

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Area Jewish Federation Project

Personal Experience

O. H. 841

JEROLD MEYER

Interviewed

by

Lois Davidow

on

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JEROLD S MEYER

MY FAMILY ON MY FATHER'S SIDE

My father, I. Harry Meyer, was born and raised in Indiana. His wife was a Bloom. When I was ten years old he took me to Aurora, Indiana to show me where he was raised. No one lived in the house. His parents were dead. The cemetery was overgrown. He moved to Youngstown in the 1890's, met Herman Ritter, and opened a men's store on the corner of Phelps Street and Federal Street called Ritter & Meyer in 1900. He met Helene Strouss shortly after he moved here and married her in 1900. He lived on Wick Oval Hill (East Spring Street).

I was born February 20, 1903. Jean, my sister, was born October 15, 1906. She married Arthur Einstein, who was born in Blairsville, Pa., January 15, 1931.

In 1914 my family bought the farm we live on for \$14,000 and mother and father moved out here into a historical house. The house was built in 1790 by the Shenefield family who obtained title in 1820 from Connecticut Land Grant at \$1 an acre. In 1890 Shenefield sold it to Wirt and in 1914 Wirt sold it to our family. The original house is still standing on the farm but has been improved in and out so it does not look like the original house. The windows are very small and the walls are very thick. So it stays cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

Ritter & Meyer were very successful operating at Phelps and Federal. In the evening my father would fill a cigar box with money and instead of putting it in the safe, he would hide the box in with the merchandise. So that if anyone broke into his

safe, they would not find the money.

One day in 1928 my father came home and told me he had to make a decision. The landlord, Wick, said he was going to raise the rent from \$10,000 to \$25,000 a year. My dad had to decide whether he wanted to work the rest of his life for the Wick's! He decided, no. So he sold out and retired.

MY GRANDPARENTS

My father's mother and father died before I was born so I never knew them.

My mother's father and mother came from Germany. Isaac Strouss and Lena Felser came from Manheim and Hanheim, Germany. When Isaac Strouss was 16 years old he had to join the German Army. He decided not to, instead he came to America, Youngstown, Ohio, where he had friends and relatives.

His job was driving a horse and cart around Canfield loaded with all kinds of household needs. He would stop at each farmhouse once a month to sell them what they needed. After his business grew he decided to open a small store on Federal Street, Youngstown, with a partner Bernard Hirshberg.

Bernard Hirshberg left the store for a year to go to Alaska and mine gold. His trip was a failure and he came home broke.

Isaac Strouss took him back and in 1875 they opened a larger store named Strouss-Hirshberg. It was successful and grew to be a leading Youngstown store.

Isaac Strouss built a home on Wick Avenue across from Rayen School. When Isaac Strouss grew old his son, Clarence Strouss took charge of the business.

Isaac Strouss died April 1, 1925. He was 77 years old. His wife Lena had died a few years before.

Isaac Strouss was very well liked in Youngstown. He did a lot of things to help others during his career.

JEROLD, RAENETTE, AND FAMILY

Gustave and Julius Kahn founded the Truscon Steel Company in Youngstown, and were very successful.

A cousin of theirs from Royal Oak, Michigan, Raenette Purdy was going to spend New Years Day 1920 with her cousins in Pittsburgh. Her local cousin Dorothy Kahn called me and asked if I would come to her house New Years Eve and be a partner of her cousin's, who was staying overnight with her. I said, "yes," and that is how I met Raenette. She was fourteen years old and I was seventeen. We saw each other occasionally for twelve years until we got married.

I thought I was out of my mind marrying a girl I had known for twelve years. So I asked Bert Lustig, my very best friend, if he would spend a weekend with me in Royal Oak, and tell me if he thought I was crazy to marry Raenette. His answer as we left Royal Oak to come home was, "There goes the future Mrs. Meyer "

Business was in a sever depression in 1932 and we decided not even to invite our family to our wedding because they would be obligated to buy gifts. So we told our family we would get married privately.

Raenette was working in Detroit, and I was working in the New Castle Strouss Store. The next time we were in New York at the same time we got married in the little church around the corner on our lunch hour.

We took a taxi to the church at noon and at the desk asked if we could get married. The clerk asked me if I had been baptized. I said, "No." She said, "you will have to get baptized." I asked, "Where?" She said, "There," and pointed to a water bowl. After being baptized we returned to the counter to get married. She asked, "Do you have any witness'?" We said, "No." So she called the scribe lady and floor cleaner over and they stood on both sides of us as we got married.

We went back to work. Raenette was a half hour late and was criticized for not being back on time.

We only received one wedding gift, and that was \$300 from an Aunt of Raenette's who lived in New York.

Raenette applied for a job at Strouss-Hirshberg in Youngstown and got it. It called for buying sportswear and junior wear.

When I got back to Youngstown I looked for a place to live and found a room in Poland. Which was run by Pete Mardo, and his wife, who were retired circus clowns and horse back riders.

I found a room on the second floor for \$45 a month, which included breakfast for two. I reserved it.

When Raenette got to Youngstown I drove her to this place and unloaded all our luggage.

I introduced her to Mrs. Mardo as my wife, and Mrs. Mardo said, "That's all right Jerold, go upstairs I won't tell anybody."

Our first baby was born November 3, 1934, named Nerabeth. She grew up to be a brilliant, charming woman. She married Dan

Roth on June 28th, 1953. She taught English at Youngstown State University, and had a commercial pilots licence. She raised a son, Bill Roth, who is a representative of Solomon Brothers in Chicago, and a daughter, Jennifer, who is a doctor in Clinical Psychology. Jennifer is getting married September 15, 1987 to Jeff Forshal and will live in Michigan.

Merabeth divorced her original husband and remarried Steve Zarembe, who she divorced seven years later and is now remarried to Dr. Bill Lurie. It looks like a good marriage.

Jeralyn was born November 6, 1937 and grew up to be an accomplished actress and performer. She married Rbett Pinsky, a lawyer, and they live in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

She is the associate director of the Grand Rapids Civic Playhouse.

She has two boys. Adam, who is going to be married and John, who is still in college.

James P. Meyex was born November 13, 1940 and married Virginia Fox on June 25, 1960. Virginia was from Muncie, Indiana

Their first child was Deborah, born February 14, 1962. Their second and third children were twins, Scott and Howard, born June 21, 1963

Deborah recently married Jonathan Mills, and they live in Nashville, Tennessee.

Scott and Howard are working in Chicago.

Jim started as a broker with Butler Wick in Youngstown.

PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Bert Lustig. Bert Lustig came out to the farm on Christmas Day the year after Merabeth was born with a gift for her.

He did this each year and after Jeralyn was born her started bringing two gifts. After Jimmy was born he brought three gifts. He did this for sixteen years until we told him that we appreciated what he was doing but he should stop, and he did stop.

His business career was in Lustig's Shoe Store.

Ritter Family. Herman Ritter, who was Harry Meyer's partner lived with his wife, had no children, and both passed on years ago.

Otto Kaufman. His family lived on Bryson Street. He operated a factory that manufactured gas mantles, and was very successful until the introduction of electric lights. At which time the market for gas mantles diminished, and Kaufman went broke. He moved out of town to live with relatives.

He was one of the founders of Rodef Sholem Temple when it opened on Lincoln Avenue.

He owns a burial area in Rodef Sholem Cemetery. Years after his family was gone an inquiry was made whether a grandson of his, who died in Florida, could be buried in his cemetery. Rodef Sholem replied, "Yes," but since the grandson was not a member of Rodef Sholem he would have to pay a fee of \$375. The never sent the grandson's body here.

Hirshberg. The family moved away and there are no descendants of Hirshberg's in Youngstown.

Clarence Strouss. When Isaac Strouss became ill his son, Clarence Strouss took over the management of Strouss-Hirshberg. He was in charge until he became ill, and died on March 7, 1947.

His son, Clarence Jr. did not have enough experience to take

charge so he left the store, and became a very successful insurance agent. He has a beautiful home on Warner Road, and a wonderful family.

Helene Strouss Meyer. She always helped her friends, and was very charitable in the community. She started the Hearing Aid Center, and Heritage Manor. She gave a room in Northside Hospital in the Obstetrics Department.

I. Harry Meyer. Active Rotarian, Lions Club, Elks Club, 32nd degree Mason, and very charitable.

Raenette Meyer. Very charitable. On Board of Visiting Nurses for twenty years and president of the Girl Scout District for three years. She had a Girl Scout troop and had a Cub Scout troop. She was on the board of Planned Parenthood, the Youngstown Symphony, and the Parent Teacher Association (P.T.A.). She furnished transportation for Bogs tennis club in Boardman, worked with her two children at the Playhouse, and was an ardent bridge player. She furnished grass on lawn for the Easter Seal Society, gave Women's City Club a brand new piano. She graduated from Cornell in 1927.

Jerold S. Meyer. Graduated from Rayen High in three years and graduated from Cornell in three and a half years. He spent six months at Harvard Business School and worked at Strouss-Hirshberg for forty years. He opened and ran the four branch stores in New Castle, Salem, Warren, and Sharon. Was made manager of Strouss-Hirshberg Youngstown store in 1942. He retired at age sixty in 1963. He raised \$650,000 to revitalize Power's Auditorium for the symphony and won the Steel Baton Award. He was active as a Rotarian and in the Barber Shop Quartet Society.

He was on board of the Youngstown Library for thirty-five years and was active in the Songwriter Club and won an award in 1967. Wrote the song for the Bicentennial. Was boss of the year in 1962. He helped merge Youngstown University into Youngstown State University. He was chairman of the Mahoning Horse Show in 1946. In 1974 the Youngstown Area Chamber of Commerce gave him an award in recognition of his civic leadership and service to the community. For ten years he was chairman of the United Negro College Fund Drive. He helped found and develop the Boys Club and was on the board for fifteen years.

CHANGES IN YOUNGSTOWN

In 1912 there was a war in Europe and ammunition and guns were required so the U. S. opened up immigration and 13,000 Italians arrived in Youngstown to work in the steel mills. Manufacturing in Youngstown grew until around 1950 because we were helping the world rebuild the bombed out portion. From 1950 the production in Youngstown declined gradually. A few companies prospered.

In 1970 Youngstown Sheet & Tube built the large office building in Boardman. Although at that time seventy-five percent of their steel was being made in Gary, Indiana. Since that time, due to foreign competition, manufacturing had steadily declined in this area. In fact the following mills are closed: U.S. Steel, Republic Steel, Sheet & Tube, General Electric, Truscon Steel.

Due to the growth in the surrounding rural areas, the downtown of Youngstown has been closed to most retailers. McKelvey,

Strouss-Hirshberg, Livingston's, Lustig's, Central Store, and many others. The only things surviving in central Youngstown are government offices, financial offices, legal offices, etc.

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INTERVIEWEE: JEROLD MEYER
INTERVIEWER: Lois Davidow
SUBJECT: Personal experiences, family background
DATE: July 22, 1987

D: This is an interview with Jerold Meyer for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Youngstown Area Jewish Federation Project, by Lois Davidow, on July 22, 1987.

Your father came from Aurora. He came to Youngstown in 1890 and that is when he met Herman Ritter. They opened a men's store then, it was called Ritter and Meyers. Then he met Helene Strouss, that was right after he moved here, and they were married in 1900. They lived on Wick Oval, and you were born in 1903. Now how did Helene ... do you say here how Helene's family got here? How Isaac got here?

M: Yes, but you see there is a problem. It has to be under Isaac's history.

D: So Jean is three years younger than you are?

M: That is right.

D: You lived on Wick Oval until you bought out here on ...

M: We may have lived a couple years at different places before that. But I didn't describe this whole thing, mainly because it is too complicated. Did you see the picture of that house in that newspaper article originally?

D: Yes, yes, you showed me.

