BERMAN: It is January 24, 2012. I am with Connie Ember, who has agreed to participate in the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project of the William Breman Jewish Heritage and Holocaust Museum. My name is Sandra Berman. I am in Selma, Alabama. I’m the archivist with the museum, and I wanted to thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this project. Connie, I’d like to begin by asking you . . . I’ve already asked your husband, how you came to Selma.

EMBER: I was traveling en route from the Miami [Florida] area to a new job in San Antonio [Texas], driving a Triumph Spitfire with a baby in the seat straps beside me and pillows all around where he’d have a place to lay down. The car was probably three foot long, when I think about it. A fairly new vehicle. Just as . . . I’m on Interstate 10 and passing where you would turn off to go to Tallahassee [Florida], I smelled smoke. I pulled over and saw smoke coming and felt heat coming from the front axle. I turned off there, fortunately, and went into Tallahassee. Coming in on the right, there was a sports car dealership. I pulled into the dealership. While I was . . . I no sooner than pulled in, and the front axle broke. The car was so new that they didn’t even make parts for it yet. They got on the telephone and probably internet too. It’s been quite a while ago, of course, but they did that. Very nice. They took me to a local hotel, the baby and I. They started trying to locate an axle. They asked me if they could use, if they could find one, in a vehicle. I didn’t care as long as it was repaired. I wound up in a hotel for two weeks. They finally they found one. Same year, same make, same model that a GI had bought and had wrecked. But they were able to salvage the axle. They got it fixed. They called me to tell me it was ready and they were going to bring it to me, which was fine. They brought it
to me. I paid the bill and planned . . . by that time it’s fairly late in the evening. I had already paid everything there at the hotel and packed everything I could pack, except what we needed in the morning. I got up the next morning, picked the kid up, got him ready to go, fed him. I went out to put the rest of everything in the car that I hadn’t packed for the night before. Somebody had stolen my bimini, the hard top, and had slashed the soft top while they were doing it. By this time, I was very, very broke. I mean, really more than very broke. Two weeks sitting in a hotel with a little kid. On top of that, the car to pay for, the hotel bill to pay for. I had left a job there in Miami that they were supposed to put the last couple of checks in my account in Miami. In the meantime, I wasn’t too sure that I needed to be going on to San Antonio in a vehicle that . . . it wasn’t that old a car. It had been bought in England and, therefore, shipped over. Therefore, it was a British make, which made it harder to be repaired. At this point, I had no choice. I had family here in Selma. My sister and her husband. I’d been back and forth several times. I’d fly in on weekends once a month to Montgomery [Alabama]. I’d rent a car and bring the baby. At that time, my father had retired from Oklahoma State College in Oklahoma. He and my mother had moved back because he was working on a house. There was an antebellum home on Church Street. My parents were helping. Mother, actually, was taking care of the kids and supervising the mayhem. Daddy was supervising the employees and the reconstruction of this. They were turning an eight apartment house back into a single family home. So, I wound up here. I rented an apartment in a house that was next door to where my sister was, upstairs. They divided it up to a bunch of little apartments. Everybody else were very, very old ladies, just living on their pensions and barely getting by. There was a pecan tree out in back. The little boy was three then. I’m out in the backyard with him, raking.

BERMAN: What is his name, your son’s name?
EMBER: Brian. I have other names for him, but you don’t need to hear those. Anyway, the outcome was, as I was out raking up pecans for the old ladies, he was picking them up and putting them in a basket. I promised to take him to the park if he’d help me, and we would play ball. Doris Plant, who I’d met several times on the visits when I came over to help on the working, had invited me . . . First, she had already introduced me to friends. She gave a great big party for anybody new she met. I met a lot of Selma people then, earlier. She came through the alley and up inside. She was one of those people that would jabber off something at you, and you would find yourself doing it. She says, “Connie, I want, you should come and go with
Henry and I out to the River House, hear?” I said, “Doris, I promised the boy I’d take him to the park to play ball.” She said, “I’ve already taken care of the boy. I called your mama, and your mama and daddy going to keep the boy. Just run upstairs and slap on a little lipstick and run a comb through your hair.” I didn’t exactly do just that, but I didn’t do much better. [She] didn’t bother to say a word about anybody else being there other than just some friends coming to the river. I knew most of them anyway. Just as we pulled into the driveway, [Doris said,] “By the way, there’s someone here I want you should meet.” I thought, just a minute, I just got out of a bad one. There is no way in the world I want to meet anybody. I assumed that maybe it might have been a female. We get out. Ed is sitting on the motor mount of his boat with his legs crossed. I think he was drinking a scotch, watching the football game, and smoking a cigar. He looks up at me. Doris told him to come on up. There was someone she wanted he should meet. So, he comes up. I don’t do too well with any kind of alcohol, period. You could put a quarter of a jigger of rum and 16 ounces of coke and ice, and I’m under the table. So, Doris made drinks and went next door. I don’t know if Doris ever came back. <She asks Ed> Did she?

ED EMBER: Not until Henry showed up.

EMBER: Henry showed up with the food. Other people showed up. By that time, finally, it was getting towards dusk. Ed had asked me, would I like him to take me home? [I said,] “Please do.” He said that he wasn’t familiar enough of the river. He had running lights, but he wasn’t sure that he could do it. By that time, I was so far gone, if I took a step, I was sloshing in my shoes. So, we leave. Henry says to me, “You haven’t even seen Doris’s chicken salad yet.” I said, “I hadn’t even seen the chicken, let alone the salad.” We left. We were going up the river. We came around the bend. I had come from an area where I was very familiar with the swamps and everything. The white owls would fly in there in the night time. We round that corner. I’m looking this way. I said, “What are all those white owls doing over there? I didn’t know they came inland like that.” Ed said, “I guess they do.” We go on. About Wednesday of that next week, he called and invited . . . he was off in the afternoon and invited me to go back out the river with him. We go around the bend. I’m looking. I said, “What are all those Clorox bottles doing over there?” He said, “Those aren’t Clorox bottles. Those are white owls.” Jug fishing.¹ I’d never heard of it. That’s where the white owls came in. Now on the business of me

¹ Jug fishing is a tackle-free method of fishing that uses lines suspended from floating jugs to catch fish in lakes or rivers.
converting, I would have converted in the previous marriage, but I already knew I wasn’t going to be in that marriage very long anyway by that time. I had a mother-in-law at the time that . . . I was so ignorant, she called me “goy.”2 I thought she was calling me “girl.” That was the story there. Ed, not even knowing . . . I didn’t realize. He didn’t bother to ask. I’d ask him. I would go to the store every week and tell him I wanted to borrow his car. I was going to Montgomery. I’d been going to Montgomery for two months for a conversion. I got to thinking about it in later years. I wondered what in the world he thought I was going to Montgomery for with his car. I had one that I could get about 40 miles to the gallon. He had one that was getting maybe four miles to the gallon or something. I don’t know what that [Ford] LTD was doing, but I was certainly getting more miles with the Triumph.

BERMAN: What were conversion classes like? It was [Temple] Beth Or,3 right?
EMBER: It was no big problem or anything. He gave me a lot of things to study, which I studied at home.
BERMAN: Who was the rabbi?
EMBER: He was the same one that married us. I can’t think of his name.
EMBER: Yes, Baylinson. The same one that married Ronnie and Barbara [Leet].
BERMAN: We’ve interviewed him.
EMBER: Yes, Baylinson.
BERMAN: Did you like him?
EMBER: Yes. No problem at all with any of them. They were just as considerate as they could be. The main thing that happened, truthfully, I think, was the day Ed and I married was that happiest day of Daddy’s life. He was getting rid of me finally.
BERMAN: So you both moved to Selma.

