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ESTHER AND HERBERT TAYLOR
JEWISH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF ATLANTA
AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE**

MEMOIRIST: MARGIE ROSENBAUM
INTERVIEWER: SANDRA BERMAN
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<Begin Disk 1>

INTERVIEW BEGINS

BERMAN: Today is July 30, 2009. I'm with Margie Rosenbaum, who has agreed to be interviewed for the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project of the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. My name is Sandy Berman. I wanted to thank you for being here today and agreeing to do this interview. I'd like to begin by asking you a little bit about your background, who your parents were, and how they ended up in Birmingham, Alabama.

ROSENBAUM: My parents were Rachel Sarasohn. She was born and raised, until she was about 15, in Jerusalem [Palestine]. Her parents, my grandparents, Lewis and Bertha Sarasohn, were also born in Jerusalem. My grandmother, Bertha, brought three of her children, by herself, on the ship from Jerusalem to New York. My father was from Poland. It's called Belarus now. The city was Drahitchen [also Drohiczyn], which was near Kobrin.

BERMAN: Do you know how to spell that?

ROSENBAUM: D-R-A-H-I-T-C-H-E-N. I had a friend who was helping me with my family tree. Herbie Cohen. He was in Moscow not long ago. On the highway, he rented a car. He saw a sign that pointed to "Drahitchen." It hit me right here. <she touches her heart> I loved it. I'm a first generation American. My father's parents were born in Poland. My mother's parents were born in Jerusalem. They each came over before they were 20. My father was about 16 when he came. My mother, Rachel. Her name was Rebeka [Rivke] Rachel Sarasohn. She married [Zelig] Felix Shevinsky. Straighten me out because I'm going a little fast.

BERMAN: Can you spell the last names? Sarasohn is . . .

ROSENBAUM: My mother's maiden name was S-A-R-A-S-O-H-N. My father's name was S-H-E-V-I-N-S-K-Y.

BERMAN: Where did they meet?

ROSENBAUM: They met in Birmingham. She was a founding member of the Bluebirds. That was an organization that came before Hadassah.¹ Hadassah came from the Bluebirds. It was young women in their early 20s [who] were members. They were devoted to Zionism.²

BERMAN: Why did they call themselves the Bluebirds? Do you know?

ROSENBAUM: I never even asked. I asked so few questions, Sandy, when I was young. I could almost shoot myself for not asking more. My mother died when she was 29. I was three years old. There wasn't much I could get from her. My father and brother went to live with her parents, the Sarasohns. I did learn a little bit from my mother's mother.

BERMAN: How did you parents end up in Birmingham?

ROSENBAUM: My father came to Augusta, Georgia, from Europe. He had relatives there, who were into the dry goods business. I guess they were peddlers. The name was Sirote. I'm not sure, and I don't really know why he came to Birmingham. It's not far from Birmingham, Augusta isn't. He started here and started peddling. He brought his brother to Birmingham. His family all moved to Chicago [Illinois]. They were in the tannery business in Europe. I don't think they were well to do at all, of course. Anyway, they moved to Chicago. My father was one of six children. The other five siblings stayed in Chicago, and he came to Birmingham through Augusta.

BERMAN: What year were you born?

ROSENBAUM: I was born in 1925. I didn't bring the dates of the rest of my family. I could have done that.

BERMAN: That's fine. So you were born in 1925. What was Birmingham like then? What was your childhood like?

ROSENBAUM: What was Birmingham like? It was very quiet. It was very backward. I had occasion to go every summer to Chicago to visit my father's family. Of course they made fun of

¹ *Hadassah*, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, is a volunteer organization founded in 1912 by Henrietta Szold, with more than 300,000 members and supporters worldwide. It supports health care and medical research, education and youth programs in Israel, and advocacy, education, and leadership development in the United States.

² Zionism is a movement that 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.

me. They would ask if we wore shoes. If we had a radio in Birmingham. If there were any other Jewish people. I could understand and speak Yiddish, and that amazed them. They had never heard of any Jews in the south. We were backward. We were at least three years behind, in the South, of anything up East or North. We were very slow in progress at that time. Most of my friends were Jewish, my young friends. I had these friends from childhood on up through high school and college. I did have non-Jewish friends also because we lived in a community here in Birmingham. On the North Side . . . There was a section when the Jewish people first came here and settled, the European Jews, in Fountain Heights. That's where our cemetery is, our Jewish cemetery is now. The Jews did gather there, but when I came along, they had spread out. We had this synagogue. This synagogue is 100 years old now. This is called the Southside. The original Jews came and moved to the North Side. There was a synagogue there, an Orthodox one, and a cemetery. They migrated to the south. This is where I grew up, on the Southside of Birmingham. All my friends were here. There was kind of a segregation between the south of Birmingham and the north. All my friends lived in this section. The others were from the North Side. They finally all moved here too because Fountain Heights became run down.

BERMAN: You grew up in Temple Beth-El?³

ROSENBAUM: Yes, I did.

BERMAN: What did your father end up doing for a living?

ROSENBAUM: He started peddling. Do you think the horse and buggy came before the bicycle? I have pictures of him peddling on a bicycle, the horse and buggy, and . . . what was the third? Walking with a pack on his back.

BERMAN: We're going to talk about those photographs after this interview.

ROSENBAUM: He started peddling. You want to know what he did . . .

BERMAN: After. Did he start a store?

ROSENBAUM: Yes, he did go into business, a building on his own. A dry goods business.

BERMAN: What was the name of that?

ROSENBAUM: Standard Clothing Company.

BERMAN: Was it general merchandise?

³ Temple Beth-El was founded in Birmingham in December of 1907 as Congregation Beth-El. It was originally housed on the North Side of Birmingham. It is the only Conservative synagogue in Birmingham.

ROSENBAUM: I think it was clothing. I don't believe he had linens or anything like that. I believe it was clothing for men and women to begin with. It was on Second Avenue North and 18th Street, downtown Birmingham. He and my mother worked at that business. They started it together.

BERMAN: Did he stay in that business for the rest of his career?

ROSENBAUM: Yes, he did.

BERMAN: Did you work at the store?

ROSENBAUM: A little bit. Not much. I would go down on Saturdays. The girls would see a movie. Are you interested in that?

BERMAN: Yes, absolutely.

ROSENBAUM: We would have lunch at a local department store, Lovemans, and we'd go to a movie. We would have an ice cream afterwards. A group of us, about eight little girls. Then I would come to the store and stayed there until he closed. On Saturdays, that was his biggest day, because it was a credit clothing store. Our customers were paid on Friday evening or Saturday, and they would come into town to buy on credit and make their payments every week. We stayed open late. We stayed open until about 10:00 at night. I would go to a movie. I had a little girlfriend, whose father had a store across the alley downtown. We would *kibitz* [Yiddish] together and play.

BERMAN: Was the clientele mixed? Was it black and white clientele at the store?

ROSENBAUM: They were all black. He didn't have any white customers.

BERMAN: Why?

ROSENBAUM: I guess the white people were more affluent. They didn't have to shop and pay with . . . the prices were higher because we had to compensate for holding the merchandise, and we didn't have the money to buy new merchandise. It was a known fact that you would pay more for buying on credit. I guess the white people had more money, and they didn't have to pay higher prices.

BERMAN: What was your family's relationship within the black community? Would you say that it was good?

ROSENBAUM: The only connection I had with black families was, we had a maid. Mattie [sp]. She came to our house five days a week. I didn't know her family. I didn't know anything about her. I don't even know where she lived. In later years, I knew where our maids lived

because we would take them home or take food to them sometimes, but I had no relationship at all with the black people.

BERMAN: Was Mattie considered a part of your family?

ROSENBAUM: She didn't stay for dinner, but had she stayed, she would not have sat at our table. I'm sorry to say. That's the way things were then. I don't think it was any different with my friends than it was with us and our family. We couldn't do without her. She was very important in our lives. My grandmother was already in her 60s when we came to live with her, her late 50s. She couldn't do the laundry. There were seven of us living in a three bedroom apartment. Two of my uncles were not married. They lived there. My grandparents, my father, my brother, and myself. She did the washing in our bathtub in the bathroom. We had one bathroom.

BERMAN: A lot of people we've interviewed have described the closeness between the black maid and the family. Did you feel that?

ROSENBAUM: That happened later with us after I married. I had a very close part with Willi Mae [sp]. She helped raise my children. I went to work when I was first married. I had three children, and I worked full time. She helped me raise the children. We were very close. She was really a good friend to me. She was a religious woman. She had high ideals. I liked the way she spoke to our children and how she told them to get along with each other and to be nice. She reprimanded them. I liked her a lot. I knew her husband well. He taught one of the children how to ride a bicycle. He did various things for me around the house. They were lovely people, very fine. She came from Chicago, in fact, and worked for Jewish people there. The Becks [sp] in Chicago.

BERMAN: Do you feel your relationship with her or your friends with their maids changed at all during the late 1950s and into the 1960s during the so-called civil rights era?

ROSENBAUM: I never had anything about the black people that I didn't like. The ones I knew were nice. They were fine people. There was just no reason or us to be together socially. I did not mingle with them at all. I don't remember having any outside friends or acquaintances who were black. I may have, but I can't recall that I had any friends who were black. I was not frightened of them, not the ones I knew.

BERMAN: What was it like when things started to change, when the laws started to change? Was it stressful when the schools began to be integrated?

ROSENBAUM: Yes, it was. I was not in the middle of that at all. But it was a worry. It was a concern. They didn't come into our group in Mountain Brook where we lived. They never did integrate into our schools. However, there were a few families who moved into the area. They could have. When I was growing up, the Jewish people could not live in certain areas over the mountain. We lived in the city of Birmingham growing up. They were able to in the 1960s, but they didn't choose to move in, the blacks didn't, in the neighborhoods where I lived.

BERMAN: Going back to your earlier childhood. Where did you socialize? Was there a YMHA [Young Men's Hebrew Association]?

ROSENBAUM: Yes. There was a wonderful Y here. That was a good part of my life and my friends. All of us.

BERMAN: Where was it located?

ROSENBAUM: It was located downtown on the North Side, right out of the downtown area. It was on Eight Avenue North and maybe 18th Street. In that area. It was maybe a block from the Knesseth Israel synagogue.⁴

BERMAN: Is the YMHA building still standing?

ROSENBAUM: Yes.

BERMAN: Tell me about some of your activities there.

ROSENBAUM: We saw the boys playing basketball. They were there all the time. We had a beautiful basketball court with a hardwood floor. We would watch the games and flirt with the boys. We had swimming downstairs in the basement. It was a beautiful . . . it was big for me in those days. If I were to see it today, I believe it would still be big. Maybe not. It was clean and fresh. We had nice coaches there and helpers. We did have maybe one or two maids to help us with our clothes, towels, and bathing suits. They were black. My grandmother would take me on the streetcar. It must have been about six or eight miles to downtown from where I lived. We lived on the Southside. Take me to swimming. I was that young that I couldn't travel alone. Upstairs at the YMHA, we had an auditorium where we had plays. We had coaches who would teach us theater. We were in plays ourselves. We had dances there during World War II when the boys came from the surrounding camps near Birmingham. We would meet the boys at the . . . what was the name of the social . . . ?

BERMAN: Canteen?

⁴ Knesseth Israel is the first Orthodox congregation to organize in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1889.

ROSENBAUM: It was like a canteen. We met the fellows. They were from all over the country. From California, New York, Chicago. Places most of us had never been and only heard of. We socialized. Many of us met our husbands there.

BERMAN: I'll get to that in a minute! Were there cooking classes at the YMHA?

ROSENBAUM: I don't remember. There could have been.

BERMAN: Were there any Temple members at the Y?

ROSENBAUM: My temple, Temple Beth-El members?

BERMAN: No. Were there Temple Emanu-El⁵ members? Did they go to YMHA?

<End Disk 1>

<Begin Disk 2>

ROSENBAUM: I guess so, but there was a division there between Reform, Temple Emanu-El, and Temple Beth-El, Conservative and Orthodox. I didn't have any friends from Temple Emanu-El to speak of. I knew them. They were acquaintances. We spoke, but we didn't socialize.

BERMAN: What about Jubilee?⁶ Did you ever attend Jubilee?

ROSENBAUM: That was really the Reform. There was a division. This was before World War II. After World War II, everything changed. [Adolf] Hitler⁷ changed it all.

BERMAN: Did you want to go to Jubilee when you heard about it?

ROSENBAUM: No. I was happy with what we had. We had a wonderful childhood growing up. A lot of Jewishness. It was comfortable and happy. We stayed busy. I did not want to go. I had no desire to go.

BERMAN: How do you feel things changed after World War II?

ROSENBAUM: We were all Jewish. It didn't matter what part, if we were Conservative, Orthodox, or what. We were all the same. They seemed to come around to our way of thinking.

⁵ Temple Emanu-El is a Reform Jewish congregation in Birmingham which formed in 1881.

⁶ From 1931 to the late 1950's, courtship weekends in southern cities included Montgomery, Alabama's 'Falcon,' Birmingham, Alabama's 'Jubilee,' Columbus, Georgia's 'Holly Days,' and Atlanta, Georgia's 'Ballyhoo.' They were attended by college-age Jewish youth from across the South who participated in rounds of breakfast dates, lunch dates, tea dance dates, early evening dates, late night dates, formal dances, and cocktail parties, with the goal of meeting a "nice Jewish boy or girl" who might well become a spouse.

⁷ Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) was a German politician who was the leader of the Nazi Party, Chancellor of Germany from 1933 to 1945, and Führer ("leader") of Nazi Germany from 1934 to 1945. As dictator of Nazi Germany, he initiated World War II in Europe with the invasion of Poland in September 1939 and was a central figure of the Holocaust.

We were always Zionists. Everybody I knew. My father was an ardent Zionist. He was president of the Zionist organization here in Birmingham, and I was raised that way. All my friends were. The Reform people came around. They saw it was important, because in Hitler's eyes, we were all Jews. It didn't matter how you celebrated it. That was the main thing that I remember, that we became one. Right now, there is no division at all. We're all just one big happy family. The synagogues are getting together, too, for the holidays and celebrations. Never did we do that before. The rabbis hardly spoke. That was my understanding. They weren't friendly at all. Rabbi [Abraham J.] Mesch.⁸ He was very standoffish. I don't know if it was that way all over the country or not, but that's how it was here.

BERMAN: What did you think of Rabbi Mesch?

ROSENBAUM: I was in awe of him. He happened to be very nice and friendly to me because my father was a big worker. I knew he was here. He was president of the congregation, which is a real, "ey, ey, ey." You know. He was nice. He came over to visit us when my husband had surgery. When we had the babies, he came over. But he held himself higher than everybody else, which probably he should have. He was a rabbi. He was a very learned man. I liked him. I liked him a lot. I guess I felt toward him like he was my rabbi, but I was not afraid of him. He had that way about him, though. You could have easily. He just never let his hair down. I think he was bald-headed probably.

BERMAN: Did you attend Sunday school?

ROSENBAUM: Yes. That was a big part of my life. I even went to Hebrew school. I was the only girl in my Hebrew class. I loved Hebrew.

BERMAN: Why did you go and no other girls?

ROSENBAUM: Because I was raised by Orthodox grandparents, who were very religious minded. I liked the way they lived. I liked the way we lived. I chose to walk to synagogue for all the holidays. I guess I lived maybe a mile and a half from synagogue. I didn't have to walk. I could have ridden. My girlfriends came and met me because we were on the way. We walked together. What were you asking me? I go off on tangents.

BERMAN: No, you're great. You're right on.

⁸ Rabbi Abraham J. Mesch was the rabbi at Temple Beth-El for over 27 years, from 1935 to his death in 1962. He was an ardent supporter and public advocate of Zionism.

ROSENBAUM: So I loved coming to temple. I have that feeling today. I'm going to cry. It's a big part of my life. I just took to it. I don't know exactly why except my grandparents were so loving and sweet, and this was their way of life. I liked it, so I went along with them.

BERMAN: Did they keep kosher?⁹

ROSENBAUM: Yes, they did.

BERMAN: Was it hard to get kosher?

ROSENBAUM: Not in those days because we had at least one kosher butcher. We always had a kosher butcher until maybe . . . I'm not sure because I'm not up on this much. Probably in the 1950s, we had a kosher butcher, Bernie Bloomston. He was right across the street here at one time. Then we had to start buying in Atlanta [Georgia].

BERMAN: I think there was a story about the kosher butcher that they found out he wasn't . . .

ROSENBAUM: Wasn't so kosher. I don't know that story, but I remember there was a story like that. We had one, Mr. Chaimovitch. He was a lovable old guy, I think. That was on Fourth Avenue, was where our kosher . . . we had a kosher style bakery on Fourth Avenue. We had the . . . The Shahids [sp] were there. All the kosher meats. Felix Cohen. His wife baked kosher style pastries. I thought it was a thriving Jewish community.

BERMAN: Do you still keep kosher?

ROSENBAUM: No. So sorry. I married a man, a wonderful man, who was raised like a Deutsch. He was Reform. He didn't even know from Zionism. He didn't know anything about Israel. I turned him around completely except when it came to keeping kosher. He told me it would be fine with him. He had nothing against it. He would go along with it. It would be wonderful. I chose not to, and I'm sorry.

BERMAN: Going back to your younger days and life at the YMHA and the canteen, did you date a lot when you were growing up?

⁹ 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.

ROSENBAUM: We had a group called the Children of Israel. It was a Young Judaea¹⁰ group. Later, we turned it into the Jolly Judettes. The boys had a group also. Same age. We were about 12 and 13. We started out there. We always had get together of boys and girls. My first date was when I was 13. Melvin Olshan's father came to pick me up in the apartment. I didn't go out on single dates until I was probably 16. But up until that time, we mixed with the boys and girls. The Jewish boys and girls mixed a lot. We had scavenger hunts. We'd go looking, I forget now what kind of animal. I think it was . . . it wasn't a real animal . . . the girls would go out in the dark to look for. We had a wonderful time together. Bertha Luks was our leader. Bertha Kranz. She married Sol Luks. Sol had the boys group. Bertha had the girls group. We had a glorious time.

BERMAN: Do you remember the name of the boy's group?

ROSENBAUM: It probably turned into AZA [Aleph Zadik Aleph]. But I don't remember the name of the boys. Maybe it was AZA. I'm not sure. We met at the YMHA. We had a lot of social activities at the Y. Of course, the soldiers came in later years.

BERMAN: Is that where you met your husband?

ROSENBAUM: No. I didn't meet my husband there.

BERMAN: Where did you meet your husband?

ROSENBAUM: My stepmother knew his family. She introduced us. She married my father when I was 18. My husband was home on furlough. It was World War II. She invited him over to our house. She just newly married my father, so I met him when I was 18. We married when I was 20.

BERMAN: Was it love at first sight?

ROSENBAUM: I think so. I couldn't believe he could be interested in me. You laugh. He was just glorious. He was 10 years older than I was. I never dated a fellow more than one or two years older. I just fell in love with him.

BERMAN: What is your husband's name?

ROSENBAUM: Albert Rosenbaum. Evidently, he fell in love with me.

BERMAN: Where did you get married?

¹⁰ Young Judaea 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.

ROSENBAUM: We were married here at Temple Beth-El.

BERMAN: With Rabbi Mesch?

ROSENBAUM: That wasn't where we married. That was where I wanted to get married. I had a stepmother that was a social climber. God rest her soul. She wanted to hire . . . there as a Hollywood country club. There had never been a wedding there before. It was a business. It wasn't a religious club. I mean, there weren't just Jews. You didn't have to belong. Anyway, she outfitted it with kosher utensils, dishes, silverware, glasses. We had a strictly kosher wedding for 400 people. A seated dinner. I got married there. It didn't mean a thing to me, the Hollywood Country Club. Beth-El meant a lot to me. I was not married in the synagogue.

BERMAN: Did a rabbi marry you, though?

ROSENBAUM: Yes. Rabbi Mesch married us. He was the only rabbi we knew, girls my age until . . . He died in the late 1960s. He was the only rabbi we knew.

BERMAN: What year were you married?

ROSENBAUM: I was married in 1946.

BERMAN: It was just about 12 years later that there was the attempted bombing at the synagogue.¹¹ Do you remember where you were when he heard about that?

ROSENBAUM: I was at home. I have not a lot to say about it. I knew it was going on, and it was scary. It was very frightening.

BERMAN: Were you afraid to attend services after that? Were you afraid to come?

ROSENBAUM: I think I was determined to come. I probably was a little frightened, but I was determined to come. I knew what we were worried about could happen again. It never stopped me from coming to services, and it hasn't today. I felt secure. I felt that I would be taken care of, that the people here would look out for me and my children.

BERMAN: Were you involved in a lot of Jewish organizations after you got married?

ROSENBAUM: I was always involved in Sisterhood¹² and Hadassah.

BERMAN: What was Hadassah like then?

¹¹ On April 28, 1958, 54 sticks of dynamite were placed beside Temple Beth-El in a bombing attempt. According to police reports, there was enough dynamite to demolish the building. It failed to explode possibly due to heavy rainfall. The crime was never officially solved

¹² A group of women in a synagogue congregation who join together to offer social, cultural, educational, and volunteer service opportunities.

ROSENBAUM: Hadassah was always the largest women's organization. It is in the country, I think. Because it was Zionist, it was of most interest to me. It was a social thing too. The meetings. We would dress up and put on our hats and gloves, early on, and go to the meetings. We did a lot of good work, nationally, for Israel.

BERMAN: Was there a chapter of National Council of Jewish Women¹³ here?

ROSENBAUM: Yes, there was.

BERMAN: Were you involved with that?

ROSENBAUM: No. I wasn't even a member. That was Reform, generally speaking. A lot of the Reform women did not belong to Hadassah. It was just not in their league. That was the way I looked at it.

BERMAN: Did you belong to any organizations that were not Jewish?

ROSENBAUM: I'm sure I did. I can't remember, though. I belonged to PTA [parent teacher association].

BERMAN: Did your husband belong to any paternal organizations like the Elks or Lions?

ROSENBAUM: No, but he started a group at Temple Beth-El. The Mr. and Mrs. Club. That was fun. It was a social club. I don't know if anybody remembers it. He was active in the [Birmingham Jewish] Federation.¹⁴ For two years straight, he lead the, what do you call it? A drive.

BERMAN: The campaign.

ROSENBAUM: Yes. He had the entertainment at our . . . I'm very proud of that . . . at our civic center here downtown. It was new at the time. It was where the symphony performs. The convention center downtown. I don't have a good memory now.

BERMAN: You're doing great.

ROSENBAUM: He brought a wonderful actor in. He played Tevye [*Fiddler on the Roof*]. What was his name? Zero Mostel. He brought him in. He lead . . . I bet Solly doesn't remember that. He's so young. Solly Kimerling, sitting over there. He brought some

¹³ The National Council of Jewish Women is an organization of volunteers and advocates, founded in the 1890's, who turn progressive ideals in advocacy and philanthropy inspired by Jewish values. They strive to improve the quality of life for women, children and families.

¹⁴ There are Jewish federations in most major cities. Their function is to fundraise for the Jewish community centrally and disperse it throughout the Jewish community (locally, nationally and internationally) rather than each Jewish institution trying to raise money individually.

celebrities, once, a singer from Israel. He did an outstanding job. They let him do it the second year, too, he was so good. I guess that is the fundraising. Every year we had a big affair. I never did anything that big. That was a tremendous thing he did. The other organizations I belonged to was Sisterhood, Hadassah, and Institute for the Blind. We were all over the country. Whoever writes us for money, we give and we joined. B'nai B'rith was big here at one time. I was active in B'nai B'rith Women.¹⁵

BERMAN: If I could ask you to describe yourself, would you describe yourself as Southern? What would be the first adjective? Southern woman or a Jewish woman?

ROSENBAUM: Both. I'm a Southern Jew. I'm real proud of each of them. Very proud. Proud to be Jewish, and I love the South.

BERMAN: Tell me about why you love the South. Try to express that for me.

ROSENBAUM: There is a warmth here like no place else in the country. I have traveled since I became an adult. I don't know what adjectives to use, but I feel comfortable here. I wouldn't want to live any place else but the South, and Birmingham in particular. I'm very happy and content. Very satisfied here. All five of our grandchildren were born here. All three of our children.

BERMAN: Do they all still live here?

ROSENBAUM: Some of them do. One son lives here with his children. The other two have moved to Georgia. Atlanta. That is as progressive as I would like. The fact is, my children did leave Birmingham. I don't like that.

BERMAN: How would you describe the way the community has changed since you were a teenager to today? Do you like it better?

ROSENBAUM: Much better. We're like all one now, is the feeling I have. I guess I would describe having a complex when I was young. I did it to myself. Nobody else would do it to you. I felt that the other congregation thought they were much better than I was and held themselves a lot higher and acted . . . the girls and I said, "snooty." I like it much better now. I'm very pleased and happy. We have a wonderful Federation that keeps us all together and

¹⁵ B'nai B'rith Women was founded in San Francisco, California in 1909. It was originally a social organization designed to attract young, single adult members with parties, picnics and dances. As women emerged into the public sphere it expanded into cultural activities, philanthropy and community service. Their announced aims are to perpetuate Jewish culture, enrich their communities and ensure the religious survival of their sons and daughters.

keeps us posted on what's going on. What effects one family, effects everybody here. We haven't grown enough, but maybe that is one beauty of Birmingham, that it is small. We have about 5,000 Jewish people here.

BERMAN: What about some of the Jewish businesses like your family store? What has happened to most of them? Are they still around?

ROSENBAUM: What happened to our business is big stores like K-Mart and all the other big stores came around and took business away from all the small

<End Disk 2>

<Begin Disk 3>

ROSENBAUM: mom and pop stores. We had a fixture business downtown Birmingham. That was a source of our customers. That's no more. Our father, that store is still in existence, but it is a furniture store. It's not clothing any longer that he had. It's been here over 100 years.

BERMAN: Is the store still in your family?

ROSENBAUM: Yes. Fourth generation. It was my father's. Then it went to my brother and my nephew and now my great nephew.

BERMAN: Was is it called today?

ROSENBAUM: Standard Furniture Company.

BERMAN: So you kept the Standard part. Standard Clothing. That's amazing.

ROSENBAUM: There is no more clothing, and it's not credit. There are no credit stores anymore.

BERMAN: Are the customers still primarily African-American or everybody?

ROSENBAUM: No.

BERMAN: That's amazing that it's been there 100 years. That's unbelievable. What about some of the big Jewish department stores. Are they still around?

ROSENBAUM: No. They were outstanding. We had Pizitz, Loveman's, Burger-Phillips, New Williams. I've forgotten some of the names. They were all Jewish merchants. New Ideal. There was another big one in town. I can't remember the name.

BERMAN: Parisians?

ROSENBAUM: Yes. Parisians was really big. They don't do business under Parisians. Belk's bought them out. It's Belk's now.

BERMAN: Is that where you used to shop?

ROSENBAUM: I shopped when it was Parisian.

BERMAN: Which store did you like best?

ROSENBAUM: I liked Parisian but not early on. They became more stylish as years went by. I liked Loveman's a lot. That was Jewish owned.

BERMAN: Are the families still here from those stores?

ROSENBAUM: The Pizitz family is still here. The New Williams family is here. Some of them are still left. No more Loveman's.

BERMAN: Do you like that change . . . that that part of the Jewish community has changed?

ROSENBAUM: I liked having the department stores here.

BERMAN: Today what is here? Is it just the big chains?

ROSENBAUM: They're all chains now. I liked to shop at individual shops. I can't right now recall any Jewish stores that I shop in, even little shops. I know they are around, I just can't remember the names right this minute.

BERMAN: Did you ever go to summer camp?

ROSENBAUM: No. I never wanted to leave home.

BERMAN: What about your children. Did they go to camp?

ROSENBAUM: They did. They went to Ramah [Darom]¹⁶ and the one in Atlanta.

BERMAN: Barney?

ROSENBAUM: [Camp] Barney Medintz.¹⁷ We have five grandchildren, and most of them have been to Jewish camps.

BERMAN: What about your children. How many children did you have?

¹⁶ Ramah Darom (Ramah of the South) is a Jewish overnight camp and retreat center in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Georgia. It opened in 1997. The camp is affiliated with the National Ramah Commission, the national parent organization that oversees all Ramah overnight camps, day camps, and Israel programs. Ramah is sponsored by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, a main hub for Conservative Judaism

¹⁷ Barney Medintz (1910-1960) was a Jewish leader both nationally and locally in Atlanta. He was one of the national leaders of the United Jewish Appeal and the Israel Bond Organization. He was also vice-president of the National Community Relations Advisory Council, vice-president of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds and a former member of the executive committee of the American Jewish Committee. Locally he was president of the Atlanta Jewish Community Center and past president of the Atlanta Jewish Community Council and the Atlanta Bureau of Jewish Education. He was also president of the Southeast Regional Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds. Medintz graduated from Northwestern University at Evanston, Illinois where he was a star basketball player. He came to Atlanta after he graduated to become a recreation director at the Jewish Educational Alliance. Camp Barney Medintz, a Jewish camp in Cleveland, Georgia, is named in his honor.

ROSENBAUM: We have three.

BERMAN: What are their names?

ROSENBAUM: Herb Rosenbaum. Robbie and Linda Rosenbaum.

BERMAN: Did your children receive a Jewish education?

ROSENBAUM: Absolutely.

BERMAN: Was it important?

ROSENBAUM: They married Jewish. It was important to me. The most important thing, though, is to be happy with your mate because we have a divorce in the family from a Jewish wife, and that is real bad. It didn't help that she was Jewish and that he was Jewish. That was what I wanted in those days. Now I look at it a little differently. I think the most important thing is to be happy.

BERMAN: Do you think that that has happened in general with the Jewish community? I mean, a lot of people think that . . . because you would never had thought of dating . . .

ROSENBAUM: I did a real turn around, though. The way I was raised and the way I enjoyed being and living. I came to that conclusion. I think he married a Jewish girl because he thought that was what I wanted. I get that feeling. He never said that. Maybe I'm just beating myself up.

BERMAN: You probably are. No need to do that. After Rabbi Mesch left, who came in as rabbi?

ROSENBAUM: It started with a "W." Wallach [Morton A. Wallach]. [Philip] Silverstein and [Steven] Glazer.

BERMAN: Did you have any close relationships with any of them?

