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Rabbi Lennard Thal

SUMMARY

Rabbi Thal, born in Bellingham in 1942, talks about his path from a small-town childhood to a career as a rabbi after studying at Princeton and Stanford. He shares memories of Bellingham's Jewish community, how it changed over time, and the important role his family played in it. Even after retiring in 2008, he stayed connected and involved, showing his lasting commitment to the Reform Jewish community and his roots in Bellingham.

Martina Lancia: Okay, so today is December 10th, 2021. We're here in New York, thank you so much for being here and giving me us this time to have this interview together. I would like to ask you to start by introducing yourself and telling me a little bit about your background, wherever you want to start.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Okay. I was born in Bellingham in 1942 and, uh, lived there continuously until I went off to college. I came across country and went to Princeton University for four years, and then I took a law degree back in California at Stanford, and then became a rabbi and have lived in Los Angeles after I was ordained for 23 years and then moved to New York in 1996 with my wife because of a great job opportunity. I became the senior vice president of the Union for Reform Judaism, which is the umbrella organization in North America for reform congregations. About 875 such congregations. Am I speaking loud enough, by the way?

Martina Lancia: That's perfect.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Um, and, uh, retired in 2008, but then, uh, was, uh, quote unquote drafted to come back to work to lead the Rabbinic Placement Commission for a couple of years. And then I also came back to work to do a couple of other things in the reform movement. Uh, but now I'm fully retired. Along the way, I spent 21 years going back and forth to Singapore as the visiting rabbi of the progressive congregation there from 1993 until 2013. Um, and one of the projects that I was most proud of as I look back over my career was, uh, raising the money to create a sleepaway camp in western Washington, in Snohomish County, just north of Seattle. Uh, it's called Camp Kalsman. And it now serves hundreds and hundreds of kids from the Pacific Northwest, uh, from different Reform Jewish congregations, not just in Washington state, but in Montana, Idaho, Oregon, Alaska, British Columbia. So I have a very- and my family is very large on both sides of my family, very large. So I have dozens and dozens of relatives in Washington state even now and I stay in touch with many of them.

Martina Lancia: That's beautiful. Another narrator I interviewed who mentioned, uh, the camp, and they told me a lot of the history. So we're definitely going back to that because I want to. I want to know more about your point of view. Um, so my second question would be, um, what is your- so you were born there so I'm sure there's a lot, um, there's a lot of connection for you. Uh, but what is your relationship with with Bellingham, both the community and the city?

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Well, let me go back in time a bit. Um, for many, many years, throughout my childhood and high school years, the size of the Jewish community remained very stable, even stagnant. Um, my mother was very and father, both were very active in the community, and they used to always talk about the fact that there were 35 households, some years, 36, some years, 34. There probably were some other Jewish families who were not affiliated or involved. But with the growth of the city and the growth of the university, now the community, as I understand it, is about 240 or 250 households. Um, the rabbi there is a fellow

named Josh Samuels, and he and my son in law were in school together. They are close friends, by coincidence. Uh, and so I've known Josh for many years, and I knew his predecessor, whose name was Rabbi Cindy Enger, for quite a few years. Uh, we'll get to the contemporary part later. But when I was growing up, um, there was no rabbi. There had been well, before I was born, the community viewed itself as Orthodox, and that meant separate seating for men and women, and it meant the Orthodox prayer books, and there apparently had been a series of Orthodox rabbis, mostly short term. This is back, you know, in 1910 to 20 and then on to World War II. Uh, I have a very dim memory from when I was a small child of a young Orthodox rabbi who then left, and there was no rabbi for a number of years. Then what happened was something kind of interesting. There had been something of a missing generation of children. And I was one of four kids approaching bar bat mitzvah age when I was about age ten. There was another fellow, uh, the two other kids who were also ten and 11. Emil Hecht, who still lives in Bellingham, and my father took an active interest in finding somebody who would tutor us and prepare us for our bar and bat mitzvah. It happened that there was a cantor no longer employed in Vancouver, an hour north and my dad and mom arranged for him to come down once or twice a week to teach us and then, so to speak, he stayed for dinner. He then became the spiritual leader of the congregation and was in that capacity. For quite a few years until he retired and subsequently died in the '60s. Well, he retired in the '60s. I can't remember when he died. I was already out of Bellingham. But throughout those years, the congregation increasingly saw itself as conservative, not orthodox. And that meant that except for a handful of older families, there was mixed seating. During the services. The compromise was that, um, for those who still saw themselves as orthodox, the first few rows, there were men on one side and women on the other. They were no longer required to sit upstairs. Um, and, uh, but the community saw itself as conservative, even though it never formally affiliated with the conservative movement in North America. Just to jump ahead for a moment in the 1970s, when I was the associate dean of Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, I collaborated with the regional director in San Francisco, who worked for the what was then called the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. We flew up to Bellingham. We had a meeting with the board of the congregation because increasingly by then the congregation was growing, and there were many, many mixed married couples in the congregation and many people who saw themselves as reform and not conservative. So I remember that meeting very clearly. Um, we at one point I think I said something like, you know, "If you look like a duck and sound like a duck and walk like a duck, maybe it's time to acknowledge you're a duck." And that led to a decision to formally affiliate with the reform movement and they immediately thereafter, one of their leaders became active on a regional and the national organization, and they by then they also had had a couple of different reform rabbis in town. When Gartner, Cantor Gartner retired, there was a rabbi named Harold Rubens [spells out] who had been in Vancouver, and he came to be the rabbi for a while. And then after that, I think that's when Rabbi Yossi Leibowitz became the rabbi. For a short time there was a fellow named Yosef Zilberberg. All of these were reform rabbis. Then uh, Michael Oblast became the rabbi [spells out]. You may have already heard his name. And when he left, that's when Cindy Enger became the rabbi and now it's Josh Samuels. So they've had, I guess, a half a dozen reform rabbis since the mid '60s. Toward the end of the tenure of Cantor Fred Gartner, he began to identify himself as a rabbi, even though he never was ordained as a rabbi. And the community accepted that. They particularly appreciated his ability to relate to the non-Jewish community. And in the 1950s and early '60s, when the Jewish community still was very small, that was important for somebody to be able to go into the schools and speak about different Jewish holidays or to meet with different church groups to, you know, to be representative of the Jewish community. So over the years, what I'm saying is that the community has changed from Orthodox to conservative to reform. There still are folks in the community, as I understand it, who identify primarily as conservative and I think that Josh Samuels, from what I understand, has done a good job creating, you know, the so-called wide tent and making people feel connected. Now, of course, they have a beautiful new synagogue building. And one other interesting note historically was that the previous building, which had been on Broadway there, um, that was officially, officially became the synagogue, I think about, uh, in the 1920s. My grandfather, who died before my parents were married, therefore I never met him, was among those people who walked with the Torah scrolls from a very small facility in what they call Old town, the old town, part of Bellingham, to what was then the new synagogue. He and others were responsible, apparently for the, you know, creating this new Jewish home, so to speak. So that's kind of a long answer to your question, but I and my own connection these days is, I mean, I get the newsletter occasionally I'm in touch with the rabbi. I've maintained some contact with some of some of the members of the Jewish community. Um, there were a few folks there who, when we were building the campus in Orange County, took an active interest. One couple gave a major contribution in honor of my deceased parents. They were very close to my parents. And, um, so the connection remains, but, you know, 3000 miles and not having lived there since 1960, only visiting from time to time, you know, it's not nearly the same as it was when I was still a youngster. [phone rings]

