INTERVIEW BEGINS

SPECTOR: This is Deborah Spector, a volunteer with the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project. I am here with Al Jacobson on January 28, 2015, at the Waycross Hebrew Center on Screven Avenue in Waycross, Georgia. Thank you for agreeing to participate in the Taylor Oral History Project at the Breman Museum. Please let me start with your family history. Tell me about your family, your parents, and where they are from.

JACOBSON: My father [Morris Jacobson] was born in Latvia and came over here just before the First World War. He traveled around the South in a horse and buggy, selling goods. He was in Fort Valley, Georgia. [He] had met my mother, Marie Lubetkin, at the time, who was a third generation Georgian. Her father was a tailor at Fort Valley and went to a synagogue in Macon [Georgia]. When they married, he came to work in Valdosta [Georgia] for a relative of his, the Freelanders [sp]. In 1923, he came to Waycross because he had served in the army here for the United States during the World War. They had an American Legion convention here in 1923. He came here for the convention. My mother did not come because she was pregnant with her first son. Here, he found a store that he thought would be great to open up. He went ahead and signed up that he wanted to open that store [Jacobson’s Department Store]. He went back and told my mother. After the boy was born, Baynard Jacobson, they came to live here. At that time, we never had a lease on the store, but we were there all those years. He was well represented. Everybody knew him. This kind of takes over. Then our sister [Anne] was born four years later and then myself. I had a younger brother, Jerry [Gerald], who was born here in Waycross. All of us graduated from Waycross High [School]. All of us stayed in Waycross except my younger brother, Jerry. He got married and lived in Atlanta. He was a CPA. Waycross is a very well-respected town, a liberal town for South Georgia. In fact, when my
father passed away in 1970, every store in town closed for the funeral, which was quite an honor. That was before the big stores like Walmart. Even today, we have, what we call, a Brotherhood\(^1\) program, which we’ve been doing over 65 years. At first, we were honoring my father as a way of giving a Brotherhood Award. Now, it is in memory of him.\(^2\) Each year in February, we have a visiting rabbi and a visiting preacher from the local community. Each one of them speak. Then the Brotherhood Award, which is given to all races and religions. First, they are chosen by the family. After that, past recipients do the choosing of the award. I’m proud to say this year when we went to choose, out of 18 still living in this area, 15 past recipients showed up for the meeting to choose the next recipient, so it is quite an honor. We will fill the synagogue up then, completely, and put out extra chairs because of the visitors throughout. Of course, 90 percent of them won’t be Jewish. It is of all religions, creeds, races, and all.

**SPECTOR:** That’s wonderful. What was it like growing up in Waycross?

**JACOBSON:** Waycross was very easy to grow up [in]. Like I said, it was liberal. We had no problems that I even remember. They respected us. When we would go, like Passover,\(^3\) they knew that we would bring our own food. My younger brother and I were very close, so we would even go to churches sometimes on Sunday just to visit with friends, Sunday school more than anything else. We knew all the songs. The newspapers here, or the newspaper, *The General Herald*, has always been very good about giving us the right publicity. All of us were very active in the community. Chamber of Commerce, Junior Chamber of Commerce, everything. We were all very, very active. That made a big difference, too. Not only were we a well-respected family, the Jewish community was respected, which is so important.

**SPECTOR:** What were some of the activities that you and your siblings did when you were growing up?

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1. A group of men in a synagogue congregation who join together to offer social, cultural, educational, and volunteer service opportunities.
2. In 1954, the B’nai B’rith Waycross chapter began giving the annual Morris Jacobson Brotherhood Award to a local citizen, either Jewish or Gentile. The award is still given annually.
3. Hebrew: *Pesach*. The anniversary of Israel’s liberation from Egyptian bondage. The holiday lasts for eight days. Unleavened bread, *matzah*, is eaten in memory of the unleavened bread prepared by the Israelite during their hasty flight from Egypt, when they had not time to wait for the dough to rise. On the first two nights of Passover, the *seder*, the central event of the holiday is celebrated. The *seder* service is one of the most colorful and joyous occasions in Jewish life. In addition to eating *matzah* during the *seder*, Jews are prohibited from eating leavened bread during the entire week of Passover. In addition, Jews are also supposed to avoid foods made with wheat, barley, rye, spelt or oats unless those foods are labeled ‘kosher for Passover.’ Jews traditionally have separate dishes for Passover.
JACOBSON: In growing up . . . while we were still in school, do you mean?
SPECTOR: Yes.
JACOBSON: We were active in different community things. Hiwi Tri Hiwi [sp], which is a Christian organization. My younger brother, he played football. He was an all-star football player. I was small. I didn’t play football. We would . . . in the scouts. Nothing in particular. When we were older, we were much more involved in the community.
SPECTOR: When you finished high school, what path did you take?
JACOBSON: This is a story here. I did not know what to do when I finished high school, so I went back to the twelfth grade voluntarily at the time. I did not know it at the time. I went back. I still did not know what I was going to do. At that time, you could join the service for one year. I joined the [United States] Air Force for one year. That delayed me in going to school, thankfully. I went up to the University of Georgia. As a junior, my present wife [Ann] was a freshman. If I had not gone back to school two years, I would have already graduated. She was a freshman. We had a blind date. I told my roommate that I found the girl I was going to marry. In November, she came back to Waycross with a friend of hers, mainly to meet my family, and had Thanksgiving dinner with us. I came home in December for the holidays, from school. My mother said, “Son, you don’t have anything on your mind but little Ann.” The reason she is “little Ann,” is she is very, very short. I had a sister of average size. “Big Anne,” we call her. She says, “You have nothing on your mind except her. If you want to quit school and work in the store, it would be okay with us.” I went back and gave her my engagement pin. We got married in March. This March, we will be celebrating 63 years together.
SPECTOR: How wonderful. Do you remember who introduced you on your blind date?
JACOBSON: Yes, I surely do. It was Kitty Jacobs. Harris Jacobs’ wife. She introduced us. Harris Jacobs was my big brother at TEP [Tau Epsilon Phi] at the University of Georgia.
SPECTOR: When you and Little Ann got married, tell me about your family. About your children.
JACOBSON: We had two sons [Ronald and Michael]. One of them was very studious. Learned. Liked to go to school. The younger one just did not care about going to school, but he went and was always in a little trouble. Nothing big at all but was a devilish type person. We took him out of school and put him in private school. He was still not doing good. We put him in parochial school. The nuns kind of looked at him. He was still a devil. He finally graduated
school. He was around. Didn’t do much. He joined the service. Even in the service . . . I don’t know how he did it. He wrote a letter to the commanding officer, saying he was not fit for the service and should not stay in and got a discharge. Just a regular honorable discharge. He came back. His brother, my oldest son, was already working in the store with us. We had two stores at the time. My wife says, “You’re not going to let Michael work with you, are you? You will kill him.” But he did work with us, and we got along real fine. He was just that type. Then we went bankrupt 1981. That left all of us out. Here I was, 51 years old without a job, almost without a job. My older brother had one store they let keep open. The bank knew that we could not do anything better. They tried to help us out. They even let us . . . instead of closing the doors and locking them, they let us have a sale because they knew that they were going to get the money. They trusted us all the way. Anyway, I went after work for a job. Michael, the little one, he decided, “I want to go to Israel just to see Israel.” He did not observe Judaism that strongly. He would go to synagogue, but that was it. He went over there because he loved the country. That was just for a tour. He came back, and he says, “I’d love to go back.” They publicized in the paper that they were looking for volunteers from the United States to go there to serve in the army. Not up front but in the back. And he did. He went over there. [He] called us and said he wanted to stay over there for a while and learn Hebrew. We told him, “You don’t even know English yet.” But he was that determined. He met a girl over there, who was the sister of the teacher who was teaching him Hebrew. He said he wanted to get married, which was fine. We said we would go there. He said, “No, I want to get married in my synagogue.” So he and his wife, who spoke English very well, her family came over, who did not speak English. The parents. We had the wedding in the synagogue. He went back over there. Worked for his father-in-law, who was in the dairy business, for a while. He didn’t like that so much because he loved engineering type things. He went to work for a factory that made nylon thread. He was doing real well. He came down with MS [muscular sclerosis]. They were afraid for him to work in the factory. Even though they got along real well, they were afraid of him around the machinery. During that entire time, about 20 years, he never went to synagogue because he was in an area that was strictly Orthodox. He didn’t feel like he belonged there. We’re Conservative here in Waycross. One time we were over there, and he had moved to a new section, a small village near Afula. When he did, there was a small synagogue there that more Conservative. We got him to go to synagogue with us. We were there two weekends. He didn’t
want to go the second time. We said, “Yes, let’s go a second time. Then, a Habad⁴ took him under his wing. That boy, now, is so religious. He goes to synagogue three times a day. He said Ha-Shem⁵ gave him MS so he wouldn’t have to work. He reads the Torah.⁶ Studies the Torah. Before, he would sneak into the Arab section and eat pork. Now, he won’t even eat at our house. That’s where he is. My older son, he went on the road selling shoes. From six years old, he never ate pork or shellfish because he had heard the rabbi say you shouldn’t do it. To this day, he still does not eat shellfish or pork. He doesn’t attend synagogue because he is in a town that doesn’t have it, but he comes up here for all holidays and various occasions. Still very religious, but he can’t do anything about it because he works late. He, the older one, had two daughters. One lives in Atlanta. One lives in Carrollton. Both of them are married. Each one has two children. So, we’ve got four great grandchildren up there in North Georgia. Michael has two daughters in Israel. One of them is married and has two children. We have two great grandchildren in Israel now. We keep up with them very strongly.

**SPECTOR:** How are some of the ways you keep up with your family?

**JACOBSON:** My son in Israel calls three times a week as a rule and just signals us. We have a special rate on our telephone, and we call him back so that we can both use a different phone together. Sit down and all of us on the phone together. We speak to him three times a week, as a rule. My oldest son in Amelia Island [Florida], he calls every night in the evening about 6:00. We know when it rings, it is 6:00 every day. We speak to him every day. The granddaughters in North Georgia, we speak to them on a regular basis. Of course, we email back and forth [with] all of them. Pictures coming in through that. We keep up with the pictures through email.

**SPECTOR:** Do you have an opportunity to go visit?

**JACOBSON:** We’ve been to Israel about 17 times over the 32 years. He’s been over there more than half his life. In recent times, due to poor health, we have not been over there in about three years. They’ve been over here a few times. Most of the time, we’ve been over there traveling around.

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⁴ Habad, also known as Chabad, is an Orthodox Jewish Hasidic movement. Habad is today one of the world’s best known Hasidic movements and is well known for its outreach.

⁵ Ha-Shem (Hebrew) One of the scriptural names of G-d.

⁶ Hebrew for ‘teaching. ‘Torah’ is a general term that covers all Jewish law including the vast mass of teachings recorded in the Talmud and other rabbinical works. ‘Sefer Torah’ refers to the sacred scroll on which the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch) are written.
SPECTOR: Tell me, please, about Jacobson’s, about the store, and the involvement of the family.

JACOBSON: When he opened up, like I said, in 1924, it took off real well. My mother was the bookkeeper. My father did the sales. Of course, they had other people that worked with them for many, many years. The same people worked for many, many years. In 1948, my older brother, who is seven years older than me, was working in the store at the time. My father, all of a sudden, he had some problems with his throat. He went to the doctor. They said, “You’ve gotten something in that throat, in your larynx. You need it to be removed. We cannot do it here in Waycross. So he went to Atlanta. In Atlanta, they determined that there was a wire that was in his throat that was caused by a strainer of some type, like a strainer in a bakery. He called us in before his surgery and said, “I’m going to tell you all a secret.” He said, “You better not ever tell this to anybody.” He says, “I know when I did that. I was at a bakery eating a donut, and all of a sudden I gagged, and something was wrong.” He said, “The reason I’m telling you this now, I don’t want you to ever tell the fellow who owned the bakery,” he said, “because I don’t want him to feel bad. This is the type my father was. It was one of those things. He didn’t to hurt. Instead of suing . . . I want to sue. That was not his idea. I don’t want him to feel bad that he caused me. I can say it now because the man is deceased, the one who owned the bakery, has been deceased for years. My father could never speak correctly again, but he learned to do a little bit. They did not have the machinery back then that could make you speak a little bit. He would drink Coca-Cola. He learned to belch up a sound like this <Jacobson speaks using the belching sound to describe his father speaking> You could hear it. You could tell what he was saying. That was the way he spent the rest of his life, but he was still very weak from that. He got a little bit younger because of his condition. My mother took over the store because she was already . . . my younger and . . . I was in the store then. Later on, my sons. Then we opened up another store after my father died. Then the third store. We went into Douglas [Georgia] also. The Douglas store did not last long. Then the other two stores in 1981 when the interest rate went to 22 percent. That was it.

SPECTOR: When the store closed, what did you do?

JACOBSON: I looked around. People were very nice about it. They knew that we had tried. I did a little bit here, a little bit there. I couldn’t do everything. I had a gentleman that called me. He was a friend of ours. He had a mobile home plant. He told me, he says, “I’d like for you to
come to work for me. You will not be in sales, but I know you also do bookwork. You will be assistant to the one who does books here.” It was a large sized plant. They had three plants. He says, “I know that when you were in the store, you went to coffee club with your buddies every morning.” He said, “I’ll let you go get the mail every morning so you can still go to your coffee club.” I did that. He says, “Don’t expect anything special from me. Just go with friends.” I was there a few months, and one of the salespeople got sick. He told me to just start answering the phone. Not try selling anything. I ended up being number one salesman. But I did not like it. I did not like mobile home sales whatsoever. In the meantime, we did part ways. I did now know what I was going to do. I decided to go into real estate. Now, I have a broker’s license, but I don’t use it. I sold real estate for the past 35 years. It has been very good for me and our family. Even though I’m 85 years old, I go in most days, but I don’t take floor duty. I’ve slowed down. I do more managing, more than anything else. Advertising. Still in sales but in a smaller way.

SPECTOR: Earlier you discussed some of the civic involvement that you and your family had within the community. What about through the business? You’ve spoken about the respect and the understanding of the community for Jacobson’s, but was there any civic involvement as owners of the store?

JACOBSON: Not as much so. My father, he was not involved with civic work. They just all respected him so much. My older brother was president of the Chamber of Commerce the same year that I was president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce. We were involved there. He was president of the Lions Club. We were both in the country club, served on the board of the country club at different times. He was chairman of the Salvation Army at one time. I had been involved with all of the city clubs. Exchange Club, in particular. I had been president and secretary there of the Exchange Club.

SPECTOR: Could you describe what the Exchange Club does and what it means to the Waycross community?

JACOBSON: The Exchange Club is the largest club in this area, in Waycross. We have approximately 140 members. I don’t want to brag about it, but I’ve got to say it when you’re asking me this. They have what they call a community award. I’m the oldest one that ever won it and the youngest one that ever won it. The only one that has ever won it twice. I was 23 the first time I ever won it and 81 the second time I won it from being involved in the community. They have the fair here. They sponsor the blood drive for the Red Cross. I’m chairman for the
Red Cross blood drive in Waycross. Our committee, which is a very strong committee, is by far, by far . . . we get more blood donations each month for community than any city in the state of Georgia. This month, last week, we had 169 pints of blood collected here in Waycross. Every month we have that.

SPECTOR: That’s wonderful. What about politics?

JACOBSON: None of us in the family have ever been involved in politics. We’ve stayed away from it. I will support politicians that I think are good by giving them money, but I stay out of it. I really don’t get involved too much. We get along very well with all of the politicians in Waycross and the whole area, but I’ve never been involved.

SPECTOR: I know that the Jewish community in Waycross was small but vibrant. Can you tell me a little bit about the communal life and the relationship that the Jewish community had with the non-Jewish community?

JACOBSON: It has always been very good. I have to go back a little bit. The Jewish community here in Waycross started in 1920. It was the first Jews that I know of that moved to Waycross. That was the Gilmore family. Alex and Annie Gilmore moved in 1920. Harry and Anna Scher were second. Harry and Rose Yermovsky where third, that I know of. There might have been a few others that were here, but I did not know of them because they might have moved on. Like I say, my mother and father moved here in 1924. Digressing a little bit as far as the community, they had the first High Holy Days in a rented Moose Hall in 1926. After that, they got a rented place for Friday night services, Shabbos services. Of course, they didn’t have anything on Saturday. All of them were merchants. Every one of them were merchants, and they were open on Saturday. But on Friday night and all of the holidays, they had a space there up until 1953. None of the ladies ever went to the services. They did for the High Holy Days but not for Friday night services. At one time, about 1945 or 1948, around that time, there were 48 Jewish families in this area. When I say this area, I use Waycross, Blackshear, Alma, and Baxley. Of those 48 families, different ones have moved on, passed on, and so forth. In 1958, it had gotten down to 25 families. Like I say, most of them were merchants, but we had attorneys,

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7 The two High Holy Days are Rosh Ha-Shanah (Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement).
8 Shabbos (Yiddish) or Shabbat (Hebrew) for Sabbath. It is the Jewish day of rest and is observed on Saturdays. Shabbat observance entails refraining from work activities, often with great rigor, and engaging in restful activities to honor the day. Shabbat begins at sundown on Friday night and is ushered in by lighting candles and reciting a blessing. It is closed the following evening with the recitation of the havdalah blessing.
doctors too. Today, there is not even eight families in this area. Right now, in Waycross itself, of those participating Jews, there is one single lady. There is one older man, who is in a nursing home that cannot attend any services. My wife and I in Blackshear are the only ones that can attend. There is another lady in Blackshear, but she cannot attend for health reasons. We’ve only got one other couple in Alma, Mark and Laure Cohen, who come each Friday night. Ronnie and Marsha Haysman come all the way from Baxley each Friday night. My nephew, who conducts the services now, he comes from Waverly, Georgia, which is about 70 miles away, one way, to conduct services. It will vary, anywhere from three to ten. Very seldom ten. Three to eight Jews here on Friday night. The ladies all come now but didn’t before. Then, we’ll have about five or six non-Jews that do come. Some have talked about converting, but most of them just like to come to the services. So, we do have services every Friday night. There might be 10 of us, but they won’t be Jewish.

**SPECTOR:** Going back to when there were more Jewish families in Waycross. Do you recall if any of them were involved in politics or served in any elected?

**JACOBSON:** Yes. Joe Schreiber, he was solicitor general. He was solicitor general in Waycross. That’s the only one that I can think of that was involved enough. Nobody ran for commissioner, mayor, or anything that I can think of. He was solicitor for years, and he never had any problem.

**SPECTOR:** Focusing on the Hebrew Center. Can you describe a little more about its founding and how it came about?

**JACOBSON:** Yes. Like I say, they started off renting. In 1952, we bought some land. They bought the land in more of a residential area. Most of the Jews lived in that area, so they could walk on the High Holy Days. That has changed a lot. But in 1952, they broke ground, and the synagogue was built. In 1953, they had the dedication. Thankfully, being that there we so many merchants, they had received money from the different suppliers to the stores, that we were able to pay off the mortgage in three years. We were very comfortable there.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Where was it?

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9 The Waycross Hebrew Congregation was organized in 1924 with services being held in a rented building in downtown Waycross. In 1952, the Waycross Hebrew Center broke ground. In the summer of 1953, the synagogue was dedicated. Since the beginning, it has been a Conservative synagogue. It serves neighboring towns of South East Georgia.
JACOBSON: It was here in Waycross on Screven Avenue. The same one we’re in now. At that time, we were so involved. It was very strong. We were active. On High Holy Days, we would have student rabbis come down from New York from the [Jewish Theological] Seminary\(^\text{10}\) to conduct the holidays. There were two that would come at each time. Then, there got to be just one because it became too expensive. This year for the first time, we did not have a student rabbi. We had one of our congregants, who moved to Atlanta, who is very, very learned. He knows everything about religion. He came and conducted the services this time for the first time. On High Holy Days, we are very active. This past time, we looked around to make sure that we would have a minyan.\(^\text{11}\) We’re so small to begin with. We would end up with about 30 people, instead of 100 like we used to. We would do Simchat Torah. We all come down here and observe Simchat Torah\(^\text{12}\) and the other holidays. For Passover, we have a community seder.\(^\text{13}\) We’ll be here in our kitchen with kosher food. We do keep the kitchen kosher. We end up being about 35 people here because people will come from out of town for that particular occasion.

SPECTOR: Do you recall some of the families that were very active in the synagogue?

JACOBSON: Yes. Very much so. There were some at the very beginning. The Yermovskys. I just remember him as an older man. He conducted services for years. They said he butchered chickens kosher style and supplied kosher chickens. I don’t remember anything about that. He

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\(^{10}\) The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City was founded in 1886 by Dr. Sabato Morais and Dr. H. Pereira Mendes, along with a group of prominent lay leaders from Sephardic congregations in Philadelphia and New York. Its mission was to preserve the knowledge and practice of historical Judaism by educating intellectual and spiritual leaders for Conservative Judaism.

\(^{11}\) A minyan refers to the quorum of 10 Jewish adults required for certain religious obligations. According to many non-Orthodox streams of Judaism adult females count in the minyan.

\(^{12}\) Simchat Torah (Hebrew: “Rejoicing of Torah”) is a Jewish holiday that celebrates and marks the conclusion of the annual cycle of public Torah readings, and the beginning of a new cycle. The main celebration of Simchat Torah takes place in the synagogue during evening and morning services. In Orthodox as well as many Conservative congregations, this is the only time of year when the Torah scrolls are taken out of the ark and read at night.

\(^{13}\) Seder (meaning “order” in Hebrew”) is a Jewish ritual feast that marks the beginning of the Jewish holiday of Passover. It is conducted on the evening of the fifteenth day of Nisan in the Hebrew calendar throughout the world. Some communities hold seder on both the first two nights of Passover. The seder incorporates prayers, candle lighting, and traditional foods symbolizing the slavery of the Jews and the exodus from Egypt. It is one of the most colorful and joyous occasions in Jewish life.

\(^{14}\) Kosher/Kashrut is the set of Jewish dietary laws. Food that may be consumed according to halakhah (Jewish law) is termed ‘kosher’ in English. Kosher refers to Jewish laws that dictate how food is prepared or served and which kinds of foods or animals can be eaten. 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.
had two sons and two daughters, who, of course, were active. I remember them as adults more than anything else. They stayed active. Of those in the way past, one during Second World War. We adopted a family, who were just a couple. A married couple from Germany. We brought them over here. Bought them a house. Put them in a house. They had to live over here to prevent them from going to the Holocaust.\(^{15}\) He was the ping pong champion of Europe, but he never played ping pong when they came here. They became very active in this community. He was secretary here for the synagogue years and years. We also had the Victors. Dr. Sam Victor. He conducted services for many years. I would say Harry Yermovsky conducted most of them, and then Dr. Victor. After that, the young men that learned Hebrew, they would take turns conducting services. My two sons, my nephews. They conducted services on Friday night. By then, the ladies were coming, to make a minyan.

**SPECTOR:** Did you have Hebrew school, Young Judea,\(^{16}\) or bar or bat mitzvahs\(^{17}\) through the synagogue?

**JACOBSON:** Yes. When my older brother, who was seven years older than me, there were a number of people . . . the Yermovsky boys. The Gilmore boys. A number of them were learning Hebrew. The rabbi would come over from Valdosta once a week to teach them. They did have their bar mitzvah. They had it here in our synagogue then. After that, there were very few of us that were enough to learn Hebrew. I did have a bar mitzvah, but it was through transliteration. Same as my younger brother. Then, when we got married and had children, my sister had children here, my brother had children here, and others too, there were enough boys and girls here, the rabbi started coming back over here. Rabbi [Samuel] Zakuto and his wife taught them

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\(^{15}\) The systematic, government-sponsored attempt by the Germans to annihilate the Jews of Europe between 1939 and 1945, which resulted in the deaths of nearly 6,000,000 Jews.

\(^{16}\) Young Judea is a peer-led Zionist youth movement founded in 1909. Its programs include youth clubs, conventions, summer camps and Israel programs that provide experiential programming through which Jewish youth and young adults build meaningful relationships with their peers, emphasize social action, and develop a lifelong commitment to Jewish life, the Jewish people, and Israel.

\(^{17}\) 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. Bat mitzvah is Hebrew for ‘daughter of commandment.’ A rite of passage for Jewish girls aged 12 years and one day according to her Hebrew birthday. Many girls have their bar mitzvah around age 13, the same as boys who have their bar mitzvah at that age. She is now duty bound to keep the commandments. Synagogue ceremonies are held for bat mitzvah girls in Reform and Conservative communities, but it has not won the universal approval of Orthodox rabbis.
Hebrew. In the meantime, all the way, the Sisterhood\textsuperscript{18} had Sunday school each morning, and they would have the services. During the time, when I was saying about my children, my sons, they did have Young Judea. There was a young fellow here at the time, Lebowitz. He isn’t living here anymore. He was a younger guy and moved to Arizona. Marty Lebowitz. They had Young Judea. They were very definitely involved.

\textbf{SPECTOR:} What was the relationship of the congregation to Israel?

\textbf{JACOBSON:} It never was that strong. I could not feel that strong about it. I do not know why. There was no reason not to. We did have . . . I’ll say this, we had the B’nai B’rith.\textsuperscript{19} My brother was a state president of B’nai B’rith. When integration came along, they were supporting integration so strongly. Although we, personally, were all in favor of it, too, we decided we did not want that vocal. We dissolved B’nai B’rith here in Waycross for that reason. Like I was saying, we were very active in integrating. We wanted that, but we did not want to be known for that. We were afraid, although there was no problem. I will say this about integration. During the time they boycotted the blacks, boycotted the stores downtown, they were trying to say, “We’ll trade with you and so forth.” We had one black fellow, he came into the store, although they were marching up and down on the street. Not designating us in particular. There was one store in town that had hired a black . . . the Schreibers. Schreibers Bootery. We didn’t have any employed, but we were very good to them. This black fellow came in. He says, “I need some things.” We said, “What?” He says, “I need some empty boxes.” He said, ”Wrap them up good.” I said, “What are you doing?” He walked outside. He said, “Those are your best friends that you will ever have. I will trade here. Anybody that wants to stop me, I’ll put these down here and fight with you right now.” That is the way it was. He was sticking up for us, which was mighty nice. He didn’t buy anything that day, but he always traded with us. After that, we had no more problems. They started coming in.

\textsuperscript{18} A group of women in a synagogue congregation who join together to offer social, cultural, educational, and volunteer service opportunities. In Waycross, the group called themselves “Daughters of Abraham.”

\textsuperscript{19} B’nai B’rith (Hebrew: ‘Children of the Covenant’) is the oldest Jewish service organization in the world. Waycross Jews had a short-lived chapter, beginning in 1947 and disbanding in 1959. B’nai B’rith is committed to the security and continuity of the Jewish people and the State of Israel and combating antisemitism and bigotry. Its mission is to unite persons of the Jewish faith and to enhance Jewish identity through strengthening Jewish family life, to provide broad-based services for the benefit of senior citizens, and to facilitate advocacy and action on behalf of Jews throughout the world.
SPECTOR: Was the Waycross congregation involved with other congregations throughout the South?

JACOBSON: Not really. We knew of them, but that was about it. We were not really involved other than the rabbi coming from Valdosta. We weren’t even active with the Valdosta [congregation]. That was about it. We were never involved.

SPECTOR: When you had a visiting rabbi, when the rabbi was not coming from Valdosta, where did those rabbis come from?

JACOBSON: When ones didn’t come from Valdosta, we didn’t have one coming in except during the High Holy Days. All of them were strictly local.

SPECTOR: Where did the rabbis come from for the High Holy Days?

JACOBSON: From the seminary. They were student rabbis mostly. We had one student rabbi. The entire time, he started off at the very beginning, Rabbi Martin Cohen, who is in New York now. He would come. He loved coming down. He kept coming down as a young man. When he was ordained, he went to Germany as a teacher, and he would still come back. He came 10 years in a row as a student rabbi. After he was ordained, too. We still keep up with him very strongly. He would have somebody come with him. One time, he had a blind student rabbi that he brought with him. He came. We keep up with him very strongly. Most of the time, there were no other rabbis involved except the High Holy Days.

SPECTOR: When Rabbi Cohen was a student, was it the Jewish Theological Seminary from the Conservative movement?

JACOBSON: Correct, it was. We went there. To tell you the truth, we used them for many, many years. I don’t know, 50-60 years. Then they said, “Do you want a lady rabbi student?” We said, “No, we prefer a man.” A boy. They said, “Will you put that in writing?” I did. They said, “No more. We will not send a student rabbi down to you,” which was a shocker. That really tore us up bad. We had some people that knew different rabbis, assistant rabbis or teacher. So, for the past five or six years, we used them because we could not use the seminary. They would not send somebody down.

SPECTOR: How long ago was that?

JACOBSON: About six years ago, I guess. I’ve always been the one to communicate with the seminary, William Lebeau. Rabbi Lebeau up there.

SPECTOR: Do you remember how old you were when they dedicated the synagogue?
JACOBSON: Yes, because I was married by then. It was a dedicated a year after I got married in 1953. My brother was chairman of the committee. They were all involved. I was not involved on that part because I was just a young punk.

SPECTOR: Do you remember the families, besides yours, that were involved when they dedicated the synagogue?

JACOBSON: The ones that were involved? Yes. They had quite a few of them other than my family. The Schreibers. Joe Schreiber was an attorney. Harry Schreiber. He had Schreiber’s Bootery and Shoe Store. Reuben Brothers. There was a factory here that made shoes. The Reuben Brothers.

SPECTOR: This is Deborah Spector, a volunteer with the Taylor Oral History Project at the Breman Museum. I am here with Al Jacobson on January 28, 2015, at the Waycross Hebrew Center, 610 Screven Avenue in Waycross, Georgia. We were discussing the dedication of the Waycross Hebrew Center. Could you tell me about the families that were involved and their involvement?

JACOBSON: Right. My brother was chairman. We had the Reuben Brothers. They were here. They manufactured shoes. They were involved very strongly. Harry and Joe Schreiber. I remember them. Mr. [Harry] Weisser had a jewelry store and his son-in-law, Ben Schemer. They were all involved with it. The Gilmore family out of Blackshear. There were others that were involved in it from Alma and Baxley but not as strongly because they were all local trying to work things out. But everybody in the whole area was very strong in getting the contributions so that we could build the synagogue.

SPECTOR: Could you tell me about the relationship to the synagogue with the non-Jewish community?

JACOBSON: Yes, very strongly. It has always been so respected. The newspaper has always been promoting us too. [Has] been very good. I mentioned the Brotherhood program before. The first one who won the Brotherhood Award was the editor of the newspaper. The college here for a number of years had a Holocaust program where they would have somebody come speak and invite different ones from the community. It has been very involved. Good.
SPECTOR: I understand when you first opened that there was information on the relationship between having a synagogue and the effect, or was there effect, on any of the churches or other religious organizations within Waycross?

JACOBSON: It was not involved that much, but they were so strong for us. They really supported us. In fact, sometimes we would even have Passover at their churches, not for the community, but to show them what’s going on. They would invite us to speak to them. Each year, one of the churches has a Sunday school come here and see it, and I speak to them. We did not own the property next door to us, that land, but contributions came in. We bought that land, which we now call the Brotherhood Garden. We opened up a big sliding door to that. On that land, we have our Sukkot. Although you are supposed to take them down each year, we leave it up. We do observe Sukkot out there every year. It’s where we go. So, we own the property next to us for that reason.

SPECTOR: Can you tell me more about the Brotherhood Garden?

JACOBSON: It was just an idea. My mother is the one who put the name up, Brotherhood Garden. There is a stone out there that shows it. It looks like a tombstone, and it is not. No one is buried there. It does say the Brotherhood Garden. When we have the Brotherhood program, people usually wonder out there just to see what’s going on.

SPECTOR: Can you speak more to the Gilmores, the founding family?

JACOBSON: Yes. Alex Gilmore was the first president of the Waycross Hebrew Center. He had a store over there. M. Blackshear. You got to remember, we’re talking about the 1920s. They kept kosher. The only way to get kosher meat was from Savannah [Georgia]. Annie Gilmore, even though she had eight children, four boys and four girls, and worked in the store, she would go by train and pick up meat in Savannah for a supply and put it in the ice box, before refrigeration. She raised all four boys and four girls very definitely Jewish. They were all very active. My older brother married one of the daughters. They were all very active. Those that are still living are very active too. So, it was quite involved in the community. He died at the

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20 One of the Harvest Festivals. It is seven days long and comes after the ingathering of the yearly harvest. It celebrates G-d’s bounty in nature and G-d’s protection, symbolized by the fragile booths in which the Israelites dwelt in the wilderness. During Sukkot Jews eat and live in such booths, which gives the festival its name and character.
age of 48. His wife, Annie, had to raise those eight children in a kosher home and run the store herself. When the older boys got older, they went to the store with her.

**SPECTOR:** You mentioned that your older brother was married to one of the Gilmore girls. Tell me a little bit, please, about your extended family – the children of your brother and brothers and sisters.

**JACOBSON:** My brother and his wife, Esther, they had two children, but they died at very young age of . . . I can’t think of the name of it now. It involves inherited from . . . Tay-Sachs disease. Both of them. Then they adopted two boys. One of the boys is Neal. He comes over every Friday night to do the service, so he is carrying on tradition. He is also president of the congregation.

**SPECTOR:** How far away does Neal live?

**JACOBSON:** About 70 miles. It takes him over an hour to get here and over an hour to get back. Some of the non-Jews that come in, they come in early, and he teaches them Hebrew best he can.

**SPECTOR:** Speak with me, please, about service during World War II.

**JACOBSON:** I don’t remember it as well, but I do remember. I was noticing on the plaque, yesterday, in fact, that there was seven young Jewish men from this area that served in the service during World War II. My brother, The Gilmore boys and different ones. There was seven of them. Of course all of them are deceased now.

**SPECTOR:** Do you know if the war, and to what degree know, what was going on in Europe during World War II? What kind of impact did it have on Waycross and the community? I know that you mentioned that you adopted and brought over a German family.

**JACOBSON:** I mentioned that part. We were involved in it. My mother was very definitely involved in the USO [United Service Organization]. I remember when the trains came through. They would stop. Different ones would serve donuts at the track, right there. As far as involvement, I don’t know. We had an air base here at the time too, a small one. One of the fellows married my sister. That was later on after the war. He married her, moved to Waycross, and lived here. The most tragic time that we have ever had in Waycross, though, digressing a

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21 A nonprofit organization that provides programs, services, and live entertainment to the United States Armed Forces members and their families. Since 1941, it has worked in partnership with the Department of Defense, relying heavily on contributions, goods, and services from various corporate and individual donors.
little bit, was in 1977. Keep in mind how small we are. In 1977, seven members of our congregation passed away. My mother. My brother’s wife. Two Gilmores. There were seven people in one year. That was a rough, rough year.

SPECTOR: It must have been. What effect did the Holocaust have on the community?

JACOBSON: The Holocaust itself, people would see us all the time and talk about it and how concerned they were. My grandmother, who I never knew, she was over there still in Latvia. So, we knew about the Holocaust. Myself. My father would send money over there to her every so often. When he didn’t hear from her anymore, stopped. We have no idea. His father had already passed away before. For yahrzeit, we do yahrzeit for her and him on the same night because we don’t know when she passed away. Speaking of yahrzeit, we have yahrzeit plaques. There are six plaques now. We have light bulbs by the names. Every week, we come in and turn on the lights next to their names. Years ago when we had the large community, we had yahrzeit on the night of the date of the yahrzeit. We would have a minyan just to come in of men only. We would have just enough to say Kaddish. Later one, we didn’t have enough people. We could never get a minyan. Now, we do it for the week. We have a newsletter that comes out and gives all of the dates. So, we come in and turn on the lights for those. About two years ago, I realized that 90 percent of those that do attend, do not know any of those people on the board, on the yahrzeit plaques. So, I sat down and wrote something for them. It gives an idea of who they were, where they lived, their relationship here, children, and so forth. Every Friday night, when it is time for services and time for Kaddish, I get up and read about those people. Those people who have moved away before, they are still recognized by the yahrzeit plaque. The calendar that I put out has been going out for about 48 years, once a quarter. Every four months, we do it. There is a newsletter that tells you what is going on in the community. On the backside is the calendar so everybody will know whose yahrzeit is when or any other special program like the

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22 ‘Anniversary’ in Hebrew. Each year the anniversary of the death of a relative is observed by lighting a special yahrzeit candle and reciting the Kaddish. Memorial services for the dead are also held during the High Holy Days and the Festivals.

23 Kaddish (Hebrew for ‘holy’) is a hymn of praises to G-d found in the Jewish prayer service that is recited aloud while standing. The central theme of the Kaddish is the magnification and sanctification of G-d’s name. Along with the Shema and Amidah, the Kaddish is one of the most important and central elements in the Jewish liturgy. Mourner’s Kaddish is said at all prayer services and certain other occasions. Following the death of a parent, child, spouse, or sibling it is customary to recite the Mourner’s Kaddish in the presence of a congregation daily for 30 days, or 11 months in the case of a parent, and then at every anniversary of the death. It is important to note that the Mourner’s Kaddish does not mention death at all, but instead praises G-d.
Brotherhood, Passover, seder, so forth. I started that in February. The reason I did that in February instead of starting it off at the first of the year when I started it 48 years ago because we were busy in December in the store, and I couldn’t get it out. The idea came. It’s not what you call quarterly. It is quarterly but not starting in January, June, and so forth. We’ve been doing it for 48 years. The other one is in the press right now for February.

SPECTOR: When did you <unintelligible>?

JACOBSON: About five years ago, I guess it was. We have a gentleman who comes sometimes from Brunswick [Georgia] for Friday night. He comes all of the time for Passover and High Holy Days. Gary Marmitt. He’s real strong, and he came up with the idea. He developed the website. He keeps it up. Now with the newsletter, we email it to him, so he can put it on the website. Anything newsy.

SPECTOR: Circling back. Was there ever any antisemitism, overt antisemitism, in Waycross or the surrounding communities?

JACOBSON: No, there was never. There was only two times that I can think of anything at all, and they were minor. My sister, when she was in high school, was dating a boy. They broke up. He had some few words around town. Other than that, not. I mentioned we have a college and the Holocaust program. One night, we had that program. Someone intentionally asked the visiting rabbi at the time, “Would you believe in Jesus?” His answer was not . . . I would say, yes, we know of him of a great learned man. Something like that. His was, “We don’t believe at all,” or something like that. That night, somebody did paint a red Star of David,24 not a swastika, on the front door of our synagogue. That is the only two times that I remember any at all antisemitism in Waycross. They’ve been here nearly 85 years. I don’t remember it.

SPECTOR: Was there ever any [Ku Klux] Klan25 activity in Waycross?

JACOBSON: Not that I know of. I’m sure there had to be some time in the past, but I do not know of any. I never saw it – against the Jews or the blacks. I don’t know of it.

24 The Magen David (Hebrew: Shield of David), or as it is more commonly known, the Star of David, is the symbol most commonly associated with Judaism today.

25 The Ku Klux Klan is a white supremacist, white nationalist, anti-immigration, anti-Jewish, anti-Catholic, anti-black secret society, whose methods included terrorism and murder. It was founded in the South in the 1860’s and then died out and come back several times, most notably in the 1920’s when membership soared again, and then again in the 1960’s during the civil rights era. When the Klan was re-founded in 1915 in Georgia, the event was marked by a cross burning on Stone Mountain. In the past it members dressed up in white robes and a pointed hat designed to hide their identity and to terrify. It is still in existence.
SPECTOR: Is there a United Jewish Appeal campaign?

JACOBSON: They did for years and years. They would travel around through the community to collect it. We’ve gotten so small now, it is strictly up to the individuals to do it. But, yes, we used to raise quite a bit of money. My brother would travel around South Georgia, going to all the Jewish merchants. They collected quite a bit for the United Jewish Appeal.

SPECTOR: I would love it if you would describe the stained glass that you have over the [Holy] Ark. Tell me something about that.

JACOBSON: My sister came up with the idea of that. She took glass and put it on a ping pong table. Anne Cooper. She took the glasses in three different sections and put them on a ping pong table. Then she took liquid lead and outlined what she was going to do and paint it. Each one of those symbols . . . it starts off at the beginning of all the Jewish holidays. Plus, it has a candelabra. Everything involved in Judaism is on the . . . bar mitzvah, yarmulkes and everything is on the stained glass. Then we had to have somebody professional come and put it together up there over the ark. So, it shines there all the time. People that come in are amazed at the design and the part that she did. We have a brochure, now, that people can read and know what each symbol represents. The shofar, the ark, the Torahs. They’ll know what it is.

SPECTOR: What other artifacts do you have at the synagogue? Were any of them made by congregants or friends of the Waycross Center?

