

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ORAL HISTORIES

I am Ann Roberts, I am conducting an interview with: Rabbi Chester B. Diamond for the JFCS archives on February 22, 2011

1. Tell me how and why your family originally came to this country and when? How did they travel?
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?
3. What is your birth date? What language(s) were spoken in your home?

My father, Sol Diamond, was born on the lower east side of New York City, the borough of Manhattan in 1908. His father, Joseph Diamond and mother, Celia Diamond, were born in Russia and came to the USA (do not know when) by ship, to find a better life.

My mother, Theresa Diamond (maiden name Blumenson) was born in Manchester, England in 1903 and was brought to this country (Dayton, Ohio) in 1906, traveling by ship, at the age of three with her parents Simon and Fannie Blumenson and her siblings to join other members of her family who had already settled here. I have always assumed that all of my mother's family came to America at about the same time. As far as I know my mother's parents were born in England, but I know that my great-grandfather, Simon's father, was born in Russia. I do not know his name, but I do know that as a child he was "snatched" into the Czar's army. It was a common practice to take Jewish boys in their early teens or even pre-teens into the army in order that they be assimilated. My great-grandfather ultimately became band master in the Czar's army. At some point he came to England and adopted the name Blumenson from a Dr. Blumenson whom he admired. No one knows what the original Russian family name was. So the name Blumenson came from England and as far as I know my dad's family name Diamond was original. Perhaps there could have been a different spelling such as Dimont, but I was never told anything to that effect. I have always assumed that the family names were all as they are now.

I was born on June 27, 1936 in Brooklyn. The only language spoken in our home was English. My father knew Yiddish, but didn't use it since my mother knew only English. However, there were many Yiddish words and expressions used at home which had become common.

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

My parents, sister (Joan--5 years older) and I lived in apartments in Brooklyn. My mother's parents at times lived in the same apartment building, and relatives, aunts and uncles, lived nearby, often in walking distance or sometimes a short subway ride away. We moved on a number of different occasions but lived always in apartments in Brooklyn and no other family members ever lived with us.

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?

My connection with Louisville began in 1963 when I came to assist Dr. Herbert S. Waller, Sr. Rabbi of Temple Adath Israel. As a student at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion I became friends with a fellow student by the name of Haskell Bernat. After Haskell graduated he came to Cincinnati on fellowship and on weekends assisted Dr. Waller in Louisville. When Haskell decided to leave, he called me in New York knowing that I had just accepted a fellowship to study in Cincinnati and was hoping that I might have the opportunity of working with Dr. Waller as well, so he arranged for me to be interviewed by Dr. Waller and the search committee. To my good fortune I was offered the position. Since my fellowship required me to attend classes during the week, we lived in Cincinnati and I commuted to Louisville on weekends. Originally, I had planned to become a professor of Bible and Semitic languages and teach at HUC-JIR. However, I fell in love with my congregational work at Adath Israel, especially because it gave me a broader opportunity to work with more than just seminary age students. I realized that being at Temple and working with all age groups, from youth to seniors, was definitely more fulfilling. And so after three years of studying cuneiform and languages like Akkadian and Ugaritic, which didn't help much on the pulpit, I decided not to complete my academic studies and look for a pulpit. After I brought my decision to the attention of those at the Temple I was gratified to learn that I had been invited by the congregation to accept a full-time position with Dr. Waller. I was thrilled and of course accepted! And now, how blessed I have been to have served this, my only congregation, for nearly half a century!

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?

Continuing with my childhood in Brooklyn, N.Y., I lived in a Jewish neighborhood and attended public school where most of the students and teachers were Jewish. I walked to school and school was open even when it snowed. My parents did not belong to a synagogue nor did most of the people in the neighborhood although there were synagogues on practically every corner -- perhaps an exaggeration, but it seemed that way. I never attended Sunday School and was therefore not confirmed. My parents did not attend services, not even on the High Holy Days. It wasn't that they had objections to it, it was simply not part of their lives. Dad worked long hours as a shoe window trimmer and at more than one job to make ends meet, and mom was the complete, industrious and loving homemaker; their lives revolved totally around my sister, me and our immediate family. They were devoted, hard working and self-sacrificing, wanting only for their children to have an education and succeed in life. As far as our religious life, we did not keep kosher, observe Shabbat or Jewish holidays, except going to my grandparents house for Seder. However, since schools were closed for every Jewish holiday and I had the day off I often walked into one of the local shuls and sat for a while during those services although I had no idea what was going on since everything was in

Hebrew and I knew none. Oddly, I did have a Bar Mitzvah. Six months before my 13th birthday my father took me to a rabbi who was a friend of the family from England. He was a conservative rabbi but in that limited amount of time he was only able to teach me my blessings and Haftarah in transliteration. So I had a conservative Bar Mitzvah, chanting everything but using only English letters. It was something I really enjoyed and it meant a great deal to me.

My neighborhood in Brooklyn had a small grocery, drug store/luncheonette, appetizing store or delicatessen, butcher, fruit market, dry cleaner, shoemaker, barber shop, and even a movie theater, all in walking distance. As a very young child I remember going grocery shopping with my grandmother. She would take me to the butcher shop, vegetable store and fish market where I remember the sawdust on the floor. When I was a little older I remember a k'nish shop around the corner where a sign in the window read: "We cater bar mitzvahs, bris's, divorces and other simchas!" As children all the kids would play on the sidewalk and in the street near our homes. We had more street games that you can imagine including stoop ball, stoop base, box ball, hit the penny, a baseball game on the sidewalk with a rubber ball which one person would serve to the other with spin which we called english and the other person would slap back, a game called potsy or hopscotch, running bases, giant steps, red light- green light, anyone around my base is it, johnny on the pony, ring-a-levio, a game called "packs" played with old leather and rubber heels discarded by the shoe maker, flipping baseball cards, chinese handball also called kings which we played against the back wall of the local movie theater, punch ball and stick ball. Everything in the neighborhood was ethnic -- barber and shoemaker were Italian, laundry was Chinese, policemen were Irish and the delicatessen and dairy restaurants were of course Jewish. From time to time we'd go to Sheepshead Bay to watch the kids dive off the piers for pennies, to Brighton Beach for Nathan's Hot Dogs and to Coney Island for a stroll on the boardwalk where we stopped to watch the famous parachute jump and the cyclone roller coaster.

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

Our family did not live in Louisville at the time of the '37 flood.

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?

In New York we used mostly the subways and we were able to get anywhere. There were also street cars and later buses. Dad had a car which he used mainly for work and sometimes on Sundays to visit family. We really did not do any other traveling.

When I was 9 we moved to Boston where we had some family. We stayed there for about a year while dad worked with one of his older brothers and then we returned to

Brooklyn. I have no special memories of that trip except that on the way we had a flat tire and the jack fell out from under the car and we got bounced around quite a bit!

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

As I indicated in answer 6, our family had no connection with synagogues or temples. Where I lived as a child, just about everyone was Jewish; we didn't think about our Jewish identity. I played with the "super's" kids who were Irish; we had the run of the building. Kids were freer then in the sense that we didn't need car pools to get around. Friends and parks and schools were all in walking distance and when we became teens or even pre-teens were were allowed to travel on the subway by ourselves (at 11 I would go from Brooklyn to mid-town Manhattan -- West 57th St. to my orthodontist's office). Still in our teens but a little older we could go to the beach with our friends. Of course our parents always knew where we were going and when to expect us home. When I was young, few if any people in the neighborhood belonged to congregations. During the High Holy Days those families who were interested simply paid for seats. Paying for seats during the holidays was the main fund raising opportunity for those congregations. The more affluent joined Jewish Centers which were actually synagogues that also had swimming pools and gyms etc. I believe that the famous opera singer Richard Tucker at one time was the cantor at the Brooklyn Jewish Center. The first Reform service I ever attended was when I was stationed at Lowry A.F.B. in Denver, CO in 1957 and was invited by a Jewish family to their home for dinner on Rosh Hashanah and to services.

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?

The only Jewish celebrations I remember were the Passover Seders at my Grandparents. Dad taught me to chant the first of the four questions in Yiddish. I have fond memories of those seders and what I remember most is one of the melodies that my dad sang and that grandpa skipped a lot of the Haggadah, so we got to the food rather quickly. We didn't search for the afikoman or anything like that. We did not celebrate any other Jewish holidays, keep kosher or have any other rituals. As a child I never even heard of Hanukkah! My grandparents fasted on Yom Kippur and from about the age of 10 so did I, just because I wanted to be like them.

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

No Sunday School, no cheder i.e. Hebrew School, no Confirmation, but I did have a Bar Mitzvah. When I was preparing for my Bar Mitzvah the rabbi would call others in to listen to me. I loved to perform and I loved the experience of singing.

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?

As an undergraduate I majored in biology and was most interested in micro-biology. Having been in the AFROTC, upon graduation I was commissioned and stationed at Lowry AFB in Denver, CO. At the time I wasn't sure what I wanted to do and considered a career in the Air Force. Research in bacteriology remained an interest. Not having any Jewish education, a rabbinical career never even occurred to me! It was while I was in the Air Force that I began going to Friday night services on base and even started to read some of the base chaplain's books on Judaism. At that time I heard that a temple in Atlanta had been bombed. I not only found that upsetting but I wondered what it was about being Jewish that would make others throw bombs at us? I wanted to know if being Jewish was worth it! The chaplain also taught me to pronounce the letters of the Hebrew alphabet so I could follow the service. As I read books on Jewish history I was filled with an overwhelming sense of pride as to who I was and what my Faith was all about. It wasn't long before my Jewish identity deepened and something new began to germinate in my mind and *heart!* I wanted to teach others what I had learned and I seriously considered going to rabbinical school. The problem was that I had already applied for three years extended active duty as prelude to a possible career in the Air Force. Although I was told that it was too late to change my mind, miraculously my application never reached headquarters and I was honorably discharged after six months of active duty, according to my special reserve status. While at Lowry A.F.B. a local family invited me to Rosh Hashanah Services at their Reform congregation (Grape Street Temple). That was the first Reform service I had ever attended. What impressed me most was that the service was primarily in English and it was the first time that I was able to understand what was going on. Shortly before being discharged I visited Rabbi Joseph Paymer who had prepared me for my Bar Mitzvah, to find out what it would take for me to become a rabbi. Having been a graduate of the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, which later merged with Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, he recommended that I seek their advice. I met with the dean and then a committee who were primarily interested in my feelings and what was motivating me to become a rabbi, and were not concerned with the fact that I lacked a Jewish education growing up. They sent me to night school to get some background and I enrolled in courses in ancient and medieval Jewish history as well as a class in Jewish customs and ceremonies. They also had me attend an intensive Hebrew training camp in Towanda, PA for six weeks that summer. It was there that I met Stanley Garfein from Louisville, not knowing that five years later I would be accepting a rabbinic position in his home town. I discovered later that Rabbi Paymer who sent me to HUC - JIR for advice was in the same graduating class as Dr. Waller and also Rabbi Earl Stone from Grape St. Temple in Denver, whom I met after services, turned out to be a friend of Dr. Waller! That is the short version, but it was the beginning of an entirely new life for me. In 1958 after three classes in night school and six weeks of intensive Hebrew I entered Rabbinic School where after two years I received a Bachelor's Degree in Hebrew

Literature. That same year I had the good fortune of meeting Joseph Topel, a Jewish musicologist who taught me to chant, what he said was an Orthodox version, of the "Kol Nidre" for my student High Holy Day pulpit in Curwensville, PA. Some years later I sang it at a Sisterhood interfaith program at our congregation in Louisville, at which time Dr. Waller asked me, from then on, to lead the Kol Nidre Service at The Temple, which I have been blessed to do ever since. Going back to my student days, I received a master's degree in Hebrew literature after another three years and on graduating in 1963 I was ordained and received a fellowship to study for my doctorate at our seminary in Cincinnati. On week-ends I assisted Dr. Waller at his congregation in Louisville and the rest, as they say, is history!

