

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz

Personal Experience

O.H. 1511

HENRY BERTOLINI

Interviewed

by

Matthew Butts

on

July 9, 1992

Mr. Henry Bertolini

Mr. Henry Bertolini was born on July 15, 1921, in Youngstown, Ohio, the son of Emilio and Lucia Bertolini. In his early childhood, his parents moved to the then rural Austintown Township. He attended secondary school at Austintown Fitch High School, graduating in 1939. Following high school, Bertolini attended Youngstown College until 1942. Bertolini's post-secondary education was interrupted by the United States involvement in World War II. He enlisted in the United States Army, serving in the Pacific Theater of operations. After his discharge from the army in 1946, Bertolini returned to Youngstown. He gained employment with his father's company, the Bertolini Brothers Marble Company, eventually assuming the leadership of it with his brother until the company closed in 1977. At this point, Bertolini became involved with the Lancaster Travel Service.

Throughout his life in Youngstown, Mr. Bertolini remained involved in the local business community. He served as a past president of the Youngstown Rotary Club. He also remains an active member of many other organizations, including the Easter Seal Society of Mahoning County and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Presently, Mr. Bertolini continues to work at Lancaster Travel. He resides with his wife, Rose, at 110 South Beverly Avenue, Austintown, Ohio. Mr. Bertolini spends much of his free time traveling, woodworking, and enjoying vintage automobiles.

MB: This is an interview with Henry Bertolini for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz, by Matthew Butts, on July 9, 1992, at 3700 Mahoning Avenue, Austintown, Ohio, at 9:45 a.m.

Okay. Let us start off with a little bit of biographical background. Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood, such as where you grew up, where you went to school, things like that?

HB: Well, I was born on the north side of Youngstown. In those days, we delivered without needing a hospital. It was made at home. I do not recall the exact location of that home, but then, we moved to Crandall Avenue. We lived on Crandall Avenue until I was about five, at which time, my father built this building, which we are in now, as a marble showroom and a marble fabricating plant. He built a home at 3841 Mahoning Avenue. I moved out here when I was five years old. I attended school in my entirety at Austintown Fitch High School. At that time, all 12 grades were in that building. It is now known as Austintown Middle School. From there, I attended -- at that time it was Youngstown College -- for about a year and a half.

That was at the time of World War II. I graduated from high school in 1939, and in 1941, of course, the war broke out. In 1942, I was inducted into the service. In the service, I was a private. I went to Fort McClullen. From there, I was made to go to Fort Benning at an officer training school. I graduated there in 1942 as a Lieutenant II. I served in the United States, in various training camps as an infantry training officer until 1944, at which time I was sent to the South Pacific. I served in the Phillipines. From the Phillipines, I went to Japan. I served in army occupation there for about a year.

I came home in 1945. I entered my father's business because he was by himself at the time and needed assistance. So, I did not finish my college education. Instead, I went right into the business and worked at that until we closed our doors in 1977. In 1978, I opened up a travel agency in our same building, Lancaster Travel Agency, and we are still here to this date.

MB: What was your father's name?

HB: My father was Emilio Giovanni Bertolini. Giovanni is the Italian equivalent for John.

MB: Was he an immigrant?

HB: Oh, yes. Yes, he immigrated to the United States from Italy, I am going to say, about 1910. I surmised that only because the first born was born in 1911, and my father was not there for the birth. He had already left with the idea of coming to the United States and finding a place to stay until he could call for his wife to come. It is unfortunate, though, that by the time he got here and got situated, World War I broke out. So, they were never able to get together until he was

able to bring my mother over in 1920, and I was born in 1921.

MB: Do you know what town he was from?

HB: Oh, yes. Oseco Viccidivercuma in the providence of Julia, which is in the northern part of Italy. It forms a triangle with Venice and Pre-est. If you were to almost make an equilateral triangle, at the peak of that triangle would be the city of Uginact, and we were a little small village. I visited there. In fact, I spent almost a year there when I was four years old. The peak of the equilateral triangle is Houdinan. Just outside of there, a few kilometers outside of there, is a small village known as Hoseko. Both my parents came from there, as did a lot of Italian immigrants who came to this country and actually ended up working for the Bertolini Brothers Company.

MB: Do you remember much about Youngstown, growing up on Crandall Avenue?

