

Transcript of Interview with Myrna Giannopoulos
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Name of Interviewer: Eric Lidji

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Transcribers Notes:

The “Susan” mentioned in the transcript is Susan Melnick who accepted archival materials for the Rauh Jewish Archives.

Transcription:

Eric Lidji: Today is July 24, 2015. This is the Small Town Project. I'm Eric Lidji and I'm talking to Myrna Giannopoulos. We are in the social hall?

Myrna Giannopoulos: Yes.

EL: ...of Tree of Life Synagogue in Uniontown. So, why don't you start by telling me how your family got to Uniontown? Go ahead and start with the Hill District and everything.

MG: Well, ok.

EL: How did your family get to Pittsburgh? Let's start.

MG: To Pittsburgh. My father's people came from the boat to Ellis Island to Mount Pleasant. My mother's family came from Romania. My father's from Russia, she was from Romania, and they ended up on Overhill Street in the Hill District. He was an albino

EL: Huh.

MG: ...and he worked at the bakery over the hill. It was Braun Baking. There were three families that lived in the house.

EL: This is in Mount Pleasant?

MG: This was in Pittsburgh.

EL: Ok.

MG: She was dating that Meyer Jamison, Jameson...

EL: ...who ran a department store?

MG: ...who had a department store in Pittsburgh some...I don't know where...down the hill...in town somewhere. In 1920s, this picture is from the '27, and when her parents found out that there was...She was eighteen and he was in his fifties. They didn't approve. They got her introduced to my uncle, David.

EL: What was your mother's name?

MG: Ida Shaffer.

EL: Ok...So, she meets your uncle...

MG: David Baron. But, she ended up marrying my father, which was his brother, William, or Bill. My grandfather gave all the boys in the family a set amount of money. I'm not sure if it was \$500 or \$1,000.

EL: What was your grandfather's name?

MG: Zaidy. I have it, let's see. It's Meyer.

EL: Ok. So Meyer Baron gives all his boys a little bit of money.

MG: He gives them money, and they get to pick the town that they want to move to. My Uncle Lou moved to Connellsville. My father picked Mount...Masontown. He goes to Masontown along with his brother, David, but they both had been dating my mother. They open up the department store, the outlet department store.

EL: In Masontown?

MG: In Masontown. David and my mother, they got along really well, but it just wasn't...So my father ended up marrying my mother. They got married in...if you go up the hill, there's a big synagogue on top of the hill off of Murray Avenue.

EL: Beth Shalom?

MG: Yes. That's what they...They were gonna get married there, but then my grandmother said no. She wanted them to get married in the Hilton. So they got married in downtown in the Hilton, and I gave Susan my mother's wedding picture. She's got it. My mother made her own dress. Then they went to Atlantic City for a honeymoon. He went back to Masontown, and at that time, there was a nice Jewish population there. I mean, they had...do you want me to tell you who they were?

EL: Yeah.

MG: Ok. Ben Bush and his wife had a furniture store. There was a Labowitz family that had a grocery store. There was Franklin family that also had a furniture store. There was my father that had the department store, which wasn't really a department store. It was men's, women's, and children's clothing. There was a jewelry store, and I can't remember their name off the top of my head. There was a doctor and a couple of other...I'm not sure at this point. I have a phone call placed to get, cause I know who they were. The Franklins, I'm going to digress...

EL: Ok.

MG: The Franklins' son Jacob married Lenore Kamins from New York. Two of her brothers were doctors, and they moved to Uniontown to watch her because she was seventeen years old. She was a member...she was in school at Julliard. She was a concert pianist at seventeen.

EL: Ok.

MG: She was just devastated because they had cows in the house. They lived upstairs and had the cows downstairs. They had chickens in the house. She wasn't used to something like this coming from New York City. So, she became good friends with my mother, and her daughter Portia and I are still very good friends today. When I...then the Margolis boys went to the Navy.

EL: Is this Herb Margolis?

MG: This is Herbie Margolis. Do you know Herbie?

EL: He came up in a previous interview.

MG: Ok. Herb Margolis went to the Navy in '46. I was born in '46. One day he says to me, "Where'd you come from?" He says, "Your mother wasn't pregnant." I said, "No, I was adopted." He says, "I knew I went to the Navy, and I came home and there you were. I never knew how you got there." I said, "That's how I got there." The Franklin/Kamins family arranged for my adoption. I was born in Chicago. My mother left Connellsville, on a train, with \$500 in her girdle and went to see this woman in Chicago. She changed her mind. She wanted more money. So she called my dad, and he put money in a money belt and drove to Chicago. Then they brought me home. I was four days old when they brought me home.

EL: And home was Uniontown or Masontown?

MG: Masontown, at that point. When I was three years old, they moved to Uniontown.

EL: Let me ask you, did Masontown have a synagogue?

MG: Yes. It is now the historical society.

EL: Huh.

MG: It was deeded over. Herbie has the information on that. I tried to get a hold of him to get this, but he never responded yet.

EL: Ok.

MG: But he had the deed and everything. That's how come I knew about it. It's still there. It's part of the historical society now.

EL: Ok. So when you were three, you come to Uniontown.

MG: Yes.

EL: Ok, and why'd they come to Uniontown?

MG: To be closer to the synagogue here. There were more Jewish families here. The Jewish families in Masontown were moving out.

EL: Ok.

MG: So they were all moving out. They all eventually moved out.

EL: Just because it was too small?

MG: I don't know.

EL: Ok.

MG: I really don't know. Now, the one Labowitz girl lived in Masontown, had what was known as a goiter. Do you know what a...

EL: Like a growth?

MG: A growth. She was in a car wreck, and the goiter exploded and she died.

EL: Wow.

MG: That's all I remember about her, but they lived above the grocery store on Main Street. When you're three, you don't remember much.

EL: Right.

MG: So then we came to Uniontown, and we lived on Murray Avenue. Do you want me to tell you who all lived there? The Horowitz's, the Radmans, the Feldmans, the Stamans, the Roffies, another Radman family, another Radman family, the Coopers.

EL: This is going down Murray Avenue?

MG: Down and back, yeah.

EL: Ok.

MG: As much as I can remember. Up on Lennox was Greenwalds, and at one time the rabbi lived on Cleveland. Haym...Hayos...Haymos...Hammonds. The Hammonds lived down the street. Glassers. Labowitz. Labowitz ran a bar. Greenwalds worked for Kaufmann's Department Store in Uniontown. The Coopers had...there were a couple Cooper families. They had a furnace place and real estate. Staman was a doctor. Roffie, I don't remember what he did, but his wife was a good cook. Feldmans worked for...she

worked for the real estate. I don't know what he did. The son eventually went into the FBI and worked for Secret Service guarding the President. Radmans were still around town up until...they're still here today.

EL: I spoke to Mickey.

MG: Well, Mickey...his sister Betty and I grew up together. We're only six weeks apart in age. My daughter and her daughter are six weeks apart. My son and her son are six weeks apart. I live in Pennsylvania, she lives in Florida, so we didn't combine to make this up. But, I still see her all the time. David just passed, not, a couple years ago. His widow is still in town. But my mother was one of four girls. There was my Aunt Betty, she was married to Dave Fineman. My Aunt Ethel, she married Morrie Pariser, he was an accountant, downtown Pittsburgh. My Aunt Tilly married a man at a bar from New Kensington, his name was Al Malyn. He's related to the Malyn that is part of this synagogue.

EL: Who I spoke to this morning.

MG: Elaine.

EL: Yeah.

MG: Yeah. Let me see, let me think...it's just...I have so much going...ok...

EL: Tell me about what you remember about Uniontown as a child.

MG: I remember when they put the swimming pool in.

EL: At the JCC?

MG: Yes. It was great. We had a day care and we had a bus pick us up every morning. We went for day care every day. We rode the bus, and it was the just best thing that ever happened. But, we spent a lot of time there. We played basketball there. They had a big trampoline. They had a pool table. We were there every day. We had lunch there and everything. We had a swim team. **The Duratmans** lived in town. They were related to Coopers. **Dittmers** lived in town. They have manufacturing still yet. Mark's still in it. Fishers. Kronicks had the cleaners. There were some hucksters...I have pictures in the car from Saul Siff's Produce. His two son-in-laws were also hucksters and they combined the three to make one of the biggest produce yards in the area, the whole area. Levins. This gentleman here is one of the founders of the synagogue. He was a Cohen.

EL: And his first name?

MG: It's upstairs on the board. [That's his son.

EL: Ok.

MG: And this one's son is named Miles. He lives in Minnesota. He's a basketball coach and he does other things, too. The lady in the picture down there is Rose Weiss. She was in charge of the kosher kitchen.

EL: At the JCC?

MG: Here. Oh, here. My mother volunteered me many times to serve in this kitchen with that woman.

EL: What was she like?

MG: Very strict. And there was no air conditioning then. It was very hot. They would serve two and three hundred people at a sit down dinner in this room.

EL: Who is?

MG: It was horrible. Everybody would...and they dressed like to the nines. Everybody wore hats. Everybody wore suits. Everybody wore nylons, heels. You dressed.

EL: How often?

MG: Quite often. Quite often, because there was a big class here of...they got rid of all the pictures. I think the pictures are all in Pittsburgh. I think Susan took a bunch of them. Dr. Tolstoy was the...he was a Jewish man, him and his wife. They had three children. He was head of the lab at the hospital.

EL: Here?

MG: Here in town. Eisen, I don't know what he did. Was it Dr. Eisen? I don't know. Morris Samuels was the manager of the JCC. I remember that...I didn't care for Mr. Eisen. He was Dr. Tolstoy's brother-in-law, but I didn't care for him. So one day, we had it out right in the middle of Sunday...right in the middle of...getting ready for confirmation. I walked out. I've always been very strong-headed. I went home. My father brought me back. In the meantime, my class here decided I would give the president, which was Mr. Eisen, the gift from the class. I was ready to kill 'em all.

EL: They did it as a prank?

MG: Yes! They didn't...So I says, so I said, "I'll do it, but I'm not happy!" I had to give a speech, and everything at that point. I was ready to kill 'em. There were a lot of Jews here. It was very big. During holiday, the high holidays, we used to leave here and go and sneak down into all the car dealerships that were down on Fayette Street and try to look underneath the sheets that they put over the new cars to see what the new cars coming out looked like. There were so many of us. We used to get in more trouble. We got in more trouble than we were worth, half the time. It was wonderful place to grow up, and I have

amazing husband right now. He grew up in the middle of all of us. I have been with...do you know...

EL: ...You knew him growing up?

MG: Oh yeah. We've been...we've been...he grew up a block away from me. So, we played together and everything. One time, I told him, "See this scar on my knee? That's from you! And see? This is from you!" I blamed everything on him growing up. We knew the same people. He understood our religion because he grew up around them all. Uniontown was a very religious town at one time.

EL: Not just Jewish?

MG: Not just Jewish. No, but there were a lot of Greeks here. There were a lot of Italians. There were a lot of everything. We would invite, like, the sisters... Their house next door, the big house, that used to be the convent at one time...

EL: For the church?

MG: For the church that's back here.

EL: St. John?

MG: ..It's back here. Yeah. They would never come. We'd invite them.

EL: Really?

MG: No. That's when, back in the early...in the 50s, the Catholics never went to anyplace except their church. But when my children were growing up, we had...took telephone book apart and we'd put all the names of all the churches, with their phone numbers, in a fish bowl, and I made them pick a name a week. We went to every church in the county. I made them call and say, "What time is your service? Do you mind if we come?" There were times that we were the only white people in church, but we went. That way, they had a better picture of how other people did things. I wanted them to be as well rounded as they could be. My daughter elected to follow. My son elected to drive truck and be all over the country so, but he's married. Neither one of them really follow that well, but they do come with me when I asked them. But, now my daughter does taharah with me and everything.

EL: Were your parents religious?

MG: Oh, my father was very, very... Yes.

EL: He walked to synagogue?

MG: My uncle owned the synagogue in Mount Pleasant. When he died, he was the last in the family. He left it to the fire department. Did you talk to...what's his name, from Jeanette...Nobody from Jeanette?

EL: I don't think so. Not yet.

MG: Ok. I'm trying to think of his name. Not Mickey. There's another person...Dave Balk out of Pittsburgh.

EL: Is he related to Brian Balk?

MG: It's Brian's father.

EL: He's on the list, but we haven't spoken to him yet.

MG: He's married to my cousin.

EL: Ok.

MG: And she went to school with my cousin, my aunt Betty's daughter, Margie. She's married to a Romanoff and she's living in Florida now. I have feelers all over the countryside for stuff for you guys.

EL: Thank you.

MG: I mean, I've sent it to...oh that reminds me...I've sent it to Mike Kirschner. He was the pharmacist. His daughter Joyce and I were very good friends and his daughter Karen and I...I still talk to them over Facebook at least once a week. She married a very Orthodox guy and he did our services here for years on the high holidays.

EL: Tell me more about your family growing up.

MG: My father was from a very religious family. We got together every week. There were a lot of them. I think he was one of ten, twelve, fourteen. I don't...there were a lot of them, they were everywhere. My one aunt married a Smith. She...her uncle or her grandfather or father, someone in her family came with my grandmother when she came over at a different time. She came over with a couple children to help her with the children on the boat. She married them, and they lived in Terre Haute, Indiana. So, I have feelers out there, too. In fact, next week...I can't think of her name...my brains are fried today. Tomorrow, Sunday, is the bridal shower for my grandson getting married. Did they tell you? I'm in the middle of a wedding...

EL: Yeah.

MG: ...within three weeks... Weinstein. She was... a Galfant. Her mother was Thelma, I was in her wedding. We're going to a concert on the 8th and she said she's gonna to bring stuff in from Baltimore.

EL: Ok.

MG: That's my father's brother's granddaughter.

EL: Was your father's store open on Saturday?

