

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Project

Youngstown Area

O.H. 481

ABRAHAM GORDON

Interviewed

by

Irving Ozer

on

July 15, 1986

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Project

INTERVIEWEE: ABRAHAM GORDON

INTERVIEWER: Irving Ozer

SUBJECT: Various places of employment, AZA, B'nai B'rith

DATE: July 15, 1986

O: This is an interview with Abe Gordon for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, Youngstown Area Jewish Project. I'm sitting here with Abe Gordon and he is going to share some of his memories with us.

You said you were born in East Liverpool?

G: February 24, 1916.

O: Then you moved to West Virginia?

G: Yes, my father brought a building in Chester, right across the river.

O: You eventually went into business there?

G: Sure.

O: Tell us about that.

G: It was on Carolina Avenue. My father's business was on Carolina Avenue too. He originally went into clothing. He became tired of selling nine dresses to a woman on Saturday night and Monday she would bring ten in for a refund. He couldn't figure out where the tenth one came. He took that building and made part of it groceries. Everything was loss leaders; that is how he got his foot in the grocery store. I was the help. At the age of eight I was making \$6 a week from my father in salary. That was for a sixteen hour day though. I managed to save the money.

O: Your Jewish education was all in the family you said?

G: No. My father and mother were strictly Orthodox. Our house was Orthodox. I went to Cheder for nine years. I went from age eight to seventeen.

O: In East Liverpool?

G: In East Liverpool. You would come out of school, get on the bus, go to East Liverpool to Cheder, and take the bus back home.

O: Did they have a pretty good size Cheder?

G: Sixteen. There were 110 families.

O: Who was your teacher?

G: Rabbi April was my teacher. One thing I hated about it, he never hit you. If he didn't like you though, his right arm enveloped your right shoulder. That was murder! That hurt! At the age of thirteen, after I was Bar Mitzvahed, my father said, "You keep on going till I tell you to stop." The rabbi made a tutor out of me because he couldn't teach my anything.

O: What all did you learn?

G: I'm a speed reader in Hebrew; I learned that before I was ten. There are three paragraphs that come after Shmai Israel; I always found myself still in the second paragraph when the rest of them were davening in the fourth. I made up my mind that wasn't going to happen to me again, and I learned to speed read Hebrew. You mumble your words; you don't daven them really. I can speed read English also self-taught.

O: You went into business for yourself?

G: I got married. I was making \$60 a week from my father in the grocery store, but I was also keeping the books and the books for the state.

O: What kind of business did you go into?

G: Mens' wear, boys and men. That still was a big mistake. I went eight months before I decided to change it to Gordon's Men and Boys Wear, but the horse had gone from the stable.

O: How long were you there all together?

G: Four and a half years. I bought a restaurant out, put them out of business, and built my own counters. The shelving was built down in Wellsville, Ohio to my specification.

O: You didn't do too well and you eventually ended up in

bankruptcy?

- G: I used to take a profit and loss sheet every month of the last year before I decided to go out of business. We never ran an ad in the paper.
- O: What brought you to Youngstown?
- G: My wife didn't want to go too far away from her folks.
- O: But you felt you had to move?
- G: Chicago.
- O: You wanted to get out of East Liverpool?
- G: Yes. My father didn't like it, but he liked it when I said Youngstown.
- O: You came to Youngstown and you stayed with some friends?
- G: Her sister, Betty Kurtzweig.
- O: Where was that?
- G: Southern Boulevard. I still remember the address, 5522.
- O: Did they have room for you?
- G: No, I slept on the floor. My wife slept on the sofa.
- O: How long was that?
- G: Two weeks.
- O: Then what happened?
- G: We got an apartment on Maywood, 116 Maywood. It was owned by a Jewish woman whose husband committed suicide down in Mill Creek Park. He extended a big, rubber hose onto the tail pipe and stuck it in the car and died of carbon monoxide poisoning.
- O: Then you went into business here or worked for somebody else?
- G: My first job was with Robert Hall.
- O: On Market Street?
- G: Yes. It used to be where Arnold's used to be. Then when I left Robert Hall's . . .
- O: When was that?

