

Living History Project of Dayton, Ohio  
The Story of Holocaust Survivors  
Oral History  
Wright State University  
In Conjunction with  
The Jewish Community Council of Dayton

July 30, 1984

Interviewee - Helen Abramowitz

Interviewer – Julie Orenstein

Typed Maureen Barash

Q: This is an interview with Mrs. Helen Abramowitz. This is Julie Orenstein. It is July 30, 1984. We are in the dining room of her home.

What is your name?

A: My name is Helen Hofmann Abramowitz.

Q: How old are you?

A: I am 57 (Fifty-Seven Years Old.)

Q: Where were you born?

A: In Nevarask, Czechoslovakia.

Q: Did you grow up there?

A: I lived there until I was eleven.

Q: Do you know when or why your family came here?

A: Yes. My father came there after graduating from medical school in Vienna. There was a good opportunity for him there to open a practice.

Q: Did he meet your mother there?

A: No they married in Vienna.

Q: So your parents were from Vienna?

A: No. No. My parents are both from what was then the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy. After 1918 it became Czechoslovakia. They were both from Bohemia. (This is the province which includes Prague).

Q: Had their families lived there for generations?

A: Yes.

Q: So your father was a doctor? Did your mother also work?

A: My mother was also a doctor.

Q: Was that not rare at that time?

A: Yes, very rare, for a woman to go to medical school.

Q: Did she also go to school the same place your father did?

A: Yes. At the University of Vienna.

Q: So they had quite a lot of education then.

A: Yes. Right.

Q: Had that been in the family to have advanced education?

A: Yes. Her father was an attorney. His father was a businessman, but he had had some training in accounting.

Q: Had their mothers also had advanced education?

A: No! Neither of them.

Q: First, since your parents moved away from the family home I will ask about your grandparents. Were they Orthodox?

A: No. No. My mother's parents were very assimilated. They were what you might call ultra-reform. My father's parents, originally may have been orthodox, but they were not in later years, not when I knew them.

Q: Your parents, were they religious?

A: No. Not at all.

Q: Did they attend services on the Shabbat and the High Holy Days?

A: Not on the Shabbat. Maybe three times a year. They considered themselves Jewish, but they did not practice in any way.

Q: Do you have any siblings?

A: I do not have any.

Q: Just out of curiosity, do you believe that, if you had had a brother, he would have been Bar Mitzvah?

A: Yes, I think so.

Q: Did you receive Religious Education?

A: Some. Yes.

Q: What kind?

A: From an after-school program. That was run during the school day by the Jewish Community.

You know like the new law which got passed on the grounds of the school. I learned to read Hebrew and I learned a little Jewish History.

Q: That was in the public school?

A: It was housed in the public school, it was not part of the public school.

Q: Were your school friends mostly Jewish?

A: No. Not at all. There were no Jewish schools in the town I grew up in.

Q: Did you have other members of the family living in the house, besides your parents?

A: No. No.

Q: What was the language that was spoken at home?

A: German.

Q: Did your parents know any other languages at all?

A: They spoke Czech fluently, my mother, at that time, spoke French reasonably well and some English. This is about all.

Q: Did you think of yourself as among the upper class of society or middle class?

A: Upper middle class. In retrospect I would say, probably middle class.

Q: Your parents had non-Jewish friends?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you have any idea what percentage were Jewish?

A: Actually most of the people they were close to were Jewish. They were also very assimilated. These were the people, who, in central Europe, felt that if you had the intelligence you did not need to be religious. That was the Intelligencia's rejection of what was traditional orthodox Judaism, that is the modern version of orthodox Judaism.

Q: They probably did not socialize much at the synagogue then?

A: No. No. The synagogue was not a place to socialize. It was not a community center type of thing, it was a synagogue, a house of worship. I believe that it had a small school with it. I am not sure about that.

Q: What kind of activities or social groups did they belong to?

A: They really did not belong to any group. My father belonged to B'nai Brith (a Jewish fraternal organization which exists also in the United States). I do not believe he went often, but he belonged.

Q: What kind of things did they do?

A: As far as I know, mainly social things. They also had some lectures, if I remember right. He was active in the medical society. My mother was not active in anything.

Q: Did they go to the theater or to the opera?

A: No. There was not much of that in the town where I grew up. When they had the chance and they went to Prague, they went to the opera.

Q: What was the town like that you grew up in?

A: Light industry; it was a small town.

Q: What kind of industry?

A: Mainly textiles. It was mostly textiles there. As far as the cultural life is concerned, I really do not know. You know at the age of eleven you do not give that much thought.

- Q: What kind of political activities did you have? I realize that you were a little young for that. Do you remember any political activity on the part of your parents?
- A: My parents considered themselves liberal, very liberal. They went along with the very liberal orientation of the Czech government. It was not really safe in the Sudetenlandt (that was the area between Prague and Breslau centered around which Hitler claimed initially from Czechoslovakia under the pretext that it had been settled by "ethnic Germans") to be politically active, as a Jew. You simply did not do that.
- Q: So they kept their sympathies a secret.
- A: Oh, yes! People knew who they were.
- Q: How would you describe your childhood?
- A: Oh, I was an only child of older parents. They had pretty much developed their own interests and really did not have much understanding for a child. My parents were not very amicable, as a matter of fact they separated when I was only ten. They demanded a great deal from me, and I got to demand even more of myself. It was not a very child oriented home.
- Q: So you were expected to perform in school?
- A: Yes -- that is right.
- Q: Did you rebel?
- A: No. I performed in school. I think that I rebelled in other ways. I was not the most obedient child which my mother would have loved to have had. You know when you have your first child when you are thirty-five, you are not as elastic as, or as giving, or as mobile as when you have your first child a lot younger than that. I think that I was difficult to raise and my mother was very resentful of that. She liked children, but I just did not fit that well that mold of the kind of children she would have liked to have had.
- Q: Did they expect talent from you, such as musical talent?
- A: Not really, no. They accepted that fact, that I was tone deaf, pretty well. They did not want me to become an actor because that was too hard a life. They wanted me to do well in school, and naturally to go through the Gymnasium (the high school to which you did not have to go in that area since the law required you only to attend school until you were fourteen years old) and then to the university. As to what I was going to do. Well, at age ten, you do not really worry about that, much. Well, during the last few years in that town, they were

involved with their own safety. It was very obvious that things were going to happen and my father was getting himself set up so that he could leave the country, which he did. He traveled a lot. He did quite a few things outdoors. He took me along for that. We went skiing and vacationing on lakes, and things like that.

Q: Do you recall any special events?

A: No. Not particularly.

Q: You said that you had regular school and that you had religious training after that. How many years did that go on?

A: Oh I would say four or five maybe. I attended a German public school for the first four years and then it was no longer safe for a Jew to attend German school. So I attended a Czech public school.

Q: When you speak of German school, do you mean a school in another part of your town?

A: No. The part of Czechoslovakia I grew up in is the Sudeten Land which is essentially a German speaking area. That was north of the border of Bohemia, up to the Silesian border. It includes the mountainous area called the Sudetes which provided a defensible buffer between Germany and Czechoslovakia. This was the reason why it was selected as the border when Czechoslovakia was set up at the end of World War I. A great percentage of the people living in the area were German oriented although they considered themselves Czech. The influx of the Hitler movement made it so that Jews just did not go to German speaking schools anymore. Actually the German school was a private school, so that they had a right to say: "We do not want you anymore". This resulted in my learning Czech very quickly! I had to do that to attend the school. The Czech school was the public school.

Q: So that is where you had your religious education.

A: No. I actually had had that in the other school also (all schools, by regulations, have to operate under the same set of rules), but now I had it in the Czech school.

Q: This religious education, how did the government relate to that? Did they support it at all?

A: I do not think so. I believe that it was supported by the Jewish Community, which sent a teacher to the public school building. Come to think of it, when I attended the German school, we had to go to a Czech school building. I do not know: the government may have supported it. I really do not know.

Q: Were you aware of anti-Semitism in school?

A: Sure. That was the big reason why we left the German speaking school.

