

Date of interview: 5/16/2010
Interviewer: Volunteer at Vilna Shul
Location: Vilna Shul, Boston, Mass.

David Glater

INTERVIEWER 1: There we go. We're ready.

INTERVIEWER 2: We're talking to --

GLATER: David Glater.

INTERVIEWER 2: -- David Glater, and today is May 16.

INTERVIEWER 1: Okay.

INTERVIEWER 2: So do you want to tell us quickly about who you are and where you grew up and --

GLATER: Okay. Sure. I grew up in upstate New York in a city called Schenectady.

INTERVIEWER 1: Oh, I went to school in Saratoga Springs.

GLATER: Oh, okay.

I left there for college and then law school and after that, moved to Boston. Arrived in Boston in 1968, which doesn't seem like such a long time except it's probably before you guys were born. And I moved into an apartment on the back side -- well, not exactly. On West Cedar Street, but on the backside side of West Cedar Street and lived there for a year and then moved into another apartment about two blocks away, also.

And shortly after that, got married. And about two years after that, moved into a house about two blocks from there. And so I've been clustered probably within a three-block radius of a point on Beacon Hill. And still with an entrance(?).

So what do you want to know?

INTERVIEWER 2: So how did you come to be involved -- you're involved with the Vilna Shul now.

GLATER: Okay.

INTERVIEWER 2: So how did you get involved with that project?

GLATER: I arrived in Boston in September, which is time for High Holidays, and I didn't know anyone, didn't know anything about the Hill. And saw posters for free High Holiday services, no charge for seats. (inaudible) And so I attended services here.

I attended services then pretty regularly for the next -- till it was closed in '84. '84 or '85.

Occasionally, I would wander over to the Congregation (inaudible), which was then occupying the African Meetinghouse until it -- it closed.

I think maybe once or twice, I would go visit the Charles River Park Synagogue, but that was -- that was the scope of my wanderings.

INTERVIEWER 1: And what was the Vilna Shul like before it closed?

GLATER: Well, let's see. The High Holiday services were very well-attended. There were a lot of people who came back, who lived here, whose parents lived in the West End, and they would come back for services. I think the fact that it was free was a big draw.

There were services for the other festivals, but that was more religion than I needed. So I didn't particularly attend them.

The building itself was painted. The sanctuary was painted in a -- my recollection was a very pale blue. I'm told that was white, but that was --

INTERVIEWER 1: It was all one color, though?

GLATER: Yes. All --

INTERVIEWER 1: No designs?

GLATER: -- all other designs had been painted over.

The -- the person in charge of the -- of the services, in charge of the whole operation was a man named Mendel Miller, who was an old-timer then and got older.

He was the one who initiated the bankruptcy proceeding for the -- not bankruptcy, but the effort to close the building in '84, the petition to dissolve the congregation, sell off the assets and use the proceeds to make contributions to charities and (inaudible).

INTERVIEWER 1: Did you have a place in that conversation? Were you part of --

GLATER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER 1: -- that?

GLATER: I was active in all of the goings-on from then on. I was one of a few people who were essentially sponsored -- sponsored -- it was -- the Synagogue Council sponsored in litigation to try to reestablish the congregation.

We were represented by Lenny. I'm not sure what his name was. He was, back then, a lawyer with Rubin & Rudman.

And they were -- are you familiar at all with the proceeding -- with what the proceedings are to dissolve a charitable organization in --

INTERVIEWER 1: No.

GLATER: The state supreme court is considered the overseer of all charities in the state. And if a charity wants to dissolve, since it has assets that have been donated to it --

Oh, there's Richard Mintz.

INTERVIEWER 1: There you go.

GLATER: -- donated to it, the state supreme court has to oversee what happens to those charitable assets to make sure that they continue for charitable purposes. And the state attorney general is the direct overseer to provide advice for the supreme court and to take any action that's required. And so the attorney general's office gets involved, and the formal legal documents goes right to the state supreme court.

So Mr. Miller hired a lawyer, I think he hired several lawyers over the course of all of this, who filed a petition to dissolve the congregation. And that became somewhat controversial because his -- his plan -- as I say, his plan was to use the proceeds from the sale of this building, whatever assets of the congregation, to support Israeli charities.

But there were local charities, in particular, the Charles River Park Synagogue that was formed in the early '70s, I think, out of four or five congregations that had buildings in the old West End, and those buildings were taken in urban renewal. The congregation was paid something for their buildings,

and they pooled their resources and built -- or merged, so if you look at the title of that, the congregation's got about five congregation names in it.

And they built the building that is the Charles River Park Synagogue and has been named in the '90s, I think as The Boston Synagogue. And they sought -- they sought the proceeds from the sale of this building because they were then an orthodox synagogue like the Vilna Shul was. They sought the proceedings, saying they -- under a legal doctrine called cy-près, which means "the next thing." And they thought they were the next closest activity and so should get the money.

There were also issues about the -- the Jew -- the Jewish Cemetery Association wanted to be sure that the congregation -- from the assets, the congregation could pay whatever obligations to maintain the charitable cemeteries that Vilna Shul had.

That effort to -- to reestablish a congregation failed. It went on for a couple of years, and so the (inaudible) could dissolve the congregation, but then questions what to do with its assets, became involved with the -- the legal efforts to declare this a landmark under the Boston landmark statute.

And that was contentious. It went on for several years. The proceedings before the city Landmarks Commission and (inaudible) and hearings before the state supreme court because the issues, whether the -- the state could landmark what had been a religious building.

And this was going on at the same time that the Catholic -- the archdiocese wanted to make changes to the Church of the Immaculate Conception, which is in the South End.

And that, too, was -- (inaudible) establish that building, both the exterior and the interior -- I think -- think about interior changes. Have the interior established a landmark so that the archdiocese couldn't make the changes.

And so there were legal questions, constitutional questions, and that went on for some time.

In -- we were helped -- a small group of volunteers, working to figure out what to do to raise money and ultimately to organize to try and buy the building; all of this by an organization called Historic Boston Incorporated. And its former executive director, Stanley Smith, was its executor -- executive director back then. And the organization was very helpful to us with providing just some organizational base of some sort for -- for the volunteers.

INTERVIEWER 1: So you wanted to buy the building to keep it as a historic site?

GLATER: Yeah. We wanted to preserve it as it -- as it was, as a historic site. We did not want to -- this was -- the volunteer organization had lots of discussions with the -- the officers of The Boston Synagogue, the primary proponents of sale of the building, and -- and use the proceeds for their purposes.

What made that attractive was that in the course of these really drawn-out proceedings over four or so -- four or five years, more than that, if you actually -- over the -- let's say '85 to '90, a developer came along who offered over a million dollars.

INTERVIEWER 2: For this land?

GLATER: For this -- well, the building, with the idea of tearing down the building and installing a parking garage. That turned out not to be a credible offer when a

deposit check that he paid to somebody bounced. That's not a good way to start --

INTERVIEWER 1: So they were about to go through with the sale?

GLATER: Well, they -- they wanted -- I think by that time, there was a court-appointed -- the supreme court appointed a receiver, very much like a trustee in bankruptcy, who managed the building, wind up the -- the organization, sell off the assets.

The receiver, I think, was ready to do that. The receiver -- because his job was to preserve the assets, it was thought that the landmarking of the building would reduce its value. And so he was opposed to the landmarking, so --

This was a group of maybe half a dozen, maybe fewer, but anyhow, kooks who -- or preservationists or whatever that were trying to save the building. The first goal was to save it.

In order to try to deal with the concern of the -- the Charles River Park Synagogue that any congregation here would compete with them and that would -- wouldn't be fair, particularly since we are getting some support from the Synagogue Council, which is supposed to be neutral among all the congregations, we agreed that we would not establish a congregation here in -- in this building. We would be a -- not a religious tax-exempt organization, but a secular historic preservation organization. And that's how we were incorporated in 1990 and got our tax-exempt status.

I was the president of the -- that organization from then until -- I don't know -- 1998 or 1999, something like that. And it went through several iterations with, you know, changes in the board composition, changes in the officers.

Again, the Historic Boston, even though they were not directly involved and just a state(?) source of stability during all of this. We did enlist Richard Mintz to join -- to join with us and join the board, and that was a tremendous boost for us.

There were negotiations that went on forever in the early '90s, aided by a very good real estate lawyer from Mintz Levin, all provided *pro bono*, who negotiated a -- a deal that allowed us to buy the building with the -- essentially the amount of cash that we had raised, which was nowhere near the asking price.

We agreed that we would settle the asking price based on an appraisal by a mutually acceptable appraiser. But -- and that was -- that was fine.

And we -- because the receiver had messed up one year and not filed for the annual nonprofit tax abatement for the property, he was -- the property had a tax lien on it for roughly the amount that we didn't have to pay anyhow. And so we insisted on withholding that amount that we didn't have until the receiver could clear the tax lien. And we were very generous. We gave him extra time to clear the tax lien because we needed extra time to raise the money anyhow.

Anyhow, this went on for -- that whole transaction was just a remarkable arrangement that the Mintz Levin lawyer worked out.

This went on until we did raise enough money in '95. We took the building. We didn't -- we held back money even after that, though, because the receiver had a hard time getting the tax lien either paid or removed. I don't know what. This eventually resolved and may have required action in the state legislature. I'm not sure.

And we set about making initial repairs in order to make it weathertight.

One of the strategies was -- that the receiver was using, just to neglect the building and -- with the hope that it would fall down and then historic preservation wouldn't have anything -- the preservation people would have nothing to preserve. And so, you know, then he would have a building without -- a lot without a building, which was worth more for his purposes.

So we -- we raised money. We got grants from the Mass. Historical Commission, matching grants. And we raised money to -- for the matches and fixed the roof, fixed the skylights, repointed the brick, fixed the windows. All of the outside stuff.

We had one of the people in this group from a very early time, who's a guy named Jack Glassman, who's an architect. And he just over -- oversaw the architectural, you know, whatever, what needed to be done and in what order and all of those things.

We did a variety of activities to make the building more visible in the Jewish community as a historic site. We were -- it's always been -- we've always struggled with how the building ought to be -- ought to be best used. It is, after all, a historic Jewish building.

On the other hand, some of the -- some of the -- I was going to say "traditionalists," but that's not fair. Some of our board members were quite insistent that we not have any services here. And so it's kind of like a joke that says -- the punch line of which is "But no praying." And so we have to make sure that nobody sneaks in a prayer, even if they felt like it. It became silly.

But the concern about prayer and all of that was -- became particularly lively when Havurah started in the early part of this century, it seems to me. Late '90s.

INTERVIEWER 1: I think so. Yeah. 2000, something like that.

GLATER: Yeah. And that has been a -- it was a continuing issue. I think it's finally gone away and -- as board members changed or became more comfortable with the idea of this -- this group becoming in essence the young leadership division of the Vilna Shul organization and became more comfortable to having them be -- expand the horizon.

INTERVIEWER 1: An issue because of The Boston Synagogue or --

GLATER: No. Although I think we -- I know that we were concerned not to raise that as a red flag because it would just be very -- it would be disruptive again. And it's very difficult to raise money if there is a controversy within the community. Nobody wants to take sides.

We would take sides, but we didn't have any money, so --

INTERVIEWER 1: That tension still exists a little bit between Vilna Shul and The Boston Synagogue.

GLATER: It may. There are some very hardy old-timers who hang on there. And they have very good memories. But don't -- don't -- (laughter)

INTERVIEWER 1: But the -- the concern around Havurah on the Hill was just from the Vilna Shul not wanting it to be more than a historic site? Is that what your --

GLATER: It was not clear what -- what we wanted and how we could -- how we could rationalize being many different things, a historic site and a place that held services and not clear -- and having use of the space for -- the phrase we use,

Jewish life cycle events like weddings, bar mitzvahs or whatever else.

And whether any of those things would then interfere with or would raise the hackles not only of the Boston -- the Charles River Park Synagogue, but of other congregations around in the Greater Boston area that thought that we might be competing with them --

(Telephonic interruption)

INTERVIEWER 1: I apologize.

(Interruption in audio)

INTERVIEWER 1: Part 2.

GLATER: Okay. Where were we?

INTERVIEWER 1: About finding a place between being a historic site and the life cycle events not taking away from that.

GLATER: Yeah. And was it a -- was it saved to be a -- a religious building or a museum? Could it be both?

INTERVIEWER 1: Did you have an opinion on that?

GLATER: Yeah. I felt strongly that we shouldn't -- we shouldn't unnecessarily exacerbate the relation with the Boston -- with the Charles -- I keep referring now to Boston Synagogue. The Charles River Park Synagogue --

INTERVIEWER 1: That place over there.

GLATER: That place. Because of the -- that people would use the controversy as an excuse not to donate.

Other than that, I thought there are all kinds of creative ways that it can be used. It -- and it's --

In a sense, there's a parallel effort going on in the African-American community of Boston because of the -- the African Meetinghouse and the -- the Museum of African-American History was being organized.

And this area, this -- particularly the north slope of Beacon Hill has a -- has a unique history in -- in Boston and probably in the country.

One of the early supporters of this project was a leader in the black community. It was a -- I think a state rep, Byron Rushing, who I think was an academic in urban planning. I'm not sure where. Maybe at UMass.

And he would say it's the only situation he knows of where a -- a black church became a synagogue rather than going the other way, and that referring to the African Meetinghouse.

And the -- the way -- the way that the West End and this -- this part of Beacon Hill was viewed, I think, as more part of the West End rather than, you know, Beacon Hill. It was always that end, that side, the other side of Beacon Hill.

The way that that -- these neigh -- these different ethnic groups functioned in the -- in the first half of this century until urban -- or last century until urban renewal ended, that -- that neighborhood, we tore down the buildings.

There's a lot there that provides lessons for -- that we could all learn from these days, that the Jewish kids who walked from here to Boston Latin School. Leonard Bernstein, who's musical --

INTERVIEWER 1: I've heard that name.

GLATER: You've heard of him. Okay.

INTERVIEWER 1: Once or twice.

GLATER: He -- he went to Latin School. And the speculation is that his growing up in this heterogeneous community inspired some of his composing.

Leonard Nimoy grew up around here. He learned about -- he saw how the priests hold their -- their hands when they do the priestly blessings. I can't do it, but he can. And that's what the ark, the hands over the ark represent, the way the priests held their hand. And he learned that and incorporated it into Star Trek, which is also before your time.

INTERVIEWER 1: No.

GLATER: Reruns.

INTERVIEWER 1: (inaudible)

GLATER: So there's a lot -- a lot of possibilities.

And one of the challenges of that -- because we've always been short of money, the focus has always had to be on raising money rather than on having some minimal amounts so that we could start raising money for programs and inspire people, so --

So there you go. There's the -- there's the short history.

INTERVIEWER 2: I'm curious, what was your main motivation in preserving this building? Was it kind of a historical interest or a sentimental because you used to go to services here or --

GLATER: Well, I -- I grew up in a commun -- a congregation like this, traditionally orthodox. At the time that I came to Boston, I was not in that mold anymore, but I found the site, just the atmosphere in the sanctuary, really very inspiring. And I thought it would be a shame to lose that for your generation and generations after that.

I thought it had stories to tell. And I was seeing the -- the children of my peers growing up in suburbia and really losing any contact with the his -- with their American roots.

Somehow they were transported or somebody was transported magically from eastern Europe, wherever that is, to nice lawns in -- in Newton or farther west, and -- and that's -- that's how life is or was, and there wasn't -- the connection was lost.

I think the connection's important. So I thought this was a way to teach -- teach people about it. Learn about this connection. So --

Did I anticipate moving to Boston and becoming involved in this? No.

INTERVIEWER 1: So things just happen.

GLATER: They do.

INTERVIEWER 2: Why did you choose Beacon Hill when you did move here?

GLATER: I didn't know anyone in the city, and I was not at all familiar with it. And I was looking just down here, downtown, and it was an easy commute. It was a -- it's a nice neighborhood.

It was much -- this was the end of the hippies, of the '60s. A lot of pot smoking, barefoot kids, grownups, too, I guess, on the Common. And so it was not as pricey a neighborhood as it has become. So why not?

INTERVIEWER 2: Convenient.

GLATER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER 1: And enjoyed it enough to stay.

GLATER: Yeah. We -- we've never owned a car. It is a different lifestyle. It's a lifestyle you can live in a few cities in the country. New York, Manhattan, I guess would be -- and the Bronx -- or not in the Bronx. In Queens or Brooklyn, you could, but much less likely. And you know, where else can you do it?

And the city is small enough so that it worked for us. And we enjoyed that. It's just a different --

INTERVIEWER 2: And how has the neighborhood changed since you've been there?

GLATER: Oh. It has gone upscale.

It has gradually become re -- reintegrated. There are more blacks and Asians living here than -- I don't know whether they are buying or renting, but there are more of them now than there were sort of for the first 20 or 25 years we've been here.

A lot of -- a lot of restoration work. Exteriors and interiors. A lot of -- a lot of feeling of entitlement, "If I buy my house (inaudible), ought to be able to do whatever I want with it." And that -- often that conflicted with what the architectural restrictions were on changes to exterior architecture.

And I was -- I was shocked. I was just innocently shocked by the way things got done around here.

INTERVIEWER 1: Is there anything else that you're involved in with the community? It seems like you have a passion for the historic preservation part.

GLATER: I -- it turns out in hindsight that this was one of the few historic preservation projects that was, you know, pretty much volunteer without much public support that actually worked. And so the preservation community -- when somebody is successful, a lot of people take credit, the preservation community. And they -- and they should because it's -- Historic Boston was just very helpful. And I don't know what all the things that happened down here in the background of this or that, that someone did or said something that helped.

But no. I'm no -- I'm no longer involved in the preservation, the preservation here. I retired a few years ago and am doing less in that area.

I was on the board of the Beacon Hill Civic Association for a few years. And I just did not find that satisfying, so I stopped.

And more recently, I've -- in anticipation of retirement, I've taken up fly fishing for trout, and I've gotten involved in an organization called Trout Unlimited, which is a national conservation organization that has chapters around the country. And I am now the president of the Greater Boston chapter of Trout Unlimited. We have --

INTERVIEWER 1: Congratulations.

GLATER: I guess. You wouldn't congratulate me for being president of this, I'll tell you.

But we have 900 members, actually close to a thousand. Our membership went up by close to a hundred in the last year or so.

INTERVIEWER 1: Neat.

GLATER: So -- and we're doing interesting environmental work that -- that needs to be done in Massachusetts.

INTERVIEWER 1: That's great.

INTERVIEWER 2: And are you involved with the current restoration work that's being done here in the shul?

GLATER: I'm on the board. When -- I stayed on the board. I left. I came back. I was the corporate clerk for several years.

(inaudible) aware mostly what's going on. I'm not sure whether any restoration work is happening besides what's going on in the sanctuary, the art restoration.

INTERVIEWER 2: Have you seen it?

GLATER: I saw -- I was here a few weeks ago.

INTERVIEWER 1: Neat.

We just have a few more minutes. Is there anything else about your -- your life in Beacon Hill or the West End or Vilna Shul that we should know for -- on the record, as we say?

INTERVIEWER 2: Any memories from your early time here?

What was the congregation like when you first started here?

GLATER: Well, what I saw was just -- the High Holiday congregation was not the same as the day-to-day congregation. Homes and apartments used this area for -- as storage so that when we did -- finally did buy the building and started to clean this out, we took out all the mattresses and just (inaudible) the rest up that he'd collected. I don't think he threw anything out.

There were all -- just all kinds of -- of adventures, misadventures, finding the Torahs that belonged to the congregation.

Dealing with the receiver's efforts to have the ark, the sanctuary removed because the feeling was if the ark were removed, that would take the wind out of the sails of the -- the people who were trying to buy the building and discourage them enough.

And so he was apparently shopping for some congregation to take the ark, buy the ark and -- just take it and install it. And fortunately was not successful. It's a good size structure.

But it got me into the idea of what are Jewish museums which exist in Israel and how can you have a Jewish, you know -- the general rule -- my understanding is that if you have Jewish artifacts, they are supposed to be used. And if we were going to have a museum, would they be used? Well, they could be used. Fortunately Havurah came along and took care of that issue.

It was -- as a -- Boston is a tight-knit Jewish community. And as a stranger to it, you know, not growing up here, part of the difficulty I had was just not knowing people to call on to -- you know, that would -- your friends growing up and your community, that could help. And that -- that was just part of the personal challenge, moving the project forward, but it got moved.

What else do you want to know?

INTERVIEWER 1: Whatever you're willing to tell us. (laughter)

GLATER: Good. Then I'll stop.

INTERVIEWER 1: What kept you coming back? You liked the services or it just was convenient?

GLATER: Coming back? You mean --

INTERVIEWER 1: Before they closed. Yeah. Before --

GLATER: Oh, it was convenient. I -- I never -- I worked first for the court for clerkship, and then I worked for federal government. I never made it big time, and so the --

the price was always right. And I didn't particularly focus on -- I made my small contributions every year, but I didn't focus on how the -- the bill -- the organization was surviving, how it was sustaining itself.

And Mr. Miller -- I would talk to him from time to time. And he said, "Just come. Don't worry about any of this." About how the -- you know, how the organization was running and all that.

It turns out that he was the president, and his daughter or somebody -- I don't know -- was the -- but the two or three people in his family were the entire corporate structure. I don't know that there was a board of directors or if there were, whether it met anymore. So he was technically the last member on the books.

INTERVIEWER 2: And what do you think will happen to the shul in the future? What would you like to see happen?

GLATER: Oh, I think there's a -- there is a -- it's a vehicle. I work for the Department of Transportation, transportation analogies. It is a vehicle to carry -- carry us in a lot of different directions, and we ought to take -- take some of them. It means learning about where those -- what those directions are.

So it means learning more about the relationship with the African-American community and the Italian community and the whole that the Jews moved into when they came in in the late 1800s or early 1900s.

And hopefully there's something positive out of that, but if there's not -- there must be something positive out of it. I thought we ought to learn about the music because I think the black musical (inaudible) had a significant. And because of Bernstein in particular, therefore had a big influence on Jewish music in this country. And there's just a lot to learn about that.

And there's a lot about how -- how businesses started here. Filene's is a Jewish business. Stop & Shop is a Jewish business. There's a lot of different -- how did these people pull themselves up from not much in a generation or two to become financial powers?

There's a lot to learn about -- about entrepreneurship because I don't think things change -- the times change, but I don't think the personality (inaudible) change.

I think that if -- if -- one of the people early involved in this was a sociologist who was a graduate student at Brandeis. And he would say that what the -- it's what the second and third generations work to forget and hide, the fourth and fifth generations work hard at discovering and learning about. And you are in the fourth and so generations.

INTERVIEWER 1: That's true.

GLATER: And probably doing this because you're a little bit curious about -- about all of this.

Saratoga -- you're from Saratoga Springs who also had an interesting Jewish history. I remember the hotels that used to advertise steam heat because they would be open through the High Holidays, and it could get chilly in Saratoga in the High Holidays.

INTERVIEWER 1: Oh, just a little.

GLATER: Have these old people, and their biggest concern was staying warm. And it

also had congregations that I guess went down to a very small number in the off-peak in the fall and winter.

INTERVIEWER 1: And similar issues recently with buying and selling buildings and what they're talking about here.

GLATER: Yeah.

So there's a lot -- a lot for you -- you all to learn about -- be part of that community or part of any community. Learn about it. The -- Boston's red lining that red, that zone of blacks in a certain -- also, I suspect, zoned Jews into other immigrant Jews and others, and why that is and how it -- how it affected the people who grew up here.

All of that are lessons that people could learn from.

INTERVIEWER 1: By the time you came, you weren't affected by any sort of feelings towards "you need to live in this specific area because of" --

GLATER: No. But at that time, I was just a single male, you know.

INTERVIEWER 1: What did you care? Yeah.

GLATER: Yeah. It didn't matter where I lived, and nobody noticed.

INTERVIEWER 1: Yeah. Yeah. Interesting.

INTERVIEWER 2: Were there still repercussions of kind of the renovation of the West End when you got there or is that kind of (inaudible)?

GLATER: There was -- there was -- there was still grumbling about it. The West End was gone when I got here. I can't remember whether the Charles River Park apartment buildings were built or mostly built by then, but there was a newsletter, The West Ender, that kept on, even though there was no community to serve.

And that there wasn't anything comparable in the Jewish communities that I know of.

INTERVIEWER 1: All right. Well --

INTERVIEWER 2: Thank you.

INTERVIEWER 1: -- thank you so much.

GLATER: Okay.

INTERVIEWER 1: It was really interesting --

(End of interview)