

Interviewee: Arlene Amarant: "Born on the Beach", Beach High,
Jewish Community

Interviewer: Kathy Hersh

Location: 1001 Ocean Drive, Miami Beach, FL

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Q: Were you actually born on the beach, or you came as a child?

A: I was born May 26, 1945 in St. Francis Hospital because there was no Mount Sinai Hospital at the time. And my parents had come because of their relatives, who were here prior to that. My father was actually in the Public Health Service Department of the Navy, stationed at Fisher Island, as a dentist. My relatives helped to build South Beach.

Q: How so?

A: My aunt, Velma Granat had one of the first buildings called the St. David Court. It was an apartment-hotel, which is now Joe's [Stone Crab Restaurant] parking lot. She was a friend of Jesse Weiss and when my parents came. Actually, my mom helped have the USO dances right here, where you're videotaping me today.

Q: Now when you say your mom had them, did she organize them?

A: They organized them, a whole group of youngsters, teenagers, probably 20s, organized dances for the USO fellows -- and probably girls, too.

Q: That helped with the dancing. So what are your very earliest memories?

A: My earliest memory was my grandma pushing me in a baby carriage and I was looking up. And I've seen a picture since then and I was with a friend who was a friend as an infant, who is still a friend now, at 129 Washington Avenue. And my grandparents had a sign shop on First Street. My aunt had the hotel on First Street. A lot of my friends lived on First Street. And my father's name is part of the sign on the Jewish Museum on Third Street with, coincidentally, serendipitously, my daughter's grandfather by marriage. And my daughter and her husband didn't know each other growing up, because he grew up in New York. So it's always six degrees of separation. If you keep talking, there's always a network.

Q: So in those days, Jews... you're Jewish, I presume?

A: Yes we were Jewish -- are Jewish -- and fortunately our children are still Jewish. The Jewish population, I would say in my recollection, was below Fifth Street, even though I've seen in my friends books that there were deeds for people who were Jewish above Fifth Street. So, I really don't know the truth.

Q: Maybe it was just kept quiet about any property above Fifth Street?

A: I don't know. I would have to see the documents.

Q: So was that area predominantly Jewish, south of Fifth Street, or exclusively Jewish?

A: I think it was predominantly Jewish. All my friends were Jewish. My parents actually built a house on 34th and Chase Avenue in 1949. And so, my friends there were also predominantly Jewish and as I grew up I became part of Jewish organizations. I became Bat Mitzvahed at Temple Emanu-El. One of the first Bat Mitzvahs. My friends, who were friends then are still friends now and we're celebrating our children's weddings, who are Jewish, and our grandchildren's namings, who are Jewish. The trend has been that natives don't stay in Miami Beach. I left when I was married and then came back with my husband. We live in North Fort Lauderdale area. So my goal is to come back to the Beach. My cousins still own property on the beach -- part of Lincoln Road -- and my friends have apartments on the Beach and I still see the buildings that my family owned in those days, on the Beach.

Q: So not everything is been torn down, then?

A: No. A lot has been sold and I am glad to see that things have been preserved.

Q: Tell me why you want to come back to the Beach to live?

A: My first experience in really loving Miami Beach was when my father took me to Lummus Park and he took me gently into the ocean. And we floated and we sang and we giggled and throughout my growing up, the ocean was a big part of my life.

5:00

As a matter of fact, I got my PhD in environmental education studying why students do or do not help the environment.

Q: So the beach, actual beach and going in the water had a tremendous impact on your life?

A: The environment was perfect. Like a turtle, I always know which way is East, came back to my home. My relatives were loving and very supportive. At one point in time I think I had 60 relatives living on Miami Beach. I remember dancing in the David Court, which is now Joe's parking lot for Joe's Stone Crab. And everybody was clapping and singing and playing the accordion and my uncle played cimbalom, which is a Hungarian instrument. The feeling was something that was perpetuated throughout my entire life.

Q: Your family reunions must've been quite something?

A: I came from... My mother's parents, who were Hungarian, my father's parents were still in New York, Russian, but the Hungarians always were loud and said they had paprika in their blood. So not only were they fun and exciting and musical, they were always controversial. My mother grew from this and she became an activist. She actually started the Miami Beach Music and Arts League, and she was an activist in politics.

Q: What years are we talking about?

A: 1950s. My mother was not a well person. So she was able to use her mind rather than her physical ability. When Jane Fisher was running for City of Miami Beach City Council, she came to my mother -- they befriended each other -- and Jane asked my mother to help her campaign. Which my mom did.

Q: Was she related to Karl Fischer?

A: She was his wife -- first wife. And she wrote a book and [it] has a lovely introduction for my parents. That's one thing I remember when I was in elementary school.

Q: Your mother being an activist and being involved.

A: And she was a piano teacher. And my father was busy with his dental practice and I remember just people watching when we had to use our one car to pick him up on Ninth Street. And then we would go to the ocean after he was finished cleaning his office, in the summertime.

Q: You took a late afternoon swim, then?

A: Yes, that's right.

Q: Did you have picnics with your family on the beach? Did you all go together or was it just you and your father?

A: My parents and I, sometimes my grandparents, but everybody seemed to have jobs. Everybody was working to earn a living. This was second-generation coming to the United States. My great-grandparents came here not speaking a word of English, and never learned a word of English. So they instilled upon the children that they had to have an education, they had to practice their religion and they had to do well for the community.

Q: So what made your parents come down to Miami Beach? They started out in the Northeast, did they?

A: My great-aunt, Velma Granat, was the oldest of six children [Velma, Julia, Terezia, Lilly, Janet, Andrew (Buddy) and Rosalind Bergida] and she built this hotel with her husband and asked the rest of the relatives, her sisters and brother, to come to Miami Beach. Which they eventually did.

Q: To work in the hotel?

A: No, actually they stayed in the hotel to get a start and then they built their own businesses and homes.

Q: She gave them a foothold?

A: Exactly.

Q: What hotel was that?

A: That was the St. David Court. She thought her husband was a saint, so she named it St. David even though she was very Jewish and helped start the Jewish Temple on Third Street.

Q: Is that the Temple Emanu-El?

A: No, Third Street is Temple Beth Jacob, I believe. It's now the museum, the Jewish Museum. And if you go there and you look at the picture of the people hanging the fruits in the Sukkot, I'm in one of those pictures, I think. When I was about ten.

Q: It sounds like a pretty idyllic life?

A: It was beautiful. I didn't appreciate it. And my mother used to say to me, "there is no place like Miami Beach." My father took care of a patient, Ben Lifter, who started the motels with his brother, on motel row.

10:00

And the wife, Vera, used to tell my father, "I've travelled the world, and there is no beach like Miami Beach." And now that I've been traveling the world, I agree with her.

Q: What is it you especially like about it? What makes it different?

A: The climate is phenomenal. The ocean is fabulous. The fishing used to be terrific and is now coming back. The environment is conducive for

people from all over the world to come and visit. As I was walking outside today, I saw people from every country; I heard languages from all of the world. When I was growing up there were old chairs outside these buildings --dilapidated buildings -- and the elderly sitting outside because they came here for their last few years. They're the only ones who could afford it. They had saved their life savings and come to Miami Beach to retire.

Q: And then they got cleared out with the gentrification or did they just die off? What are your feelings?

A: The buildings were bought up. At the time I was not living on the Beach, we had moved. My husband was in the Navy, we moved to Hawaii where our son was born and then we moved back to North Miami Beach. So I was really not involved with the transfer of what used to be dilapidated and old to what is now a \$500/\$1000 a night hotel rooms across the street from where we are right now.

Q: And how do you feel about that transition?

A: I think this is a place that everyone can enjoy. And I feel uplifted when I see everybody coming from all over the world.

Q: You had some religious affiliation. You said you became members of Temple Emanu-El?

A: Actually my aunt gave the first Torah to Temple Beth... on 41st Street. I'll think of it in a second. It's Rabbi Kronish's Temple. In fact yesterday the son was just honored at Beach High. And then my parents joined Temple Emanu-El, which is a little less reformed - it's more conservative. My father grew up Orthodox and Temple Emanu-El, which was run by Rabbi Lehrman, saw me through my Bat Mitzvah and, eventually, my wedding. And fortunately it still's standing and is still beautiful as it was then.

Q: What are some of your early memories - you said you were Bat Mitzvahed there. That must've been quite a party with so many relatives around?

A: First let me say that I was one of the first children to start in that temple. It used to be called the Jewish Community Center. I have my report card, actually, which you can research later. And we started as a very small group. There must've been fifteen children. We started in a very small building. And then they built the big temple. Those children used to sit from Sunday school lessons through Wednesday religious school lessons, starting in third grade, to Saturday pre-Bat Mitzvah and Bar Mitzvah lessons to all the Jewish holidays, finally, across the street at the Beach Auditorium. I went to hear Sting the other night and sat in the same seats. And then the Temple expanded and they changed the school holidays to be teacher workdays because the Jewish children were not going to school on those days. They needed the subsidy if it was an FTE Day.

Q: You went to Miami Beach High. Tell us about that experience and what that culture was like, at that school?

A: Would like to start earlier in my life, first.

Q: Yeah.

A: Okay. Great. I was living on Chase Avenue, with my friends and playing and going to the Polo Park, which was a city-run park, actually, which was a preschool, and then I started North Beach Elementary. And my recollection was that the teacher who was going to teach me kindergarten came to my house in the summer before the kindergarten started and my mother braided my hair and got me ready to meet this teacher.

15:00

So when I started kindergarten, I already knew the teacher. And it was a very easy transition for me. Now I find, years later, that Miami Beach paid for its own kindergarten and we had our own school system. So at North Beach Elementary School I had wonderful teachers, wonderful friends and we stayed in the same classes from kindergarten through fifth grade. Then in sixth grade the classes mixed. And that was just like a new life. Then in seventh and eighth and ninth grades, at the junior high school, I was involved with the band. I was first flautist so I was the only child involved in a community organization. I went on to Beach High knowing the people in the band because I played with them in the summer. So Beach High was an easy transition for me, also. We were the first class that had three years in the new Beach High. Well, it's not the new Beach High, now. It's the Beach High that changed from downtown.

Q: Where did that start off?

A: Beach High, before I was there, was where Ida M. Fisher is and it was an open air -- I think Hohausser built the school. We used to go and visit and have parties there, before we went to Beach High with the older students. And then, when I got into the so-called "new Beach High," which is not new anymore (it's been renovated) that school was not air-conditioned. And after the second year I believe the company called Ren-U-Art air-conditioned it, and then years and years later the son of Ren-U-Art became the principal, I believe. The school was community. We had a lot of community organizations. Of course I was in the band. That took up a great deal of time. My friends were in the band with me. We are still friends today. We still play together, our musical instruments. The school itself was airy, before we had air-conditioning. I remember one person riding his bike down the hallway and there was a big ruckus about that. The school had a cafeteria and usually nobody ate from the cafeteria.

Q: Why?

A: They brought their own food from home. The band room was always accessible. You could go in and out. We practiced on the field. We had the camaraderie. And that was my life in high school with a group called P'Nena - Precious Gem - which was a B'nai B'rith youth organization. Would you like to hear what Precious Gem did for me? We had parties. At one of the parties was this fellow who was a guest of one of my friends. We started talking and eventually we went out for five years. I married him

and now we have four grandchildren. So that's a Beach High story. And I have quite a few friends who are married that long, also.

Q: What was it, do you think, about the atmosphere here -- was it the school, was it the neighborhoods, what was it that made such a tight community?

A: We had 565 graduates. I venture to say that I knew most of those people because we interacted in so many different ways. Our parents were a very strong guiding force. Maybe there was one person whose parents were not up to the standards of everybody else, but yet the other parents would help those children. It was definitely an interactive community.

Q: Do you think the idea of being on an island had something to do with it?

A: Not necessarily, because my mother went to Miami High. She took the jitney to go there. And even though she didn't have the long-term friendships that I have, she still had the foundations. It was her parents who gave her the foundations.

Q: So maybe it was the fact that there were generations of family members living in this place that made people have a sense of belonging? The alumni association is very active; it's got to be one of the most active in the state.

20:00

A: In the country. Q: In the country?

A: In the country. If you had been there yesterday, we had so many people stand up that are Hall of Famers. We've had national recognition for many of our Hall of Famers. We have people -- one is running for governor in the next election. We have doctors, lawyers, no Indian chief, unfortunately, but people in every profession. We reinforce each other. We nominate each other. We see each other's accomplishments. In my class, we're 65-66 years old. So we realize that we leave a legacy. We are still working, but we are going to leave a wonderful legacy. And Miami Beach High has an alumni association that is very, very strong. Thanks to the Internet.

Q: So that's made a big difference?

A: Absolutely, absolutely. People hear the information and in 30 seconds make the choice to come and spend time at one of the functions.

Q: Did you go to school with anybody famous? Now famous?

A: One of my best friends is Dr. Barry Katzen. He is world-renowned. His wife Judy and Barry and my husband and I travel together in the summertime with our other friends Arnie Staloff who was in the Philadelphia Exchange and they've written books about him. We have... we're planning to be with our friends from our high school and yes, they are famous. You want to know about everybody?

Q: Just the ones that people might know. You mentioned this guy who was world-renowned.

A: Barry Katzen is head of the Miami Vascular Institute. He is an innovator in interventional radiology. He can do un-clotting of your pipes without surgery. Yesterday, we were honoring another friend, Dr. Barry Grosskoff, who is a psychiatrist in Seattle and he has developed programs to help the homeless come back into the community. These are programs that can be replicated in every community in the country. I was with another friend sitting at the table, Dr. Michael Telson. He was with the Department of Energy and a CFO in the United States Department of Energy. Prior to my going to Beach High, I know my cousin used to play mah-jongg with the mom of Robert Rubin who was our Secretary of the Treasury.

Q: Under Clinton.

A: Right. If I had a list I could ramble off these people. I saw a Nan Rich, yesterday. She is our senator in Tallahassee. I saw my cousin, Dr. Pepe Granat, who is also a Hall of Fame recipient. I saw Jeffrey Chesky who is a doctor teaching about aging in Illinois. Many of these people are starting to retire but they are really not retired. They're still helping wherever they live and writing.

Q: So a lot of very influential people?

A: Yes.

Q: You consented very readily to participate in this project. What do you think it's important for people to understand about Miami Beach? About its history about its culture or cultures?

A: Miami Beach was a spoil island. There were mangroves here. People realized that the climate was fabulous, the ocean was fabulous and they developed it. I am an environmental activist. I am involved in Broward County. I think that seeing this area on a Google map from outer space makes us realize how fragile it is. I don't want saltwater intrusion in the well water. I realize that things have to be limited. Government has to be able to see the future and I would like to be part of it. I've seen the past, which is glorious, and I would like there to be a very long future.

25:00

Q: So that's why you're coming back?

A: Yes.

Q: So you're ready to roll up your sleeves?

A: And make some comments.

Q: Did your parents and grandparents speak Yiddish? What was the Yiddish community here? You touched on the Jewish community but I think we need to explain the Yiddish culture.

A: My grandparents and my parents, my mom, spoke Hungarian. So, if they ever wanted to communicate something that they didn't want me to hear, it was in Hungarian. I can sing you a song about squirrels in Hungarian. So Yiddish was not part of my upbringing. My husband's grandmother spoke Yiddish to him. So he remembers a lot of Yiddish from Brooklyn. I'm sure other families who had Yiddish as their culture, spoke Yiddish here. And I wish I knew what. "Shalom Aleichem" knew it.

Q: Were you aware of the discrimination? There were covenants on Miami Beach written into deeds. Did you have any sense of any discrimination any anti- Semitism when you were growing up?

A: I grew up in a Jewish neighborhood. We were not Orthodox; we were Conservative. So, therefore my friends were Jewish. I would say that, as I was growing up I heard about Arthur Godfrey coming to the Kenilworth, which was a restricted hotel. I heard about "no Jews, no dogs." I did not see the signs. I didn't see the covenants because we moved to Chase Avenue. I was with mostly Jewish but some non-Jewish people. My next-door neighbors were Chuck and Clara Sustegaman. I just played with them. There was no discrimination. I can say that I did see television pictures of the Holocaust when I was young and I realized that I am part of a group that must remember. I can never forget. And, unfortunately, I've heard that the city of Hollywood can't afford to keep their Holocaust Museum and the train that they brought from Europe. So I feel very strongly that things have to be made public and people who feel empathy need to be part of this.

Q: The Jewish Museum you mention had a prior existence. Could you reiterate what the building was used for before?

A: I can tell you in my growing up, since my mom was sick, my grandma would take me to temple while my father was praying. When he wasn't working. And my grandma took me upstairs because it was an Orthodox temple. And the men were downstairs and you could hear them. I don't think we could see them - I quite honestly don't remember because I was very, very young. But I know we could hear them and the women were upstairs praying. And that's why my mom, later on in life, made sure that I joined a Conservative synagogue. Not Orthodox.

Q: Your father had grown up Orthodox?

A: Yes, he had. But understand that that was in New York. And that was a whole different time. His parents were here from Russia.

Q: Your parents met here in Miami?

A: My parents met on the tennis courts in New York. And they fell in love. They courted; they separated because my grandparents moved to California.

30:00

Then they moved back to New York, I believe, but I'm not positive of years and sequences, but they moved down here after they were married, when

my father was in the public health service. I know my mom and dad were in New York during the Depression. My mother said there was very little to eat. She was teaching piano in the dental office after my father's patients went home. So it was a very difficult time and they never forgot it and I appreciated things, even though I asked for those Harburt skirts and Papa Geller's shoes, I appreciated the fact that I had to earn a living. I started working at an early age. I started becoming a helper in attorneys' offices in the summertime. I was a counselor in the San Souci Hotel when I was sixteen. And I knew that I had a job to do.

Q: What did you do as a family? Did you go out to eat? Did you go to clubs and anything like that?

A: I was looking through the pictures today and I saw pictures when my grandparents were married 50 years. Had a very old-time car and I remember we went to the Casablanca Hotel, I think, and they had a big ceremony. And my relatives came in from all over the world and then they took pictures. So that's my remembrance. I remember playing with the cousins that I hadn't seen before. Prior to that we used to go to the Famous restaurant and have stuffed derma, which is now made out of Ritz crackers. You don't need stuffed derma, which was - is totally fat, anymore. And we ate at the delis. There was Dubrow's Cafeteria. There was my girlfriend Cookie Beck's father had a cafeteria on Collins. There was the Governor Cafeteria. And we would wait in line to get the roast beef sliced. And the corn on the cob. That was across from the old City Hall of Miami Beach.

Which reminds me I have to tell you about a great-uncle. My grandmother's youngest sibling was Rosalind Klein; her older sibling was Buddy Bergida, Andrew Bergida. Uncle Buddy realized that because he was born in Europe, he wanted to go back and serve [in World War I] and tried to protect the United States. So he lied about his age, age 15, and went back and served. [After World War I] he came to this country as fired up in order to help youngsters [learn Americanism]. He helped out in the Boy Scouts of America. He gave the American Legion award in the high school every year. And he never used a microphone. And I asked Burton Young yesterday, the attorney and judge, if he remembered him and he said, "certainly."

Q: Because had a booming voice?

A: Absolutely. And was so gung-ho America.

Q: So what other influences did members of your family have on this community?

A: As I said, my oldest aunt started the hotel [David Court Apartments and Hotel] on Miami Beach. A second aunt had family and hotels. Her son was actually a dentist and invented the first implant. The third aunt had a fruit shipping business on Lincoln Road and they owned the property there, which is across from the Lincoln Theater. That was the first Cadillac dealership, actually. I'm trying to remember without my notes. I teach my kids with string beans so I can remember which one to do...My fourth aunt was in California and eventually came here and her husband had passed

away, so she brought her daughter and son-in-law. They owned the Variety Hotel on 17th Street [and Alton Road]. [A fifth aunt was also in fruit shipping and owned an apartment house.] So, my family was in real estate and fruit shipping and in trying to promote the community.

Q: Promoting it to vacationers or people in general?

35:00

A: I would say, for music and arts and culture and the Hungarian community, was part of that. My mom actually was so involved in politics that any time she took me anyplace I remember her talking about current events for hours and hours with all her friends. And a lot of the people who were in City Council. She wanted the beaches to stay free and clear and not have the hotels that were going to be built by the two people she called the "Gold Dust Twins," who were on the council.

Q: They were on the City Council and they were going to be building hotels?

A: Yes, and Lummus Park has no hotels. But after, if you go farther north, there are hotels there. And my mom felt that the Beach ought to be free of hotels they should build across the street.

Q: So you think she had an impact on that?

A: No, because you have a lot of hotels after Lummus Park.

Q: But, down at this end there's not a lot built out on the beach.

A: No, but farther you do. Penrod's is right on the beach. This building is right on the beach. This was the USO center in the 40s.

Q: And your mother organized entertainment here?

A: Yes, one of the few people who realized the need for it. And she told me there were submarines off the coast. They could see the lights at night. German submarines. So they were tenuous times. But I didn't grow up in those times. I grew up postwar and it was burgeoning. There was prosperity here. Everybody worked and everybody had a job to do.

Q: So the 50s was really the heyday. It was the boom time on the Beach, from what I gather?

A: From my lifetime, yes. And the 60s.

Q: When did it stop?

A: Well since I left after high school and I was at the University of Miami and then got married and moved to Hawaii and then moved to North Dade, I didn't follow it as much because I had three young children. But I could see that people were moving off the beach, that the elderly were being put into group homes and that there were large investors buying properties. And today, I am happy to see the beautiful reconstruction and people from

all over the world. It started with mangroves. Carl Fischer actually had that elephant here, who was called Rosie, I think? And Rose Weiss got postcards [which people meant to send] for that elephant.

Q: So what was some of the lore or mythology about the beach that you heard as a child?

A: I'm trying to think what you mean by mythology.

Q: Who were the bogeyman?

A: Well there was mafia here. My aunt had a dry goods store, actually in Smith's casino. There was gambling here. Which was really a beach resort, at the time. The beach prospered. There were people coming from all over the country. Indianapolis brought Carl Fischer and his buddies they -- were investing here. They realized the gorgeous capabilities of this area. At one point in time people wanted to build a canal across South Beach and my relatives and I and a lot of very smart environmentalists realized that if you build the canal that the point [or tip of Miami Beach] is going to sink. And now I think they're building a canal across from Dodge islands so we'll see what happens.

Q: Was there an environmental consciousness back then? Living right next to the ocean?

A: Well they cut the mangroves. They brought in palm trees, which were exotics, from other places and they eventually got the blight. The

consciousness was that the land was the important part. Fishing was always prevalent. They probably had offshore fishing that was from other countries. I can't tell you because I'm not the expert, but I know that things are better now because of the regulations. There is a limit, you know. Although I think it's pretty confusing because they let you catch the big ones who are the reproducers and you have to let the little ones go.

Q: Did you ever go to Joe's Stone Crab?

A: When I was growing up that was a hamburger joint. It wasn't Joe's Stone Crab - it was a little shack. And then, I believe, they used to throw out the stone crabs until they realized they could boil them and then they could refrigerate them. I was not fortunate enough to go to Joe's Stone Crab until I was in high school. And then my cousin who came down from Syracuse, who had grown up on Miami Beach, said, "I'm taking you to Joe's Stone Crab." And then my husband, who was my boyfriend at the time, proposed to me at Joe's Stone Crab.

Q: So that place has a special significance?

A: Oh yes, and it is special right now. We were there the other night.

Q: And that's become an institution.

A: Yes it has. At one point in time they were keeping one claw of the crab but now, I think, they are taking both claws because they say it can grow back quickly, but I have to look into that. ##