M: Just a little house. Now when we first saw it, which

was like that. We went out the back door twenty feet and there was another little, one-story house. Did I tell you about that?

D: Tell me again.

M: That is where they did their cooking and laundry and everything else. So in their house it was always neat and clean. There was no laundry done, nothing. They didn't even eat in their house. See the little windows. Alright see the house ... the walls are this thick solid wood.

D: It is about a foot.

M: Yes. So that in the wintertime very little cold got into the house. In the summertime very little heat. It was very easy to keep the house warm. It isn't like here where you got half the wall windows.

D: Now you lived in that house originally, or you are talking about that?

M: Part time. When I got married that house that was in the rear ... What we wanted to do was we wanted to have a place for the farmer to live. So we moved it over here. And it is this room and the next room one-story high. We put a second floor on it, you know an addition to it, and had the farmers over here. Until they quit farming then Raenette and I moved in here. We put this room on and another room on. See it has been twice added to, improved several times.

D: But you did a lot of farming at that time. Was this the time when the cattle was here?

M: I think it is mentioned in there.

D: No, you don't mention the milk farm, raising the milk for babies. Well, just tell me about it. Tell me about the milk farm.

M: Well, we had cattle here. We had a lot of cattle, like fifty head of cattle. They were high grade, holsteen cattle. We were told there was a need for milk for babies in Youngstown. Not the good pasteurized milk, they just wanted milk that was free from germs. So we had the milk tested and then we had a little truck and we took it in every morning and delivered it to people. We were getting about \$10,000, \$12,000 a year for milk. It was costing us about \$10,000, \$12,000 ... I remember finding it was costing us \$12,000 or \$13,000, finally \$13,000 and \$14,000. We decided this was no way to live, so we disbanded the milk.

D: But at the time you did a lot of raising your own vegetables and everything here too?

M: Oh, yes. Farm way is different. We had ducks, pigeons, chickens, geese, pigs, cattle, goats, horses, and cows.

D: The whole farm specter.

M: Oh, yes. It was a big farm.

D: That was as you were growing up, that is what was going on here. That was a nice way to grow up.

M: I have a picture of me, twelve years old, working out in the wheat field. The machine used to tie it in little bundles. Then you would go on and stack them like this and break them and put them on top. They had a picture of me picking them up to cure the wheat. I was twelve years old.

D: That is great. Now when your father and Mr. Ritter were in business how long was that store open, do you know? Oh, in 1928 the store ... That was the end.

M: 1900, but can you imagine the Wick's telling my dad that he was paying \$10,000 year round rent and next year they were going to charge him \$25,000 year round? Can you imagine anyone asking such an increase in rent?

D: That is when he decided to go out of business?

M: Yes, he had no choice. He told me this, he says, "I have to decide whether I am going to work for Wicks the rest of my life or not. I have decided I am not going to so I am going to close the store."

D: Did he go into Strouss then at that time, Strouss's?

M: No, he worked right here in the garden.

D: Stayed home for awhile?

M: Stayed home, yes.

D: But he eventually ... He ended up in the store?

M: No, he didn't work at Strouss's.

D: Oh, I thought ... I am mistaken there. I thought he did.

M: What happened, though, when he got the money from selling out, Strouss's needed the money and so they sold

him a certain interest in the store. Which helped him live without having to work. They were expanding and he was going out of business.

D: So he did have an interest in the stores?

M: Yes.

D: Although he didn't physically work there.

M: That's right, that's right. You see how complicated it is?

D: About your grandparents.

M: Oh.

D: This is Isaac and Lena Felser and they came from Mannheim, and Hanheim, Germany.

M: Neighboring villages.

D: He was sixteen years old. Jean gave me that biography on Isaac and, I guess, Clarence.

M: Well, read this and see if they are the same. Shouldn't even have said. Do you know what I mean?

D: How long was Bernard Hirshberg in the store, wasn't too long? Yes, but it doesn't say how long he was with Isaac. He went up to Alaska.

M: Yes, you see what a nice guy Isaac was. Bernard Hirshberg left the store went up to Alaska to mine gold. When he got up there he was a failure and he lost all his money and he came back. So Isaac Strouss took him back as a partner. That is what a nice Isaac Strouss was. When he got back from Alaska, done getting gold ...

D: He hadn't changed the name, or anything? He left the Hirshberg name.

M: You can also see what a lousy merchant he was. He wanted to leave here to go up and mine gold. He wanted to leave Strouss-Hirsberg's. Basically he was a crumb. But he would have gone away a year or two, leave the business he is in and mine gold and a lot of stuff.

D: He must have known Isaac would take pretty good care of it, which he did.

M: No, I don't know what he knew. I know that if he had many partners like that you would go broke.

D: When Isaac built this house on Wick Avenue, across from Rayen School.

M: Oh yes, I will tell you it is torn down now but it is right next to Masonic Temples. You see in those days you could walk to work.

D: Yes.

M: You could walk from there about a block and a half and you were at work.

D: Yes. Now we do have that biography on Isaac so that clears it. That straightens that up pretty well. In the Truscon now that you have got Julius Kahn here. Raenette is related to cousin Julius Kahn. When he started the Truscon business were there other people that helped found it with him.

M: A lot of friends of mine got married, got divorced. Good friends of mine. If the you lived in Youngstown ... College friends of mine I said, "My God, how can you tell when you are young who you should marry?" They thought they should marry them and then two years later divorce them. Went back to a reunion like three years, or four years after I graduated and guys with other women and divorced now. So, I liked Raenette very much and I always had great regard for her. So I asked Bert, I said, "Will you please do me a favor? Will you come up to Detroit, look this babe over, and tell me whether I should marry her. Because I am afraid I am just over ... dizzy about her. See and I don't even realize what she is really like. I am just romantic about her." He said, "Sure I will do it." So he spent two days there with me. Then he the day left when he said goodbye to her he said, "There goes the future Mrs. Meyer."

D: When you were in New York, when you married Raenette, were you working in New York?

M: No, I was working at Strouss's. I had to go to New York every few weeks on business.

D: Oh, buying.

M: Yes. In fact I was working in the New Castle store.

D: I see.

M: I just opened it. She was working in Detroit, had to go there for ...

D: Her buying trips.

M: Yes, that is right.
D: Tell me the secret of a good marriage.

M: Capital M, capital R. Do you know what that means?
D: No, what does that mean?
M: Mutual Respect.
D: Meaning?
M: Yes. You know how much respect I have for Raenette? If she does something I hate, I am happy. You know why? Because she has the privilege of doing something that I hate, makes me happy. She has that privilege.
D: Isn't that great? That is wonderful.

M: That is the only way you can stay married because I will tell you why. No two people ever think alike, I don't give a damn who they are. Never believe in the same thing. Never think alike over what is happening. Some like to do this way, some like to do it that way. If they try to win the other one over they get irritation. But if one of them gives consent, "Well, you like to that. I am very happy, but you can do what you want." Well, that makes them happy then. I am still happy. She can do whatever she wants. Whatever she does, no matter how much I hate it, it makes me happy that she can do it and enjoys doing it. You follow me?
D: I sure do.

M: That philosophy, if that were followed through the world, half the people wouldn't get divorced.
D: Let me ask you. Where did your children go to school, here in town?
M: Well, they went to school through high school here then Jeralyn went to Cornell, Jimmy went to Miami, and Merabeth went to Western Reserve University in Cleveland.
D: Tell me some memories you have of Clarence. The kind of person he was. Clarence, your uncle.
M: Clarence Strauss. Well, he was a very, very fine person. Let's see, I think he died when he was sixty. He wasn't too well. But he certainly was a lovely person. That is all I can say.
D: Did you spend a lot of time with him?

M: Well, yes. Of course he hired me, and so forth. And you know what happened ... He was so lovely he had a lot of people hired in the store that weren't lovely. You know what I mean? He wasn't strict enough with what he expected them to do. Let's say they were inefficient. Weren't capable of doing the job they were doing.

D: But he wouldn't let them go?

M: He didn't even know that. He was nice to them ... It was a friendly thing.

D: Now, he lived ... Where did they live? They had a farm too.

M: Oh yes, they lived up on Warner Road. They sold it to the Catholic diocese.

D: Yes.

M: We had married this girl from ...

D: From St. Joseph, Missouri.

M: She was sick for a long, long time. He had rather tough luck, with his family I mean.

D: I would like to know some of the things you remember. Your social activities as you were growing up. Just the fun stuff. The people you remember besides Burt Lustig. You had other friends.

M: Well, I had a very dear friend Joe Brown, did you know him?

D: No.

M: Well anyway, at Lake Milton ... Many years ago, he and I bought a sailboat. We would go out Sunday, take our lunch out, Raenette and his wife, and sail around Lake Milton in the afternoon. Have dinner there and come back in the evening. For years after that I had a pontoon boat. It had wheels on it and had a little motor on the back to run it. I took these wheels, put little tabs on them, made beautiful designs on them so when it ran along side the wheels it turned around. The wheel wasn't pushing the boat but the wheel was going around. People didn't know that. Really I never played golf because living out here ... Worked six days a week I spent Sunday afternoon at Lake Milton in the summer. All my spare time I spent gardening here and working around the house.

D: You had a lot of picnics and fun out here too.

M: Well, we had picnics at these clubs here. We had song writers that came out here and picnic. Barbershop quartets would have picnics out here. Of course this was a great place for them because they could have ... In fact I will tell you what we did. We had barbershop quartet ... Nineteen years we had picnics here. The nineteenth year there were 400 who came to the picnic. What happened was we opened the basement for them and they used the john, and they crapped all over the place and ruined the basement. We had to spend a week cleaning up the basement. Threw pop bottles in the bushes around so we decided we would never have one again until we find a new place. But when there were a few of them, they treated it very nicely, for nineteen years. We first started about fifty a year. In nineteen years they would come from Akron. A big bus would come in and on the top would be about ten people sitting around singing when they came down the drive. It was fine while it lasted, but when it got to a number of people who cared less.

D: They got abusive.

M: We had to quit. So that is the story. We used to grow corn and when I had three, big corn kettles ... Boiled the corn, and I would peel the corn back, take all the fuzz out of it, then put the fine little leaves, take the other stuff off, leave it back in. So when they got the corn they could eat it.

D: And how you were busy, besides working six days a week.

M: Music was very interesting. I played the musical saw a lot. I gave lectures on bees.

D: Yes, tell me about the bees. You raised them here too?

M: Oh, yes. What happened was ... Yes, in fact I was a member of the Bee Society. I started with one colony. I got up to six colonies of bees. One year we had Garver's rent the field to raise strawberries. One year they got 40,000 quarts of strawberries on the field across the way. Well, I had my six colonies of bees between here and the lake and they sprayed them one year to kill the bugs on the strawberries. All the bees in the six colonies died from the air ... Flew around and died. So then I closed the bee business.

D: That was the end of the bee business.

M: Everything has an end. Nothing goes on improving every year forever. Nothing. Even a peison. They end don't they?

D: That's right.

M: So there you are.

D: That was the end of the bee business.

M: Well, what else did I do? People in the whole world and they are teaching the Jews ... The Jews are God's chosen people.

D: When you were in Cornell you were in a play?

M: Yes.

D: What was your position in that?

M: Well, it was around 1920 and I went to a play, and they gave me a job as a wife of a professor. They dolled me up in a wig, and a comb, and so forth. I dressed like a woman and they took pictures of me to promote the play. One good picture they gave me, I sent home to my dad. Unbeknown to me the Vindicator was running a beauty contest. So he turned the picture in under the name Jeroldine Nuttly of North Lima, which of course no one knew there was no Nuttly's living there. They published it in the Vindicator with three other real, real ... You saw that, the contestants. Well, of course I didn't win anything but it was amusing because ...

D: Nobody ever knew at the time who Jeroldine Nuttly was

M: No, no, no one ever knew.

END OF INTERVIEW