Transcript of Interview with Avram Machtiger
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Eric Lidji: Today is February 12, 2018. I'm Eric Lidji with the Rauh Jewish History Program and Archives, and I'm speaking with Avram Machtiger in his home in Highland Park. This is for the Bet Tikvah Oral History Project. So if you could start by telling me: where you were born, where you grew up, what your childhood was like?

Avram Machtiger: Sure. I was born in New York City. And I grew up in New York, and then in the suburbs of New York. Then London, England for eight years.

EL: Where in New York?

AM: Actually, I'm missing: Philadelphia. Where in New York? Jamaica, Long Island. And then out in Elmsford, New York in Westchester County, and then five years in Philly, and then my dad's work took us to England for eight years. So that's where I considered where I grew up. Because I was there from ages fourteen to twenty-two. And then I landed in Pittsburgh.

EL: What was your life like in New York?

AM: Young, suburban. (AM laughs). Nothing out of the ordinary that I can think of.

EL: What was the Jewish life like?

AM: For elementary school, it's kind of hard to remember, you know, the synagogue, per se. But, you know, late elementary through junior high school, outside of Philadelphia, was one of those, golden ghetto neighborhoods. And, a very beautiful congregation. So, went to Sunday school; went to Hebrew school. It was Conservative, but then when we moved to England, we joined a Reconstructionist congregation. And, that's really been my focus since, although I'm not particularly religious or observant at this point.

EL: What took the family the England?

AM: Gulf Oil. I was an oil brat.

EL: Is that how you came to Pittsburgh too?

AM: Yep. Because Gulf was here and headquarted here at that time. (Phone rings). So.

EL: So how old were you when you came to Pittsburgh?

AM: Twenty-two.

EL: Okay. (Phone rings again).

AM: So I was away from fourteen to twenty, out of the country for fourteen to twenty-two.

EL: (Phone in the background) Let's hold for that… So you were twenty-two, what year was that?

AM: 1974.

EL: What was Pittsburgh like?

AM: A mill town. Kind of very ethnic. Very stratified, very stratified. I didn't find it any— I didn't find it attractive. While I was in Britain, as wonderful as that was, Britain went through a lot of socio— sorry, a lot of social and cultural turmoil, and political turmoil. And, with fourteen-week garbage strikes, many months mail strikes. Coal miners went on strike. So the electricity, sorry, the availability of coal, to generate electricity in the plants, was decreased. We had rolling blackouts in the city, and I kind of— When my dad was transferred to Pittsburgh, I thought, "Well, none of my friends are having a very good time right now. I haven't lived in the States for years. Let's see what it's like." And I'm from New York, and even though I lived, you know, in the 'burbs, my parents were always New York City focused, and I had a familiar with it. I mean a *familiarity* with the town. But, well I thought of moving to New York City etcetera, etcetera. My folks bought a house in Schenley Farms near the Cathedral of Learning. It needed work, I agreed I would stick around and help them renovate the house. For something else to do, I walked down to Western Psyche and ended up with a volunteer job that led into a real job. And, at that point, you could go to Pitt for $5 a credit for your Masters. So, like within a year or so, I had, a job, I was in grad school, an apartment, friends, a life. And at various junctures along the way, I thought, "Gotta get out of Pittsburgh!" But, then you sort of look at other cities and prices and how people live, and, you know, go back to New York and see friends and relatives, and go, "But I like my house and I like my yard. And, I like getting— being close to places, and frankly sometimes going, Where should I go: Market District? Trader Joe's? Whole Foods?" I mean what a problem to have at this end of town. So you know, for all sorts of reasons we stayed. So, now, you know, the city has changed so much, it's like, why leave?

EL: Yeah.

AM: So much is going on. Culturally, food scene, you know, art scene, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

EL: What was the gay life, like in Pittsburgh in '74?

AM: '74, I really couldn't tell you because I was first coming out, and I was working with children. And, I was very, what's the word I want, not apprehensive, that over-describes it: weary. Of, I don't want any BS about, "Oh my gosh, he's working with kids!" Which I had done since I was sixteen, as a Sunday school teacher. And you know, the conflict between what was real and perceived out of being gay then. So, it was really more late '70s and early '80s, when I came out. But, I thought, you know, well New York was supercharged with the great clubs, you could hang out in all night, and lots and lots of bars. Pittsburgh was very low key, but it being Pittsburgh, lots of, you know, running into people who you knew. Very friendly, small community. And, then, once, you know, I was much more comfortable with being out, then it was very nice. I mean, I miss it. I mean on one hand, I'm older, and so I'm not about to go disco

‘til dawn, but I liked the camaraderie. Didn’t like the cigarette smoke, but you know. Did you— Well probably you never went to the Holiday. It’s been gone for a while. The Holiday was a bar, where you had to part the smoke to go in. But any weeknight, you wanted to like go out, you’d run into all sorts of people. It was— Carnegie Mellon owns the property now. You know, with CMU’s “Leave No Square Inch Untouched” it’s gone. But it was just the— it was the oldest gay bar in Pittsburgh, right on Forbes Avenue. Right at that little cluster where there was a bank and a gas station.

EL: I remember that.

AM: Forbes and Craig. Forbes and Craig. And there was a dance club called Pegasus, Downtown. And, you know, again, you know, very friendly, very fun. And a couple of after-hours clubs, where the Shakespeare Street Giant Eagle is, and then over on Hamilton Avenue, Travelers. It was a lot of fun. Where Casbah is, that used to be a gay bar called The Tender Trap. Dancing on the basement level. So it was a lot of fun. But bars were kind of all there was. There wasn’t a lot of intra-space clubs or activities, the way there seems to be now.

EL: Was that the same in other cities at that time?

AM: I would say so. I would say gay bars were the place, where people would go. Because we had no other space, you know, to ourselves. I mean you know there was Persad. That was for, you know, meeting needs, specialized needs of people. There wasn’t, you know, I’d say in the ‘80s that’s when you started with the Renaissance Choir and Gay Runners, and all the different activities. You know, gay clubs. You know, straight-gay neighborhood groups that would do projects together. Stuff like that. Just like, you know, at some point we’ll lead in to Bet Tikvah. But, you know, why we started it, because there really was nothing else going on in the bars. And you know, the bars, if you didn’t drink a lot, you know which has like you know. You try things when you are younger, and kind of go, “Oh, okay, I get that. Fine.” And especially if you found yourself, you know, dating or partnered long term. Or dating long-term, or partnered, then it was like there must be more to gay life than bars. So.

EL: Do you think there’s a reason, why in the mid to late ‘80s, new kinds of places, like RCC, start showing up?

AM: Yeah. I think. I think a couple of things were going on. Probably more than two. One, I think we were becoming much more visual culturally and politically. I think people were just very pissed off with the Reagan years. AIDS started to show up. We started to be influenced by large-scale political action groups, like ACT UP. The marches on Washington, for various, you know, groups and rights. You know, the whole quilt. When you started seeing, you know, that people were dying and couldn’t get medical help, you know, you are both, crushed with grief and really pissed off. Because these were people that were young and should have thirty, forty years ahead of them. And so the whole thing of, seizing attention or legitimacy by anger, despite bias or prejudice, and saying, “I’m no longer going to put up with that. I’m going to be more visible,” I think, had a great effect. I also think, as people became more out, and I think this is especially since the ‘80s, as gay and lesbian, etcetera, people become more assimilated, and accepted, there’s like half the number of gay bars in the U.S. that there was in the ‘80s and ‘90s, because

you no longer have to have that as a safe or private space. You go anywhere, no one bothers you, and no one thinks of it. You know, I think, I can honestly say, I've never felt discriminated against or never, you know, I'm fortunate enough, to never have had, any, you know, major overt incident of harassment in my life. When my partner and I moved on the street. I mean we've been in this house thirty years, so we joked, this was our starter house and now it's our retirement house. But I remember standing on the front lawn, with a female friend, after we owned the house, but before we had the keys. And the older gentleman from across the street, came marching over [and said,] "You the new couple?" And I said, "Oh, I'm Avram Machtiger and I'll be living in this house, and this is my friend Kate So-and-So, and I'm just showing here the house." He said, "Are you going to be living here by yourself?" And I said, "Oh, I'll be living here with a frie—." You know, because I wasn't sure. And he cut me off. He said, "You'll like this street! We have everything on the street. We have black people, we have white people, we have doctors and lawyers and professors and teachers, and businessmen." And I thought, "Just you wait, we're going to round it out." But in thirty years here—I mean I think it reflects, and you know, a group of people who sought out.— They wanted to live in an urban environment, with a diverse population. Ended up on this street. And, we've never been anything but welcomed on this street. And in fact, when the first lesbian couple moved onto the street, they were welcomed and told, "Ah, these guys got here ahead of you." And with the second couple, whose been here a long time, who you know: it's Deb and Val. You know, when, they had their child— I mean, when they were looking at the house: "Oh, you should talk to these guys. Oh you'd really like this street." And then, when they had their, you know, they had their child, the woman on the street all got together for a baby shower. You know, which is just really normed. And so many kids on the street, **Leif**, my partner and I have "guncled" we call it. You know, who like are now in their 20s and 30s and grew up with, us hanging around, and like doing special things with them, you know, throughout the course of a year. And it's been, it's been really great.

EL: "Guncle" is gay uncle?

AM: Gay uncle.

EL: Okay.

AM: Gay uncle.

EL: So it's the mid to late '80s.

AM: Yep.

EL: People are coming out. They're becoming more active and engaged, and there's these new social settings, that people (AM interjects).

AM: Right.

EL: And this is the environment that Bet Tikvah was created in?

AM: Right.

EL: So how does that happen?

AM: Looking back, you know, there were several conversations between me and some of the people on your list we'll go over. My recollection is with, you know, Mark Friedman, Larry Karnoff, Steve Zupcic. Eileen Yacknin. An Israeli couple, and let's see, Barb and Etty. And Eitan, and ooh, have to look up at your list later. But you know, we knew each other socially, both well and not so well. But, there was a conversation out there, like among people of, "We wish as Jewish folks, we had a place to go." Now I'd say the most welcoming group at the time, was Dor Hadash, which is Reconstructionist, where I was involved, because my parents had been involved and were on the board, and that was also a congregation that was building up at that time. In the main more mainstream conservative synagogues, you know, if you were quiet, you probably were welcomed, but no one just wanted a group of us. And I think we just wanted a place, to like mark— We didn't— None of us was particularly religious. Or observant. But we wanted a place to mark important holidays. You know, Jewish holidays. Like getting together for Rosh Hashanah or getting together a Passover Seder, etcetera. And this was really before people could see, the kind of life— open life that's developed now with marriages and children. Because nobody had kids then. But, you know, now you look, and you have kids being bar and bat mitzvah. That wasn't even on the radar then. So it really was, more of a, you know: "Gee there's Dignity. There's MCC. There's this group, there's that group. There's nothing for Jewish folks. Well there'll continue to be nothing for, you know Jews, unless, maybe we get together and start something." So it actually started here in my living room, in my kitchen. And then as the weather go nice in my backyard. And you know: What will we do? Where do we do it? And, so the first things we had, were like in the backyard and nice weather. Just sort of short little, Shabbat acknowledgement things. And then, sort of social time.

EL: When you say, Shabbat acknowledgement, what did that look like at the time?

AM: Well none of us were like leaders in synagogues before, so like we didn't quite know what to do you know? When you're dredging up, you're in your '30s or '40s, and dreading up old prayer books and kind of going, "Oh what page, what do we do?" "Who knows, who remembers enough Hebrew?" You know, fortunately we had a couple of Israelis there who were fluent in Hebrew. So, you know they could lead us through a prayer service. But it was more just to kind of like give it a Jewish structure and just feel comfortable. Because that was the thing too, I have to say. I think— I just think, in terms of peoples' friendship networks. How do I put this? Like, I'm an extroverted person, and I have a lot of friends. It's easy for me to make friends. But, I didn't have that many Jewish friends. And, I think my non-Jewish friends still had a lot of outlets, you know, to, if they wanted to like manifest, some kind of religiosity or spirituality, then the Jewish friends, because where would we go? We would just like be on our own or going to, you know, Temple Sinai, or Tree of Life versus people who've grown up in the area and had like families to hook into and go to church with or something like that. So, it started, it wasn't anything regular, but we did have activities, before things shifted and I dropped away for various reasons, which will get to. But I remember we had a series, over a few years, of Seders. And, all of a sudden everybody was interested. Well, wait, let me back up. Who's everybody? All the other groups, like MCC or Dignity, they were very interested in Seders, because somebody

finally was, you know, forming a Jewish group and doing Seders. And, because of my background in non-profits and boards and organizational initiation and development, I kind of taking a lead, and all of a sudden I found myself leading Seders, which I was not familiar with. And you know you have— You had the Hagadah, and it's not that hard, but there we learned about coordinating and getting a bunch of people together and managing the food, and where would we have it. So for several years we had it out in (Phone ringing) Boyce Park in Monroeville, and, because that was a big enough place. Because no synagogue would let us do it.

[Interruption for phone]

EL: So what year are we talking?

AM: I would say late '80s, early '90s. Early '90s for several years. We did Seders.

EL: And the Seders were— They were at the request of MCC? Or you were doing them already?

AM: No we were doing them, and then other groups asked if they could participate. And, it was sort of this well: "How could you say no?" And so we ended up, with like, I think our largest was a hundred. I don't know how many, a hundred something people, thirty, forty. And it was a little anarchic, because the food sometimes, I mean. I think somebody brought sliced ham to a Seder once. And, you know, you know they're not a Jew. I mean, their background, peoples' backgrounds are very different. And of course you know, some of them had never been. And it was sort of for the social experience of it. So you know you had lots of us scattered among tables trying to explain. It wasn't something that really felt like we were building our own congregation at that point. It was like, "Whoa, that was a lot of work!" But it was still fun. It was. It was. And we had some small gatherings, you know. We tried to have Shabbat nights. And, I think, Jamie Gibson, at Temple Sinai was the first one to welcome us. He was a little dicey, apprehensive at first. He was sort of the junior rabbi at that point. But you know, he got us space. And then to my recollection—

EL: Space at Temple Sinai?

AM: Yeah. And then to my recollection, a big thing— Steve Zupcic would be the one you have to talk to. He got some money from I want to say Hadassah. So we had money for coffee and cookies, and stuff like that. And, but, there was something else going on. We you start a group like this, several things happen. One, is it's a come one, come all. Anybody who's interested, come on down. And, I think two points. One was: I think then there was more, separation between the gay male communities and the gay female communities. And, they were very, especially the women, who were lower in profile, and sort of lower, what do I mean by that? I mean lower key, more keeping to themselves. There was a struggle for leadership, even though I think the guy's approached it with, this is just for everybody: it's egalitarian. And, some people had non-Jewish partners. So there was weirdness around if a non-Jewish partner tried to chime in around organizational development. Sometimes there was like a "What do you know," kind of thing. And, there was a reluctance I think on the part of the lesbian community to get involved, was my sense at the beginning. My sense at the beginning was the guys were friendlier than the woman, be that as it may. The other thing was, we got some weird people. We got some people

who, honestly, I thought of as the "Walking Wounded." Not everybody, but a few. Where you just got, they weren't the bar type, weren't other gay activities for them to meet people, and they happened to be Jewish. And we happened to be starting this group. And look what they found. So we had some people, who, these days I think we'd say they were "on the spectrum." Then we didn't know what to call them, or what, or you know, why they were so weird and odd. But we had some real social misfits, so anytime we gathered there was sort of like ways the group dynamics worked and gelled really well. And ways it was just weird. And you just thought, "Oh why? Wow, what's this? Oh, it's him," and you know, I'm not going to name names, but you know this man is kind of like socially deficient. So, you know, you extend a little bit, but that kind of backfired. And I'll get to that. What else, what else, what else. There were also dramas going on, between some of the people, some of the couples in the group, which I had no clue about, because some of them were not my close friends, and then you realized: "Wow! They got drama going." There was you know, definitively people who were sort of power struggling. Well, just because you have more experience, you know, blah, blah, blah. It's like, this— And my attitude was just, you know, I don't need to be in charge, or president, but I do have the experience that I'm happy to contribute it. But, you know, if we don't do X, Y, and Z, nothing gets done and the group goes away. What do you want to do? Because some people would take on tasks, and just didn't follow through. Didn't have the skills to. All that. So part of this, as an organization, that I think it's quite amazing and miraculous, that thirty years later, it's still around. Because it had fits and starts, and we were one of the fits and starts. So for me, what happened was, things were going okayy. Also, when an organization starts, you get tired. If you're one of the initiators, you are tired of it, after a while. It's like, you need to spread this out. Other people need to take it on. So there were periods of drift, where no one was taking things on. And I would. — For me personally, and I would just think: "I've got enough to do." Like in my real life, I run a statewide program. And I just don't need this. You know, I was running a teen suicide prevention program at the time. And travelling and all that stuff. So like, something that was a volunteer activity, that would you know, also require weekend stuff, it's like, there's only so much time I got. Also, we went into this weird thing where, and this was a crossroads for me. Someone developed a crush on me. Which on one hand is like, "Oh how lovely," but, I was partnered, and I'd been with my partner about seven or eight years at that point. And this person, hit up on me in my own living room. And it was like: "You don't get this, you're like so socially inappropriate, you just hit on me in my living room. And, my partner is like two rooms over in the kitchen like getting stuff together, so that we could all eat and drink something tonight while we meet." You know, he's being like a real mensch in helping out, kind of thing. And you know, he's not part of this, he's not Jewish. And that, kind of me go: "Oh it's just getting really weird." I choose to not be around weird. And let some other folks step up. And, it wasn't just like there was one incident, there were a couple, where I basically had to address it with this person, and go: "No, no, no, no, no. Nothing's ever going to happen. You know, I don't understand this. It makes me very uncomfortable. You know, it's not even a nice compliment. It's just completely not appropriate." And then they kind of like distanced from the group. The next phase was that other people came forward: Steve Zupcic, Nachum and Steve, who I'm sure you have on your list to interview. And a woman, who's sadly is no longer alive. I want to say her name was Shirley Halberman? She was one of these— She was a big girl, larger than life. And, she, unfortunately died young. Like in her '40s of a heart attack, but she was someone who just took it on, like this group needs a den mother and it needs someone to help make it happen. It's going to be me. And so, that really helped pulled it along. And also, as I recall, Steve got some money.

There was a conference— He got a few thousand dollars, and invited two people to town. A guy who wrote, Lev somebody, who wrote "Dancing on Tisha B'Av." And a woman, whose name I'm blocking on, you might have it there.

EL: Is it Christie Balka?

AM: Yep. Christie Balka, because Dev and I liked looked it up. Yep.

EL: And is Andy Rose the other one?

AM: Maybe. Maybe.

EL: Lev Rafael?

AM: That's it! That's it. They came along and it was surprising how many people attended the conference. And, you know, the conference was separate, but then they also came along to meet with people, and it really gave the group a boost, plus, meeting— I'm sorry, Steve having the conference, I believe at Pitt, really helped boost the profile and it being Pitt, you know, and the space, it provided some legitimacy for Bet Tikvah. And I think if memory serves me right, Lev stayed with us. Because, of course they were bringing them in and scraping together the money for the air fair and their lecture fee. So, hotel was sort of beyond pale, so he stayed here and hung out with us for the weekend. Which was really interesting, but you know, "Wow! Long time ago." And, then somehow in the— Then I think it was kind of, dead for a couple of years. And, then Nachum and Steve, who are you know, so socially focused, stepped in and put some structure and regularity behind it. And then things kind of got rolling even more, and I was not involved, but just aware of it. And occasionally attended events, but also because, around, in 2000, Leif and I got a weekend place out in the mountains a couple of hours away. And then found ourselves with another side of life, another set of friends. And that's where we kind of spent a lot of time. I've watched through the years with, you know, the ease of which this group now has grown, and is regular, and gets congregants, and gets people. And welcomes them, and has I think become institutionalized.

EL: In a good way?

AM: In a really good way. So that's my story from the very beginning. I guess.

EL: When we say that Bet Tikvah started in 1988, that marks the meeting here at the house?

AM: Yeah, that would.

EL: And at the time, what do you guys see it as? A congregation? A minyan? A get together?

AM: A Jewish get together. I thought— I guess we also thought of it as a congregation lite. Or a mini-congregation. That you know, the whole thing, around, a congregation structure, with consistent attendance or membership. We didn't think that far ahead. It was more: there's no Jewish group. We know each other, let's get together, let's see. But then, it got scattered in all

these different directions. I don't think it wasn't until a few years later, and some— You know, we had fits and starts and stops. And, I think, you know even some failures, as it were. That somebody, you know took it on, as like a project they really loved. When I think of Steve and Nachum and Steve. And, Shirley, especially there. And that got the momentum going by the force of, you know, something academic, someone whose willing, like Shirley, whose willing to volunteer consistently, and make sure there're activities going on. And then Nachum and Steve who are so social and pulled so many people into different things, and are so connected and evolved across the city and region. I think, then that people had a clear vision of what they wanted and went after it, and that's what you see today.

EL: When you say that the original group wasn't necessarily religious, why do you think that prayer was— kind of became an early part of it, from the beginning?

AM: Because we were Jewish and it was the tie that binds. You know. It was— We wanted something to mark, our own faith for you know for Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur or Hanukkah. Or, Passover. I think for so many of us, you know, even if you're not— I mean, nobody involved in the group was, I would say grew up Orthodox. You know, we were Conservative, Reform. But I think, even though people weren't that, weren't particularly religious, it's— With Judaism, it's not just like you go to synagogue and you pray. It's such a culture and a history, and such a set of rituals. And I think people missed the comfort of the rituals together. The communal experience of having a Seder, you know. Of having Hanukkah together, even if it were just like, you know, an evening party. Just to kind of have that particular kind of ethnic food and be among other Jewish gay people.

EL: Yeah. Was everybody in that original group at a similar place in life? Like were people the same age? Were people in similar relationships?

AM: I would say yes we were the same age group. '30s mostly, early '40s. People were across the board in terms of relationships. You know we had, single people. We had a lot of people with non-Jewish partners. We had some people with Jewish partners. No one could conceive that they would ever be married. And, excuse me, you had a lot of people still dating. And, but actually, since you asked the question I'm thinking about it. There were a lot of partnered people, and I think there was a little bit, not all clash. But I think there was a little bit of tension after a period of time had gone on between those who came looking to meet someone, and date someone. And those of us who are already partnered, and were not looking for that at that, you know in, at that stage of life.

EL: So there were some people who saw the congregation as a way meet other Jewish singles, or?

AM: I think it was meet singles, date singles, but also socialize, you know, to be fair. Not everybody was like, you know, looking for the next pick up. But just, you know, having a social circle. And, I think some of us, myself included, came in going: "Gee, on one hand I always have room for more friends! But I already have friends and it's hard to keep up." Given work and life, and their work and stuff.

EL: Yeah.

AM: So. And I think, because we were, under twenty people that added an intensity to it. I think that once the group expanded to be more than that, then you had more people to dissipate the social energy. More people to do tasks. More people to provide structure. Stuff like that.

EL: Once the group had started, how did word spread? Were there flyers? Was it just word of mouth?

AM: Word of mouth. Word of mouth. I don't remember, no there was. We did have a gay paper.

EL: Is that *Pittsburgh's Out*?

AM: Yes. So we had a bunch of stuff there. Boy, I haven't thought of this for a long time. So there were articles on us.

EL: From the early days?

AM: From the early days.

EL: Like from the eighties?

AM: Yep.

EL: In what papers?

AM: In *Out*. I don't know about, let's say *Post-Gazette* or the evening paper that was defunct.

EL: *Press*?

AM: *Press*. I do know, that we— There were people that did try to get that kind of mainstream press coverage. But there was always a section in *Out*, you know, listing gay-focused organizations or activities. So whether it was Persad, or other mental health or medical things, then it went to social, went to bars, and so we were— We you know, were soon— As soon as we were declared ourselves, "We're Open for Biz!" You know, you look at any *Out*, and I think it came out monthly, and then there we were: "Bet Tikvah" you know, "Welcoming Jewish, yadda, yadda, yadda. Call so and so," whoever the contact people were at the time and give them people's phone numbers. Because this was pre-email.

EL: Yeah.

AM: So.

EL: How did the paper get—? Was it subscriptions? Was it available in bars?

AM: No, no, no. It was available at bars, bookstores.

EL: What were the bookstores?

AM: Pitt Book Store. St. Elmo's, which used to be in the South Side. I want to say Stonewall Bookstore, which has nothing to do with Stonewall. It was actually, run by two of my neighbors on the street.

EL: Where was that?

AM: On Filbert Street in Shadyside. And they called it Stonewall because there was a stone wall in the bookstore. It was a little off the street, basement bookstore. It was really a cool place. It's one of the best bookstores in the city. I think Tara [McLarney] and Jerry [Farber] carried it, because they carried all sorts of community stuff. So it just—.

EL: What's Tara and Jerry?

AM: Huh?

EL: Tara and Jerry?

AM: Tara, um, and Jerry are the couple—

EL: That owns Stonewall?

AM: That owns Stonewall.

EL: Okay.

AM: Yeah. Yeah. And, bars. There were a couple of gay restaurants then, if I recall right. So it was there. Yeah, and it was you know, I mean, if you wanted you could purchase a subscription to the paper and get it every month. But mostly people just picked it up like freebies in a bar.

EL: Yeah. Is St. Elmo's a part of this story? You had mentioned them.

AM: St. Elmo's isn't really a part of the story, except that St. Elmo's was such a cool bookstore and so welcoming. And you know, had such a GLBT profile. Because, you know, Pitt Bookstore had a limited collection of you know, gay and lesbian literature and historical stuff. But St. Elmo's had an extensive collection. And of course they were also known for their magazines and you know, their videotapes and stuff in the basement. You know, depending on your tastes. That was back in the day.

EL: How— At what point did the name Bet Tikvah come along?

AM: Ah, "House of Hope." Um, you know I don't remember. I think one of the Israelis came up with it.

EL: Was it early in the process?

AM: Very early. We were always called Bet Tikvah.

EL: And you had a name early?

AM: Yep.

EL: Yeah.

AM: Yep.

EL: Was it ever incorporated?

AM: Ha! According to some people, according to Steve Zupcic, and a guy named Larry Karnoff, who was a friend. Who spends time between here and Boca Raton. He's retired. Larry was a lawyer. They filed Articles of Incorporation and, you know, they know they did this, but nobody has the paper work. So someone would have to do some search, you know, for going back in time, but yes they did do that.

EL: Would this be in the late eighties, early nineties?

AM: Yes.

EL: Okay.

AM: Because I know Steve and Larry, and somebody else, I'm not remembering right now, did it together.

EL: This Shirley you mentioned, is that Shirley Supernaw?

AM: That's it! Thank you. Supernaw, yep.

EL: What was the relationship— We talked about this a little bit with the Seders, but was the relationship between Bet Tikvah and some of these Christian organizations like Dignity and Integrity and MCC?

AM: There really wasn't one. I mean there's no animosity or anything, it's just, we just all didn't do anything with each other, beyond: "Oh wow! Yeah, they want to come along to our Seder!" And then I was contacted or a few of us were contacted as well. And then, you know, then we kind of met people with the other organizations and tried to coordinate this.

EL: Okay.

AM: But in between, there was not you know mutual socializing, or anything like that.

EL: When did this, sort of second wave with Nachum and Steve and Shirley—?

AM: I would say, early ‘90s. Shirley was earlier than that. Nachum and Steve was later than Shirley.

EL: And the conference with Lev—.

AM: Steve. Talk to Steve.

EL: Okay, but that’s your saying. What was the significance of that moment? For the congregation.

AM: I’d say because we got, you have to ask Steve about the numbers of people who came, but you know a pretty significant number of people turned up to, like, to hear these authors, and then socialize with them. So I think that added more cred, because we had two authors who had written books and had contemplated the dualities of being gay or lesbian and Jewish. And as I recall, also were in conversation, really good guides. Like: here’s some more things to think about: you know, they came from places like New York City, where there were more established, longer-term congregations. More than one, as I recall. And so they were also good around, “Here are some things to pay attention to. Here are some things you guys should reach for, go for.” Just general support.

EL: So it’s sort of like, if you’re gay and Jewish, it’s this very, like specific experience and here are these people who could speak to it in a really articulate way, and kind of give you—

AM: And were public with it.

EL: Okay.

AM: And were public and polished with it. And had years of experience with it, you know being out there in the world, because they were— They were scholars and authors. So you know, they were used to presenting stuff out there in the world and defending their work. You know. And being very assertive about their work. Because you know these were the times when, you know, we were transitioning from the dark ages, around you know gay identity, to something much more positive. And they were also, I mean especially Lev, very articulate about the AIDS epidemic. And you know, the righteous anger we all had to adapt in order to fight it.

EL: In the early years, that you were most involved, was there ever a talk about affiliating with a movement?

