

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

**MEMOIRIST:** LYDIA SARDA AMIEL (1909-2007)  
**INTERVIEWER:** PATTY MAZIAR  
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<Begin Tape 1>

**INTERVIEW BEGINS**

**Patty:** This is Patty Maziar. The date is March 4, 1992. I am interviewing Mrs. Lydia Amiel. This is for the Oral History Project for the American Jewish Committee and National Council of Jewish Women. Mrs. Amiel, thank you for inviting me into your home so we could have this interview today.

**Lydia:** You're welcome.

**Patty:** I wanted to talk to you about a branch of your family that made a very significant contribution to the Sephardic<sup>1</sup> community in Atlanta. That is, Rebecca Amiel and her husband, Ralph Amiel.

**Lydia:** Ralph Amiel. Raphael . . . he was known as Raphael Amiel.

**Patty:** Can you tell me about them?

**Lydia:** Yes. They came into Atlanta in 1905, but in the [United] States much earlier . . . with two young boys. They were the first Sephardic couple who came in just because there was one young girl from Cairo [Egypt] who married and came to Atlanta to be with her. That young girl left. They stayed behind and lived in a room over Mrs. Cohen on Washington Street . . . then when she got her apartment on Gilmer Street. There were five, six or seven young men . . . bachelors . . . in Atlanta. She used to gather them in her house for the holidays and go to the synagogue . . . to

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<sup>1</sup> Sephardic Jews are the Jews of Spain, Portugal, North Africa and the Middle East and their descendants. The adjective "Sephardic" and corresponding nouns Sephardi (singular) and Sephardim (plural) are derived from the Hebrew word 'Sepharad,' which refers to Spain. Historically, the vernacular language of Sephardic Jews was *Ladino*, a Romance language derived from Old Spanish, incorporating elements from the old Romance languages of the Iberian Peninsula, Hebrew, Aramaic, and in the lands receiving those who were exiled, Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, Greek, Bulgarian and Serbo-Croatian vocabulary.

the *shul* [Yiddish: synagogue] on Gilmer Street, the AA [Ahavath Achim].<sup>2</sup> Mr. Jacobs was in charge, borrowing a *Sefer Torah*<sup>3</sup> and having holidays . . . *Rosh Ha-Shanah*<sup>4</sup> and *Yom Kippur*<sup>5</sup> in her own house.

**Patty:** This is Rebecca Amiel.

**Lydia:** That's Rebecca Amiel. Later on, those young men would bring in their brides from Rhodes, Istanbul, Turkey, or from Greece. She had them in her house until their weddings.

**Patty:** The girls would stay with her?

**Lydia:** The girls would stay with her.

**Patty:** She was like a mother.

**Lydia:** Like a mother to all of them. She was a godmother of more than one of the boys, because she was helping the mothers with their first childbirth. She was really considered as the mother of the first timers . . . the first members of the congregation. She had a brother-in-law with her who, unfortunately, died at 22 years old. He is buried by the name of Jacob Amiel. He is buried at the Oakland Cemetery.<sup>6</sup>

**Patty:** What brought them to Atlanta? Why did they come to Atlanta?

**Lydia:** My father-in-law came in before for a fair in 1898 . . . or something. Then he came back

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<sup>2</sup> Ahavath Achim was founded in 1887 in a small room on Gilmer Street. In 1920 they moved to a permanent building at the corner of Piedmont and Gilmer Street. Rabbi Abraham Hirmes was the first rabbi of the then Orthodox congregation. In 1928 Rabbi Harry Epstein became the rabbi and the congregation began to shift to Conservatism, which they joined in 1952. The synagogue is now on Peachtree Battle. Cantor Isaac Goodfriend, a Holocaust survivor, joined the congregation in 1966 and remained until his retirement. Rabbi Epstein retired in 1982, becoming Rabbi Emeritus and Rabbi Arnold Goodman assumed the rabbinic post. He too retired in 2002 and Rabbi Neil Sandler is now (2014) the rabbi.

<sup>3</sup> A handwritten copy of the *Torah*, the holiest book in Judaism. It must meet extremely strict standards of production. When not in use in services, it is stored in the holiest spot in a synagogue, the *Aron Kodesh* (Holy Ark), which is usually an ornate curtained-off cabinet or section of the synagogue built along the wall that most closely faced Jerusalem, the direction Jews face when praying.

<sup>4</sup> Hebrew for "head of the year", i.e. New Year festival. The cycle of High Holy Days begins with *Rosh Ha-Shanah*. It introduces the Ten Days of Penitence, when Jews examine their souls and take stock of their actions. On the tenth day is *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. The tradition is that on *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, G-d sits in judgment on humanity. Then the fate of every living creature is inscribed in the Book of Life or Death. These decisions may be revoked by prayer and repentance before the sealing of the books on *Yom Kippur*.

<sup>5</sup> Hebrew for 'Day of Atonement.' The most sacred day of the Jewish year. *Yom Kippur* is a 25-hour fast day. Most of the day is spent in prayer, reciting *yizkor* for deceased relatives, confessing sins, requesting divine forgiveness, and listening to *Torah* readings and sermons. People greet each other with the wish that they may be sealed in the heavenly book for a good year ahead. The day ends with the blowing of the *shofar* (a ram's horn).

<sup>6</sup> Oakland Cemetery is the oldest cemetery and one of the largest green spaces, in Atlanta. Many notable Georgians are buried at Oakland including Margaret Mitchell, author of *Gone with the Wind*, Dr. Joseph Jacobs, owner of the pharmacy where John Pemberton first sold Coca-Cola as a soft drink, Bobby Jones, the only golfer to win the Grand Slam, the United States Amateur, United States Open, British Amateur and the Open Championship in the same year, as well as former Georgia governors and Atlanta mayors. Oakland is an excellent example of a Victorian-style cemetery and contains numerous monuments and mausoleums that are of great beauty and historical significance.

with his family for the fair in 19 . . . what do you call that fair?

**Patty:** St. Louis?

**Lydia:** St. Louis Exposition.<sup>7</sup> They lived in New York for a while. This young girl, who had come with them, also had come to Atlanta. She was expecting a baby. The husband called Mrs. Amiel to come down, being a friend from Cairo, because the girl was very unhappy. They stayed behind. Mr. Amiel was mainly a tailor . . . he was a cutter, not a tailor, a cutter. He would cut only.

**Patty:** Why was he here for the World's Fair? Was he working?

**Patty:** Yes, he worked on the World's Fair, but he came in as a young man exploring. In those days, the new world was the United States. His family was in boats, they were ship[ping] . . . how would you say it in English . . . so, I imagine they came in with . . .

**Patty:** . . . they built ships or . . .?

**Lydia:** . . . they had ships. That's why they came down. Can you close it for a minute?

<interview stops, then resumes>

**Patty:** Let's move back a moment. Your father-in-law came here to the United States to explore, to see what kind of opportunities there were.

**Lydia:** Sure, opportunity. He was going away from Greece a young man. He went to Cairo to get married [into the family] with boats . . . or the ships of the family . . . or whatever it was . . . before he came to the United States. I don't know which exposition it was in 1898. He came in with one of his cousins, apparently. They have lost contact. But lately . . . about last year . . . the son of that fellow wrote an article in the *New York Times*<sup>8</sup> asking to find if there were any relatives of his father. He even had gone to Greece to try to visit the cemeteries. Dr. [Perry] Brickman<sup>9</sup> read it. He faxed it to my son, who is Ralph Amiel. I wrote to the editor of the *New York Times* whose name is Joseph Amiel. We found out that his father with my father-in-law . . . as a matter of fact, one of my father-in-law's brother's names is Joseph Amiel . . . this fellow, Joseph, was named after his father's father. They happened to be relatives . . .

**Patty:** . . . first cousins . . .

<sup>7</sup> The St. Louis Exposition was a series of annual agricultural and technical fairs that ran from the 1850's to 1902 in St. Louis, Missouri. In 1904, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, a major World's Fair, was held in St. Louis. The annual agricultural/technical exposition was not held in 1903-4, and ceased after the World's Fair.

<sup>8</sup> *The New York Times* is an American daily newspaper, founded and continuously published in New York City since September 18, 1851.

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Stanley Perry Brickman was kicked out of Emory University's School of Dentistry in 1951 because he was Jewish. Brickman spent the next few years interviewing dozens of Jewish students who attended the school in the 1950's and 1960's, compiling a video that revealed a pattern of antisemitism by the school's dean. In 2012, Emory University administrators issued a public apology. Dr. Brickman is a noted oral surgeon practicing in Atlanta. (2014)

**Lydia:** . . . first cousins with my husband, which is very coincidental. I found that out this year.

**Patty:** That's incredible.

**Lydia:** I'm corresponding with that Mr. Joseph Amiel, who is the editor for the *New York Times*.

**Patty:** The father of Joseph Amiel came over with your father-in-law. They went to the Exposition together. Were they living in Greece at the time? Or Cairo?

**Lydia:** Greece. They had come from Greece.

**Patty:** Where were they living in Greece? Where was their home?

**Lydia:** Crete.

**Patty:** They were on the Isle of Crete?

**Lydia:** The Island of Crete. They all came in from the Isle of Crete.

**Patty:** Did Raphael Amiel's family live on Crete?

**Lydia:** Yes, but then they came, after the time of the . . . there was cholera<sup>10</sup> in Greece. They all moved and they went to Cairo.

**Patty:** . . . to Cairo . . .

**Lydia:** . . . to Egypt.

**Patty:** . . . and they opened up their businesses?

**Lydia:** They all opened up their businesses there . . . very, very successful. My father-in-law had about five brothers and three sisters. They're all very close friends. They had to go away . . . the only time they left Egypt was after the war in 1945 or 1946 . . . after World War III.

**Patty:** World War II.

**Lydia:** World War II.

**Patty:** He came over here really as a tourist?

**Lydia:** When he first came, he came as a tourist. Then he went back and got married and came back in 1903 for the . . .

**Patty:** . . . St. Louis Exposition . . .

**Lydia:** . . . St. Louis Exposition, with his wife, to explore. They were going exploring from . . . [unintelligible: 9:36] in Williamsburg . . . Jamestown Exposition.

**Patty:** In Virginia.

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<sup>10</sup> An infection in the small intestines caused by a bacteria that is transmitted by contaminated drinking water or food. If untreated it causes severe dehydration that often leads to death. It was a major scourge and killer as periodic epidemics swept through parts of the world regularly until the nature of its transmission through contaminated water came to be understood and combated with water treatment standards. Once acquired, it can be treated medically with a fair chance of survival.

**Lydia:** In Virginia. They had gone to Jamestown Exposition in Virginia. From there they came to Atlanta in 1906 or something like that.

**Patty:** Did he have some sort of a business at these expositions? Did he sell anything?

**Lydia:** Yes.

**Patty:** What did he do? What was he selling?

**Lydia:** Yes . . . restaurateur . . . restaurant.

**Patty:** He'd open up restaurants . . .

**Lydia:** . . . restaurants at the expositions.

**Patty:** There was an exposition in Atlanta, is that right?

**Lydia:** Yes, but I don't believe he was involved with that exposition in Atlanta. Never was. When they came to Atlanta in 1905, he was in business downtown . . . in Five Points.<sup>11</sup> He had the restaurant and pool room . . . billiards.

**Patty:** What made them settle in Atlanta?

**Lydia:** They had a little night club or something like that at the Arcade Restaurant. They had a night club in there, too.

**Patty:** Is that building still standing?

**Lydia:** No, the Arcade . . . that building was torn down to make place for the First National Bank in the early 1940's.

**Patty:** They came to Atlanta because there was a young woman living here?

**Lydia:** That's right. The only reason they came to Atlanta from Jamestown [was] because that Attias fellow wanted . . . his wife was expecting. He was an elderly man with a younger wife. She was crying that she wanted to go back home to Cairo. They were from Cairo. They had come together for the exposition. For some reason they had come to Atlanta, I don't know. But that's the only reason that brought them to Atlanta.

**Patty:** It was because of this girl . . . her husband was in Atlanta, also?

**Lydia:** They were both from Atlanta.

**Patty:** No, the girl and her husband?

**Lydia:** Yes.

**Patty:** But the Amiels, you say, were the first Sephardic family.

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<sup>11</sup> Five Points refers to the downtown area of Atlanta, considered by many to be the center of town. It was the central hub of Atlanta until the 1960's, when the economic and demographic center shifted north toward the suburbs. It was recently revitalized, mostly due to Georgia State University having a large presence in the area.

**Lydia:** The first Sephardic after the Attia's who came in and stayed one year just to have the baby. Then they went back.

**Patty:** How do you spell their name? Do you remember?

**Lydia:** A-T-T-I-A.

**Patty:** They [her family] were really the first permanent . . .

**Lydia:** The first permanent people who stayed. They lived on Gilmer Street until 1919. After the war, they went back to Cairo to see their mother, both of them . . . with two children . . . two sons. Unfortunately, the oldest son was my husband, Leo Amiel. The second son was Bando Amiel, who graduated from Georgia [Institute of ] Tech[nology—Atlanta, Georgia]. After they left in 1919, three weeks later, he died in Cairo from erysipelas.<sup>12</sup>

**Patty:** From what?

**Lydia:** Erysipelas. He went to be shaved by the Arabs, by the big razors. He was a young boy of 19 years old. Apparently, he was nicked. He had an infection in the brain. A week later he died. That's what prompted them to come back home. Mr. [Raphael] Amiel had . . . right-away . . . a heart attack. In 1922 he died.

**Patty:** In 1922. [NB: 1923]

**Lydia:** In 1922. He died at 55 years old. That left his wife, Rebecca, with my husband, Leo Amiel. They lived here, on Pryor Street.

**Patty:** What kind of woman was she?

**Lydia:** Mrs. Amiel? She was the most wonderful person. Very helpful to the whole congregation . . . loved by everyone . . . considering everyone like her own children. I could say more on that. She lived with me after I got married for 40 years. She died when she was 95 years old. She died 10 years after her son . . . 95 years old in 1969.

**Patty:** Ten years after your husband?

**Lydia:** Ten years after my husband. She died in 1969 . . . 95 years old.

**Patty:** Someone told me a story that she used to visit Leo Frank<sup>13</sup> when he was in jail.

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<sup>12</sup> Erysipelas is an acute streptococcus bacterial infection of the skin characterized by lesions especially on the face. Also called 'St. Anthony's Fire.'

<sup>13</sup> Leo Frank (1884-1915) was a Jewish factory superintendent in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1913, he was accused of raping and murdering one of his employees, a 13-year-old girl named Mary Phagan, whose body was found on the premises of the National Pencil Company. Frank was arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to death for her murder. The trial was the catalyst for a great outburst of antisemitism. Frank was sent to Milledgeville State Penitentiary to await his execution. Governor John M. Slaton, believing there had been a miscarriage of justice, commuted Frank's sentence to life. This enraged a group of men who styled themselves the 'Knights of Mary Phagan.' They drove to the prison,

**Lydia:** Yes. There wasn't one person who would be in the hospital that she wouldn't be at their bedside. There wasn't one young woman of those days that would have a child that she wouldn't be at the bedside with Dr. [Joseph O.] Kinard or Dr. [Oscar H.] Matthews. The two doctors who were delivering all those boys of . . . what would you call it? . . . Alhadeffs . . .

**Patty:** Sephardim?

**Lydia:** *Sepharad*. Their mother was there, or Benveniste, or even the doctors. The doctors would ask for her to be there as a help.

**Patty:** To help translate?

**Lydia:** No, not only to translate . . . just to help the doctor . . . to be there like a midwife.

**Patty:** Sounds like she was really extraordinary. How did she become involved with Leo Frank?

**Lydia:** Just for following and feeling sorry that the young man. The Jewish boy was in jail. When I first came in here, that's the first thing . . . she took me out to Rich's<sup>14</sup> . . . Rich's annex . . . and showed me the place where the [pencil] company<sup>15</sup> was. She told me all that story about Leo Frank, and all that. She was feeling so sorry about that. I don't know whether she knew the family. She knew all the Yiddish ladies from living on Gilmer Street next to the synagogue. She was a very religious person. Until she died it was all kosher<sup>16</sup> . . .

**Patty:** . . . in her home . . .

**Lydia:** . . . in her home, and very religious. She was fasting up to the last year that she lived.

**Patty:** On *Yom Kippur*.

**Lydia:** Although for 10 years she had cancer on the esophagus.

**Patty:** What did she tell you about Leo Frank and about the case?

**Lydia:** She just told me the story about what had happened . . . that the young man was innocent and everybody knew it. In those days they were afraid to talk because he was a Jewish boy.

kidnapped Frank from his cell and drove him to Marietta, Georgia where they lynched him. Many years later, the true murderer was revealed to be Jim Conley, who had lied in the trial, pinning it on Frank instead. Frank was pardoned (although they stopped short of exonerating him) in 1986.

<sup>14</sup> Rich's was a department store retail chain, headquartered in Atlanta that operated in the southern United States. It operated from 1867 until 2005. Many of the former Rich's stores today form the core of Macy's Central, an Atlanta-based division of Macy's, Inc., which formerly operated as Federated Department Stores, Inc.

<sup>15</sup> The National Pencil Company was a Jewish owned manufacturing aggregate founded in 1908. The company's business office and factory were located on South Forsyth Street in Atlanta. Most of the laborers were pre-teen and teenaged children. Leo Frank was a superintendent at the factory who was falsely accused in the murder of 13-year factory worker old Mary Phagan. Frank was kidnapped from jail and lynched in 1915.

<sup>16</sup> Kosher/*Kashrut* is the set of Jewish dietary laws. Food that may be consumed according to *halakhah* (Jewish law) is termed kosher in English. Food that is not in accordance with Jewish law is called '*treif*.' The word 'kosher' has become English vernacular, a colloquialism meaning '*proper*,' '*legitimate*,' '*genuine*,' '*fair*,' or '*acceptable*.' Kosher can also be used to describe ritual objects that are made in accordance with Jewish law and are fit for ritual use.

**Patty:** Was she ever afraid to be . . .

**Lydia:** . . . no . . .

**Patty:** . . . because she was Jewish?

**Lydia:** No. Not those days.

**Patty:** What did she do exactly to help him?

**Lydia:** Nothing, no, she didn't do nothing to him, but maybe just to visit him or see him or comfort . . . by words or being sympathetic to the young boy. She may have known his family from Gilmer Street.

**Patty:** The wife's family?

**Lydia:** No, Frank's family.

**Patty:** His family was here also?

**Lydia:** Yes, Leo Frank's family . . .

**Patty:** . . . lived here . . .

**Lydia:** . . . she may have known the family. I couldn't tell you. In those days . . . she told me once when she first came in and lived . . . took a room with her two little boys in one Jewish family. She didn't know Yiddish. All she was speaking was Greek and a little broken English. The lady wouldn't believe that she was Jewish. She opened her trunk and took out the *mezuzah*<sup>17</sup> that her mother had put in there with some Jewish religious books or something. When she showed it to them, they asked her where she was from. She told them, "*Ben mizraim.*"<sup>18</sup> Then she called the lady . . . Mrs. Cohen . . . [whose house] she lived in . . . called all the neighbors around [Yiddish phrase: unintelligible: 19:30] in Yiddish that she's Jewish. Ever since then, they took care of her and patted her and took care of the kids. Before, they wouldn't believe that she was Jewish because she didn't know Yiddish.

**Patty:** . . . speak Yiddish . . .

**Lydia:** All the Jewish people were Yiddish here. They couldn't imagine that there was someone who was Jewish and couldn't speak Yiddish.

**Patty:** I understand that. That language has been very important.

**Lydia:** Definitely, definitely.

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<sup>17</sup> A *mezuzah* (Hebrew for 'doorpost') is a parchment scroll often contained in a decorative case which is fixed on the right side of doorpost of a home. The parchment scroll made by a scribe contains the handwritten text of the first two paragraphs of the *Shema*.

<sup>18</sup> "*Mizraim*" means 'Egypt' in Hebrew.

**Patty:** I guess that may have been one reason why the reformed Jews were not involved, because they probably didn't speak Yiddish.

**Lydia:** That's right.

**Patty:** They were all either English . . . I don't know how far removed from German-speaking . . .

**Lydia:** . . . she was studying . . . she had a lady coming home teaching her how to read and speak English. She was a very strong-willed person. She was a wonderful person.

**Patty:** Does your husband have any . . . were there any stories about her that he liked to tell you about? Things that she did, or that really made her very unusual?

**Lydia:** Mostly for being very involved with the community. There were only very few people . . . there were about 30 or 40 women or people around. One time, she had nine people for *minyan*<sup>19</sup> for *Rosh Ha-Shanah*. She went out in the street to walk around and see if she could find one of the Yiddish boys in the neighborhood to call him for *minyan*. All of the sudden she saw two strangers walking on Gilmer Street. She asked them who they were. They find out that they were some boys who had come in from Montgomery [Alabama] looking for some others bachelors that they knew were in Atlanta that they wanted . . . to gather. She called them, "Come on in and you'll be a *minyan*." That's what held them to have *minyan* in the house. But for two or three years before. . . after that, when those boys got married . . . they were renting a room at the [Jewish Educational] Alliance<sup>20</sup> on Capitol Avenue and they were borrowing a *Sefer Torah* from the AA [Ahavath Achim] next door to have services.

**Patty:** At her house?

**Lydia:** Before it was in her house . . . for three years. After . . . when those young boys got married . . . there were about 10 to 12 of them in Atlanta . . . they were borrowing a *Sefer Torah* from the AA and they were renting a room at the Alliance on Capitol Avenue. They were celebrating *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur* there for many years, before they built the *shul*, Or

<sup>19</sup> A *minyan* refers to the quorum of 10 Jewish adults required for certain religious obligation. According to many non-Orthodox streams of Judaism adult females count in the *minyan*.

<sup>20</sup> The Jewish Educational Alliance (JEA) operated from 1910 to 1948 on the site where the Atlanta Fulton County Stadium was located. The JEA was once the hub of Jewish life in Atlanta. Families congregated there for social, educational, sports and cultural programs. The JEA ran camps and held classes to help some new residents learn to read and write English. For newcomers, it became a refuge, with programs to help them acclimate to a new home. The JEA stayed at that site until the late 1940's, when it evolved into the Atlanta Jewish Community Center and moved to Peachtree Street. It stayed there until 1998, when the building was sold and the center moved to Dunwoody. In 2000, it was renamed the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta.

VeShalom<sup>21</sup> synagogue, on Central Avenue.

**Patty:** She really helped them along.

**Lydia:** When she left in 1919 to go to Cairo and visit her family, that's when the synagogue was built . . . they had rented on Central Avenue . . . in 1919.

**Patty:** By 1919 her husband already had his business going . . . the restaurant business in Atlanta.

**Lydia:** He had a business right ever since they came in 1905 or 1906. He was a man . . . he was well-to-do then. He had a restaurant and a kind of vaudeville at the Arcade. They had billiards . . . where the Chamber of Commerce building is in Five Points . . . that's where he had his billiard room. When they came back from Cairo after their visit in 1921, he opened the same type of business on Luckie Street. That's when he died. He died in 1923.

**Patty:** Tell me about your husband.

**Lydia:** He was the most wonderful person. He really was,

**Patty:** Was he in the family business?

**Lydia:** No, when his father died he took over the business. He was . . . the father was in partnership with Mr. [Sam] Papouchado . . . Becky Taranto's daddy. My husband was nothing but a bachelor. He was very happy to be going around and having a little business. He was 35 when he finally got married.

**Patty:** He was a bachelor?

**Lydia:** Yes, he was a bachelor. He always said that unless I had come in, he would have never married.

**Patty:** How old were you when you got married?

**Lydia:** Twenty-five. We lived together with his mother for 40 years. I had his mother in the house for 40 years. They closed the business and [Leo] opened a liquor store. He had a liquor store. He had one of the first licenses in the city of Atlanta in 1937. Unfortunately, he died in 1959.

**Patty:** Was he very active in the community, also?

**Lydia:** No, he wasn't very active. He was active in the beginning when they first built that *shul* in here . . . when they transferred from Central Avenue to Highland Avenue. But he wasn't. I was active in the community but not him. I was president, but I have to mention in here that if . . . I

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<sup>21</sup> Or VeShalom was established by refugees of the Ottoman Empire, namely from Turkey and the Isle of Rhodes. The congregation began in 1920 and was based at Central and Woodward Avenues until 1948 when it moved to a larger building on North Highland Road. The current building for OrVeshalom is on North Druid Hills Road.

stayed behind . . . is with the help of the National Council of Jewish Women<sup>22</sup> with whom I was a member for many years, because I stayed. I came in for the World's Fair.

**Patty:** As a visitor?

**Lydia:** As a visitor.

**Patty:** That's how you came to Atlanta?

**Lydia:** I came to Atlanta. I was in New York for two weeks and he came to New York to meet us for the World's Fair. Then we came down to Atlanta to visit his mother. The [World War II] broke, so, I had to stay behind. I had to extend my permit . . . my visa . . . for three more months. When I decided to get married, I couldn't stay. I had to get married and I had to go out of the country and be called in by a husband. I didn't want to get married until I was sure that I could stay. The National Council of Jewish Women . . . Miss Phillips [sp] was in charge . . . she made arrangements for me to go to Cuba and to send all my papers to Cuba. About two months later they called me and they said my papers were ready. All I had to do was go for a visa. I got married in a hurry and went to Cuba. Three days later I came back . . . called in by an American husband. The National Council of Jewish Women had a meeting at the home of . . . the Phipps Plaza<sup>23</sup> is where it . . .

**Patty:** . . . Alexander . . .

**Lydia:** . . . Alexanders. Mr. [Henry Aaron Sr.] Alexander's home. I wasn't married yet, but I was taken there to the meeting. They had a raffle and I bought a ticket. I'd be honest to say now that it was the last dollar I had in my pocketbook until they sent me money from home, because I stayed behind. I didn't have enough money with me. I felt embarrassed. I bought a ticket for \$1. A week before I got married, they called me one night at 10 o'clock . . . National Council of Jewish Women, "Miss Sarda, you're lucky. You won the table cloth, the prize. Would you like to sell it?" I said, "Why?" "Somebody in here is offering you \$100. Would you like to sell it?" I said, "No, I haven't seen it yet. I'd like to see it first. Maybe that will help me to have it . . . seeing that I'm getting married next week." I went to see it and I told Miss Phillips, "No, I'll keep it." So, they took it back and they engraved my initials on it. I still have that table cloth and used it always in good *simchas*<sup>24</sup> . . . my daughter's wedding, my son's *bar mitzvah*,<sup>25</sup> my son's wedding parties. I hope

<sup>22</sup> The National Council of Jewish Women is an organization of volunteers and advocates who turn progressive ideals into advocacy and philanthropy inspired by Jewish values. They strive to improve the quality of life for women, children and families.

<sup>23</sup> Phipps Plaza is an upscale shopping mall on Peachtree Road in Atlanta's Buckhead neighborhood. In 1969, Phipps Plaza opened as the first multi-level mall in Atlanta.

<sup>24</sup> Hebrew word with several meanings: literally, it means 'gladness' or 'joy.' It is often used as a noun meaning

now . . . I have my granddaughter getting married. I'll use it for her.

**Patty:** Isn't that wonderful? It's always brought you good luck.

**Lydia:** That's right. I still have it!

**Patty:** Such a wonderful story.

**Lydia:** It was given to National Council [of Jewish Women] by Franklin in Washington D. C. It was Franklin Department Store, or something. I still have it in the box.

**Patty:** That's a wonderful story.

**Lydia:** They took it back and they embroidered my initials on it . . . a damask table cloth in silk. Somebody offered me \$100 for it then . . . the table cloth was valued more than that. I still have it. That's something.

**Patty:** You did not have a typical Sephardic wedding when you got married?

**Lydia:** Sephardic wedding? I certainly did, but I got married at the AA . . . at the big *shul* on Washington Street with Rabbi [Joseph] Cohen<sup>26</sup> and Rabbi [Harry] Epstein<sup>27</sup> because my husband didn't have any Sephardic education. He had an Ashkenazi<sup>28</sup> education because the *shul* was next to their house on Gilmer Street and there was no Sephardics. My mother-in-law, Rebecca Amiel, being so religious, sent both of her children to the AA. It was Rabbi [Aaron A.] Jacobs<sup>29</sup> who was, I think she told me . . . he was the *chazzan*<sup>30</sup> then . . . who educated them. Even my son was *bar mitzvahed* and educated at the AA.

**Patty:** How come?

**Lydia:** Or VeShalom was on Central Avenue. We lived in here in north side. I couldn't commute

'festive occasion.'

<sup>25</sup> Hebrew for 'son of commandment.' A rite of passage for Jewish boys aged 13 years and one day. At that time, a Jewish boy is considered a responsible adult for most religious purposes. He is now duty bound to keep the commandments, he puts on *tefillin*, and may be counted to the *minyan* quorum for public worship. He celebrates the *bar mitzvah* by being called up to the reading of the *Torah* in the synagogue, usually on the next available Sabbath after his Hebrew birthday.

