

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Education Project

Jewish Education in Youngstown

O. H. 263

KAROL BERLINER

Interviewed

by

Beth Kurtzweig

on

May 16, 1980

Karol Berliner

Karol Berliner, a native of Youngstown, was born on August 29, 1949. Her parents are Harvey and Mimi Sniderman. She attended local schools and graduated from the Rayen School in 1967. Following graduation she attended Ohio State University until 1968. On June 7, 1970, she married Anthony Berliner and in 1979 gave birth to her first child, Adam.

While growing up in Youngstown, she attended both Sunday school and Hebrew School at Anshe Emeth Temple, which is now El Emeth Temple. After her marriage, she moved to Minnesota and at that time became employed at the Dayton's Department Store. She is still presently employed there.

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INTERVIEWEE: KAROL BERLINER  
INTERVIEWER: Beth Kurtzweig  
SUBJECT: Jewish Education in Youngstown, traditional  
Jewish customs  
DATE: May 16, 1980

K: This is an interview with Karol Berliner for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program by Beth Kurtzweig at the home of Mrs. Sniderman, her mother, on May 16, 1980, at 3:00 p.m.

The first thing I would like you to do is to just tell me a little bit about your family, about how many brothers and sisters you have, something about your parents.

B: Like what?

K: What your parents do, how many brothers and sisters you have?

B: I have three brothers, all younger. My father is in a family-owned business. He's a wholesale grocer and my mother is a housewife.

K: What type of schooling did you have? What kind of schools did you attend?

B: The basic, elementary through high school. I had one year of college.

K: What schools were those here in Youngstown?

B: Harding Elementary, Hayes Junior High, and Rayen High School.

K: Let's put a narrow focus on your Jewish education. Did you come from an environment that was filled with Jewish education?

B: Yes.

K: What kind of exposure did you have?

B: My grandparents came from Russia, the ones who lived in Youngstown, my paternal grandparents, so there was always Yiddish being spoken and Hebrew. They were in temples all the time. As children we remember this. They were pretty religious I suppose.

K: What about holidays and that? Did you come from a family that celebrated the holidays?

B: Oh, yes.

K: Did your parents teach you things about Judaism? What kinds of things did they teach you?

B: I don't think they really taught us anything, just the customs and festivities at the time. They really didn't teach us what they meant, what things signified. We just always knew them. I mean, we just grew up knowing that this is Hanukkah, this is what we do on Hanukkah, but we never really knew why.

K: Was it ever asked?

B: I really don't think so.

K: Is there any holiday or an even when you were a child that sticks vividly out in your mind as far as one of the Jewish holidays?

B: Oh, I suppose it's the same for every child where Hanukkah would be the most memorable because it was always a gift giving holiday. In Sunday school it has always been the dreidel and the games. It was a fun holiday. I don't think we've cared for the solemn holidays.

K: Was your house filled with different religious types of articles such as literature that dealt with the history of the Jews, things like this. Were things readily available in your home?

B: No. There were the mezuzahs at the doors, there was the menorah for Hanukkah, but other than that I don't think so.

K: You had mentioned that you had gone to Sunday school. Can you think back and tell me when did you start going to Sunday school and did you go to Hebrew school? Can you tell me something about that?

- B: I really don't know how old I was when I started Sunday school. I started on the south side when we lived on the south side. I suppose that was Ohev Tzedek that we went to. Then when we moved north, we switched. I'm sure I started very young, the first grade you could.
- K: In comparison to your secular education, would you have been in kindergarten? Would you have been in first grade or you can't remember?
- B: I really can't remember. It's somewhere between kindergarten and first grade.
- K: How long did your education last?
- B: Through confirmation.
- K: Which was?
- B: Comparable to tenth grade I suppose.
- K: Can you think of some of the things that you were taught in the Hebrew school or the Sunday school? Did you attend Hebrew school?
- B: Hebrew school, I think I lasted, maybe, three years, up to my third year and then I quit.
- K: How many days a week was Hebrew school?
- B: I believe it was twice a week, yes.
- K: What were some of the courses that you took? When you think back, what were some of the activities that you had done when you were in Sunday school and Hebrew school?
- B: Well, the one thing that really sticks in my mind is bringing the money every week for the Karen Ami fund. Isn't that unreal? (Laughter) Because they used to yell at us if we forgot it. I mean, if we didn't bring that dime or whatever to contribute, and to think that they would actually mark this down on your report card; that scared us. We didn't want an F in our Karen Ami fund.
- K: Did you ever know what the Karen Ami fund was for?
- B: Not really. You guessed it was probably like the United Way Fund or something like that to help people

less fortunate than yourself.

I can remember when it was time for buying the trees in memory or honor of someone. I remember that. I remember having the Latkes party put on by my sisterhood. I always remembered them having the fruit from the ceiling for Succoth. I do remember, in Sunday school, as we got older, arguing when you're old enough to start questioning, when you want to start questioning, how some of the students would get into arguments with the rabbi and questioning certain things. I remember that.

K: Do you remember any of the questions that they were arguing about?

B: I can't remember the exact questions, but I can remember the gist of what it was. As far as I was concerned, we had a rabbi with a very narrow mind, and people our age, approaching teenage age, were questioning things. We can't believe [things] word for word from the Bible. We look at these stories as what they are, stories, symbolic stories and not actual happenings, and the rabbi didn't see it that way. Like there was really an Adam and an Eve rather than just a story depicting a symbolic picture of the first man and woman. He believed that way and we had a hard time believing that and we used to have arguments going on like that back and forth.

K: What were some of the classes that you took? Did you study a language? Did you study history, comparative religions, or anything like that?

B: In high school?

K: In the Sunday school or the Hebrew school per se?

B: No, no. That's another thing that bothered me as I look back on it--not that I thought about it then, I didn't--why we were not taught anything about other religions; what they believe in. Why is ours different? What made them break away and go into other beliefs? Nothing was ever discussed. The name of Christ was never even mentioned, like the man did not exist. If you said the word, it was terrible. You don't say that word, like they denied there ever was a Christ. When you look back on it, how ridiculous. How can you deny a man who preached nothing but brotherly love and love towards your man? And he was Jewish himself? I couldn't understand why other religions

were not studied. I do remember that we had inner-faith services. As I look back on that now, I don't know if they were really thrilled about having them. It's just that other synagogues were having them and ours just followed. What's the point of having them if you don't get to go into discussion groups and discuss, which there never was. There was just an inner-faith service and that was it.

K: No type of follow-up?

B: Right. I think it would have been great if we could have done it, not on a Friday night, more so at another time when we could break into discussion groups and find out something about the religion. We knew nothing. I still know nothing because I don't think my parents know anything about other religions.

K: Did you ever take any Hebrew classes? Was Hebrew ever offered at your temple?

B: Yes. I went to Hebrew school, I think, for maybe three years, but I quit because at that time none of the girls were having Bat Mitzvahs. I don't think my father even really cared. It was the boys that had to go. They didn't make it interesting. You just read from a book and learned how to write. It's like in any class, you have to keep the interest up. The men were always geared. They had something, the Bar Mitzvah. They had a goal to be learning Hebrew. They got to go up and read the Torah, read their portions. The girls at that time had nothing. I didn't see any goal. I didn't see any purpose in learning it at that time.

K: Did other girls your age in your class feel the same way?

B: Some, yes. Some stayed. Some of them, I think, did have a Bat Mitzvah because other synagogues had them then and then they started them, but I had already quit Hebrew school for several years. So, it was too late, really, for me to go back.

K: You had mentioned something about your reason for quitting was a type of disenchantment or something like that. About the courses, what were with the courses? Were they interesting, or they weren't interesting? Can you elaborate on that a little bit more?

B: I don't know that I remember too much about it, probably because it was so uninteresting. I remember, as of first year, you're learning the language probably like learning English. You're learning the symbols under the letter so you know how to pronounce them all and all you did was write one hundred times in a notebook ah, uh, eh, or bah, buh, beh, (Laughter) or something like that, just a repetition.

The first year was the best. Learning the characters, learning how to read it. I was never much into vocabulary, as far as meaning. You weren't learning it as a language, I don't think. In other words, it wasn't like learning French where you could probably carry on a conversation with someone else. I don't know if you know what I mean. Hebrew, you could only do it with other Jews where French you could speak to anybody that would be learning French. It didn't seem, at that time, to be a very useful language as far as I was concerned. You didn't seem to be learning it to be speaking conversational Hebrew. You were just learning it so you could just read it from a book. I could never see the interest.

K: Let's kind of focus on the teachers themselves, the quality of teachers. Did they have certified teachers? What did you feel about the teachers, the people that were employed to instruct you? Did you feel they were qualified?

B: In Hebrew school I really can't remember. I remember one teacher. He was a teacher at Rayen or one of the schools. I mean, he was a certified teacher who obviously knew I liked him. His name was Mr. Bender. He was also a tennis instructor.

K: Yes, I know who he is. I've heard the name.

B: I think we had his daughter at one time too, for Sunday school.

K: As far as the teachers are concerned, did you feel that they were qualified to teach what they were supposed to be teaching, as far as history and that?

B: I don't think so. They were ordinary housewives who were into the temple or into the sisterhood who were willing to donate their time, which was very nice. I mean, they wouldn't donate their time--maybe they were being paid so it was a little easier to donate their time. I really don't know. I don't remember any of the teachers. Does that say something about



it? Obviously, I couldn't have been that impressed if I don't even remember. I do remember one teacher and as far as I know--I don't know what her qualifications were--but it was the only interesting year that I had and that was Mrs. Schwartz. It was Glen Schwartz's mother. I believe it was his mother. That was the year--I think it was fifth grade--that we learned all about Jewish customs, and supposedly what they meant. Why you break the glass at the wedding ceremony, the significance of smooth wedding bands, things like that. That I found fascinating and I enjoyed that part. But for the most part, it seemed like you were just reading. The teacher was just reading through a text-book and kind of made up tests and that's all you did. I don't really remember anything about the teachers.

K: Who ran the Sunday school or the Hebrew school? Who was the administrator of that?

B: I believe Eli Greenfield.

K: What was this person's capacity?

B: I don't know. It was like in midstream. There was another rabbi before them and when he passed away we got Rabbi Schectar, and then I think Mr. Greenfield was brought in later on. I don't even think he was originally from Youngstown. I don't really know much about the man.

K: Do you remember why he was brought in? What was the purpose of his being brought in?

B: Probably to be the educational director. I don't even know if he was. I don't know what else he could have been. (Laughter) I just thought it was just dull and uninteresting until maybe the year that you were being confirmed. Maybe it was because you knew that was it, that was the end, that was the last year. Also, you're getting ready so you're busy. You're getting ready for the confirmation, for your goal too, so it made the year go faster. Just the fact that I can't remember anything about the teachers, they couldn't have been too impressive. They don't leave any impression on me at all.

K: You mentioned confirmation, how old were you when you were confirmed?

B: Sixteen or going on sixteen that year, equivalent to tenth grade.

- K: As far as recommendations were concerned, was there anything at that time that you thought well if they would have done this, I would really be getting more out of it? Did you ever think about what things could have been improved or how the situations could have been improved?
- B: Not at that time I didn't. I thought it was a chore to go to Sunday school. I had never really given it much thought about how it could be improved unless they really got you involved, rather than just a teacher standing there talking from a book. Maybe asking questions to make you think would be an improvement, discussion groups. There was no feedback. I don't think there was much communication between student and teacher, you just sat there, listened to what he had to say, and took a test. I thought that's the way it was. I think it would be improved if you get the students to ask questions. I don't think anything should be so black and white. Get them to question what they've heard. Give them interesting stories. My goodness, Judaism is . . . look how old this religion is! I bet you it would be absolutely fascinating to go back and find out why things became the way they were, the reasons for them, for the way we practice, for the kind of people that we've become today. If they want to keep the youth, the generations . . . you can see it, how it's slipping a little bit. I can. They've got to hold the attention. They've got to do that with the students and I don't think they did. You can see it just from the increasing number of intermarriages.
- K: You were talking about communication, were you aware of any type of communication between parents and the teachers or the parents and the rabbi and the teachers?
- B: None.
- K: There was really no input then?
- B: To tell you the truth, I don't really think my parents cared. You have to go to Sunday school and you will be confirmed and my brothers were going to be Bar Mitzvahed. That was just the way it was. I don't think they ever really had a part in the education, like saying, "Well, what did you learn today and what did you think of it?" We never asked them questions either. Like I said, I think it was a chore. You hated getting up on Sunday morning. We would pretend we were still sleeping. We were hoping we could oversleep so we didn't have to go. That's terrible.

K: What time did Sunday school last from? Do you remember?

B: It was only a couple of hours. Maybe 9:00 to 11:00, 9:00 to 12:00 or 11:30. It was something like that. It wasn't too terrible.

K: What about Hebrew school?

B: That was always after school like 4:00 to 6:00, something like that.

K: As a parent, now that you're a parent, when your child gets older he, I would think, is going to have some type of Jewish education whether it be formal or an informal type of educational environment. What would be the type of things that you would want him to be exposed to?

B: I would really research synagogues before I send my child to one, which I don't think my parents did, to see what kind of an educational program that they provide for him, to make sure of the qualifications of the teachers. What do they do with them? Do they sit and have discussion groups? Do they get groups of people together for parties or something like that? I think that's really important. It just is to do your homework as far as choosing a synagogue. I would want him to attend and make his own decisions, of course, if he wanted to continue. I do want him to know about his religion because I don't think I can help him that much. I don't think he can learn from me, so he's going to have to learn from someone who knows what they're talking about and who does have the education. I think, really, he should know. It's a religion to be proud of, that's why we're around so long. When we're so strong, we should know why. The customs are fascinating and I think he should know about them too, not that it's just a holiday, it's a Day of Atonement, but everything behind us. I feel sorry for him if he's exposed to what I was, because I don't think he would last. I don't think he would go. I know my husband didn't, so it's the same answer.

K: Do you have any final comments that you would like to make as far as what we've been discussing?

B: It sounds like I know what I'm saying, that my Jewish education was really a bummer, and I think it was. I regret that I don't know anything. I regret that people who are interested, other people outside our religion, ask me questions and I can't answer them. They ask

me why we do certain things and I can't tell them, and that's not right. That's a little bit of my own fault too because I'm an adult now. There's a library out there and if I really cared to know, it's available to me. I don't think, like when I was small, that I cared that I was not really given a good enough background to care. I am religious in a way. Maybe I don't follow the customs, but I believe. I believe in Judaism and I certainly am very proud of it. I really wish my education had been more exciting, more challenging. That's it.

END OF INTERVIEW