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Mrs. Meyer Lerman (Ethel)

Ethel Arline Lerman

(24)

Final Transcript Mrs. Meyer Lerman (Ethel)

PORTRAITS OF THE PAST: THE JEWS OF PORTLAND

The Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Program

Dr. Konnilyn G. Feig, Director

September 1, 1977

Commissioned by: The Jewish Federation of Southern Maine

The Maine Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Program

PORTRAITS OF THE PAST: THE JEWS OF PORTLAND

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Project Dates:

June 1, 1976 to September 15, 1977

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22. Mrs. Max Kaplan (Ethel)
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24. Mrs. Meyer Lerman (Ethel)
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27. Mrs. Harold Nelson (Mildred)

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29. Mrs. Rebecca Rice

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41. Judge Sidney Wernick

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* Deceased since interview

August, 1977

The Oral History Study

A Note to the Reader from the Director:

Background to the Study

Sometime in the early summer of 1975, a group of Jewish leaders appointed by the Jewish Federation of Southern Maine as a "Jewish Bicentennial Committee" met together at the home of Rabbi Sky. National and State Bicentennial planning was at its peak; and some Jews wanted the Jewish community to do something to emphasize the heritage, the presence, the tradition, or the contributions in Maine over the 200 years of a distinctive culture and religious community. They knew from heresay that the Jews had come early to Maine, formed significant communities and had made and were making a considerable impact on the past, present and future of the State. But what should they do? The American Bicentennial theme, "Heritage and Horizons," seemed to echo the Talmudic words: "Know whence you have come and wither you are going." So many possibilities existed, and the suggestions flowed freely. Should the plans be comprehensive and cover the entire State or should they emphasize only the larger communities? Should the program, whatever it became, be aimed at increasing the historical and cultural understanding of the general community, or should it be a kind of re-exploration, re-examination, reminder for the diverse Jewish community? Ought it take the form of some gift which a grateful Jewish community could present to the State which had so recently served as a haven or opportunity for all of their immigrant parents and grandparents? And what vehicles should it use - theatre, music, lectures, exhibits, discussion groups, dialogues? Whatever was done would have to be inexpensive, because the Federation Program Funds were already committed to a continuing project which by consensus the entire community agreed had an urgent priority - the resettlement in Portland of Russian Jewish families, fleeing from the

modern form of Soviet persecution. The Federation had always participated fully in national and international projects, and the Refugee Program received its usual alert and committed attention. So the Committee deliberated, argued, pondered, debated.

Finally, a member of the group hesitatingly suggested the sponsorship of a book - which would detail the entire history of the Jews of Maine. No information was available on the Jews of Maine with the single exception of a brief book, Portland Jewry, written by Ben Band in 1955, sponsored by a newly formed Jewish Historical Society, and published locally. Meant to be a beginning step in helping the Jewish community learn about itself, the book essentially tried to pull together the chronology of events in the formation of the Portland community and its institutions, and to identify some of the participants and leaders in that extraordinary development. The beginning step was a valiant one, but it ended there as did the Historical Society. The Portland Jews were too busy doing, building, creating, and helping Jews across the world. It was not yet the time for reflection, for stocktaking, for a thorough examination of the ROOTS of the community. But now, perhaps the time and energy had to be taken, lest the history disappear, never to be reclaimed; and the rich tradition never be transmitted accurately to the children and to the community.

Rabbi Sky mentioned that the American Jewish Committee was suggesting, in fact, encouraging, a series of Oral History Projects across the country, emphasizing that a well conceived multifaceted reconstruction of the past could surely help to create a balance, an awareness of the unfolding story of the American Jewish experience. Perhaps that thrust should be seized upon in Portland. But no one really knew what oral history meant, and additionally, who would do it? There were no Jewish historians in the State of Maine. Rabbi Sky alerted the Committee to the unusual fact that the Dean of Arts and Sciences

at the University of Maine at Portland-Gorham was a scholar of the Holocaust; and as an Associate Professor of History had initiated courses in Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Perhaps Dr. Konnilyn Feig could be approached. Rabbi Sky knew that Dean Feig had a heavy schedule in her position; that she would never allow her additional commitment to the teaching of the Holocaust to be tampered with; and that in whatever free time she managed to find, she was writing her own book on Hitler's concentration camps - the capstone of fifteen years of research in Europe. It looked hopeless, but the Committee asked the Rabbi to try. And he persevered. And Dean Feig found herself volunteering her free time to create and direct the project.

When I entered the picture, I had the same overwhelming reservations which the Committee had already expressed. I had little time, and my interest and commitment centered on the Holocaust. Where would I ever find the space for such an enormous project, and who would help? We had no graduate program in Liberal Arts at the University. Where would I get the trained assistance I would need? I met with the Committee, outlined the limits of what could be done, and explained that the project could never be a book, but a re-beginning, another first step, which could be built upon in the succeeding years, and resulting perhaps, someday in a full and real history of Maine Jewry.

It would be an oral history folklore of Portland Jewry; but widened to use the group as a microcosm of Maine Jewry, an example of some kinds of experiences of American Jewry, a renewed acquaintance with the Old World Culture, and a picture of the often-repeated American immigrant story. It would result in a set of final transcripts, made available to the entire reading public. Thus, a small study, a beginning, with wide implications, centering in Portland but suggesting a state-wide impact, a re-examination for the Jewish community and a first reading understanding for the general community, a part of a picture

puzzle for an entire nation, a gift - to the Jewish community and to the Portland community. To my surprise, the Committee and the Federation voted to sponsor the project. I finally agreed to do it for two reasons. When I came to Portland, the Jewish community had been very good to me and had invited me to the Synagogues, the organizations and the homes to talk about the Holocaust. I felt some gratitude. But far more important, I felt a sense of shock when I, too, discovered the absence of any real research and history on one of Maine's most significant immigrant groups. I, too, felt the sense of urgency to re-begin before it really was too late.

Oral History as a Research Discipline

Oral History concerns itself with conservation of a special kind. It conserves the intimate knowledge and experience of humans who have made significant contributions to the life of the time, to a group, to an area, or who have been ideally posted to observe the major events and developments. These humans may be leaders and movers of history, such as Kennedy, Kruschev, and other notables. But oral history taken from those who "made history," only touches the tip of the iceberg when understanding of human cultures and the fabric of civilization is at issue. Perhaps, then, of even greater significance are oral histories taken from groups of ordinary human beings - men and women, known primarily to their neighbors, and perhaps in their towns and states, through whose lives have flowed the currents of an historical age; and whose reactions and understandings determine a collective impact upon a cultural grouping and a time; or upon whom a collective impact of a time and a culture can be measured, evaluated, analyzed, pondered.

The ways of life characteristic of earlier America are rapidly disappearing, but there are persons still alive today who remember them

vividly. Their memories will not be preserved by writing historical memoirs. Oral history projects have attempted to utilize individual recordings, which are admittedly fragmentary and highly personal, but when taken together provide a fund of color, detail, and incidents valuable for future historical research. Roots, centers, beginnings, road signs - all are critical ingredients to any portion of America's colorful culture, and to the essentials of every human being's possession of knowledge of his own individual and group past. And here it is that the necessity for an oral history project centering upon Jewish life in Maine reaches the critical level.

The Jews in Maine

That Jews have been deeply involved in the religious, educational, political, cultural, intellectual and economic life of the State of Maine is one of the best-kept secrets in historical and sociological literature. And Maine is one of the few states in America to be devoid of any major study of one of its important cultural influences. Since 1800 at least, Jews have been living in Maine, and since 1829 with the formation of a Jewish Community in Bangor, some Jewish community life has existed. By 1866, Jews had begun to settle in Portland in noticeable numbers. For nearly 100 years, then, Jews have been making a considerable contribution to and impact upon the state at every level and in every area.

The Jerusalem of the North - the term used so frequently in the past to refer to the Portland Jewish Community. Almost all of the Jews who immigrated to Portland came from Eastern Europe - from Poland, Russia, Latvia, Lithuania - and they brought with them the rich Ashkenazen Orthodox religious and cultural traditions. Orthodoxy found a new home in Portland, in a transplanted form, and held its strength and oneness far longer than most communities in the U.S.

