

Temple Israel Archives

Interview of Hal Gerber

Date Unknown

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My name is Hal Gerber.

[BACKGROUND DISCUSSION]

My father (Will Gerber) was born in Kishnev which is a city in southwestern Russia, and the seat of one of the worst pogroms they ever had in Russia. It's about that time that my grandfather decided to bring his family to the United States, which he did. And, of course, landed in New York as most, if not all immigrants did. And, those they surely are the ones from Eastern Europe and he found his way to Memphis, Tennessee, and I guess my father was perhaps three or four years old, when he arrived here, and he was raised here. He was educated here and he went to high school here. And, in the late teens, early '20s, his family decided to move back to New York, but by then he met my mother and they had decided to marry and he stayed here. He obtained a job with the Illinois Central Railroad as a clerk (Noise in Background) and went to night law school. When he finished night law school, he was lucky enough to be employed by a prominent Memphis Law Firm, called McClain & Bejach, both of those people were very closely associated with Mr. E.H. Crump, Boss Crump. He was the political leader, of a political machine. The firm only remained in existence perhaps a year after my father joined it, which was, I would say, 1923-24. When Mr. McClain became the District Attorney General and Mr. Bejach became a chancellor, that is, a Judge of the Chancery Court. Mr. McClain took my father with him, to the Attorney General's Office and he, my father became an Assistant Attorney General. He was a hardworking man, he was a tough prosecutor. McClain, and he became closely associated and, and while Mr. McClain, or General McClain, was close to Mr. Crump,

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through that connection, my father caught Mr. Crump's eye. And, little by little, he was taken into confidence and to the decision-making apparatus of the machine. And, finally about 1935, my father was appointed city attorney. Now, you must understand that that, Anti-Semitism pretty well flourished in those days. We're talking about the 1920s and '30s and Jewish people did not attain places, high places in the political world, at least not in the south. So, it was rather unheard of that that he could achieve that position.

He remained city attorney from 1935, until about 1940.

And, little by little, he did catch Boss Crump's eye and became a confidant and a close associate. As a matter of fact, his closest associate. In 1940, my father was appointed Attorney General himself, and that's the most important, most powerful law enforcement office in this district or this county. In addition to that, he went to Nashville every two years when the General Assembly met, to be sure that the Shelby delegation, that's our county, did what Mr. Crump wanted it to do. And again, Mr.

Crump, over the years, became so powerful because there were so many votes in Shelby County. This was by far the largest population of any county in the state. And, he could produce 50,000 votes, in those days, a lot of votes. And, people that wanted to be elected governor or another high office, United States Senator, sought Mr. Crump out and with his support, little by little again, I hate to keep using that expression, but Mr.

Crump became the most important political person in Tennessee, and my father was next to him.

I know of no other person, no other Jewish person in Tennessee, that achieved the high office that he did, or that was as powerful, as he was, in his day. Even since that time,

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there are very few that have achieved such prominence. We have a few Judges today, I don't know of anybody really that is, holds a political job, as he did. So, he was, what shall I say, one of a kind. At the same time, he was vitally interested in the Jewish community, particularly interested in the Baron Hirsch Congregation, of which he was President for about eight years, in the '30s or early '40s. He improved that Congregation, considerably. He was, he was vitally interested in what they called then the UJA, the United Jewish Appeal. I don't know what they call it today, something else I know, but ... and, he also raised the first money for Jewish Community Center, in Memphis. He remained interested but strangely he, although many of his friends were, he was never a Zionist. He certainly applauded the creation of the State of Israel, but I never understood why he was not a Zionist, because he was an Eastern European and that's the way he lived his life. Even though he was brought here at an early age, I don't think he ever got away from those, what he was taught in those early years.

When my father was appointed Attorney General, actually when he was appointed City Attorney, it was unheard of, in this community, for a Jew to obtain such a position. I won't say that Anti-Semitism was rampant, it was dormant, it was here. And, there were a lot of people (who) did not like the idea of a Jew being in those positions, particularly the latter, as Attorney General, it was just too strong. Although I must say that most of his friends in politics, because there were so few Jews, that might be (Noise in Background) kind of a silly thing to say, but they were non-Jews, and admirers of his, because he was straight as a die. He never, his integrity was never questioned. A lot of people didn't like him because he was tough, he was a tough prosecutor and he was a tough politician. But, nobody could doubt his integrity.

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What you should understand, my father balanced that integrity with Boss Crump , because Mr. Crump was a man of integrity, too. There was no graft in in this city and county, or very little, when he was the political leader. (Stutter) this place was honest. There wasn't any finagling at the polls. I will say that Mr. Crump made it possible for black people to vote here. We had poll tax in those days, which was designed to keep black people from voting. And, no place else in the south did that happen but, in Memphis, Tennessee. And he, through the administration slush fund paid their poll tax, and saw to it that they were able to vote. And, that was not altogether altruistic, they voted in his favor. But, Mr. Crump was a honest man and you won't find anybody, although people didn't like him, because of what they called his dictatorial powers. And, in those days, you know, there were dictators around and about the world and that was not very well looked upon. But, you must also remember that in those days, in the '20s, the '30s, the early '40s, many cities had political machines.

But, political machines were able to do things for people that government couldn't do, because government in those days was not the way it is today. The United States Government was well, the United States was still a dual federalist country and there was much power in the states. And, that sort of diminished, not sort of, but has diminished in recent years. But, (stutter) there was no conflict insofar as integrity was concerned.

I don't think there's any question about that and when I say that Mr. Crump was a friend of the black people, he was a friend of the Jews too. He had strong support. This has never been a really big Jewish community. In those days, I don't think there were more

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than eight to ten thousand Jews in the whole county . There may not be very many more than that today. But, Mr. Crump was supported almost to the man, and the woman, by the Jewish community.

Well, maybe I didn't go far enough with with Mr. Crump's, shall I say liberality, as far as his views of race and religion are concerned . He was very careful to see to it, that appointed officers were different religions. If the, if the Circuit Court Clerk was a Protestant, the Chancery Court Clerk was a Catholic. If the Chief of Police was a Catholic, the Chief of the Fire Department was a (stutter) Protestant. He spread it around, in other words. And, he himself, had no prejudice of any kind. I knew Mr. Crump pretty well, as I guess you can imagine, because of my father. And, I had some times to talk to him and he was a, he was a self-educated man. And, he was, he was probably the best politician that I'd never known because he was so attuned to it. He so knew what the people needed and wanted. He would get in his car on a Sunday afternoon with his secretary and drive around the city, she with a notebook and he would dictate to her, various things that he saw that needed to be repaired, whether they were streets or whether there were improvements that were required or whether, whatever - whether there was a place to put a park. He did that every week. He he was vital, insofar as this community is concerned and he, and he took care of it, he tried to take care of everybody. Now, that's not to say that we didn't have segregation, we did. That was, that was the rule in the south, until really after he died. But, I think we had a we had a better relationship, all races, of both races, I guess I should say, all religions, because of what he tried to do .

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You should know and I'm going to be a little biased here, that this was a good place for Jews to live and it was because of the close relationship between my father and Mr. Crump . I'm bound to say that, because I believe that and I know that , in my heart. I know that my father was so vitally interested in the Jewish community and got a lot of things accomplished, through his association with Mr. Crump , that I don't think could have happened otherwise. And, the Jewish community knew it, and applauded it and that's why it supported Mr. Crump, as it did. But, if my father had not attained that degree of importance, that power , and had not been the kind of man he was, that never would have happened.

I have seen the Jewish community change over the years, and that Jews of whatever persuasion - Conservative, Orthodox, Reform, are much closer and much more congenial. There was quite a cleavage back in the '30s between the Orthodox side and the Reform. I see that disappearing. I also see the Reform becoming more Conservative or closer to the middle. I don't see that particularly, on the Orthodox side. I do see for a time a lot of Jews switched from Orthodox to Reform, I see a good bit of that going the other way today. But, I see the community itself, closer and more able to cooperate, more able to do things together. The Jewish Community Center might have had a lot to do with that. It's a, it's a beautiful organization and, of course, it's non- sectarian. There are lot of non-Jews that belong to it, that helps, too.

Well, I as my, in my case, I'm not really a religious Jew. I am Jewish, proud of it, always will be, never will be anything else. I, you know, Jews are marrying non-Jews today. In most cases I have seen, whichever the non-Jew mate is , becomes

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Jewish , sometimes Orthodox Jewish. I know , I know men and women, Christians, formerly Christians that converted and have become Orthodox Jews. And, when I ask why, they said well, one of them did anyway, told me, this was a man . He said, if I was going to do it, I was going to do it, all the way. I don't , it's a hard question and since my relationship with it is a good bit (more) liberal than most. I have good close friends , my doctor who shall go unnamed , who is a little bit tighter about this, than I am, a good bit. And, he's very religious and he had, he adheres to all of the rules and the dietary rules and he goes to services regularly and, and all of that And , doesn't really understand people that don't do that He thinks that's the way it should be. And, I'm not one to say that he's not right about it, but I am one to say that the community itself, in my opinion is a good bit more relaxed than that. I think there probably a few people on either side of the spectrum, a few Reformed that that don't want to wear a yarmulke in services and a few, on the other side that (are) just as tight. (Stutter) I just think in the middle , most people are pretty liberal about it, although very firm and and proud of the fact that they're Jews. I don't know in this day and time, among educated, intellectual people, how important old time religious concepts really are. (Noise in Background) I got to tell you something here. You know, I've had this conversation

[END INTERVIEW]
