

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz

Personal Experience

O.H. 1535

RENA POLLOCK

Interviewed

by

Matthew Butts

on

July 13, 1992

RENA POLLOCK

Mrs. Rena Pollock was born on May 21, 1911 on the north side of Youngstown, Ohio, the daughter of Isaac and Bertha Goldsmith. Growing up on the north side of the city, Pollock attended school at Hayes Junior High School and the Rayen High School, graduating in 1929. Following high school, Pollock went to study dressmaking in New York City at the McDowell School of design. She returned to Youngstown in 1930, and soon married her husband. Mrs. Pollock stayed at home to raise her child, Susan. She also continued to pursue her dressmaking interest from her home.

Presently, Mrs. Pollock enjoys retired life. She continues to be an active member of the congregation of the Temple Rodef Sholom. She spends much of her free time taking part in the activities of the Sisterhood of Temple Rodef Sholom and dressmaking.

B: This is an interview with Mrs. Rena Pollock for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Youngstown Jewish Community, for the Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz Project, by Matthew Butts, on July 13, 1992, at Rena's home, at 1:10 p.m.

We are going to get going here. We will start off with some biographical questions. Could you tell me something about yourself, as far as your childhood: when you were born and things of that nature?

P: Oh, yes. I was born on Park Avenue in Youngstown, and my father was working of the Strauss Hirshberg Company at that time. I do not remember too much about the very early years. After that, we moved to Fairgreen Avenue, and I went to school there until Harding School was built, and the last two years to Harding School.

I suppose I was a normal teenager. We went to religious school. I was confirmed at Rodef Sholom. While I was in Rayen, my father had started a business of his own on East Federal. He was up quite high in Strauss', but he wanted to go out on his own. And he picked the wrong time to do it. It was just when the Depression had started, and the business failed. So, I graduated from Rayen, and right after that we moved to Cleveland. We lived there for a short time. He had a job there. From there, after I worked for a year, they moved on to -- it is near Chicago. What is the place? It is in Indiana.

B: Gary?

P: No, it is right across the harbor from Hammond, Indiana. That is when I went to New York to school. Then, eventually, they came back to Youngstown. After I finished my schooling in New York, I tried to get a job there that would pay for my room and board, but it was impossible at that time. And I decided then the only thing I could do was to come home. So I came home and started to sew for people, and I helped my family in that way. My father got a job then at the Shopping News. It belonged to the United Printing Company. I kept on sewing for people, for dance recitals and all kinds of things.

B: You attended the Rayen School also for high school?

P: Yes.

B: What was going to school there like?

P: Well, I enjoyed it for me. I had a lot of friends there, and we lived on Todd Lane at the time, at the corner of Selma. It was a short walk. I could walk there and back. I went to the football games and I belonged to the Latin Club. I belonged to, there was another club for girls. I forget what it was called. I belonged to that. I was good in school, except for history. For some reason, I did not like

history. There were some very good teachers at Rayen at that time. There was Miss Baldwin, who was a math teacher. I did like math. She taught when she was very, very old. Most of the students did not like her because they thought she was kind of old, mean, nasty. Me, I liked her because she was good and she knew math, and I did very well in math. I took an art course there. I did not take the sewing course there because I knew more about sewing by that time than they could teach me there. So, I do not know, I enjoyed going to Rayen.

B: Growing up in Youngstown, what was the city like, physically? What did it look like? What was the atmosphere?

P: Well, I do not know much of anything else, of course, except after we were in Chicago for a little while, then Hammond, but I liked it. It was very nice. It seemed as if it was a safe place. There was not what there is now, of course. I just liked it. I did not see anything wrong with it at the time.

B: What did the city physically look like? Was the downtown area thriving then?

P: Oh, yes. The downtown area was thriving. The better stores, [such as] the Strauss' Hirshberg, McKelvey's, Livingston's, they were on the West end from the square, or what used to be called the square. It is now the plaza. And then, on the East end down the other direction, there were all kinds of groceries and markets and delicatessens. And then there were several nice stores down there, popular price stores. And that was where my father opened his store. It was a popular price store. He had a good idea, but he had it at the wrong time.

I do not recall that we ever had much use to go to the South side because there was nothing like the mall or plazas or anything like that on the South side. So I do not know that I went over there very much. Then we had Idora Park. Of course, that was not downtown, but that was a nice place to go when I was growing up.

B: What sort of things went on at Idora Park?

P: They had, of course, all kinds of amusements. They had a place to eat. I think it is still there. They are trying to remodel it or resurrect it, the dance floor [of the] ballroom. We went out there when I was old enough. We went out there dancing. Next to the dance hall was a baseball field, and we used to have baseball games out there. They had the normal things, rides that you find, the merry-go-round and what we used to call the Panama Canal. It had a million different names after that. It was the thing that you went in that little boat that went up the hill and down, and splashed into the water. And there were things that I never liked. What do you call the things that go up and down?

B: Roller coasters.

