

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Area Jewish Project

Personal Experience

O.H. 1123

JOSEPH HILL

Interviewed

by

Irving Ozer

on

March 18, 1988

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSTIY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Area Jewish Project

INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH HILL

INTERVIEWER: Irving Ozer

SUBJECT: Youngstown area, friends, and wife Naomi

DATE: March 18, 1988

O: This is Irving Ozer and I'm sitting here with Joseph Hill who is going to share some of his memories of his wife Neoma. Joe, you already made an oral history for Youngstown State University. Is that right?

H: Yes.

O: Okay, so today we can talk a little bit about Neoma. When did you meet Neoma?

H: We met about 1925. At that time, we were organizing a Hebrew Club, a cultural club. We became friends and then in 1929, we got married. Neoma started teaching Hebrew while she was still a high school student. She was seventeen or eighteen years old. She was teaching part time at the old Temple Emmanuel or Wood Street, wherever they met; the Youngstown people who instituted it at the time. When she was seventeen or eighteen, she was teaching part time.

O: Okay, good. Go ahead.

H: After she left, it was probably 1925 or 1926 that she graduated from high school, or maybe 1922.

O: 1922, I think. She was the last class on Wick Avenue, wasn't she, or was she before that?

H: At age eighteen, after she graduated from high school, she left for college at Athens University.

O: Ohio University.

H: Ohio University.

O: At Athens.

H: Athens, yes. And she took up kindergarten teaching and when she came back, she taught at Lincoln School. I remember Lincoln, there may be other schools too, for about two years; a full time kindergarten teacher. And then, at that time, we got married and married teachers, women particularly, could not teach in the Public School System. So she applied herself more to Hebrew teaching, gave more time to it. She spent many years at Temple Emmanuel. From there, she went to the Anshe-Emeth Temple and at that time, the Hebrew Schools had four afternoon classes, instead of twice a week as we have now, and she was at the Anshe-Emeth Temple for a long time.

O: What Rabbi did she teach under?

H: She taught under Rabbi... A little fellow.

O: Abraham?

H: No. That was Rabbi Waldon? Rabbi Asnier. But before that, for many years... He was originally from Cleveland. I don't remember his name.

O: Okay, not that important.

H: And the Anshe-Emeth, in addition to teaching Hebrew full time, including in those days even Saturday mornings and Sunday mornings... The Anshe-Emeth engaged a cantor by the name of Paul Discount who was a well known musician. Discount was trying to organize a Chorale Society in Youngstown and also organize a choir for the Anshe-Emeth Temple. Someone told him about Neoma, that she was a very fine soloist, an alto...No.

O: A soprano.

H: Soprano. So he called the house, I remember, he called on Wick Oval, Okzersky's house, and came over and I was there. He came over, spent an evening, and he asked Neoma to sing for him. I remember that quite well. After two or three minutes of listening, he said, "That's enough, you're the one I want. That's is who I was looking for." Eventually, he organized a Chorale Society of fifty or sixty voices and they gave concerts at the Stambaugh Auditorium and she was his soloist. They met, the Chorale Society, they used to meet at the old Jewish Center up at Bryson Street, on the third floor. But because of Discount's ability and reputation, everybody cooperated. In addition to that, she

became his soloist at the Anshe-Emeth Choir. Every Friday night, he composed a special V-Shomru number. He also, for the high holidays, he composed some very high musical numbers. One of them, I remember, the U-Veom Simchaschem. And people used to stay in Temple just to listen to the choir and listen to her singing. And that kept up for many years. Paul Discount left and Ernie Glottasman succeeded him.

O: Before you get on to Ernie though, Discount went to Hollywood, didn't he?

H: He went to Hollywood.

O: He wrote music for movies?

H: He was an arranger for... I forgotten the movie industry, national known musician. Ernie Glottasman succeeded Discount and he continued Discount's music.

O: She was in the choir.

H: She continued being in the choir.

O: He had been in the choir, Ernie, hadn't he?

H: No.

O: I thought he did.

H: Ernie was a cantor who had a full time position somewhere in Minneapolis, I believe. There was an opening here, when Discount left. He came here and he became the cantor of the Anshe-Emeth and they continued for many years. They also continued with the Chorale Society until that fell apart, dissolved. While that was going on, the Anshe-Emeth had quite a large membership. The Rodef Sholom began growing fast and many of the Anshe-Emeth people went to the Rodef Sholom.

Due to some reorganization up there, Neoma left the Anshe-Emeth and took with her a number of students, because they stayed at the Anshe-Emeth because she was their teacher. By the way, she used to say that within three months, she was able to get the kids to read the Siddur. Now she was the only teacher that had her certificate. She knew how to teach and she loved her work. She used to estimate, that during her career as a Hebrew teacher, that she probably started about 2,000 kids in Hebrew School over a period of forty some years. She was asked to teach Hebrew by Dr. Burkowitz, to teach Hebrew at the Rodef Sholom Temple. Dr. Burkowitz came in to see how she was doing and after class was over, he called her into his study and he said to her, "From now on, you are on your own, you do whatever

er you want. I'm fully satisfied that you can do a better job than any teacher I've ever seen." I remember she came home and said that this was the first time that she had a Rabbi tell her that. She felt very good about that. She felt towards that she was kindly towards Burkowitz. And since the Rodef Sholom did not have a full time Hebrew School at the time, there was a shortage of teachers, they needed a part time teacher at the Emmanuel. They asked her to teach there during the week. So during the week she was teaching part-time at the Emmanuel and on Sundays at the Rodef Sholom Temple. By the way, when the Anshe-Emeth asked her whether she would be interested in teaching in their congregation on a full time basis, and this was in the early 1930's, she was still at the Emmanuel. She asked her father, who was a vice president and founder of Emmanuel whether she should make the change and he encouraged her to do it. He thought that the future, since all our Jewish people are moving away from that area anyhow, she'd be better off and she probably could make a better contribution teaching up there.

O: At Rodef Sholom?

H: No, at Anshe-Emeth. That was in the early 1930's.

O: Oh, I see.

H: Rodef Sholom at that time, the Anshe-Emeth, rather, had a financial problem. During the Depression years, their membership shrunk and they still had heavy mortgages and they no money. The chairman of the educational committee was Mr. Dave Olshansky. He called Neoma up before they engaged her, and asked her whether she would teach on a full time basis for \$50 a month. That was all they could pay. The Public School System, where she started teaching kindergarten, she was making \$1,050 a year, full time basis. Money at that time was very valuable. Even \$50 at that time was nothing to sneeze at. David was a baby.

O: That's your son.

H: My son, yes. We used to have part time help in the house, and at that time you could get help in the house for about \$5 a week.

It got to be a question whether she should accept a job or not accept a job. And Mr. Olshonsky said, "You will be doing us a favor if you will accept it. In due time, we'll make it up to you." So she accepted it. The question came up whether she should teach for \$50 or should she stay home and do the housework because we couldn't afford even \$5 a week. So it is better to teach and let somebody else do the housework. And that

worked out fine, very fine.

By the way, the Rabbi was in at the Anshe-Emeth. He was from Cleveland. He was making about \$3,500 a year. His name was Nathan Collins. In addition to Neoma teaching full time, there was Sarah Schwartz. They worked together. And the Anshe-Emeth, at that time, used to engage a full time principal. But they had about 150 kids going to Hebrew School, as the congregation grew. And Nathan Collins, every time before Hanukka and before Purim, would come to the teachers and ask them to rent some kind of a Purim, Hanukka party for the children and the Purim Party for the children. That is to be a treat from the teachers, not from the congregation. Nathan Collins never put in \$1. So it continued until she quit teaching.

O: When?

H: This is 1988. She died in 1973, I think. Probably five years before that. About five years...

O: 1968?

H: 1967, 1968, and she missed it. Because teaching Hebrew was part of her life. She had a few youngsters who came to her privately for private lessons. One of them, I remember was Bernard Schwartz's son. Bernard wanted him to get more Hebrew than he was getting even in the Hebrew School at the time. In addition to all these activities, she was involved and so was I, and many others in a Hebrew Club. That was really the finest club. There was plenty people coming. The finest club in Youngstown. We used to meet every second week in private homes. It would attract twenty-five to thirty or forty people, and we had Hebrew classes for what we called, for beginners and post beginners. We would also start about 8:00 and about 9:00 or 9:15, we would invite speakers. That's not too easy to engage speakers every second week. And I remember I was asked to assume a chairmanship program to see what we could do about straightening this out and a young Rabbi came to Youngstown who's name was Arnold Turetsky at the Ohav Tzedek Temple. I believe he was still single when he came here. I called him up and we had a committee meeting. Teachers, Neoma, Sarah Schwartz, and I believe Sol Newman. They decided Adult Education they should study the Avot; the ethics of our fathers. I called up Turetsky and asked him whether he would be interested and he said to me, "Pirkeavot, I'm a Pirkeavot Specialist." And he was. He gave us a lecture every second week, he would come down well prepared to deliver a lecture and that kept up for two or three years until he was married and they had small children and he could not

continue. But while he was around, we would get in to private homes, twenty-five or thirty people, many times, forty people.

O: Who were some of the people who were involved?

H: In the Hebrew School?

O: No, the Hebrew Club.

H: The Hebrew Club?

O: Just of the top of your head.

H: Norris Golomb, Sol Newman, Rabbi Brockman, Sarah Swartz, Neoma, Principals of the Anshe-Emeth, all these. But the teaching of Hebrew even at the Hebrew Club, Beatrice Newman, a student, she would come for I don't know who, either Neoma's or Sarah Swartz's class and many others. And that was quite an asset to the unit. The Rabbi's always cooperated. Now where do we go from here?

O: I would like to ask you, for instance, who was in your group when you were dating, and going out together? Where did you go and what did you do before you were married?

H: Harry Bassn, Leon Dunn, Marv Mader, that's all I had.

O: And how long did you go together before you were married?

H: About two or three years.

O: Where were you married, in Youngstown? Where did you get married?

H: Oh, that was a scandale.

O: It was?

H: Yes.

O: Tell us.

H: Oh, I don't know. Mr. Lewis Ozersky didn't have any money at the time. He was already down and out. For him to marry off a daughter, was almost an impossibility at the time. Whether we were right or wrong I do not know. We were probably wrong. We did not consult. We knew the circumstances. We did not consult with Neoma's parents. So one day, we said, "Well, we will just go into Cleveland and get married. We'll make it a point not to tell anybody anything." And we took a

train excursion from Youngstown to Cleveland for \$1.25 round trip or so. Neoma and Joseph Hill, Ruth Ozersky and Harry Gibber, the four of us went down to Cleveland and we went down to the Jewish Center, asking without an appointment, asking for Rabbi Goldman. Solomon Goldman later became President of the Zionists Organization of America but he was a personal friend of her father, Mr. Ozersky. Without knowing that he is a personal friend, we told him that he is a personal friend, who we are, that maybe he would give us fifteen minutes. Well there was school going on and he was busy and we had no appointment. "Oh, sure sure, your an Ozersky, I'll see what I can do." And he called up a Rabbi on Fifty Street. Is it in Cleveland, where all the Jewish people used to live around.

O: 55th.

H: 105th.

O: Yes, 105th.

H: A Rabbi Epstein, a Hungarian Rabbi, who had no position at the time. A Rabbi with a beard, a strictly Orthodox Rabbi. We later found out that he was the greatest authority, probably in the state of Ohio, on Jewish divorces. And Rabbi Goldman called him up and he said, "Yes. He'd take care of us." So we came down to his place, which wasn't too far from the Jewish Center and he being a strictly Orthodox Rabbi had to have a Minyan of Man. This was in the midst of the delicatessen places. So he sent down somebody and they broke up a poker game in the back and he created a Miniea. It was funny but, I don't know, right or wrong, I don't know. A bride has to have a...

O: What's that called?

H: A headcover.

O: A headcover... I can't think of the name.

O: I don't know the name of that either.

H: We didn't have it. We had nothing. So they used a towel to cover her head. And we got married. We gave them some money.

H: A Sheitel?

O: No, a Sheitel is a wig. I don't know. We'll find out.

H: And then we went out and we had lunch some place and we called Joe Altrshunfer, an uncle who lived in Cleveland. And Joe Altrshunfer, who had the nastiest temper

of anybody that we've ever known and he was mad. He said, "You're getting married in Cleveland and you didn't call me?" And he was right. We didn't call him, we didn't call anybody. And then he decided, "Well, O.K. we'll keep peace." he said, "Well, we're going to a Kosher restaurant some place later in the afternoon, and his treat." So we went to a Kosher restaurant and within five minutes as we sat at the table, a fight was going on between the chef and some of his helpers in the kitchen. We were not far away from the kitchen. They started yelling at each other and throwing dishes, breaking dishes and everything else. After dinner we got to go to the railroad station in time to get back home. That's how we got married. So Ann Altshuler says quite often, "One of them eloped." And I keep quiet. She doesn't know which one it was. It's me.

O: Where did you used to go when you were dating? What did you used to do? Go to movies, go to dances? What did you do?

H: No, not dancing. Movies and concerts. I remember attending one musical concert at Stambaugh Auditorium. I remember a debate between Clarence Darrow and Rabbi I. E. Philo at Stambaugh Auditorium on the subject, 'Is man a machine'. A formal debate and Dr. I. E. Philo lost the debate. It was judged by professionals. From Youngstown, Clarence Darrow went to Cleveland and in debating Rabbi Brickner and in Cleveland, Darrow lost.

O: In Youngstown, did you go to Idora Park. What did you do when you went out socially? What kind of things?

H: This was in the 20's. I did not have a car. So we had to do the best we could.

O: Street Cars, Buses?

H: Yes. Idora Park. Yes we used to go to Idora Park in the summertime. I remember going boating at Mill Creek Park.

O: Canoe or Rowboat?

H: A Rowboat. Canoe. Social life: Neoma was still teaching. Actually, she was teaching in Public School. Kindergarten. Talking about when she was still single. She was also teaching part time Hebrew in the afternoon at the Emanuel. The only thing that she bought from her income, and she had two incomes, I remember some kind of Victrola, a big one, which was an expensive unit. The rest of the money, she gave to her father because he needed it. She had no savings. "Pop needs money". She was not a saver anyhow. When she was

single, she didn't need it. When we got married, your grandfather gave her some money.

O: He knew about it?

H: We received a gift from a Rabbi Silve from Chicago who used to be a principal at the Youngstown Hebrew Institute. He roomed and boarded at your parents' home and from here, he left for Chicago and organized a Yeshiva out there. He sent us an expensive gift. Some sort of stand or something that we kept for many years.

O: Where was your first home?

H: Mine?

O: Your first marriage, where you set up housekeeping.

H: We rented a three or four room apartment on the East side on Bruce Street.

O: That was Pearl.

H: On Pearl Street.

O: And then, how long did you stay there?

H: Probably six months, maybe to a year.

O: Then where did you go?

H: Then we moved to Thornton Avenue. I just reminded myself. I think those buildings are still there, two apartment buildings; Thornton and Wick. Down the hill on the right side, there used to be two brick apartments and we paid rent. I don't remember how much it was. Oscar Alturlar, at that time, for a short while. I'm talking about the Depression years, we run into the Depression and Oscar lived with us for a short while. We had an empty room up there. I didn't have any money, the rent was too high so I went to the landlord, I think his name was a Mr. Kimowitz, he had a business down on East Federal Street and he had big motives to sell those buildings. I asked him to reduce the rent and he said if you can't pay that much then you'll have to move, so we moved to your house.

O: Wick Oval.

H: On, Wick Oval.

O: And then?

H: Then, that's when I got into the insurance business. And Neoma started teaching Hebrew. Oh, yes, I forgot,

from your house, I believe, we moved to Benita Avenue and we stayed there, I don't know, it was still the Depression years. I think Roosevelt came into office, still things were beginning to improve. We lived there and had a five room apartment for \$18 a month. Then when they raised the rent to \$22 a month, we bought a house on New York Avenue for \$4,000 and moved there. We stayed there for quite a while.

O: Okay, tell us a little now about Neoma's last days. What happened that week.

H: She didn't feel well. She was always overweight and she had a gland condition. And she became a diabetic. For many years, she was under the care of Dr. Philip Giber. I remember that she had to take a bus downtown to go to Girard to his office. We always timed it. Take the bus, I didn't have a car yet, take the bus about 1:00 p.m. or something, and go down to the bus station downtown, go to Girard, go to his office, and come back and run out, and then go to teach Hebrew and take a bus home. And the buses, in those days, by the way, would run every five or ten minutes.

O: So what happened at the end?

H: Well, she gave up teaching because of a physical condition. I think it got on her nerves and so on. She gave up teaching and she almost had a nervous breakdown but she got out of it. My business began to improve substantially. We were getting along very well. We didn't have to ask anybody for anything. I bought a car.

O: By the way, Rose Lewin got into the insurance business because of me in 1936 and she had a car. I figured on business, she used to drive a lot. She worked with me for nineteen years. If it were not for me they would not have hired her at all. It was understood, that I was... The district manager at the time said because of her limited education, he wasn't sure... Today she couldn't get into it because of her limited education at that time. He had full authority to make a decision and we got along pretty good. She made a living.

O: Let's jump up to the last week or two of Neoma's life.

H: Before she died?

O: Yes. How did this happen?

H: We drove to Arlington, Virginia for Passover. She wasn't feeling too well but she snapped out of it because she wanted to be with the girls.

O: With the girls?

H: With Mildred and Miriam. We were supposed to have a Passover, Seder at Mildred's house.

O: I thought you were at David's house.

H: No.

O: Okay, I'm sorry. Go ahead.

H: No we were going to Arlington, Virginia...No definitely not at David's house. That was the second time that we were going to Mildred's and Miriam's house. They called in friends for the Seder, actually, I think at one Seder they had a young man who was around doing something there. It was Bessie Post's son. I would conduct the Seder, and I drove. We were much younger at the time and I'd make it in four or five hours, six hours. Shortly before getting into Arlington, Neoma said she wasn't feeling well. She was not feeling well at all and I didn't know what to do about it. So I drove to the house. Miriam was home, Mildred...Miriam put her to bed right away and kept her in bed for overnight and the next day, she said she's not getting any better, she's actually getting worse, so we put her in the hospital. The following day she was gone.

O: What was it?

H: Combination of circumstances, I think. Basically, I believe it was a massive heartattack. I believe that I called you. We did not have a plot for any arrangements at the Children of Israel Cemetery, where the Ozersky family is buried. I asked you to make arrangements. Rabbi Schechter delivered the Eulogy and Cantor Klein, I believe officiated.

O: Klein?

H: Klein. Actually about two weeks before, there was some sort of program at the Jewish Community Center, I don't remember exactly what it is, but cantor Klein was one of the entertainers and so was Neoma, they were both in the group. Now at that time, we were in the process of changing membership. She liked Rabbi Berkowitz and we were not members yet. We had just joined. We were from traditional background and so on. Cantor Ehrlich, I didn't know him too well. Rabbi Schechter was a personal friend of mine, a very close friend, there was standing room only. Definitely standing room only. About three hundred contributions were made in her memory from people from every walk of life, the names, which I still have in a box. James Ross contributed \$1000 to the Jewish National Fund, in her memory.

O: She was active in that, wasn't she?

H: In what?

O: JNF.

H: She had no time. Sure, she was emotionally involved. Now, something interesting happened later. Several months later, we were putting up a tombstone at the Children of Israel Cemetary. At that time, I was already in the Rodef Sholom and I asked Cantor Ehrlich and Rabbi Berkowitz to officiate it. They came in. It was supposed to be on a Sunday, I don't remember when it was, 11:00 in the morning, an unveiling ceremony and Berkowitz was supposed to be in charge. 10:00 at night 1973, I remember that, I had a telephone call from Mr. Nathan Marks, pre-resident of the Children of Israel. He said, "I see in the paper that you're having an unveiling. Didn't you know that Rabbi Berkowitz is not permitted in our cemetery, and didn't you know that according to our rules and regulations, you have to use our cantor." It's 10:00 at night, Saturday night. I said, "Mr. Marks, I did not know. What am I supposed to do now?" He said, "I'm telling you as president of the congregation, that these two people cannot appear in our cemetery tomorrow." David Myson, was standing there and he said to me, "He's looking for a law suit, isn't he." So anyhow, I was with him on the phone for a half hour and I called up Rabbi Harold Brockman, who was their Rabbi, a personal friend. Harold said, "There is a war going on in Israel in 1973--I think it was probably in the fall that we put in the tombstone--There is a war going on in Israel and here they are fighting around about who is to appear on the cemetery and who is not to appear on the cemetery. And he said, "I'll call Nate Marks." Well he didn't because Nate Marks was his boss and I said to David, "We are going. I'm not making any changes. If they want a policeman at the gate. The answer is no. "Who's is going to be at the gate?" Henry Adler. He's a personal friend of mine. He's a vice president treasurer or something. I said, "I'll punch him in the nose." Anyhow, the following morning nothing happened, absolutely nothing. Nobody from the Children of Israel showed up, but Berkowitz was quite surprised. He said, "I have officiated many occasion such as this, but I've never seen so many people." I don't remember how many, probably a couple hundred people showed up.

O: Okay, we'll call it quits.

H: All right. I wasn't prepared for this. If I was prepared, I would have done work.

O: Thanks a lot. We appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW