

Transcript of Interview with Charles Coffey
Homestead Hebrew Congregation Oral History Project
Call Number: CSS #4

Library and Archives Division
Senator John Heinz History Center
Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania
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Name of Interviewer: Anne Shekter Powell

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Name of Transcriber: Kristi Tyler

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Transcribers Notes:

The interviewer is very difficult to understand. There are several instances where a small portion is marked inaudible.

....	Indicates unfinished sentence
(unclear)	Indicates that the words are not understood
(?)	Indicates that the spelling may not be correct

Transcription:

Anne Powell: ...93 and interviewing for the Jewish Archives of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society.

Charles Coffey: My name is Chuck Coffey. I was bar mitzvahed in Homestead Synagogue in 1946.

AP: (unclear) ...to do is take you back all the way back before that, to ask you if you were born in Homestead area.

CC: No. I was born in Pittsburgh and lived on Hill District until I was nine years old. And then we moved to the Glen Hazel Project. And I went to Hebrew school in Homestead.

AP: Ok, so when did you move... Let's go back. When did you move to Glen Hazel?

CC: We moved to Glen Hazel in 1942.

AP: 1942? So 1942, we know that that means you were born in 1933.

CC: Correct.

AP: Did your parents, did your father work at all in that Homestead area?

CC: My father worked at Westinghouse in East Pittsburgh.

AP: Is that why he chose Glen Hazel?

CC: That was a project put up for defense workers and we moved there so that he could be somewhat close to his work.

AP: Oh I see. So that's what distinguished it from Terrace Village, which was that it specifically...

CC: Defense workers.

AP: Defense workers. And everyone who lived there was a defense worker?

CC: To the best of my knowledge, in 1942, and during those war years, yes.

AP: Did you go to Hebrew school before you went to Glen Hazel?

CC: I had gotten to Hebrew school briefly on the Hill District.

AP: Where did you go?

CC: I don't know if it was the Hebrew Institute or what. I think it might've been the Hebrew Institute.

AP: And you went to synagogue in (unclear)?

CC: On the Hill District?

AP: Yeah.

CC: Yes.

AP: What was that?

CC: Well we went sometimes to the synagogues on Miller Street.

AP: They were Russian, weren't they?

CC: There were two synagogues on Miller Street. There was larger one and a smaller one. One of them may have been called the Russian shul. yeah.

AP: You said, to reiterate, what we were talking about before, that your father came from Homestead...

CC: He came from Lodz, Poland, yeah.

AP: What about your mother?

CC: My mother came from the Ukraine. From the community called Volhynia Gubernia... You know that community? [laughs]

AP: Well, Gubernia is the province...

[Speaking at the same time]

CC: The county, the province...

AP: The county...here, everybody came from Gubernia...

CC: Some...Gubernia, yeah. A lot of Ukrainians.

AP: Right. So that would probably have been the Russian shul connection.

CC: Yeah. That is where we often went down to Miller Street.

AP: Then after you went to Glen Hazel, you didn't go there anymore?

CC: To the Hill District? Or synagogue? No.

AP: Did you have other family who lived in the area?

CC: We had cousins who lived in the Homestead area, Homestead Park. And that was the Coltins and the Steins who are very active in the congregation. Yes.

AP: Did your mother have relatives who still lived in the Hill?

CC: When we left, my father's mother and my father's sister still lived in the Hill District, and possibly, my mother's father, too, but if he's lived there in 1942, he left very shortly after for Los Angeles.

AP: And what about the other ones? Did they also go to Los Angeles, or did they...?

CC: No. My grandfather was the only one who went to Los Angeles.

AP: So you had relatives who were in other parts of Pittsburgh, rather than in that Homestead area.

CC: Yes, yes.

AP: But, when you moved to Glen Hazel, you started to Hebrew school?

CC: I went to Hebrew school there, yes. Homestead.

AP: Did you find that it was very different from where you had gone before?

CC: As far as the Hebrew classes, not really.

AP: Ok.

CC: In my time, teaching in a Hebrew school was to teach you to read Hebrew fast. And they did that in the Hill District and they did it in Homestead. And that was pretty much the extent of Hebrew school training as I remembered it. Read Hebrew fast.

AP: Was the rabbi your teacher?

CC: Rabbi Weiss in Homestead. First there was a rabbi or teacher named Pinkas.

AP: ...Rabbi.

CC: Rabbi was he? And then it was Rabbi Joshua Weiss.

AP: So it was always the rabbi who taught you?

CC: Yes, yes.

AP: Was it the same way when you were in the Hill?

CC: Yes.

AP: So it really wasn't all that different. I mean you said you didn't remember Sunday school.

CC: No, no.

AP: Was that because it was so...But you were at four days a week? Is that right?

CC: Yeah.

AP: Was it hard to get from Glen Hazel to...

CC: Well, we took a bus, usually, from Glen Hazel to 8th and Amity and walked from 8th and Amity to 10th and McClure.

AP: Oh I see. So, it was...now you said we.

CC: Well, I mean, whoever went from our house to shul on whatever occasion, sometimes, if my parents would go to synagogue there, that's the route they would take, too. I went to Hebrew school myself and that was the way I went.

AP: That's what I was asking. Were there other Jewish kids in Glen Hazel and...

CC: There were a few other Jewish kids in Glen Hazel, but none of them my age.

AP: So you were sort of by yourself...

CC: Yes.

AP: Was that...I guess that was not exactly the same situation when you were in the Hill.

CC: No. In the Hill District, there was mixture of Jews and Gentiles, even people from the Arabic countries, a lot of Syrians lived in our neighborhood on the Hill in addition, there was blacks. So we had a mixture of people there, but there was a good number of Jews on the Hill as late as 1940. After that, the number of Jews diminished quickly on the Hill District.

AP: The way I was thinking was for you that was a change...(unclear)...and you were in the Hill. Then when you moved to Glen Hazel and were going to Hebrew school by yourself.

CC: Yes.

AP: Were you able to plug into that.... What did you do then, how did you...where did you get your friends and whatever. How were you able to plug into that Jewish community, or...

CC: Coming to Hebrew school there, I eventually joined to AZA in Homestead.

AP: But that was when you were a little bit older?

CC: When I was bar mitzvahed. AZA require that you be 13. So we had an AZA then and there was a core of maybe 6-10 Jewish boys from Homestead that were approximately my age that had formed that AZA. And then we got boys from other areas of Pittsburgh to join us. [telephone ringing in the background and an unknown woman answers] So we had a very strong AZA group there then and we were particularly strong in athletics. Yeah. And then we would win the regional basketball tournaments and things of that sort. So I plugged into those Jews from the Homestead area through the AZA.

AP: You know, there's no reason...just randomness, but I was wondering, if you could... Do you think that the fact that you were strong in it, that group was strong in athletics because you were all boys who went to school with non-Jewish boys and got more involved in athletics to fit into the regular school situation?

CC: Well, the Jewish boys from the Homestead area I'm sure felt that athletics, what should I say, was the currency of the group and saw that that was important and they were interested for that amongst other reasons. The other boys that we brought from the city of Pittsburgh that were strong in athletics, too, lived in communities that were largely Jewish. We had boys from Oakland and East End.

AP: Why did they join an AZA in Homestead?

CC: [laughs] I think I brought most of 'em. I had gone to the YMHA then, too. And so I met these boys from Oakland and I had met these boys from East End and the idea of being able to play in basketball tournaments and that sort of thing interested them. And so they were willing to be members of this AZA to have the opportunity to play basketball.

AP: I think that that was (unclear) of those who got involved.

CC: Yes, yes.

AP: I want to sort of move back, first, for a little bit, and talk a little bit more about part of what we talked about before we started this. Your father became a defense worker. Do you want to talk about what he did when he was in the Hill District.

CC: Well, my father, in my years on the Hill, took whatever kind of work he could and sometimes he worked on the WPA. He felt thrilled to get a regular job at Westinghouse when he did. This was a big step up for us.

AP: And that was Westinghouse in East Pittsburgh?

CC: East Pittsburgh, yes.

AP: And what did he do there?

CC: Spray painting.

AP: Uh-huh. That's a whole job?

CC: They sprayed generators and motors and all those kinds of equipment that were used in the war effort in those years. Then, after that, then generating electric power and whatever other uses there are for transformers, generators, motors, and so forth. And that's what he did his entire career there.

AP: I also wanted to ask you, again, about the thing about Jewish people, as much as you understood, about taking jobs at Westinghouse and what your understanding was about their being hired there.

CC: I think as late as the early and middle 30's, Westinghouse did not employ many Jews at all and made it very difficult for those Jews that somehow were employed and almost forced many of those that they did employ to leave. My guess is as the war approached, they loosened up that policy and more Jews were employed in Westinghouse starting around the time of the Second World War.

AP: So that was when your father thought it was an opportune time. It was a reasonable thing...

CC: That was a plum for him. That was a plum for him to get that job there and he only got it through some kind of connection.

AP: Now I mean, I'm assuming that before that, a lot of Jewish men would not have gone to large corporations, right? That he would not have applied for a job....

CC: I don't think so. I don't think so. Not only those kinds of corporations, but, as you know, banks and other large employers were very reluctant to hire Jews.

AP: Did you have brothers and sisters?

CC: I have a brother. Yeah.

AP: Is he older or younger?

CC: Younger. He's six and a half years younger and I think he also was bar mitzvahed in Homestead.

AP: So then, he was so much younger than you that he was not a companion when you were going...

CC: No, no.

AP: So you just were, he was only a little child.

CC: Yes, he was six years old when I was bar mitzvahed.

AP: ...Hazelwood must have been new then...

CC: It was brand new, we were the first ones to live in our particular unit of the project there, yeah.

AP: So was that considered...

CC: ...That was a step up [laughs]. It was a step up from where we had to live. Yeah. My mother was thrilled that we had our own thermostat for the first time. We had our own bathroom for the first time.

AP: And you lived in a big...

CC: We lived in three story houses on the Hill and they generally had one bathroom for the three families. The furnace was controlled by the owner of the house who usually lived on the first floor. So to have our own thermostat and have our own bathroom was a big step up. [laughs]

AP: Yeah.

CC: Sounds funny today, I know, but it was.

AP: Yeah, no, no, I...it'll be nice for the Archives, for us of our generation...also unusual. But, I was thinking that if things need to...I mean, some of those projects then, you had to get on waiting lists to get in so (unclear) something like a plum

CC: Yeah.

AP: Were your parents observant?

CC: Excuse me?

AP: Were they observant?

CC: We kept kosher. We observed the holidays. We were not shomer Shabbos. I think we held the traditional Jewish values, largely associated with Jewish people, in addition to the Gentile neighbors who lived all around us in Glen Hazel and I think we were very Jewish.

AP: The reason I ask was because now your mother, or your parents really, had moved from something of a Jewish community to a non-Jewish community.

CC: Yeah.

AP: Did they feel at all isolated?

CC: At first, at least, my mother felt terribly isolated. My father never spoke of that, I mean, for him, it was just a great opportunity to have a regular job and to live in a unit of our own. So he never spoke of that.

AP: Uh-huh. Where did she go to get her kosher food? Did she drive?

CC: No.

AP: No. I was thinking (unclear) but I'd better clarify that.

CC: There was a time that the groceries were gotten, there was some place in Homestead called Star Market, and got groceries there. And then they no longer got their groceries there and they got 'em from Squirrel Hill and by street car and bus.

AP: So they tended, this is what I was trying to figure out, how much they used Homestead versus how much they used (unclear). She tended to go, then, to Squirrel Hill, for example (unclear).

CC: Oh yes, yes.

AP: ... rather than to go to Homestead.

CC: I'm trying to think if there was a kosher butcher shop in Homestead, I don't remember there being...

AP: ... There was at one time, but I don't know when that one time was...

CC: Yeah, I can't recall (unclear).

AP: ... (unclear) ... So, actually, your memory of her not going there may mean that by the time you got there, it wasn't there anymore.

CC: Yeah. I know that there was a Mr. Coltin, who was a brother of our cousins, who had a chicken store in Homestead, and he may have had a schochet, or he himself may have been a schochet, so the Jewish people may have gotten kosher chickens from him, but I can't recall a kosher butcher in Homestead. There may have been. I don't know.

AP: Did you get your chickens from him?

CC: No.

AP: Then (unclear).

CC: Yes, yes.

AP: And, generally speaking, then, did they do their shop... (unclear) they only shopped at the Star Market for a while. The general kinds of shopping that they did, they weren't using Homestead that much for anything. It was just going there for...

CC: Hebrew school.

AP: For Hebrew school.

CC: That's all. And my father would go through Homestead on his way to and from work in East Pittsburgh, and he may have, in some years, done some grocery shopping there. But, as far as chickens and meat, that was gotten either in Squirrel Hill, or early on, it may have been gotten on Logan Street. Do you know Logan Street?

AP: Yes, of course. [laughs] Yeah, I think (unclear)...

CC: The Civic Arena, 'til the Civic Arena.

AP: ...redevelopment.

CC: Yeah.

AP: What about the high holidays? Did your parents... it was a distance for you to shul there?

CC: Well, I can remember on a couple of the years, we would walk to Homestead.

AP: Oh you did?

CC: Yeah, we would walk to Homestead on a couple of the years, then some of the other years we would go to the Jewish aged home for services.

AP: Oh, their services were open to the whole community?

CC: Yes, yes.

AP: I didn't realize that. Was it odd going with a lot of old people?

CC: Yes. [laughs]

AP: [laughs]

CC: Yes, it was still the time that the women sat in the balcony and cried the entire service. I don't know if you are familiar with that scene. You don't see that anymore.

AP: Right they were here...

[Unidentified person: (unclear)? (at 16:30-16:31)]

CC: I think this just focused their attention on the rough life that they have had or the rough life that the Jews have had, but they always cried.

AP: Did your mother read Hebrew?

CC: I think so.

AP: Did she read Yiddish?

CC: I'm not clear on whether she read...we didn't get the *Forward* or any of the Yiddish papers. I know that. I know she spoke Yiddish and we spoke Yiddish at our house and I can still understand Yiddish and speak it somewhat.

AP: Oh, so you did. So they spoke it in the home. (unclear)

CC: Oh yes and my grandparents, yes and my grandparents. Yeah.

AP: The reason I asked if she read Yiddish was because, one of the reasons is...(unclear) the thing you raised about why the women cry was because they would take the (unclear) which were Yiddish prayer books and I think the prayers were in the vernacular and so they were much more passionate.

CC: Oh really? I didn't know that.

AP: ...those prayers that they cried so much.

CC: That's interesting, that's interesting. And my mother had her own prayer book. That's true.

AP: Yeah, they didn't have standard...

CC: No, she had her own book.

AP: Was there...when you went to Homestead was that the time when it was still very, very crowded during the holidays?

CC: Yes, high holiday services completely filled. The synagogue was completely filled and I can remember distinctly the rabbi stopping the services several times, trying to get the kids from running up and down the aisles. Do you remember those days?

AP: Well, I didn't go there, but I was an only child and we didn't (unclear)...

CC: They ran up and down the aisles...And they would also chastise the women for coming to the synagogue in their fur coats and standing outside, rather than staying inside the synagogue for the entire services. Yeah.

AP: Do you remember (unclear)

CC: Oh yes. That was a social event of the sort. Yeah. In fact, a couple of my peers resented on through the years the way Jewish people or Jewish women expressed their religiosity by coming to the synagogue in fur coats, big cars, fancy dress, big cigars, and so forth, but not participating in the synagogue activities throughout the year. And they resented that. That they felt that this was all Judaism is, it's not for me.

AP: These are...you are not talking about people in Homestead?

CC: Yes.

AP: You're talking about people...Homestead (unclear)...they felt that about women...

CC: And men, and men, yes. And then, of course, the rabbis would scold the people for driving to the synagogue in those days. But the synagogue was filled. It was filled.

AP: Did your parents have to buy seats?

CC: I don't know if they paid something for the high holidays only or what they did. But, my guess is they paid something for high holidays. I don't know that they were ever fully members of the congregation. Maybe they were, I don't know.

AP: And did you have a seat even though it was crowded?

CC: There were no set seat arrangements in the main, although, I guess that there were some big givers of the synagogue that sat up front, or whether they still held with the value of sitting close to the eastern wall or whatever they chose as the special seats. They

may have had some people who had those special seats, but I think the rest of the people sat where they could. I think that's the way it was, maybe it wasn't.

AP: Yeah. You don't remember, like, children, separate services for children?

CC: I think I do. I think I do remember that, yeah, I think they may have had services for the children downstairs at a certain hour while the regular services were going on upstairs. Is that about the way it was?

AP: Could have been.

CC: Yeah. I think so.

AP: Did you go to those?

CC: No. They didn't have those in the years when I was less than bar mitzvah age. They may have had it after I was bar mitzvah age.

AP: I see. So you were around doing whatever it was that...

CC: Yes.

AP: Do you think your parents walked. Even on Yom Kippur? Even though you were hungry....

CC: Yeah.

AP: Or they were hungry?

CC: Yeah, I fasted, too, from the time I was thirteen.

AP: Oh yeah, then before that...

CC: Before that, I don't remember how much I ate between thirteen and nine years of age, I don't remember.

AP: So people would...here were your parents walking, a few miles, isn't it?

CC: Yeah, a few miles. Yeah, they fasted and they walked, yeah. Yeah.

AP: You see, you don't remember... You actually touch on something I was going to ask you about. You don't have a memory about whether your parents were active members of the congregation. So I take it that that means they weren't actively involved in it.

CC: No, they weren't. No.

AP: Did that make you feel that...do you think that they was any kind of distinctions between the people...

CC: Well, in a small way, I guess or maybe even a large way I may have felt second class. There were people who seemed to be the regulars or the pillars of the congregation and whatever and I kinda felt, well maybe we were just peripheral to the whole thing.

AP: And would you, do you think you would have liked to (unclear) going more and more? Is that your memory of it?

CC: Hmm, I don't know about that. I just took that as fact and I don't know that I had desires other than observing what was so.

AP: What was that that was going on? And you didn't hear your parents saying anything, or did you?

CC: One of the things I say is it's tough to be a poor Jew. And I'm sure by comparison we were poor Jews and it probably bore heavy on my father more so than any of us. I was just a kid, but I think it's tough being a poor Jew. But that's about it.

AP: Where did you go to public school? Did you...

CC: Went to public school in Hazelwood.

AP: Oh, in Hazelwood. That's where people from Glen Hazel went to school.

CC: Yes. Yeah, it was a city school.

AP: Did you go there all the way?

CC: I went through elementary school and through the tenth grade at Gladstone. And then in eleventh grade I went to Allerdice and graduated from Allerdice.

AP: Hmm. Well how was it like going to Hazelwood schools? I take it Hazelwood was also a place where Jews were a minority.

CC: A couple things that I can remember about being Jewish is that I would take salami sandwiches to school and in elementary school I shared a locker with a boy. And one day he came into the teacher and says, "There's something that smells terrible in our locker!" And the teacher went out to look to see what this was and here it was my kosher salami sandwich. [Both laugh] And the other thing I can remember is going to Gladstone on Passover and being the only one in the lunchroom eating salami on matzah. But that's what I took for lunch!

AP: Yeah, but you didn't have anything like....

CC: ...anti-Semitism? I had anti-Semitism from the first day I moved there to the last day I left. I got called “dirty Jew” in every eastern European language from the first day I moved there. And if we would play ball, they would pile on me, and just make it a little more difficult, which made me kind of think to myself even before the show New York, New York: if I can make it here, I can make it anywhere. That was my attitude. I used to think to myself, “Why did my father do this to me?”

AP: Yeah, I was gonna ask you, if you asked to leave?

CC: So, I just had to stay in there and do the best I could. I really don't think that their attitude towards me was based on my being, my personality, or whatever because when I would be one on one with 'em, it was fine. It was just when the whole group got together, or a group got together, that's when it would all come out. One on one, I would go with any of 'em.

AP: And that went all the way through Gladstone? You said...

CC: Well that was years...in Gladstone, I didn't have the anti-Semitism. It was the neighborhood that I lived in. There were a lot of these eastern European kids whose fathers who were working in the mill and I guess the virulence of anti-Semitism in eastern Europe carried over to these people who were largely first generation eastern Europeans. And that's what I was dealing with.

AP: They brought their programs with them?

CC: Yeah. Yeah.

AP: Did that make you gravitate more towards (unclear)....

CC: Well, when I would cross the line from the projects to Hazelwood Avenue and onto Murray Avenue, it was like freedom. It was like another world. Or if I got to the AZA tournaments where there was Jews, it was another world.

AP: How were teachers? Did you have any feeling about them in terms of...

CC: In public school?

AP: Yeah. And Jewish...

CC: No. No I can't...I did see some of that in dental school.

AP: In dental school?

CC: Oh yeah. When I was in dental school, there was still kind of an unofficial quota of the numbers of Jews that were admitted and it was known that some of the instructors didn't take kindly to Jews.

AP: That was Pitt?

CC: Yes. Yeah.

AP: And that would have been 50's?

CC: '53. Yeah. Yeah. But you had to make it in spite of it.

AP: Yeah. I knew already....you were already exposed to...

CC: Yeah, I was exposed to it so it didn't make that much difference to me.

AP: But it persisted beyond, I guess, where you expected to see it persist.

CC: Well, I had been told that it existed there and it did. Yeah.

AP: Did you noticed that at all in undergraduate school?

CC: No.

AP: So it was more in the professional side?

CC: Yeah. Yeah. I just was at a dinner the other night with a neurosurgeon and I discussed with him that I can't think of a Jewish heart surgeon in Pittsburgh. And I asked if there are any and he couldn't think of any either.

[End Tape One]

[Start Tape Two]

CC: ...He did say that it's not only that there's so few Jews but that's also true of Catholics.

AP: So people who applied for the specialties (unclear)

CC: Yes. This is him talking. I do not know this first-hand. This neurosurgeon on the staff at Presbyterian Hospital talking.

AP: Oh, but he's the man on the inside...[inaudible]

CC: Yes, yes. And he confirmed it and gave reason. Yeah.

AP: The world doesn't change as fast as we sometimes think it does.

CC: Oh, no.

AP: I wanted to ask you about your bar mitzvah. Was it on, I assumed, that it was more modest than we think of bar mitzvahs now.

CC: [laughs] The Bar Mitzvah party probably consisted of a fifth of liquor, egg kichel, and maybe some herring and that's it.

AP: At the shul?

CC: Yes, and a few of the men who attended services went downstairs and partook of that. And that was the bar mitzvah party.

AP: And did the other kids from your class come?

CC: I don't remember particularly any of them coming.

AP: Yeah. There wasn't a sense that...I was wondering if there was a large Jewish community that tended to show up...I assume this was Saturday.

CC: Yes. It was Saturday. And we didn't have close friends in Homestead that we invited. The people that I felt maybe warmest towards in Homestead were the Seiavitches.

AP: Being that man who was...

CC: The shamas and his wife and daughters who lived a couple doors from the synagogue. They seemed to be what you'd call hamishe people. The others were all probably of a socio-economic class above us.

AP: You know, that actually, that was sort of what I wanted to ask you about. For example, where did you go for Pesach, for Seders?

CC: Seders were held in our house.

AP: In your house. And you had...did you have other people come?

CC: My grandparents. My grandmother came and my aunt. Like that. Yeah.

AP: And were there any observances or did the...(unclear)...recollection of the congregation doing anything to celebrate various holidays at all?

CC: Hmm. I remember maybe something about Purim and the gregors, or Succos. There may have been candied apples.

AP: Did you go round?

CC: I think so. I think so. Yeah. But I didn't attend there very often, frankly.

AP: Is that partly because you didn't feel involved?

CC: Well, I wasn't involved with the religion. I was a kid that liked to run around a lot. I had a lot of energy and my wife tells me I had no zitsfleysh. I probably had less zitsfleysh then and so that was primarily the reason. Then, of course, I didn't have any strong relationships with the people there.

AP: Yeah, I guess that's what I was sort of trying to get at about whether they...you were saying that (unclear) felt any kind of...

CC: There's a little warmth that came from the Seiavitches that I think I noticed going to my parents.

AP: Uh-huh. But other than that, you didn't have a sense that this was a community that tried to bring...

CC: They didn't embrace me and take me in, so to speak. No.

AP: Mhmm. That was what I was getting at, so it was hard as the...

CC: I didn't consider it hard, it was just the way it was.

AP: I mean it was not something that (unclear). Did you get a sense, in retrospect, that you or your mother or your parents would have liked...

CC: Would liked to? They may have. They may have. Yeah. Yeah. They may have. Sure. They may have.

AP: (unclear) It probably was hard for them to...

CC: As I say, it's hard to be a poor Jew.

AP: You didn't think it was really, it wasn't so much the geography that separated you as it was...

CC: That may be a factor and then, of course, you have to factor in that maybe there was nothing exceptional about us that would endear us to that crowd. So we had to accept that position. I mean, I think if you have less materially, it has to be more substance to you to be desirable. And apparently, there was not that kind of substance that endears us to those people. As I remember, maybe I'm not remembering it correctly. It's a long time ago.

AP: Yeah. Now, you had been to Hazelwood, or was it Gladstone, Allderdice, and you were still living in Glen Hazel?

CC: Yes.

AP: And you were already a member of AZA in Homestead at that point? How was it going to Allderdice, which was this intensely Jewish...

CC: Yeah. I had, you know, my anxieties as to how I would be accepted there. I got there, and I was embraced with open arms. I just couldn't believe how warmly everyone treated me there. I was the president of the homeroom. I was this, I was that. I played basketball for the school. I was in this and that. The people in Squirrel Hill would come pick me up in their cars and take me here and there and do this and that for me and so forth. So, although there was a scholastic shock, because in Gladstone, the kids didn't pay attention to the schoolwork and no matter what my capabilities were, if the instructors weren't teaching, I couldn't pick up anything. And then I get to Allderdice and they're generally good students and they're going at this rate and I'm not prepared for it. So that was a little bit of a shock, but even that, I was able to get right into it and I was able to do all right. So I had two very, very good years at Allderdice, two very, very good years. I surprised myself.

AP: Yeah, so, interestingly, the fact that you lived in another community and the fact that your economic gap still existed, that that didn't make the same kind of problems for you there as (unclear).

CC: ...in Homestead. Yeah. Right. It may also be that maybe I developed more in those years and just became more desirable. I mean, I am not in any way demeaning the people of Homestead as not being warm people. Maybe I wasn't so desirable there and then the people in Squirrel Hill saw me as desirable because maybe I had developed into more. I don't know, but I was.

AP: Did you continue to go to services in Homestead after you were bar mitzvahed?

CC: Probably not.

AP: Uh-huh. So you think your parents...Oh but you had a brother who was still going...

CC: Yeah.

AP: But where did you go then?

CC: Well, as I say, sometimes we went to the Jewish aged home.

AP: Oh I see. So it was sort of back and forth between these two places. And you think that there was this period of time when you went to the Home for the Aged.

CC: Yes, we did.

AP: Was it hard to get to Homestead (unclear) to Squirrel Hill from Glen Hazel?

CC: I often walked. I walked through the Calvary Cemetery and down Murray Avenue.

AP: Oh. Was it, as (unclear) as Homestead?

CC: Squirrel Hill?

AP: Yeah.

CC: I guess it's about the same distance.

AP: The reason I'm asking you is I wonder why you were sent to Homestead rather than Squirrel Hill in the first place.

CC: It may have been cost. It may have been cost. I really don't know how that decision was made, but it may have been the cost of going. I don't think B'nai Emunoh existed then.

AP: Yeah it did. My family went there for years.

CC: Oh, then I don't know then. Rabbi Weiss, that was the rabbi at B'nai Emunoh, was the rabbi at Homestead before he went to B'nai Emunoh. So I don't even know if B'nai Emunoh existed.

AP: We were going there in the 40s.

CC: B'nai Emunoh? Ok.

AP: It existed in '48 because my piano went there when we moved.

CC: Oh ok. Ok. That's how much I know. It may have been a cost.

AP: It was a different old building like the one they have now.

CC: It may have been the cost. I really don't know how it came about. I didn't concern myself with those things.

AP: You...[inaudible] is that in the fact that you were just feelings were socially involved with Allderdice when you went there [(unclear) go on to the AZA in Homestead.

CC: No. By that time, that group from the AZA had dissipated.

AP: Oh.

CC: Yeah. And I then began to belong to an AZA in Squirrel Hill amongst other things.

AP: Oh so that whole community, to some extent, was weakening during the time that you were there?

CC: I think so.

AP: (unclear) and gathering...

CC: I think so.

AP: Because, what? They didn't have enough...

CC: Enough kids.

AP: I mean, because I was thinking of saying that the AZA had already gone.

CC: See, you're a few years younger. Did you know of a B'nai B'rith group or AZA when you were there?

AP: I left when I was ten.

CC: Oh. Ok. What year was it?

AP: '48.

CC: Well, did you know of, well '48 we existed.

AP: Uh-huh, but I wouldn't have paid attention.

CC: Right. Ok. Ok.

AP: (unclear) Did you have any, I just wanna ask. Well, first of all, I wanna ask you if you have any impressions of anything that I didn't really touch on that, I mean if it doesn't follow the (unclear).

CC: I think that there was a core of people there that felt warmly towards each other that had seen a couple generations of their family participate in a synagogue, and it was probably a very mutually supportive group of people. We just happened not to be in the in group. That's all.

AP: Were you aware of other poor Jews who were there at the time that you were?

CC: Well, I think the Newmans or the Mandells may have been approximately the same. That's all I can think of.

AP: Well, what I was asking is did you have sort of a sense of that they too formed a little...because they lived there.

CC: Yeah. They lived right there. Yes.

AP: And so I wonder if there was a sense of some kind of difference...

