

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Project

Youngstown Area

O. H. 533

DAVID OYER

Interviewed

by

Irving Ozer

on

May 18, 1986

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: DAVID OYER

INTERVIEWER: Irving Ozer

SUBJECT: Jewish synagogues, Jewish Organizations, anti-Semitism

DATE: May 18, 1986

OZ: This is an interview with David Oyer for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Youngstown Area Jewish Project, by Irving Ozer, on May 18, 1986.

Where were you born?

OY: Romania, in the city of Darabani.

OZ: When were you born?

OY: 1901.

OZ: How many were in your family in Europe?

OY: Three children, myself and two sisters.

OZ: When did you leave Romania?

OY: 1913. I was thirteen and Bar Mitzvahed on the ship. We were twenty-one days on the water.

OZ: Why did you leave?

OY: My dad came to this country first.

OZ: When did he come?

OY: 1912. He wanted to bring his family over so he came back. We couldn't leave right away because the war broke out with Bulgaria at that time and no one was allowed to leave; so we had to wait until the war was over and then we went.

OZ: The war wasn't over until 1919.

OY: No, this was the war between Bulgaria and Romania. The borders were closed during the war. We left in 1913 because we got here in January, January 14th, 1914.

OZ: You left before the First World War?

OY: Yes.

OZ: Why did your father want to move the family to the United States?

OY: Because he wanted to make a good living here.

OZ: What was his field of work in Romania?

OY: He dealt in cattle, in sheep.

OZ: What was he planning to do here in the United States?

OY: Anything.

OZ: Did he have to serve in the armed forces?

OY: No.

OZ: From Romania where did you go?

OY: Baltimore. The ship we came on, Ghemnits, that was the last trip it made. It was such an old ship.

OZ: How did you end up in Youngstown?

OY: We settled in Pittsburgh. My father had a sister in Pittsburgh and that's where he was during the time he was here without the family. Then we moved to Farrell because my mother had cousins there. Farrell was a very progressive town at the time. My dad opened a little grocery store there and he made a living there. I was working at a shoe store after school and then I left and went to New York.

OZ: Did you graduate from high school?

OY: No.

OZ: When did you go to New York? How old were you?

OY: Eighteen or nineteen.

OZ: What did you want to do?

OY: I didn't know. I walked with a suitcase and a man on the street asked me if I needed a room to rent. He was a retired editor for the Forward Newspaper living by himself. For companionship he rented out a room or two. He told me to get the World Newspaper and to look in the want ads. That's what I did. I saw where a shoe salesman was wanted and I applied for it and got the job right away. I lived there for four or five months and didn't like it.

One night I decided to see New York so I walked home on Columbus Avenue. When I came in the house I went in the house I went to unlock the door and somebody grabbed me by the shoulders and said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I live here." He showed me his badge and they found the old man dead. They didn't know why and they had to question me. I was scared stiff. The officer told me not to take my things out that night. He said to go around the corner and for 50¢ I could sleep the night at a turkish bath. Tomorrow they would release my stuff he said, which they did.

OZ: What did he die of?

OY: Heart.

OZ: Then you left New York and where did you go?

OY: I came back to Farrell where my dad was. He at that time had a haberdashery store on Broadway. Then I came to Youngstown and started working as a salesman for Bloom-Rosenblum & Kline. I lived in the YMCA and then I got married. Then I got a job with Sniderman Brothers; I worked for them seven or eight years. While I was working for them I made it sort of a hobby to follow up on bankruptcies and buy bankrupt stores and resell them.

OZ: Where did you get the capital to do that?

OY: I accumulated it. I was making good money as a salesman. In those days \$50 or \$60 a week was good money. If you saved \$10 a week you had \$500 by the end of the year. It was about \$2000 or \$3000 to buy one of those stores. If you sold it you could make \$500 on the deal.

OZ: So you were living at the Y when you met your wife?

OY: Yes.

OZ: When were you married?

OY: 1927.

OZ: Did you buy a house or rent a house?

OY: I rented a house first on the south side. Then the banks went bad while I was living there. The owner of the house was working for the railroad and he wanted to buy a car very badly and didn't have the money. He couldn't get finances in those days so he was after me to buy the house. After I got him down to the price I thought was right, I went and bought Home Savings & Loan passbooks, 50¢ on the dollar, and paid for the house. That's how I got started in real estate.

OZ: So what street was that on that you lived?

OY: Avondale.

OZ: Was that a Jewish area at that time?

OY: No. After I worked for Sniderman seven or eight years I went and told them I was going into business for myself. J. H. Butler was a grocery store chain and they had a store in Youngstown that was going out. I bought the store from them. I started the store on Mahoning Avenue. I had the first self-serve market in the city of Youngstown. I copied it from an outfit in Detroit and it was very successful.

OZ: Did you have buggies?

OY: Yes, wooden ones that I made. It was pretty successful because it outgrew the size of the store. It was uncomfortable to shop in it so I started shopping for a bigger location. I went to Wickliffe and bought nine acres of ground with some buildings. I was going to make the biggest shopping market that the area had.

OZ: This was in the 1930's?

OY: 1938, 1939. I bought that area, which I own to this day, and when I went to get estimates to remodel for a food store, it ran to \$40,000 or \$50,000. In the meantime, some fellow approached me and asked me if I would like to go into the lumber business with him. He was working for a lumberyard. That's how I got into the lumber business. It was very successful.

OZ: What was it called?

OY: Wickliffe Lumber Company. I was sued by somebody because I used the word Widkliffe, so I had to change it to Ajax Lumber Company. Then I also owned a ready-mix concrete plant on the same property. It was another division. I had ten or fifteen trucks with that deal. I was very busy.

Then the war broke out and you couldn't get any lumber and everything froze. I couldn't sell anything. So then I went after government contracts in the wood, and in metal; I was in that during the war. I worked three shifts. I also rented another building in another location as a factory. When the war was over I took a break and went to California for two years. While I was there I bought houses and remodeled them. That kept me busy. Then I came back because I didn't like Los Angeles. My son graduated from UCLA then and came back and started in the lumber business in this area with my two boys. I was there as an onlooker. I stayed with them until they could run the business very well by themselves.

OZ: Was it still called Ajax?

OY: Yes. I applied for a real estate license, which I passed, and I took an office in Central Towers. I stayed there for a couple of years and then started to go after the appraisal business. I had to go to school to pass to get certification. I attended classes for a long time and got my certification. I liked it very well. I encouraged my sons to follow and they did. To this day they are in the appraisal business as well as real estate.

OZ: They sold out the lumber company?

OY: Yes, they sold to Carter Lumber.

OZ: You lived on the south side until when?

OY: 1950 I think.

OZ: Where did you move?

OY: I bought a house on the north side.

OZ: Why did you come north?

OY: The Jewish community was growing in that direction.

OZ: All this time were you a member of a temple?

OY: At all times.

OZ: Where were you?

OY: I was at Temple Emmanuel. We eventually joined Rodef Sholom. I've been a member there ever since, for thirty years.

OZ: You were a member of Emmanuel first?

OY: Yes. Then Rodef Sholom, and then Anshe Emeth. Then after I came back from California, I went to Rodef Sholom again.

OZ: Was you family Orthodox?

OY: Yes.

OZ: They kept kosher?

OY: Yes.

OZ: When you went into housekeeping did you keep kosher?

OY: For a long time.

OZ: Where did the kids go to Sunday school?

OY: To Temple Emmanuel and Rodef Sholom.

OZ: Now I'm going to ask you to back up to the period when Hitler was getting started. Do you remember how people reacted in the beginning? Did they believe it or not?

OY: They definitely believed.

OZ: What did people do about it?

OY: What could they do?

OZ: From the books I've read it seems not many Jews got excited about it in the United States.

OY: No.

OZ: Do you remember anything in particular that they did?

OY: No, I don't. I knew that everybody was sad about it. Well, I do remember that I attended a meeting in 1933 or 1934 at Louis Regenstreich's home where the speaker warned Youngstown Jewery about the dangers of this man named Hitler in Germany and that all Jews everywhere should fear him and his party.

I was among the first group to solicit funds for what is now the Jewish Federation. I collected from Jewish merchants on Poland Avenue and East Federal Street. Most of them were beginning to be aware of Hitler's world danger from their relatives in Europe and Jewish Newspapers like the Daily Forward, as the local papers and radio did not tell the general public much about it in those days.

OZ: Now I'm going to ask you to try to describe what your

recollections of downtown Youngstown were?

OY: Every inch was valuable and worthwhile. You didn't have to worry about robberies. You could go there at night or day; it didn't matter. Everyone was successful. There were very few failures in that area.

OZ: Do you remember the streetcars?

OY: I sure do.

OZ: Do you remember the horses?

OY: No.

OZ: The central square was round, right?

OY: Yes.

OZ: What businesses do you remember from the 1920's and 1930's, Jewish businesses?

OY: Mostly clothing and food businesses. Hartzell's, Rose & Sons, Printzes, those were the three main ones. Richman's was big downtown. On the east was Bunshaft.

OZ: Backing up to the Second World War again, what were your feelings and feelings of people that you knew when Hitler defeated Austria, Poland, and France?

OY: I can't remember.

OZ: What kind of Jewish education did you have?

OY: I went to Heder in Romania. During the two years that we were delayed in coming here because of the war we moved to the second largest city in Romania. Its name is Iassi. It had streetcars and everything modern. They enrolled me in a school and it was Jewish oriented. You learned so many hours of each subject. I got more education there in those two years. When I came here they tested me and they didn't know where to put me; I was way ahead of other students.

OZ: How many languages did you speak when you came here?

OY: Three. Romanian, Jewish, and German. I could read and write German as well as I could Romanian, as well as Yiddish. It was a must.

OZ: Did you find it difficult to learn English?

OY: Not any more than the average I don't think. Naturally

it is hard for any language. You go through the same routine of being made fun of also. That's everywhere, especially amongst the youngsters.

OY: Tell me a little bit about what Sharon and Farrell were like in those days as a Jewish community.

OY: Very progressive and very close-knit.

OZ: How many temples would they have at the time?

OY: In Farrell they had two: they had the Hungarian and the Romanian. The Hungarian was a really nice, brick building.

OZ: Do you remember what it was called?

OY: No, I don't. The Romanians had a storeroom which they used as a temple. I belonged to that because my group was going to that temple.

OZ: What about Sharon?

OY: Sharon had a temple that I knew of, but I never joined it.

OZ: Farrell was more active Jewishly than Sharon?

OY: Definitely, yes. You had a lot of newcomers there, Europeans. Sharon was already second generation.

OZ: What part of Europe did most of them come from in Farrell?

OY: Mostly they were Hungarians.

OZ: Thanks a lot.

OY: You're welcome and thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW