

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

The Rayen School Project

Faculty, Student Body, Social and Academic Life

O. H. 68

MRS. SIDNEY DAVIDOW

Interviewed

by

Mark Connelly

on

December 4, 1974

MRS. SIDNEY DAVIDOW

Mrs. Sidney Davidow was born in Youngstown, Ohio, on December 12, 1921. Her father came to this country from Hungary at the age of three or four. He later went into the confectionery business, owning a couple of stores. Her mother came from Baltimore to Youngstown, and met and married her father.

Mrs. Davidow lived on Crandall and Elm Streets during her youth, and went to Harding Elementary School, Hayes Junior High School, and finally The Rayen School for grades ten, eleven, and twelve.

In this interview, Mrs. Davidow reminisces about the freedom of The Rayen School as compared to the disciplined atmosphere of Hayes. She remembers some of her teachers, and her social life involving her high school sorority, Delta Theta Pi. Mrs. Davidow feels she enjoyed school, however, she doesn't think she learned what she should have.

Mrs. Davidow is a member of the Rodef Sholem Temple, and belongs to the National Council of Jewish Women.

ELIZABETH A. REITZEL
June 7, 1978

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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The Rayen School Project

INTERVIEWEE: MRS. SIDNEY DAVIDOW

INTERVIEWER: MARK CONNELLY

SUBJECT: The Rayen School as seen by a Jewish student in the mid-1930's: it's faculty, student body, social and academic life.

DATE: December 4, 1974

CONNELLY: This is an interview with Mrs. Sidney Davidow for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on The Rayen School. The interview is being conducted by Mark Connelly at Mrs. Davidow's residence at 3460 Fifth Avenue. It is approximately 10:15 a.m. on December 4, 1974.

Mrs. Davidow, would you please talk a little about your background?

DAVIDOW: I was born in Youngstown. My father came here from Hungary. He was in the confectionery business. He made candy and owned a factory. He also owned a couple of stores. I have a brother who is now in Texas. We always lived on the North Side of Youngstown.

CONNELLY: Where did you live on the North Side?

DAVIDOW: We lived on Elm Street in about three different places. We also lived on Crandall and Selma Avenues.

CONNELLY: Where did you live at the time you were going to The Rayen School?

DAVIDOW: We lived on Crandall and Elm Streets, I believe.

- C: What about your mother?
- D: My mother came here from Baltimore and met my father. They married and lived here for the rest of their lives.
- C: How old was your father when he came to this country from Hungary?
- D: I think he told me that he was about three or four years old. He had seven brothers and sisters. One of them lived here in Youngstown with him, and the others lived in Cleveland.
- C: Did his whole family immigrate to the United States?
- D: Yes. They must have come together with his parents.
- C: Where did you go to grade school?
- D: I went to Harding, then Hayes. I went to Rayen High School.
- C: Could you describe for us your first impression of The Rayen School?
- D: I can't remember a real first impression. Going from Harding to Hayes was the big jump. I do remember that it was kind of exciting going to Rayen. I didn't start there as a freshman. We went to Hayes at that time for our freshman year. I only had three years at Rayen.
- C: What changes did you note when moving from Hayes to Rayen?
- D: Oh, I think the freedom was the biggest change. We went from a perfectly restricted Hayes, which was very disciplined at that time, to a little more freedom at Rayen.
- C: What sort of discipline was there at Hayes?
- D: Well, you couldn't linger in the halls at that time when you had a change of classes. You went directly to your class, or you were in deep trouble. It was very quiet and well monitored at Hayes. In fact, if you went out into the hall, you had to have a pass. You really couldn't do very much. It seems to me that Rayen gave us a lot more freedom.

C: In what year did you enter Rayen?

D: 1937.

C: Did most of your fellow students from Hayes go with you to Rayen?

D: Yes. Most of my fellow students started with me at Harding. About forty of us went right through from kindergarten to graduation together.

C: How many students were in your sophomore class?

D: I don't remember.

C: Was it a relatively large class?

D: I would say so. We probably had three classes of twenty-five students. I am just guessing. I don't quite remember.

C: What had you heard about The Rayen School before you entered it?

D: I had heard about some of the tough teachers.

C: Who were the tough teachers?

D: Miss Seegar is the first one that comes to my mind. She's the only teacher who really scared the devil out of me. She had a dreadful personality and what she did to me was dreadful.

C: What did she do to you?

D: She scared me. She was the Latin teacher, and I wasn't that great in Latin to begin with. If you didn't have an answer for her immediately, you were through with your recitation for the day. It was very frightening. She would just stand up and point at you with her finger. She wouldn't even call you by name.

C: Did she know your name?

D: I'm not sure she did. But, there were some good teachers; some who were relaxed. Mr. Pickering, for instance, was a lot of fun.

C: Why did you find him to be a lot of fun?

D: Well, I don't think we learned too terribly much from him. He'd sit at the desk with his feet in the drawer. If you sat in the front of his class, you were in good shape because you graded all the tests. What you learned was what you actually picked out for yourself. He would answer any questions. He was a good historian, but I don't think he was a good history teacher.

C: What was the approach to his class?

D: It was relaxed. He would write the assignments and test dates on the board. He didn't do a lot of talking, as I recall, or if he did, it wasn't about history.

C: Were there discussions in his class?

D: There weren't any that I recall. There must have been some discussions, but I don't remember actual history lessons. It was just a lot of fun to be in his room.

C: Who did you think was the best teacher?

D: I think it was Miss Keck, an English teacher. She had to be the best teacher I have ever had in my life. Really. She was a great help to me before I went to college. She was absolutely marvelous.

C: What did she do that was so different?

D: She actually made you think of what you were doing. I think I had her for junior and senior English. She let us read the material, and then explain it to ourselves. She was really an excellent teacher. She would draw out all the beautiful parts of the poetry and the stories that we were studying at that point. I think she was absolutely marvelous. She made English so interesting that I went to the library without her telling me to do so and studied more about the material that we were working on at the time. She was probably the best teacher that I have ever had.

C: Would you say she was a harsh disciplinarian?

D: No, I don't remember her being a disciplinarian. The students were so glad to be in her class and to learn from her that whatever she said they did. I don't think that she had to work on discipline because students really enjoyed her class.

C: Do you think you could recall most of the teachers that you had?

D: No, but I'll tell you a story about one that I do recall. She was a hygiene teacher named Miss Stoops. Hygiene, at that time, is what we call Health today. The course of study came to the point where Miss Stoops had to tell all the girls about the facts of life. She would go to the back of the room and teach. She wouldn't dare teach the girls about the facts of life where someone could look in the window of the classroom door and see her. One of her biggest pieces of advice to the girls was that they must never, never wear patent leather shoes because they reflected underthings. We used to tease her and ask her questions that she couldn't answer. Even if she could answer them, she was too embarrassed to do so.

There were some other teachers involved in the extra-curricular activities. I don't really remember them that well.

C: What was your favorite subject?

D: It was probably English. My next favorite was history.

C: What did you enjoy most about your high school?

D: I liked just being in school with people and going to the extra activities after school. It certainly wasn't the education that I was enjoying. I liked being with the students and the friends that I made.

C: What sort of activities were you in?

D: I belonged to a few clubs.

C: What did you do in these clubs?

D: I don't know. I actually don't remember any of them. I was in Latin club and English club. I was also in the A Cappella Choir for a while, which was not very good. I think students of that age like to be in groups whether the groups do anything or not.

C: Was your student body a closely knit group? Was it a unified group on the whole?

- D: Yes. There were cliques. I would say that every group was a small clique.
- C: What type of cliques were they?
- D: They were social cliques.
- C: On what were these cliques based?
- D: I don't have the faintest idea. Kids really don't know what their cliques are based on. It's whether you're invited into a group or not, and whether you're a leader or follower that counts.
- C: Were there sororities and fraternities at Rayen?
- D: Yes.
- C: Did you belong to one?
- D: Yes.
- C: Which one?
- D: Delta Theta Pi was one that we actually organized in junior high school. It was a very busy little group.
- C: In what way?
- D: Oh, we did some politicking and had a lot of dances.
- C: Where were these dances held?
- D: Some were held at the Ohio Hotel, and others were held at Stambaugh Auditorium.
- C: Would a sorority actually sponsor the dance?
- D: Yes, we sponsored them, got the bands, and decorated. We also had picnics, parties and meetings.
- C: What was the school's position on sororities?
- D: They did nothing about them. Even if they knew about them, they'd ignore them. I don't believe that there was any anti-sorority feeling.
- C: How did students who were not in the sororities and fraternities react?

- D: They were miserable. They really were. When you're in a group, you don't realize how outsiders feel. When you're part of something, you don't know what is happening to the others. There were some girls who were miserable. I know of one little girl whose mother asked everybody, including our parents, "Why aren't you taking this poor child into your sorority?"
- C: Why didn't you take her?
- D: We just made up our minds that we weren't going to take her. There was probably nothing wrong with her. A clique could be a very cruel group of young girls. We took one girl into our sorority that we never even knew. We just liked her name. We thought that if anybody had a name like that, she had to be a good person to have in our sorority. That was stupid reasoning.
- C: Were there certain qualifications that the girls needed to get into the group?
- D: No, I don't think so. We never took in girls who were unknown, or who didn't do anything to interest the rest of the group. I suppose if someone was ugly, they wouldn't get in either. The girls in the sorority were nice girls, but they didn't act too nicely.
- C: How many students were in your sorority?
- D: I think we had about twenty-five or thirty girls. They were of different ages. We had freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior girls.
- C: Did you have any sort of initiation to get into the sorority?
- D: Yes. We had to wear a lot of junk and do certain things. There were special initiation days.
- C: Where were these initiations normally held?
- D: We had meetings at our homes, so the initiations were usually held there. We also used Crandall and Mill Creek Parks many times.
- C: What did parents say about these meetings?

- D: They really didn't pay too much attention to them. No one got hurt. We had to do ridiculous things like wear two pairs of different colored socks, shoes, or ribbons, or stand on corners and do some silly things.
- C: Was there an intense rivalry between different groups?
- D: Yes. There was another sorority, Phi Gamma. The girls in that sorority seemed to be a little wealthier than our girls. Our sorority was a little more democratic, at least we felt it was. The other sorority had more money, and they were snooty. There was a big rivalry for pledges, too, at that time. We wanted the same people they wanted. The field was pretty small because we didn't take girls from the South Side. All the girls we chose were from Rayen.
- C: How many sororities were there?
- D: There were two Jewish sororities and two or three other sororities. We had a rivalry with these other groups too, but it was not the same. We ignored each other.
- C: Were these strictly Jewish groups?
- D: They were strictly Jewish groups, yes. We discriminated among ourselves.
- C: Did the other members of the student body discriminate against you because you had these Jewish sororities?
- D: I don't think so. We all kept to our own. There's no question about it. I would imagine that our sororities were started after the existence of the Gentile sororities. The Gentile sororities weren't about to let us in, and none of us ever expected or wanted to get in. Because of this, we started our own sororities. It was a very simple thing.
- C: Were you ever harrassed in your attempt to start an all Jewish sorority?
- D: No. Some of the girls that were in the other sororities were good friends of mine at school. I had gone all through school with a few of them, but we didn't inter-mix as far as having parties, sororities, or dances together. I didn't, but maybe some girls did.

- C: If you sponsored a dance at the Ohio Hotel, would only the girls from your sorority come to the dance?
- D: No. The other Jewish sorority would come, too. I can't remember if any of the Gentile sororities came to our parties. I don't think so.
- C: Were there any teachers who actively tried to disband these groups?
- D: There weren't any that I know of. They allowed the girls to wear different socks or funny clothes for the initiation rights. A lot of the activities had to be after school, but the teachers didn't stop them.
- C: Did you notice any discrimination against you at The Rayen School?
- D: Yes. There were certain people that I've known all my life that were and are definitely anti-Semitic. There were some name-calling people that were always there.
- C: This was just in the student body?
- D: Yes, yes. When you move around in the same neighborhood as much as we did, you run into the same people. You run into people that might have been neighbors at some point or another, and people that are prominent in our community today were big name-callers.
- C: Did any of these people live close to you?
- D: Yes. Our neighborhoods were mixed.
- C: What type of discrimination did you find in the neighborhood?
- D: Well, I wouldn't really call it discrimination. We walked to school with our own friends. Occasionally we walked with someone else, but not often. In those days, we all walked. There were no busses. Our parents hardly ever picked us up. Today, when it rains all the cars are lined up outside the school, waiting to pick up the children. My mother used to drive to the school and leave my rubbers and raincoat so I could walk home in the rain.

- C: Did most of the students that you entered Rayen with eventually graduate?
- D: I think almost everyone graduated. I can't think of any student that didn't.
- C: What type of grades did you get in school?
- D: I got mediocre grades. They weren't really good, just mediocre. I moved along.
- C: Did you find yourself impelled to study very much?
- D: No, but I wish I had been impelled to study. That is something I missed.
- C: Could you describe a typical day at The Rayen School?
- D: Not really. I can't remember too much about school. You went to your home room. Then, you went to your classes until it was time for lunch. Most of us went home for lunch in those days because we lived within three or four blocks of the school, but a few times we stayed at school to eat. After lunch we went back to school and through the same routine again. There were three or four classes in the afternoon. You could stay for whatever activities there were after school.
- C: What was your favorite year at The Rayen School?
- D: Oh, it was probably my senior year. By that time, you knew your way around. You knew you were on your way out, and felt very important.
- C: Were you glad to get out?
- D: Yes, I was glad to get out. I graduated in January, which was hard for me. It was hard on all of us because we couldn't start college until the following September. At that point, I wasn't too happy to get out. It left me with a lot of time on my hands.
- C: Were you taking a college preparatory curriculum at The Rayen School?
- D: Yes. Well, I took some secretarial courses just because I needed them, but most of my courses were academic courses.

- C: Did you go to college after high school?
- D: Yes, I went to Tulane University of Louisiana. It is also called Sophie Newcomb Memorial College.
- C: Did you find that you were well prepared for college life?
- D: No. No, I really wasn't. I thought I was very well prepared because at that time, graduates of the Rayen School didn't have to take any college entrance exams. I only applied to one college and was accepted. I found that I was not prepared. I don't know whether it was the fault of the school, or my fault. I was not a good student and I wasn't into studying. I just couldn't get myself into it, for which I am, even today, quite sorry. I was not prepared.
- C: Did you eventually graduate from Tulane?
- D: No, I couldn't finish there. This was in 1941 or 1942. I went on to become a medical technician.
- C: What was the most impressive feature of the Rayen School? What impressed you the most?
- D: I'm afraid there really wasn't anything too terribly impressive.
- C: If you could have changed one thing about the school, what would you have changed?
- D: I probably would have made sure that most of the people knew what they were doing in school, and had more reason to study. I would also make sure that they knew how to study. There was no way to learn how to study at Rayen. You were just given an assignment and told to do it. There's a way to study and a way to just skim through. Most of us skimmed through.
- C: Would you say the teachers took an elite approach to their classes and expected that the students would know how to study?
- D: Yes, I think they expected it. Maybe some students did know how to study. After I got out of school, I talked to a lot of people who felt exactly the way I did. They were very ill-prepared. Study halls were

to see how much you could get away with without studying. They were large study halls, and the teachers were more concerned with discipline than with how much you learned in them.

C: How would you have rated the faculty in light of this?

D: I don't know. I had some good teachers, but I would say most of them were not good teachers.

C: Who was the principal of the school?

D: Mr. Tear.

C: Did you have much contact with him?

D: No, none. His son was a half year behind me in school. Other than that, I had no contact with him. We only saw him at assemblies.

Miss Boyton, I think, was the Dean of Women at the time. She was a very nice, lovely lady. I had no contact with her either. It seemed that the only time you ever saw the Dean of Women was if you were in trouble, and I was never in trouble.

C: Did you ever have Miss Boyton in class?

D: No. She was Dean then and wasn't teaching at the time.

C: Have you kept up with what's been going on at Rayen?

D: No. In fact, I went back to the one hundredth anniversary reunion recently, and I will never go back again. Actually, there was no one there I really knew. The people that I see all the time were there. The rest I wasn't interested in.

C: Would you make a distinction between the Rayen High School that exists now and the Rayen School you went to? Would you consider them one and the same?

D: No, I wouldn't consider them one and the same. Some of the reasons are obvious. I don't know what the curriculum is like now. It was a predominantly white school when I went there. There were only two or three blacks in the classes.

C: How did they get along with the other students?

- D: Fine. They really got along fine. It didn't matter to us. Some black students too, went all through school with me, from kindergarten to high school. It was quite a homogeneous group. We got along well as a class. Everybody went their own way. There was not a big class feeling in my class, but there may have been in some of the other classes.
- C: Were you aware, at the time you were going to school, of an article in the original Rayen charter which stated that Jewish people were not allowed to teach at Rayen?
- D: I think I did know it at the time. We did know that there was a lot of anti-Semitism. It was something that we heard about at home and in our Sunday schools. We were aware of it. I think we shied away from it by staying together. We didn't want to expose ourselves.
- C: Is that how you handled the problem?
- D: Yes, I think that was how we handled it. It was a lot easier.
- C: Did you feel any resentment toward the school for this?
- D: No. I think the school thought that this was the way it was supposed to be. This was prior to the war and Hitler. I think we more or less accepted our station, if you want to call it that. A lot of us felt superior, and some felt inferior. I think our better students, at that time, were Jewish. This gave us a feeling of superiority. Even though I was not personally a better student, I was proud that other Jewish students were.
- C: Did you feel that the school you went to was superior to the other schools around?
- D: Oh, sure. There was a lot of feeling for your school, especially at the Rayen-South games. We always thought Rayen was better than South. I really didn't know that much about the other schools. I suppose we played them in football, but South was the big competitor.
- C: Are there any other comments you would like to make? Is there anything you feel that you should say about the school?

D: I don't think so. I enjoyed school. I don't think I learned what I should have. I don't know whether it was the fault of the school or the fault of the student. I can't blame the school completely. However, I think they could have handled some things a little bit better. That's about all.

C: Thank you very much, Mrs. Davidow.