

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Anti-War Movement at YSU during the 1960s

Personal Experience

O. H. 1368

DR. MORRIS SLAVIN

Interviewed

by

Matthew T. Butts

on

October 16, 1990

## Dr. Morris Slavin

Dr. Morris Slavin was born on July 11, 1913 in Kiev, Russia, the son of Lazar and Vera Slavin. Following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917, Dr. Slavin's parents decided to immigrate to the United States. They arrived in Youngstown in 1923. Here, Dr. Slavin completed his secondary education at Youngstown Rayen High School, graduating in 1933.

After his graduation from high school, Dr. Slavin worked for the City Street Department in Youngstown to help defray the cost for his schooling at Youngstown College. In 1935, Dr. Slavin was able to save enough money to attend college at Ohio State University. He graduated in 1938 with a Bachelor of Science degree. Dr. Slavin then returned to Youngstown where he worked as a steelworker and as a teacher until being drafted into the Army in 1942.

Upon his return from the service, Dr. Slavin began his graduate studies. He attended the University of Pittsburgh graduating with a Master of Arts degree in 1952. Dr. Slavin then moved on to Western Reserve University, achieving his Ph.D in 1961.

During this time, Dr. Slavin served as a part time member of the History Department at Youngstown University. In 1961 he was granted a full time position.

As the United States' involvement in Southeast Asia grew in the 1960's, Dr. Slavin became one of the first faculty members at the university to speak out against it. He became an active member in the Anti-War movement soon after. Dr. Slavin partici-

pated in a number of national protests against the Vietnam War, including the March on Washington following the invasion of Cambodia in 1970. He was also an active member in the peace movement at Youngstown State, participating in many events including the Peace Moratorium of 1969.

Dr. Slavin continued to be an integral part of the Youngstown State University History Department up until his retirement in 1981.

Presently, Dr. Slavin is a Professor Emeritus at Youngstown State University. He resides with his wife Sophie at 262 Outlook Drive, Youngstown, Ohio. He has continued to support human rights issues through his participation in groups such as Amnesty International. Dr. Slavin spends much of his free time reading, writing, and golfing.

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INTERVIEWEE: DR. MORRIS SLAVIN

INTERVIEWER: Matthew T. Butts

SUBJECT: protests, anti-war movement, Vietnam

DATE: October 16, 1990

B: This is an interview with Dr. Morris Slavin for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Anti-War Movement at YSU During the 1960's, by Matthew Butts at DeBartolo Hall, Youngstown State University, on October 16, 1990, at approximately 11:00 a.m.

B: Tell me a little bit about where you're from and your family background.

S: I happen to have been born in Kiev, Russia. My mother was a dentist by profession. My father was a dentist by apprenticeship. After the Bolshevik Revolution, they decided that there was no place for them in Mother Russia. They had relatives here, two sisters. One lived here in Youngstown, one was in Warren. They decided to take the family, myself, my younger brother and my younger sister. I was, I think, about nine years old when we left Russia. In 1923, we came to Youngstown. I have been here for over sixty years. Now, as far as intellectual matters, my father and mother were both members of the Socialist Bund, which was a Jewish socialist organization that opposed the Czar and his anti-Semitic policies, his anti-labor policies and his imperialist-oppressive policies of various nationalities. At the same time, because of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Bolsheviks, from what my father at least felt, were very intolerant of the possibility of developing a cultural Yiddish life.

Since my father was very much interested in intellectual matters, as well as with Yiddish literature and Yiddish language, he felt that there was no place for him in Russia. This is why my family decided to come to America, happily, I should say, decided to come to America.

So that's my background. Of course I went to the old Elm Street School, here. Then I went to Madison School. In Junior High, I went to East High School. Then I graduated from Rayen High School. I had a very fine background. At that time, I think, Rayen had a great reputation. It was academically, one of the best schools, I think, in the country. Certainly in the state. Then, after I graduated, which was in the very depth of the Depression, 1933, I certainly didn't have the money to go on to a university so I went part-time to Youngstown College, which was already here. I was working on the City Street Department. I worked from 1933 to 1935 and then I saved up enough money and with the help of the National Youth Administration, it enabled me to go to Ohio State. I got my degree from Ohio State in teaching, teaching History and English. My two majors were History and English literature.

I went to the steel mills then because there were no teaching jobs available. I worked in two steel mills. Then, I got a job in the school system, I might say, for very little. They paid me very, very little and I stayed there a year and a half and then I was in the Army, I was drafted into the Army. I stayed in the Army about two years and I came back. I went back into high school and started working on my Doctorate. First I should say, I went back to get my Masters at the University of Pittsburgh and then after that, I went for my Doctorate and got my Doctorate at Western Reserve University in French History. I was always interested in the French Revolution.

B: When did you first come to Youngstown College as a faculty member?

S: I think it was about 1948, part time. I was still going for my Masters and for my Doctorate.

B: What was Youngstown College and Youngstown State like in the 1960's? Say from 1965 to 1970? What changes?

S: I think in 1965 is when it became recognized as a growing institution because we became a state university, of course, in 1967, I think it was. I went to teach for a year at a New York University called University of Stonybrook on Long Island. I had a very nice year there. When I came back, we had already become a state university. I went full-time in 1961.

I became a full-time instructor in 1961, because I got my Ph.D, my Doctorate in 1961. I could see there was a big change, of course, since we became a state institution. Then it expanded both in terms of buildings and in terms of faculty. We got a lot of Doctorates, Ph.D's, which we did not have. We didn't have too many of them when I started teaching here.

B: What was the physical appearance of Youngstown State before it became a state university?

S: They had a lot of different buildings. We taught classes in places like Pollock Hall, various churches and all over the neighborhood really. The only place that would be recognized as a building was what is now known as Jones Hall. Once, of course, we became a state university, then we built. We did have a library where the Administration Building is now. This was a library but, of course, nothing like what it is today. There were some serious and very good instructors here, good students, but of course, it was on a small scale.

B: At what period did you first become opposed to the United States' involvement in Vietnam?

S: I think what happened was that it was almost a universal movement of dissent in the universities. I don't remember exactly where it originated. Maybe Cornell or one of those universities, where it started off. I remember reading, of course, the literature. We all thought it was a bad mistake on our part. Most of us thought it didn't really matter to the United States whether Vietnam was Communist, Monarchist, Fascist, Nationalist, Democratic or what have you. Because we felt, and I think we were proven right in this, that the real opposition to Vietnam came from China, and happened as you know, some years later, when China invaded Vietnam.

We felt that we really didn't have any reason for fighting the Vietnamese after all, the right of self determination is a natural and universal democratic right. We felt that the Vietnamese had a perfect right to whatever regime they wished to establish. We felt that by supporting the reactionary regime of the generals there, we were playing into the hands of the Communists. In other words, what was happening was that in opposing the Nationalist Movement of Ho Chi Minh, though he was a Communist, that's true, but primarily he was a Vietnamese Nationalist, we felt that we were creating a lot of Communists. People who were simply Nationalists, originally.

I remember signing a petition which went to President Johnson. I thought there were about 5,000 or so signatures. I think it asked to abide by the agreement that had been signed between President Eisenhower and the Vietnamese. I have forgotten which....It might have been Ho Chi Minh, I'm just not sure. But they had made an agreement and from what I understand, from what I read, we broke the agreement. We felt that this was an expansion of Communism. Most of us felt that it was more a Nationalist movement than anything else.

B: When did the students first become aware of the United States' involvement?

S: I think as we began to draft masses of young men and we had several hundred thousand people there, a lot were opposed to the draft, because they felt that this was an unjust war. So there was this opposition and a kind of ideological opposition but also, of course, people simply didn't want to go to the jungles of Vietnam.

B: When and why did you first decide to become active in the Anti-war movement?

S: I felt that it was my duty. I had some understanding as just as many of us had. Students were looking for guidance and some leadership and we had debates and spoke out. We had demonstrations. I marched at several demonstrations in New York and in Washington. Massive mass movements. All kinds of people supported the peace movement not just students. Workers, business people, professional people. It became a great mass movement. We had, I remember, a demonstration on the square in Youngstown. I don't know how many people, maybe 1,500 people or so. We marched from the campus down to the square and spoke out against the war.

B: Was that the Peace Moratorium of the Spring of 1969?

S: I think so.

B: The other marches you were involved in, do you remember any specific dates or years?

S: I think in New York, I marched in the Spring of 1967 and in Washington, it was after the invasion of Cambodia, during Nixon's administration. After we invaded Cambodia there was a big demonstration in Washington. I don't remember exactly when it was.

B: When did you first become active, the general time frame, at YSU?

S: Probably about 1965 or 1966. Shortly after Johnson's election in 1964. There was a general upsurge of the anti-war movement in the United States.

B: Was it a popular or more active membership then, or was it limited to a few?

S: Oh, no, no. I think it became a very popular movement. There were organizations, there were groups more or less politically conscious. But I think most people were simply opposed to the war. They felt it was an unjust war. I don't know whether they belonged to anything. They simply were just opposed to the war and they came out to these demonstrations and signed petitions, wrote letters and so on.

B: What was the general feeling of the student body towards the peace movement and the peace activists?

S: I think, like the rest of the nation, I think the student body in Youngstown was divided. There were some who were strong supporters of the war and they had followers too. That was the point. The whole nation was divided. The campuses were divided. That was true of our own. I remember attending a debate. I wasn't a debater, but I was there when the partisan feelings were very warm and passionate. There were some who felt this was a place where we had to stop Communism. Then, the others of course, those of us who didn't believe this, we thought it was a Nationalist movement and we were on the other side. So each side had its supporters. Very passionate supporters. A lot of applause and so on. But the debate was more or less a formal debate as I recall. There were no cat-calls there was no hollering, no attempt to stop the speakers. I mean, they heard them out. But they applauded very vigorously one side or the other.

B: As the war progressed, did the student body and the faculty members active in the anti-war movement grow?

S: Yes. I think that was obvious among the various campuses. There were, of course, riots as you know, at least riots in Chicago. There was this great riot in 1968, I guess it was. Humphrey was running against Nixon. Wait, I think it was 1972.

B: There were riots in Detroit at the Democratic Convention. Is that...

S: Yes.

B: It was 1968.



S: Okay, 1968. Well this was kind of a thing that happened all across the country. There were demonstrations here, as far as I know, I don't remember there was any kind of violence in demonstrations. Nothing like that.

B: Do you recall what students or what faculty members would be supportive of the war?

S: I remember some of them but it's hard to recall them. I think mostly those in humanities and the college of Arts and Sciences had a lot of opposition to the war. You didn't have that kind of opposition, say in the College of Engineering, partly because of their technical background, but the College of Arts and Sciences, I think throughout the United States, the Colleges of Arts and Sciences tended to be anti-war. That was true of the History Departments, it was true of the English Department, the Language Departments. Again, I don't want to generalize and say that every historian was, obviously not, it wasn't true. But by and large, I think it was true that the Colleges of Arts and Sciences tended to be opposed to the war.

B: What events stand out as major and significant during the period of the anti-war movement?

S: I remember the demonstrations we had here on the campus. I think it was shortly after the Cambodian invasion. Some of us didn't teach that one day, or the morning, whatever it was. I remember there were a number of speakers. I was one of the speakers there. I believe that there were cameras taking pictures of the demonstration. I'm not sure who it was but I would imagine it would be the FBI. I don't know this but the rumor was that there were agents here on campus. That was one thing. The other thing was that I remember was our demonstration that we marched from the campus to the square, I'd say about 1,500. Quite a massive demonstration to the square and the traffic was rerouted. We had our speakers. I think we had a number of people from the labor movement that spoke also. Also, a number of churches were involved. I remember I spoke at the Presbyterian church one time and received surprisingly warm applause, almost universal applause. There were several hundred people there.

So it was a widespread movement, it was not just a student movement, not just a bunch of red professors. Churches were involved, business people were involved, some of the trade unions, more progressive, I'd say, trade unions were opposed to the war. Though, by and large, I will say that the trade union movement, the working class movement, supported the administration.

B: Professor Mark Shutes, I don't know if you recall him...

S: Yes, Sociology.

B: Do you remember him as a student in the peace movement?

S: No, I don't.

B: He made reference to the march to the square during the peace moratorium of 1969, that the business community was very unsupportive. Do you have any recollections of that?

S: No, I don't. I remember meeting with the mayor. I was one of the people, there must have been twenty of us, fifteen or twenty of us. There was Al Shipka, who was one of the directors of the AFL-CIO, the steelworkers union came down with us and we were trying to...What happened was that a number of right-wing groups were trying to persuade the mayor not to give us a permit to demonstrate but finally, it was obvious that it would have been an illegal act on the administration's part. We had a right, after all, to speak out against the war. So we did get the permit, finally, and we spoke up. It could very well be that he's right, of course. The business community might have been opposed to this, simply opposed to any kind of demonstration in the streets.

B: You made reference to some right-wing groups. Do you know any names of them?

S: Yes. The Young Republicans, I think they were called. That wasn't their name. I have forgotten the name. The Young...something. It might have been close to the Young Republicans but at the moment I forgot the name of this....I think it was the Young Americans for Freedom or something like that. I think that's what they called it. Something of that nature. They were extremely right-wing, well not extremely. They were a right-wing group. They supported the war. They were opposed to our demonstrations.

B: That was a campus organization?

S: That was a campus organization. Right. An interesting thing was that a number of people who became extremely active in the anti-war movement started out as being supporters of Johnson's Administration Policy in Vietnam, including the Protestant Minister here, whose name at the moment escapes me. He turned very militantly against the war. But he started off as being a supporter. There were others who had finally become very

militant in the anti-war movement, but began by thinking it was an anti-Communist crusade.

B: What was Youngstown like as far as a community goes in the 1960's. Was it basically a conservative community?

S: I'd say basically, it was conservative. But it had progressive movements of various types, political movements and certainly peace movements. Churches were active in the Peace Movement. Catholic churches, for example, became...Young people in the Catholic churches, Newman, became active in the anti-war movement.

B: Was there much community support for the anti-war movement?

S: That, I wouldn't say. I don't think there was any kind of violent opposition either. I think a lot of people simply were neutral or perhaps, simply not interested at all. Probably, I think it would be correct to say that...well, I'd say probably the majority sentiment would be against the demonstrations and against the peace movement, rather conservative.

B: Do you recall what Youngstown State was like following the shootings at Kent State? What impact did that have on you, personally?

S: Yes, I think that we were all shocked by this and angered because I remember Nixon's statement. Instead of blaming the shooting on the National Guard, he blamed it on the demonstrators. What he said was that violence is going to bring out violence. In other words, the demonstrators were responsible. There was a good bit of opposition to him. I think that aroused a lot of opposition here on the campus.

B: What was the student body's response and the anti-war movement's response to the shootings?

S: Well, I think they were sympathetic to the students by and large.

B: Was there any demonstrations planned in support of it?

S: Yes, against the war. There were demonstrations. The following day, I think, perhaps, a number of us didn't teach. We met out classes, I think and I remember I said I was willing to answer questions but I wasn't going to give a formal lecture in History. This was not the time. A number of people didn't even meet their classes.

B: As far as not meeting your classes, what was YSU's administration's feelings towards actions like that?

- S: The administration was opposed to that kind of an action, as I recall. The president, who was at that time, Pugsley, was a staunch supporter of the war.
- B: As far as other aspects of administration, did the pro-war support permeate all of the administration, did you feel?
- S: No, I don't think so. No, of course not. The administration was split also. There were some who were sympathetic to the movement and some simply, who did not take any position.
- B: Did President Pugsley undertake any actions as to discourage the anti-war movement on this campus?
- S: I remember this...I can't pinpoint it, but I remember that he endorsed a meeting that was organized by the Army. I don't remember what officer came up. He spoke, as I recall, at the Youngstown Playhouse. President Pugsley endorsed the meeting and gave the impression that the whole university community was behind this, which, of course, was not true at all.
- B: Do you recall any individuals other than President Pugsley who were actively trying to disrupt the anti-war movement on this campus?
- S: I wouldn't say he was trying to disrupt, I think he was opposed to it. Not that he didn't have a right to oppose it but he never tried to close down a meeting or to disrupt it. That never happened, no. No I think that there were individuals in the administration who were opposed, but there was no conservative effort made to stop or in any way, to interfere with our own right of expression. That never happened in Youngstown.
- B: In previous interviews with Dr. Shutes, from dealings with Professor Budge, a name came up, Dr. Robert Smith, who was Assistant Dean of Arts & Sciences during this period. They made reference to him checking classes to make sure that classes were met. What reasons and motivations do you believe were for this?
- S: I have no idea. I had no relationship of that type with Dean Smith. I don't know. He certainly never came around to check my classes.
- B: What was your role or responsibilities as an active member of the anti-war movement on this campus?
- S: I spoke out and I think perhaps one of the things that I would do periodically was during the national elections, we would devote one period of our history

classes to a discussion where I would encourage, of course, opinions from both sides. Then I would speak also and I would say, "Look, I don't speak officially, but I want to speak honestly with you about my theories about this." We did this in 1968 and we did it in 1972. As I said, I spoke at a demonstration here, I spoke at the Presbyterian Church and I spoke in the auditorium.

B: At any events or any rallies in support of the anti-war movement, was there any violence by YSU students?

S: I know of no such violence. It might have happened but if it did, I'm certainly not familiar with it.

B: Do you recall any other faculty members who were actively involved...?

S: Well you, of course, mentioned a number of them. Alice Budge, of course, was very active. Quite a number of them. There is no point in my just listing them.

B: Could you name at least five that you feel were very important?

S: As I remember, Professor Roberts was very active in the movement, Professor Lowell Satre was active in the movement. In the English Department, there were quite a number of people, the Minors, two Minors, Ward and Thelma Minor. Professor Henky, and as I remember, Taylor Alderman, who was in the administration later was also active in the anti-war movement. He marched with us at the demonstration. So there was quite a number.

I became convinced that it would be a terrible mistake on the part of the United States to support the French continued occupation of Indochina. It was known as Indochina. I was doing an article, I was doing some research. I went through the current papers and this was even before Dien Ben Phu, which was in 1954, as I recall. So this was even before Dien Ben Phu, when there was an upsurge of the Vietnamese or the Indochinese Nationalist movement which the French were suppressing and to which we were beginning to give aid to the French against the movement. I felt that we should have taken just the opposite stance. We should have endorsed the movement as we had in other places. We supported Nationalist movements in other places and I felt that this was a bad mistake because, as I said, we were creating supporters for Ho Chi Minh and at that same time, we were betraying our own democratic traditions. This, I said, was before 1954, when I was doing this research on an article, which I never published but I used the thing for my talks later on.

Once we got involved, we were of course, already involved in the Eisenhower Administration, especially the Kennedy Administration and even more so, of course, in the Johnson Administration. We went back. We talked about having observers and military experts, military advisors and I felt that this was a step in getting involved, which of course is what happened. We got more and more involved. So that my opposition stemmed from the opposition of the continuing occupation of Indochina by the French before it became the Vietnam War, itself.

B: Do you think most faculty members that were opposed to the war held the same views...Not as much as a battle between Communist forces and a Noncommunist camp, but an issue of Nationalism?

S: I think so. I think a lot of people realized that it was a nationalist upsurge. It happened to have been a Communist upsurge, rather a Communist face but it was primarily Nationalist. The best example, as I said, I'll repeat this, that I felt that it didn't really matter what kind of regime was established in Vietnam because the Vietnamese, the real opponents, the real enemies of Vietnam, for a thousand years had been China. So it seemed to me that the smart thing for us to do, the diplomatic thing to do, if you will, perhaps the cynical thing to do was to play on the differences between Vietnam and China. At that time we were opposed to China, very much and used Vietnam as an ally in the struggle against Chinese Imperialism.

B: As far as students go, how did they rationalize their opposition to the war? Was it along this basis or more on emotional issues?

S: No, I think most of them were opposed to it ideologically. At least those that I met. I shouldn't say most. I don't know, I didn't meet most, after all. The student leaders that I met were I think politically aware. And were opposed to the war on a political basis, on an ideological basis.

B: Do you recall any of the names of any of the student leaders?

S: I don't right off the cuff. No I would have to look at my records and see who some of them were.

B: Could I pull out a couple names? John Greenman?

S: Yes, he was one of the opponents.

B: Professor Shutes, was one that we already brought up.

S: I think Alice Budge would probably know many more than I would.

B: What do you think the peak of the Peace Movement was? If you had to pick a year, which year would it be?

S: Probably after the invasion of Cambodia. That would probably be it. That and then probably the Democratic Convention in Chicago.

B: As far as the administration goes, we've already discussed President Pugsley being opposed to the anti-war movement, do you think it was evident that the United States was going to gradually withdraw or pull out of Vietnam, that those faculty members who were active in the movement had anything to worry about as far as repercussions from the administration?

S: I don't think so. This never reached that stage. Not in Youngstown, anyway.

B: Do you recall Professor Chap Morrison?

S: Yes, very much so. Of course he was one of the leaders. He is a good example of...He started off by being a strong pro-ponent of the war. He supported the war on idealistic grounds- that this was an anti-Communist war. Then he reached the position that so many did, that this was not so. So he became a very strong anti-war activist. But I want to stress that he started out being pro-war and then became anti-war.

B: What was your reaction to Dr. Jones' closing of the library in support of the Peace Moratorium in 1969? It seems Dr. Budge mentioned that that was the only campus building that closed down during that period.

S: I don't remember that, I'm sorry.

B: Do you recall what a typical day was like during the war? Was the peace movement active in a daily manner or was it...

S: Not really. I don't think it was any different from any other day except for the demonstrations and the occasional meetings. Classes went on. No classes were disrupted as in some other universities. There was no such thing.

B: Do you feel the students at YSU did all they could to aid the Peace Movement?

S: Well, I thought that on the whole, our students became aware of the issues involved and took a position. Now, of course, most students came here because they were

interested in completing their studies and getting a degree and getting a job. One can understand that. But even those who were involved in the peace movement, at the same time, realized the practical aspects of all the university life. So they had to study and they did. They did their homework and so on.

B: Of all the faculty and students at YSU, if you had to give a number of those involved, how many were there, would you say?

S: That's pretty difficult because nobody ever took a survey of that. I would say that a good 10% would be active of the student body. Maybe another 10% would be quite warmly sympathetic. Then the rest would be neutral or simply not interested.

B: At what point did the anti-war movement begin to lessen or begin to fade?

S: I think once it was obvious that we were pulling troops out and the war was winding down and we supposedly "Vietnamized" the war, that is when we left the arms for the Vietnamese and pull our own troops out then the anti-war movement itself began to decline.

B: Is there any event or issue that a large percent of the anti-war protesters took up following the conclusion of the Vietnam War Era?

S: Restate that question.

B: Is there anything, any issues or events that continued in opposition to...

S: That continued, in other words... This was one of the tragic things of this movement that had potential to reform some things in our life. Quite a number of things needed reforming. Unfortunately, there was no permanent organization that remained. No political movement arose as a result of this. What you had then was a preparation for the conservative reaction of the 1980's. By the 1970's, you had already seen this division and this lessening of social awareness. By the 1980's, of course, you had the revival of the conservative movement, which I think was a tragedy.

B: Do you feel that the anti-war movement had a direct impact on the United States' withdrawal from Vietnam?

S: I think it contributed. Absolutely. I think it contributed to it.

B: Is there anything that you, yourself would have liked to have seen done differently in the anti-war movement or in your participation in it?



S: I would have liked to have seen some kind of a liberal progressive permanent organization arise that could have been part of a political party or had then become the basis or the heart of a political party. It could have turned America away from its conservative trend of the seventies and the eighties. The potential was there, I felt in the sixties. But there was a great deal, I think, also of sheer anarchy. There was no real ideological or theoretical basis for the movement so it simply dissipated.

B: Is there anything else that you think would be important to add at this time that I didn't cover?

S: No, I think that perhaps we can draw certain conclusions from this and that is that as long as America remains a democracy with the right to dispute foreign policy, as well as domestic policy there will always be opposition to foreign ventures, just as today there still is a movement against our participation, our support of reactionary generals in Central America. Many still support the various guerrilla movements in Central America because they see the same kind of reactionaries in charge at the expense of the mass population. Mass killings in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and so on. I'm hoping that this will have an impact on the administration's role in the Middle East, as well. That they will not plunge, frankly, not plunge into a war.

B: Okay, well thank you very much for your time.

S: Okay, Matt.

END OF INTERVIEW