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ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

MEMOIRIST: CELIA SCHEER HIRSCH
INTERVIEWER: C. ROBERT FRIEDMAN
DATE: MARCH 23, 1998

INTERVIEW BEGINS

Robert: Today is the 23rd of March, Monday, and we are in the process of recording Celia Scheer Hirsch. Ceil, can you tell us when you were born, and where?

Celia: I was born January the 2nd, 1918, at home, I presume. In those days they didn't go to a hospital, so I couldn't--

Robert: Is that true? I mean, are you sure of that?

Celia: Yeah. Yeah. In fact, my mother says that, I don't if you remember Mr. Garwitz?

Robert: Yes.

Celia: He was supposed to have helped in the delivery.

Robert: Is that right?

Celia: Um, hm.

Robert: Well, since we know each other a little bit, I wondered, you know what I was told by mother--

Celia: What?

Robert: That you were born behind the store. Is that where you all lived?

Celia: Probably. Yeah.

Robert: Is that where you all lived?

Celia: Yeah. It had to be at home. Sure.

Robert: And where was the store?

Celia: On Gaston Street.

Robert: Gaston and?

Celia: Gaston- had to be Gaston and West Broad, somewhere near there, as far as I can recollect.

Robert: So he moved his store later?

Celia: Yeah.

Robert: To Perry Lane?

Celia: Yeah.

Robert: Okay. I remember Mother saying that you had been born behind the store. I didn't realize that that was home.

Celia: That was home.

Robert: So you grew up in Savannah?

Celia: Grew up in Savannah - never went anywhere until I was about 13 years old and I was elected a delegate to go to a Workman's Circle¹ convention.

Robert: Where was that?

Celia: In Birmingham, Alabama. That was my first time ever leaving Savannah. And that was a nerve-wracking experience. I had to get up in front of people and make a speech and I was never good at that. That's about all I can remember about that trip.

Robert: When you spoke in Birmingham at this convention, did you speak in Yiddish or in English?

Celia: No. This was in English. This was the younger children's group. I spoke in English.

Robert: And what was the language you all used at home?

Celia: We used a little of both, Jewish and English. My parents spoke Jewish most of the time when they spoke to us, and sometimes, well, we'd answer in English but once in a while we would answer in Jewish, cause we did go to Jewish school.

Robert: You did?

¹ A national secular Jewish group that focuses on the cultural education in the Yiddish language, and the importance of progressive social justice. Started by Eastern European Jewish immigrants, it is now also called the Workers Circle, with the motto "to create a more beautiful and better world for all".

Celia: Oh, yeah, all of us went to Jewish School but, unfortunately, I don't, it's been such a long time ago I don't remember how to read or write it. But I love the language, love the language.

Robert: Well, when you say you went to Jewish School, that means that there was a Jewish or Yiddish school in Savannah?

Celia: There was a Yiddish in, from the Workman's Circle. Is the one who handled it. In fact, they had a teacher, Mr. Wiseborn, if I remember correctly his name.

Robert: Were there many people affiliated with the Workman's Circle?

Celia: Well, in those days I wouldn't say a whole lot. Maybe, maybe 50.

Robert: Fifty families?

Celia: Fifty families, maybe, I'm not even sure of that. And then little by little, it died off and a lot of them just dropped out and, eventually, it was dissolved. Workman's Circle was dissolved.

Robert: Of those families-- who were the families that perhaps you knew best or your parents?

Celia: Well, the Hirsch family, the Applebaum family, the Dunns, the Gerbers, Mr. Izzard who was not married. Who else? Mr. Fineblum who also was not married. The Grablows. Mr. and Mrs. Oast. And Mr. and Mrs. Udinsky. That's right.

Robert: Did they, they were your parents age so did they all have children about your age?

Celia: Most of them, sure.

Robert: There were a number of them. So ya'll went to school together?

Celia: Went to school. I went to school with Ethyl Richman and Marsha Udinsky. I lived on Bolton Street, Marsha lived on Park Avenue so she used to meet me at my house and we used to walk, there was no such thing as riding then, we walked to where Ethyl Richman lived and she lived near the old Alliance, I think it was Charlton Street? And then we used to walk to school together and that was rain or shine.

Robert: What school was that?

Celia: Junior high school. We went all the way through junior and high school together.

Robert: What was the name of that school? Do you remember?

Celia: Savannah High.

Robert: It was called Savannah High?

Celia: Yeah. And that was on where, Oglethorpe? Liberty and Oglethorpe?

Robert: Yeah.

Celia: In fact, it's still there. And instead of, when I was in high school, I decided I was going to take a general course because I thought I was going to college. But I got married instead a year later.

Robert: What kind of activities were held at the Workman's Circle, do you remember?

Celia: Well, we, the children, used to put on plays and they used to have concerts several times a year that were held mostly at the Alliance. We used to have a pretty big attendance.

Robert: You all went to, you all went to Yiddish School in the afternoon?

Celia: Yeah. After school.

Robert: Did you ever go to Hebrew School?

Celia: I never did.

Robert: Did anyone in your family ever go?

Celia: My children. All three of my boys went to Hebrew School and they were all three bar mitzvahed.² But after the bar mitzvah they did not want to continue.

Robert: What about your brothers - did they go to Hebrew School?

Celia: Morris was, I don't remember any of them being bar mitzvahed. I don't think so.

Robert: But they all went to the Workman's Circle shul³?

² A *bar mitzvah* is a rite of passage for Jewish boys aged 13 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.

³ Yiddish word for "school" or "synagogue".

Celia: Yeah. I don't ever remember my father setting foot in shul. He used to stand outside.

Robert: Yes. Why would he do that?

Celia: Talking to his friends.

Robert: Well, if he didn't go to shul, and yet, although he didn't go to shul and I know you say your mother didn't either, would you consider your home having been Jewish?

Celia: Yes. Because when the holidays came around, everything was like it was supposed to be. The only thing, then, she didn't keep a kosher house.

Robert: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Celia: Six. There were seven of us altogether. Course she had twins that died, they were the firstborn. That was before--

Robert: In Europe?

Celia: Yeah. As far as I can remember, because I didn't remember them being other than being told. Of course, Morris was born in Europe, too.

Robert: Yeah.

Celia: Bertha was born in New York. The rest of us were born here. I think Sammy was the only one born in a hospital.

Robert: Is that right?

Celia: Yeah. We were all grown. In fact, I was getting ready to get married when she found out she was pregnant. She was so embarrassed and so ashamed, she wouldn't even walk out in the street. We had to fuss at her all the time to get out. But she had a terrible pregnancy.

Robert: Of course, her oldest daughter was already pregnant and already had a child, during the course of her pregnancy.

Celia: Bertha, sure. Bertha had Pat.

Robert: I'm older than Pat.

Celia: That's right. She had Pat just before I was married. That's right. You're right. She did. Yeah she did.

Robert: But when you say you had school, you did these performances as children, were they in Yiddish or English?

Celia: Some of it was in Jewish, some in English.

Robert: You say you went to school in the afternoon - how long did you stay in school then and what did you, what kind of things did you learn? Do you remember that?

Celia: I don't know. Gosh, it's been so long, every phase of, there were a lot of words that had a lot of Hebrew in it, but like I say, it's been so very long ago and I'm 80 years old now and I just don't remember. Don't remember. You know when you don't keep up with these things, you do forget.

Robert: But you do remember the teacher and you remember being in class--

Celia: Yeah, I remember the teacher, that's right.

Robert: And the classes - what did you all read when you typically went to class?

Celia: Hebrew.

Robert: Hebrew or Yiddish?

Celia: Hebrew, it was a mixture of Jewish and Hebrew.

Robert: Is that right?

Celia: Some of the words were Hebrew and some were, most of it was Jewish.

Robert: By the time I went to the Workman's Circle, we didn't do any Hebrew. We did only Yiddish.

Celia: Everything was Jewish?

Robert: Everything was Yiddish.

Celia: Even the alphabet, some of the alphabet was something like Hebrew--

Robert: It used the same characters.

Celia: But yet, when I went to that Hebrew class, it was like something I had never heard before. I was too embarrassed to go back.

Robert: Oh why?

Celia: I felt so stupid. By the time I learned one phrase, he'd start on another one, I forgot the first phrase.

Robert: Let's talk a little bit about Savannah as you were growing up - the Jewish community was a relatively smaller community at that time and probably a lot of people knew each other.

Celia: Well, we stuck to those from the Workman's Circle mainly, because Papa in those days used to play pinochle.⁴ So who'd he play with? He used to play with Sam Hirsch, my father-in-law, Sam Hirsch, who else did he, Mr. Applebaum and Mr. Izzard, I believe, used to play, too. That was their recreation. When Sundays came around, that's one day that the family all ate together. They did do that. The big thing was to put all the family in a car and take a ride to Isle of Hope and buy us all ice cream. That was a big treat. You know, for us.

Robert: What years are we talking about now? Is this about in the 20's

Celia: Well, I was born in '18, so you've got to figure it was in the late 20's and early 30's. As the kids got older, they didn't want to go any more, each wanted to go his own way. I think I was the first one in the family to graduate high school. Morris was a terror. He went almost all the way through and Izzy dropped out, too, to go to work. Help support the family. Then mother, I don't think she graduated high school. Gert and Sam did. But the three of us were the only ones out of eight, out of seven children.

Robert: When you say you stuck with the Workman's Circle families and their children and all--

Celia: Well, because we were all, we had all of those were in the same, how shall I put it -- financial straits. All of us were in the same - so naturally they all stuck together. For recreation at night, especially in the summertime, they used to go sit in front of Nat Daubs' store and shoot the bull.

Robert: Where was that at?

Celia: That was on York and West Broad. That was, I mean, just about every night except when it rained. He used to play pinochle with them once in a while, too,

⁴ Pinochle is a trick-taking card game for two to four players using a 48-card deck. It was very popular with American Jews in the first half of the twentieth century.

when they played in his house, 'cause Eva used to stay downstairs and watch the place and he would play pinochle with them. His youngsters, I remember, when we were in our teens, Fanny, Fanny Applebaum was my age so all of us girls, Marsha Udinsky, Fanny, Pike, I don't think she did, not at that time, but a few others, we used to get a nickel for spending money. When we were getting a little older, we used to go to the store and buy five or ten cigarettes and hide in our bedroom and smoke the hell out of them. Big deal.

Robert: And after you finished high school - you were married?

Celia: No, I waited a year. He wanted to give me a ring and I said, "No, let's wait a while." I worked. I went to work, but a year later we did get married. I worked for Abe Samuels in his grocery store. I recall, we used to go to work at 8:00 o'clock in the morning and get off about 7:00 o'clock at night. Saturday it was about 11:00-12:00 o'clock at night. I made a big \$12 a week. I started off with \$7. When I got married, he gave me \$12. And what did I do? I used to buy groceries for the \$12. I never took any money home. Oh, gracious. We used to borrow from Peter to pay Paul. But strangely enough we had good credit. He could go to the Morris Plan, which was THE place in those days, and get money any time.

Robert: Did the Workman's Circle at that point have loans like they do now?

Celia: No, this was much later. I think Papa came up with the idea of forming a credit union so that the members who were always needing money could borrow and it mushroomed, it really did, and the idea got so popular and they sold so many shares, 'til it really went well. As long as Hymie Hoffman had a big say in it. But he used to bend the rules a little bit, you know, when someone needed money. But when Philip took over, he went strictly by the book.

Robert: Well, it's a big credit union now, it's big, very, very well established, well record-

Celia: Yeah. What else?

Robert: Did you ever leave Savannah to go to work? You never went to New York to go to work?

Celia: I was 13 years old at that time and you know, I had bad skin. My Tante⁵ Leesy used to come to town all the time, so she said she thought she could take me to a doctor that might be able to help me. So my parents let me go. It didn't help me, but I spent a year there and I went to school there.

⁵ Yiddish for "aunt".

Robert: What year was that, do you know?

Celia: '33. After about a year I got a letter from Dave, I didn't even know he remembered me, and he said in the letter he said "I would like to have the first date with you when you come home."

Robert: Is that right?

Celia: Yeah, and he said, "I'll send the stamp in this envelope to make sure that I get an answer from you." He did. Then we started going out from that time. We went together for three years.

Robert: So you all were young, knew each other a long time.

Celia: Yeah. Um, hm. I was only 19 when we got married, he was only 21. But believe it or not, we planned our family. We didn't just go helter skelter. It was almost four years before we had Alvin, and then we waited exactly three years and nine months to have Carl and Marvin was not quite three years difference. So I had them planned quite well.

Robert: What were the big social things you did as a teenager, besides smoking?

Celia: Nothing.

Robert: Nothing?

Celia: I can't remember. I remember I had so few clothes. The few that I had my mother used to make. All three of us, in fact. So when I got home from school I used to have to take the dress that I had worn to school and change it into something else. Then I used to walk to the store and that was almost every day, except when Mama had a lot of housework and I just couldn't stand to see her do housework because that was a big house. I used to try to help her whenever I could.

Robert: That's after, you must have moved from behind the store to the house on Bolton Street?

Celia: Oh, yeah. We went to, from Gaston Street we went to Oglethorpe Avenue, the corner of Oglethorpe and West Broad. In fact, there was an apartment house there and we lived in one of those apartments. We lived there for a long time. In fact, I used to babysit with the Dobb children when they were younger.

Robert: So when did they move to Bolton Street? That must have been considerably later.

Celia: Gert was born on Bolton Street so it had to be a long time.

Robert: From what I gather then, they were very poor, but somehow after the Depression, they started earning enough money so that they could actually move and--

Celia: During the war, there used to be a fruit stand right next to Papa's shoe shop, if you recall?

Robert: I recall the barber shop.

Celia: No, the barber shop was a little further down. Anyway, the owner of the fruit stand died and Papa and Alex decided that they gonna take that store over and enlarge and sell new shoes along with shoe repair. He did nicely with that. But, he was...

Robert: Ceil, the Alliance, the Jewish Educational Alliance⁶, was for many people, I believe, the center of the Jewish community in terms of activities.

Celia: It was, it was.

Robert: Did you all participate at all?

Celia: You know I have vague memories of that for some reason or other. I know we did go.

Robert: Well, I know, for example, Izzy played basketball there 'cause I saw pictures.

Celia: Yep.

Robert: That's Isadore Scheer.

Celia: Morris went, too. I can't remember, I'm sure we did. 'Cause that was really the place to go.

Robert: Of course, you spent a lot of time at Workman's Circle in the afternoons and then there was Sunday with family--

Celia: Yeah, but this was after, after the Workman's Circle School. We had already

⁶ 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 program. 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 Temple Sinai 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'.

grown up.

Robert: How long did you go to the Workman's Circle School?

Celia: Oh, gosh, I know it had to be at least three years, if not longer. I'm not even sure.

Robert: You don't remember when you started?

Celia: No.

Robert: All right, so you spent a lot of time within the small community of the Workman's Circle, what about the rest of the Jewish community? What was that like? Where were they? Who are they?

Celia: I really don't know.

Robert: Well, for example, there was a temple Mickve Israel⁷ was established and there was a--

Celia: Yeah, but we didn't, we didn't go, we didn't go there. In fact, I don't even recall that we belonged to a synagogue. I really don't. It's only since we married that we all belong.

Robert: Because your father really did not believe in the synagogue?

Celia: No.

Robert: That was part, was that not part of the philosophy of the Workman's Circle?

Celia: I wouldn't say that.

Robert: No?

Celia: I wouldn't say that, because there were a lot of members that were members of the synagogue. It's just, he just, let's put it this way - we knew we were Jewish and we loved it, I'm proud to be a Jew. But we just were not from a religious family. The only reason, the only one that's religious now is Gert.

Robert: That's true.

Celia: She goes every Saturday because of her husband.

⁷ Founded in 1735, Mickve Israel is the third oldest Jewish congregation in the United States and the oldest in Georgia and the American South. It still exists today.

Robert: And her grandchildren.

Celia: And her grandchildren. Yeah. They call her up and remind her that we're going today. So she does go pretty much every Saturday.

Robert: And yet, as we spoke earlier, when my grandfather, your father, died, he was recognized within the community as a significant contributor to thinking and activities and the like.

Celia: In fact, he had a lot of wonderful, wonderful books which would probably be worth a lot of money today and he gave it to the Alliance, I believe.

Robert: Oh, I'm very pleased to hear that.

Celia: Either the Alliance or synagogue, but I think it was the Alliance. But he really had some wonderful books. When he came to this country he used to have someone come to the store to teach him how to write English. Everything he learned, he learned because he was motivated to learn. Mama was just the opposite. Mama, all she could do was write her name and she could add and subtract. You couldn't beat her there.

Robert: Did she ever work? Did she ever work?

Celia: At home.

Robert: Did she ever work in a store?

Celia: Only on, like Christmas, she used to come then. There wasn't much she could do 'cause after all it was just a repair shop. So there was really not much she could do. I remember when we used to sell sparklers outside the place, but only for Christmas. But every little bit you took in helped.

Robert: Now, his store, he moved his store from Gaston and West Broad to Perry Lane. That was before the war because that was where I --

Celia: Oh, yeah, he was there a long time, long time. [Got a frog in my throat.]

Robert: And the Workman's Circle shul was when I knew it was above the Center store on Perry Lane.

Celia: Up over the dry goods store of Mr. and Mrs. Center. Yep. In fact, we all grew up together. Course Leo was older than we were and Fanny. I think, is older than we are. But the twins and the brothers, we all knew them and grew up together.

Robert: Were they members of the Workman's Circle?

Celia: No.

Robert: Interesting that they--

Celia: But it was his property that they held the meetings in the shul.

Robert: Yeah, I wondered.

Celia: I mean, right over his store. I'm pretty sure he owned the property. But rents in those days were so inexpensive.

Robert: Relative to what. Inexpensive but yet maybe expensive relative to what your income was. Well, can you think of anything else you would like to tell for posterity?

Celia: I don't know, like what?

Robert: Well, if we knew, you say you used to go out in the car on Sundays to Isle of Hope,⁸ you'd go to the beach, was there--

Celia: We used to go to the beach, I remember when we were all smaller, Mama used to cook, get up early in the morning and cook a big, big meal and had to pack it in baskets and we used to go, before we had a car, we used to go by train to the beach. That was the thing to do every Sunday. Then the minute we'd get off the train, we used to have to have, the children, we used to have to run to find a place to put the food where we could sit and eat. I remember that vividly. That's what we used to do and everybody used to go swimming.

Robert: I know it's a bit off the subject but tell me a little bit about how you felt about relations with non-Jews in the community; with blacks in the community. What kind of feelings were experienced?

Celia: I never felt comfortable around Gentiles.⁹ I'm not sure I knew what it was that made me so uncomfortable around them. Maybe it was the way they talked, maybe their thoughts, and I always felt like they were anti-semitics. And blacks, now I worked around blacks - every job I ever had was around black people, so I felt rather comfortable with them because they showed me a great deal of respect and, of course, I gave them the same respect they gave me. I never had a problem. I never had a problem.

⁸ An island Southeast of Savannah, GA, now included in the National Parks as the Isle of Hope Historic District where it houses large manor houses of the 19th century.

⁹ A gentile is a person of non-Jewish faith.