

**CELEBRATING OUR STORIES**  
**Jewish Life in Ann Arbor**

**David and Helen Aminoff**  
**Recorded April 22, 2013**

**5:43-7:20**

*Helen:* In any event, we finally joined the synagogue in 1962. We felt at that time that our youngest—our oldest child—older child at that time was four years of age, and it was time to think about affiliating. Especially since at school, when they got into school, they were the only Jewish child in the class. There were no other Jewish children. They were scattered through the schools. We felt it was important for the children, and it was for us, too. Then I was pregnant, and in 1963 we had our third child, Janet. She was named at Beth Israel.

*David:* Besides my research, I was also teaching in the department. We used to teach the lab courses on Saturday mornings. I was working with Professor Christman, Christinsen.

*Helen:* Christman, Adam Christman, yeah.

*David:* He was the senior lecturer and I was the junior one, of course. I had to tell him that it's going to be the naming of my youngest daughter and I will not be able to come in on this Saturday. He said, "Are you Jewish?" He was so surprised. Most of the faculty here were not Jewish.

*Helen:* In the medical school, certainly.

*David:* Very few in the medical school, very few indeed. In the LS&A there was Dean Haber.

**7:55-8:45**

*David:* Then there was Isadore Lampe—.

*Helen:* He was in the medical school.

*David:* - who came to Ann Arbor in 1930, around about.

*Helen:* Oh, he was in the 1930s. Yeah, I think they both were, though. I think they both were.

*David:* That was radiation therapy.

*Helen:* Yeah, radiation therapy.

*David:* Right. Then there's Kasimir Fajans, who was a physical chemist. Reuben Kahn, originator of the Kahn test for syphilis. He was at the medical school. Jonas Salk, with the polio vaccine, he was in the School of Epidemiology, and Phil Elving, who was in Analytical Chemistry. Those were the ones that were—

*Helen:* The old timers.

*David:* - had been here before we came.

### **32:47-35:42**

*Helen:* We found, actually, a tombstone was delivered to Hillel Foundation, and Rabbi Rudolph was the director. Rabbi Rudolph was leaving Ann Arbor to take a position up in Washington, DC. He gave this tombstone to Rabbi Kensky. The tombstone remained in our building in the basement for a while because nobody knew what to do with it. Nobody knew where it came from. It was a stepping stone at a fraternity. When it was turned over it was all beautifully preserved Hebrew writing.

*David:* Inscription.

*Helen:* Inscription, yeah. Finally, Rabbi Kensky said, "Helen, you like a challenge. Go ahead. Find out where this came from." Well, I started my research, and ultimately I'll make it short. With the help of the president of the University, Howard Shapiro, who himself was Jewish, he told them over in the Planning Department, "Open up all the files."

We discovered that where the Rackham Building at the university is today was the site of the first Jewish cemetery in the State of Michigan. There was a whole community, which I uncovered, going from 1840 to the 1880s. Then there were stories that maybe there had been a pogrom, or what happened to them. There was no pogrom. It just happened that the families moved away. The businesses took them to Chicago and New Jersey.

We couldn't initially find out what to do with that tombstone. The rabbi said, "Well, we should really plant it in our garden because it's an object. It's a historical marker." Henry Gershowitz was sitting in the board meeting and he says, "Over my dead body

*[laughter].*” He didn’t realize what he was saying *[laughter]*. Everybody broke into laughter. It was very, very funny. Actually, I published an article, “The First Jews of Ann Arbor.”

*David:* It was written up in the newspapers.

*Helen:* It was written up in the newspapers and the 1980 was the mark. I think ’83 we had a dedication. We had to undo Temple Beth El in Detroit. Temple Beth El was the claimant for the first Jewish cemetery in Ann Arbor. The Michigan Historical Society undid that and we have a historical marker at the site. That site also was the site for the establishment of the Holocaust Memorial, which also honored Raoul Wallenberg, who was a graduate of the University of Michigan. Baskin was the architect of the—the sculptor.

Then, speaking of cemeteries, we have a cemetery in Ann Arbor, which was bought by Phil Seymour, purchased for the congregation. It’s inside the Arbor Crest Cemetery. It was wonderful. He bought a whole area of land and we laid out the plots and so forth...

### **38:50-39:24**

*Helen:* The only other thing that I think is important to talk about is the arrival of—the community gets renewed. More people come in, like the first. Originally it was the town and gown versus the townspeople. Then the gown people came in, the university and so forth. It constantly gets renewed. Then we had the cycle of the New Americans, we call them, the influx from the Soviet Union, the former Soviet Union.

Bechtel Corporation was here. They hired a lot of people, engineers and so forth. The Russians were very—well, they’re not really Russians. We called them New Americans. They were very talented...

### **41:30-42:28**

*Helen:* It turned out, we found out that there were a whole community of Russians, New Americans, who were coming to the community and revitalizing our community, mind you. The cycle of life is coming on again. All these people came, like Katzenelson or the other families, had mothers or fathers. They were elderly, and nobody was taking care of them. The younger people had to take jobs. They didn’t have time to take care of their elderly parents.

Rabbi Kensky came back from the sabbatical and Claire Bernstein and Iz Bernstein at that time were sponsoring another Russian family. Their name was Bernstein. This family's name was Bernstam. They claimed them as relatives. They were stocking up furniture and trying to get them out. So we all coalesced and came together, the Bernsteins and the Bernstams, and the Bernstams also had a mother and so forth. We formed a committee called the Soviet Jewry Absorption Committee, SJAC.