ROSENBAUM: They all knew who I was because I was active here. We always had the rabbis over for dinner. Always. [Rabbi Michael] Wasserman. I was very close to him. I liked him a lot. He came before [Rabbi Brian] Glusman. Glusman was the one we just lost recently. I knew all the rabbis well.

BERMAN: You mentioned having the rabbis over for dinner. Did you cook Southern or did you cook Jewish?

ROSENBAUM: One time I had kosher hotdogs, and we had kosher buns. He had children, so that came out well. When I had the cantor over, we had fish. It was okay with him because he had fish out. One time I bought kosher meals. They ate with me because I told them I had

plastic, fresh plates. I did everything just right. I wanted to be friendly with them. I wanted them to know who I was. I wanted to help them. I did. I worked probably with each of the rabbis in one thing I was interested in.

BERMAN: Were you ever Sisterhood president?

ROSENBAUM: No.

BERMAN: Were you active in the Sisterhood?

ROSENBAUM: I'm on the board now, but I never was president. I worked all the time. I worked for 46 years. I enjoyed it. It was not an effort. I didn't mind working.

BERMAN: Where did you work?

ROSENBAUM: My husband opened a business, a store fixture business in downtown Birmingham. I was in the office, and he traveled.

BERMAN: Were you the administrator, the bookkeeper?

ROSENBAUM: No. I was a secretary like. I did all the ordering. I took care of the orders that came in. We had three little children. The youngest was one year old. Robbie was four, and one was seven. I didn't want to be tied down. If I couldn't get away from the store, so I would never take a job like bookkeeper or buyer.

BERMAN: That was unusual during the . . .

ROSENBAUM: Yes, I was one of the few women my age that worked. Did you know that? Women weren't working in those days.

BERMAN: Right.

ROSENBAUM: I missed out on a lot of social things. I didn't go to Temple for years because I only had Saturday and Sunday off. After I quit, left the business, it was still going on. I was fed up with it. I did come back to *shul*.¹⁸ I've been an active attendant. I do work here all the time but not like I used to.

BERMAN: Why did you decide to work?

ROSENBAUM: Because he decided to leave my father's business after five years. He wasn't happy, and he wanted to go in for himself. He found a banker who loaned him \$10,000, and there I was. I told him, when he was unhappy working for my family, I said, "Whatever you

¹⁸ *Shul* is a Yiddish word for synagogue that is derived from a German word meaning "school," and emphasizes the synagogue's role as a place of study.

decide to do, I'm with you 100 percent. I'll help you. I'll do anything I can." And I did. I had never really worked before.

BERMAN: Did you enjoy it? Are you glad you worked?

ROSENBAUM: I'm glad I did. I'm very glad that I did. Did I enjoy it? Yes. I wouldn't have chosen to do it. I never did choose to work before then. I'm glad I did. I feel like I accomplished a lot. I left good memories with my children, too, about holding down a job and working and keeping a house too. I had good help, and I could take off whenever I needed to. I was not indispensable in the business, ever. He really was the boss. I wasn't. I didn't want to be.

BERMAN: Do you ever regret not living anywhere else?

ROSENBAUM: I only regret that I haven't been back to Israel. I have been there twice. I always really wanted to go back. That is the only regret . . . one of the few regrets that I have. But, no, I don't want to live anyplace else. I'm very happy living here. Most of my family has moved away. We were 10 first cousins all living in Birmingham until we became adults and aunts and uncles, but nobody is left. I have one cousin left in Birmingham and myself.

BERMAN: Where did they go?

ROSENBAUM: They went all over. California, Washington, DC, Georgia.

BERMAN: Because there wasn't as much opportunity . . . ?

ROSENBAUM: They had jobs. They had good jobs. Married someone who lived in Florida.

BERMAN: If you could, in conclusion, describe how you feel about your city, your life here in Birmingham, your role at the temple. If you could conclude with . . .

ROSENBAUM: In our community, right? It's a very warm community here. It's a very accepting community. I feel very comfortable. I feel as important as anyone else. I feel important. I have a hard time giving vent to my feelings and telling you what's inside of me. I feel I've accomplished a lot here, too. But nothing really big. I never would undertake anything really big. I guess I didn't have the confidence in myself. If I had tried, I could have done anything. But I never did take a big responsible job. I was always, like maybe, a follower. A good worker. I'm satisfied with what I've done in the community. I think I've added a lot.

BERMAN: Thank you very much.

ROSENBAUM: I thank you for bringing back all these memories to me. It's been wonderful.

INTERVIEW ENDS

<End Disk 3>

Cuba Family Archives