
Todd Menenberg

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SUMMARY

Todd Menenberg shares the story of his family's migration from Kiev to the United States in 1905, fleeing pogroms. He explores the relationship of his family's story to the narrative of "Fiddler On The Roof", and finally shares his experiences as a Jew living on Whidbey Island.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Can you state your name for me, please?

Todd Menenberg: Sure. It's Todd Menenberg.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Great.

Todd Menenberg: Should I look at you or look at the mic?

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: At me?

Todd Menenberg: At you. Okay.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: And may I have your consent to record this interview?

Todd Menenberg: Yes. You have.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Thank you. Um, so can you tell me about your connection to Jewish community or your connection to Fiddler?

Todd Menenberg: Well, I am Jewish. I was born in Detroit, Michigan, and I grew up in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. So I clearly, uh, was raised in a cultural Jewish community, although I wasn't a practicing Jew in the sense of going to synagogue regularly and having a bar mitzvah, although we did go to synagogue, but we were a liberal synagogue. So in that sense, um, many of my friends were more, I think, traditionally Jewish than I was. Um, but I went to college at the University of Michigan, which took me out of my neighborhood, which was, as I say, predominantly Jewish, uh, which opened up my eyes to a much broader world. So that's kind of the background. [Knocks off mic] Sorry.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yeah [Laughs]. Can I redo it for you? I'm noticing a little fuzz.

Todd Menenberg: Okay. My apologies. There you go.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Okay, it's perfect.

Todd Menenberg: Okay. Is that better?

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yeah.

Todd Menenberg: Okay. So stepping back, uh, Finland on the roof, uh, which I'd seen the movie many years ago. But now seeing the play is particularly relevant to my history because my grandfather lived in Kyiv in 1905, and he was 15, and he and his brother William, who was my great uncle, left Kyiv because of the pogrom of 1905, which is what the play is about. So in that scene, any of those teenage boys very similar to what my father went through, grandfather. And in those times the parents tried to get whatever parts of the family they could get to a safer spot and the United States was the logical spot. So the two boys went on a ship to Louisiana. They were indentured servants, which meant that I'm sure their parents couldn't afford to send them over because they were poor. So in exchange for the passage overseas, they would work for perhaps five years. They worked in the sugar fields in Louisiana, which, you know, it's kind of slave labor, except it was in 1905. They didn't know anybody when they came here, and they had no money, so they were very poor. So, you know, you look back, it's quite an unbelievable endeavor of strength and courage and, and, uh, certainly a lot of unknown. And I'm sure life was extremely hard for them in those times in Louisiana, not having any family or knowing anybody. Um, and at some point they, my grandfather recognized that this was a, not a great deal by any stretch and was going to be extremely hard life. So he and his younger brother hopped on a freight train to Detroit because they had heard that Detroit was a boomtown. Henry Ford was hiring people at \$5 a day, which was unheard of at that time. So they went to Detroit just thinking they could make their life there. I'm sure they were scared, but they, you know, some courage. They thought there must be a brighter life somewhere. So they hopped on that train and they arrived in Detroit. And this was all told by my father, um, to me before he died. And they arrived in Detroit. And because my grandfather, when he lived in Kyiv which is, you know, part of Ukraine, he spoke six different languages. I don't know those six languages, but I suspect they were Polish and German and maybe Hungarian and Yiddish and Russian. So maybe that adds up to English. So maybe it adds up to six. So because of that, he recognized he could have a successful business selling fish that he would buy from the fishermen who would come off the Detroit River, as well as buying fruit from the local markets in his what was called a, he would be called a peddler by today's terms, but somehow they had a horse and they had a horse and carriage, I don't know. My father didn't know the history of that. But they would go into these ethnic neighborhoods in Detroit. And because he could speak the languages of those people, he was successful and made a living. And then eventually he opened up a fish market in Detroit where, you know, eventually they bought a home and they became part of, I guess, the, you know, the lower middle class of Detroit, maybe the middle class at some point. My father and his two sisters were raised in that neighborhood in Detroit, which is kind of a rough neighborhood now. But he, like many first-generation immigrants from that part of the world, was the first to go to college. So he studied accounting, went to Wayne State University, which is a very large school in Detroit. People don't know a lot about it because it's a commuter school, but it's very large. And then he later got a law degree a few years later. So although he has a law degree, he was more of a practicing accountant for his lifestyle. And, um, you know, we grew up in a suburb of Detroit, like I said, predominantly Jewish neighborhood. But that's the heritage and the link to Fiddler on the roof, which is I mean, it's really incredible for me just because this is the exact story. It's not like I'm putting a different time or different nation or different location or different people. It's all fitting nicely. Um, and I knew about this before I saw the movie or the play, um, you know, the pogroms of 1905. And I've even gone back to just check the history records to make sure that my dad told it. Although my dad would be the last person in the world, I can imagine telling a lie. But I did go back to look at the original immigration certificates and those things. And he was born in 1889, which would have made him 15 going to 1905, which so it all jived what I was told versus the historical record, which I've only checked in the last several years. So that's the connection to Fiddler on the Roof. Um, I've made my adult life in Seattle, and you met my wife, Mimi, and we have, uh, six children, and there's a broad family with, uh, both grandchildren as well as siblings and their families who are now spread off much around the country. But that brings us to Whidbey Island, which we bought a vacation home here ten years ago. We traveled on vacation to most of the Pacific Puget Sound Islands, but always liked Whidbey a lot. And when a home came up for sale that we thought fit our needs. We made an offer and we negotiated a deal. And we've been here on vacation. You know, we come here a lot during the summer, maybe once a month or in the winter. And it's been wonderful. It's been very welcoming. We've learned about WICA through the current board, and they've been very welcoming, and we've been involved. So that brings us to Whidbey Island. And I, after seeing the play my wife and I Mimi, we thought we should thank Deanna for putting this all together and some other reasons. And she said, gosh, you have the Jewish Historical Society here. I'd love if you could come and make a quick video. I said, absolutely, let's do it. So that brings me to here and that's why we're here. Any questions or anything I can expand on for you?