Early twentieth century Portland might be described for the Jews as a community of eastern European shtetl survivors, a pious Orthodox community with several synagogues, central in the lives of the community members. Formal education played a minimal role in the lives of their parents, yet most of the children are learned in the study of the Talmud and graduated from college or comparable institutions. Here we have an unusual phenomena: parents are immigrants, starting out as peddlers or small shopkeepers, and in one generation, the children are college graduates. These college-educated men and women began in the Twenties and Thirties to question traditions which seemed to them troublesome in a modern world. In America, the land of freedom, of relief from pogroms and Russian Army conscription, where the streets were "paved with gold," the wall of Orthodox piety of Portland's Jews began to show cracks as these men and women struggled to educate and provide a better standard of living for themselves. Many had to break the holiness of the Sabbath to work.

Institutions had to be created. In the decade from 1920 to 1930 the Jewish Home for the Aged was built to accommodate family members who could no longer be cared for by their families. In the decade from 1930 to 1940 the idea of a new Jewish Community Center, with a gym, social rooms, kosher kitchens, and sauna and bathing facilities, culminated in the dedication of the present Center in 1938. Throughout the Forties and the Fifties this Center was the focus of family, social and athletic life and the focus of all Jewish functions in the city of Portland.

The winds of Conservativism and Reformism bypassed Portland and it was not until the decade from 1940 to 1950 that a demographic migration from the inner city to the outskirts of Portland, and a shared belief by many that options to Orthodoxy had to be created, resulted in the formation of Temple Beth El, as a Conservative Congregation. The Conservative movement wanted to conserve

that which was appealing in Orthodoxy, and to bring those who were no longer practicing Judaism back into a religious atmosphere. That decade also saw the organization of the Jewish Federation, and its international concern in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the birth of Israel. The funds raised to help Israel during those eventful years into the Fifties are impressive for a community which has relatively little Jewish wealth.

Jewish people succeeded during the next two decades in breaking down some of the barriers to those of their faith in clubs, organizations, professions, institutions, and geographic areas which had previously excluded them. The need for the construction of a new Orthodox Synagogue in the Temple Beth El area became clear during the early Fifties; and the Orthodox Shaarey Tphiloh Hebrew School and Synagogue on Noyes Street was erected. The Newbury Street Synagogue, Etz Chaim, and Anshe Sfaard maintained their separate identities, although many of the congregation members of Newbury Street became members of the new Synagogue. During the Sixties the Community Hebrew School was created.

Today Orthodoxy and Conservativism exist today side by side, strong, active enriched by each other. In the baggage which the immigrants, the founders of the Portland community and those who followed brought with them were two unflinching commitments and enduring dreams - education and public service, unfaltering, regardless of the cost. And the story which emerges is one of involvement and the mutually beneficial changes which come out of the tensions and reciprocal relationships between Maine society and Maine's Jews as individuals and as a community.

The Study

This transcript is only one of forty-four. It presents a portrait of a family, a story of generations, in America and in Europe. The reader would be doing himself a disservice to focus only on this transcript . All forty-four

volumes should be read, because they tell a different story - the story of a remarkable community, a courageous people. Each volume is a family story and one small part of a community folklore history. The full set of final transcripts will be readily available to the Jewish community in the Temple Beth El Library and to the public, in the Portland Public Library. In addition, a professional Permanent Photographic Exhibition containing mounted pictures of each interviewee and pictures of all of the buildings and places significant in Portland Jewish History has been presented to the Federation. It will reside in Temple Beth El.

The enormous project itself was completed under the Coordinator, Lisa Wilhelm, with two years of committed, continuous and volunteer help from a few undergraduate students trained by the Director and the Coordinator, and a few gentile and Jewish community volunteers who worked with incredible energy and dedication. Behind it was the unfailing sponsorship of the Jewish Federation. And, of course, central to it all are the human beings who are the study, the men and women who invited us into their lives and homes, and who so openly and compassionately shared their thoughts, their honest assessments, their feelings and intuitions, their remembrance of factual events, their hopes and their fears concerning the development of this exceptionally strong and traditionally Orthodox Jewish community over a period of seventy-five years, and its development in the future.

Contained within their words is an intricate web of Jewish concerns which bear significance not only to the present and future generations of this community, but also to the broader realm of American Jewry. The project raised as many questions as it answered, questions of considerable scope which could affect American Judaism in the future: What does being

Jewish mean to you? Of what significance is Israel to you in your life? How do you feel about intermarriage and assimilation, and how will these facts affect Judaism? What trends have you observed in the Jewish institutions in this city, and where are these trends leading you? What have been the changes in your Jewish family life - which traditions, cultural and religious, remain with you and which have been discarded?

The majority of interviewees are over the age of fifty, born of immigrant parents or immigrants themselves, who carried with them to Portland the traditions of the Eastern European shtetl and who have watched that ghettoized secure life in the "Jerusalem of the North" be slowly supplanted by a more modern, urbane existence of the present-day Jews.

They represent a heterogeneous group but with a strong linkage. Each is an inspiration, and each reflects commitment, dedication, humaness. As individuals, each has something to say about himself, his life, his hopes, his dreams, his thoughts, his sadnesses. And if the group is placed together, the picture that this gathering together paints, patch-work quilted as it may be, kaleidoscopic as it may seem, has an artistic potential for richness, continuity, color, form and spirit.

Those of the older generation miss the piety of the "Jerusalem of the North": the days when on a Friday afternoon the smells of the Sabbath baking emanated from Jewish neighborhoods; when the men gathered after the daily minyan within the confines of their synagogues to share their thoughts, discuss business, or play cards; when Bar Mitzvah celebrations were simple, with a little herring and kichel, and pure; and when the younger generation shared their lives with the older generation. Today the traditional, Orthodox ways are melded with a modern age, and Jews realize that they can be both good Americans and good Jews. The Jewish Family Services has successfully

brought about, during the past three decades, a transition from the old belief that Jews should take care of their own to an enlightened view that Jews should take advantage of community services. Citizens are now aware of Jewish contributions to the general community, and the "Jewish tokenism" of past decades is disappearing. While there are as many definitions of Judaism as there are Jews, ranging from ultra-Orthodox to minimal identification with any aspect of Judaism, there is little to support the belief of one of our interviewees that the American Jew "will sink into the fading sunset." Many view Judaism, to some degree, as a continuum which has survived for centuries. Many also talk about it as a cultural identification, a combination of religion and common ancestry in terms of the Bible and mystical in the sense that it is inexplicable. Judaism is more than good works and ethics. It includes that mystical, spiritual something which ties all Jews from all times together in their diversity - that mystical tie which all of our interviewees struggled to define when speaking of their own Judaism.

To everyone the state of Israel has some degree of significance. "A Homeland." "A fountainhead with which all Jews can identify." "A place that worries about Jews - just in case." "A unifying structure of Judaism." "The yearning of a 2,000-year-old culture." "It shows the world that Judaism lives." "Israel made the Jew an important human being in today's world." "A paradise built from a wasteland." These are just a few of many reasons why Israel must survive for the Portland Jews.

It is with a depth of gratitude that I express my final thanks to these forty-four individuals who have allowed all of us from the outside to view for the first time a picture of the Jerusalem of the North, to understand

the background and traditions of this community, and to realize the commitment and contribution, past and present, of Portland Jewry.

Dr. Konnilyn G. Feig
August 25, 1977

JEWISH BICENTENNIAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE:	Ethel Lerman
INTERVIEWER:	Dr. Konnilyn Feig
PROJECT ASSISTANTS:	Lisa Wilhelm Cheryl Greaney
PLACE OF INTERVIEW:	63 Pembroke Street Portland, Maine
DATE OF INTERVIEW:	August 31, 1976
TIME OF INTERVIEW:	10:30 A.M.

ETHEL ARLINE LERMAN

Ethel Lerman, born in 1910, has spent her entire life in Portland. Her parents, however, came from a shtetl in Lithuania. In 1902, her father, at age 25, immigrated to Portland because he had relatives in the Portland area. Two years later he brought over his wife and five children. Ethel and a brother were born in Portland. Mr. Lerman started a shoe repair shop, but he died in 1925 when Ethel was 15. Her mother lived until 1955.

