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Interviewee: Sarah Burgen Ackerman (b. 11/27/21, Montgomery, AL)  
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**Note:** words in brackets are additions/corrections made by the interviewee while proofing the transcript.

**Begin Tape 1**

DR: Mrs. Ackerman, would you tell me your full name and when and where you were born.

SA: Sarah Burgen Ackerman, I was born in Montgomery, Alabama on November 27<sup>th</sup>, 1921.

DR: 1921.

SA: Um-hum.

DR: I always like to start out by trying to get as much family history—you know the background of the family as possible. What do you know about your father's family and also your mother's family?

SA: My mother and father came from a town they called Koden in Poland. It was on the Bug River. I think they pronounced it Buge River.

DR: Koden?

SA: It's K-O-D-N-A is the way I think, actually it's spelled K-O-D-E-N, but Jews always seem to pronounce a lot of those towns a little different. I don't know why.

DR: Um-hum and the Vogue?

SA: It was the Bug, B-U-G. It separated Poland from Russia, but they were in the Russian territory. I think they call it the Pale, because my father served in the Russian Army three years and when he had served the three years, he came home to Koden and my mother had saved up the money for him to go to America. They had to have twenty-five dollars to show when they got to America. I don't know how much the trip actually cost.

DR: Were they already married?

SA: They had three children already; they were married. They got married when my mother was sixteen and my daddy was eighteen.

DR: Um-hum, and tell me what their names were in the old country.

SA: Momma's name was Pesel Steinberg and Poppa's name was Avram Grinberg.

DR: Um-hum, I'm spelling these phonetically, but Pesel is?

SA: P-E-S-E-L.

DR: P-E-S-E-L and Avram Grinberg?

SA: They spelled it on the [Pesel's] passport G-R-I-N-B-E-R-G.

DR: What do you know about their lives in Koden, I mean in terms of what they did for a living, what kind of circumstances their families were in?

SA: They came from very poor families. . . . My father was orphaned when he was very young and his grandparents raised him. They were very poor so when he was eight years old, he was sent to Lublin to take care of a rabbi's younger son. I guess he [the rabbi's son] was maybe five or six, and he stayed there a couple of years and then he came back to Koden and he was an apprentice to someone to learn to build houses or little huts. They built them all over Russia.

DR: So he was a carpenter, a house carpenter?

SA: Yes, I guess that's what you would call it. My mother could read the Yiddish. She learned it at home; they did not go to any kind of school. There were no schools provided for the Jewish people in that town.

DR: Was Koden a Jewish shtetl or was it a bigger town?

SA: I think it was just a shtetl, but there were peasants that lived there that were Polish, because they have a big church in that town that's still there. When my brother went back, a few years ago, that church was still there. It's the most prominent building in the town, a big Catholic church. And other than that there's not much there.

DR: And were these big families? Did your parents have many siblings?

SA: They did because—my mother did; my father did not have much family, but my mother's father had been married and had children by a first marriage and his wife died. Then my mother's mother had been married and she came from the Russian side, I think it is called Kobrin. It must not have been many miles away. They married and they had three more children. I don't know how many they had before, but they had . . . several. She [my mother] had a lot of half-sisters and brothers.

DR: Did your parents talk about life in the old country? I mean was that something you learned about when you were a kid?

SA: Yes. They would talk about the house. It was very small that my mother lived in with my father. Her parents lived there also in the same house and her brother and his wife. At the time that she [my mother] was still in Europe—they [her brother] had five children . . . I think it had about two rooms. The floors were dirt. Momma would say that on Friday they would go down to the river and get the white sand that was on the bank and put it on the floor for Shabbat to make it look pretty. They baked their own bread. And, actually, during the time of the war [First World War] when the Germans would come through, or the Russians would come through, they would hide the bread that they made in a kind of a basement. Well, they didn't have a basement, but they dug a place where they could hide certain foods. Otherwise, they would steal their foods.

DR: Um-hum.

SA: And that's what she talked about mostly, the fact[s] about the war, because she was there without my Daddy from 1914 to 1920.

DR: Wow.

SA: People don't realize it but because in this country everybody has Social Security and we have a lot of charities, but they didn't have that. The way she said she was able to make a little money was they had a wagon and a horse and she would go to the next town. I don't know what the name of the town was or how far it was, it couldn't have been very far and she would buy things like maybe sugar and whatever she thought she could sell and bring it back. They had a little market in that town and she would sell and that's the way she made a living.

DR: So, explain what happened. Your father got back from having spent three years in the army. Your mother had three little children?

SA: Um-hum.

DR: And then what happened?

