That's interesting.

SL: So it's to the best of my knowledge, the cemetery is still a functioning entity. I'll get you the names.

AL: Okay, it would be interesting. And so the memorabilia is at Beth Shalom.

SL: The torah scrolls, the memorial plaques, couple bimas with the coverings.

AL: Do you have any Homestead memorabilia, that would relate to the Jewish community at all?

SL: No. I mean I would drive to Homestead every day, I would park behind the store, I would go to lunch everyday across the street, when the day was over I'd go out the back door get in my car and go home.

AL: When you went to lunch did you eat with the Jewish businessmen?

SL: I ate with the fellow Milt Wolf, who I just mentioned, every day, six days a week for over forty years.

AL: So did most of the men, most of the Jewish men, in other words, were they a community? The Jewish men, the Jewish businessmen, in their own way, a community?

SL: Maybe at one time, maybe in the fifties. I don't really think so, because even by then most of them lived in Squirrel Hill, and it was just, Squirrel Hill was the bedroom community for them and they made their living in Homestead and went home.

AL: The chances of finding somebody who knew about the early, early times is very hard to come by I think.

SL: It would be, well, if Lawrence and I are about the last remnants to Homestead, there's nobody else to ask.

AL: Right, that's what I'm saying.

SL: And you're gonna find this is many, many communities.

AL: Oh I know that. That's the problem.

SL: That's why you need to do it now.

AL: Right, because otherwise...

SL: Because there might not be a next year.

AL: The tidbits that you've given me, and I don't mean to negate them, it gives a picture, but we don't have an in depth analysis, and we probably won't for any of the towns.

SL: I mean you know, I can't go back before '35.

AL: Right, you don't remember.

SL: We were never there.

AL: Right. Is there anything else you think I should know?

SL: I think those were most of the highlights.

AL: Well thank you I really appreciate this.

SL: I've enjoyed this.

AL: And I know that (tape cuts out)

END OF FIRST RECORDING

SECOND RECORDING

AL: Alright, Stanley I think we should add about the Merchants Division.

SL: Oh the thought just occurred to me, Homestead had a very active Chamber of Commerce those days, of course it was somewhat supported by U.S. Steel which money didn't mean anything to. And we had a full-time director, nice pleasant Irish fellow by

the name of Tom Mahoney, and he must have been the Executive Director of the Chamber of Commerce for twenty-five years at least. Just what he did or how much work he had to do I seriously doubt, but the interesting point was you had this umbrella group, the Chamber of Commerce, and within it you had what was called the Merchants Division, which probably have had its own chair. And the consistency of the Merchants Division was probably ninety-five percent Jewish, it had a couple little Gentile owned businesses.

AL: So that you're saying that the business community of Homestead was mostly Jewish.

SL: Absolutely.

AL: I mean there wasn't a big Gentile store of any sort?

SL: Not really.

AL: That's interesting.

SL: I mean the furniture businesses were certainly all Jewish.

AL: In other words there wasn't an outstanding...

SL: Now I might have missed, this is hard to believe, we had I think five five and tens, we had Grants, we had McCrory's, we had Kresge's, we had Woolworth's, we had Autenreith's but they had you know, what my father would refer to as *shagetz* (Gentile) managers.

AL: Right, you didn't have a Homestead family that had a big...

SL: You know they were working guys, and the manager probably belonged to one of the service clubs, but they were generally laid back.

AL: So that the business community then as a whole, was Jewish.

SL: The business community absolutely was Jewish driven.

AL: What happened when these people went out, did they lose money with their properties or what happened to the real estate? I mean did any of them get out in time or was most of it a loss?

SL: I don't... I never really thought about that. I don't think that by today's standard, you would say that very many of them got out in time. Or they didn't read the tea leaves and say I can see what's coming.

AL: Do you think they owned their business, their property?

SL: Many cases they owned the buildings. This was for the most part, this was a different generation of people.

AL: Right, yeah but I'm saying so that the, if they sold their buildings they didn't sell them for much, it was a decline.

SL: Oh yeah. They probably didn't lose money on the buildings considering what they paid for them originally, but the peak was already past, and it was definitely on the downward slope.

AL: Right. And they didn't go out in a blaze of glory.

SL: And another thing you have to understand is that most of these merchants were not college-educated people. This is what you did to make a living in those days even if they were second generation. I would have to guess, and I can't prove this, but most of the second generation people there were not college educated. Unless, maybe, during World War II they had gone to some sort of an AST (?).

AL: They didn't need to be for what they were doing.

SL: Yeah. I mean there was no need to go to college. Because so many other avenues were closed to the Jews, so you had a successful family business, the war ended, you got out of the service, you came back. Most of these guys would have been in their early, mid-thirties, late thirties, they had twenty years of excellent prosperity right in front of them.

AL: So it probably was, it just dwindled away then was what happened.

SL: It really literally it dwindled away. I could remember when the steel mill would start closing one section after the other, you just couldn't see that the whole mill was going to be closed. It was just too big. And, but it happened. And by then you had the development of other shopping areas. Century Three, which was a big real estate development of U.S. Steel's out beyond the old county airport was probably the initial threat to Homestead. In a very small sense we contributed to it because we built a little strip shopping center out in West Mifflin--Duquesne Village which opened in 1956. And that syphoned off a little bit of business from Homestead.

AL: While I'm talking to you what do you know about Duquesne? Is there, could you, are you a good source for Duquesne to ask?

SL: No, but you could talk to Nancy Rubinstein, who would know more about it than I did.

AL: But you don't know about the Jewish community there?

SL: All I know is there was a group of ten guys in Duquesne and McKeesport, and they built a lodge together in Ligonier called Ten Guys. And if I mention the names most of them will be familiar to you. My uncle was one of them. Hirsch, and Joe Gellman, and da da da. So Duquesne in itself had a nice little, because that was one of the big, big U.S. Steel plants, and they had, I know Duquesne has their own synagogue, they had their own cemetery. So Duquesne...

AL: Is worth checking out.

SL: Is worth checking out. I myself have no personal knowledge of it.

AL: Okay, well we'll get to McKeesport and Duquesne pretty soon. Thank you, Stanley, I really appreciate it.

END OF SECOND RECORDING