

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rayen School Project

Student Experience

O. H. 32

MRS. CAROLYN COHN

Interviewed

by

Mark Connelly

on

December 5, 1974

CAROLYN H. COHN

Mrs. Carolyn H. Cohn, of 2321 Selma Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio, is currently a Realtor Associate with Max Baumgarten Realtors. She is married to Stanley Cohn and has two children, Steven, 22, and Brian, 20.

From 1945 to 1948 Mrs. Cohn attended Rayen High School, which is the subject of this interview. She recalls classmates and teachers and speaks of sorority and fraternity functions. While at Rayen Mrs. Cohn was a member of the A'Cappella Choir and was active in other school activities, in addition to being on the Honor Roll.

After leaving Rayen, she attended the Connecticut College for Women, now a coeducational school. Upon graduation, she worked for one year at Abraham and Strauss, in New York. She returned to Youngstown in 1953 and was married.

Presently, Mrs. Cohn has been active in the March of Dimes Drive and is president of the Harding School PTA. She is an active member of Rodef Sholom Temple and is president of the Youngstown section of the National Council of Jewish Women. She enjoys golfing in her free time.

SILVIA PALLOTTA
AUGUST 2, 1977

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: MRS. CAROLYN COHN

INTERVIEWER: Mark Connelly

SUBJECT: Student Experience

DATE December 5, 1974

MC: This is an interview with Mrs. Carolyn Cohn for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on the Rayen School. It's being done by Mark Connelly at Mrs. Cohn's residence at 2321 Selma Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio. The date is December 5, 1974 and it's approximately 10:15 a.m.

MC: Mrs. Cohn, would you please talk a little bit about your background?

CC: Well, I'm a native Youngstowner. I've always lived on the North Side. I went to Harding, Hayes, and Rayen. I went to college in the east and after graduation from college, I worked in New York for a short period. Then I married a Youngstowner and returned to Ohio.

MC: Were your parents native Youngstowners?

CC: No, my father moved here. He was born in Pittsburgh and he moved here before he went to college at Penn State. My mother was born in Liverpool, England, and came to this country when she was four years old. She grew up in Harrisburg and met my father at college.

MC: I see. So both your parents have a college background.

CC: No. Mother didn't go to college. She met Dad at a fraternity affair at college.

MC: Where are your father's roots or his family roots?

- CC: His parents were born in Russia. I have my grandfather's naturalization papers. I don't know exactly when they came to the United States, but Dad was the second oldest of five boys and they were all born in the United States. As a matter of fact several of them went to Rayen after the family moved to Youngstown.
- MC: How many brothers and sisters do you have?
- CC: I have one sister.
- MC: Did she go to Rayen?
- CC: Yes. She graduated from Rayen four years before I did.
- MC: Where did you live in Youngstown?
- CC: We lived on the corner of Ohio and Dennick Avenues, just a half a block from Rayen.
- MC: Did you walk to school every day?
- CC: Yes, I walked every day to school.
- MC: What was the biggest change you noticed in going from Hayes to Rayen?
- CC: Well, Rayen was a big school. The halls were large. There was the excitement of being with students who were older. You didn't have that experience at Hayes. Hayes was an adjustment, a terrific adjustment from Harding, but there was more excitement in going to Rayen because you really felt grown up. To get to Rayen was the big goal.
- MC: Did you hear a lot about Rayen before you went there?
- CC: Yes.
- MC: About how many students were in your freshman class? Was it a large class or small class?
- CC: I don't know how many students were in the freshman class because many of the ninth graders stayed over at Hayes. In our graduating class we had about two hundred and fifty students. There were many students who stayed at Hayes for ninth grade because they would drop out of school when they were sixteen.

If you lived on one side of Crandall Park, you went to Rayen for ninth grade and if you lived on the other side, you stayed at Hayes. I'm not sure of the division, but it was something like that. There were a lot of kids who stayed at Hayes until they were able to drop out of school. They never went to Rayen.

- MC: Were most of the ninth graders at Hayes the people that were not planning to further their education?
- CC: I would say there was a large percentage of them, but there were quite a few who stayed at Hayes because of the boundary division for ninth grade.
- MC: How many grades did Harding have?
- CC: Kindergarten through sixth.
- MC: Okay. During what years did you attend the Rayen School?
- CC: I started in January of 1945. I was a mid-year student. After three and a half years I graduated. This was in June of 1948. I made up the half year.
- MC: Did many students graduate after three and a half years?
- CC: Yes, there were quite a few of us, especially those of us who wanted to go on to college because you could only get into Eastern schools in September. So of the students that I started with at Harding, I would say about half of us accelerated. I carried five majors in order to do that and I went to summer school at South during one summer.
- MC: Was this your own decision?
- CC: Oh, I would say it was an accepted pattern in those days to graduate earlier if possible. I think during the war many students graduated in August. They were able to go to summer school and graduate in August instead of waiting until the next January. Graduating in mid-year was a problem.
- MC: Could anybody do this that wanted to or were there certain qualifications?
- CC: That I can't truthfully answer. I know there wasn't any problem with my meeting the requirements for graduation. I imagine we did have to have approval for this program because I know I had to carry five majors most of the way through Rayen.
- MC: What were your grades like?
- CC: Well, I was able to graduate on the honor roll, which was a big deal. To be on the honor roll you had to be in the upper ten percent of your class academicwise. I never had any problem.
- MC: What was the student body at Rayen like, when you were there? Was it what you would call a "cohesive" student body?

- CC: Very much so. There were different divisions. There was a division as to what sorority or what fraternity you belonged. There were regional divisions too, such as the group we had from Brier Hill. There was a certain feeling. I think everyone kind of--this is a trite expression--"knew their place," but cooperated with each other.
- MC: What sorority did you belong to?
- CC I belonged to a Jewish sorority, Phi Gamma.
- MC: You said that everybody knew their place.
- CC: Well, socially, to get into a sorority or a fraternity was a big deal. There was a black balling system, which was very prevalent at that time. If you were from a certain background, you got into a certain Jewish or a Gentile sorority or fraternity. They didn't cross social lines too much, but yet I imagine it was very harmful to certain people. I know, specifically, that there were many individuals who were hurt by this. I was very secure in it because I was accepted. There was cooperation between the different groups. When there were social affairs of the different sororities or fraternities, we supported each other.
- MC: So you went to other sororities' functions.
- CC: Oh, yes. Yes. Definitely. We supported each other's affairs. That was our big social life.
- MC: Did you support both the Gentile and Jewish sororities?
- CC: Absolutely. There wasn't any inter-dating, but there was a lot of support for each other's groups.
- MC: Could you theorize what would have happened to a Jewish girl who went out with a Gentile boy, especially if she was in a sorority?
- CC: Well, I personally found that rather restricted. I don't know of any cases. I imagine the boys had more experience with it than the girls. I think we kept pretty much to our own groups. There was some inter-dating, but it was very limited and I didn't necessarily approve of not inter-dating and didn't continue with it in college at all. That was the situation at home.
- MC: You mean the family did not allow inter-dating?
- CC: No. My family really didn't care. It was the peer pressure, I guess. There were other families that cared, but mine didn't particularly care.

- MC: Was there hazing in that sort of activity?
- CC: We had many weeks of pledging and were made to do ridiculous things. They were just so embarrassing. We would have Hell Week and we'd have to dress strangely and face the problem of being expelled from school. It was against the state laws in Ohio to have any sorority or fraternity hazing in the public schools.
- MC: How did the faculty and administration look upon this sort of activity?
- CC: I never had a run-in with any of them, but I guess there were some who did. There were, occasionally, situations where students were called into the office and told that they couldn't come to school dressed like that. We would have our hair in little pigtailed and we'd have to carry boxes of candy so that if any superior wanted candy or gum we had to have it for them. We wore different colored socks. We really looked silly.
- MC: Was anybody ever expelled for this to your knowledge?
- CC: I don't recall that anyone was.
- MC: What percentage of students, out of the whole student body, belonged to the sororities or fraternities? Did most students belong to them?
- CC: No. I would say about ten or twenty percent belonged to them.
- MC: You said there were two Jewish sororities. What was the point of division? Why did some girls join one sorority and other girls join the other sorority?
- CC: Well, the sorority I belonged to was made up exclusively of Rayen students. The other sorority took students from South. They were affiliated more with the Jewish Community Center and ours was not. Our sorority met in each other's homes. It was eventually taken over by the Jewish Center and then disbanded.
- MC: Were you involved in any other extracurricular activities at the high school?
- CC: Yes. I was in the A'Cappella Choir and Girls Octet. From these groups I have the most cherished memories of extracurricular activities at Rayen.
- Mr. Nischwitz was the leader of the choir and quite an interesting respected individual in the Rayen community. The A'Cappella Choir was well known throughout the area and had many singing engagements. When I got into the Octet, my senior year, we sang before various groups.

- MC: Did you perform only in this area or did you go to other cities?
- CC: I think the A'Cappella choir did participate in other cities. Maybe they went to competitions in other cities, but I don't recall too much of that. I remember that on Easter we used to sing at the sunrise service at the church. We also sang for school functions and one year they did a program with the symphony. I don't remember participating in that. We gave concerts in the spring and in the winter and they received more support than any function ever conducted at Rayen.
- MC: What do you recall most about the faculty at Rayen?
- CC: Oh, I remember individuals like Miss Seager, the Latin teacher. I took three years of Latin and I took one of my achievement tests for college in Latin. She spent some extra time preparing me for it. She was a wonderful teacher, but she frightened everyone.
- MC: Did she frighten you?
- CC: Yes, I would say she did. Before I took the achievement test I was a little discouraged when she said to me, after having had three years of Latin, "Carolyn, I don't see how you're going to pass it."
- By fear, she would get the performance out of us. When we had an assignment for translation, she would go up and down the aisle. You had to stand at the side of your desk and you had a few seconds to start your translation. If you didn't start it immediately, she would say, "Sit down," and mark a zero in her book.
- MC: Would you consider Latin one of your favorite subjects at the Rayen School?
- CC: Latin was considered a must. It was the basis for good vocabulary. It was the basis for all the Romance languages and if you wanted to continue in higher education, then Latin was a requirement. I didn't object to taking Latin.
- MC: What was your favorite subject?
- CC: I don't think I had a favorite subject.
- MC: Who was your favorite teacher?
- CC: I remember certain teachers. I never actually felt that there was a teacher to whom I could have gone to discuss any problems that I might have had; I think we went to Mr. Tear if there was a problem.

- MC: The principal.
- CC: Yes. We went to the principal.
- MC: What was your relationship with him? How did you view Mr. Tear?
- CC: We viewed him with respect. I felt that he was really interested in maintaining the fine academic standing that Rayen had. Rayen gave us a good education and there was a good spirit. I think he was responsible for creating this fine atmosphere under which we all studied and participated.
- MC: You talk about the good spirit at Rayen. Did you ever feel superior because you were going to the Rayen School and not to some other school?
- CC: We felt that we were getting a good education, and that we were going to one of the finest high schools in the state of Ohio. We felt that way because alumnae who had gone east to college had no trouble getting into the eastern schools, the Ivy League Schools. We thought we were getting an excellent education.
- MC: Now, when you went off to college, did this prove to be true?
- CC: No.
- MC: It didn't. Why not?
- CC: It was a rude awakening.
- MC: In what way?
- CC: Well, I had never had trouble in English in high school. However, it was expected that college freshmen would have a rude awakening when they took freshman English. I remember my first few papers had some grammatical mistakes, which were sloppy habits that I had that were never corrected in high school. Taking my first college exam was a new experience, too. I had never seen a blue book and had never been required to write a theme.
- MC: Were most of your tests in high school objective type tests?
- CC: Yes. Definitely.
- MC: Did you ever have Miss Keck for English?
- CC: No.

MC: Miss Boynton?

CC: Yes. I had Miss Boynton.

MC: What's your opinion of Miss Boynton?

CC: Well I thought she was just charming and a very good teacher. I had her for senior English.

When I went away to college, I couldn't have developed all of those bad habits just over the summer. I acquired all these sloppy habits in theme writing because I didn't have experience at Rayen in theme writing. However, there were a lot of things that I knew about grammar that children today don't know.

Well, during my junior year I had a very interesting experience. That was when a lot of the fellows came back from the service. They were all in my junior English class.

MC: How did you feel about this?

CC: It was kind of exciting to see some of these older fellows in school.

MC: How did the teachers generally react to them?

CC: I think they were very tolerant of them. It was very hard for them to come back and try to complete their education. I can remember several of these men. One is a very prominent doctor in town now. I don't remember him as being a particularly outstanding student.

The teachers at Rayen realized that it was difficult for these boys to get back into their studies. It took quite a lot of perseverance for those who had not completed their high school education to come back. Many of them then went on and became professional people. Generally, the teachers weren't too hard on them.

MC: When you were leaving Rayen, did you have regrets?

CC: Oh it was very sad. I think the whole Rayen experience had been a happy one and a very secure one. Going to Rayen was a pattern that I grew up into. I was afraid of going off to college in the east and not knowing what was going to happen. I had to leave all my friends. None of them were going east to college. Most of those who were going to college went to Ohio State.

MC: What college in the east did you go to?

CC: I went to Connecticut College for Women, which is now a coeducational college

- MC: What one thing stands out in your mind most about the Rayen School?
- CC: I don't know. It was such a happy time. The A'Cappella choir meant a great deal to me.
- MC: What one thing would you have changed about the school if you could? What perturbed you the most?
- CC: I'm sorry. I can't truthfully say that anything did. I found the whole experience very enjoyable. We didn't question things in those days. We just accepted them. I stayed very involved in the schools because my children went through Harding, Hayes, and Rayen. I can see the changes that have occurred over the years.
- MC: Are you still involved with Rayen High School?
- CC: Well, our youngest son just graduated last June, so I was involved until last June. I was even on a parents advisory committee there.
- MC: Do you think the Rayen High School which exists now is the same Rayen that you went to?
- CC: Oh, no way. It's changing every year. The student body is changing. The faculty's changing. The whole idea of public education is changing.
- MC: When you look back at your high school days and see how different it is today, how do you feel?
- CC: I think public education has to change for the majority. You have to program for the majority of students. I do feel badly that in some ways the children aren't getting the basics in education that we did.
- One good thing is that they're being given an opportunity to express themselves more than we were. I mean we just couldn't express ourselves. We sat there and, if you talked back to a teacher or you got into a problem with a teacher, that was it.
- MC: In your experience, did anybody ever talk back to a teacher? Do you remember?
- CC: Oh yes, there were some who did. They were sent to the office, and it was a terrible thing if anybody did that.
- I had an experience at Rayen in which a math teacher had a grudge against me. I was a very good student. This math teacher had had, in class, a cousin of mine, who was

not very studious and somehow or other, she associated me with this cousin. I would remind her of my cousin when I did little things like kick my leg.

She'd be standing at the board with her back to the class and I had a front row seat. She'd say, "Carolyn," and she would accuse me of cheating. I was the most innocent sensitive child and this had a traumatic effect. She would come over to my desk and accuse me of cheating. It got so bad that my mother had to go up to school. That teacher gave me a D, but the grade was removed from my record because there was just no way that I could communicate with her. I had never had a D before. I was an A and B student.

MC: Well, who did your mother talk to?

CC: Mr. Tear.

MC: Did he talk to the teacher or did he just remove the grade without even consulting her?

CC: I don't know how it proceeded, but the grade was removed. I didn't need the course for graduation. It was an advanced math class.

MC: How did you generally do in math?

CC: I did very well. Math is one of my aptitudes.

MC: Did this teacher continue teaching for a long time?

CC: Oh, yes. She was a fixture at Rayen. She was elderly when I was a student there and I don't know how much longer she taught. She gave some of the students a marvellous background in math. She was a good teacher but if she classified you in a certain way, there was no way that you could get her to change her opinion of you.

MC: Did some of your friends get along well with her?

CC: Oh, yes. There were other students in the class that were her little pets. There were loads of teachers' pets in those days.

MC: Did girls in your sorority get along with her?

CC: I'm sure they did. She just happened to have a thing about me.

MC: When you were going to school, were you aware of the fact that there was an article in the charter of the Rayen School which stated that there could be no Jewish teachers at the Rayen School?

CC: No.

MC: If you would have been aware of it, at the time, what would have been your reaction then?

CC: Well, it's very hard to differentiate what my reaction would have been. Then, I think I would have said, "Well, okay."

MC: What would be your reaction now?

CC: I'd think, "Oh, what an unfair stipulation to question someone's teaching ability because of their religion."

MC: Did you find that the fact that you were Jewish hinder you in your relationship with the teachers and the administration?

CC: No. It didn't hinder me at all because of course, there was a large Jewish population on this side of town and very prominent Jewish families sent their children to Rayen. There was never any problem, as far as that went.

MC: Do you think if the Jewish community would have been aware of this stipulation in the charter they would have taken action to end it?

CC: No. I think the Jewish community had many other problems at that time to contend with especially with displaced persons from Germany. I don't think that changing the charter would have been one of their major thrusts at that point.

MC: Are there any other things you want to say about the school?

CC: Oh, I'm sure everyone's told you about the ramp and selling ramp tickets.

MC: No.

CC: Oh. Well, you know that in the Rayen building there are ramps from the second and third floors. I went home for lunch because I just lived a short distance away from school and until the bell rang, we would congregate in the mornings and at lunchtime, by the ramp. As a neophyte in the sorority, I had to be at the ramp early to see my superiors and to give them candy and gum. It was just so jammed by the ramp.

One of the traditions was that incoming freshmen were told by upperclassmen that they couldn't get near the ramp. Freshmen were told they couldn't use the ramp unless they bought ramp tickets. The upperclassmen would try to sell the tickets. I never saw anybody actually sell any tickets. It was kind of a traditional thing that freshmen were asked to buy tickets for the elevator and the swimming pool, which were nonexistent. There was a great school spirit at Rayen. We all were excited to be participating in the games and events.

MC: In what year did you join your sorority?

CC: I joined the sorority when I entered Rayen in January.

MC: Did most girls join during their first year there?

CC: Yes. Sorority functions made up your whole social life. You were anxious to get in because each of the sororities and fraternities had affairs which were big social events.

MC: Did the students who were not in sororities or fraternities attend any functions of that type?

CC: Yes. It was our social life. We had ad books and everybody would buy ads, one liners, for their boyfriend or girlfriend. They'd go to these affairs. There was a traditional Thanksgiving Dance and there was a traditional Christmas Dance.

MC: Did you buy ads in the Rayen Record?

CC: No, no. As far as the state of Ohio was concerned, sororities and fraternities were nonexistent, so we couldn't put our ads in the school newspaper. I don't think you'll see an ad in there. We put ads in our dance books. We sold ads in those to businessmen and to the students. Then we'd sell tickets to our affairs.

MC: Is there anything else you would like to say?

CC: I'm sure everybody has told you about the traditional Rayen-South game. I can remember going to that as a little girl. It was on Thanksgiving and there wasn't anything else you would do on that day.

MC: Do you recall your graduation day?

CC: I remember sitting up there in the front row because I was on the honor roll. I don't remember the speaker. I remember the week end. I remember certain things about the parties. We went to the homes of some of the kids in Brier Hill.

There were a lot of parties there. I remember bacca-laureate and walking out of the church after. I think it was held at the Trinity Church downtown. It was an exciting time.

MC: You mentioned going to Brier Hill parties. Were there girls in your sorority that lived in Brier Hill?

CC: No. There were no Jews living in Brier Hill. It was a predominantly Italian section. They were participating with those of us who lived up around here and we were very friendly.

MC: Was that the first time that you ever intermixed with the Brier Hill group?

CC: Oh no. When I went from Harding to Hayes, not only was I with blacks for the first time, but I was with a lot of the kids from Brier Hill. They were great and we got along fine.

There was never any problem at Rayen but there was always a problem at Hayes because the junior high age group creates a lot of problems. Kids are very selfish at that age and they're trying to find their own identity. At Hayes they took this mixture of people and put them in a junior high situation. I had some bad experiences at Hayes. Part of it was due just to the age group.

MC: How would you compare the discipline at Hayes to the discipline at Rayen?

CC: I think that at Hayes they had a larger problem with discipline.

MC: Would you attribute this to the age group also?

CC: Yes, I attribute this to the age group and the mixture of people at that school. Students at Hayes were people who were frightened. We had never been with each other. My friends and I came from our little secure Harding situation and went over to Hayes.

I think some of this is blown out of proportion. I had a knife drawn on me in the locker room by a black girl. The teacher came in and stopped the situation. I became very friendly with this girl later on. I don't know if the girl was ever disciplined or not. Some good friends of mine wrote me poison pen letters. It was the age of the students at Hayes that compelled them to do these things. It never upset me that much.

MC: Did most of this clear up once you reached high school?

CC: Oh, yes. There was none of that in high school. It was just one big, happy group.

MC: What was a popular meeting place for the students?

CC: Benita Drugstore, of course, was at the corner of Benita and Elm Streets. I believe it's still in existence. Everybody used to go down to the drugstore after school and we did a lot of fraternity and sorority hazing there.

As a neophyte or a pledge you were required to spend a certain amount of time there. You just absolutely couldn't get near that place. They used to serve sundaes and ice cream in there. It was a big deal. They had booths and you could eat there after football games or after school. Everybody went to the drugstore.

MC: Did you go to the drugstore often?

CC: Oh, I did for a while because it was convenient when I was living on the North Side. The drugstore began to have a tremendous problem because they couldn't control the crowds. Sometime after I graduated, they stopped letting the students go down to the drugstore. It really became rowdy and uncontrollable. Boys used to shoot crap on the sides there.

MC: Was it the school itself that stopped them from going there?

CC: No, I think the owner of the drugstore stopped them. It was a little store and they couldn't possibly handle the crowd.

MC: Were they ever destructive of the property of the drugstore?

CC: No. I think that after a football game when the crowd would be tremendous, they just let in a few students at a time. It was definitely a popular meeting place.

MC: It was the main meeting place.

CC: Yes, it was the main meeting place.

MC: Okay. Thank you for this interview, Mrs. Cohn.

END OF INTERVIEW