Q: Was it from the teachers or mostly from the students?

A: No. It was rather subtle, but it was there and my parents tried to shield me from it. This was one of the big reasons why they took me out of there. However, you learned that you did not associate with German children anymore. Then you began to make friends among the Czech speaking population. These were the people who were not anti-Semitic, as a matter of fact they were anti-Germans who had gone toward the Nazi (National Socialists, i.e., the party formed and led by Hitler which took over the German government in January 1933) movement.

Q: So in the Czech school, it was a little bit better?

A: Yes. By that time the Jewish children who were left in my town -- and I do not remember numbers -- were attending Czech schools. We had gotten the word that we did not belong in the German school.

Q: How did you feel about that?

A: That is a long way back, you know. I can only assume to remember. I am not sure that I actually do remember. You know there was a good deal of fear on the street. There was also a good deal of fear from the people whom we used to know, who no longer talked to us. They actually went across the street when they saw you.

Q: Were you ever physically attacked?

A: No. I was never physically attacked. I never saw anybody being physically attacked. In our community, it was a matter of being ostracized.

Q: As I talk to many people, most of them older than you, who were adults when that happened, they had such a long history of anti-Semitic acts against them that they did not seem at all surprised when it escalated to this. Did that apply to you?

A: No. We were very surprised. I remember that by the time my mother had moved to Prague which was in the center of Bohemia, the Anschluss (the German army moving into Austria after civil unrest and a plebiscite) had taken place with Austria and Hitler made it known that the Sudeten Land was next in his planned expansion of Germany. So it was just a question of time until he occupied it. So the drama which was involved, when I realized that he was going to march, is what I remember most, because I thought the march was going to take place immediately, so I had great fear. We had been in Prague for the weekend and I felt that I had to come back to go to school. That Monday night, I remember it

very clearly, Hitler spoke over the radio and we listened. My father had left word with our maid – at the time we had a live-in maid -- that if Hitler had indicated that he was going to march into the Sudeten Land, friends were to take me back to Prague. Prague was still going to be free. This was in 1938.

Q: Your parents separated in 1937?

A: Yes, in 1937.

Q: Your mother lived in Prague?

A: Yes, in Prague.

Q: You stayed with your father?

A: Yes, I stayed with my father. Then in 1938, we all left the Sudeten Land and we all lived in Prague a while. (On September 30, 1938, the Munich accords were signed by Neville Chamberlain of Great Britain, Edouard Deladier of France, Adolf Hitler of Germany, and Benito Mussolini of Italy to transfer the Sudeten region from Czechoslovakia to Germany over the objectives of the Czech president Eduard Benes). My father had already applied for a visa to the United States. His and my visa came through, but I did not want to leave. I do not believe that he was too anxious to take me either. He left in 1938, with the understanding that they would extend my visa and that I would, eventually follow him. (On March 15, 1939, German troops crossed the Czech border at dawn. No shots were fired. Hitler was in Prague for a speech eight hours after the border crossing.) I was to follow him in the beginning of 1939. In the meantime, I stayed with my mother, in Prague. I went to a Czech school. I think those who thought and those who were prepared knew that it was only a matter of time. My father was amongst those people who thought and were prepared. He had put money into a Swiss bank and he left, as he did. He was able to get most of his furniture out. He had a lot of very good connections, people who did a lot of this for him. People who packed the furniture to be shipped to America.

Q: How was it possible to get all these possessions out?

A: I believe that this was less difficult from Czechoslovakia. It was less (probably meaning more?) difficult in the Sudeten Land. (It was of course no longer possible after the German occupation of the area).

Q: He left in 1938?

A: Yes, in 1938.

Q: You stayed with your mother?

A: I stayed with my mother. When we went to the United States consulate in the beginning of 1939 to renew my visa the consul said: "No way! You need to get out. We will not renew it because we know this is serious." So I left on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, so I arrived in the United States on March 3<sup>rd</sup>? My mother took me to Paris and to the boat and my father met me in New York City. She stayed for another year because her mother was still there, and her sister was there. My mother had applied for a visa to go to both America and to go to Australia. That was with her sister and brother-in-law who wanted to go to Australia where they had some business connections. They went to Australia in 1939 and my mother came to this country in 1940.

Q: Now what was that year like after your father left and you were with your mother (it was more like six months than one year) -- did you attend school at all?

A: Oh sure. It was fairly normal in Prague, especially if you spoke Czech. That made you part of the native scene and it was pretty comfortable.

Q: So it was just a matter of waiting for visas?

A: Yes. Well I was not aware that things were going to happen that quickly. I do not think that my mother was. However, obviously the United States government was, since they would not renew the visa. However in 1940, even a year later, my mother was able to get out (that however was much more difficult and dangerous since a shooting war was in effect since September 1939). Czechoslovakia was occupied by Germany, a warring nation, and steam ships were being torpedoed. United States passenger ships no longer sailed to Europe. Italian steamships sailed until June 1940 and the Trans-Siberian railroad operated until June 1941. Things were not that tough in Czechoslovakia until much later. My mother was able to send possessions out. In 1940 my aunt and uncle sent all their things to Australia (this may be slightly in error since Australia had entered the war in September 1939 against Germany, so the things may have left earlier), so they were able to get things out. I suspect that it may have cost them money, but I do not know that for sure. Now my grandmother did not get out. She was in the B'nai Brith Home for the Elderly and they did not get out. The whole home was apparently deported to Theresienstadt.

Q: How was the boat ride to the United States? Were you alone or were you with someone you knew?

A: My mother had made the acquaintance of a lady who proposed to look after me. You know, I was twelve. She was seasick all the time. I looked after myself pretty much. I guess being on the boat was just it. I am assuming that some people looked after me, but I am not certain. I was pretty big in size and pretty self-sufficient. So I guess I was all right. I was also pretty shy of people, so I did not let anyone do much helping. Actually, I let them do as little as possible. Well, I remember getting into this country and I did not know any English. While

I was in Prague I had studied a little bit of English, but you know how much you learn in this short time. I was of course, concerned about that, but my father met me and so it worked out. By then he already spoke some English.

Q: How did your perception of yourself as a Jewish person develop or change? Did you find yourself wishing that there was more religion?

A: Yes, but not until much later. Not actually until I went to college.

Q: I find myself wondering how this persecution changed your feelings. Obviously, I did talk to many people who had no conception of themselves as Jews, and then who suddenly find themselves suddenly, faced with a very negative concept, changed.

A: I guess I never experienced really that much anguish or danger that I really can remember it having much effect on me. Well, I remember that when I went into New York, and there I did not continue my religious education.

Q: You did not?

A: No. But we did go to synagogue for the Holy Days.

Q: Was that the first time you went?

A: No. I had gone in Prague. I went with my father on occasion. My mother never went, but I went with him on occasion. You see we were a totally assimilated home, with Christmas, the whole bit.

Q: Did you ever attend church?

A: No. No! They tried it themselves. My father was very proud to be a Jew. My mother never felt very strongly about it. It did not matter to her whether I married someone Jewish or not.

Q: What did you think would happen if Hitler had overrun the Sudeten Land while you were there? What were your fears?

A: I remember that. It was of being killed. However that was not part of your everyday life. It was kind of an instantaneous moment. I remember walking through the street, after we listened to the radio that night, and I remember distinctly worrying that the troops were coming. They actually did not come for another two weeks, or whatever. I have no sense of that kind of time. I was worrying how we were going to get out of the Sudeten Land in time. I was being concerned about being killed. But, when you go to Prague, where there is no anti-Semitism, that I experienced -- you know that I really don't know whether there was or not -- I stopped worrying. You see, when you are eleven years old you

really are much more concerned about that is going on in your little world, where my parents were using me as a football in their marital strife, than about the real world. So these kind of things were much more important. The emphasis on academic education was pretty hot and heavy and I worked hard in school. You know that I was in a Czech Grade School and then in a Czech Gymnasium which is the equivalent of a heavy-duty high school program. I was working hard while thinking that that would influence my parent's concern for me, or their care for me. I played on the street with Czech children. We played regular children's games such as marbles, jacks, and so on. I had very few friends really. A couple of friends from Nevarask went to Israel. They were trained. I remember wishing I could go. They were older than I was. There was no way my parents would let me go.

Q: What year was that?

A: In 1938 (after the occupation of the Sudeten Land).

Q: So it was still Palestine.

A: Yes. A couple of other friends, whom I was also close to, they and their mother went to New Zealand. Most of the others with whom I had any relationship with I met up with in New York. This was just a group of people who had decided that they knew what was ahead and they took care of themselves and of their families. That is what they did. My parents always lived a very self-involved life, so they were not too concerned. I know that my father was not too concerned about his relatives. He felt that they were safe. Some of them had intermarried and were very nationalistic Czechs and some of them had ties with some of the government bureaucracy and they believed that they would be safe. His mother and father, by that time had died. He had a brother who was running the family business and who thought that he was safe.

Q: He was taken away to a camp?

A: I was not aware of that. I never knew.

Q: So of your family, your relatives, your father's brother and his wife, or was it your mother's brother.....

A: My father's brother was single and we do not know what happened to him or to cousins. Some of those who had converted are still living in Czechoslovakia. We went back, about ten years ago. We did not go to their homes because we were not sure that they wanted us to. We had received some input which implied that that was not such a good idea. We knew that they were there because we had met some who had emigrated to England and who had converted. Inside of Czechoslovakia that was considered to be safer. My mother's only sister and her husband and daughter emigrated to Australia.

Q: So that was pretty much the family?

A: Yes, pretty much. That was a very small family. There were some cousins who came to this country.

Q: So then, by 1940, your parents were both here.

A: Yes.

Q: Your parents remained separated?

A: Yes, as a matter of fact, they were divorced in 1941, I believe.

Q: Did they both live in New York?

A: They did for a while, then my father had taken his medical exams for his license and he moved to Ohio.

Q: So he had a pretty good command of English.

A: Yes, yes -- (a command of English was required for a doctor to get his license) and my mother's English was not bad. She had studied English at home. She was a linguist. She was always studying one language or another. She was in New York for a while. She did not take her licensing exams until 1950.

Q: What did she do until then?

A: All kinds of things. She was a housekeeper in a residential school. She did private duty messages. She worked in hospital administration for housekeeping kind of things. She finally remarried and decided that she did not have enough support and she really wanted to practice medicine. She had never practiced in Europe. My father would not permit her to do that.

Q: That is interesting. You lived at your father's?

A: Not really. While I was in high school I lived in a boarding school, because neither of my parents really wanted me.

Q: That was the time you came to New York?

A: Well soon after that. When they split in 1941. My mother had been a camp doctor at the boarding school which, in the summer, became a camp in Connecticut. I got a scholarship to stay there. So I went to high school there. My father remarried. My parents were still using me as a go-between, you know the typical kind of divorce proceeding.

Q: So your father returned to life as a doctor rather quickly.

A: Yes.

Q: He did all right financially?

A: He did very well. He was a dermatologist and apparently a good one. He did very well.

Q: It sounds as if your mother went through some rather hard years.

A: Yes. Very difficult years .You know, for her to go back to school was a real feat. She had been away from practicing medicine. In this country she turned to internal medicine, since she felt that she was too old to do pediatrics. She never built up a good practice. She was living in Philadelphia in a neighborhood that was not very conducive. She also did not want to push that hard. She did all right. Then she finally gave up the practice and was a school physician for a long time. Philadelphia schools at that time had about thirty schools, involving so many days a week so she had several schools to which she went. Later she worked for the Red Cross Blood-mobile. Then she finally retired, and a year ago died at the age of ninety-two.

Q: Yes. A long life.

A: Yes. She never could understand what it meant to be Jewish. She never could understand how I had become more religious. She never could understand that. She was very resentful of all that, for a long, long time.

Q: Her lack of religion mattered to her.

A: Yes. To her, in the same way as to many of her contemporaries to be religious was for the lower classes. It was the Eastern European Jews who were religious and they were definitely lower class people.

