

HELEN BENNINGA

2-3-94

I: Mrs. Benninga is a long time resident of Asheville and will be soon moving to Israel so we have a lot of important things to talk to Mrs. Benninga today. Helen our focus today is a social history of your experience of living in the local Jewish community in Asheville. But for the first 5 minutes or so, could you tell us a little bit about your life before you came to the United States and Asheville.

HB: I was born in a big town in the north part of Holland. My parents were in business. My father sold everything that you have to use in the kitchen and stoves and things like that. My parents did, after the first world war, financially quite well. And our life was quite easy in that particular part, financially. And we did get more or less what a normal child should have. We had a good education. My mother was a teacher. My mother was very particular about education. As a child of 10, I was quite sick and I was in bed for 10 weeks. After that I had to start learning to walk again and everything. And we used to go 4 days a week to Hebrew school after regular school. This was a normal thing that we were doing. And after I got so sick, even when I got so sick, that was of course out. My mother felt at that time, and it was very strange when you compare it with the people my age here, my mother even tried to get me private lessons for Hebrew. But the teacher she picked was a very good friend and didn't want to do it privately. So I went very soon in an organization where you came together every Sabbath afternoon with a lot of youngsters. And he had during the week prepared things on a blackboard, of course he was not writing on Sabbath. And he prepared us for conjuring the works and I learned a lot there. His daughter is still living and I am very good friends with his daughter. She lives in Haifa and we are still talking about what a marvelous teacher her father was. I grew up and at the age of 15 I went to indoor swimming pool, what we did have already in our home town. And it was half an hour walking from our house but I went on my bicycle. It was about 15 minutes. And I went absolutely on my own with a receipt from a sport organization of my sister where you could learn how to swim. And I learned to swim in that place. My sister didn't care for swimming and I did. And I always loved to swim. I cannot do it now anymore because the water is too much with chlorine. I knew how to swim. My father got interested in it and at that time you had separated swimming for women and for men separate. But twice a week on Thursday night and on Sunday morning, it was mixed swimming. And many times on Sunday morning I was walking with my father to the swimming pool and we were swimming together and we enjoyed it very much and we walked together back. When I grew up my mother wanted me to become a regular teacher but I didn't want to so I became a kindergarten teacher. Mother didn't like it very much but finally she had to give in. And I enjoyed my training very, very much. Until today I have said many times, if I had to do this over, I would be definitely be a kindergarten teacher again. I love little children. I think children are fascinating. I can watch a child for hours. A baby, I never cuddled perhaps for long, but I never really cuddled my children like people do now. I could watch them in the crib and I could watch them in the playpen and I just enjoyed watching them. And I'm there when I need help. Every child, according to me, is an individual by itself and has to learn to develop by itself and they do, according to me at least. When I was 19 1/2 I got to know Noah. And by that time I was already in a Zionist organization and I wanted to go to _____. _____ is in part where you are being trained for something in Palestine.

I: And this was approximately what year?

HB: This was in 1932-33.

I: For tape purposes, Noah was your future husband.

HB: Yeah. I wanted to go for training for chicken farm in a kibutz and help. But my mother said, okay whatever you do, but first you have to get your diploma. By that time I got to know Noah and Noah was also in a Zionist organization. But we were a different kind of Zionist. I was what he called the sensitive one and he was the brain one. And we didn't go to Israel at that time. But finally in 1937 we were _____ to get married. And it was a very, very small ceremony. One and a half years later our first child was born. She was born in 1939. Adelaide Benninga, now she is married. But she lives now in Israel. At that time it didn't look very well in Europe and Noah was extremely afraid for the Germans. He read always a tremendous amount. He bought himself English newspapers and he felt that, oh boy, maybe we could get out. And then by the time the Germans really started to invade Holland in May 1940, we would have been ready to get to Palestine because we made an application to go to Palestine. And we had an interview in March 1940 with somebody from the Jewish agency and the man said, okay, in about half a year you might be able to go to Palestine. It was not easy because at that time Palestine had a tremendous amount of refugees. And the refugees were from Germany were very much academic people. So some of these refugees we knew were bus drivers instead of doing their own work or street cleaners or whatever to make a little bit of money. But they were happy to be out of Germany. And then we had moved in that time for an emergency case closer to the west side of Holland. And when Hitler invaded Holland, in was on a Friday morning, my father was still in my hometown up north, my mother was staying with me because I didn't want to stay alone with the baby and my father never has been able to reach us. So my father stayed in Holland and Noah was able to come to where we were, the city was Haarlem. It's a very famous _____. And Noah came that Friday afternoon. Noah had always taken care that he had a lot of money with him. And at that time at a certain point he bought himself a bicycle for 300 guilders which was at least 10 times the price for normal bicycles. And he came the last part on his bicycle to where we were and we were together. My mother stayed with us and the war went on, we didn't hear from my father and on May 14 when finally we heard on the radio that the government had left, the queen had left, the top people were in England, and we decided, with another family that was in Haarlem for emergency case, we decided to try to get away. And we succeeded. Luckily, we came to harbor and we found a fish trawler. The fish trawler went that night all the way along the Belgian coast, part of the French coast, across the canal and we arrived in Folkstone. Folkstone is the farthest east point of England. And there was a big committee because we really hadn't had a decent piece of food, not even a decent meal, but decent piece of food in 40 hours. And not even for the baby. And there were people standing with big, I think at least half quarts, mugs with hot coffee and milk. I never have tasted coffee as good at that point. I took one sip, gave my little baby of 15 months some coffee and went to my mother to give her the mug with coffee. And then I got it back. And from there on we went, were put on a train to London. And where we exactly landed in London, I don't know because the baby was so important. But we landed, as far as I could see, a kind of Red Cross building. Last year it reminded me very much during the blizzard. But we were laying on the floor, not on cots. Everybody that was there, men, women, children, everyone was there. The only one that got a decent bed was our baby.

And she cried very much and everybody was furious because everybody was tired. Anyhow, then because of our affidavit and my parents had put some money in England, we were allowed to go to a hotel that day. And we could support ourselves for the hotel. That was very lucky. And we stayed in that hotel that was on the east side in London, that's the Jewish part, we stayed in a Jewish hotel close to the tower and the tower bridge. We came there on Friday afternoon and the young lady who owned with her husband the hotel was very, very nice. She gave me a carriage for the baby because her child had grown out of it and at least I could take the baby wherever I was going. We were very much under security at that time because we didn't have anything with us. And there were little manufacturing stores with textile, and we needed underwear and we needed something. Because in 48 hours not being able to change and that was terrible. But on Saturday morning in the hotel they got a telephone call from the police office in the neighborhood because we needed a gas mask. And somebody, I think Noah, went to the telephone and they said, what did you do outside of the hotel yesterday afternoon? They had been watching us very carefully.

I: That was the English government?

HB: Yeah. And Noah told them that we had to buy some underwear. How many people do you have in your group? Well, an uncle and aunt and two young men and _____. So Noah told them how many there were. He said, and older people. My mother was 55 and my uncle was that same age. They were the older people. He said, well, we have to come to you because we need all the information and because you have older people in the group, we will come to the hotel for questioning and we will bring you gas masks for everybody who is there. So even the little child needed a gas mask. And we had to take them with us wherever we went. When you were caught on the street without your gas mask, you got a fine. And we stayed two weeks in that hotel. And after two weeks we were able to go in a kind of a flat, a part of a tremendous house in south Kensington, London. Elizabeth Dave had lived there and we one time exchanged experiences and while we were living there for 6 or 7 weeks, she was living there too.

I: But you didn't know this at the time. You met them later. That was the Dave family that was from Asheville later.

HB: Yeah.

I: Which Dave is that now?

HB: David Daves. And then still we had even several times bomb alarms and Noah and the family were very much afraid and we tried to get out of England. And that was not very easy because at first you had to get a permit, an outgoing permit and you couldn't get an outgoing permit without showing that you had a ticket for the boat. And they wouldn't give you a boat ticket without a permit. It was very, very difficult because they had to get a piece of paper from one to go to the other to get the ticket there to get the permit there. It was back and forth and back and forth. But this was one thing I was not involved in because I stayed with the baby at home and Noah and my other relatives did that. And then at a certain day we went from London with one suitcase each which was already an improvement with what we had when we went to London itself. With one suitcase we went to London, from London to Southampton and there we went on a tremendous boat where they were going to pick up soldiers from Australia. In each cabin were two beds and a hang mat because they had to get as many people in a cabin on the way back.

I: Hang mat, I'm not familiar with that term.

HB: A hammock. And under that was a little crib for our child.

I: So they were going from England to Australia.

HB: Yeah and we were going to Australia. But it was not so easy because from Southampton because for safety the boat almost was going to the South American border and then we went to Gibraltar and then we went all the way around South Africa and then we ended up in Perth, west Australia.

I: And that took several weeks?

HB: Five weeks. And we were not allowed to get off the boat. Australia was marvelous, west Australia, because we arrived there at the beginning of August and that's so-called the winter time. But it was like the most enjoyable days in May here, not too hot, not too cold, good nights. We stayed there also in a kind of hotel and was really socialized at that time when you were not at a certain time for breakfast, breakfast was gone. When you were not at a certain time for dinner, dinner was gone. But anyhow we were there and we had wait for connections from there to East Indies. That was Dutch colonies.

I: So you were going to go to the East Indies as a Dutch citizen.

HB: Yeah. And there we arrived at the end of August and they knew about the group. We were in a group of Dutch people on that boat, 40 people, and they had inquired along the route what everybody was doing. And Noah had no trouble finding a job because in May, 1940, they had interred about 3000 Nazis and most of them were academic people. They were Dutch people. And when Noah arrived, the day after we arrived, there was an appointment made for him for a job, which he didn't take and he felt sorry later on, but everything fell in place. He was a chemist and he got a job at a gold and silver refinery, didn't like it very much but it was at least something to live on. And very soon, in the middle of September, we stayed with a Dutch family and my mother stayed with friends who were in that place. And the Dutch family came from my hometown. So it was very nice seeing a new part of my family and was very nice and she really was teaching me many, many little things that I have carried on in life very much because she used to say, when you are starting with fooling around and playing bridge and playing tennis in the morning, that is the, then there's the gossip part and that is the people who are getting right away divorced. But when you are taking care of your baby and when you are telling your, because we had a lot of servants there, when you tell your servants, I want to cook or to bake or whatever, you go to the kitchen and do whatever you want, you enjoy it there because the best part is you don't have to clean up. The maid is going to clean up. And get yourself a sewing machine and start doing something for your child because the material is very inexpensive and when you make a mistake, then you throw the piece of material in the garbage can, no one will notice and you've got yourself another piece of material, but keep busy for yourself and don't start all this nonsense.

I: This lady's name was...

HB: Mrs. Crock. But she died in the meantime of course. I talked to her son, her son is a dermatologist in Holland, in Rotterdam.

I: So you were in East Indies for how long?

HB: We arrived in August, 1940, Noah had a job. And then in 1941 the Japanese occupied and we were at first still for a fight of our free. Noah still was working. Then he was working for the Japanese. He made from the products that were available in Indonesia, he made _____ and _____. We were not inturned, yes inturned. We were in a kind of a camp but more or less we could still order from one day to the other, food that would come in. We still were, when you wanted to, you still could go, this was a neighborhood. And we had a part of a house, not a complete house. They took away, of course, everything that you didn't, that was not able to do but that was bearable.

I: How long a period was this, roughly?

HB: Half a year I think. Then at a certain time, we got Japanese soldiers in the house in the morning. Noah was gone to work. And they did house searching very roughly. And they came out at the same time they inturned Noah from his work. So I didn't see Noah coming home at that time anymore.

I: For how long?

HB: After that, we were inturned, my mother and child and I. And we were separated, Noah and I, for two years.

I: But you were both still in the East Indies. And then from there you moved to, you didn't move to Asheville from there.

HB: No. But to know how you get in touch with each other, again, because officially we didn't know from each other where we were. We got post cards. I've still got some post cards. We have post cards that I wrote to Noah, Noah saved them. The post cards that Noah sent to me, I didn't save. And a lady here translated it a few months ago for me. It was in Malay.

I: Somebody had written it for him.

HB: No. You've got a big board in front of you and postcards that we could send to one in another camp. So in my case it was Noah. And all you have to do was to put your name and the prison number because we didn't know where he was. The other way around was the same way. And through the prison number they knew where the post card had to go. It came out that Noah was about 10 kilometers away from the camp where we were. But it took three months before the post card was there because of censors. We got on the blackboard 12 sentences and you could pick three and each sentence was a lie. The food is excellent.

I: The only thing you could write on the card was what they chose for you to write.

HB: Yeah. And I always chose the shortest sentence because when you made a mistake the post card was not going. And they you were allowed to put 25 of your own words in Malay. And when you made a mistake or when they saw there was a code in there, they wouldn't send it through. It was very heavily censored. And the only thing that made an impression was your signature because that was a regular

handwriting. And that was what I was studying, if the handwriting was still okay. The rest I didn't care. And then after the war, Noah, you could write a postcard with the same number on it but your own address could be where you were. So I got a postcard that way from Noah and Noah got a postcard from me. I was one of the first in the camp who got a little note that Noah had given to somebody and I was also one of the first one that was, I think on Yom Kipper eve, that I got a call. You hardly could understand it because it was very much of static. But at least I heard his voice. And then a little bit later a friend of his came to the camp and took me because Noah was at that time at this friend's house and I was going, at that time they had very much of _____ people from _____. The Indonesians were very much now poor and was dangerous. But I made it and the child made it and we all made it and then we came to _____ is in the middle of a very gorgeous place, almost like Asheville on the mountains. And then we tried to get out of Indonesia and also the government helped and we came on the boat and we went to Amsterdam through the Mediterranean Sea.

I: So from the time that you first left and went to England and the time you came back was...

HB: Almost 6 years. And my father-in-law had been hidden for 2 1/2 years and he was alive. And he had a house and it was really important. And we stayed at first for 2 years in his house and then at that time Noah got a job in another town and finally got a house there and we moved to there. But Simon is born, Simon is our second child and the oldest boy and he was born in the house and in the same room that Noah was born. And it was an amazing thing that after so much trouble because I had very much, I was very much swollen from being undernourished, that it was a healthy baby.

I: From that point you were in Amsterdam.

HB: No, I never lived in Amsterdam. _____ and there Noah started with the nylon.

I: That's the city that he started with the company that you eventually moved to Asheville. That company was American Enka.

HB: No, that was the mother company of American Enka. That was called AKU.

I: And that's now BASF right.

HB: Yeah. And in Holland it's Akzona.

I: What year did you come to Asheville?

HB: Noah was sent out in 1952 for 3 months to start here the research for nylon. He had done that already in Holland. He had done the nylon research in Holland and they ask him to go for 3 months to here to start here the nylon research.

I: Nylon was not quite yet a finished product?

HB: No.

I: So Noah was actually in on the formation of nylon.

HB: And Dupont had started, but here they didn't and Noah didn't want to go because at that time we had a household with 4 children because our 3 boys...

I: So the next two children were born in Holland. And what were their names?

HB: Jack and David. And they were very short after each other so a full household and Noah didn't want to leave me alone. So then they said, okay, what about if your wife goes part time with you. And that was done. And my mother was at that time 70 and she took care of the household for me for 10 weeks.

I: So your children stayed with your mother and you came here for 10 weeks.

HB: And they did it very nicely because AKU paid Noah first class boat trip and we were allowed to go tourist class.

I: So you're visiting for a short time here.

HB: And we were not being put in a hotel or motel but they took care that we were going to stay with another Dutch family in _____.

I: There were several Dutch families since the parent company was Dutch?

HB: Yeah. And with that family, we stayed very close friends and the oldest daughter of that family is now living here in the apartment downstairs.

I: And the family name was...

HB: Spanbroke. And the family was very, very nice and I became very good friends with the woman and Noah went with him to Enka in the morning and we were invited very much because they knew that we were staying here and for what reason. And lots of people with whom Noah had to work were friendly and the women put up coffee mornings and tea afternoons and we were out for dinners and that's the typical thing. But in the meantime...

I: You said typical thing of...

HB: Of American people. At that time special, people did everything in the house. After all in 1952, it was still very shortly after the war. People also here were happy that they could do something. They didn't go out that much.

I: I don't know if it's that much typical now. But it was typical then, people just opened up their homes.

HB: Yeah. And then in the meantime we were in west Asheville and the family Spanbroke was very much aware of our religious part and we went to the schul and to the temple on Friday night and we went, it was at the end of _____, the holy days we went to either one of them to see what was available. I went to hadasa meetings. I went to sisterhood meetings just to see because we were supposed to move from ____ to a smaller place in Holland where there was a big plant being built and there Noah was chief chemist. And even the position was nice. Jewish life was nothing because in that place, it was not a town, it was a village, and in

that village were only 8 Jewish families. And most of them were war widows. The Jewish population after the war has been going downhill very, very rapidly and very much... A lot of them didn't return. The ones who returned were very often single people. They were hidden, the single people or they survived the camps. There were a lot of people who came back to hiding as couples, had had enough of it and tried to get away from Holland. They immigrated to America, Australia, Canada, wherever they could get to. And this happened in the first, the war was over in 1945 and this happened in the first ten years.

I: In Holland and here, do you consider yourself conservative or orthodox?

HB: Conservative. I wouldn't go to an orthodox. I feel very comfortable in the conservative.

I: So you were conservative in Holland.

HB: There was in Holland at that time nothing else than orthodox system. But when we came here I felt very comfortable in the conservative schul.

I: In 1952 the rabbis were who?

HB: Rabbi Cline. He was not very knowledgeable. And then he left. I don't know where he went to because at that time I was not so much involved. I had 4 children to take care of. We came here in 1954. We went back in 1952.

I: So you stayed here the 10 weeks or whatever, then you went back and then you came permanently in 1954.

HB: I wanted to go back.

I: You missed Holland?

HB: No. I didn't want to go back to Holland. Of course I wanted to go back at that time. But when we came back to Holland, I was the one really who said to Noah, do me a favor and try to get out of here. Because I couldn't see myself raising my children in a Jewish line in Holland. There was nothing. There was no schul where we lived in the small place. Twenty kilometers, that is more than an hour on a bicycle, we didn't have a car, was a schul, sometimes on Rosh Hashannah and sometimes on Yom Kippur and that was it. A teacher for Jewish lessons came from another town and had to do part of his trip on a bicycle and when the weather was bad he didn't come. And the weather is very often bad in Holland. Jewish education in Holland at that time where we lived was extremely poor.

I: And even thought Asheville was such a small place in the mountains, they actually had more organized Jewish...

HB: We came here and Noah, I would say the first weekend, went with our daughter who was at that time 15, to schul. I stayed at home with the boys because the boys were at that time 7 and 6 and almost 5. And I felt when a child cannot sit quietly, then don't go. So I stayed with the children at home, prepared my meal of my lunch and when Noah came home. But Noah went with Adelaide to the...

I: This was in 1954.

HB: Yeah. And then we lived for a while in another friends' house on Evelyn Place. First we were 10 days in west Asheville in the same house again as from the Spanbroke, but then I felt that it was not right for Mrs. Spanbroke to have another family with 4 children in the house. And this Dutch family we knew and they were still in Holland and we asked them if it was okay to get their house and that was across the street from where Morris and Ruth Fox were living. That was Evelyn Place. Evelyn Place when you come now from Murdock to the right, down that last part, downhill, not the other part. And Morris Fox saw us in schul, saw Noah in schul and he was the first one who came over to introduce himself and then we told him that we were planning at least, at that family's house we couldn't have a kosher household. But as soon as we would get our stuff, we would get back to a kosher household. And then of course we became introduced to Aaron Schandler.

I: That Morris' brother-in-law.

HB: Yeah. Well then the ball was rolling. We got a car and we moved to Kenilworth's at that time. We rented a house. And that's one thing that I advise always everybody else, don't start when you're planning to move to another town, no matter where, don't start and buy a house. Rent at first and see where you want to live. And so we rented a house and Noah was not very happy because he was promised to get a certain place in the company and they didn't do it. And he was ready to leave again.

I don't know if you were at the funeral at that time for Noah. Simon mentioned it. After almost 4 years being here, I felt really that I got the ground under my feet firm. I got really what I was looking for, the children got Hebrew lessons, there was Sunday school and at home we were doing the things we wished together. I felt that I really got what I was looking for. This was in 1957-58. And Noah was not happy. And Noah went to Holland. And they offered him in the place where the children were born, the last two, and they offered him a better job. And he would have liked to go. And he came home from Holland and he said, we have to sit down and talk. That and that is offered to me and I really would like to go. And my answer at that time was, well, if you'd like to go, go, but I'm not going away from here. And so the story was that he made up his mind to switch from organic chemistry to the other part of chemistry because it was the rayon part. He didn't like it but this was what we discussed and then suddenly the nylon plant didn't go very well and the chief chemist was not doing as well as the Dutch company who had at that time over 50 percent interest in the company here. So they had a _____ here. And somebody from Holland came here and said, what are you doing here, you have a man who knows what to do and you put him in a corner. And then Noah became chief chemist. And then we stayed in Asheville.

(END OF SIDE 1)

I: Tell me a little bit about Rabbi Cline and the congregation as you remember it. He was here for a number of years.

HB: I don't know. He was here when we came and he left and then we were for a long time without a rabbi and then Rabbi Gelberman came.

I: Gelberman's the one that taught me for my barmitzvah.

HB: And honestly I didn't like him.

I: Cline?

HB: I didn't like either one of them. I didn't like Gelberman either. I had a lot to do with Gelberman.

I: You said Rabbi Cline was maybe not as knowledgeable. Is that he didn't follow traditions or he just didn't care?

HB: I don't know. Questions that you were asking were not answered. And the way the children got the Hebrew lesson were not what I had expected. They didn't get very much. But it was a very short time for Hebrew lesson, our daughter had had already Hebrew and she didn't go. She was 15. And all he wanted at that time was to have our daughter going up for confirmation and the main reason for him was that you get nice clothes to wear and you go on the _____ and you get a lot of presents. And we all felt when that is _____ then it is extremely low. And so she never went for that. And we didn't push it either. Because we felt it was all so silly. And then he left. I don't know exactly where he went. If he went to Washington and then later on to something else, but I didn't care. And I had not very much contact with him at that time. Gelberman was the first and Gelberman, according to me, I don't think he ever had had _____.

I: Which is, for the tape purposes, a diploma, a traditional rabbinical diploma.

HB: I don't think he had it. He was born in Hungary, his wife was an American lady, a very nice person and he was very, very unpleasant to her in the open.

I: Now that's his first wife.

HB: And the second wife, he was even worse. I became friends with her. At that time we moved to the north part of Asheville and I was close by and we became very good friends together. And she complained very bitterly about many, many things about him.

I: And at the temple at that time, Rabbi Unger was here for most of that or all of that, he was here for a long time.

HB: He was here for a tremendous long time. And with Rabbi Unger you never got anywhere. I did, honestly, when I went to Rabbi Unger a year before Simon's barmitzvah and I said to him, that was the booming years, and I said to him, I know that a lot of barmitzvahs and batmitzvahs coming up in the temple and in the schul, can you tell me, we are planning to have a barmitzvah at that and that date, are you planning to have something on that and that date too. Because then we will change the date. Because children were friends together, we all came to the same affairs. And he said, I cannot tell you, I don't know because the children are here not longer prepared than half a year. And we will find out at half a year what's coming up. But he did put it in his ears and he didn't have anything that Friday night. He didn't want to commit himself.

I: One of the things that I'm interested in, the Jewish communities in the temple and the synagogue, haven't they been somewhat separated?

HB: Even on social things in the Jewish community center we got together. But the temple, lots of people went to the temple really for social reasons. And the service was very little Hebrew.

I: The temple is reformed, just for the tape purposes.

HB: And in the schul where all the people, the Reubens, the Schandlers and Noah picked up a lot of these older people. Slosman's were definitely here but they were not older people at that time. Benson was already in college and Freddy was still in high school. Mostly the people also, Mr. Schwarz, these people were older than Noah and I were. Noah was 45 when we came here, I was 40 and these people were older than we were. And the Goldsteins and the Scheptowitz.

I: The Scheptowitz was from Waynesville.

HB: Yeah but also Sarah Goldstein is a Scheptowitz.

I: So Sarah Goldstein was married to Bernie Goldstein and she was a Scheptowitz. So her brother was in Waynesville and she was here.

HB: And the Litchenfelds.

I: They were at the temple or not.

HB: No the older people were in the schul. And Mr. Rosen, Phil Rosen's father.

I: And he was like butcher, killed the chickens?

HB: Yeah. And the chickens were ordered ahead of time and then he slaughtered them and we picked them up from Youngs Poultry on Lexington on the corner of Lexington and Woodfin. It's now a secondhand, antique store or something there on the corner, across the street from the fish market. And all these people, either they themselves, or their parents came from east Europe. And they were really trained, the men at least, were really very much raised in the old fashioned traditions of Judaism.

I: So they were more observant.

HB: Yeah. Mr. Rosen knew a lot of things. And Mrs. Rosen was very nice always to us. We were there several times for a visit and they were living on Cumberland Avenue.

I: Ida Belovan was a Rosen and her brother Phil Rosen and there was another couple of brothers. One's a doctor.

HB: One is a doctor and one of the brothers was intermarried and for a long time they didn't talk to each other. But I think now they're together again. But time has changed too. They were one of the foundational kind of group that we met. And there was a little schul where now the Best Western is.

I: Yeah, that's where I was barmitzvahed.

HB: Yeah, of course. We heard about your family, the Schulmans.

I: I was going to ask you. Were you very aware of or did you meet many of the families west of Asheville? I know there was our family, the Schulmans. But

did you know any of the ones in Franklin or Waynesville?

HB: Rollman, Heinz Rollman. The Rollmans had one time a niece I think from Israel visiting and she was about the age of our daughter and she came to visit us several times. And Adelaide went that way also. But Mr. Rollman's wife was Catholic. He was very much aware of Judaism but they hardly came to schul.

I: So you would see them during the high holy days...

HB: Yeah, most likely. And then we had the first real director that we met here from the Jewish community center was Charlie Parmet. That was the uncle of Arlene Dolabof. And Arlene and Jack Dolabof came here because the uncle had a job for Jack Dolabof at the _____. And Jack and Arlene came here with two little girls and were far from what they are now, far down. They were, I would say, almost poor. And Jack worked and then he did other things and then he got involved in Jerry Sternberg's business. And they bought together, at that time, the Langren Hotel, the internal things from the Langren Hotel, the furniture and all. When the Langren Hotel went out, a parking garbage for the BB&T.

I: That was a nice hotel wasn't it?

HB: Yeah. And I have still a picture of it.

I: Didn't they have like a roof garden?

HB: That I don't know. But it was this way that they sold every little thing, _____ and the sheets and _____.

I: So they salvaged the inside when they were going to tear the hotel down?

HB: Yeah. Jerry Sternberg took Jack Dolabof with him and they made a tremendous amount of money. And then Jerry Sternberg bought the Castle, the Sealy Castle at Asheville-Biltmore College and then Jack got enough money to buy the house that they live in now. And then from there on the business went way up. But Arlene and Jack are still very down to earth people.

I: So the Jewish Community Center was always sort of a unifying force between the temple and the synagogue.

HB: And they had New Year's parties, very much Helen Pozner, was very much involved in that.

I: Did the center start in the 50s? Was it already here when you came?

HB: Oh yeah. Because we had our Sunday School there. And Hebrew school because in the schul there was no room for that downstairs. There was no room in the little vestry room. The vestry room downstairs was for the _____ and for sisterhood meetings, whatever. You go down narrow steps and the kitchen was terrible. They had mice.

I: When they had barmitzvahs, didn't the sisterhood or the hadassah or something, didn't they actually do the catering?

HB: No. When we knew that Simon was going to barmitzvah, everybody knew and everybody was jumping in. And we didn't have a freezer at home. Later on, on Broadway where now Stone Soup is, that used to be Aaron Schandler for a while. But Al was not in there yet at that time, but next door this side was a place from Westinghouse. And Westinghouse had, you could rent a freezer locker. And there was a drawer in a big freezer and you could put things in there that you want to save when you didn't have a freezer yourself. And I rented a freezer locker and every time when I had made something, cookies or whatever, I marked it down and put it in a box and put it in that freezer locker. And we got information how many pieces we needed and we asked Lee Schandler at that time, who had had already one barmitzvah for Mickey and the other one for Trudy, Trudy is half a year older than Simon. And that was already done or coming up. Anyhow, Lee Schandler was much more aware of what you needed, so we talked about it with her and she said you need at least 4 or 5 pieces of hand picked things to make to put on the table for each person. We expected at that time a lot of people from Enka, we expected about 200 people. So I had to take care that I had at least 1000 or more small hand picked things. And I wrote everything down, to my regret I threw that away. And then of course people came and say, I have made 50 cookies for you.

I: So everybody pitched in?

HB: Yeah. And then the funniest thing that I have said many times, I had altogether counted that I had 1500 little pieces of pastry, plus a big cake, but they were in small little boxes. And the evening that Simon was barmitzvhed, I came with all my boxes to the kitchen and Norma Feingold was there and Mildred and I don't know who else but several of these people were there to help to set it up because the plates were from the schul and then so on. And I put my things on the counter and I was very proud that I had so many pieces and Norma looked, not even in the boxes, but on the boxes, and she said, is that all you have? We better go home and bake. Anyhow, we had Friday night and the _____ was all there. Things even for lunch that you had prepared for yourself. And I didn't have that much knowledge about that kind of thing at that time. And I remember that we had big cardboard boxes full of pastry that we sent that same afternoon after the barmitzvah for Simon, we took it to _____.

I: So you had too much?

HB: Of course we had too much. Still Norma is still doing it the same way.

I: Do you think that, like in that case the kitchen was too small, so that sort of necessitated people to have to chip in and cook from their own kitchens? Do you think like now when you can go to Rolling Pin and get the whole thing catered and just write a check, do you feel that that's changed the feeling of cooperation? Because you had to do it then.

HB: Yeah. There was more closeness among the people. Your child will be barmitzvhed, we will help you. Your child will be _____, we will help you.

I: It was just an accepted fact from necessity. I know people will tell me stories about like in New York or I'm sure in other cities, people talked to each other more in the ghettos because they ran the laundry lines from one building to the next and when they had to wash, they had to talk to their neighbors because they were sitting there looking at them which sort of made for more community I guess is what I'm saying.

HB: You know that is the truth. Poorness, poor situations, financially poor situations are bringing people together. There is no doubt about that. Because I was here and this is not Jewish, but I became very soon after we came here a member of the YWCA. And they had a wonderful thing going on at that time. This was in '55 about. On two Thursday mornings a month, the first and the third, they had from 9:30 till 11:30 a group of women together. They called it the Y Wives. And the start was that at the first meeting that they had a list was going around and two women together were taking care of very small refreshments, like some doughnuts or small cookies, not expensive, coffee and tea were served at the Y and then by 10:00 there was a meeting. A lecturer or whatever there was.

I: And this was how many times?

HB: Two times a month. And I had one time was a lady who was at the time was between Thanksgiving and Christmas talking about how to pack different packages for Christmas. How to make your own bows because bows were not bought ready made, you were doing it yourself, different ways of doing it. And all kind of things. There was one I remember, how to remodel old hats. There was one lady who came, that was Barbara Friedman, how to have your posture when you are cooking and working in the kitchen. And this kind of thing. And around Christmas time they had figures for the Christmas tree, the ceramic kind of things. And we were sitting on long tables with 20 women, 10 on each side with paint in between and laughing and painting the things for the Christmas tree. I made two Santa Clauses and gave them away. But it was fun. And then slowly one woman didn't come because she wanted to work. This woman wanted to work, this whole organization fell apart.

I: When the women went to work. So that's another major change really.

HB: And I don't agree for that. I think that time was an enjoyable time because everybody, there were people who were in the same boat as I was, where the husband was working at _____, the salaries were not tremendous but it was at least, it was enough to live on and we were housewives. But then you got all the modern equipments and the time in the kitchen and the time in the household cuts down very drastically. You put your things in the microwave and its done in 5 minutes and cleaning vegetables that was a very normal thing, but it is not normal now anymore because everything that you want to eat you can get frozen.

I: Besides in the vegetable case it maybe not being as healthy, it allowed for more time but it actually gave people less time to be with each other.

HB: Because when you have less time, you have to fill up your time. The day is still 24 hours, that hasn't changed. But when your children are in school and you had had a college education or whatever education and at that time you felt that you could find a job in the way that you had had your education, I can see that you would like to do that. But it is overdone. The things are, according to me, and this is one of the biggest trouble right now, somebody has an education and they have children and they have a job and they go on with the job and in the beginning they will say my child is too young and I only can have half day jobs. But then they get enthusiastic and the boss get enthusiastic and the job grows but the child who has grown in that time but not enough comes home by itself. And that is the biggest trouble right now. The family life is hurting.

I: So you see the value in the woman running the home?

HB: I feel that a woman, its not a woman should always stay at home, there is enough other things to do. In Israel, for instance, they have made arrangements, I don't know if it is still that way but I hope it is, where a woman can have half time jobs. So they are at home when the children are coming home. And when a mother is home half an hour before the child has to come home, at least she will get rested up, she will freshen up, she will be ready when the child comes home.

I: In my generation I call it, everybody is constantly out of breath. Everybody is always running and they never have time to do anything fully.

HB: And then you get, of course, an overproduction from whatever. Then you get the layoff and the life is not made for that and then the women are getting itchy and unpleasant and you get the divorces and you get the children that have no control any more because mother has no control. Did you hear the speaker last night?

I: No.

HB: I thought he was a marvelous speaker. I would have liked to sit down and talked to him for a length of time.

I: This was Mr. Lester.

HB: Yeah. Because he hit several points but the main thing is somewhere else according to me. But that's my mistake. But anyhow, you have certain things that a home has to have. Because what are you carrying on a life. You go on in life, what are you carrying on.

I: You have to have a family life to carry with you. The converse is if you don't have the family life...

HB: Then you miss part and you have no roots.

I: And you probably don't have any experience to give roots to your children.

HB: No. I very much afraid for the next generation, honestly, especially the poor people like Hillside. Hillside was built when we were here. Westgate was built when we were here. Hillside was, in the beginning, was very nice because it was supervised and there was a big daycare center and I was not afraid at all to go there. I have been there several times. I know the lady who was teaching there, the daycare center and I visited there several times to see because we were very good friends. And I loved it very much. I had at one time a maid who was living there and I was not a bit afraid to go there to bring her back home. And I had been visiting her when I brought her home just to see how her apartment was, what she had in the apartment. And it was supervised if these people were keeping the things clean.

I: Make sure they were taking care of it.

HB: Yeah. But now a taxi driver doesn't even want to bring anybody in there. And why, because the children are on drugs. These are children, let me say

from 10-11 through 16 when they are not in jail at that time and they have ruined their life. And when they get married and they want to have a child, but its coming out of that child.

I: Getting back to the feeling of the Jewish community, how would you, just give me your feeling of the Jewish community today versus when you first came. Good and bad.

HB: The good part hasn't changed very much. I think we still have the warm feeling for many people. The bad part is that I think the amount of intermarriages and amount of even the nice, and I know now several people who have been converted whom I very much like, very much, but not having the background because Jewish life is not only going to the synagogue. Jewish life is a race, we are a race by ourselves. We are a race with a background.

I: Background meaning history or background meaning rituals?

HB: Both. History and ritual are tied in together and that is what the people who are converted don't have, even our rabbi. But they don't have. For instance, I mentioned Friday night, the Friday evening at my parents' house, and the memories that my sister and I have from that. Of course we were living in the town where most of our relatives were living, but Noah and I changed it a little bit because we went to the synagogue. You know yourself, parties and cocktail parties and football games and all these things are always on Friday night. The first cocktail party that Noah and I were invited in Asheville was two or three months after we arrived. And I didn't even wait til Noah was home and I went to the phone and I called the people and I said, I'm sorry, I see you have it on a Friday night, we are not coming. Why, because Friday night is an evening that we stay home or that we go to the synagogue. And we are not going out to cocktail parties. At that time it was a smoking business and everything besides drinking. Noah and I never liked very much drinking. I was never drinking hard liquor. And I think in the 20 years that Noah had been working here, I can count on one hand very easily the times that we were out on Friday night unless we went to the _____. Then we went to a party.

I: And that added what to you and your family?

HB: Atmosphere. And the atmosphere is something that gives something.

I: How did your children in the 60s, did they adjust to that or did they have to modify that or have they?

HB: I was lucky. Simon was in the band and you know the Lee Edwards band had to play at the football games most of the time.

I: Lee Edwards, the high school band.

HB: Yeah. Simon was prepared to leave at 7:00 at that time, I don't know exactly when. I went altogether one time to a football game. I don't understand it and I don't enjoy it either. When Simon had to go, Noah was able to come home a little bit earlier and we had anyhow our Friday night meal together.

I: So you still had it. You altered it a little bit but you were still able

to maintain it.

HB: Yeah. And when you do agree for your child to get them in the band, you have to take the consequences. But I don't know if it came through that, but our children and when you are interested, I know I cannot give you completely because I promised it to _____. I have still one copy left for my speech. I put one in my book and one for myself away also. But I mentioned there too that from home, a Friday night in my parents house was something, not only a special meal, a special atmosphere.

I: When you say atmosphere, that added, I know its hard to put into words, but a security do you think?

HB: Yeah, oh yeah, a belonging. Definitely.

I: Do you see, again this is my opinion and this is your interview, but it does seem that that belonging is stretched now. People are in one way maybe even friendlier in saying hello, but they really don't want to know who they're saying hello to, sometimes versus maybe, even when I was growing up in the 50s and 60s, you really got to know people. In other words, their relatives were your relatives, almost. You knew who they were, you knew this was the brother-in-law. And now it seems like sometimes you know them, but it doesn't really make any difference or do you feel that way? I'm not trying to put words in your mouth.

HB: That depends upon with whom you are dealing of course. We became very close to the Reubensteins. Herb and Frieda. I know her family quite well. I mean I know when she is talking about one of her brothers or sisters.

I: Do you think like my generation or your children, do they have the intense friendships that you did, do you think?

HB: In Israel they do.

I: Then again, maybe for necessity.

HB: No, no. Because they also go out on Friday night but they go to other people. But of course Israel is a different case. Now they have also cinemas open, movies on Friday night and our granddaughters are going there. But I don't agree with but I'm not the mother, I'm the grandmother.

I: How many children do you have living in Israel?

HB: Three.

I: Three out of the four.

HB: I have one in Fresno, California.

I: And that's Jack. So Jack lives in California and everybody else lives in Israel. And do they live close to each other?

HB: Yeah.

I: And you will be living there.

HB: I will be about 5 minutes walking from our daughter and no more than 10 minutes from Simon and I have to go by bus to David because it goes up and down the hill. I'll be in Jerusalem. And Jerusalem has no bus transportation on _____. And now you have tremendous amount of cars driving in Jerusalem.

I: Didn't you live in Jerusalem for a while after you retired?

HB: Yeah. We had that apartment that I'm going into to, is our apartment. And we bought it in 1971. Let me say the children told us to buy it. And I'm very happy with it because it's a good neighborhood and neighborhood has improved enormously.

I: So you moved in '71?

HB: No, 1974 after Noah was retired. For the first time, in the beginning every time half a year. And then in '87 we went for a year, really to see the whole year round, to see if we really would like it. And then that year Noah got three times very sick, was three times in Hadassah Hospital in '87-'88. And then we came back here and we didn't go back together. I just recently went back for myself to see if I really would like to go there and I really felt very much at home and I still have many, many friends there besides the children and the grandchildren. From Holland and America.

I: People that you met here?

HB: No, mostly there. Also, some of them that came from here but most of them that I met over there. I'm a member of a Dutch organization, I'm a member of an American Association, I'm a member of the Pioneer Women, English speaking. They have a English and a Hebrew speaking.

I: What does that mean Pioneer Women?

HB: They are taking care of all kind of nurseries and those kinds of things. And that is a very nice, pleasant organization.

I: And since you like kindergarten teaching too...

HB: Yeah. And of course Hadassah. Every time when I was in Israel, I did somewhere else some volunteer work. I have been an _____, that is for the retarded people. I have been working at Hadassah and I have been working at that is an organization, to me it's a unique organization where older people are getting together, they're everyday coming about 400 older people who are mostly coming from East Europe.

I: Helen, I thank you very much for taking this time to do this important interview. This tape will be very helpful for many people for many, many years, we hope at least. I just wondered if you had any general feelings that you'd like to say about your experience in western North Carolina in Asheville as you're about to leave for Israel.

HB: I was happy to come here. I'm mixed feelings leaving but because the situation has changed and everything, Israel has grown in one way and not grown in the other way. It still is in many ways a small kind of a town. The possibilities of shopping possibilities has grown. But the possibilities of real art and life hasn't grown at all according to me. I was in Israel in October on a holiday and was in between, of course you cannot compare a big town like Jerusalem with Israel but I saw, for instance at the Israeli Museum, the complete works of Shegal. And it was jammed full every day with people who were interested.

I: So there's so much more cultural life...

HB: People are interested in it and the Israeli Museum is something completely out of this world.

I: So you're looking forward to all of the activity and growing yourself?

HB: Yeah. I lived very happily here but the last couple of years with Noah being not able to go to the things. We always have been members of Asheville Symphony and we have been members of ACT and we have been going to ____ in Mars Hill. All these things were nice and marvelous but Noah was not up to that. When I would live, let me say, 65 years ago with Noah in Israel most likely I wouldn't have participated in that part too. Now I still can as long as I can. And I went to two nice concerts with the children in Israel. I went the last Saturday night I was in Israel we went to a monastery where there was a concert, a chamber music concert from 4 or 5 Russian violinists in a monastery so gorgeous.

I: A Christian monastery or what?

HB: Catholic.

I: A Catholic monastery in Jerusalem.

HB: Yeah. So marvelous that it was soft in your ears. (INTERRUPTION) It's very loud, my voice. I was not planning to have it that loud.

I: So you're looking forward to the rich cultural life that Asheville still really doesn't have and maybe you think has less of now or at least not any more.

HB: There have been several things that came up. I saw, for instance, from the beginning, coming up. And I feel terrible that it is at the place where it is now and not being attended as well. Because off the place, the Pack Place, I don't feel very optimistic about it. Also, I think the Pack Place is making a big mistake and while they have different things there and they have a membership for this and a membership for that and a membership for that, by not having an all over membership. So when you are a member you can go to _____. Instead of separate groups. It makes it very difficult and very unpleasant. For instance, when I would like to spend, let me say, an afternoon with visitors to the Pack Place, I can go to one part when I would be a member.

I: But the other parts you maybe wouldn't.

HB: And when you are a member you can get everywhere, you can say well I'm going to here and there and spend an afternoon and then you spend also much more money there. But the whole thing, they have tried and tried but I feel very sorry

that it is there.

I: So you already belong to several groups in Israel.

HB: I will also become a member of the schul where David is.