HB: No, not really. Not really. I have more of a memory probably because of repeating the year I spent in Italy with my grandfather. I actually spent time with my maternal grandparents because my paternal grandparents had died and my maternal grandmother had died. My grandfather had remarried, and so he had a second wife. I knew her. Of course, we have pictures of that vacation and everything else. In talking at home, we relived those memories, and that is why I have a great recall of that instance. That was just when I was five years old.

Then, I had occasion to go back again, and we spent six months when I was thirteen years old. I was supposed to come back and go into the sixth grade, and I did not make it back until after Christmas. I still managed to proceed to the next grade, even though I had only six months, or rather three months, of schooling. So, I do not recall anything on the north side. Here, of course, yes. I had come back, and my parents were perturbed because I was unable to speak American English at the time. I had spent a year in Italy, and I could only speak Italian in our dialect, which was Fotalon. But, as children are, in about two or three weeks, I picked up enough that I could go to school when I was supposed to go.

I remember more of Austintown Township because we were out here in the sticks. There was hardly anything here except the lumber yard next to us. We were one of the three homes here, one along side of each other. Other than that, there were not many homes out here in 1925.

MB: Describe for me the growth of Austintown that you have seen over the years.

HB: Well, what I have seen in Austintown, of course, is that thinking that Mahoning Avenue, at the time when we moved out here, the road between Meridian Road and Raccoon Road was known as Whitler Boulevard. In my early youth, it was repaved. At that time, it was brick and was three lanes wide, and that is where it got its name of Whitler Boulevard. They thought that it was going to be quite big

because Security Lumber Company was the developer of Austintown. They had a lot of roads put in, padded with concrete, the roadways, but there was not much activity. Why, I do not know.

At that time, it was a farming community. We were one of the first schools to get out in Spring. We would always be out either the third or fourth week in May. City schools always went into June, the first or second week into June. So, we were left out presumably. At least we children came to think that it was because we were a farming community and the children had to go home and help their parents with the plowing or whatever they did.

There was a little center at Austintown, Jordan. We had an automobile agency up there. We had a Ford agency on Whittler Circle owned by Abe Frank. I can recall that one, which became an aluminum sheeting plant. Then, it became Ohio Chair and so on, but that was the one industry that was here. The lumber yard next to us and Bertolini Brothers were probably the only industry out here. Homes started to build up along Mahoning Avenue, very little industrial. I do not know whether we are classified as commercial or industrial. We had a grocery store up there right across from Abe Frank, which was the Shivoni Store, the only grocery store around. From there on out at that time, right at the corner of Raccoon and Mahoning there was an airport known as the Jones Airport, surprisingly. From there on out to Austintown, they were scarce. The homes were sparsely spaced. There was hardly any industry until you got out to Austintown. Then, there was a couple of automobile dealers out there. There was a gas station and, of course, Fitch High School. Although they expected Mahoning Avenue to become a commercial development, it was very slow. I have no idea why because, in your youth, you do not worry about those things. You have no idea why.

Then, it was only after World War II that things started to build. They built the new high school and built all those little elementary schools, Austintown Plaza, Mahoning Plaza. K-Mart came in there. Art Stiskle bought the corner there on Raccoon Road, and he has made a little plaza. We started to get out from the city and move out into the suburbs to the detriment of the inner city. Austintown was never a larger residential community either. It appeared that people preferred to go to Canfield, Boardman, or Poland. Austintown was considered to be blue-collared and therefore probably not desirable, at least for people considering building with an idea of their investment increasing in value. That is my opinion of the growth of Austintown Township.

MB: Did you have any occasions to visit the city of Youngstown while growing up?

HB: Oh, yes.

MB: What was it like?

HB: Well, I really enjoyed Youngstown. Again, if we go back earlier in my youth, when I learned to drive at 16, I used to take my mother downtown on Saturday

morning. I had to take her to town because she went to town to see a movie. Then she would shop, and I would pick her up at the back of Lowell's Market. At that time, Lowell's Market ran from Federal Street all the way back to Boardman Street. There is a big market. In fact, it even had an entrance coming out on Phelps Street. I would pick her up there about 6:00 at night. It was like clock work. Every Saturday, that was one of my duties. Of course, I enjoyed it because I would have the car to drive down by myself. I had to go down and pick her up.

We would go down to the theater. We, being on the west side, would go down to the Mahoning Theater that is down there just beyond Steel Street. You would go down by streetcar because the streetcar, at that time, ended at Meridian Road. Where the gas station is now there used to be a loop. The streetcar made a loop right there at that thing, never came out in Austintown Township. In the early years, we had a chitney. Boy, I remember him very well, but I cannot put a name on him. It was only an old four-door sedan automobile, but he would pick up people from the streetcar and take them out to Whitliff. In the early years, my mother and I would do that. We would take the streetcar and go down to Mahoning Theater. We would go down to the Theater. It was the matinee, ten cents. You would see a movie. You would see a serial. You would see the news reel, and you would see the coming attractions. You always stayed to see it twice because they did not push you out the door. That was one of the Saturday experiences that you grew up with as a child, movies. A lot of movies, a lot of serials. Then, as you got older, you went downtown to the Paramount, to the Warner, to the Keith Alby, to the State Theater, to Old Parke Theater.

Probably the nicest memories are Christmas time. It was really a Christmas in the city. You would go down there. Snow would be there. The streets would be full of people. The shoppers were jovial. We had a great time. At that time, you had Livingston's, Lustig's, McKelvey's, Strauss'. Grant was down town. You had three ten cent stores. You had Woolworth's and McCrory's and Kresky. You had Petrocus restaurant, which if you went down, you almost had to stop and have a sundae there before you came home because they had excellent ice cream. So, it was an experience to go down. During the Christmas season, you would probably go down four or five times. It was not just one trip and back because it got you into the spirit of Christmas. The shopping, the people working downtown were concerned about you coming in and buying something. They bent over backwards to be nice to you. It was so much different than it is now. We really enjoyed it, really enjoyed it. That is what I remember of downtown Youngstown.

MB: How did you meet Dr. Berkowitz?

HB: I have been thinking about that, and I think I probably met him because, at the time, Bertolini Brothers were marble and tile, contractors and I met him when we went up to inquire about some work over there that he wanted done in his

restrooms and things. We did some work in the chapel. We did some work around the arc. I know we did some changing in his toilets because I think they have marble toilet partitions up there, ceramic tile floors, and as was the case in a lot of the nicer churches here, you always had ceramic tile restrooms. And you always had marble toilet partitions rather than the metal, which came into being right after World War II and then started to knock marble out the market because we were too expensive. As I remember, I think that is how I first met Dr. Berkowitz.

MB: What does the temple of Rodef Sholom look like? Can you describe it for me, please?

HB: [Laughter] Well, the chapel itself, it looks more like a small theater because the floor is ramped. You start off at the back, and you go down to a lower level to where you would sit. The seats are not square with the arc, but they are in an arc. Of course, you have the, I do not know what they call it. Let us see. It is a shame when you get older. You get some memory blanks, and it is hard to recall the proper word. Part of the place of worship, I would think, where they kept the Tolek. On either side of that, of course, I would call it the arc. Of course, you have the Ten Commandments inscribed in the Jewish language. I do not know really what that language is called. That is about the only thing that I can think of because, other than that, I know they have rooms for classes, classrooms, something like what Christian churches have for Sunday schools, and so on. I think they have an auditorium.

MB: What was Dr. Berkowitz like?

HB: Well, for me, surprisingly, I expected something different, but I found him to be very outgoing, very personable, very likable. I think what made him likable was the fact that he was interested in you and did not look down on you or demean you because you were of another faith. I was a Catholic, and in those days, before the getting together of the faiths, there were some Catholics that were almost told not to enter a Protestant church, let alone a Jewish temple. But that did not bother me any, and finding him to be accepting someone like me as a Catholic, I thought it quite nice. We hit it off quickly, and we had no difficulty. I found him to be fair in business because we had to estimate what jobs would do and he allowed us to do it under those conditions. Of course, when people do that, you almost ensure the fact that you are going to do a job that more than meets his approval.

MB: What did Rabbi Berkowitz look like?

HB: [Laughter] Well, I do not know why you are asking me that. You must have pictures of him to be able to describe him, but I would say he was probably medium height. I think he was about five foot, ten inches. He was just a little

shorter than I. He combed his hair back quite flat. Other than that, I would not be able to describe him. I think he had dark hair, and I am kind of at a loss of words after that.

MB: Okay. Other than your initial business contact with Rabbi Berkowitz, what other contact did you have with him?

HB: Well, we were in Youngstown Rotary Club together. That is probably where I had more dealings with him than anywhere else. In the Rotary Club at that time, we only had three officers. We had a treasurer, a vice president, and a president. Once you became treasurer, it was automatic that you became next year's vice president, and ultimately the president, because it is the board of directors who nominate and select the officers. So, the board selects the treasurer. When you become president, you want your vice president to be able to work with you, so the vice president is allowed to select who will become treasurer.

I had selected, out of the board of directors, when I was vice president, a Major Knickerbocker from the Salvation Army. He was a big gentlemen, probably bigger than I am, quite robust, 200 pounds or so, very jovial, very nice man. He was anxious to do all these things for me because when you become president, your vice president is chairman of the club service avenue, which has about 30 committees under it. He has to make sure that all those committees function right, that they do things that you want to be done. So, it is very important that your vice president and you get along quite well. It is not somebody that you are going to be at odds with. So, that is the reason that you are allowed to select out of the board of directors who will be your vice president. Well, it so happens that Major Knickerbocker got a notice from the Salvation Army that he was going to be moved. So then, it became my duty, and another thing came into being.

Rotary International came out with an edict that from now on rotary clubs will include in the list of officers the president-elect. The gentleman, who having served as vice president, having no functions at all but just to become better acquainted with the operations of the club, so that during his term as president he can do a little better job. It was nice except, when you initiate the program, somebody is going to go from nothing right into president-elect, particularly in our instance because our treasurer that was going to be our vice president all of a sudden was gone. So, I had to pick somebody who would be my vice president, turned out to be president-elect. Out of the board of directors, I selected Sidney Berkowitz to be my so called vice president. Then, when the Rotary International said that your vice president will become the president-elect, he went then right to president-elect, and I had to pick another gentleman to be my vice president. So, in all of those times, you are on the board for two or three year terms. He served on the board for quite a few times.

It is in this context that I really got to know Sidney, and I found him to be very nice because in the Rotary Club there were not many Catholics years ago.

There were not very many of the Jewish faith either. One president was of the Jewish faith. That was Sidney Moyer who had a pants manufacturing plant down on Walnut Street. Bertolini Brothers had their office in the first floor of the Moyer Pants Plant back in the early days. This was before we moved out here to Whitler. So, that tells me that my dad got along with Jewish people as well as he did with the Catholics because he was a Catholic, of course, as well as my mother. There are a lot of things about racial problems, but I never found that. It was not until later in life that I found out that I was probably discriminated against because I was a Catholic. In my naiveness, I never realized that until somebody pointed it out to me. So, it makes you more tolerant.

But, there was not anything to be tolerant with Sidney. He was great. He did not make it a point to impress you with anything of the Jewish religion. He was a Rotarian, and we treated him as a Rotarian. I treated him as a Rotarian. I thought he had a great potential to be a good Rotary president. As it turned out, he was one of our, probably, better presidents because of his speaking ability, his knowledge, of his ability to bring people together. So, Sidney became president. He may have become one a year or so later, but I selected him to be my vice president. He became my president-elect, and therefore, served the year following my term. So, that is probably my closest association with him, and it was a great joy. I enjoyed him. I hope he enjoyed me. I do not know.

MB: What was his personality like?

HB: As I said, he was easy to work with. I never saw him in anger. When we had things to do, I think probably the other thing that I liked about him was that he always had a different point of view. I do not know what I could attribute that to. To his upbringing, his faith, or his, maybe some of the discriminations that he may have been subjected to. You never knew that from seeing him or knowing him because he never practiced it. I never saw any evidence of it. We had a lot of occasion in the three or four years that we served together on the board of directors. You meet at least once a month. You had a meeting, which you attend once a week, and you have committee meetings. You have all of these functions. You have all of our little fund raisers that we had at that time. Our major fund raiser was the Youngstown Charity Horse Show. So, you have a lot of those little things and a lot of social events that you went to. So, I think he had a different point of view. He was a great speaker, had wonderful enunciation, and was personable. I do not know how you could not like him. I do not follow him in his faith, you know, but he came up with some excellent reasons. One of them, of course, that he repeated a couple of times in some programs was, "If it was not for us Jews, there would not be a Catholic church." [Laughter] Of course, that is a fact that Christ was a Jew. So, that made it all the more poignant.

MB: Did he have a good sense of humor?

