

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Area Jewish Project

Personal Experience

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SAM GREENBLATT

Interviewed

by

Harry Alter

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
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INTERVIEWEE: SAM Z. GREENBLATT
INTERVIEWER: Harry Alter
SUBJECT: Youngstown Area Jewish Project
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A: This is an interview with Sam Greenblatt for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on The Youngstown Area Jewish Project, by Harry Alter, on Thursday, March 10th, 1988.

This is interesting, this picture here. [Looking at a photograph.]

G: Would you believe that I worked for the Westinghouse as a messenger at the age of 13 from East Pittsburgh. I was a trouble shooter for them. I could have worked into a good job but it wasn't good enough for me. I had to make a lot of money, because the most my father ever made in his life was \$25 a week. Even in those days it was too rough because there was sickness going on.

In 1926--I'm not good at dates, but I'm only guessing--we bought a home for my parents, Hyman and I, and we kept them living very comfortably because they were both sick. My father had to quit his work. We kept Hyman's parents, Hyman's in-laws, because they weren't doing too good. We used to bring them that little panel truck. We brought them all food.

A: Is Hyman still living in Pittsburgh?

G: Oh no, no, no. He came to Youngstown, I think, 10 years before I did. On all holidays we used to haul food for all the families.

A: Did Hyman convince you to come to Youngstown?

G: Well, it's a long story. I was making a lot of money and, as kids would, I was living pretty high. I was with four partners, and we were all doing very well. Hyman thought that for my own health it would be better if I would come here. I owned a garage in Pittsburgh on Craig Street, right in the busiest section of Craig Motor Service, the way you used to go to the ball park. It's a long story. I won't go into how I got the business. I was in so many things, you could not believe. That's the reason I left Westinghouse. I wanted to make big money, which we did. We kept five families in Youngstown, all living out of our one little store.

A: And then Hyman talked you into coming here?

G: Yes, he thought it would be healthier for me, and I agreed with him. I wasn't doing very well, and he just felt that I wasn't living, you know, taking as good care of myself as I should have. My coming here. . . .

A: Was Hyman older than you?

G: Yes. He was just two years older than me. Then I came here--this is very interesting--and we bought out a meat business, which was A & Hill, the best meat business in this entire territory. I hired one of the partners. In fact, I had them both, but later on, one of them left for England. The other one stayed and worked with us.

A: Was it wholesale or retail?

G: Oh, retail. I had wholesale when I had my manufacturing business, but this was all retail. We did very well. Like you read in the article, I didn't know the difference between any animals at all. I knew nothing. I took over this great big meat business that was doing \$8,000 a month.

A: Where was it?

G: Originally it was the market house where these fellows came, down on Front Street. I moved the business over on Midlothian Boulevard across the street from the Pleasant Growth Church. I had meats only, and the other fellow had groceries. That's L.S. Harris; one of the best grocers in the territory. To cut the story short, they wanted to break me real quickly so that they could have the business back to themselves and put

me out of business. Well, you could see by my accomplishments that I am a fighter, and I put them all out of business. We worked for a while on Midlothian Boulevard, and then I wanted to. . . . They wouldn't give me the chance to stay in business and they tried to break us in a hurry, so I felt that I couldn't make a living on meats only. We came here with \$25,000 cash from Pittsburgh, and in nine months time they just about had us cleaned out. So, I went to Rose Johnson first, and then I went to Tomarkin's. I explained to them my situation. I told them that if they could give me a little bit of groceries, I could put it in conjunction with my meats. Then I knew I could make a living. To cut the story short, both of them said, "We'll send you anything you want." Tomarkin's especially said, "I'll send you up a truck load of merchandise. All you do is pay us \$50 a month on the groceries and forget about the balance, and the current bill has got to be paid." That's the way we got started, and we started doing it very well. When we split up away from the other fellows, we took that store on the corner of Judson and Market Street right near Isaly's. We'd done well there. Then it was getting a little small for us, so I says, "Why don't we build a building?" So, we got a hold of a good. . . . Well, I'm getting ahead of my story. He said, "Alright, let's buy a building or build a building." So I went down to my banker, Bob Smythe. I think you probably know him. He was very good to the Jewish people from the Dollar Bank. As I got my drawings for the building, I said to Bob, "Bob, I'd like to put up a building," and he said, "How much money are you going to need?" I said, "Well, about \$38,000." That was a lot of money in those days. He said, "Sam, your crazy." I says, "Why?" He says, "You are licked before your even get started. You are borrowing \$38,000 to put up a building. What are you going to do for shelving? What are you going to do for groceries?" Anyhow, he convinced me to take \$75,000, and I paid that \$75,000 at the rate of \$100 a week and never missed a payment.

A: That's the building that you. . . ?

G: That's the building that I just sold. Of course, you know why we sold it. Why, we went out of business, I'm sure you know; Bernice died, Ralph died, and my wife went blind. They took me and gave me up, but I was still able to work.

A: Yes, I knew you were active. How many years were you there?

G: Fifty-two years.

A: Then soon after you came to town, you got active in the Jewish community.

G: I think I was on the ground floor of the Federation. I just assume you know on Bryson Street. Well, we got into the First Federation.

A: Bryson Street . . . the old Jewish Center.

G: Yes, yes.

A: The Federation started about the time they got out of that building. They started meeting up at Anshe-Emeth's.

G: Right. I put in a lot of time for the federation.

A: They named it Anshe-Emeth after they got out of the Lincoln-Anelem. You were never active in the Lincoln-Anelem?

G: I was active right from the ground floor. Lincoln-Anelem was the one that I'm thinking about.

A: The one that you were active in first?

G: Yes, then they moved over to. . . .

A: They moved to Bryson Street after Temple Emanuel lost the building to Lincoln-Anelem.

G: Right. Yes, we were in. . . .

A: And you were active in the early Federation campaigns.

G: I did a lot of collecting for the Federation.

A: During the early Federation campaigns, they had it split up according to various trades, and you were. . . ?

G: I had handled the grocery end of it.

A: Hyman was active in it?

G: Yes, Hyman was very active.

A: He was active at the same time, too.

G: Although, he had the Jewish War Veterans.

A: You and Hyman were also active in the Jewish athletics?

G: Oh yes, that was our big project. I had a little touring car, and we used to haul these kids from all around

here for basketball games. There's a lot of stories about that. These boys were really fighters.

A: That was all through the 1930s?

G: Yes, you got it.

A: That was when it was being declubbed.

G: That's right. It brings back all those memories.

A: Did you do a lot of traveling?

G: We did a lot of traveling and never charged one penny to anyone for transportation or anything. We bought them their meals. I remember taking the team up to Toledo. I'll never forget this. . . .

A: That was the tournament in April one year?

G: That's right. Mike Jaffey--I think it was Jaffey, I'm not sure. They were in between playoffs, and they put Jaffey on one of these beds to give him a rub down. The game was real tight and Mike Jaffey says, "Oh God, give us strength." And boy, I'll tell you, that got to me. They were all hard, really devoted.

A: Yes. There was also the Jewish League being held both at Anshe-Emeth and then on Sunday nights at the armory.

G: Yes, yes.

A: Those armory games. . . .

G: Oh yes. I'll tell you, these boys were all good. They really could have been all professionals if they followed through.

A: The team played against professionals at the time?

G: Yes.

A: I remember the New York Celtics came in Rayenwood auditorium.

G: They brought some real crowds.

A: Who else was active with you and Hyman at that time?

G: I don't know of anyone else. I mean, all the players.

A: I mean, some of the other people that helped out? Harry Prigason was one.

G: Oh yes. I know Harry came with us to many of the games.

A: Talking about the grocery business back in those days, about what percentage of the grocery stores in Youngstown were Jewish?

G: A big, big, big percentage. I'd say 80 percent.

A: And were you all active in the grocers association?

G: Very active, yes.

A: You were president?

G: I was president for two years. Let me give you the dates.

A: That was 1954 and 1955 when you were president.

G: Yes. We went to conventions. I went to Florida three or four times. I went to Chicago, Columbus. It was a real good business.

A: The grocers had big days out at Idora Park, didn't they?

G: We fed hundreds and hundreds of people at Idora Park. We really had a good time. All of the families came. They didn't want to go home, that is how good a time they were having.

A: What went on during those days?

G: Well, we had bingo games, and they had dancing and a lot of food, baseball games, and of course, you know all of the rides that they had there. They came early and went home late.

A: It was a big community event.

G: Oh yes, it was a big thing.

A: All of the food you gave away, was that contributed by a wholesale place?

G: By wholesalers mainly.

A: Tomarkin's at that time was just starting to grow, weren't they?

G: Yes. They were awfully good to people. You know what I mean? They were very lenient.

A: They helped put a lot of grocers into business, didn't they?

G: That's right. I was very, very active in the bond business.

A: What bonds?

G: I was active in Israeli bonds. I knew Mrs. Schwebel.

A: That started in 1951, in Youngstown.

G: Around December. Yes. I took a lot of work for those Israeli bonds. I remember one day Mrs. Schwebel said, "You have got to buy some bonds." She was a great lady. Until we closed the store, I don't think I ever missed buying a bond.

A: Do you still have some? Have they all started to mature?

G: After we had to close up, I had to sell an awful lot of stuff, too.

A: Getting back to Idora Park, I remember Jewish days out there.

G: Oh yes. Well, I wasn't active in the Jewish days.

A: You didn't have much to do with that?

G: I was there, but I didn't have much activity of my own.

A: What else do you recollect from?

G: From my activities?

A: From your activities, yes.

G: The El Emeth, I was on the board for Anshe-Emeth. I don't know how many years, but quite a few years. Where there was a bunch of us there. And it's hard for me to remember too much.

A: Let's talk about the grocery business in Youngstown years ago when you first got started.

G: All right. Some were larger than Mom and Pop stores, and they were all doing real good through and up till. . . . Well, the Grocers' Association is what kept them all together. We looked after each other, and we helped each other.

A: This is an interesting article that you've just shown me. The NRGs, which is the National Retail Grocers

Association, is it still in existence?

G: Oh no. It was at that time the largest publication for grocers in the entire area.

A: In the issue of December 1961, there's a story called, "Who is Afraid About Kroger and A&P."

G: That's right. We had Kroger below us and A&P above us, and we were in our little place. They minded their own business.

A: Here is a picture showing the Kroger sign just below your sign; Cousin Grove United Market.

G: Yes.

A: And the A&P was up on the corner of Midlothian.

G: Yes. Both of them were gone, and we were still there as long as we wanted to stay. Our main item when we first got started. . . . I went to all these conventions and I learned an awful lot about the food business entirely. I attended food basket arrangements from the big outfits. I learned an awful lot about the meats, and I learned about making lunch meat. That is actually what kept us booming there. We were busy at all times. We had our barbecue chickens, and we made special roasts for customers, and they could walk in any time and find food to take home with them for their dinner.

A: You were doing something then that a lot of the big markets are now getting into.

G: Yes. It seems like old times. Things are reversing as far as 50 years back right now. They're doing baking and cooking, and we've done that many, many, years ago.

A: You had samples, I see, of giving lunch meat.

G: Oh yes, everybody came in and got some lunch meat.

A: Offering samples was good business.

G: When we got started, our main item was a chicken loaf business. We found ourselves with 25 chickens on a Saturday night, and we didn't know what to do with them. So I says to myself, "Why not cook them up and see what can happen." Well, I cooked these chickens up and I boned them up and put them in a loaf. There was no salt, pepper, preservatives, and it made about the biggest hit that we had all the time we were in business. We got the chicken loaf started and we made a ham and egg loaf the same way; ham, bacon and pork, ham

and cheese, and roast beef. We cooked up as many as 25 loaves a day and that is more meat than a big market would sell. We kept them moving all the time.

A: At that time you had a small supermarket?

G: Yes, you would call it very small, but we had everything there that you could possibly want.

A: In this article here in 1961, it says there were about 300 food stores in Youngstown?

G: That's about right.

A: About what percentage of those were Jewish owned?

G: Well, the percentage was big, I'd say 80 percent.

A: An article here in the Vindicator, March 25th, 1979, and you were called the South Side Pioneer. You were one of the first businesses up in the South Side.

G: That's right.

A: It says in 1936 you helped organize the Union Cooperative on Williamson Avenue.

G: That was a very, very big item. This business was mainly by the Italian merchants in this territory, and I was the first Jew that they would accept, then we got others. I was their treasure for quite a long time. We were able to meet almost anybody's competition because this was our wholesale house. We got a lot of merchandise that some of the stores that weren't affiliated with us couldn't get. That enabled us to do a much better job.

A: The co-op bought from the manufactures?

G: Yes, the union co-op was what it was called at the time. Then by me getting in there, I got about six more Jewish grocers in, and it was very helpful.

A: Molly Greenblatt just sat down.

G: That's right.

A: She was part of the business your entire married life?

G: Let me tell you a little story about Molly Greenblatt. I ran the meat department, and she was at the cashier's desk. We came to work at 8:00 in the morning, sometimes earlier. She went up front and I stayed in the meat department. Sometimes we didn't see one another till our way home. I'd bring her lunch, that's the way

the thing ran. You know, of all the years that we've been in business, no person that ever had any dealings with us as far as being our customer ever went hungry.

A: All of your customers you mean?

G: Any of our customers that had no food, or lost a job, or anything. Even if they didn't come back to buy from us, they always had milk and bread or just a little food that they needed for their kids.

A: Did most of them stay faithful?

G: We didn't lose one-twentieth of one percent when we closed our store. Yes, we have a very beautiful relationship.

A: This 1979 article says that many of your former delivery boys have become executives.

G: Executives. Yes, everyone of them have done very, very well. Our last boy now is working for the Kessler Products Company, and he's got a real good job. You know, he calls us at least once a month and says that we've been his mother and father. We had one fellow that worked for us years back that became president of the Youngstown Building Materials. We were very lucky with boys.

A: What year did you close up?

G: We closed up in 1980.

A: You were 52 years in the grocery business at that time.

G: Yes, about three to four years ago I went to work for Nemenz on route 224 to teach them how to make our homemade lunch meats. I got them started real well.

We were so stretched out with knowledge. These other fellows, they were pretty wealthy. We were in any business that you could think about. We had cordials through World War I. We had Canadian Club, and this was all legitimate. We bought the syrups. We were the first ones to be able to buy denatured alcohol by the drum, and all of it was measured. It went to the bootleggers because a lot of them bottled it up. We done very well that way, too.

A: How did you get to join these men? Let's go back to when you came from New York. You said that you didn't start school then?

G: No, I had no schooling, I went to the 4th grade. Then, as I told you, we had parents that needed help. So, my

first job, at the age of nine, was on a huckster's wagon for \$1 a day. That kept our family eating pretty good. That was the first thing that I'd done. Through the years I have done anything that you could possibly think of to make a buck. Then when we were growing up, as I told you, I worked for Westinghouse. I worked for the first ones to go through the countries and take pictures for enlargements. They called themselves the Chicago Portrait Company. We would take these pictures and put them in a beautiful frame, and if you'd ask these people \$100 dollars for that thing, they wouldn't hesitate at all. That was about one of the first jobs I had done. This was all on commission.

A: You were a teenager at that time?

G: Oh yes, I was a teenager and doing. . . . I've made it through the countries. I made as high as \$30 a day as a teenager. You see, when you're desperate, you have got to find something to do to make a dollar. Then I got hooked up with these other fellows. They were in business for many years before they came to me. We got into just about anything that was available. We were selling storm doors and windows and just. . . . Well, we did very well.

A: Then, what year did you two get married?

G: We got married in 1920. She worked harder in that business than I did. She was there from morning to night. I was available to walk out anytime I wanted to because I had a butcher, and we just worked together real perfect.

A: How did you come to Youngstown?

G: Brother Hyman thought I was living too high in Pittsburgh, and he thought I should slow down. He just suggested it, so I took him up on it. As I told you, we came to Youngstown and we bought this very, very good meat business.

A: Was Hyman a partner?

G: Hyman was a partner, and I could tell you stories about that, too. Hyman was a partner and, as I told you, we were going down fast. These fellows were after all of our investment. Hyman came to me one day, and he says, "Sam, I'm afraid if you go broke they'll take my business away from me, too." So I says to him, "Hyman, I want you to meet me by St. Elizabeth's Hospital." I wrote out a paper and I sold him my end of the business for a dollar. So I'm out and he is still. . . . He was afraid he'd lose his business.

A: When did he open up his store he had on Parmalea?

G: On Parmalea, he opened up in 1927.

A: Before you came to Youngstown?

G: Oh yes.

A: He already had his store. He was established.

G: We never had any problems, but Youngstown is where I had my big problems. When these fellows that I bought out tried to put me out of business quickly. . . .

A: Thank you for the interview.

G: Oh, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW