

BUREAU OF JEWISH EDUCATION OF GREATER BUFFALO

JEWISH BUFFALO ARCHIVES PROJECT “CREATING A JEWISH COMMUNITY ARCHIVES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY”

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Oral History Interview Process Information

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What is Oral History?

Oral history is a method of historical documentation, using live interviews with people living during the time being investigated. An oral history interview usually involves recording or transcribing an eyewitness account of historical events.

Who conducts the Oral History Interview?

The interview is conducted by Dr. Chana Kotzin, Archivist and Historian to the Project.

Where is the interview conducted?

This is entirely up to you. It can be at the Delaware Office of the Bureau of Jewish Education, or in your own home or office. Where ever you are most comfortable. Any quiet room away from the sound of a phone and free from interruptions is the best space.

How long is the interview?

The interview is generally no more than an hour and can be shorter. There can also be additional follow-up interviews, if the interviewee would like.

What questions are asked during the course of an oral history interview?

This varies from person to person. There are some questions that are asked in every interview. These include questions about date and place of birth, what parents' and the interviewees own main jobs or voluntary experiences were. Family background, grandparents, parents and brothers and sisters and childhood may be briefly discussed. Most of the interview will focus on two main areas: your working life (be it in paid or unpaid capacities) and your experience living within the Buffalo Jewish and wider Buffalo communities. Your own personal perspectives on Jewish life in Buffalo will be sought. Some interviews are “life reviews,” conducted with individuals towards the end of their paid or voluntary careers, others focus on a specific period of a person's life or recall specific events. And you do not need to have been born in Buffalo to take part in an Oral History Interview!

What if I can't remember a particular date?

Exact dates aren't always necessary, and there are several ways to approach this if it is of concern. For example, you might remember your age at the time, or another event that helps pinpoint the date. What is important is to get an idea of your experiences and impressions of the event or times.

What if I don't want to answer a question?

You don't have to! This is entirely voluntary. An interview can be stopped at anytime.

How can I prepare for an oral history interview?

There is no correct way to prepare for the interview. I can send you a list of specific questions I might ask given a little research. You might also want to think about what you feel you brought to a particular event, organization, club, group, idea, or initiative. Other areas to think about might include what you have seen change in the community – is there something you really miss? What has particularly struck you over the last 10, 20 or more years? What has most surprised you? What are your hopes for the future of the Jewish community in Buffalo? What is the essence of Jewish life in Buffalo in your opinion?

Do you need paper documentation, photos or other items?

This is not necessary, but very helpful as a way of preparing for the interview and arranging your thoughts. Items can be donated to the archives, or copied by the archives.

Will you be taking my photo?

If you agree, this would be very helpful. If you have a preferred photo, I can copy it.

How will my oral history be preserved?

Your oral history will be recorded in digital format and stored on a computer. Eventually it will be recorded onto CD discs and you will receive your own copy. Another CD copy will be preserved in the University archive at the University of Buffalo in Amherst, NY.

How will my Oral History Be Used?

Historical documents and books cannot tell us everything about our past. Often they concentrate on famous people and big events, and tend to miss out ordinary people talking about everyday events. Oral history fills in the gaps and gives us history that includes everyone. Recording the living memories and feelings of all, creates a more vivid and inclusive picture of our past. Everyone has a story to tell about their life that is unique to them.

Your oral history may be used in research

- to bring a new dimension to local and family history.
- by young people in schools to explore their own community.
- by museums, galleries and heritage displays to inform and bring displays to life.
- to serve as an important new source for all those interested in history.

Where can I get more information?

Please call Chana Kotzin at the Archives Office on 716-923-0020. If I am out, I will return your call within 48 hours. You can also e-mail: <archivesproject@bjebuffalo.org>.