

THE WILLIAM BREMAN JEWISH HERITAGE MUSEUM
ESTHER AND HERBERT TAYLOR JEWISH ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
SAVANNAH JEWISH ARCHIVES

MEMORIST: BESS CENTER
INTERVIEWER: GAIL ROBINSON
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Gail: This is Gail Robinson. I'm at the home of Bess Center and I'm interviewing her for the oral history of people from Savannah. I wanted to get Bess to talk a little bit about her early history first, what it was like growing up in Savannah and how her family got to Savannah. So, can you just tell me a little bit about your parents and how they happened to come to Savannah.

Bess: My father came from Moscow (born in Moscow). He came over in about 1905, 1906. He was on this ship that landed in Savannah and Mr. Portman, who used to meet the ships (I suppose to welcome the immigrants that were coming in from overseas), met Poppa and seemed to take a liking. And Poppa stayed in Savannah and later married my mother, who was related to the Mirskys. Mr. Louis Mirsky, who she was living with then, was her uncle. So they got married in about 1911. I was born in 1912, and from that time on I lived in Savannah. At that time there was the Oglethorpe Sanitarium Hospital which is no longer in existence, and that is where I was born. Dr. Waring was the doctor. He was not an obstetrician, but in those days they did everything as everybody well knows. As time went on, I grew up in Savannah and went to Hebrew School.

Gail: Were you the oldest?

Bess: I was the oldest of four children and went to Barnard Street School first. It was an elementary school. It is now a SCAD¹ building. And then I went to Henry Street School, which is also a SCAD building.

Gail: Was the Henry Street School a high school?

Bess: No, it was an elementary school. I can remember the principal, Mrs. Strong, she was there. We had lunch out in the yard. I can remember that real well. I remember Albert Tenenbaum had just come from Europe, and they put him in our class. He was sitting right in front of me. He was quite a large boy at that time. He was so smart - by the end of the day I think they promoted him and sent him on to high school. I'll never forget it. And then from there I went to Chatham Junior High, and from Chatham Junior High to Savannah High. It think this is important - when I was in Savannah High, there were two sisters by the name of Furst that were teachers. One taught history and the other taught English. I remember not coming to school for a certain reason because it was a Jewish holiday, and I didn't come, and she was upset over the fact that I had missed a test or something, and she said to me, "Well, why can't you push your holidays up to Saturday or Sunday?" And I was so upset I started to cry. I was very naive and shy and I wouldn't speak up to anything, but I'll never forget that woman as long as I live. Their names were Furst.

Gail: Did you meet up with other kinds of prejudice like that? No, that was the first time. Were you friendly with people who were not only Jewish, but Christians as well?

Bess: Yes, Helen Schwartz Harris - we went to high school together. We used to walk home. There were a lot of girls that since have moved away from Savannah. You know, nobody took you to school or brought you back. You either walked or took the street car, and we would walk all the way from where I lived to Savannah High which was on Bull and Oglethorpe. Of course, we lived on Habersham and Gwinnett, and also on East Bolton, and prior to that my father had a store on West Broad Street.

¹ Savannah College of Art and Design. College located in downtown Savannah, founded in 1978 by Richard G. Rowan, Paula Wallace, May L. Poetter and Paul E. Poetter to provide college degree programs not previously available in southeast Georgia and to create a specialized professional art college.

Gail: What kind of store?

Bess: It was a regular department store - a dry goods store. And from there I went to Hebrew School.

Gail: Every day?

Bess: Yes, every day, or four or five days a week. I don't know that anybody remembers this, but I think he was the rabbi there - his name was Dr. Palatz. I can never forget him because he was a very large man and he never induced the children to like him. All he did was walk around with his hands behind his back and his glasses lowered like that, and give you a look that scared the living daylights out of you. Those were the Hebrew School days. This teacher I had was named Sarah Rotkow, and I'm sure a lot of people in Savannah remember Sarah Rotkow. She taught Hebrew School and she later married a Mr. Bonchek, who was a Hebrew School teacher when my child was going to Hebrew School. Well, anyway, she had this bell on her desk, which I can never forget. She didn't control the class, so the only thing I ever remember was "chai yeled" and "chai yeldor" and a few other words. We didn't learn to read or anything. She would hit her bell and say, "Outside for you." Every other minute, it was, "Outside for you." At the end of the class there wasn't a soul left in that class because we were all outside for misbehaving. So that was the extent of my Hebrew lessons. Today it's such a wonderful thing what they are doing for the children that I am really envious of how those kids are learning - the Rambam School² and the Temple³ and the Agudath Achim⁴. It's wonderful. The knowledge that those children are getting is absolutely fantast your mother and myself and two or three other ladies that I had

² The private Jewish Day School associated with Bnai Brith Jacob – the orthodox synagogue of Savannah. They educate the orthodox Jewish youth in preschool through eighth grade.

³ Congregation Mickve Israel is often referred to as The Temple. It is the oldest congregation in the United States. Sephardic immigrants from London who arrived in the new colony in 1733 originally organized it. The original synagogue was granted a charter by General James Edward Oglethorpe, who established the colony of Georgia for England in 1732. In the late nineteenth century it began to shift to Reform Judaism. The current building was consecrated in 1858, The actual synagogue building was built on a plot of land given to the congregation by the city of Savannah. The cemetery was established in 1733 on a plot of land given to the congregation by James Oglethorpe in the name of King George III.

⁴ The conservative synagogue of Savannah. It was established in 1903.

arranged for them to come over to my house and Mrs. Levine came over and she taught us how to read Hebrew.

Gail: Oh, my goodness.

Bess: I can read, but not a lot, but I can follow a service, and I can recognize words.

Gail: When you were growing up in Savannah, the girls were not confirmed or bat mizvahed?

Bess: No, the girls were not confirmed or bat mitzvahed.

Gail: Where did you grow up - which synagogue?

Bess: The B.B. Jacob⁵.

Gail: And now you're a member of the B.B. and the Temple. Can you talk a little bit about the attitude the Reform Temple had toward the B.B.?

Bess: Back in the old, old days, the Reform Temple was a very snobbish place and they just thought they were above the Orthodox or anybody else because they were early comers.

Gail: Were they new immigrants also?

Bess: A lot of them were new immigrants. It wasn't just the early ones, but they just had that attitude toward the Orthodox. The Orthodox were not considered of a higher level as the Reforms were. It was not a healthy attitude, but things have changed considerably from that time until now, and it's a lot more traditional, and it's a lot friendlier, and it's a lot of everything. Some of the older members just would not want to talk to anybody who was not a member, and they're no longer living. And younger people are coming around and it's making it a lot easier and a lot nicer. It's too bad that all the synagogues can't be friendlier, be more bonded. Did you

⁵ B'nai Brith Jacob, often referred to as the BB or BB Jacob, Savannah's Orthodox Synagogue established in 1861, originally located at the intersection of Montgomery and State Streets. It moved to its current location on Abercorn in Midtown in 1962.

hear the man who lectured on “Jews for Jesus”⁶ at the JEA⁷? He was wonderful. He said he felt that Savannah was well bonded. It’s too bad that Savannah can’t be better bonded by having all the synagogues and the rabbis intermingle and intermix. It would be wonderful if they could do that, then they would be bonded. That would be a wonderful step in the right direction.

Gail: I wanted to get back to one thing that you told me when we were having lunch, and that was that you had moved away from Savannah and lived in New York for a while.

Bess: Well, I’ll tell you. First I worked at the JEA, I did a little bit of everything. The JEA at one time had to close down because of lack of funds; they didn’t have any money.

Gail: Do you remember what year that was?

Bess: That was in the 30s - 33 to 34.

Gail: Corresponding with the Depression?

Bess: After the Depression. I can’t remember the man they had that came down to be the director, but at that particular time they were having lectures at the Alliance and there was a lecturer by the name of Fisher that came down to lecture - he was very good. He was supposed to be in Jacksonville at a certain time, so they asked me if I would ride him over. Sol asked one of the Sutker boys (I don’t remember who it was), and we drove him to Jacksonville and we came on back. The Alliance had that type of activity and they also had a lot of basketball games. They were noted for a good basketball team.

Gail: What was your actual job at the JEA?

Bess: I handed out towels, and I answered the phone, and I did a little bit of everything.

⁶ Jews for Jesus is a non-profit Messianic Jewish organization that seeks to proselytize Jews towards the belief that Jesus is the promised Messiah of the Jewish people. Jews for Jesus is not considered a sect of Judaism by any mainstream Jewish authorities. It was established in 1973 by Moishe Rosen.

⁷ JEA Is Savannah, Georgia’s Jewish Community Center. A Jewish community center (JCC) is a general recreational, social, and fraternal organization serving Jewish communities in the United States and Canada, as well as in the former Soviet Union, Latin America, Europe, and Israel. The JEA was once the hub of Jewish life in Savannah. 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.

Gail: This is after you were in high school?

Bess: Out of high school. I remember my salary was \$5 a week. For a while they didn't pay me because they claimed they didn't have any money. Mr. Blumenthal, I think, was President at that time. And I went and asked him for my check, and he said, "What do you need money for?" And I was aghast and walked away. But finally I got my little check, about \$30. I used to take some of the kids out and we'd go to the park and we'd have little games and things like that. I'd organize the club for girls. After I left there, Mat Clark became the Director so I don't know anymore than that about what she did.

Gail: And after that, when did you go to New York?

Bess: After that, I think I went to New York. I couldn't get paid in Savannah. I thought maybe I'd go to New York and try my luck there. I got a job almost right away.

Gail: Can you tell me how you got the job?

Bess: First I did some secretarial work, and then I saw an ad in the paper that wanted a millinery buyer, and having worked in my father's store, I figured that was working in merchandise. So I answered the ad and told them I was a millinery buyer, which wasn't the truth.

Gail: You were still in Savannah when you answered this ad?

Bess: No, I was up in New York at the time, and I got the job. They had stores in Poughkeepsie, New York, and Utica, New York, and Hartford, Connecticut. I was transferred to different places and I'd come into New York to buy the hats. I enjoyed that - it was a nice job.

Gail: Sounds wonderful. And then you married Mesch in what year?

Bess: 1939

Gail: Can you talk a little bit about how you met?

Bess: Yes, Ralph Rosenzweig one day said to me, "Do you know Mesch Center?" And I said, "I've heard of him but I don't know him." He said, "I've got a date tonight. How about you all go out together." And I said, "That's fine with me." So he introduced me to Mesch and we went out.

Gail: And Mesch, at that point, was already a physician?

Bess: Yes, he was with the government.

Gail: And you were visiting Savannah at that time?

Bess: I was living here. I had come back to Savannah to live. It was my home so I decided to come back, and I think I made the right choice. I'd done what I wanted to do in New York, so I came on back, and then, as you said, I met Mesch, and he was in Savannah for a week. We dated and then he went back, and then he came back a year later, and then he called me, and then we got married.

Gail: And he was already an MD at that point?

Bess: Yes.

Gail: Where did he go to medical school?

Bess: He went to Emory⁸ and the University of Georgia⁹.

Gail: He went to Emory undergraduate?

Bess: And then he graduated magna cum laude¹⁰.

Gail: From?

Bess: From the Medical College of Georgia¹¹.

⁸ Emory University is a private university in Atlanta. It was founded in 1863 by small group of Methodists and named after a Methodist bishop John Emory. Today it has nearly 3000 faculty members and is ranked among the 20th national universities in *US News's and World Report's* in 2014 rankings.

Emory University was officially desegregated in September of 1962 and admitted the first African American undergraduate in the fall of 1963

⁹ The University of Georgia, founded in 1785, also referred to as UGA is an American public research university in the city of Athens in the US state of Georgia.

¹⁰ Graduating from a university with high distinction and high honors.

¹¹ Medical College of Georgia was founded in 1828. It is located in Augusta, Georgia.

Gail: At that point - you and I had spoken about this - there was a Jewish quota as far as the medical students went. I know my own father had gone to medical school.

Bess: I don't remember the quota, but I do know that they had a certain number of Jews that could attend.

Gail: So the Jewish boys who went to medical school were extremely bright.

Bess: They were all Phi Beta Kappa¹² and graduated with honors.

Gail: Were there any women in medical school then?

Bess: I don't think so at that time.

Gail: So it was totally male oriented at that time. And you married when he already had his MD?

Bess: Yes.

Gail: Was he already a trained psychiatrist?

Bess: No, he wasn't practicing. He was with the government working in a veterans' hospital. He did a lot of psychiatry there - he got the training there.

Gail: What year did you get married? And that was prior to WWII or during WWII?

Bess: During WWII. At the beginning of WWII. When did WWII start? I think it was '38 or '39. So it was during.

Gail: You had told me that Mesch was stationed where?

¹² America's most prestigious honor society, **Phi Beta Kappa** has celebrated excellence in the liberal arts & sciences and championed free thought since 1776.

Bess: At Fort Screven. When he got his orders to go there, he couldn't believe it so he called someone to verify the fact, because after all we were from Savannah and they don't usually send anybody back to their hometown. So we had a delightful life at Fort Screven¹³.

Gail: How long were you there?

Bess: About a year.

Gail: Did you already have children?

Bess: Yes, Gary was born at Fort Screven.

Gail: And Melvin was born before that.

Bess: Melvin was born in New Orleans.

Gail: Now, what were you doing in New Orleans?

Bess: We were stationed in New Orleans. You know, I told you Mesch was with the government and he was stationed in New Orleans. And Melvin was born in New Orleans in 1940, and then Gary was born in July of 1943 in Fort Screven. Dr. (I can't remember his name), he was an obstetrician in Savannah - he came out and delivered Gary.

Gail: At home?

Bess: No, they had a hospital at Fort Screven and Gary was born at the Fort Screven hospital.

Gail: After Fort Screven, where was Mesch's assignment?

Bess: Then we went to Waco, Texas, and from Waco we went to Tuscaloosa [Alabama].

Gail: And this was all during the war?

Bess: Yes, and then from Tuscaloosa, we came to Savannah.

¹³ Fort Screven was established in 1897 as part of America's integral coastal defense system. It is now a neighborhood on Tybee Island, Georgia. It was operational from 1898-1944

Gail: So you were with Mesch almost the whole time, because I know a lot of people had separations.

Bess: Yes, I remember that. We didn't have any separations. We were together the whole time we were stationed in Tuscaloosa. And after the war, Mesch decided to go into practice, so we came to Savannah.

Gail: And he knew he wanted to practice in Savannah?

Bess: I kind of pushed him into that.

Gail: You wanted to be here. Your family was here.

Bess: Yes, so we came back to Savannah.

Gail: What was your life like as a young married mother living in Savannah?

Bess: Car pooling and going to Hebrew School - taking the kids, dropping them off at Hebrew School, and taking them to Cub Scouts, and being a den mother, and running here and there. I was active in the medical auxiliary - I was president of that - and president of the Savannah High PTA, and started the Alliance for the Mentally Ill, and the Chatham Association for Retarded Children. I started that years back, so I was busy with organizational work and the kids and the community.

Gail: Were there a lot of other young Jewish couples in your crowd?

Bess: Yes, there were David and Beck Robinson, and Thelma and Mannie Rosen, and who else, I can't remember. But we used to go out a lot, you know, go to dinner as couples. It was very nice.

Gail: You had a nice life at that stage, and where did you live in Savannah at that point?

Bess: We first moved back to Savannah - the first house that we had was the house that my Aunt Fanny and Saul Robbins vacated on 33rd and Drayton. They bought a house on 50 something street and we rented that little apartment that was over Dena Gottlieb, where Dena and Irving lived downstairs and we lived upstairs. I'm sure they weren't happy with the kids running around. Then after that a few years later, we bought a house on East 48th Street, near the schools

and all. Then from there we went to Washington Avenue. From Washington Avenue, we came to the Landings, and this is it.

Gail: Can you tell me about some of the major changes you've seen in Savannah?

Bess: Oh, my God. The fact that the Landings¹⁴ is here has brought so many people. You know, the symphony - a long time ago, if it wasn't for the Jewish people in Savannah, I don't think the symphony would have made it. And now, today, when you go to the symphony, you see nothing but a lot of people from the Landings, and without the Landings, I don't know that the symphony would have made it. The same holds true for the Savannah Theatre, which used to be known as the Little Theatre, and City Lights. So there have been a lot of changes in Savannah. Along with all the shopping centers and the malls and things like that. At one time, Paulsen and 59" Street was the end of the street. Beyond that, there was nothing but woods and trees, and that was it. But now, Medical Arts has moved out there and all the businesses and things, it's just tremendous. DeRenne Avenue opened up and Waters Avenue going way out. I remember when the Mall first opened up - Adele Schneider was so excited about the Mall - she came over and we went over there. We went there twice to look at it and it was just, you know, a treat because the city was growing. We were always squished in, and now here it is, this big mall, and it was really something to see. For us, it was.

Gail: Well, I remember, too, my parents, especially my mother, telling me about Tybee when she was growing up as a visitor here, and the big bands came. Can you say a little bit about that?

Bess: Oh, yes. They had that light that used to shine, and they would have these dances with Lou Steele.

Gail: I don't know if people would remember Lou Steele.

Bess: They had wonderful dances on Saturday night that were great. They always had a big crowd of people and it was really very nice. Dorsey was there, too, Tommy Dorsey. And I remember, on Sundays, everybody went to Tybee on the train. The train that now is a bike trail?

¹⁴ A neighborhood located on Skidaway Island, just south of the city of Savannah

Gail: Right. Did you go with your family?

Bess: Oh, yes, and everybody packed a lunch to take to Tybee, consisting, of course, of boiled eggs and sandwiches and things like that. You had a little shoe box with your lunch and you went on the train. And, of course, the cinders and things would get in your eyes from all the smoke and everything. But anyway, we'd ride to Tybee and the kids would run and get a rocking chair for Momma. Miss Lillian Bragg, who was a physical ed. teacher in Savannah, wrote a cute commentary, "Run and Get a Rocking Chair for Momma." All the kids would run ahead with the shoe boxes in their hands with the lunches, and we'd all run to the Pavilion and get a table and chairs or whatever, and everyone would sit around and eat their lunch. Then after that, they'd get in their suits.

Gail: Where were the changing rooms?

Bess: The dressing rooms were downstairs below the Pavilion. I've got a picture somewhere, I could show you.

Gail: I'd love to see it.

Bess: Anyway, everybody would get into their bathing suits and go out and swim.

Gail: So the parents would stay on the Pavilion and the kids would swim?

Bess: No, the parents would go, too. Everybody knew everybody. It was just like Old Home Week. There wasn't a stranger about because everybody that was there was everybody that you knew. And then after a while you got tired, and you got packed up, and you came back on the train, and all of the kids were asleep. Everybody was so sleepy and tired. And then you had to ride the streetcar back.

Gail: To your house?

Bess: Yes, you rode the E & W Belt - that was the name of the streetcar - and that went around like that, and it would drop you off near your house, and you shlepped home with your packages and kids and all that.

Gail: Now, when your kids were growing up, did you take them to Tybee a lot?

Bess: Oh, yes.

Gail: Did you ever spend summers renting a cottage at the beach?

Bess: One time we did. You know, I kind of remember that because I think my family did at the same time, too. You know, they had those little bungalows over there near Fort Screven. Of course, we were stationed at Fort Screven, but these were little bungalows near that hotel, the DeSoto Hotel. And so we did, we rented a little bungalow one summer there. And then the kids started going to the Alliance and getting involved with their group things and Boy Scouts and all that sort of stuff.

Gail: So the Alliance has played a big part of your life from when you were a child until when?

Bess: Not especially.

Gail: No.

Bess: Well, maybe it did. I don't know. I remember Mr. Pinsker. Of course, I don't know if anybody remembers Mr. Pinsker. His wife was a lovely person and she taught dancing and I took dancing from her.

Gail: At the JEA?

Bess: At the JEA. But they didn't have near the activities that they have today. But Mr. Pinsker was a very much liked person - everybody liked him a lot. I didn't have that much to do with him except when I worked there.

Gail: You worked there, and later on your kids.

Bess: And my children did, too.

Gail: So there was always some kind of involvement.

Bess: Mesch was always active. He used it a lot for handball. He loved it. It was his second home.

Gail: I remember my dad used to talk about going to the Alliance, and he would get massages.

Bess: I don't know about massages, but Mesch played handball. I remember he and Pete Kaminsky every night would go to the Alliance and play handball.

Gail: Now, you have always been an athlete, and now you're doing...

Bess: I don't call myself an athlete. I just like things that are outdoors, like I played a lot of tennis.

Gail: From when you were a teenager?

Bess: Yes, but I wasn't wild about golf. I played golf but I wasn't crazy about that sport.

Gail: And now you're a swimmer. Is that your main sport?

Bess: Yes, I can't do any more on account of my hip.

Gail: But you have been an active swimmer for the last thirty years.

Bess: At least that.

Gail: And you're swimming now - what - three days a week now?

Bess: Yes, but I teach water exercises three days a week.

Gail: Out here at the Landings?

Bess: Yes.

Gail: And you're teaching something at the JEA.

Bess: Yes, chair exercises at the JEA.

Gail: Is there anything else you'd like to add to your picture of Savannah?

Bess: Savannah has just grown so. Now you feel when you go to a grocery store anywhere, you don't hear a southern accent, you hear a northern accent. You don't see anybody much that you know. You go into a Publix and all those places - it's so large and it's entirely different. But that's growth, and I guess you have to expect that. Now Savannah's grown, particularly since that book, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, came out, Savannah has been swarmed with tourists. I've never seen anything like it.

Gail: It's become a hot spot.

Bess: It has. Now, at the Temple lots of people ask you about the book, or ask you if you've read the book, and a lot of times I show them because the Temple is right across from where the murder took place in that house.

Gail: Jim Williams?

Bess: Yes. I show them where that house is. So that's brought a lot of people to Savannah.

Gail: Can you talk a little bit about your work at the Temple now, what you're doing?

Bess: Well, I'm a docent. I just take visitors around and tell them about the history of the Temple, when it was started. The Temple that's presently situated there now was finished in 1876, but prior to that, they had services in a small building on Whitaker and Liberty streets, and then that got so small they had to build a new building. People come from all over - they've heard about the Temple and they want to see it. Once they see it, they can't get over it because they say it looks like a church. They can't believe it's a Temple.

Gail: With the gothic ceilings - it's one of the only gothics.

Bess: In those days gothic architects prevailed. I guess that's why they built it like that. And the building committee didn't object to what they did.

Gail: Well, I thank you very much.

Bess: You're welcome. I hope that I was able to contribute a little something.

Gail: A lot.