Ruth Rose Oral History

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Taken by Geraldine Mund

GM: So we have the recording and the transcript. So, first of all, we are recording and that's okay with you, right?

RR: Yes.

GM: Okay, and we're transcribing it.

RR: Alright.

GM: And as I said in my email, I will send it to you after I go over the transcript and cleaned it up a bit. It does weird spellings and that type of thing. Then I'll send it to you and you can edit it to make sure that that's what you really said. And also, this is going to go into the temple archives and they may use it. They may not use it, but it will be available in the temple archives to people who wish to see it. And is that okay?

RR: Yes.

GM: Okay. And they can use it as they see fit, correct?

RR: Correct.

GM: Why don't we start with your family religious background, which is very interesting.

RR: Well, I did a little bit of research in 1998. There was a Wolpe family gathering and there was a wonderful book that was put out with genealogy and all kinds of things. The Wolpe family goes way back. I have from a cousin an interesting letter that says in 1961 a relative died in Lithuania after having been confired citizenship in the Soviet Union. And in order to do that he had to do a search of family history, which goes back to 1492 when a man by the name of Semak Volpe with a V was forced to leave Cordoba, Spain. So I just wanted to say the family is old.

GM: Okay. And a lot of rabbis, right?

RR: A lot of rabbis. My grandfather, Morris Wolpe, was kicked out of his father's home because he refused to become a rabbi. And yet he settled in Washington DC, was married there in 1900, moved to California in about 1922 and was one of the founders of Temple Israel of Hollywood.

GM: So that was Morris Wolpe?

RR: Morris Lewis Wolpe.

GM: So he was reform?

RR: Well, eventually. Originally he was orthodox. His father, and orthodox rabbi, eventually came to New York and founded a yeshiva. I suspect that my grandfather and his father never spoke after my grandfather left his home because my father, Arthur Wolpe, who went around the world collecting relatives, never once mentioned his grandfather, whose name was Eliezar Wolpe.

GM When were your parents married?

RR: 1932.

GM: So, did either of them join the temple before that? The temple was founded in 1926.

RR: I'm sure my father was a member of the temple, or at least was involved in the temple, from the time it was founded, because he taught the first confirmation class which was 1930. There is a tzedakah box at the end of the hallway by Miller Hall that has a plaque that says that.

GM: Oh, interesting. So I will get a picture of that gift. So your parents were married in 1932. Who married them?

RR: I have no idea. Whoever was the rabbi at Temple Israel might be my guess. Although my mother's parents belonged to Wilshire Boulevard. So they might have been married there. I do not know where they were married. Interesting, but know that their engagement party was held at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. And so they continued as members of Temple Israel once married. My mother, Claire Fox Wolpe, was Sisterhood president in 1940.

GM: And your maternal grandparents?

RR: Yes. Pauline and David Fox joined TIOH after my parents were married.

GM: And when were you born?

RR: 1933.

GM: So you were born into the temple?

RR: Yes.

GM: And you started religious school?

RR: Oh, of course I did. However, my paternal grandmother started teaching me to read Hebrew before I ever did that. By the time I started religious school, I knew the Hebrew alphabet.

GM: So you went to religious school on Ivar Street?

RR: Yes.

GM: And tell me tell me about it. What was the building like? What was the curriculum? How many kids? Whatever you can remember?

RR: Well, first of all, the building no longer exists. It is now the swimming pool of the Knickerbocker Hotel. And I think the stained glass windows went to another temple when we built on Hollywood Boulevard. But there was a sanctuary and there were classrooms for the school children. From the time I was little Morton Bauman was the rabbi. I remember that when he went off to war, the Temple gave him a radio to take with him.

RR: When he came back, he brought it and a wife. He and Max Nussbaum, who had arrived while he was gone, were co-rabbis for several years. I don't know how many. Then Morton founded Temple Beth Hillel in North Hollywood.

GM: Were you confirmed on Ivar street or on …?

RR: I was confirmed on Hollywood Boulevard in 1950.

GM: So that was Max Nussbaum?

RR: Yes. And I think I worked harder in confirmation class for Max Nussbaum than I did for my five A's at Fairfax High School.

GM: Did Rabbi Nussbaum actually teach the confirmation class virtually and who else taught?

RR: He taught most of the confirmation class. There was a lot of Israel, a lot of history and very strict demeanor.

You know, I grew up with Hannah Nussbaum as one of my playmates. She was a year younger than I but we became very friendly. And so I spent some time at their home. It was on Gardner as I recall.

GM: Yeah, Gardner and Franklin?

RR: Yeah,

GM: So let’s just take the period while you were in religious school those years. Any memories and stories; anything you want to just say?

RR: Well, religious school was always interesting to go to. There was a lot of social action. I made friends there. And one of those friends was Phyllis Birnbaum Gottlieb, who was a friend of mine also at Fairfax High and at Stanford and after. She died a few years ago. I was active in the youth group, not as an officer but as a participant. I specify not as an officer because my mother was sort of President of everything. She was president of Sisterhood in 1940. She missed her first meeting giving birth to my sister Sheri. And she went on to be active in many organizations. When I was young, she was a psychiatric social worker at County General Hospital. She discovered she was pregnant the day the banks closed and asked her father what was she going to do now? And he said you have a fine education, use it.

I remember the Fleicmanr family that was active at temple. I remember the Coffman – Ralph, their son, was my first boyfriend.

When I go to temple these days it's a mixture of long time members and a lot of new families which I'm delighted to see because it shows that we are relevant and keeping up with the times and that are attractive to more than just the old timers. And I think that we can give ourselves a pat on the back for that reason. I know I'm off topic.

GM: That's okay. You can do anything you want. So, you were in religious school, as a child - a young child - during the lead up to World War Two and the war, right? What did you do and I'm sure your parents were quite involved with whatever was going on at the time. What do you remember? What did the children do?

RR: It was a Sunday.

GM: Yes.

RR: I remember hearing about Pearl Harbor on the radio coming home from religious school. Shortly after that, of course, Morton Bauman enlisted and I don't remember who filled in. I do remember when Max [Nussbaum] came and I remember many of the rabbis after that. When I brought my fiancé in for a premarital conference, Bill Kramer, who was the associate Rabbi, hired both of us to teach religious school. So that year, I began teaching mathematics in the public school and religious school on Saturday and Sunday.

GM: What year was that?

RR: 1956.

GM: Let me go back and we're gonna come to that. So do you remember that they had they had a canteen, a Hollywood Canteen in Ivar Street and so do you remember any of that?

RR: I don't. I really. I was too young. I remember that Pearl Friedman was very active. And Pearl Friedman was the person who got my mother involved in sisterhood.

GM: She was something else.

RR: A dynamo

GM: When the Nussbaums came, do you remember the community response? You know, I mean, this was quite different from what we had had.

RR: Well, I know that after they came our services developed a lot more Hebrew during the service.

From being very liberal, we were still quite liberal, but we picked up a little more tradition, both in holiday celebrations and in the format of the services. Saul Silverman, our cantor, was one of my idols because I relate to prayer through music. And for a while, I couldn't understand why he kept changing the melodies, until I realized he needed to keep himself interested as well as the congregants interested, by introducing new material. He had a daughter, Ina, also in the religious school. She was a couple of years younger than I and he had a son Richard who later became a cantor.

What I remember is that we certainly had a lot less professional staff. Yes, we were a smaller congregation. But there was a rabbi and Cantor and an executive director, Sam Buchholz. His wife Rena was active in sisterhood. Molly Silverman was less active in sisterhood, but active in the congregation and Ruth Nussbaum, of course, was always active.

I find that my memories coming to Temple Israel has made us more of a family than we have been in a while. And I like that.

GM: So you were confirmed. You graduated from Fairfax? You went to Stanford. You graduated from there?

RR: Right. Did graduate work in education at UCLA.

GM: You married Roy.

RR: Right.

GM: Okay. And you were asked to come and teach in the religious school. And what did you teach?

RR: I had a third grade class. No, a second grade class and a sixth grade class. Since my teaching credential was secondary, I opted out the next year from the primary class. Mostly I taught history. Jeffrey Sobel was one of my early students. So was Harry Chotiner. I can remember that Lew Barth was the Hebrew specialist who came into my sixth grade classroom, because I wasn't expected to teach Hebrew whether I knew it or not. But I developed a number of other specialties in the religious school. I did a lot of work with the librarian, Sulamis Armon, encouraging our students to read and a lot of our audio visual work. When Murray Shapiro, who was then principal went to Nigeria in 1960 to teach for the State Department, I became the interim principal. When he came back, I moved on. I was at University Synagogue for five years. After that I got my Master's in Jewish education from Hebrew Union College in 1977. I was at Temple Beth Hillel, I was at Wilshire Boulevard Temple where I developed the Learning Center for them. Eventually I retired from religious education because I needed the time. I was divorced. I was working full time, not in a classroom because I had a teenager at home and I didn't want six classes of teenagers. I went into the business world and moved on from there. I have always been a member of Temple Israel, whether I was working there or working at another congregation. So my membership began in 1956 under my own name. But before that, Temple Israel was where I grew up. It’s family. I don't know whether an institution can be part of a family but it's part of mine.

GM: Where were you working your full time job, your real job outside of Jewish education? I know you were teaching in various schools.

RR: At Emerson junior high school for six and a half years before I took a maternity leave. It is now Emerson middle school since our junior high schools have changed their format. I also taught summar sessions at Uni [high school] and at Fairfax [high school], mostly algebra and geometry.

After a while, I'm trying to think what year I - maybe around 1968 or so - I started teaching at this Bais Yaakov School for Girls. A good friend of mine from Jewish education, Jan Elbaum, was the secular principal. She called me one day and said, “how would you like to teach math for me?” And I said, “why? I'm busy.” She said, “come meet the girls.” That got me. I taught there for four or five years.

I did a lot of tutoring in mathematics. While I was teaching and after I was no longer teaching. Math had always been something that was just interesting to me. It was what I took to raise my GPA every now and again. My degree is not in mathematics. My degree is in psychology. I started out pre- med at Stanford and decided that there was more to college life than just studying and while I didn't change my major until considerably later I knew I wasn't going to end up in medicine.

So from Stanford, I went to UCLA where I earned my general secondary credential, did my student teaching at Emerson and at LA high in English and social studies. I had the qualifications to do it.

GM: So let's get back to temple. Were you part of the junior choir when you were religious school?

RR: On and off, but laterI was a member of the adult volunteer choir, which I miss very much

GM: When you were in religious school who directed the choir? If you remember Lillian Klass?

RR: Yes. When I was in religious school too.

GM: And then when was there an adult volunteer choir formed?

RR: Oh dear. There was one that I didn't participate in during my early married years. I'm not quite sure when. I know that Aviva Rosenblum instituted an adult choir and Danny Maseng continued it and

as we both know, singing is great fun and great joy.

GM: Anything else choir stuff you want to relate? Or musical stuff?

RR: I love it when we sing things I know. And I miss some of the old familiar ones. We make music and I sing along whether I'm asked to sing. And on Friday nights, I generally arrive early and listen to the warm ups

GM: Well for some years you also sang with a choir outside the temple.

RR: The Musart Singers led by Judith Berman, who was also active as the organist at Temple Beth Hillel. This was a woman's chamber Chorale. It disbanded with Judith’s death. I sang with them for a number of years. How did I meet Judy Berman? She was the music director at University Synagogue when I was the principal there.

GM: And so what about plays. I know that you were in some of the plays and other stuff that went on at Temple.

RR: Acting is more Sheri's department. But yes, I was in two or three of them. Roy, my ex-husband, did sound for several of them. I grew up as a pretty shy child. I had to work to be outgoing. So no, I didn't participate in all of them. As I gained more confidence and the more ability to interact with people rather than hide, activities like the temple plays became much more interesting to me.

GM: So let's talk about your parents involvement. Okay, so first your father.

RR: So he was the first religious school confirmation class teacher. All his life he was active in B’nai B’rith. That took precedence over his Temple activites.

GM: And I know your mother had tremendous involvement. What about your father after that? Was he involved? Were they involved in the couple's club? Was he part of brotherhood?

RR: He was part of the Brotherhood. Couples Club was formed in the late 1950s and they were too old for that. They certainly participated in temple activities. I don't think my father was part of Temple leadership in terms of serving on the board. He certainly had his say about a lot of things. And he delighted in finding errors that Max [Nussbaum] made in the reading of Torah because he was fluent. Actually my father debated between the rabbinate and the law. The law won out.

GM: You were not bat mitzvah? Sheri [Langer] was the first bat mitzvah that we had here.

RR: It was the first for Temple Israel. That was September 1953.

GM: So what about you?

RR: I had an adult bat mitzvah after my two grandsons were bar mitzvah. Josh was Bar Mitzvah in 2006. Aaron in 2007. And I had my bat mitzvah in 2008.

GM: Before that, when you were 13?

RR: None of the girls were bat mitzvah. Bat Mitzvah was introduced in other parts of the country, about maybe the late 40s early 50s. But Sheri was the first one at Temple Israel.

GM: Were all of the boys in the class Bar Mitzvah.

RR: Some of the boys were and some of the boys were not. In order to become Bar Mitzvah, you had to come an extra day a week for three years. And some parents I guess didn't care enough to make their children interested.

GM: So let's take a look at your mother. She was actually very involved in the sisterhood. And what do you remember about all of that?

RR: Sisterhood was active in the religious life of the Temple. It provided Chanukah candles for religious school children and it still does. I organized holiday celebrations. When I was an adult, I remember the first meeting in which I introduced my mother instead of the other way around. That was a big thrill. I remember mother being involved in sisterhood activities. There was a bridge circle that included Pearl Berg and Gertrude Maier, and a batch of other people. That started around the time that mother was Sisterhood president. There were all the holiday celebrations. The annual dinner dance that they always went to. By the time I started going to them, they were no longer doing that. And then my father died very early. He died in 1962, shortly before his 60th birthday. Whereas mother had a very long life. She was 94 when she died in 2003.

GM: After your father died, she went back to college to get her psychology credential or…

RR: She had a social work certificate from Smith College in 1930 ish. People wanted the new MSW degree and she wanted something to do so she went back to USC. USC didn't want to admit her. She was too old. She was 55. She looked at whoever was interviewing her and said, “Of course you will admit me. I have a mother who is alive and well, I look forward to at least 20 years of professional life and if you ever want to see another dime from me, you will.” And they did. Hillel at USC had a scholarship in my father's name. Mother established it after his death, USC being Sheri’s school. It took Sheri 10 years to get her degree at USC. She graduated from Fairfax half a semester early. She had attended a semester and a half when she married Jerry (Langer). And then of course their son Robert came along. Sheri’s major at USC was theater arts, although her degree’s in elementary education. She has a master's in psychology and almost a PhD. I think she never wrote her dissertation. But she spent a lot of her professional life counseling and still does. She is pursuing her interest in art. She has always been interested in art and in many media. What she's doing lately in addition to oils and photography is making jewelry. She's keeping very busy.

GM: Yeah, I know. So anything more about your mother?

RR: Mother was president of every Jewish organization around. She was president of the Beverly Hills B’nai B’rith Women, She was president of Hadassah, I don't know which chapter. She was active in the National Council of Jewish Women.

GM: So Roger grew up at Temple?

RR: Yes. Mostly. He became bar mitzvah at University Synagogue because I was principal of the religious school there from 1968-1973.

He was not married at Temple Israel because Danny Polish did not perform intermarriages. I can remember telling Danny that I had good news and bad news. The good news was my son was engaged and the bad news was he wouldn't marry him. They were married at the temple in Santa Monica. And they were married by the wife of the rabbi, also a rabbi, who had been a classmate of mine at HUC. If you're asking for her name, I don't remember.

GM: Do you remember the name of the temple?

RR: No, I don't. But I can remember Rabbi Alan Freehling at University Synagogue, when Roger was Bar Mitzvah, commenting that there were more rabbis in the congregation than he'd ever seen in a congregation at one time. And that was because I had been in Jewish education for a long time and I knew all the rabbis.

GM: And I know that through the years that Roger took over the responsibility for the sound, the audio for major services and worked with us on that on plays and other types of things.

RR: I mean, he is good with that kind of stuff. Yeah.

GM: And then he had two kids, two boys.

RR: 1993 and 1994. They are 12 and a half months apart. We just finished celebrating their birthdays, and Roger and Kim's anniversary, which are all in October,

GM: but the boys grew up at Temple Israel.

RR: The boys grew up at Temple Israel. Both became bar mitzvah there. Josh was confirmed. I don't think Aaron was.

GM: I know that there was a bit of a brouhaha on one of their bar mitzvahs about Aviva [Rosenbloom] and Danny [Maseng].

RR: That was Aaron’s bar mitzvah, but I don't remember much about that. I can remember tripping up the stairs at Josh's Bar Mitzvah when I went up to the bima for the chain passing of the Torah. There was no handrail on those portables stairs - the powers that be decided against it. I can remember that my daughter in law was upset that they wouldn't let her participate in that because she wasn't Jewish although she was raising Jewish children.

GM: Was that in the sanctuary or the chapel?

RR: Josh became bar mitzvah in the sanctuary. Aaron was Bar Mitzvah in the chapel. Aaron is on the end of the spectrum. He's very bright but he was socially inept at that point. He's grown since then.

GM: I was at his Bar Mitzvah and he did just great.

RR: Yeah. Wow. I mean, he had the ability. It was just hard to get him to sit down to work at it.

GM: I'm actually pretty much through my list. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

RR: I think I've probably said it before, but Temple Israel is my second home. And I think that this feeling shows up in others of our members as well. And that that is one of our great strengths. Our members do not just send money but participate, make friends and are part of an extended family.

GM: Let me ask about somebody else that comes to mind because you'd mentioned Hannah Nussbaum and that you were friends and playmates and that you'd spent some time in the Nussbaum home. What was Rabbi Nussbaum like at home?

RR: Much friendlier and more loving. At temple he was pretty standoffish. At home, he was much more relaxed. Even away from the temple. He was more relaxed. When I was president of the Western Association of Temple Educators, he came to speak at one of our conventions and after one meeting, he insisted on taking me for coffee. It was delightful, relaxed, and charming time as opposed to his being his formal self.

GM: So you and Sheri were co-presidents of sisterhood one time, weren't you?

RR: Yes. Sheri was President first. And actually she was president for four years. I think I was co- president for the last two of those years. Sheri did a wonderful job as president in that she did what every leader now is trying to do: she got younger people involved, one being Karen Gilman.

GM: It's my memory that one of the problems that sisterhood had then was was a generational change; that there hadn't been new leaders developed to take over from the prior leadership and that that was their problem. I think at one point there were three co-presidents, but I can't be sure about that.

RR: I think that was after Sheri and me. But I think this is a problem for every organization today. Getting younger women who have careers and who work outside the home is increasingly difficult. That was when evening meetings were became part of the calendar. When Sheri and I were president, we had monthly meetings. Those no longer exist and haven't for a long time. What we have now are more major social events - in the past many of the events were educational.

Sisterhood used to have many interest groups such as the temple has recently formed. My mother was part of a bridge circle. There were book groups and other things. We keep reinventing the things that work.

One sideline, this will be family. There is a picture of my father as a child playing the violin. And he played the violin all his life. At every family gathering, he would pull it out. He used to like to play Humoresque so I learned to play it on the piano. The only problem was it written in five flats and he played it in the key of G which is one sharp so we never did play it together.

GM: Nice memory.

RR: One of the proudest things that I did while I was religious school principal was to institute child care on the High Holy Days. It had never existed before. And I went to my first staff meeting as principal during the summer and proposed the idea and I thought it was something that was badly needed. And I must have made a case because George Hecker agreed to underwrite it. And that was the beginning of our child care at Temple Israel on IMO weekdays. Sheri Langer was the first teacher and I can remember making playdough from flour and figuring out what sort of snack we were going to serve because young children can't go all morning without something. Do I have a bearish moment? And just seeing that it still exists, makes me feel proud.

*Note that Ruth’s friend, Jim Powers, is the first non-Jewish member of TIOH under the new policy. According to Ruth, his deceased wife was Jewish as was his long-term significant other (also now deceased). He has been coming to services with Ruth and wanted to give back. After meeting with Rabbi Chernow, she agreed that it would be appropriate for him to become a member of TIOH – the first non-Jew to be granted this privilege. [comment by Geri Mund, approved by Ruth Rose]*