
Shirley Grossman

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SUMMARY

Shirley Grossman describes her entry into the Spokane Jewish community, the merge between conservative and reform congregations there in the late 1960's, the changing role of women that she witnessed, as well as her background in music and life as a music teacher.

Shirley Grossman: Okay.

Kara Brown: Wonderful. So, thank you. Today is November 2, 2021. My name is Kara Brown and I'm interviewing Shirley Grossman on behalf of the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. So, Shirley, I do want to thank you for taking the time to talk with us today and share your story and your experience in Spokane. You're welcome. I do just want to get started, because I know you've lived in Spokane for many years. Um, but I want you to just maybe share a little bit about yourself and what initially brought you to this wonderful city.

Shirley Grossman: Well, I am 79 years old, and in 1965, I married a Spokane boy. Now, this boy named Larry Grossman had traveled over the Pacific Northwest looking for a Jewish woman because there were not very many in Spokane. And so he came to Vancouver with a friend, and I was at a Jewish social thing. And in the olden days, you didn't consider marrying anything but Jewish? I mean, there wasn't an option. I always knew that I would marry somebody Jewish. Didn't matter what kind of background I came from, what kind of depth of Judaism I had. I was swallowed up as a child. It was that you married a Jewish person. And so Larry came to this social function that I was at. I was there with somebody else, a nice Jewish doctor, and he. And he decided he wanted to get to know me better. So he called me the next day, and that's what happened. And so then we got engaged and married on September 5th, 1965, and we were married in Victoria, British Columbia. It was the first Jewish wedding there, and I don't know how many years in the lovely little synagogue that's very much there now. And I was allowed to come to the States. Larry had to sign a paper that he would support me. And I came to Washington as a 23-year-old, and that's what happened. 1965.

Kara Brown: Wow, what a story. Um, and an international one. That's simply wonderful. I'm glad that you met your Prince Charming. Even if it had to happen in Vancouver, for that to occur. But that sounds quite wonderful.

Shirley Grossman: Unexpected?

Kara Brown: Yes. Quite unexpected. But I guess that's how life works sometimes. Now, I can imagine, at 23 years old, with your new husband, moving to a new city, a new country, was quite an experience. So what was that like for you? Uh, moving into such a tight-knit community like Spokane really is.

Shirley Grossman: You know that, Cara? Uh, everybody knew about Shirley, but Shirley didn't know anybody.

Kara Brown: No.

Shirley Grossman: And so they had this marvelous function at the Davenport Hotel. If you don't know. Spokane, that's the premier most beautiful hotel in Spokane. And I think it was the Isabella Room or the Elizabethan Room. And they invited everybody. And

Larry was the vice president of this rather famous company called United Paint. And he was very well known, and I didn't know anybody. And that's a very strange phenomenon when the whole world knows you and you don't know them. But it was fine because people were friendly and kind to me, and I didn't know one from another. That's the way it was for a while, and I was rather shy, and my husband was very outgoing, so that was a good combination of people. So what else would you like to know?

Kara Brown: That's great. Yeah. I'm sure having an outgoing person by your side certainly helped. Um, were there any aspects, though, even having the benefit of Larry with you, that were just super challenging for you to get past? Um, or was it just pretty smooth sailing once you kind of broke that initial barrier?

Shirley Grossman: Well, having a man who was so outgoing and so friendly made it. You know, I couldn't you know, which I might have tended to do. Just become a sweet little housewife. Staying at home all the time. Couldn't happen. I would have been happy cleaning house and arranging the furniture and scrubbing the floors and doing all that random stuff, which I thoroughly enjoyed, and not acquired the ability to go out into the world. It's thanks to him because he was such an outgoing person and he was a member of the conservative synagogue, which was called. Oh, I'm going to forget Knesseth Israel synagogue. Oops. Turn off the phone. Come on. The phone never works when I want it to. Thank you. Okay. I'm back. Anyway, so we were members. He was a member of the Conservative synagogue, which had tended to be more Orthodox. There was also a reform synagogue in town, and, um, I shouldn't say that the two didn't meet, but they used to have B'nai B'rith in Spokane in those early days, and that was the bond that brought both synagogue groups together. And it was a very important thing that happened, because otherwise they wouldn't have had much to do with each other. And so that was 1965. And then and I think it was in 1966 or 67, that the city, the state, or I don't know who decided they wanted to buy that property, that that Keneseth Israel was on, and put a highway through there. And so the gene happened, and it's probably a familiar name to you. They're a very well-known family. He arranged so that the temple or the synagogue got a goodly sum of money for their land and building that had to be torn down. And so then the move was made to bring the reform and the conservatives together. And in 1969, I was at the big community meeting where the decision had to be made, and it was a free-for-all because the reform, a lot of the reform, did not want to combine with the conservative. They had a strict sense of what they believed the religion was, and then the conservative were more towards Orthodox, had their own sense of what they wanted out of their religious life. And so, anyway, they came together and somehow I'll never forget it. Somehow, the vote was made that they would combine and build a new facility, get a new rabbi, and start together. And it was moved that the Friday night services would be reformed and the Saturday morning services would be conservative. And in 1969, I was there at the dedication of the new temple, which was built, by the way, two people named Dick and Marv Rubens two brothers actually over oversaw the building of our beautiful sanctuary. And so we had the dedication, and I sang Ailey. Ailey at it. I don't know why that doesn't seem appropriate now. And we had this whole special program, and it was a we started together. Um, let's see how far did I get? Ask me question.

Kara Brown: That's wonderful. No, that's wonderful. And thank you for sharing that story of coming together. I think, um, well, I hope for you as someone who, like I said, was outside, or you said is outside of Spokane. Seeing that as well was probably very helpful to kind of making you feel at home and knowing that the community was coming together as one.

Shirley Grossman: Yeah.

Kara Brown: Along with you.

Shirley Grossman: And those who left, I didn't know them, but there were those, you know, that's often what happens. They were gone. I'm not going to have anything to do with this because it didn't go my way. And so that's typical anyway.

Kara Brown: Right. And I'm sure you've seen a, I mean, that's one change you've seen over the years in Spokane. I'm sure you've seen many, many more. Yeah. Are there any that?

Shirley Grossman: Divide again and then come back together again. And it's been really quite amusing when you think about the history. But that's the history of our people, too. And, it ended up happening that now here we are in 2021, we have one rabbi for both Reform and Conservative, and all under one building, except the Reform, is renting space from the Conservative because the Conservative ended up owning the temple, so to speak. And so that's a long tale in itself.

Kara Brown: Yeah, it's funny how things come full circle. Um, it seems like in the end.

Shirley Grossman: Yes.

Kara Brown: Have there been any other kinds of changes you've noticed in Spokane that, over the years, have kind of stood out to you and maybe a good change or maybe even not so good change that you've seen?

Shirley Grossman: Well, are we talking about our community, our Jewish community, or Spokane? Well, are you referring to something larger than our community? Is this, um, or is that where you're pinpointing our Jewish community?

Kara Brown: Well, I would love I know, I would love to hear about the Jewish community, but if you feel there's something, um, just as I guess, poignant from the greater community, please feel free to share that.

Shirley Grossman: Okay, well, I will say, for the Jewish community, where the conservative movement would not recognize women reading from the Torah, would not recognize them as part of the Minyan. And boy, I saw that change. I saw that happen. I remember Rabbi Gottesman saying, Absolutely not. We will not allow women to read from the Torah. And then I saw the first woman actually read from the Torah, and that was Libi Avnet. And what year? I have no idea what year it was. And I saw the two men who were the goodbyes or whatever saying, I'm going to I'm Sam said, I'm going to let the heads of our movement know about this terrible thing that's happening, that a woman's reading from the Torah. So it's really intriguing how we have come a long way, and now we not only have a woman rabbi who's also a lesbian, but we have women who have led the temple in terms of administration. There's been a huge change through the years where women have become more and more and more the real foundation of our community. And the men seem to have receded in a way and given their power or said, Fine, you want to do it, you do it. I think that's what's happened through the years, because the women have really stepped up to the plate and are really doing most of the hard shopping at our temple. I do believe that. Anyway, I think I went off on a tangent.

Kara Brown: But no, that was wonderful, and it's great to hear about the changes of, you know, women within the temple and the faith. Um, because it is very much so. What's happening outside as, as well? Um, so it's and.

Shirley Grossman: I will say this too, I'll just add this, that the acceptance of converts, you know, that we've had converts who have been president of our temple. Can you imagine how unimaginable that would have been when I first came to town, even? And having a male, a female rabbi. There are so many things that are so different and more open and more accepting now that we're absolutely undreamed of. So we've come a long way.

Kara Brown: Certainly. Well, thank you for sharing that. I did want to circle back because you did mention that you sang at the temple when it first came together. I would love for you to kind of elaborate on your love of music and the role that that's played in your life.

Shirley Grossman: Well, I'm thinking about how when I first came to town, they put me in the choir right away. And guess who was leading the choir? My brother-in-law. Larry's brother Nate was the choir director. And I look back and I kind of giggle a little bit, and then because I got a degree in teaching. Well, I got my original degree from the University of British Columbia. I got a degree, a Bachelor of Education in teaching, period. Then I went for a master's at Whitworth College. It was Whitworth College then. Now it's Whitworth University. And I got a Master of Arts in teaching music, and I spent about a year at that, and I actually had a baby by the time I finished. Um, and so I also went to Eastern Washington State College, which is now Eastern Washington University. And, um, would drive out with McSauce. He remembers that well. And so, um, then I got a job teaching in the schools in the Valley. I taught there at University Elementary for a year. And then I got pregnant and I stopped teaching. So. And I had my first baby, Eve, in 1967. Now, music. Music has always been a big part of my life. I took piano from the time I was a little kid. And I've always loved to sing. And I took singing lessons, and I took singing lessons for probably 40 years. I mean, I always took singing lessons. Not that I'm a great singer, but I just, I kept trying to improve. But, you know, if you don't have a big voice to begin with, it doesn't matter how many lessons you take; you just don't get it. You don't end up with a great voice. And I sing, okay, I would call myself a mediocre, really good amateur singer, but it's been enough to give me a great deal of joy. And I've been part of choirs through the years. I've been part of the temple choir. And Nate, Larry's brother, conducted the choir for many, many, many, many years. Anyway, I'm sorry, did I go off track?

Kara Brown: No, that was wonderful. Um.

Shirley Grossman: I also started a music school after our company. Larry was the owner with his brother of a huge paint company called United Paint, and they went bankrupt in 1981 or 82, maybe the beginning of 82. And so I started my school, my music school, in 1985, and I retired from that about 14 years ago. But that was a real joy for me. I had a school in my home for years and years and years and years. Had a lot of darling students. I taught them from the age of 18 months through to seven years. And that was fun. Anyway, it was a great, joyful experience for me.

Kara Brown: Wow, that's wonderful. So I'm sure there's still are many of your students, walking around Spokane singing your praises?

Shirley Grossman: Oh, yeah. Oh, Mrs. Grossman, they. I used to look down on them, and now they're. I have to look way up there at them. Oh, hello. Uh, no, I don't remember you. What's your name? Oh, yes. It happens all the time. And the parents remember.

It's sweet. Oh, Mrs. Grossman, we remember because it's such a good time in everybody's life. Kara, when you have kids. I take it you don't have any yet. But when you have kids, those early years are so precious and they're so dear. And the children are so adorable, and it's such a lovely time in people's lives. And they remember that time when these kids were in music school with such fondness and nostalgia for the good old days. I've only had one kid go to prison. Of all my students, I got a letter from him the other day. Oh, well, that's another story, so anyway.

Kara Brown: Well, that's wonderful. It seems like you have just as much nostalgia for. For them, as children, as their parents do, which is just wonderful.

Shirley Grossman: Oh, they were so sweet. Of course, of course.

Kara Brown: So what have you been doing now that you've been retired, have you? I mean, I know you're part of the chorus. The temple chorus still, but are there other things you've been doing to keep yourself busy?

Shirley Grossman: Well, you know, you'd written some questions, so I jotted down some stuff. And so you'd like to know what I'm doing now. Okay, well, right now, I've been a part of Mitzvah Corps for a temple that services the older people. If somebody's in the hospital, we try and bring them meals. When they come home, we try to offer help as much as we can. But we have a Jewish Family Service. The Mitzvah Corps is feeling a need for lonely people, so that we can call them, visit them. But we haven't been able to since the pandemic. And so the goodness that we can provide has been. It's been dedicated to phoning and to just letting people know that we care, or sending cards or whatever. Um, and so I do that. After Trump came along, I became very involved in politics, which wasn't my thing at all before I had been very somnolent. Is that the word sleepy about politics, and just took it for granted? Everything would be all right. And was just horrified when this man came along, this dreadful, lying, evil man. And so I have become very political. So I do spend time doing that. And, when Larry was still alive, my husband died about three years ago, we always used to do different things. We used to usher the symphony. We ushered at the theater, we ushered at various places anyway we could. And, I also headed the membership committee for a while. I was the educational director for one year while we were in transition. I've done a lot of different things over the years. I worked hard for B'nai B'rith. I taught Sunday school, except my kid was the worst-behaved kid in the school. Which is normal. Let's see, what else do I do? Oh. I also worked quite extensively on creative services for our synagogue, and that was a real love I had. And then we'd have music and instruments and things, and I just really wanted that because I was not satisfied with the humdrum routine created, uh, services that were provided. And so that's something I tried to do myself, Else was to make that happen. And we had some beautiful services. But now the rabbi has taken elements of that and incorporated them in these in, in her special services. But we haven't had any of that since the pandemic. So that's all gone by the wayside. So anyway, what else can I tell you? I think I think we as a community have become more religious, if that makes sense. Um, more spiritual. I think like, now, my daughter was saying to me this morning, I told her I'm going to be interviewed today. She said, Oh, Mom, look at what you've done. Because I came from Victoria and Trail, British Columbia. Had no education, no Jewish education. I didn't know how to read Hebrew. I didn't. And yet I have two Jewish parents who came. My mother was an immigrant from Russia. She had no knowledge of Judaism. My dad had a lot more. He was born in Winnipeg, but he was from a Russian mother who knew diddly squat. And so the fact is that we have become learners. I go to my daughter's Torah class every Saturday morning, which is via Zoom. So I'm reading the Torah, which I can admit that I'd read little bits and pieces at bar and bat mitzvahs through the years, but never sat down to read. I'm studying Hebrew now, which I'm very excited about. I want to go to Israel again, though I've been several times over the years. And so I think there's a spiritual thirst in the new generation that wants more than what we were offered as kids. And I know that Larry, Larry, when he was 85, he read from the Torah for the first time anyway. And it was a beautiful thing. And then he died about six months later. But how wonderful that he could read from the Torah when he was 85. Can I show you two pictures?

