Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Harold Friedman

November 12, 2021

Elana Anedda: Okay, so today is the 12th of November, 2021. My name is Elena Anedda, and I'm interviewing Harold Freedman on behalf of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. How are you, Harold?

Harold Friedman: Fine. How are you? Hello. Nice to meet you.

Elana Anedda: I'm good. Um, so, just to start, would you like to tell me a little bit about your childhood?

Harold Friedman: Yes. I was born in Tacoma in December 1947. Um, I was I am the son of the, uh, the late, uh, Abdo Friedman and Rose Friedman, both of whom were born in Tacoma, Washington themselves. And, uh, I grew up in a close knit community of, uh, conservative Jews at that time who belonged to what was then Sinai Temple. Sinai Temple was the descendant of the Talmud Torah, an Orthodox congregation that was formed by a community of largely Latvian immigrants that included my grandfather, Julius Friedman, who was one of the founders of that congregation and its early presidents around 1906 or 1907. So my roots in Tacoma are quite strong. Uh, three of my four grandparents were among those Latvian immigrants. My maternal grandfather was the only non Latvian immigrant, uh, Harry Rotman. Uh, unfortunately, by the time I was born, I only had one grandparent, my grandmother. Uh, I grew up living in the home that my maternal grandparents had purchased in 1923. So. At that time, uh, they bought it new on North J Street. Um, and part of the time I was a boy. the rabbi of Sinai lived down the street. We lived at 810 North J. And the rabbi lived, as it turned out, for a while, for a couple of years, at, uh, 824 North J. There were, uh, a lot of Jewish, uh, Jewish sites were nearby. I would walk past the reform synagogue, Temple Beth Israel, which was at North fourth and J about four blocks away, and the shul, which will certainly come up in this interview, which was very important in my life, was at South Fourth, and I really about a eight or nine block walk away. So it was a it was a good location at that time.

Elana Anedda: That's great. So you were talking a little bit about your neighborhood, would you, oh, would you like to say a little bit more about how how it was, what it felt like? Um, Debbie, when I interviewed her, she told me that, um, there wasn't, uh, such a thing as a as a Jewish neighborhood that you guys were all spread out, but that you could still, uh, ride the bike to each other and see each other anyway. Is that your experience with it as well?

Harold Friedman: That's true. There wasn't really a Jewish neighborhood. There weren't that many

Jewish kids my age. My year particularly had very few Jewish, uh, students. I think in my class out of high school, between the two high schools that had Jewish kids in them, there were probably only five in my class. My year was particularly small, but um. There were- and there weren't any Jewish institutions by that Jewish butcher shops for the, the people who still kept kosher in the in the '50s, when I was really a little boy prior to bar mitzvah and things like that, my grandmother, with whom we lived, my father passed away when I was six, and so my grandmother always lived with us. My household was kosher, so the kosher meat would come in from Seattle on the bus, and the Seattle was about 30 miles away and the butcher shop had kosher meats. And sometimes my, uh, my mother and grandmother and we'd make the trip to Seattle to pick up kosher meat and then go to Brenner Brothers Bakery to pick up kosher bread or Jewish bread, Jewish rye and things like that with all on on Cherry Street. But anyway, those were big trips. But when that wasn't practical, which was most of the time my mother would call Barron's and they'd put the meat on on the bus. And it wasn't just for my, my mother and grandmother that the meat would be shipped. My mother would pick up the bus, the the meat at the bus station and deliver it to the other, uh, which at that time seemed elderly people who were still keeping kosher, uh, who were included on the shipment. Uh, I, of course, am now older than all those people were at that time, but when I was I'm recalling this they seemed old at that time, and all those people lived within close proximity to us. There was Mr. Sam Cohn and Mrs. Sarah Grindley, and sometimes there'd be meat for Mrs. Sarah Tone. These were all people-I'm just mentioning a few who had been friends of my grandmother and my mother, because my mother was so good to my grandmother's friends, um, their entire lives. Um, and among my, my boyhood memories is my grandmother talking to, for example, Mrs. Cohn every day. Uh, I like to recall the story that my grandmother would talk to Mrs. Cohn every day for about 55 years, and it was such a formal generation, Eleanora. Um, they'd always refer to each other by Missus. They never called up each other and said, Goldie or Lena, it was Mrs. Cohn and Mrs. Rothman. It was-the times were so different in that regard. No one called each other by their first name. It was by Mrs. Cohn and Mrs. Stone. Mrs. Rothman there. It's funny what You remember it that way. Uh, it was a very formal generation. I don't know why that's coming out now, but that's the way it was. Of course, the phone was something that was plugged into the wall, the idea of the technology that we have today was straight out of Flash Gordon. Anyway, so those people I'm speaking of now live very close to us by that, within a mile of where we lived. Uh, we were in a much older part of the city than where Debbie grew up. She lived in a much newer part of Tacoma. Those houses were built much later. Okay. Um, in terms of my childhood, I'd like to build up, mention a couple of things. The, uh, I attended the public schools, and I want to talk about Jewish education and how the Sinai Temple was so important in my life. Because life was done by walking for me and the car wasn't dominant at the shul, there was something called junior congregation, and probably from the time I was eight years old or so, I had already started Hebrew school. Certainly there was a thing called Junior congregation Saturday morning at 9:00, and I would go regularly to that. Frequently I also attended Friday night services with my mother, but on Saturday morning I actually look forward to junior congregation and I'd walk down J Street, like I say, past the Reform synagogue and then cross Division Avenue all by myself, and walk then them down to the shore. This walk probably didn't take any more than ten, ten, twelve minutes. Uh, I'd walk in about 9:00, uh, with the other kids, and there couldn't have been more than eight or ten of us. And the minion of the Orthodox merchants or men

would be rushing out, having completed the service right at 9:00. Again, now I'm older than these men all were at that time, and they were men. Uh, and but they'd be finishing their davening and they would lead, uh, walk out of the, the minyan at 9:00 and they'd, they'd leave and go down to their stores and open them up on Shabbat morning to do business on Saturday. Uh, but that was what I saw. There was a lot to describe regarding Tacoma and that's one of your questions as a community and a downtown. None of which exists in real life right now and I've had trouble describing this to my family. But at that time, there were all kinds of Jewish merchants and pawnbrokers all doing business in downtown Tacoma. And if they weren't davening together Saturday morning during the week, as my late uncle Sig Friedman would have told me, they might have been having breakfast together at Mannings on 11th between Commerce and Broadway, and they'd all have breakfast together, or many of them would daven together, and then they'd go open their stores and be competitors. But as Uncle Sig said, there was plenty of business for everybody, and it was amazing to me that these people, uh, for example, if you if you walked into my uncle's store and they didn't have the merchandise that you wanted. They'd refer you to the competitor that they knew would have the merchandise that you wanted. It was a really interesting community, not just of businessmen, but of friends as well. I may be glorifying this a bit, but I don't think I'm glorifying it very much. They actually did business that way, and because they were either the children themselves or they were the landsmen who had come from the old company, old country and established these, these businesses. I benefited from this because I worked for Jewish people as I grew up. My first real job was working for Morley Brotman, who had the photographic concession at the Seattle World's Fair. And I was 14 years old, and I, I asked him if I could get a job working at the Seattle World's Fair. Nobody thought I'd really keep the job. My grandmother's great niece, Molly Lambkin Cohen, who lived in Seattle, said she'd put me up all of this sort of tongue in cheek because no one thought I'd really get through the work. Anyway, I did it, and I had this fabulous summer in 1962, working for Morley Brotman at the Seattle World's Fair. It continued on in high school, where I worked for his photographic studio on Pacific Avenue. I also worked in high school for what was then called the Value Mart. In the heyday of the discount department store, the Value Mart was owned by Weisfield's. Um, all these Jewish connections were really important. The community took care of its members in the sense that, um, I don't think I ever paid full retail for clothing prior to going off to college. Um, you'd go into a clothing store owned by a Jewish merchant and you'd always get a discount. These are the things that weren't part of me written down, but that's the way it was. The there was professional courtesy among the medical and dental people. I don't know whether that was because my late father had been a dentist, but I think it was more because we were Jewish. Uh, so it was it. I don't think I'm hallucinating all this. It it really was close knit. Okay. And the audio won't show is that you're actually smiling. Okay. Everything in Tacoma wasn't ideal, though. As I mentioned before, we started turning on the tape. There was the smelter. Asarco had smelter. And when I think of memories I had from where I lived in Tacoma, there were many, many summer days that I remember that smell from the smelter and the taste it would put in my throat. I verily remember the sulfur smell in my throat and we lived three, four miles. But when those westerly winds would come in, that Asarco smelter was was toxic and needless to say, it's a good thing that that is gone. Um. Uh. Tacoma was a community that had a downtown. That was where the business was. I'm talking about the Tacoma before the mall. The mall opened when I was

in high school and changed everything in the course of three, four or five years. But everything was downtown. All the retail was downtown. It was a world of daytime shopping. Not nighttime shopping, except perhaps Monday nights and maybe Monday and Friday nights before Christmas. Um. That's a different world from what we have today. Um. I guess I'd like to talk a little bit about my family's involvement with the shul. As I mentioned, I can't remember because I wasn't born. My my grandfather's, uh, work for it. That's history. That's something that that we can write about. What I can talk about is my grandmother's work for the shul, because she lived with us and I like to tell the story that I grew up with a basement filled with rubbage and if there's anything I remember from my my youth is that my grandmother would solicit rummage for the Sinai Temple rummage sale. Uh, one of my favorite stories is the advantage of soliciting rummage in a world before there was technology. Uh, that to with the, uh, the phone answering machine. Uh, my my grandmother, for whom English, of course, was a second language, Yiddish being the first and whose English was not perfect, but certainly sufficient, would not take no for an answer, for an answer from a merchant from whom she had decided to get rummage for the Sinai Temple rummage sale, or earlier the rummage sale. So if the merchant who had tried to put her off by saying that he or she would call her back, hadn't called her back, she would call the merchant up and say, "Oh, you know, I was out in the yard hanging up the laundry, and I missed the phone, and I assumed that it was you calling me back with your donation for the Sinai Temple rummage sale." I heard that phone call numerous times when I was a little boy. I was horrified by the white lie. But, you know, in the course of these Sinai rummage sale, those were the values I learned. Um, anyway, um, she was not alone in raising her collecting rights for the Sinai rummage sale. She did not drive. She was from a generation of women that did not learn to drive. Uh, and other synagogue members or shul members would come by to come with her, to go to the merchants, to try and and get the, uh, get the donations necessary. Obviously, all of this did not work because by by 1960, there weren't- it was impossible to keep the shul going. It was impossible to keep Beth Israel going. And the merger took place. And you've heard, I understand from from Debbie Rosenthal-Calderon and about the the magic that her father, the our late beloved Rabbi Shalom Richard Rosenthal did in getting people like my grandmother, uh, who for whom the thought of belonging to a congregation affiliated with Reform Judaism was just anathems. To get her to love Richard Rosenthal was just an amazing, amazing achievement. Um, because he was such an amazing man and, um, he was the only person on, on this earth who could have pulled that off, and he did it. So, uh, I spoke about that at the 50th anniversary of temple Beth-El, um, about the great unification that he did. And, uh, I will reiterate that today. That was just an amazing, amazing achievement. Wholly, wholly dependent on Rabbi Richard Rosenthal. Um. I don't know what am I missing? I'm going to pause it for a second.

Elana Anedda: Um, well, I could ask you another question, if you're-

Harold Friedman: -sure.

Elana Anedda: Um, so you you mentioned a lot about your grandma. Were you really close to her?

Harold Friedman: Oh that's an understatement. She was the best woman I ever knew. Yes. Yes. Yeah. My grandmother, uh, Lena Roman, uh, lived to about 104, I believe, and, uh, she was a a

wholly remarkable woman. Yes. Yeah. I was extremely close to her. Yeah. She gave me unconditional love.

Elana Anedda: Do you have any any stories that you remember about her?

Harold Friedman: Well, I don't know how to summarize other than that statement, you know, giving unconditional love, but she she she truly loved the shul. Uh, she loved her community, and and she worked for it. In my interview with her, which is lodged at the-through the Washington State Jewish Historical Society at the the University of Washington, I kept trying to ask her what she wanted to have live beyond her. Um, she truly valued community and, um, I've come to just be overwhelmed by what that generation did. When when she, at a young age, um, said goodbye to her family knowing she'd never speak with them again. Never see her mother again. Um, and go to a totally strange world. It's not like now. And and, uh, I'm just overwhelmed by how intrepid she was, by the courage she demonstrated. And by the life that she and my grandfather developed in Tacoma. I found these articles through newspapers.com about parties. You know, that a little party that that that was given in their honor on one of their anniversaries in Tacoma because the newspaper was the Facebook of its day and, you know, to build a life in a foreign country using a foreign language and, and all that is just an amazing thing. They had strength from the community and gave back to it. She drummed into me the values of community and the values of education. There are only three things I could be a doctor, a lawyer or an accountant. [laughs] So, you know, there those things were very education was important in the community. It was probably more important to be a mensch was the most important thing, or to try to be a mensch. Who knows if I'm a mensch? But, you know, that was really important. Uh, and, uh, so, uh, I miss her very much. I miss her very much. Yeah, there's so much I'd like to ask her, but that's that's the nature of the human condition. Yeah. Yeah. Anyway, she's, uh. Let me- I don't think this interview was about genealogy, so I'm not going to talk about that. But if there's anything I've wanted to convey, it's. It is, I think, within the, the congregation that I primarily grew up in and of course, which was Sinai Temple, the conservative congregation and to, I believe, the same extent within the reformed congregation, there was a core group of within each That was very close knit. And I think it was a result of the size of the communities. The size of Tacoma itself, the population and, uh, the necessity of maintaining identity within those larger communities. So although there was interaction because it was of necessity in the business sense, there was a large amount of socializing purely within the Jewish community. The people who were active within the synagogue also were active in Hadassah or the women, of course. And this was before the time when women were largely working. That didn't apply to me because after my father passed away, the time I'm speaking of my mother was working, so her volunteer days were over. She was the volunteer before my father passed away and then my father passed away. So in the in the '50s, she was already working. But many of the women still in the '50s before it really changed, were active in the synagogue and the Council of Jewish Women and Hadassah, uh, all three of those organizations were active in, in Tacoma in the '50s during my youth. Um, and of course, then the world changed in the '60s. So others would, would, would have to talk to you about that. But they, they maintained, uh, a cohesion that way. Uh, I joke with one of my, my boyhood friends. With who I'm still in touch, Steph Farber, who's still doing business in downtown Tacoma that the women didn't have first names. They were only, you know, you read the articles in the papers, they were

mesdames, uh, mesdames Farber or mesdames Friedman or whatever it was. They were, as I said, Mrs. Cohn and Mrs. Tone or Mrs. Rothman. They didn't call themselves by their first names so that that world is long past. And that's, of course, for the better. But that was their world at that time. So, um, but the women were very active in incredible amounts of volunteer work. They just incredible amounts of volunteer work. It was like a job. It wasn't like a job. It was a job, uh, you know, so that's that was the impression, uh, like I said, there was a basement filled with rummage, so. I don't know how this will sound, but, uh, that that was just like the people seemed older. Maybe there was less rummage than it seemed like, but there was a lot of rummag down there. So of great interest to a little kid. Yeah. Uh, okay. Um, why don't we pause for a second?

Elana Anedda: All right. So, um, we, uh, you wanted to tell me a little bit about, uh, your relationship with, um, Debbie's family, right?

Harold Friedman: Right. I think I'd mentioned earlier that I could I, along with many others, would feel that Rabbi Rosenthal was unique in his ability to unify the two congregations in Tacoma. In 1960, the merger between Sinai Temple and Temple Beth Israel was a Herculean achievement, which I don't think any other rabbi could have, uh, could have done and certainly could never have maintained. The members of the congregations ranged from Orthodox Jews who still kept kosher to very liberal, uh, Reform Jews who would have never thought of putting on a yarmulke. Um, and he was uniquely empathetic and, uh, able to, to listen to everyone and frankly, to give everybody what they wanted, uh, to make them feel comfortable in a new congregation that, even though it was affiliated with the reform movement, would enable everyone to worship as they wanted with the prayer book they wanted for as long as they wanted so that they would feel at home. And that's what he did. He made them still feel at home in the new congregation. Uh, it was an amazing achievement. I also became, because of the merger and with my new rabbi, who, uh, was the rabbi at the time of my bar mitzvah in late 1960, um, became acquainted with his wife, Rabbi, or with Barbara Rosenthal and and Barbara Rosenthal, who passed away in in May of 2020, was just an amazing woman as well. She was a wonderful friend. Uh, I stayed in California after I attended, uh, the University of California, and my mother and grandmother were in Tacoma, and I just was talking with, Eleanora off, when we were off tape for a moment and explaining what a wonderful friend Barbara was. Uh, she, uh, there was a time when actually both my late mother and grandmother were hospitalized at the same time. I, of course, came up to try to care as best I could, but I had to return down here. Barbara would be my eyes and ears. It wasn't just for me that she fulfilled that role. Uh, so many people had Barbara as their friend at time of need. She was there at those times and at times of joy that she deserves special mention and always will be remembered for just an amazing woman. She spoke her mind. She told you, uh, what? She felt she had amazing judgment. So together they brought to the Jewish community of Tacoma, uh, uh, just a wonderful period of growth and stability. That was that was, uh, quite, uh, quite a legacy. There's one other thing I wanted to mention that sort of is also related to Rabbi Rosenthal and enables me to bring up my grandmother in a more, uh, more unique, uh, uh, an ancestral way. And that's my grandmother made a, uh, I guess what I'll call a Latvian delicacy called, uh, Tigila. It's sort of a rolled dough in honey. Um, it can be found online. The recipe is quite complicated. Um, there were a couple of women in Tacoma who made it. My grandmother and another woman, Mrs. Mary Friedman, and

Mrs. Sam Friedman. And sort of the presence of Tigila for the Simca defined whether an event was a Simca. My grandmother and Mary Friedman would sort of alternate so that there weren't too many at, at the same event or needless to add an event. To make the long story short, uh, Rabbi Rosenthal was not fond of Tigila, to say the least, but when my grandmother made Tigila, she would take a take one, uh, and run over to him, thinking that he liked it or insisting that he liked it and shove it in his mouth. I remember him telling me that it was sort of like biting into a rock [laughs] and, uh, it was just one of those moments where he was willing to take one for the team in order to please his congregant. Uh, I can't think of many, uh, many rabbis who would do that. But, it was part of his charm. And I will say that my grandmother, uh, loved Richard Rosenthal. Loved Rabbi Richard Rosenthal. I think, uh, as much as, uh, any person she ever knew, he was unique and deserving of that love. And, uh, he set a standard for of of rabbis for me that, uh, frankly, I don't think any other rabbi could ever meet. That's all I wanted to add, Eleanora.

Elana Anedda: Perfect. Um. And, um. And yet you also talked about Barbara and, uh, your friendship with her, which was lovely. And, um, it all sounds fantastic to hear on this end, and I don't- I just met you, so, um. Yeah. So is there is there anything else that you'd like to say before I, um, stop the recording?

Harold Friedman: No, I wanted to convey the sense of, um, that my review of of of things on Newspapers.com, that's what we were talking about off tape, actually substantiates that. This community was close knit. Um, I'm not remembering it that differently than it was when I was a child growing up. They depended on each other, they, uh, they socialized with each other, they worshiped together. They maintained their institutions. Um, but they interacted with the larger community. Um, as I mentioned to you, I think they treated their customers fairly, in part because it was their own values. Those were the, the values they were raised with and because it was the right thing to do and because they had to act that way or their businesses wouldn't have thrived. As Uncle Sam said, there was plenty of business for everybody if they treated people right. So they tried to. So I'm proud to have, uh, grown up in that community. It left me a proud legacy to be a part of and the world today is very different and much more transitory. Um, but, uh, for those, uh, immigrants and first generation descendants of immigrants, uh, they, they did a wonderful job of bringing their values and trying to maintain them as best they could. That's what I want to say.

Elana Anedda: Perfect. I will go ahead and stop the recording.

Harold Friedman: Okay.