MG: Sometimes. Very rare. Well, when my Uncle Dave left to go to Baltimore, his sister, Rose, came from Mount Pleasant every day to Masontown to work with my dad. She lived at home with Bubbie and Uncle Meisch... Morris. He had a used car lot. He had a junkyard. He had real estate. He had everything. He was never married. Had a girlfriend, a couple of girlfriends. They all had dogs... all had dogs named Max. I guess its because they were all Maxines. It was just... it was a great... but once my dad got sick...

EL: When was that?

MG: Let's back up. We lived on Murray Avenue, then my parents adopted two more children. They were my brothers. They were identical mirror twins, and they were born in Philadelphia. So they left me in Pittsburgh. I didn't know they were adopting people. They lived in Pittsburgh, and they went to Philadelphia. They came back with babies. I said I wanted a gift, I didn't want babies. So then they decided the house was too small. So they moved into a house, two houses from Milt's. On Derek Avenue, there's two houses that were built by twins. We lived in one, the other house was next door. It was near the country club. I was so bad because the country club at that time wouldn't accept Jewish people, and they didn't even want us sled riding on the grounds. We might curse it or something. I don't know what we'd do to it, but we went over every day. Every day that we could go there, we did it. They were chasing us and everything. They didn't want us there. Too bad. We went anyway. But, in 1965, Jerry and I decided we were getting married, and my father said, "You will not get married." I said, "Yes, I will." We went round and round. He said, "If you're gonna marry him, you have one phone call, and get out of my house." I said, "Fine." I went to the phone, I called Jerry, he was at work, his dad came and picked me up. Meanwhile, my father went upstairs to my bedroom and started throwing things out the window. We must've looked like real idiots. He was mad. I was mad. We just couldn't... In '67, Jerry got drafted into the Army and went to Vietnam. They lost him.

EL: What do you mean?

MG: He got wounded very, very badly, and they literally could not find out where they sent him. I know I got a phone call that said, "We found him. He's in Japan. He's had several surgeries, but he's coming home, and he's gonna go to Walter Reed. But, he's asked for a three-day pass. Since Walter Reed is within driving distance of what he can

tolerate, will you meet him at the airport?" Of course. I was there for three days. He never showed up. I would call them, they'd said, "He's on his way." I'd call them, "He's on his way." Finally, I said, "I can't stay here in the airport." This is before the airport in Pittsburgh had a hotel, and I said... So I left. It took them a good three weeks to figure out where he was. Meanwhile, I had already had a phone call from him, and he said, "How would you like to come over?" I said, "I'd come anywhere you'd tell me, as long as you tell me where over is." I went to Okinawa.] The government says, "You're not going." I said, "Stop me." What were they gonna do? Then, I had to have all these shots. So, I had to travel to Pittsburgh to the airbase every other day and got all these shots. Oh my God, did I get shots.

Went from Pittsburgh to Chicago, Chicago to Seattle, and from Seattle I was supposed to go straight over, but they had plane trouble. I ended up in Alaska. We were there for eight hours. So, I said, "I'm not sitting in this airport for eight..." I've always been like this. So, I said to this girl next to me, "You want to go for a cab ride? I'll share the expenses with you." She said, "Sure." We got... there were four of us... we got in this cab and we told the guy, "Take us and show us everything you can in four hours," because we didn't want to miss our flight. We saw every bit of Anchorage we could. (Phone rings) Excuse me.

[END TAPE ONE]

[START TAPE TWO]

EL: ...Ok, so you're in Anchorage...in the cab in Anchorage...

MG: Ok. We saw all of Anchorage. Anchorage wasn't that big in 1967... '68, '68, because he got wounded Good Friday of '68 and now it's September! Took that long. So, we get to...back to the airport after viewing everything we could, and we fly to Tokyo.

There's a typhoon. Couldn't go...couldn't...couldn't go anywhere and they said, the girls that were traveling with me...weren't traveling with me but traveling with me, said, "What are you gonna do?" I said, "I'm not sitting in the airport. I'm going to downtown Tokyo. I've never been here. I'll never be back. I might as well see whatever I can see." We got so lost. We went on that fast train. We got so lost. We walked all over downtown Tokyo. Finally, we went to this little shop, this little man...he sold the seven piece wedding...traditional wedding dresses. He was so nice. He took us back to the airport.

But, meanwhile, Northwest Orient was the airline, they paid for everything. They fed us dinner. So we had a great time, get in the plane the next day, everything's ok. We go to Okinawa. Again, Jerry doesn't show up. I'm going, ok. I was allowed forty-four pounds and I knew I was going to be there a couple months. I knew that I had to have dishes and everything else. I took as much...I carried twenty-five pounds and I shipped forty-four. Well, I couldn't find him. So I see this guy with all this stuff on his shirt. I says, "Could you help me?" And he says, "Why?" I said, "Because my husband was supposed to meet me here an hour ago and he hasn't shown up." "Well, who is he and why is he supposed to show up here? Why didn't you fly in military?" I says, "Because I was told I wasn't

allowed to be here.” He said, “Who?” We went through all...he took me, he was the head of the Ryukyu Islands for the U.S. Army. If you’re gonna go to someone, go with the most stuff on their shirt.

We had a great time. He took me everywhere, but he found him. He was walking guard as a punishment for something stupid. Then they found out he wasn’t supposed to be walking...he wasn’t...So he got two days off ‘til we found a place. We didn’t live on post. We lived off post. We lived in front of the bachelor officer’s quarters, but I had a wonderful time there. It was absolutely great. I almost got arrested a couple times, but that’s ok, too. There is a leper colony right outside of Okinawa. It’s within walking distance by water. The shelf is that long. I’m walking and walking. The Coast Guard comes along, “You can’t do this.” I said, “Oh, now what?” I had...coming home I said, “Well, I already done the northern route. I’m coming home the southern route.” “Do you know if you’re ever going to be back that way again?” No! So I went to Saipan, and Guam, and the Philippines, and Hawaii. Get to Hawaii, they won’t let me into the country.

EL: Why?

MG: I didn’t have the bubonic plague shot. They had to find a doctor that could give it to me, go to the Naval base and get it, and give it to me in the airport. Then I came home, and I lived with my parents for a while. My father still didn’t talk to me. He sat shiva for me when I got married. He had nothing to do with me. They didn’t take me to the airport. I paid someone to take me to the airport. Everything. They wouldn’t acknowledge the fact that I was going. They wouldn’t acknowledge the fact that I was ever married. But when he found out that he was really sick, he came to terms with everybody, with everything. Him and my husband became the best of friends. They watched television together and everything else. I mean, he was at our house daily. When my daughter was a year old, for her first birthday, he took her out to dinner for her birthday. He died a week later. But, it was very hard. That was very hard on me. This year, I was married fifty years, and everybody said it would never work.

EL: What did your husband do?

MG: He was a painting contractor. He was a high steel Greek bridge painter, and then he went into business himself. They did smoke stacks, and water tanks, and cold tipples, and bridges, and then he got a job with the Ames Corporation. He did that. But, his wounds caught up to him. Once he hit late fifties, he had a harder time, hard time, so he finally just stayed in the office and could not do it anymore. When he hit sixty-two, he says, “I had enough.” So, we’ve been retired for a long time. At the age of fifty-six, he decided he was going to become an airplane pilot. So he went and got his license. Then we bought a plane. Then he says to me, “Why don’t you go on the board at the airport?” I said, “I don’t know if I really want to do this.” He says, “Yes, you do. Your mother was out here years ago. You can do it.” Because my mother watched for planes during World War II.

EL: What do you mean?

MG: It was an airport. The Japanese might come to Fayette County! They had everybody watching from high buildings. They had all these women watching. They never changed the style of that flashlight. It's like this. It's straight up and then it comes to a... for a right and it has the little things that go from red and green and blue. She had that, and then I found it when I was younger. Then Jerry got one, I said, "I've seen these before!" But, she watched for airplanes out at the airport. So he said, "Look. We have a history with this place. My dad flew outta here. I fly outta here. You're mother watched this place. Do it. You don't do anything else." At that time, I wasn't here. I said, "Ok." Ten years I put out there on the board. It was my community service because the board did not get paid. The airport here in the county is owned by the Authority. They made a mistake when they deeded it. Connellsville deeded it back to the county, but when the county wrote the deed out, they deeded it to the Authority. So the county has nothing to do with it, except they appoint one person a year. So, I had two appointments. They were five years each. But, I'm done.

EL: So, you said you weren't here at the time. Did you take a break from the synagogue?

MG: Yes, because some people weren't so nice when I got married, and some were very accusing of various things. I sort of went my own way. They were really nasty.

EL: Because your husband wasn't Jewish?

MG: Right. But he had the same thing with the Greek Church, and the more I learned, the more that they're apart but they're the same. They bury the same way. They don't embalm. They bury within twenty-four hours. You don't get a nameplate for a year. I mean, the burial's the same. You get a different name, you get named. I have a Jewish name, I have an English name. He has an English name and a Greek name. They're the same, but they're different.

EL: When did you start coming back?

MG: Oh, I think my daughter was a freshman in high school. No... my daughter and my son are two worlds apart. One is Mensa and one is the other direction. He's not retarded or anything. He's just slow. He has a lot of learning disabilities, but I have two kids at two ends of the rainbow. The school district did not satisfy her in education, so I sent her to the Greek Catholic school here in town. She ended up with a teacher that told her that the Jews killed Christ and that she was no good. She came home in tears, and I said, "Wait a minute." We had to go through this whole thing about Christ was a Jew. Why would they kill one of their own? Why don't we believe in it? I said, "Ok. The Jewish people believe when the Messiah comes, which is the son of God, all persecution on earth shall cease and it will be peace. Yeah," I said, "Melissa, look at the news. You tell me if we have peace." "Mommy, don't be stupid. You know we don't." I said, "So, what do you believe?" "Oh, it can't be. Can it?" I said, "No, it can't." So, that's how... and she went back to school, and she tells the nun, this nun who's very old, "You don't know

what you're talking about." I get more phone calls from school between my two kids than anybody in their right mind ever needed.

EL: Aside from the country club, did you have anything like that when you were growing up?

MG: What do you mean?

EL: Did you have any problems with Gentiles in Uniontown?

MG: No, until she went to school, and you get something like that. I had...but, of course, I have a way of dealing with things that are different from most people. And, my friends have all told me, my daughter's even told me, you have a way of when something's bothering you, you just walk away. I don't even realize I'm doing it. I don't even realize that I have...I didn't realize that I had two sets of dishes 'til it was pointed out by my kids. I didn't realize that I have black and white in the same crock, but I only use the black for the meat and the white for dairy...

EL: It was just habitual.

MG: I just...it's been that way as long as I can remember. And Jerry says, "Yeah. So what?" He grew up accepting this, and we've been together so long, he just accepts all my little stupid things. He says, "She cleans the house really good once in a year. So look out when she's doing that."

EL: For Pesach?

MG: Yeah. He says, "But, then she makes a good Easter dinner." And they eat a lot of lamb. So, there's...we don't eat that much ham in our house. I do make it for him. I don't eat meat that much. I do things that I don't know I'm doing. So, if it benefits them, fine. If it...doesn't like it, do something else. I don't care.

EL: Why did you decide to come back here instead of going to Temple Israel?

MG: I didn't like their service. It wasn't something I was used to. The prayers weren't the same. It was a total different praying, everything. I knew the same...I knew the people. It wasn't like they were strangers. It just...I didn't feel comfortable. It wasn't my home. It wasn't where I wanted to be. We go now to Morgantown. There's a Tree of Life there. I really like that place. It makes me feel good, but there's isn't really the same as here, but it's not as far out as the temple was. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?

EL: Yeah.

MG: It's just...this is like home. I taught Sunday school here. I was the advisor for the BBYO the first two years I was married.

EL: Tell me a little bit about BBYO.

MG: It was the B'nai B'rith Youth.

EL: Yeah, but what kinds of stuff did they organize?

MG: Oh, I don't remember. We went to dances. They had car washes. They did...they played games and they went to...we went to all the different little towns all around, went down to the valley. They traveled around. They played sports, whatever they felt like doing. They would come to me with a project, I would run it past the B'nai B'rith here in town. If they said they could do it, we did it. If they said no, we didn't. I was the easiest person to get along with. I think I was the youngest they ever had. Then, shortly after that, it fell by the wayside.

EL: When did the community start to shrink?

MG: I was shocked when I came back.

EL: Which was about what year?

MG: It was in the eighties. Early eighties. My daughter graduated high school in '89, so it was in the early...she was born in '71, my son was born in '75. So, I came back in the early eighties. Yeah. Sometime in the eighties. I was just shocked that they had seats roped off. I had called and asked if I needed reservations for the holidays. "Why," was the answer I got. I said, "Always did before." He said, "Not now, you don't." When I first came back, there were three or four rows, and then there's six rows roped off now, if not more. It's hard. Yeah...it's like knowing this place will not be here, but I'll tell you what. The people that are buying this have been so nice and so accommodating. I had a man here from Iowa, they do nothing but stained glass for churches. He showed me how to take the memorial plaque off of the...and not hurt the window. They said, "Please leave it. That way we can appreciate this was purchased in this person's name." They're keeping the name Tree of Life. They're just a nice, nice people. They're going to have a church here. We're leaving I think just about everything that's here now, and there was so much...there was so much stuff here. When we decided to sell, there were so many dishes in this place. And I decided...I took it upon myself and I talked to one of the other...two of the other board members and I said, "While we're here, let's do something for the community." What? I says, "I'd like to donate to people who've had fires and need dishes." We have helped twenty families.

EL: Wow. Why fires?

MG: 'Cause at a fire, you're devastated. You have nowhere to go. The first thing you need to do is find clothes and food.

EL: Did you have this happen to you?

MG: No...my son set fire to my kitchen by mistake. So, sort of, yes. Not really. But, when we first came back from overseas, one of the girls in the neighborhood was at the house. She says, "Oh, where'd you get the dishes?" "We bought them when we were overseas. Bought them in Japan." She says, "Well, are you going to use them all the time? Are you going to get rid of your other ones? I know who could use some dishes. These people had a fire in their house." And that just stuck with me. So that's what stuck with me. We helped twenty...twenty families and depending on the amount of people, they never got less than a service for twelve.

EL: There were that many dishes here?

MG: Show you...

[END TAPE TWO]

[START TAPE THREE]

EL: All right. So tell me about your uncle's store in Connellsville?

MG: It was Lou Barron...

EL: Ok.

MG: ...He had the Hollywood shop. It was a ladies' dress shop. He lived in Connellsville with his wife, Bertha. They had three children: Bernie, Myra, and Rhoda. Rhoda was the oldest...Rhoda was the oldest, I think. They lived on Race Street. They lived in the middle of three churches. Sundays was very musical. But, he was there in his little store by himself. Then Ralph Mazer, I don't know if you've talked to them or not. Marsha, that's his wife. Ralph's deceased now. He had a children's shop in Connellsville, and he would go with my Uncle Lou or my father on buying trips. He would come to Mount Pleasant to the house and talk about business because he was young. He was much younger than they were and he was learning. So they took him and showed him the ropes. It was right on Main Street next to the talking stoplight.

EL: What's the talking stoplight?

MG: It made all these weird noises for the blind (unclear) to cross the street. We called it the talking stoplight. Also in Connellsville was a building called Aaron's Furniture. They were there. It's being redone, and its gorgeous, if you've seen it. Tuffy Shallenberger's doing it. If you want in, just let me know...

EL: Ok

MG: ...I will call him. He was on the board at the airport with me. There was a department store, it's gone, they tore it down. It had an elevator, everything inside of it. I can't think of the name of it, but there's one in Greensburg, too, but it's empty. I don't know, there was a Myrna Cohen...she wasn't a Cohen. She married...yeah, and Susie

Cohen. Susie married my cousin Bernie. I don't know why, but they didn't get along, and she didn't get along with my uncle. So he said, "Goodbye," and he wrote it up in his will that she or her children were never to receive one penny. Oh, he had the will from hell. I have never seen a will like that. Everybody said, "You'll never get a penny." So why don't you ask the... They all called me to ask the attorney all these questions cause they figured I was written out. But, I can ask questions because I didn't know if I was written out or not. So, I said, "What the hell. If I'm written out, I'm written out. If I'm not, I'm not." You've gotta find out things. It shocked them to find out that I was not written out because when the synagogue Mount Pleasant was running out of people, my uncle would call and say, "Can you come for services?" to my brothers, "and bring your sister." They never called me. So one day, I says, "Why don't you ever ask me to come down?" Boy, did I stir up a hornet's nest! I said, "I will be there." Then we went to service and I followed along. I knew the whole service, I've been coming for years. He said, "What is with you? You know the service, why don't you go?" I said, "I've always been a member of the synagogue. I never dropped my membership. I just didn't go, but I didn't drop it. I still...now am going." He said, "You are?" I said, "Yeah." He called. He didn't believe me. He called here and talked to the guys and they said, "Yeah." So he called me back and he said, "Why didn't you ever tell me?" I said, "It's none of your business." He said, "Ok." He never took my name out. If he did, he put it back in, and they didn't know this. There were twelve of us that inherited from my uncle. Very lucratively. His will is on a tea cart in Greensburg.

EL: What do you mean, it's engraved on it?

MG: No, it's this big. They can't carry it.

EL: Oh. It's that thick?

MG: It's that thick. It went through probate and got thicker because every holding had to have its own piece of paper. Yes, it was that big they had to have it on...it's probably filed away somewhere now, but it was huge. He put down names, I don't want this person to have it. I don't want their children to have it. I don't want this person to do this. This person will get so much. This person'll get so much. This person will only get this much. He would...he really wrote it out exactly like he wanted it. I've just never seen one like that. But, he had never married, and he was mad at some of the family because they put some of their parents in nursing homes. They had Alzheimer's. They couldn't take care of them. But, he didn't understand that. That wasn't the way he was raised. So, he got, like, funny, but he was the last one to die. No? Yes. He was the last of the family. Susan has a picture of the whole family. I gave it to you. It's a big picture, about this big. My father is thirteen or fourteen in that picture. He was born in...I don't remember... '02, '12... '02, '12, somewhere around there. My mother, I could never figure out when she was born. She had four birth certificates. Every time she had to go someplace, she needed proof of age. She applied for another one, and she got younger. But, I don't know. I jump all over the place when I talk.

EL: Were you involved in any conversations about trying to merge the two synagogues?

MG: Just a few and I thought they were being very stubborn, stupid, and I've vented what I thought was...that they should do it.

EL: You thought it was a good idea?

MG: Yes. And I got told that I'm just...at that point, you're just a woman. You don't know what you're talking about. But, see, I was raised you don't go on the bima. You don't read from the Torah. You don't do any of that sort of thing. But now everybody goes up there. I still to this day have a hard time just going up there. I don't know why. It's just how I was raised. When you...when it's that engrained in you, you just can't do it. This is a nice building.

EL: When did the conversations start about selling it?

MG: I have no idea. All I know is that I think I'm the first woman president, but I'm not sure about that. I'm the most vocal they've ever had.

EL: You're the president right now?

MG: Yeah. I'm president and treasurer. Ralph Mazer was the treasurer. His wife, Marsha, married one of my friends, and she used to live in Uniontown. I've known Marsha since I'm six years old. She was from a very big family, too. So she didn't know what to do with him. She knew I was the president and she says, "What am I gonna do with him?" I said, "Bring him back. If you don't want the job. Why don't you keep it? You were in business in banking." "No," she says, "I just can't do it." I said, "Bring him back." I was at the doctor's office, I get this phone call on my cell phone... "I have these boxes, can I put them in your car?" I said, "Sure. Come get the key." She said, "I'm outside the doctor's office." I said, "How did you know I was here?" She said, "Barnetta had told me." Her sister had worked for the doctor. So I said, "Ask Barnetta take my keys to your sister outside." And, I said, "When you're done, leave 'em at the desk." I went out, all the financial records for the whole synagogue that weren't here, were in my car. Six big boxes. The big boxes...

EL: Yeah

MG: ...they were put in my car. I had them in my house 'til about a month ago. I brought them here. I still have two boxes, because being the treasurer and being the president, I get stuff from everywhere. But, I said, "When I took this," I said, "I can do it, but I don't want it." I said, "We will hire somebody." So, I hired somebody. Boy, did they give it to me. "What do you mean you hired someone to look at our books?" I said, "She's good." "How do you know?" I said, "Because she's the tax collector." "Well, how do we know if she's honest?" I said, "The County has her for the...she's the tax collector. She's bonded by the County." "Oh, in that case, it's fine. I hope she's not charging us much." I said, "I don't care what she charges us. She is being so reasonable." Fifty bucks a month. She does the payroll, the taxes for the payroll, all the bills. I pick up the mail and sign the

checks, and she does the rest, for fifty dollars a month. She writes and she does a monthly audit for us, telling us how much is here and everything that I present to the board for the meeting.

EL: Is the congregation also ending, as well as selling the building.

MG: No.

EL: Ok.

MG: We're gonna go to...they had their first meeting...(unclear)

EL: (unclear)

MG: Shabbos service.

EL: Yeah. At the JCC?

MG: I could not make it. We were out of town that day.

EL: So, what do you think the future of the congregation will be?

MG: The JCC's up for sale. I don't think it's long. I really don't. Chester Miller is ninety years old. Milt Kronick is in his late eighties. I'm seventy. Mort Opal is seventy-eight. Marsha is seventy-eight. Shirley Radman is eighty-two. What do you think this life is? Not very good. Doesn't sound very...It's a shame, but I can't see it being more than a couple of years, at the most.

EL: How do you feel about that?

MG: It's very sad. It really is, knowing that it will not be here. But I have...I guess I've come to terms with it because I've worked on it so long and I've come to know the people in Morgantown so well. I think that's where I'm gonna be. We've taken the synagogue, the cemetery, and I'm not even going in that cemetery. I'm going with my husband somewhere else, but they've put the wall up and they have the mixed marriages on the other side of the thing.

But, I'm on the board of that. I'm not even a member! I don't have anybody out there, but you have to do what you have to do. I've told them when I first came here, and I've took the first board meeting. "I will not be quiet. I will tell you what I think and I think you're gonna have to look to the day that you close this place up. So start to look now." They've poo-poo'd me for the longest time. Then all of a sudden, it hit them. I was right. So that's what's...but, it's very...it is sad. It's the end of...this is the last synagogue in the county...in two counties. Greene County doesn't have any that I know of. Other than Morgantown, the next one, there's one in Cumberland, which is...their congregation

a...Allegheny County's full of them, but it's big. Westmoreland County...I don't think there's too many there.

EL: Greensburg.

MG: That's it. Somerset...that's an iffy. I don't think there's one in...but I doubt it. There aren't very many around. Then I'd tell them all of my political views, too.

EL: Which we won't get into today...

MG: No, I just...I sat back one day and I said, "You guys are not gonna like this, but," I said, "I know that ninety percent of people at this table voted for Obama, and let me tell you something, he's killing Israel." And, I says, "Take that to the bank." They said, "No!" I was right, but I'd never tell them I was right.

EL: Well, thank you very much.

MG: You're very welcome. If you can find out...

[END INTERVIEW]