

GEORGE MOSLER

interviewed by Karyl Winn and Jeanette Schrieber

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JEWISH ARCHIVES PROJECT

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This is a tape-recorded interview with George Mosler of Seattle, Washington, recorded in Seattle on November 21, 1972. Mr. Mosler is interviewed by Jeanette Schrieber and Karyl Winn.

Q Mr. Mosler, can you tell us when your family came to Seattle, and where they came from?

A Well, the original group on my maternal side was my mother's uncle who was Nathaniel Rickles, who came here first with his wife and daughter from Rumania, and settled in what's now the Green River Valley, where they had a farm. I've been told their principal crop was potatoes. And after his arrival and being here a few years he evidently sent the tickets or money for my grandfather, George Rickles and his wife and seven children, who made the trip from a small village in Rumania to Hamburg and then New York and then across the--a nine-day trip across the country to Auburn where they landed in the middle of the night on a rainy night. And they stayed there a couple of years. But due to a lack of Jewish culture they moved into Seattle

Q Were they farmers in Rumania?

A No they were not. My grandfather Rickles was a scholar and somewhat of a mathematician, and farming was a little bit foreign to them. It may have been for the other brother, I don't know.

Q This is quite unusual. We haven't found anyone so far who came and settled in farms here in Washington.

A Well, that's the story. In fact the daughter of that uncle is still living. She's around here. They moved to Seattle, and I don't know their exact location but I do know that my mother and a few of her sisters and brothers attended the old Denny School, which was down in what is now the Denny Regrade district.

Q Do you recall the year of their arrival?

A No, I don't. Those have been clouded in mystery. I don't know whether it was before or after the fire of '89. It's hard to get it down in person. There is one person here in Seattle, a brother of my mother's who is still living, and who has an excellent knowledge of all these things, probably much better than I do-- living up at Council House, Julius Rickles. Of course if you interview him you better take plenty of tapes. But he has a phenomenal memory for these facts, whether they're important or not I don't know, but he does have a good memory and he could probably tell a lot more of these things because as I say, I just heard them. My Grandmother Rickles who died in 1937, I believe, spoke Jewish, very few words of English. We always thought she didn't understand English but she understood it perfectly because when we spoke of her in English she knew exactly, but we heard these second hand from her to my mother. My Grandfather Rickles along with a few other Jewish pioneers established the first Jewish orthodox synagogue in Seattle.

Q That's what Mr. Rickles told us about--it was a really excellent interview.

A Yes, he could tell you that. And at that time and later on the immigrants who had come here previously were of German origin, such as the Schwabacher family and the Schoenfelds and Langs and so forth, and in the latter part of the century they formed what's now the Temple de Hirsch. And very few of the orthodox swung over there although I think Julius Rickles attended the first service that Temple de Hirsch had.

My father came here during gold rush days. He had emigrated from Austria when he was about 12 or 13 years of age, in standard form--his brother had preceded him to this country and then sent for him. My father had already been apprenticed in the bakery business in Austria, and he arrived in New York City at Ellis Island in those days. And there were not the formalities that there are now--he just got off the boat and my uncle wasn't there to meet him because he was working. So as he tells it he hopped on the back of a wagon of somebody who had come there

to meet his wife and children, and rode to Brooklyn and found his brother there ultimately, and worked in that area for a number of years, even opening his own bakery. And ^{he} then decided to see the United States, and he took five years to go from New York to Seattle. He would hop a box car and then work in a bakery for a while and then go on to the next city and do the same thing. In fact he was naturalized during the first time that Bryan ran for President, in a very different way. Some ward boss came in the bakery and said how many of you fellows are citizens? One or two, and he said come on down and he took them down to some judge and he swore them in and then took them over and they voted. That's how he became a citizen. But my father when he arrived in Seattle, only had twenty five dollars to his name. He found an old abandoned bakery which is now on the site of the railroad station. And he paid a small deposit on it, and then with a few dollars, ordered a telephone, which was then a novelty. And with that he called up several wholesalers and announced that this was the New York Baking Company calling, and ordered certain merchandise. As the man was delivering, then he was opening sacks and mixing it, so then he couldn't take it back when he asked for the cash. And he started in, baked the bread and would deliver it with a basket. He went house to house selling it. Business was good, of course these were the boom days, and he soon had horses and wagons and a lot of people working for him. He supplied practically all the restaurants in Seattle with their bread. And started buying real estate. And then I think ultimately he built apartment houses on Yesler Way between 12th and 14th Avenues, which was across the street from what was then known as Dugdale Park, the original ballpark in Seattle. And then when the ballpark was abandoned there was a street cut through from Yesler to Fir Street, and it was named Mosler Avenue. It was vacated by the city a number of years ago because the County built a building on there for housing of voting machines during the off season. I have the street--they gave me the street signs; there

were two of them Yesler to Fir Street. We were all very proud of the fact that he had a street named after him. He was very unhappy when they took the signs down.

Q What was your father's first name?

A Samuel. He started New York Bakery, and it went on for years and years, and he sold it out in 1924 I believe. In the meantime he had brought two brothers here. One of them was a baker and one was not a baker, but they--he built a bakery for them. My father's bakery was known as the New York Bakery, they called themselves the Brooklyn Bakery. And they did very well. They are both deceased now; they were an unusual pair. My father's whole family was short except for the one brother who was 6' 2". And he and his other brother who was a bout 5'5" were partners and they were very successful, and they ultimately sold out. And then they bought and operated for some time what was then known as the Washington Bakery, which is now the Continental Baking Company. And they sold that out to the Skinner and Eddy interests. They built a bakery which ultimately became the Langendorf in Seattle. And then they suffered some setbacks and one brother who was a baker went down to Portland and opened his own bakery. He died about two years ago at the age of 87, and was very successful in the bakery business down there.

My father was president of the Herzl Synagogue, and it was a little one story shack on I think 16th Avenue and Spruce or Fir Street. All synagogues were started with a basement, really. That's all they could afford, and that's why you find, like the one on 17th and Yesler, it's up so high above the street because the original place was all they could afford at that time. And so when they did have money they built above. He was president of that synagogue during World War I.

At the same time he was operating this bakery and he had a chain of six coffee shops or restaurants. He had a nervous breakdown during that time, and it wasn't I don't think, from the bakery or the restaurants, but I think it was being

president of the Synagogue.

Q Did he have a health-food business?

A Yes. My father probably opened the first health food store in the United States. During World War I when there was a shortage of white flour and white sugar, things of that nature, he developed what he called a health bread, probably the first known health bread in the United States. He put in his own small mill where he ground his own wheat flour, and then there was a Dr. Harvey Kellogg, who was a brother of the Kellogg of Kellogg's Corn flakes, who was quite a dietitian, which was unusual for M.D.s in those days. He had written a book, and my father, who had been ill for some time, had followed this book and decided that that was the right way so he sold out the bakery business and opened -- I know it was the first health food store in Seattle, and probably one of the first in the United States, probably about 1924 or 1925. Sold mostly health foods. In those days there were ... today we can see all these organic foods by the thousands; it's hard to believe that there was no such thing available in those days. The first diabetic foods that ever came out were put out by the S&W Company, they called it the Nutra Diet Brand, sugar-free and salt-free fruits and vegetables for diabetics. But he had quite a successful business there for a number of years.

Q This was after he sold the bakery?

A Right..

Q And did he get out of the restaurant business too?

A The restaurant business--he had gotten out of that in World War I

There was a large family on the Rickles side of the family. There were nine Rickles children of my grandmothers, seven born in Europe and two born in this country.

Of the two born, the youngest, the girl is now almost 80 and still lives in

San Francisco. The boy died a number of years ago. His name was P. Allen Rickles.

He was/well-known attorney here in town; president of the District Lodge #4 B'nai B'rith,

active speaker and active in all Jewish community affairs. He was probably the better-known of the Rickles group.

My father, after his term as president of Herzl, did not stay active in Jewish affairs; he was a member and paid dues, but that was about the size of it.

My Dad built apartment houses on Yesler, I think it was in 1907, there were three buildings. His brothers built one down a ways, and the whole family lived around there together--cousins--and my Grandmother Rickles was quite the matriarch of the Jewish community here in the early days. Just like they are in small towns, there were no such things as, say, funeral parlors. Everybody took care of the living, and they took care of the dead. They formed a group. In ancient days, or early days, when an orthodox person died, the elderly women, or the women of this particular group would sew a shroud for the deceased. A carpenter was called to build a coffin, and she would more or less have charge of that group which ultimately built a funeral parlor or chapel, which is on 12th Avenue and Spruce Street I believe.

There was a Mrs. Shucklin? Jerry Shucklin's grandmother I guess, who was the guiding spirit behind all of that, and caused that place to be built. Before that time there were no funeral parlors, people had no place to conduct the funerals. That was one of her activities; she was a very wonderful, warm person. She knew every one of her children's great-grandchildren by name, and even collateral relatives.

Q This was your Grandmother Rickles, the wife of George Rickles?

A Yes.

Q What was her first name?

A Sometimes she was referred to Rose and sometimes as Rachel. But I would say that Rose Rickles was probably

Q

A No, it's a Hebrew name, I don't know if you'd be able to spell that--~~Che~~ Chevra Kadisha. Chevra is root for organization; Kadisha means holiness, or good works, good deeds.

