

1 ORAL HISTORY OF: Robert Aronson
2 INTERVIEWED BY: Charlotte Dubin
3 DATE OF INTERVIEW: Thursday, November 10, 2005
4 LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Jewish Federation
5 SUBJECT MATTER: personal and family history, role
6 as executive director of Jewish
7 Federation, world scene of Jewish
8 philanthropy (second interview)

9
10 MS. DUBIN: I'm Charlotte Dubin on behalf of the
11 Leonard N. Simons Jewish Community Archives. I'm conducting
12 part two of an oral history interview with Robert Aronson,
13 chief executive officer of the Jewish Federation of
14 Metropolitan Detroit. It's November 10, 2005, and we're at
15 the Max M. Fisher Federation Building. Mr. Aronson, I'd like
16 to focus on your recollections of some important Federation
17 events and your views on issues that we didn't have time to
18 cover in our first interview.

19 Let's start with Israel. I know how important it's
20 always been to you and you've told us how the Yom Kippur War
21 made a great impact on your life. Not long after you came to
22 Detroit there was another war, a smaller war, but it posed a
23 threat to Israel, and that was of course the Persian Gulf War.
24 Do you have any recollections of that time?

25 MR. ARONSON: I do remember it because I believe

1 that the night that the first rockets hit in Tel Aviv, I
2 remember Michael Borke, who was at the time the executive
3 director of the Federation, coming up to me. We had a
4 campaign opening meeting at Shaarey Zedek that night. He came
5 up to me and said they're firing poison gas at Israel. That
6 stuck in my memory because I remember how terrified we all
7 were when the first scuds hit. Everyone knew Israel was going
8 to be in danger. Even though Iraq had threatened to fire
9 missiles at Israel, we really didn't believe that it would
10 happen. When the smoke cleared, it was not a big deal, but in
11 the period of the war it was very frightening for Israelis,
12 for American Jews, et cetera. I have a very clear
13 recollection of that time and mobilizing staff -- you were
14 with me at the time -- and lay leadership to try to deal with
15 all the issues about the war.

16 **MS. DUBIN:** There have been many crises since and
17 some of them have to do with immigration issues. The Soviet
18 Jewry, Ethiopian Jewry, and we're seeing now that there will
19 be more Ethiopians coming to Israel. Anything you could tell
20 us about the way Israel is responding to those issues and how
21 Detroit is getting involved.

22 **MR. ARONSON:** First of all, maybe a little
23 background on the Israel/Detroit connection because I think
24 it's important. Apart from my own feelings which are brought
25 to the job of concern for the connection of Israel, this

1 community has always had a very strong commitment, I might
2 even call it a first commitment to overseas funding and to
3 Israel in general. Our past leadership for many years were
4 all very Israel oriented people. Max Fisher especially. Paul
5 Zuckerman. Other people from this community who shaped the
6 community were very Israel oriented. That's why today we
7 still have much more so than other communities, and I've been
8 around the country and I've seen it, there is still a bedrock
9 foundation of major support for needs in Israel and overseas,
10 for involvement in Israel programs. And the challenge to this
11 community going forward as the relationship of Israel changes
12 from one of simply sending money to involvement in projects,
13 the challenge for us is to figure out how we can engage our
14 younger newer generations of people in Israel projects that
15 excite them and motivate and interest them. We are going
16 through a transition with our relationship with Israel which
17 our founding fathers and mothers really never foresaw. So how
18 we deal with Israel as a community in the future, I think, is
19 one of the two or three critical issues for the Federation to
20 be dealing with.

21 **MS. DUBIN:** Tell us about Partnership 2000.

22 **MR. ARONSON:** Partnership 2000 is a project that
23 basically does what we were just talking about, which is
24 trying to create a connection. It is a partnership between
25 the Jewish communities in the state of Michigan, especially

1 Grand Rapids, Ann Arbor and Detroit, with the central Galilee
2 region of Israel, which is Migdal Ha'emek, Nazaret Ilit, Emec
3 Israel, which is the Jezrell Valley.

4 The project is about taking some dollars which we
5 call elective dollars, apart from our allocation, and jointly
6 with Israeli volunteers in the region spending those dollars,
7 primarily on people-to-people programs in Israel. But the key
8 to Partnership 2000 is the development of a new core of
9 volunteers in Israel, which is new for them, and connections,
10 personal and otherwise, and charitable connections with people
11 in our community and creating lasting relationships where
12 people feel good about the connection. So for instance over
13 the course of the last five years we've brought almost a 1,000
14 children from Israel to Camp Tamarack for the summer. Many of
15 them from the region.

16 In a way it started with the int[']afada when we
17 couldn't send our kids to Israel. We've continued it since
18 then. But it's an example of a Partnership 2000 program which
19 focuses on connections now and for the future. It's been
20 tremendously successful.

21 The partnership is an evolution of an earlier
22 concept called Project Renewal. Project Renewal was twinning
23 our community with two other communities in Israel, first
24 Ramla and then Yavna, and taking some of our dollars and
25 spending them specifically in those areas, so that when the

1 Detroit community would go to Israel, we would go to Ramla and
2 Yavna, just as now we go to the central Galilee.

3 What was missing in the Project Renewal was the
4 grass roots involvement of the residents of the area. That's
5 what we focused on in Partnership 2000. One might argue, and
6 some do, that the partnership has been more beneficial for the
7 Israelis than for us in Detroit, but I don't feel that's the
8 case. I feel that people who are involved in it feel a deep
9 and abiding connection for the people of Israel. That's
10 really what we're after in Partnership 2000, and that's what
11 we're after in our relationships in the future.

12 There really was a time in our history, and it was a
13 significant time and helped build this Federation, when
14 Israel's survival was at stake and people gave money primarily
15 for Israel. The irony is, is that today our major donors
16 still give money primarily for Israel, despite the fact that
17 we are much more involved in our local community and funding
18 many more things, especially Jewish education in this
19 community, that we never really did before. But the primary
20 motivation of our major donors is still what's going on in
21 Israel and how they feel about it. So how we move that
22 relationship forward in a new way without throwing out the old
23 association but building on it in terms of people-to-people
24 projects really is critical for the future of this community.

25 **MS. DUBIN:** Is there a personal experience you've

1 had with Partnership 2000 that comes to mind when you want to
2 talk about its success?

3 **MR. ARONSON:** There are so many that it would be
4 hard for me. I think off the top of my head if I think about
5 the camp experience with the young people from Nazaret Ilit,
6 immigrant kids, Russians, Ethiopians, people coming here and
7 experiencing Tamarack for a summer. When I see the kids and
8 they come up to me and say this was the greatest experience of
9 my life and I talk to their parents and they say you know it's
10 really affected us and made us want to be more Jewish in our
11 homes in Israel, the kids come back from Tamarack with
12 something as simple as lighting candles on a Friday night,
13 something that they want to do that they learned at Tamarack.
14 All of a sudden a family in Israel is beginning to observe
15 Jewish customs and traditions, which is not normal in the
16 central Galilee. To see those connections and those personal
17 experiences, when I talk to the kids, is one of the greatest
18 satisfactions I've had as a professional and I think one of
19 the real benefits of the program.

20 **MS. DUBIN:** What about the Ethiopian immigration?
21 Has Israel responded well, in your opinion?

22 **MR. ARONSON:** Well, the Ethiopian immigration has
23 been problematic in Israel from the beginning. When the first
24 Ethiopians came over in Operation Solomon, the integration of
25 the Ethiopians was very difficult. They were put into

1 caravans, mobile homes, the kids were taken away and put into
2 Orthodox boarding schools. The immigration had a lot of
3 problems. Primarily because of the social and cultural
4 issues, the Ethiopians could not be integrated effectively
5 into society.

6 The new emphasis, which this community is involved
7 in, through what's called the PACT program, Parents and
8 Children Together, in Natanya, which happens to be the largest
9 Ethiopian population in Israel, is really to focus on
10 education and to try to level the playing field for Ethiopian
11 children, in this particular case between the ages of zero and
12 six years old, in terms of integrating them into the
13 educational system, teaching Hebrew, helping the parents learn
14 basic social skills which many do not have, and to try to get
15 the kids to compete on an equal level in the educational
16 system, in the secular system.

17 When the kids were pulled out and put into the
18 Orthodox system, they were removed in effect from Israeli
19 society. It's almost like getting to do a redo right now with
20 the Ethiopian population.

21 There's now a new population coming in which is even
22 more problematic. They're called the Falashmora. They are
23 Christians today, although their ancestors were Jewish. They
24 have to go through a conversion process. They are even more
25 culturally different, one might say primitive perhaps than

1 even the earlier populations.

2 I think Israel is beginning to come to grips with
3 the fact that education is the key to the integration of the
4 Ethiopians. It hasn't worked well. Everybody means well, but
5 the population has really not integrated as effectively as it
6 should have. That's what we're working on now.

7 There's over 100,000 Ethiopians currently living in
8 Israel. The families are large and getting larger. It's an
9 issue that has to be dealt with in Israeli society.

10 MS. DUBIN: You mentioned that ^{the} ~~AG~~ General Assembly of
11 North American Jewry will be taking place next week. Will
12 that issue come up?

13 MR. ARONSON: I think the issue will come up.
14 There's a national campaign now to bring the Falashmora to
15 Israel. It's having mixed results. There are many
16 communities, including Detroit, that have their own programs;
17 just as we have a Natanya, other communities have elsewhere.
18 I think the issue will come up. There is still a tremendous
19 amount of agitation to bring as many Falashmora out of
20 Ethiopia as possible, but I don't see it as being a disruptive
21 or overwhelming issue at the GA. I think there are other
22 issues there.

23 MS. DUBIN: Tell us what they are.

24 MR. ARONSON: I believe, and if this is for
25 posterity, which I think it is, we have to take kind of a

1 longer view, that the very idea of the national organization
2 is the issue at the general assembly. It's now called the
3 United Jewish Communities. It used to be United Jewish Appeal
4 and Council of Jewish Federations and United Israel Appeal.
5 Make a very long story short the three were merged at the
6 request of Federations so that we would have a more
7 accountable and effective national system.

8 Over the years the national system I believe has
9 been seriously weakened and diminished. As my old friend Max
10 Fisher would have said, the reason for a national system at
11 the end of the day really is to mobilize support for overseas
12 Jewry in Israel. The allocations from communities to Israel
13 has been going down dramatically. The creation of the
14 national system has not stemmed the reduction in overseas
15 dollars. The notion for advocacy for Israel, which was what
16 the UJA was all about, has been diminished. Even the name
17 UJA, which is a household name in virtually every Jewish home
18 throughout America, the name no longer exists as part of the
19 organization.

20 So I think the challenge for us as a federated
21 system today and certain five, ten and 20 years from now is
22 what kind of national system do we want. Do you still want a
23 kind of a dominant expensive national system that is going to
24 speak on behalf of the Federations and mobilize Federations
25 for collective action, such as the current Ethiopian campaign?

1 Or are we going to have an organization which is more of a,
2 for lack of a better word, a trade association, which will
3 bring us together but not have a strong central presence.
4 That's the issue before us right now.

5 And I believe that we are probably moving away from
6 a expensive strong central American Jewish Federation
7 organization and we're going to be moving more towards
8 individual community action. I believe that's the trend. I
9 believe that's really the core issue facing the UJC today.

10 **MS. DUBIN:** In the past, because of the issues that
11 have come before American Jewry, there has been a central
12 spokes organization. Will that be diminished?

13 **MR. ARONSON:** I have always felt, perhaps
14 unpopularly, that United Jewish Communities or whatever our
15 national organization is does not have to speak for us on most
16 issues. We don't need resolutions calling for the end of
17 suicide bombing in Iraq or in Israel for that matter. There
18 are other Jewish organizations that are spokesperson
19 organizations. You have the Conference of Presidents, you
20 have ADL. Every Jewish organization speaks out and says it
21 speaks out for American Jewry on all issues.

22 I don't see that as the role of the United Jewish
23 Communities. I see it as a mobilizing role, bringing the
24 Federations together where there are crises and challenges
25 that transcend individual communities.

1 Now, to be fair in the course of the last several
2 months UJC has done really a great job of mobilizing Jewish
3 support for hurricane Katrina victims and has raised from all
4 of us well over \$30 million and has become the information
5 center, the distribution center for needs, not just Jewish
6 needs but across all lines for hurricane Katrina victims.
7 That's an example of how the national system should work. But
8 it should be working that way even when there isn't an
9 emergency. That is not what is happening today.

10 The trend today in Federations is to individual
11 decisions in communities to do things that that community
12 feels is important. If communities are no longer allocating
13 40 or 50 percent of their overseas dollars through UJC, to the
14 Jewish agency and the Joint Distribution Committee, that's a
15 thing of the past. Communities are taking their own money and
16 spending it on their own projects and dealing with their own
17 concerns. Communities are acting much more locally,
18 especially as the Israel agenda and the notion of Israel's
19 survival becomes less significant. So communities are making
20 their own decisions and that's a new trend which I believe is
21 going to continue and grow.

22 **MS. DUBIN:** That's a great segue into local issues.
23 You've faced a number of challenges over the past number of
24 years. I thought maybe you could just give us a few
25 recollections. Jewish Home for Aged.

1 **MR. ARONSON:** That was a disaster. That was one of
2 our challenges, as you call them, over the last number of
3 years, and we continue to have those challenges because, to
4 try to put this in context, our Federation in this community
5 is the place of last resort when something goes wrong in an
6 agency. It becomes the Federation's problem, not the agency's
7 problem. We understand that, we embrace that and we have to
8 be prepared to deal with it as we did in the case of the home.

9 The case of the Home for the Aged was an example of
10 a change that we were not ready for or able to cope with, and
11 that was as people became older and sicker it became harder
12 for us to run chronic care facilities for the elderly in a
13 proper way. We didn't have the expertise. I'm talking now
14 about the home. We didn't have the focus on the issue of
15 patient care and what was involved in it. We didn't have the
16 staff that could deal with it. To make a very long story
17 short, two of our facilities, Borman Hall and Prentis Manor at
18 the time, received very bad reports for patient care and for a
19 while we were in danger of losing reimbursement from the
20 federal government.

21 At that point we fired the board, which is the first
22 and only time in my history when I've had to do that, put an
23 expert group in place, brought in an outside firm to run the
24 facilities and ended up privatizing our chronic care home for
25 the aged with a company which now runs the facility out at the

1 Applebaum Campus.

2 The Home for the Aged as an agency remained intact
3 and still has a facility, the Jewish Home and Aging Services,
4 of which Fleischman Residence is a part. And we have the
5 Jewish Apartments and Services providing services for many
6 elderly.

7 The challenge for us now is non-institutional care
8 for the elderly as we have a greater population that needs
9 care because they're aging in place. But at the time of the
10 crisis we were shelling out almost a million dollars a month
11 trying to get the problem under control until such time as we
12 could sell Borman and Prentis Manor and move to a different
13 kind of care.

14 We now have two facilities, the Danto Facility and
15 also Menorah House in the Oak Park area. Both have excellent
16 care, both are run by a company that knows what it's doing. I
17 think we got out at just the right time and I think other
18 communities will face that issue as well.

19 I will say that in terms of decision-making, when
20 you face a crisis in an agency and you have to make a decision
21 as a Federation and a Foundation, it's very problematic
22 because crisis sometimes calls for fast action and quick
23 intervention. Our process as a community does not lend itself
24 to that. We have to take soundings and get input from
25 virtually hundreds of different people who have different

1 stakes in the issue. Special meetings, special committees,
2 board meetings at all different kinds of agencies. It's an
3 exhausting experience when you're running a community to try
4 to deal with a crisis.

5 That for me was probably the biggest single agency
6 crisis we faced because the people involved we couldn't move,
7 we couldn't ignore. It wasn't like a crisis at the JCC, which
8 we've dealt with also consistently for 20 years. When you're
9 dealing with a crisis involving elderly people confined to
10 bed, who are in trouble, we have an obligation to them. We
11 couldn't walk away from it. It made the crisis quite
12 difficult and hard to deal with.

13 The ultimate answer, unfortunately, was to do away
14 with the boards that had a not-for-profit attitude towards
15 patient care and get in touch with a more business-like
16 approach to dealing with the issue.

17 **MS. DUBIN:** How did you handle Sinai Hospital?

18 **MR. ARONSON:** The closing of Sinai was another big
19 one primarily because of the history. People in Detroit, God
20 bless them, our Jewish community, are very aware of and
21 involved in their history. When you change an institution,
22 you have to deal with the history.

23 Sinai had a great history. Many of our major
24 families were involved with it. It had long ago ceased to be
25 necessary as a Jewish institution, but convincing the

1 leadership of the hospital that they had to look for an
2 opportunity to sell and in effect to get out of the hospital
3 business in the city of Detroit, which was a complete non-
4 starter, was again a difficult, mostly behind-the-scenes
5 project.

6 I do want to say that the key individual, and I say
7 this for posterity because it's important, the key individual
8 that made that happen was a gentleman named Bob Sosnick, who
9 is no longer with us. A tough guy, tough businessman, a
10 little intimidating and frightening sometimes, but completely
11 dedicated to the hospital and the Jewish community. He was
12 the one who really engineered the sale of the hospital and the
13 creation of the Jewish Fund which now benefits our community
14 in very significant ways, especially our elderly and people in
15 need of health care, and the Jewish Fund was really the legacy
16 of Sinai Hospital and specifically I must say Bob Sosnick's
17 legacy to this community. If we had attempted to do it even
18 six months or a year later to sell the hospital, we would have
19 been out of luck. It was a moment in time that we grasped,
20 and thanks to him we have the Jewish Fund today.

21 **MS. DUBIN:** How about the Jewish Community Center.

22 **MR. ARONSON:** It has a long illustrious history, as
23 you know, going back many years. We've moved it more than a
24 few times, with complete facilities going from one place to
25 another, rebuilding buildings. We've been a very building

1 oriented community. We actually have the strange distinction
2 of having a Jewish Community Center that was open the shortest
3 period of time of any center in America, the one on Curtis and
4 ^eMyers, which was open about 12 years if I'm not mistaken.

5 Then we bought some wonderful land as a Federation
6 out at Maple and Drake amidst the corn fields and barns, and
7 that turned out to be our Jewish community campus. In
8 retrospect we should have bought more land at the time, but we
9 didn't see it then. A new center was built. Everyone you
10 talk to will agree that the Center was built poorly, too big,
11 not put together well, not user friendly. Over the years
12 Federation has struggled with the Center to deal with the
13 physical facility, the enormous costs involved in running it.

14 We still have a center down on Ten Mile Road, the
15 Jimmy Prentis Morris Center on the Taubman campus, which we
16 also raised money for when I first came to the community and
17 revived and is still doing very well as a small community
18 center. But the 800 pound gorilla has always been the one at
19 Maple and Drake, the Applebaum Campus. We recently went
20 through a \$35 million renovation of the Center because we were
21 still facility oriented. If we had to do it over again, I
22 don't know that we would have done that.

23 The center movement in general in America is on the
24 wane because Jews no longer feel the need to socialize or
25 recreate or get together only with other Jews. That was the

1 basic mission of the Center.

2 It's always been in deficit, has always had a
3 problem attracting health club members and other members.
4 We've made leadership changes for many years. We've always
5 said we're about to turn the corner, we never quite turn the
6 corner, and we're in that same situation today.

7 My hope from the beginning at the time I got here
8 is that the Center would be able to develop programs that
9 would attract Jews and non-Jews because it's now not just a
10 Jewish center, and become a place that really was a center for
11 the Jewish community with programs that people wanted to come
12 to, not just health and recreation facilities. We're not
13 there yet. I think it will continue to be an issue and in
14 today's Federation with fewer dollars available, it's becoming
15 more and more difficult to find the dollars to keep the Center
16 running.

17 The Center is a business, it's going to have to
18 operate like a business if it's going to survive. Federation
19 support will not be as forthcoming as it has been over the
20 years.

21 **MS. DUBIN:** Sixteen years ago the community
22 undertook a population study and is doing it again. I'd like
23 to know as a consequence of the strategic plan that followed
24 that study what you anticipate for the current survey and
25 you'd like to see happen.

1 **MR. ARONSON:** I don't really want to pre-judge what
2 the results of the study are going to be. I've always said
3 that 98,000 Jews in Detroit is a ridiculous number. I think
4 it's something closer to 75,00 or 80,000. Hopefully our
5 demographic look-back, if you will, will give us some new
6 numbers. But that is probably not the most important finding
7 of the study.

8 The most important finding of the study is the aging
9 of the population, how many children are being born, what is
10 our potential population for our synagogues and our schools,
11 what kind of planning do we have to do for our older adults,
12 how well is Federation known and understood in the community.
13 But the real issues we have to look at is are we a rapidly
14 aging population with lowering or dropping affiliation rates
15 and smaller numbers of kids, or are we not, are we a more
16 stable community. That's really what I want to find out is
17 what's happening to affiliation numbers with synagogue, with
18 giving to community, with Jewish observance. What's going to
19 happen 10 and 20 years from now, what population of children
20 are we going to see coming into our schools. Those are the
21 numbers and information we really have to have in order to do
22 effective community planning. The issue of how many Jews live
23 in Detroit is really not the critical issue.

24 **MS. DUBIN:** A neighborhood project was one outcome
25 of the first study. Is that considered one of the highlights

1 or success stories of Federation that you managed to
2 stabilize?

3 **MR. ARONSON:** I absolutely think that one of the
4 great unsung stories of the Federation of the last 25 or even
5 30 years has been the stabilization of the Oak Park and
6 Southfield neighborhoods. It's not totally what we would like
7 to see all the way. However, we now have stable populations,
8 people who received low interest loans to buy homes, we have
9 wonderful thriving Jewish campus, we have schools. We just
10 built a new 18-room mikvah, which is a good indication of how
11 the population has stabilized.

12 Detroit was a community that abandoned its buildings
13 and moved to the next place. They moved in total I think four
14 times since its creation, which is unbelievable. So we made a
15 stand in Oak Park and Southfield and it's worked. They're
16 good and desirable neighborhoods now. I think Federation can
17 be proud of the Neighborhood Project, the rebuilding of JPM
18 and the other efforts made in that area. I think it's been
19 terrific and it's great to go there.

20 **MS. DUBIN:** What vision do you have for this
21 community? What would you like to see this community do?

22 **MR. ARONSON:** That's a good question. I think about
23 it a lot. My vision is, if I could simplify it, two things.
24 Number one, I want the community to be a place where every
25 single Jew can get whatever help or service from the Jewish

1 community that the family, the individual needs from cradle to
2 grave. From the time they're born and we are able to set
3 aside money for them to go on a trip to Israel, to the time
4 that they die in a Jewish hospice setting and everything in
5 between. I want our community to be able to say that it's
6 providing the very best service for every single Jewish person
7 in the community, for every vulnerable person in the
8 community. That's one whole set of issues and that's one
9 vision.

10 The second vision I have is that we will do a real
11 job of educating our young people to the joys of being Jewish
12 as the central tenet of their life, and the responsibilities
13 of being Jewish, and that that will be part of every person's
14 psyche and soul in this community. I would like to see that.

15 And third, and just as important as the other two, I
16 would like to see every single Jew from young to old feel a
17 commitment and responsibility to world Jewry, not just
18 educating our own children and not just building lovely
19 institutions and centers and homes for the aged and schools,
20 Hillels and other things, but feeling committed to helping
21 Jews, knowing them, helping them as part and parcel and
22 foundation to who we are as Jews. That we should feel that
23 commitment to Jews around the world. Those are the three
24 things, if I could give you a vision of the future, Charlotte,
25 that I would like to see the community accomplish.

1 **MS. DUBIN:** Sounds costly.

2 **MR. ARONSON:** It is. I've learned as a fund-raiser,
3 and I'm primarily a fund-raiser, if you don't set your sights
4 high and if you can't articulate a vision for the future, then
5 the dollars won't follow. That's the way we have to do it.

6 **MS. DUBIN:** Is there anything I have not asked you
7 that you'd like to say?

8 **MR. ARONSON:** We could talk for hours. I've enjoyed
9 talking and reflecting on my time here. I appreciate you
10 talking with me. My work here has been my life's work, and I
11 want to be sure that when I'm not here that there's a new set
12 of professionals coming up who will also make it their life's
13 work. That's what I would like to see. Thank you.

14 **MS. DUBIN:** Thank you, Bob.