

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Project

Youngstown Area

O. H. 544

ELSIE WILLIAMSON

Interviewed

by

Irving Ozer

on

November 6, 1986

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INTERVIEWEE: ELSIE WILLIAMSON

INTERVIEWER: Irving Ozer

SUBJECT: Jewish synagogues, Jewish culture, Personnel at
the Jewish Center

DATE: November 6, 1986

O: Today is November 6, 1986 and I'm sitting here with Elsie Williamson who is going to give us some recollections for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Youngstown Jewish Area.

What is the earliest memory you have of things Jewishwise in the city of Youngstown?

W: At one time we used to give a play for money raising funds. Oscar Coffin had something to do with that and also Molly Waldhorn.

O: Was there an organization?

W: No, it was just a group. We had it at the Rodef Sholom Temple.

O: Did you meet there?

W: Yes. We rehearsed there. It was a musical and dancing and that kind.

O: How old were you at that time?

W: That was at least sixty years ago. I was in at least a couple of those shows. There was quite a large cast.

O: You were an adult already?

W: Oh yes.

O: Do you remember growing up in Youngstown at all?

W: Yes, I do.

O: Where did you go to school?

W: I went to South High. We lived on the north side, but my loyalties were toward South because that was very competitive with Rayen.

O: Where did you live?

W: On Fairgreen Avenue. My mother was driving and she would drive me to high school.

O: How did you become loyal to South High?

W: The football was very competitive. I had started at Rayen; first we lived on the south side and then we moved north.

Then I graduated from South. When we came north then I went to Kent, and then I went to California to school. When I finished school in California then I came back here and taught school.

O: What year was that?

W: That was 1940.

O: You were here when war was breaking out?

W: Yes. I was in England at least six months during the war.

O: Doing what?

W: My husband was gone; then and I worked at the publishing company for a while.

O: While he was at war?

W: He was killed at that time.

O: You lived there during the war?

W: Yes, part of the war. I came back here in about later 1939.

O: Do you remember the prevailing mood in Youngstown when the war broke out?

W: I was in Germany in 1932 and saw Hitler.

O: What were your thoughts?

W: I was very, very worried because when we were there we heard so much of Hitler. We happened to be following him; he was

going down to Germany and he was at the hotel where we happened to stay at that particular time. When I was coming back on the plane I happened to sit next to a gentleman that was on Parliament. He was asking me questions and I told him my experience of meeting people that were in camps, and people that were drafted for the service. He hadn't seen much of this. He said, "When I speak I'll call you and ask you to come in." I said, "I'm leaving. I'm not going to speak and get involved in something like this being Jewish," and so on. He gave a very enlightening speech from what I had told him.

O: You said you were reluctant to speak because you were Jewish. Did you have some foreboding about the Jewish aspect?

W: No, there was a certain amount. We had a very good friend who was a publisher in Berlin. He called us one day and told us that he had to leave his Jewish friends, have them expelled from the offices. He said that he would like to bring them over for a final treat. He said he could not bring money with him, and he asked if my husband would be able to finance this. I told him he would if he felt that he could. He did come and there were about six or seven Jewish staff that he brought with him. We had a good time. They were upset over the fact that they were being fired because they were Jews.

O: You did recognize the Jewish problem then?

W: Yes.

O: Was there any thought about the Jews being wiped out?

W: No.

O: What was the mood here before you left for England? Storm clouds were already brewing weren't they?

W: Yes. Chamberlain was in office then in Munich. My husband happened to be in the States that week. Someone called and said that we should evacuate and we should go south toward Southampton.

O: You were already in England then?

W: Usually I came with him to the States.

O: What years were you in England?

W: In the late 1930's. I lived there twelve years. Once the war broke out that part of the country was the first place to be hit. We had a nice place to stay, but we came back

as soon as we could.

O: Why did he want you to go south?

W: He felt that that was more out of the way. When we went back we were all given gas masks and various things. When it really got bad the man that published magazines for our office had a home out in the country and he asked me to come out there. He was taking as many of his close friends as he possibly could. My family was extremely concerned about our being there.

O: Before you went to England how did you meet your husband?

