INTERVIEW BEGINS

SPECTOR: This is Deborah Spector. I am here with Ira Lavinsky on December 5, 2016, at his home, 2601 Massee Post Road in Adel, Georgia. Thank you for agreeing to participate in the Taylor Oral History Project of the Breman Museum. Let’s start with your story about how you got involved with Jewish communal life.

LA VINSKY: As a youngster, like many others, I went to Hebrew school. I went to Hebrew school after I got out of public school, where you just go from one to the other. It wasn’t just me, it was all of my basic friends. I lived in Crown Heights in Brooklyn, New York, which was a very religious area. I went for two hours. I didn’t go every week. I wasn’t really active in Jewish life at that time, but when I went on to college in Florida, I started to get more involved with synagogue. It was just before Rosh Ha-Shana and Yom Kippur, so I did want to go to services for the High Holy Days. I started to go in Tampa, Florida, [at] Beth Israel Congregation. The president of the synagogue was across the street from university. I didn’t drive, so he would drive me there and drove me back. There was a family in Tampa that were very friendly with me. They would generally have me over to their house just about every

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

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

3. The two High Holy Days are *Rosh Ha-Shanah* (Jewish New Year) and *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement).
Friday night for *Shabbos* meal, which I appreciated. Then, unfortunately, I don’t remember which one of them had a relative who passed away. Then I tried to come a lot more often. So, I was going to synagogue maybe . . . even though I was a college student . . . whenever I didn’t have class. I was probably going five times per week so they could say *Kaddish*.

As I was going to synagogue, the rabbi noticed because I had a singing voice. I’ve had some professional training too. Even as a youngster, my parents sent me to a school for music, singing, and stuff. In college I took private lessons also. At Beth Israel, I joined the synagogue choir. I was at the University of Tampa for a year and a half, and then I transferred to the University of South Florida in Tampa. I joined the new Jewish student union. They just started up a new Jewish student union. I was elected the vice president of the Jewish student union there. I was really shocked, because the person who organized the Jewish student union ran against me. I started the first religious service because I could sing. The University of South Florida at that time was so isolated from the world and didn’t really have a ton of Jewish students, but I started a religious service on campus. I started conducting services at the University of Tampa.

Excuse me, at the University of South Florida, I started conducting religious services. That was the first religious service South Florida ever had on campus. It was long before they had Hillel or anything like that. The rabbi at the time, Rabbi Samuel Mallinger, taught me a lot of the melodies and stuff. I learned such beautiful melodies. I use many of them still today. He gave me books and everything that the congregation, Beth Israel, weren’t using. That was the start of really getting active in life. After I graduated college, I taught in Tampa for two years. I continued to attend at Beth Israel and joined there. Again, I was active in their choir. Then I taught for two years, as I was a school teacher in Brandon, Florida. I taught two years of school

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4 *Shabbos* (Yiddish) or *Shabbat* (Hebrew) 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.

5 *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.

6 Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life is a Jewish campus organization. Its mission is to enrich the lives of Jewish students so they may enrich Jewish people and the world.
in student teaching. I was looking for a job up north. I was certified. I thought I wanted to get back closer to home. I was certified in New Jersey and Massachusetts but not in New York. In all honesty, being single and picky, I really didn’t want to teach something I really wasn’t interested in. The only jobs I was offered were in world history and geography. I didn’t feel it was my background, and I didn’t want to teach it. I wound up taking a job, which was almost like a misunderstanding. I ended up take a job for a teaching agency in Georgia. This is how I came down here. When I took this job, it turned out . . . I was a high school certified teacher, and this job turned out to be sixth grade elementary. I couldn’t stay with the state certification I had. This was in Statenville, Georgia, where I met my wife, Glynda. My wife is from Statenville, Georgia. She was a principal’s secretary when I first came down, and that is how we met. Then I started going to services . . . I rode a couple of times to Waycross [Hebrew Center] because I knew Waycross synagogue was there. I didn’t know about the Fitzgerald [Hebrew] Congregation.7 There were two Jewish families in Alma [Georgia] who attended services in Fitzgerald where I was teaching in Alma that year. One of them is the president of our synagogue, the synagogue I go to now, Fitzgerald Hebrew Congregation. Brett Fielding was his name. Mr. Fielding brought me to this congregation here. Then, my wife and I decided to get married. In all honesty, Glynda was not Jewish. I had to have her converted. My parents were opposed to the idea. My parents told the rabbi at Valdosta [Temple Israel/Valdosta Hebrew Congregation] not to convert her. When we went to Fitzgerald, the rabbi at Fitzgerald agreed to convert her. That’s is how we started. The whole thing worked out for the best. That is how we started at Fitzgerald. We started Fitzgerald in 1968 or so. We were married in 1970 in Fitzgerald congregation. There has only been one wedding since 1970. Rabbi [Nathan L.] Kohen8 married us. There have only been two weddings since 1970 at Fitzgerald. That’s been it. At that time, the rabbi was still alive for a few more years, so I just attended services. After the rabbi passed away and after Abe Kruger passed away . . . Abe Kruger acted as the cantor9 there for many,
many years. I don’t know how many years he was cantor before me. Kruger's go back a long, long time in that congregation, as you know. Abe was a wonderful person. Anyhow, after he stopped doing it, I took over. Being a small congregation, we felt that maybe we couldn’t afford a full-time rabbi. So, I sort of took over the duties, not only of cantor but more or less as rabbi as well because if somebody had a situation . . . for instance, I remember Isaac Perlis. Their father died and their mother died, the Hellers, and others. They wanted at least to say Kaddish every week. I would come. We’re 55 miles from here . . . .55 miles from the synagogue each week. I would drive 110 miles every week so they could say Kaddish. They always appreciated it. If I hadn’t done it, no one would have done it. That was when I really started conducting services there. Around 1973-74, somewhere in there, is when I really started actively doing this full time. Over the years, I continued doing it at Fitzgerald and in Valdosta since Fitzgerald only has services once a month. I’d go to Valdosta some, as well, if the rabbi was on vacation. Sometimes Georgia honor high school students would come to Valdosta and attend services, where the rabbi explains Judaism to them. I’ve also done services when the rabbi wasn’t there, for him. They have been coming to Valdosta for about five or six years. The rabbi asked me to cover for him because he usually goes to Israel every year. He has a son living there. His family is there. When he retires from here, he going to live in Israel full time. I’ve done services for them. He is going back. I’ve done services for them. I’ve never done services for Waycross, but I’ve done services for the rabbi in Valdosta a number of times, with him and without him. I’ve done services in Tampa. I used to do it in college. The other place, which is a cute little story. We were on vacation, and we went to St. Augustine [Florida] for one day. St. Augustine had a synagogue. Now it is probably a lot bigger, but they did not have a rabbi in St. Augustine at that time. They do now, but this is going back a lot of years. St. Augustine didn’t have a rabbi, and we were there. I introduced myself and said I do services at Fitzgerald. So, they asked me to do the services. I did the services for them in St. Augustine, and they offered me the job for High Holy Days at St. Augustine. I had to turn them down. I said, “I appreciate it, but I’m at Fitzgerald.” I said, ”I can’t do that.” That was a long time ago.

SPECTOR: Do you remember when you were at the university, what years when you first went down to Florida?

LA VINSKY: Yes. I was at the University of Tampa from 1961 to about 1963. Then I was at the University of South Florida . . . it was a state college, from 1963 through when I graduated in
1965. I stayed in Tampa two more years and taught in Tampa. That was when I joined Beth Israel. Beth Israel, unfortunately, that is a sad story. I don’t know because I left. Apparently, there was a fall out between some of the members and the rabbi. What happened, they built another congregation across the street and next block over. The rabbi moved, and they built Temple of David. Temple David has actually survived, and Beth Israel did not. I think Beth Israel became some housing there now. Temple David became Chabad\textsuperscript{10} synagogue [Bais David Chabad] in Tampa now. I think Chabad took it over way after Rabbi Mallinger died. I wasn’t down here, so I’m not sure. My cousin was a rabbi at Rodeph Shalom for a few years. Rodeph Shalom had a rabbi who was fairly well liked. Unfortunately, the man died in a plane crash [Rabbi Kenneth Berger]. He was loved. I told my cousin, “Don’t you take that job.” He said, “Why?” I said, “Because the man is like a legend down there. No matter how good you are, they aren’t going to like you.” He was there, I think, for four years. He had a contract. Then he had to leave and [he] moved on. He is a rabbi now in Phoenix, Arizona at a very big congregation there for about 14 years now. He has found his place where he really likes. I told him, unfortunately, of my having cancer. I told him that I’m hoping he can make it down because I want him to do my funeral if he can. My father wanted him to do his, and he couldn’t. My cousin and I have been pretty close. I’m probably as close to him as anybody. He told me that he would try his darnedest to get down here and do the funeral for me. So, it’s nice. I’ve had a lot of moral support with different rabbis. Rabbi Moshe Elbaz from Valdosta called yesterday. My cousin has called me twice in the last couple of weeks. I’ve had about five or six different rabbis contact me. Also, old student rabbis. A few of them are in New York. I’ve had a call from Arizona, which was nice. It makes you feel you still are appreciated.

**SPECTOR:** Sure. Would you like to take a break?

**LAVINSKY:** Just a second, yes. I’m dehydrated.

**NOAH LEVINE:** Is there anything unique to Jewish life in South Georgia, different than places you grew up in, New York or Florida? Can you say what is unique to the way the Jews participate or are involved in South Georgia?