P: Roller coasters. I never liked them. I will not go on one to this day. We had a maid at one time and my mother said, "Take her. Take them." I guess that was my sister. By that time, she was five years older than me. "Take them out of Idora Park and let them go on everything." And I guess the maid thought take them on everything, and she took me on the roller coaster; I hated it. I never would go on one after that. But they were there. What else did they have up there? Oh, all kinds of these games of chance where you would throw the ball and knock down a milk bottle or something and get baby dolls or something. And also the popcorn and all that stuff. I do not remember much about hot dogs in those days. I think it was more popcorn and that kind of stuff. You could get out there on the streetcar, which we did on numerous times. The streetcar went right down -- I guess it is called Idora -- the street behind the park.

Then it was a great place for picnics. We had all kinds of picnics. As I recall, the temple used to have a picnic every year for the kids, and some of them were out there. We would take baskets out there. I do not know. Maybe the temple fixed a dinner, fixed a meal. Their picnics were out there either in that ball park or near it. Also, they used to have a little train, but it was big enough that you could get on it and ride around. It was a lot of fun.

B: Did you always attend Rodef Sholom?

P: Yes.

B: Okay. Your family were members there.

P: My grandfather was, incidentally, married by a rabbi at Rodef Sholom. When the first rabbi of the temple was there, he was married by the first rabbi of the temple, back in 1869.

B: You would not know, by chance, what the rabbi's name was?

P: Well, yes. It was Rabbi Litman.

B: Oh, okay.

P: And I found my grandfather's marriage certificate. It was called a betuba, and it was on exhibit down at the Arms Museum when they had it at the museum. I assume they still have that exhibit there because I have not gotten it back yet. Anyhow, I had that framed and put down there. But it is all in Hebrew, and I could not read Hebrew, but Rabbi Brown read it. It did not give the rabbi's given name; it gave his Hebrew name. So that is the only thing we had to go by, the fact that my parents told me that it was Rabbi Litman who married them. We could not find out what his Hebrew name was.

B: Growing up, then, you must be experienced with Rabbi Philo?

- P: Well, we lived right across the street from Rabbi Philo, up on Todd Lane. He was on the corner of Selma and he lived on Selma, right across the street from us. So naturally, we got very friendly. He had two daughters and one of them, the younger one, is my sister's age. She and my sister were very friendly.
- B: What was he like?
- P: He was a very, very intelligent man, very well liked, and he gave wonderful sermons. He was very well liked in the community and he did a lot of community things. In those days he was very proper. In fact, we were talking about it the other day, what he always wore. He always wore a suit. I know that. There was something else that somebody said he used to wear. I am not sure what it was. He married me, my husband and I. He was a very nice man and very, very intelligent.
- B: Do you remember anything about your confirmation classes under Rabbi Philo?
- P: Well, yes. I remember that I was confirmed. I do not remember, in particular, anything about him. We had teachers, a teacher that was not the rabbi that taught us during the year. But, I cannot say that I can remember exactly what he did, except when we got towards the confirmation we had our rehearsals and all that. But I do not remember too much of anything else.
- B: Was he Rabbi Berkowitz's predecessor?
- P: Well, I have got the book right here, if you want to look at it.
- B: Okay, yes.
- P: Have you seen this book?
- B: Yes. I guess I was over Virginia Solomon's, who had a copy of it.
- P: I am trying to think who was after. I think it was Rabbi Feinberg. I do not know where to find it in here. The answer to your question is no. Dr. Berkowitz was not his successor. The pictures were down at the Arms Museum. I think that Rabbi Feinberg was next. I do remember Feinberg, I think. Now, there is Rabbi Berkowitz there, so he must be somewhere. I do not know. Well, there is Rabbi Litman. Well, I am pretty sure that Feinberg was the next one, and then died not too long after. Oh, here we are. Dr. Philo. Abraham Feinberg was elected rabbi of the congregation after Dr. Berkowitz retired, and I think they have got it all spread out in this book, because after he died, somebody else might have been there temporarily. I am awfully sorry. I will do some research. It was a temporary rabbi and then Rabbi Feinberg.

B: Do you recall when Rabbi Berkowitz first came to Youngstown?

P: Yes, I do.

B: Could you tell me a little bit about that? When you first met him, what struck you about him?

P: He made a very good impression on everybody. I think the way I first met him was I used to be chairman of the sewing committee that met at the temple. I think it was when he was first here. He would come up -- we were on the second floor. We met once a week. He would come every Tuesday when we had our sewing. He would come up and talk to us. He was always very nice, very pleasant, and easy to get to know. You know, some people are not. You can meet them a million times and they do not know you; but not with Rabbi Berkowitz. He knew us all, and he was very well liked.

B: What did he look like?

P: You mean physically?

B: Physically, yes.

P: Not awfully tall. I am not much of a judge of heights, but a little bit on the heavy side, not fat, but just pretty well built, and pleasant looking. Wore glasses very studiously, which he was. He was very, very nice looking.

B: I have a list here. What does the temple at Rodef Sholom look like? Can you describe it to me please?

