

[Worksheet]

## TAPE LOG

Name of person(s) interviewed: Dr. Louis Schmier  
 Fieldworker: Jenna Switzer  
 Date of interview: 3-4-04  
 Location of interview: Dr. Schmier's house  
 Other people present: Susan Schmier  
 Brand of tape recorder: Wallensak  
 Brand and type of tape: \_\_\_\_\_

## SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF TAPE QUALITY (background noise, etc.)

- There is a ~~go~~ small humming noise.
- Susan Schmier is cooking in the kitchen. Pots and pans can be heard moving around. A blender is also used.

## SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF TAPE CONTENTS

Discussion about Dr. Schmier's life and his religious, ethnic and cultural practices.

TAPE INDEX  
COUNTER NO.

## SUBJECT

- Interview Report Form.
- Family's migration history.
- Food customs
- Seder - placement of Elijah, traditions, other holidays.
- Shabbat -
- meaning of Judaism to Dr. Schmier
- Jewish community in Valdosta.
- involvement with the synagogue

(Adapted from Discovering Our Delta, A Learning Guide for Community Research, Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage,  
<http://www.folklife.si.edu/MississippiDelta/discoveringourdelt.htm>)

[www.valdosta.edu/folkwriting](http://www.valdosta.edu/folkwriting) Chapter 5

## **Tape Index**

1. Questions from Interview Report Form
2. Migration History
3. Jewish Food Traditions as a Child
4. Preparation of the Seder
5. Discussion of Elijah Cup- (introduction of tzedakah)
6. Coming to Valdosta
7. Influence of South on Religious Meals
8. Reception of Community to the Jewish Temple

Jenna Switzer

3-23-04

Dr. Sommers

Transcription of Interview

JS: This is just some background information. What is your full name?

LS: Louis Schmier.

JS: Do you have a nickname?

LS: Louis. Of course, that depends on what students you talk to.

JS: What is your mailing address?

LS: 203 E Brookwood Place Valdosta GA 31602

JS: Is that Lowndes County?

LS: Yes

JS: What is your telephone number?

LS: 229-242-3049

JS: And your birthday?

LS: 11-01-40

JS: And your birthplace?

LS: New York City

JS: How many years have you been living in this community?

LS: Since 1967

JS: Where else have you lived?

LS: Well I was born and bread on the east side of Manhattan in New York City. At 8 years old we moved out to Long Island in Rockfell center. I stayed there until 1962. Than went to Chapel Hill North Carolina.

JS: Okay, and then you moved here?

LS: Then I moved here in 67.

JS: What is your wife's name?

LS: Susan

JS: What are your parent's names?

LS: My mother's name is ...was Helen and my father's name was Reuben.

JS: How about your children's names?

LS: My oldest is Michael, my youngest is Reuben.

JS: Your occupation?

LS: I am a professor at Valdosta University

JS: Any additional skills or activities that you participate in?

LS: I garden, I am a fixer upper...so a handy man.

JS: How about with the Temple Israel?

LS: I am currently president of the synagogue.

JS: What is your education?

LS: I got my A.B. at Adelphi University well it was a college in those days in 1962. I got my M.A. at St. Johns University in 1963. I got my Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill officially in 1969.

JS: Okay... what is your ethnic background?

LS: My mother's parents came from what is known as Warsaw Gubernia. Gubernia is Russian for province. My father's parents came from a little town known as Boblica, which was in Galicia. Which was Polish, Russian, Austrian, Ukrainian depending upon what year and where the border was.

JS: And what is your religious affiliation?

LS: Jewish

JS: And your hobbies are to garden and fix up stuff?



LS: Amongst other things... sculpt...I do sculpture.

JS: This is Jenna Switzer. It is March 4<sup>th</sup> and we are at Dr. Schmier's house. What is your family's migration history?

LS: It is kinda vague because my parents really didn't talk about it. Actually last year I was contacted by long lost relatives that I didn't even know exist. But it goes something like this.... My grandfather came to this country in 1888. All of his children with the exception of one was American born, and they all grew up in New York City.

JS: And were your parents Jewish?

LS: Uh-huh...yeah...yes

JS: What type of Judaism do you practice?

LS: Huh...I suppose formally it's known as conservatism but it's more of a moralism rather than a ritualism or ceremonialism.

JS: And does your wife practice the same type of Judaism?

LS: Yeah... yes

JS: Do you keep Kosher?

LS: No

JS: Do you have any memories of the Jewish food traditions you participated in as a young child?

LS: Oh gosh yeah.

JS: That is going to be a long question.

LS: Oh yeah...What do you want to know about that?

JS: Um... Just some of the different things you participated in.

LS: Well when I grew up I grew up in what was known as the Jewish Shtetl in New York. I grew up in the tail end of the immigrant experience. I knew Yiddish almost before I knew English because even though we lived with our grandparents, my mother's parents. They owned a building at Orchard and Delancy Street and my Aunt Polly and Uncle Victor lived below us. Whenever they were in the house they always spoke Yiddish. Whenever I went outside the whole neighborhood essentially spoke Yiddish. So I learned Yiddish virtually before I learned English. The foods we ate were I don't

know some people would call Jewish foods. They're really not. They were really the ethnic food my grandparents brought over. Foods like Flampkin which was a boiled meat. Borscht which is a beat soup. Now there were the Jewish delicatessens all around us so I ate Jewish delicatessens. We had meals like Cachca Vanishgas. How do I describe it? Vanishga is a bow like little bows you can see it. Casha is a cracked buckwheat... You fried the Casha with onions and mixed it up with Vanishgas and so it was Casha Vanishgaas. What were some of the other foods we had? Perogin... Perogin is almost like an east European ravioli. Knishes which was a sort of a...dough filled .I do not know how you describe it. Except to say it was delicious. It was filled with farmer's cheese or potatoes. So we ate all those foods in the restaurants. So all of those foods that people would call Jewish were actually American inventions. Like the bagel they did not know from the bagel. I never ate a bagel all that much. So we had all those different kinds of foods but primarily they were ethnic East European.

JS: Did you celebrate the Jewish Seder as a child?

LS: Yeah we used to say my grandpa; while Moses had to walk across the Red Sea my grandpa loaded us on a speed boat. It was my grandmother who was really very religious my grandfather wasn't. When we moved out onto the island... Now again our Judaism was far more cultural than it was religious. I stopped going to synagogue when I was barmitzvah and didn't step into one again until I was married and that was 12 years.

JS: Does your extended family still celebrate the Seder?

LS: Extended family....what do you mean?

JS: As in like your sisters and brothers?

LS: No my sister converted to... She is a Baptist... Southern Baptist. She converted to that. My brother is totally non-practicing and non-participating... non-everything.

JS: How about your aunts and uncles? Did you live close to them during your childhood?

LS: Well like I said my Aunt Polly lived below us.... I am trying to remember. One of the things you will learn about oral history is you just wait. We weren't like Brighton Beach. The associations we had with our relatives were close in some respects and not in others. There were times that we celebrated Passover with friends and relatives and times we celebrated them alone. In fact when you talk about extended families.... I had been led to believe that we were the only Schmier's in New York and I said last year that someone contacted me and suddenly I found that there were cousins and grand cousins whatever you call them living in and around New York that I never even knew existed. That we never had contact with. And we all think that there must have been have been one helluvah knock-down drag out fight in the old country that was brought over here.

JS: Can you describe the preparation of the Seder?