JACOBSON: The only artifacts we have is in memory of people that we have put around. Stained glass windows on the side. The different plaques. The Torahs. The ark covers. Things

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26 The United Jewish Appeal (UJA) was a Jewish philanthropic umbrella organization that collected and distributed funds to Jewish organizations in their community and around the country. UJA existed from 1939 until it was folded into the United Jewish Communities, which was formed from the 1999 merger of United Jewish Appeal (UJA), Council of Jewish Federations and United Israel Appeal, Inc.

27 The Aron Kodesh [Hebrew: Holy Ark; also sometimes called the “Torah Ark”) is the holiest place in the synagogue and where the Torah scrolls are kept when not in use. The Aron Kodesh is situated in the front of the synagogue and 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.

28 A hanukiah (or chanukiah) is the proper term for a candelabrum with nine branches that is lit during Hanukkah. Since Hanukkah lasts for eight days it permits the lighting of eight candles, one for each day, by the ninth candle. Generally, the candelabrum used at Hanukkah is almost always called a menorah. However, the menorah, which has only seven branches, is an ancient symbol of the Jews and which has become connected with Hanukkah. According to the Talmud, after the desecration of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, there was only enough pure oil left to fuel the eternal flame in the Temple for one day. Miraculously, the oil burned for eight days which was enough to make new pure oil. The Talmud states that it is prohibited to use a seven-branched menorah outside of the Temple so the Hanukkah menorah (hanukiah) has nine branches.

29 Jewish men cover their heads during prayer with a small skull-cap called a ‘yarmulke’ or ‘kippah.’ Orthodox Jewish men wear it at all times to remind themselves of G-d’s presence.

30 The ram’s horn which has been used on special religious occasions since biblical times.
of that type are around the synagogue in memory of people so that they can see that. The only other thing we have that is more original more than anything else is the Flussman family we brought over from Germany, we have some artifacts of his back in the anteroom for everybody to see what was going on, him being the ping pong champion. We have that because it dates back so far.

SPECTOR: Do you know some of the families that have benches in your garden in memory of the family?

JACOBSON: No. I can’t think of any off hand. I do know, this is something we have not discussed. Back in the fifties, 1958 to be exact, we approached the city commissioners that we wanted a Jewish section in the cemetery. They said yes. We wanted to buy it off a little bit, but it is still here with the others. What they did, they said, “We’ll take one whole row and plants trees on it. Then we will add $25 per grave site when . . .” You don’t need to put any money now, but when somebody does buy a grave site, we’ll add $25 to cover the section that we did. That was showing you that they were trying to cooperate with us very strongly. We built an arch over the road that you go into. The first graves were in 1958. They were the Rudnicks. Julius [and Adeline] Rudnick, who had no children. They were a family here. They were active, not real strong active, in Waycross. That was many years ago. We have hevrah kadishah.31 Thankfully we haven’t used it recently, but we do have our own hevrah kadishah. Many years ago, we used to sit up with the body, but we don’t do that anymore either. Things have changed. We have some that have intermarriages. We decided to do this. At the very end of our section is for those right there, so they can be buried in the Jewish section but not in the Jewish section. It would be the same thing, but it is in the same section as the Jewish community.

SPECTOR: As you know, my husband is from Waycross. I know that, especially his dad, was involved with the synagogue. Could you mention again some of Dr. Victor’s involvement?

JACOBSON: He conducted services more than anything else. He was just very, very involved in the synagogue itself. His wife, Gertie, she was also involved. Gertie had a sister that lived in Waycross. She and her husband were involved in the synagogue. Everybody that has

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31 The traditional organization that existed in every Jewish community to provide the services required for the dead. The members of the organization would be called to sit with the dying person throughout the day and night, making sure that they confessed and uttered the Shema on their dying breath. After the death had been confirmed, they took the body away to be prepared for the funeral.
lived here, more or less, has been involved. Dr. Victor was very respected as a physician here in Waycross.

SPECTOR: Are there any other elements of the community that we haven’t touched on that you would like to speak to?

JACOBSON: I can’t think of anything. I have pride about our congregation. That’s the whole thing about it. How we stayed together and worked together. The newsletter that I mention, it goes out all over the country. Most of it, people are from out of town, way out of town. There is one lady who is 96 years old. She was raised here. I mentioned that her parents, the Schers, were the second family to move to this area. She moved when she was probably 20 years old. We’re talking about over 70 years ago. She still gets the newsletter. She still sends her contribution every year to the Waycross Hebrew Center. That is what is keeping us going. In other words, all of those who have moved out of town and that receive the newsletter and send contributions, that is what keeps us going. We couldn’t afford to do it here. Even though it is paid for. My nephew, Neal, he cuts the grass and things like that. There are still things to do. The utilities. Different things are involved. Without them, we couldn’t survive.

SPECTOR: As we come to the end of the interview and you mentioned your pride in the community, what would you like to see the legacy of the Waycross Hebrew Center be?

JACOBSON: The biggest part is Jews moving here. Because at my age, when I’m gone, who is going to be down here every day? There is nobody else here. Neal and them will come all the time. The Cohens and the Haysmans. But, locally, who can do it? I’m not saying I can do better. I’m just saying there is nobody here to do it. That is the biggest problem. I’m very concerned. I just don’t know.

SPECTOR: Your participation at the Waycross Center and your generosity to be involved with the oral history interview, which will be in the Breman heritage museum, will carry your message about your family, about the Jewish community in Waycross, about the Hebrew Center.

As we come to the end of the interview, I would like to thank you for your generosity and for spending the time today to speak on the Hebrew Center and the Jewish community in Waycross.

JACOBSON: Thank you. I appreciate you coming down and speaking to us. Send us some Jews down. This is what we’re needing, badly. We’ll get them involved, for sure.

SPECTOR: Thank you very much. This is the end of the interview with Al Jacobson today January 28, 2015 at the Waycross Hebrew Center.
<End Tape 1, Side 2>

INTERVIEW ENDS