

1 ORAL HISTORY OF: William Davidson
2 INTERVIEWED BY: Sharon Alterman
3 DATE OF INTERVIEW: Wednesday, April 7, 2004
4 LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Guardian Industries Office
5 SUBJECT MATTER: Jewish life, family history,
6 philanthropy

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8 MS. ALTERMAN: Good morning, Mr. Davidson. My name
9 is Sharon Alterman. I will be interviewing you for the
10 Leonard N. Simons oral history project. Today's date is April
11 7th, 2004.

12 Do we have your permission to use the contents of
13 this interview in the future, for any historic documents?

14 MR. DAVIDSON: You do.

15 MS. ALTERMAN: Thank you very much.

16 It's a pleasure to be here and I know that your
17 family has such a history of involvement in this community,
18 and actually involvement with world Jewry. Let's start at the
19 very beginning. Can you tell us a little about your family
20 and life that you remember growing up?

21 MR. DAVIDSON: Basically, the family that I grew up
22 with was my mother's family, the Wetsmans. I believe they
23 came here from Iowa some time in the 1910-1915 era.
24 Historically they were ardent Zionists, so were brought up in
25 a very staunch Zionist home. We had the blue collection box

1 all the time. There were five children of my grandfather's.
2 All outstanding people, all contributed to the Jewish
3 Community.

4 **MS. ALTERMAN:** I understand that your grandfather
5 attended the Second Zionist Congress.

6 **MR. DAVIDSON:** Correct. Yes.

7 **MS. ALTERMAN:** Do you have any remembrance of
8 stories that he told about that meeting?

9 **MR. DAVIDSON:** No. I just know that he attended.
10 Unfortunately, he contracted pneumonia when I was 10 or 11.
11 It's something that would have been cured easily today, but he
12 died.

13 **MS. ALTERMAN:** Where was the family from in Europe?

14 **MR. DAVIDSON:** They were from a small town called
15 Grishilera (ph. sp.), which is northwest of Kiev in what is
16 now the Ukraine. Sometime in the mid-1930s he, my mother and
17 father took a trip to Israel and they visited the village. He
18 regaled them with stories about how great America was and all
19 the stories of the golden Medina and the streets of the United
20 States weren't paved with gold but they were excellent
21 opportunities.

22 We also had relatives remaining in Grishilera at
23 that time and my Aunt Mary corresponded with them. We also
24 sent food packages, et cetera, during the '30s. But then
25 towards the end of the 30s, they asked us not to send

1 anything. The war came and there was a gap of some 10, 12, 15
2 years. Unfortunately at that time we lost track of them. All
3 belief is that, unfortunately, they all perished during the
4 war.

5 **MS. ALTERMAN:** Your mother was also very involved,
6 was she not?

7 **MR. DAVIDSON:** Yes. She was a ardent Hadassahite.

8 **MS. ALTERMAN:** Do you have any recollection of
9 Henrietta Szold's visits to your home?

10 **MR. DAVIDSON:** Very, vaguely. This was on Virginia
11 Park. The family home at that time was on Virginia Park near
12 Woodward, which is where she basically came, which was my
13 grandfather and grandmother's house. I was too young at that
14 point to remember, but I do know it was recounted to me many
15 times. And of course that's when they formed Hadassah. She
16 formed a chapter of Hadassah.

17 I also remember a little bit that Dora Ehrlich was
18 very, very friendly with Golda Meir, because they were both
19 school teachers, she being a school teacher in Milwaukee. So
20 I remember before she went to Israel that she visited us.

21 **MS. ALTERMAN:** You're a native Detroiter and your
22 formative years were spent in the Detroit Public Schools. Can
23 you tell us a little about that?

24 **MR. DAVIDSON:** I started at Thurkcle when we lived
25 on Virginia Park off of Twelfth, then went to Hutchins, then

1 went to Central. We were moving a little north from Virginia
2 Park to Chicago Boulevard when I was in Hutchins.

3 **MS. ALTERMAN:** What activities did you participate
4 in?

5 **MR. DAVIDSON:** I did practically everything you
6 could do. Outdoors, fortunately, I had an older sister who is
7 the first grandchild, she was also the first girl, so they
8 kind of left me alone and concentrated on her. So I was out
9 in the streets quite a bit.

10 But I played everything. Baseball, football,
11 anything you could do. And as I recently recounted within the
12 last 10 days when I was elected to the Michigan Hall of Fame,
13 that the great thing about that period of time in my youth is
14 of course, there was no television, so you weren't in the
15 house, you were out. But more importantly, there weren't any
16 organized sports. And as a result we had to organize our own
17 sports, which as I reflect now, gave me organizational skills
18 which otherwise I wouldn't have had, and which today, the
19 kids, because they have little leagues, everything's organized
20 for them, also they don't have that opportunity to gain.

21 **MS. ALTERMAN:** And I understand you won some awards
22 even as a youth.

23 **MR. DAVIDSON:** There were four Jewish boys in the
24 spring of 1940. We won the city 880 relay championship.
25 Graham Landau, who was the anchor and of course, since then,

1 not only has no Jewish kid done anything like that, but
2 neither has any white person.

3 **MS. ALTERMAN:** But you showed it could be done.

4 **MR. DAVIDSON:** Right. So it was an exceptional
5 thing.

6 **MS. ALTERMAN:** You graduated from Central and then
7 went on to the University of Michigan?

8 **MR. DAVIDSON:** Right. Then my father was killed the
9 following year, and so I went to Wayne, and back to Michigan,
10 eventually graduated Michigan Business School, and then Wayne
11 Law School.

12 **MS. ALTERMAN:** And during that time also, was your
13 education interrupted by the Navy?

14 **MR. DAVIDSON:** Yes.

15 **MS. ALTERMAN:** Did that have a profound effect, your
16 years in the Navy?

17 **MR. DAVIDSON:** I don't know if profound is the right
18 word, but it was adventuresome. I was in the Pacific for over
19 two years. Fortunately it was on a ship, so you weren't
20 subject to the health conditions of the area. But we were in
21 several of the battles.

22 I was on a picket ship which also fortunately, in
23 the early days again, kamikaze pilots went after picket ships.
24 The picket ship was between the main fleet and the Japanese
25 fleet. But then they lost enough kamikaze pilots that they

1 stopped coming after the picket ships. So we were fortunate
2 in that regard.

3 **MS. ALTERMAN:** What was your role there?

4 **MR. DAVIDSON:** I was a store keeper in the Navy and
5 also manned a gun position.

6 **MS. ALTERMAN:** I heard that you played football
7 there, too.

8 **MR. DAVIDSON:** When we got to China, we played a
9 little football. All along the way, when we were in Guam, in
10 the various islands, you always played baseball, but football
11 was a little more organized by the time we got to Shanghai,
12 actually.

13 **MS. ALTERMAN:** Did you spend much time in Shanghai?

14 **MR. DAVIDSON:** I was on a destroyer. For about six
15 months were on a thing called the Yangtze River patrol and it
16 was interesting. On that patrol one of the main places was a
17 warehouse called Holtza's Warehouse, which was owned by a Jew.

18 **MS. ALTERMAN:** I was going to ask you if you saw the
19 Jewish population that was in Shanghai in those years.

20 **MR. DAVIDSON:** They were just coming towards the end
21 of the war. There were some in what they called the
22 international area it was just beginning to happen. So people
23 like Mike Blumenthal would have come a little bit later than I
24 was there.

25 **MS. ALTERMAN:** That was one of the very large

1 populations that was saved?

2 **MR. DAVIDSON:** Yeah. They came from across Russia,
3 which was a long, long trek in order to get to Shanghai, so if
4 they got out, they would have been saved and could make the
5 trip.

6 **MS. ALTERMAN:** So after the Navy you came back to
7 the University of Michigan?

8 **MR. DAVIDSON:** Yes. I had one semester to go in
9 business school, and then the only male left in our family was
10 my Uncle Frank Wetsman, so I came back to work in family
11 businesses. Our business was theater businesses, so I worked
12 nights and then went to law school in the daytime at Wayne,
13 and eventually got my degree.

14 **MS. ALTERMAN:** Did you practice law for any length
15 of time?

16 **MR. DAVIDSON:** No. Just probably two, three years.

17 **MS. ALTERMAN:** What did you do then?

18 **MR. DAVIDSON:** I partially worked with my uncle in
19 the theater business and then partially began to buy
20 businesses of my own. The first one I did was the Frank W.
21 Kirk Company, which basically is still around.

22 **MS. ALTERMAN:** Reading about you, over and over
23 again I read that you have a vision and that education is such
24 an important issue for you. So many of the things you have
25 supported are educational. Can you tell us a little bit about

1 your vision?

2 **MR. DAVIDSON:** Well, it's fairly obvious that if
3 anything you're going to succeed, be an expert in or semi-
4 expert in, you must have enough background to know what you're
5 about and what your field is. In order to develop a vision
6 you have to have that background. In order to have that
7 background it has to be educational. So you have to learn.
8 No matter what it is. It applies to practically anything that
9 you do. Without that education in whatever field you're
10 talking about, including religion and most importantly now in
11 the Jewish religion, education would be kind of paramount.

12 As we know, our kids don't have the historical
13 background. That's a little bit of what we're doing here
14 today. And clearly, you have to give them that background in
15 order for them to move forward. They have to understand what
16 Judaism is about. They may make choices after that as to what
17 they do, but at least they need the education.

18 **MS. ALTERMAN:** The Davidson School of the Jewish
19 Theological Seminary really has done great things in the 10
20 years that it's been around. What are some of the things that
21 you've seen?

22 **MR. DAVIDSON:** We're training teachers to come out
23 and have a greater impact. They're more highly trained. The
24 things I would refer to now go back maybe 40, 50 years. But
25 if you recall 40, 50 years ago, one of the criticisms of

1 Jewish education was that the Hebrew teachers were basically
2 just Hebrew teachers. They knew Hebrew but they weren't
3 really teachers, so they didn't impact the students. I'm
4 going back a long time. So we finally had to develop a core
5 of educated teachers, and gradually we did down through the
6 years. Then the Davidson School hopes to go to a different
7 level of education in terms of transmitting Judaism to the
8 present generation.

9 **MS. ALTERMAN:** Locally, Davidson Initiative for
10 Congregational Excellence, I think has done great things,
11 also. What was your goal --

12 **MR. DAVIDSON:** Well, the idea was, and these things
13 are presented to me, I don't initiate them. The goal was
14 there to start with pre-school kids, realizing that that was
15 the entry point. Also, that's more where the parents of kids
16 are certainly involved. They've got to bring them, et cetera.
17 And so the emphasis was to get as much impact as we could at
18 that level and then move up from there. It certainly has
19 worked.

20 Recently with Bob Aronson, I was in New York
21 starting another program which is for professional education,
22 and the comment was, well, you know, Judaism is fading, it's
23 going in the other direction, we've got to bring it back.
24 Well, my impression of Detroit is that we are growing and not
25 fading, and so I'm very happy of the status of our community

1 here. I truly believe that -- Temple Israel has five rabbis.
2 When you talk to the rest of the people in the country, they
3 can't believe a phenomenon like that exists.

4 **MS. ALTERMAN:** And your initiative with Synagogue
5 2000 was also a very important way to bring -- and I speak for
6 myself, because I participated -- I think it was a very good
7 way to bring people in.

8 **MR. DAVIDSON:** At one point we were trying to raise
9 the level of compensation for the teachers, feeling that they
10 were underpaid. And hopefully, that succeeded too.

11 **MS. ALTERMAN:** Let's go back. We didn't speak of
12 your Jewish education. What was it?

13 **MR. DAVIDSON:** Fairly thin. I spent one day in
14 Hebrew school once, and then I had a second day about two
15 years later. That was about it. Other than reading and being
16 self-taught. However, I did have an individual teacher for my
17 Bar Mitzvah, who started out with Oscar Colton and then Joe
18 finished off. These were nephews of Dora Ehrlich. That's how
19 I learned my mafter. Then when my father died, I didn't miss
20 a day of going to the daily services. So basically my
21 education is in the synagogue.

22 **MS. ALTERMAN:** And then you became president of
23 Congregation Shaarey Zedek. You're very involved with that
24 congregation to this day.

25 **MR. DAVIDSON:** Correct. And would learn from Rabbi

1 Groner, who I learned a lot from. And I do studying Torah. I
2 do that a couple times a week, in which I read as much as I
3 can for about an hour a day.

4 **MS. ALTERMAN:** Do you study with someone?

5 **MR. DAVIDSON:** No.

6 **MS. ALTERMAN:** Who were your mentors or people you
7 really revered growing up?

8 **MR. DAVIDSON:** That's a little hard, but Rabbi Adler
9 was obviously a very, very close friend of my mother's, so he
10 had some influence on me, but not a lot. So it was mainly my
11 family. My mother probably more than anything else.

12 **MS. ALTERMAN:** What were the values that she
13 imparted?

14 **MR. DAVIDSON:** Well, she went to services. She was
15 spending inordinate amounts of time with Hadassah, Hadassah
16 politics, et cetera. So when I was in the house, I absorbed a
17 little bit of that.

18 **MS. ALTERMAN:** I know that you have a deep
19 friendship with David Hermelin. And sadly we're not going to
20 be able to speak to him, but we will speak to Doreen. Could
21 you tell us a little about him?

22 **MR. DAVIDSON:** I miss David tremendously. We
23 traveled a lot in Israel. A lot of the business connections
24 that I made in Israel David would have made first and then
25 brought me in. David was head of the Bonds and so he had

1 contacts with practically every international chairman of
2 Bonds. So he brought me in contact with people in South
3 America, Israel.

4 We traveled Israel together probably a couple times
5 a year. I always enjoyed his company. It was always very
6 engaging. He certainly always had something new going if you
7 turned around. I'll always remember -- typical of David
8 Hermelin, no matter where you went -- I once went to a bank in
9 New York. I had to go up the stairs, take maybe three, four
10 minutes, come down. We had a car. I said, just drive around
11 the block and come back and pick me up. Drove around the
12 block, came back, picked me up. In the meantime, David got
13 out, went into a store, shopped, brought back the Lord knows
14 what, and still came back. Typical of David, no matter where
15 you went, he always managed to buy something. It's
16 unfortunate that the art dealers and the store keepers in
17 Israel are suffering today just because there's no tourists,
18 but they're doubling suffering because David Hermelin isn't
19 there to buy from them.

20 **MS. ALTERMAN:** He really supported the economy.

21 **MR. DAVIDSON:** He sure did. David supported all
22 economies.

23 **MS. ALTERMAN:** You mentioned your involvement with
24 Israel, and I know you've done so many things there.
25 Technion, Weizmann, Second Temple Archeological Park. Can you

1 talk a little bit about some of those projects?

2 **MR. DAVIDSON:** I think the most rewarding was with
3 the Antiquities Authority and probably the best part of that
4 is because I do understand Israel politics fairly well, as
5 much as an outsider can, because I spent a lot of time with
6 prime ministers before they became prime ministers, after they
7 became prime ministers. But fortunately, the Antiquities
8 Authority stays fairly well away from politics, so I've really
9 enjoyed working with them and the development of the Center
10 has been a rewarding thing for me. Learned a lot of the
11 history of King Herod, read a lot of those books. We
12 excavated Herodian Wall, and then doing the visitors center,
13 has been one of the most satisfying things I've done in
14 Israel.

15 **MS. ALTERMAN:** Can you speak a little bit about
16 what's happening at the Weizmann Institute?

17 **MR. DAVIDSON:** There, we're doing science education
18 which is a project that Chaim Harare, the then president of
19 the Weizmann favorite projects. ^{initiated} I'm very pleased to be able
20 to support him in what he's doing and what he's going to
21 accomplish. Basically, the school is set up and run by him
22 and all the things that are done to position the school have
23 been his work, and that is to transform the Israel education
24 system so that we will inject a lot more science education
25 into the system and therefore, prepare Israeli kids for the

1 future. It's happening. We have science education courses.
2 Their education materials are prepared, teachers are brought
3 to the institute and trained in chemistry, physics, et cetera.
4 So that in kindergarten, first grades now, the basic
5 curriculum is not the curriculum that's gone on for 30-40
6 years, but is beginning to be a new curriculum which is more
7 attuned to the technology of today.

8 **MS. ALTERMAN:** Larry Jackier said that you are a
9 visionary and that everything you do you think through
10 carefully. In these projects, what are some of the elements
11 that you were looking for when you take on a new project?

12 **MR. DAVIDSON:** The most important element is a
13 person who's going to be responsible for making sure that they
14 happen. That's a key to me. Obviously, I can't have much to
15 do with them myself, if anything. So I have to depend on
16 whoever that person is. So basically you're betting on a
17 person and how serious that person is for the particular
18 project that he's going to propose and carry out. Obviously
19 in the case of the Davidson School at the Jewish Theological
20 Seminary, you're betting on the seminary itself, knowing that
21 whoever that chancellor is, the head of the school is a key
22 guy, and they'll always support and nurture that particular
23 school.

24 Similarly, at the University of Michigan, it's the
25 head of the business school that does the William Davidson

1 Institute, and makes sure that it fulfills the task it's going
2 to. You run into some wavering, side issues, et cetera, but
3 hopefully looking at the people involved, you have the ability
4 to bring them back on course.

5 **MS. ALTERMAN:** Are there any other things we haven't
6 touched upon, things you'd like to talk about that I didn't
7 ask you?

8 **MR. DAVIDSON:** No. Thank you.

9 **MR. ARONSON:** You were campaign chair for the Jewish
10 Campaign, Bill, during the Yom Kippur War. I'm wondering if
11 you have any recollections of that time or what happened
12 during that time as campaign chair?

13 **MR. DAVIDSON:** My only recollection is that we far
14 exceeded the previous records. Being a competitive person, I
15 was very pleased to see that we held the record for campaigns
16 for a number of years. But of course, we had a very good
17 cause at that time. Again, I do recall that there were
18 prominent Israelis who came to help in that campaign because
19 it was a fairly desperate time, a very important time in the
20 development of the state of Israel.

21 **MS. ALTERMAN:** I have one last question. What would
22 your message be to young people?

23 **MR. DAVIDSON:** Well, that's difficult. It depends
24 too much on the young person and where they are. But I would
25 say that whatever you're going to do, make sure you get the

1 best education you can possibly get. And you will succeed if
2 you do that. If you try to shortcut it, people have had real
3 success but it won't be as lasting as it is if you're
4 thoroughly grounded in whatever you're going to do, which
5 applies very importantly today to Judaism. Today, being able
6 to assimilate, you need that background which doesn't exist in
7 a lot of the kids growing up today.

8 **MS. ALTERMAN:** That's why schools are so important.
9 Thank you so much. I think you told us a great deal
10 about this community and about you.

11 **MR. DAVIDSON:** Thank you.