SA: Well, he went to America. He went—it was only required, they didn't have to have a passport when he went—they only had to have an address of somebody that was willing to house them. He had that address. He didn't have enough money. He was supposed to have twenty-five dollars, but in Belgium he said he had to spend the night [in a train station] before he got on the boat and somebody stole his boots, so he had to go out and buy a pair of shoes, so he had spent five dollars for the shoes. He had only twenty dollars, so he was afraid that they would—he didn't know what they would do about it, but actually when they asked him if he had the money, he had had it sewn into his belt. When he got ready to pull it out, the man that was receiving the immigrants said, "Oh that's okay." And he let him go on through.

The interesting thing too was that he went to that address and he found that address and [but] the people had moved. They were some relatives of his, but the people that were living in that place took him in, let him clean himself up, and fed him and the next morning they suggested some places where he might find a job, which he did. But he didn't like New York very much. He found a construction job, because he was kind of a builder, and he didn't like it so much so he decided—he had two brother-in-laws in Birmingham—he decided he would go down there and see what he could find there. He did and how he got there I don't know, but he got to Birmingham.

Both of the brothers-in-law were pretty well fixed already . . . but he said they didn't want to finance him in any kind of endeavor. He had thought about what everybody else was doing buying some stuff and then going out and trying to sell it in the countryside. And so he went on farther south, I think he just went probably by the trains. He said when he would stop at places he would work on the farms until he got to a little town called Opp, Alabama. He stopped there and started working for a man learning how to repair shoes. He had never done that. You know so many shoemakers came from Europe, but he had not been a shoemaker in Europe, but he learned how to repair shoes. He was able to rent a very small place and he started selling second hand shoes that he repaired and then he started buying new shoes. He lived behind the store so he didn't have any expenses. Everything he made he could use for his business. This was in about 1915. By 1919, he had about fifty thousand dollars—isn't that amazing?

DR: That is amazing.

SA: He was trying to get somebody to take some money to his wife, my mother, so that she could come over. At that time there were certain people—he said this man's name was Tennenbaum that would go to Europe, setup in Warsaw and send telegrams to the people that he had money for them to come and get. He set up in Warsaw and my mother was in Koden, which was a train ride away, but she went and got the money and then they got passports and came to America.

They got to Ellis Island—they had to have passports—and one of her relatives in New York knew she was coming and picked them up—my father didn't pick her up—and he [the cousin] redressed them into American clothes and they went on the train to Montgomery where my father decided to move as he thought he could make a better life with his wife and the children there. He bought a home on Sayre Street and there were several Jewish families that already lived on that street. When my mother got there they all tried to help her out, help her

with everything she needed to do because she didn't speak English. They were very good to her. She had some very good Jewish neighbors.

DR: Let me ask you a couple of spellings. Opp, Alabama you said?

SA: Yeah, O-P-P I think it was.

DR: That's an odd name for a town.

SA: Um-hum.

DR: Opp, Alabama do you know where it is or how big it is?

SA: It must have been a small town and it had a lumber mill there . . . it had a sawmill.

DR: In the vicinity of Montgomery?

SA: No.

DR: No.

SA: It's not close to Montgomery. I think it would be at least a hundred and something miles.

DR: Um-hum. Have you ever been there?

SA: No, my face is so red. I've thought about that several times. We should have gone. We could still go. My brother and I should go because he [Papa] said when he was there that the man who ran the saw mill would help him write his checks for his business. And that there was a woman there who had been a teacher who knew he needed to learn more English and she was teaching him English. People were very caring for him.

DR: Um-hum.

SA: They really were, they did a lot of nice things for him. [However,] I don't think he ever went back to Opp.

DR: One other spelling, then I'm going to ask you a question. Sayre Street?

SA: S-A-Y-R-E.

DR: S-A-Y-R-E. Okay, Sayre Street.

SA: It was named after somebody there.

DR: Okay. [What was] the reason that your mother stayed in Russia as long as she did after your Dad left?

SA: The war [First World War] broke out.

DR: Okay, it wasn't because he didn't have the—I mean he had already made a lot of money, I mean if he made fifty—

SA: He could have gotten them sooner.

DR: But he couldn't.

SA: They couldn't communicate [because of the war].

DR: Okay.

SA: I don't think they could even mail a letter. From 1914 . . . until the war was over in '18, but then the [Russian] revolution lasted until 1919.

DR: That's sounds about right.

SA: And then see she came over in 1920, and she left her brother and his wife and five children, and they had two more children after she moved, and that was seven that stayed there, and that's what's so sad. Because of those seven children only two survived; all the rest were killed [by the Nazis].

DR: And where are those two now?

SA: The reason they survived was because of some kind of circumstances. Russia, when the war started, Russia was on the German side. You know they joined up with the Germans first.

DR: The Hitler-Stalin Pact.

SA: Um-hum and so they happened to be somewhere—I think he was running some type of grocery type business, not right in Koden, and she was working for him, the sister. They were picked up and taken to Russia and taken all the way to Siberia, and then they were released because then Russia went with the Allies. So all those prisoners were released. They were Polish people, but they couldn't go back; they had no money. There was no transportation for them to go back so they stayed there thinking all the time that they were having a hard time and that their family was probably okay. When the war ended and they were able to get back, they actually didn't go back to Koden. They were told what had happened [and] that their family wouldn't be there and they went to a DP camp.

DR: Oh.

SA: And, believe it or not, they remembered an uncle, the uncle in Birmingham, they remembered his address and they got in touch with him. He got in touch with us and all the families put some money in and had them come over. They could have waited and would have

come over with the HIAS—one of the Jewish agencies would have brought them over, but they wanted to come. So we brought them to our house in Walhalla, the two of them. Well, there were three then because she married while she was in Russia, so there were three and they came to Walhalla. They stayed there about two years and then went to New York, because we left Walhalla and came to Fort Mill and they moved, too.

DR: Just, you know, not to get ahead of the story, you just mentioned an uncle in Birmingham?

SA: Um-hum.

DR: Tell me about that because I didn't—this was?

SA: My mother's brother, and she also had a half-brother there.

DR: So, tell me about the rest of the family coming over—your father brought your mother and three kids.

SA: Um-hum.

DR: And then, you said, her brother?

SA: Her brother remained there with his wife and children.

DR: Right.

SA: They didn't want to immigrate.

DR: Right.

SA: They were very religious and he had heard that America wasn't religious, so he opted to stay.

DR: Right, but you said that when your cousins got here, they came because they remembered an address of an uncle in Birmingham.

SA: Right.

DR: So who was that?

SA: His name was Itchy Stein. Actually they cut the Berg off of Itchy Steinberg.

DR: So one of your mother's brothers had come.

SA: Um-hum, he came before my father came.

DR: Ah, okay.

SA: He had come over earlier.

DR: Okay, he was the first, Itchy Stein?

SA: I think he or I don't know about the half-brother, he was an Applebaum, the half-brother. His name was Joseph **Rizer**—they called him Applebaum. He actually was not in Birmingham. He was in one of the suburbs. I don't remember what they called it, Ensley, I think, but I think he probably came over first and then Uncle Itchy came over.

DR: So it wasn't just—

SA: It was just my mother and father and three children really.

DR: Right, but it wasn't just in your extended family, it wasn't just your Dad who came south? It was these uncles too.

SA: Yes they were really—they had come south first, and why, I don't know. See I didn't know anything about them at all why they came, but they came first. Because of them, he came down and then he went farther south.

DR: Kept going—and what were their businesses?

SA: Uncle Itchy had a grocery store. He used to drive all the way to Florida with a big truck and pick up oranges and bring them back. Can you imagine doing that today? Later he started a junk business and his sons are still in that today. They're very wealthy. They make a lot of money on junk, just like Eddie Aberman. See, that's how they made their money.

DR: Um-hum.

SA: You don't call it junk anymore; you call it metals or something.

DR: Scrap metal.

SA: Scrap metal.

DR: It's a big Jewish business. I've never understood.

SA: But that's what he went into and his sons, he's got two sons that are in it and they are very wealthy . . . .

DR: And the Applebaum half-brother was?

SA: He was in the dry goods business.

DR: Dry goods.

SA: He had, I think, five sons and one daughter.

DR: Um-hum.

SA: And one of his sons became a doctor and the rest of them were all merchants. One of them got killed in the war; the younger one got killed in a plane crash.

DR: Fighting on the American side.

SA: Oh yes.

DR: So it's almost sort of a classic immigration story. Dry goods merchant, grocery, scrap metal, shoe—you know these—

SA: They went into some kind of business.

DR: Um-hum, little business.

SA: And really you have to remember this, that they didn't get that business experience in Europe. They didn't get that. It was like my father; he grew up building these little houses . . . he used that ability or that training . . . he would go into a store he would build his own shelves and his own tables. Also when we moved to Eufaula from Montgomery—see, we moved to Eufaula about three years later; we stayed there [in Montgomery] only three years; I was born there—we moved to Eufaula, we rented a house for about a year, but then he built our house there and it's still there.

I have gone back to Eufaula to see our house. It's still a nice little bungalow. He built it himself. I think he had one man to help him. He had a black man working with him. You know, these European people that came over were not prejudiced against the blacks because they had never seen them before. They never saw a black where they lived. My father had this black man that worked for him. He drove his car like his chauffeur because he [Papa] didn't drive. He [Papa] bought a car . . . and learned how to fix shoes . . . . He [this black man] was like one of the family . . . . All the Jews I ever knew never were prejudiced against blacks like the Southerners were at that time.

DR: What was your father's—the man's—name?

SA: I can't remember. I really don't. I can see his face, but I don't know his name.

DR: Was he a contemporary of your Dad, about the same age or—

SA: I think so. I think he must have been about the same. He was a big fellow. My older brother might remember his name, but I don't remember it. I was old enough to know his name because I was fifteen when we left Eufaula and moved to Birmingham. The reason we moved to Birmingham from Eufaula was I had these two sisters . . . [who] have never thought of

intermarrying . . . but my momma was afraid we might. I mean they, I wasn't old enough I was fifteen when we moved, but they were already up in their twenties. She insisted and that's something that's brought out in this *Jew Store*. Did you read that?

DR: *The Jew Store?*

SA: Um-hum.

DR: I have read it, yeah.

SA: And that's what she brings out; see they moved so that they would marry Jews. And it was the same thing with us. My father rented a store in Birmingham up on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue that was where the lower end of merchandise, you know, cheaper merchandise was sold, and we moved to Birmingham. We bought a house; we sold what we had in Eufaula—they did—and bought a house on a really lovely street in Birmingham and sure enough by the time—it took about two years and all three of us got married. My older sister got married first and the next sister got married in a few months and I was married a few months later.

DR: Um-hum.

SA: They were in their late twenties and I was eighteen, so we all married about the same time.

DR: How about the third child that your mother came over with?

SA: It was a boy, my brother who lives in Seneca now.

DR: So where was he in the family lineup?

SA: He was third. There were two sisters and when he [they] came over he was about eight and the next sister was nine and the older sister was twelve. They all went through school and graduated in the proper age like about seventeen or eighteen even though they had had no schooling, all during the war they had no schooling at all. They got to this country and teachers would keep them after class to teach them English, and they put them . . . in their proper grade for their age level and they went right on through with good grades.

DR: That's amazing.

SA: It is really that they could do that because the one that was twelve, she was already in high school by the time she started, and made good grades. They didn't go to college though because I think our parents didn't really know what college was. They weren't aware of how nice it would be to go until I came along. I went to the University of Alabama for one year and then I got married. By then, I'm about eight years younger than my—well there is more than that actually because he was eight when he came here and I was born the year after my mother came here. She was here over a year and I was born so I'm about eight or nine years younger than he was. Then I had another brother born five years later.

DR: After you.

SA: Um-hum, that's the one that lives in Cornelia, Georgia.

DR: So, there are two boys, okay. So, back to the moves from Montgomery to Eufaula; what kinds of businesses did your Dad have in each of the places that you lived in Alabama?

SA: In Montgomery he bought out a shoe store and he was running a shoe store. One of the reasons he failed at it was that, in 1923, there was a tremendous style change. Women's shoes went from high tops to low tops. He said he had these shoes come in that he had never even opened, and he tried to get the manufacturers to take them back because he knew he couldn't pay for them, and they wouldn't do it. So he had to go into bankruptcy. He lost everything. He had a true bankruptcy. You hear of people today going into bankruptcy and they have the businesses listed as corporations or something and they don't get [lose] their private money. They only get the store money, but anyway, he lost everything. He just packed us up; all our furniture and everything on a truck, rented a truck, and took us to Eufaula, which was about a hundred miles south of Montgomery. It was a nice plan, by the way. It was a nice little town, and I know it had two German Jewish families that had lived there a long time. They were Roth and Oppenheim, and they were in businesses too. My father rented a store [building] and opened up a store.

DR: Shoes again or—?

SA: Everything.

DR: Everything, general merchandise.

SA: General merchandise.

DR: In 1919, okay, he had fifty thousand dollars.

SA: Um-hum.

DR: And, by 1923, nothing.

SA: Um-hum.

DR: So it was the reinvestment?

SA: He bought the store, the shoe store and he was right near the capital. He was in a great location. He bought the house and he sent money to Momma and children to come over. He furnished the house. He had somebody from a department store come in and just furnish it all the way, bedrooms, living rooms, dining room. And as I said, he bought a piano you know none of them had shown any talent or anything, but I guess they thought they were supposed to have that. He lost all of that.

DR: But he just picked himself up.

SA: He did. Just packed everything up. I can see the truck now. It wasn't one of those covered trucks; it was an open truck and took us to Eufaula. Those people [my parents] were not afraid to start over again. You know they just did—if I had thought that we had to start over after we had . . . this business here in town and we had lost everything, I don't know whether I could have done it.

DR: This may seem like an odd question to you, but you said that when your mother first arrived he got her dressed like an American. Where he—I don't know what expression you used, but—

SA: She had a cousin, a Steinberg cousin that knew she was coming. . . . my father was in touch with him . . . and he lived in New York. He met them at Ellis Island. I think you had to have someone to pick you up and he picked them up the three children and my mother. My mother said he immediately took them to stores and bought them clothes because, you know, they didn't look American. They stayed with him I think two or three days my mother said. He had remarried. He'd lost his wife in Europe . . . and he had been very close to my momma in Europe. He kept them for about three days and then they [he] put them on the train to Montgomery where my father met them.