P: The way it is now?

B: Yes.

P: It has been all remodeled. You have never been there?

B: Yes, but we like to get other people's perceptions of it.

P: Well, the sanctuary really has been completely remodeled some years back. I am not sure what year it was, and it is really very beautiful. The original pipe organ is there because I think it was the first large pipe organ in town of that type, and it is still there. But they have remodeled everything else in there and it is very beautiful. Carpet, and beautiful seats. It has a very large dome, and when they rebuilt they put a balcony, a small balcony, so they could seat more people. All in all, it is really very beautiful. And the Sunday school was enlarged about the time my daughter started to go, because her class was the biggest

class they ever had there. They needed more space, so they added on a space and a sort of wing around the back of the side. We put more Sunday school rooms in, which are all very nice. Then in recent years they built a chapel, which is very nice for during the summer and other small occasions, like a small wedding or that type of thing. Then, we have a beautiful social hall. It is downstairs and that has all been completely remodeled, too. I can always remember the old one. The old one was more like a gym because they had baskets on the sides where the boys could practice basketball. But then that has been remodeled several times over the years. The last time it was recarpeted, and it is very beautiful.

B: Could you describe the bema for me please?

P: Yes. There is a picture of it right there.

B: Oh, thanks.

P: That has been remodeled somewhat. The arc, it has been remodeled. The doors on the arc are beautiful, and it has all be recarpeted. And I think these steps are the original steps. When they remodeled, they did not change the steps, the marble steps. It is very, very lovely.

B: Coming back to Rabbi Berkowitz, how would you see he operated the temple? Was he very autocratic?

P: Not to my knowledge. I really was never in on what exactly went on. He had a secretary. I just passed you her picture. She was secretary when Rabbi Philo was there, too. She seemed to have things pretty well under control, from the day-to-day operations and all that. So I really do not remember too much exactly what he actually did about the running of the temple, but he seemed to have gotten along fine with the board if directors, or the board of trustees they were called, and most everyone else. I do not remember really too much about the actual running.

B: how about the services with Rabbi Berkowitz? What were they like?

P: Always very, very nice. His sermons were always very good, and his speaking voice was excellent. His sermons, sometimes a rabbi, or a minister for that matter, can talk over the congregation's head. [Laughter] But not with his. His you could understand and enjoy them. I enjoyed everything he did, and I think that most people did.

B: How about some of his personality traits? Did he have a good sense of humor, for instance?

- P: Yes, he did. I knew him quite well, but I really cannot really tell you exactly much of anything else, except he did have a good sense of humor. He was pleasant to everybody, and he knew everybody. He attracted a great many new members to our temple.
- B: Was there a rapid growth?
- P: There was. That was the reason that they had to add this, put this addition on to the Sunday school, because we had so many new families join and we needed the room.
- B: How about Dr. Berkowitz's role within the Youngstown community? Was he very active?
- P: He was very active and very well liked. I cannot tell you exactly what things he did, but I know that there were a lot of things he did. He got along well with the other ministers and Catholic priests and bishops and so on. I think he did a good bit of interfaith relation.
- B: What do you think Rabbi Berkowitz's impact was on the Youngstown Jewish community?
- P: Well, I think he had quite an impact on the community. I think everybody remembers him and like him. I would think that would be it. I do not really know of anything else, other than that to add.
- B: We talked a little bit about the way he did his sermon. Describe for me in your own words how you feel he would give a speech.
- P: Well, I think the subjects were well chosen. And I think, like I said, it was understandable. It was not over people's heads. He had quite a way with language, and the sermons were always, to my knowledge at least, very good and interesting in general.
- B: You said he had a good speaking voice. Could you expound on that a little bit? In your own words, what was his voice like?
- P: Well, it was a well modulated voice. It was not so high pitched or so low that you could not understand it. It was understandable, and I would say it was a very good speaking voice. It was a very good manner of delivery..
- B: Did he marry your daughter and confirm her? Performed all the services for her?
- P: Yes. He married my daughter and confirmed her.

B: Do you think his dealing with the other churches or religions within Youngstown developed a great rapport?

P: yes. I think it did. I think there was a great many people that knew him and a great many people that liked him.

B: Is there any other personality traits that we have not really touched on?

P: I think he cared for people. I think he was very caring and he was always there if you needed him or he came to the house in time of sorrows, that sort of thing. I think that people liked him for that reason, too.

B: He was able then, any time that anybody needed him, he would be there swiftly?

P: Yes.

B: Would you describe him as one of the leaders of the Youngstown community throughout his service?

P: Yes. I would say that he was. He was very well known, and he was in so many organizations that I cannot name them. But he got to be very well known.

B: Is there anything that we really have not touched on about him, or is there anything you would like to add?

P: Well, yes. I cannot think of much else. Me and my daughter got along very well with him, because Rabbi Berkowitz's son was the same age as my daughter Susan, and knew him better than anyone else.

B: Okay. Well, thank you very much for your time. It was very helpful.

End of Interview