Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Suzanne Rubens

SUMMARY

Suzanne Rubens reflects on her family's Jewish heritage, her move to Spokane, and her decades of involvement in the local Jewish community through synagogue leadership and religious education. She shares stories of her family's immigration from Eastern Europe, the preservation of letters, records, and other historical documents, and the importance of researching and passing down family history across generations. Rubens emphasizes that preserving family stories and traditions is essential for maintaining cultural identity, strengthening community connections, and fostering resilience in the face of antisemitism.

Sha'Niya Black: My name is Sha'Niya Black with the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. The date is May 27th, 2026. Can you please state your first and last name for me?

Suzanne Rubens: Suzanne Rubens.

Sha'Niya Black: And do I have your consent to record this?

Suzanne Rubens: Yes.

Sha'Niya Black: So I'd like to start by asking, what is your connection to the Spokane community?

Suzanne Rubens: Um, my husband grew up here, and we moved here a year after getting married. So I've been here since 1982.

Sha'Niya Black: 1982. Uh, where were you born?

Suzanne Rubens: In Seattle.

Sha'Niya Black: Oh, Seattle. Did you grow up in Seattle?

Suzanne Rubens: I grew up in Seattle and Bellevue.

Sha'Niya Black: Okay, okay. Uh, what keeps you connected to your identity in Washington?

Suzanne Rubens: Well, I'm very involved in my synagogue. I've been on the board. I've taught there for 40 plus years. Um, just very involved in Jewish life in Spokane.

Sha'Niya Black: And how has movement or migration shaped your family's identity? Your identity, or your family's identity?

Suzanne Rubens: Um, I think it shaped it quite a bit. My parents on both sides were first-generation Americans, and so they grew up in a much more European Jewish kind of way than other families did. I noticed that because my husband's parents were both born in this country, and they had a much more American kind of upbringing than ours. And I think, um, when my maternal grandmother came here, it was shortly after the turn of the century and, um, was able to get out. Some of her siblings were older and married and weren't able to leave Russia or Romania, would go back and forth. Um, but it was always a discussion of where we came from and what their situations had been like.

Sha'Niya Black: Uh, what physical traces of your family history have been preserved, for example, photographs, films, letters or any other material.

Suzanne Rubens: There are some letters that my grandmother had from her sister who had stayed in Russia, and they're interesting because around the time of my bat mitzvah, my grandmother was writing her sister, but Russia, the Jews still weren't free there, and she didn't want to say anything that would get them in trouble. And so she told her that girls on their 12 or 13th birthday have the same ceremony as the boys to try to get that understanding to her. Um, when um my, after my parents passed away and I was going through things, they had, they had a number of things from my grandparents, my grandfather's, um army records and um, marriage certificates and things like that.

Sha'Niya Black: Um. Have you ever tried to research or uncover pieces of your own family history? What was that process like?

Suzanne Rubens: A little bit. I haven't gotten too far into it. My one of my brothers has done quite a bit more. Um, my dad had worked for years on, um, our family trees. And then my brother took that information and did a little bit more. Um, there's one cousin on my mother's side who has done quite a bit and published it for the family. Um, and he lives in California, came from Minneapolis, where my parents are from. Um, and so that's been interesting. And I, it's kind of on my list of things to do, but I haven't.

Sha'Niya Black: Is there a specific family memory that you're comfortable sharing with us?

Suzanne Rubens: Let's see. Well, there's one in particular that my brothers and I talk about often. Um, we went to one of the family wedding, and my grandmother, and her sister, and her brother were sitting around talking and arguing like siblings do, and they had this really strong memory, when they were still in Russia of their father sitting at the kitchen table. And the argument was, was he sitting reading the newspaper wearing a tallis? Because one sibling was sure that he did, and the other was horrified and said he would never do such a thing. And they just went around and around and around and that was fun.

Sha'Niya Black: I'm curious on your thoughts. Um, why do you think it matters to preserve family stories like these?

Suzanne Rubens: I think it just, it gives you a tie, an unbroken tie to generations before, and especially right now with all the anti-Jewish sentiment that's going around and how accepted that is in society now. Um, it's really important that we understand where we came from, and each generation does things a little differently. My kids don't do it the way I did it. I don't do it the way my parents did it necessarily. But we still have those things that we try to pass down.

Sha'Niya Black: Do you have any other stories or thoughts about the presentation or your experience today that you'd like to share?

Suzanne Rubens: It was fun to hear. I actually grew up with, um, with the blocks and, um, one of his cousins, Perry, and I were just a year apart in school and were friends for many years. And, um, so it's fun to have that connection. And two of my kids live in Seattle now. And so they interact with the children and grandchildren of my friends. And so it's been nice to see that continuity as well.

Sha'Niya Black: That's so special. Well, thank you for interviewing today.

Suzanne Rubens: You're welcome.