- G: 1953. I worked for Sam Scher the tailor also. He couldn't sell, but if you took your wife in there he had his arm around her shoulder. He was a great holder, but he couldn't sell worth a darn. Jack Goldman was the manager then.
- O: Then you ended up in business again for yourself?
- G: No. Then I worked for Ohio Notion, Sam Harshman. I was a stock boy. One hundred and twenty-eight pounds of stock boy; I was proud of that. He fired me when my wife reported me off sick one day. Dr. Sam Zlotnick came all the way from Liberty to see if I was sick. He said, "This young man belongs in the hospital." I thought that was very nice of him to come all that way.
- O: Did they take you back?
- G: No, he fired me. I never even asked to go back. He gave me more money than what Scher's was giving me.
- O: Where did you go from there?
- G: I went to Real Silk from there.
- O: Where was Real Silk?
- G: Real Silk was in Indianapolis. I became manager for five counties. I worked under contract. Nobody else that worked for Real Silk in this area worked under contract. I signed the contract in a parking lot downtown near the gas office.
- O: Did you move out there?
- G: No, I ran five counties here. It was Real Silk Hosiery Mills, though they never made silk in my time. Then it became Real Silk, then Real Silk Incorporated. The manager's name was automatically on any order blank.
- O: Why did that fall through?
- G: Thirteen and a half years was a long time. That was six days a week work, and the seventh day book work. I made the design committee the first year I was with Real Silk; I was proud of that. I had 3,000 file cards when I left Real Silk, personal customers.
- O: Why did you leave?
- G: Thirteen and a half years I felt was enough.
- O: Then what did you do?
- G: I went to work for the furniture man on Market Street, Ben's

Furniture. I think I was with him six months.

O: Then?

G: I went to work for Real Silk again.

O: Doing what?

G: Just as a salesman. I didn't want to have anything to do with books. That was a double job, I was working for Lustigs also.

O: You worked with Lustigs too?

G: I managed the Vogue downtown also.

O: What else?

G: I had quite a checkered career.

O: You got to know downtown Youngstown pretty well.

G: I got to know the whole area. I knew every zip code in five counties.

O: What about the stores on Federal Street, can you tell me something about them starting at the square and going west?

G: No. I used to work downtown because my help couldn't work it. They were scared. They were thrown out of buildings. The Mahoning Bank building was the most strict I think. They used to have a sign. I used to work every other floor. It's pretty hard for the janitor to catch you on every other floor. They walk you out of the building.

O: Tell me about what you did in the Jewish community, how you related to the Jewish people.

G: Through Ohev Tzedek when we moved here I was very active.

O: Where were they at that time?

G: I didn't become active until they were at their present address of Glenwood.

O: Who were some of the leaders at that time?

G: Sam Reich was preceded by Kessler. We had a forty man committee that met every Thursday night with forty people.

O: To do what?

G: It was a meeting to set that temple up. That temple was

built by the forty men.

O: You were there before they moved in?

G: Yes.

O: You were on the building committee?

G: Yes.

O: Who were some of the other people that you were involved with there?

G: Sam Siegle. Leonard Siegle's wife used to run around in our crowd. I dated her.

O: Where did you go when you used to date?

G: We would drive to New Castle. We would go to various night-clubs in the area.

O: Like what?

G: There was one on Woodland.

O: What was so attractive about Youngstown that you came up here to date?

G: That should never be recorded; we had a lot of loose women in this community.

O: More than Steubenville?

G: Jewish girls are looser than the average female, I think.

O: At the temple what else were you involved in after the temple was built?

G: I used tlike to go on Thursday night to the credit union meetings.

O: Who was running that?

G: Belive it or not, the Farbman boys used to sit around the table playing cards, and Max Kirschenbaum was a great pinochle lover.

O: What did the credit union do?

G: They lent you money at low interest rates. I was never a member though.

I was in a couple of the plays they gave out there: "Oklahoma" and "Guys and Dolls".

O: Who did you work under?

G: Shy Lockson.

O: What do you know about Shy?

G: He was one of my closest friends. I met him before he married Ruthie. He also played a year with Ben Bernie; I have him on record at home. I don't think he knew that in his lifetime.

O: Tell me about the people on Federal Street.

G: Sid Kline was a boss of mine. I used the Chinese drip torture method to get to work for Lustigs. I went in once a month even though I was gainfully employed and filled out a job application. Pete Gross would interview me. In fact, Kline used to come out of his office to see what the hell I was like, whether I was human or animal.

O: I don't understand what you were doing there?

G: I wanted a job. I wanted to come off the road. I worked ten and a half years as a department head.

O: What was Ed Kline like?

G: To me he always reminded me of a bag man. I lost all respect for him when I saw his wife walking three feet behind him on a trip. That turned me against him.

O: Did you run into much anti-Semitism as you were growing up or when you came to Youngstown?

G: When I came to Youngstown I went to work for Real Silk and I went out to Poland, Ohio where anti-Semitism was supposed to be very strong. At the bottom of the order you signed your name. I signed it A. Gordon, never Abraham or Abe. A couple of years later when they found out I was a Jew, I was a good Jew. Anti-Semitism was still ripe out there. I felt if you couldn't sell in The Manor, you couldn't sell anyplace. The Manor was one of the first places I worked in Poland. I picked up quite a few customers in The Manor.

Children loved to see me come; I always carried Lifesavers, small packages in my pockets. They always got Lifesavers and they loved that. Their parents wouldn't give them Lifesavers, but I did. These are door openers. I would give stocking runners in the shape of matchbooks to the women, combs; I used every trick in the book.

