

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

The Depression

Personal Experience

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MORRIS SLAVIN

Interviewed

by

Relly Moskovits

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: MORRIS SLAVIN

INTERVIEWER: Relly Moskovits

SUBJECT: personal experiences, family life, high school and college

DATE: July 18, 1974

M: This is an interview with Dr. Morris Slavin for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Depression, by Relly Moskovits, on July 18, 1974, at 2:30 p.m.

Professor Slavin I understand you were a teenager during the Depression?

S: I was a teenager. I started high school in 1929 and finished in 1932, the very depth of the Depression. I attended Rayen High School.

M: Do you remember how it effected your family?

S: Very much. My father was in a second hand furniture business on East Federal Street. His customers naturally came from the steel mills. That is they were workers in the steel mills. They were among the first, of course, to be laid off. Which immediately effected his own business. It was never much of a business. We all used to kid him about being a furniture tycoon. He was far from that. With the beginning of the Depression it suddenly became progressively worse because, of course, who could afford furniture when people could hardly afford to eat. Moreover, those who had accumulated bills, debts, those whose furniture he had to mortgage, simply could not pay. So, naturally it effected the family directly almost immediately.

M: Did your mother have to go out and work?

- S: No, my mother simply . . . My mother, unfortunately, did not have the conversion of her dental degree which she had obtained in Russia. She had never simply converted this in America. The result was that she could not really apply her professional abilities. She was simply a housewife, if one could say simply, throughout the Depression.
- M: Professor Slavin you said you did complete high school. Did you know anybody that had to quit school because of the Depression?
- S: Yes, quite a number of people who started the high school with me, that is who were enrolled in the freshman class, never completed for various reasons. Mostly I would assume economic but there were also academic reasons.
- M: What did they do after they finished school?
- S: Many of them were simply unemployed. They tried to get part time jobs. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that a number of them came back after they lost their jobs. That is people who had started high school, and then thought they could work, and in a short time found out that either their jobs ended or they never could find a job, so they came back. In fact, there were post graduate programs at Rayen High School. Which is really a way of keeping people off the streets. There was nothing else to do.
- M: And when you finished high school in 1932?
- S: Then what happened was that I simply couldn't afford to go to college. It took me three years of work, which was not very steady, to accumulate a little bit of money in order to go away to Ohio State University. What happened was I went to work for the City Street Department between 1933 and about 1935. Approximately three years I worked at everything from paving roads to cleaning streets to cleaning sewers and things of that sort. Usually what happened was we would work two weeks on and then we would be laid off for two weeks. We were paid \$.50 an hour.
- M: And for those two weeks you were on welfare?
- S: No, no the family never went on welfare. We just simply didn't have very much but at least we could have enough to eat. What happened was that I was trying to get away to college. I didn't have any money except by accumulating and working. I was working for \$.50 an hour which at that time was quite good. Had I been able to work steadily, which was very difficult in those days, this is . . . This was after 1932 when the

economy began to rise a little. I finally was able to have all of \$400 after some three years of working, which was enough to get me to Ohio State. Then with the help of the National Youth Administration, it was a way of helping students--I was doing some work for the various professors--I managed to finish my degree in teaching.

M: Your brothers and sisters?

S: Well, my brother managed to finish too by hook and crook. I don't know how he did this but I think he worked part time and the family helped a little bit. Then, he couldn't find a job teaching, it was very difficult. So, he went to Puerto Rico and taught for a couple of years. My sister also finished school, went to Ohio State, and graduated in social work. It took some time before she got a job.

M: Did you work during the college years?

S: Yes, for this . . . As I said I worked for this National Youth Administration. Under this National Youth Administration. I was doing research work of various type in the museum, the Ohio State Museum, and for several professors. I think, as I remember, we were paid something like \$25 a month but since rent was about \$8 a month . . . I shared two rooms with another two people as I recall and we somehow managed to get a dinner for about \$.35 and \$.40. Everything was cheap but you were lucky if you had \$.35, or \$.40.

M: Do you think family life improved during the Depression?

S: I don't see how it could have possibly improved. The many economic tensions led to psychological tensions and a pessimistic outlook. I know of some families it led to some real emotional explosions.

M: Because of the situation?

S: Yes, the situation was simply very bad, very frustrating. Especially for young people.

M: Did many young people tend to leave home during the Depression or did young people tend to remain at home longer than otherwise would have been expected of them?

S: Well, I know some who left home because they felt it would ease the situation at home. They simply rode the tracks as they went to climb on board a freight car. They took their chances and went wherever the train would go and get off and tried to get a meal.

M: Like to today the youngsters want to leave home as early as possible.

S: Well, that is a different thing. This is quite a different story. I think the people want to leave today because they want to accumulate experiences because they want to mature because they feel they want to grow up. This was a different thing altogether. There were, of course, quite a number that stayed at home because they simply could not go anywhere.

M: Go anywhere. Were there any specific individuals to blame for causing the Depression?

S: Well, I moved in circles who tended to blame the system itself; our economic system. I would occasionally run across people who blamed it on capitalists or Wall Street bankers, people of that sort. As I said, the young people that I knew tended to see this as either a temporary fault of the system or something which is very basic. They would favor reforms.

M: Did they blame the administration?

S: Well, there was of course a great deal of anti-Hoover sentiment, anti-Republican sentiment. One of the things that happened when the election of 1932 rolled around was this optimistic search. That would be the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt of the Democratic Party and things would be mended. Of course, a number of things improved. I don't know whether one could say this was due to the policies of the administration and to what extent one could say this. Maybe, of course, by 1932 all indications are, at least economically speaking, the Depression had reached the nadir, its lowest point, and was beginning to . . . The economy was beginning to revive.

M: As you mentioned the Stock Market crashed in 1929 and then it crashed again in 1937. Were people aware of any worsening of their lives as a result of that second crash in 1937?

S: No, I think it was more of a disappointment because there was this recovery for a number of years. The so-called pump priming, the various economic measures of the Roosevelt administration helped the revival of industry. It had a tremendous psychologically lifting effect on thousands and thousands of people here in our community. Then when 1937 came with its recession there was a disappointment. I don't think however that it was the same kind of pessimism that existed between 1929 and 1932. Most people felt this was temporary.

M: Did people worry much about what was happening around

the world at this time? For example the rise of Hitler in Germany in the 1930's.

S: There were, of course, people who were aware of it. I can't speak for those who were unaware naturally. Those of us who were politically minded as we had to be--the Depression made many of us politically minded--were very much aware of the rise of fascism. Of course there was, as you know, a strong radical movement here. Revival, for example, of the old Socialist party which had practically disappeared in the 1920's and the growth of industrial unionism, the birth of the CIO. So that people were aware but they were more concerned with the national economy than with international problems.

M: What do you think the people felt about what the Russians were doing with communism during this period?

S: I would often read good, middle class, conservative journals whose writers welcomed this so called experiment in Russia. Many of them, who were certainly not communist or procommunist in any way, nevertheless pointed to the fact that allegedly Russia had no unemployment. This was you see a startling factor, quite a sharp contrast. America supposedly had 15,000,000 or 17,000,000 people unemployed and here the Russians were building heavy industry. No one was terribly concerned with the kind of exploitation that was going on of the Russian peasantry and the terrible conditions in the Russian factories. The whole Stalinist system arose as a result of this rapid industrialization. I think that a lot of people envied the fact that at least you could find a job. Whereas it was so difficult to find any kind of job here.

M: Were people reluctant to go on strike? If so were there any exceptions? For example the little steel strike in Youngstown in 1937. How did people feel about that?

S: Of course you are asking me and it is a personal impression of this all. I don't know how people felt but I know how some people who worked in steel felt. Naturally most were reluctant to go on strike but at the same time they were determined not to allow themselves to be thrown out of jobs at the whim, or what they considered to be the whim, of the employer. There was a great sentiment, an overwhelming sentiment, to build a powerful, or as powerful as possible, trade union movement. The history of the 1920's was such and the experience of the early 1930's was such that they determined not to allow this kind of condition to be repeated. Therefore, this harsh confrontation in terms of a class struggle that occurred in the little steel

strike here in Youngstown with shooting and beatings and militant picketing and so on.

M: In 1937.

S: In 1937 yes. I think that there is no question that the overwhelming mass of workers in our steel mills supported the CIO firmly. They realized that their economic well being and their personal life were involved.

In 1939 I worked in several steel mills. This is after I had my teaching degree. Jobs simply were unavailable for many of us. Though I graduated from Ohio State in 1938, I did not begin to work as a teacher until 1941. So, there was a three year gap. I went back to the university to start my masters but money quickly ran out. I had to go back and find whatever I could. I worked in a department store, and then finally I got a job in one of the steel mills.

M: What were you doing?

S: Heavy work on steel presses. One of the things that I remember, and I dislike, was having to get up very early in the morning and being out at the steel mill about 7:00. Then, the foreman simply chose those that he wanted to work for that day and the rest of us were dismissed and had to go home. The trip was for nothing. This happened time and time again. We were completely at the mercy of the foreman. There was no job security or any kind of priority or any kind of attempt to call the person that he wasn't needed in the morning. You simply had to come out. It wasn't a very pleasant experience needless to say. It wasn't really until the war was in full sway in Europe that our economy began to recover.

M: How much did you get paid?

S: I don't remember now but somewhere around \$20 or \$22 a week.

M: What were you doing in your free time? What were the other people doing in their free time?

S: Reading, playing ball, dating, doing all the normal things that supposedly "normal" young men should do.

M: What kind of movies did you see?

S: Yes, movies, of course, were very popular. Well, I don't remember right now. Movies like Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath is what I was trying to recall. There were so many. There were of course escape movies,

romantic stories of all kinds, what have you.

M: How much was the ticket?

S: About \$.10. A far cry from today's prices.

M: Did anybody go on vacations? Did you ever go on vacations? Where did you go?

S: At the beginning of the Depression a number of people would go but they would be very modest vacations; camping, going out say to swim at Milton Dam for a week, renting a cottage, things of that sort.

M: No overseas treats?

S: No, nothing. At least not for people in my economic condition.

M: You have never been welfare?

S: No.

M: You worked in the mill then maybe you were a union member. If so, what were the unions most interested in during the period, economic matters?

S: Yes, mostly, almost exclusively in economic matters and first, of course, in recognition. First in getting recognition and after that wages more than anything else.

M: Were union members generally interested in politics?

S: Oh, indirectly. I think that the leaders were very interested and there was indication that they did have influence on the rank and file. I recall very well acts of discouragement on the part of management of employees from belonging, from joining unions.

M: Were veterans organizations active during the Depression? What kinds of things did they want?

S: I don't know of this type of activity personally; you know of course the bonus march and all the rest of that.

M: Yes, in Washington, D.C.

S: In Washington. There was nothing as far as I recall here in the city itself.

M: Were women's organizations active during the Depression? If so what kind of things did they want?

S: I don't remember any women's organizations specific-

ly. I remember unemployed organizations in addition to unions, I remember political activity, but I don't recall any womens' organizations as such.

M: Do you remember there being any talk about conservation and ecology during this period? Can you give any instances?

S: Conservation of what?

M: Ecology.

S: Oh, I don't recall that no, except the Work Reforestation. That is about all. It was mostly really a type of public works project, ecology was second. It was putting men to work that was important, giving them work. Giving them work meant building pavilions in Mill Creek Park, building dams, saving our natural resources, planting trees, things of that sort. Primarily it was a way of putting men to work.

M: Do you remember how people felt about having to pay income taxes when the federal personal income taxes began in the early 1930's? Did many people try to avoid the tax?

S: I don't recall this at all. They were lucky if they had enough to pay.

If I have to make a summary off the cuff, looking back from the vantage point of 1974, the 1930's were an unpleasant decade for young people. Certainly it was for me. Many of us . . . Almost everyone that I knew wanted to work. We didn't care what kind of job it was, hard physical labor, boring work on a production line, that didn't matter because we simply wanted to work. We needed a few dollars in our pockets because we had nothing, or next to nothing. So, it was an unpleasant decade from that point of view.

On the other hand it was also a stimulating decade from the point of view of clash of ideas and ideals; political, economic, and social ideas. This is you know the decade of communism and fascism and depression. So that people were trying to find solutions, everything from extreme left, and extreme right, to technological solutions. Intellectually speaking it was stimulating. Yet it was a depressing decade for the obvious reason that we simply didn't have the most elementary things. We didn't have the money to fulfill our most elementary needs. Not a very pleasant decade. I suppose if I had been in a position where I could enjoy profits, or interest, or rent . . . Prices were extremely low and I could have lived very well. Like the tens of millions of others, I was on the other side.

So that it wasn't very stimulating.

M: Thank you very much Professor Slavin.

END OF INTERVIEW