

Transcript of Interview with Marvin Morris
Lowenstein Interviews - Small Towns
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Transcribers Notes:

Words not clearly heard will be marked: ---

MM: Marvin (Sonny) Morris

BM: Benita (Bunny) Morris

AL: Amy Lowenstein

Transcription:

Amy Lowenstein: Today is July 24, 2015, I'm Amy Lowenstein and I'm interviewing Marvin Morris who had a business in Aliquippa, PA. Marvin, tell us a little bit about your background. How did you get to Aliquippa?

Marvin Morris: My father was born in Lithuania, and my mother was born in Pittsburgh, PA, and when my father came over he met my mother and I think they moved, he moved to Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, in 1924 or '26.

AL: And what business were they in in Aliquippa?

MM: They were in the clothing business. And the reason, there were six brothers, and they reason they went there I think is because Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation had the big steel plant there and there were a lot of business opportunities. And that's how they ended up there.

AL: And now when did you live in Aliquippa, did you grow up in Aliquippa?

MM: Yes, I was born in Aliquippa in 1930 and lived there until I got married in 1958 and moved away.

AL: What we really want to know for this project is what it was like being a Jew living in Aliquippa. Could you tell us a little bit about your childhood? Were there many Jews in Aliquippa?

MM: Ah no, not many Jews, but we were very close, the Jewish kids, because of the Sunday school and cheder and we all mingled together and our parents encouraged us all to associate with our Jewish friends. We went through the harassing by the Catholics here about the dirty Jews and things like there, which I guess every child would have at that particular period of time.

AL: Was there a congregation, a particular Jewish congregation in Aliquippa?

MM: Yes, there was a Jewish congregation in Aliquippa, and at one time I think there were 125 Jewish families.

AL: There were that many?

MM: Yes.

AL: It was a big community.

MM: Yes, yes.

AL: Were most of the people merchants?

MM: Most of the people were merchants, that's correct. Beaver Falls, which is near there, at one time had three Jewish synagogues.

AL: Really?

MM: Yes. There were a lot more, we were very close to the Jews who lived in Ambridge, which was right across the bridge. And the communities we had, we had the AZA and the BBGs and the Ambridge and Aliquippa kids were very close to each other.

AL: So you had a rather large network of Jewish friends.

MM: Yes, yes, yes.

AL: Now your father's store, what sort of a store was it?

MM: It was like a general store, which had clothing and plumbing fixtures, because at the time there wasn't like Walmarts where you could just go anywhere. And my father was there for a number of years, and there were six brothers and four of them had stores in Aliquippa.

AL: Oh really?

MM: Yes.

AL: Were they all sort of the stores the same type?

MM: Yes, yes.

AL: And did they compete with each other?

MM: No, no, they were in different sections, but they were all similar stores.

AL: Mhm. My grandfather used to say that if a town had a, he called it a Monky Ward, Montgomery Ward, it was a good business town and that's where the Jews would settle, was that true about Aliquippa?

MM: Uh, not necessarily, there was no, the big name store in Aliquippa was the Pittsburgh Mercantile Corporation, which was a big store owned by the Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation, and its main thrust was to take care of their workers. They used to give coupons and, you know, they could buy merchandise there, but that was the main store.

AL: Were they competitors of yours then?

MM: Yes. Yes, yes, but that was the only --- department store at the time way back to the thirties and forties.

AL: Mhm. Well growing up in high school, did you intermingle with the Christian community, or did you stay with only your Jewish friends?

MM: No, no, no, we mingled with the Christian community. We never had any real problems. We had a lot of good friends that we went to school, but the Jewish kids still kept close together.

AL: But there wasn't any overt anti-Semitism?

MM: No, no, no.

AL: What about for the merchants, were they accepted in the town?

MM: Oh yes, the merchants, they had no complaints. They did very well, and what happened to the kids as they grew older and went away and became professionals such as doctors and attorneys, came back and settled in the town.

AL: Oh really?

MM: Yes. And Aliquippa, I don't know whether you remember, at that time there were no specialists doctors, everybody went to the Jenkins Arcade to go to a doctor as a specialist. You know, and there was one family, I don't know whether you heard of them, was a Chamowitz family.

AL: Yeah, I know the name.

MM: Yeah, it was Jerry and Bobby and David, and they were five brothers. The oldest one got killed during World War II, and the other four boys were all doctors. And their father was in business with his brother-in-law in Jackson Shoe Stores. And at that time it was very hard to get into medical school, and it was through the connection with the shoe stores they were able to get the boys into medical school.

AL: Were you, so you were pretty comfortable living in Aliquippa socially, I mean you –

MM: Yes.

AL: You, did you feel isolated because you were Jewish, or...?

MM: No, no. You know you accepted what was going on, I mean nobody ever pointed out that you know, you were Jewish, and you made your own friends and everybody seemed to get along.

AL: Mhm, and did your parents socialize with any of the gentile community?

MM: Oh yes, yes. Everybody, my father could speak six languages and that helped him in the business because a lot of the people that came over to work in the mill could not drive a car, and they used to come to the store because he could talk their language, it was well known. And they had a local bus service that used to go around the town to pick up the people to take them to the mill. And that's how a lot of the workers, and I attribute that to a lot of kids who take it for granted you learn how to drive because your parents taught you, a lot of my goyishe friends' parents never owned a car and never learned.

AL: How did the relationship, were there other merchants in the town who weren't Jewish?

MM: Oh yes, yes, there were a lot more.

AL: Did they get along with the Jewish merchants?

MM: Yes. As far as I know they got along with them, yes they did.

AL: So it was a rather comfortable environment.

MM: Right.

AL: Relatively speaking.

MM: Right, right. And we used to go every Sunday to Pittsburgh where my grandparents lived, and my grandfather would reinforce it, "I want you do marry a Jewish girl", and he would go on and he was very strict. I can remember, my mother had two children, you know, two children, my brother and I, and we would go to visit my grandparents. My grandfather would talk to her, this was his child, and even though she was married and had two children, she still listened to him.

AL: What was his name?

MM: Sam Weinberg.

AL: And where did he live?

MM: He lived on, at that time, on Butler Street. In Lawrenceville.

AL: But you said something earlier, that there was a home in the Strip?

MM: Yeah, well that's where they originally were, in the Strip District then they moved out to Lawrenceville later. And I can always remember as a child there, the street cars would come down Butler Street, and we never had any street cars in Aliquippa and I

couldn't understand how they could sleep with all the noise that the street cars would make.

AL: So your grandfather didn't live in Aliquippa?

MM: No, no they lived in Pittsburgh all the time.

AL: And so it was his son who started in Aliquippa?

MM: No, no.

AL: His daughter?

MM: No, it was my, his daughter moved to Aliquippa and she married my father because my grandfather-

AL: This is your maternal grandfather.

MM: Right, right. Because my grandfather stayed in Lithuania and he came over in 1930, and he's buried in the McKees Rocks cemetery here, and I did not know him.

AL: So it was on your father's side that you went to Aliquippa.

MM: Right, that's correct.

AL: And how, and he, around what year did he go there?

MM: I think 1924 or 1926 is when he went there. And he went there because I guess the two older brothers out of the six started over there, and one followed the other. You know I would talk to my friends, and I used to ask my father, would he like to go back to Lithuania and visit? And he says no, he always had bad memories of the place.

AL: What town in Lithuania? My family was from Lithuania.

MM: Serey. The town of Serey was where my father came...

AL: My grandfather, he came over around 1890, and talked about they lived in the town of Amdur, and it was Grodno Guberniae he talked about. That was the big, I guess greater unit, I never understood, I guess like a state or something.

MM: And I used to ask my cousins, my first cousins, how, did their father ever talk? My father never really talked about his childhood. They all had bad memories, and they just never talked and told you where they were and where they went shopping or what. I don't know any of that.

AL: Yeah, I guess what I'm really trying to find out, if you don't have other, is what got somebody to Aliquippa, why did they pick Aliquippa, did they have a cousin there maybe?

MM: No, no they did not have anybody there. And I used attributed it that they must have known because of the mill that they could go there and make a living, that's why.

AL: Mhm. I had an uncle who was in the hardware business there.

MM: Not Sloan?

AL: No, his name was Jerry Goldberg.

MM: Yeah, I knew Jerry Goldberg.

AL: Yeah?

MM: Jerry Goldberg owned the Sloan Hardware.

AL: Is that what it was?

MM: Yeah, oh yeah.

AL: I didn't know which one it was.

MM: He, wasn't he an attorney?

AL: Yeah, he was a Harvard law graduate.

MM: That's right. I knew him real well. His hardware store was about five storerooms away from my uncle's store.

AL: He was never, he was there sort of as, I won't go into it, but he was never really a part of the Aliquippa community.

MM: No, no, no, because he commuted, he lived in Pittsburgh and he used to come out there.

AL: There would be no reason to interview him because they wouldn't know anything about it.

MM: Right, right.

AL: I'm trying to get the feeling of living in a town like that, and the relationship with the gentile community. Like was there a country club that people belonged to?

MM: No, no, there was no country club. There was no Jewish country club.

AL: Was there a gentile club, and were Jews allowed to belong or anything?

MM: You know, I'm trying, I don't know that there was, yeah you know like the Italians, you know it was a big ethnic community, the Italians, Croatians, the Serbians. There were a lot of people.

AL: Were there a lot of blacks then, or did they come later?

MM: No, blacks came later because of the mill. A lot of the blacks came up from the South and they were treated very nice, we never really had any problems. They got along wonderful and in Aliquippa, they didn't have the tenements and so forth. Most of the blacks lived in their own house.

AL: So it sounds like some of the other towns, Aliquippa seems more tolerant than some of the other communities.

MM: Yeah.

AL: I mean like when you were in high school was it uncomfortable being a Jew?

MM: No, no, no.

AL: Isn't that interesting.

MM: No, we always had a good report with the other people that lived there. And like I say, we used to get along with the other children. And the Jewish parents would try to make the kids get together and to have them remember their Jewish values.

AL: What about socially? Dating and things like that? Did you stick within the Jewish community?

MM: Oh yes, yes. Most of those did because of the enforcement of the parents, you know that was sort of...

AL: It was your mother and father who kept you ---

MM: And they would pound that sort of into you that you know, you are Jewish, you are different. And you associated that way, you still kept your goyishe friends, but you still remembered where your roots were.

AL: When did you leave Aliquippa?

MM: Let's see, I left Aliquippa in 1948. I went into the United States Air Force. I enlisted for three years, and I got extended for a year because of the Korean War. That's when I was first away really from the community.

AL: Mhm. And did you ever go back to live there?

MM: No I never went back to live there, but I still had a lot of friends and some family.

BM: You went back after the Korean War.

MM: Oh yeah, I had yeah, right after the Korean War I went back and I went to the University of Pittsburgh and graduated with a degree in business then from there I did get married and I moved to Pittsburgh.

AL: What did you do in Pittsburgh?

MM: No, I worked at, I was a tax agent for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

AL: So you, after you had left Aliquippa, was your father's store still in existence?

MM: Yes, yes, my father's store was still in existence. And then my father passed away and my mother ran the business for a couple years, and then she retired and that was the end of the business.

AL: Around what year was that?

BM: '69, '67.

MM: Yeah in 1967.

BM: He died in ---.

AL: When did the town begin to disintegrate businesswise? That was long after you were gone I guess.

MM: Yeah, yeah, I'm trying to remember.

AL: Did all the Jewish families gradually leave, is that what happened?

MM: Oh yes, yes. Because there was nothing to keep them there, the only people that really stayed a little bit was the professional people, say a dentist or a doctor, they eventually left also because their patients, you know, moved away.

BM: Talk about Eugene, he was an attorney, your brother.

MM: Yeah.

AL: So are there other things, ask questions.

BM: Okay, well tell them about, well tell them about first of all the store, the difference, the population at first were the ethnics, then the African-Americans families, why don't you talk about that. The change in your father's store and the wonderful relationship.

MM: We already did that though.

AL: Elaborate on it a little bit, his customers, in other words...

MM: Most of the customers, you know, were white and then after the many changes the mill grew bigger and more blacks moved up from the South because there were jobs, they all made a good living.

AL: Did the blacks interact with the Jews?

MM: Yes. The Jews never had any problems with the blacks.

BM: Tell them about the housing, how the mill built the houses.

MM: Yeah, Aliquippa was laid out by the Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation, and the sections were called plans, people lived on Plan 6 or Plan 11 or Plan 12, and there was the element like the of-sort of high-class, white people lived in the certain section and blacks moved into a certain location, and on, not you know, it wasn't like you had to go there...

AL: Right.

MM: It was just you'd disseminate to where your own were.

AL: Where did the Jews live, did they...

MM: The Jews seemed to live all over because there weren't that many of them so they, there was no Jewish section so to speak.

AL: But did they, I guess, did the ones that were more successful lived in [the better ?] neighborhoods and ...

MM: Yes, yes, right, right. That's correct.

BM: Tell them about, like the black families all owned their homes.

MM: Yeah I did tell them that.

Unknown: Yeah the owned their homes. And then my father-in-law was very unique how he would, you know, help them out, he was very unique, very kind, my father-in-law. You know, if they needed money, if they couldn't pay, he would take care of them.

AL: He was a smart business man.

MM: As my father used to say to a black person who was one of his customers, he says, "I was better to you than your mother, your mother only carried you for nine months, and I've been carrying you for two years."

AL: Right, that's like my father's line. He was a pallbearer, and he said, "I carried him all his life, I'll do it til the end."

BM: It was a very nice relationship when I came into the family, and for me it was new coming from Squirrel Hill and from Pittsburgh.

MM: But that's funny I remember Jerry Goldberg, that he had the hardware store, and I remember he was an attorney.

AL: Well he was, it was a long family story.

MM: Yeah. But there were, later, like not quite a few, but I can name about four or five people, Jerry Brostoff and Albie Weiner, who lived in Squirrel Hill but had stores in Aliquippa.

AL: Oh really?

MM: And go back, you know both of them?

AL: Yeah.

MM: And they would come back and forth every day.

AL: I didn't realize that.

MM: Yeah.

AL: How far, long a drive was it?

MM: About three quarters of an hour, that's all. It's actually ten minutes, it's actually ten minutes from the airport really.

AL: Mhm. So it was a steel town.

MM: Right. It was a steel town, that's correct.

AL: How did it compare with say the Jewish population there with the ones in Beaver Falls or Ambridge?

MM: Well, I would, I guess it was different. Beaver Falls never had the mills and so forth for the people to work in like Aliquippa did. It was just a steel town, it was a different caliber of people there.

AL: Mhm. You related differently to the gentile community.

MM: Right, right, right.

BM:: Tell them about Eugene, his brother.

MM: My brother...

Unknown: His brother went to Pitt then...

MM: My brother went to the University of Pittsburgh, then he went to Harvard Law School. And my brother was in the United States Army for two years, and he came back and he practiced law in Beaver County, and he was president of the Beaver County Bar Association. And he died at a very young age.

AL: Really.

MM: Yeah.

AL: So people did go back to their roots at some point.

MM: Yeah.

AL: But they had to have a reason I guess.

MM: Yeah, that's correct.

AL: Well I think we have a picture of Aliquippa. Is there anything else you want to talk about?

MM: No, no...

BM: There were actually two shuls at one time, there were, not two shuls, two different locations.

MM: Yeah.

AL: Tell me about the congregations.

MM: Yeah well, you know the congregation was old that I can remember and I was young. The children, the children, like I say, you went to Sunday school and you went to the religious events all the time because-

BM: Where was the first one located?

MM: On Highland Avenue, the first synagogue there was located on Highland Avenue in Aliquippa. And then as the congregation got older...

AL: Did you draw from, I just can't get over how large a population Aliquippa had, did you draw from other towns around?

MM: No, no that was all Aliquippa, because Ambridge had their own shul and own congregation just like Beaver Falls had more, they had...

AL: It must have been a booming environment.

MM: Yeah, yeah. Right.

AL: Was there a lot of competition from gentile businesses, or were most of the businesses Jews?

MM: You know, it's hard to say. Most of them were not Jewish, no. There were more gentile businesses than Jewish businesses.

AL: I just never realized what a big town it was. It must have been a very good business town for the Jews to be there. For that many.

MM: Yeah, right.

BM: --- because you'd go along Franklin Avenue, which was the main street-

AL: I don't know that I've ever been there, but-

MM: And then you have Sharon and Farrell, there was a lot of towns all the way up toward Erie that we, through the AZA and BBG, we were close to the Jewish children, socializing, right.

AL: So that was fostered I guess. But now what's left there?

MM: Well now, in Aliquippa right now there's three Jewish families still there.

AL: Really?

MM: Yeah, and they don't-

BM: They're not actually in Aliquippa.

MM: Yes they are.

BM: Explain that there's Center Township and Hopewell Township, which is the Aliquippa address, but they're actually like different school districts.

MM: Yeah, we're sectioned.

AL: Right, and what's their reason for living there?

MM: Well, they...

BM: They have beautiful houses, really they do.

MM: Right, and their kids are away, they're not, these are just older parents and they're just still there, they never moved on.

AL: Isn't that interesting.

MM: Yeah.

AL: Okay, well thank you very much, this is terrific. Should we play it back and listen to it?

END OF TRANSCRIPTION