

Temple Israel Archives

Interview of Marvin Ratner

No Date

Page 1

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
TAPE 4, PAGE 1
MARVIN RATNER

79 1
Batch 3
Page 4

MR: I'm Marvin Ratner.

People, Jewish people, in Memphis, I think accepted things pretty much as they were. I mean there were some Jewish people who got involved in civil rights to some, some extent. I mean I think especially ^{Myra}~~Amara~~ Dreyfus who founded the fund for Needy Schoolchildren. And even today, Sheldon ~~Coronas~~ has been honored for being head of the med, the baby delivery area for so many years. I mean I think, with civil rights we knew he was already the head of that department, I think. But I was trying to think of who, who was involved back early, early on. And it really wasn't anybody to my knowledge. I mean ^{Myra}~~Amara~~ Dreyfus, ^{Selma Lewis}~~Elma Louis~~ to some small extent, some extent, before the middle '60s. And it's just hard for me to think of anybody. I wasn't, I haven't _____ that well. I don't want to say, you know, I don't want to leave out the Rabbi from Beth Shalom, who was a real hero, who went to Selma and marched with the people in Selma. He was the most outstanding, I think. And then Rabbi Wax. So, I mean Rabbi Wax was involved so much with the sanitation strike. He was head of ~~XXXX~~ (?) at that time, and he stood up to Henry Loeb. And but I will say that in general I think blacks felt like Jews were sympathetic towards them. I was reading about "At The River I Stand" by Joan Byfus, where she points out that the blacks voted for Henry Loeb when he first ran for office because he was Jewish. And he turned out to be, you know, the enemy of the civil rights. But my wife at that time, said that Henry Loeb was the kind of Jew who adopted all the bad qualities of the non-Jews in order to prove that Jews are like non-Jews. And but he was Jewish and he got black support because apparently the blacks perceived the Jews as friends. And even though I can't think of anybody who was a real leader in Memphis in the civil rights, early on, except ^{Myra}~~Merer~~ Dreyfus, and maybe

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
TAPE 4, PAGE 2
MARVIN RATNER

04:19 you can think of somebody. I just can't seem to pull anybody out that was really prominent. There just wasn't any civil rights. There was -- there was a group at the YWCA, and that was, and they became very close friends. In other words there weren't any integrated groups in Memphis. And but the YWCA had one, a bunch of women, I don't know of any Jewish women who were in it. But that was a, really that was amazing to me when I heard about it later, that these women had met in each other's homes and all this. [You can't imagine the way it was in the '60s and earlier, about socializing with each race. You just didn't do that. What, what happened to me, Jesse Turner and Lucius Birch got together and decided to get a bunch of black professionals and white professionals and have them have pot lucks and meet each other. And that's where I really started meeting a few black people. And the Sugarman's and my family became best friends. And this is apropos, I think, of the Jewish community during that time. This was in about 1963 or '64, or '65.] The... we decided, we and the Sugarman's were best friends. And we had gone to their country club a couple of times. And we wanted -- and we were members of the Jewish Community Center. So we wanted to take the Sugarman's to the Jewish Community Center. And we called Paul Schwartz and said, Paul, we want to warn you, but we're bringing the Sugarman's to the Jewish Community Center. And Paul said, wait a minute, wait a minute, don't do that. And he said, let's don't... let's don't get -- we're striving so hard to do things here. You might mess up our future. Don't do it. So, OK, we said, well, we won't do it this time, but so a year went by, it was summer again. And we said, we're going to bring the Sugarman's to the Jewish Community Center. So he called Joe Felt who was in Miami and asked him to come back here and talk us out of bringing the Sugarman's to the Jewish Community Center swimming pool. You know, I mean in those days people thought

06:33

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
TAPE 4, PAGE 3
MARVIN RATNER

black skin had germs that rubbed off in the water. I mean it was not just -- it's incredible to look back on. You know, it's incredible now that we ever thought that. But I, I, I understand. I mean I grew up with that kind of idea that, that you know, there was something wrong with black skin. Something that you didn't want to touch. And now the -- so anyway, so, after that year Joe felt... talked us out of it. So that next year, two years after we decided to do it, we just said, we're going to do it, you know. Forget it. And everything was very, very smooth. And it was no problem at all. And I wish I could remember what Russell told me some of the comments were. They were all very accepting. And that's the first... that was the most popular we ever were at the Jewish Community Center. So maybe the -- that's what happened. So I really, I really can't remember since I didn't have any, any experience personally with any other Jews that were involved in civil rights, I, I just really don't know what, what Jews were involved in. But I do know that blacks felt like Jews were more friendly than, and on their side than the majority of white people.

09:10

I, I think the reason that blacks felt that Jews were more their friends than the average whites was that, I, I think it's primarily in that they've studied the Israelites and their, and their trials and tribulations in the Bible stories, and knowing that they too were persecuted. But in addition, I think Jews, Jews generally have more compassion. And, and because of that reason. Because they, you know, wish other people had shown them more compass... their forefathers more compassion. And, and I think blacks could feel

10:01

that. I don't know that, that Jews would have been any better employers of blacks. I just don't know.

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
TAPE 4, PAGE 4
MARVIN RATNER

I hadn't thought of that.

I think that my involvement in civil rights came from, you know, my Jewish background. That I did feel that people who were you know, not in the majority, they had, they had a strike against them. And that I, I think that you know, I could understand, see, I grew up in a small town as very much a minority, being Jewish. And of course, blacks were a minority that was persecuted because they were a majority (sic). I never was persecuted -- I mean because they were a minority. I never was persecuted but still I felt there was a difference. And that it was you know, the Christian white community was dominant. I was not part of it in the sense of being in the establishment. And here were all these black people who were not given a decent education. You know, things that all of us white kids took for granted. And you know, and but I could have some rapport with them. Because we were both in a minority. And then as, when I went to college and became more liberal, although I can't remember any racial influences in college, just becoming more liberal about poor people and uneducated people. People who were deprived and didn't have equal opportunity. And so when I came to Memphis and became friends with the Sugarman's and we went out with a lot of other blacks too, we went with the Cal's and the Willis' and others, and the Cook's, anyway we were just friends with this group of professional people who were as good as anybody, you know. And but yet, you know, they, they were discriminated against at the same time. And so I, I had to come back from NYU with a masters degree. I had gone there while I was a CPA and had gone to law school as a CPA. So I had some pretty good credentials as a CPA, a lawyer, a masters in taxation. And I came back and got a job in a, with the firm, I was affiliated with the, one of the big firms. And then that firm merged in with another

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
TAPE 4, PAGE 5
MARVIN RATNER

firm, and I became a founding partner of that firm. And, and that firm is now the biggest firm in Tennessee. It was then Hiskell Donaldson, now it's Baker, Donaldson. And I had a, it looked like a good opportunity, but my, my real, my real feeling was to try to help these people who were, not the ones who were my friends, but the other blacks who didn't have the chance for any education.

14:41 I was President of the Memphis Better Schools Committee. That was what Meier Dreyfus had formed as a fund for needy school children. And I was vice president of the Tennessee Committee for Better Schools. I was active in a lot of organizations. But these two were really my, my, my main interest was education. Educating the people who were outside of the mainstream and needed -- and I felt like that's how you integrate things too. That, that if people have equal educations they are accepted. So that, that was, that was where I was coming from.

And when Russell Sugarman asked me to join this law firm, I had to really think about it.

I mean not so much from the standpoint of whether or not it was good for me in the long run, but whether, which was better for me to help the world. Would it be better for me to stay in this prestigious firm and look like I was going to make a lot of money. The First Tennessee Bank Trust Department thought I was the best will and trust writer in the city and were recommending people. Anyway, it looked like it would, I would have the opportunity to make money. And is it better to go ahead and move into a situation where it's very tough, financially or stay where you can make money and do things with the money later on. And I had to make that decision. My goal was to be helpful, to

16:57 have an impact in the community. To help people, mainly to people to get any... for people to get an education. And so my wife at that time, the former Emily Goldberger, was very much in the same mindset that I was. And we wanted to, to choose what would make our lives help more people. And there wasn't any guarantee that if I stayed

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
TAPE 4, PAGE 6
MARVIN RATNER

where I was that I would make a lot of money or that I would give it away after I'd made it, you know. And but I could go into this firm and, and bring something special to it that would keep it from being thought of as a grubby firm that just took any kind of case to make money. Or you know, people would say that even though, even though the firm was always financially strapped, but you know, if it didn't, if all it had were people that were trying cases that bothered people, you know, that disrupted the status quo, they'd say, oh, they'll do anything to make money, you know. But with my coming into the firm, it, it brought some establishment clients that people wouldn't talk about it that way. And -- the, the response of the Jewish community was, was good. I mean it was, when I say that I didn't really have that much connection with the Jewish community. I mean I was a member of the Temple and we went to various programs at Temple, and nothing as far as I know was said at Temple. But whether -- it was when they had an educational director. And when he left he made a talk, and especially mentioned me as somebody that you know, he was glad to have been a congregant of the Temple. So but... the reason that I say that the response was good from the Jewish community is that I didn't lose any Jewish clients. I did have a number of non-Jewish clients that didn't stay with me. I can tell you some stories about that. It was, I went to the trust department of the First National Bank and talked to Norfleet Turner, the younger, who was running the trust department. And I said, Norfleet, I've been asked to be part of this integrated group, you know. And he said, he said we can't send you any business if you go. He said you can go and open up an office right next to them, and you can work for clients that they want you to work for, but if you become part of that firm we can't send you anymore business. He said most of our, most of the people we can recommend to are new executives in Memphis, and they wouldn't like us if we sent them to a controversial

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
TAPE 4, PAGE 7
MARVIN RATNER

firm. ~~So that was one, that was the end of that immediately.~~ And there were some other clients who were pretty, pretty strong business people that I lost. I lost insurance people. I'd probably written as many pension plans as anybody in Memphis up to that time. And I lost all of that business. And, but, but the insurance people came to me, and once I did their personal work. They wouldn't send any more clients to me, but they continued to use me themselves. ~~But the Jewish people, I asked three major clients, you know, what did they think of my moving to this new firm. And [laughs] all three of them, each of the three of them said, well, you'd be crazy to do that. You'd lose every client but me. So I knew I had those three major clients that would come with me to the firm. And that was a big support. And they were all Jews.~~ So... so that is, you know, I, I didn't really have many Jewish personal friends. I never, I never sought out somebody because he was Jewish or not Jewish. It's just how, whoever, I was just happened to be connected with. I had Jewish relatives. My wife had some very close relative that we, we thought a lot of. And they all, all my wife's relatives, applauded this decision to go into this firm.

No, I'm, no, I'm less. I'm not even a member of Temple anymore. So I'm, you know, I'm not somebody that's involved at all. I married a non-Jewish woman. She became Jewish, but somehow it didn't stick because neither one of us is religious. And when, when you convert, you can only be that new religion through being religious, especially Judaism. I mean we can't -- she wasn't born Jewish like I was, so she can't be Jewish from being born Jewish. She could only be Jewish by being religious. Neither one of us is religion, religious. And I just, a few years ago I just decided to terminate my membership. I had a wonderful correspondence with Rabbi Danziger, and he, but I, I couldn't convince him

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
TAPE 4, PAGE 8
MARVIN RATNER

that the Temple ought to be, you know, ought to be a place for Jewish atheists, and Jewish agnostics, as well as Jewish Jews or whatever. And, and I felt like that after the Holocaust, hardly any Jews believed in an intervening God. And it was a great opportunity for Reform Judaism to say, you know, we, we're going to rely on each other. We're going to connect to each other. There's no, you know, there's not any -- we gave the world this intervening God, but that was good for those days, but it doesn't happen. You know, look at the Holocaust. There's no intervening God. So we can, we don't have to connect to that, that myth to make the world work. We need to connect to each other. And that's what I was hoping, I, you know, they would do. But people laugh at me for thinking that anybody would go that far, stick their neck out that far. But I just didn't find that it was a place for me any longer.

23:35

Yeah, well, the... I remember going to a sermon Rabbi Wax made once, where he talked about how wonderful Jews have had it in America. They had it wonderful because of the public schools. That it was the most democratic institution in the world. That people could come and go to public schools with everybody else, you know. And I, I see, that you know, I feel like the point he was making and he didn't, didn't go around a bush about it, he was making a point of criticizing the Hebrew Academy at the time. And, and you know, that's nothing now. I mean it was one little Hebrew Academy then. But now there are a number of religious schools. And I think you know, the Jews are going back to more and more isolation, and I don't think that's a good thing. I don't think it's good for the present or the future. I don't think it's good for. You know, I just don't, I, I think it will eventually create anti-Semitism again, as well as be depriving the community of more Jewish involvement, and the Jews of more involvement with other people.

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
TAPE 4, PAGE 9
MARVIN RATNER

Yes. That's right.

Becker. Becker. It's Ari Becker, that's who it was.

27:42

Yeah, the... the Jewish rabbis who were involved in civil rights early on, the first of them, Rabbi Becker at Beth Shalom was very active, and very courageous. He went to Selma and marched with the people and just... And I know he did it from his Jewish ideals. And Rabbi Wax was a real leader here for the, for the moderate community. He was a... he stood up to Mayor Loeb and fought for the sanitation workers to, to be able to get what they were asking. And so that it wouldn't lead to more, more bloodshed. And, but not only that, Rabbi Wax was just generally extremely liberal, and right on point, right in sync with that movement.

Well, let me, you know... you didn't really ask anything about the firm. Whether people know that it was pretty important.

The, the... my interest in joining this integrated law firm, the first integrated firm in the south stemmed primarily from my interest in education. I wanted to see the mainstream, and the people outside of the mainstream receive an education and become part of the mainstream. I felt like that's what would solve the problems of the underclass, the problems of the world, the problems of crime to a large extent. So that's where I came from as President of the Memphis Better Schools Committee. Vice President of the Tennessee Committee for Better Schools, Chairman of the Day Care Center, Vice

MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
TAPE 4, PAGE 10
MARVIN RATNER

President of other Day Care organizations. Anyway, when I was asked to join this lawfirm by Russell Sugarman, who was then my best friend, and you know, after a lot of soul searching, I said --

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-- And employment discrimination was a big part of what we did, and what was accomplished over the years. That employers were always afraid they would be sued. There was a lot more indirect benefit than there was direct benefit from the employment. So anyway, this firm was a place where young idealistic men and women could come and work for what they believed in, even though we were having to switch banks constantly to get enough money to operate. Sometimes we'd owe three banks at once and whatever. But we took whoever we could that was interested in promoting this ideal of making people have equality. OK?

[In July of 1967, Russell Sugarman, a black lawyer in Memphis, and I, and several other persons including one other Jewish lawyer, Irvine Salkie (?), formed the first integrated law firm in the, in the south, whose principal purpose was to promote the civil rights of deprived people.]

[ROOM TONE]