

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Education Project

Jewish Education in Youngstown

O. H. 449

FLORINE RUSNAK

Interviewed

by

Beth Kurtzweig

on

May 23, 1980

FLORINE RUSNAK

Florine Fish Rusnak, the daughter of Herman and Anna Fish, was born on March 27, 1939, in Youngstown, Ohio. After attending local schools, Taft Elementary and Princeton Junior High School, Florine graduated from South High School in 1956. She then attended Youngstown University and graduated in 1958 with an A.B.A. In 1959, she married her husband, Robert, and had their first son, Stephen. Three years later, their son Jeffery was born.

From 1958 to 1960, Florine was employed at Republic Rubber and from 1969 until the present time has been employed as a secretary for Ohev Tzedek Temple. The organizations she has been involved in throughout the years include: Hadassah, Ohev Tzedek Sisterhood, Boardman P.T.A., and the Women's Division of the Youngstown Jewish Federation.

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INTERVIEWEE: FLORINE RUSNAK

INTERVIEWER: Beth Kurtzweig

SUBJECT: Formal and informal settings, Staff, Students,
Curriculum, Changes, Strengths, Weaknesses,
Recommendations, Personal Experiences

DATE: May 23, 1980

K: This is an interview with Florine Rusnak for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Beth Kurtzweig, at the home of Florine Rusnak, on May 23, 1980, at 3:30 p.m.

The first thing I would like you to do is give me a little bit about your background as far as your parents, how many brothers and sisters you have, and things like that.

R: I have an older sister, five and one half years older than I am, and a brother who is ten and one half years younger than I am. For many years I was the baby of the family.

K: What kind of home environment did you have as far as being raised in a Jewish home?

R: Our home was very Jewish. I knew no other way. My parents observed all the holidays. Their friends were Jewish. The children who I brought into the home, my friends, were Jewish. I really grew up in a totally Jewish environment.

K: Can you recall at any time one of the holidays? How did the celebration in your home go on?

R: All Jewish holidays were very family oriented. When I was very young I can recall going to my grandmother's house on Dewey Avenue for Passover. I had seven aunts and uncles who had children. Many of my first cousins were close in age. We were a very large crowd sitting around the table. After my grandmother passed away we had many holiday observances at our home. Our dining room was always filled to the brim, overflowing into the living room with relatives and friends.

The Sabbath, the Friday night, was a very special evening in my home. We always sat at the dining room table and there was a special meal cooked. The table was as beautiful as you would read in all the books. My father always recited Kiddush; mother said the blessing over the candles, and it was a traditional Sabbath meal. Even after we were married, Friday night was always spent with my parents. From there we would go to services at Ohav Tzedek Temple. It was always a very traditional Jewish home for all the holidays.

K: As far as academia, were there Jewish books and Jewish articles in your home? Did your parents speak of the history of the Jews and things like that?

R: Yes. Probably the publications were those that were related to the Jewish organization. I have in my scrapbook when I was twelve years old, my father cut out the picture of Chaim Weitzman, who was elected president of Israel in 1948. He had a very special place in my scrapbook. Intellectual books, no. Those were things that I probably got in school.

K: Did you attend any type of school to get any type of formal Jewish education?

R: Yes. I attended probably from the time I was five or six on. I started out at the old Ohav Tzedek on Myrtle Avenue whenever they had a teacher, which was very sporadic. When they didn't have a school I went to Temple Emanuel. They belonged to both synagogues and I attended school regularly. I was in grade school; I used to take two buses during the week to Temple Emanuel on Rayen Avenue. I wasn't alone; there were maybe four or five of us. We were young. When we were real young we used to have a taxicab pick us up at public school and take us to Hebrew school. When we got old enough to ride buses, maybe fifth or sixth grade, we took two buses and went downtown. Sometimes we would walk up the hill to Temple Emanuel. It was just a way of life. I never thought to fight and say I didn't want to go. I just was going. I enjoyed it. I remember the old rooms and the old chairs and the old teachers! I had about three or four friends who were either a year older or a year younger and we all went together. I continued on through confirmation and Temple Emmanuel. I think for a year after there was a postconfirmation class. I really enjoyed Jewish living. No one had to force me to go.

K: All of these trips that you took on buses, how many days a week did you do that?

R: Two afternoons a week, plus Sunday school. On Sunday school days we carpooled; the parents took turns. When we took the

bus up one of the parents always brought us home. For a good many years I went on Monday and Wednesday afternoons, and Saturday and Sunday mornings.

K: I take it with all of the transportation that you went directly after school?

R: Yes. Maybe when I was younger I went home first. When the taxicab picked us up, the driver's name was Bill, he would stop at Isaly's and buy us klondikes. That must have been our after school snack. I think Emmanuel provided cookies for us.

K: You always had the same taxicab driver?

R: I think for that year.

K: You were talking about the rooms and teachers of the school, but what was the room like? What were the teachers like?

R: There must have been temporary partitions in the old building on Myrtle Avenue where we went periodically. When I was six or seven I remember learning songs from a young lady in her late teens. Rabbi David Massis was the teacher there. He went to my mother and told her I was a very good student and that I should be encouraged to continue even beyond high school. When they built the new Temple Emmanuel the students went there; that was a great, big move. There were new classrooms with new desks. It was a whole new atmosphere. We had good teachers and we had bad teachers. I remember one educational director would get so angry that he would throw erasers at the children. There was such frustration. I was never a discipline problem, but some of my friends were really terrible. I remember mother saying the rabbi had called to say that I was being influenced by my peers and that I was stepping out of my normal role and that she should talk to me about it. It was just so much fun to get them mad sometimes.

I had a teacher who confirmed me, Rabbi Soloman Schulson; I think I had him for about two or three years. I just adored him. I would just love sitting in his classroom. I really give him a lot of credit for my continuing on. What made him an excellent teacher I don't know, but I just really had a good rapport with him. I remember he taught us Yiddish. I thought that was so great because I learned to read a Yiddish newspaper. We learned the four questions in Yiddish.

K: You were talking about the four questions and the songs and that, what other things do you remember being taught when you were attending Hebrew school?

R: I remember that we worked on the translation of the B'Rashib (Genesis), the first book of the bible, every year. I think we never got past the second paragraph. I love Jewish music. I still have papers in my old scrapbook. I have letters of the alphabet, customs and traditions. It was during my time in school that Isreal got its statehood, and I remember that only vaguely; I was only nine at the time.

K: Were there any problems or weaknesses in the Jewish education that you had gotten? Is there anything you can say that could have been improved upon?

R: The teaching, certainly, left a great deal to be desired. They weren't professional teachers. They certainly were doing it out of a sense of love for the children, and a need for an education. I suppose that the afternoon school does not lend itself to a good education. After being in school all day, you're really not "there." We touched on Bible tales and Jewish history. It's really hard for me to remember my early days. I know that it really wasn't that great, but I thrived on Jewish education. There was never really anything that was too much for me. If they wanted me to come another day, I would go another day. It didn't seem to be a hindrance to my secular education. I missed school for all of the Jewish holidays.

K: Where was consecration?

R: There was no Bat Mitzvah ceremony for girls when I was growing up. I remember a group ceremony where the girls wore white scarves with the blue Mogen David on the back. I can't remember anything else about the ceremony other than marching. I remember we had an award ceremony at Temple Emmanuel and we got certificates and pins.

K: Were any of the teachers certified?

R: I know that Temple Emmanuel had an education director that was a rabbi, so he must have been trained. They came and went every couple of years. The rabbis themselves were trained; I doubt very much if any of them taught public school.

K: Are any of your teachers still living here in Youngstown that you know of?

R: Lillian Berkowitz Lockshin taught me when I was about six or seven years old and Naomi Hill, who has died, taught me in Hebrew school for many years.

K: Tell me a little bit about your family now, how many children you have.

R: We have two sons. The oldest is twenty and in his second year at the University of Cincinnati. Jeff is sixteen and he is still in high school.

K: Can you tell me a little bit about the type of environment that you have created in your home for the raising of your children?

R: I have seen a change from the time they were younger to the way it is now. Stephen would go every Saturday when he was young up until the time he told me he didn't want to go. He went even after he went to religious school. It was just something that we knew that we did on Saturday morning. After Jeffery was born he would start to go. When they started fighting about not going then I stopped going, which was really wrong. When they were younger our family observed a lot more than as they got older. Friday nights used to be a special dinner with a special table. All of a sudden the basketball games came up on Friday nights and we no sooner would sit down and eat and he would have to go. Rather than do this every week, Friday night became special only when there was company. In a way, they influenced me more away from it than I influenced them.

K: In addition to the Jewish orientation that they had gotten at home as children, did they also have a formal Jewish education?

R: Yes. Stephen was four years old when he started going to Sunday school. He went through Confirmation. Jeffery did the same. I wanted them both to continue in high school. I think Stephen went to a couple of classes. This year Jeffery went to Community School when we found out there was going to be a high school program offered. He was excited and I was excited. He went to one class and didn't like it. I was really disappointed because I wanted him to continue.

K: Confirmation is at what age?

R: Fifteen, tenth grade. I really feel it is important they go on through high school. I think they need that before they go to college. Both my boys were involved in youth group and through that had been continuing their education.

K: What were some of the things that your children were taught from attending a Jewish institution?

R: They got basic Hebrew, reading, and writing. They got Hebrew prayer, Jewish history, customs and ceremony, ethical discussions.

K: What kind of teachers did they have?

R: In the afternoon school they were not exposed to professional teachers. On Sunday there were some professionals who came in and taught. I don't think that the boys were unhappy with their teachers. When the rabbi taught they may have not especially liked the rabbi, but they "put up" with him!

They were both particularly fond of Dr. Saul Friedman, as a teacher. It was due to him that they continued into high school.

K: Who ran the Sunday school? Was there an educational director?

R: Not at Ohev Tzedek for the kids, but the rabbi was there. He was in charge of the school together with the school board. I worked very closely with them and some of the rabbis were very demanding. It was very difficult for me to accept those that were less demanding of the teachers.

K: If you had to assess that entire situation then what would you say that some of the greatest strengths of that type of environment were? As we see it we're not only seeing it as a parent's perspective, but we're also seeing it from a teacher's perspective.

R: I think it's easier to say the problems. From one year to the next, there was no consistency; that can be a problem, both for the staff and for the kids.

The strengths, I think, are maybe being exposed to different people. Each one brought you something new and fresh, and a different idea. You certainly couldn't go stale. They changed the curriculum and they changed the texts. The kids were exposed in their own small way to a great deal. It wasn't all bad.

END OF INTERVIEW