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?

Fran and I have been married for nearly 23 years. We met at the Temple and were married by Dr. Waller. I was previously married and had three children with my first wife. Together Fran and I have six children, 9 grandchildren and 3 great-grandchildren.

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

While growing up in New York a Jewish atmosphere pervaded our lives but my parents were not associated with any organizational life, Jewish or otherwise, except for an aunt who was a member of Hadassah.

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

Growing up in New York we had a few non-Jewish neighbors who were all very friendly. I know my dad experienced some anti-semitism when he was young but I never did.

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?

I grew up during the 2nd World War. We did all the things that other families did. Dad was an air raid warden and I remember the blackouts. He worked in a sheet metal factory during the war; we used ration books, we conserved what we were asked to and listened to radio broadcasts and watched pathe newsreels in the movie theaters. I also remember the celebrations when the war ended.

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

As a child all my experiences with Judaism though limited left me with very positive feelings especially my Bar Mitzvah. On that occasion my mother's parents Fannie and Simon Blumenson gave me a small siddur (prayer book) with a pearlized cover, which is

very special to me and which I read from every night to this very day. Another prayer book which is very dear to me is Dr. Waller's High Holy Day prayer book which I always have with me on the bimah on those sacred days. There was an experience I had when I was a child, on a Jewish holiday when off from school and I went into a synagogue, one of the men came over and let me hold a Torah. Perhaps it seems like a small thing but to me it was a big thing for I never forgot that moment! On those days sitting in shul, while I didn't understand the prayers, I learned the "sounds of the synagogue" and they always stayed with me. When I was seven or eight years old my dad took me to his cousin, Rabbi Shizgal, to be given a Hebrew name. My dad believed that it was something he had failed to do when I was born and so he wanted to correct that mistake. Rabbi Shizgal, whom I never saw again, gave me a most amazing Hebrew name. He tried to make it as close as possible to my English name Chester and chose the name "Tz'reel." At least that's what it sounded like to me. It was only after I studied Hebrew that I realized that my name was "Tzuriel," which appears only once in the Torah, in chapter 3 of the Book of Numbers, verse 35 and it means "God is my Rock." It also meant a lot to me that I was named for my father's mother Celia whom I never met since she and my grandfather Joseph moved to Israel before I was born so that they could die in the Holy Land. In Yiddish she was called Tcherke Baileh and so they named me Chester Bailey -- the closest sounding name to hers that they could think of. In 1969 on my first trip to Israel I visited her grave on *Har ha-Zeitim* -- The Mount of Olives. Sadly her grave had been desecrated by the Jordanians in 1948 when they had gained control over Old Jerusalem. My Grandfather lived for another 20 years and was buried on *Har ha-Menuchot* -- The Mountain of Rest, in the newer part of Jerusalem. Knowing that my grandparents went to die in Israel because that land meant so much to them also impacted my life as well. As I have already mentioned, when I was in the military service there was a news report that a bomb had exploded in the Temple in Atlanta (told of in *Driving Miss Daisy*) and, though I wouldn't call it a spiritual moment, it was definitely an awakening, and my search for the meaning of my identity began then.

But beyond these momentary flashbacks into my earliest years, there are literally volumes of spiritual memories that as rabbi of The Temple for almost five decades I hold especially dear. It is difficult to even begin to grasp what it means to have shared sacred moments with so many cherished families and friends, life-cycle events that have touched their lives and mine with both happiness and tears. The Temple is not just my congregation it is my family, and each week at Sabbath services when I hear recited the names on our *yahrzeit* list my mind is filled with precious memories of those whose lives have touched mine in ways that are deeper than one can possibly imagine. The greatest blessing of my rabbinate lies in my having been in this one community for my entire career enabling me to witness children growing into adulthood, marrying and having their own children. For me it is the essence of the meaning of the words: "L'dor va-dor!" "From generation to generation!" Of course above all has been my unique relationship with Dr. Herbert Waller, my colleague, my mentor and my dearest friend who was like a father to me. I cannot begin to express how he blessed my life and how profound was the grief I felt when he died. I moved into his corner office where I had received so much of his sage advice. For me it was a way that I could continue to physically feel close to him. When we built the new administrative wing of The Temple it

was difficult for me to lose that place, but it turned out that without realizing it when I chose my new office Rabbi Rapport told me that it was precisely in the same location in the new building that Dr. Waller's office had been previously. On the first Yizkor service that I conducted following his death I literally felt him at my side and I still do especially on those occasions. To this day I carry his prayer book with me on the High Holy Days when I am on the bimah.

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?

Then: playing handball, singing in the high school glee club, doing impressions of famous people; Now: working on projects for The Temple Archives, among them preparing a book describing the art and architecture of the Temple, training docents to assist the rabbis in giving tours of The Temple, and a project for the Temple Bulletin called Pillars of the Temple, not only to remember those deeply dedicated to the our congregation who have died, but to inspire the present and future generations to walk in their footsteps, in addition I am computerizing my personal papers. I also enjoy reading mysteries and spy thrillers, have a strong interest in computers, especially using animated GIF images in my emails, digital photography, and playing the piano. As far as my school years, I attended P.S. 189, Winthrop Jr. High, Samuel J. Tilden H.S., Brooklyn College and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. All of my best memories happened in my seminary years which are too numerous to mention. Before that I will always remember my singing a solo "Asleep In The Deep" at my high school graduation and receiving my Commission as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Air Force upon graduating from Brooklyn College.

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

My favorite family times were simply visiting our relatives. I always looked forward to those occasional Sunday drives with my parents to see family in Brighton Beach or Far Rockaway. Often my dad would sing songs of Al Jolson and I loved them as well as he. Also, though we never took family vacations -- I don't really remember my dad being on vacation -- but how special it was on Labor Day when he had off, sometimes he took us to Kiamesha Lodge, a small resort in the Catskills, for the long week-end.

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?

I believe that one's legacy is something for others to determine. From the beginning of my rabbinic career, I have been inspired by the words of the prophet Micah: "It hath been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee: Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God." (Micah 6:8) To be worthy of that teaching has always been my deepest desire. As far as how I would like to be remembered it is simple: *"He loved his family and his Faith; he cared about others; and to the best of his ability he did what was right."* Regarding a message to my children, I

plan to follow the Jewish tradition of leaving them an ethical will containing the thoughts and values which are most precious to me. Included among those thoughts are these: from Dr. Herbert Waller one of his deepest convictions was that as Jews, our desire and responsibility should always be: *"to will the well-being of others."* from his wife Sylvia shortly after his death, one day she shared with me her belief that: *"To love and be loved is life's greatest reward."* and from my beloved wife Fran when once I asked her to briefly express her philosophy of life, she said: *"To be happy with yourself, to take care of those you love, to not knowingly hurt another, to learn and grow from your experiences, and when you confront trauma in life: to respond in a positive way; then you will grow and rise to a higher level of spirituality."*

Perhaps this verse is a good way for me to conclude, because I believe the entire oral history project is of monumental significance, for it will ultimately be an everlasting memorial to those who have been and are being interviewed, and will stand as an indelible reminder of how much we owe to all who have preceded us!

*I am standing on the shoulders of the
ones who came before me.*

*I am stronger for their courage, I am
wiser for their words.*

*I am lifted by their longing for a fair
and brighter future.*

*I am grateful for their vision, for their
toiling on the Earth.*

Joyce Johnson Rause



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Chester B. Diamond
Participant

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Feb. 22, 2011
Date



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