

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Project

Youngstown Area

O. H. 464

HARRY BASSIN

Interviewed

by

Irving Ozer

on

October 14, 1985

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Project

INTERVIEWEE: HARRY BASSIN

INTERVIEWER: Irving Ozer

SUBJECT: Anti-Semitism, Immigration, Tamarkin Company

DATE: October 14, 1985

O: This is an interview with Harry Bassin, taken by Irving Ozer, on October 14, 1985. The interview pertains to the Youngstown Area Jewish Project.

Harry, where were you born?

B: I was born in Russia.

O: Where in Russia?

B: Cha-use. Before the revolution it used to be Mogodov. After that they changed it to Gomell.

O: Was that in Russia or Poland?

B: That was in Russia, White Russia.

O: When were you born?

B: I was born in 1904.

O: How old does that make you now?

B: Figure it out. Eighty-two.

O: How old were you when you left Russia?

B: I left there in 1923.

O: So you were nineteen years old?

B: I had to falsify my passport. I had to make myself under eighteen. I was seventeen when I left because if I was

eighteen they would never let me out.

O: Was your name Bassin then or was it something different?

B: It was the same.

O: Was there a particular reason you left?

B: My mother and father were both married twice. I'm the only one from their second marriage. My father had two daughters and my mother had four daughters from her first husband. The reason she married my dad was because he was pretty well off financially. My mother didn't know where her next meal was going to come from, that's how poor she was. She was twenty years younger than my dad.

O: Why did you suddenly leave there? Did you just leave or did the whole family leave?

B: The family was mother and I. My father's daughters remained in Russia.

O: Was it because of the pogroms?

B: No, that didn't have anything to do with it. We don't want to go into that. We never had any pogroms in our city.

O: This was before the Revolution?

B: That was six years after the Revolution.

O: So you just came because you wanted to come to America?

B: Your dad, Louis Ozersky, was my mother's nephew. She had correspondence with him in the United States.

O: Were there any particular problems you had coming from Europe to America?

B: None whatsoever. The only thing was that as soon as we crossed the border I caught a cold in my armpit. It was like a big boil, and I was afraid they would stop me at immigration.

O: When you came did you see Ellis Island?

B: I never saw Ellis Island because we had passports and our visa was for second class. We arrived at New York Port on Friday and stayed at a Jewish place, HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society], over Saturday. After that we came to Youngstown.

O: Were you religious in Europe?

B: To a certain extent.

O: Did you go to "shule" every Sabbath?

B: Could be.

O: Did you become more religious in America than you were in Europe?

B: No.

O: You left New York Saturday evening?

B: No, Sunday.

O: Where did you go?

B: Youngstown. I don't remember if we stayed in the train overnight or not; all I know is that I looked out the window and I recognized my sisters: Sarah, Esther, Della, and Florence.

O: They all came to meet you?

B: Yes. We never thought that Florence would be alive.

O: How much earlier did they come?

B: Florence and Della came to America three days before I was born. I never saw them until we got off of the train.

O: When was that?

B: 1923.

O: When you first got here where did you live?

B: My mother and I stayed with Sarah and with Morris Malkin's family until I got married.

O: When did you get married?

B: I think in 1930.

O: How did you meet Annette?

B: My in-laws lived in Washington, D.C.

O: What is her maiden name?

B: Her Russian name was Belinky, but they changed it to Belin. At that time we lived on Dewey Avenue.

O: Where did you go to school at that age?

B: I didn't go anyplace.

O: You just picked it up?

B: Yes. After sixty some years I wish to know what I don't know.

O: Where did you get your first job?

B: There used to be a cigar-cigarette company by the name of Sam Rifkin.

O: What kind of work did you do for Rifkin?

B: I just delivered and made up orders.

O: How did you get from there to the food business?

B: I really don't know. I worked for Bloom Rosenblum and Klein. Then Morris Malkin asked Tamarkins to give me a job I think. After they gave me the job I spent forty-seven years with them.

O: I was trying to figure out how many synagogues we had in Youngstown when we had the most . . .

B: Temple Emmanuel was built in 1904.

O: When was the Summit Avenue Temple built.

B: Summit Avenue belonged to the Hungarian Jews. That was just around the corner from Rayen Avenue.

O: Where was the Children of Israel?

B: I can't remember. I think Himrod Avenue.

O: Where was Ohev Tzedek?

B: That was on East Myrtle Avenue. That was a very small shule.

O: How about Children of Israel? Was that on the east side?

B: I don't know.

O: Was Emmanuel basically Russian or Polish?

B: That was a mixture of everything, but mostly Russian.

O: Did you know what was going on during the Revolution in Russia?

B: Yes.

- O: Did you have any feelings about it?
- B: I was too young.
- O: You weren't scared?
- B: A Jew was never afraid. No one ever called me a dirty Jew. That started with Stalin.
- O: There was no anti-Semitism in the revolution until Stalin?
- B: Right. Communism does not preach.
- O: Why do you suppose he did that?
- B: Stalin's name was not Stalin.
- O: A lot of them were Jewish, weren't they?
- B: Yes.
- O: Lenin?
- B: Lenin was not a Jew. As a matter of fact, Lenin's brother was executed by a firing squad.
- O: Trotsky is who I'm thinking of. There was anti-Semitism under the Czars; did it just suddenly disappear?
- B: Yes, it disappeared all of a sudden. The Goyim were afraid to call a Jew "Dirty Jew" or something.
- O: Then you found more anti-Semitism in America than you found in Russia?
- B: No. Anyway, Stalin was supposed to have been a priest.
- O: What was Youngstown like when you got here? Physically what did it look like?
- B: It was a small town.
- O: Are there any stories you can tell me about people in Youngstown or people who came to Youngstown?
- B: No.
- O: Were you involved in community activity when you were young?
- B: Yes, but I was too busy making a living.
- O: How big was Tamarkin when you started with them?

B: Very small.

O: Was that on Fifth Avenue?

B: They started on Front Street. There were little storage counters and Tamarkin . . .

O: Where did they go next? Is that when you started to work for them, when they were there?

B: No. From there they went to Boardman Street.

O: Is that where they were when you came to work for them?

B: No. From Boardman Street they went way out to West Federal Street. From there they went to Commerce Street. They bought the building on the corner of Fifth Avenue.

O: That was a big place.

B: It used to be a wholesale grocery. Tamarkin bought that building from Dollar Bank I think.

O: Was that Depression time?

B: No.

O: Do you remember how the stores were lined up on East Federal Street going east from the square?

B: Just like West Federal Street.

O: Do you remember some of the stores?

B: There are too many.

O: Most of the Jewish stores were Walnut Street and East?

B: It was a general mixture. There was Walnut Street, East Federal Street.

O: You've been very helpful. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW