

Milton Grishman Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: -- on St. Charles Avenue in Biloxi, Mississippi. Today is Thursday, November 9, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archives in the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Milton, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Milton Grishman: Yes.

RH: Why don't you begin with telling me the year you were born and a little about both your Jewish and general education.

MG: I was born in 1949 here on the Gulf Coast. Grew up here. Went through Biloxi Public Schools. Graduated from Biloxi High. And had my bar mitzvah in 1963 at Beth Israel. My cousin, Barry, and I, we had a double bar mitzvah, and my uncle Irving was our Hebrew teacher and he taught us, along with some other teachers, but he was the main one that prepared us. And he -- now he got his Hebrew education in New Orleans at Communal Day School, and Dad still talks about going to Hebrew School and Professor Lisitsky and -- it's amazing. He can still -- he can quote Bialik poetry in Hebrew and I mean he's in his 90s. It's amazing. Apparently, it was really a fine Hebrew school in their day. So, Aaron Shockett was another teacher. He was from New Orleans, went through Communal Hebrew School. Uncle Irving. And my Dad, too, helped, but it was mostly Uncle Irving that got us ready for our bar mitzvah. And it was a great affair. And we had family from New Orleans that came over, and a lot of friends from New Orleans that came over. Dr. Joseph Cohen and the Bernsteins from New Orleans came over and it was -- I remember Mother and Dad and my aunt and uncle worked for weeks beforehand preparing blintzes. They made blintzes, blintzes, blintzes. They would make

them all frozen and they pulled them out that morning and had them all ready. It was a great bar mitzvah.

RH: Tell me a little about what it's like to be Jewish on the Gulf Coast.

MG: Well, it's fine. There is a great bit of diversity on the Gulf Coast. It's a little different than what most people think of when they think of Mississippi. Gulf Coast has a lot of Mediterranean ethnic groups here, your Greeks and French and Spanish and Portuguese and Yugoslav and now Vietnamese, so it's a real melting pot or a gumbo pot. There's been a Jewish community here on the Gulf Coast for a long time. The old cemetery dates back to 1853. It was deeded to the Hebrew Society of New Orleans. We don't -- we can't find a lot of the old records, but there is one stone left there at the cemetery, and we have found the copy of the original deed. And there are names on there of the trustees. And names that you would recognize as old New Orleans Jewish family names. And also some from Mobile. But it was called the Hebrew Society of New Orleans and it's not an active cemetery anymore, but it is a historic site. And coming forward in time, if you look in the city directories, you'll see a lot of Jewish names, merchants, in downtown Biloxi in the historic business district along Howard Avenue around the turn of the century. Levi. Cohen. And then, I don't know. It seems that it kind of disappeared, and it wasn't until after World War II that the Jewish community re-emerges. You got a lot of military with Keesler came here. That's when, in 1953, the Jewish community sort of organized itself around founding a B'nai B'rith Lodge. Max Signoff from Hattiesburg and Dr. Joe Cahn from New Orleans came over and they organized a B'nai B'rith Lodge in '53 and then that group sort of continued and formed a congregation in '58. And so the Congregation Beth Israel was dedicated in '58 at the site where it's been all this time until Katrina, so that's sort of a Coast Jewish history in a nutshell.

RH: Is Beth Israel Reform?

MG: Conservative.

RH: Conservative.

MG: Always been Conservative. In the bylaws it said that it was Conservative and the only way they could change it was if they had a majority vote of the charter members. It came up one time. There was a move to -- because we've always been kind of on the Reform side of Conservative, although we've got quite a diversity. We've got some families that have a very Orthodox, traditional background, but most of our congregation has been more Reform leaning. But our bylaws were Conservative in trying to hit that middle road. It came up for a vote and they nearly had a fistfight over it, but they didn't change it. So -- and now, there's -- I don't think there's but two charter members left, so I don't think it's ever going to be changed. And we've gotten -- actually, we're becoming more Conservative. We've -- our affiliation with United Synagogue is a lot stronger than it used to be. They've given us a lot of help. So we're probably more in the mainstream of Conservative Judaism now than ever.

RH: Is it -- is it difficult to be observant on the Gulf Coast?

MG: Well, it is. It is. And I'm not observant. I don't keep a kosher home and you know, I'm not Shomer Shabbos. And so -- but there are people in our congregation that are observant, keep kosher homes. And I don't know anybody who's Shomer Shabbos. But, you know, you just -- you make your compromises where you can justify them.

RH: Can you tell me what the Jewish community here means to you?

MG: Well, it's part of my identity. People see me in the community and they say, "Oh yeah. There's Milt. He's a Jew. He's our Jew." And you can't escape that. And, you know, the Deep South is really the Bible Belt and people know you by your religious identity and they respect that. I think, you know, there is some antisemitism as there is everywhere, but there's more, I think, a love of Judaism and appreciation of Judaism than

a negative feeling toward Jews. People are always asking about what Jews believe and there is -- people -- you know, there's always Christian groups coming to visit the congregation. In fact, that's how we sort of -- the background to how we were invited after we lost our synagogue to Katrina, how we were invited over to worship at Beauvoir Methodist. Beauvoir Methodist, under Reverend Perrine for years would bring their confirmation class to our services to visit. They'd always bring a group of their teenagers over and they'd sit with us during a Friday night service. And then we'd have a question-and-answer. And sometimes we'd take out a Torah and let them see the Torah. And so that relationship was cemented over many years. And then after we lost the synagogue and Reverend Perrine read in the newspaper that we were out at Keesler, we didn't ask them. They just wrote us a letter and invited us to come over. It was really a wonderful thing that they did. So we've been meeting at Beauvoir Methodist now for, gee, almost since right after Katrina.

RH: So is the meeting place --

MG: It's a Fellowship Hall.

RH: A Fellowship Hall.

MG: And this is the amazing thing. We -- you know, they were very sensitive. We realize that you probably won't want to have a service in our sanctuary, but we've got this Fellowship Hall and you're welcome to use that. So we meet there and they have -- you know, it's just kind of like a general-purpose room. And they have banners on the wall with their religious symbols, but they turned the banners over so that their symbols aren't visible while we're having our service. Very, very thoughtful.

RH: Yes. That certainly is.

MG: It's really amazing. They've been very supportive.

RH: Can you tell me, before we move into your Katrina story, any other rituals or traditions that you enjoy on the Gulf Coast? And then -- within the Jewish community or not, in the larger community I should say.

MG: Well, the Passover seder. We've always had a big seder. Always liked to do it at home, but we also have a community seder and have always invited people from the general community. Always invited the Chaplain from Keesler and there was always different community leaders outside the local Jewish community that were invited and we'd always have the place packed. We didn't have a big room. That front room in the synagogue, you know, it would hold maybe 75, 80. But sometimes, for seder, we'd get close to 100. We'd have them packed in there so tight. And Abe Silver, for many years, would prepare the seder meal. And did a lot of the work himself and after he passed away, I guess that was the mid-90s, we continued that. And then we tried --

RH: Did he have a restaurant, or --?

MG: No. He was just our lay leader. He was our spiritual leader. And was recognized in the community as being a leader of the Jewish community. And we tried going to one of the hotels and it was nice. It was less work letting them do the work, but didn't have the same feel. So this last community seder, we were over at Beauvoir Methodist again, in their big -- they have a big multi-purpose building in the back where Hands On volunteers have been using that space but they let us have our seder there for Passover and it was well attended. It went real well. So, you know, that's always -- and you know, we always get good coverage for our events. When we do a big event like a community seder, the local press, you know, gives us a big write-up, and they always try to cover the Jewish holidays and, you know, explain what's going on to the non-Jewish community. So I'd say that the relationships have been real good on the Coast for the most part.

RH: Well, let's go into Katrina. And tell me about when you first kind of were aware of the storm.

MG: Well, it was kind of -- you know, there was -- it was kind of a strange development. You know, you had Dennis just before, and that was sort of a false alarm. And a lot of people evacuated for Dennis and came home feeling kind of foolish for having evacuated because it fizzled. And so people -- it sort of set people up. It sort of led to maybe a little complacency. We didn't -- we never evacuate for storms. Didn't do it for Dennis, and I hadn't planned on doing it for Katrina. And my aunt, Aunt Mim, passed away just that week before Katrina. So we were focused on her funeral and we weren't paying attention to what was going on in the Gulf until, gee, come Saturday, wow, there is a Category 5 storm out there and it looks like it's coming our way. So, we were slow to react to the early warnings. But, I did -- I had been thinking that I needed to be better prepared. So I had -- that summer, I had had boards cut for every window in the house. This house has a lot of windows. So I had boards cut and I had rigged a way so that it would be easy to mount them. So I had all that done and didn't know it -- not knowing that a Katrina was going to be coming. I even had boards for my office. I had never boarded up the office before. But, so that Saturday, I went down and I boarded up the office and glass, big glass in the front --

RH: Just talk a minute about your business.

MG: Oh, in the real estate business. Have an office down on Howard Avenue in the traditional Biloxi business district and it's pretty high ground and pretty safe. A couple of blocks off the beach. But you never know, with flying debris, so I figured, well, I'll be better prepared and I'll board up the windows. First time ever I did that. So, did that Saturday. I had plans to watch reports and I said, well, I'll get up Sunday morning and I'll put the boards up on the house. And get everything boarded up. And if it looks real bad, I'll try to talk Roberta into driving to Jackson with the kids and staying with my brother, David, and Kay up in Jackson. And I'll stay here. Dad lived a block away at the time. I'll go over and stay with Dad. And, you see, we're two blocks off the beach, and Camille was everyone's frame of reference. Camille didn't come up this high. This neighborhood

weathered Camille pretty well and so I'll go over and stay with Dad and send Roberta and the kids to Jackson. If it looks bad. If it looks like it's going to turn away, maybe we'll all stay. But I'll go ahead and board up the windows. So I did that Sunday morning, got them up. They went up pretty well. My little plan worked pretty much. But come the noon report, man, we heard that the pressure in the eye wall was far worse than Camille. And it looked like we were going to be on the worst side of the eye. I said, "Gee, we better go." And so we called Dad, or I think he called here. His thinking was pretty much parallel to ours. By the time he realized we should go, we came to the same conclusion. So we said, "Well, get everything you need. We'll be over in an hour and we'll head to Jackson." So we grabbed up what we thought we would need and loaded the car. We were going to take the cat with us, but Roberta couldn't get the cat in the cage. The cat was spooked, I guess, and ran off. So we told our neighbors down here, Al and Marie, since they said they were going to stay, they've got enough to worry about, but we asked them, watch out for our cat. And so they agreed. And so we went and picked up Dad, and about 2 o'clock, we hit the road headed to Jackson, Sunday. And I knew that 49 would be jammed, so I -- we got the map out and followed the state roads, secondary roads. They're fine roads, but they're two lane. But it was like a Sunday drive. There was no traffic at all. We went on a nice ride up through the country. You know, it was a pretty afternoon and very little traffic. We made it to Jackson before dark. I loaded -- filled the car up with gas, because I knew when power went out there'd be no more gas for a while so I had the car full of gas and that Oldsmobile has a big gas tank, which is a good feature. And it came in handy when we tried to come back. And so we went to -- got to David and Kay's and then, there were a number of folks from New Orleans that had come up, friends of theirs had come up, friends of friends from New Orleans, so they had a full house. And -- but everybody -- we made room. We had a big dinner that night and listened to the news until we got tired of listening to all of that and went to bed. And woke up the next morning and, you know, heard more about the storm and it was really frightening, the early reports, especially when we heard -- one of the reports, which later

turned out to be false, that there was something like 20 or 30 people killed down here at the foot of St. Charles in those condominiums and apartments. I don't know where that report came from but it really shocked us because we figured, well gee, if they have that much loss of life at the foot of our street, then maybe we didn't survive. Maybe the elevation wasn't high enough to avoid the surge. So we were pretty nervous and we didn't really know what to expect until we were able to come back the following Saturday.

RH: So you were gone a week?

MG: We were gone almost a full week, and you know, in Jackson, even in Jackson it was -- they were pretty hard hit and my brother's neighborhood, there were some houses that lost roofs and they lost power for like three days. So you had a house full of people with no power and, you know, after a storm it is always hot. So it was hot, hot, hot. And, in his neighborhood, they have those grinder pumps, so if you don't have power, you don't have sewer. So, luckily, David knew someone in construction and he was able to arrange for a port-a-potty to be delivered in to his front yard. So the whole neighborhood was lined up outside using this port-a-potty. But we managed. And we used the hose -- yeah, we had water, but not sewer. So we could stand on the patio with the hose and take our Katrina showers. And then -- so, we had -- the only thing -- the only reports you could get were on the little battery powered radios. We were listening to Mississippi public radio and they were giving us a lot of reports and so we were -- and I was walking around all day with my little ear plugs listening to radio and you were getting a lot of reports that were very discouraging. And then someone -- one of the neighbors had -- someone had evacuated with an RV and they had a TV in there, a little battery powered TV. I guess it ran off the generator for the RV, so we were in there watching. And they had these aerial photos, you know, these flying down the coastline, and they'd get close to our area and then they'd cut it off because -- I don't know why, but I guess they were flying along mostly the commercial area, where the casinos are. So I don't know how many times we saw the President [Casino] barge up on the beach and the Grand

[Casino] barge up on the highway. Then they'd get to our neighborhood and they'd cut away. So we never -- we didn't know until we came back that Saturday and, you know, you couldn't get gas, but I had a full tank of gas. But it wasn't enough to just get down here. You had to get down here and get back because we knew we couldn't stay. So we were a little worried -- did we have enough gas to get down and get back. So we had some extra cans that we put in the trunk. We -- David's neighbor had a powerboat so we siphoned the gas out of the tank in the powerboat into the cans for us to take in case we ran out of gas on the highway, we could have some extra gas to get us home. But, as it turned out, we were able to get down and back on that one tank of gas. And we got here. We left early that Saturday morning and we got here pretty early, before noon, and first we went to the office. We came in from -- just the way you came in off of I-10. Came down Division. Came in the back way. And gee, the office was OK. Very little damage. Of course, there were a lot of trees down in the street, limbs, and the sign was blown out. But no windows, inside the office there was no water, even though there were a few shingles off the roof. Very little damage at the office. I said, "Wow, what a miracle." So we said, "All right." We tidied up there. There was a little bit of water that had blown in under the front door. We mopped that up. Then, drove over to Dad's house. And couldn't get close because there was so much debris in the street. Got as close as we could and then we walked on in. And there was a huge, huge debris pile in front of Dad's house because that's about -- he's two blocks from the beach and that's about where the surge stopped and it just dropped all that debris, all of the bits and pieces of the apartments and the homes that were south of him on the beach, you know, they were all pulverized, and all of that debris was dumped right there in front, almost roof high. Well, we had to climb over that, and we got into Dad's house and, you know, he had -- the roof was gone. Had been peeled away. But inside there was very little damage. Very little -- the worst damage, other than the roof, was the window, the front window, he has these old time metal crank type windows. Well that had been jimmied and busted by the rescue people. They came and we left in such a hurry that we didn't

have a chance to tell the neighbors over there. They thought Dad was still inside the house. So, when the rescue teams came through, they went in thinking they might find some -- an elderly man inside. And so they had busted the window and painted the door with the X and everything. But, so we got to Dad's house and basically it was OK. We thought, "Gee, another miracle." Whoa. So, while David and Dad were over there kind of straightening up at his place, I walked on over here and it was a heck of a walk because you were climbing over debris the whole way. And, you know, I was out in the street -- you could hardly see the house because the debris pile was so high. So I had to come around the side and I couldn't come through the front. It was just too piled up. I mean there was refrigerators and cars and just everything imaginable. So, I came around and managed to get in and looked around and I said, "Gee, it's OK." The house and the neighbors in the house next door stayed and rode it out. They said the water got up to the top step and then receded. It was like within six inches of -- if it would have come up another six inches it would have been inside on the floor. But it stopped just in the nick of time. Their theory was that we were spared -- in a way, the debris pile itself protected us. It became like a levee holding the water back. And it was a natural levee that held the water -- the surge water -- back. Now --

RH: So all this junk just came up with the surge water?

MG: Right.

RH: And was deposited.

MG: Right. Just like you -- when you walk the beach and you see the little debris line, well, there was a debris line right up here. It was just two blocks off the beach. Our neighbors, Al and Marie, were going to watch our cat. Well, their house is a more modern house and is built on a slab on the ground. Our house is built on a raised foundation. That's what saved us. Well, in the middle of the storm, they had to wade out of their house. They were up to their waist in water. And had to seek shelter across the

street. So, and everything south of them is gone. It is really sad. There were some beautiful old homes here. That, you know, that go back to early 1900s. Some nice little bungalows and it's sad we lost those. And then all of the beautiful old homes along the Beach Drive are all gone, and they are not likely to come back. So, it's going to be a big change.

RH: Talk about that a little bit. What is it like being on the Coast here, day to day.

MG: It's -- I try not to drive the beach too much because it is depressing. The Beach Drive was just a joy. I mean, it was one of the great parts about living on the coast was that Beach Drive. The 26 miles of sand beach, beautiful water, well that's all still there. But on the other side, facing that beautiful view, were these, you know, long rows of beautiful homes, antebellum homes, some not so old, but still historic, and with lots of character. And all those are gone. It's a wasteland. It -- you really do have the feel of -- you're like in a war zone after a bombing or something. And there's so much that's unknown. It's going to take a long time for -- there are stretches that are still zoned single-family, so how will that be re-developed single family? Other stretches are zoned multi-family, and of course you're going to have the high-rise condos that you're hearing a lot about in the news now. I mean, there are so many of them coming in the pipeline. But those stretches of beachfront that are zoned single family, how will they come back? Some people are building back, a few are, a courageous few, but for most of them, I don't think they'll be able to, and I wonder what will happen -- how it will be re-developed. The land -- prices on the raw land have really gone up terrifically. I think there is a lot of wishful thinking. You know, I hope these people can sell their lots for what they're asking. A lot of them are asking as much for the lot as what they get for the house and the lot before the storm. Whether they'll find a buyer at that price level, I don't know.

RH: Do you know how long it's taking to turn these houses? I mean, 90 days, 120, six months?

MG: There are lots still for sale. This is over a year later. So I mean, they've been a -- basically, they cleared the debris off the lot, finished the demolition of the old houses, hauled the debris away, now they've got a bare lot with a for sale sign on it. And there is not much moving. Not where it's zoned single family. Now, if it's zoned where they can put a condo, it's in hot demand.

RH: So you think that that's going to be the new look of the Gulf Coast?

MG: That's going to be -- apparently, that's what's coming. We're going to have more high rise kind of condominiums, and we're going to have more casinos. So, the character of the coast will change. I don't think there's any doubt about it. Our Mayor is saying that we may have as many as 20 casinos in Biloxi alone. Let's see, I think we've got 9 or 10 have re-opened. He said by 2010, we may have as many as 20 casinos here in the city of Biloxi. And there's -- God, I don't know -- I've lost track of how many condominium projects are being proposed. It's -- I think the -- the last press release I saw from the city was there was something like 12,000 units proposed. Well, not all of those will be built. I don't know what's coming. I have a feeling it's going to be the boom-bust cycle. They'll over do it and there'll be some people who will be hurt.

RH: So, the vision for the Gulf Coast now is --

MG: The vision --

RH: Tourism. Tourism.

MG: Right. Everybody thinks that that's going to -- everybody has this -- there's a lot of optimism that, you know, the casino industry will be the engine that will drive the rebuilding. The renaissance that will be casino-driven with a resurgent tourism industry and it will be a little different in that it will be a lot of these condotels. Instead of -- the condos they're building are all for, not for permanent residents, but for short-term residents, for management as a hotel. So you're going to have these -- a lot of these out-

of-town investors buying the units and then putting them into a rental management plan and they will offer them, basically, as hotel rooms for short stay. So, the little mom and pop motels that you used to see up and down the beach, which were part of the charm of the Gulf Coast -- you know, people used to joke about it being the Redneck Riviera. And they've got all these little tacky, little souvenir shops. Well, I guess the vision is we're going to step up in the world of tourism. We're going to be closer to a first-tier resort once we go through this rebuilding. We'll see.

RH: And so, it's kind of like a mini Las Vegas, I suppose.

MG: That's right. That's right. Our -- what the folks in City Hall and the Development Commission are talking is that we're going to be competing with Las Vegas.

RH: Hmm. So, let's go back into the Jewish community and talk a little bit about the synagogue, because it took in water.

MG: No. Well, it -- OK. To pick up the story. After we finished here, getting Dad's house sort of stabilized --

RH: Right.

MG: -- and my house, sort of checking it out, grabbing a few things that I'd forgotten to take, I mean, we had our list we had to pick-up. So we got those things and got in the car and went back around the back way to the synagogue. Got to the synagogue and, you know, here's another miracle. Synagogue escaped the worst damage. It took some damage, but it didn't get floodwater inside. The floodwater stopped right in the front yard, right at the street. Again, there was this huge debris pile just sitting right there at the front door. But what the wind did, it peeled off the roof and water came down through the roof and that caused some damage. Luckily the sanctuary was an addition, a newer addition, and it had a pitched metal roof which held. And so there was hardly any damage inside the sanctuary. And our caretaker was smart enough, when he left, to take the Torahs.

The Torahs were evacuated, so we didn't lose anything, really. We lost the roof and we lost the brick veneer on the east wall -- took the brunt of that wind force, and the wind sheer -- I guess it rattled those bricks so much that finally they fell away. So we lost part of that brick veneer exterior on that west side, no, east side, excuse me. But, there was no floodwater inside, so again, we felt like, gee, again, we dodged another bullet. So, when we went back to Jackson, we were on a high.

RH: Were you one of the first people down here?

MG: I don't know. We were -- see, they didn't open the roads for a couple of days. They were trying to clear the roads, the state officials said stay off the roads. But, by that Saturday after the storm, they finally said you could go on south to the Coast. So we were waiting for the green light and we came on down and I think we were maybe some of the first and we -- we had a full car, but we brought -- I brought a chainsaw, which you couldn't get down here. Bought a brand new chainsaw in Jackson and brought it down. We had the water and, you know, dried beans and rice we brought and left them with the neighbor. Already, there were, you know, Red Cross trucks coming in, bringing in water and stuff. But they were glad to get whatever we brought them. And so I didn't stay. You know, I never lost my phone line. Never. Phone line was there. We lost power, but we never lost water. We never lost gas. So, we came down that Saturday and then we went back, but as soon as I heard the power was back on in this neighborhood, which was two weeks after the storm, there were power service crews in here from all over the country, from out West, from Midwest, from Florida, Georgia. You know, coming in, fixing the lines, so within two weeks, they had power back in this neighborhood and I came back. And first, I came back and Roberta and the kids stayed up there. We got the kids enrolled in schools, because we didn't know how long it would be before Biloxi Public Schools would reopen. Well, as it turned out, they got the schools reopened by October 3rd. They were amazing. Within -- just a little over a month after Katrina, they had public schools open, so we were able to bring the kids back down. And we stayed. And we

had the job of cleaning up all of the debris. Every -- it took a long time to get all of the debris to the street. For the trucks, city trucks -- the city had contractors with big trucks coming through and Bobcats loading it and loading the trucks and hauling it off -- we had a refrigerator out here that must have washed up from one of the apartments or condos, and you know, it smelled to high heaven. Well, it sat out there for weeks before we finally could get that hauled off.

RH: How about your fridge? After two weeks of --

MG: Well, see, that first Saturday, Roberta came in here and made a beeline for the refrigerator. Emptied everything out and tossed it. And so we had taken care of that. And had left, you know -- left it open so it would air out and wouldn't smell. But, the one out in the street was loaded with stuff and just was rotten. And it was -- luckily, we had that picket fence out front, and that refrigerator was jammed up against that picket fence. That picket fence probably helped protect -- kept the debris out at the curb and didn't let it get up further into the yard. It had a lot of limbs in the yard, but none of that -- all of the lumber and all of the household goods and all of that stuff that was out in the street didn't get up to the house thanks to that picket fence. A four-by-four sunk in concrete was snapped from the pressure pushing up against it, but it cracked, but still, it held it back. So I was able to fix the fence and patch the roof a little bit. I still have some screen work to do on the front porch and so -- not -- everything's not done, but we've made a lot of headway.

RH: Are there things that you -- that are -- how is it different being here?

MG: It's different because we lost our neighbors.

RH: Yeah?

MG: You know, it's sad. Those houses -- my good friend in the little bungalow down here, she's had to relocate. Some other good friends had to -- their house washed

away. So everything south of us is pretty well gone. We still have our neighbors to the north of us, but it just so happened that we were closer to everybody back toward the beach, I guess because that's where we mostly -- when we walked, we'd head south to the beach. We'd pass them, talk to them when they were sitting on their front perch, so we'd get to know them. We don't take too many walks back this way, but the neighborhood has changed and you wonder how that's going to re-develop. I'm sure that it's going to come back with more multi-family condos. It was condos and apartments before, and it will probably be even maybe more condos and apartment. So how will that -- how will that trend of more dense, more high-rise development along the beach impact the established, traditional Biloxi neighborhoods just off the beach?

RH: Mm-hmm.

MG: I don't know. I hope we can, we can, you know, minimize those negative effects. That's what I'm hoping. But it's, you know, it's going to be, I'm afraid, a real struggle to hang on to -- this neighborhood, it's all -- all of the streets are named after saints, and so people jokingly refer to it as the Holy Land. So this is Biloxi's Holy Land. And it is a real Garden of Eden, in a sense, because I mean, you could walk to the beach -- gee on yontif, I could walk to the beach and walk to synagogue. I mean, how many Jewish communities do you walk the beach on your way to shul? But, now I won't be able to do that.

RH: Tell me about the Jewish community here. Is it -- has it sustained the size?

MG: No. We've dropped. We've lost significant membership. We were never a big community. I think at our peak we got up to about 65 households. Now, gee, the last report I heard, we're down in the 30s as far as paid members. Of course, there are many others.

RH: So what is the -- do you know what that is compared to Biloxi or to the Gulf Coast in general. I mean, how's the population in the Gulf Coast pre- and after the storm?

MG: I think it's down significantly. School enrollment is down, if you want to use that. Our children's school, before the storm, had enrollment over 300. It's now down below 200. So I think maybe we lost a quarter, maybe a third, that's probably on the high side of our population. Jewish community probably didn't lose that high of a percentage. I think we probably lost, in the Jewish community, maybe 15 percent.

RH: Although you're saying, if you've gone from 65 households to 30, that's over --

MG: Well, ok, so 65 was the high --

RH: OK. OK.

MG: -- but just before the storm, we were down to -- I think we were down to the mid-50s, and we're down, probably, not as low as in the 30s. That was a paid figure I saw in a recent report, the treasurer's report, and there are some that are maybe partly paid and, you know, there are some that have been hard-hit by the storm and of course they can't pay. Don't expect them to pay. But we lost significant numbers. I know that the Romm family relocated. They lost their home in Pass Christian. The Marcus family lost their home. They relocated to Mobile. Rose Datlof moved out to California to be with her daughter. A lot of the older members -- and we had quite a few older members -- took the opportunity to just go ahead and move, be closer to family, so we lost about -- I'd say close to 15 percent of our members. And lost some of our -- like Dr. Romm and Joyce Romm were very active. And it's hard losing your active members.

RH: Right.

MG: Because you've got so few of them.

RH: When you were away, and even when you first got back, were there members of the Jewish community you were kind of trying to get in touch with?

MG: Right.

RH: Or contact?

MG: And it was weird. We were up in Jackson and didn't realize that there were so many people who didn't know where we were, and didn't think that they wouldn't know just -- to just put two-and-two together and think, well, they went up to David's up in Jackson to his brother's. But, finally, I got a call from, I think it was Robin Dorfman -- the Dorfman's were living here on the coast and, a few years before, moved out to Houston. Got a call from her. She tracked me down in Jackson and found us. And then the word got out that I'd gotten out. And I heard from Lori Beth Susman, who had relocated with her sister and brother-in-law over to the Florida panhandle, so one by one, as the communications system came back up, and that was down for quite a while. That was one of the biggest hurdles. You couldn't communicate. Even cell phone networks were out. And, you know, that's something we've really got to work on because that really impeded the recovery, the fact that you couldn't communicate.

RH: How did it impede the recovery?

MG: Well, you didn't know. Like -- we couldn't -- we couldn't communicate down here to really find out what is the situation on the ground until we drove down here and drove back and took the word personally back to Jackson. Nobody really knew. And the first responders, they were fighting the same battle. Their cell phones didn't work. Their satellite phones would work, but you had to be outside. So, if somebody calls and you were inside, well, you didn't get the call. So there was a lot of work that they've been doing that they've got to be sure the next time we don't face that same problem of the whole communication infrastructure failing, which is what happened. And that slowed

everything down, because if you don't know what really the situation is, you don't know what to bring, what is needed, until you get there and then it's too late. You've got to make another trip back and you don't have time for all of that running back and forth when you don't have much gas.

RH: Right. So, with the Jewish community, was there any kind of a telephone tree, a network of people kind of trying to find one another in the -- ?

MG: Right. That's right. It was sort of just patched together effort. Oh yeah, I heard from so-and-so, and people would keep lists. Oh yeah, have you heard about so-and-so? Yeah. She's up in Birmingham with family. So, one by one, you'd go down -- and then there were some you hadn't heard from so-and-so, you hadn't heard from so-and-so. Henry Signoff in Gulfport, we never heard from Henry. Finally, when I -- I drove to Gulfport and looked at his house. Looked OK. There was no answer on the door. I left a note on his door, Henry, are you -- give us a call. Finally, we heard from Henry. But communication was a big problem in the early days because -- and it was really amazing how quickly they got the roads open and amazing how quickly they got the electricity system working again. The Red Cross would come through with the hot meals wagons, which was a great help.

RH: Did you use that?

MG: You bet. You bet I used it. You know, when you're out working, pushing debris out into the street, and it come time for a meal and they come through with their bullhorn, hot meals, hot meals, and everybody, you know, dropped their shovels and rakes and go get in the line. And so I have a much better feeling for Red Cross today than I did before. And also a much better feel for UJA or UJC.

RH: Tell me about that.

MG: You see, they -- we were in Jackson, even before we came down here. So it was during the week. It was like in the middle of the week, right after the storm, the Jackson rabbi, Rabbi Cohen, and a delegation from UJC, including the Director up in Nashville, I'm drawing a blank on his name, but he came and they came to the house, to David and Kay's house, and brought envelopes with cash.

RH: How did they find you?