After graduation from high school, Mrs. Lerman became a secretary. She was active in Shaarey Tphiloh, in the Wilmot Community Center and formed the first Jewish business girls group in the United States. In 1940, she married Leo Cohen from Lowell, Massachusetts, who became a part owner in the Bath Dry Cleaners in Bath, Maine. Mr. Cohen's parents were immigrants from Poland. The Cohens divorced in 1953 and Mrs. Lerman continued her active work in the Jewish community. When the new Jewish Community Center was opened, she was President of the Business Girls and on the first Board of Directors. She remained active with the Center, particularly with the USO. She served as President of Hadassah and joined the Shaarey Tphiloh Noyes Street Synagogue.

In 1968 Mrs. Lerman married Meyer Lerman, a widower, who had been born in Poland. He owned Lerman's Furniture Store and had been active in the Jewish community. Mr. Lerman was a member of the original board of the Jewish Family Services. He died in 1972. Mrs. Lerman has six step-children, all of whom attended college. David Cohen earned a B.S. from the University of Maryland; Joseph Lerman earned a B.A. from Syracuse University and his law degree from Suffolk Law School; Russell Lerman earned a B.S. from Pennsylvania University and Helen Lerman Segal attended Westbrook Junior College. Donald Cohen works in the State Department in Washington, D.C. Joseph Lerman is a lawyer in Boston, and Russell Lerman is employed as a United States engineer in New Jersey. The

women are married and at home.

Mrs. Lerman is on the Board of Directors of the Jewish Home for the Aged, is the financial secretary of the ladies auxiliary to the Jewish Home, recording secretary of the American Mizrachi Women, and the chairman of the flower fund for the Synagogue. She belongs to Sisterhood, the Center Women's Club, the Jewish Community Center and Hadassah. Mrs. Lerman has been a Zionist since 1943, and visited Israel in 1962.

She is retired and lives at 63 Pembroke Street.

August, 1977

JEWISH BICENTENNIAL PROJECT

Portland, Maine

1976

ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPT

Interviewee Name Ethel Lerman

I certify that I have transcribed the Interview Tapes to the best of my ability, as accurately and clearly as possible. I have discussed the contents of the tapes and transcripts with no one.

Transcriber:

Name Judy Goldberg

Signature Judy Goldberg

Date Nov. 16, 1976

Ok'd by: Konnilyn Feig

Project Director

Jewish Bicentennial Project
Dr. Konnilyn Feig, Director
1976

JEWISH BICENTENNIAL PROJECT

Portland, Maine

1976

EDITED TRANSCRIPT

Interviewee Name Ethel Lerman

I certify that I have edited the Original Transcript to the best of my ability, checking carefully on all unclear sounds and omissions from the tape. I have added no material of substance and changed no ideas. The editing goals were completion, clarity, removal of redundancy, removal of unnecessary comments and "chatter" non central to the interview, and grammatical clarification. The prime goal was a transcript which read well, flowed, and presented the ideas clearly, while always retaining the mechanisms and responses which kept intact the personality, state of mind, and beliefs of the interviewee.

Editor:

Name and Title Dr. Konnilyn Feig

Signature Konnilyn Feig

Date 12/18/76

Reread and Rechecked and held Confidential by

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Date 11/25/76

Name Lisa Wilhelm (signature)

Date 12/2/76

Typist:

I certify that I have typed this transcript accurately and held the contents confidential.

Name Elaine Lewis (signature)

Date 1/8/77

Jewish Bicentennial Project
Dr. Konnilyn Feig, Director
1976

JEWISH BICENTENNIAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: Ethel Lerman

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Konnilyn Feig

DATE: August 31, 1976

F: This is an interview with Ethel Lerman for the Jewish Federation and the University of Maine, College of Arts and Sciences, Portland, Maine, the Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Project by Dr. Konnilyn Feig and her assistants Lisa Wilhelm and Cheryl Greaney at 63 Pembroke Street, Portland, Maine, on August 31, 1976 at 10:30 A.M.

F: Now, I am trying to gather some information about the origins of every one of the people I am interviewing. So a lot of the focus of this will not be on Portland - it will be on background. You were born in Portland?

L: Right.

F: Your parents, did they come to this country, or were they born here?

L: Well, they came to this country from Russia.

F: And were they married in Russia?

L: Yuh.

F: What year did your father come?

L: Well, he came over in something like 1902 or 1904, something like that.

F: And then he brought your mother?

L: My mother came over two years later.

F: And they were already married?

L: Oh, yes. She had five children she brought over.

F: How old do you think your father was when he came over?

L: When he came over here?

F: Uhhuh.

L: I would say roughly around 25 years old.

F: And they already had five children?

L: Right.

F: Do you know what part of Russia they came from?

L: Lithuania.

F: Do you know about any towns you remember them talking about?

L: Kedain, a little village.

F: A little village?

L: Yes.

F: Would you call it a shtetl?

L: Yes.

F: And were both your mother and father from that little town?

L: Right.

F: They had both been born there?

L: Yes.

F: When you heard them talk, do you think that both of their parents came from that same place?

L: I would assume so. My father's father was supposed to be one of the mainstays of the village.

F: Do you know what he did for a living?

L: He was sort of a liaison between the Russian Army and the people of the town.

F: And what about your mother's father?

L: I don't know too much about him.

F: But you'd guess that your grandparents and your great grandparents, and your great great grandparents probably all came . . .

L: All came from that area, yes.

F: Now, I assume, living in this little town, that your parents did not grow up wealthy.

L: No, I guess my father's parents weren't poor, but they got along pretty well.

F: And what about your mother's home?

L: I don't think there was any wealth there. I think they were just common people. According to what I can remember, they had a few chickens and a cow, and they lived near the river, and they did some fishing and that sort of thing.

F: So why did your father say that he came to America?

L: He didn't want to serve in the Russian Army.

F: Did he have to escape, or did he go out under the rules?

L: His father had paid money to a poor family to send their son in his place in the service, and he came to America.

F: When your father was in Russia, what did he do for a living? Did he go to school, first of all?

L: He was a bootmaker.

F: A what?

L: A bootmaker, a shoemaker. They wore these high boots and he used to make the boots.

F: Did he have much of an education?

L: Just the regular Jewish education.

F: Do you think both your mother and your father grew up in very strict Orthodox homes?

L: I would say yes.

F: Now, why did your father decide to come to America and not someplace else?

L: I think because other members of the family, uncles, had come to America.

F: Did he come directly to Portland?

L: Well, I guess he landed in Boston first, and then he came to Portland.

F: And was there family here to meet him? Relatives?

L: Yes.

F: Uncles?

L: A brother-in-law.

F: A brother-in-law here?

L: Yes.

F: Now, when he came here, he must have spoken Russian.

L: Yes.

F: Yiddish?

L: Yes.

F: And perhaps some Lithuanian?

L: Polish, I think he knew. Polish and Russian and Yiddish.

F: When he first came, then, what did he do for work?

L: Well, he stayed with his brother-in-law and he opened up a little store and started doing shoe repairing here.

F: Who is that brother-in-law? What is his name?

L: Louis Levy.

F: And then he made a little bit of money in order to send for your mother.

L: Just enough.

F: And so your mother and five children came over then.

L: Yes.

F: In about 1904.

L: Yes.

F: And then you were born?

L: I have a brother who was born in 1906, and I was born in 1910.

F: So there were seven of you.

L: Then, after that, I had two sisters who were born here.

F: So there were nine of you.

L: Right, nine children.

F: Did your father continue as a shoemaker?

L: Shoe repairman, yes.

F: Until he died?

L: Practically.

F: When did he die?

L: 1925.

F: So he died as a young man.

L: Right.

F: Was he sick?

L: He had pneumonia. In those days pneumonia was incurable.

F: He died when you were fifteen years old?

L: Right.

F: And your mother, what did she do then?

L: Well, some of my sisters were married, but the boys worked; and we got along until we all came out of high school, and all helped the family.

F: And when did she die?

L: 1955.

F: She lived on to a ripe old age.

L: I think she was 75 when she passed away.

F: Now, you have nine brothers and sisters. How many of them are still living in Portland?

L: Let's see, I have two sisters here, and a brother.

F: What are your sisters' last names?

L: Lillian Rosen, Ruth Berman, and my brother, Henry Levine.

F: What does Mr. Levine Do?

L: He is retired now. In years gone by, we were in a cleaning business.

F: And what did Mr. Rosen and Mr. Berman do?

L: Mr. Rosen is a taxi cab driver now. At one time he, also, was in the cleaning business, and Berman was in various businesses. He works for Carr Brothers now.

