

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Berkowitz

Personal Experience

O.H. 1539

ANTONIA SCHILDCROUT

Interviewed

by

Matthew Butts

on

July 3, 1992

Mrs. Antonia Schildcrout

Antonia Elizabeth Herz was born on June 3, 1943 in the city of Chicago, Illinois, the daughter of Rudolf and Zelda Herz. Growing up in the city, Schildcrout attended secondary school at the Bowen High School, graduating in 1961.

Following high school, Schildcrout studied pharmacy at the University of Illinois, earning her Bachelor of Science Degree in Pharmacy in 1966. During her scholastic career, Schildcrout also married her husband, Steven Schildcrout, in 1964. In the late 1960's, the Schildcrouts moved to the city of Youngstown, Ohio. Mrs. Schildcrout soon gained employment with Phar-Mor Incorporated Valu Drugs, working there until her retirement in 1992. Along with her duties at Phar-Mor, Schildcrout also became very active in the Youngstown community. In 1985, she was named the Woman of the Year in Youngstown for her activities with the League of Women Voters.

Presently, Mrs. Schildcrout remains very active in the Youngstown community. She resides with her husband at 2201 Goleta Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio. She continues to be an active member of the congregation of the Temple Rodef Sholom. She dedicates herself to a number of organizations including the League of Women Voters of Greater Youngstown, and the Youngstown Charter Review Commission. She spends much of her free time traveling, being involved in government, and studying historic architecture.

-- Matthew Butts

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YSU Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz Project

INTERVIEWEE: ANTONIA SCHILDCROUT

INTERVIEWER: Matthew Butts

SUBJECT: Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz

DATE: July 3, 1992

B: This is an interview with Antonia Schildcrout for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz Project, by Matthew Butts, on July 3, 1992, at 10:25 A.M. First we will start with a couple questions of biographical information. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, your childhood and your education?

S: I grew up in a part of Chicago called Jeffrey Manor. It was a community that they built after World War II. Most of the people who lived there were veterans from that war with families. There were a few older couples. So, I grew up in a very planned neighborhood where there was a planned community and sort of a central square, which is not what we think of in Youngstown. The center of the community was the elementary school. Around the schools were a variety of churches, including what eventually became a temple. So, it was a very interesting sort of central area for the community that included a variety of people with a variety of backgrounds in education. What they had in common was that most of them served during the war and had families. I lived there throughout my childhood. I had what I consider a very happy childhood. I was an only

child. I remember my friends said whenever they would talk about only children and them being spoiled they would say, "Oh Toni, but you are the exception." I was the exception to the rule. (Laughter) We had lots of friends and fun socializing growing up in a somewhat structured, but mostly unstructured way. We as children provided our own structures by forming our own clubs and groups. We had a great deal to say how they socialized us. Our parents did some planning for us, but certainly not the kinds of things we do today for our children. We had activities to go to, and my parents were very cultured people so it was important that I get an education in art and music even if I did not have any talent in either area, as a form of expression for myself. My parents were not wealthy. The middle class was not even my income standard. As a child, they protected me from this. I realized I did not go on as many vacations as my friends did. Most of our vacations were to family in California. We did have many family gatherings. We took turns at different aunts and uncles homes for family gatherings. I would say overall, I had a very happily protected childhood. It was an interesting community in which to grow up.

B: Tell me something about your education?

S: I went to the local elementary school where we all mixed together although, there was probably a higher percentage of young Jewish people than would be in the general world. Why that happened, I do not know. The high school we went to drew of course, from a larger area of ethnic groups. There were very few Hispanics and blacks, but many Polish and Czechoslovakians. So there was a pretty good mix. It was fun learning about other people and their cultures and so on. It was the days that they had special honors classes, so if you were a good student, you were in these classes. Again, there was a higher proportion of Jewish students in these classes. So, most of the time I was with my friends that I knew from elementary school. I was very active in the literary area of school. In my senior year, I was editor of the yearbook. I always had pretty good feelings about myself. After I graduated, I went to University of Illinois Navy Pier for my pre-pharmacy year. I then attended the University of Illinois' College of Pharmacy for four years. I graduated in 1966 with a Bachelor of Science and Pharmacy.

B: When did you first arrive in Youngstown?

S: Good question. I think it was 1969. My husband Steven, who I had married in 1964, and I have known each other since we were ten years old. We had a similar background. We grew up in the same neighborhood for most of our lives. We moved to Youngstown because he was offered a job at the Chemistry Department at Youngstown State University and I went with him.

B: What struck you about the city? What did Youngstown physically look like when you came here?

S: From our point of view? (Laughter) Or the legal definitions? My husband is not a religious man. He does not believe in ritual. He believes in the integrity of the history of the Jewish people and that we are a part of that continuous history. He did not have a religious education, but he did have a Jewish education. In a larger community, often these kinds of groups are formed by residents who do not want to participate in a temple, but just want to give their children a Jewish education from the historical standpoint. So, he had grown up with that kind of background. I had a more religious background. Although, at that time, Sinai Temple was probably the most Reform temple in the country. It had very little Hebrew and ritual. So, when we came to this community, my husband and I had to do a lot of talking. Even prior to having children, we had been talking about this all our married life, about what kind of religious education, if any, we were to give to our children. Finally, we both agreed that when the time came, that we did want to give our children a religious education. The type of organization that my husband experienced was available in Cleveland. We toyed for a time driving to Cleveland once a week to take the children to that type of experience, but we decided that it was probably and rightfully so, more important for them to remain in the community to get a feeling of community. Because of the type of congregation Rodef Sholom was at that time, we joined without too much trepidation. My husband, although he did not feel initially comfortable at the congregation still would participate and have very many long and interesting discussions with the leadership at the temple about what was important about being Jewish. There was no question that we would participate in either a Conservative or Orthodox environment primarily because of our lack of feeling for the need of ritual in our lives.

B: Did Rabbi Berkowitz use any ritual in his services?

S: Yes.

B: It was less Reform than the one you went to [in Chicago]?

S: Yes, it definitely was, but not by much. An interesting story was when my feelings changed dramatically and sort of solidified the decision to participate in Rodef [Sholom] when I found out that they asked that Rabbi Berkowitz be Rabbi at Sinai Temple after Dr. Mann had died. So, it was a connection, not only because both of them were Rabbi's, but because both of them were the same kind of Rabbi. That piece of knowledge made me very comfortable and solidified my decision anyway.

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

S: No. I think that the only time I really had a detailed conversation with him, in the sense of meeting other than just shaking hands and having chitchat, was when he came to our home after we had come home from Chicago after my father had died in 1975. He and his wife Pauline came to call on us when we arrived home. It was a most interesting and

enlightening conversation we had because Dr. Berkowitz had not met my father, but had known that he was from Germany and had come to this country in 1933, prior to our involvement in the war. My father had begun to be harassed by the Nazi soldiers. He was a young man at the time. His family was smart enough to send him over. My father had chosen to be cremated after he died and not buried, which is certainly not part of the Jewish tradition. Rabbi Berkowitz was very interested in why someone whose distant family members had been decimated at the concentration camps, whose sister had been jailed, but had not been in a concentration camp from that type of background, would have chosen to be cremated and not buried and then have his ashes scattered over Lake Michigan. He could not understand it. He was trying to talk it out and understand my father's reasoning and thinking. I could not help him much. I said that my father had always said that cemeteries were a waste of beautiful grounds. He said that those grounds should be playgrounds for children and the living, not a place where someone goes when everyone who knows that person is dead that no one will visit. He had very strong feelings about that. I think that he had very strong feelings about religion, too. His father had helped build a very large congregation in Essen, Germany, and had been president of the temple and very active in the temple. My father really wanted to have nothing to do with organized religion. He somehow felt that the Jewish community and organized religion must have failed the Jewish people somehow by not either providing leadership or something. He never would really talk about it. I, too, have to sometimes think about why he thought the things he did. I just remember Dr. Berkowitz trying to resolve that issue in his own mind about why my father did what he did. It was an insight to a person's personality, because someone like Dr. Berkowitz who has done so much studying, is intellectual and sometimes makes autocratic decisions. He has made his place in the world and people admired him. He still took the time to try and understand one individual man he did not know and tried to understand his decision. I found that very moving and interesting about Dr. Berkowitz.

B: Speaking of Dr. Berkowitz, do you remember anything about how he ran services at the temple?

S: Yes. His sermons were wonderful. You did not always agree with what he had to say, but he spoke with wisdom and intellect on a variety of subjects. He was very much at ease with so much knowledge. My husband always enjoyed going to services when we did attend because, even though he disagreed with the Rabbi on some of the things he said, it was intellectually stimulating. That was something that appealed to us. Sometimes he and Cantor Ehrlich would get into little tiffs that were visible and maybe they were not following what they had decided to do prior to the services, so they would get together and have these little talks. Sometimes one of them would win and sometimes the other would win. It was always a kind of display of confidence and of wanting to be where he was. He had a very strong sense of self. All of this sort of came together for me when I found out more about him and the other things he had done in the community.

B: What were some of these things that he had done within the community?

S: What was so interesting was when I was appointed by Mayor Ungaro to the Human Relations Commission for the city of Youngstown, one of the few other Jewish people who had ever been on that commission was the Rabbi. Some of the people I was serving with had served with him and spoke very highly of him. He sort of lead the way, sometimes, and made things seem clearer to other people. He would always get down to the basic question, find the basic question, and then underline a particular conflict that we were asked to resolve. It was again a further insight to his personality that he would take the time out of what must have been a very busy hectic life to participate in this government unit that was not always well funded and certainly often the center of controversy. But that he participated in this particular organization made me feel good personally to also be a part of the Jewish continuum and also be a Jewish person who was interested in the conditions of humanity within the city.

B: What were some of the important things that while you were on this commission, you faced?

S: First, the lack of money to support a commission which I personally felt was very important to have. We have Federal and State commissions that deal with problems with inequities and housing, the job market or wherever it could be found. We felt, and I felt very strongly, too, that there had to be some place locally that people who had conflicts could come to their peers and talk about their problems and perhaps get them resolved. It takes funding. You need an investigator and a lawyer. I was involved for a long period of time with an age discrimination case. I am sure we saw different kinds of things than Rabbi Berkowitz saw. I am sure he saw many more race discriminations cases than we did. We were beginning to see age and sex discrimination cases. I was a member of the commission at the time which wrote the Human Relations Ordinance, which is a beautiful work of legislative art, but when not adequately funded, it is useless. So, we were involved to make sure, at that time, that for instance, sexual preference was a part of this ordinance. Because when I was a member was the time when all of the AIDS things and homosexuality and everything was in the newspapers every day. So, we felt that it was important that we write an ordinance, which we did. The ordinance that Rabbi Berkowitz worked under was a rather weak one. Again, if you have a strong ordinance, that is wonderful. If you do not have the funding for it then it is useless. You can listen to people, but when you do not have adequate investigation, it becomes a very frustrating and useless kind of participation, which I found it to be and therefore resigned. I felt that my energies could be used elsewhere to better advantage for myself and the city.

B: What are some other activities you are involved within the city?

S: I am a member of the Youngstown Charter Revision Commission. We have not done much lately, but I was involved with the two elections in the 80's when Charter Revision

was on the ballot and a lot of charter changes were made, including giving the Mayor a four-year term and those kinds of changes. That was a very exciting commission to be on because one had to do almost anything. You had city resources to help you. Obviously the law department from the city had to help you legalize your ideas. We had to interview many, many leaders and organizations in the community in order to get their input into what changes they felt were important for the city. It was time to do some changes, time to make people realize that the Constitution of the United States and the Ohio Revised Code are not the only structures that we are working under. We have this structure that helps govern us that we know is not written in stone, but it is supposed to be a live document and something to change with time. Clingan Jackson was on our commission, which was wonderful because he would always tell us wonderful stories and he would give us a lot of background information. I am friendly with Ivis Boyer through the League of Women Voters, who as a member of the Political Science Department at Youngstown State University, was a member of one of the previous Charter Revision Commissions. So, we had a lot of knowledge to draw from and that was a lot of fun. Those were the two groups that I have been primarily active with on the governmental level in the city. At one time, back in the middle 70's I believe, the Youngstown Health Department had a Citizen Board, and I was on that board. That was dissolved because we were making too many waves. We got into the paper too much. The Vindicator was reporting on what we were saying too much.

B: Through my research, I found that Rabbi Berkowitz was involved with I think 38 different boards.

S: Wow, he was a busy man.

B: Yes. Are there any other things that you are familiar with him being active within the community?

S: He probably was active on every board that he could possibly be on. The one that is now called the Human Relations Commission, I do not recall what it was called at that time, was the one I was most familiar with his participation in.

B: What do you think Dr. Berkowitz's impact was on the Youngstown Jewish community?

S: I think he certainly was, by being a leader not only in the Jewish community, but going outside the Jewish community and being interested in everything around him, he became even a stronger leader within the Jewish community. I think he was *the* Rabbi of this community. He was certainly thought most highly of by non-Jewish people. Maybe as you could tell, most of my activities have not been within the Jewish community, but have been outside the Jewish community. So, I have been in contact with people who had known him in his capacity other than being a Jewish leader. I think that has helped the community in general. I see a tendency toward the other direction, unfortunately, over the last few years,

of leaders in the Jewish community tending to stay within the community and the members of the Jewish community spend much of their volunteer efforts within the community and not getting outside. I think that is a mistake. Therefore, I feel more strongly than ever that it is important for Jewish people to partake in other areas other than just Jewish things. So, I feel a strong impact that he has had was one of showing by example, that Jews must be involved in their surroundings. When someone tells you that you are the only Jewish person that they have known, then you know there is a lack of this mixing and so on. I think he exemplified the kind of life that a Jewish person should have. Of course, maybe he had more energy than most people do. He did so very much.

B: Would you characterize him then as one of Youngstown's foremost urban leaders?

S: I think he was an urban leader, yes. I think people perceived him not only as a Jewish leader, but someone who was interested in the community as a whole. I have to say that I think the two Rabbis that followed him, Rabbi Powers and Rabbi Brown, both are trying to reinstall this into their own Jewish communities by also participating, not too as great an extent as he ever did, but somewhat.

B: I have been asking everybody this question, are there any personality traits that you could attribute to Rabbi Berkowitz?

S: I think he was a probing person. Again, it was not a selfish intruding type of probing. He was trying to understand you, a humanity kind of probing. I think he was caring. Sometimes I think he might have been perceived as caring in a non-tactful way, but it was still a truly caring personality. I remember, after my father died and my mother first came to visit, and we went to temple, he was extremely solicitous of her. It was not the gushy-mushy kind of stuff, but he was deeply caring. "Zelda, how are you getting along?" He was so caring. Here is a woman he has never met, and it was not just being a Rabbi, he was not just doing what he was expected to do, because I think people can tell when it is false. It was a truly very caring kind of feeling. My mother, who had never really been a religious person, was very moved and touched by him with his almost intense of caring. She always felt very good about that and I did, too. I just want to add about his intellectual aspirations and his intellectual approach to Judaism was something that I liked, maybe because I was used to it from my childhood. The fact that he lived in the city, he did not leave the community when everybody else was leaving our community.

B: Do you live on the north side?

S: Yes, just a couple of blocks away.

B: Is there anything that we have not touched on that you think we need to add?

S: Of course, much of our communication with the temple was through the education program

for our children. Dr. Berkowitz was still very aware of my husband's feelings. When our oldest son Douglas said that he wanted to be Bar Mitzvahed, my husband did not know how we could do that because it would mean a ceremony, my husband participating, and he was not sure that he could do that. So, we spoke with Cantor Ehrlich, who was, by virtue of being Cantor, head of the religious school and also the person who did the training for the Bar Mitzvah. We discussed this at length. They came to some sort of agreement as to how the traditional liturgy could be worded to make it comfortable for my husband, to enable Douglas to be Bar Mitzvah and to enjoy it. I am sure he communicated with Rabbi Berkowitz even though we did not directly because that was not the way the system was set up. So, the Bar Mitzvah was very nice. We had it in the chapel. We were one of the few families which opted to do that. Since we had no family in town, we had a small family who was coming in from out of town. I am not the kind of person to invite everyone I know to a Bar Mitzvah or to a wedding just because they are a business associate or something. I felt that the people who were invited had to know Douglas. So, we had a small group and then afterwards we had a reception with a lunch in our home. Rabbi Berkowitz was very excited. First of all, for some reason he liked our house. Second of all, one of my friends had made a Challa herself to have at the reception. He was so excited, "I haven't tasted homemade Challa in so many years, I can't tell you," he said. I think he had a good time. That was a good memory. That was fun because he really could enjoy himself. He could get enthusiastic. Maybe as a mother of two pre-adolescent teenage boys, I was not able to get enthusiastic about much. I was tired most of the time. So, to find someone like him who was enthusiastic about something like that it again gave me another insight into what I always thought the kind of person he was.

B: Is there anything else that you would like to add that you think we have not touched on?

S: When you had called and said that you were going to talk to us about the Rabbi, I tried to collect my thoughts and my stories. I think that those are really the highlights of my feelings. I felt that and he did hand pick Rabbi Powers to lead the congregation after he died. I personally like Rabbi Powers very much. I was on the committee to try and save his position at the temple; you cannot win every battle. You cannot even win the war sometimes. Rabbi Powers was very much like Rabbi Berkowitz. I think he wanted to step in his shoes without laying the ground work first. Rabbi Berkowitz earned where he was through a lot of time and effort. Rabbi Powers did not start at the bottom. He had to start at the top. So, he took on many of the positions of Rabbi Berkowitz and I think everyone looked on him as sort of an upstart and they did not always approve of all the things he had to say. They would take it from Rabbi Berkowitz, maybe the same thing, but they would not take it from him. Which was sort of an interesting thing, but Rabbi Berkowitz was an intellectual. His sermons were stimulating and again, you did not always agree, but they were stimulating. There was a tendency to include more ritual and more Hebrew into the services, which I think has been happening throughout this country. I do not think that it has only been our temple. Which makes us feel as a family, a little less comfortable. Certainly, the experience and the education that they had at Rodef [Sholom] basically was set up under

Cantor Ehrlich and Rabbi Berkowitz's feelings of what was necessary for their education has made both my children comfortable in any synagogue they attend. My younger son, particularly, who has always been interested in Jewish history to the point where he did a National History Day project on "The Rabbi, the Nazi, and the Survivor." He based his Rabbi on Rabbi Powers and his survivor on a friend of the family he interviewed. He took that program all the way to National History Day and won first place. He then performed it in our community, too, at certain places including the temple. I think although Rabbi Powers was the person at the time he related to, the whole philosophy was Rabbi Berkowitz's. I think Rabbi Powers was picked by Rabbi Berkowitz because of that similarity. So, I give that kind of insight. Douglas, our older son, also through the temple was given an opportunity as Jordan was to participate in contests and they had awards and so on. I know, as parents it is wonderful to take credit for what children do, but you cannot always do that. It is a philosophy and it does not only come from the family, it comes from the surroundings that they live in and that children see on a day-to-day basis. Like going to the integrated public schools where they were actually a minority and so small of a minority that they posed no threat to anyone. So, we are able not to feel threatened and not have any prejudice against them throughout their schooling because of this philosophy. I think that Rabbi Powers and Rabbi Berkowitz, even though they were religious figures, encompassed much of the same kind of philosophy about life that my husband and I did. Because of that, I think that they influenced our children in ways we will never know and that is very important to us, probably more important to us than ever memorizing dates, turning out the kind of people they are. The adults in their lives were few because we did not have family living in Youngstown. So, the adults that they did come across in their lives, Rabbi Powers, Rabbi Berkowitz, Cantor Ehrlich, and their teachers at school were the ones they had to learn from. If you want to get philosophical about it, I think that they had an impact. What it is exactly, I do not know. I do not know if I will ever know. I just know that I am proud of my children for the kind of people they are. I do not care what kinds of jobs they have or how much money they have; I care about the way they think and what they think about human beings and how they treat people. It has been proven to me, even in their young adult years that they both are very sensitive to their surroundings and that respect humanity. That has been a source of great gratification to me. I think Rabbi Berkowitz could be perceived as being a role model in that respect.

B: Thank you very much for your time.

S: This has been fun.