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INTERVIEWEE: Dorthy A. Levin Serotta

INTERVIEWER: Spencer (Salzburg?), James Joseph, Theodore Peters

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(Salzburg?): Good morning Mrs. (Serotta?). My name is Spencer (Salzburg?)--

Joseph: James Joseph--

Peters: Theodore Peters--

Sa: --and we're from the Turner Tech School of Technology. Um-- go ahead.

Unknown: Can you describe when and where you were born and a little about-- and a little bit grandparents?

(Serotta?): I'd be glad to, Kevin. I think it's a very good start for this. I was born in Baltimore but I've lived in Miami so long that I was brought down here when I was really little; I don't remember anywhere else. My grandparents, however, lived in Europe in Poland, Russia and my own parents were brought from there when they were so little that they don't-- didn't remember Europe, either. They grew up with accents just like mine, they didn't know anything but the deep south of the United States and I'm the same- I didn't know anything but Miami-- [audio cuts off] --my growing-up years.

Sa: And what was it like growing up when you were as a child?

Se: It was very, very segregated. Our school was white and we didn't know any black children to play with. You didn't even know they existed. The only black people you ever saw was somebody that came to the house maybe once a week or if you had some money, maybe everyday. But other than that, you didn't know them any other way. My parents were under the impression- although we were-- [audio cuts off] -- and our Rabbi taught and we knew from the Bible, everybody's is the same, we've all got one father. But they still had learned as little children- don't forget, they were born twenty years after the Civil War- they had learned that those other people, they're not really people, they might be some species of animal, you know, they weren't the same as us. That's the way they grew up and that's the way it looked like to me in the beginning. I thought that was the way it was supposed to be when I was really little.

J: Describe what your community was like as a child.

Se: Well the community, as I told you, was very separate. The first-- [audio cuts off] --the first inkling that I had-- [audio cuts off] -- aren't right, this isn't the way it's supposed to be, I was helping in the school library in my nice little lily-white (Buena Vista?) Elementary School and the teacher was sorting the books at the end of the year. There's one pile of books over here the pages are torn and their swollen and their-- I said, "These go in the garbage, don't they?" And my teacher said to me, "Oh, no." She said, "We gotta save those. We give those to the black schools. They'll be glad to have them."

Sa: And so, did you ever have the intention, maybe that you wanted to go play with the other kids--

Se: Sure, I would have like to--

Sa: --but you just weren't allowed?

Se: -- and particularly after hearing that. You know, when I first hear it, I thought oh, isn't that nice of my teacher to want to do such a generous thing? Then after thinking about it, I realized that's not the way it should be and from then on I felt different about it and wanted to do-- [audio cuts off] --things.

Sa: And earlier you mentioned that you were Jewish. So when you attended your temple, did they do anything to help out the community?

Se: Yes. You know, don't you Spencer, because you're part of that temple, too? This was Temple Israel in Miami, Northeast Nineteenth Street and our Rabbi at the time was telling people who considered themselves lily-white southerners, "Don't you know that your brothers and sisters are all the same people with the same father God?" We heard that every service and we lived it all our lives. Temple Israel had the first Head Start program in Miami for the little, little children came to our temple for their studying. And we did many things along the way as we get into more recent history, I can tell you some more things Temple Israel did--

Sa: -- well, explain.

Se: Well, for one thing, my son Gerald who grew up to be a Rabbi, but when he was in high school, one of the things his youth-group did was they went into the nearby Liberty City area and they went door to door, they were registering people to vote. This was pretty uncommon in that time. Of course that was way later, you know. He was born in 1946. The time he was in high school was the '50s. And it wasn't that unusual but it was still segregated, there were still differences.

Sa: Okay.

J: What else do you remember about the days of segregation?

Se: About segregation? Let me tell you that I have seen the Ku Klux march. The Ku Klux Klan. Do you kids know what that is? The Ku Klux Klan, their sworn idea was that white Christian-- [audio cuts off] --were the only people that really deserved to live on the Earth, and the rest of them, if they did anything wrong, you were supposed to punish them, and punishment included killing and sometimes-- [audio cuts off] --having fun with them first. I remember seeing a parade go by with those people, they had on the sheets and they had on-- [audio cuts off] --the hats and-- [audio cuts off] --could see of them was their eyes. My parents were with me in that-- [audio cuts off] --rade side, you know, (?). But they were part of it and my parents said, "Don't look at them. Don't even look at them, Dorothy. Turn your head away." But I wanted to see, and I looked at them and you could see their eyes, they looked like the mailman, or some teacher that you had in school. They didn't look different-- [audio cuts off] --anyone else and I was trying to say, well, they're not such bad people. And years later, then I found out-- this I heard from somebody who grew up black-- [audio cuts off] --and she was telling us about when she was little, about the same age as me, her parents would-- maybe a maid in a white person's house, they'd be ironing the sheets for these people with costumes that they wore with the pointy hats and the eyes. And in her house, when the maid knew, she'd go in the white person's house, she's iron the sheets, she came home and told the rest of the family, "Stay indoors tonight. They're gonna march. Stay inside." So everybody stayed inside and the Ku Kluxers came by in their sheets and their cars and their prancing around, you know? At one point there, this woman was telling me-- her name's Dorothy, too. She's one of the local historians. She said somebo--one of the dogs went out on their porch and barked-- [audio cuts off] --and that her little brother went out to get the dog,

you know? Guys driving by in the car, they heard the dog bark. Somebody pulled out a gun and shot it, shot the dog. Kid was out there, too. He could have just as well have hit the kid, he didn't care. Now, that's something I didn't know from my own knowledge, but I did hear about it, I do know about it now.

Sa: I don't know if you might have heard about it, but have you ever heard of Virginia Beach?

Se: I do know what Virginia Beach is and where--

Sa: How are your feelings towards that?

Se: Well, at the time, you know, when I was a kid, I thought well we got our beach, they got their beach, their's is as nice as ours. Well, not only it wasn't as nice-- oh it was ocean, ocean is ocean wherever you are. I just heard today that they-- I didn't realize it-- (Should have known?) the causeway didn't come 'til later. They wanted to go swimming, they had to get on a boat to get to-- [audio cuts off] --Beach. The rest of us-- when I first year-- when we lived in Miami, we could walk to the beach. We lived in Miami Beach and the ocean was on one side and the bay was on the other. Come out of our house, you could see the ocean over here and you could see the bay over there because there weren't any hotels or anything where we were--

Sa: -- [audio cuts off] --were pretty much past segregation. Have you ever visited the beach?

Se: Virginia Beach? No I haven't been there, no.

Sa: Okay. [school bell rings] I know this has been short but do you have any more stories that you want to share?

Se: I sure do. I could tell you a few things. I want to tell you about my friend Ruth Greenville. I know you've interviewed her, too but you may not know this particular story. Ruth Greenfield is a professor, musician, and concert pianist. She had in her home the first inter-racial school-- art school of music for black and white children in her home. Her own children when to a private school, Cushman School in Miami, very famous school, the first private school. And Ms. Laura Cushman had Ruth into her office one day and she said, "You know, I have had parents in my school tell me that they're thinking about taking their children out because your children go to my school and you let black children come to your school- to your home- to take lessons." And my friend Ruth thought, oh Ms. Cushman is going to tell me to take my children out of school. So she sat there and waited and Ms. Cushman said, "Well, I told those parents that we will miss their children when they take them out of the school." So you see-- [audio cuts off] -- always somebody that was on the side of segregation-- desegregation. I went to school with a young man, Jack Orr that was the-- he was the president of the Student Council. He was a sophomore and I was-- I mean, he was a senior and I was a sophomore at Miami Beach High. Nice kid, we liked and admired him, but I didn't know he was gonna grow up and do something famously wonderful. He was in the state legislature of the state of Florida and the question came up in the state legislature, "Shall we desegregate the schools?" And, you know, this has already been ordered by the Supreme Court at this point. And Jack Orr stood up and said, "Yes, we should." And he tried to pass the law. He was the only one in the state legislature of Florida that voted that way. He didn't get re-elected, but we did get the schools desegregated. It was partly things we were doing. I spoke for it over the years, worked for it, and had people object to my doing it.

Sa: And are you just happy that you've done it?

Se: I'm glad we've gotten to this point with it all. I'd like it to see it go-- see it go even further.

Sa: Thank you for coming.

Se: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW