

**THE WILLIAM BREMAN JEWISH HERITAGE MUSEUM
ESTHER AND HERBERT TAYLOR
JEWISH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF ATLANTA
AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE**

MEMOIRIST: BETTY ROSE GIBIAN
INTERVIEWER: SANDRA BERMAN
DATE: JANUARY 23, 2012
LOCATION: SELMA, ALABAMA

<Begin Disk 1>

INTERVIEW BEGINS

BERMAN: Today is January 23, 2012. I'm in Selma, Alabama, with Bo. Should I say "Bo" for the purpose of the interview?

GIBIAN: I'm Betty Rose Gibian.

BERMAN: Betty Rose Gibian, who has agreed to participate in the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project of the William Breman Jewish Heritage and Holocaust Museum. I am Sandy Berman, the archivist with the museum. I'm really appreciative of you taking the time to participate in the interview. I'd like to start by asking you to tell me a little bit about your own background. When you were born, also your parent's names, and how your family came to Selma.

GIBIAN: Where do you want me to start?

BERMAN: When you were born.

GIBIAN: I was born April 30, 1922, in Selma at the Baptist Hospital.

BERMAN: And your parent's names?

GIBIAN: Ray Naman Leva was my mother.

BERMAN: What was the last name?

GIBIAN: Leva. L-E-V-A. Her maiden name was Naman. She was from Waco, Texas. My dad was Jackson Leva. He was born here in Selma.

BERMAN: When did the family first come to Selma? Your father's side.

GIBIAN: I'm really not sure about the date. I do know that my grandmother was born in Albany, Georgia. My grandfather came from Rutesheim, Germany. How this came about . . . My grandparents are buried out at the cemetery. How that happened, I don't know.

BERMAN: Here or in Selma or in Albany?

GIBIAN: Here in Selma.

BERMAN: So they came before . . . did they come before the Civil War?

GIBIAN: I don't know exactly when they did come.

BERMAN: Whatever date, they've been here a very long time.

GIBIAN: Right.

BERMAN: You are part of the old Selma kind of community, right?

GIBIAN: Yes. I guess.

BERMAN: Yes. Let's talk a little bit about . . . what kind of work did your parents do . . . your father here in Selma.

GIBIAN: He was in the manufacturing business, candy. He had a candy company.

BERMAN: What was it called?

GIBIAN: American Candy Manufacturing Company.

BERMAN: Were they competitors of the Norris Candy Company¹ in Atlanta, do you know?

GIBIAN: I have to ask my husband that. <Betty turns to ask her husband, Richard> Norris Candy Company in Atlanta, was that a competitor?

RICHARD: Everybody is a competitor. I have heard of Norris Candy.

GIBIAN: I have never heard of Norris Candy Company. You have, I'm sure.

BERMAN: It was Jewish. It was "Lowenstein," but they went by "Norris." That's great, they were in the candy business. What about your grandfather? What business was he in? Also the candy business?

GIBIAN: No. Had a liquor store here, a whiskey store. I think at one point, they may have had a men's clothing store. I'm not positive about that, but I do know that they had a whiskey store here.

BERMAN: And it was Leva?

GIBIAN: Leva. L-E-V-A.

BERMAN: Because I saw a picture of one of the jugs from the liquor business.

GIBIAN: My cousin, Lynn, had it with her. I have two of those jugs.

BERMAN: Did that go out of business because of prohibition?

GIBIAN: That I couldn't tell you. I don't know.

¹ Norris Candy Company was established in 1910 by William, Frank, and Max Lowenstein in Atlanta, Georgia.

BERMAN: Did you work in the candy business growing up?

GIBIAN: Not really, until I married Dick. He came over here and went in the business with my dad. I helped him out some.

BERMAN: What was it like growing up in Selma in the Twenties for a young Jewish girl?

GIBIAN: It was wonderful.

BERMAN: Can you describe it?

GIBIAN: How do you go about describing?

BERMAN: Describe what you did on a regular basis, where you went to school, and some of your activities.

GIBIAN: I went to Byrd Elementary School, which was around the corner from where I lived. I lived in a wonderful neighborhood with lots of friends, all of them Christian at that point. I mean, I had some Jewish friends too, but the neighborhood was . . . I had no Jewish friends in the neighborhood. Then I went on to junior high school and high school. It was no different from anybody else growing up in Selma, as far as I was concerned.

BERMAN: Did you ever feel as an outsider being Jewish?

GIBIAN: I didn't feel an outsider, but I felt a little different. I don't think you can help but feel a little difference there. In school during the Christmas holidays, I think I did feel a little difference.

BERMAN: Did you participate, or did your parents want you to participate in any of the Jewish social dances that were in the south, like Jubilee, Falcon, Holly Days, or Ballyhoo.² Any of those?

GIBIAN: I went to some of them. Yes.

BERMAN: Can you remember which ones you went to and what the dances were like?

GIBIAN: I actually didn't go until I married, or just before we married, to Falcon and Jubilee. In high school, I went over and visited in Atlanta and went to dances there.

² From 1931 to the late 1950's, courtship weekends in southern cities included Montgomery, Alabama's 'Falcon,' Birmingham, Alabama's 'Jubilee,' Columbus, Georgia's 'Holly Days,' and Atlanta, Georgia's 'Ballyhoo.' They were attended by college-age Jewish youth from across the South who participated in rounds of breakfast dates, lunch dates, tea dance dates, early evening dates, late night dates, formal dances, and cocktail parties, with the goal of meeting a "nice Jewish boy or girl" who might well become a spouse.

BERMAN: Were your parents trying to encourage you to date somebody Jewish or to marry somebody Jewish by sending . . . ?

GIBIAN: Not particularly date because that was limited, but I don't think I ever would have considered marrying out of my faith. I just never . . . It was just set in stone, so to speak, that I was going to marry a nice Jewish boy.

BERMAN: Was your religion important to your family in the home?

GIBIAN: Very important to my mother. It was very important. On Friday night, we had a special . . . the meal wasn't special, but we were at home for Friday night dinner. We lit the candles and said the blessing.³

BERMAN: What about the other holidays? Did you celebrate Passover⁴ in the home?

GIBIAN: Not in the home, but down here. Yes.

BERMAN: That's what I've heard.

GIBIAN: And at the Harmony Club⁵ when I was real young. That's where we had everything.

BERMAN: Was the Harmony Club a Jewish Club?

GIBIAN: Oh yes.

BERMAN: What did you do at the Harmony Club?

GIBIAN: My dad played cards there early on. We had Passover suppers there. We had *purim*⁶ dances there.

³ Lighting the candles on Friday evening before sundown to usher in the Sabbath is traditionally done by women. After lighting the candles the woman waves her hands over them, covers her eyes and recites a blessing: "*Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light Shabbat candles.*"

⁴ 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.

⁵ In 1867, Selma Jews founded a Jewish social club called the Harmony Club. The club erected a three-story brick building on Water Avenue in 1909. This building served as a social hub for the Jewish community, hosting dances, card games, billiards and other social functions. Non-Jews would occasionally rent out the space to host their events. In 1999, the abandoned building, which had become an Elks Club in the 1930s, was bought and renovated by a private owner and is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

⁶ A Jewish holiday that commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people in the ancient Persian Empire from destruction in the wake of a plot by Haman, a story recorded in the Biblical book of Esther. According to the Book of Esther, Haman planned to kill all the Jews, but his plans were foiled by Mordecai and his adopted daughter Queen

BERMAN: What happened to the Harmony Club? Did it merge and . . .

GIBIAN: I don't know. <She turns to ask Richard> Do you all remember when the Harmony Club . . .

RICHARD: It was probably after the war.

GIBIAN: I think it was before the war. I can't remember who bought it, maybe the city. In high school, we used to have dances there. High school dances. It was not a Jewish club then.

BERMAN: It changed over.

GIBIAN: Yes, it changed over. I don't remember how or when.

BERMAN: The building is still standing, isn't it?

GIBIAN: Oh yes. Have you not been there?

BERMAN: No. Later today, I think.

GIBIAN: Yes. You really need to go.

BERMAN: That was mostly . . . that was a large part of your social life, the club and the synagogue [Temple Mishkan Israel].⁷ Do you remember the rabbi who was here when you were growing up?

GIBIAN: Rabbi Mark. Jerome Mark.

BERMAN: Any relation to Rabbi [David] Marx from Atlanta?

GIBIAN: I don't think so. He left here. He went to Australia. They lived around the corner from us. His two daughters were friends of myself and my sister. My parents were real friendly with them.

BERMAN: What was he like as a man? Do you have any memory of him?

Esther. The day of deliverance became a day of feasting and rejoicing. Some of the customs of *Purim* include drinking wine, wearing masks and costumes, and public celebration.

⁷ 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. Soon after its founding, Mishkan Israel affiliated with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the national organization of Reform Judaism. 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.

GIBIAN: No. I don't.

BERMAN: I was wondering if he was stern or . . . ?

GIBIAN: No. I don't remember that. I remember going to his house to play with his daughter.

BERMAN: What about Sunday school. Did you attend Sunday school?

GIBIAN: We did.

BERMAN: What was that like?

GIBIAN: Like any Sunday school.

BERMAN: Bible class, Bible study, and Judaic, you know. Whatever.

GIBIAN: Whatever, yes. The only part of Sunday school that is vivid with me is when I first started. In the back room, it was kindergarten, I guess they would call it today. I remember we had a sandbox on stilts, up this high, and playing with the biblical figures in the sandbox. That's my memory of . . .

BERMAN: That's a good memory. I wanted to talk to you a little bit about the candy business. What kind of candy did the company make?

GIBIAN: Hard candies, stick candy, and lollipops. Peanut brittle.

BERMAN: Did you sell all through the south or was it national or regional?

GIBIAN: It was regional. Regional you'd call it to begin with, wouldn't you? <She turns to ask her husband> Then we expanded and sold nationally and internationally.

BERMAN: What were some of the candy brands? Would I know some of them?

GIBIAN: There was a candy stick that was short and fat called "Big Bo." My husband did that. <She laughs> Then we had a King Richard. "King Richard Stick." Those were the . . . I have to keep asking him about this.

BERMAN: Big Bo and King Richard?

GIBIAN: Yes. There were two of them.

BERMAN: That is great. What would you consider . . . Did you have help in the home? Domestic help?

GIBIAN: Oh sure.

BERMAN: Did you read the book *The Help*?

GIBIAN: I did. And saw the movie.

BERMAN: How true to life do you think that was?

GIBIAN: You know, I've discussed this with all of my friends. I think a little of it was exaggerated, but it's hard to say, because you don't know what went on in other homes. I know what went on in our home, but I don't know . . .

BERMAN: What are some of your personal memories of that relationship?

GIBIAN: You mean as a child or as an adult?

BERMAN: Both, I mean early on and then later.

GIBIAN: I had, I guess you would call, a mammy when I was growing up. I may start crying talking about her.

BERMAN: Take your time. What was her name?

GIBIAN: Lucy.

BERMAN: Her last name?

GIBIAN: Jackson.

BERMAN: Take your time.

GIBIAN: I'm sorry.

BERMAN: No, no, it's emotional. I see that she meant quite a bit to you.

GIBIAN: I'd rather not talk about her.

BERMAN: Okay, okay. What about later on?

GIBIAN: This is ridiculous. <She is wiping her tears>

BERMAN: Let's stop for a minute.

GIBIAN: All right. Okay.

BERMAN: You were saying about *The Help*, in some cases you think it was exaggerated and some cases . . .

GIBIAN: Yes, I think a little bit maybe, but not in every home. I'm sure that it was true.

BERMAN: What about your other friends? Do they agree with you?

GIBIAN: Some do and some don't. That's what I say, we've talked about it. Some felt like it was exaggerated and, and some don't. It did change the way I do things. I'm ashamed of what we did. Now I hesitate to give left over clothes and things to the lady who helps me now. I do it, but I do it in a different way, I think, than the way I did.

BERMAN: I think it was just part of the whole culture, and it was just . . .

GIBIAN: Well it was. Looking back on it, it was not a good culture.

BERMAN: Yes. What about within the business, did you have African-American employees?

GIBIAN: Yes.

BERMAN: Was that ever a problem?

GIBIAN: No. It was never a problem that I know of. When you talk to Dick, he can tell you more about that because he was down there. He can tell you a funny story about it too.

BERMAN: Did you belong to the country club?

GIBIAN: Yes. We did.

BERMAN: Was it ever an issue being Jewish at the country club?

GIBIAN: This is interesting. My uncle, who was in the candy business with my dad, was one of the founding members of the country club. He gave my dad a membership in the club. This was when it was first started. I never felt any different over there. I mean, I grew up there with my friends. When we married and came back to Selma, there was a board that was . . . I won't say they were anti-Semitic, but a couple of the men on the board were anti-Semitic, and we got blackballed. It was very traumatic because this was right after the war. Daddy had taken Dick around when we came back . . . we lived in Montgomery for a few months after we married. When we applied for membership, Daddy took him around, introduced him to all the board members, and then we were blackballed. But we were not the only ones. There were three others blackballed at the same time, all Jewish. So my Christian friends went to work on it, and we got in. They said it was not anti-Semitic, they just didn't know him well enough.

BERMAN: Even though your own grandfather was a founder.

GIBIAN: Not my grandfather. My uncle.

BERMAN: . . . uncle was a founder of the club.

GIBIAN: It was very interesting.

BERMAN: Did you end up feeling comfortable there after that?

GIBIAN: Yes, because those men are gone.

BERMAN: How do you describe the closeness . . . the Jewish community was fairly small compared to other [communities]. Was it a close knit community?

GIBIAN: The Jewish community? Very close, yes.

BERMAN: Did you do a lot of things together besides at synagogue? Did you socialize with one another?

