Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Joan Hirschberg

SUMMARY

Joan Hirshberg shares her early Jewish education in Montana, highlighting her family's efforts to preserve Jewish traditions across generations despite not being highly observant. She emphasizes her active role in the community through the Council of Jewish Women and underscores the importance of community service as a core Jewish value. Reflecting on recent events, she shares her thoughts on the current state of the world and how the Jewish community continues to move forward.

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Mother in law has something.

Lisa Kranseler: That's what Laurie was just saying.

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Yes, her Henrietta Block.

Lisa Kranseler: Yeah, and I think so, too. They were going. They were looking that up. Oh, yeah.

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: So I, her family was one of the first in Seattle. So.

Lisa Kranseler: So, um, I know they're going to check that. I can probably check it too, but I think they're checking.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: All right. That looks and sounds great to me. If you don't mind just dropping your purse down onto the ground.

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Mhm.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Beautiful purse. Yeah. Um, so I'll sit here and I'll just keep an eye on the time and I'll ask you a few questions.

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Okay.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Like the ones that.

Lisa Kranseler: We can see your clipboard.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Oh yeah.

Lisa Kranseler: There you.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Go. Is that okay? Wait, what about that?

Lisa Kranseler: Yeah.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: That's okay. Okay. Um. All right, so we're currently recording. May I have your permission to record this

interview?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Yes.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Thanks. Um, I'm Ruth, and it's May 7th. Would you state your name for the record?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Joan Schwartz Hirschberg.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Thanks. And for this interview, if you don't mind. Just kind of like looking at me. Just try not to look at the camera. And, um. Yeah, I'll just ask you, like, 4 or 5 questions about history. Um, so we're here today to talk about the importance of preserving Jewish history. Can you remember being taught about Jewish history when you were growing up?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: I did. I lived in a small town in Montana and went to Butte to Sunday School. And we did have a pretty good education because it was small and they were able to give us at least background. I never learned any Hebrew, or anything very... We're not from a very observant family, but, um, I did have a, a history education.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Would you say? Do you remember the name of the school or the temple that you were?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: The school? Oh, you mean...

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: The Sunday school?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Yeah. It was. It's called, um, B'nai Israel, I think. Isn't that terrible? I can't-Anyhow, it's one of the oldest in the country. It's, uh, for reform, that is. And it's, um, still standing and still operating in Montana. Smaller and smaller, but it's still operating. [cross talk] Beth Israel, I think it's. I think that's it.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Have you ever been a part of preserving Jewish history more generally?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Um, not really, not really. I think the fact that my family is very mixed, and that my two children are Jewish, of course, and their spouses were not, and both converted. They raised each two children, and they were raised Jewish. And, um. are pretty good Jews, I think, certainly an addition to our people. And, um, uh, the grandchildren now are following in their footsteps. Two of my grandchildren are married to Jews. Two are not. And the, the two that are not, grandchildren that is, they have not converted. But their children are going to be bar and bat mitzvahed. So, we are going on with the history, if that is what you mean by history. That's about it.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yes. Um, we're trying to also gather some stories about the historical society as a Jewish history institution. So, I'm curious about your connection to the historical society.

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Well, I really haven't done much with the historical society. I was a full-time volunteer; I never went to work. I graduated from college. But I have a husband that thought he would have his dinner at 6:00 and just was not going to happen, that I'd work. Anyhow I was president of Council of Jewish Women for a couple of years, and also regional director at one point. Um. What else? I worked in, uh, Temple De Hirsch Sinai. I forget that. I was on the board at one point. Couldn't stand it because there were too many men. And they'd talk all night if they could. Anyhow, uh, what else? I belong to the other organizations but never was an officer other than those two.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Can you tell me more about your experience with the Council of Jewish Women? What were your...?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Oh, I loved it. I worked very hard. I started a volunteer program at Harborview. Um, we manned it for two years, and then they took it over. But it was a good program. And I loved Council because it did a lot of things outside of our religion. They, we worked, you know, with, uh, politicians. I don't know, it was a very active organization in the years I worked in it.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Can you explain to me, like, the goals of that organization?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Well, I don't know what the goals are today, but at that time, it was just as a service group to the community. And we did some very good things. I also worked in the um; under the auspices of Council, I worked as the blind volunteer. They used to have a room down-at downtown... Can't remember what building it was in, but, um, I volunteered there once a week, and, um, I, we did Braille. We did up to, I think, grade through two or three and we had about ten girls that did Braille.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: You were teaching Braille?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Oh, we were doing it. Oh, we were physically doing books for, um. I think the ages in first grade, second and third. And that's, what else? I seem to be very busy but never got paid for it.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yes. Um, so my understanding is that the Jewish, the Council of Jewish Women would do volunteer efforts to support maybe people with marginalized needs or people with special needs. Is that correct? Or people in the hospital? So, like care work?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Um, I never did much like that. It was a messenger service was a, um, um, working with the-What do you call it? Stations and moving paper, really, or medicines or something. Someone's floor to the next. We had two women every day. It was very interesting. And, as I say, they took it over. And I think doing it still to this day.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: What was the connection for you between Jewishness and that kind of work?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: I think that just as a Jew, I feel I owe my community so much, and I think that's all part of it. I don't know, it certainly gave us a good face. And we were active in other things, too. The blind. The president, after I was president, was Ann Nieder. And I think she was very active in the historical society.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: You mentioned it was important to have a good face. What? Why was that important?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Well, I think that we always should. And I think that's one thing we, if, f they only know one. The town I was from had only one family, but I think they had a good impression of what Jews were from that. My folks were the kind that volunteered and I certainly did.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Interesting. Um, I want to move on to ask about your family history. Are there members of your family that keep your family history alive? And how do they do that?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Uh, not in my immediate family, but there have been in both my husband's family. Uh, he did a research of the Hirschbergs, they were, um, traders that came up the Missouri, uh, Mississippi, then the Missouri as traders and settled in Montana. And, um, they were in northern Montana. My family was more in the Butte and Anaconda area, and they came in the early 1900s. And, as I say, they were Jewish, but we were in towns where there were very few. And we, we carried on. And although we didn't do everything, we probably could do as observant Jews, we, we certainly were good people, and that was that. I always felt that was important.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Being a good person was important to being Jewish.

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Yes, I do. I think it is. I don't think things like what happened at the university would happen if you-everybody goes that way. I don't know, maybe I'm wrong.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Are there any places that your family goes to or call family history or events that you, your family organizes?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Well, I think we have a couple of, um, you know, histories. My daughter has a Bible that, um, my mother's family kept. It's a Christian Bible; it is not a Jewish Bible. But it's from, like, the early 1800s. They came to Tennessee, and it's a history of them, really, I guess, of their whereabouts and the people they married and children. That's just that.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Did they write the genealogy?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Yes.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: I'm curious about what, in your lifetime...? This is a big question. In your lifetime, you want the next generation to understand?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Hmm. That we all owe something to our communities. And I think that being a volunteer, that I think that I tried to. And I think my kids do, Laurie [daughter] has to leave here and go to a meeting that's working with the school board. I mean, I just think it's important that we, as Jews, do something for not only ourselves, but for the people we live with.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Do you think that's a contemporary value or something you're carrying along from generations past?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Yeah, I think so. I think so. I think. My mother was a volunteer. I think that's probably right.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: What did your mother volunteer doing?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Well, in a small town, it was hard. She was active in the different organizations. worked in the hospital. Just active. I think just being a part of the community. Not for pay, but for the good of the community and of your neighbor.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Do you want to state your mom's name?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Oh. Sibyla Guggenheim Schwartz.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Um. Is there anything you want to say about, um, the Jewish Historical Society and the importance of the work that we're doing?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Well, I think it is important that we know. I mean, I think that, uh, our children certainly don't know anything about how these temples got started, and how and who kept them going for all these years. I don't suppose there's really any way of doing it, but. I think all of these things are important and just what the Jews have done in this community. I think that if you trace them, we've had a lot of good done.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: I'm curious if you can speak specifically to the experience of Jewishness in the West, especially as a native Montanan? [Laughs] You know, like, what is it? What is unique about being Jewish out here?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Well, my sister married a boy from New Jersey, so, um, I certainly saw that their life was much, much more involved, I think, not the community of the Jews, but the observance of the Jewish faith. I don't know how to put that, but I think that that's a big, a difference as anything. They're much more observant, I think, than we were. But we were always Jewish. Nobody ever was not part of the Jewish community.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: So that kind of community activity versus, um religious?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Right. Right.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yes. So, there's probably less options for you to be religiously engaged to being in a small town?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: True. Of being the only family. Or there was one other family.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: What were they called? Do you remember?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Coldwater. They had two boys, but they were quite a bit older than I. So, I, other than just knowing them as a family; I never knew them or what happened to them even. In Butte, we had, um. when I was growing up, maybe 300, in our temple, families. But today they're lucky if they have ten. There were just a few professors at the School of Mines in Butte that belong, but it's very small, very small.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Do you understand most people left to go to bigger cities or?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Pardon?

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Where do you think everyone went to university? Oh, I'm thinking of why the Jewish population was bigger when you were growing up than it is now.

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Oh, young people left, you know, they just did. There wasn't that much for them. And, and they're all scattered all over the country. I guess. Few stayed, but not many. It's hard.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Were you treated differently as a...?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: No. I never felt any antisemitism at all when I was younger. And after the war, then. Just somebody I think was not being nice and they, they loved to put labels. So. Everybody gets that label.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Is there anything else you want to share with us about, you know, the importance of Jewish history or Jewish volunteer engagement?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Well, I wondered with this thing on at the university, I wondered what it would be. Would there have been more of a force had they let the Jewish fraternity stand?

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Do you want to just for the record, describe the event you're referring to?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Oh, it's the, the takeover by the Palestinians, um, backers, um, of the I don't know which engineering building it is, but I heard today it's over $1 million worth of damage. That's ridiculous.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: At the University of Washington?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Right. And, you know, not you or I can change Netanyahu. So that's, that's the way it is.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: What, what, do you have a message or something you would communicate about? You know, the, the current state of things from your perspective to them or to your children?

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: Well, my children, I hope I can. I think that if they stayed the way they, you know, they are going, they will.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Okay. Thank you so much.

Joan Schwartz Hirshberg: I don't know whether that's what you want.