---

2 Goy is a Yiddish term meaning “people” or “nation.” In common usage, it designates a non-Jewish or Gentile person.
3 A Reform congregation in Montgomery, Alabama. The congregation was formally formed in 1852 and was known as Kahl Montgomery. In 1862, they completed a temple in downtown Montgomery and later changed the name to Temple Beth Or [Hebrew: House of Light]. It is listed in the National Registry of Historic Places and still stands today serving as a church. Due to the increasing Jewish population, a new house of worship was built in 1902 and again in 1961, which is the location of Temple Beth Or today.
4 Rabbi David A. Baylinson served Temple Beth Or in Montgomery, Alabama from 1965 until his retirement in 1994.
EMBER: Yes. I was living here. When we started dating, Ed had brought me to temple. First time I came in that door, that table just like that was there. I was carrying a Florida type straw, more like a beach bag, but it was a purse with glitter all over it. I put my purse down there as I stepped in. An elderly lady from the congregation, Mrs. Corningstall [sp], came up, dumped my purse out and started going through it. “What do you got in there?” she says. I thought, “My land, what have I got into?”

BERMAN: Can you describe some of the other people you met when you first came to the congregation [Temple Mishkan Israel]?^5

EMBER: Truly, everybody was . . . with the exception of Mrs. Corningstall, which took a while. I ran into her one time at the grocery store not too much longer. ’I’d gone to get groceries for Mother. Mother had ordered a ham. I picked up a ham and had it in the cart. She says, “What are you doing with a ham in your cart? That’s not kosher.” I thought, I didn’t know then that nobody here kept kosher anyway. Mostly, I can’t say that I had any major problems being accepted. I think they were just glad to have somebody else here.

BERMAN: Not problems. I was just wondering about your impressions of different people that were in the congregation.

EMBER: I think we had an exceptionally nice group of people. Truly, they really helped me learn a lot. I became very fond of quite a few of them. In fact, some of them, I think I grieved over more than I did when I lost my own mother. Mother had been sick for so many years, she’d been gone so long and just hadn’t died yet. But it was just an amazing relationship, really, all the way around. Everybody was fun. Everybody was nice. It just worked out real well for me.

---

^5 Temple Mishkan Israel was founded in 1867, with services held at the home of Joseph Meyer. In 1870, the Reform Congregation Mishkan Israel was formally established. In 1876, the congregation began to rent an Episcopal church for its functions, and 16 years later, they acquired a parsonage and school house on Broad Street for Sunday school. The congregation built a permanent temple on that site. Ground was broken in June of 1899, and the building was completed in December of that year. February, 1900, the synagogue was dedicated. Although their membership was relatively small, Mishkan Israel was able to support a full-time rabbi. From 1885 through 1976, Mishkan Israel usually employed a rabbi, although its small size meant that most of their spiritual leaders did not stay in Selma for very long. From 1910 to 1930, the congregation reached a plateau of 80 members. Its membership peaked at 104 households in 1940. Since then, its membership has gradually declined. The congregation’s last full-time rabbi, Lothair Lubasch, died in 1976. In the early 20th century an Orthodox congregation, B’nai Abraham, located at the corner of Alabama and Green, was founded, but eventually disbanded due to declining membership in 1944. Its remaining members joined Mishkan Israel.
BERMAN: Who, in particular, were you close to?
EMBER: Evelyn Loeb.
BERMAN: Can you tell me about her? What kind of person she was?
EMBER: She had a husband that could be mighty bullheaded. So could a few others. I can remember one time when we were having a meeting . . . I’m assuming it was when we used to have the congregational meeting once a year and elected new officers. Her husband announced that we were going to have the telephone taken out, that we didn’t need the phone bill. He and Billy Rosenberg decided that among them. I immediately stood up. I said, “Look.” Most of the congregation at that point were quite a bit older than I was. I said, “If we had one of our elderly people that were to fall down those steps or something and break a hip, we couldn’t use the phone to get them help,” I said, “We’d be sorry. A telephone doesn’t cost that much.” That was all about it. Nothing else was said. Except going out, Evelyn spoke to me. She said, “I’ll take care of this and that old fool both.” Anyway, we had a [National] Council of Jewish Women meeting the next day. The first thing she announced, she said, “The telephone has been” . . . because he had already had it taken out and we didn’t know it . . . “The telephone has been reinstalled.” She said, “David will be paying the bill from now on as long as we’ve got it.” As long as he was alive. You know. He did. She took care of that. But that’s the kind of people they were. Everybody worked pretty much together. There was another one that was really quite a memory to me because I don’t like to cook. I’ve never liked to cook. We had one here that was just . . . I think Miriam Lilienthal was probably one of the best cooks in the whole gang there. Everybody always brought some kind of a special dish for the Council of Jewish Women luncheon. I came in one time. I don’t know what I had. She’s going on over something. She says, “Connie, for somebody that professes to hate to cook you’re always coming with all these gourmet meals.” I said, “Just because I hate to cook it, I don’t have to be bored senseless with it.” I still don’t know what it was, I really don’t. It was probably some concoction that I threw together at the last minute and threw in the microwave.

