

ORAL HISTORY OF: Natalie Charach
INTERVIEWED BY: Sharon Alterman
DATE OF INTERVIEW: Thursday, October 10, 2013
LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Home of Manny and Natalie Charach
SUBJECT MATTER: Jewish Community Leadership Oral
History Project

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SHARON ALTERMAN: I'm privileged to be sitting with Natalie Charach in her home for an oral history interview. And Natalie, it's just a great pleasure to be interviewing you because you are one of the leaders in this community. And Natalie, before we begin, I do have a question. Is it appropriate for us to use all the information that you share with me today for our educational programs?

NATALIE CHARACH: For the education, not for advertising.

SHARON: No, it wouldn't be for advertising. And you have the option to say if there are some confidential parts of this that you wouldn't want us to include in a transcript. So when we get to that, we'll talk about that later if you so desire.

NATALIE: Yes.

SHARON: When we start our oral history interviews, we like to start as far back as we can go, and we like to talk about our parents and grandparents. And some people have

wonderful stories that they've heard about their families; they came from Europe. So do you have stories like that?

NATALIE: Well, my mother was a writer, and she would write history of the family, and I have her papers. Some of it I'm going to some day put it all together. She came from Lithuania, Klaipeda. It was a small town outside of Kovno. She came to the United States, and she had a brother here. He lived in New Kensington, which is a small town right outside of Pittsburgh. But she didn't move right to New Kensington. She stayed in Pittsburgh and she got a job in a delicatessen.

My uncle got to know my grandfather, and my father was single, and they wanted to make a shiddach. My mother did make a shiddach, but there's more history, and I don't want to go that far into it. Anyhow, they got married. As a matter of fact they got married a year after Manny's parents got married in the same shul on the same date.

SHARON: Really. Isn't that amazing.

NATALIE: Yes. They got married on June the 14th, and my mother got married on June 15th at the same shul.

SHARON: What year?

NATALIE: One year later, in 1924 and 1925. I was born in 1926. My sisters were born three-and-a-half years later. My father died a month before my sixth birthday. So my mother raised three children, and I think she did a good

job. I really do.

SHARON: Where was your father from?

NATALIE: He was from Lithuania, which at that point it was part of Russia, then it was part of Lithuania. The government changed. He was in Grigiskes.

SHARON: Do you have any memories of him?

NATALIE: Yes, I do.

SHARON: Anything you'd like to share with us?

NATALIE: I don't think so.

SHARON: So tell us about your formative years, your early years. Where did you live? Where did you go to school?

NATALIE: We lived in New Kensington. And then in 1937 my mother decided we were going to move to Pittsburgh. So we moved to Pittsburgh and she worked in the deli there. She was behind the counter. When we first went to Pittsburgh, she worked nights, so she had to leave us alone. We lived in one area and then we moved. We rented a house, and it was like a row of houses, but it was built up. So you had steps to go up, and then you had the cement, and then you had the fence. While we lived there, my mother bought a little cafe, and she and I worked the cafe. So when I would get out of school, junior high, I would go there, and then she would come home and rest up, and then be back for the dinner.

We didn't know it at that time, but it was in a German area, and they did vulcanizing. My mother was very

pretty, dark-haired, short little nose, dark eyes, and they kept saying, Hey, Rose, what are you? What's your nationality? And she kept saying, I'm an American and very proud of it. And they kept doing that, over and over again. Then they said, Rose, do you mind if we pay you once a week instead of paying you every time we come in? She said okay.

They kept after her, What's your nationality? She said, Do you want to know my religion? Oh, yeah. She said, I'm Jewish. They boycotted and left us with all the bills. My mother said, we can't stay here, so we paid everybody off, and we decided that we were going to move.

She had landsman that lived in Detroit, and as a matter of fact my sisters were little flower girls at William Cohn's daughter's wedding. Kaminski. They said, Come to Detroit. Detroit is a real interesting city and you can get a job. This was in 1940.

My mother thought and thought, and we gave up the cafe. So in 1941, right after Pearl Harbor, we moved to Detroit, my sisters, my mother and I. And we moved to Hamtramck. My mother spoke seven languages. She read and wrote seven languages. She got a job right away at a bridal shop. It was on Holbrook and Joseph Campau. Barbara's. We had a room that we rented down the street.

We came in December, and my mother wanted us to be in a Jewish neighborhood. At that time they didn't trust

women who were widows or who were divorcees. They made it very, very difficult. So she couldn't get an apartment because they wouldn't rent to a widow. So Barbara, who owned the bridal shop, was very outgoing, and she said, You take John, and John, you act like Mr. Miller. So John went with my mother. My mother signed the papers. Then we moved over to Gladstone and Linwood. They kept asking my mother, Where's your husband? Oh, he travels, he's on the road. I think they realized after about six months that there was no husband.

I worked in an ice cream parlor, I worked as a waitress, and I started going to Central. The war was on, so I got a job, a full-time job from four till midnight.

SHARON: While you were in high school?

NATALIE: Yeah. Two years.

SHARON: What were you doing?

NATALIE: I worked at Fort Wayne ordinance depot. We would do the billing of loadings for the tanks and everything that was going out of Detroit. We'd send it ahead so that the ports, wherever we would send it to, they knew what they were getting, and then they had the bills of lading.

SHARON: You were about 16 at that point?

NATALIE: Yeah.

SHARON: You must have been a very smart young woman. Were you a good student?

NATALIE: I would come home at one o'clock from

school and maybe do my homework, and at three o'clock I would take the Clairmont bus to Joy Road and walk across Livernois, and then take the Livernois down, because it's down at Jefferson. I worked there until I graduated.

When I graduated, the war was over, so I worked for Skinner Purifiers, which made purifiers.

SHARON: Did you ever have any aspirations to go to college?

NATALIE: I did, but I couldn't afford it. I wanted to.

After the war was over and I graduated, I was going with a very nice young man, but he wasn't my type. He had come back from the war, and he was bragging about his friend. He wanted to impress me that he knew somebody from Pittsburgh.

SHARON: How funny.

NATALIE: He mentioned his name, and I said, I don't know who he is. I figured he must be like Red, and Red was a sweet guy, he really was, but he wasn't my type. My sisters and I were home, and Red called. They knew to say I wasn't home, but my mother said, he's a nice man, he's a gentleman, and you never know who you meet when you go out with somebody.

SHARON: She was a smart woman.

NATALIE: A very smart woman. Red called me up and he said, Oh, my friend is coming in from Pittsburgh. And Red's sister knew that it was Red's twenty-first birthday, and

she had seen pictures of Manny that Red had brought home. So she said, I'm going to invite him to the party. And Red said, Good. He thought he was going to be making points. I said, Okay, do you want to come over on Saturday? And I purposely put on the oldest pair of pants, the oldest sweater, and I put my hair in curlers. Now, at that time, we used to take socks. My hair was longer and we'd take the socks and roll it up, and then tie it.

SHARON: You were a beauty in other words.

NATALIE: Oh, I was a real beauty. So Manny came in, and we started to cut each other up. Just joking. And everybody he mentioned I knew or we had them over to the house. My mother always felt that she'd rather have us entertain in the house and play games and talk and whatever we wanted to do, but in the house. So we started cutting up. And I knew all his friends, every one of his friends, but never knew Manny.

SHARON: Same neighborhood.

NATALIE: We went to the same school, went to Shinley High. I still say that we went to mechanical drawing. He says he doesn't remember me. I said, I don't remember you, but I remember taking the class at the same time he was taking it.

Anyhow, that evening we went over to Red's house for the party, and my mother was invited.

SHARON: I hope you took the curlers out of your hair.

NATALIE: Yeah, I did. That I did, because there were other friends there. Manny was all alone, he didn't know anybody, so he was sort of sitting there. So he and I started to talk -- should I say it, Manny? He said, Come on, I want to talk to you on the porch. So we went on the porch, and he tried to kiss me. At that point Red walks up and says, Oh, I'm so sorry.

SHARON: So this was a first date.

NATALIE: It wasn't even a date. It was just the party. My mother knew that he was from Pittsburgh. She didn't know anybody in his family, but she said he should come for dinner. My sister at that time loved to cook, so she said, okay, we'll have dinner at six o'clock. Six o'clock came, six o'clock went, and 7:30 he walked in. My sister was not happy. He claimed she still hasn't forgiven him.

I invited my girlfriend, Lil Bricker -- it was Lil Cohn then, because I figured to make it even. After dinner we decided rather than sit around, there was the Docks Theater on Livernois, and we were a block and a half way, so we walked over. When we got into the theater, Manny pushed Red and Lil down; he said there's two seats down there. And then we sat in the back; there were two seats in the back.

As soon as we sat down he said, I've got to talk to

you. I'm going back home tomorrow. I said, Yeah. The movie had just started. He said, I got to talk to you. So we got up, we left them there, they didn't know where we were. We walked back to the house. My mother was working at the DAC at the time, in the kitchen. So she was already in bed. I went to reach for my key, I did, and he took this hand and he put it behind me. And I thought, He's going to try something, and he's going to get hurt. So he put his class ring on my finger.

SHARON: Oh, my goodness. Love at first sight.

NATALIE: I said, What's this? And he said, We're going to get married. I said, I don't think so. I'm supporting my family. My sister's in college. I can't. I can't. Oh, yeah. Well, my mother met him and my mother fell in love with him. She thought he was just the most wonderful young man there was.

The next morning when she got up, I got up, too, and I told her that he proposed. She said, He loves you and he'll make you a good husband. And I said, But I don't think so. She said, It's better for a man to love a woman more than for a woman, because a woman can grow to love the man.

SHARON: Interesting.

NATALIE: Yeah.

SHARON: She was right.

NATALIE: Then I'll let him continue the story.

SHARON: So you married soon thereafter?

NATALIE: Well, we got engaged. Let's see, that was in February, and we got married by a justice of the peace on April 12. I worked for Skinner, the purifying company, and we had to stay two weeks in Pittsburgh if we were going to get married in New Kensington, because my two uncles, Uncle Wisby and Uncle Louis, were going to pay for the wedding. The wedding was keckel, liquor and a two-piece band. That was my wedding.

SHARON: What year?

NATALIE: Same year, 1946. When I said to Manny, I can't take off two weeks. I had a job, he didn't have a job. So I said, we'll have to get married here, and then get married in a religious ceremony in June. So April 12th I had a co-worker and she was a boyfriend who was part of the Mafia. So he knew the bigshots downtown in city hall, and she got Pete, her boyfriend, to get a judge to marry us during his lunch hour.

So I called Manny up and told him to meet us under the Kern's clock, and from the Kern's clock we walked over to the city hall, and Judge Thomas Murphy married us. I gave Manny \$5 to take the best man out for lunch, and I gave him \$2 I think for the license, and I gave the judge \$5. So that was my investment. So he's been paying ever since.

SHARON: Things were a lot different in those days,

weren't they?

NATALIE: Yeah. And then I went back to work, because it was Friday and it was payday. And I belonged to a girls club, and we had bought tickets for Roberta that was playing at the Masonic Temple that Friday night. I think my sister gave up her ticket so that Manny could go. So he went and saw Roberta with twelve other girls. And that was our honeymoon.

SHARON: Fortunately, you did make up for it.

NATALIE: Yeah. It took time, but we did make up for it.

SHARON: So Manny didn't have a job, so you came here.

NATALIE: No, he didn't have a job, and he came here with \$7 in his pocket, and I was working. My mother gave us her bedroom, and we lived there. Finally the people upstairs -- it was a two-family flat -- moved, so then my mother moved upstairs and we had the downstairs.

SHARON: I will be interested to hear Manny's story about that.

NATALIE: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

SHARON: So you started off poor.

NATALIE: Very poor. Very, very poor. My mother, before she died -- she died when she was 93 -- she would have us come over. She had a little breakfront. She wanted to

make sure who got what. She gave me a yellow sheet. I'm trying to find it. I found all the other sheets, but I couldn't find this one. My mother didn't have any money. She worked all her life, and she made up a sheet. JNF, \$10. The Red Cross, \$5. And she made out a sheet down to here like she had the money, and it was 10, 5, 10, 5, maybe it was \$100 if it was. She always instilled the values. As bad as we had it, there were worse.

SHARON: Her values were really remarkable. Do you attribute a lot to her, the way you think about life?

NATALIE: Definitely.

SHARON: Do you want to talk about the early years of your marriage?

NATALIE: No, I'll let him tell it.

SHARON: Where did you live?

NATALIE: We lived on Tyler, and then in 1950 we had Janice. We traveled, but Manny will tell you that. So we didn't have our children until 1950. We were married in 1946. We had Janice and about 19, 20 months later we had Jeff. Jeff was Caesarian, and when they pulled him out, his lungs filled with fluid, so we weren't sure, and we had to keep him there for over a month to get all that fluid out, because once the fluid went into the lungs, it got hard.

Then we moved from Tyler in 1953. My mother gave us the down payment. She remortgaged her house on Tyler.

SHARON: What a generous woman.

NATALIE: Yeah. So that \$5,000 is worth \$100,000, if not more, today. She kept saying I have money when they pay me back, but we were paying back all the time. It was funny and she was cute, and she appreciated everything.

SHARON: Did you work along with Manny?

NATALIE: A little bit. He will tell you what he did. In certain places I would work, and certain places that he was they didn't need me. But I've been working all my life.

So then we lived in Oak Park until 1981 and then we moved here, and we've been here ever since. And we're perfectly happy. We travel.

SHARON: So Detroit's your home.

NATALIE: Yeah.

SHARON: So what do you think of this city?

NATALIE: Well, I'll tell you, I came from Pittsburgh, and Pittsburgh, you got on the streetcar to go downtown, and you had a friend when you got off the streetcar, and it was warm and friendly. You knew everybody by name. You were introduced, hi. I mean you didn't have to be friends with them, but you saw them and they always knew your name.

Moved to Detroit, went to Central. To this day there's one --

SHARON: It's very cliquy.

NATALIE: Very cliquy. One experience I had with my mother, it was the first year, and we wanted to go say yiska, Yom Kippur. We went to Adat Shalom on Curtis, and all the way in the back were two empty seats. So we went and sat down. A woman came and in the loudest voice, You're sitting in my seat. Like I stole those seats. Embarrassed us.

SHARON: Something you never forget.

NATALIE: Cruel, real cruel.

SHARON: Did you get involved with the religious community here?

NATALIE: No. Because I just felt that that was not a way you treat somebody.

SHARON: Over the years though did you affiliate with the community?

NATALIE: Yes, we did, with Adat Shalom. Very nice. Our son was in the choir. We used to go every holiday; we were always there. The children participated. Janice, when she was 34, she wanted to be bat mitzvahed. At that time she would have to be with the children, but Shaarey Zedek started their first Bat Mitzvah class, and she was in that first class. And that's how she met her husband. Somebody fixed them up.

From that point, when we decided for our son to be bar mitzvahed, I didn't want to have any affiliation.

Even at Central they didn't know your name. So I

had nothing to do with them, which was fine. And I went to work, so I never knew anybody other than who was in my class, and I knew three other girls who were also poor.

SHARON: You said you had a group of friends, those twelve women.

NATALIE: Yeah. Some were older and some were younger than me.

SHARON: I see.

NATALIE: Mary Clinton, used to be Mary Kessner, was my girlfriend. Fran Milgram, and Lil Cohn, and Frieda Novak. So I had a very select group. And if I said it was twelve, maybe that twelve was my sisters and my mother. We were all part of that twelve people.

SHARON: It was hard getting into this community.

NATALIE: I didn't want to. Now people say, hello, how are you, but I remember what they did. Very cruel, very cruel. Very cliquish. But I was busy working.

SHARON: But you support this community like few other people do. So tell me how that happened? What were some of the first projects you got involved in?

NATALIE: Well, I belonged to Pioneer Women, which was Namat, and met some lovely, lovely women, and they were sweet. They were very nice. We have two homes in Israel, one in Janice's name and one in Jeff's name.

SHARON: What kind of homes are they?

NATALIE: Nurseries. One is in Siderot, which has been bombed. They have some land there, so they just moved it up the hill.

SHARON: Did you and Manny travel to Israel often?

NATALIE: Oh, yeah. We gave money to JNF. (name of a place I can't get) Those people, they really need all the help they can get. Kadima. Then we built the gallery in the Jewish Community Center.

SHARON: The gallery, which is one of our cultural gems in this community, do you want to talk about how that evolved?

NATALIE: It was fortunate. Janice's work was sought after by the galleries. She had some friends who she felt sorry for because they never got into a gallery, and she felt they were just as good. Maybe they weren't, but she felt sorry for them. So I always teased her: we'll open up a gallery and we'll put your stuff there. She said, You don't know anything about art, and I'm not going to sell my stuff. It's hard for an artist to sell their pieces, so somebody else has to do it, and it can't be the family. And the fact that I didn't know anything about art, which is fine.

Because she felt sorry, she was going to do this for the Jewish artists because they had a hard time: first, being Jewish, and being an artist, to being well-received. So we felt we wanted to do something in her honor.

SHARON: Did the Center welcome the idea at first?

NATALIE: No. We said we would give them a fair amount of money, and the Federation wanted it to go for the Russians. This was at the time the Russians were coming in. And we said no, we want this in our daughter's honor. And there was no building there. We had to build the building. So the whole year they wouldn't say yes. They wanted the money but they didn't want us to tell them what to do with it.

SHARON: So who advocated for you?

NATALIE: I don't know. Maybe Manny remembers. I don't really know who advocated for it. Probably Mort. We said, Look, if you don't want to, fine. We'll build the building, but we thought it would be for the Jewish community. So that's what we did.

SHARON: And all the years you've been very involved with the gallery.

NATALIE: Yes. Definitely.

SHARON: What are your thoughts about the way the gallery has progressed over the years?

NATALIE: I'm very proud of it and I'm very proud that we've been open for over twenty years. A lot of artists have gone forward, and they're in New York. Some are in Europe. There's one out in California, and they attribute the fact that they got their start at the gallery, which makes us very, very happy and very proud.

SHARON: Do you sit on the board?

NATALIE: Yes. We have a steering committee. And it's funny, we have this show going on now, Let My People Go, and it just seems like people are coming in and they say, I didn't know you had a gallery.

SHARON: Really.

NATALIE: To this day.

SHARON: They do so much publicity.

NATALIE: You would think. But there are so many people out there that don't know anything about the gallery. And this surprises me, this really surprises me. And I'm thinking, how do we get to these people then?

SHARON: It's a puzzlement.

NATALIE: And then there are people who make comments, and I don't like that. I don't like people saying, With your money. And people say that to me. And that's why I don't like publicity. I don't want people to know who we are. Because that bothers me, why people are like that.

SHARON: You've done it for the community. And fortunately you overlook that.

NATALIE: Well, no, I don't. I'm like an elephant. I don't forget. I have lists, and nobody wants to be on my list, believe me they don't.

SHARON: But you have done such wonderful things for this community, and you are well loved and well respected.

What are some of the other ventures that you really prize? What are some of your favorites?

NATALIE: I like that word. As far as community?

SHARON: Yes.

NATALIE: I get a little angry about people I know could afford to help other people, and they don't. And I guess I shouldn't feel that way. You know, let everybody do their own thing. And my sister says, You can't tell people what to do or where to spend their money. It's true. But if you see people suffering and you see that they need the food, they need this, I mean why not? But they don't. And yet they turn around and they say to me, it's your money. This bothers me.

SHARON: I can understand that. The value system you learned you learned in your home; right?

NATALIE: Yes.

SHARON: And I'm sure you transmitted it to your children.

NATALIE: Oh, yes. My son has been sick. He's really like on a fixed budget. And yet gives money. Constantly he's giving money. The cancer took this one and that one. I mean any time somebody goes up to him and says, you know, they don't have any money for food, he buys them food. He is the most generous person I have ever seen in my life. He gets angry with me. And he's on a fixed budget.

SHARON: But it's in his heart.

NATALIE: And Janice was the same way. And we get upset with him sometimes because he doesn't do for himself, but he does for other people.

SHARON: So the value system you learned from your mother. So you have a message then. What is the message that you would give to other people in this community?

NATALIE: Look around and see. You've got to get them started. It's sad there are so many people with problems, and you want to help them.

SHARON: I know you've been very involved with the gallery. Are there other organizations that you've been really involved with? I know you sat on the JARC Board. Do you get involved in boards?

NATALIE: No. I guess I'm set in my ways, and when something happens and I don't feel that it's right and I say it, and they don't pay any attention, you don't really want me then, because if you really want to know what's going on or how people feel, you should listen, and they don't. So I feel I'm just better off not getting involved with anybody.

SHARON: But you just continue to do your good works.

NATALIE: Yes.

SHARON: We're coming to the end of the interview, but is there anything that we haven't spoken about that you

would like to add? You've lived in Detroit for a long time. What do you think about the current situation in our community? Are you hopeful?

NATALIE: At my age, I'm not going to see it, but I do feel that it will be come back. I do. There are enough people that want it to. And I hope so. I won't be around, but I hope so. Because it was a vibrant city, it really was a beautiful city, and it had a lot of cultural things going on. It was a good city, it really was, and I hope it comes back.

Pittsburgh came back. Pittsburgh was really rundown and dirty and all that, and it came back. So I feel that there's hope. That's the message. There's hope.

SHARON: Natalie, thank you so much. Your story is remarkable. I'm so happy to be able to talk with you.

NATALIE: Thank you.