O: Where were you when Hitler came into power?

G: I was in Chester.

O: How did you and the other Jews in Chester react?

G: There were three Jewish families in Chester.

O: You were living in Chester?

G: Yes.

O: But you also got into East Liverpool and Youngstown?

G: To go to shule you had to go to East Liverpool.

O: How did the Jewish people react to what was going on then?

G: My father wanted to bring his stepmother over from Poland and his brother Sam refused to come up with the money.

O: Because of Hitler?

G: Evidently he heard something which he wouldn't repeat. His stepbrother (same father-different mother), Sam Gordon, said he couldn't afford it because she was going to live with my folks even though she had originally years ago kicked him out of the house because she didn't like him. She kicked him and his sister out.

O: When you talked with the girls and the fellows socially, was there any feeling that something ought to be done?

G: No, everybody was too busy insulting each other. We liked each other, but we always insulted and teased each other. We never meant any harm. The ones we like the most were the ones we teased the most. When I went to school in first grade, I have never heard the work Kike until I went to school. When I went to high school I was the most popular boy and most witty boy in the class.

O: Who were your peers when you were dating? Who were the ones you double-dated with?

G: Mostly it was my closest friend. His wife is now married to Sam Copperman. Sid Ruder was my best friend.

O: Who else?

G: I had a cousin down there by the name of Phil Manlovitz, and he and I used to go out all the time. His father had an Elcar. It was made in Cleveland. It was the Cadillac of the automobile industry at that time. It was a very expensive car. When cars were selling for \$900 or \$1000 it must have been \$3200.

- O: What else can you tell me about the Jewish community?
- G: I was secretary for AZA for about five or six years. I was on the board of the shule because we had two in East Liverpool. They had two shules and two cemeteries, an Orthodox and a Reform. I belonged to the Orthodox.
- O: What was it called?
- G: B'nai Jacob. It is now a parking lot.
- O: The congregation doesn't exist?
- G: When they went conservative and later joined up with Reform, a judge from our side and an attorney from their's drew up the papers. They marched towards that Reform building. It is still a beautiful building in East Liverpool.
- O: Who were some of the people that are still in East Liverpool that you remember?
- G: How about Mike Turk? He was a cousin, so was his wife.
- O: Did you serve in the Armed Forces?
- G: I was four F. I volunteered in 1939. You only had to serve six months. There were thirteen of us that went down to New Cumberland, West Virginia. We all volunteered. They took twelve and I was the thirteenth and they refused to take me because they said I had a very bad case of hemorrhoids. They took my glasses off and asked me to read a chart in this large room. I said, "Doctor, just point me at it and I'll read it." Right then and there within a week I got a card saying I was four F. You had to carry that card all the time. I finally got a letter from the adjutant general after I had volunteered seventeen times in sixteen other cities to quit volunteering; I was lousing up the program.
- O: Why did you feel it necessary to volunteer?
- G: We hadn't gone to war. I quit volunteering when the war was on.
- O: Why did you think you wanted to volunteer?
- G: I was born in this country and I loved this country.
- O: Why was it so important, you could do other things?
- G: Take the matter of John F. Kennedy. He was elected president and I didn't vote for him. I didn't think he would make a good president, but when he got killed he was still my president and I'm the one who cried for him.

- O: It's a little different. The war wasn't on and you were volunteering seventeen times. Why was it so important?
- G: I just felt it was necessary.
- O: Because you were an American or because you were a Jew?
- G: Because I just wanted to serve. My father didn't want me to serve. Having grown up in Russia that meant twenty-five years in the Russian army if you were Jewish.
- O: Why did he come to the United States?
- G: I never asked him. I knew he slept under steps and sold yeast. The money they saved, he and his sister, they used to come to the United States. He came to East Liverpool the day before Rosh Hashanah.
- O: When you went on dates on the streetcar where did you go?
- G: Usually to the theatre in East Liverpool.
- O: Where did you go in Youngstown?
- G: There were always lots of places to go in Youngstown. There were theatres, stage shows. When we felt real nasty we would go to the Burly-Q. That was wide open in Youngstown.
- O: Anything else you think would be interesting?
- G: I used to enjoy running around with the crowd I ran around with, doing work for a shule.
- O: What kind of work did you do for a shule?
- G: I was a good money raiser when I was a kid.
- O: How did you do that?
- G: Go up and grab you by the chest and say, "How about giving us some money?" I had a letter from Eddie Cantor. I used to go around when I belonged to AZA and B'nai B'rith down in East Liverpool and I liked his hospital plan for the veterans for Christmas. I collected money every year and the Red Cross put up the packages and took them to Aspinwall. I got a letter of thanks from him for doing that.
- O: Thank you.