

SANFORD L. ZIFF JEWISH MUSEUM OF FLORIDA: Home of MOSAIC  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interviewee: Natalie Beller Lyons  
Interviewer: Honey Robins  
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In view of the historical value of the oral history interview, I, Natalie Below Lyons knowingly and voluntarily permit the Mosaic project the full use of this information for whatever purposes it may have, in return for which I will receive the typed copy of the interview, so you have to sign that.

This is Saturday, May 12, ....., Coral Gables, Florida. I am meeting with Natalie Below Lyons for Project Mosaic Oral History and Natalie, I am Honey Robins, and I am going to ask you some questions with relation to your family.

Q Would you begin by identifying yourself and say where you live and then we are going to discuss your personal family.  
Please give me your full name.

A My name is Natalie Engler Beller Lyons.

a What is your address?

A I live at 1010 Andora Avenue, Coral Gables, Florida.

Q What is your date of birth?

A I was born April 3, 1926 in Havana, Cuba.

Q And when did you come to the United States?

**A** I came to this country in 1943, October of that year. It was during World War II.

**Q** What was your father's name?

**A** My father's name was Herman Lawrence Beller.

**Q** And where was he born?

**A** He was born Comonitsk Pedowski Gibernia and he was brought to this country at the age of sixteen or eighteen months. He was the eldest of six sons.

**Q** Do you remember what year it was?

**A** It was in the late eighteen hundreds. Well, he was born in 1899 so it would have to have been shortly after that, so that would make it 1900 or **1901**.

**Q** And what level of education did he complete?

**A** He went through some college in New York City.

**Q** And what was your mother's maiden name?

**A** My mother's maiden name was Engler. She was Jennie Engler.

**Q** And where was she born?

**A** She was born in Key West, Florida.

**Q** When did her parents come to the United States?

**A** Her parents came from Rumania, either Jassy or Podoloy. I don't know which one of the two. They came in the late eighteen hundreds and went to New York City and in a settlement house there, were persuaded to go with 60 other young Jewish couples to the big city of Key West, Florida, which according to the inviter was a Medinait Yisrael, where young people should go to make their lives.

**Q** Your grandparents, were they married in New York?

**A** Yes, My mother's people were married in NYC, and I do have pictures if anybody wants them.

**Q** Do you know what city they were married in?

**A** No, I don't. Oh, I take that back. It's possible that they were married in New York City/

**Q** Oh, okay.  
What type of school did your mother attend in Florida?

**A** She attended the local public schools, she was fluent in reading and writing. In fact, she was quite a good reporter.

**Q** And your grandmother?

**A** My grandmother, Sarah. Her maiden name I found out through family history, her maiden name was Itskovitch and she was one of 5 siblings, 3 of whom came to the United States and acquired different last names other than Itskovitch, and two of the siblings, a brother and a sister, remained in Rumania and subsequently sent their children to, or their descents, to Israel, where I met them in 1974.

**Q** Did your grandmother work outside of the home?

**A** Yes.

**Q** What did she do in Key West?

**A** Well, in Key West she was just a young girl. She went to school.

**Q** Your grandmother?

**A** Oh, my grandmother, yes. My grandmother must have helped grandfather in his business.

- Q What was his business?
- A He had a grocery type store heavy with produce which he would bring in from Cuba.
- Q Do you know when they left, when they first came to America, do you know what their port of embarkation was?
- A My grandparents, my mother's mother?
- Q Your maternal grandparents.
- A They must have come through New York.
- Q Do you know the port of embarkation when they left Rumania?
- A No, that I do not know.
- Q Okay. Do you know why they left?
- A If the history follows everybody else's, it was economic conditions more than anything, but I was never told.
- Q How did they learn English?
- A They learnt English through daily commerce. I don't know if they went to school. My grandmother, I did meet her, and she spoke only Yiddish. I do not know that she ever really learnt much English or that it was required.
- Q Again. Do you know what year it was that your family came to Florida?
- A It was in the late 1800's.
- Q So your mother, then, was born in Key West?
- A My mother was born in 1900 in Key West.
- a Were there other children in the family?

- A** There were 3 other sisters. My grandmother was very much involved in the Jewish community there and the classic story is --
- Q** You mean in Key West?
- A** -- in Key West -- that she brought over Mrs. Aronowitz whose son later on became the first mayor of the City of Miami, and the family legend is that my mother and Mr. Aronowitz shared the same wet nurse in the area when there were no bottles, and the wet nurse was a Bahamas lady.
- Q** So they were in the produce business and grocery business in Key West?
- A** Among other things.
- Q** Can you give us the approximate size of the Jewish population when your grandparents first settled in Key West?
- A** There must have been very close to 60 families with the assorted children, and I don't really know how many children they produced, but they were all rather prolific in those days. Out of this 60 young couples eventually they spread out to Tampa, to Miami, very slightly to Miami, and heavily to Jacksonville, which is where my grandparents ultimately went.
- Q** In Key West, where was their place of business located?
- A** I really don't know the name of the street. I suppose I could find out because my mother's cousin is still around and she could tell you, and have visited the store, and it was one of these very tall, wooden 4-storey structures typical of the era. The store was in the corner of the front and the family lived in back of the store and in the top 2 floors.
- Q** What is your aunt's name?
- A** My aunt's name is Jennie Appelsouth.
- Q** And is she a sister to your --
- A** No, she is a cousin to my mother. She is my first cousin once removed.

- Q Were there other young couples that went to -- other relatives of your grandparents that went to Key West with them, or were they the only ones in their family?
- A No, there were the Weintraub's, which were related to the family, which is where this cousin Jennie comes from. They were there, and they had an array of children, they had 4 children also.
- Q Were your grandparents involved in the community organizations in Key West?
- A I suppose they were doing whatever young couples did at the time, but my grandmother was busy raising 4 children at the time that she was in Key West.
- Q And did your mother speak of any Jewish organizations that she was involved in?
- A No, she was just about 12 or 13 years old when she left Key West so she would not remember too much.
- Q Did your grandfather hold any elected office?
- A No, he did not.
- Q Are there any special anecdotes or memories you have about the family members' involvement in business or community life that you can relate?
- A My **grandmother** tells the story that her father owned a ship. I don't know whether it was a frigate or whatever kind of a ship it was.
- Q And what was his name?
- A His name was Harry Engler.
- Q And your grandmother's name was...
- A Sarah Itzkovitch Engler.

Q Now who was it again that owned this ship?

A My grandfather, Harry. He was quite a dashing entrepreneur. One year he would be extremely wealthy and the next year he might be flat, but this was the kind of life that he lived so he was a man of some kind of reputation. He travelled, according to the family, in a buggy with 3 or 4 horses and he would sweep up all the young ladies and g'o picnicking wherever one picnics in Key West. But the story that tickles me that my mother told me, very inadvertently, when we once asked her to relate what she remembered, my grandfather was hired by the Navy and took his ship with supplies during the Cuban-Spanish War, the Spanish-American War, and he delivered his merchandise, his navy material, or whatever it was he was delivering, to the Teddy Roosevelt, and that group of people on that part of the Island, and then he was paid in gold and came back to Key West. The ship was quarantined because there was yellow fever on the Island, and he hadn't seen his family for quite some time, so my mother tells the story where he put the gold in his laced boots and slung the boots around his neck and jumped overboard and he swam home. The next day he was down with Yellow Fever. That's one incident that my mother reports and there was another that she tells which I found very poignant and she got very poetic about it. She said there was a hurricane in **1912**, and little girl that she was -- she was 12 years old at the time -- she went out in the eye of the hurricane and she found the peace and serenity -- not that she knew that it was the eye of the hurricane -- she said that there was an extraordinary calm that it looked as though God had come and the world was quiet and beautiful, and then all hell broke loose again and she scurried home. So this was an incident. Now her cousin relates an additional yarn to this episode -- this is cousin Jennie-- and she said the Jewish community was very involved in the sweep up and clean up of the hurricane and worked hand in glove with the authorities to restore Key West to the way it was before the hurricane.

Q How was it that you were born in Cuba?

A How was it that I was born in Cuba? My father was a New Yorker. He lived in New York most of his young adult life, and he was working on the stage with Georgie Jessel and Eddie Cantor and that group of entertainers, and he was 10 years younger, so he never really achieved the standing that they did, but at the same time he was working as the corset puller in John

Wannamakers to make money, and he was attending the University.

Q Which university was that?

A I think it was NYU, but I am not sure, and he suffered a heart attack, so the doctor told him he should go South and marry a nice, quiet Southern girl, and he would live to be a grandfather. So he went to Jacksonville, this was as far south as he went, and my grandparents, the Englers, had moved to Jacksonville. Well in those days there were no hotels, Jewish people went and stayed with other Jewish people, so he wound up at my grandmother's house.

Q What year was that?

A It must have been in 1921, and my grandmother had 4 daughters, which my mother was one of them, so they fell in love, and grandfather Harry told his prospective son-in-law that an up-and-coming whipper snapper from New York would do well to go to Cuba and make his life because it was a virgin territory, and persuaded him to go to Cuba, which the young couple did as soon as they were married. They were married, went to Cuba on their honeymoon and lived there until World War II knocked them out. That's why I was born in Havana.

Q So did you travel back and forth between Jacksonville and --

A I travelled back to Florida during the revolution of the ousted Machado, Geraldo Machado. This was the time it was called the Machadato, and it coincided with the Depression. My father sent his family away from Havana because there was shooting going on and he was inadvertently involved in the Revolution because he was manufacturing ammunition for the rebels and he scooted us out just to be safe, and so then I came through Key West for the first time that I could remember, and came through in a blinding rain and saw a shanty town of wooden houses, which was contrary to my expectation of what a city of gold with paved streets, etcetera, and --

Q What year was that?

A This was in 1932, and coming from Havana, which is a large metropolitan



city, I thought Key West was a real jerk town, and in Spanish I said to my mother so nobody should hear me around on the ship because I was waiting to get off, you know, debark, and I said, "Mother, this place looks like a dump." I said this in very good Spanish and everybody around me roared because all the passengers waiting also to debark were fluently bilingual and could understand what I was saying. That was my first experience with the great United States. It was a terrible disappointment. I remember, then, going to my great aunt's house, Aunt Rose Weintraub, and playing jacks on the floor, and my ball wouldn't bounce, and I looked at the floor and it looked like the tiled floor that we had in Cuba and I picked at it, and it was sort of -- then I found out that it was linoleum and this was the ultimate insult, linoleum, and it looked so raggedy-tatty that I burst out crying, much to the humiliation of my mother who was then, you know, showing that she had a bratty daughter, and I must admit that I didn't like what I was seeing. But then I came down with pneumonia, so I guess I could have been excused.

Q Tell me what your grandparents, Engler, did in Jacksonville when they moved from Key West to Jacksonville?

A I don't know what their line of work was. I really have no information on that. It was never really discussed.

Q Do you know why they went up there?

A They went up there because the living in Key West had deteriorated , possibly as a consequent of the hurricane, or the fact that the railroad came through just about then and it just seemed expeditious to move to a larger city, and that's why they went.

Q Did they talk about -- or did your mother talk about going to school. Did she go to high school in Jacksonville?

A No, her schooling ended in Key West. I don't think she went to high school. I think she had one or two years of high school so if she left at 12, yes, she must have had one or two years of high school in Jacksonville.

a Do you recall any mention by the family of encountering any anti-semitism, either in Key West or in Jacksonville?

**A** No. If there was any, they never mentioned it to me.

**Q** Did your mother go on to college?

**A** No.

**Q** As you said, her education ended in Key West.

**A** No, In Jacksonville.

**Q** Jacksonville, o k a y .

Did they say anything about any synagogue in Jacksonville, or belonging to a synagogue or any denomination?

**A** No. Remember that I only went up there during the Machadato which is equivalent in time to our Depression, and I was 6 or 7 years old at the time.

**Q** When did you move to Miami?

**A** I moved to Miami in 1967.

**Q** And lived where?

**A** I have been living here ever since I moved to Miami. I married for the second time and my husband brought me to the big city of Coral Gables, and I have been in this house for 23 years.

**Q** When did he first come to Miami?

**A** My second husband?

**Q** Yes, Arthur Jeral Lyons.

**A** Arthur Jeral. He discovered Florida during World War 11. He was stationed here as a soldier, and after the war he came to live in Miami.

**Q** Could you tell me the names of your children?

A My children -- I have 2 daughters, one is Sara. Her married name is Sara Burns and she is named for my grandmother Sarah Itskovich Engler, which we have just spoken about. My daughter's name is Anne, and she was named for her father's mother.

Q Are there any other anecdotes that you would like us to know about?

A About the era of Florida?

Q Yes.

A I can't think of anything that's worth recording for history. Basically, the yarn of my grandfather going down to the Island of Cuba and coming back with gold is one that has always delighted me, but I really have nothing further to contribute.

Thank you Natalie.