

Ruth Salmonson Krasnoff Transcript

Miriam Smulow: -- 1983. My name is Miriam Smulow and I am a member of the Temple Israel Oral History Committee. This morning, it gives me a great deal of pleasure to interview someone very special to me: my mother, Ruth Salmonson Krasnoff. Mother was a member of the confirmation class of 1927 and has been a member of Temple Israel almost all of her life, with the exception of the brief time she spent as a member of Temple Ohabei Shalom. Of course I am aware of most of the information she will give us today, but I think it will be interesting to have a few anecdotes on tape. Good morning, Mum.

Ruth Krasnoff: Good morning.

MS: Let's begin by asking for the names of your four grandparents.

RK: My four grandparents were as follows. My father's parents were Marcus Salmonson and his mother was Hannah Salmonson. My mother's parents were Henry Steinmetz and my mother's mother was Lena Steinmetz.

MS: Do you know where they were born, what country and possibly the city or town in which they were born?

RK: I do not know too much about this period. However, I do know that my father's parents were born in Russia, on the German border, I believe, because they spoke German quite a bit -- occasionally. My mother's parents were born and came from Austria-Hungary. I do not know the city.

MS: Do I remember you telling me at one time that your father's family came from a town called Kurland? Was that --?

RK: Kurland.

MS: Kurland. I see. What were your parents' names, and when and where were each of them born?

RK: My parents were Isadore Salmonson and Sadie Salmonson. My father was born in Russia, came to this country as a young child. He used to speak of going to school from about the fourth or fifth grade on. My mother came from Austria-Hungary, and I would say she came to this country at about the same age as my father.

MS: Do you have any idea of approximately what year they arrived in this country?

RK: I have no idea of when they arrived in this country.

MS: How old they were when they came?

RK: My father was in the vicinity of six or seven, I believe, and my mother was within that range, from five to seven.

MS: How old were they when they got married?

RK: When they got married my mother was eighteen and my father was twenty-five.

MS: What was your father's occupation?

RK: My father's occupation was roofing and sheet metal working.

MS: Did he have his own business or --

RK: And --

MS: -- was he employed by someone else?

RK: -- when he first came to this country he was employed by someone. And in that way he was introduced to my mother.

MS: Well, that's very interesting.

RK: And then, after they were married, my father went into his own business of roofing and sheet metal working.

MS: What is your name, and where were you born and when?

RK: My name is Ruth Helen Salmonson Krasnoff. I was born in Cambridge, Mass., in August 1910.

MS: Where did you live from 1910 to 1930?

RK: For the very first part of my first year, I lived in Cambridge. And then my parents moved to Dorchester.

MS: Do you have brothers or sisters? And what are their names?

RK: I had two brothers. One is Leonard Salmonson.

MS: Where does he live?

RK: He lives in Lawrence, Massachusetts. And the other one was Lester Salmonson, who lived in New York and has since passed on.

MS: Where do your children live and what are their names? And could you tell us what cities they live in?

RK: Fortunately for my husband and myself, our children live close by. Our daughter Miriam lives in Brookline, and our son Bernard lives in Carlisle, Mass.

MS: Do you have any grandchildren?

RK: Oh, yes. I have four beautiful grandchildren.

MS: You're very lucky, like all the other grandparents.

RK: I would say so! (Laughs)

(Break in audio)

MS: What schools did you attend? Could you tell us elementary, high school, and any other training that you might have had?

RK: The schools that I attended were -- My primary school was the John Marshall School on Westville Street in Dorchester. From there I went to the Oliver Wendell Holmes School in Dorchester. And from there I went to the Dorchester High School for Girls in Dorchester.

MS: What year did you graduate?

RK: I graduated from high school in 1928. And after that I went right into the business world. However, at night I did take different adult education courses.

MS: What was it like to live in Boston in those days? I know you said you came from Dorchester. Can you give us some idea of what day-to-day living was, about --?

RK: As far as I can remember, we had no problems, as --

MS: You mean as far as antisemitism?

RK: -- far as antisemitism was concerned. I did live in a neighborhood that was predominantly Christian, with a very small community of Jewish families. However, I encountered no difficulties with my Christian friends, and my friends that I traveled with

all the time were all Jewish.

MS: Do you remember whether possibly your brothers had any problems with antisemitism?

RK: I do not remember my brothers having any problems with antisemitism. However, they lived the same as I did, in that they had Christian friends, but the friends that they traveled with and were with all the time were Jewish friends.

MS: Why did your parents join Temple Israel? And do you remember when they joined and who the Rabbi was at that time?

RK: I think that my parents joined Temple Israel because I had an aunt, Dora Hirschson -- aunt and uncle, Jacob Hirschson, and they were members of Temple Israel from early years, when I was a very young child. And I think they influenced my parents into becoming affiliated with Temple Israel. And that's how my brothers and I were sent to the Sunday school. At that time, my parents were not members. But we did attend the Sunday school. Because Temple Israel had afternoon classes on Sunday for nonmembers, children, and the morning classes were for the children of the members. However, when it came to confirmation, we were all in the same class and graduated all together.

MS: What year did this happen?

RK: Well, I was confirmed in 1927.

MS: Who was the rabbi then?

RK: And at that time the rabbi was Rabbi Harry Levi. To me, he seemed to be a very stern man. However, I was very fond of him and I enjoyed going to temple and listening to his sermons.

MS: Do you remember any specific sermons or any specific incidents that you would like to recall?

RK: I don't remember any specific sermons. However, as I recollect, I think that he was our teacher in the confirmation class for that year. And when it came to confirmation rehearsals -- Of course we were confirmed in the old temple on Commonwealth Avenue, the original temple there. And that's where the Sunday schools were. Everything took place there, because that was the only building. And at that time, as you know, there were no microphones and the acoustics that we have today. And when it came to confirmation rehearsals, Rabbi Levi would sit in the very last row of the temple and when we -- the students got up to the lectern to recite our portion, we had to be heard by Rabbi Levi, sitting in the last row.

MS: Was that an intimidating feeling?

RK: It was really an intimidating feeling, (laughter) because he insisted on it and we had to do that. And so we did.

MS: What part of Temple Israel life interested you most?

RK: Well, I did not spend that much time at Temple Israel, other than in school. And, of course, I took part in all the holiday celebrations. And I did make some friends there that I spent time with. But other than that, most of my time was spent in Dorchester, which was quite a distance from Temple Israel.

MS: I remember you telling me once about a story of how our brothers used to travel back and forth.

RK: Of course, my brothers --

MS: Why don't you tell us about that?

RK: -- attended Sunday school in Temple Israel on Sunday afternoons. And my parents would give us carfare to take the trolley from Dorchester to Boston. Well, very often on a Sunday afternoon my mother's family, her sisters and all the grandchildren, would congregate at my grandparents Steinmetz' home on Seaver Street in Dorchester. And I can remember very vividly how my brothers were very, very late in arriving there after Sunday school, the reason being that they would spend their carfare on a candy bar and then walk from Boston to Dorchester, to my grandmother's house.

MS: Not like today's child, who gets transported by car everywhere.

RK: That was for sure!

MS: What about the bar mitzvah ceremony? Was that present or absent in your family?

RK: In my family -- Of course, at that time Temple Israel did not have bar mitzvah services. They did not bar mitzvah children. And I don't think they taught Hebrew at that time. However, my grandfather lived in the same building as we did.

MS: Excuse me, but which grandfather are you referring to?

RK: My grandfather Salmonson lived in the same building as we did. And he made sure that we received, as he saw it, real Jewish education, in that he did not accept Temple Israel's teaching, naturally. He was an orthodox, conservative Jewish man. And every night after dinner he would come trotting down with the Hebrew siddur under his arm and my brothers and I, individually, each one, for about fifteen or twenty minutes, would have to read to him. We also had to go to the Hebrew school of a small shul in the neighborhood. And it was from there that my brothers were bar mitzvahed. In those days, the celebration ceremony was small. And I can remember my brothers having a party in my father and mother's home.

(Break in audio)

MS: Let's discuss Shabbat services. When did they take place?

RK: As I remember, we had Shabbat services on Saturday morning. And in the confirmation class, it was compulsory for students to attend either one Saturday morning or two Saturday mornings a month. There were no Friday evening services. There were Sunday morning services, which were very popular.

MS: Now that we've covered the bar mitzvah and Sunday school and Shabbat observances, when it came time for you to get married, were you and Dad married at Temple Israel? And if not --? (Audio break)

RK: When it came time for my husband and myself to be married, we had a problem in that William Krasnoff would not accept Reform Judaism, and if we were married at Temple Israel he would not attend the wedding.

MS: Excuse me, but – (Audio break)

RK: For that reason, we were married by Rabbi Abrams at Temple Ohabei Shalom. And we could understand my father-in-law, in that he was an Orthodox Jewish man, an ardent Zionist, and a very active worker in the Jewish community in Cambridge.

(Break in audio)

MS: Yeah.

RK: My father-in-law did not consider the people in Temple Israel as being Jewish, because there were no yarmulkes or tallises worn there. However, in Temple Ohabei Shalom they did wear yarmulkes and tallises. And to him, it seemed that this was a very important part of Judaism. And so he accepted it.

(Break in audio)

RK: We remained as members of Temple Ohabei Shalom until our children had completed their religious school education and my father-in-law, William Krasnoff, had passed away. At that time, we rejoined Temple Israel and that is where we are today.

(Break in audio)

MS: How did your friends in the community regard you, as a Jew and as a member of Temple Israel?

RK: My friends in the community all came from Orthodox Jewish families and background, and they did not consider Temple Israel as being a Jewish house of worship. And so they really could not ever understand how my family were members and worshiped at Temple Israel.

MS: Do you have any special possessions related to Temple Israel that you would like to talk about?

RK: The possessions that I have of Temple Israel today are my confirmation certificate, which I am very proud of, and my Bible, which was presented to me by the Sisterhood at the time of my confirmation and which contains all the lifecycles of my family over the years.

MS: Thank you very much for spending this time and sharing some of your recollections with us. It was really a nice morning.

RK: It was my pleasure. I never thought that someday you would be interviewing me for my recollections of Temple Israel as a child and young adult.

[END OF INTERVIEW]