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From Immigrant to Ethnic: Interview with Beryl Segal by Joseph Conforti

Beryl Segal

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Rhode Island College
ETHNIC STUDIES PROJECT

Oral History Interview # 17

with

Beryl Segal

April 28, 1976

By Joseph Conforti

Tape 1 Side 1

- 7 Background on his village in Russia. Population was Jews, Ukrainians and Polish Catholics. Market was held every week.
- 46 During World War I, suppression of Jews by Russian troops. This was one reason for coming to America.
- 71 Village life: father was scribe and slaughterer and cantor.
- 117 Role of rabbi in village.
- 160 Sabbath observance in village.
- 176 Synagogue was center of almost all activity--charity organized by synagogue, social activities were connected to it.
- 227 There were two types of synagogues.
- 245 A different set of regulations prevailed for the different populations in the area. Feudal system in effect--Ukrainians worked the land, Polish Catholics were usually businessmen, Jews were artisans and merchants.
- 263 How state affected the Jews--taxed but got nothing in return.
- 285 Jews cared for their own. Separate school systems for populations, Jews could hold no public offices.
- 320 People came to America beginning in 1905. His sisters left in 1912-13. One went to North Dakota and other to Minneapolis. They saved money, bought tickets for others--it was a duty to save money to bring others to America.

Beryl Segal

- 376 Government agents in Russia subject to bribes and that's how he got out of the country.
- 431 Russian government blamed Jewish population for trouble during Russo-Japanese War and reprisals began. Description of what Russian soldiers did to his village.

Tape 1 Side 2 (Numbering continues)

- 484 Flight from Russia.
- 489 Description of trip to America.
- 501 What he knew about America.
- 508 His brother-in-law worked as window washer and earned \$7.50 a week. They thought this was very large amount. Working for wages was new concept to them. In Russia they worked for food.
- 528 He brought nothing from Russia except his knowledge. Attended classes at Brown University as well as citizenship classes at YMCA where he also studied English.
- 560 Came to Providence and lived with relatives. They helped him to get a job at Miriam Hospital in the lab. He had married in Russia.
- 583 Lived in South Providence, came there in 1923. Description of community.
- 631 Other ethnic groups in South Providence, mostly Irish but they soon moved to Washington Park. Short description of inter-ethnic conflict.
- 670 South Providence did not have the same kind of self-help as in Russia. Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society helped them in New York.
- 718 Hebrew Free Loan Association in Providence helped him.
- 732 He was a teacher in a Hebrew school soon after his arrival in America. Comparison of functions of synagogue here and in Russia.
- 755 Remarks on establishment of community centers here--something unheard of in Russia. They took over some of the functions of the synagogue and added others. Jewish hospital took over the function of helping the sick. Home for the Aged and orphanage also served functions formerly done by the synagogue.

Beryl Segal

- 799 The synagogue still had schools. Changes in functions already evident when he came.
- 837 He lived in South Providence until 1952. Changes in the Jewish community there were gradual. Jews began moving out of the area when blacks began moving in. Also the government took their houses away for urban renewal and he sees this as the primary reason for the end of the Jewish community in South Providence.
- 922 He returned to South Providence to visit after he moved to the East Side to be near his work at Miriam. He no longer used the synagogue there but instead went to one on the East Side.
- 931 Current use of synagogue--just once a week for worship. American Jew uses synagogue as long as his child needs the school.

Tape 2 Side 1

- 2 Origins of Jewish community in Providence: 1840 Jewish names in city directory; 1854 first Jewish synagogue in Providence; 1870's establishment of North End community; 1875 Sons of Zion on Orms Street.
- 54 Community on Orms Street, Charles Street, Constitution Hill up to Benefit Street. Many Jewish businesses on Constitution Hill. First synagogue in that area in 1905--eventually were 5 in North End.
- 72 Differences in the two Jewish communities: North End and South Providence.
- 84 All current organizations were organized by Jews of North End: Free Loan Association, Community Center, Home for the Aged, Orphanage.
- 108 North End Jews moved to the East Side but he's unsure of reasons--they weren't pushed out as were the South Providence Jews.
- 142 South Providence Jews went to Cranston and Warwick.
- 158 In 1925-26, movement began in both Jewish communities.
- 174 Jewish people on East Side now have a sense of community. South Providence Jews didn't take anything with them when they moved except the synagogue. All institutions are on the East Side.

Beryl Segal

- 225 Future of Jewish community: he feels it will persist but it is changing, feels definition of a Jew is changing-- external appearances he knew as a child are gone, knowledge of Hebrew largely gone. Only thing preserved are the charitable characteristics--they support institutions in Providence, support for the state of Israel, very little religious meaning remains.
- 282 He does not consider himself an American Jew. Still has traditions of smaller town, of Russia. His children are non-religious, not involved in synagogue, don't observe Jewish practices. Even he has dropped some of the customs his parents observed. Religious aspects are diminishing in general. He brought up his children to know Jewish culture.