The Women of Beth-El: Jewish-American Women in Middletown

by

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In the fall semester of 1996, the Women and Gender Studies department offered two faculty and student grants for the production of technological projects dealing with topics related to women. Looking for a topic for my Honors thesis, I approached one of my professors. Dr. Mjagkij keenly encouraged me to consider a series of videotaped oral history interviews with Jewish-American women in the Muncie community. Previously, I had decided to complete a creative project for my Honors thesis which would bridge my interest in history and women's studies. I had considered a video project as I had limited video production experience through my work with Video Information Systems (VIS). However, I did not finally decide on a video project until the Women and Gender Studies Department offered the grants.

Soon after Dr. Mjagkij and I decided to apply for the grant, I developed a grant proposal. With the help of several professors, I developed a time line, potential budget and statement of purpose.

Through my initial research, I became aware of the need for this project. First, two Ball State history professors completed a similar oral history project in the 1970's, but they had focused primarily on the issue of being Jewish in Muncie. We wanted to focus on the experiences of Jewish-American women. Also, some historical research involving the Muncie Jewish community had been published with regard to the famous Middletown studies which largely overlooked the Jewish community. Once again, this research dealt with the Jewish community, rather than Jewish women. Thus, focusing on Jewish-American women's experience seemed appropriate given the previous research. Furthermore, timeliness was also a factor in deciding on the project. The last historical research done on the Muncie Jewish community, the oral history project, was in the 1970's with a different population. Our group partly consisted of the original participant's children and other people who had since moved into the community.

After considering the previous research, we enlarged the scope of our project.
What began in idle conversation as a series of interviews evolved into a short video documentary. We hoped the combination of the previous research and our findings would illustrate some broad themes of continuity and/or change regarding the lives of Jewish-American women since World War II. In addition to the video, we still planned to contribute copies of our interviews to the Ball State archives and the Women and Gender Studies Department for future research.

After receiving notification of the grant award in late October, Dr. Mjagkij and I developed the project in more detail. I continued with my historical research, contacted women about the interviews and developed a series of interview questions with Dr. Mjagkij. For continuity, Dr. Mjagkij always conducted the interviews while I videotaped. Also, she was more knowledgeable with regard to Jewish-American history and could better steer the conversations. We frequently discussed the progress of the project and noted emerging patterns or interesting exceptions among the interviews.

Soon after we began the project, we were aware that it would be difficult to deal with our original question of change and continuity with regard to WWII and the lives of Jewish-American women. We only had ten participants, most were in their early fifties and late forties, one was in high school and another was a Ball State student. Some of the women had grown up in Muncie, others had moved here from larger cities and one, the Ball State student, was only here temporarily. Thus, the project was evolving again.

We largely concluded the interviews in mid-February. At this point, I began the tedious process of logging the information on the videotapes. This was an essential step as it refreshed my memory and helped me develop the actual form of the video. We had approximately 12 - 15 hours of videotaped interviews with ten participants. After discussing the material, Dr. Mjagkij and I decided to concentrated on four topic
areas: heritage, childhood, marriage and family, and the future of Judaism. In addition, we included a brief discussion of the history of Muncie and Jews in Muncie to place the video in a context.

The scope of the project far exceeds the 35 minute video. After logging the tapes, it was obvious that several different topics could have been extracted from the interviews. However, we chose to look at issues that affected the participants as a result of being women.

It is important to see this project as more than a history project. It was truly a capstone project for me as it brought together multiples areas of interest and skills. It was time consuming, challenging, exhausting, and rewarding all in one. Not only did I have the opportunity to do some primary historical research, I learned how to put together a video documentary. I learned the technical skills while I developed the vision, focus and creativity skills video production requires.

Those looking for a perfect technical product will likely be disappointed with the video and will miss the point. There are problems with lighting, and sound quality throughout the video and the oral history collection. However, viewers should keep in perspective that the video and interviews were an attempt to enhance our understanding of the experiences of Jewish-American Women. I chose to use a different and creative media that allowed me to develop my technical and creative abilities to produce a worthwhile and interesting product that hopefully represents good historical research.
Project Contents and Holdings

The entire project contains one video (approximately 35 minutes long) and ten interviews. Copies of the video and interviews are available through the Women and Gender Studies Department and in the Archives and Special Collections. Jennifer Reynolds has all original copies of the video and interviews. Nina Mjagkij, the women interviewed and the Ball State History Department have copies of the video, but not the interviews.

The following interviews make up the ten tape collection:

Anne Eliades
Stacey Eliades
Ruth Freund
Stacy Jordan
Judy Koor
Florence Lapin
Dorothy Malman
Livia Polcz
Alba Rosenman
Juliette Terman