

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Education in Youngstown Project

Teaching Experiences

O. H. 684

ESTHER SHUDMAK

Interviewed

by

Beth Kurtzweig

on

May 20, 1980

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Education in Youngstown Project

INTERVIEWEE: ESTHER SHUDMAK

INTERVIEWER: Beth Kurtzweig

SUBJECT: formal and informal education, staff, curriculum,
students, strengths and weaknesses

DATE: May 20, 1980

K: This is an interview with Mrs. Esther Shudmak for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Beth Kurtzweig, at the home of Mrs. Shudmak, on May 20, 1980, at 8:30.

The first thing I would like to ask you is if you would give me a little bit of background about your family, your parents, and your brothers and sisters.

S: I was born in Europe, in Czechoslovakia. I come from a family of nine children. My parents were observant Jews. We lived in a small place. As much as I remember, we were at home, just five kids, the rest of them were married. I have a very good Jewish background, and not strictly Orthodox. It was more observed than Judaism.

I went to school in Czechoslovakia; it was a democratic country. We were very happy in family life and very much together. The problem was that World War II started in 1939, and that was odd. Czechoslovakia was occupied or liberated by many other countries. It started an operation of the Jewish people by taking away the stores and we had to wear yellow stars to identify us as Jews. We could not go out to a certain point; they started to expel Jewish children from school. Then throughout the later years, like in 1942, 1943, we were absolutely not allowed to attend school. My father was keen on education and he sat with us and helped us as much as he could because he couldn't work in the workshop where he worked. Most of us were home. The 5:00 curfew brought Jewish people of the city more together as a family, and we did a lot of home studies. We got a lot of self-education.

After that, we were put into a ghetto and were taken to Auschwitz where I was separated from my parents, and from my family. I returned with five other sisters and brothers after the concentration camp. We got together to try to rebuild a family without parents, without relatives. We went from country to country. We were not well educated. As much as we were freed from a concentration camp we were not free from all the anxiety and all the problems and all the difficulties that we went through. We had to really put ourselves together somehow and rebuild our lives. We went from one country to the other and ended up in every European country. Then we came back to Czechoslovakia, and there too, communism started and we could not stay there. We did not want to stay so we went back to Germany. There I started a little bit again in my education. I started to study Hebrew and it looked like a preparation for going to Israel. This was in a DP camp, displaced persons camp, where we were kept in barracks without freedom. Many things were offered in education, including Hebrew, English. People who did want a profession could go to other cities. From there we picked up a little bit of our lives. It was difficult because we didn't get guidance from our parents anymore. We got guidance from other people, from older brothers. The general idea was each and every girl or boy would look to get married to start a new life. That is what happened to me. When I was eighteen I got married. I had a child in Germany and we went to Israel. Israel was like a new life. We had to tackle a new language because I did not know any Hebrew. We had to start to adjust to a new life and a difficult life in 1949. I had a child. I worked in every field that was possible, for plenty of people cleaning, and sewing, everything that came in because we had to live. I was very unhappy. I started to go to night school, first to learn the Hebrew language. I was not happy with just learning the Hebrew language, so I started to take courses in education. One thing was that I loved children. I organized children in the ghetto and when I was sixteen I would have a nursery, a kindergarten. That was my dream; I reached it years later.

I went to school and it was not like here; you have to go to four years of college. We had special teacher seminars. They gave you situational tests--what would you do in a situation of a child behaving in a certain way. I had to answer it. Most of my answers had to be good. I did not get the results. I ended up being a helper to a kindergarten teacher. Then I conducted my own kindergarten. I worked with children for years.

Life in Israel was very difficult for us. The climate

especially was difficult for me. Having relatives in Youngstown, they helped us with papers to come to the United States. After ten years, we came to the United States.

- K: You had said, prior to the beginning of the interview, something about the difference between the schools here in the United States and the schools that you had gone to as far as religious education was a part of secular education. Could you kind of go over that again?
- S: Yes. I attended school in Israel under the Czech government. Our Jewish education was partly with the rabbi at home. He came to the home and started to teach prayers and Jewish education. In later years the school system had brought in religious education in the system of public school. What really happened was there was set aside a subject which was called a religion. The groups were divided into different religious sects: Jewish, Christians, Methodists, Greek-Orthodox. A teacher came in for the Jewish students, who was qualified to teach Bible in Hebrew in the religion, for the Catholics, a priest or a reverend. Religion was studied in the public school. We were graded on it on the report card and it was part of our studies. Whereas here religion is taught at the church and synagogue.
- K: Really all of your formal education in Judaism would have been taken care of in public schools.
- S: Some of it, yes. Let's say part of it was taken care of in the public school. We studied the creation in Hebrew. We always brought up certain points and certain ethics that we would believe. We were taught in both languages: Hebrew and Czech. I think that each and every one in a class was looking forward to being separated and going to their own respective classes. We did not create any problems among the students. After the hour we went back for another subject in the classroom.
- K: You left off with coming to this country. Let's push up a little bit to the present. You have two children, correct?
- S: Yes.
- K: Could you please explain to me a little bit about the type of Jewish orientation that they have received both in the home and as far as a formal education is concerned?
- S: With my children, they were a little bit different than any American-Jewish child. When we came to the United States, one of my daughters was six years old and the other was twelve. We were raised in Israel. They had that feeling

being part of a country where Judaism is political, religious, and every day. Their background was very good. When we came to the United States I kept a Jewish home. The language of prayer or of Jewish education wasn't foreign because we spoke Hebrew and we continued speaking Hebrew until today after twenty years. It's our first language. Most of the Jewish education they got at home, and later on they did attend Hebrew school to be part of a congregation, and acquire a Jewish education in the sense of the American way.

K: Let's take a step backward. In Israel what kind of formal education did they get? How was the school system set up?

S: The school system was just like here. The only thing was that religion, Judaism, was part of the study because that is the history of Israel.

K: It would be like our American history?

S: Yes. Your American history is the history of the land. The history of the land of Israel is the old testament, going through the Bible to the ethics, and through the Talmud, and the pioneering of the people to Israel. Then everything comes automatically. If you study the Bible in the school, that means right away they start with creation. They study the Bible and go into deep studies of the Bible. I don't know how much prayer book is used in the class, possibly none, but there is no need for it because certain prayers are taken out of the Bible and explained, and the five books of Moses. The five books of Moses are studied religiously and scientifically. The Bible is looked at from every point of view. The student has a deep feeling about Judaism, about its history, and the life of the Jews in Israel and in the world.

K: So there was really no type of Hebrew school per se because it was a part of the regular education?

S: Yes.

K: What kind of educational experiences did they have here? Did you immediately come to Youngstown?

S: Yes. We came in the middle of summer and they went to school one month. They had problems, language barriers, but that vanished very quick. They learned fast. They did not have any need of Jewish education like Sunday school or Hebrew school because they had that. They were so much ahead of their friends that going to Hebrew school and

Sunday school would only be sitting there. I did not send them to Hebrew school.

K: Did you think that there would be that type of problem? You don't think that the other children would have seen them as someone they could look to for information?

S: The difficult things were that they had problems in school; they had to cope with the English language. The Jewish education that we offered here, now I'm speaking as a Hebrew teacher, is after school. I felt that it would be unnecessary for my kids to sit two hours there just for the sake to be with children their age. Instead, I let them study their English and other schoolwork to catch up with their friends in school.

K: Let's forge ahead a little bit. You mentioned that you were a Hebrew schoolteacher. As a teacher then, what were some of the things at the time that were really good about the Sunday school and the Hebrew school? How was it set up? How many days a week?

S: It was set up three times a week. Each student attended three times a week for two hours a day. That means they finished their public school studies, regular studies, and they went straight to Hebrew school. Hebrew was offered to them as a language, as a prayer book, Bible, and religion. There was another hour for ethics, customs, and ceremonies to be taught. Each student studied one hour of Hebrew and one hour of customs, ceremonies, Bible, or ethics. Sunday school was from 10:00 to 12:00. Sunday was possibly a little more fun for the students because Sunday was a day where Hebrew conversation was taught, customs and ceremonies. We could spend more time on Israel, Israeli music, singing, and dancing. I always thought that Sunday was more of a fun day than the others. I don't think kids resented it as much as on a weekday because they did have to come from school.

K: You mentioned some of the classes that were taken, who was really the head of the Hebrew school, Sunday school? Was there a person designated to be director or educational coordinator?

S: On the south side, Boardman, our rabbi was always the principal. He had written out a curriculum with the teachers. He was the one who guided us and supported us and helped us, not only in the subjects, but also in understanding the problems that faced our teachers at that time. In another school on the north side the rabbi would not have such a big part in education. He was the leader of the congregation, but he had a higher

- principal who was a Jewish educator. He had a principal diploma, set up the school, prepared everything. It was very easy because handed down from the principal.
- K: That's interesting that you had two different setups. Let's stick with the south side for a couple of minutes and then we'll go up north. You said that the rabbi had worked with you as far as the curriculum was concerned. Were the teachers, in your estimation, certified? Did they have a type of diploma? How were they seen as being competent in the areas of what they were teaching?
- S: Not all of them were certified teachers, but all of us were dedicated teachers. I found that a certificate in teaching does mean that person is a teacher. The dedication of those people who taught was so great. They were willing to sit hours with the rabbi and be instructed by him. That they were certified or not did not make too much difference. They were there for the time and they did the utmost of their ability.
- K: As far as materials were concerned, I take it that since they were dedicated but not certified teachers . . . Did the rabbi work hand in hand with each of the teachers, and did the teachers do a lot of research and reading on their own in order to prepare for the classes?
- S: The rabbi worked hand in hand with each teacher, but each teacher did a lot of research. He got books; he got teachers' guides. He did a lot of preparation for school. The two hours were just a small part. I have twenty years behind me teaching Hebrew.
- K: The preparation time that you had spent made you knowledgeable about the material, and because of the dedication and the mixture of the two then it was a good learning situation.
- S: Teaching Hebrew for me was no problem, but when I was asked to teach in English ethics on the cycle of Jewish life, I wanted to change from a Hebrew teacher coat to a social studies teacher. I had to do a lot of research, a lot of preparation.
- K: What about the types of materials that were available, did you find AV material and different kinds of textbooks that you felt were quality materials to be used by you to teach the students? Did you find any problems with lack of materials or lack of good materials?
- S: There was a lack of good material in the past. Today, the material for Jewish education is excellent.
- Hebrew is a spoken language in Israel, but what I as a

teacher would like my children to learn is the ethics, to understand what it means to be a Jew, to understand why we still pray in Hebrew, why we keep all our old traditions. I would like to teach them the love of Judaism, to teach them to understand what it means to be a Jew in every sense, and that means living in the United States as free people, free of choice, free of religion. I want them to understand the sufferings and the problems the Jewish people go through and went through in their lives; it's still going on today.

K: Do you think that any of this was done at our temple when I was there?

S: I hope. I think that to go back, I find that today's Jewish education is better.

END OF INTERVIEW