F: Let's see, the other five, where did they go?

L: My brother, Arthur, was in the cleaning business in Lewiston. My brother, Sy, had been in the cleaning business and he had moved here - his widow lives here, too. I have a sister living in New York, and I had an older sister in New York, but she passed away quite a number of years ago.

F: There should be one more.

L: She died in '69, my other sister. She lived here.

F: Did every one of your sisters and brothers marry a Jewish person?

L: Everyone except Henry. Henry married a Catholic girl, way back in the Thirties.

F: Well, when you were growing up, all of you worked very hard, didn't you?

L: Uhhuh.

F: What did you live in? An apartment?

L: Yes.

F: Do you remember what it was like? There were so many of you.

L: Well, I was born here on Middle Street, and then we moved over the Franklin Street. We had a five room flat and it was a cold water flat. We were there quite a few years. Then, my mother used to do dress-making; and she saved enough money to make a down payment on a house near the City Hall. It was a 2 1/2 story wooden house and we occupied the street floor; and on the other two floors, we used to let out rooms. I was roughly ten years old at that time and I used to have to help changing beds and that sort of thing. It was no easy life, but we all pitched in. She used to have a little garden there and she grew vegetables. We used to have a few raspberry bushes and things like that. We got along. We couldn't always depend on my father for income, because he had asthma and you never knew when an attack would strike him. So, he wasn't always working. I don't know whether you know, but in the shoe repair business, you don't buy your machines. They were always rented and we had to pay rental every month on the machines. So that whatever you made really went into the machines. But, we managed to get along. In those days people had their shoes repaired a lot more than they do today, and he was a good repairman. Whenever he worked, he worked, but when he wasn't able to, he couldn't.

The boys, when they were young, used to sell papers on the corner. My brother and I, in the winter time, had a sled. When we came home from elementary school at noontime for lunch, we used to have to go down to a big coal furnishing place and get a

bag of coal for a nickel or a dime. If we had a lot of money, we'd get two bags for fifteen cents. This was almost a regular daily ritual for the stove. This was the way of heating and cooking. We had one stove in the kitchen in those days and that heated up the five rooms.

F: In the wintertime, it must have gotten pretty cold.

L: Well, you know, in those days, the kids were all young, and you'd herd two or three kids together in one bed. We had feather beds from the old country, and we took things for granted. This was the way it was. Then in the summertime, we would take the same little cart, take the sleds off and put the wheels back on, and go down to the Sebago Ice Company and get ice. We'd come back with a piece of ice every day for the ice refrigerator. These things, you know, today are unknown to children, but this was the way we had to do things. You always got more when you went down there and spent five cents or ten cents for a piece of ice than if you waited for the iceman to come around. He sawed off or hacked off a piece of ice and brought it up to the house. But, because you could get more by going down yourself, we were always elected to do it. That was the way we were brought up.

F: Did all of you go to high school?

L: Yes.

F: Did everyone graduate from high school?

L: Yup.

F: Did any one go to college?

L: No, no, we didn't go to college because we all had to go to work.

F: When you grew up in your home, it was an Orthodox home [L: right]? How observant was your family?

L: Well, my father didn't work on Saturday. Of course, the children were growing up, and if they went out to work, they worked on Saturday because there was nothing else they could do. Because of the work they did, they had to work on Saturdays. When we were going to school and we worked afternoons, we had to work on Saturdays. But Friday nights we did everything that

everybody else did on Friday night. We had the rituals, and on Saturday my mother didn't do anything. We had the regular Saturday meals and we didn't do anything. The house was always quiet. She usually had some women come up during the afternoons for, I suppose you would call it like a coffee klatz or something. They sat around drinking tea and that was the usual thing on Saturday afternoon.

F: Well, did your brothers go to Hebrew school?

L: Yes.

F: Were they all Bar Mitzvahed?

L: They were all Bar Mitzvahed.

F: Did you go to Hebrew school? [L: No] Did they have anything for girls in those days?

L: Only my younger sister did. By the time she was growing up, it started to be a custom for young girls to go to Hebrew school. But, up until then, it wasn't the thing for the girls to be doing.

F: So you graduated from high school, and I am sure you worked all the time you were in high school, didn't you?

L: Right, right - but in-between times I was one of the few Jewish girls who participated in sports. There were very few Jewish girls who participated in sports until two or three of us came along.

F: Why is that?

L: I really don't know. My freshman year, I think there were two Jewish girls ahead of me who were in sports, and that's all.

F: Well, what kind of sports did you enjoy?

L: Well, all that was available to girls at that time was basketball. We would start in when school started and we would have practice on Monday afternoon, and we had games Saturday afternoons.

F: Were you any good?

L: Fairly decent.

F: [Laughs] That's all they had when I grew up, too.

L: Basketball for girls, yes.

F: So I also played basketball. In fact, there wasn't anything else.

L: Yeh, that's all that we played; and I played basketball for 19 years.

F: You did?

L: Yuh.

F: Did you keep playing with the city teams or something?

L: Well, when I came out of high school, after a couple of years, we formed a Jewish Business Girls group - the first in the United States. We had a very active group, because at one time we had over 100 girls as members here in Portland. We had a basketball team as one of the things to do and keep the girls busy. We played for quite a number of years and we used to play the regular YWCA team and a lot of the teams all around here. We used to have a lot of fun. Nasson Institute had a team, and we were invited out there. Of course, we all came from Orthodox families, and when we were invited to play out to these places, after the game they always served refreshments. The time we went out to Nasson, they served these little ladylike sandwiches to us. Of course, none of us had done much eating out and they served us, I think, a couple of crabmeat sandwiches; and some of us had never eaten anything like that before. Of course, that was on the banned list. We had to tell them that we were very sorry; we just couldn't eat it. Of course, they had never heard of this. They thought they were really giving us quite a treat! Well, we just had to tell them it was against our religion for us to eat it. Of course, today I don't think people would have done anything about it, but at that time it was considered quite a sin to do that. It was just one of those experiences which we had.

F: To which Synagogue did you go?

L: Shaarey Tphiloh. That was the only one here.

F: There were a couple of others around, weren't there?

L: Yuh, Etz Chaim and so forth, but we were mostly members

of the Shaarey Tphiloh.

F: And what rabbi, do you remember, Bar Mitzvahed your brothers?

L: Well, in those times they had a Hebrew school that was run by Weisberg, and they had some others. But there was a little old man who used to come around to the homes to teach in your home. He was a very good man, a very good teacher. I have no idea what his name was. We used to pay him so much a week.

F: Do you remember how much?

L: Oh, I don't know. I think if you gave him a dollar a week or something, I think it was a lot of money. He used to teach these children who wouldn't go to Hebrew School, or, if they said they were going, they would never get to the school. There were always hooky players. I had one brother, in particular, who never could find the Hebrew school [F: laughs]. So he ended up having to be tutored by this man, but he was a very good man and, you know, these fellows who learned that way still remember to this day, whatever they were taught.

F: Well, what rabbi performed the service?

L: Well, they used to just take them in there. They made no big to-do about it.

F: Oh, I see.

L: They just went through the service and that was it.

F: It wasn't a great big deal at the end [L: no] with lots of food?

L: Oh, no. You were lucky if they served you crackers and a piece of herring at the end of the thing, see. If they did that, that was a real big deal. Half the time they brought the boy in and he read a portion of what you were reading that day of the Torah. If he went through it all right, that was it. But, outside of that, they made no big to-do. If they did bring you in on a Saturday and you read that portion for the week, why they must have thought you were real good. A shoemaker's family couldn't afford any of those big things.

F: It was a hard life growing up, wasn't it?

L: Yes, it was.

F: Did you know it was at the time?

L: Well, I knew we didn't have the things that a lot of the other children had; but it got so that you knew you couldn't have it and you just didn't ask for it, that's all.

F: When you were younger, did you think about being Jewish? Did it seem to be different?

L: It never really bothered me because, even going to school, I always had a lot of gentile friends. It never bothered us too much.

F: Well, after you got out of high school, besides playing basketball in your spare time and forming a Jewish business girls group, what did you do for work?

L: Oh, I worked in an office. I did office work all the time.

F: Did you continue to work after you were married?

L: Just two years.

F: How many years was it after high school that you got married?

L: Fourteen years.

F: Fourteen years!

L: Yes.

F: How old were you then, about 29?

L: Yes.

F: Do you know what year that was?

L: Well, I got married in 1940.

F: So, you were married about 1940?

L: Yes.

F: So, you grew up, then, in the Jewish community during the depression years?

L: Right.

F: Do you remember them?

L: Yes.

F: What was it like?

L: We always had very nice ideas of what we wanted to do, but we always had to pull everything down to what we could afford to do. We had the Community Center building which was nothing but a converted small home.

F: Was this on Pearl Street?

L: Wilmot Street.

F: Wilmot Street.

L: We took advantage of that, and that is where we formed the business girls group. We used to have different classes in there during the week. We would have a dramatic group; we had an interior decorating group; we had a book reading group - so that the thing was varied. People with different interests found something to keep them busy. If you wanted to be real busy, you could belong to as many of the groups as you could have time to work with. We used to have a supper once a month and we used to charge the girls 25 cents. And it used to be a damn good supper. We had one of the girls on a committee who worked down near Commercial Street, and a lot of time she would get us some fish at very low cost. Other people worked in other places where we got stuff almost free of charge so that we could make these things. We really had a very nice time.

F: Did they have social affairs?

L: Dances, yes. We had a fellow in town who had juke boxes and he would always set up a juke box for us so we could have dances. We couldn't afford an orchestra so we used to use a juke box. I remember one dance. We had the place all decorated as if it

were a ship [F: laughs] and it really was very clever. We had nets all around that we had borrowed from somebody down on the wharf and we had life preservers hanging all around. We had done the thing up beautifully.

F: So you made your own pleasure?

L: We had to make our own little things because we couldn't afford to do anything else.

F: Were you living at home until you got married?

L: Oh, yes.

F: And taking care of your mother?

L: Right.

F: Were you helping support her at that time too?

L: Oh, yes.

F: Did all the brothers and sisters continue to help?

L: Yes. All of us, until we got married, always lived at home, and our pay envelopes always went directly to her. We never opened a pay envelope. When we got them, we put them in our pockets and took them home and gave them to her.

F: What did you do for money?

L: She gave us an allowance.

F: When you are 26 or 27 years old, you got an allowance?

L: Right.

F: Is that really true, Mrs. Lerman?

L: Yes, it is. And do you know what she used to do?

F: What?

L: She would make us a Christmas Club. Everyone of us had a Christmas Club and that's how she would save us some money. So that, by Christmas time, we would have $50 or $75 or whatever it was that she saved up

for us. We never had any money of our own; and anything that we wanted we had to tell her in advance that we needed that. Boy, we had to be very careful with our silk stockings because sometimes you just looked at them and you would get a rip [laugh]. You had to make sure that you took good care of them because you couldn't afford more than one pair of silk stockings a week.

F: Let's say you are 27 years old. How much allowance are you getting each week from your mother?

L: Before I got married, I was making a big sum of $25 a week, which was very good pay for a girl at that time.

F: You were a secretary?

L: Yes, and that was a very good salary. In fact, there were very few girls who were getting that salary at that time.

F: Who were you working for at that time?

L: I was working for Portland Tractor at that time. There were very few girls who were getting $25 a week in those days. My mother would allow us, plus what she used to put in the bank, something like $5 a week. At that time my sister and I had saved up enough money out of this $5 a week allowance that we had both pitched in $25 each and we had bought a Model A Ford [F: laughs]. Yuh, it was old and we had a rumble seat in it; we didn't know how to drive, so we bought it and put it in the yard! We had two pear trees in that yard, and we parked it right under the trees. We wouldn't take it out until we learned how to drive, see. There were two men down in my office who would alternate picking me up mornings to take me to work and I would drive their car to work. That's how I learned to drive a car. In those days you didn't have to pass a test, but you had to make sure that you knew how to drive. My brother taught my sister how to drive, so when we felt that we knew enough about driving, we took the car out. We had it licensed and everything long before we even took it out; but we wouldn't take it out until we knew that we could drive. That old thing - sometimes I wish I had it today! [ALL: laugh] We went everywhere in it. She would take it one weekend and I would take it another weekend and that's how we operated.

F: Well, where would you go?

L: Well, we would go to Old Orchard Beach, or any of these places all around here. There were always a lot of places where we had never been that we would like to go. After we had it a couple of years, we sold it to a fellow and he gave us what we paid for it; so we didn't lose any money on it. Then we went and put in another $50 towards it and got a better car [laughs], and that's how we worked it.

F: At what age did you leave Portland for the first time?

L: Leave Portland for the first time?

F: Yes.

L: You mean to get out of . . .

F: I mean leave Maine. When was the first time that you traveled outside of Maine?

L: Well, my older sister lived in New York and we used to go up to New York two or three times a year [F: um]. The first time I think I was a junior in high school, way back in the summer of 1925, I think. I went to New York and I had a brother-in-law who had a car. If it was supposed to hold six people, he usually had about ten in there. We used to go to New York quite often, maybe two or three times a year.

F: That's more than I go now.

L: Well, I don't get there now at all [laughs]. I haven't been to New York for quite a number of years now, but in those days we did.

F: In those days, when you were in high school and after high school until you were 29, I suppose that you dated. Isn't that what it was called then?

L: Yes.

F: What was the attitude toward young Jewish women dating gentile boys? Was it done?

L: No, no. If it was, you didn't do it here. You just went out of town, that's all [laughs].

F: Well, what did one do on a date?

L: Well, the movies were always here [laughs]. And you'd go bowling and dancing.

F: Were young Jewish women who were in high school in those days taught the facts of life? Was it a cultural thing that happened? What are you laughing about?

L: [Laughs] We got together, a bunch of girls our own age [laughs], and talked about it. That's how we were educated! [ALL: laughter]

F: But your mother didn't sit you down?

L: No, no [laughs]. My mother had a group of women who used to come up to the house on Saturday afternoons. Saturday was their day of leisure, and the women would get together and talk. They'd sit around the kitchen table and they'd have tea and cookies. They would all tell the things that happened during the week, when their daughters started to menstruate, and so forth. That was a big discussion that week. [F: laughter] No, it was an accomplishment, you know - the child was growing up! One woman always used to cater to her daughter. She had a house on Commercial Street and sailors used to go in there when they got off the boat. They used to say that a lot of the sailors used to get rolled and so forth down there. Well, I don't know whether anything like that happened in her place or not, but it seems possible.

F: Did Jewish girls ever get pregnant?

L: Yes.

F: It happened?

L: Sure.

F: Really?

L: Uhhuh. There were a few that did, and usually the child was put up for adoption, or it was sent away.

F: Well, when you look back on the Thirties - the years in high school to when you got married - do you see them as fun? Or as hard work, or what? How do you look at it?

L: Well, in some cases it was hard work; in some cases it was fun. I don't know.

F: You did most of your socializing with men and women in the Jewish community, right?

L: Yes.

F: How did you meet your husband?

L: I met him in Boston. My first husband was a Boston man.

F: What was his name?

L: Leo Cohen.

F: And how old was he when you married him?

L: Twenty-seven.

F: What was he doing in Boston?

L: A shoe salesman.

F: Had his parents come over from the Old Country?

L: Yes.

F: Where?

L: I don't know.

F: Oh, by the way, I wanted to ask you one other thing. When you were growing up, what happened with the language in the house? What did you do at home with language?

L: My mother and father talked Yiddish to us and we responded in English.

F: Did your mother end up learning English?

L: My mother wanted to learn English, which is the reason why she asked us to respond to her in English. In the Twenties, she went to Americanization school. There was no charge to it. The Council of Jewish Women had that as a project at one time. They were after a lot of the women to go to school to

learn how to read and write English. Clara Soule, do you know her? Have you met her? No? She was one of the first teachers in the Americanization school, the Americanization classes. She was after my sister to bring my mother to the classes, so we did. We got her to go and she learned how to read and write so that she could write her name; she could distinguish certain letters. She really got a lot out of it.

F: Were there a lot of people in the Jewish community, at that time, older people who couldn't read or write English?

L: Yes.

F: So, then you met your husband. His parents had come from Europe, and he was a shoe salesman.

L: Yes.

F: Had he always lived in Boston?

L: The family had lived in Lowell, Massachusetts, but he had gone into Boston and had worked in Boston.

F: Where were you married?

L: Portland.

F: Where?

L: At home.

F: And then what happened? Did you move down to Boston?

L: No. He came here; he worked for my brother in the cleaning business.

F: He wasn't in the service, was he?

L: No. He was 4F.

F: Did he work in the cleaning business until he died?

L: No, he worked there until 1953. Then we were divorced and he moved to Washington and he went back into the shoe business.

F: Did you and he have any children?

L: No.

F: What did you have to do to get a divorce? Did you get a regular Jewish divorce?

L: Yes.

F: What did you do?

L: What did I do [laughs]?

F: Yes, what did you have to do?

L: Well, Bekritsky was the rabbi at that time and we went through the ritual. He took care of all the paperwork. Everything had to be written on special paper with special ink and all that sort of thing. And then I had to appear with my wedding certificate. There had to be ten men in this sort of court, and one man took the place of my husband who was out of town at that time. The Rabbi asked a lot of questions and this man answered according to instructions, and he asked me some questions, and I answered them.

F: All very formally done, right?

L: Yes.

PA: But your husband didn't have to be there?

L: He had this man appear.

PA: Could you have done the same thing? Or did you have to be there?

L: I had to be there. One of us had to be there and I wanted to make sure that I got it [F: laughs]. As far as he was concerned, it made no difference to him; I wanted to make sure that it was right [F: laughs]. It was going to cost him $250 and I was just going to put the screws on him. I was a bitch about it, but I didn't care. I wanted it done. So anyhow, then I had to go out and they were supposed to talk the thing over, and then I was asked to come back. In the meantime, Bekritsky had taken my marriage certificate and torn it. Then he was supposed to fill this big form

out, which of course he didn't have time to do in the few minutes, so he told me that the jury or panel had agreed to give me the divorce, so that I could go home and it would be all right. He would send me my papers when he had finished writing them. The paper had been signed by a rabbi in Washington where my husband was, and he had signed it, also. So, what he had to do was just fill in all the stuff, plus this other sheet of paper that this rabbi in Washington had had to fill out. So they got the thing all together, and then he called me one day and said he had it all done for me.

F: Well, then did you have to go through a . . .

L: An American divorce? Yes.

F: You had to do both?

L: Yes.

F: Well, how long did it take from the time you started to do it until everything got done?

L: About three months.

F: Is that all?

L: Yes. As it happened, the lawyers who took care of it knew my husband and they knew there was no reason for my not getting it. So the judge asked me about him and I told him everything, why I wanted it, and so forth. Then the lawyer talked to him and the whole thing only took about ten or fifteen minutes.

F: What happens to people who don't go through the rabbinical divorce?

L: Well, if you get an American divorce, you could still get married, but not by a rabbi, because, if you tell a rabbi that you were married by a rabbi before and you don't have a rabbinical divorce, well, then another rabbi won't marry you unless you get one of these marrying Sam's [F: laughs] who will marry anybody to anybody!

F: Had he had any children before, that he brought with him?

L: Yes. Yes.

F: So you had a stepson all those years?

L: Yes.

F: How old was the stepson when you first married your husband?

L: Five years.

F: So you and he raised that young man?

L: Donald was born in 1935. He was five years old when we got married, so Donald must be 41 years old now.

F: And he works in Washington at the State Department.

L: Yes.

F: Was he Bar Mitzvahed?

L: Yes.

F: These years from 1940-53, were they difficult years economically? Did you continue to work?

L: I continued to work for the first two years until 1942. Then, in 1949 I did volunteer work for the Federation. During their campaigns, I worked for Krems in '49, '50, '51, and '52.

F: In the old days, as a young working girl, you spent a lot of time with the Jewish Business Girls group and in the Community Center, right?

L: Uhhuh.

F: That's primarily what you did in the Jewish community in those days.

L: When the Community Center opened up on Cumberland Avenue, I was President of the Business Girls, and, as President, I was on the first Board of Directors of the Jewish Community Center. So, when they had their new opening, we took part in their opening dedication ceremonies.

F: Was this a big thing in the Jewish community?

L: Oh, yes, it took ten days.

F: But was it a big thing to get this building? Had it taken a long time?

L: Oh, yes, sure. You see, we went from a 2 1/2 story house to this five floor building.

F: Who do you think about or remember as being most responsible for getting that new community center?

L: Well, Judge Louis Bernstein, the late Abraham Levey, and the late Phil Ruben, and Abraham Siegal.

F: It cost a lot of money, didn't it?

L: Oh, yes.

F: Did you have to go fundraising?

L: Yes.

F: How did the Jewish community feel about this building? Were they excited about it?

L: Well, at that time they were all very enthused about it because it was a place where the young would have a place to go and the older folks would have meeting rooms. And the men thought they were going to have a card room where they could come and play cards whenever they wanted to. Then we had a bowling alley on the fifth floor and they put up a handball court. It was really quite an undertaking because before they could do anything with that building, they had to pay off a $5,000 mortgage on the house on Wilmot Street. That had to be taken care of first, so they really had quite a job; but these men all were very good businessmen and they all worked hard.

F: So, you were involved in the new Jewish Community Center in its first years.

L: Yes.

F: Do you remember Norman Godfrey?

L: Yes.

F: Was he helpful with the Center?

L: Oh, yes. He had a lot of ideas.

F: What were the problems that the Community Center had in its early times?

L: There were so many things that people wanted to do all at once that I think getting instructors and getting time for all these things were some of the major problems.

F: Did people go down there in the first years? Was it used?

L: Oh, yes, very popular. The Board of Directors had a sign-up. We had a curfew for the children, 9:00 P.M., and we had to patrol the place and make sure that all these kids were out of the place by 9:00 P.M. Two or three directors a night had to go through the place.

F: What else did you do between 1940 and 1953 in the Jewish community?

L: After we got started, the USO came in and then there was an entirely new breed. We got all the veterans' organizations and, somehow or other, they kind of took the place over.

F: Was there worry at the time that this was going to be a bad thing?

L: No, as long as there was activity in the building, we thought it was worthwhile. Of course, they did have a lot of dances and affairs for the visiting servicemen.

F: Let's see, you concentrated most of your work on the Community Center during the war years, right?

L: Yes.

F: Then, after the war years, up to the time of your divorce, were there any other Jewish groups with which you worked?

L: I was interested in Hadassah, and I was President.

F: Was Hadassah more fervent in those days after the Holocaust?

L: Well, I don't know. In my younger days, I was a member of Junior Hadassah, way back in the Thirties.

That kind of petered out here in Portland. After I got married and I stopped working, I went back into Hadassah. After a year there, I got, I'll say roped into the job as President [laughs]!

F: What are the kinds of things that Hadassah was doing in those days? I take it, by the way, that you were a Zionist from age one?

L: Yes. You couldn't help but be. Youth Aliyah, of course, was always the big thing with Hadassah. At that time, it was still a big point to help children and other people into Israel. I had gone as a representative from Portland to the National convention in Cleveland. I came back all worked up about things. That's when the Arab League was just formed; we felt that that was going to be the big thorn in our sides. There were a lot of different things that we could do, and there was a big question of whether we should allow the Arabs to come into the Hadassah Hospitals for health reasons. At the convention, the delegates voted to allow them to come in, to get regular care like they had been, and not pay any attention to this Arab League thing; to treat them like they always had treated them and try to show them that we were not war-like people. We were there to establish a homeland. Of course, it was hard to get a lot of people to feel that way. Some people felt that they didn't want to be working on raising money if they were going to fight the Arabs on one hand, and help them on the other hand. They said you had to teach them that you just don't turn the other cheek. But you just had to help them as far as health went, because, if you didn't, you didn't know what in heavens name would happen. You didn't know whether something would break out if matters weren't taken care of; because, by that time, they had licked so many of the diseases that they didn't want a recurrence of anything from previous years.

F: After you finished with the Presidency, I am sure you just kept working in Hadassah, didn't you?

L: Well, I did off and on.

F: What did you do then? What other things did you work with while you were still married? Do you remember when Temple Beth El was built?

L: Yes.

F: How did you feel about Temple Beth El?

L: I thought it was very nice for the people in Woodfords. At that time there were a lot of Jewish people living in that area who did not have a Synagogue or a Temple to go to within easy walking distance of their home, and I thought it was very nice. In fact, for a few years I had joined the Temple out there.

F: You were even a member for awhile?

L: Yes.

