

Temple Israel Archives

Interview of Warren Wurzburg

October 31, 2000

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH WARREN WURZBURG. THE INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED BY MARGARET HALLE AND RECORDED ON OCTOBER 31, 2000 IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE. THE SERIES IS UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE MEMPHIS JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS AND THE MID-SOUTH.

Date of Interview:	October 31, 2000
Interviewer:	Margaret Halle (MH)
Address:	343 River Oaks Road, Memphis, TN
Telephone:	901-761-2929
Date of Birth:	May 29, 1926
Place of Birth	Memphis, TN
Sex:	Male
Ethnic/Racial Heritage:	White/Jewish
Religious Affiliation:	Temple Israel
Educational Background	Memphis City Schools, Graduated Central High, Attended UT
Occupational History:	Retired Co-Chairman Wurzburg, Inc. Executive, Tennessee Lumber Company
Special Interests:	Family, Fishing, Travel
Name of Spouse:	Mickey (Marjorie) Opler
Name of Child:	Nancy Wurzburg Shapiro, Warren Wurzburg Jr., Kenneth Wurzburg
Father's Name:	Abe Wurzburg
Father's Occupation	Wurzburg Bros.
Mother's Name:	Mary Wurzburg
Mother's Occupation:	Housewife

MH: Today is Tuesday, October 31, 2000, I am Margaret Halle and I am interviewing Warren Wurzburg. Could you please give me your full name and place and date of birth?

WW: Warren Seymour Wurzburg, Sr. I was born in Memphis, Tennessee on May 29, 1926.

MH: Were you named after anyone?

WW: My paternal grandfather was Seymour Wurzburg.

MH: Do you know from where your ancestors emigrated? As far back as you can go, go.

WW: I have always heard from my father that we came from Wurzburg, Germany; my paternal ancestors. I always theorized that when they got to this country, they didn't speak English and they were asked where they were from. When they said, "Wurzburg, Germany", "Okay, you are Wurzburg." My father and I theorized that is what happened.

MH: What about your grandmother...were they married when they came here?

WW: I think my great-grandparents emigrated from Germany. They came in 1858 and settled in New York.

MH: Your great-grandmother's name was...?

WW: My great-grandmother's name was, to my knowledge, Henrietta Kahn Wurzburg.

MH: Did they come over as an entire family?

WW: Husband and wife, as far as I know.

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MH: Okay. What about your grandparents? What were their names?

WW: Their names were Seymour Wurzburg and Henrietta Wurzburg.

MH: Henrietta?

WW: Oddly enough, my grandmother was "Henrietta" and my great-grandmother was "Henrietta."

MH: And your grandmother's maiden name was...?

WW: "Ladenberg."

MH: How and why did they come to the South?

WW: My grandfather was a traveling salesman. He traveled through the South and met my grandmother in Memphis. They met and married in Memphis and they stayed in Memphis until 1878. When the Yellow Fever hit Memphis, they left and went to Port Gibson, Mississippi where they are buried.

MH: How many children did they have?

WW: I am not sure. Either it was...well, my grandparents had five.

MH: Could you name them, please?

WW: Henry Wurzburg. He resided in Memphis. They all lived in Memphis. He died in 1948 at the age of fifty-eight from a heart attack. My father was born on June 18, 1895. My uncle, "Reggie" Wurzburg, (Reginald) was born in Memphis. He was born in, I believe, 1900 in Memphis. There was another brother, Louis. He died very young during the First World War and I am not sure what from. The four boys had a sister, Frances Wurzburg. She was a maiden lady and never married.

MH: Did you know your grandparents?

WW: I knew my grandmother. My grandmother Wurzburg died when I was about six years old.

MH: So, you don't remember much about her.

WW: I don't remember much about her at all. My grandfather, Seymour Wurzburg, died about 1914 or 15.

MH: Do you hear any stories about your grandparents?

WW: Very few. No, not really.

MH: Where did they live?

WW: My grandmother, when I was a small child--I don't know why I remember this--but at 1855 Poplar, at the corner of McLean and Poplar. I remember, distinctly, my father taking me over to see her on Sunday mornings.

MH: What did your father do for a living?

WW: My father, as a teenager went to work for his father, who was a salesman. He sold, what they used to call, essential oils.

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MH: Oils?

WW: Oils, yes. They took orders and then my father and grandfather delivered them in a horse and buggy. Later on, my father expanded the business and went into packaging. In 1920, my uncle, Reggie Wurzburg, joined in the business. Our business is still...uh,

MH: Flourishing.

WW: Flourishing. I would like to think it is flourishing. We have the fifth generation. My grandson works for the company.

MH: How very nice. Where did your parents live?

WW: My parents? I remember everywhere they lived. I was born in an apartment building at 306 S. Cleveland in Memphis. In 1928, they got a house on the corner of Eastmoreland and Willett, 1536 Eastmoreland. My father told me that he didn't have much money at the time. He went to see Mr. Brinkley Snowden at NBC bank, who lent him one hundred percent of the money to buy that house because he had faith in my father's ability to succeed.

MH: What were your parents like?

WW: What can I tell you? They were wonderful. My mother was...I don't mean it disrespectful, but she was a spoiled Jewish lady.

MH: Nothing better to be.

WW: She had a lovely life. She passed away too soon. She was seventy years old when she died in 1966. My father followed her in death, eleven months later.

MH: That often happens. Where did your parents grow up? Here in Memphis?

WW: Here in Memphis, both of them.

MH: How did they meet?

WW: I now have that now.

MH: Oh, good.

WW: My mother was a secretary to a man who worked in the Randolph Building downtown. Where the Randolph Building was, I couldn't tell you. I remember my mother saying many times that she met my father in the lobby of the Randolph Building. I think that was around where the ball field is now. They both worked in the same building. They met, fell in love and married on June 16, 1920 at her parents' home. They were married by Rabbi Feinschreiber. You ever hear that name?

MH: I surely did! Were your parents involved in Jewish institutions?

WW: Very much so. My father was president of Temple Israel for a number of years. And, he was very active with the Jewish Federation, which was known as the Jewish Welfare Fund back then; as well as, many other organizations. He was president of Kiwanis. He was the only Jewish man at the time that had been president of Kiwanis.

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MH: What about Jewish clubs?

WW: The only club that I knew that he belonged to was Ridgeway.

MH: Okay. Did your mother belong to it?

WW: Yes, she did. She also belonged to a club that is no longer in existence, called the Pollyana Club. You ever hear of that?

MH: No, I haven't.

WW: The Pollyana Club was a group of Jewish women who raised money to buy wheelchairs for indigents.

MH: How nice.

WW: And, most all of her friends belonged to the Pollyana Club.

MH: Tell me a little more about your parents.

WW: Oh, I didn't tell you anything about my maternal grandparents!

MH: No, you didn't. I want to get that.

WW: Do you want me to tell you right now?

MH: Okay, you may.

WW: My grandparents--mother's mother and father lived in Memphis. They came from Poland.

MH: And what was their name?

WW: Herman and Sarah Bresler. In a minute, I will recall the town in Poland they came from. I know that because Mr. Morris Fogelman used to tell me all of the time that his mother and my grandmother were friends in Poland and they both ended up in Memphis.

MH: Did your maternal grandparents come over as a family?

WW: No.

MH: Were they married?

WW: Yes. My grandfather came first to look around and see if the streets really were "paved with gold." He left my grandmother in Poland. He wanted to come over here to see for himself if he could make a living here. So, he had friends in St. Louis. This was in...1895. He decided that he could and went back to Poland, married my grandmother and in two, three or four months later, immigrated to Memphis---no, to St. Louis. My grandmother was pregnant with my mother when they came. So, my mother was born in St. Louis. My grandfather decided-- he was a cobbler--and he decided that there was so much of the shoe industry concentrated in St. Louis that he'd better pick another city where there weren't so many cobblers. So, he came South to Memphis in the late 1890(s). So, he and my grandmother came to Memphis and they lived on Vance Street for a time, until my grandfather "got on his feet," they bought a house on Minna Place.

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MH: I know where that is!

WW: Do you?

MH: I sure do.

WW: 1138 Minna Place. Now, early recollections of my grandparents was on Minna Place and that was when I was a very small child.

MH: Did your mother have any siblings?

WW: There were three boys and two girls. (offering to show pictures)

MH: Tell me, what was Memphis like when you were a child?

WW: Memphis was an overgrown country town. I remember once when I was sixteen years old, I went to a party at the Peabody Hotel. The young man I went with---I may have been fifteen years old because I didn't have a driver's license. The young man I went with, I won't name, I remember him well --- had too much to drink and I wouldn't let him drive me home. So, I drove the car home from the Peabody to my house. I had never driven a car before. We drove down Union Avenue and never saw another car!

MH: How lucky for you.

WW: Now, this was in the mid-thirties. I have never forgotten it and I've never forgotten who the other fellows were. (chuckle)

MH:: Who are or who were your siblings? Who are your siblings?

WW: I had two sisters, Dorothy Wurzburg, who married Syd Lerner, Jr. My sister, Dorothy, died prematurely when she was fifty-three years old of a heart condition. "Dot," as we called her, was five years older than me. She was born in 1921. My other sister, Shirley--her name was Shirley Harriet Wurzburg. She was named after my grandmother, Henrietta. "Shirley" was taken from my maternal grandmother, Sarah. She died also, prematurely, in an automobile accident.

MH: Was she married?

WW: Yes, she married Bernard Lapidés.

MH: When did she die?

WW: She died...I think Shirley was sixty when she died.

MH: Who were your friends when you were growing up?

WW: (offering to show pictures) Probably, my oldest friend is Maury Bronstein. We are still very close friends. Here is a picture from my sixth birthday party in 1932, in which Maury is present, his sister Bobbye. Hope Dan is in the picture, Betsy Seligstein, Bonnie Seligstein..... And in the background of this picture is Sister Davis who then was Sister Michel, and Jeannie Bensinger Sebulsky and my sister, Dorothy. Some additional friends of mine; Avron Spiro, Jr. and I were close friends, Sonny Spiro, Bernie Cohn....Do you know Bernie?

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MH: I sure do! (pause) Okay, what schooling did you have?

WW: I went to Bruce School. Do you know where that is? It has been torn down. Bruce School on Carr Avenue and Bellevue Jr. High. And, I went to Central. Maury Bronstein and I, during the Second World War they had a program, whereby, if you had a certain number of credits, you could go to go to Tech High School in the summertime and take your last two credits and graduate early, in case you needed to go to service. We both went into service and we did that. We graduated from Tech.

MH: Did you go to college?

WW: I went to college. I went to the University of Tennessee. I did not graduate and I enlisted in the Navy in 1944.

MH: How long were you in the Navy?

WW: Two years. (showing memorabilia)

MH: Did your religion cause you any difficulties at school or in the community?

WW: Never in my life did I have any prejudice aimed at me. Never!

MH: What kind of Jewish education did you receive?

WW: I went to Temple Israel. I confirmed there in 1941.
In that day, that completed your Jewish education.

MH: What did you do in the summers when you were a child?

WW: Went to summer camp.

MH: Oh, which one?

WW: There was a camp in Hendersonville, North Carolina called "Osceola."

MH: Oh, really! My brother went there.

WW: Really?

MH: Uh-huh!

WW: It was run by Rabbi Solomon.

MH: Right.

WW: The year I attended there was 1939. And in 1939 was the year of the World's Fair in New York. The camp sponsored a trip to the World Fair. How we got there? In the back of a truck! They mounted benches in the back of a truck. We rode from North Carolina to New York in that truck! (laughter)

MH: That is a funny story.

