

**William Davidson Institute**  
**William Davidson and Dorothy Gerson Interview**  
**August 2, 2006**

Q Well, we had the pleasure of meeting two years ago and we spoke at that time about your family history, your formative years, your involvement in this community and the philanthropy but we didn't speak that much about your mother. And I understand that in the intervening two years there's some information that has come into your possession that you'd like to share with us primarily about your mother's role in Hadassah. What are your recollections?

A Well, I recently found a letter from Henrietta Szold to my mother. It was a lengthy two-and-a-half-page letter. It was written in the summer of 1917. At that time, my mother would have been single. It was written to Sal Wetsman. She would have been 26 years old. And the letter described the formation of Hadassah which took place at my grandmother and grandfather's house on 90 Virginia Park where Henrietta Szold stayed apparently for about three days. And the letter described how much she enjoyed the visit, how much she enjoyed the Yiddish (inaudible) of the house, and that she was so pleased with the formation of the new chapter. She then left for Youngstown, Ohio, where apparently there was already an established chapter. I would guess that my mother's two sisters, Fan Saltz and Mary Wetsman, who were roughly two years younger each, one two and then another two, would have been at the meeting but I'm not sure of that. I'm almost sure that Fan was because my Aunt Mary did go to law school in Chicago where she was actually a very close friend and classmate of Susan Brandeis who was Brandeis' daughter and they were good friends for quite a few

years because of that connection. At the same time, the other two members of the family, my older uncle, Barney Wetsman, who was the oldest of the children, probably lived partially in the house but also did live partially out because he was already fairly heavily engaged in the business whereas the younger uncle, who was Frank Wetsman, was in the Navy at that time, 1917, being World War I.

Q So your mother was an ardent Zionist right from her earliest years.

A Yes. She was awarded a Showman Award, whatever that was particularly at the time. And in that particular speech she describes the fact that my grandfather attended the second Zionist convention at Balfour and took her and the other two daughters. So he took them to a number of Zionist – not only the Balfour things at Basel, Switzerland, but to various, oh, let's say, programs, in the States where she was fascinated by all of the Zionist speakers. And she always referred to Louie Lipski, Rabbi Weiss, and there were a number of early Zionist speakers who had a great influence on her. After the formation of Hadassah, she was always devoted to Hadassah through her whole life and that was what she supported and did. I talked to –

Q Bob Aronson?

A Yeah. Bob Aronson. And I was telling Bob that I do recall, 'cause down through the years when she was very active, the most powerful woman in the community was Dora Erlichs and Dora kind of was a (audible) thing for everybody and they didn't have a disagreement but when the federation was formed my mother disagreed with Dora and Dora felt that, you know, the federation – because she was also – Dora was friendly with Leo Butzel so that the federation was a good

thing. My mother didn't think it was such a good idea so Dora did split her time between Hadassah and the federation and my mother didn't. That was in the late '30s.

Q And you also mentioned that your family traveled to Palestine early on.

A Yes, in the 1930's. It was kind of interesting. Actually, John Aaron went to the village where my grandparents came from, particularly my grandfather, and – 'cause I don't think my grandmother came from that same little village, and it's about 100 kilometers west of Kiev and there are no Jews left there anymore. What really was unfortunate in our family was that my Aunt Mary corresponded with relatives in the village which are probably cousins and they were relatively close relatives. And then as World War II started because it was under communist Russian control at that time, the particular village, we used to send (inaudible) to write them on a fairly regular basis and send clothes, food, etcetera. And they said, "Don't correspond with us anymore." So we lost track of them and then I think they were probably all killed because when we finally went back there was none there. However, in 1930 when my grandfather and mother went to the village they were there and he describes how he told them how great America was and that was the days of when they would almost think that the streets were paved with gold and they were just fascinated by his presentation. And he loved, you know, talking to them and telling them how great things were here. And then they went from there on to Israel and they also had contact with a lot of the early Israeli pioneers, including – you know, some of them were radical (inaudible) –

Q (Inaudible).

A – who were friends of – became family friends. And, also, as I recall, there was an Erma Lendime who was a pioneer in terms of the Kibbutz Movement who migrated to Israel and then, of course, Goldie Myerson who was a teacher, as we all know, (inaudible) and she was a friend of Dora Erlich because Dora was also a teacher. So my mother and Dora had contacts with Goldie Myerson before she moved to Israel.

Q When was your first trip to Israel?

A My first trip to Israel was in 1949. And I went with a cousin, Jonathan Orr, and we were able to see the refugee camps. They were spread across the beach at Tel Aviv. And then we visited Kibbutz and all I remember at that time was all you had to eat was tomatoes and cucumbers.

Q (Inaudible)?

A That was a buy wherever you went but when you got the food at the (inaudible) Kibbutz was great. There you got some real good food.

Q So you have really seen the growth of the country from its really early years.

A And then I've gone back probably every – for a long period of time every three or four years. And then being into several businesses in Israel I, over the last, I'd say, 15 to 20 years, I've been going almost yearly.

Q Really? Supporting the country in so many ways.

A Yes. Yes. We, of course, have an interest in – we established a (inaudible) plant there in Phoenecia and then have a major interest in a company called Barbatech. So, actually, with David Hermelin, we did a lot of business in Israel

over a period of 15 to 20 years with various investments moved in and out. And the interesting part is that we always made money in Israel and that wasn't necessarily the primary intention but it worked that way. So Israel has been very good from a business point of view from the things that we invested in.

Q Is there anything else that you recollect about your mother in the past that we didn't say on the first tape that you'd like to include here?

A Yes. When I came across the papers and found out that she was asked to be the founder of Women's(?) for Bonds and she accepted that job and kind of organized it but then turned it over to Mina Bargeman who because the first chairman and then my mother was a co-chairman but I think Mina did more of the work than my mother at that particular time.

Q So she left us a beautiful legacy.

A Yes, as did my grandparents. And they probably arrived in Detroit – 'cause my mother graduated from high school in Iowa – Oskaloosa, Iowa – at the age of 15. What's kind of interesting, who knows what kind of high school, you know, it was but we have her degree and she was born in 1890 and that was in 1905. So somewhere between 1905 and 1908 or '9 they probably arrived in Detroit. We do know that they stopped in Chicago 'cause he decided that he had three girls and that they weren't going to find husbands in Iowa. So he decided to move to either Chicago or Detroit; stopped in Chicago, decided he'd move on to Detroit, which he did. So the family must have arrived somewhere '7, '8, '9, something like that. And what's kind of interesting to me is I know that my mother went to Central High School, which was Wayne University, and probably for maybe a

year. So she also got another degree from there. And when I went to Central, which was in 1938, I had two of the same teachers that she had, which was about a 30-year span so (inaudible) probably early in their careers and then later in their careers but I told her the teachers – I said, “I had that one.” So that was kind of interesting. I would say that’s pretty much it. Like I say, my grandfather did take them to all kinds of Zionist meetings and they thoroughly enjoyed all the great Zionist speakers of the time.

(comments)

Q So she was an educated woman.

A Oh, yeah. And my aunt particularly – there’s another story in that my Aunt Mary, who was the youngest, and she was really brilliant – so she got a degree from the University of Chicago – a law degree. And then when she came back – and my sister and I have a little disagreement as to the time – but my grandfather decided – because my youngest uncle, Frank, well he was a fun guy, and decided that he should become a lawyer but he wouldn’t go by himself so she went back to Detroit College of Law with him to make sure that he got a law degree which he got and never used.

Q So she got a double degree.

A Yeah, right. So she went back again. In her speech – and I’ll quote from it – “We became familiar with the outstanding personalities in Europe as well as in this country and the Zionist Movement. We heard Dr. Chaim Weizmann, the first president of the State of Israel, on numerous occasions. We were fascinated by talks by Dr. Smira Levin and well informed by the talks of Louie Lipski. In this

country, we were inspired by Judge Louis Brandeis, Rabbi Steven Weiss, Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, and many others.” I thought it would be nice to mention those names.

Q Definitely. That’s part of the legacy. Thank you, Mr. Davidson. I’m glad we got a chance to speak again.

A Thank you.

### **Dorothy Gerson**

Q I’m now speaking with Dorothy Gerson. We might just speak a little bit more about your family legacy. What was the story you wanted to add to the discussion?

A Well, I just wanted to add that my grandparents both, my grandfather and my grandmother, were two of the strongest personalities I have ever met and very different but in their own way, if they were there, you knew they were there. And their five children turned out to be very much like that. Our oldest uncle was a born entrepreneur, as was our grandfather, but he also liked to have fun. So he happened to have flunked out of the University of Michigan where he was having such a good time and that was one of the reasons that my grandfather made up his mind that the other son was going to be a lawyer. He was not even going to just have to be graduating but he was going to be a lawyer and that’s how Aunt Mary became one of the first female lawyers in the country. She had a photographic memory. She was brilliant – absolutely academically brilliant. She had gotten a teacher’s degree. She got a degree from Detroit College of Law. She got this scholarship or whatever it was to University of Chicago where she

was a star in the law school. And she became the head of the Legal Aid Bureau of Detroit. And our mother was this incredible speaker. I mean, she just got up and spoke. And our youngest uncle was – the two brothers, the sons, were full of fun which was our grandfather. He was one of the most fun guys you could ever imagine. He was always laughing, telling jokes, and that kind of person. And his two sons – well, especially the younger son – were so much like him but they were not the perfect students. The three girls were marvelous students and that's why Aunt Mary got her second degree and everything.

Q Would you name the sons?

A Yeah. The oldest was Barney Wetsman and he was actually the one who Guardian Glass came from. This was one of his many things that he purchased when he was in his entrepreneurial days. He was basically a builder and my grandfather was not only in real estate but in theaters. And when the Avalon Theater was going to be built my grandfather had as his builder Barney Wetsman, his son.

Q How nice.

A So that was that brother. And the youngest uncle was a partner of a very serious man. He was a fun guy himself but they were a marvelous partnership and they eventually owned lots of theaters and lots of everything and were very entrepreneurial as well.

Q What was his name?

A That was Frank Wetsman. And he was also very active in his day in federation here and a very wonderful man – wonderful. I think that's about it.



Q Thank you. It sounds like your formative years were very interesting and –

A They were very interesting. The brothers and the sisters in that family, although they had lots of friends and lots of, you know, life outside of the family, loved to be with the family; I think almost would rather be with their family than with anyone. It was a very close family and interesting because they were all such vibrant personalities but they loved to be together.

Q Being in that room was quite an experience.

A Well, and it was a marvelous thing for the children because I'm the oldest and the only girl. Then came my brother and four more boys. And it was more like we were almost brothers, all of them, as far as I'm concerned. And our mothers spent all their summers together, which is quite unusual. All the three sisters wanted to be together so they had this cottage in Port Huron where the day after school, the cars were packed, and up we went to Port Huron to spend the summers together. So it was, you know, it was all three sisters but the mothers were interchangeable and I always felt in some ways I had four mothers because there were three sisters and a sister-in-law but they were very, very close, all of them. It was a very unusual, very loving, very caring family. And always their idea was to give back. They always, from a tiny little girl, they'll know, it was the first check I ever got in my life that was mine, my mother said, "Oh, that's just wonderful because now we have this cousin we can give it to." I mean, there was the feeling of you had to take care of other people. It was a very strong feeling in that family.

Q Those were the family values –

A And I think (inaudible).

Q – that you lived by.

A (Inaudible) so that would be what I wanted to say.

Q Thank you. I'm glad we have the opportunity to meet with you today as well.

W They would come over on a – every Friday night he would come over and you would hear screams, yells, I mean, you can't imagine the –

Q What was going on?

W I mean, I thought they were crazy, you know, 'cause I was used to it. I thought they were killing each other. (Inaudible) and it was the two – my Aunt Mary was already gone but the two – mother and me against Frank, and they would – I mean, then all of a sudden there would be quiet and they would have their coffee and their (inaudible) and they were very loving again and that was the greatest experience. I mean, we just loved it.

D That was their tradition.

W (Inaudible) It was so fun because he was always, you know, trying to reestablish himself and always disagree – anything they said they would fight but then next Friday night (inaudible).

D (Inaudible) chase them away.

W They lived across the yard from each other. We lived in one house, my aunt lived across the street, and he lived behind us on Chicago Boulevard. He lived on Boston.

Q The good old days when family was so close (inaudible).

W All you had to do was walk over.

D Well, the interesting thing was that, you know, this family were all born out in Iowa. Very often, as people stay longer in this country, they are less of that kind of family life.

Q That's right. They're all (inaudible).

D I mean, born in Iowa, raised in Iowa, raised in cities where there were no other Jewish people and always friendly with everybody in the town and everything; but they never lost their Jewishness, their feeling about being Jewish, and it means so much to them. And they never lost their familial feelings at all – not at all.

W They all spoke perfect English. My grandfather, when he came over, couldn't speak a word of English. By the time (inaudible) his English was perfect. He didn't really even have an accent.

D No. And our grandmother was the kind of person – first of all, she was brilliant, absolutely academically brilliant but there (inaudible) but because she knew every plot – she was a great gardener – knew every flower in the garden. You'd drive by, she knew every plant. I mean, she had such knowledge of so many things. Then, of course, she was a vegetarian.

(comments)

D She became friendly with Dr. Kellogg, the brother of the Cornflakes chain who ran something called the Battle Creek Sanitarium which was completely vegetarian. This man was years ahead of his time. He was always sure that we were eating too much meat and it's not good for you. And my grandmother – I was the oldest and the only girl so I spent a lot of time with her. So she used to take me to the Battle Creek Sanitarium which she loved and you could order, you

know, steak, lamb chops, this or that, and out would come this plate – if it was lamb chops, something looking like a lamb chop, a vegetarian (inaudible), completely vegetarian, and partially she must have loved it ‘cause she was kosher. So –

Q Oh, that’s right, so that was easy for her.

D (Inaudible) steaks or lamb chops, this or that. The other thing was that was so amazing – did you know this? – at the end – this man was so far ahead of his time, so we’d have this dinner and then everyone got up and they’d say “to the gym.” And we all went to the gym. And my grandmother led the line walking around the gym – walking, walking, walking. It was the most amazing thing.

Q How old would she have been in those –

D She would have been – well, her children were grown and, of course – her children were grown by the time she was 25 maybe. So she was 40 or 50, you know, so she was – 50, 60, right in there. And she believed in exercise, I can tell you. And she was always also into vitamins. I mean, she prescribed for everybody.

Q Did she live a long life?

D 92. In those days –

Q That was a long life.

D It was amazing ‘cause she had a stroke at 88 or 89 and they said, “Three months. She can’t live anymore.” So two or three years later –

Q She was still going?

D Right. Very commanding. I mean, just gave orders a lot.

Q Do you have a lot of photographs of your family?

D Yes, I have wonderful photographs. Well, you know, Bill had a book called “The Wetsmans.” You’ve seen the book.

Q Yes. I’ve seen that book.

A And most of those photographs I have. And the focus of the book was the five – my mother and her four siblings.

Q I have to go back and look at it again.

W Funny story –

Q Do you have any extra copies for the archives because I don’t know if Bob has a copy.

W The what?

D Of the archives.

Q I’d like to have a copy of the book of “The Wetsmans.”

W Yeah. I just asked (inaudible).

Q Oh, bood, good. I will take (Inaudible).

W The funniest thing was she lived with us and she was getting into her nineties by then and she was treated by Dora Erlich’s son-in-law.

A Gingold – Sam Gingold.

W Yeah. And here again they were yelling at him one day. He’d been treating her for 10 years and (inaudible).

D But you’re still here.

W He was yelling at her.

D (Inaudible) years old.

W What good are you (inaudible)?

D There was a better one.

Q (Inaudible).

D Oh, she was a character. She got something wrong with her on her foot and I had already gotten married and gone. She had gotten my bedroom at mother's house after I left. Anyway, so my grandmother's there and they couldn't find any doctors that day and she needed a doctor. Her foot was bothering her so they got a hold of a dermatologist. I've forgotten his name but, anyway, so in comes this guy who was (inaudible) dermatologist and he said blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, this and that, and my grandmother and we could hear her. And she had a voice you could hear. He said, "You know, I'm a dermatologist, Mrs. Weitzman. And I don't really believe that I can treat what you have. You've got (inaudible)." There's a long silence and I hear this voice, "Young man, did you go to medical school?"

(end of tape)