**ORAL HISTORY with MYER MEHL**

**INTERVIEWER: Faye Berkowitz**

**Fort Worth Jewish Sesquicentennial Committee**

**Date of Interview: November 10, 1985**

*Myer Mehl, 1907-1991, was the owner of Mehl’s Shoeland for 41 years. His parents, Annie and Israel N. Mehl, and his three uncles were active at Congregation Ahavath Sholom. Myer remembers watching Ku Klux Klan parade downtown during which many of the masked Klansmen called out to his father, “Hello I.N.” and “Hello, Israel.” Myer mentions surnames many still-familiar merchants and prominent families. An area with fresh produce stores and vendors was referred to as “Cabbage Tow.” He recalls that when he and his teenage friends walked to Temple Beth-El during the High Holidays, they were not allowed in.*

FAYE: Myer, if you will just tell us something about your family. Where you were born in

Fort Worth? Your parents, where were they from and their names?

Myer: I am Myer Mehl. I was born in Fort Worth, Texas, December 15, 1907, at 819

Taylor Street, Fort Worth, Texas. My father’s name, Israel Nathan Mehl from Ponevezh,

Poland [Lithuania]. My mother’s name, Annie Jacobs Mehl, born in the United States.

FAYE: And where was she was born?

Myer: Fort Worth, Texas.

FAYE: How did her family get here so early? Do you know? Where did your father come in from?

Myer: My father came in through Galveston, Texas, in 1900. He was brought in by his older

brother, A. M. Mehl. Later on, his mother and dad and sister came into the United

States via Galveston. Several months later, my father’s other two brothers came in via

Galveston. And the entire family resided in Fort Worth, Texas.

FAYE: How many uncles of that was yours?

Myer: That would be Abe M. Mehl, B. Max Mehl and Myer Mehl. And the Mehl was…

FAYE: What was the sister’s name?

Myer: Was Eva Mehl Horwitz, who resided in Fort Worth and moved later to Philadelphia,

Pennsylvania.

FAYE: What did your family do for a living here, Myer?

Myer: My father owned a men’s furnishing store, 1200 block of Main St. downtown Fort Worth.

FAYE: What did some of the other family do? What did some of the uncles do?

Myer: B. Max Mehl became a numismatist—rare coins, rare letters—and became nationwide

famous. Abe M. Mehl operated several boutique shops specializing in women’s hats

in those early days. Uncle Myer Mehl opened a business in Duncan, Oklahoma.

FAYE: Okay. Go back to when you were just a child growing up here. Was it different being

Jewish? Did you know any different or was there any problem being Jewish back then,

Myer?

Myer: No not all. We lived in downtown Fort Worth on Taylor Street, and we were one of the

two Jewish families in that particular area. And all of our neighbors, of course, were

Christians with whom we got along wonderfully well due to the fact that my mother,

Annie Mehl, was quite a baker, and these neighbors always looked forward to her

Christmas offerings of apple strudel.

FAYE: Who was the other Jewish family on the block?

Myer: The Sandler family. Also, the Rosenbaum family. And, the *schochet* [kosher butcher], Mr. Gordon, was two blocks up from our home.

FAYE: And where was that? How close was that to the Shul [Congregation Ahavath Sholom] on Taylor Street?

Myer: Approximately two blocks from the Shul. Now we lived in between the Shul and the Hebrew Institute.

FAYE: Your family did?

MYER: My family. We lived in a four-room, frame home, and when the *succah* [temporary outdoor shed], was put up on *Sukkot*, [weeklong, fall harvest holiday] I and Mr. [Eli] Horn, the *shamash* [caretaker of synagogue], looked forward to this occasion each year ‘cause I hung all the fruit and all of the greenery, and each year it seemed that when we finished, there was quite a bit of the fruit missing from the *succah*. Everyone thought, of course, that it was I who stole the fruit, being the one that strung it up. On the other hand, having two brothers who were able to climb the fence as well as I . . . and to this day, we don’t know which one stole one of the three “borrowed” fruits.

FAYE: Borrowed the fruit?

Myer: Borrowed the fruit!

FAYE: Living that close to the Shul did you have much contact with the Shul? Were you there much?

Myer: I never missed a Friday night service, or Bar Mitzvah or any special occasion at the Shul or the Hebrew Institute.

FAYE: Did you help them any? Did they call on you to help other than the Succah?

Myer: Yes, I helped the Ladies Auxiliary prepare tables for the Bar Mitzvahs, Bat Mitzvahs,

special occasions, yearly dinners, New Year’s affairs, dances. I did most of the decorating at that time by putting up the flowers and streamers, etc. I also helped with the serving. And, of course, I was strictly the head dishwasher. At the time I was

approximately 9, 10 and through my 11th year.

FAYE: And you were saying that if people didn’t show up you, had to do their job also you

were telling me.

Myer: Well, it’s not that whether they would show or not. That was my job. They expected

it of me, and I looked forward to doing it, and I ran errands for anything that

everything that was ever needed. Which I also enjoyed. And most of all, I enjoyed

the food.

FAYE: You had also said something about doing the candle lighting.

Myer: On Friday nights the Shul had a Negro janitor who might not have shown up on time

to turn the lights off and on Shabbos. Many time I was the culprit that turned off and

on the lights. I always put on a pair of white gloves and a hat when this was done.

FAYE: Who got you to do it?

Myer: This was strictly between Mr. Horn and myself, and I’m sure that my brothers knew

that I was the one that did this. I do not believe that my mother or my father knew

of it. But I’m happy that I was able to do it.

FAYE: That’s great. Myer think of some of the significant Jewish professionals. You know,

. . . were there Jewish doctors, lawyers, accountants. Who do you recall being

some of the early Jewish families here that were professional people?

Myer: Basically, there weren’t but a few medical men in the city. I remember Dr. [Abe] Antweil very well. Dr. A. I. Goldberg, Dr. [Abe] Greines. On getting into possibly the field of law, Mr. [E.L] “Elly” Gilbert, Mr. Sol Gordon, Mr. Max K. Mayer, and Mr. [David and Sol] Greines.

FAYE: Myer, what were some of the significant Jewish-owned businesses? Where were

they located, and who owned them here at that time?

Myer: Well, the first one was the nearest one which was Mr. Persky who had a junk yard on

the corner of Taylor and North Street of those days. And, because he was the nearest and the other businesses – starting with the north end of Main Street – was Abe Salsberg, Ben Levenson, Joe Dworkin, Weinstein’s Hardware, L. G. Gilbert’s Department Store, Colton’s Ready to Wear, Jackson’s Ready to Wear, the Fifth Avenue Shop (which was owned also by the Jacksons). Coming a little south was

quite a few men’s stores, Henninger & Graves, A. Davis, Washer Bros. Then,

there were quite a few smaller operations: Mr. W. [Wolf] Moses, Mr. Schuster, Mr. [Sam] Corban, the Schwartzes—were all shoe men, shoe-repair men. The men’s stores: Sam Gilbert, Morris Nudleman, Harry Levine, Mr. Rabinowitz, Cohens. Now on the west of Main Street—which was Houston Street—was what we called “Cabbage Row,” all of the fruit markets—the Cohens, the Foxes, later on the Chicotsky’s. The

Levines had a delicatessen on the corner of 11th & Houston. Mr. Rosenthal had a

meat market on 13th & Houston Street. And on up the street were more stores

of all types and quite a few second-hand shops on the side streets. More names

than I can mention.

FAYE: Where did you go to school, Myer?

Myer: I started grade school at the 4th Ward.

FAYE: And where was that located?

Myer: That was located on Texas & Macon Street. Two-story building, wooden steps and wooden floors. Four rooms to each floor. I started the 1st and went through 6th grade. My brother Milton also went to the 4th Ward. My brother Abe, being older, went to the 2nd Ward. And just past years, years past, and in 1920 we moved to the Southside of Fort Worth where we all still went to different schools because of our ages. I went to E.M. Daggett on College Avenue. Milton went to De Zavala on College Avenue, and Abe was in junior high school—the old Jennings Avenue Junior High. And as years went on, we each continued in the same schools as Abe did.

FAYE: Where on the Southside did you live at that point?

Myer: We lived at 1903 College Avenue. We moved there two weeks after I was Bar

Mitzvahed. In those days Bar Mitzvahs weren’t like there are today. I happen

to have received twenty-one Eversharp pencils when I was Bar Mitzvahed. But that’s all

I received. And, of course, we had a kiddush with herring and strudel and wine,

and that was it. Nothing else.

FAYE: And that was the Bar Mitzvah?

Myer: No parties. I recall how much enjoyment I received out at those Bar Mitzvahs.

FAYE: Where was the Temple at this point?

Myer: Temple Beth-El was located on the corner of 5th & Taylor Street.

Myer: Rabbi [G. George] Fox was the rabbi of the Temple Beth-El in those years. I recall that

several of us would walk from the Shul, which was near West 7th, down to 5th Street

during the High Holidays, and as we entered, we were told that we were not

allowed to come into the Temple. But I won’t mention the words at this time

that were said to us.

FAYE: Myer, did the ’29 Stock Market Crash – the Depression – have any great big

effect on the Jewish people here – or your family in particular?

Myer: Well, in my family it didn’t seem to bother us because there was little business done.

In those days, it didn’t take too much to get by on. However, I was not on a salary

– I just took what I needed. It so happened that I fell in love, and I married Bessie

Goldberg from Shreveport, Louisiana. Not having but a couple of dollars I didn’t

know what to do, but we managed greatly. We were married in Fort Worth August

2, 1931, at the home of Harry and Lena Bockstein, who was an older sister of my wife,

Bess. And, thank God, we’re here today to tell about it now.

FAYE: About what – prejudice? Racism? Any prejudice with the Klu Klux Plan? Did you have

any incidence with them at the time?

Myer: No, No.

FAYE: Any incidence with the KKK that you can remember ever seeing them?

Myer: It was announced that the Klu Klux Klan would be marching on Saturday. I don’t recall

the date. The time was approximately [indecipherable] PM on a Saturday. My father and I closed the store and decided to go home, and on our way home, of course, we had to cross Houston and Commerce and those streets, and the parade had started and proceeded down Houston Street. We stopped on the corner of Houston & 10th Street, and as the KKK came marching, there were approximately 30 or 40 men – all masked. Every fifth or sixth man that passed us would greet my father by saying, “Hello I.N.” “Hi, Israel.” “Hello I.N.” “Hi Israel.” And I, myself, became very much surprised because I doubted very much if my father could recognize their voices. But I don’t know the outcome of the parade. I heard nothing further on the KKK, and we proceeded home, and we were joking with Dad and asking him why he doesn’t apply as a member of the KKK.

FAYE: Did ya’ll know what they were? Did you know what the KKK was, Myer?

Myer: Klu Klux Klan.

FAYE: But you know what their purpose?

Myer: Their purpose was to do away with possibly Judaism and all other ‘isms.”

FAYE: But they didn’t scare you – did they?

Myer: No. No. We had no scare of any kind. The only other incident that I can remember

the KKK, that one Jewish person, a male – his name was Toby – who was taken into the park and tarred and feathered and asked to leave town – which he did. And this

is all that I can recall in regard of the KKK.

FAYE: That’s quite a bit.

Myer: OK.

Faye: Tell us something about the *kashruth*. Was it easy to keep kosher? Was there a

butcher? Did most of the Jewish people keep kosher at that point?

Myer: In those days – yes. Yes.

FAYE: Easy to get *matzos* and kosher?

Myer: Oh yes, yes, yes.

FAYE: Who was the butcher?

Myer: Well, we had another butcher.

FAYE: More than one?

Myer: No.

FAYE: No

Myer: Wonder what happened to [Abraham] Gordon? So we’ll say the butcher. But in

those days it was Gordon.

FAYE: Did most of the people keep kosher?

Myer: Yes.

FAYE: They did?

Myer: Yes, yes.

FAYE: And it was easy.

Myer: Easy. You bet. Yes. See, the old timers. Sure. Strictly a kosher home. Outside the kosher home, there’s another question. Yes.

FAYE: As a teenager, Myer, the dating. Was there much interdating, intermarriage –

in your age group?

Myer: No – very little. In fact, we never heard of anything. During our age.

FAYE: All of your friends only went with Jewish girls?

Myer: Right. Nice get togethers almost every Saturday night at someone’s home.

Whether we had dates or not, the boys showed up. The girls showed up. And

We always had that togetherness – all Jewish. And we continued on through

the years until we started spreading around and being married. Living steady.

Those were wonderful days.

FAYE: You said you had get togethers. Who sponsored them? Were there any Jewish

organizations? Who were the Jewish organizations at that point?

Myer: Well, these particular parties had no connection with any organization.

FAYE: Okay.

Myer: Each person, each boy or girl would bring something to the party whether it was

cake or cookies or what it might be. In those days I can’t recall taking hard drinks to

these parties because we were in people’s homes, and we had a lot of fun.

FAYE: What were some of the organizations that were here at that point that maybe your

parents belonged to?

Myer: Well, in those days, of course the Ladies Auxiliary, and the M. Shanblum

Endowment Fund. We had the YMHA – the Young Men’s Hebrew Association— which met on the third floor of the Hebrew Institute where there was a gymnasium. We had a Jewish Boy Scout troop, which you may see the photograph in the 50th

Anniversary yearbook of the synagogue. Many of you will recognize some of the

scouts. Harold Simon and myself were not in that particular troop because we

had joined a gentile group prior to this Jewish troop which was formed. We

participated with the Jewish group, but we both finished our scouting with

this Baptist church group on College Avenue. If you see this photograph of these

scouts, and you cannot recognize most of the boys – or most of the boys – you may call me, and I can help you with approximately 90% of the boys.

FAYE: They were all your age? And what was the relationship between the Shul and the

Temple at this time, Myer? Were there dual members like there are now?

Myer: Very few that I recall. You were either a member of Temple Beth-El or a member

of Congregation Ahavath Sholom, and in the early days I can’t recall any dual membership.

FAYE: Were the sizes approximately the same as they’ve gone through the years?

Myer: Oh, no. The Temple was a very small congregation. And the Orthodox—or the Shul—

possibly would have three or four times more members than the Temple.

FAYE: What was the effect of World War I on our Jewish community here, Myer? Did

you know any of the soldiers who had to leave?

Myer: Well, I was a little young, but I know that the Fort Worth Jewry sent quite a few

young men to the war. I was always standing on the street where we lived . On

Taylor Street was the Robertson Mueller Funeral Home, and any of the Jewish

aviators who were stationed at the field who were killed in flight or on

maneuvers, services were held at Robertson Mueller. And they proceeded

right down Taylor Street to their hearse and on to the cemetery. Several

of you at the cemetery, the Congregation Ahavath Sholom, there are several

names there that people would not know who they were, and those are boys— Jewish faith—who served their country and were killed in maneuvers here within

the city.

FAYE: Where were most of the Jewish people in Fort Worth – where were most of the

their families from? Were they from Poland, from Russia? Where were most

of the people from here at that point. Were most of your friend’s parents from

Europe?

Myer: Most of them.

FAYE: So most of your friends were first generation?

Myer: Most of them came out of the pogroms – places from Lithuania, in any Russian parts

of these countries. They kept romping over with their pogroms. And I would say that

the majority of those people were from Lithuania, which is the same as Poland,

Ukraine, Kovna Gobernia, . . . Gobernia, Ponevezh. But most of them strictly

European.

FAYE: And most of them came in through Galveston?

Myer: Galveston or New York.

FAYE: Galveston or New York.

Myer: When I was about twelve years of age . . . I had been at the store after school with my

Dad . . . every month or six weeks Father [Robert Michael] Nolan of St. Patrick’s Cathedral and Reverend J. Frank Norris [of First Baptist Church] would always come by to chat with my father in regard to their sermons for the coming week. My father related to them from the [Old] Testament and answered their questions to the proper manner, which I felt quite proud because I couldn’t have answered those questions. To this day I still remember those incidents, and it makes me feel very happy to have been there to see the brotherhood between Catholics, Baptists, and the Jews.

FAYE: That’s wonderful, Myer. Thank you very much.

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**OBITUARY: Fort Worth Star-Telegram (TX) - September 23, 1991**

**FORT WORTH - Myer Mehl, owner of Mehl's Shoeland for 41 years, died Sunday at his Fort Worth home. He was 83.  
  
Funeral will be at 9:30 a.m. Wednesday at Robertson Mueller Harper Eighth Avenue Funeral Home. Burial will be in Ahavath Sholom Cemetery.  
  
Mr. Mehl was born in Fort Worth and was a lifelong resident. He was a member of Ahavath Sholom Synagogue, Fort Worth Scottish Rite and the Moslah Shrine Temple. He was a master Mason for 60 years.  
  
For religious reasons, the family cannot accept flowers and suggests memorials be made to Congregation Ahavath Sholom or the American Cancer Society.  
  
Survivors: Wife, Bessie Goldberg Mehl of Fort Worth; daughter, Realene Mehl Coggan of Fort Worth; and four grandchildren.  
  
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