

Transcript of Interview with Rosalyn and David Balk
Small Town Oral History Project
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Transcription:

Eric Lidji: Today is August 26, 2015. I'm Eric Lidji. This is the Small Towns, Small Towns Jewish Oral History Project. And I'm talking to Rosalyn and David Balk and we're going to be talking about Latrobe. So Rosalyn, why don't you start by telling me how your family got to Latrobe.

Rosalyn Balk: Like most Jews we went into business in Latrobe. We were married a year and finally found a store that we wanted and started a business there. We were brand new, only married a year, and it was really a very nice beginning.

EL: So you weren't born in Latrobe?

RB: No.

EL: Where?

RB: We were from Pittsburgh.

EL: You were from Pittsburgh. How did your family get to Pittsburgh?

RB: Well, my family moved to Pittsburgh after I was born, and then we moved to Mount Pleasant, went to school there. Then in high school, we all moved back to Pittsburgh and my family stayed in Pittsburgh, and David and I met.

EL: Was there a community in Mount Pleasant?

RB: Yes. Uh huh. There was a small community in Mount Pleasant and there was a small community in all of the surrounding towns, too, at the time.

EL: Was there a synagogue in Mount Pleasant?

RB: Yes!

EL: What was it called?

RB: It was called B'nai Israel, and my grandfather was one of the founders, so I'm very proud of that. Unfortunately it's no longer there, but it was a thriving community for quite a while.

EL: What was his name?

RB: Meyer Barron.

EL: So Barron is your maiden?

RB: Mhm.

EL: Meyer Barron.

RB: Mhm, my mother's...

EL: How did he get to Mount Pleasant?

RB: Like all the immigrants. He had a friend who brought him over, in the junk business, and he worked for him, ironically in Latrobe. And when my grandfather wanted to go off for himself he found a place in Mount Pleasant, our family is there.

EL: And so he started a junk business.

RB: Right.

EL: What was it called?

RB: They didn't have titles. He started out with a horse and wagon.

EL: Wow.

RB: And my uncle modernized it when he grew up and took over and went from there and had quite a business after that.

EL: So the business remained after your part of the family went to Pittsburgh.

RB: Yes. Yes. We always had a presence in Mount Pleasant.

EL: And this was your mother's father?

RB: Mhm.

EL: What was your mother's name?

RB: Mary Barron.

EL: Mary Barron.

RB: Mhm.

EL: So she gets married.

RB: Yes.

EL: Your father?

RB: Yes.

EL: Is who?

RB: Frank Hirsch.

EL: Okay.

RB: He was a Pittsburgher, and he had a store in McDonald, and they met, and they moved to Pittsburgh for a while. My dad was in business then, and then the Depression came, and we moved to Mount Pleasant to be with my family until my dad got work again. And six years later we moved back to Pittsburgh.

EL: What was his field?

RB: A little bit of everything. He was really a merchant. That was his main field.

EL: What was it, did he have a store in Pittsburgh?

RB: No. For a short time they had a store with my uncles on Market Street. But the Depression came, and things changed.

EL: So what year did you end up in Latrobe?

RB: 1955

David Balk: '54.

RB: Well we were married in '54. In 1955.

EL: What was the town like at the time?

RB: The town was a nice small town. I was used to it so it was very comfortable for me, I don't know about my husband. He went into business, ladies' business. My husband didn't know a size dress from the man in the moon, but he learned very quickly. And we made a living there, and the town was nice. The shul, we had about thirty-five families and it was lovely. The Jewish community welcomed us with open arms. Of course, we all, small towns do that. And it was very comfortable for us. We really enjoyed living in Latrobe.

EL: So this would have been right when the new synagogue was built.

RB: It was a year old.

EL: Okay. So you don't have any memories of the older synagogue.

RB: The only memory I have, I was at my uncles, oh, I would say three years prior to this. And some ladies came in selling tickets to a dance. I think it was a dance. And they were from Latrobe and they were making money for the shul. Little did I know it was connected later. Then we came in, the shul was already there, then the debts were pretty low, so we were pretty lucky. We came in and we didn't have that much money, so, but our contribution was to the shul and we worked hard for it the rest of our lives.

EL: Just going back a minute, why Latrobe? You had said you were looking at...

RB: We found the business there.

EL: So it was a business that already existed.

RB: Yes.

EL: And you knew that you wanted to be in business.

RB: Yes. My whole family was in business so it was very easy for us to step in. They taught my husband all about it, and we went from there.

EL: Huh. So let's talk a little bit more about the synagogue. What was the involvement, were you going to services, were you...?

RB: The involvement, I think we were there about a month, Gladys Dunhoff was very active, and, I'm sure you'll hear her name again, was also, I knew her from childhood because she was from Mount Pleasant. She came to make her call on the newly tenant there and she said to me, "You're going to have to bake a cake. We're having a cake sale, and we have a wonderful reputation in Latrobe." And I, who was newly married and learning how to cook, said, "I don't have any recipes, what'll I do?" She said, "Here's a recipe." I made it and ever since then I've been cooking and baking. And I've been doing it for the synagogue a lot.

EL: Do you remember what the first recipe was?

RB: Yes, it was called the Spanish Bun. It was a cake with a sea foam icing. I remember.

EL: What was the culture of the synagogue like, was there a rabbi?

RB: No. We never had a rabbi.

DB: We've had a rabbi except for High Holidays, student rabbi.

EL: So it was lay led.

RB: Mhm. I can proudly say my husband was one of the laypeople that conducted the services and saw that everybody was there on Friday night.

EL: And were there a lot of children in the congregation?

RB: At the time we had a Sunday school, so we had enough for that. Classes were small naturally. I would say there were about ten or twelve kids, at least.

EL: And who taught the Sunday school?

RB: The parents. Everybody took a turn teaching Sunday school.

EL: Did you?

RB: I did later on after I had my own children. But Dave taught Sunday school before we had children.

EL: I want to know a little bit about the town. A lot of times when we talk to people, they grew up in the town that we're talking about. Since you didn't, I'm curious to know, for instance, how did the Jews get along with other people in the town in the fifties and sixties and seventies when you were there?

RB: I would say Latrobe is unique more so, living in Mount Pleasant I could feel the, being different as a Jew. But in Latrobe they were very welcoming, don't you think? Maybe it was because we were in business and we were a young couple, but I noticed Latrobe, we had very little, in quotes, anti-Semitic feelings towards us. Everybody was very cooperative. I'll go further by saying my kids went to school there, they still have friends from Latrobe. We were Jewish, they were Gentile, but we were friends.

EL: And how did that differ from your experience growing up in Mount Pleasant?

RB: In Mount Pleasant I was known as Jew Barron's granddaughter.

EL: Wow.

RB: So there was quite a difference. But then I'm quite old now and that was a different time, too.

EL: In Latrobe what was the level of observance in the home?

RB: In my home?

EL: Mhm.

RB: We were Conservative. We had a kosher home.

DB: Honey, don't look at me, you're doing fine.

RB: And we were observant to the point that we made sure we were in shul when we were supposed to be. And when we were first married we came into Pittsburgh for the High Holidays because my parents were still living. So we went to the big synagogue then.

EL: Which was the big?

RB: B'nai Israel.

EL: Okay.

RB: So Dave's father was very active. He would be a hazzan at Weirton shul, so we went with my folks.

EL: What were some of the, were there groups or anything like that? Was there a Sisterhood and a Brotherhood at the synagogue?

RB: Oh, we had a wonderful Sisterhood.

EL: What, tell me a little bit about that.

RB: As I say, I'm going to mention Gladys again because she was a dynamo as far as Sisterhood was concerned. And we did a lot of activities. In fact, our moneymaking was, we supported the shul more than the men did. We had bake sales, which we were quite, had quite a nice reputation. They had raffles, we had dinners. Anytime we needed money we would do something, and we had meetings every month, and we were all friends. The mahj groups and so forth that everybody else has, we had that, too. And you know, they say you pick your, you can pick your friends? I don't know if we would have been as good friends had we lived in a city as we were because we were in a small town and we were together.