Martina Lancia: Of course. Um, so in the history of like so as you just mentioned, you haven't lived there for a while, but in general, what would you recall being the most important event in the history of the community in Bellingham?

Rabbi Lennard Thal: That's a good question. You know, the most important may have been after I lived there in formally becoming part of the reform movement and having a series of ordained rabbis and watching the community's rapid growth, you have to understand that Bellingham itself has grown at the same time. I mean, for years and years, the population of the town remained so stable, it was always 34,000, 35,000 people. And here were the 34, 35 Jewish households. Right now the population is something like 85,000 people because Western Washington has grown tremendously. Also Bellingham itself, you have to understand, has

changed a lot culturally. When I was a kid, the politics were sort of moderate Republican. I used to call it sort of an Eisenhower Republican town in 1950s. Okay. Now western Washington, including Bellingham from Bellingham down through Everett and Seattle, Tacoma and Olympia, all the way down to Portland, Oregon is sort of the ultimate blue state. I could not have imagined in those days that there would be a gay pride parade in Bellingham. I could not imagine that the city would have voted overwhelmingly Democratic. I'm delighted, but I couldn't have imagined it in those days. That gives you an idea of how much has changed. I think one of the other things that has affected the demographics of the Jewish community is that, um, housing, while not cheap, was less expensive than in Seattle and also for young professionals doctors. There were a lot of Jewish doctors who came to town. As I understand it, and part of the draw was that you could have a boat, but an hour away was a mountain that always had snow for skiing. So you had this physical setup that when the first Jews started coming there, it was very different. You know, nobody had boats, nobody went skiing. In fact, you know, here's a historic perspective that I think is important. I assume you've spoken to or someone will speak to Tim Baker. Does the name Tim Baker-

Martina Lancia: -So we tried to I tried to get in contact with him, but I, I was not successful to get in touch with him. But it was the first night reader, I, um-

Rabbi Lennard Thal: -Okay. I can help you get in touch with him if you want, but he is married to a Jewish woman and he became absolutely passionate, really interested in the Jewish history of Bellingham and he has gone through I think every issue of the Bellingham Herald, you know, to record, to make notes about events affecting the Jews of Bellingham. But the most interesting part of this is that at least prior to World War II, the majority of the families all came, all traced their ancestry to the same little town in Lithuania. Had you heard about that at all? Yeah. So and I know a fair amount about that because I'm a genealogist. So, um, the town in Lithuania, in Lithuanian would be called Skepsis. But, um, the Yiddish term was skopecek. I've been to the town. Um, now, to the best of my knowledge, no Jews left there. But what happened in the early part of the 20th century is that a few people came and they would send letters to say, this is a nice place, and you could make a living here. Why? Because, you know, there were people who were going from Washington state up to Alaska to the Klondike Gold Rush and the Yukon Gold Rush, and many of the Jews became what they called Alaska Outfitters. They would sell the kinds of things that people might need by way of clothing and tools and whatever. And that included members of my own family. The first the first member of my family to come to Bellingham was a man named Herschel Tall. You see, when in the in Lithuania, the name was spelled in in Hebrew. Tet, Aleph, Lamed, which would have been pronounced Tal. So you can imagine as if different people came through immigration depending on whether the immigration official was Irish or Italian or whatever. They would hear whatever they heard, and so part of our family wound up with names spelled Tall [spells out] and others Thal [spells out]. And in fact, one part of our family never came to Washington statenwound up with Toll [spells out] in New Jersey. So in any event, the first member of the family was Hershel Tall, and he came with his wife, why? Because she had relatives who were there, not relatives of mine, but her side of the family. He then apparently sent letters back to Lithuania, and the next member of the family to come was my grandfather. That happened in 1906. My grandfather came leaving behind his wife and little boy, my dad. But the next year he had saved enough money, apparently, to send for them and so my grandmother and my father came in 1907. I have the ship manifest, which shows their passage and the answers to all the questions they had to ask, answer, um, it was hard for me to imagine this woman who was four feet eight, four feet ten. I remember her very well. She she lived until I was nine years old. Her English, even even then, was very limited. Um, and she was asked all these questions including are you- one question was, are you a communist? Are you a polygamist?

Martina Lancia: They would ask-

Rabbi Lennard Thal: -Well? What's that?

Martina Lancia: -They would ask, are you an anarchist?

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Yeah. Anarchist. A you know, a polygamist or you plan to overthrow the government? You know, here was this woman who had a few kopecks in her pocket and a little boy, you know, trying to figure out how to get to, according to the ship manifest to Burlington, Washington, not Bellingham, Washington. Okay, so so in any event, Um, he then, my grandfather started sending letters, and eventually six of his seven younger siblings came. By the end of of World War I, the youngest one remained in Lithuania for a while, marrying a woman from a nearby town and when they decided to come in the late 1920s, um, the law had changed here and so they wound up in Vancouver. At least they were close to the family, an hour's drive away, and they would visit in Bellingham frequently, and finally got permission to move to Bellingham also. So eventually there were these eight siblings, my grandfather being the oldest, and their families all living in Bellingham. So the family was large. Um, now I've got one second cousin still living there. That's it. There's one other fellow who's more distantly related, who I think is still living there. Um, and, uh, but my point is that it was an insular community. We had all of these people who traced their roots to this little town in northeastern Lithuania. Um, and in fact, for a while, sadly, the papers have been lost, there was something called the skopecekcher lauftmeinshaft, which was like the the, the society of people who came from that town, who then were trying to be

helpful to others to come, and apparently, according to notes that I took years ago, there were meetings of this group. But if there ever were minutes taken, they'd been lost in time. Somebody threw them out. Um. So, you know, I'm a little bit all over the place here, but. But this bit of history, I think is important to understand.

Martina Lancia: Absolutely.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: You know how the community came to be what it was. Um, some of those families. Well, I mentioned that I was one of four youngsters preparing for a bar mitzvah. Uh, the young woman among the four of us, her her mother's family also came from this town. But the other two, their families were not from this town. Um, in something like 1910, if I remember correctly. Excuse me. 2010. My wife and I and our younger daughter and her husband, who's also a rabbi, we traveled to Lithuania and we wanted to go to the town. We hired somebody who spoke Russian, Lithuanian, Hebrew, Yiddish and English and who worked with other genealogists and who had been to the the town in the cemetery. When we got there, we found not only the cemetery, which had been partly damaged during World War II, but not completely. We found the boulders marking the graves of my great great grandparents, who were buried in 1891, 1893. Then after scraping the moss off the stones and we could read the Hebrew inscriptions. 20 feet away we found markers of the graves of their fathers. So it enabled me to go back even further in terms of my own family history.

Martina Lancia: Very interesting.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: There's another unusual twist in terms of my own family. My wife is my second cousin and her mother, she she grew up in California, but her mother grew up in Bellingham. And Linda and I never really knew each other. We met once when we were kids, but her mother and my father, who were first cousins, were quite close because they both were music teachers and they had a lot of friends in common. Um, so when I talked about my grandfather and his younger seven siblings, one of those siblings was Linda's grandmother.

Martina Lancia: Interesting. Interesting how, um, some of the, um, other characteristics. But some of the things you mentioned, um, are interestingly found also in old families in Italy. So it's interesting.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Yeah.

Martina Lancia: It's interesting. Um.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: It was very common in the 19th century for in the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, for first cousins to marry each other. That would be very questionable now. But but it turned out that when we visited these, these grave sites of my great great grandparents, they were her great great grandparents, too. And so it was a very meaningful visit. And my wife pointed out at the time, um, again, I think it was 2010, um, that it was probably the first time in a century that those graves were intentionally visited. So, um, anyhow.

Martina Lancia: Very interesting, though, and I'm glad you were able to find, uh, you know, sometimes you will travel and they search and they search and their search is not fruitful. I'm very glad you were able to reconnect with that part of your past.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: It was very fortunate.

Martina Lancia: Um, so in terms of, um, traditions and holidays, so I know you left the community, uh, Bellingham a while ago, but to your also to, you know, your memories, what you remember being, um, what were the holidays or the celebrations, the traditions that the community had at the time?

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Yeah. Well, first of all, they they did observe two days of the holidays. You know, like most conservative in all Orthodox communities do in the diaspora. Um, and so there was a second day of Rosh Hashanah, for example. As a youngster, I wasn't terribly interested, and I would find excuses, you know, at age eight or ten or 12, to walk out of the sanctuary and go, and the kids would gather outside and we would we would catch grasshoppers or whatever and one of my many cousins lived a block away from the synagogue and, um, when I was ten or 12, I would sometimes go over to their house because this one cousin, much older than I was, had this amazing collection of comic books. And, um, so, uh, or it would sometimes the holidays would coincide with the World Series. I could listen to some of the baseball games. Um, I don't think they had a TV set at that point. In any event. But the holidays were observed in a in a traditional fashion. I have pictures in my files of when we were kids of Purim carnivals, Purim plays. Um, and um, I actually have pictures from when my dad was a child. Uh, I could show you some of those pictures if you want. Absolutely. Tim Baker has all those pictures also. Um, some of them were published in the Bellingham Herald. Some of them were just taken.

Martina Lancia: If I'm not mistaken. He takes care of the of an archive as well.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Yeah he does. Yeah. That's right. He would be really important for you to talk to and I would imagine he'd be interested.

Martina Lancia: You know, he was he was expressing interest. But then when I reached out to him a few times, I never heard back from him.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: You know, at one point I think he changed his email address.

Martina Lancia: Ah, that might be it.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: That may be a problem. So before you leave, I'm happy to look to see.

Martina Lancia: Absolutely. That would be great if you were able to talk. That was the first time I read it on my list. So. Yeah. And it's my white whale. You know. It's my white whale. I have to be able to talk to him.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Absolutely right. I mean, he what he's done. I believe that he grew up in a Quaker community. But as I said, his wife is Jewish, and he just took this very strong interest, he, I think he's still a paralegal. He was for many years and he his kids, you know, were very active in the synagogue there, as I understand it, as, as long after I've left town. But, um, you know, there were also these multigenerational families in Bellingham in the community. So for example, when I was in college, I would come back to Bellingham every summer and I worked at Gordon's Auto Parts and I'll tell you a great story, actually. Um, but I worked for a fellow named Bill Gordon. This was a store that belonged to his father Henry Gordon and his bill's uncle was still alive, and he worked in the store. Um, my, when I was growing up, one of my uncles ran the store that my grandfather started called Thal's Furniture. I have a wonderful photo of my grandfather and two of his brothers who were his partners, you know, in this old furniture store with beautiful brass bed and then then when my grandfather died, one of his sons, my uncle, you know, took over his interest and ultimately the store was kept in the family until 1957 or 58, when my uncle and his family moved to Vancouver. Um, and also in that same area of Old Town where that store was, Linda's grandfather had a small shop. There were two of my great uncles had had, um, you know, what was called junkyards. They, they bought and sold Non-precious metals and two of my great uncles had places in Old Town. Um, you have to also understand in the history of Bellingham as a city is really interesting because originally it was four separate towns. I don't know if you come across that town of Whatcom, the town of Sehome, the town of Bellingham, the town of Fairhaven, both Whatcom and Sehome, Sehome is really today's downtown area. Somewhere along the line, there was an effort to merge all of these four towns, and there was jealousy about what the town would be called. The section that was then called Bellingham, which was named after, his name was Captain Henry Bellingham. Something like that. Um, uh, was only residential, and I guess that meant that there would be less resentment if that became the name of the town. Um, Fairhaven is this historic area on the south side of the city. Fascinating area. Uh, not far from where I grew up actually. I grew up in what was then called the part of Bellingham on what they called the the South Hill area. Um, but I went to Fairhaven Junior High and the Fairhaven business district, which was a very sleepy kind of place when I was a kid. Then all of a sudden got gentrified and has jewelry shops and artisan stuffs and bookstores and restaurants and, you know, it's a little bit removed from downtown Bellingham. You'll see it when you when you get there. Um, make sure you visit Fairhaven. It's the, you know, really interesting bit of history. Um, but the Jews in the early days all tended to live on the north side of town in what was then would have been either Whatcom or Sehome, and that merged and, um, so, for example, my grandmother and grandfather lived at the corner of F and DuPont, walking distance to the synagogue. That was important for many of these people who were Orthodox, to be able to walk to the synagogue. After my grandmother died, my youngest uncle, who was also a music teacher, remained in that house. But then as Bellingham expanded, Jews lived all over the town. So, Um, one kind of amusing anecdote, because we lived in South Side, um, when we would drive to the synagogue for the High Holy Days, my father, who grew up in an Orthodox home but was certainly not Orthodox himself, you know, he was respectful of those who had walked to the synagogue. So we would park at least a couple of blocks away. [laughs] It wasn't so much I don't I never was quite clear whether he didn't want to be seen driving that close to the synagogue on the High Holy Days, or whether he liked the idea of at least symbolically walking the last couple of blocks with his family. Um, but I always thought that was kind of interesting and amusing.

Martina Lancia: Um, so do you. Um, so you left. You mentioned that you left Bellingham when you went to, I suppose, undergrad. So you were around 18, 19,

Rabbi Lennard Thal: 18, 1960.

Martina Lancia: Um, so do you remember growing up? Um, if you, so you mentioned that you were not that interested when you were younger?

Rabbi Lennard Thal: I was interested, but I had limited patience for services that lasted all day, let's put it that way.

Martina Lancia: Did that, um, patient increase, uh, before you left?

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Yeah, I guess it did. And, you know, ultimately, I became a rabbi, so, you know.

Martina Lancia: Like, do you remember? So, like, since we were talking about holidays and traditions, do you remember, um, any change in that? Um, the last few years you lived there, um, compared to when you were a little younger?

Rabbi Lennard Thal: I don't have a clear memory of that. I do have very clear memories of family Passover seders there, which, until my grandmother died, always took place at her house. She had four sons, the oldest being my father. The youngest was this other music teacher who lived with her. He was a bachelor until he was 40 some years old, and a one, the son that ran the furniture store, who was married with three kids and lived near us, actually, and then another son, Maurice, who we all called him mash, who got married also when he was about 40, but married a woman in Vancouver and moved to Vancouver at that point. But we would all gather at my grandmother's home for Passover Seder while she was still there. She died in 1951. Um, and then after that, it was always at our home. So there was not I don't, in those days, there was no community seder, as you have in many places across the United States these days. Maybe there is now. I wouldn't be surprised, but in those days it was all home ceremonies. The same thing with Hanukkah. On the other hand, there were other holidays like, um, Sukkot. They would build a sukkah out just outside the synagogue, outside the shul and I remember that very clearly. And, and Simchat Torah, or they would call it Simchat Torah because they used Ashkenazi pronunciation of Hebrew. Um, that was definitely a holiday observed by the community before World War II, there was actually a mikvah in the synagogue, but it I don't believe it had been in use at any point in my lifetime. For those women who wanted to use it, or for that matter, men that might have wanted to use the mikvah for various ritual purposes. So that was a change. But I also remember very clearly was that the congregation, though it was small, was very active. So there was an active sisterhood. There was an active B'nai B'rith men's group. There was a very active Hadassah group. My mother, at different times was president of Hadassah, was president of sisterhood. My father was the treasurer of the synagogue for 22 years. Talk about a glutton for punishment. And, um, he was, um, very devoted to, you know, maintaining the synagogue in a financially stable fashion. I don't know when it started, but there was a section of the cemetery that was set aside for the Jewish community. It still is there, fenced off from the rest of, it's called Bayview Cemetery. It would be when you go to Bellingham. It'd be worth your while to visit the cemetery. So I have a lot of family members buried there.

Martina Lancia: Um, so, so in terms of, since we were talking about, um, traditions and holidays, um, you might I'm not sure. You know, it's fine if you don't have knowledge about it, but, do you can you think of any difference between the community of Bellingham and the other ones around the area? I know they're not. Bellingham is not as one of the few that there's another one, but it's in, uh, already past the border in Canada. And there's another one. Um, but Bellingham is kind of the only one right now in the area. Um, do you but do you have any idea of differences between them?

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Well, first of all, I remember very clearly that by the time I was in junior high, high school, high school especially, there were a few families who would come from British Columbia, Abbotsford and Chilliwack, uh, either because they liked the idea of a smaller community in Bellingham, or because they were closer to Bellingham than they were to Vancouver, I'm not sure. They were also a couple of families in Mount Vernon in Skagit County, which is the county just south of Whatcom County. Um, interestingly enough, there were at the time when I was a kid, there were a few families who considered themselves reform, even though it was it was generally understood to be a conservative congregation. So I remember that the Levin family and a couple of others, maybe the Orloff family, would go to Seattle for the High Holidays to attend the large reform temple, Temple de Hirsch, in Seattle for the holidays. Um, at that point, I don't think there was a functioning community in Everett. Everett was 60 miles south of Bellingham. There is now, of course. So you know Bellingham was it for, you know, the surrounding area, including, as I say, for a few families who would come from Canada.

Martina Lancia: Um, and do you remember if most of your community at the time was observed, you know, would observe like Shabbat or the kosher diet or if most people would, uh, because now it's it's quite different. Yeah. Um, but do you have any memories of how was it back then?

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Yeah. Very good question. Um, I mean, I imagine there were some families who were a bit more Shabbat observance than my family was, was we would go to services, but besides my dad, who was a violin teacher, he taught violin students all day on Saturday. First of all, they were not in school. That was one of the best opportunities for him to teach us. But the but the the question about kashrut keeping kosher was was particularly good question because first of all, in terms of my own family, my dad used to say that the second question he asked my mom after the first question was, Will you marry me? Was, do you really want to keep kosher? They both grew up in kosher homes. And, um, she didn't want to keep kosher particularly, and he didn't want to keep kosher. There were families, though, who did. And they would have kosher meat brought in from Seattle. They

would go to Seattle to buy kosher products. Um, and I'm, I'm sure that before before my birth, before World War II, there were more a higher percentage of the families did keep kosher. I'm guessing that some probably brought food in from Vancouver, if not from Seattle. Um, but in terms of my own family's practice, my parents ate bacon, they ate ham, but they drew the line at pork chops. They wouldn't eat pork chops. Um, they ate shellfish. Um, and, um, so here were two people who grew up in Orthodox homes who still, they, they would speak Yiddish to each other when they didn't want my sister and me to understand what they were saying. Okay, and we would joke to keep things from the kinder, you know, and, um, but of course, after a while, my sister and I could begin to understand. We just wouldn't let them know that we understand what they were saying. They had kids everywhere right? And my father would communicate with his father in law, my mother's father, who lived to 91 by in Seattle by writing him letters in Yiddish. My father could, knew Yiddish well enough to write letters in Yiddish to his father in law, which which his father in law really appreciated, because my grandfather's English was always pretty limited. I'm talking about my mother's father and my father's mother, Yiddish was her primary language. When when I was a child, um, prior to her death, whenever my sister and I would come to see her or her cousins, she would greet each of us with what she called five kisses in cupola. She would grab our heads and kiss our foreheads five times, okay. Very old country stuff. So here were in the '50s. It was a time when you still had people with one foot in the old country, while the community was now had become conservative, becoming more American. You know, following, you know, the local customs and traditions more and more. Um, it was a time of great change, not just in Bellingham, but elsewhere around the United States, you know. So.

