Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Freedman, Deborah Oral History Interview

October 6, 2021

Eleonora Anedda: All right. Today is the 6th of October, 2021. Um, my name is Eleonora Anedda, and I am interviewing Deb Friedman on behalf of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. Um. Hi, Deb. How are you?

Deborah Freedman: Hello. Welcome. Thank you.

Eleonora Anedda: Um, so, just to start, could you tell me a little bit about your relationship with Tacoma?

Deborah Freedman: Sure. Like many people, I moved to Tacoma, so we call it Tacoma by choice. We have chosen to be residents of the state. Um, and, uh, I think we'll find that our, our narrative over and over again is that our Jewish community is made up of people who chose to come to Tacoma or to come to Washington. In fact, there was a third state rule, um, that often people had lived in at least two states before coming to Washington. Um, and in my time here, I worked for the Tacoma Public Library, where I had the great pleasure of learning about doing genealogy research and the even greater pleasure of doing preschool story time and telling stories to little kids. And so when I retired from the library, it was quite natural that I would tell stories about history, and that's what I have been doing.

Eleonora Anedda: And can you tell me a bit more about the histories that you've been telling?

Deborah Freedman: Um, I volunteered pretty full time for about ten years for Tacoma Historical Society, and during that time, um, we were telling stories through exhibits at the museum, and we started telling stories for children. And we created a series of books that we called 21 tales. And they were short stories about local history, and we were able to get funding so that we could give the books to the schools. So sometimes we gave one out to the public schools so that the teachers would have those books available to teach the local curriculum. And after a few years of that, then I was able to, through Tacoma Historical Society, publish my own book on my research on Tacoma's Jewish community. Um, and in another real barn burner about the banking history in Tacoma.

Eleonora Anedda: Lovely. And could you tell me more about your research?

Deborah Freedman: Sure. You know, I always say that it always starts at the end. Um, when our son

was being confirmed, we were looking for a confirmation project for his class, and we talked to the folks at the cemetery. There's one Jewish cemetery outside of Tacoma, and we ask, is there a project there for the kids? And they said, no, but does anybody know how to use this thing called a computer? Um, we're back in the 90s, and, um, we've never really done any recording of our cemetery and our records around three by five cards. And I suggested that I'd be happy to read the cemetery, to do inscriptions of the headstones to create, in those days a book of of who was buried there. And I said if they would be willing to share that information with the library, then that would be a win win. And so I was working on that and, um, discovered you really need to know Hebrew. Um, but I had help from the community. Um, and I will always be proud of the research I've done is. It's okay, but what will last beyond everything else is that as a result of the research, we discovered that there were nearly 75 graves in the cemetery that over the years had been unmarked. And I was able to identify those names from the records, but there was no headstone there. And so our Tacoma Jewish community raised those funds, and in the fall of 2000 marked those graves. And as Herman Kleiner said, it was like a scrapbook of our community, a photo album, and there were faces missing. And he said that our God knew who was there. But we needed we needed those for us. Um, and that will always be something that I'm so proud of, that this community did that is going to be there for, I hope, for centuries. Really proud of that. So at that time, as I was working on that, the State Jewish Historical Society was working on a book that became Family of Strangers. And they discovered that no one had really ever written about the Jewish community in Tacoma. And because I was doing some research on those burials, they came to me and we worked in the library. And you know how things start. I was just going to do a little I was just going to do a little bit of, well, let's look at the High Holidays articles. In September. I was just going to do a little bit of research to help them have a file on Tacoma. And we discovered that quite by accident, the Tacoma Public Library had never started a file on the Jewish community. The building index talked about one synagogue, but there was not. There were files on Methodists and Baptists, but there was just they never started a file on Tacoma Jews. And it was clearly just an oversight. And I just think that they didn't think about their being Jews in Tacoma. And so I was going to build a file for Tacoma Library, and I was going to help with the book. And 20 years later, I was still researching. Um, one really unique advantage I had was that because I worked in the library were the old newspaper microfilms were. I had a very good friend in our Northwest Room special history collection department who allowed me to come in with him at seven in the morning, and we spent two hours in a dark room going through microfilm before the public came in. And that way we weren't taking the reader the machine away from the public. And so I ended up magically discovering that if you want to read about a class of Jewish merchants, their living depended on their ads in the newspaper. And so they would regularly take out newspaper advertising. And because of that, the way publishing works, the regular newspaper advertisers just happened to get social mentions, so if their brother came from Chicago to visit, it'd be in the paper. And if a sister in law came for a birthday, it'd be in the paper. And those tiny little details are what really helped fill together. And then I went on to what became kind of my personal bias is that in order to study our history, you have to look at the women. You can't just look at the men. And the only way you can understand the relationships is if you look at the women and the wives and the sisters and how they were connected. And if you have a company known as Feist and Bachrach, you know that either Mr. Feist married a Bachrach, or Mr. Bachrach married a Feist, and

you don't know which came first. But those partnerships were usually based on those family relationships. So I kind of got into a pattern of, I needed to do the genealogy in order to figure out the families. And that's when I was able to discover that of maybe a surnames. In Tacoma of people who were involved in the Jewish community just in the 1800s. There really were clusters of families. There'd be a cluster from Hungaria. There'd. Be a cluster from Latvia. There'd be a cluster that came through Chicago, um, many Prussians, many Germans. Um, but they were really clusters of families. And it wasn't that just one boy came and decided to live in Tacoma. No, he came because his mom's cousin lived here and gave him a job. Um, so his family connections became a really important part of that. Yeah.

Eleonora Anedda: That's wonderful. Thank you for all the detail, I love it. Um, so, um, you you were mentioning a few things, uh, about, uh, the book and how the research came, um, uh, to life. But, um, if, uh, for example, if you were. Well, you're talking to me, and I'm someone who hasn't ever been to Tacoma or Washington State. So what would you say are the most important things that a person like me should know about the Jewish community? Yes.

Deborah Freedman: Yes, yes. Well, for one thing, if you're not familiar with the geography in, in Washington, uh, understand that in the early days of, uh, our white pioneers in Washington state, Seattle and Tacoma were really pretty much the same size. And, um, Tacoma's big boost came in 1873. That was going to be the terminus of a northern route of a transcontinental railroad. And we beat Seattle out for that honor. And, uh, since 1869, there's been a pretty serious competition between Seattle and Tacoma. Um, and that really is a part of everything we do. In fact, in one of my first 21 tales book, I had a reader tell me you used the s word four times, so I had to figure out how to write the book without actually saying the word to Seattle. You know, I root for the Seahawks. They're a regional team, so that's very real. Um, but in reality, what happened was with the 1893 banking panic, um, Tacoma had been building and building and building and had, uh, a very relevant topic right now, an incredibly high municipal debt. And the debt of the city was $5 million in 1893. We had just purchased, uh, Light and Power Company. We still have Tacoma City Light, our power. Uh, and we had borrowed millions of dollars. And then this banking panic hits in New York and Tacoma has been said to be the worst hit city in the entire nation because of the timing of that. And so if you have a city of Jewish merchants who are depending on the economy to sell goods and merchandise, if the economy crashes. For Tacoma, this was bigger than our depression of the 20s and 30s. Um, you don't have anyone who can buy your merchandise. And so the little guy who has a few secondhand goods and some odds and ends of things and really not strong credit, he's going to go broke. And then after he closes, the middle, guy goes broke. And after a while, the rich guys are like, why should we be in business anymore? There's no economy here to support it. And what happened was Tacoma lost over half of her population and the majority of its Jewish population. And wherever they went, whatever city they went to, wherever they started over, they didn't brag about having been in Tacoma. They didn't tell their kids sometimes that they had lived here, and they definitely didn't. They just omitted it from the resume because they were embarrassed to have not succeeded in business. So the result of that is you have a gold rush in 1897. Seven. Seattle has a huge advantage because they already have exclusive shipping contracts to Alaska to get to Alaska. You can only go from Seattle and that is when Seattle really started booming. It was the death toll

for Tacoma in relationship. And so over the next 100, 120 years, Seattle's population grew, Seattle's Jewish population grew, and Tacoma's Jewish population really struggled. And what we are finding to this day is that every decade or two, we have another turnaround of population. And we do not have longevity in our Jewish community, which means we don't have someone saying, my grandpa built that building. If that. That's big picture.

Eleonora Anedda: I don't know, but but it makes sense. Thank you for sharing that. It's, um, I appreciate it. Um, so another question that I have for you is, um, what would you how would you say that the Jewish community in Tacoma is different from other Jewish communities in the country?

Deborah Freedman: Yeah, I would imagine that we're very much like any other community. But like as I just said, I think that the big piece we're missing is the five and six generations of families who can who were born here. I was just trying to think yesterday could identify anyone under 60 who was born into our Temple Beth El in Tacoma, uh, or, you know, the formation of it. And I don't think we would have more than 1 or 2 people. Uh, so that turnover, um, within the past 30 or 40 years, we've, um, had a lot of people come here always. You come here for jobs? Um, many people move here from California because the housing prices are less. Um, the job market is strong, housing is reasonable. Um, but we've had many, many medical professionals come. And so if there's a stereotype of who our Jews are, who are coming in now, it's it's doctors and psychiatrists and psychologists and, and professional professional people coming in there. Yeah.

Eleonora Anedda: Um, so. Oh, sorry. Go ahead.

Deborah Freedman: I was just going to add one thing that is kind of a brief overview of our congregation, which we always talk about is our first Jews that we've been able to identify in the 1800s, practiced what became a reform style of Judaism. And the people who came here came knowing that they wouldn't have kosher food, that they would have their stores open on Shabbat. And so they came knowing that. So maybe the less observant were the ones who came here. Um, and the reform style that was emerging suited what their life was like. Um, but in the 1890s, we had another wave of immigration. And in Tacoma it was a wave of interrelated families from Latvia. I know that Spokane has Romanian, some other. But in Tacoma our Jews were were coming in the 1890s from a cluster in Latvia, and they were what we would now think of as orthodox. And I cannot imagine what they felt when they came here and saw that the B'nai B'rith were serving chicken and cream sauce and ham at their dinner. Um, that was a cultural shock. And so this cluster of families formed their own chevra, uh, bought their, commissioned their own Torah, rented their own building, started their own congregation. So in that same time period when Tacoma is struggling financially, we're struggling to support two very diverse congregations. Um, and over the years, neither congregation could afford to maintain a long term rabbi. And it wasn't until 1960 that Rabbi Rosenthal came to Tacoma, and he was hired by what was then the reform congregation, and he would do services there on Friday night. And he gradually became trusted enough to go over to what was then the conservative congregation and do services on Saturday morning. And he is credited with negotiating a merger to bring those two together into what became Tacoma's Temple Beth El. Um, and it took generations for that to to blend. And our congregation still to this day recognizes

that we are a merger of those two. And we honor that in that our Friday night services are more reform, and our Saturday morning services tend to be more conservative. And I think that that history is very much a part of of who we are today.

Eleonora Anedda: Yeah. That's so interesting. Thank you for explaining that. Um, so you said something, uh, before you said that, um, the first Jewish groups that were coming into town that they that they knew that they couldn't eat kosher, that they they had to have businesses open on Shabbat, which totally makes sense because, you know, it was they knew that it was just them. And so they had to adapt to the customs in this new city. So when would you say, um, that, um, people could decide that there were enough Jewish people in town that they could decide to close on Shabbat and, um, and then, you know, they had the opportunity to eat kosher.

Deborah Freedman: No. In the 1880s, they would close for high holidays, and it would have to be in the newspaper because they would say, Pacific Avenue, our main street is going to be dark. So they would warn the community, shop at a Jewish store, because today is Yom Kippur. Um, but I don't think that closing stores on Saturday really came into practice until we had a strong orthodox cluster of families. Yeah, it just wasn't an option.

Eleonora Anedda: Makes sense. Um, so, um, I have, uh, one last question for you. Um, so, as you know, in November of 1885, um, um, white citizens in Tacoma expelled several hundred Chinese residents who were, you know, peacefully living in the city. Um, and, um, I wanted to know if you have any information about how the Jewish community at the time reacted to, um, this event.