<sup>26</sup> Rabbi Joseph I. Cohen (1896-1985) was born in Constantinople (Istanbul), Turkey. He was trained for the rabbinate in Turkey and accepted his first pulpit in Havana, Cuba in 1920. In 1934 he moved to Atlanta where he was installed as the rabbi of Congregation Or VeShalom, a Sephardic congregation. Rabbi Cohen officially retired in 1969, but remained active at both the synagogue and in the community until his death in 1985.

<sup>27</sup> Rabbi Harry Epstein (1903-2003) served as rabbi of Ahavath Achim from 1928 to 1982, when he became rabbi emeritus.

<sup>28</sup> Ashkenazi is an ethnic division of Jews which formed in the Holy Roman Empire in the early 1000's. They established communities in Central and Eastern Europe.

<sup>29</sup> Aaron A. Jacobs was the *ba'al tefillah/chazzan* of Ahavath Achim in the early 1900's. He was also the *cheder* [Hebrew school] teacher, who had a school room at the corner of Butler and Gilmer Streets. He helped prepare young Jewish boys for their *bar mitzvah*. Girls were not educated in Hebrew.

<sup>30</sup> The *chazzan* (cantor) is the official in charge of music or chants and leads liturgical prayer and chanting in the synagogue.

to take him down there. Ralph was going at the AA ever since he was in kindergarten on Tenth Street. Then he went to [study] Hebrew there. He was *bar mitzvahed* on Washington Street. I got married there. I had a Sephardic wedding with a *tallit*.<sup>31</sup> That's the main thing, the difference between the Sephardic wedding and the Ashkenazi wedding . . . it's to have the *tallit* put on the head of the bride and groom, generally, the parents' *tallit*. Rabbi Epstein married us. He married also . . . the same thing at the AA . . . my daughter got married by Rabbi Epstein and Rabbi Cohen at the AA on north side.

**Patty:** How did you become involved with Or VeShalom? Did you belong to both places?

**Lydia:** Yes, I belong both places, Or VeShalom and AA, always. My husband had his seats always at the AA. His plaque<sup>32</sup> is in both synagogues. Then when Or VeShalom came to Highland Avenue and I had a little bit more time, I got involved with Or VeShalom. I was president for nine years . . . six years president and eight years . . . I don't know how many . . . and vice-president. Then I quit when my son was *bar mitzvahed*, because I was busy. Then, unfortunately, my husband passed away and I started working. That was it. I'm active now with Or VeShalom, but not like I used to be.

**Patty:** You were president of the Sisterhood?<sup>33</sup>

**Lydia:** Yes, president for six years or nine years.

**Patty:** So you knew all the women?

**Lydia:** I was member of the National Council [of Jewish Women] for so many years until I started working after my husband died. I was very active with the refugees when the National Council had [unintelligible; 35:00] all those ladies. Now I'm a little retired lady.

**Patty:** Looks like you stay pretty busy. Let's just back track a little bit. The war broke out and you had to stay in Atlanta. What were you doing? Who did you stay with?

**Lydia:** I stayed with my husband's mother.

**Patty:** Because she was your relative?

**Lydia:** Yes. My husband's mother was my grandmother's sister which I had met once when I was a little girl when they came to Cairo in 1919. I didn't know them, but being that I was in town I had

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<sup>31</sup> A prayer shawl fringed at each of the four corners in accordance with biblical law. The wearing of *tallit* at worship is obligatory only for married men, but it is customarily worn also by males of *bar mitzvah* age and older.

<sup>32</sup> In many synagogues it is customary to display plaques in recognition of donors, special groups, memorials, *yahrzeits*, or significant events.

<sup>33</sup> A group of women in a congregation who join together to offer social, cultural, educational, and volunteer service opportunities.

to stay somewhere. I couldn't go nowhere. Where else would it have been better than my grandmother's sister's?

**Patty:** Your husband lived there also?

**Lydia:** Yes.

**Patty:** I guess you got to know each other.

**Lydia:** That's where we got to know each other. It could have been family attraction. You can never tell but . . .

**Patty:** But aside from them, you didn't have any other family. Your family was all where?

**Lydia:** I have no one here. After the war . . . my sister came in 1945 with my mother and my grandmother.

**Patty:** They moved to Atlanta?

**Lydia:** They moved to Atlanta. They first came here. They've been in this house for 48 years.

**Patty:** Their name is Sarda.

**Lydia:** Yes, Mama is Sarda.

**Patty:** How do you spell that?

**Lydia:** S-A-R-D-A. My grandmother was Levy. L-E-V-Y. They're both buried in here . . . the Or VeShalom cemetery. Grandma died at 95 also. They were both in here. My sister was established in New York. She worked for the . . . what do you call it?

<interview pauses, then resumes>

**Patty:** Your sister worked for the United Nations.<sup>34</sup>

**Lydia:** Yes, she worked for the United Nations. [She] got married over there. Her husband was in the stock exchange. After they came down in Atlanta . . . her husband died in here, after he got sick. It was too cold to be up there [unintelligible: 37:45], so we live together here now.

**Patty:** Your sister is here also?

**Lydia:** Yes, she lives with me. When she came to Atlanta she worked for the Fulton County.

**Patty:** What's her name?

**Lydia:** Anita Hemmo. H-E-M-M-O. She went to the doctor today. We both live together now in this little old house for the last 50 years . . . 48 years I've been in this house. There's no one else but

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<sup>34</sup> The United Nations (UN) is an intergovernmental organization established in 1945 to promote international co-operation. The organization was created following the World War II to prevent another such conflict. Its objectives include maintaining international peace and security, promoting human rights, fostering social and economic development, protecting the environment, and providing humanitarian aid in cases of famine, natural disaster, and armed conflict. The headquarters of the United Nations is in New York City.

us two. We have no other family.

**Patty:** You have a son?

**Lydia:** I have a son in here. I have a daughter in New York. My daughter is married in New York. Her husband is a professor in college. She is an assistant to State Attorney in Richmond, Virginia.

**Patty:** I'm sorry . . . she's an assistant state attorney in Richmond, Virginia?

**Lydia:** Yes.

**Patty:** She lives in Virginia now?

**Lydia:** Yes, she lives in Richmond.

**Patty:** She lived in New York for a while?

**Lydia:** No, that's my sister that was in New York. That's my daughter who is in . . .

**Patty:** . . . Richmond . . .

**Lydia:** . . . Virginia.

**Patty:** What's your daughter's name?

**Lydia:** My daughter, Anita Rimler. She's assistant to a State Attorney. My son is here . . . Ralph Amiel in Atlanta . . . Standard Press . . . Ralph Amiel.

**Patty:** Your daughter is in . . .

**Lydia:** . . . Richmond, Virginia.

**Patty:** Your son is Ralph Amiel?

**Lydia:** Ralph Amiel with Standard Press.

**Patty:** That's his business?

**Lydia:** Yes.

**Patty:** He has children?

**Lydia:** He has a daughter, Sharon Lynn [sp] and a son, Leo Amiel, who is named after my husband. Leo Amiel is in college. My daughter is the same thing. She has a son who is studying at Jamestown University [Jamestown, North Dakota] who is becoming a lawyer, and a daughter who is very active in Israel and very . . . she's in Jamestown University . . . JMU . . . James Madison University [Harrisonburg, Virginia]. She's very active in Israel. I guess that's my family.

**Patty:** You're from originally . . .

**Lydia:** . . . Cairo.

**Patty:** You were born in Cairo. Your sister was also born in Cairo?

**Lydia:** Yes.

**Patty:** Your mother was born . . .

**Lydia:** . . . in Cairo. My father was born in Cairo.

**Patty:** What business was he in?

**Lydia:** Banking.

**Patty:** Was he a money lender?

**Lydia:** No, he worked at the National Bank of Egypt. That's where I worked after I came out of college. My sister was working with Shell Oil Company. We were five generations in Cairo.

**Patty:** It sounds like the Jewish community must have been very comfortable.

**Lydia:** Eighty thousand Jewish people in Cairo. Now there's not even a *minyan*. I went there to see some cousins five years ago. That's the last trip. I went for the first time after I came in in 1939, but just to see my family . . . my cousins. Unfortunately, they both passed away in between. I don't believe there were about 30 old ladies in an old *shul* . . . the big *shuls* open every Friday night, hoping that there will be some tourists going in and visiting so that they can make prayers . . . but every Friday night religiously it opens.

**Patty:** That's a sad story.

**Lydia:** It was a beautiful town [and] country, but not anymore.

**Patty:** What was your life like there?

**Lydia:** Life like? I didn't know what it meant to put my fingers in the water unless it was to wash my face. We had a sleep-in maid when we were young. We had the servant who would come in morning, noon, and night . . . all day long from eight o'clock in the morning until eight o'clock at night to serve, clean, shop or cook. You won't believe it. That's one thing that kept the country alive. We were sitting at the table eating dinner. This I could give you my word of honor. I swear to G-d, it happened to me. I was a young girl, maybe 14 or 15 years old, a child. I was eating at the table. G-d forbid if we eat with the same fork fish and meat. Not for kosher, because we didn't keep kosher at home in Cairo. Just because it's not done, the smell or something. I'd ring the bell. Below the chandelier there was a bell to call the servant in the kitchen. I'd ring the bell for the servant to come in and say, "What do you need, lady?" "Please, give me a fork." The forks were in the drawer of the buffet. All I had to do was get up from the table, go down there, and pick it up. I wouldn't get out of the table . . . for the servant to hand me a fork to eat something else after I had tasted fish or what. Now, when I first came in here I had to wash diapers.

**Patty:** How did you do that after never having put your hands in water?

**Lydia:** You learn. The ring that I came in with on my finger was big enough for my little finger . . . see, your hands. What can you say? Thank G-d, I don't complain. I wouldn't go and live anywhere else. I couldn't. I've traveled. I went back to Europe many times until two years ago. I went to visit my uncle in Lausanne [Switzerland]. My uncle and my aunt, both of them died . . . 105 my uncle was. My aunt was 85 only . . . my father's sister's . . . sister and brothers. I still have part of my family in Paris [France], a cousin. That's the only thing left over from my family. One cousin in Paris.

**Patty:** This is from your side of the family?

**Lydia:** My side, Sarda. My side of family. My father's side . . . family . . . in Lausanne, Switzerland, and in Paris.

**Patty:** Let me go back a little bit to life in Egypt. These were Egyptian people who worked in your house or were they . . .

**Lydia:** . . . Arabs . . . just like years ago they used to have. They were not slaves. They were not considered slaves but they were Arabs.

**Patty:** They were paid servants.

**Lydia:** Paid servants, yes.

**Patty:** How come your family didn't keep kosher?

**Lydia:** Very few of the Greeks . . . of the Spanish . . . of the real Spaniards of way back that had gone away and went to Greece or to Turkey . . . could not keep kosher. There was none. There were no kosher foods in there. There was nothing, because they were received from Spain. They couldn't find nothing. They lived in there. When they came back to Cairo, there were none. But there was kosher . . . amongst us we were called European Jews. The Oriental Jews, or the Yiddish people, when they came to Cairo, they had their butcher. They started having their kosher meats. You had to go to the Jewish quarter to get it.

**Lydia:** [In Cairo] my grandfather and grandmother used to walk at least one hour . . . an hour or an hour and a half at least . . . *Yom Kippur* . . . to go to the synagogue, the Sephardic synagogue where there was in the Jewish quarter. When they come back, they come back by horse and buggy. They walked until . . . my grandfather even was blind . . . he was 85 years old. He would walk every [*Yom*] *Kippur* to go to the synagogue. Two or three nights before, it was something. We had to have the *shochet*<sup>35</sup> coming home. I was a little girl. I'll never forget it, even until I

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<sup>35</sup> A *shochet* is an adult male Jew who is trained and accredited by a rabbinic authority in the Jewish dietary laws.

came back. He used to come home and kill the chicken for the holidays. It was . . . make the *kappara*. You call it in [Hebrew] ‘*kapparat*’<sup>36</sup> . . . in the name of every member of the family. They had to kill that. The servants will clean the chicken, because it was killed right in the kitchen, in a big pan . . . like for making. This little old lady here was very religious . . . my grandmother's mother-in-law. For Passover,<sup>37</sup> they had to make the pots and pans . . . we didn't have any special for the whole year, but they had to make them kosher . . . burn something . . . coal or something and put them in there and make them kosher for the Passover. We used to keep religion, but we couldn't buy any kosher meats. That was it.

**Patty:** You ate non-kosher meat.

**Lydia:** Yes, but you see the Arab was . . . we were very close with the Arabs. The Arab was like kosher, because the Arab wouldn't eat any *treif* meat.<sup>38</sup> They wouldn't eat ham or pork, so we never ate that. We used to eat lamb mostly, and veal. That's what the Arab eats . . . used to eat in Cairo. I couldn't tell you what they are doing now. We never had to have . . . except for *Yom Kippur* . . . the man used to come home and have to kill one hen or a pullet [young chicken] for a child . . . or a hen or a rooster for a man. . . in the name of every member of the family.

**Patty:** Where did that come from?

**Lydia:** What do you mean where did that come from?

**Patty:** Where they had to kill one for every member of the family.

**Lydia:** Yes, for grandpa, grandma, any child, any member of the family who lived in the house. They used to go and buy them live and bring them in the house. The *shochet* had to come in a day before or two days before *Yom Kippur* and kill them. As a matter of fact, they had to kill them and take a little bit of that blood and put it on your forehead.

**Patty:** Why is that?

**Lydia:** So that you live like a *kappara*. You kill that chicken or that pullet for you to live, and

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Specifically, a *shochet* slaughters animals in a way prescribed by Jewish dietary laws to avoid pain to the animal as much as possible, and to safeguard the health of the consumer.

<sup>36</sup> *Kapparat* (Hebrew) is a Jewish ritual practice by some Jews on the eve of *Yom Kippur*. The person swings a live chicken, or a bundle of coins, over one's head three times, symbolically transferring one's sins to the chicken or coins. The chicken is then slaughtered and donated to the poor for consumption at the pre-fast meal.

<sup>37</sup> Hebrew: *Pesach*. The celebration 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.

<sup>38</sup> Food that is not in accordance with Jewish law such as pork, or foods that are not prepared according to kosher.

celebrate the New Year.

**Patty:** It's like a custom.

**Lydia:** A custom, yes, a Sephardic custom. I think so, I don't know.

**Patty:** How unusual. Did your family keep Friday nights?

**Lydia:** Yes. I still do it. I don't sew Saturday . . . sewing or cooking or anything on Saturday, no. The only thing was, they were keeping it a tradition . . . the Jewish tradition . . . but no kosher meats. That's the only thing, because we didn't eat any ham or pork.

**Patty:** You did when you moved to Atlanta, you kept kosher?

**Lydia:** Yes, when I came in here I kept kosher for my mother-in-law's sake, continually. As a matter of fact . . . I had some place around me, anyway. Yes, I used to buy from Mr. [Aaron] Hoffman [Hoffman & Miller].

<interview pauses, then resumes>

**Patty:** Tell me about what your schooling was like in Egypt. What kind of schools did you go to?

**Lydia:** School? We were raised by the nuns, Bon Pasteur. It's the best education you can have. It's a French education. French is our language. We still speak French between my sister at home.

**Patty:** Is that right?

**Lydia:** Yes, that's our language. We speak French.

**Patty:** Did you speak Ladino?<sup>39</sup>

**Lydia:** No, we never spoke Spanish. I learned Spanish when I came to Atlanta with all these ladies in here. My mother-in-law the same thing. She didn't know Spanish. She learned from the ladies in here. We were Europeans . . . French. We didn't go to Turkey. All these other people went to Turkey and then went to Rhodes, because it was part of Turkey . . . the island. All of our background, and the Amiel's, too, went to Greece . . . from Greece to Cairo. It was French in Cairo. It was French. The nuns had the best education. It happened that my mother went to the same school. My aunts, my daddy's sisters went to the same school, educated by the nuns, Bon Pasteur [Ecole du Bon Pasteur—Cairo, Egypt].

**Patty:** Was there a Rothschild School . . . one of those Alliance schools?

**Lydia:** There was the Jewish Alliance [school].<sup>40</sup> It wasn't the cream of the crop, unfortunately.

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<sup>39</sup> Also known as 'Judeo-Spanish,' Ladino is a romance language derived from Old Spanish originally spoken in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire (the Balkans, Turkey, the Middle East, and North Africa) as well as in France, Italy, the Netherlands, Morocco, and the United Kingdom. Today, Ladino is spoken mainly by Sephardic minorities in more than 30 countries.

It was mostly for the Jewish people. In Egypt mainly I would say, or in Europe, it is class that counts. Do you understand what I mean? It's not if you are rich. It's not the money. It's the old society that counted. Most of the . . . I wouldn't say aristocratic, but the better-educated people would go to the *lycée Française* [French schools], or to the nuns. There were two nuns' schools: Bon Pasteur and Mère something else. Our family was educated with the Bon Pasteur. I still have pictures of when we went to school in there. From there, we graduated . . . after you have your [unintelligible: 55:15] . . .

**Patty:** What did you do about your religious education? How did you get a religious education?

**Lydia:** At home. No religious education.

**Patty:** Who taught you to read Hebrew?

**Lydia:** No, that's what I say. Now that I'm here . . . I say that's my anguish. I don't know what the real word would be . . . not to be able to read Hebrew.

**Patty:** You don't read Hebrew?

**Lydia:** Never had any Hebrew. We used to go to synagogue. The men used to pray and our books come in French. Believe it or not, my grandfather, his books were the Spanish . . . he had Italian and Hebrew. When he was an old man and he was blind, he couldn't go to *shul* anymore . . . the synagogue. I used to read . . . during services you used to see about 4:00 . . . come on read to me this part of the services. I used to read it to him in Italian for him to follow.

**Patty:** In my mind, when I'm talking about Sephardic people, one of the most important things about the Sephardic services is conducted in Spanish.

**Lydia:** No. In here?

**Patty:** In Cairo. It wasn't?

**Lydia:** No, ma'am. It was French. The books were in French and Hebrew.

**Patty:** How interesting, because it was really . . .

**Lydia:** . . . we had the Spanish books from Spain from way back, and then it was from Italy . . . Italian because my grandfather . . . I told you that her mother came from Venice, Italy. She was the daughter of Baron de Trevers in Italy, in Venice. She had her books in Italian. These were the books that my grandfather had. It was his grandmother's books. He would make me read it to him

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<sup>40</sup> Abraham-Salomon Rothschild, together with a Paris-based international Jewish organization founded in 1860. Together with Abraham-Salomon Rothschild, it established over 100 schools for Jewish children across the Middle East. They still have schools in Israel today.

at every time of the services when it was *minhah*.<sup>41</sup> Maybe the services when it was the *Kol Nidre*<sup>42</sup> or something like that, to make me read him the part.

**Patty:** Let me ask you. If the language wasn't there . . .

**Lydia:** . . . Hebrew was there. They knew Hebrew.

**Patty:** Yes, but what made you feel Sephardic. What did you think about it?

**Lydia:** That I'm Sephardic goes with tradition. I belong to the Sephardic synagogue . . . my grandfather . . . I still have my father's *tallit*<sup>43</sup> from his *bar mitzvah*. Over there the boys had to have a rabbi come home to educate them for the *bar mitzvah*. It wasn't that they were going to a Hebrew school. They had the rabbi coming in to educate them.

**Patty:** Like a tutor?

**Lydia:** Like a tutor, yes, to educate them. At the Jewish quarter . . . maybe that was about 10 miles away . . . from the downtown where everybody was living . . . maybe they were going to Hebrew or something when the Yiddish people came, but not when the Sephardics were there.

**Patty:** Did you know any of the *romanceros* . . .<sup>44</sup> the Spanish songs, the Spanish hymns or anything like that?

**Lydia:** No.

**Patty:** You are really assimilated Sephardim.

**Lydia:** That's right.

**Patty:** You were completely assimilated into European . . .

**Lydia:** . . . not assimilated. We were traditional Sephardic. I had eight uncles and aunts, as I showed you on my father's side . . . my father . . . were eight . . . five brothers and three sisters . . . eight of them, with children in there. My mother's side . . . my grandfather had one brother with five children married and their cousins . . . we were all the same thing. The girls . . . nothing but the family . . . we knew by going to the synagogue, or whatever it was. The men, that's what counted, the boys.

**Patty:** They were important.

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<sup>41</sup> The afternoon prayer service, one of the three daily services of the Jewish liturgy.

<sup>42</sup> *Kol Nidre* is an Aramaic declaration recited in the synagogue before the beginning of the evening service on every *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement.

<sup>43</sup> A prayer shawl fringed at each of the four corners in accordance with biblical law. The wearing of *tallit* at worship is obligatory only for married men, but it is customarily worn also by males of *bar mitzvah* age and older.

<sup>44</sup> Originally, a *romancero* was a Spanish ballad based on narrative poems written in lines of sixteen syllables. The form was forgotten by the sixteenth century. However, the Sephardim have preserved this form by combining it with their unique Judaic heritage and even came to be included in the Sephardic liturgy.

**Lydia:** They were supposed to be educated, and so on. We went to Catholic school by nuns for 10 or 12 years. They used to go to church. They were not forcing us to go to church. They were not making any praise or anything. Whenever the other ones would go to church, we used to be out of school.

**Patty:** Were you ever allowed to be friends with non-Jewish girls or non-Jewish boys?

**Lydia:** Yes. In the neighborhood over there . . . we didn't live in the ghetto . . . we didn't live in that surrounding. We had friends.