F: Well, can you remember when this was done? Do you remember if everybody thought it was a good idea? Or were there some problems with it?

L: Well, of course there were some who were still very Orthodox and wouldn't consider changing from Orthodox at all. But my husband wasn't the type that it made any difference to him. It was easier for us to get to the Temple because he couldn't walk all the way from where we lived to the Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue on the High Holidays.

F: And in those days you did not drive on High Holidays.

L: No, no.

F: Or on Saturdays?

L: No. So, if you belonged to the Temple, there were so many people who were driving if they lived a distance away, that you didn't feel you were committing a sin by driving. So, that's why we decided we would join the Temple. We joined the Temple and I guess we were members there for about four years.

F: Did you miss the Orthodox Synagogue?

L: I did. I used to miss the male choir that they had.

F: You missed the male choir. What else did you miss?

L: Well, there were some hymns that the male choir sings during the holiday that were very appealing, and I missed those, even though the choir at the Temple was very good. But their music was different, and that's

what I missed, mostly. Their services, of course, would go much faster and there was no repetition like there is in an Orthodox Synagogue.

F: From the time you were married to 1953, did you keep a kosher home?

L: Yes.

F: And you and your husband did something on Friday nights? [L: yes] Did you go through the full . . .

L: Oh, yes.

F: So you kept an Orthodox home.

L: Yes.

F: So it didn't bother you then, except for some rather small things [L: right] to go to Temple Beth El.

L: Right. It didn't bother me.

F: It must have bothered some people in town.

L: Yes, it did bother some people.

F: But you don't think it split the Jewish community, do you?

L: No, in fact, it brought a lot of people to Judaism who weren't particularly interested.

F: By the way, was divorce a no-no in the Jewish community at that time?

L: No, not really.

F: Well, after the divorce, the son went with the father?

L: Yes, he went to Washington.

F: So then, what did you do? Did you go back to work?

L: I went back to work.

F: Doing what?

L: Office work. I got a job with Nelson & Small and I stayed with them for 15 years.

F: And when did you get married the second time?

L: In 1968.

F: That's 14 years. That's a long time to be single.

L: Yes.

F: Did you do that on purpose? Were you having a good time? Did you really like being on your own?

L: Not really, [laughs] not really, but I had no choice. I mean, that was it.

F: The pickings here weren't all that good?

L: That's right.

F: So, what did you do with your time?

L: Well, after you work all day, there isn't too much that you want to do at night. I still belonged to Hadassah and the Synagogue.

F: You continued your work in the Jewish community besides Hadassah?

L: Yes.

F: Like what?

L: I belonged to the Center.

F: What does it mean to belong to the Center?

L: Be a member of the Center Women's Club; partake in things that they would have for adults.

F: Like what in those days?

L: Well, lectures. One year we had a lecture series that was co-sponsored among the Temple, the Synagogue and the Center. I was on the Board or the committee that worked on that. I get into the damnedest things [F: laughs]!

F: After you got divorced, you went right back to the Synagogue?

L: Yes.

F: Why?

L: I don't know. They built the new Synagogue on Noyes Street; I kind of liked it, and it was more in keeping with what I was looking for. They seemed to be, at that point, changing rabbis quite often out there at the Temple.

F: How Orthodox are you now?

L: How Orthodox am I now?

F: Yes. Do you keep a kosher kitchen?

L: Yes.

F: How many of the rules do you not observe? Would you drive on Saturday?

L: Only under necessity. I don't do anything unnecessary on Saturday. Anything that I can put off to any other time, I do.

F: You don't go to services on Saturday, then, do you?

L: No. Because you have to ride. But I have my books here and I can read that portion of the Torah here and read the service here.

F: It is important to you, isn't it?

L: Yes.

F: Why?

L: I get some kind of a feeling of, oh, I don't know, satisfaction out of it. I tell you, when my late husband was alive, I used to walk down to the Synagogue. He was what we call a Shamus Shabbus - a man who observed the Sabbath all his life. He never had his store open on Saturday, and he would always go to the Synagogue on Friday night and Saturday. He broke me into the habit of going to the Synagogue on Saturday. So, I got to reading the portion of the

Torah for the week and reading the services; and it got as a habit for me and I would get some sort of well-being, I don't know what you would call it. It's the satisfaction of it. I enjoyed it, even though I was reading it in English rather than Hebrew. So, one day I said, "What would happen if I couldn't walk it, and I would have to ride?" And he said, "I only say that you don't ride on Saturday unless it's an emergency." So I said okay. Now that he is gone, I have my own books and I follow along from one week to the next, according to what they are reading. I try to keep up with the things that way.

F: When did you meet your late husband?

L: Late '67.

F: And you got married in 1968.

L: Yes.

F: Was he from Portland?

L: Yes.

F: Was he born in Portland?

L: No, he was born in Poland.

F: When did he come over to America?

L: When he was 2 1/2 years old; I would say somewhere around 1900.

F: Had he always lived in Portland, then?

L: Yes.

F: So you had known him.

L: Well, I had known who he was, but I didn't have anything to do with him until . . .

F: But he had been around in Portland for all those years.

L: Yes.

F: What was his name?

L: Meyer Lerman.

F: What did he do?

L: He had a furniture store.

F: Which one?

L: Lerman's Furniture.

F: And he had children from a prior marriage?

L: Five.

F: Had his wife died?

L: In 1966.

F: And so, you met him one day on the street?

L: No, we were introduced the end of December, 1967.

F: You mean this was a matched marriage?

L: Yes. I was asked to meet him.

F: And so you said . . .

L: I said, "I'll take a chance." [laughs] And he said the same thing. He had never seen or heard of me, and he had come to a point where he felt that he needed a wife.

F: Were his children all grown up and gone away?

L: Yes. He had three girls and two boys. The three girls had been married and the two boys are not married.

F: And are they married to Jews?

L: Yes.

F: And one of the boys is a lawyer in Boston and the other is an engineer, right? Every one of them went to college, except for one of the girls?

L: Yes.

F: Well, then did you move into his house or did he move into yours?

L: No, I moved into his.

F: When did he die?

L: In 1972.

F: From some long illness or was it unexpected?

L: Well, he had a bad heart.

F: For those four years, were you comfortable?

L: Yes.

F: You weren't working?

L: No.

F: He was, as you said, very Orthodox?

L: Yes.

F: And so you grew into that?

L: Uhhuh.

F: What, in the past five or six years, have you done in the Jewish community?

L: Well, I am a member of the Board of Directors of the Jewish Home for the Aged. I am financial secretary of the Ladies Auxiliary to the Jewish Home. I am recording secretary for the American Mizrachi Women. Right after I married Meyer, when all the women's organizations heard that I had stopped working, Hadassah nagged me to do their Donor's dinner; and I was Chairman of their Donor's one year. I helped with their dinner, with Mrs. Robert Clenott, and I was Chairman of the Sisterhood package party.

F: Do you still belong to Center Women's Club?

L: Yes. And I helped with Sisterhood at the snack bar on Beano nights.

F: [Laughs] You do get roped into the darnedest things, don't you?

L: Yes, I do.

F: Let me go back to the Community Center [L: yes]. You were in the old house. Then you went on the Board of Directors when it was newly formed and you worked in

it, and now you can view it. How do you feel about the Jewish Community Center now?

L: I think it is a glorified kindergarten.

F: Well, why do you say that?

L: Because everything that they have is pointed towards children, for children, and nothing for adults, especially senior female adults.

F: Now, the Center doesn't do the kind of programming it used to do, or even new kinds of programming [L: right]. It seems almost as though, when I hear people talk, that it is not as essential to the Jewish community as it used to be.

L: That's right. It's in an out-of-the-way place. You can't park your car anywhere around there unless you leave it in a parking lot where you have to pay so much an hour, which is ridiculous in this day and age. If you go into a meeting, you don't know whether you are going to be there one hour or two hours, or God forbid, three hours [laughs] - it's been known to happen. You go down there to help for something, and you don't like to feel it should cost you $1 to park your car. You can never find a place on the street, unless you want to walk a block or two. If you come out of a meeting at half-past nine at night, which would be early, a woman alone doesn't feel like walking a block up the street to get to her car.

F: Are you one of those who believe that a new Center should be put out in Woodfords or something? What do you think? That the days of a community center are over? Or numbered, at least?

L: No. I think they could have a community center that would cater to the wants of people from cradle to grave, if you want to call it that. [F: laughs] They certainly have the place open to a lot of things because they are under the United Fund. You go in there and you can see that it is open to a lot of different things, so you know that somebody is using it. But, as far as I am concerned, there is nothing, absolutely nothing there for me. We did have a program of seeing shows in Boston - The Show-of-The-Month Club. Unfortunately, the last four or five times they have had a

show reserved in Boston, either they didn't have enough people sign up for it, or something has happened and the trip from Portland has been canceled. Well, I think they could arrange for other activities. It doesn't have to be a Broadway show in Boston. There are other places around Boston that have shows that we could go to see just as easily as not. From this complex where I am living, we have gone to see some of the entertainers who visit some of these other places around Boston. It entails a bus trip; and I feel that if we can do it from a senior citizens complex, then they certainly should be able to do it in the Community Center.

F: Is this a senior citizens complex here?

L: Yes.

F: What are you doing living in it?

L: I am a senior citizen.

F: Oh, you're not a senior citizen!

L: I sure am!

F: You are only 65 years old, aren't you?

L: Well, anybody over 55 is a senior citizen.

F: OH, MY - don't say things like that.

L: It's true.

F: All right, now, listen. You've watched both Synagogues develop. When you look at the two Synagogues, do you think there is a serious rift between Orthodoxy and Conservatism in this area?

L: No. I don't think there is a serious rift, but I think there are some people who want to make one.

F: Why would they?

L: I don't know. Maybe because they want to be in the limelight? I can't see that there is any reasnn for a rift. I think that if people want to be one kind, there shouldn't be anybody pushing them the other way. If a husband and wife want to sit and pray together, it is perfectly all right. They can go to

their Conservative Temple. If they believe that they want to pray individually, as the Orthodox do, they are welcome to go the Orthodox way. There are a lot of people who don't know any other way but Orthodox to pray. Some people chose on a non-religious basis. First they find out which is the cheapest one to go to, and then they go. It isn't a matter of religion at all. If one would charge them, say $25 for three days of the year, why, that's the one they would go to. But if you have to be a member the whole year round, and it costs you $100, or something, they don't want to spend $100 if they are single. It is just a matter of opinion. I don't think there is any real rift, but I am just wondering if some of these people really want Reform instead of Conservative. Reform is really way out, and I heard some people say they would like that, but I don't know.

F: Well, you have watched all these groups and institutions in the Jewish community grow, and you are now on the Board of Directors of the Jewish Home for the Aged. When did that start? When was that built?

L: The Jewish Home for the Aged was started in the early Twenties and has been expanding. It is now a combined home for the aged and nursing home. I don't think we have too many real residents there, as far as the Home for the Aged goes.

F: You don't?

L: I don't think there are too many there. I think they hold 97 people and I would say the convalescent or nursing home would probably take in about at least 80 of them. So that the residents are confined to maybe roughly 20 people, whereas in years gone by, when it was just a home for the aged, there were a lot more people there.

F: What was its purpose in being built? To serve the needs of the elderly Jewish people?

L: Yes.

F: Well, it's not limited to Jews now, is it?

L: No, no.

F: Is it supported by the Jewish people or is it self-supporting?

L: Well, it is supported by the Jewish people, I'd say 99 percent. Arthur Benoit is on the Board of Directors. I think he is the only gentile who is on it.

F: Why are you serving?

L: As a representative of a woman's group.

F: Are you concerned about what happens to the elderly?

L: Yes. One reason why it was started, really, is that there were people who had parents and couldn't take care of them in their house. They were sort of in the way of the younger generation, and the older folks wanted Jewish food - kosher food, an Orthodox way of living. Some of the younger people didn't want to live that way, or didn't adhere to all the rules and regulations of Orthodoxy. So, the women really started this, and then, of course, with the men, they got together, and got the thing going. As time has gone on, we've had people go in there just to convalesce. Since there are nurses there, it seemed the natural thing for them to start a nursing home, so that's what happened. Now, it is one of the most highly recommended nursing homes of the vicinity.

F: You've been active all your life here. By the way, are you working now?

L: Yes.

F: You've been working?

L: I only substitute for my sister when she needs it. She works down at Goodmans. She went for a cataract operation in April, so I took her place for two months. Outside of that, I don't do anything.

F: Well, you've been here a long time now and you are not what any of the old-timers would allow to be called an old-timer, though.

L: I don't mind.

F: Well, what do you think, as you look around now, are the major problems facing this Jewish community in Portland?

L: I think they need a Hebrew school that would teach the children what it is to be a Jew, and why and how they are Jewish. I think there are a lot of young married couples who are new to the community who can't seem to find what they want here. And they move out again. So, I think that something should be done to help them find their place in the community, to make things more interesting for them. Rabbi Dworken is leaving, you know.

F: I know.

L: When you get a young rabbi like that, it is too bad to see him leave because he feels that his children won't get the right background that he wants them to have. So, I feel that something should be done in that field instead of some of these people sending their children away to Boston or New York to go to school. I know they've got that Hillel Day School, but that only goes up to a certain age - it's limited. They should have a school like Bekritsky tried to do, up until entrance into high school and keep it going so that it wouldn't fall apart every five or six years. At one time, they had this thing going so that they had a fairly decent class in every grade. It was doing very well, but then, somewhere along the line, one year the thing just fell apart. There were maybe four students in it. Well, it is beautiful for your child if there are only four students in the class, because he is getting individual instruction. You couldn't get that kind of instruction in a public school. That point is good, but, on the other hand, it's not doing the school any good. Look at what it is costing the school to give your child that instruction. It would be much better if they had 14 children or 24 children in that class.

F: So you are concerned about this area in Portland?

L: Yes, I think that's a very important thing.

F: Well, then, you must have some strong feelings about the need of American Jewry to retain itself.

L: Yes, because if they don't do something about it, then American Jewry will just fade into the sinking sunset.

F: Well, I have heard some people express concern about that. Are you worried about that?

L: I've been thinking about it, not that I've done anything to propagate the Jewish faith. It's just the idea that you think about it.

F: Well, do you think it is important that Israel remain?

L: Yes, I do. I think for the good of the world. They may have made mistakes, like any other country has, but I think basically they are trying to get along as good as other countries.

F: You've done most of your work within the Jewish community, am I right?

L: Yes.

F: Most of your efforts have been within the Jewish community, haven't they?

L: Well, I've done some work here. I am secretary of this group here.

F: You are?

L: This tenants' council here. Just keep talking [laughs]; I'll tell you what else I do [laughs]!

F: So besides the tenants' council, what else have you been into?

L: Oh, I don't know. I do some card playing; I do a lot of extra things. I get people who call me. I sit here and I listen to people talk on the telephone and tell me their troubles, so I have a long cord on it; and I bring it over here and I sit here - sometimes days on end. People tell me their troubles, and I act as their psychiatrist. I just sit here and I'll say yes and no, and after they talk themselves out for about a half-hour, I say, "Do you feel better now?" and they'll say yes, and I say, "Okay, now you can pay me $25." I am in charge of the fair that we are having here. We are having a fair. All the people here are making different things. That's why you see all these bundles here, all the things that are going to be made to be sold at a fair that we are going to have in October. A lot of other little things that go on around here.

F: You are busy all the time, aren't you?

L: Yes. I am in charge of the flower fund for the Synagogue. If people want to make donations to the flower fund in memory of or in honor of or wishing speedy recovery to different people, that's one of my jobs that I do.

F: How do you keep track of each job that you are doing at the moment?

L: I have a whole row of hats. I pick up the hat I want to wear [laughs].

F: You have a little appointment book ?

L: I have all kinds of little things that I do.

F: Well, let me ask you this, finally. You have been active in the Jewish community, very, very active for so many years. What difference do you think it has made in your life that you are Jewish?

L: What difference?

F: Uhhuh.

L: I have a lot of gentile friends, and I don't think it has made any difference.

F: Do you think if you were not Jewish, that you would be as committed a citizen?

L: Oh, I think so. I don't think it would make any difference.

F: Being Jewish means something special to you, doesn't it?

L: Yes: adhering to rules and regulations that my gentile friends don't. I think they think much more of me because of some of the things that I do as a Jew.

F: Being Jewish has never been a negative thing to you. I don't get from you that it ever has, has it?

L: No, no. I don't think it has ever stopped me from doing anything!