BERMAN: Did anyone ever try to teach you some of those Jewish recipes?
EMBER: No, but I gathered all of them together and hoped to get them published. Then, it got to the point where I couldn’t even get together with it all. Hannah Berger was working on...

---

6 The National Council of Jewish Women is an organization of volunteers and advocates, founded in the 1890’s, who turn progressive ideals in advocacy and philanthropy inspired by Jewish values. They strive to improve the quality of life for women, children and families.
it with me. Unfortunately, Sharon Vim [sp] was helping too, but she wasn’t helping very much. It just kept drifting into something else. Finally, I just gave up the project. I’ve still got all the information.

BERMAN: You still have all the recipes and all that?
EMBER: Yes.

BERMAN: I know everybody has spoken about the Passover7 service here at the congregation. What are your memories of that?
EMBER: Wonderful. Wonderful. Pesach was wonderful.

BERMAN: Can you describe what it was like?
EMBER: We had one or two that drank an extra lot of wine, and they had to help them out of the building. The best time, I think, was when we had somebody at the door when we opened it. It was somebody that just wandered in off the street. We invited them in, and they sat down with us.

BERMAN: That’s great. Who led the service?
EMBER: We had a student rabbi up until probably about 15 years ago, at least. I don’t remember when the last student rabbi was here. Once, after the congregation quit doing it, Ed and I did one once for the congregation. Actually, it was just something I wanted done. I just couldn’t stand it not being done. So we did that. Basically, that’s about it. It was a thriving group when we first came.

BERMAN: Do you, as a group, still try to get together? The congregants?
EMBER: The women did for quite a long while after there was really no one else. I knew the minute the women were gone, that it would be over.

<End Disk 1>

<Begin Disk 2>

BERMAN: What was NCJW like? The National Council.
EMBER: It was absolutely . . . I went to that.

---

7 Hebrew: Pesach. The anniversary of Israel’s liberation from Egyptian bondage. The holiday lasts for eight days. Unleavened bread, matzah, is eaten in memory of the unleavened bread prepared by the Israelite during their hasty flight from Egypt, when they had not time to wait for the dough to rise. On the first two nights of Passover, the seder, the central event of the holiday is celebrated. The seder service is one of the most colorful and joyous occasions in Jewish life. In addition to eating matzah during the seder, Jews are prohibited from eating leavened bread during the entire week of Passover. In addition, Jews are also supposed to avoid foods made with wheat, barley, rye, spelt or oats unless those foods are labeled ‘kosher for Passover.’ Jews traditionally have separate dishes for Passover.
BERMAN: Was it fun?
EMBER: It was fun. It was very interesting. It was very informative. I was president of the Council of Jewish Women twice in a row. It was kind of like Ed being president of the shul. It’s the same thing. It kind of got to be a life time sentence sometimes. One year, they decided they were going to send me to the . . . it worked out well, because it was in West Palm [Beach, Florida]. It was an area that I was familiar with. That worked out nice.
BERMAN: What were some of the activities that National Council of Jewish Women did here, that your chapter did?
EMBER: For instance, one year they would . . . the ladies always had a project, some type of a . . . that they could contribute to. Some kind of a group that needed assistance. One year, it seemed like nobody wanted anything. They were trying to beg people to take it. They had scholarships and things. I kind of got a little tacky. I stood up, and I said, “You know that I was raised different. I was raised to believe that your religion started at home.” I said, “Our building is falling in. Our kitchen is despicable. It’s filthy. Dirty.” Our range that we had at the time was something that the . . . a lot of times we had problems with it. I said, “I think that what we need to do is restore our kitchen, get in cleaned, get professionals to come in.” At that time we had linoleum in here that was peeling up. I said, “If nobody else wants it and we’re begging them to take it, why don’t we keep it and do it for ourselves?” I’d already been picking on people to restore the whole building ever since I came here. I just couldn’t stand it falling apart. But that’s basically the background of the way a lot of it came about. A temper tantrum on my part was really more like what it was. It just didn’t make sense to me. Why be begging some other congregation to take money that they don’t act like they want any way, to do what with, when we need it here.
BERMAN: Like everyone else, you’re hoping to raise the money to . . .
EMBER: I’d love to see it restored. I really would. There’s more here than a lot of people . . . even the older people that are still around don’t remember. In talking to different people, I realize, like all of this black woodwork out here is walnut. It’s not just plain, ordinary wood that needed to be painted. Somebody painted it. It’s just amazing what we’ve got here.
BERMAN: It’s a beautiful sanctuary.

\footnote{Shul is a Yiddish word for synagogue that is derived from a German word meaning “school,” and emphasizes the synagogue's role as a place of study.}
EMBER: We’ve got windows out here that are worth as much as $10,000 each or more. There are some that are signed by local people who were trained with Tiffany.9
BERMAN: Really.
EMBER: Yes. You can barely make it out. It’s some of the windows back there in the front.
BERMAN: What are these? When did these get installed? These etched windows.
EMBER: That was in 1979. I can tell you that real simple because it was done . . . I did all four of them. One was . . . my father was deceased and so was Ed’s. The mothers were both still living. Ed’s mother died the day I finished them.
BERMAN: You actually did these windows?
EMBER: Yes.
BERMAN: Unbelievable.
EMBER: No. I got to admit, that of all the glasswork I’ve done over the years, the nicest compliment I ever got on any of my work was from Jane Barton. Little Jane. She came to me and she’s crying. She said, “Connie, not since I left Austria have I seen anything that beautiful.” I stood there and cried with her.
BERMAN: They are beautiful.
EMBER: I’ve enjoyed them, a lot. I look at them now, though, and I find flaws that I wish I had done differently.
BERMAN: Do you still do glasswork?
EMBER: I have a studio that has a sign on the door that says, “Toxic waste dump. Empty at your own risk.” No. I should, but I don’t.
BERMAN: I want to make sure . . . I’ve so enjoyed interviewing you. I want to make sure that I haven’t missed anything that you want to . . . anything that I’ve missed that I should ask her?
ED EMBER: Yes. Ask her how many great grandchildren we have.
EMBER: My goodness.
BERMAN: How many great grandchildren do you have?

9 Tiffany glass refers to types of glass developed and produced from 1878 to 1933 at the Tiffany Studios in New York City by an American, Louis Comfort Tiffany, and a team of other designers. He was associated with the Art Nouveau movement. He was famous, in part, for his richly-colored stained glass windows but he also designed lamps, mosaics, ceramics, jewelry, enamels and metalwork.
EMBER: Let’s see. We’ve got three great granddaughters. We have one great grandson and another one . . . two more on the way. Two more grandsons on the way.

ED EMBER: Three boys and three girls pretty soon.

BERMAN: Very nice. That’s wonderful. Ruth, if you could turn the camera at some point so we can get Ed and Connie in front of one of the windows. It would be so nice. <Camera pans, showing Ed and Connie holding hands in front of the etched windows> That’s beautiful. Thank you so much.

INTERVIEW ENDS

<End Disk 2>