**Patty:** Do you think of this as a matter of social class?

**Lydia:** I think so. Although my mother's friends were old ladies that I know, they were all Jewish . . . she had a few Greek friends. We had Greek friends and Orthodox,<sup>45</sup> and so on. Mostly, once a month . . . every second Thursday of the month . . . was my mother's visiting day. Each one of them had one day of the month. That's how they went visiting. All her friends would come in and you had the servant. They were serving coffee. You had cakes and this and that. Maybe the first Wednesday was someone else. All the Amiels, like my father-in-law, had about seven or eight brothers and sisters. They were friends with my mother . . . although they were strangers . . . but yet they were Greek, coming in from Greece and knowing and related and so on. They were friends. They were coming in. They had a drink and they had a coffee. They were Jewish ladies. All the children married with Greeks. Never had an intermarriage. All married at the synagogue, very religious. That was it . . . assimilation, because you knew your background was Jewish. I'll be honest with you. I had a girl working with me at the bank . . . a Jewish girl, Yiddish girl . . .

**Patty:** . . . you mean Ashkenazi?

**Lydia:** . . . Ashkenazi, Yiddish, Ashkenazi. Do you want me to say it?

**Patty:** Go ahead.

**Lydia:** She married a Jewish boy, but local. I would say . . . Egyptians, not Greek, not European, not Italian, Greek, or French. Maybe from the first one who had come in. They called them . . . we used to call them . . . local . . .

**Patty:** . . . 'Oriental' . . .

**Lydia:** . . . 'Oriental.' Do you know that his mother sat *shiva*<sup>46</sup> because he married a Yiddish girl

<sup>45</sup> Orthodox Judaism is a traditional branch of Judaism that strictly follows the Written *Torah* and the Oral Law concerning prayer, dress, food, sex, family relations, social behavior, the Sabbath day, holidays and more.

<sup>46</sup> *Shiva*, literally "seven," is the week-long mourning period in Judaism for first-degree relatives: father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister and spouse. The ritual is referred to as "sitting *shiva*." Immediately after burial, first-degree

. . . an Ashkenazi girl. I swear to G-d . . . because it was a disgrace. They wouldn't consider them.

**Patty:** Because the Ashkenazi were considered of a lower social class?

**Lydia:** That's right. That's how the Europeans are. In Europe, that's how it was . . . Russian, the Germans was just because it was French and Germany nationality that [would] clash. There were always wars between France and Germany, but talking of Polish or Russian . . .

**Patty:** . . . they were not acceptable.

**Lydia:** It was a disgrace. It was Jewish quarter.

**Patty:** It's been wonderful talking with you. We've been talking for over an hour and fifteen minutes.

**Lydia:** No kidding? I'm sorry I kept you that long.

**Patty:** No, you're not . . . don't be sorry at all. I really enjoyed it. One of the things that happens the more we talk the more that comes to mind. I find that after talking for a while . . . we don't want to get too tired.

**Lydia:** No, that's not what I mean. You have it closed, don't you?

**Patty:** Go ahead.

**Lydia:** No, I was going to tell you . . . you talked about the school . . . nuns. I had some pictures. That's was a good time . . . of my nuns and my school.

**Patty:** Maybe we can get together again.

**Lydia:** You see what the family was, in those days, in 1900 maybe or . . .

**Patty:** . . . how many people are in that picture?

**Lydia:** How many would there be in here?

**Patty:** No, it looks like there are at least 60 or 70.

**Lydia:** At least. Two . . . four . . . about six or seven. You see some children in there and that was way before my mother was married.

**Patty:** Must have been a wonderful life.

**Lydia:** Yes, they were getting together, and there were never intermarriages. It was all very close family. Whenever we had Passover at home, it was all my uncles . . . when I come to my grandfather and grandma, my uncles and aunts, the cousins . . . everybody would come in. We

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relatives assume the status of "mourner." This state lasts for seven days, during which the family members traditionally gather in one home and receive visitors. At the funeral, mourners traditional rend an outer garment, a ritual known as '*kerish*.' This garment is worn throughout *shiva*. In this case Lydia means that marrying an Ashkenazi Jew was so tragic that it was paramount to the girl being dead from her family.

would put tables and tables in there. We must have been at least every year 20 or 25 people at the table.

**Patty:** Really? That's wonderful.

**Lydia:** I told you it took a trip especially to see my cousins in there. They both passed away. The third one, the other sister was in Belgium, in the home.

**Patty:** Did any of your family move to Israel?

**Lydia:** Yes, part of my grandmother's side . . . my mother's cousins. I still have them in there. One, her niece, her brother's daughter died. She was over 100, also. The children are still there. There were eight children. They are all there. G-d bless them. They keep the same tradition. I received a letter lately. The daughter is my age. All her brothers have their children married and grandchildren. She is the only aunt . . . the oldest of the family. Every year she says for Passover this year, each son, each brother has one night in his house. His children, grandchildren and the aunt went with them. She has eight of them. Once a year they have a reunion of all the eight brothers and sisters with all their children and grandchildren. She sends me a picture of all of them. There'd be about 40 of them at least, 40 or 50. Each one getting married, and they keep contact.

**Patty:** That's wonderful. We're going to need to stop now.

**Lydia:** Let me tell you . . . one of the boys . . . I went to see him in New York when he came . . . he was in the Six-Day War.<sup>47</sup> He was a lieutenant in his command. They went out to Port Said,<sup>48</sup> and they had won all Port Said. They had won all Egypt and Cairo. They had taken all parts of it. He wanted to be sure that all his boys were out. He took a tank and he went out to see that all the boys in Port Said had gone out before they were withdrawing and going away, because they had thrown out all the Egyptians out of there. One kid from a roof threw a hand grenade on his tank . . . his eye, it hit his head. He said he found his eye in his hand. He put it up and put it back in there. He couldn't see anymore. He was blind. He was such a hero. He was a hero in that battle. The government sent him to New York to a special hospital to see whether they could do anything for him. They couldn't. They operated on him. They couldn't do nothing. Twenty-three year old boy.

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<sup>47</sup> The Six-Day War was fought between June 5 and 10, 1967 by Israel and the neighboring states of Egypt (known at the time as the United Arab Republic), Jordan, and Syria. Relations between Israel and its neighbors had never fully normalized following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, and in the period leading up to June 1967 tensions became heightened. As a result, Israel launched a series of preemptive airstrikes against Egyptian airfields on June 5 following the mobilization of Egyptian forces along the Israeli border in the Sinai Peninsula. The outcome was swift and decisive. Israel took control of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. The Sinai was returned but the other territories were incorporated into Israel.

<sup>48</sup> Port Said is an Egyptian port on the Mediterranean Sea.

They gave him an honor dinner. I went especially to New York to see him, because he was a son of a cousin. He came with his father. They gave him a seeing [eye] dog. They gave him . . . I don't know . . . the Israeli government gave him a big dinner and medals and someone in New York . . . what they did to him. When he went back to Israel, he got married. It didn't last too long . . . about five or six years later . . . he lives with his father now. He's still blind. That's terrible.

**Patty:** He was very brave.

**Lydia:** That's the only casualty. Thank G-d and knock on wood, that's the only casualty we had in about . . . at least 50 or 75 in the family.

**Patty:** We're going to need to stop. Thank you very much.

<End Tape 1>

**INTERVIEW ENDS**