Q: The ghettoized Jews?

A: Yes. You could find hundreds of Jews of that type. In order to live they had to get out of Europe. I can tell you that much. That was the case whether they wanted to be Jewish or not. There was no way of hiding it, but being Jewish, being actively Jewish, not really. I think that they all wanted to be buried in a Jewish cemetery and those kinds of things.

Q: Was your mother buried that way?

A: Yes. Yes. She was buried with her second husband. He was also a Viennese Jew. We saw to that. You know that that was important to us.

Q: That was not necessary to your mother?

A: Yes. She wanted to be buried in a small community (the name could not be understood by the transcriber) she had a lot of attachment to. So that is where they were buried. Now there was not any question about that.

Q: Did you live with your father after you arrived in New York?

A: Yes. My mother was there for a little while, after she came to the United States.

Q: Did they live together?

A: In the same apartment. There were also other people living there. My parents were from the "Free Thinker School".

Q: They had attachments?

A: They had their own attachments. I just think they could have all done better without me around. But what could you do. When I first came to the United States I lived with my father. I was his housekeeper and I took care of things.

Q: Then you went to boarding school?

A: Not for another year or so,

Q: Did you go to school while you were living there.

A: Yes.

Q: Where was that apartment -- in Manhattan?

A: Yes. In Manhattan. On 91<sup>st</sup> Street and Central Park West. That was a really nice neighborhood at that time. I went to an American school. At that time they had classes for foreign born however, I moved up pretty quickly. My father had the good sense during the first summer I was here to send me to live with a family for a month -- a family who had a teenager so I would not speak anything but English. Within that month, I spoke English. After that I was able to do well in school. Coming out of a good European school, you know a lot more than you do here. I got out of eighth grade at the same age as anybody else. They just took me along then. I started high school in New York (at that time the New York system had the reputation of being a top notch system, if not the very best in the United States, then nearly so). They had special high schools for gifted students

and for special interests for which you had to pass stiff entrance tests. Then I went to the boarding school.

Q: What was the boarding school called?

A: Grodes School (At least that is what it sounded like).

Q: Where was it located?

A: In a very small town. Up in Connecticut, not far from New Haven.

Q: What kind of economy did the town have? Was it mainly the school?

A: No. It was not the school. It was very much in a rural area. The name of the founding physician was on the sign.

Q: Was there any industry.

A: A very small kind of machine tool and die shops. I do not know why they ever located a school there, except that it was nice country. In that respect they took over some buildings.

Q: I think that they often have a boarding school where the parents like to vacation. Did you feel abandoned?

A: Yes I guess so. All my life I felt that way, at least all my youth I did. My parents did all kinds of crazy things. "We did not do this, so you do not get to do this...", you know that kind of thing.

Q: To get you to behave?

A: To get me to do whatever. If I did not do right or my father's messages to my mother did not bring back the right answers there were repercussions. There were all kinds of things like that. Examples were: "Tell your mother that...." and "You tell your father that he promised me that.....". I was better off being where I was, at least at boarding school I could be a person, not just a pawn. I think that they were very unhappy people and always had been. My mother was always a distant kind of lady. At least toward me. I never got close to her. She told me that not too long ago, shortly before she died that during the last six years I behaved all right. When you are fifty-seven, that is something since it means that for the first fifty years of your life you were not behaving properly. My father was a very bitter man. He did not have much to be bitter about. We lost contact. At least he used to keep contact with us pretty much until he retired. He had been practicing in Camden, Ohio. When he retired he and his wife moved to Florida. He left some possessions at some flea market so that if I wanted them to set up housekeeping with my mother, I should go and get them or something of the kind.

When I got there they did not have them. That was kind of the nature of things. So in a way whatever I experienced was more intrafamily rather than the external, the fact that I was a refugee which had the most effect on me, on my growing up. We did not really feel that much. We never went hungry. We never went without clothing. (Note that she never lived in an area under the authority of Germany, she took refuge from what was anticipated, once Hitler overran her homeland). We never went without shelter. We were never physically attacked, in any way, or even imposed upon. The people we knew closely, all were also safe. So this is different, a lot more tangential than you could imagine. It never took on the reality it took on for other people.

Q: What was the school like? How many years were you there?

A: Four. It was a very liberal school. It was mainly for children with emotional problems. It was rather small. There were not more than forty children there. I also got a good education, a very good education. I spent the last year in town school, that meant that I walked to school, since they did not have anybody else who was a senior. However, those were the years where high school was overly decent.

Q: It was very small.

A: Yes, very small.

Q: Was it an all girls' school?

A: No it was a co-ed school. The staff was essentially Jewish. But, again, totally uncommitted. They were Jewish. It was totally unrelated to Jewish life in any meaningful way; yes, in any religious way.

Q: How about the students -- were they Jewish also?

A: Yes, they were for the most part. The ones whom I remember were. But you know again it was the same kind of story. They came from very assimilated families who sent their children to boarding school, that was the thing to do. This happened to serve some other needs. Whether they were Jewish or not did not really matter all that much.

Q: How did you come to Dayton?

A: He had a job in Columbus, after we were married and he wanted to go into some kind of public sector. The City of Dayton offered him a job.

Q: Where did you meet him? (Obviously meaning her husband).

A: At Ohio State. (The main campus of Ohio State University is located in Columbus).

Q: You came to Ohio State after the boarding school?

A: Yes.

Q: Was there a reason?

A: Well, my father was a resident of Ohio. In those years that made a lot of difference. Tuition was reasonable. I tried to get into Antioch University (the main campus is located in Yellow Springs, Ohio) but neither my husband nor I, we did not make it. My father would only pay for tuition in a state school. And my mother was in no position to pay.

Q: Did you get married after you graduated?

A: Yes.

Q: Then you came here.

A: He was in Columbus for two years, he was working there for a large engineering firm. By that time he had made the decision that he would like to go to work in the public sector. He was particularly interested in working for a city. He applied for a job with the City of Dayton. He got the job and so we came.

Q: When did you experience your renaissance of Jewish feeling, actually it was not even a rebirth but the individual birth of feeling.

A: Well, while I was in college pretty much. I had no ties at home. I went to every club I could go to and I went to every class I could go to. I learned Hebrew. I did not know that much. I got a scholarship to a Jewish camp. That led from one thing to another and when I met Chuck, who was a very strongly conservative Jew, very committed. It was either, or. He came from a Kosher home and that is how he wanted to live. It was the matter of making the decision that that was OK.

Q: That was difficult. I kept thinking about living Kosher and decided we could not possibly do it.

A: I never said this but really, it is not all that difficult. If you have never kept a house and if you are starting over at his apartment which was already Kosher. So it is just the matter of learning some technicalities on the use of some details and stuff.

[Here the side of the tape was changed and some part of the interview was lost in the process.]

- A: Who knows what tomorrow will bring, right now.
- Q: You had no trouble fitting into synagogue life? I am asking this because I was not raised Jewish and I am finding that I would have trouble working with children. Obviously, I would not know what to teach them. However, you had no trouble making up for the fact that you had very little background.
- A: Not really. I think I can attribute that to the fact of having started in college to find out about things, on my own, before actually becoming active in a synagogue or a temple. So that there was not the transition to temple membership or synagogue membership, that did not happen until later. I believe that that eased things. Somehow I found the need to be more Jewish. I do not remember, as a child, what my needs were. I remember the few times that my father took me to the synagogue I liked to be there. However, my memories of anything actively Jewish were nil. We never observed any holidays that is any Jewish holidays.
- Q: You now attend services regularly.
- A: Yes. I am not as active any more since I worked there. That is neither one of us. My husband is very active in the federation, at this point. I also do some work there. I am not as active at Beth Abraham (that is the Jewish Conservative Congregation of Dayton of which Helen and Chuck Abramowitz are members) any more for reasons into which I will not go into now. (Federation means the Jewish Federation of Greater Dayton).
- Q: The thing which I am now curious about is to know whether you encountered any anti-Semitism here, in the United States.
- A: Having worked where I work during the last five years, I have been very careful to play down anything -- and I am not saying that I am hiding -- it has to do with the population I work with, but my religion was never a subject for discussion. When clients would ask me I would say we do not discuss it; I do not think that it is appropriate. The eastern population, at least the ones I worked with, is pretty willing. I know that in some situations, with some clients who are fundamentalists, it would have been a real issue, so I thought that it would be better not mentioned. It really was not appropriate.
- Q: I shake hands with some Presbyterians. Some would not.
- A: Exactly. Exactly. The children who, even though we go to Israel every year, and they know that we went, do not quite make that leap. I just let it go at that. I encourage joining and I am pretty active in Christian-Jewish dialogue situations. I believe that anti-Semitism is based on a lot of mis-information, a lot of insensitivity. However, I am not sure that we can equate that with anti-Semitism.

