

**Transcript of Interview with Carole Schwartz-Cohen
Small Town Jewish History Project
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Name of Interviewer: Eric Lidji

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Name of Transcriber: Leah Geibel

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Transcription:

Eric Lidji: Today is May 27, 2015. This is the Small Towns Oral History Project. My name is Eric Lidji and I'm interviewing Carole Schwartz, and we are in the library at Temple Hadar. So why don't we begin by you telling me how you got, your family got to New Castle.

Carole Schwartz: Well this, this really is my husband's business. This was before I was even married, he, Joseph Schwartz and Martin Mermelstein started Ace Auto Wrecking Company. It was in Mahoningtown, which is a section of New Castle. And they were in business for well, in 1987 Joseph bought out Martin.

EL: When did they start the business?

CS: 1957.

EL: Was that before you were married?

CS: Yes, before I was married. Yeah, I was married in 1962. And he was, they were in business already. In fact it was funny, when I first went out with him, my first date, he said something about doing something with cars and my cousin got stuck on the turnpike in Beaver Falls so, and he didn't know what to do, at that time you didn't have cell phones or anything and I think he needed towed. He called my father and I said, well I went out with this fellow named Joe Schwartz in New Castle and he said something about cars, and I called him and he was able to tow my cousin's car into New Castle and they fixed it. So then in 1987, Joe bought out Martin Mermelstein. And Joe died in 1990 and my son, Alan Schwartz, took over. I guess it was transferred, when he died it was transferred into my name so that I was the principle owner but Alan Schwartz, my son, ran the business until 2004 when we sold it.

EL: 2004.

CS: Yes.

EL: Did you grow up in New Castle?

CS: No, I was born in Pittsburgh. So Joe, and Joe was born in Sharon, Pennsylvania. And Martin came over from, he was born in Europe.

EL: Really?

CS: Yeah, yeah. Joe met Martin through a cousin and this is, that's when they decided to go into business. I think Martin was related to the cousin on his mother's side and my husband was related on the other side, the mother's side. So that's how they got together to open this business. And they did fairly well. And when we sold it, it was a time when

scrap was really going down, it wasn't, we weren't making that much money so that's when we sold it. And now my son works for Preston Auto and he sells BMWs. But that, I don't know if you want, do you want to know anything else?

EL: Yeah. How'd you meet your husband?

CS: How did I meet? It was a blind date. My mother lived in Pittsburgh and had, and was friendly with some women and every day they'd go to lunch in Squirrel Hill. They went to Weinstein's, and this one woman, my mother said that she had a single daughter and this one woman, Vivian Solomon said that, oh, her daughter's married and lives in New Castle and she has a single brother-in-law. So that's how I was fixed up. And it was a blind date and we, our first date was March 17, we were engaged May 12, and married July 6.

EL: Of 1962?

CS: Of 1962.

EL: Very quick.

CS: Yeah. Well I don't know, my, I didn't want a big wedding. My mother wanted a big wedding, Joe didn't because he said that he'd rather have the money that they'd spend on the wedding because he thought big weddings were foolish. But our parents were there and sisters and brothers and it was nice.

EL: Was it in Pittsburgh or New Castle?

CS: In New Castle, it was in, married here in the temple in Tifereth, it was Tifereth Israel at the time. And our reception was in New Wilmington at the tavern.

EL: What, is that a popular place?

CS: Yes. It's still in business you know under different, a different owners but it was always nice. It's a restaurant that has home-style food, it was really nice at the time. My kids, when my children were small they got embarrassed when they went there because the waiters and waitresses always announced all the food instead of the menu. So they would say, oh, do they have to stand there and do that? But they did. And they were always noted for their honeybuns.

EL: Huh.

CS: And they people that own it now, they still have the same honeybuns, but they're just not as good as they used to be.

EL: Was it a hard adjustment at all coming from Squirrel Hill to New Castle?

CS: Uhm, no not at all. Because the distance wasn't, it wasn't that far. I did, I wanted to keep kosher because my mother kept kosher, and Joe said, oh, it's too hard to keep kosher in a small town and you'll have to always go to Pittsburgh for your food, so let's not keep kosher. But when my, you know, I never really had ham or pork or anything but I just didn't keep kosher when I got married.

EL: So was your family very religious growing up?

CS: Conservative. They were members of Beth Shalom and that's where I, in fact I really, my teenage years were spent in New Jersey.

EL: Really?

CS: Yeah. In Trenton, because my father worked for Rockwell International, and he was an internal auditor and he was transferred there. And I went to high school in Trenton and then we moved back to Pittsburgh when he was transferred back.

EL: What was New Castle like in the sixties, the early sixties?

CS: Well there were always stores downtown to go to. There was Strauss's department store, children's stores, it was nice to go downtown. And people dressed to go downtown shopping which they don't do now, but there's really not too much downtown at all now. There's a couple florists and some restaurants and that's about all, and second hand stores. But it was nice going downtown. There was a five-and-ten and department stores. In fact there was another store that was owned by Jewish people that was a hat store which now they don't, people don't wear too many hats. But it was owned by a Jewish family here in town.

EL: Do you remember the family?

CS: Oh they would know the name I'm sure, Ruth Love would know the name because they were members of the temple.

EL: Okay. Were you very involved in the synagogue?

CS: Very. Yes, I always was. I learned so much from the women in the kitchen. I really enjoyed it. And my kids, it wasn't, we didn't have dairy and meat, it was strictly meat and parve kitchen. And my kids, I didn't work so that I brought the kids, and they'd always play and they, it was their place to play too. They liked coming here.

EL: So you would come here during the week?

CS: Yeah when we, if we, we catered more bar mitzvahs here. We had, oh we, and it was beautiful what we did, I learned so much from the women. We'd cook and bake and it was just always a bustling place.

EL: What did you learn?

CS: I learned a lot, how to cook. We did three cookbooks, two cookbooks. And I really enjoyed working with the women it was, it was a learning thing and also just being with the women.

EL: Were they older?

CS: Yeah, most of them were.

EL: So you were learning from an older generation?

CS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

EL: And were you coming to services every weekend?

CS: Well my kids were, my daughter was born in 1963 and another daughter in '66 and then my son in '71, so the Hebrew School, we always had a lot of kids and we always had Sunday school. If it wasn't here it was with the temple kids or we even, at the time when my older daughter, we went to Beaver Falls, some of them came here for Sunday school and we went down there. And Elwood City. Because my daughter 'til this day is best friends with someone from Elwood City that she grew up with. She lives in Raleigh and her friend from Elwood City lives in Charlotte, In fact they're on a cruise right now together.

EL: Were there other Jewish organizations at the time?

CS: Yeah. Hadassah, I was always active in Hadassah. And we had the Council of Jewish Women.

EL: Really?

CS: Yeah. They were very active. In fact the Council of Jewish Women sponsored a summer day nursery day camp. And most, they had a big, a lot of kids that went. And they were very well known.

EL: Aside from your son, did your other children stay in New Castle.

CS: No, no. I have one daughter in Pittsburgh and one daughter in Raleigh.

EL: They didn't want to stay in New Castle?

CS: My oldest daughter lived in New Castle and her husband's from New Castle, but he was transferred there, his company. And they wouldn't come back here. They like, they come to visit. But my daughter from Pittsburgh met her husband through BBYO.

EL: Really?

CS: Yeah. And they go to Or l'Simcha in Pittsburgh.

EL: Did the business change a lot after your son got involved? The nature of the business.

CS: Yes, yes. In fact the person that bought it from us does mainly repairs, it's not a lot of selling parts. But the nature changed because of computers. We had teletype, first we had teletypes there were among all of us that we could trade parts with other auto wreckers. And then when the computers started coming in, it was sort of expensive to go into all that. So we really didn't, that's when we really sold.

EL: So the nature of the business was somebody's car gets junked, they would come, you guys would come pick it up and take it apart and figure out what of these parts could be scrapped and what could be sold.

CS: Right, right. They'd tear it apart, then sell the extra for scrap. They had tires, people came and bought the used tires to reuse the rubber.

EL: Did he work at all with Sybil's family?

CS: Yes. Yeah, a lot, they sold the scrap to them. And then they went out of business, and they had people that came around in trucks and picked up things.

EL: You said it was on, what part of town was it in?

CS: Mahoningtown.

EL: Okay. Is that a neighborhood of New Castle?

CS: Yes. Yeah. Italian, a lot of Italian down there. They still have, oh there's a restaurant, there's a hardware store, there's a pharmacy. In fact I still do business with the pharmacy because you, I just like them, so I've stayed with them.

EL: Were you active in the congregation when the merger occurred?

CS: Yes. I was on the committee.

EL: Was that a difficult process?

CS: Yes [laughter]. It was difficult. When we first started, we had a faction of our synagogue that sued us, I guess you've heard all this, oh you haven't?

EL: No.

CS: Oh! That's a whole other story. You should interview Jonathan Solomon. We went to court and in a way it was embarrassing because they judge felt that it just didn't belong in regular court. That was the first time we tried the merger.

EL: Because it was just too small of an issue?

CS: No, it just didn't, they felt they didn't want the Reform coming in and taking over. I think, that's my opinion of why they, because they completely separated from us, some friendships were broken up because of the two.

EL: But then eventually it happened.

CS: Yeah, yeah. It happened because some of these people left, like my husband's partner Martin Mermelstein was, well he was always a religious man but became more religious and was very much against the merger.

EL: Huh. Do you feel that it worked out?

CS: Now it, oh yes, yes the agreement was wonderful. It did work.

EL: Yeah?

CS: Yeah.

EL: What do you think the future of the congregation will be?

CS: Well since we're, we have no children in our Sunday school anymore and that's the main problem that we're just getting older, and people are dying and leaving the community. I like it here because I have a lot of friends and I'm still active in other things. We have a swimming pool and I'm president of the swimming pool association, and I'm active in the Cancer Society and I work part-time at a funeral home. I greet people at a funeral home, so I'm one of the involved people. And I just helped, excuse me, I just helped the secretary out with something for the Memorial Board because not a lot of people know who the relations are to move to put a plaque in. I feel bad it's come to this that we are, lost so many people. But I think it's the best thing that we could do to sell the building and we'll still have, be able to have services here.

EL: Alright, well thank you so much.

CS: You're welcome.

END OF FIRST RECORDING

BEGIN SECOND RECORDING

EL: Today is May 27, 2015. This is the Small Town Oral History Project and I'm Eric Lidji. I'm still talking to Carole Schwartz. After we turned off the tape recorder we started talking about some other things and we thought we'd just turn the tape recorder back on. So first I want to ask you about the Relief Society.

CS: Okay.

EL: So what do you know about the Relief Society, or how the Relief Society was created?

CS: Well these women felt that there was a need to help people if someone couldn't afford medical bills, dental bills, if they had some problems with money they wanted to help them. So that's why they decided to have this Jewish Ladies' Relief Society. And it was only, in fact when they disbanded it was a five dollars a year dues. And I think there were other, there had to be other donations from wealthy people that knew that there was a need for this and wanted to give money. So there was a lot of money. I have a CD that I eventually want to put in to earn interest for New Castle for the Jewish Federation where we have the rest of the money.

EL: The articles of incorporation that you have listed a date of about 1925, 1926.

CS: Right.

EL: What year did it disband?

CS: Uh, I'd say the early 2000s because a couple of the women that were very active passed away. And, there was only one woman who took over, Rose Levine took over the finances and Rose started getting sick and decided that she couldn't do it anymore and I've had it for about, oh, maybe three years.

EL: So after it disbanded there's still money left over.

CS: Oh yes, there's still money left over. In fact in the past three years, I've helped several people that have called.

EL: Huh.

CS: We don't go looking for the people, they have to really call and say that they have a need. And there was always a committee that decided, but since there wasn't much of a committee anymore I sort of took it on myself to decide. And the ones that I've given money to have needed it.

EL: Were the clientele always Jewish?

CS: Yes. Yes, they were. Some of them don't practice the Jewish religion, but they've always, children of members, too, that have needed. In fact, several years ago, someone,

a son of a member died, and he had nothing at all. And I just couldn't have him buried in a pauper's field or whatever they do, and I got together with the couple people and we decided to pay for the funeral. And the funeral home was wonderful, he gave me everything at cost, he knew that we were going to do this. I, there is some family, but I don't know if they'll ever put a marker. Because they said they were going to pay me back, but they never did so, but everyone has the intentions that if they have money they'll pay back but I haven't seen too much payback.

EL: Did the Relief Society become more in demand when some of the industry started failing?

CS: I think so, I think so. Yeah, that, yeah I think that was the time that it peaked. Once a year they would have a meeting. They only had a meeting once a year of all, I think all the Jewish women in New Castle were members and that's when they would pay their dues and I'm sure some of them, I don't know for a fact, but I'm sure some of them that had more money gave to help out more.

EL: But the dues were only five dollars.

CS: Five dollars a person.

EL: A year.

CS: Yeah, a year. Right.

EL: How many members were there?

CS: Oh they had a big, probably when it was at the peak time it was close to a hundred, and then gradually got smaller and smaller when the women... Janet Mirow was very active. She and her husband had a jewelry store in town and she was very active and the head of the committee until she passed away. And then Rose Levine took over from her with Betty Moskowitz and then Betty Moskowitz passed away and then Rose Levine's still living but she isn't well so that's why I'm, I've taken over.

EL: Aside from the annual meeting were there any other, were there monthly meetings to decide, how...

CS: I think no one really knew. The women got together when they had a need, when they had someone that needed money. I think they maybe, or called each other on the phone. I don't think, I don't think there were regular board meetings or anything like that but I think if there was something that came up in town that they knew someone that needed money or someone that called I think maybe they got together and called each other.

EL: Tell me about the cemetery.

CS: Oh. The cemetery, we have, I'm chair, it's still called Tifereth Israel Cemetery. And I'm not sure what year it was started in, but we have some pretty old graves out there, it, it's almost, it's in Neshannock Township. And I think when the people that bought the property bought the property they had no idea that they were gonna be that close to town but it's prime real estate, and it's very easy to get to. I think maybe because it's near the hospital they decided to buy this plot of land. In fact when, at the court house it has a completely different address because the access was in a different road than we go into now. So that the original, I guess that's the original deed, the property deed, it has a different address than we use.

So, but we have an old, we have three sections. There's a very old section that has upright stones, and then we have another section that has stones, big stones upright, and then we have another section that has just flat markers. And originally there was a chapel there that they did the chevra kadisha, cleaned the bodies and prepared the bodies, and they had the services there. But we tore it down a few years ago it was in disrepair. So we just have a shed now to keep some tools and some cleaning things, that's all. And we maintain. We have a wonderful person who takes care of the grass and it really, we've gotten a lot of compliments on how nice the cemetery looks.

We also have a World War II veterans' memorial stone that we, we had, little white stones that they had a section near the chapel that were for the veterans, the World War II, when they were getting old, from that sandstone, or the kind of stone that crumbles. So a few years ago we decided, since we did have enough money, that we'd buy a really nice big stone and we had it dedicated. I think you might be able to find it in an article in the *New Castle News*, I'm not sure maybe it's been four or five years, and maybe not even that long ago. But it's nice, we have a nice cemetery. And we have lots of people from Pittsburgh that have bought plots because it's cheaper than in Pittsburgh.

EL: Huh. You said that there was a census at some point? Or a map made?

CS: Yes the, Susan Melnick, her name was on it that it was from her, but she just told me that some volunteers went in the summer and visited different cemeteries and did that.

EL: Yeah that's part of the cemetery project that she undertook.

CS: Yeah.

EL: So there's a cemetery association that does all the, that manages the cemetery.

CS: Not yet.

EL: Okay.

CS: We have, we plan on talking to people in Pittsburgh because we want to keep going on and we have, we put the money in the Federation in Pittsburgh, and we want to continue because it looks nice. We want it to keep looking nice and if anyone still wants

to buy plots there that they still will be able to. Well we want it to be maintained for perpetuity as long as we can.

EL: So the oversight is just informal right now? It's just a group of people that take that responsibility?

CS: Yeah, yeah. There was always a committee that took care of it.

EL: Tell me about your store.

CS: Oh, we had, my sister-in-law, Phyllis, Phyllis Schwartz and I decided, I guess it was in the late eighties, we decided that we wanted to go into business and have a stationary invitation store. And we named it R.S.V.P. Abby. Her granddaughter, who is now twenty-eight years old and an attorney, was a little girl then and we decided to name it R.S.V.P. Abby because her name was Abby. And we were downtown and we had greeting cards and gift items. Mainly we did invitations. And then we had, we did calligraphy, we had, it was an electronic machine that did the calligraphy. And we enjoyed, we really never made a lot of money. We put a lot of money into it but we were always discounting for people because we wanted to get their business so we got their business and we just never made a lot of money. There was a time when my husband said, "Why are you doing this?" Well, we both loved it. We did, we really enjoyed helping people, doing the invitations. And then Phyllis decided, she and Marty decided, her husband Marty was my husband's brother, they decided they wanted to move to Florida because her mother was down there and that's when we sold it.

EL: Is it still around?

CS: No, no. It was in someone's home, she had the calligraphy machine, and they went out of business.

EL: What did the machine look like?

CS: It was a flat, flatbed machine that held a pen, the company was out of New York. I can't think of the name, and it held a pen.

EL: A calligraphy pen.

CS: A calligraphy pen. And you programmed it, and it wrote like, just like a person would.

EL: And it looked authentic?

CS: It was beautiful, yeah. They're still in business, this company because my girlfriend, she has since passed away and they've gone out of business, but when she saw what we were doing she and her friend went into business and they had the same machine. And I can't think of the name. And they did a lot of invitations and envelopes. I wish I had it

right now because my granddaughter's getting married next year [laughter] and I could do her invitations, but we're not.

EL: Alright, well thank you!

CS: Oh, you're welcome.

END OF SECOND RECORDING

END OF INTERVIEW