

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Senior Citizens Project

Jewish Culture

O. H. 326

GOLDIE SMULOVITZ

Interviewed

by

Karlyn Bennehoof

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: GOLDIE SMULOVITZ

INTERVIEWER: Karlyn Bennehoof

SUBJECT: Jewish culture; Religion; Temples; Organizations

DATE: January 28, 1984

B: This is an interview with Goldie Smulovitz for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project Heritage Manor. This interview is being conducted at the Heritage Manor at approximately 2:50 p.m. on January 28, 1984.

Could you tell me a little bit about where you were born? I know it was in Hungary, but where in Hungary?

S: A very small village, Kish Dabron. It's not even on the map I don't think. I went to high school in a city in Ungvar. I compared my school that I went to to the American schools and it's practically the same method. The teachers are also very lovely ladies. The girls didn't have man teachers, they had lady teachers and they were all very nice, intelligent ladies and they knew how to handle us girls.

B: Were the sexes split up? Did the men go to one class?

S: No. Some of them, yes. In some places yes and in some places no. When we were younger the boys and girls were together, in grade school. When we became older, the girls went to a girl's school and the boys . . . I compare my high school that I went to, they called it Polgari, it was just like an American high school.

B: What was the date of your birth? What year?

S: 1896. How old am I? We celebrated my 87th birthday. They gave me a party last year. So, I must be about 90 years old. Am I right or am I wrong?

B: I'm not good at math. Let me see if I can figure this out. You're 88, I believe.

S: I know on my 87th birthday I had a big party, but I don't remember how long ago that was.

B: I think that was last year. I did some very quick subtraction here, so I think that was 88 years.

S: So I am 88 years old then. I didn't know if it was 87. I didn't really remember, but it doesn't make any difference to me.

B: You told me a little about your academic education. Did you have any religious training? Could you tell me about that?

S: Do you know what dovening is?

B: No, I don't. I've heard that term.

S: That's praying. I have the Hebrew prayer book right over there. I know how to read the prayer book. In those days, we had no . . . the Jewish people couldn't go to the Hungarian schools. Not that we were forbidden, there were not that many Jews in the area and the Hungarians were really packed. They all went to the priest for schooling. That, we didn't have. We had to have private teachers. Hebrew teachers and . . . My father was very particular about hiring these gentlemen to teach us, that they knew how to read and write Yiddish and Hungarian. From then on we always had very prime teachers. You went to the city a certain day in the year, and there were all kinds of teachers there and, of course, you had to pick the one that was authorized in Yiddish and Hungarian. That's how he taught us both. You had to get a hold of a teacher that knew how to use both languages good, to read and write. I do read and write Hungarian and Yiddish. That was not all from the public schools, it was the private teachers that I had as a little girl. That was a long time ago.

B: Yes, that was a while ago. Can you describe a typical day for me as far as the kinds of things you did on a weekday with your education?

- S: I am active in whatever they have here for me.
- B: No, I mean as a girl. What was a typical day like as a girl in Hungary?
- S: We had a very lovely home that I came from, with all the lovely things in it. We had a beautiful, big mirror that you see in the dress shops standing on the floor with all the beautiful candlesticks my mother had. The Sabbath was very well observed and my mother happened to be a very intelligent woman. I don't know how many languages she could read and write. She used to get the Jewish paper from New York every day and there were stories of Catherine the Great. During the day she didn't read them and then when the girls came home from work we would sit down to the table after supper and my mother would read that serial about Catherine the Great; we got such a kick out of it. She could read Hebrew and Yiddish like you read the English paper. She was a terrific person, a very intelligent person. They don't come like that nowadays.

I was asking her how she knew so much. The Jews from the village used to come to her and her father to get themselves well versed. She always used to sit down with them and take it in. As I said, my mother was a very intelligent woman. She could read and write Hungarian and Yiddish and German.

- B: What did your grandfather do?
- S: My grandfather was a big landowner. He had an awful lot of people working for him. The Jewish people didn't do any of that type of labor, they were more above the goyim. Do you know what goyim are?
- B: No.
- S: NonJews. In Yiddish they say a goya. Do you know what a Jew is? A Jew is a Yide.
- B: Is that Hungarian?
- S: No, it's Hungarian, Russian, whatever. I'm a Jew. What do you call yourself, for example? Are you Yiddish?
- B: No, I'm not Jewish.

- S: Well then you are a Gentile, or whatever. We lived in a village among a lot of Gentiles. You see, we had our own private teachers. Every Jewish family that had children . . . My father obviously had a teacher because we had several children and he wanted them all to know how to read and write and to get an education. So, we always had a private teacher in our house. They were very nice people, and to get these teachers there was a certain day in the year when you had to go in the city to this certain place; they called it Beregsaaz where we found these teachers. All these people went and you got to choose the teacher you wanted. You asked them questions, they asked you questions. You had to answer every question. My father would go into the city and hire these men. We all knew how to read and write Hungarian and Jewish because we had these teachers. You had to give them supplies, shelter, and food. It wasn't easy, but if you wanted your children to learn you had to do this.
- B: Was this a teacher for the community or was this a private tutor?
- S: No, this was a private tutor.
- B: All the Jewish families did this?
- S: Those that could afford to, they took the teacher. Who could afford to took their children to the best to learn.
- B: Okay, so did the teachers just stay for one year?
- S: That all depends on how much the children learned and how good they were.
- B: And how you got along?
- S: Yes, that's right. It all depended. I remember some of the teachers, they were unforgettable almost. That's how in the village where I came from there were no educational facilities for me. We had this Hebrew teacher, but that didn't answer the purpose. I was very lucky we had an aunt on my father's side. Aunt Rose lived in the city and I went and stayed with her and went to a Hungarian school. I compare it many times to the American school. It was exactly the same method only it was in Hungarian.
- B: The same subjects?

S: Yes. Everything was the same. The method was even the same. In America there are a lot of men teachers and a few lady teachers. Here there were mostly lady teachers. They were very nice, intelligent women. They were Hungarian, but they also spoke different languages. I compared European schools many times to the American schools. I feel very unfortunate that I didn't go to school in the United States because I had already graduated from high school in Europe. I had four years of high school, six years of public school. How many years is public school in the United States?

B: They include high school, so it's twelve grades.

S: Four years of high school is called Polgari in Hungarian. I had four years of Polgari in Europe. Grade school was called Alomee Elemee.

B: It sounds like the same thing. What was the Jewish-Gentile relationship like in your town?

S: Very good, very good.

My grandfather happened to be in business. He had a lot of grounds, fields. These Gentile men worked for my grandfather and once a week they came out for payday. I even remember the window where he used to sit and they used to come to get their pay. They would tell him how many hours they worked, how many days they worked, and he would figure it out and pay them. Cash, no checks. Papa was a very good businessman, a clever European businessman. He had thrashing machines. That was a very big business because how many people could afford to have a thrashing machine? It was very expensive.

B: They still are.

S: My father owned a saloon or bar. It was called a vertzhosen.

The peasants in Hungary were poor, but everyone had a field. Everybody had these vegetables and meats that had to be thrashed so they brought them to my grandfather's house. They are very expensive machines that you have to know how to handle, how to take care of. Once a week they would come out, it was payday and my grandfather would stay by this window and pay them the money they had earned; always in cash. It was a long time ago, but I still remember.

B: Whereabout in Hungary did you live? Were you near the German border or nearer to Russia?

S: It was nearer to the city.

B: What city was it near?

S: Budapest. That's where I went to school. My birth-place was a little village, Kish Dabron. That is where I went to high school; it was a nice city. I compared the schools, the public and high schools, to those of the United States. They are exactly like in the United States.

B: Would that be in central Hungary?

S: What do you mean by central?

B: In the middle of the country. Or was it nearer to a border?

S: Hungary is quite a large country. Everybody had their own schools. The Hungarians went to the priest's house to learn, but the Jewish had to have private teachers.

B: I remember in talking with a couple of other people from here that around the turn of the century in Eastern Europe and the Russian provinces there were pogroms going on.

S: We were very lucky. In Russia, there were always pogroms. There were none where I came from. We were living a very normal . . . We got along very nice, just like the American people. We got along just like you see people today; that's how we got along.

B: So you were lucky?

S: We were lucky. In Hungary we were lucky because a lot of the people that came from different parts of the country, like Russians, they treated them terribly. We didn't have to go through any of that. We were just very lucky.

B: How long after you graduated from high school did you leave Hungary?

S: I'm trying to think.

B: Do you remember how old you were?

S: How old are you when you graduate from public school in the United States?

B: It's usually eighteen when you get out of high school.

S: It probably worked out the same way. Public school was six years where I came from.

B: How come you left Hungary?

S: I had aunts. I moved in with my one aunt because she had no children. My sister moved with my other aunt. We were very lucky to get our education. Helen and I both got our education in Europe in these schools.

B: Did you come to this country on your own or did your family come with you? Were you married when you came to this country?

S: My father and oldest brother were here already and they sent us tickets, ship tickets. We had to go over the ocean. He sent us tickets and passports, and that's how we came. When we arrived here we already had someone to take care of us.

B: How come he came here?

S: He always wanted to try. Papa was a very smart and intelligent man. He wanted to come. You have a daughter, you want to give her money. He had so many children that he decided to try the world.

B: What was the trip like from Hungary to the U.S.?

S: We had to go by boat. First we came to New York, I guess.

B: Where did you leave from in Europe?

S: In the little village where I lived.

B: Where did you get on the boat is what I mean?

S: In Hamburg.

B: That's in Germany, isn't it?

S: Yes, but we had to travel to get there. I'll never forget that ocean. It was unforgettable. I think of it many times. It was very interesting and it's becoming more interesting to me today.

B: How did you travel?

S: By boat.

B: What was the boat trip like?

S: Beautiful, it's unbelievable. There were beautiful people that handled you, very nice meals. It's almost hard to describe on the ocean, those boats. When I think of it a lot of times I sit down and cry. It was so beautiful. You went someplace and you had to learn the language.

B: What was your first impression when you got to New York? What was your first impression of this country?

S: Something really beautiful.

B: Then you saw the skyscrapers?

S: Till this day I think of the impression that makes on a person. Unbelievable.

B: Did you have to go through Ellis Island? Since you already had family here . . .

S: Yes, sure. It's something that you come and go through.

B: What was it like?

S: Ellis Island? That is also so hard to describe. How it's even possible for a little girl, in a little village, to leave and come to America. I couldn't believe that such a thing was possible. I wasn't the only one, it was millions of people that went through the same thing.

B: When you got here did you hire a tutor to teach you English?

S: No. I was very young and I went to night school. It was very nice, we had nice teachers and learned a lot. I'm very fortunate that I speak very good. You can't tell that I'm a foreigner. I was very lucky. I liked the language and learned it. I used to go to night school. They were wonderful, they gave all they had for us.

B: Were these classes for immigrants that didn't speak the language?

S: No. It was a regular school for everybody.

B: You were there with Americans that already spoke the language?

S: Yes, a little bit.

B: Did you work when you got here? Did you look for work?

S: Dressmaking.

B: In a factory or at your home?

S: There was a Mrs. Crosby, a wonderful dressmaker. Someone who knew Mrs. Crosby recommended me. I went up there and learned more than I knew, and I was a dressmaker there for many years.

B: Does that mean you were designing clothing or sewing?

S: No, I was not designing. I was sewing. I was not a designer, I was a sewer.

B: Was she a designer?

S: Mrs. Crosby? I think she was. Oh yes, she knew how to design and how to cut. She was a very talented woman.

B: What were the differences between America and Hungary in terms of religion? When you got here did you see any?

S: An example, we all had private tutors. All went to the public schools.

B: Your religious training was through tutors?

S: Religious training came from home. Public schools in Hungary are exactly like American schools; I have compared them many times.

B: What about the synagogues?

S: I've always belonged to a synagogue. Synagogues are also always different. Even right now I go to the El-Emeth, that's my temple.

B: Is El-Emeth Orthodox?

S: No.

B: What happened here in America and how was it handled here?

S: My younger sisters and brothers went to school in the United States. I was the only one that was too old to start all over again. The schools were exactly like the European schools. The only thing is that in the United States you have male teachers. We girls always had women teachers.

B: The religious training isn't taken care of in the schools here.

S: No. The religious training comes from home, from your own home.

B: It still did in America. Do you remember which synagogues were here when you came to Youngstown?

S: Children of Israel, which was Orthodox and for Hungarian Jews; it's a very lovely congregation. They always have nice rabbis, nice services. It never changed.

B: Do you remember what some of the other synagogues were here? A Reform synagogue?

S: Yes, but I didn't belong to the Reform. It's still here. They have quite a congregation.

B: In Europe, the Gentile Christmas wasn't nearly as commercialized as it was in America.

S: The public was poor. There was nothing to advertise, not like in the United States.

B: Was it a shock when you got here that Christmas was such a big thing?

S: No, it was a big thing in Europe too. In the village I came from they all went to church, a beautiful church right near the village. If there wasn't a church in some of those villages the preacher had a big home and gave his congregation a nice service. Where I came from we had a nice temple, a church. All the Gentiles were very well taken care of. A pope is a priest, a Hungarian priest.

B: You keep saying priest. That's probably more Catholic. Catholics have priests, Protestants have reverends or ministers.

- S: These priests, or whatever, were very faithful to their village. If there was no school for them he would have school in his own home.
- B: How did you get to Youngstown from New York? What was it about Youngstown that attracted you and your family?
- S: I didn't land in Youngstown, it was in McKeesport that I was first. Then people from all over started coming in and we belonged to the same congregation, Orthodox.
- B: More people from Hungary, do you mean?
- S: From all over Europe.
- B: They were all Orthodox Jews?
- S: Yes, they were European Jews. They all came from Europe. European Jews all observed the Sabbath. Where I came from there was nobody on the Sabbath that worked, in those days. Of course, it's probably quite different today. When I came everyone observed the Sabbath, we all went to the temple, the shul, whatever congregation you belonged to. Now, the Rodef Sholom was a Reform congregation. I belonged to an Orthodox congregation. Just like here in the United States today, you have Orthodox and you have Conservative Judaism.
- B: Was your father already settled in Youngstown when you came over here?
- S: Yes, my father was already settled.
- B: Was it family or business? What was it that brought him here?
- S: Business. I told you we lived in a small village. There was no future for the children, so he decided to come to America. Then we all came over. The only kind of education we could get out there was from the Hebrew teachers.
- B: I have to wonder, there are so many cities in this country that an immigrant can choose from, I'm curious as to what it was about Youngstown . . .
- S: My father sold whiskey. There were an awful lot of immigrants, Hungarians and Slovaks, around here. He was a whiskey agent, he sold whiskey by order. Once a week he would go get the money for it. That's how

he made money and got settled, and brought the family over. [When the whole family arrived the parents opened a restaurant, serving kosher meals to those who observed the dietary laws.]

B: Did you have any problems when you first came to the country?

S: For example?

B: We already talked about language, did you run into any problems of anti-Semitism here?

S: Not too much. Even where I learned dressmaking with Mrs. Crosby, she was a very lovely person. She had two more Gentiles that worked for her. I was very lucky that I didn't come across too much anti-Semitism.

B: What was the city like when you first got here, Youngstown? How has it changed since you got here?

S: An awful lot. The main street became very main. McKelvey's, which was nothing, became a big department store. All the stores downtown were growing up and getting more and more beautiful. It's unbelievable from then to now. The difference, unbelievable. Mostly all Jewish merchants on East Federal Street, mostly all the stores were a Jewish concern; Strouss. McKelvey's was a Jewish concern. Mostly all the people on Federal Street were all Jews.

B: What types of businesses were there?

S: Everything; clothing, shoe stores, clothing stores. Whatever you asked for they had it, in Youngstown. More people used to come in and open up stores and it became what it is today.

B: I was talking to Mr. Altshuler. He said that the reason he left Russia, he was born in Russia, was because Zionism had been outlawed in Russia at the time.

S: That's very possible.

B: Were there any Zionist movements in Hungary when you were living there?

S: No. But I did join Hadassah when I came to the U.S.

B: What does Hadassah do? What's the purpose for that organization?

S: More social than business really. Everybody belonged. We had very nice meetings, nice get-togethers. It's very nice to belong to it. Money raising for social and medical needs in Israel and Hadassah Hospital. No one refused to belong to it. You know how big Hadassah is today.

B: I know it's pretty big.

S: As I said, nobody ever refused to belong. It is very nice to belong to. All the Jews are together. You have your meetings, your affairs. I would call it a very nice social organization.

B: Did you ever become involved in any Zionist movements yourself?

S: For example?

B: I believe the name of the organization is the Jewish-American Fund, during World War II.

S: In those days, everybody wanted to belong. We wanted to have something to get ahold of our own. This was a very wonderful thing to belong to, to have it and keep it.

B: You were already in this country when the Depression hit, the Great Depression?

S: When was that, honey?

B: In the 1920's-1930's. The stock market crashed in 1929. Then there were Work Projects Administration and all sorts of things trying to take care of the people.

S: Some of the things I just can't put my finger on far as that, is there anything in particular about Hadassah?

B: Just your experiences.

S: It wasn't easy to live through all of the things we had to, but by everybody joining and being together it doesn't make it so hard to exist.

B: What do you remember about World War II?

S: How long ago was World War II?

B: It ended in 1945.

S: What year is this?

B: This is 1984. World War II, in the Pacific, we were fighting Japan. Japan was trying to build an empire in the Pacific. In Europe, Germany, Hitler and the Nazis . . .

S: It wasn't too pleasant.

B: No, I imagine it wasn't.

S: But, we lived through it too. God was good to us. It was hard work and important in keeping together. We made it.

B: Was the Jewish community in Youngstown aware of what Hitler was doing in Europe?

S: Of course. Who could not be aware of that? With the help of God he died or something. Something happened to him; I think he was killed or something . . .

B: He was defeated. There was a little debate about whether he committed suicide . . .

When did you marry?

S: I was about twenty, but how many years ago?

B: Twenty would be around 1916, right around World War I. What was your husband's name?

S: Jacob Smulovitz.

B: Did you have children?

S: Yes, four sons.

B: Could you tell me some more about them?

S: My son, Morton, he takes care of all my business affairs. I had Sam, he unfortunately passed away. I have a son Harold in Cleveland who's married and has a very lovely family. Sam passed away. Morton is the one that does everything for me. Harold is a young, married man with, I think, three children. He lives in Cleveland

with his very nice wife, Carol. Harold, my youngest one, lives in Cleveland. He has a very nice family and wife. My other son is Leonard and lives in the Los Angeles, California area. The children all go to school.

B: Are your grandchildren being instructed in the religious studies at home?

S: They all were, but are adults now. In our temples today we have very nice high schools, I mean Hebrew schools. If you're a member of the congregation . . .

B: Then you can attend the schools. That's nice. If Harold has three children and Morton has three children . . .

S: Morton has Michael, Jodi, and David, three. Morton has three children.

B: How many grandchildren do you have all together?

S: Morton has three. Harold has three and Leonard has two. That's ten grandchildren all together.

B: Is there anything else that you want to tell me about Hungary or Youngstown?

S: For example? What do you want to know about Hungary?

B: Well, we've already talked about it . . .

S: It was a very wonderful place, we were not persecuted there. That was one nice thing because mostly every other place where Jews were, they were chased out. We were lucky; we had our own temples and homes. Thank God we in Hungary didn't go through that.

B: You've answered all my questions, is there anything else you think someone might be interested in hearing about?

S: For example?

B: I don't know. An anecdote from early Youngstown or whatever you think might interest someone.

S: I really don't know what to say. There are so many things to say. I'm grateful that I'm here to tell the story.

B: I'm grateful too. This has been a very nice interview. I want to thank you very much for talking to me.

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S: I'm very glad I had someone interested to talk to me.

B: More than just me, there are a lot of people interested.

END OF INTERVIEW