Interview with Anita Newell
Audio Transcript

Carnegie Mellon University Archives
Oral History Program

Date: 08/04/2017
Narrator: Anita Newell
Location: Hunt Library, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA
Running Time: 00:46:28
Interviewer: Kate Barbera, Assistant Archivist, Carnegie Mellon University

Abstract:
This Carnegie Mellon University oral history features Anita Newell, who graduated from Carnegie Institute of Technology in 1947. She is interviewed by Kate Barbera, Assistant Archivist at Carnegie Mellon University. Newell studied library science at Margaret Morrison Carnegie College at Carnegie Institute of Technology, and she received her master’s in library science from Columbia University. She worked as a Librarian at Westinghouse Research Laboratories for more than 30 years. Newell provides insights into her experiences growing up in a Jewish family in the Hill District neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She discusses topics such as education and discrimination.
[Begin Interview]

Barbera: [00:00:00] Today is August 4th, 2017. And we are in Hunt Library at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. My name is Kate Barbera, Assistant Archivist at Carnegie Mellon University. And I am interviewing Anita Newell. Anita, can you please state your full name, including your maiden name, age, and birth date?

Newell: My name Anita Newell. And I am 93 years old, having been born October 2, 1924.

Barbera: And where were you born?

Newell: I was born in Vertiujeni Moldova Romania.

Barbera: And can you tell me a little bit about your family?

Newell: [00:00:55] Well, our family – I had a brother younger than I, who also was born in Romania, and our parents. And our parents were – well, we are Jewish people. And living in Romania, fortunately, we did not have any of the terrible things that were happening in the '30s in Europe. And also, fortunately, my mother had three sisters and two brothers, all of whom had come to this country, starting off in Pittsburgh, as a matter of fact.

And, finally, we were the last family on my mother's side who were told to come to Pittsburgh to the U.S., and they made all the arrangement for us, fortunately, right before the Second World War, a little bit before the Second World War, as I recall, had started. Maybe the – well, the date on the passport will show what the date was. I don't remember that date too well. But still, we didn't miss that Second World War over there fortunately.

And we came to Pittsburgh because of my mother's family who was here. And I feel very lucky that it was all done in a very good time for us. And here in Pittsburgh, we lived in a place which became known to us and is still known as the Hill District. And at the time that we came, the Hill District was well-known for all the immigrants who lived there. And it was – a lot of them, many, many of them were recently arrived Jewish immigrants, too. So somehow there was a comfortable feeling, even though most of the people had come from this place and that place, from all over.

[00:03:20] And the result of coming here eventually – as of today, I can say we, therefore, never got to know – my brother and I never got to know our father's family. So fortunately, we came over as a family, and my father – and the reason we were able to get here so – get a passport
so quickly, is because my father was coming here because of a job he was offered by our uncle. And on that basis, we really were able to come very quickly to this country, fortunately.

And so when we came, I was I think around four years old, something like that, if you can [laughs] do the arithmetic there. And my brother was about a year old – But at whatever age I was, it was time for me to go to kindergarten. [Laughs] So they did put me in school.

And all I can tell you is that – I will tell you her name. I cannot – kind of see her in my mind’s eye. Miss Howe, the kindergarten teacher, H-O-W-E. She took me under her wing and helped me so very much because I couldn’t speak English. [Laughs]. And so, because of her kindness and helpfulness, by the time I was ready to go to first grade, I could speak. I knew how to communicate all right. And from then on, it was a successful time for me. [Laughs]. At least in school it was.

[00:05:26] But I think what was very important for both me and my brother is that I think in most conservative Jewish families, the idea of learning was always very important. And what was very interesting is I didn’t learn, of course, until we were all here – I think the first English word my mother got to know was the word "learn," because the Jewish word "To learn" is lern. Lern. [Laughs]. We heard that word a lot. [Laughs].

So the idea of going to school and learning was number one for the both of us as children. And that was very lucky for us because it made us feel, both me and my brother, that what we were doing was so very important. And we observed that. It did hit us. We got to think like that, lucky for us.

So even though we were always a little different from the other kids because we were speaking – at home we always spoke Jewish because our parents never really learned to speak English too well.

Although, my father, because he was now working for our uncle at a fish and poultry store, he had to learn how to approach people. Of course, where we were living and where the store was, it was in that Hill District area where there were so many Jewish immigrants. My father could make it. And he got to learn English pretty well quickly so he could do the work that he needed to do. However, our mother still continued mostly to speak Jewish at home. And we knew Jewish, my brother and I. So Jewish was the home language, and English, for my brother and me, was the outside home language.

But the idea was to learn, to learn, to learn. Certainly, that is what really saved us in school from feeling we were out of it, we were outsiders. So lucky that way.
And we went to McKelvey School where we lived in the Hill District. And then we went to Herron Hill Junior High School. And then we went to Schenley High School.

And I must say, [laughs], by the time I was in high school, I had made some very good friends. And most of them were not living in the Hill District. They were able to go to Schenley from Herron Hill. But where I was living, the school law was I should go to Fifth Avenue High School. But I wanted so much to be with my friends. I did not tell my parents what I did.

And what did I do? I told the school people that I'm in a new address, and I gave the address of a friend who allowed me to use her address [laughs] who was going to Schenley. So that's how I got to Schenley High School. [Laughs]. And so, I still was with my friends. But it was – and fortunately, the bus – it was an easy trip with the bus. So I'm glad that happened the way it did.

And I will say this. Both for my brother and me, the main thing, of course, that really kept us going to school and how important it was the to lern, to lern, to learn, to learn, to learn. And that was really the main situation that we always lived with the whole time we were going into school.

And our parents really – they were uneducated people and knew nothing about how things were going on in. And I must say that I began to feel, because I was doing well and I was considered a smart person [laughs] in school, so I felt very ashamed of my family. And I never wanted, never in all the time I was even up into college, I never invited anybody to come home because I felt so ashamed that we couldn't speak English well at home.

But they were people who had brains. They knew what had to be done and what was necessary and all that. So we never suffered anything as students. But we had a different kind of way of living, both my – not so much my brother. He really became a very strong American kid. [Laughs]. But the – and I got to have some very good friends, too. So we made it through all right.

However, because I wanted to go to Schenley and I did what I did without telling our parents that I gave out a different address, my brother, when it came time for him from Herron Hill, he didn’t do that. And we were not – I was almost four years older than he was. So we didn’t talk to each other all that much. I don’t even know if I ever told him about what I did to go to Schenley. But he knew he had to go to Fifth Avenue, and he went.
And he liked – and do you know what? Since I have been living where I am living, I have found a couple of people who also knew us from that far back. And they knew my brother, too. And one of the people went to Fifth Avenue at the time he was going there, and she told me, "Did you know that he became the president of our class?" He was voted the president. I never knew that. [Laughs]. So here I am, finding out – I wish – unfortunately, he died last year. But I wish I could have talked with him about that.

But something else that I think is a very good American story – that's the way I begin it with people I want to tell this story. Despite the fact that we had to mostly speak Jewish or Yiddish at home – and by the way, by the time we were around ten years old, approximately, we were also enrolled in Hebrew school, and we had to go there for about an eight years, until we could get through all the classes there. So we were working really with three languages [laughs], English, Yiddish, and Hebrew, when we were young people like that.

And fortunately, the Hebrew school was right across from Carnegie Library on Wylie Avenue. So [laughs] I got to know that library very well, I can tell you. And I keep on thinking, being children of immigrants, it was something not unknown to us, because we were aware of other families with these kinds of situations. So for us, it didn't mean anything special. But today, when I think of so much that is talked about, how the family – what – how young people should be taken care of and talked about and all that, somehow it all happened without the Americanization [laughs] that was slowly but surely coming along to us. And I think the main thing that we were lucky with was to get the idea that to learn was number one for us. So that was a big help for anything that I can thank our parents for, even though they couldn't help us with certain things, the idea of learning that they instilled in us, put us through.

**Barbera:** So can we talk a little bit about your later education?

**Newell:** [00:15:59] Yes. And then – so after – I became interested in science because the family that brought us over, there were three children in that family. We were much younger than they were. But I found out, as we got older, that the boy – there's a boy and two girls. The boy got into chemical engineering, and the two girls – they got interested in chemistry. Both of them took chemistry at Pitt when it was time for them to graduate from high school and then go on to college.

So because of this family, our family got to see that to go to college was important. And that was, I think, very lucky for us, too, because it was during the Depression, and most of the families around us were very poor, as we were. And the idea of – the main thing, when you graduate,
you've got to work, you've got to work, you've got to work. That was the main idea.

But I'm glad that, with the background of our own family, we were able to think about going to college without feeling out of it in any way, lucky for us. And so, I was able then to after – and I graduated with high honors. So that was very nice.

[00:17:40] And we – And I wanted to go to a girls' school. Now, we didn't talk to our family about which college we were going to. But I just had decided to go to this girls' school. Why? I got a very, very nice letter from the president of the girls' school. I think it's today Chatham College, but I am not sure about that. So I – but it was a girls' university. And I felt very honored that they had sent me that letter.

And they asked me to come and visit them, which I did because I could get there by bus. I knew exactly how to go. And they had chemistry too, so I thought, "This is where I want to go."

So I did enter my application there. And then they found out something about me that they didn't know. When I filled out the application, there was a question concerning religion. And they found out I was Jewish. So, I got another nice letter from them telling me, "We are very sorry, but our quota for Jewish students has been filled. We cannot accept you now."

Oh! And all of this – I never told my parents about this. Never, never, never. A lot of this really I was doing pretty much on my own, because most of the other young people I was friends with – well, I must say, I was doing well at school, and most of them were not doing all that well. So the idea of going to college in those days when nobody had any money, everybody was going to work, going to work.

But I decided – because of my own background and being with the people who brought us over and what was happening with the "children" [laughs] there, my mother and father got to know that to be successful, you need to go to college. Kolej. [Laughs].

So the idea – my idea of wanting to go on with school, the idea of going to work, going to work, was not – I wasn't in that situation, as most of my friends were. Lucky, again. So much was useful, helpful to us, because of the people around us. I can see that today, but I really never thought very much about it until [laughs] I have now retired and thinking about the life that we had here.

And so, fortunately, my parents were very willing – they didn't say, "You're a girl. You're going to get married. You're going to have children. Why do you need to go to college?" No, never heard
that. So they were helpful that way to us.

But to help us decide what to take in college and things like that, we pretty much had to do a lot of that on our own, my brother and I. And fortunately, we had good friends, people who did help. Of course, we couldn't do it completely on our own. We certainly had teachers who were helpful to us, too.

[00:22:12] So – and I think it's a very good American story. And I would like to continue with that story, because my brother [laughs] we spoke Jewish at home, English outside the home. What did he become? An English professor. [Laughs].

And his main interest was in Shakespeare. And about eight years ago, he [Alex Newell] did publish a book [The Soliloquies in Hamlet: The Structural Design] dealing with Shakespeare's – oh, what was the name of the – oh, I can't think of the play. Oh, if you – I'm sure – I'll have to call you and let you know what that play was that he wrote a book about. And I think, as I recall, it was pretty well-received. And so that's what happened [laughs] to him.

But I became interested in science because of my cousins. And fortunately, I was able to continue with science. And so, when it came time to graduate and I wanted to go on and I thought about science, fortunately my parents helped me. They never said to me, "You can't go to college. You have to work. We need money."

[00:24:04] And I was accepted – after the girls' school, which as I said, I never told our parents about that, I – to me, where we were living in the Hill District, Pitt – I thought I would feel so lost at Pitt. I just felt uncomfortable going to such a big place, that I decided to go to Carnegie Mellon after the girls' school situation. That's when I decided to go to Carnegie, because it was a smaller school and I could get there very easily too, because all I needed to do was get off at Pitt where the bus stopped and then walk over to Carnegie Mellon, Carnegie Tech in those days.

And so, I started off at Carnegie Tech and got through it all right. And fortunately, I was able to graduate. And in the meantime, after I had had already some chemistry in my class, I was able to get a part-time job in laboratory, a private laboratory, which I did do. I think I was still – I was a senior in high school when I got that job, I think. At least I was making some money.

And when I was at that job, one of the people there – he knew I was planning to go on to college and I was interested in chemistry. He told me, "I need some information. I wonder if you could help me with it." And he told me what he wanted. So I said, "Oh, yeah, I'll go right down
to Carnegie Library, their Science Department. I can get it." And he said, "No, no. We have a library right here." And I said, "We do?" [Laughs].

[00:26:38] I had no idea that there was a library there. And so he showed it to me. And that's how I got to know about the technical library that laboratories can have. And, oh, that was a great discovery, because it made me – this is what I did for the rest of my life.

So I was able to give him the information. And in the meantime, when you do something like that, you learn something. And I thought, "Oh, you can learn something every day." It really changed my mind, from going into the laboratory.

See, I was still thinking of my cousins. They were all into science and chemistry. So I thought, "I'll go the way they go." That's what I was following. So I then decided on my own to try to become a technical librarian. And so that's what got me into technical literature. I'm so glad it happened like that. So many lucky things kept on happening, really.

And I will say also that my cousins – that family also – they were a pretty sophisticated family, as far as I was concerned. And because they were interested in music, for some crazy reason, I can tell you – I will never know this, unfortunately, know more. My family – my mother and father brought an old piano into the house. I don't know why. I never spoke to them about it.

[00:28:46] But here in the Pittsburgh – I'm sure you've heard of this place. It was called the Irene Kaufmann Settlement. Have you heard of it? I can't begin to tell you how important that community center was for the people living in the Hill District. From them, both my brother and I became Americanized, really, through what we could do there. We were very lucky, being able to have those – that community center there, because we had – well, I took dancing lessons there, I took sewing classes there, and they had drama theater there, took care of everything like that.

We were able to really get an idea of so much that most – I think most of the poor kids in the Hill District couldn't. So that community center was something I will never forget. And to this day, I thank them for what they gave to me and my brother.

So he – well, going to high school and then to college and after – well, the other thing – after taking that – getting my job, I told them – by that time, because I had found out about the technical library situation, I told the people in that private laboratory, my big interest was to go to library school, get a library degree to work with technical literature.
And so that's where I was when – I forget what happened that made me decide not to go to Carnegie Tech Library School. Something –

Barbera: Can we –

Newell: [00:31:51] Oh, yes, I remember now. Now I remember. I was speaking with the person there to whom I needed to speak about going and attending. And there was one thing she told me that just stuck with me. And that – she said, "We have." I think it was that she said, "We do want to tell you; we have trouble placing our graduates from the library school." She was trying to be very honest with me. And that is the thing I remember the most from that interview. And I think that is what made me think, "Maybe I should go." because I did well, and I was having a good job, and I thought, "Why can't I go to a very good place to go to library school?"

I made up my own mind to do that. And fortunately, again, my parents felt I was doing so well. And I knew what I was doing. They really trusted me to do the right thing. And so when I told them where I wanted to go and why – oh, and they had – my mother had a relative living very close to New York, I remember. So I think she felt I would be close to family somehow.

But when I saw that I got accepted by Columbia and I was going on – and by the way, the place where I was working, that private laboratory, they were willing to give me a year's leave of absence – wasn't that nice – to go and get my degree at the library school. So that's how I got to Columbia.

[00:34:13] And [laughs] – but – and from all of these things, the one thing that now keeps on coming to me is this: In this country, whatever you want to do, if you really want to do it, you can do it. It doesn't matter what your background is. And today I'll say, it's beginning not to matter what your color is. I hate to have to add that, but certainly being – that time of the teacher telling me I couldn't – that letter, because the Jewish quota had been filled, I had an idea of what some of these African-American kids are going through.

So the – but, again, in this country, you want to do something, you don't have to take no for an answer. I really do feel very strongly that way, and still continue to feel that way.

So I got my degree from Columbia and came back. And in about six or eight months, Westinghouse Research was looking. What I didn't know was that they had decided to really put together an excellent technical library. But I went looking for something in technical library work. And I must have gotten to Westinghouse somehow, because I did get a call from them telling me that they are interested in putting together a very
good technical library. And they wanted to know if I could come and talk to them. Which is what I did.

And that's how I met Dr. Yolan Furtig. She came to this country from Hungary with a PhD in chemistry already. And her husband, who was an engineer, he got work right away. She just couldn't, until they called her from Westinghouse Research to ask whether she would be willing to try to put together a very good technical library. And she said yes.

And it is she, Dr. Furtig, who hired me for my first and only library [laughs] – technical library job. She was very, very smart, yes. And she was doing a very good job. That library had a very good reputation throughout the laboratories, yes. So I really felt honored, really, that she had hired me.

And coming with the background in poor immigrant and not very educated people, to work in a place like this when at least half the people had PhDs in science [laughs] of one kind or another, and they were from all over the world. I can still think of at least two Chinese people and two Japanese people who were there. It was an international place, and it still is. So I really was lucky, really was lucky. And that was my one and only technical library job.

And fortunately, Dr. Furtig was somebody who expected very good work. And of course I had to give it to her. And that was also very good for me, too.

[00:38:53] But she – I was still feeling that after all, I was just a poor immigrant. Who am I? [Laughs]. And so when she knew she was going to have to retire, so she hired – she went and hired a man. I can't think of his name right now. But he had a degree in – see, my degree was in chemistry and then I went to library school. And I can't think of the man's name right now. Very nice man whom she hired. See, she became active in technical library circles. So she got to know people. She got to know this person who was looking for a job, but he took his degree in physics and then he went to library school. And he went to – I think he went to Carnegie Tech.

But at any rate, it was at the Westinghouse Research labs that she got to know about – he got to – he came to work at the laboratories. But he was – oh, I don't know how she got to know about him, but she liked him when she met him. I think he was already working in a library.

But at any rate, I got to know that she hired him. And from the way she began to work with him, I got to know that he was going to be number one when she left. But I didn't care because I, myself, never felt myself as being a manager. Yes, I could work with people, they needed this or
that. And the two other people in the library that they knew whenever they needed something, I would try very hard to do what they needed.

So I had a good relationship with both the professionals and all the other people working in the laboratories. So I felt comfortable there. I just felt so very lucky. Here I am working in science. And I was doing literature work.

And when she retired, yes, he became the manager. But while he was a very nice person, his management skills were not very good, I must say. So I took over some of all that, too, to help him. And I forget. After about two years or so, he became very ill and eventually died. And as a result of that, they could see in that short amount of time, that I was doing a lot of the work. They said, "You can be the manager if you want."

[00:42:16] So that's how I became the manager of the Westinghouse Research Library. And I was there for about 30, 32 years. And I know that when I left, it had a very good reputation. That I do know. And because even to this day, I bump into people who just shake my hand and remember the good work. So I feel very comfortable for all the years I spent there, and my one and only job.

And I don't think really, for what I was interested in doing, I could have had a better job anywhere. I just – I had so much luck. [Laughs]. But the main thing is, you've got to try. First of all, you have to try. So it turned out all right.

[00:42:23] And then when I retired, it was only a couple of years. I didn't – they knew – I was not afraid – not ashamed to tell people that I was Jewish. And I took the days off that I needed. I was being very honest with myself to everybody.

So about a couple of years after I retired, I got a call from one of the engineers. He said, "Anita, we're going to go out to lunch. We would like you to come and have lunch with us." So I said, "Sure, I would love to." So I did go to the restaurant they told me. And it turned out that they were honoring me at the restaurant. [Laughs]. That was so nice, so very – so unexpected. [Laughs].

And I just feel so very lucky, that I couldn't have found a better place for myself to every day learn something when I loved learning, and then to have all these nice people, and people from all over the world. I still can't believe that it all happened to me. [Laughs]. Who am I? But I just feel so very lucky that it happened the way it did.

And I was able – my father died after I got that job. And my brother – he was working on his PhD. I was able to take over what was needed. So
fortunately, for that – in fact, I was making more money than my father was making. So that's what finally happened. I really did take over. And couldn't have been better. It really couldn't have been better.

Barbera: Well, that's wonderful, Anita. Thank you so much for sharing your story with us. We're very appreciative.

Newell: Yes, isn't that a good – I hope I didn't talk too much, but –

Barbera: This is wonderful. I want to thank you so much. This has been such a pleasure and an honor.

Newell: Well, I just feel one piece of luck after the other is what happened. But again, I will repeat, it all depends on the individual. First of all, they have to get to work and to do – and then – and to try, and then go on from there.

Barbera: That's wonderful.

Newell: It does depend on the individual. That's what's so wonderful about this country. They have made the individual most important. Yes, I love this country.

Barbera: Well, thank you so much. Thank you, thank you.

Newell: So, well, that's it. Did you get all – [00:46:28]

[End Interview]