

# Temple Israel Archives

## Interview of Herbert Louis Notowich

March 13, 2001

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Herbert Louis Notowich (HN)

Date of Interview:	3/13/2001
Address:	5410 Collingwood Cove
Telephone:	901-682-3000
Date of Birth:	11/17/1932
Place of Birth:	Memphis, TN
Sex:	Male
Ethnic/Racial Heritage:	White
Religious Affiliation:	Jewish
Educational Background:	Bachelor of Science
Occupational History:	Business/Accounting
Special Interests:	Golf, tennis, people
Father's Name:	Sam Wolf Notowich
Occupation:	Grocer
Mother's Name:	Sayde Ostrov Notowich
Occupation:	Department Store Salesperson
Name of Wife:	Marilyn Kolker Notowich
Name of Children:	Stacy N. Canales, Scott E. Notowich, Lee M. Notowich
Interviewer:	Lorraine Schneider (LS)

HN: My formal name is Herbert Louis Notowich. I was born in Memphis, TN on November 17, 1932 at the Baptist Hospital on Madison Avenue which is the old building portion of the Hospital on Madison Avenue. My name is "Chaim Label ben Schmiel Wolf". My first name "Herbert"-- I was named after my grandmother "Ida Ostrov"—O S T R O V and my middle name "Louis"—I was named after my grandfather on my father's side who was "Louis Notowich". My father's parents emigrated from Kiev, Russia around the early 1900's. My father was only a year old so that would have made it approximately 1904. They made their way to Memphis because they knew some people who were living in the area and had recommended that my grandfather was a tailor and that there was a need for a tailor in the area and they moved to the old "Pinch" area of Memphis, TN where a large portion of the Jews emigrated and settled in the early 1900's. My mother's family came originally from Poland and moved on to Sweden and then made their way to America. My mother was about five or six years old when she came over around 1907 or 1908 and they had relatives who had already settled in Mississippi and they found their way to Memphis and decided to settle here.

LS: What was your mother's maiden name?

HN: My mother's maiden name was Ostrov O S T R O V.

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LS: And your mother's first name?

HN: Sadye Ostrov. My dad's name was Sam Wolf Notowich. My father had one brother—Maurice Rusty Notowich who was younger than he and he had a baby sister who was Faggie Notowich Young and she is still living today. His brother and he are both deceased. My mother is deceased and all of the—she had three sisters and a brother. She had an older sister Mildred Rosenblum who was married to Harry Rosenblum. She had a brother Morris Ostrov who married Jean Friedlander. And they had one son Bernard Ostrov (Deceased). She had three sisters. She had Nellie Hoffman who was married to Dr. Jack Hoffman and had two children, Jerry and Ronnie. Jerry is deceased. Both my Uncle Jack and Aunt Nellie are deceased.

LS: Were they from here?

HN: All my mother and father's siblings lived in Memphis, TN

LS: What a blessing.

HN: Ronnie Hoffman still resides in Memphis with his wife Stephanie and his young daughter. Then there was Fanny Ostrov Mathias, married to Milton Mathias, who is still living. She lives in the Memphis Jewish Home at the present time, but she had two children—Mark Mathais and Joanie Mathais Lingerman. Joanie lives in Dallas now. Mildred Rosenblum who I mentioned earlier had one daughter Adelaine Thomas who was married to Larry Thomas who passed away a couple of years ago.

LS: This is wonderful.....

HN: The question that you asked—did I know my grandparents personally. I certainly didn't know the two that I was named after but the other two I was extremely close with. My grandmother who lived in the Pinch on Jackson and Second Street. It's over near the St. Jude Hospital. I spent a great deal of my childhood there, and there used to be a park over there called Market Square and in the area there were several Jewish meat markets. There was a Mr. Dubrovina, a Mr. Makowsky. There was the old Suzore theater, the Rosen's Delicatessen, which was one of the most outstanding we ever had on Main Street. Then there was the Anshei Sphard Synagogue right across from the little park where we attended. In the neighborhood there also was Blockman Shul which was on Jackson between Main and Second. That was a little shul supported mainly by the Blockman family, and as I recall, there was another little synagogue on a second story on Second and Jackson Avenue, but I wasn't very familiar with it. A few blocks away was the Beth El Emeth Synagogue which was on Poplar Avenue and of course the Baron Hirsch Synagogue which was on Washington and it was right across the street at the time from the old Coca Cola Bottling Co. At the time I was growing up the only synagogue—orthodox synagogue—that had a religious school was Baron Hirsch so all of us attended religious school at the Baron Hirsch Synagogue.



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LS: What did your grandparents do for a living?

HN: My grandfather on my mother's side—Ike Ostrov—had a grocery store on the corner of Walker and Barton in South Memphis. That's near the railroad and next door to him lived a Mrs. Berzansky—Mr. & Mrs. Berzansky—but it is Mrs. Berzansky I remember. Mr. Brazanki was deceased. They now call themselves "Burson". It's the Bursons in town that you are somewhat familiar with. My grandfather on my father's side, of course, had a grocery as well, and also was a tailor and he of course, was deceased before I was born in '32. My mother and father married in August of 1930), I do recall that date, and I spent a great deal of time as well with my grandfather on Walker and Barton so I was very close to both of my living grandparents. I spent a great deal of time with them which was most memorable. My grandfather was quite a character. He belonged to the old Anshei Sphard Synagogue, and I'll never forget. They had a drawer under the benches where he would sit, and he would keep his tallis, his tefilen, and his yamulke, but he also used to keep a box of snuff and he would walk around the synagogue and offer people snuff during the services. He was a real jolly guy and he was a real fun guy and everybody liked him very much.

LS: That's fabulous. You have any other stories about them?

HN: Well, gee. The only stories that I recall was—my grandfather had a heart attack, and he came to our house to recover and we had not really a nurse, but a caretaker who would look after him and when he was feeling a little bit better, he—one day she was teasing him. And I'll never forget this as long as I live. He had a white gown on, and he jumped out of the bed and he shook his hand in the air and he said "you go to the Hell". But he was a lot of fun. My grandmother—there are a lot of stories there. She spent a lot of time raising me as well, and I have a lot of fond memories in the old Pinch. She used to take me to the butcher shop. She took me to the Suzore theater. She'd take me to the park, and I had some very fond memories.

LS: Were your parents in business?

HN: No, at that time when I was just a little boy my father worked for a plant on Front and Jackson called Eagle Malt Manufacturing Co. and what it was was a liquid drink that you could mix with water and make larger drinks like grape, orange, strawberry. It was liquid bottles, and he was the plant manager. My mother worked at Goldsmith's in the Boys Department, and they used to tease her that she spent most of her money on my clothes—but with a good discount, right?

LS: What was Memphis like? Were your parents involved in Jewish clubs or the synagogues?

HN: Well, my parents were so occupied in working that they didn't have a great deal of time to participate, but my mother did belong to the Anshei Sphard Ladies Auxiliary. I do remember that. My dad did do some work for the Anshei Sphard Synagogue, but they weren't big organizational workers. They did what they could and were very supportive.

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LS: Did they keep kosher at home?

HN: We kept kosher for a number of years, and then once my mother had a heart condition, we loosened our kosher guidelines and didn't strictly keep it. We had a grocery store on Olive and Driver, 505 Olive in South Memphis. That was the first enterprise they had. We lived above the store, and I worked in the store. After a number of years we bought a home a few blocks away at 1569 Wellington—a little nicer place. In South Memphis there weren't a number of Jews at the time—it was in the late 40's and early 50's, but I do remember a Dr. Bryan who is Marcia Bicks father had a office on the corner of South Parkway and Wellington. The Katrovitzws had a grocery store under the bridge near South Parkway and Third. The Moskowitzs had a store under the bridge. They had two sons, Buddy Moss (changed his last name) and Eddie Moskowitz. And then also in South Memphis were the Kaplans—Ruben Kaplan—whose son was Jerry Kaplan, a contemporary of mine who is now deceased—who was Dr. Kaplan. Then, of course, there was Morris Franklin who's the father of Alvin and Sidney Franklin. They had a place on Florida Street. But there were a small number of Jews that lived in South Memphis. I attended Bruce Junior High School which was on Bellevue my first two years of school and then I moved on to A.B. Hill School which was on Latham and Olive, and then I went on to South Side High School which had about 1,000 students, and I think in the whole school there probably wasn't a dozen Jews going to that school at the time.

LS: Interesting. Did your religion cause you any difficulty at school or in the community

HN: Well, in those days to some degree. They picked on you, and of course, called you names, but most of us got along pretty well at South Side and were respected very well and that was limited to the first year or two we were there. But those who attended, as I recall, Jerry Kaplan attended, a Lansky—Bernice Lansky who is now Bernice Baines—Mrs. Alvin Baines—she attended, Betty Manis who lives in Knoxville. That's Ruth Kahn's (I don't know if you know Ruth Kahn who lives here in town) sister. She attended, and Annette Moskowitz. That was the only ones I recall. Alvin Lansky did go as well. But we got along okay.

LS: What kind of a Jewish education did you receive?

HN: Well, it's interesting. I had a very limited Jewish education. I attended Sunday School every Sunday at the Baron Hirsch Synagogue. As I told you, that was the only religious school at the time. We were members of Anshei Sphard at the time and before my Bar Mitzvah I had a teacher who came to my house twice a week for two years and that's the extent of my Hebrew education. My family respected our religion very much. Every Friday night it was a ritual that we go over to my grandfather's house on my mother's side, the entire family, and have Shabbos dinner together and then, of course, during the holidays, Passover, etc., we always participated and had a great deal of respect, but my folks had a limited time to go to Services. Saturday was a big day in the grocery store, and they were open from 6:00 to midnight, as I recall.



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LS: What about your family? Did you have any brothers or sisters?

HN: Well, it so happens that I have one younger brother—Alvin Notowich, and Alvin happens to be my oldest brother. He's 10 years younger than me. He's my only brother.

LS: What did you do during the summer?

HN: Well, during the summer in the early years, I worked in the store with my family. After I graduated high school, I went to—it was Memphis State College at the time—University of Memphis. After I finished my four years at college with a degree in Accounting and a minor in Management, I had to go into Service and serve my two years. I came back and went to work for Ernst & Ernst, a public accounting firm, for three years and then I went on to work for Nylon Net Co. Became the Secretary-Treasurer of Nylon Net Co. and then in 1970 my brother Alvin and another fellow Larry Welch started Plastico, an industrial plastic distribution and fabrication company of which we still have to this day. Larry has passed away in 1994, and I am now in a semi-retired stage right now

LS: Well, you should be. What was Memphis like when you were a child?

HN: Well, it has changed a great deal. When I was a child, you had segregation rather strong. There was no such thing as blacks and whites going to the same rest rooms, restaurants. There was no such thing as a black policeman, bus driver, fireman, what have you. The schools were completely segregated, and although it has been very frustrating for a number of people, I know, in our community, when I look back we have made a great number of strides, yet we have a long way to go. We have come a long way as well over the past, I'd say, thirty or forty years.

LS: When did you get married?

HN: I got married the same year Marilyn did—August the 30th, 1959 we got married at the Claridge Hotel.

LS: How did you meet your wife?

HN: That's a very interesting story. My wife is originally from St. Louis, Mo. and she had come to Memphis and we were fixed up on a blind date. We had a blind date, and we had a miserable time and didn't get along at all. She came back to Memphis, and a friend of mine, Buck Boshwit had gotten a blind date with her and asked me about her and I told him that if he couldn't get out of it, to go on and take her out. It so happened at the time that my mother had just passed away (may she rest in peace), and I was not dating at the time and I went over on Yom Kippur night -- someone was having sort of an open house, and Buck brought her over and that night we got along real well. Then we started dating and I would say with in a year we got engaged. Marilyn came to live in Memphis with her brother and sister-in-law at the time. That was Elliot and Lorraine Kolker. Lorraine has

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has since passed away. Lorraine was Lorraine Graber. That was Marlin Graber's sister. That's how she came to Memphis, and we really started to date and got married. We have three children—Stacy, Scott, and Lee. Stacy and Scott are both married. Lee is still single. We have five wonderful grandchildren. Fortunately, both of our married children live in Memphis, and at the present time Lee lives in California and is single. So we have got to work on him.

LS: What was your greatest influence outside of your parent?

HN: My greatest influence outside of my parents? Well, of course, my grandparents had a great influence on me. My parents had a great influence on me, and wonderful family and friends have had a great influence on me. Many of my friends that have had a great influence are through the synagogue at Beth Sholom, but through the community I was very active in AZA BBYO youth organization that was very helpful to me. I got active at the Jewish Community Center when it first started and the first Executive Director Paul Schwartz and I became very friendly. He had a great influence on me as well. And I think over the years I've just been extremely fortunate in being associated with a lot of very fine people who have all had an effect on me.

LS: Why don't you tell us about some of the things that you have had done through the organizations? You are not just a member of the Jewish community.

HN: Okay. Well, let's see. I was very active—became Vice-President of Harry Washer AZA. Was frightened about taking the presidency so I didn't do that. While in High School I was president of Phi O Kay Fraternity. When I got into college, we had an independent fraternity at the University of Memphis of which I did take the presidency and became very active. After I got out of the service, I got active a little bit in Beth Sholom and eventually became on the board—became an officer—became president—past president there. I am a past president of Plough Towers, the high rise for the elderly. I've served on the board at the Memphis Jewish Community Center. I've worked on a number of committees for the Memphis Jewish Federation. I am past president of the International Association of Plastic Distributors which is affiliated, certainly, with our business. I have had some very nice honors, and it has been a very beneficial experience for me. I also serve on the Board of Bornblum Solomon Schechter School.



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LS: How did Beth Sholom come about?

The following is from a presidential address on December 8, 2001

HN: In the early 50's one evening when Joe and Gertrude Altfater were visiting Dr. Justin and Herta Adler, Joe indicated that he wished there were more options in the practice of Judaism than what he observed in Memphis, an Orthodox and a Reform Community. Dr. Adler mentioned that he was aware of the United Synagogues of America, which was a different concept of Judaism, a Conservative movement and that he might also be interested. Joe and Dr. Adler contacted about 30 people they thought might be interested and 20 people showed up at what was known as the Southern Bowling Lanes, located in Midtown, a blocks few from the large Sears and Roebuck and across the street from Halpern's Delicatessen, owned by Gilbert Halpern's mother and father. They met in one of the meeting rooms and the beginning of Beth Shalom had its start.

This devoted group of men and women later met on the evening of December 16, 1954, whose dream became a reality, by forming a new Jewish Conservative Congregation. It became the first new Jewish Congregation in Memphis in one-half century; for the Conservative Movement it was the first and only Conservative Synagogue in the Mid-South area, electing Herman Appelson as their chairman, who later was elected our first President. Gale Apperson sends her regrets, as she was unable to be with us this Shabbot to share some of her memories about her Father's involvement and commitment to Beth Sholom the remainder of his life.

On the east wall of the entry to our Synagogue is a beautiful plaque, which includes the names of our founding families, donated by Mrs. Herta Adler.

Today we honor our Past Presidents and recognize and pay tribute to our Founding Charter Members. As in any organization, there are many who were not only Presidents, other officers, board members, and other members who all were very important in the history of Beth Sholom Synagogue.

Important history is so often forgotten, but today we remember and pay tribute to our Past Presidents, and also a special honor to our Founding Past Presidents and Charter Founding Families.

I received regards from Maurice Fink, Joe Newman and Louise Makowsky Bramson who also regretted not being able to be with us today.

