

Pittsburgh Oral Histories
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CL

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed in Squirrel Hill at the Jewish Community Center

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Interviewer's Note

This lady, by her own admission, is a live wire. Tireless in her community activities, in all manner of helpfulness, in keeping up with her family and friends. (She found time in the course of our interview to fix this hungry interviewer an egg-salad sandwich.) This lady is a doer. Great stories of the Lower Hill / Uptown in the early years of the 20th Century when Syrians and Jews and Italians and Irish and Poles and African-Americans all lived together, Pittsburgh's true Melting Pot.

Interview

bc: We've been talking prior to the interview and, it's clear you're a woman who obviously has tremendous energy, has done a lot, continues to do a lot. You have always lived in Pittsburgh?

CL: I was born and raised on Gist Street, which is near the Boulevard of the Allies. I went to Fifth Avenue High School. I had six brilliant, wonderful siblings. I came from wonderful, hard-working parents. My mother was always in the kitchen and busy, but she was a businesswoman. She went to business college on Grant Street in Pittsburgh and graduated. She was a great cook and homemaker. We lived during the Depression and, during the Depression, she bought a little [grocery] store on Montclair Street. (She had to take, at six o'clock in the morning, a bus to 616 Montclair Street.) And she operated the store.

I had four brothers—Allen, Jerry, Adriel—and two sisters—Eva, Mildred—who were very bright, and, after school, they went up to the store to help her; and that's how we mostly maintained our finances. At that time banks would come to you and you wouldn't have to pay any charges—any down payment or anything—for houses. (This is way back in the '20s and '30s.) And they would say to [my mother], Would you like to take this row of houses over? (And they were out where the store was.) So she had these rows of houses and that was an income although [it was a] poor section.

My grandmother, Stishi, lived across the street [from us] in a home they had. Her husband was killed: he had a truck—a wagon of horses—and he sold produce. He drove the horses and wagons to Millvale where his son, Jake, had a store and, unfortunately, he fell off the wagon and was killed and it left my grandmother a

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widow with three children--Lena, Will and Jake. So Jake had a store in Millvale and they owned a house at 1842 Locust Street and my grandmother had boarders there.

All of [my mother's] children were born at home by Dr. Mann who came to the house. [And Allen was the first born who survived.] Two pounds he weighed. And he survived to be a strapping, six-foot, spoiled, handsome, gorgeous man. And all he wanted to do was be a State liquor store clerk on Center Avenue. And it made him very happy.

[Another one of the] boys—Jerry, whom we called “Jerry on the job”—went to Duquesne University and graduated in Accounting. He became a Post Office clerk. [And his son opened a successful plant and pet fish store, which still exists today.]

We had great energy—all of us--and personality; and we were all wild.... [She laughs.] These people are all self-made. My father said to us, I'm not leaving you any money, but I'm leaving you a good name. And that was true. Everybody knew my Dad—“J.D”. He was the President of the synagogue. And everybody knew J.D. The synagogue—Beth Hamedrash Hagadol—was on Washington Street, right next to the Epiphany Church. It was up a lot of steps. And it had gorgeous stained-glass windows. And we walked from our home on Gist Street—every Saturday and every holiday—to the synagogue. And it was the only time we ever got to eat out—was when they had a dinner, which wasn't very often. Those steps were treacherous: one time somebody took me by the hand and swung me all the way down the steps...and I never forgot it. It was something! I probably was around seven or eight. But I never forgot it. I don't even know how I survived it. [At the synagogue], where the women sat, upstairs, I sat up there with my mother and grandmother. And my father, with the four sons, sat down [below]. And often they didn't always want to go to the synagogue, but they went with him.

My mother always had beggars come up. We had a house on Gist Street with a huge backyard bordering on Tustin Street. We had a huge yard and a little alley. (They made cigars in back of our house--stogies.) And we had a chicken coop in our yard. And my father grew tomatoes and all that stuff. My mother had a trail up to her house. (There must have been a mark or something.) If you didn't have anything to eat—all these beggars came. They always got the same thing: a cheese sandwich, a cup of coffee, and something to take with them. [My family] was never afraid. We had an ethnic neighborhood: Blacks, Polish, Italians, Jewish.... Nick Lopeia made wine in his yard. He lived across the street. And they had the Italian parade with the flags—they had these huge flags.... You name it, we had it. And the people across the street, the Monks, that was their name: [if] they got sick, we took chicken over.... The three ladies next door: we never had a pot of soup or a watermelon that it didn't go over the fence to the Millers...Emma was the teacher.... They had a fireplace in their house...and the biggest thrill was to be invited over to their place [and sit around that fireplace]...and the way they talked to us and taught us... They had little hectograph machines....

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bc: I haven't heard the word "hectograph" in a thousand years. My father had one and we used to do a school publication on the hectograph....

CL: Well, I was one of their favorites, and I did everything for them, and, when she died, she had this gorgeous gorgeous table—like a card table—and she said to me, I don't know whether to give this table to you.... (They had no relatives—except a distant cousin I'd never seen.) And we were never allowed to take any money or anything for what we did: we had to scrub the floors over at my grandmother's [house] and my grandmother's neighbor's house on Friday to make ready for the Sabbath...we never were allowed to take any money. So I said, That's such a gorgeous table...she better give it to that other guy (one of her relatives whom she never saw). And her sister said to me afterwards, Emma wanted to give you the table; she didn't know who to give it to; and you should have had it. The Millers—I still have poetry she wrote about me.

bc: I've got to ask you, you called yourselves—your siblings—"wild"?

CL: We were good kids and wild. We never stole. We didn't do anything bad. We gave to everybody. We were great people.

bc: How did you mean "wild" then? I'm curious.

CL: Wild! Well, [my brother] was as attractive as a movie star; he was a great dancer...and the women were after him [but] he didn't want to get married. The woman whose father owned Gimbels wanted to marry my brother. He didn't want to get married. And she was lovely. Lovely. [He eventually met a woman who] was determined she was going to get her man. And she did. She was very smart. She was a lovely person, but she was not Jewish. But she converted from Rabbi Lichter. And she took it seriously. She kept two sets of dishes. She was serious [about her conversion.] Then they went to live in my grandmother's house across the street on Locust Street. (I told you they took in boarders.) So they got the first floor and had that little apartment, a nice apartment, one-bedroom [at] Locust and Gist.

I [also] went to Forbes School on Forbes Avenue where the Mercy Hospital is. It was a school for kindergarten to eighth grade. We walked to school every day, had an hour lunch, walked home for lunch, and walked back to school. We got a great ed-u-ca-tion. [She emphasizes each syllable of the word to stress its importance.] And these teachers we had—[they] only went to Normal School—in Oakland. And they were dedicated, great teachers. They weren't allowed to get married. I can almost tell you their names.

[One of my sisters] was a great fashion person and could do fashion stuff. And she was wonderful. She was offered a scholarship to Pratt. (Now who in the heck could go to Pratt?) So she didn't take that. And she became the head of a department store downtown—Biddell's. (She supported my family.) She also worked for the ballpark [Forbes Field] as a bookkeeper/accountant. (She could have gone to college, but she didn't.)

We were Orthodox. [My father] would bring everybody home on Saturday—all the Rabbis or anybody that came to town—he'd bring [them] home to eat. And

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they used to say, “Nobody knew...”—we had three floors in our house: two floors and an attic—“Nobody knew who slept there the night before.” And that was true. [She laughs.] My mother always had a pot of soup on the table, on the stove.... (We didn’t have a lot of money.) I still make her soup [from her recipe]. (I just made my daughter four quarts.) I just made it for my neighbor. Lentil soup. I can tell you how to make great soup in an hour.

bc: What kind of soup?

CL: Well this one was lentil. I can make a green pea mushroom. I can make a chicken soup.... What kind of soup you want? I’ll make it. I really have a skill at doing it. My father would go down to The Strip and bring back sweet potatoes, baskets of sweet potatoes. He’d bring a big “chip,” they called it, of potato chips and what we had for supper was marvelous. My mother put the sweet potatoes in the stove and we ate them with the skins on. We loved it! Or, she’d sit us down and make a pan of potato pancakes, which is another one of my expertises. And each one got six potato pancakes. It was wonderful. I do it to this day. (My granddaughter wrote a paper: What Food Do I Like Best? How many times has she said to me, Grandma, you ought to open a potato pancake store in Squirrel Hill.)

bc: How do you make your potato pancakes?

CL: All you do is take four potatoes. The big secret is if you can use a grater. But now I make them in a blender. And people don’t [notice] the difference, but I know the difference. And you put in one onion and one egg. Salt to taste and season it. If you want to put a little baking powder in it—one teaspoon—you can if you want. (It’s optional.) And you mix it up and you drain the water off. The biggest deal is that the skillet has to have hot oil. The oil has to be hot. Take the spoon and make them the size you want. And it takes a minute. You can do it in 15 minutes. And watch it and you can see it turning. Flip it over. It’s out-of-this-world. Applesauce and sour cream. 15 minutes. It takes no time to cook at all anymore. It’s fantastic, and you can do it.

bc: Aside from yours, where’s the best place in Squirrel Hill to get potato pancakes?

CL: You can’t get good potato pancakes. [The interviewer laughs and slaps his knee.] They’re fried and they’re good, but.... [You can do it.] Don’t let it scare you: you can’t make a mistake. As long as your oil’s burning hot. You’re not going to do it the first time perfect—you can’t expect yourself to. But you can’t spoil it.

bc: Once you throw it in the frying pan, it doesn’t take that long does it?

CL: No. If it’s hot and you flip it over...and you can see it, you can see it when it’s done. It’s just a thin pancake.

bc: I think we got off the track here.

CL: We always do with me.

My mother had “two families”—the four older children—and then she had three children eighteen months apart. [One of my brothers] was in the Army Reserves; [another] was in the Air Force in England in World War II; [and a third brother] was in the 13th Armored Division. (They were going to go to Japan, but the War was over.) [A younger brother] was in the famous Timberwolves, a Lieutenant in the Timberwolves and was wounded on the field in action. And they thought he

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was dead. [But,] they saw him move and they saved his life. And at that time I had the great job at the OPA (Office of Price Administration) in the Fulton Building for the Government. And I had a great job with all the soldiers—we gave out the [ration books]. My boss was an Irishman...my brother [who had been wounded] came home and needed a job—he was improving...he just had a limp at that time--and he came home.... And I asked [my boss at the OPA] if he could get my brother a job. And he got my brother a job in the Internal Revenue Department of the United States. My brother became one of the best tax people in the country. He was sent all over the United States...like he saved Philadelphia \$500,000 or something by looking over their tax [documents]. His brains were worth millions. After he retired, he became a consultant to doctors [dealing with tax problems]. Today he's 85 and, from the War, he's suffering. He was a great dancer—we were all great dancers--'til he was in his seventies.

bc: The OPA.

CL: Office of Price Administration. I still have a ration book. You were rationed sugar and gas.... You got a book; every family got a book, a little book. Well I still have my book. And we gave it out to the soldiers when they came home [on leave]. They had to come and get a ration book. We met a lot of soldiers. It was a perfect job for me. Talk about angels. I got that job and I was head of a counter. That's my expertise—that's what I did at school: I was a secretary. The day we were let go was the 17th of June, that was our last day of work. This was after V-E Day [Victory in Europe].

bc: You could make a movie based on your experiences and your opinions.

CL: No.... You know that I typed all of my son's films? You'll see my name on the credits. [I typed my grandson's films as well.]

bc: You didn't go to college.

CL: No, I went to the college of hard knocks. I have a doctorate.

I went to Fifth Avenue High School and got a clerical education. I went for college courses. I graduated with honor. I also was offered a scholarship, but I couldn't go. When I went to [high] school, we were able to be in the honor class but we were also able to take any "side" courses that we wanted. I took typing and stenography, and I excelled in typing. I didn't excel in arithmetic but I had great skill at typing. I could type real fast and I still can. So I went to the Office of Price Administration. [When I first worked], I was 14-years-old. [That was] at Murphy's Five and Ten [on Forbes Avenue] in the basement to sell dresses. And I was a natural. I looked Italian...and all the Italian people would come over [and ask], Are you Italian? And I said, Yeah, I'm Italian. And they all loved me. Then, a relative of mine worked at May-Stern's. So she said [to me], We need somebody at May-Stern's; could you be a clerk? So I said, Sure. (We were poor; we didn't have anything.) So I said, I'll go over there. I was interviewed and I became a "look-up" clerk. (When somebody would come in to get a charge, you had to look up their credentials and look up certain things. And through that skill—even to this day—I can find anything. If you want something, I'll find it for you. If you

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need something, I'll get it for you. It's a great skill. I'm really good at it. It was all from working at May-Stern's. So then they wanted to transfer me to be a cashier. I told them I can't do it. So the first couple of days I gave a person the wrong change—too much money back. So they realized that what I said was right. [And] I went back to being a look-up clerk. Then the Government jobs came open and I applied for the Government job and I got my job at the OPA. I was there until the War ended. I worked there about three years. The pay was fabulous. I think I made about \$60 a week—which was big big-time money. And we—my family—were all trained the same way: we didn't keep any of our money. We weren't allowed, except, I think, the boys may have kept some of theirs. I gave every cent of my money to my mother. (I wouldn't think of keeping my money.) Then, when I got married, I felt sorry for my mother so I still hid some of my money and gave it to her. After I got married, I kept all of my money—most of it. And my husband made \$75 a week, which was good. I wasn't working for May-Stern's at that time. But we accumulated enough money...we found this old house [near a good school] and Linden [Elementary] at that time had a principal...who was very famous and supposed to be great. And I found this dump of a house up steps that hadn't been sold for years. And it was only \$11,000. So we bought the house in back of Linden School—on Barnsdale Street--and it was important that my children could walk to school. It's half a double house. It was beautiful, had a nice porch. The only handicap was the steps, which I never minded—I could go through the back. It had a big living room and dining room—I liked to have my family over.

bc: You haven't been talking about yourself. You've been talking about your family.

CL: I didn't work when my kids were little. I wanted to raise my own children. I wouldn't have a maid push my kids around. I was going to raise them. And I didn't go to work until they were self-sufficient—after they graduated Linden and went to high school.

bc: Your family—both when you were living with your parents and after you got married—family seems to be really really important to you.

CL: It was. My husband worked six days a week. At Rosen Drugstore. And he worked at night. They had long hours at that time; and he wasn't home. I raised those children. I did dumb things: I kept them out every day—even if it was a freezing day. I had to put them outside. My children never get sick, thank G-d. Never: because of the way I raised them. And they had to make their own toys. (I have a movie—my son just put all our [home] movies on [DVD]. [In one of the home movies] they made a car, my husband and my son.) They made their own toys.

We used to go to West Virginia. Prisoners built these great gorgeous houses. And they give you a maid once a week. You live in the woods, and the deer came up.... My grandmother went. We were at Blackwater Falls.

bc: Cabins?

CL: Cabins--but gorgeous though. They had square dancing. My kids still go camping. [My kids] didn't do the things that the other kids did. We were Nature

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people. (I love Nature.) They go skiing now. My daughter is a great square dancer. She's also become involved in contredanse.

bc: When did you feel it was okay to re-enter the workforce?

CL: When [the kids] could get in the house themselves. They didn't need me. They were going to school for eight hours. And, the reason I [chose to work for] the [Pittsburgh] School Board was, I could be home at three o'clock. When you work for the School Board, you work eight to three.

bc: You worked at the School Board in Oakland?

CL: No, I worked in every school. Anywhere I go, they know me. My son always says that. I worked in every school in the system—wherever they sent me. Ten years I worked at Overbrook School—over on [Route] 51.

bc: I suppose that kind of job could be routine.

CL: Nothing's routine with the school system. I also worked up at Letsche. Frank Bolden's wife was my boss. [The late Frank Bolden, past writer and editor of "The Pittsburgh Courier."] She was a good educator; she had high standards. [My grandson did a film on Frank Bolden's life and career.]

[My son is now involved in making a film about the "Courier." My son also did the film on Teenie Harris' life and his career as a photographer, "One Shot"-- Charles "Teenie Harris."] Teenie Harris walked with my son for three years, three solid years!

[And so]...I worked at Letsche. I worked at Connelly. I worked at Minadeo. [I retired in 2000. I didn't want to retire...because I did everything for the kids.... [I retired eventually because of the incentives they provided.]

bc: Aside from your family and your jobs, how have you kept busy?

CL: I was a caregiver [for a lady in the area.] I cooked for her and took her out in the afternoon. She was 90 at the time. I knew the history of the family. I did that for three or four years. I loved doing that.

I also do a lot of volunteer work here [Jewish Community Center]. [At the luncheon meal CL acts as a kind of hostess/greeter. She explains,] I go around and see that the people are happy. If people come in, I see that that they get a table. I go around—I know what everybody wants. And I do great at it. (My sisters used to dress me up as a maid—in a little black skirt and a little white skirt. And, when their girlfriends would come in—my sisters had a big social life--I would greet them, "Can I take your coat?" [she says in a polite, diminutive voice]. I was seven- or eight-years-old.) And my mother went away to Atlantic City with my Dad when I was about twelve: I did all the cooking. I mean, I was the baby. And I gleaned everything I learned from my mother. My mother was an amazing woman. She was way before her time. My mother went, at six o'clock [in the morning] to open the store; then my brothers and sisters would take turns to be there and to close it. I don't know how she did all she did, but she did. My Dad was always happy: he had his family; he had his wife. And he was just a happy man. My father would not work on the Sabbath. He worked; he was a salesman;

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he sold men's clothing on Fifth Avenue—near the synagogue on Washington. On Fifth Avenue there were all stores like that. He worked for another man. I guess he made a meager living, but we worked and we gave our money in. I never thought about money—we just had a nice warm home. We had stoves. We didn't have central heating. We used to sit around the table—we had a huge dining room table. When my sisters had boyfriends, they'd all come to eat there. We had a lot of relatives and they'd always come to see Lena. They all loved my mother. We didn't have a car, but we had chickens in our yard.

I also volunteer and participate in medical studies at Pitt and, as part of volunteering, work with others at the University who oversee these studies. I have been doing that for some time now.

Also, a very memorable event that I participated in was the celebration of Eubie Blake that took place in Washington, D. C. I was brought there by my son and, for the program, we were able to sit in the President's box! So, you can see I keep very busy.

bc: In many ways you've had a hard life, but, at the same time, you've been very positive and very upbeat about everything that you've told me.

CL: Because I had a great childhood. I had a great childhood. I was the baby of seven. I always had to come home from school and scrub the floors on Friday. We had to go over and help Minnie that had a little one-room place on the second floor with my grandmother. (I don't remember cleaning for my grandmother.) My grandmother made cheese and butter. She did all these things. My mother baked bread all day. And, when we got married—seven of us--every Friday we got seven cheesecakes [from my mother]. She made farfel. On the holidays we each got a jar of handmade noodles and farfel. My mother did that. (My grandmother helped her sometimes. And we helped.) My father died in '53; and he was 73. My mother lived until '96 in Pittsburgh. In her 90s she came to my house and she made rigatoni—we call them kreplach—they're filled noodles. She sat at my table. She did all these things. She loved my husband—he worked as a pharmacist in Homewood. She used to hide her rings in the sofa and she'd call him up 'cause she wanted to see him and say, "I can't find my rings. I don't know where my rings are."

bc: In your long life, how has Pittsburgh changed?

CL: It's terrible now. Politicians are legitimate crooks. They are. They're taking everything from us. They don't care for us. [CL focuses in on the current problems and threatened cutbacks of the Port Authority transportation system. She focuses in on recent news accounts of legislators' *per diem* payments. She refers to the legislative pay raise of a year or so ago that outraged many. She also voices concern over the costs of prescription drugs for those without healthcare.]