LS: The way we practice is not as strict as the way orthodox may practice it. If you were Orthodox you would get rid of everything that was what was called kumix. Now my grandparents had two sets of dishes. They had two sets of silverware. But we could afford that not all families could. Here we don't really have two sets we have a set of fine china that we rarely use so it has kinda become our Passover set. When I grew up we were well to do until my folks went bankrupt. While we were well to do my father had gotten my mother a 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary dinner set that was extraordinarily fine. It was Lamoje and that dinner set was not exactly what you call everyday stuff and that only came out at Passover. But we don't necessarily ....we use essentially the sterling silverware. And the reason we do that is that I hate to polish silverware. But that is the time we polish silver and bring out the good dishes. We don't rid the house of all the Levin foods. I love Matzah. So we bring it in here by the box enough to last throughout the whole year. I just finished the last box. And fundamentally I don't keep the unleaven practice except for the Matzah. Don't ask me why. It's cultural. It's symbolic. It's even hypocritical to some respect. It's almost like being half pregnant. But it is something that is cultural. Susan will cook up a very very special meal. It will be a lot like what she is doing for you and we will have maybe about 15....20 friends over for Seder. Normally the first night is the most important as opposed to the second night and with our new rabbi we have been having a community Seder. So the whole congregation or most of it celebrates the Seder at the synagogue and the second night we will brake up into our smaller group families and friends. We don't have any family here so we will either go to someone else's house and help prepare or they'll come here....it varies. That's the ritual plate which the people listening to the tape can't see. The white plate and the matching candles. And then we will sit down and before we eat we will do the Seder. Seder means to tell so we'll recite from the prayer books the tale of the Exodus. There will be special foods that commemorate different aspects. There'll be an egg as a symbol of life because the Passover is both a spring right as well as a historical holiday as well as a religious holiday. And that is why it is akin to Easter but I won't get into religious history. Susan will make a food that is symbolic of the mortar that the Hebrews had to make and it is made from nuts, apples, and wine. We will dip the egg into salt water as a symbol of life but as a remembrance that sometimes life ain't easy and sometimes there are sorrows and bitter tastes. The worst part of the Seder is that you've got to take some of the matzah and dip into horseradish which to me is proof that God isn't perfect...and tears...they are called the bitter herbs as a reminder of slavery. So we will go through that ritual and then we'll have the ritual meal.

JS: So will that happen just on the Seder or will that happen tomorrow night?

LS: No that will just be for the Seder. What will happen tomorrow night is ....we are putting on the ritz for the Shabez meal. We don't always do the formal Shabez meal. Although Suzie will light candles. There's really no ritual Shabez meal. The Shabez meal is a celebration of the coming of the Sabbath because in Judaism the holidays are celebrated....well the only remnant in the Christian calendar is Halloween, all Hallows eve and Christmas Eve. The holidays start from sun down and end at sun down. So



tomorrow night is the beginning of the Sabbath. We don't keep tight to sundown. We will have services at 7:30 and that is just for convenience whether it is dark or not.

JS: You were talking about these religious things. Is that uniform throughout all people who participate in it?

LS: The ritual plate...the Seder plate generally is uniform. The Seder book itself evolves overtime. And it just depends how technically...the Seder meal on the first night should go until 2:00 in the morning and that is the part I left out. There is lots of wine. You have to...you are obliged to drink 4 cups of wine. I remember little...my son getting drunk. But that is because you can incorporate songs and additional prayers. There's a service what they call benching it is sorta like a giving thanks service after the meal is over and how long you want that to last depends upon your religiosity.

JS: When I was reading some books about the Seder I read there is a custom to save a place for Elijah. Have you heard of that?

LS: Oh yeah... It's called The Shabez meal is a celebration of the coming of the Sabbath. It's not really unique to the Passover Seder it's true of every holiday we celebrate. Because one of the essences of Judaism is called Sadoga. There is really no word for it so let's just call it charity. Literally it means doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do. So technically, any time we celebrate the door is open for anyone who wants to come in, who is needy, and who shares with the meal. So the cup of Elijah is a symbolic cup and part of the service says all who wish to enter may come. And so we pour the Elijah cup and open the door symbolically to let Elijah in because Elijah is sort of the prophet of charity for want of a better term. And that cup is not partaken so it stands there. Although my father used to come out about 2:00 in the morning and nip it and tell us kids that Elijah had come. So that cup will stay on the buffet for about two days.

JS: I thought that was really interesting.

LS: But see, that is true of ...if we are celebrating Hanukkah, it's true if we are doing Purim, it's true on Rosh Hash omen, the new year or Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. It's just that it is a symbolic part of the Passover. Because what you do technically....part of the service is to remember the Egyptians who were killed and that our freedom was at their expense but they were also children of God. And so we shouldn't really celebrate their death we celebrate our freedom. And so we drop about three, four drops of wine into the plate that the Elijah cup is on. I will show you an Elijah cup.

JS: Do you and your family have any unique practices that come from your ethnic background that is different from around here? How they practice?

LS: There used to be a family. Not so much....um...I have been at a Seder...my wife hasn't, where they served a ham instead of beef...which is kinda....But again that was because they were for want of purposes, ultra reform. They weren't Kosher. But that's



all superficial. The most important thing is that they were practicing the Seder. They were saying the Seder. They were doing the rituals. They were doing an abbreviated version. They were doing it all in English as opposed to all in Hebrew. We do Hebrew and English because while I know Hebrew my wife doesn't and most of the people around here don't. It is more in the food than it is in the ritual table itself. Everyone will have the ritual plate. On there is the shank bone, the roasted egg, the horosis, the horseradish, and the sprig of lettuce. That will be the centerpiece of the table. Tomorrow we will have a Hallah, which is eggbread, which is sumptuous. Publix makes a good one. But of course during Passover you would have the Matzah. So that is not appreciably different because it is not the meal or the food per say as it is the service the Seder itself.

JS: What do people normally wear to the Seder?

LS: It depends upon the household. My philosophy is... it's not my wife's, Moses walked around in bed sheets so who cares. I have been to Seder's where it was coat and tie. This is a very informal house so if the boss says its okay there is no coat and tie if she says there is...there is. In a more traditional Seder, when I grew up, my zeta, grandfather would dress in a white gown as a sign of purity. The Passover was probably the only formal religious happening we had in the house and he was the Shamiz, the caretaker of the synagogue. But at home he wasn't orthodox even though the synagogue was. Probably the two most prominent portions of the Seder is that the youngest son asks what is known as the Fier kasha...the four questions. And essentially the questions ask what are we doing? Why is this night so special and why is it different from all other nights? Why do we sit and lean. Then the whole Seder is the answering of those 4 questions. They're called the Manish stannous...why is this night in Hebrew.

JS: How often do you participate in the Seder?

LS: Between the time I was barmitzvah at the age of 13 until I was married at 26 I did not participate.

JS: Why do you participate in these religious meals?

LS: I don't know

JS: What does it mean to you?

LS: I don't know

JS: okay...

LS: I think about it and I write about it. I don't know...I go into these things in my head..and this is just me...I go into these things in my head as if it's tradition. To me this is not Judaism. To me Judaism is living your religion not just doing the accoutrements. Joseph Campbell said organized church gets in the way of a religious experience. To me, my Judaism is living it. The me is inseparable for the me at work, in



the classroom, me going around. If you haven't heard I am a character educator and what you see is what you get. I don't need these and then again I come out of them spiritually in my heart. I don't know whether it is a walk down memory lane. I don't see it as a renewal of spirit or identity. I don't see these as making me more moral or ethical. In fact if anything I am anti-ritual and anti-ceremonial. My favorite passage in scripture is Micah 6:8 and it is essentially anti ritual and it says you gotta behave and live it. So I don't know why. Part of it is because she says so. And when the boss says so you say yesmam. And it's part of my cultural identity. It's one side of my hyphen. You know Jewish-American. So it's that. It's not like I need to do it and yet at the same time it is like I need to do it. There's a mystery about it and sometimes you just don't ask. I'm still Jewish because I went through a religious crisis as a youngster. I was engaged to a Catholic girl. I did a lot of soul searching and decided that I happen to agree with what I was. Most people come out of the womb and they are whatever they are and they really don't think about it or reflect upon it because they are afraid what they are going to find. So they will just go to the church and be that religion that there folks were. They'll quote scripture and read Bible but they really don't have the spiritual grasps because they don't question themselves.

Second tape

JS: My next question is about your siblings and whether they still practice but I know that they don't.

LS: Michael is what is known as a Jewish Zen. So am I really to some extent. There is a great deal of similarity between Zen and Judaism: Which is what make me attracted to Judaism not because I came out of a Jewish womb but because it is very horizontal. It's very human. It's probably....It's all about human relations far more than it is about man god relations.

JS: And is this Judaism or Zen?

LS: Judaism and so it fits into Zen very easily. Although Michael still celebrates his wife is not Jewish. Robbie will be here for the Seder and he'll fast on Yum Kippur and things like that but he doesn't go to synagogue and neither does Michael. His fiancé is not Jewish either but that's okay as long as they are good kids I could care less.

JS: What brought you to Valdosta?

LS: Oh you don't want to know...What brought me to Valdosta? Well you heard the story so we'll just have to put it down. My wife and I got married and we were in Chapel Hill and I could not make it on a T.A.'s salary. She was just finishing up. So I went looking around and found a school. It was a black school in Durim and we had agreed that I would essentially be an adjunct for a year and be making twice what I was at the Hill. So I resigned my T.A. and turned down some exchange fellowships. But when I went back to sign the contracts they figured that since I had been a civil rights leader and had done voter registration that I would magnanimously agree to work for half of what



we had agreed upon which was less than I had been making at the Hill. I went back to the Hill and everything was gone and this was in a matter of days. Got a phone call from a drinking buddy, a friend, who had just taken a position here. I knew about Valdosta because another good buddy of mine had gone to Moody. He said that there was a position here and I was desperate. Desperate enough that I was even going to go to Georgia. It was one of the three states that I swore I would stay clear of. I didn't even think the streets were paved. So we came down here in a world wind and I wouldn't take her down town cause I really didn't think the streets were paved and she wouldn't come here. I figured also we would be here for about a year or two. She'd finish up her year at the college. There were only 1500 students at the time. I'd finish up my dissertation and then we'd get out. I've never told her until this year how scared I was when we came down here. New Yorker, Yankee, Jewish, liberal, civil rights worker and I knew I was gonna get lynched. I really was scared and then the economy dropped out just phhhew. And there was no moving. Been here ever since and now we got two born and bred Georgia crackers.

JS: Has living in South Georgia influenced the way you perform your religious meals?

LS: No not me. I've seen it ... how it affects other people. See, a lot of people around here were born and bred in the Jewish community that was here. The contemporary Jewish community is almost a family affair and it has been here since... Well it was really started in 1892. There were Jewish families...extremely prominent Jewish families living in Valdosta since the Civil War. But the contemporary Jewish community is really almost an extended family and so they grew up here. Even though they were Orthodox and they built the synagogue, their children and grandchildren essentially became non-practicing more reform than anything else. Although they would say the contrary. They were not really learned in the ways of Judaism. They couldn't read Hebrew and a lot of it was because the schooling wasn't here and the environment that I grew up in wasn't here. Susie wanted a Jewish community and by luck it happened to be here. So we slowly but surely got involved in it and slowly but surely all of those experiences I had were reawakened. And now I'm stuck with the Presidency of the synagogue.

JS: Can you describe your involvement in that?

LS: I'm very active. I was a member of the board for about 20 years. I've served twice as President of the synagogue. A four year stint back in the 80's and I am doing a four year stint now.

JS: What has been the reception of the larger community to the Jewish temple in Valdosta?

LS: It depends upon the time that you are looking about. Now I've been here 36 years. This is a very church oriented community. They call the synagogue a church. What a lot of people would take to be anti-semantic I would take to be...for want of a better term...uninformed, ignorant. The attitudes were essentially benevolent. I know of no overt act of anti-Semitism and I ran for political office. I have never been a closet Jew.

When we didn't have a rabbi I would be the one to go off to other churches and explain the them what Judaism was. A lot of them look upon Judaism almost through Christian eyes. There's almost a naïveté and childishness about it. But my sons were Jewish. They received awards so that there was never in my mind any malevolence because we were Jewish. A lot of curiosity. And in the old days 1880's and 1890's they were welcomed for curious regions of course they were more reformed now. We are here. In many respects the more reformed members of the take pride in the diversity. There are Jews here, there's a masque, there's a morbin temple. But most of the community is really uninformed except for what they learn about it in their Sunday schools which is really a Christian take on it and is not Judaism per say. They see Judaism as the heralding of Christianity. Of course we don't. I have fun sometimes in classes...am I gonna go to hell... Why don't I believe in... I am not afraid to take a stand. In fact I ran for political office. I ran against one of the top executives in Valdosta who was a deacon in one of the largest Baptist church. So his campaign was 'I'm a Christian'... Some people saw that as well...anti-semantic. So sometimes it exists. Have I experienced it? A little but I don't think it's vocal. Historically, there was only one act. There was a cross burning on the lawn of one member of the Jewish community but that was because he was an avid supporter of John Kennedy. Racism and anti-Catholicism is far stronger. Much more stronger. I am sure there are some jerks around here who talk about Christ-killers but they are just ignorant idiots.

JS: Well I think that is it. Thank you very much for your time.