GIBIAN: My parents did. Actually, I socialized with some, but you stuck with your class growing up. I mean, in school, your friends were your classmates. There were no Jewish

children in my class. I was friendly with some of the kids that were ahead of me, but they were not my closest friends at that point.

BERMAN: What about in the general community? Did you participate in different organizations and clubs in civic areas in Selma?

GIBIAN: Say that again.

BERMAN: Did you participate in some of the civic associations or civic-minded organizations in Selma?

GIBIAN: As an adult?

BERMAN: Yes. As an adult.

GIBIAN: Yes. I guess I did.

BERMAN: Do you have an example of any of the ones? There were a lot for men, like the Kiwanis and the Lions. Was there anything for women?

GIBIAN: Not a civic club.

BERMAN: Was there a garden club?

GIBIAN: I joined the garden club for a short time, but it wasn't for me. I got out.

BERMAN: You weren't a gardener.

GIBIAN: Not at that point. I was raising children.

BERMAN: What about the National Council of Jewish Women? Were you a member of that?

GIBIAN: Yes.

BERMAN: What did the council do here in Selma?

GIBIAN: We did a lot. We tested school children for hearing. We fed children. I hate to say, the mentally retarded, but disabled children. There was a place, one of the churches, where they took them during the day, and we did meals out there. My mother's group fed lunch every day to one of the schools. They fixed big pots of soup and took their meals to them.

BERMAN: You've spent most of your life living in Selma.

GIBIAN: I have.

BERMAN: You raised your children in Selma.

GIBIAN: Right.

BERMAN: Did you ever want to live anywhere else?

GIBIAN: No. We lived in Montgomery for six months after we married. When Dick was in business, that he wasn't happy with, my dad asked him to come over here. We came back and

been here ever since. Now when we go to Montgomery, he says, "Let's go home. The traffic is too heavy over here."

BERMAN: The city has obviously changed a lot in the time that you've lived here.

GIBIAN: Yes.

BERMAN: How do you feel about the changes? I know that a lot of the main streets, which had so many Jewish businesses . . .

GIBIAN: It's sad. It's sad to drive down Broad Street and see all the businesses that are gone because most of them were Jewish.

BERMAN: What do you see for the future of Selma?

GIBIAN: That's a question I'd rather not try to answer. I mean, I just don't know. I really don't know what I see for the future.

BERMAN: What do you see for the future of this building and this temple or what do you hope will happen?

GIBIAN: Well I hope that somebody will take it over and do something with it. I'd hate to see a beautiful building like this destroyed along with all the history that goes with it. But what I see. . . It depends on who comes along.

BERMAN: Do any of your children live in Selma?

GIBIAN: We have a daughter living here. One out of three.

BERMAN: Why did she come back? It's just . . . because so many of the younger people do not return.

GIBIAN: Yes. Let's strike that.

BERMAN: Okay. You don't have to. Getting back to the congregation, you're hoping that somebody will take it over to have some kind of future. Can you describe what this synagogue means to you?

GIBIAN: Well, I guess it means a lot to me. I remember as a child being in there and even as an adult with our children. I remember where everybody sat. You knew who was singing the loudest, who was giggling, and this was part of my childhood.

BERMAN: And your adulthood.

GIBIAN: And young adult. Yes.

BERMAN: Well I'm hoping in some small way we can help rejuvenate it a little bit by doing these kinds of projects.

GIBIAN: Yes. I was confirmed here, and my children were confirmed here.

BERMAN: I want to get to your husband. I don't think that you . . . when did you meet again?

GIBIAN: Right after the war.

BERMAN: How did you meet?

GIBIAN: I visited a cousin of mine who was living in Montgomery.

BERMAN: Where did you go on your first date?

GIBIAN: Where did we go? <She asks Richard> I don't remember.

RICHARD: <Unintelligible>

BERMAN: What did he say?

GIBIAN: What did you say? That we parked somewhere? <She laughs>

BERMAN: At any rate, the rest is history.

GIBIAN: Right.

BERMAN: And you got married.

GIBIAN: You better strike that.

BERMAN: No, that one is okay.

GIBIAN: Oh lord.

BERMAN: I think we're just about to conclude unless you can think of anything I may have missed that you would like to talk about.

GIBIAN: I don't think you've missed anything.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What is your fondest memory?

BERMAN: I often ask that. What is one of your fondest memories of growing up here and living here, a memory that you cherish.

GIBIAN: That would be so hard to say, Sandy, because I really cherish all of them. I really do. I'd love to do it all over again.

BERMAN: I've discovered from interviewing all of you that you have a great love of your community and a great love of this synagogue. I appreciate very much you participating.

GIBIAN: Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS

<End Disk 1>