My mother was for many years president of the Ladies group the Free Loan Society, which was an organization that granted interest-free loans to immigrants primarily. She for many years was also president of the Ladies Auxiliary of the original Herzl Synagogue, and for many years was president of the then-called the Jewish Consumptive Relief Society, which today has a different name I believe. It's in Denver--do you know the name? What is it called?

Q I don't know, I thought it was still called the JCRS.

A It could very well be. She was very active in those organizations

Q It may have been combined with the Hospital for asthmatics.

A Isn't it Jewish National Hospital, or something like that? In those days, when tuberculosis was rife, particularly among the sweatshop workers of New York, this Hospital ?guild was formed and they had chapters in all the various cities, and she was active in that for many, many years. I think my sister maybe, this is ? Muriel Brill Do you know Muriel?

Q We've talked to her

A She's got a lot of pictures I think, unless she's thrown them out. You know, years ago, every time somebody had a birthday or a Bar Mitzvah or something, they took pictures and gave them to everybody, and we just had stacks of the things. We had to throw them out. I have a picture at home of my father standing in front of one of his wagons ...

Q That would be very nice to have

A Well, it's about -- many years ago that I was written up in the Sunday paper--I don't know whether you ever saw that article, it was a full page article and the headline was "Attorney Unwinds by Baking Bread" and it was an article about me, and it had to do with my father's background and my background and the fact that I bake, of course. And that's just what I'm telling you--but we got that picture from my sister but I think I may have two or three of those articles at home. It would be kind of interesting , probably won't be

any good for your interview, but it was in the Sunday Times Supplement, and my phone started ringing around 7:30 in the morning. But what was most gratifying to me is that so many people called who I didn't know, and were very annoyed because the articles referred to my father, but it didn't refer to his charitable works. No one ever came into the bakery who was ever refused something to eat and was given bread, and if there wasn't any stale bread available, they got fresh bread. In fact my father used to tell that when St. Francis Cabrini first started in Seattle, she started a little orphanage. And she and a couple of nuns used to come down to the bakery about once a week and my father would fill up their baskets with bread. ^{They} didn't have a horse and wagon then; when they got a horse and wagon he would give them bread too, and the same thing-- if he didn't have stale bread they got fresh bread. But it was very pleasing to me that so many people were annoyed that they didn't refer to my father's good deeds. But as I say, it was just second nature to him.

During World War I, in the latter part of it, there was quite a wave of immigration from Russia, people escaping from the revolution. And they came through Vladivostok, Japan, and Seattle. My father was president of the synagogue so they would wind up in the synagogue there and he would see that they had a meal, gave them a few dollars, and a lot of them he helped get started in business. In fact, in the earlier days, say 1900 to 1915---from 1910, my Grandfather Rickles died in 1910-- any Jew who would come to Seattle, same as any city, the first thing they would do would be to go to the synagogue. And my Grandfather Rickles was invariably there--he was a scholar, supported by his children and he would bring them to my grandmother, see that they got something to eat and then take them to my father and see if they could get some financial help. My mother used to tell the story that when the first Sephardic Jews came to Seattle, which was in 1905 or '06, and one of them named Policar, and someone else, they naturally went to the synagogue, and they could not speak Yiddish or Jewish--they could only speak

Ladino. But my grandfather recognized the fact that they were Jewish because Ladino has a mixture of Hebrew in it. He brought them to my grandmother, and she didn't want to let them in the house because she was sure they were not Jewish because they couldn't speak Yiddish. But one of those men, I think both of those men who first came as a Sephardic people were taken by my grandfather down to my Dad and he gave them a job for a while--they loaded the bakery wagons at \$6 a week. I presume you've gotten the names of these Sephardic Jews?

Q Yes,

A Policar one of them? (discussion regarding the name)

One of them was a sheet metal worker I believe, in a shop down on Yesler Way, I believe. They preceeded the ones _____ became wealthy like the Alhadeffs and the Calderons _____ and the Francos.

It's interesting about the Sephardics because for many years Seattle had the largest Sephardic population -- how they happened to arrive here is just like pure chance. And they were very, very poor when they came.

Q It may be word-of-mouth, just the way it was when

A Yes. I've heard that the first ones that came here bought tickets from some travel agent, told them that they had so much money, and he sold them the maximum amount of travel that they could get, and wound up here. I don't know whether that's just a story or not, but they did come here. And they were even poorer than the Russian and Polish immigrants if that were possible. And they were the great recipients of the various welfare societies here. And a lot of them had less education than the Russian or Polish Jews. Evidently they weren't allowed to have the schooling that the Russian Jews and the Polish and Rumanian Jews had. But they did a lot of menial work, they weren't proud, and they became quite successful. As you know, the Alhadeff family is probably the --they aren't now, but they were the biggest people in the fish business in the country.

Q To go back to the Rickles family. Did Nathaniel stay on the farm in the Green River Valley, or did he move into Seattle

A I'll have to back-track on that. That wasn't Nathaniel. There were two brothers, it wasn't Nathan, it was somebody...I forget his first name. No, he died at an early age

Q While he was still on the farm?

A Yes, and then they moved to Seattle.

Q That's unusual that they would have...do you know how they happened to...?

A No, I don't know how they happened to ever start farming or how they got there, but I think he had been fairly successful. Oh, there are family stories that he liked to gamble, which seems kind of surprising

Q When they came to Seattle, how did they get along, do you know?

A Always kind of clouded in a mystery. I know that after my...whether the girls went out and worked, and probably some of them did work, and whether my grandfather did any teaching or not, I don't know. But my mother and father were married in 1900, September 9, 1900--in fact I think my mother's wedding gown is out here at the Historical Museum. And then another younger brother married a Rickles sister, so two brothers married two sisters, and they were very proud of their father-in-law's scholarly attainment, so they sort of supported the family.

Q Then your father brought over his brothers; but they weren't actually in the same business--he set them up...

A So he set them up in business, yes. And made them his competitors. My grandfather died in July and I was born the following September, and that's the reason, the orthodox name after deceased, and I was named for him. He was quite well educated, and had kind of an interesting background. My grandmother used to tell they lived in a wine-growing section of Rumania, and every fall when the peasants had pressed the grapes, they would come to his house. There would be long lines, with various containers, various

sized containers. And he was a mathematician and by measuring the containers could tell them the gallonage. They didn't have standard barrels there so that was the big time of the year for him. And he could charge them for it. And so I asked my grandmother why they didn't mark this down. But they were so ignorant they couldn't read or write and would never think of marking down what the container contained so next year they wouldn't have to ask him. But they did every year they would come down and he would measure their containers. It sounds kind of silly, but that's how it was.

(discussion here about whether Mr. Mosler had met the Schriebers previously)

Q Were both the Rickles family and the Mosler families active in Herzl, or was it only the Mosler family?

A No, just my father, primarily. Then he switched over to the Bikur Cholim, and that 's where the Rickles family. How my father got over to the Herzl for a short period of time, I don't know.

Q It's interesting that he was president...

A It was an orthodox synagogue and in fact my uncle, P. Allen Rickles who I mentioned before, at a later date became president of the Herzl synagogue and was the one who led the switch to make it a conservative synagogue. Prior to that time the Herzl had been under the leadership of Rabbi Shapiro, who was of the extreme orthodox faith. Evidently they were losing congregants and my uncle P. Allen Rickles had been president of the Bikur Cholim, and he was attempting to modernize it and couldn't get any cooperation making it conservative, so he left the Bikur Cholim and joined Herzl and became president of that, and was the one I think who engaged the first conservative rabbi for the synagogue, a Dr. Lang. So I've been president of the Temple de Hirsch, so we've run the gamut with our

- Q Do you know what... We've come across P. Allen Rickles quite a bit, especially as we've found records, his name is on all kinds of letterheads, and all kinds of correspondence. Do you know what might have happened to his papers?
- A He has a daughter living in Los Angeles who is married to a Reformed Rabbi. Her first name is Shirley, I can't think what her last name is. Her husband's family is from Portland. And I wouldn't be a bit surprised if Shirley would have some of those. He also has a son living in Portland, named George Rickles. The Rickles name is ... they all thought it was quite novel, till Don Rickles came along; we don't know if he's any relative or not. But George Rickles lives in Portland, and he could very well have --- I imagine the Portland directory would give you the information.
- Q If they have moved, I would expect there would be extensive but I doubt they would have all of them.
- A I don't know. He practiced law for many years. He graduated from law school and got married right away, so for a couple of years he did not practice but worked for an old company known as the M. Seller Company which was a distributor of hardware and stuff like that, then started (as a) practicing lawyer with Morris Robbins. This was the firm of Robbins and Rickles for many years. In fact, when I got out of school in 1932 I was with them for five years.
- Q Did you help your father in the bakery or in any of his other ventures? Did you work in your father's bakery?
- A I just hung around the periphery of it. I was quite small when he had the big bakeries, and I used to go down there on Saturdays when I was a little kid and worked in the cake shop. And then when he had the health food stores, I was in high school and the university and I would go down on Saturdays occasionally in the afternoons and picked up a knowledge of bakery just by observing. I never actually did any baking or working. I had an older brother who was with my father. So I didn't actually work in the shop as such. When I was old enough to drive--

when I was able to drive rather than old enough to drive, because I drove
[REDACTED] a bakery truck. But that's about the
extent of my connection with the bakery business, but I did observe, so I was
able to learn to bake.

END OF TAPE