SPEAKER_S3: Of course you can.

Shirley Grossman: I brought them up from downstairs. We have a lot of historical pictures. Okay. I don't know how much you can see. Can you see this? Okay.

SPEAKER_S3: Yes. Yes.

Shirley Grossman: Well, on the back is a newspaper clipping from 1917. Okay. On the back of this picture, it says May 17th, 1917, the story of a Russian boy who has made good in the Spokane Bank. That's Larry's uncle, and his father is this little boy here who came from Russia at the age of 13. And it's a magnificent thing that these little Jewish Russian boys who didn't know any English started this, this United Paint, this huge, huge business. And here they just work their tails off. And that's what they did. These two little Jewish boys with not much education, certainly no money. And there they are selling papers, and a whole article written about them in 1917. And then I'll show you one more picture. This is a very big picture. You probably heard I'm going to turn off the light. Maybe the shadows will be better. Is that better? Somewhat.

Kara Brown: Somewhat, yes.

SPEAKER_S3: Okay.

Shirley Grossman: So you see what it is? Okay. Now, let me read it to you. This is a Christmas celebration by the Grossmans in Hilliard in 1923. These two brothers, Samuel, Sam and Sam and Manuel, put on a Christmas party. This is six years after, I think Manuel was 19 years old. And Sam was maybe 22. They started a hardware store. I don't know if you can see it. Grossman Brothers. What is it? What does it say? Grossman Brothers. Hardware, paint, and leading furniture dealers. Satisfaction guaranteed. And they put on this Christmas party for all these little kids in Hilliard in 1923. It's almost a hundred years ago. They were trying to get goodwill for Jewish people. And I think it's pretty beautiful. Isn't that amazing? And there they are on each side of Santa, on Santa Claus. I just, you know, these Jewish boys. Boy, did they work, work, work, work. Tried so hard. We're so serious and dedicated and learned all they could. Manuel learned how to make paint from a book. He didn't know how to make paint, and they ended up with this big United Paint Company. So these immigrants who come to America, they're pretty special people, I think. I do. Anyway, are there any other questions?

SPEAKER_S3: Thank you. For you.

Kara Brown: Yeah. Thank you so much, Shirley, for sharing all that. I think you brought up some great points that it's never too late to become a learner, and that learning can come in many different ways. I do want to ask you about you. You said that you think over the years, the community has become more religious in some ways. Do you think that especially with what's happened, um, you know, since 2016 and over the last year that you've seen that kind of multiply and really increase, or do you think it's even changed just with what's happened in this last, you know, year or two now that we've been all going through?

Shirley Grossman: You know, I think our rabbi could answer that better than I can. All I can say is, I think, you know, the interpersonal connections are extremely important. We know that we need that, we all do. And I gotta say that something about our community, our Jewish community. It's an extraordinarily caring and loving community. And after my husband passed away, there was such goodness and caring that was extended to me. And I lost my daughter last year. And the outpouring of anything they could do for me was extraordinary. So I truly feel like I have this lovely family that's here that would do anything for me. I've had every kind of outpouring that could be imaginable, people willing to do anything for me. And I feel like I could call anybody in our community and say, Would you please do this? And they would. That's how I feel about this beautiful Jewish community. And that's reform. And I belong to both. I belong to the reform, and I belong to the conservative. And I just feel very blessed.

Kara Brown: That's wonderful, Shirley, and I'm, you know, I'm sorry to hear about your losses.

Shirley Grossman: Everybody worries about me, but I'm really okay. I don't need anything.

SPEAKER_S3: Okay, well, well, good.

Kara Brown: I'm glad to hear that. And thank you so much for sharing your story and your life in Spokane. Um, I've certainly learned a lot. Um, and it sounds like such a wonderful, wonderful place. Um, and I'm glad you are supported by people, um, that you can call your family.

Shirley Grossman: That's true. Kara.