WW: We had fun and we stayed about a week. We stayed at the YMCA in New York and I will never forget the experience.

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MH: Describe any particularly memorable family gathering.

WW: Family gatherings. The family had a cabin on Horseshoe Lake. It was built about 1940. My father and my sisters would go there and we'd go fishing there. My mother hated it! (laughter) She would go once a year on the Fourth of July she would condescend to the lake and I still have the house at Horseshoe Lake.

MH: Who was your greatest influence outside of your parents? A teacher?

WW: Oh, I don't remember a particular teacher. Teenagers and pre-teenagers in that day, their lives were rather routine. we went to school. We went to Sunday School. When we got to be teenagers, we dated.

MH: Did you date just Jewish girls?

WW: Just Jewish girls. My parents didn't approve otherwise.

MH: Describe your first job.

WW: Well, when I was in high school, I wanted to earn some extra money. So, I went to Julius Lewis and I worked there when I was a teenager, after school and on Saturdays. I also worked at Goldsmith's.

MH: What did you do at Goldsmith's?

WW: At Goldsmith's, I wrapped packages. Dorothy Laitman, who is Dorothy Gronauer who was a close friend of mine and lived a few blocks from me That was a memorable incident in my life. I was the perfect kid. I went to Bruce and Bellevue Schools which was a little less than a mile from my house. I would ask my mother for bus fare, which was then seven cents. She said, "No, you walk home!" She wouldn't give me the seven cents. Dorothy Gronauer lived on Peabody in a great big house. They had a Cadillac and a chauffeur pick them up. When school was out, Dorothy and I ran for the car and I got a ride to her house, which was two-thirds the way home for me. So I got a free ride and that was during the Depression.

MH: Can you remember any memorable events when you were in the service?

WW: Oh, yes. I remember many a...

MH: Excuse me. I didn't mean the service. I meant your first job.

WW: I went to Julius Lewis and I went to Goldsmith's. Back then, I think you were paid roughly fifty cents an hour. But, it was good money to me. I stayed on and whatever. Those are the only two jobs I remember. When I was seventeen years old, right before my eighteenth birthday, I enlisted in the Navy.

MH: How long were you in the service?

WW: It was for two years. I was on LS and shipped immediately to an LSD in the South Pacific for nineteen months. I participated in..... when Gen. McArthur said, "I will return." I was one of the five hundred thousand who "returned" with him. I was in 5 invasions. And I have some of the

MH: Medals, which were very impressive.

WW: The whole time that I was in service, my mother later told me, she had hives. She would later tell me that there was a major, an army major stationed in Memphis, a Jewish major. And, she had him for dinner --- a Major Tannenbaum. Why I remember the name, I don't know. He asked my mother where I was at that time. She said, "somewhere in the Philippine Islands." Well that is where was real the real heavy fighting is. So my mother got hives--and so was I. (chuckle)

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MH: I can believe it. Do you remember any memorable events while you were in the Navy?

WW: Being shot at and manning an anti-aircraft gun. Yes, I remember it. I remember that we used to have the night watch and I remember being on the night watch. In the China Sea where you had to hold on to keep from being swept over into the ocean. And I can remember it to this day the ship that I was on and it was a flat bottom. I can hear, to this day, the flat bottom hitting the sea. It was tough. I was eighteen years old and....

MH: Nothing bothered you?

WW: No, no.

MH: What was social life like when you were growing up?

WW: Well, it was fun. In Memphis, there was fraternity life.

MH: What was the fraternity?

WW: I was in a fraternity---- Gamma Delta Chi. That was in high school. There were Jewish sororities and fraternities. Excuse the expression during the Christmas holidays we had one party after the other. And most of them were formals. Some of the girls, I remember from those days, are my neighbors now.

MH: Oh, good.

WW: Henri Grossman is now Henri Fooks. Henri Fooks was the most beautiful girl you could imagine. She had dark, dark hair and "Elizabeth Taylor" violet eyes. I thought she was gorgeous. I can see her still in the formal attire for the Christmas party. Another girl that I was extremely fond of, at that time, was Rosalee Cooper. We dated. She married Henry Rudner. I had a good time.

MH: Did you go with any non-Jewish people?

WW: No.

MH: How did you meet Mickey?

WW: Mickey's father and my father were business friends. Her father was in the food business. He was a food broker.

MH: What was his name?

WW: Arnold Opler.

INT: And her mother's name?

WW: Eleanor. Eleanor Opler.

MH: Did she have any brothers and sisters?

WW: Oh, yeah. Well, let me tell you. You asked how we met.

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MH: Yes.

WW: My father was in Chicago at a business meeting and my later to be father-in-law said, "My daughter would be visiting Thelma Goldberg, who was a friend of ours in Memphis." My father said, "My son will take her out while she is in Memphis." So, my father came home and said, "I made a date for you to take this girl out." I said, "Dad, you made a date for me? I'm not going to take her out. Since you made a date with her, you take her out!" I think I made my father's life miserable for two or three weeks that I wouldn't take out with her. You I took her out when she came and the "sparks" were there. We had three dates and became engaged! It didn't last. We were only married fifty and a half years.

MH: And how many children did you have?

WW: Three. Nancy, Warren, Jr. and Kenneth.

MH: How did your grandparents practice Judaism?

WW: They belonged to Temple Israel. All 4 of them and we were reformed Jews there. My grandfather Bresler who came from Poland. They came from a little town in Poland called Poltisk. As I told you earlier, Morris Fogelman used to tease me about it. He would say, "I know you. You are from Poltisk." So, that is really how I know where they came from.

MH: Your parents practiced reformed Judaism?

WW: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

MH: And you did not observe the Shabbat or kashruth?

WW: Oh, yes we did.

MH: Oh, you did?

WW: We went to temple on Friday nights, but that was probably the extent of it. Temple was always a big part of our lives. As I told you my father was president of Temple.

MH: Do you observe the way your parents did?

WW: I go to temple, I can't say frequently, but occasionally. It is very important in my life.

MH: What was the nature of the Jewish community in which you were raised? I know you went to Sunday school.

WW: You know, I remember my father inherited many Jewish guides and I remember his description of (laughter) It makes me laugh when I think of it. But he described on of his contemporaries, who I will let remain nameless. He said that he called on him down at the Jewish Welfare, as it was called then. He said, "That S.O.B. won't give ten cents to see the Statue of Liberty do the hootchie gootchie (laughter)

HW: How large was the Jewish community?

WW: Of course, temple was on Poplar. I am sure it was less than half of what it is today.. We went to Sunday school and I remember two...well, I remember several of the teachers when I was in Sunday school. I remember two teachers, one was Amy Halle, who spent half of the time tapping her pencil on the desk trying to get order in the room And Mrs. Rae Gutman was a teacher. The kids always knew teased that she looked like George Washington.

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MH: Did your family have any relations with other branches of Judaism, such as conservative or orthodox?

WW: I remember when my father was president of the temple, he invited an orthodox rabbi to a dinner at the temple and offered to have kosher food brought in. And the rabbi declined his invitation. That made my father so angry.

MH: What about relations with gentiles?

WW: My father had wonderful relationships with gentiles. He was president of the Kiwanis Club and he headed the Chamber of Commerce trip called "Know Your Neighbors." They would take train trips to little towns around in the South promoting Memphis. I guess the members of the board of the Chamber of Commerce.

MH: What about with blacks?

WW: I don't have much memory of that.

MH: What were your attitudes toward Zionism?

WW: When I was a kid growing up, I didn't even know what Zionism was. I am not sure that I do now, except to move to Israel.

MH: What is the most significant change in southern Jewish life in Memphis?

WW: I think the 3 branches of Judaism are more compatible right now than they were then. I know they are.

MH: What is the most significant historical event in your life?

WW: World War II!

MH: And you did experience the Depression?

WW: Yes. I remember, during the Depression, people coming to our door asking for food. I remember my mother going into the kitchen and making fried egg sandwiches. For people just came to the door and she never turned anyone away. We even had a neighbor, who had financial reverses. My mother would go to the grocery store and buy fish.. She would tell the neighbor that my father fished at Horseshoe Lake and caught more than we could eat. She would ask them if they could take some of the fish off our hands.

MH: That was nice.

WW: That gave them their dignity.

MH: Yeah. Well, do you spend any significant time, except during the war, out of the South?

WW: No, not at all.

MH: What is the most important thing have you done outside of your work?

WW: I worked very, very diligently---and I have to be modest about it.

MH: Oh, you don't have to be.

WW: Yes, I do. That was to get the Memphis Jewish Home built.

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MH: Oh, good.

WW: I was adamant to that we needed that facility. I worked very hard and raised a whole lot of money for it. I was on the executive board and I was vice-president of the Home at that time. I guess I'm egotistical to be proud of the fact that my name is up there in the entry.

MH: Tell about the Mitzvah day you started.

WW: Alright, I will try to tell you without getting too emotional. I don't know if I can or not. on that.

MH: Okay, go ahead.

WW: My wife had---well, a theory, a mission or whatever you want to call it. She told me that all through the years I wanted to live my life doing something for somebody everyday. If it was giving somebody a ride. She was part of God's Unfinished Business from the beginning. She took people to the doctor. And she spent a good part of her life doing for others.

MH: And the things she did for you.

WW: And the rabbis came to her. As far as my memory is concerned

MH: Yes, I remember.

WW: (recounted with deep emotion) I told him about Mickey's purpose, whatever. And I said what if we had a Mitzvah Day we could get everybody together to do some good deeds. So Mickey was just beside herself. She was so happy with it. And she and I sponsored it in perpetuity. They'll always be a Mitzvah Day at Temple Israel.

MH: If it does not bother you, I would like for you to tell me about your children; their names and dates of birth.
WW: (emotionally) You know it is no trouble to talk about your children. It is almost not fair, They are absolutely wonderful.

MH: Of course, they are.

WW: My daughter is the oldest, Nancy. She lives in Nashville and is married. She is the mother of a daughter. She married a boy from Boston, they she met at college.

MH: His name?

WW: Stephen Shapiro. They were married at the old temple. She has been married for thirty-two years and her daughter is currently twenty-seven years old. And she is on the verge of marrying a wonderful Jewish boy. I told my friend that are teasing me that I am so excited because her fiancée to be met two of my requirements. He's Jewish and he's got a job.

MH: Now, about your sons.

WW: Warren, Jr. He married a Memphis girl. He married the daughter of Ben and Shirley Schwartz.

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MH: What is her first name?

WW: Jean. They live around the corner from me and I am delighted with that. They have three children; Megan, who is a junior at Duke, Joseph, who is a junior in high school and Brian, who is eleven years old and plays the piano like an angel. And, there is Kenneth, who is forty-five. He married the daughter of Shirley and Alfred Wexner and they have three absolutely gorgeous, wonderful children. So I have eight grandchildren for them, I am very blessed.

MH: And you are most proud of....what are you most proud of?

WW: My eight grandchildren!

MH: Good. What advice would you give to young generations?

WW: Of course, to apply themselves in school and apply themselves in their religion, be participants in the community and be a good citizens. I was raised in a family where it was important to be a good citizen. And so was my wife. We have tried to pass that on to my children. I am very proud to say that my son will be the next president of Temple. And it kills me to death, I am sorry that his mother was not here to see it.

MH: Is that Kenneth?

WW: Uh-huh.

MH: Good.

WW: And I've tried very hard, as Mickey she did, to pass the thought along to others devote. And be a participant in your community.

MH: Thank you so much.

WW: Thank you.