Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Powered by Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle

Recording Date: July 24, 2023
Last Edited: October 27, 2026

David Altaras

SUMMARY

David Altaras reflects on his childhood in a religious Jewish immigrant community in early 1900s Seattle, highlighting his strict religious education, cultural and linguistic differences, and strong community bonds. He describes observing religious rituals, participating in synagogue life, and transitioning to broader social interactions, including the impacts of Japanese internment during the war. Ultimately, he attributes his success to determination and family values, expressing a wish to be remembered as a loving and honest person who cherishes family and well-being.

CONTENT WARNING: This interview discusses themes of death, grief, racism, and discrimination.

Dean Altaras: Hi, everyone. Dean Altaras here. I'm here with my father, David Altaras. Um, it's, uh, Monday, July 24th, 2023. And I wanted to record some of my dad's history. Uh, my dad was born in 1933 into the Seattle Sephardic community. And, uh, I want to learn a little bit more about his story. So I'm going to ask some questions, and off we go. So, dad, um, you were born, as I said, in 1933, into an immigrant community to immigrant parents. And just, uh, wanted to get your thoughts on what it was like to grow up in a, in an immigrant community, in early 1900s of Seattle.

David Alteras: It was. It was different. I didn't lead the life of a regular run-of-the-mill kid because, kosher home. We kept kosher. Quite religious. Um, while other kids were getting out of school and doing intramural sports and baseball or basketball or whatever, I was going to Hebrew school.

Dean Altaras: Every day of the week?

David Alteras: Monday through Friday.

Dean Altaras: Oh, boy.

David Alteras: And in later life, when we were raising children and raising you, uh, it was either Tuesday or Thursday or maybe Monday and Wednesday, maybe two days a week. I went five days a week until I was 13 years old. You went rain or shine. The synagogue is where we met in the after school. It was seven or eight blocks from my house. And you went, as I say, rain or shine. Yeah. And, uh, it-it-was, it was different. But I have fond memories of everything that went on. I have fond memories of going to White Kosher Meat Market with my dad; it was run by Sam Azose, my uncle. And I have fond memories of going to Maimon's 24th Avenue, 24th and Yesler Market, and there was Bension and Isaac Maimon running the store. And I have a lot of good memories, even though we were quite religious.

Dean Altaras: What was it like being in a community, here you are in America, but the community that you're in is all, you know, speaking Spanish or Greek or Turkish, um, and it's just different than the people.

David Alteras: It was very different.

Dean Altaras: The community was different than from the people that you went to school with, let's say.

David Alteras: I will tell you how different it was. My mother didn't read or write English. My father, his English was pretty good, and he went and got his second papers, which made him a citizen of the United States. And there was a big celebration when that happened.

Dean Altaras: And was your mother never a citizen?

David Alteras: My mother was never a citizen. My mother died an alien.

Dean Altaras: I did not know that.

David Alteras: So that's one reason that my Ladino is so good. It's very good. There are a few guys, their Ladino is a little better than mine, but mine is better than most because there was very little English in the house. It was mostly Ladino.

Dean Altaras: Interesting, interesting. And so that in your early years, did you primarily, I mean, your friend group, your, you know, your extended group of friends. Were they all from within the Sephardic community early on?

David Alteras: Not all. I had-I had a variety of friends I was in. I was-I was in an Italian neighborhood, so I had Italian friends. I had some Asian friends.

Dean Altaras: Yeah, I know, I know that we'll get to that a little later. Right.

David Alteras: And, uh, I had a broad spectrum of friends.

Dean Altaras: Yeah, yeah. And did you find that your parents, uh, did they pretty much stick with their immediate peers from their community?

David Alteras: Absolutely.

Dean Altaras: They did not branch out-

David Alteras: -they had no-

Dean Altaras: except for maybe commerce and so forth.

David Alteras: All the friends that they had were their weekend friends where they played ??PUSNAH?? and they played all kinds of games and sat and had bolemas and borekas-it was all Sephardics, not just Jewish. They were Sephardics.

Dean Altaras: Right, right. So back in that-during that time, there was a-I don't know if a division is the right word-but a separation between the Sephardic and the Ashkenazis-

David Alteras: -a big separation, yeah. Yeah.

Dean Altaras: They just didn't mix.

David Alteras: No, no. There was there were so many and and they were friends from childhood.

Dean Altaras: Right.

David Alteras: They weren't just random Sephardic friends. They were friends that they all knew each other all of their lives.

Dean Altaras: Interesting. So another, you know, just talking about your your growing up in an Orthodox community, just one question I had was just to hear from you what a typical Shabbat or a Jewish holiday was like, you know from sundown to sundown.

David Alteras: A typical Friday for example, was: there were no showers, of course. My ma stuck me in the tub and scrubbed me on Friday, and if I needed a haircut, I went and got a haircut. There was no cooking because all the Sephardic ladies cooked on Thursday evening. They cooked for the whole weekend, so there was no cooking on Friday. And, um, they, they had to prepare meals for Friday night, Saturday and Sunday. And it was, it was different. And of course, on Saturday morning-on Friday night I went to synagogue, almost every Friday night. But my father didn't because he had a shoe repair shop, and he would get home late and I would go without him. And, um, I sang in the choir at the Bikur Cholim, and our teacher was Sam Goldfarb, and I still remember the tunes and I'm 90 years old.

Dean Altaras: Yeah. Yeah. And wasn't Sam Goldfarb a pharmacist?

David Alteras: No, no.

Dean Altaras: I'm thinking of something else.

David Alteras: Sam Goldfarb's family are the Goldfarb jewelers.

Dean Altaras: Okay. Got it, got it. And one funny story I remember you telling me about Shabbat was that your mother, Noni to me, would, uh, pre-tear the toilet paper.

David Alteras: That was-

Dean Altaras: -that was mostly newspaper, or?

David Alteras: That was-that was mostly on Kippur.

Dean Altaras: On Kippur? Okay.

David Alteras: On Kippur. But my-my average Saturday was go to synagogue every Saturday with Papu Ben Ezra, my grandpa. I'm talking every Saturday, not now and then. And then, uh, right after the service, I would go with Dave Azose, my cousin, to his home, which was about a half a block away, and we would have the usual huevos haminados and borekas and bolemas and the whole business. And then we would stay dressed. We would meet up with maybe Joe Calvo or a couple other guys from synagogue. We would play Monopoly on Saturday afternoon. And the reason we stayed dressed was because at 4:00 or 5:00, we were heading back to the synagogue for Minchan Ma'ariv.

Dean Altaras: Yeah. So it was all consuming.

David Alteras: Very.

Dean Altaras: But you didn't know any different at that point.

David Alteras: I didn't, I didn't know any different. I mean, that was, that was an expected way of life.

Dean Altaras: And did you resent it or did you look forward to it?

David Alteras: No, I didn't, I didn't resent it. I just accepted it. I mean, I thought that was the proper thing for a Jewish kid to do.

Dean Altaras: Right. And it was a time that you got to be with all your friends.

David Alteras: That's right. Yeah. That's right.

Dean Altaras: Yeah. Interesting. So with all of that, you know, the close knit nature of the community and living in an Orthodox home, how do you think that Jewish values have shaped your life moving forward?

David Alteras: Um. I don't know that it changed my life. I will say that-

Dean Altaras: -shaped your life?

David Alteras: I always, I always had a feeling that I was very proud to be Jewish, because I was old enough to know what was going on. Jews were prominent in Hollywood, and they were prominent in science, and they were prominent in medicine. And there was a long list of Jewish Nobel Prize winners, and I was always very proud to be Jewish.

Dean Altaras: Mhm. Mhm. Yeah. So moving on into maybe a little later in life. You know, I understand when you were younger, you were pretty much in your community. But then I'm sure with school, middle school and high school, you started expanding your friend group.

David Alteras: I did.

Dean Altaras: And I recall you talking about some of your Italian friends and notably your Asian friends.

David Alteras: I kind of drifted away from just Jewish friends only. And I had Filipino friends and Japanese friends and Gentile friends. And it was it was a broad spectrum of friends.

Dean Altaras: And I remember you talking to me about how painful it was when some of your friends were interned during the war. And so I wanted to just ask you about that and describe your, your mood and the mood in the community during that time and, and why it was impactful for you.

David Alteras: I remember it vividly. And I was only eight years old when Pearl Harbor took place. And I remember it was a Sunday, and shortly after that we had a prominent Japanese family just a half a block away. He was a prominent dentist, and we had another one in business just a few doors away, and in no time at all, they were gone. Their homes were just boarded up and they were gone. And I mean, shortly after that, I felt like these people, they didn't investigate them. Did they have a tie with the Japanese government, or what? I mean, were they spies? Which I doubt very much. They just-if you were Japanese, you got rounded up and you went to the camp. And-and Bainbridge Island was even worse. They went to Bainbridge Island and they cleaned out the whole farming community. They were all Japanese.

Dean Altaras: Yeah, yeah.

David Alteras: It was, uh, it was a black mark on American history.

Dean Altaras: Absolutely. And did you have any Japanese friends at that point in time, or are these people you came to know?

David Alteras: No. At that point in time, I did not have any Japanese friends, but I did have a very, very dear Japanese friend that I met while I was, uh, registering for pharmacy school, and we were in line together. His name was Hiro, and he had just recently, uh, in recent years, that is, he had been in the camp and he had developed tuberculosis in the camp.

Dean Altaras: Yeah.

David Alteras: And, uh, we-when I say good friends, we studied together, we went fishing together. We did a lot of things together. Really close friends. And then we graduated from pharmacy school, and he went to Japan for a while. And then when I saw him again when he was back, he was carrying an oxygen tank. And shortly after that, he developed left ventricular failure, and he died. Yeah.

Dean Altaras: As a young man.

David Alteras: And the reason I think about him so often is his wife lives in our building. And I see the children all the time. I know, I know Gloria real well. She lives one floor below us. And I see the girls. The three girls all the time. And, um, I have fond memories of the whole family. But it was a-it was a tragedy. Yeah. He would be alive today. Possibly.

Dean Altaras: Hard memories. Yeah. Yeah. So, speaking of those days, you know, being at the UW, University of Washington, uh, being in the Navy, being in pharmacy school, um, and we're talking about, you know, how the Japanese were treated. I wanted to ask you about how you may have been treated as a Jew. Did you ever in your life experience antisemitism? That was outwardly...

David Alteras: I always was very aware of it in conversations. I never had anyone actually single me out with an antisemitic attack on me. That never happened. But throughout my stay in the Navy and the UW and even in pharmacy school, I would always catch a conversation about those damn Jews or dirty Jew or Kikes. Kikes was a very popular derogatory term at that time, and probably the most the most prominent remark of all was if anyone was bargaining for something-whether it's a house or a car or what it was about-and I got sick and tired of hearing it about "jewing them down."

Dean Altaras: Yeah. Yeah.

David Alteras: And to this day, you will still hear people say, "Hey, I was jewing him down.."

Dean Altaras: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That's been my experience.

David Alteras: It's always been a temptation for me to catch one of those that say that and say, "What do you mean by jewing them down? Tell me."

Dean Altaras: So that was going to be my next question, so-and I think I've learned this from you-when you do hear those things, it's important to speak up and to say something.

David Alteras: It is. I didn't always speak up. I spoke up at times about some of those awful remarks.

Dean Altaras: Yeah.

David Alteras: It's just a way of life.

Dean Altaras: Yeah. Yeah. So in looking at your life, what, uh, what do you think were some of your greatest challenges? And also, on the other hand, what are your greatest successes?

David Alteras: My greatest challenge probably was-when you consider what I came from-I came from immigrants. My mother couldn't even read and write English. She pounded me for years, pounded it into my brain that you had to be educated so that you wouldn't have to live the way they live. Uh, life was always a struggle for them. So my greatest challenge was to get educated. And I chose pharmacy because there were pharmacists in the family. And-

Dean Altaras: -I wanted to ask you just about that, sorry to interrupt, but I think I remember somebody making a comment to me. There were so many Jewish pharmacists. And was there a challenge for Jews to enter into medical school at that time? Do you think that do you think that that might have...like pharmacy was maybe just kind of as good as you could get? Or I just-I don't, I don't know, I don't know the answer to that, but did you ever have a sense of that?

David Alteras: I don't know, my-my grandpa Yaakov Altaras, who I never met, who never left Tekirdag, he was the village pill pusher. Everyone went to him for medicine, for this or that or whatever. And then, of course, my older brother, who was 15 years older, was a pharmacist. So, I was exposed to pharmacy. I never-it never entered my mind to be a doctor. I would have never been able to afford it. So part of the challenge that you asked about was not only going to college, but there was no money in the family. I didn't get any financial help from any one-

Dean Altaras: -except for the G.I. Bill.

David Alteras: Except for the G.I. Bill, which was $110 a month. And that didn't go very far. So my stay in pharmacy school was to go to school for four years, and I had late labs regularly where I would, I would be in a lab from 4:00 to 6:00 and I would dash home, or not even go home. And I always had a job after after school, while I was in pharmacy school, always had a job that lasted until 9:00. And then at 9:00 you started studying, and you stayed up until midnight studying. And then the next day you did the whole thing all over again.

Dean Altaras: Do it all over again. Yeah.

David Alteras: So that was probably my biggest challenge.

Dean Altaras: Okay. And then your greatest successes?

David Alteras: My greatest successes was, when you consider what I came from, I ended up in business for myself, and it was a rather successful business. And we are not wealthy. We are very comfortable. We can do whatever we want and go wherever we want. And that's probably my greatest success considering where I came from.

Dean Altaras: And um, next question I have for you. So knowing what you know now at the age of 90, what would you say to your 20-year-old self knowing, knowing how your life has gone.

David Alteras: Well, I would say this to any 20 year old, including myself, that if you have a dream, or if you have a goal, no matter how difficult it might be, don't sweep it under the rug. If you if you stick with it and try real hard, you'll find a way to make it work. And I did make it work. And, uh, I would say that to a lot of people. I mean, fight for your dream and fight for your goal.

Dean Altaras: Yeah. I like that. So what message based upon your life experience. You've had a lot of life experience. What message or messages would you want to leave to your family and or to the community that you came from?

David Alteras: When I'm gone, I would hope that people would think of me as a nice person, a fun person. Um. I love my wife dearly and I love my kids dearly. And, um. I was honest and, um, I always tell my friend, people approach my wife and I often, and they said, well, you're 90 and your wife is 88. What's your secret? Our secret is to love each other and keep moving. When when the remote and the couch become your exercise, You are done [laughs].

Dean Altaras: Yeah, well, you've been a great example to all of us to keep moving because you guys move every day. That's why you're healthy and that's why you're still together.

David Alteras: We are still moving. And I think that's why we're still alive. Knock on wood. Yeah.

Dean Altaras: Yep, yep. Well, this has been great. Awesome. Thank you. So I'll take this recording and it'll go to the Washington

State Jewish Historical Society. And it'll become part of the digital archive. And it'll be shared with family as well. And, um. Yeah.

David Alteras: And thank you for the interview. Yeah, and thank Lisa. I used to see her fairly often when we went to the J. But we no longer attend. Right. And, um, she's a she's a good gal. Yeah, absolutely. Okay. Will do. Thank you. [edited MM 7.30.25]