

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Community in Youngstown Project

Jewish Culture

O. H. 316

IRVING OZER

Interviewed

by

Neil S. Yutkin

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: IRVING OZER

INTERVIEWER: Neil Yutkin

SUBJECT: Jewish schooling, Changes in the synagogues

DATE: March 10, 1982

Y: This is an interview with Mr. Irving Ozer for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Jewish Community in Youngstown by Neil S. Yutkin at 499 Richards Drive on March 10, 1982.

Mr. Ozer, can you tell me what you do for a living?

O: I am the associate director of the Youngstown Area Jewish Federation.

Y: When were you born, sir, and where?

O: I was born in Youngstown, Ohio, in 1919.

Y: Were you born at a hospital, or were you born at home?

O: In the North Side Hospital.

Y: Can you tell me a little bit about your early Jewish education?

O: When I was in junior and senior high there was, in Youngstown, the Youngstown Hebrew Institute, on the corner of Elm Street and Lincoln Avenue. It was co-sponsored by Temple Emanuel and Anshe Emeth Temple. It conducted classes after public school classes in the evening. Aside from going to Sunday school at the Temple, we used to go four nights a week after school. We got on the bus at school and rode down, or walked down, from school.

Y: How many people were involved in this?

- O: I was too young then to really think in terms of numbers, but there must have been a hundred kids going, one class or another.
- Y: What did you learn at the institute? What classes did you take?
- O: Because it was sponsored by two different temples, with two slightly different ideologies, it stayed away, pretty much, from theological sorts of things. We studied Hebrew--not conversational Hebrew, but liturgical Hebrew--we studied the Bible, we studied post-biblical history, we studied the Talmud, and we studied the Torah, most of it in Hebrew.
- Y: Can you explain what the Talmud and the Torah are?
- O: The Torah, of course, is the five books of Moses. It was called the Old Testament. The Talmud is the interpretation of the Torah. It evolved over many, many years. First it was an oral interpretation, which was passed down from one wise man, so to speak, to another, who was responsible for interpreting the Bible. Gradually it was put into writing and canonized. It became what is known as the Talmud. There's further interpretation of the Talmud called the Gemara, then Mishnah; it's pretty well narrowed down. I would say that it covered everything in the lives of the Jews down through the years, from complicated legal questions, jurisprudence, down to such things as how to get dressed in the morning and how to get undressed at night.
- Y: You were talking earlier about you didn't discuss theological ideas because of the difference in the temples. How many temples were there in Youngstown and what were their differences?
- O: At that time there were, I think, five temples. There was Temple Emanuel, there was the Ohev Tzedek Temple, there was the Shaarei Torah Temple, there was Anshe Emeth, and there was Rodef Sholom. I believe that's all there were at that time.
- Y: The Children of Israel wasn't yet?
- O: Yes, the Children of Israel. I'm sorry, that makes six.
- Y: And the Summit Avenue Temple?
- O: The Summit Avenue Temple, I think was the other name for either Shaarei Torah or the Ohev Tzedek. I'm not sure which. The Shaarei Torah I think it was.

Y: What were the differences in the temples?

O: As you know, there are three schools of thought in Jewish religion. There's Orthodox, then there's Conservative, and there's Reformed. At that time, I believe, the Children Of Israel, Shaarei Torah, Ohev Tzedek, and Emanuel were all Orthodox. Anshe-Emeth was Conservative and Rodef Sholom was Reform.

Y: Why would there be a need for four Orthodox temples and only one of the other two?

O: You've got to bear in mind the stage of Jewish history at that time. Jewish immigration to the United States started way back in the 1700's, and most of the people who came here at that time came from the Western European countries, especially Germany. Reform Judaism was rather strong in Germany at that time. Those who came were very small minorities who had to live amongst the great majority of Christians. They tended to assimilate. They tended to accentuate the things that were alike, and to set aside those things that made them so very different. As a result, they practiced what we consider Reform Judaism. They melted into the background. They came in slowly increasing numbers, and in Youngstown built up a fair size community by the turn of the century. They organized the first temple in Youngstown, which was the Rodef Sholom Temple, which I understand first met in someone's home. Didn't it?

Y: Yes, Dr. Theobold's home.

O: Then they eventually built a temple on the corner of Holmes and I think it was Lincoln. It's now Fifth and Lincoln. I believe they celebrated their hundredth anniversary about ten years ago at their relatively new temple on Elm Street and Wick Park.

Around the turn of the century came the heavy migration from Eastern Europe, from the pogroms in Russia, Poland, Lithuania, and so on. They tended to come en masse, bringing more or less the entire shtetle from Europe to . . .

Y: Excuse me, could you explain the word "shtetle"?

O: Shtetle, that would be familiar to anyone who saw Fiddler on the Roof. It was a Jewish town, a settlement. It was more or less self-contained with all the institutions to which . . . It was a ghetto town, actually.

They brought with them, then, their institutions,

including the temples. They would set up in a particular neighborhood, and that neighborhood took on all the flavor of the European counterpart. For years they tended to live, more or less, in isolation in this ghetto. That's how these different temples got to be set up. One was Polish, and another one would be Hungarian, and another one would be Russian. God forgive that a youngster from one of these communities should date, or fall in love with, a girl from another one because this was almost tantamount to being excommunicated or simply rejected. I understand that there were times when people said the "Kaddish" for someone who intermarried with a Jewish girl from a different community.

Then, over the years, it began to break down and membership in the temples became mixed. Socially they became mixed. The whole thing slowly became decentralized in one sense, and centralized in another sense, which we can talk about a little later.

That was the reason they had these separate temples, their own idiosyncrasies, their own traditions, customs, and taboos. Instead of having one temple for Orthodox and one temple for . . . After all, the Orthodox were all Eastern Europeans.

Y: Could you explain what the word "Kaddish" means?

O: Kaddish is a prayer, or an affirmation, which is used in the Jewish services, in all the branches of Judaism, which is basically a re-affirmation of faith in God and trust in God. It is used, among other reasons, when a family is faced with the death of a member of the family or a loved one. Instead of praying to God and saying, "Why did you do that to me," or "Why did you take him or her," you say, in essence, "God, I don't know why you did this, but I continue to believe. I have faith in you. What happened must have a reason," and so forth.

Y: So, the feeling between the communities was so strong that if the child would intermarry they were considered to be dead?

O: Yes, but that lasted only for a very short time, though.

Y: About how long?

O: Probably after they got to the United States, five or ten years.

Y: How old were you when you went to the Hebrew school?

O: I think I was there from about age nine to about sixteen.

- Y: You were confirmed at the age of sixteen?
- O: I don't know whether it was a confirmation service or a graduation service, but something that I got a pen and pencil set for happened at that time. If I remember correctly, we were confirmed from the Sunday school and graduated from the Hebrew Institute.
- Y: Then you went to Sunday school at the temple also?
- O: Right.
- Y: What were the differences in the classes at the temple from the institute?
- O: Well, of course, the focus at the Sunday school was more English, and you studied the Bible again and some theological aspects, and I frankly don't remember.
- Y: In your life I assume you were Bar Mitzvahed?
- O: Yes.
- Y: Can you tell me a little bit of the difference between the Bar Mitzvah service then and the Bar Mitzvah service now?
- O: A lot depends on the temple, the institution. A full-fledged Bar Mitzvah today is really similar to what it was then. The youngster is prepared to conduct all or part of the service. He is prepared to read from the Torah, and he is prepared to read a portion from the Haftorah. That's another long story. The service on a Sabbath morning is made up of Shachris, which is the preliminary prayers.
- Y: Would you spell that?
- O: In English? It's a matter of opinion. S-H-A-C-H-R-I-S or T, whichever dialect you use.

This is followed by the Torah reading service, the Haftorah or the Maftor, and then by Musaf, which is the closing part of the service. In the days when the people of Israel were scattered in the diaspora, in many places they were forbidden to read the Torah, out loud at least. They devised a scheme of not reading the Torah out loud, but reading the Apocrypha, which is our additional writings which were not canonized as part of the five books of Moses. Usually the people, in their infinite wisdom back in history, when they tried to put the service together, tried to tie something from the Apocrypha, from the non-canonized writings, to the spirit of the content of the particular reading for

that day from the Torah. The youngster had to learn the symbols aside from being able to read it; he had to learn the various symbols of what's called trop, which have particular sounds. As he reads he not only knows the word, but he had to know the particular combination of notes that make up that symbol. The idea is to demonstrate to the congregation that he has the required knowledge to participate in the service and that he can become part, at that time, of the adult Jewish community and be counted as an adult.

Y: Was the child, at that period of time, when you were Bar Mitzvahed, considered more of an adult than a thirteen year-old child today?

O: No, less. Children today are growing up much faster. They think they're growing up much faster.

Y: In the area of anti-Semitism, did you experience much of that as you were growing up?

O: Looking back, I would say I did, yes. Much of it rolled off of my back, but some of it made an impression, particularly when I was going to Madison School, having to walk about ten blocks to and from the school. The other kids teased me and called me "kike", and constantly harrassed, including, at the time, physical harrassment, getting into fights, and so on, because I was Jewish. The covert type of anti-Semitism from that period I really don't remember.

Y: Were there many areas that were segregated against Jews?

O: Oh, yes, that was very prevalent at the time. Most of the country clubs were closed to Jews. Many of them that are open now were closed to Jews at the time. There were areas in Youngstown, areas in Liberty Township, where you couldn't buy a house. There were many areas in the business area, commerce, that you could not . . .

Y: Did this increase or lessen as we came towards World War II?

O: At that point, I would say just prior to World War II would be the height of Father Coughlin, of Gerald L. K. Smith. Even Henry Ford was anti-Semitic and expressed it publicly. There were other zealous, missionary types on the radio and in public who were anti-Semitic. It was a period when there was a lot of talk about anti-Semitism. Yet, during my college career just before World War II, I had difficulty thinking of any particular occasion, aside from the fact that it was taken for granted that a Jew would not

be asked into a non-Jewish fraternity, and I didn't want to belong to a fraternity anyway, so it didn't particularly bother me. I can't think of any real anti-Semitism to which I was exposed to on a personal level.

Y: Were there any organized activities in Youngstown as there were a decade earlier, such as the Klan, that were openly anti-Semitic?

O: The Klan was very active in and near Youngstown. I'm having trouble with dates, but it was before World War II. Some of my peers and myself actually would go to these rallies with ideas of breaking them up. One, I believe, if I remember rightly, was at what is now Avon Park. There we did get into a push-and-shove sort of thing and broke up the rally. The Ku Klux Klan, to my knowledge, never got too strong in this area.

Y: Where is Avon Park?

O: It's on 422 between Youngstown and the strip, on the right side.

Y: The Avon Oaks Ballroom?

O: Yes.

Y: You say that a group of you went to some of these rallies and got in trouble there. Was there any organized group, like the Anti-Defamation League or the Jewish Defense League, back then?

O: Well, the ADL, the Anti-Defamation League, was in existence then, I'm pretty sure. The American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress were all prewar, but not by much. The preoccupation at that time for most of them was in terms of what was going on in Europe, Hitler.

Y: Were there any specific Jewish clubs organized, social or otherwise, that a Jewish person had an alternative to belong to since he wasn't allowed in the non-Jewish fraternities?

O: You're talking about Youngstown?

Y: Youngstown or just in general.

O: Some Jewish communities by that time had their own country clubs, which I'm opposed to. Socially, there were always organizations for young men; the B.M.D., in Youngstown and the A.Z.A., Masada.



Y: Could you explain what that's for?

O: Masada was the young Zionist Organization. B.M.D. stood for the "Blue Star of David". It was a social club, a fraternal club, of young men. The A.Z.A. and the B.B.G., of course, were the B'nai B'rith clubs, which were national. They each had their own program.

Y: Were those youth-oriented clubs also?

O: The A.Z.A. and B.B.G. definitely. Youth clubs, they covered a greater time span than they do now. Here, on the local level, there were fraternities and sororities that sprang up now and then, but not until the Jewish Community Center was organized was there an actual communitywide effort to centralize the club structure.

Y: What did you do during the war?

O: Shortly after I graduated in 1941 I enlisted in the Air Force for pilot training. During the physical they found out that my eyes were not suitable, so I enlisted at Fort Hayes to become an aircraft mechanic. While that was being processed I was sent to Shepard Field in Texas, Wichita Falls, Texas, where I went through mechanics school and was selected to become an instructor. I spent a good share of the time teaching what were to become mechanics. Of course, I had been there when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and that accelerated the whole process. After remaining at Shepard Field for a good time as an instructor, I decided that I wanted to get out of that position. I applied for O. C. S. [Officer Candidate School] and went to Harvard Graduate School of Business to become a statistical control officer. Upon graduating from there I was shipped to the Southwest Pacific to the Fifth Air Force. After remaining there I was transferred to the South Pacific headquarters in New Caledonia to help set up the Thirteenth Air Force serving the South Pacific area. We island hopped from New Caledonia to Guadalcanal. I came back in late 1945 long enough to get married. On the West Coast I was a statistical control officer at the San Bernardino Air Depot until I was discharged.

Y: What year were you discharged?

O: I get a little confused with the accumulated time that I had. It was about a year after, in late 1946.

Y: Did you keep kosher before the war?

- O: When I grew up my family kept kosher until the family tended to disperse and the only ones left were my mother and myself. When I took her to Columbus during the last years of college we did not keep kosher. We have used kosher food. We have avoided "tref", the pork products, but we have not kept kosher.
- Y: When you came back from the war did you get involved with any Jewish activities in Youngstown?
- O: Yes. That was the period immediately following the Second World War with the sudden horrible realization of what had happened to the Jews during the Holocaust and the tremendous traumas involved in trying to save the remnants. It was the period during which there were negotiations and deliberations and political maneuvering going on. To ensure that upon the end of the British mandate in Palestine there would be a Jewish homestead, a place for Jews to go, I got involved in a lot of that sort of thing at that time. I became very active in the Zionist Organization of America. We organized a young people's branch called Masada, which was made up of young singles and young marrieds. The activities ranged, during those first couple of years, from bringing speakers in, to raising money, to having dances, to writing letters to the editors of the paper, to speaking to other groups, to putting pressure on politicians and writing letters to the president, and to the secretary of state, and representatives, and to the senators and newly organized United Nations, all those kinds of things.

With the imminent establishment of the State of Israel, however, we were given a challenge to do something practical and meaningful, and that was to get arms for the Jews of the kibbutzim. At that time England had established a policy of confiscating all guns from the kibbutzim. They were defenseless in the face of the invasion of the Arabs upon the State of Israel in 1948. In that period from late 1947 to early 1948, we went from door to door asking people to give us their souvenir guns and whatever else they brought back from the Second World War. We accumulated a lot of such stuff, which we would put in crates, mark "radio parts", and ship them to an address in New York where they were sorted out and repacked and shipped to Israel.

- Y: When you say you went door to door, do you mean just to Jewish homes?
- O: No. You've got to understand that at that time the people were aware that less than a million and a half Jews in Israel were fighting eighty million Arabs intent on pushing them into the Mediterranean. The Americans

have always been in favor of the underdog, so there were a lot of people who were sympathetic to the point of giving up their souvenir guns. Whether they would have gone beyond that is something else.

Y: Could you give some examples of the types of guns?

O: Oh, we got everything, everything from .22's to Lugers and .45's, American GI guns, Japanese guns, all with different size ammunition. Then we forgot about ammunition. This was the central point. But when it was sorted out, it turned out that there was enough ammunition for almost every piece that they got. We got some big stuff, tommy guns, rifles, submachine guns. We even got, locally, enough pieces from various places to put together a triangulations unit for artillery, a few radios, a few telephones.

You have to realize this was a period when the Jews, trying to defend themselves in Israel, were resorting to making howitzers out of pieces of pipe. They would run from one kibbutz to another kibbutz, clear across the country in the middle of the night so the Arabs would think there was artillery at both places, shooting off firecrackers over the loudspeaker systems so the Arabs would think they had ammunition. I like to think that what we did at that time had a large part in saving the Jewish community in Palestine.

Y: Can you tell me about how many people were involved in this effort?

O: Locally?

Y: Yes.

O: Masada Club had about sixty to seventy members, but this work was done by a handful, maybe six or seven of us.

Y: How were the weapons transported to New York?

O: We took them downtown to a store which stocked radio parts and whose owners were involved in the thing. We boxed them, crated them, and marked them as radio parts and shipped them up and reshipped them. We didn't know and we didn't want to know who it was or where it was because the less people that knew what was going on the better the operation was.

Y: Do you have any estimate of how many guns you collected, how many weapons?

O: No, but I would say we probably shipped out of here--

counting all kinds of things, not ammunition or bullets, but things including field radios--probably close to two hundred pieces.

- Y: Were there other groups from the various other synagogues working on the same thing at the same time?
- O: No, this was not a synagogue operation. This was a ZOA, a Zionist organization operation. People who belonged to our organization would belong to the various temples, but it wasn't a religious effort. At that time, as a matter of fact, Rodef Sholom was still, officially, not Zionist. They were no longer anti-Zionist, but there had been a period of time when their philosophy was that they should find a home for the Jews, but not a homeland. This has changed a lot since then.
- Y: What did you do after that? We're up to about 1948 now. Did you stay in Youngstown?
- O: I stayed in the Youngstown area till about 1953 working with the Albro Packing Company, which was headquartered here. In 1953 we moved the main office to the factory in Springboro, Pennsylvania, and I moved to Meadville, Pennsylvania. The reason I moved to Meadville was that one of the other Jewish men in the organization had been hired to come to Springboro from Michigan. He came to Springboro and found half of a duplex. His family moved in and a couple of evenings later there was a knock on the door. He opened the door and the gentleman standing there said, "Mr. Blum, I'm Reverend Marsteller of the local church." He invited him in. He said, "I stopped by to find out whether we can expect to see you in church next Sunday." Herman Blum said, "Reverend Marsteller, you know we're Jewish, don't you?" He said, "Really? Full-blooded?" Well, when this was related to me, I made up my mind that that was no place for a nice Jewish boy, so I moved to Meadville. It was about eighteen miles away and it required me to commute. Herman Blum also moved shortly thereafter because we would have been sort of freaks in the smaller community. Despite the fact that the people seemed to know that Jews owned the factory in which they worked, they had no concept of what a Jew was.
- Y: Was there a large Jewish community in Meadville?
- O: There were eleven families when I moved in.
- Y: Did you continue in Jewish activity in Meadville?
- O: I became more involved, actually. I had taught Sunday school both at Emanuel and Anshe-Emeth. At that time

in Meadville they had a small Sunday school in the B'nai B'rith rooms, which were above a bar in downtown Meadville. On Sunday we used to have Sunday school classes there. It was a heterogeneous group with a woman who had been a schoolteacher teaching. But it wasn't too successful and when they heard that I had been a Sunday school teacher, they asked me if I would help, which I did, and I gradually began to change the curriculum. They thought I was a great innovator.

When we decided to try to build ourselves a temple, a sort of community center, I became active in the building campaign. We brought in resources from Youngstown to help. We built ourselves a temple, a center actually, with a chapel in it. I suddenly found myself in charge of the Sunday school and in charge of the ritual committee running the services, after which I had to go home at night and study up on it so I knew what I was doing the next day. I became second president of the congregation. Yes, I was quite active in the Jewish community; we all were. The community grew to about 35 families and practically everything we did those first few years we did together. If it was New Year's Eve, or Yom Kipper, whatever it was, we did it at the center and all the women pitched in in the kitchen, and the men did the maintenance work. That was a very stimulating time. I understand that they're back down to eleven families now, which is unfortunate.

Y: When did you return to Youngstown?

O: I returned to Youngstown in 1965.

Y: Did you become immediately involved with the Jewish community upon your return?

O: I became involved during federation campaign times; I made my contribution, and took some cards to call on. I was working for Simco Enterprises at the time, until I was approached by the Jewish Federation, whom I had used as resources at the time we were organizing in Meadville. They approached me to find out whether I would consider coming to work there because of my background. After some deliberation and my wife finding a job to compensate for the loss of wages which I would experience, I agreed to go to work. I used to commute to Pittsburgh twice a week during the day and then I would come home and work at night at the center with precocious teenagers, including Neil Yutkin.

Y: When was the Jewish Center originally organized?

O: If you don't count the Youngstown Hebrew Institute,

the first center in Youngstown was located on Bryson Street, near campus now, 635 or 536, something like that, in a house in 1935. It stayed there until 1954 when the new building on Gypsy Lane was built.

Y: You've been a Jewish educator in both temple and Sunday school and so on for a number of years. Can you describe the differences in Jewish education from when you were a student and today, for example?

O: Outside of a difference in perception between being a student and being a teacher, I would say that back in the 1920's and 1930's, the Jewish education, by and large, outside of Sunday schools, which were volunteer parents, was placed in the hands of what we call Malamuds, who were almost like semi-professional teachers. Very few had any kind of degree or special education as a career. They would come and stay in the community for a short time and then move on. Of course, they were augmented by the people in the community. It was out of their own commitment, certainly not for the kind of pay that was given. They usually stayed, maybe a matter of months or years and then moved on somewhere else. They came from everywhere, from Palestine, New York, from any metropolitan area where Jews tended to get a heavy Jewish education. Some were good, some were lousy.

Gradually, after the Hebrew Institute closed its doors, Hebrew education went back to the temples. There they again leaned heavily on volunteers or lightly paid volunteers. If I remember right, they used to get something like fifty cents teaching Sunday school. Then it went up; when I started teaching Sunday school it was five dollars. All of this was because of the fact that no one temple had a lot of students and the budgets wouldn't permit the payment that was necessary for professional teachers.

Recently, about two years ago, the community woke up again, after being urged for the previous ten or twelve years by the leadership, to the fact that Jewish kids were not getting a decent Jewish education, that you can't teach a combination of things at one class time, or a small class, anything on a once a week, or twice a week, or three times a week basis, especially using volunteer type teachers. They tended to read the chapter involved on Saturday and come in and try to teach the subject on Sunday. The kids were just not getting what they needed.

As a result of that, the Commission for Jewish Education here in Youngstown was organized. They established a community school to meet after public school, which was

made up of a combination of all of the three remaining active temples, that is Ohev Tzedek, El-Emeth, and Rodef Sholom. It was, incidently, subsidized by the Jewish Federation. There were contributions from the temples and from the Federation, which make up their budget. On that basis they were able to go out and hire professional Jewish teachers, people who were trained as teachers and people who were trained in Jewish subjects. As that now exists, it meets at Temple El-Emeth. Each youngster would go two evenings a week plus having to go to their own Sunday schools. We had three schools of Jewish education, which was not enough, but it was a damn sight better than what it had been previously. I see it because ever since I came back to Youngstown I have been helping to conduct services.

At Heritage Manor the A.Z.A. and the others would bring their kids in and they could barely say the b'roches; now we have youngsters that can conduct the whole service. They take turns. Now how important is it to have a youngster who can recite all the prayers and conduct a service as compared to one who had acquired the Jewish heart, the understanding of Jewish history and tradition and all those kinds of things I am not prepared to say at this time. I don't know how good a job they do in that area.

- Y: Basically they have re-installed the classes that you had when you were growing up?
- O: It is almost a corresponding sort of thing except the type of direction and the type of teaching is much higher; it is more professional. On the other hand, the element that is missing now that was there then was the motivation, the discipline, and the family support. By that I mean, in those days if I didn't behave in school I would probably go to bed without supper, whatever. Nowadays, if a teacher raises a hand to a student, the family is up in arms and if the child requires discipline the leadership is involved, and the question is, which is more important, to have discipline in the class or to have the family resign from the temple. It is a real problem. It is the same kind of problem that exists in a public school. Public schools have that kind of support from the home.
- Y: Do you see a difference in the commitment of parents to their Jewishness of their children?
- O: Yes, definitely. It is a much more permissive society, and it is cumulative; we, the parents, rebelled as youngsters, and though there was at that time more

discipline in the family than there is now, the fact is that we all edged a little further away from being strict, observant Jews. We made the first step. I am sure that our parents had made small steps themselves from their family traditions, especially when they came to America. Our kids carried it a point further, now their kids are carrying it still further and one had to worry about whether there will be any such thing as Judaism in the future.

Y: Going back to the Jewish Center, have the programs within the center itself changed since you have come back?

O: Yes, they have changed since I have come back. They have changed drastically from the beginning of the movement. You have to understand that at the beginning of the movement, the Jewish Community Center was a settlement house. It was a place where these Eastern European people with their payises and their black hats and their frocked coats and their tzitzis hanging out and all that, the fringes from the talliths they wore under their clothes . . . It is probably spelled T-Z-I-T-Z-I-S. They wanted to become Americans, and more important, I would say, the Jews who had come before them, had become fairly well assimilated and they were more or less ashamed of the East European Jew, and they wanted to get him oriented and assimilated as quickly as they could. Their response to that was the formulation of what were then called "settlement houses" in which Jews were pioneers. They had classes to teach English, classes to teach civics, classes to teach the constitution, classes on how to live, how to furnish a home, how to be an American. The whole emphasis was on the assimilation. Then as the second generation started to come through, you didn't need to learn English because you spoke English. They were American, their friends were Americans. The center became a recreational place, a leisure time activity sort of thing, where you learned to do things that you didn't learn in school. You might have typing classes, you might have art classes, you might have . . .

Y: About what year are we talking about?

O: Oh, this is a gradual thing, from the 1920's up to the Second World War. We came and played Ping-pong, we had dancing. If they had a swimming pool you swam, if they had a gym you would play basketball; that was the big thing, of course. You had lecturers and so on. After the Second World War, substantially after, the movement suddenly became aware of the fact that we were contributing to the dissolution of the American-Jewish community. We were doing everything we could to make everybody into the same mold and to minimize Jewishness.



The programs of the Jewish community suddenly then began to change direction towards Jewish content, the Jewish content, watching that we didn't step on the toes of the temple; we didn't get the quality and liturgy and the theology. Nevertheless, Jewish tradition, we did observe all the holidays and have programs around the holidays, but not as religious activities but as recreational, educational, informational type things. That's where we are now, concerned about the security and the viability to continue the existence of the Jewish community.

Y: In walking through the center the other day I noticed that the top floor has been converted into a Jewish pre-school. When did that come about?

O: Well, the pre-school was always on the top floor, Neil. Except, back in your time it seems as soon as the clubs were done and left the place, maintenance crews descended on those rooms and removed the chairs and put the pre-school furniture in for the next morning, and the pre-school would come in the next morning and the next night the rooms would be made back into meeting rooms.

Two things happened gradually. Number one, the number of teenage Jews dropped sharply, and many of the clubs went out of existence. In fact, they all did except for A.Z.A., one A.Z.A. and one B.B.G., who often meet with as few as nine or ten people. It was no longer feasible to dedicate those rooms to that purpose and so the pre-school department requested and was granted permission to make it a permanent pre-school situation. You could decorate and get that stuff in there that was usually there. They got disgusted with the dislocation of things and looking for things; where did they put this yesterday, I need it today. Now it is just a pre-school; meetings that the teens have are downstairs in the library, the Schwebel Room, et cetera.

Y: Is this specifically a Jewish pre-school? What forms of Judaism does it teach?

O: It is not just for Jewish children. It teaches about Judaism. It doesn't teach Judaism. They observe all the holidays, they have model seders, they have shabbat services, they sing the songs, and so on. They tell the stories behind the holidays, and that is very important. There are some humorous results. The pre-school at the Jewish Community Center has become almost like a miniature international institute. When an immigrant doctor gets a position here at the North Side Hospital, for instance, or at St. Elizabeth's, from India, China,

Taiwan, South America, or wherever they come from, they report first to the office. There they are helped to find a home, and then if they have children of pre-school age, they are sent to the Jewish Community Center because there is no other place for them to go. They come here barely able to speak English, with no concept of the American way of life and they become Americanized, but they become Americanized as a side effect, believing that the Sukkah is an American thing, and that the Passover is the American Holiday. I sometimes wonder how long it takes them to realize that it ain't so.

Y: Excuse me, could you explain what succah is?

O: The succah is a booth or a small hut of some kind which is erected just outside the home of Jewish people for the holiday of Sukkot to commemorate the fact that the Jews lived 40 years in tents and huts made out of whatever they could salvage from the surrounding wilderness. They looked up to the stars, and therefore the roofs must not be solid. In the years afterwards, when Israel existed in a biblical state, people would come to the temple in Jerusalem for the three pilgrimage holidays each year. Obviously, there weren't enough hotels or motels around to accommodate them, so they would build themselves these shacks. We, today, build the four-sided shack just outside of the center, and spread stalks of corn across the top, and branches, so that you can still see through. We decorate it with fruits and vegetables. It's also a harvest holiday. The youngsters, of course, come and visit and put decorations on it.

Y: You mentioned that a number of non-Jewish children belong to the pre-school. Are there a lot of children of non-Jews in the center?

O: Yes, a large number, a sufficient number to where we are concerned. We have an open membership policy. However, we do not recruit non-Jewish families. The center is subsidized by the Jewish community through a campaign. What a member pays in the way of membership just barely pays for the light bill. Most of it is subsidized. Nevertheless, if a non-Jewish family becomes a member, they are entitled to all the same privileges as a Jewish family. It is really a bargain for them. About forty percent of the members are non-Jewish, not quite forty percent.

Y: Could you describe some of the other programs at the center that are Jewish oriented?

O: Well, even the swimming and the gym, as far as they are concerned, are Jewish oriented because the kids are

Jewish. Teams usually take a Jewish name, sometimes the camp groups take Jewish names. You try to run contests on the basis of Jewish names for brackets and that kind of stuff. Kids in the arts and crafts classes, for instance, would make a reproduction of the Western Wall. During Federation campaigns they make a papier-mache tree with branches, and sell these at a quarter apiece and give that money to the Jewish National Fund. Of course, when you have a Chinese, what do you call it, sumi, art, there is nothing Jewish about that, I am sure. There is nothing Jewish about weaving classes. The fact is, they generally make something Jewish for Jewish purposes. They hang them in the house or above windows or something. Of course, most of our lectures are based on Jewish topics, whether it be anti-Semitism or what is going on in the Middle East, it is usually Jewish oriented. You either are Jewish or have Jewish content in the program. Sunday we will present the string quartet from the Youngstown Symphony, only one of whom is Jewish. They are going to be playing some Jewish numbers especially for the occasion.

Y: You seem to be skeptical about where the Jewish community is going, do you see any hope for it at all?

O: Oh, definitely hope, but the leadership has to become a little more alarmed than it is now. We are working desperately to think of ways of improving, but it's basically up to the family. The program, for instance, that we had Thursday night was what we call our Education for Family Living, which was done together with the Jewish Family and Childrens Service, all part of the Jewish Federation. We brought in Reverend Greenburg who is top man in the field of the Jewish family in the whole country. Thursday night we had a young lady who was a social caseworker from Cleveland who conducts these kinds of things, and her session was an experimental group, a group that becomes involved on intermarriage, some of the problems and how to handle them, how traumatic it should be and all these things.

The average non-Jew who applies for membership knows he is getting into a Jewish atmosphere. We tell them, "Do you understand that you are going to be talking about and celebrating Jewish holidays and your kids are going to be singing Hebrew songs, making Jewish decorations, and this and that, and there won't be any Christmas, there won't be any Easter and so forth?" In terms of group work, you can not just exclude the non-Jewish kids and talk to the Jewish kids. Their kids are going to be exposed to the stories of the holidays. They say, "Fine, that's exactly what we want." "Good, here is the card, sign it." As much as you try to do it, swimming, the gym, playing basketball, and all that, it's hard to

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comply to Jewish company.

Y: Thank you very much, sir.

END OF INTERVIEW