YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Pyatt Street Market

Life at Pyatt Street Market

O. H. 279

JOSEPH ROHOVSKY

Interviewed

by

Philip Bracy

on

December 17, 1982

JOSEPH ROHOVSKY

Joseph Rohovsky was born in 1929 in Youngstown. He worked as a young boy until after World War II at the Pyatt Street Market. From 1948-1953 he served in the U.S. Army. In 1954 he was married. He has two sons, Rodney and Richard. He received a G.E.D. while on active duty. He attends St. Cyril Catholic Church. Mr. Rohovsky enjoys baseball, boxing, and fishing.

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INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH ROHOVSKY

INTERVIEWER: Philip Bracy

SUBJECT: Pyatt Street Market, growing up at the Market

DATE: December 17, 1982

B: This is Philip Bracy for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program for December 17, 1982. Today I'll be talking about the Pyatt Street Market, which is in Youngstown, Ohio. I'm interviewing Joe Rohovsky concerning the Pyatt Street Market.

First of all, Joe, would you explain a little bit about where you grew up and your background.

R: My name is Joe Rohovsky. I was born in the city of Youngstown on February 10, 1929. I was one of those depression babies. I was born on 1017 Erie Street on the corner of Erie and Pyatt, right across the street from Pyatt Street Market. I attended Garfield Elementary School, from there I attended a parocial school, St. Cyril & Methodius, on Watt and Wood Street. From there I went to James Hillman Junior High School and then on to South High School where I quit school and went into the service.

B: Were you in World War II?

R: I went in in 1948 in the occupation of Germany. I returned in the United States and reenlisted and went overseas to the Korean War. I was in the Second Infantry Division, 23rd regiment.

B: First of all, could you tell me the location of the Pyatt Street Market?

R: The location of the Pyatt Street Market is on the south side. It runs off of Market Street and extends from Lois Court all the way to Erie Street, from Pyatt back to Wayne Avenue. You have all your wholesale distributors there. You have the farmer's market and the retail market.

B: When did you first go to work at the Pyatt Street Market?

R: I think I went to work on the Pyatt Street Market when I was seven years old in the first grade of school. We shelled peas and sold for retail, sold fruits and vegetables, potatoes to the retail customers.

B: Do you know when the market was originally opened?

R: That's before my time. I know it has been there, I guess it was opened in the early 1900's. As far as I know, the Shiptons always managed it. When they sold the Market, just in the past year or year and a half, Mary Kensel, a farmer that's located out in Salem, had controlling interest.

B: What was the importance of the Market? In other words, today you have refrigeration and you have a lot of things, and products in that respect, what was the situation when you went to work in the Market?

R: The situation when we grew up around the Market was that the farmers had an outlet for selling their merchandise to wholesale distributors that were there at the Market at all times. They had market days three days a week, Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays, where they could bring in their goods that were homegrown and sell it to the retailers and you would have your wholesale and retail market right there. One side was wholesale, the other side was retail. There were fresh vegetables and produce, and meat. There was a meat market there, a farmers meat market where they baked the most delicious apricot pies you would ever want to taste. The crust on those pies was delicious. Plus they had doughnuts and a number of consumer smoke sausage and pork. Mainly in the old days, everyone raised pigs in the area and did their own smoking.

B: Was it a seasonal market or was it open year-round?

R: It was seasonal, but they had year-round too on your retail market. You had wholesalers where, say your seasons, mostly dealt in your winter months with roots, like potatoes, onions, carrots, parsnips, turnips, something that would keep all year round, apples.

B: If you were to stand at the beginning of Pyatt Street and look down, could you identify the companies and where they were located?

