

CELEBRATING OUR STORIES
Jewish Life in Ann Arbor

Barry Margolis and Judy Lax
Recorded April 22, 2013

8:37-11:57

Barry: As I said, I was born in 1955, my family was already members of Beth Israel Congregation then. So I kind of grew up at Beth Israel. From the time I was born, I went through religious school. I was always here. My mother was very involved. She and two other people started the library at Beth Israel, and she was a big cook. At the time, she was always involved in all the cooking that went on in the kitchen for every event from different bar mitzvahs to you name it. Which meant a big commitment. We lived, at the time, which seemed like a very far distance from here. It didn't change but—

Judy: It was out in the country.

Barry: Yeah, it was far away. On a morning where I'd be in Hebrew school or afternoon for a two hour session, she wasn't going to drop me off, and go home and come back. She always stayed and had projects she got herself involved in. She was very involved for well over 30 years at Beth Israel. So anyway, I went through all that, I was Bar Mitzvah'd at Beth Israel. At the time, there were confirmation classes, I was involved in those. I had a confirmation. I'm probably skipping over things. My wife and I were married here in 1984, and my wife has become pretty involved in a lot of things at Beth Israel. All my kids have gone through, and Bar and Bat Mitzvah'd here. We have three children. Then over the years the way it's changed is that really, when I was young, there was really Beth Israel only. I remember when some other families—some that were Beth Israel families, some that weren't—started Beth Emeth. It was somewhere in the early to mid-1960's, I don't remember the exact year, but I know some of the families that were involved, and it became a large temple. I remember when Rabbi Goldstein and his wife came to Ann Arbor in 1975 and the first Chabad house was formed. Matter of fact, I'm pretty sure that I can remember when they first came here. They came and visited with my family—my parents, myself—I was 20 years old at the time, and introduced themselves. And so I've known them since they came here. As time went on that there were more temples and more synagogues being formed in the community, and then along with the federation and the JCC that

came on. As time went on, I don't remember which years they were each formed, I know we just had some kind of anniversary for each one of those organizations. Jewish Family Services which just celebrated I think—

Judy: Its 20th anniversary.

Barry: Their 20th anniversary.

Judy: Last night.

Barry: Yes, yes.

Judy: It was a wonderful occasion.

12:45-14:26

Judy: I have really just been amazed in watching the Jewish community grow. My oldest son is 42 now, but when he graduated from Huron High School, and he was the president of his class, there were four Jewish kids. I don't know the numbers now, but I am sure that that's tenfold. Beth Emeth has over 700 families, Beth Israel has—

Barry: Close to 500.

Judy: - 500 families. It's the diversity of the Jewish community, in that there are every kind of—you can be any kind of a Jew in Ann Arbor, and yet all of these people come together. I think one of the greatest moments was, when the federation decided to have a humanitarian dinner. My husband and I were asked to chair the first one, and we were honoring Ari Weinzweig and Paul Saginaw. We had it out at the Sheraton in Ypsilanti, I think. We had 625 people, and Mandel Berman came. He said something that has always stuck with me. "You could never have this size of a Jewish crowd in the Detroit area, because people come to Conservative things, they come to Reform things. They'll come to a JCC event." Having everybody in the Jewish community come—we had to turn people away, because the hotel wouldn't hold that many people. That continues to happen, in where the whole community comes together.

32:30-34:56

Barry: Judy, I think you asked me earlier about Osias—

Judy: Zwerdling.

Barry: - who was like the founding—one of the founding members, but the founding father at Beth Israel. I did know him, I think I may have been around 16 or 18 years old when he passed away. He lived to be well up into his '90's. He was a pretty unique man. I knew him a little bit closely because he was a great uncle to my best friend growing up at that time, so I had been at his home several times. What I remember mostly about him was he was—I can remember him at services at Beth Israel, Shabbat morning or on a Friday night service. He always sat in the same seat, always had a smile on his face. I can remember being a small child, maybe five and ten years old. He always would give you a big smile and a handshake, a very tight grip and tell you how proud he was to see you at Beth Israel and that type of thing. He was a big businessman in Ann Arbor, too. A very successful real estate man, and I believe—

Judy: Furrier.

Barry: - he started as a furrier. Way before my time so I didn't know too much.

Judy: There's still a wall downtown that says Zwerdling Fur.

Barry: Okay. I remember when he owned many properties around town still, and in his later years. That's what I knew of him. Very nice man. His wife had died several years before he did, and I don't really have memories of her. I remember one afternoon going to his house with my friend. Maybe we were 13 or 14 years old at the time. The back door was always open, we just walked in the back door. My friend Dave called out his uncle's name. He didn't answer. He called out his name, he didn't answer. He was hard of hearing by then, okay. As we're walking through the house, we see him lying face down on the floor. We got very nervous, we ran to him. He was laying on the floor, he wasn't passed out. He was counting his money. The stacks of cash dollars out in front of him, laying on the floor. So I'll never forget that one.