

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Project

Youngstown Area

O. H. 564

HELEN SHAGRIN

Interviewed

by

Irving Ozer

on

August 4, 1986

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: HELEN SHAGRIN

INTERVIEWER: Irving Ozer

SUBJECT:

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O: This is an interview with Helen Shagrin for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Youngstown Area Jewish Project, by Irving Ozer, on August 4, 1986.

Would you tell us where you were born and when you were born?

S: My recollections go back very, very far. I can give account of the fact that the Shagrins' were one of the pillars of Youngstown Jewry. I was born in 1908 and have come through the years of the changes in Youngstown. I've gone to college away from town, traveled away from town, but always came back to town to teach, and I've remained in this city all my life.

O: Were you born in Youngstown?

S: Yes.

O: What part of town?

S: We lived on the north side. At that time the Jewish people were divided into areas. The more liberal thinking Jews lived on the north side; the more Orthodox Jews lived on the east and south sides. The north side was where both the Conservative and Reform temples were built.

O: What temples were in existence when you were growing up?

S: I imagine Ohev Tzedek was, but I know very little about that. I am definitely aware of Rodef Sholom, Children of Israel on Summit Avenue, and on Rayen Avenue was Temple Emmanuel.

Later, many of the Children of Israel Temple members broke away and El Emeth merged. Temple Emmanuel later in our Youngstown history merged with Anshe Emeth. El Emeth was located on Fairgreen and Fifth Avenues. Rodef Sholom moved from Lincoln to their present building .

O: Where did you grow up in Youngstown?

S: On the north side.

O: Where did you live?

S: I lived at 357 Cluster Avenue--born and raised there until both of my parents died.

O: You went to Elm Street School?

S: Yes, I went to Elm Street School and Rayen School. I went one year to the old Rayen School before I attended the new one on Benita Avenue.

O: You were members of Rodef Sholom Temple?

S: No, I always belonged to the Conservative temple, El Emeth, which is Anshe Emeth now. My father was a charter member who broke from the Children of Israel "shul" to build the Anshe Emeth so that his children and grandchildren could have Sunday school and American-Jewish education.

O: Can you give me some recollections of your life in those days? Was it gracious living?

S: We were always middle class. We always had a fondness of our fellow neighbor so we lived in a mixed neighborhood.

O: Who were some of the Jewish families?

S: The Giber's, Sheinberg's, Goldberg's, S. Amil B. Friedman, Louis Klafter, Henry Rigelhaupt, Florence White, a granddaughter of one of the Strouss' who lived on Grant Street.

O: Was there any friction between Jew and Gentile in those days in the community?

S: Maybe among the boys that played together on our streets.

O: How did that manifest itself?

S: I think the name shinie was sometimes used in referring to Jewish boys.

O: Were there fights?

S: No.

O: So there wasn't any real overt anti-Semitism?

S: There was never any. As far as our family was concerned we always had beautiful relationships. Most of our neighbors were care-loving, concerned friends.

O: Do you have any particular fond memories of growing up on Custer Avenue?

S: The greatest thrill to us kids was that we were allowed to pedal the player piano and hear the music that came from it.

O: What were things like in Youngstown during that time? Where did you go? What did you do for fun?

S: Our lives were rather restricted in those days. We respected the laws that were laid down by the family.

O: What business was your dad in?

S: He was a butcher on East Federal Street. My dad sold kosher and nonkosher meat. My uncle Max catered only to the non-Jewish trade. From the window of my father's store when the circus came to town we would watch the parade go by.

O: Where did the circus perform?

S: Wright's Field, but they always had the parade downtown in the morning and the children would get out of school if their folks wrote an excuse for them to see it.

It was the circus from Barnum & Bailey. It came in the morning and I always remember the sound of that large calliöpe that announced the end of the circus.

O: Where did they move to?

S: Wright's Field was way out on West Federal Street. As a teacher, I took my children to the circus grounds when I taught deaf youngsters. It was held someplace on the east side. I remember one time it rained so hard that there was nothing but a field of mud. The circus people took bales of hay that they fed their animals to make a path so that we could get into the arena to watch it.

O: Where did your parents come from?

S: We originally came from a part of Europe that was Austria-Hungary--Czechoslovakia after World War II. Our families left the country because of mandatory military service. We feel our family escaped to France and took on the name

Joulipons because they hid or were protected by families of that name. Our family differs on definite facts.

O: When did they arrive in the United States?

S: That I do not know exactly, but about 1885 they settled in Youngstown, Ohio.

O: What brought them to Youngstown?

S: I imagine migration and knowing it might be a better life.

O: Was your family married in Europe or did they meet in the United States?

S: In the U. S. All of the men in our family married American girls.

O: Did they consider themselves of German derivation?

S: No. We considered ourselves American-Jews of a Conservative type. I say Conservative because my dad was always interested in Jewish education for his children and always was active in temple activities, though we kept a kosher home and observed many of the religious laws.

During the influenza epidemic our Jewish community died right and left. Nobody was brave enough to go into those homes and make funeral arrangements. My dad did, and my mother would say that she was afraid something would happen to him. She would say, "Think, you have four children." His reply was, "It is because I am thinking of my four children that I have the ability to go into those homes."

O: You were speaking of pillars of the community before we started taping. I think you mentioned twelve of them.

S: We had about twelve basic families. I remember the Frankle's were a large, staunch family, both Max and Mose. The Schwartz's were in the saloon business. The Wilkoff's were strong. Our family was strong, and also the Fish family and Sig Yarmy. These were the ones that went to the Children of Israel, broke from Children of Israel, and were some of the twelve charter members of Anshe Emeth.

From the Rodef Sholom families I know of the Hartzell's, Strouss', Guggenheim's, Wolff's, Goldsmith's, Wikoff's, and Printz's.

From Temple Emmanuel I remember well the Ozersky family. The one I remember most is Louis Ozersky, whose heart they said was like an elastic band that stretched to touch everybody.

- O: Can you shift back now to the First World War? What was the impact of that on Youngstown and the Jews of Youngstown?
- S: That was back in 1918. I remember the indiscriminating enlistment of men and from that war they found out that many of the brilliant persons should not have entered the war as infantrymen where their lives were lost.
- O: Let's talk about the Depression. What impact did that have?
- S: I was most fortunate. By that time I was already through school and I had a position in the Youngstown public schools. I think I can remember that the most that the board of education ever made as a sacrifice was a cut of 20% of our salaries throughout all the years of the Depression. They borrowed, they loaned, they used script, but they paid us.
- O: How about the rest of your family and neighbors?
- S: Fortunately, I think between the very rich and the very poor our family has been a narrow, thin layer between the two. We never truthfully once said that we had to sacrifice. We weren't allowed the freedoms that many of the comfortable families could have in allowances, et cetera. I had worked from the time I was fourteen years of age either helping a neighbor-friend in their grocery store or at the the Five-and-Ten store on Saturday that paid a salary of \$1.50 which then was acceptable. I really can't say I ever suffered, but so many people I know did. We always had food, shelter, and clothing. Many came to our house begging and mother always fed them.
- O: In terms of the community did it make a great impact, did you realize what was going on?
- S: Yes. At the time of the Depression I taught at Covington School, and in our whitewashed basement our principal, Mr. Saunders, put up a table and children who came to school without breakfast, we made porridge, oatmeal, to feed them. I do remember the children came to school in very shabby, ragged clothing with no shoes or shoes that had been beaten up. Many of us teachers would bring bags and bundles of clothing to distribute to the children.
- O: When did you first become aware of what was going on in Hitler's Germany? What reaction did you and your family and friends have? Did you believe it?
- S: 1937 was the first time while traveling in Europe I was really conscious of what was happening. Although we felt safe, Europeans talked of "War Clouds". Franklin Roosevelt interrupted a radio program to announce that Pearl Harbor had been

bombed [Sunday, December 7, 1941]. To me it was very frightening because I had an uncle whose son, a graduate from West Point, was stationed at Pearl Harbor the day of the bombing. I started a war diary and I kept it almost daily. It will refute today anyone who says there wasn't a war on Jews or concentration camps. In this diary, I wrote my reactions to what was happening in Europe.

- O: Can you go back and put a pulse on Jews in Youngstown in 1937, 1938, the time that Hitler started working his program of eradicating Jews?
- S: I observed then as I do today that until it hits you personally you are sympathetic, empathetic, but you are not involved.
- O: Would you talk a little more about your childhood?
- S: Some trivia I remember happened in my mother's home. Like taking the goose my mother had "shupted" (hand fed by pushing corn down its throat) to the kosher butcher shop and checking with the butcher, Mr. Rosenberg, to see if it was kosher.

We "schlugged kapura" with live chickens swung around our heads prior to their demise as a High Holiday rite. Later this practice was given up and putting money in our charity boxes called "Pushkas" was used instead.

Mother made her own dough to be stretched on our kitchen table. It was thin enough and big enough to be filled with batter or to be filled with fruits and nuts before rolling with the tablecloth, the sheathes, into long rolls, thus making strudel.

On our back porch crocks of cucumbers, spices, and dill were filled and with a heavy plate covering the top of the crock, the cucumbers turned into delicious dill pickles. Crocks filled with cabbage also stood on our back porch to be turned into sauerkraut. Apples were put in the cabbage to enrich its taste.

On our neighbor's back porch a pump was installed which enabled all of us to pump "well water" for drinking.

In our cellar, prior to Passover, beets were fermented to turn into borsch to be used during this holiday. Some families made wine for Passover.

We girls had household duties to do such as: scrubbing the linoleum bathroom and kitchen floors, changing the bedding weekly, setting the table for dinner and supper. Dinner came at noon. We had to wash the dishes after the meals and this included all pots and pans used in their preparation.

I remember helping with the family washing. After separating the clothes, they were scrubbed on a scrubbing board which was a corrugated washboard, then put in a tub of hot water, there to boil and become clean. Skillfully, with poles, we fished them out of the boiling hot water and put them into a washtub of cold water for rinsing. Onto this tub a hand wringer was attached and as much excess water as could be was wrung out of the clothes. We hung lines outdoors and with a clothespin bag tied around our waists hung our wash out on the lines. Lines in our cellar were used in winter.

I was taught to crochet, embroider, cross-stitch, knit, play bridge, and if there was any idle time, to read. During World War I, scarves were knit for our soldiers serving overseas. The yarn was being provided by the Red Cross and distributed through the grade schools.

That we take piano lessons was a must. The discipline of practicing wasn't so strongly put in force.

Our home was kept warm by a furnace. We had a chute leading into our cellar and down this chute Mr. Carl Waldman shoveled the bituminous coal by the ton which we had ordered. Later since this coal made so much smoke we bought the hard coal. At night the furnace was banked so that we would not awaken in a cold house.

We had brass brackets on our walls to hold our gas mantles which were used for lighting. Very delicately did we have to handle them for they broke so easily. When electricity came into being these brackets were transformed to hold electric bulbs; then center ceiling chandeliers replaced these brackets.

Children in a family that contracted either measles, chicken pox, diphtheria, scarlet fever were quarantined for the duration of the disease. The Board of Health tacked an orange quarantine sign on our front door. Other child members not having the disease were boarded out to friends during this period.

During the flu epidemic of 1918, bandages in which garlic had been wrapped were encased around our throats to prevent our catching this deadly virus.

Home was the place for mothers to give birth to their offspring, and from where departed loved ones left this world. Wreaths with large purple ribbons hung on the doors of Christians where there was death. If it was in our street, neighborhood children went from door to door to collect money for flowers for the mourners' family.

In school, nickels and dimes were collected so that a statue

to Volney Rogers could be erected in honor of his doing so very much to preserve the natural beauty and to make school children cognizant of the value of Mill Creek Park for all citizens. His niece, Ada Rogers, I had as an English teacher in Rayen High School years and years later.

The Lily Pond, the Goldfish Pond, Daffodil Meadows, Dogwood Ridge, Sulphur Water Springs, vast violet and bluebell fields, were a few of the attractions noted on our drives through the park, not to forget Lanterman Falls, the Old Mill, and Steamship Rock that one passes just before turning on Silver Bridge.

I have some very vivid memories of either what I lived through or was hearsay. That goes back to maybe 1913 or 1915. At that time Campbell was East Youngstown and our Jewish business started from Federal Street coming up to Youngstown. At the time of that year there was a flood, and I very distinctly remember that one of my friend's father had his business flooded. In working to save it, he contracted something from which he didn't survive. The Adlers' were the one family that I knew who had no father as young as I. I lost my dad when I was only eleven years old.

I also remember that the last day before the Volsted Act went into effect, liquor could be sold in stores for the last time. Naturally, all the liquor stores surrounding my dad were busy and one of the men from one of the liquor stores came in and delivered to my father two cases of pure, 100% liquor. They were cutting the cases of liquor that they were selling at 100% full proof. Like all business they made what they thought was a legitimate profit.

O: Do you mean they were watering it down?

S: Yes. Those were the early ones.

Later in life, the more pleasant experiences I remember, for 35¢ my dad, mother, and we four kids went to the movies. It was 10¢ for adults, a nickel for children, and since Seymour was under six years old, he was admitted for free. For a nickel we were treated with a large ice cream cone after the show.

O: Where did you go to these movies?

S: Some of the theaters on Federal Street were the Dome, the Bijou, Orpheurn, Liberty Strand, Capitol, Princess Burlesque, Park Theatre.

O: Where was the Dome?

S: Near the corner of Hazel Street. Later in my life, around the corner from the Dome Theatre was a place that was used by the Jewish women for the USO for entertaining the soldiers from Camp Reynolds. These boys came in droves from Camp Reynolds. They were stationed there before being shipped out overseas or elsewhere. It was Hazel Kauffman, who was the chairman of that committee. All the Jewish girls would go down and serve the food, dance with boys, and be listening companions.

O: Where else did you go to get ice cream after movie?

S: Across from what is now Powers Auditorium was the most beautiful ice cream parlor owned by Harry Burts. Louis Davidow's dad, Martin Friedman, had one of the loveliest ice cream parlors adjoining the Palace Theatre. After the show, you could walk in there to get refreshments. Those were the other two downtown parlors.

For live entertainment I remember the Stroller's. Sophie Levine, Lillian Schermer, Doris Shagrin, Sam and Dave Farkas, were some in this theatrical group. They gave mostly musicals that first group. Later there was the "Temple Follies" sponsored by Rodef Sholom Temple where the Farkas boys, Bob Cohen and Fritzi Philo were very outstanding performers. Later there was also Shy Locksin who put on the Ohev Tzedek musicals that came out every year for twelve or fourteen years. That was a huge success.

O: When you were young where did you used to go for fun?

S: Truthfully, my only fun was with the girls my age on our street.

O: As you grew up did you date and go places? If so where did the fellows take the girls and how did they take them?

S: I remember the Young People's League, from El Emeth Temple, which had men and women in it and was very active. They provided entertainment for the young Jewish people. On Elm Street there was a ballroom. Every Yom Kippur holiday ended by a dance given by one of the temples.

O: In those days how did you get from place to place?

S: We walked. We also had buses and children could have bus passes for \$1 a month, which also included the right to use the pass to go to Hebrew school at night. I went to Elm Street School on the corner of Grant and Elm for Hebrew. Mr. Brown taught me.

O: That predated the Hebrew Institute on Elm Street?

S: Yes. I was only ten when I went there.

O: What made you decide to go into teaching?

S: They said that I was a born teacher.

O: Where did you take your training?

S: It was called the Cleveland School of Education. At that time, most of our Youngstown Jewish girls, if they did go to school after graduating high school, went to Kent for teacher's training. The tuition was \$100 for six weeks, room and board, books, and tuition. There was no income tax to pay then so everything was relative.

O: Did this Cleveland school expand?

S: Yes, the year after I was there it became affiliated with Western Reserve. It was a normal school that trained teachers for the Cleveland school system. After two years I was granted my teacher's certificate for teaching. I graduated in January and came home that weekend. I went down to the Board of Education to apply for a position and a week later I started teaching.

O: Where?

S: My first assignment was at Jackson School, southeast side of Youngstown. It was 1928. I think I was preceded by several Jewish teachers who asked to be transferred. That time of history in Youngstown, you will recall, had a revival of the Ku Klux Klan era.

O: Was that the hot bed of the Ku Klux Klan, Jackson?

S: (No response)

O: What effect did anti-Semitism take?

S: I was always well-received. We has some Jewish girls that if they wanted to have a job did not put down anything to what religion they belonged. If they put down something for nationality they put down American, not Jewish. One of my good friends even had to deny her Judaism to get a job. She had to absolutely never refer to anything Jewish where she worked.

O: What about personal harassment, was there any?

S: For me, none.

O: For the kids?

- S: No. Marvin Itts, the Millstones', and the Moranz's know more about that for they lived in that area.
- O: You talked earlier about traveling sponsored by the university, what was that?
- S: I had no ties at the time so my summers were free for me to do whatever I wanted. To broaden my horizons I signed up at different universities that offered credit if I would take the summer to travel with them or study on their campuses. I started in 1950 with my first trip to Mexico. A group from Kent, Ohio in privately owned cars went down to Mexico. With New York State University in 1958, I studied six weeks in Israel. I studied with Pittsburgh University and Wisconsin University.
- O: Any events with this travel during the summer?
- S: The Sunday that we landed in Mexico was the Sunday that President Truman declared that we were at war with Korea. One of the first trips that I took after World War II was to Israel, when the country was only eight years old.
- O: Let's talk a little bit about World War II. Is there anything that sticks in your mind about your experiences or impressions about the war in Europe or Hitler?
- S: I have vivid impressions. I was living on Wick Avenue renting a room because I taught at Harding School and was taking classes at Youngstown University in the evenings and during the summers.

On December 7, 1941, I made my first entry into my war diary and rereading it today brings many recollections. I became an Air Raid Warden while living at the Stoneleigh Tea Room on Wick Avenue, which included inspecting all those lovely big homes of our prominent Youngstown people--Schaff's, Pollack's, Arms'. I took first aid at Covington School; I was a nurse aid in St. Elizabeth Hospital; I tried to be a blood donor but they once thought that the blood they took from me would have to be returned so that ended that good endeavor. We teachers were asked to do the interviewing for food stamps, gas stamps and other rationing information.

- O: When did you go to Harding?
- S: After I taught at Covington, I was asked to teach there by Kitty Edmonds. When I went to Harding it was at the outbreak of the World War.
- O: How did the Jewish population and population in general react to the news coming in about Hitler's plan to destroy the Jews? Did we believe it?

- S: We were sympathetic, but not emotionally involved until he gained control of the Third Reich.
- O: How did we react to the domino process that went on with Austria, France, and so on? Were we worried, scared?
- S: Prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, I was so involved with going back to school that I didn't spend too much emotional time concerning myself with what was really going down. I knew about it, but my own commitments were very involved.
- O: You mentioned something about specialized teaching, teaching the deaf and that sort of thing.
- S: After twenty years of teaching in the public schools, I had come in contact with the assistant superintendent of Youngstown schools, Mary Haddow. She and I were on the same committee to choose an English book for the Youngstown school system. From our contacts she realized that I had attained as much interest to the level I was teaching. Special education was then coming into Youngstown. By that I mean instead of sending children who were deaf to state institutions we were having area schools in which hard of hearing or deaf children could live at home to get the social atmosphere of a family life and just be brought on the weekdays to the Youngstown school area where they were taught.
- O: Where were these classes being held?
- S: I started at Princeton teaching just hard of hearing children. Then because I was certified only for elementary schools I was sent over to Adams School. In-service training I got until I completed all the necessary requirements to become a certified teacher of the deaf. It was twenty years of hearing and twenty years with the exceptional child that my career was based on. When I started teaching hard of hearing and deaf youngsters it was like beginning a whole new career for myself.
- O: Where did you do most of your teaching of the deaf?
- S: We were confined to Princeton School for junior high, which was then moved to Wilson School for junior and senior high school and elementary grades were held first at Bennett School and then moved to Adams, where it stayed until classes were moved to Stambaugh.
- O: In teaching regular students and hearing impaired students which would you regard as the best experience?
- S: We were pioneering with the hearing impaired. We had nothing to go on but our own initiative, our own common sense, and

our own intelligence. Many of the things we did would make fascinating stories unto themselves. Then we were very narrow-minded. Most of us were not trained in the manual language and those who were weren't allowed to teach or use it. As a result we found teaching to be much more difficult, because without the manual language the child found it harder to comprehend and learn from only oral speech. The Board of Education came out with certain rules and regulations which restricted our initiative.

O: Over the years you must have gotten to know quite a few unusual and remarkable people in Youngstown. Can you talk about some of them?

S: Marvin Itts, who rose from "rags to riches". My sister Ruth Shagrin Elder who was vice-president of the Women's League and first Jewish president of Women's Federation of Youngstown. Marion Roth, a community and a Jewish leader. Phil Levy, our city treasurer; Sidney Rigerhaupt, an elected judge; Clarence Strauss and Senator Maurice Lipscher; Doris Bardman, an outstanding humanitarian.

Braille and Binding Books for the Blind was a project that Mrs. Julius Kahn brought to Youngstown. It later became a civic project and other organizations or groups came a definite day each week to make these books. Our group went on Monday mornings. I joined it after my retirement and stayed with it until our workshop was moved to Canfield. Irma Garson nee Guggenheim, Evelyn Wilkoff Felsenthal, and Rena Livingston Strauss were in that very early group.

The International Institute meeting at the old Wood Street School met twice a week at night in that building, manned by Jewish volunteers to teach English to the foreign-born so that they could be educated sufficiently to get their citizenship papers. This was around 1918. Selma Kornhauser was one of these volunteers. Later the institute was housed on Walnut Street in a dilapidated old house just below the railroad tracks which are no more. From there it was moved to Lincoln Avenue where Nettie Simon, one-time secretary and office manager of Rodef Sholom, Julia Sauber and I continued to go one evening a week to teach English and conversation to the foreign-born who were coming to our city from many, many European countries.

The Council of Jewish Women beside initiating the above two mentioned projects, were the first group of women to have a place for elderly people to drop in to relax, to have a piece of cake, a cup of coffee, and to talk. How often they met to do this I cannot remember, but the meeting place was a basement room in the Mural Room on Front Street. Three of the first volunteers were Bertha Wolff (Mrs. Seth

Wolff), Mrs. Lena Rosenblum (Mrs. A. M. Rosenblum), and Ruth Shagrín Elder (Mrs. Irwin Elder). From this first recognition that older folk need social contact the Council of Jewish Women have expanded their work to be included with the Youngstown Jewish Federation's Project of Horizons Unlimited, a citywide group of older citizens that meet every or almost every other Monday morning for a day of fun and food and frolic!! Buses pick them up and see that they return home safely. When some members of this group in their tenth decade namely Regina Kline, Bella Ostash, and Abe Levy, still turn out for this socialability, this project certainly can be deemed most successful.

One Wednesday the Golden Agers also meet for a similar program.

- O: Did you know Clarence Strauss personally?
- S: Yes. He combined the 32 Jewish agencies who were contributing individually into one, collective group of charity giving. He founded the Jewish Federation of Youngstown. I was made captain of professional people. He was really loved by the community and his death saddened the entire city. His name in memory enriched the YSU Library greatly.
- O: Of all the people that you can remember, Jewish or non-Jewish, who was the most outstanding?
- S: I can't even begin to answer that.
- O: Comparing Youngstown today to the olden days what kinds of feelings do you have?
- S: I have feelings of sadness. I hope Youngstown will be revitalized. I see buildings being boarded up and torn down and nothing replacing them. There is a feeling of sadness that so many fine working people have fared so badly.
- O: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW