
Dianne Arensberg

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SUMMARY

Dianne Arensberg shares her childhood in Tacoma, Washington, her involvement in the small Jewish community, and her family's business in plumbing. She recounts her educational choices, work experiences, and family history, including challenges like maintaining a kosher diet and the impact of a local earthquake. Dianne also talks about her fond memories of summers in Seaside, Oregon, her experiences growing up Jewish in Tacoma without a neighborhood, and the changes in the local Jewish community over the years.

EA: Today is the 16th of November 2021. My name is Eleonora Anneda and I'm interviewing Dianne Arensberg on behalf of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. Hi Dianne, how are you?

DA: I'm fine, thank you.

EA: All right, so just to start, would you like to tell me a little bit about your childhood.

DA: I'm trying to get rid of this—"this meeting is being recorded by the host."^[1] Well, okay, I'm back. Okay, what was your question? I'm sorry.

EA: I asked if you could tell me a little bit about your childhood.

DA: I grew up in Tacoma, Washington, and I remained in Tacoma until I went to the University of Washington in Seattle. As far as the Jewish community, it was very small—extremely small. There were three of us my age, which is hard to believe today. Well, I was confirmed, and there was Burton Gruber, Sandy Feingold and myself, my last name was Rosen. Burton had a *bar mitzvah*. He could not be confirmed. So it was only two of us in my confirmation class.

As far as activity, I was very close and active with them in all the schools. I was on a lot of committees and I intertwined with the non-Jewish community because we didn't have one. I taught Sunday School and tried to stay as active as I could in the Jewish community. In high school, I made a lot of friends. I think I was on every committee, possibly, that was in the school. I wanted to take German and Rabbi Rosenthal said no. Rosenberg, [Rabbi Rosenthal], I'm sorry. He said no because my grandmother only spoke Yiddish, and he was afraid that if I got up to talk, I'd intertwine the Yiddish! So therefore, I took Spanish instead. [Laughs]. So that's about that. Do you have any questions that you'd like to ask me?

EA: Yeah. Would you like to say a little bit more about your family history?

DA: My family had two brothers. One brother passed away when he was forty-five from cancer. My other brother is alive and well. We spent a lot of time together. There was no one else to spend time with! Anyway, we got along very well. We went to Camp Saratoga in Simi Valley outside of San Francisco. We did that every year. Our children went there as well.

So anyway, my parents had a business in retail—in lighting and plumbing—in downtown Tacoma. Later they gave up the lighting and moved to what they call Nelly's Valley in Tacoma and went strictly into plumbing and changed the name to Rosen Supply. I worked at Rosen, graduated from the University of Washington in 1959 in teaching. I taught—substituted on and off until I was

married in 1961. I was offered a job, but my dad said no. And in those days you listened to your parents. He said, "Your mother needs you here in the office." So for fifty-seven years, I worked in the office in Tacoma and drove back and forth to Bellevue—before freeways.

Anyway, that bring[s] you up to date. We lived in the north end of Seattle from 1961 to 1964.

We moved into our home here in Bellevue in 1964, and fifty-seven years later, we're still here. So it's been a journey.

EA: Do you often go back to Tacoma?

DA: I used to go to Tacoma every day to work, and then my husband got sick and I stopped going. I did some work from home as much as I could, but then it just kind of faded away. I trained other people to take over what I was doing. Eventually I had to stay home every day with him. So now I have a caregiver for him as well as myself. So my schedule is full. My days are fuller.

My parents were from—my mother was born in Vancouver, B.C. and her name was Sara Belle

Meshner. My dad was born in Dayton, Washington, and he had a twin sister who lived in Portland. Her name was Celia Tushin, and she had no children. He had another sister that lived in San Francisco and her daughter had no children. So kind of limited there. My mother was raised—they had—Republic, Washington seemed to be where the Jewish people were; that used to be like a spot for people to go to. Now, if you go back—and I tried to get this—but if you go back to the newsletters that the Washington State Jewish Historical Society had—I have a copy but I can't read it very well—from March 1984, there is history here on Republic, Washington and the Jewish people and the Meshners, but it's very, very difficult for me to read to you. So maybe Lisa or someone can get that. I could try to read it to you, but it will take forever. They were very well known in Republic and then they moved to Portland. Some people came to Seattle; some to Portland.

And that's about it. I can't give you any history. My grandma Rosen saw me graduate college. I don't remember exactly how old she was. My grandpa Rosen died when I was three years old, so I don't remember too much of him. We've tried to get family history and there's no one to ask, and like many families, they don't want to talk about it. They just absolutely were not talking about it. So I know a little bit more on the Meshner side, but on my father's side that's the end; that's the end of the story. It's just I can't get any more, and I have no one to ask, which is really a shame. But it's the best I can do for you!

EA: Oh, no, that's okay! Don't worry. I have something I wanted to ask you. You mentioned your parents had a business in downtown Tacoma, right?

DA: Right.

EA: So was the business open on Saturdays?

DA: Yes.

EA: It was, yeah—

DA: It was, and I can remember as a child there were a lot of gypsies on that street. I can remember, as a child, we used to have to come down on Saturdays, and my brother and I would sit in the front window to prevent them from coming in or alert my parents that they were trying to come in because the gypsies were known for stealing at that time. That's in the late forties. It's really a shame. My dad was a very generous person, and if somebody needed food or asked for money—my dad would ask them if they needed food and if they said they were hungry he would take them up to the corner—I don't remember the name of the drug store, but he took them up to the corner drugstore, [would] sit them down at the counter and tell the girls, "Give them whatever he wants and I'll come back and pay you." But he would never give them money. But he fed a lot of people through doing that.

In the summers—being that both of my parents worked in the summers—we used to go to Seaside, Oregon and stay for two and a half, three months with our grandparents because my parents worked. They would come down and they'd visit. Sometimes my mother would stay for a week or two. And then my grandparents had a home there, which was actually a duplex, so there was always somebody there, either one of my aunts from Portland and her family. There was always somebody there besides my grandparents. So I'm very attached to Seaside. My husband and I bought a condo down there for our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. We just celebrated our sixtieth, so yes. Seaside is very dear to my heart.

EA: Can you tell me more about Seaside?

DA: It's a beach community. Seaside is right on the coast. Somebody asked me how close I was to the ocean and I said, "Well, it

depends on the tide.” Because our condo was right there on the ocean, and it’s great. And then they have a promenade; it’s two miles. You walk the entire prom, and then you have to come back, of course. The center focus is Broadway, and cars will go up and drive around and—that was the end of the Lewis and Clark trail. They have the salt mines there. Every summer they dress up as Lewis and Clark, and they’re on the beach and people can come down and see them. It’s very interesting, especially for the children. They have Fourth of July, which we did not have last year because of the pandemic. Then they have this main street and there’s eateries and there’s games to play and vendors. It’s just a fun, fun town. It’s changed a lot in sixty years or seventy years because we used to have a Ferris Wheel and the Ferris Wheel is gone. Used to have two movie theaters, now we have none. There’s one down on the highway, but as far as the center of town is concerned—it’s just a real nice place to go. The weather’s decent. You can walk around and walk the prom. Sit down and turn around if you want to watch the water, watch the people. It’s a great place; a great resort.

EA: Well it sounds wonderful. I also live by the seaside, so I quite understand.

DA: You’ve been there?

EA: No, no. But I live by the seaside, so I enjoy all the love for the water and the ocean.

DA: Yeah. Seaside, Oregon. The Oregon coast is absolutely beautiful. The Washington coast, forget it. It’s there to stay. It’s changed a lot. But is there to stay. Then further south there is Cannon Beach, which is more quiet than Seaside and some people prefer to be down there. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen pictures of Haystack Rock; if you ever look at that, that’s in Cannon Beach and you can take that highway, which is partly washed out at the moment because of these heavy rains, but all the way down into California. Windy road, but a beautiful drive.

EA: I wanted to ask you a little bit more about Tacoma. What was it like growing up Jewish in Tacoma?

DA: Well you had all non-Jewish friends. Growing up you didn’t have your Jewish people. When

I went to college one of the girls said to me, “You mean your parents let you date non-Jewish?” And I said, “Yes.” They said, “Why?” And I said, “Well, they wanted me to have the experience of dating before I went on to college.” So they accepted that for an answer. It’s just—I don’t know. I mean, life went on. We didn’t know from a Jewish life. My parents tried to keep kosher when they first moved to Tacoma, but they’d have to drive to Portland. I presume they could come to Seattle, but being that their parents were in Portland, they went to Portland to get kosher food, and then they had to give that up because it was just too hard—I guess especially after they started having children. Just got to be too much. So they gave that up.

EA: So they were never able to keep kosher?

DA: No, no. But to this day we have no bacon in the house and there’s certain things— somebody can’t understand how I can make a meatloaf [without eggs]—I just went through this with some non-Jewish people: “You have to have an egg in the meatloaf.” I said, “No. I make a meatloaf without eggs.” [They said,] “How can you do that?” I said, “You do this and you do this.” [They said,] “No, no, no, that’s not fun for me.” And then I went into the history and tried to explain to them with milk and *fleishig* [meat], but of course they don’t understand that. Life is interesting.

EA: I was going to say, could you go into a little bit more detail about what they were able to do in trying to keep kosher, but not in its entirety, I guess? So you wouldn’t mix dairy and—

DA: No.

EA: Right, and what else did you try to do?

DA: I don’t really remember. I can’t really tell you, I don’t really remember. It was a long time ago! [Laughs].

EA: And what do you do now?

DA: What do I do now? Well, I did a lot earlier because I had a little sister from college that kept kosher. So I did a lot there, and one time I had all the rabbis over for—I think it was a Jewish Day School, and I made sure that everything—the standards of being kosher with the paper plates and the plastic, and I went to the kosher bakery and put everything out, and I still had a couple of rabbis that would not eat in my house. But that’s fine. But a couple did, and a couple didn’t. So it was fine, but I tried to emphasize: if you’re having the meat, you don’t put the dairy on the table. I do that to some extent, but not what I used to do.

EA: And what is your relationship with Tacoma today?

DA: The only relationship I have with Tacoma is my brother. I have no other bonds there. Had a couple of very close friends that have passed away, so other than that I don't go to Tacoma.

EA: Were you in Tacoma when Rabbi Rosenthal merged the two temples?

DA: Yes. I don't remember the name of the other temple or synagogue—I can tell you where it was: right across from Wright Park. But I can't remember the name of it. There was a group of fellows that couldn't put up with going conservative and they went off on their own. Whatever happened after that, I don't know. Once I came to—got married—came to Seattle, I kind of kept losing track, especially the people I knew, and one-by-one they faded away. I lost contact, unless my brother will tell me something. It's interesting; people are interesting because they'll say, "Well, you have to know them." "Well, I've been gone since 1995. I don't have to know." "Oh, yeah, but you must, they're from Tacoma!" Can't help it! Can't tell you who they are when I'm standing next to them! Everybody knew everybody when I was growing up because the population was so tiny. My mother used to work for all the—volunteer for all the dinners, Passover—she was always involved with Temple.

We had a very bad earthquake in 1949, I believe. Where one of the Jewish boys got killed with the rocks tumbling from the school and his mother and my mother were in charge of the second night of Passover Seder at Temple that particular night. So obviously there was no Seder. There's a lot of different stories—I probably can think of more.

That was a very sad day for the Jewish community, especially when they told me that my brother had gotten killed. My brother had walked out with this fellow that got killed—but Marvin Klegman went to the right to do patrol duty and my brother went to the left, so they were maybe six feet apart when the earthquake hit. So yeah, that was also a very sad day. Anyway, hopefully we don't have earthquakes like that again, for any of us in the world.

EA: One thing I got told about Tacoma is that there isn't—unlike other cities, maybe bigger cities—there wasn't really a Jewish neighborhood.

DA: Absolutely. There was no Jewish neighborhood; people were spread out. I mean, we didn't even have any Jewish neighbors. I don't know what the population was. There was no such thing. We had a Jewish family that lived one, two, or three blocks away from us. And then the fellow that started Costco^[2]; he also lived two, three blocks from us. But there was no particular Jewish neighborhood, no.

EA: Was that hard?

DA: I didn't know any different. It can't be hard when you don't know any different.

EA: That's very true.

DA: We grew up really—I don't want to say blindsided as far as the Jewish community outside of Tacoma. We used to do High Holy Days services a lot. At least one of them in Portland because we would go to share. I think it was generally Yom Kippur that we would go and share with our grandparents. They belonged to Congregation Neveh Shalom in Portland. So when you don't know any different, you just do your thing.

EA: Yeah, that's very true. I have one last question for you, but I wanted to ask you before: is there anything that I haven't asked you yet that you would like to talk about or something that you've already talked about that you would like to say a little bit more about?

DA: I can't think of anything.

EA: That's okay. And if anything comes to mind, even later, just tell me. So the last thing that I wanted to ask you is: what do you wish for Tacoma and the Jewish community in Tacoma today?

DA: From what I understand, the Jewish community is not too active anymore. A lot of people left the temple, and this is all hearsay because I don't know it as a fact, and they've gone over to the Chabad House because they're not happy with the temple over there. Other than that, I just don't know. I just hope. I haven't been over there to see. I haven't been to the temple. I was married in the old temple before they built the new one. Maybe the Jewish people are leaving the city. I don't know. There are a lot of people from Fort Lewis that would come for the holidays. I don't know. I can't really tell you.

EA: That's okay. Maybe they've all moved to Seaside, Oregon.

DA: There you go. That's a good place. That's a good place to raise a family. People have done that. People that we know—a non-

Jewish family that moved out of Seattle and then moved down there because they felt that it was a better environment for their children to grow up. A lot of people are leaving the area now for smaller communities because Seattle is not the best place to be at the moment. Hopefully that'll get straightened—straighten itself out.

EA: That's okay. Is there anything else that you'd like to say before I stop the recording?

DA: No, I really can't think of anything at the moment. If I do, may I text you or email you?

EA: Of course, of course. And we can always do another interview if anything comes to mind.

DA: Okay. That's okay.

EA: I will go ahead and stop the recording now so we can keep chatting.

DA: All right. Thank you.