HB: I think so, yes. I think so. I think that is one of the reasons, as I say, he came up

with a different point of view. Yes, he had a good sense of humor, and I am thinking of one other thing. There are some Rotarians to this day. One of them is Bill Kostler, Bob Brooks, and a couple of other ones, Johnny Function. They are all past bretherens. But, Sidney Berkowitz, before he was president, he was called to make the invocation at the Rotary meeting, which we do, and because of three faiths we would have Catholic, the Jewish faith, a Protestant minister, and the salvation army minister. We never had one of the Moslem faith. Although we do have members of the Moslem faith, we never had a minister of the Moslem faith. So, they took turns in the chaplain committee to give the invocation, and I probably should not be saying this, not that it is bad. But, the Protestants make an invocation of about two or three minutes or four minutes blessing everything in sight and everybody, and they go on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on. Sidney Berkowitz would get up and make an invocation of one sentence, and very thought provoking sentences. I am trying to remember one while I am talking to you, but it is hard to concentrate. I am trying to remember a line.

I know something else. When my first daughter was married, I asked Sidney to make me a toast, and he wrote the toast for me so that I could give it at my daughter's wedding, our first wedding in the family. It was two sentences. No going on and on and on. None of this bologna. He was right to the point. What was that one that I liked so much? It has to do with us having what we want. I am sorry. It is wanting what you have, not having what you want. You should be desirous of what you already have instead of being desirous of other wants, in one sentence. To this day, when we have a minister get up in Rotary Club and he will make an invocation of two or three minutes, we look at each other and say, "Sidney Berkowitz, where are you?" [Laughter] So, even to this day, because of his succinctness and brevity and still thought provoking invocation, he is still remembered.

MB: Along with the Rotary, was he also involved with a number of other things within the community. Were you aware of anything else?

HB: No. He was involved with this inter-faith.

MB: Council of Churches?

HB: Well, yes, the Council of Churches, but also Ecumenical, the Ecumenical Movement that began late. We were in front of that Ecumenical Movement, or at least I thought I was because we did a lot of work in churches. We did Jewish temples, Orthodox churches, Byzantine churches, Catholic churches, and various denominations of the Protestant religion, Methodism, Baptist. So, you had to respect all these other religions. You should, anyway. They are just coming around to the fact that we are all praying to one God, and why should we not get together? But, it was the Catholic church that was the biggest one against that because it was that if you go into a Protestant church, you were

demeaning yourself. I never thought that, but that was one of the things. No. I am trying to think of that.

He may have worked with the Youngstown Horse Show. I think my principle dealings would have been in some way related to the Rotary Club because the Rotary Club would be involved with crippled children. At that time, we used to take crippled children to the Canfield Fair. We would take crippled children to Stambaugh Auditorium to see the firemen's show. We took them there for a Christmas show, but our principle activity was until just a few years ago the Youngstown Horse Show. That was a five day event. Most of the Rotarians would at some time be involved out there. Those, I think, were the only ones. No, I cannot think of any other because if it was a social event, it would have involved Rotary. No, I cannot think of anything outside of Rotary in which we participated unless it was work related. I mean by that that, if they wanted something done, we were the subcontractor who could do the job.

MB: Okay. Is there anything that we have not touched on that we need add?

HB: No. The other thing that I could think about was the fact that Sidney was such an outstanding president of the Youngstown Rotary Club. They made him a Paul Harris Fellow very quickly. I think that was a tribute to his persona. You just knew that he was going to do a good job. You just knew that when he was given something to do, he would do it, and that, as you may well know, is not always true. There are so many that aspire to be leaders that, when they become leaders, they find other ways to make someone else do their duties for them. I do not think that was Sidney. So, no. I can say that I enjoyed him. I liked him. I enjoyed him. I enjoyed his fellowship, his friendship, and as I say, at Rotary now, when we have one of those long winded invocations, particularly the three or four of the fellows I just named, we look at each other and we say, "Oh, Sidney Berkowitz, where are you?" because he was good at that.

MB: Just one quick thing. Could you describe that honor that was bestowed upon him?

HB: Oh. Paul Harris Fellow?

MB: Yes.

HB: It is, at the moment, the highest honor that is awarded by the Rotary Club International. It is achieved by making a donation to the Rotary International for the sum of \$1000. It was devised as a means of honoring Paul Harris who is the founder of Rotary, who was its first president. Usually, a club will make a donation in that person's name, and then, they are given this honor. It is a medal, and it is something that Rotarians, at least, find it quite desirable. It is a way of honoring people for past service, for outstanding leadership. I do not know if he was given it while he was still president, or maybe he was given it

afterwards. I do not know. I am kind of leery on that because we are going back now to 1974 or 1975, which is quite some time ago. In fact, I do recall that he was made a Paul Harris Fellow very, very quickly and, as I say, it was a tribute to his great year as president, which I thought was very nice.

MB: Okay. Well, I thank you very much for your time.

HB: You are welcome.

End of Interview