EL: That's interesting. There were circumstances and people made the most of them.

RB: Absolutely. It turned out that they, our friends were more meaningful I think because there were so few of us that were close. There were different age brackets, that's what I mean by being so few. My age bracket was, at the time was the youngest. And there were about four or five couples that were young at the time. And then there was a few middle-aged and then older people.

EL: Were there ever families coming in after you?

RB: A few families, but not very many. They would come and go.

EL: So there was already a, a decline in membership happening?

RB: Yeah, yeah. And as the kids were getting older, they were leaving Latrobe?

EL: Do you know why?

RB: Opportunities. They, we, they all went to college, and the opportunities were elsewhere. And some like Ruth's family, the children moved to Pittsburgh so they joined them.

EL: Yeah.

RB: And that's, we kept losing, well we'd been there over fifty years, so we've seen a lot go on.

EL: When did you leave?

RB: Thirty years ago. We left our residence in Latrobe, but we never left Latrobe synagogue.

EL: So you still go back out there?

RB: Yeah. It's still ours. And my family, my boys and their family are. We were one of the few that were left of the shul when it closed. Two other families and a few single people and that was it.

EL: Do you think that having a synagogue without a full-time rabbi changed the relationship that the congregants had to the institution?

RB: I think we were closer.

EL: Yeah.

RB: Because the men participated. And I have to say that my husband was stubborn. There were times when the weather was bad and they wanted to call off Friday night services and my husband said, "No!" Everybody tried to come, and they came. And because we never stopped, we kept going and going. And we helped one another.

EL: What was the concern about missing a week?

DB: Oh I, I reprimanded them.

RB: Well, his principle was, if you miss one week you're going to have an excuse to miss another week and so forth and so on. And if you don't try to go every week it's going to fall apart.

EL: Yeah.

RB: So it didn't. And it reached the point where everybody had to tell why you weren't there if you weren't at services. And we took our kids when they were very young, and our kids knew that Friday night they went to shul. And my, I'm rattling on, but my kids, my daughter was fortunate to have three other Jewish kids in class with her. My youngest had a couple and my middle boy had none. It was hard for him.

EL: Were there activities for children? Jewish activities?

RB: Uh, yeah, we made the activities in our shul. We had Hanukkah celebrations and Simchas Torah when we had a lot of people. And then we had a jointure of our shul with the shul in Greensburg that the kids went to Sunday school together and they had the activities together also.

EL: Was there anything like AZA or...?

RB: No, no. I started a B'nai B'rith, a boys and girls group, but that was too hard. The traveling was too hard.

EL: Did you have anything like that when you were growing up?

RB: No, I didn't. I had one other friend in Mount Pleasant that was Jewish, so... But I was fortunate, I moved to Pittsburgh when I was in high school.

EL: Were you apprehensive about moving to a small town?

RB: No.

EL: Because you had grown up in one.

RB: Yeah, yeah.

EL: Tell me a little bit about the business.

RB: That's my husband's part.

DB: Well, we had a ladies' ready-to-wear store. And we catered mostly to the kids, secretaries in Latrobe that were in the corporate business, corporate entities. And they were young kids maybe anywhere from twenty to up. And we catered mostly to the young kids. We were there, let's see, we were in business seventeen years. And then my wife and I bought a, and our cousin, who had a store in Connellsville so we sort of bought him out, so we had two stores for a little short time. I think we covered everything.

EL: What was the name of it?

DB: Hollywood Shop.

RB: Hollywood Shop, very original for a small town.

EL: Hollywood Shop, and where was it?

DB: On Ligonier Street, one of the main, Latrobe has three main streets, Ligonier, Main, and Depot. And it's a town of around ten thousand people, and that's pretty steady. We didn't increase it, the Jews didn't increase it. But it's a mill town, quite heavily industrialized, Kennametal, Latrobe Steel, Alcoa, Rolling Rock Beer. So it had diversity.

EL: What did the store look like on the inside?

DB: Picture a twenty foot front, maybe eighty foot long and so a twenty foot front would pretty much describe it. And we had three, four dressing rooms and the rest of the store was devoted to inventory.

EL: And how was it presented, the inventory?

DB: On hangers, we had bins, we had sizes. We had anything that they would wear from the undergarments to the dresses and coats. We had a little costume jewelry, which is almost negligible. And the undergarments, we had bras and slips and gowns and stuff of that nature. But most of our business was dresses.

EL: Were there window displays?

DB: Oh yeah.

EL: And who was responsible for those?

DB: Well we had a guy, Bob Lee, came in every two weeks, every month, there was no schedule, and we had that for I guess ten years, I'm guessing. When we first went in we tried to do it ourselves. Then you make a few bucks, and you say, well, we could afford a window dresser for maybe every month or so, and we did that for I'm guessing around ten years, I would think. Nothing other than that. We took, my wife and I joined the Chamber of Commerce, the Elks.

RB: I was in the Ladies Professional Business Group. He was in Junior Chamber of Commerce, and he was quite active. But that's what you do when you go into a small town, especially if you're in business.

EL: Did you work long hours?

RB: Very long hours. At least it was to me.

EL: And it was six...

DB: She got so tired of working in the store, she said let's make some babies.

RB: That's right.

EL: And how many days a week were you guys there?

RB: Seven, six days a week.

DB: We didn't take off for Shabbos, we took off for Sunday. We already were integrated.

EL: Where were you getting your supplies from?

DB: New York. I would, my wife and I would go to New York at least four times a year in the season, so we'd be three, four months ahead of the season we were going in to.

RB: That was our vacation.

EL: So by that point there was, coming to the wholesalers in Pittsburgh was not part of it.

RB: For fill-ins we did.

DB: We, fill-ins, we didn't do too much in Pittsburgh here, we wanted to get the fashionable clothes, and New York was the mecca for that.

EL: Yeah. Were, were manufacturers' reps coming through?

DB: Oh yeah.

RB: Yeah.

DB: Yeah we had, we would have, if we had a little line that was productive for us, profitable for us, and it was good for us, we had that gentleman or lady stop in the store and we would look at, on the road. As time went on the road business almost dissipated. There's very few retailers, very few manufacturers on the road now. It's all out of New York. Or a center like Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh would have I think my wife is right with fill-ins, but it wasn't, we didn't have much wholesale business. In fact we had no wholesale business, the wholesale business is when we bought from the manufacturers.

EL: Right. You said seventeen years. So in the, this is the early seventies then.

DB: Yeah we went from 1955 to '72?

RB: '72, '74.

DB: I became a broker for thirty-six years, stock broker. And that's it.

EL: What, what led to the change?

DB: I've always had a fascination for stocks.

RB: Plus the fact that the, the malls came in.

EL: Yeah, I'd heard about that.

RB: And some of the big people took away some of our lines that we had exclusivity to. They just choked the little person out. You go through any small town today you don't, you see very few small business people.

EL: Was that disappointing?

RB: Yes and no. I was glad to see my husband get into something else that he loved more. And but it broke our ties to living in Latrobe eventually. We waited until our children were out of high school and then we moved to Pittsburgh.

EL: And that was thirty years ago?

RB: Mhm.

EL: Tell me a little bit about the closing ceremony.

RB: The closing ceremony to our shul?

EL: Yeah.

RB: It was lovely. We had a handful of people left.

DB: We went to around sixteen.

RB: I don't even think we have sixteen left.

DB: Most of them were widows though.

RB: Yeah. And then a lot of the widows passed away in the past couple years.

DB: Right, uh huh. So we were down to, we had a, we would have a minyan but only because people from Greensburg would help us out. And we would go to Greensburg on an alternate basis every Saturday. I'm talking about recently.

RB: But he asked about the closing ceremony. The ministerium joined Rabbi Perman from Greensburg and us for the ceremony. And we had over a hundred people from other churches.

DB: Were there a hundred?

RB: Yeah, from other churches that came, to honor us I guess. And Catholic priests spoke, a minister and another lady minister. They were just lovely because, I'll start to cry, they said that we'll continue, there will always be a Jewish presence in Latrobe and we left a legacy for them. And it made us feel very good that we're not going to be forgotten. But, and then the torah ceremony, they took the torahs to Beechhaven, New Jersey, and I understand they had a lovely ceremony too, thanking the people from Latrobe for the torahs and their carrying on for us.

EL: When did it become clear that the synagogue would need to close?

DB: I would say we've had rumblings for the last five years because we just had deteriorating people staying in Latrobe. I would say five years, I'm just guessing.

RB: We were dying off. Nobody was coming in.

DB: We used to have forty people, or maybe forty families. Now we had two or three families, but the actual count was around sixteen, seventeen people. And it was just quite evident that we wouldn't last too long. But I'd say the rumblings would start around five years ago.

EL: What was the mood when it became clear that that was going to happen?

DB: It was almost a determination that it should close.

RB: It was, you couldn't get a minyan anymore. There was just nobody to get a minyan from.

DB: Well you could get a minyan, but you'd have to coordinate with Greensburg.

RB: We were counting my recently bat mitzvahed granddaughter and the women up until I guess...

DB: Just recently because we had two people, two families from Greensburg move to Squirrel Hill and both, one gentleman passed away, he was in his nineties and I would, my son and I, my son more so than me, would pick up two gentleman in Oakland and Squirrel Hill. And my son and I, so that's four. Four is forty percent of a minyan.

RB: And then they, they'd go to Latrobe for the minyan on Saturdays.

DB: So that worked out for a couple years but...

RB: It was very evident because nobody was moving into Latrobe.

DB: We were, I would say most of the, most of the people who were in our age group were merchants. And their children would go to college and go into other professions. That's what happened.

EL: Who were some of those families?

DB: Well, the two families that are still in Latrobe are the Radmans and Bob Mendler's son Mark. Bob Mendler was a Holocaust survivor.

RB: His son.

DB: And he passed away. He and his wife passed away. He did a, I thought, a very unselfish, he would go around to communities in our area and speak about his Holocaust experience. And I think he got quite a bit of nachas, quite a bit.

RB: Well, he was instrumental in starting the Holocaust studies at Seton Hill and at Saint Vincent College.

EL: Wow.

RB: And Latrobe High School has Holocaust studies too and they have a memorial.

DB: Do they have Holocaust studies?

RB: Yeah. Don't you remember? We saw their artifacts. Bob gave him all the artifacts from it.

DB: Oh I don't, I was in the store. How's that for an excuse?

RB: So, no. We're quite proud of him.

EL: And you said he's still living or no?

RB: No, he passed away.

DB: No, he just passed away recently.

RB: These were the pillars of our shul.

EL: Yeah. Who were some of the other Jewish families in Latrobe?

RB: The past families?

EL: Yeah.

DB: Oh, there's some people by the name of Don Friedberg?

RB: Oh, he's still living. But the Lowenstein family.

EL: Right.

DB: The Lowenstein lady that you know, her grandparents I think, would Ruth have the...

RB: Her mother and father.

DB: Right, they lived in Latrobe.

RB: Berkosky.

DB: Berkoskys, they're unfortunately nobody there for that. But they were quite constant in their attendance in shul.

EL: Did they have a business? Berkosky?

DB: Uh one of the gentleman was a mailman. The other gentleman was, he had business connections, what shall we say...

RB: Sort of a tobacco/candy kind of salesman.

EL: Notions.

RB: Yeah. Yes. And there were the Kahanowitz family.

DB: The Kahanowitz family have no, have no members in a shul.

RB: Yeah, I'm talking about all the members that are gone.

DB: Oh.

EL: What was their business?

RB: Kahanowitz's ...

DB: Furniture.

RB: Furniture? And...

DB: Sam Frankel was a furniture man. And Dunhoff's.

RB: Furniture.

DB: Gladys Dunhoff was quite instrumental in keeping the ladies together.

RB: And the Weiss family.

DB: Hymie Weiss, you might see, you ever been to Latrobe?

EL: Yes.

DB: You saw the shul as you came in, not the shul, you saw the Weiss Furniture?

EL: Yes.

DB: That family and the offspring of that family is the Dunhoffs, they married in, and I'll probably forget some of them.

RB: I think we mentioned the workers of the synagogue.

EL: How many Jewish families were at the closing?

RB: Families? Three.

EL: Just three.

RB: And we were one of them and we don't even live in Latrobe.

EL: So it was you and the Radmans.

RB: And the Friedbergs.

EL: Huh.

DB: Well then we've had..., what's her name? We ought to give her credit.

RB: Well he's talking about families, honey.

DB: Oh.

RB: We have a few singles.

DB: A lady discovered she was Jewish from, her mother was on her deathbed, and she, the mother told the daughter, you don't know this but you're Jewish.

EL: Wow.

DB: So, and she was an excellent speaker. In fact she spoke at the closing.

RB: She studied Judaism after that.

DB: Yeah, her name is...

RB: And she gave our sermons on Friday night, beautiful sermons.

EL: What's her name?

RB: Jeanette...

DB: Jeanette Wolf.

RB: Wolf.

DB: And that was one of the things we still...

RB: We have, we have her sermons online.

EL: That's nice. David, what was your background?

DB: My background, well, the nicest thing that happened to me, I married my wife. That's for posterity. I lived, my parents came to America in 1927. They had a grocery store in a city in a little mining town called Coverdale, which is now, closest thing you would remember to that would be Bethel Park.

EL: Okay.

DB: We lived there 'til I was nine years old, then we moved to Squirrel Hill. So nine...

RB: Because he had to go to Hebrew School.

DB: Yeah Hebrew School was the reason we moved to Pittsburgh.

RB: And he had four...

EL: There were no Jews besides your family in this town?

DB: Two.

EL: Two.

DB: My family and Mr. Fineman, who I thought was, I don't think he was Jewish, but he was. And then I was a merchant, went to college, went to, we had a store, the Hollywood Shop and after seventeen years, I've always had a yen on the financial markets so I was a broker for a stock broker for thirty-six years, and then I retired.

EL: How did you meet? The two of you.

RB: Jewish Council.

EL: NCJW?

RB: Yeah. And before that I went to Pitt, and I was on the committee for the yearbook with his brother. So we had a little bit of common ground there to meet and greet.

DB: I never met my wife 'til around a year before we got married. She worked for her, my brother's, are you familiar with Pitt?

EL: Yeah.

DB: Pitt has an *Owl* book, they don't have it anymore, a yearbook.

RB: It's no longer there anymore.

DB: And he was an editor for a couple years and she, she was one of the workers in his... So it's small world. And then one day he inadvertently said I have a nice brother, which he was a little blind to, but he, I don't know. The first thing I remember about Ros, she, you know Jews try to get wholesale prices, so I think you had Hobart what? A Hobart...

RB: I had a contact. Mixer.

DB: Mixer. So I went over.

RB: I got it for his brother to give to his mother and Dave picked it up.

EL: And that's how you met?

RB: That's how we met.

EL: Through the Hobart mixer.

RB: And then I worked at Carnegie Library, and his sister who was sixteen at the time, brought him in to get a library card, and I gave it to him. And I can still see her standing there giggling. It worked!

DB: Our romance was rather unique in the fact, I don't know how it came about, but I thought her how to drive. That was the biggest mistake I ever made.

RB: That was our courtship. We couldn't afford anything more.

DB: That was our courtship.

EL: How many children did you have?

DB: Three.

RB: Three.

EL: And where are they now?

DB: Two, the boys, are in Pittsburgh and my daughter's in Atlanta. And she's not married, my two boys are married.

RB: And we have four beautiful girl granddaughters. I'm not prejudiced.

EL: Alright, well thank you so much for your memories.

RB: I hope we, you can edit it, anything you want.

DB: You, yeah edit, throw out whatever you want, it'll be like if you took our picture.

RB: We rambled on. You were, you were taking the cobwebs out of our head I think.

EL: It was good.

END OF INTERVIEW