

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Sam Wahnish
Interviewer: Stanley Garfein

G: This is the second interview on the early Jewish community in Tallahassee. I am Rabbi Stanley Garfein, and I am speaking with Mr. Sam Wahnish, a native Tallahassee of the Jewish community. Sam, do you remember when your family came to Tallahassee?

W: We moved here right after the Jacksonville fire in 1902 or 1903.

G: So that means you were already alive at that time. When were you born? Do you mind answering that question?

W: 1894.

G: How many Jews were in Tallahassee at that time? Do you remember the names of the families?

W: I do; I can give you the names of most of them, in fact, all of them. [There were] the Diamonds, the Hirschbergs, the Apts, the Cohens, the Jacobs. That is about it, as far as I know.

G: Were they mainly relatives of one another?

W: They were all related.

G: They were all related. [What about] the Levy family?

W: Oh, yes, and the Levy family. Pardon me.

G: But the Levy family was not related.

W: They were separate and apart.

G: The fire chief Levy is yet a different family.

W: No relation whatsoever.

G: And the fire chief Levy's family evidently never did associate with the Jewish community?

W: No, they never associated with them.

G: They must have intermarried quite a bit back then.

W: Way back, and they lived mostly in the Lake Bradford section.

G: I see. Now, what about Levy Park?

W: Levy Park? That was named after the Levys, the Jewish Levys.

G: The ones who were affiliated with the congregation.

W: You could identify them that way.

G: Good. So there were less than ten families at that time.

W: Less than ten families.

G: Was your father in business?

W: Yes, the tobacco business--farming, packing, and cigar manufacturing.

G: Did he have a farm here in Tallahassee?

W: Two thousand acres.

G: Where was that?

W: Out about three miles from the city. We sold it to Collin English. It is now one of the show places of Leon County.

G: What is that name?

W: Collin English, formerly the superintendant of public instruction.

G: Is the farm named in any way?

W: Wahnish Plantation.

G: It is still called Wahnish Plantation?

W: It is still called Wahnish Plantation.

G: What road is that?

W: It lies between the Belairstone Road and St. Augustine Road, right back of the golf links. It is approachable from two angles.

G: I see. Now, where was your father from?

W: Dad was from Casablanca.

G: From Casablanca. So you are Sephardic Jews.

W: Yes. And my mother was from Louisville, Kentucky.

G: Oh, that is where I am from. We had spoken about that. How did your father and mother happen to meet?

W: My father got in trouble with the school teacher in Casablanca. His father was a merchant, so my father knew the ships and the ship owners and the ship captains. When my father knocked a school teacher down, he started running. Somebody said, "Wahnish, you killed the teacher."

G: Was that so?

W: No. He ran to the wharf to see his father, but his father was not present at the place of business at that time. So Dad kept on running, and he got on board a ship. The captain knew him, and he hid out. When they pulled out, why, my father was still on the ship, and they arrived at Boston. Then the captain got in touch with my grandfather, and my father stayed away for fifty years before he went back. But he corresponded with his mother and father. His mother lived to be ninety, and his father ninety-five years of age. They corresponded frequently.

Dad often said [he got] his first job walking down the street in front of the theater. A man asked him if he wanted to earn a dollar, and he said yes. The captain had given him some money when he left the ship, knowing he would collect it from his father on the return trip. It was some grand opera. Anyway, Dad's job was to walk back and forth on the stage at the proper time with a spear and a helmet on. That was his first job. Then he got various jobs until he went into business for himself, in the cigar business in Boston. In traveling around selling cigars, he happened to go to Louisville at a very tender age, and that is where he met my mother. My mother's father had a shoe business, and she was in the store when [my father went in].

G: What was your mother's maiden name?

W: Clara Metzner. It was the Metzner shoe store. My mother was in there, and Dad said he bought five pairs of shoes he did not need. [laughter] So that was the courtship, and they married. They went to New York, and Dad was still in the cigar business. Then they went to Jacksonville.

G: What year was that, Sam?

W: It was in the 1890s.

G: There were good ship connections between New York and Jacksonville?

W: Oh, yes. It was wonderful. There was the Cloud Line and the Merchant Miners. The reason I know is because we ship tobacco from Tallahassee to New York and Philadelphia by the Merchant Miners steamship company and the Cloud Line.

G: I see.

W: They built a big factory in Jacksonville, and when the fire burned us out (burned him out, rather), why, he moved to Tallahassee. He had heard about Tallahassee. There were 3,000 people.

G: Did any others come over from Jacksonville at that time?

W: Some of the cigar makers followed him over here and located. They built up a big business in cigars; [they were] shipping cigars all over the state and all over the eastern states. Then my father decided that instead of buying tobacco, he would raise it. Oh, yes, I left out another family: Ginsburg. That was an old prominent family, and they owned the farm. My father bought this plantation from Ginsburg. It was 800 acres. The farm adjoining it was the Bushnell farm; he was a state surveyor, Captain Bushnell. My father bought his place, [which was 1,200 acres]. Eight hundred and 1,200 made 2,000 acres.

Father built tenant houses and had as many as forty tenants. They worked the crops, and he gave each one of them a certain amount of land to do their own farming. They raised hogs, and that was their own little outfit. They had a commissary there. At a tender age, I would open the commissary. The plantation was only three miles from town. I had a bicycle, and I rode up to the commissary at 3:00 and kept it open until 5:00, and then I went back to town. I was a merchant; my father was never a merchant.

We stayed out there during the tobacco season, for two months. We had a country home out there. We lived on the corner of Calhoun and College, where that elevated parking [garage] is now. We lived there fifty-some-odd years. When my sisters married and my brother married, Mother [wanted to travel]. My father passed away in the meantime, so I sold the plantation. I sold it to Collin English. My mother wanted to go to Miami and Orlando where my brother and sisters were. I sold the home then, and I built out in Los Robles.

Tallahassee was very rough in those days. There was a carnival down on Monroe Street. They blocked it off to traffic and had confetti and barrooms open and horseback riding tearing up and down the sidewalks. It really was a frontier town.

G: According to what I have read in the newspapers, there was very little enforcement of the laws.

W: Very little. Very little.

G: Why was this?

W: Laxity. They patterned themselves after the western states. Most of the men carried guns, and the barrooms flourished here. Most of the barrooms were owned by Jewish people.

G: By the ones that you have mentioned?

W: Yes.

- G: Was Prohibition ever enacted in those days?
- W: No. Along in 19 something (I forget the exact year), a group of ladies in Tallahassee decided they had had enough of these barrooms. They decided they wanted Tallahassee dry, and they held an election. Mr. Hirschberg, who employed about 350 cigar makers, on the building that was occupied lately by Sears Roebuck (that two- or three-story building that has been demolished since then; that is where the talk of this eighteen-story office building is going up on Monroe Street) appeared before the crowd at Lewis State Park. The name of the factory was the El Provido Cigar Company. It was run by Hirschberg and the Apt boys.
- G: Now, these were uncles of Ruby Diamond.
- W: That is right. Mr. Hirschberg was the money man, and the boys were working for him. They had about 300 Cubans here. They had their own restaurant. The restaurant was where Millard Caldwell [governor of Florida, 1945-1949] and Maddie Hume [had their law offices]. That long, wooden building on Calhoun Street that has been bricked up now was the restaurant. Mr. Diamond was a big merchant here, and he got a lot of their business. So did the Levy brothers. Anyway, at this speech they had their own band, and Mr. Hirschberg said, "If you are dry in this county, my factory will close."
- G: Why would that be?
- W: Because the Cubans would not work where they could not get their liquor and beer.
- G: And rum?
- W: And rum. Notwithstanding that threat in the election, the dries won. The bars had thirty days to close up. I remember my father's bringing over a basket full of wine. The barrooms were selling it wholesale to get rid of it; they had to get rid of everything. He brought a basket full of wine home, and he told Mother it was just a few dollars a basket. I said, "Well, let us go get another basket," but Dad said, "This is enough." The bars all closed, and in sixty days' time Hirschberg closed. He was a man of his word. The Cubans all went back to Tampa. He rented the building . . . [fades out]
- G: Prohibition was behind the push to move the capital away from Tallahassee.
- W: Yes, that started also along that time.