CC: I don't know. I mean, I was young and my perception wasn't too acute.

AP: Did you maintain any friendships with any of those people who were in your AZA group?

CC: Today, I see none of them from Homestead. I see a couple of the ones from East End and Oakland that were in our group that I brought to the group. So I see them, but the ones from Homestead, I don't see at all.

AP: Yeah, that's another interesting thing, which is that you had already made an effort to go to Oakland as well. So you were looking for...

CC: Yeah. That was my way. I would go wherever I thought my interests were or where it would benefit me. Yeah. I would go and do wherever it was. If I had to walk, I walked. If I had to ride a bicycle there, I rode a bicycle. I would get there. That was for sure.

AP: Did you ever get involved with the IKS or the IKC after that at all?

CC: I went to the IKS in the Hill District until I was nine. I spent a lot of time there til I was nine. When we moved, I went back to the IKS for their camp. I became active at the YMHA when I was about nine and played ball there until I was into my forties. I was on the board there. I was a chairman of the athletics department. I was...I'm sure that there were many years that I spent seven days a week at the YMHA. Then at the IKC here in Squirrel Hill, while I was in dental school, I worked for the IKC. I was in charge of the gym on Forward Avenue and led a couple of the clubs that were located in the original structure at Forbes and Murray. And then when I came back from the service and started to practice dentistry in Squirrel Hill, I still played some basketball there and was on the board there. I guess that I had gotten away from it except that I'm in this organization called the Jewish Sports Hall of Fame, which I'm very active in and we are a support group for the athletic program at the JCC, and I give a lot of time for that. Yeah.

AP: So you really, I was going to say you sort of came back to it, but you were always finding other Jewish institutions...

CC: Oh yeah.

AP: (unclear) that were doing something...

CC: Yeah. Yeah. My life is primarily or largely with Jews and Jewish institutions. I served on the board of a couple other of the Jewish agencies in Pittsburgh. So my life is largely with Jews and Jewish agencies.

AP: But I was thinking as you were growing up you sort of gravitated...you sort of sought them out yourself.

CC: Oh yeah. I wanted to get out from under the anti-Semitism in my neighborhood, I mean, I wasn't a masochist that I wanted to stay with all of that. Yeah, I wanted some relief and that was one of the reasons we moved to Squirrel Hill after I came home from the army because I didn't want to put up with it constantly.

AP: Oh, so your parents were in Glen Hazel (unclear).

CC: No, my parents moved to Greenfield the year that I started dental school. So I lived in Greenfield for the four years I was in dental school. Then, the year I graduated, we got married. I went to practice with a fellow in Johnstown 'til I went to the service. And when I came back from the service, I came to Squirrel Hill, and that's where I've been ever since because I didn't want to put up with it anymore. I feel as though prejudice reduction is one of the main interests in my life, and I am trying to get a prejudice reduction program started at the JCC now.

AP: Hmm...

CC: Yeah. In fact, I sponsor a basketball tournament that's called "Harmony Basketball Tournament" in which we bring together blacks and whites, Christians and Jews, and draft them onto four teams of equal ability, mixing the blacks and whites, Christians and Jews on the teams, then play the basketball tournament. Which is, in my mind, a tiny effort of prejudice reduction, and there are other things that I would like to do at the JCC if they'll go along with it in terms of prejudice reduction.

AP: That's interesting. You found all these things through sports (unclear).

CC: Yeah. Sports has been a vehicle for me...(unclear).

AP: (unclear) that you managed to hold onto your Jewish identity...

CC: Yes, yes.

AP: ... And now that you see another way of trying to reach another kind of project, you see a way of using that...

CC: Yes, yes. Yeah. So, I think that sports has been a great vehicle for me.

AP: Yeah. It sounds like it as you're telling the story and you make a case for the importance of those kinds of things...

CC: Oh yeah. Yeah.

AP: ... Within Jewish institutions...

CC: They just had the Maccabi games here, you know, and our organization supported it and so I was there each day seeing it. And I think it's fantastic to be able to bring Jewish boys and girls together from different cities and to see how well they get along together and the good times that they have. I think it's great. So sports has been good for me.
[laughs]

AP: [inaudible, then tape stops briefly] ...capitulate. This is Anne Shekter Powell interviewing Charles Coffey on his porch in Squirrel Hill on a lovely August day for the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society's Jewish Archives about his experiences in the Homestead Jewish community.

END OF INTERVIEW