

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Area Jewish Project

Personal Experiences

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MIRIAM AND MILDRED OZER

Interviewed

by

Irving Ozer

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: MIRIAM AND MILDRED OZER

INTERVIEWER: Irving Ozer

SUBJECT: life experiences, education, Youngstown history

DATE: July 1, 1986

IO: This is an interview with Miriam and Mildred Ozer for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Jewish Community in Youngstown. The date is July 1, 1986. The interviewer is Irving Ozer.

Mildred, when were you born?

MIL: I was born in Youngstown in 1911 in the house we grew up in on Wick Oval.

IO: How about you Miriam?

MIR: I was born in 1916. I left in 1935 and went to Baltimore and that took care of me and my Youngstown life.

IO: You were both born in the house?

MIR: I was the only child of the family who was born in the hospital.

IO: What hospital?

MIR: I don't know. It might have been South Side Hospital. I think the doctor was Joseph T. Brody.

IO: Give me your recollections of Wick Oval? Describe it and your recollections of growing up there.

MIL: I think Wick Oval was a delightful place for any child to grow up. It was a very cohesive neighborhood. My favorite playing place was on the Oval proper. We also had tennis courts.

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MIR: I remember mom always taking us to things that came to town. I remember "Uncle Tom's Cabin" at the Stage and Repertory Theater. I was so involved in it.

MIL: I remember the flood in Youngstown in 1914, I think.

IO: Going back to the Oval, give me some recollections of people who lived there when you were young.

MIL: Wick Oval was a fairly middle class neighborhood. Along Spring Street the Ford's lived on one side and the Pollack's lived on the other side. I remember the Ford's had a beautiful party in the garden of their home. There were the Cunningham's on Wick Oval, and the Campbell's. One of my friends lived a few doors down, Helen Fickes. We also had a well and pump in the middle of the Oval where everybody went to get water to drink.

IO: Can you give a recollection of what happened to the family business?

MIR: I don't remember the wholesale grocery business too much except that we used to get large cartons of canned goods that we would put down in the cellar. The first crisis was in 1919.

IO: Were you aware of a change in family condition?

MIR: Not really. I think mother made a definite effort to keep our lives normal.

MIL: We continued to go to movies, for example, and usually stopped for an ice cream soda before going home.

IO: When were you first aware of Zionism?

MIR: I think I've always been aware of Zionism. We were one of the few families who kept completely kosher, I would say. When speakers came to town who were Jewish, they were almost always invited to our house for meals or for an evening.

IO: What did Zionism mean to you?

MIL: It was a way of life. I didn't know that any others were not Zionist.

IO: How did you two get involved in Zionism?

MIL: Everybody was Zionistic.

MIR: I was never involved in much.

MIL: We used to go out for the National Fund.

IO: Flag days and flower days?

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MIL: Yes.

IO: Where did you go?

MIR: At one time I remember working in the front room on the organization of the plans. Tables were set up and things were done according to sections of town.

IO: Was this splitting the city up into sections for the purpose of going out and collecting money from the blue boxes in the homes?

MIR: It was going out and knocking on doors. I don't think it was the collection of the boxes.

IO: What was the general reception you got at the homes?

MIR: I recall we were well-received for the most part. In those days there weren't large contributions.

IO: You didn't notice any difference in attitude between Eastern European Jews and the old-time German Jews.

MIL: I didn't. I really wasn't aware of a difference. They were just Jewish.

MIR: I never felt bad about a refusal because it was Depression time. I felt that if they couldn't afford it it wasn't fair to take money out of their mouths.

IO: You never went down on East Federal Street?

MIL: We used to stay on the north side or went shopping on West Federal Street.

MIR: I remember we had picnics out at Southern Park.

IO: You didn't pick up the feeling that the Eastern European Jews were an embarrassment to the Western Jews?

MIL: I don't remember that.

MIR: That would have been 1935, 1936, and I was gone by then. In talking about that, I know that in our homes we did not speak Yiddish.

IO: Tell me about school.

MIL: My grade school was Madison. I had a happy school life. When I was going into seventh grade, the old Rayen High School became Central Junior High. I started my sophomore year at Rayen High. That was then a place where you were proud to go to school.

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IO: Any teachers or fellow students who you remember?

MIL: I remember Mr. Herr; I took journalism class with him. He became principal after I graduated.

IO: When did you graduate?

MIL: 1928, June. Then I went to Ohio University in Athens and had a two-year course there.

MIR: Madison was first. I can vaguely remember a teacher by the name of Miss Brown and someone by the name of Rice. The only other thing about Madison was that we were given pennies and we went across the street after school to a little grocery store, I think it was Froomkin's, and we picked up Mary Janes or those little wax bottles with syrup in them and ate them on the way home. Then I went to Hayes for a couple of years, next was to Rayen. The one agonizing thing I remember was going to Hebrew school on Lincoln Avenue. It gives me chills to this day. It was a beautiful mansion with a chandelier. I remember going to class there. I think Mr. Haines was the teacher. I never considered myself dumb or stupid until I got into that class. Those kids could read Hebrew so fast. I did that so slow and it was pure agony.

IO: Who were some of your classmates?

MIR: I haven't the vaguest idea. I hated it with a passion and didn't want anything to do with it.

IO: Tell us about some recollections of downtown.

MIR: I remember we could go to Rayen High School walking down Wick Avenue. We had to cross tracks to catch the bus. Right near the tracks was a doll repair place that had all these dolls and wigs in there. I remember the Hippodrome Theater that was so plush.

IO: What other theaters do you remember?

MIR: There was the Park Theater that had different plays. Ballet recitals were held there. That was on East Federal.

IO: What do you remember about the Depression?

MIL: I don't have terribly awful memories of the Depression. We couldn't do all the things that we used to do. There weren't any big parties at the house anymore. But I don't ever remember the table not having adequate food.

IO: What transpired?

MIL: It wasn't as easy to make ends meet. I remember the bakery

being staffed, and the men who were drivers being immigrants.

IO: Do you remember the long lines of people at the bakery?

MIL: I remember things being reduced so people could buy a loaf of bread for not very much.

IO: Do you remember the first movie you saw?

MIL: No. Before movies there was the symphony and we had a repertory group that did some nice plays.

IO: Do you remember what was behind the Hebrew Institute?

MIR: I think there was a Youngstown Playhouse.

IO: You never told us how you got started with the Federation.

MIL: I worked at the bakery until they closed and from there I went to work at Albro Packing for a while.

IO: Did you work on Bryson or Lincoln?

MIL: Both. Malvina Kline was the social worker. At that particular time they had just hired an executive director whose name was Peretz. They needed a secretary so I was given the job. I worked there from 1936 to 1939. During that time we moved the office from downtown to Lincoln Avenue and then to Bryson Street.

IO: Memories of Hitler and news of Hitler didn't hit you in Youngstown at all?

MIL: Yes, it did. I remember thinking it was impossible for something like this to be happening, that somewhere it was exaggerated. Before I left there were already some refugees from Germany in Youngstown.

IO: What brought you from graduation to going into nursing?

MIR: It was the heart of the Depression and I think it was expected of all of us. There was nowhere to turn to and I wanted something worthwhile. I heard through Florence Schwartz that she was applying to Sinai Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland to go into nurses training and there was no tuition. It was the only thing that I had heard of that I could go to and not have to pay. I applied and I was accepted for February and she applied and was approved for the following June. I think the difference was in the age, where the birthdays came.