Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Bradley (Brad) Lehrer

SUMMARY

Bradly (brad) Lehrer shares his lifelong connection to Jewish history, emphasizing the importance of preserving it through personal artifacts like family heirlooms and community efforts. He discusses his early activities to engage others in Jewish culture, such as organizing events with incentives, and highlights the value of physical archives over digital ones. Reflecting on community involvement, he underscores the significance of genuine human connections and recounts a philanthropic project funded through early Amazon investments that brought joy to many.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Pretty good on the screen. You're comfortable and you have your water comfortable?

Brad Lehrer: Comfortable and have my water. So, is this a, is this something that you edit at some point, or do you just go raw?

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: More or less take the original footage. But you know, this is recording right now so I can frame it up and I will edit out this part of the conversation. Um, great. I'm just going to turn this down a little bit. That looks better. Okay. So, my name is Ruth Kodish-Eskind. It's May 7th, [2025], and we're at the Washington State Jewish Historical Society on Mercer Island. Can you state your name, please?

Brad Lehrer: Brad Lehrer.

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

Brad Lehrer: Yes. You may.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Thanks. We're here today to talk about the importance of preserving Jewish history. Can you remember being taught about Jewish history when you were growing up?

Brad Lehrer: Yes. [laughs] I mean, we could do this like a really bad David Letterman interview. Yes, yes. No. I'm sorry. I digressed. [laughs] Um. Yes, I mean, I've learned about it in, I guess, in the Sunday school way, if you wish. But I think that I've also learned it in, just the importance of it. Uh, I remember that – I've, I grew up in Tacoma, and so I've always kind of taken like a marketing bent towards Jewish history or Jewish events or people and that type of thing. I remember at the temple that I belonged to down there, that I went to Mom and Dad and said, "You know, can, can we sponsor a 'temple come-to contest' so people would show up on Friday nights?" And I think that, uh, I think that too, I'm a believer that you need to preserve it. I think that oftentimes, uh, people miss out on the idea that, that what is – what is written in the Five Books of Moses is basically the same story, you know, century after century, decade after decade. And, and, just being able to kind of have that as a framework, as a way to I guess measure against what's happening in life today. So history has always been important to me.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Would you just share the name of the temple you grew up in in Tacoma?

Brad Lehrer: Temple Beth El.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Okay. And what did you mean by "a marketing bent?" You've always had a marketing bent.

Brad Lehrer: Well, I just think that, I like people gathering together. So when I mentioned about, um, you know, encouraging people to come. I think that there was some sort of gift or something like this. And this is, you know, now 60 years ago that I was doing it. And, you know, I mean, the issues then are the same issues today as far as, you know, getting people to participate or getting people in the pews or that type of thing.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: How did that event go that you initiated?

Brad Lehrer: Oh, I thought it was great. My, my folks had a a chain of retail stores, uh, in the, in the northwest. And at that time, as part of the women's clothing store, uh, they also sold posters. And so Mom and Dad, you know, they gave me some posters and if people showed up, you know, we would see, like, uh, you know, it's like a poster of, like, "Rebel Without a Cause" or or something like that. So, they were popular posters. It was not, you know, anything particularly religious or anything like that. But it was just, just kind of fun and eventful.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: What was the name of the retail store chain?

Brad Lehrer: It was called Lyon's Apparel. L y o n s. And that was my mother's maiden name. Her maiden name was Griselda Lyon. So it was L y o n apostrophe s. We want to punctuate correctly.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Thank you. Have you ever been a part of preserving Jewish history more generally, or even within your family?

Brad Lehrer: Um, I think that a lot of that is, uh – when, like I encouraged – in fact, I think that one of the things that, um, one of those treasures that, uh, that, that I have today is that, uh, my mother put together a – like a Passover cookbook. I have a little folded, you know, nothing special. And you know, it still has, or not still has, but it has, you know, accumulated different food spots on it over, over time. And although we have the digital copy, there's nothing like, you know, pulling that book out. And, and then one year my, my folks really enjoyed singing. And this was, um, and so one year for their anniversary I rented a – a sound recording studio, and we recorded their favorite songs; and songs that they would sing to me, songs that we would sing to our son who is now 38. And I think at that time he was probably – 10, 15, something like that. And we have that on CD. And so being able to capture that memory. And I think that I also, um – we would always get together for Passover and that. And um, but I think that oftentimes when that's the only time you get together, um, it's well, matzos dry, but it can be kind of dry and that type of thing. And so I encouraged, uh, for like a family get together with my brother and his family and my family and some others in our extended family to celebrate my mother's birthday. And this went on for, towards the end of her life, like 3 or 4 years. And so it wasn't at the – and took a lot of convincing. So it was really again back to a marketing bent, really. You know, this is this is really going to be a good thing, you know. Because I've always been taught that it's, it's um, it's really good to – for families to get together and to see themselves in different, you know, in different ways and that type of thing. So those are, um, those were very joyous, happy memories.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Thanks for sharing those. Um, I want to go back to your mom's Passover cookbook.

Brad Lehrer: Sure.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: How do you think she assembled it? Was it over time? Was it all in one moment?

Brad Lehrer: The cookbook? Oh, no. She – this was like a pamphlet that she brought together. Uh, and, uh, you know, with her, you know, favorite recipes and that type of thing, whether it was matzo ball soup or, or gefilte fish or, um, chopped liver. And it was every, I mean, it was a very, it wasn't just like ingredients or that. But it was like, you know, you go out and get the, the chicken backs and you render the chicken fat and you, and you do all this other kind of stuff. And so, um, after she passed away, although I had had it, right. It was, she was no longer taking the leadership in the kitchen because she wasn't there to do that. And I think that, um, I got – it just kind of made me laugh after – after I made it, uh, I think I was making, uh, whether it was gefilte fish or the chopped liver or that type of thing. The part that I had not factored in, she had, she created this cookbook. But my mother was a very giving person and she would always send my father out to, you know, send the chopped liver over to the cardiologist. Okay. I mean, and they, the different [cardiologists], the different doctors and that type of thing, they really they really liked that chicken fat and, and, uh, and that. But what I wanted to tell you is, is that what I didn't account for. So I followed the recipe. What I didn't account for was all of the giving that she had, uh, that was – you know, in the plan. Okay. Where it was. And so there was a lot of leftovers. And although I tried to keep up to that pace, I've actually had to like, you know, cut, cut down on the recipes. So it was just kind of a – just kind of giggled and laughed about it.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: I like that detail. Can you just say your mom's name for the record?

Brad Lehrer: My mother's name for the record. Well, everyone knew her in the Tacoma Jewish community as "Babe," because she was the baby of the family. Her real name, her legal name, um, is Griselda Lorraine Lyon Lehrer. Right. So. And I'm not I don't, I don't think there are a lot of Griseldas in the, in the Jewish community. Uh, and but that's a story for another day because she always said she had like three, three or four different specific, you know, parts of her life and that type of thing.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Um, I'm going to move on to your connection to the Jewish Historical Society or any other Jewish history institutions. My question is, what is your connection to WSJHS?

Brad Lehrer: Well, um, my connection probably, I don't know, I don't know when the society was formed. My connection actually goes back to when I was probably a tenth grader. So how does that make sense? Well, I was a member of, um, BBYO, AZA. And, um, I was at a regional convention at the Davenport Hotel in downtown Spokane and that's where I met Dennis Goldstein, a pretty instrumental person in the whole Jewish Historical Society world. And so, he's been a friend of mine since, I think, in since I fell asleep in a discussion group when I was in tenth grade in that type of thing. In fact, he's, he, uh, was–in both of my weddings. Okay. So that's my connection. And I mentioned before we started that, uh, that I would like to be doing what you're doing. And I know that I've, over the years, volunteered for [to] do it, but nobody ever called me back. So, I thought I'd come visit with you in person, Ruth. And maybe I'll get on a list. Who knows?

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: I think we can figure that out.

Brad Lehrer: Okay.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Will you just tell me what is BBYO?

Brad Lehrer: The B'nai B'rith Youth Organization. So that still exists today. Uh, it's an offshoot of the of B'nai B'rith, which was an organization that was probably formed more than 100 years ago. And it was it was, uh, a typically it was a men's organization and they had the, the youth organization part of it. And so I was involved with, uh, with, uh, AZA. Are you familiar with what that is? No. So there is, um –that basically was for the boys and the B'nai B'rith Girls, BBG was for the girls. And there was a whole structure in this where there was, uh, I mean the organization was an international organization. And, um, that's, uh, that's – I remember that, uh, for many, many years and this, this was kind of a of a happy memory that, that they don't, that they don't do anymore. In fact, I'm not sure if – I don't think B'nai B'rith in the United States is, is active or definitely in Seattle. Um, but they actually, they had like a big fundraising dinner, um, and – and like all the different community members would go and that. But, uh, it's um, uh, as, as my folks would say, "sweet memories."

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Um, can you state what what the purpose of an organization like the Jewish Historical Society would be in your eyes?

Brad Lehrer: I think it is – I know that now it is, it has moved to the, to the digital archive world, uh, which, uh, which I think is kind of sad. Okay. Uh, as I was mentioning to you earlier about that, that Passover book about how much more special the book is than the digital recreation that, you know, I could probably pull it up on my phone for you, because I think that it's important for, uh, for people to be able to, to have a personal connection to those artifacts.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Um, I want to ask about your family history.

Brad Lehrer: Sure.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Are there any members of your family that keep your family history?

Brad Lehrer: Uh, I guess that would be me. Okay. I think that, um, because I'm the last man standing at this point. My, my, uh, brother passed away in 2019. Uh, my mother passed away in, in, uh, 2015, '14, January? Uh, my father probably ten years before that. And so, uh, for a long time, we had, like, the the rental storage unit. Uh, and I think that, um, I figured if I've got a, a very large house, I should be able to find 100 square feet and not have to rent the storage unit anymore. So this past year, I actually moved everything up, up to my home in Redmond. And I think that– and, you know, maybe this is a, um, you know, maybe this could be like a, a value-add. There I go marketing again, you know, trying to trying to help the organization. But I think that, um, a pathway to assemble that personal record for people to be able to take things that are in the, you know, that are in the big black and yellow Costco boxes and, you know, how do you make that so that it is a accessible, uh, type of piece? And, you know, part of that accessibility is, um, you know, maybe, maybe it is a digital collection, or maybe – because I think that the thing that, um, the thing that I have found is that, um, in that storage unit, there were, there were, um, a lot of assets in that type of thing for, of my folks, memories and all that other kind of stuff. And you find that, um, you know, ten plus years after they passed away, that what you thought was very important, you know, kind of life changing is not necessarily important. In fact, I learned that lesson with

my son maybe ten years ago when just going through the garage of all of the memories and of just his life. And all the things that I knew, I just knew that he would want to keep, he really didn't care about it. And all the things that I knew that I could just probably throw away, he cared about that. Okay. And and I think that I was, uh, you know, pretty savvy as far as what's understanding. But as I said, you know, even for myself, something that was important to me ten years ago today is is not. And those things, um – and there is no one to to give it to, per se. But I think, um, as I say, I've always had like a – a belief in history that, that we're tied to. Whether you're tied to the land or whether you're tied to, you know, what has happened before us, We're that old phrase about, you know, we're, you know, "built on the shoulders of all the people that have come before us." And I think that at some point, um, things that I think that, let's say, that my son says, "Not, not that important," you know. I think that, uh, he may think, "Oh, I, gee, I kind of like, oh, yeah. I wish I would have had that photo or, you know that whatever."

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: So it sounds like you've inherited the family archive.

Brad Lehrer: I have.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: You're curious about how to organize it?

Brad Lehrer: Right?

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: What things to save and how to maybe share and tell your family stories?

Brad Lehrer: Right. And it can be. And for myself, I tend to like to do it with others, and I tend to end up doing it by myself. Okay. Which I don't think is as fun.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: I'm curious about when you were growing up, if there was anyone who was doing that kind of storytelling or history sharing amongst your family?

Brad Lehrer: Oh, that definitely would be-that would definitely be my mother and then followed by my father. But my mother, you know, we would like at a, like a Passover meal or something like that, or whenever we would get together. And she was, she would retell the stories. I'm not talking about retelling the Passover stories, but, well, that kind of falls in there too. you know, where, where as something that typically will always come up, is – within our extended family; my cousins and that type of thing. You know, they will always re-quote my famous quote from a Seder from way, way, way, way, way back. And what is that? You know, we've all heard the fourth- four questions. Well, the fifth question is, um, "Tell me, um, do pineapples have bones?" Okay. So, uh, it's just kind of, those kind of crazy, offbeat type of things. But she would tell, she would always be telling or retelling, you know, her history or – so she was definitely a an oral historian.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Um, so close to wrapping up here. And I just want to ask, you know, big question about your role in history, which is what have you experienced in your lifetime that you want the next generation to understand?

Brad Lehrer: Um. Well, I think that – I think that most people are good. I think that, um – I think that a lot. I think that most people want to do things with others. I think that, um, in fact, I was listening to a program just just coming over here today about how, um, oftentimes currently, or people of, of my generation will talk about, you know, about the disconnection as a result of like Facebook or Instagram or that type of thing. And the commentator really put a, I thought, just a wonderful spin on it. That there are 18 year olds, 18 year olds or, you know, younger people that are that are now coming to the fore and saying, you know, "We want that. We want that human connection." Kind of like Mark Zuckerberg, great idea, okay, but not necessarily for me. And so I think that, um, yes, I think that that's, I think that that's important. I think that, um, being able to do things for your community, that, um, there are things out there that are, you know, much larger than yourself, you know. And for me, that's, um, that's always a challenge because I refer to myself as a – when it comes to television, I'm kind of like a crackhead, you know. You can, like, if you put me in front of a television at minute one, I'm going to watch it for the 120 minutes. But if you put me in front of that television at minute 90, I may just skip through those first 90 minutes and then pick it up. Or, if I come in the last 15 minutes, it doesn't matter. But if, if I, if I find myself in front of a television I can just burn away time, which I don't – it doesn't necessarily make me feel real good.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Thanks. Um, is there anything else that you want to share for the record about history? Washington Jewish history or family history?

Brad Lehrer: Um. I think that, um. Um, I, I'm a big supporter of Camp Solomon Schechter in Olympia. Are you familiar with that organization? And probably one of the, um–I'd say right up there until my son got married this past December. But right up there was, uh, some philanthropy that, uh, that we were involved with. As far as, um – we, um, courtesy of Jeff Bezos, or actually courtesy of my neighbor across the street. This is like, this would have been like, um 2000? Would that be right? No, that can't be

right. Right, right around when Amazon first came out. My neighbor across the street, they had just recruited him to become a – like, in charge; basically in charge of their IT department. I mean, he's like a really smart guy. And we were out doing something one day or another and he said, "You know, Brad, I just got involved with this company, Amazon, and I think you should invest in it." Okay. And, um, and oh, in that, whatever that year was. So it was, uh. So it was, um, yes. So it was just coming, 1999, 1998, or that event. It afforded me the opportunity; as it split like 3 or 4 times. Right? And, uh, I guess I could be a lot richer today and that type of thing if I would have held on to it. But it, it provided an opportunity for us to, um, build the amphitheater down, down at Camp Solomon Schechter which the kids have gotten so much joy from over that, you know, over the past, you know, 20 plus years. And, um–and that was, I guess, part of the, the "Babeisms" part of it, which is that it's really easy or the – the – the most precious thing that we have is time. And it's not money. Okay. Because even if you donate the money, you're [always], you're going to be able to, you're going to be able to replace it. Okay. And I think that that is um, I guess, I guess that would be it. It's that time–and so it was, it was our greatest joy to be able to be able to fund that. And it's one that I - and because of that our son was um–and I guess this is part of Jewish history and that type of thing. Something happened at his bar mitzvah which was at camp, and frankly, the only bar mitzvah that has ever been at camp during camp. Okay. Um, and so, you know, we brought in the bouncy game. Whatever we did it was it was a lot of fun. But that's not what was special. The special part was, and I still remember it. So it was on a, it was on a Monday. And there was, there's an airfield right there. So there was an airplane coming right over where the amphitheater was – is. And, but something that does not happen, uh, in, in the Jewish community is in many ways we're, we're fractionalized. And what happened was that Rabbi Jim Mirel was there, who was, at one point we belonged to Temple B'nai Torah, which was, I don't know if you know this, but it was on Mercer Island. Did you know that? Yes. Very small, intimate. Not the one that you probably are familiar with the one that's at the Jewish Day School. And so it was a very small one. And that and at that time, we were sharing space with the Jewish Day School to have our Sunday school there. So he was there. And my parents were there. And Julie Mirel, his wife, was the cantorial soloist at Temple Beth El in Tacoma, which is where my parents were members. And, uh, we also had Cantor Kurland there. So we had the, we had reform, we had conservative, we had Rabbi Dan Bridge there, who, who married Susan and myself at Hillel. Story for another day. And, and as I reflected back on it was that we had all of these very religious people. And because it was at camp and because of this special occasion that we had, it provided a place for all of these different, separate groups. And we're all part of the Jewish people, were able to commingle and celebrate, as I was saying. One of the greatest joys of my life. How about that one?

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: That's really great. Thank you for sharing.

Brad Lehrer: Good.