Martina Lancia: And do you have any now, I'm very curious about this detail. Um, do you have any, uh, do you know why your parents, even if they grew up in a kosher home and even if, you know, pork is not generally allowed? Um, why did they...

Rabbi Lennard Thal: I'm not sure. I just whether it was just a matter of seeing it as too constraining, or maybe they just didn't see the reason behind it. Or maybe, you know, of course I wasn't there when they had that conversation, when he was getting engaged to my mom. Um, but I do know that, um, you know, when my grandfather would come up from Seattle to visit, uh, all that stuff was out of the kitchen.

Martina Lancia: So they didn't know.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Oh, yeah. My grandfather. If my grandfather may have suspected, but it was like a topic that was never really addressed, you know?

Martina Lancia: So, so so you also you and your, um, you know, also, the kids were allowed, like you and your sister, like you grew up like that as well, even when you were.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Yeah.

Martina Lancia: Interesting.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: I mean, so we bacon almost every breakfast.

Martina Lancia: Oh, okay. So to this day. So for you it was-

Rabbi Lennard Thal: -you know, it just didn't mean much, you know, but we have a kosher home here in New York, but, you know, but, um, when I was a kid, we didn't even know my parents had grown up in a kosher home. So, you know, you can see how changes.

Martina Lancia: It's very interesting, you know, due to the fact that they grow up so, so differently and they ended up on the other side of the spectrum eating, you know, the opposite.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Well, we want anybody who is fully observant to feel comfortable eating here. Absolutely. My wife will not eat non-kosher meat when we go to a restaurant. I'm happy to have a steak or chicken dish in a restaurant. But we avoid all pork products.

Martina Lancia: Interesting. Um. And was that ever, um, a point of conflict or the community they were part of? Never, was never aware.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Yeah. I don't I don't remember any conflict around that kind of issue there. I think there was just sort of a live and let live kind of attitude, and people were going to do what they were going to do.

Martina Lancia: Interesting. Yeah. You know, did it affect that some people really, you know, it's a very serious aspect of-

Rabbi Lennard Thal: -Yeah. See also just you know, I mentioned there were some elderly people. Even when I was still in junior high and high school, who still followed, including a few of my relatives more traditional practice. So when they would come to the synagogue, they would separate. The men sat on one side, the women on the other, and there was like a compromise made. At one point, the sanctuary of the synagogue was renovated, and originally, like in many Orthodox schools, the the bimah was in the middle and the Torah in the middle. But when they renovated the sanctuary, they moved the bimah up to the front, and the first several rows were devoted to those people who wanted to sit separately. And then after the first few rows, any family that wanted to sit together could sit together.

Martina Lancia: Interesting. Um, so even if you left the community, um, when you were when you were very young, um, you mentioned that you still had ties.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Yeah. I was 18 when we left. Yeah. Sorry.

Martina Lancia: Um, yes. Do you have a- so we also talked about this early in the interview that the community also politically went from not necessarily the Jewish community, but the Jewish community at large went from Republicans to more conservative to liberal. And and, you know, Democratic. Um, how do you see the community, not only politically but in general, um, going in the future? Like, where do you see?

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Well, you know what? I I'm not sure I can predict the future, but what I will tell you is, you just reminded me of a conversation I'll never forget. My father died in 1983, and I, of course, flew out there. I delivered the eulogy and, uh, in the first day or two of Shiva, there were all these visitors. Uh, and by then there were lots of people in the Jewish community. I never knew when before I left in 1960. Okay. So I remember talking with this fellow who was more or less my age, a little bit younger. And, um, I said to him, what brought you to Bellingham? I knew he'd been there for about 15 years and he said, "The quality of life." And he said, "and why did you leave?" And I said, "The quality of life." Because I found the, I mean, I don't know whether I would have gone back anyway, but I was being a little bit of a wise guy. But the fact was that in the 1950s, politically and culturally, it was, you know, staid and somewhat conservative, and as I said before, I couldn't imagine that there would ever be a gay pride parade or that there would be, uh, you know, other things that have changed in voting practices or whatever. Um, and, uh, you know, we both sort of smiled at that exchange because we each understood what the other was saying, that everything had to do with timing. Timing was everything, right? Um, and, and I went back very, very often because not only when my father was still living, I would visit my parents, but also, you know, to see my mom, who she lived as a widow from 1983 to 2009, and she was eight and a half years younger than my dad. But she, you know, we buried her on her 98th birthday. Um, and so, you know, there was a reason for me to go back frequently. Um, and as I said, I had a lot of friends there. I still do. Look, I stay in touch with a number of my classmates. Not in the Jewish community, but in the general community and, you know, some of my closest friends among my class are no longer living. But just yesterday, for example, I got an email from one of my classmates, a woman who's an old friend who said, I think you might want to see pictures of we have a ladies ladies at lunch group that meet once a month or something like that. You know, different women from my class who get together, you know. Um, and so I stay in touch and, and I feel deeply connected. Part of what enhanced that connection was the decision on the part of our organization to build a sleepaway camp there, this camp Kalsman, um, which has had, I think, an important effect on the Jewish community in Bellingham. They send a lot of kids to this camp. It's only an hour drive south. Um, it's a beautiful facility. The reform movement has about a dozen sleepaway camps around North America. What happened was that very dear friends of my wife's and mine who live in Los Angeles, he's no longer living, but they were very grateful for the impact of the California camp had on their granddaughters and they were willing to make a major naming gift if we wanted to build a new camp in the northwest where their daughter was then their daughter lives on Bainbridge Island, just off the shore of Seattle and I was put in charge of raising the money to build that camp. When I retired, we had raised over $17 million, still needed to raise more because it was very costly to build, especially because the state of Washington had very strict regulations about environment stuff, and there was tax issues, and when Hurricane Katrina had hit in the South, it raised the price of lumber all over the country. So it was a long project, but it meant that I would come out to western Washington four or five times a year for four or five days at a time and that enabled me to maintain more ties to Bellingham and a number of people in Bellingham supported the building of the camp. So.

Martina Lancia: Yeah, that was, um, you know, and the narrator mentioned it and, uh, he told me briefly about the, you know, how they came to the decision of, um, trying to create this, this camp and how it was a point of pride.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Yeah, right. I'm a firm believer in the idea that Jewish camping may have as much impact on Jewish identity formation for youngsters as anything else that we do. You know, to send a kid there for 2 or 3 weeks at a crack and, and have these counselors who they could look up to, and people who were college age and who really cared about being Jewish and thought it was cool to be Jewish and all of that, that really has an impact. Um, when I retired, people donated money to the camp in my honor and so if you visit the camp, you will see that the main roads of the camp is called Lenny Lane. With apologies to the Beatles. Talked about Penny Lane. So.

Martina Lancia: Um, so. So I, I know that there were a few You moments of conflict, let's say, in the community at different times in its history. Um, and that they led to split.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Yes. That's right. That's right. And it goes back to that meeting I mentioned when, uh, Rabbi Hirschman from San Francisco and I went up there to help them realize that they really had become a reformed congregation. Some people were quite unhappy with that, and they split off. I don't remember whether it was about a dozen households, maybe 15, maybe 20. And they created a second congregation. I think they called it Etz Chaim, I think. Tree of life. I think that was the name of it. They met in a facility adjacent to the Episcopal Church, which not very far away from where the synagogue, the old synagogue was. Um, not that very far. Maybe a mile. Um, But that effort collapsed after a number of years. I don't know why, but there just wasn't enough interest, or problems financially, you'd have to ask other people about why it you know, it ended some, as I understand it, some of those people then came back to Beth Israel, but I don't know for sure. I think that was the only I'm trying to think of other conflict situations. That was certainly the one that stands out in my mind. That would have been about 19, I want to say about 1975, 77, maybe something like that. Tim could tell you exactly when that happened. Um, and I don't know how many years. Sorry. I don't know how many years that, um second congregation existed. Other conflicts may have arisen around the tenure of a rabbi. That happens everywhere. There wouldn't be any different from other towns. Other cities. Um, but, uh, I don't think there's been any significant conflict around a rabbi for a long time. When Rabbi Ungar left, it was of her own volition, as I understand it, and she was there for a number of years. My impression was that she was appreciated and well liked. Um, she told me at one point she felt the need to give herself a sabbatical and I don't know whether she came back after sabbatical. I just don't remember for sure. Um, and then Rabbi Samuels has been there ever since, and I have the impression that he's very popular in the community, so I can't, I don't if there were other major conflicts. I don't remember, but that was one for sure. And I could understand that because there were some people who were not ready to acknowledge the reality that more and more of the community saw themselves as reform and not conservative any longer. Now there is a famous incident from way back before I was born about a food fight at a- there was there's an article in the Bellingham Herald about this, Tim might have it, I have it in my files someplace. I can't remember now whether it was before World War I or after World War I, but apparently there was a rabbi who was a source of contention and he, there was an allegation that he was operating a still to produce some kind of alcohol, either in his house or backyard or whatever and he claimed that he was simply creating wine to use for, for religious purposes. Um, but, um, there was an argument that apparently broke out at a. A a celebration after a great meal, after a circumcision. And, uh, people started throwing food at each other [laughs] and a small community can imagine, um, and it is detailed in an article that appeared in the Bellingham Herald. Again, I know I've got it in my files someplace, but Tim Baker for sure can tell you about that. Okay, I guess that would qualify as a conflict, especially in a small community.

Martina Lancia: I agree.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Not exactly dignified.

Martina Lancia: Um, so I wanted to go back a little bit on-

Rabbi Lennard Thal: -By the way, one other thing I should have mentioned when you were talking about how the culture and the politics have evolved in the town before I was born, apparently there was something of a Ku Klux Klan chapter in Bellingham and there was certainly, um, you know, prejudice against African Americans. There was an incident where the famous singer Marian Anderson came to Bellingham to do a concert. An African American woman and she could not stay in a hotel there. We're not talking about Alabama or Mississippi. We're talking about near the Canadian border. And as I remember the story, I think she had to stay at the YWCA and all of that, you know, and then during the McCarthy era, I remember very clearly there was one man who who had a shop on Railroad Avenue. He had sold it was like, uh, tricks and jokes and, you know, novelties. And he was a polio survivor. He walked around on crutches all the time, and he was accused of being a communist. So, you know, it's hard to imagine in Bellingham of today what that but that happened back in the during the McCarthy era. I remember this very clearly. I was eleven or twelve years of age, something like that, maybe ten years of age. Um, and that was really uncomfortable. But another indication of how the town itself has changed.

Martina Lancia: Um, do you have any sense of how why it went from, um, you know, episodes like that to-

Rabbi Lennard Thal: -Well, you know.

Martina Lancia: Fortunately.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Just like Seattle changed and I mean, Western Washington. Look, look, when I was growing up, there was only one major corporation based in Seattle, Boeing aircraft. And the joke was that if the CEO of Bellingham caught a cold, the rest of the state would get pneumonia. Okay, now think about it. Who's based in Seattle? Starbucks. Microsoft? Amazon? Costco? I'm

forgetting one or two Nordstrom's, these major corporations, you know, and that drew all sorts of young professionals. So no big surprise. You know, starting in the '60s and the '70s, you know, it wasn't just a state of Boeing. And then, as it turned out, Boeing moved their headquarters to Chicago anyway, even though they still build aircraft in Everett, Washington. So a major change in the in the politics and in the demographics of western Washington, the state is cut in half by the Cascade Mountain. Go east of the Cascades is a whole different story, you know. Okay. I'm sorry, that's sort of-

Martina Lancia: -No, no, everything is welcome.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Yeah.

Martina Lancia: You can interject as many times as you want.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Right. But the question you asked me that led to that, what was it? Remember? Oh.

Martina Lancia: We were mentioned the change.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Yeah.

Martina Lancia: Changes over time. Yes.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Yeah.

Martina Lancia: Um.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Okay. Whatever.

Martina Lancia: So going back a little bit to, um. Probably. Well, not probably definitely before you were born. Maybe it's something you might have heard or that definitely a history. But do you know a little more about, um, the community that started, uh, the temple? Um, and, you know.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Yeah, my understanding is that that back around the turn of the century, you know, in the first decade of the 20th century, I think there were services that were held in the Oddfellows Hall. I don't know if you've heard of IOOF, International Order of Oddfellows. It was like a men's lodge of some sort. I believe it was on Holly Street, the main street, and but then, um, the congregation first met in, I think it was like an old house in Old Town, and then they built the whether they built that building on Broadway or whether they bought an existing building, I don't know. But I do know, as I mentioned earlier, that my grandfather was one of the ones who signed the charter when it became officially recognized as a congregation and when they marched with the Torah scrolls from one location to the other, um, and again, it was during that time it was primarily people who had come from the same small town in Lithuania. So there was this additional bit of kinship. They weren't just all, you know, shared religion, but they shared a sort of history of, of, uh, coming from the same part of Eastern Europe. It's not the same part, but the same town. Many of them. Not all, but many of them. Tim. Tim will be able to tell you more about that.

Martina Lancia: Um, so is there anything you would like to share about even not necessarily things we've discussed so far, even unrelated, that you think, um, would be important and should be part of this interview.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Um, well, uh, I suppose the most significant thing of late is the it was a long process of raising the money to build the new synagogue, which was dedicated, you know, a couple of years ago. Um, I saw it while it was still being built. So I haven't been out there in the last couple of years to see because of the pandemic. I don't travel quite so much. Right. I'm eager to see the completed facility. There were a lot of people involved with getting the land and building this space. Um, it was really important, partly because the old facility not only no longer could seat everybody. But it was built at a time when, you know, people didn't think twice about disabilities, so you had to climb a bunch of steps to get into the sanctuary, whether you entered from the main entrance or you went through the basement. You had to climb a bunch of steps and that that must have been very difficult and challenging for some people. So I was thrilled, you know, when we built it. Um, uh, you know, there's an old joke about a speaker who comes to a congregation for the first time, and the president, um, meets him at the airport, and they're driving in to speak to the guest, says, you know, I've never been here. I'm very eager to get acquainted with your community. You'll enjoy seeing our synagogue. It sleeps 300. [laughs] Like a boat that sleeps 12. Um, so, um, uh, that, you know, a major milestone. I was invited to speak at the 100th anniversary of the congregation. I flew out there and did. That was when Rabbi Enger was still the rabbi. They had a big celebration at the country club. Um, and, uh, at that time, if I remember correctly, I talked a little bit about the community's history as I understood it and how the evolution had taken place, you know, to, uh, being a reformed congregation. Um, there were a lot of people there I didn't know, you know, because I'd been away for so long. And, um, um, what else can I tell you that we haven't touched on?

Rabbi Lennard Thal: You know, to give you an idea a little bit about some sometimes how there could be tension in a small Jewish community in which I grew up, you know, between the needs of acculturation into American society and the needs of the synagogue. I remember that my mother had a big fight with Cantor Gardner because, uh, when I was eleven or twelve, I did not show up for service for Torah, for Simchat Torah, because I had there was a major I think it was a Boy Scout event that I was involved in and conflicted. And the cantor got incensed because I was approaching bar mitzvah and I wasn't there for that holiday and he apparently called and got into something of a screaming match with my mother. My mother was not exactly a bashful person, nor was he. So it was no big secret that they didn't love each other very much. Um, but ultimately they made peace. But that will give you an example of how there could be tension, you know, at least at that time in this small community. Now, I don't know if anybody would notice if some youngster didn't show up for a particular holiday, but when there were only four kids in that generation, you know, 25% of them were missing. [laughs] So, um, other than that, I don't know that, you know, after the four of us had our bar bat mitzvah. So then there were lots of kids who came up and, you know, so for whatever reason, there just were no kids in the next age group up from us. And so that's why, I guess there had not been that same, uh, felt need to find somebody, You know who could prepare youngsters for a bar mitzvah? So that was a that was a major turning point for the congregation to go from no clergy to bring in someone to do bar mitzvah tutoring, who then, you know, hung around and became the spiritual leader and then eventually decided he was really a rabbi and, um, and was known as Rabbi Gardner for a number of years prior to his retirement. So if I think of other things, Martina, I'll be glad to get in touch with you.

Martina Lancia: Um, so I was thinking, have you ever thought about in your life to move back to Bellingham?

Rabbi Lennard Thal: You know, it's an interesting question because when I was working on the camp, you know, I loved the northwest, and it's so beautiful. Um, but, you know, my wife, first of all, if I moved anywhere, we'd move back to Los Angeles. We spent, you know, first of all, when we were first married, we lived there for three years. Then we came east for graduate school for three years, each of us back here. And then we moved back to California in 1973. We raised our daughters there, and we have, I should have mentioned at the outset, we have two daughters, Ilona and Ariella. Each is married for many years. Each has two children and we go back and forth to, before the pandemic, we were very often, even during the pandemic, we spent 13 months hunkered down at the home of our older daughter because she's the she's the head of a large private school, and as such, she's entitled to the use of a very spacious home that had a swimming pool and a tennis court, five bedrooms. So we went out there. When the pandemic first hit New York, we were planning to go for 19. This was 2020. We planned to go for Passover anyway and she said, get on a plane. Come now before it gets much worse. So instead of waiting till April to go out there, we went out like in the middle of March, and we stayed and we stayed and we stayed and they kept saying, why go back? You know, here you can sit around the pool in the wintertime, you know, there you're going to deal with a cold winter and the pandemic was still strong here. And we stayed until April of 2021. Um, and we went back for ten days in early October, and we went for two weeks recently for Thanksgiving and part of Hanukkah. We'll go back in February. So would I would we ever live in Bellingham? I kind of doubt it. You know, uh, first of all, I don't have family there. Like, we there were lots and lots of family members there when I was a kid. That was a big part of my life. All the holidays were with families and whatnot. Um, I could see living in Seattle, but I also have a huge amount of family on both sides of my family and both my mom's and my dad's, but more likely, if we were to move, we'd move to LA, because I think that's where our kids are going to remain and our grandkids and our grand dog. I'm a dog lover.

Martina Lancia: I have a delicious no doubt.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: We have a delicious goldendoodle dog. So.

Martina Lancia: Um, so another question I have is, um, about your decision to become a rabbi. Um, how did that-

Rabbi Lennard Thal: -When I was 12, I decided I was going to be a lawyer. Two of my best friends fathers were lawyers. One was one of these other kids who, becoming a bar mitzvah. One was a non-Jewish family and I thought their fathers were kind of interesting people. I was very interested in politics. I was interested in debating. I was, you know, I always was interested in politics, I still am, and I thought it fit who I was, and I when I told my parents in the seventh grade that I was going to be a lawyer. They thought that was great. They said, that fits and my friends all thought it was fit. So when I went to Princeton, there was no question I was there for an undergraduate education. But I'm on my way to law school. And, um, while I was there in it was the first semester of my sophomore year. We were assigned faculty advisors at random before we selected a major. And this guy was from the Department of Oriental Studies. And he said, you know, he was obliged to interview the students assigned to him, and we were obliged to go. Neither of us really wanted to have to have the meeting, but whatever. So he said, "What are you going to do when you leave here and go to law school?" And he rolled his eyes and said something like, "You know, the world needs another lawyer, like a giraffe needs a longer neck." You know, That's what I want to do. "That's fine," he said. "But you're at a fine university. Do something really interesting while you're here. You don't have to major in anything to go to law school." I realized he was right, and I had the previous semester. My second semester of freshman year enrolled in a sociology of religion course that fascinated me and in the semester in which this meeting took place, I had enrolled in what they called Old Testament

literature in the Hebrew Bible, and I was enjoying that. I thought, you know what? I'll major in religion. And I wrote my senior thesis on the relates to this interview on the acculturation patterns of American Jews with different generations. We became more and more American and what the issues were that they dealt with. So, um, but nothing prompted me to think about this decision that was now eight or ten years old. In 1964, I enrolled at Stanford Law School. I was lucky to get into a fine law school. But in those days, the law school there was very conservative, and I was on fire with social justice issues, with the war in Vietnam, with civil rights, with the Farm Workers Union in California, Cesar Chavez, etc., and my law professors didn't show any interest in that stuff at all. Um, and like many people in their first year of law school, it was the first year law school was really like boot camp. You know, I hated it. At that time, Linda and I started to get involved and she grew up in Palo Alto. Um, but she was going off to Israel that next year and my second year, I decided I'm going to really think this through and my second year, I realized that this was not how I wanted to spend my life. Then I applied to the Hebrew Union College. I met the rabbi who handled admissions at the Reform Movement camp the summer after my first year. There were rabbis there in every session who really validated these concerns I had. Even though my law professors didn't seem to care about it, and I got in to the seminary and then decided, I've done two years, I'll finish. And I did. I stayed because she then made a decision that I made a decision while in Israel to enroll at Stanford so we could be together. So I didn't want her to come to Stanford, and I would have just left to start rabbinical school in Los Angeles. So, um, my third year of law school, the cloud was gone. I enjoyed it more than I had the first two years. But part of the enjoyment was I knew I was not going to spend my life doing that. I was always interested in social justice, I still am, and you know, I look back over the positions I've had as a rabbi and I've been very fortunate to be in a place I had only three jobs. Associate dean at the Hebrew Union College for nine years. Regional director for the reform movement, based in LA for 14 years. And then the vice president. Senior vice president of the union nationally. North America, I should say, for 12 years until I retired.

Martina Lancia: Um, this makes me, um, think of another question. Um, so you said you were always very interested in politics since you were a very young. Um. Was that something your family also your parents fostered? Like, were they-

Rabbi Lennard Thal: -Not really, but as I said, Bellingham in those days was an Eisenhower town. But my parents, my mother for sure voted for Adlai Stevenson. And so she was a distinct minority. I always appreciated that about my mother. She held her own talking to neighbors who were passionate about Eisenhower, etcetera. Um, so my parents were interested, but not nearly at the same level as I became interested.

Martina Lancia: Did they ever, um, you know, was there ever a doubt of moving back home for them? Like, or they consider the US their home?

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Oh, my mother was born in Seattle. My father was born in Lithuania, but he was three when he came. So. Yeah, as a matter of fact, my father, before I got interested in genealogy, my father, when I would ask him, "So tell me about this place you were born. I know you don't remember it," but he said "No. They call it skopecek." Nobody calls it that. My dad, called it skopchek. the Yiddish was skopecek, but he sort of collapsed the skopecek to skopchek. I said, "How do you spell that?" He said, "Skopziges." [spells out] I found out later that was just wrong. And, um, my mother's family came from what they used to call white Russia. Now it's called Belarus from towns outside of Minsk. Um, and my, her father, um, and her mother got married in Europe, but all of their five children, my mother was the youngest of five were born in the States. But before they emigrated to the States, my grandfather went to Asia. He was part of the Russian army during the Boxer Rebellion and, um, the word was that when they first came to the United States, they lived on the Lower East Side for a couple of years before they moved to Seattle. And my father and my grandfather, or rather, um, knew enough Mandarin as a result of having gone to Asia, that he would go into a Chinese laundry with and talk, you know, a little bit of Chinese, you know, on the Lower East Side. I don't know if that story is accurate or not, but I was told that several times when I was a kid. Um, but then his wife, whom I never met, my grandmother, my mother's mother, my mom was only 15 when her mother died. Um, but she had at that point, three sisters in Seattle. And so they moved to Seattle to be there. So consequently, my mother was born there in 1911. And, uh, I really feel deep roots on both sides of my family with western Washington, you know, um, since, you know, my grandfather came in 1906 and brought his little boy in 1907 and his wife. And so there was no question in my mind that that's my, you know, my home.

Martina Lancia: So for them as well, it was always-

Rabbi Lennard Thal: -pardon me?

Martina Lancia: So for them as well. Like they, they-

Rabbi Lennard Thal: -Yeah they deep deep roots. No, they would never move back to Europe. No. My mother never had any sense of connection to to Europe. My mother's family I mean when when she married my dad, as I think I started to say her father was worried about her moving to Bellingham because the Jewish community was so small and my my dad was a violin teacher. My grandfather would use the Yiddish term a musikant. He says, how is he going to make a living and how can you raise children to

be Jewish there, you know? But ultimately, he made a living and they raised a Jewish family. My sister certainly is practicing her Judaism. She lives in the Portland area. Um, and so that was never a question, except in my grandfather's mind initially.

Martina Lancia: Right, right. Um, so, um, first, all the questions that I had, uh, we covered. We covered all of them. So thank you so much for for this opportunity. It's been very, very, very, um, a pleasure for me to listen to the story and if you have any, uh, future, um, things you would like to add, you know, no hesitation.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Um, if you have a few minutes.

Martina Lancia: Absolutely.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: I will look and see if I can find a few of these things in my files to show you.

Martina Lancia: Absolutely.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: Okay. Just, you can just-

Martina Lancia: Absolutely.

Rabbi Lennard Thal: I'll, I'll be right back with you.