

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Faculty

O.H. 2185

Dr. Martin Berger

Interviewed

by

Jack Lorenzini

on

April 20, 2004

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INTERVIEWEE: Dr. Martin Berger

INTERVIEWER: Jack Lorenzini

SUBJECT: YSU Faculty

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P: This is an interview with Dr. Martin Berger for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on YSU Faculty, by Jack Lorenzini, at Dr. Berger's office in Debartolo Hall, on April 20, 2004. At 1:00 p.m. This project was funded by the Ford Foundation.

L: When and where were you born?

B: November 22, 1942, in Columbus.

L: Do you have any siblings?

B: I have one, I have a younger sister.

L: What were the names of your parents?

B: Otto Berger and Irene Berger.

L: What were their occupations?

B: My father worked as a traffic manager at Summer & Company, which was a scrap metal yard in Columbus. My mother had worked a number of jobs but she dropped out to be a full-time homemaker as they said in those days, and when I was in about the seventh grade, I think, she went back to work part-time for the state senate as a stenographer and later was secretary and then office manger for Central Ohio Heart Association.

L: Where did you live?

B: In Grandview Heights, which is a suburb, a small Columbus suburb south of Arlington.

L: Can you describe your neighborhood at home?

B: Most of the houses were like ours; they were immediate post-World War II construction, small, this was kind of the middle of Grandview Heights, which had at that time kind of a lower-middle class tilt. The suburb has been yuppified beyond all recognition in recent years.

L: What is your ethnic background?

B: English on my mother's side, German on my father's side.

L: Where did you attend grade school?

B: Grade school and secondary school were in Grandview Heights.

L: Can you describe any influential teachers for us?

B: There were, let's see, there was an English teacher who was also journalism advisor who was good. There was an Art teacher who was more than slightly odd but who offered a kind of refuge for the nerd element as such, so that we didn't have to be in study halls; that was good. Other good English teachers, good biology teacher; the History teachers were weak. Mostly well-meaning, but I was in the home room of our high school History teacher, and he wrote things all over the blackboard, and I corrected, he had spelled Woodrow Wilson "r-o-e," and I changed the "e" to a "w" one morning when he wasn't looking and the next day he had changed it back. As I say, nice fellow, but I did not take history very seriously because of the way it had been done. He was not, by the way, a coach.

L: So what were your favorite subjects?

B: I thought that I was going to be a writer. I did English, and in those days the state-scholarship test in English in Ohio was entirely a matter of grammar and spelling, and that sort of thing, and I worked that hard. I had been a Spelling Bee champion in junior high school, going to the national in '56, and as a freshman I placed third in the state in the English Competition, so I always worked on that, and I worked on grammar and so forth, and had another third and a first in the state in those subsequent years. So as far as I knew that's what English people did so I thought I was an English Major when I went to college.

L: Do you remember which word you spelled correctly to win the spelling bee?

B: I do not. However, I remember the word that I misspelled in Washington that knocked me out. It was "marcescent," which means dying or withering, and had I had some Latin at that point I might have caught the c-e-s-c-e-n-t. In D.C. the vice-president came out to do the tiresome task of welcoming the spellers in front of their local papers and all, and Vice-President Nixon actually said something, his speech writers had given him something reasonable to say, and he said that, "Only one of you will win, but each of the others will remember one word forever."

L: How did your parents influence your education?

B: My mother in particular was a person who was a books person, a cultural-oriented person, and in her family and my father's family college was simply not an option, they graduated from high school when they did, and that was in the Depression. She bought in to the idea that education was the way to get to be better in every way, and I was neurotic and pushed, and very much fit the all sorts of stereotypes about the perfectionist-obsessive sort of kid. She was very good at spelling, at grammar and so forth and she had spent many years making a series of bosses look as if they could read and write English. This was all stuff that I internalized.

L: Were there any extracurricular activities that you participated in high school?

B: Being by far the least coordinated kid in my class, I was not going to do any of the physical stuff, but I was on the newspaper, I was on the yearbook, I had co-founded our chess team, there was a bunch of stuff of that sort, and in addition until I was a senior I continued to carry afternoon papers. Or maybe I switched over to just a morning route at the time, but I carried papers for an awful lot of years. It's a useful thing to do, it teaches you to distrust capitalism at an early age.

L: What sports were offered in your high school when you attended?

B: There was football, basketball, and baseball, and that's all that I know of. Basketball and baseball were coached by a bright, sadistic, and genuinely evil man by the name of Hopkins, who made gym class perhaps a more vicious environment than it needed to be for people of my sort. It was only much later that it dawned on me that the regular academic classes were the same sort of systematically humiliating and brutalizing

environment for a lot of my classmates, the gym was for me, and that wasn't until I encountered as one of the gym instructors in college a great fencing coach, and a civilized human being, that caused me to re-evaluate the role of sports in society and all that sort of thing.

L: Before coming to YSU, where and when did you go to college?

B: After taking the various tests and things and applying not quite at random, but applying to brand names because no one in my family had been to college so it was a matter of researching these things. I applied to several places and was accepted everywhere at Harvard where it was weight-listed, and it seemed to me that Columbia was by far the best deal because it was, so far as I knew, a first-rate institution, having the Ivy League brand to it, and it was also in New York City. And I had learned probably when in junior high or so before I had caught up an interest in Jazz music, and already in Freshman Week at Columbia I found someone else who bored at a freshman mixer, and we went off to Monday night at Birdland where for two dollars at that time you could get in. And Monday night was the young guys, so we heard Eric Dolphy and Freddie Hubbard that night, and had I had more money I would have caught a lot more. I regretted missing a lot of the stuff that was going on, but you can't be in New York City in possession of a radio and not gain a great deal of cultural enrichment. I was able to hear while an undergraduate a fair number of the greats that are, of course, long gone now.

L: If we can back up just a little bit. You attended the University of Pittsburgh, correct?

B: I went to Pitt for my graduate work. I had a good B undergraduate average, but my Columbia experience was kind of intimidating because I was no longer the smartest kid that I knew, and there were a lot of people who were at least as clever and most of them much more sophisticated and much better prepared. So I had a decent record, I had some okay recommendations, and Pitt was the only place that gave me money, and it turned out to be a pretty good fit in most respects.

L: When did you know that you wanted to study history?

B: Not really until I was a junior, because the initial classes that I took were so-so, taught by instructors who were not terribly good at it; some of them might have become good later. Well, I caught some good stuff as a sophomore, I guess, as well. I had found out that I didn't really want to do English, although I was technically an English major until I was a junior. I had had a course with Anthropology, which I thought looked interesting, and Marvin Harris, who is a major figure in twentieth century Anthropology, is also a dogmatic and unpleasant classroom performer, and I moved away from that. And history was a large part of what I had read while being a kid reading at the local public library, and finally I got some people who were excellent teachers, and it just seemed like an extremely good fit.

L: When did you receive your doctorate?

B: The doctorate came...the undergraduate degree was in '64, Master's after two trimesters at Pitt, because that's the way they did it in '65, and the doctorate in 1969; and by the time it was awarded I had on the strength of the ABD and my recommendations from Pitt, got the job at Youngstown State. So that was summer, I guess, of '69.

L: What was your dissertation on?

B: The dissertation had to do with the military thinking of Karl Marx and especially Fredrick Engels. It's called *Engels, Armies, and Revolution: The Revolutionary Tactics of Classical Marxism*. It didn't get published in somewhat modified form until '77. It was an unfashionable tactic in some ways because in Marxist studies, as well as in history in general, the emphasis was coming to be history from the bottom up; stuff about leaders and thinkers was sort of passé. And there are advantages and disadvantages of being on the frontier of two different disciplines, because I was kind of between Marxist studies and military history, and those are two sub-disciplines that don't communicate very often.

L: Knowing what you know now, what would you change about that book today if you had a chance to?

B: The book would be somewhat breezier, easier to read, less dissertation-like. It was cleaned up quite a bit from the dissertation, but I would now make it much more so. I don't think I could have done that at the time, partly because I didn't have the confidence to punch up the assertiveness of it, and partly because junior faculty in the profession were not then encouraged to be real uppity.

L: When you came to YSU in the summer of '69, how were you hired?

B: I interviewed at the AHA in New York in December of '68. I had I think four or five interviews at the convention, I had a total of two off-campus interviews, the other one at Eastern Illinois in Charleston, where I found it a much less attractive setting in a lot of ways. At YSU there was this sense that the faculty were really interested in the subject. Scholarship and teaching were taken very seriously. It seemed and generally has been an opportunity to do my thing, teach some of the classes that I wanted to teach, and that's generally been a good thing. YSU was extremely weird as a campus visit because I flew in for the on-campus interview out of a snowstorm in New York where I had trouble getting a cab to take me to the airport, and eventually I got one cab driver a two-week suspension for refusing to take me to the airport. But flew in to Youngstown International Airport, and at that the time the Guard out there were using C-119 long, obsolete, twin-boom, weird-looking cargo aircraft, and there was nothing around but snow and these ghostly antique aircraft, and I felt as if I was descending into the Twilight Zone. But it was pretty neat once I was picked up and hauled to the campus, and it was clearly an institution in the process of change; the department was quartered in the motel across Wick Avenue where now stands the McDonough Museum, and the cafeteria was in a temporary building in the center of campus. There was a great deal of mud and confusion. Changes were being made, and I liked the people that I interviewed with, and then, later, I met the rest of the co-workers that had been hired the same year, because as

you recall the place went state in '67, and commenced to hire people and increase the full-service faculty, so that in '68 and '69 the faculty doubled in size. And we had a considerable bunch of new people come in that year, and the fact that so much of the faculty was new would have a great deal to do with the way things turned out on campus, unionization and other issues as well.

L: Which other history professors came in '69?

B: We had Al Donovan, who bailed out soon and went into psychological counseling. We had Dom Capece, who did African American History, and was a major figure in setting up what then called the Black Studies program at the University. There was so much conflict about how that should be arranged, and he made essentially a lateral move after a few years and went to Southwest Missouri. The rest of us; Ronda, Jenkins, Friedman, pretty much stuck around, and we're now seeing the last of us retired or approaching retirement.

L: Why did you stay at YSU?

B: This was going to be the first job for everybody that came here. The high teaching load was a disadvantage, but the goal was that we would all publish intensively, attract attention, and move up. Jim Ronda was the only one who actually did that over the years with his Pulitzer nominations and his frenetic publishing activity. He managed to distance himself from the rest of us and had that opportunity. One of the ways that YSU entraps people is that promotion and tenure come relatively quickly. You get to the point where it's unusual to find an offer where you can actually move up; you'd be giving up security of where you are, and besides, the last jobs that there were in the profession were out there in '69, it was the beginning of the great academic depression. And there's a terrible number of good people out there in the market as we see every year when we do our recruiting in almost all fields-lots of people who are terrifically qualified and very promising, and not enough real full-time, genuine work for them. Also at YSU we developed a sense that we had a stake in what there was here by the struggles to unionize, to improve the way the university worked, we became identified with it, and it's good that I think young faculty for the most part have some sense at least of how the place changed during our three decades and more chance of participation here. It's a very different place than it was when I came.

L: How has the administration changed since you've been here?

B: Most new administrations have seemed like an improvement, a direction, a change in the direction of rationality and reason, and courtesy, and so on. Most of those hopes were at least partially smashed as time went on, because there's a tendency for administration and faculty to view priorities somewhat differently. I think my own sense that where we are now is somewhat less confrontational and less nasty than it's been in the past. I think there's some truth to it. I think it may have to do with the fact that we now have anti-depressants that we didn't used to have, so I perceive the situation somewhat differently.

L: How have the students changed since you first came here?

B: YSU students used to be somewhat more intimidated. They still come that way; they still come with some of that sense that college is not really for them, that they're not really good enough, that if they were any good they'd have gone someplace else. On the other hand it's less intense than it used to be, it's been years and years since I've heard anyone refer to the place as "Wick High." And now we get fewer of the classic kind of student, the kind of student that I was to a degree, that fusses too much, that works too hard, and obsesses over trivia and can't loosen up to see the big picture. We've seen more in the direction of people who consider vagueness to be perfectly okay, and have trouble getting around the idea that stuff needs to be in complete sentences in order to be acceptable examples and illustrations, and having actual evidence thrown in to the blue-book essay for instance. In general though, the level of YSU students I think has remained pretty similar. We've always had this very challenging mix of people whose ability to read and write is marginal at best, people who should really sue their high schools, or their parents, or somebody, because they're not ready, mixed in with people who would be quite competitive in an Ivy League classroom. That's why we have to be careful hiring, because it's much harder to teach in a place like this than in a place where you've got all persons of academic talent, or I suppose at a place with no serious students, where you could know where to aim it. But the students have been sometimes maddening and frustrating, but surprisingly often, quite often, people who some of whom are really just splendidly equipped when they come in and consistently very good. And other people who have abilities that have not really been tapped, and they need encouragement and coaching, and it's very rewarding to be able to see the difference, and we can pretend-it's kind of an encouraging stratagem-to try to pretend to ourselves that we're responsible for that improvement.

L: What are your favorite courses to teach?

B: Actually, I like all of the courses that I teach. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Europe, the Germans, The World War II course, even the History of Medicine, which was a brute to get on top of, is a lot of fun nowadays now that I think I've got the handle on it. The graduate classes are usually a good deal of fun; this depends entirely on who takes it in a particular term of course. I'm fortunate that I don't have to teach anything that really bores me. I just wish that I had time to do some of the other things that interest me as well, we don't get to do Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Germany anymore because of the curriculum revamping, and some areas that really intrigue me a great deal, particularly the Russian Revolution and World War I, these things have been handled by other people and I've already got more courses than I can really easily keep on top of, so it's about as good a mix as I could hope for. And that's partly because the way curriculum development happens here is that we pretty much build the courses around the faculty and what they're interested in, because you're not going to have people do going and teaching if you make them teach stuff that they're not really intrigued by.

L: Do you have a favorite lecture?



B: No.

L: Is there a least favorite lecture?

B: No, there are some...my least favorite lecture is one that happens not to go well. And if it happens not to go well, that's not because of the material, it's because I didn't enough sleep, or I was sick, or didn't have time to look over my notes, or the difficulties of parking, or some other minor harassment, or committees, have got in the way. There was one term where I was consistently five minutes late to a class because the only time in the whole day when you could schedule Library Committee was one hour in the middle of the day. And it was an important committee; it had to meet and meet a lot, and it really took a bite out of that class, whichever one it was that came right after it.

L: How has the campus changed since you first arrived?

B: (End of side one, no continuation) That was the built environment question, as we've learned to say now that we have historic preservation. When I came classes were still taught in what is now the Tod Building, Tod Administration Building, which at that time was both library and a classroom building, and those were among the better classrooms. There were classes held in the Rayen building, which is now the Board of Education, a cater-corner from the Public Library, and that was a particularly noisy place; when the trucks ground their way up the hill, bits of plaster would drift down from the ceiling. In some ways the campus has become better and more conducive to teaching. On the other hand the climate control in the buildings, including some of the newer buildings, continues to be miserable, and I don't think anybody can concentrate well when it gets above 80 with no air movement in a classroom. It will help a little bit if I'm talking about Guadal canal and the experience of being stuck on the bottom of a submarine with the air running out, but I don't do that stuff all the time. We've got new buildings, some of which like the Williamson building are notably noisy and flimsy and unsuitable, and it continues to amaze me that the buildings that are rehabilitated and newly constructed are not better adapted to the presumable purpose of providing an environment for classes. Places with no air, too much heat, too much noise; it just doesn't make very much sense, of course now we're seeing the construction of new Fitness Center, whose immediate consequence is to put up a gulag-like giant fence to keep us from getting into our office building, but this is the way its been carried out, and it just reminds me of some of the things we've had in the past; the guys pounding on the wall with hammers, the guys setting explosive bolts next door in the rearranging of the Cushwa building, and so on and so on. Its certainly a prettier campus, with the exception of the devastation that awaits the Wellness Center, and that's worth a good deal because people come with a not-too-hot expectation of what to expect from an urban campus, and when you do have trees and grass and stuff like that it makes for a more positive impression.

L: Can you describe the impact that technology has had on YSU, especially computers?

B: Well it certainly imposed considerable psychological costs on me because the difficulties of dealing with the computer for me happen to be very great because I learned

to type, and still preferentially type, with an Underwood manual, where you can bang on your key and this mechanical series of things happens, and there's a click and a letter appears. The flimsiness of computer keyboards, the tendency to put in extra letters, the irrationality of so many procedures, has been very difficult for me to deal with. Even though my wife, who was also a history major, and has shown no technical aptitude in general, is very good at computers. I've had a lot of struggle, and I particularly hate Microsoft Word, which was imposed for a while as the campus medium of expression. There's now a kind of tolerance, a kind of Edict of Nantes, that permits Word Perfect to survive as a minority, and I can get through it a little better. When stuff happens like the time somebody just came in and replaced the computer, just carried away my computer, without warning or the opportunity to transfer my stuff, this is symptomatic of a technology-worshipping climate. I'm not a Luddite and I really like certain kinds of technology. I particularly like stuff that works, and it's just been frustrating dealing with a moving target. It was a good thing when they let us do slides, which I still do, that adds a dimension to my classes, but so often when they get a new version of something, there's a fine German noun, a *Schlimmbesserung*, that's an improvement that makes things worse, and we have an awful lot of those, particularly in the Microsoft direction. There's a book called *Silicon Snake Oil* by one of the developers of the internet in the first place, whom I cite here just to indicate that it's not me just being crotchety, the crap that is in a lot of computer stuff is just manifest.

L: Can you describe your most memorable colleagues?

B: Probably not, words kind of fail, but one of the ways to make an impression on students, and to develop a kind of teaching persona, is to work on various kinds of shtick, and some people were often good at that. Sid Roberts, who modeled his style on Mort Sahl; Hugh Earnheart, who was Acting Chair when I came and for a long time thereafter, who worked up this kind of countrified scene; he was a very sharp, very sophisticated guy, but he went out his way to hide it, as one of our graduate students figured out some years ago, doing Foghorn Leghorn. It's been very interesting to watch and sometimes you'll in your colleagues things you can use, things that are admirable. Sometimes there are things that are useful as a cautionary tale. Not that either of those guys is a cautionary tale, let me underline that.

L: Have you seen a broader diversity in faculty over the years?

B: We were always pretty diverse in terms of politics, and age, and places of origin, and so on. Certainly for a long time there was only one woman in the faculty, and then after Agnes Smith retired there was for a while none, but diversity is hard to measure in a profession where now the departments are about half female, or close to it. Certainly that's a change that came about because the model of the profession has changed. There have been recruiting efforts in the past where you had no minorities and hardly any women in the pool. It's changed but it's not striking; your professoriate consists of a kind of self-selected group of people who are sufficiently interested in this stuff, whatever it is that we teach and work in. Who are sufficiently interested in this stuff to work obsessively at it for years and years, and they have that in common, even though they

may disagree over many things, and it's something that differentiates us from the general run of the population, which simply cannot understand why we take this stuff so seriously. Part of the challenge of course is to communicate why this is neat stuff, why you need to know about it.

L: What have been your biggest scholarly achievements at YSU?

B: My scholarly achievements have been frustrating. I did get the book out in '77, and since then there have been a few articles, a number of conference papers, but mostly small-time book reviews, targets of opportunity, and so on. And the reasons for that are partly the heavy teaching load and the number of different courses that I'm responsible for, it took a bite to get on top of *The History of Medicine*, partly the distractions of family, and partly a matter of not having the single-mindedness to concentrate on scholarship instead of whatever crisis in home repair, auto repair, etc.-comes up. And also it's more difficult to accomplish what you want to do and what you need to do if a psychological problem is really, really in your way-that is if you're seriously debating whether it would be more work to finish reading the stack of blue-books, or to write the necessary suicide notes. Completely out of field, I've had the opportunity to learn a good deal about depression. One of the weirder things about it is that at those times, sometimes for weeks at a time when I was barely functional, few if any colleagues or students could tell the difference, which is kind of weird, but when you asked about scholarly achievements I've talked about scholarly frustrations, and that's been the biggest frustration. And I, you know, way back when one of our colleagues retired with many years of work, but really only one article to his credit, he published three significant books in retirement, and I don't know that I'm going to be able to do that but there is some stuff that I want to work on.

L: What kinds of things do you want to work on once you're retired?

B: Well, a scholarly thing that I want to follow up mostly is the work on jazz music in the Second World War, which I worked up as a conference paper, and have not taken the time to get into article shape. I think there might be a book in it; there's nothing specifically on that intersection between my World War II stuff and my jazz stuff, and I think it will be fun to work on once I don't have the classroom responsibilities. At least we can do up to five years of tapering off, so I don't have to go cold-turkey with this teaching thing. And there will be more time to work with.

L: You do a weekly jazz show on 88.5 F.M. When did you start that?

B: Second of December, 1972 was the first *Now Is the Time* program on the air. I recorded that one in the basement studio of my colleague Charles Darling, who taught American History, American Economic History, and so on, and did the folk music show. Then I went in to the radio station which then was in the motel, and commenced to do it, and the only time I missed a show was when one of my tapes got lost when they were moving the station. I've had to do reruns now and then when some crisis came up, I get points for doability.

L: Who is your favorite jazz musician?

B: It's hard to say but probably some of the mainstream guys like Coleman Hawkins, who virtually invented the jazz tenor saxophone, and Roy Eldridge, who's perhaps the most exciting trumpet player that we've had. That's the area, but I actually like and have had on the program everything from the very earliest stuff available to avant-garde stuff, everything but smooth jazz, or most fusion.

L: Do have any regrets in life?

B: Sure, I regret not getting my act together and getting more stuff published. I wish that I had been able to get my teaching skills together quicker, because I think that there were opportunities that I missed. I don't regret any of the things that I've said about administrators, generally it's been a reasonable run.

L: If there's one word to describe your experience at YSU, what would it be?

B: Interesting.

L: Why?

B: Well, it's kind of like what H.L. Mencken told Alistair Cooke back in the Twenties when Cooke commenced to do journalism in the United States. "It's been a never-ending source of amusement."

L: Is there anything that you would like to add that was not covered in this interview?

B: There's probably another project that's dealing with the Union, with that sort of thing. Tom Shipka did a very good job of writing it up in the NEA Thought & Action a few years back. That covered it pretty well, but I think that was a pivotal thing in the history of the institution.

L: Well thank you for your time today, it's been a pleasure. This has been an oral interview with Dr. Martin Berger for the Youngstown State University Oral History project on YSU by Jack Lorenzini.