



Oral History Project of Long-Time Members of Delaware's Jewish Community

Researcher: Dalia Handelman, University of Delaware

Faculty Mentor: Professor Roger Horowitz of the University of Delaware Jewish Studies Program

Abstract Description:

There is so much to learn from each person in this world, especially from people who have lived a lifetime of unique experiences during ever changing time periods. This project focused on conducting ten extensive interviews with senior citizens in the Jewish community of Delaware. The people who were interviewed ranged in age from 80 to over 100 years old. Each interview covered the time and place the interviewee was born all the way through to their opinions on the current political climate. There are countless takeaways from each of the interviews, ranging from understanding anti-Semitism in the 1940s to thinking about the biggest threat Jews face today and everything in between. Every interviewee has a lifetime of unique experiences that shaped their lives, and hearing their stories will help shape the lives of all those who choose to listen.

Quotes:

I hope people will listen to my interviews and learn from our elders about what's really important in life and understand a little bit about how different our world is today from 50+ years ago. Each interviewee left me with advice and/or life lessons that I had never thought about before. At every interview I found myself writing down specific quotes that really stuck with me. Here are a few highlights of those special quotes:



Anne Jaffe

“I feel I have lived in this crucible of history where I was a part of the old and have stepped forward into a whole new world”- Yetta Chankin (min 46:12)

“Belonging is a source of happiness”- Yetta Chankin (min 53:08) Yetta was explaining how being Jewish provided her with a sense of belonging and why that was so important.

“I think being Jewish is a gift” - Yetta Chankin (min 1:14)

“It is not going to be easy, but Judaism is a way of life and to disregard it would be a crime.”- Connie Kreshtool (min 1:42) Connie was explaining that she thinks the biggest threat to Judaism today may be the lack of connection from the younger generations.

“Our heroes were Chaim Weitman and Theodore Hertzl”- Faith Brown (min 5:00) Faith was explaining the kind of people who she and her friends looked up to as children.

“Treasure your traditions” - Faith Brown (min 55:23)

“You will ruin your life if you walk around hating other people, they don't know that you hate them, it will only destroy you.”- Anne Jaffe (min 37:58) Anne was describing the advice her father said to her right after their family was liberated from the Nazi's control.

“But I will not give up as long as I can stand on my own two feet”- Anne Jaffe (min 1:09) Anne was explaining how she will never stop telling her story about surviving the Holocaust and sharing her ideology of living a life without hatred.

Highlights From Select Interviews:

Anne Jaffe was born March 5th, 1931 in Poland. During World War 2 Anne and her family lived in a forest for three years, hiding from the Nazi's. She and her family were liberated on July 4th, 1944. She moved to Wilmington, Delaware in 1975 and has lived in Delaware for 45 years.

The most striking part of Anne's interview was when she explained to me her attitude on life. She explained that after the holocaust she was filled with hatred. She told me the story of when her attitude towards the world changed. She had just spent years living in a forest, wearing the same clothing and eating nothing more than a potato a day, fighting to survive. Her father overheard her speaking about the hatred she felt. Her father sat her down and asked, “We were victims of hatred, did you like it?”, Anne quickly responded “I hated it, of course, I hated it.” and her father said, “Then why would you do to others the thing that was so hateful to you?” She has always kept this piece of advice with her, “You will ruin your life if you walk around hating other people, they don't know that you hate them, it will only destroy you (min 37:58).” Anne is a woman who has survived the worst imaginable events and yet holds hatred for no one. If a woman like her can let go of hatred, then we should all be able to do so as well.



Faith and Lou Brown

Faith and Lou Brown were both born in Wilmington, Delaware. They both grew up in Wilmington but had very different childhoods. Lou was born on the Westside of Wilmington, which he described as the “tough” side. Lou served in the navy during World War 2. When he got back, Faith and Lou's parents had bought a house next door to each other. They soon started dating, fell in love, and eventually got married. Faith and Lou both valued traveling immensely. They have traveled to about 27 countries and wherever they go they look for a Jewish community. They have gone to Israel ten times, mostly as volunteers helping to build up the state of Israel. They founded an Israeli dance group 70 years ago that they are very passionate about. Faith described the dance group as “bringing a little piece of Israel with them everywhere they go.” Zionism was a very big part of their lives, growing up and as adults.

One very special part of the interview was when they described to me one of their experiences volunteering for the Israeli Army. They volunteered with the Israeli army many times, however, they explained one experience in particular when they were stationed on an army base in the Golan Heights. Faith explained how it was very rustic; they would be thrilled if they found an extra nail because they used nails in the wall as closets. Regardless of the tough conditions, Faith and Lou absolutely loved it. Faith explained one of the first interactions she had with an Israeli soldier on the base in the Golan Heights. She described it to me in Hebrew. The soldier asked them, “Where are you from?” they responded, “from America,” the soldier looked at them and said, “You guys are crazy!” At the time the Israelis thought the American volunteers were insane for leaving their lives of comfort and stability in America to come work in Israel under very rustic conditions. Faith explained that as volunteers during this time they were looked at like 4-star generals. They had the utmost respect from the Israelis because they paid their own way to Israel, left behind a world of comfort, and had to do very tough work all with the goal of helping Israel become the country it is today. During the interview, Faith stopped for a moment and said, “And I want to recommend to you, while your young, travel as much as possible. Save your money, don't buy clothes and stuff, put your money in a different bank account. You won't regret it (min 48:12).” After the interview, I had a chance to show Faith a picture of the time I spent with the Israeli army last year. Faith looked at the picture and said: “We wore the same outfit!” It was truly remarkable to be a 19-year-old-girl, meeting a 90-year-old woman and learning that we had almost the same experience 40 years apart; we both worked with the IDF (Israeli Defense Force), in the desert, even wearing the same uniform. Their love for traveling and Israel really stuck with me after our interview because I share the same values. It was really special to see that, even with our age difference of 71 years, we have the same priorities in life.



Lou and Faith Brown, In uniform from their participation in “Sherat Le Israel” during their sixth trip to Israel 1995



Dalia Handelman (Author) left, standing with friend in uniform during Israeli army “Gadna” training 2018

The Interviewees:

- Yetta Chaiken
- Connie Kreshtool
- Faith Brown (twice)
- Lou Brown
- Helen Gordon
- Anne Jaffe
- Frances Stein
- Norman “Buddy” Aerenson
- Phyllis Aerenson

Goals & Accomplishments:

One of the goals for this project was for the people I interviewed to realize how incredible and special their lives were. Many of my interviewees told me that at first they did not think they had anything interesting to say. After I conducted the interview they really felt like their story was truly meaningful.

Another one of the goals for this project is for the rest of the world, especially young adults, to hear these stories and to make them think. One little thing or story from one of these interviews can truly stick with someone and change their mindset on their lifestyle, goals, aspirations, and much more.

Takeaways:

There are two big pieces of advice I would give to anyone interested in conducting oral histories: First, be as polite as possible. This project and the overall internship I am part of are all about community engagement. People often don't realize how much of an impact a first impression can make and even how a tone of voice can change the way someone feels about you. Before all of my interviews, I call the person I am interviewing to set up an appointment. Being very polite and enthusiastic over the phone is the first impression people have of me and being positive can really help them get more excited and interested in the interview. Also, during my interviews, a simple smile and strong eye contact really help the interviewee feel more comfortable and ultimately gets them to elaborate on what they are saying. Being genuinely polite to strangers, whether or not it is for a job, can really go a long way. Another piece of advice I would give is to be open-minded. When you connect with people through community engagement it is really important to be as open-minded as possible because even if you don't expect it there is always something you can learn from getting to know other people. It doesn't mean you have to agree with everything someone said, but be truly open to understanding the new ideas and thoughts someone is sharing with you.

Acknowledgments:

There are many people that made this project possible and helped make sure it was successful! The first two people who deserve recognition and gratitude are Professor Roger Horowitz of the University of Delaware Jewish Studies program and Gail Pietrzyk of the Jewish Historical Society of Delaware. They were both direct supervisors of the project. They both taught me a tremendous amount and were always very supportive and helpful. I would also like to thank the entire Jewish Historical Society and each of the liaisons for being such wonderful partners on this project. I would like to thank the Undergraduate Research Program and Summer Scholars program for making it all possible! Most importantly, I would like to thank each of the interviewee's for allowing me to come into their homes and share with me so much of their lives history.