**LAVINSKY:** That is a very hard question. I’m not sure I can answer because in certain areas it is different. For instance, at Fitzgerald the Jews have had many Jewish businesses for a long, long time. Unfortunately, most of the businesses now are all closed or the people have all died.

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\textsuperscript{10} Chabad is a Hasidic movement in Orthodox Judaism.
out. In Fitzgerald, there never was any type of discrimination because you are Jewish. In Valdosta, to some degree, a lot of people know Jews, and there is a fairly good relationship between the Jewish community and others. Because, for instance, the last rabbi spoke at different civic organizations and at churches too. There are a lot of churches interested. So the Jews haven’t experienced mass discrimination that I hear of in some other places in the south. I don’t know if that is the best way I can answer that to you.

NOAH LEVINE: Did they participate in Jewish activities? Jewish seders? Religious school and youth group?

LA VINSKY: Unfortunately, by the time I came to Fitzgerald, most of the kids were gone. To be honest with you, most of them have gone back to Atlanta. I’ve seen pictures of previous seders with 30 to 40 children. You can see where they had community seders, where there was over one hundred people, easily. Now the only time you get a hundred people is for Rosh Ha-Shanah. I did teach Sunday school for a few years, but now all the children are gone. I did teach Sunday school for only a few children. Valdosta has an active Sunday school, where Fitzgerald still doesn’t have that. In Valdosta, now we’re trying to start teaching groups, encouraging them to learn Hebrew and learn about the Bible. The rabbi has been conducting classes in lieu of a service on Saturday mornings. He has been doing these things here. Apparently, it was hard to get people to attend once every three weeks on Saturday. In fact, Valdosta has never been able to get, that I know of, people to attend on Saturday morning. Now they are getting enough people, but just for study. At our synagogue, what we do now, Friday night we have our services. Saturday night we have an adult service. We have an adult study session. The rabbi picks a topic in advance and brings information on it, and we have a round-table discussion. It goes on a long time. On Saturday nights, we usually start around 8:00 and don’t get home until around midnight. It is a very interesting discussion, and people seem to enjoy what we’re doing over the years now. People enjoy talking about general topics relating to religion, not necessarily politics, but general topics on what things mean and things like that.

SPECTOR: How often do you have Shabbat services at Fitzgerald?

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11 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.
LA VINSKY: In Fitzgerald, we try basically once a month. Sometimes we’ll have it twice a month. Sometimes we won’t have it for a month and a half. We try to have it at least once a month now. When a student rabbi comes down from a Jewish theological seminary, he and I conduct services Friday night, and I don’t do anything Saturday night. He does it all Saturday night other than sing along. He conducts Saturday nights himself. Friday nights, I probably do the majority of it.

SPECTOR: You mentioned when we spoke on the phone, that you had some family coming to Fitzgerald this weekend.

LA VINSKY: Hopefully, yes. I mean, they are coming for sure.

SPECTOR: Twenty-six down here?

LA VINSKY: Twenty-six down here.

SPECTOR: Can you tell us something about your family? Where your family was originally from and how they got to Crown Heights in Brooklyn. Where were your grandparents from?

LA VINSKY: This is going to be hard for me because I was so little. The grandparents on my father’s side were born in Russia. They are Russian. They came to the U.S. How they got here, I really don’t know the story. My father was born in the U.S. One of his brothers and one of his sisters, by a previous marriage, were born in Russia. When I say previous marriage, apparently, my grandfather was married. From what I understand, my grandfather was married and something happened. His wife died very young in her 20s. He was married to my grandmother for over 50 years. The grandpa that I know. My grandfather was very religious. I remember that. He was Orthodox. I remember one time I rode with him to services. He said to me, “Do you need the book?” It was Friday night. I thought I had to have a prayer book but know it by heart because you are supposed to look at the book in case you make a mistake. You might not be perfect. My other side, I never met my grandfather on my mother’s side. I’m not sure if she came from Poland or if she came from Russia. I think she might have come from Poland. I don’t want to swear on that. I’m not sure. I remember my grandma. I was very close to my grandma on my other side because she lived with us for probably about 11 years until she just got too sick. Then one of my mother’s brothers took her for a while. They finally had to put her in a nursing home where she died less than a year later. My grandma lived with us. That’s why I remember the little Yiddish that I picked up from my grandma. She would talk in Yiddish. My father spoke fluent English, but he could read Yiddish. My father used to read the Jewish paper
in Yiddish paper every day. *The Forward*,¹² I guess. That was written in Yiddish at that time. He used to be able to read it in Yiddish. This doesn’t relate to this, but this will be an interesting story that you can laugh at, which is true, though. Otherwise you probably won’t hear this.

Going back to my *bar mitzvah*¹³ . . . this is really an interesting story to tell you. I told you I went to Hebrew school for a number of years. For my *bar mitzvah* I wanted to do a good job. I wanted to a private tutor, so my parents got me a private tutor for a year, which was nice. My father went to one of these little tiny synagogues. Of course the men and women were separated. Basically, it was a rabbi’s home, which was converted into a little synagogue in Crown Heights. I didn’t like going to services there because the service was in all Hebrew, and the sermon was all Yiddish, so I couldn’t understand anything. This is one reason why I got away from the movement when I first turned 13 until I went to Tampa. But this was the funny thing. I always told you I could sing. So, I did *haftorah*,¹⁴ and it was beautiful. The rabbi comes up to me and says, “You do a great job.” I said to him, “I didn’t know you spoke English.” That is a funny story, but that is absolutely true. It was the first time I ever heard a little English spoken in that synagogue. I had no idea he spoke English.

SPECTOR: That’s wonderful. Do you remember your grandmother’s family name?

LA VINSKY: Yes. My grandmother’s family name was Tucker. T-U-C-K-E-R. Of course, my father’s was Lavinsky.

NOAH LEVINE: When were you born? What day?

LA VINSKY: I was born April 22, 1944, at Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn.

SPECTOR: You went to junior high school and high school in . . .

LA VINSKY: Brooklyn in the Crown Heights area. And elementary school.

SPECTOR: Besides school and Hebrew school, what interests did you have? What was family life like? I know you mentioned that your grandmother lived with you for a while.

¹² *The Forward* (Yiddish: *Forverts*) also called *The Jewish Daily Forward*, is an American newspaper published in New York City. *The Forward* began publishing in 1897 as a daily, left-leaning Yiddish language newspaper. The organization publishes two newspapers weekly in English and biweekly in Yiddish.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ The *haftorah* is a series of selections from the books of *Nevi’im* (“Prophets”) of the *Hebrew Bible* (*Tanach*) that is publicly read in synagogue as part of Jewish religious practice. The *haftorah* reading follows the *Torah* reading on each Sabbath and on Jewish festivals and fast days.
LAVINSKY: Right. My mother’s mother.

SPECTOR: Did your brother and sister come over from Russia or did they stay in Russia? Did they live with you?

LAVINSKY: You got confused. I told you my father I was born in this country. I had a sister. My sister was born in this country.

SPECTOR: So, you sister was born here.

LAVINSKY: Right. We didn’t have anybody born outside the U.S. except my father’s brother and sister, Uncle Jack and Aunt Faye.

SPECTOR: But they stayed in Russia?

LAVINSKY: They came. My whole family came to the U.S. I know one of them . . . They all came here.

NOAH LEVINE: What did your father do?

LAVINSKY: My father was a wholesaler in a hardware line. He worked independently for himself. Today you would call him a peddler, I guess. He would go from store to store selling. He had his regular customers. That is what he did for a living. He also worked for Armstrong racing sheet. I don’t know if that is still around. He did that for a morning job, distributing racing papers. I remember that.

SPECTOR: I don’t know if they are around or not. It would be interesting to find out.

LAVINSKY: Armstrong was called *Daily Racing Sheet*.  

SPECTOR: Racing was very big. When you left New York and went to Florida, how different was it for you, coming from Brooklyn and going down into south Florida.

LAVINSKY: That is a hard one. It would be easier to answer . . . Georgia was more of a culture shock to me. Tampa was a metropolitan area. You had Jewish people. When I came down here, in all honesty, my dorm was almost half Jewish. This was in Tampa. When I transferred to University of South Florida, that was a different story. When I transferred to University of South Florida, it was still a new school, but there were very few Jewish students. On campus, I think there were only 50 Jewish students, period. Maybe another 50 coming that

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15 The *Daily Racing Form* was a publication established in 1894 by Frank Brunell. America's horse racing enthusiasts relied heavily on the information and statistics provided. The *Form* started as a tabloid with regional distribution and was purchased by Moses Annenberg in 1922. Triangle merged the regional editions into a single broadsheet in the early 1970s when it moved operations into a new facility in Hightstown, New Jersey. The *Daily Racing Form* was one of Triangle's most profitable publications. A sister newspaper, *The Morning Telegraph*, was closed by Triangle during a strike.
lived off campus. Again, I was so isolated. I didn’t have a car. In New York, the driving age was 18. I left New York when I was 17, so I never could drive. I didn’t have a car. The only difference is, I really didn’t associate, except for the Jewish student union, as much with Jewish people. In my dorm, I was the only Jewish person on my floor. The guys . . . we all got along very well. We were close, but they just weren’t Jewish. Even when I was living in New York and living in Brooklyn, my best friend at school happened to be Roman Catholic. Even though my school was primarily Jewish, my best friend was a Roman Catholic. He just called me up a few days ago. We keep in touch. In fact, he was down here a few months ago visiting. If you are at university, you are so isolated anyhow from everybody. I didn’t have a chance to really get in the culture. I didn’t get into the culture until I came down here. This was a culture shock.

NOAH LEVINE: How so?

LAVINSKY: In many ways. When I first came down here . . . even in Valdosta, they knew about Jews already. When I first came down here to Statenville, there were no Jewish people in Statenville. Period. That’s where my wife lived. I got this thing one time, “Why don’t you go back to live where your people are.” That came from the principal I was working for.

NOAH LEVINE: You were teaching sixth grade at the time?

LAVINSKY: Yes, just for that one year. That was a culture shock because Statenville is very rural. When I came down, there was no place to even live in Statenville. They had one traffic light, and it wasn’t working. I thought there was no electricity when I first came down. Then I went to the school when I first came down . . . this is what I mean about culture shock. This is why I say I saw it in Statenville. I didn’t see it in Tampa as much. There was some in Tampa too. We’ll go back. It is reminding me now. Here, I went to the school. I went there to teach, and they started to laugh. I said, “Why are they laughing? I didn’t say anything that funny.” I found out they have a black school and a white school. I went to the black school. I didn’t know from a black and white school in New York City. I always attended integrated . . . I shouldn’t say that. Elementary was probably all white. They used to go by where you lived, and my neighborhood was all Jewish. So, elementary school was all Jewish. When I went to high school, I went to the first integrated high school in New York. I was used to being around people who were not Jewish. I had one African-American friend, and we got along very well. We were very friendly from high school. Then I had, I told you, my best friend was Roman Catholic. We still keep in touch. That was a culture shock down here when I saw things like that. I didn’t
experience a whole lot of prejudice, but it was little things. A different principal I had down here . . . she and I got along. I got along very well with her, but there were still some differences. One day she was talking and made this statement, “I Jewed them down,” when she was talking to the teachers. I said to her, “Why did you say that?” She was embarrassed. She said she was sorry for the remark. But still, it was made. But, this was serious. In Georgia, I did experience this somewhat. I was fortunate. I lived in Lowndes County, which is the next county over. This is Cook County? This county is south of Lowndes. I was very fortunate, it’s the only school in South Georgia, the only school even to this day that beats the national average every year. Every year. It beats the schools in Macon. Everybody. I mean, the only schools that come any closer are Atlanta’s. Not in the city, either. But still, there are no Jews in Lowndes County schools. There were no Jewish teachers. To this day, we’ve only had one Jewish teacher I know of . . . he is a music teacher, since I’ve been here all these years. Anyhow, this is where we had a problem. We always had a Christmas program and always had a door decoration. My particular class never had one because I didn’t help with it. I said, “Do you want to have it?” Fine. It never stopped them. They can put up whatever they want on the door. They can put up whatever they want. I don’t care. They’re children, you know. I didn’t participate, but I’ll let them do whatever they want. We don’t have any Jewish students. First time, Jewish student comes to my classroom. Of course she was Jewish. In fact, they weren’t supposed to probe her like that, but they gave her to me because they knew she was Jewish. Which is nice. What happened, she wanted to put up a Hanukkah\textsuperscript{16} decoration. She put up some Hanukkah decorations, which of course was fine with me too. The principal saw it and told her she had to take it down. I said, “No way.” I told the principal, “You make her take it down, that is fine with me, I’ll take it down. But I guarantee we won’t have Christmas decorations up there either. I’m just not going to allow it. I’m not going to have it.” She said to me . . . We got along very well. We really liked each other. In fact, I was at her funeral when she passed away. I thought the world of her. She and I got along very well. Her name is Mrs. Peggy Griffin. But I told her, I said, “No way.” She said, “Ira, you’ve been here. We’ve worked together for four years. You’ve never ever

\textsuperscript{16} Hebrew for ‘dedication.’ An eight-day festival of lights usually falling around Christmas on the Christian calendar. Hanukkah celebrates the victory of the Maccabees in 165 BCE over the Seleucid rules of Palestine, who had desecrated the Temple. The Maccabees wanted to re-dedicate the Temple altar to Jewish worship by rekindling the menorah but could only find one small jar of ritually pure olive oil. This oil continued to burn miraculously for eight days, enabling them to prepare new oil. The Hanukkah menorah, or hanukiah, with its nine branches, is used to commemorate this miracle by lighting eight candles, one for each day, by the ninth candle.
objected to doing Christmas.” I said, “Mrs. Griffin, I’m an adult. These are children.” I said, “It’s not my holiday. I don’t believe in it, but I let them have it because their holiday. I’m not going to take it away from them.” I said, “Surely, you are not going to take away my Jewish student’s holiday. I’m not going to take it away from them.” Surely, they are not going to take away my Jewish student’s holiday either. You’re not going to take that away.” This went to superintendent of schools. The superintendent was my former principal, who got I along with very well. He had been out in California, where there were a lot of Jewish people. He left teaching for a while and was selling medical supplies. He knew. He told her that you have to allow Christmas decorations. He said, “I also allow you to have Hanukkah decorations.” He knew that, but we had to fight for that. That, to me is prejudice. It’s also ignorance. It wasn’t so much prejudice as much as there is ignorance. There is a lot of that that still goes on in South Georgia. In Tampa, it’s hard to say. In Tampa, it’s more sophisticated. It is a bigger city. Even though I was isolated at University of South Florida. I’ve been back to Tampa and I know. Tampa isn’t that way, I don’t think. It’s just too big a city, but down here, where there is such a small amount of contact with Jews . . . It’s improved a lot because of this particular rabbi we’ve had down here in Valdosta for about ten years. They really love him. He is good. He can get along with everybody. He’s also very active with the church groups. It makes for a better relationship. But when I first came down here in Valdosta . . . it wasn’t prejudice. It was ignorance. Now every year in the newspaper, they would ask the rabbi on Hanukkah . . . Every year during Hanukkah, there is an article, a big article, a few pages, on Hanukkah in the local paper here in Valdosta. I don’t think there was as much down here in this area. There were also some Jews that moved here that I got along with. I think there is a little ignorance. Just like teacher organizations. It always annoyed me every time I went to meetings . . . I was active in the local teacher organization when I was a teacher . . . They would say a blessing in Christ’s name. I hated that. Finally, when the old president was elected, a friend of mine, I said to him, “Ron, I need them to cut that out.” Ironically, that whole year they didn’t do it. They don’t think. It’s not done out of ignorance. It’s done out of just not knowing any better. People need to be educated. That’s the way I feel about it.

**SPECTOR:** It sounds like you made a significant difference.

**LAVINSKY:** It takes time. You have to know how to do it. As I said, Fitzgerald never really had that problem.
NOAH LEVINE: You did it in a non-confrontational way.

LAVINSKY: Right. I tried to be non-confrontational.

SPECTOR: It sounds like it was very positive and started a long, necessary process.

LAVINSKY: I think so.

NOAH LEVINE: Was Zionism\(^1\) important to the Jewish community at Fitzgerald or the Jewish community at Valdosta?

LAVINSKY: I don’t think so.

NOAH LEVINE: Morris Abram . . . \(^2\)

LAVINSKY: Morris Abram was from Fitzgerald, but he was gone for so many years. I never met him. I know of him. I don’t hear much of Zionism. I haven’t heard the term in a long time.

NOAH LEVINE: Did you celebrate Israel’s Independence Day\(^3\) when you were involved at Fitzgerald?

LAVINSKY: We generally didn’t have a special celebration for Israel’s independence. They have had a few in Fitzgerald’s service. I don’t think the Valdosta congregation does that. I don’t want to say.

NOAH LEVINE: The Holocaust . . .

LAVINSKY: We do mention that every year. I think it is mentioned in both synagogues.

GLYNYDA LAVINSKY: Didn’t they have some kind of program this year?

LAVINSKY: Fitzgerald had some kind of a program. That was done mostly by Penny [Penson] and Claudia Kaminsky. They did that, which was very interesting situation, too.

GLYNYDA LAVINSKY: Wasn’t it like a church?

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\(^1\) Zionism is a movement which supports a Jewish national state in the territory defined as the Land of Israel. Although Zionism existed before the nineteenth century, in the 1890’s Theodor Herzl popularized it and gave it a new urgency, as he believed that Jewish life in Europe was threatened and a State of Israel was needed. The State of Israel was established in 1948 and Zionism today is expressed as support for the continued existence of Israel.

\(^2\) Morris Berthold Abram (1918-2000) was an American lawyer, civil rights activist, and leader in the Jewish community who grew up in Fitzgerald, Georgia. Defending civil rights workers in Georgia in 1963, Abrams won decisions that helped overturn the state’s insurrection and illegal assembly laws, which had been used against civil rights demonstrators. Over the years, Abram helped bring civil rights cases to the United States Supreme Court. President John F. Kennedy named him the first general counsel to the Peace Corps in 1961. President Lyndon B. Johnson made him United States representative to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, co-chairman of the Planning Committee of the White House Conference on Civil Rights and a member of the Committee on the Office of Economic Opportunity. Abrams served as President of Brandeis from 1968-1970. He was the Representative of the United States to the European Office of the United Nations from 1989 to 1993. In 1993 he founded United Nations Watch while he was Honorary President of the American Jewish Committee.

\(^3\) Many Jewish Americans remember Israel’s Independence Day, also known as Yom Ha’Atzmaut. Celebrations are annually held on or around the fifth day of the month of Iyar, according to the Jewish calendar.
LA VINSKY: Yes. Claudia, since she has been down here, has done a lot for that synagogue. Claudia is not Jewish. Claudia never converted, to my knowledge. Claudia does a lot for that synagogue, a lot more than anybody else the last few years. Of course, she is a little younger, which helps too. Most of the congregation is my age or older. I’m one of the younger ones. Unfortunately, I have cancer now. She does a lot, but she never converted. She cooks a lot of Jewish stuff. Just this past month, she cooked me a kugel. What else did she bring me? She made me extra stuff to give me. She knew I was sick.

GLYNYDA LA VINSKY: She is from Brazil. She made us flan.

LA VINSKY: Yes, which is very good. It’s funny because one of the members in our congregation the last couple of years has done so much also for the congregation, who is not Jewish, which is very interesting.

SPECTOR: I noticed in your YouTube videos your Hanukkah decorations.

LA VINSKY: I was going to take them down, but I haven’t. I keep the dreidels here all the time. I have some Jewish things over there. All my Hanukkah stuff is out there. I have a building out there. Not this building here, but the one other there. I used to use as an office when I was teaching. I also bar mitzvahed a child there – not at the house but in the Valdosta congregation when they didn’t have a rabbi. They had a cantor. A nice one too. That is why I have some sort of relationship with Valdosta too. They had a cantor coming down once a week, I think it was, from Jacksonville [Florida]. The cantor probably couldn’t get along with this child. This child was very disabled. He had a conflict. He might not be a professional teacher like I was. That’s my thing. He couldn’t get along with the child. The child was disabled, and he couldn’t teach him. The parents came to me and asked if I would teach him. They said, “Can you teach him maybe one prayer or maybe two for the bar mitzvah?” His sister was a very intelligent girl. [She] went on to college. His sister did the whole service. Everything, which is what most of the children in Valdosta do now. They do everything. When I was growing up, we didn’t do everything. We just did haftorah. Now they do it all. Basically, they said, “Can you teach him enough to do one or two paragraphs.” I told them, “I’ll teach him to do everything.” They looked at me like I’m insane. I told you he was learning disabled. When we started, I found out very quickly that the child couldn’t read. I didn’t realize it was a real problem until he got started. I told the parents, they can come to my house, that building twice a week, and I will teach him for an hour and a half. I didn’t charge them. I said, “I’m not going to charge you for
that.” I said, “That’s a mitzvah.” What happened was . . . First of all, the prayer books in those days weren’t transliterated anyhow. They have one or two prayers transliterated. I tried to teach him a transliteration prayer, but he couldn’t read the transliteration. That’s when I knew. What I had to do, I had to take every prayer I transliterated . . . I had to break down the words into small portions so that he could pick it up. He couldn’t pick up the reading. By doing that, by translating every single prayer for him in this way, they were amazed. They just couldn’t believe it when they heard what he could do in the end. He did the whole thing with a special transliteration. At least he was able to do it. There was one condition . . . he lives in Valdosta. They said, “What is the one condition?” “He has to be bar mitzvahed in Fitzgerald.” I said, “He is not going to Valdosta synagogue.” That was my condition. He, of course, was bar mitzvahed at Fitzgerald. They have remained friends to this day. I was going to try to go this past Friday to Valdosta, but I just didn’t feel good. He is now an adult, and he and his wife come to Valdosta to host the one this week. His parents were also there this week. I am sorry that I couldn’t attend. He turned out to be relatively successful. He’s making a decent living. It’s a happy ending story.

GLYNDA LAVINSKY: His uncle lives here.

LAVINSKY: Yes. His uncle lives here, which makes a good relationship between his uncle and me.

SPECTOR: That started because you worked with him?

LAVINSKY: Yes, right. I bar mitzvahed him. There are a few stories like that in Valdosta. I did a funeral for the rabbi in Valdosta when he was going to be gone. It wasn’t one from his congregation. It was somebody else. I did a funeral for him in Valdosta. I’ve done other services. For our congregation, I’ve done a few unveilings. The Valdosta congregation has a rabbi now. They have a very nice rabbi there. A lot of members are back now. Our congregation spoke with the Valdosta congregation to get the services of a rabbi because we didn’t have a rabbi for funerals so we would always know we would have a rabbi available

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20 The Hebrew word ‘mitzvah’ refers to precepts and commandments as commanded by God. It is used in rabbinical Judaism to refer to the 613 commandments given in the Torah at Mount Sinai and the seven rabbinic commandments instituted later for a total of 620. In its secondary meaning, the Hebrew ‘mitzvah’ refers to a moral deed performed as a religious duty.

21 Within the first year after the passing of a loved one, mourners and their family gather at the gravesite for a ceremony called the unveiling, the placing of the tombstone. At this event, a grave marker is put into place and the monument is formally dedicated. There are a variety of specific customs that revolve around the gravesite to honor the person who is now deceased. These gatherings are generally smaller and more intimate than funerals.
unless the rabbi is out of town. For years, we had to go finding rabbis for funerals. So, we have a working relationship. We pay a few thousand dollars a year, I believe it is. The rabbi comes and does funerals for us or can do unveilings for us. I’ve done some of the unveilings too. Some people prefer that I do an unveiling because I know the people. But the rabbi does come and do funerals for us. That is going to bring the synagogues a little closer together.

SPECTOR: Any other thoughts or reflections on being involved?

SPECTOR: This is Debora Spector. This is the continuation of my oral history interview with Ira Lavinsky.

NOAH LEVINE: For all the years that you have been involved, what would you say is your greatest impact on Jewish life at the Fitzgerald Hebrew Congregation? What gives you most satisfaction?

LA VINSKY: In all honesty, right now I get the most satisfaction . . . I never knew . . . I mean, a fair amount of people . . . we’re a very close knit people. We all love each other. But, I never knew how much people cared. Especially now. Unfortunately, I found out that I’m dying, I’m getting these letters, emails, and phone calls from people. In Fitzgerald, we are a close-knit community, and you would expect that. But other people not from around here, people that I don’t see but once a year. This is just happening now. It is a shame that you have to be dying to find out how much you’re appreciated. I never realized the impact I made on people. When you are a man and married. I’ve been married about 27-28 years. That to me has been a wonderful feeling, all the letters of appreciation and people telling me how much I’m appreciated. You just don’t realize it. The most satisfaction . . . that is a personal satisfaction. The most satisfaction I’ve gotten with the job of cantor per se . . . I guess you could say the most satisfaction I get is when I can help the people when I have to say Kaddish. I don’t know what they would have done without me, to be honest with you. They wouldn’t have been able to do it without me. People that live, like, in Cordele [Georgia], there is no synagogue nearby. They would have to go to maybe Macon or Atlanta. It’s things like that. That to me is . . . I always felt it was important to do that. If people have needed me for services or someone isn’t available, I could do it. That has been good. I don’t want to do this, don’t get me wrong. I would not have someone die. I know is it serving an important purpose. I always appreciate doing it for people.
SPECTOR: Is there anything else that you would like to express, either to the congregation or to the community, as they are transcribing your scripts, about the enormous touch that you have had through your interaction and your work with the Fitzgerald congregation? Also Valdosta. The effect that you have had on the introduction and better acceptance of Jewish students and Jewish people in the communities that you have been involved in, not only when you were serving as a cantor but also when you were teaching. I wonder if there are any other thoughts.

LA VINSKY: That question is hard to answer. At Fitzgerald, I appreciate that. The people were always very kind to us and always very friendly. It was a love affair. I guess that is . . . the congregation are friends. That is the best way to describe it – as friends. Because I have the knowledge that others didn’t have, I was glad to share it. I like to teach by example. I always try to be fair as far as being Jewish, especially in schools with no Jews. If students I taught asked me questions about Judaism, I would answer them honestly. I didn’t preach it, but I certainly answered any questions honestly. Children have questions. I never had a parent, over the years I taught, come up and complain that I said something to their child from a religious standpoint that they disagreed with. I have parents come up with other things to complain about, but I’ve never had a parent complain that I’ve said something from a religious standpoint that they objected to. I tried to be very careful of other people. I didn’t preach it. I don’t discuss it in class, but if it were asked, I would answer. That’s the way I tried to handle it, that education was helping people understand, that I think they should have an awareness, and that it is not only a Christian country, as many preach. It’s not a Christian country. It is supposed to be a non-sectarian country, by definition anyhow. People need to be aware of other people’s feelings. I always try in a nice way to let them know if there was something that I felt was offensive to me. I would let them know. Most of the time, I never felt that things were done maliciously. Things were done from ignorance. It’s always good if you can try to teach that way, to eliminate that ignorance. That is about the best way I can describe it.

SPECTOR: That’s beautiful. This is Deborah Spector. I am signing off with my oral history interview with Ira Lavinsky. Thank you so much for your thoughts and your time and your hospitality.

LA VINSKY: It was a pleasure. I hope this is what you wanted.

SPECTOR: It’s beautiful.
<End Disk 2>

INTERVIEW ENDS