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Thank you so much. Um, yeah, I'm curious about. Well, I'll go in a couple directions. One, if you can share it all about Whidbey Island Jewish community. This is a new area for us to be recording. And I'm curious if you could share, you know, anyone you've met here, communities you've discovered or yeah, anything about that?

Todd Menenberg: That's a good question. Um, my immediate thought and answer is I have not met any other Jewish folks here. But that's not to say I didn't. I just wasn't aware of it. I do know, I do have several books at my house about Whidbey Island, the history and so forth, and one has a list of the churches. And I've noticed there is no synagogue here, so I'm not aware of a broader Jewish community, but I'm sure there are other Jewish people here. Just because Seattle is a pretty diverse community. And I've certainly met a lot of Jewish people in Seattle. And, um, actually, as I think about it, as I think about it, I do know, uh, someone who is a client and friend, uh, David Robbins, who I understand as I think about it, as you asked the question, who does have a

second home here, so there probably are others as well. I just don't readily think of them or I haven't visited with them here.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yeah. Um, another question more related to Fiddler is, uh, you know, the play is all about tradition, resilience. How do you think about keeping traditions alive today? Is that important to you or.

Todd Menenberg: It is very important. And there's no question I was raised, ingrained in me. And I think it's pretty common in the Jewish community that, you know, being Jewish, you have to be tough. And you had to be resilient because the history is one of, uh, a lot of oppression and a lot of very visible, cognizant things that we were, they were visible in our community. I mean, people who survived the Second World War, you know, you'd see the, uh, some had numbers on their arms from the concentration camps. So, yeah, it was visible. And everybody knew someone who was impacted by the Second World War. Fortunately, no one in my family that I was aware of. Um, but the tradition is very important because I think it's really ingrained in the Jewish people to work hard to be kind, be compassionate, to be well beyond just the Jewish community that's really ingrained, to be kind to everybody, but also to prize and aspire academically and educationally, to learn and be the best you can. Um, family is really important. Take care of your family first. You know, before reaching out to others. Um, but definitely reach out to others. I mean, if you look where I grew up in Detroit, there's a huge community and even now is still way over represented in terms of the large philanthropies and large charitable and even business organizations, and the same thing in Seattle. So the tradition of getting involved and being a positive giver rather than a taker was really important. Um, yeah. Those are the things that occur to me on the tradition side. Yeah.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Thank you so much.

Todd Menenberg: Yeah. Okay. Thanks, Hannah [Referring to Ruth].