W: I met him in London when I was there. I went on a trip with Isabelle Uzursky. I met Jim at a restaurant with three or four other guys he was with. Two of the guys were American.

O: What temple did you belong to?

W: My mother and dad belonged to both the Rodef Sholom and Emmanuel. They went to Emmanuel for the high holidays.

O: Where did your mother and father come from?

W: Titusville and my father came from Russia. Her parents are from Russia, but I'm not sure from where.

O: You considered yourself a Russian family?

W: Yes, we did.

O: Where did you attend Sunday school?

W: Rodef Sholom.

O: Had they already built their new building on Elm Street?

W: Yes.

O: Who were some of the big names when you were big?

W: DeBacus, Strouss', Altshuler's.

O: What kind of meetings did you go to the center for?

W: I belonged to a Jewish group of girls.

O: Was it a sorority type of thing?

W: Yes.

O: It was teenagers?

W: Yes. The boys had groups too.

O: What kind of things did you do within the Jewish community?

W: It was a social kind of thing. On Saturday nights we would have a little party at the center.

O: How did you first get involved in a leadership or supervisor capacity at the center?

W: Actually it was just a coincidence. Stanley's predecessor asked me if I would work with the kids.

O: When was that?

W: This was already on Bryson Street. I was never involved in any way with the one on Lincoln Avenue. I came back to Youngstown in 1941 and then Grace Malkin was taking care of the camp. She asked me if I would take it over because she wasn't too well. That's when I started and hired the staff. I actually didn't work at the Bryson Street backyard. I met with the kids that were involved. Then we went to Rodef Sholom and that's when we hired a bigger staff. We had two high school teachers from South. They were not Jewish. We fired the man that was involved, but the girl stayed on for a while. Then I hired Sally and Ann Davis.

O: What was their background?

W: They were teachers. The older one became a principal of a school and she was there for quite a while. They were both very conscientious and very dependable.

O: Did they have any problem picking up the Jewish proponents?

W: No. We didn't emphasize the Jewish content at the camp as we do today.

O: Who was your supervisor?

W: I can't remember his name.

O: Did you get involved in the nursery school?

W: No, I didn't.

O: Did you go to the dances at the center?

W: Yes, I supervised the dances.

O: How did you become involved in that?

- W: I suppose since I didn't want to take day camp anymore. Day camp was a tremendous responsibility for me. We had a lot of children and it scared me when they went swimming and canoeing.
- O: How big was the camp?
- W: The first year I was there it went somewhere between 70-99.
- O: When you supervised the dances were you paid staff?
- W: Yes, I was paid staff by that time.
- O: Were you teen director at that time?
- W: Yes. From the teenagers I took the senior highs.
- O: How did the kids get to the center?
- W: They rode bikes and some of them had a car.
- O: Do you remember the move here, was it very traumatic?
- W: Yes, it was. I was still with the junior high school at that time. Then I went with the seniors. I had charge of meetings and chose certain kids to represent their club.
- O: Was this the beginning of the council of clubs?
- W: Yes. We had a representative from each club, the girls and the boys.
- O: How many groups did you have at that time?
- W: I think there were about five or six.
- O: What sort of activities did you do?
- W: We had various parties and I would supervise those on Saturday night. I would have parents come also as chaperones.
- O: Was there any intramural competition?
- W: No, not specifically. We had a few. I did enjoy the council meetings.
- O: When and why did you graduate from that?
- W: Then I became an adult director.
- O: Whose idea was that?
- W: That was Mr. Gerig's idea. I worked with Harry Carpolus

before Gerig. I was also the leader of the boys' young adult singles.

O: When did you leave that?

W: They wanted something for the senior citizens. I thought I would be more suited for that.

O: When was that roughly?

W: About 1964. We met Wednesdays and gave them lunch.

Did I tell you about the Yiddish cultural group?

O: No.

W: The men mostly wanted that. I sent out invitations for speakers. We had meetings and they were in English and suddenly they said this was a Yiddish cultural group and we ought to speak Yiddish. I told them they lost a manager. I understand Yiddish but I didn't speak it all.

END OF INTERVIEW