

Interview with Milton and Betty Hodas, Interview 1
Date of interview: August 20, 1980, 55 Ferrante Avenue, Greenfield, MA
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Transcriber: Jacqui Walker
Begin Tape 1, Side 1

Saul: Milt, why don't we begin with you, and why don't you tell us something about yourself. For example, when and where you were born.

Milt: I was born in Greenfield, October 8, 1919.

Saul: So you are a native of Greenfield?

Milt: I am a native of Greenfield.

Saul: Ah, what was Greenfield like ah in your early years, in your childhood years, can you remember anything about Greenfield, Milt?

Milt: I'll say that it's very similar to what it is today. Only thing is the town has spread out a little bit farther in the outskirts than it was back then. Other than that the population has gone up very little. Industry is still in town like it used to be, and there's still a lot of familiar faces and people in the town of Greenfield. A happy, pleasant, and good life in the town of Greenfield.

Saul: What was it like growing up as a young Jewish person in Greenfield?

Milt: Never gave it a thought as being a Jewish person in the town of Greenfield.

Saul: You never had any problems being a Jew here in Greenfield? For example, ah anti-semitism.

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Milt: I never had any experience in Greenfield at all.

Saul: Milt did you attend Hebrew school?

Milt: I did off and on, mostly off. (Betty: Under duress, huh!)

Saul: Could you tell us what was Hebrew school like. For example, how many days did you go to the Hebrew school, how many kids were in Hebrew school, what was the typical day like there?

Milt: Typically, I'd remember vaguely something like ten pupils at school. I'll say I did not like to go. I did not enjoy the teachers, the instructors or the rabbis, whoever happened to be there. And I couldn't wait to get out of it.

Saul: Would you mind sharing with us why?

Milt: I really can't answer that.

Saul: Okay. During your early years here in Greenfield, Milt, what public schools did you attend here, and what was school like here in the public sector for you?

Milt: For me it was a very pleasant experience, I was never too far away from any school that I had to go to. I made friends easily, and covered a wide range of different people.

Betty: In fact, two of his best friends was still from grammar school.

Saul: Is that right.

Milt: Who Jimmy and Bob?

Betty: Bob and Smitty.

Saul: So you really had a nice time going to school here in Greenfield and growing up here in Greenfield.

Milt: I had a very pleasant time and a happy time. My first experience with anti-semitism was after I left Greenfield and went to school in Worcester.

Saul: After you left Greenfield!

Milt: Umhuh, that was my first experience.

Saul: What happened in Worcester?

Milt: In Worcester, there was a fraternity, and there were two Jewish boys involved that were pledged and both were turned down. After the meeting took place and I found I had been turned down, I talked to some of the other fellows that I knew pretty well and said, "Why." They explained to me there'd never been a Jewish boy in the fraternity before, and they weren't going to start now.

Saul: Now, what year are we talking about, Milt?

Milt: You're talking the year 1938.

Saul: And that was your first encounter with anti-semitism?

Milt: First encounter.

Saul: Betty, what was your early childhood like and can you tell us when and where you were born.

Betty: I was born in New Jersey in 1924, and I lived in actually suburban, metropolitan New York, you would consider it, it was right across the river from New York. It was a mixed neighborhood, I would say. I think there were about eight Jewish kids in my school, in my high school class, as I recall.

Saul: Now why was that, there were just a few Jews around your neighborhood?

Betty: Well, I think in my age bracket, more or less. But I lived in a mixed area. I mean I had gentile and Jewish friends. My closest friend, however, was a Jewish girl growing up. And then I went away to college and of course then I made mostly Jewish associations, belonged to a Jewish sorority, Gamma.

Saul: Did you have any problems growing up Jewish in New Jersey? For example, did you have any encounters with anti-semitism when you were a Jewish youngster?

Betty: My father was quite an active person in the American Legion, but I always felt when I used to go to some of these things, both my mother and I used to feel uncomfortable because we were the only Jewish people at these affairs. It never bothered my father but it did my mother and me, and I can always remember feeling just a little bit uncomfortable.

Saul: Both of you, Milt and Betty, when you were youngsters, how were the Jewish holidays celebrated? You come from a large town right Betty? Okay, and Milt you come from a very small town. Betty, what were the Jewish holidays like when you were a youngster in New Jersey.

Betty: Well, we always observed them at my grandmother's house and after my mother died when I was 13 I observed. I lived with my grandmother who is very orthodox, so I more or less observed all the holidays. I don't know, was your mother religious? Your mother was a religious, but she didn't enforce the holidays.

Milt: We didn't observe the holidays at home.

Betty: She didn't enforce it upon them.

Milt: As far as the holidays were concerned, that was the time of going to the synagogue period.

Saul: Milt can you remember how large the Jewish community area in Greenfield was when you were in your teenage years?

Milt: I would say probably in the neighborhood of 95 to 100 families.

Saul: 95 to 100 families.

Betty: Same as it is today?

Milt: I'd say it's the same.

Betty: There were that many families when you were growing up?

Milt: A lot of them have left.

Betty: But when you were growing up there were that many?

Milt: Families coming and going back then.

Betty: Huh?

Milt: There were families coming and going back then.

Saul: So that figure is roughly the figure we have today of the Jewish community of Greenfield, right?

Milt: I would say so.

Betty: Yeh

Saul: So it's been very stagnant. Was there any time ah that you can remember where the Jewish community was more than the figures we're talking about?

Milt: It could have been a fraction higher just after World War II. I think there was an influx then of, say, another ten families.

Betty: A lot of young couples.

Milt: Which dissipated and left.

Betty: But you had a feeling, you know, they would leave.

Saul: Yeh.

Betty: Course there were a lot of Jewish families, you know, within the community who have not declared themselves Jewish, and in and around here. Much larger than we...

Saul: And where are these people living, Betty, do you have any idea?

Betty: There are some in Greenfield who have not affiliated, and there are a lot in the hills around here.

Saul: The hill towns, yeh. Now what hill towns are we talking about?

Milt: I've heard Colrain mentioned.

Betty: Colrain, Shelburne Falls, there are a few here and there. I don't know, maybe get fifteen or twenty more families.

Saul: After college in Worcester, what did you do after that?

Milt: Well, I went to another school in Boston called Wentworth, and I found I didn't like that. So I left that and went to work for my uncle.

Saul: And where was this know, Milt?

Milt: This was in Holyoke.

Saul: In Holyoke.

Milt: And that didn't work out too well, so I came back home, looked for a job, and finally went to work for Ruby's Furniture Stores. I was there for one year and I was drafted.

Saul: And what year was this, Milt?

Milt: Drafted?

Saul: Yeh.

Milt: 1941.

Betty: He was in the first draft call.

Saul: You were in the first draft call?

Milt: The first draftees that left the town of Greenfield, I was with.

Betty: Didn't you see his name, number one up on the synagogue board. Where have you been!

Saul: I will take a look, for sure, next time.

Betty: Where have you been! Please take notice of that!

Milt: Yeh, that was one lottery I won.

Saul: Would you mind sharing with us your experiences or some of your experiences ah in World War II.

Betty: Oh, please!

Milt: In World War II?

Betty: Come on.

Milt: Well...

Betty: He was in too long, that's all.

Milt: We left the town of Greenfield, there were moving pictures taken of us as we moved down the railroad station. There were 55 of us. As of now there's are over a dozen of us still in town.

Betty: We have yet to see the movies.

Milt: I still have yet to see the movies, but we were sent down to the 26th division down to Camp Edwards which is National Guard division. And

Milt: after going through basic training of 13 weeks, I didn't like the infantry. I saw a little bulletin board, or a little piece on the bulletin board, looking for truck drivers. I'm a good truck driver, so I put my name on top of the list. I got interviewed and called and was accepted for transfer. The company commander called me into his office and said, "You know you're going to lose your PFC stripe?" and I said, "I don't care!" So I was transfered to an outfit called 6th Corps which nobody down to Camp Edwards knew anything about.

Saul: Excuse me, where was Camp Edwards?

Milt: Down Cape Cod.

Saul: Cape Cod.

Milt: A place called Mashpee, around Buzzards Bay. I transfered to Providence, Rhode Island in the Sixth Corps as a driver. And we were stationed in the center of the city of Providence. We had a very nice set up till one day I was standing in the pay line.

Betty: You asked for all this.

Milt: And this fellow in front of me, no in back of me, his last name began with an I, his name was Izagof. So I went up and got my paycheck of \$50, for private's pay, and I saw him get up in line and get \$80. So I pulled him aside. I says, "I don't see any stripes, how did you get \$80 and I got \$50." He says, "I'm a specialist." I says, "What's a specialist?" Well they give you specialist ratings for certain jobs. He says, "Do you want to become a specialist?" I said,

Milt: "Yep." So he put my name in for a transfer into his section. I was sent upon approval and I was accepted. I was made a specialist very quickly, and I stayed there for like four years.

Saul: Now a specialist in what, Milt.

Betty: Sorting papers!

Milt: I was in the Adjutant General's Office, handling correspondence in and out of the headquarters unit. If anything came in that wasn't top secret I could read and mail out. And I had the same job for four years.

Betty: He was overseas for four years.

Saul: Was this in the European Theater?

Milt: Yeh. I wasn't overseas for four years, I was in the Sixth Corps for four years.

Betty: Oh, excuse me.

Milt: I was overseas for like 30 months.

Saul: When you got discharged from the Army, when did you return to Greenfield and why did you return to Greenfield?

Milt: This was my home. This is where I was born and this is where I wanted to come back to. I was discharged in August of 1945, in fact the war wasn't over with Japan at that particular time. I had enough points for discharge early.

Saul: Now, when you came back to Greenfield in 1945, I know before you mentioned very little had changed in Greenfield, but if you can remember what were your impressions when you came back to Greenfield in 1945, as to how Greenfield looked and appeared.

Milt: It looked just the way it was when I left. I was very happy to be back. I'll go farther and say that I wasn't too anxious to go to work to quickly, but one of the fellas I worked with before I went into the army, in the furniture business, had opened up his own retail store. He chased me for two months before I went to work for him. I finally went to work in a furniture store.

Saul: Now, was this in Greenfield?

Milt: This was in Greenfield.

Saul: And where was that located? What street was that located on?

Milt: Main Street

Betty: Main Street

Milt: I went to work for him on Chapman Street.

Betty: Sklonick was on Chapman?

Milt: Then he moved over to Main Street that's what he hired me for, that's when he made his move to Main Street, which was very shortly after I went to work for him.

Betty: This is Joey Meyer's brother-in-law.

Milt: Si Skolnick.

Betty: You know, Skolnick and (?) in Springfield? They are decorators.

Saul: When did you go into business on your own?

Milt: I worked in the furniture store for about a year, then decided I'd had enough of it and wanted a change. So I decided to go to Florida for vacation. In between the time of making my plans of going to Florida, I met Louis Kramer and he came up with this idea of going into business, which we did.

Betty: You said you met Louis, but actually, you knew Louis all your life.

Milt: Yes. He was out of the service at that particular time like I was.

Saul: Now what kind of store you know did you decide to start and where was the store located?

Milt: We never decided to open a store. We decided to go into the wholesale business.

Betty: Oh, you're right.

Milt: Traveling on the road selling merchandise. And after doing that for about three months, we finally did end up having enough capital to run the wholesale business. And that's when the store became vacant on Chapman Street, which my father owned, and we decided to take it. We started the retail store more as sideline in conjunction with the wholesale business.

Saul: So you were doing both at the same time.

Milt: We were doing both at the same time. One of us would be in the store, the other would be on the road until we found out that the retail business was far better for us than the wholesale business. So we passed up the wholesale business and stayed retail.

Saul: Okay now, what year did you start up the retail store?

Milt: January 7, 1947.

Saul: Now, can I ask you this? The store has been a very successful concern, now why did you and Louis decide to go in the type of merchandise that you specialized in?

Milt: That all happened by just running the store and finding which way the customer's tastes were running. At the time of starting the operation, we had both met people in business who helped us along as far as suggestions, some with merchandise and different help to get us going. I will say that the help came mostly from Jewish people.

Saul: It did?

Milt: It did. And most of the stores that we called on, a large proportion of them were Jewish owned.

Betty: Jewish merchants.

Saul: So, there was a big help, needless to say. Betty, when and how did you come to Greenfield?

Betty: I came as a new bride.

Saul: And when was that?

Betty: 1948.

Saul: 1948. And what were your impressions?

Betty: Well, actually I came from a small town, I came from Weehawken, New Jersey, which is a small town. It took me awhile to adjust to this that whatever you did, everybody else would know what you were doing. You couldn't lose yourself in anything, but I wouldn't go back to the city today for anything. I like small-town living. I just wish that the opportunities in the city were a little bit closer.

Saul: Well ah now you have been involved with Hadassah and the Sisterhood.

Betty: More so with Hadassah than the Sisterhood.

Saul: First of all, what is Hadassah? You were president of Hadassah.

What is Hadassah and what does a president of Hadassah do?

Betty: Well, let me just say this. Being president of Hadassah is not prestigious in the town of Greenfield...

Saul: Why not?

Betty: ... the way it carries weight in other areas. We're really not a very active chapter for doing things. We do raise our money and our quota, but we offer very little.

Saul: Offer very little to whom?

Betty: To the membership as far as cultural things are concerned.

Saul: Well let's just go back a little, like what is the purpose, what is the function of Hadassah?

Betty: Well it supports Isreal.

Saul: Okay, you mentioned that Hadassah has offered very little cultural aspects.

Betty: It has offered a lot more in the past when people were more interested, but today so many of us are working. When I first came to town, there were very few organizations that the Jewish girls were involved in, other than their own. But now we're on the hospital board. Well, at one time, you could belong to PTA but you weren't really an a Very few people became officers of PTA, but that changed in the past. I can't remember some of the other things, but we've spread our wings. We have become involved in a lot more things.

Saul: So, earlier on you were involved basically in a few organizations but as time went on people became involved with more.

Betty: Then many of us have gone back to work.

Saul: So, what are you suggesting?

Betty: We don't have the time to give to the organizations and working you become very selfish.

Saul: What other changes have you noticed over the years here as far as the Jewish community is involved, other than more people have joined additional organizations and don't have enough time.

Betty: People are willing to support it but they just don't want to become involved. And I think you'll find this wherever you go today. You don't find the dedicated club women that you did years ago.

Milt: If you take the town of Greenfield as a whole and the Jewish people in it, you'll

Milt: find that most of the children in their twenties have left the town of Greenfield and left their families here. There's very few that have stayed.

Betty: If they have, most of them are in their father's business.

Saul: So in one respect, Milt, when you were a youngster this time was for you, but because we're in a different day and age that their attractions are elsewhere, in other words.

Milt: For the youngsters.

Betty: Well, I think if you analyze, so many of the people in Milton's age category came back from service, came to settle in Greenfield and imported their wives from Boston, New York, and New Jersey. We're imports, it's very funny!

Saul: Talking about dating, and you touched upon this earlier, Betty, was there any problem for you dating when you were a Jewish youngster, in your teenage years?

Betty: I dated both Jewish and Gentile boys. When I went to college, well in my freshman year I went to the wrong school for me, you could almost say. It was a small school in West Virginia and there were sororities and fraternities and Jewish people were only allowed social privileges, and you couldn't be a full-fledged member and I did want that. I was dating a Jewish boy there but I felt it wasn't the school for me so I transferred to a larger state university where I joined a Jewish sorority and dated Jewish boys.

Saul: Milt, when you were growing up here, the Jewish community was small.

Betty: Don't ask who he dated!

Saul: No, I'm not going to ask who he dated. What was it like trying to get dates here in Greenfield?

Milt: It was very easy as long as you didn't care who you took out. As long as you didn't draw any lines. When you were looking for some of your own, it was a question of going to Springfield.

Saul: Springfield?

Milt: Most of the Jewish boys in town here I'll say at times have all traveled to Springfield, some have gone through the same girls.

Betty: Let me just say this, as a point of reference, Milton has an uncle who married a second time, his wife had passed away. She used to date two or three boys who are contemporaries of Milton now in Greenfield. She's now Milton's aunt by marriage but former girlfriend, I won't mention who the boys are.

Saul: That's amazing. That would be quite a trip to go on a date wouldn't it.

Milt: That's very true.

Betty: They were younger, they didn't mind it.

Milt: In the old days it meant nothing. In fact, Boston wasn't too far.

Betty: It was three hours Milton.

Milt: Not in those days.

Betty: When you're young, three hours meant nothing.

Milt: It wasn't three hours.

Saul: World War II, which in recent American history has been one of the most significant developments and the other was the Depression of the 1930's. Living here in Greenfield, Milt, can you remember anything about the Depression years? What were conditions like here in Greenfield?

Milt: They were no different to me than at any other time. Now my family had no hardships, they had no problems monetarily wise, and we weren't held back from doing anything that we wanted to do.

Saul: Betty, how about you?

Betty: My father lost his business during the Depression.

Saul: What business was that?

Betty: He was a printer. He went back to working on newspapers as a "sub" and we moved from a larger apartment to a smaller apartment, and things were tight. As I recall.

Milt: Point of information in regard to myself. We lived in this house here or, I should say on this street, for 30 years, but I spent my childhood on Long Avenue.

Betty: Which is around the corner.

Milt: Which is across the Bernardston Road, not too far from here.

Saul: Oh, I know where it is, it's right near the pharmacy.

Milt: I never traveled to far.

Betty: Well you lived on Woodleigh Avenue for five years.

Saul: Well, I think it's a great that a person can live so long wherever he was born and...

Milt: Well, a little more to it than that. I'm comfortable in a small town, I'm like a fish out of water in the city. It's too big, it's too fast and I don't like it. I'm a small town boy and very happy to stay in one.

Saul: Now, Betty, over the years when you came to Greenfield to present day times, what changes have you noted in Greenfield as far as the town is concerned? Any significant changes?

Betty: Well, it's progressed to a certain extent. Shopping's a little bit better than when I first moved here. But really Greenfield as a whole is not a very progressive town. I'm sure you hear that from everybody.

Saul: I'm sure the Chamber of Commerce wants to hear this.

Betty: This is true. You go to Amherst, you go to Brattleboro. Brattleboro has changed fantastic in the years since I've been here. Northampton has done something, but Greenfield is still a narrow-minded, small, provincial town.

Milt: When I was in the store, you talk to people that have moved to this area from the big cities, they said this was heaven.

Betty: It's a nice pace and as you get older it gets more comfortable, but it is not very progressive, it really isn't. Sure the stores change on Main Street, you know there's face lifting, we do have super highways, we have a few discount stores and stuff like that, but as a whole it hasn't changed that much.

Saul: Now, Milt, these people you came into contact with in the store, was generally was their reasoning to coming here, they wanted out of the large city because of the fast pace?

Betty: Slower pace of life.

Milt: I'm talking now about mostly people that had retired...

Saul: Oh, okay.

Milt: ... coming to this part of the country. Few of them were from Chicago, Midwest. Now, the family next door here, they came from the far West.

Betty: Wisconsin.

Milt: I think Wisconsin. Somewhere in that area. And the reason they came up to this area was because she had family, his wife had family up here, and this is where she wanted to come, so that's why they're here. They live their life and they seem to be very happy with it.

Saul: So in effect Greenfield is becoming a bedroom community?

Milt: I would say so. In fact, you take this street of Ferrante Avenue. I don't know how many houses are on it today, possibly 60 at a guess. I'll say out of the 60, I'll say 25 percent are retired.

Betty: Yeh, when we first moved on the street and our children were born there were 32 kids all the same age, within a few years of each other growing up.

Milt: There were about 32 houses.

Betty: Growing up on this street, that would be children, I would say, anywhere from 25 to 30, that would be 25 to 32 today. When we first moved on the street there were loads of children.

Saul: Yeh, that's a lot of children, is right.

Betty: And some of them have moved away, and of course there are many of us that are still here. But we're the older people.

Milt: In our case, our two children have both left, in Mildred's case her two children have left, in Dean's case three children have left.

Betty: Most of them have left. But it's funny, they used to call Greenfield a small town growing up and I think they would be upset if we ever left Greenfield. They still like to come back to the old hometown.

Saul: Like home in other words, yeh.

Betty: My daughter has to come back for the football game and Thanksgiving time.

Saul: This is between like Greenfield and Turners Falls.

Betty: Connecticut, she lives outside of Hartford. But she still, they still like Greenfield. And it's very funny, she'll do a lot of her shopping here in town now which she never would before because she likes the pace better. It's a comfortable town to live in, it's a quiet town; and I suppose if you want to seek more, you'll have to go out of town. I mean you yourself have found that.

Saul: Temple Israel which is the synagogue here for Jewish community, Milt, from what you remember, where was the Temple when you first became aware of the Temple?

Milt: Right where it is today.

Saul: Right where it is now, and that's on Pierce Street. Where was the temple located before Pierce Street?

Milt: My memory says there wasn't one. They did have a hall that they'd rent, whether it was Washington Hall or Oddfellows Hall, or Knights of Pythias, I don't know.

Betty: Your mother told me they used to have services in Washington Hall.

Milt: I heard something about Knights of Pythias.

Saul: Now Washington Hall...

Betty: It's over where the old town hall was.

Saul: And that was on Main Street.

Betty: Main Street, opposite Wilsons

Milt: And Knights of Pythias was on Main Street.

Saul: On Main Street too.

Betty: Over Goodnow's?

Milt: Yep.

Saul: So services might have been conducted in either one of those two places.

Milt: Could have been elsewhere.

Saul: Yeh.

Milt: The synagogue, as far as I know, I don't know if it was Lutheran Church or Herman's Lodge.

Betty: It was a German church. I don't think it was Lutheran though because...

Milt: I kept hearing the name Herman's Lodge.

Saul: Herman's Lodge?

Milt: Which I think is a branch of the Lutheran church.

Betty: Yeh, but the Lutheran church used to be on Hope Street and they built next to your mother on Long Avenue. It was a German church, this I know.

Saul: Okay, so the present site of Temple Israel was ah the former Lutheran church.

Milt: No, don't say that. We're not sure of that.

Saul: Oh, okay, it might have been Herman's Lodge.

Betty: Did you ever read the history of the community, that was in the Recorder in 1953?

Saul: Thank you for the information. This was in 1953?

Betty: Wait a minute, I have it here. I'll get it for you later if I can find it.

Saul: This would be very valuable.

Betty: There's a history of the Jewish community in that.

Saul: I am unaware of that.

Betty: When the town celebrated it's what Bicentennial was it?

Milt: 250th I think.

Betty: I don't know, whatever it was, there was an anniversary issue of the Greenfield Recorder.

Betty: When we get finished though I think I have one. I have it.

Saul: This would be a gold mine.

Betty: And also there's also Thompson's History of Greenfield and there's a little bit about the Jewish community in that article. That you can get in the library, volume 1 and volume 2. There's a lot of misinformation in it though. Remember when we read...

Saul: Could you remember what some of that misinformation might be?

Betty: I'll tell you later.

Saul: Okay.

Betty: It's just about personalities.

Saul: If I remember correctly, there was an expansion of Temple Israel between 1955 and 1957? And this consisted of what?

Betty: Schoolrooms.

Saul: Schoolrooms in the back, and what did the Jewish community do at that time to be able to expand.

Betty: Had a fund raising campaign.

Saul: Fundraiser, and generally what did that involve now, this fundraising? Can you remember?

Betty: Series of dinners to raise money.

Milt: I don't think so, I just don't remember.

Saul: Okay. Temple Israel's physical size was a result of this expansion between 1955 and 1957.

Milt: There's another expansion in between which I think Mrs. Levy, Morris' mother, paid for. I don't know when that was.

Saul: And this was the front part of the synagogue, okay. Milt and Betty we've been talking on a variety of areas concerning the town of Greenfield and the Jewish community of Greenfield, is there anything that we haven't touched upon that you would like to make some comments on?

Milt: I believe I've made all of mine.

Betty: We haven't really been that involved with the synagogue as far as the religious aspect goes. I mean we're not that religious, we go to services for the High Holidays and that's been about the extent of it.

Saul: Betty and Milt, I want to thank you very very much for this interview.

Milt: Entirely welcome.

Betty: I hope it was informative.

Saul: I think it was, thank you.