MG: Well, she knew I was there because I guess my sister-in-law, Kay, was in touch with the Jewish temple office, the Jackson rabbi -- you see, there were lots of folks that evacuated New Orleans who had gone to Jackson. So there were a lot of New Orleans evacuees there. And the Jackson Jewish community really did a good job in welcoming them and then putting them in touch with the relief, the Jewish relief that came. And so they made the rounds to all of the houses where there were Jewish evacuees, and every evacuee got a check with \$700 cash in it. And so that cash was king. Because, you know, without a lot of the -- you know, the ATMs were down, everything was -- so you had to have the cash. And so that was real helpful. So, we got the cash and that was a big help. And then as soon as I got back, I called Rabbi Cohen in Jackson and I said, "Look, the Jewish families down here on the coast need that same help," so the UJC director up in Nashville flew down and he came and stayed with us and he brought envelopes with cash and we got the word out. We met over at Lorraine Studin's warehouse, office and warehouse, which is up near I-10. So it was easy for people to get to. And we got the word out, come at this time and we had a good response. People came. And they met, individually, and received the help that they needed.

RH: Now, did you ever -- you knew the Jackson Jewish community previously through your sister?

MG: Oh yeah. Right. Through my brother.

RH: Your brother --

MG: And sister-in-law.

RH: -- and sister-in-law. And had you worshipped up there?

MG: Oh yeah. You know, their children had their bar and bat mitzvahs up there and we go to Camp Jacobs for different events.

RH: Mhm.

MG: So we were kind of plugged into the Jewish community in Jackson and they even gave us a free membership for that year. So, while we were there, we could go to the Temple as an official member. So they were real --

RH: Did you go to services while you were up there?

MG: I think we did. I think we did go. I always like to go there. I love their service. They have a great choir. We don't have a choir. I always like their music at their service.

RH: Do -- they have a permanent rabbi.

MG: Right.

RH: Now, what is the situation with --

MG: We have a visiting student rabbi, UJC has been very generous and has funded our -- they funded our entire congregational budget for two years. So, we were bringing down a student rabbi once a month for like seven or eight visits a year. Now we're bringing Rabbi Noah down, I think, for 13 visits this year. So he's coming in almost every two weeks. He'll be here tomorrow night for a Shabbat dinner. He was here two weeks ago and so he's coming down from New York. He's a student at JTS, Jewish Theological Seminary in New Orleans, a Conservative -- in New York, not New Orleans. And so he's

doing a good job. And he'll be here, hopefully, I think he's a junior, so we've got another year. We'll have him for two years. Which is good. That's the problem with a student rabbi is, you know, just when you get to know them, they move on. However, it worked in our favor because we had had student rabbis, we had a network of student rabbis who had a love for our community and they would organize and fundraise in New Jersey and in Dallas and wherever they had moved on to, they immediately, you know, contacted us and said, "What can we do?" And they've been real helpful in helping us to recover and --

RH: So, when was -- where did you spend the High Holidays? Do you remember?

MG: Keesler.

RH: Keesler.

MG: Yeah, Keesler Chapel.

RH: So what was the first service? How did it come about, that first service?

MG: Oh, first service we met at Lori Beth's office. She's the magazine editor. We met at her little office. I think we managed to raise a minyan. We met in her office for a Friday evening service. Mark brought the box of books and the yarmulkes and we had a little service. And so we were -- there was no place to have any meetings. Everything was occupied. Any public building had already had Red Cross or Salvation Army had taken it over, so you didn't have any meeting space. So we really scrambled. We met at Lori Beth's for a week, and then finally we found a motel that had a little breakfast area that they would rent, so we started meeting over at Ocean Springs, near the I-10 exit, at one of the little budget motels in their little breakfast area. They rented that to us. And we carried our box of books over there and people would meet. And then, for High Holidays, we had arranged for the chapel at Keesler -- believe it or not, there was a Jewish Chaplain here, Rabbi Dubov, who was assigned the Keesler Medical Center as one of

their hospital clergy. And he facilitated the arrangements for us to use the chapel at Keesler and we had -- UJC furnished us with a rabbi and a cantor from New York and we had a wonderful High Holiday service there. And we had a lot of Jewish volunteers participate. They were down here with the recovery.

RH: I want to continue that thought in a minute. As soon as we change the tapes.

MG: OK.

END OF PART ONE

MG: Pretty amazing. It's pretty amazing. It's pretty amazing. Katrina has put a spotlight on this little community and we have a higher profile in international Jewish press than ever. Jewish writers, journalists from everywhere have come here. We've been -- we've been visited by writers from the Forward, by writers from Jerusalem Post, by -- it's amazing. They come here to write about our story. It's unbelievable. So, in that way, maybe we're impacting. We're showing how, in this day, how a small Jewish community can weather a huge storm. After, I think it was after George, a writer for one of the Jewish newspapers in New York, he went on to become the editor of the Forward, J.J. Goldberg I believe is his name. He called me and he was doing a story about Jewish communities that were hit by Hurricane George. And there I was. I was in his lead in a Jewish press column that went to Jewish newspapers all over the world. And it was about me preparing to do the Haftarah for Yom Kippur service, reading the story of Jonah. And I was saying that -- I was reading the story, preparing for yontif that year, George hit just before yontif. So I was studying the Haftarah to be ready, and reading about the great storm and here is the great storm blowing up my street. Well, he used that in the story as part -- as the lead. And then he went on to talk about Jewish communities that were dealing with the hurricane down in Puerto Rico and Alabama or

wherever they were hit with George, so that kind of coverage has really put a spotlight on our community way out of proportion to our size. It's really amazing. Some of our community, I think Steve Richer, our President, thinks that that kind of publicity will bring Jews here. I don't think it will. He thinks people will read about us, read about our story, and want to move here. I don't think that's going to happen.

RH: Well, tell me this. Since you just brought up Jonah, and that's an interesting lens to see what's going on.

MG: Right.

RH: Have you thought of any Jewish concepts or frameworks that have kind of helped you understand this past year and the recovery?

MG: Well, the Jewish framework is you just keep on going no matter. I mean, that's it. Jews have lived through a lot worse than this. And you just -- you just have faith and keep on. The -- you know, there was this whole thing in the press about how Hurricane Katrina was the wrath of God and punishment, which I think there was even a rabbi in Israel expressed that point of view and took a lot of heat for that. But, there's that fundamentalist notion that well, why was it destroyed? It must be God punishing us. We did something to deserve it. I don't believe that, and I don't think, really, that's the thinking most Jews would have. I think that you see the act of God not in the storm but in the recovery. The volunteers coming. That's where you see God at work. It's really amazing the faith groups that came down here and pitched in and helped people. It's -- I have a whole new appreciation for faith groups and really have made me question my ideas about separation of church and state. Maybe faith groups should have a bigger role, a formal role, in government planning for disaster recovery. Maybe government dollars should go to faith groups because they're the ones that can get the job done. Government bureaucracy pretty well failed the test. FEMA was a joke. So, it was the faith groups, faith-based groups -- there were Jewish groups, there were Christian

groups, there were Muslim groups, there were every faith imaginable, even, you know, groups that are atheist groups were here helping. So, maybe they should be given a more -- a bigger role, a more formal role in disaster recovery. The groups were here. They were handing out Bibles. Like, they went over to my Dad's house. They helped clear his yard. And they gave him a Christian Bible and they gathered around for a prayer, but they asked him to lead the prayer, and he gave them a Hebrew bracha. So, it's OK. Give me your Bible and I'll pass it on. It doesn't bother me that you're trying to proselytize me while you're cleaning up my yard. I can understand that. I can deal with that. At least you're here. You're helping. It's not a big bunch of red tape. You're here. So, OK, you've got an agenda. People are smart enough to understand that. They were passing out -- the kids got balls, little balls. They were passing out balls with "Jesus Loves You." You know, everything's got a message on it. OK. The kids kicked the ball around and then the balls disappeared. And then they got a different ball. But, you know, they were here and they did terrific work.

RH: Anything else in your worldview change after being through what you've been through this past year?

MG: Well, I don't know. I guess I'm having to feel my way. I think I -- I'm, you know, very thankful that I was spared the worst of it so, you know, I guess, if this house had been flooded, we'd have had to gut it and start over. How would we have dealt with that? I don't know. I imagine I would be a lot darker than I am. I was really very lucky. I was right on the edge. I was on the good edge. And so I feel very blessed. And maybe I have a better -- more of an appreciation for that blessing than before.

RH: Anything you want to do differently now? Any new directions you want to go in?

MG: You know, I do think I want to try to savor and celebrate life more and try to, you know, appreciate just the ordinary, every day things more. And just -- it was great to be able to go back down on the beach for Tashlich and yontif. You know, we'd go down

there. We'd go down there. We'd toss the crumbs to the ocean. And we did that with Rabbi Noah. It was funny, because the seagulls were flying down. They were eating up the crumbs before they even hit the water. It'd be great to get back on the beach, have that all cleaned up, and be able to -- it's going to be different. I'm sure it'll be beautiful, again. It's going to take some time for the wounds to heal, and, but it will be different. But it certainly will be beautiful.

RH: Is there anything you took for granted before that you won't --?

MG: Yeah. I think I took for granted that things were going to continue to go along. And you know, you'll be -- you're on this sort of future path and you see it and it's like a table spread before you, but it's not for sure. Anything can change. A big storm can come along and blow it all away. And so you -- it is. It does, sort of -- the idea, this idea of long-range planning becomes -- you begin to realize that, you know, you can't know what's out there. So, maybe you should -- I guess it's important to long-range plan, but keep it flexible because major changes can come along.

RH: What have you learned about yourself in the midst of all of this?

MG: Well, there are some things that I -- you learn some things that you maybe wish you hadn't learned. You learn that you're maybe not as open as -- that you're maybe, you know, you don't have control over your temper as much as you wish you had. Tempers run short. You know, in this kind of situation, everybody is stressed and, you know, you wish you could do better.

RH: Tell me, when you talked about things you'd do differently, you want to savor life more. Do you have any ways to go about that? How -- what have you realized?

MG: Well, I think -- I just want to -- we're going up, not this weekend but next weekend, we're going up to Percy Quinn State Park. We've got a cabin up there. So I think maybe that's the thing. Just enjoy being together as a family and, you know, in a beautiful park

setting. We've always liked the outdoors, liked hiking. So I want to do more of that. My sailboat got smashed by a falling tree limb. But maybe I can get that fixed, and maybe by next summer we'll be back sailing. We've missed that. I look forward to maybe teaching the kids how to sail. So we've always liked the outdoors, and that's what I really want to spend more time doing.

RH: Is there anything that you'd like to add to this interview that we haven't talked about?

MG: No. I think it's been pretty comprehensive.

RH: I didn't mean to wear you out with that.

MG: Yeah. I think it's been good. I was thinking before the interview of some things I'd like to say, and I think I've pretty much said them all.

RH: Have you gotten them in there?

MG: Yeah.

RH: OK. Well, I appreciate that.

[END OF INTERVIEW]