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Oral History Interview: Rabbi David Wucher

David David Wucher

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Index/Abstract

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Interview Transcript

The interview took place at the B'Nai Sholom Congregation located at 949 10th Avenue in Huntington, WV. The interview lasted roughly from 1:50 to 2:40pm on Monday, November 7th, 2005.

Rabbi David Wucher: I'm Rabbi David Wucher and this is B'Nai Sholom Congregation in Huntington, WV and were here to talk about the congregation and my role as the Rabbi. (This statement was used to test the equipment)

Tara Allman: I'm Tara Allman and I'm here with Rabbi Woocher,..Wucher, I'm sorry. I mispronounced your name.

RW: It's okay.

TA: Its November 7th, 2005 and its roughly about 1:50pm. Thank you for doing this.

RW: My pleasure.

TA: About how long have you been a Rabbi?

RW: I was ordained in 1972 in Cincinnati at the.. I went to the Hebrew Union College Rabbinic School in Cincinnati and I was ordained in 1972 so its been more than 30 years.

TA: Is, Are there other Rabbis in your family?

RW: No, no I'm the first and so far the only one. I had a very religious family. I grew up in Connecticut. Bridgeport, Connecticut but no one else has become a Rabbi before or since. And my two daughters have other plans as of now.

TA: How long have you been a Rabbi in Huntington?

RW: My wife and I came to Huntington in 1989 so its been more than sixteen years. We are in our seventeenth year as Rabbi of B'Nai Sholom in Huntington.

TA: Where else have you been a Rabbi?

RW: Well before this we were in the Kansas City Missouri area for a number of years.

And we also lived in Springfield Missouri. I served there for many years. That is where both of our children were born. I also served briefly in Congregations in Maryland a couple of other places just briefly and I was also a Chaplain in the army after I was ordained in the early 1970s. I served for a few years as an army Chaplain in Louisiana. This was during the Vietnam period although I didn't have to go to Vietnam, but it was during that period. And after finishing my service as a Chaplain then I served a number of congregations. But this is, Huntington is the longest we've been anywhere and this is where I will finish my career. I'm scheduled to retire in another six or seven years and we will, I will finish my career here, my active career here. This is a very wonderful congregation and this is by far the longest we've been anywhere and this is by far,.. the best congregation I've had a chance to serve.

TA: About how large of a congregation is it?

RW: It has about a hundred and between a hundred and twenty and a hundred and thirty families. We count family unit so that would be several hundred people. Some families of course are three or four, five and some individuals but it has between a hundred twenty and a hundred thirty member units, family units. It serves the whole area I might add Tara. While of most people live around Huntington we also have members who live in Eastern Kentucky and Southern Ohio as well as other West Virginia towns because there is not another synagogue for some miles from here in any direction. Charleston would be the nearest one and that's of course is not that close to her but if you go West, North,

Northwest, it's quite a ways until there's another synagogue so we also have members live in places like Ashland Kentucky and Russell Kentucky and Gallipolis, and Proctorville, Ohio. So in a sense we serve this whole part of the tri-state area.

TA: How long has the temple been here?

RW: The temple uh, goes back to the late 19th century. Its more than one hundred years old. We've already had our centennial and beyond and why there used to be two Jewish congregations in Huntington when Huntington had a little larger population as you know it used to have more than eighty thousand people so there were two Jewish Congregations and about thirty or so years ago there was a merger into the one congregation we have no. The other congregation in fact was just a couple of blocks from here, but they had to make the decision as the overall population of the area was declining of course that effected the Jewish population too. They decided to keep this building and to dispense of the other building. So this building, this building as a Jewish Temple has been here for many many years. This building was actually built in the early 1920s. The community again goes back much before that. But this building goes back to the early 1920s. Its more than eighty years old and since the 1970s this has been the sole Jewish congregation in the area. One synagogue serving the whole area.

TA: What was the name of the other temple?

RW: Well, the other temple was B'Nai Israel and this was Ohev Sholom. These are very common Hebrew names for Jewish Congregations across America. This was Oheve Sholom and the other one was B'Nai Israel and when they put it together into one congregation they also merge the names and that where they came up with B'Nai Sholom

which literally means children of or followers of peace. But they took one word from each of the two congregations' titles that existed before and came up with B'Nai Sholom. So that's is what we had and this is like I said now the only Jewish Congregation not only in Huntington but for some distance in any direction.

TA: Since you have been a Rabbi have the number of families increased or decreased while you have been here?

RW: Since I've been here, you mean?

TA: Yes sir.

RW: Its been pretty stable, uh its, its remained about the same. There's a few hundred people a hundred twenty – hundred thirty families. It used to be somewhat larger, twenty, thirty, forty years ago as I said before I came here but since I've been here its been pretty stable. Its really not growing but its really not declining. Every year a few people leave and a few people arrive and it stays pretty much the same as it has been. So the congregation figures to be stable and no problem continuing for quite a number of years to come yet. Many of the young people, as it is true in West Virginia in general many, of the young people when they finish school and move away they don't necessarily come back. My own daughters are headed in that direction too. Your happy if they just live somewhere nearby. But then you have a few other people come. We've had a few other people come pretty much every year, young people with children and so it makes up and we've maintained a pretty stable population.

TA: Are there like, I'm not sure how to ask this, are there anything that the Jewish community faces?

RW: Problems, issues, changes?

TA: Yes.

RW: Well of course you always have some changes. Things never remain quite the same. Problem areas would be those facing this community this area as a whole again declining population in general sometimes makes it a little more difficult to attract people to move to this area. Huntington used to have more than eighty thousand people and I think now it has fewer than fifty thousand. And there are those who prefer to live in an area where there is a larger density, larger concentration of Jewish people. But for those, I always tell people thinking of coming here for those who can be happy living in a smaller city. My wife and I have always preferred living in a smaller cities where you get to know everybody and we nurture the attitude of an extended family. We may not have actual relatives living around here, my wife and I don't, but the congregation can serve as your extended family. And we've been here for so many years now that we really have that feeling. It's a wonderful city, we have Marshall University, much to offer and we have many other improvements taking place. The current mayor by the way, mayor Fellington is a member of the congregation and certainly doing all that he can to improve this area. So the problems we would have are the problems that Huntington in general has. How to maintain the population base, how to get some more of the younger people to stay around, how to get younger families to move here, how to build up the cultural and social as well as the economic base to make it more attractive. But everyone faces these issues and as I said we've been pretty fortunate in the Jewish community. For every younger people that young people who move away there's a few more that have been arriving. Some to teach at Marshall, some in the medical community, various other businesses. We had a family that showed up out of the blue this fall that live in Wheelersburg Ohio,

which is about a forty-five minute drive from here. But again there is no synagogue there; there is no synagogue anywhere around there. They have two boys and they wanted to find a synagogue and were the closest one where there would be religious school, which we do have for the boys. Religious school, Hebrew school. They need to study for their Bar Mitzvah when their thirteen, very important ceremony for Jewish kids and of course there are other families with children and so we are the nearest temple so they drive in a couple of times every weekend, (phone rings) for those things and for their boys and it gives to have the chance to meet other Jewish kids and we have people coming in from Kentucky as I said and other parts of this area so we've been able to maintain a stable population doing that. There is no reason why that shouldn't continue.

Huntington, I'm always telling people is a lovely city to live in if you like a small city and my wife and I certainly do and we feel, we try to encourage the idea of an attitude of an extended family in the temple, everyone can come and see people that they can be close to. We did have, the building, in terms of a physical issue, the building since it is more than eighty years old had to have extensive renovation a couple of years ago and that was a quite a serious project for a relatively small congregation. It got to the point that the building needed extensive repair and renovation and fixing up eighty some years after all. So we had to undertake a major project, fundraising and fixing up project that or either that or build a new building which is quite a major project for such a small group.

Well, we did have the renovation and we fixed everything up. We fixed the holes in the roof. It's quite a big roof you can see it for miles, the green dome on this place. We fixed that all up and the water damage. Repainted, recarpeted, redid everything. We used to say when I was in the army, if it doesn't move paint it, if it moves, salute it. We

were pretty much painting, fixing everything and we bit the bullet and it was quite a fundraising project but we got it done and now this building will be good for several more generations at least past the point that anyone here now has to worry frankly. It's really a lovely sanctuary it's a lovely house of worship. That was one of the things that attracted us to come here. It's a beautiful sanctuary. So that was quite a project. That was a concern of few years ago are we going to be able to keep this building are we going to be able fix it up and maintain it, but that's now been dealt with it. This building will be fine and we have a stable population we still have a number of young people here and as I said and we serve the whole area and there is no reason why this shouldn't continue here. And the Jewish people I might add in many communities such as where we used to live in Missouri and Kansas there's often a problem with discrimination against Jewish people we had quite a bit of that in the Midwest and also in Connecticut where I grew up. But we really don't have that problem around here. The Jewish community is fully involved in all aspects of this area and I can't even remember the last time there was a serious problem with prejudice or discrimination and there are a lot of parts of the country where you can't say that. Occasionally we have a bit of a misunderstanding. We have to explain you know that to people that you know we don't celebrate Easter, we celebrate Passover, we don't celebrate Christmas we have other holidays. But that's not of course that's not discrimination, that's just a bit of a lack of information, which we can easily fill in. So one of the attractions of this area is that there's no problem living here and being Jewish there hasn't been any problem with discrimination that I can recall. People who have lived here even longer would say the same thing. So that's a problem we don't have and

I'm hopeful that we don't have and I look forward to many more years of service here and to a continuing to have a fine experience here.

TA: You said that the building itself was eighty years old, where did people, you said that the Jewish community has been here longer, was there a temple before this one?

RW: Well, there were other locations, yes, smaller, there were buildings that they used not exactly houses of worship necessarily, but they were buildings they used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. And remember there were two congregations then so there were two fairly small groups that met in different buildings. But then they determined around 1920; it took a few years to happen, they determined they needed to have a much finer house of worship. As an organized community it got started really shortly after Huntington was founded, remember Huntington was founded after the civil war and it wasn't too long after that like the 1880's or so that there was an organized Jewish community here. Then they would meet in different places, people's homes, near, in the back end or the top of a store, that type of thing until they were able to have a real house of worship, which I would like you to see before you leave. I think that would also answer a lot of questions.

TA: Thank you.

RW: And in terms of changes I could also add a comment, we were talking about changes that have occurred. One change that's occurred in the last generation or so is a much more active role for women in the congregation. For this is an issue that a lot of religions have been dealing with. Like many religions of course the Jewish religion goes back to the ancient Near East and was largely oriented toward men having the positions of authority, the priests and so forth. But in more recent times one of the changes we've

seen here and its true across the country too is a much more active and equal role for women. Not only in services but in the administration of the congregation. That women have a fully active and equal role in services is much more typical now. This never used to be the case. The current president of our temple, Mrs. Pressman is a female and that would have been out of the question some years ago. That's the way it is now and there will probably be many more females in these positions in years to come so your seeing that kind of a change. And since both of my children are girls I'm certainly all in favor of that. That they should, of course they've kinda grown up assuming that of course they would be able to do anything that they wanted to do, in religion or any other area. But its not been the case in the Jewish religion until fairly recently. In fact there were no, no women Rabbis until 1972. All Rabbis were men before that. One of my classmates at the school in Cincinnati when we were ordained in '72, one of my classmates was the first woman Rabbi ever. It's just been in the last thirty plus years and now there are many more that have followed, but she was the first. All Rabbis were men, again, before that. So that's, that's a sign of course if there are women Rabbis then there can be women involved fully involved in all aspects of congregational life. And that's pretty much the way it is here now. But, that been quiet a change in the last one or two generations.

TA: Are you a Rabbi full time?

RW: Yes it's a full time job. I have some part time activities such as teaching one class every semester at Marshall. And occasionally some other things. But basically this is what I do. I'm the Rabbi of the whole, this congregation and the area occasionally I need to travel. As I said we serve the whole area, but occasionally I go down for example to

the Williamson, Logan area in the Southern part of West Virginia. There's a very small temple down there. Only a hand full of people and they don't have a Rabbi of course so occasionally I would go to a place like that and have a little service when I can and visit with people or occasionally I'm called upon to have a ceremony in one of the towns some distance from here. But yes this is my work; this is where I am either here or doing some related activity pretty much everyday. Of course I have to visit people who are hospitalized or who are in nursing homes and so forth and I'm involved in a number of community activities, interfaith activities, and so forth. Since I'm the only Rabbi around here, you know, I'm who they call when this comes up. But that's a pleasure, that's a privilege but it does keep you pretty busy. And as I think I have said earlier we have at least three services every week, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday and many weeks when there are holidays, we recently had the feast of Tabernacles for example, so there are extra services for holidays. For special events including life cycle events weddings and funerals and all kinds of other activities so we have many weeks, in fact most weeks we have more than three or four services plus we have religious school and Hebrew lessons and adult education and so on and so forth so everyday there is something to do and especially Friday through Sunday is a very hectic time. So yes this is what I do and this is where I got some of these premature gray hairs in my beard from running around like a crazy person, but its very fulfilling, very rewarding and as I said earlier no kidding this is a fine community so it is a privilege to serve this community.

TA: That is all I have. Thank you so much for doing this.