In Louise's note to me she expresses what today is about in such a beautiful way that I would like to share her comments with you. "When I received the lovely invitation to join you and the Beth Sholom Family for Shabbot on December 8, I immediately wanted to fly south to honor my father, as well as all those whose leadership played an important role in the building of Beth Sholom Synagogue. As I reflect on the role my father personally

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played in the history of his beloved synagogue, my heart is full with abundant memories. His passion for Beth Sholom was unsurpassed, but for the immense love he felt for his family. He lived and breathed his commitment with a generous heart embracing Beth Sholom's dreams, as his own. My family celebrate the Past, Present and Future of Beth Sholom and its leaders.

As I have mentioned on a previous occasion, I had the honor and pleasure of knowing and working with all of the Past Presidents as well as most of the other involved and committed members of our Synagogue. They were very giving of their time and their means. I recently read a moving statement that sums up my opinion of their total dedication.

**WE MAKE A LIVING BY WHAT WE GET \_WE MAKE A LIFE BY WHAT WE GIVE"**

From his initial involvement Joe Altfater remained active as long as he could and interested always in the well being of Beth Sholom. On November 10, 1990 Joe received the Rabbi Ari Becker Hevrah Award, Beth Sholom's highest honor, which was most deserving and fitting, which reads.

**"Beth Sholom Synagogue does hereby bestow the Rabbi Ari Becker Award upon Joseph H. Altfater, the moving force in the founding of Conservative Judaism in Memphis and the Guardian Spirit of Beth Sholom Synagogue."**

At this time it gives me a great pleasure to call upon Dee Altfater Kline, one of Joe's daughters, to reflect on some memories of her father's deep involvement with Beth Sholom Synagogue.

**HN:** Did you have a specific question you wanted to ask me? I can tell you one person who had a tremendous influence on me that I think we should not exclude from this interview and that was Rabbi Arie Becker. He was probably one of the most outstanding human beings that I have ever had the pleasure of knowing—so much wisdom, so much warmth, so much concern for his fellow man a wonderful human being. In fact, I think it is best described by someone who once told me when he first met Rabbi Becker that he considered him the closest to a sage that he had ever met. He was, of course, the rabbi at Beth Sholom for about twenty years before he passed away. And he was certainly just a wonderful, wonderful human being who set beautiful examples for everyone, and if you met him, you couldn't help but love him—only because he loved everybody else. Did you have the pleasure of knowing him.

**LS:** Yes, I had the pleasure of going to one Service.

**HN:** Oh, he was just a very special human being.



Ira - I think the only involvement in the sixties is that I had a very tough situation in that two of my customers -- it had a lot to do with building my business, The Civil Rights movement--

Selma - Really?

Ira - A couple of our customers were St. Jude and St. Joseph Hospitals, and Guardsmark had the security service for both St. Jude and St. Joseph and in sixty-eight when the company was basically five years old we were just overwhelmed by the need for security and protection by people that people --

Selma - you mean individuals?

Ira - No, by companies because we were providing this service and Martin Luther King was pronounced dead at St. Joseph Hospital and we were protecting the facility and our aggressiveness during that crisis propelled us to significant growth. It was very significant because we stayed open around the clock when no other security company did and as a result of that we had a number of customers and -- you know -- we provided security at an extraordinary risk. We ran out of people-- security officers - and so we brought them in from Arkansas with the approval of the Memphis Police Department who at that time was licensing our people and we brought them over across the bridge and when they had crossed the bridge we made them special officers -- you know, of our company. They were already part of the Little Rock operation.

Selma - Were you still able to not use fire arms? A hallmark of your company has been --

Ira - Well, see, no --most security companies have always been interested in <sup>carrying</sup> guns. I've been opposed to it because, basically, the only person who could take your life legally -- the only person who ~~can~~ take your life legally is a police officer and to take someone's life -- such a treasure -- a life is such a treasure -- and to take that life you've got to have a lots of circumstances and reasons. It seems that we have too many weapons in our country and we do not need weapons like we do -- so I have led an effort nationally and as documented as early as 1970 and as was reported in GENTLEMEN'S QUARTERLY in '70 and then subsequently in later years that we should not have armed security officers. We don't need them. Security officers have walkie-talkies and closed circuit televisions and defenses and all types of technologies so they don't really need to shoot and that's been something that I have tried to fight in the industry and I think it would be even larger if I hadn't taken that stand and we refused customers in the sixties that were even asking us to sign statements for the EEOC that we were in compliance that we would refuse to put officers that were black at their facility.

Selma -- Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Say this again.

Ira - If you sold the government some food -- or, say --- whatever -- basically, you would ----

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- LS: Did your family have any connection with the people that were not Orthodox or Conservative. I mean when they went Orthodox and then to Conservative? Was there any tension?
- HN: An interesting question. When I was growing up, there were two forms of Jews in Memphis. Well really 3. There was Orthodox, participating Orthodox, participating Reform, and non-participating. The Orthodox and Reform Jews in my early years—and this was mostly in the 1940's and early 50's—did not socialize very much. They were very distinctive in keeping to themselves and not interacting with one another. One of the greatest things that happened in the Memphis Jewish community was the formation of the Memphis Jewish Community Center. And I can't tell you the exact year, but it was around 1950—1951 that it was formed, and it was the greatest catalyst for bringing the Jewish community together. I really contribute that as the thing that really warmed our community as one Jewish community.
- LS: Did your folks have anything to do with gentiles outside of serving them in their store or with blacks? Did blacks come into your store?
- HN: Yes, we served blacks and whites, and non-Jews in our store. They did not socialize hardly at all with any non-Jews, and I think that probably was an example that rubbed off on Alvin and I—friendly but did not socialize.
- LS: What was their attitude toward Zionism?
- HN: They weren't strong Zionists. They supported Israel and supported the Zionism movement, but they weren't really avid Zionists.
- LS: What do you think was the most important—significant—change in Jewish life in Memphis? You said the JCC but do you see any other changes?
- HN: The only changes other than what I have already described was that we have become much more educated toward Judaism and much more embraced toward one another than we were years ago. But I think we are much more informed—much more informed with the outstanding speakers and programs—educational programs. It's much more effective. In fact, when I first went to Anshei, they didn't have an official rabbi and the sermons were given in Yiddish. I couldn't even follow that.
- LS: What was the most significant historical fact—just in general—in your life?
- HN: Oh, gee! Historical facts—there are just so many outstanding. I guess the formation of Israel was one of the most outstanding. I do remember when several of the presidents passed away and how it affected me and of course, the outbreak of the war which I was a very little boy at the time (WWII) and also when we had peace at last. But mainly I would say the formation of the State of Israel was the most profound.



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LS: Do you remember the Depression?

HN Very little about the Depression.. The only thing I do remember—it's interesting—when you are young, you don't realize that you are living in a very primitive manner. I remember in our first apartment we had only one bedroom and my bed was in the dining room. We ate meat once a week, and I thought that was the thing to do. I didn't know that we only ate meat once a week because that was all we could afford. But I must say this, I was-- Alvin and I, my brother, were very, very fortunate. We unfortunately lost our parents. My mother passed away in 1958. She was 52 years old. My dad passed away in 1960. He was 56 years old. Alvin did not have a mother or father when he was still 18 years old. But we were fortunate to have wonderful parents—to set such wonderful examples—and really cared for us and I think it's hard to describe when you have the pleasure of having such wonderful, outstanding parents but we had them for only a very short time.

LS: What is your own personal philosophy? What is the most important thing you have done outside of your work? What are you most proud of?

HN: Gee, that's a difficult one. I think I am the most proud of my family. I am the most proud of my friends, and to me, I think, they are the most important part of life. In fact, at my stage of life—I'm 68 years old—I think the most important things in life are the time you have left—which gets shorter each day—the health you have which normally does not get better, family and friends. Nothing is more important than those four things in my opinion.

LS: What kind of advice would you give the younger generation? If you tell someone who is really going to listen to you.

HN: Well, not too many people are going to listen to me. I would say: Try to get a good education, always be responsible, make certain that your word is your bond, and try to make a contribution to society.

LS: Thank you very much, Mr. Notowich