

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ORAL HISTORIES

I am Ann Friedman, I am conducting an interview with: Helene Banks
for the JFCS archives in 2001.

1. Tell me how and why your family originally came to this country and when? How did they travel?

My mother was born in the United States (Philadelphia, PA) but returned to Brussels, Belgium with her parents and brother Ben (also born in the U.S.) around 1912. Her parents felt there was much anti-Semitism in U.S. at that time and felt they would live more comfortably in Belgium. My mother returned to the United States in July 1940 when we were fleeing the Germans in World War II. She came with me (age 3-1/2) and my sister Simone who was only three weeks old and who was born in Bordeaux, France, en route to the United States. I was born in Brussels but we had to flee Brussels because the German occupation had already begun there. My mother had never relinquished her U.S. citizenship so we, as her children, were able to come to the U.S. with her. My father couldn't come at that time because he was not a U.S. citizen, having been born in Poland. He fled to Casablanca, finally making it to the United States and rejoining his family in 1941. My mother's brothers helped him get to the U.S.

2. Tell me about your parents - their names and where were they born? Have there been other family names used in the past? Where, when, and why was it changed?

My mother's name was Lena Halpern. She was born in Philadelphia, PA on May 14, 1907. My father's name was Leon Bronstein (later Anglicized to Brownson). He was born in Poland about ten days after Chanukah in 1908.

3. What is your birth date? What language(s) were spoken in your home?

French and English were spoken in our home. When I arrived in the U.S. at age 3, I didn't know a word of English – a year later I didn't know a word of French. We lived in New York City immediately after arriving in the U.S. When my father rejoined us a year later, we moved to Norfolk, Virginia where my father accepted a position as a furrier in a well-known department store. Later he opened his own fur salon and storage vault which in the 50s was billed as the largest fur storage vault in the South. We lived in a small bungalow in a lovely residential area. When I was 12 years old my parents built a large brick Colonial home in the Larchmont area of Norfolk. I lived in both these homes with my three younger sisters, Simone (Mona), Bernice (Bunny), and Rachele Joyce (we called her Joyce then). No aunts or uncles lived nearby and all four of my grandparents were lost in the Holocaust.

**4. Where did you live as a child? Who lived in the same house with you – Grandparents?
Uncles/Aunts? Brothers? Sisters?**

5. What brought you or your family to Louisville, Kentucky and when did you come? How did they travel? Did they share any unusual experiences with you?

I came with my former husband who was transferred to Louisville with the Recruiting Service of the U.S. Air force. We arrived here on June 9, 1975.

6. What was your neighborhood like? Were there other Jews living in the neighborhood? Did you walk to school? Sunday school? Synagogue/Temple? What kind of shops were in your neighborhood?

There were several other Jewish families in the Ghent area where we lived in our first home. We walked to school. We were driven to Sunday school at Temple Beth El, our Conservative synagogue. There were both a grocery and a drug store in this area. We had no Jewish neighbors in the Larchmont area. I took a bus to high school each day and we had to travel some distance to get to a grocery or drug store.

7. If you or your family lived in Louisville at the time - how did the 1937 flood affect you and your loved ones?

The flood did not affect me because I did not live in Louisville at that time.

8. If you wished to travel within the city limits what kind of transportation did you use? Did you travel out of town when you were young? What kind of transportation did you use when you traveled out of town? And if so, where did you go? What special memories do you have of those trips?

We didn't travel a lot but when we did, it was by car. We did attend family weddings and Bar Mitzvahs, usually in New York. I took my first plane trip to New York to visit my aunts, uncles and cousins when I was 17 years old.

9. Was your family involved in a synagogue/temple? Were your parents or other family members religious?

Yes, my family was always involved with our synagogue. My father was a respected member of our synagogue and belonged to the Men's Club. My mother belonged to the Sisterhood.

10. What holidays and rituals were observed in your family? Do you have any significant memories surrounding Jewish celebrations and what was special about those occasions?

All Jewish holidays and rituals were celebrated in our home and in the synagogue. We were Conservative and very observant.

11. Did you attend Sunday school or other religious schools? Were you confirmed? Did you have a Bar/Bat Mitzvah? What are your memories from that time? Are you still in touch with some of the people that attended Sunday school with you?

Yes, I attended Sunday school, Hebrew school and I was confirmed.

12. What is your educational background? What was your occupation? Who or what influenced you to choose your career? What kind of preparation or training was required for your career?

I graduated high school and completed one year of college. I took a summer job for an insurance company and promised to stay. I did not return to college for that reason. I was an executive secretary, a legal secretary and administrative assistant. I retired from KFC Corp. headquarters in November, 1985.

13. How did you meet your mate? At what point did you realize that this was the one you wanted to marry? Where and when were you married? Do you have children? Grandchildren?

I met my first husband, Jack Jaffe, at the Jewish Community Center in Norfolk, Virginia in 1956. We were married March 2, 1957 in Norfolk. We had three children: Denis (Deni) JaffeTownsend, Sharon Ellen Jaffe (Glasser), and Leonard Burton Jaffe. Jack and I were divorced in June, 1976 and he died in June, 1980. I met Norman Banks in June of 1982. His sister Rhona, after meeting me, gave Norman my number to call and we began dating regularly thereafter. We were married at Adath Jeshurun on May 27, 1984. We have no children together. Norman has three children of his own from his previous marriage,

14. Discuss your involvement in the Jewish Community outside of your temple or synagogue when you were growing up.

Before moving to Louisville, I was always working full time but was a member of Hadassah (and still am) because there was always a chapter in every city to which we were transferred. I joined NCJW, Louisville Section, the day I retired from KFC – November 1, 1985. I have remained active in all areas of the section and served as president from 1991 to 1993. In the late '70s I was an advisor to Modern Femmes BBG. I chaired the Scholarship Committee of the Home of the Innocents Auxiliary, served on the Holocaust Steering Committee and on the Board of the Federation's Community Relations Council. My children were active in the Jewish community organizations in San Antonio and Louisville. They continue to serve their respective communities.

15. What was your involvement in the non- Jewish community? Did you witness any anti-Semitism living in Louisville? If so, how was this incident handled?

16. How was your family affected by the World Wars? Wars in Israel? Pearl Harbor? What are your earliest recollections when thinking about major events in history?

As mentioned earlier, I lost all four of my grandparents in the gas chambers. And there, but for the grace of G-d, went I. Although I have not been directly affected by the wars in Israel, I have grave concern for its people. I pray they will one day enjoy peace.

17. What are your favorite spiritual memories? How did religion affect your life?

I particularly recall celebrating Simchas Torah with my father. The men marched around the synagogue carrying all the torahs from the ark and we children followed behind, carrying and waving our flags that we topped with an apple. A fond memory is of sitting between Joe Kaplan and my husband Norman chanting and singing the prayers on the High Holidays at Adath Jeshurun. Judaism has affected my life greatly. I have tried to live my life by its commandments.

18. What interests or hobbies did you have when you were young and what are they now? What schools did you attend and are there any memories that stand out from that time in your life?

Family, volunteer work, mahjong, needlepointing, knitting and reading are my interests.

19. What are your favorite family memories – whether it was with your family of origin, or your extended family and friends?

My sister Mona and I would get my mother's hats down from her closet and along with my mother, the three of us would try on all the hats frontwards, backwards and inside out. We'd laugh so hard. My son's Bar Mitzvah and all our other joyous family events also are favorite memories.

20. What is your legacy? How would you like to be remembered? What message do you want to leave for your children and future generations?

My legacy to this world is my three children who, in spite of obstacles and hardships they had to overcome, have become outstanding and respected citizens in their own communities. I'd like to be remembered as a good wife, a good mother, honest, caring and someone who tried to help others.

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13. Tell all about your involvement in the Jewish Community. Was your whole family involved.

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There was no question about the 1937 flood on the form when this interview was done.

The flood did not affect me because I did not live in Louisville at that time.