DR: What about her sheitel? Was she wearing a sheitel?

SA: No, I don't think so. I don't think she was. My father wasn't religious at all. My mother was and he knew that. He knew that she would want kosher food. I think he knew that when he moved to Montgomery. It [he] would have been better off staying in that little town because he didn't have the experience to go to a city and open a store. He had no help. You know he didn't have a brother or someone that would have more ability than he had or somebody to help him.

DR: But she had already—well, maybe she never wore a sheitel.

SA: I don't think so. [I really don't know.]

DR: I ask that because I just saw *Hester Street* again, you know, the movie, and when she gets off and he says, “Oh that looks so awful, that wig looks so awful,” and the husband makes such a big deal about her hair.

SA: Oh that's the saddest story. I cried so because it did remind me of my parents because of the fact that the conflicts that they had; my parents had that. He had been here seven years so he could speak, you know, broken, but he could speak and understand English. Here she was, new, and they had lots of arguments. I can remember them as a child and it wasn't until Momma had been here about ten or eleven years that she—she felt so different about life. First of all, it was not a love match. They had been mated in Europe and here she hadn't seen him much. He had been in the army and come home and had three children, but he had been in the army and then he had gone away. Here he was so different, just like in *Hester Street*. People couldn't understand why I cried so much in that, but I could just see my mother. It took her about ten years to accept

my Daddy, really accept him. And she was [inaudible] always working hard and he did [too]. He never—I mean he didn't have anything. He didn't have any avocation or anything. The only thing he knew to do was work and he was a hard worker and she was too.

When we lived in Eufaula, my father had bought about seven acres and built this house. Immediately she got a cow and chickens and she milked the cow. She wouldn't trust anybody else to milk it because if you don't milk them thoroughly, if you don't get all the milk they will go dry. She milked the cow and she made butter and buttermilk. She was a great cook. She always said—I used to talk about how great a cook she was—and she said, “Well, that's all I ever did. I didn't go to school, so that's all I ever did was cook.” But she was a business-lady too. As soon as she could, she would pack up one of those baskets that you get a bushel of peaches in and she would walk to the store with that—we lived about four or five blocks from the store. She would walk to the store with that basket full of food and she would stay all day in the store with my Daddy. We would come from school to the store.

Another thing I said, my brother-in-law, Sol, was here on Yom Kippur and my daughter was there, and we were sitting around talking about this new integration problem in Charlotte. You know, they voted not to bus anymore and stuff. She said, “It's just not fair the blacks haven't had a chance to catch up and whatnot. Their backgrounds are different. They don't have books; they don't have this—” I said to my brother, Nathan, who is five years younger than I am, I said, “Do you ever remember a book in our house in Eufaula?” He said, “No.” I said, “Did you ever see a magazine in our house in Eufaula?” “No.”

The only thing my father got [did get] the Jewish newspaper, but it would come to the store and he would read it at the store and we never got to hear that. Yet all of us wanted to go to school. My mother never had to tell us, make us go; we wanted to go and made good grades. Eufaula had a good school system because when I moved to Birmingham, my cousin who lived in Birmingham, said, “Oh you won't make good grades here.” Well, I found it even easier than it was at [in] Eufaula because the school was smaller and the teacher knew us better and it was a good school. What we did do, we learned to go to the library early, but you know they talk about poor people don't have books in their homes and they're not read to and they're not—our parents didn't read to us.

DR: What newspaper did your Dad get?

SA: *The Forward*.

DR: He got *The Forward*?

SA: Yes, he got it all his life until he died. George took it for a while, but we just quit a few years ago.

DR: Did you grow up speaking any Yiddish?

SA: No, and that's sad because my mother was only here a year when I was born so I heard Yiddish; and I know that because I find it easy to learn [Yiddish] vocabulary, but I don't speak well. She wanted us to speak English so she could learn English. She never encouraged us to speak Yiddish. And I'm really sorry about that, but can't do anything about that.

DR: Well, I'm going to jump ahead because I want to get to South Carolina. So at age seventeen you went to the University?

SA: I was seventeen.

DR: Seventeen in Tuscaloosa.

SA: Tuscaloosa.

DR: Then at eighteen you got married?

SA: Yes.

DR: So where did you meet George?

SA: In Birmingham. He had come—we lived there in 1936 and I think he came there that same year, or maybe '37, to teach [Hebrew and was the assistant rabbi at Temple Beth El]. He rented a room with a Jewish family right up the street from us.

So when we would go to catch the bus . . . [to] go to the YMHA to go swimming or something like that, we would go on the same bus. We started talking, but I had met him, been introduced to him, by a girlfriend once right in front of the synagogue. He was teaching and he came out and she introduced me to him.

There was something—you know it's funny how when you meet somebody—to me, I thought he— He was seven years older than I. I was sixteen and he was twenty-three. I'm sure he liked me some right away because I went to a dance. I had a date that night with a college boy; this friend had gotten me a date. She knew some boys from college and we went to a Valentine's dance at the YMHA. I know it was Saint Valentine's, but we used to have dances on Valentine's Day. They used to do that. And he came to that dance, George did, and I couldn't help but notice that he noticed me. So then when we saw each other on the bus, go to catch the bus, we started talking and he started taking me out when I was sixteen. I must have been fifteen when I met him. Then, as I said, I went to college one year and I came home in May, he gave me a ring and we got married in June.

DR: Just for the purpose of the tape, would you just tell briefly what his background was because that's a very interesting—I mean that is a whole other story.

SA: It is. Well, he was born in Winnipeg in 1914. His parents had come over from Lithuania, from Rugova, Lithuania. They had brought over two little boys and he was born [in Winnipeg]—they were about two years apart. In 1919 [1918], four years later, both his parents died in the flu epidemic. There was such a big group of children that were orphaned about that time, if not from the war, then from the flu epidemic. The Jewish people in Winnipeg decided that they wanted to have their children not go—a lot of the Christian churches offered to take these children, but the Jews in Winnipeg, they were very Orthodox Jews in Winnipeg; they didn't have Conservative or Reform, they just had Orthodox—they wanted those children in their own [orphan's] home and they started one immediately. . . . In 1920, they built a building, a special building for them and he [George] was raised in that building.

The interesting thing about that was the fact that they had really wonderful educations in Hebrew and in music. His brothers were very musical. One of them played the saxophone and one played the clarinet. The second brother was a professional musician; played with bands all his life until he died. His older brother, when he was about sixteen, was taken by a family in Humboldt, Saskatchewan, to work in their retail store and he later was able to buy the store and became fairly wealthy. George got the scholarship from the Bronfman's. It was Edward Bronfman's family that offered this scholarship for Hebrew-speaking children to go to the Yeshiva in Chicago and he got that scholarship, so he went there when he was sixteen. He was there until he was twenty-three.

**End Side A, Tape 1**

**Begin Side B, Tape 1**

SA: He had started—he finished high school in Chicago and I have his diploma from, I think it was called John Marshall High School, and then he went two years to a college there—Lewis Institute, it was called.

Then he got this job. This rabbi [Rabbi Mesch of Birmingham] came up looking for a Hebrew teacher and he [George] was recommended, and he decided to go. . . he went on to become a teacher and a cantor. He went to Birmingham.

DR: And went to Birmingham, okay.

SA: That's where his first job was.

DR: Okay.

SA: And I had just moved to Birmingham too.

DR: So how did y'all get from Alabama to South Carolina?

SA: That was because of my brother. We actually went to Memphis one year and got a better job in Memphis with more pay, not a whole lot more but enough that we decided to go there for one year. We were there for the last year of the war. By the way, George had thought he would, even though he had children, he volunteered to be a chaplain, but they wouldn't take him. They said he had to be ordained. So, because of his religious teachings, he was never drafted—I guess more than the fact that he had children. We had two children already. We went to Memphis for one year and he worked at Baron Hirsch Synagogue there as a teacher and also did some Hillel work there. They had a couple of colleges in Memphis.

My brother came to see us—the one who had gotten the store in Walhalla—and he propositioned George. He said if you will come work for me, I'll give you [the same] salary you're making here plus a commission, plus he promised he would help us go into business too. George went up to look at the store and decided he would try it. He was thirty years old when he made that complete change. It was a complete change for him. He had never worked in a store. He had never worked on the Sabbath and it was a complete change, but he did it.

DR: He had to work on the Sabbath?

SA: You know, in business you do, if you're working, especially [since] he was working for my brother. When we moved to Fort Mill, what he would do a lot of times was go to synagogue Saturday morning then come back and help me. I would stay in the store and he would go, but he made that break, and he did it. . . . He didn't like it especially.

DR: He didn't?

SA: Not really, you know it wasn't his first love [the religious work was his main interest], but he worked hard [in business] and he made himself comfortable in it. It was not easy. Have you ever made a change completely in life?

DR: The change that we made was where we lived because my husband and I were both Northerners and we moved from a big city in the North to a tiny town in the South.

SA: That is a big change.

DR: It was a very big change, but this was more—what you're describing was more I would say by compulsion that is or maybe not, but it was something he felt he had to do whereas we were sort of being experimental, you know.

SA: You thought you wanted—

DR: Why not try, you know.

SA: What did y'all do when y'all moved there to McClellanville?

DR: I worked for the Forest Service for a year. Well the first thing I did was we started an Arts Council, I with some other women. It was a volunteer, I wasn't being paid and then I got a paying job with the Forest Service, The National Forest. There's a big one in McClellanville.

SA: Forest?

DR: Um-hum.

SA: And what did you know about that? Nothing?

DR: Nothing, but it wasn't a skilled job. I wanted to ask you, Mrs. Ackerman—because you've lived in several places in the South, always in the South—first of all, whether there's a difference among those, from place to place, in terms of being a Jew, raising your children as a Jew, your reception or, if in fact, they all seemed similar or the same?

SA: I can say that Walhalla was very unreceptive of Jews. I don't know whether they had never been exposed to Jews, but they were not friendly or welcoming in any way. George is the one that made the Jewish life for us. George is also the one that finally broke the ice with some of them and we were there over six years. He got very friendly with a minister named Ace

Tubbs— I think they moved down to Charleston—who was getting ready to try to put on the *Messiah*, a musical. He was talking to George—George was in the store—and he was talking to George. George says, “I know that music real well.” He said, “Well, maybe you could help me.” George agreed to help him and then, when he started working with him and his group and we had them to our house once for a rehearsal, they loosened up a little bit, but they were never really [accepting]. They seemed to be—they’re so isolated there, I guess, in Walhalla.

When we moved to Fort Mill, I felt an entirely different atmosphere. It was just so much more open. People greeted us and invited us and did things that you would expect if you are decent people and you come to a community. I was looking for some pictures to show you and I came across George—in 1953 they organized the Optimist Club here and he was one of the first ones in that club. I was asked immediately to join the women’s club here. They didn’t seem to notice that we were Jewish that we were different. We were accepted. It was a different—so some of the towns are different.

DR: What about, say, a big city like Birmingham versus a little town like Eufaula; or do you think a big city versus a little town makes a difference?

SA: Well, for Jews it does because—when I moved to Birmingham I felt like someone who—I was fifteen, just the age where I was noticing boys, and I felt like I had been liberated because I knew that even though I went to prom parties already in Eufaula and we were driving in Eufaula—you could drive when you were fourteen, I think, there—and I had dates, not just to go with one person. We would go to a party or something. I knew that they weren’t [like me], even though I was that young . . . I wouldn’t ever want to get very close to any of those boys. When I moved to Birmingham, I felt like I was liberated. I had a Jewish crowd and you did look for that as such a young person. There is a difference. I don’t know if Harriet—

HG: No, I would agree. I certainly agree.

SA: I don’t know if you could feel that or not. [Inaudible] in Rock Hill from mostly Christians.

DR: Your kids were born in?

SA: I had two born in Birmingham and two born in Walhalla. Bernie and Penni were born in Walhalla. It was a county hospital. It was not in Walhalla actually.

DR: The move to Fort Mill was because you had a store opportunity right?

SA: Right exactly.

DR: So it didn’t figure in your thinking that well we should go to Charlotte or Charleston or whatever like your Mother did?

SA: No. We were very happy though, to learn that we were close to Charlotte. George, before I even got here, he came in May and stayed here and I didn’t move until the end of July because I was selling out the store. We had a small shoe store along with my brother’s store and

I was selling that out so I stayed there until July. Before I got here George had already joined the synagogue and had already bought us cemetery plots. He had just—

HG: He was organized.

SA: He was organized is right.

DR: And he felt like this was a move to stay.

SA: Um-hum. A lot of people would say “Why don’t you live in Charlotte and commute to Fort Mill?” But I didn’t think that was a good idea because the children were all within walking distance of the schools at that time. They didn’t have the busing then. One school was here and the other was there. It was within three or four blocks and they could all walk to school. They could all walk to the store, and I just felt like I wouldn’t want for them to be there and us to be here. I didn’t know what kind of help you could get and stuff like that. And then they loved it here.

They went to Charlotte for the Hebrew school and Sunday school or whatever they had there, but George taught all of them but the oldest, Allan . . . . That’s another thing about Charlotte though—even though that is peculiar—is that even Bernie’s children go to Charlotte to Hebrew school at least three days a week. Somebody takes them over there and Bernie is over there at least a couple of times a week, and Teri, of course, her office is in Charlotte. And yet, we’re considered out-of-towners because we lived in Fort Mill. [Even though] you can get to the synagogue in thirty minutes . . . . People do consider you out-of-towners.

DR: It just occurred to me to ask you this. When you were in Walhalla and had a child, how did you arrange the bris?

SA: We had a mohel come from Atlanta.

DR: From Atlanta?

SA: Yes, Bernie and Teri had theirs [the mohel] come from somewhere in Florida; they had heard about him being so good.

DR: Really.

SA: Yes, it didn’t seem to be a problem.

DR: And what was your husband’s role in the synagogue here, or I should say in Rock Hill?

SA: If you notice in that picture, they call him a cantor.

DR: Yeah.

SA: And he would help out whenever they needed him. Really, if those Jewish families in Rock Hill had been more educated Jewishly they would have talked George into being their

leader, but see they didn't have that whatever it is to realize that he could have done that. Instead, he took a position for the High Holy Days in Salisbury, and he served there in Salisbury for twenty-five years. He went there on the High Holy Days and whenever they wanted him. He performed a few funerals and weddings. Are the Gordons still your neighbors?

HG: No.

SA: You know who they are?

HG: I do. I do know exactly. Eleanor died, didn't she?

SA: I don't know.

HG: I think she did.

SA: I didn't know any of them, but George—Jackie Leader called George up and asked him if he would officiate at his funeral and he did.

HG: When Howard died?

SA: Um-hum.

HG: Yeah.

SA: I didn't know them and he didn't either.

HG: Yeah.

SA: It is strange; the children said they never even really knew they were Jewish. I mean, that they had a Jewish father. But he wanted a Jewish burial.

DR: When someone would hire your husband as a cantor or to officiate, is that a paid position?

SA: He got paid, not much, but he got paid. I think he got a thousand dollars at that time. That was in 1953. I mean nobody would do it, what he did for a thousand dollars, I can tell you that. He did everything. [He was so well educated as cantor and teacher.] He read the Torah, he did [blew] the shofar, he did the sermon, he did the whole thing, the whole bit [service]. You never really could even find somebody who would do it all from beginning to end.

HG: It's tiring actually; a big job.

SA: But he was accustomed to it. He liked to do it.

DR: Have you made any observations about the difference between being Jewish in the South versus being Jewish in the North?

SA: I've never been Jewish in the North.

DR: You haven't visited up in the North much?

SA: No.

DR: Do you have any sense that there is a regional difference?

SA: I don't know exactly.

DR: Let me ask this because, at least in our milieu in Charleston, when you get a big Yankee influx like we have in our synagogues, the Southerners feel it and they feel pretty uncomfortable in certain ways—The Jewish Yankees, wouldn't you say, Barbara?

SA: What do they do?

DR: Well, they're loud, pushy.

BS: They're not as mannerly and they certainly aren't as friendly.

DR: They maybe act a little superior and more sophisticated, I don't know.

SA: I guess I've never been around them.

DR: Okay, that's not part of your experience here.

SA: I guess not even though I have relatives in New York.

DR: If I asked you whether you would think of yourself as a Southern Jew or a Jewish Southerner? In other words, what's the core part of your identity?

SA: I think I'm very Jewish if that's what you're asking, and I find that my friends don't mind me being that way. My Christian friends, they don't mind me being really Jewish. I walk with this girl—really she's Lutheran, but she goes to the Presbyterian Church here because the Lutheran Church is in Rock Hill so she decided she would go here. She is just very interested in what we do and I'm interested in what she does. She teaches a lot of classes.

I do find most of my, I mean all of my non-Jewish friends that I have don't mind me being Jewish at all. They don't expect me to be Christian. . . . George and I went to something at the Baptist Church when they invited us. Oh, I know, they were going to show some film on Fort Mill. Somebody had—I think it was J. B. Mills, who has passed away now—had slides of Fort Mill when it was maybe a hundred years ago or something and somebody told us about it. So we went there and after we went there they all wanted to know why we don't come back more often. You know there are a lot of people that can't understand that you are not joining if you come to some program there. I tried to go to something in Rock Hill—maybe you've been

to it at times—where they teach a course all year in one part of the Bible, maybe one like in Deuteronomy.

HG: Like one of the churches or an extension of the university?

SA: No, it was at a church and somebody told me about it and they were going to study—I've forgotten which book they were going to study, but it was something out of the Old Testament. I decided I would go, but what happened was they started off with a complete Christian service. They don't go right into study. I thought it would be like a study group, but it wasn't.

HG: They call it Bible study.

SA: Well, they start off by preaching a little sermon and then praying some and all of that first. I felt uncomfortable in that, so I didn't go again.

DR: We don't have a lot of time, but I just wanted to ask you if your kids, growing up, were involved at all in the integration of the schools? They are about the right age, I guess.

SA: Um-hum.

DR: Were they in public school when they integrated schools here?

SA: Um-hum.

DR: And how did that go?

SA: It went fine because, first of all, Fort Mill doesn't have a big black population. I don't know why, but they don't. I don't know about Rock Hill. Do they have a big—

HG: Um-hum, Rock Hill is, I think, about a third black.

SA: Well, they don't have it here so there wasn't any problem. We only had one black school here and what they did with that school is they made it into a junior high school. So they had all the schools integrated and they didn't mind at all. First of all, my two girls, Esther and Penni, both graduated from Sacred Heart, and they were both a Miss Sacred Heart. Kays Gary . . . when he was writing a column [in the *Charlotte Observer*] said, "Only in America do you have a Jewish person become a Miss Sacred Heart in high school." Esther started in the eleventh grade commuting over there. That was before our school system was very good and— [Penni went for four years. Sacred Heart was in Belmont, North Carolina.]

**END OF TAPE**