

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Senior Citizens Project

Jewish Culture

O. H. 296

FANNIE SCHNEIDER

Interviewed

by

Karlyn Bennehoof

on

December 14, 1983

FANNIE SCHNEIDER

Fannie Schneider was 94 when she passed away on October 9, 1984. She lived at Heritage Manor Nursing Home from May, 1983 until her death. She was one of twelve children born to Jacob and Anna Kaufman, in Vasilevetch, Russia. In 1911, she married her first husband, Jack Kalin, and came to the U.S. to join other family members in Youngstown. They had two sons, Sam, born in 1912 and Mitchell, born in 1914. Jack Kalin deserted her and the children in 1919 and she subsequently divorced him in 1922.

Mrs. Schneider ran a grocery store on which her family was supported until 1930, when she married Jack Margolis, who was a jeweler. Fannie gave up her store to a niece who was widowed and left with young children. When Jack's business began to fail, he and Fannie moved to New York in 1938, where he found work. When Jack's health began to fail, Fannie opened a candy store in 1945 to help with expenses. Jack died in 1951.

After living with Mitchell, who was widowed, and his children until 1938, she married Morris Schneider, a retired shoe repairman. He convinced her to sell the candy store and they moved to Youngstown in 1961. Mrs. Schneider invested her money in a four-plex on Fairgreen Avenue. Morris did nothing to help with the upkeep of the house or management of tenants, they divorced in 1968 as a result of Fannie's disgust.

After selling the house on Fairgreen, Mrs. Schneider moved into Gutknecht Towers where she lived until she entered Heritage Manor. Her son, Sam, wanted her to move to Pennsylvania with him and his family, but she remained in Youngstown where she felt she would be happiest. She was a strong-willed, independent person, not wanting to depend on her son.

Her attitude towards Heritage Manor was positive, as she realized her ability to function independently became difficult due to blindness and a missing arm (which was a birth defect). She chose to live at Heritage Manor to "adapt to her aging". Her death was caused by a stroke which she suffered on October 7, 1984.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Senior Citizens Project

INTERVIEWEE: FANNIE SCHNEIDER

INTERVIEWER: Karlyn Bennehoof

SUBJECT: Jewish culture

DATE: December 14, 1983

B: This is an interview with Fannie Schneider for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Jewish Senior Citizens, with Karlyn Bennehoof. This interview is being conducted at Heritage Manor on December 14, 1983 at approximately 2:45 p.m.

I'd like to know a little about your background, the basics, like where you were born and that sort of thing.

S: Well, I'll tell you about me. I will be 86 in July.

B: Okay, you'll be 86 in July. Good. You were born in Europe?

S: I was born in Europe.

B: Where approximately?

S: The city was Vasilevetch.

B: Vasilevetch, that's in Russia?

S: Yes, Russia.

B: Is that near the Polish border?

S: Yes, it's not far from Poland.

B: How old were you when you came to this country?

S: I was nineteen years old.

B: Did you marry in this country?

S: No, I was married in Europe.

B: Tell me a little bit about your childhood in Europe?

S: About myself in Europe?

B: Yes. What was your childhood like?

S: I was born a handicap. I was born with half of my left hand. I grew up just like other children. If I laid around, when I got older I'd realize that I'd have to do something about myself. I started to make things that the other children couldn't. If they could, I liked to do it better than they did. That was in Russia.

At that time there were no schools, so the parents used to get a teacher. They would get five or six girls from the city and we used to then get the education. Not too much. That was the basic kind of life led there.

My parents had a store and we lived pretty comfortably. Some people were very poor there. What else do you want to know?

B: What was your house like? Was it like we have today or was it different than that?

S: House life?

B: What was the house like?

S: Usually the gentile goyim, the men, used to build houses for themselves and to rent. We rented two rooms, very large rooms. One was a kitchen; it was almost like a dining room.

B: Wow! That's a big kitchen.

S: A big kitchen where you cook and the dining room all in the same thing, the same kitchen. There was an awful lot of kitchen. We had a stove, not like here, we had cement ovens. They used to make the ovens out of cement and they would cook by wood. That's how they used to like to make the heat and cook bread and everything.

The other four rooms they split in two. They made different sections with the curtains; the boys in one section of the room, the girls in the other and the parents in the other room. That divided it all in curtains, not in regular rooms. That's the kind of life we lived. Our father is dead, but we had everything we needed. We were counted already in the higher class of people. That's all. That's the life we led. What else do you want to know?

B: Was the town that you lived in a large town like a city or was it like . . .

S: No, it was a very small town. You'll find there are smaller ones than that. There are villages, which appear to have two Jewish families . . . Jewish people used to have a lot of things for the goyim to sell. That's the very poor life we had. This was in the poor section. They had big cities, but I don't know anything about that.

B: Did the Jewish people in that part of Europe own property at that time?

S: Yes, they did. The Jewish people there had a temple, the Gentile people had a church. It just so happened that in one little city the church men, the father of the church, used to live there with everybody so they didn't have any programs. Usually in small towns they killed the Jewish people and did bad things to them, but we didn't have that. We lived in a good atmosphere. The Jewish people had their religion and we had our shul and we got together and the Gentile people had their church and they got together. With us we avoided arguments. We had like a jail, anyone that got bad was put in there.

B: It was good there?

S: It was miserable. They had no schools, so each one had to teach themselves. When the boys were bigger they used to get a teacher to teach them Yiddish. They used to get five or six boys and get a teacher to teach them the higher class of Jewish. If you wanted to learn about the goyim leaders, we used to get a teacher to teach them the language, which I forget what it is. That's the way we lived. Each one lived separately; the Jewish class was different and the Gentile class was different.

As far as the business, we used to rent everything from the goyim. We didn't build anything ourselves. Whatever they built for them we had to pay them rent. We didn't have anything of our own. As long as we could make a living and make a dollar we were satisfied. We didn't grow up there to be big because the money we had we didn't spread it around.

B: Why did you leave Russia?

S: My older brothers didn't want to be soldiers in Russia, so they came to America; one started to pull the other one. Gradually, we all came to America.

B: One by one? You didn't come as a family then? You came separately?

S: My father was here already and my three brothers. My mother was the last to come.

B: What route did you use to get from Russia to the United States? Did you go through Poland to a port on the Atlantic?

S: We went through Germany. In Germany we got the ship to come to America. We went to Atlantic [City], I guess. We traveled two weeks on the ship. It must be Atlantic City and Atlantic Ocean.

B: Do you remember the passage on the ship, what it was like on the ship?

S: A lot of people were on the ship, Gentile people that I don't know where they came from, but there were mostly Gentile people. They had plenty to eat and drink. The Jewish people that went to America brought a lot of things from home, to be able to make the trip than send it. Otherwise, we only left our daddy, that's all. That's the way we lived. The Gentile people had plenty to eat; they had dining rooms and everything like a ship here, but the Jewish people were a different class.

B: What port did you come into at the United States? Did you come through New York?

S: No, after New York. We stopped in New York, passengers went down there then after that I think we stopped in Philadelphia. What's the next port of all the ships? Philadelphia?

B: No, I don't think so. I really don't know.

- S: I don't remember myself. I think Philadelphia or another name. Passengers went down to New York, I know, and we still went one more day to another port. I don't remember what port it was.
- B: So you didn't come through Ellis Island?
- S: No, we weren't in Ellis Island.
- B: I don't know what port that would be then.
- S: We went to Ellis Island just for a stop . . .
- B: But you stayed on the ship?
- S: We stayed on the ship. We were on the ship mostly.
- B: Once you got off the ship in the United States . . .
- S: Everything was over; my husband was here, my brothers were here. We had a home already for us. My father was here so we came to my father's beginning. They already had a place for us to stay.
- B: What city was that? Was that Youngstown?
- S: No, we came to Cleveland in the beginning.
- B: What was your first impression of the United States? What most impressed you about the country?
- S: I don't remember anything about it because there is nothing to remember about it. We lived there, we just existed; we didn't have any schools, any theaters, any amusement. We were plain children, that's all I remember.
- B: I'm talking about the United States now. When you came to the United States, how is it different, what do you most remember about the difference?
- S: I was married when I came to the United States. We came to Youngstown. Youngstown was a very small town. There were a lot of factories here at that time; the factories were leading the whole town by then. The goyim used to have a lot of money to spend. You made a living and then you always had money to get. The city at that time was a poor city; they didn't have any streetcars, trolley cars, everything but horses.

That was a long time ago. Youngstown was very poor. The Jewish people had only enough to rent a house or for the Sabbath or doven. There was nothing in Youngstown at that time, there were only a few factories, our factories who were here before and were pretty rich people who knew how to live. It was very hard for the newcomer.

B: Was communication a problem? Was there a language barrier? You spoke Russian, right?

S: Yes. I took it pretty easy. The young ones take it easy.

B: So you were able to pick up rather quickly the English language?

S: Well, I'll tell you. I was married at that time and it happened that in three years I had children. I wasn't educated. I learned a little bit in the schools, as much as I could. I didn't have an education; whatever I learned I learned in business, how to talk, the names of all the businesses I sold to before I knew what it was. That's the way it started in the beginning.

B: What kind of business was that?

S: I had a grocery business.

B: Do you think that the Jewish people at that time were assimilated? The Jewish people from Europe, do you think they were pretty well assimilated into the culture of America?

S: Yes, they wanted to come to America very badly. First of all, they used to call it the Golden Land. Do you know what it means? Village country. Russia was very dead so the first chance the Jewish people had they came to America. Not only to America, but to a loving, different city.

B: In Russia, you said, the Gentiles and Jews avoided each other.

S: All according. If they had a good leader they weren't so bad; a lot of people were very bad. They used to drink a lot, so they would get drunk and go to our Jewish houses and do a lot of things that weren't nice.

B: Was it the same situation in America?



- S: No, my time was pretty good in America. It was the foreigners; they behaved very low here. They didn't go to schools, although they were forced to go. They had very bad characters; if they could do anything bad they did it.
- B: You are talking about the Gentiles who came from other lands? Are they continuing that tradition of anti-Semitism here in America?
- S: They didn't like it. But very seldom did they come to America. Do you know when they started to go to America? When the Czar went away. They killed the Czar, then they started to run to America because they were afraid of wars and things like that. Otherwise, in the beginning, it was not too good to go to America.
- B: You said you were originally living in Cleveland, is that right?
- S: No, we came to Cleveland, but we didn't live very long in Cleveland. We lived mostly in Youngstown.
- B: Why did you end up in Youngstown? What prompted you to come to Youngstown?
- S: My father was an old man and he had a sound job. He couldn't make a lot of money. We stick together, and if my father tries to make a living there, the other tries to make a living there too.
- B: Very family oriented.
- S: We are very close to each other.
- B: Did you face any anti-Semitism here in Youngstown? Were you aware of it?
- S: No.
- B: What was Youngstown like . . .
- S: Very poor at that time. No cars . . .
- B: Yes, we talked about trolley cars.
- S: Horses. It was a very poor city and hard to make a living to tell you the truth.
- B: How has Youngstown changed over the years?

- S: The Jewish people didn't go to the factories, I don't know why. As soon as the Gentile people started to come in the factories were doing very good. The factories started to think about war, that's when things started to get better and Youngstown started to work itself up. They made cars, buses, everything . . . You could make a lot of money in the factories because it was burning. It was the leader of the whole city at that time. That's how the money came in.
- B: The economy changed and Youngstown started to grow?
- S: Yes, Youngstown started to grow. The factories went away already. After the war, I think the factories didn't have anything to do. They changed to businesses and that started to grow. There were a lot of businesses after that.
- B: Was most of the Jewish community located in a particular area?
- S: No. Each person used to live in a different part of Youngstown. Some rich people became rich and bought homes themselves and they've done good business so they separate. The lower class built a nice shul and the class has changed. We didn't have any difficulty.
- B: How many synagogues were here when you first came to the city?
- S: There weren't any.
- B: None at all?
- S: No. The Jewish people used to go in an empty place, an empty store to use for a synagogue. Little by little it started to grow and grow and that's how you got Youngstown now. It started low and very poor, but as soon as the factories worked, we didn't have to worry about anything. As long as the factories were working our pockets were full of money. They had plenty of money.
- B: Mrs. Schneider this has been a wonderful interview and I thank you very much. Is there anything you would like to add before we stop?
- S: I don't think I have to add anything. Each one has a life for themselves. That's not a question of life. The beginning of Youngstown was very poor with no cars, the streets weren't paved, only sidewalks. Everything worked out gradually.

- B: I wanted to ask you about your children. How many children do you have?
- S: I have two.
- B: What are their names?
- S: Sam Kalin was my oldest one and my last son is Mitchell Kalin. Mitchell was 62 years old, married with two children. His wife got cancer and he had a lot of trouble. I was helping him as much as I could. They all went away. Thank God his children are living and they are making a nice living. His boy is married now and his daughter got married and has five children. I have seven great-grandchildren.
- B: They are not in Youngstown anymore, your own children?
- S: I have no one here.
- B: Your grandchildren either?
- S: No. Some of my grandchildren are in Long Island, New York, and some in Louistown, Pennsylvania. I'm here all by myself. I have a few nieces. They are very nice and come over, but nothing to write about.
- B: Let's get back to the early days in Youngstown for a minute. What did your family do to make a living in Youngstown during the early days?
- S: No one came.
- B: When you first came to Youngstown, do you remember?
- S: Everybody was together and we stuck together.
- B: What did your father do?
- S: He was working at a junkyard. He made ten dollars a week.
- B: What about your husband, what did he do?
- S: He died a long time ago.
- B: I'm sorry.
- S: I had to make a living for my two children and myself. I raised my two sons all by myself. At first I started out small, but little by little I started a business and worked myself up pretty good.

B: What was the name of your grocery store?

S: On Seventh Avenue.

B: What was the name of it?

S: There were no names, only family. Only Fannie; at that time there weren't any names. Fannie Kalin, that's my . . . I remarried you know. My name was not Kalin. After my children got Bar Mitvahed I decided to get remarried. After I got remarried I gave up the store, my husband made a living himself.

B: What did he do?

S: He was a jeweler. He fixed watches.

B: What year did you remarry?

S: I don't remember. Thirty-five years ago I think.

B: Can you remember anything else about your life or your family that you would like to talk about?

S: My life or family I haven't got too much to say about. My son was nineteen and he was a salesman; he wasn't rich but he was making a nice living. My husband was a watchmaker. He'd get watches to fix. My oldest son was 26 years old and got married; he married a girl from the neighborhood. He opened up a store for more business and she helped him. My son in Louistown is well off, but he was very sick lately. Thank God he's getting better now. The youngest one was in business for himself also. He delivered from the dealers to retailers.

B: What sort of merchandise?

S: School supplies.

B: It has been a very nice interview. I've enjoyed talking to you very much.

S: It was very nice to talk about the old times, but I don't think it's very interesting talking about this.

B: I think it's very interesting and I know some people who are also going to think it's very interesting.

S: Is it going to be a book?

B: We are working on getting it into the Jewish Library at the Jewish Community Center. Also, we are going to have a transcript sent to the library at Youngstown State University. Now it might evolve into a book on Jewish history.

S: That's right.

B: That's what is so wonderful, that we have so many people here that we can talk to about these things.

S: Each one had a different story.

B: That's right, and each one is interesting.

S: That's life.

B: That's wonderful, and thank you again.

S: You're welcome I'm sure.

END OF INTERVIEW