- Q: I have the feeling that the fundamentalist population does not really understand until you begin to develop what a Jewish person really is.
- A: Yes. You know that a lot of insensitivity, comes from a lack of listening. I do not know whether it is anything beyond that.
- Q: What do you mean by that; lack of listening?
- A: After you work with it, with a Christian-Jewish group, or with a non-Jewish group and you talk. I have done a lot of speaking for Beth Abraham. Every other day there is another group coming through. The main thing which I try to teach them, is that they can learn some of the vocabulary of the Jews. You know that it is pretty easy to say that -- this is not a church but a synagogue. No-way. We deal with it and with these kind of things. It is just terribly hard for people to understand. It is not a question of Kashrut or even the concept of the Shabbat, of not working. The concept of what "Not-Working" means, you know what is work. In the extreme, that turning on the light is considered work, is a concept that is really hard for people to understand. You try to interpret it as much as you can, it is just hard to understand...having so little experience. No. I have not found any real anti-Semitism. A lot of Jews say: "I can not understand why you do this, that or the other thing. Really what difference does it make".
- Q: I find that to be the big difference between Jews in the Midwest and on the east coast. Here there is so much self -deprecating humor. I hear more Jewish jokes from Jews here, than I hear from anyone else. On the east coast it bothers me because anyone would tell a Jewish joke.
- A: Yes.
- Q: So there is a big difference in the Midwest of even the Jews perception of themselves.
- A: Yes. I think that that is very true. I think that the Jews here have a much harder time. I like this much better. I know that when we first started being more active, the idea that you had non-Jewish associations outside of business was very very hard for people to understand. They just were not comfortable.
- Q: This was here?
- A: Yes. It has gotten better.
- Q: With people at Beth Abraham.
- A: With a lot of our Jewish friends and acquaintances. Such remarks as "Oh, you have non-Jewish friends! My goodness".

- Q: I know that up to a few years ago this area (the area close to Good Samaritan Hospital but just south of Salem Avenue) here was just about all Jewish.
- A: Not all Jewish, but heavily Jewish. You know, at that time the Jews lived at this end of town. However, I am talking about even the time before that. My husband and I had moved in the non-Jewish community. They were accepting of us. If he does not eat meat outside of the home, that is no problem to order a fruit plate. However, if this happened in a Jewish group, that always was a big issue. You know, I am talking about that kind of thing.
- Q: Would anyone in the Jewish community of Dayton think of this? I have no sense of the Jewish community.
- A: Oh, there was a very strong kind of interphase.
- Q: Do you think that it was the migration out to areas of Englewood that changed that? I know that Beth Jacob is completely moved (Beth Jacob moved from Kumler Avenue in Daytonview to North Main Street, just South of Westbrook Road in the late 1970's, but of course, not all the congregants moved and certainly not all at that time).
- A: That had a lot to do with it. Other Jews moved south. I am still not sure how many social friends people have who are not Jewish. I still think that they are a pretty small number. We have rarely gone to a home, a Jewish home, for a social occasion that there was a mixed group.
- Q: That is very interesting.
- A: Even those people who have non-Jewish friends will think "Well, you know, is this person going to be OK, comfortable with everybody else who is coming?" Not because the host has the problem, but because of the guests.
- Q: Well, I think that this is a good place to stop.