Deborah Freedman: Yeah. Um, so first of all, to kind of set the stage for that, um, there was a lot of anti-Chinese sentiment coming out of San Francisco, and there were federal anti exclusion laws. Um, so it was a national problem. but on the Pacific Northwest, we copied what San Francisco did. We named our stores after San Francisco stores. We went there to shop. So we kind of idolized. And they joke that everybody said that when they retired, they wanted to go live in San Francisco. So there was that, um, it was very much a labor issue. Um, Tacoma had, um, a pretty good year in 1883, 1884 started declining. Um, it was also a part because the when the railroad came, they brought Chinese workers with them. They were able to contract with Chinese bosses. Say, I need 500 men out here to do this job. You talk to them and they'll do the work. Um, so there was a little bit of resentment about living under the thumb of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Um, but the meetings were regional. They were all over the coast. It just so happened that Tacoma people were a little more efficient about it. Um, and probably the death toll on it was when the Chamber of Commerce bought into it and, um, passed a resolution that people should let their Chinese workers go. They should terminate their jobs. And leading up to the actual expulsion, we think that there were probably 1200 Chinese people living in Tacoma. Over half of them were, um, intimidated into leaving on their own. And in that morning in November, the remaining couple hundred were. Yes, we helped them pack, dragged them out of their houses, packed them on and made them march to the train station and buy their own tickets out of town. So when you say, how did the Tacoma Jewish community respond to that? We all know two Jews, three opinions. There's no one opinion of that. Um, it was a time when if you were dependent on the goodwill of the community, you had to show up

at the anti-Chinese meetings or your building would be chalked like the hobo markings. Um, there was one family of the gross brothers who had the courage in their ads to say that all people were welcome in their store. That was pretty incredible. Um, there was one man named Meyer Kaufman who had just come here from Seattle. He was a new man on the block. He was trying to figure out how he could make his business succeed when others were more established than he was. He became very active in that. He became basically the treasurer for that committee. Um, he worked on the arrangements. He was arrested with the group. He was indicted with the group. He was exonerated with the group. And it became his claim to fame and launched his political career. And so when Washington became a state in 1889, he was candidate for state treasurer. And two years later, God struck him dead. I'm just saying there's the timing. Um, but, um, it was very strong. Um, I remember when I first started doing this research, talking with the late Rabbi Rosenthal, and he said that he really felt that the Chinese expulsion was the beginning of the sullying of Tacoma's reputation. Um, that it really that that was a turning point for how the rest of the country looked at us. And it wasn't until the Narrows Bridge fell down that we had something else to be totally embarrassed about. Yeah. So to this day, a complex, complex topic.

Eleonora Anedda: Yeah. Um, thank you for sharing your knowledge about this. Um, so, um, is there anything else that you'd like to talk about in the interview? Something that maybe, uh, you've already, uh, touched upon, but. Or something that I haven't asked that you'd like to, um, to say. And you can think about it.

Deborah Freedman: We haven't talked about the cemetery. Um, in many communities, the cemetery comes first. You know that you can set aside some of those daily practices. You can set aside some of those observances. You can travel to another city to have a Jewish wedding. But if your wife dies in childbirth, you have to have a cemetery where you are. So the Jewish cemetery in Tacoma really was the beginning of our organized Jewish community. And in the 1880s, um, they formed an organization that was the first Hebrew Benevolent Society of Tacoma. And I think I had an impression that cemeteries were formed by old men. Um, but ours were formed by young men, some who had just married, some who were looking to marry, whose wives might die in childbirth. Um, for me, that's always been a very impactful thought, um, that those are the men who formed that cemetery. And it was very much formed to be the beginning of an organized congregation in Tacoma. Um, and what is unique is that it was formed as a benevolent society that happens often around the world. And people who have, especially who have immigrated from a particular area will band together and they'll borrow money if need, um, help with hospitals and maintain a burial space. Well, our cemetery still is a benevolent society. It is not connected to any specific temple or synagogue. It does not sell plots. Um, you don't get a deed that says I bought this land. You're still a member. And your dues support the Jewish community before you and after you. So I think that's that's probably highly unusual. I can't say unique, but highly unusual for it to still be all the way back to the 1880s and still a benevolent society.

Eleonora Anedda: Yeah, that says something about the community, I think. Right.

Deborah Freedman: Either that or we never rewrote the bylaws.

Eleonora Anedda: Um, well, um, if there's, um, if there isn't anything else that you'd like to say, um, I can I can stop the recording.

Deborah Freedman: Terrific. And thank you so much for the honor. Much appreciated.

Eleonora Anedda: Thank you for taking the time. I will stop the recording.