

CELEBRATING OUR STORIES
Jewish Life in Ann Arbor

Zvi and Marlene Gitelman
Recorded April 22, 2013

3:30-4:41

Marlene:

When we came to Ann Arbor, when I came also, the Beth Israel congregation was in existence as well as the Hillel Foundation from the University of Michigan's affiliation with the Hillel Foundation. We found that their being affiliated with the Orthodox community, there was a small Orthodox community here.

At that time, I remember that—well, we shared the same building with the Beth Israel congregation, and it was a very nice sharing that people helped each other back and forth. It was a relatively small Jewish community. For us, kosher food was an issue, and there was very little available in Ann Arbor, although Detroit's only an hour's drive away. So about once a month, we'd make the trip to Detroit to stock up our freezer, and that was fine. We managed just fine.

Things have changed dramatically over the years, but it has been more than 40 years. While I do go to Detroit once in a while cuz I have family there, certainly there's everything one could need as far as kosher food, kosher facilities are available in Ann Arbor now.

6:06-9:09

Zvi:

Interesting some of the changes that we've seen. I recall that when I came there was a Yiddish reading group in existence, which was founded probably by Herb Paper, late professor of linguistics and Judeo-Persian and Persian at the university. It was a small circle of people, maybe 15 people would gather, and we would read Yiddish literature and converse in Yiddish. Interesting range of people there. We had, aside from Herb Paper and myself who usually did the reading, we had Aliza Shevrin who's still in town and is a translator of Sholem Aleichem and other Yiddish writers. We had Finkel—what was her first name?

Marlene:

Anya.

Zvi: Anya Finkel, who was the head of the millinery department at Jacobson's. Both Anya and Jacobson's are gone.

Marlene: Was Rae Lampe a part of it?

Zvi: Rae Lampe was part of it. Anya was born in Lida, Belarus. She was married to Maurice Finkel, who was a distinguished architect in Detroit, in fact, designed the Michigan Theater. They had a son. I think his name was George who was a producer for NBC. We had Mrs. Lipnick, Lillian Lipnick, one of whose sons worked for the Ann Arbor Bank. We had a woman who called herself Mrs. Abba P. Ginsburg. She was known as Bessie, and her parents, the Cheslooks, had a store, a Hebrew bookstore in the old Jewish neighborhood in Detroit.

We had Phil Seymour, who was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Came to Ann Arbor during the war to study Japanese. Part of the military, found a local Jewish girl, Clara Lansky. The Lanskys were among the first families in Ann Arbor. They had a junkyard out on Main Street. They'd come from Toledo. Married her and settled down, and he had a company that produced glassware for chemical laboratories, obviously, in some need here. We had quite a variety of people, and that was great fun.

That has transformed into a group of people that meets every Friday between 12 and 1, who now consists not of native speakers of Yiddish, for the most part, but rather of undergraduate, graduate students, faculty, some community members still. We have a very interesting character here named Gabriel Weinreich, who is a physicist by profession. I think he's 86. His younger brother Uriel was my Yiddish Teacher at Columbia, and their father Max Weinreich was one of the founders of YIVO, the Jewish scholarly institute founded in Vilna, which was then in Poland, in 1925, now in New York, and the man who wrote a four-volume history of the Yiddish language.

9:36-12:15

Marlene: One of the things that was mentioned to me to explain about was the founding of the Hebrew Day School. We were among 12 couples who thought that that was one of the things that really was missing from Jewish life in Ann Arbor. While the public schools were fine, a number of us in that group had day school background, Hebrew Day School background, coming from the New York area or Chicago, other places, and wanted our children

to have the same. It was quite a revolutionary undertaking at the time.

Many people, even strong supporters in the Jewish community thought we were doing the wrong thing, that we were being separatists. That our children would not grow up understanding other cultures. But since we had ourselves for the example, that we seemed to have done all right in the United States, and with that education, we decided to give it a try. The other thing that was I think special about this group was that about a third of them we would say affiliated with the Orthodox stream, a third Conservative and a third Reform or unaffiliated.

Yet, we all managed to get along very well and help each other as far as a lot of volunteer work was necessary to get the school going. We started with a class, a kindergarten class of 12 children. Our son, Yitzhak, was among them. Our first quarters were actually in the Beth Israel building, the old one, which was on Hill Street. We slowly grew. Again, in the beginning years, it was almost all—it was all volunteer work from administration to curriculum. Some of the people like myself had an education background, so we worked on curriculum, both the Hebrew and Judaic side as well as the English. We found, again, a slow growth. It took quite a while to establish ourselves as something that wasn't going to just fade away and to change people's opinions about it.

16:10-18:12

Zvi:

As far as I know, the first self-identified Jewish member of the faculty was a man Moses Gomberg, who was a very distinguished professor of chemistry. In fact, there's a chair named for him. He seems to have arrived here in the 1880s. It's well documented. He came from Starakostiantyniv in Ukraine. Came to the United States and may have been educated in Germany. Never married, didn't leave family here in Ann Arbor, but certainly a very distinguished chemist whose work is acknowledged to this day.

There was a Professor Winkler of German in the early 20th century. His house still stands on Cambridge, so there were a few Jewish faculty here. Not very many, probably. There does not seem to have been a quota restricting Jews among the students, unlike the Ivy League schools and many other schools. There was informal discrimination against Jews on the faculty. The Department of Political Science was founded in 1910, and it wasn't until half a century later that the first Jew was hired by the department. The

chairman for 14 years or so of the department, James K. Pollock, was a specialist in Germany and he made it quite clear that, as he called them, the children of Israel and Catholics were not really wanted on the faculty. Catholics would be okay, he once told a colleague of mine, as long as they stuck to political theory. They could do theory, thinking about Aquinas and Augustine, but they couldn't do much else. That was the kind of person you had as the head of a major department. Fortunately, that changed radically in the 1960s. The English department here, too, like most English departments around the country, was the preserve of proper White Anglo-Saxon men and Jews were not welcome there.