

Transcript of Interview with Ruth Lowenstein Novice
Small Town Jewish History Project
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Transcription:

Eric Lidji: Today is August 19, 2015. This is the Small Towns Project, I'm Eric Lidji and I'm talking to Ruth... Lowenstein Young?

Ruth Lowenstein-Novice: Novice.

EL: Novice. Ruth Lowenstein Novice.

RL: Lowenstein Novice.

EL: About Latrobe.

RL: Right.

EL: So if you would start by telling me how your family go to Latrobe, as best you know.

RL: As best I understand my grandfather came over from Germany, went into Baltimore rather than New York, settled in New Jersey. I thought the name of the town was Belvedere, I'm one hundred percent positive. Decided he wanted to have a store of his own. My understanding is he got on a train, he had heard about a store in Latrobe and he took the train to Latrobe, walked around, felt it needed a store and settled there. And it was only because it was on the train stop.

EL: What was his name?

RL: His name was Fred Lowenstein.

EL: So he comes to Latrobe on a tip.

RL: Right. He comes to Latrobe on a tip, on nothing more, and ended up settling there. And opened a department store around 1900 and the store was in existence until the fifties.

EL: How did he meet your grandmother?

RL: I honestly don't know. My grandmother was from New York. So my thought is it may have been an arranged, or he met her when he was there in New Jersey.

EL: What was her name?

RL: Her name was Fannie Lowenstein.

EL: Do you know her maiden name?

RL: I did. Come back to that. It may pop in, I'm not sure. I'm not sure it will.

EL: Did you know them?

RL: I did know them. My grandmother was alive until I was in the upper grade school. My grandfather passed away when I was a freshman in college.

EL: What do you remember about them?

RL: She was five by five and jovial and loved to cook. And was just a typical Jewish grandmother, sweet. He was a very staunch German, very particular. He was a hard driving man. Very, very nice. And I remember going down to their home all the time. I remember sitting on the front porch swing and swinging. They had all the family dinners. The grandchildren, of which there were six in Latrobe, used to have dinner down at their home every Saturday night because our store was open, and our parents all worked. So we would go down to grandma and grandpa's every single Saturday night. They would make dinner. Well, she would make dinner. And it was, it was a fun time to grow up.

EL: Do you remember what they cooked?

RL: She cooked almost anything. And I know she loved making things like hamburger because she loved tasting it raw, which was so unhealthy. My grandfather's, one of his favorites were sweet breads. And many Saturday nights he would have sweet breads and I had the chair, because I was the youngest, right next to him, and to this day I cannot even look at, or anything, a sweet bread. I don't remember what she cooked. I kind of remember a lot of chicken, a lot of brisket. She liked to bake. I don't remember past that. A lot of food.

EL: I guess part of the question was, was the food American, was it German?

RL: A little bit of both.

EL: Yeah.

RL: Kind of Americanized German, she was a good cook.

EL: Were they religious at all?

RL: Yeah. And there was, the original synagogue was a very, very old building. I think it was in the First Ward. I think that was the area. And the building is still in existence. It was the kind of synagogue where the men were on the first floor, and the women were upstairs in the balcony with the children, and you could look down over the balcony and see the men davening. So they were religious. They had all the holiday. We had every holiday there. And on Passover my grandfather would lean on a pillow, and he would go through the entire service in English and in Hebrew, and it lasted forever. But it was fun.

EL: How many children did they have?

RL: They had three. They had my Uncle Irving, my father's name was Jerry or Jerome, and they had a daughter Miriam.

EL: Did all three stay in Latrobe?

RL: All three stayed in Latrobe. My father and my uncle worked for my grandfather in the department store their whole lives. And my aunt was married to a gentleman who sold I believe it was ribbon.

EL: In Latrobe?

RL: In New York.

EL: Okay.

RL: And he traveled a lot. I know him the least of any of the people because he was always out of town.

EL: How did your father meet your mother?

RL: That's an interesting story. My parents were older for that time. They were in their pretty late thirties, and my mother was, my mother was raised in Brooklyn and she was a buyer for a company where the small town department store owners would come in and the buyers would take them around to show them where to buy the merchandise. So my mother worked for the buying company, and my father came in to buy for the store. She's the one that took him around, and that was it.

EL: That's interesting.

RL: Yeah, it's a fun story. The fact that my mother could go from a life in Brooklyn, which was a very full life, and transform herself into a thirty-five Jewish population, thirty-five families in Latrobe, is just amazing to me.

EL: Did she ever talk about that transition?

RL: Uhm, no. She didn't talk a lot about anything. Which was the way everybody was in those times. But I am sure it was a very hard transition. She loved Latrobe. They had so many friends and so much activity just among the group that it was, it was wonderful.

EL: Why do you think they waited so long to get married?

RL: I don't know. Nor was I ever told. I don't know.

EL: Do you know what year they got married?

RL: Yeah, they were married in 1936, I believe, right around '36, '37.

EL: So your father didn't have to serve?

RL: My father did serve, but not actively.

EL: Okay.

RL: He did, but not actively.

EL: So how many children do they have?

RL: I had a sister, born in 1938, who passed away three weeks after she was born, she was not well. And then they had me and that was it. They were older, they were afraid to keep going, so I guess I was their last hope.

EL: And what year was that?

RL: 1939.

EL: Okay, so the very next year. What are your early memories of Latrobe?

RL: I loved it. I mean, I didn't know that it was a small town. It was a very nice way to live. I, some of my memories, my best friend lived right across the alley, because you had the detached garages. And we used to go back and forth, and I remember her mother made the best apple dumplings, and we would, every year she would make us apple dumplings, we would go over. I remember going to kindergarten, which was a private kindergarten, and my father would drive us one day a week, my aunt would drive us one day a week, my neighbor would drive us one day a week. And I went to school with Fred Rogers' baby sister, and their chauffer would drive us the other day.

EL: The Rogers' chauffer would?

RL: Yeah.

EL: Did you know him? Growing up did you know him at all? Not really.

RL: No. But that just ended up being a cute story because of what he became.

EL: You mentioned your best friend, was she Jewish?

RL: No. She was Catholic.

EL: And there was no issue.

RL: No, we were just together. I would go there and help her trim her Christmas tree, you know. She would come over, most of the holidays were not at my house they were at my grandparents, but no. I went to school with her one day, I guess we were in first grade, and she went to a Catholic school. And for some reason the public schools were closed that day and I went with her, I haven't thought of this in, God, so many years. I went to, what was it, Saint Xavier's with her. And I remember walking in the door and being petrified because I saw all these people running around the hallways dressed in these long black robes, and I just remember wanting to go home.

EL: It was just an intrinsic fear?

RL: Oh, I guess. I mean you know, it was just mind boggling to me. I had never seen anything like that, so that was kind of cool.

EL: How did the Jews get along with the Gentiles in Latrobe, in your opinion?

RL: I think we just all got along. Was there anti-Semitism? Probably. Did I feel it personally? I really didn't. My friends were my friends, some of them were Jewish, some of them were not. Most of them were not. Because there weren't that many Jewish children. I had two Jewish girlfriends and the only boy my age was my cousin. So it was just, we just all merged together, and there probably was anti-Semitism. I didn't personally feel it. Were the schools receptive to the practice of the Jewish faith? No. There was always a class election on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. I mean, there was also something that kept us a little bit apart. Just because they didn't think to look at a calendar. But that was about it.

EL: Were there prayers in school?

RL: Yeah, there were. As long as they were allowed to do it.

EL: Yeah, that's interesting. Was there a Jewish part of town? Or did Jews live all over?

RL: Just all over the town. The town was kind of divided. Originally I guess it was a railroad track going through so you either lived above...

EL: In town?

RL: Yeah, you either lived above the track or below. Most of the Jewish people seemed to live above. You know, it was up on the hill.

EL: Okay.

RL: But no, they lived all over. The town wasn't all that big.

EL: Who were the most prominent Jews in town that you remember?

RL: Truly?

EL: Yeah.

RL: My family.

EL: Yeah. What do you remember of the store?

RL: Oh the store was wonderful. The store was one of the old-time department stores, where the first floor was very large. It was divided into a women's section, soft goods, which was fabric and lingerie and just a ton of stuff. And then the third section was the men's section. And then upstairs they had children's, and at Christmas they used to bring in toys. And at one time they sold shoes up there also. I loved when they brought in the toys for Christmas because my birthday was December 23rd, and I made out like a bandit. The store was one of the stores that had the, you'd send the money cup up, people would pay... It's in here, I forget what it was called, but it was in this article. [reading from an article] "When a customer made a purchase the clerk took them money, put it in a cup attached to a wire transport, pulled a wooden handle sending the cup up to the second floor office. The bookkeeper up there, Pauline, made change, reversed the process and sent the cup back down to the clerk and the customer."

EL: I've never heard of that before.

RL: You would see the cup just going across, up to this little office that was there, and Pauline was very staunch and very strict and she wanted no jokes made out of this. And of course my father and my uncle would sometimes just send cups up or whatever. My grandfather used to pay us a quarter when we were young to stay out of the store, because he thought that was more beneficial. I remember there was a small office in the back. So we were the only place in town that gave S&H green stamps, and we were the Girl Scout/Boy Scout store for the town so that brought in a lot of people. So it was a cool store.

EL: How many people worked there?

RL: Well my aunt ran the women's department, and there were a couple clerks there. My mother ran the soft goods. My father and my uncle ran the men's and the children's. Each of them had a couple employees that would come and go. The two people that stand out in my mind, and they were there forever, was Pauline, who was the cashier, and a dear lady named Flossie, who was the seamstress. And my life, I owe to Flossie because she would finish whatever sewing project we had to do in seventh and eighth grade because I couldn't sew. So I would take it home and then on Saturday I would take it down to Flossie and she would just do a couple things. So I'd probably be in eighth grade. They were wonderful.

EL: Did you ever work at the store?

RL: Mhm. I would work in the summers when I was older and for the holidays. But would you call it work? I was in my mother's department. I'm sure I didn't do that much, wait on some customers.

EL: Do you know if your, if your father and your uncle were in touch with Pittsburgh at all in terms of buying, the wholesalers in Pittsburgh?

RL: Oh yeah we used to come into Pittsburgh on Sundays very often and go down to, what was it, lower Fifth Avenue.

EL: Yeah.

RL: And they had merchants that they would go, and then when the children's show or whatever would into Pittsburgh, or the women's, they would come in and go to the shows.

EL: What do you remember of Fifth Avenue from those days, what was Sunday like on the Avenue?

RL: I wasn't there all that many, but I would come in. I just remember them shopping in the old-time stores and when we were here we would always go to a deli because my father loved them. And we would always end up in Squirrel Hill, and go to a place like Adler's and take some things home. They were wonderful memories.

EL: Did the salesmen ever come out to the store?

RL: Oh sure.

EL: And did they have their big brief cases?

RL: They had their big briefcases and they would come. More often than not, my parents would come in, but I do remember a lot of the salesmen calling on the stores.

EL: Did you parents have to work seven days a week?

RL: The store was closed on Sundays. They did work six days a week. They were open Saturday nights, which is why we ate at my grandparents' house. Yeah, they worked, they worked hard.

EL: And you said it was open until what year?

RL: The upper fifties. I know I have the information. It was the upper fifties or the lower sixties.

EL: And what was the reason, did they sell it, or did they close it?

RL: They closed it. You know, when car, when families became two-car families and there was more ability to go out to the outskirts, people would come into Monroeville and shop, and I think that was the beginning of the fall of the small town department stores. We were the largest until Reed, S.P. Reed, I think it was, came in and then they were the largest. But people had more flexibility to go other places, and it just became a sign of the times that the store needed to close. So they had a going out of business sale and then many years later the store was leveled and it became a parking lot.

EL: Was the closing traumatic for your parents?

RL: Oh I'm sure it was. I'm sure it was traumatic. Just trying to think, it was probably '58, '59, '60. Oh, I'm sure it was traumatic. My father had worked there his entire, entire life. He had had an opportunity to go into business, I believe with an uncle, a little further south which would have been cool. And he wouldn't leave his father, they were very devoted to maintaining the name and everything in town, and they just wouldn't leave their father in the lurch.

EL: It was called Lowenstein's.

RL: It was called Lowenstein's. So they stayed, they stayed their whole lives.

EL: And what did he do after the store closed?

RL: Retired.

EL: Okay, because he was older.

RL: Yeah, he was older. He retired. They stayed in Latrobe for a while, and then they moved into Pittsburgh. And my grandmother lived with us, my mother's mother from Brooklyn lived with us from the time I was in first grade. And they moved into Pittsburgh with my grandmother and bought a small home in Whitehall, a ranch, and my father passed away. My father passed away before my grandmother did. So he only lived to be sixty-five, so he didn't get to be retired very long.

EL: What was your home like growing up? You mentioned your grandparents' home, but what about your house?

RL: Oh it was great. I took a ride past it on Sunday when I went up for the closing of the Latrobe synagogue, and it was a happy home. I was an only child. My grandmother lived with us. She did a lot of the cooking and baking. She was Hungarian by birth, and her food and her pastries were amazing. So I mean, it was a happy home. My parents were very active in the community, they were very well respected. My father was in all the organizations, he was an Elk, he was whatever it was. And he was the kind of person that if you went down the street, and people knew that you knew Jerry Lowenstein, the

only comment was, “Wow, what a nice guy.” He was just wonderful. He was kind. He was just a great guy.

EL: What was your family’s involvement with the synagogue?

RL: They were one of the founding members. There were about ten families and they worked so hard to raise the money. I mean they dedicated so much of their lives to this. And then after it opened they wanted a Sunday school and my father ran the Sunday school for my whole length of time there, which I guess was from the time I was six until I was confirmed at sixteen. And then he continued for a while after that.

EL: And we’re talking about the new building.

RL: Mhm.

EL: When was that, the mid-fifties right?

RL: Yeah.

EL: Do you remember it?

RL: Oh I do.

EL: Yeah?

RL: I do, I have a picture of it on my phone that I took on Sunday and it looked exactly the same when I walked in this Sunday as when it opened. It looked, I mean it looked great. It was so well maintained, it looked exactly the same.

EL: Was that a big accomplishment in the life of the community?

RL: Oh yes. Yes. And they devoted, they devoted their years to this, you know, to give their families a better understanding of Judaism with the larger facility that had classrooms. Yeah, it was a very big part of their life.

EL: How often did you, did the family go to services?

RL: We went pretty often on Friday nights. We did not have a rabbi. My father did an awful lot of the English. He would read the English and one of the other members would do the Hebrew. So we did go, we did go fairly often. It was a part of our growing, or my growing up, I was an only child. But we did, we went pretty often. And I am sure someone has, or will, tell the story of a young rabbi that came in from Cincinnati and my parents had him up, my parents would have the visiting rabbi up for drinks and then somebody would have him for dinner that kept a kosher home. So he was there for two years, they loved him. His name was Jack Mason.

And you're laughing so I know that Mickey probably told you the story. My father was watching television about five years later and said to my mom, "I know this man." And it was Jackie Mason. And when he does his shtick about being a rabbi, Latrobe was the only time he practiced, so when he does that he's talking about Latrobe.

EL: Do you remember him?

RL: I very vaguely, I mean I just remember, you know, once you look at his face you kind of remember him being there. And I remember that my parents had him up and every time he would come to Pittsburgh we would go to see him. And some of the times we would go backstage and I'm sure he pretended he remembered. It was fun.

EL: What were, what was the Sunday school classes like?

RL: Small. Mine had five people in it.

EL: And you had, this was part of the Southwestern District?

RL: Yes.

EL: So you had teachers coming in from the city?

RL: No.

EL: No.

RL: No. It was run by the people from Latrobe. My father, there was a man by the name of Harold Paul that taught. They owned a jewelry store, almost right next door to my parents' store. A woman by the name of Sylvia Kahanowitz used to teach, and I don't remember who else taught, different people coming in and out. The time that we would be associated with the District was confirmation. We would have our own little one and there would be like a second one, and that was run by a man named Oscar Harder, and he would come out.

EL: Did you like Sunday school?

RL: Probably not any more than anybody else.

EL: Yeah.

RL: But I went.

EL: Did they have bar mitzvahs?

RL: They had bar mitzvahs but not bat mitzvahs.

EL: Do remember having an opinion of that at the time?

RL: No, because it was just the way it was. And I didn't think about it one way or the other. It's a shame, I don't know any Hebrew, and it would have been kind of fun to learn it.

EL: Yeah. But you did have confirmation?

RL: I did have confirmation.

EL: And that was at sixteen?

RL: Fifteen, sixteen depending.

EL: So when you graduated from high school was Latrobe in your future, did you, you knew you were gonna leave?

RL: No. Latrobe was in my past.

EL: What was the, you wanted to get out of a small town or...

RL: Well there was no opportunity there. So I just never even, I graduated in '57 and never even thought about going back. I mean I wanted to be in a city where there were more opportunities. So when I graduated I went into teaching. I taught business subjects and, after I had my children, I couldn't teach business subjects anymore because they no longer gave shorthand. The typewriter was replaced by the computer. I had to have picked the only kind of education that would grow old. I mean history is the same, English is the same, languages are the same, but business totally changed.

EL: Where was this that you went to school?

RL: I went to Penn State for two years and then I went to Boston University for my last two. I had a lot of family in Boston, and I just wanted to try a city.

EL: Were you involved with the Jewish community in either of those places? I'm curious if it felt different coming from Latrobe.

RL: Only, only a Hillel, and I was not actively involved. I went.

EL: And so since your family left Latrobe you probably didn't go back, there was no reason to go back and in the '70s or '80s.

RL: I didn't go back. Once my father passed away, I would take my mom to the cemetery outside of Greensburg every year and very often we would, we would go back into Latrobe, and we would go visit some of the people that were still there and go say

hello. We used to stop and see Flossie who was the seamstress because she was so sweet. And we would do it then and then gradually it went further and further to the wayside as other people moved away, passed away, and, you know, we just didn't go back that often. I was there on Sunday.

EL: What were your impressions of the event on Sunday?

RL: It was amazing. It was the end of an era. Sad, but so worthwhile. They kept it alive for so many, many years. And I'm sure it was a struggle. And I sent Mickey Radman a note, I said, "You reminded me of my dad, even your hairline." Which was not, he worked his life to build it and your worked yours to maintain it. So it was a beautiful day, just beautiful. After my dad passed away, this is just an aside, I donated a breastplate for the torah in memory of my dad and in honor of my mom and Mickey called and asked if I would like it, and I thought wow, what a great family memory to have. And two of the torahs, I'm sure you were told this, were purchased by Beachaven, New Jersey. The third had not been purchased at the time, it has been since. So at the end of the service, after everyone had filed out, Mickey said, "I'll take you in and we'll get the breastplate." And I looked at it and I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it.

EL: You felt it should stay with the torah?

RL: Very much. So there it is.

EL: Well thank you so much for telling me all these stories.

RL: Yeah, it was great, it was a great growing up time. It was fun.

END OF INTERVIEW