R: Yes. I probably worked for most of them at one time or another. There were too many retailers and too many farmers there, but at one time I used to know most of the retailers and most of the farmers and the wholesalers. Looking from Market downward, as far back as I could remember, your wholesalers started with Joe Feldman Produce. He started in the old horse and buggy days. There was one horse and a wagon. I think most of us around the neighborhood worked for him because he was the biggest, at that particular time, and he grew. From there next to him was Chevlin Produce. Louie Chevlin was the owner and his son helped him. Then there was Zadel Frank, and he was in partnership with the Sniderman brothers. There was Zadel, he was another wholesaler distributor who went to Pittsburgh every day and brought in a load and disseminated to customers. You had Belkin Produce, which the son, Stanley Belkin, was the salesman. I'd worked for Belkin and Chevlin. Then you had Ohio Fruit, which was Erv Handler at that time. Handler, later on, went out of the produce business into the roofing and siding business and auto seatcover company. Then you had your Youngstown Grape Distributors. Itz Goldberg, he was considered a live wire in Youngstown. He handled more produce than anybody I knew on a wholesale basis. One day he was broke, and the next day he made it. This is how it went in the old days. You had Aaron Cohen, he was about the biggest guy on the Market, I mean in size and weight. Another person, besides Itz Goldberg, who ran the Youngstown Grape Distributors, there's Louie Goldberg, Itz's brother, he had a wholesale, and he hauled from out of Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Hartville, Ohio. He hauled from farms and delivered to A&P Warehouse, which was located on Hubbard Road. They did a terrific business. A&P in the old days was the red rooster in town. They were the biggest supermarket chain in the Youngstown area. Now there are none.

B: What were the locations of the stores? Were they like Krogers?

R: Yes. You had your A&P which was the biggest in town. Then Kroger was second biggest. They had the little corner markets, the green stores. Kroger was noted for painting their stores green at that time, all wooden. They had coffee stacked up. They specialized in coffee and in fruits and vegetables. But as far as groceries, your grocery stores didn't carry that much of a line in those days because everything was fresh. In the

summertime, the Pyatt Street Market used to be so packed, and the traffic was so great, you couldn't even walk on the street. You had to run through traffic and walk, and then on the market. I guess it's about 200 yards long, but you walked elbow to elbow because of the business. They used to come from all over town and out of town, just to do their shopping there.

B: How many people, would you guess roughly, were able to get into that area?

R: I'd say you had, at your peak business, and I've seen it run from 7:00 in the morning until 1:00 in the morning and I'd say you had, in one area, 2,000 people just shopping there at one particular time, or more. Besides this, all the kids who grew up around there, they had jobs. They weren't paying much, maybe a big ten cents or fifteen cents or a quarter all day long, shelling peas, lima beans in quarts, and they got paid maybe one penny a quart or two pennies a quart.

B: How much did you make on a good day for working in the Market?

R: Well, in those days if you made a quarter, you were rich. My brother is about four or five years older; we worked all day unloading a truckload of cantaloupes one time. He made fifteen cents and I made a quarter. You want to see somebody mad, you should have seen my brother.

B: Did we cover most of the major people who were in the market?

R: No. You had, on the farmers side of the market, other wholesalers who didn't have wholesale houses but they were wholesaled from other towns. They had Phil Spalla & Sons, they had Mineo, Mineo & Sons, Sam Mineo. You had Joe Cohen. You had the Scott Brothers from Sharon, Pennsylvania that used to come over. Downtown you had the Roseblum Brothers, which were one of the biggest in the downtown area. You had Al Frank and Sons, which were located on Front Street, where the Halleran Company is now located.

B: Did they operate out of the Pyatt area or were they just supplied through there?

R: They sometimes hauled up to the Market and had a stand there to sell their wares on market days. Plus, you had Matt McCueria, he was a jobber downtown, and his

building is now demolished, but he moved across the street from the Iron G Cigar Company, up by the old Hotel Ohio. You had a lot of farmers from the Hartville area, Kent area. This was their area and they used to bring in truckloads on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. They would sell to the wholesale houses, also the retail customers that came and shopped at the Market. You had Bill Fite, Hardwick, Halloman, Grayber, these are the bigger farmers. You had Mary Kensel. There were so many of them, I could go on all day. There must have been a hundred farmers there that displayed their wares and sold them, and this is in all categories from nuts to apples.

B: How far, in those days, could they truck it in considering there was no refrigeration?

R: They trucked it in from areas, I'd say from 75 miles, because you had Herman Bowdler from Ashtabula who used to come in. You had North Lima, and as far away as Pennsylvania. In Linesville, Pennsylvania you had farmers haul in their wares from Andover, Ohio, but in those days you had the old-time trucks. They could haul maybe a hundred bags of potatoes and this was their limit.

B: How long was the Market open? What was the season for the Market? I know we talked about it being all year, but in real terms, the largest time?

R: The biggest part is when your vegetables come in season, like say early spring. You have your spinach, your greens. All summer, up until the last of September, were all your home-grown stuff, your vegetables, on into October where you have your winter supplies. In the old days people used to buy their winter potatoes; about three or four hundred potatoes would last through the winter. This is what they did. They kept them in their coal cellars where it was cold, or wine cellar, either one.

B: Considering Youngstown had quite a variety of different languages, how did everybody interact?

R: They got along good together up there. Occasionally you had a squabble, but not much. In those days it wasn't the fast life it is today. Everybody walked around at their leisure, stood there three or four hours, talked and shopped, and tried to get the best buys to take home because there wasn't that much money around.

B: You worked in the Market from about when, approximately?

R: Like I said, when I was seven years old. I'm 53 now, so I've been working either in produce or groceries all my life outside of the service time that I had.

B: In working in the Market itself, how long did you work there?

R: Working in the Market, I worked there from seven, when I was seven years old, to about 1936 or 1948. From 1948 I went in the service until 1953. In 1953 I came back and went back to work in the Market.

B: Did the Market decline during that period of time?

R: The retail end of it declined, the wholesale end increased when your supermarkets came into being. In other words, the wholesale houses went in as distributors. They serviced the people, the customers. They serviced the corner stores, they serviced the supermarkets. Once the supermarket got so big, they broke away from these wholesale houses and opened their own. After that, then the business declined a little bit because of the supermarkets. Right now, if the wholesale houses don't have a big supermarket chain or a chain of supermarkets, then they're into the restaurant business now, hotel business. Even now, your big restaurant chain is all a conglomerate.

B: When I was speaking about the language, I didn't mean in terms of problems, per se, but since everybody didn't speak the same language because of the diverse groups present in Youngstown, how did they communicate, was what I was basically trying to get at?

R: In the old days, people, older people, used to speak three, four, five, six and seven languages. My mother came from the old country and she used to speak seven languages.

B: So that wasn't really a problem as far as them trying to bicker, and do whatever they did?

R: No. There was no problem. The only problem was did they have the money to buy it, and they bickered to get it down where they could afford it.

B: Did the Market service some of the downtown establishments and businesses?

R: Yes. They came from all over town. All your retailers used to come up Monday, Wednesday, and Friday to buy from the farmers. They bought from the wholesalers because other than your fresh fruits and vegetables that were in season in this area, you still had to get your Florida oranges, your California oranges, your Iceburg lettuce, which only California knows how to grow, that would keep. Your plums, your peaches, come from the south, your watermelons.

B: Did you personally make any deliveries downtown? Did you service any of the stores?

R: I used to go out of town. I used to go all over and haul the produce in from the farms. I used to haul watermelons out of Evansville, Indiana, peaches out of Michigan, tomatoes and roots out of New York, apples, peaches out of New York State, onions, cabbage, out of New York State in season. We used to go all over. Jamestown, New York to haul potatoes. Linesville, Pennsylvania to haul potatoes.

B: But I mean for any of the companies that you worked for did you personally deliver?

R: In the old days I delivered to every store in Youngstown, Niles, Warren, and all the way down the river to Steubenville and West Virginia.

B: What was the number and location of the markets you serviced downtown? What stores were downtown?

R: Downtown you had Rulli Brothers that were one of the biggest downtown. You had the Public Market. You had Toth's Market downtown. You had a lot of corner stands down on Watt Street on the east end which is now demolished. You had the Sisman Market downtown, Ole's Market downtown. There were numerous ones just in the downtown area. These were all located on Federal Street, besides your big restaurants like the Brass Rail. You serviced them. Blue Ribbon.

B: Were these restaurants as we know them today or were they specialty restaurants?

R: In the old days they had a big bar and they had some big places downtown. The Brass Rail was pretty big, the Blue Ribbon was pretty big.

B: Was it like Italian food or Hungarian food, was it a speciality type of restaurant?

R: These here were the big ones. You had your specialty restaurants downtown. You had Ambrioso, that was Italian foods. You had Rulli Brothers that specialized in Italian foods, fresh fruit, and vegetables. They also had their own farm where they grew their own fresh vegetables. You had ethnic places downtown where they specialized in Hungarian foods. You had Jewish delicatessens downtown where they specialized in rye bread, Jewish rye, corned beef, bagels. You used to go down and have a bagel now and then with butter, fresh butter.

B: Since you mentioned the delis, could you identify where they were and how many there were and so forth?

R: I would say, right down in one area, usually it was in a family group. They used to have two, and this was on the East end of Federal Street, by Watt Street, which now is where the Post Office is located. You used to have the Friedmans there. You used to have four delicatessens in one area. One specialized in one thing, one specialized in another thing.

B: They were mainly located where the present Post Office is?

R: Down in that area.

B: There were four or five?

R: Four or five. All the delicatessens were together.

B: Did they buy produce in the Market? Did you deliver to them?

R: They didn't have any produce. They didn't specialize in produce.

B: They were just strictly delis?

R: Strictly delis. They specialized in bread and bagels and hot rolls.

B: The Ole's Market, you said you made deliveries there. Where was the building and what did it look like?

R: Ole's was down by the County Jail across the street, on the same side of the street; next to the Star Oyster House and they specialized mostly in meat, and then later they opened a produce market in there, meat and produce and a few dairy items with cheeses. Primarily, their biggest seller was meat and they catered to customers and you had to pick your number and wait in line.

B: I'm not familiar. Was the old Public Market where the small one is across from City Hall or was it someplace else?

R: The old Public Market was located right off the square next to the People's Bank and the Brass Rail. It was across the street from the Blue Ribbon and Rulli Brothers Market downtown. Sam Solomon owned the market and he was very particular in the produce that he sold down there. If you went downtown you would never see a display now as they had in those days because the whole store was mostly produce. He had mass display and did the business.

B: During the Second World War I understand there were limits to the amount of food that was able to be purchased. Could you comment on the situation as it existed here?

R: I could comment because I saw it. I was there and I saw it happen. I can give you broad generalities. In other words, you were a customer and onions were scarce and they had an OPA [Office of Price Administration] limit price of $8 a bag which you couldn't charge over that, and they did black market onions. Then, in order for the wholesaler to get his money, he had to charge the limit of $8. For every bag of onions he'd sell you a basket of carrots that sold for 50¢ regular, he would charge you $3 for it. This pertained to any item, lettuce from out of California, when it was scarce.

B: Who set the local limit on what you could purchase? You mentioned the Office of Price Administration. Were there policemen or something that monitored?

R: No. There was no police action of such, but you had people that came in and checked your books periodically to see that your prices met the OPA standards. In other words, you couldn't overcharge. It's just like today, supply and demand. If the supply is short and you go to the supermarket today they don't have any price restraints. At one time you could buy lettuce at 29¢ a head and then the next time when they're changing seasons in growing valleys in California and they're in between seasons, then you're paying $1.29 a head for the same head of lettuce. So we are talking a dollar difference a head. In those days, when you had restrictions, the only way the wholesaler can make this up was when he paid the farmer or the guy at the other end, he paid him cash. He didn't have this on the books. When he sold it he had to put down what he sold it for.

B: The only real monitoring they had was to check their books and that was done by the local OPA, or was that down by the treasury of some other office?

R: I wouldn't know, but they had people who came around and said that they wanted to come in the office and inspect your books. I guess they had the authority at that time.

B: Do you know who the local OPA official was at that time?

R: I wouldn't know the local man, but the head of the OPA in the state of Ohio at one time was a former governor, Mike DiSalle.

B: Is there any aspect of the Market I haven't covered that possibly is important to understand the significance of the Market itself?

R: The way that I understand it, this was an outlet for growers, shippers, retail men. It was a way of life at that time. People came from all over town and were able to do all their shopping in one place where you didn't have your corner stores, they didn't do the business. They had lunch meats and a few groceries. They didn't carry the fresh fruits and vegetables because they were so highly perishable. They didn't have the refrigeration in those days at your corner supermarket. They had a little refrigerator or icebox that you had to put ice in daily. This they kept for their milk and highly perishable products, meat. It didn't pay to refrigerate produce in those days.

B: You mentioned that sometimes, I think it was Mr. Goldberg, he used to keep produce for storage. How did they store it? Were you talking about pears or something that you could keep for a while? What would you store?

R: They had coolers in those days. Old ammonia coolers, but they didn't have them in big capacities. The stuff in those days moved faster at the wholesale level. I can recall in season, in canning seasons, that they had pickles, peaches especially, where maybe you'd have 5,000 bushels of peaches coming in. What they did was just unload them on a flat surface. They didn't even keep them in a warehouse. They just open-air unloaded them, and sold them.

B: What is an ammonia freezer?

R: This is a refrigeration system that you have to have ammonia in to cool the lines.

B: Like freon?

R: Freon. Right. You have freon now where it's a lot safer than ammonia. This refrigeration system was, in those days, a little complicated. They didn't have the techniques and machinery that they have today, or the knowledge.

B: What was the refrigeration process at that time?

R: In the winter time, you had no refrigeration in the winter time. What you did when it was a freezing temperature outside, you had a charcoal burner, a stove within a stove, that you put in a truck and lit to keep the merchandise from freezing. This was the way you used to haul it in. They used this system not only in trucks and trailers, where you had a fire going all the time back there, but they also used it in boxcars, where they shipped from Idaho, say Idaho potatoes. They still had problems where the bottom layers might freeze because your charcoal heaters then went out or weren't burning; they went off.

In the summer months, like your trailers, they didn't have any refrigeration in small trucks at all because they had tarps, straight-body trucks, open-air trucks, but on your trailers you had bunkers. In these bunkers you packed blocks of ice and you had a little putt putt motor to describe, like a fan, that would turn these fans and blow the cold, moist air over the truck where it would circulate in the truck. When the ice melted we had to go and stop and they had these icehouses clear across the country where you could buy blocks of ice.

B: One thing we really didn't talk about was the packing houses in Youngstown.

R: You didn't have very many packing houses. You had a few that were your meat-packing houses, but as far as produce-packing houses, I don't recall any. They might repack a few items, but as far as wholesale repacking, we've never had any in Youngstown.

B: Was the reason for that, as you mentioned, some of the stores were specialty and they took care of their own meat? They had their own meats.

R: That's right. You had a lot of meat stores, like Toth's downtown, that had their own smokehouses, and smoked it out on the farm and brought it in. They butchered their own meat and hauled it in from their farm like it

was an ethnic group. They might have used their uncle's farm or cousin's farm and did it there.

B: I'd like to thank you for taking time this morning to fill me in with what was going on with the Pyatt Street Market. Thank you very much.

One thing I should ask you or follow up with is where did you live at that time?

R: I lived on Erie Street and it was directly across the street from the farmer's market. These were all the wholesale farmers. My mother owned a restaurant for 28 years there, and all the farmers used to come over and eat and she had beer and wine, food. She specialized in food and I can remember that on Friday all the Jewish people used to come over and she used to make a fried fish haddock sandwich that was out of this world. Every Friday when the Jewish people came over she said, "You know what, I'm going to make Catholics out of all of them."

END OF INTERVIEW