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From Immigrant to Ethnic: Interview with Benjamin Ferdman by Joseph Conforti

Benjamin Ferdman

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Rhode Island College

ETHNIC STUDIES PROJECT

Oral History Interview # 20

with

Benjamin Ferdman

May 12, 1976

By Joseph Conforti

Tape 1 Side 1

- 6 He lived in Poland till age 9½. Came to America in 1921. His mother had to care for 4 children alone during war years. Very bad conditions--bombs, little food. He remembers aid from America.
- 21 His father was a carpenter who left in 1913 because he had heard of better opportunities in America. He saved money, sent tickets but war broke out before family could leave.
- 45 They sometimes got clothing from U.S. Schools had soup kitchens. His mother was a nurse during the typhus epidemic. They all contracted it but survived. They moved frequently.
- 81 Family left in 1921 when borders opened and passage money arrived. His father became a citizen. He was living in Pawtucket.
- 97 He and brothers and sisters went to public schools when they arrived. Had all the advantages of citizenship. Noticed great contrast between U.S. and Poland and was grateful to be here.
- 104 Idea of America: America the golden--thought people were in the streets shoveling gold.
- 110 Landed in New York and took boat to Pawtucket. Father lived in apartment on Jenckes Street in Central Falls, worked hard, did very well compared to standards in Poland.
- 148 In 1924, they had their own home. Children in school. Mother passed away when he was 13, shortly after his Bar Mitzvah. Father remarried and his stepmother had children--some adjustments necessary.

Benjamin Ferdman

- 187 Religion was important to him. When you live in a neighborhood with your own ethnic group you develop a sense of belonging, he feels. They were brought up to believe certain things such as observing Kosher laws and rituals but this makes little difference to him--a man is a man no matter what his religion.
- 220 Had no sense of belonging when he lived on Middle Street which was mixed neighborhood--but mostly Polish and Portuguese. No sense of Jewish community. Contrast was very real to him because wherever they went in Europe there had been a Jewish community.
- 233 He knew no English when he came. He feels no loss because of lack of "neighborhood". Better to recognize that other ethnic groups have same aspirations and desires. Had some trouble as young boy, children were cruel, had fights.
- 271 Synagogue made difference in his life. His father was working for the contractor who was building the synagogue on High Street, Pawtucket.
- 287 He has no deep religious feelings, but his father was somewhat more religious. Father belonged to Hebrew Free Loan Association, was a member of the synagogue.
- 355 At that time there were probably 150 Jewish families in Pawtucket-Central Falls area--scattered around. Only real center was on Central Avenue. Grocery, butcher shops, bakery. His father frequented that shopping area. Gentiles also bought food there.
- 400 Place of worship was active--more so than now. Had prayer meetings daily, went twice a day for special prayers after mother's death, celebrated holidays, fundraising drives held for furnishing of synagogue and payment of mortgage. Now people are more apathetic.
- 466 No contact with Providence North Main Street Jewish community. Not involved in larger Jewish community in Providence, self-contained. No longer any one area that is Jewish in Pawtucket, shopping area is gone.

Tape 1 Side 2

- 2 Schooling: went to regular public schools, quit at 7th grade level, after father remarried. Father was ill and he had to work. He tried to learn a trade, upholstering. Began to learn when 16 and did it for 43 years. Had own business on Mineral Spring Avenue.

Benjamin Ferdman

- 23 First learned the trade in Providence. Started at \$6. a week for 48 hours. In 1929, he got job at an upholstery shop through his brother-in-law. Paid board at home so he often rode to work and walked home because money was short. Worked for other firms for 15 years then had own business. Did well, all his children went to college, he owned his home. Then he became ill.
- 54 Lived at home until marriage. Met wife at party in Providence. They lived in Pawtucket. He was in service during World War II. They have 4 children.
- 112 In 1971, he wrote song for Pawtucket Tricentennial--he felt he made a contribution to the area which had been good to him.
- 129 Not many good memories of Poland--just trying to survive but in America he could enjoy life.
- 159 His children knew they were Jewish, went to Hebrew school and identify themselves as being Jewish but it's not the all-important thing in their lives.
- 175 He went to Hebrew school in Pawtucket then to one in Providence which was held after regular school, was for religious instruction.
- 200 Changes in temple: more apathy now that mortgage is paid off, less emphasis on ritual. Now mostly for holidays. Temple in Pawtucket is Orthodox. But most residents of Pawtucket go to Temple Emmanu-El which is Conservative.
- 255 Children: all had college educations. He feels it's important especially since he didn't have it.
- 305 Still a Jewish community in Pawtucket but interest has diminished. No longer a matter of self-preservation as when they first arrived from Europe. Rituals haven't been as strong a binding force as adversities.