AM: Not me directly, I’d refer you back to Steve Z about that.

EL: Okay.

AM: Because he’s much more, was much more political and active, at that point, than I was.

EL: Why do you think the congregation has lasted as long as it has?

AM: Well that's a question for someone current like Deb. I think it— My guess is, you know, it turned into a congregation. It turned into something very welcoming and familial, and responded to people's emotional needs. In terms of religion and support and social—what's the word I want? Just being social, and you know getting that kind of support and having a Jewish space. And a place to identify. And I think you know, some people have just— And I think, people have gone through stages of life, which gives an organization even more strength, so when you now can be long-termed partnered, or have children or be married, etcetera. There's a place to observe life events. You know, like Deb was saying: "Ah you know, you got to write down the date for Aviva's bat mitzvah." You know, or I'm kind of going, "Oh my God!" You know, that's like, within the next couple of years, and look at the lifecycle. So there's been a norming, you know of this special organization. And you know, I think also, there's not the stigma, anymore of: "Oh, we're a mainstream synagogue, we can't have *those* Jewish people in our congregation." Also because I think, Bet Tikvah, has had to walk its talk—this is my impression—about, being open and flexible, because I think you look at the congregation now, and I get this from Deb Polk. It's not like many 99 and 99-tenths percent Jewish. It's people with non-Jewish partners. You attract some heterosexual families, where one partner might be of one race and one of another. And they find they are just more comfortable in this diverse, welcoming group. I think especially having kids, norms things and opens things up. I think you know— We used to joke, you know: "Oh God, he's one of those A-list gays." You know, I don't see that so much anymore.

EL: What's an A-list gay?

AM: The kind of gay, back in the '80s and '90s, who was just always out there, always politically active. Had some money. Had some, you know, flash, they wanted to spread around. Treated it like an exclusive club. Pretty much only socialized with other gay guys. Whereas like my attitude has always been, I have friends and they might be gay and they might be straight and they might be male and they might be female. And you know, "Gee, this guy's a really good friend. He's a straight male. And gee," that kind of thing. Because I've never been someone to like, just deal with something, that exclusive-izes so many people, because I worked in too many, culturally diverse environments. That's just not how I was hard wired. Yeah, so that's why I think it's lasted as long as it has. It's a very accepting group.

EL: Do you think that its' continued longevity depends on distinctiveness. Do you think that as, as society is more welcoming of LGBT people, that the congregation would somehow be threatened by that?

AM: Um, probably in the end, I'd say not because— Because this is Pittsburgh. And this is you know, this is a smallish congregation. You know, there's nothing— I guess I'm thinking there's nothing that would like, swallow it up. You know, that, as welcoming as let's say, a Temple Sinai, or a whatever, might well be. If you're— To just go and just be, a congregant dilutes your gay identity. And I think people are very cognizant of that and want, not just to hold onto it, but like that's who I am and I'm glad about it.

EL: Do you think that the fact, that it's; that there's not a synagogue, and it's not every week helps because, you can be a member of three weeks out of the week—

AM: Yes.

EL: Here, and one week out of the month here?

AM: Yeah, I think so. I think so. I think having something like every week would just be burdensome for people given how spread out people are in terms of their activities and social life and raising kids. Stuff like that.

EL: Is there anything else we should talk about?

AM: Um, you wanted to go— mention to go over your list.

EL: We can do that off tape.

AM: Okay.

EL: Is there anything else we should talk about?

AM: No. I mean, I look forward to a time, when you know, I might feel like I want to, you know, rejoin for some— or reconnect for some other, for sort of various reasons, you know with the congregation. I find myself amazed that something that kind of started here, in my home, and, you know, sort of went off in some weird directions, so I had to make like a personal choice and go: This is not what I wanted, but I'm not going to fight people about it. You know, like if it's where it's going, this is where it's going. I got a choice here. I think it's something that it is so, solid and viable three decades later. I mean I think that's an incredible achievement. And you know, it's not like, "Oh I'm proud that I started it!" Because you know, I look back and go that was a long time ago. But, I think I'm just proud of the people who like stuck with it and it's still here. And, continue to develop it and you know new blood. You know, it really makes a statement.

EL: Yeah. All right, well thank you so much.

AM: You're welcome.

(End of Interview)