

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz

Personal Experience

O.H. 1509

GENEVIEVE M. BAUMAN

Interviewed

by

Matthew Butts

on

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B: This is an interview with Genevieve Bauman for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz Project, by Matthew Butts, on June 30, 1992, at 32 Norwick Drive, at 2:20 p.m.

Could you tell me a little bit about your childhood, your education?

GB: I think I had quite a normal childhood. I was the youngest of four daughters, no brothers. I started piano lessons from Bill Thauger who was, at that time his studio was on the very top floor of Jones Hall. Thank goodness I was only thirteen years old at the time, do not ask me to climb those steps today. Anyhow, I had piano starting at age thirteen. By the way, he was an outstanding musician. I would then study with Herman Grooce. He was from Lipsick, Germany, by the way. I was nuts for my fascination with German instructors and Germany. They became very important to me. He was an excellent instructor.

I left him when I graduated from high school. By the way, while I was studying with Herman Grooce is when I was taken down to Dayton, Ohio. They had a contest and I played a Chopin number. I won first position on that. After I was out of high school, the summer before I went to conservatory in Cleveland, I studied with a woman by the name of Louise Fenny. She had studied with very fine technicians in the United States and Europe, and by the way, was a good friend of Bogner's widow. She was acquainted with the two sons of Bogner. Every year she went to Byroit, over in Germany. One year I remember that summer she wanted to take me with her, my mother said, "Oh my goodness." At that time in 1938 young ladies did not do things like that. She prepared me to study. My mother was the one that wanted me to be a piano major. My interest was always in pipe organs. At that time I was studying piano. She prepared me for an interview with Rubenstein who was, at that time, head of the piano department. He was head of the whole Cleveland Institute of Music for that matter. When she felt that I was ready, she took me up there to Cleveland. I played for this guy and he accepted me. So that year I was a piano major with Rubenstein.

Of course, you have to take your other subjects, too. At that time it was less reserved, now it is tasteless and reserved. You do your other studies, English and others and Western Reserve. The next year I became very much interested in the pipe organ because when I would come home on weekends I had some good friends in the church where we went. After choir rehearsal, when I would go to choir rehearsal, basically on weekends after church service. His name was Gordon Brooks. Gordon was rather well known around these parts, even yet. He would let me play the pipe organs. I thought this is it. Then I studied with Fred Miller at the time, that summer. He pushed me in the pipe organ field. I was totally fascinated by it and I changed my major to pipe organ. When I was in Cleveland, I had lessons with Edwin Arthur Craft. He was located in the Episcopalian church there at 24th and Euclid. The Cleveland institute of music was located about three blocks farther out. That was in the old Mather estate at that time. Now, of course, they have a very lovely building out in

University Circle. I think it is located in University Circle. I studied with Fred Miller who really gave me a lot of nice opportunities and pushed me. That was it.

Then I married and we moved to Pittsburgh. I played in Pittsburgh churches, a Luthern church, and I played at the 6th UP church on Parrysville Avenue. I had some lessons with Marsha Bidwell, who was a very fine concert organist. She gave recitals every Sunday at Carnegie Hall. I started with him and then we moved back to Youngstown. I have always had a job, a playing job. I was hired at Boardman Methodist before I even came to Pittsburgh. When my husband relocated here, back home, so to speak in his law practice. I played organ at Methodist for quite a few years. I played at Indianola Methodist for 27. At that time I started at Rodef Sholom. I think this is the part that you are most interested in with Rodef Sholom, correct?

B: Yes.

GB: I was told that the position was open there. I applied, talked with Cantor Arlick. I am assuming you have had interviews with Arlick, have you not?

B: Not yet.

GB: But you will have them, I am sure. I was just talking to him yesterday. It was 1955 when he had hired me. I was there 30 years, retired out of there in 1985. It was a wonderful experience. When I came out of conservatory I thought I had been educated. I was reeducated in those fields. Cantor Arlick is a fantastic musician. He taught me so much along the Jewish music, which I find very fascinating. The Jewish music has meant a lot to me. Of course, I worked with the fabulous Dr. Berkowitz. There will never be another rabbi in my mind. I know at that time Dr. Berkowitz was considered the finest rabbi, the most outstanding rabbi between Pittsburgh, Cleveland, New York, the whole area. I highly respected him. I think he respected me, or he would have not let me play for 30 years.

Canor Arlick and I had a wonderful 30 years together. He and I were both retired out of Rodef Sholom. He and I do the high holidays in the Jewish temple over in New Castle. That is about all I could say for me. I think I was kind of an average sort of a person, did average things. Once you are in music you are in music and you stay in music. You really love it, which I do to this minute I do. Then, of course, putting my latter years in such outstanding position in Rodef Sholom really put the crown on my whole life in music. That is how I fell about it. If I have not made myself clear in some of these things I would be glad to clarify it.

B: I have a few here. Moving back to where you were growing up in Youngstown, what was the city like when you were growing up?

GB: It was a lot nicer that it is today. I am referring to family life. You could go away,

leave your door unlocked, go to bed at night and feel safe. I do not think we do today. You would not think of leaving your car unlocked anywhere, even out here in Liberty. The thievery that goes on here is ridiculous. Downtown, and we refer to it as "down town"--I should not take out time for this, but the word downtown has always amazed me. Why is it they refer centrum statmit, in Europe as it is to downtown. Every city in the United States will have signs that say this way to downtown. Anyway, every store in Youngstown was occupied. When I was growing up Federal Street was paved, but I guess prior to that it was kind of not so good. The streetcar was there. We took the streetcar downtown on Saturday afternoons. You met all your friends there. It was nice. The suburbs were nice. It was a nice place to live.

B: Where did you grow up, what street?

GB: I was born on 1716 Mahoning Avenue. That was between Cortland and Lakeview. In 1925 my parents built a home way out in the suburbs, way out at the corner of Bon Air and Mahoning. That was far out. The streetcar went at that time past our house and they had a turn around on Meridian road. That was the end of the line. We are in the Fourth of July period now, just beyond where the streetcar would turn around they had fireworks for sale. There were fields, empty field all around us. The reason being was my dad was superintendent of the blast furnace in what was called Ohio Works then. That whole street were men in his position. It was nice, clean. The reason the name Bon Air was given was that Bon Air means good air. The gypsies used to come and camp kind of across the street down over the hill when I was a little kid. I stayed indoor at that time. Gypsies were well known for doing all sorts of things. Any other questions?

B: What high school did you attend?

GB: Chaney. I did not graduate from Chaney. When it started getting crowded back in 1935, they moved far out. This is a little far, but Dad drove to work. He was still at Ohio Works. It was Carnegie Illinois at that time, to Niles Cortland Road. That is adjacent to the Eastwood Mall. You know 422, well Niles Cortland Road goes across. Our home was the fourth house on the right hand side. We had the lake and the big pillars. It is still there. All of those homes are there. It was lovely because it was secluded. It was nice. My father did not mind driving down to the Ohio Works at that time. The traffic was nothing by comparison. He went down 422, and down Division Street. Then I went to Howland School. We went to church in Niles at the Presbyterian church. So many of my friends from church lived in Niles. I switched my last year at Niles McKinley, and that is where I graduated in 1938.

B: What was going to school there like, curriculum and things like that?

GB: I was in the academic courses preparing to go to school. That was a family requirement. It was a good school, excellent school. We had good teachers. You did not have this disrespect in the halls. We had nothing. It was unheard of. The problems that these kids are creating for teachers today is unheard of. I know if I were a teacher in the high school I would not put up with five seconds of it. I would not think of it. After rearing eight children you kind of know how to control kids. I am in charge, but the teachers today, are they allowed to be in charge? I do not know.

B: They are handcuffed to a great extreme, now.

GB: They sure are. I feel sorry for them. At that time the schools were good. Chaney, of course, had Ritsaker. He was supposed to run the concentration camp. He was a strict disciplinarian, but when you came out of Chaney you were educated. All the schools were like that at that time. It is too bad that era seems to be gone, unless we have some dictator rise out of nowhere and set things straight. I do not know.

B: Do you remember the first time you met Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz?

GB: Yes. When the cantor introduced me to him I was impressed. He was fine, refined. You could just read intelligence when you met him. I was so interested in the man. Talking about him, it is quite often sermons are just like the word says, "sermons." Not his. His were so you did not miss a word. You did not want to miss a word. His was like electric, right on the nose, twenty minutes. The discipline in that temple at that time was wonderful. Of course, my whole life has been based on discipline. I was raised by a strict Scottish Presbyterian family and disciplined. The home was disciplined. We had levity, of course we did. We enjoyed life, but we knew we had to toe the line. That is the same with Rodef Sholom. Cantor Ellick had everything lined up because he knew the rabbi would come in just before the sermon. I had to go upstairs. I had a paid professional quartet. I was first, then the quartet came. Of course, Dr. Berkowitz and the cantor came in on the nose, 8:00. The cantor knew he had to have everything in line, which he did. He was a disciplinarian, too. We had a lot of fun with them. You could enjoy what they were like. Dr. Berkowitz had his side of fun, too. He was a very outstanding gentleman. I think I had lived at that point long enough to recognize who is and who is not.

B: What was the rapport like between Cantor Arlick and Rabbi Berkowitz?

GB: As far as I knew, excellent. I think I should know.

B: Did Rabbi Berkowitz have any input into the musical selections?

GB: He was interested. The cantor knew, of course, the season, the special music

for each season. He knew the rabbi's favorites. That is where I felt the rapport, as I could see it, was excellent.

B: Do you remember any of the favorites that Rabbi Berkowitz had?

GB: He liked our high holiday music very much.

B: What is it like?

GB: Inspiring is the one word to cover it. It was very tedious work. Here was a little thing that Dr. Berkowitz did. You asked if he had any requirements or favorite things; yes he did. I had to play background music, very softly behind his readings out of the prayer book. We had a special prayer book that we read from Friday night. Then on the holidays we had another special prayer book. I tried to fit my background music with compositions that dealt with that theme or what he was saying. I tried to go with the tone of his voice. His reading, how he read was so outstanding that I know I will never forget. I have been out of there seven years now, I guess. After you leave I will probably think of sixteen compositions. The cantor was very smart, too, in choosing. He dealt closer with Rabbi Berkowitz than I did. The cantor tried to choose.

End of Interview